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**AN INVESTIGATION OF THE EFFECTS OF FRONT-LINE EMPLOYEES' WORK-FAMILY  
CONFLICT ON CUSTOMER SATISFACTION THROUGH EXHAUSTION AND EMOTIONAL  
DISPLAYS**

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**ABSTRACT**

The present study investigates the distal effects of employees' work-family conflict on customer satisfaction. Based on data from 200 paired employee-customer interactions, a structural equation modeling was conducted to test the hypothesized model and the results supported most of our predictions. Specifically, participants' FIW (family interfering with work) was positively linked to physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion, while WIF (work interfering with family) did not have such associations. Further, individuals with higher levels of physical exhaustion were more likely to manage their emotions by faking positive emotions and suppressing negative emotions, whereas participants with higher levels of emotional exhaustion were more likely to fake positive emotions. Although faking positive emotions enhances the employee's role performance, such actions failed to enhance customer satisfaction. The current research extends our knowledge of work-family conflict on employee-customer interactions and suggests that service organizations need to be aware of the critical effects of employees' family affairs on work behaviors and ultimately on customer satisfaction.

**Key Words:** Work-family conflict, Exhaustion, Emotion displays, Customer satisfaction

**INTRODUCTION**

According to the satisfaction-profit chain, customer satisfaction is critical in increasing customer loyalty, decreasing complaints and switching behaviors, and generating profit for the hospitality organization (Anderson & Mittal, 2000). Service employees are the "face" of hotels (Adams, 1976, p. 1177), and customer satisfaction is heavily driven by employee attitudes and behaviors (Wharton & Erickson, 1993). In fact, many hotel employees confront long working hours, high levels of job insecurity, irregular and inflexible work schedules, limited weekend time off, and low wages (Karatepe & Uludag, 2008). Consequently, work-family conflict (WFC) (i.e., employees' role interferences resulted from incompatible demands between work and family) is common among line-level service employees (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Front-line employees might feel exhausted due to WFC, yet, they are required to interact with customers in a cheerful way (Karatepe & Uludag, 2008). It can be argued that WFC influences front-line employees' attitudes, behaviors and emotional displays, thus having a potentially detrimental impact on customer satisfaction. However, research on customer satisfaction has ignored such effects. Moreover, prior studies in WFC have mainly focused on employee attitudes and behaviors while failing to make the link with customer evaluations. To bridge these gaps, the current study examined the impact of work-family conflict on customer satisfaction. In the following pages, we first discuss how work-family conflict might lead to physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion. We then illustrate how these three different types of exhaustion might result in distinct emotional displays (i.e., display of positive emotions and suppression of negative emotions). Finally, we test the link between emotional displays and employees' role performance and customer satisfaction.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

International CHRIE Conference-Refereed Track, Event 21 [2009]  
Work-family conflict (WFC) can be defined as “a form of interrole conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect” (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p. 77), and is composed of two interdependent dimensions: work interfering with family (WIF) and family interfering with work (FIW) (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992). Previous research shows that work-family conflict (WIF & FIW) results in work-related, nonwork-related, and stress related outcomes, including low job and life satisfaction and high somatic/physical symptoms and exhaustion (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000). Hence, it is not surprising that front-line employees easily perceive their jobs as a source of stress and exhaustion (Grandey, Cordeiro, & Crouter, 2005).

Exhaustion is individuals’ chronic state of negative physical (e.g., “low energy, chronic fatigue, and weakness”), emotional (e.g., “primary feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and entrapment”), and mental (e.g., “negative attitudes toward one’s self, work, and life”) depletion resulting from excessive job demands, continuous hassles, and work-related stress, and it has become an increasingly important topic for work-family conflict research in hospitality organizations (Zohar, 1997; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). Front-line employees’ excessive and incompatible work-family demands are likely to lead to high levels of exhaustion. Higher levels of WFC imply excessive and continuous work and family demands, thus being highly taxing on the individual’s coping resources (Lewig, Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Dollard, & Metzger, 2007). Both excessive demands and overconsumption of resources for fulfilling incompatible work-family role obligations are strongly related to exhaustion levels (Lee & Ashforth, 1996). Hence, we propose that work-family conflict (i.e., both WIF and FIW) will increase service employees’ feelings of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion.

*Hypothesis 1a.* WIF is positively linked to physical, emotional and mental exhaustion of front-line employees.

*Hypothesis 1b.* FIW is positively linked to physical, emotional and mental exhaustion of front-line employees.

Front-line employees are expected to manage both inner feelings and external expressions to “create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” for achieving organizational goals (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7; Grandey, 2000). These organizational goals and requirements are specified by role occupants, or display rules that outline the types of emotions service employees are expected and allowed to express and other emotions they need to hide in their interactions with customers (Wilk & Moynihan, 2005). Previous research has categorized emotional displays into two types: faking positive emotions and suppressing negative emotions (Diefendorff & Greguras, In Press). Exhaustion resulting from work-family conflict may lead hospitality employees to regard their work as personally costly and unjustified, thus reducing the level of service offered to the customer (Cropanzano, Rupp, & Byrne, 2003). Specifically, service workers who are exhausted by WFC tend to suffer from multiple physical and mental problems (e.g., anxiety and depression), thus making it difficult to display positive emotions in front of customers (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993). Taken together, exhaustion caused by WFC is likely to reduce the display of positive emotions while heightening any negative emotions toward customers during service interactions. To fulfill their roles, exhausted frontline employees have to manage their emotional displays by faking happiness and suppressing negative emotions when facing customers. Comparing others, those frontline employees with higher exhaustion ought to consume greater efforts on faking positive emotions and reducing negative ones. Accordingly, we propose that service employees with a high magnitude of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused due to WFC are more likely to manage their emotional displays during service interactions by faking positive emotions and suppressing negative emotions.

*Hypothesis 2a.* Front-line employees with greater levels of physical exhaustion are more likely to fake positive emotions and to suppress negative emotions.

*Hypothesis 2b.* Front-line employees with greater emotional exhaustion will be more likely to fake positive emotions and to suppress negative emotions.

*Hypothesis 2c.* Front-line employees with greater mental exhaustion will be more likely to fake positive emotions and to suppress negative emotions.

Customer satisfaction reflects the customers’ cognitive and affective evaluations of a product or service in terms of “whether that product or service has met the customer’s need and expectations” (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Grömler, 2008).

2006, p. 110). Role performance, on the other hand, refers to “cumulative set of actions, interactions, activities undertaken by service provider in their fulfillment of service role” (Broderick, 1999, p. 125). Recent research suggests that emotional displays are a critical factor in driving perceived role performance and customer satisfaction (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). However, in the context of WFC, emotional displays may be linked to employees’ role performance but not to customer satisfaction. Grandey and her colleagues (2005) found that authenticity of displayed positive emotions is perceived as extra-role behavior, thus enhancing customers’ overall evaluation of service experience. In a similar vein, suppressing negative emotions might induce negative job attitudes (e.g., low job satisfaction), thus reducing the likelihood that the employee is going to go out of his way to delight the customer (Diefendorff & Gosserand, 2003). Thus, we propose that exhaustion due to WFC will lead to faking of positive emotion and suppressing negative emotions. Moreover, these emotions management strategies are expected to be positively related to role performance but negatively linked to customer satisfaction. The overall framework is shown in Figure 1.

*Hypothesis 3a.* Faking positive emotions is positively associated with front-line employees’ role performance.

*Hypothesis 3b.* Faking positive emotions is negatively associated with customer satisfaction

*Hypothesis 4a.* Suppression of negative emotions is positively associated with front-line employees’ role performance.

*Hypothesis 4b.* Suppression of negative emotions is negatively associated with customer satisfaction.

*Hypothesis 5.* Front-line employees’ role performance is positively associated with customer satisfaction.

## METHODS

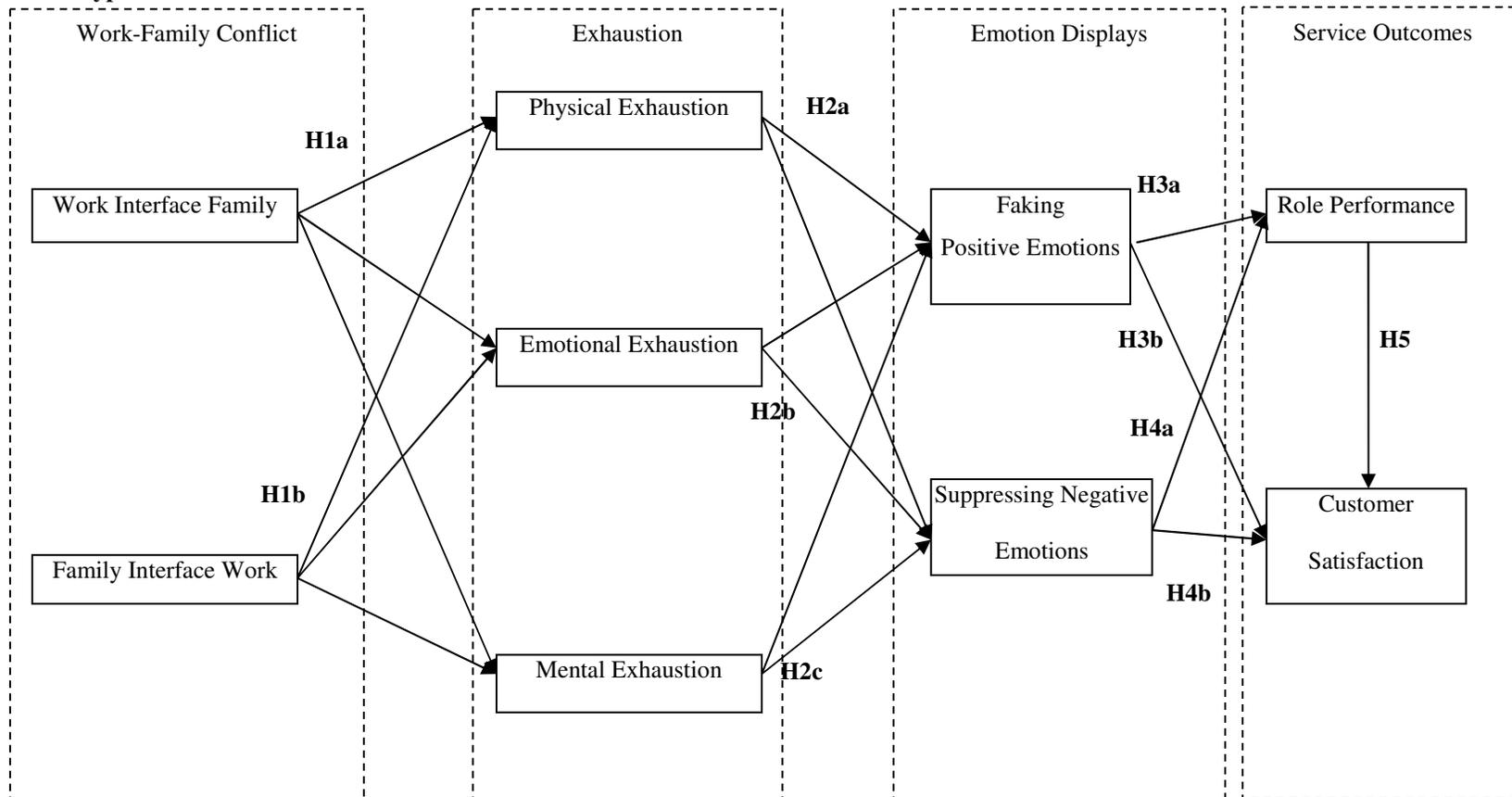
Forty front-line employees in each hotel were randomly selected from a list of employees provided by the human resource department. Their jobs spanned various types, ranging from front desk, to bars & restaurants, and business centers. Employees were then asked to fill out the surveys and return them to research assistants. Next, customers who had interacted with these employees were asked to participate in the study. Two hundred pairs of service employees and customers returned valid surveys thus resulting in a response rate of 84% and constituted research subjects. A MANOVA test demonstrated that the effects of employees’ and customers’ demographic characteristics on the study variables were insignificant for both groups ( $p > .05$ ).

Work-family conflict was measured with eleven items modified from Grandey, Cordeiro, and Crouter (2005). The WFC inventory consists of six items measuring work interfering with family (WIF) and five items measuring family interfering with work (FIW). Exhaustion was assessed by a 21-item devised by (Pines, Aronson, & Kafry, 1981), which asked respondents how often they experience physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion (Etzion, 1984). Employees’ emotional displays were measured by an eight-item scale developed from Spencer and Carnevale (2003) and further adapted by Rupp and Spencer (2006), which measured the extent to which employees perceive they have to exert effort in managing their emotions during their interactions with customers (Rupp & Spencer, 2006). Role performance of hotel front-line staff was measured by a twelve-item scale adapted from Price, Arnold, and Tierney (1995) and the scale captured the extent to which the service provider displays emotions and interacts with customers according to job description and organizational requirements. We asked the customers to think about the service that they just experienced and to rate the employee on each of the attributes listed (e.g., “Efficiency in handling my requests”). Customer satisfaction was assessed by a four-item, seven point Likert scale adapted from Hennig-Thurau et al. (2006). The respondents were asked to evaluate their satisfaction with the service experience (e.g., “I am delighted by this service experience”).

## RESULTS

Table 1 displays the correlation matrix with means and standard deviations of all study variables. Participants’ average level of WIF ( $M = 5.94$ ,  $SD = .53$ ) is greater than that of FIW ( $M = 5.22$ ,  $SD = .79$ ), which is consistent with previous research findings (e.g., Frone, et al., 1992). Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with maximum likelihood estimation by AMOS 5.0 (Byrne, 2001) was used to test the hypothesized model (see Figure 1). The model fit indices are shown in Table 2. We followed Hu and Bentler’s (1999) absolute criteria to assess the fit of the model (i.e.,  $RMSEA < 0.05$ ,  $GFI > 0.9$ ,  $AGFI > 0.9$ ,  $NFI > 0.9$ ,  $CFI > 0.95$  and  $IFI > 0.95$ ).

**Figure 1**  
**The Hypothesized Model**



**Table 1**

Zhao et al.: An Investigation of the Effects of Front-Line Employees' Work-Fam

**Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
(1) WIF	5.94	.53	<b>.916</b>								
(2) FIW	5.22	.79	.142*	<b>.883</b>							
(3) PE	3.22	.63	-.089	.225**	<b>.845</b>						
(4) EE	2.71	.97	-.021	.040	.625**	<b>.928</b>					
(5) ME	2.83	.73	-.060	.051	.482**	.589**	<b>.895</b>				
(6) FPE	5.98	.51	.150*	-.053	.127	.078	.044	<b>.853</b>			
(7) SNE	5.73	.61	-.049	.090	.132	.096	-.172*	.027	<b>.832</b>		
(8) RP	5.43	.84	.053	.005	-.030	-.004	-.046	.249**	.077	<b>.865</b>	
(9) CS	5.40	1.18	.001	-.006	.012	-.045	-.034	.123	-.061	.664**	<b>.925</b>

*Note.* Cronbach  $\alpha$  values for each scale are indicated in bold on the diagonal.  $N = 200$ . WIF = Work interfering with family; FIW = Family interfering with work; PE = Physical exhaustion; EE = Emotional exhaustion; ME = Mental exhaustion; FPE = Faking positive emotions; SNE = Suppressing of negative emotions; RP = Role performance; CS = Customer satisfaction. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

**Table 2****Parameters of the Model Modification**

Model	$\chi^2$	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	NFI	CFI	IFI
M1	723.89	.163	.754	.651	.641	.685	.692
M2	729.13	.161	.749	.653	.639	.684	.691
M3	86.82	.01	.933	.903	.900	.99	.99

*Note.* M1 = the full model (with all possible paths); M2 = the hypothesized model; M3 = the reduced model (with only significant paths); REMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation; NFI = normed fit index; CFI = comparative fit index; IFI = incremental fit index. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

As Table 2 indicates, an examination of the fit statistics indicates a poor fit of the hypothesized model. In order to find a better fitting model, we first tested the full model with all theoretically plausible paths and then deleted all non-significant paths. The reduced model fits the data well: GFI = .93; AGFI = .90; NFI = .90; CFI = .99 IFI = .99; REMSEA = .01. As Table 3 indicates, participants' WIF failed to have a significant impact on their physical ( $\beta = .083, p > .05$ ), emotional ( $\beta = -.039, p > .05$ ), and mental exhaustions ( $\beta = -.072, p > .05$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 1a is not supported. In other words, employees' role interferences from work to family may not influence their exhaustion level at workplace. On the other hand, participants' FIW had a significant effect on their physical exhaustion ( $\beta = .298, p < .05$ ), but had a marginal impact on emotional ( $\beta = .201, p = .069$ ) and mental ( $\beta = .209, p = .082$ ) exhaustion. Therefore, Hypothesis 1b is partially supported. Neither WIF nor FIW had a significant direct impact on employees' display positive emotions or suppression of negative emotions ( $p > .05$ ).

Yet, our findings indicate that employees' physical exhaustion significantly increased their faking of positive emotions ( $\beta = .171, p < .05$ ) and suppression of negative emotions ( $\beta = .200, p < .05$ ). These results are consistent with Hypothesis 2a. Similarly, emotional exhaustion significantly increased employees' faking of positive emotions ( $\beta = .213, p < .05$ ) but not their tendency to suppress negative emotions ( $\beta = .002, p > .05$ ). Consequently, Hypothesis 2b is partially supported. Finally, mental exhaustion did not have a direct impact on the likelihood of faking positive emotions ( $\beta = .008, p > .05$ ) or suppressing negative emotions ( $\beta = -.008, p > .05$ ). These results fail to lend support for Hypothesis 2c. In other words, employees' mental exhaustion may not necessarily influence their emotions regulation strategies.

The display of positive emotions increased customers' perceived role performance ( $\beta = .562, p < .05$ ) while having the opposite effect on customer satisfaction ( $\beta = -.497, p < .05$ ). Thus, Hypotheses 3a & b are supported. Furthermore, employees' suppression of negative emotions was not significantly associated with either role performance ( $\beta = -.020, p > .05$ ) or customer satisfaction ( $\beta = -.029, p > .05$ ). Therefore, both Hypothesis 4a and Hypothesis 4b are rejected. Finally, customer satisfaction was strongly influenced by employees' role performance ( $\beta = .752, p < .01$ ), thus lending support for Hypothesis 5.

## DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

*International CHRIE Conference-Refereed Track, Event 21 [2009]*

The current study investigated the linkages between work-family conflict, feelings of exhaustion, and employees' emotional displays in the context of hotels. These employee-related constructs were then connected to customer evaluations in terms of perceived role performance and customer satisfaction. First, the findings demonstrate that FIW, rather than WIF, influences employees' physical, emotional and mental exhaustion at workplace. These results are consistent with the traditional two-component model of work-family conflict (Frone, et al., 1992). Employees with greater FIW exhibited higher levels of job-related exhaustion, in particular that related to physical exhaustion. This is concerning as exhaustion easily leads to feelings of helplessness which in turn can translate into negative attitudes toward the workplace. Employees' with greater level of physical exhaustion are more likely to fake positive emotions and to suppress negative emotions. Employees who feel physically tired and lack energy are highly likely to feel negative emotions and to transfer these emotions to the workplace. Yet, their jobs as boundary-spanners require them to hide such negative emotions and to look cheerful in front of the customer.

**Table 3**  
**Path Coefficients**

DV	IV	M1	M2	M3
PE	WIF	.051	.083	.066
EE	WIF	-.025	-.039	—
ME	WIF	-.025	-.072	—
PE	FIW	.293*	.295*	.298*
EE	FIW	.181	.201	—
ME	FIW	.209	.209	—
FPE	PE	.082	.164*	.171*
SNE	PE	.104	.100	.200*
FPE	EE	.129	.192**	.213*
SNE	EE	.020	.002	—
FPE	ME	.008	.008	—
SNE	ME	-.006	-.008	—
FPE	WIF	.077	—	—
SNE	WIF	.151	—	—
FPE	FIW	-.017	—	—
SNE	FIW	-.010	—	—
RP	FPE	.474*	.554*	.562*
RP	SNE	-.032	-.020	—
CS	FPE	-.409	-.480*	-.497*
CS	SNE	-.186	-.118	-.029
CS	RP	.756**	.767**	.752**

Note. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

The results of the present investigation also show that faking positive emotions is positively linked to role performance while the association is negative with satisfaction. These results are consistent with previous research. Prior studies in organizational psychology show that employees regulate their emotional expressions by faking happiness and hiding sadness in order to fulfill work role demands, organizational requirements and service standards (Pugh, 2001). Hence, it is not surprising that faking positive emotions was positively linked to perceived role performance. Yet recent studies suggest customers can sense the fakeness or lack of authenticity of such emotions and therefore are less satisfied with the service encounter (Grandey, 2000). The fact that suppressing negative emotions was not significantly linked to customer evaluations is common sense since it is a whole lot easier for customers to read cues of positive emotions, such as smile and enthusiasm, than trying to guess that the employee is hiding negative emotions inside.

The current study has several important implications for hospitality organizations. First, the study findings imply that well-designed, family-friendly policies and benefit programs might lead to higher levels of customer satisfaction. Work-life benefit programs may be helpful in establishing a positive social exchange between an employee and an employer, and therefore employees will have high commitment to organizations and work hard to achieve higher levels of work performance and ultimately serve customers with authentic smiles (Muse, Harris,

Giles, & Feild, 2008). Second, hospitality organizations could also provide employees a series of training programs including self-relaxation skills, stress coping, time management, interpersonal skills, and attitude change. Finally, a supervisor with a transformational leadership may enhance job satisfaction, make employees experience more positive emotions in interactions with coworkers and customers, and create a positive organizational climate. Employees then may be less likely to contain strong negative emotions when interacting with customers.

The present study has several limitations in interpreting the findings. First, the study was cross-sectional in nature and it relied in self-reports. Second, employees' mood states were not controlled for in the present study. Future research could further take individual characteristics into consideration and explore how different employees may react to WFC and express emotions to customers with various levels of authenticity. In addition, future research could examine whether employees' surface and deep acting strategies will have interactions with individuals' emotion displays after mood states have been controlled. Finally, the follow-up research could take more climate level variables (e.g., justice) into consideration and further demonstrate how organizational policies, systems, and practices may influence employees' coping with WFC, psychological and physical status, and emotion expressions.

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