

# Online Customer Service and Emotional Labor: An Exploratory Study

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## Background

- Online customer service options, such as real-time chat or email, have been growing in popularity and are expected to increase quickly, particularly for retail organizations (Klie, 2012).
- Real-time chat is also being used in a wide variety of service organizations, such as telecommunications and tech support.
- Both public and academic libraries have been increasing their use of online patron services in the form of virtual reference desks (Olszewski & Rumbaugh, 2010), which typically offer both email and real-time chat options (Shaw & Spink, 2009).
- Prior research has shown that customer service representatives engage in what is known as emotional labor, which refers to “jobs in which workers are expected to display certain feelings in order to satisfy organizational role expectations” (Miller, 2012, p. 200).
- Most emotional labor research has been conducted in face-to-face contexts, and little is known about the impact of online interaction on customer service representatives.

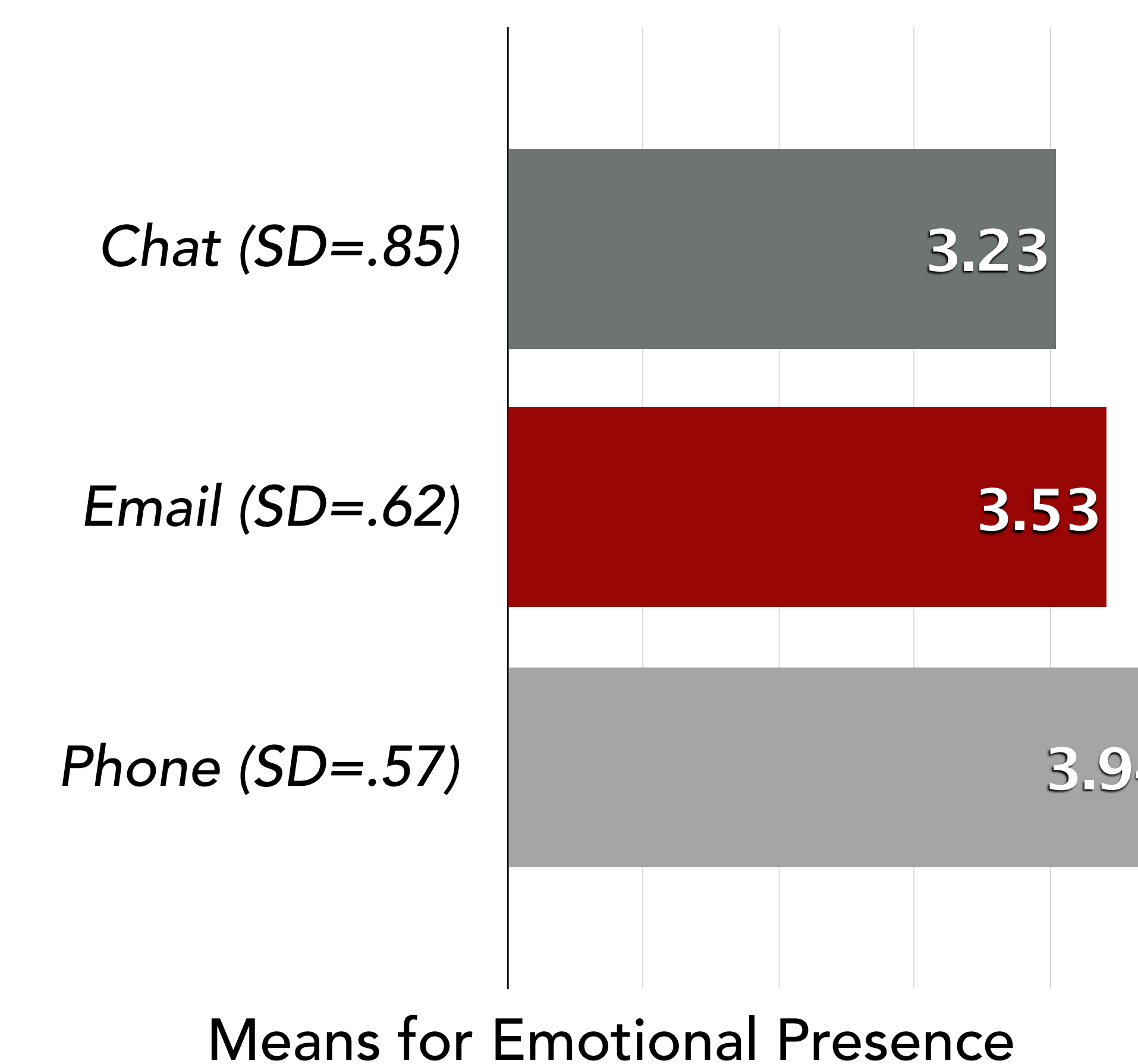


## Data

- Web based survey, n = 130, 68% female, 49% 18-34, 48% librarians
- 48.5% spent more than 50% of work time interacting with clients/customers
- Over half used face-to-face (n = 67), phone (n = 79), & email (n = 67) with their clients/customers daily
- Librarians more likely to use chat than non-librarians 1-3 times/wk ( $\chi^2(2, n = 116) = 22.52, p < .001$ )

## Results

**RQ1: WHAT EXTENT OF EMOTIONAL PRESENCE ARE ONLINE CUSTOMER SERVICE WORKERS EXPERIENCING WITH EACH COMMUNICATION CHANNEL?**



**RQ2: HOW IS EMOTIONAL PRESENCE RELATED TO THE FREQUENCY OF COMMUNICATION WITH CLIENTS/CUSTOMERS ACROSS CHANNELS?**

There was a significant positive relationship between perceived emotional presence in email and frequency of email communication ( $r = .33, p < .01$ ), but no significant relationship between emotional presence and the use of chat and phone.

**RQ3: WILL ONLINE CUSTOMER SERVICE WORKERS MORE BE LIKELY TO ENGAGE IN SURFACE ACTING WHEN PERCEIVED EMOTIONAL PRESENCE IS HIGH?**

Those who perceive higher emotional presence over the phone are less likely to use surface acting strategies ( $\beta = -.28, p < .05$ ).

**RQ4: WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE DEGREE OF EMOTIONAL PRESENCE AND DEEP ACTING AMONG ONLINE CUSTOMER SERVICE WORKERS?**

There was no significant relationship between the degree of emotional presence and deep acting.

**RQ5: IS (A) SURFACE ACTING OR (B) DEEP ACTING RELATED TO JOB SATISFACTION OF ONLINE CUSTOMER SERVICE WORKERS?**

Surface acting strategy was the only significant negative predictor of job satisfaction ( $\beta = -.49, p < .001$ ).

**RQ6: IS (A) SURFACE ACTING OR (B) DEEP ACTING RELATED TO BURNOUT OF ONLINE CUSTOMER SERVICE WORKERS?**

Surface acting strategy was the only significant positive predictor of emotional exhaustion ( $\beta = .63, p < .001$ ); depersonalization, ( $\beta = .52, p < .001$ ); and reduced personal accomplishment ( $\beta = .22, p < .05$ ).

**RQ7: WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DEGREE OF EMOTIONAL PRESENCE AND JOB SATISFACTION?**

Emotional presence over phone was the only significant positive predictor of job satisfaction ( $\beta = .29, p < .05$ ).

**RQ8: WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DEGREE OF EMOTIONAL PRESENCE AND BURNOUT?**

Emotional presence over the phone was the only significant negative predictor of burnout outcomes ( $\beta = -.25, p < .05$  for emotional exhaustion;  $\beta = -.59, p < .001$  for depersonalization;  $\beta = -.56, p < .001$  for reduced personal accomplishment)

## Emotional Presence

- The concept of social presence has been refined from a sense of being together to definitions that revolve around psychological involvement (Biocca, Harms, & Burgoon, 2003; Lee, 2004).
- Several studies (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 1999; Shen & Khalifa, 2008) have identified emotional or affective presence as one dimension of social presence.
- For the purpose of this study we define emotional presence as *the degree to which communicators in mediated contexts perceive they are engaging in emotional communication with a real person*.
- Five-item emotional presence scale was developed for this study, with satisfactory Cronbach's alpha scores for Email ( $\alpha = .70$ ) and Phone ( $\alpha = .72$ ). Three items dropped for Chat ( $\alpha = .71$ ).

## Surface Acting, Deep Acting, & Workplace Outcomes

- *Deep acting*: Service workers attempt to modify their felt inner emotions to meet organizational goals (Grandy, 2003; Groth et al., 2009).
  - *Surface acting*: Service workers fake their true emotions (Groth et al., 2009) and modify their facial expressions (Grandy, 2003) accordingly.
- Surface acting and deep acting are related to a number of workplace indicators, including:
- job performance (Goodwin et al, 2011),
  - personal accomplishments and sense of authenticity (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002),
  - job satisfaction (Grandy, 2003, Blau, Bentley, & Eggerichs-Purcell, 2012; Matteson & Miller, 2013; Scott et al., 2012),
  - burnout and turnover (Blau et al., 2012; Goodwin et al., 2011; Grandy, 2003; Matteson & Miller, 2013).