



Impose and I'll pose? A vignette experiment examining organizational positivity expectations: A conservation of resources and emotional labor perspective

Shafag Garayeva¹ · George Michaelides¹ · Almuth McDowall²

Received: 10 March 2025 / Accepted: 13 June 2026 / Published online: 22 June 2026
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Abstract

Previous research points to numerous benefits of positivity, overlooking potential downsides of workplace positivity prescriptions. Grounded in organizational culture theory, we introduce and differentiate organizational positivity expectations as a distinct organizational norm requiring cognitive, affective, and behavioral positivity demonstrations in intra-organizational interactions. Drawing on conservation of resources and emotional labor theory, we examine surface acting as an immediate instrumental response to such expectations and test whether psychological safety buffers this effect. In an online vignette experiment with an international sample ($N=241$), we found that employees in the positivity expectations conditions reported stronger intentions to act more positive than they felt, regardless of whether they perceived the workplace as psychologically safe. Our results advance positive organizational scholarship by demonstrating that well-intended positivity initiatives may inadvertently encourage inauthentic emotional expression. Our study further contributes to conceptual refinement in organizational culture research and extends work on the implications of organizational norms for individuals, the antecedents of emotional labor in the intra-organizational context, and the limits of personal resources under strong situational pressures for desirable behaviors. We discuss avenues for future research and provide practical recommendations for designing healthier positivity practices.

Keywords Organizational positivity expectations · Organizational culture and norms · Surface acting · Intra-organizational interactions · Psychological safety · Resource limits

Positivity, a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing positive affect, cognitions, and behaviors (Caza, 2021), has been associated with benevolent outcomes such as subjective wellbeing, job satisfaction, work engagement, or social support, as evidenced by positive psychology and positive organizational scholarship (e.g., Seligman, 2019). Yet, the focus on the bright side while neglecting the negative

potential of positivity (Spreitzer et al., 2021) hinders its holistic understanding. Specifically, the possible downsides of organizationally prescribed positivity in intraorganizational interactions (i.e., with leaders and colleagues) remain largely unexplored. Critical perspectives have proposed that when positivity becomes an expectation, it may carry unintended consequences (Brinkmann, 2017). While this concern is supported by adjacent empirical evidence pointing to repercussions of an excessive emphasis on positivity for individual wellbeing and organizational interactions (e.g., Ilies et al., 2020; Zerwas & Ford, 2021), direct empirical evidence on organizationally mandated positivity has not been established, warranting investigation.

We frame organizational positivity expectations as the assumption that employees should demonstrate positivity in their work in the intra-organizational context and argue that such expectations hold the risk of unintended consequences. Grounded in organizational culture theory (Chatman &

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✉ Shafag Garayeva
s.garayeva@uea.ac.uk

¹ Norwich Business School, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK

² School of Psychological Sciences, University of London, Birkbeck, London, UK

O'Reilly, 2016; Schein, 2010), we position such expectations as organizational culture norms, which are “socially created standards emerging from an organization’s values that help group members interpret various events and set expectations about appropriate behaviors” (Chatman et al., 2014, p.787). Norms represent expressions of a group’s central values and beliefs, such as how to interact with one another, and help people understand what behaviors are likely to be valued or useful within their organizational context (Chatman et al., 2014). Organizational culture research often conflates the content, consensus, and intensity of organizational norms, making it difficult to isolate specific norms and examine their individual-level consequences in specific contexts (Chatman & O'Reilly, 2016). We focus on the *content* of norms, which reflects “appropriate behaviors and attitudes described through the norm” (Chatman & Choi, 2022, p. 100), to examine expectations to demonstrate positivity in intra-organizational interactions.

Further, existing research has largely focused on broad organizational emotional display rules, mandating appropriate emotions and their expressions, both positive and negative, in various contexts (e.g., Lee et al., 2025). Such rules can prompt emotional labor, requiring individuals to manage own emotions (deep acting) or their expressions (surface acting) to exhibit desired displays (Grandey, 2000). Yet, the impact of specific organizational expectations that reach *beyond* emotions to prescribe also cognitive and behavioural positivity in intra-organizational settings remains less understood (Chatman & O'Reilly, 2016). This distinctiveness within the broader class of organizational norms warrants examining how a specific norm content (positivity) influences employees in a specific context (internal workplace interactions), addressing the call for greater precision in identifying which norms affect which behaviors (Chatman & O'Reilly, 2016).

We therefore first define and differentiate organizational positivity expectations from similar constructs by focus, scope, emphasis, context, and manifestation across apparency and intentionality dimensions. We blend the prisms of conservation of resources and emotional labor theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Grandey, 2000) to understand the immediate effect of organizational positivity expectations on individuals and the role of one’s resources. Specifically, we aim to examine surface acting in intra-organizational interactions as an instant instrumental response to organizational positivity expectations, motivated by resource protection and acquisition. We further seek to identify whether psychological safety, a resource denoting the belief about safety of one’s work environment for genuine and repercussion-free self-expression (Edmondson, 1999), shields against organizational positivity expectations. We test our hypotheses in an online vignette experiment with an international sample of employees.

Our contribution to the literature is multifold. First, we conceptualize positivity as an externally established expectation acting as a resource threat and examine the unintended impact of organizational positivity expectations in intra-organizational interactions. As such, we advance positive organizational scholarship largely focused on the benefits of positivity as an individual disposition or experience, or as an outcome of supportive organizational practices (e.g., Cunha et al., 2020). By isolating positivity as a specific norm content in intra-organizational interactions, we address the norm dimension conflation in organizational culture research (Chatman & O'Reilly, 2016), and extend previous research that has studied specific organizational norm content domains such as collaboration and integrity (O'Reilly et al., 2021), ethics (Roy et al., 2024), or growth (Murphy, 2024). Examining surface acting as an immediate outcome of organizational positivity expectations adds to the literatures on the implications of organizational norms for individuals (Chatman & O'Reilly, 2016) and the antecedents of emotional labor in the intra-organizational context (Gabriel et al., 2023). By investigating the role of psychological safety, we contribute to the literatures on the construct’s impact in the workplace (Newman et al., 2017) and the limits of personal resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Our study informs organizational practice by identifying the risk that well-intended positivity practices may inadvertently prompt surface acting, with implications for employee wellbeing.

Defining and differentiating organizational positivity expectations

We ground the concept of organizational positivity expectations in organizational culture theory (Chatman & O'Reilly, 2016; Schein, 2010), outlining in this section what the expectations comprise and how they differ from seemingly similar constructs, including emotional display rules, emotional job demands, and toxic positivity (see Table 1 for a summary).

Organizational positivity expectations represent the assumption that employees should demonstrate positivity in their work and interactions with colleagues and leaders. Emphasizing cognitive (‘Think positive!’), behavioral (‘Be positive!’), and affective (‘Show enthusiasm!’) demonstrations, not necessarily experiences, of positivity at work, positivity expectations may vary in *apparency*, ranging from explicit directives to subtle cues. *Explicit* positivity expectations may appear in formal organizational communications, including a job advertisement requiring ‘passionate, high-energy team players’, or a performance review criterion assessing ‘positive attitude and can-do spirit.’ *Implicit*

Table 1 Differentiation of Organizational Positivity Expectations from Similar Constructs

Dimension	Organizational positivity expectations	Emotional display rules	Emotional job demands	Toxic positivity
Context	Intra-organizational	Various, often customer-facing	Various, often customer-facing	Various
Focus	Positivity	Positive and negative emotions	Positive and negative emotions	Positivity
Demonstrations	Cognitive, affective, and behavioral	Emotional	Emotional	Cognitive, affective, and behavioral
Intentionality	Deliberate and unintentional	Deliberate	Deliberate	Deliberate
Apparency	Explicit and implicit	Implicit	Implicit	Explicit
Emphasis	Expression	Experience and expression	Experience and expression	Experience and expression
Source	External	External	External	External and internal

positivity expectations may emerge through subtle cultural cues, including distinguishing ‘positive’ employees, motivational posters with positive messages, or energetic demeanor in team meetings. Positivity expectations may also vary along the *intentionality* dimension, reflecting the extent to which the expectations are deliberately implemented (e.g., leadership competency frameworks listing ‘demonstrates optimism’ or ‘inspires positive outlook’ qualities) or arise without prescriptive intent (e.g., casual ‘Look on the bright side’ messages or social media images and hashtags) but may inadvertently create pressure to exhibit positivity and suppress authentic concerns.

Organizational positivity expectations prescribe how employees should demonstrate positivity in intra-organizational contexts, including interactions with colleagues and leaders. These expectations may be codified in organizational documents, such as leadership frameworks and job advertisements, or expressed verbally in interpersonal interactions (e.g., through managerial discourse), as well as used without the intent to enforce but also without consideration given to potential backfire (e.g., ‘Cheer up!’). Such externally defined, rather than self-initiated, prescriptive standards dictate specific ways of thinking, feeling, or behaving, suggesting that employees are deficient in meeting these norms (Higgins, 1987), which may exert

unintended pressure, preventing employees from internalizing organizational positivity expectations.

Organizational positivity expectations correspond to the level of norms and values about appropriate attitudes and behaviors of organizational culture (Schein, 2010) in representing standards about how employees should behave in intra-organizational contexts. Organizational positivity expectations also fall under the “content” dimension of organizational culture, as they define what employees are expected to demonstrate in terms of cognitive, affective, and behavioral displays (Chatman & O’Reilly, 2016). As organizational culture functions as a social control system, shaping member behaviors through informational and normative influence (Chatman & O’Reilly, 2016), organizational positivity expectations too can influence employee behavior. Yet, our understanding of how specific prescriptive norms, such as organizational positivity expectations, affect employees in intra-organizational settings remains limited (Chatman & O’Reilly, 2016).

Applying exclusively to intra-organizational contexts, organizational positivity expectations differ from emotional display rules. The latter reflect broader organizational guidelines about which emotions are appropriate and how they should be expressed, in other words, pertain to both the experience and expression of emotions in various contexts, although they have been originally and predominantly studied in customer-facing settings (Elfenbein, 2023). Unlike organizational positivity expectations, such rules, concerned only with emotions, are often deliberate, yet implicit, existing as unwritten norms rather than explicitly stated (Zapf et al., 2021). Further, they prescribe both positive and negative emotion displays, such as flight attendants’ warmth and debt collectors’ anger (Elfenbein, 2023). As such, organizational positivity expectations represent a distinct form of prescriptive organizational norms, regulating not only emotion but also the general orientation of positivity in organizational life.

Organizational positivity expectations are also different from emotional job demands, an umbrella term for the psychological requirements around managing and regulating one’s emotions as part of one’s job, which encompass emotional display rules, situations that elicit emotions, emotional labor, and care for others’ emotional wellbeing (Diefendorff et al., 2016). Extending to task- and job-specific emotional experiences and responses, for instance, in healthcare, sales, or service jobs, these demands differ from organizational positivity expectations emphasising the display of various forms of positivity at work in intra-organizational interactions.

Finally, organizational positivity expectations should also be distinguished from toxic positivity, which is a mindset enforcing constant positivity as the standard while dismissing or suppressing the negative, even at the risk of

overlooking genuine concerns (Lecompte-Van Poucke, 2022). Examples of toxic positivity include attributing illness or poverty to insufficient positivity, dismissing emotional distress with positivity directives, or framing workplace concerns as ‘negativity’ requiring correction. While organizations may not necessarily aim to exert pressure through positivity expectations, toxic positivity, holding individuals accountable for their own wellbeing and success and viewing “negativity” as a flaw needing correction, often deliberately and overtly imposes positivity on oneself or others (Lecompte-Van Poucke, 2022). While toxic positivity actively invalidates negative experiences, positivity expectations prescribe positivity without delegitimizing the negative. Finally, unlike positivity expectations defined externally and applying to intra-organizational interactions, toxic positivity can be both externally established and self-generated, extending to any domain of life.

In sum, organizational positivity expectations represent a distinct form of organizational norms, prescribing cognitive, affective, and behavioral demonstrations of positivity for employees in the intra-organizational context. Yet, their influence on employees is not well understood.

Conservation of resources and emotional labor perspective on the consequences of organizational positivity expectations

Conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018) provides an explanation for potential consequences of organizational positivity expectations. Principles and corollaries of COR theory outline people’s motivation to protect and acquire resources, including objects, conditions, skills, traits, or energy (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Resources can have intrinsic value (e.g., self-esteem, good health) or enable obtaining other resources (e.g., networks, money) (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

The relationship between organizational positivity expectations and surface acting

Failing to adhere to organizational positivity expectations may jeopardize resources associated with positivity displays such as favourable appraisals, promotions, job security, social approval, and acceptance, because organizations sanction deviation from norms and reward desirable displays and behaviors (Chatman & O’Reilly, 2016; Grandey & Melloy, 2017). Consequently, employees engage in self-serving tactics to increase their likeability and improve access to organizational resources, including self-promotion, impression management, and the management of emotions or their

expressions (Grandey, 2000; Hu et al., 2022; McFarland et al., 2023).

Research on emotional labor, traditionally centred on the service context, is increasingly examining it in employee interactions with coworkers and leaders (see Gabriel et al., 2023 for a review), particularly, in interactions with managers having discretion over resources, and employee performance evaluation and career outcomes (Yang et al., 2021). While the focus has largely been on the impact of emotional labor (e.g., Deng et al., 2020), some studies have shown that in the intra-organizational context employees may feel compelled to modify emotional expressions to exhibit desired emotions without internalising them, known as surface acting (Grandey, 2000), for practical reasons. These include the motives of acceptance, social influence, goal achievement, or perceptions of political processes in organizations (Bindl et al., 2022; Ozcelik, 2013). We extend this line of research by building on COR theory’s principles that the risk of losing resources can encourage instrumental behaviors (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

We focus on the emotional expression in response to organizational positivity expectations as research indicates its instrumental potential for effective communication and signalling immediate adherence (Van Kleef & Côté, 2022). We argue that in the short term, organizational positivity expectations can prompt engagement in surface acting to deliberately portray a positive image. Even where organizational expectations are congruent with how the person thinks or feels, they are likely to feel compelled to regulate self-expression to exhibit the “right” amount of emotions in “appropriate” ways (Morris & Feldman, 1996). Further, as organizational positivity expectations can strain already limited cognitive and affective resources, such as attention or energy (Baumeister et al., 2024), employees may immediately modify emotional expressions, which is a routine process not necessarily involving elaborate conscious efforts (Zapf et al., 2021). This is supported by research indicating that employees experiencing shortage of resources do tend toward surface acting (e.g., Nesher Shoshan et al., 2022). Therefore, in the short term, surface acting, rather than more resource-intensive deep acting involving reflection and reappraisal, may be a pragmatic adaptive strategy (Grandey, 2000; Sayre et al., 2025). We thus expect a positive relationship between positivity expectations and surface acting:

Hypothesis 1: Organizational positivity expectations are positively associated with employee surface acting.

The buffering effect of psychological safety

One’s resources may influence how individuals perceive and respond to environmental demands (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

We focus on perceived workplace psychological safety as a resource that could potentially buffer the resource threat represented by organizational positivity expectations, reducing the likelihood of surface acting in response. Psychological safety denotes a belief that the workplace is safe for being oneself and expressing one's opinions without fear of repercussions for the image, status, or career (Edmondson, 1999). Psychological safety is linked to numerous learning, performance, and wellbeing outcomes (Newman et al., 2017). By fostering a sense of security and support, it allows individuals to express themselves genuinely, report errors, take risks, and challenge organizational practices without fearing negative consequences (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). As such, psychological safety can act as a protective resource enabling one to oppose group norms and act in line with one's attitudes and beliefs (Stühlinger et al., 2021), but, when low, employees might feel compelled to protect themselves, avoiding risk-taking and challenging behaviors (e.g., Kizrak et al., 2023). We argue that when employees feel safe, they are less likely to interpret positivity expectations as threatening and behave inauthentically.

Specifically, we expect that individual perceptions of workplace psychological safety mitigate the influence of organizational positivity expectations for two reasons. Due to the associated sense of security and trust (Newman et al., 2017), psychological safety may equip individuals with resistance to external demands, reducing the need to create desired impressions and enabling uncompromised self-expression. When employees feel psychologically safe, the perceived risk of missing out on resources (managerial approval, favorable evaluation, career advancement) from failing to meet positivity expectations may diminish. From an emotional labour perspective (Grandey, 2000), safety should reduce the need for surface acting because when one expects acceptance rather than judgment, they may be more likely to express themselves authentically (Sutton, 2020). Further, the positive affect engendered by feeling safe (e.g., Lin et al., 2022) may satisfy positivity expectations, rendering performing positivity unnecessary. Although research into psychological safety's role in resisting external pressure is limited, existing evidence suggests that surface acting increases in insecure environments (Gabriel et al., 2023). As such, higher psychological safety could attenuate the relationship between positivity expectations and surface acting by enabling authenticity and through the associated positive affect.

However, given that positivity expectations create an avenue for acquiring valued resources, which individuals strive to obtain, retain, foster, and protect (Hobfoll et al., 2018), surface acting, as a pragmatic strategy, can operate independently of psychological safety. While psychological safety may reduce fear of repercussions for self-expression, it may not necessarily

eliminate the instrumental motivation to acquire valued outcomes through aligning with positivity expectations. Further, as resources are finite (Hobfoll et al., 2018), they may fail to buffer against a strong situation reflecting "implicit or explicit cues provided by external entities regarding the desirability of potential behaviors" (Meyer et al., 2010, p. 122). Explicit, consistent positivity expectations tied to tangible outcomes can represent such a strong situation. Additionally, while evidence points to psychological safety facilitating cognitive and behavioural self-expression, such as speaking up, admitting mistakes, taking risks (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023), it remains unclear whether this effect extends to affective self-expression. We therefore test whether psychological safety mitigates the effect of positivity expectations, acknowledging the possibility that it may not:

Hypothesis 2: Perceived workplace psychological safety moderates the relationship between organizational positivity expectations and surface acting such that the relationship is weaker at higher levels of perceived workplace psychological safety.

Method

This study was conducted as part of the first author's doctoral research examining positivity in organizations. Ethical approval for the study was granted by Birkbeck, University of London, UK (the ethics committee approval number OPEA-19/20–17). In a vignette experiment, we tested whether organizational positivity expectations can prompt surface acting (Hypothesis 1) and examined the potential of psychological safety to buffer the effect of positivity expectations (Hypothesis 2). Following ethical approval, we recruited participants through the online *Prolific* platform, offering £1.25 per completion of the experiment. Participation was voluntary, with confidentiality and anonymity assured.

Sample and procedure

We included participants aged 18 and above, employed globally by formal organizations (not self-employed) for at least three months, and speaking English. A total of 276 individuals volunteered to participate in the study, the final sample (once incomplete data removed) comprised 241 individuals (43% female, 76% employees, and 83% in full-time positions) working in the private (62%), public (34%), and non-profit (4%) sectors. Most participants (54%) were in the 25–39 age group, 23% in the 18–24, 22% in the 40–60, and 1% in the 60 plus age groups. Participants' self-reported geographic regions included Europe (62%), UK (31%), North America, South America, Asia Pacific, and Africa (7%).

In a 2×2 between-subject online experiment, participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions (low vs. high psychological safety x positivity expectations vs. no positivity expectations). In each condition, they were instructed to imagine themselves joining a large project with career advancement opportunities and were given a bespoke vignette scenario describing organizational positivity expectations and individual perceptions of psychological safety in the work environment (Table 2). After reading the scenario, they were asked to report their likely surface acting in the situation where they are not inclined to demonstrate positivity, and respond to manipulation check and demographic questions.

Manipulation and measures

To manipulate the independent variables, we used textual vignettes presenting short realistic scenarios about hypothetical characters in specific situations related to the research topic, inviting participants to respond (Aguinis &

Bradley, 2014). We developed the vignettes based on conceptual definitions and measures of the constructs under study (Podsakoff et al., 2013). This included diverse conceptualizations of positivity and expectations for employee positive behavior, cognition, and affect, such as enthusiasm, confidence, or passion (e.g., Caza, 2021; Collinson, 2012; Grandey & Melloy, 2017). We used the literature on psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999; May et al., 2004) to inform the respective paragraph about the individual's perceived workplace psychological safety.

Manipulation checks ensured that vignette scenarios were interpreted correctly (Hauser et al., 2018). This involved requesting to indicate on a 7-point Likert scale after experiment completion the extent to which participants agreed that (a) there were organizational positivity expectations in the scenario and (b) that the project described was a psychologically safe workplace, subjected to analysis of variance. The positivity expectations manipulation ($F(1,237)=15.35$, $p<0.001$, $M_s=5.04$ vs. 5.71 , $\eta^2=0.06$) but not psychological safety one ($F(1,237)=0.20$, $p=.65$, $M_s=5.36$ vs. 5.40 , $\eta^2=0.001$) had a significant main effect on the positivity expectations check. The psychological safety manipulation had a significant main effect on the psychological safety check ($F(1,237)=27.71$, $p<.001$, $M_s=3.64$ vs. 4.57 , $\eta^2=0.10$) and the positivity expectation manipulation did not ($F(1,237)=1.20$, $p=.27$, $M_s=4.03$ vs. 4.19 , $\eta^2=0.004$).

We measured the outcome variable operationalized as surface acting with the respective five-item scale (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.85$) (Ozcelik, 2013) using 7-point Likert scales (1 = *Extremely unlikely* to 7 = *Extremely likely*). Example items included: 'In this scenario, how likely is that you would resist expressing your true feelings to your manager?' and 'In this scenario, how likely is that you would pretend to have emotions that you do not really have when interacting with your manager?'

Results

We conducted a 2 (organizational positivity expectations: present vs. absent) × 2 (psychological safety: high vs. low) between-subjects factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) with surface acting as the dependent variable using IBM SPSS 29 software.

Descriptive statistics

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and sample sizes) for surface acting across all four experimental conditions. Across the full sample ($N=241$), the overall mean for surface acting was 4.29 ($SD=1.29$) on the 7-point scale. Descriptive statistics (Table 3) revealed

Table 2 Description of Vignette Text Clauses

	Condition (underlined)	
	High/+	Low/-
Positivity Expectations (independent variable)	There's an overall air of <u>enthusiasm</u> in the project. Management <u>always</u> encourage people to display passion, energy, and confidence in their work and behaviors. Project newsletters <u>regularly</u> tell inspirational stories of organizational role models held up as enthusiasm champions. People's performances are scrutinised and rewarded for these behaviors. Demonstrating enthusiasm is not your natural ability and therefore your direct manager <u>continuously</u> encourages you to develop it.	There's an overall air of <u>agreeableness</u> in the project. <u>Occasionally</u> , management encourage people to display passion, energy, and confidence in their work and behaviors. <u>Sometimes</u> , project newsletters tell inspirational stories of organizational role models held up as enthusiasm champions. People's performances may be scrutinised and rewarded for these behaviors. Demonstrating enthusiasm is not your natural ability and therefore your direct manager <u>doesn't</u> encourage you to develop it.
Psychological Safety (moderator)	Members of the project team are <u>always</u> able to bring up problems and tough issues. This is because project management <u>always</u> mean what they say and can <u>always</u> be believed and relied upon to keep their word.	Members of the project team are <u>not always</u> able to bring up problems and tough issues. This is because project management do <u>not always</u> mean what they say and <u>can't always</u> be believed and relied upon to keep their word.

Table 3 Mean Surface Acting (SA) Scores and Standard Deviations (SD) for Each Condition ($N=241$)

	C1 (PE+/PS+)	C2 (PE+/PS-)	C3 (PE-/PS+)	C4 (PE-/PS-)
<i>N</i>	65	58	57	61
Positivity Expectations (PE)	Yes	Yes	No	No
Psychological Safety (PS)	High	Low	High	Low
Mean SA	4.44	4.52	4.00	4.20
SD	1.43	1.23	1.12	1.37

Table 4 Two-Way Analysis of Variance Statistics for Study Variables

Predictor	Sum of squares	Mean square	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Partial η^2
Intercept	4378.89	4385.78	2601.34	0.00	
Positivity Expectations	10.67	10.67	6.34	0.01	0.03
Psychological Safety	0.55	0.55	0.33	0.57	0.00
Positivity Expectations x Psychological Safety	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.94	0.00
Error	398.95	1.68			

Degrees of freedom = 3, 237; η^2 = eta-squared (effect size)

that participants in conditions with organizational positivity expectations (C1 and C2) reported higher surface acting ($M=4.48$) than those in conditions without such expectations (C3 and C4; $M=4.10$). The highest mean for the surface acting score (4.52) occurred when positivity expectations were present and psychological safety was low (C2). The lowest mean (4.00) was in the condition involving no positivity expectations and high levels of psychological safety (C3). Participants in high psychological safety conditions (C1 and C3; $M=4.22$) reported similar surface acting levels to those in low psychological safety conditions (C2 and C4; $M=4.36$).

Hypothesis 1: Organizational positivity expectations and surface acting

Hypothesis 1 predicted that organizational positivity expectations would be positively associated with surface acting. Table 4 presents the complete ANOVA results, including sums of squares, mean squares, *F* statistics, significance levels, and effect sizes for all main effects and the interaction term. The results of a factorial ANOVA (Table 4) showed a significant effect of organizational positivity expectations ($F(3, 237)=6.3$, $p=.01$, $M=4.48$ vs. 4.10),

where participants exposed to positivity expectations ($M=4.48$) reported significantly higher surface acting than those not exposed to such expectations ($M=4.10$), supporting Hypothesis 1. The effect size ($\eta_p^2 = 0.03$) indicated that positivity expectations explained approximately 3% of the variance in surface acting.

Hypothesis 2: Moderating role of psychological safety

Hypothesis 2 predicted that perceived workplace psychological safety would moderate the relationship between organizational positivity expectations and surface acting, such that the relationship would be weaker at higher levels of psychological safety. The main effect of psychological safety on surface acting was not significant ($F(3, 237)=.33$, $p=.57$, $\eta_p^2 < 0.001$), such that participants in high psychological safety conditions ($M=4.22$) reported statistically equivalent levels of surface acting to those in low psychological safety conditions ($M=4.36$). More critically for Hypothesis 2, there was no significant interaction between positivity expectations and psychological safety ($F(3, 237)=.01$, $p=.94$), indicating that the effect of positivity expectations on surface acting did not differ depending on levels of psychological safety. As such, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Analyses revealed no significant differences in surface acting responses across demographic groups (gender, age, employment type) or geographic regions, suggesting the effects of organizational positivity expectations were consistent across the sample. In sum, employees exposed to organizational positivity expectations reported higher surface acting regardless of psychological safety level, with the results supporting Hypothesis 1 but not Hypothesis 2.

Discussion

Our study introduced the concept of organizational positivity expectations representing an organizational norm of cognitive, affective, and behavioral positivity in intra-organizational interactions, differentiating it from similar constructs. Drawing on conservation of resources and emotional labor theory, we examined whether such expectations prompt surface acting in intra-organizational interactions (H1), and whether psychological safety moderates this relationship (H2). Our vignette experiment with an international sample of 241 employees revealed that organizational positivity expectations were significantly associated with increased surface acting ($F(3, 237)=6.3$, $p=.01$), supporting Hypothesis 1. Contrary to Hypothesis 2, psychological safety did not moderate this relationship ($F(3, 237)=0.01$; $p=.94$). We interpret the results in relation to existing theory and research.

The link between positivity expectations and surface acting

Our results suggest that organizational positivity expectations can exert normative influence on employee behaviour, supporting the premise that organizational culture shapes individual responses (Chatman & O'Reilly, 2016; Schein, 2010). When organizations communicate expectations that employees should demonstrate positivity and link these to tangible outcomes, employees may perceive these as prescriptive standards against which their behavior is evaluated and rewarded. Our vignette manipulation, which included performance scrutiny and reward contingencies for positivity, made these evaluative implications salient. The resulting surface acting can be understood as signaling adherence to organizational expectations, consistent with the view that emotional expressions serve communicative functions in social hierarchies (Van Kleef & Côté, 2022).

The observed effect size for organizational positivity expectations on surface acting was small and should therefore be interpreted with appropriate caution. This effect size is comparable to those observed in organizational vignette experiments examining behavioral responses to organizational practices (e.g., Maaravi et al., 2023; Van Waeyenberg et al., 2023), suggesting our findings are consistent with experimental research in this domain. While the effect is modest, small effect sizes can have meaningful practical consequences in organizational contexts (Lakens, 2013). If positivity expectations increase surface acting even marginally across employees engaging in multiple daily interactions, the cumulative costs through emotional exhaustion and reduced wellbeing may be considerable. Further, our vignette presented brief, one-time exposure to positivity expectations, whereas sustained exposure through repeated cues in real organizations may yield stronger effects over time. Therefore, even this small-scale link between perceived positivity expectations and surface acting suggests that employees respond to positivity cues, with potential consequences for wellbeing that warrant organizational attention.

From a COR theory perspective, this finding illustrates resource-oriented behavior in response to potential resource threat. Failing to meet organizational positivity expectations threatens both existing resources (managerial approval, positive reputation) and potential resource gains (career advancement, favorable evaluations). Consistent with COR theory's premise that individuals strive to obtain and protect resources they centrally value (Hobfoll et al., 2018), employees can engage in surface acting to safeguard their current standing and access to future opportunities. As such, surface acting represents a pragmatic strategy allowing the protection and acquisition of valued resources by projecting

the expected image, even when organizational expectations clash with an individual's natural inclinations (our vignette specified "demonstrating enthusiasm is not your natural ability"). This suggests that externally imposed positivity standards can prompt inauthentic expression.

The role of psychological safety

In answer to our second research question, we did not find evidence that psychological safety buffers the effect of organizational positivity expectations. As such, in our sample, psychological safety did not appear to reduce the perceived pressure to conform when tangible outcomes were at stake. The absence of a moderating effect for psychological safety may be due to the strength of the vignette situation suppressing the effect of individual resources. Organizational positivity expectations may represent a strong situation, where implicit or explicit signals from external entities regarding preferred behaviors (Meyer et al., 2010) constrain individual responses. Our vignette described a scenario, where positivity expectations were made explicit, consistently reinforced through organizational communication, and tied to performance evaluation.

Specifically, the vignette was high on such facets of situational strength as *clarity*, with cues being available and easy to understand (e.g., encouragement of "passion, energy, and confidence"); *consistency*, with cues being compatible with each other (multiple organizational channels reinforcing the same message), and *consequences*, with actions' implications being stressed (performance scrutiny, reward contingencies). Such strong situations may constrain behavior to a limited set of choices. It is possible that participants perceived organizational positivity expectations as particularly strong, negating a buffering effect of psychological safety.

Further, individuals may choose to align with organizational expectations even in a perceivably safe environment (as indicated by the psychological safety manipulation check), if there are clear resource protection and acquisition implications. The latter were exemplified by the explicit and substantial consequences of displaying positivity in our vignette with the emphasis on performance scrutiny and rewards. Finally, psychological safety may facilitate authenticity in what people say (voice, challenging status quo, admitting mistakes) but not in how people emotionally present themselves when specific displays are expected or even framed as performance requirements. In sum, our result may reflect the strength and implications of positivity expectations, as well as the contextual limits of psychological safety, rather than its ineffectiveness as a protective resource.

Theoretical implications

Our results advance positive organizational scholarship, largely focused on the benefits of positivity (Wong & Roy, 2018), by providing empirical evidence for the unintended consequences of organizational over-emphasis on positivity. More broadly, our study advances theoretical understanding of positivity in organizational contexts by revealing how, when, and why positivity may not be beneficial. Previous research in positive organizational scholarship and positive psychology has conceptualized positivity primarily as an individual disposition or experience that enhances performance and wellbeing, or as or an outcome of supportive organizational practices (e.g., Cunha et al., 2020). We position positivity as an externally established expectation, acquiring a regulative function and shaping behavior through normative pressure.

Drawing on the COR theory, we show that organizational positivity expectations can create a resource threat, prompting instrumental responses. Our result that organizational attempts to instill positivity may prompt surface acting aligns with research on the drawbacks of self-generated positivity, such as moral disengagement and incivility (Ilies et al., 2020), and the pursuit of positivity, including diminished wellbeing (Zerwas & Ford, 2021). We extend this line of research by examining the impact of externally prescribed positivity in interactions with colleagues and leaders and showing that organizational efforts to promote positivity may backfire too.

We introduce a conceptualization of organizational positivity expectations as a distinct organizational norm of cognitive, affective, and behavioral positivity in intra-organizational interactions, prescribing what employees are expected to demonstrate, which adds a nuance to the conceptual landscape of organizational culture research (Chatman & O'Reilly, 2016). We specifically focus on the *content* of organizational norms, rather than culture broadly conceived, which aids understanding of how organizational norms operate at the individual level (Chatman & O'Reilly, 2016; Yip et al., 2020) and uniquely influence emotional labor in interactions with colleagues and leaders.

The evidence that not only emotional demands but also broader organizational norms targeting cognitions, affect, and behavior can prompt surface acting adds to the growing body of work on the antecedents of surface acting in the intra-organizational context (Gabriel et al., 2023). We focused on surface acting as an immediate resource-oriented response to organizational positivity expectations, extending research on its instrumental role in navigating organizational dynamics (Ozcelik, 2013).

Further, our findings inform COR theory by showing that organizational norms can act as a threat triggering

individual resource-protection strategies. Additionally, finding no evidence for psychological safety's moderating effect adds to understanding of resource limitations (Hobfoll et al., 2018), suggesting that individuals may comply with resource-threatening demands despite possessing protective resources, when situational pressures are strong and tied to tangible outcomes. As such, psychological safety may be a valuable but bounded resource, effective in some domains such as speaking up (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023), but limited in others including resisting norms and prescriptions.

Practical implications

Our findings suggest that organizational positivity expectations can prompt surface acting. While surface acting may serve as a short-term adaptive response (Sayre et al., 2025), sustained engagement in inauthentic emotional expression is detrimental to psychological and physical health (Humphrey, 2023). As such, paradoxically, promoting positivity may undermine employee wellbeing. We therefore propose the following practical recommendations.

First, we recommend organizations should review internal communications including leadership addresses, performance frameworks, job advertisements, onboarding materials, and internal newsletters to reduce language that prescribes positivity as a generic and universal requirement and add contextually appropriate guidance. Such guidance may include examples of where positivity is to be directed (e.g., task or behavior) and what specifically this would involve, to develop a reflective and contextual understanding. For instance, this may involve specifying "maintain task-focused optimism when problem-solving" rather than "bring positive energy."

In addition, we suggest organizations should undertake a participative approach tapping into employees' understandings of positivity in their specific work contexts. Engaging employees in defining what positivity means for their specific roles can generate contextually grounded and more readily internalized understandings, reducing the need for surface acting.

We also recommend decoupling positivity displays from performance criteria as our findings suggest that linking positivity expectations to performance scrutiny and rewards may intensify their prescriptive force. For instance, competencies like "positive attitude" or "high energy" should be removed from performance frameworks unless they are genuinely job-relevant, such as in customer-facing roles requiring affective displays. Additionally, surface acting prompted by positivity expectations may erode the quality of workplace relationships. Research demonstrates that positive leader-member exchange and collegial climate are critical predictors of employee satisfaction and commitment

(Kazemi et al., 2024), yet these relationships depend on authenticity and trust that surface acting may undermine.

Organizations also need to foster psychological safety specifically around emotional expression. This may require moving beyond general psychological safety messaging (“speak up”) to explicit permission for emotional authenticity (“it’s acceptable to express that this project feels overwhelming”). Leaders should actively communicate that expressing concerns, acknowledging difficulties, or showing non-positive reactions (frustration, disappointment, uncertainty) will not result in negative evaluation when contextually appropriate and model this by sharing their own challenges.

Finally, organizations could designate responsibility, such as wellbeing committees or HR, to track indicators that positivity expectations may backfire into emotional labor. These include declining employee voice behaviors despite seemingly positive climates, increasing burnout alongside high engagement (suggesting effortful maintenance of positive façades), or employee feedback indicating pressure to appear constantly upbeat. Engagement surveys and exit interviews could explicitly ask whether employees felt pressure to display positivity or did not raise concerns because of expectations to stay positive.

Limitations and future research suggestions

Several limitations of the study point to areas for further research. We acknowledge that despite enhancing experimental realism and internal validity (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014), the use of vignettes might have undermined ecological validity by simplifying the social and temporal complexity of real workplaces. The scenario presented a discrete moment of encountering positivity expectations, whereas employees in actual organizations experience these norms through accumulated interactions over time, embedded within broader relationship histories, ongoing power dynamics, and peer influence. Consequently, the cognitive and emotional processes elicited by the vignette may only approximate those that arise when employees negotiate such expectations in enduring relationships with managers and peers.

Yet, experimental approaches allow for accurate and controlled variation in characteristics of culture while addressing the challenges of collecting culture data through more intrusive methods (Chatman & O’Reilly, 2016). We therefore suggest that future studies could complement experiments with experience sampling to observe daily fluctuations in perceptions of organizational positivity expectations, surface acting, resources, and any contextual influences on their relationship, as well as longitudinal field studies to examine how responses evolve over time in organizational settings.

By focusing on the immediate reaction to organizational positivity expectations, our study provides a starting point

for understanding how they influence employee behavior, paving the way for future research on their impact over time. Surface acting may represent an initial, rapid response to positivity expectations because modifying outward expressions is more automatic and requires fewer regulatory resources than reappraising internal emotional state (Zapf et al., 2021). However, longitudinal research would be required to examine if and when employees, over time, internalize organizational positivity expectations, whether surface acting persists, or whether individuals develop selective strategies (e.g., surface acting in high-stakes interactions while maintaining authenticity elsewhere). Future research should also investigate whether sustained exposure to positivity expectations and consequent surface acting predict longer-term organizational outcomes such as turnover intentions and actual turnover, as workplace stressors including emotional demands have been linked to employee exit decisions (Hommelhoff et al., 2025).

Our research examined individual levels using self-report data, but examining the relationships between group-levels of organizational positivity expectations and psychological safety and individual levels of surface acting would be an interesting avenue. Our reliance on self-reported surface acting may be subject to social desirability bias or limited self-awareness about one’s own emotional regulation strategies. Future research could complement self-report data with manager and peer ratings of observable indicators of surface acting. Alternatively, experience sampling methods capturing surface acting in real-time across multiple interactions would reduce retrospective bias.

Further, research could examine individual differences (e.g., neuroticism, extraversion) and boundary conditions such as organizational politics (Andrews et al., 2016) or leadership styles (e.g., authentic leadership (Lux & Lowe, 2024) as moderators impacting perceptions of organizational positivity expectations and consequent engagement in emotional labor. For instance, employees high in neuroticism may experience positivity expectations as particularly threatening, whereas those high in extraversion may find positivity displays more congruent with their dispositional tendencies, organizational politics may intensify the resource threat posed by such expectations, and authentic leadership could buffer such effects through permission for genuine self-expression.

In this study, we focused on the *content* of organizational expectations but not their *intensity*. Organizations likely differ not only in whether they hold positivity expectations, but in their intensity, potentially operationalized through *explicitness* (implicit cues versus explicit policy statements), *consistency* (uniform messaging across organizational levels versus mixed signals), or *enforcement* (performance evaluation consequences versus informal social approval). Our

vignette represented relatively high-intensity positivity expectations (explicit, consistent, performance-linked). Psychological safety may be more effective in contexts where organizational expectations are weaker or more ambiguous, which could be tested by manipulating intensity variation.

Future research could examine the role of the congruence between organizational expectations and individuals' values (Chatman & O'Reilly, 2016) in amplifying or attenuating the expectations' effects. For instance, the person-organization value misfit may increase stress and anxiety levels (Yip et al., 2020) and thus strengthen the effect of organizational positivity expectations. Additionally, cross-cultural research examining whether positivity expectations operate differently in cultures with varying display rules around emotional expression, would illuminate cultural boundary conditions. We also encourage the investigation of how other personal and job resources might shape the response to positivity expectations. Finally, the lack of evidence for psychological safety's moderating effect suggests there may be a distinction between *content* safety (what one says) and *display* safety (what expressions one shows). Organizations may foster voice while simultaneously mandating positive displays, creating environments where employees feel safe to speak up about problems but not to display authentic feelings.

Conclusion

We introduced and differentiated organizational positivity expectations as a distinct organizational norm prescribing cognitive, affective, and behavioral positivity in intra-organizational interactions. Drawing on conservation of resources and emotional labor theory, we examined whether such expectations prompt surface acting and whether psychological safety moderates this relationship. Our vignette experiment revealed that organizational positivity expectations are positively related to employee surface acting representing an immediate instrumental response to perceived resource threats. Notably, psychological safety did not buffer this effect, suggesting that personal resources may prove insufficient against strong situational demands tied to tangible outcomes. By establishing foundational knowledge about organizationally prescribed positivity, we advance positive organizational scholarship, organizational culture research focused on specific norm content and individual-level implications, emotional labor literature in intra-organizational contexts, and understanding of psychological safety's boundaries as a protective resource. We provide directions for future studies and recommendations for organizations looking to implement positive workplace practices.

Data Availability All data have been made available at the Open Science Framework (OSF) and can be accessed at https://osf.io/dthq4/?view_only=328c60cfd6a44de82382803e21bbca1.

Declarations

Conflict of interest We have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

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