

Study on the Practice of Female Players' Love Games from the Perspective of Gender and Communication: An Example of Light and Night

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Abstract. In the electronic game market in China, the growing female player group and the increasingly popular female love games are strongly influencing the traditional gender pattern dominated by men in the field of electronic games. This paper takes the popular female love game *Light and Night* as the research object and analyzes the intrinsic motivation and behavioral characteristics of female players participating in the game, as well as the influence of the game on their love concept and love practice. It is found that female players participate in the game because their lack of self and love relationships in real life can be compensated in the game world. In the process of participating in the game, female players misappropriate the game text to perform participatory performances and use negotiated decoding to actively sort and construct the meaning of the game. *Light and Night* provides opportunities for female players to simulate love relationships and shape their love concepts, but it also causes their tendency to isolate themselves from real love. This paper holds that the female love games, represented by *Light and Night*, have a positive influence in promoting gender equality in the field of electronic games and giving female players the right to narrative and gaze.

Keywords: Gender and Communication Research; Female Love Games; Female Players; *Light and Night*.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, electronic games are dominated by males. According to statistics, as of 2022, the proportion of female mobile games accounted for 48.6%, which is basically equivalent to the proportion of male players. [1] As female players gradually occupy half of the game market, female love games targeting women are thriving. Among them, *Light and Night* has become the most popular female love game in the Chinese market with its huge user base and cross-platform topic. As a representative force challenging the gender pattern in the field of electronic games, the participation of female players in the game of *Light and Night* is a topic worthy of exploration and discussion, and the present paper takes this specific topic as the starting point for research.

2. Literature Review

Electronic games have both social attributes as interactive rituals and emerging media forms and are therefore included in multiple disciplines such as sociology, communication, and cultural research. Gender, as one of the most prominent issues in human society, is also fully reflected in the virtual society of electronic games. Based on this, this paper conducts a literature review in two sections, which are Gender and Communication Research and Gender Research in Electronic Games. Starting from a relatively macro-disciplinary category and a relatively micro research topic, it sorts out existing academic achievements and establishes the research scope of this paper.

2.1. Gender and Communication Research

The study of gender and communication is an interdisciplinary field of communication and gender studies, which not only explores media, communication, and popular culture from the perspective of

gender but also interprets the development of gender through the paradigm of communication theory and cultural research (Zhang, 2009). [2] Therefore, gender is the key theoretical basis that distinguishes this study from other topics in communication studies. Beauvoir (1949) once pointed out in *The Second Sex* that “women are not born, but acquired after birth”. [3] This viewpoint laid an important foundation for the formation of the concept of gender. Ann Oakley clearly distinguished social gender from physiological gender for the first time, pointing out that social gender was formed under the influence of social culture (Liu, 2001). [4] Social gender not only focuses on gender differences under social construction but also explores the social value judgments and deep power structures reflected behind gender differences, thereby discovering the fact that women are oppressed. Therefore, it is regarded as the central concept of feminist theory and a theoretical premise consensus among female research scholars.

The development history of gender and communication research is the gradual combination of integrating gender and communication studies, and in this process, two different research paradigms have emerged. The first approach focuses on the theory and research framework of communication studies, that is, introducing a gender perspective into the “5W” of communication studies, describing and explaining the gender differences and reasons that exist within the scope of communication studies (Zhang, 2015). [5] As Daphne Joanna Van der Pas (2020) found in her research on political media reporting, the media tends to report on the political activities of male politicians and the private lives of female politicians. [6] The second approach takes gender as the theoretical subject to further explore how the media presents and even creates and replicates the deep-seated reasons for unequal gender reality based on analyzing what kind of gender reality the media presents (Zhang, 2015). [7] For instance, Hannah Feldshu et al. (2017) found that “leftover women” in China are an artificial structure created by gender stereotypes rooted in Chinese social culture and further promoted by media that produce hidden gender discriminatory discourse. [8]

There are three main research areas in gender and communication research (Chen, 2001). [9] Firstly, research on media production focuses on female media professionals such as journalists [10] and streamers [11], focusing on the interaction between their feminine temperament, professional image, and professional activities. The second is the study of media content, which exposes the encoded gender meanings in media texts, such as analyzing the construction of female images in anime from dimensions such as profession, dominance, clothing, and violent behavior (Liu and Qian, 2021). [12] The third is the study of media reception, mainly exploring the cognition, attitude, and behavior of female audiences in media use, as well as the underlying motivations for female media exposure (Li et al., 2019). [13] As Xu and Gao (2019) pointed out, the online female gender aversion characterized by female audiences attacking and abusing female beauty bloggers is the result of women gradually internalizing gender discrimination. [14] This category of research emphasizes the individual practical experience of female audiences in the process of media reception while showcasing a distinct experiential theme that media reception reflects or participates in the gender identification and identity construction of female audiences.

2.2. Gender Research in Electronic Games

With the continuous innovation of media technology, the research object of gender and communication has gradually shifted from traditional mass media such as literary works, newspapers, and television to new media forms such as mobile phones and the Internet. As a trendy and highly interactive media form, electronic games naturally become the new favorite in this field.

Despite the increasing number of female players, the main audience of electronic games is still dominated by males, and electronic games are also traditionally regarded as male spaces (James D. Ivory, 2009). [15] Observing numerous electronic games targeting male players, it can be seen that female “second sex” status in the real world is projected into the virtual gaming society. Compared to the large number and dominant male characters, female characters are fewer in number and mostly in marginal and subordinate positions. Meanwhile, they are often excessively objectified and sexualized in image creation (Berlin Beasley & Tracy Collins Standley, 2002). [16]

At present, the cross-research on electronic games and females mainly focuses on two topics, that is, the presentation of female character images and female players. Research centering on the presentation of female character images often portrays female characters in electronic games from perspectives such as body, personality, and degree of importance. For example, through observations of electronic games released between 1983 and 2014, Teresa Lynch (2016) found that most female characters have protruding breasts and buttocks, and their clothes are exposed, which is particularly obvious in combat games. Although the number of female characters increases over time, games still tend to describe female characters as secondary characters. [17] Research focusing on female players pays more attention to the psychological motivations, practical experiences, and emotional experiences of women participating in electronic games. Many female players are unwilling to participate in electronic games as the gender of women and instead use anonymous online features to play the role of men in order to avoid harassment and bullying in the game (Huang et al., 2021). [18] For example, Lu and Yu (2022) found that female players in *The Sims* use narrative power to temporarily escape real life on the one hand, and on the other hand, replicate the mainstream values and power structures of real society in the virtual game space. [19]

Among a variety of game genres, the highest concentration of female players is in love games, especially female-oriented love games developed specifically for women. The popularity of this genre of the game seems to have broken through the gender stereotype that “electronic games belong to men”, established a virtual female space, and thus became a new research field for feminist scholars. The study of women in love games also focuses on two topics, that is, female presentation and female player, with most studies on female player pointing to the core element of romance. On the one hand, scholars have explored the psychological and emotional mechanisms of female players participating in such games. For instance, Wen and Zhou (2018) attributed the daydreaming experience of female players in love games to the construction needs of virtual ideal selves and the role expectations of ideal romantic partners. [20] On the other hand, it is demonstrated that the virtual romantic experience of female players is related to their real social life. For example, Wen (2016) [21] and Wu (2020) [22] used quantitative research methods to verify the correlation between factors such as role identity, quasi-social relationships, and romantic beliefs of female love game players. They found that immersing themselves in female love games not only enhances female players’ sense of identity with the game characters that they play but also deepens the quasi-social relationship between them and their virtual boyfriend, ultimately increasing their idealized expectations for intimate relationships, influencing their mate selection criteria and romantic tendencies.

2.3. Research Questions

It is found that the number of previous research on this topic is still limited and remains on the edge of communication research. At the same time, the existing research has three limitations:

From the perspective of the research paradigm, most of the relevant research adopts the research paradigm of communication research norms, supplemented by a gender perspective, while few studies adopt the more critical paradigm of social gender as the theoretical subject. Concerning the research content, the research on gender and communication with female love games as the media object and female players as the main object has certain innovative significance, but it lacks attention to the individual experience of female players participating in the game. In terms of research methods, the existing research focusing on female love game players basically adopts quantitative research methods, while the research uses qualitative methods is little. It is worth noting that these conclusions obtained through quantitative verification seem to have negative value judgments on this category of game.

In view of this, this study takes the female players of the popular female love game *Light and Night* as the research object, aiming at answering the following three questions, and trying to reflect on the interactive significance of female love game and its female players from the feminist perspective:

(1) What psychological motives do female players have to participate in the game?

- (2) What methods do female players take to participate in and interpret the game text, and what characteristics do they present?
- (3) How does *Light and Night* influence the love concept and love practice of female players?

3. Research Design

In this paper, the female players of *Light and Night* are taken as the research object, and two research methods of participatory observation and in-depth interview are adopted to describe and analyze the group, aiming at exploring the intrinsic motivation and behavioral characteristics of female players participating in the game, as well as the influence of the game on their love concept and love practice.

3.1. Research Object

Light and Night is a highly immersive interactive love mobile game produced by Tencent oriented to women. It was officially publicly tested on June 24th, 2021, and ranked first in the app store free game list on the day of its launch. In early 2022, it was shortlisted for the “Top Ten National IP Awards” game track in 2021.

The basic game mechanism of *Light and Night* is for players to enter the fictional modern city Guangqi City as new star designers, encounter five male protagonists with different styles, namely Xiao Yi, Lu Chen, Qi Sili, Xia Mingxing, and Charlie Su, and freely choose to have romantic relationships with them. Specifically, it can be divided into three sections: interactive storyline, card cultivation, and virtual social interaction. The interactive storyline includes the main storyline and an independent storyline with five male protagonists. Card cultivation includes two stages: unlocking and upgrading, with each card featuring a male protagonist as the main subject. Players unlock cards by drawing lots and upgrading them with specific items to unlock special storylines within the cards. Virtual social interaction refers to the WeChat-like social module in the game, where players can interact with the male protagonist in text, voice, and video based on specific themes, and can also browse the male protagonist and other characters’ social WeChat Moments.

As a female-oriented love game, the vast majority of users of *Light and Night* are females. Although the official restrictions limit the registration and login of underage users under 18 years old, through the Baidu search index and actual research, it has been found that there is still a certain number of underage players, and the true age of the game players is concentrated between 17 and 25 years old.

3.2. Research Methods

Table 1. Interviewee information

Number	Interviewee nickname	Age	Occupation	Region	Game participation duration
F1	Anna	20	Undergraduate	Taizhou Zhejiang Province	3 months
F2	Bonnie	21	Undergraduate	Guangzhou, Guangdong Province	6 months
F3	Claire	19	Undergraduate	Guangzhou, Guangdong Province	2 years
F4	Delia	21	Undergraduate	Guangzhou, Guangdong Province	14 months
F5	Eva	22	Postgraduate	Chengdu, Sichuan Province	10 months
F6	Frida	20	Undergraduate	Ningbo, Zhejiang Province	2 years
F7	Gemma	23	White collar	Ningbo, Zhejiang Province	15 months
F8	Heloise	20	Undergraduate	Guangzhou, Guangdong Province	17 months

This paper adopts two research methods, which are participatory observation and in-depth interview. The author conducted a three-month game experience and observed the interactive comments of female players on social platforms such as Weibo Chaozhua and Zhihu. Taking purposeful sampling

to recruit loyal female players as interviewees, and the interview duration of each interviewee is not less than 30 minutes. Finally, according to the saturation principle of the interview, the following eight interviewees were selected, as shown in Table 1.

4. Results and Discussion

It is found that female players' participation in *Light and Night* is a complex social behavior, which stems from the psychological motivation of lack of demand and compensatory satisfaction, has the behavioral characteristics of participatory performance and negotiation decoding, and leads to the contradictory result of love simulator and heterosexual insulator.

4.1. Motivation: Lack of Demand and Compensatory Satisfaction

Media dependence theory is regarded as a classical theory to understand the dependence relationship between individual audiences and specific media, in which the satisfaction of one party's demands and the achievement of goals depend on the resources owned by the other party (Ball-Rokeach, 1985).[23] Therefore, lack of demand and compensatory satisfaction are two key elements in the formation of media dependence. All of the interviewees played the game of *Light and Night* for more than 3 months, up to 2 years, and most of them said that they were online almost once or twice a day, with a single online time ranging from 20 to 60 minutes. Judging from the length of access and frequency of use, the interviewees have formed a dependency relationship with the game medium *Light and Night*. The reason why *Light and Night* can gain the loyalty and dependence of players is largely because the players' lack of demands in real life can be compensated in the virtual world of the game, which also confirms the views in previous studies.

From the perspective of lack of demand, under various restrictions in real life, players who are ordinary girls are inevitably hindered in their studies, careers, lives, and other aspects, and it is difficult to obtain perfect love partners and love experiences in their sexual relationships. In addition to objective factors, this lack of demand is also closely related to the interviewees' own personality characteristics and self-identity, among which the influence of self-esteem is quite significant. Self-esteem refers to an individual's self-evaluation, which consists of two parts: self-efficacy and self-love (Ma and Jiang, 2002). [24] Interviewee Anna (F1) denied her ability to cope with challenges, while Frida (F6) doubted the possibility of enjoying love, which respectively corresponded to low self-efficacy and low self-love, and were typical representatives of people with low self-esteem. Social psychologist Mruk (2006) pointed out that people with low self-esteem are more inclined to use certain things to avoid self-denial or social interaction. [25] It can be seen that low self-esteem not only amplifies the interviewees' lack of demands but also drives them to take the initiative to engage in the perfect virtual world created by *Light and Night*.

"I always encounter various difficulties in my studies and life, and I always fail to do well. I also lack an outgoing and cheerful personality, I am not good at handling interpersonal relationships and I have almost no close friends." (F1)

"I still feel inferior and I am not attractive and lucky. How could those excellent males like me? (F6)

In terms of compensatory satisfaction, *Light and Night* provides players with the satisfaction of both their ideal self and ideal partner. As far as the ideal self is concerned, *Light and Night* portrays the female protagonist as a perfect woman who combines success in her career, freedom in wealth, smooth love, and good conduct. It not only conforms to the players' beautiful imagination of modern women who balance career and love but also embodies their ideal selves in their hearts. In terms of ideal partners, each of the five male protagonists has strong economic strength, prominent social status, outstanding personal abilities, handsome faces and figures, with a strong idealistic color.

"If it weren't for envy, I would not have taken on the role of the female protagonist. Because she entrusted me with the person I most wanted to become, loved and recognized by everyone, and achieved what I wanted to do. This is my ideal self." (F3)

“I really like a father-like boyfriend like Lu Chen. His love is like a father, giving me a full sense of security and allowing me to be a happy little girl in love.” (F6)

The interviewees chose to seek compensatory satisfaction from *Light and Night*, with a layer of economic and practical considerations. Gemma (F7), who has not yet recharged, enjoys this “zero cost” class transition and the love experience very much. Delia, who has a large recharge amount, is enthusiastic about “generating electricity for love” and believes that compared with the time, money, and energy required for a three-dimensional relationship, recharging in the game is still low-cost.

“It is inevitably difficult to become a female protagonist and requires a large investment in oneself, which is impossible to achieve in a short period of time. However, in the game, I dare to dream like this.” (F7)

“Falling in love is always about spending money. As I recharge in this game, the gaming experience is better, and the male protagonists love me more, all of which have positive feedback with certainty. In reality, love is uncertain.” (F4)

In summary, female players perceive a lack of demands due to limitations in real-life conditions and low self-esteem personality characteristics, while *Light and Night* provides compensatory satisfaction by allowing players to transform into their ideal selves and fall in love with their ideal partners. Low cost serves as a catalyst, promoting players’ choice of the game.

4.2. Behavior: Participatory Performance and Negotiated Decoding

“When I substitute myself as the female protagonist, I become her, and the story between her and the male protagonist becomes my story.” (F2)

Jenkins (2016) once defined television fans as “audiences who actively misappropriate text and transform their experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture”, resulting in a participatory culture in the media consumption behavior of fans. [26] Nowadays, the rapid development of media technology has given birth to interactive storyline games such as *Light and Night*, providing players and fans with a more direct and immersive way to participate. Fans have also achieved a transformation from being “audiences” to “characters in the play”, opening up participatory performances. The female protagonist portrayed in *Light and Night* only has a basic identity background and plot framework, without clear personality characteristics and subjective thoughts and emotions. Therefore, players naturally take on the role of the female protagonist, interpret the female protagonist’s script, choose the plot branch according to their own preferences, and use game mechanisms to write stories that belong to “oneself”. In this process, female players project their real selves onto the female protagonist of the game, portraying and presenting their ideal selves. On the other hand, female players perform love scripts with the ideal partner and weave romantic memories together. Simultaneously, female players adopt a special participation strategy, which integrates real-life experiences with virtual game texts, giving *Light and Night* a “real” meaning. Heloise (F8), who is currently in college, is a classic example of the unique naming of male protagonists.

“There is a module similar to WeChat in *Light and Night* that allows players to change notes for friends. The note I gave Charlie Su are clinical Xiaocha at level 21, as well as design Xiaoqi at level 21, finance Luchen at level 20, and so on. In this way, there is a feeling that the male protagonist is my classmate.” (F8)

In addition, female players use negotiation decoding to interpret the meaning of the symbol system compiled by game manufacturers. Negotiated decoding refers to the state in which compatible factors and rebellious factors are mixed between the audience and the dominant ideology. [27] Female players are immersed in the game, which does not mean that they fully agree with the role, plot, and values of the game. Their typical reaction to *Light and Night* is not only love and addiction but also dissatisfaction and disgust. These positive and negative reactions constitute and promote their positive interaction with the game media.

In terms of content, female players' negotiated decoding of *Light and Night* includes two factors: identification and criticism. The former points to the ideal self, ideal partner, and ideal love created by the game, while the latter focuses on shaping the image of the female protagonist, believing that the female protagonist is still a "little woman" waiting to be loved and protected by men, and it is difficult to break out of the narrative pattern of "Mary Sue", without truly achieving gender equality.

"The female protagonist is really not good at protecting the male protagonist. Once, Xia Mingxing was injured for her, and she did not even say a word of concern. She tacitly agreed that the injured Xia Mingxing would take her home. On the way, the female protagonist even fell asleep without conscience. It made me so angry." (F5)

In terms of strategy, female players perform negotiated decoding through the following two methods. Firstly, it is selective substitution. Senior player Frida (F6) said, "For high-quality storylines and the behavioral choices of the female protagonist that I agree with, I will substitute them. Otherwise, I will choose myself." Secondly, it is publicly speaking. For unsatisfied gaming experiences, more and more players are choosing to express their demands on social media platforms, taking the opportunity to negotiate with gaming companies, in an attempt to influence future game design, with a strong sense of femininity.

"Charlie Sue's latest copywriting really makes me feel unwell, full of malice towards women, serving for the sake of sex. A game company needs to have correct values and social responsibilities." (Weibo user Lanxi na)

"A good Otome Game is a combination of men and women, which makes them not tired of working together. They understand each other, tolerate each other, teach each other to grow, and heal each other's scars. The female protagonist of *Light and Night* depends on the male protagonist to stand up." (Zhihu user Chunjuaner)

In summary, the practical behavior of female players in *Light and Night* is a participatory performance based on game text, and also a negotiated decoding with rational thinking. This also demonstrates that female players are not passive cultural receivers, but active meaning builders.

4.3. Results: Love Simulator and "Heterosexual Insulator"

On Christmas Eve in 2021, Heloise (F8)'s roommate went out on a date with her boyfriend, leaving only Heloise, who was single, to stay in the dormitory and feel lonely. Therefore, she downloaded and registered *Light and Night*, hoping to experience a simulated love in the game. Female players gradually outline their "in sync" partner portraits by interacting with five different types of male protagonists, thus forming real-world mate selection standards. Heloise (F8) enjoys the state of being with Charlie Sue the most. "Charlie Sue likes to infect the people around him with happiness, and I am very happy with him. In the future, when I look for a boyfriend, I will also find someone with an outgoing personality and stable emotions." Delia (F4) has explored the "minefield" of mate selection in the game: in the past, when reading romantic novels or watching idol dramas, Delia has a good impression of male characters who are cold, arrogant, and venomous. However, when she met Qi Sili, she suddenly realized, "Who can bear this kind of boyfriend who hates you every day? Even if I know he was just a sharp-mouthed kind heart, I cannot bear it. In real life, if you encounter him, you must take a detour."

Female players reflect on their love experiences in the game, summarize the basic characteristics of ideal romantic relationships, and attempt to explore methods and paths to establish ideal romantic relationships. Interviewees believe that a healthy and good romantic relationship is a "two-way journey" that relies on the combination of excellent individuals and the joint management of both men and women. They advocate for women to continuously improve themselves, possess the ability to provide love and support to their partners, and get rid of identity labels with strong stereotypes such as "spoiled wife". Therefore, the good performance of the female protagonist in *Light and Night* in this aspect has been learned and imitated by female players.

“The female protagonist is a kind, brave, and dreamy designer. In order to achieve the ultimate in her field, she works very hard, which is a motivation for me and makes me fully motivated.” (F7)

The female protagonist is very attentive and can take care of the boy’s small emotions and make heartwarming actions in love. Only in this way can the love be healthy and stable. I also learn to feel the emotions of people around me like her, and bring warmth to them.” (F8)

Female players use a love simulator to clarify their mate preferences and cultivate their love skills, seemingly fully prepared to welcome love. However, it is interesting that the interviewees were all single during the interview: 6 had no romantic experience, and 2 were in a breakup state. Anna (F1), who is single since birth, jokingly refers to herself as a “heterosexual insulator”. As a highly immersive love game, *Light and Night* has the basic function of providing a love experience and meeting love needs. As the level of game involvement deepens, the love needs of female players are fully satisfied, and their love motivation in real life also weakens. Most interviewees stated that they did indeed aspire to love in the early stages of game participation, but the essence is still the need for social companionship and emotional support, with the aim of relieving the pressure of work and life, compensating for the lack of social emotions, and relieving the boredom of leisure time. With its romantic storyline, simulated social media interactions, and synchronized birthday and holiday blessings with the real world, *Light and Night* allows players to enjoy intimate companionship at any time, accurately responding to the needs and pain points of the target audience, and thus becoming a substitute for female players in real love.

“When I am tired, I can chat with the male protagonists and get some spiritual comfort from it. Moreover, the spiritual sustenance that *Light and Night* can give me is enough, and I do not need to get it through realistic love.” (F2)

At the same time, female players in real relationships will also consciously or unconsciously compare virtual lovers with real boyfriends. As a perfect partner, virtual lovers are naturally beyond the reach of real boyfriends, and the result of comparison has become a knot in the hearts of both couples. The trigger for Delia (F4)’s breakup with her ex-boyfriend was precisely what she said during their argument, “You just learn from others (Charlie Su)”. Meanwhile, her ex-boyfriend was also dissatisfied that Delia still spent a lot of effort on virtual lovers during their relationship, stating that he cannot tolerate this mental infidelity. Therefore, the two broke up in discord, and Delia seemed to play a role as the “heterosexual insulator”, which made her return to the single state. In summary, as a love simulator, *Light and Night* has a positive promoting role in helping female players clarify mate selection standards, explore love skills, and shape marriage concepts. However, meanwhile, due to the deep involvement of female players in the game, the boundary between virtual and real life becomes blurred, leading to fatigue and alienation from real love, which may also lead to a state of “heterosexual insulator”.

5. Conclusion

There are often views accusing women of indulging in “daydreams” in love games such as *Light and Night*, which leads to blind expectations of intimate relationships and self-indulgence in life development. Although these viewpoints can be found as examples for individual players, from another perspective, the popularity of female love games and the growth of female player groups are impacting the male-dominated and female-absent situation in the field of electronic games, and their role in promoting gender equality is undeniable. Female love games endow female players with the right to narrate and gaze: the narrative right allows female players to break free from the “other” status of other electronic games and real life, and write the “me” story as the protagonist; The gaze power allows female players to subvert the traditional gender gaze culture and act as the “desire subject”, boldly gazing at the physical characteristics and emotional labor of male characters. Through the participation and practice of female love games, female players utilize and defend the rights of the female narrative and female gaze, engage in dialogue with real society through game experience, and continuously enhance their gender subjectivity.

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