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Transactional Intimacy in Delta Force: Psychological Effects of Paid Gaming Companionship on Players and Service Providers

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Abstract. Paid gaming companionship services for high-risk online shooters have started to provide technical support and emotional support in the form of paid contact. Delta Force is a tactical extraction game; if it fails, one loses all of one's in-game items forever, so there has been a steady increase in both the demand for gameplay support and emotional comfort among players in this game. Most research on emotional labour in service workers has focused on companions; the psychological experience of paying players has not been studied much.To address this gap, this study adopts an exploratory mixed-methods design, combining semi-structured interviews with 18 companions, qualitative analysis of 505 Weibo posts, and an exploratory survey of 50 players with purchasing experience., it can be concluded that paid companionship has increased the satisfaction and sense of achievement of players, but it has also led to a dependence on standardised emotional support and changed players' expectations for non-transactional social relationships. Companions are tired emotionally and feel alienated from themselves because of the combined pressure of high-demand performance and emotional labour. Therefore, this study concludes that the main reason for the difference is power asymmetry; players consider emotional support a paid service, while companions feel it is an expensive form of labour. According to Zelizer's theory of the "purchase of intimacy" and Hochschild's concept of emotional labour, this paper finds that transactional intimacy results in bidirectional cognitive alienation and changes the boundaries of relationships in the digital gig economy.

Keywords: Transactional Intimacy, Paid Companionship, Emotional Labor, Gaming Companionship

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background: the crucible of high-stakes gaming

The paid companionship services in the digital gaming industry have gone from informal leisure exchange to an organised part of the gig economy. Most of the previous research on this issue has focused on low-penalty MMOs or MOBA games, and *Delta Force* is a high-risk tactical shooter

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with extraction mechanics that has not been studied in this paper. A typical feature of this type of game is that failure has material consequences; for example, death in a raid will result in losing all collected and purchased in-game items and money.

Most games are over after you lose, but this one will erase the progress you've made and the real-money investment you've put in. The punitive system will lead to problems in the field and increase people's anxiety and fear of disaster. Given the above structural pressures, the real goal of the players is to manage emotions and achieve emotional regulation. Free-roaming companions may have silently judged one's mistakes and are thus more anxious about losing their belongings. Therefore, people have begun to want more patient and understanding behaviour, as well as a non-judgmental environment in games. Feeling like a failure, some people are paying for the help of punitive game systems that offer them reliable and unconditional emotional support. It is therefore a basis for transactional intimacy.

Therefore, the relationship among players and companions is no longer that of a service. Rather, it is a form of commodified intimacy that is produced through market-based transactions and does not arise from genuine reciprocity in social relationships [1]. Companions carry out both technical and emotional labour, helping with gameplay and caring for the emotions of the players through comfort, patience and company [2].

However, the present research has a problem. Most research has focused only on the emotional labour, exploitation and precarity of service workers and has paid less attention to the psychological changes in demand-side workers. There has been little attention paid to how players deal with the conflict of believing that companions are real social partners and knowing that these relationships are transactional. There is likely cognitive dissonance because people believe that being close to someone should be free of money and artificiality [3]. The power imbalances in the commercialised relationship are also not fully explored here.

1.2. Research questions

To address the above deficiencies, this paper will explore the reasons for the close relationship among partners by answering the following three questions.

1. What are the different psychological experiences that lead to good and bad outcomes for players and companions in transactional companionship?
2. How has the high-pressure environment of *Delta Force* affected the double burden (technical and emotional) carried by the companions?
3. How is the commodification of emotions related to cognitive incongruence in service definitions, reciprocity norms and relational boundaries?

1.3. Significance of the study

Paid companionship is also a type of relationship and not solely a market transaction. Although there is a payment for the service, it is provided through interaction, talk, comfort and repeated co-existence. Therefore, this relationship is often irregular; even if one pays to have a companion, the high-quality service expected in friendship, such as patience, attention, emotional support and comfort, is often absent. Ambiguity is particularly harmful in a high-pressure situation; a technical problem can make the players feel very bad immediately, and they may also form an opinion about a companion based on the mood in the game.

This paper has some theoretical and empirical results. In theory, it extends Arlie Hochschild's idea of emotional labour and Viviana Zelizer's study on the purchase of intimacy to show that

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intimacy is a contested resource; it is a commodity for the buyer and a cost of production for the seller [2, 1]. It is not only a case of labour exploitation but also a type of cognitive alienation, as the two parties attach different meanings to the same emotional service. Based on the above, 505 public social media texts, 50 exploratory survey responses and 18 in-depth interviews were collected. Together, the above sources can provide some statistics and relevant experiences from the daily lives of the participants, but they cannot be generalised to the whole population.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical foundations

2.1.1. Emotional labor and transactional intimacy

Hochschild's theory of emotional labour indicates that service staff are emotionally distant from the emotions they wish to display and must control their true feelings to present standard, customer-oriented emotions [2]. Zelizer's "purchase of intimacy" theory does not fall under the traditional division of economic exchange and intimate relationships; rather, he believes that the two can coexist, and relational meanings are produced through people's own perceptions [1]. Extending the above view to paid gaming companionship, this paper believes that such interactions are hierarchical transactional relationships and that money can organise seemingly egalitarian online relationships into service contracts. Based on the division above, paying players will be the main consumers, and companions will offer personalised emotional and instrumental in-game services.

Given that the game environment in this study is high-stakes and asset-penalising, this paper combines and revises the frameworks put forward by Zelizer and Hochschild to examine the mechanism of employer-type intimacy from two aspects [1, 2]. Paid companionship can be regarded as a type of help for players to deal with problems caused by a lack of time. Good business relations can help create an environment of stability for the staff and support the employer-employee relationship. For companions, by contrast, service delivery embodies Hochschild's emotional alienation [2]. Their gentle and comforting interpersonal performances are not spontaneous expressions of society; rather, they are organised and controlled forms of labour that separate emotions from professional conduct. This paper will also investigate how the basic contradiction of subjectively valued purchased intimacy for players and structurally alienated emotional labour for companions maintain the hierarchical and transactional nature of Employer-type Intimacy in high-risk gaming situations.

At the same time, the context of Chinese game-companionship does not directly fit the above Western framework. Local "boss-carry" activities (as mentioned in Chinese gaming discourse, "the boss" refers to a paying customer with more power than consumption, such as surveillance of the emotional state of service players; "carry" refers to skilled players securing match victories and raid extractions for these customers) have given purchasers considerable power over the selection of services, demand for tasks, ratings, and switching providers. Game companions should have good skills in playing games and be good-natured. Due to the special boss-carry power hierarchy in China, a type of employer-employee intimacy has arisen as a result of this structural asymmetry; those who pay for "bosses" have employer-like discretion over service conditions and evaluations, and companions are in a subordinate service position. Therefore, instrumental gaming services need to perform emotional labour and are not the same as the commercial intimacy market in China and abroad; platform algorithms also mediate this relationship by ranking, reviewing, distributing traffic and showing orders. The above mechanisms not only reproduce the process of emotional labour

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mentioned by Hochschild [2] but also add platform-based control and market hierarchy to the intimate relationship. Therefore, the Chinese digital gaming environment has expanded the traditional framework to show how algorithmic governance and transactional power have changed who is entitled to receive emotional care, who must provide it, and where the boundaries of reciprocity have been drawn.

Parasocial interaction is a suitable way to increase awareness of the issue here; it does not mean that all paid-companion relationships are parasocial. Not like the old performer-audience model, game companionship is interactive and often has direct contact. However, many times over, they have grown accustomed to it and expect the same service. A player may remember a companion's way of speaking, prefer the same companion in the next round, or see supportive behaviour as an indication of care. At this time, combined with money, it is no longer clear whether it is a paid service or a friendship. It can be seen that service boundaries are a necessary element of the current study and not a minor problem.

The context of the Chinese platform also needs to be considered; companionship is not arranged directly between two people. Platform ranking, reviews, order visibility and traffic distribution determine which companions are shown and what kind of behaviour is favourable. A rating system can link a person's technical ability with their emotional expression; for instance, a friend skilled in technology but in a bad mood might receive a lower score, whereas an empathetic and gentle person will be praised even if they are not outstanding in technology. Therefore, the company will be motivated to manage both performance and influence. Based on the above reasons, the theory of emotional labour can be applied to the case of platform-based game companionship.

2.1.2. The gig economy and parasocial interaction

It is a type of unstable work within the gig economy and thus considered precarious digital labour. At the same time, the kind of connection is often close to parasocial relationships (PSI), as referred to by Horton and Wohl in their 1956 work on television [4]. *Delta Force* needs emotional support from its comrades in daily life, so the line between transactional PSI and real friendship is blurred; thus, it is a good material for exploitation and disillusionment.

2.2. Current state of research on game companions

Most of the previous studies have been qualitative studies that focus on the "behind-the-scenes" life of workers. Goffman's theory of dramaturgy has been used to study how friends maintain their "front-stage" identities [5]. Yu and He have put forward that companions can use "surface acting" (faking emotions) and "deep acting" (genuine empathy) to please their clients [6]. Ye believes that this labour is gendered; that is, female friends are usually expected to provide "soothing" emotional support, and men focus on technical skills [7]. Li and Guo, together with Yan, have found that algorithmic regulation (ratings and comments) causes problems in emotional regulation and burnout [8, 9].

2.3. Research gaps

The above contributions still have three deficiencies that directly correspond to the research problems in this paper. First, regarding RQ1, most studies focus on providers and have paid little attention to the demand side; thus, the psychological gains and depletion experienced by consumers in purchasing companionship have gone uninvestigated. Secondly, there are very few studies on the

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effect of high-stakes game mechanics on both the technical and emotional burden of companions, and this research is lacking compared with what has been done in general chat-based companionship. Thirdly, the extent of cognitive dissonance resulting from power asymmetry in the definition of service, norms of reciprocity and boundaries of relationships has not been examined in RQ3. These shortcomings are the reasons for the bidirectional mixed-methods design in this paper.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

Based on exploration and qualitative research, this paper will explore all kinds of expressions of "transactional intimacy" in *Delta Force*. Research on paid companionship in high-stakes gaming environments is still in its early stages, so this paper will not aim to achieve statistical generalisation but will instead explore the reasons for this phenomenon in more detail.

Based on the qualitative data and the two sources of exploratory quantitative data mentioned above, this study will be carried out. The first kind of evidence is an extended interview with 18 paid companions to learn more about their lives as service workers. (1) Based on the survey of 50 players, some patterns and descriptive trends in consumer behaviour have been identified initially; (2) A large amount of natural user data has been obtained by analysing the qualitative content of 505 Weibo posts and comments. Together, the above sources can show us what patterns occur, as well as how and why these patterns develop; qualitative data can explain the reasons for them, and supplementary quantitative data can provide more context.

3.2. Participants and sampling

3.2.1. Qualitative sample (companions)

Approximately 18 paid companions of the *Delta Force* have been interviewed semi-structurally. Purposive sampling was used to select participants from gaming communities and private QQ groups, and all of them had a history of accepting paid orders and related service experience. Data collection was carried out until thematic saturation was achieved; that is, no new themes or ideas were obtained from further interviews. Based on the requirements of the method for in-depth interviews, a relatively small number of interviews will be conducted until no new information emerges [10].

3.2.2. Quantitative samples (players and social media corpus)

• Exploratory Survey: An online questionnaire was distributed in gaming communities, and after obtaining 50 valid answers, they were from players who have used companionship services in the past. A small, non-probability sample was used for the survey, so the data are only for exploration and description, and they do not represent the entire population in formal hypothesis testing. The first is to find out why players do something, what they think it feels like, etc. [11].

• Social Media Corpus: Web-scraping technology was employed to gather 505 posts and comments from the Weibo "Delta Force Companion" super-topic. Remove the advertisements and irrelevant information from the corpus, and then use qualitative content analysis to find repeated topics, reasons, emotions, etc., in the natural language.

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3.3. Data collection and analysis

• Qualitative Data: Semi-structured interviews were carried out via voice or text, and most of them were about 20 minutes long. The three steps of thematic coding for the interview transcripts were: initial coding to find new ideas, focused coding to organise related categories, and theoretical integration to create a complete system of analysis. Induction was used to have the key theme of the dual burden of technical and emotional labour arise directly from the participants' narratives.

• Survey analysis: Descriptive statistics were used to show the demographic information of the respondents, their consumption habits and self-perceived psychological states, etc. All the correlations that were found were considered to be exploratory patterns and did not establish a causal relationship.

• Given that the social media corpus is relatively small, the formal topic model method of Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) was not employed. Instead, manual coding of the qualitative content was carried out to find the main topics and emotions. Based on the above, some new ideas were gained from talking with and surveying people.

4. Findings

4.1. Bidirectional impacts

The first theme is about the psychological benefits and dependence resulting from purchasing company. Based on the Weibo corpus, there were generally two types of services: Technical Escorts focused on the protection of equipment, survival and winning; Entertainment Escorts placed more emphasis on "emotional value" and "zero pressure". In line with this division, more than 90% of the surveyed players reported an increase in their enjoyment of gaming and achievements, and almost half experienced temporary relief from loneliness. At the same time, almost 64% of people used standardised companionship, and although correlation analysis showed a slight positive correlation between the frequency of payment and social intolerance, this is considered only an uncertain trend and not a significant result. It can be seen that the short-term benefits of paid company are outweighed by changing needs for social support. Players can get a reliable partner for a fee, but the off-line relationship will demand negotiation, patience and compromise.

The second topic is the double burden carried by companions. According to the interview results, although the companions want flexible working hours and good pay, *Delta Force* still needs to handle technical-performance tasks and emotional labour. The extraction environment had a serious technical problem, and the customers were also in a bad mood. Companions described a large division between the performing self (enthusiastic, patient, service-minded) and the private self. As one of the participants put it, "I have to force a smile even though I want to cry inside; my true feelings must be hidden behind the screen" (Interviewee 8). Frequent exposure to the negativity of the clients and the pressure to perform well in the game resulted in compassion fatigue, emotional numbness and a blurring of the lines between staged performance and real life. Another companion said that sometimes they could not tell whether the warmth they gave was genuine or just part of their work (Interviewee 14).

4.2. Divergent pathways of influence

There were four differences in the paths of influence across the whole dataset. First of all, the types of gains are different; players have immediate, acquisitive gains after buying a service, whereas the

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income of companions is continuous technical and emotional investment. Second, the causes of depletion are different; player depletion is due to cognitive alienation and changed expectations for social interaction, whereas companion depletion results from emotional exhaustion and occupational burnout. Third, the pattern of time is different; after repeated use by players, dependence will increase, and companions will also become more skilled, so repeated emotional performances need to be contained more strictly. Fourth, power is asymmetric: players have many choices in selection, payment, continuation and termination, but companions are limited by ratings, platform visibility and the need to maintain a good reputation.

The first dimension is the definition of service; that is, what the payment covers. Players may have a wide understanding of the service package and expect technical support, conversation, comfort, etc. Companions may interpret the same payment more narrowly, seeing it as compensation for specific tasks and a small amount of emotional labour. Reciprocity norms refer to whether one should give emotional support back in a different way. Players may believe that the payment is due to reciprocity, but companions will still expect respect, reasonable requests and recognition of the effort made. The third dimension is boundary perception; that is, can frequent paid contact be considered friendship? The reasons above are combined; an expanded idea of service may lead to lower expectations of reciprocity and thus increase the likelihood that people will cross relational boundaries.

Player dependence has grown over time, but the emotional attachment of companions has faded with professional detachment. Finally, the power relationship is that the player has the authority to choose and stop; companions are left in a subordinate position and must adhere to platform algorithms and the demands for positive ratings.

4.3. Cognitive dissonance mechanisms

Based on the above results, power asymmetry has caused cognitive dissonance in the three linked areas of service definition, reciprocity norms and boundary perception. The above reasons will be taken into account. When the players purchase the service and add their own emotions, they are less likely to feel that they need to give back. It blurs the line between professional service and friendship, and some players are beginning to seek private or parasocial relationships. Friends believe that their duty is to offer emotional support; therefore, they need time and emotional energy for this work and expect basic respect and clear professional boundaries.

The results also show that transactional intimacy should not be regarded as the loss of intimacy in the market. Intimacy is thus organised by market rules. The service for the player is good because it is a type of relationship between people, and the companion creates this similarity through labour that can be observed and evaluated. Thus, commodification changes the conditions under which one feels close to someone. The emotional quality of the interaction is still worth mentioning, but its meaning is unevenly distributed; it can be felt as comfort by the consumer and as a work demand by the service provider.

To build a relationship, people may extend this to their own lives and hope for friends or parasocial relationships; generally speaking, companions try to maintain a clear division between work and life. The three divisions of cognitive dissonance are: the service definition discrepancy, the reciprocity norms problem and the boundary perception fault. The mechanism can therefore be summarized as: platform and transaction-based power asymmetry→different definitions of the service→different expectations of reciprocity→divergent boundary perceptions →cognitive dissonance.

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5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical implications

This paper revises the idea of transactional intimacy by pointing out the dispute over defining emotion. *Delta Force* is not only about sharing emotions; it is also a necessity in the face of great pressure. Cognitive alienation is a particular type of result of transactional intimacy in the digital gig economy. Companions may be too reserved in expressing their emotions because they are constantly expected to be patient, happy and understanding; at the same time, players are also far from the natural, unforced exchange of non-transactional relationships, given that standardised emotional support has become common. The first theoretical contribution is that there are two sides to this process: the buyer commodifies emotion in the transaction, and at the same time, the seller perceives it as a production cost. Emotional alienation is a characteristic of platform capitalism, and emotions arising from labour exploitation are realised through algorithms in the form of ratings and rankings of emotions by organisation of emotions. Platforms do not value genuine relationships among people; they only encourage the conversion of emotions into paid usage time.

We have also shown that the high-stakes game mode in this paper increases the need for emotional labour in adults. The fear of losing one's virtual assets gives people a sense of security in these games that is not available in less demanding ones.

Thus, this paper will present a more balanced overview of paid gaming companionship. It is not to be taken as exploitation, and the service should not be treated as friendship. From the above results, we can conclude that there are two types of cognitive alienation in this transactional relationship: paying players are alienated from genuine friendship because they believe that true relationships can be purchased, and companions experience cognitive alienation in their own emotions as these emotions have been used instrumentally for performance. The above results indicate that technical risk, emotional labour, platform governance and repeated consumption are related and have different meanings. The same commercial arrangement will give the players joy and comfort, and the companions need to keep their emotions in check despite the technical and economic pressure. Given this double alienation of consciousness, it is necessary to protect the rights and interests of workers while also attending to the reasons why players turn to companionship apps in the first place.

5.2. Practical implications

Based on the above results, the following practical suggestions will be made to improve the platform's UI and UX. First, add an explicit "emotional labour" index to the evaluation system along with the existing technical ratings and have users rate patience, communication and emotional support; do not assume that these will be considered unsaid gifts. Second, it is possible to add an optional expectation or emotion label, such as "technical-focused", "casual", or "supportive communication", to meet all the different service needs of customers and companions. Third, platforms could display session-duration reminders and standardized boundary notices before or during long sessions, helping distinguish paid service from private friendship. Fourth, drawing parallels to labour protections for physical work, platforms should introduce configurable limits on consecutive booking sessions for companions to mitigate cumulative affective exhaustion; companions retain agency to override these time-based safeguards rather than facing rigid mandatory lock-outs. Fifth, there will be a platform-based affective safety trigger (an emotional stop-loss function); if a person is in a bad mood, they can press a single button to temporarily stop

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new order allocation without harming the reputation of their account. Given the current profiles, ratings and matching interfaces, the modifications mentioned above are more practical than adding a separate "fatigue level" system, and they can still make emotional labour and relational boundaries more explicit to provide targeted protection against the mental health damage caused by prolonged affective performance.

5.3. Limitations and future research

This paper has some shortcomings. First, the sample sizes (N=50 survey respondents and N=18 companions) are too small; therefore, we cannot be sure that the results will apply to the whole population. Second, this paper is a cross-sectional study. Although there is a positive association between the frequency of payments and social intolerance, it cannot be determined whether this is due to time or causation; thus, this relationship should be regarded as correlational rather than causal. Third, the Weibo corpus contains only public expressions and does not cover all users. In the future, large-scale surveys will be carried out on all kinds of games, and over an extended period, changes in social cognition and occupational experience can be observed; experimental or quasi-experimental designs can also be employed to determine whether repeated paid companionship leads to changes in interpersonal expectations.

6. Conclusion

This paper studies the various types of transactional intimacy in *Delta Force*. Labour exploitation is one problem, but both sides have also contributed to it; players receive rapid technical and emotional support from companions, but this has led to an increase in dependence on standardised companionship, and the companions themselves are suffering from burnout due to the double load of technical and emotional labour. At the base is a power asymmetry that results in different ideas of service, reciprocity and relational boundaries. Players believe that emotional support should be paid for in general, but companions consider their own emotional support to be unpaid labour. Cognitive dissonance is a reduction in people's hopes for relationships in the face of highly commercialised intimacy.

Author contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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