

Emotional Exploitation in Digital Labor from a Feminist Perspective: A Case Study of the Collapse of the Image of a Top Streamer

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Abstract. This article uses feminist theory as the analytical framework to deeply examine how digital platform capitalism systematically exploits digital emotional laborers, and to reveal the underlying gender power dynamics in this process. This study argues that the exploitation of digital emotional labor on digital platforms is not merely a new form of exploitation, but rather a continuation of the traditionally gendered and privatized emotional labor that existed in patriarchal societies, intensified and complicated within the context of the platform economy. This study, using Marxist feminist theory, defines the emotional management and emotional performance on digital platforms as a productive labor, in which a certain value is captured by the platform economy. Furthermore, in the context of traditional society, platform capitalism has utilized platform algorithms and rules to discipline digital emotional laborers, resulting in a separation between the true emotions of digital emotional laborers and the emotional masks they create. After the alienation of digital emotional laborers, the consumers' expectations for genuine emotional interaction are shattered, and the consumers themselves become alienated. It can be seen that platform capitalism has exploited the disciplinary power to invisibly force digital emotional laborers to perform "feminine" emotional displays that conform to the expectations of patriarchal society, resulting in the dual alienation of both laborers and consumers.

Keywords: Digital emotional laborers; Platform capitalism; labor alienation; Platform economy; Emotional performance.

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the current situation where the digital platform economy is developing rapidly, digital working methods are constantly evolving, digital emotional labor methods are developing, and consumers have an increasing demand and higher expectations for platform digital emotions. It is believed that from a feminist perspective, studying the causes and impacts of the hot events of the collapse of the personas of top streamers on the platform is very meaningful, as it can prompt the platform to re-examine its rule-making, the public's value orientation, and the updates and modifications of laws regarding digital platforms. This study specifically delves into the in-depth analysis of the hot topic of the collapse of the top streamer's persona through several aspects, including case analysis, discussion of the logic of emotional exploitation and the consequences of alienation, as well as reflection and reconstruction from a feminist perspective on this event. The literature analysis method was employed to search and read relevant materials and documents. The advantage of this approach lies in its ability to effectively analyze the occurrence logic of the hot event, conduct critical discourse analysis of the power relations and gender ideology in the research on headlive and consumer psychology and behavior, and explore the alienation results between digital emotional laborers and consumers, which is conducive to the progress of the research. The ultimate goal of this research is to construct a new analytical approach from a feminist perspective to study the collapse of the image of top streamers, in order to provide a new solution path for addressing the unfair rules of the digital platform economy and the imbalance of gender rights. It aims to inspire laborers to jointly define platform rules, establish a diversified platform evaluation system, actively legislate, and safeguard the common interests of digital platform laborers and consumers.

With the rapid development of the platform economy, a new type of labor mode under the digital labor branch - digital emotional labor has emerged. Different from physical digital labor and intellectual digital labor, this digital labor is a labor mode that sells emotions as commodities to the public and earns profits. However, since emotions are treated as commodities, excessive commercialization of emotions will inevitably lead to the alienation of emotions among digital emotional laborers [1].

In the face of such an alienated outcome, feminist theory offers indispensable critical perspectives and analytical approaches. The essence of the feminist theory presented in this article is to use "gender" as the core analytical perspective, to reveal and deconstruct the patriarchal system in order to achieve a new theory of fairness. Traditionally, emotional labor has been closely associated with "feminine" occupations such as nursing, service, and education. Platform capitalism not only intensifies the gendered discriminatory division of labor but also places emotional labor in a more covert private domain, in order to conceal its economic value and the nature of exploitation [2]. The feminist perspective enables people to go beyond the single-gender perspective and critically challenges the notion that "emotional labor is a natural trait of women and is an invisible obligation that must be fulfilled"[3]. This article expands its perspective to cover all the exploited groups, revealing the underlying gender politics within them.

2. Literature Review

Lin Ying and Wu Dingming in their article "*The Absorption and Laborization of Netizens' Emotions - On the Formation and Exploitation of 'Emotional Labor' in the Internet Industry*", conducted on the process by which netizens' emotions were commodified and laborized as the application of internet technology became more widespread [4]. It reveals how the internet industry and digital platforms incorporate the emotions and social interactions of a large number of netizens into the process of capital accumulation. This study indicates that the commercialization and laborization of online users' emotions, as well as the development of Internet technology, occur simultaneously. The invasion of commercial principles has led to the weakening and distortion of human emotions and rationality, even to a state of indifference. This research has made a significant contribution to revealing the mechanism of systematic exploitation of public emotions by capital on digital platforms at the macro level, and to examining the universality and harm of digital emotional labor. However, the research content of this article still lacks significant gaps in two aspects.

First, the research perspective is extremely broad and holistic. Focusing on the "general public" and "netizens" as a whole, when dealing with more specific and representative cases, especially those involving influential live-streamers who have a certain number of followers and who have already made certain in-depth efforts in the field of emotional labor, his character design, as a concrete and extreme manifestation of the commercialization of emotions, and the internal contradictions exposed during the process of his personal image's collapse, as well as the public reaction and emotional changes, are not covered in the content. Secondly, although this study profoundly exposed and criticized the erosion of the commercial logic and unreasonable mechanisms of digital capital platforms, it did not conduct an analysis within the framework of feminist theory, regarding the fact that emotional labor is highly gendered and suffers from significant gender bias. And the unique exploitation form that the male top streamer assumes while playing the traditionally "feminine" role of providing emotional care, combined with the expectations of public opinion, the research is not yet comprehensive.

In response to the aforementioned research gaps, this paper will adopt a feminist perspective and use the "top streamer persona collapse incident" as a key case to conduct a more in-depth critical analysis. This article will make up for the existing research's deficiencies in terms of micro-case studies and the gender dimension. It will specifically explore the construction and collapse of the personas and emotional mask of the top streamer, the internal logic of public opinion when emotional performances are exposed, and the reasons for such intense public reactions.

Through this research, the aim is to provide a micro-level, more concrete and deconstructed case analysis of the macroscopic theory of emotional labor exploitation, and to fill the existing research gap.

3. Case Analysis

3.1. Event Description

In September 2023, during a live stream, top influencer Liu lost control and responded to a consumer's question about the price of a certain brand of eyebrow pencil: "Expensive? Where is it expensive? It has been at this price for so many years. Don't talk nonsense with your eyes wide open. It's very hard for domestic brands. Sometimes look for your own reasons. Has your salary increased over all these years? Have you been working seriously?"

As soon as these words were spoken, the live-streaming room was filled with an uproar. His sense of superiority and condescending attitude immediately sparked an unprecedented public outcry. The remarks of this host were particularly provocative for the general public, especially female viewers and fans. Many viewers felt extremely hurt, believing that the streamer they had always supported and admired had betrayed their original intentions. Not only did they completely dismiss their purchasing experiences, but they also blamed the economic hardships of the viewers and fans on their own lack of effort. Controversial remarks spread virally on social media through live-streamed video clips.

Rapidly climbed to the top of the hot search list on major video-sharing platforms such as Weibo, Douyin, and Bilibili. Even many platform creators began to create their own versions of the live-streamed clips. Netizens flocked in, and even started to "re-examine" the brand's eyebrow pencils, believing that the brand's premium pricing was too high and the cost-effectiveness was poor, essentially treating the audience like chives (a term used in Chinese to describe people who are exploited or cheated). For a moment, voices of doubt, ridicule and criticism filled the air. Under intense public pressure, the top streamer made two apologies within 24 hours after the incident. Late at night on September 9th, the streamer posted a written apology statement on Weibo. He said, "I admit that as a streamer, I should have always provided positive guidance to everyone. But I failed to meet your expectations. I'm sorry. I deeply regret my inappropriate remarks and sincerely accept everyone's criticism." However, this apology was criticized by many netizens as being merely "public relations rhetoric", lacking sincerity, and failing to quell the audience's anger.

On the evening of September 10th, the streamer appeared on the live stream and, with tears in his eyes, apologized once again. He sobbed and said, "I shouldn't and don't have the right to criticize any netizen from a personal perspective at will." "Everyone has the right to express their own opinions and thoughts about the products in the live-streaming room." He admitted that he'd forgotten how he'd gradually reached where he is today. and announced that he would suspend broadcasts for a few days to reflect deeply. This live-streaming of the tearful apology has sparked more discussions among netizens. Some people believed that the streamer had shown remorse, but under the overwhelming influence of the public outcry, many others still considered it to be a performative apology. They thought it was a crisis management campaign aimed at saving the career of this streamer. This is not merely a complaint about the exposure of the streamer's personal emotional facade; rather, it represents a collective outburst of public sentiment regarding the platform's capitalism, which has transformed intimate relationships into cold transactions [5].

Digital platforms treat the general public as objects of exploitation and oppression. When human emotions, spiritual values, and rational communication are blatantly disregarded and ignored, what awaits them is only the use of public discourse weapons [6].

3.2. Analysis of the Core of Public Opinion

From the perspective of feminist theory, it can be seen that even though this streamer presented the idea of gender equality, they still internalized the patriarchal logic, such as belittling women's

economic capabilities [2]. However, the public and media's attitude towards this streamer incident also indicates that male laborers are also involved and subject to this traditional gendered labor logic that "emotional services are 'female-oriented' and are considered as unpaid, hidden labor that is not included in the remuneration". This indicates the expansion of the exploitation scope of platform capitalism. The success of this top streamer, is essentially a carefully packaged process of emotional commodities. He skillfully constructed his "personality" through a series of emotional performance strategies: 'A motivational entrepreneur who never wavers from his original aspiration and started from scratch. He is the close "female companion" of all the girls in the live-streaming room.' This kind of intense emotional labor has created tremendous commercial value, but it has also deeply sown the seeds of emotional alienation.

From a feminist perspective, this kind of emotional performance requires the performer to invest genuine emotions and psychological energy. This is likely to lead to a separation between the laborers and their own emotions, that is, emotional alienation [3]. The streamer has exhausted his emotional resources over a long period of time. The contradiction between the character he presents and his true self is bound to erupt [1]. When emotions become commodities, workers become prisoners of their own emotional masks. The collapse of the personality of this leading anchor is precisely a concentrated manifestation of this alienated state.

4. Discussion

4.1. The Logic of Emotional Exploitation and the Consequences of Alienation

Platform capital exploits digital emotional labor through various complex mechanisms [4]. And digital emotional labor treats emotions as work, so emotions are no longer naturally occurring but instead become a series of cold, measurable and quantifiable data [7]. Workers constantly monitor themselves, adjusting their emotional responses to commodification. While bringing benefits, this ultimately also leads to the disconnection between the real self and the performance self of digital emotional laborers.

This kind of exploitation also led to the alienation between laborers and consumers [8]. For consumers, the genuine emotional connection they were seeking online turned out to be merely a false performance. This kind of emotional consumption has eroded genuine social relationships and led to the alienation of consumers. For laborers, continuous and prolonged emotional display is bound to lead to the depletion of their own inspiration, fatigue and a sense of estrangement from themselves. Serious and high-probability events can lead to mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. This is also a form of alienation for the laborers.

4.2. Reflection and Reconstruction from a Feminist Perspective

The analysis of the top streamer Li incident from a feminist perspective holds significant theoretical value and practical significance. The collapse of the leading anchor's persona reveals the gendered aspect of emotional labor. To a large extent, this was a collusion between the patriarchal system and capitalism. This has prompted the public to start paying attention to the value of emotional labor and the issue of unfair distribution. This has prompted the public to start paying attention to the value of emotional labor and the issue of unfair distribution. The success of this head anchor is largely attributed to the carefully crafted "best friend like ladybro" persona he has created. The use of intimate terms such as "all girls" and "all beauties" by him, along with his "personalized" makeup tutorials and product recommendations, essentially constitutes a highly gendered form of emotional labor [9]. When a man skillfully performs this kind of "feminine" emotional labor, he reaches the peak of the platform capitalism's segmentation in the live streaming field [8]. This may seem to break the gender bias, but in reality, it reinforces the exploitative logic of patriarchy behind the scenes. This is a collusion between the "emotional rules" defined by patriarchy and the "profit-making mechanism" of digital platform capitalism.

Emotional labor should not be regarded as "the covert and free obligation of women", but rather its value should be defined [10]. Discrimination should also be exposed and faced squarely. While the platform is generalizing the commercialization of emotions, it actually reinforces the underlying gender power structure. This incident of the collapse of the streamer's persona has revealed this.

Based on this criticism, in order to build a healthier and more just digital labor environment ecosystem, multiple-dimensional changes are needed: In terms of the system, emotional labor should be included in the scope of compensation calculation, and proactive legislation should be adopted to safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of digital emotional laborers. In terms of the platform, efforts should be made to establish a more humanized and diversified evaluation system; in terms of cultural dissemination, it is necessary to cultivate and guide the public's critical understanding and healthy evaluation system regarding emotional labor. Strictly resist the excessive commercialization of emotional relationships; In the field of digital emotional laborers, it is encouraged for the laborers to unite and jointly define the boundaries and value of emotional labor.

5. Conclusion

The collapse of the image of the head anchor is not merely a personal public relations crisis that has sparked widespread discussion; it is also a multi-faceted prism with various sizes and aspects.

The findings of this study indicate that platform capitalism not only exploits digital emotional laborers through mechanisms, but also alienates consumers in the same way. This further leads to the conclusion of the study that the platform, by making emotional commodities more prevalent, has actually strengthened the underlying gender power structure. This study provides many valuable references for future research that takes a feminist perspective to examine the inherent logic of digital emotional labor exploitation. This has mainly influenced the new paths and development directions of emotional labor on digital platforms. Future research should focus on analyzing the gendered operation mechanism of platform capitalism from a feminist perspective, and exploring the direction of reconfiguring the relationship between platform live-streamers and consumers.

Through the focus of feminist theory, this article explores how platform capitalism exploits digital emotional laborers through mechanisms, and leads to the dual alienation of both laborers and consumers. This analysis not only helps researchers understand the new changes in the trend of labor alienation in the digital age, but also enables us to reflect on the current institutional flaws and gaps, as well as the deeply rooted biases and distortions in gender politics. It also provides important insights for a more equitable and healthy development model of the digital economy. Only by acknowledging the value and cost of digital emotional labor, and courageously challenging the underlying gender politics, can we break the vicious cycle and build a better future that respects individual emotions and dignity.

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<p>This article deeply analyzes how digital platform capital systematically exploits emotional laborers within the framework of Marxist feminism, and reveals the gender power mechanism that continues the traditional patriarchal society behind it. Innovatively defining digital emotional management as productive labor, this study keenly points out the current situation where platform algorithm rules lead to dual alienation between workers and consumers. The theoretical perspective of the paper is unique, the criticism is profound, and the logical structure is rigorous. It has an important theoretical breakthrough in revealing the cross oppression of platform economy and gender politics.</p>				