

From Solo Players to Fan Girls: A Study on the Fan-ization Trend in the Emotional Dynamics of College Students Playing Otome Games

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Abstract

With the explosive growth of otome games, their immersive romantic experiences have reshaped the intimate relationship practices and behaviors of contemporary female players. Focusing on players of the phenomenal 3D otome game *Love and Deepspace*, this study uses in-depth interviews and participant observation to explore the emotional dynamic cycle mechanism and fan-circle-like trend among college student players. The findings reveal two core paths of emotional transformation: gradual and leapfrog. Gradual transformers evolve from solo players to "quasi-fan" members via online-offline social integration, while leapfrog ones directly join group interactions through real social resources. Intertwined virtual-real emotional practices give rise to multiple contradictions: virtual dependence reduces real interpersonal alienation. Fan-circle-like behaviors intensify player conflicts, and identity shows self-fragmentation. Based on this, we need to construct a collaborative governance system from three aspects: reshaping the virtual-reality boundary through media literacy education, urging game manufacturers to fulfill their main responsibilities, and strengthening government regulatory guidance. This system will support the healthy development of the otome game industry and the rational growth of players, and provide a new perspective for understanding the emotional practices and identity construction of young women in the digital age.

Keywords

Otome Games; Emotional Dynamic Cycle; Fan - circle - like Tendency; Love and Deepspace

Introduction

Otome games are games centered around female protagonists, where players complete tasks and challenge dungeons by assuming the role of the female lead. During this process, female players interact with multiple virtual male characters and gradually increase their affection toward them, ultimately establishing romantic

relationships with one or more of these virtual male characters. Currently, otome games have evolved from 2D to high-quality 3D dynamic scenes, with overall interaction modes and narrative experiences becoming more diversified.

1. Origin of the Research

Currently, virtual companionship, virtual lovers, and virtual idols have driven the rise of non-embodied emotional product platforms. Among them, virtual companions provide customers with highly realistic emotional services through specific service 'personas' and carefully crafted romantic scenarios [1]; Virtual lovers build a deep emotional connection with customers through methods such as “creating a relaxed and sweet atmosphere” and “showing care, proactively understanding the customers” needs [2], meeting each customer's unique needs, Virtual idols establish emotional bonds with audiences through their highly personalized image design and diversified content output, and demonstrate distinct 'humanized' characteristics in scenarios such as concerts, live broadcasts, and social media interactions, enabling them to create strong emotional resonance with fans. They are all endowed with human-like attributes, becoming an important part of human social composition, making the boundaries between the game world and the real world increasingly blurred.

In this process, the emotional experience of otome game players becomes richer, and they develop intimate imaginations of the virtual male protagonists. This is an imitation of an ideal intimate relationship — players, through interactions with virtual characters, shift their emotional exploration from romantic love to a love of fusion. Once otome game players immerse themselves in intimate fantasies, they unconsciously invest a lot of emotional labor. This is because female gamers, under the influence of patriarchal discourse hegemony, face a dual exploitation—both emotional and temporal. This invisible exploitation subtly transforms them into "digital laborers" for gaming capital: on one hand, through their voluntary posting and comment management on social media, gamers reduce developers' promotional costs while simultaneously enhancing the game's brand reputation and market influence among user communities; On the other hand, the quantified emotional labor reduces emotions to simplified and stereotypical forms, gradually turning them into fast-consumption commodities that ultimately lose their depth and authenticity. Driven by breakthroughs in emerging technologies such as AIGC and the metaverse, these virtual characters embody the utopian ideals and value pursuits of young people that differ from reality [3]. Thus, the emotions of otome gamers began to diverge: some regarded the male protagonist in the game as a one-on-one virtual lover, nurturing intimate online relationships; others preferred sharing game details and gameplay strategies with friends, forming communities centered around shared interests; while still others viewed the virtual protagonist as an idol, organizing birthday celebrations, engaging in comment moderation, and

promoting his popularity through data-driven strategies. These players engage in debates over supporting different characters and develop varying emotional attachments based on their distinct motivations. These phenomena reflect the growing complexity within the otome gaming community, increasingly exhibiting characteristics of fan circle fragmentation.

Based on this, the paper focuses on the genuine emotional needs of otome gamers, exploring how players evolve from simple romantic relationships with virtual characters to establishing real-life intimacy with their in-game partners, and how their exclusive attachment to romantic relationships transforms into a fan culture-like admiration.

2. Research Subjects and Methods

According to QuestMobile's 2024 "She Economy" Insight Report, PapeGames' "Love and Deep Space" leads the female-oriented gaming market with an absolute advantage of 6.781 million monthly active users (MAUs)[4]; by the start of 2025, its global user base had surpassed the 50-million mark[5]. As China's first 3D otome-oriented game, "Love and Deep Space" completely eliminates dialogue boxes and static character art designs through its seamless first-person narrative. Throughout the main storyline and select side quests, the game employs cinematic-style visuals and action sequences, immersing players in the role of a film's protagonist. This approach creates more direct and engaging interactions with the male lead, effectively breaking the "fourth wall". Players can also upload their own photos to customize their characters and create personalized images. This successful breakthrough attracted numerous players who had previously never encountered or followed otome games. Thus, as a typical yet innovative otome game, "Love and Deep Space" provides rich material for exploring the psychological motivations and behavioral patterns of contemporary otome gamers.

The study employed in-depth interviews and participant observation methods. A one-month observation was conducted on multiple online platforms including Weibo, TikTok, and Xiaohongshu. Participants joined the official Weibo sub-forums of the main characters in "Love and Deep Space" to gain deeper insights into the dynamics of the player community. Through online recruitment and referrals from friends, a total of 15 core players of "Love and Deep Space" were gathered (identified as P1, P2, ..., P15). During the recruitment and screening process, players with limited knowledge of the game were excluded—specifically those who had only heard of it or occasionally watched short promotional videos. To protect the privacy of respondents and enhance their willingness to self-disclose, this study chose to conduct online interviews; each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Respondent basic information: 10 undergraduates, 5 graduate students; ages concentrated between 20-23 years; 7 open-world game players; the majority of players are single, totaling 13 (see the table below for details).

Table 1. Basic Information of Respondents

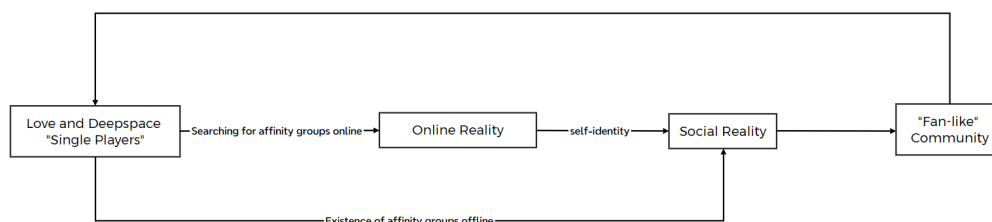
Study subjects	Age	Education level	Game playing duration	Single or not
P1	22	postgraduate	launch player	Single
P2	21	postgraduate	four months	Single
P3	20	undergraduate	launch player	Single
P4	21	postgraduate	launch player	Single
P5	20	undergraduate	launch player	Single
P6	20	undergraduate	one month	Single
P7	22	undergraduate	four months	Not
P8	20	undergraduate	three months	Single
P9	22	undergraduate	launch player	Single
P10	22	postgraduate	launch player	Single
P11	23	postgraduate	five months	Not
P12	20	undergraduate	four months	Single
P13	21	undergraduate	launch player	Single
P14	21	undergraduate	one month	Single
P15	20	undergraduate	three months	Single

3. The Emotional Dynamic Cycle of Female gamers and Its Underlying Mechanisms

3.1. Two Emotional Dynamic Cycle Paths of Female Gamers

The study finds two emotional transformation paths: gradual cycle and leapfrogging cycle. (see Figure 1 for details).

Figure 1. Emotional dynamic cycle pathway map of otome gamers



3.1.1. Progressive cyclical path: Single-player → Online reality → Social reality → "fan-like" community → Single-player again

In early gameplay, players build digital intimacy with virtual characters through frequent interactions, fostering belonging and identity. But virtual emotions alone cannot satisfy ongoing needs, leading to emotional fatigue. They then seek enjoyment by sharing experiences with like-minded others. However, such communities are often lacking in real life, so players turn to social platforms and online forums. Gradually, they form genuine social networks. Some players become real-life friends with in-game companions, extending virtual emotions offline. They join fan-like activities—virtual character birthday celebrations, comment moderation—forming a "fan-like" community. Yet some feel a gap between expectation and reality after joining, developing disillusionment with social interactions. As Interviewer P1 said: “*His Super Topic was full of toxic fans who*

brutally attacked other characters—I was shocked by the malice.”

These negative experiences make some players resistant to fan culture. They gradually distance themselves from the "fan-like" community and return to a singular emotional bond with their virtual male protagonist.

3.1.2. Leaping Cyclic Path: Single-Player → Social Reality → 'Fan-Like' Community → Single-Player Again

Unlike gradual paths, leapfrog path players directly use their existing real-world social networks. They already have stable offline communities where they share gaming experiences, bypassing the "online reality" phase to integrate quickly into "fan-like" groups through real-world interactions. This model enhances emotional immersion more directly. However, these players may also experience emotional or social burnout. Complex group dynamics and fan disputes often dampen enthusiasm, prompting a return to single-player mode to reconnect with virtual characters. Compared to gradual paths, leapfrog paths initiate emotional development more decisively but are more susceptible to existing relationship fluctuations. This pattern highlights the pivotal role of real-world social interactions in players' emotional experiences. As P2 said: *" We shared cards and plots at first, but online fights over male protagonists made me uncomfortable. Now I just watch the story alone."*

3.2. Behind the “Emotional Dynamic Cycle” of Otome Game Players

These two cyclical patterns reveal a typical phenomenon: in private settings, otome gamers crave exclusive emotional companionship and fulfillment from their male character roles; in public spaces, however, they tend to idolize the virtual male protagonist as a symbol of personal emotional identification and group belonging. This process reflects the dynamic nature of emotional adaptation in virtual reality, characterized by the alternating and intermingling of virtual and real experiences.

3.2.1. From Virtual Games to the Real World: The Multidimensional Extension of Emotional Needs

The virtual world created by otome games is ultimately limited. Repetitive game content and fixed gameplay mechanics often leave players feeling bored, inevitably eroding their sense of novelty. Although game mechanics or paid subscriptions compel players to log in daily, this passive engagement actually diminishes the game's appeal. As the respondent stated:

" My monthly subscription forces daily logins to earn rewards. Tasks take five minutes, then boredom. Meow cards were fun at first but became routine." (P2).

While the "fan-like" community fosters a stronger sense of belonging, some players experience disappointment after joining, even developing a sense of disillusionment toward its social dynamics. Against this backdrop, to address the lack of virtual

emotional engagement, some players have begun seeking new sources of emotional fulfillment, enhancing their gaming experience through real-life interactions to satisfy deeper psychological needs. As more and more players seek like-minded gaming companions in real life, interest-based communities have emerged, united by shared passions. They expand their social circles through online platforms like Xiaohongshu and Weibo, hoping to find someone in real life with whom they can confide and share their thoughts. As one player put it:

"Otome games are ultimately virtual, but in real life, I need outlets for expression and sharing—so it's only natural that I seek a 'partner' to build more tangible, intimate relationships" (P4).

This online-centric "emotional connection" significantly enhances players' sense of belonging and trust, deepening their bonds with each other and allowing the virtual emotional experience to be sustained and elevated within the digital realm. For these players, online interaction is not just an extension of the gaming experience, but also a vital means of emotional connection.

3.2.2. From Online Reality to Social Reality: The Self-Deepening of Identity Resonance

Self-identity primarily consists of identity and personality. Identity refers to an individual's identification with certain members of an organization—that is, their perception of alignment between themselves and other members. Personality refers to an individual's understanding of 'who I am,' specifically their perception of their uniqueness within a group [6]. Through interactions with their social circles, otome gamers not only strengthen their social networks by sharing emotions and resources but also deepen their sense of self-identity and belonging. One player mentioned: *"Playing alone makes me want to share, but without fellow players I feel left out. With companions, we understand each other."* (P6).

The identity-practicing mechanism inherent in offline interactive engagement has given rise to a symbolic interaction network where the virtual and the real intertwine. Especially when players transform virtual romance into intimate narratives between close friends, this not only strengthens the sense of group identity but also creates unique emotional memories through personalized interpretations. This interaction internalizes game symbols as cognitive frameworks, thereby reinforcing psychological dependence on virtual relationships.

3.2.3. From Solo Players to Fan Communities: The Emergence of "Fan-like" Characteristics Among Otome Game Players

The virtual male protagonist has captured widespread attention among players thanks to his human-like personality, nuanced emotional depth, immersive gameplay experience, and the exceptional casting of voice actors. These players have gradually acquired the traits characteristic of fans, such as addictiveness, carnivalesque spirit, communality, and consumerism. These players have

established a fan organization with extensive outreach and strong core cohesion through social media platforms such as Sina Super Topics and Xiaohongshu. The broad accessibility is manifested in the fact that these organizations impose virtually no entry barriers for ordinary fans; participants simply need to follow the relevant celebrity super topics or fan club accounts to join. The core cohesion is evident in the management layer, which not only features high entry thresholds and a small membership base but also exhibits a tightly organized structure [7]. As one player put it: "*Weibo's data monitoring and blocking feel just like celebrity fan routines—subtly different, but basically the same*" (P7).

Notably, as the player's "fascinating companion," the virtual male protagonist holds great appeal. Many otome gamers have created Weibo fan subreddits (Super Topics) for their virtual partners. Each has a fan leader and a clear internal structure. Die-hard fans (hosts) plan birthday events and manage comment moderation to ensure smooth operations, while coordinating casual fans to strengthen community cohesion. This highly organized fan culture mirrors that of celebrity fan bases. One player mentioned: "His fan group required loyalty to one male lead—check-ins, review monitoring—just like celebrity fan culture." (P9).

Additionally, players can create fan groups on Weibo, where there are dedicated data statisticians and casual fans who share merchandise related to the male protagonist. These fan communities serve as gathering and interaction spaces for dispersed individual players, fostering growing cohesion among them.

3.2.4. From Being Tagged to Being Boycotted: The Contradictory Identity of Players versus Fans

Fan culture has always been a hot topic of social interest. When discussing fan culture, another closely related term is "fan girl" [8]. In the public perception, "fan club girls" and otome gamers are two distinct parallel groups that are difficult to directly connect. However, during actual interviews, many otome gamers have observed numerous similarities between their behavior and that of other players versus that of fan community members. Nevertheless, many players explicitly oppose such practices and characterize their actions as "*defending the rights of their loved ones*," insisting that "*we cannot be simply categorized as a fan community*" (P14).

The otome gaming community has shown signs of fragmentation. Some players treat the virtual male protagonist as a romantic partner with strong exclusivity; others view him as an idol—exclusivity fades, admiration grows. The latter group's behavior mirrors fan culture patterns, notably through collective actions, reflecting players' ambiguous identity. This differentiation increases community complexity. Players are reluctant to call themselves fans mainly because:

First, emotional "cleanliness obsession." In otome games, players establish intimate and profound emotional connections with virtual characters, rather than engaging

in mere "idol worship" or "star-chasing." *As a result, players tend to view rights protection and comment moderation as defending the interests of their 'idols,' rather than seeking resources or influence for them like typical fan communities. This emotional specificity makes them resistant to being labeled as mere fans. Many players exhibit an exclusive desire toward their virtual characters: "It feels strange to like the same character, after all, this is a romance game."* (P12) "I generally reject sharing partners; I can't accept sharing an object, even though for most people it's just a virtual character." (P3) "I refuse sharing because seeing others post about me making advances makes me a bit jealous." (P6) Clearly, unlike real-life idol fans, otome players do not wish to share their characters with others. This sense of exclusivity further drives them to reject the 'fan club' label, in order to preserve this emotional exclusivity.

Second, aversion toward fan community behavior. One player remarked, "N I think the fan community and the otome gaming community are quite different, yet upon closer reflection, they're actually quite similar... To be honest, it's a bit strange—their behavior isn't much different from that of fans, but when the topic comes up, they tend to react strongly against it" (P11). Many otome gamers deliberately maintain a distance from their fan communities, believing that fan behaviors stem primarily from fervent admiration and collective actions toward real-life idols, whereas their own actions are driven by personal emotional needs and their relationship with virtual characters. Therefore, they are reluctant to identify themselves as fans of fan communities, believing it would diminish their personal emotional connection with the virtual characters.

Third, the ambiguity of identity. On one hand, otome gamers enhance their sense of participation and belonging in the virtual world through actions such as advocating for their rights and moderating comments; on the other hand, they wish to avoid being equated with traditional fan communities, believing that their relationship with the virtual male protagonist is more personal and unique. This ambiguity leads them to refuse to identify as 'fans,' instead using their actions to maintain and enhance their perceived status as players.

4. Issues and Solutions in the Trend of College Female Gamers Becoming Fan Communities

4.1. Problem Identification

4.1.1. Heavy dependence on virtual emotions erodes real-life relationship boundaries

Otome games create a unique emotional interaction space for players, where they meet, grow close, and ultimately fall in love with virtual male protagonists. This experience leads them to construct an idealized model of intimate relationships within the virtual world.

On one hand, the "emotional utopia" created by technology may exacerbate players'

sense of alienation from real-life intimate relationships. In reality, however, very few people truly match these idealized scenarios. As a result, players often feel disappointed and dissatisfied when faced with actual romantic opportunities, leading to a lack of interest in real-life relationships. On the other hand, players in virtual romance not only gain emotional fulfillment but also enjoy the pleasure of controlling interaction details, thereby avoiding the uncertainties inherent in complex real-world relationships. In the game, the virtual male protagonist remains constantly by the player character's side, offering unconditional support and praise while fulfilling all of the player's emotional needs.

Such experiences prompt players to compare them with real-life interpersonal relationships, creating a striking contrast. As a result, female gamers who are long-term immersed in otome video games are more susceptible to the influence of simulated social relationships, leading them to develop unrealistic, idealized expectations regarding real-life marital and romantic relationships [9]. Many respondents explicitly stated a lack of interest in real-life relationships, considering virtual male protagonists to be "more perfect and easier to control" (P4, P11).

4.1.2. Internal conflicts among player communities hinder the healthy development of the otome game industry

Conflicts within the otome game community are not merely about differing preferences for virtual characters. Driven by fandomization, they reflect a struggle over collective identity and symbolic power. Virtual characters, once sources of emotional resonance, become boundaries of group identity. The community splits into in-groups and out-groups, with differences amplified into open hostility. In-group players emphasize their character's depth and complexity to legitimize their emotional attachment, while out-group players are dismissed as having poor taste or lacking understanding.

As a result, emotional projections detach from the game text and turn into exclusive identity markers, giving rise to toxic solo fans (*du-wei*). Group moderators reinforce cohesion through comment control and data-driven support, while ordinary players join in. Attacking rivals becomes a show of loyalty, pushing discourse toward extremism and personal attacks—mirroring mainstream idol fandoms.

Continuous conflict disrupts community harmony, causing many players to leave and leading to a loss of social capital. Moreover, these fights spill into public spaces like Weibo and Xiaohongshu, reinforcing the public's perception of otome gamers as irrational—hindering the subculture's entry into the mainstream. In turn, developers face rising operational costs, ultimately threatening the industry's foundation.

4.1.3. The ambiguity in player identity leads to psychological conflicts and a sense of self-disconnection.

In the digital era, young women actively explore digital media and have developed

their own sense of subjectivity [10]. Players can effectively navigate between the dual spaces of the real and virtual worlds, easily overturning the existential logic of reality, breaking through real-life dilemmas, gaining virtual pleasure, and fulfilling their own "daydreams" [11]. While this dual survival strategy provides players with a buffer zone for emotional projection, it also conceals the risk of cognitive dissonance. On one hand, they view virtual characters as their exclusive romantic partners, emphasizing emotional privacy—"refusing to share my significant other" (P3); On the other hand, Players idolize virtual characters through data voting and collective support. This harms their mental health and real-life social interactions, making it hard to express genuine emotions. As some interviewees said, despite behaving like fans, they insist their expression is merely "defending the rights of their beloved" (P8), not star-chasing.

4.2. Addressing the Trend of Female Gamers Becoming Fan Communities

Coordinated efforts in education, manufacturer responsibility, and government oversight are needed to address otome players' fan culture dilemma, forming a multi-stakeholder governance framework for healthy industry and community development.

4.2.1. Educational Guidance

At the cognitive level, education should deconstruct virtual intimate relationships. Schools, especially secondary and tertiary institutions, should integrate media literacy into curricula—offering targeted courses or lectures to help students understand the virtual-real relationship. Psychological knowledge can explain why people seek virtual intimacy and how it differs from real-life relationships, helping students see that virtual intimacy often lacks the complexity and authenticity of real connections.

At the practical level, the focus is on strengthening real-life social skills. College clubs or community organizations can host themed activities on otome games' cultural and industrial aspects. Analyzing these games academically cultivates critical thinking and prevents blind immersion. Representative players can share case studies of escapism or fan community conflicts. These efforts help players reshape the virtual-real boundary, making virtual emotions a supplement to real life rather than a substitute.

4.2.2. Game Developers' Accountability

Balanced, coherent character design reduces cognitive dissonance. Overly perfect characters fuel unrealistic fantasies; adding flaws and growth paths makes them more real. This study introduces an "Emotional Responsibility Index" with three components: character perfection deviation, option balance, and emotional feedback

delay. These enhance realism and reduce over-reliance on virtual emotions without breaking immersion.

Narratives should promote healthy relationships. Beyond entertainment, they carry moral values. Developers can embed real-world principles into main stories, with side quests on conflict resolution and authentic gender dynamics. This reduces fantasies of unconditional obedience, making otome games a safe space for women's emotional growth.

Community management is essential. Otome games offer a digital space for entertainment, expression, and identity [12], but irrational competition leads to distorted behaviors. Developers must set clear rules and appoint professional admins to prevent conflict-driven traffic. Malicious accounts face tiered penalties: traffic restriction → muting → suspension. Publicizing violations deters bad behavior and ensures a healthy gaming environment.

4.2.3. Government supervision

With the evolution of Otome games and new challenges from players' fandom culture, existing regulations may prove insufficient. Moreover, some Otome games contain negative values such as extreme individualism and materialism, posing particular risks to adolescent players. Thus, governments must formulate targeted policies and clear content standards. Rigorously review games that induce excessive emotional investment, promote unhealthy values, or trigger extreme behavior. For games violating public order or promoting harmful ideologies, enforce takedowns, rectifications, and fines. Establish industry guidance funds and provide incentives for games that prioritize psychological well-being and positive values.

As the community expands to public platforms, irrational statements arise, requiring government intervention. The government should convene stakeholders to clarify responsibilities and establish industry standards. Require developers to strengthen community management and restrain misconduct. Urge social media to refine moderation, balancing commercial and social interests to prevent opinion spirals. Use public opinion monitoring to issue early warnings and foster harmonious development.

5. Conclusion

Currently, female gamers are rising, breaking down the gender barriers in the traditional gaming industry. At this stage, otome gamers have established a dynamic cyclical pattern within their emotionally intertwined virtual and real experiences. Through gradual or leapfrog emotional transitions, they progressively shift from intimate interactions in single-player modes to collective fan-like behaviors, giving rise to a distinct fan culture trend. How to address and resolve these issues, while helping them enjoy the fun of gaming without becoming overly addicted; and finding a balance between virtual and real-life experiences—not only impacts the long-term

development of this group and industry but also concerns the sustainable growth of China's society in the future.

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