A study on the alienation phenomenon of China Bao Ma blogger's emotional labor in the digital age

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Abstract. Bao Ma means "mom with kids", which is a popular term on the Internet..In the digital era, "Bao Ma" parenting is heavily featured on social media via vlogs and experience sharing, shifting emotional labor from private to public spheres and challenging traditional parenting norms. Digital platforms amplify expectations of "selfless motherhood" into "visual maternal standards," creating a digital discipline. Through text and video analysis, this study reveals that "Bao Ma" bloggers receive economic benefits from fan engagement, transforming unpaid labor into valued labor and quantifying the emotional labor of motherhood. Platform algorithms standardize parenting experiences, and brands integrate "Bao Ma" bloggers into marketing, turning self-expression into commercial tools. This paper examines the disciplinary role of network society on mothers, highlighting the emotional labor dilemma in informal employment. It advocates for a social protection system for digital maternal labor, urging platforms to reduce content promoting perfect motherhood and encouraging authentic parenting content. The government should protect digital "Bao Ma" rights, include them in flexible employment policies, and provide labor subsidies to prevent labor alienation.

Keywords: Bao Ma logger, digital age, emotional labor, alienation of labour

1. Introduction

Most current studies are about the positive and negative effects of housewife bloggers in the practice of Short Video. Housewife bloggers earn income through Short videos, reducing their financial dependence on their husbands. Family status improves as bloggers connect emotionally with fans through shared family and parenting content, building an "emotional community" that boosts confidence and belonging. Negatively, some bloggers exploit controversial topics like "son preference" and "domestic violence" for views, even using extreme content ("breakfast at 5 a.m.") to cater to audience expectations. This self-objectification weakens the authenticity and quality of the content, with some videos criticized as "all ads, unwatchable." [1] Digital parenting is reshaping norms, causing internalization and anxiety. Online communities offer support but foster comparison and privacy risks. Over-reliance on digital communication may reduce real-world interaction [2]. The construction of the mother image in social media. Mothers create new pictures of motherhood (independent moms, happy moms) through social media that challenge traditional parenting norms, but some bloggers need to balance perfect motherhood with self-expression. Interactive support in social media helps mothers establish maternal subjectivity, but the "grand mother image" recommended by platform algorithms masks individual differences and converges maternal practices; mothers acquire scientific parenting knowledge through digital technology, but the dissemination of pseudo-scientific information may lead to poor parenting decisions [3].

Emotional labor research highlights the "new father" image, where fathers express affection through physical touch and prioritize emotional listening over problem-solving. They document parenting via short videos, seeking social validation as good fathers. Unlike traditional, rule-enforcing fathers, these new fathers build partnerships with their children, investing time and emotion alongside material support. But few scholars discuss Bao Ma's emotional labor from this angle. Therefore, this paper will discuss the influence of emotional labor alienation in the digital era from this perspective.

This paper selects Bao Ma bloggers with children aged 0-12 as the research object. Bao Ma, a blogger, refers to taking responsibility for parenting in real life and sharing parenting life on social media to gain fan support and attention. To make the research results more representative and convincing, the subjects of this paper will be selected according to the following criteria (this criterion refers to Literature 1):

1.The owner of the blog is Bao Ma.

2.Active in a strong social attribute platform, about 80% of the video content released is related to parenting and parent-child daily life.

3.Have at least one million followers.

4.Account content is updated for a long time, at least one year.

5.Avoid singleness by choosing a blogger whose family situation is different.

This article uses network ethnography, goes deep into the Bao Ma blogger group, and carries on the research to its video release goal, content, etc. Watch its daily live stream and interactive comments section for a comprehensive case study. In-depth interviews are also used to get in touch with bloggers through private letters and live comments to understand their behind-the-scenes life and the impact of their identity as bloggers.

2. Related notion

2.1. Concept of emotional labor

The concept of emotional labor was first proposed by American sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild, who pointed out that emotional labor is the labor process in which individuals actively regulate, manage and display emotions in specific social situations to meet professional norms or social expectations [4]. This theory reveals the complexity of the emotional dimension in the labor process, especially in the commercial service field, such as flight attendants, bank tellers, etc. Workers need to realize "emotional performance" through standardized emotional expression, and there is often alienation or even conflict between their professional role and true self. In addition, Hochschild further pointed out that this kind of emotional labor is not only a skill input, but also a type of suppression and reconstruction of individual genuine emotions, thus expanding Marx's critical theory of labor alienation.

2.2. The theory and expression form of emotional labor alienation

As for the extension of the theory of emotional labor alienation and related problems, the root mainly comes from Marx's theory of labor alienation. Marx pointed out that labor alienation refers to the separation between laborers and their labor results, labor process, essence, and other people under the conditions of capitalist private ownership. This alienation manifests in four key contradictions: the worker's separation from their product, their labor, their species-essence, and from other individuals [5]. In emotional labor, suppressing genuine emotions to conform to platform or social norms leads to emotional burnout, representing alienation of labor. Conversely, the alienation of quasi-essence occurs when freely expressed emotions are constrained by virtual and real-world regulations. The alienation of human-to-human relations is not only manifested in the performance of emotional interaction, but also reflected in the excessive dependence of workers on external feedback to confirm their self-value and gradually lose their autonomy over real emotions [6]. Therefore, Marx's theory of alienated labor "four provisions" is the basic framework to discuss the alienation of emotional labor.

2.3. The influence of the digital age on emotional labor

(1) Digital platforms reshape emotional labor

With the development of the network platform, the expression mode of emotional labor has changed greatly. Live streamers use exaggerated interactions to engage viewers, while e-commerce staff promote products cordially. These emotional displays must adhere to platform rules and user preferences. The platform analyzes user reactions through algorithms, attracts traffic with "moving" and "resonance", and then enhances user stickiness and consumption desire. The true emotions of the worker are masked and replaced by standardized emotions that conform to the requirements of the platform. Capital's exploitation of workers has expanded from physical and mental to emotional labor.

(2) Emotional labor in virtual space leads to role conflict

In digital environments, emotional labor is deeply integrated, requiring workers to promptly manage emotions and foster connections that extend beyond transactional interactions. Bloggers, for example, can boost product sales by sharing parenting stories that resonate with fans. This emotional interaction is directly translated into economic value, but it causes the worker to struggle between his virtual role and his real self. This "performance emotion" may infiltrate personal life, causing self-identity confusion, emotional exhaustion, or job burnout [7].

3. The characteristics of emotional labor of Bao Ma blogger

(1) Visualization and symbolization of emotional labor

Bao Ma transforms the invisible housework into visible content through Short videos and live broadcasts, creating the perfect mother's persona with emotional labor [8]. To engage the target demographic, familial settings are repurposed as advertising platforms, effectively turning commonplace environments into product displays.

(2) Monetization of emotional labor

Mom influencers monetize emotional engagement through live broadcasts, promoting family-related products, selecting collaborations based on audience size and product relevance, and endorsing celebrity-branded goods [9]. The core products of emotional labor are "healing,""warmth" and "intimacy," which attract fans 'trust through Short Video and emotional performances in live broadcasts, and then translate into purchasing behavior.

(3) Monitoring of emotional labor

The platform uses algorithms, user ratings, and traffic data to monitor Bao Ma's emotional labor, requiring active "self-discipline" to meet platform standards [10]. Even actively create "conflicting" content to attract attention. Long-term suppression of true emotions to maintain perfect personality leads to emotional exhaustion, dual personality and other problems.

4. Bao Ma blogger emotional labor alienation performance

4.1. Contradiction between self-expression and commercial performance

In digital communication, Bao Ma bloggers' emotional expression reveals a tension between personal experience and commercial content. Applying Goffman's pseudodrama theory, content creation strategically reconstructs "frontstage" performance and "backstage" reality. He sees social scenes as a stage for performance and interactions in social situations as character performances; managing impressions with specific audiences is called character impressions [11]. By showcasing prenatal pain and postpartum depression, Bao Ma bloggers amplify parenting's contradictions, challenge the perfect mother image, foster equality with fans, and evoke emotional resonance. When entering the commercialization field, emotional expression presents the characteristics of "emotional labor" mentioned by Hochschild. Emotional labor refers to the labor form in which individuals adjust and manage their emotions under specific rules to meet professional expectations. Its alienation is manifested in the commercialization of emotional expression, physical and mental exhaustion of laborers and materialization of interpersonal relations, which is rooted in the control and exploitation of emotional resources by capitalist private ownership [12]. Bloggers must mimic facial expressions and intonation while authentically conveying suggested emotions. Algorithms enhance this by using data to filter content, pushing bloggers to amplify popular emotional themes, which standardizes personal emotional expression to align with algorithmic norms.

4.2. Emotional labor intensity

Bao Ma Blogger is a typical digital emotional labor, and its labor characteristics are embodied in the double alienation of time and value. The comment section offers round-the-clock interaction with private messages. Bloggers should use standardized communication techniques to address fans' parenting concerns, turning personalized emotional support into scalable service offerings.

On the value dimension, the data feedback mechanism establishes the evaluation system of emotional labor. Quantifiable metrics, such as likes and comments, drive content adjustments by bloggers, leading to paradoxical emotional labor. Bloggers need to provide empathic support while maintaining commercial personhood when dealing with fan problems, which may lead to "secondary emotional exhaustion" in the long run [12], that is, self-emotional overdraft generated by empathizing with others 'pain.

4.3. Emotional commercialization of motherhood

Baudrillard posited that modern consumption transcends material needs, becoming symbolic. Commodities, detached from reality, are manipulated by capital via media, leading to alienation [13]. Bloggers transform daily parenting behavior into professional anxiety by emphasizing scientific parenting standards, creating anxiety by using society's lack of experience in scientific parenting and cognitive bias in content, and expanding consumer demand. In this closed-loop design of anxiety-solutions, the courses and products recommended by bloggers are packaged as extensions of maternal responsibility, giving moral value to consumer behavior.

Postpartum body recovery and lactation makeup management turn the female body into a commodity. Bloggers display "42-day vest line recovery" as a self-disciplined narrative, creating an inspirational mother image while advertising fitness products, linking maternal value to body management. The created family space satisfies fans' ideal postpartum life and enables home furnishing brand commercialization, turning private living space into a product advertisement display.

5. The influence of emotional labor alienation and corresponding strategies

5.1. The impact of emotional labor differentiation

(1) At the individual emotional level, Bao Ma Blogger needs to suppress real emotions for a long time in order to maintain the established person design, which will lead to emotional disorder [14]. Data-driven platforms can induce bloggers to perform roles, leading to emotional labor, depersonalization, and reduced fulfillment. Conflicts between curated personas and genuine parenting experiences may cause self-identity fragmentation.

(2) On the social impact level, emotional labor alienation strengthens gender division of labor. In order to gain traffic, bloggers often deliberately strengthen the gentle, patient and selfless traditional mother image, objectively solidifying the traditional social concept of male and female [15]. In "Village Flower Chen Buding" videos, over 90% depict the mother's solo childcare, reinforcing the stereotype of maternal dominance in parenting and exacerbating paternal absence [16].

(3)At the economic level, algorithms transform bloggers' emotional expressions into quantifiable attention commodities. To cater to user preferences, bloggers adjust content based on data analysis, sometimes fabricating conflicts to create topics. Data discipline diminishes emotional labor's subjectivity, and authentic parenting lacks traffic [17]. The labor process is controlled by capital and technology, which leads bloggers to fall into the trap of internal flow, and the economic benefits and emotional costs are seriously unbalanced [18].

5.2. Corresponding strategies

(1) The platform shall establish an emotional labor protection mechanism. Refine algorithm recommendations to decrease biased content, promote diverse parenting videos, and incentivize authentic creation. Incorporate emotional depth and constructive fan feedback into ranking, while de-emphasizing conventional metrics.

(2) The society should reconstruct the cognition of motherhood and restore the pluralistic appearance of child-rearing process by advocating the concept of "real child-rearing". Policies to develop family-friendly policies that weaken mothers 'single parenting role and avoid increasing women's responsibility for the family [19]. The society should enhance the perceived value of emotional labor, extend labor rights to cover emotional management by bloggers, and counter the exploitation of maternal selflessness.

(3) Clarify the labor relationship between bloggers and platforms, require MCN institutions to sign formal contracts, and prohibit depriving bloggers of bargaining power and normal working power [20]. To safeguard social and labor rights for "Bao Ma" (mother) bloggers, they should be formally classified as professionals. Flexible work schedules should be implemented to accommodate their availability, and content published during these per iods should receive increased traffic support, rather than mandating round-the-clock online presence.

6. Conclusion

The essence of emotional labor alienation is the result of the common domestication of digital platform and capitalism. The purpose of labor has been instrumentalized, from recording childcare to pursuing economic gains. Content production performance, creating an ideal mother image than the real daily get more traffic. To address identity fragmentation among bloggers and the blurring lines between authentic expression and fan expectations, which leads to a performative existence, the equation of maternal value = traffic = income must be disrupted. This requires a multi-pronged approach: platforms should refine algorithms to minimize manipulative content recommendations, implement emotional labor safeguards, and transparently label commercial video traffic distribution. Furthermore, platforms should discourage the coercion of bloggers into projecting an idealized maternal image. At the social level, digital labor will be included in the new social protection, recognizing the identity of Bao Ma Blogger as a laborer, recognizing its social value, enabling it to enjoy basic social security, and having basic living security during the fluctuation period of flow. At the individual creator level, focus on authentic parenting content and genuine product reviews to increase subjective engagement, actively shaping content rather than passively following trends. Prioritize building personal value and avoid sensationalism for mere traffic. Set specific content production periods, refuse off-hours business advice, and return to normal life. Output fatigue should also be explained in time to adjust the update time to prevent emotional overdraft.

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