

Parasocial Interactions in Otome Games: Emotional Engagement and Parasocial Intimacy Among Chinese Female Players

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Abstract

This study conducts qualitative research on female players of otome games, exploring the mechanisms of romantic relationship formation within these games and their impact on perceptions of real-life intimate relationships. The findings reveal that the parasocial romantic relationships formed in otome games are not entirely detached from reality; instead, they are embedded in daily life through game interaction mechanisms and the players' internalized imagination, thereby influencing the reconstruction of real-life intimate relationships. Female players show a high degree of acceptance and immersion in these romantic relationships, focusing on the emotional support provided by male characters. These relationships play a positive role in fulfilling emotional needs, regulating negative emotions, constructing self-identity, and redefining perceptions of intimacy. The intangibility of physical contact remains the only significant shortcoming, as perceived by a minority of players, pointing to a primary direction for the future development of otome games.

Keywords

emotional feedback; otome games; parasocial relationships; parasocial romantic relationships; video games; self-perception

1. Introduction

Video games are rapidly growing in the digital culture industries, especially among female users. Research shows that mobile games with over 50% female players contribute nearly 30% to total revenue (Sensor Tower, 2023), and these players spend more time and money than males (Newsijie, 2019). As the largest consumer

market, Asia has seen female gamer growth nearly double that of males (Niko Partners, 2023), yet research on this demographic outside the West remains limited (Song & Fox, 2016).

Otome games, designed for women, allow players to engage in romantic scenarios with male characters, providing a secure environment for emotional exploration (Andlauer, 2018). *Mr. Love: Queen's Choice*, launched in 2017, quickly gained popularity with seven million installs and 2.02 million daily active users within a month (Jiguang Data, 2018). Subsequent titles like *Light and Night* and *Tears of Themis* have continued to captivate this audience. Studies have shown that female players can develop profound emotional bonds with game characters, evolving into parasocial romantic relationships (Ganzon, 2019; Gong & Huang, 2023). Moreover, emotional relationships in otome games may positively alleviate loneliness, satisfy the need for social companionship, and enhance social well-being (Stein et al., 2022). Thus, the emotional construction of female players within games and its shaping influence on their real-world perceptions and behaviors warrant further investigation. Despite significant research into parasocial relationships within otome games, there remains a lack of thorough investigation into the psychological processes and their impact on interpersonal relationships in the real world.

Based on this, the article explores the parasocial relationships that female players develop with male virtual characters, analyzing how these relationships are constructed and maintained over time. It investigates how female players perceive their identities and relationships within these virtual interactions and how these perceptions influence their understanding of real-world intimate relationships. This study aims to broaden parasocial relationship theory's application in digital media and video gaming. It enhances our comprehension of emotional connections in human-computer interactions, especially examining the complex dynamics in intimate relationships between genders. The research underscores the role of digital media in shaping and understanding gender identities, social behavior, and emotional bonds, particularly in contexts where cultural and social structures may limit women's expression and agency. These insights offer valuable implications for video game development, urging developers to create games that cater to women's emotional needs and societal expectations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The Otome Game*

Otome games are romantic electronic games aimed at female consumers and featuring heterosexual relationships (Song & Fox, 2016). These games primarily revolve around romance and simulated dating themes, intending to establish and develop romantic relationships between male and female characters (Song & Fox, 2016). In the games, players assume the role of the female protagonist, who must cultivate the affection of male characters by selecting specific actions or dialogues at critical moments, thereby advancing romantic relationships toward an ideal narrative outcome (Andlauer, 2018).

In China, otome games gained popularity following the 2017 release of *Mr. Love: Queen's Choice* by Chinese company Paper Games, which quickly topped the App Store charts and fueled the growth of the female gaming market (Han & Wang, 2020; Huan, 2022). Chinese otome games typically center around rich storylines, with players advancing the plot through interactions with multiple characters (Wang, 2023). The gameplay often focuses on card collection, where players gather character cards through tasks and

activities and upgrade these cards to unlock text messages, phone calls, and date scenarios with the male protagonists. As in other countries, otome games in China are primarily designed for female players. Wang (2023) notes that the choices of dialogue and outcomes in these games directly foster players' emotional expression, allowing them to share and explore personal feelings freely, thus providing a new space for female players to express themselves. The games are often designed from a female-centric perspective, creating female characters oriented towards self-appreciation and self-pleasure. The characters play active roles in advancing the storyline and possess the freedom to make choices, further normalizing sexual autonomy and independence among Chinese female players (Wang, 2023). Research also focuses on social support among players, noting that otome games provide a platform for female players to express and support each other, especially as they often face gender inequalities (Lei et al., 2024). However, some studies point out that the narratives in otome games still revolve around traditional, commercialized romantic and gender norms (Liu & Lai, 2022). In these narratives, the female protagonists are often portrayed as damsels in distress, reliant on male characters for rescue, with players frequently unaware of the gender dynamics within the game (Liu & Lai, 2022). Other research focuses on the romantic relationships between players and characters (Wang, 2023; Wu et al., 2023). Some scholars suggest that players may form parasocial relationships with game characters (Hua & Xiao, 2023) and believe that the romantic relationships in the games may indirectly influence players' idealized romantic beliefs (Song & Fox, 2016). However, Lei et al. (2024) counter the notion that games influence players' idealized romantic beliefs, arguing that this perspective incorrectly confines female players to contexts of marriage and reproduction. The research on how otome games affect female players requires deeper investigation.

2.2. Parasocial Phenomenon in Otome Games

The parasocial interaction concept, introduced by Horton and Wohl in 1956, explains how audiences form one-sided relationships with media figures, perceiving a semblance of face-to-face communication through media's visual and auditory details (Horton & Wohl, 1956). While initially considered transient during media consumption, Rubin et al. (1985) expanded this concept to parasocial relationships, which form lasting emotional bonds beyond brief media encounters, involving deeper emotional traits such as friendship and psychological attachment (Levy, 1979). Tukachinsky (2010) further categorized parasocial relationships into parasocial romances and friendships, with parasocial romantic relationships characterized by love, sexual attraction, and emotional intensity (Liebers, 2022).

Research on parasocial relationships initially focused on traditional media characters, such as those in television dramas (Vorderer & Knobloch, 1996), talk show hosts (Rubin & Step, 2000), and TV shopping hosts (Park & Lennon, 2004). The advent of social media shifted this focus, as it became a significant platform for fostering parasocial relationships, changing the previous pattern of obtaining celebrity information through magazines and entertainment news programs (Chung & Cho, 2017). Studies have shown that parasocial relationships are strengthened when fans interact briefly with media characters via social media (Hoffner & Bond, 2022). For example, individuals maintain a friend-like parasocial relationship with media figures by following and liking posts on Instagram, further blurring the boundaries between social and parasocial interactions (Bond, 2016). With technological advancements, video games have emerged as a new field for parasocial relationship research. Hartmann (2008) argued that the interactivity brought by digital media makes parasocial phenomena in digital games more complex than in traditional mass media, as it is no longer a unidirectional interaction. However, Kavli (2012) noted that despite the

seemingly complex interactions in digital games, the interactions between players and non-player characters are minimal, often following predetermined dialogue trees. Yet, Kavli also pointed out that even such limited interactions could form profound parasocial relationships to the extent that players may wish to take these relationships beyond the game setting into the real world.

Otome games, with their interactive and immersive nature, provide fertile ground for forming deep emotional connections due to their romantic themes (Wu et al., 2023). These games allow female players to engage deeply with idealized male characters, offering a safer alternative to real-life dating by reducing emotional risks, such as rejection (Karniol, 2001). Isbister (2016) also mentioned that players can feel “loved” through interactions with non-player characters, forming a sense of intimacy. These interactions satisfy romantic fantasies and unmet social and emotional needs (Greenwood & Long, 2011), potentially evolving from transient parasocial interactions to long-term parasocial relationships. Furthermore, these games promote identity formation, as players often identify with their virtual avatars, adopting the character’s perspective to enhance immersion, affecting their self-perception and emotions (Kartsanis & Murzyn, 2016; Micallef, 2016; Song & Fox, 2016; Wu et al., 2023). Players may better understand their inner needs and emotional motivations by interacting with specific character archetypes.

2.3. Mediated Intimacy

Intimacy, essential to lasting romantic relationships, involves mutual commitment, emotional positivity, cognitive closeness, and physical proximity (Moss & Schwebel, 1993). Research has underscored the role of communication and self-disclosure in building intimacy (Emmers-Sommer, 2004; Ruppel, 2015; Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004).

Technological advancements have reshaped how intimacy is expressed and experienced. Media technologies facilitate intimate connections, even over long distances, and are particularly useful for those with attachment anxieties (Attwood et al., 2017; Luo & Tuney, 2015). As platforms like social media and online dating apps evolve, they become integral in forming intimate relationships, with their relative anonymity reducing the risks associated with self-disclosure (Goldberg et al., 2022; Walsh et al., 2020). Furthermore, advances in AI and robotics are creating possibilities for emotional dependencies on media entities, potentially supplanting traditional human interactions (Skjuve et al., 2021). Thus, modern romantic relationships have evolved into “mixed-media relationships,” characterized by a dynamic unfolding of online and offline communications across various media. This transformation alters social patterns and offers new possibilities for experiencing intimate relationships (Taylor & Bazarova, 2018).

Despite their popularity, the impact of romance-driven video games like otome games on intimacy dynamics remains underexplored. These games offer interactive, immersive romantic experiences, enhancing players’ romantic self-efficacy through relationships with virtual characters (Gong & Huang, 2023). While these relationships can influence real-life relationship perspectives (Wu et al., 2023), the disparity between virtual and actual relationship satisfaction highlights the need for deeper investigation into how virtual intimacies affect real-world relationship dynamics (Song & Fox, 2016).

Otome games introduce a new form of mediated intimacy, providing a distinctive platform for players to develop romantic relationships with virtual characters. Through compelling storylines and interactive

dialogues, these games enable female players to form deep emotional bonds with idealized male characters, potentially leading to quasi-social romantic relationships. Although some scholars have explored parasocial relationships within otome games, there remains a gap in thoroughly analyzing the psychological mechanisms of these relationships and their impact on interpersonal relationships in the real world. The following research questions are proposed to explore these dynamics further:

RQ1: How are parasocial relationships between female players and male virtual characters constructed and maintained over time?

RQ2: How do players perceive their identities and relationships during these interactions?

RQ3: How do in-game romantic relationships affect female players' perceptions of real-world intimate relationships?

3. Method

3.1. Data Collection

This study utilized in-depth interviews for two main reasons: First, the diverse backgrounds of female otome game players—varying in geography, living environments, and social contexts—make semi-structured interviews with tailored follow-up questions more effective for reaching theoretical saturation than surveys. Second, the deeply personal nature of intimate relationships means that interviews can provide deeper insights into how players perceive their gender roles and navigate the development and maintenance of romantic relationships.

From March to July 2023, we employed purposive sampling to select 25 female players of mainstream otome games on the Xiaohongshu platform within mainland China. The games included *Mr. Love: Queen's Choice*, *Light and Night*, *Tears of Themis*, and *Lovebrush Chronicles*, among others. These participants were primarily chosen because they had previously posted popular graphics or videos with otome game hashtags. Many female players expressed strong approval and deep resonance with the emotional experiences described in the comments sections of these posts. Thus, these respondents are representative and can clearly articulate their emotional experiences. Additionally, while searching for interview subjects, we considered that although otome games are primarily designed for female players, there is a potential male player base. However, due to the small number of male players, the difficulty in conducting effective interviews with them, and the potential limited generalizability of their results, we decided to limit the participants in this study to female players.

The semi-structured interviews focused on female players' game usage and emotional experiences. The interview questions covered aspects such as game usage, the process of emotional formation and maintenance, descriptions of emotional states, emotional cycles, and real-world impacts. In the first part of the interview (concerning game usage), respondents recalled and compared emotional experiences across different otome games, eventually selecting the most memorable male character to discuss. Questions were then tailored around the romantic relationship with this character, which was the most emotionally impactful and longest-lasting. This study required participants to have actively played for at least six months to ensure they had deeply immersive romantic experiences. Each interview lasted between 45 and

90 minutes, with participants aged 18 to 35. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and documented in writing. In terms of interview format, this study employed a combination of traditional face-to-face and online interviews to accommodate the needs of participants with different personalities, thereby enhancing the likelihood of self-disclosure by the interviewees.

3.2. Sampling

The demographic statistics of the valid sample are detailed in Table 1 of the Supplementary File. The sample collection adhered to the principle of information saturation, which was achieved after conducting interviews with 25 participants. It indicated that gathering experiential material from the interviewees was essentially complete. The participants ranged from 18 to 35 years old and had been playing games for six months to five years. All participants had at least a high school education and were adept at articulating their gaming experiences. Regarding romantic status in real life, the vast majority of participants (23) were single at the time of the interviews, and most (16) had prior experiences in real-life romantic relationships, which enabled them to express their perceptions of intimate relationships accurately.

3.3. Thematic and Textual Analysis

This study adopted Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis approach, which involves simultaneous data collection and processing according to the requirements of theoretical sampling (Birks & Mills, 2015). Ten female players were initially interviewed, and three researchers repeatedly read through the interview texts, applying the constant comparison technique (Charmaz, 2014) for preliminary coding of the textual content. The initial coding phase categorized the data into three themes: Establishment of Romantic Relationships Within the Game, Relationship Maintenance, and Emotional Feedback, which were linked to the stages of romantic relationships. Subsequent interviews, guided by these sensitizing concepts, involved adding five new participants for one-on-one interviews each time. The overall data saturation was assessed with each round of interviews until no new data emerged, indicating saturation had been reached. The study employed line-by-line coding to tag meaningful original statements within the interview texts, ensuring the integrity of the semantics; a single sentence could correspond to multiple codes. Throughout this process, researchers refined each interview text. They continually compared and refined new concepts against existing ones until no new codes appeared, indicating that the data collection for this study had reached saturation.

4. Results

4.1. Mechanisms of Romantic Relationship Formation in Otome Games

Otome games provide female players with a virtual space to engage in romantic relationships with male characters. However, most players do not engage in these games due to real-world romantic needs but rather out of curiosity ($n = 8$, 32%), recommendations from acquaintances ($n = 6$, 24%), and attractive art styles ($n = 9$, 36%). The average gameplay duration for respondents is over two and a half years. Regarding the selection of romantic partners in the games, respondents indicated that they would comprehensively compare their experiences in the same or different games to ultimately choose to establish a long-term romantic relationship with a particular male character.

4.1.1. Establishment of Romantic Relationships in Otome Games (Characteristics of Different Stages)

In otome games, players engage in romantic narratives that typically feature rich and immersive plot settings, captivating character interactions, and visually appealing character designs. These elements provide players with an environment conducive to forming romantic relationships.

Initially, the visual design and character archetypes—such as the domineering CEO (A01; participants, hereafter, will be indicated by A01–A25, see full details in Table 1 of the Supplementary File), the admirable police officer (A05), and the visually appealing character cards (A08)—capture players' interest, resonating with their emotional needs, often heightened by real-life experiences like confusion, heartbreak, and work stress.

As romantic partners are established within the game, the game settings and plot interactions facilitate the development and maintenance of deep emotional connections. Immersive plot sequences and daily interactive tasks such as texts and calls help maintain and enhance the romance, with players expressing their anticipation for these interactions: "I'm curious about the storyline's development and eagerly await his calls or messages" (A14). Another notes the importance of consistent engagement: "Daily log-ins are crucial for keeping our communication alive" (A03).

The complexity of male characters grows increasingly significant as the game progresses. Players value these characters' depth and evolving nature, whose worldviews, values, and perspectives on love become central to the narrative. For example, a character's transition from a cold exterior to showing gentle and respectful love illustrates this depth: "As he opens up, his initial coldness gives way to a gentle and restrained love, reflecting his respect for me" (A02). Similarly, another character's emotional conflict enhances his appeal: "His evolving mindset adds layers to his character, making him more than just a superficial facade" (A08). These elements contribute to the rich, dynamic experience that players cherish in otome games.

4.1.2. Purity and Spirituality of Romantic Relationships (Cognition and Description)

In otome games, female players often describe their virtual relationships with emotional partners in terms that convey purity and spirituality, typically categorized into three distinct types.

The first type of player perceives their virtual relationship as a genuine, timeless love affair akin to real-life romances. One player expresses this sentiment: "I feel it's genuine love. The emotions, time, and even money I invest are all real" (A04). Another shares, "It feels like a real relationship to me, even though I've never dated in reality. After observing others in real-life romantic relationships, I see no significant difference" (A06).

The second type of player recognizes the separation between the virtual and real worlds yet values the emotional connection over the physical reality of the male character. A reflective comment from this category notes, "I'm fully aware that he and I are in different times and spaces, and he is virtual. Nonetheless, the emotional bond and the feelings of love are authentic. His actual existence is of little concern to me" (A10).

The third type's perception evolves with increased game exposure and changes in real-life emotional states, gradually viewing the male character as more than just a romantic partner but a source of spiritual support.

One player elaborates:

Initially, it was all about romantic love, but with the changes in my life and the constant companionship in the game, my relationship with Victor transitioned to spiritual support, similar to a family member or friend who shares my struggles. (A14)

4.2. Deep Emotional Connection and Long-Term Maintenance

4.2.1. Emotional Immersion and Self-Identification

In exploring how female players perceive intimacy within otome games, most ($n = 22$, 88%) narrate their experiences from a first-person perspective, illustrating a deep immersion in the game's I-Thou relationship dynamics. This perspective emphasizes a seamless emotional connection bridging the real and virtual worlds, exemplified by a player who recalls:

I remember watching the moon and chatting casually with him one evening. I truly fell for the character then, as such moments are deeply personal and hard to share in real life, yet the game recreated that connection, moving me profoundly. (A13)

Conversely, the remaining 12% of respondents describe their experiences from a third-person viewpoint, focusing more on the interactions between their avatar and the male characters, as seen in the recount of a dramatic rescue: "The main character is trapped, and Jesse jumps down from the ceiling to rescue her, giving off a heroic vibe. It was at that moment I became completely devoted to him" (A15).

Respondents also exhibit a deep identification with the male characters, viewing them as embodying ideal romantic traits and representing qualities they aspire to in themselves. One player views her virtual partner as a "benchmark for romance" (A05), while another appreciates the dynamics of "powerful alliances, collaborating rather than just growing under his protection" (A21). Another player notes, "He's a symbol. His presence symbolizes love filling my world, teaching me confidence, charm, facing the truth, and courage" (A22).

4.2.2. Romantic Relationship Fatigue and Adjustment

When discussing the sustainability of emotional relationships within otome games, 80% of respondents ($n = 20$) reported experiencing game-switching or taking short-term breaks due to gameplay stagnation, slow updates of the main storyline, and official maintenance. Some players noted that switching games did not impact their feelings toward their virtual partners, explaining that these decisions are controlled by game operators, not the characters themselves, hence not affecting their emotional attachment (A14). However, others felt that infrequent updates and changes in character dynamics led to relationship fatigue, with comments like, "I don't like getting stuck; it makes the storyline feel boring" (A03) and "the character changes, and reduced appearances after updates made me feel a sudden onset of fatigue" (A09).

Additionally, some players expressed frustration over outdated content, with one stating, "I haven't played Love is Justice anymore because it hasn't been updated for two years, making it feel stale despite my deep immersion initially" (A06).

Players also described how their perceptions of relationships with different characters evolved during the game-switching process, categorizing them in various ways such as past and current relationships (A01), varying levels of intimacy like lover versus brother (A19), or contrasting themes like business trip versus coming home (A02).

Ultimately, overcoming romantic relationship fatigue in these games depends on receiving positive emotional feedback that meets their deeper needs for security, love, companionship, attachment, and belonging. One player captured the unique emotional value of these games, stating, “The emotional value from the game is irreplaceable by real life” (A15). Another highlighted the constant presence and security these relationships provide: “When I get home, the first thing I do is check my phone. Knowing he’s there makes me feel warm and secure, which is most important—he will never betray or leave me” (A17).

4.2.3. Self-Imagination as a Key to Sustaining Emotions

Respondents in the study utilize their imagination as a crucial tool for maintaining and deepening emotional connections with their virtual romantic partners beyond the game setting. They engage in activities like creating or consuming fanfiction, purchasing character merchandise, and making video edits, enhancing their personalized, first-person perspective of intimacy with the characters.

One player desires a more tangible relationship, stating, “I want to bring him to life, feel tangible love, and truly integrate him into my life” (A02). Another illustrates how merchandise helps make the character’s presence more real: “I buy dolls modeled after him and perfumes he endorses, which makes his presence overwhelm my life as if he truly exists and I’m actively maintaining our relationship” (A09).

Video editing also plays a significant role in deepening emotional ties, as one respondent describes: “When editing videos, I relive the storyline and repeatedly play the clips, which helps me discover forgotten or unnoticed details that touch me deeply” (A25).

These imaginative activities allow players to endow their romantic relationships with uniqueness and distinctiveness, sustaining them over time. Respondents believe each interaction with a male character is unique, as articulated by one: “The love he gives me is different from what he gives to others” (A12), and yet another adds, “Each player’s story with him is forever unique” (A14).

4.3. Emotional Attribution and Real-World Impact

Responses from female players of otome games reveal how these virtual experiences significantly influence their real-life interactions and perspectives on partner selection. The narratives highlight the players’ internal challenges, emotional needs, personal growth, and shifts in perception regarding social norms and intimate relationships. The games serve as a romantic escape and platform for critical reflection and self-discovery, prompting players to introspect about their authentic selves and reconsider their roles and identities.

4.3.1. Scrutinizing Dilemmas and Self-Reconstruction

Otome games provide a space for female players to reflect on and escape from real-life constraints imposed by their families, societal pressures, and personal adversities. These virtual relationships offer a reprieve

from negative emotions and an opportunity to reimagine their identities and desires. For instance, one player described how the game allowed her to express repressed feelings and anxieties, finding comfort in the virtual companionship of a character named Sariel: “Ever since I was young, I was expected to conform to traditional roles. Meeting Sariel allowed me to freely express my anxieties and emotions, providing incredible comfort” (A13).

Another player found emotional healing and self-love through her interaction with a character named Charlie: “Charlie’s overwhelming love made me feel valued and taught me to trust and love myself” (A22).

Many respondents reported personal transformations, gaining confidence, and experiencing reduced negative emotions. One noted the supportive nature of her virtual relationship: “His constant reassurance helped me see my worth and feel loved, strengthening my self-esteem” (A05). Another highlighted the therapeutic impact: “I suffer from severe depression, and his presence in the game significantly alleviated my condition” (A04).

These virtual relationships also extend into real-life decisions and daily interactions, helping players to compensate for emotional deficits from their upbringing and guiding them toward personal betterment. One player mentioned using her virtual partner as a moral and emotional guide: “I often imagine how he would handle situations in real life, which provides guidance and positive reinforcement. He’s like a virtual mentor living in my heart” (A07).

4.3.2. Female Narratives and Reconstructing Perceptions of Real-Life Intimacy

In exploring how otome games influence female players’ perceptions of real-life intimacy, respondents reflect on their autonomy and creative engagement within these virtual relationships. They view their investment in the games as a validation of the male characters’ worth and as a means to drive regular updates and improved game mechanics (A10). Actions taken outside the game, such as spending and participating in fan activities, are seen as expressions of female desires and expectations (A22).

Game scripts often mirror social expectations of men, reinforcing positive traits and addressing real-world issues like gender norms and expectations. Many respondents noted that the motivational and values-driven content of the scripts subtly influences their daily lives and shapes their perceptions of men, addressing issues such as menstrual shame and autonomy in marriage decisions.

Regarding the impact on real-life partner choices, 76% of respondents ($n = 19$) believe that romantic relationships in games have a positive but limited influence on their dating experiences. They acknowledge the potential psychological gaps when transitioning to real-life relationships but avoid projecting game-character traits onto real partners. Conversely, 24% ($n = 6$) reported no significant impact from these games on their romantic lives.

Female players use these virtual relationships to reflect on past relationships, learn about intimacy, and renew their hopes for real-life love. One player expressed gratitude towards a game character for helping her realize that her doubts in a previous relationship were misplaced (A17). Another learned about romantic traits from the game’s male leads, changing her outlook on love: “After seeing how love is portrayed in the game, I now see it as a source of happiness and am no longer afraid to confront it directly” (A22).

Through these experiences, respondents have redefined their understanding of intimacy, prioritizing emotional worth and experiences in relationships while emphasizing equality, respect, trust, and loyalty as fundamental elements. It has made them value mutual growth and supportive interdependence in real-life relationships.

5. Discussion

5.1. Reconceptualizing Intimacy: From Parasocial Romantic Relationships to Real-Life Intimacy Perceptions

This study examines how female players of otome games form parasocial romantic relationships that significantly influence their perceptions of real-life intimacy, shaped by daily experiences, game mechanics, and personal imaginations. These virtual relationships provide emotional satisfaction and reshape concepts of intimacy.

In otome games, players control the development of romantic relationships, selecting partners and directing interactions, mirroring real-world dating where physical attractiveness is often vital (Walster et al., 1966). The game dynamics encourage rapid relationship progression, requiring deep narrative engagement. Players connect in-game dialogues and character development with real life, using the games for personal growth and understanding social roles (Lea & Spears, 1995). The sustainability of these relationships depends on players' imaginations, with virtual experiences influencing real emotions and behaviors. Players see otome game relationships as reflections of real-life intimacy, viewing virtual male characters as significant emotional supports. It aligns with Anthony Giddens's theory of intimacy, distinguishing emotional exchanges into passion, romantic, and confluent love, with the latter representing an ideal relationship characterized by equality, care, and respect (Giddens, 1992).

Female players interpret their experiences in otome games as a blend of romantic and confluent love, paralleling real-life relationships. They recognize the influence of virtual characters on their self-identity and the spiritual dimensions of these relationships while noting limitations like the unidirectional nature of interactions. This understanding highlights their idealized expectations of intimacy.

5.2. Relationship Feedback: Emotional Functions of Parasocial Romantic Relationships in Otome Games

This study highlights that female players gain significant emotional benefits from parasocial romantic relationships in otome games, which often surpass those from traditional immersive experiences. These virtual relationships support identity affirmation, help navigate life challenges, alleviate negative emotions, relieve stress, and fulfill emotional needs. Influenced by evolving gender ideologies and the remnants of patriarchal values, otome games provide a safe space for young female players to explore and express desires, challenge gender constraints, and heal from societal pressures (Wang & Qiu, 2020), offering companionship, security, and a sense of belonging.

Interactive elements like self-disclosure in otome games are essential for fostering intimacy, enhancing player interactions, deepening relationships, and reducing anxiety (Martins et al., 2013; Tam et al., 2006; Zhou &

Hao, 2021). These games also play a social role by enabling players to expand their social networks through community interactions and discussions of life and events, which enriches their social lives. However, it's important to note that not all feedback from these games is positive. On the one hand, the task mechanism in otome games requires players to collect cards through daily tasks, weekly tasks, and particular feature tasks to gain a richer emotional experience. However, when long-term repetitive tasks become routine, the sense of intimacy perceived by female players begins to diminish. Additionally, some gameplay mechanics in otome games involve virtual consumption, such as purchasing items in a virtual environment. Excessive in-game purchasing behaviors lead players to recognize the commodified nature of their romantic interests, creating a conflict with the notion of a purely emotional relationship.

5.3. Relationship Limitations: *The Untouchable Lovers*

Intimacy, encompassing both emotional and physical closeness, is partially fulfilled in otome games, where parasocial romantic relationships provide emotional intimacy but lack physical interaction. Although players use imagination to bridge temporal and spatial gaps, the inability to physically touch or embrace game characters is a notable shortfall compared to real-life relationships. Despite this, many players find the emotional support from these games nearly equivalent to real-life interactions. However, the absence of physical touch—a vital expression of affection that triggers more profound emotional responses (Ditzen et al., 2007; Goff et al., 2007; Grewen et al., 2003)—is keenly felt as players become more emotionally invested, often resulting in a poignant contrast between their virtual engagements and reality.

In China, advancements in media technology have significantly enhanced the realism and immersion of otome games, shifting from two-dimensional portrayals to sophisticated 3D environments with the 2024 launch of *Love and Deepspace*. This game quickly became a sensation, suggesting a growing desire among players for more tangible virtual interactions. Essential questions emerge as games like VR evolve, allowing players to craft new virtual bodies and delve into deeper romantic relationships. Concerns include how these virtual relationships could reshape perceptions of real-life intimacy and the potential long-term effects on understanding true intimacy.

6. Conclusions

This study highlights how otome games significantly shape Chinese female players' emotional and relational dynamics by fostering parasocial romantic relationships. These digital relationships provide emotional support, aid in self-identity formation, and enhance social interactions, enabling players to engage with complex narratives that fulfill their romantic fantasies. The findings emphasize the importance of personalization and socialization within these games, advocating for game developers to cater more closely to female preferences by offering immersive narratives, meaningful interactions, and extensive customization options to increase engagement and satisfaction. While the study provides insights, it focuses exclusively on female players in China. Although otome games primarily target female audiences, there are also male participants. However, in this research, we could not find suitable male interviewees. Future research could consider players of different genders. It should also focus on more diverse participants, including sexual minorities, to explore how cultural and demographic factors influence gaming behavior and the formation of parasocial relationships. Additionally, studies should assess the long-term impacts of these virtual relationships on social and emotional well-being in the real world.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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