

Exploring Pathways of Emotional Commodification: Media Production and Symbolic Consumption in Jubensha Mystery Experiences

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Abstract. Against the backdrop of the experience economy and the rise of emotional consumption, Jubensha (particularly those centered on emotional narratives) have emerged as a quintessential phenomenon of "paying for emotions". Drawing on media theory, emotional labor theory, and consumer society theory, this paper constructs a framework for the emotional commodification industrial chain by using the examples of Eternal Glory (LiuFang in Chinese) and The Seven-Thousand-Mile Homecoming (Gui Tu Qi Wan Li in Chinese). The study systematically elucidates the entire process of emotional commodification in Jubensha, spanning script design, production, venue operations, and symbolic consumption. Findings reveal that emotions are systematically commodified within the Jubensha industry, forming an efficient production and consumption chain. The study further highlights the risks of homogenization, instrumentalization, and diminished authenticity in existing works. This research offers new perspectives on the experience economy and emotional mediation in the digital age.

Keywords: Jubensha, Emotional Commodification, The Seven-Thousand-Mile Homecoming, LiuFang, Emotional Labor

1. Introduction

The experience economy refers to a business model centered on creating personalized, memorable participatory events for players. By designing services, environments, and interactions, enterprises transform the consumption process itself into an experience worth paying for. Jubensha, particularly emotional variants, has emerged as quintessential examples of "paying for emotions" in multiplayer social games. Guided by a Game Master (commonly referred to as DM in Chinese contexts), players embody characters within a script, collaboratively deducing, interacting, and completing an immersive narrative. This market segment has experienced sustained growth over the past few years.

Existing research primarily focuses on the narrative characteristics of Jubensha and explores the service role of the DM as an "emotional intermediary." Other scholars analyze players' emotional experiences from a usage and satisfaction perspective. However, there is a lack of research that systemically explores how this phenomenon is converted into a commercial commodity.

Based on three media theories, this paper selects *Eternal Glory* (LiuFang in Chinese) and *The Seven-Thousand-Mile Homecoming* (Gui Tu Qi Wan Li in Chinese) to analyze the operational pathway of emotional commodification in Jubensha. It aims to reveal the experiential economy structure and the industrial chain of emotional commodification. This research provides a framework for optimizing creative production and rationalizing consumption within the Jubensha industry. It also connects ideas from media studies and emotional sociology.

2. Literature review

2.1. Research on Jubensha

Scholars have explored Jubensha from multiple perspectives. For instance, scholars like Zhang and Chen define it as a cross-media field integrating drama, literature, and gaming, emphasizing its interactive characteristics as a novel narrative medium [1]. Others focus on game hosts, conceptualizing their role as "emotional intermediaries" and examining their emotional labor and operational mechanisms in practical service delivery [2]. Jia et al. analyze players' psychological needs fulfillment and emotional experiences during participation from the perspectives of player experience and motivation [3].

These studies explore the reasons behind the explosive popularity of Jubensha from multiple angles, including content production, service delivery, and the consumption experience; however, most remain confined to single perspectives. Few have conducted an integrated analysis of the complete industrial chain, from systematic design and professional intermediation to symbolic consumption, with emotion as the core commodity.

2.2. Theoretical framework

McLuhan's assertion that "the medium is the message" emphasizes that the form of the medium itself, rather than its transmitted content, is the key force in shaping both societal and individual perception [4]. Similarly, Peters further revealed the mediating essence of communication, noting that any transmission of meaning necessarily relies on intermediaries such as language, the body, and technology. This provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the institutionalized transmission of emotions labor within specific contexts [5]. Horkheimer's theory of emotions labor explicitly analyzes how individuals manage external emotional expressions (surface acting) and even induce internal feelings (deep acting) to conform to organizational demands at work. This provides direct theoretical tools for dissecting the professional role and labor process of Jubensha game hosts [6]. Baudrillard's theory of the consumer society indicates that in the postmodern context, the core object of consumption has shifted from use value to symbolic value---the social identity, symbolic meaning, and emotional experience embodied by commodities. This establishes a critical perspective for defining the commodity attributes of the "emotional experience" sold by Jubensha [7].

Therefore, this study integrates media theory, emotional labor, and critical consumption perspectives to construct an analytical framework centered on "emotional commodification." This framework posits that the process of "emotional commodification" involves the mediatized design of emotional experiences, transmitted through specialized emotional mediation and labor, ultimately transforming into concrete commodity value forms among players.

3. Analysis of the emotional commodification industry chain in typical emotional Jubensha

This section, based on the representative emotional-themed *Eternal Glory* and *The Seven-Thousand-Mile Homecoming* as case studies, will systematically convey the complete process by which emotional experiences are produced, transmitted, and consumed within this industry chain.

3.1. Emotional encoding: script design and distribution

Script creation and design constitute the primary stage, where emotional production begins with meticulous design of the experiential framework. In *The Seven-Thousand-Mile Homecoming*, six player characters must record messages to their compatriots twenty years in the future. These pre-written scripts contain themes like homesickness and visions for the nation's future, content designed to evoke patriotic sentiment. Through an external, standardized ritual process, the target emotion, patriotic sentiment, is reliably elicited.

In *Eternal Glory*, the plot device of "compiling the *Jiangyin Chronicle*" materializes loyalty and righteousness. During the post-fall recollection phase, the sole surviving player must compose individual entries in the *Jiangyin Chronicle* for each fallen comrade. These entries summarize the character's life story, their heroic deeds during the siege, and their demise. When each player receives and recites their own "chronicle entry," they accept a creator-preset "certificate of sacrifice". This design of emotional mementos completes the transformation from player imagination to written record, to bestowal, and finally to ritualistic validation.

Through core segments like Collective Recitation and the Compilation of the *Jiangyin Chronicle*, the creator solidifies this into a consistently triggered core experience module for each playthrough. Every element, the lighting (dim), music (boat songs), dialogue rhythm, and even the duration of silences, is strictly prescribed. What players experience is not the complex, contradictory emotions of historical study abroad, but a simulated emotional journey generated by this model. This design process embodies a symbolic production in the Baudrillardian sense [7]. Emotional experiences are extracted from concrete history, undergo symbolic expression and standardized processing, ultimately crystallizing into a stable commodity form.

3.2. Mediating and activating emotion: physical stores and DM services

Since ideas and historical contexts cannot be directly transmitted, they are conveyed through the DM's body language, speech patterns, pacing, and physical props [5]. Consequently, the experience heavily relies on offline stores and DM services. In *The Seven-Thousand-Mile Homecoming*, DMs must precisely control narrative pacing and emotional tone. During joyful chapters like studying at Yale, their voice may be light and bright, guiding players through gift exchanges or debates. When the somber final moments of returning home and facing decisions, DMs slow their speech, using prolonged silences and intense gazes to create a suffocating sense of historical weight. In *Eternal Glory*, DMs must deeply embody pivotal NPCs (such as garrison commanders or relatives). Through sudden emotional outbursts during player interactions, like harsh reprimands, choked sobs, or farewell embraces, along with physical expressions like trembling hands, they evoke collective sorrow and loyalty among players.

This highly specialized service represents an advanced application of emotional labor theory [6]. The DM does more than execute procedures: they continuously manage surface role-playing emotional expressions, following established emotional protocols. They also engage inner feelings to provide authentic guidance. This dual ensures players consistently enter predetermined emotional

states, such as patriotic tragedy or sacrificial loyalty. Simultaneously, players should exert corresponding emotional management efforts to immerse themselves in their roles, thereby achieving the full experiential value. This constitutes collaborative emotional labor on the consumer side. Thus, by providing ritualized gaming spaces and professional DM services, the store turns symbolically simulated emotions into complete emotional experiences, achieving a closed loop in the emotional commodity value chain.

3.3. Emotional consumption and completion: player experience and feedback

Within the emotional value chain of Jubensha, players are active recipients whose consumption and feedback realize emotional commodity value. In the Seven-Thousand-Mile Homecoming and Eternal Glory, players are motivated not simply by gameplay hours but by immersive possession of specific emotional symbols, including awakened patriotic devotion or ultimate sacrificial loyalty.

This aligns with Baudrillard's insight that consumption's core is in pursuing symbolic value rather than use value [7]. After finishing the game, players are encouraged to share their emotions by writing reviews, uploading screenshots, or discussing plotlines. It is essentially staging a symbolic social performance. Comments like "heartbreak" or "tear-jerking moments" spread the meaning of the Jubensha experience, reaching social networks and driving upstream market demand. In response, creators can promptly update popular script types. Thus, players' feedback and consumption form a closed loop in the commodification of emotion, as sharing helps reproduce symbolic value and confirms emotions are delivered and consumed as a tradable commodity.

4. Discussion

4.1. Integration of the emotional commodification industrial chain logic

The transformation of Jubensha into standardized emotional commodities has several stages. Designers take real-world materials and reshape them into repeatable, standardized emotional "highlights." The end product is an emotional simulation product, more concentrated and controllable than real historical experiences [7]. Storefronts and DM services are critical for activating symbols and delivering the product. Static symbols (plots) rely on the DM's body, language, and props as intermediaries to translate into players' embodied experiences [8]. These elements build emotional atmospheres. They guide players through an emotional ritual: leaving daily life, entering an immersive "liminal" state, and ultimately converging [9]. In summary, this chain follows a clear logic. It goes from symbolic encoding to mediated activation and ends with consumption and re-dissemination of value. It turns private emotions into cultural commodities that can be mass-replicated, priced, sold, and flaunted..

4.2. Reflections of sociocultural mentalities in emotional consumption

Against the backdrop of accelerated life rhythms and increasingly superficial interpersonal relationships, these emotional games offer participants a highly concentrated, controlled, and deeply emotional experience. Through their unique medium of confined time and space, role-playing rules, and intense ritualistic atmosphere, this format compensates for the scarcity of deep experiences in our accelerated society. It compresses the complex processes of emotional establishment, development, eruption, and resolution into a few hours, enabling people to rapidly achieve intense resonance and collective emotional release within an efficient, safe environment.

Second, choosing emotionally charged scripts like *The Seven-Thousand-Mile Homecoming* or *Eternal Glory*, which carry distinct symbolic values, and immersing oneself in them transcends mere entertainment. "emotional consumption" means deliberately selecting and internalizing emotional experiences from these games. This allows identification with social circles and expression of self-worth. Consuming certain emotions signals specific symbolic values, making emotional consumption a cultural practice for social differentiation and self-affirmation. This validates the core logic of consumption as identity construction [7].

4.3. Practice implications

This industry currently also faces challenges. While using standardized emotional templates can maintain consistency and repeatability, overreliance on emotional tropes can lead to narrative and emotional homogenization. Players who can predict what will happen may not feel as engaged. Also, there is not enough focus or support to help DMs (Game Masters) avoid emotional burnout. The sector must establish better training and safeguarding systems to protect staff from emotional overwork. From the idea of alienation, emotions may transform from real, natural feelings into commodified forms that can be measured, priced, and used up for profit [10]. It is important to keep room for real feelings and true human connections.

5. Conclusion

This study examines the path of emotional commodification in *Jubensha* through representative emotional scripts like *Eternal Glory* and *The Seven-Thousand-Mile Homecoming*. It reveals that this value chain involves publishers extracting symbols and designing frameworks to encode historical emotions into standardized "emotional simulacra." Stores and DMs then activate these static textual symbols into deliverable immersive services through specialized emotional labor and intermediary dissemination practices. Players ultimately consume the value of these emotional symbols and exchange them for cultural capital through purchasing and social sharing. This study also identifies current industry issues, including severe script homogenization, physical and mental health deterioration among DMs, and diminished emotional experience capacity among players.

As this study primarily relies on specific cases and lacks surveys or interviews, it requires additional statistical data. Future research may employ in-depth interviews and ethnographic methods to explore player motivations and feedback. Incorporating other genres, such as hardcore deduction or mechanism-driven scenarios, for comparative analysis could deepen understanding of this industrial logic.

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