

# Emotional Construction and Consumer Retention in Otome Game Brands: A Case Study of Crisis Public Relations in "Light and Night"

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**Abstract.** In recent years, with the awakening of female consciousness and the flourishing of the gaming industry, otome games targeting female groups have emerged. These games stimulate continuous emotional consumption by guiding players to build virtual intimate relationships with game characters, thus unleashing enormous commercial potential. This paper, based on the Theory of Parasocial Interaction, selects two typical crisis events in the game production and consumption conversion process. By conducting text mining and public opinion analysis, this paper aims to analyze the emotional marketing, public relations strategies, and feasible measures of otome game brands.

**Keywords:** Otome games; Virtual intimate relationships; Emotional marketing; Crisis public relations.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, with the rapid proliferation of smart mobile devices, mobile games that integrate daily socializing, entertainment, and self-satisfaction have become a new blue ocean, especially otome games (romance simulation games primarily targeting female players and focusing on pursuing male characters). In contemporary society, where female self-awareness is increasingly awakening, traditional gender relationships and a male-dominated societal environment inevitably create conflicts and feelings of alienation in women's exploration of emotional relationships. Recognizing the lack of ideal social relationships, otome game brands construct perfect digital intimate relationships, becoming psychological compensation for female consumers. The most representative examples in China include: PAPE Co.,Ltd's "Mr. Love: Queen's Choice" launched in 2017 with over 2 million daily active users, Aurora Studio's "Light and Night" launched in 2021 with first-month revenue exceeding 100 million, and NetEase's "Far Beyond the World" set to launch in 2024 with pre-launch reservations surpassing 15 million... The explosive growth in user numbers and high daily active user rates highlight the enormous consumption potential, loyalty, and digital labor behavior of the female demographic, while also sowing the seeds for potential emotional crises in development and operation, as well as mass user exodus.

This paper selects two significant crisis events in game production and consumption conversion to analyze the construction, maintenance of intimate relationships, and corresponding consumption labor in otome games.

In June 2022, the game "Light and Night" experienced a bug causing an interface ID display error. Players discovered a Weibo account named "BrownCloud," identified as a former system planner of the game, whose personal experiences highly matched the game's female protagonist's settings, such as being lost, unable to cook, and having a best friend named Anan. This caused dissatisfaction among many players, who believed that the private setting of the female protagonist severely affected the game's sense of reality, immersion, and the parasocial relationship, leading to some players quitting the game. As of April 2024, Weibo hashtags #LightAndNight BrownCloud# and #LightAndNight FemaleProtagonistPrototype# have amassed over a billion views and 358,000 discussions, making it one of the most negative public opinions in the otome game subculture.

In December 2022, the game "Light and Night" planned a collaboration with the milk tea brand "Auntea Jenny" set to officially start on the 17<sup>th</sup> December. However, on the eve of the event, it was revealed that "Auntea Jenny" employees had insulted the game's male protagonist and players, and

had privately sold collaboration gifts, leading to large-scale online protests by related players and the cancellation of the collaboration on the 14th, making it the shortest collaboration in history. In March 2024, when "Light and Night" launched a new collaboration with another milk tea brand "Heytea," the previous collaboration failure was brought up again, sparking renewed discussion.

Based on these two large-scale and typical negative public opinion events in the otome game community, this paper aims to analyze the players' emotional tendencies and consumption behaviors of otome game players under the theoretical framework of Parasocial Interaction. It explores the impact of digital intimate relationship creation on consumer decision-making behavior and considers how game brands guide and maintain digital intimate relationships, examining the transformation path and risk crisis from emotional marketing to digital exploitation. Thus, this paper provides referential suggestions for the female-oriented game industry, balancing its dual attributes as both a cultural communication medium and a virtual entertainment product.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Parasocial Interaction

In 1956, American social psychologists Donald Horton and Richard Wohl proposed the concept of Parasocial Interaction, referring to the phenomenon where audiences perceive media personas as real people and react to them, forming quasi-social relationships similar to real interpersonal interactions, essentially a "fantasy of one-way social relationships."

Current research on the communication of otome games mainly focuses on the constructive impact and limitations of the one-way intimate relationships they provide on changing women's views on marriage and enhancing female discourse power. There is limited exploration of otome games as a vehicle for creating digital relationships and the parasocial relationships they construct and reflect. Wen Caiyun and Zhou Xuanren (2018)[1] suggested that "daydreaming," as the essence of romance games, possesses the illusory narrative characteristic of social performance, stemming from players' needs to construct an ideal virtual self and their expectations for creating ideal relationships, effectively masking reality through the Proteus effect. Wu Yue and Sun Yuannan (2020) [2] argued that long-term immersion in otome games affects female players, leading to idealized expectations of real-life romantic relationships. These studies provide references for interpreting female psychological emotions. Overall, existing researches mostly focus on the emotional connection process between female players and otome games with the related characters, without exploring otome games' parasocial relationships from the perspective of brand communication.

### 2.2 Digital Intimate Relationships

Currently, the academic community has not formed a clear definition of "digital intimacy," which mainly encompasses two dimensions: one is the frequent, continuous, and deep connection between people and the Internet, the other is the "digitized intimacy," i.e., intimate relationships between people mediated by internet technology. Existing studies discuss these two dimensions: one is the establishment and maintenance of intimate relationships in virtual internet environments, the other is the digital transformation of physical intimate relationships. This paper discusses "digital intimate relationships" in the first dimension, i.e., the non-realistic intimate relationships constructed between game players and virtual characters.

Zhang Ao (2024)[3] argued that intimate relationships have an important driving effect on emotional labor, discussing the forms and alienating effects of emotional labor in games on virtual intimate relationships. Fu Senhui (2024)[4] proposed that digital intimate relationships can be seen as an important form of self-expansion for fans in the era of human-computer interaction, with issues of gender discourse cheapening, capital logic infiltration, and relational ethics. Current research on digital intimate relationships have conducted comprehensive discussions on emotional labor but has not detailed specific game areas, with limited research on female-oriented games.

## 2.3 Emotional Marketing and Digital Labor

In 1988, American clinical psychologist Barry Feig first introduced the concept of "emotional marketing," believing that image and emotion are the sources of power in the marketing world. Understanding and satisfying customer needs and establishing strategic product models are the keys to success in modern marketing markets. Li Jinkui (2005)[5] refined the definition of "emotional marketing," which has been widely recognized by the academic community: companies use consumer needs and emotional differences as the core of their marketing strategies to achieve business goals through emotional branding, product, price, distribution, and promotion strategies. Current research focuses on defining the connotations of brand emotions and related factors, proposing new concepts like "brand fanaticism" and "brand worship," but has not comprehensively explored the purpose and associated value of emotional marketing.

Canadian political economy scholar Dallas Smythe's "audience commodity" theory[6] in 1977 pointed out that the most important products of mass media are not the messages, ideas, images, entertainment, opinions, and information they produce. Media companies' mission is to gather and package audiences for sale, revealing that "the real commodity of commercial broadcasting is the audience group." Italian scholar Tiziana Terranova (2000)[7] introduced and explored the concept of "free digital labor," where internet users voluntarily undertake unpaid digital labor. Related research objects mainly focus on professional digital practitioners and consumer-producer digital practitioners, with this paper focusing on the latter, i.e., otome game players who produce digital content in the process of game entertainment and consumption.

In otome games, the boundaries between production and consumption, work and leisure, are increasingly blurred. As Julian Kücklich proposed, "playbour"[8] (a combination of play and labor) involves spending a lot of time and energy in online games, where players unknowingly become free labor for game companies by attracting more users, creating more content, and improving more services. Players voluntarily become "free labor" due to emotional marketing based on preference perception and emotional guidance, leading to voluntary laborization in leisure activities.

## 3. Audience Analysis of Otome Games

From the beginning, otome games have focused on women's emotional needs, aiming to respond to female subjective satisfaction and expectations. Therefore, their audience group is concentrated in the young female demographic with distinct psychological characteristics and consumption patterns, providing guidance for game brand creation and subsequent operations, mainly reflected as follows:

1. Large user base with gradually increasing consumption capacity

As "mobile natives," the user base of Gen Z female groups has exceeded 120 million and is steadily growing, highlighting the large group size and enormous consumption potential.[9]

2. Long consumption cycles with continuously optimized group consumption structures

In the past decade, the average age of first marriage for Chinese women has extended from 24 to 28 years, with changes in consumption behavior and expenditure structure. [9]Stimulating, attracting, and retaining "new" consumers influence otome game production and business decisions.

3. Emphasis on emotional satisfaction with breakthrough needs

With the awakening of independent consciousness, modern women pay more attention to personalized consumption behaviors. Based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, the initial five levels of needs have developed into eight levels, aligning with the new connotations of female consumption. Knowledge needs, aesthetic needs, and transcendence needs reflect the necessity of expanding game content from "emotional satisfaction" to "ideological satisfaction".

4. Highly Dependent on the Internet and Passionate About Online Social Sharing

The internet is the lifeblood of Gen Z women, who exhibit a strong desire to share their lives through online social interactions. This provides ample opportunities for them to engage with, play, and consume otome games.

## **4. Emotional Construction and Subsequent Maintenance in Otome Games**

### **4.1 Strengthening and Weakening: Setting and Building Intimate Relationships in Otome Games**

The demand for female self-expression, often overlooked by society, has been considered due to its vast market potential: political rights, economic status, spiritual needs, the vision of a perfect male partner and intimate relationships, the pursuit of value affirmation, and the possibility of self-realization.[10] These infinite imaginations are contained within the fantasy of otome games and are satisfied in a virtual form. In a reality dominated by male-centric discourse, the creation of perfect male characters and the construction of idealized intimate relationships based on this is a significant attraction of otome games.

Firstly, ideal male characters are created through settings and imagination. Otome games typically feature multiple male characters with perfect partner qualities and different personality traits as romanceable options. They leave room for personal interpretation, encouraging players to project their own imaginations onto the characters, thus creating their perfect partner within the broader setting. This means that players are essentially involved in the creation process of male characters. As the "female protagonist," they have absolute interpretive authority and control over the virtual intimate relationship.

Secondly, in balancing "her" and myself, the female protagonist's perspective is de-emphasized. Otome games establish specific standards for the female protagonist. Compared to an independent character image, the game player often acts as a "perspective presentation" subject who tracks male characters and follows the plot development. Therefore, the key to shaping the female protagonist lies not in having a charming personality, independent actions, or lively dialogue but in being easily relatable and becoming the player's "digital avatar," creating the illusion of "I am her."

### **4.2 Virtual and Reality: Brand Connection and Maintenance of Intimate Relationships**

Young women are the target audience for many cross-consumption types, making brand collaborations natural. These collaborations provide consumers with emotional experiences and intimate connections from online gaming to offline consumption. For example, the game "Light and Night" collaborated with the French beauty brand Guerlain to launch co-branded lipsticks, with different styles based on various male protagonists. The "Valentine's Day gift" gimmick blurred the line between virtual and reality, encouraging players to actively deepen the intimate relationships built in otome games through imagination and construction, leading to voluntary consumption and even secondary dissemination behaviors.

## **5. Breakdown of Intimate Relationships and Brand Public Relations Reconstruction**

### **5.1 Event Overview and Public Opinion Insights**

The creation and maintenance of virtual intimate relationships are essential for otome games to attract players and guide consumption. Given the highly overlapping audience, otome games have recently engaged in co-branding with beauty products, new tea drinks, and other brands to increase revenue while further blurring the line between reality and the virtual world. However, any improper behavior by the brand or its partners can easily lead to the deconstruction of virtual intimate relationships, thereby negatively impacting the game brand. This paper selects two significant events that sparked considerable public controversy in the context of relationship construction and real-world expansion to explore the crisis events and public relations situations of otome game brands.

### 5.1.1 The Broken Immersion Incident

In June 2022, the game "Light and Night" faced backlash when it was revealed that the female protagonist's setting might have a real-life prototype, causing widespread player dissatisfaction and a subsequent exodus from the game.

Date and Time	Event Overview	Trending Keywords	Public Opinion Keywords
<p><b>2022.06.05</b> <b>12:00</b></p>	<p>"Light and Night" launched a wedding dress event for its anniversary, with a random acquisition method</p>	<p>#LightAndNight WeddingDress#</p>	<p>Dissatisfaction with the game: "Not worth it," "Greedy," "Money-hungry"</p>
<p><b>2022.06.05</b> <b>22:02</b></p>	<p>Players discovered an incorrect ID display on the game interface and posted a recording in a super topic</p>	<p>#LightAndNightMeitu#</p>	<p>Distrust and sadness towards the game: "Shut down and refund," "Disgrace," "Shame of otome games," "Unbelievable"</p>
	<p>The Weibo user "BrownCloud" is a former game planner whose personal experiences closely match the female protagonist's character.</p>	<p>#LightAndNight #LightAndNightBrownCloud</p>	
<p><b>2022.06.06</b> <b>02:46</b></p>	<p>"BrownCloud," a former game planner, posted a clarification on Weibo</p>		<p>Anger towards the person involved: "Unprofessional," "Apologize"</p>
<p><b>2022.06.06</b> <b>03:06</b></p>	<p>"BrownCloud"'s friend "Most Anshen" (suspected prototype of the female protagonist's friend "Anan") posted an explanation on Weibo</p>		<p>"Private settings confirmed," "Better not explained"</p>
<p><b>2022.06.06</b> <b>11:27</b></p>	<p>Game officials stated that the rumor of the planner being the prototype for the female protagonist was untrue</p>	<p>#LightAndNightResponse PlannerPrototype#</p>	<p>Disappointment with the game: "Meaningless response," "Shutdown statement," "Treating players like fools"</p>

<p><b>2022.06.06</b> <b>18:22</b></p>	<p>"BrownCloud" posted another clarification on Weibo</p>		<p>Slight trust in the person involved: "Somewhat believable," "Cyberbullying is illegal," "Acceptable"</p>
<p><b>2022.06.06</b> <b>20:56</b></p>	<p>Game officials issued another statement and gave players a free wedding dress in the game</p>	<p>#LightAndNightSecondResponse#</p>	<p>Soften attitude towards the game: "Compensated 1000 draws," "Still a good game," "Players are fundamental," "Fix issues when identified"</p>

In the "BrownCloud" incident, the overly distinctive personalized traits of the female protagonist disrupted players' self-immersion, severely undermining the intimate relationships constructed by the game.

### 5.1.2 The Real-world Shock Incident

In December 2022, the game "Light and Night" was set to begin a co-branding event with the milk tea brand "Auntea Jenny" on the 17th. Before the event, reports surfaced of "Auntea Jenny" employees insulting the game's male protagonists and players and illegally selling collaborative gifts, leading to large-scale player protests. The co-branding was ultimately canceled on the 14th, making it "the shortest co-branding in history."

Date and Time	Event Overview	Trending Topics	Public Reaction
<p><b>2022.11.24-</b> <b>12.14</b></p>	<p>Multiple platforms reported negative incidents involving "Auntea Jenny" employees leaking materials, spreading false information, and illegally selling collaborative gifts</p>	<p>#LightAndNight Leak#</p>	<p>Doubts about "Auntea Jenny": "Poor management," "Who dares to collaborate," "Disgusting"</p>
<p><b>2022.12.12</b> <b>10:30</b></p>	<p>"Auntea Jenny" changed its official account and online store avatars to silhouettes of "Light and Night" characters</p>	<p>#LightAndNightAunteaJenny#</p>	<p>Expectations from both sides: "Do good peripherals," "Looking forward to the launch"</p>
<p><b>2022.12.14</b></p>	<p>Players inquired about the event details at "Auntea</p>		<p>Anger towards "Auntea Jenny": "Insulting"</p>

	Jenny" stores and online, only to receive insults from employees about the game's male protagonists and players, and threats of spitting in drinks		customers," "Wouldn't buy their tea if not for the merchandise," "Unprofessional," "Ruining their own brand"
<b>2022.12.14</b> <b>12:05</b>	"Light and Night" and "Auntea Jenny" announced the co-branding event, stating it would officially launch on the 17th		Dissatisfaction with the game: "Had to be 'Auntea Jenny?'" "Quality control issues"
<b>2022.12.14</b> <b>15:06</b>	"Light and Night" officially announced the termination of the co-branding with "Auntea Jenny"	#LightAndNightCollabCancelled#	Understanding and satisfaction towards the game: "Apologize first," "Impressive," "Handled well"
<b>2022.12.14</b> <b>19:30</b>	"Auntea Jenny" issued an apology statement on Weibo regarding the termination of the co-branding	#AunteaJenny Apology#	Distrust and disappointment towards "Auntea Jenny": "Avoiding," "Never drinking again," "Manage your employees"

Although the game was the victim, the boundary between reality and the virtual world was once again highlighted. Players were inevitably reminded of the "daydream" nature of virtual intimate relationships, ultimately reflecting negatively on the game brand itself.

## 5.2 Crisis and Response: Analysis of Mishaps and Related PR Measures

### 5.2.1 Overview of Common Mishaps in Otome Games

The unique ecosystem of otome games lies in ensuring and maintaining player "immersion," which guides players to stay engaged and continue spending. Once this virtual intimate relationship is disrupted, the game brand inevitably falls into the vortex of public opinion. The aforementioned incidents represent two common types of crises in current otome games: internal issues in planning and production leading to player dissatisfaction, and external expansion where inappropriate handling of collaborations causes public controversy.

In the "BrownCloud" incident, initial public opinion focused on the wedding dress draw mechanism and pricing. Later, the incorrect game interface display and clues about the former planner "BrownCloud" led to a concentrated outbreak of player trust crisis, drastically worsening the game's reputation. On June 6 alone, nearly 2,000 negative reviews were added on rating platforms. It wasn't until the game's official statements and promises of free item giveaways that the public opinion began to calm down. The root cause was the "character appropriation" problem in game planning and production. Unprofessional behaviors like embedding personal elements in immersive games pose significant risks to the subsequent construction of virtual intimate relationships.

In the "Auntea Jenny" co-branding incident, a series of violations by the partner exposed issues of poor decision-making and lack of management in the game brand. In brand collaborations, uncontrollable factors and real-world impacts are potential risks that otome games must carefully consider in their marketing strategies.

### 5.2.2 Public Relations Response and Emotional Flow

Consumer Issue Feedback		Brand PR Measures		Public Emotional Attitude Changes	
Time	Issue Overview	Time	PR Response	Before PR	After PR
2022.06.05 12:00	High price and unreasonable draw mechanism for the anniversary wedding dress set	2022.06.06 00:30	Adjusted set content, changed random draw to self-selection	Doubt, Anger	Opposition, Dissatisfaction
Evening of 2022.06.05 to early morning of 2022.06.06	"BrownCloud" and the private setting of the female protagonist caused player identity collapse	2022.06.06 11:27	Denied private setting, shared creative ideas	Shock, Dissatisfaction, Sadness	Anger, Rights Protection
		2022.06.06 20:56	Detailed explanation, gave away anniversary wedding dress		Moderation

Time	Issue Feedback	Time	PR Measures	Public Emotional Attitude Changes	
From 2022.11.24	Partner employees leaked materials, illegally sold products	None		Slight dissatisfaction	
2022.12.14	Partner employees insulted game protagonists and players, and there were issues with food hygiene and brand management	2022.12.14 15:06	Game terminated collaboration and apologized	Anger, Dissatisfaction, Concern, Doubt towards the partner	Satisfaction, Understanding towards the game
		2022.12.14 19:30	Partner apologized, expressed regret		Disappointment, Distrust towards the partner



Based on the five crisis response paths proposed by Wang Xiaoyu (2012) [11], otome games focus on the first path: "direct correction and remedy, apology, defense." They aim to respond immediately to prevent more severe emotional shocks and the deconstruction of intimate relationships for players. For internal production mechanism issues, "Light and Night" chose the second path: "initially deny or defend, make excuses, then correct and remedy." They denied the private setting, investigated the issue, and compensated with free anniversary costumes. When facing external risks, the game used the first path to directly terminate the co-branding, minimizing losses and soothing player emotions.

## **6. Recommendations for Preventing Public Opinion Risks for Otome Game Brands**

### **6.1 Game Production Phase**

In the creation of characters and plot development, otome games use the female protagonist as a vehicle for player immersion, diminishing her distinctiveness. This character allows players to build an intimate relationship with empathetic male characters and gradually develop a "self-identity" within the virtual storyline as the experience deepens and the plot advances. Therefore, the key focus of otome games is to balance unique character settings and growth without interfering with the player's personal connection to the game character.

Throughout the numerous phases including scriptwriting, planning, development, and operations, it is crucial to manage team members effectively, clarify the division of tasks, and enhance internal review mechanisms to avoid character appropriation, distorted settings, and inconsistent art styles.

### **6.2 Marketing and Promotion Phase**

First, when selecting marketing strategies and collaborating brands, in addition to considering game characteristics and audience needs, it is important to ensure the alignment of promotional concepts and values. To smoothly transition the virtual intimate relationship into real-world spaces, otome game brands and their partners should create immersive online and offline environments. This can be achieved through employee training, quality control management, store design, and innovative merchandise, thereby preventing emotional imbalance and resultant emotional shocks.

Second, to truly achieve "breaking the dimensional wall," long-term IP operations should be carried out, including offline official events like meetups and conventions, creating real interpersonal spaces for players, and sharing multimodal text symbols in online communities to facilitate the spread of emotional energy.

Lastly, emotional marketing should be the core strategy, tracking consumer emotional tendencies in real time, monitoring negative public opinions, and responding promptly to ensure both online and offline presence and emotional cohesion.

### **6.3 Crisis Management Phase**

The focus of otome game crisis management is emotional repair, specifically the reconsolidation and reconstruction of virtual intimate relationships.

**Responding Promptly to Prevent Public Opinion Fermentation:** When players start doubting the virtual intimate relationship, the absence of an official response can easily lead to group polarization, causing significant negative impacts on the brand's image. Prompt official statements can provide an outlet for players' emotions, making it crucial to have crisis management mechanisms that include preemptive and reactive strategies.

**Perceiving Emotional Preferences and Conducting Emotional Guidance:** In official responses, event explanations and countermeasures must be sincere and transparent, valuing players' emotional dependencies, showing understanding and concern, and using the game's context for effective guidance. For players emotionally impacted, the game brand should offer timely consolatory measures, such as gifting items or discounts, to show sincerity and repair the emotional relationship.

Continuous Feedback and Follow-up: Throughout the entire crisis management process, the game brand should collect player feedback, adjust countermeasures according to their emotional needs, and demonstrate the brand's attention to players through subsequent activities. For instance, after the failed collaboration with "Auntea Jenny," in March 2024, the game partnered with another tea brand "Hey Tea" and through activities like "receiving happy certificates," managed to provide subsequent emotional compensation, closing the crisis management loop.

## 7. Conclusion

With its unique form of emotional fulfillment, otome games have created a distinct game brand consumption ecosystem. Players, deeply immersed emotionally, develop strong brand loyalty and consumption potential, but these intimate relationships are highly fragile. By analyzing the PR cases of the otome game "Light and Night," this paper concludes that the construction and maintenance of intimate relationships are crucial for connecting otome games with consumers, permeating through game production and subsequent marketing. In game production, the creation of ideal male characters and the diminishing of the female protagonist's distinctiveness deepen players' emotions but also pose risks of sensory separation and immersion breakdown between players and the protagonist. In marketing, the alignment of values and communication behaviors between brands is key to successful collaborations.

In summary, as carriers of emotional construction, otome games, while realizing their commercial operations through the creation of fantasies, should always use understanding women's emotional needs, respecting players' subjective awareness, and constructing a utopia that meets players' spiritual fulfillment as their value guidelines.

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