Using the Doing Gender Theory to analyze gender differences in emotional consumption: A case study of intimacy course

Xiaoyue Yao

Department of Public Administration, Guangdong Police College, Guangdong, China

Abstract. With the continuous growth of spiritual demand, the field of emotional consumption gradually occupies a certain share of the market, and it is obvious that men and women have different consumption tendencies in it. This paper analyzes the gender differences in the field of emotional consumption (especially intimate relationship courses) based on the doing gender theory, mainly uses in-depth interviews to collect data and conduct research, understand the various situations of consumers and providers of such intimate relationship courses, understand how they operate and expand their influence, and finally finds that the essence of such intimate relationship courses is the externalization of traditional gender concepts in society, and uses them to recruit students, design courses, and deepen gender stereotypes.

Keywords: Emotional consumption, Doing Gender Theory, In-depth interviews, Intimate relationship courses

1. Introduction

In modern society, emotional consumption accounts for an increasing proportion of the market share, and intimate relationship courses have gradually entered people's field of vision. This study mainly focuses on the consumption trap in the intimate relationship course, which is of great significance for the study of gender differences in emotional consumption, and supplements the existing research on the lack of awareness of the consumption trap in the intimate relationship course. The theory of "Doing Gender" was proposed by sociologists Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman in 1987, and the core idea is that gender is not a fixed biological attribute, but is constantly constructed and maintained through daily interactions and social practices, emphasizing the social constructively of gender. The theory is that society invisibly shapes people's perceptions of how "male" and "female" should behave through various cultural norms and expectations. This study mainly uses the theory of doing gender to explore how women realize social expectations through the consumption of intimate relationship courses, and to study the gender differences in them, so as to understand the operating mechanism of such intimate relationship courses. The advantage of this study is that it can better understand the psychology of the people who consume intimate relationship courses and obtain authentic and reliable first-hand information. The ultimate goal of this study is to clarify the operating mechanism of intimate relationship courses, including how to recruit students, how to provide services, etc., as well as the motivation and harvest of consumers, and to explore how the doing gender theory affects and promotes the relationship between the two.

2. Theory

With the continuous development of today's society, people's needs are no longer limited to the basic material aspects of clothing, food, housing, and transportation, and they have begun to focus on satisfying their own emotional and spiritual needs. Whether subjective or agency consumption, women realize themselves, highlight their value, and pursue self-development through consumption. As women pay more and more attention to personal consumption and independent consumption consciousness, their consumption needs, consumption structure, consumption methods, and consumption behaviors have changed, and emotional consumption has increasingly become the normal mode of daily life and consumption of urban women (Shuai, 2016).In today's society, the pressure is increasing, and it belongs to the society of instrumental rationality, which refers to the

perception of the situation of external things and the behavior of other people, and the use of this expectation as a 'condition' or as a 'means', to achieve the results of one's care. This social model ignores people's emotional and spiritual values, making people's emotions give way to reason, and women's stressful emotions are even stronger when they are in an atmosphere of lack of emotion for a long time (Su, 2024). As a result, many types of emotional consumption aimed at various groups of people in society have entered the market, especially in the female market. "Emotional consumption" refers to the behavior of "seeking emotional goods from the market to obtain emotional satisfaction and support", and women become the subject of emotional consumption under the social gender characteristics of "male instrumentality, female affectivity" and the social gender model of "male production, female consumption" (Guo, 2024). There are many classifications in the field of emotional consumption, and this research mainly focuses on intimate relationship courses. "Intimate relationship courses" are the result of the collision between the emotional industry and the wave of knowledge payment, which refers to an emotional counseling service that is generated to improve the communication skills of "emotionally significant" others and solve conflicts in daily life (Guo, 2024).

Intimate relationship courses are also differentiated in the market, most of them are in the category of knowledge payment, with rational and scientific characteristics, but a small part is a consumption trap set for specific groups of people. The so-called "emotional experts" in this type of course are different from professional psychological counseling experts, who only rely on their personal emotional experience to solve similar emotional problems, and are just dream workers on the emotional counseling assembly line (Liang, 2022). Most of the existing research focuses on the intimate relationship course of knowledge payment, and there is a certain research gap in the consumption trap set up for people's emotional anxiety. This kind of emotional consumption occupies a certain share of the market, so why do these non-specialized, flowing emotional consumption traps have a market? Why do target groups choose this way of spending? What do they gain in consumption? And why are there such significant gender differences in this area? These questions constitute the main questions that need to be further explored in this study.

3. Research method

3.1. Interview

In this study, in-depth interviews were used to collect relevant data. A total of 10 participants in the Intimate Relationships course were interviewed during the study. Among them, 8 were females and 2 were males, all of whom were in the range of 20-30 years old. In this study, the interview questions mainly focused on the interviewees' psychology and state of consumption and explored how they learned about the intimate relationship course, what services they received in the process of consumption, and whether the course helped them achieve their initial goals.

During the interview, it was found that the vast majority of female respondents were influenced by the values of various entertainment works on the market, such as romance novels, idol dramas, and mainstream social values, and were limited by traditional social concepts. Even textbooks reinforce this traditional notion. Textbook images of primary schools in Indonesia found that women were portrayed as dependent on others compared to independent males (Damayanti, 2014). Women are often the most susceptible to stereotypes, which prevent them from reaching their full potential (Nair & Talif, 2010). As a result, they believe that they should invest more in their emotions and ignore their role in other areas. And the increasing pressure on women to accept marriage has led to a panic of "leftover women" since 2000 (Wu & Dong, 2019). Under the dual influence of social traditional concepts and external pressures, the customers of various types of intimate relationship courses are more women, and the courses for women's emotional problems are also significantly more.

In addition, when we understand the consumption status of the interviewees, it is found that the anxiety of the target group in the field of emotional consumption is stronger than that of the general social level, and most of them choose to consume when they are in a situation where they are not in a good relationship or do not achieve their ideal state. The research process found that many of the

intimate relationship courses were aimed at the lovelorn community. When making purchases, they all have different degrees of anxiety: the anxiety of being urged to marry by their families, the anxiety of becoming a leftover woman, and the anxiety of not being able to return to normal life (respondent W said, "I am not young anymore, and it may be difficult to start a new relationship after this breakup, and my family will say that I am a 'leftover girl' again.") Respondent V also mentioned, "I was anxious at that time, and I felt like I couldn't do anything, like the walking dead." These two anxious mentalities reflect the negative impact of social stereotypes on women's psyche.

When asked how he found out about this kind of intimate relationship course, most of them were learned about it through large social platforms (Douyin, Xiaohongshu), and a small part was introduced by friends. If you enter tags such as "broken love", "redemption" and "internal friction" on social platforms, you will find that the initiators of such intimate relationship courses often expand the popularity of their course projects through social platforms. And the titles are always "his psychological journey after the breakup", "what to do to make his return to his heart", and "how long does it take for a man to be emotionally reversed after separation", these titles and labels reflect social values and traditional concepts, but also further deepen the concept that women invest more in emotions. The ultimate goal of this kind of propaganda is consumption, where there is anxiety, there is demand, where there is demand, there is a market, where there is a market, there is a product, and where there is a product, there is a need for consumption (Liang, 2022). In addition, some bloggers create "leftover women" panic, such as Ayawawa, who once said, "Never overestimate your attractiveness, misjudge the value of your overall marriage, and target the right group of men to save too long waiting in the market!" (Wu & Dong, 2019). These further exacerbate the psychological pressure of lovelorn women and fall into deeper anxiety and panic. Therefore, when consuming intimate relationship courses, these women with higher levels of anxiety and greater psychological pressure are more likely to have the phenomenon of rushing to the doctor when they are sick, or they are unable to rationally distinguish the difference between traps and knowledge payment when choosing emotional consumption.

Women have stronger, more delicate, and flexible emotions, as well as the dual emotional needs of loving and being nurtured (Shuai, 2016). Therefore, women pay more attention to emotional experiences in the consumption process to meet their own emotional needs. In this type of intimate relationship course, the need for companionship and security is more reflected. Men are more efficient and practical when consuming, and they are more inclined to choose courses that can acquire practical professional theoretical knowledge when choosing intimate relationship courses. Therefore, one of the important reasons for the intimate relationship consumption courses studied in this paper to gain the market is that they can provide consumers with certain emotional value and relieve consumers' current psychological pressure. Ms. Chen, the interviewee, mentioned that signing up for such emotional courses can not only effectively alleviate her anxiety, but also obtain a certain degree of emotional compensation, and she feels that the tutors of such courses are more like the people she confides in, and her original intention of consumption is to meet her emotional demands. Since the interviewees were mainly lovelorn, the interviews were also asked whether the course had a practical effect on them to achieve "recovery" results. Another interviewee, W, said, "Actually, I rarely hear about successful cases, and there is no chat behind our communication group, maybe they are all slowly coming out." According to W, most people found that it didn't really solve their problems in the course of receiving the course, so they slowly completed the process of self-consistency and voluntarily ended their participation in the emotional course, and only a few people were able to actually achieve their goals, but the re-established intimacy did not last long.

3.2. Research Results

In the process of analyzing the course notes of different interviewees, it will be found that the three keywords of "disconnection", "weak connection" and "improving self-worth" all appear with high frequency. Through searching on major platforms (such as Xiaohongshu and Douyin), it is found that the homogenization of such paid intimate relationship courses and the videos of online dating

bloggers is very obvious. Therefore, it can be seen that the methodological suggestions that are different from the normative intimate relationship courses are based on scientific and professional theoretical formation, and the output content of such courses mostly relies on personal experience and the summary of common phenomena. Affective consumption provides emotional comfort, dependence, and support channels for urban women in emotional scarcity to meet their emotional, work, life, and social needs (Shuai, 2016). Therefore, the essence of this kind of intimate relationship course is to hang the brand of "providing targeted intimate relationship advice for individuals", but it mainly plays the role of providing customers with emotional value and emotional companionship, and is the gentle slope of their unsuccessful intimate relationship. Like most emotional consumption, this kind of intimate relationship course can help them temporarily escape from real problems and dilemmas (Su, 2024) and find a space to rest, although they do not really solve real problems.

At the same time, in the process of research, it was found that there were obvious differences in the content settings of intimate relationship courses between men and women, which was also a manifestation of the externalization of the theory of "doing gender". Courses for men generally emphasize male subjectivity in relationships by teaching techniques and methods to gain greater choice and control over intimate relationships. Most of the course content received by female consumers is how to learn to understand, tolerate, and consolidate the relationship by improving their own value in the relationship, which requires women to reduce the sharper side of emotions and emphasize the subordinate status and objectivity of women in intimate relationships. In this type of intimate relationship curriculum, the curriculum for women is less respected and valued for their social value than for male clients. Rather, it places women in the position of objects and weakens their sense of subjectivity. However, some courses use "female independence" and "love subjectivity" as gimmicks to attract consumers, but their fundamental purpose is to collude with the patriarchal consciousness and co-opt the avant-garde side of women's consciousness (Liang, 2022). The values of these female consumers will be not advanced enough or completely backward, and they will be in an embarrassing situation. Since this study mainly focuses on the theory of gender, we will focus on the curriculum of women's intimate relationships.

4. Discussion

This article focuses on the theme of "personal value enhancement" based on the courses participated by different interviewees. In the course of service delivery, whether it is to salvage feelings, enhance feelings, or achieve other goals, course instructors often ask participants to demonstrate an increase in personal value, such as learning a new skill or trying a new experience. Activities such as rock climbing, fitness, and more are recommended to create a personal image that is different from traditional beliefs and is showcased through social media. This process is often accompanied by keywords such as "independence" and "transformation", which is ostensibly in line with the awakening of contemporary women's consciousness, but in fact, contains the practice of many undoing gender theories.

Women freely stretch their repressed emotions in emotional consumption, seek ways to affirm themselves and emotional support, and pursue self-realization and self-satisfaction (Shuai, 2016). However, the "personal value enhancement" advocated by the intimate relationship course is more superficial, and the core question is: is this improvement for self-growth, or is it for the maintenance of relationships? Ms. V, the interviewee, said, "Actually, I don't resist this kind of change, although I have thought about whether to change and improve myself, I don't want to step out of my comfort zone and try other things." Most of the participants in this type of intimate relationship course are forced to break the behavior pattern of gender expectations for the sake of so-called happy emotions, which means that they may have the idea of breaking the stereotype of society beforehand, but in the end, they do not act on it and do not have subjective agency. Some cosmetics industries imply that women seduce and conquer men by buying goods through advertisements that emphasize beauty, stereotypes, or necessities (Jurčić, D., & Jurčić, I, 2018). This type of intimate relationship course

also uses certain means to enhance the external attractiveness of women, to achieve the purpose of attracting men's attention. Ms. V mentioned, "The teacher said that I should show more of my different self, such as wearing yoga clothes and yoga pants to the gym and taking some beautiful photos. In contemporary culture, the body, especially the female body, is regarded as an object that can be shaped and modeled to compound the aesthetic standards advocated (Damean, 2010), so the behavior is essentially a way to cater to contemporary male aesthetics, ostensibly a break from social stereotypes and traditional impressions, but the ultimate goal is to make women meet social expectations. In particular, it satisfies the societal expectations of women that men have changed with the times: they need to be gentle and housekeeping but also have a sense of mystery and freshness. In this process, by constantly instilling the concept of self-worth, "female independence" and "getting rid of traditional stereotypes" are used as shields to create a life model that seems to have a "new female consciousness", but this makes individuals ignore the real emotional needs and self-worth in the process of pursuing this model (Wen, 2024). According to Ayawawa, to be a strong competitor in the marriage market, women must strive to increase their attractiveness, marry early, and reduce PU by showing virtue, loyalty, and chastity (Wu & Dong, 2019). It can be seen that although women are in line with traditional social expectations to conform to contemporary social expectations, this expectation is top-down and unequal and is the product of male power and social men, and women have further completed self-discipline in this kind of intimate relationship course: the need for self-worth improvement is essentially family-oriented and emotional-oriented, and the process and result are ultimately in line with the traditional social gender structure. All in all, this kind of intimate relationship course is also essentially an emotional control, reflecting how individuals, especially women, are subtly manipulated and exploited in a seemingly liberal consumer culture (Wen, 2024).

5. Conclusion

The results of this study are that in the field of affective consumption (intimate relationship courses), both service providers and service recipients are affected by traditional social gender structures, which directly or indirectly reinforce traditional gender stereotypes. In this way, we can know that this concept of the service recipient plays a certain role in promoting it throughout the whole process of consumption. In the process of attracting consumers and providing services, although the service provider has raised the issue of opposing traditional concepts, the most important thing is to strengthen the influence of traditional gender concepts, so as to achieve the result of creating anxiety and promoting consumption, which is the biggest difference from the paid knowledge course. When it comes to the intimate relationship courses paid for knowledge, due to their professional and scientific characteristics, coupled with the analysis of this type of intimate relationship courses on the market, it is found that they are more and more inclined to embody the idea of undoing gender, which mainly aims to promote the idea of women's independence and promote the awakening of women's consciousness through teaching. This study provides a lot of valuable reference significance for the study of the consumption trap in intimate relationship courses, mainly clarifying the specific operation mechanism of this kind of intimate relationship courses and how it embodies and reinforces the idea of doing gender, and future research should focus more on how to reverse the idea of this kind of intimate relationship, reduce the influence of the idea of doing gender on it, and add more theoretical ideas of undoing gender.

From this point of view, the awakening of women's consciousness in today's society is still incomplete, and the traditional gender concept of society is still obvious in the field of emotional consumption. Therefore, women should improve their ability to think independently when consuming emotions, get rid of the restrictions of traditional gender structures and concepts in society, and have the ability to rationally discern the consumption traps that exacerbate traditional gender concepts, so as to gradually realize the emancipation of thoughts and behaviors in a certain sense.

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