

Experiential Marketing in the Esports Industry: How Technique-oriented and Entertainment-oriented Game Companions Sustain Career Stability

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Abstract

This study investigates a novel form of digitally mediated labor in the esports industry: professional game companions, through the lens of experiential marketing, examining how technique-oriented and entertainment-oriented companions sustain career stability by leveraging both functional and experiential values. Using qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews with 16 professional League of Legends companions and virtual ethnography, the research reveals distinct strategies between the two groups. Technique-oriented companions attract and retain clients by showcasing gaming expertise and adapting rapidly to patch updates, while entertainment-oriented companions rely on image construction and emotional labor to meet customers' social and affective needs. The findings extend esports professionalization and experiential marketing research by focusing on non-elite esports digital labor. Practical implications suggest that platforms should offer differentiated training and support: Technique-oriented companions need to enhance social and communicative skills, whereas entertainment-oriented companions should strengthen gameplay abilities. Such measures may improve occupational resilience and contribute to the sustainable development of the esports companionship industry.

Keywords

Experiential marketing, Game companions, Esports, Career stability

Introduction

Esports is widely recognized as a form of sport in a digital environment and is experiencing rapid expansion, with the global market projected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 17.48% and reach USD 5.18 billion by 2029 [1]. The emergence of numerous esports leagues has been a key driver of industry professionalization, elevating players to superstar status [2]. This rapid expansion has prompted growing research on esports professionalization [3]. Overall, the process is fraught with challenges and uncertainty, as it depends not only on individual skill but is also shaped by structural factors such as institutional gaps, limited social recognition, identity construction, and gender bias. Moreover, existing research on the professionalization of esports has primarily focused on professional gamers and has identified two major challenges. First, persistent

financial instability remains prevalent, particularly among players competing in lower-tier leagues or less commercialized game titles. Second, professional esports careers are typically characterized by remarkably short career spans, which generate an intense and stressful working environment and pose significant challenges for subsequent career transitions [4].

In this context, existing research has not fully addressed the problem of career stability in esports outside some recent research based on players. With the rise of diverse forms of labor, greater attention is needed for non-elite players who rely on gaming for their livelihood. Emerging careers, such as game companions, represent a novel mode of digitally mediated labor in the gaming ecosystem, delivering entertainment-oriented or in-game support services. This mode demonstrates remarkable

labor market inclusivity, as it is accessible to individuals regardless of age, gender, educational background, or gaming skill level. This article addresses this significant research gap by proposing, through a case study of China's online game companions, that technique-oriented and entertainment-oriented companions can leverage their functional or experiential values in experiential marketing. By doing so, they can enhance their customer acquisition and retention capabilities, thereby improving their career stability.

China offers a particularly significant case for studying game companionship due to both its substantial economic impact and remarkable workforce participation. Notably, to alleviate youth employment pressures, Chinese authorities formally acknowledged this emerging profession in 2020. Importantly, this economic significance is sustained by an extensive labor pool, as evidenced by "Bixin", China's leading game companion platform, which recorded over 10.25 million registered companions by 2024 [5].

League of Legends (LOL in short), the most-watched esports game worldwide in 2024 (Esports Charts, n.d.), has also maintained its position as the most prominent PC-based game in the Chinese market (China Audio-Video and Digital Publishing Association E-sports Working Committee, 2024). Its unique combination of competitive depth and entertainment-oriented value has fostered a strong demand for specialized companionship services. This distinct market position justifies our research focus on professional PC-based game companions specializing in LOL. Accordingly, this study seeks to specifically focus on how technique-oriented companions and entertainment-oriented companions in League of Legends employ different experiential marketing strategies to sustain their career stability in the esports industry.

The article is structured as follows: First, we establish the typology of game companionship. Next, building on prior literature that has applied the concept of experiential marketing to the esports industry, we focus on functional and experiential value in the context of game companions [6]. We then outline the research methodology, present the findings, and discuss their implications in relation to existing literature.

Literature review

Game companions' typologies.

Online game companionship has emerged as a novel mode of digitally mediated labor in the gaming ecosystem, delivering entertainment-oriented or in-game support services. In this industry, game companions are categorized into technique-oriented (T-type) and entertainment-oriented (E-type) specialists. T-types focus on securing competitive outcomes, while E-types enhance the overall gaming experience. Although no published academic literature has yet formally established this distinction, such terminology has long been used within companionship platforms and the industry itself. It serves to differentiate between companions who emphasize in-game technique-oriented expertise and those who focus on providing entertainment-oriented and social interaction.

This professional specialization in game companions both reflects and reinforces broader gender dynamics in gaming culture, evidenced by the current division of labor where male companions predominantly occupy technique-oriented roles while their female counterparts specialize in entertainment-oriented services. In general, the game space is predominantly recognized as a masculine terrain [7]. Research indicates that male players are more likely to identify themselves as hardcore gamers, whereas females tend to participate more in social gaming interactions [8,9]. Simultaneously, in pursuit of maximizing commercial profits, the application of algorithmic systems on online game companionship platforms has further systematically institutionalized these gendered service correlations [10].

Experiential marketing in esports

The fundamental logic behind the emergence of these two distinct types of companionship services lies in esports being a highly experiential industry that generates demand for different consumption needs. Specifically, players differ in their gaming motivations, as some seek personalized progression and achievement, while others pursue experiences beyond victory, such as fulfilling social needs [11]. This multidimensional experiential nature precisely explains why esports naturally align with the logic of the experienced economy.

Existing research on the experiential economy in esports has established its crucial value. Understanding co-

created experiences involving multiple stakeholders is essential for effective marketing and management practices in esports. This perspective is further supported by Brock and Crawford (2025), whose research emphasizes that esports products and services are increasingly tailored to the needs of an experience economy, where consumers express themselves through the process of consumption [12].

However, experiential economy studies in esports have not yet applied the two value dimensions of experiential marketing, functional value and experiential value, to examine two distinct marketing strategies within the same profession. In this context, this study aligns technique-oriented companion and entertainment-oriented companions with functional value and experiential value in experiential marketing, respectively, applying its frameworks to elucidate how these two types employ differentiated strategies to attract and retain clients for more stable income streams.

Theoretical framework

Functional and experiential value

Schmitt's seminal work marked the transition from traditional feature-and-benefit marketing to experiential marketing, which strategically engages consumers' emotions to create memorable experiences and brand devotion. This paradigm shift redefines value creation, emphasizing not just products' functional utility but also their experiential dimensions and consumption pleasures. This evolution in marketing thinking highlights the need to distinguish between different types of value that consumers seek. Scholars have identified two core consumption values: functional/utilitarian and hedonic/experiential.

Functional value fundamentally refers to a product or service's ability to fulfill consumers' practical needs and desires. This concept is intrinsically linked to the utility derived from perceived quality and expected performance. Concrete examples include quantifiable attributes like a vehicle's horsepower or a camera's pixel resolution. Within the game companion industry, this functional value is most clearly embodied by technique-oriented companions, whose core value proposition lies in their capacity to immediately enhance a team's combat effectiveness and consequently increase the chances of victory.

Experiential value originates from interactions involving both direct usage and indirect appreciation of products/services, representing consumers' evaluation of multifaceted experiences. Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello systematically classified these experiences into sensory (e.g., sensations), affective (e.g., feelings and emotions), intellectual (e.g., imaginations, creativity), and behavioral (e.g., physical experiences, behaviors, and lifestyle). This value manifests concretely in elements like restaurant ambiance or hotel decoration. Within the game companionship industry, entertainment-oriented companions deliver this value by fulfilling players' social needs and generating positive emotions. The fundamental distinction between the two values, lies in functional value, achieving practical goals, versus experiential value deriving from pleasurable engagement.

Satisfy your customers to attract and retain them

Customer satisfaction and loyalty form the cornerstone of experiential marketing, crucial for both acquiring and retaining customers. Customer satisfaction reflects an overall evaluation based on accumulated purchase and consumption experiences, whereas loyalty represents a deeply held commitment to repurchase despite potential switching influences. Customer satisfaction fundamentally arises when perceived service performance meets or exceeds expectations, and extensive empirical research has consistently established the significant positive correlation between this satisfaction and subsequent customer loyalty behaviors. In today's competitive market, achieving superior customer satisfaction fundamentally depends on thoroughly understanding customer needs, as such understanding enables businesses to precisely tailor their product and service offerings.

Notably, customer needs encompass both functional and experiential benefits. Customers might base their purchasing decisions on either functional utility or experiential benefits, making it essential for businesses to identify which value dimension predominantly drives their target market's preferences and behaviors. This differentiation enables companies to tailor their products or services, accordingly, ensuring effective customer acquisition. To ensure continuous satisfaction and retention, it is imperative to establish and maintain an ongoing platform for two-way communication, ensuring

that the customer's definition of value is consistently met. In the context of the game companionship industry, only by continuously attracting new customers while maximizing customer loyalty to retain them can companions ensure career stability, and this process fundamentally relies on how effectively they implement experiential marketing strategies. Guided by this theoretical framework, this study innovatively maps two

types of services in the game companion industry onto experiential marketing values: functional value for technique-oriented game companions and experiential value for entertainment-oriented game companions. It examines their differences in strategies for attracting and retaining customers, aiming to provide recommendations on enhancing career stability in the game companion industry (see Figure 1).

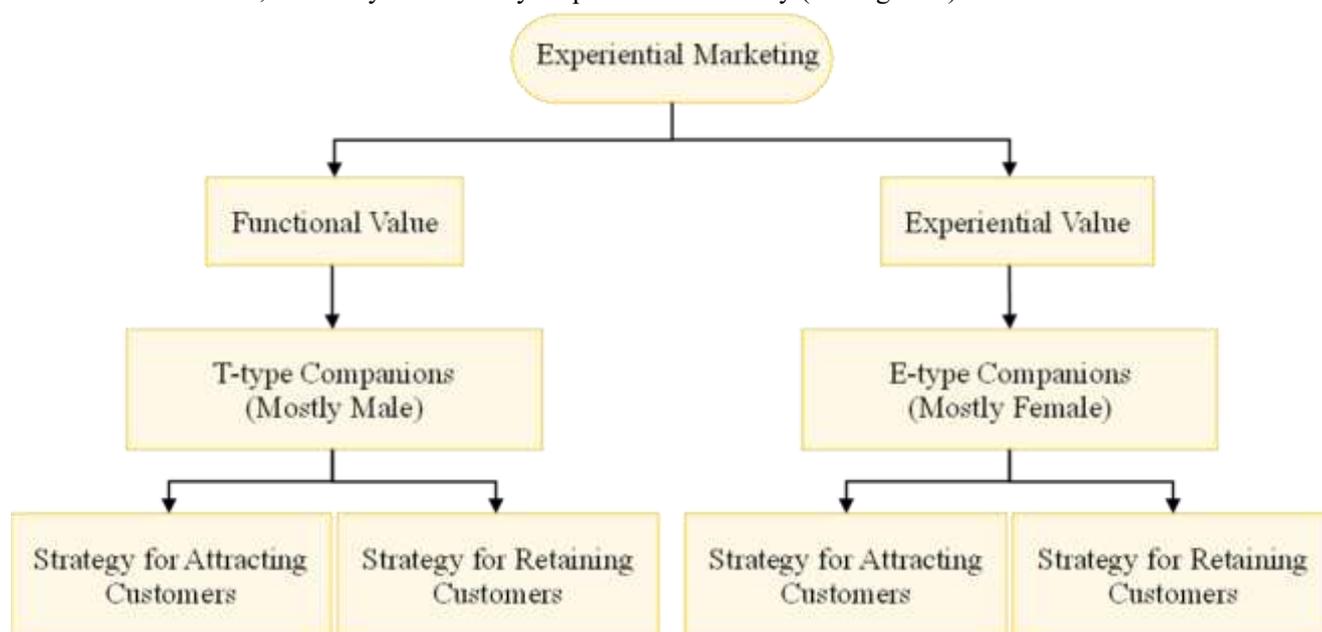


Figure 1. Experiential marketing strategy in the game companion framework.

Research and methodology

This study falls under the realm of qualitative research, and as such, we employed a qualitative abductive exploratory approach. Our goal was to interview 16-20 game companions (of equal types and genders) to ensure meaningful findings. The methodology comprised three methodologically rigorous stages:

Our research employed a two-phase interview approach. The exploratory phase involved five semi-structured interviews (totaling 5 hours) with strategically selected participants: three former male professionals, LOL players (T-type companions), and two female E-type companions. Through these preliminary interviews, we obtained exploratory insights that suggest potential research directions, for example, technique-oriented companions rely on adapting to game patch updates as a key means to secure victory rates, whereas entertainment-oriented companions tend to sustain customer loyalty by leveraging strategies that enhance social and emotional value. Accordingly, in the actual interview protocol, we tailored our questions to highlight

these aspects for each type of companion. Based on these findings, we then map the key dimensions of experiential marketing, functional value, and experiential value onto technique-oriented and entertainment-oriented companions, thereby constructing our analytical research model.

The main study phase then conducted in-depth interviews with 16 participants (8 male: 6 T-type, 2 E-type; 8 female: 6 E-type, 2 T-type), selected to both reflect the market's gendered service distribution and build upon our exploratory findings. Specifically, 5 male T-type participants achieved the highest rank, "Challenger", confirming their gaming capability to help clients improve the win rate. In contrast, 7 out of 8 entertainment-oriented companions were ranked between "Emerald" and "Diamond", a distribution that aligns with their service orientation toward enhanced gaming experiences rather than pure skill advancement. In addition to semi-structured interviews, this study employed virtual ethnography. Over seven months, we conducted monthly observations and analyses of video

and image content posted by these participants on WeChat and Douyin, with particular attention to clips documenting their actual service sessions. This approach provided critical supplementary data for examining practical differences between the two types of game companions.

Data collection and participants

Participants were recruited using direct contact via platforms like “YY” and “Bixin”, supplemented by snowball sampling [13]. Initially, six participants were recruited directly through private messages, and the subsequent ten participants were recommended by these initial six based on our specified gender and service type

requirements. To ensure data validity, this study established rigorous participant selection criteria: All respondents were required to have at least one year of full-time professional experience in companionship service.

For analytical clarity, a Three-character coding system was implemented (see Table 1): The first letter denotes gender (M = male, F = female), the second indicates service type (T = technique-oriented, E = entertainment-oriented), followed by a numerical identifier (e.g., MT1 represents the first male technique-oriented companion, FE2 the second female entertainment-oriented companion).

Table 1. Breakdown of interviewees.

#	Gender	Age	Education	Working experience	Service type	Code	Interviewer
1	Male	20 years old	Junior School	3 years	T-type	MT1	Author 1
2	Male	21 years old	High School	2 years	T-type	MT2	Author 1
3	Male	24 years old	High School	3 years	T-type	MT3	Author 1
4	Male	23 years old	College	2 years	T-type	MT4	Author 1
5	Male	22 years old	Bachelor	1 year	T-type	MT5	Author 1
6	Male	24 years old	High School	2 years	T-type	MT6	Author 1
7	Male	23 years old	High School	2 years	E-type	ME1	Author 1
8	Male	22 years old	College	2 years	E-type	ME2	Author 1
9	Female	24 years old	College	2 years	E-type	FE1	Author 1
10	Female	27 years old	Bachelor	4 years	E-type	FE2	Author 1
11	Female	25 years old	College	3 years	E-type	FE3	Author 1
12	Female	25 years old	Bachelor	2 years	E-type	FE4	Author 1
13	Female	30 years old	Bachelor	10 years	E-type	FE5	Author 1
14	Female	25 years old	High School	3 years	E-type	FE6	Author 1
15	Female	26 years old	College	3 years	T-type	FT1	Author 1
16	Female	28 years old	Bachelor	5 years	T-type	FT2	Author 1

Table 1 presents the basic information and coding details of all 16 interviewees. Notably, the shortest interview duration was 31 minutes, whereas the longest interview

lasted 55 minutes. Overall, all 16 interviews were conducted semi-structured via WeChat voice calls or telephone, averaging 41 minutes in length. All the

interviews and message interactions occurred between May 2024 and December 2024. All 16 interviews were independently conducted by the first author, a Chinese esports researcher who possesses the linguistic ability and necessary gaming fundamentals to complete these interviews independently.

Data analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim by professional transcribers. Following Mortelmans' recommendations, the transcribed data were imported into QSR NVivo 15 for qualitative analysis. This software platform enabled efficient data management and repeated examination of textual materials, thereby supporting systematic coding procedures as described by Jackson and Bazeley (2019). The author implemented Lincoln and Guba's trustworthiness criteria through independent verification of both data collection procedures and theoretical frameworks. Through in-depth discussions among the three authors, we ultimately identified four key research themes: (1) live-streaming strategies, (2) online image-building investments, (3) satisfying in-game needs, and (4) satisfying post-game needs. These were then analyzed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic approach to maintain theoretical coherence while mitigating potential researcher bias.

To ensure methodological rigor, this study implemented a multi-phase iterative validation process following Srivastava and Hopwood's framework. Through this validation approach, we empirically confirmed several emergent themes, such as (1) challenges and adaptive strategies related to game patch updates, (2) the strategies for online persona development. This structured approach facilitated continuous refinement of research outcomes while ensuring adherence to recognized qualitative research standards.

Results

This article, drawing on the concepts between functional value and experiential value in experiential marketing, emphasizes research findings that illustrate how two different types of game companions adopt distinct strategies to acquire and retain customers based on their unique market value orientations.

Result 1: How do different types of companions attract customers?

(1) Live streaming

Among the 16 game companions surveyed, 11 (6 T-type and 5 E-type) have been engaging in live streaming to gain new customers. The main reason for using live streaming is that it can generate greater online traffic for them. "As a game companion, you can't reach simultaneously as many people simultaneously as when doing live-streaming (FT1)". In this regard, T-type and E-type companions adopt very different strategies and achieve different effects due to their value discrepancies. For T-type, their live-streaming strategies are more straightforward. They often showcase their gaming skills, as a breakthrough to attract viewers and traffic, as exemplified by the following quote: "Many game companions name their live-stream room by their game ranks or game win rate to attract viewers (MT4)." Therefore, customer stickiness and conversion rates are also relatively high: "Many people who choose to watch T-type companions' live streams are seeking to learn about the gameplay of a particular character or position. Their purpose is more specific, so once these viewers recognize the streamer's gaming skills, they may have the need and motivation to purchase his/her services (ME2)."

In our case, MT1, as a technique-oriented game companion who has been engaging in live streaming for over 3 years, stated that he got more orders through his fan base rather than from online game companion platforms.

In the field of E-type companions, especially for female ones, considering that they do not possess very high gaming skills and most viewers are male, they need to attract customers by enhancing the value of the viewing experience and delivering entertaining content. Among these methods, the use of the concept of the "thirst trap" (all 3 female E-type companions employed) has become one of the most common and effective ways. "When I was streaming League of Legends, I took the 'thirst trap' route because it was the easiest way for female streamers to gain traffic in the early days, especially considering that I have a decent physical appearance (FE2)." Moreover, viewers, especially male viewers, rarely pay attention to the gaming skills of female streamers, which

results in a situation where these streamers may have high popularity but low conversion rates when it comes to attracting companionship service customers. “They rarely pay much attention to your gaming skills. First, they make comments on your looks and physique. Second, they focus on whether you can produce entertaining and humorous content. Thirdly, they might finally talk about your gaming skills (FE6).”

Although not as effective as T-type companions in converting viewers into customers, 3 female E-type streamers said that live streaming can still serve as an alternative revenue stream for them. As FE5 said, “Viewers may not necessarily purchase my companionship services, but they may send gifts during the show, so for me, it is still worth doing live streams when I don’t have orders.”

(2) Online image building

Our research also revealed that entertainment-oriented game companions place greater emphasis on the pleasant sensations that their appearance and voice can bring to customers. The two most basic investments are auditory and visual.

In terms of auditory, FE5 emphasized the importance of having a charming voice: “Having a pleasant voice will undoubtedly increase your chances of being chosen. I once spent seven hours just uploading an audition audio clip of my voice. Consequently, all 8 E-type companions, regardless of gender, said that they have a consistent habit of purchasing and using sound cards. When serving female players, I use a sound card, both males and females tend to seek more than just gaming when purchasing entertainment-oriented companionship services (ME2).”

For visual investment, regardless of service type, all female companions (8 out of 8) admitted that they invest a lot of time and effort in Photoshopping their photos, as this helps attract male customers. “The lifestyle photos I post on my WeChat Moments are not truly authentic. I spend a lot of time selecting locations, doing make-up, taking photos, and editing them (FE3).” Male T-type companions, on the other hand, do not invest much in this area. In terms of the neglect of personal image-building among T-type companions, especially male ones, MT6 explained, “Since the entire market is male-customer-dominated, it is very rare to see male companions

investing heavily in this regard. If you are handsome at 1.85 meters tall and want to rely on your appearance to make a living, you can live-stream on other channels on Douyin, rather than becoming a game companion.”

For the strategies of creating an online image that suits oneself, some game companions are outsourced to professional companies: “The company I work for in live streaming will provide a unified image packaging for me. They will ensure that my style in photos and during live streams remains consistent (FE2).” On the contrary, some companions tend to rely on themselves, as shown below: “Since I’m not very tall, less than 160 cm, I can’t take sexy photos like some taller girls. My makeup and dress style tend to be more of a cute Japanese girl style. The sound card I use, after being fine-tuned, enables my voice to sound very much like the female characters in Japanese cartoons.”

Result 2: How do different types of companions retain customers?

(1) Satisfying in-game needs

In this context, T-type companions face much greater challenges in managing fluctuations in win rates due to patch updates, whereas E-type companions focus more on meeting social and emotional demands during service delivery.

Game patch updates pose a significantly greater challenge to T-type companions, especially in terms of the modifications made to game characters (including new character introduction, character nerfing, buffing, or redesigning). “If my favored characters are not suitable for the current patch, it can also have a direct impact on my game performance and income (MT2).” 7 out of 8 T-type companions have indicated that patch updates impact their work and income. Notably, T-type companions expressed a sense of resigned compliance with this systemic constraint, as exemplified by MT5’s statement: “You can’t fight against the game’s patch... To achieve good results, you must adapt to the patch by selecting characters that suit both the current patch and your team composition.” Therefore, adapting to new patches more quickly and effectively has become a crucial aspect of retaining clients for T-type companions. “Being able to adapt well and quickly to the new patch will help improve the win rate, thereby making it more likely to increase the number of repeat customers (MT3).”

T-type companions mentioned that they needed to spend a lot of time learning new patches after each update to ensure their win rate. “I usually watch some tutorial videos by former professional players online, learning their gameplay and item choice strategies, typically taking one to two weeks (MT2).” Concerning the practical practices, most T-type companions (7 out of the 8 companions) acknowledged that they could utilize their previous gaming experience to practice playing other patch-dominant characters: “If you are skilled in playing some mage characters in mid-lane, it will be easier for you to practice this type of character. The main differences only lie in the skill sets of these characters.”

However, for a trick player like MT1, who specializes in one single character, he tends to find ways to adapt the character’s gameplay to fit the patch: “I’ve been playing this character (Evelynn) for over a decade. My win rate with this character is much higher than with others. I mainly make changes in terms of item choices and gameplay strategies. I won’t easily switch to other characters unless necessary.”

On the other hand, although less affected by patch updates, E-type game companions must focus more on satisfying clients’ social and emotional needs to increase the likelihood of repeat purchases. In terms of fulfilling customers’ social needs, since male customers dominated, 5 E-type female companions emphasized the importance of satisfying males’ social needs with young females. “It may be difficult for them to find opportunities to chat with girls in real life (FE4).” “They (males) are more or less feeling emotionally empty and mainly seek emotional value or companionship (FE1).” To illustrate how male customers’ social needs are fulfilled, FE5 provides a specific example: “We often accept ‘sweet or couple orders’ (higher price). During the service, we pretend to be lovers with the client. We usually call each other ‘baby’, ‘honey’, or other nicknames specified by the other party, if our character gets killed, we’ll give the customer a virtual kiss.”

In addition, entertainment-oriented game companions also need to actively create positive emotional value during the game to meet the needs of their customers. In this respect, FE6 provided a very detailed and interesting example: “Once, I chose the character Soraka (a healer). During every team fight, I only focused on healing my

customers, even though many times I knew that if I healed other teammates, we might have a better chance of winning the game. He would feel emotionally satisfied cause his female companion was always following him, obeying his commands, so the game outcome became less important (FE6).”

Whether to fully comply with customers’ game instructions constitutes one of the biggest differences between offering technique-oriented services and entertainment-oriented services: “But when taking technique-oriented orders, you can’t always obey your customer’s instructions; sometimes you must make decisions that are more beneficial for winning the game. As long as the result is good, your customer won’t blame you (MT6).”

Notably, although technique-oriented-type and entertainment-oriented-type companions cater to different customer needs, the companionship industry emphasizes a holistic gaming experience. This means that technique-oriented-type companions also require social and emotional competence to meet client expectations, while entertainment-oriented-type companions must maintain a basic level of gaming proficiency. As one entertainment-oriented-type companion (FE1) noted, “If your gaming skill is too poor, no matter how charming you are, it will be difficult to gain repeat purchases.” Similarly, a technique-oriented-type companion (MT1) stated, “If you completely don’t have any emotional intelligence, you can only be a game booster.”

(2) Satisfying after-gaming needs

All 16 game companions emphasized the importance of maintaining good relationships with customers after service. They strive to build long-term bilateral interactions with customers and to meet some of the off-service needs for free as much as possible. However, in practical terms, the eight T-type companions provided very conceptualized strategies mainly involving interacting through WeChat by sending greeting messages, holiday wishes, and so on. This is mainly because the functional value of the T-type is more direct, so their need for customer maintenance is relatively weak. “If you can’t help customers win, no matter how much effort you put in maintaining the relationship, it won’t be useful (MT2).” Furthermore, when technique-oriented

game companions interact with customers, 6 out of 8 interviewees stated that the topics of conversation still mainly focus on gaming. “Among my customers, our interaction topics still mainly revolve around gaming, for example, which characters are easier to rank up within the current patch (MT6).”

On the other hand, all eight entertainment-oriented game companions acknowledged that, in general, E-types face a more urgent need to maintain customer relationships, especially with the opposite gender customers, due to their high replaceability. “Typically, a male customer who hires female entertainment-oriented companions won’t just stick to one. That’s why we need to maintain a very close relationship with them (FE2).” “Both male and female customers tend to prefer choosing opposite genders and trying out new ones when seeking entertainment-oriented companions (ME2).”

Hence, when asked about how to maintain customer relationships, E-type companions have provided more specific and personalized service strategies such as FE5, often recording a birthday song for her customers, FE2 sometimes accompanying her customers to play other games for free, ME2 often making suggestions on their female customers’ dressings and make-ups. Meanwhile, all 6 female E-type companions admitted that they must sacrifice their sexual appeal to retain male customers because there are many non-game-related topics and special requests, like asking them to send private and sexy photos. “You need to find a balance between being open and maintaining your bottom line, you have to sacrifice a bit, or you may lose these customers (FE3).”

Discussions and implications

This study investigates how two distinct types of game companions (technique-oriented and entertainment-oriented types) leverage different experiential marketing strategies (functional and experiential values) to sustain career stability. Based on the findings, the study advances the existing literature by offering significant theoretical insights and practical implications.

First, this study contributes to research on the professionalization of esports, with a particular focus on non-elite professional players, representing a continuation of Johnson and Woodcock’s (2021) research. Zhao et al. (2024) highlight the extremely short career spans of esports athletes [14,15]. Our results

indicate that game companionship may offer longer career opportunities. At the same time, consistent with Smithies et al.’s (2020) result for esports professional players and Parshakov and Barajas’ (2024) results for teams, we find that income instability also remains a persistent challenge for game companions[16,17].

Our study further confirms that the game companion industry, as its customer base consists predominantly of men, remains a male-dominated consumer market. This finding echoes the conclusions of previous scholars on male hegemony in the esports ecosystem. Within this context, male-dominated technique-oriented companions primarily help customers increase their win rates or improve their ranks, which aligns with Molesworth and Watkins’ observation that some players seek personalized progression and gaming goals, emphasizing their desire for advancement and achievement. In contrast, female-dominated entertainment-oriented companions focus more on providing emotional value and fulfilling customers’ social needs.

Finally, this study extends experiential marketing theory by mapping functional value to technique-oriented-type game companions and experiential value to entertainment-oriented-type companions, while systematically explicating the industrial logic and strategies employed by different types of game companions for sustaining their careers. It situates its contribution within the broader integration of esports marketization and experiential marketing theories. Building on previous studies, this paper offers concrete evidence of how game companions co-create gaming experiences with their clients, thereby facilitating the professionalization of their work. Our findings suggest that a comprehensive understanding of esports consumption requires simultaneous attention to both functional value and experiential value, which enables the design and delivery of products and services that better align with consumer expectations.

Overall, this study demonstrates that experiential marketing strategies not only contribute to the broader development and commercialization of the esports industry but also play a crucial role in enhancing the career sustainability of esports professionals.

For practical implications. Both types of companions embody a combination of functional and experiential

values, supporting the argument about the need to balance these values rather than prioritizing one exclusively.

To enhance career stability for game companions, technique-oriented companions should improve their entertainment-oriented and social skills while incorporating game skill instruction into their services. This hybridization not only enhances customer satisfaction but also allows them to diversify their revenue streams, such as through personalized coaching, collaborative streaming, or content creation.

Entertainment-oriented companions, on the other hand, need to elevate their gaming proficiency to adapt to high-level matches and expand their client base. This upskilling can also empower them to participate in competitive or ranked gameplay modes, thereby expanding their occupational identity and customer appeal.

Additionally, for online game companionship platforms, it is essential to establish differentiated support and evaluation systems based on companion types. Technique-oriented companions may benefit from training in communication and emotional engagement, while entertainment-oriented companions need support in improving gameplay skills. Platforms can offer modular skill development programs, mentorship opportunities, and tiered reward systems that correspond to companions' unique service orientations. Evaluation criteria should also reflect this dual value logic, balancing technique-oriented performance with user experience indicators such as interpersonal communication quality, emotional resonance, and customer satisfaction metrics.

Conclusion

Drawing upon experiential marketing theory, this study examines how technique-oriented-type and entertainment-oriented-type game companions strategically employ functional and experiential values, respectively, to enhance career stability. Based on in-depth interviews with 16 participants (8 Technique-oriented-type and 8 Entertainment-oriented-type), we draw the following conclusion: Technique-oriented game companions, characterized by their functional value, primarily focus on the "game" aspect. In customer acquisition, they utilize live streaming to showcase their gaming proficiency, achieving a relatively high customer

conversion rate. To retain these customers, they must invest significant time and effort in adapting to game patch updates. In contrast, entertainment-oriented game companions, distinguished by their experiential value, emphasize the "companion" part. When attracting customers through live streaming or online promotional channels, they must dedicate considerable energy and resources to crafting their online image. For customer retention, they must skillfully address the social and emotional needs of their clients. Additionally, due to the higher substitutability of their services, entertainment-oriented game companions need to excel in maintaining customer relationships beyond the gaming sessions.

The limitations of this study are primarily reflected in the following two aspects: First, the exclusive focus on League of Legends, a game with a male-dominated player base, constrained our ability to examine cross-gender service dynamics, particularly regarding male companions serving female customers and female-to-female companionship interactions. Future research should incorporate games with more balanced gender distributions to develop a comprehensive understanding of gender-based service strategies. Second, by concentrating solely on PC-based online companionship, this study does not account for the rapidly evolving mobile gaming sector and emerging offline entertainment-oriented formats, which may involve substantially different user experiences and service delivery modes. Subsequent investigations should expand the analytical framework to encompass these increasingly important industry segments

Future research could adopt the perspective of game companion customers to investigate their motivations, habits, preferences, and satisfaction levels when engaging with different types of companion services, which can offer valuable insights into how the industry can better tailor its services to meet diverse needs in the evolving esports servicescape. Additionally, comparative research could be conducted on game companions who specialize in a single game versus those who are proficient in multiple game genres. Such studies may reveal the different challenges these game companions face regarding career instability, as well as the feasibility and implications of transitioning between these modes of service.

Furthermore, future studies could explore how online companionship platforms can ensure income stability for companions and take on greater corporate social responsibility. This includes examining platform-level strategies such as implementing fairer compensation models, providing long-term career development support, and introducing mechanisms to mitigate occupational precarity, thereby helping companions extend their career longevity in the platform economy.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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