

How Women Construct Emotional Identity and Empower Themselves Through Romantic Mobile Games in China

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Abstract

In contemporary China, Otome mobile games—interactive romance simulations designed for female audiences—have emerged as significant cultural spaces where women engage in emotional self-construction, empowerment, and subjective expression. This paper explores how Chinese women utilize Otome games to articulate emotional resonance, affirm their self-worth through consumption, and navigate new forms of digital intimacy. Far from being mere escapism, Otome games provide an interactive emotional landscape where players exercise narrative authorship, rehearse relational agency, and cultivate emotional self-efficacy. Through monetized engagement, players transform consumption into acts of feminist self-assertion, challenging traditional gender norms and reframing emotional labor as valuable and autonomous. These digital platforms foster communal forms of emotional solidarity, enabling women to collectively reimagine intimacy, desire, and identity in ways that contest both mainstream media representations and entrenched patriarchal structures. By analyzing these dynamics, this study reveals how Otome games serve as profound mediums for cultural negotiation, emotional meaning-making, and the redefinition of female subjectivity within China's rapidly evolving digital and social landscape.

Keywords: Otome games, emotional identity, female empowerment, digital intimacy, narrative authorship

1. Introduction

In recent years, the popularity of Otome mobile games—narrative-driven romance simulation games designed primarily for women—has surged across China's digital entertainment landscape. These games, often centered on idealized romantic narratives and interactive storytelling, have transcended their initial function as casual leisure activities. Instead, they have evolved into emotionally immersive

platforms where users, predominantly young urban women, explore, construct, and affirm deeply personal affective identities. In a sociocultural environment where gender roles remain in flux and expressions of female desire are often constrained or marginalized, Otome games provide a rare digital sanctuary for emotional experimentation, self-narration, and agency.

The increasing popularity of these games is no

accident. It coincides with the rise of “she economy” in China—a market phenomenon and cultural shift that recognizes and monetizes female consumer power, autonomy, and lifestyle aspirations. Within this context, Otome games become not just sites of emotional engagement, but also terrains of social meaning and gender negotiation. These digital worlds simulate romantic companionship, emotional intimacy, and personalized attention, allowing players to craft idealized relational experiences that often serve as counterpoints to the emotional labor and alienation experienced in real-world interpersonal dynamics.

Unlike traditional gaming genres that emphasize competition, conquest, or strategy, Otome games prioritize emotional depth, relationship-building, and choice-driven storytelling. Through branching dialogue trees and customizable story arcs, female players are encouraged to make decisions that shape their character’s emotional journey. In doing so, they enact agency, express desire, and engage in reflective play that can mirror or reframe their real-life relational paradigms. These emotional narratives are not isolated fantasies; they are embedded in the sociotechnical infrastructure of mobile platforms, shaped by algorithmic recommendation systems, user-data feedback loops, and monetization mechanics that center emotional capital.

This paper seeks to explore how Chinese women construct emotional identity and empower themselves through their participation in Otome mobile games. It investigates two primary avenues through which these digital experiences foster meaning and autonomy: first, the ways in which affective interactions and narrative intimacy within the games elicit emotional resonance and a sense of being understood; and second, the manner in which consumption within these platforms becomes a practice of self-affirmation, whereby players translate spending into symbolic acts of self-worth and empowerment.

By analyzing these dynamics, the essay not only unpacks the cultural and psychological dimensions of Otome game engagement but also considers the broader implications for understanding female subjectivity in digital spaces. It argues that within the affective economies of mobile gaming, Chinese women articulate new forms of identity and intimacy that challenge conventional norms of gender,

desire, and relational labor. Far from being passive consumers, these players actively participate in the creation of meaning, emotional selfhood, and cultural agency—revealing the critical social significance of what might otherwise be dismissed as “virtual romance.”

2. Emotional Resonance and Constructing Identity

Otome games typically center around interactive romantic storylines involving idealized male characters—often portrayed as attentive, sensitive, emotionally intelligent, and unwaveringly supportive—designed to respond intimately to the player’s actions, dialogue choices, and emotional expressions. These meticulously constructed virtual relationships are the result of sophisticated narrative engineering, aimed at maximizing emotional resonance by simulating feelings of connection, validation, and personalized affection. For many Chinese women navigating a socio-cultural environment where emotional needs are often subordinated to familial obligations, rigid gender expectations, and hyper-competitive urban life, these games offer a rare experiential space where they are deeply seen, heard, and emotionally nurtured. In this simulated relational environment, players encounter a fantasy of emotional reciprocity that remains elusive in many real-world interactions.

Through the game’s branching narrative structures, players are empowered to actively shape their emotional journeys. Each choice—whether to confess affection, demand respect, assert boundaries, or pursue independence—becomes a significant narrative act that reflects the player’s inner desires and emotional priorities. Unlike passive modes of media consumption, Otome gameplay demands emotional decision-making, encouraging players to engage in responsive intimacy—a dynamic feedback loop where the player’s emotional investments are acknowledged, mirrored, and validated within the digital world. This interactive agency transforms the gaming experience into a semiotic playground for identity construction, where emotional selves are not inherited or externally imposed but actively authored through intimate, reflective engagement.

This phenomenon also exemplifies what theorists like Arlie Hochschild describe as affective labor—the management, regulation,

and production of emotions in social contexts, here adapted into a virtual, self-directed arena. Unlike the traditional forms of emotional labor women are socially conditioned to perform—such as managing familial harmony or workplace morale—the emotional labor within Otome games is voluntary, self-rewarding, and deeply personalized. Players are not expected to regulate others' emotions; instead, they invest in emotional experiences that prioritize their own feelings, desires, and emotional authenticity. Emotional labor is reconfigured from a site of exploitation into a tool for self-empowerment and emotional self-affirmation.

The narrative affordances of *Otome* games validate a broad spectrum of emotional expressions rarely sanctioned in traditional cultural scripts. Players can embody vulnerability without stigma, assert emotional needs without fear of reprisal, or reject romantic advances that fail to meet their standards for respect and care. These narrative possibilities function as emotional rehearsals, offering low-risk environments where players practice articulating their emotional truths, negotiating relational boundaries, and envisioning emotionally reciprocal partnerships. This capacity to rehearse and refine emotional agency marks a significant departure from cultural models that have historically valorized female emotional suppression and self-sacrifice.

In psychological terms, navigating the emotional labyrinths of *Otome* narratives cultivates what is known as *emotional self-efficacy*: the belief in one's ability to influence emotional dynamics and manage relational outcomes effectively. Each successful negotiation of intimacy, every articulation of need or boundary, reinforces players' confidence in their emotional competence. Rather than seeking external validation for their emotional worth, players internalize a coherent, self-directed emotional identity. They come to view their emotional experiences not as derivative of others' approval but as intrinsic, legitimate, and deserving of self-respect and nurturance.

Repeated engagement with emotionally rich, responsive narratives enables players to create what can be termed *affective archives*—reservoirs of emotional memory that extend beyond the gaming experience. These accumulated affective experiences—moments of being cherished, respected, understood—inform how players

perceive their own relational worth and emotional entitlement in everyday life. Rather than viewing gaming as mere escapism, these affective archives contribute to a gradual, iterative process of emotional meaning-making and self-authorship, providing players with emotional scripts and frameworks they may apply in offline relationships and self-conceptualizations.

The emotional resonance generated through Otome gameplay is neither superficial nor transient. It constitutes a profound cultural and psychological practice wherein Chinese women articulate, validate, and construct emotional selves in ways that defy traditional gender expectations and challenge the restrictive relational models embedded in their social landscapes. Through digital intimacy, they reconfigure emotional labor as a site of empowerment, narrative authorship as a form of self-construction, and consumption as an act of emotional and cultural resistance. In doing so, they demonstrate how even within commodified, technologically mediated environments, genuine acts of emotional self-making and feminist subjectivity can emerge.

3. Spending on Oneself: Consumption as Empowerment

A key component of Otome gameplay lies in its carefully designed monetization systems. Players are encouraged to purchase exclusive dialogue sequences, rare collectible character cards, elegant avatar outfits, limited-time romantic scenarios, and other premium content that personalizes and intensifies their emotional immersion. To external observers, these microtransactions may appear frivolous, a symptom of excessive commercialization or digital exploitation. However, for many women players, this consumption operates on an entirely different symbolic and affective register. It is not about material possession but about emotional investment: the conscious choice to nurture their own emotional worlds, to prioritize personal pleasure, and to reaffirm self-worth through acts of deliberate spending.

By investing in emotional experiences, players reframe their consumption as an affirmation of personal value. Every transaction becomes a declaration: that their emotional lives matter, that their fantasies are legitimate, and that their emotional satisfaction is worthy of financial

investment. In a cultural context where women's emotional needs have often been minimized or instrumentalized, this practice reclaims emotional fulfillment as a self-owned, self-funded right.

In contemporary Chinese society, the emergence of the "she economy" signifies a major cultural and economic shift. Urban Chinese women now possess unprecedented purchasing power, reshaping consumption as an act of personal expression, aspiration, and autonomy. However, this economic empowerment still operates within lingering gendered frameworks that idealize female sacrifice, emotional labor, and relational dependency.

Against this background, spending money on Otome games acquires profound counter-cultural significance. It challenges traditional relational scripts that suggest women must passively await affection, recognition, and validation from men. Instead, Otome players assert sovereign control over their emotional experiences, choosing when, how, and with whom to engage romantically. This sovereign consumption severs the link between emotional gratification and male approval, suggesting instead that intimacy, romance, and affection can be self-selected, self-created, and self-legitimized.

Through these acts, players are not just buying content—they are rewriting the narrative of romantic agency. They demonstrate that emotional satisfaction need not be contingent upon social norms, marital institutions, or heteronormative expectations. In doing so, they create new models of relational autonomy where desire is neither policed nor pathologized but celebrated as a personal right.

Another critical dimension of Otome consumption lies in its redefinition of emotional labor. In traditional heterosexual romantic economies, women's emotional labor—nurturing, empathizing, soothing—is expected yet often rendered invisible or devalued. In contrast, the Otome environment makes emotional labor explicit, curated, and valued. Romantic attention, emotional sensitivity, and responsiveness from male characters are premium commodities that players actively choose to invest in.

By paying for these carefully designed emotional interactions, female players symbolically affirm the worth of emotional labor.

They declare that being listened to, being cherished, and being emotionally prioritized is not a luxury but a necessity—one so valuable that it commands investment. This inversion of traditional emotional economies reconfigures intimacy itself: it reframes care and affection not as asymmetrical expectations but as services and gestures deserving of conscious selection and reward.

Through this dynamic, Otome players also redefine what constitutes valuable labor in relationships. Emotional attunement is no longer invisible, assumed, or expected for free—it is a prized component of relational experience, one that players actively seek, pay for, and curate according to their own emotional standards.

The practice of spending in Otome games suggests a more radical cultural implication: it reframes consumption from passive commodification to active self-making. Female players are not simply subjected to consumer culture; they use economic resources to co-author personalized emotional worlds, sculpt affective experiences aligned with their fantasies, and assert control over narratives of love, affection, and relational fulfillment.

In this context, consumption becomes a feminist act. It represents a refusal to subordinate emotional needs to external validation or patriarchal relational expectations. Instead, women claim the right to pursue emotional satisfaction, fantasy, and self-recognition on their own terms, without apology or shame.

The act of spending in Otome games is far more than a transaction—it is a complex performance of identity, autonomy, and feminist subjectivity. In these intimate, digitally mediated spaces, Chinese women transform everyday acts of micro-consumption into profound expressions of emotional agency and cultural resistance, revealing how private pleasures can become sites of public significance and socio-political critique.

4. Digital Intimacy and the Expression of Female Subjectivity

The digital intimacy enabled by Otome games fosters a distinctive and transformative form of cultural expression, one that moves beyond simple fantasy to become a vital site of meaning-making, emotional articulation, and gendered self-fashioning. These games do not merely reproduce traditional romantic scripts; rather, they reimagine the very structure of

intimacy through a user-centered, interactive model that prioritizes the woman's perspective, agency, and pleasure. Unlike mainstream media narratives, which often marginalize, distort, or commodify female desires, Otome games construct spaces where women's emotional experiences are not only acknowledged but celebrated, offering alternative imaginaries of love, reciprocity, and relational autonomy.

Within these immersive, emotionally charged environments, intimacy is not a static story delivered to a passive audience; it is a dynamic process shaped by the player's choices, desires, and interpretations. Through customizable avatars, branching dialogue trees, and relationship-building mechanics, players participate in narrative authorship—actively scripting their own emotional realities. Each decision made within the game becomes an act of relational and emotional world-building, allowing players to externalize and refine their ideals of love, respect, care, and mutual recognition. The Otome platform thus functions both as a mirror reflecting internal emotional needs and as a laboratory where alternative relational paradigms can be explored, practiced, and validated.

The male characters in Otome games, although virtual, are far more than empty romantic archetypes; they are symbolic vessels through which players negotiate complex emotional and relational themes. These interactions allow women to pose critical questions often suppressed or marginalized in real-world relationships: What does unconditional emotional support feel like? How should genuine respect and emotional attunement be expressed? What does it mean to establish boundaries without fear of emotional retaliation? In answering these questions through play, players rehearse the emotional scripts they aspire to enact in their offline lives, confronting and redefining notions of vulnerability, independence, and relational equity.

In the context of contemporary Chinese society—marked by rapid urbanization, shifting family structures, rising career competition, and escalating emotional fatigue—Otome games provide an urgently needed emotional refuge. They offer a simulated relational world where women can temporarily transcend the demands of filial piety, social conformity, and economic survival to center their own emotional narratives. Here, players are not daughters, workers, or

wives bound by societal expectations; they are emotional subjects free to imagine relationships that prioritize their needs, boundaries, and aspirations. This freedom allows women to momentarily reclaim a sense of emotional sovereignty often eroded by the pressures of modern life.

The emotional investments cultivated through Otome gameplay complicate conventional binaries between real and virtual, public and private, serious and frivolous. Emotional experiences within these “unreal” spaces are no less authentic or transformative for their digital mediation. Instead, they demonstrate that affective life is increasingly hybridized, with digital technologies expanding the field of emotional expression and experience. Otome players inhabit a hybrid subjectivity—one that seamlessly navigates between embodied emotions and virtual relationality—challenging reductive understandings of digital play as escapism and asserting its role as a legitimate extension of lived emotional life.

These digital performances of subjectivity are not politically neutral. By centering female emotional agency, Otome games offer subtle but potent critiques of prevailing gender hierarchies. They subvert cultural narratives that position women's emotions as secondary, excessive, or disruptive by portraying emotional needs and desires as central, legitimate, and narratively privileged. Through their engagements, players reassert the value of emotional experience, challenging the marginalization of affect within both public discourse and private relationships. This emotional re-centering constitutes a quiet but meaningful form of feminist resistance, redefining how intimacy, care, and emotional labor are valued and enacted.

Beyond the individual, Otome games foster communal forms of emotional solidarity through expansive fan communities, online forums, social media discussions, and creative cultural production such as fanfiction, fan art, and alternate storylines. These networks enable players to share emotional experiences, co-construct narratives of alternative romance, and validate each other's affective realities. In doing so, they extend the personal intimacy of gameplay into collective modes of emotional affirmation and feminist storytelling, creating digital publics where women's voices, fantasies, and emotional self-inventions are not only visible but celebrated.

Otome games, therefore, do not merely offer women a retreat into fantasy; they open up profound cultural spaces for emotional self-invention, communal validation, and feminist critique. Through the mechanisms of interactive intimacy and emotional authorship, women carve out new terrains for articulating desire, negotiating relational power, and affirming emotional agency. In a rapidly modernizing Chinese society, these games illuminate how digital intimacy serves not as an escape from reality, but as a critical medium through which female subjectivity is expressed, contested, and continuously reimagined.

5. Conclusion

Otome mobile games in China serve as far more than ephemeral entertainment; they have emerged as powerful cultural instruments through which women actively construct emotional identities, assert economic and emotional agency, and articulate complex subjectivities within the evolving landscapes of digital intimacy. In worlds designed around responsiveness, choice, and emotional resonance, Chinese women engage in profound acts of self-definition, using interactive romance not merely to fantasize but to rehearse, negotiate, and affirm their affective realities.

These games illuminate broader societal shifts in the understanding of female desire, autonomy, and relational agency. In a context where traditional models of femininity are being simultaneously reinforced and contested, Otome games create new arenas where emotional needs are not marginalized or pathologized but placed at the center of experience. They enable women to reclaim emotional labor for themselves, to monetize emotional value on their own terms, and to narrate their desires without shame or external validation. The experience of spending for emotional satisfaction, crafting individualized romantic arcs, and participating in community storytelling becomes an emancipatory practice—one that challenges the normative structures of both digital economies and gendered expectations.

Far from being mere escapism, Otome games constitute a meaningful and nuanced form of digital storytelling and cultural negotiation. They reveal how affect, agency, and identity intersect in a uniquely gendered and localized way, particularly within the pressures of China's rapid modernization, urban alienation, and

shifting gender politics. Through these platforms, women explore new configurations of intimacy that blend fantasy and authenticity, control and vulnerability, emotional realism and aspirational idealism.

Otome games invite a rethinking of what constitutes "real" emotional experiences. They show that emotional authenticity is not diminished by virtuality but can be expanded through it. The affective engagements within these games create genuine emotional impact, contributing to players' emotional self-efficacy, reinforcing their sense of value, and allowing for the rehearsal of relational models that may not yet be widely available in offline life.

The flourishing of Otome gaming culture among Chinese women reflects an emergent form of digital feminism—one that is subtle yet potent, personal yet collective. It exemplifies how even within commercially driven, algorithmically mediated spaces, women find avenues for resistance, self-affirmation, and imaginative reconstitution of the emotional self. It underscores the need to understand digital intimacy not as a retreat from reality but as a vibrant site of cultural production, emotional experimentation, and social critique.

Through the lens of Otome games, we can better appreciate the layered, dynamic, and often subversive ways that contemporary Chinese women are negotiating their place in a rapidly changing world—one digital love story at a time.

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