

“We are trapped in the swamp of binary choices”: An Investigation into the Feminist Consciousness of Chinese Female Otome Game Players

Kuma X. XIONG

School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong

xiongy54@outlook.com

Keywords

Otome Game; Female Game Players; Online Community; Popular Feminism; Feminist Consciousness; Affective Dissonance; Affective Solidarity; China

INTRODUCTION

Female players continue to face challenges within the gaming community, including perceptions of “inferior competence” (Kelly et al. 2023) and being treated as a less important, “secondary” demographic by game producers (Liu and Lai 2022). The emergence of *otome games* [乙女ゲーム] represents an industry response to the growing gaming needs of female players and the demand for a more female-friendly gaming environment. Otome games, originating in Japan, are romance adventure games intended to only target female players (Saito 2021). Players typically play the role of the main female protagonist, and the goal of the game is to successfully establish romantic relationships with the main male characters (Song and Fox 2016). The term “otome” typically refers to “an unmarried young girl, evoking the ideal of her femininity and virginity” (Andlauer 2018, 166).

Previous research indicates that while otome games are designed for females, otome game developers regard female players merely as consumers, ignoring their strong affective bond with male characters (Lei et al. 2024). This virtual intimate relationship constructed in-game ultimately reinforces gender stereotypes and heterosexual hegemony (Lei et al. 2024), which is considered to lead to an uncomfortable affective experience for female players.

Hemmings (2005, 2012) argues that females feel discomfort in gendered experiences and may develop feminist consciousness due to this affective dissonance, which is aroused by the mismatch of “my sense of self and the social expectations” (Hemmings 2012, 150). As this affective dissonance accumulates, females seek affective solidarity, which emphasizes the process of “individual experience to collective feminist capacity” (Hemmings 2012, 150).

Several academic studies focus on otome games have been conducted in the Asian context, including studies focus on the construction of parasocial romantic relationships (Gao et al. 2025; Gong and Huang 2023), interaction and narrative

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

© 2026 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

structure (Kim 2009; Saito 2021), and the rights of “female gaze” (reversing male gaze, emphasizing the sexual empowerment of females) among female players (Lai and Liu 2024). However, there is still a research gap on how otome games can stimulate feminist consciousness among female players, especially under the discomfort affective experience.

This study focuses specifically on young female otome game players in China through the theoretical framework of affective shift from dissonance to solidarity (Hemmings 2012, 2005). It aims to explore female otome game players’ views on the construction of feminist consciousness during gameplay and is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: Do female otome game players in China experience discomfort regarding the relationship construction in Chinese otome games during gameplay?

RQ2: How do female otome game players cultivate feminist consciousness and form affective solidarity through their gaming experiences?

RQ3: After establishing feminist consciousness, how do these gamers pursue discursive power and self-identification by converting their consciousness into action?

METHOD

This research applied semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. Participants were recruited through calls for participants on Chinese social media (including Xiaohongshu, Douban, and Weibo). Snowball sampling was used to recruit more participants. Currently, 17 participants, aged between 18 and 32, have been interviewed (as shown in **Table 1**). Participants comprise students and people from various industries, including one from the video gaming sector. All of them have played otome games for at least six months.

Pseudonym	Age	Career	Resident city
A	18	Student	Harbin, Heilongjiang Province
B	23	Student	Shanghai
C	26	Finance	Suzhou, Jiangsu Province
D	23	Student	Chengdu, Sichuan Province
E	24	Student	Wuhan, Hubei Province
F	26	Marketing	Guangzhou, Guangdong Province
G	32	Game	Shanghai
H	26	Teacher	Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province
I	23	Research	Dalian, Liaoning Province
J	26	Lawyer	Beijing
K	27	Student	Hulunbuir, Inner Mongolia
L	18	Student	Hulunbuir, Inner Mongolia
M	28	Lawyer	Beijing
N	26	Education	Taiyuan, Shanxi Province
O	28	Editor	Shanghai
P	24	Student	Harbin, Heilongjiang Province
Q	29	Education	Fuzhou, Fujian Province

Table 1: Basic information of interviewees

Each Interview lasted around one hour and is conducted via an online meeting platform (Tencent Meeting) (M = 64.5 mins, SD = 17.0; min 40 mins and max 103 mins). With participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data undergo thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), starting with open coding and advancing to the identification of final themes through iterative analysis.

The researcher conducting the data analysis is an experienced otome game player with a deep understanding of gaming culture and feminist theory. Moreover, the researcher has been involved in other academic projects related to women's issues, which provide her with perspectives as both a researcher and a participant in female game culture.

PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Through the preliminary data analysis, the affective trajectory of female otome game players has been identified as three phases: discomfort, empathy, and solidarity.

(1) Discomfort: The gendered experience extended from otome games, such as being viewed as the "protected side" by male characters, can always cause discomfort for female players. The discomfort experience can sometimes be connected with the dilemma they face in reality, such as being perceived as weak and inferior, thereby reinforcing the harm. This experience of discomfort usually occurs among individuals who associate gaming with real life and is the key to arousing their curiosity to explore the so-called "common sense" in the construction of intimate relationships.

(2) Empathy: Most female otome game players often face the problem of "I know something is wrong, but I cannot express it." Online otome game communities provide them a safe space to discuss and exchange affective experiences. By empathizing with other players' gameplay experiences, they can transform their feelings into specific words or stories. Online community functions as a feminist education and discussion space, contributing to the collective rise of feminist consciousness.

(3) Solidarity: A substantial number of female players ($n = 9$) expressed their dissent on the internet critics concerning the excessive nudity of male characters in otome games during interviews. The primary aim of players is for the game company to respect female players' demands and initiate an official response to safeguard their reasonable sexual rights. Their actions include issuing statements about stopping in-game purchasing in the game's official account comment or on their private social media, as well as participating in offline protests. These actions give them a feeling of collective empowerment, and some participants even describe it as a step toward the utopia of female players.

However, as a participant said, "We are continuously approaching the utopia, but we will never arrive there." The grassroots feminist practices within otome game communities are challenging to fully implement. Given the significant emotional investment and attachment to the male character, completely abandoning the game remains an exceedingly difficult option. As a result, when facing discomfort, most players still have limited options: to endure the game with feminist consciousness or to entirely disconnect the gaming experience from feminism.

REFERENCES

- Andlauer. 2018. 'Pursuing One's Own Prince: Love's Fantasy in Otome Game Contents and Fan Practice'. *Mechademia: Second Arc* 11 (1): 166. <https://doi.org/10.5749/mech.11.1.0166>.
- Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2006. 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology'. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.
- Gao, Hao, Ruoqing Guo, and Qingqing You. 2025. 'Parasocial Interactions in Otome Games: Emotional Engagement and Parasocial Intimacy among Chinese Female Players'. *Media and Communication* 13. <https://www.cogitatiopress.com/mediaandcommunication/article/view/8662>.
- Gong, An-Di, and Yi-Ting Huang. 2023. 'Finding Love in Online Games: Social Interaction, Parasocial Phenomenon, and in-Game Purchase Intention of Female Game Players'. *Computers in Human Behavior* 143 (June): 107681. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2023.107681>.
- Hemmings, Clare. 2005. 'INVOKING AFFECT: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn'. *Cultural Studies* 19 (5): 548–67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380500365473>.
- Hemmings, Clare. 2012. 'Affective Solidarity: Feminist Reflexivity and Political Transformation'. *Feminist Theory* 13 (2): 147–61. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700112442643>.
- Kelly, Danielle, Brona Nic Giolla Easpaig, and Paola Castillo. 2023. "'You Game Like a Girl": Perceptions of Gender and Competence in Gaming'. *Games and Culture* 18 (1): 62–78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120221077730>.
- Kim, Hyeslin. 2009. 'Women's Games in Japan: Gendered Identity and Narrative Construction'. *Theory, Culture & Society* 26 (2–3): 165–88. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409103132>.
- Lai, Zishan, and Tingting Liu. 2024. "'Protecting Our Female Gaze Rights": Chinese Female Gamers' and Game Producers' Negotiations with Government Restrictions on Erotic Material'. *Games and Culture* 19 (1): 3–23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120231151300>.
- Lei, Qinyuan, Ran Tang, Hiu Man Ho, Han Zhou, Jingyi Guo, and Zilu Tang. 2024. 'A Game of Love for Women: Social Support in Otome Game Mr. Love: Queen's Choice in China'. *Proceedings of the CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, May 11, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3613904.3642306>.
- Liu, Tingting, and Zishan Lai. 2022. 'From Non-Player Characters to Othered Participants: Chinese Women's Gaming Experience in the "Free" Digital Market'. *Information, Communication & Society* 25 (3): 376–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1791217>.
- Saito, K. 2021. 'From Novels to Video Games: Romantic Love and Narrative Form in Japanese Visual Novels and Romance Adventure Games. *Arts*, 10 (3), 42'. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/Arts10030042> [Hämtad: 2022-02-08].
- Song, Wen, and Jesse Fox. 2016. 'Playing for Love in a Romantic Video Game: Avatar Identification, Parasocial Relationships, and Chinese Women's Romantic Beliefs'.

Mass Communication and Society 19 (2): 197–215.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2015.1077972>.