

## **Paid Companionship: A Study on the Phenomenon of Gaming Accompaniment from the Perspective of Emotional Consumption Postprint**

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### **Abstract**

The ever-changing digital technology has brought people into the era where everything is shown as a form of a medium, and the online game escort is gradually evolving into a new profession. At present, the game escort is not only a simple “newbie escort” but also an emotional exchange, and players are willing to pay a certain amount of money precisely because the process of game escort meets their needs. So, what are the reasons for the phenomenon of “game accompaniment”? What are the players’ consumption motivations? How do game escorts increase consumer stickiness and promote their purchasing willingness? In this paper, we will analyze the above questions in depth through the research method of in-depth interview.

### **Full Text**

#### **Preamble**

**“Paid Companionship”: A Study on the Phenomenon of Gaming Accompaniment from the Perspective of Emotional Consumption**

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**Abstract:** The ever-evolving digital technology has ushered humanity into an era where everything manifests as a medium, and online game escort services are gradually evolving into a new profession. Contemporary game escort services extend beyond simple “newbie guidance” to encompass emotional exchange; players are willing to pay precisely because the escort process fulfills their needs. So what are the reasons behind the “game accompaniment” phenomenon? What are players’ consumption motivations? How do game escorts enhance consumer

stickiness and promote purchasing willingness? This paper analyzes these questions in depth through in-depth interviews.

**Keywords:** Game Accompaniment, Emotional Labor, Virtual Social Interaction

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the rapid development of online social platforms, voice chat technology, and increased time spent at home during the pandemic have amplified people's demand for games. Within this context, a new profession has emerged in the gaming industry: the game escort. Today's game escort services not only provide "newbie guidance" but also represent a structural consumption upgrade within the gaming industry. Service providers offer game escort services to paying clients through voice or text communication online, receiving compensation for their work. Although "playing for others" has long existed in the gaming industry, the professionalization of game escort services is a recent development. Escorts now provide not only technical skills but also chat, social interaction, and emotional companionship. The phenomenon of escorts using deep performance to establish intimate relationships for emotional compensation constitutes a form of invisible labor.

This raises several questions: Why is the "game escort" phenomenon emerging? Who consumes game escort services? What are their consumption motives? Why do consumers engage in this type of emotional consumption? What do they hope to gain from it? Through what mechanisms do game escorts encourage consumers to make purchases?

### 2.1 A Literature Review on the Phenomenon of Game Accompaniment

While no specific research has been conducted abroad on the "playbor" industry and its development, the phenomenon of "playbor" has attracted scholarly attention. Downey (2015) examines the shift of the labor market to the Internet from political and technological perspectives, revealing the causes of "playbor" and its empowerment potential [1]. Meanwhile, Johnson and Woodcock (2019) investigate how users of the popular foreign gaming site Twitch transform their digital labor into financial gain from the perspective of online labor monetization, noting that in the current digital era, "playborers" often utilize new media channels to create rewards [2].

Domestic scholars have already studied this emerging profession. Chen (2022) conducted a detailed examination of game escort practitioners from the perspectives of labor process, network society, and transaction cost economics, demonstrating that policy influences have made emotional labor the primary characteristic of game escort practitioners' work processes [3]. In 2020, Li conducted a detailed study of interpersonal interactions in online games from a cultural-

philosophical perspective, showing that virtual societies formed through game interactions often cause social differentiation in daily life [4]. Meanwhile, Fan (2020), in “Analysis of Digital Labor and Its Alienation in Marxist Perspective,” examined the potential alienation behind free labor in capitalist society from a Marxist viewpoint, demonstrating that digital labor is alienated in three aspects: the product of labor, labor itself, and the worker [10].

## 2.2 Literature Review of the Phenomenon of Game Accompaniment from the Perspective of Emotional Consumption

Due to its complexity and controversy, emotional consumption lacks a precise definition in current academic discourse. However, one widely accepted description characterizes it as “the emotional response of customers during the consumption process.” Foreign scholars often examine emotional consumption from sociological perspectives. American sociologist of emotions Hochschild (2012) analyzed how individuals modify and perform their emotions within the marketplace [5]. Simmel’s 2004 book *The Philosophy of Money* examined the impact of the monetary system on human emotions from an economic perspective, demonstrating that public emotions have become exchangeable commodities under monetary systems [6].

In contrast, domestic scholars tend to focus on emotional consumption from communication science perspectives. Wang (2000), in his 2018 work “Emotion Consumption and Emotion Industry—One of the Sociology of Consumption Research Series,” studied the nature of emotion consumption, proposing that its essence lies in providing virtual emotional products through market mechanisms to satisfy consumers’ virtual emotional needs [7]. In 2010, Sheng focused on the mechanism of emotional consumption when combined with specific media products, demonstrating that audiences’ emotions are often transformed into social pastime tools by the media [8]. Meanwhile, Pan (2019) examined the transformation of the entire social consumption structure, suggesting that in China’s new consumerist society, media are becoming more closely integrated with people’s daily lives, and people increasingly purchase for physical experiences and spiritual needs [9].

However, none of these studies have examined the game escort phenomenon from the consumers’ perspective, and therefore have not answered questions about the mechanisms through which game escorting prompts consumer purchasing behavior.

## 2.3 Research Questions

Therefore, this paper attempts to answer the following questions through theories of emotional consumption, virtual socialization, and emotional labor: What are the reasons for the emergence of the “game escort” phenomenon? What are the target audiences and consumption motives of game escort services? What

are their needs? Through what mechanisms do game escorts stimulate consumers' purchasing behavior?

### 3. Method

This paper employs in-depth interviews to answer the above questions.

#### 3.11 Interview Outline

The interview questions were divided into three main parts. The first part collected basic information such as age, gender, time in the industry, platforms used, occupational categories, and occupational characteristics. The second part explored players' consumption motivations, player group characteristics, and the career characteristics and values of escorts. The third part examined escorts' emotional contributions and the value of their emotional labor during the escorting process.

During the interviews and research, the researcher avoided the four ethical issues highlighted by scholar Alan Bryman: (1) causing harm to participants; (2) failing to obtain informed consent; (3) violating participants' privacy; and (4) deceiving participants. Additionally, if interviewees did not wish to answer certain questions or became dissatisfied during the interview, they could remain silent or withdraw. Interview materials that participants declared they did not want disclosed were not included or cited in this study.

#### 3.12 Choice of Targeted Interviewees

This study conducted 15-minute semi-structured in-depth interviews with 10 interviewees of different genders, ages, and education levels. Interviews took place from December 2022 to January 2023. Following the maximum variation sampling principle of qualitative research, interviewees differed in age, occupation, education level, and region of residence, resulting in low homogeneity. Interviews were conducted via telephone, WeChat text, and one-on-one face-to-face meetings on Tencent Meeting. The interview results were transcribed into an eight-thousand-word verbatim manuscript.

After two weeks, the author selected 10 interviewees through unsolicited private messages, unsolicited consumption, and referrals. All interviewees' identity information was anonymized to protect privacy. Five escorts received orders through the "Bixin App," Weibo, and WeChat. Five clients were also selected from these three channels. During selection, the author observed that students, including college students, comprised a significant proportion of both groups. On one hand, popular e-sports games target teenage demographics. On the other hand, the time flexibility of "game playing" suits students who need part-time income or companionship.

The basic information statistics of all interviewees (nicknames) are listed in the table below.

## 4. Data Analysis and Findings

After two weeks of interviews, re-interviews, and personal observations, we compiled and analyzed the game escorts' labor process in conjunction with interview content. When seeking answers about emotional labor, its value, and representation, we were surprised to find that the process of providing or consuming emotional labor was accompanied by a certain form of socialization. Interviewees' answers about motivations behind emotional labor and associated hidden social needs support the observation that "Many people just want to find someone to talk to, and this kind of competitive game provides a platform to vent, and we, the escorts, are the listeners" (S1). "Very often, the orders are ordered more frequently and the communication with the bosses sometimes becomes like friends" (S2). "Usually, we chat about everything—daily necessities, food, clothing, housing, transportation—that is, everything friends would talk about. I think to identify, and a customer's relationship is good, depending on his strong desire to share; some sharing desires are particularly strong, generally can be developed into a good relationship with friends" (S2). After in-depth communication about customers' attitudes toward game escorting, the interviewees' answers corroborated the finding that, compared with traditional industries, game escorting features highly flexible working hours and equipment. Simultaneously, platform diversity and management freedom make the "emotional labor" behind this seemingly fun work hidden and thus often ignored. However, it is worth emphasizing that emotional labor represents the biggest difference between the game escort industry and traditional industries.

### 4.1 The Commodification of Professional Identity and the Extension of Emotional Labor

In the game escort industry, due to the invisibility of the escorting process and information anonymity, voice becomes one of the most important production materials for escorts. Customers' selection and consumption of escorts are often influenced by clear preferences and requirements for voice. Voice auditions are prominently featured on escorts' homepage introductions. Although gaming skills are important, voice differences become the most critical deciding factor when consumers choose between escorts with similar technical abilities.

To increase income and adapt to the invisibility of the accompanying process, escorts often adjust their voices to meet consumer preferences, transforming their voices into fixed "personas" presented to consumers. Beyond voice packaging, escorts frequently operate their homepage accounts and work-related Weibo to further strengthen these personas. Common female escort personas include "soft and cute loli" and "cold, aloof lady," while male escort personas typically include "cold male god," "gentle milk dog," or "wild king brother." These personas are constructed through avatar photos that tend toward homogeneity: females appear young and often from breast-focused angles, while males focus on angles showing Adam's apples or pectoral muscles. Hochschild suggested

that female flight attendants often appear “sexualized” in advertising images to respond to passengers’ sexual fantasies, a pattern that holds true for both male and female escorts [11]. These game escort platforms provide opportunities to commercialize emotions, converting them into economic benefits. Escorts transform themselves virtually and construct different personas through media technology, with maintenance of these personas translating into players’ gaming and emotional experiences. Virtualization features contribute to the commodification of this profession, with all image modification and maintenance driven by the internal factor of profit generation.

Beyond communication about the game itself, topics often extend to the personal lives of consumers or escorts. Influenced by the casual nature of chatting and the emotional labor characteristics of the profession, escorts’ private lives and real emotions are often spontaneously or non-spontaneously mobilized as resources. Beyond simple game escorting, numerous other companionship businesses have emerged—some for economic purposes, others as spontaneous extensions. These extensions of emotional labor often lead to deeper social relationships between escorts and clients. The convenience of technological media breaks down the boundaries and time limits of escort services, as well as traditional buyer-seller relationships. However, driven by profit motives, role positioning between the two parties can create emotional exploitation, with consumers expecting escorts to charge less.

## 4.2 The Efficient Transformation of Daily Social Interaction and Emotional Consumption

Beyond simple gameplay, to improve user stickiness, escorts often extend communication into daily life, increasing emotional input through everyday social interaction to efficiently convert it into consumption behavior. Based on perceptions of the “labor-capital” relationship between escorts and consumers, many escorts establish personal contacts with consumers through WeChat and QQ to obtain long-term consumption and higher pay.

Escorts’ practice of calling consumers “boss” reflects recognition of the employment relationship. Simultaneously, this profession meets people’s implicit social needs. Combined with interview data, the efficient transformation of emotion and reward is often proportional to the emotional initiative escorts demonstrate in daily social life with consumers. However, once this initiative exceeds a certain threshold, it often becomes reverse emotional exploitation, with consumers asking escorts to lower their rates. This transformation of social relationships lacks clear boundaries, making escorts’ emotional contributions and the extraction of their surplus value more hidden. There is no clear boundary between emotional payment and demand. Although media technology convenience satisfies escorts’ purpose of converting emotional labor into economic benefits, it also strengthens commercial emotional connections with consumers. This transformation also enables negative impacts that interfere with authentic self-perception.

## 5. Conclusion & Reflection

This study theorizes the emotional labor and virtual socialization of game escorts through interviews, attempting to answer questions about the target audience and consumption motives of game escorts and the mechanisms through which they stimulate purchasing behavior. The study finds that game escorts target young people aged 17-30 with more free time, homebody tendencies, and desire for companionship. Game escorts often stimulate consumers to purchase services by offering hourly discounts or playing the “emotion card.”

This study suggests that game escorting represents a kind of professional identity commercialization reflecting the commodification of this phenomenon. It also provides insights for the organizational development of game escorts within modern China’s prevalent network economy. However, the study also finds that game escorting affects escorts’ real lives and negatively interferes with their self-image and authentic perceptions, warranting caution and reflection. Due to insufficient sample size, this study is imperfect in its scope of audience motivation analysis. Future research should pay more attention to negative phenomena in game escorting and expand investigation and practice of virtual socialization.

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