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Emotional Labour in the Context of EU-Internal Immigration: A Qualitative Study on Immigrants' Emotional Adaptation at Work[1]

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Abstract

In 1983, Arlie Hochschild introduced the theory of emotional labour, framing the management and regulation of emotion in professional settings as an additional form of labour. While her theory has been widely adopted within sociology, its application to immigrant experiences remains limited. This article – based on the master thesis 'Emotional Labour Across Borders' written within the program 'International Migration and Ethnic Relations' at Malmö University, Sweden – explores how immigration shapes workers' perceptions and performances of emotional labour by focusing on the workplace experiences of immigrants from Southern EU countries (Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Greece) living in Sweden. Drawing on seven semi-structured interviews, which were analysed through Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA), the study examines how emotional labour is affected by cross-cultural transitions, workplace diversity, and structural inequalities related to gender and race. The findings suggest that while emotional labour remains a consistent part of service work, its perception and intensity are influenced by economic contrasts between home and host countries, the nature of collegial and managerial support, and intersecting experiences of marginalization. This research not only contributes to emotional labour theory by incorporating EU-internal immigrant perspectives but also opens avenues for further studies on integration and the emotional dynamics of migration more broadly.

Key Words:

1   Introduction

In a globalized economy marked by increased labour mobility, the emotional dimensions of work take on new complexities. Migration often entails not just geographic relocation, but also cultural and emotional negotiation of norms, expectations, and social hierarchies. For immigrant workers, the transition into an unfamiliar labour market can involve the navigation of unfamiliar emotional expectation within both customer-facing roles and workplace hierarchies. These transitions are further shaped by factors such as language barriers, different cultures, and varying work environments.

This article – in line with the master thesis 'Emotional Labour across Borders', on which it is based – explores how immigration affects emotional perception and performance at

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work, using Hochschild's theory of *emotional labour*. The study presented here focuses on EU-internal immigration to Sweden and uses semi-structured interviews, later analysed with a Qualitative Content Analyses (QCA) to examine the intersection of economic conditions, workplace composition, and experiences of gendered and racialized emotional labour with immigrant workers' emotional experiences on the job. By centring voices of workers navigating transnational employment contexts, this research seeks to expand emotional labour theory beyond its traditional focus and contribute to broader debates within migration studies.

2 Theory

In her book *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling (1983)*, sociologist Ariel Hochschild introduced the theory of *emotional labour*, a foundational idea in the field sociology of emotion. Her work shifted focus from private emotional management to the workplace, highlighting how emotions are shaped, regulated and commodified to meet organizational demands. This section outlines Hochschild's theory and reviews key research developments, which will also create the basis for the deductive categories used in this empirical study, a Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA).

2.1 Core Ideas

Hochschild's theory of *emotional labour* describes the emotional management required of workers in order to adequately perform on their job. According to the author, this may entail either altering one's outward expression to convey the appropriate emotion without changing one's internal feeling – a process Hochschild calls *surface acting*. For example, a worker may smile to appear friendly despite feeling frustrated. Alternatively, workers may attempt to internally generate the required emotion by drawing on emotional memories or emphasising with the customer – a process Hochschild calls *deep acting*. A worker might, for instance, pretend that they are interacting with a child instead of a rude customer (Hochschild, 1983: 37-48).

Hochschild classifies emotional management as an additional form of labour, suggesting that the suppression and evocation of emotions in exchange for wages entails the commodification of workers' private emotions. This distinguishes emotional labour from previous understandings of *emotion work*, which refers to similar emotional regulation in people's personal life. Hochschild emphasizes the importance of commercialisation, suggesting that employers gain control over worker's emotional expression, turning emotional management into part of worker's professional responsibility, distinct from existing forms of physical or cognitive work (Hochschild, 1983: 20, 55).

She further specifies that the performance of emotional labour is guided by *feeling rules*, socially constructed norms that dictate the appropriate length and expression of emotion, reinforcing social hierarchies and workplace expectations. These rules are context specific and vary by institution and culture (Hochschild, 1983: 56-63).

Hochschild also highlights several risks tied to emotional labour. Mainly, she points out the gap created by performing emotions that are misaligned with the workers genuine feelings – which she calls *emotional dissonance* – can over time lead to identity confusion, stress and feelings of emotional detachment. Especially deep acting – the purposeful altering of genuine emotional reactions – can cause internalisation issues, negatively influencing the workers self-perception as untruthful or deceitful. Additionally, with the

performance of emotional labour for unsympathetic audiences comes a loss of control for the worker performing it, which may heighten stress or defensiveness (Hochschild, 1983: 90, 132-134).

In essence, emotional labour is the regulation of emotions required to meet workplace expectations, shaped by social norms and employer demands.

2.2 Further Developments

Hochschild's foundational work has since inspired further research, refining and expanding this theory. Following, the different areas of theoretical focus that have emerged will be described.

2.2.1 Private and Public Sector

Hochschild – in her initial publication – focused solely on the emotional labour expected of workers in customer facing roles in the private sector. While this focus has since been researched further in an attempt to determine the importance of differing factors such as task variety (Morris & Feldman, 1996a), job satisfaction (Guy & Jin, 2009; Hsieh, 2012) and job autonomy (Wharton, 1993), her theory has since been applied to public sector work also.

Scholars have determined that emotional labour in public sector work, with research mainly focused on the fields education (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006; Meier et al., 2006) and healthcare (Riley & Weiss, 2016; Theodosius, 2008), differs from the private sector in some key aspects. In the private sector, emotional labour often aims to increase customer satisfaction with the goal of heightened profitability. In contrast, in public sector roles, emotional labour serves to build public trust and legitimacy, with a lessened focus on generating profit.

2.2.2 Internal Organizational Relations

The theory of emotional labour has been further expanded to include internal organizational relations – specifically workers' interactions with co-workers and managers – as oppose to solely focusing on face-to-face and voice-to-voice communication with customers. Kang and Jang (2022) examined emotional labour among colleagues, finding that high emotional demands can reduce engagement and increase turnover intentions. They also emphasized the importance of supervisor support to reduce the emotional strain caused by the performance of emotional labour. Gabriel et al. (2020) found that emotional labour between co-workers differs from that with clients due to the deeper and longer-lasting nature of these relationships. According to the authors, workers tend to deep act with colleagues, reducing the emotional dissonance and exhaustion they experience, while increasing the amount of emotional labour due to the increased intimacy and duration of these interactions. Shumski Thomas et al. (2018) investigated how emotional labour is perceived differently based on hierarchical position, with supervisors viewing meetings as less effectively if they themselves must surface act.

2.2.3 Gender and Race

Gender was a central focus of Hochschild's initial publication, as her research focused on flight attendants, a largely female-dominated profession. In her book, she outlines four gendered dimensions to emotional labour: Firstly, women have limited access to material resources, which increases pressure to commodify emotions. Secondly, women are

overrepresented in emotionally demanding roles such as caregivers, in part due to the socially constructed understanding of women as nurturing and caring. Thirdly, women's perceived lack of authority makes them more vulnerable to customers' emotional outbursts. Lastly, gender norms dictate which emotions should be portrayed by whom, stipulating that women should be warm and giving while men are expected to show dominance through negative emotions like anger (Hochschild, 1983, pp. 162-184).

Later studies expand on the gendered dimension, showing that women are more often expected to perform emotional labour. Müller (2019) attributes this to women's socialization and subordinate position in the social hierarchy, making them more vulnerable to exploitation, while Meier et al. (2006) highlight the gendered division of work based on presumed emotional capabilities. Acker (1990) further argues that organizational structures are often built on gendered assumptions, disadvantaging women and reinforcing male dominance.

Although race was not a major focus in Hochschild's initial theory, recent research has developed the concept of racialized emotional labour, which examines the added burden of managing emotions under conditions of discrimination and microaggressions. In workplaces where positive emotional display is required, racialized workers must suppress genuine emotional responses to racism (Evans & Moore, 2015). They often perform additional emotional labour to be perceived similarly to their white colleagues, working against racial bias (Grandey et al., 2018; Humphrey, 2021). Wingfield (2010) argues that black women, in particular, must navigate both gendered and racialized stereotypes, requiring them to suppress negative emotions to appear approachable and counter prejudices. Similarly, Holgersson and Romani (2020) show how racialized women in male-dominated workplaces are simultaneously hyper-visible and constrained, resulting in added emotional strain as they manage both their organizational roles and broader social expectations. Schütze and Stelljes (2025) suggested that racialized emotional labour is a multi-dimensional process depending on the type of interaction, colour-blindness in the organizational culture and racialized processes, such as micro-aggressions and white normativity.

Overall, research shows that emotional labour is more burdensome for marginalized groups, who must navigate stereotypes and discrimination without space for authentic emotional expression.

2.2.4   Consequences of Emotional Labour

Hochschild's work primarily highlighted the negative impacts of emotional labour on workers. Subsequent research has reinforced these concerns. Hsieh (2012) found that emotional labour – particularly the suppression of negative emotions – is closely linked to emotional exhaustion, diminishing worker enthusiasm and contributing to burnout. Other studies have also connected emotional labour to burnout, especially in environments with low social support or inadequate training for emotionally demanding roles (Bartram et al., 2012; Näring et al., 2006; Shankar & Kumar, 2014). Additionally, emotional labour has been associated with depression, cynicism and alienation (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Wharton, 1993).

The concept of emotional dissonance, first introduced by Hochschild as the disconnect between genuine feelings and displayed emotion, has also been explored further. Van Dijk and Brown (2006) argue that this dissonance mediate the relationship between emotional

labour and emotional exhaustion. Morris and Feldman (1996b) frame it as a form of role conflict, particularly evident in surface acting, where emotional mismatch can increase stress and lead to burnout.

While much of the literature emphasises the risks, some scholars have identified potential benefits. Wharton (1993) suggests that when emotional labour is performed successfully – especially under conditions of job autonomy and moderate workload – it can enhance job satisfaction. Similarly, Humphrey et al. (2015) introduce the idea of genuine emotional labour, in which workers naturally identify with their roles and rarely need to fake or suppress feelings. This form of emotional labour may improve self-esteem and reinforce positive sense of self.

2.2.5   Emotional Labour and Immigration

Research on emotional labour in relation to immigration has primarily focused on the care sector. This is largely because of Hochschild (2000) expanding her theory through the idea of global care chains – networks of transnational care work in which migrants exchange emotional and physical labour for wages, often shifting family responsibility back home. This globalized care work reshapes both emotional experience and family structures. Immigrant care workers are often vulnerable due to the isolated, informal and unprotected nature of in-house care (Bauer & Österle, 2013; Fu et al., 2018). Work visa dependence further restricts the immigrants freedom to leave exploitative environments (Dyer et al., 2008; Huang & Yeoh, 2007).

Additionally, racialized and gendered hierarchies in care professions intensify emotional strain and limit career advancement due to stereotyping and systemic barriers (Batnitzky & McDowell, 2011; Dyer et al., 2008). Cultural and social differences further complicate emotional labour for immigrant workers. Ho et al. (2019) note that 'morality and expression of emotion are socially conceptualized' (p. 6), which can lead to misunderstandings or stigmatization in cross-cultural care relationships. Dyer et al. (2008) similarly highlight the challenge of navigating culturally specific feeling rules in emotionally demanding roles. Bauer and Österle (2013) argue that the commodification of domestic care often aligns with culturally ingrained family and social values around caregiving, making immigrant workers particularly suited for these roles. Researchers also emphasise that gendered expectations in care roles increase emotional strain, particularly for women, who face added risks of exploitation and abuse (Fu et al., 2018; Huang & Yeoh, 2007).

Despite this focus on vulnerability, some studies highlight potential benefits. Tsujimoto (2014) suggests emotional labour can be used strategically to build trust and gain work advantages. Singkul et al. (2019) argue it offers immigrant sex workers a way to screen clients and maintain agency, while Sahraoui (2018) sees it as a source of pride and identity reinforcement.

3   Methodology

To explore how immigration shapes the experience of emotional labour, this study is based on interviews with seven immigrant workers from Southern Europe. This section outlines the research design and methodological approach, explaining the rationale behind the chosen focus and the criteria used to select participants. It also details the process of data handling and introduces the method of analysis employed – Qualitative Content Analysis as developed by (Kuckartz, 2014).

3.1   Research Approach

This qualitative study is both case-based and problem oriented to investigate how immigration affects emotional management at work (Aghamanoukjan et al., 2009). Methodologically, this approach combines deductive and exploratory elements: deductive reasoning, grounded in Hochschild's theory and existing literature, guided the research approach focus and study design (6 & Bellamy, 2012). At the same time, the study remains open to theory-building by exploring under-researched areas and generating context-specific insights.

3.2   Data Collection

To explore the effect of immigration on the perception of emotional labour, this study employs semi-structured interviews, which allow the participants to share their personal experiences while guiding the conversation towards relevant themes (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). The interview guide uses open-ended, and narrative questions designed to elicit in-depth reflections without leading responses. Rather than asking directly about theoretical concepts, the guide encourages participants to narrate their experiences – starting with their previous workplaces in their home countries and then moving to their current place of employment in Sweden. This interview design aligns with both deductive theories used and explorative research, supporting a nuanced understanding of immigration's influence on emotional labour.

3.2.1   Area of Investigation

This study focuses on immigration from the Southern EU – specifically Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece – to Sweden. These countries were chosen due to their cultural and economic contrast with Sweden, offering a meaningful context to explore how immigration influences emotional labour. In 2024, approximately 58,000 individuals immigrated from Southern EU countries to Sweden (StatisticsSweden, 2023). This pattern, rooted in post-WWII dynamics and intensified by the 2008 financial crisis, reflects ongoing economic disparities between the Northern and Southern EU (Lafleur & Stanek, 2017). The four southern countries continue to face high unemployment and lower wages, with annual salaries ranging from 20,000€ - 30,000€, which is significantly below Sweden's average of 45,000€ (Eurostat, 2023; Yanatma, 2024). Beyond economics, the Southern EU cultures tend to emphasize close familial ties and informal social norms (Andreotti et al., 2001; Boltho, 2020). These differences shape emotional expectations and behaviours, making the transition to Sweden's work environment a particularly insightful case for studying emotional adaptation through migration. Furthermore, the focus on EU-internal immigration ensures that the participants did not experience visa-related barriers, which has been a focus in existing research on emotional labour and immigration.

3.2.2   Selection of the Participants

Based on the chosen area of investigation, participant selection was based on three main criteria: a background of immigration from Southern EU countries to Sweden, employment experience in both regions, and work within the same or similar fields before and after immigrating to isolate the effect of immigration on emotional labour. Recruitment followed a convenience sampling approach (Gill, 2020) through public Facebook, WhatsApp, and Discord groups targeting expats and international students in Malmö, Sweden. To broaden the pool, snowball sampling was also used, with participants helping to identify additional

candidates through their social networks (Heckathorn & Cameron, 2017). In total, seven interviews were conducted – five with participants in customer-facing roles and two in less public-facing fields: academia and engineering.

Table 1: Interview Participants

Alias	CO	Job in CO	Job in Sweden	Time in Sweden
Nicos	Greece	Waiter in a restaurant	Waiter in a restaurant	1.5 years
Pavlos	Greece	Engineer	Engineer	8 years
Sofia	Spain	Cashier in a supermarket	Assistant in student housing	1.5 years
Maria	Portugal	Barista in a pastry shop	Barista and waitress in a bar	1.5 years
Luna	Italy	Academia	Academia	7 years
Camilla	Italy	Waitress	Waitress	2 years
Elena	Italy	Seller in an ice cream shop	Worker in a museum	3 years

3.2.3 Processing of the Data

All interviews followed the interview guide and lasted between 24 and 56 minutes. They were conducted either in person or via Zoom, depending on participants' availability – one no longer lives in Sweden (Camilla), and another resides in Gothenburg (Elena). Informed consent was obtained in line with ethical guidelines (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Interviews were recorded and transcribed using the rules outlined by Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022), ensuring consistency for the analysis. To protect participants' anonymity, pseudonyms were used, and identifiable details – such as specific workplaces or job titles – were generalized.

3.3 Data Analysis

The collected material was analysed using Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA), following Kuckartz (2014) seven-step model. This approach combines a structured, rule-based method with flexibility to capture both theoretical and emergent insights. Rooted in Mayring (2010) original framework, QCA aims to ensure transparency and comparability in qualitative research by organizing data into thematic categories derived from theory.

First, transcripts were reviewed for relevance to the research question. Based on Hochschild's theory, four main categories were developed: Internal Organizational Relations', Gender and Race', Social Differences', and 'Economic Differences'. Interview excerpts were coded accordingly, with irrelevant content excluded. Subcategories were added where needed – further distinguishing between 'Co-Worker Relations' and 'Supervisor Relations'. The material was then re-coded for clarity, and findings were interpreted, beginning with social and economic differences to provide contextual grounding for the other themes.

The finalized categorical system looks as follows:

Table 2: The Deductive-Inductive Category System

	Main Category	Subcategory	Section
1.	Social Differences in Emotional Labour		2.2.5
2.	The Influence of Economic Differences on Emotional Labour		2.2.5
3.	Internal Organizational Relations	1. Co-Worker Relations 2. Supervisor Relations	2.2.2
4.	Gender and Race		2.2.3

Section = section of theoretical derivation

4   Presentation of the Findings

This section presents the interview findings, structured according to the categories identified through QCA. Each category is explored in a separate section, with attention paid to how participants' experiences differ based on their occupational fields. Following the presentation of each theme, the findings are discussed in relation to the theoretical framework outlined earlier, expanding existing theory through the perspective of immigration.

4.1   Differences in Emotional Labor

4.1.1 Findings

This category examines how participants perceive emotional expectations at work in their respective country of origin compared to Sweden, especially in customer-facing roles. It is interesting to note that none of the interviewees received formal training in emotional conduct; instead, they were broadly encouraged to remain positive during customer interactions.

Sofia recalls being told:

> "So, it was basically just to learn to be always with a good attitude, always leave my problems outside the work and only focusing on the customer […]" (Sofia, 12/03/2025).

Elena was similarly advised:

> "Well, yes, we were encouraged to just smile all the time […] trying to not show any negative, just emotions. Just try to be nice and pretty like kind" (Elena, 20/03/2025).

Despite similar guidance across workplaces, participants noted cultural differences in customer interaction. In their home countries, encounters were perceived as being more familiar and emotionally expressive, whereas in Sweden, they experienced more reserved and formal interactions.

Nikos, a waiter from Greece, observed that:

> "[…] Swedish people are more shy […] while the Greeks will be more loud, more demanding, most of the time, they will be more mean" (Nikos, 07/03/2025).

Camilla, who worked as a barista, observed that Swedish customers seemed largely indifferent to service workers' emotional display, while in Italy, failing to smile or show friendliness would prompt immediate feedback from patrons:

"[in Sweden] if you were bringing that coffee with a smile or without it, it wouldn't be a problem to them, but in Italy […] they're gonna say to you 'why' in a – in an explicit or hidden way" (Camilla, 17.03.2025).

For many participants, adjusting to the Swedish style of emotional reserve required a period of adaptation. Maria, who works in a bar in Sweden, described having to tone down her natural expressiveness and recalibrate the energy she projected in interactions with customers. She describes this adjustment as creating a sense of dissonance, especially early on, as she struggled to understand and embody the unspoken emotional norms of the new environment. Nikos also struggled with the initial adaptation, reflecting that: "I had to let go of a lot of stuff that I have learned from Greece […] it was a bit difficult to start questioning my whole working experience up until now […]" (Nikos, 07/03/2025).

According to these participants, the transition was not just about suppressing emotional expression, but about developing new ways of interpreting and responding to social cues, many of which were seen as more subtle or ambiguous in Sweden.

Interestingly, while all participants found this cultural shift challenging at first, their response diverged over time. For four of them, the more reserved Swedish service culture eventually became preferable. They felt it required less emotional effort and thus became less draining over time.

"[…] so there are differences, of course, like the type of – like, Spanish people are like the cliché, you know, like loud, like obnoxious, like really touchy, we are like this. So here it's more like introverted, more like polite reserve, which I like, honestly, I love it" (Sofia, 12/03/2025).

However, not all experiences are aligned with this view. Camilla offered a contrasting perspective, expressing a strong preference for the more familiar, emotionally engaging environment she experienced in Italy. She described service encounters as an opportunity for genuine connection, reflecting on how her emotional performance often led to real emotional improvement.

Ultimately, Camilla found the Swedish context emotionally unsatisfying. The lack of expressive, personal interactions made it difficult for her to adjust. Despite higher wages, she returned to Italy after two years, choosing authenticity and comfort over financial gain.

"But honestly, also with that little money, I would rather live in a – in a place that is (..) very relaxing for your mentality and sanity, mentality, for your mental health. So, I felt like Sweden was not for me, was not a good fit" (Camilla, 17/03/2025).

Camilla's story highlights how emotional culture at work is not only nationally shaped but deeply personal. While some participant valued the emotional detachment of Swedish service work, others experienced it as alienating. These accounts suggest that emotional expectations in customer service – though often informal – have a significant effect on how workers experience their jobs and, in some cases, their broader sense of belonging in a new country.

4.1.2 Discussion

The interviews revealed that all seven participants found adapting to Sweden's emotional norms initially challenging, particularly those in customer-facing roles. They described a period of emotional strain as they adjusted to new social cues and unfamiliar feeling rules – supporting the idea that emotional expectations are culturally constructed and not universally shared (Andreotti et al., 2001; Boltho, 2020).

Once adjusted, participants' experiences diverge. Some came to value Sweden's emotionally reserved climate. They noted that fewer expectations for overt friendliness reduced the emotional dissonance they experienced, making their work feel more manageable. These individuals viewed their emotionally intense past work experiences in their countries of origin as useful preparation, helping them remain composed and resilient in Sweden's more subdued customer service context.

For others, the shift to a less expressive culture felt unnatural. Camilla described missing the informal and emotionally rich interactions of her home country, finding Swedish customer exchanges more performative and less authentic. This echoes Humphrey et al. (2015) concept of genuine emotional labour, where workers feel aligned with their emotional performance. In this context, the emotional display expected in Sweden clashed with Camilla's self-perception, increasing emotional dissonance and reducing job satisfaction.

These findings suggest that not only are emotional expectations culturally shaped, but so too are notions of authenticity in emotional labour (Ho et al., 2019). For some, immigration reduced the emotional burden of work; for others, it intensified it. Ultimately, the effect depends on how closely the host country's emotional norms align with workers internalised feeling rules and concept of self.

4.2   The influence of Economic Differences on Emotional Labour

4.2.1 Findings

This category explores how economic disparities between the investigated four southern EU countries and Sweden shape participants' workplace experience and emotional performance. All seven participants touched on this topic, with the clearest examples emerging from those working in customer service roles.

Across the interviews, participants described work in their countries of origin as more emotionally and physically draining due to low pay, long hours, and chaotic environments. These poor conditions affected expression at work. Maria, who previously worked in a Portuguese pastry shop, emphasised how the low wages influenced her willingness to perform:

> "Your work depends on how valued you feel. And this, you know, be it money wise, be it like, you know, this kind of interactions and like, emotionally wise. Um, obviously I was doing the bare minimum in Portugal, you cannot expect me to do more. I'm paying- I'm getting paid 3.5 euros an hour, like I will not be doing more than a bare minimum" (Maria, 13/03/2025).

She recalls how the emotional strain of unfair conditions made it difficult to display positivity with customers, instead generating resentment towards her workplace.

> "You cannot live off of 3.5 euros an hour, right? And also, you don't want to work getting paid 3.5- it's like you'd rather be unemployed. Because the energy, the mental space, the time that you are wasting getting that little pay, obviously it doesn't compensate I think [...] And here in Sweden, like, it's not- that's not what's bonding. You know, bonding is like, you don't hate our workplace" (Maria, 13/03/2025).

Maria's comparison illustrates how better pay and recognition in Sweden increased her emotional investment and made her more willing to engage positively with customers. Similarly, Elena, who formerly worked in Italy's hospitality sector, noted how the calmer, more balanced conditions in Sweden made emotional management easier:

> "Well, since here, I'm more relaxed, I feel like I can deal with my emotions better, like they don't just pop off, but I have time to just calm down. [...] I think that's the main differences, like feeling more like a human being than a machine" (Elena, 20/03/2025).

Pavlos and Nikos also linked emotional strain to economic hardship. Pavlos highlighted how economic instability shaped his workplace stress in Greece, impinging that "the economic circumstances are what makes people who they are [...]" (Pavlos, 12/03/2025).

He describes experiencing burnout in Greece and a sense of relief upon starting work in Sweden, where his newfound job security and structure improved his overall well-being as well as attitude towards work and therein his ability to portray positive emotions. Nikos similarly noted that the conditions of his Swedish workplace left him with more time and mental space, leaving him less emotionally drained.

Despite the improved economic conditions experienced by all seven participants upon starting work in Sweden, some raised concerns about exploitation. Camilla recalls being denied pay for trial shifts and suspected she was being taken advantage of due to her unfamiliarity with local laws. Maria echoed this, noting that she and her peer later realized their wages were below average for the Swedish standard, voicing concern that her employers were abusing the knowledge that their workforce mostly consists of immigrants who are unaware of the local job market. Maria ultimately describes her move as beneficial, but also emotionally taxing – especially during the early period of job searching and instability:

> "[...] before that, you know, just getting so like rejected, and then having like, trial shifts in places that were so awful [...] having to negotiate, in your mind, like, I either stay in Sweden with a really shitty job that makes me extremely unhappy, or I have to give up on this part of my life [...] a tricky process (Maria, 13/03/2025).

Maria's experience highlights how the emotional burden of immigration often begins before stable employment is secured. After getting work, the improvement in economic conditions shapes the workers' ability and willingness to engage in emotional management and display positivity.

4.2.2 Discussion

The quotes gathered into this category made it apparent that the economic disparities between southern EU countries and Sweden influence the participants experience of emotional labour. In accordance with Morris and Feldman (1996a), the findings reflect that both frequency and duration of emotional labour – particularly when paired with low job autonomy – can heighten emotional strain. However, participants' accounts expand on these notions by showing how immigration and improved economic conditions also shape emotional management, job loyalty, and ultimately, willingness to perform emotional labour.

Four participants who viewed their immigration as overall positive mainly attributed this to improved financial and working conditions – such as higher wages, reduced hours, and greater job security. These improvements enhance their emotional state and made them more willing to engage in emotional labour, supporting Wharton's (1993) link between job security and emotional performance.

Many participants described emotional detachment from previous workplaces due to poor economic conditions, which made positive emotional display feel forced. In contrast, Swedish workplaces, perceives as fairer and more supportive, reduced this burden, and allowed for more authentic emotional expression – aligning with (Hsieh, 2012) findings that positive workplaces reduce the risk of burnout linked to emotional labour.

These experiences suggest that emotional labour is not only shaped by its volume but also by workplace conditions. They support Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional transmutation, but further suggest that fair compensation can make this process feel more acceptable.

While prior studies on immigrant workers' emotional labour focus on their vulnerability – especially in underregulated sectors like in-home care (Bauer & Österle, 2013; Fu et al., 2018) – this study's participants, working in varied sectors and not dependent on employment for legal residency (Dyer et al., 2008; Huang & Yeoh, 2007), reported less long-term vulnerability and more agency within their work. They noted the freedom to leave Sweden or change jobs, which reduced work related pressure.

However, two participants described a period of vulnerability upon arriving, including unpaid trial shifts and low wages. These early challenges affected emotional well-being but were seemingly not directly tied to emotional labour. Over time, increased familiarity with Swedish norms and labour laws reduced these risks.

Overall, the participants' experiences suggest that while emotional labour is shaped by workload and job autonomy (Morris & Feldman, 1996a), broader structural and economic factors also play a crucial role in how it is experienced and performed – making the context of immigration particularly unique.

4.3   Internal Organizational Relations

This category explores how immigration influences internal organizational relationships and, consequently, affects how workers perform emotional labour. It examines two key sub-categories: first, the relationship and interactions between immigrant workers and their co-workers; second, the dynamics between immigrant workers and their supervisors or managers.

4.3.1 Co-Worker Relations

- Findings

This section highlights key differences in emotional labour experiences between immigrants working in predominantly international workplaces (in the case of this study predominantly participants working in customer service) and those in mostly Swedish environments.

Before immigrating to Sweden, many participants describe strong bonds with their colleagues in their countries of origin, rooted in shared dissatisfaction with their jobs. These relationships allowed for mutual emotional support, often expressed through shared frustration. For example, Elena and Maria recall managing difficult customer interactions with the help of their co-workers, often venting together to cope with stress. This camaraderie seemed to ease the burden of emotional management by aligning internal feelings with shared external reactions.

After moving to Sweden, some participants found similar support in international teams. Maria, for instance, now works in a diverse workplace where emotional openness is encouraged. She describes how team solidarity allows them to adjust responsibility based on each other's emotional states, helping reduce the strain of pretending to be cheerful in customer-facing roles.

> "I do have to – to pretend sometimes emotions. But I also feel like the team closeness allows us, for example, if I come, it has happened and I go and I'm like 'Guys, I'm so sad today. I feel so awful today.' And they were like 'Okay, you can just go work in glasses. You don't have to interact with anyone.' Perfect. And we do this to each other, you know. So, it's like, I do have to pretend, but I also, if I really, really have to pretend that I don't have to do that work because of my colleagues being so cool" (Maria, 13/03/2025).

This positive and supportive environment reduces the emotional dissonance perceived between felt and displayed emotions; by allowing workers to reduce customer interactions on days their internal feelings differ significantly from those they are expected to perform.

However, participants working in a predominantly Swedish workplace reported a different experience.

Firstly, they described instances in which they struggled to accurately interpret their co-worker's intentions and actions. Sofia and Pavlos struggled to understand Swedish colleagues, who they perceived as more reserved and difficult to read. To them, this made it harder to build trust, increasing emotional uncertainty.

> "Here, I can't here, I don't know, I don't know what they think about me. It's more like, I don't – I don't (…) they are so well reserved and so introvert sometimes that it's difficult for me to read their minds, like how – you know? It's really difficult to know" (Sofia, 12/03/2025).

Secondly, they recall experiencing linguistic isolation deepening their loneliness. Elena shared how Swedish-language conversation excluded her, making it hard to participate in workplace culture or express herself fully.

> "Sometimes they speak only Swedish, so sometimes I'm cut out from this group. [...] I just let them be and just be by myself or speak with someone else. [...] Kind of like, maybe on the short run, it was okay. Now it's the long run sometimes, yeah, I feel a bit lonely, maybe. Not being able to build real connection at work" (Elena, 20/03/2025).

This linguistic divide limited social bonding and added emotional strain, especially in customer-facing roles.

Thirdly, they describe that due to cultural differences, the workplace norms they were familiar with from their countries of origin did not properly translate into the Swedish context. Luna, for instance, found that what was considered professional in Italy (e.g., wearing heals and makeup) felt out of place in Sweden. When colleagues commented on her appearance, she felt jugged but suppressed her reaction to maintain a professional façade, reflecting the emotional effort required to adapt to unfamiliar norm as recalled by Luna, "[...] because obviously you can't show that you are being affected by the – by the comment, even though it's weird [...]" (Luna, 14/03/2025).

Overall, participants who reported more negative experiences after immigration linked them to the social, linguistic and cultural disconnects. Elena, who felt open and friendly at work in Italy, now feels increasingly reserved in Sweden. This emotional distancing, driven by loneliness and cultural mismatch, increased the gap between her genuine feelings and

expected emotional display – amplifying the amount of emotional management necessary. More international teams on the other hand can seemingly offer emotional support and reduce strain.

- *Discussion*

The participants' experiences of emotional labour after immigration appear to be closely tied to the collegial composition of their new workplace. In their countries of origin, many recalled bonding with co-workers over shared dissatisfaction with their jobs – an experience consistent with Hochschild's (1983: 115) observation that collective negativity can ease emotional strain through shared understanding but may also lower workplace loyalty and reduce the willingness to perform emotional labour. This negativity seemed to intensify emotional dissonance and decrease motivation to display positive emotions.

After immigrating to Sweden, these dynamics shifted depending on the workplace's cultural makeup. Participants working in international teams reported a smoother transition. Shared immigrant backgrounds and mutual unfamiliarity with Swedish norms helped foster understanding and reduce emotional strain. These environments were described as more supportive, enhancing workers' sense of loyalty and aligning emotional performance more closely with genuine feelings.

In contrast, those in predominantly Swedish workplaces faced additional challenges. Language barriers and unfamiliar display norms made it harder to connect, leading to prolonged adaptation and increased emotional labour. As Kang and Jang (2022) suggested, greater emotional effort in co-worker interactions can negatively affect organizational engagement. For these participants, managing emotional expression in both customer and co-worker interactions contributes to feelings of isolation and emotional fatigue.

These findings align with broader research showing that low workplace social support increases the risk of burnout and depression (Bartram et al., 2012; Näring et al., 2006; Shankar & Kumar, 2014). While Gabriel et al. (2020) argue that deep acting is typical in long-term co-worker relationships, this study suggests that immigration may shift interactions toward surface acting – particularly in Swedish-majority settings – due to linguistic and cultural disconnects that hinder emotional resonance.

4.3.2 Supervisor Relations

- *Findings*

This category explores how participants' relationships with their superiors influence their workplace attitudes, behaviours and emotional management skills. Across different professions, participants highlighted the effect of hierarchical structures on emotional expression and workplace dynamics, often comparing experiences between their countries of origin and Sweden. Luna and Pavlos reflected on the rigid hierarchies of their home countries – Italy and Greece – where power imbalances discouraged open communication and required additional emotional suppression to maintain professionalism.

Luna noted that while Swedish workplaces portray themselves as egalitarian, similar power dynamics persist, albeit less acknowledged. She believes her awareness of

hierarchy, shaped by her experiences in Italy, gives her an advantage in navigating these structures, even if it requires more emotional management.

> "And I feel that despite the fact that, again, Sweden tends to portray itself as being a land beyond power differentials, my experience of Italian power differentials made me understand these dynamics better in the Swedish context and be able to respond to them in a more – (...) in a smoother way, essentially" (Luna, 14/03/2025).

Pavlos, working in engineering, echoed this view. He contracted the strict vertical hierarchy in Greece with Sweden's more open work culture, observing that, despite ultimate decision-making still being top-down, Swedish workplaces encourage employee input. This perceived openness positively affected his willingness to express himself and made emotional labour feel more authentic.

> "And there is a much more vertical hierarchy in – in Greece compared to Sweden. If I'm honest (...), I think here is also vertical the hierarchy in the sense that the actual decision making happens at a really high level, and as an employee [...] you can make your voice be heard, you can share your opinion, what you think about it, but at the end of the day, you're not the one making it, etc. But regardless, you know, at least – especially in [company] your opinion – you're actually encouraged to share your opinion, even if you disagree, or whatever you know, stuff like that" (Pavlos, 12/03/2025).

Maria, employed in customer service, described a similar shift. In contrast to the inaccessible leadership she experienced in the Southern EU, her Swedish workplace offered more direct interactions with higher management. This accessibility made her feel valued and increased her workplace loyalty and emotional investment.

> "[...] even like, the structures of the company are very different. So, like, I have talked to the CEO many times. I have talked to the upper manager [...]. And like, the fact that they all know us, and they all appreciate us, and like they talk to us directly and like, this kind of stuff. This, like break, breaking of [...] hierarchy. I think it's, I think obviously changes a lot my own position in work, and I feel like I kind of, I'm a bit more bound to the work in that sense" (Maria, 13/03/2025).

Elena's experience stands out. Working in a museum, she initially struggled with self-doubt and cultural disconnection. However, having a superior who was also an Italian immigrant helped her feel understood.

> "So, I was lucky enough to have my (...) supervisor, she's also from Italy, so she actually took me under her protective wig- wing, and so I could talk to her about anything. So, after a while, I – I told her how I felt, and kind of told me, 'you don't need to feel like that. You know, it's, it's very different', and she knew how it worked, how is the work environment in Italy" (Elena, 20/03/2025).

This shared background provided emotional support and reduced the pressure to perform according to culturally unfamiliar emotional norms, highlighting the importance of empathetic leadership in easing emotional burdens.

Together, these accounts suggest that participants from hierarchical cultural backgrounds initially experienced emotional burdens, having to supress their feelings. In Sweden, some found greater openness that aligned emotional performance with genuine engagement. Others, like Luna, retained their hierarchical awareness, seeing it as a strategic tool. Meanwhile, shared cultural experiences, as Elena's case, proved valuable in fostering trust and reducing emotional strain.

- *Discussion*

Participants emphasized that their relationship with management significantly shaped their experience of emotional labour. Supportive and empathetic supervisors – especially those who understood the emotional challenges of immigration – helped ease the emotional strain, fostering more sustainable and affirming work environments. This aligns with Kang and Jang (2022) that managerial support can reduce the burden of emotional labour.

However, immigration seemingly complicates how managerial support is perceived. Participants describe more positive experiences when managers acknowledged their migratory challenges or shared a similar background. In contrast, a perceived lack of understanding from superiors increased emotional strain and reinforced participants' reliance on the hierarchical understandings they developed in their countries of origin. Coming from southern EU contexts where workplace hierarchies are more explicit, many continued to interact with Swedish superiors using those same frameworks, even when Swedish workplaces were expected to be more egalitarian,

While co-workers sometimes misread this as emotional distance, participants viewed their hierarchical awareness as an asset, helping them navigate unclear power structures. This expands on Shumski Thomas et al. (2018) findings that emotional labour is shaped by organizational standing, and supports Hochschild's argument that feeling rules uphold workplace hierarchies (1983: 56-63). Importantly, participants' emotional expressions were not only shaped by formal hierarchy, but also by culturally informed understandings of power – suggesting that rather than discarding their old feeling rules, they adapted them to their new context.

4.4   Gender and Race

4.4.1 Findings

This section explores how marginalized groups, known to experience heightened emotional labour (Humphrey, 2021; Meier et al., 2006; Müller, 2019; Wingfield, 2010), navigate immigration, focusing on gender and race.

Of the five female interviewees, four reported experiencing gender-based discrimination, particularly during customer interactions. These incidents were not limited to one country but occurred across the four southern EU countries and Sweden. The women described situations where male customers flirted or acted overly friendly, despite feeling uncomfortable, they supressed their emotions and maintained a friendly demeanour, as they felt unable to express dissatisfaction while at work. Elena, in Sweden, recalled an instance with a male art customer who acted too familiar. She didn't report it, fearing her supervisor's response and instead managed the situation by distancing herself and guiding the conversation in a more professional direction.

> "So, there are some clients like (...) I'm noticing in the art world, when it specifically is men like with money that wants to buy art, they feel like entitled to kind of be too friendly with me, sometimes, kind of too flirty, sometimes, and maybe they are big customers, so I cannot go to my director and say 'that man did that'. [...] I just try to be like kind but not let them be too flirty with me, so just like going somewhere else, like have a different conversation" (Elena, 20/03/2025).

Similarly, Maria working in Portugal faced inappropriate customer behaviour but felt her comfort was viewed secondary to the customers experience in the eyes of management. In contrast, in Sweden, when a group of men harassed her, her co-workers and managers swiftly intervened, surprising Maria, as such a response seemed unlikely in her previous workplace.

> "[...] a few episodes happen [in Sweden] in which, like, my comfort was put – was jeopardized because of customers, and I felt like the team, like everyone, and, you know, the manager and everything, it was very clear from moment like one, that the customers had to go and that I had to take a break and go home, possibly with the rest of the day being paid, yeah, you know, and that was something that was really hard for me to kind of adapt my mind to, because in Portugal, if a customer was fighting me, I'd be fired, you know" (Maria, 13/03/2025).

While gendered emotional burdens were experienced in all countries, its effect was influenced more by workplace dynamics than by immigration. Elena suppressed her feelings due to fear of backlash, while Maria felt her emotional strain was alleviated through support from colleagues and management.

Racialized experiences, however, appeared to change more significantly with immigration. Luna, a woman of colour, recalls how in her home country, she had to overperform to combat racial bias, striving to be seen as competent to avoid stereotypes.

> "But it's also because I am aware that as a woman from racialized background, from a working-class background (...) I can't afford to not be competent, and I can't afford to not be seen as competent. [...] I still feel like I need to prove myself and work much better than anybody else to have that kind of stability" (Luna, 14/03/2025).

She expected Sweden, a multicultural society, to offer a more inclusive environment, but was instead confronted with racialized structures and racist encounters. This disillusionment left Luna emotionally drained and attempts to voice her frustration didn't yield the results she was hoping for. Over time, Luna learned to suppress her emotions instead of expressing her authentic feelings.

> "So (...) like my, my current serenity in dealing with some of these frustrations, or at least, at least not showing how they frustrate me, derives from my experience of having shown how to frustrate me earlier and then still not being able to solve it" (Luna, 14/03/2025).

Lunas experience of racialization intensified after her immigration, as she navigated being both racialized and an immigrant, leading her to question whether the challenges she faced were due to her gender, race, or immigrant status. This multifaceted marginalization caused insecurity, as she felt others were less likely to face similar obstacles.

> "But it's just – you know, it's always a question like, are they questioning me because I'm a woman? Are they question me because I'm an immigrant? When I feel like other people wouldn't necessarily feel or experience the same pushback" (Luna, 14/03/2025).

Over time, Luna developed a more strategic approach to managing her emotional energy. Her improved socio-economic position allowed her more emotional distance, and she began applying a personal framework, influenced by the serenity prayer, to decide when to engage in struggles and when to conserve her emotional resources. According to Luna, her careful control over her emotions, which emphasised calmness and self-control, was crucial to her success in Sweden. Despite this, she acknowledges that she could not fully express her authentic emotions in a racialized environment where her struggles were often ignored.

4.4.2 Discussion

The participants' experience of gendered emotional labour – particularly during interactions with male customers – appeared largely unaffected by their immigration to Sweden. These gendered dynamics transcended into national contexts, but the emotional toll varied depending on the level of support participants received from colleagues and management. In more inclusive and diverse workplaces, often shaped by immigrant backgrounds, such support helped alleviate the emotional burden of gender-based harassment. Conversely, in environments where participants felt socially or linguistically isolated, the stress of these encounters intensified. Across the board, female participants described suppressing frustration during uncomfortable interactions, confirming earlier findings that women perform emotional labour due to gendered expectations (Müller, 2019).

Racialized emotional labour, too, showed cross-national consistency in structure, but immigration introduced new complexities. Although racial bias persisted post-migration, what changed was the participant's response. Expecting less race-based discrimination in Sweden, Luna encountered disappointment and frustration when faced with systemic indifference, resulting in a slow process of disillusionment and eventual resignation. Her reluctance to express anger or challenge injustice echoed concerns form Wingfield (2010) about the risk of being stereotyped, as well as Evans and Moore (2015) findings on workplace feeling rules that prioritize positive emotional displays.

Luna also felt compelled to overperform emotionally to be perceived as professional and competent, reinforcing research that shows racialized workers often must work harder to counteract racial bias (Grandey et al., 2018; Humphrey, 2021). She deliberately managed her emotions to gain professional traction, aligning with Tsujimoto (2014) argument that immigration may use emotional labour strategically to secure economic advancement. However, immigration appears to exacerbate racialized emotional labour, not only by defying hopeful expectations but also by adding the burden of navigating dual discrimination – both racial and immigration-based. Over time, this emotional toll contributes to a sense of cynicism, consistent with outcomes outlined by Ashforth and Humphrey (1993). In accordance with Schütze and Stelljes (2025) proposition, Luna's narrative underscores how marginalized individuals often bear the weight of compounded emotional labour; not just to meet professional expectations, but also to mask the emotional effect of unacknowledged structural discrimination.

5. Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Research

This study explored how the theory of emotional labour by Hochschild (1983), applied to the context of EU-internal immigration. Despite participant diversity, several common patterns emerged.

A central finding is that the participants' perceptions of emotional labour were shaped more by their workplace environment and cultural expectations than by the immigration process itself. Those employed in diverse, international workplaces reported greater emotional well-being and smoother adaptation, often attributing this to shaped immigration experiences that foster a sense of solidarity and support. In contrast, participants in predominantly Swedish workplaces described longer adjustment periods, greater emotional strain, and feelings of isolation.

Gendered emotional labour was also mediated by workplace context. Supportive and diverse environments helped mitigate the stress caused by harassment, whereas participants in more homogenous settings were less likely to disclose such experiences due to fear of being misunderstood or dismissed. Racialized emotional labour on the other hand, was seemingly amplified by factors surrounding immigration, such as prior expectations, unfamiliarity with cultural norms and feeling rules and the added stress of being perceived not only as racialized, but also as an immigrant.

Despite the emotional challenges, all the participants viewed their economic transition positively. Higher wages and reduced working hours in Sweden were seen as benefits that eased emotional dissonance and increased job satisfaction. Some participants also felt that their familiarity with more rigid hierarchical structures in their countries of origin gave them an advantage in adapting to Swedish workplace norms, which they perceived as more flexible and respectful.

Interestingly, the length of time spent in Sweden appeared to influence participants' outlook. Those who had lived in Sweden for longer expressed greater calm and acceptance of workplace challenges, suggesting that emotional adaptation occurs over time – though this may also be linked to age and personal development rather than immigration alone.

These findings suggest that emotional labour is deeply intertwined with the experience of immigration, shaped by workplace dynamics, cultural expectations, and the evolving perceptions of the immigrants themselves. While this study focused on EU-internal immigration, its findings might have broader implications relevant for migration studies at large. Future research could explore voluntary and forced international migration, broadening the scope of emotional labour research to include theories of displacement, identity reconstruction, and social mobility and shedding light on emotional challenges related to the workplace that immigration might cause. Especially studies focusing on the experiences of refugees would highlight compounded emotional challenges – such as heightened vulnerability and frustrations when confronted with systemic barriers – that amplify the emotional labour required in integration and employment contexts.

Furthermore, interdisciplinary approaches combining sociology, migration studies, and psychology could deepen the understanding of emotional labour in transnational contexts.

In conclusion, this study supports the idea that Hochschild's theory of emotional labour, though critiqued for its narrow focus, can be fruitfully expanded to capture the complex realities of immigrant workers. By shifting the narrative from one of vulnerability to one that also acknowledges agency, this research attempts to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of emotional labour and opens new avenues for interdisciplinary explorations within migration studies.

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