

Emotional Labor in the Paid Co-playing Practice

Yahui CAO

City University of Hong Kong
Hong Kong
iuhay.c@my.cityu.edu.hk

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INTRODUCTION

The paid co-playing service, is a video game practice in China, in which customers pay gamers to play video games with them. Paid co-player as service workers dedicate to improving customers' game experience by offering their gaming proficiency, in form of considerate and caring communication, and pleasant voices. The paid co-players who service to gamers embody the characteristics of emotional labor, defined by Hochschild (1983) as compensated work that "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others". Emotional labor is often assumed to be what women are 'naturally' predisposed to and 'better at' (Hochschild, 1983). And women are more likely to face harassment and scorn as emotional laborers (Jackson, 2019, Hochschild, 1983). In paid co-playing practice, the effect caused by emotional labor on paid co-players especially for genders has not been revealed. Previous research mentioned women's occupational dilemmas in the patrilineal culture of video games, such as live streamers, professional eSports players and game developers, while gender performance in the job of paid co-player is unclear (Witkowski, 2018, Gray et al., 2017, Taylor, 2018, Zhang and Hjorth, 2019).

Besides, the significance of emotional labor has been acknowledged in a variety of occupations, in which employer-employee relations examined a lot to reveal feeling rules that are considered appropriate emotional expression controlled by organizations (Hochschild, 1979, Hochschild, 1983, Morris and Feldman, 1996), which may lead to self-identity confusion, job burnout, and other negative feelings and poor health of workers (Hochschild, 1983, Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002, Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993, Jeung et al., 2018, Moreo et al., 2019). While few games research work has examined emotional labor, the field has discussed other forms of labor in games. Previous research on emotional labor in video games is mainly focused on the live streaming (Taylor, 2018, Wohn, 2019, Guarriello, 2019, Woodcock and Johnson, 2019). While little research mentions the well-being and dilemmas of people who provide emotional labor between work and play. As paid co-playing is a novel practice in video games, emotional labor in paid co-playing practice has received less attention. Examining emotional labor in paid co-playing practices will not only enrich related research of emotional labor in video games but also help to understand the dilemma of paid co-players between work and play.

This study investigates how emotional labor "exists" in paid co-playing practices, which is mainly focusing on the paid co-players to see their feeling rules, experiences and the consequent impact on themselves by providing emotional labor in paid co-playing service. In-depth interview is adopted with eight participants from Bixin app

which is one of the most famous paid co-playing platforms in China (Boellstorff et al., 2012, Spradley, 1980).

Firstly, unspoken feeling rules regulate paid co-player' behaviors to affect gamers and make them 'feel good'. Previous research on emotional labor emphasizes "feeling rules" on the emotional labor of organizations so that their clients get a suitable experience (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993, Grandey, 2003, Hochschild, 1979). Feeling rules exemplify emotional expectations for workers, which are disciplined, regulated and managed by their organization to achieve organizational norms or goals. In the paid co-playing practice, gamers who purchase paid co-playing services act not only in customer identity, but also act as employers. In this relationship between customers and paid co-players, paid co-players' portraits, voices, attitudes towards gamers, game experiences will affect customers and make them feel good. To satisfy the potential customer's expectations, cheating is a common way to use. Paid co-players may use fake portraits and voice changers catering to customers. Also, paid co-players should balance of intimacy and alienation in the relationship with their customers or potential customers. Intimacy relationship helps to get more orders from their customers. While in the Chinese relation-based society, too intimacy between servant and customer may lead to work for free. Besides, in order to get satisfaction evaluations from their customers, paid co-players need to adjust their actions, feelings and discourse to cater to customers, sometimes those actions and discourse they performed are not their genuine desire.

Secondly, gender discrimination and harassments exist in the paid co-playing practice. Men take a large part of customers to invite female paid co-players on the platform, mostly not for improving achievement in video games, but take female paid co-players as accessories to games and gameplay (Witkowski, 2018). Female paid co-players more easily encounter discrimination and harassment, which is not only because of their femininity as a service work but also because of their gamer identity in video games. Hochschild (1983) finds that emotional labor is concerned as low status in the social hierarchy of gender, the job requirements for men and women are different, although they take the same job position. In the paid co-playing practice, gamers often take female co-player as people for emotional talking, while taking male paid co-player as players for high efficiency of game skills. The femininity of the paid co-player has the potential to amplify hegemonic masculinity in the video game field.

Thirdly, Endless work makes it ambiguous between play for themselves and play for work. In the paid co-playing practices, the workplaces of paid co-player are various video games. When playing with their customers, paid co-players need to service for teaching their customers game skills, talking about entertaining topics, paying attention to customers' moods and their game experience, which might cause different game experiences compared with paid co-player to play video games alone or with their friends without payment. This phenomenon exhibits what Hochschild (1983) indicated that the workers are estranged from their own feelings in the workplace when their actions and emotion are disciplined in a commodification process.

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