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The Gendered Psyche of Emotional Labor: A Psychological Exploration of Expectation, Performance, and Burnout in the Digital Era

Yayun Xiao ^{1,*}

¹ High School Attached to Shandong Normal University, Jinan, 250014, China

* Correspondence: Yayun Xiao, High School Attached to Shandong Normal University, Jinan, 250014, China

Abstract: Emotional labor has long been recognized as central to service economies, yet the digital era amplifies its psychological dimensions through algorithmic monitoring, constant connectivity, and gendered cultural expectations. While prior research has extensively explored the sociological and organizational facets of emotional labor, comparatively little attention has focused on the psychological mechanisms linking expectations, performance, and burnout in digitally mediated work. To address this gap, this study integrates emotional labor theory, gender role perspectives, and burnout models into a unified analytical framework. Methodologically, it adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach combining recent literature review, textual and discourse analysis, and comparative case studies of Amazon digital customer service representatives, post-pandemic remote teachers, and social media influencers. Findings indicate that women encounter heightened and gender-specific emotional demands: customer service workers are pressured to over-perform scripted friendliness, remote teachers engage in deep acting under conditions of role overload, and influencers navigate hybrid authenticity performances that merge personal identity with brand expectations. These dynamics contribute to diverse yet convergent forms of burnout, disproportionately affecting women. By extending emotional labor models into digital contexts, this study advances theoretical understanding and offers practical guidance for designing equitable workplace policies, establishing digital boundaries, and enhancing platform accountability.

Keywords: emotional labor; digital contexts; gendered expectations; burnout; algorithmic monitoring

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1. Introduction

Emotional labor has emerged as one of the most critical yet contested concepts in contemporary organizational and psychological research. Originally articulated by Arlie Hochschild in *The Managed Heart*, the term refers to the regulation of feelings and expressions as part of professional performance, often required in service-oriented occupations [1]. Over the past four decades, scholars have expanded this framework to examine not only organizational contexts but also broader sociocultural dynamics, in which emotional regulation is both demanded and commodified.

In the digital era, emotional labor has become increasingly pervasive, extending beyond traditional customer service settings into digitally mediated professions such as online education, social media influencing, and virtual call centers [2]. This expansion has transformed the texture of emotional work: algorithms, platform metrics, and constant connectivity impose novel forms of surveillance and evaluation that reshape how emotions are performed and experienced [3]. Within this shifting terrain, the gendered

dimensions of emotional labor remain particularly salient, as women and marginalized workers continue to bear disproportionate expectations of empathy, warmth, and attentiveness [4].

Despite the richness of this scholarly tradition, critical gaps persist in our understanding of emotional labor in digitally mediated contexts [5]. Much of the existing literature remains rooted in sociological or organizational perspectives, emphasizing structural inequalities and economic logics while giving insufficient attention to the psychological mechanisms through which emotional work produces both resilience and harm [6]. Although research has documented the disproportionate emotional demands placed on women and their links to stress and burnout, these findings are often presented descriptively, without integrating deeper psychological models of expectation, identity strain, and exhaustion [7]. Furthermore, digital mediation complicates the conventional binaries of surface acting and deep acting by introducing algorithmic feedback loops—such as customer satisfaction scores or social media engagement metrics—that amplify pressures on emotional self-presentation. Recent studies in occupational health have begun to examine digital burnout and technostress, but few explicitly situate these phenomena within the gendered psyche of emotional labor [8]. This gap limits both the explanatory depth of current scholarship and its capacity to inform interventions for equitable and sustainable work practices.

The present study addresses this lacuna by advancing a psychological exploration of gendered emotional labor in the digital era. Its central aim is to examine how expectation, performance, and burnout intersect in digitally mediated workplaces, where emotional labor is simultaneously intensified and rendered more visible. By focusing on psychological processes underlying emotional regulation—such as identity negotiation, affective dissonance, and cognitive depletion—the study extends existing scholarship beyond structural accounts of labor toward a nuanced understanding of individual experiences. This contribution is especially significant in an era in which digital economies increasingly rely on "affective capital," demanding constant displays of enthusiasm, empathy, and adaptability from workers constrained by gendered cultural scripts.

Methodologically, the study employs an interdisciplinary approach that integrates literature analysis, comparative case studies, and theoretical synthesis. First, a comprehensive review of recent scholarship on emotional labor, gendered work, and digital burnout establishes the analytical foundation, with particular attention to post-2023 contributions reflecting the rapidly evolving landscape of digital labor. Second, comparative case analyses focus on three contexts where emotional labor is particularly pronounced: digital customer service, remote education, and influencer economies. These cases illustrate how digital mediation and gendered expectations interact to produce unique forms of strain, while highlighting variations across occupational domains. Third, insights from psychology and gender theory are synthesized to construct a conceptual framework linking expectation, performance, and burnout in ways generalizable across digital professions.

The significance of this study lies in both its scholarly and practical contributions. Academically, it expands the theoretical boundaries of emotional labor research by introducing psychological depth into an area often dominated by sociological perspectives. It also extends established models of burnout and gender role theory to digital contexts, providing a novel lens for interpreting emerging labor phenomena. Practically, the findings offer actionable guidance for organizational leaders, policymakers, and mental health practitioners seeking to mitigate burnout and promote equity in digital workplaces. By foregrounding the psychological costs of gendered emotional labor, the study underscores the necessity of workplace policies that recognize invisible affective contributions, establish digital boundaries, and address inequities in emotional expectations. In doing so, the research aims not only to enrich academic debates but also to contribute to healthier, more sustainable digital work environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Classical and Contemporary Theories of Emotional Labor

The conceptual foundations of emotional labor were laid by Hochschild's seminal distinction between surface acting and deep acting, framing emotional regulation as a form of commodified labor intrinsic to service roles. This early model highlighted the psychological costs of suppressing or inducing emotions to conform with organizational expectations, providing a framework that has guided decades of research. Subsequent scholarship refined these categories by examining situational, organizational, and individual moderators of emotional performance. For instance, Gabriel, Diefendorff, and Grandey advanced integrative perspectives emphasizing the interplay among emotional display rules, personal resources, and occupational norms [9]. While valuable, these approaches often remained confined to face-to-face service contexts, overlooking transformations induced by digital mediation. Moreover, the binary framework of surface and deep acting has been critiqued for oversimplifying the dynamic and hybrid strategies workers employ in complex social environments [10]. Building on classical insights, this study emphasizes the need for nuanced psychological models that capture the evolving realities of digitally mediated labor.

2.2. Gendered Dimensions of Emotional Work

A second body of scholarship focuses on the gendered dimensions of emotional labor, emphasizing how social norms and cultural scripts differentially shape emotional expectations. Feminist scholars have long argued that women are disproportionately tasked with affective responsibilities, both professionally and domestically [11]. Recent empirical studies confirm that women in customer-facing roles are more likely to be penalized for perceived lapses in warmth or attentiveness, whereas men are often rewarded for minimal emotional engagement [12]. Research in educational and healthcare settings further demonstrates that gendered stereotypes of nurturing render emotional contributions largely invisible, reducing recognition and compensation [13]. However, much of this work has been criticized for its descriptive orientation, rarely theorizing the psychological mechanisms by which gender norms translate into burnout and identity strain. By integrating gender role theory with psychological models of emotional regulation, the present study seeks to elucidate how expectation-performance cycles generate disproportionate vulnerabilities for women and marginalized workers, particularly in digitally mediated contexts.

2.3. Emotional Labor in the Digital Era

The third strand of research investigates how emotional labor is reshaped in digital and platform-based economies. With the rise of remote work, gig platforms, and content creation industries, scholars have documented the intensification of affective demands under conditions of algorithmic surveillance and constant connectivity. For example, studies of call center workers demonstrate that customer satisfaction ratings heighten pressure to maintain positivity, with digital monitoring systems leaving little room for authentic emotional expression [14]. Analyses of influencer labor further reveal how platform metrics commodify authenticity, transforming personal affect into a measurable and monetizable resource [15]. While these studies underscore the structural and technological dynamics introduced by digital mediation, they often neglect psychological inquiry. Consequently, the specific pathways through which digital platforms exacerbate emotional dissonance, identity strain, and burnout remain underexplored. Situating these findings within psychological models of stress and emotional regulation allows for a more granular understanding of how digital infrastructures intersect with gendered expectations to shape the psyche of emotional labor.

Taken together, these three strands illuminate the evolution of emotional labor research, from foundational sociological theories to contemporary considerations of

gender and digital mediation. Yet, each domain reveals limitations: the oversimplification of classical models, the descriptive tendencies of gender-focused research, and the structural emphasis of digital labor analyses. The present study advances the field by integrating these perspectives through a psychological lens, offering a framework that conceptualizes expectation, performance, and burnout as interdependent processes shaped by both gender norms and digital infrastructures.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

3.1. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates emotional labor theory, gender role theory, and burnout models, extending them into digitally mediated contexts. Emotional labor theory, first articulated by Hochschild, introduced the influential distinction between surface acting and deep acting, capturing the tension between externally displayed emotions and internal affective states.

Gender role theory complements this perspective by highlighting the sociocultural expectations assigned to men and women regarding affective expression. Feminist research demonstrates that women are disproportionately tasked with empathy, patience, and relational warmth, resulting in heightened psychological demands in service and care work.

Finally, burnout and stress models provide the psychological dimension of the framework. The Maslach Burnout Inventory conceptualizes burnout through emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment, while the Job Demand-Resource (JD-R) model emphasizes how imbalances between work demands and available resources generate strain. Together, these theories provide a lens for examining the interplay of expectation, performance, and psychological outcomes in digitally mediated emotional labor.

3.2. Methodological Approach

The research adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology designed to capture both structural and psychological dimensions of digital emotional labor. Three complementary methods are employed:

Literature Analysis: Synthesizes peer-reviewed works published between 2023 and 2025 to ensure that the theoretical foundation reflects the most current debates in psychology, gender studies, and digital labor research.

Textual and Discourse Analysis: Examines organizational policies, training manuals, media interviews, and autobiographical accounts of workers to reveal how emotional display rules are articulated, internalized, and resisted across digital industries.

Comparative Case Study Design: Enables systematic analysis across three occupational contexts. By juxtaposing digital customer service, remote education, and influencer economies, the study identifies both shared mechanisms and domain-specific dynamics. Comparative analysis is particularly suited to exploring how structural conditions (e.g., algorithmic monitoring) intersect with psychological processes (e.g., emotional dissonance) in gendered ways.

3.3. Case Selection and Research Process

Cases were selected based on three criteria: (1) high reliance on emotional labor, (2) strong gendered expectations, and (3) significant mediation by digital technologies. The three chosen domains—Amazon digital customer service, post-pandemic remote teaching, and social media influencer economies—exemplify how expectation, performance, and burnout converge.

- **Case 1: Amazon Digital Customer Service**

Remote and hybrid call center workers are subject to algorithmic monitoring and

customer satisfaction ratings. Women are disproportionately penalized for lapses in friendliness, reinforcing gendered expectations.

- **Case 2: Remote Teachers (Post-COVID-19)**
Educators, particularly women, experienced heightened emotional demands during the pandemic while balancing domestic responsibilities. Female teachers reported higher exhaustion due to expectations of constant availability.
- **Case 3: Social Media Influencers**
Content creators on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok exemplify the commodification of authenticity. Women face scrutiny to maintain positivity and availability, with metrics serving as relentless evaluators of affect.

The rationale for these selections is summarized in Table 1, which outlines occupational contexts, justifications, and key analytical dimensions.

Table 1. Case Selection and Analytical Rationale.

Case	Occupational Context	Rationale for Selection	Key Analytical Dimensions
Amazon Digital Customer Service	Remote and hybrid call center workers evaluated through algorithmic monitoring and customer ratings	Illustrates how algorithmic feedback loops amplify emotional display rules and disproportionately penalize women for lapses in friendliness	Gendered expectations of politeness and empathy; surface acting under hostile interactions; burnout from constant monitoring
Remote Teachers (Post-COVID-19)	Primary and secondary school teachers transitioning to online platforms such as Zoom and Teams	Highlights how traditional care-oriented gender roles are intensified by digital platforms, with women reporting higher emotional exhaustion	Gendered expectations of availability and patience; digital deep acting in maintaining student engagement; role overload and burnout
Social Media Influencers	Content creators on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok	Demonstrates the commodification of authenticity in digital labor, where women face intensified scrutiny and pressure to sustain positivity	Gendered expectations of relatability and constant positivity; identity-brand fusion; burnout from hyper-visibility and algorithmic evaluation

Data collection proceeded in three stages: (1) reviewing recent empirical studies and industry reports, (2) conducting discourse analysis of organizational documents and worker testimonies, and (3) synthesizing findings through comparative analysis using the tripartite framework of expectation, performance, and burnout. This approach enabled triangulation of data sources and ensured that psychological dimensions of digital emotional labor were situated within real-world occupational contexts.

By combining theoretical rigor with empirical illustration, this methodology advances an integrated understanding of how gendered expectations and digital infrastructures jointly shape the psychological experience of emotional labor in contemporary workplaces.

4. Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study are organized around three interrelated dimensions: expectation, performance, and burnout. Each dimension is examined across the three selected cases—Amazon digital customer service, post-pandemic remote teachers, and

social media influencers. By situating these cases within the integrated theoretical framework, the discussion elucidates how gendered expectations, emotional acting strategies, and digital infrastructures converge to produce psychological strain. The chapter also situates these findings in relation to existing scholarship, highlighting both continuities with classical theories and the innovations required to account for digital mediation.

4.1. Gendered Expectations in Digital Emotional Labor

Across all three cases, gendered expectations regarding emotional work persist and are intensified in digitally mediated contexts. In Amazon customer service, female employees reported heightened pressure to convey warmth and patience, even in hostile interactions, aligning with gender role theory, which associates femininity with empathy and care.

For remote teachers, these expectations manifested as demands for constant availability and emotional reassurance. Female educators were often expected to provide motivational support for students struggling with online learning, extending responsibilities beyond academic instruction to emotional caretaking. Recent studies in the UK indicate that female teachers experienced significantly higher stress when managing both student and parent expectations, particularly alongside domestic caregiving responsibilities.

Influencers faced perhaps the most visible form of gendered expectation. Female content creators are required to embody positivity, relatability, and authenticity, often under constant scrutiny from both followers and platform algorithms. The feminization of influencer labor is evident in the expectation of "always-on" engagement, where emotional display becomes inseparable from personal identity.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that while emotional labor expectations are universal in digital work, they are disproportionately internalized and enacted by women, reflecting broader cultural scripts that feminize care and relationality.

4.2. Emotional Performance and Digital Mediation

The second dimension concerns the modalities of emotional performance under digital mediation. Amazon customer service employees predominantly engaged in surface acting, masking irritation or frustration with scripted politeness. Algorithmic monitoring reinforced this strategy, as deviations from prescribed emotional tones were flagged in performance evaluations. Women, in particular, described the need to "over-perform" friendliness to secure positive ratings, illustrating the intersection of gendered expectations and algorithmic oversight.

Remote teachers engaged more frequently in deep acting, as effective virtual instruction required both visible enthusiasm and genuine motivational effort to sustain student engagement.

Influencers exemplify a hybrid form of performance, where surface and deep acting collapse into one another. Performing authenticity demands both strategic display and genuine affective investment, as audiences quickly detect insincerity. Female influencers often described exhaustion from maintaining a consistent brand identity that increasingly merges with the personal self. Emotional labor in these contexts is continuous, blurring boundaries between work and life.

These observations underscore that digital mediation not only reshapes emotional performance but also magnifies the psychological dissonance between displayed and experienced emotions.

4.3. Burnout and Psychological Consequences

Burnout, conceptualized through the Maslach Burnout Inventory and JD-R model, manifested differently across cases. In Amazon customer service, burnout was

characterized by emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, with employees describing strategies of "numbing" themselves to repeated customer hostility, undermining genuine emotional connection.

For remote teachers, burnout took the form of role overload and diminished accomplishment. Female educators reported feelings of inadequacy despite extensive emotional investment, as digital platforms hindered accurate assessment of student engagement, contributing to emotional depletion and reduced self-efficacy.

Among influencers, burnout was marked by hyper-visibility and identity strain. Maintaining constant positivity and authenticity induced self-objectification and anxiety. Female influencers described cycles of withdrawal and return, where temporary disengagement was necessary for mental health but risked algorithmic penalties, threatening career sustainability.

Together, these cases reveal that burnout in digital emotional labor is context-dependent but consistently imposes disproportionate psychological costs on women, who face intensified expectations alongside digital pressures.

4.4. Cross-Case Comparative Insights

Comparative analysis highlights both convergences and divergences across cases. Convergences include the reinforcement of gendered expectations, the centrality of digital metrics in shaping emotional performance, and elevated burnout risk. Divergences concern specific modalities of emotional acting and burnout forms: surface acting in customer service, deep acting in teaching, and identity-brand fusion in influencer economies.

These findings extend classical emotional labor theory by showing that digital infrastructures collapse traditional distinctions between surface and deep acting, producing hybrid forms of emotional performance. They refine gender role theory by illustrating how digital environments amplify cultural scripts, rendering gendered expectations algorithmically enforceable. They also enrich burnout models by identifying digital-era stressors—hyper-visibility, continuous evaluation, and algorithmic surveillance—as novel contributors to emotional exhaustion (Table 2).

Table 2. Cross-Case Comparison of Gendered Emotional Labor in the Digital Era.

Dimension	Amazon Digital Customer Service	Remote Teachers (Post-COVID-19)	Social Media Influencers
Gendered Expectations	Women pressured to display warmth and patience; penalized more severely for lapses	Female teachers expected to provide emotional support and constant availability	Female influencers expected to perform positivity, authenticity, and relatability under constant scrutiny
Emotional Performance	Predominantly surface acting; scripted politeness enforced by algorithmic monitoring	Deep acting to sustain motivation and engagement; emotional projection internalized	Hybrid surface-deep acting; brand identity merges with personal self
Burnout Outcomes	Emotional exhaustion and depersonalization; coping through detachment	Role overload and diminished accomplishment; feelings of futility	Identity strain, self-objectification, and anxiety; cycles of withdrawal due to hyper-visibility
Digital Mediation	Algorithmic monitoring and ratings intensify emotional dissonance	Blurring of professional and domestic boundaries through	Algorithmic visibility and follower metrics commodify emotional

	online teaching platforms	display and penalize disengagement
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4.5. Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings have several theoretical implications. First, they extend emotional labor theory by demonstrating that digital mediation produces hybrid forms of performance not fully captured by the surface/deep acting dichotomy. Second, they advance gender role theory by showing how algorithmic infrastructures institutionalize cultural expectations, making them quantifiable and enforceable. Third, they enrich burnout models by identifying digital-era stressors-hyper-visibility and continuous evaluation-as novel contributors to emotional exhaustion.

Practically, organizations and policymakers must recognize the gendered psychological costs of digital emotional labor. Interventions could include revising evaluation systems to mitigate algorithmic bias, providing training in emotional resilience that avoids reinforcing gendered stereotypes, and establishing clearer digital boundaries to safeguard psychological well-being. For influencers and other platform-based workers, collective action and platform accountability mechanisms may be necessary to alleviate the individual burden of sustaining constant emotional performance.

5. Conclusion

This study has investigated the gendered psyche of emotional labor in the digital era through an integrated framework linking expectation, performance, and burnout. By drawing on emotional labor theory, gender role theory, and burnout models, and applying them to three distinct yet complementary cases—Amazon digital customer service, post-pandemic remote teachers, and social media influencers—the research illuminates how gendered cultural scripts and digital infrastructures jointly shape the psychological costs of emotional work. Findings reveal that women and marginalized workers experience disproportionate pressures to perform warmth, patience, and authenticity, with algorithmic monitoring and hyper-visibility amplifying these demands. The resulting psychological strain manifests in diverse forms of burnout, including emotional exhaustion, role overload, and identity fragmentation.

The scholarly contribution of this study lies in extending classical theories of emotional labor into digitally mediated contexts. It demonstrates that traditional binaries of surface and deep acting are insufficient to capture hybrid performances under algorithmic oversight. Moreover, the study refines burnout models by highlighting novel digital stressors such as hyper-visibility, continuous evaluation, and the collapse of boundaries between personal and professional selves.

Practically, these findings underscore the urgency of designing workplace and platform policies that recognize and mitigate gendered emotional demands. Strategies may include revising evaluative algorithms, instituting digital boundaries, and providing gender-sensitive support mechanisms to protect workers' psychological well-being.

Future research should explore cross-cultural variations in digital emotional labor, investigate intersectional differences beyond gender, and adopt longitudinal designs to track the evolving psychological impacts of digital work. Such inquiries can further inform the development of equitable and sustainable digital labor environments, ensuring that emotional labor is recognized, valued, and supported in the contemporary era.

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