

'I like to feel strong but not to kill': an exploration of age 4 to 10 girls' console game experiences in China

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

During the past decade, China has seen significant growth in its game sector, with female gamers surging to half of the whole gamer population (Niko Partners, 2023). Chinese scholars and industry experts have been investing more in understanding the female gamers. However, when it comes to different age groups, young girl players in early to middle childhood seems to be under-considered. They are usually either grouped together with their boy counterparts as 'children/minors', or with the teenage/adolescent girls as 'young girls/schoolgirls'; while the gaming characteristics of the specific group are overlooked, understanding of their experiences of playing video games stays ambiguous.

Girls have the double bind of gender and youth (Cunningham, 2020). In contemporary China the concept of 'girl' can be more complicated when it takes accounts of a particular age as well as their living experiences. The aim of this study is to locate the young girls in various spaces via exploring their video game playing experiences in mainland China. In this paper, it will begin with a brief review on the play history of girls in China, which aims to provide a background of understanding play as a historically gendered concept in the focused context as well as its evolvement through different eras. The choice of focusing on console game rather than mobile games with a larger audience is that the researcher intends to utilise this particular genre as a 'filter' to find the interested group: girls from middle class background in urban area. This is because that console games as an imported concept and foreign culture initially and historically dwelled in cities transforming into a branch of youth sub-culture through time, as well as is less affordable than mobile games with a slightly higher entry bar to play which performs as socioeconomic filter in this study.

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This paper focuses on girls aged from 4 to 10 years old who play video games on consoles. Three key features of the participants include: 1) coming from the middle class (socio-economic status of their family), 2) developmental resources (school education, family resources, and social resources), and 3) growth environment (core family, local surrounding, and the lived city economic and culture background). Twelve participants are involved in this qualitative research, who have engaged in online gameplay led research interactions, including in-depth interviews and observations as well as participant generated drawing. Participants are recruited by non-probability sampling, and interestingly, all of them are from the developed cities and majority from the advanced coastal belt of China. This coincidence gives evidence to one assumption underlying this research that console game is associated to city culture.

Despite the fact that there are now as many girl game players as boy players, the bias of 'video game is for boys' is still strong in the society widely and as game historically constructed for men (Cote, 2018), especially when it comes to the genre of console games. It is not considered as a typical 'place' for girl playing at. In western academia video game playing as a leisure activity is considered as 'gendered' (Cunningham, 2020; Lynch et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2009), something also evidenced by the participants of this study in China.

Findings from child development studies to neurological studies provide a range of evidence that the impact of the experience gained in early childhood can deeply affect the development in adulthood. (Casey et al, 2000; Connell et al., 2014; Cooper et al. 2015; Greenspan and Pollock, 1991; Huston and Ripke, 2006; Larvie and Fischl, 2016; Mah and Ford-Jones, 2012; Montemayor et al. 1990) In addition, the dominant power driving the feminist movement in China currently are widely formed by women born in 1980s and 1990s (Zhou and Qiu, 2020) who are the one-child generation formerly known as the 'little emperor/empresses. (Li et al., 2021) The parents of the study's participants are from this generation, who are also the first generation to be born and grew up in a relatively more developed society attributed to China's Reform and Open-up policy implemented since 1978. Since their children were born, China has become the second largest economy by GDP with however an expanding gap between the poor and the rich. (Credit Suisse Research Institute, 2021)

Two objectives will be presented in this paper from a doctoral study in progress. One is to examine four different dynamics between the girls and their different kin members in the nuclear family, and how girls interact and reflect on the different relations while gaming with them. By demonstrating the girls' experiences in the four dynamics, a discussion on how girls locating themselves in a blending environment of game (virtual space) and home (real space) will be interpreted referring to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception. The other one is to investigate the concepts of 'being strong' from younger girls' perspectives, which provide an alternative angle to rethink about creating hero/heroine in video game.

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