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Abstract

Due to its influence on important workplace outcomes, surface acting has drawn increasing attention from researchers in recent years. Most of the research in this area has focused on employees' interactions with individuals external to the organization, such as customers and clients (Bolton, 2005; Grandey et al., 2013). With the current study, we contribute to and extend the literature by focusing on employees' leader-directed surface acting and examining how leader-directed surface acting (i.e., faking positive emotions and suppressing negative emotions in interactions with one's leader) relates to leader ratings of employee task performance. Data collected from 414 employees and 103 leaders showed that employees' faking positive emotions in interactions with leaders was positively associated with employee withdrawal, but withdrawal was not significantly related to leader-rated task performance. In addition, male employees' suppressing negative emotions in interactions with leaders was positively associated with leaders' communication satisfaction, which was, in turn, positively related to leader-rated task performance. Yet, similar effects were not found for female employees. Theoretical and practical study implications are discussed.

Keywords: leader-directed surface acting, faking positive emotions, suppressing negative emotions, leader-rated task performance, gender

Fake It Till You Make It With Your Boss? Surface Acting in Interactions With Leaders

Employees' regulation of emotional displays (i.e., expressions) without changing internal emotional experiences is commonly referred to as *surface acting* in the work context (Hochschild, 1983). Given its associations with various important workplace outcomes (e.g., poorer health, well-being, and performance; decreased job satisfaction; increased turnover intentions; see meta-analyses by Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2011), this emotion regulation strategy has drawn increasing attention from researchers in recent years. Most of the research in this area has focused on employees' interactions with customers and clients, who are external to the organization (e.g., Bolton, 2005; Grandey et al., 2013; Harper, 2020; Holman et al., 2008). Indeed, regulation of emotional displays in these interactions are often explicitly required by the job (i.e., "service with a smile"; Grandey, 2000). However, employees' regulation of emotional expressions is also common in interactions with other organizational members (e.g., leaders, coworkers). For example, by surveying employees in 12 organizations, Mann (1999) found that faking or suppressing emotional displays occurs in about two thirds of workplace communications, both at and away from the frontline. In addition, Mann found that there is just as much surface acting among organizational members as there is between employees and individuals external to the organization. However, it is important to note that interactions among organizational members differ from those between employees and customers. For example, the nature of interpersonal relationships (e.g., ongoing relationships vs. one-time incidents) and expectations regarding emotional expressions (e.g., display rules) may differ depending on whether an employee is interacting with another organizational member or with a customer (Diefendorff & Greguras, 2009; Grandey et al., 2007). Given such differences, traditional

research on surface acting may be inadequate for understanding employees' management of emotional displays in interactions with coworkers or leaders. This concern has resulted in several recent calls for research on employees' surface acting in interactions within organizations (e.g., Grandey & Melloy, 2017; Hu & Shi, 2015).

Even with interactions among organizational members there are differences depending on the interaction partner. Due to the employee–leader power imbalance, employees' interactions with leaders, rather than coworkers, may necessitate the largest amount of employee surface acting. Given that leaders have the power to control and influence employees' resources and career advancement (Kramer, 1995; Tucker & Jimmieson, 2017), employees may feel a strong need to manage their emotional displays in interactions with their leaders. However, there is scant research on employees' regulation of emotional expressions with leaders. Very few studies involve employees' surface acting in interactions with leaders and its outcomes. For example, in previous studies, leader-directed surface acting was negatively related to employees' job satisfaction, perceived supervisor support, and leaders' perceived competence of employees and positively related to employees' leader–member exchange, subjective health complaints, and burnout (Deng et al., 2020; Glasø & Einarsen, 2008; Hu & Shi, 2015; Mo & Shi, 2017; Yang et al., 2021).

In the present study, we build upon and extend previous research by examining whether and how employees' surface acting in interactions with leaders is related to task performance ratings provided by leaders. Given their importance for both employees and organizations, task performance ratings are often considered the core outcome variable in organizational research (Campbell & Wiernik, 2015). To our knowledge, only one study has examined the relationship between leader-directed surface acting and employee task performance, and no significant

relationship was found (Mo & Shi, 2017). We contend that the effects of leader-directed surface acting on leader ratings of task performance are likely complex, given that such effects can be considered not only intrapersonal, but also interpersonal. This notion is consistent with Côté's (2005, p. 509) recommendation that, in addition to "intrapersonal mechanisms that operate inside the mind and body," researchers should also examine "interpersonal mechanisms that operate between individuals" when studying the effects of emotion regulation. In line with this recommendation, Martínez-Iñigo and colleagues (2007) examined the intrapersonal and interpersonal mechanisms linking emotion regulation in the service sector and emotional exhaustion and supported the existence of both mechanisms. Although Côté (2005) and Martínez-Iñigo and colleagues (2007) focused on the impact of emotion regulation on well-being, we contend that employees' surface acting can exert influence on other important outcomes, via both intrapersonal and interpersonal mechanisms, such as leader ratings of task performance. On the one hand, surface acting can incur psychological costs (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013) detrimental to task performance (Lyddy et al., 2021). On the other hand, as we discuss below, surface acting may facilitate smooth and pleasant communication and relate to favorable performance evaluations when directed toward leaders. To disentangle these intricate effects and examine intrapersonal and interpersonal mechanisms simultaneously, we propose a dual pathway model wherein employees' surface acting in interactions with leaders has negative and positive effects on leader ratings of task performance via different mechanisms (see Figure 1). Specifically, we expected employees' surface acting to increase withdrawal, which, in turn, leads to lower task performance ratings provided by leaders (i.e., the intrapersonal pathway). In contrast, we also expected surface acting to improve leaders' communication satisfaction, which, in turn, results in higher leader ratings of task performance (i.e., the interpersonal pathway).

In addition, the effect of employees' surface acting on their performance ratings is unlikely to be the same across individuals. Despite past studies linking surface acting and performance in the service industry (Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011), little is known about the conditions under which the effects of surface acting differ. This omission is problematic because we need to know not only the general impact of surface acting, but also when and for whom such impact exists. Consistent with this notion, Grandey and Gabriel (2015) called for research identifying the boundary conditions of surface acting on performance. Given the cumulated empirical evidence supporting significant gender differences in emotion regulation (e.g., men are more likely to use alcohol to regulate their emotions; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012) and its impact (e.g., surface acting is negatively related to job satisfaction for women; Walsh & Babartirtikowski, 2013), gender is likely to be a key moderator for the aforementioned relationships. Thus, we examine the potential moderating effects of employee gender to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the linkages between employees' leader-directed surface acting and leader ratings of task performance.

By focusing on these issues, this study makes three major contributions. First, the literature on emotion regulation in interactions between leaders and employees has generally focused on leaders' management of their own emotional experiences and expressions in interactions with employees and the impact of leaders' emotion regulation on employees (see, e.g., Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011; Côté et al., 2013; Haver et al., 2013; Humphrey, 2012; Humphrey et al., 2015). Although the aforementioned research is invaluable with respect to the emotional nature of leading others (Humphrey et al., 2016), much less is known about *employees'* emotion regulation in interactions with leaders. The few studies on leader-directed surface acting have largely focused on various well-being and relational outcomes (e.g., Glasø &

Einarsen, 2008; Hu & Shi, 2015). The current study sheds light on the potential implications of leader-directed surface acting for employees' performance evaluation and contributes to a more complete understanding of the role of surface acting in interactions between employees and leaders.

Second, we propose and test a dual pathway model to elucidate relationships between leader-directed surface acting and task performance ratings provided by leaders. Specifically, we simultaneously considered the influence of surface acting on both the actors (employees) and the interaction partners (leaders). By drawing from perspectives on emotion regulation (Gross, 1998), emotional labor (Grandey, 2000; Grandey & Gabriel, 2015), and emotions-as-social-influence (EASI; Van Kleef et al., 2012), the present study speaks to the importance of recognizing the potential effects of emotional expressions on both parties (employees and leaders) when researching employees' emotional displays at work. Given the intrapersonal and interpersonal nature of surface acting's effects (e.g., Martínez-Iñigo et al., 2007; Zhan et al., 2016), the dual pathway approach adopted by the current study can provide a more complete understanding of emotional displays in the workplace.

Third, to our knowledge, no study has examined the role of employee gender in leader-directed surface acting. However, given significant gender differences in emotion regulation and its consequences (e.g., Chaplin, 2015; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012), the effects of leader-directed surface acting are likely to differ across gender groups. The current study addresses this research gap and examines employee gender as a key moderator variable, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of leader-directed surface acting.

Theory and Hypotheses

Emotional labor refers to individuals managing their emotions vis-à-vis work-role interaction expectations (e.g., emotional display rules) involving how to interact with others. (Grandey & Melloy, 2017). Originally, emotional labor was conceptualized as surface acting (i.e., regulating outward emotional expressions rather than internal emotional experiences) and deep acting (i.e., regulating internal emotional experiences to align with outward emotional expressions) in the context of customer-facing jobs (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Hochschild, 1983; Troth et al., 2018). Yet, in recent years, researchers have started to expand the boundaries of this construct and apply the concept to interpersonal interactions beyond customer service (Grandey & Sayre, 2019). As Grandey and Gabriel (2015) indicated in their review, "Today, emotional labor is being studied as surface and deep acting with coworkers (Ozcelik 2013) and leaders (Ashkanasy & Humphrey 2011, Gardner et al. 2009), and even with marital partners (Yanchus et al. 2010)" (pp. 327–328). In the current study, we focus on surface acting because it is generally considered more maladaptive than deep acting (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). Following recent research (e.g., Deng et al., 2020; Hu & Shi, 2015; Mo & Shi, 2017), we use the term "surface acting" in the examination of employees' regulation of emotional displays (without changing internal emotional experiences) in interactions with other organizational members.

In previous research, surface acting has usually been treated as a single construct despite scholars conceptually differentiating between faking and suppressing (Côté, 2005; Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Troth et al., 2018). Recently, multiple researchers have encouraged separating the faking and suppressing dimensions of surface acting from one another in empirical research because they may relate to other variables differently (e.g., Hu & Shi, 2015; Taxer & Frenzel, 2015). We accordingly examined faking positive emotional expressions and suppressing

negative emotional expressions[1] as two major forms of surface acting. In many organizations, social norms encourage expression of positive emotions and suppression of negative emotions to help employees build courteous and friendly interpersonal interactions (Grandey & Sayre, 2019; Wharton & Erickson, 1993). Consequently, employees generally tend to display positive emotions and suppress negative emotional expressions in interactions with different work targets (Diefendorff & Greguras, 2009). Moreover, the surface acting strategies employees frequently engage in include faking positive emotions and suppressing negative emotions (Glomb & Tews, 2004). For example, an employee may intentionally express enthusiasm without actually experiencing it or suppress their expression of irritation while still experiencing the negative emotion internally.

Below, we provide a detailed discussion of the study variables and advance hypotheses regarding their expected relationships with leader-directed surface acting.

The Intrapersonal Pathway Through Employee Withdrawal

Faking positive emotions and suppressing negative emotions often requires considerable employee effort—especially in the presence of strong emotional display rules (Grandey & Sayre, 2019). Doing so tends to have deleterious consequences, such as impaired health, well-being, and job performance (Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2011). Surface acting inevitably results in a state of emotional dissonance characterized by a lack of alignment between authentic and displayed emotions (Grandey, 2003; Lewig & Dollard, 2003). Emotional dissonance is an inherently detrimental state for individuals and leads to alienation from the true self (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). Given

[1] Although the term "suppressing" may mean the suppression of negative emotional experiences, we examine suppressing as a dimension of surface acting in the current research. Thus, in the present study, "suppressing" refers to the suppression of emotional displays rather than emotional experiences.

the resulting emotional dissonance, surface acting in the workplace is associated with increased internal tension (Wagner et al., 2014) which may require additional work breaks to release. Moreover, surface acting may necessitate a great amount of emotion regulation as people need to continuously monitor the discrepancy between their internal feelings and external displays. The effortful emotion regulation surface acting typically requires can be very taxing to employees' personal resources (motivational energy), which are important for the completion of work goals (Beal et al., 2006; Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Richards & Gross, 1999; Uy et al., 2017). Each individual has a limited pool of motivational resources. Surface acting can drain such resources and lead to a resource loss spiral because it requires constant modification of expressions (Grandey et al., 2005; Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). Given the likely resource deficit associated with surface acting, it may be difficult for employees to maintain engagement. Consequently, they may become more likely to withdraw (e.g., take long breaks, talk to coworkers about non-work-related topics; Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). Researchers have observed this phenomenon in the context of employee–customer interactions (e.g., Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Côté & Morgan, 2002; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012; Rubin et al., 2005; Scott & Barnes, 2011).

Additionally, employees' emotion regulation can be influenced by perceptions of others' power and status. For example, employees may be motivated to surface act in the presence of powerful and high-status individuals (Shumski Thomas et al., 2018; Wessel & Steiner, 2015). Moreover, leaders' preferences and expectations for compliance and respect may, in part, compel leader-directed surface acting, which could be particularly taxing due to the strong situational demands caused by the power imbalance (Hu & Shi, 2015). Therefore, we expect positive relationships between leader-directed surface acting and employee withdrawal.

Withdrawal entails "behaviors that restrict the amount of time working to *less than is required by the organization* [emphasis added]" (Spector et al., 2006, p. 450); thus, withdrawal undermines task performance by limiting the amount of time employees spend fulfilling their job responsibilities. In addition to physically keeping employees from working, withdrawal is associated with reduced efficacy, cognitive distancing from job activities, and decrease in efforts that can be put forth to perform work tasks (Swider & Zimmerman, 2014). Several meta-analyses (see Bycio, 1992; Swider & Zimmerman, 2014; Viswesvaran, 2002; Zimmerman & Darnold, 2009) point to an overall negative pattern of relationships between withdrawal behaviors and job performance (but cf. Carpenter & Berry, 2017). In addition, a supervisor noticing a direct report's withdrawal behaviors may evaluate this employee's performance negatively. For example, if an employee begins to take more breaks than usual, this employee may draw suspicion from their supervisor, who may question their work performance.

Taken together, we expect leader-directed surface acting to precipitate withdrawal, which, in turn, leads to lower leader-rated task performance.

Hypothesis 1: Employees (a) faking positive emotions and (b) suppressing negative emotions in interactions with leaders are positively associated with their withdrawal.

Hypothesis 2: Employee withdrawal mediates the relationships between employees (a) faking positive emotions and (b) suppressing negative emotions in interactions with leaders and their task performance rated by leaders.

The Interpersonal Pathway Through Leaders' Communication Satisfaction

In contrast to the potential detrimental effects described above, leader-directed surface acting may also have positive relational consequences. Given its inauthentic nature, surface acting may lead to unfavorable perceptions and reactions of interaction partners as such behavior

may indicate lack of interest in relationship development (Côté, 2005). Relatedly, prior research showed that individuals generally respond less favorably to inauthentic emotional displays than to authentic emotional expressions (Frank et al., 1993; Grandey et al., 2005). However, this may not be universally the case, and we contend that employees' surface acting may result in positive reactions from leaders given the power imbalance between the two parties. Interaction partners' expectations can inform emotion regulation in the workplace (Troth et al., 2018). In interactions between employees and leaders, leaders typically expect obedience and respect from employees, who may use adjusted emotional expressions as a deference gesture to facilitate smooth interactions with leaders (Hu & Shi, 2015). Given the power leaders hold over employees, leaders are likely to interpret employees' surface acting as a demonstration of submissiveness and compliance (Liu et al., 2006) rather than disinterest in relationship development. In interactions characterized by power asymmetry, obedience of the less-powerful party can balance the other party's dominance and facilitate high-quality communication (Kiesler, 1983; Wiltermuth et al., 2015). In addition, emotional expressions have been linked with impression management at work (Soran & Balkan, 2013). Indeed, cultivating a courteous and friendly image often involves expression of positive emotions and suppression of unpleasant emotions. It has been found that employees' engagement in impression management has a positive impact on their interactions with leaders (Aggarwal & Krishnan, 2013). Displays of positive emotions and suppression of negative emotions can help employees express conformity with the values and thought processes of leaders, indicating the congruence and harmony between the two parties. Thus, employees' surface acting likely promotes smoother communication with leaders and engenders leaders' communication satisfaction.

According to the EASI model, emotional expressions can ultimately impact interaction partners' behavior (Van Kleef et al., 2012). One mechanism explaining the expression–behavior link posited by the EASI model entails emotional displays eliciting complementary affective or affect-driven reactions. Another mechanism involves emotional expressions impacting observers' cognitive inferences. Thus, based on the EASI model and the ideas discussed above, we expect the positive emotional displays and lack of negative emotional displays from leader-directed surface acting to engender leaders' positive feelings (e.g., "I enjoy communicating with this employee."). Moreover, leaders may make positive cognitive inferences about employees' communication (e.g., "This employee is a great communicator, and it is easy to reach agreement with this employee.").

To our knowledge, the link between leader-directed surface acting and leaders' communication satisfaction has been examined only in one study, yet no significant relationship was found (Hu & Shi, 2015). Notwithstanding this null finding, we draw on the aforementioned theoretical perspectives and anticipate positive relationships between leader-directed surface acting and leaders' communication satisfaction.

To succeed at work, employees must demonstrate the ability to communicate well with others. Indeed, meta-analytic evidence demonstrates a positive relationship between other-rated communication skills and job performance (Arthur et al., 2003; Huffcutt et al., 2001). Moreover, keeping track of employee performance and communicating performance feedback are fundamentally important leadership responsibilities (Tseng & Levy, 2019). Leaders glean insights about performance by interacting and communicating with employees (Kacmar et al., 2003). Additionally, it has been long established that much of leader–employee communication is task related (see Dunning, 1988; Jablin, 1979). Thus, satisfying leader–employee

communication may indicate task-related communication synchrony between employees and leaders (Barry & Crant, 2000) and elicit more favorable performance evaluations. It may be that leader-directed surface acting amounts to enjoyable and satisfying task-related communication that positively informs leaders' evaluations of employees' task-related behavior (e.g., "This employee does a good job fulfilling their job responsibilities."). Relatedly, previous research suggests that leader-rated communication competence is positively associated with leader-rated job performance (Payne, 2005).

Taken together, we expect leader-directed surface acting to engender leaders' communication satisfaction, which, in turn, leads to higher leader-rated task performance.

Hypothesis 3: Employees (a) faking positive emotions and (b) suppressing negative emotions in interactions with leaders are positively associated with leaders' communication satisfaction.

Hypothesis 4: Leaders' communication satisfaction mediates the relationships between employees (a) faking positive emotions and (b) suppressing negative emotions in interactions with leaders and their task performance rated by leaders.

Employee Gender as a Moderator

The psychology literature has documented gender differences in emotional expression and regulation (Chaplin, 2015; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012). In particular, Brody and Hall (2008) pointed out that "both interpersonal and intrapersonal processes may be influenced by a complex interaction or feedback loop between gender differences in underlying biological processes and social and cultural responses to those differences" (p. 395). Therefore, in this section, we integrate research on gender differences to develop hypotheses for gender as a moderator.

Employee Gender as a Moderator for the Intrapersonal Pathway. Although surface acting requires employees' effort and can result in resource depletion, how exhausting it is may vary depending on employee gender. Limited empirical evidence supports gender differences in customer-directed emotional labor literature. For example, across a wide range of customer service positions, female (vs. male) service employees have been more likely to report negative well-being consequences when engaging in surface acting while serving customers (Johnson & Spector, 2007; Walsh & Bartikowski, 2013). Additionally, and more specifically, the within-person relationship between surface acting and withdrawal behaviors may be stronger for female (vs. male) bus drivers (Scott & Barnes, 2011). Notably, none of these studies involved emotional labor directed toward other organizational members such as leaders, and none have differentiated different forms of surface acting. In the current research, we aim to examine whether gender moderates the effects of leader-directed surface acting on employee withdrawal, and subsequently, leader ratings of employee task performance.

We contend that leader-directed suppression of negative emotions is more exhausting and therefore more likely to relate to withdrawal for female (vs. male) employees. Existing studies suggest that based on a combination of biological gender differences and socialization into different gender roles (Chaplin, 2015), women are more reactive to emotional stimuli and generally more emotionally expressive than men. For instance, research by Gross and John (1998) has shown that women reported higher levels of emotional expressivity. As such, hiding one's true feelings is incongruent with women's tendencies and, therefore, can be particularly resource demanding for women. In contrast, men tend to be less emotionally expressive. Indeed, research has shown that men reported higher levels of emotional suppression compared to women (Gross & John, 1998, 2003; Rogier et al., 2019); thus, men may be better accustomed to

hiding their emotions. Relatedly, compared to women, when men attempt to suppress negative emotions in interacting with leaders, exhaustion and withdrawal may be less likely.

Hypothesis 5: Employee gender moderates the relationship between suppressing negative emotions and employee withdrawal, such that this relationship is stronger for female (vs. male) employees.

Hypothesis 6: Employee gender moderates the indirect effect of suppressing negative emotions on employee performance rated by leaders through employee withdrawal, such that this indirect effect is stronger for female (vs. male) employees.

As for faking positive emotions, given women's tendency to express what they are feeling and men's tendency to be less expressive, we expect faking unfelt emotions to be similarly exhausting to male and female employees. Therefore, we do not develop a formal hypothesis for a gender difference in the effect of faking positive emotions on withdrawal. Rather, we explore the potential of this gender difference in our analysis.

Employee Gender as a Moderator for the Interpersonal Pathway. We hypothesize that leader-directed surface acting (both faking positive emotions and suppressing negative emotions) is more strongly related to leaders' communication satisfaction for male (vs. female) employees. Drawing on gender stereotype research, there exist both descriptive stereotypes, which *describe* what men and women are like, and prescriptive stereotypes, which *prescribe* how men and women *ought* to be like (Heilman, 2012). According to the prescriptive stereotypes, in general, women are expected to be warm, obedient, and concern for others (Eagly, 1987). In contrast, men are expected to be dominant and assertive but low on warmth (Heilman, 2012; Hentschel et al., 2019). We contend that faking positive emotions and suppressing negative emotions are in line with the prescriptive stereotypes of women but less consistent with the

prescriptive stereotypes of men. These emotion regulation strategies increase positive emotional displays and decrease negative emotional displays in social interactions. Such behavior may help foster a friendly and comfortable communication atmosphere for one's interaction partner and reflect one's respect and obedience to the interaction partner. Therefore, depending on the (in)congruence with gender stereotypes, faking positive emotions and suppressing negative emotions tend to be expected for women but unexpected for men.

Further, according to the notion of expectation violation, people who engage in unexpected yet positive behaviors can be evaluated more favorably than people who engage in the same behaviors but for whom such behaviors confirm a stereotype (Hentschel et al., 2018; Prentice & Carranza, 2004). Accordingly, the warmth and respect women express through faking positive emotions and suppressing negative emotions are taken for granted and less appreciated—as such behavior confirms female stereotypes. In contrast, male employees demonstration of warmth and respect through surface acting contradicts prescriptive stereotypes. Indeed, previous research suggests that men are perceived positively when acting warmly (e.g., Heilman & Chen, 2005; Hentschel et al., 2018). This pleasant violation of gender expectations can be particularly relevant when the interaction partner is one's leader; followers' respect and compliance help facilitate leaders' influence over followers (Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011). Specifically, a male employee's effort in regulating his emotional expressions may signal that he is cooperative and that he respects the leaders' power. Therefore, we expect that male employees' surface acting is more likely to increase leaders' communication satisfaction.

> *Hypothesis 7*: Employee gender moderates the relationships between (a) faking positive emotions and (b) suppressing negative emotions and leaders' communication satisfaction, such that these relationships are stronger for male (vs. female) employees.

Hypothesis 8: Employee gender moderates the indirect effects of (a) faking positive emotions and (b) suppressing negative emotions on employee performance rated by leaders through leaders' communication satisfaction, such that these indirect effects are stronger for male (vs. female) employees.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Data were obtained from full-time employees and their team leaders within different companies located in a major city in China. All employees were entry-level or junior-level workers with no leadership responsibilities. The team leaders were responsible for overseeing direct reports. There was a significant amount of interaction between employees and their leaders at work. During the recruiting process, we first contacted team leaders through the human resource departments of multiple organizations and asked whether they would like to participate in the study. We then asked the human resource departments for the lists of employees for whom each leader was in charge. We contacted these employees about their willingness to participate. Out of a total of 500 employees contacted by the research team, 414 (82.80%) employees from 103 teams (ranging from one to five members)[2] voluntarily completed and returned the survey. The majority of these employees were female (62.32%). Employees' mean age was 31.28 years (SD = 7.44) and their mean organizational tenure was 5.44 years (SD = 5.52). Among the 103 team leaders, 51 were female (49.51%). Leaders' mean age was 34.72 years (SD = 5.10), and their mean organizational tenure was 6.31 years (SD = 3.65). Participants worked in 22

[2] Given that our conceptual model and analysis are at the individual level rather than the team level, all teams (including those with only one or two members responding to the survey) were retained in the final sample and data analysis.

companies operating in different industries, including manufacturing (87%), information technology (7%), construction (4%), and publishing (2%).

Employees responded to a paper-and-pencil survey containing measures of leader-directed surface acting, withdrawal, and demographic variables. Their task performance was rated by their team leaders. The leaders also rated their communication satisfaction with each direct report. All participants were assured that their responses would be kept confidential and would only be used for research purposes.

Measures

All measures were translated from English to Chinese following Brislin's (1981) back-translation procedures. All responses were made on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 6 (*completely agree*), except for the surface acting and withdrawal measures as indicated below.

Employee-Reported Variables

Demographic Variables. Employees were asked to report their gender ("Your gender?" with "Male" and "Female"—coded as 0 and 1, respectively—as response options), which was examined as a moderator variable. Additionally, employees' age and tenure with leader (how long they have worked with their leaders) were included as control variables. These control variables were measured because age differences have been found in surface acting, emotion regulation, and other employee behavior such as task performance and deviance (Dello Russo et al., 2021; Peng et al., 2021; Scheibe et al., 2016). Additionally, employees' behaviors in interactions with their leaders are likely to be influenced by how long they have worked together with their leaders (Hu & Shi, 2015).

Surface Acting. Surface acting was assessed with items adapted from the Discrete Emotions Emotional Labor Scale (DEELS), which was developed to measure employees' general, on-the-job surface acting (Glomb & Tews, 2004). The original questions were revised because the current study focused on employees' surface acting toward leaders. More specifically, for faking positive emotions, participants were instructed to answer questions in the form of "How often do you express feelings of _____ in interactions with your leader when you really do not feel that way?" Positive emotions occupying the blank were happiness, interest, and amusement. The questions for suppressing negative emotions were in the form of "How often do you keep feelings of _____ to yourself in interactions with your leader when you really feel that way?" Negative emotions occupying the blank were sadness, anger, and frustration. Employees answered these questions using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*always*). The original DEELS measures employees' faking and suppression of fourteen emotions. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Hu & Shi, 2015), only the six emotions indicated above were measured in the current study due to concerns regarding the length of the survey. Coefficient alpha was .88 for the faking items and .87 for the suppressing items.

Withdrawal. Withdrawal was assessed with Spector et al.'s (2006) 4-item withdrawal scale. A sample item is "Taken a longer break than you were allowed to take." Employees were asked to rate the frequency of engaging each behavior on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*always*). Coefficient alpha for this scale was .76.

Leader-Reported Variables

Leader's Communication Satisfaction. Communication satisfaction was measured by three items adapted from Park and Raile's (2010) communication satisfaction scale. A sample

item is “Overall, I am very satisfied in my conversations with this employee.” Coefficient alpha for this scale was .78.

Leader-Rated Task Performance. Team leaders rated employees’ task performance on four items from Williams and Anderson’s (1991) in-role performance scale. A sample item is “Adequately completes assigned duties.” Coefficient alpha for this scale was .77.

Analysis Strategy

Before running primary analyses to examine study hypotheses, confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) were conducted to examine whether core study variables represented distinct constructs. Next, path analyses were conducted in Mplus to test the hypotheses. Because Hypotheses 1–4 do not involve any moderation effects, a path model without interaction terms was first estimated. Specifically, withdrawal and communication satisfaction were regressed on the two predictors (faking positive emotions and suppressing negative emotions) and three control variables (gender, age, and tenure with leader). Task performance was regressed on the two predictors (faking positive emotions and suppressing negative emotions), the two mediators (withdrawal and communication satisfaction), and the three control variables. Subsequently, to test Hypotheses 5–8, a second path model including interaction terms was estimated. Specifically, withdrawal and communication satisfaction were regressed on the two predictors (faking positive emotions and suppressing negative emotions), the moderator variable gender, two interaction terms (faking positive emotions * gender and suppressing negative emotions * gender), and two control variables (age and tenure with leader). Task performance was regressed on the two predictors (faking positive emotions and suppressing negative emotions), the two mediators (withdrawal and communication satisfaction), gender, and the two control variables. For both models, to account for the nested structure of the data (employees nested within teams),

we specified team membership as a clustering variable in the analysis. Essentially, these analyses represent multilevel modeling with no Level 2 predictors. The two types of surface acting are Level 1 predictors. Analyses were conducted based on $N = 414$. Organization membership did not contribute to significant variance in surface acting and outcome variables and thus was not included in the analyses.

The Monte Carlo method was used to construct 95% confidence intervals (CIs) for the indirect effect of surface acting on performance via withdrawal or communication satisfaction (Selig & Preacher, 2008). Significant indirect effects are found when CIs do not include zero (Preacher & Selig, 2012). Similarly, conditional indirect effects were examined by using the Monte Carlo method and constructing CIs to determine the significance of the indirect effects separately for males and females.

Results

Table 1 displays means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables. CFAs were conducted to examine whether core study variables (faking positive emotions, suppressing negative emotions, withdrawal, communication satisfaction, and task performance) represented distinct constructs. Results showed that a five-factor model fitted the data well ($\chi^2 = 182.66$, $df = 109$, CFI = 0.97, RMSEA= 0.04). We also tested a four-factor model in which items of faking positive emotions and suppressing negative emotions were set to load on one factor. This model fitted the data significantly worse than the five-factor model ($\chi^2 = 631.14$, $df = 113$, $\Delta\chi^2(4) = 448.48$, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.82, RMSEA= 0.11). Additionally, as the communication satisfaction and task performance were both rated by leaders, we tested another four-factor model where items of these two variables were set to load on one factor. This model also fitted the data significantly worse than the five-factor model ($\chi^2 = 374.20$, $df = 113$, $\Delta\chi^2(4) = 191.54$, p

< .001, CFI = 0.91, RMSEA= 0.08). Taken together, these results supported the discriminant validity of the study variables.

Path analytic results were presented in Table 2. Supporting Hypothesis 1a, faking positive emotions was positively related to withdrawal (b = 0.13, p < .01). Suppressing negative emotions was not related to withdrawal (b = -0.07, p > .05), failing to support Hypothesis 1b. Further, withdrawal was not significantly related to task performance (b = 0.13, p > .05). As a result, withdrawal did not significantly mediate the effect of surface acting (faking positive emotions and suppressing negative emotions) on performance. Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

As shown in Table 2, faking positive emotions and suppressing negative emotions were not related to communication satisfaction (faking: b = -0.03, p > .05; suppressing: b = 0.01, p > .05), failing to support Hypothesis 3. Further, communication satisfaction was positively related to task performance (b = 0.37, p < .01). The indirect effects of faking positive emotions suppressing negative emotions on performance through communication satisfaction were not significant given the nonsignificant relationship between the two forms of surface acting and communication satisfaction, failing to support Hypothesis 4.

As presented in Table 2, gender did not moderate the relationships between surface acting and withdrawal (faking: b = 0.02, p > .05; suppressing: b = -0.09, p > .05), failing to support Hypothesis 5. Given these nonsignificant moderation effects, the indirect relationship between suppressing negative emotions and performance via withdrawal would not be moderated by gender. Thus, Hypothesis 6 was not supported.

As seen in Table 2, gender did not moderate the relationship between faking positive emotions and communication satisfaction (b = 0.06, p > .05) but significantly moderated the relationship between suppressing negative emotions and communication (b = -0.17, p = .03).

Tests of simple slopes showed that suppressing negative emotions was positively related to communication satisfaction (b = 0.12, p = .02) for male employees, but not for female employees (b = -0.06, p > .05). The pattern of the interaction is presented in Figure 2. Thus, Hypothesis 7a was not supported, but Hypothesis 7b was supported. Because the moderation effect of gender on the relationship between faking positive emotions and communication satisfaction was not significant, the indirect relationship between faking positive emotions and performance via communication satisfaction would not be moderated by gender. Thus, Hypothesis 8a was not supported. Given that gender moderated the relationship between suppressing negative emotions and communication satisfaction, the indirect effects of suppressing negative emotions on performance through communication satisfaction were estimated for males and females separately. The indirect effect of suppressing negative emotions on task performance through communication satisfaction was significant for males, 95% CI [.0050, .0823], but not for females, 95% CI [-.0613, .0274]. Thus, Hypothesis 8b was supported.

Discussion

With the present study, we advance research on leader-directed surface acting by examining how and why this phenomenon relates to employees' leader-rated task performance as well as exploring the potential moderating role of employee gender. First, faking positive emotions in interactions with leaders was positively associated with employee withdrawal. Second, male employees' suppressing negative emotions in interactions with leaders was positively associated with leaders' communication satisfaction, which mediated the positive indirect effect of suppressing negative emotions on leader-rated task performance. Yet, similar effects were not found for female employees. Below, we discuss the theoretical and practical implications of the current study.

Theoretical Implications

First, our study builds on research of employee surface acting within organizations by examining both intrapersonal and interpersonal outcomes of two specific surface acting strategies (faking positive emotions and suppressing negative emotions). Intrapersonally, our research supported withdrawal as a negative behavioral outcome of surface acting. This finding is in line with the emotional labor literature, which has underscored the largely resource-draining nature of surface acting (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). Yet, we found that withdrawal was only significantly related to faking positive emotions but not suppressing negative emotions, indicating that faking positive emotional expressions might be particularly resource depleting. One possible explanation is that people are typically expected to suppress or control negative emotional expressions in many situations both inside and outside the workplace. For instance, prior research has shown that people, especially those from interdependent cultures, tend to value emotional suppression to preserve interpersonal harmony (Wei et al., 2013). As a result, participants in the current study might be more accustomed to emotional suppression (Richards & Gross, 1999), especially suppressing negative emotions, in comparison to emotional faking.

Further, interpersonally, our study suggested that communication satisfaction of the interaction partner (leaders in the current research) may be a positive outcome of surface acting, at least for male employees. Although this finding is consistent with our hypothesis, prior empirical studies, mostly in the context of employee–customer interactions, have provided divergent findings, showing that surface acting may relate to unfavorable perceptions and reactions of interaction partners (Grandey, 2003; Zhan et al., 2016) due to the inauthentic nature of surface acting. One possible reason for the divergent findings could be the present study's focus on the interactions between employees and leaders. Whereas customers might be

particularly sensitive to cues of emotional authenticity when they expect genuine interest from the service employees, leaders may focus less on employees' emotional authenticity but more on the valence (positive or negative) of employees' emotional displays. Indeed, we found that leaders' communication satisfaction was only significantly related to suppressing negative emotions (for male employees) but not faking positive emotions. This finding suggests that leaders tend to be sensitive to male employees' display of negative emotions or lack thereof. By studying faking positive emotions and suppressing negative emotions separately, we provide evidence that they may be distinct surface acting strategies that have different implications for intrapersonal resource depletion and interpersonal satisfaction. In general, faking positive emotions appears to be a more maladaptive surface acting strategy that gives rise to withdrawal, but suppressing negative emotions can have a beneficial outcome in increasing leaders' communication satisfaction, at least for male employees. Building on our findings, we call for future theoretical development to explicitly consider different forms of surface acting and elaborate on their roles separately. In addition, the significant influences of surface acting on withdrawal and communication satisfaction support the intrapersonal and interpersonal nature of surface acting's effects, highlighting the importance of simultaneously considering these two characteristics in future research.

Second, our study advances research on the understudied topic of leader-directed surface acting by examining *why* leader-directed surface acting relates to leader-rated task performance. Specifically, we proposed work withdrawal and leaders' communication satisfaction to explain the negative and positive relationships, respectively, between employees' leader-directed surface acting and leader-rated employee task performance. Nevertheless, our study only provided support for the pathway whereby suppressing negative emotions related to better leader-rated

task performance via increased communication satisfaction from leaders. This finding is consistent with the EASI model, suggesting that surface acting, or suppressing negative emotions in particular, may give rise to better affective experiences of leaders and favorable inferences about the employees. As a result, performance ratings may have been positively impacted. Surprisingly, work withdrawal was not significantly related to task performance and thus did not play a mediating role between leader-directed surface acting and employee performance. It is possible that employees who are used to faking emotions may also pretend to be engaged in work while actually being psychologically absent. Consequently, such withdrawal may not be highly visible to their leaders and thus may not be reflected in leader ratings of task performance. We do expect that the pathway through withdrawal is more likely to be observed with alternative measures of performance (e.g., performance assessed with objective measures), and we will return to this point later while discussing the limitations of the current study and future research directions.

Third, we examined the role of gender for the relationship between leader-directed surface acting and leader-rated task performance. Previous research suggests that women tend to be more emotionally expressive than men (Gross & John, 1998), and, therefore, we expected women to find emotional suppression more difficult. However, we did not find a significant gender difference. As discussed earlier, we suspect that while women may be more emotionally expressive in general, in the context of workplace, especially in interacting with more powerful figures in the workplace, it is a social norm not to express negative emotions. As a result, employees, regardless of their gender, are likely accustomed to suppressing negative emotions. In line with our hypothesis, we found that suppressing negative emotions was positively related to leader's communication satisfaction for male, but not female, employees. This finding adds

evidence to the "warmth bonus" (i.e., being portrayed as warm relates to favorable perceptions and evaluations) that has been observed for men in past research (e.g., Heilman & Chen, 2005; Hentschel et al., 2018). Overall, by explicitly testing the moderating role of gender, our study highlights the importance of investigating the conditions under which surface acting impacts employee outcomes.

Practical Implications

The present study has practical value for leaders in the context of employee performance evaluation. Our results revealed an indirect relationship between employee surface acting and leader-rated task performance mediated by leaders' communication satisfaction. More specifically and importantly, it seems that only male employees benefit from suppressing negative emotions while interacting with leaders. Such a phenomenon amounts to a gender bias favoring men in employee performance evaluation. From the perspective of organizational justice and equity, this gender difference is problematic because women's efforts to suppress their negative emotions may go unrewarded by their leaders—as such behavior is expected of female employees. Organizations may alert those in leadership roles to this potential source of unfair treatment and encourage them to take such possible bias—as well as other demonstrated gender biases present in performance appraisal (e.g., Rivera & Tilcsik, 2019)—into account. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that rater training is beneficial for reducing gender bias in performance evaluation (Bowen et al., 2000).

In addition, our results showed that faking positive emotions may lead to employees interacting less effectively with the work environment, resulting in withdrawal behaviors. We encourage employees to be cognizant of the negative influence of surface acting on their work behaviors. Also, leaders need to be cautious with the emotional display norms in their work unit.

Emotional requirements generally compel the suppression of negative emotions in the workplace (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). But, if there is an overly strong norm for displaying *only* positive emotions in interactions with leaders, employees are at higher risk of experiencing resource depletion. Recently, scholars have highlighted the importance of cultivating an authentic affect climate for organizational success (Parke et al., 2021; see also Parke & Seo, 2017). Leaders can actively foster such a climate by demonstrating empathy, allowing the expression of negative emotions, and modeling and supporting the expression of genuine emotions (e.g., Harper, 2020; Little et al., 2016; Lu et al., 2019; Parke & Seo, 2017; Thiel et al., 2015).

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study has limitations that should be considered. First, we adopted a cross-sectional design to collect data with surveys, thus limiting our ability to make causal inferences. Specifically, both surface acting and withdrawal were self-reported by employees in the same survey, and both leaders' communication satisfaction and employee performance were rated by leaders in the same survey. As a result, reverse causality may be an alternative explanation. For example, employees who withdraw more often might feel a stronger need to engage in surface acting when interacting with leaders. Also, leaders might have more communication satisfaction when interacting with high-performing employees. Therefore, for future studies, researchers should consider adopting experimental designs to manipulate employee surface acting or time-lagged and longitudinal designs to better establish causal effects.

Second, the cross-sectional design raises concerns for common method bias, which leads to upwardly biased correlations (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Nevertheless, we collected data from different sources, which aligned well with our conceptual model (withdrawal reported by employees and leaders' communication satisfaction reported by leaders) and helped reduce the

concern for common method bias. But, by solely relying on leader ratings of employee performance, our design might unintentionally hinder our ability to observe the relationship between withdrawal and task performance yet make the pathway through communication satisfaction more relevant. Other researchers may wish to corroborate our findings with objective performance data or performance data from multiple sources.

Third, our study was conducted in China with a sample of Chinese employees, potentially limiting the generalizability of our findings. It has been well documented that a central value in Chinese culture is interpersonal harmony (Chen et al., 2015). Additionally, China is a country high in power distance (Zhang & Begley, 2011). Thus, hiding negative emotional expressions is more likely to be expected in day-to-day social interactions, particularly when interacting with people occupying higher levels of the organizational hierarchy. Given the emphasis on interpersonal harmony and thus the general avoidance of expressing negative feelings (Wei et al., 2013), suppressing negative emotions might be second nature and consequently require little regulatory effort. This explanation might explain why we did not observe a significant relationship between suppressing negative emotions and withdrawal. This relationship might be stronger in countries that encourage the expression of all different types of emotions. In addition, interpersonal harmony might also lead leaders to be more sensitive to the expression of negative emotions in the workplace. We call for future studies to test the current hypotheses in different countries and regions with different or more diverse cultures.

Fourth, although we proposed a dual pathway model with an intrapersonal mediator (withdrawal) and an interpersonal mediator (leaders' communication satisfaction), there are likely other mediators that may help further explain the relationship between employees' leader-directed surface acting and leader-rated task performance. For example, other intrapersonal

mediators such as employees' job satisfaction or other counterproductive work behaviors (e.g., uncivil behaviors) may be valuable to examine. Additionally, other interpersonal mediators such as leader–member exchange and trust might also contribute to the explanation of the relationship. It is possible that the (in)authenticity aspect of surface acting becomes more relevant in forming high-quality leader–follower relationships (Deng et al., 2020); thus, different patterns of results are likely to be observed. We call for more studies to further understand these links and provide a more complete picture of how employee surface acting might influence performance ratings. In addition to measuring performance, we encourage researchers to consider other potential job-related outcomes of leader-directed surface acting, such as compensation and promotion.

Conclusion

In closing, this study adds depth to our understanding of how, why, and when leader-directed surface acting relates to employee task performance as rated by leaders. The findings show that faking positive expressions is associated with withdrawal, whereas, for male employees only, suppressing negative emotions may pay off in the form of better communication satisfaction from leaders, in turn relating to higher task performance ratings provided by leaders. These findings underscore the importance of examining employees' surface acting in interactions with leaders, who hold a higher status and more power in the workplace. We hope that researchers continue to explore this topic given its rich theoretical and practical implications.

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Bivariate Correlations

Variables	Mean	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender	0.62	0.49							
2. Age	31.28	7.44	.00						
3. Tenure with leader	2.80	2.25	-.01	.41**					
4. Faking positive emotions	2.79	1.16	-.15**	-.01	.02				
5. Suppressing negative emotions	3.19	1.13	-.05	-.08	-.03	.44**			
6. Withdrawal	1.35	0.51	-.12*	-.06	-.05	.25**	-.01		
7. Communication satisfaction	4.68	0.75	-.07	.13*	.14**	-.03	-.01	-.05	
8. Task performance	4.89	0.67	-.11*	.15**	.23**	.13**	.00	.11*	.43**

Note. N = 414. *SD* = standard deviation; Gender: 0 = men, 1 = women. Tenure with leader measured in years.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2

Path Analyses Results

Predictor	Withdrawal		Communication satisfaction		Task performance	
	b	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*
Model without Interactions:						
Gender	-.09	.06	-.11	.09	-.07	.08
Age	.00	.00	.01	.01	.00	.01
Tenure with leader	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
Faking positive emotions	.13**	.02	-.03	.04	.08**	.03
Suppressing negative emotions	-.07	.03	.01	.05	-.03	.03
Withdrawal					.13	.07
Communication satisfaction					.37**	.06
Model with Interactions:						
Gender	.17	.19	.27	.29	-.07	.08
Age	.00	.00	.01	.01	.00	.01
Tenure with leader	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
Faking positive emotions	.13**	.04	-.07	.06	.08**	.03
Suppressing negative emotions	-.01	.04	.12*	.05	-.03	.03
Gender * Faking positive emotions	.02	.05	.06	.09		
Gender * Suppressing negative emotions	-.09	.06	-.17*	.08		
Withdrawal					.13	.07
Communication satisfaction					.37**	.06

Note. $N = 414$. *b* = unstandardized path coefficients; *SE* = standard error; Gender: 0 = men, 1 = women. Tenure with leader measured in years.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model

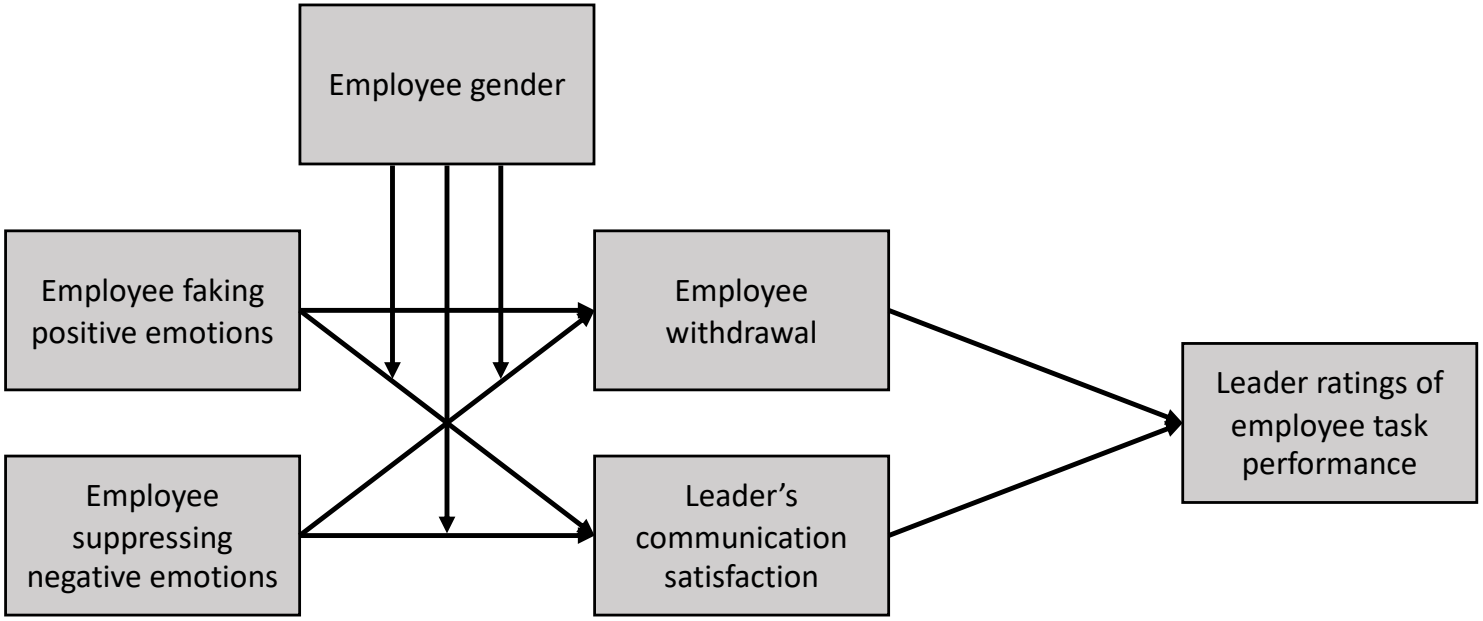
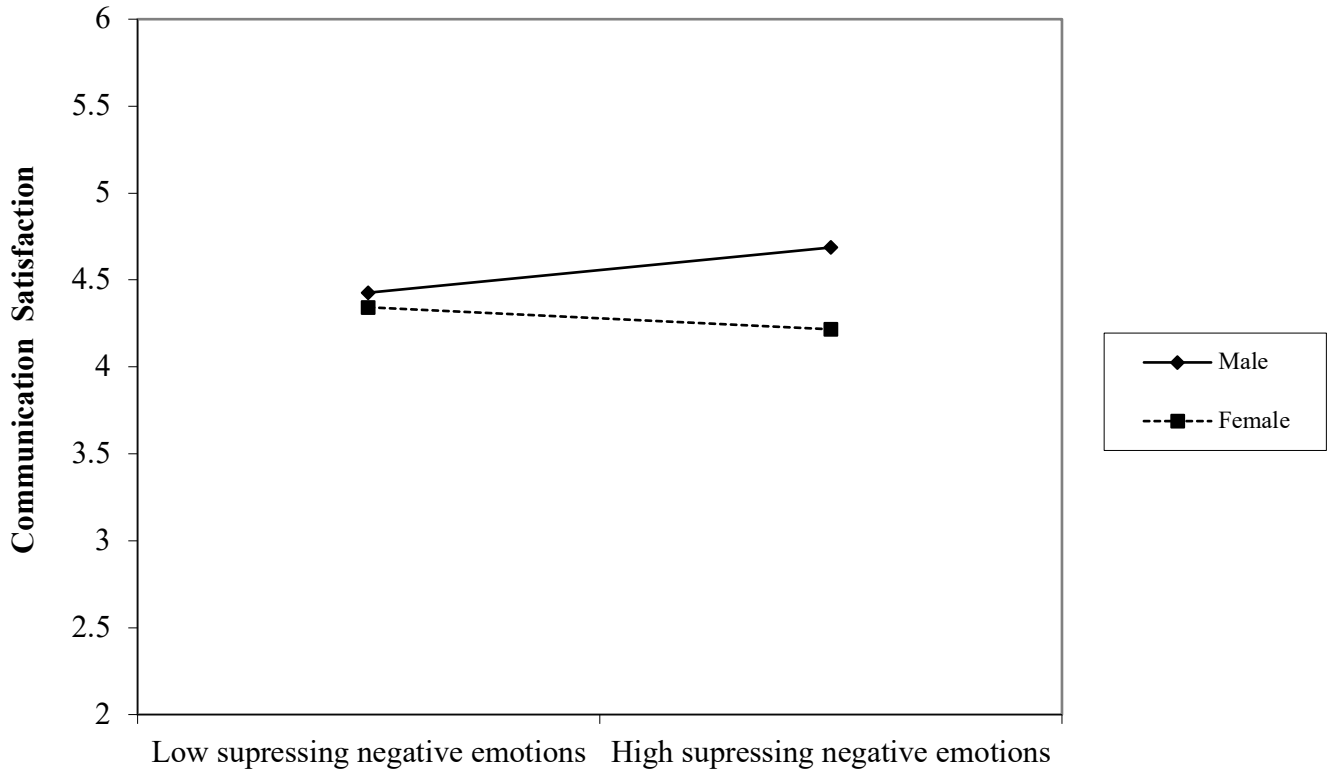


Figure 2

Gender Moderates the Relationship Between Employees' Suppressing Negative Emotions and Leaders' Communication Satisfaction



Note. The relationship was positive for male employees and nonsignificant for female employees.