NEWS LESSON

What Are You Buying When You Pay for Company?



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. Would you pay for company at an event you did not want to attend alone?
2. What makes a good companion different from a good friend?
3. Can an enjoyable conversation feel genuine if someone is being paid?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**fragmented**	☐	A	able to be trusted to do what is promised
2	**dependable**	☐	B	hard to find because there is not enough
3	**scarce**	☐	C	to make something seem better or more attractive than it is
4	**commodity**	☐	D	broken into separate parts that do not fit together
5	**romanticise**	☐	E	to treat as less important or valuable than it is
6	**undervalue**	☐	F	something that can be bought and sold
7	**clarity**	☐	G	unfair differences in wealth, chances or power
8	**inequalities**	☐	H	the quality of being clear and easy to understand

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

In China, customers pay companions to join them on hikes and meals. What exactly are they buying: friendship, a guide or a guarantee that someone will turn up?

1 You want to go for a hike, but none of your friends is free. In China, some customers solve that problem by paying someone to come along. Others book company for sightseeing or a restaurant visit. The meeting may be friendly, but it begins with an agreement about time, money and what each person expects.

2 Reporting in June 2026 described this so-called companionship economy, with providers offering everything from practical assistance to encouragement on demanding mountain walks. For customers, the appeal can be straightforward: an activity becomes easier, safer or more enjoyable in company. Some seek a guide with local expertise; others simply want the certainty of having somebody available at a particular time on a particular day.

3 The trend is associated with broader changes in urban life. Geographic mobility, demanding jobs and fragmented social networks can leave people surrounded by others yet lacking companions for ordinary activities. Digital communication provides constant contact without necessarily producing the dependable, face-to-face relationships on which plans depend.

4 Commercialising companionship introduces an unusual kind of clarity. Unlike a reluctant friend, a paid companion has explicitly agreed to attend. Expectations can be negotiated in advance, payment compensates the provider for their time, and the arrangement may feel less emotionally demanding precisely because neither party has to pretend it is an enduring personal bond.

5 Much of the discomfort the idea provokes may boil down to a question of honesty rather than substance. Social life has always involved obligation, favours and quiet accounting; what unsettles observers is seeing the exchange stated openly in a price rather than left politely unspoken.

6 That clarity nonetheless comes with complications. Boundaries, personal safety and the risk of misunderstanding require careful management, particularly where a stranger is engaged for hours in an isolated setting. The transaction may also sharpen existing inequalities: some people can purchase experiences that others can reach only through personal relationships, while providers depend on turning social and emotional skills into marketable labour.

7 The work itself deserves more attention than it usually receives. Remaining attentive and interested for a paying stranger is genuinely demanding, and it is a job that is easy to romanticise and easy to undervalue at the same time.

8 It would be simplistic, however, to write the industry off as proof that friendship has disappeared. People have long paid guides, coaches and entertainers to make shared experiences possible. The distinctive feature here is how openly company itself is valued. China's paid companions suggest that in an age of abundant digital communication, reliable human presence has become a surprisingly scarce commodity. Whether that scarcity is a cause for concern or simply a feature of modern urban life is, in the end, a question the industry leaves its customers to answer for themselves.

Sources: Reuters. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The text suggests that a paid companion's attendance is less in doubt than a reluctant friend's. T F NG
2. The writer thinks the discomfort people feel is mainly about the quality of the company provided. T F NG
3. Providers of paid company earn more than tour guides. T F NG
4. Paid companionship could widen the gap between people who can buy experiences and people who rely on personal relationships. T F NG
5. The writer treats the rise of paid companionship as proof that people no longer value friendship. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

abundant **compensates** **dismissive** **negotiated** **obligation** **provokes** **reluctant** **unsettles**

1. The tenants were _____ to sign a new lease until the landlord agreed to repair the roof.
2. A generous salary hardly _____ staff for the stress of working nights.
3. Under the terms she had _____ with her employer, she could work from home on Fridays.
4. In a city with _____ cafes and restaurants, choosing where to eat is rarely difficult.
5. The proposal _____ strong feelings whenever it is raised at a meeting.
6. He felt a moral _____ to tell the truth, whatever the consequences.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. Many workers resent the _____ of being available at all hours. (EXPECT)
2. The _____ of the arrangement made both sides relax. (TRANSPARENT)
3. Critics called the scheme _____ because it took advantage of lonely people. (ETHIC)
4. Researchers link chronic _____ to poorer health. (LONELY)
5. Rising rents make it _____ for young people to live near their work. (AFFORD)

7 Language focus: prepositions

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. At this level the preposition belongs to a formal adjective. Learn each pair as one unit.

at	by	from	of	on	to	with

1. For some critics, the service is tantamount _____ renting affection by the hour.
2. The trend may be symptomatic _____ a deeper loneliness in big cities.
3. A paid friendship is fraught _____ awkward questions about sincerity.
4. The arrangement is contingent _____ payment, which is exactly what unsettles its critics.
5. Some customers are adept _____ hiding how lonely they feel.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. What should a paid companion be honest about from the start?
2. Could paying for company make it easier to meet people elsewhere?
3. Which matters most in company: shared interests, attention or reliability?

9 Role-play: hiring a companion for a hike

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the customer

You want to hike up a mountain on Saturday, but your friends are busy. Ask a companion to come with you. Find out the price, the hours and what the companion will do.

Student B · the companion

You are a student and you work as a paid companion. You want clear rules before you agree: the price, how long you will stay, and what you will and won't do. Say yes, or suggest a change.

Useful phrases

I'd like to book you for Saturday.

How much do you charge for a full day?

I'm happy to walk with you, but I'd need to finish by five.

What's included in the price?

That's more than I'd planned to pay.

Let's agree the rules before we start.

Afterwards, tell the class: did you agree a deal, and was it fair for both people?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 D · 2 A · 3 B · 4 F · 5 C · 6 E · 7 H · 8 G

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 NG · 4 T · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 reluctant · 2 compensates · 3 negotiated · 4 abundant · 5 provokes · 6 obligation

6 Word forms

1 expectation · 2 transparency · 3 unethical · 4 loneliness · 5 unaffordable

7 Language focus

1 to · 2 of · 3 with · 4 on · 5 at

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