

FROM TAKING CHARGE TO TAKING IT TO HEART: PROACTIVE PERSONALITY AND EMOTIONAL LABOR AT WORK

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between proactive personality and emotional labor strategies (i.e., deep acting and surface acting), with particular attention to the mediating role of psychological ownership and the moderating effect of role overload within the mediating relationships. Cross-sectional data were collected from 330 full-time service employees in South Korea. Hypotheses were tested using multiple regression analyses supplemented by the PROCESS macro for mediation and moderated mediation analyses. Results showed that proactive personality was positively related to psychological ownership, and psychological ownership was positively associated with deep acting. No significant relationship emerged between psychological ownership and employees' use of surface acting. The mediation analysis supported the role of psychological ownership as a partial mediator linking proactive personality to deep acting. Contrary to expectations, the moderated mediation analyses results showed that role overload strengthened rather than weakened the indirect effects via psychological ownership, indicating that under certain high-demand conditions, psychological ownership may become a more potent motivational resource for proactive employees.

Implications for Central European audience: This study advances emotional labor research by identifying proactive personality as a key antecedent and psychological ownership as a motivational mechanism. It challenges traditional resource-depletion models by suggesting that, under high role overload, psychological ownership may serve as a motivational resource for proactive employees in ways different from conventional expectations. Practically, organizations can benefit by selecting proactive individuals and fostering psychological ownership through autonomy and support. When paired with enabling resources, job demands like role overload may function as motivational challenges. Aligning personality traits, psychological resources, and work design can enhance authentic emotional labor.

Keywords: emotional labor; proactive personality; psychological ownership; role overload

JEL Classification: M10, M12

Introduction

Emotional labor – “the act of displaying appropriate emotion (i.e., conforming to a display rule)” (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993, p. 90) – is common across diverse occupations, holding particular significance in service-oriented roles where effective employee-customer exchanges are essential to organizational performance. A growing body of research has investigated how employees regulate their emotional expressions through emotional labor strategies such as deep acting and surface acting, both of which have important implications for individual and organizational outcomes (Goodwin et al., 2011; Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Hülshager & Schewe, 2011).

Although a considerable amount of past studies have explored the outcomes of emotional labor strategies, fewer studies have examined their antecedents, particularly regarding the intersection of stable personality traits and underlying psychological processes in shaping employees’ use of deep versus surface acting. Among various individual difference factors, proactive personality has emerged as a key construct in organizational behavior research, recognized for its role in promoting initiative, goal attainment, and self-driven change (Crant, 2000). It was also considered in prior emotional labor research, but not as a central focus. For instance, Randolph and Dahling (2013) examined the moderating role of proactive personality in the relationship between display rule and emotional labor, and Chen and Haga (2022) examined the interaction effect of proactive personality and emotional labor on in-role performance. A more recent study has linked proactive personality to proactive and engaged forms of customer-service behavior, reflecting employees’ tendency to take responsibility and persist in addressing interpersonal demands (Peng & Chen, 2023). However, relatively little is known about the direct influence of proactive personality on emotional labor.

Moreover, the pathways through which proactive personality influences these emotional regulation strategies remain underexplored. Emotional labor is not merely a behavioral response but an effortful and resource-demanding process that unfolds through employees’ psychological states (Grandey, 2003; Hülshager & Schewe, 2011). In this sense, a key question that remains concerns the psychological mechanisms linking proactive personality to emotional labor. Accordingly, clarifying the psychological mechanisms through which proactive dispositions are translated into employees’ emotional labor strategies is important for developing a more complete theoretical understanding of emotional labor at work.

While proactive individuals may experience heightened ownership and control over their roles, the extent to which these internal states affect emotional regulation efforts is still not fully understood. Drawing primarily on conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), supplemented by identity control theory (Burke, 2007) and self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), this study proposes psychological ownership, a personal sense of possession and responsibility for one’s work, as a potential mediating variable. Additionally, this research introduces role overload as a contextual factor that may condition the motivational effects of psychological ownership, particularly in shaping employees’ emotional labor strategies. These theories are brought together to explain how proactive personality comes to shape emotional labor: identity control theory explains how proactive dispositions foster a sense of psychological ownership, self-determination theory helps explain why such ownership is motivationally relevant for emotional labor, and COR theory explains how these motivational processes are shaped by differences in resource availability and job demands.

This theoretical approach informs the development of the moderated mediation framework examined in the present study.

In sum, this study aims to develop and empirically test a moderated mediation framework in which proactive personality affects emotional labor through psychological ownership, with this indirect effect being influenced by the level of role overload. In doing so, this study seeks to contribute to the literature on emotional labor by shedding light on how and under what contexts proactive personality is translated into genuine emotional expression. It also enriches theoretical models of emotional labor by highlighting the joint role of individual motivation and job demands in how employees manage and express their emotions at work.

1 Hypotheses development

In developing our hypotheses, we treat proactive personality as the primary antecedent in the proposed model linking individual dispositions to emotional labor strategies. We theorize that proactive personality is associated with employees' internal psychological states, particularly psychological ownership, which in turn relates to the use of deep acting and surface acting at work. Consistent with this logic, the hypotheses are organized to reflect this sequential relationship from proactive personality to psychological ownership and, subsequently, to emotional labor strategies.

1.1 Proactive personality and psychological ownership

Proactive personality is defined as "a stable disposition to take personal initiatives in a broad range of activities and situations" (Seibert et al., 2001, p. 847). Individuals high in proactive personality tend to persist through challenges, actively seek out opportunities, and modify their surroundings to better align with their objectives (Bateman & Crant, 1993; Crant, 2000). As a result, they are more likely to engage in future-oriented behaviors at work, such as initiating improvements, voicing ideas, and proactively addressing potential issues (Parker & Collins, 2010), that contribute not only to individual achievement but also to organizational performance. Meta-analytic findings confirm the positive outcomes resulting from proactive personality. Specifically, employees who score high on proactive personality typically experience greater job and career satisfaction, demonstrate enhanced performance, and engage in higher levels of organizational citizenship behaviors (Spitzmuller et al., 2015; Yu et al., 2022). Importantly, these findings suggest that proactive employees are inclined to invest effort in shaping and committing to their roles, a tendency that is relevant for understanding the development of psychological ownership in the workplace.

Proactive individuals tend to be intrinsically motivated to exert influence over their roles. For example, Fuller and Marler (2009), in their meta-analysis, showed that proactive personality correlates positively with work-related psychological resources such as perceptions of autonomy, empowerment, role flexibility, and self-efficacy, along with behaviors like voicing concerns and taking initiative. Through the use of these resources, proactive employees are able to take ownership over their tasks by shaping their work to align with their personal goals. This perception of control over one's role aligns with the identity control theory (Burke, 2007), which suggests that individuals consistently monitor and modify their actions to align with their internalized self-concepts. Accordingly, proactive employees may strive to enact work identities that reflect their values and aspirations, using proactive behavior as a means of reinforcing and validating these identities. One of the key consequences of such identity

alignment is the development of psychological ownership, which refers to “the psychologically experienced phenomenon in which an employee develops possessive feelings for the target” (Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004, p. 439). Employees are more likely to experience a sense of ownership over their tasks or organizations (i.e., psychological ownership) when they perceive those elements as extensions of themselves (Pierce et al., 2001). Over time, the more they invest time, energy, or self-concept into a target, the more it becomes incorporated into their identity (Pierce et al., 2003).

Given their proactive tendency to shape their work environments, proactive employees are more likely to invest themselves in their roles and workplaces. From the identity control perspective, such investment promotes a stronger sense of psychological ownership. Consistent with this perspective, past studies also provide support by demonstrating positive associations between proactive personality and psychological ownership (Najam & Mustamil, 2022; Yavuz et al., 2019).

- **Hypothesis 1.** Proactive personality is positively related to psychological ownership.

1.2 Psychological ownership and emotional labor

Employees who develop a sense of psychological ownership often experience both emotional and cognitive attachment to their organizations, viewing their work as an extension of themselves (Li et al., 2015; Pierce et al., 2001). Consequently, they likely adopt organizational values and goals as personally relevant, which may, in turn, shape how they manage emotions at work. This process can influence the ways employees regulate emotions during interpersonal interactions at work.

Research on emotional labor distinguishes between two primary regulatory strategies: deep acting and surface acting. Deep acting involves the intentional adjustment of one's internal emotions to align with externally required emotional display rules, while surface acting requires only the outward expression of appropriate emotions, often concealing or faking one's true feelings (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Diefendorff et al., 2005; Grandey, 2003). Empirical evidence generally supports the advantages of deep acting over surface acting for both individual-level and organizational-level outcomes. For example, recent meta-analyses showed that surface acting increases emotional exhaustion, reduces job satisfaction, and diminishes personal accomplishment. In contrast, deep acting tends to correlate with improved job satisfaction, lower depersonalization, and enhanced job performance (Humphrey, 2023; Hülshager & Schewe, 2011). These strategies differ substantially in their psychological costs and motivational foundations, making them particularly relevant for understanding how psychological ownership influences emotion regulation at work.

For understanding how psychological ownership may influence emotional labor, self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) offers a useful framework. According to self-determination theory, individuals are intrinsically motivated to fulfill basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Psychological ownership, in particular, fosters a sense of autonomy by reinforcing the perception that one's work is self-directed and personally meaningful (Avey et al., 2009; Pierce et al., 2001). When employees perceive their job as “theirs”, they are more likely to perceive their behavior as internally motivated, which can encourage deeper emotional engagement (Gagné & Deci, 2005). In contrast, low levels of ownership may lead to feelings of external pressure and diminished motivation, increasing

the reliance on surface acting, which is a strategy that is typically more taxing and less effective. Past studies provide support for the prediction. For example, Shao et al. (2023), drawing on a sample of full-time service employees, found that perceived autonomy increases the use of deep acting while reducing reliance on surface acting. Similarly, Hur et al. (2022) found that autonomous motivation increases deep acting, while controlled motivation increases surface acting among frontline hotel service employees. Furthermore, Phuoc et al. (2022) found that employees in automotive retail outlets who experience higher autonomous motivation engage more in deep acting. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

- **Hypothesis 2.** Psychological ownership is positively related to deep acting.
- **Hypothesis 3.** Psychological ownership is negatively related to surface acting.

1.3 Mediating role of psychological ownership

Dispositional traits, such as proactive personality, have long been recognized as a key antecedent of emotional labor (Morris & Feldman, 1996). Specifically, employees with a proactive orientation are likely to favor more authentic emotion regulation, preferring to engage in behaviors that support goal attainment while managing emotional demands (Randolph & Dahling, 2013). This tendency suggests a greater likelihood of using deep acting rather than surface-level emotion management. Consistent with this view, Chen and Haga (2022) note that proactive individuals “tend to actively explore or improve the expression of emotional states required at work...internalize the needs...and show real emotional experience and empathy, rather than ‘masking’” (p. 5). Supporting this, past studies also showed that proactive employees engage more in deep acting and less in surface acting (Andrews et al., 2016; Randolph & Dahling, 2013). Existing research therefore suggests that proactive personality is positively related to deep acting and negatively related to surface acting. Yet, how these relationships unfold at the psychological level remains underexplored.

Building on the above reasoning, and drawing upon COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), this study proposes that psychological ownership functions as an explanatory mechanism between proactive personality and emotional labor strategies. COR theory proposes that individuals are motivated to acquire, protect, and leverage psychological resources. From a COR perspective, proactive individuals likely accumulate psychological resources, such as autonomy, self-efficacy, and flexible role orientation (Fuller & Marler, 2009), which facilitate effective emotional regulation. Among these resources, psychological ownership is particularly important as it reflects employees’ emotional investment in their work, which can enhance motivation and goal alignment (Avey et al., 2009). Psychological ownership can also act as a motivational driver that supports sustained, effortful emotional labor. Deep acting requires considerable emotional and cognitive investment. When employees feel a strong sense of ownership toward their roles, it is more likely that they perceive emotional labor as worthwhile and personally significant, making them more willing to engage in deep acting (Pierce et al., 2001). In contrast, a lack of psychological ownership may lead employees to perceive emotion regulation as externally imposed, resulting in a preference for surface acting, which is a strategy that requires less effort but may be more emotionally depleting in the long term.

Self-determination theory further supports this mediation argument by differentiating between autonomous and controlled forms of motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Sheldon & Elliot, 1998). Autonomous motivation, driven by personal values and intrinsic interest, promotes sustained

engagement, whereas controlled motivation arises from external pressures. Meta-analytic findings showed that autonomous motivation facilitates goal achievement more effectively than controlled motivation, particularly under conditions involving planned goal pursuit (Koestner et al., 2008). Psychological ownership is closely related to autonomous motivation, as it fulfills employees' basic psychological needs for autonomy and relatedness. Hence, when employees experience high psychological ownership, they are more likely to engage in deep acting. In contrast, low psychological ownership may undermine intrinsic motivation, thereby increasing reliance on surface acting.

- **Hypothesis 4.** Psychological ownership mediates the positive relationship between proactive personality and deep acting.
- **Hypothesis 5.** Psychological ownership mediates the negative relationship between proactive personality and surface acting.

1.4 Moderating role of role overload

Role overload refers to a condition in which employees perceive that the demands placed upon them, whether in terms of responsibilities or tasks, exceed what they can manage given their available time, capabilities, and other limiting factors (Rizzo et al., 1970), a construct commonly measured as a quantitative job demand in organizational research (Cammann et al., 1983). In emotionally demanding work contexts, role overload is particularly relevant as it shapes how employees allocate their limited psychological resources when managing their emotions at work. According to role theory, this type of quantitative role stress can undermine individuals' ability to meet workplace expectations (Tang & Vandenberghe, 2021). Prior research has also documented the adverse impact of role overload. Consistent with this, meta-analytic findings suggested that employees who perceive high levels of role overload tend to show low levels of job performance, particularly in quantitative assessments (Gilboa et al., 2008).

In the framework of COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), role overload represents a salient threat to employees' psychological resources, as excessive demands may deplete their resources. Under such conditions, it can undermine an individual's psychological well-being and reduce the availability of internal resources such as psychological ownership. Empirical studies provide support for this interpretation. For example, Alfes et al. (2018) found a negative relationship between role overload and employees' subjective well-being. In a similar vein, Bowling et al. (2015), in their meta-analysis, showed that prolonged overload contributes to emotional exhaustion.

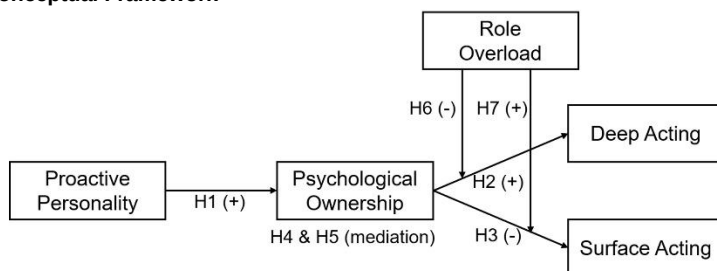
Accordingly, we predict that role overload moderates the indirect relationship between proactive personality and emotional labor via psychological ownership. Consistent with COR theory, when role overload is high, employees likely experience a depletion of psychological ownership, a critical resource for engaging more in deep acting. As emotional labor requires employees' cognitive and affective effort, in such contexts, they may adopt a defensive stance toward the use of their psychological resources. In other words, although proactive personality fosters the development of psychological resources (Avey et al., 2009; Fuller & Marler, 2009), such as psychological ownership, role overload may limit their emotional investments. Therefore, even those with strong psychological ownership may resort to more superficial strategies like surface acting, which require less cognitive and emotional energy (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002). On the other hand, when role overload is low, employees are

better positioned to act on their sense of ownership and engage in deep acting. Under such situations, proactive employees who experience psychological ownership are better equipped to align their emotional expressions with organizational expectations, thereby performing more authentic and adaptive emotional labor. Hence, role overload is expected to moderate the strength of the indirect effect of proactive personality on emotional labor via psychological ownership.

- **Hypothesis 6.** The indirect relationship between proactive personality and deep acting, mediated by psychological ownership, is moderated by role overload. Specifically, this mediated relationship is weaker for employees with high levels of role overload than for those with low levels.
- **Hypothesis 7.** The indirect relationship between proactive personality and surface acting, mediated by psychological ownership, is moderated by role overload. Specifically, this mediated relationship is stronger for employees with high levels of role overload than for those with low levels.

Figure 1 depicts our conceptual framework.

Figure 1 | Conceptual Framework



Note: Control variables are omitted for clarity.

Source: Authors' own elaboration

2 Methods

2.1 Participants and procedures

Data were collected from full-time employees in South Korea. Given the study's focus on emotional labor, the sample was limited to employees working in the service sector, where emotional regulation and interpersonal interactions are integral to their daily job performance.

Participants were recruited through a professional online survey firm that has a panel of employed adults. Potential respondents were invited by the panel provider via email based on predefined screening criteria, including full-time employment status and current employment in service-related occupations. Data were collected through an anonymous and voluntary online survey.

A total of 330 individuals completed the questionnaire. The average age of participants was 37.7 years ($SD = 8.91$). A majority (68.8%, $n = 227$) held a bachelor's degree. With respect to job context, most participants worked in customer-facing service roles, including service providers (64.5%; $n = 213$) and distribution-related positions (24.5%; $n = 81$), and the majority primarily served individual consumers (77.0%; $n = 215$). The sample comprised 190 men

(57.58%) and 140 women (42.42%). Organizational tenure varied across participants, ranging from one year (17.9%; $n = 59$) to more than ten years (18.8%; $n = 62$), reflecting a range of career stages within service roles.

2.2 Measures

All the items were measured using 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Proactive personality. Proactive personality was assessed using a shortened version of the original scale by Bateman and Crant (1993), adapted from the work of Claes et al. (2005). The scale consisted of six items, including statements such as “If I see something I don’t like, I fix it” and “I am always looking for better ways to do things”. The internal consistency of the scale was high, with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.88.

Psychological ownership. Psychological ownership was measured using six items from Van Dyne and Pierce (2004). Example items include: “I feel a very high degree of personal ownership for this organization”, and “I sense that this is my company”. The reliability coefficient for this measure was 0.93.

Emotional labor. Emotional labor was measured using nine items adapted from Diefendorff et al. (2005), four items for deep acting and five items for surface acting. For instance, deep acting was assessed with the item “I try to actually experience the emotions that I must show to customers”, while surface acting was measured with “I fake a good mood when interacting with customers”. The Cronbach’s alpha values were 0.90 for deep acting and 0.87 for surface acting, indicating strong reliability.

Role overload. Role overload was measured using three items from the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire developed by Cammann et al. (1983). A sample item reads: “I have so much work to do. I cannot do everything well.” The internal consistency for this scale was moderate, with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.64.

Control Variables. Age and gender were included as covariates because they have been theoretically and empirically linked to emotional regulation processes and emotional labor strategies. Prior studies suggest that age influences emotional regulation abilities and preferences for deep versus surface acting, reflecting developmental changes in emotion management in the workplace (Dahling & Perez, 2010). Gender was also controlled because it may influence expectations regarding emotional expression and regulation at work, which can affect emotional labor strategies (Meier et al., 2006). Thus, controlling for these variables can help reduce potential confounding effects when testing our study hypotheses. The full set of measurement items used in the final analyses is provided in Appendix 1.

3 Results

Before testing the hypotheses, a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) were conducted to assess the discriminant validity of the five latent constructs in the model: proactive personality, psychological ownership, deep acting, surface acting, and role overload. The hypothesized five-factor model demonstrated strong model fit, $\chi^2(242) = 370$, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.97; TLI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.05; SRMR = 0.04. In contrast, alternative models performed significantly worse. For instance, the four-factor model (merging deep acting and surface acting) exhibited a poor fit, $\chi^2(246) = 1,129$, with a significant degradation

in fit compared to the five-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 759$, $\Delta df = 4$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, the three-factor model (merging proactive personality with psychological ownership) resulted in $\chi^2(249) = 1,836$ ($\Delta\chi^2 = 1,466$, $\Delta df = 7$, $p < 0.001$), and the two-factor model yielded $\chi^2(251) = 1,974$ ($\Delta\chi^2 = 1,604$, $\Delta df = 9$, $p < 0.001$). The one-factor model, in which all indicators were loaded onto a single latent construct, produced the worst fit: $\chi^2(252) = 2,509$ ($\Delta\chi^2 = 2,139$, $\Delta df = 10$, $p < 0.001$). These results support the distinctiveness of the five constructs.

Table 1 | Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

Model	χ^2	<i>df</i>	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	<i>p</i>
5-Factor (hypothesized)	370	242	0.97	0.97	0.05	0.04	-	-	-
4-Factor (DA and SA merged)	1,129	246	0.81	0.78	0.10	0.11	759	4	< 0.001
3-Factor (PP and PO merged)	1,836	249	0.65	0.61	0.14	0.14	1,466	7	< 0.001
2-Factor (PP, PO, and RO merged)	1,974	251	0.62	0.58	0.14	0.14	1,604	9	< 0.001
1-Factor (all merged)	2,509	252	0.50	0.46	0.17	0.15	2,139	10	< 0.001

Note: DA = deep acting, SA = surface acting, PP = proactive personality, PO = psychological ownership, RO = role overload

Source: Authors' own calculation

In addition to overall model fit, we assessed the convergent validity and internal consistency of the measurement model. Table 2 reports the standardized factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE). Although the CR and AVE for role overload were below commonly cited benchmarks, they are comparable to those reported in prior studies using short role overload scales (e.g., Cammann et al., 1983) and were considered acceptable given the limited number of items.

Table 2 | Measurement Model Results

Construct	Items	Standardized Loadings	CR	AVE
Proactive personality	6	0.62–0.87	0.89	0.56
Psychological ownership	6	0.75–0.88	0.93	0.69
Deep acting	4	0.80–0.87	0.90	0.69
Surface acting	5	0.70–0.82	0.88	0.58
Role overload	3	0.46–0.71	0.66	0.40

Source: Authors' own calculation

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations are presented in Table 3. As predicted, proactive personality was significantly correlated with psychological ownership ($r = 0.49$, $p < 0.001$), and psychological ownership was also positively associated with deep acting ($r = 0.43$, $p < 0.001$). No significant correlation was found between psychological ownership and surface acting ($r = -0.01$, $p > 0.05$). In line with expectations, proactive personality was positively related to deep acting ($r = 0.59$, $p < 0.001$), but unrelated to surface acting

($r = -0.11, p > 0.05$). Additionally, role overload was negatively correlated with deep acting ($r = -0.29, p < 0.001$) and positively correlated with surface acting ($r = 0.36, p < 0.001$).

Table 3 | Descriptive Statistics and Zero-Order Correlations

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Gender	1.42	0.50						
2. Age	37.7	8.91	-0.17**					
3. Proactive personality	3.27	0.62	-0.18***	0.16**				
4. Psychological ownership	3.79	0.79	-0.06	0.10	0.49***			
5. Role overload	2.83	0.70	-0.01	0.03	-0.27***	-0.22***		
6. Deep acting	3.64	0.62	-0.05	0.14*	0.59***	0.43***	-0.29***	
7. Surface acting	2.55	0.73	-0.04	0.16**	-0.11	-0.01	0.36***	-0.17**

Note: Gender was coded as 1 = male, 2 = female.

Source: Authors' own calculation

Given that all variables in this study were measured through self-report, the potential influence of common method bias was addressed (Podsakoff et al., 2003). To address this concern, Harman's single-factor test was performed. An exploratory factor analysis including all measurement items revealed that the first unrotated factor accounted for only 30.52% of the total variance, which is well below the conventional threshold of 50%. This suggests that common method bias is unlikely to significantly influence the results.

To test the hypothesized relationships, a series of multiple regression analyses was conducted. For mediation and moderated mediation hypotheses (Hypotheses 4–7), indirect effects were estimated using a bootstrapping approach with 5,000 resamples as implemented in PROCESS macro (Preacher et al., 2007). The multiple regression results are presented in Table 4. Hypothesis 1 predicted that proactive personality has a positive relationship with psychological ownership. Consistent with the prediction, the results show that proactive personality is positively related to psychological ownership ($b = 0.49, p < 0.001$), providing support for Hypothesis 1. Hypotheses 2 and 3 suggested that, whereas psychological ownership has a positive relationship with deep acting, it has a negative relationship with surface acting. The results show that psychological ownership is positively related to deep acting ($b = 0.19, p < 0.001$), but the relationship between psychological ownership and surface acting was not statistically significant ($b = 0.05, p > 0.05$). Thus, whereas Hypothesis 2 was supported, we found no support for Hypothesis 3.

Hypotheses 4 and 5 proposed that psychological ownership mediates the relationship between proactive personality and emotional labor. Bootstrapping results showed a significant direct effect of proactive personality on deep acting (direct effect = 0.47, $SE = 0.05$, bootstrap 95% confidence interval (CI): [0.37, 0.57]). The indirect effect of proactive personality on deep acting was also statistically significant (indirect effect = 0.10, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI: [0.04, 0.17]), indicating that psychological ownership partially mediates the positive relationship between proactive personality and deep acting. Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was supported. However, the direct effect of proactive personality on surface acting was not statistically significant (direct effect = -0.08, $SE = 0.08$, 95% CI: [-0.25, 0.08]), nor the indirect effect of proactive personality on surface acting via psychological ownership (indirect effect = 0.04, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI: [-0.02, 0.10]). Hence, we found no support for Hypothesis 5.

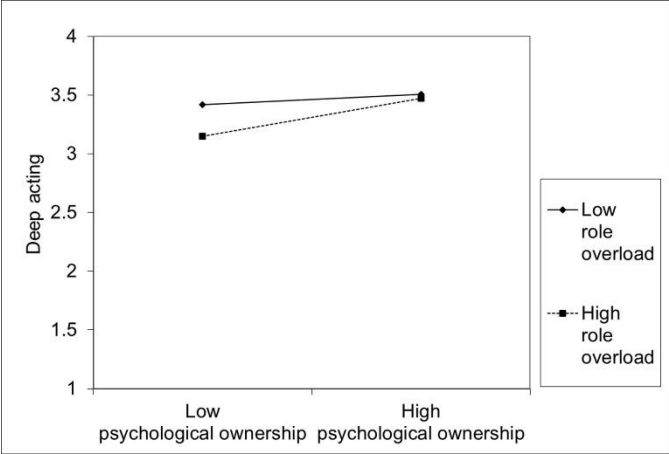
Table 4 | Regression Results

Variables	PO	Deep acting			Surface acting		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Gender	0.04	0.06	0.05	0.06	-0.03	-0.02	-0.01
Age	0.02	0.05	0.06	0.06	0.18**	0.15**	0.15**
Proactive personality	0.49***	0.50***	0.47***	0.46***	-0.16*	-0.08	-0.09
Psychological ownership (PO)		0.19***	0.17***	0.16***	0.05	0.09	0.08
Role overload (RO)			-0.13**	-0.12**		0.35***	0.36***
PO × RO				0.11*			0.18***
Adjusted R ²	0.23	0.37	0.38	0.39	0.03	0.14	0.17
ΔR ²			0.02**	0.01*		0.11***	0.03***
Overall F	34.02***	48.73***	41.43***	36.18***	3.92**	12.00***	12.45***

Source: Authors' own calculation

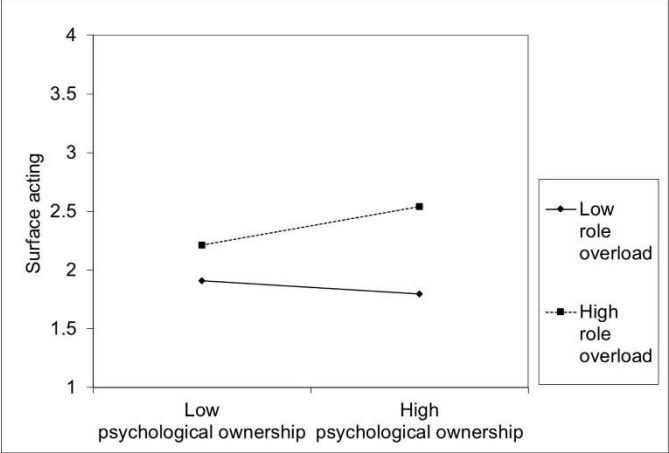
Finally, the moderated mediation effects (Hypotheses 6 and 7) were examined. Hypothesis 6 proposed that the indirect relationship between proactive personality and deep acting via psychological ownership is moderated by role overload, such that the relationship is weaker when role overload is high. The results indicate that, when role overload is low, the indirect effect is not statistically significant (indirect effect = 0.03, *SE* = 0.04, 95% *CI*: [-0.04, 0.10]). However, when role overload is high, the indirect effect is positive and statistically significant (indirect effect = 0.14, *SE* = 0.05, 95% *CI*: [0.06, 0.24]). In addition, the index of moderated mediation is significant (estimate = 0.08, *SE* = 0.04, 95% *CI*: [0.01, 0.16]), indicating that the strength of the indirect effect significantly differed across levels of role overload. Although the index of moderated mediation is significant, the direction of the effect is opposite to that predicted in Hypothesis 6. That is, the indirect effect is stronger when role overload is high, rather than weaker as predicted. Therefore, Hypothesis 6 was not supported. Hypothesis 7 suggests that the indirect relationship between proactive personality and surface acting via psychological ownership is moderated by role overload, such that the relationship is stronger when role overload is high. The results show that, when role overload is low, the indirect effect is not statistically significant (indirect effect = -0.03, *SE* = 0.04, 95% *CI*: [-0.11, 0.03]). When role overload is high, the indirect effect is positive and significant (indirect effect = 0.11, *SE* = 0.04, 95% *CI*: [0.04, 0.21]). In addition, the index of moderated mediation is significant (estimate = 0.10, *SE* = 0.04, 95% *CI*: [0.04, 0.18]), indicating that role overload moderates the relationship between proactive personality and surface acting via psychological ownership. Specifically, the indirect effect is stronger when role overload is high. However, the direction was opposite to our prediction. Thus, Hypothesis 7 was not supported. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the interaction effect of psychological ownership and role overload on deep acting and surface acting. As shown in the figures, psychological ownership is more strongly associated with deep acting and surface acting under conditions of high role overload, whereas the association is weaker and non-significant when role overload is low.

Figure 2 | Interactive Effect of Perceived Ownership and Role Overload on Deep Acting



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Figure 3 | Interactive Effect of Perceived Ownership and Role Overload on Surface Acting



Source: Authors' own elaboration

4 Discussion

4.1 General Discussion

This study investigated the link between proactive personality and emotional labor strategies, with a focus on the mediating role of psychological ownership and the moderating effect of role overload in the mediating relationships. Findings showed that employees high in proactive personality are more likely to perceive psychological ownership, which in turn was associated with greater engagement in deep acting. However, psychological ownership was not significantly related to surface acting. The mediation analysis confirmed that psychological ownership partially accounted for the effect of proactive personality on deep acting. Interestingly, although role overload was expected to weaken this indirect effect, the results showed a counterintuitive pattern: the indirect effect of proactive personality on

emotional labor via psychological ownership was stronger when role overload was high. These findings suggest that under conditions of increased job demands, psychological ownership may serve as a motivational buffer, prompting proactive employees to respond with more authentic emotional engagement rather than disengaging from emotional labor strategies altogether.

4.2 Theoretical Implication

This research offers several theoretical contributions to the literature on emotional labor, personality traits, and work motivation. First, by identifying proactive personality as a meaningful predictor of emotional labor strategies, this study shifts scholarly attention from the consequences of emotional labor to its dispositional antecedents. Prior research on emotional labor has primarily emphasized its consequences (e.g., Hülshéger & Schewe, 2011; Goodwin et al., 2011). Although personality is widely recognized as an influential factor in shaping workplace behavior, the roles of personality-based antecedents in shaping how employees regulate their emotions at work have received relatively limited attention. In particular, previous studies have suggested a positive relationship between proactive personality and deep acting without its underlying mechanism (Randolph & Dahling, 2013; Chen & Haga, 2022). Building on this line of research, the current study clarifies the underlying psychological mechanism through which proactive personality is linked to emotional labor strategies.

Second, the study deepens our understanding of emotional labor by introducing psychological ownership as a key motivational mechanism linking proactive personality to emotional labor strategies. In particular, the findings demonstrated that psychological ownership mediates the link between proactive personality and deep acting, offering a pathway through which proactive traits influence not only work behavior but also how employees manage their emotional experiences at work. Grounded in identity control theory (Burke, 2007) and self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), the results suggest that employees who feel a strong sense of ownership over their work are inclined to experience autonomy and alignment with organizational goals, conditions that foster deep acting. This finding also complements COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), as psychological ownership emerges as a valued resource enabling effortful emotional management. In doing so, the present study extends prior work by explicitly identifying psychological ownership as an underlying mechanism through which proactive personality is translated into emotional labor strategies. Specifically, whereas prior studies have shown that proactive personality moderates the relationship between emotional display rules and emotional labor strategies (Randolph & Dahling, 2013) and that emotional labor strategies condition the relationship between proactive personality and in-role performance (Chen & Haga, 2022), the present study highlights psychological ownership as the motivational mechanism underlying these relationships.

Third, the findings provide a new perspective on the role of job demands (i.e., role overload) in shaping emotional labor. While role overload was expected to weaken the positive influence of proactive personality by depleting psychological resources such as psychological ownership, the results showed the opposite pattern. Specifically, the indirect effects of proactive personality on both deep and surface acting were positive and stronger when employees experienced high levels of role overload. It is also important to note that the moderated mediation effect for surface acting, although statistically significant, was in the

opposite direction from what was hypothesized. This pattern suggests that under conditions of high role overload, proactive employees with stronger psychological ownership may increase emotional regulation efforts more broadly, rather than selectively engaging in deep acting while reducing surface acting. One possible explanation is that employees who are both proactive and feel a strong sense of ownership may double down on emotional regulation when job demands are high, either because they feel more accountable for outcomes or because the pressure activates their internal drive to perform (Parker et al., 2010). Another possibility is that, particularly for those in service roles, perceptions of role overload may co-occur with heightened emotional demands, such that higher role overload reflects increased requirements to manage emotional displays. For instance, low perceptions of overload may reflect lower demands for emotion regulation, whereas high role overload may indicate greater needs for emotion regulation. Rather than contradicting COR theory, this finding extends the traditional COR perspectives that emphasize the resource depletion under high job demands (Hobfoll, 1989; Bowling et al., 2015) by aligning with recent studies suggesting that, under certain conditions, job demands can serve as motivational challenges rather than just stressors (LePine et al., 2005). These results suggest that emotional labor is not just about the presence or absence of resources, but about how those resources interact with job demands and an individual's personality traits, offering a more comprehensive understanding of emotional labor as a dynamic self-regulatory process. The findings also emphasize the complex and potentially ambivalent nature of emotional labor under high role overload, and suggest that proactive employees may simultaneously engage in both adaptive and taxing regulatory strategies.

4.3 Practical Implication

The findings offer meaningful insights for organizations seeking to promote authentic emotional expression among employees, particularly in service settings. First, the results emphasize the value of proactive personality traits in promoting authentic emotional expression, particularly deep acting. Proactive employees are more inclined to engage in deep acting, which is related to positive outcomes such as higher job satisfaction, improved well-being, and enhanced customer satisfaction (Humphrey, 2023; Spitzmuller et al., 2015; Yu et al., 2022). Therefore, organizations may benefit from identifying and recruiting individuals with proactive tendencies.

Second, this study highlights that it is important to foster psychological ownership as a motivational resource that supports deep acting. Organizations can cultivate psychological ownership by increasing employee autonomy, organization-driven investment, and the perception of organizational justice and organizational support (Zhang et al., 2021). These efforts can help employees experience a stronger sense of control and connection to their roles, which in turn encourages more genuine emotional engagement.

Finally, although role overload is often viewed as a hindrance to performance, the findings provide a more complex picture. For proactive employees with high psychological ownership, increased demands may strengthen emotional regulation efforts rather than undermine them. This implies that organizations should not only manage workload levels but also ensure that job demands are paired with enabling conditions, such as clear role expectations, regular feedback, and access to support resources, so that these demands are experienced as motivating rather than overwhelming. That is, aligning individual differences, psychological

resources, and work design may be a key to supporting sustainable and effective emotional labor in organizations.

4.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that warrant consideration. First, the use of self-reported, cross-sectional data raises concerns about common method variance and limits causal inferences. For example, it remains less clear how psychological ownership develops over time or whether its effects on emotional labor strategies persist, fluctuate, or diminish under varying conditions. Although Harman's single-factor test suggests that common method bias was not a significant concern, future studies should employ multi-wave or multi-source data collection methods to improve the robustness of causal claims.

Second, while this study identified psychological ownership as a key mediating variable, it is likely not the only mechanism explaining the link between proactive personality and emotional labor. For example, individual-level variables, such as organizational identification or affective commitment, may also influence how proactive employees express their emotions at work. Future research could explore these alternative mechanisms to build a more comprehensive understanding of the affective processes underlying emotion regulation at work.

Third, our sample consisted of employees working in the service sector, and future research will benefit from exploring the generalizability of our findings to other sectors. We suspect that our sample characteristics may be related to the unexpected findings regarding the moderating effect of role overload: high role overload strengthened, rather than weakened, the relationship between proactive personality and deep acting. In the service sector, it is possible that employees conflate work overload with the need to engage in emotional labor. The reliability of the role overload measure, which was slightly below the commonly accepted threshold, may also be related to this possibility. If participants perceived the demand for emotional labor as role overload, the findings that high role overload strengthens the positive relationship between proactive personality and emotional labor may simply reflect that they engage in emotional labor when needed. Future research could further explore this possibility.

Fourth, the unexpected findings related to role overload challenge the assumption that demanding workloads always undermine employees' psychological resources. Instead, it suggests that in some cases, high demands may serve as motivational fuel, especially for proactive employees who feel a strong sense of ownership at work. Future research could take this further by using the challenge-hindrance stressor framework and looking at personal factors like resilience or coping style to clarify the process.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 | Measurement items

The following items were used in the final analyses. All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Proactive personality

Source: Claes et al. (2005)

1. If I see something I don't like, I fix it.
2. No matter what the odds, if I believe in something I will make it happen.
3. I love being a champion for my ideas, even against others' opposition.
4. I excel at identifying opportunities.
5. I am always looking for better ways to do thing.
6. If I believe in an idea, no obstacle will prevent me from making it happen.

Psychological ownership

Source: Van Dyne & Pierce (2004)

1. This is my organization.
2. I sense that this organization is our company.
3. I feel a very high degree of personal ownership for this organization.
4. I sense that this is my company.
5. Most of the people that work for this organization feel as though they own the company.
6. It is hard for me to think about this organization as mine. (reverse-coded)

Emotional labor

Source: Diefendorff et al. (2005)

Deep acting

1. I try to actually experience the emotions that I must show to customers.
2. I make an effort to actually feel the emotions that I need to display toward others.
3. I work hard to feel the emotions that I need to show to customers.
4. I work at developing the feelings inside of me that I need to show to customers.

Surface acting

1. I put on an act in order to deal with customers in an appropriate way.
2. I put on a "show" or "performance" when interacting with customers.
3. I just pretend to have the emotions I need to display for my job.
4. I show feelings to customers that are different from what I feel inside.
5. I fake the emotions I show when dealing with customers.

Role overload

Source: Cammann et al. (1983)

- 1. I never seem to have enough time to get everything done.
- 2. I have so much work to do. I cannot do everything well.
- 3. The amount of work I am asked to do is fair. (reverse-coded)

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