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"Cyber Intimacy" in the Digital Age: A Literature Review of Otome Games and Youth Emotional Subculture

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Abstract

With the iteration of digital technology and changes in the emotional needs of young people, otome games, as a unique emotional medium, have undergone profound changes in form and meaning. Taking time as the main thread, this study systematically reviews the development process of otome games in China and deeply analyzes the logic of emotional subculture behind them. This study also reflects on digital intimate relationships and critically examines the ethical challenges that may be caused by the intervention of generative artificial intelligence.

Keywords

otome games, cyber intimacy, emotional labor, generative AI, human-machine intimate relationship, emotional subculture

1. Introduction

Today, the digital wave is sweeping across the world, and the forms of interpersonal communication in human society are undergoing major changes. Mobile Internet technology is constantly being updated, and artificial intelligence technology is also gradually being integrated into everyday life. Against this background, "cyber intimacy," a new form of emotional connection, has begun to become popular among young people [1]. Otome games are a highly representative example of this phenomenon. They are gradually no longer a niche subculture, but are slowly entering the public view, and they can also be used to observe the emotional and psychological needs of contemporary youth as well as their daily patterns of social interaction.

"Otome" comes from Japanese and means "unmarried young woman" or "girl." "Otome games" specifically refer to a game type that takes young women as its main audience, uses female players as the first-person perspective, and centers on plot interaction and romantic experiences between the heroine and multiple male characters. Since Angelique, launched by Koei Co., Ltd. in Japan in 1994, the game category of otome games has been formally established [2]. With its unique "female-oriented" narrative perspective, it has created an exclusive game world for female players. In the 21st century, with the popularization of smartphones, domestic otome games such as Love and Producer, Light and Night, and Love and Deepspace have been released one after another, and this game category has experienced explosive growth in the Chinese market [3]. These games have not only repeatedly achieved strong results on bestseller lists in app stores, but have

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also generated many related industrial chains, including merchandise, cosplay commissions, and offline exhibitions, showing remarkable commercial value.

However, the wide popularity of otome games cannot be attributed only to commercial success. Behind this phenomenon is the true spiritual condition of contemporary youth in a digital living environment. The pace of modern social life is very fast, and young people are often deeply trapped in the pressure caused by emotional management: they need to maintain stable emotions at all times at work, keep a fixed image in everyday social interaction, and face many responsibilities in real intimate relationships. These factors continuously form a mental burden. By contrast, otome games create an emotional utopia with low risk and high emotional value. In it, players can obtain timely, pure emotional responses that also highly match their personal expectations. This kind of burden-free emotional dependence precisely fits the psychological defense mechanism formed by young people in a highly competitive environment, and it also creates a harbor where they can temporarily put down their guard and achieve psychological healing [4].

From the perspective of social psychology, this kind of "cyber intimacy" cannot simply be equated with escaping reality. It is in fact an attempt by young people to construct self-identity in the digital age. Goffman's dramaturgical theory can explain this phenomenon well: through role immersion, players project their ideal selves into the virtual world and experience equal interaction and emotional initiative that are difficult to obtain in real life [5]. Otome games are not only entertainment products for passing time, but also a form of emotional compensation and cultural practice. This phenomenon reflects young women's thinking about and reconstruction of traditional romantic patterns. In games, they directly face their own emotional demands, learn to establish healthy intimate relationships, and can also find their own position and gain a sense of belonging through consumption behavior.

Although otome games provide emotional comfort for young women, attention should also be paid to the social and ethical issues they raise. Blind consumption by minors, the blurred boundary between the virtual and the real, and reduced social interaction caused by excessive immersion in games all show that emotions in the digital age may face the risk of alienation. When "instant replies" become a service that can be bought with money and intimate relationships are measured by algorithms, it is also necessary to think carefully: do emotional connections built by technology bring people closer to each other, or do they lead to social emptiness?

Through an in-depth review of otome games as a youth emotional subculture, this study discusses the social psychological motivations, cultural characteristics, and potential social influences behind "cyber intimacy." Through this social phenomenon in the digital age, this study seeks to more deeply understand the emotional choices and real living conditions of contemporary youth between the virtual and the real.

2. Germination and Rise: The Introduction of Otome Games and Early Studies of Emotional Projection (Mid-2010s to 2017)

2.1 Localized Implementation

As a female-oriented romance simulation game originating in Japan, otome games underwent significant localization adjustments after entering the domestic market. This process involved not only cultural adaptation, but also the optimization of gameplay and narrative strategies, so as to better fit the emotional needs and aesthetic preferences of young Chinese players. At the cultural level, localization adjustments were mainly reflected in character settings, plot backgrounds, and language expression. For example, early otome games introduced into China began to incorporate traditional Chinese festivals, historical elements, and modern urban scenes, thereby weakening the sense of distance caused by Japanese cultural symbols and strengthening players' cultural identity [6]. In terms of gameplay, developers added social interaction functions, such as friend systems and guild activities, according to the gaming habits of domestic players, so as to promote connection and emotional resonance among players. These adjustments not only reduced cultural barriers, but also significantly improved young players' acceptance of otome games, laying the foundation for their initial popularization in the domestic market [7]. From the perspective of communication studies, the localization of otome games also reflects the ability of youth subculture to accept and transform emerging entertainment forms. Studies show that the otome games currently on the market all contain certain cultural value identifications in order to cater to Chinese players. For example, the "I" in some games has ideas such as self-improvement and concern for both family and country. Such characters with strong emotional identification not only satisfy

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players' need for identification with local culture, but also strengthen the emotional appeal of the games to a certain extent [8]. At the same time, localization adjustments are also reflected in marketing strategies. Developers carry out precise promotion through social media platforms and use the influence of KOLs (key opinion leaders) to expand the visibility of games among young people. This multi-channel communication model further promoted the rooting and development of otome games in the domestic market and accumulated a user base for their later explosive growth [9].

2.2 Emotional Consumption as "Escapism"

In the early stage of the development of otome games, young players' emotional consumption behavior showed an obvious tendency toward "escapism." This tendency was mainly reflected in players temporarily getting rid of the pressure and anxiety of real life through the virtual world constructed by games, thereby obtaining emotional comfort and satisfaction. Studies show that otome games provide players with an idealized space for emotional projection through carefully designed narrative texts and visual presentation. In this space, players can establish deep emotional connections with virtual characters and feel the warmth of being cared for and understood through interactive experiences [10]. For example, male protagonists in games are often shaped as flawless figures. They not only have outstanding appearances, but are also gentle and considerate in personality. This setting greatly caters to young women's fantasies about ideal partners and also provides them with a form of alternative emotional compensation. However, the relationship between this emotional consumption behavior and "escapism" has also attracted attention and discussion in academia. On the one hand, otome games do provide young players with an effective way to release emotions. Especially in the social context of an accelerated pace of life, when many people experience setbacks in real intimate relationships, they become an important tool for relieving loneliness [11]. On the other hand, excessive dependence on virtual emotions may cause players to become alienated from real social interaction and even develop a certain psychological dependence. The references point out that after some players are immersed in otome games for a long time, they gradually regard emotional experiences in the virtual world as substitutes for real life, and this trend may further intensify their sense of social isolation [12]. In addition, capital has also played a role in fueling this process. By continuously introducing new characters and new plots, it stimulates players' desire to consume and turns emotional consumption into a continuous commercial activity.

3. Outbreak and Development: Domestic Development and the Emergence of Emotional Labor (2017-2022)

3.1 Hit Products and Emotional Labor

Existing studies propose that players of otome games are not only consumers who passively receive emotional supply. Through continuous interaction and financial investment, they actively participate in the construction of virtual intimate relationships and continuously promote the deepening of such emotional connections [13]. Some scholars have taken Love and Producer as a research object and analyzed its sudden popularity, arguing that the emergence of this kind of hit otome game is not accidental [14]. Whether players spend money in daily play, spend time completing tasks, or gain favorability through daily phone calls and replies to Moments, these practices are essentially a form of emotional labor [15]. This emotional labor is further projected into real life. On the birthday of Zhou Qiluo, one of the male protagonists of Love and Producer, some female players spent a large amount of money to buy screen advertisements in Times Square in New York to celebrate for him; some even bought an asteroid and named it after Zhou Qiluo [16]. This kind of emotional labor exists not only between players and game characters, but also spreads into fan circles. Secondary creations such as fan works and merchandise production require players to invest not only money, but also a large amount of time and energy, which also makes user stickiness stronger [17]. At the same time, long-term and high-intensity emotional investment also contains hidden risks. As a commercial product, game content is inevitably associated with consumption, and commercial capital can easily obtain profits from it. While players gain emotional value, they may gradually regard emotions as commodities, causing the relationship between love and desire to be inevitably distorted into an unequal transaction [12]. A synthesis of existing literature shows that scholars have fully discussed the exploitation faced by players after they become "digital laborers." By comparison, there is still insufficient in-depth analysis of what psychological comfort

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players gain when they perform emotional labor and to what extent virtual relationships replace real intimate relationships.

3.2 Expansion of Fan Communities

With the popularity of hit otome games, the establishment and expansion of fan communities became an important feature of the development of youth emotional subculture in this period. Taking Love and Producer as an example, its large fan group quickly gathered on major social platforms. Game players usually called themselves “Mrs. Li,” “Mrs. Zhou,” “Mrs. Bai,” or “Mrs. Xu,” and these forms of address carried a strong sense of identity [18]. The “wives” formed fan communities with distinctive characteristics. These fan communities not only provided players with platforms for exchanging game experiences, but also promoted secondary creation activities around game content, such as fan painting, fiction writing, and video editing. Although fan creation in some games touches the gray area of infringement, the official team of Love and Producer strongly supports fans’ secondary creation activities. They hope to further increase the popularity of the game and expand the market through fan-made works [19]. Obviously, this kind of secondary creation activity based on common interests and strongly supported by the official side has greatly enriched the cultural connotation of otome games and has gradually turned them into a unique youth subcultural phenomenon. In addition to online secondary creation activities, players also further deepen community cohesion by organizing offline activities, such as cosplay commissions and comic exhibitions. It is worth noting that these interaction patterns are often accompanied by a strong sense of identity. In communities, players can not only find a sense of belonging, but also obtain emotional support through communication with other members. Studies show that the interaction of fan communities plays a crucial role in shaping youth emotional subculture. It not only provides individuals with channels for emotional expression, but also promotes the formation and dissemination of collective values [20]. This unique cultural phenomenon not only reflects the function of otome games as emotional carriers, but also reveals their core position in the construction of youth emotional subculture.

3.3 Benefits for Related Industries Derived from Otome Games

At the same time, capital also noticed the huge business opportunities contained in related industries. Various merchandise items modeled on male protagonists in otome games emerged one after another. Cotton dolls, “guzi” (from the English word “goods”), and other merchandise often captured the affection of the vast majority of female players. In the 2022 Tmall 618 sales ranking for trendy toy shops, the official flagship stores of Love and Producer, “Paper Games Xinyi Flagship Store,” and Light and Night Flagship Store ranked seventh and eighth respectively, even surpassing the sales of better-known flagship stores such as Bilibili and Sanrio [21]. It can thus be seen that the merchandise market derived from otome games has strong commercial potential. In order to maintain the popularity of games and obtain greater profits, capital usually also conducts cross-sector IP co-branding. For example, Love and Producer has carried out various forms of cross-sector cooperation with well-known brands such as KFC, Watsons, and LUX. Different from the past model of simply selling merchandise, co-branding with products that have a sense of everyday life greatly strengthens players’ feeling that the male protagonists of otome games are “by my side,” brings players a completely new feeling, and makes players more willing to pay for this sense of reality [19].

Studies at this stage show that otome games are no longer merely a form of entertainment. Players can vent the pressure of real life through games and obtain comfort from conversations with male protagonists. They have gradually become an important way for contemporary youth to express emotions, seek identity, and explore self-identity.

4. Evolution and Reconstruction: “Cyber Intimacy” under the Intervention of AI (2023 to the Present)

4.1 Interactive Changes Caused by the Development of AI

With the rapid development of generative artificial intelligence technology, the interaction model of otome games is undergoing a profound technological transformation. Traditional otome games usually rely on the narrative method of “preset scripts,” meaning that players’ choices in the game can only trigger limited and

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predesigned plot branches. However, the introduction of generative AI has overturned this interaction model. Through powerful algorithmic models and natural language processing capabilities, games can realize a more intelligent and personalized "algorithmic companion" type of interactive experience [22]. This interactive change not only enhances the sense of immersion in games, but also provides players with richer emotional feedback and more possibilities for interaction. Specifically, the application of generative AI in otome games is reflected in many aspects. Based on calculation using large-scale data, AI can generate dynamic dialogue content, making the language and behavior of game characters more similar to real people and reducing the "machine-like" feeling. Second, by analyzing players' choices and preferences in real time, AI can dynamically adjust plot directions and character responses, thereby creating highly personalized game experiences [23]. One of the most successful examples of AI application is undoubtedly the voice acting of Mo Yi, one of the male protagonists of Tears of Themis. The project team produced the male protagonist's voice based on Anti-Entropy AI technology, and players have said that it is no different from human voice acting. Together, these technological innovations have promoted the transformation of otome games from a single "preset script" model to a complex "algorithmic companion" model, providing players with a new way to construct digital intimate relationships. It can therefore be seen that generative AI is not only a product of technological progress, but also the result of the otome game industry's continuous pursuit of innovation and breakthrough.

4.2 Changes in Human-Machine Intimate Relationships

The intervention of generative AI has not only changed the technical architecture of otome games, but also deeply influenced the nature of the relationship between players and game characters, promoting the gradual transformation from "parasocial interaction" to "human-machine intimate relationship." In traditional otome games, interaction between players and game characters is usually defined as "parasocial interaction," that is, a phenomenon of emotional projection based on imagination and role-playing. Although players may develop strong emotional dependence on game characters, this relationship is still essentially a one-way and unreal form of interaction [24]. With the application of generative AI technology, game characters have begun to show higher levels of intelligence and emotional expression. This has caused the relationship between players and characters to gradually move beyond the traditional category of "parasocial interaction" and toward a more complex stage of "human-machine intimate relationship." In this transformation process, the key role of generative AI lies in giving game characters more "human" characteristics. For example, through natural language generation technology and affective computing models, game characters can communicate with players in a more natural and delicate way, and can even adjust their own words and behavior according to changes in players' emotions. This highly realistic interactive experience makes it easier for players to regard game characters as individuals with independent personalities rather than as purely virtual beings [7]. It can be seen that the functions of generative AI not only improve the attractiveness of games, but also constitute an important practical case for the study of human-computer interaction and digital intimate relationships.

It should be recognized that although the rise of generative artificial intelligence has brought many innovations and possibilities, it has also triggered broad discussions about its social meaning and ethical influence. For example, some studies show that excessive immersion in human-machine intimate relationships may lead to a decline in players' interpersonal communication ability in real life and may even produce excessive dependence on virtual relationships [24]. At the same time, the powerful ability of generative AI to simulate emotions and construct intimate relationships has also raised concerns about algorithmic manipulation and privacy protection. This study will next introduce in detail the challenges that this kind of "cyber intimacy" may bring.

5. Research Summary and Prospects

Through a review of the existing literature, it can be found that academic perspectives on otome games are not fixed, but present a clear evolutionary path along with changes in game forms and the development of technology. At the same time, while fruitful results have been achieved, existing studies still have room for further deepening.

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5.1 Evolution of Research Perspectives: From Emotional Consumption to Digital Intimacy

Existing studies of otome games have gone through a deepening process from "escaping reality and emotional compensation," to "emotional labor and fan communities," and then to "algorithmic interaction and human-machine intimacy."

In the early stage, studies mainly focused on players' psychological motivations and regarded otome games as a form of "escapist" emotional consumption. Scholars generally believed that young players temporarily got rid of real-life pressure through the virtual world constructed by games and obtained idealized emotional projection and comfort from it. This perspective revealed the initial function of otome games as an emotional compensation mechanism.

With the explosive growth of domestic otome games, research perspectives turned to interactions between players and games and between players and communities, with "emotional labor" and "fan communities" becoming core issues. Studies no longer regarded players as passive recipients of emotions, but emphasized that they actively participated in the construction of virtual intimate relationships through continuous investment of time and money. This emotional labor deepened the connection between players and game characters and also gave rise to active fan communities and rich secondary creation, causing otome games to evolve into a unique youth subcultural phenomenon. After entering the era of generative AI, the research frontier began to focus on the reconstruction of intimate relationships by digital technology. Scholars began to pay attention to how AI technology overturns traditional interaction models and creates more personalized and anthropomorphic "algorithmic companions." This has caused the relationship between players and game characters to gradually transform from one-way "parasocial interaction" into a two-way "human-machine intimate relationship," providing a new research field for understanding intimate relationships in the digital age.

5.2 Shortcomings of Existing Studies and Prospects

Although existing studies have made significant progress, through systematic review, this study argues that the following aspects are still worthy of further discussion:

First, critical analysis of platform mechanisms and commercial capital is insufficient. Existing studies pay more attention to players' subjective emotional experiences, but there is still insufficient discussion of how platforms guide, shape, and even exploit such emotions through algorithmic mechanisms and business models. How emotional relationships are penetrated and used by the logic of capital, and the operating mechanisms behind this, still need to be revealed more deeply.

Second, discussion of the continuous production mechanism of otome games as an emotional subculture is insufficient. Existing studies mostly explain the popularity of otome games from the perspective of individual players or fan communities, but there is still a lack of systematic theoretical explanation of how this subculture achieves continuous expansion through game content, commercial operations, and other links.

Third, research on how AI technology reshapes the structure of intimate relationships is still in its initial stage. The intervention of generative AI has brought revolutionary changes to otome games, but current discussions are mostly concentrated on technical applications or ethical risks. Relevant research is still in the early stage of exploration regarding how AI fundamentally changes the subjectivity and interaction modes of virtual characters, as well as the deep structural transformation of intimate relationships caused by this. It still needs more in-depth analysis from multidisciplinary perspectives such as sociology and communication studies.

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