

# Making Virtual Romance Real: Intimacy and Relational Labor in Otome Games Cosplay Commission

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## Keywords

Otome games, cosplay commission, gender, feminism, identity transformation, relational labor

## INTRODUCTION

This study examines how Chinese otome game players construct virtual to real intimacy through the emerging phenomenon, ‘cosplay commissions’, where they pay cosplayers to portray game characters and perform scripted encounters (e.g. Chen et al. 2025; Zhou et al. 2024). Unlike the virtual romance already designed in otome games, 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). Cosplay commissions bring in-game intimacy into offline interaction and reshape dynamics of identity, expectation, and power among participants. Otome games are especially relevant to this practice because they are built around emotional connection and the cultivation of intimacy with fictional male characters (Gao et al., 2025). Cosplay commissions extend the parasocial intimacy developed through gameplay into face-to-face interaction, where players can experience physical presence and emotional response beyond the game interface.

Existing research on paid intimacy shows that emotional connection in commercial contexts is produced through negotiated emotional and relational work rather than spontaneous sentiment (Zelizer 2000). Emotional labor involves managing expressions to create a desired atmosphere, while relational labor highlights ongoing responsiveness that sustains connection (e.g. Hochschild 2022; Baym 2015). In digital romance, quasi-virtual intimacy explains how emotions formed in virtual settings seek grounding in interpersonal interaction (Chen et al. 2025). These perspectives help explain why emotions formed in otome gameplay come to be enacted in offline

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commissioned encounters. This study explores how commercial and emotional relationships are integrated within cosplay commissions, and analyzes emotional labor from the dual perspectives of players (commissioners) and cosplayers (commission recipients), thereby filling 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 players' and cosplayers' perceptions of intimacy, authenticity, and self-expression?

## **METHODOLOGY**

Semi-structured interviews were used to examine how players and cosplayers construct intimacy and negotiate identity in cosplay commissions. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling on Xiaohongshu, requiring at least six months of experience with otome games and cosplay commissions. Snowball sampling was applied afterward. The final sample included 25 participants, consisting of 7 cosplayers and 18 players (further interviews are planned to follow). Interviews centered on three stages of the commission process: pre-commission communication, offline arranged date experiences, and post-commission reflections involving emotional feedback and payment. Supplementary materials such as scripts, chat logs, and scenario descriptions were collected. Interview data were analyzed through thematic analysis.

## **FINDINGS**

Firstly, players enter commissions with strong emotional attachments to otome game characters and hope to receive emotional responses that the game characters cannot offer. Intimacy unfolds throughout the commission process. Before the commission, questionnaires and schedule planning allow both players and cosplayers to begin investing in the relationship, functioning as early relational labor. During the session, interaction cues such as tone and gesture guide how intimacy develops. Players understand authenticity as emerging through emotional resonance rather than role accuracy. The cosplayer's physical interaction, shared schedules, and emotional engagement make the relationship feel warm and personal, enabling players to project feelings toward virtual partners while receiving tangible emotional responses. After the commission, feedback and brief follow-up interaction require further relational and emotional labor and form part of the cosplayer's work.

Beyond financial needs, cosplayers are also motivated by the emotional satisfaction of being appreciated, a form of affective return described in emotional labor. Emotional expression, atmosphere building, and interaction design become expected parts of the service, showing how emotional warmth is packaged and exchanged as a commodity in this setting. The preference for "boyfriend mode" 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 becomes embodied interaction, resonating with Hutabarat-Nelson's (2017) argument that cosplay performance transforms fictional attachment into lived emotional experience.

Lastly, paid cosplay commissions reshape the traditional one-directional model of paid intimacy. Emotional labor is not delivered solely by the cosplayer but is jointly performed and jointly sustained. This collaborative production of intimacy reflects the relational work through which participants negotiate expectations, emotional boundaries, and mutual value. Players invest emotionally, help maintain the atmosphere, and provide feedback, while cosplayers adjust the depth and pacing of their performance based on players' reactions. Both sides contribute emotional effort and both receive emotional value (e.g. Chen et al. 2025). Cosplay commissions therefore form a shared labor of intimacy in which intimacy is co-produced and co-consumed, creating an interactional structure that differs from conventional one-side paid intimacy.

## CONCLUSION

This study shows that paid cosplay commissions provide a pathway for transforming virtual romance from otome games into embodied and emotionally reciprocal interaction. Players and cosplayers both invest emotion, and through preparation, live interaction, and post-session feedback, they construct a temporary but meaningful form of closeness. Players use commissions to make imagined affection feel real, while cosplayers gain not only income but also a sense of being valued through emotional recognition.

The study also highlights that intimacy in this context is actively performed and shaped by ongoing negotiation. Boundaries, rules, and agreed expectations help both sides remain emotionally engaged and make it possible for intimacy and monetary exchange to coexist. At the same time, this intimacy is influenced by commercial aims, personal limits, and occasional mismatched expectations. These findings extend existing research by showing how virtual intimacy within otome games is grounded, negotiated, and emotionally sustained through collaborative labor in a commercialized setting.

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