

Emotional labor takes its toll on tourism workers

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The emotional cost of a customer-facing job—or emotional labor—puts a heavy burden on tourism resort workers, according to a new study.

Holiday "reps" are expected to be fun, look good and remain professional 24/7, which leads to burnout and high staff turnover, even for the most extrovert.

The new study, led by Dr. Georgiana Busoi, at the University of

Portsmouth, Dr. Alisha Ali, and Dr. Katherine Gardiner from Sheffield Hallam University, is published in *Tourism Management*. It calls on tour operators to mitigate the cost of its staff's emotional labor and argues such changes would be easy and quick.

The term emotional labor was coined by sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild in 1983 to describe someone suppressing their emotions in order to do their job.

It has become a catch-all for politeness, tactfulness, courtesy, [professionalism](#) and friendship.

Dr. Busoi, lead author, said: "We all perform emotional labor—it includes putting on a bright face when you don't feel bright inside. Most of us do it at work and at home, it's part of being a human.

"But for those whose jobs require they perform in a certain way 24/7, it carries a spectacularly heavy toll and it can be exhausting.

"Holiday reps are the face of package holidays. They're in near-constant contact with customers. As well as sorting out any problems at the resort, they're usually expected to host leisure activities day and night and to appear always as someone fun and professional."

The researchers argue that tourism businesses which rely on their resort reps to maintain a happy face can—and should—recruit, train and support staff specifically to cope with the emotional labor of the role.

Dr. Busoi said: "The [tourism industry](#) relies heavily on recruiting the right people—often extroverts—to be its resort reps, but even extroverts need to be supported to maintain a façade of happiness.

"We've all worked with or known people whose cheerfulness comes

across as fake and others whose cheerfulness seem genuine. Humans are very good at gauging the authenticity of someone's manner. People on a resort holiday expect their rep to be ever-helpful, cheerful, empathetic and professional at breakfast, at lunch, at dinner, and if there's a problem in the middle of the night.

"For reps, to be expected to be always 'on,' regardless of their true feelings, is a big ask."

Tourism bosses could help their staff and reduce high staff turnover by recognizing and rewarding the emotional labor of the role.

Researchers suggest the industry could help by limiting the number of hotels and resorts reps are expected to work at; match reps with resorts, rather than expect all reps to work at all resorts; and by encouraging reps to specialize.

"It's unfair to ask someone to be all things to all men, all the time," Dr. Busoi said. "By recognizing the burden on their reps and supporting them to carry it out, a great deal of the emotional labor would be reduced.

"Allowing and encouraging reps to specialize, so their role more closely aligns with their personality, would demand less need to act, greatly benefitting the reps' [wellbeing](#) and the perception of customers of the tour company."

This research calls on the industry to review the terms and conditions of reps' employment.

"The package holiday industry is notorious for its low wages, irregular hours, intense workloads and the pressure to sell. If wages cannot be improved—and competition in the industry is fierce, so this seems

unlikely—then other ways of recognizing and rewarding the emotional labor of reps should be addressed."

More information: Georgiana Busoi et al, Antecedents of emotional labour for holiday representatives: A framework for tourism workers, *Tourism Management* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.tourman.2021.104450](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2021.104450)

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