

The “Invisible” Construction of Professional Identity in the Beauty Industry: Psychological Capital and the Limits of Technical Training

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Abstract

Beauty work is usually classified as a technical craft, and vocational curricula reflect this classification: they concentrate on application technique, product chemistry and hygiene, and assume that competent graduates will find a market. This paper draws on Giulia Ruy’s *Além da Técnica* (2026) and on published qualitative and survey research from Brazil, China, Pakistan, South Korea, the United Kingdom and the United States. It argues that professional identity in this occupation depends less on manual skill than on psychological capital, understood as self-efficacy, hope, optimism and resilience. Technical skill is a precondition of practice, but on its own it offers a weak account of why some practitioners stay in the occupation and others leave. The four psychological resources help explain who persists through the poorly paid and largely unrecognised early stage of a beauty career. Training that focuses on technique leaves novices without preparation for this stage. The paper also identifies a limit of the argument: when resilience is used to absorb stigma, gendered devaluation and the absence of credentials, an individual resource ends up compensating for a structural problem.

Keywords: professional identity, psychological capital, aesthetic labour, emotional labour, beauty industry, occupational stigma

1. Introduction

Millions of people worldwide work in beauty services as hairdressers, nail technicians, aestheticians, make-up artists and in a growing range of specialised body services. The economic weight of the sector is well established; its institutional standing is not. Beauty workers combine technical precision, emotional competence and communicative skill, yet they rarely receive the credentials, licences or public recognition that are routine in health care or teaching. The occupation expects professional conduct without granting professional status.

This paper examines a question the literature has largely left aside: how practitioners build and maintain a professional identity during their first years of work. The word “invisible” in the title has two meanings. First, it describes the situation of the novice, whose training is complete but who has neither clients nor reputation. This phase can last months or years and is experienced mainly as an absence of demand: few

enquiries, empty appointment slots and little response from the market. Second, it describes the occupation itself. Even established practitioners remain structurally undervalued, underpaid and uncredentialed, and their emotional and aesthetic work is seldom recognised as work.

The central claim of the paper is that professional identity in beauty work rests substantially on psychological resources rather than on technique alone. Technical skill is necessary, but it is a poor predictor of persistence. Two graduates of the same course may leave with comparable skills and follow very different paths, one still practising five years later and the other leaving within the first year. We propose that psychological capital, comprising self-efficacy, hope, optimism and resilience, accounts for much of this difference, and we ask how these resources are used, depleted and rebuilt in everyday beauty work.

Three questions guide the analysis. How do novices interpret the invisible phase, and which features of it are decisive for their persistence? Which psychological resources, as distinct from technical skill, enable them to remain in the occupation? How do gendered and classed structures shape the psychological work on which persistence depends?

The paper is organised in six sections. Section 2 sets out a theoretical framework combining aesthetic labour, emotional labour and psychological capital, and describes the approach and sources. Section 3 reconstructs the invisible phase as novices experience it. Section 4 traces the four components of psychological capital through the construction of professional identity. Section 5 discusses the gendered and classed dimensions of the argument, its contextual limits and its implications for vocational training. Section 6 concludes.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Aesthetic Labour and Body Work

Warhurst and Nickson (2007) introduced the term “aesthetic labour” for a requirement that has become common in interactive service work: employees are expected to display particular embodied attributes and to meet aesthetic standards as a condition of employment. In beauty work this requirement operates twice. Practitioners manage their own appearance to meet professional expectations, and they also work directly on clients’ bodies through sustained physical contact. Kang (2003) describes this second element as “body labour”, emphasising the intimacy it involves; beauty workers attend to the client’s body and emotional state together, often over long and repetitive sessions. Twigg, Wolkowitz, Cohen and Nettleton (2011) extend the point: body work is paid work that takes other people’s bodies as its immediate object, and it carries the low status associated with such work across health, care and personal services.

General accounts of aesthetic labour tend to understate how closely the beauty worker is tied to the work. The practitioner’s body serves at once as instrument, product and advertisement. A flight attendant presents a corporate appearance at some distance from the service exchange, whereas a beauty worker’s face, hands and manner form part of the service itself. The boundary between worker and work is therefore unusually weak, which helps explain why the psychological side of the job carries particular weight in the analysis that follows.

Qualitative research with beauty workers supports this view. Studies of hairdressers, nail technicians and other body workers show that practitioners establish professionalism through appeals to expertise, hygiene standards and technical skill, and through comparisons with medicine or psychology (Gimlin, 1996; Kang, 2003). These comparisons have a defensive function. They are made in an institutional context in which beauty work lacks formal credentials and carries stigma, so that emphasis on technical expertise also draws attention to the status the occupation lacks.

2.2. Emotional Labour and Its Invisible Costs

Hochschild's (1983/2012) concept of emotional labour, the management of feeling to produce a display that meets occupational expectations, has become central to the study of feminised service work, and beauty work is a clear example. In an early study of beauty therapists, Sharma and Black (2001) found that practitioners described their work as emotional rather than physical transformation: clients sought stress relief, validation and renewed confidence. This emotional dimension was not reflected in pay or working conditions, consistent with the broader devaluation of feminised service work.

Subsequent research has documented the costs of this labour. Beauty workers face elevated risks of emotional exhaustion, of a weakened boundary between self and role, and of interpreting client dissatisfaction as a judgement of personal worth (Grandey, 2000; Hong & Hong, 2019). The client relationship is also a source of meaning and well-being, as well as of strain (Gilius & Hendry, 2024). The relationship between performance and reward is uneven: the more skilfully emotional work is performed, the less visible it becomes as work, and the more readily the relevant skills are attributed to "natural femininity" rather than to training. On this reading, invisibility functions as a mechanism of devaluation rather than as a simple oversight of the market.

2.3. Psychological Capital as a Framework

Psychological capital (PsyCap) extends the logic of human and social capital to positive psychological resources. Developed in organisational psychology (Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007), it comprises four components. Self-efficacy is confidence in one's ability to mobilise the cognitive resources and actions required for success (Bandura, 1977). Hope is the capacity to set goals and to identify pathways towards them (Snyder, 2002). Optimism is an explanatory style that attributes success to internal, stable causes and treats failure as temporary and situation-specific. Resilience is the capacity to recover from adversity, uncertainty and failure. Across occupations, PsyCap is associated with higher job satisfaction, commitment and well-being and with lower stress and turnover intention (Avey, Reichard, Luthans, & Mhatre, 2011; Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007; Newman, Ucbasaran, Zhu, & Hirst, 2014).

The framework is used here for a specific reason. Research on aesthetic and emotional labour describes in detail what beauty work demands of workers, including effort, feeling and the withholding of recognition, but says less about the resources that allow some workers to absorb these costs and continue. The invisible phase places demands on each of the four PsyCap components. Lack of demand tests hope; rejection by clients tests self-efficacy; early setbacks test resilience; and the gap between training and practice tests optimism, because novices are taught that competence leads to recognition while the market does not immediately confirm this. PsyCap thus provides a vocabulary for describing which resources are under pressure and why some practitioners persist. Table 1 summarises this mapping, and Figure 1 places it within the overall argument.

Table 1. The four components of psychological capital and how the invisible phase tests them

Component	Definition	Invisible-phase stressor	Manifestation in beauty work	What technical training omits
Self-efficacy	Confidence in one's ability to mobilise resources and act successfully (Bandura, 1977)	Client rejection; low early demand	Pricing with confidence, setting boundaries, reading feedback as market information	Pricing, boundary-setting, separating market feedback from self-worth
Hope	Goal-setting plus the capacity to find pathways to goals (Snyder, 2002)	Market silence	Strategic patience; reinvestment in durable capital (skills, certificates)	Realistic time horizons for building a client base
Optimism	Explanatory style that treats setbacks as temporary and specific	Training–practice gap (competence without recognition)	Narrating the career as growth rather than a series of verdicts	How recognition is actually built over time
Resilience	Capacity to recover from adversity, uncertainty and failure	Early failure; occupational stigma	Drawing on clients, peers and the craft itself as sources of validation	Stigma management and internal sources of meaning

Note. Definitions follow Luthans, Youssef and Avolio (2007); stressor and manifestation columns are the author's synthesis of Sections 3–4.

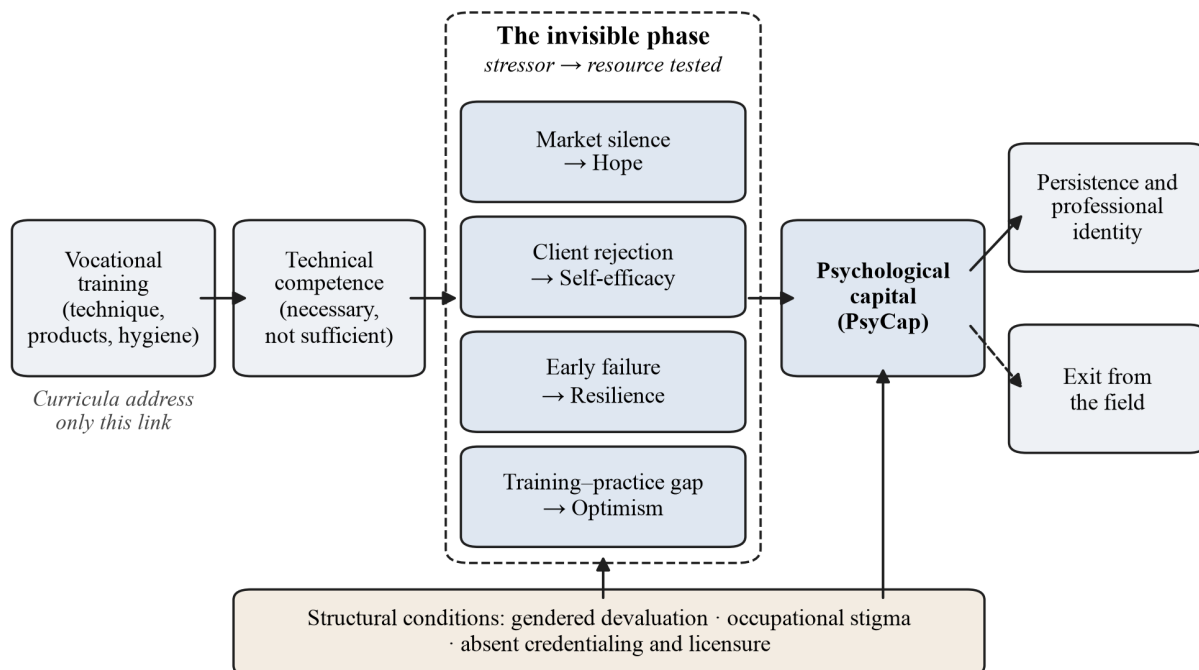


Figure 1. Conceptual model: from technical training to professional persistence

Note. Technical competence is a necessary input, but persistence depends on whether psychological capital survives the stressors of the invisible phase. Structural conditions shape both the stressors and the resources available to meet them. Author’s elaboration.

2.4. Approach and Sources

The article is an integrative conceptual synthesis rather than an empirical study. Sources were selected purposively according to two criteria: they document the experience of beauty and body-service workers, and they address at least one of the three themes of the argument, namely aesthetic and emotional labour, occupational stigma, or the psychological resources on which persistence depends. Ruy’s (2026) first-person account provides a description of the invisible phase from the inside, and the studies listed in Table 2 provide comparative and empirical grounding. PsyCap categories were applied to these sources interpretively; none of the original studies used the PsyCap framework.

Table 2. Principal empirical sources synthesised in this article

Source	Context	Workers studied	Design	Contribution to the argument
Sharma & Black (2001)	United Kingdom	Beauty therapists	Qualitative interviews	Beauty work framed as emotional labour; occupational rhetoric as a claim to recognition
Gimlin (1996)	United States	Hair-salon workers and clients	Ethnography	Expertise claims used to offset low occupational status
Kang (2003)	United States (Korean immigrant-owned salons)	Nail technicians	Ethnography	“Body labour”; emotional and physical labour shaped by gender, race and class
Hong & Hong (2019)	South Korea	Hair-salon workers	Survey	Resilience, burnout and turnover intention
Liao (2016); Ip (2017)	China (Shanghai)	Rural migrant women in beauty parlours	Qualitative	Affective labour, seniority and precarity
Sun (2025a, 2025b, 2026)	China (Beijing)	Young rural-to-urban migrant women in beauty salons	Fieldwork and interviews	Identity work, affective labour; conversion of aesthetic into certified capital
Kamran (2021, 2025)	Pakistan	Women beauty and retail workers	Ethnography and interviews	Occupational, class-based and gendered stigma; family resistance to entry
Alves (2018)	Brazil (Rio Grande do Sul)	Hairdressers (n = 9)	Semi-structured interviews (psychodynamics of work)	Client recognition as “the anchor of mental health”
Ruy (2026)	Brazil	Nail designer (first-person account)	Autobiographical narrative	Phenomenology of the invisible phase

Note. Alves (2018) and Sun (2025b) are unpublished theses; all other sources are peer-reviewed publications

or monographs.

3. The Invisible Phase: The First Years of the Beauty Career

3.1. The Gap Between Training and Practice

Vocational training in beauty concentrates on technical content: application methods, product knowledge, hygiene protocols and the use of tools. It implicitly assumes that competence, once achieved, will lead to professional success. What this assumption overlooks is the period, short for some practitioners and long for many, in which competence exists but is not yet recognised by the market.

Ruy's (2026) *Além da Técnica* describes this period through the case of Maria, a novice nail designer who has carefully prepared a workspace at home. The room is clean, materials are arranged on a tray and a diffuser releases a light scent. Maria has rehearsed her first working day many times and expects enquiries, bookings and a full schedule. Instead, she receives no bookings, and her social media announcement is liked only by her mother and a former school friend.

Maria interprets the lack of response as evidence of personal inadequacy. She lowers her prices, runs promotions and offers discounts to her first clients, without result. Only months later does she conclude that her difficulty lay in visibility rather than in competence. Ruy argues that every practitioner begins from this position.

The vignette illustrates a distinction that novices find difficult to maintain and that outsiders seldom notice: being unknown is not the same as being incompetent. When this distinction is kept in view, the absence of demand appears as a structural feature of the early career rather than as a verdict on ability, and repeated price-cutting appears as a strategic error rather than a rational response. This reframing also underpins the other PsyCap components, since hope and optimism depend on it. Figure 2 presents the contrast schematically.

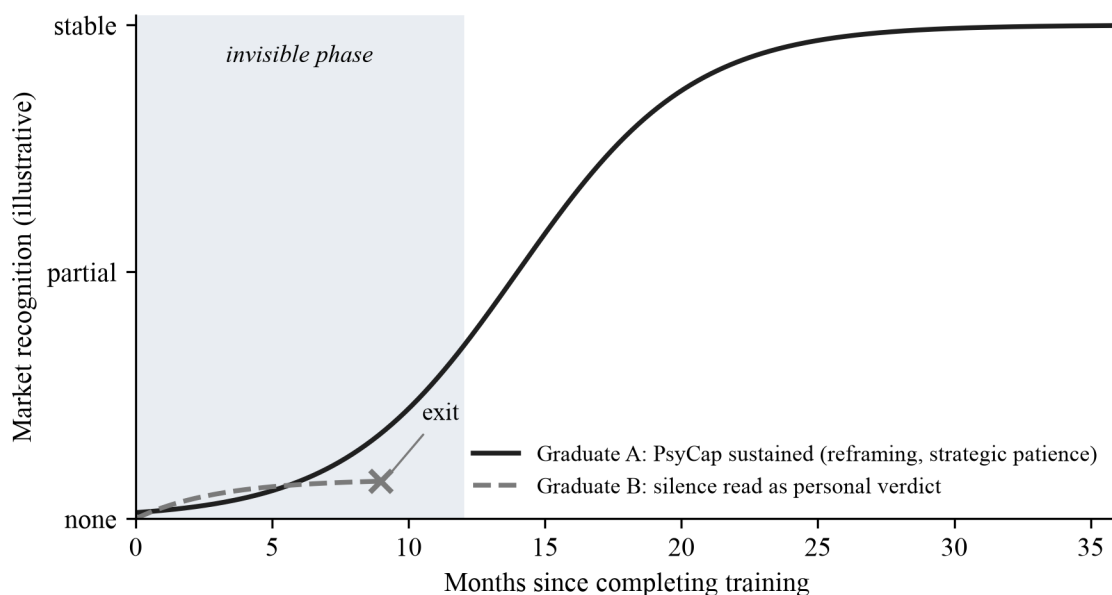


Figure 2. Two graduates with the same technical skill: schematic trajectories through the invisible phase

Note. Illustrative schematic based on the argument of Section 3, not empirical data. The shaded band marks the invisible phase, whose length varies in practice from months to years.

3.2. Emotional Labour in the Novice Phase

Emotional labour in beauty work begins with the first client. Sharma and Black (2001) found that therapists described their work as emotional transformation: clients came for relief, validation and confidence as well as for a service. This framing positions the practitioner as an emotional caretaker who must manage her own feelings in order to present an appropriate display to the client.

For novices, this labour is intensified by a particular vulnerability. They must manage clients' emotions while also managing their own insecurity, anxiety and fear of failure, without the experience or reputation that might support them. Research on aesthetic labour shows that workers are expected to embody organisational ideals and to follow emotional scripts that reinforce gender norms and class hierarchies. Lacking the confidence that comes with experience, novices are particularly prone to the internalisation described in Section 2.2, in which client dissatisfaction is taken as a reflection of the self rather than as information about the market.

4. Psychological Resources and the Construction of Professional Identity

4.1. Self-Efficacy: From Technical Confidence to Professional Confidence

Self-efficacy in beauty service work involves more than technical mastery. It includes confidence in setting appropriate prices, maintaining professional boundaries, presenting one's work accurately and managing the social dynamics of the client relationship. Research on body workers shows that, in the absence of institutional credentials, practitioners construct professionalism discursively, through claims of expertise, hygiene standards and comparison with established professions (Gimlin, 1996; Kang, 2003). This strategy serves two purposes: it asserts professional status, and it distinguishes the practitioner from "unprofessional" others in the field.

Developing self-efficacy in this context requires an interpretive shift. Market feedback needs to be read as information about business conditions rather than as a judgement of personal worth: a quiet week says something about marketing, pricing and timing, not about the practitioner's value. The move from "I am failing" to "my strategy is not yet working" may be one of the most consequential cognitive changes in the early career, and it is one that technical training does not address.

4.2. Hope and the Capacity for Strategic Patience

In the PsyCap framework, hope is the capacity to set goals and to identify pathways towards them. In beauty service work it appears as the ability to maintain a long-term perspective despite the immediate frustrations of the invisible phase. This involves what may be called strategic patience: the understanding that professional recognition accumulates through many small actions rather than arriving through a single breakthrough.

Ruy (2026) makes this point explicitly. She describes the temptation to wait for the right moment ("when I finish another course", "when I have more experience", "when I feel confident") and argues that such waiting hands control of one's career to an imagined future self. In her account, the confidence that novices expect to have before gaining experience in fact develops only through it.

Studies of Chinese rural migrant beauticians point to a similar dynamic at the level of careers (Ip, 2017; Liao, 2016; Sun, 2025a, 2025b, 2026). Some of the women studied, described by Sun (2025b) as "the more farsighted among them", converted early gains from emotional and aesthetic labour into more durable forms of capital, such as education, certifications, leadership roles and business plans, which did not depend on a youthful appearance. Ip (2017, p. 571) observes the same pattern from the perspective of the business, noting that what is valuable for a salon owner is "her certified skillset instead of her aesthetic labour". One

beautician summarised the lesson: “I used to think a good face could take you far. Now I know, without skills and certificates, you will never stand firmly on your own” (Sun, 2025b, p. 129). The move from embodied to institutionalised capital is a strategic reorientation, and it requires a degree of hope about a future that is not yet visible.

4.3. Resilience and the Management of Occupational Stigma

Beauty service work carries a stigma that complicates the construction of professional identity before any client is seen. In Pakistan, for example, beauty work is subject to a “stigma triad” of occupational, class-based and gendered stigma: low-status beauty work is regarded as “morally dubious”, many workers conceal their occupation from relatives, and families often resist or forbid women’s entry into the field (Kamran, 2021, 2025). Comparable patterns appear in other contexts in which the occupation is associated with feminised, low-status and sometimes morally suspect work. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) show how members of such “dirty work” occupations maintain a positive identity through shared ideologies that reframe, recalibrate and refocus the meaning of the work.

In this context, resilience refers to sustaining a positive professional self-concept despite external devaluation. Its most common form is the search for alternative sources of validation, such as clients, professional networks or the intrinsic satisfaction of skilled work. A qualitative interview study of hairdressers in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, found that client recognition functioned as “the anchor of mental health” (Alves, 2018, p. 22), easing the strain of physically and emotionally demanding work. One participant described it as follows: “When the client arrives here, a client that has never been here, ’bah, I came here because so-and-so sent me here’ [...] oh, that has no price, man, the best advertising” (Alves, 2018, pp. 21–22; author’s translation).

Reliance on client recognition is, however, both a resource and a risk. It provides validation, but it ties self-worth to external approval and therefore to the lack of demand that characterises the invisible phase. A resilient professional identity consequently requires internal sources of meaning that can sustain the practitioner when external recognition is absent. This requirement leads to the narrative dimension of psychological capital discussed in the next section.

4.4. Optimism and the Narrative Construction of Professional Selfhood

In the PsyCap framework, optimism is an explanatory style that interprets setbacks as temporary, specific and external rather than permanent, pervasive and personal. In beauty work this corresponds to the ability to describe one’s career as a process of development rather than as a series of judgements on one’s worth. The idea is consistent with Ibarra’s (1999) account of “provisional selves”, through which newcomers try out images of who they might become before a professional identity settles.

Ruy’s (2026) account of her own career illustrates this mechanism. She began working at thirteen in an online doughnut business and used her earnings to pay for a R\$100 online nail design course, practising at her parents’ dining table. She describes the fear she felt before each of her early clients, including trembling hands and the silent rehearsal of every step, and how she gradually came to treat these episodes as lessons rather than verdicts. The book’s central line, “the fear never disappears, it only changes address”, works as an optimistic narrative device: it treats fear as normal and presents persistence, rather than the absence of fear, as the key professional quality.

A similar logic operates at the collective level. Sharma and Black (2001) found that beauty therapists developed an “occupational rhetoric” that emphasised the emotional dimension of their work as an argument for greater professional recognition. Although this rhetoric may have been strategically motivated, it also supported identity: it allowed practitioners to regard their work as valuable and professionally legitimate. Occupational

rhetoric can thus be seen as one way in which psychological capital is shared within an occupation, a point that connects to the discussion of structural conditions in Section 5.2.

5. Discussion

5.1. Beyond Technical Skill

The sources reviewed here suggest that professional identity in beauty work develops through psychological processes that are related to, but distinct from, technical competence. The invisible phase is not only a period of skill consolidation; it is also a period in which practitioners build the psychological resources on which long-term persistence depends. This has implications for the relationship between training and identity. Vocational programmes that focus on technical instruction leave aside the preparation that helps practitioners cope with the emotional and social demands of the work. That practitioners already undertake some of this preparation themselves, for example through the occupational rhetoric described by Sharma and Black (2001), highlights the gap between what training provides and what the career requires.

Taken together, Sections 3 and 4 suggest the following propositions, which can be tested empirically:

P1. Among graduates with comparable technical competence, psychological capital at the end of training predicts persistence in the occupation two years later more strongly than measures of technical skill do.

P2. The effect of psychological capital on persistence is mediated by how novices interpret early market feedback, specifically by whether low demand is treated as information about pricing, visibility and timing or as a judgement of personal worth.

P3. Occupational stigma and the absence of formal credentials moderate this relationship, so that psychological capital is more strongly associated with persistence where institutional recognition of the occupation is weaker.

P4. The relative importance of the four components varies with institutional context. Hope and investment in credentials are expected to matter most where employment is precarious, resilience where family and community stigma is strong, and self-efficacy in self-employed, platform-based practice.

P5. Vocational curricula that combine technical instruction with explicit training in interpreting feedback, pricing and managing stigma reduce early exit from the occupation compared with curricula limited to technique.

5.2. The Gendered and Classed Logic of Invisible Labour

The invisibility of beauty service work is produced and maintained by gendered and classed structures that devalue feminised labour, particularly labour performed on and through the body. Research on aesthetic labour shows how appearance and embodiment become conditions of employment, while the labour involved remains largely unpaid and unrecognised. The Chinese case illustrates this: research on rural migrant beauticians shows that beauty work offers mobility while also deepening precarity, with workers' "cultivated bodies and emotions" becoming "instruments of subordination within a precarious labour system" (Sun, 2025b, p. 122; see also Liao, 2016; Sun, 2025a).

This is where the psychological capital framework reaches its limit. If beauty workers must develop exceptional psychological resources simply to remain in a structurally undervalued occupation, then the appropriate response is not only to strengthen individual resilience but also to change the conditions that make such resilience necessary. A framework designed to explain differences in persistence can easily become advice on self-management, offering a private solution to a public problem. The construction of professional identity is therefore also a collective and political process, carried out in training institutions, professional associations,

regulatory debates and the informal networks through which practitioners support one another.

5.3. Variation Across Contexts

The studies synthesised here come from the United States, the United Kingdom, South Korea, China, Pakistan and Brazil. These settings differ in labour market conditions, cultural attitudes towards beauty work, gender norms and the extent of state regulation. Several features are shared: the emotional demands of the work, the experience of invisibility and the importance of client recognition. There are also notable differences. Ruy's Brazilian account emphasises entrepreneurial self-presentation and the psychological rewards of visibility on social media. The Chinese studies highlight credentials as a route out of the precarity of embodied labour. The Pakistani research focuses on family and community stigma (Kamran, 2021, 2025). These differences suggest that the relative importance of the four PsyCap components varies across contexts, and that the ways in which psychological capital can be converted into professional standing depend on the institutional environment.

5.4. Limitations and Directions for Research

Three limitations should be noted. First, the article is a synthesis of secondary sources: its empirical basis consists of studies conducted by others for other purposes, and none of them used the PsyCap framework. Second, the country studies differ in depth and comparability, and the PsyCap framework has not been validated for beauty work across cultures, so the claims about contextual variation are provisional. Third, the description of the invisible phase relies heavily on a single first-person account, Ruy's, and one career cannot represent the occupation as a whole. In addition, two sources are unpublished theses (Alves, 2018; Sun, 2025b); they are used to illustrate mechanisms rather than to establish how widespread these are.

Future research could address these limitations directly. Longitudinal studies following cohorts of graduates through the invisible phase could test propositions P1 to P3, using the 24-item PsyCap Questionnaire (Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007) together with measures of technical skill and objective persistence outcomes, and could identify the points at which the risk of leaving is highest. Comparative studies addressing P4 should take into account the institutional conditions, such as licensing, unionisation and training reform, that shape how psychological capital is converted into professional recognition. More generally, research should treat psychological and structural factors as interdependent rather than as competing explanations, and ask under what conditions practitioners persist.

6. Conclusion

This article has argued that the construction of professional identity in the beauty industry is to a large extent a psychological process that takes place, largely unobserved, during the early phase of practitioners' careers. Technical competence is necessary but not sufficient: it does not explain why some practitioners endure low demand and occupational stigma while others with similar skills leave the field. Psychological capital, comprising self-efficacy, hope, optimism and resilience, offers an explanation, and the article has traced how each component operates in the everyday construction of professional identity.

The article makes two contributions. For the sociology of service work, it shows that beauty work involves not only aesthetic and emotional labour performed for clients but also the ongoing construction of professional identity through processes of meaning-making, which existing frameworks tend to treat as costs rather than as resources. For debates on vocational education and the valuation of care work, it suggests that the psychological preparation of practitioners and the structural recognition of their work are closely connected. Neither individual resilience nor formal credentials is sufficient on its own; the sustainability of beauty careers,

and of feminised service work more broadly, depends on progress in both.

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