Representing New Women in China: The Female Characters in Otome Games and TV Dramas

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Abstract. As women's social status improves, the portrayal of women in the media has also evolved. Many popular TV dramas in China now focus on women's personal growth, and their images are no longer restricted to traditional roles such as housewives. Instead, these dramas depict women as competent professionals who excel in the workplace. At the same time, video games have become an increasingly popular yet understudied form of mainstream media. Simulate love games, specially designed for women, known as Otome games, sets off a boom in China. The consumer demographics of TV series and Otome games are different. To explore the differences between TV series and Otome games in portrayal of female images due to the consumer demographics and their ideological implications, this study uses the semiotic analysis method to analyze the heroine images in TV series and Otome games and compares them. Despite many similarities between the female lead characters in TV series and B-girl games. However, the main difference is that the heroines in the TV series can achieve feminist awareness in their careers after going through struggling experiences. By contrast, the heroines' abilities are denied in the Otome games and they rely solely on men to succeed. Popular TV dramas can portray women's abilities and their process of feminist awareness to a certain extent, while the heroines in the Otome games mostly represent conservative women stereotypes and are less independent.

Keywords: Otome games, TV dramas, Female characters, Feminism, China.

1   Introduction

As the primary source of information for people, the media is the main tool for shaping and disseminating ideologies. According to Gallagher (1979), media have the potential to be influential agents of socialization and change. They present role models, confer status, suggest appropriate behaviors, and encourage stereotypes.[1] A few years back, there was a craze for TV dramas featuring domineering presidents in China. In these dramas, men were portrayed as elites from all walks of life who could protect women whenever and wherever necessary. Actually, the once popular TV dramas about the domineering president is an epitome of the male-dominated society in which we live.

In the 1970s, under the influence of the feminist movement and the sprout of feminism, gender theory entered the research fields of different disciplines.[2] In terms of media, how women are portrayed has also become a topic of concern. Most of female characters in the media are need to rely on men to get a foothold and live in society. Moreover, In the context of a culture where male-dominated is prevalent, women's existence is always seen as an object. Women are objectified in the media in numerous ways, with their beautiful faces and figures appearing as commodities in the window.[3] In brand advertisements targeted towards male consumers, companies often use attractive and seductive women as models. They tend to focus on specific body parts of these women such as the waist and breasts to highlight their sexuality and draw the attention of male consumers.[4] According to a UNESCO-funded cross-cultural study, Ceulemans and Fauconnier (1979) found that whether in the West or the Asia-Pacific region, media forms such as advertising, television, film, and the press are keen to emphasize women in traditional domestic roles or as sexual objects.[5]

In recent years, many feminists have launched campaigns to combat media bias against women and critically examine female imagines portrayed by the media. There is no doubt that the actions taken have improved the status of women to some extent. In China, there has been a noticeable shift in the portrayal of female characters in the media. Nowadays, we witness the emergence of numerous female-centric dramas and female group dramas. Women have become the central characters in various stories, and their roles are no longer limited to the traditional stereotype such as housewives. Instead, they are portrayed as social elites who can stand on equal footing with men. Some researchers also focus on analyzing female images in TV series or movies when studying female images in media. Yet, little research have been conducted on female images in video games. With the rise of technology, video games have emerged as a significant aspect of mainstream media, particularly for young individuals. These games feature a diverse range of virtual characters, both male and female, that mirror the mainstream ideology and common gender roles. As such, exploring the female image projected and the ideology reflected by such video games seems highly important. Further investigation in this regard is warranted.

Prior to the 1990s, video games were largely regarded as a pastime for males, and the game design was heavily focused on male interests, featuring elements such as gunfights and violence. During this era, women had little to no knowledge of video games, and there were no video games designed specifically for women. Due to the differences in preferences, women were unable to experience the excitement of violent games in the same way as men. In the 1990s, female game designers began emerging as women became more familiar with computers, attempting to break industry stereotypes.[6] Therefore, the "girl games" movement emerged, and games such as Barbie Fashion Designer were created to appeal more to women. These games were quite successful, although some critiques argued that they still reinforced stereotypes and upheld male power.[7] According to Cassell and Jenkins (1998), Women's gaming preferences differ significantly from men's, compare to competitive games, women prefer creative, collectible games with a focus on character, story, and socializing. However, Chen (2015) found that, there is a gender bias in the gaming industry where

competitive games, which are mostly played by men, are perceived as being of higher value due to the amount of time and energy they require.[8] On the other hand, games that are mostly played by women are often considered casual and insignificant and are not given as much attention in the gaming market. This bias has resulted in a male-dominated gaming culture, where women are often marginalized and don't even deserve to be called "players".[9]

In addition to the games themselves, the character setting in the game is also a topic worth discussing. In most video games, the central character of the series is still a brawn male, and the female characters are few and weak and are often portrayed as victims who need to be rescued by the male characters. In addition, many female characters in the game tend to be pornographic in terms of visual presentation, and they are always disproportionately exposed to the chest, waist, and other private parts, which are the objects of male viewing and staring.[10][11] Although some video games later featured women as main characters with important responsibilities, the portrayal of female characters in them still perpetuated stereotypes. In the game Tomb Raider, Lara Croft is presented as a female hero character who inherits her family's legacy at a young age. Despite her significant responsibilities and being recognized as an expert in tomb exploration, Lara's design is focused on her physical appearance. She is depicted as a conventionally attractive woman with a revealing outfit, which is a common practice in many other video games to portray women. It appears that women have always been marginalized in video games, whether through the devaluation of their preferences, the disproportionate character-gender ratios in games, or the consistent stereotyping of female characters.[12][13] In the game world, there seems to be a subconscious male dominance similar to that in the real world.

But there's no denying that female characters in video games are in flux. In addition to evolving from initially completely unsupported victims to heroic characters with stereotypical overtones, they have become the main role throughout the plot of the Otome game, breaking the trend of male hegemony and gender inequality in video games. Unlike most video games, Otome games cater exclusively to women. It presents the plot through a variety of media (e.g., words, pictures and narration) and satisfies female players' love fantasies with romantic stories, leading to psychological satisfaction and happiness.

The market for Otome games in China is growing rapidly. It has evolved from being a niche medium to a mature one and is now attracting a large number of female users [14]. Previous research on these games has mainly focused on examining their marketing mechanisms and how they affect players' perceptions of love.[15] However, very few studies have analyzed the portrayal of female characters in Otome games. Most studies on the portrayal of female characters have focused on TV dramas. While the image of strong and independent professional women has increased in these mediums due to the improvement of women's status in modern society, gender stereotypes are still prevalent.[16] TV dramas always popular among diverse age and gender groups. For instance, *The First Half of My Life*, a TV series that depicts women's growth, attracts viewers from the different generations. Moreover, females comprise 73% of the audience, while males make up the remaining 27%. In contrast, the audience for Otome games is more specific and accurate, as the games are designed for

young women. Therefore, the female images portrayed in these games and the under-lying ideologies may have a more direct impact on women.

Based on this, this study proposes the following research question:

Q1: Whether the portrayal of women in media differ based on different consumer demographics?

Q2: What ideology does the media's portrayal of women reflect in China?

This study will compare the portrayal of female characters in Otome games with those in TV dramas, to explore how female images are portrayaled and the ideologies behind them based on different consumer demographics.

2   Research Method

Both Otome games and TV series are made up of a plethora of texts, sounds, and images. In light of this, the study has chosen to utilize the symbol analysis technique to examine the information present in the text and images of TV dramas and Otome games. The aim is to uncover the female images represented within them and draw comparisons between the two, finding the ideology behind these differences. According to Zoonen (2007), semiotic analysis can go beyond the traditional text analysis based on frequency and deeply analyze the connotation and ideology behind symbols, which has become a popular method in female media criticism.[17]

For this study, the game *MR Love: Queen's Choice* was chosen from a selection of samples. This game is considered a pioneer in the Chinese Otome game market and is very popular. It has no competitors that can compete with it.[18] To echo the image of a professional female heroine in "*MR Love: Queen's Choice*", the study chose TV dramas related to female workplaces such as *Just Thirty* and *The First Half of My Life* for a comprising study. These TV series depict women who, after their cheating hus-bands left them, returned to the workforce, gained independence, and learned to value themselves.

2.1   Semiotic Analysis

2.1.1 Appearances

The heroine image of *MR Love: Queen's Choice* has fair skin, a slender figure, an oval face, big eyes, and a small cherry mouth. Her beauty is not only apparent but also aligns perfectly with modern society's ideals of feminine beauty. Similarly, in many TV dramas, the lead female character is always portrayed as an exceptional beauty. For instance, in the TV series *The First Half of My Life*, the protagonist Luo Zijun is a stunning woman over 30 who can make many men fall for her. Likewise, the protag-onist Gu Jia in the TV series Thirty Just is almost perfect, possessing both good looks and a good figure, along with a high degree of intelligence and talent.

There is no doubt that whether it is an Otome game or a TV series, the heroine im-ages portrayed in it are very much in line with the strict standards of modern society for the external image of women, and this standard is derived from the joint shaping of the perfect female image by social culture, media, male aesthetics, etc. [19]

Throughout history, there have been changing standards of female beauty. However, despite the changing beauty standards over time, the underlying principle has remained the same. These beauty standards are often norms imposed upon the female body by the ruling class according to their own aesthetic, economic, and political purposes.[20] Compared with other ways of manipulating women, these social standards can be widely disseminated through the mass media, thus forming a coercive force and eventually becoming a mode of thinking, feeling, and behavior outside the female body, which makes every woman accept and obey it unconsciously.[21] In the TV drama *The First Half of My Life*, when Luo Zijun finds out that her husband Chen Junsheng cheated on her with his subordinate Ling Ling, her initial response is, "Why would Junsheng want someone like Ling Ling? She's not young, her complexion is dark, and she doesn't dress up". In the Otome game *MR Love: Queen's Choice*, while most of the visuals feature handsome male characters, occasionally the background shows glimpses of the heroine's slender waist or legs. Even players who are obsessed with the male characters can't help but admire the heroine's beauty, taking pride in being a beautiful woman themselves in games. It is easy to notice that both popular TV dramas featuring female leads and Otome games marketed to women often claim to promote female independence and empowerment. However, these media platforms indirectly perpetuate strict beauty standards and reinforce the harmful notion that only conventionally attractive women are worthy of male attention. Compared to TV dramas, Otome games can have a more profound and long-lasting impact on women due to their more precise and focused audience. As Liu (2020) points out, due to the unique context, Otome games are more likely to reveal the hidden meaning behind the popularity of heroines among men, which is often due to their superior physical appearance and figures. At the same time, many previous studies have shown that the widespread dissemination of the "slim" ideal in the media can have an impact on women's eating habits and their body satisfaction.[22][23] Under the "*MR Love: Queen's Choice*" tag on social media, it's can indeed be found that female players are obsessed with losing weight for the male characters in the Otome game. These players even resort to harmful methods, such as "liquid dieting", which highlights how the distorted values conveyed within Otome games can have a significant impact on women's perceptions of body image and weight loss.

2.1.2 Clothing and Apparel

According to Huang (2022), Clothing plays an important role in shaping female image in media and different meanings can be conveyed through clothing styles.[24]

In the Otome game *MR Love: Queen's Choice*, the heroine's everyday attire consists of a blue and white dress that complements her innocent and kind personality. Similarly, in the TV series *The First Half of My Life*, Luo Zijun's clothing choices reflect her early dependence on her husband's protection and lack of self-identity. Her clothes are expensive but mismatched, highlighting her inability to dress herself. Later, when Luo Zijun returns to work and transforms herself, her clothing also becomes more sophisticated. Even the same dress looks completely different before and after her transformation. Another example is Gu Jia from the TV drama *Just Thirty*. Gu Jia has a gentle personality but is also wise and capable. Her clothing choices are primari-

ly light-colored and simple in design, except for those around her who wear brightly colored, saturated clothing, emphasizing her character traits through contrast.

Whether it is an Otome game or a TV series portraying women's growth, it's hard to avoid the image of "working women" as a symbol of female power. In various media, it seems like high heels have become an essential part of their attire. As Wilson and Pender (2017) stated, high heels are closely related to women's status,[25] which is depicted in the movie and TV series *Just Thirty*. When the heroine Gu Jia is in her roles as a "housewife" and "mother", she usually opts for comfortable flat shoes when picking up her son from school. However, when she is in the socialite circle as a "rich wife" attending parties or back in the workplace, she almost always wears high heels.

Some scholars believe that high heels serve as a symbol of external power for women. This power allows women to accept their existence as an object of desire, which ultimately reinforces male power. This is because high heels were initially associated with sexual implications to some extent [26]. In the Otome game *MR Love: Queen's Choice*, the heroine changes into a formal suit and high heels when she needs to enter a specific institution. During this time, the game camera emphasizes her beautiful figure and slender legs. However, high heels are not typically associated with convenience and ability, so the female protagonist is given the character setting of "easy wrestling." This is because high heels are difficult to control, and she often accidentally falls or stumbles. As a result, the male character often comes to her aid. Therefore, In Otome games, high-heeled shoes serve a functional purpose. They not only showcase women's external image as slim and soft but also reinforce their characteristics as needing protection. Additionally, they pave the way for female characters to be unable to stand alone in certain plotlines. According to Liu (2020), the notion of weakness suggests that women are naturally more passive, and not as assertive and robust as men. Furthermore, the societal hierarchy assigns different roles to male and female individuals, resulting in women being placed in subordinate positions where they are protected and dominated in future benign interactions.

This point was also conveyed in *The First Half of My Life*. On the first day of her return to work, Luo Zijun struggled to move around comfortably due to her high heels. The difference is that the later episodes of the TV series, no longer emphasize that high heels are a necessity for women in the workplace, as most media tend to do. This indicates an unrealistic expectation. On the contrary, flat shoes imply a practical and down-to-earth approach, which should be the first choice for women in the workplace.

2.1.3 Role Setting

In the world of Otome and female-lead dramas, the main heroines are often portrayed with vastly different characterizations.

In most female TV series, the heroine's character is usually depicted as a victim of a failed marriage. Through a process of self-discovery, they eventually awaken to their true potential and become powerful independent women in the modern city. In "To the Lighthouse," Virginia Woolf compares women to "angels in the house." They are bright and beautiful, pleasing to the eyes of men, but behind their gorgeous ap-

pearance, their souls are empty. According to Zhang and Yang (2021) [27], the protagonist Luo Zijun in *The First Half of My Life* is a typical "angel in the room" at the start of the TV series. She has no job and is completely dependent on her husband Chen Junsheng. Her only effort is to stay young and beautiful so that her husband does not have an affair. When her husband does cheat, her first reaction is to blame her poor dress sense. This ridiculous and sad idea shows that Luo Zijun is used to being in the "object" position dominated by men and accepts it. In the TV series *Just Thirty*, another heroine Gu Jia also a housewife who, despite having more abilities, chooses to give up her career for her family. Although Gu Jia could have lived a successful life in the city without relying on her husband, she still upholds the societal expectation of women being responsible for the home. This is reflective of the unequal gender rights in society, where women, regardless of their abilities, still rely on men to survive. Although those heroines eventual return to the workplace after their husbands' infidelity seems to suggest that their careers are not their means of being independent and self-reliant, but rather a necessity for survival.

The heroine of *MR Love: Queen's Choice* is a strong-willed professional woman from beginning to end. She is deeply passionate about her career and even when her company is on the brink of bankruptcy, she refuses to give up. Despite the advice of those around her, she remains committed to fulfilling her father's agreement and taking on the enormous responsibility of saving the entire company from collapse. The game also imbues her with a savior identity as the only one with a special gene called "Queen" that can save the game's chaotic world from frequent accidents. In modern society, a woman's professional identity holds great significance and represents autonomy, independence, and freedom from dependence on others.[28][29] When a company is on the verge of bankruptcy, reviving it requires an immense capacity beyond imagination. The Otome game also adds a layer of mythological and unique "savior" identity to the heroine, which directly reverses the social order in the real world. In the Otome game, women hold the dominant position and men take on a subordinate position with an auxiliary nature.

In the initial stages of the game, the heroine is portrayed as a powerful character. However, in the subsequent levels, the plot of each level follows a similar narrative structure where the heroine encounters difficulties, gets stuck, finds a male character to help, and finally solves the problem. The game portrays the heroine as supreme but does not provide her with the corresponding ability to tackle the problems on her own. As a result, the titles in the early stage become meaningless. On the other hand, the male character in the supportive role is depicted as calm and self-reliant, showing excellent problem-solving abilities. For instance, the heroine initially wants to work with one of the male protagonists, Li Zeyan. However, despite several rejections, she persists in this, causing a delay in an important approval and investment report. This highlights her lack of professionalism and management skills. Additionally, when she accepts a filming commission from a TV station, she becomes depressed due to a misunderstanding about another male protagonist, Xu Mo, dating other girls. Her emotions cause her to neglect her work, and it's only after her subordinates repeatedly urge her to wake up that she realizes her mistake. In this way, we can see that her actual work performance doesn't match her character's independent and unyielding

professional spirit. in the same work process, the male character Li Zeyan plays a crucial role in assisting the heroine during chaotic moments. Unlike the heroine, Li Zeyan remains calm, composed, and rational. He provides guidance and assigns tasks to the heroine, while also offering financial support at key moments. Li Zeyan's actions play a direct role in determining the success of the heroine's work tasks. Despite the heroine's professional female and savior-like identity, she lacks leadership in the actual work process and often struggles to achieve results without the help of males.

In most cases, whether it is a female-led TV series or an Otome game, the heroines presented tend to have traditional gender personalities. They are often depicted as being dependent on men, unable to break free from male control. It is noteworthy that when portraying heroine in the Otome games, they are often given a modern, independent facade, but ultimately still exhibit male-centered stereotypes. This approach often undermines female strength. As a result, they fail to inspire or empower the game players.

2.2   Personalities Traits of Heroines

Xue (2018) believes that women in the media are often depicted as being in a weak and vulnerable position, with the tragic fate of being abandoned by men.[30] However, there is a difference between earlier portrayals of weak women who were unable to fully awaken to their ideals until their death, often due to the failure of marriage, and later portrayals of vulnerable women who can overcome their struggles and achieve feminist awareness and rebirth.

Luo Zijun, in *The First Half of My Life*, is still a typical case. She was once completely dependent on her husband and only concerned about her appearance. However, her performance in the later parts of the TV series is inspiring for female audiences who are looking for independence. Her feminist awareness went through three stages: germination, exploration, and determination.[31] To fight for custody of her child, Luo Zijun first had the idea of finding work after her divorce. However, returning to the workplace proved to be difficult as she faced many obstacles. Despite this, she did not give up and continued to explore different job opportunities until she found the most suitable one with the help of her friends, He Han and Tang Jing. Working in a famous brand store allowed her to find a new self-identity and economic independence. When a wealthy man pursued her, Luo Zijun maintained a calm emotional state and did not say yes immediately. This moment marked the peak of her feminist awareness. Certainly, this process is not entirely spontaneous, but rather feels somewhat necessary, as Luo Zijun's feminist awareness is contingent. Had her husband not abandoned her after years of support, she would have remained a housewife preoccupied with superficial concerns such as appearance and brand names.

In the Otome game *MR Love: Queen's Choice*, the heroine's character also portrayed as weak and dependent. Despite being a professional woman and company manager in modern society, she displays a lack of professionalism in her work. In the game world, she is always under the control of the male characters, despite being the savior. However, she seems content with this arrangement and often contradicts herself, claiming to be ready to face challenges but showing no courage when faced with

adversity. This dependence on the male hero is a prominent aspect of her character. In the second chapter of the game's main storyline, the heroine and the hero often work together to save the day. However, when the heroine is alone in a crisis, she rushes to the scene unprepared and becomes overwhelmed with fear. She always wants to prevent the crisis but her emotions get the best of her. She looks forward to the male protagonist to come and save the day. When the hero confronts her about her weakness, she becomes aggrieved and cries, saying that she doesn't want to be weak forever and doesn't want to be protected forever. However, when the hero tries to make her more powerful, she doubts her ability and is paralyzed by negative emotions. This cycle repeats itself with no growth or character development. Instead of being a "savior" in the game world, she is portrayed as a tool person with no consciousness of her own. Her existence is only to highlight the strength of the male characters.

3   Conclusion

The social status of women has been improving, which has affected the way females are portrayed in the media. In China, we can see a lot of TV dramas that focus on the growth of women. The heroines in these dramas are no longer restricted to traditional female roles such as housewives. They are portrayed as individuals who can stand on equal footing with men in the workplace and showcase their remarkable abilities. Moreover, video games have also become an essential part of mainstream media. While some scholars have researched female image shaping in TV dramas, there is little research on how female images are shaped in video games.

The audience of TV dramas is diverse, including individuals of different genders and generations. Even dramas that have female leads can attract a significant number of male viewers. On the other hand, however Otome games are designed specifically for women, with a focus on young female consumers. The portrayal of female images in these games and the underlying messages can have a more direct impact on women. This study explores how the portrayal of female characters in the media differs for different targets groups and how these female images reflect gender ideology in China. In particular, the study examines the Otome game *MR Love: Queen's Choice*, which gained popularity in the Chinese market, analyzing how the heroine is portrayed in it. As a comparison to the image of a professional heroine in *MR Love: Queen's Choice*, the study also offers a critical reading to TV dramas featuring workplace women such as *Just Thirty* and *The First Half of My Life*.

The study employs the method of semiotic analysis to examine the female protagonist's image created by the producer from four perspectives: appearance, clothing, character traits, and personality. The heroine possesses an exceptional appearance and a slender figure that conforms to the conventional social norms regarding women's appearance. Furthermore, her clothing also serves the portrayal of the character, not only emphasizing her superior appearance but also reinforcing her vulnerable character that requires constant protection. The game attempts to challenge the traditional stereotype of women by presenting the heroine as an independent and capable professional woman. However, her actual work performance is depicted as unprofessional

and ineffective, particularly when she always needs help from male characters to achieve her goals. Additionally, the game places the heroine in a central position and presents her as a "savior", but her behavior in crises appears contradictory. While she claims to face challenges bravely, she often resorts to helplessly praying for the male character to rescue her. Although the heroine in the game appears to have a powerful character setting, the game fails to provide her with corresponding abilities. By contract, the male character is portrayed as an all-powerful auxiliary. This makes the heroine's character appear weak. Despite having fancy titles, the heroine is depicted as a weak person who needs constant protection and never grows. Consequently, the female image that the Otome game *MR Love: Queen's Choice* creates is still male-centered. It reinforces gender stereotypes and the traditional gender discourse that "men are strong and women are weak".

Similarly, the female characters portrayed in the TV series share beautiful appearances and relatively weak personalities with those in Otome game. However, unlike the latter, they are capable of demonstrating more feminist awareness after facing marriage crises and exhibit corresponding abilities to find self-worth upon returning to work. feminist awareness marks the most significant difference between traditional and modern women. Although the lead characters' feminist awareness remains limited, it still manages to inspire female viewers who aspire to become independent to a certain extent.

Generally, the portrayal of female characters in television dramas targeting at women shares similarities with those in Otome games. However, mass-oriented TV dramas can showcase the abilities of female characters and their journey of self-discovery to a greater extent, while the heroine in Otome games lacks the characteristics that represent modern women. She is more in line with the traditional stereotypes of women. This difference may be attributed to the functions of these two media. Due to a wider audience, TV series inherently serve an educational purpose. Considering the current social context of women's improved status, the portrayal of female characters in TV series is in line with the expectations of independent women in modern society. However, the nature of the Otome game is to simulate love games. Compared with the social reality, it pays more attention to the romantic plot.

Although "men are strong and women are weak" is the stereotype left by the traditional society, only such a setting can resort to conventional gender stereotypes to highlight the romantic elements of the plot, attracting more female players. It is important to note that because the audience of the Otome game is concentrated in young women, the female image it creates is likely to directly strengthen the female players' incorrect cognition of themselves, which will not only reinforce the patriarchy's discipline for women but also lag the process of women's feminist awareness.

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