

A 'Smart Win': A Glimpse into the Behavioral Practices of Otome Game Players from a Post-Feminist Perspective

Xinyi Qi

Guangdong Ocean University, Zhanjiang, China
xiyiqi040906@gmail.com

Abstract. Against the backdrop of a "cold reality, hot virtual reality" situation—the deep development of the digital entertainment industry and the shifting social and family dynamics—domestic otome games have transformed from mere emotional consumer goods into an important arena for contemporary women to construct their identities and hedge risks. This study takes domestic otome game players as its research subjects, adopting a post-feminist perspective to explore how players reclaim their individual subjectivity within an industrialized romantic narrative through a set of "intellectual" strategies. The study employs questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews. Through thematic analysis of 135 valid questionnaires and interview texts with 15 in-depth players, it was found that players are not the "daydreamers" who cannot distinguish between reality and fiction, as traditionally assumed in academia, but rather highly proactive actors. The results show that players use intellectual strategies to gain psychological empowerment within a virtual ideal self, and through the domain established by community connections, they transform emotional premiums into real-world survival skills through fan labor. The conclusion indicates that the behavioral practices of otome game players are essentially strategic risk avoidance and cognitive training implemented in virtual space under the guise of consumerism, completing a subjectivity reshaping from passive audience to active practitioner. This research fills a gap in existing research regarding the logic of player agency in reality.

Keywords: Otome Games, community practice, post-feminism, winning strategies, subjectivity construction

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of the digital entertainment industry, female gamers have become an indispensable force in the Chinese game market. According to the "2025 China Game Industry Report" released by the China Audio-Visual and Digital Publishing Association (GPC) on December 19, 2025, the actual sales revenue of the domestic game market reached 168 billion yuan, a year-on-year increase of 14.08%; the number of game users in China reached 679 million, also a record high. Although the industry as a whole has entered a stage of stock competition, the otome game sector still shows strong growth resilience. Data shows that in 2025, among the top 100 highest-grossing mobile games in China, role-playing games ranked first, accounting for 20%. The "Female-Oriented

Game Survey Report" released by the China Audio-Visual and Digital Publishing Association (GPC) on December 18, 2025, shows that the market size of otome games in China reached 8 billion yuan in 2024, a year-on-year increase of 124.1%, with its share of the overall game market growing much faster than the industry average. This "paying for love" model has not only brought huge commercial revenue but has also made otome games a sub-category worth hundreds of billions of yuan, becoming an important window for observing the social mentality of contemporary women.

The core entry point of this study is this seemingly contradictory social spectacle: on the one hand, the risk of intimate relationships in reality continues to rise, and on the other hand, the virtual emotional market is unprecedentedly prosperous. This hedging relationship of "this disappears and that grows" provides an excellent window to observe the changes of women's subjectivity in the digital age. If the girl game is only regarded as a kind of "daydream" or consumption trap, it might be considered biased; this study is more inclined to explore how women can complete the reconstruction of self-subjectivity in emotional avoidance and cognitive training through this media technology. In terms of specific argumentation logic, this study attempts to move beyond the simple consumerism framework and turn to feminism as the theoretical basis to explore how players can find "victory in paradoxes" in many difficulties. By combing the academic context of post-feminism, Proteus effect and digital labor at home and abroad, this study tries to clarify the internal mechanism of players' transformation from passive audiences to active practitioners.

In order to ensure the solid conclusion, the author was not satisfied with theoretical deduction alone, but go deep into the front line to obtain first-hand evidence through 135 valid questionnaires and in-depth interviews with 15 senior players. These interviewees cover a variety of groups from students to professional creators, and their real feedback forms the skeleton of this study. The ultimate goal of this research is: not only to analyze how players can get psychological empowerment through strategic games, but also to build a complete set of explanation models for players' "wise victory" behavior on this basis. From macro-industry evolution to micro-data deconstruction, the following chapter will try to restore the game of identity and power played by contemporary women in digital space.

2. Literature review

In the relevant fields involved in this study, many scholars have conducted in-depth discussions from different dimensions. At the market level, Li Ya studied the entertainment needs of women during fragmented time in "Analysis and Marketing Strategy Research of Otome Game Market with Female Users as the Main Focus", which contributed to this study in terms of analyzing the growth momentum of the segmented market [1]. Miao Yumeng studied how players compensate for the lack of real emotions through consumption in "Research on Compensatory Consumption Behavior of otome game players", which provided support for this study in terms of understanding the psychological compensation motivation of players [2]. Ding Wenxian studied the extreme pursuit of "self-centered" experience by contemporary players in articles such as "Emotional Consumption and Rational Pursuit of Otome Mobile Games", which contributed to the analysis of consumption emotional tendencies [3]. At the level of psychological mechanisms, Wen Caiyun studied how the Proteus effect can effectively obscure reality in "Love, Games, and Daydreams: An Analysis of the Psychological Mechanism of Otome Games," contributing to the explanation of ideal self-construction [4]. Huang Lu studied the psychological motivation of the fantasy mechanism in "Fantasy and Identification: A Psychological Analysis of Players in Otome Games," which is enlightening for understanding the logic of player identification in this study [5]. With the deepening of subjectivity research, Sarah Christina Ganzorn, in "The Growth of the Otome Game Market: Fan

Labor and Otome The research of player behavior in "Game Community Online" introduced a post-feminist perspective, suggesting that players should be regarded as "rational and shrewd entrepreneurial actors," which contributed to the study on labor empowerment from a post-feminist perspective [6]. Gao Hao and Guo Ruqing studied how players cope with life challenges through emotional investment in "Quasi-social Interaction in Otome Games," contributing to the qualitative analysis of emotional benefits [7]. Liu Aihua studied in "When Feminist Consciousness and Romanticism Conflict in Games" that players' emotional investment in otome games is not blind indulgence, but a kind of emotional consumption based on self-pleasure and psychological value enhancement. They consume through... Virtual emotions are used to hedge against high-risk intimate relationships in reality, which contributes to the study of women's precise regulation and self-empowerment of their own quality of life in post-feminism [8]: Wang Yirou studied the attributes of the community as a platform for women to speak out in "Virtual Love Experience in Love and Producer", which contributed to this study in the dimension of social cognition [9]. Li Yixuan studied the visual mechanism of power reversal in "Female Gaze in Otome Games" [10]. Liu Tingli studied the game space of players in patriarchal narratives in "Negotiation-style Resistance: Female Images in Domestic Otome Games", which made a theoretical contribution to understanding the subjective status of players [11].

While existing research has built a solid foundation—covering everything from the psychological pull of virtual fantasies to the visual politics of the female gaze—there is still a noticeable gap in how we understand the "afterlife" of these digital experiences. Most studies tend to trap players within the role of a consumer, focusing on their emotional compensation or their presence within a fan hub. What's missing is a deeper look at how these women, specifically within the high-pressure social climate of 2025, are using "intelligence" to flip the script. We haven't fully explored how the psychological empowerment gained in a game translates into actual survival capital in a world where marriage and career structures are rapidly shifting. This paper steps into that void. Through a post-feminist lens, games are examined beyond the notion of mere "daydreams" and are instead analyzed as a practical arena. The goal here is to show how players shed the label of a passive audience and instead use their virtual identification to fuel real-world action and career-ready skills.

3. Research methods

3.1. Questionnaire survey

Rather than relying solely on theoretical assumptions, a questionnaire survey was employed to construct a grounded quantitative profile of the otome game community. This wasn't just about gathering numbers; it was about testing the water regarding their consumption habits and behavioral shifts. Drawing on Li Ya's methodological approach, the questionnaire was distributed via Weibo Supertopics and Xiaohongshu; of the 150 responses collected, 135 valid datasets were retained, allowing analysis of the tension between players' "emotional investment" and "real-world awareness." The questionnaire items were designed with a specific analytical logic, examining whether gaming duration, spending motivations, and attitudes toward real-life relationships collectively exhibited a pattern of "strategic winning."

3.2. Interview method

Quantitative data can show us the "what," but it often misses the "how" and "why." To get into the weeds of player motivation, the author followed up the survey with a series of in-depth interviews.

The beauty of this qualitative approach is its flexibility; it enabled the identification of subtle and strategic details that standard survey instruments are unable to capture. The author sat down virtually with 15 dedicated players—a mix ranging from students to professional creators who have turned their fandom into a career to conduct semi-structured conversations (Table 1). The questions focused on the real friction points: how they handle the clash between game scripts and their own feminist views, and how they actually "weaponize" game-learned skills in their real professional lives. Following the interviews, the transcripts were analyzed using a three-level coding system. This hybrid approach ensures that the proposed model of "intellectual victory" is not merely theoretical, but is grounded in the lived experiences of the players.

Table 1. Detailed record of interviewee coding

number	age	profession	Years of gameplay	Core Identity	Interview date	Interview format
A	31	Illustrator	8 years	The Great Creator of recreation and successfully monetized her career.	2025.12.16	Text interview
B	27	Bank assistant	4 years	Facing pressure to get married and deeply involved in community activities.	2025.12.16	Voice Interview
C	24	College student	3 years	Organize and manage communities, run side businesses about cotton doll.	2025.12.16	Voice Interview
D	26	graduate student	5 years	Organize and manage communities.	2025.12.16	Text interview
E	29	free-lancer	7 years	Reconstructing the Main Character.Personality by Writing Fanfiction.	2025.12.17	Text interview
F	23	interior designer	4 years	The Radical Party with a more extreme female gaze.	2025.12.17	Text interview
G	22	graduate student	4 years	Participate in the Party with a clear mind, consume wisely, and use games as emotional tools.	2025.12.17	Text interview
H	21	College student	3 years	Use games to hedge academic pressure and seek pure emotions.	2025.12.17	Voice Interview
I	25	Employee of a game company	5 years	The Great Creator of recreation.	2025.12.17	Text interview
J	19	community worker	2 years	Resolving Realistic Loneliness through Community Connection.	2025.12.18	Voice Interview
K	27	Video Editor	5 years	Making creative videos has improved her editing skills.	2025.12.18	Text interview
L	29	English teacher	3 years	Participate in the Party with a clear mind and to reject traditional marriage in reality.	2025.12.18	Text interview
M	24	College student	1.5 years	A hardcore gamer who plays games with filter-based effects.	2025.12.18	Text interview
N	21	Bookkeeper	2 years	Minimalist consumption, pursuing high emotional value, rejecting low-quality social interactions.	2025.12.18	Text interview
O	30	Cultural business owner	4years	Manage online stores in the Youshou area and learn private domain management.	2025.12.18	Text interview

4. Research results

4.1. Questionnaire results

The data from the 135 valid questionnaires paint a clear picture of the modern otome gamer: they are young, highly educated, and surprisingly pragmatic. Most respondents fall into the 18-25 age bracket (62.22%), with a staggering 88% holding an undergraduate degree or higher. This demographic profile immediately challenges the old academic stereotype of the "unthinking consumer."

Data analysis revealed was the spending pattern—while most players keep their monthly game-related expenses under 200 RMB, a dedicated 16% are willing to invest over 500 RMB. This isn't just reckless spending; it correlates strongly with a high level of "emotional identification" (averaging 3.73/5). Interestingly, the survey reveals that these players aren't replacing real-life social needs with games. Instead, they use games as a supplementary "emotional gym." Many respondents indicated that their virtual experiences actually make them more critical of traditional relationship dynamics in the real world. Rather than retreating from reality, they are using these digital spaces to calibrate their emotional expectations.

4.2. Interview results

Moving beyond the numbers, interviews with 15 intensive players revealed something far more nuanced than simple escapism. A recurring sentiment among the interviewees was the idea of the "community as a fortress." For instance, Player A mentioned that the online space acts as a vital safety net where shared anxieties about marriage and career are validated, not dismissed. It's a space where the "if-lines" of the game become a shared language for resisting social pressure. The transformation from a passive consumer to a "creative talent" was another striking thread in our conversations. Interviewees A and E, both of whom have been in the otome scene for nearly a decade, explained that their years of play eventually pushed them to pick up the pen and the brush themselves. They don't see secondary creation as a mere "labor of love." Instead, they view it as a strategic feedback loop. By sharing their work and refining their craft based on community reactions, they've managed to break away from the grind of traditional employment. For them, taking freelance work or managing an online store isn't just about the money—it's about the professional confidence they built from the ground up.

The study also noticed a very sophisticated level of "media literacy" in how players like K, G, and L handle their games. Player K, for example, taught herself high-end software like After Effects just to create birthday tributes for her favorite characters—a skill set that unexpectedly gave her a massive edge in the real-world job market. Meanwhile, G and L spoke about a kind of "narrative gymnastics" where they skillfully switch between being the heroine and acting as a director. They aren't just following the script; they are rewriting it in their heads and within their communities to challenge traditional gender roles. As E pointed out, this ability to create "self-sustaining emotional cycles" allows them to achieve a level of autonomy that makes traditional social expectations feel less like a requirement and more like an option they can choose to skip.

5. Discussion

The data collected in late 2025 forces a significant rethink of the "industrialized daydream" label so often pinned on otome games. While academic skeptics often worry that these hyper-idealized

digital romances lure women away from real-world responsibilities like marriage or childbearing, the reality on the ground is far more nuanced—and frankly, more strategic. What is observed is not a mindless slide into fantasy, but a "conscious descent". Players aren't just drifting; they are navigating within traditional gender expectations by intentionally entering these spaces to reclaim their own agency. It turns out contemporary women are perfectly capable of using consumerist tools to paint their own subjective reality.

This goes beyond simple fandom. The otome community has quietly morphed into a training ground for survival. Players were found to take the feedback they get in these digital circles and honing high-level professional skills—everything from narrative copywriting to complex video editing—and then paring that into actual career leverage. It's a form of collective intelligence. By connecting online, they build a shared psychological coping mechanism that helps them face real-life marriage pressures with a much cooler head, which is essentially the "Proteus Effect" in action, but with a practical twist: the confidence built while playing a high-status, decisive character doesn't stay in the game. It leaks back into their real lives. When a player gets used to being the one in the driver's seat emotionally, she's much less likely to settle for a mediocre or draining relationship in the real world. It's a subtle victory—less of a loud revolution and more of a quiet, strategic self-affirmation that works within the system to empower the individual.

6. Conclusion

Looking at the "cold reality vs. hot virtuality" of 2025, it's clear that domestic otome game players have found a way to turn digital consumption on its head. They aren't the passive, confused audience academia often makes them out to be. Instead, through clever perspective-shifting and community backing, they've managed to reshape industrialized romance narratives to serve their own ends. These games aren't just traps; they are gyms for cognitive training and risk avoidance.

By the time a player finishes a session, she's often converted "virtual" empowerment into real-world capital. This shift from a passive consumer to an active, strategic practitioner is a vital piece of how women are now navigating the digital media landscape. This research bridges a major gap by showing exactly how these virtual hours translate into tangible survival skills, effectively killing the myth that otome games are just a "daydream" or a waste of time.

The social paradoxes of 2025—manifested as social structural shifts—demonstrate that digital spaces have become a primary platform for the development of female identity. Moving forward, it is necessary to monitor how AI and more immersive tech will change these "smart winning" strategies. Future research should examine whether these patterns hold up across different cultures or if they provide a long-term boost to a woman's professional social mobility. The game, it seems, is only just beginning.

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