

The Construction and Alienation of Digital Intimacy in the Perspective of Emotional Labour

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we selected the users of TikTok 'Raising Little Fireman' as the research object, and used the research methods of participatory observation and interviews to analyze how these intimate relationships are presented in the form of emotional labour, and explored the phenomenon of the construction and alienation of digital intimacy under the perspective of emotional labour. By analysing users' motivation for participation, the path of emotional labour, and the alienation of emotional labour, the study finds that the "Jointly Raising a Little Fireman" promotes the establishment of non-physical, high-frequency interactive digital intimacy, but it also leads to problems such as the alienation of time, the alienation of interactions, and the alienation of memories. This paper reveals how digital platforms discipline users through emotional labour, suggests ways for users to resist emotional labour, and emphasizes the need to pay attention to the impact of social media platforms on digital intimacy in the digital era, in order to promote the construction of online intimacy.

KEYWORDS

Emotional labour; Digital intimacy; TikTok; Co-raising little fires

1 Introduction

With the continuous development of the Internet, various kinds of social media have changed the way people communicate and reconstructed their relationships. Constructing digital intimacy has become an important way for people to maintain intimate relationships. TikTok has launched the 'Joint Raising of Little Fireman' as an emerging social currency in interpersonal communication, which constructs a unique digital intimacy relationship. The prerequisite for the 'Joint Little Fireman' is that users must upgrade to the latest version of TikTok, and users need to chat with other friends for more than six consecutive days. At this point, a link will appear in the chat dialogue box to invite friends to join the Little Fireman. When both parties interact and chat every day, the 'Little Fireman' will gain a corresponding growth value, and when the growth value reaches a certain level, it will unlock the next form, and so on. Currently, there are three types of 'Little Fireman': 'Toddler', 'Growing Up' and 'Mature'. Many users have turned to TikTok for daily interpersonal communication and intimacy maintenance in order to make Little Fireman enter the maturity stage as soon as possible.

As social media platforms such as TikTok are embedded in our lives, our relationships are inevitably becoming 'digitalised'. Various online social channels, such as 'raising a small fireman', seem to help users build digital intimacy, but behind the scenes they hide the invisible emotional labour of digital labour. Users' information data, social content and even emotional exchanges are being commodified by platforms. Digital intimacy is gradually alienated by the platform. Based on the participatory observation and interviews with 'Raising Little Firemen' user group, the following research questions will be answered:

- (1) What kind of intimate relationship do users establish with 'Little Fireman' and what are their motives for participation?
- (2) What kind of emotional labour do users engage in during the process of 'raising Little Fireman', and what is the path of their labour?
- (3) How do platforms use Little Fireman to alienate users' digital intimacy?

2 Research methods

This paper adopts the combination of participatory observation method and interview to collect data. The author conducts interviews with the user group of 'Jointly Raising Little Fireman' through face-to-face, telephone and online methods, focusing on the motivation of users to participate in 'Jointly Raising Little Fireman' and the characteristics of the digital intimacy constructed by users, as well as analysing how the platform alienates digital intimacy under the perspective of emotional labour. The author also analyses how the platform alienates digital intimacy in the context of emotional labour.

The author chose 10 youth interview subjects (Table 1) through real-life recruitment and social accounts (e.g., TikTok,

Douban) recruitment. In terms of gender, there were seven females and three males; in terms of age, it ranged from 18 to 29 years old; in terms of city, it involved five cities in China; in terms of educational attainment, the interviewees included five master's degree (students) and five bachelor's degree (students); and in terms of occupation, the interviewees included eight students and two people in the workplace. Each respondent participated in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 20 minutes. As shown in Table 1.

Table 1 This is the basic profile of the respondent

Number	Genders	Age	City	Qualification	Career	Level
A1	women	25	Jinan	undergraduate	employee	Growing Up
A2	women	20	Jinan	undergraduate	schoolchildren	Mature
A3	women	28	Jinan	undergraduate	Coffee Shop Manager	Toddler
A4	women	24	Chongqing	bachelor's degree	schoolchildren	Growing Up
A5	women	29	Shanghai	undergraduate	network editor	Mature
A6	women	23	Jinan	bachelor's degree	schoolchildren	Growing Up
A7	women	25	Jinan	bachelor's degree	schoolchildren	Mature
B8	man	26	Jinan	bachelor's degree	schoolchildren	Toddler
B9	man	28	Beijing	bachelor's degree	schoolchildren	Growing Up
B10	man	20	Liaoning	undergraduate	schoolchildren	Mature

3 Building digital intimacy by 'co-farming the little fireman'

3.1 Motivations for user participation

3.1.1 Social interaction and interpersonal connection

Albert Bandura emphasised that in social interaction, human mental activity is a process of interaction between three factors: the individual, the behaviour, and the environment. In this theoretical framework, the interaction between individuals and the social environment is seen as a key way to form relationships and construct meaning. The introduction of the feature of 'Shake' to raise small firemen encourages users to maintain daily interactions with their friends and construct digital intimacy. This kind of positive interaction not only enhances the social interaction between users, but also deepens the emotional bond between users through the sense of achievement gained from raising Little Fireman.

3.1.2 Self-expression and self-realisation

Irving Goffman put forward the theory of mimesis based on the performance of individuals in society, and he regarded the interaction of individuals in society as a kind of performance, and individuals can play different social roles in different social occasions. In the page of 'Little Fireman', users can choose different skins and costumes to dress up the 'Little Fireman', and also add various accessories and props, and even change expressions. For example, interviewee A2 once mentioned, 'When commenting on the Shake Music comment section, accessories will be randomly dropped, and I've received 3D glasses and popcorn.' Users can create their own 'Little Fireman' image according to their own choices, thus realising self-expression. At the same time, unlocking the high-level 'Little Fireman' and displaying it in the personal homepage further satisfies the user's sense of achievement.

3.1.3 Group identity and social currency

In the process of 'raising a small fireman', users can form interesting groups. At present, on social platforms such as TikTok and Xiaohongshu, there are user-organised communities on the topic of 'raising small firemen together', which has given rise to new online literature such as 'I can't even take care of my children at home' and 'experience of raising small children'. New online literature such as 'experience of raising a baby' has emerged. Individual users share their achievements and 'experience of raising children' in the community to achieve a sense of group identity and belonging. As a virtual intermediary, 'Little Fireman' has become a new generation of social currency, which not only provides users with more opportunities for personal performances, but also improves user stickiness with its own social attributes, further enhancing users' loyalty to the function. Users and other self-media accounts have also increased the spread of 'Raise a Little Fireman' in the process of rubbing internet hotspots, thus attracting more people to join this interactive carnival.

3.2 Emotional labour paths for digital intimacy

3.2.1 Collaborative participation: users participate in the interactive emotional labour of content dissemination

Users invest time in 'raising small firemen' to establish digital intimacy because of emotional resources, and they inevitably like, forward and comment on short videos in the process of social interaction, in which the attention consumed by users and the high traffic generated have become an important tool for increasing the daily activity volume of TikTok. The 'Little Fireman' function launched by TikTok aims to improve its own attributes. In Internet traffic, social networking is at the top, content is at the middle, and payment tools are at the bottom, and the higher the level, the more irreplaceable it is. ^[1]In order to further compete for users' time, both TikTok and WeChat are infiltrating each other's domains. Interviewee A7 said, 'Every day on-line TikTok, not only to brush the video content, now more accustomed to the feeling of chatting on TikTok, the function feels more powerful than WeChat, but also can be co-opted to raise a small fireman.' At the same time, users spontaneously share their own Little Fireman on various social platforms, which must have attracted other friends of the users to join in the adoption of the Little Fireman. Users are actively constructing digital virtual intimacy in Jiyin, and the resource serves as a communication medium and emotional digital labour for social media such as Jiyin, consciously becoming a marketing tool.

3.2.2 Emotional engagement: Creative emotional labour for self-expression and intimacy

In the process of 'raising Little Fireman', besides the emotional investment in interacting with friends, users will also make various attempts to raise Little Fireman. TikTok stipulates that users must complete three tasks, including sending messages to each other every day, sending 10 messages every day, and sharing three TikTok videos with each other every day in order to obtain the corresponding growth value of the Little Fireman. B10 said: 'In order to make the Little Fireman look better and have more interactive effects, my girlfriend and I will often make phone calls on TikTok, and send each other photos, etc., in order to take care of the Little Fireman.' At the same time, many Little Fireman users post 'parenting manuals' to help other users raise their Little Fireman. Most of the users interviewed believe that these experiences can help their little fireman enter the growth period as soon as possible,' said A5: 'I once posted a guide video on Jieyin about caring for the little fireman, and it would be very fulfilling to help everyone.'

3.2.3 Unpaid resources: immaterial affective labour as 'production and consumption in one'

Unlike physical and mental labour, the process and outcome of emotional labour is primarily emotional rather than material. What workers create through emotional labour is intangible emotional value and social relationship capital. Users invest their emotions, time and energy in raising Little Fireman with their friends, and this labour process does not directly produce material products, but builds intimate and social relationships in the digital space through emotional exchanges, interactions and sharing. A2 said, 'Little Fireman is very adorable, and there is no substantial reward after reaching the top level, but it is more about harvesting an emotional experience.' The growth of Little Fireman, the unlocking of various forms of accessories, and the interaction and sharing between users are all manifestations of the immateriality of emotional labour. Users at this point are not only producers of emotional input, but also consumers who gain emotional comfort. The entire labour process of the 'Hopscotch Little Fire' is an immaterial process of information dissemination.

4 Alienation of digital intimacy and user resistance

4.1 Alienation of digital intimacy

4.1.1 Time alienation: users are forced to be online all the time

The convenience and full-time nature of social media bring a new kind of time pressure to users, high-frequency interaction makes users have no place to hide, and users are forced to be 'online' 24 hours a day. The special nature of the 'joint adoption of Little Fireman' requires both parties to interact more in order to harvest the growth value. This further aggravates the user's anxiety about the interaction between the two sides. B10 said, 'Since the adoption of the small fireman, if the message is not returned in seconds, the other side may be angry and anxious.' Meanwhile, Jitterbug's read setting exposes 'read but not replied' to the sunlight, said B9: 'Sometimes when I turn on my mobile phone during class and a Jitterbug message pops up, I subconsciously click on it, but I don't have time to reply to the message because I'm in class.' In the process of co-opting Little Fireman, private space is encroached upon by the co-opting rules set by the platform, and the individual may be forced to fall into an eternally online state of exhaustion. If they don't send each other ten messages a day, the little fireman will become 'grey', and in order to make the little

fireman come to life, they have to interact with each other. When social media platforms are embedded in people's daily lives, users' time is gradually alienated, and "late messages" or "no messages" have become the cause of crises and even the breakup of intimate relationships.

4.1.2 Alienation of interactions: mechanical interactions suppressing emotional communication

In order to maintain the growth of Little Fireman, B10 and his friends signed a 'Little Fireman Raising Contract' around Little Fireman, and set up detailed rules and regulations for interaction in an entertaining way. According to A9, in the process of raising Little Fireman, the speed of feedback, the frequency of interaction, and the number of achievements may become important indicators of the growth of Little Fireman, etc. B10 talked about the 'foster contract' and said, 'As time passes, it will feel very burdensome and meaningless. B10 says of the contract: 'As time goes by, it becomes burdensome and meaningless. Rule-following based on a lack of interactional buy-in can become a shackle on the relationship and a form of social pressure. Some interviewees use the '1 deduction' for interaction in order to continue to raise Little Flame, and even one interviewee was forced to continue to raise Little Flame even after she broke up with someone. Users pursuing Little Flame 'The interaction behaviour stays on the surface, mechanized interaction, and even encroachment on offline interaction time, only results-oriented relationship binding digital intimacy interaction, the user's interaction is gradually alienated, regimented, boring and meaningless endless exchanges make the digital intimacy relationship gradually tasteless. There is a lack of real emotional communication between users.

4.1.3 Memory alienation: relationship data desperately needs to be forgotten

In the age of big data, where any social interaction on the Internet is recorded and expired digital intimacy is forced to be remembered, the 'right to be forgotten' has become a luxury in the age of mediatisation. The 'right to be forgotten' requires that data subjects have the right to demand that data controllers permanently delete data related to them. A1 said, 'As long as you've shared a little fireman, it will be displayed in the Jitterbug chat box, leaving a mark forever.' ^[2] At the same time, during the process of 'raising Little Fireman', users generate a large amount of interactive data, including chat logs, which, to a certain extent, reflect the personal social media habits and preferences of users and their friends. Although the platform records the data in the background to optimise the user experience, users still have the right to delete the data to protect their privacy. In the context of the mediatised era, Internet technology is constantly shaping each user's unique digital identity, comprehensively recording their text, voice, video, pictures and other types of data, which ordinary users are unable to change, and the memory is alienated from the Internet, depriving users of their 'right to be forgotten'.

4.2 User resistance to alienation of intimacy

Marx pointed out that conscious and voluntary labour and practice are the essence of human beings. As mentioned earlier, as time passes and the sense of novelty diminishes, the users of 'Raising Little Fireman' carry out repetitive and mechanised operations and labour under the pre-programmed rules of TikTok every day, which brings a sense of compulsion and burden to the users. The resulting pressures reflect the dichotomy between multidimensional individual meaning and unidimensional platform capital logic. This kind of emotional labour creates a special kind of emotional abduction for users, which makes the users hate the discomfort brought by emotional labour, and at the same time worry that the intimacy between them will be dissolved after leaving 'Little Fireman'. Users of 'Little Fireman' are blocked in this circle and cannot extricate themselves from it. In the interviews, many interviewees said that they felt uncomfortable in the game, and A1 said, 'When I first started to raise Little Fireman, I felt that it was particularly fun and interesting, but as I played, it became boring, but I had to raise it again.' A2 said, 'Although it's not difficult at all to raise the little fireman together, but the operation is too mechanised ah, a lot of dress up is also needed to kryptonite, it's hard to eat.'

Based on this, some players began to re-examine the relationship between themselves and online communication methods such as 'Little Fireman', gradually divorced their emotions from themselves, and began to resist the alienation of emotional labour. Through observation, it is found that users' resistance to emotional labour is mainly manifested in two ways, namely, "shouting" communication with the platform and withdrawal from co-parenting. Many users chose to express their emotions by repeatedly emphasising and affirming under ShakeEn's official media accounts in the hope that the co-adoption task would be improved and adjusted. For example, some users with a hard attitude will take more radical ways such as reporting, or even withdraw from the game to achieve the individual's withdrawal from the emotional labour. Either way, it can reduce the online emotional labour to a certain extent, and return to offline real interaction.

5 Conclusions

The 'Raise a Little Fireman' campaign is a microcosm of the construction and alienation of intimacy in the digital age. In this process, users are both participants in emotional labour and objects of capital exploitation. Though 'Share a Little Fireman' provides users with a way to build digital intimacy, this online relationship has been alienated to a certain extent. Firstly, this kind of relationship is built in the virtual world, and as users' reliance on the platform deepens, they may fall into a state of continuous online and constant contribution, and the digital intimacy constructed by the digital platform will weaken the sense of reality of interpersonal relationships. Secondly, emotional exchanges between users are often constrained by platform rules and algorithms, presenting a state of being manipulated and regulated. Finally, users' interactions on online social platforms are in the realm of a "panoramic open-view prison", where users not only have to pay attention to the protection of their privacy to avoid excessive labour, but also have to pay more attention to the rational expression of their emotions, and the exercise of users' 'right to be forgotten' is also a response to the platform's exploitation and exploitation of people. The exercise of the user's 'right to be forgotten' is essentially a revolt against the exploitation and alienation of the platform, so as to avoid becoming an 'emotional net slave' in the digital age.

The emergence of social media has changed the interaction behaviour and communication mode of users, but to a certain extent, it has alienated the interaction relationship of users. The labour control methods of social media are more covert. Users self-control under the trap of rules set by the platform and spontaneously carry out emotional labour, obscuring the fact that excess labour and labour value are exploited. Therefore, in the future, scholars need to pay more attention to the emotional labour unconsciously produced by users when using social media, and the construction and alienation of our intimate relationships by social media platforms. At the same time, we also need to think about how to construct more authentic, equal, healthy and sustainable online intimate relationships in the digital age.

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