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Virtual Smartphone Fan Fiction in the Age of AI: Technology Empowerment and Fan Culture Reproduction

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Abstract

This study examines virtual smartphone fan fiction, in which fans use large language models (LLMs) and front-end tools to create interactive smartphone interfaces. Through passwords, simulated apps, prewritten content, and AI-generated replies, readers explore a character's digital space and participate in an unfolding narrative. Using the perspectives of technology empowerment and fan-culture reproduction, this study analyzes the shift from screenshot-based stories to operable interfaces, the redistribution of authorship, the production of virtual intimacy, and the limits imposed by AI models, community norms, and platform governance. It argues that interfaces and AI responses now help shape narrative rhythm and reader agency, while creators increasingly act as system designers. However, greater technical access does not guarantee cultural recognition. The reproduction of fan culture is therefore shaped by the interaction of creators, readers, interfaces, models, and communities.

Keywords

Technology Empowerment; Fan Culture; Virtual Smartphone Simulator; Fan Fiction; Communication Ecology; Parasocial Relationships; Interface-Based Narrative

1. Introduction

Fans have long been the most active and proactive "prosumers" within the idol industry. In the digital age, fan participation has developed more complex mechanisms and taken on increasingly diverse forms.Around 2020, "Pick-Up-Your-Phone Literature"emerged in Chinese fan communities. Creators presented fictional chats and social-media posts attributed to celebrities as screenshots, inviting readers to imagine a relationship through familiar interface images. Although the format became popular, its narrative was essentially closed: readers viewed conversations already arranged by the author and could not change

their development.

More recently, fans have begun using LLMs and front-end frameworks to build virtual smartphone simulators and share them through web links. These simulated phones may contain passwords, chats, photo albums, social-media feeds, and notes, while AI characters respond to users in real time. Readers therefore move from viewing completed screenshots to entering and operating a simulated digital space. Within a platform content-production order dominated by the logic of traffic and commercial capital, generative AI serves as a new tool for fans to create utopian worlds, giving rise to new technical capacities, aesthetic sensibilities, and communal imagination.This is more than a technical upgrade; it changes how the narrative is experienced.

This practice connects fan culture, generative AI, and interface media. Earlier studies of participatory fan culture often focused on fans' reinterpretation and rewriting of existing texts. Virtual smartphone simulators introduce another form of participation: fans design systems in which narratives can be generated through configured character profiles, prompts, models, and interface functions. Readers also become operators whose actions and interactions help shape narrative pace and emotional experience.

Fans "poach" the texts that interest them, extracting them from their original contexts, breaking them into fragments, and then remixing and reassembling them according to their own interpretations, thereby highlighting and amplifying shared emotions. This process itself constitutes a "carnival of poachers," in which individual fans' interpretations are reshaped and reinforced through discussions and interactions with other online users.This study asks how the shift from screenshots to operable interfaces changes the reproduction of fan culture, and what conditions limit this change. It examines four dimensions: media transition, redistribution of authorship, interactive intimacy, and the technical, cultural, and institutional boundaries of empowerment.

2. From Screenshots to Interfaces: The Media Transition in Fan-Fiction Narratives

2.1. The Closed Nature of Screenshot-Based Narration

The narrative effect of "Pick-Up-Your-Phone Literature" derives from a carefully constructed media simulation. Authors use virtual chat generators such as "talkmaker" or actually create group chats to produce chat screenshots, fabricate conversations between two or more people, and post the virtual chat records in image form on online social platforms for fan-fiction enthusiasts to read.By adopting the visual form of chat screenshots, it invokes readers' bodily memories and interface literacy associated with everyday instant-messaging applications. Fictional conversations consequently acquire the quality of something "overheard" or "discovered," rather than something explicitly narrated. It also relies on a shared

"database" within fan communities to enable readers to complete meanings, thereby producing an efficient sense of immersion in a "quasi-intimate relationship." The crucial limitation, however, is that screenshots are closed. Readers encounter a completed interface snapshot, while the possibility of interaction is excluded from the narrative experience. Material details such as borders, timestamps, battery indicators, and signal bars function as atmospheric cues, but they do not constitute mechanisms for narrative progression.

2.2. The Interface as a Narrative Apparatus

The virtual smartphone simulator transforms the interface from a narrative shell into a narrative apparatus. In simulators built with frameworks such as Next.js, the lock-screen password serves as a narrative threshold: only after entering the correct password can readers "enter" the character's private space. This action itself produces a sense of intimacy based on being granted access. Messages in the chat interface are not displayed all at once; instead, they may "arrive" one by one according to preset timing or reader-triggered actions. AI characters may be assigned daily routines, memories, and long-term relationship histories, while delayed replies and read/unread indicators can create suspense. The arrangement of photo albums and social-media posts, as well as fragments left in notes, are no longer static atmospheric decorations. They become layers of information that readers can actively explore. The narrative is thus no longer a completed text delivered to the reader, but an environment gradually disclosed through sequences of operation.

The significance of this transition for communication studies lies in the interface's emergence as a producer of narrative rhythm and emotional suspense. In screenshot-based narration, pacing is controlled by the creator's selection and arrangement of screenshots. In a simulator, pacing is partly transferred to interface affordances: password protection creates a ritual of entry, the gradual arrival of messages produces waiting and anticipation, and the distinction between clickable and non-clickable areas defines the boundaries of reader agency. Affordance theory reminds us that the design features of technological objects both enable and constrain possible actions. What the simulator interface enables is a designed sense of agency. Readers feel that they are exploring and triggering events, yet the available paths and conditions for triggering them have already been structured by the creator's system design. This "structured sense of agency" is the central media characteristic distinguishing simulators from screenshots and conventional fan fiction.

3. Technology Empowerment and the Redistribution of Authorship

LLMs and accessible frameworks lower the technical threshold for building

interactive narrative environments. More importantly, they change the nature of fan authorship: creators increasingly design the conditions under which stories are generated rather than writing every line themselves..

3.1. From Writing to System Configuration

In "Pick-Up-Your-Phone Literature," although the author also assumes the role of performer, the core labor remains writing: designing dialogue, arranging plots, and selecting moments to capture in screenshots. In the production of virtual smartphone simulators, the object of creative labor shifts. Based on accounts of this practice, creating a "girlfriend simulator" may involve importing a game-instruction document of more than twenty pages into ChatGPT, Gemini, or Claude, testing and comparing different models, and configuring character boundaries, narrative pacing, and attribute systems. Open-source projects on GitHub provide creative systems involving "character cards," "world information," "presets," and "regular expressions." AI functions somewhat like a dungeon master in a role-playing game: it advances the plot, plays non-player characters, and generates random events, rather than simply writing dialogue word by word. The creator's task is not to write a story in the conventional sense, but to construct the conditions under which a story can occur, establish rules, and adjust parameters.

This practice approaches a form of "system authorship." Authorship is no longer expressed primarily through word-by-word control of a text, but through control over the conditions of generation: which personality traits are included in the character card, which response patterns are established through regular expressions, and which model is judged to perform better in maintaining character consistency and avoiding immersion-breaking responses. Some commentators have described this process as a set of skills that could be "polished and included on a résumé," suggesting that its technical complexity has moved beyond the conventional image of fan labor as unpaid work undertaken purely out of love.The widespread adoption and popularity of AI-generated content in fan culture lie in its ability to create customized texts tailored to fans' preferences, thereby constructing a seemingly "real" world and creating a utopia that fulfills their emotional and psychological needs, allowing fans to realize their fantasies.

3.2. Asymmetries of Visibility in the Redistribution of Authorship

The redistribution of authorship is accompanied by an asymmetry of visibility. Within fan communities, the quality of a simulator is often attributed to the creator's understanding of the character and narrative design, while the AI model's contribution—how it interprets prompts and fills in details that have not been explicitly specified—tends to recede into the background. When readers feel that "this is exactly what the character would say," praise is directed toward the creator's ability to capture the character, rather than toward the model's probabilistic choices.

This asymmetry makes it difficult for the identity of the "system author" to be fully recognized in community discourse. What becomes visible is the creator's aesthetic judgment and control over characterization; what remains obscured is the technical labor of configuring a generative system.

3.3. Tensions between Community Evaluation and AI-Generated Content

A deeper tension emerges between community evaluation systems and AI-generated content. A study of 157 active members of fan communities found that attitudes toward AI-assisted creation ranged between cautious acceptance and concerns about authenticity and ethics, with participants placing particular emphasis on transparency. In Chinese fan communities, this tension can be expressed more sharply. AI-generated fan works are criticized for having "formulaic syntax" and lacking a human touch, and are sometimes placed at the bottom of an informal hierarchy of creative value. Community members have also developed practices of identifying AI-generated content at a glance. This means that the technological empowerment on which virtual smartphone simulators depend does not automatically translate into cultural legitimacy within fan communities. Creators must respond to two sets of expectations simultaneously: on the technological side, AI output must convincingly reproduce the character; on the community side, the work must avoid being dismissed as "AI-made." The redistribution of authorship is therefore not a smooth transfer, but an ongoing negotiation between technical capabilities and community norms.

4. Producing a Sense of Reality through Interaction: Parasocial Feedback and Emotional Labor

The appeal of virtual smartphone simulators is not limited to technological novelty. For self-insert and shipping fans, they offer a more controllable experience of imagined intimacy with an idol or fictional character.

4.1. Material Cues and Ontological Framing

Existing research provides an important empirical basis for understanding this dimension. A qualitative study involving 18 self-insert fans who had extensive experience interacting with AI clones of idols found that pre-existing parasocial attachment lowers the threshold for interaction with AI characters and scaffolds deeper self-disclosure. The emotional experiences fans gain through interactions with AI agents can, in turn, feed back into their perceptions of real idols, generating emotional dependence and tension between virtual intimacy and real-world distance. In virtual smartphone simulators, this process of "virtual-real feedback" receives additional material support. The simulator provides not only an AI conversation partner but also a set of contextual material cues: lock-screen

wallpapers, notification bars, battery indicators, photographs taken from seemingly candid perspectives, and fragments of everyday life left in notes. The function of these cues is not simply to make the simulation realistic. Rather, they anchor AI conversational behavior in an interface environment that can be perceived as "the character's life," reinforcing the ontological frame that the user is entering a specific person's digital space.

4.2. Interaction, Agency, and a Sense of Possession

Interaction plays a particularly important role in this framework. Entering passwords, swiping, clicking, and waiting for replies to "arrive" all draw on bodily habits and interface knowledge acquired through everyday smartphone use. When these habits are transferred into an environment designed by fans and powered by AI, they produce more than the familiarity of use; they also create a sense of agency. Readers appear to uncover a relationship through their actions rather than passively receive a narrative. This sense of agency has an affinity with the feeling of possession associated with parasocial relationships. In the simulator, "I" am not simply watching a story about an idol; I am operating a phone that belongs to the idol and triggering the idol's responses. A report by Huxiu captures the duality of this experience. On the one hand, the simulator "does provide an emotional outlet for self-insert fans." On the other hand, fans' awareness of their real-world identities can repeatedly pull them out of immersion. One user described moving from being deeply absorbed in the simulator to suddenly returning to the perspective of a fan and feeling uneasy when reflecting on their in-game behavior. The symbol of the "girlfriend" itself carries complex and ambivalent emotions in fan culture: it is both an entry point into romantic fantasy and a projection of a position that may be rejected or scrutinized in reality. The simulator's immersive quality is built precisely upon this semi-enclosed virtual space, which is continually permeated by real-world knowledge.

4.3. The Dual Nature of Emotional Labor

From the perspective of emotional labor, the production and use of simulators also reveal forms of labor obscured by the discourse of "creating for love." The time and technical skills creators invest in adjusting character settings, testing models, and correcting immersion-breaking responses extend beyond conventional writing and enter the intersection of technical configuration and emotional design. Such labor is generally circulated through free links, and creators do not directly profit from it, while commercial AI models may benefit from usage data and the vitality of the broader ecosystem. At the same time, players' interactions constitute a form of emotional labor. They must identify and maintain character consistency within AI-generated responses, adjust their expectations when the AI automatically rationalizes implausible inputs, and repeatedly recalibrate themselves between

immersion and detachment.In this process, users engage in unpaid labor on behalf of capital by leveraging their emotional investment to expand the influence of original works. On the surface, capital owners appear to officially incorporate fan creators' works through initiatives such as fan creation competitions. In practice, however, these initiatives serve to encourage more creators to participate, thereby attracting greater user attention to the original works and subtly guiding and controlling users' interests. The tension between the unpaid nature of this labor and the autonomy it affords is an important question for the political economy of communication.

5. Conclusion

The transition introduced at the beginning of this study—from screenshots to interfaces, and from reading a completed story to operating an environment in which a story unfolds—is not simply a change in narrative medium. It represents a structural reorganization of the mechanisms through which fan culture is reproduced. Technology empowerment shifts fans from writers toward system designers, readers from interpreters toward operators, and narrative pacing from the author's selection and arrangement of content partly toward interface affordances and AI feedback mechanisms. Through interaction, parasocial relationships acquire a tangible sense of reality. Yet this reality remains subject to ongoing negotiation with fans' awareness of their real-world identities, community evaluation norms, and emerging governance frameworks.

The implications of this phenomenon for communication research are that the entry of AI into fan culture requires us to reconsider not only how fans use technology, but also how technology reorganizes the relationships among authors, texts, readers, and communities within fan culture. the development of digital media technologies has further expanded the boundaries of participatory fan culture. Fans are no longer merely recipients of cultural products; instead, they actively engage in cultural production and meaning-making through collective intelligence, media technologies, and community collaboration.The classical framework of participatory culture centers on the relationship between texts and audiences. Virtual smartphone simulators, by contrast, reveal a multidimensional configuration of interactions among humans, interfaces, models, and communities. Within this configuration, empowerment and constraint are not two successive stages, but two sides of the same ecological process. Fans' creativity is released through technological conditions while simultaneously being shaped by technical limitations, community norms, and institutional environments. Understanding this duality may be essential to grasping the trajectory of fan culture in the age of AI.

This study has several limitations. Its empirical materials are drawn primarily from public reports, community discussions, and existing studies. It has not yet conducted systematic fieldwork on the interface texts of specific simulators or on the

operational practices of their creators and users. Future research could proceed in two directions. First, representative simulator works could be selected for detailed analysis of interface affordances and narrative structures, examining the specific mechanisms through which "operation" differs from "reading." Second, in-depth interviews could be conducted with simulator creators and users to understand practices such as adjusting character settings, identifying out-of-character responses, and switching between immersion and vigilance through fans' own accounts. Only by examining the act of "operation" at the empirical level can the relationship between technology empowerment and the reproduction of fan culture move from assertion toward explanation.

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