



Evaluating Emotional Labour in Romantic Relationships: An investigation into how romantic partners understand emotional regulation

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Article journey

Received

02/06/2026

Revised

01/07/2026

Accepted

07/07/2026

Published



11/07/2026



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Abstract— Emotional Labor is a fundamental characteristic of romantic relationships encompassing emotional support, conflict management and relational harmony. Although the term originated from research in organizational set up, current literature review has extended its application to romantic relationships focussing its role in emotional intimacy and psychological well being. The present study examines the role of young adults in assigning meaning to different facets of emotional labor specially in non traditional relationship patterns. Qualitative research design was used to collect data which was analysed through thematic analysis. The findings revealed that emotional regulation extends beyond to include continuous emotional availability, ambiguous relationship expectations and efforts to sustain emotional connection within a digitally mediated world. By addressing the narratives of young adult's dating patterns, this study significantly contributes to the existing gaps in research for emotional labor in the contemporary dating era.

Keywords: Emotional labor, dating era, social media, intimacy, emotional connection, emotional regulation, casual dating, digital intimacy.

INTRODUCTION

Sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1983) coined the term emotional labour to define the organised efforts, planning and control that are required to express socially desired emotions during interpersonal communication. Her research focused on emotional labour in the workplace, however it extends to how one continues showing affection and patience while hiding unpleasant emotions such as anger and disgust. Emotional labour in relationships is relatively a newly researched idea and has over the years gained significance due to its meaningful impact on empathy, emotional intimacy and to define one's personal meaning to the relationship (Erikson, 2005). Her research also explored other dynamics of emotional labour such as listening without judgement, providing reassurance and maintaining optimism during stressful situations. She concluded that although showing comfort and reassurance strengthened intimacy and trust in the relationship. However, putting these efforts without reciprocation hampers one's mental well being. Investigation of emotional labour amongst married couples by Walzer (1996) demonstrated that most women compared to men felt that they are responsible to maintain the emotional climate in their relationship while also taking care of their children as the primary caregiver. Women also maintained greater emotional connections, remembered important events and mediated conflicts in the family. (Sweeney & Biani, 2000). Other researchers found that emotional labour involves managing together varied emotional responses rather than isolated emotional acts. This requires planning and controlling one's actual emotions as they might be perceived and distressing rather than being socially desirable (Daminger, 2019). Finkel et al., (2014) proposed the "suffocation model" according to which contemporary relationships require greater amounts of emotional labour as partners are expected to play an important role in each other's identity building, psychological well being and personal growth. Hence, the growth of a relationship depends on the partner's emotional compatibility with each other. Other researchers such as Brown (2012) have demonstrated the importance of emotional labor in relationships stating that it strengthens the space for openness, vulnerability and communication in a relationship and therefore emotional labor is not just emotional regulation of the individuals but it also shows emotional courage of the partners for their growth and wellbeing. According to the current literature, emotional labor is a multifaceted process with evolving dynamics such as empathy, conflict management, reassurance and relational harmony. These factors are crucial in determining the well being and growth of the relationship. Studies have consistently shown that women put greater effort and control to maintain emotional harmony by often suppressing their true emotions while displaying the socially desirable ones. However, the



lack of reciprocity leads to emotional exhaustion and lower relationship satisfaction. Although extensive research has been done on understanding emotional regulation between the partners in a relationship, emerging relationship patterns of the contemporary dating world have brought major changes in how individuals perceive empathy, reassurance and emotional intimacy. The current literature has not yet explored the changing dynamics of different facets of emotional labor in the contemporary dating era that impact one's emotional and psychological well being.

Present Study

The current literature has consistently focussed on evaluating how significant components in a relationship such as conflict management, emotional intimacy and emotional labor unfold in romantic relationships. These findings have crucially contributed to the theoretical background in understanding the behaviour of each individual in a relationship. However, the 21st century has changed the ways in which individuals manage conflicts and provide reassurance to their partners. Emerging relationship patterns such as situationships, bench marking, bread crumbing to name a few have changed the dynamics of traditional relationships. This gap has not been explored in the current literature. The present study focuses on providing a detailed account of one of these crucial factors i.e emotional labor in romantic relationships that will allow individuals to understand their partners better while maintaining their own psychological well being.

Methodology

The current study has adopted a qualitative research design using thematic analysis to understand in depth young adults 's lived narratives of their experiences within emerging patterns of relationship dynamics. The subjective and context dependent nature of emotional components cannot be fully understood through quantitative measures alone. A qualitative approach will allow us to capture the depth of these varying dynamics of emotional regulation in the modern dating era which differ from traditional dating patterns. This study aims to understand how young adults perceive, negotiate and assign meaning to their partner's emotional regulation patterns and how it impacts their psychological well being rather than relying on statistics alone.

Participants

The study was conducted on 50 participants in the age range of 19 to 25 years as this period is marked as " emerging adulthood" in the developmental stage and considered important for identity exploration, emotional maturity and experimentation with romantic relationships. To explore diverse experiences, participants were recruited from all the major contexts of relationship patterns including casual dating, friends with benefits and situationships to name a few.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was employed in the research design, whereby participants were directly selected by the researchers as they had primary experiences of the modern dating patterns and can potentially provide detailed narratives of emotional labor and other related components of romantic relationship.

Data Collection Method

Data was collected through semi structured interviews with the selected participants. This method was chosen to be appropriate as it allows participants to report their subjective experiences while being flexible and open to the interviewer. The interview schedule was prepared by reviewing concepts of emotional intimacy and emotional labor from the current literature which were then utilised to prepare open ended questions. Follow up questions and probing were used according to participant's responses.

Data Analysis

All the interviews were transcribed verbatim using the tool sonix. The transcribed data was then analysed using Braun & Clarke (2006)'s thematic analysis framework. The analysis was carried out in 6 stages ; familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, defining themes and producing the final report. The themes were carefully organised around shared experiences, recurring narratives and contradictions derived from participant's verbatim.

Results

The following themes were derived using Braun & Clarke (2006)'s phases of thematic analysis.

Theme 1 : Emotional Labour In contemporary relationships.

This theme provides useful insights on young adults's experiences of emotional labour in the contemporary dating era as it is marked by prominent differences in how emotional labour was prevalent according to traditional dating patterns. Participants have reported that emotional investment and responsibility begins much even before a formal commitment is made. Young adults make efforts in casual dating, situationships and friends with benefits where roles



and expectations of the partners are often ambiguous and emotionally taxing.

The theme highlights that emotional labor in the contemporary era does not only come from clarity in expectations but emotional intimacy in the initial stages is considered essential for partners to ensure security and strengthen their bonding. Participants described getting emotionally invested without being aware if their efforts will be reciprocated.

Theme 2 : Digital Emotional Labor

Communication through online platforms played a vast role in how individuals regulated their feelings and emotions. The convenience of online platforms often led to the expectation of emotional presence and availability all throughout the day. As described by participants, digital emotional labour was marked by monitoring response patterns, interpreting online behaviour and emotional investment as it indicated the quality of the relationship and insolvent of their partners in deterring emotional significance. Even without a formal commitment, participants reported feeling the need to initiate conversations and ensure that conversations remained emotionally engaging. Liking and commenting on social media posts is attached to emotional meaning. They also described feeling worried and getting anxious on delayed responses as it might communicate emotional withdrawal.

Digital technology has significantly changed the patterns of emotional regulation making it an ongoing , uninterrupted process.

Theme 3; Conflict in Digital Spaces

Digital communication has brought new challenges as it cannot interpret the vocal tone, facial expressions and immediate clarification compared to face to face conversations. Participants reported reading texts several times, interpreting emojis , punctuation marks and consciously structuring responses to avoid misunderstandings. Emotional labor is not only associated with conflicts when it goes unnoticed but also involving analysing ambiguous reply to texts, anticipating misunderstandings and regulating emotional meaning within the digitally mediated interactions.

These findings illustrate how technology has significantly transformed how emotional needs are expressed and experienced.

Theme 4 : Reciprocity, Recognition and emotional fairness

Recognition and reciprocity were considered as crucial components to express emotional regulation. Emotional effort acknowledged if its reciprocated, if not it was considered one sided and burdensome. Participants reported that they often showed invisible acts which carried emotional meaning such as remembering important dates, checking on their partner's emotional well being, however these efforts sometimes went under noticed and overlooked. Other group of participants explained that although showing concern and caring about one's emotional needs were recognised and their partners failed to acknowledge the emotional work required to maintain the relationship. In such cases, although the relationship looked stable , it made partners feel undervalued for their efforts.

These findings suggest that emotional labour is considered a shared responsibility rather than an imposition. Participants valued active listening, emotional responsiveness and appreciation as evidence for strengthening emotional responsiveness.

Theme 5 ; Emotional Labor as an act of care

One of the interesting findings of this analysis is the difference in emotional labor performed out of obligation and emotional labor performed willingly. Many participants reported showing care, concern and understanding their partner's emotional needs. Such acts were viewed as meaningful expressions of love and partners continued to show such acts if their efforts were reciprocated. Such emotional labor was performed willingly. However, another group of other participants described emotional labor as being burdensome when they continuously suppressed their own emotional needs while prioritising their partner's feelings.

Conclusion

This research highlights that emotional labor is not limited by visible acts of reassurance and concern , however it goes on to include dynamic patterns of cognitive and emotional processes which vary across different relationships. Contemporary romantic relationships are increasingly shaped by social media and non-traditional romantic patterns such as situationships, casual dating , friends with benefits. Such relationship arrangements have unfolded new forms of emotional regulation that have not been adequately covered by the current literature.

The present study demonstrates that emotional labor is not inherently detrimental if reciprocated and appreciated by both the partners in a romantic relationship. On the other hand emotional labor can become exhausting and frustrating if fairness and recognition is not perceived. Future studies must employ longitudinal research designs and take into account how individuals's attachment style intersects with emotional labor, gender identity and relationship development over time.



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