Interpretation of the Path of the Exportation of Japanese Popular Entertainment Products from the Perspective of Cross-Cultural Communication

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Abstract: The Otome game has received widespread attention and popularity among Chinese and Japanese female players. However, the research on cross-cultural communication of Otome games is still insufficient in the academic community. This paper uses questionnaire surveys and interviews, to get female consumers' satisfaction with different characteristics of Chinese and Japanese Otome games. This paper compares and analyzes the differences between Chinese and Japanese Otome games. The results show that, based on the differences between Chinese and Japanese cultures, the game texts of the Otome game, such as the protagonist's personality, age, and interaction pattern, have undergone significant localization when spread from Japan to China, to satisfy Chinese audiences. Based on this, this paper proposes the following suggestions: cultural products should be localized according to the local culture while retaining some original features during cross-cultural communication, which is beneficial for both media companies and consumers to enjoy commercial and intrinsic value.

Keywords: Otome Game, Japanese and Chinese Culture, Cross-Cultural Communication, Localization

1.   Introduction

Because of the structural pressure faced during the period of social transformation, a subculture of "lying flat" with "weak resistance" has formed among young people [1]. The main characteristic of Generation Z, who are embracing this subculture trend, is to withdraw from the intense social competition and avoid active socializing. The nihilistic value has led to an unprecedented surge in their spiritual needs as consumers, resulting in the rapid development of online entertainment products. On the other hand, with the gradual rise of Feminism, the impact of Japanese culture, and many other factors mentioned above, the Chinese Otome game market has emerged. An Otome game is a media product composed of characters, stories, CG, music, and dubbings [2]. It takes a female character as the protagonist, and players can control her to develop romantic relationships with two or more male NPC characters, satisfying women's expectations for ideal romantic relationships.

In 1994, Japan released the world's first Otome game "Angelique". Japan served as the birthplace of the Otome game and released numerous classic IPs that players loved. However, the Japanese

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Otome game market is not as prosperous as before. In contrast, a Chinese company called 'Papergames' has launched an Otome game called "Love and Deepspace". This game immediately topped the Japanese iOS total download ranking. According to Sensor Tower's data, "Love and Deepspace" had over 5.4 million downloads in less than two weeks, making Japan become its largest overseas revenue market. This is an important cross-cultural communication phenomenon of cultural and entertainment products.

At present, research on Otome games at home and abroad mainly starts from two aspects: feminist perspective and technological application. In fact, as a phenomenal event, the cross-cultural communication of the Otome game is influenced by the cultures of two countries. Taking this event as a starting point, the innovation of this paper is to delve into the social mechanisms and operational logic of "decoding - cognitive dissonance - recoding - decoding" behind the event. This paper analyzes the topic from the perspective of localization, that is, when cultural products are disseminated across cultures, appropriate localization strategies are adopted to integrate into the local culture better. This is a strategic coordination method for the local environment, which merges one's own culture with the local one [3]. This paper also uses the "Encoding - Decoding" theory of Stuart Hall, which means that cultural producers transform the conveyed information, intentions, etc. into codes with specific rules and regulations. Then, the audience interprets the codes based on their group position and decoding context [4]. This paper aims to answer the following three questions.

Q1: Have Japanese Otome games experienced localization after being introduced to the Chinese market?

Q2: What kind of localization did Japanese Otome games experience after being introduced to the Chinese market?

Q3: From the perspective of cross-cultural communication theory, what do Japanese Otome games experienced localization in China reflect?

2. Method

2.1. Questionnaire Survey

This paper used a questionnaire survey method to quantitatively obtain the preferences of Chinese female players towards various typical features of Chinese and Japanese Otome games. The preparation of the questionnaire is based on the typical characteristics of Chinese and Japanese Otome games identified and summarized after immersive participation in these games. The questionnaire includes multiple dimensions, including the protagonist's personality, plot design, protagonist's age, protagonist's education experience, game experience, consumption pattern, etc. It is presented in two types of questions: 5-point Likert scale questions and multiple choice questions, to quantify the degree of players' preference. This paper used snowball sampling to distribute questionnaires to Chinese female players who have played the Otome games and collected 70 valid questionnaires in total.

2.2. Result

From the perspective of character traits, as in Table 1, the acceptance rate of Japanese male protagonist' characteristics like cheating on the female protagonist, being much older than the female protagonist, and having rich sexual experience were all below 2.5 points, which was in low value. Besides, the plots such as the Japanese game male protagonist' saves the female protagonist's life and makes all decisions for the female protagonist; as well as the characteristics of Japanese female protagonist, such as being gentle and weak, and being a housewife, the average scores of the interviewees were relatively low, about 1.9 points. It can be seen that Chinese female consumers are extremely dissatisfied with the female protagonist's portrayal of depending on her husband and having no ideological opinions. However, when faced with the characteristics of the female protagonist

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actively pursuing the male protagonist, becoming a superwoman in the workplace, as well as the male protagonist putting the female protagonist in the first place in everything they do, the interviewees were quite satisfied, and the average score increased significantly to about 3.5. In terms of academic qualifications, 98.57% of the interviewees said that they hoped the male protagonist had a bachelor's degree or above, and 74.29% of them hoped that the male protagonist had a master's or doctoral degree.

Table 1: 5-point Likert scale of interviewees' attitudes.

Characteristic	Average score
Male protagonist saves female protagonist' life	1.9
Male protagonist cheats on the female protagonist	1.41
Male protagonist drops out of school	2.57
Over 12 years age difference between two protagonists	2.29
Male protagonist has sexual experience before	2.47
Male protagonist makes all decisions for female protagonist	1.24
Male protagonist put the female protagonist in the first place	3.36
A housewife female protagonist	1.27
Female protagonist has a weak personality	1.93
Female protagonist is a superwoman	3.71
Female protagonist makes the first move when falling in love	3.44

Therefore, original Japanese otomo games' text settings did not meet the expectations of Chinese players, and the localizations of Chinese otomo games also verified this phenomenon. Chinese Otomo games also shortened the age gap between male protagonist and female protagonist and created pure and highly educated male protagonists. The female protagonists also tend to control their destinies positively. Chinese Otomo games make the localization of protagonists and plots to be in line with the Chinese consumers' concepts of mate selection.

According to the questionnaire results, the consumer group of Otomo games is concentrated in women aged 18-25, and the number of people who can spend 100 yuan or less on games per month accounted for 52.86% of the sample. The results prove that the audience of Otomo games tends to be younger, and is more accustomed to frequent and small-volume consumption. Therefore, instead of choosing a one-time buyout system for Japanese Otomo games, which reach several hundred yuan, Chinese Otomo games prefer to monthly purchase system, which promotes players' continuous consumption in small quantities and multiple times for 30-60 yuan per month.

31% of the interviewees tended to put themselves into the character's perspective when playing Otomo games, allowing their bodies to be virtually present. In their technologically coupled bodies, they experience intimacy with virtual male characters in interactive plots that are unlocked through repeated card draws. Chen Yanran's research shows that through repeated experiences, players can establish lasting emotional connections with virtual characters [5]. In addition, according to market research, the retention rate of female players is much higher than that of male players, and their financial investment is 31% higher [6]. This shows that the target group of Otomo games has high stickiness and can be converted, creating huge profits for Otomo games.

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3.   Factor Analysis

This paper adopts the event-structure theory as its theoretical framework. This theory emphasizes how events change structures, and studies how social structures are reproduced in the cultural domain to form structured dynamic processes, thus breaking down binary oppositions such as event vs. structure, and tradition vs. modernity [7]. This paper takes the popularity of Otome games in China as an event, and takes off from the perspectives of consumers and mediators, and examines the necessity of localizing Japanese Otome games in China from the social-cultural dimensions, such as gender, education, and language.

3.1.   Consumer Factor

One of the reasons for the localization of Japanese Otome games is the cultural difference between Japanese and Chinese consumer groups. The traditional female protagonists of Japanese Otome games are often criticized for being indecisive and going with the flow, while their traditional feminine traits such as being skilled in cooking are instead seen as a strategy to attract men [8]. However, Chinese society in the 21st century has been greatly influenced by the rise of female economic power and the baptism of gender movements, and consumers' expectations of female characters are no longer limited to the discipline of traditional femininity.

On the other hand, compared with the male characters in Japanese Otome games who are decisive, have distinct personality flaws, and have obvious power imbalances with the female protagonists, the male protagonists in Chinese Otome games respect women as a premise, appear perfect, and flawless on the surface, but occasionally reveal a vulnerable side, which is a fusion of the current female players' needs and traditional masculinity. Many female players would consider these male characters to have feminine qualities and become a kind of modified male chauvinism [8].

Additionally, Chinese society places a strong emphasis on the pursuit and reverence of academic qualifications, whereas Japanese society prioritizes craftsmanship. Regardless of industry, there is little disparity in salary and status among employees at the same level, with no culture of academic qualification worship. As a result, male protagonists from Chinese Otome games have largely eliminated the dropout experience characteristic and tend to be highly educated, aligning more closely with the preferences of Chinese consumers in mate selection.

Furthermore, East Asia has long been characterized by a culture of shame, which exerts significant biological influence [9]. Japan's historical roots contribute to its openness and tolerance towards sexual culture, highlighting distinct differences between Chinese and Japanese societies in terms of mate selection concepts.

Localized improvements to plotlines and character settings have led to a notable increase in satisfaction among Chinese female consumers. Negative feedback of traditional Japanese Otome games from Chinese consumers has prompted creative adjustments to the Otome games during localization processes. These changes in Otome game reflect various cultural trends and the structure of Chinese society has changed in modern times.

3.2.   Mediator Factor

The second reason for the localization of Japanese Otome games is the difference between Chinese and Japanese mediators. According to a CEDEC survey, 85.6 percent of Japanese game developers are male [10]. The Japanese game ecosystem is dominated by men. Although the Otome game is a type where the consumer group is women, its characterization is modeled after gal games designed for men. The lack of female players and developers makes the gender cultural connotations in-game symbols still follow a strong patriarchal color, which separates the female awakening consciousness

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from the Yamato Nadeshiko presented in the text of the game, thus leading to discontent among Chinese female consumers [8].

In addition, the Japanese pop culture industry generally has the problem of introversion, the big factory is committed to continuing the series of works to expand the domestic influence of IP but did not realize the limited scale of the existing domestic market, resulting in the lack of innovation in the market of B female games. In contrast, the media companies that bring Otome games to China intersperse Chinese cultural elements into the game text, which is in essence a moderate defamiliarization of foreign culture, and increases the sense of surprise that Japanese players gain [11]. For example, Chinese eating habits such as eating wontons, and locust flower cakes, and the tradition of sending banners in ceremonial countries can arouse the curiosity of overseas players, thus promoting cultural export.

Besides, Chinese mediators encode their lines according to different language cultures, making decoding easier for players from overseas. For example, in Love and Deepspace, the Chinese version of the same line is "far away, close at hand", while the Japanese version combines cultural idioms to translate the sentence as "the moon is beautiful tonight", which is a popular expression of "I love you" in Japan. The two ways of expressing love are in line with the high-context culture of China and Japan, which values implicitness. The creative coding has contributed to the game's popularity in both China and Japan.

Last but not least, Chinese mediators design game mechanics based on the spending power of the target consumer. Players are required to make small monthly payments for more virtual currency and use this currency to draw cards, to unlock more love stories. The male protagonist's emotional domestication of consumers along with the gacha mechanism, meets the demand for consumer stickiness in China. At the same time, it promotes the mediators to further improve the player's control over the female protagonist's attributes (name, personality, clothing), so that players can better substitute themselves, and finally achieve long-term stable purchasing. Otome games hit as an event, fuels a new consumer culture of female gamers in China with its special mechanism.

4. Suggestions

The importation of Otome game modes from Japan to China necessitated localization and re-encoding, which minimizes cognitive dissonance for Chinese players. This process provides a blueprint for the dissemination of pop culture products abroad. To begin with, an in-depth understanding of the variegated social cultures and consumer preferences in both regions is crucial. Based on these differences, tailored modifications to the original content are necessary for foreign acceptance. For instance, Love and Deepspace modifies the protagonist's age and personality by the disparate marital concepts in Chinese and Japanese history and culture. When exporting cultural products, it is imperative to cater to the aesthetic demands of overseas audiences. This adaptive approach exemplifies the transformative nature of cultural creativity in the international market.

Secondly, mediators should develop an international perspective and further deepen the cross-border linkage between traditional culture and new media. For example, the linkage planning with shellfish carving and kites in Love and Deepspace shows that market-oriented economy and macro-control are not contradictory. The National Entertainment Audit Authority can deploy resources to encourage enterprises to incorporate traditional cultural elements in the research and development process. Starting from a successful popular product case, incorporating high culture and integrating with mass culture, it can break through the original cultural circle, open up a new direction for overseas communication of cultural inheritance, and help solve the problems of lack of sales channels and no inheritance. This practice can eventually achieve a win-win situation of internal value and commercial value.

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5. Conclusion

To sum up, to explore the cross-cultural communication phenomenon of Otome game products, this paper investigates the satisfaction of Chinese Otome game players with different characteristics of Chinese and Japanese Otome games. The results show that based on the different characteristics of mediator and consumer groups given by the social and cultural context of China and Japan, the text of the Otome game has produced significant local changes through the transmission from Japan to China. For example, due to different cultures, consumers have different degrees of acceptance of the game. Therefore, Chinese mediators adjust the characters, ages, and other settings to adapt to Chinese players' aesthetic appreciation and improve their popularity.

After the spread of Japanese Otome games to China, the mediators carried out localization reform of the text of the game and added traditional Chinese elements. The improved game returned to Japan and was well received by Japanese consumers. This chain of processes can be seen as a whole, which can provide a new direction for the overseas dissemination of pop culture products. Contrary to the traditional perception, people should not only tolerate and compromise after understanding the estrangement of different cultures. On the contrary, cultural differences can be exploited in communication. For example, under the joint action of the media's localization and re-encoding, the consumers' re-decoding, as well as market mechanism and other factors, the localization reform of Otome games relies on differences, thus creating a diversity of commercial value and intrinsic value that both China and Japan can enjoy. This diversity cannot be produced while maintaining local purity. This event supports the view that globalization and regional cultural diversity are not incompatible. The overseas dissemination of pop culture products should aim at creating this diversity and constantly promote the integration and innovation of multi-national cultures.

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