

Emotional Utopia or Distortion in Spouse Selection - A Study of Otome Game Female Players' Satisfaction with Men of the Same Group Post-print

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Abstract

“Light and Night,” “For All Time,” “Mr. Love: Queen’s Choice,” and other otome games are gradually filling the gap in the women’s mobile gaming market, providing female players with a strong sense of immersion and companionship. However, this phenomenon also raises certain questions: while these games satisfy female players’ romantic fantasies, some players begin to develop idealized expectations regarding relationships and unconsciously compare real-life men with male virtual characters in the games. In this study, through in-depth interviews, we found that virtual lovers fulfill players’ real-life emotional deficits and relationship needs to a certain extent, and shape female players’ idealized expectations for relationships. Nevertheless, the majority of female players’ perceptions of marriage are not influenced by the games, as female players do not compare their real-life male counterparts with male virtual characters in the games. Furthermore, we discovered that the depth of parasocial relationships between female players and virtual male characters in the games does not have an absolute influence on women’s satisfaction with real-life men in the same group.

Full Text

Emotional Utopia or Distortion in Spouse Selection? A Study of Otome Game Female Players’ Satisfaction with Men

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Abstract

“Light and Night,” “For All Time,” “Mr. Love: Queen’s Choice,” and other otome games have gradually filled the gap in the women’s mobile gaming market, providing female players with a strong sense of immersion and companionship. However, this phenomenon raises important questions: while these games satisfy female players’ romantic fantasies, do they also lead some women to develop idealized expectations about relationships and unconsciously compare real-life men with male virtual characters? Through in-depth interviews, this study finds that virtual lovers do fill players’ real-life emotional deficits and relationship needs to some extent, shaping idealized expectations for relationships. However, the majority of female players’ perceptions of marriage are not influenced by these games, as they do not systematically compare real-life men with virtual characters. Moreover, the depth of parasocial relationships between female players and virtual male characters does not absolutely influence women’s satisfaction with real-life men.

Keywords: parasocial relations, media dependence, quasi-social interactions, otome game

1.1 Background of the Study

The gaming industry in the Internet era has matured considerably, with female users representing a rapidly growing demographic. At the end of 2017, “Mr. Love: Queen’s Choice” launched as China’s first otome game, generating massive discussion and significant economic returns. Subsequently, titles such as “Light and Night,” “For All Time,” and “Tears of Themis” have disrupted the male-dominated gaming market, establishing female-oriented games as an important market segment. These games clearly satisfy women’s fantasies and demands for romance, yet scholars have raised concerns that they may foster unrealistic relationship expectations, causing players to unconsciously compare real men with virtual characters and consequently reducing their satisfaction with real-life partners. In light of rising divorce rates and declining fertility in contemporary society, we must ask: what is driving these phenomena? Are games truly responsible? Do they genuinely affect female players’ views on marriage? Do virtual characters diminish women’s satisfaction with real men? Can long-term immersion in otome games create unrealistic and idealized expectations for real-life relationships?

2.1 Literature Review of Otome Games

Otome games represent a specialized category within female-oriented games. Historically, the gaming market has been dominated by male players, but the emergence of female-oriented games with their substantial economic impact has made the female market impossible to ignore. These games feature design aesthetics and styles distinctly different from male-oriented titles.

In 2018, Yu'er argued in "Game of 'Her Era'" that the success of female-oriented mobile games depends on world-building, narrative design, exquisite artwork, and engaging gameplay mechanics, suggesting that hits like "Mr. Love: Queen's Choice" were no accident. In 2022, Zhang Xueying and Chen Ziyang examined how "paper men" (virtual characters) capture female users through emotional communication in female-oriented games, proposing that these games provide emotional satisfaction and romantic reverie for female consumers. In 2020, scholar Yao Yao noted in "The Development Strategy of Female Games from Chengguang Games" that female players' importance is widely recognized in the international gaming market, and that their rising numbers and spending power have elevated their influence. In 2022, Chen Changkai and Hu Xinzhe characterized otome games as a "landscape window" into female players' views on marriage, arguing that these games reveal young women's pursuit of equal status, positive interaction, and emotional support in intimate relationships, while also demonstrating how women's growing sense of autonomy strengthens their commitment to personal independence and self-growth.

2.2 Literature Review of Quasi-Social Interaction

The concept of "quasi-social interaction" was introduced by Horton and Wall in 1956 to describe audiences' imaginary emotional attachments to media characters through continued television viewing. This relationship resembles but differs from real social interaction, hence the "quasi" designation. Long-term immersion in female-oriented games has attracted multi-perspective research attention, with virtual characters forming quasi-social relationships with female players.

In 2021, scholar Guo Qin explored fan cults and their multi-causal psychological mechanisms, finding that individuals immersed in quasi-social interactions experience similar emotions to real social interactions—from unfamiliarity to intimacy. However, while real social interaction involves two-way, equal communication, quasi-social interaction is one-way and mediated. Entertainment stars, for example, can cultivate personas that deepen audience fantasies of interaction. In 2017, Quan Yan examined trust alienation in social networks in the post-truth era, characterizing quasi-social relationships as interpersonal connections for audiences but control mechanisms for media characters facing anonymous collectives. This hierarchical communication structure renders parasocial phenomena illusory, beginning and ending with performance. In 2022, Cheng Bo analyzed the non-reciprocal nature of parasocial interaction from a meta-perspective, proposing that media figures are central actors who dominate the formation of parasocial relationships by inducing target audiences to create imaginary friendships through role imitation.

2.3 Problem Formulation

A search of academic literature reveals only ten papers related to “otome game,” indicating that domestic research on this topic remains underdeveloped. Scholarship on female-oriented games is still in its infancy, lacking multi-perspective analysis. Most existing literature focuses on marketing strategies, reasons for popularity, and influences on female players’ views of marriage, but lacks in-depth psychological analysis of user changes or impacts on real-life mate selection. This paper addresses whether long-term immersion in otome games truly influences female players and whether women’s satisfaction with real-life men is genuinely related to game immersion levels.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs in-depth interviews to answer two key questions: Do otome games genuinely affect female players’ views on marriage? Do virtual characters make women less satisfied with real-life men?

3.1.1 Interview Outline Development

The interview protocol comprised three sections. The first collected basic demographic information including age, gender, and occupation. The second transformed research questions into interview questions, exploring participants’ views on otome games and their specific gaming experiences. The third prepared follow-up questions for deeper probing.

Throughout the research, the investigator carefully avoided four ethical violations highlighted by scholar Alan Brightman: (1) causing harm to participants; (2) failing to obtain informed consent; (3) invading participants’ privacy; and (4) deceiving participants. Additionally, interviewees could remain silent or withdraw at any time if they encountered uncomfortable questions. Any materials participants requested not be disclosed were excluded from the study.

3.2.2 Selection of Interviewees

This study conducted 15-minute semi-structured in-depth interviews with ten otome game users aged 15-25. Interviews took place between January and February 2023. Participants included college students, high school students, freelancers, and other professionals recruited through social networks. Following qualitative research’s principle of maximum variation sampling, data collection concluded after the tenth interview, by which point sufficient data had been gathered to answer the research questions. Respondents varied in age, occupation, education level, and geographic location, ensuring low homogeneity.

Interviews were conducted via WeChat text chat, producing 12,000 words of verbatim transcripts that were analyzed by the author. Basic participant information is presented in .

4. Research Findings and Discussion

When examining participants’ “marriage perceptions” and “game immersion and satisfaction with real-life men,” we discovered no necessary correlation between game immersion and satisfaction with men. Female players with high immersion did not report reduced satisfaction with real-life men because of gaming. Similarly, most highly immersed players did not develop unrealistic expectations about marriage from gameplay.

4.1 Otome Games Meet Female Players’ Emotional Needs

Interviews with ten players revealed that 90% reported otome games partially fill emotional voids in their real lives, providing a form of Tachiban-style emotional compensation. Horton and Wall’s 1956 concept of “quasi-social interaction”—describing audiences’ imaginary emotional attachments to media characters—perfectly characterizes the relationships female players form with virtual lovers. Since their introduction, otome games have attracted large female audiences through beautiful artwork, but retention depends on more than graphics: narrative design is crucial. Virtual lovers in these games are gentle and considerate, offering emotional value that real-life men often cannot provide. Many players noted that the care, warmth, respect, and tolerance shown by virtual lovers are precisely what real men lack, as reflected in daily details and widespread social news coverage.

Paradoxically, playing otome games also teaches women about handling real-life relationships. Unlike programmed game scenarios, modern women face stressful work lives and complex emotional problems. The “paper man” setting provides emotional value, making women more willing to invest time in virtual relationships than navigate real-life complexities. In today’s new media environment with explosive information growth, the rapid spread of negative social news also shapes women’s perceptions.

4.2 Games Do Not Directly Affect Women’s Satisfaction with Men

While satisfying emotional needs, otome games create stereotypes about men and marriage within their mimetic environments. Interviews revealed that some underage players, exposed to otome games before forming mature marriage concepts, developed unrealistic fantasies—believing men should be gentle saviors, for instance. However, socialization is influenced not only by media but also by primary and sub-groups in people’s social networks, leading these players to adjust their unrealistic expectations after developing more realistic views.

Notably, some women’s low satisfaction with men stems not from otome games but from actual real-life interactions with men. Furthermore, female players with real-life partners did not report disappointment in their partners due to virtual lovers’ perfection, suggesting otome games do not decisively shape women’s perceptions of men.

News reports about gender conflicts also create an environmentalized “distrust of men” through media trigger effects. Following events like the shocking Hangzhou wife-murder case and the Thai cliff incident involving a pregnant woman, influential users have advocated “no marriage, no children, keep women safe” in open cyberspace. This one-sided guidance particularly affects underage women with limited life experience, aggravating spirals of silence like “male widowhood.”

However, adult players’ interview responses differed significantly from underage players. Contrary to rejecting men, some adult female players expressed eagerness for future partners. Adult players also adopted more dialectical, comprehensive views of otome games’ effects and more objective perceptions of real men, attributable to their education, social experience, and maturity. Some underage players held relatively extreme views, lacking real emotional experience while being exposed to cumulative reports of marital misfortunes, reducing their satisfaction with men. Though this group exists, they represent a minority, and these effects cannot be simplistically attributed to otome games themselves.

4.3 Otome Games Reinforce Existing Dissatisfied Attitudes Toward Men

Paul Lazarsfeld’s Erie County political election survey introduced the IPP index and demonstrated that media have limited power to change audience attitudes, typically reinforcing pre-existing positions. In this study, over half of interviewed women reported varying degrees of dislike or fear toward men. Through in-depth discussion, we found these players held misandrist feelings before encountering otome games, with gaming further reinforcing their rejection. The root causes closely relate to their real-life experiences. With pre-existing disapproval of men, these women encounter stark contrasts between game characters and real-life counterparts, strengthening their dissatisfaction.

Further analysis revealed most of these players were either minors or women from traumatic family backgrounds who had never established correct or complete marriage concepts. Consequently, their views on men become more extreme under otome games’ influence. Helping these women develop healthy marriage perspectives could potentially modify their attitudes toward men.

5.1 Otome Games Are Not the Primary Cause of Women’s Dissatisfaction with Men

From a market perspective, the early gaming industry catered predominantly to male players, so production design flowed from consumer demand to manufacturing biased toward male preferences. Otome games originated in Japan, initially designed for male players. Only with rising women’s consumption power did producers develop female-oriented games like otome games to meet women’s expectations.

This study finds that declining satisfaction with men is not entirely caused by game exposure. Real-life dissatisfaction correlates more closely with women's age, education level, and social experience. As game recipients, players selectively understand and engage with male images and romantic interactions based on their experience domains, education, and economic status. Thus, game players are not passive targets as suggested by magic bullet theory; instead, they actively make selective interpretations. In short, otome games do not decisively influence how female players view men.

5.2 Otome Games Are Not a Direct Cause of Mate Selection Aberrations

Interview results show that adult players with healthy marriage outlooks do not develop aberrant spouse selection criteria from gaming. In today's digital communication era of immersive screen consumption, users are dynamic agents who clearly distinguish between reality and games. They neither seek real-life partners based entirely on game characters nor develop cognitive prejudice against men solely from exposure to perfect virtual characters.

Meanwhile, women's age, education, economic status, and other factors mediate their acceptance of marriage concepts presented in games. As an important modern information and entertainment source, games should carry social responsibility alongside profit motives. Facing inexperienced minors, developers should implement anti-addiction mechanisms and restrict playtime and content. Regulatory agencies should strengthen market supervision to build healthy gaming platforms. As consumers, female players should enhance their media literacy, dialectically viewing real men and marriage relationships while using games for stress relief.

Contemporary women's mate selection criteria reflect their era, with each generation holding different partner requirements. In today's frothy communication environment, individuals receive massive information, fostering open and tolerant concepts. Whether love strategy games like otome games subtly influence selection criteria remains a question worthy of continued analysis.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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