

Affective labor and performative masculinity: Examining the performances of Vietnamese game streamers (WIP paper)

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Keywords

affective labor, masculinity, performativity, game streamer, Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

Game live streaming plays a central role in building an engaging and passionate community within the gaming ecosystem. This billion-dollar industry has seen significant growth over the past decades and is projected to expand by 10.2% over the next five years (Modor Intelligence 2024). While ample research on its culture and impact is widely focused on Western contexts (e.g., Johnson and Woodcock 2017; Johnson 2021; Maloney 2018), there remains a notable gap in research on the Asia-Pacific region. This gap is particularly striking given the rapid rise of gaming cultures in Southeast Asia, which underscores the need for more focused studies in these areas. Vietnam has a significant games culture within the growing Southeast Asian market. Game streaming accounts for approximately 45% of all online content consumption in the country (Appota 2021), often attributed to its young population (Allcorrect Group 2022).

Research on game-related content, including live streaming, revolves around three pillars of creators, platforms, and viewers. Central to the success of game streamers is their online performance of affective labor, which encompasses emotional engagement, audience interaction, and the creation of a sense of community (Woodcock and Johnson 2019a). Affective labor (Hardt and Negri 2001) describes the visceral feelings of those whose labor turns passions and hobbies into careers. While there is rich literature examining feminine social media influencers, research on the masculinity of online content creators is in its infancy. This paper focuses on the affective labor of masculine game streamers in a Vietnamese context.

In Vietnam, global streaming platforms such as YouTube and Facebook remain major sites where content creators broadcast their gameplay, often with localized games like *Arena of Valor* (TiMi Studio Group 2016), *PubG: Battlegrounds* (PUBG Studios 2017) *Free Fire* (Garena 2017), and *Genshin Impact* (miHoYo 2020). However, there is a growing presence of regional platforms of NimoTV, driven by promotional incentives and a user-friendly interface. Preliminary digital ethnographic observation reveals that Vietnamese game streamers often work at night, wearing loose-fitting clothes, and interact with their audience in an unscripted and informal manner. This runs counter to Western game streamers, who are often more attentive and professionalized (Johnson and Woodcock 2017).

Proceedings of CDiGRA 2024

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These Vietnamese game streamers achieve popularity not only through gaming skills but by being perceived as genuine and original, often swearing, talking loudly in a casual manner, and making jokes. This approach fosters a sense of intimacy, encouraging viewers to stay longer and contribute through donations. These findings align with the concept of affective labor in the game live streaming context, where content creators' abilities to connect emotionally with their audience generate a dedicated following (Woodcock and Johnson 2019b). By embracing a laid-back and casual approach, these content creators seemingly challenge the conventional norm of masculinity.

Ultimately, this research advances knowledge at the intersection of affective labor and masculinity in the Southeast Asian context. This approach provides crucial insights into the digital dynamics of Southeast Asia and enriches the global discourse by revealing the diverse ways in which gaming and digital cultures manifest and evolve within this distinct and vibrant sociocultural environment. The examination of Vietnamese game streamers not only fills a significant gap in existing literature but also emphasizes the importance of localized studies in comprehending the global impact of digital media. As the gaming industry continues to expand, understanding these regional nuances will be vital for both scholars and practitioners aiming to engage with the rapidly evolving digital landscape.

ENDNOTE

¹ A worldwide version of Huya Live.

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