

Interpreting Para-social Intimacy among Players from the Perspective of Emotional Labor Theory: A Case Study of Sky: Children of the Light

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Abstract. In the realm of game socialization, existing research on affective labor predominantly focuses on quantifiable, commercialized forms (e.g., paid game companionship), paying insufficient attention to non-commercial fields' player-to-player interactions. This study investigates the jianhu-zaizai relationship (a mentor-apprentice bond) in Sky: Children of the Light through the lens of affective labor. Employing in-depth interviews with 10 experienced jianhu, the research reveals that jianhu are primarily driven by altruism, engaging in affective labor through teaching, companionship, and emotional support, which fosters a simulated intimacy governed by a gift economy rather than monetary exchange. Findings indicate that mentors employ both surface and deep acting strategies, incurring emotional costs such as time investment and emotional suppression. These dynamics and associated risks (e.g., emotional exhaustion) are further moderated by age and relationship duration. In this research, the jianhu's labor partially aligns with definitions of affective labor, the absence of clear exploitation and measurable surplus value challenges its classification under traditional paradigms. This study underscores the complexity of affective labor in non-commercial contexts and offers insights for game design and community management, suggesting that future research develop tailored metrics to capture immaterial investments and returns.

Keywords: Sky: Children of the Light, immaterial labor, affective labor, mobile games, simulated intimacy

1. Introduction

With the evolution of video games, players have established rules of engagement within virtual gaming spheres that require adherence. The transmission of "gamer ethos"—such as a sense of achievement, spirit of cooperation, individual emotions, and moral values—has fostered simulated intimacy among participants in these digital worlds [1]. As a social adventure game, Sky: Children of the Light (hereinafter referred to as Sky) employs a unique progressive emotional design that encourages proactive socialization. Its distinctive anonymity mechanism enhances players' sense of security, thereby facilitating self-disclosure and emotional expression [2]. The fundamental concern

in affective labor research remains understanding how management influences such labor, along with the social consequences this impact entails for individuals, groups, and organizations [3]. Most studies on affective labor in games focus on quantifiable forms, such as paid companionship or virtual romantic relationships, while overlooking unquantifiable affective labor between players.

This study focuses on the *jianhu* (a term for an experienced player who acts as a mentor or guardian) and *zaizai* (referring to a novice or apprentice) relationship in *Sky*, and attempts to interpret how players sustain a "simulated intimacy" through "immaterial labor" such as voice communication, emotive gestures, and gift exchanges from the perspective of affective labor. On one hand, this approach may deepen the understanding of non-instrumental emotional connections in game-based social interactions; on the other hand, it can provide empirical support for the applicability of affective labor theory in virtual environments. The research is structured along three dimensions: the practical characteristics of the *jianhu-zaizai* relationship in *Sky*, the behavioral logic behind mentors' emotional investments, and their alignment with affective labor theory.

Methodologically, this study employs in-depth interviews and textual analysis. Using judgment sampling, ten players with experience as *jianhu* (aged 14–29, with 1–8 *zaizai* each) were selected for in-depth interviews. The interview questions were designed around four dimensions—motivation, behavior, norms, and impact—and were structured to progress from general to specific, ensuring thematic saturation. A key advantage of this method is its capacity to uncover underlying meanings in discourse, allowing flexibility to adapt questioning based on participants' responses and probe deeper into emerging themes, thereby strengthening the research process.

The ultimate aim of this study is to determine whether the emotional investments of *jianhu* in *Sky* conform to the definition of affective labor, and to explore the particularities of affective labor within non-commercial gaming social contexts. The findings are intended to provide insights for the management of online communities and the design of in-game social interactions.

2. Research methods

The interview questions were designed around four key dimensions: motivation, behavior, norms, and impact.

The first question aimed to explore the initial motivations of respondents for becoming a *jianhu* (mentor) (Q1: Why did you initially choose to become a *jianhu*?). This question was designed to distinguish between different types of motivations, in order to examine in subsequent analysis whether the mentor's strategies in affective labor are related to their "non-instrumental" or "instrumental" motives. By investigating differences in motivation, the study seeks to further verify whether player communities are driven by "non-instrumental" motivations such as pure interest, sense of responsibility, or community identification.

The second question focused on how respondents define the role of *jianhu* and how they perceive its distinction from other in-game relationships (Q2: What do you think a *jianhu* is, and how is it different from other kinds of game relationships?). Its purpose was to reveal the cognitive boundaries respondents assign to the *jianhu* role and analyze whether they subjectively differentiate affective labor from other forms of social interaction. This helps verify whether players are consciously aware of the affective labor implicitly embedded in the *jianhu* relationship.

The third question solicited specific behavioral examples from the respondents (Q3: What do you usually do with your *zaizai*? Could you give some examples?). This was intended to provide empirical material for subsequent coding analysis and to help distinguish between surface acting and deep acting.

The fourth question examined whether respondents engage in surface acting or deep acting when responding to a zaizai's request for help (Q4: How do you respond when your zaizai encounters difficulties?). By collecting detailed descriptions of the respondents' reactions, this question facilitates analysis of potential risks associated with affective labor.

The fifth question focused on determining whether the respondent's immaterial investments were voluntary or exploitative in nature (Q5: Are you willing to sacrifice your personal time for your zaizai? Why?). This question aimed to examine the underlying motivations of players' behaviors, distinguishing between active, willing investment and passive, obligatory undertaking.

Question six also addressed the risks associated with affective labor (Q6: If your apprentice continuously engages in utilitarian behavior, such as persistently requesting paid virtual item packages, would you still maintain this relationship?). By inquiring about the respondents' attitudes and decision-making when faced with prolonged unilateral demands, this question sought to determine the balance of giving and receiving in the jianhu-zaizai relationship. It is designed to analyze how respondents cope with potential emotional exploitation and the risk of relationship breakdown.

Question seven aimed to explore the non-instrumental consensus within the game community and perceptions toward virtual gifting (Q7: Is there an unwritten rule in the game that jianhu should not accept gifts or money?). The purpose was to investigate the significance of virtual gifts and the impact of anonymity on player behavior, thereby assessing whether the jianhu-zaizai relationship maintains its non-instrumental nature.

Question eight sought to understand players' attitudes toward utilitarian behavior within the game (Q8: Have you encountered zaizai or jianhu who exhibit utilitarian behavior, e.g., explicitly asking for paid gifts? What do you think of such players?). By capturing respondents' perspectives, this question helps validate how utilitarian motivations can undermine trust and balance within the community, revealing the effects of such behavior on simulated intimacy in an anonymous environment.

Question nine aimed to explore the dynamic evolution of mentors' self-perception (Q9: After mentoring an apprentice for an extended period, has your understanding of the role of jianhu changed?). This question was designed to investigate how players' cognition of the jianhu identity transforms over time. By analyzing discrepancies between their initial and current perceptions, the study seeks to examine whether virtual relationships trigger a process of identity reconstruction among players.

Question ten focused on the actual permeation and impact of the jianhu-zaizai relationship on players' offline lives (Q10: Has this relationship affected your real life?). The objective was to gather evidence of affective labor manifesting in the real-world dimension. By identifying behavioral changes or psychological effects resulting from simulated intimacy, this question helps demonstrate the social significance of such bonds and determine whether they hold "authenticity" within the framework of affective labor.

The final question addressed the social meaning of simulated intimacy (Q11: Do you consider this relationship important?). Through respondents' subjective evaluations, this item probed the perceived value of virtual connections. By analyzing whether players view the relationship as a meaningful interpersonal bond that extends beyond the confines of the game, or merely as a transient instrumentally driven interaction, the study ultimately aims to verify whether affective labor within virtual contexts fosters genuine emotional connections.

3. Research results

3.1. Age dimension

As shown in Table 1, the initial motivation of adolescent players is strongly characterized by altruism. Their willingness to “guide newbies” stems largely from an innate desire to help others. In contrast, adult players are motivated by both instrumental and emotional needs.

Regarding role perception, adolescents demonstrate relatively vague self-boundaries, often conflating the jianhu identity with other in-game relationships. This makes them more susceptible to emotional distress when encountering utilitarian behavior (e.g., novice players requesting paid virtual item packages from mentors). Adults, on the other hand, deliberately differentiate between multiple roles. They exhibit a clearer understanding of such utilitarian actions and employ concrete strategies to manage them.

In terms of affective labor strategy, adolescents engage mainly in surface acting. They express willingness to empathize with and console their zaizai, but their support often remains situational and short-term, with their own activities taking precedence. Adults tend toward deep acting, accompanied by cognitive reconstruction—some relationships even extend beyond the game into real life.

The potential for in-game relationships to extend into reality also varies by age. Adolescents show higher involvement during leisure periods such as summer vacation, whereas adults are more likely to integrate virtual bonds into their offline lives—for example, by meeting in person or attending gaming events together.

Table 1. Analysis by age dimension

	Adolescent Group (18 years and below)	Adult group (aged 18 and above)
Initial Motivation	Altruism	Fulfillment of instrumental and emotional needs
Role Perception	Relatively blurred boundaries	Clear distinction between this role and other relationships
Affective Labor Strategy	Primarily surface acting; willing to empathize yet prioritize own matters	Primarily deep acting, with cognitive reconstruction; relationships often extend beyond the game
Risk Perception	Pronounced emotional frustration when facing utilitarian behavior	Clear awareness of utilitarian behavior and explicit coping strategies
Real-life Impact	High engagement during summer vacation, low after semester begins	Integration with real life

3.2. Duration dimension

As shown in Table 2, during the "Novice Phase" (3 months and below), interactions are almost exclusively centered around in-game tasks. The affective labor of jianhu primarily takes the form of on-demand companionship, with no significant shift in identity observed. They strive to assist their zaizai, unilaterally evaluating the relationship as “important.”

Upon entering the "Stabilization Phase" (4–12 months), in-game tasks and daily social interactions become equally important, and companionship gradually follows a more fixed schedule. During this stage, the self-identity of jianhu begins to loosen, and the relationship often evolves into a friendship. When faced with persistent unilateral demands from zaizai, some jianhu mitigate

burnout by lowering their expectations (e.g., viewing the apprentice as an ordinary online acquaintance). The perceived value of the relationship shifts from “important” to “replaceable.”

When the relationship exceeds 12 months, interaction scenarios become highly diversified, extending from online to real life. The intensity of affective labor stabilizes, and jianhu often develop systematic coping mechanisms. Identity becomes further multiplexed; mentors redefine their roles based on prolonged interaction. The evaluation of the relationship’s value becomes highly individualized—its significance depends on the mutual experience of both parties.

Table 2. Analysis by duration dimension

	Short-Term (≤ 3 months)	Medium-Term (4 – 12 months)	Mentorship Duration (≥ 12 months)
Focus of Interaction	Centered around in-game tasks	Balanced between game tasks and social interaction	Diversified, extending to real life
Affective Labor Intensity	Primarily on-demand companionship	Scheduled companionship during fixed periods	Stable and consistent
Identity Shift	No significant change	Transition from apprentice to friend	Increased role multiplexing
Burnout and Coping	Little burnout observed; lacks strategies to handle unilateral demands	Lowers expectations (e.g., viewing the other as a casual online friend)	Develops systematic coping mechanisms
Perceived Value of Relationship	Considered important	Coexistence of importance and replaceability	Highly individualized

4. The mechanism of affective labor in the jianhu-zaizai relationship

4.1. Operational logic

The game motivates players to voluntarily seek friendships and cooperate by designing scenarios that require multi-player collaboration, imbuing these settings with emotional narratives and stories. All ten interviewees explicitly cited helping others and alleviating loneliness among their initial motivations, indicating that the jianhu-zaizai relationship is markedly non-utilitarian in nature. Seasonal events and community traditions within the game strengthen emotional bonds through "shared memories," elevating interactions from mere "game tasks" to "emotional rituals" [2]. Interviewees consistently mentioned ritualized activities such as candle-running, completing seasonal quests, celebrating New Year’s Eve, and birthday events. However, unlike adult players, minor participants did not reference interactions beyond the game—such as celebrating New Year’s Eve together, learning skills from one another, or meeting in person.

Emotions among players can propagate within the game. Just as members of a well-coordinated team grow closer through collaboration, the jianhu-zaizai relationship in Sky evolves over time [1]. Most interviewees reported a transition from a mentoring relationship to a friendship. Conversely, negative interactions—such as a zaizai’s utilitarian behavior (e.g., seeking unilateral monetary or labor benefits)—can lead to emotional frustration and diminished expectations on the part of the jianhu. As Interviewee 2 stated: “I was really hurt by their coldness later and felt down for a long time. Now I’ve taken on a new zaizai, but we’re just ordinary friends.”

4.2. Strategies and risks of affective labor

In the service industry, affective laborers often switch between "surface acting" and "deep acting" to preserve their sense of self [4]. A similar phenomenon was observed among the interviewees, many of whom mentioned both strategies. Surface acting includes suppressing emotions, offering scripted or immediate yet superficial responses, and defensive denial. Deep acting involves cognitive reconstruction, emotional synchronization, and reciprocity loops. These two states dynamically shift depending on the stage of the jianhu-zaizai relationship, the jianhu's age and experience, and the degree of reciprocity.

The most significant risk for jianhu (mentors) is emotional exhaustion. According to Affective Resource Theory, affective laborers expend psychological effort, which depletes their emotional resources. If these resources are not replenished, the individual may experience discomfort and ultimately emotional exhaustion [5]. Among the interviewees who faced unilateral contribution or utilitarian behavior from their zaizai (apprentices), the majority indicated that they would no longer invest high levels of enthusiasm, sacrifice personal time, and would only regard the other as an ordinary friend. Interviewee 6 described themselves as having "come to terms with it" – which, in essence, represents a retreat to surface acting after the failure of deep acting. When in-game relationships extend into real life, most interviewees expressed that they would feel a sense of loss if the relationship ended, as revealed in the final question regarding the importance of the bond. Those who did not experience emotional exhaustion developed deeper relationships with their zaizai, thereby obtaining emotional compensation. However, this also carries the risk of relationship alienation. As Interviewee 8 stated, "They just saw me as an ATM/tool." Another risk is blurred boundaries. Interviewee 2 noted, "Sky relationships are prone to ambiguity; the jianhu-zaizai dynamic exists somewhere between mentor and lover." The game's progressive intimacy design can amplify players' possessiveness, potentially leading to emotional coercion.

Finally, there is the risk of utilitarian erosion. While all interviewees emphasized that gifting within the game should be voluntary, Interviewee 6 acknowledged, "Some treat giving gifts to the jianhu as an unwritten rule and will morally condemn those who don't comply."

5. Discussion

5.1. The "anti-commercialization" norm

Sky: Children of the Light consistently emphasizes background-free and egalitarian communication [2]. However, this anonymity makes community consensus relatively fragile. While players generally disapprove of utilitarian jianhu-zaizai relationships, responses tend to be limited to moral censure rather than active intervention. Interviewees frequently expressed respect for mutual consent, neither endorsing nor openly criticizing such interactions. Similarly, all respondents reported acceptance of mutual gifting, interpreting it as a symbol of strong relational bonds, while rejecting unilateral material contributions. This pattern reflects a "gift economy", characterized by reciprocal exchange and emotionally grounded communication [6].

5.2. Affective labor

Affective labor is not involuntary or compulsory. In its practice, laborers continuously affirm themselves, exercise their intelligence, and are driven by affection and passion to build community networks, thereby attaining a highly coherent sense of identity [7]. In the game, jianhu provide game

tips, companionship in candle-running, and emotional support without monetary compensation. In return, zaizai offer emotional value or virtual gifts. Interviewees perceived their role as “helping newcomers acclimatize to the environment” and “providing emotional value,” with a majority expressing willingness to sacrifice personal time for their apprentices. Thus, the contributions of jianhu align with the definition of affective labor. On the other hand, affective labor theory emphasizes its “immeasurable” nature and embeddedness in “biopolitics” [7]. Unlike commercialized game companionship services (a paid profession), where the primary goal is “earning money” and affective labor serves merely as a means to increase profits [8], the jianhu-zaizai relationship in Sky cannot be measured through subjective interviewee responses regarding time or emotional investment. This relationship lacks official rewards, cannot be converted into monetary value, and has no clear chain of surplus value. Gestures such as gift-giving and emotional suppression are voluntary. Although the “unpaid mentoring” by jianhu implies an underlying need for emotional compensation, the benefits they obtain lean more toward those typified by a gift economy.

5.3. Impact of affective labor on jianhu

In today’s consumer society, the process of individualization continues to accelerate the loosening of interpersonal bonds and has produced a growing number of atomized individuals [9]. Six interviewees explicitly stated that they used in-game intimate relationships to compensate for gaps in their real-life social interactions. Within these relationships, jianhu can gain a sense of achievement and companionship, which may eventually develop into real-world connections. Several interviewees described the satisfaction derived from guiding newcomers’ growth and using these bonds to fill voids in their offline social lives. Most respondents indicated that simulated intimate relationships in the game evolved into friendships or even familial ties.

The emotional costs borne by jianhu include sacrificing personal time for their zaizai and consciously suppressing negative emotions. Once the balance of reciprocity is disrupted, jianhu often resort to three self-protection strategies: reducing their investment in the relationship, cutting off contact directly, or psychologically distancing themselves from the situation.

Throughout this relationship, jianhu commonly exhibit altruism and seek emotional compensation. Through sustained interactions such as completing game tasks, teaching, and providing emotional support, they produce immaterial products like “a sense of ease, friendliness, and belonging” for the other player, which aligns with the definition of affective labor. Jianhu do incur emotional costs, including investment of time, misalignment of genuine emotions, and feelings of loss and burnout when the relationship breaks down. However, such contributions and the value generated are difficult to quantify. It remains challenging to determine the surplus value created by virtual relationships between players or to assess potential exploitation by the platform, such as increases in game market activity or sales.

This is partly because the game’s official framework does not assign value to these behaviors, and partly because the level of investment cannot be precisely gauged from interviewees’ self-reports.

In summary, while the labor performed by jianhu in the zaizai-jianhu relationship partially aligns with the definition of affective labor, this study lacks the necessary metrics to measure the returns on such emotional investment. Therefore, it cannot be definitively categorized as affective labor.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that players in Sky: Children of the Light enter the role of jianhu primarily driven by altruistic motivations, forming zaizai-jianhu relationships with other players. As the relationship develops over time, it tends to evolve into a friendship, provided that the balance of reciprocity is maintained. Throughout this process, jianhu gain a sense of achievement and compensate for gaps in their real-life social interactions. Simultaneously, they incur emotional costs in maintaining this simulated intimacy—intangible yet significant investments that include suppressing their true emotions and sacrificing personal time.

Thus, while this relationship partially aligns with the definition of affective labor, the absence of a clear exploitative relationship and the difficulty in measuring exploited surplus value highlight the limitations of traditional quantitative paradigms in capturing immaterial inputs and outcomes. Since the game does not assign monetary value to these contributions, and the benefits reaped by players are equally challenging to quantify, this study concludes that the labor within the zaizai-jianhu relationship resembles—yet cannot be definitively classified as—affective labor.

This research offers valuable insights for future studies in this area. Methodologically, it underscores the need to develop tailored metrics to measure player-acquired benefits and generated surplus value. Practically, it provides game designers and online community managers with important considerations for mitigating user emotional exhaustion and countering utilitarian behavior.

Future research should incorporate the perspectives of zaizai (apprentices) to examine the authenticity of reported experiences, compare the characteristics and affective labor dynamics of simulated intimacy across different games, and introduce new theoretical lenses to interpret the role of capital in such processes.

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