

Hong Kong Net-Bar Youth Gaming: A Labeling Perspective

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This chapter explores how Hong Kong youth perceive their collective gaming experience in net-bars and how they negotiate their images and identities in such a cultural setting. Net-bar is also called Internet café, net café, cybercafé, or Internet bar in gaming literature.^{1,2} However, unlike other similar names referring to a place providing public Internet access, net-bar specifies two important cultural implications. On one hand, the word “bar” is an imported term from the English language, firstly describing pubs or night clubs. Its Chinese translation (吧) in general connotes undesirability of a place, where social interactions often involve moral delinquency and excessive behaviors such as binge drinking. Net-bar is a term that represents negative designations in the public’s imagination. On the other hand, the term reflects the boom of net-bar business and multiplayer gaming in East Asian countries

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including Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, where net-bars or Internet cafés are essentially LAN gaming centers, especially for the youth.³ These two socio-cultural meanings jointly create the public perceptions of net-bars. The social discourse of net-bar gaming is generally pejorative in Hong Kong: in media outlets and daily conversations, the net-bar is constructed as a place where the youth gather and engage in delinquent behaviors. Therefore, the government, social workers, media, and other interest groups demand that net-bars should be monitored and controlled, for the purpose of protecting the youth.

Discussions on the social designations of net-bar gaming rarely focus on the voices of the majority of net-bar goers, the youth. Through this a socio-cultural backdrop, and largely informed by scholarship on deviance and societal reaction, I investigate Hong Kong net-bar youth's perceptions on gaming and their strategies to manage their images and identity in their reaction to social designations. Specifically, this chapter asks: *how do the net-bar youth perceive social designations, and what do they do to deal with the labels?* I conduct this study by analyzing qualitative data drawn from focus group interviews of 20 Hong Kong students aged from 15 to 20. Some designations of net-bar goers recurring in the youth's narratives include: Dokuo, a reference to Hong Kong young men who are poisonously obsessed with anime and video games; MK boys, a term referring to young provocative punks and hipsters haunting Mong Kok area; sex-seeking; and excessive vulgarity. Interestingly, these labels are terms of not only how the youth perceive what other people think of themselves, but also how they stereotype other net-bar goers. They actively distance themselves from and resist such designations by identity negotiation strategies including avoiding, normalizing, neutralizing, professionalizing, and quitting. Through the youth's interpretations and negotiation of the labels applied to them, the collective experience of net-bar gaming is articulated.

In the following, I first review the literature on labeling perspective to formulate the theoretical framework of this study. Then I provide my research method. Next, I discuss the Hong Kong context of gaming culture and net-bar going. Within this context, I analyze some social labels attached to net-bar goers and how the youth interpret and negotiate with these labels. A discussion is provided at the end, with a note on the limitations of this study.

LABELING PERSPECTIVE

Labeling perspective, also known as societal reaction theory, takes the social reaction of others toward a certain behavior or a group of people as the fundamental parameter when defining deviance and social problems. Deviance is not regarded as an etiological terminology but as a social construct that is created and identified through social interactions. It is a designation or a label attached to someone. Many sociologists in the 1960s and 1970s loosely formed a "labeling school," a new sociology of deviance.⁴ Frank Tannenbaum, Edwin Lemert, John Kitsuse, Howard Becker, Erving Goffman, Kai Erikson, and Thomas Scheff, to name a few, were pioneers that have studied deviance from an interactionist perspective.

Existing literature has identified two propositions of labeling theory. First, because deviance is not an inherent quality, some social elements such as race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity can influence the labeling process, when the labeler and the labeled contest within a certain socio-cultural context.⁵ This proposition highlights power dynamics in a specific social context where the label is born. The second core of the labeling perspective relates to a self-fulfilling prophecy.⁶ This proposition puts forth that deviance labels generate stereotypical views toward the norm violators, while other members of the society/group manifest an exclusionary reaction to deal with deviant behavior.⁷ The biased and/or hostile attitude to those being labeled, and their limited participation in conformity, in turn alternates self-perception that internalizes a deviant identity, and deviant ascription ultimately becomes a "master status."⁸

These two propositions lead us to think about the dynamics and complexity of social life. The further deviance is not inevitable when taking social elements into consideration. In different socio-cultural settings, individuals may react to the labels differently. They acquire information about other's perceptions on them and subsequently and subjectively adjust self-image in response to how they understand the label. Because the label of deviance is unstable and constantly in relationship with social actors, it becomes a routine for those being labeled to negotiate the identity to adjust to social life.

Here, Erving Goffman's work provides insights into the process of labeling and identity management. He defined stigma as a situation of the

individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance, an attribute that is deeply discrediting.⁹ Using autobiographies and case studies, Goffman examined how people manage impressions of themselves when they are away from social norms. His study revealed that people who are stigmatized may not be sure how others really think about them, and that they do not choose between two options—acceptance or resistance—in their response to the social designation. Rather, they adopt various strategies to adjust their images and negotiate their identity in relation to other “normal” people.

Though the early definition and theoretical foundation of stigma emphasized labeling as a process and a relationship between the labeler and the labeled, the bulk of scholarship on societal reaction theories largely overlooks the perspective of the labeled; most studies came from an “outsider perspective.”¹⁰ That is, research on societal reaction concerned mostly with how and why the labeler express social stigmas and what strategies can be used to reduce such prejudices. It must be noted that, roughly starting in the 1960s, the popularity of labeling theory, with its interactionist components, can be seen as a direct reaction to the dominance of structural functionalist views on deviance. Scholars in previous decades believed that deviance and social problems could be revealed in a causal relationship as a result of psychological determinacy and/or structural conditions. It shifted the sociological tradition to societal reaction and its relation to the deviance in particular contexts.

These studies of social reactions to stigmas had their heyday during the 1970s while ebbing thereafter, even to the extent of being pronounced dead. Not until the 1990s, scholarship of societal reaction surged to emphasize the importance of studying the stigmatized group/individual, which has brought new insights into previous theoretical and empirical work. In a review of the historical development of labeling perspective, Plummer pointed out that it is a generational theory, which, in its widest sense, continues questioning social phenomena yet for another generation of sociologists.¹¹ This position is more apt, as many recent works on deviance and social controls have refashioned the core themes of labeling perspective.¹² In a recent issue dedicated to studies of social stigma, Barreto and Ellemers identify five major themes standing out in this area of research: (1) contextual factors influencing social prejudice; (2) interactive nature of stigma—interaction between the labeler and the labeled;

(3) disparate findings of how social stigma affects the self; (4) the function of group identification; and (5) how social stigma affects task performance.¹³

In this chapter, I put forth the role of the net-bar youth to understand how they perceive the social labels of their net-bar going and gaming behaviors as well as what their strategies are to manage their images and identity related to the stigma, both as a group and an individual. Moving beyond the labeling literature, three implications are derived from my point of view.

First, instead of focusing on the internal factors of individual elements causing social labeling, I emphasize the social context which induces undesirable social designation to the people who belong to certain groups. Past research usually associated the term deviance with certain types of rule violation, including crime and delinquency, mental illness and other psychological problems, drug use and addiction, and sexual activities. The introduction of the societal reaction approach expands the scope of study to myriad forms of deviance, as it is being created, defined, and labeled through context-specific social processes. As mentioned above, net-bars are essentially multiplayer gaming centers in Hong Kong. The social discourse of gaming has influence on perception of the specific place of the net-bar as well as the net-bar goers. Exploring the contextual factors contributes to the understanding of net-bar youth's perceptions and negotiation of their identities.

Second, studying the stigmatized group/individual, the net-bar youth in this case can enrich the scholarship of both societal reactions and game studies. Most of the previous research emphasized the psychological and behavioral effects of gaming, such as video game addiction.¹⁴ Few have taken the individual perceptions of social designations into consideration.¹⁵ Because of the interactive nature of social labels, it is necessary to understand how the net-bar goers perceive the social prejudice toward their behaviors and how they interpret the meanings that the society attributes to their actions.

Third, this study explores both individual and collective images and identity of the net-bar youth. As gaming centers, net-bars often serve as a base for the youth groups to play video games together. Group identity developed in this process may influence individual members of the group. How will this group identity affect the youth's perception of the labels? How will it affect their interpretation of their individual identity in relation to social stigma? These are the aspects that I seek to explore in this chapter, through the youth's articulation and narrative as group members.

METHOD

To investigate the youth's perceptions of social ideas toward net-bar gaming, I conducted focus group interviews as a qualitative research method. The purpose of the interviews was to invite conversations among groups of net-bar goers who had similarities in cultural experience while differences in personal expressions and perhaps also in their interpretations of social interaction. Thus, three groups of informants, 20 people total, were recruited from personal contacts with a snowballing process to conduct peer group interviews. All participants were students aged from 15 to early 20s. One group was comprised of high school students and the other two were made up of college students. Informants in each group were acquaintances and net-bar friends with each other. The peer group interviews were designed to create a familiar environment for the net-bar youth to articulate their personal as well as collective experience. The interviews were conducted in February to early March, 2013. Each interview was recorded and coded afterwards. To ensure confidentiality, a pseudonym was used for each participant.

The participants came from different districts in Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and New Territories: one in Eastern, two in Southern, two in Kowloon City, one in Yau Tsim Mong, two in Wong Tai Sin, two in Tuen Mun, three in Tsuen Wan, two in Yuen Long, one in Tai Po, and four in Sha Tin. The average number of their family members was four, and only one in twenty was single parenting. The participants' average monthly family income was between HK\$20,000–29,999 (approx. US\$2,580–3,871). Although participants came from diverse geographical backgrounds, they were identical in their gender (male) and occupation (student). It is understandable that all participants were male students because net-bar goers are overwhelmingly men and that students are the major customers of net-bars. These characteristics are consistent with findings of a local net-bar survey.¹⁶

THE NET-BAR AND THE YOUTH IN HONG KONG

Before getting into the analysis, in order to better situate this study, it is necessary to provide some information about youth and net-bars in Hong Kong. Hong Kong is a media-, Internet-, and technology-saturated metropolis. Up to 2014, Hong Kong had the fastest Internet access in the world and

the overall high-speed Internet penetration rate of 73%.¹⁷ The game sector is part of the creative industry in Hong Kong, contributing to its digital economy. Hong Kong gaming culture is largely influenced by Japanese and Korean popular cultures of games, manga, and comics.¹⁸ Net-bars contribute to the game industry through the specific position they established in society: instead of being a mere access point to the Internet, net-bars are places for multiplayer gaming as a collective activity. This is a unique feature of gaming culture in Hong Kong, as well as in many East Asian countries. Although no specific number of net-bars in Hong Kong is available, an increasing number of franchise locations have established in recent years, largely monopolized by three big enterprises: i-One, Msystem, and G-Force.

In Hong Kong, gaming culture has flourished since the 1980s. Since the first introduction of console games, such as *Dragon Quest*, *Final Fantasy*, and *Super Mario*, a variety of game magazines have entered the market. At the turn of the century, arcade/game centers and net-bars became highly popular. It was trendy for the youth to play in net-bars and show off their gaming skills.¹⁹ Yet, the vogue of gameplay in game centers and net-bars has become a large concern in the eyes of moral entrepreneurs, such as the government, social advocacy organizations, and the media, which regarded net-bars as a “dangerous space” for the youth²⁰ and argued that they should be kept away from such a place.²¹ These social entities played a crucial role in defining deviance by strategically projecting moral judgment. The net-bar youth were often treated as game addicts and social problems that need to be regulated and controlled.

These ideas of youth deviance are in line with how people expect a norm-conforming youth should be. In other words, the net-bar youth are acting out a way of life that does not meet the social imagination and cultural construction of the youth. In Hong Kong, for example, it is common to expect young people between 15 and 19 years of age to study hard and get into college. This expectation enabled the flourishing business of cram schools, where students are intensively tutored to pass the entrance exams for high schools or universities.²² Such an expectation is deeply rooted in the historical construction and social imagination of the youth. Though the traditional saying goes “young people are the key to the future,” the youth are frequently depicted as social problems. As Dick Hebdige noted, “in our society, youth is present only when its presence is a problem, or is regarded as a problem.”²³ Concerning young people,

society is immersed in pejorative narratives, such as high unemployment rates, increasing number of young drug abusers, deviant youth culture, and bullying in school, to name a few, which makes it easy to blame young people and places them in a disadvantaged position.^{24,25}

The mid-1960s witnessed the rise of Hong Kong youth's own culture of "Ah Feis" (literally as Teddy boys). Since then, young people have frequently been constructed as antisocial and dangerous, especially after the riots in 1966 and 1967. In the 1970s, the drastic upsurge of reported juvenile crime rates further alarmed society.^{26,27,28} Moving onto the 1980s–1990s, the new generation was accused of losing the drive and dedication their parents had possessed to make Hong Kong prosperous.²⁹ Then, at the turn of the twenty-first century, an increasing number of youth were involved in the public discourses of substance abuse, gangsters, sex trades, delinquency, and other forms of subcultures. Since the "youth" is constructed as a social category, society predominantly perceives young people as being "anti-social, marginal and pathological in society," who act against norms and should "be controlled and regulated on the plea of their abnormality."³⁰ As Gray suggests, Hong Kong youth are frequently presented as social problems, which require government interventions.³¹ Recreational places of the youth, such as game centers, KTV rooms, and net-bars became the primary targets of monitoring and control.

The youth, however, are not passively accepting the social expectations imposed on them. Having virtually unlimited access to the media and information, the youth are able to create and participate in various forms of subculture, such as indie bands and otaku culture.^{32,33} The rapidly changing society provides them with opportunities to experience more freedom, to experiment with different lifestyles and social relationships, and to create their ways of expression and culture. With the advancing information and communication technology, the voice of the youth can be spread out through many channels, allowing them greater social presence. A recent example is the significant role that students/young people took in the protests of MNE (moral and national education).³⁴ Despite its increasing importance, there is a dearth of research examining Hong Kong youth from a cultural perspective, which might be attributable to other factors that characterized (late) modernity such as the emergence of diasporic cultures, as well as the temporal and spatial changes in the creation and sustainability of youth cultures.³⁵

Setting against such a background, this study focuses on how the youth perceive and interpret social labels associated with their collective gaming

activities in net-bars. Based on the data collected from focus group discussions, below I will focus on two parts. In the first part, I articulate the social labels of the net-bar youth, analyzing the tags that people put on the youth. These labels include Dokuos, MK boys, sex-seeking, and excessive vulgarity. The second part examines how the youth develop their strategies to deal with these labels, through which they manage conflicts of identity, that is, who they are and who others think they are. The strategies of avoiding, normalizing, neutralizing, professionalizing, and quitting are primary concerns in this part. A discussion of these findings follows.

Social Labels on Net-Bar Youth

In all the discussions around the topic of net-bar gaming, the informants expressed their feelings about how others consider what the net-bar is and who they are; they articulated that people who do not go to net-bars and play games would think the net-bar goers are different groups of people. A recurring pattern through their narratives is that, in addition to how their perception of what the social stigma of net-bar is, they also label other net-bar goers with similar prejudice. In other words, while the net-bar goers think people see them as Dokuos, MK boys, sex-seeking, and vulgar teens, they distance themselves from these labels but use the same labels to stereotype other net-bar goers. They are both the labeled and the labeler, stigmatized and the stigmatizer. Before discussing this irony, I will elucidate several frequently occurred labels of net-bar youth: Dokuos, MK boys, sex-seeking, and excessive vulgarity.

Dokuo (毒男)

The idea of Dokuo originated from a Japanese TV drama broadcasted in 2004, *Densha Otoko*. The name referred to single men who lack confidence in dealing with the outside world and interacting with women. Later, the HK Golden Forum borrowed this term to refer to Hong Kong young men who were poisonously obsessed with anime and video games. The meaning thus changed significantly and became more pejorative. Dokuo as a subcultural term has prevailed in Hong Kong in recent years, used both as a noun and an adjective to both indicate a person and describe the quality of a certain behavior. In many spots in online forums and social networks, the meaning of Dokuo has been largely extended, referring to who have never dated a girl, who are introvert, who have average look, who are in the lower social class, who are poor, and who criticize “Hong

Kong girls.”³⁶ An incidence that this term gained greater social attention happened in 2007, when a user from Golden Forum posted a Dokuo checklist, listing 23 criteria to represent a Dokuo’s physical appearance and daily behaviors. An online news portal named *NextMedia*, an affiliate to *AppleDaily*, has reproduced this checklist, accelerating the spread of the word.

MK Boys

MK boys refer to young people who wander around the Mong Kok area, dressed up in a pompous way. They are seen as punks, hipsters, Ah Feis, and so forth. They usually have their hair dyed gold and are claimed to have some connections with gangs. My informants talked a lot about how people would think they are MK boys if people knew that they go to net-bars and have some physical traits, such as gold hair and hippie outfits. While describing the general public impression of net-bar goers as MK boys, the youth also expressed their own opinion of what a MK boy really is.

Spencer stated that, “Sometimes you’ll see girls accompanying boys to net-bars, and those (boys) are MK boys,” because few girls will go to net-bars. According to the informants, MK boys usually come out very late at night and play in the net-bar; thus the informants were only aware of MK boys’ existence but had no interaction with them directly. The MK boys were seen to be extremely rude and fierce, and were accused to have bonds with gangs. Steve argued that there were many MK boys with a gangster background and they frequently caused troubles in net-bars; he said, “Almost every net-bar has hired a bouncer, who is a member of a gang, to which the net-bar manager will pay periodically. And he will help to keep away those who are troublesome.”

These statements were based on what the informants heard, rather than what they saw by themselves. The youth rejected the label of MK boys on themselves, while applying the same label to other net-bar goers.

Sex-Seeking

When net-bars first became popular in Hong Kong, some girls in the net-bars provided one-to-one instruction on Internet surfing ostensibly while actually offering companionship and possibly sex services, primarily for middle-class men.³⁷ This phenomenon has widely been seen in Hong Kong society, where net-bars are one of possible places where the service provider and the customer to “hook up.”³⁸ It is similar to compensated dating

originated in Japanese popular culture, where old men give money as a compensation for young girls' companionship and/or for sexual favors. Since early 2000, Hong Kong government has made efforts to ban the sex business in net-bars. In 2003, Hong Kong police arrested 82 underage girls between 14 and 17 years of age for providing sex services in net-bars. From 2004 onwards, the police has been cracking down sex business particularly in entertainment places to eradicate underage prostitution; such a business in net-bars has ebbed as a result.^{39,40}

My informants in general have seldom experienced sex-related issues in net-bars. Most of them believed that this kind of net-bars operated not in Hong Kong but in Mainland China; or, they exist only in certain areas where sex business prospers. For example, Quentin claimed, "I've really never heard of this kind of stuff. It's so crazy. I bet it must be the net-bars in Temple Street."⁴¹ It must be." The youth also acknowledged that some special private net-bars would operate this kind of business back in time. Frederick said that they knew about girls who touted sex services in net-bar as "Internet instructors," providing instruction on how to surf the Internet as a guise. Isle further explained this phenomenon by referring to "fish ball stalls" and that "the Internet instructor is an updated version of a fish ball girl."⁴² Interestingly, many youth argued that people would search for pornography in net-bars, most of whom were middle-aged men, and they suspected they would look for sex services in net-bars as well. Sometime those people would behave improperly and disturb others. Steve shared a story, "So many people watch porn in net-bars! One day I went to a net-bar early in the morning. A guy watched pornography there, and then slept on the sofa. He would not leave so the manager had to call the police. When the police arrived, he was still reluctant to stand up. And after he stood up, we found a nasty thing on the sofa!"⁴³

Excessive Vulgarity

My informants mentioned about three images that they considered other people would perceive net-bar goers as: smokers, drug dealers/users, and those who use foul language.

According to the youth, smokers were less likely to be seen in net-bars, though not completely disappeared. This is because Hong Kong has amended the Smoking (Public Health) Ordinance in October 19, 2006, and enacted it in January 1, 2007. This enactment aimed to create friendly places for the youth to go to after school. However, my informants stated that some net-bars still allowed smoking, which made them suffer from

second-hand smoking and smell unpleasantly after playing in net-bars. They would not be surprised if people still hold the perceptions of net-bar goers as smokers, not only because smoking still exists in net-bars, but also because the mass media reproduces this stereotype.

In addition, they claimed that drug dealing and use would occur to people's mind when talking about net-bars.⁴⁴ Most of the time, the informants accused the media to broadcast hearsays about net-bar drug dealing. "They (the media) like to exaggerate things," said Zach. They articulated on this issue in three ways. Firstly, they denied using drugs in net-bars. Secondly, they believed that MK boys would probably trade and take drugs, although they claimed that people dealing drugs in net-bars were none of their business. Max put it in this way, "There were always bad people doing bad things. And you cannot blame the place and everybody in it."

Thirdly, the youth I interviewed reported the excessive use of foul language in net-bars. They recognized that the vulgar expressions and dirty words would spread out easily when playing games. They themselves frequently spoke out profanity when they played games in net-bars while not in other places. They also gave an example that elementary school students seemed to be easily influenced by foul language in net-bars.⁴⁵ Zack illustrated, "Once I went to play *Nobunaga's Ambition* and beat the avatar of an elementary school student who was sitting next to me. He cried out 'Fuck!' really loud... they say fuck anytime anywhere. When they win the game, they say fuck; when they lose, they say fuck; when they kill someone (in game), they say fuck; and when they are chased away, they also say fuck. For them, it is so easy to say fuck."

NEGOTIATING IMAGE AND IDENTITY: STRATEGIES TO DEAL WITH LABELS

As I mentioned previously, the youth played the roles between the stigmatized and the stigmatizer; when they realized social prejudice and labels toward them, they strategically distanced themselves from those negative designations, and even used the stigma to label other net-bar goers. In order to do so, they practiced different strategies to manage their own images and negotiate their identities as students, sons, good citizens, and ultimately ordinary people, for presenting themselves in front of others. These young people admitted that the stereotypical view toward net-bar

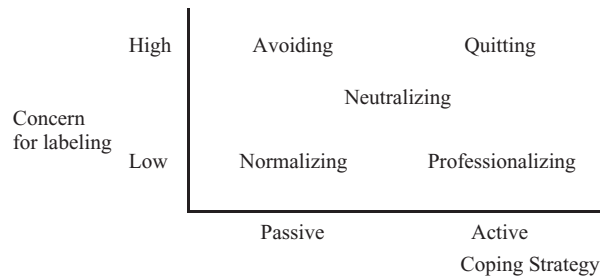


Fig. 7.1 Negotiating image and identity through coping with labels

goers is valid to some point as there are potential threats in net-bars that might lure teenagers to engage in deviant behaviors. Interestingly, on one hand, the youth tended to reject negative tags and downplay the effects of being labeled. On the other hand, they tried to adjust themselves through managing their images and identity in order to cope with negative designations, even though they claimed the designations were not based on real conditions. Being both the labeled and the labeler, they knew not only exactly what was happening in net-bars from their gaming experience but also how not to follow a deviant path.

Based on the degree of their concerns for labeling, their coping strategies also have different degree of action. By providing different scenarios of coping with social labels, I categorize the five types of negotiation strategies in the chart below (Fig. 7.1).

Avoiding

When the net-bar youth are highly concerned with the labels, they would avoid having conversations about net-bar gaming. This is an instinctive response to social labels. Avoidance works effectively for secret deviants, whose “improper act is committed, yet no one notices it or reacts to it as a violation of the rules.”⁴⁶

For example, many of the youth had experience of going to net-bars after school without telling their parents and their schoolmates, because of the fear of being punished by parents and being ostracized by their peers. Yana confessed that he never told his schoolmates about playing in net-bars when he was in middle school, until he met other students who shared his gaming interests in net-bars. During the discussion, Dominic recollected

his experience 10 years ago, when he was in elementary school and smoking was not banned in net-bars. He complained that the air in net-bars was messed up along with people “boiling tobacco” and his school uniform was always smelly.⁴⁷ “I had a trick,” said Dominic, “Usually when I went home after playing in net-bars, around 6 pm, my mom was not back from work and the house was empty. I quickly threw the uniform into the washing machine before anyone noticed that I went to net-bars and got smelly.” In doing so, people could not find out their identity as net-bar goers, assuming them as ordinary students who conformed rules and norms in school and at home.

Normalizing

In many sociological studies of identity management, such as organization studies, criminology, and medical sociology, normalizing is a process as well as strategy to manage social stigma and deviance (Kramer 2010).^{48,49} In the case of net-bar gaming, normalizing is understood as a strategy that the youth utilized to either favor or proactively be against social stigma. My informants underscored how the changing social environment and new ways of thinking would incorporate the deviant identity into everyday life, making net-bar gaming as a “normal” activity and net-bar goers as “normal” people in the public’s eyes. This is vividly demonstrated in how the net-bar youth reacted when confronting the designation of Dokuo.

The net-bar youth expressed their concerns about being labeled as Dokuo or in Dokuo-style. Most of them seemed neither favor nor disfavor this label. From their physical appearance, they were hardly categorized as Dokuo. Yet, sometimes they would claim that, as Honda said, “we are all good boys, though also Dokuos.” This acknowledgement was “self-mockery,” according to his peers who broke out of laughter during the interview. Once other people learned that they were game fans and frequent net-bars goers, they would tag the net-bar youth as Dokuos to interpret their behavior. Expressions like “girls think those boys who go to net-bar everyday are very Dokuo” (Carl) and “those who don’t go to the net-bar would say we are so Dokuo” (Zach) were common. As the conversation revealed, Dokuo as a negative label is not applicable to every net-bar youth but limited to those who do not conform to social expectations. For example, if the youth behaved as good students with good grades, they would rarely be accused as Dokuo.

By contrast, academically struggling students were more likely to be tagged as Dokuos. However, rather than arguing against being labeled as Dokuos, the youth, on one hand, emphasized the value of collective activities in net-bar gaming. For them, collective gaming was an important aspect that strengthened social ties and bonds within in the group, which contradicts the loner stereotype attached to Dokuo. On the other hand, they juxtaposed net-bar gaming and other leisure activities such as jogging, justifying their behaviors as non-rule-breaking. In their understanding, being labeled as Dokuo may have multiple meanings; playing games in net-bars did not necessarily lead to the deviant identity associated with a Dokuo.

Neutralizing

Another strategy employed by the youth to manage their images is to add socially desirable elements into their identities. This strategy aims to neutralize people's perceptions toward the labels on the net-bar youth.

One of the elements that the society desires is education. The high school teens group were concerned significantly more with being labeled as Dokuos, compared to the college groups. The high school youth talked about being watched by teachers and parents and were afraid of being ostracized by their schoolmates once they were labeled as Dokuo. In discussion with the high school teens, Zach put it, "If you enter college, people just assume you are good students, and they care less about whether you are Dokuo or not." Quentin added, "True, you perform really well then people will compliment you even though you are playing in net-bars." They suggested that college students, especially those in top universities such as Hong Kong University (HKU), Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST), were less likely to be perceived as deviants by others.

This line of narrative was in concert with what the informants in the college groups claimed. Honda recollected that his parents once told him, "after you getting into college, you can do whatever you want," implying that they will not forbid him from going to net-bars and playing games with friends. Indeed, he did not need his parents' permission after going to college. The college youth were less confused and struck with being called Dokuo or other social stigma attached to net-bar gaming, largely because their identity as college students offset the negative labels associated with net-bar goers. Fredrick also stated that college life would

help develop their social networks and acquire more independence from parents. He added, “people assume you know what to do with your life.”

Nevertheless, even though the “normal” good-student identity overshadows the deviant identity, it does not substantially affect the image of a whole group of net-bar goers. Although the informants acknowledged that adding the socially desirable elements into their identity can help reduce stigma, not every one of them actually made efforts to neutralize people’s perception toward them.

Professionalizing

Although not common, some of the youth expressed their interests in developing gaming into a career that could make a living. A prominent example can be found from one of my informants’ profession: gold farming.

Max was in his final year of high school. Usually students at that time would feel great pressure from the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE). However, his peers said that his main business was playing video games, not studying. He was stepping into the world of gold farming, where hardcore players dig into the game to acquire in-game currency and exchange real-world money with other players. He opened many accounts in different online games, spent lots of time to gather rare items and high-level avatars, which he sold to other players with a hefty price tag.

- Max: Some trades are really crazy! A trick for thousands of dollars! I surely do it everyday!
- Lester: The parents spoil the chick-chicks.⁵⁰ They give them so much money.
- Steve: That’s what Max can take advantage of.
- Max: I’m just fine with the situation. Sometimes I buy a piece with \$200 dollars (approx. US\$26) but can sell it up to \$700 (approx. US\$90).
- Lester: How much time do you spend to work on the items?
- Max: Two weeks, more or less.
- Lester: So you get your job! Playing games!

Max: Well, I can earn around \$4–5000 dollars (approx. US\$516–645) per month now. And it's true, that's my main business. But I think those who spend huge money on exchanging virtual goods are really stupid. Many people spend over \$1000 (approx. US\$129) to buy virtual goods per week! Can you believe it? Aren't they crazy?

Max now plays less frequently in net-bars for security reasons but more frequently at home. No one knows how long this job will last for him; it could be a temporary excursion, considering that there are many more competitive gold farmers in Mainland China.⁵¹ Yet through their conversation, Max and his peers seemed less inclined to continue their education into college. To professionalize their gaming, the youth try to negotiate their identity and justify their positions. Such efforts are precarious, without any guaranteed outcome.

Quitting

For the net-bar youth, another way to negotiate other people's perception toward them might be simply quitting. Quitting the net-bar gaming allows them to detach themselves from the social designations of net-bar goers. The informants revealed that their gaming groups were becoming smaller as members left. This happened more frequently among college informants than high schoolers.

Ben: One of our old friends is very disciplined.
 Xander: He behaved quite rational. When somebody suggested we should play another hour, we all, except him, immediately agreed.
 Ben: He's not a friend, anyway.
 Lance: He didn't treat us as a friend! Always leaves early.
 Honda: You know? That's why he's working at i-Bank and we are still sitting in i-One.
 Xander: He went to HKU. He's quite successful now.
 Spencer: Every time after playing nightlong, we all regret not leaving with him.
 Honda: He is successful.

- Xander: He's leaving.
 Spencer: He's no longer your research object.
 Lance: Perhaps he is the object of another research, ha!
 Frank: He's no longer one of us.

In this case, exiting the peer group and quitting games in net-bars is a personal choice mostly due to changing environments. College informants agreed that getting into college granted them more autonomy and opportunities to choose their lifestyle, which would make some people turn to activities other than net-bar gaming. From the conversation among the informants, their friend who left their gaming group cared more about conventional views of success: academic excellence, well-paying job, and quality of life. Once a person achieves a higher social status through education and work, he would probably follow the social conventions of viewing the net-bar as an undesirable place for his image.

For some other people who still remain in collective gaming activities, their gaming groups are facing declining membership. As revealed, some of the informants' conversation came up with a feeling of nostalgia. Immediately after graduating from high school, the college youth usually gathered once a month. Participation gradually declined over time; their appointments would be canceled for various reasons. Jack put forth, "We did not have much time to play together at net-bars unless we are in the same colleges, or even in the same departments." Dominic added, "We seldom go (to net-bars) alone. I have a friend who always had a time conflict with our gatherings because he took a course which we did not. Sometime later he just quit and no longer played with us." In this case, members quit net-bar going not because of social stigma but because of changing situations.

DISCUSSION

By analyzing how Hong Kong youth perceive social stigma toward them as they play games in net-bars, as well as how they negotiated their images and identity to cope with negative designations, this study offers two implications.

First, the net-bar youth are both the labeled and the labeler. They not only think they are negatively perceived by others but also use those stereotypes to label other net-bar goers. The social stigma does not

only affect how the youth react to social labels but also affect how they perceive other stigmatized people. Though it is unclear how this mechanism works for the teens, it is safe to say that the youth constantly refuse being labeled as unconventional, partially by allying with social standards to stereotype other net-bar goers. They are playing around the roles of “insiders” and “outsiders”: when being accused deviant, they defend themselves with both insiders’ view by arguing that the public is ignorant of what net-bars really are and outsiders’ view by distancing themselves from the accused deviant identity of net-bar goers. The different positioning and the changing social context complicate the understanding of the labeling process, where the line between the labeled and the labeler blurs.

Second, when the youth perceive the stigma on them, they try to manage their images and identity to cope with the labels. The process is important in that the youth try to make sense of the social labels while at the same time redefine and reinterpret the social meanings attached to their identity. Here, a reconciliation of individual identity and collective identity can possibly occur, when individual behaviors and reactions are connected to groups of net-bar goers who create and participate in the formation of a subculture. Through the youth’s expression, interpretation, and negotiation of the labels, what they articulate is not only gaming or friendship but also a significant part of their identity, lifestyle, and culture.

Third, the collectivist aspect of gaming is important in the net-bar youth’s negotiation of social stigma. Despite the social prejudice toward net-bar goers, many of them still prefer playing in net-bars over playing individually at home, largely because of sociality, companionship, and friendship. Such group identification may or may not alleviate the pejorative labels attached to net-bar goers. Yet it is a significant part of cultural identification of the net-bar youth, which may also explain why some of the college student informants were nostalgic about their gaming experience in the past. The collective gaming also reflects the collectivistic cultural practice in East Asian countries at large.⁵²

Limitations

This study examined the social labels attached to net-bars from the perspectives of Hong Kong youth. However, the study might have overlooked the opinions of various groups, which might be different

from those of the youth. Thus, a follow-up study on different groups, such as the government, school, media, parents, who often designate net-bar youth as deviants, would be helpful to understand the labeling process.

Another weakness of this study is the non-representative sample. The gender composition in this study makes it difficult to depict a comprehensive picture of net-bar youth culture. Although it would be difficult to recruit net-bar girls due to their low numbers, investigating this population may yield some interesting results. For example, as social expectations toward men and women are different, net-bar girls would be perceived to be in a more dangerous situation compared to their male counterparts. In addition, the labels may have more negative effects on girls. Nevertheless, my informants reported that the number of girls visiting net-bars was growing, though slightly, during the past several years. What the girls' presence in the net-bar means, how their experience constructs their identity, how they perceive the labels attached to them, and whether they feel the same pressure and use the same strategies as their male counterparts are some of the questions to be investigated.

NOTES

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41. It is an area notorious for prostitution and sex business.
42. The fish ball stall here is not a street-side food stall that sells fish balls, typical Hong Kong snack. It is a place that sex business takes place. It was very popular in the 1980s–1990s in Hong Kong. Girls who provided sex services were mostly adolescents. Clients gave a nickname to such place by comparing the girls' growing breasts to fish balls. These girls were called fish ball girls.
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