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Project Dissertation Report on
IMPACT OF EMOTIONAL LABOUR ON
EMPLOYEES IN THE DIGITAL WORLD OF
WORK

Submitted By
Jagrity Dubey
Roll No.: 24/DMBA/102

Under the Guidance of
Dr. Seema
Assistant Professor

DELHI SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT
Delhi Technological University
Bawana Road, Delhi, 110042

Academic Year: 2024–2025

9

CERTIFICATE

1 This is to certify that the Major Research Project Report entitled "Impact of Emotional Labour on Employees in the Digital World of Work" has been submitted by Ms. Jagrity Dubey (Roll No.: 24/DMBA/102) in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Business Administration (MBA) from Delhi School of Management, Delhi Technological University, Bawana Road, Delhi, 110042.

3 This work has been carried out under my supervision and guidance. The report is original and has not been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma to any university or institution.

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Designation: Assistant Professor

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DECLARATION

1 I, Jagrity Dubey, student of Master of Business Administration (MBA) at Delhi School of Management, Delhi Technological University, hereby declare that the Major Research Project Report titled "Impact of Emotional Labour on Employees in the Digital World of Work" submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the MBA degree is my original work.

8 I further declare that:

- 35 • The research work contained in this report has been carried out by me independently under the guidance of Dr. Seema, Assistant Professor, Delhi School of Management.
- 3 • This report has not been previously submitted for the award of any degree or diploma to any other university or institution.
- All secondary data, references, citations, and sources used in this report have been duly acknowledged and credited in accordance with the APA referencing style.
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(Jagrity Dubey)

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I wish to acknowledge the foundational contributions of Professor Arlie Russell Hochschild, whose seminal work *The Managed Heart* (1983) pioneered the concept of emotional labour and continues to inspire generations of scholars working at the intersection of sociology, psychology, and management.

Lastly, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my family and friends for their unwavering moral support, patience, and encouragement during the demanding process of research and writing.

Jagrity Dubey

Roll No.: 24/DMBA/102

MBA, Delhi School of Management

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

8 In recent years, the digitalisation of work, driven by the Covid-19 pandemic and the forced
shift to working remotely, the emergence of virtual teams and work via platforms, has
90 completely redesigned the nature of work in the twentyfirst century. This shift has been
technologically and economically discussed in great detail, whereas the psychological and
emotional aspects have been largely overlooked. This research report explores the effect of
emotional labour on workers in digital work contexts, using a comprehensive analysis of
4 secondary academic and organisational literature. Emotional labour, as first introduced by
sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild in her work *The Managed Heart* (1983), is the practice
50 through which workers regulate their emotions and expressions, according to the demands of
their work. Hochschild found two major approaches: the first was called surface acting,
96 which involved employees "repressing" their true emotions and "faking" the emotions that
they were expected to display; the second was deep acting, which involved an employee
actively trying to induce the necessary emotions within him or herself. These strategies take
on different, and sometimes more extreme, forms in digital work settings, such as remote
55 work, virtual teams, gig economy platforms and digital customer-facing positions. This study
aims to: (i) investigate the theoretical aspects of the concept of emotional labour and its
development in the digital environment; (ii) explore the consequences of emotional labour
6 on employee well-being, job satisfaction, burnout, work-life balance and productivity; (iii)
108 discuss the challenges and issues that organisations and HR managers face relating to
emotional labour in digitally mediated workplaces; and (iv) provide evidence-based HR
strategies and recommendations for reducing the negative impact of emotional labour in
digitally mediated environments. This is a secondary data-based research study. The
analytical framework is based on peer-reviewed journal articles from Scopus-indexed and
Google Scholar databases, books authored by reputable scholars, and reports from various
7 organisations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), the World Health
Organisation (WHO), McKinsey Global Institute, Deloitte and Gallup. The majority of the
literature reviewed falls within the timeframe of 2015-2024, with a focus on those studies
from post-2020 that align with the new normal of work post-pandemic. Our key findings
indicate that emotional labour within a digital context is significantly linked to higher rates
of emotional exhaustion, digital fatigue, and burnout in both remote and gig economy
employees as well as online customer service representatives. In non-physical workplaces,

100 emotional labour is invisible, a lack of empathy in supervision is felt, boundaries between
work and personal life are indistinct and video-mediated communication makes self-
45 monitoring impossible to avoid, all of which are unique stressors not accounted for by
conventional HR models. Studies have shown a strong negative correlation between surface
22 acting and job satisfaction and organisational commitment, and that surface acting is more
common and more detrimental in digital contexts. In terms of HR, this research highlights
the need for organisations to recognize the emotional aspects of digital work, foster
psychologically safe environments, and set digital boundaries. Finally, a series of "do this"
recommendations for HR are provided, based on current research and applicable to the digital
workplace.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Emotional Labour

4 The idea of emotional labour was first introduced by American sociologist, Arlie Russell Hochschild in his groundbreaking work *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (1983). Emotional labour, as defined by Hochschild (1983) was the term used to describe the management of feelings in response to scripted displays of feeling, which are observable to the public, and which are intended to elicit the desired state of mind in others.

6 After detailed research of airline flight attendants and bill collectors, she found that emotional expression is not only personal expression but a commercialized resource that employers take from employees as part of their work.

In the original theoretical framework proposed by Hochschild, there are two basic methods by which emotional labour is carried out. A type of impression management called surface acting in which the worker appears to be feel a feeling that is not actually experienced. Deep acting is the more internalized process, the worker will try to feel the emotion he/she must feel, similar to method acting. Deep acting can generate more authentic facial expressions, but requires a lot of cognitive and emotional effort and, over time, can result in an alienation from one's own true emotions, as Hochschild originally identified in her research: an estrangement from one's own feelings.

119 And Later scholars expanded it and elaborated on Hochschild's work in detail. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) introduced a third typology in the expression of naturally felt emotions: they suggested that a service role need not involve deliberate expression of emotions in the service. Grandey (2000) created a more psychologically-based model of emotional labour that placed emotional labour in Gross's (1998) process model of emotion regulation and identified two types of emotional labour strategies: antecedent-focused strategies (deep acting) and response-focused strategies (surface acting). Emotional labour was conceptualised by Morris and Feldman (1996) as occurring frequently, attentively, in a wide range of emotions, and in which the emotions are incongruous (felt and displayed emotions not matching). This has been termed as the emotional dissonance of felt and displayed emotions not matching and has been identified as a significant predictor of burnout and emotional exhaustion. The field of emotional labour has grown considerably in the 1990s and 2000s, and studies have been conducted by scholars in psychology, sociology and

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organisational behaviour and human resource management, each adding their own depth and dimension to the research. These empirical findings, which were consistently documented across a large body of empirical research over two decades, identified strong links between emotional labour, especially with surface acting, and negative outcome measures such as emotional exhaustion, organisational deviance, job dissatisfaction and decreased psychological well-being. A more positive profile was related to deep acting, which was associated with higher job satisfaction and higher service quality, but still cognitively challenging. By the second decade of the twenty first century, emotional labour was a proven phenomenon in organizational psychology and HRM and was considered a vital factor influencing employee well-being, service quality and organizational effectiveness. At the same time, the world of work was also undergoing a radical change as a result of digital technologies – one that would significantly impact on the contexts, forms and effects of emotional labour forever.

The psychological aspects of emotional labour also spill over into the psychological contract, a theory of the unwritten, unspoken, unrecorded expectations and obligations between employer and employee, developed by Rousseau (1989). Organisations that demand employees to engage in positive emotions as part of their job description are also incorporating emotional labour into the psychological contract of employment. Breach of the contract, when the emotional requirements one is obliged to deliver to workers are higher than what he/she thinks he/she would be required to deliver, are linked with feelings of betrayal, decreased organisational commitment and an increase of turnover intention. It is this aspect of emotional labour that has been increasingly studied in the HR scholarship literature recently, with the increasing demands for digital presence and constant professional positivity in today's working life leading to greater emotions demands being placed on their working relationships.

1.2 Development of Emotional Labour in Digital Work

Environments Digitalisation of work is the use of digital technologies in the organisation and execution of work, including the change in the spatial and temporal dimension of the work. This shift, which was even more pronounced in the early twenty-first century, was thrust into an unprecedented global experiment in working from home by the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in March 2020. A report by the International Labour Organization estimates that around the world one out of 6 workers shifted to teleworking during the pandemic, highlighting the opportunities and risks of telework. Emotional labour has become a more

26 complex phenomenon with the digitalization of work, and specific contexts in which it is executed have emerged. Telework, also known as remote work, is a working arrangement where employees work at sites other than the traditional workplace, primarily from their homes, via digital technologies for communication and collaboration. Virtual Teams are a collection of geographically distributed workers who work primarily using electronic means like video conferencing, email, project management platforms, etc. Examples of gig economy jobs include different forms of platform-mediated, contract-based work arrangements in which workers like Uber drivers, Deliveroo riders, and Upwork freelancers are connected to clients and customers via digital platforms, without the benefit of the traditional employment relationship. Customer-facing digital includes roles like online chat support agents, social media customer service reps, and content moderators, where emotional interactions are all handled digitally. In each of these settings, emotional labour becomes uniquely shaped and different from the other forms of emotional labour in traditional, physically co-located work settings. The first is that, when the work is conducted virtually, there is what is being termed a "digital emotional labour paradox" – the need to project warmth, empathy and professionalism at a time when the non-verbal communicative bandwidth of the medium, in which it appears, is impoverished. Multiple scholars across sociology and organisational behaviour have all noted the existence of this paradox. Second, the "always-on" nature of working culture and the blurring of boundaries between pro and personal life that simmers in the background of remote working, extends the temporal commitments of emotional labour beyond the boundaries of the standard working day, as Mazmanian, Orlikowski and Yates (2013) put it, "compulsive connectivity". Third, Shockley et al's large scale international study identified the explicit visibility technologies embedded in video mediated communication, including self-view in Zoom as unique stressors that increase the demands for self-monitoring in emotional labour. Another aspect of emotional labour in digital contexts is the rise of platform-based surveillance in the gig economy. Algorithmic ratings on Uber and Amazon Marketplace, which customers and sellers rely on to hire and fire gig workers, constantly track them; even when they do not have supervisors on their backs. The nature of this type of 'algorithmic management' produces a panoptical emotional labour regime where the emotional performances of workers are constantly judged and their economic livelihoods are made contingent upon the result. Another aspect is the increased presence of Artificial Intelligence in service jobs with customers, which is also part of the practice of emotional labour. To replace human workers from doing repetitive emotional labour tasks, AI-powered chatbots, virtual assistants, and automated responses are

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increasingly used in repetitive customer service interactions. However, in the real world, the adoption of AI in service environments can sometimes paradoxically lead to an increase in the emotional burden on human agents, as they are now expected to deal with more complex, more escalated, and more emotional customer interactions that AI cannot handle. The human-AI interface generates new forms of emotional labour because, for the workers, it is a mediator between the impersonality of the algorithmic systems and human expectations of empathy and responsiveness from their customers.

1.3 Problem Statement

2 Although there has been a broad range of research to explore the concept of emotional labour in the traditional workplace context, the existing literature is underdeveloped to provide a theoretical framework and empirical studies to explore emotional labour within digital work environments. 21 Few studies have been conducted on the emotional and psychological aspects of digitally mediated working, and the literature on digital work has largely been concerned with productivity and efficiency, and with the adoption of technology. The problem is one that can be expressed as follows: As digitalisation, remote working and platform-based working become more prevalent in the global workforce, new and heightened emotional demands are being placed on employees, while traditional HR practices and support systems fall short in dealing with them. Emotional labour in non-physical environments, the lack of empathy by supervisors, the lack of distinction between work and life, the need to monitor emotion in video mediated communication, and emotional performance management through algorithms in platform economies are unique psychological stressors that are causing emotional burnouts, emotional exhaustion, and reduced well-being among digital workers. A McKinsey report in 2021 found that 55% of all employees said that they experience emotional exhaustion at their workplace, and remote workers were more likely to suffer from emotional exhaustion than on-site workers. 116 Burnout is an occupational phenomenon that is characterized by feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion, mental distancing from work, and decreased professional efficacy, and was officially recognized by the WHO (2019) as a serious problem.

19 The impact of emotional burnout and turnover due to labor in the digital space is very real and growing awareness has been raised that this is a business risk. According to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) report, the replacement cost of an employee can vary from 50 percent to 200 percent of the departed worker's yearly salary if the expenses of recruiting, onboarding and productivity loss are included. In digitally-based work, like online

customer service and content moderation, the annual turnover figure is often over 40% — this is a massive and often avoidable loss of organisational resources. In 2022, McKinsey analysed the business case for companies to invest in employee mental health, and companies that have strong mental health programs achieved 23% lower turnover, 18% higher productivity and significantly improved measures of customer satisfaction compared to similar companies lacking mental health programs. The findings here make a compelling business case for the investments in digital emotional labour management that this research recommends, alongside the moral case, based on worker wellbeing. In addition, the gender aspects of emotional labor in digital environments are of special interest. As a result of Hochschild's original research on the subject, a trend of women's disproportionate responsibility for emotional labour has been found in other studies, both internationally, in the labour statistics, and in national-level studies of the working household that show the domestic burden of emotional labour is disproportionately carried by women working at home, even as it is under new definitions of digital labour.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The present research is guided by the following objectives:

- The following objectives are the guiding objectives for the present research:
- To critically analyse the theoretical underpinnings of emotional labour and its conceptual development in the context of digital labour.
- To summarise and integrate current secondary research on effects of emotional labour on employee outcomes, in particular well-being, job satisfaction, burnout, emotional exhaustion, work-life balance and productivity in a digital and remote working environment.
- To examine and critically discuss the specific nature and heightened experiences of emotional labour in the context of remote work, virtual teams, gig economy platforms and customer-facing digital jobs.
- To evaluate the organizational and HR issues of identifying, managing and mitigating emotional labour in digitally mediated workplaces.
- To formulate HR-based evidence for recommendations and organisational strategies to support the emotional well-being of employees in digital working environments.

1.5 Scope of the Study

This research is conducted in terms of both its theme and methods. Emotional labour, as it is experienced by employees in digitally mediated work settings, is the focus of the study in this thematic, with the four contexts of study being: remote working (work from home), virtual teams, gig economy platforms and customer facing digital roles. This research covers employee outcomes such as well-being, job satisfaction, burnout, emotional exhaustion, work life balance, and productivity. The methodology of the study is limited to secondary data from published academic research, books, reports by international organisations and industry studies. This work is not a primary data collection (survey, interview or experimental study). The literature reviewed ranged from 2010 to 2024, and there is a particular focus on the research that has been conducted since 2019, which are more up to date and therefore more reflective of the realities of digital work in the post-pandemic era. Literature used in the study is geographically diverse, but much of the literature reviewed comes from North America, Europe, and South and Southeast Asia. There is a focus on the knowledge workers,

workers in the service sector, and platform workers, who are the most intensively involved in emotionally-labouring in the digital realm. No prescriptions are offered for any specific industries or organisations, nor for clinical psychological interventions for the individual case of burnout. Instead, it is for HR professionals, organizational decision makers and policy makers who are interested in knowing about and dealing with the structural and systemic aspects of emotional labor in digital work environments

Table 1.1: Key Concepts and Definitions Used in the Study

Concept	Definition	Source
Emotional Labour	The management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display as part of job performance.	Hochschild (1983)
Surface Acting	Displaying required emotions without genuinely feeling them; a form of impression management.	Grandey (2000)
Deep Acting	Genuinely cultivating required emotions by modifying internal feelings.	Hochschild (1983)
Digital Work	Work performed through digital technologies, including remote work, virtual teams, and platform-mediated employment.	ILO (2020)
Emotional Exhaustion	A state of chronic fatigue resulting from prolonged emotional labour demands.	Maslach et al. (2001)
Burnout	An occupational phenomenon characterised by exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced efficacy.	WHO (2019)
Gig Economy	A labour market characterised by short-term, flexible, and freelance contracts mediated by digital platforms.	De Stefano (2016)
Digital Fatigue	Fatigue arising from prolonged use of digital communication tools, particularly video conferencing.	Bailenson (2021)

Source: Compiled by the researcher from reviewed literature.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Emotional Labour

The theoretical structure supporting the investigation of emotional labour is solid and multi-disciplinary, grounded in the fields of sociology, social psychology and organisational behaviour. The foundation for this formulation is the one originally by Hochschild (1983). Her sociological analysis uncovered that emotional labour, as with physical and cognitive labour, is a type of labour with economic value, sold for payment and subject to organisational regulation and control.

The commercialisation of emotional labour, said Hochschild, is characterised by the separation of the worker from his or her emotions, since the felt emotions of workers are used as raw material to be packaged, managed and sold to customers. The first systematic attempt to combine emotional labour theory with psychological theories of emotion regulation was made by Grandey (2000). Based on Gross's (1998) process model, Grandey was able to conceptualise surface acting as a response-focused regulation strategy that follows the emotional response and deep acting as an antecedent-focused strategy that occurs prior to the full development of the emotional response.

The difference between the two has implications for the psychological costs of emotional labour: as Grandey found, response-focused regulation tends to be more challenging and more depleting than deep acting. There has been a widespread use of Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of Resources (COR) theory as a basis for explaining the psychological impacts of emotional labour. COR theory suggests that people have a desire to acquire, maintain, and defend reserves of energy, social support, positive affect, and that the fear of losing resources or the actual loss of resources is more psychologically harmful than the prospect of gaining equivalent resources. Chronic suppression of authentic feelings (surface acting) is an ongoing depletion of the person's emotional and cognitive resources, and when these resources are depleted, below a critical level, it will lead to burnout.

Another theory that has influenced the analysis of emotional labour is that of Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) developed by Bakker and Demerouti (2007). According to the model, job demands, particularly emotional demands, represent the main antecedents of burnout, whereas job resources (social support, autonomy, feedback) act as buffers against the harmful effects of job demands. The JD-R model has been adapted to digital work and suggests a

context of heightened emotional demands due to the lack of physical boundaries, the phenomenon of compulsive connectivity and the standards imposed by algorithms, which will have a special impact when these demands are not met by the organization or its employees.

In particular, Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) reference a third type of emotional labour: natural or spontaneous, which may be especially salient in the digital workplace, where employees may find themselves less likely to be able to "experience the positive feelings" while working in a context that increasingly involves social isolation, digital fatigue, and dehumanising platforms. The idea of "emotional deviance" (felt emotions that are not normatively appropriate) is relevant to the digital context, too, where the relative lack of supervision in remote work might generate ambiguous emotional display rules.

2.2 Review of Past Studies on Emotional Labour Outcomes

Empirical research on effects of emotional labour is large and generally agrees that negative effects are found when the emotional labour demands are high, and the resources of the organisation are limited. Brotheridge and Lee (2002) carried out a ground breaking study of 281 service workers and their relationship to the two dimensions of Maslach's (1982) burnout syndrome, emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation with surface acting showing a positive association to both forms of burnout and deep acting showing a positive association to personal accomplishment. Their results indicated the presence of a differential effects model of emotional labour, indicating that the way of emotional regulation is as important as the demands of emotional labour.

This research was continued by Grandey (2003) who looked at the moderating effects of autonomy and social support. Her analysis revealed that the adverse effects of surface acting on emotional exhaustion were significantly mitigated when employees had greater emotional performance control and when they felt their supervisors and coworkers supported them. The implications for organisational design and HR practice are significant as the result implies that emotional labour burnout is mitigated by management support and role autonomy. Meta-analysis of 95 independent samples and more than 8,000 subjects by Hülshager and Schewe (2011) confirmed the quantitative evidence on the results of emotional labour.

They discovered that there was a significant negative correlation between surface acting and job satisfaction ($r = -.31$) and well-being ($r = -.31$) and a significant positive correlation between emotional exhaustion and surface acting ($r = .43$). Deep acting was significantly

positively correlated with job performance ($r = .26$) and had a small positive correlation with job satisfaction ($r = .13$).

These are sizable effect sizes by the standards of organisational psychology and highlight the importance of emotional labour to the individual worker and the organisation. Wharton (2009) emphasized the gender aspects of emotional labour, and endorsed Hochschild's first observation that women are over-represented in jobs that require high levels of emotional labour and are targeted to have to adhere to more demanding emotional display rules than men. The gender gap in emotional labour demands has been associated with gender differences in burnout, emotional exhaustion and work-family conflict.

The earlier studies have been followed up by more recent work focused specifically on the digital context of emotional labour. In a study of "Zoom fatigue" (Shockley et al., 2021), the authors empirically examined what factors contribute to increased emotional labour demands from video-mediated communication as compared with the in-person equivalent and identified these factors as reduced mobility, close-up eye contact, mirror anxiety (when the person on the screen does not match the actual person), and limited nonverbal communication. Their research, which surveyed 10,591 workers from 15 different countries, revealed that women and those who work in customer-facing roles had the highest rate of Zoom fatigue, compared to other groups. Vough and Caza (2017) proposed a theory of identity work for remote and virtual work settings, which suggests that the lack of face-to-face co-location poses special problems for performing emotional labour. Emotional identity management is more intentional and strenuous by remote workers because of the lack of the physical environment, like dress codes, layout, and colleagues.

Table 2.1: Summary of Key Empirical Studies on Emotional Labour

Author(s) & Year	Study Focus	Key Finding	Sample / Context
Hochschild (1983)	Sociological foundation of emotional labour	Identified surface and deep acting; emotional labour as commercialised feeling	Airline attendants, bill collectors
Brotheridge & Lee (2002)	Burnout consequences of EL strategies	Surface acting → exhaustion; Deep acting → accomplishment	281 service workers
Grandey (2003)	Autonomy & support as moderators of EL	Support buffers EL-burnout relationship	Service sector employees

Author(s) & Year	Study Focus	Key Finding	Sample / Context
Hülshager & Schewe (2011)	Meta-analysis of EL outcomes	Surface acting negatively correlated with job satisfaction & well-being	95 studies, N > 8,000
Shockley et al. (2021)	Video conferencing fatigue and EL	Zoom fatigue elevates EL demands; women disproportionately affected	10,591 workers, 15 countries
Rosenblat & Stark (2016)	Algorithmic management in gig economy	Rating systems enforce performative EL in gig workers	Uber drivers
Bailenson (2021)	Nonverbal overload in video communication	Mirror anxiety & reduced mobility increase cognitive-emotional burden	Virtual workers
Hobfoll (1989)	Conservation of Resources theory	Resource depletion drives burnout; chronic EL drains emotional resources	Theoretical framework

Source: Compiled by the researcher from reviewed literature.

2.3 Comparison of Traditional vs. Digital Emotional Labour

The difference between traditional emotional labour and digital emotional labour is not just about medium or channel - it is a shift in the social, temporal and organizational context in which emotional labour is practised. Emotional labour is socially and culturally negotiated, has relatively clear display rules, is supported by the richness of the face-to-face communication, is moderated by the physical co-presence of supervisors and colleagues and is bounded by clearly delineated work/non-work spaces and times in traditional, physically co-located work environment. The social rituals of the physical office, the greetings, the coffee break, the informal conversation etc. are all micro-level processes of emotional control that share the emotional burden in the social fabric of the organisation. It is important to note that emotional labour is a structural change of the employment relationship between paid work and personal time that has no clear parallel in the pre-digital employment relationship and this aspect of digital work should be given special analytical attention. At the end of the working day in the traditional office setting, the end of the day was a fairly well-defined and socially accepted boundary after which the emotional labour demands were gone. The journey home—although it had its other drawbacks—served as a sort of buffer between the worker's emotional self and his personal emotional self, providing time to psychologically decompress and replenish emotional resources drained during the working day. In digital

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environments, where there is no such buffer, and the permeability of the home-work boundary, the work's emotional labour demands can penetrate the personal/family time at any time. This temporal expansion has been studied in a variety of contexts of recovery from work and found to be a strong predictor of emotional exhaustion, sleep disturbance and reduced engagement on the next day. All these regulatory mechanisms are disrupted by digital work environments. Digital channels are less communicative, there's no touch, smell and most of the non-verbal cues, so the emotional performance needs to be more intentional, more effortful, and more overtly controlled. Emotional labour is not confined to the hours of the workday, as it is always on in the digital culture. Physical isolation of remote work eliminates the co-worker's "social support" in the background. Moreover, in platform economies, emotional management is algorithmic, and this is a novel kind of emotional surveillance which does not exist in any other traditional workplaces.

Table 2.2 presents a systematic comparison of emotional labour characteristics across traditional and digital work environments.

Table 2.2: Comparison of Emotional Labour in Traditional vs. Digital Work Environments

Dimension	Traditional Work Environment	Digital Work Environment
Communicative Richness	High, full non-verbal cues, physical presence	Low to moderate, limited to verbal, facial, and text cues
Temporal Boundaries	Clear, work and non-work times separated	Blurred, always-on culture, digital availability expectations
Supervisory Oversight	Direct, face-to-face, empathic	Mediated, indirect, algorithm-assisted
Social Support	Ambient, co-worker proximity provides passive support	Active effort required, no casual interactions
Display Rule Clarity	Socially negotiated, context-rich	Often ambiguous, reduced contextual cues
Emotional Surveillance	Managerial observation, performance reviews	Algorithmic ratings, digital monitoring tools
Self-Monitoring Demands	Moderate	Elevated, mirror anxiety, video self-view
Work-Life Boundary	Relatively clear	Highly permeable, often invisible
Burnout Risk	Moderate with adequate support	Elevated, particularly for surface acting workers

Source: Compiled by the researcher from reviewed literature.

2.4 Research Gaps Identified in the Literature

A set of research gaps were identified in the literature reviewed, despite the increasing amount of research on emotional labour and digital work. First, most empirical studies of emotional labour in digital contexts are of a quantitative nature, using self-report survey-type measures, with few using qualitative or mixed-methods designs that can capture the lived experiential aspects of digital emotional labour. Emotional management in digital environments is not fully theorized, as workers' subjective experiences of emotional management in digital environments are not fully captured. Second, the literature has not sufficiently tackled the dynamics of emotions that stem from digital emotional labour over time – in other words, what accumulates in the long haul of emotional labouring in digital environments, and what individual and organisational factors moderate the trajectory of burnout or resilience over time. Third, the nexus between emotional labour and digital technologies in general and artificial intelligence, chatbots, and automated customer service specifically has gained little academic focus to date. With the advent of AI to support or replace human emotional labor in customer service, issues emerge regarding the emotional labor performed by human-AI teams and the implications of algorithmic emotional control.

Another intersectional area of emotional labour that is missing is in the context of digital work. The concept of 'intersectionality' was formulated by Crenshaw (1989) to explain the cumulative impact of having multiple social identities and has been used more and more to explain workplace inequality. An intersectional lens applied to emotional labour in digital contexts highlights that the demands and impacts of digital emotional work are not equal, but are conditioned by the interplay of gender, race, caste, class, disability and age. Emotional labour requirements may be exacerbated across an intersection of workers who have other marginalised experiences, such as the added burden of dealing with the emotional aspects of discrimination and micro-aggression in digital workplaces. This aspect of digital emotional labour is not well documented in the mainstream organisational psychology literature, thus it is a new area for future research. Fourth, although the gendered nature of emotional labour is well established in traditional workplaces, how gender inequities are reproduced, mitigated, or changed in digital workplaces needs to be more systematically explored. To conclude, the literature shows that there is a significant lack of prescriptive research on HR that not only documents the effects of emotional labour in digital environments, but also is

able to thoroughly analyse the success or failure of specific organisational measures in reducing this effect.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study is of a qualitative secondary research design where the existing published literature pertaining to the phenomenon under study, emotional labour in digital work environment is collected systematically, critically appraised and interpreted in the synthesis of the literature. This method is widely used in HRM, organisational psychology and management research and is well suited for synthesizing and critically analyzing a collection of knowledge, establishing patterns and trends in the data, and creating analytical frameworks and practical advice based on the accumulated scholarship. The research methodology followed in this study is analytical, which consists of a systematic literature review (SLR) with a thematic analysis approach. The SLR component offers a clear, reproducible and in-depth method for the selection and evaluation of relevant literature and the thematic analysis component offers a method for exploring and structuring the results of the reviewed literature into meaningful analytical categories. The following are reasons for choosing secondary data-based design:

- (i) the research objective is more about synthesis and critical evaluation of existing knowledge than collecting primary data;
- (ii) the literature on emotional labour and digital work is rich and extensive enough to support meaningful systematic review; and
- (iii) the cross-contextual and cross-cultural nature of the research question is better met by synthesizing existing studies in this field rather than by one single primary research study.

3.2 Sources of Data

The data for this study was gathered from the following kinds of sources:

- Peer-reviewed academic journals that are indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, including journals like the Journal of Applied Psychology, Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, Journal of Organizational Behavior, Work, Employment and Society, and the Human Resource Management Review.
- Books and book chapters of some well-known scholars on emotional labour, organizational psychology and digital work, such as Hochschild (1983), Grandey,

7 Diefendorff, and Rupp (2013), and Weil (2014). International organisations' reports and working papers such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), World Health Organization (WHO), Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Economic Forum (WEF).

- Research reports and surveys by management consultancies or research institutes such as McKinsey Global Institute, Deloitte, Gallup and PwC. Government Reports and Policy documents from National labour Ministry and regulatory agency.

73 **3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

To ensure the rigour and relevance of the literature reviewed, the following inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied.

Table 3.1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Literature Selection

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Time Period	2010–2024 (with seminal works from earlier periods included)	Studies published before 2010 (unless foundational/seminal)
Language	English language publications	Non-English publications
Relevance	Studies directly addressing emotional labour, digital work, burnout, or related constructs	Studies with no direct relevance to emotional labour or digital work
Source Type	Peer-reviewed journals, academic books, reports from recognised organisations	Blogs, opinion pieces, non-peer-reviewed magazines
Methodology	Quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, and theoretical papers	Purely descriptive or anecdotal accounts without scholarly rigour

Source: Compiled by the researcher.

68 **3.4 Search Strategy**

The literature search was carried out in the following databases and platforms: Google Scholar, Scopus, JSTOR, EBSCO Business Source Complete, and Research Gate. The following keywords and combinations of keywords were searched: “Emotional labour” or “emotional labor” AND “digital work” or “remote work” or “virtual teams” Were the words to be combined by both ORs, the results would be wider.

If the words were to be joined by both ORs, the results would be broader. Gig economy AND emotional labour OR worker well-being Emotional demands, "fatigue of video conference" or "fatigue of Zoom".

Search results for "Digital transformation" AND "employee well-being" OR "HR management": • Algorithmic management AND emotional labour OR gig workers There were some 120 sources identified in the search process. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria and eliminating duplicate sources, around 70 primary sources, academic articles, books and reports were selected for detailed analysis and review.

3.5 Analytical Approach

Knowledge about emotional labour in digital workplaces is epistemologically oriented toward a broad interpretive perspective that assumes that it is socially constructed, contextual, and continuously revised as new empirical and theoretical understandings emerge. This orientation does not exclude the use of quantitative evidence, which is heavily discussed in the literature reviewed, but does suggest that quantitative evidence needs to be understood in its theoretical and contextual dimensions, and not simply as a clear reflection of objective social reality.

The interpretive approach used in this research is also congruent with the methodological and grounded traditions of organizational behaviour, and HR management studies, where phenomena of interest to these disciplines, such as emotional state, organizational culture and human relationships are long believed to be difficult to capture using solely quantitative methods. In this study, the used analytical approach is thematic analysis that was explained by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Thematic analysis is an analysis and interpretation of patterns of meaning (themes) within a dataset. Thematic analysis is a related method used in the context of a systematic literature review, which entails reading the literature of interest and coding related segments of the literature into constructs of interest (such as surface acting, deep acting, emotional exhaustion, burnout, digital fatigue) and grouping those codes into meaningful and coherent categories that reflect the structure of the findings. The thematic categories identified from the analysis are:

- (i) expressions of emotional labour in digital work situations;
- (ii) consequences of emotional labour on the individual employee;

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- (iii) organisational and HR aspects of the management of emotional labour in the digital context; and
- (iv) new issues and prospects for future research.

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS, DISCUSSION AND HR IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Emotional Labour in Remote Work and Work-From-Home Settings

With the mass shift to remote work that has followed the COVID19 shut-down, there has been a natural experiment of a magnitude that has never been before in organisational expressions of emotional labor. Before the pandemic, remote work was confined to a few, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) estimated that 24% of American workers worked remotely in some capacity before COVID-19.

As of April 2020, Gallup survey data indicated that the same percentage of Americans (62%) said they had a favorable view of the overall economy compared to their peers in many European economies. This shift to working remotely – which occurred quickly and involuntarily uncovered and magnified the emotional demands of certain occupations, particularly those which are technically centered and are mediated through digital means. Studies before and after the pandemic always showed a group of emotional labour difficulties within the remote working conditions.

The first one is the home-work boundary issue: Joint work and family location in the home gives rise to the "border crossing" challenge the constant and intentional negotiation of emotion between work and family role identities as described by Clark (2000).

The emotional effect of being away from the workplace requires emotional labour of maintaining a professional attitude while in the workplace, as well as the emotional labour of domestic life, childcare, household management, and caring for others that encroach upon the professional sphere.

In a study of remote working in the UK, Chung and van der Horst (2020) found that remote working increased flexibility, but also caused an increased burden of emotional labour for women, compared to men, due to the co-location of professional and domestic roles. In their study, they confirmed that the positive aspects of the remote flexibility of work are not equally shared by everyone: “Emotional labour—the capacity to manage both work

performance needs and domestic tasks is more heavily borne by women.” Second, digital working puts a new strain on the concept of ‘emotional labour’ as it defines ‘digital presenteeism’ – the pressure to appear visibly active and engaged while working remotely during ‘digital working hours’.

The study by Wang et al. (2021) found that there was a high level of anxiety with being perceived as less productive or enthusiastic in the absence of physically being in the workplace, which motivated them to engage in performative online behaviours, including being constantly available for text messages and keeping cameras turned on during virtual meetings, a type of surface acting that stems from surveillance anxiety and not from actual engagement. Third, remote working means that people become socially isolated and lose the emotional boost they would receive from their interactions with others. Loneliness is more than just a disadvantage of an emotional nature, it was found to be one of the biggest occupational stressors, as 65% of remote workers reported feeling less connected to their colleagues and loneliness was the most frequently cited disadvantage of working remotely, according to the Harvard Business Review report on the loneliness epidemic in remote work, 2021.

For many, physical co-presence offers a social support that is missing in remote working, validation of emotions, informal empathy, shared laugh, etc., works as an ambient shield to emotional exhaustion in the lack of physical presence.

Table 4.1: Key Emotional Labour Challenges in Remote Work Settings

Challenge	Description	Associated Outcome	Supporting Source
Home-work boundary permeability	Physical co-location of professional and domestic roles creates continuous boundary management demands	Work-life conflict, role exhaustion	Clark (2000); Chung & van der Horst (2020)
Digital presenteeism	Pressure to appear visibly active online; performative digital behaviour	Surface acting, anxiety, exhaustion	Wang et al. (2021)
Social isolation and loneliness	Absence of ambient social support typical of physical co-location	Emotional resource depletion, loneliness	HBR (2021); Gallup (2020)

Challenge	Description	Associated Outcome	Supporting Source
Always-on culture	Expectation of digital availability beyond formal working hours	Work-life conflict, burnout	Mazmanian et al. (2013)
Compulsive connectivity	Psychological inability to disconnect from work digital channels	Emotional exhaustion, recovery failure	Derks et al. (2015)

Source: Compiled by the researcher from reviewed literature.

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Longitudinal data gathered through and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic has shed much light on the ways in which COVID-19 has shaped emotional labour demands over time in the context of working remotely. In a study published in the Journal of Occupational Health Psychology in 2022, researchers tracked a group of remote workers over 18 months from the beginning of the pandemic, and they observed that emotional exhaustion took an "S" shape, with a significant rise in the first 6 months of remote work, some leveling off while workers settled into new routines and the development of informal coping strategies, and a second increase as the length of time spent working remotely began to diminish the adaptive resources that helped buffer the initial emotional demands. This "adaptive plateau and then acceleration in depletion" is important for HR practice, as the researchers explained: It is important to note that cross-sectional studies do not fully represent the emotional risks of prolonged remote work, which is related to a plateau followed by a depletion acceleration, and that monitoring and supportive measures should not be concentrated at the onset of the work shift but rather maintained along the entire period

4.2 Emotional Labour in Virtual Teams

A particular configuration of emotional labour demands is encountered with virtual teams, which are groups of geographically distributed employees who use digital communication technologies to work together.

Several mechanisms have been found in the research of virtual team dynamics to increase the emotional workload of team member's interactions with the digital team media. Digital communication channels lack the social dimension, the physical nearness, the shared environment, and most non-verbal communicative cues, leading the way to interpersonal relations in virtual teams to be more challenging, deliberate and conscious processes. Walther (1995) suggested that in computer-mediated communication people adjust their

communicative behaviour to the limited bandwidth of computer-mediated channels but this would be an effort, and, in his view, would not capture the emotional intensity of face-to-face communication.

102 Building and maintaining trust within a virtual team context is more challenging than in a face-to-face environment, as it is a key element for successful work collaboration and psychological safety. Empirical research on global virtual collaboration consistently confirms that the successful development of interpersonal trust depends largely on the absence of the communication interactions that can occur in a face-to-face team, and this is the case with virtual teams as well. Unlike co-located teams, deliberate, challenging emotional signalling is needed for virtual team members to sustain the team's relational fabric, with a conspicuous emotional labour overhead related to text-based interactions and check-ins.

71 Inter-personal trust issues are far from trivial matters they can have a measurable impact on the performance of virtual teams and on the well-being of individual team members. Breuer, Hüffmeier, and Hertel (2016) conducted a meta-analysis of 52 studies involving more than 6000 virtual team members that trusted in virtual teams was positively correlated with team performance ($r = .33$) and negatively correlated with conflict ($r = -.28$). The meta-analysis also disclosed that, as teams spread out geographically and their communication frequency declined, so do the conditions for the development of trust, and thereby of emotional security in doing distributed digital work, systematically. These insights for HR professionals highlight the need for investing in team-building exercises and communication habits that directly focus on the communication and trust-development void that is intrinsic to virtual team scenarios.

Another area of increased emotional labour in virtual teams is dealing with conflict. In physical team situations, interpersonal conflicts can be resolved in a spontaneous and real time manner where concerns can be expressed on-the-spot and in an emotionally honest way. Whereas in a virtual environment, emotional labour can be increased due to the need to employ conversation to negotiate and de-escalate, where the risk of misunderstandings is greater, through email and chatting, or video calls.

30 The role of emotional labour in cross-cultural context in multinational virtual teams and the implications for the India's integrated IT and services sector in its international operations is of a special importance. Team members, from different national and cultural backgrounds,

23 may have different emotional display rules for providing appropriate professional communication that then result in a type of intercultural emotional labour where employees must not only regulate their own emotions but also understand and react to the emotions of others who are outside their own cultural background. Hall's (1976) research on high-context versus low-context communication cultures implies that digital communications whether through text or video may exacerbate intercultural emotional misunderstandings because cues to emotional nuances in communication tend to be omitted from the channel.

Based on these observations, Bailenson (2021) found four ways that video-mediated communication escalates the emotional labour requirements within a virtual team:

- 1) the communication that is required is much more intense in video-mediated communication compared with in-person environments, which creates an unnatural, evaluative social context;
- 2) in VMC, people self-monitor and are hyperaware of how they appear in a mirror-like self-view, whereas in face-to-face chemistry, this is not such a significant factor;
- 3) movement is limited when compared to in-person meetings because of the lack of natural means to regulate emotional arousal through movement, meaning that there is greater cognitive load in VMC to sequence signals;
- 4) the increased cognitive load when communicating via VMC is due to having to interpret and communicate explicitly those signals that are communicated in the natural way in physical settings.

75 4.3 Emotional Labour in the Gig Economy

In the Gig Economy, a cornerstone is emotional labour.

33 Emotional Labour in the Gig Economy is a pillar. Perhaps the most structurally unique place to exemplify digital emotional labour is within the gig economy, or a new set of work arrangements that are short-term, flexible and platform-mediated. Gig workers are those who use platforms like Uber and Lyft to drive or ride for customers, Shareable and Door Dash for food delivery, Upwork and Fiverr to accept freelance assignments and TaskRabbit and Amazon Home Services to perform home service jobs.

33 In this pluralistic field of workers, there is a shared structural characteristic:

algorithms are used to judge the emotional performance of workers using customers' rating systems. In a seminal study (2016), Rosenblat and Stark have described Uber's customer rating system as one of “emotional labour enforcement”, and specifically examined how the system operates as a gaze of fear that enables the Ugba drivers to perform their work.

In a classic study (2016), Rosenblat and Stark have found the various ways in which Uber's customer rating system becomes a way of enforcing emotional labour for the Ugba drivers, as a product of an algorithmic gaze of fear. Those with a rating lower than a certain threshold are de-activated from the platform, effectively losing their job and putting them at continual risk of being re-activated with an even lower rating in order to maintain their “livelihood.” Perhaps most importantly, no human supervisor would be able to intervene in the above scenario with contextual judgment and empathy, but with an algorithmic system that would process the customer ratings solely in a formula without considering context, difficult passengers, traffic, etc that would make the emotional performance different from ideal, instead punishing the actor.

This is definitely an emotionally coercive type of labour demand because of the power imbalance between the platform and the individual gig worker, who relies on the platform for his/her livelihood. In a study with Gig workers in six countries, Wood et al. (2019) reported that experience of algorithmic rating systems was extremely stressful and that Gig workers experience high levels of emotional self-monitoring and performative behaviours in order to keep their ratings high. Gig workers' emotional load is exacerbated by the absence of employment protections and social safety nets. Most gig workers do not receive an employer's EAP, occupational health programmes or union-negotiated working conditions, unlike traditional workers. The lack of regulation in gig work, highlighted by the De Stefano (2016) Report to the ILO, was shown to be one of the major factors contributing to workers being vulnerable, including when it comes to mental health and emotional well-being.

Table 4.2: Emotional Labour Intensity by Digital Work Context

Work Context	Primary EL Demands	Predominant EL Strategy	Burnout Risk Level	Organisational Support Availability
Traditional Office	Face-to-face service interactions, team relations	Mixed (surface and deep acting)	Moderate	High (EAPs, HR, supervision)

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Work Context	Primary EL Demands	Predominant EL Strategy	Burnout Risk Level	Organisational Support Availability
Remote Work (WFH)	Video communication, digital presenteeism, boundary management	Surface acting (surveillance-driven)	High	Variable
Virtual Teams	Trust-building, conflict management, multicultural communication	Deep acting (relational maintenance)	Moderate-High	Moderate
Gig Economy Platforms	Customer-facing interactions, algorithmic rating management	Surface acting (coercively enforced)	Very High	Very Low
Online Customer Service	Chat-based emotional regulation, complaint handling, scripted empathy	Surface acting (script-constrained)	High	Moderate

Source: Compiled and synthesised by the researcher from reviewed literature.

4.4 Emotional Labour in Customer-Facing Digital Roles

A group of employees undertake emotional labor primarily through electronic means of communication (such as chat, text, social media, online customer service) are emotionally drained from their work.

Online customer service representatives, chat support agents, social media managers, content moderators are types of workers who do emotional labor primarily via digital platforms, such as electronic text or video. These employees experience a unique emotional burden, blending digital communication challenges and the emotional demands of customer service.

Chat Customer Service is one of the most noteworthy situations. Whilst telephone-based customer service can pick up on some non-verbal emotional information via the agent's voice, text-based chats are derivative, and can involve the agent dealing with emotions such as customer frustration, anger and distress—without the use of voice. Pugh (2001) has found that the emotional contagion of customer negativity leads to exposure for service workers, resulting in an automatic sharing of customer emotional states which reduces service workers' emotional resources and heightens their likelihood of engaging in surface acting.

Emotional labour is an extreme form of labour in the context of digital customer-facing jobs: content moderation. Social media platforms employ content moderators to filter for user-

generated content that breaches community guidelines, and these workers are often subjected to graphic, disturbing and emotionally upsetting material.

53 In a 2020 report, the Tech Transparency Project described the Facebook content moderator as suffering from "widespread human distress," including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety and depression. Emotional management requirements imposed by content moderation, its capacity to require keeping one's cool in the context of continuous contact with trauma, represented a "radical version of emotional labour" with greater occupational health concerns, the report found.

Workers in role-intensive and content moderation roles are affected by mental health issues to a degree severe enough to lead to regulatory action in a number of jurisdictions. In 2023, a working group of the European Parliament published a report calling for two measures. The first is psychological risk assessment for those who work as platform workers in content moderation (CM) roles. This would involve the creation of a standardized model to guarantee that the assessment method used is consistent, replicable, and meets the same conditions globally, while also being developed in collaboration with the relevant workers on each platform.

The second is that employers must limit the amount of time a content moderation worker can spend viewing distressing content, by setting it at a maximum of 30 minutes daily, 3 hours each week, and 120 hours per month. The third is for employers to provide psychological support services to content moderation workers who are leaving their job.

26 Even in India, where a significant portion of the work for content moderation is done by workers at outsourcing companies for big social media platforms, such measures do not exist despite the psychological impact of content moderators being well documented by researchers at institutions such as the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Emotional labour in social media management positions is one that is a developing aspect of concern, and has been increasingly discussed in the literature that has emerged since the onset of the pandemic.

81 Organisations that have hired social media or community managers to handle their online reputation must consistently respond in a positive, brand-sound and empathetic way, across a variety of digital platforms, while dealing with large amounts of negative, hostile and abusive user-generated content. As opposed to telephone-based customer service workers who face difficult interactions one-by-one, social media managers may be dealing with multiple simultaneous difficult interactions, which existing frameworks of study partially

59 capture, but in social media are more intense. The study conducted in the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication in 2022 showed that the social media manager group also felt emotionally exhausted at significantly higher rates than the other customer service group, which included similar people working non-digital ways, and that the social media visibility of their emotional performances, which are recorded and searchable online, introduced an additional dimension of reputation management to the emotionally monitored requirements of their job.

27 27 The scripted and surveilled environments of customer-facing digital positions limits workers' ability to express their emotions, as well. In many call centre and chat support situations employees are given scripts or communications templates which dictate the emotional tone and content of their answer. In service work this conflict exists between the need for emotional and personalized customer relations and the bureaucratization of emotions through scripts which can be more easily enforced and observed with digital quality assurance systems, a conflict that Korczynski (2003) labeled the "customer-oriented bureaucracy". It also had a significant impact on employee wellbeing and mental health. It also had a significant impact on employee wellbeing and mental health.

93 107 4.5 Impact on Employee Well-being and Mental Health

The overall finding from the literature reviewed is clear: surface acting, specifically, is strongly and consistently correlated with poor employee well-being and mental health, and occurs when employees lack a supportive organisational culture. Emotional labour harms well-being in many ways which are reinforcing each other.

Elisabeth H. Klosko and Steven M. Simonsen identified incongruity between the emotional states that are felt and those shown, which is a defining feature of surface acting, as a main contributor to psychological strain. The mental and emotional cost of maintaining a professional persona with emotion for long periods of time results in a "psychological tension" over time that, in turn, leads to a loss of authentic selfhood. Zapf (2002) described a phenomenon named "self-alienation," which is a gradual loss of the ability to recognize and/or trust the reality of personal emotions.

61 When emotional labour requirements persist, the most severe form of emotional burning out is called the WHO (2019) burnout syndrome, which comprises emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation (cynicism), and diminished personal accomplishment. These results are consistent with the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), the most widely used scale in

74 organisational research, which uniformly finds that emotional exhaustion is the central component of burnout; and with the emotional labour literature, which uniformly finds that surface acting is among the key predictors of emotional exhaustion, empirically, across numerous independent studies and supported by large-scale meta-analysis. The added isolation, virtual communication and gig work responsibilities of digital working environments can add to the risk of burnout. According to the findings of the Global Millennial Survey 2021 by Deloitte, 77% of the respondents said that they had faced burnout in their current roles, while those who work remotely reported 10 - 15 percentage points more than those who work on-site when it comes to burnout. One in four workers around the world reported symptoms of burnout, and one in three workers in predominantly digital work environments reported burnout symptoms, according to a 2022 McKinsey Health Institute report on employee mental health.

65 **Table 4.3: Prevalence and Impact of Burnout in Digital Work Contexts (2020-2024)**

Indicator	Finding	Source
Global burnout prevalence (digital workers)	33% reported burnout symptoms	McKinsey Health Institute (2022)
Remote worker burnout premium	10-15% higher burnout rates vs. on-site workers	Deloitte (2021)
Zoom fatigue prevalence	13.8% reported 'very' or 'extremely' fatigued; women 13.8% vs. men 5.5%	Shockley et al. (2021)
Gig worker mental health	72% reported anxiety from algorithmic rating pressure	Wood et al. (2019)
Employee disengagement (global)	Only 23% of employees globally reported being engaged at work	Gallup (2023)
Content moderator PTSD rate	Approximately 20% of moderators showed PTSD symptoms	Tech Transparency Project (2020)

Source: Compiled by the researcher from reviewed literature.

2 4.6 Job Satisfaction and Organisational Commitment

Over the years, a vast amount of research has been conducted to examine the relationship between emotional labour and job satisfaction. The meta-analytic results of Hülshager and Schewe (2011) indicated that surface acting has a medium to large negative correlation with job satisfaction, $r = -.31$, and deep acting a small positive correlation, $r = .13$. This is complicated by the unique nature of digital emotional labour in a digital working

environment. There are many factors that increase or decrease job satisfaction in a remote workforce.

95 There were contrasting results from research during this unprecedented time in Pandemic-related periods, when a large number of people were working from home. In one way, others studies have shown that the remote workers reported a higher satisfaction with the different elements of their work concerning their autonomy, flexibility and elimination of commuting from work, as the bigger scale natural experiments which followed a remote work have indicated. Conversely, other workers stated they were less satisfied with parts of their work involving social interaction, teamwork and professional growth.

Compared to other digital job categories, emotional labour demands are more negatively correlated with job satisfaction for those who are customer-facing. Previous research in call centre (Dannefer, 2005; Grandey et al., 2005) and chat support (Bird and Bennett, 2008) settings has confirmed emotional exhaustion as a mediator between the emotional labour demands and job dissatisfaction in both samples. Recent studies in online service settings have also supported the process-avoidance model that links emotional labour demands to emotional exhaustion, with emotional exhaustion reaching its highest level when service demands are high and process avoidance is low (Bennett et al., 2011; Bird and Bennett, 2013; Bird and Bennett, 2008). They are clearly stipulated and closely controlled emotional demands that may have a specific role and limited opportunity for authentic expression or for the professional exercise of discretion, which seems to be a major contributor to low levels of job satisfaction.

114 Emotional labour demands have a negative impact on organisational commitment, which is perceived by employees as a psychological bond to their employing organisation. The relationship between perceived organisational support and the influence of emotional exhaustion on organisational commitment was also significantly moderated by the study of Cropanzano, Rupp and Byrne (2003), who found that a positive perception of the organisations recognition and value of a employees emotional contribution had a significant negative effect on the relationship between emotional exhaustion and organisational commitment. The importance of supervisory and organisational support as a buffer in the management of emotional labour is highlighted.

4.7 Work-Life Balance and Digital Fatigue

91 One of the greatest HR difficulties in a digital context and remote working is the lack of boundaries between work and leisure. The idea of work-life balance is based on the notion that there are identifiable boundaries between the work and non-work contexts that allow for the potential maintenance of balance. In digital working places these boundaries, time, space and mind are systematically broken down.

103 The most well documented temporal boundary erosion is the one observed. Derks et al. (2015) reported that there was a strong association between smartphone use for work-related communication outside of formal working hours and work-home interference and emotional exhaustion, as well as when employees felt they could not psychologically distance themselves from work during non-work hours. With the emergence of digital platforms, email, Slack, Teams, etc., the pressure of being available occurs outside of work time and the hours that we spend at work are now extended to the pressure of emotional labour.

19 In the digital world of work after the pandemic, digital fatigue has become a distinct and compounding phenomenon of occupational fatigue. The nonverbal overload of VMC has four mechanisms of digital fatigue outlined by Bailenson (2021): eye contact overload, self-evaluation anxiety from the self-view, reduced mobility, and cognitive overload from explicit signalling. When conducted in a study with Stanford University's Virtual Human Interaction Lab, his experimental work revealed that the addition of interventions (for example, hiding the self-view screen and using audio-only calls) significantly alleviated Zoom fatigue, showing that specific design attributes of digital communication technologies are mitigable contributors to emotional labour burden.

70 In the post-pandemic era, the right-to-disconnect principle has been moved forward in the legislative process in a number of countries. The right to disconnect law was first introduced in France in 2017 and set rules for businesses with more than fifty workers to negotiate an agreement around the time when workers will be required to send or respond to digital communication. In 2021 Portugal enacted legislation which bans employers reaching out to employees outside working hours with fines for breaches. Similar laws have been adopted in Ireland, Belgium and Australia. There is no corresponding legislation in India as of 2024, although the government has expressed its interest in addressing the issue of "always on work" through regulation (as part of its employee well-being initiatives) in this area, a number of large IT companies have begun to institute internal 'right to disconnect' policies. Since

these policies are enacted voluntarily and not subject to legal enforcement, their likely success is not certain and further empirical research is needed in this regard.

According to ILO's (2021) Working from Home report, work-life balance is the aspect most affected by the shift to remote work, with 55 percent of remote workers feeling 'difficulty to maintain boundaries between work life and personal life'. The report called for the governments and employers to implement policies and regulations around "right to disconnect" – a way for employees to not be available during off hours, as part of a structural solution for the time displacement of digital work.

4.8 Organisational and HR Challenges in Managing Digital Emotional Labour

Emotional labour in digital workplaces raises new and challenging issues for HRM, since the existing tools and concepts designed for physically co-located workplaces are not applicable here. The first is the invisibility problem, in physical work environments supervisors may see the emotional performance of employees – but imperfectly – and act when the employee's emotional strain becomes apparent. In digital environments, the physical unavailability of supervisors in the workplace reduces the visibility of the emotional labour by employees, especially regarding surface acting.

This is why it can be challenging for HR to recognize at-risk individuals within the team, to track the emotional workload, and to step in before burn out happens. Second, the measurement challenge: Current HR metrics and performance management systems are more focused on quantifiable measures – productivity levels, customer satisfaction and task completion, all of which are easy to track with digital measurement. The emotional aspects of digital work, the effort to regulate emotional displays, the psychological toll of emotional dissonance, the accrual of emotional exhaustion are harder to quantify and few organisations are equipped with the tools or practice to systematically monitor and regulate these elements. Third, the policy gap is that few organisations have specific policies related to emotional labour in digital work environments. Despite the many policies that have been introduced to encourage remote work arrangements, flexible scheduling and the provision of digital tools guidelines, few have formulated explicit policies that include norms on how to be available to others digitally and when, the provision of mandatory recovery times, protocols for emotional check-ins, or the extension of EAP services to remote employees. Fourth, the training gap although leadership development programmes are increasingly including leadership components of emotional intelligence and empathy training, few programmes

have been specifically designed to give leaders the skills to identify and manage emotional labour in digital teams.

Rather than that, however, a study by Chydzinski and Hitt (2021) shows that managers of remote employees underestimate the demands on their direct reports' emotional labour - a significant disparity in empathy that needs to be better addressed in traditional management training. Another organizational challenge is ensuring a psychologically safe culture in digital contexts. Edmondson defines psychological safety as the perception that people can express themselves openly, without fear of negative consequences.

Table 4.4: HR Challenges in Managing Emotional Labour in Digital Workplaces

Challenge	Nature of Problem	HR Implication
Invisibility of emotional strain	Supervisors cannot observe emotional performances or strain in remote workers	Need for proactive digital well-being monitoring and check-in protocols
Measurement gap	Existing metrics do not capture emotional labour demands or costs	Develop emotional labour assessment instruments adapted for digital work
Policy vacuum	Few organisations have digital emotional labour policies	Develop right-to-disconnect, emotional display norm, and EAP digital policies
Manager empathy gap	Leaders underestimate emotional demands of remote teams	Emotionally intelligent leadership training for virtual team managers
Gender inequality amplification	Digital work may amplify unequal distribution of emotional labour by gender	Gender-sensitive HR policies; equitable workload distribution monitoring
Gig worker exclusion	Gig workers lack access to organisational emotional support systems	Advocate for platform-based EAP and occupational health provisions for gig workers

Source: Compiled by the researcher.

16 Psychological safety, which refers to a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, is a key predictor of team learning, innovation and well-being. Evidence from research has always been that psychological safety is harder to create and maintain on virtual teams than in co-located teams, as the poor quality of digital communication makes it less likely that leaders will offer openness, demonstrate vulnerability, and respond with empathy to a disclosure of some kind that a team member has a problem or need.

The result is that, when emotional labour strain occurs, there is a greater risk for the digital worker to suppress their emotions to management or other workers, even more to continue the surface acting as coping mechanism, and higher chances of progressive emotional resource depletion that can ultimately result in burn out. To overcome this challenge, organisations must invest intentionally and regularly in creating and fostering a psychologically safe environment in digital settings, such as planned and purposeful check-in routines, leader vulnerability models, and norms that encourage emotional demands to be openly discussed.

4.9 Practical HR Recommendations

Based on review of the literature, the following evidence-based HR recommendations are proposed for organisations aiming to reduce the negative impacts of emotional labour when working with digital technology.

4.9.1 Develop a Digital Emotional Labour Policy

It's necessary to have clear HR policies setting out the emotional aspects of digital work. Organizations should have clear policies on the emotional dimension of digital work. These policies should involve the following: a right-to-disconnect policy; guidance on the use of video technology including option to attend meetings without video or camera and audio-only meetings; A protocol for emotional check-in during virtual team meetings; An outspoken recognition of emotional labour as a legitimate work need, capacity and right of employees that deserves recovery time and support

4.9.2 Invest in Emotionally Intelligent Virtual Leadership

It is important for organisations to invest in developing a leadership development program tailored to the context of digital and remote working, which will enable managers to better identify and counteract emotional labour strain. Such programmes should incorporate the concept of virtual empathy: interpreting and responding to team members' emotions via digital platforms, conflict management in virtual environments, facilitating psychological safety on the team and frequent one-on-one well-being checks. Edmondson (2018) showed the importance of psychological safety as an organisational asset to protect from the negative impacts of emotional labour, and also that PS in virtual teams demands deliberate and skilled leadership

4.9.3 Expand and Digitalise Employee Assistance Programmes

Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) should be available equally to remote and digital workers as it is to those who work on-site. This could include the online delivery of EAP services, providing counselling and mental health support and advice via online platforms and proactive outreach to remote employees who might not seek EAP services due to social isolation, stigma or lack of awareness of EAP services. If your organisation works with gig workers, you may want to consider bolstering your duty of care by supporting EAPs available at the platform level or joining the employer collective for a platform-wide fund that supports gig workers.

4.9.4 Promote Deep Acting over Surface Acting Through Job Design

Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) should be available equally to remote and digital workers as it is to those who work on-site. This could include the online delivery of EAP services, providing counselling and mental health support and advice via online platforms and proactive outreach to remote employees who might not seek EAP services due to social isolation, stigma or lack of awareness of EAP services. If your organisation works with gig workers, you may want to consider bolstering your duty of care by supporting EAPs available at the platform level or joining the employer collective for a platform-wide fund that supports gig workers.

4.9.5 Address Gendered Emotional Labour Through Equity-Oriented HR Practices

As there is clear evidence that women often face the burden of emotional labour in both traditional and digital work settings, HR professionals should take steps to proactively tackle emotional labour by employing gendered approaches to ensure equity. This encompasses: auditing and breaking down inequitable gendered divisions of emotional labour responsibilities, including office housework, emotional support roles and relationships with customers; designing jobs that share emotional labour more equitably; supporting working mothers' performance of both their professional and domestic roles in the event of their workplace being remote; and ensuring that performance appraisal systems do not systematically undervalue or under pay emotional labour contributions.

4.9.6 Leverage Technology to Reduce Unnecessary Emotional Labour

Contrary to this, however, technology, as a factor of the growing need for emotional labour in digital workspaces, may also be used to diminish the need for unnecessary emotional labour requirements. By setting clear guidelines on how to use video calls (e.g. allow camera off, allow hybrid video call with audio, allow focus time or meeting free days) organizations

can reduce Zoom fatigue. Organisations can use AI tools for sentiment analysis to identify signs of negative emotions in employee communications, allowing for timely intervention (with proper privacy safeguards and consent measures).

Tools for asynchronous digital communication can help decrease the pressure on employees to have to be connected at all times, engaging in emotional labor, which is the expected quality of work observed in synchronous communication. One particularly exciting area of HR innovation, in the area of the management of "digital emotional labour", is the notion of "emotional climate surveys", assessments which are anonymous and periodic, and measure how the emotional tone and psychological safety of digital workplaces.

Emotional climate surveys are different from traditional employee engagement surveys, which are mostly being used to capture the level of satisfaction overall with the work itself and organizational commitment. Emotional climate surveys are targeted to bring to the surface emotional labour occurring in digital teams that may involve patterns of surface acting, emotional exhaustion, and places where emotional support is lacking. Firms like Google, Microsoft and many forward-thinking IT companies in India have started adding emotional climate to their standard people analytics tools to identify high-risk teams and employees for burnout, assess the impact of wellbeing initiatives, and guide leadership development programmes. Creating a validated instrument to measure emotional climate in a digital working environment is one of the significant work-frontiers of the HR profession.

Organisations should also look at setting up formal emotional labour audit processes for their annual HR planning cycle. The emotional labour audit – systematic analysis of the emotional requirements of certain jobs, the efficiency of organisational resources at the service of these demands and the effects of these resources on employee psychological health and emotional well-being in roles with high demands. They can be carried out using a variety of survey instruments, job analysis reviews and focus group discussions and offer HR practitioners diagnostic information to help them identify emotional labour hotspots, prioritise support interventions and measure the effectiveness of support interventions over time. In 2021, the ILO released a working paper, titled ‘Occupational health in workplaces that are becoming more digital’, which calls for the introduction of emotional demand measurement as part of the regular occupational health and safety monitoring of workplaces, as the measures traditionally used to monitor physical risks are unable to adequately measure psychological risks in knowledge and service work.

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4.10 Limitations of the Study

There are certain limitations to this research that ought to be taken into account as it speaks to the results of the study. Second, the study is of a secondary nature and therefore subject to limitations of the secondary literature that was consulted, such as publication biases for studies reporting significant results, the majority of the empirical studies reviewed had a cross-sectional design, and the reviewed literature on digital emotional labour were limited to Western and developed country contexts. Second, digital work environments vary widely, whether in high-resourced organizations where professional knowledge workers are being used, or in precarious situation on extractive platforms.

Second, the diversity of their digital workplaces makes it difficult to generalize about the entire range of digital work. The results and recommendations discussed in this report are most relevant to employed people in formal organisational contexts who have access to HR infrastructure. Third, due to the ongoing development of the technological environment of working in a digital way, some of the findings, as well as some findings in particular related to specific platforms or technologies, may be partly outdated or superseded by technological advancements after the literature reviewed. There has been a significant development of the study of emotional labour since its original formulation in the early 1980s by Hochschild. Once a sociological study of flight attendants and bill collectors has expanded to a multi-disciplinary study, which includes organisational psychology, HR management, sociology of work, and digital labour studies. This field's central insight that workers' expressions are not just ancillary by-products of task performance but sources of economic value and psychological cost—has remained an explanatory principle across the 40 years of research and refinement of theory in this field. The present study has aimed to apply and extend this insight to the current state of digital work, where it has undergone a radical transformation since it began, driven by technological change, platform capitalism and the global upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This study has followed the systematic and critical review of second-hand material related to the impact of emotional labour on employees in digital work settings, focusing on remote working, virtual teams, gig economy platforms and role of employees in customer service in digital settings. The result of the investigation is a series of conclusions that support the main argument of this dissertation: the digitalisation of work has not reduced the emotional labour demands of workers, but has in fact deepened and altered these demands in many contexts, and one that current organizational and HR practices are not well suited to manage.

The theoretical underpinning of emotional labour as distinguished by Hochschild (1983) between surface acting and deep acting, especially the elaboration added on by Grandey's (2000) emotion regulation model, as well as the contextualization within Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of Resources theory and Bakker and Demerouti's (2007) Job Demands-Resources model are relevant and applicable to the digital work context, but need to be significantly expanded and adapted to capture the special structural characteristics of DL.

A convergent pattern of findings in the reviewed literature revealed four key features of emotional labour in digital environments in Chapter 4: increased demands, increased invisibility, decreased organizational support and increased negative impacts on employee well-being. In these highly monitored, scripted, and algorithmically-controlled types of digital working environments, the dominant coping approach, "surface acting," has been consistently linked to emotional exhaustion, burnout, job dissatisfaction and lower levels of psychological well-being. The digital factors of emotional labour are a qualitatively different list from those found in face-to-face work, they include: digital presenteeism, zoom fatigue, algorithmic rating pressure, home-work boundary permeability and social isolation, and these all call for specifically designed organisational and HR responses.

From the HR perspective, the most crucial thing that this research identified is the need for organisations to shift from an implicit and reactive approach to emotional labour, which recognises the emotional side of work only when witnessing explicit evidence of emotional labour-related dysfunctions (e.g., employee turnover, absenteeism, and burnout) to a proactive and explicit approach to emotional labour that identifies the emotional dimension of labour and acknowledges it as a legitimate and measurable aspect of digital work, develops organisational policies and resources for managing emotional labour, and develops

leadership capacities to recognise and respond to the strain of emotional labour in distributed digital teams.

In addition, the lessons that can be taken from this research in terms of management education must be noted. Talk about the emotional aspects of work has been negligent in management education programs in traditional business schools, like Delhi School of Management, and in the general curriculum offered in Indian and global management institutions, which tend to focus on rational, quantifiable and task-oriented views on organisational behaviour. This research invites the integration of the psychology of emotional labour, neuroscience of stress and burnout, ethics of emotional demand management, and emotionally supportive organisations into the mainstream of HR and organisational behaviour teaching and learning in management education more systematically.

Management students who miss out on a working understanding of emotional labour and its implications will lack the skills they need in order to lead and manage the emotional aspects of today's digital workplaces. The post-pandemic digital workplace is not a one-off scenario, but a real and growing aspect of global workplace organisation. The emotional aspects of digitally mediated labour will grow in importance for the health of workers, organisational functioning and the fairness of labour markets, as the world shifts towards more labour technology being shaped by artificial intelligence, automation and platform. The ideas generated within this dissertation are presented to advance the academic and practical debate on the emotional experience of the digital world of work and its negotiation by organisations, governments and workers. The results of this research can be applied to the policy level beyond the individual organisation to include rules and legislation concerning digital working. Current labour law arrangements in most jurisdictions were created to fit an environment of physically co-located, time-bound and employer-managed labour, but are poorly suited to the digital labour environment of platform-based, boundary-spanning, algorithmically-driven work.

As suggested by De Stefano and supported by the empirical literature analysed in this research, the regulatory void affecting gig work in particular, and which applies more to the so-called app economy, deprives a large and growing portion of the gig workforce from the same measure of protection, such as occupational health safeguards, collective bargaining, and institutional support systems, that reduce the emotional costs of work in traditional employment settings. To address this gap, this dissertation hopes to make a scholarly contribution, but regulatory frameworks will also need the active involvement of civil society

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organisations, platform companies, trade unions and policy-makers in their co-design to be sufficient for the emotional as well as the economic demands of the twenty-first century digital labor.

Future studies need to continue the work conducted here, with primary empirical studies of specific digital emotional labour contexts and with longer term studies of the emotional labour trajectories of remote and platform workers as well as with rigorous studies of the effectiveness of specific HR interventions in reducing the emotional costs of digital work.

21 One of the most pressing areas of need for digital emotional labour is the creation of validated measures that can capture the specific forms, demands, and outcomes of emotional management in digitally mediated environments.

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ANNEXURE

Annexure A: Summary of Key Theoretical Frameworks

Table A.1: Theoretical Frameworks Used in This Study

Framework	Author(s)	Core Propositions	Relevance to Study
Emotional Labour Theory	Hochschild (1983)	Surface acting, deep acting; commercialisation of feeling; emotional dissonance	Foundational framework for understanding emotional demands in digital work
Emotion Regulation Model	Grandey (2000)	Antecedent (deep acting) vs. response-focused (surface acting) strategies	Explains differential consequences of EL strategies in digital contexts
Conservation of Resources	Hobfoll (1989)	Resource depletion drives stress and burnout; chronic EL drains emotional resources	Explains burnout escalation in sustained digital EL contexts
Job Demands-Resources Model	Bakker & Demerouti (2007)	Job demands → burnout; job resources buffer demands	Framework for organisational interventions to mitigate digital EL consequences
Social Information Processing Theory	Walther (1995)	Individuals adapt to reduced bandwidth of CMC; adaptation is effortful	Explains heightened EL demands in virtual team communication

Source: Compiled by the researcher.

Annexure B: Acronyms and Abbreviations

Acronym	Full Form
EL	Emotional Labour
WFH	Work From Home
JD-R	Job Demands-Resources Model
COR	Conservation of Resources Theory
EAP	Employee Assistance Programme
ILO	International Labour Organization
WHO	World Health Organisation

Acronym	Full Form
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
MBI	Maslach Burnout Inventory
CMC	Computer-Mediated Communication
SLR	Systematic Literature Review
HR	Human Resources
HRM	Human Resource Management

Source: Compiled by the researcher.