

The Rise of Otome Games in China: Exploring the Social and Psychological Traits of Otome Game Players

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Abstract: In recent times, the popularity of otome games in China has soared, with the genre becoming increasingly mainstream and witnessing the emergence of highly popular otome mobile games. In contrast, otome games have not received the same level of attention in Europe and America. Consequently, there are likely distinctions between Chinese otome game players and those in other countries. Despite this, scholarly research on Chinese otome game players is scarce. Existing studies often rely on singular theories, such as the Uses and Gratifications Theory or the Parasocial Interaction Theory, to analyze this demographic. To address this gap, this paper adopts a comprehensive approach, integrating both the Uses and Gratifications Theory and the Parasocial Interaction Theory. Utilizing a combination of survey and interview methodologies, the study investigates the social and psychological characteristics of Chinese otome game player groups based on media attributes.

Keywords: Otome games, Uses and Gratifications Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory

1. Introduction

The widespread adoption of the internet has propelled electronic gaming into a prominent position within the realm of entertainment, often referred to as the "ninth art." Despite this growing popularity, electronic gaming was traditionally perceived as a predominantly male pursuit[1], leaving the female gaming demographic largely unexplored. It wasn't until 1994 that the inaugural otome game, "アンジェリーク," debuted online in Japan, marking a significant milestone in the inclusion of women in the gaming industry.

In the span of merely three decades since their inception, otome games have attracted unforeseen attention and engagement as an emerging gaming genre. Despite this, otome games persist as a specialized category, especially in Western nations, where only a handful of prominent game developers prioritize their production. It is noteworthy that otome games have surprisingly found a substantial audience in China.

The current body of research concerning otome games is notably sparse, despite the significance of exploring both their medium characteristics and player experiences. Moreover, China has witnessed a surge in the release of localized otome games in recent years, accompanied by positive reception. Consequently, this paper aims to delve into an examination of audience demographics and an exploration of the underlying motivations for engaging with otome games within the Chinese context.

This study centers on Chinese otome game enthusiasts as its primary subjects, with a primary aim to explore the audience demographics of otome games in China and to analyze the factors influencing player engagement and frequency of usage. Furthermore, the research methodology involved the collection of non-player samples to enhance the breadth and depth of the analysis.

2. Development of otome games

The trajectory of otome games' introduction into China has been marked by obstacles, delineated into three distinct phases.

The initial phase is characterized by the prevalence of forum-based platforms facilitating the dissemination of Japanese otome games through localized versions within the Chinese market. This period, coinciding with the late 20th century emergence of otome games, was marked by limited internet penetration in China, which significantly hindered their distribution. Consequently, Chinese players predominantly accessed otome games via PC or console platforms, often acquiring Japanese-localized versions from forums such as "Yimeng Wucheng." The niche appeal of otome games, coupled with the restricted internet accessibility, deterred major Chinese game developers from venturing into otome game production. Additionally, smaller-scale studios involved in otome game development encountered challenges such as financial constraints, leading to the production of games with relatively lower quality.

The second phase marks the rise of browser-based gaming, notably spearheaded by platforms like Orange Games. In 2012, the gaming platform 4399 introduced a game titled "Queen Development Plan," which stood out for its refined production quality and attracted a new wave of players. Concurrently, the debut of the Orange Games platform in the same year drew significant attention for its release of visual novel games catering to female audiences. Moreover, during this period, the Paper Folding Company launched "Warmly Traveling the World," a dress-up game targeted at female players. This period witnessed a growing recognition of female players as the primary demographic by several gaming companies. However, the persisting gap in high-quality domestic otome games within China remained a notable concern.

The third phase represents the emergence of narrative-driven vertical-screen mobile games, prominently exemplified by "Love and Producer." In 2017, the Paper Folding Company introduced a self-developed otome mobile game titled "Love and Producer." Contrary to expectations, the game garnered widespread acclaim in mainland China, heralding the transition of Chinese otome games into the mobile gaming landscape and elevating their visibility among the general populace. "Love and Producer" substantially expanded the user base of otome game players in China, subsequently prompting the development of numerous domestically produced high-quality otome mobile games. Examples include "Light and Night" and "For All Time."

Upon reflection, it becomes apparent that the evolution of otome games correlates with the period of internet expansion in China. By the end of December 2011, the number of Chinese internet users had surpassed 500 million[2]. By December 2023, this figure had escalated to 1.092 billion[3]. The pervasive presence of the internet enabled the proliferation of otome games and created a conducive environment for the transition of mainstream Chinese otome gaming from PC and console platforms to mobile devices.

3. Research Design

The data collection methodology employed in this study primarily involved the administration of questionnaire surveys and the conduct of sampled interviews.

Questionnaire Design: The questionnaire was developed using the platform Questionnaire Star and distributed via social media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo, as well as through offline channels.

Its primary objective was to investigate the gaming preferences and motivations of Chinese otome game players. To target the desired demographic accurately, the questionnaire included screening questions to distinguish between players, non-players, and individuals unfamiliar with otome games. It comprised 19 items, covering players' personal information, gaming habits, perceptions of gaming experiences, and non-players' impressions of otome games. A total of 199 valid responses were collected from players, with an additional 45 valid responses from non-players.

Following the administration of the questionnaire, interviews were conducted with 19 players and 7 non-players. For players, eight questions were devised to investigate their experiences and preferences regarding otome games in greater detail, aiming to uncover nuanced aspects of their gameplay experiences and needs. Conversely, four questions were tailored for non-players to explore their perspectives on the current state of otome games in China and related topics.

SoJump link: <https://www.wjx.cn/report/253458898.aspx?sat=1>

4. Analysis of Characteristics Among Otome Game Players

4.1. Differentiation of player identity

Among the 199 valid responses obtained, the female demographic overwhelmingly dominates the profile of Chinese otome game players, representing a substantial 93.46% of respondents, while male and other gender players collectively constitute a mere 6.54%. Within this demographic, heterosexual individuals account for 72.86% (encompassing both male and female heterosexual players), with female heterosexual players comprising the majority. Moreover, full-time students comprise the largest segment, constituting 84.92% of respondents. The youngest player surveyed was 13 years old, while the oldest was 30 years old, with adolescents aged 16-22 representing the majority of players in this study.

In summary, the primary demographic of otome game players consists of female heterosexual individuals, although they are not the exclusive group. Male players, homosexual players, and individuals of other genders also engage in otome gaming. Among these, full-time students comprise the majority, spanning various educational levels from junior high school to doctoral studies. Additionally, the age distribution of players predominantly falls within the adolescent range.

For female students with restricted leisure time and limited financial resources, otome games emerge as a preferable form of entertainment due to their flexibility in time management, affordability, and accessibility through simple mediums like smartphones. During interviews, Interviewee A revealed that during her secondary education, she had to abstain from playing otome games due to constraints in both time and finances. However, upon entering university and experiencing greater autonomy in terms of time and financial resources, she opted to resume engaging with otome games.

4.2. Highly dependent but the stickiness is unstable

Based on the data collected from the questionnaire item "How frequently do you engage in otome games?" it was found that 104 players, comprising 52.26% of respondents, play otome games once or more daily, as shown in table 1. Conversely, 44 players, representing 22.11%, reported discontinuation of otome gaming. Among the 18 players interviewed, 7 disclosed that they no longer participate in otome gaming. Reasons for discontinuation commonly included financial constraints, lengthy gameplay, and dissatisfaction with marketing strategies employed by game companies. Of the remaining 11 players who continue gaming, 9 reported daily logins. Some players logged in for storyline immersion or virtual interaction with male protagonists, while others did so solely for daily rewards. Additionally, some players resumed otome gaming after a hiatus due to factors such as the introduction of new storylines, appealing card designs, and emotional attachment to male characters.

Based on the aforementioned information, it is evident that otome game players exhibit a notable dependency on these games. They demonstrate a need for frequent logins to fulfill various personal needs. However, player engagement levels exhibit instability. Some players who perceive the male characters in the game as romantic partners necessitate frequent logins to satisfy their emotional needs, yet they may also experience fatigue from prolonged gameplay. During periods of fatigue, players may decrease their login frequency or discontinue the game entirely. Nevertheless, players who abandon their current game may still express interest in newly announced otome games. For instance, as previously mentioned, Interviewee A transitioned to a different otome game several years later and continues to play it. Furthermore, two interviewees noted that player login frequency increases during specific periods, such as the game's initial launch, storyline updates, or collaborative events with other intellectual properties.

Table 1: Frequency of Otome Game Usage Among Players

Option	Number of Valid Responses	Percentage
No longer playing	199	22.11%
Once every few months	199	2.51%
Once every two to three months	199	2.01%
Several times per month	199	3.02%
Several times per week	199	18.09%
Once daily or more	199	52.26%

4.3. A wide range of interests in various aspects of the game

Data obtained from the questionnaire item "What prompted you to play otome games for the first time?" reveals that players exhibit diverse interests in various aspects of the game. The percentages of the ten predefined reasons for initially playing otome games show minimal variation, indicating that most players' reasons for playing otome games for the first time are not singular, as shown in table 2. Furthermore, data obtained from the questionnaire item "Currently, what do you find most appealing about otome games?" demonstrates that across the five predefined questions, the proportion of players selecting positively worded options exceeds fifty percent in each case, according to table 3.

Games represent a widely accessible medium of mass communication with intricate attributes[4]. The allure experienced by audiences, or players, upon developing an interest in games is multifaceted, as are the needs they seek to satisfy through gameplay. Otome games demonstrate excellence across various domains, including music, art, character design, and narrative. Beyond their primary demographic, individuals with interests in related professional fields may become potential players. For instance, Interviewee B, a male heterosexual college student studying visual design, finds interest in otome games due to their utilization of high-quality live2D technology in character cards. Furthermore, the synergistic effects of positive player word-of-mouth, the burgeoning development of derivative cultures, and the effective promotional and operational strategies employed by game companies contribute to the widening of the otome game audience. Consequently, individuals initially disinterested in otome games may become inclined to explore them.

Table 2: Player's Reasons for Playing Otome Games for the First Time (Multiple Choice)

Option	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Recommended by friends	64	32.16%
Passing time when bored	52	26.13%

Table 2: (continued)

Already an experienced otome game player	25	12.56%
Attracted by excellent derivative works	57	28.64%
Attracted by official promotion	61	30.65%
Interested in the voice actors/voice team	60	30.15%
Interested in game content (gameplay, storyline, etc.)	76	38.19%
Interested in game art	95	47.74%
Interested in male protagonist design	111	55.78%
Other	3	1.51%

Table 3: Level of Agreement with Various Aspects of the Game

Aspect	Very Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Very Agree
Attracted to the game's sound performance	3(1.51%)	1(0.50%)	34(17.09%)	65(32.66%)	96(48.24%)
Attracted to the game's artistic design	4(2.01%)	0(0.00%)	17(8.54%)	63(31.66%)	115(57.79%)
Attracted to the game's artistic design	3(1.51%)	1(0.50%)	25(12.56%)	60(30.15%)	110(55.28%)
Attracted to the game's gameplay	9(4.52%)	15(7.54%)	41(20.60%)	68(34.17%)	66(33.17%)
Attracted to the characters in the game	3(1.51%)	2(1.01%)	8(4.02%)	42(21.11%)	144(72.36%)

5. Analysis of Otome Game Players and Their Needs: A Fusion Approach Based on the Integration of Proximal Social Interaction and Uses and Gratifications Theory

Electronic games serve as a platform for individuals to fulfill their innate desires for escapism and fantasy[5]. Within the realm of otome games, players engage in a unique form of quasi-social interaction with virtual characters to satisfy their longing for intimate connections. These games construct elaborate worlds centered around romantic fantasies, enabling female players to explore diverse identities and experiences. Through emotional investment and attachment to characters, players undergo personal growth within the game[6]. Female characters play a pivotal role in driving the narratives of otome games, facilitating the development of self-identity among female players. Interviews revealed that many respondents experienced heightened immersion in the game when the choices of the female protagonist resonated with their own, fostering a sense of authenticity. This indirect form of identification fosters a sense of realism, prompting players to rationalize their affection and emotional needs for the virtual male characters, both within the game and beyond.

In the realm of media consumption, young individuals engage in communication and establish a sense of belonging based on shared interests and hobbies, leading to the formation of nascent youth subcultures [7]. Otome games, as a component of this subculture, provide players with a platform where they can engage socially, find affinity through similar aesthetic preferences in music and art, and fulfill their desires for self-realization and self-esteem through creative expressions. However, this subcultural affiliation also creates a distinct boundary between otome games and other gaming genres, fostering stronger internal cohesion and homogeneity within the group [8]. Within this subculture, players develop shared linguistic norms, social conventions, and interpersonal dynamics. Nevertheless, there is a notable exclusivity exhibited by the primary players (heterosexual females) towards non-primary player groups. These individuals are often reluctant to share their romantic interests with homosexual players or those significantly younger, experiencing a sense of betrayal upon encountering such information. Even if the preferences of non-primary players diverge from those of primary players, they are typically not embraced, reflecting an inherent characteristic of this subcultural dynamic.

6. Conclusion

The emergence of otome games in China has been relatively recent, aligning with the expansion of the internet. The predominant demographic for these games comprises female heterosexual students, characterized by a relatively homogeneous age range yet diverse educational backgrounds. While players exhibit a pronounced reliance on these games, their engagement tends to be inconsistent over time. Furthermore, their interests within the gaming sphere are varied, and the specific needs they seek to satisfy through gameplay are markedly diverse.

Indeed, otome games represent not merely a recreational pursuit but also an emergent and distinctive force within the contemporary electronic gaming industry. They constitute a unique subculture primarily catering to a female audience, thus establishing a nuanced and intricate cultural sphere. While otome games have yet to transcend their subcultural identity to achieve mainstream recognition, they are undeniably undergoing a positive evolution. In recent years, there has been a discernible trend in China towards the proliferation of otome games, marked by a steady increase in player engagement and a growing societal acceptance of these games. Through localized adaptations tailored for the Chinese market, players are afforded the opportunity to engage with familiar cultural motifs, thereby fulfilling a spectrum of needs ranging from emotional and social to aesthetic and self-actualization.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory posits that individuals interact with media with the intention of fulfilling their needs, which are influenced by both social and personal psychological factors. Within this framework, otome game players constitute merely one subset of the multifaceted audience consuming diverse forms of media. Accordingly, they should be afforded equal rights to access and utilize media platforms.

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