

Silent Strain: The Emotional Cost of Workplace Incivility in Quality Control Management

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ABSTRACT

This paper systematically explored the literature to establish the mediating role of emotional labour, surface acting and deep acting in the relationship between workplace incivility from co-workers and superiors and emotional exhaustion. Grounded in Affective Events Theory (AET) and Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, the paper illustrates how quality control (QC) managers, tasked with precision and compliance, face a dual burden of technical rigour and emotional regulation. The findings from the literature challenge industries to recognize emotional labour not as an individual responsibility but as a structural issue, where uncivil environments undermine well-being and quality outcomes. Surface and deep acting are critical links between incivility and emotional exhaustion. The framework presented in this paper challenges organizations to reconceptualize workplace interactions as behavioural issues and systemic drivers of emotional attrition. Mapping the mediating role of emotional labour offers QC professionals and organizational leaders actionable insights to disrupt the incivility-exhaustion cycle through targeted emotional skills training and cultural interventions. Theoretical and practical implications for quality control management in manufacturing settings are discussed. This paper calls for organizational strategies that mitigate incivility while equipping QC managers with emotional resilience, ensuring product standards and human sustainability.

Keywords: workplace incivility, emotional exhaustion, surface acting, deep acting, quality control managers

INTRODUCTION

The rapid transformation of workplace dynamics in recent years has brought heightened attention to the psychological toll of interpersonal friction, particularly in high-stakes industries where precision and compliance are paramount. Workplace incivility, manifested through subtle disrespect, condescension, or exclusion, has become a pervasive stressor, eroding employee well-being and organizational performance (Banerjee & Malik, 2025; Chakraborty et al., 2025). Affective Events Theory (AET) (Gregg, 2024; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) helps explain this phenomenon by positing that daily workplace interactions trigger emotional reactions that shape attitudes and behaviours. These affective events are especially consequential for quality control QC managers as they operate at the critical intersection of technical rigour and human interaction (Chang et al., 2024). AET explains that workplace events, particularly those with emotional significance, influence employees' affective reactions, shaping their attitudes and behaviours (Tran et al., 2025). In the context of QC managers, incivility, such as dismissive remarks or exclusionary behaviours, serves as adverse affective events that can disrupt their emotional equilibrium. These disruptions may compel managers to engage in emotional labour strategies like surface acting, where they suppress genuine feelings to conform to organizational norms, potentially leading to emotional dissonance and exhaustion (Sayre et al., 2025). The cumulative effect of such affective events can erode job satisfaction and commitment, undermining both individual well-being and organizational effectiveness.

According to COR theory (Boley, 2025; Hobfoll & Hou, 2025), individuals strive to obtain, retain, and protect valuable resources, be they emotional, cognitive, or social. When QC managers are subjected to persistent

incivility, they are forced to expend additional emotional resources to maintain professionalism and meet job demands. This ongoing resource expenditure, without adequate replenishment, can initiate a loss spiral, culminating in emotional exhaustion and diminished performance (Hobfoll & Hou, 2025; Sayre et al., 2025). Moreover, the need to engage in surface or deep acting as a response to incivility further accelerates resource depletion, highlighting the need for organizational interventions to address the root causes of incivility and support resource restoration. COR theory further clarifies why these professionals are vulnerable; repeated incivility depletes their finite emotional and cognitive resources, forcing them to invest additional effort in surface or deep acting to maintain professionalism (Dorta-Afonso et al., 2025; Miao & Yu, 2025). This resource loss spiral leaves QC managers susceptible to emotional exhaustion (Jiang et al., 2025; Sayre et al., 2025), compromising their ability to perform precision-based tasks effectively.

While extensive research has examined incivility's impact on frontline service workers (Khanam & Tarab, 2025; Shin et al., 2025; Tam & Hoang, 2025) and healthcare professionals (Allari et al., 2025; Aunger et al., 2025; Joseph et al., 2025), QC managers remain an overlooked population despite their critical role in ensuring product safety and operational integrity (Foster & Gardner, 2022). Tasked with enforcing rigorous standards while navigating complex interpersonal dynamics, they face a unique double burden where emotional labour becomes an unacknowledged job requirement (Humphrey, 2023). It is vital to address the critical gap by investigating how workplace incivility from both co-workers and superiors (Gupta et al., 2025; Weiss & Zacher, 2025) translates into emotional exhaustion through the mediating mechanisms of surface and deep acting (Deb Biswas & Sengupta, 2025; Tarab, 2025), with both AET and COR theory providing complementary explanations.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges, amplifying workplace stressors (Xin et al., 2025) and reshaping organizational norms globally. Yet, the specific vulnerabilities of QC managers in this evolving landscape have received scant attention. Grounded in these theoretical frameworks, this research reveals how incivility initiates an affective chain reaction (Lin et al., 2025) that, combined with persistent resource loss (Hobfoll & Hou, 2025), creates unsustainable work environments. The COR theory better captures the long-term stress and emotional exhaustion caused by the ongoing threat to personal and organizational resources during the COVID-19 pandemic (Haar et al., 2025). While AET helps understand emotional responses to discrete incidents (e.g., being laid off or remote work challenges), COR theory captures the long-term stress and emotional exhaustion caused by the ongoing threat to personal and organizational resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. Examining these interconnected processes provides a nuanced understanding of workplace incivility that transcends individual coping strategies, instead highlighting systemic solutions for preserving human capital and operational excellence in precision-driven industries (Amin Dlima et al., 2025).

The transition to hybrid and remote work arrangements has introduced new challenges for workplace civility, as digital communication barriers and reduced face-to-face interaction exacerbate misunderstandings and perceptions of disrespect (Giumetti et al., 2013; Suler, 2004). For quality control professionals, whose roles demand precise communication and coordination, virtual work environments appear to intensify emotional labour demands as they contend with ambiguous digital messages and potential exclusion from spontaneous virtual collaborations (Fieseler et al., 2015; Vanden Abeele & Postma-Nilsenová, 2018). Emerging evidence suggests these technologically-mediated interactions require adaptation of existing organizational frameworks to address their unique impacts on employee well-being and resource depletion (Kahn et al., 2013; Holtom et al., 2018).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Association between Co-worker Incivility and Emotional Exhaustion

Theoretical frameworks and empirical studies consistently demonstrate significant relationships between co-worker incivility and emotional exhaustion across various occupational contexts (Bernuzzi et al., 2024; Yaqoob et al., 2025; Yun et al., 2024). Grounded in the Stressor-Emotion Model (Bhattacharjee & Sarkar, 2025; Good et al., 2025), this body of research suggests that repeated exposure to subtle disrespectful behaviours from colleagues, including condescending remarks, exclusion, or passive-aggressive actions, initiates a cascade of psychological processes that ultimately deplete emotional resources. The COR theory

(Hobfoll & Hou, 2025) provides a robust explanatory mechanism for this association. When employees experience incivility from co-workers, they must invest additional cognitive and emotional resources to manage these interpersonal stressors (Tarab, 2025). This constant resource expenditure, particularly through surface acting, suppressing negative emotions and heightened vigilance (Zhao, Jiao, et al., 2025), creates a loss spiral that culminates in emotional exhaustion characterized by feelings of being emotionally overextended and depleted of emotional resources (Peter et al., 2025). Empirical evidence reveals numerous key pathways through which co-worker incivility leads to emotional exhaustion. The cognitive path involves rumination, as employees continuously replay uncivil incidents in their minds, extending physiological stress responses (Yaqoob et al., 2025). The emotional pathway reflects how such encounters evoke negative emotions that build up over time (Stronach & Holmvall, 2025). The behavioural pathway shows that employees may resort to counterproductive work behaviours as coping strategies, intensifying emotional exhaustion (Alam, 2025). Notably, the impact of co-worker incivility appears particularly severe in high-interdependence work environments like quality control, where collaboration is essential, but power differentials may inhibit direct conflict resolution (Zhang et al., 2024). Recent studies indicate that the effects are dose-dependent, with the frequency of exposure predicting exhaustion severity (Irwin, Santos, et al., 2025; Tarab, 2025), while meta-analytic findings confirm these relationships across cultures (Morkevičiūtė, 2025; Yaqoob et al., 2025). Thus, hypothesized that:

H1: There is a positive relationship between co-worker incivility and emotional exhaustion.

Association between Superior Incivility and Emotional Exhaustion

A growing body of research demonstrates that superior incivility, characterized by disrespectful, condescending, or dismissive behaviours from supervisors, has a pronounced impact on employees' emotional exhaustion (Gupta et al., 2025; Imam et al., 2025; Madan et al., 2025; Theriou et al., 2025). Unlike co-worker incivility, which occurs among peers, superior incivility carries an additional power differential that exacerbates its psychological toll (Abid et al., 2025). According to AET, superiors' demeaning behaviours serve as negative affective events that trigger emotional distress, which, when repeated, leads to chronic emotional exhaustion (Saptoto et al., 2025). The COR theory further explains this relationship where employees subjected to superior incivility expend significant emotional and cognitive resources managing their reactions, fearing retaliation or career repercussions (Shin et al., 2025). This constant resource depletion leaves employees emotionally drained, reducing their ability to cope with job demands (Rubaca & Munir, 2025). Empirical studies confirm that supervisor incivility predicts emotional exhaustion more strongly than co-worker incivility due to the former's influence over performance evaluations, promotions, and job security (Kodi et al., 2024; Weiss & Zacher, 2025). Several interconnected mechanisms explain why superior incivility leads to emotional exhaustion. The power imbalance inherent in superior-subordinate relationships initially forces employees to suppress their genuine reactions to incivility, engaging in frequent surface acting that heightens emotional strain (Singh & Ramdeo, 2025). Next, uncivil superiors create a climate of fear through unpredictable behaviours, leading employees to maintain constant vigilance and threat appraisal that increases stress (Deb Biswas & Sengupta, 2025). Subsequently, employees typically perceive little organizational recourse or ability to address superior incivility, fostering feelings of helplessness and lack of control that accelerate emotional depletion (Chouhan, 2025). These mechanisms are particularly potent in high-stakes roles like quality control, where precision requirements compound the stress of managing superior relationships (Anis et al., 2025). Research shows that prolonged exposure to superior incivility leads to progressive emotional exhaustion, increased turnover intentions, and even somatic health symptoms (Kyei-Poku & Orozco Quijano, 2025; Madan et al., 2025; Rubaca & Munir, 2025). Based on this evidence, it hypothesized that:

H2: There is a positive relationship between superior incivility and emotional exhaustion.

Association between Co-worker Incivility and Superior Incivility

Research demonstrates that co-worker and superior incivility, while distinct, often interact to create toxic workplace environments (Green, 2025). Co-worker incivility involves peer-level disrespect, such as exclusion or passive-aggressive behaviour, while superior incivility carries added weight due to power imbalances that threaten job security (Abdullah, 2025). These forms frequently co-occur through social learning processes,

where employees may mimic superiors' uncivil behaviours (Zhao et al., 2025). Though both predict emotional exhaustion, superior incivility shows stronger links to turnover, while co-worker incivility more often triggers direct conflict (Krishnan & Rathakrishnan, 2025). Their combined effect is particularly damaging, suggesting organizations must address incivility at all levels to prevent the normalization of disrespect (Irwin et al., 2025). Co-worker incivility and superior incivility will demonstrate a positive reciprocal relationship, where exposure to one form of incivility increases the likelihood of experiencing the other, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of workplace mistreatment. Thus, hypothesized that:

H3: There is a positive relationship between co-worker incivility and superior incivility.

Association between Co-worker Incivility and Emotional Labour

Research demonstrates that co-worker incivility predicts increased emotional labour demands, particularly surface acting (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2025). When employees experience subtle disrespect from peers, such as dismissive comments or exclusion, they typically engage in surface acting by suppressing negative emotions and feigning positivity to maintain workplace harmony (Hu et al., 2025). This emotional regulation strategy is cognitively depleting, as employees must simultaneously manage interpersonal tensions while performing job tasks (Nesher Shoshan et al., 2024). The COR theory explains this relationship where co-worker incivility forces employees to expend emotional resources on self-presentation rather than task performance, creating a resource loss spiral (Hobfoll & Hou, 2025). Notably, the association differs for deep acting. While some employees may genuinely reframe their perspectives to mitigate incivility's impact, most resort to surface acting due to the unpredictable nature of peer mistreatment (Y. Li et al., 2024). This pattern is robust in team-based environments like quality control, where employees cannot avoid uncivil co-workers but lack the authority to address issues directly (Aunger et al., 2024). Therefore, hypothesized that:

H4: There is a positive relationship between co-worker incivility and surface acting.

H5: There is a negative relationship between co-worker incivility and deep acting.

Association between Superior Incivility and Emotional Labour

Superior incivility, characterized by condescension, dismissiveness, or passive aggression from supervisors, has a pronounced impact on employees' emotional labour strategies (Joseph et al., 2025). Due to power imbalances, employees facing supervisor incivility are more likely to engage in surface acting, suppressing their true emotions to avoid retaliation or career repercussions (Gupta et al., 2025). Unlike co-worker incivility, where employees might confront peers, supervisor incivility leaves subordinates with limited coping mechanisms, forcing them to fake emotional compliance (Tremblay, 2025). This constant self-regulation depletes emotional resources, contributing to exhaustion (Hobfoll & Hou, 2025). While deep acting could theoretically mitigate these effects, empirical evidence suggests it is less common in superior-subordinate conflicts (Li & Chen, 2024). Employees perceive supervisor incivility as threatening job security, making authentic emotional reframing difficult (Abid et al., 2025). Instead, they default to surface acting, exacerbating emotional strain over time (Gupta et al., 2025). This dynamic is powerful in hierarchical work environments where employees have little autonomy to challenge authority figures (Menguc et al., 2025). The following are the hypothesis

H6: There is a positive relationship between superior incivility and surface acting.

H7: There is a negative relationship between superior incivility and deep acting.

Association between Emotional Labour and Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional labour, particularly surface acting, has been consistently linked to emotional exhaustion, with emotional exhaustion as its core component (Lampert & Hornung, 2025). Employees who frequently engage in surface acting, suppressing genuine emotions while faking required ones, experience resource depletion, as this

strategy demands sustained cognitive and emotional effort without genuine resolution (Sayre et al., 2025). Over time, this depletion leads to chronic exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy, which are the key dimensions of burnout (Hu et al., 2025). In contrast, deep acting, genuinely reframing emotions, shows weaker or null associations with emotional exhaustion, as it involves authentic emotional regulation that reduces dissonance (Ejaz et al., 2025; Hassan & Samy, 2024). However, in high-stress environments, even deep acting may fail to buffer emotional exhaustion due to overwhelming emotional demands (Joffe et al., 2025). The COR theory explains this relationship of surface acting accelerates resource loss, while deep acting may preserve resources, but only when employees have sufficient autonomy and support (Li, 2024). Empirical studies confirm that surface acting predicts emotional exhaustion, whereas deep acting's effects are inconsistent (Erasmus & Oosthuysen, 2025). This divergence is particularly evident in hierarchical workplaces (e.g., manufacturing), where power imbalances constrain employees' ability to regulate emotions effectively (Hassan & Samy, 2025). The relationship between emotional labour strategies and exhaustion is best understood through key theoretical frameworks. Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) explains why surface acting depletes energy reserves, which is the sustained effort to suppress genuine emotions while displaying false ones, which creates an unsustainable resource drain. Affective Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) further clarifies how discrete emotional labour episodes cumulatively shape exhaustion outcomes. Emotional labour theory (Hochschild, 1983) provides the foundational distinction between surface acting (emotion faking) and deep acting (emotion transformation), while the emotion regulation perspective (Gross, 1998) explains their differential impacts on well-being. These theories collectively suggest that hierarchical work environments constrain the potential benefits of deep acting by limiting employees' emotional autonomy (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). Thus, hypothesized that:

H8: There is a positive relationship between surface acting and emotional exhaustion.

H9: There is a negative relationship between deep acting and emotional exhaustion.

Mediating Effect of Emotional Labour

Extant research demonstrates that workplace incivility triggers distinct emotional labour strategies, influencing emotional exhaustion (Humphrey et al., 2024; Madan et al., 2025; Omotoye et al., 2024; Tarab, 2025). Grounded in AET and COR Theory (Amin Dlima et al., 2025; Hobfoll & Hou, 2025), this study proposes that surface-acting and deep-acting mediate the incivility-exhaustion relationship asymmetrically. When QC managers experience co-worker incivility, they typically act surface, suppressing frustration while feigning professionalism (Hu et al., 2025). This dissonance between felt and displayed emotions depletes psychological resources, exacerbating exhaustion (Lei & Kuok, 2025). Similarly, superior incivility forces surface acting due to power imbalances but with more severe exhaustion effects (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2025). In contrast, deep acting shows weaker or non-significant mediation. While some managers may use deep acting to mitigate co-worker incivility (Nesher Shoshan et al., 2024), a superior's incivility threat appraisal often renders deep acting ineffective (Menguc et al., 2025). COR theory explains this divergence: deep acting preserves resources only when employees have emotional autonomy, a condition rarely met under hierarchical mistreatment (Sayre et al., 2025). QC managers in manufacturing face unique emotional labour demands due to their dual accountability for both technical precision and interpersonal harmony (Lampert & Hornung, 2025). In high-stakes environments where errors carry significant financial or safety consequences, the pressure to suppress emotions during uncivil interactions is amplified. For example, a manager who experiences condescension from a superior may mask frustration to maintain team morale while ensuring product standards, a dual burden that accelerates resource depletion (Nauman et al., 2024). Conversely, deep acting is rarely feasible in such contexts, as hierarchical structures and time-sensitive production goals limit opportunities for genuine emotional reframing (Sayre et al., 2025). Explains why surface acting dominates as the primary mediator between incivility and exhaustion. Therefore, the following four hypotheses are proposed:

H10: Surface acting mediates the relationship between co-worker incivility and emotional exhaustion.

H11: Deep acting does not mediate the relationship between co-worker incivility and emotional exhaustion.

H12: Surface acting mediates the relationship between superior incivility and emotional exhaustion.

H13: Deep acting does not mediate the relationship between superior incivility and emotional exhaustion.

The mediation role of emotional labour strategies reveals critical insights into how incivility translates into exhaustion. Surface acting consistently emerges as a more potent mediator than deep acting because it requires sustained effort to suppress authentic emotions while displaying organizationally expected ones (Grandey, 2000; Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011). This emotional dissonance creates a resource drain particularly acute in hierarchical settings where power differentials constrain coping options (Diefendorff et al., 2011). For QC managers, the mediation effect is intensified by their need to simultaneously manage technical accuracy and interpersonal tensions, leaving fewer cognitive resources for genuine emotional reframing (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002). The asymmetric mediation patterns align with COR theory's prediction that surface acting accelerates resource loss spirals, while deep acting's potential protective effects are neutralized in low-autonomy work contexts (Gabriel et al., 2021).

METHODOLOGY

The review examines how emotional labour mediates the relationship between workplace incivility and emotional exhaustion among QC managers in the manufacturing sector, guided by Affective Events Theory (AET) and Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory. A cross-sectional survey design recommended using three validated instruments: the Workplace Incivility Scale (WIS; Cortina et al., 2001) to measure co-worker and superior incivility, the Emotional Labor Scale (ELS; Brotheridge & Lee, 2003) to assess surface and deep acting strategies, and the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI; Kristensen et al., 2005) to evaluate emotional exhaustion. These instruments have strong psychometric properties and relevance to the manufacturing context. This methodology thoroughly tests the hypothesized relationships while addressing the unique challenges QC managers face. The findings will contribute to the theoretical understanding of emotional labour processes and practical strategies for reducing emotional exhaustion in high-stress manufacturing environments.

CONCLUSION

Workplace incivility has emerged as a critical threat to the well-being and performance of QC managers in the manufacturing sector, with emotional labour as a key mechanism linking uncivil experiences to emotional exhaustion. Grounded in AET and COR Theory, the review demonstrates that surface acting, the suppression of genuine emotions to comply with workplace norms, plays a pivotal mediating role in exacerbating exhaustion, particularly in response to superior incivility. In contrast, deep acting shows limited protective effects in these high-stakes environments, where hierarchical structures and production pressures constrain authentic emotional regulation. Empirical findings will challenge organizations to reconceptualize emotional labour not as an individual coping strategy but as a structural issue requiring systemic interventions. The theoretical contributions following the proposed framework of empirical study will be threefold. First, it extends AET by illustrating how incivility triggers affective reactions that compel specific emotion regulation strategies among QC managers. Second, it advances COR theory by revealing how surface acting accelerates resource depletion in precision-driven roles. Third, it contextualizes these dynamics within the manufacturing sector, where cultural power distances may intensify incivility's impacts. Practically, any empirical results will call for organizational changes, including leadership training to reduce superior incivility, team-building initiatives to mitigate co-worker incivility, and emotion-regulation skill development to minimize reliance on surface acting. While future research focuses on QC managers, its implications extend to other high-stress, precision-oriented occupations. The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened these challenges, making the empirical study's timing particularly relevant for post-pandemic recovery efforts. Future research may also explore longitudinal effects and test interventions targeting the incivility-emotional labour-exhaustion pathway. As manufacturing industries evolve, recognizing the human sustainability of QC professionals, not just their technical competence, will be essential for maintaining both product quality and workforce resilience. This synthesis from the literature provides both a caveat about the costs of workplace incivility and a roadmap for building more emotionally sustainable manufacturing environments. Figure 1 shows the graphical link between the variables and the hypothesis.

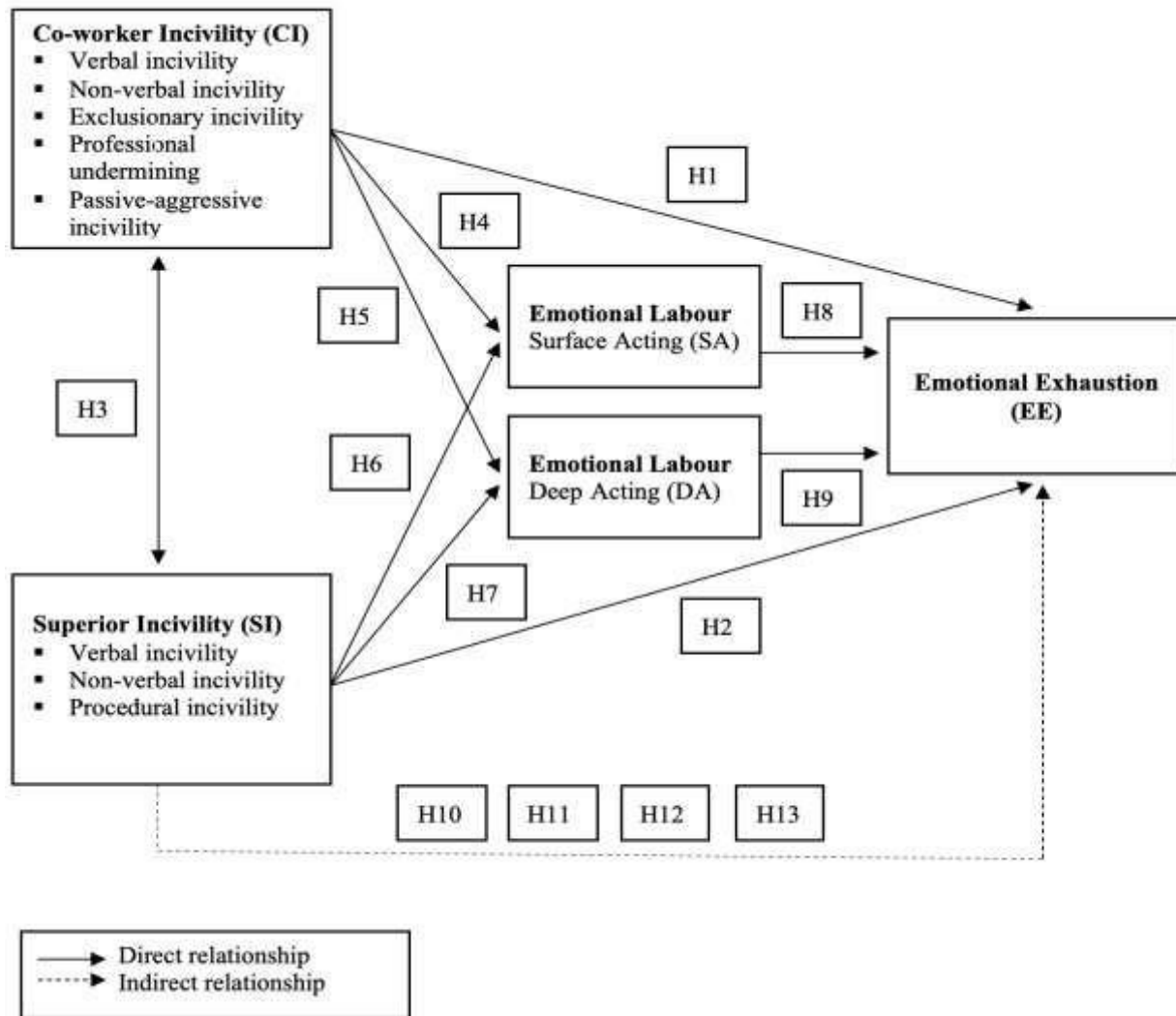


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

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