

Shaping Virtual Romance in Real Life: Intimacy and Identity Reconstruction in Otome Game Cosplay Commissions

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INTRODUCTION

This study examines how Chinese otome game players construct virtual-to-real intimacy through the emerging phenomenon, 'cosplay commissions', in which they pay cosplayers to portray game characters and perform scripted encounters (e.g., Chen et al. 2025; Zhou et al. 2024). Unlike the passive consumption of in-game romance, commissioned performances let players choose cosplayers, create scenarios, and shape emotional experiences through relational labor. Cosplayers negotiate constructed intimacy through continuous identity shifts, moving between performer, emotional laborer, and service provider roles (Bandelj 2020; Baym 2015; Duffy 2016; Hochschild 2022). By bringing relationships that are typically confined to online gameplay into offline interaction, cosplay commissions reshape dynamics of identity, expectation, and power among participants. Focusing on cosplay commissions as a paid form of interaction, this study examines how emotional and commercial relationships are integrated, and analyzes relational labor from the dual perspectives of players (commissioners) and cosplayers (commission recipients), thereby addressing a gap in existing research.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1. How do players and cosplayers approach and define paid cosplay commissions as a form of close interaction?

RQ2. How do players and cosplayers co-construct, experience, and negotiate intimacy and emotional boundaries during cosplay commissions?

RQ3. How does this practice influence their perceptions of intimacy, authenticity, and self-expression?

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was used to examine how players and cosplayers construct intimacy and negotiate identity through mediated interaction. Through purposive sampling on Xiaohongshu (RedNote), participants with more than six months of

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experience in gaming and in paid cosplay commissions were recruited, including both cosplayers and commission recipients. Snowball sampling was then applied, with initial participants asked to recommend others who met the criteria. The final sample included approximately 15 to 20 participants. The interview data focused on three main stages: pre-commission communication, offline date experiences, and post-commission reflections involving emotional feedback and payment. Supplementary materials, such as scripts, chat logs, or scenario descriptions, were collected to better understand how intimacy is co-produced and maintained through financial negotiation in commercial settings (e.g. Chen, 2025). The data were analyzed to examine the two-way model of paid emotional labor in cosplay commissions, how temporary norms of intimacy are negotiated and formed within consumer relationships, and how both consumers and producers shift their identities through the specific dynamics of commissioned interactions.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Players enter commissions with strong emotional attachments to otome game characters and seek emotional responses that the game characters themselves cannot offer. Intimacy unfolds across the entire commission process. Before the commission, questionnaires and schedule planning allow both players and cosplayers to begin relational investment, functioning as early relational labor. During the session, interaction cues such as tone and gesture shape the development of intimacy, and players understand authenticity as emerging through emotional resonance rather than mere role accuracy. The cosplayer's physical interaction and emotional engagement make the relationship feel personal and emotionally responsive, enabling players to project feelings toward virtual partners while receiving tangible emotional responses.

Beyond financial needs, cosplayers are also motivated by the emotional satisfaction of being appreciated, which can be understood as a form of affective return within emotional labor. Accordingly, emotional expression and atmosphere-building come to be expected components of the service. The preference for "boyfriend mode" further illustrates how players purchase a blend of the game character's traits and genuine emotional warmth rather than strict character replication. This mode continues the parasocial intimacy developed in otome games and translates it into embodied interaction, resonating with Hutabarat-Nelson's (2017) argument that cosplay performance transforms fictional attachment into lived emotional experience.

Paid cosplay commissions reshape the traditional one-directional model of paid intimacy. Emotional labor is not delivered solely by the cosplayer but is jointly produced and sustained through ongoing interaction. This collaborative production of intimacy reflects relational work in which participants continuously negotiate expectations, emotional boundaries, and shared value. Players do not remain passive recipients of care but actively invest emotion, maintain the interactional atmosphere, and provide feedback that shapes the course of the encounter. In response, cosplayers adjust the depth, pacing, and emotional tone of their performance based on players' reactions and expressed needs. Through this reciprocal process, emotional labor becomes situational and responsive rather than standardized. Both sides contribute emotional effort and both receive emotional value, whether in the form of emotional recognition, validation, or affective satisfaction (e.g., Chen et al. 2025). Cosplay commissions therefore form a shared emotional economy in which intimacy is co-produced and co-consumed, creating an interactional structure that differs from conventional models of paid intimacy.

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