

A review of the literature on emotional labor based on CiteSpace visualization

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Abstract

Emotional labor plays a crucial role in modern service industries, serving as the core factor driving customer satisfaction, employee well-being, and long-term corporate competitiveness. While research on emotional labor has made some progress, issues such as vague research subjects, lack of generalizable situational analysis, fragmented findings, and insufficient systematic organization remain. This paper selects two widely representative databases, Web of Science (WOS), to systematically review and conduct bibliometric analysis of 2,392 target documents using CiteSpace software. It reconstructs the literature from both cognitive regulation and affective management perspectives, revealing the current state of research on emotional labor. The study finds that the antecedents of emotional labor involve four dimensions: individual, organizational, customer, and socio-cultural. Its outcomes have profound impacts on employees, organizations, and customers. The research on emotional labor presents three levels of exploration: dimensions, specific manifestations, and situational contexts. After reviewing the outcome variables and influencing factors at each level, it integrates an integrated analysis framework for emotional labor, explores its dynamic evolution and feedback loop mechanisms, and summarizes the shortcomings of existing research. Based on this, it discusses future research directions. This paper approaches from the dual perspectives of cognitive regulation and emotion management, revealing research blind spots through CiteSpace visualization. By employing multi-level research threads such as keyword clustering, co-occurrence analysis, and time series analysis, it systematically reviews previously scattered related studies, providing scientific evidence for management. This promotes employee well-being and organizational development, offers pathways for theoretical integration and practical optimization.

Keywords

Emotional labor; Literature review; CiteSpace

1. Introduction

Emotional labor plays an indispensable role in multiple key areas of modern society, especially in critical sectors such as services, healthcare, and education, where its importance is irreplaceable. Emotional labor primarily involves the effective man-

agement of one's own emotions to positively influence others' experiences and feelings, thereby achieving higher quality interactions and outcomes. In the service industry, smiling service not only reflects professional etiquette but also serves as a strategic tool for enhancing customer experience and brand loyalty. Healthcare professionals establish a trust-based therapeutic relationship through emotional care, which is a core element in improving clinical outcomes and patient satisfaction (Wang et al., 2015). In the education sector, teachers foster a supportive and motivating teaching environment to promote the comprehensive development of students' cognitive, emotional, and social skills (Cheng & Song, 2020). Therefore, emotional labor is not only a workplace skill but also a core cultural value. It drives organizations toward more humanized and efficient directions, becoming a significant driving force for enhancing industry competitiveness and promoting social harmony.

Although the discussion of emotional labor is increasingly rich in theory and practice, it still faces several important challenges: (1) The misuse of similar yet different concepts leads to ambiguity in research subjects. Many studies adopt broad definitions, such as emotional management, emotional regulation, and emotional work, which result in a lack of consensus on the conceptual connotations and dimensional structure of emotional labor, thereby increasing the difficulty of literature dialogue. (2) Current research focuses more on the single effects of emotional labor (such as improving service or work burnout), lacking exploration of its "double-edged sword" effects. Studies have shown that emotional labor can both bring positive impacts and lead to negative consequences. (Liao et al., 2014; Yin et al., 2019). (3) Although the specific manifestations, influences, measures, and experiences of emotional labor vary across different occupational contexts, there is a lack of systematic thinking and summarization of common issues in different contexts. While some studies have explored the impact of emotional labor in specific situations, such as kindergarten teachers or public service sectors, further exploration is needed to address common issues in different contexts, building a multi-level analytical model that can explain emotional labor problems in various scenarios. (4) Research findings are fragmented and lack systematic reviews with clear threads. Although some literature attempts to systematically review the research on emotional labor (Zeng, 2024; Fu, 2013), overall, the field of emotional labor still lacks a comprehensive review to integrate existing research findings.

This paper advances the study of affective labor from three main aspects: First, it constructs a knowledge map of emotional labor research using bibliometric methods. Second, it organizes previously scattered related studies according to multi-level research threads and proposes an integrative cross-level analytical framework to provide a reference for comprehensively analyzing the multi-layered activity trajectories of affective labor. Third, based on a literature review, it summarizes the shortcomings of existing research and proposes future directions for further

advancement.

2. Core concepts and research methods

2.1. Core concepts

The concept of emotional labor has evolved into an important research field since Hochschild first proposed it in 1983, encompassing theoretical discussions, empirical studies, and its impact on organizational behavior. An increasing number of researchers have begun to pay attention to and explore this phenomenon. Hochschild's perspective emphasizes that employees need to manage their emotions to conform to the expressions or behaviors required by organizational rules at work. This concept was inspired by dramaturgical theory and has been widely applied in the fields of organizational behavior and management. (Li & Lin, 2007)

Psychologists have developed more psychologically paradigmatic definitions based on this foundation. From the perspective of organizational behavior and management, emotional labor can be deeply defined as: an emotional regulation process in which employees, within an organizational environment, regulate their emotions to meet the expectations of the organization or customers. (Yang, 2009) This process involves managing and regulating employees' own emotions to ensure that they exhibit the emotional expressions expected by the organization during interactions with customers or colleagues. In organizational behavior, emotional labor is considered a component of individual job content, requiring individuals to appropriately conceal and control their true inner emotions when interacting with others, even if they are exhausted or feeling down, they must smile and face others according to organizational requirements. Research on emotional labor is not limited to theoretical discussions but also involves empirical studies, exploring how employees manage their emotions through surface and deep role-playing to adapt to organizational demands. For example, the book "Theoretical and Empirical Research on Emotional Labor" summarizes and reviews the emergence, connotations, development process, current status, and cutting-edge dynamics of core concepts such as organizational emotional management. It also analyzes emotional labor in organizations from three aspects: concept and essence, dimensions, and research status and development.

In summary, it is evident that the definition of concepts presents a dual dimension of cognition and emotion. In terms of cognitive regulation (Hochschild, 1983; Grandey, 2000), emotional labor is viewed as a psychological processing procedure, emphasizing strategic emotional regulation, such as deep role-playing achieving emotional consistency through cognitive restructuring; studies often use quantitative scales (such as the Emotional Labor Strategy Scale) to focus on the relationship between resource consumption and job burnout. From the perspective of emotion management, (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Zapf, 2002) emphasizes the organizational embedding of rules for emotional expression, exploring the direct impact of emotional authenticity on service quality; research methods tend towards qualita-

tive analysis (such as interviews and case studies), valuing the moderating role of cultural differences..

2.2. research method

This study selected Web of Science as the search platform. Web of Science is a globally leading academic literature database that covers journals, papers, books, and other resources across multiple disciplines, providing reliable data support for the literature search in this paper. During the search process, "Emotional Labor" was used as the subject term in the core collection, with the time window set from 1980 to 2024, yielding a total of 5,538 articles related to the "Emotional Labor" theme. After obtaining preliminary search results, this paper first conducted an initial screening of the literature, selecting journal articles and review articles while excluding book reviews, conference papers, and retracted publications. Then, by examining the titles and abstracts of the articles, we excluded those that were not relevant or had weak relevance to the "Emotional Labor" theme, ultimately retaining 2,392 articles that met the requirements for further analysis in this study.

This study uses CiteSpace software to conduct visual analysis of literature data. Citespace (Gao et al., 2015) is a software that can quantify literature data, thereby filtering out the required visual maps. It is currently widely used in literature research to present research directions and future trends in a specific field. It is also a relatively mature tool for bibliometric analysis visualization, capable of providing various types of functional maps simultaneously, such as co-occurrence maps, co-citation maps, and keyword detection, which are crucial for discovering and uncovering hotspots, evolutionary processes, and (Zhong & Li, 2008) future trends in related research fields (Zhao, 2012; Chen, 2015). This study employs CiteSpace software to sequentially analyze the trend of publication volume, temporal analysis, and keyword mutation of literature data, thereby proposing future research directions based on the findings.

3. Visual analysis of bibliometric data

3.1. Analysis of the number of articles published

By systematically analyzing the evolution trend of the number of literature over time, it can effectively reveal the dynamic characteristics of knowledge production in the field of emotional labor, and then evaluate the current development maturity of this discipline and determine the possible research direction and academic value in the future. The overall trend of the number of publications from 1980 to 2024 is shown in Figure 1.

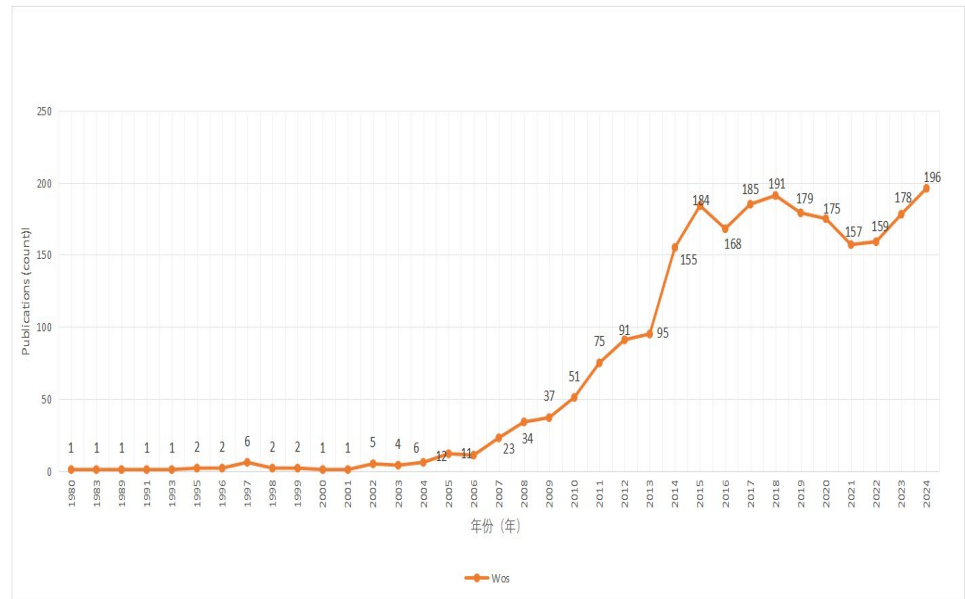


Figure 1. Overall trend chart of the number of articles in the field of emotional labor from 1980 to 2024

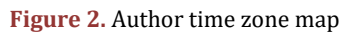
From the overall trend of publications in the field of emotional labor research, studies on this topic have shown a steady upward trend since the early stages of neglected research and theoretical accumulation in the 21st century. While receiving significant attention from scholars and institutions both domestically and internationally, these studies also demonstrate a sustained high level of interest and concern among the general public.

3.2. Time series analysis

In order to further study the correlation between researchers in the field of emotional labor and the evolution of research directions over time, this paper uses Citespace software to analyze the author's time series with a time slice of 1 year, as shown in Figure 2.

Based on the author timeline analysis of foreign libraries, it can be seen that the connections and exchanges among foreign scholars in the field of affective labor can primarily be divided into three time periods. The first period is from 1994 to 2005, during which the main focus was on defining concepts related to affective labor, exploring different dimensions, and proposing the quantification of affective labor. In this period, the research by Zapf, D received high citations and had strong collaborations with multiple authors, such as Holz, M, Seifert, C, and Isic, A. Zapf, D's definition of affective labor and his research on the seven dimensions of its internal structure provided important perspectives and tools for the quantification of affective labor and the exploration of future research directions. The second period is from 2006 to 2016, during which Alicia A. Grandey made significant contributions and stood out in the field. Not only did he advance the theory of affective labor and research on

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WoS: E:\CitSpace\2025.4.19\英文共笔电4.19\data
TimeSpan: 1979-2024 (Slice Length=1)
Selection Criteria: g-index (k=25), LRF=3.0, L/N=10, LRF=5, c=1
Network: N=648, E=537 (Density=0.0018)
Largest 5 CCs: 42 (6%)
Nodes Labeled: 1.0%
Pruning: Pathfinder



It can be observed that the keywords "expression (15.08)", "service work (11.76)", and "job (6.18)" exhibit strong prominence in the early stage, reflecting to some extent the multidimensional exploration of various conceptual definitions and research on emotional labor during this phase. In the later keyword prominence, "consequences (19.46)", "dimensions (11.64)", and "service (10.34)" show high prominence. By analyzing the research keywords of this stage, it is evident that the main focus is on different manifestations of emotional labor and further promoting the quantitative study of emotional labor.

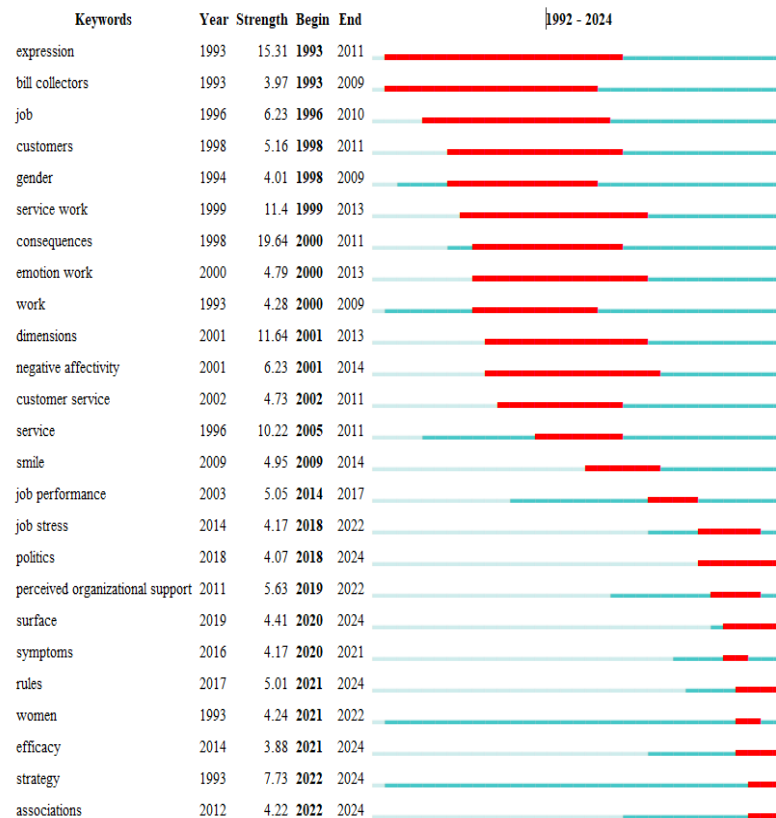


Figure 3. A time zone map

4. An integrated analysis of emotional labor

Emotional labor, as a core characteristic of service industry employees, has become a focal point in management studies due to its antecedents, mechanisms, consequences, and dynamic evolution processes. By summarizing and integrating literature, and exploring the research context mentioned earlier, this chapter constructs an integrated analytical framework for emotional labor, focusing on the feedback loop of its antecedents, consequences, and dynamic evolution.

4.1. The antecedent and mechanism of emotional labor

The antecedent research of emotional labor is mainly carried out from the four levels of individual employee, organization, customer and social culture, and the psychological mechanism of emotional labor is explained by combining cognitive dissonance theory, resource conservation theory, emotional event theory and so on.

1) Employee individual factors

Employees' emotional intelligence, personality traits (such as neuroticism and extraversion), and emotional regulation abilities are important precursors to emotional labor. Research shows that employees with stronger emotional regulation skills tend to adopt deeper role-playing strategies and are better at managing their

emotions, thereby reducing negative effects of emotional labor, such as burnout (Grandey, 2000). The level of work engagement also influences emotional labor; highly engaged employees are more likely to view emotional labor as part of self-actualization and are more willing to invest in it to meet job requirements rather than as a burden (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002). Employees with high emotional intelligence can better identify and manage their emotions, thus demonstrating higher adaptability and efficiency in emotional labor (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2002).

2) Organizational factors

Organizational emotional management strategies, such as emotional rules and requirements for emotional expression, are one of the main causes of emotional labor. Strict rules may lead employees to adopt superficial emotional regulation, increasing the risk of emotional exhaustion. Organizational support (such as emotional support and work resources) and job stress also affect employees' performance in emotional labor. High workload and prolonged stress can exacerbate employees' emotional labor burden, leading to emotional dysregulation (Morris & Feldman, 1996), and high-pressure environments can easily lead to the depletion of employees' emotional resources, causing deep role failure (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002). Conversely, organizational support can buffer the negative impacts of emotional labor, enhancing employees' job satisfaction (Zapf, 2002). Organizations can help employees better cope with the challenges of emotional labor by providing emotional management training and psychological counseling services (Grandey, 2003).

3) Customer factors

Customers' emotional expressions (such as anger and dissatisfaction) and behaviors (such as complaints and provocations) are direct triggers for employees' emotional labor. Research has found that negative emotions from high contact service demands can increase the intensity of employees' emotional labor, leading to frequent use of emotional regulation strategies, which in turn increases the risk of emotional exhaustion (Hobfoll, 1989). Moreover, customers' negative emotions may force employees to cognitively reevaluate or suppress their true feelings; for example, customer provocation can compel employees to expend additional resources to maintain service standards (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987). When faced with negative customer emotions, employees need to invest more resources in emotional regulation, which may lead to emotional exhaustion (Rupp & Spencer, 2006).

4) Sociocultural factor

Cultural values (such as collectivism emphasizing emotional suppression) and social norms (like the "smile requirement" in service industries) shape emotional labor patterns through institutional pressure (Hochschild, 1983), defining the boundaries of emotional labor. Employees in collectivist cultures tend to suppress genuine emotions to meet organizational demands, thereby maintaining harmony (Hofstede, 1980). In collectivist cultures, employees may focus more on team harmony and organizational goals, whereas employees in individualistic cultures may prioritize the

authentic expression of personal emotions (Triandis, 1995).

4.2. The effects of emotional labor

Compared to previous studies, more scholars have focused on the impact of emotional labor, but most research has concentrated on its effects on employees, organizations, and customers. There is still relatively little research on the influence of sociocultural factors, primarily from three scholars: Grandey, Brotheridge, and Puglisi et al. This section will delve into the impacts of emotional labor to address the insufficient exploration of the 'double-edged sword' effect of emotional labor mentioned in the introduction.

1) Employee satisfaction with work and job performance

Job satisfaction is a crucial indicator of employees' contentment with their work environment and job responsibilities. Research indicates that surface emotional labor (where employees mask or suppress genuine emotions to meet job demands) significantly reduces job satisfaction (Puglisi et al., 2017). This is because surface emotional labor requires employees to suppress their true feelings over time, leading to a discrepancy between internal feelings and external behavior, which in turn generates psychological conflicts and dissatisfaction. The impact of emotional labor on work performance is dual. Moderate emotional labor can enhance customer satisfaction, thereby boosting employees' sense of achievement at work. Conversely, it may lead to emotional exhaustion, job burnout, and occupational burnout, reducing job satisfaction. On one hand, deep emotional labor (where employees use cognitive reappraisal and other strategies to genuinely change their inner emotions to meet job demands) can improve service performance, making employees more professional and approachable when interacting with customers (Grandey, 2003). On the other hand, surface emotional labor can lower task performance, as prolonged emotional masking can distract employees, affecting their focus and quality of task completion. In addition, prolonged emotional labor not only leads to emotional exhaustion but also intensifies employees' occupational burnout. Emotional labor encompasses frequent emotional expression, attention to performance rules, and emotional disharmony. Occupational burnout manifests as weariness towards work, alienation from the organization, and a negative attitude toward career development (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002). When employees are under constant high pressure from emotional labor, they may gradually lose enthusiasm and motivation for their jobs, even developing intentions to leave, which poses a challenge to the organization's human resource management.

2) Organizational reputation, performance and employee turnover

Employees' emotional labor directly impacts customers' perception of service quality, which in turn affects the organization's reputation (Grandey, 2003). When employees can genuinely express positive emotions and provide high-quality service, customers form favorable impressions, thereby enhancing the organization's repu-

tation. Conversely, if employees exhibit negative emotions or unprofessional attitudes during service, customer satisfaction and trust will decline, damaging the organization's reputation. Similarly, the impact of emotional labor on organizational performance is dual. Deep emotional labor can increase customer loyalty and satisfaction, promoting long-term development and performance improvement (Puglisi et al., 2017). However, superficial emotional labor may tarnish the organization's image, leading to negative customer evaluations, which in turn affect the organization's market competitiveness and performance.

Research has confirmed a significant positive correlation between emotional labor intensity and employee turnover rates (Hochschild, 1983). When employees frequently encounter the stress and challenges of emotional labor at work, they may choose to leave to avoid such negative work experiences. High employee turnover not only increases organizational recruitment and training costs but can also lead to a decline in service quality and customer satisfaction.

4.3. Regulatory variables of emotional labor

At present, the research on emotional labor regulation variables is still relatively thin. The relevant research mainly discusses the regulation variables of emotional labor from three levels: individual, organization and situation.

1) Individual regulation ability

Cognitive reappraisal (Cognitive Reappraisal) reduces emotional exhaustion by reconstructing the explanatory framework of emotional events, thereby decreasing the conflict between emotional experience and expression (Gross, 1998). Research has found that hotel staff can reframe customer complaints as "opportunities to improve service quality," thus preventing the accumulation of negative emotions. In contrast, emotional suppression (Emotional Suppression) requires continuous cognitive resources to suppress genuine emotions, leading to depletion of self-control resources and exacerbating anxiety and occupational burnout (Hochschild, 1983; Zhang, 2017). A follow-up study by Shi Junqi (2019) further revealed that negative emotions significantly inhibit deep action (Deep Acting), while individuals with high emotional intelligence can mitigate this effect by flexibly switching regulatory strategies. Notably, the choice of emotional regulatory strategies is related to brain region functions: the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex leads cognitive reappraisal, while the orbitofrontal cortex participates in the automatic process of emotion suppression, indicating that individual neural foundations may regulate the effectiveness of regulatory strategies.

2) Organizational moderating factors

Colleagues and leaders support reducing the self-exhaustion of emotional labor by providing emotional identification and instrumental assistance (Grandey, 2003). Chen et al. (2012) further found that supervisor support can strengthen the positive correlation between deep performance and work engagement while weakening the

negative correlation between superficial performance and emotional exhaustion. Additionally, a psychologically safe team environment (such as allowing genuine expression of emotions) can reduce the risk of emotional dysregulation, with its mechanism closely related to organizational authentic culture (Climate of Authenticity) (Grandey et al., 2012). For example, if call center supervisors allow employees to briefly leave their posts after being verbally abused by customers, it can reduce the frequency of superficial performance (Shi, 2019).

3) Contextual moderating factors

High-contact services, such as healthcare and hospitality, require the simultaneous management of emotional expression and body language (such as the extent of smiles and physical distance), making their emotional labor intensity significantly higher than that of low-contact services like online customer service (Hochschild, 1983). This difference stems from the competitive use of cognitive resources across multiple interaction channels. Face-to-face interactions demand real-time decoding of customers' micro-expressions and tone of voice, increasing cognitive load (Puglisi et al., 2017). However, research analysis shows that the frequency of interactions does not significantly moderate the effects of emotional labor (Hulsheger & Schewe, 2011), indicating that the quality of a single interaction (such as conflict) is more predictive than frequency.

5. Peroration

5.1. Research conclusion

Emotional labor plays a crucial role in modern service industries, and research on it has made significant progress both theoretically and practically. This paper systematically reviews the literature related to emotional labor and examines its current status and future directions from the dual perspectives of cognitive regulation and affective management. Specifically, this study primarily draws the following conclusions: First, the connotation of emotional labor has not yet reached a fully unified consensus in academia, primarily focusing on two dimensions: cognitive regulation and emotional management. The perspective of cognitive regulation emphasizes that emotional labor is a psychological processing process, paying attention to strategic emotional regulation (such as surface acting and deep acting) and its impact on mental resource consumption; the perspective of emotional management focuses on the dynamic balance between the authenticity of emotional expression and organizational rules, highlighting the embedded nature of emotional expression rules. Although existing research has measured emotional labor from different perspectives, there is still a lack of a comprehensive and unified measurement tool, which limits the further deepening of emotional labor research. Second, the emergence of emotional labor is mainly influenced by four levels of factors: individuals, organizations, customers, and social culture. Most existing studies explore the antecedents of emotional labor from a single perspective, lacking systematic analysis of the interac-

tions among multiple factors. Third, emotional labor has profound impacts on employees, organizations, and customers. While existing research has discussed both the positive and negative consequences of emotional labor, studies on its dynamic evolution and feedback loop mechanisms remain limited. Fourth, research on moderating variables in emotional labor primarily focuses on individual, organizational, and situational levels. However, current research on moderating variables remains fragmented, lacking systematic integration and analysis.

5.2. Research conclusion

Although scholars have made active exploration of emotional labor and achieved certain research results, domestic research is still in its infancy and there are still many shortcomings. Future research can focus on the following four aspects: First, pay attention to the new characteristics and manifestations of emotional labor. With the development of digital technology and changes in work methods, the features and forms of emotional labor may evolve. Currently, the widespread adoption of remote working and online services has increased the immediacy and transparency of employees' emotional expressions, presenting new challenges and opportunities in emotional labor. This could have new impacts on the strategic choices and psychological resource consumption in emotional labor. Future research can use qualitative methods such as interviews and grounded theory to further explore the new characteristics and manifestations of emotional labor in the context of digitization, such as the features of emotional labor in scenarios like virtual customer service and social media services, providing new perspectives for theoretical research on emotional labor. Second, explore the formation mechanisms of emotional labor from an integrative perspective. Existing research has made initial explorations into the dynamic evolution of emotional labor, but further in-depth discussions on its long-term evolutionary path and transformation conditions are still lacking. Most studies focus on single perspectives (such as resource conservation theory, social exchange theory, etc.) to investigate the formation mechanisms of emotional labor, but they lack systematic analysis of the interactions among multiple factors. Future research can adopt an integrative perspective to pay more attention to the evolutionary characteristics of emotional labor at different stages, as well as how organizational interventions and individual adjustments can facilitate the transition from negative to positive emotional labor. A more comprehensive theoretical model (such as the AMO model) can be used to explore the formation mechanisms of emotional labor. The AMO model emphasizes that employees' emotional labor is influenced by a combination of ability, motivation, and opportunity. Future research can base its approach on this model, using qualitative comparative analysis methods to delve into how different combinations of factors affect emotional labor. Additionally, it can explore how organizations can help employees better cope with the challenges of emotional labor by providing emotional management training and optimizing work

environments, promoting a virtuous cycle of emotional labor.

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