



Emotional labor in the digital era among teachers: A systematic review

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Abstract

The purpose of this systematic review is to examine the unique dimensions, strategies, and challenges associated with emotional labor in online teaching, emphasizing the role of digital communication in conveying emotions and maintaining professionalism using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. An extensive search was performed across electronic databases, including Web of Science, Scopus, Taylor & Francis, ScienceDirect, ResearchGate, and Google Scholar. The search identified 211 records, of which six studies met the inclusion criteria. Result highlight that emotional labor in online teaching involves a combination of surface and deep acting strategies, with educators frequently using text-based communication methods, such as emojis and personalized messages, to convey emotions and maintain professionalism. The study also revealed that educators face significant challenges, including the invisibility of students, emotional dissonance, and the difficulty of maintaining socio-emotional connections. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the emotional labor demands in online teaching by emphasizing the obstacles they encounter and the strategies used by educators to perform emotional labor.

Keywords: Emotional labor, online teaching

Introduction

Teaching is an emotionally laden profession (Hargreaves, 1998) ^[12]. Teaching is a complex interpersonal process that involves effective communication and the ability to establish a relationship between the instructor and the students (Sonnenberg & Rutledge, 2024) ^[26]. Additionally, the norms of the teaching profession necessitate teachers to regulate their emotions to meet professionalism (Winograd, 2003) ^[31]. To create a positive emotional connection in any learning environment, teachers must actively manage their emotions within professional guidelines (Sonnenberg & Rutledge, 2024) ^[26]. The concept of emotional labor emphasizes not just what educators do, but more significantly, how they perform it. Teachers engage in emotional labor by actively managing their emotions to improve teaching effectiveness, aligning their actions with the normative beliefs and expectations associated with the teaching profession (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014) ^[5]. Both online and offline teachers regulate their emotions to adhere to professional emotional display rules. Despite the emotionally intensive nature of teaching, research on teacher's emotions remains relatively limited in online teaching (Sonnenberg & Rutledge, 2024) ^[26]. Therefore, a deeper examination of emotional labor in teaching, especially in online classrooms, becomes increasingly important.

Emotional labor

The term 'emotional labor' is frequently applied when the effort to manage emotions is linked with a valued outcome (Lee & Madera, 2019) ^[16]. Historically, the concept of EL evolved from the work of Hochschild (1984) ^[28] and she defined as 'the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display' (p. 7). In her model, surface acting is emotional suppression and the display of inauthentic feelings. Deep acting, on the other hand is the

effort to align internal feelings with the emotions displayed to create more genuine emotional experiences. These emotional requirements, referred to as display rules, can be explicit or implicit and are influenced by social, occupational and organizational norms (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993) ^[2]. Diefendorff (2005) introduced the element of naturally felt emotion as another strategy. Keller *et al.* (2014) ^[13] notes that emotions can influence teacher's behaviors, student's behavior and outcomes, and teachers themselves have mentioned that they use emotional labor on a regular basis. Therefore, unlike other employees in the service sector, teachers engage in emotional labor not just to align with the prescribed emotional-display rules, but also because they see such efforts as instrumental in reaching their teaching goals and positive learning outcome (Sutton *et al.*, 2009) ^[27]. It is a complex combination of decision making and emotional regulation (Park *et al.*, 2014) ^[20].

Emotional labor in the digital classroom

The pandemic led to a shift from in-person to online learning, normalizing online education despite of challenges. This shift enhances access and flexibility, particularly for non-traditional and less affluent students (Bashir *et al.*, 2021) ^[4]. Recent research highlights the increased emotional labor teachers face in transitioning to online teaching. Technology-mediated communication intensified emotional effort (Kennedy *et al.*, 2022) ^[14] and teaching through online was more emotionally demanding than in-person teaching. These challenges worsened during the pandemic due to sudden, unprepared transitions to online courses (Bennett, 2014) ^[5].

The shift to online education brings notable differences compared to face-to-face learning. The physical separation in online classes often makes it harder to create the emotionally safe environment typically fostered in traditional settings. This challenge enhanced student's

feelings of isolation and loneliness (Auger & Formentin, 2021)^[11]. Online courses demand a certain level of technical efficacy, and when individuals struggle with this, it can reduce their sense of control and lead to increased frustration (Khanlarian *et al.*, 2022)^[15]. Zhao and Song (2022)^[32] found that emotional intensity varied between in-person and online components in blended learning environments. The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped education, with predictions pointing to a rising demand for online and hybrid instruction alongside the integration of advanced technology (Sonnenberg & Rutledge, 2024)^[26]. Teaching, an inherently emotional process, has evolved from a tradition of emotional suppression to an acknowledgment of emotions as central to nearly every aspect of the teaching experience (Schutz & Lanehart, 2002)^[8, 24]. In traditional classroom settings, emotional labor often revolves around direct interpersonal interactions between teachers and students (Bao and Feng, 2022)^[3]. However, online teaching introduces computer-mediated dynamics that significantly alter the nature of emotional labor for educators. Managing new demands, especially in virtual environments, can lead to excessive emotional labor, which has been linked to burnout (Pyhältö *et al.*, 2011)^[23]. This creates a unique emotional labor challenge for teachers in the digital age.

Despite the extensive research on emotional labor in face-to-face contexts, studies focusing on online teaching remain scarce. Both online and in-person teaching requires significant emotional investment, effort, and energy to cultivate safe and equitable learning environments (Sonnenberg & Rutledge, 2024). As Nyanjom (2020)^[19, 26] highlighted, the concept of emotional labor in online teaching remains poorly understood, necessitating a deeper exploration of its implications for educators. This study aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of the existing body of research on emotional labor in the context of online teaching. By synthesizing and analyzing relevant literature, the study seeks to explore the unique dimensions, challenges, and implications of emotional labor in virtual educational environments. The findings will reveal more understanding about how educators navigate emotional labor in online teaching, including its influence on professionalism, the strategies used to convey emotions effectively, and the challenges faced in managing emotional demands in virtual learning environments. It was found that there is no literature review which includes an overview and analysis of previous research on emotional labor in online teaching that has been carried out as of now. To fill the gap the present review study focused on: (1) to investigate the role of emotional labor in upholding professionalism among educators, (2) to explore the strategies utilized by online educators to perform emotional labor, (3) to understand how educators convey and make their emotions perceptible to students, and (4) to evaluate the unique challenges faced by educators in managing emotional labor in online teaching environments.

Methods and procedure

The guidelines for Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) were followed for the current systematic review (Page *et al.*, 2021)^[22].

Eligibility criteria

Quantitative and qualitative studies published in the English language with a focus on promoting self-forgiveness across diverse populations were included. No limits were placed on gender, age, ethnicity of the participants, and year of publication due to the limited number of studies in the area. Whereas, review papers, book chapters, conference proceedings, and abstracts were excluded.

Information sources and search strategy

For the present study an extensive search was carried out in November 2024 across research publication platforms i.e., Web of Science, Scopus, Taylor and Francis, Science Direct, ResearchGate, Academia, and Google Scholar identified relevant studies using keywords such as "emotional labour," "online teaching," "virtual teaching," and "digital learning," including various spellings and synonyms of "emotional labour".

Selection process

Articles were exported into Zotero, and duplicates were removed. The remaining studies were screened by title and abstract, and those that didn't meet the criteria were excluded. Only English-language studies using qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods were selected, while articles focusing solely on the COVID-19 impact on emotional labor in online environments were excluded. Full texts of the qualifying studies were then obtained and analyzed. The selection process followed the PRISMA guidelines (Page *et al.* (2021)^[22]; see Figure 1), and to operationalize the research questions and search strategies were according to the PICOS approach (Shamseer *et al.*, 2015)^[25]. The PICOS acronym, which stands for population, intervention, comparators, outcomes and study design, was used to develop the terms used in searching the literature. Only peer-reviewed, full-text, English-language studies using both quantitative and qualitative designs were included. The retained studies are listed in an Excel document with the following information: authors, year of publication, title, type of research (quantitative, qualitative, mixed), research instrumentation, number of participants, country of conduct, participant profile, methodology summary, study aim, variables measured, psychometric measurement tools used and main results.

Quality assessment and data synthesis

To identify the risk of various biases included studies and its impact on the validity of finding used JBI critical appraisal tools for analytical cross-sectional studies and JBI critical appraisal checklist for qualitative research.

Results

The database search yielded 211 records which resulted in 6 that fitted the eligibility criteria. Six studies were included in the systematic review and their study characteristics are reported in Table 1. Most of the studies are done post Covid-19. With respect to the study's sample characteristics, the overall sample size was 416 educators (69.95% women; 28.58% men). Three studies related to English language teachers, two are related to professional courses and one is related to tutors in a private coaching institute.

Table 1: Summary of Studies Included in The Review

Sl. No	Author and year	Type	Sample size	Findings	JBI score
1.	Sonnenberg and Rutledge (2024) [26]	Qualitative (Thematic analysis)	19	Emotional labor was more intense than face-to-face classes in online settings.	7
2.	Nyanjom and Naylor (2020) [19]	Qualitative (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis)	20	Educators displayed emotional labor by fostering socioemotional presence with professionalism.	8
3.	Wang and Song (2022) [29]	Qualitative (interview and online classroom observation)	20	Teachers face dilemmas in emotional rules, emotional expression, and professional identity.	7
4.	Webb (2012) [30]	qualitative (semi-structured interviews)	7	Despite the push for standardization, online tutors performed significant, individualized emotional labor.	7
5.	Peng <i>et al.</i> (2023) [21]	Mixed method	338	Teacher's acceptance of online teaching enhances deep acting and natural emotions while reducing surface acting	7
6.	Liu <i>et al.</i> (2023) [18]	Qualitative (case study)	12	Teacher's emotional labor in online teaching involves managing technological challenges and student engagement using various emotional regulation strategies.	8

Note: JBI=JBI critical appraisal tool

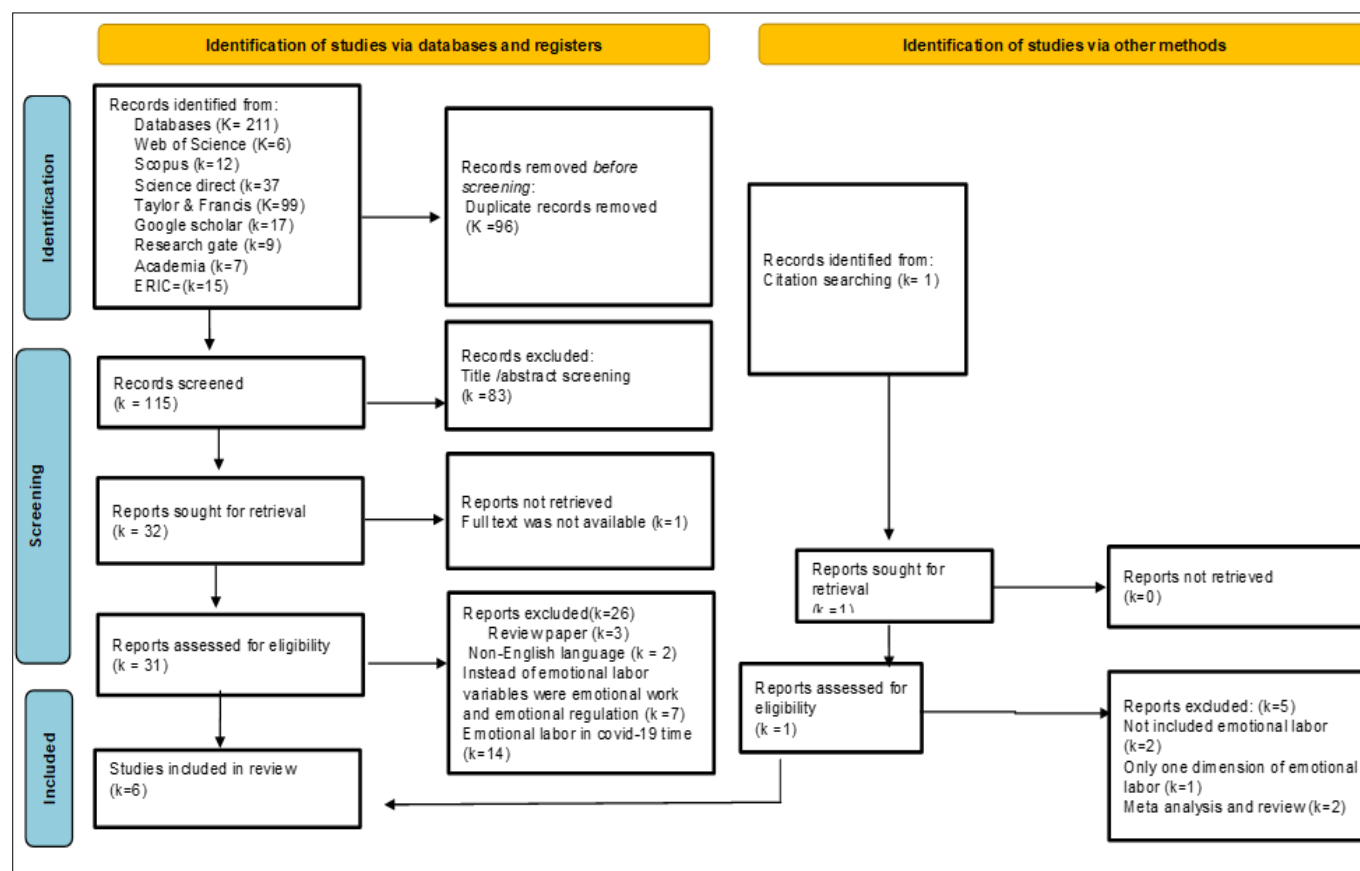


Fig 1: Identification of studies examining emotional labor among teachers in online teaching

Summary of studies

Emotional labor in the context of professionalism

Teachers engage in emotional labor based on perceived display rules, aligning with the idea that emotional labor is practiced according to the emotional demands of each occupation (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015) [9]. Nyanjom and Naylor (2020) [9, 19] highlighted that online educator engaged in emotional labor driven by a strong desire to demonstrate professionalism, evident in behaviors like showing empathy, expressing concern for student's well-being, fostering intimacy, and appearing approachable and friendly in communication. Teachers navigated emotional labor by aligning their practices with their professional identity, which involved being dedicated to teaching with responsibility, caring for students, having a passion for teaching, and responding flexibly (Liu *et al.*, 2023) [18].

Emotional labor turns into a negotiation and game between feelings and professional standards to prevent their feelings from interfering with regular lessons, the teachers chose to hide them as a way to adhere to professional standards and expectation (Wang & Song, 2022; Peng *et al.*, 2023) [21, 29]. Teacher's perceptions of what it meant to be a good tutor ranged from "the coach as an enforcer" to one who is a "care who empathizes," with the tutor's main objective being to motivate students (Webb, 2012) [30]. Nyanjom and Naylor (2020) [19] found that teachers engaged in emotional labor by repressing their emotions in text-based communication, expressing their emotions through tone and verbal cues, and establishing a socio-emotional presence through professionalism, empathy, concern, and friendliness (Sonnenberg & Rutledge, 2024) [26].

Emotional Labor strategies in online

Teaching involves emotional labor, requiring instructors to manage the expression and suppression of their emotions, even when it conflicts with their true feelings. This session provides insights into the effort educators engage in controlling emotions to meet the perceived emotional display rules (Grandey and Gabriel 2015; Gross 1998) ^[10]. Nyanjom and Naylor (2020) ^[9, 10, 19] found that surface acting was more common than deep acting in online interactions with students, as emotions were often suppressed and controlled, a strategy more prevalent in text-based interactions than in face-to-face settings. Emotional regulation strategies, including surface acting, deep acting and genuine expression, were used by English as foreign language teachers while interacting with students online (Liu *et al.*, 2023; Peng *et al.*, 2023) ^[18, 21]. Teachers utilize strategies like reframing, empathetic thinking, self-persuasion and adaptation under deep acting to align emotions with professional expectations. Since online learning provide teachers with more time to prepare and reduces the spontaneity typically associated with in-person encounters with students, it is likely that teaching in an online environment allows educators to choose the acting technique they prefer to perform with greater intention, careful thought and a more deliberate approach, ultimately providing them with more control over how they manage and express their emotions during interactions. Wang and Song (2022) ^[29] found that teachers chose to hide their emotions in order not to let them interfere with their normal lectures and help the to maintain emotional connection with students (Sonnenberg & Rutledge, 2024). Similarly, Webb (2012) ^[26, 30] also highlighted that emotional suppression is performed by teachers because of the concern about teacher student relationship.

Making emotions perceptible in online teaching

Because of the lack of in-person interaction and instant student feedback, online learning environments frequently force teachers to regulate their emotional expressions and they are more intense than traditional classroom settings. Wang & Song (2022) ^[29] found that teachers adapt their emotional expressions based on situational demands, such as ensuring student's engagement despite their invisibility in the virtual space. Sonnenberg & Rutledge (2024) ^[26] highlighted that in online asynchronous classes, instructors experienced less stress about their visible behavior, as they were not directly seen by students and focused more on other communication methods. However, teachers noted the challenge of not being able to observe student's reactions, which led them to invest extra effort in conveying their awareness of student's experiences. To express care and empathy, instructors used strategies like punctuation, emojis and explicit wording, which differed from the in-person context where emotions were effortlessly conveyed through nonverbal cues (Sonnenberg & Rutledge, 2024 ^[26]; Peng *et al.*, 2023 ^[21]). Nyanjom and Naylor (2020) ^[19] added more layers to the finding of the previous study by stating that emojis were used to convey felt emotions, while a few saws them as a way to strengthen socio-emotional connections with students. They found that Participants highlighted the advantage of extended engagement time with students in online classes, facilitating more comprehensive interactions, with one instructor noting that while they missed the physical connection, the online platform allowed for better

responses and, overall, a more effective communication experience, providing more time for deeper, higher-level discussions and stronger connections with students. Tutor's express emotions through personalized, non-repetitive messages to foster a human connection and use deep acting by drawing on their own emotional experiences as learners to authentically engage and motivate students (Webb, 2012) ^[30]. Teachers verbalized their emotional aspects more explicitly to ensure effective communication with students, especially in the absence of face-to-face interaction (Peng *et al.*, 2023; Liu *et al.*, 2023) ^[18, 21]. Educators needed students to see them as real people through their online behavior, while also encouraging students to show their true selves to build socio-emotional connections (Sonnenberg & Rutledge, 2024) ^[26].

Emotional labor challenges in online teaching

In online asynchronous classes, the invisibility of instructors allowed students to focus more on other forms of communication (Sonnenberg & Rutledge, 2024) ^[26]. This format led instructors to feel an increased pressure to communicate empathy through non-verbal ways, as they had to rely on written text and other indirect forms of interaction. Without access to visual responses and nonverbal cues, online educators had to be particularly careful in their written communication, putting in extra effort to convey their awareness of student's experiences. Nyanjom and Naylor (2020) ^[19] examined the impacts of emotional labor on educator well-being. Their analysis highlighted those negative emotions such as anxiety, uncertainty and frustration from emotion management exacerbated emotional stress. Educators reported stress and exhaustion from maintaining interpersonal connections with students online, with many struggling to establish a socio-emotional presence essential for effective emotional labor. Some felt alienated from their students and found it challenging to display consistent care. The workload and expectation of constant availability further compounded these difficulties. Additionally, the pressure to appear professional led to emotion suppression, increasing the risk of emotional dissonance. The invisibility of teachers in online classes positions them in a place of power, leading students to speculate about their emotions (Wang and Song, 2022; Peng *et al.*, 2023) ^[21, 29]. However, this invisibility also prevents teachers from observing student's activities, which significantly complicates emotional labor. Additionally, the frequent use of emojis to convey emotional expressions in online communication is often perceived as unprofessional by teachers, even though they feel compelled to use them (Nyanjom and Naylor, 2020) ^[19]. Misunderstandings of emotions and the lack of visual cues make invisibility a key factor in emotional labor. Teacher's peripheral environments also influence their emotional labor, with English teachers facing unique challenges due to cultural and linguistic differences in emotional rules. The technology-driven emotional rules of online teaching significantly reshape communication norms. English teachers particularly struggle to balance expressing emotions and adhering to norms, as both options pose challenges emotional expression may lead to stress, while lack of it may cause student disengagement. These factors contribute to burnout and professional identity dilemmas and emotional rule dilemmas. Similarly, Liu *et al.* (2023) ^[18] concluded that Teachers faced challenges such as a lack of

spontaneous interactions, feeling distant from students, and being emotionally affected by student's lack of positive responses or engagement. Investing excessive emotional labor in tutoring may harm business by reducing tutor productivity and leading to dissonance and alienation (Webb, 2012)^[30].

Discussion

This study examines the multifaceted nature of emotional labor in online teaching, emphasizing the challenges and strategies educators use to maintain professionalism with students. The findings highlight the complex interplay between occupational requirements, emotional regulation and the unique demands of online learning environments.

The results indicate that emotional labor in online teaching is shaped by the need to project professionalism, empathy and care while navigating the constraints of digital platforms (Sonnenberg & Rutledge, 2024^[26]; Webb, 2012^[30]). In this context, teacher's emotional regulation becomes an integral aspect of their professional development (Li & Akram, 2023)^[17]. This is similar to the findings of Bao and Feng (2022)^[3] Retrospective emotional learning aids in emotional labor by helping individuals manage short-term institutional expectations while aligning their emotional responses with long-term professional norms and discourses.

Teachers employ surface acting more frequently than deep acting, particularly in asynchronous and text-based communication, where the absence of nonverbal cues necessitates careful regulation of emotions. (Nyanjom & Naylor, 2020; Wang & Song, 2022)^[19, 29], may be because text-based communication is a lean medium, individuals often resort to surface acting by using emojis or polite language, to simulate emotional expressions that would be more naturally conveyed through rich media (Daft & Lengel, 1986)^[7]. The study also highlights the advantages of online teaching, such as extended time to process emotions and craft thoughtful responses, which mitigate the spontaneity and immediate emotional demands of face-to-face interactions and these benefits enable educators to better address the academic and emotional needs of their students (Sonnenberg & Rutledge, 2024; Nyanjom & Naylor, 2020)^[19, 26]. However, the lack of direct visual feedback and the reliance on written communication pose significant challenges (Wang & Song, 2022)^[29]. Instructors often compensate by using punctuation, emojis and explicit language to convey emotions, although the professional appropriateness of such methods remains contested (Wang & Song, 2022; Sonnenberg & Rutledge, 2024)^[26, 29].

In online teaching, invisibility offers control over emotional expressions but also alienates teachers from students, complicating emotional labor (Peng *et al.*, 2023)^[21]. It limits teacher's ability to gauge reactions, increasing emotional strain, while cultural and linguistic differences in emotional display rules add further challenges, especially for English teachers in diverse classrooms.

The findings also underscore the psychological toll of emotional labor in online teaching. Teachers reported anxiety, frustration and exhaustion from managing their emotions and maintaining socio-emotional connections with students (Wang & Song, 2022)^[29]. The constant demand for availability, compounded by the pressure to adhere to professional standards, heightens the risk of burnout and

professional identity conflicts. These outcomes emphasize the need for institutional support and training to help educators effectively navigate the emotional demands of online teaching.

Emotional labor in online teaching is more intense and challenging than in traditional classrooms mainly due to the invisibility of students. Teachers face added pressure to make emotions visible in online communication, requiring extra effort to verbalize the emotions more and use of emojis in text message. Unique challenges, such as maintaining emotional connection and managing misunderstandings of emotional expressions, professional dilemmas and emotional rule dilemmas further differentiate it from offline teaching.

Gaps in the literature

Several gaps remain in research on emotional labor in online teaching. Limited research explores the balance between surface and deep acting in asynchronous formats and no study has addressed the long-term effects on teacher's well-being and student outcomes. Cultural and linguistic differences, the use of digital tools like emojis for emotional expression and the psychological toll of emotional dissonance on mental health are underexplored. Additionally, the impact of invisibility in online teaching, the role of institutional support, and how gender and race intersect with emotional labor require further investigation to better support online educators.

Limitations

This study analyzed emotional labor in online teaching based on six articles, including qualitative studies and one mixed-method study. The limited number of articles poses a challenge to generalizing findings. Additionally, studies primarily focused on the impact of COVID-19 on emotional labor in digital platforms were excluded, which may have narrowed the scope of the analysis. The limited availability of research specific to online teaching emotional labor emphasizes a gap in existing literature. Although the analysis was done manually, the researchers made sure about the significant codes to be included for the analysis and did an equivalent job just like any other software in the market reducing the total cost of this meta-analysis. However, the same code and thematic analysis can also be done with the help of software like NVivo, MAXQDA, etc. Despite all the limitations, the findings of the article are true to the knowledge of the researchers and are completely based on past studies and not on the researcher's personal opinions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlighted the unique dimensions of emotional labor in online teaching. While digital platforms provide opportunities for deliberate emotional regulation and personalized student interactions, they also impose significant emotional challenges, it is more intense than in traditional classroom settings. Future research should explore strategies to enhance emotional well-being among online educators and develop interventions that balance the professional and emotional demands by performing emotional labor in a healthy way in digital teaching environments.

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