"Paid companionship": a study on the phenomenon of gaming accompaniment under the perspective of emotional consumption

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Abstract The ever-changing digital technology has brought people into the era where everything is shown as a form of a medium, and the online game escort is gradually evolving into a new profession. At present, the game escort is not only a simple "newbie escort" but also an emotional exchange, and players are willing to pay a certain amount of money precisely because the process of game escort meets their needs. So, what are the reasons for the phenomenon of "game accompaniment"? What are the players' consumption motivations? How do game escorts increase consumer stickiness and promote their purchasing willingness? In this paper, we will analyze the above questions in depth through the research method of in-depth interview.
Keywords Game Accompaniment, Emotional Labor, Virtual Social Interaction

1 Introduction

In recent years, with the rapid development of online social platforms, voice chatting technology and the high rate of time spent in home in the context of the epidemic, people's demand for games is also increasing day by day. In this context, a new profession is born in the game industry - game escort.

Today's game escort does not only mean "newbie escort", but also highlights a structural consumption upgrade in the game industry. The person who provides this service provides game escort services to people who buy escort services through voice or text communication in the network and obtains a certain amount of compensation for this service. We have observed that although the service of "playing for others" has appeared in the game industry for a long time, the professional construction of game escort is a product of recent years, and the escort not only provides skills, but also provides chatting and social and emotional companionship. The phenomenon of escorts using deep performance to establish intimate relationships to obtain emotional compensation is actually a kind of invisible labor.

In this regard, we are curious: why is the phenomenon of "game escort" appearing? Who is consuming for "game escort"? What is the motive of their consumption? Why do consumers want to make such emotional consumption? What do they hope to get from it? Through what mechanism do game escorts make consumers buy from them?

2 Literature Review

2.1 A literature review on the phenomenon of game accompaniment

No specific research has been conducted abroad on the industry of "playbor" and its development, but the phenomenon of "playbor" associated with it has gained the attention of many scholars. According to Downey (2015), he examines the shift of the labor market to the Internet from a political and technological perspective, revealing the causes of "playbor " causes and its potential for empowerment [1]. Meanwhile foreign scholars Johnson and Woodcock (2019) examined how users of the well-known foreign gaming site Twitch transform their digital labor into financial gain from the perspective of online labor realization, pointing out that in the current online era, "playborers" are often accustomed to using new media channels to create rewards [2].

Domestic scholars have already studied this new profession. Domestic scholar Chen (2022) conducted a more detailed study of game escort practitioners from the perspectives of labor process, network society and transaction cost economics, and his study showed that under the influence of policies, game escort practitioners 's labor process shows the characteristics of mainly emotional labor [3]. In 2022, another domestic scholor, Li (2020), conducted a very detailed study of interpersonal interactions in online games from a cultural-philosophical perspective in her study "Interpersonal interactions in virtual culture", which showed that the virtual society formed in the process of game interactions often causes social differentiation in daily life [4]. Meanwhile, Fan (2020), in "Analysis of Digital Labor and Its Alienation in Marxist Perspective", studied the potential alienation behind free labor in capitalist society from a Marxist perspective. Her study shows that digital labor is alienated in all three aspects: the product of labor, labor itself, and the worker [10].

2.2 Literature review of the phenomenon of game accompaniment from the perspective of emotional consumption

Due to its complexity and controversy, the concept of emotional consumption does not have a precise definition in the current academic community. However, one of the most widely accepted descriptions of its meaning is "the emotional response of customers in the process of consumption".

Foreign scholars often study emotional consumption behavior from a sociological perspective. Hochschild (2012), an American sociologist of emotions, summarized and analyzed from a sociological point of view how individuals modify their emotions and perform them in the marketplace of emotions [5]. Simmel's 2004 book, The Philosophy of Money, examined the impact of the monetary system on human emotions from an economic perspective, showing that public emotions have become an exchangeable commodity under the monetary system [6].

In contrast, domestic scholars tend to focus on the phenomenon of emotional consumption from the perspective of communication science. Scholar Wang (2000) in his 2018 "Emotion Consumption and Emotion Industry-One of the Sociology of Consumption Research Series" studied emotion consumption in terms of its nature, and his study proposed that the essence of

emotion consumption is to provide virtual emotional products in a market way so as to achieve the satisfaction of consumers' virtual emotional needs [7]. In 2010, Sheng focused on the mechanism of emotional consumption when combined with specific media products. The results of his study demonstrate that the audience's own emotions are often turned into a social pastime tool by the media [8]. Meanwhile, Pan (2019) looked at the transformation of the entire social consumption structure and suggests that in China, which has entered a new consumerist society, media are becoming more closely related to people's daily lives, and people are buying more for their own physical experiences and spiritual needs [9].

However, none of these studies have examined the phenomenon of game escorting from the consumers' perspective, and therefore have not answered the question about the mechanism through which game escorting prompts consumers' consumption behavior.

2.3 Research Question

Therefore, this paper will try to answer the following questions from the theories of emotional consumption, virtual socialization and emotional labor: What are the reasons for the emergence of the phenomenon of "game escort"? What are the target audiences and consumption motives of "game escort" consumption? What are their needs? Through what mechanism do game escorts stimulate consumers' purchasing behavior?

3 Method

This paper adopts a research method of in-depth interviews in an attempt to answer the above questions.

3.1 In-depth interviews

3.11 Interview Outline

The interview questions were divided into three main parts. In the first part, we asked the interviewees about basic information such as age, gender, time in the industry, platforms where they take orders, occupational categories and occupational characteristics. In the second part, we use the interview to understand the players' consumption motivation, the characteristics of the player group and the career characteristics and value of the escort. In the third part, the author explores the emotional contribution and the value of the emotional labor of the escorts in the escorting process.

During the interviews and the conduct of the study, the researcher tried to avoid the fourfold ethical issues and transgressions highlighted by scholar Alan Bryman: (1) causing harm to the study participants; (2) not using informed consent documents or materials; (3) violating the privacy of the study participants; and (4) deceiving the study participants. Also, if the interviewee had any questions that he or she did not want to answer or was dissatisfied with during the interview, he or she could remain silent or withdraw from the interview. Interview materials that

the interviewees declared they did not want to disclose were not included or cited in this study.

3.12 Choice of targeted interviewees

This study conducted 15-minutes of semi-structured in-depth interviews with each of the 10 interviewers of different genders, ages, and education levels. The interviews began in December 2022 and ended in January 2023. According to the maximum sampling principle of the qualitative research method, the interviewees differed in age, occupation, education level, and region they lived in, with a low level of homogeneity. Interviews were conducted by telephone interviews, text interviews by WeChat, and one-on-one face-to-face interviews at Tencent meetings. The interview results were organized into an eight-thousand-word verbatim manuscript.

After two weeks, the author finally selected 10 interviewees through unsolicited private messages, unsolicited consumption, and referrals. All the interviewees' identity information was anonymized to protect privacy. The five escorts received their orders from "Bishin App", Weibo and WeChat. The five clients were also selected from these three channels. In the selection of interviewees, the author noticed a phenomenon that the proportion of students and even college students are not low in both groups. On the one hand, the target players of popular e-sports games are the teenage groups. On the other hand, the time flexibility of "game playing" is more suitable for students who need part-time jobs to earn commissions or need company.

Table 1 The basic information statistics of all interviewees (nicknames) are listed in the table below.

Name (Nick-name)	Gender	Age	Identity	Trade Platform	Frequency (Per Week/ hours)	Career
Zhang	Male	20	Part-time	Bixin app	30	Sophomore
Wan Zi	Female	27	Full-time	WeChat	70	Freelance
Xiao Xu	Male	21	Part-time	Bixin app	20	Junior
Qiu	Female	21	Part-time	Weibo Group	23	Junior
Baibai	Male	26	Part-time	Bixin app	33	Middle school teacher
Xiao An	Male	19	Consumer	Bixin app	12	Freshman
Sheep	Female	27	Consumer	WeChat	8	Staff
Qiqi	Female	22	Consumer	Bixin app	20	Senior
Mantis Shrimp	Male	31	Consumer	Bixin app	17	Staff
Miracle	Male	28	Consumer	WeChat	18	Official staff in local government

4 Data Analysis and Findings

After two weeks of interviews and re-interviews and personal observations, we compiled and analyzed the process of the game escorts' labor in conjunction with the interview content. When

we tried to get answers to the questions about the emotional labor and the perception of its value and representation, we were surprised to find that the process of giving or consuming emotional labor was accompanied by a certain form of socialization. The interviewees' answers to the questions about the motivations behind the emotional labor and the hidden social needs associated with it support my belief that,

"Many people just want to find someone to talk to, and this kind of competitive game provides a platform to vent, and we, the escorts, are the listeners." (S1)

"Very often, the orders are ordered more often and the communication with the bosses sometimes becomes like friends." (S2)

"Usually, we chat about the content of words, food, clothing, housing and transport will talk about some, that is, friends will talk about all will talk, I think to identify, and a customer's relationship is good, depending on his strong desire to share, some sharing desire is particularly strong, generally can be developed into a good relationship with friends." (S2)

After my in-depth communication about the customers' attitudes towards game escorting, I found that the interviewees' answers corroborated my thoughts: compared with the interviewees' main occupation and the characteristics of traditional industries, the working hours and equipment of game escorting are highly flexible. At the same time, the diversity of platforms and the freedom of management make the "emotional labor" behind the fun labor hidden and thus often ignored. However, it is worth mentioning that emotional labor is the biggest difference between the game escort industry and the traditional industry.

4.1 The commodification of professional identity and the extension of emotional labor

For the game escort industry, due to the invisibility of the escorting process and the anonymity of the information, the voice becomes one of the most important elements for all the production materials of the escort. Customers' choice and consumption of escorts is often influenced by their clear preferences and requirements for voice. Voice auditions are also placed most prominently in the introduction of the escort's homepage. Although the game technology is important, the difference in voice becomes the most important deciding factor when consumers choose to spend their money with the same technology.

In order to get more income and the invisibility of the accompanying process, escorts often adjust their voices to meet consumer preferences, and their voices become a fixed "persona" that they present to consumers. In addition to packaging their voices, escorts often operate their own homepage accounts and work weibo to further strengthen their "persona". The common female escort persona is often "soft and cute loli" and "high and cold lady". The common persona of male escorts is often "high cold male god", "gentle milk dog" or "wild king brother". The creation of these personas is often done by setting up avatar photos, which tend to be homogeneous. Females tend to be young and often appear in a breast-focused angle. Males tend to focus on angles that show throat knots, pectoral muscles, etc. Hawkshields has suggested that female flight attendants often appear "sexualized" in their advertising images, in response to passengers' sexual fantasies. This holds true for male and female escorts as well. [11]

These game escort platforms provide an opportunity to commercialize emotions, allowing

them to be converted into economic benefits. The escorts transform themselves virtually and construct different personas through media technology, and the maintenance of these personas translates into the players' gaming and emotional experiences. The virtualization features contribute to the commoditization of this profession, and all the image modification and maintenance are driven by the internal factors of gaining profit.

In addition to the communication about the game itself during the game, often the topic involves the personal life of the consumer or the escort. In addition to the influence of the casual nature of chatting, the emotional labor nature of the profession itself makes some escorts' private lives and real emotions often called upon as resources, either spontaneously or non-spontaneously. In addition to simple game escorting, a number of other companionship businesses have been extended. Some of these are for economic purposes some are for spontaneous extensions.

These extensions of emotional labor often led to a deeper social relationship between the escort and the other party. The convenience of the technological medium breaks down the boundaries and time limits of the escort's services, as well as the traditional buyer-seller relationship. However, based on the purpose of profit, the positioning of the roles between the two can also create an emotional exploitation, and consumers will expect the escort to charge less.

4.2 The efficient transformation of daily social and emotional consumption

In addition to simple game play, in order to improve the stickiness of users, escorts often extend the communication to daily life, and increase the emotional input through daily social interaction, so that it can be efficiently converted into consumption behavior. Based on the perception of the "labor-capital" relationship between escorts and consumers, many escorts often establish personal contacts with consumers, such as WeChat and QQ, in order to obtain long-term consumption and higher pay.

The fact that escorts call consumers "boss" reflects the recognition of the employment relationship between escorts and consumers. At the same time, this profession can meet people's implicit social needs. Combined with the interview data, it is easy to find that the efficient transformation of emotion and reward is often proportional to the emotional initiative that escorts occupy in their daily social life with consumers. But at the same time, once this initiative exceeds a certain threshold, it often becomes a reverse emotional exploitation, and consumers will ask the escort to lower the billing rate. But the transformation of this social relationship is not clear, which also makes the emotional contribution of escorts and the extraction of their residual value more hidden. At the same time, there is no clear boundary between emotional payment and demand. Although the convenience of media technology satisfies the purpose of escorts to realize the transformation of emotional labor and economic benefits, it also strengthens the commercial emotional connection with consumers. But this transformation also makes possible the negative impact of their interference with the true perception of self.

5 Conclusion & Reflection

This study theorizes the emotional labor and virtual socialization of game escorts through the interview method and tries to answer the question of what is the target audience and consumption motive of "game escorts" and the mechanism of game escorts to stimulate consumers' purchasing behavior. The study finds that the target audience of game escorts is young people aged 17-30 who have more free time, like to live at home and are eager for companionship, and game escorts often stimulate consumers to purchase services by offering some hourly discounts or playing the "emotion card".

This study suggests that game escort is a kind of professional identity commercialization, which reflects the commercialization of the game escort phenomenon. On the other hand, it also provides an idea for the organizational development of game escorts in the context of the prevalent network economy in modern China. However, it is worth noting that this study also finds that the phenomenon of game escorting affects the real lives of escorts and negatively interferes with their self-image and true perceptions, which is worthy of caution and reflection. However, this study is not perfect in terms of the scope of audience motivation because of the insufficient sample size. In future studies, researchers may need to pay more attention to some negative phenomena in game escorts and expand the research and practice of virtual socialization.

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