



Dating with My Ideal Lover: Image Construction of Participants in Delegated Cos and Their New Subjectivity

Wanying Jiao^{a,*}, Yushu Chen^b

School of Culture and Communication, Central University of Finance and Economics, Beijing, China

^{a,*}Jiaowanying330@outlook.com, ^bsulico447@gmail.com

Abstract. With the growth and expansion of the Cosplay community, a new derivative type of Cosplay - "Delegated Cos" has become popular among Asian young people. "Delegated Cos" refers to the situation where the "Delegator" initiates a delegation request, asking the "Delegated person" to play their favorite character and interact with them. This study analyzes the delegated Cos details and interview contents of 68 participants by conducting personal observations and in-depth interviews, exploring the phenomenon from three dimensions: ritual performance of delegated Cos, construction of virtual emotions, as well as opportunities and potential concerns. The results indicates that Delegated Cos offers highly customized emotional experiences to delegators, satisfying to a certain extent their aspirations for idealized emotions. Furthermore, practitioners, by engaging in Delegated Cos, have escaped the cycle of capital exploiting cultural commodities to coerce fans into performing free immaterial labor. Instead, they leverage "self-branding" strategies, thereby enhancing their own subjectivity.

Keywords: Delegated Cos; Cosplay; Emotional labor; Emotional Commodity

1 Introduction

Cosplay is short for "Costume Play", specifically referring to the role-playing game in which real people portray characters from ACG (Animation, Comic, Game) works, simply called "Cos"[1]. Players who participate in Cosplay are called "Cosers". Generally, to express their love for a certain image, Cosers will use self-made or purchased specific clothing and props, combined with specific makeup, appearance, behavior, language, and other expressions, attempting to achieve a vivid interpretation of the role through dramatic character portrayal, cross-dressing, or subversion of gender temperament in the real environment.[2]

With the growth and expansion of the Cosplay community, the types of Cosplay have become more segmented. In recent years, along with the continuous expansion of the virtual love game (otome game) market, a new derivative type of Cosplay - "Delegated Cos" has become popular among Asian young people. This cultural phenomenon is predominantly prevalent among the youth in China. As its influence continues to expand, it has garnered the participation of youngsters in several East Asian and

Southeast Asian nations as well. "Delegated Cos" refers to a scenario in which the "Delegator" initiates a commission, entrusting the "Delegated person" to play their preferred character and engage in interactive experiences, catering to the Delegator's emotional needs and preferences. During the delegation period, the Delegated person needs to play the role of the Delegator's romantic partner, friend (primarily a romantic interest), or other designated character, and engaging in a series of shared dating experiences

In addition to completing the delegation offline, the "delegation" can also be completed online, and this form is called "Language Costume-play" (also known as "Language-C"). "Language-C" refers to a Cosplay activity that relies on the Internet platform to play a role and simulate its speech in the form of text interpretation. Cosers engaged in Language-C can freely engage in role-playing in the online space by creating a virtual identity, without being limited by personal conditions or geographical environment.[3] Originally, Language-C only existed as a personal hobby, and after the development of the Delegated Cos industry, Language-C also existed as a form of it.

Delegated Cos, as a new cultural phenomenon active among the youth, has seen its industry scale and influence continuously expanding in recent years. Essentially, Delegated Cos belongs to the category of new emotional consumption in the digital context. In the interaction of this type of emotional consumption, the "Delegator" and the "Delegated person" exhibit relatively unique behavioral patterns and psychological characteristics. This study uses the method of virtual ethnography to conduct interviews and observations with the participants of the Delegated Cos activities, to further explore the construction process of the Delegated Cos activities, deeply understand the psychological motivations behind the behavioral performance of both parties during these activities, and how the Delegated person enhances the subjectivity of their personal market and brand by leveraging existing cultural products. It also attempts to provide additional research and theoretical underpinnings for the reasons behind the formation and orderly development of this cultural phenomenon.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Rise of Delegated Cos: A New Emotional Consumption Market and Customized Emotional Commodities

In the past studies on Cosplay culture, research on the development of the broader concept of Cosplay has been relatively abundant, including analyzing the specific manifestations of Cosplay[4], explaining the behavioral logic behind it with relevant theories[5], the psychological motivations of young people to engage in Cosplay[6][7] and the practical significance of Cosplay itself.[8]

However, we note that "Delegated Cos" as a transactional service-oriented consumer activity is essentially different from the original self-entertaining Cosplay. "Delegated Cos" has a service nature that meets the individual needs of the delegator - that is, the delegator pays for their own emotional needs by spending a certain amount of money to delegate others to spend time and energy to play their favorite roles, and by creating an ideal and romantic interactive field, thereby satisfying their own sentimental demands.

This transaction form also reflects the change in the consumption concept of current digital consumers: they are willing to spend money to meet customized emotional needs.[9]

Currently, while there are not many studies specifically focused on the emerging cultural landscape of Delegated Cos, the academic community has already produced relatively rich research findings on the emergence and development of emotional consumption, emotional labor, and the emotional transaction market.

Lv Peng pointed out that initially, online emotional labor emerged with the rise of the platform economy, and the development of the digital economy also gradually emerged and strengthened the feature of emotional commodification.[10] The "emotional transaction market" has thus gradually formed and developed. In the past, the emotional consumption market primarily comprised virtual lovers, chatting companions, and other customized services. Some professional virtual lover practitioners of "chat companions" provided virtual love services for economic purposes, taking flirtatious words, voices and appearances as transaction elements, and adopted transaction strategies of genuine expression and shallow role-playing to get along with customers to meet their emotional needs.[11] In order to show its "customized" excellent service, some "virtual lover stores" also create "exclusive personas" tailored to ensure that their discourse skills and emotional expression methods effectively cater to the unique needs of their customers.[12]

However, the personas of virtual lovers in this business model are set based on real-life figures and usually do not have the "fantasy" that otome or harem games possess. Comparatively, in the virtual worlds of otome games and harem games, the identity experiences offered to players and the image settings of interactive characters are often far from reality and closer to the ideal category, making it easier for players to produce a dreamlike effect similar to a "daydream".[13] This high-quality "dream-making" experience and the "charm" of the personas are often beyond what the real world can bring. The emotional transactions formed by players' in-game payments represent another prevalent mode of emotional consumption at present. Nevertheless, in this mode of emotional consumption, consumers are limited to "choosing" rather than "customizing"; that is, the interactive scenes and character-related feedback are all pre-determined by game companies. Therefore, compared to those "virtual lovers" played by real people, the interactivity and flexibility of virtual game characters are relatively insufficient.

It is evident that the past emotional transaction market often struggled to effectively integrate captivating personas, prompt responses, and personalized emotional services. In contrast, the innovative emotional labor service offered by Delegated Cos succeeds in accomplishing this, explaining its swift popularity among young people. Simultaneously, the ubiquitous presence of this "new emotional consumption demand" is precisely what motivates more Cosers to embark on the realm of "Delegated Cos," enabling them to procure substantial profits by rendering tailored emotional services.

2.2 **Becoming the Delegated Person: Remunerated Immaterial Labor and the Emerging Subjectivity**

The concept of emotional labor was initially proposed by the American sociologist Hochschild, who believed that emotional labor requires people to arouse or suppress their own emotions, create and adjust facial expressions and body language to maintain an appropriate external appearance and obtain labor remuneration.[14] Emotional labor is an aspect of immaterial labor, involving interpersonal interaction and communication, and its core lies in the creation and manipulation of emotions.[15]

The current researches on emotional labor mainly focused on the following aspects: First, based on the implicit labor control and exploitation imposed by capital on individual occupations (especially in the service industry), that is, the service industry, under the framework of "labor - capital - consumers", tends to increase its requirements for the emotional input of practitioners, involving the emotions of workers in the entire production process,[16] thereby achieving the invasion of capital into productivity. For example, the aviation industry controls the posture and expressions of flight attendants[17], frontline employees in the hotel industry must make extra emotional efforts to deal with difficult consumers.[18] The same situation also occurs in the catering industry[19], medical care industry[20], etc.

Second, the feminist researches based on the division of labor by gender, examine the gender injustices concealed within the commercialization of emotional labor and its potential to perpetuate such injustices. This arises from the fact that the gendered nature of labor itself serves to reproduce social status, often positioning women in subordinate roles[21]. For example, capital may impose different controls on female workers through identifying different gender identity mechanisms[22], women often provide unpaid "emotional performances" in the family[23], and female teachers are often considered as "better at taking care of students", while they indeed spend more time and resources on deep acting than male teachers.[24]

Third, the researches on fans' affective labor based on Affective Economics and cultural studies, focused on digital laborers who, as fans of a particular product, voluntarily and freely engage in immaterial labor, notably emotional labor, by "regularly and emotionally investing in narratives or texts".[25] This situation does not merely arise within the fan ecosystem centered around star idols, but permeates the broader landscape of cultural products, encompassing films, television series, and games. As new marketing strategies for these cultural products strive to amplify consumers' emotional and social investments, they simultaneously foster brand communities and forge long-term bonds between consumers and brands, allowing consumers to immerse themselves in an atmosphere of infatuation while engaging with cultural products[26], voluntarily performing affective labor to seek value recognition or entering into some imaginative and virtualized intimate relationship [27][28]. The youth who have embraced any digital fan circle will become free digital laborers of the global cultural industry, often finding themselves powerless to confront the entrenched system, even if they have cultivated a critical stance towards the construction of digital fandom-subcultures.[29]

However, contrary to the Western discourse on digital production, that is, the dichotomy of digital labor as "exploitation or empowerment", the activities of Delegated Cos present a kind of "subjectivity" that stems from digital capital but gets rid of serving the capital itself. In other words, practitioners engage in the "standardization of personal entrepreneurship and branding of the neoliberal self" by offering emotional value grounded in cultural products, thereby transforming themselves from mere consumers into economically productive workers.[30] Undeniably, in this process, the practitioners build their own service forms around virtual images. This, too, falls within the realm of unpaid labor for capital and serves to expand the influence of cultural products. However, neither consumers nor practitioners take "building communities and a sense of belonging" as their purpose. Instead, given the contradiction between the selling point of "uniqueness and customization" of Delegated Cos and the scale market, they have established a large number of "one-to-one" online and offline relationships, which leads to the inability of related industries to utilize the emotional production capacity and social relations of film and television fans or game players and transform them into measurable and manageable labor force.[31] Therefore, capital is also unable to develop its commercial interests.

Unlike traditional digital labor, practitioners in Delegated Cos do not rely on the existing extended market of a certain cultural product - such as the former trading market of game skills and resources, and gradually transform it into a semi-professional workplace. Instead, they harness the "allure" of virtual characters to bolster their services and brands. This may elicit an emotional transfer from consumers, redirecting the affections originally invested in commercial cultural products (e.g., popular characters) towards the practitioners of Delegated Cos. In turn, this may even influence existing cultural products.

The industry of Delegated Cos is developing rapidly, coupled with a large number of consumers and practitioners, most of whom are young adults and teenagers. It is evident that a thorough investigation into practitioners and consumers within this industry would significantly contribute to our re-examination of the psychological motivations driving the new generation of "digital consumers" and their emerging sense of subjectivity. Furthermore, such an investigation would enable us to explore, at a macro level, the transformation of traditional digital laborers' identity and emotional labor models.

To sum up, we attempt to address the following research questions:

1. Understand the specific procedural behavioral manifestations of the delegated persons (delegated teachers) in delegation and how they use existing cultural products to establish personal markets and personal brands;
2. Focus on the psychological motivations, manifestations, and obstructive factors of the behavioral manifestations of the delegators and the delegated persons;
3. Discuss the extent to which the behavioral manifestations of both parties in delegations meet the pre-requirements of the delegators, and explore the impacts these manifestations have on the emotional investment and emotional labor of both the delegators and the delegated persons.

3 Methodology

3.1 Selection of Research Methods and Research Objects

This study primarily employs the method of virtual ethnography. Firstly, as of now, the practitioners and consumers of Delegated Cos mostly reside in first-tier or super-first-tier cities with relatively developed economies and abundant cultural resources. Most of the practitioners are adult college students who do not have specific geographical clustering. Therefore, it is determined that the research objects have no geographical boundaries, and the research scenario should be a virtual space.[32] Secondly, just like the AGC cultural circle[33], the participants of Delegated Cos rely on online platforms and network communities for communication. After a period of preliminary investigation, it is found that the relevant activity communities are mainly concentrated on platforms such as Xiaohongshu, Weibo, Xianyu, WeChat groups (in China), Instagram, and Twitter (in other regions). Within the communities, only those with a membership exceeding 300 individuals will be selected, ensuring that at least 40% of these members possess experience as either delegators or delegated persons. This criterion has been set in place to guarantee that the chosen research subjects possess ample resources and are viable for investigation.

In view of the concern in the academic community that "virtual ethnography cannot guarantee to explain the entirety of the social situation"[34], it is necessary to ensure that participation does not merely culminate in the pure observation and analysis of online texts, pictures, and videos, but rather integrates into the "circle" as much as possible during this process, attempting to perceive and understand the motives, emotions, and desires of users during the production of all online materials. [35] Therefore, this study also uses participation, observation, semi-structured interviews, and other methods as supplements.

Firstly, we personally participated in and observed the behavioral dynamics of the research objects before, during, and after the "Delegated Cos" activities to obtain direct experience and a deep understanding, which is convenient for examining the psychological changes, motivations, and hindering factors of the both parties.

Also, the research endeavored to enter the community of the research objects, observing and recording the relevant content information within the community. This encompassed text, pictures, audio, and video information provided by community participants for recording or display purposes. A first-hand information database was subsequently established, followed by the conduct of text collation and analysis. representative research objects were invited for in-depth interviews. Guided by the in-depth interview questions devised in this study, the views and feelings of the research objects on specific issues were elicited and documented. The texts captured in the interview records underwent classification, collation, and analysis. This investigation spanned a period of 10 months, starting from June 2023 to April 2024.

3.2 Explanation of Case Studies

The research objects in this study consist of 34 groups, with 2 people in each group, totaling 68 individuals, including both delegators and the delegated persons who have had an experience of "Delegated Cos". In this study, the interview subjects, specifically the characters appearing in the cases, will be identified through a unique combination code of letters and numbers. Among them, "C" (cosplay) represents offline Delegated Cos, "LC" (Language Costume-play) represents online Delegated Cos, "DR" refers to the "Delegator" who "places an order" in the delegation. "DP" refers to the "Delegated Person" who receives the order in the delegation and is responsible for "playing" the role. The respondent number also indicates the group and age. For example, "DR-C-1-18" represents the delegator in Group 1, who participates in offline Delegated Cos and is 18 years old at the time of the interview.

The interviews and surveys targeted individuals aged between 18 to 26 years old, predominantly students, from countries including China, Japan, South Korea, and Malaysia. The virtual characters discussed are primarily from the games and film and television works such as *"Mr Love: Queen's Choice," "Love and Night," "Love and Deepspace," "Tears of Themis," "Ash of the Kingdom," "Touken Ranbu," "Haikyuu!,"* and *"Spy x Family."* The detailed information of the interviewees and survey participants has been omitted here.

4 Results

4.1 The Ritual Performance of Delegated Cos: Customized Self-Construction and Co-Construction

Before formally entering the "Delegation" process, the delegated person often needs to undergo an identity transformation through a "ritual". A ritual is something special and unique, separated from daily life,[36] and it is the transformation process of an individual and society from one state to another.[37]

When the delegated person engages in the role-playing activity, they need to go through the pre-liminal preparation stage, the liminal performance stage, and the post-liminal stage of the daily return to normalcy.[5] Before entering the liminal stage, the "delegated person" needs to separate from the original social structure first and conduct "role cognition" of the role to be played. The purpose is for the individual to psychologically establish a set of social response patterns that are congruent with their assigned role.

Overall, In the process of "Language Costume-play"(hereinafter all represented by "L-C"), the stages are generally well-defined, typically involving pre-communication, trial orders, and formal orders. Pre-communication occurs "when DPs (hereinafter all represented by "DP" for "the delegated person") are not in role-playing state," meaning "before the formal delegation, I will first chat with my delegators in my own tone. Usually, we discuss some basic information, including the delegators' age, city of residence, whether they are a student or employed, their field of study or profession, as well as personal interests, among others. This serves as an icebreaker and facilitates the

swift establishment of rapport between two individuals who may initially be 'strangers' to each other." (DP-LC-10-19)

In addition to understanding the delegator's basic personal information, the most important aspect is the detailed communication about the "delegation order" itself, "The delegator can set her own relationship with the character, which makes it easier for me to create special character settings." (DP-LC-16-24) This is also a manifestation of the customization of "L-C", "For example, some people feel that they are just getting to know the character; while others believe they are in the honeymoon phase with the character. In summary, this serves as a preliminary exploration, where each delegator's interpretation of the stages in a romantic relationship differs, consequently leading to a variety of topics that I must prepare for." (DP-LC-16-24) In addition, details such as the daily working hours of the entire delegation and sensitive topics for both delegators and DP are also finalized during pre-communication.

During the process where the DPs evaluate, study, and specially handle a certain virtual character's norms and the virtual character according to the cultural patterns they have summarized, they can not only clarify the rights, obligations, and behavioral norms of the roles' position but also reasonably deduce and infer based on the internal logic of the virtual social culture they are in and infer their future or current states.[38] After formally stepping onto the performance stage, the DPs must abandon their original identity characteristics and fully present the identity state of the role they are playing. This endeavor necessitates the concerted effort of the delegators, who must actively "immerse themselves in the play" by treating the DPs solely as the characters they represent, while minimizing discussions pertaining to irrelevant aspects of the delegated roles, including the personal lives of the DPs.

With the groundwork laid in the previous stages, communication between delegators and DPs becomes more convenient when it comes to the formal order. In formal delegation, the general service content includes "saying good morning and good night, chatting, accompanying the delegator in studying or working together, anything else would be considered as additional services." (DP-LC-6-23) Throughout the entire activity, DPs need to ensure that their words and actions are in line with the characters' settings. "For example, I previously portrayed a rather sarcastic (speaking bluntly, always criticizing others) character, so when watching online movies with my delegator, I would comment on the characters in the movie without reservation. My delegator wouldn't feel offended or think I'm too noisy, they would just find it interesting and satisfying." (DP-LC-20-22)

Offline delegation will have more uniqueness and randomness, as not every DP follows a fixed process, and the chosen activities vary greatly. However, most offline DPs state that, like "L-C", they conduct preliminary investigations online before formal activities, with similar main discussion topics, chiefly to understand the delegators' personal situations and interests, facilitating the quick initiation of topics during formal delegations.

In terms of format, offline delegations are more diverse than the investigation format of "L-C". For example, some DPs directly create a questionnaire and send it to their delegators for completion. "A questionnaire is more convenient than chatting inquiries; it is more comprehensive and systematic, preventing omissions, and gives the delega-

tors a sense of professionalism. After receiving the answers to the questionnaire, I can directly conduct online 'L-C' to establish a relationship with them based on their answers, and enter a dating state in advance." (DP-C-29-22) This kind of pre- and post-'L-C' in offline delegation is considered as a supplement. "In my previous delegation, my DP started chatting with me three days in advance, adopting the tone of the character I admired, so when we met for the formal delegation date, I didn't feel awkward. Furthermore, even after the date, she persisted in chatting with me in that character's tone for another one or two days, facilitating a smooth emotional transition." (DR-C-12-21)

In offline delegation, a crucial element is DP's fidelity to the character in appearance. Typically, before formal date, DPs need to confirm three aspects with their delegators, including makeup (facial makeup and wigs), clothing, and height display. "Makeup and wigs are essential courses for a cosplayer; only after passing these two tests can one be qualified to become a qualified DP." (DP-C-17-20) "DP needs to be taller than the delegator, which is a consensus in this industry. Usually, DP plays a male character, so the majority of delegators set standards based on minimum height, typically stipulating a net height exceeding 170 cm." (DP-C-29-22) "Since girls have a lower average height, they often need height-increasing insoles to imitate male virtual characters. Some DPs can reach a height of 180-185cm with the added insole height, which is already an ideal state." (DP-C-8-26)

Regarding clothing, most delegators are quite tolerant and will ask DPs to "match daily wear that you feel fits the character." (DR-C-18-19) This is because traditional cosplay costumes are often exaggerated and not suitable for appearing in malls or on the streets, so daily wear is either chosen by DPs or decided by the delegators. "Sometimes, I will match clothing based on the delegator's attire for the day, such as wearing couple outfits with her. The style of us needs to be similar, and we will not be out of place when going out and taking photos together" (DP-C-13-25) All of these aspects, DPs will confirm with their delegators through videos and photos before the formal date, to ensure satisfaction and confirm that their appearance or attire matches their delegators' expectations.

The activities on the day of the date are generally decided by the delegator or mutually agreed upon by the delegator and DP. The forms of offline "dates" are highly diverse. "Common activities include going to the mall, dining, shopping, playing video games, watching movies, visiting cat cafes, and taking photos or videos during this time." (DP-C-25-20) "I've heard of some more innovative date ideas, such as renting a cottage, cooking together, chatting, and watching movies inside, which was also very romantic." (DR-C-3-25) "There are no restrictions on the form of the date; as long as both parties agree, they can go anywhere." (DR-C-17-20)

4.2 The Establishment of Virtual Emotions in Delegated Cos: Emotional Labor and Investment

During delegation, whether the online and offline image shaping of both parties adheres to the character itself, meets the needs of different scenarios, whether chat topics and date formats meet psychological expectations, greatly affects whether emotional con-

nections can be effectively established between delegators and DPs during the delegation. The establishment of emotional ties not only deepens the emotional experience and immersion of the delegators during the delegation but also to some extent realizes the purpose of the delegation initiated by some delegators due to spiritual needs. Moreover, establishing a strong emotional connection is also a crucial indicator for assessing the "professional skills" and delegation quality of DPs, as well as their core competitiveness within the market.

More than half of the respondents believe that they have established an emotional connection with the other party during the delegation activities, whether they are delegators or DPs. "Spiritual bond is very important to me. I will ensure that in every delegation, my DP clearly understands my need for intimate connection and is willing and capable of giving me sentimental value during our interactions." (DR-C-3-25) For me, I am very introverted and socially anxious, but when I engage in delegation, I feel like I am really playing another person, a lover of a girl in reality, so it is important to establish an emotional connection in advance. If DP completely does not understand the delegator, it is impossible to do this job well." (DP-C-18-20)

DPs usually use different methods to establish emotional connections with delegators. For "L-C", this requirement is often more stringent. "The essence of 'L-C' is 'chat companion', this is precisely what delegators need to receive emotions and respond quickly in the manner they prefer." (DP-LC-16-24) Some online DPs tend to see this process as "interpretation", similar to what actors do before starting a new play, such as "script readings". This is because "cosplay involves swiftly assuming a role, and this role is tailored for the other party. Before 'I' enter this relationship, my delegator has already had a long emotional foundation with her virtual lover. My task, then, is to ensure that this continuity is maintained and that my involvement does not seem abrupt or out of place." (DP-LC-14-23) "I will conduct a survey of my delegator's ideas and then write a 'character biography' of the role I am going to play and send it to her to confirm whether it accurately meets her needs." (DP-LC-23-23)

Compared to online delegation "L-C", the requirements for emotional establishment in offline delegation are generally more looser because there are many other factors to consider during the delegation. Emotional establishment at this time becomes "the icing on the cake factor", if there is, it is better, and if not, it doesn't matter." (DR-C-5-21) However, some DPs hold different opinions on this, believing that emotional concern and establishment are necessary additional values for delegation. "A qualified or excellent DP not only needs to be able to do makeup and cosplay, but also needs to take over the delegator's emotional needs and truly restore or interpret the words and deeds of the character during the date." (DP-C-11-20) However, very few DPs can achieve this because it is difficult for offline delegations, "it requires a certain sense of belief" (DP-C-18-20). Some DPs believe that DPs' own personality or "social energy" plays a key role in emotional connection. "Generally speaking, most delegators are relatively introverted, so it is a big challenge for DPs to be active in the atmosphere without offending delegators. Similarly, DPs who are outgoing or even 'naturally approachable' are more popular in the market." (DP-C-13-25)

Many interviewees believe that "fitting the character image" is the key to establishing the personal characteristics of DPs. When the degree of fidelity reaches a certain

level, fans will even regard DPs who can "fit the character image" as substitutes for virtual characters in the real world and become infatuated with them. If a DP can deeply understand a certain character and perform it, they will definitely highlight it on their own promotional posts, "The market is basically in short supply and the business is booming, which will fill the schedules of these DPs. But in fact, I think this is due to the unclear cognition of the delegators. No matter how similar a DP may play a role, it does not necessarily mean that their true character aligns with the character's. Many people's fascination with them stems solely from the fact that DPs 'borrow' the charm and aura of the virtual character." (DP-C-18-20)

To maintain emotional connections, DPs will also try to maintain their "virtual identity" as much as possible, and use skillful expressions before and during delegation activities to guide delegators and themselves into emotional immersion. "From the moment my delegator places the order until we meet, I will maintain the role-playing state in the chat software to quickly make my delegators feel familiar with me. When it is not necessary, I try to avoid communication or chat as much as possible when I am not in role-playing state." (DP-C-18-20)

Some delegators believe that the most important factor in establishing an emotional connection with a DP is long-term interaction, because "short-term contact can at most be casual friends, and it is difficult to gain energy from it. At least for me, it is very important to have long-term contact with the same DP. Only when two people are familiar with each other, can the DPs clearly know what you need, understand your interests, and adjust the way they treat you and the topics of conversation accordingly." (DR-C-15-20) Most delegators admit that if long-term interaction can be guaranteed, establishing an emotional connection is not a problem for them.

Long-term delegation services, or repeatedly engaging the same DP, holds far more significance for some delegators than merely "fulfilling their spiritual and emotional needs," because "a partner willing to earnestly spend time sharing thoughts and energy with each other is extremely precious and rare, and DPs can accomplish this." (DR-LC-14-26) However, prolonged or repeated delegation may yield both positive and negative impacts, often introducing complex emotional factors requiring consideration from both parties, a phenomenon particularly common in "L-C".

DR-LC-14-26, one of the older delegators we interviewed, believes that maintaining a long-term delegation relationship with a person is no less important than seeking long-term assistance from a psychotherapist. "While I don't equate a virtual romantic partner with a psychotherapist, I can't deny their healing effects. But Delegated Cos is different; I spend money to have someone love and respect me. Though this 'love' may be illusory, its impact on me is genuine and direct."

Similarly, in our interviews, three respondents admitted that they turned to "virtual partners" and extended their search to Delegated Cos after experiencing emotional setbacks in real life. Some of them believe that Delegated Cos healed the wounds they suffered in past relationships. (DR-LC-31-21) Some believe that Delegated Cos hasn't changed their poor mental and emotional states, the reality is that problems cannot be solved by a virtual "dream lover" performer. "This person who plays my favorite 'virtual lover' is just a girl who has not experienced much of the world. The help that the male lead gives to 'me' in the game cannot be replaced in real life, no matter how much

money is spent." (DR-C-25-22) "Delegated Cos create a virtual dream for me, but they're also a fleeting, quenching experience." (DR-LC-7-21)

Most of these delegators believe that establishing emotional connections is crucial, even describing it as the "most important key element" in Delegated Cos activities (DR-C-26-19) However, their reflections on establishing emotional connections often have both positive and negative aspects, sometimes leading to reflections on the impact of otome games themselves. During this process, the delegators often have "transference" towards the DPs. The original love for the virtual character is also very likely to "be directly transferred to the DP individuals, while the love for the character itself diminishes." (DR-C-25-22)

4.3 The Opportunities and Concerns of Delegated Cos: The Establishment of the Personal Market and Withdrawal Psychology

Undeniably, the emotional connection forged between delegators and DPs during the delegation process can yield both positive effects, such as psychological healing and emotional sharing, as well as negative consequences, like emotional overload and psychological burdens. It's worth noting that this emotional connection established during delegations does not immediately "disconnect" once the delegation process ends. Instead, it continues to exert a lasting psychological impact on both parties in the form of "withdrawal reactions."

When the consumption behavior of "Delegated Cos" ceases, the delegator will permanently retain the memory of the experience throughout the process. In the future, by continually evoking and savoring the psychological satisfaction derived from this consumption process, the purpose of experiential consumption can be fulfilled.[39] For the delegator, this psychological need is to further satisfy the "emotional fantasy" generated in the experience of the two-dimensional anime or otome games. This "emotional fantasy" stems from the role expectations of the ideal romantic partner, the construction demand of the virtual ideal self, and the penetration and influence of the logic of two-dimensional games on the three-dimensional world.[40]

Particularly for those delegators who rely on DPs for emotional support, they constitute the main group experiencing withdrawal reactions. "My withdrawal reactions are severe; every time a delegation date ends, whether at the subway station or a street corner, I burst into tears." (DR-C-4-18) The duration of withdrawal reactions varies for each individual. Some people "may still feel upset until dawn, constantly reminiscing about the happy moments of the day, feeling extremely reluctant, and continuously reviewing the photos and videos taken that day. They may not fall asleep all night." (DR-C-13-22) Others may need more time to heal from withdrawal reactions, and this situation may even affect their attitude toward virtual characters themselves. "After the last delegation I couldn't get over it for about a month. This may sound ridiculous, but since the end of the delegation, I haven't dared to open the game again because every time I see that character, I'm inevitably reminded of that day, and I find myself comparing the happiness of that moment to the boredom and misery of my current life, which makes me feel even worse." (DR-C-8-22) This disparity is often something that delegators struggle to accept and takes time to reconcile.

In fact, the emotional transformation towards virtual characters is quite common in Delegated Cos and is also the key for every DP to establish a personal brand effect. Because when the delegators try Delegated Cos, they usually realize that this is a more three-dimensional and vivid emotional companionship model. Consequently, DPs will receive more attention and orders with the enhancement of the charm of the role. "I need to admit that after getting in touch with Delegated Cos, I am more willing to use the money that I originally invested in game to hire DPs because I think in this form, I am truly cared for, a kind of real concern." (DR-C-4-18)

Generally speaking, withdrawal reactions are more common in "L-C". Among the delegators from "L-C" we interviewed, about 80% of them admitted feeling "very upset when deciding to end a delegation" (DR-LC-10-19) or "completely unable to accept it if DP proposes to end the delegation, almost like being dumped." (DR-LC-10-21) Some people believe this is something they must face and a moment they must stay rational. " 'Ending' is her right, and how to heal myself is my concern." (DR-LC-23-26) Some feel that the experience of ending a "L-C" contradicts their initial "emotional comfort." (DR-LC-28-20) and that "DPs should incorporate a period of emotional buffer for delegators into their workflow when ending." (DR-LC-7-21)

Some delegators, reflecting afterward, believe that this prolonged online "L-C" activity is actually very unhealthy and "emotionally unsafe because we still leave the option to leave at any time in the hands of the other person, but fundamentally, this is a consumer relationship. Market transactions are free, but the emergence and fading of emotions are not." (DR-LC-14-26)

For those who have realized this, they may adopt more conservative delegation date agreement strategies to avoid being trapped in irreparable emotional consumption. "Although I hope to employ the same DP for the long term for services that better suit my preference, I've decided not to focus solely on one DP anymore. I've discovered that focusing solely on one individual often leads to the development of 'transference' or even unrealistic 'idealization' of that person." (DR-C-25-22) "If the DPs want to leave, they must tell me at least three days in advance, giving me time to buffer. I will only choose DPs who accept this contract." (DR-C-5-21)

However, not every delegator has the ability and determination to have clear awareness and withdraw. Most delegators admit that if they want to overcome withdrawal reactions, they only have two choices, "either indulge in it and wait for time to resolve these emotions, or immediately cover up this sadness with a new delegation." (DR-C-26-19) Some feel that they have already become addicted to delegating with a specific DP, meaning that this affection is not only for the virtual character they play but also for DP's "uniqueness" or "exclusive love." (DR-LC-27-20) This exclusivity may burden both parties in the delegation relationship. "I keep looking for the same DP, although she has politely rejected me three times." (DR-C-21-18)

More seriously, it may escalate to a desire to "monopolize" the other party's services or a specific character because "I can't accept my DP, who has acted as a virtual lover with me, also provided these services to others using the same persona, so I want to 'buy out.'" (DR-C-1-18) In the Delegation cos world, "buyout" means a delegator pays a high price to monopolize all the services of a DP or the service rights of a specific character. Buying out a DP means that during the agreed-upon period in the contract,

DP cannot accept delegations from other delegators, and DP's portrayal of a certain character must comply with the exclusive delegator's requirements, including costumes, behavior portrayal, and other elements.

The above-mentioned behaviors are actually the behavioral manifestations of the delegators or DPs in resisting the "withdrawal psychology" after the end of Delegation. Withdrawal reaction is defined as when specific behavioral activities are stopped or hindered, individuals feel unpleasant feelings, states or physical reactions.[41] Thus, withdrawal reactions can trigger a series of compulsive behaviors.[42] And the three core components of addiction are withdrawal reactions, dependence, and the recurrence of behaviors.[43]

In comparison, DPs experiencing withdrawal reactions are relatively few. The primary components of withdrawal psychology for DPs are "reluctance to separate" and "unresolved feelings of unworthiness." (DP-C-29-22) Compared to delegators, DPs often maintain more rational boundaries. Their approach to dealing with withdrawal psychology is more restrained and measured. However, overall, what they need is a process of "recovery and healing." (DP-C-25-20)

Furthermore, they will continually refine their "compatibility" with virtual characters, both in terms of appearance and behavioral language interpretation, with the aim of becoming more akin to these virtual characters. During this process, most DPs will upgrade their services based on the character settings, plotlines, and dialogue in films, television shows, or games. And all of this is almost costless for DPs. "I can say that I rely on this game for profit. Their (game company's) painting team and copywriting team actually continuously provide me with inspiration, such as ideas on how to style outfits and how to respond to my delegators." (DP-C-29-22) "I think my service is derived from the plot but more based on reality. Sometimes when a new plot is updated in the game, I will recreate this plot when meeting (with my delegators)." (DP-C-18-20) Many DPs admit that they are "obsessed" by the delegators precisely because of this faithful interpretation.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

This study shows that delegated cos offer highly personalized emotional experiences tailored specifically for their delegators. Through meticulous preparation before the activities and elaborate performances throughout, DPs satisfy the delegators' pursuit for ideal emotions to a considerable degree. However, Delegated Cos also faces several challenges, such as the excessive indulgence and withdrawal reactions of delegators, as well as conflicts arising from transactions and emotional expressions between the involved parties.

The Delegated Cos reflect the pursuit of emotional satisfaction among youth groups in contemporary society, as well as the customized and IP-based trends presented by emotional consumption in the digital context. These results are also beneficial for us to understand the psychological driving factors of the new generation of "digital consumers", as well as the way relevant practitioners behave when they use the method of "self-branding" to take advantage of the character settings, copywriting applications,

and virtual charm of virtual roles and characters in games, films, and television works to enhance their own subjectivity.

However, as the scale of the Delegated Cos industry continues to expand, the chaos and disputes within the industry are gradually emerging. We still need to further consider: As emotional consumers, how can delegators clearly define their own emotional needs during the delegation and have a rational and clear understanding of DPs and their emotional labor? As providers of emotional labor, how can DPs improve their professional competencies while providing healthy guidance for the emotional needs of delegators? Will DPs creating personal brands based on IP character images cause copyright disputes with the capital of the IP source? If the aforementioned problems can be effectively addressed, it will play a positive role in promoting the orderly development of the Delegated Cos industry.

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