

# *The Role Model Power of Otome Games for Modern Women*

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**Abstract:** With the improvement of women's social status, the female market in the game market has been continuously developed, which makes the otome game culture gradually become popular. Because there is relatively little academic guidance for games in this category, otome's game has received polarizing reviews. It does help to establish the growing status of female group and show their growth, but also reflects some inadequacy of stereotypes in the portrayal of heroines. To improve this situation, the study found that even though the players put themselves subjectively in the heroine's perspective to enjoy a virtual romantic relationship with the heroes, the heroine and the player in otome's game still can form a para-social relationship because the heroine's different image from the players. Taking the Para-social Interaction (PI) and Wishful Identification (SI) theory as the starting point, this paper discusses the chance of the heroine becoming a role model for players, possible process of the heroine becoming a model for players, what benefits can heroines bring to players as a role model, and what kind of settings can make the heroine an effective role model. At the end of the study, this paper gives some specific suggestions for designing otome games.

**Keywords:** role model, otome games, modern women

## 1. Introduction

Due to the high development of society, young people's enthusiasm to participate in social activities and work is greatly reduced. This leads to the emergence of "otaku", a group immersed in animes and manga that is not good at social communication [1]. On the other hand, as an important part of the labor force, women's psychological needs have gradually been put on the agenda under the social background of the gradual rise of the feminist movement. Driven by these conditions, a cultural industry tailor-made for women, the otome game market, has emerged. Otome game is a kind of media product composed of characters, story, CG, soundtrack and dubbing [2]. Most Otome games involve the heroine (the player herself) choosing one of several male protagonists to start the story, fulfilling women's expectations of an ideal romantic relationship.

In 2017, *Mr Love: Queen's Choice* was born and became China's first phenomenon-level otome game. Within one month of its launch, the number of installs reached nearly 10 million, and the number of daily active users reached more than 2 million [3]. Since then, many domestic game manufacturers have cut into the market. According to statistics, in 2020, the sales revenue of the Chinese female game market reached 53 billion yuan, with a year-on-year growth of 47.15% [3]. Tencent, NetEase and other mainstream game manufacturers are creating a culture of otome games.

However, at present, academic research on otome games is relatively scarce. According to Peng and her colleagues, otome players project their own subjective emotions onto their characters, reinforcing their sense of self-orientation and transforming women from being stared at to staring [4]. In contrast, Cheng linked the otome game's heroine to Cinderella and suggested that the occupation setting of otome games is almost useless, which implies the negation of the value of women by the patriarchal ideology. In addition, this idealized view of love will not only solidify the stereotype of an intimate relationship, but also cause women a sense of loss in the real marriage relationship [5]. In the context of various positive and negative views of otome's game, Liu's team believes that the para-social relationships established by otome games are unique and more likely to be two-way interactions [2]. Based on para-social relation theory and role modeling theory, this study provides an objective analysis of existing otome games and proposes some practical suggestions for the design of otome games.

## **2. Immersive Identity and Para-social Relationships in Otome Game**

### **2.1. Wishful Identification**

The process of identification is defined as the "merging of self with characters in the media to share a character's perspective and "internalize their worldview [6]." By identifying with the media character, individuals imagine themselves in the narrative, which is very similar to the process by which players of otome games merge themselves with the game's heroine. According to Srividya et al., when the heroine in a game has a stronger affinity, the audience is more likely to identify with a character with wishful thinking [7]. Cohen suggests that similarities in "age, gender, and social class" are also related to wishful identification [8]. Not to mention gender, most of the game makers have designed the heroine to be around 20 years old, the age of their target consumers, but the social class of the heroine is worth discussing.

### **2.2. Para-social Interaction**

Para-social relationship refers to a long-term and one-sided relationship between the audience and the media characters [6]. Para-social audience relationships experience a variety of cognitive, emotional and behavioral phenomena, depending on how close they are to the media and how involved they are [9]. Cohen defined PSI as the typical emotional response of the interaction between the emotions and behaviors experienced by the audience while watching the media characters, including "experiencing the same emotions expressed by the characters" and "experiencing an emotion as a result of watching the characters" [8]. For example, if the heroine in a game expresses sadness that the hero is injured, the player will also be upset. When a heroine in a game behaves in a way that doesn't match what the player wants, the player may be angry. Extrapolating from this, it is possible that the heroine's empathy and positive attitude toward life can have an impact on the player. Klimmt et al. also noted that PSI behavioral responses refer to physical activities, such as mimicking media character gestures or unique movements or repeating phrases used by characters [9]. This can be seen in otome games as the player cosplays and mimics the heroine.

The theory implies that the heroine may have a subtle influence on the player. For example, if the heroine helps someone in need, these impressions of the heroine may suddenly hit the player into responding in the same positive way when the situation is reproduced. Furthermore, the regression analysis and path analysis of previous studies show that the stronger the prosociality of the heroine's personality, the easier it is to strengthen the wishful identification, and the closer the PSI will be formed.

### **2.3. Immersive Identity and Para-Social Relationships Between Heroine Player**

In previous studies, para-social interaction (PSI) involves perceiving the media role, creating distance between the self and the media role, making judgments or interacting at a distance. However, wishful identification (WI) involves inserting one's self into the character, that is, the audience is almost unable to judge the media character because the premise of identification is that there is little distance between the self and the other [10]. As a result, wishful identification and para-social relationships are often considered incompatible. However, Ramasubramanian and Kornfiel proposed in their study of Japanese Anime Heroines as Role Models for U.S. Youth that WI and PSI can be comprehensive effects [7]. The audience can go from liking a heroine to identifying with her with wishful thinking to participating in a para-social relationship with the heroine. Wishful identification usually refers to the audience's ability to identify with the character they wish to become [7]. This process is self-evident in otome's games, as players hope to become the heroine in the game in order to develop virtual romantic relationships with the male protagonists. Bian pointed out in her research on otome's game immersion that players do not have a single story perception in the experience process, but superimpose real emotions on the interaction of game characters. Players don't fully agree with the heroine; some even have negative opinions about what she does in the story. Therefore, "Immersion" in otome's games is different from "complete internalization" [11]. This confirms the research of Srividya et al. that identity identification in media is flexible because audiences usually enter and exit "identity", constantly changing from the role of the audience to the identity of the media role, and then jumping out of it [7]. So in an otome game, the player can both identify with the heroine's identity and judge her behavior and whether she likes the character depicted in the game. The integrated behavior of WI and PSI is fully embodied in the course of otome's game. The study also indicates that WI can cause and increase some PSI effects in this relationship. Through WI and PSI, the player's unilateral recognition of the heroine serves as a foundation for otome's heroine to be a role model for the player.

## **3. The Role Model Power of Female Characters**

When playing a game, players tend to put themselves in the game scene or character to achieve some special aspects that might be difficult to complete in real life. This is the beauty of such "role-playing" games. In otome's games, the female character's representation of female power is also actively conveyed to the player's consciousness. Morgenroth et al. mentioned in their research on role modeling that Role models are often seen as a way of motivating individuals to perform novel behaviors and inspire them to set ambitious goals [12]. This is especially true for members of underrepresented and stigmatized groups in educational and occupational Settings [12]. That said, in the context of women in the high-knowledge profession, the otome game has its guiding value. But research has shown that giving the heroine an intellectual career is useless. How to correctly depict the heroine image in otome games can bring positive effects to players, which is worth further exploration.

### **3.1. Representation of the Possible**

The first definition of the Role model focuses on the representation of possibility, which is relevant to people's expectancy. For short or long-term goals, expectancy refers to the subjectively perceived probability of success, that is, the degree to which an individual sees a goal or a possible self as attainable [12]. Expectancy can be influenced by both internal factors (ability beliefs based on one's social identities) and external factors (associated stereotypes, perceived discrimination and prejudice). For example, when players see female characters taking positions as managers and leaders in the setting of otome's game, it may promote expectancy in different ways. Firstly, these characters prove

to players that gender is not an insurmountable obstacle for management. Secondly, the role model can also provide players with a model of behavior that can be imitated, such as her decisive character, behavior and management style. Being exposed to these role models continuously and intensely can change players' view of the group they are in, reduce self-stereotype and increase expectancy. Such psychological change can increase their efforts and performance, forming a positive cycle.

### 3.2. Behavior Models

There are also some views that define a role model as a person from whom they can acquire specific skills and behaviors. Perceived self-efficacy is an essential component of goal-related expectations. According to Bandura, self-efficacy will lead to vicarious learning [13]. Vicarious learning means that watching others successfully complete a task increases one's confidence to complete the task on one's own successfully [13]. Unlike the previous point, the focus is not on representing the possibility of someone succeeding at something, but on how to do it specifically. For example, the player's observation of the growth experience and specific behavior and performance of the heroine in otome's game in her career has become the player's perception of the embodiment of their goals, and the player can get resonance from the role model to make them more convinced of their goals. Vicarious learning can increase players' self-efficacy and expectancy based on their internal attribute perception. A high level of these two things, in turn, increases players' motivation and goals for their career, leading to the acquisition of new skills.

### 3.3. Inspiration Models

Other definitions show that role models inspire and contribute to role aspirants' adoption of new goals. Unlike the two above, this function is not to improve the aspiring person's confidence in and skill acquisition of the goals they already have, but to make something worth pursuing in the first place [12]. For example, the player has no previous exposure to the art field, but the heroine she meets makes her interested in art and drives her to become an artist. The role model facilitates a process in which aspirants want to become close to the role model and set their goals according to the role model. Thrash and Elliot demonstrate that inspiration has three core qualities: "transcendence", "evocation", and "motivation" [14]. "Transcendence" means that inspiration leads an individual to adopt a new or better goal or to think in a new or better way, and evocation is usually caused by something outside of a person, and the role model is a good example [14]. For instance, the player is interested in picking the heroine's career because of their wishful thinking of the heroine. Finally, motivation guides one to pursue new goals, which is associated with the above mechanism. These insights illustrate not only how role models inspire aspirants but also how they increase motivation to pursue their goals.

To sum up, firstly, the player can promote vicarious learning by perceiving the female lead's career growth in the game, thus influencing motivation and goals. Secondly, players can unconsciously change their self-stereotypes through the images presented by the heroine in the game, which affects their motivation and goals together with their perception and attainability. Additionally, the enlightenment gained from perception can have an effect on motivation and goals. Positive actions facilitated by perception can change external barriers, which in turn have an impact on motivation and goals. These conclusions are beneficial to the practical design of the otome game.

### 3.4. Reflection of the Image of Role Model

With an understanding of the various roles that the role model can achieve, the portrayal of the heroine in otome's games requires some reflection on who the player thinks is ideal and whom the player identifies with, internalizes, and therefore increases expectancy. The emotion that promotes the role model's positive influence mechanism is different from admiration. Attainability is a significant

influence in the process of generating identification and inspiration. Lockwood and Kunda's study points out that the success of role models positively affects role aspirants' expectancy only when it appears attainable [15]. Hoyt and Simon show that a role model that is too successful is likely to dampen the role aspirants' expectations of success [16]. Part of the reason why the heroine in the current otome games is not a role model for most players may be that the heroine's rich family, cute looks, slim figure, and high IQ all add up to a high level of success that makes her seem unattainable and diminishes players' expectations of approaching her. In response to this situation, specific improvement suggestions will be put forward below.

#### 4. Suggestions of Otome Games

As Cheng points out, even though the women in otome's games are positioned as highly educated women, such as producers, designers, and lawyers, these professions are useless in the game world except for unlocking the story through simple games [5]. In the otome game, women have a soft, slender appearance, an infantilism that "often falls over", and a lack of foresight and decision-making judgment in management, reflecting the patriarchal stereotype of "high enthusiasm, low ability". Liu found that while players expect the heroine to be stronger, they also enjoy and expect to be protected by the hero, even if it means giving up some of their rights [17]. It is the strength of the male protagonists that makes them extremely excited and provides economic value to the otome game, and the weakness of the female protagonists are served as a foil. This paradoxical attitude makes the optimization of the female protagonists' image almost impossible. Game makers need to strike a balance between satisfying users' desires and portraying women in the right way.

First of all, there needs to be a certain degree of weakening of the heroine. "Road numbness" and "falling flat", which are not suitable for adult women and may reduce the sense of engagement, should be removed. Secondly, studies have found that player choices rarely affect the story. Therefore, later otome games should be more diversified, such as researching individual users before playing, matching their food tastes, interests, and presenting them with different story combinations. At the same time, players can set different facial appearances, body shapes, and clothing, improve the similarity between the heroine and the player, reduce the psychological resistance of the player to the heroine, and strengthen the role model of the heroine.

Additionally, start with the setting of the hero. Compared with *Love and Producer*, the male protagonists in *Love of Light and Night* are not only handsome and brave, but also have their own pain and defects. The heroine gives play to her subjective initiative to realize the two-way redemption of the heroine and the male protagonist. Not only does this not undermine the compelling commercial purpose of the game, but it also helps to portray women in games in the right way, which is worth learning from.

Apart from the male and female protagonists, Liao's research points out that the management of the company in *Love & Producer* is mainly dominated by women cameo, which is a testament to the ability of women in the workplace, as well as the ability to select supporting characters during career progression [18]. These cameo storylines feature characters with different workplace experiences and distinct personalities. It can also be a role model for female gamers. In this regard, otome games could also do more to give players a better story experience and provide more models.

#### 5. Conclusion

Female characters have long been the object of the gaze, definition, and selection in the game industry, but otome's games have changed that to some extent. Otome players internalize the heroine's worldview, projecting their own thoughts and feelings onto her, thus expanding the channels of self-recognition and self-expression. However, the current otome games still have not realized the

transformation of women from "being stared at" to "staring at", and the portrayal of the heroine in the game is full of a large number of stereotypes under the patriarchal society. Moreover, academic guidance has been relatively absent from the development of otome games. Based on the combination theory of WI and PSI, this paper discusses a para-social relationship between the player and the heroine of the game, and proposes that this relationship can lay the foundation for the model effect of the otome game heroine. This effect is manifested explicitly in three aspects: representation of possibility, model of behavior, and bringing inspiration. In addition, the study found that the image of the heroine must be attainable to the player so that similar model effect can be generated, which is constructive for the design of the image of the heroine. According to this point, this paper puts forward some suggestions to improve the game from three aspects: heroine, hero, and cameo.

The research in this paper is based on previous PSI, WI, and role modeling theories, so there is no actual data verification. After all is said, otome games are a female product. What really matters is how well the game hits the market and how players respond to it. Therefore, based on these theoretical conclusions, future studies can collect and analyze players' opinions and conduct in-depth interviews to give more definitive conclusions.

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