



The ‘smile’ that delivers the brand: Organisational dehumanisation among frontline staff in the hotel sector – evidence from Sri Lanka

Wanninayake, S.D.K.

University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

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**Abstract**

*This study explores how Sri Lanka’s frontline employees in the hotel industry experienced and responded to organisational dehumanisation. Utilising 58 interviews, this study found that experiences of and responses to organisational dehumanisation were both positive and negative. Adhering to emotion and appearance management, as the ‘face’ of the brand, enabled employees to be recognised as professionals, gain social esteem, and develop a sense of belongingness with the organisation. However, on the other hand, employees suffered emotional strain associated with representing the emotional proletariat and handling constant discrepancies between preferences and organisational requirements. Limited organisational support received by employees to proactively handle their emotional strain led to the adoption of destructive emotion-focused coping methods aggravating the experiences of resource depletion of employees.*

**Keywords:** Organisational dehumanisation, Frontline employees, Sri Lanka

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\*Corresponding author: [dananja.wanninayake@hrm.cmb.ac.lk](mailto:dananja.wanninayake@hrm.cmb.ac.lk)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2808-3226>



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## **INTRODUCTION**

This study explores how frontline employees in the hotel industry in Sri Lanka experience and respond to organisational dehumanisation. Organisational dehumanisation refers to the process of objectifying employees by considering them as property, tools, or objects for organisational benefit rather than thinking, and feeling people with individual goals and desires (Bell & Khoury, 2011). Organisational dehumanisation may be in the form of emotional dehumanisation or aesthetic dehumanisation. Emotional dehumanisation refers to using employees' emotions and feelings for organisational benefit where employees are expected to perform either surface or deep acting. Aesthetic dehumanisation, on the other hand, refers to moulding employees' physical appearance including dress codes, voice, and tone as well as behaviour patterns for organisational benefit.

Organisational dehumanisation would enable organisations to achieve organisational goals and objectives; however, the findings on employees' experiences of and responses to organisational dehumanisation remain contradictory. Some scholars (Baldissarri, Andrighetto, & Volpato, 2021; Caesens, Stinglhamber, Demoulin, & De Wilde, 2017; Nguyen, Dao, Nhan, & Stinglhamber, 2020) claim that organisational dehumanisation impaired employees' well-being by increasing levels of anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion (Caesens et al., 2017) which often led to lower levels of job satisfaction, higher levels of employee turnover (Nguyen et al., 2020) and counterproductive behaviour patterns such as sexual harassment, discrimination, and hostility (Baldissarri et al., 2021; Muhammad & Sarwar, 2021). On the other hand, there are others (Bell & Khoury, 2011; Cutcher & Ahtel, 2017) who propose that organisational dehumanisation is not always negative, but a subjective experience depending on firstly, the individual's degree of tolerance of dehumanisation because anyone is often aware of the existence of some degree of dehumanisation when they enter employment and

secondly, on how employees perceive organisational dehumanisation. For example, if employees develop a sense of belongingness with the brand, being subjected to practices of organisational dehumanisation to be the face of the brand would be a favourable experience (Cutcher & Ahtel, 2017).

This paradoxical juxtaposition has led to a call for more research to explore how individual employees or targets experience and respond to organisational dehumanisation (Väyrynen & Laari-Salmela, 2018). Further, as extant research on organisational dehumanisation has not integrated the cultural and contextual influence on this phenomenon (Nguyen et al., 2020) and most of the current studies have focused on Western work environments, there is limited understanding of whether non-Western employees also experience and respond to organisational dehumanisation similarly to Western employees. Therefore, to add to minimal research on employees' experiences and responses to organisational dehumanisation in general and to understand the contextual and nuanced nature of non-Western employees' experiences and responses to organisational dehumanisation in specific, this study explored how frontline employees in the hotel industry in Sri Lanka experienced and responded to organisational dehumanisation.

Frontline employees in the hospitality sector in Sri Lanka – and globally – are the ambassadors to organisations who convey their organisational image to service recipients. They are expected to “transform their show of personality into a symbol of the company” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 155) via expressing ‘right’ emotions such as respectfulness, empathy, and enthusiasm (Nyanjom & Wilkins, 2021) while maintaining the required physical attractiveness through bodily as well as visual representations (Basnyat, Che, & Ip, 2021), which often made them victims of emotional and aesthetic dehumanisation. For instance, in most hotels, employees are trained to use manipulated gestures, expressions, voices, and tones to appear sincere and authentic to customers (Chu, Baker, &

Murrmann, 2012; Kim & Han, 2009). Many researchers (Chu et al., 2012; Hochschild, 1983; Warhurst & Nickson, 2007) suggest that manipulating expressions of feelings and appearances all day to be a ‘symbol’ of the organisation often became an occupational hazard for frontline workers in the hospitality industry. However, others (Van Dijk & Kirk, 2007) have revealed that when employees ‘performed’ the organisationally expected role for a while, they often got accustomed to it which made ‘performing’ this role not as stressful and there were also instances where it became a positive experience. This contradiction raises the requirement for further research on this phenomenon in the hospitality sector. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore how frontline employees in the hotel industry in Sri Lanka experience and respond to organisational dehumanisation using the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory as the primary theoretical lens (Hobfoll, 2012).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Organisational Dehumanisation – Emotional and Aesthetic Perspectives**

Dehumanisation refers to the process of denying humanity to some persons or groups whereby they are treated as ‘something lesser’ or different from other human beings (Demoulin et al., 2020; Väyrynen & Laari-Salmela, 2018). Dehumanisation may range from simply evaluating others as possessing less human attributes than oneself to the overall exclusion of others from the human category (Demoulin et al., 2020, p. 1). Haslam (2006) proposed that dehumanisation may include two forms which are animalistic dehumanisation and mechanistic dehumanisation. Animalistic dehumanisation refers to perceiving the target to lack features that distinguish animals from humans, for example, civility, refinement, rationality, and maturity (Caesens et al., 2017). On the other hand, mechanistic dehumanisation refers to comparing others with non-human objects such as machines or perceiving that they lack features that define human nature such as individuality, interpersonal warmth, emotional

responsiveness, and seeing the other party as superficial, rigid, passive, and replaceable (Caesens et al., 2017).

The roots of dehumanisation studies lie in violent contexts including war, massacres, and genocides; however, subsequent studies have applied the concept of dehumanisation to relatively less violent contexts including organisational settings and everyday life (Väyrynen & Laari-Salmela, 2018). In discussing dehumanisation in organisational and work contexts, Bell and Khoury (2011) introduced a new phenomenon to the literature, namely, organisational dehumanisation. Organisational dehumanisation is largely in line with mechanistic dehumanisation (Nguyen & Stinglhamber, 2021) and is defined as employees feeling that they are “objectified by his or her organisation, denied personal subjectivity, and made to feel like a tool or instrument” (Bell & Khoury, 2011, p. 168). Researchers (Nguyen & Stinglhamber, 2021) have assimilated organisational dehumanisation to a sort of mistreatment coming from the organisation.

Organisational dehumanisation may be twofold: emotional dehumanisation and aesthetic dehumanisation. Emotional dehumanisation involves believing that employees’ emotions, feelings, and experiences can be nullified or disregarded (Haslam, 2006; Nussbaum, 1999). Aesthetic dehumanising, on the other hand, involves considering employees as physical capital or ‘human hardware’ moulded and marketed by organisations to exemplify organisational requirements through clothing, actions, and behaviour (Witz, Warhurst, & Nickson, 2003). While emotional dehumanisation may lead to performances of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983; Nguyen et al., 2020), aesthetic dehumanisation may lead to performances of aesthetic labour (Nickson, Warhurst, & Dutton, 2005).

Emotional labour refers to the effort employees took to modify their emotions for a wage to meet the expectations of their job roles (Hochschild,

1983; Hülshager, Lang, Schewe, & Zijlstra, 2015). In adhering to the emotional requirements of organisations, employees may either surface or deep act. Surface acting refers to employees stimulating unfelt emotions and/or suppressing felt emotions through careful use of verbal and nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures, and voice tone to meet organisational expectations (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Bozionelos & Kiamou, 2008). Deep acting, on the other hand, refers to individuals displaying “a natural result of working on feeling; the actor does not try to seem happy or sad but rather expresses spontaneously...a real feeling that has been self-induced” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 35). Both deep and surface acting are effortful strategies for meeting organisational requirements in emotion management (Grandey & Sayre, 2019); however, deep acting may be relatively less stressful to employees than surface acting (Bhowmick & Mulla, 2016; Grandey, 2000).

Aesthetic labour refers to organisations creating customer appeal by deliberately manufacturing employee language, dress code, shape, and body size in line with customer expectations (Nickson et al., 2005). Aesthetic labour can be further analysed using the concepts of organisational hardware and software. Organisational hardware, also referred to as aesthetics of organisations includes artefacts used as symbols that help to differentiate an organisation and its products or services from others, for example, the ‘M’ in McDonald’s (Karlsson, 2012). Organisational hardware is used by organisations for many reasons such as to affect the way people feel about the organisation and its brands, as a commercial tool to add value to the organisation and to differentiate one organisation’s goods or services from another’s in highly competitive markets (Witz et al., 2003). Organisational software, also identified as aesthetics in organisations refers to employees’ physical attributes and skills that are used to create brand appeal (Witz et al., 2003). However, through aesthetic dehumanisation in organisations, employees are often used as ‘human hardware’ by being moulded and marketed to

exemplify the organisation's brand name through their clothing, actions, and behaviour (Pettinger, 2014).

The findings on how emotional and aesthetic dehumanisation impacted employees remain contradictory. On one hand, researchers (Bhave & Glomb, 2016; Cutcher & Ahtel, 2017; Humphrey, Ashforth, & Diefendorff, 2015; Rouxel, Michinov, & Dodeler, 2016) have found that having to express organisationally sanctioned emotions and maintain an organisationally sanctioned appearance is not inherently harmful to employees, instead, depends on negative organisational contexts such as poor working conditions, lack of person-job fit and how employees perceived these requirements. For example, employees enjoyed adhering to the demands of organisational dehumanisation when they developed an attachment to the organisation or the brand when they believed that aesthetic and emotional requirements gave them a sense of professionalism and recognition, and when they viewed these requirements as an effort to appear positive towards customers (e.g., appear happy and professional) rather than to suppress negativity (e.g., hide anger).

On the other hand, the detrimental effects of emotional and aesthetic dehumanisation are significantly discussed in extant literature. Studies (Nguyen & Stinglhamber, 2021) have found that emotional dehumanisation often leads to performances of surface acting and emotional dissonance that may increase the emotional strain experienced by employees. Emotional strain includes diminished mental resources, fatigue, a weakened sense of authenticity, and an impeded capability to create rewarding social relationships (Grandey, 2000; Hülshager & Schewe, 2011). This would enhance job burnout resulting in distress, low job performance, depression, poor self-esteem, physical illnesses such as heart attacks and cancer, and developing intentions to leave organisations (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Pandey & Singh, 2016). In addition, employees being used as human hardware (aesthetic dehumanisation) led to

significant physical and psychological trauma among employees. Employees suffered emotional distress primarily because they were discriminated against when their physical appearance was not in line with organisational requirements (Spiess & Waring, 2005). Additionally, employees were often strained when they were expected to maintain an outer appearance that they were uncomfortable with, for instance, though Sri Lankan frontline male hotel workers were often expected to wear the traditional 'sarong' to portray the culture, some did not prefer this because the Sri Lankan society often perceived that a traditional 'sarong' portrayed a lower status in the society compared to a suit (Wijesinghe, 2007). Further, aesthetic dehumanisation often led employees to engage in practices that were physically and psychologically damaging to maintain the organisationally desired outlook, for example, addictions to slimming pills (Butler & Harris, 2015).

### **Organisational Dehumanisation Interventions**

To reduce the effect of emotional and aesthetic organisational dehumanisation employees may use numerous interventions and responses. The Conservation of Resources (COR) theory explains that people strive to retain, protect and build resources and they will feel stressed when their resources are threatened with loss or actual lost (Hobfoll, 2001). In response, people often use diverse interventions that may act as resource replenishing strategies and the use of coping strategies is one such intervention (Hobfoll, 1989). Coping involves "constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141).

Several kinds of coping strategies have been discussed in the literature. They can be categorised into firstly, problem-focused coping, also referred to as approach coping or engagement coping, and secondly, emotion-focused coping, also referred to as avoidance coping or disengagement coping (Bakker



& de Vries, 2021; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused coping strategies focus on changing or trying to alter the source of the stress to solve the problem (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1986; Teoh, Wang, & Kwek, 2019). Problem-focused coping strategies are described as proactive coping strategies that enable individuals to build resource reservoirs to respond well to stressful incidents (Hobfoll, 2001).

Emotion-focused coping strategies, on the other hand, are often used by individuals when they do not possess sufficient resources to engage in problem-focused proactive coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Emotion-focused coping strategies focus on managing or reducing the psychological distress that arises due to a situation (Carver et al., 1986). These strategies may or may not distort the reality, but they help individuals to maintain hope and optimism, deny facts and implications, refuse to acknowledge the worse, and act as if nothing is wrong because they take individuals' minds temporarily off the problem (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For example, physical exercise, practising hobbies, meditation, and consuming alcohol or smoking are a few emotion-focused coping strategies. While problem-focused coping strategies may result in greater feelings of self-accomplishment and satisfaction, emotion-focused strategies may lead to depression, stress, self-blaming, and wishful thinking (Demerouti, 2015; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Wang, Yin, & Huang, 2015).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study underpinned by a social constructionist epistemological perspective explored how Sri Lanka's frontline employees in the hotel industry in Sri Lanka experienced and responded to organisational dehumanisation. Data was collected through 58 semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with frontline hotel employees (38 men and 20 women) and the number of interviews was limited to 58 upon reaching data saturation. The participants who volunteered to participate in the study were selected using

purposive sampling. These participants possessed work experience ranging from 2 months to 30 years. The 58 participants consisted of 12 from the managerial level, 12 from the supervisory level, and 34 from the operational level in organisations. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes to 1.5 hours. At the time of conducting the study, the participants were attached to functional areas such as the restaurant and bar, front office, housekeeping, the training department, and the human resource department in five-star luxury hotels belonging to a Sri Lankan hotel chain. However, most of the participants possessed work experience in multiple organisations and they shared their experiences of frontline work from the current organisation as well as previous organisations they worked for in the hospitality industry. This study was conducted under the ethics approval issued by the Ethics Committee of the University of New South Wales, Canberra, Australia.

The researcher conducted interviews in both English and Sinhala. Even the participants who were not conversant in English were able to communicate terms specific to the hospitality industry in English. With the permission of the research participants, the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The researcher being a Sinhala-speaking Sri Lankan, a cultural insider as per Liamputtong (2008), was able to translate the interviews that were conducted in Sinhala to English when transcribing.

The six-step approach of Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to thematically analyse the data. The researcher generated the initial codes based on the transcripts and these initial open codes were collated into broader categories and then into themes. Then the researcher revisited and refined these themes to ensure that they cohered together meaningfully and had identifiable distinctions across them after which detailed analysis was carried out for each theme (Wanninayake & O'Donnell, 2021; Wanninayake, O'Donnell, & Williamson, 2021). Four key themes that emerged included walking billboards,

feeling guide-lined yet burdened, strict surveillance, exhaustion and strain, and approaching and avoiding as presented in the findings section below. Table 1 provides an example of the data analysis process.

**Table 1:** An Example of the Data analysis Process

<b>Data example</b>	<b>Examples of initial codes</b>	<b>Broader categories</b>	<b>Themes</b>
Maintaining this outlook gave me the perspective of a professional...It has given me the status I needed...To be honest I miss it [fashion] also...I like having long hair. I already have a tattoo on the back. What [management] told me was if my tattoo doesn't look insulting to guests it's OK to have... The thing is... I like to look rugged (sic)... (male, 1 year, receptionist and cashier)	Strict organisational guidelines on appearance Feel professional Gain expected recognition Like to be fashionable Missing fashion Following guidelines against personal fashion preferences	A sense of professionalism and recognition through organisational guidelines Appear against personal fashion preferences Lose authentic selves	Feeling guide-lined yet burdened

## FINDINGS

This section provides details of the four main themes that emerged during the data analysis process.

### Walking Billboards

Hotel frontline employees in Sri Lanka were often considered to be the ‘face of the hotel brand’. For this purpose, the employees were expected to materialize and deliver the brand by constantly identifying themselves with the brand and becoming artifacts of the brand. One participant stated,

...Basically, they [the management] say we are supposed to deliver the brand. From check-in to check-out, we become the face of the brand... (female, 3 years, stylist).

To become a ‘walking billboard’ for the hotel in delivering the brand, the employees were compelled to adhere to two main requirements. Firstly, to engage in scripted and routinised behaviour patterns, and secondly, to adhere to strict guidelines enforced on dress code and styling. The scripted and routinised behaviour patterns were guided by a range of formal guidelines on greeting and welcoming guests, telephone etiquette, and procedures for handling guests’ issues. One participant noted:

...From the point of greeting a guest, everything is there in policies. We have a way of answering the telephone. Earlier we said ‘*ayubowan*’ (may you live long) when we greeted guests. But now...we say ‘hi’... We have something like a script. We have specific words that we can use... (male, waiter, 5 years).

As part of the script, the employees in the front office used specific dialogues and gestures to greet and welcome guests to the hotel, and waiters

used specific dialogues when serving guests in hotels' restaurants. In addition, when handling an aggressive guest, workers were expected to follow specific processes that included showing empathy and apologizing to the guest even if it was not the employee's fault. Further, controlling expressions of negative emotions, such as anger, was always expected of all employees when interacting with guests. One participant revealed,

The first impression is a smile. We train them... you need to smile like that, you need to greet like that, you need to answer like this, the way to thank the guest, if it is a complaint you need to listen first. We do have policies, processes, and 'how tos'. In those, we have included everything... (male, 12 years, front office manager).

Further to following scripted behaviour patterns, all frontline employees were expected to constantly perform and project the hotel brand through their appearance. The frontline hotel employees were expected to follow strict guidelines in relation to grooming and appearance. On top of the dress code, employees were expected to maintain their nails, hair, jewellery, tattoos, and piercings as per the grooming guidelines that enabled employees to project and perform the brand. For example, there were restrictions on makeup, nail polish and hair colours, jewellery, and tattoos. It was compulsory for employees who directly dealt with guests to wear mild perfume, deodorant, and mouthwash. Further, when hotels went through brand enhancement programmes, employees were expected to immediately change their outer appearance to become the 'face of the new brand'. Explaining the appearance requirements to be the 'face of the brand' a participant stated,

... the previous brand was kind of a contemporary Sri Lankan brand... The current brand is more kind of a lifestyle brand. So, we had a designer come in and he designed all the uniforms... It was basically made for the brand. The brand purpose, the brand look, and the feel of

it. The uniform reflects it... this is how the hotel would feel like...There are five things that a woman associate can wear. Earrings, the wedding ring, a watch, a bracelet, or something like that. Apart from that no piercing... No anklets, nothing that makes a sound when you are walking... Cover tattoos if you have any... (male, 7 years, training and development manager).

### **Feeling Guide-lined yet Burdened**

The response of frontline hotel employees to strict rules on behaviour and appearance was mixed. Some participants believed that the strict guidelines on emotion management as well as clothing and styling to be in line with the brand requirements gave them a sense of professionalism and a sense of belongingness with the organisation. For example, these participants believed that the organisational guidelines on clothing and styling helped them to become representatives of the brand as well as to develop an organisational identity. They further believed that managing and maintaining their appearance and emotions in accordance with organisational requirements often made it easier to portray and deliver the brand and to develop the 'right mood' together with 'right emotions' to serve guests. One participant revealed,

...Maintaining this outlook gave me the perspective of a professional. When I go out everyone can see that I am clean-shaven, and I have very short hair. The first thing they ask is 'do you work in a hotel?' It has given me the status I needed...I am a professional and I have to express myself as a professional inside and outside...There is a career I need to follow. For that, I need to follow this... (male, receptionist, and cashier, 1 year).

Further, eighteen participants perceived the organisational rules as guidelines that helped them to make guests happy and to maintain a professional

approach to customer service in the organisation. Out of these 18, 10 participants revealed that despite the benefits of adhering to organisational rules and regulations, they often felt frustrated over the 'limited freedom' these rules created and felt extensively 'burdened' by them. One participant stated,

...It's a script and we have dialogues... Sometimes having a script is okay because it maintains the standard. Sometimes, guests are very friendly. Then if we try to be formal it will not work. But we have to follow the standard. So, most of the time, we follow dialogues in the policy. Sometimes I feel burdened by rules... I like freedom... (male, junior naturalist, 2 years, and 3 months).

Forty out of 58 participants considered these rules and regulations too strict. Such participants felt burdened by these rules they were expected to adhere because there were 'lots of rules and regulations' and they 'had to follow them' with no exceptions. These employees were of the view that though the checklists and guidelines helped the management to deliver consistent service, they rendered employees powerless especially when dealing with difficult guests. At times, employees had to watch guests breaking the hotel rules but could say nothing as it could negatively affect them later if guests wrote negative comments about the hotel and/or specific members of the hotel staff in their online hotel reviews. They were expected to absorb high levels of aggression from guests, tolerate being shouted at in public, and be subjected to frequent threats. For example, the hotel's rules stated that employees should not display anger or refuse to consider guest requests. Regardless of guests' comments and actions, they were expected to 'smile', however, forced to avoid sanctions from the management. One participant stated,

...Sometimes I feel burdened by rules and regulations... We have lots of rules and regulations here... (female, receptionist, 8 years).

Another participant revealed,

I can't be angry because this is our standard... We are humans, and we also can get angry... Sometimes I feel angry. Sometimes I feel 'why am I here?' But challenges are made for people... So, they [guests] shouted but I was smiling... (male, junior naturalist, 2 years, and 3 months).

The majority of participants strictly believed that having to maintain an organisationally sanctioned outer appearance constantly burdened them due to several reasons. Firstly, female participants were expected to wear the organisational dress code of blouse and slacks and most of them revealed that this dress code was against their personal preferences. It is because this dress code did not match the general cultural perception of a stereotypical front office female employee in the Sri Lankan hospitality sector. In Sri Lanka, the dress defines the status and culture (Wijesinghe, 2007), and the general perception of a Sri Lankan hotel front office female employee is 'traditional, beautiful and warm'. Therefore, the participants were of the view that they did not look their best in their current uniform and they did not 'feel' that they were front-office employees. Since the dress code did not make employees 'feel right' for their roles, it often impacted their self-confidence and performance. One participant stated,

...I am not happy about the uniform. I wish they changed the uniform. This is not comfortable for anyone. The girls expect something like a sari, which is more comfortable. We are not happy with the uniform. It doesn't give the feeling that we are in the front office... (female, receptionist, and cashier, 6 months).

Secondly, some male employees 'missed being like other boys' and having a 'rugged look' because they should be clean-shaven, have short hair, and not wear earrings or any jewellery. In addition, both male and female participants



revealed that having to adhere to styling requirements often led to losing their 'authentic selves' as they had to change their preferences to portray the organisational brand. Explaining the employees' complaints and concerns on organisational appearance-related requirements, the training, and development manager stated,

...When we do the induction, they [inductees] would come and say, 'I have one tattoo what can I do?'... 'I would like to put my hair like this and why can't I do like that?'...Some would like to have a different hair colour. They ask, 'why do we have to put a light tint?' Some would have heavy makeup. Then we would say there is too much make-up. Then they say 'this is the normal make-up I wear'... (male, 6 years).

### **Strict Surveillance, Exhaustion, and Strain**

Despite mixed feelings on adhering to behavioural and appearance-related organisational guidelines to portray the organisational brand, all participants suffered emotional exhaustion as they were constantly under the strict surveillance of supervisors who ensured that employees did not deviate from organisational requirements. The senior management often monitored cameras located in different departments of hotels and highlighted any deviations from the behaviour that the hotels expect from employees. Frontline employees received warnings and were required to undertake more training if they deviated from hotels' rules and regulations. While all employees in supervisory and managerial grades acknowledged the importance of monitoring employees during their interactions with guests, some of them firmly believed that it is important to make employees follow 'strict rules' and 'not give them too much liberty' so that they do not damage the organisational reputation and brand image. One participant stated,

...The managers watch us when we are dealing with guests and if we

don't smile, they will notice and will tell us... Also, they have cameras now and the general manager and front office manager will then and there check the cameras and tell us... (female, receptionist, 8 years).

On top of the hotel management, guests also expected positive and cheerful behaviour from frontline employees. There were instances where guests complained to the hotel management that employees were not considerate when dealing with them or did not smile when handling their requests. In addition, some guests inserted or threatened to insert negative comments in online travel forums such as TripAdvisor with employees' names if employees' behaviour was different from their expectations. Therefore, frontline workers had to make a conscious effort to appear cheerful during guest interactions. One participant revealed:

...When I have to handle a guest just after attending to a complaint, my facial expressions change. I forget to smile. Guests have complained saying that I didn't smile when dealing with them. The guest is right... Sometimes I forget to welcome a guest with a smile... Some guests don't tell but they directly put it on TripAdvisor... Once, I handled a complaint and had to handle another guest right after that and I might have forgotten to smile with the guest. There was a TripAdvisor comment saying I didn't smile beautifully with the guest... (female, receptionist, 2 years).

As a result of being emotionally and aesthetically scripted and strictly monitored, employees often suffered emotional exhaustion and strain where they were often 'fed up', 'tired'. 'frustrated' and 'stressed'. Additionally, adhering to strict guidelines on managing emotions often led employees to suffer a loss of face as they could say very little when guests abused them verbally in public. Experiences of emotional exhaustion and humiliation of frontline hotel workers led to work/family issues where workers carried the

burden home with them and released their frustrations on family members. Frontline hotel workers also suffered from insomnia where they woke up in the middle of the night and thought of guests or experienced nightmares or regretted their choice to seek employment in the hotel industry. Further, there were times when employees vented their stress on their colleagues. One participant stated,

...Sometimes I wake up early in the morning or in the middle of the night and utter room numbers and names of guests... Even last night, I had a bad dream about the reception... I always have nightmares of answering calls or being in the reception. It may be because I feel burdened by the responsibility... (female, receptionist, 2 years).

### **Approaching and Avoiding**

Frontline hotel employees received limited organisational support to enable them to take proactive measures to prevent emotional distress at work. The only support provided by the hotels included a few recreational activities such as a gymnasium, access to the internet, an annual family day, or sports activities. None of the hotels provided professional counselling services or any employee assistance programmes where employees had access to therapeutic services or a telephone helpline to obtain professional assistance on personal or psychological issues. Therefore, most participants have selected their methods to handle stress. One participant stated,

...We have the training and other facilities like the internet...but nothing special to reduce stress... There is an annual trip and in December we have a staff party, and we can bring our families... No counselling, but at trainings, we tell our issues to the training manager... (female, receptionist, 8 years).

Limited organisational support often led employees to react to the emotional distress they suffered. These reactive measures included those that

were constructive with no damage to employees, the organisation, or others as well as measures that were destructive which led to physical and psychological issues among employees and in turn affected the service delivery. The constructive reactive measures used by employees included taking a break from toxic guest interactions, using breathing and anger management techniques to distance themselves from emotional distress, and practising hobbies such as reading, dancing, going for walks, listening to music, watching movies, cooking, and meditating. One participant explained,

...I listen to music, or I go to the beach. I talk to someone trustworthy. Or I think to myself what happened. I only talk to my close friend in my department. She also goes through similar issues, and she understands when I say something... (female, receptionist, 3.5 years).

Additionally, employees often sought social support by talking about their negative experiences to a supervisor, a colleague, or a friend. Frontline hotel staff also helped each other to be emotionally stronger when they had to face guest aggression in general or a traumatic experience with a specific guest. One participant stated:

...If a staff member was insulted, the other staff members would help him/her...We try to bond with each other and then help each other. We all take the external hit together. We do not isolate the employee... (male, lifestylist, 3 years).

Frontline hotel employees also engaged in destructive reactive measures which often led to work/family conflicts, negative health outcomes, and even loss of employment. These strategies included venting anger on family members and excessive drinking and smoking to cope with stress. Drinking alcohol and smoking were common among male employees because women in Sri Lanka were less likely to consume alcohol or smoke as a coping mechanism

because of their religious (Buddhism) and cultural beliefs (Lombardo, Perera, Beaudry, Grad, Maselko, & Østbye, 2013). One participant stated:

...About 30 percent of my anger is vented out at home. Out of the balance 70 percent about 60 percent I hide. The balance of 10 percent is vented out by smoking and other ways. I have seen a lot of people in this trade getting addicted to smoking and drinking due to the pressure... I have seen people who go to the bar right after work and they spend all their money in the bar... It's not possible to sleep with the pressure in your head...then they drink to sleep. Or they get together with friends and drink... (male, wine sommelier, 18 years).

Additionally, there were instances when employees vented their genuine negative emotions on co-workers and guests as a coping method. For example, there were incidents where employees shouted at, scolded, and fought with rude guests despite strict rules, regulations, and constant surveillance. However, employees were questioned and warned by hotel management when they expressed negative emotions such as frustration towards guests. One participant stated:

...I have expressed my genuine emotions. It was after 30 minutes of arguing. It was a guest from the US living in Dubai. He said, 'I didn't insert my child in the booking because he is not having breakfast'. Then I said, 'look here, you purposely did it'. I argued for 30 minutes. He was going to leave without paying and I said 'you have to pay'... (female, assistant front office manager, 8.5 years).

As handling emotional distress at work was a personal responsibility of employees due to the minimal organisational support they received, the majority of participants chose reactive measures over proactive measures to overcome the strain.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study explored how frontline hotel employees in Sri Lanka experienced and responded to emotional and aesthetic organisational dehumanisation. The findings revealed that there were times when employees considered being subjected to emotional and aesthetic dehumanisation as positive experiences. Confirming past research (Rouxel et al., 2016), this study found that the impact of being subjected to emotional dehumanisation depended largely on how different employees perceived the organisationally-sanctioned strict guidelines on emotion management and that there could be instances where employees enjoyed and benefitted from adhering to such guidelines to express organisationally-required emotions (Bhave & Glomb, 2016; Shuler & Sypher, 2000). This study also confirmed the findings of prior studies (Cutcher & Ahtel, 2017; Hancock, 2013) that being the face of the brand. Being subjected to aesthetic dehumanisation through adhering to organisation-specific appearance requirements was a positive and rewarding experience for some frontline employees as it gave them the role they were striving to live up to (e.g., being a professional) and the social esteem and personal recognition they expected. Additionally, following the organisational requirements in terms of dress codes and artefacts often enabled employees to develop a sense of belongingness with the organisation and its brand. This is in line with Pratt & Rafaeli (1997, p. 889) who found that organisation-specific dress codes formed an organisational identity that improved the plurality among organisational members who felt that they were part of ‘one big family’.

Despite the positive experiences of organisational dehumanisation, the majority of the participants openly acknowledged the ‘burden’ and ‘frustration’ they experienced by being treated as objects and symbols for the enactment of the organisational brand, as explained in prior research (Cutcher & Ahtel, 2017). Firstly, this study revealed that emotional dehumanisation led Sri

Lanka's frontline hotel employees to represent the 'emotional proletariat'. 'Emotional proletariat' is a concept developed by Macdonald & Sirianni (1996) and refers to employees who were constantly "subjected to control, intervention and monitoring from supervisors, behaviourally scripted and routinised, subordinate to customers and dealt with fleeting, massive contacts with customers" (Qian & Miao, 2017, p. 71). As representatives of the emotional proletariat, these employees were constantly and closely monitored both in person and via cameras by the management to ensure that they refrained from deviating from the scripted guidelines on behaviour routines, and any deviations led to warnings, more training, and even loss of employment. On top of constant monitoring by the management, the employees were often verbally and physically harassed in public by guests without being able to respond to such behaviour. These incidents led employees to suffer a loss of face and experience diminished self-confidence. Additionally, guests often threatened to insert hotel workers' names on TripAdvisor or to provide the hotel with a poor rating, if workers refused their demands which led to increased levels of emotional strain and stress referred to as the negative online review stress in the literature (Bradley, Sparks, & Weber, 2015). These attributes of emotional dehumanisation led to emotional exhaustion and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment among employees.

Secondly, the effort of hotels to regulate employees' physical appearance to enable them to embody the organisational brand (aesthetic dehumanisation) became a burden to many employees. Female front office employees often perceived that the aesthetic requirements (especially the dress code) of their current organisations did not match with the general cultural perception of a front office female employee in the Sri Lankan hospitality sector which was a 'traditional, warm and beautiful woman'. In addition, some male participants often missed 'being like other boys' and lost their 'authentic selves' in the process of being aesthetically dehumanised. Having to maintain an outer

appearance that was against their personal preference affected employees' ability to develop a comfortable emotional state that facilitated the performance of their job role (Rafaeli, Dutton, Harquail, & Mackie-Lewis, 1997) and often led employees to perform a role that they could not identify themselves with which also led them to question their enchantment with the organisational brand they represented (Cutcher & Achteh, 2017).

Responding to and coping with the organisational dehumanisation-related emotional strain experienced by Sri Lanka's frontline hotel workers was a 'personal responsibility' as found in prior studies (Wanninayake et al., 2021; Zander, Hutton, & King, 2010). As employees received minimal support from their organisations to handle the emotional strain from organisational dehumanisation, employees were often compelled to adopt emotion-focused reactive strategies to replace the depleted resources (Hobfoll, 1989). This inflexibility experienced by employees to choose coping strategies often led them to select destructive emotion-focused reactive coping methods such as developing addictions to alcohol and smoking and venting anger on family members, co-workers, and guests. The effects of these destructive coping strategies often spilled over to other domains of life creating work-family conflicts, issues with co-workers, negative health conditions, warnings by the hotel management, and even loss of employment. This confirmed prior findings that destructive emotion-focused reactive coping strategies may result in higher levels of depression, stress, and emotional isolation because such strategies can involve self-blaming and responses that can be harmful to workers' health and wellbeing (Demerouti, 2015). In addition, the findings of this study confirmed the findings of prior research (Bakker & de Vries, 2021; Muhammad & Sarwar, 2021) that coping inflexibility often led to further depletion of resources and emotional strain because employees may overuse strategies that may be destructive to themselves and others while underusing constructive and proactive coping methods.



## **CONCLUSION**

Sri Lanka's frontline hotel employees' experiences and responses to organisational dehumanisation revealed the tension experienced by employees when having to maintain the right emotions and appearances to become the face of the organisational brand. On one hand, adhering to strict and scripted guidelines on emotion and appearance management gave employees the social esteem, personal recognition, and organisational belongingness they strived for. On the other hand, as victims of organisational dehumanisation, these employees represented the emotional proletariat and experienced a constant discrepancy between their preferences and organisational requirements which often affected their ability to develop a comfortable emotional state to perform the job role and led to emotional strain and exhaustion. This feeling was aggravated by the provision of minimal organisational support to handle the emotional strain proactively and the resultant coping inflexibility that led to the use of destructive emotion-focused reactive methods of coping.

## **THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

This study has several theoretical and practical implications. Firstly, it adds to the small body of research available on employees' experiences and responses to organisational dehumanisation in general and even less research available on how employees experienced and responded to organisational dehumanisation in non-Western contexts. Secondly, this study proposes that organisational dehumanisation needs to be analysed from emotional and aesthetic perspectives which could ultimately lead to performances of emotional and aesthetic labour. Thirdly, the findings of this study add to the emerging body of literature on burnout interventions and (in)flexible coping especially from a non-Western perspective. From a practical standpoint, firstly, this study revealed how frontline hotel employees were exploited emotionally and physically to achieve organisational objectives. Secondly, the findings

revealed how important it is for the hotel management to provide sufficient resources to frontline employees to cope with the emotional strain of being ‘walking billboards’ for their hotels. Finally, the findings showed the hotel management how insufficient organisational support could lead employees to adopt destructive coping methods that would harm themselves, their co-workers, and the organisational image at large.

Despite the significant theoretical and practical contribution of this study, there are limitations. This study was conducted based on self-reported details provided by frontline hotel employees on incidents of organisational dehumanisation they experienced in the past. This may have resulted in participants explaining only selected details of their experiences and their information being influenced by later events and incidents. Though this is a common limitation in qualitative research (Adikaram & Kailasapathy, 2021), it would have affected the explanations and analysis conducted in this study.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

The findings of this study suggest areas for future research. First, how frontline hotel workers in other non-Western contexts experienced and responded to organisational dehumanisation could be explored. Second, future studies could explore the service recipients’ expectations of organisational dehumanisation in the hotel sector to reveal the complex nature of the performance of organisational dehumanisation.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no potential conflict of interest concerning the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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