"Utopia" or "Communicative Area"?—Community Belonging and Identity Construction in "China Otome Game Convention"

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Abstract: As an important component of youth subculture, otome games and their offline cultural activities have rapidly developed in China in recent years. However, existing research primarily focuses on in-game narratives and gender representation, with less emphasis on offline subculture practices. Based on the "Triple Articulation" theory, this paper explores community belonging and identity construction mechanisms through online participation observation and in-depth interviews in the context of the "China Otome Game Convention" (COGC). The study finds that the convention builds ritual connections through free gift exchanges and digital bridges at the level of media objects, enhances emotional bonds through static symbols and dynamic social interactions at the level of symbolic texts, and creates immersive cultural experiences through spatial design and emotional continuity outside the convention. The research further suggests that the short-term "withdrawal response" induced by the convention is limited to partial feelings of belonging within the convention, with a limited impact on identity. Long-term responses, however, significantly strengthen overall community belonging and identity, promoting social relationship building and fan culture production.

1. Introduction

With the booming development of fan fiction and the large-scale domestic ACG (Anime, Comics, and Games) culture conventions, the otome game-only conventions have gradually emerged in China, which can be called the Guo Yi convention (COGC). These conventions are organized by players or dedicated ACG cultural event organizers to focus on female players of otome games. The conventions feature otome games, role-playing (Cosplay), fan creations, and related merchandise, providing a platform for communication, sharing, and interaction, attracting active participation from a large number of female players. The COGC is not only a venue for offline consumption for otome game players but also a crucial social space for expressing self-

identity and constructing community belonging. Based on the Triple Articulation theory, this paper analyzes media objects, symbolic texts, and spatial-temporal settings in the context of the convention to explore how players use the formation and enhancement of community belonging to reshape their identity.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Interaction between Youth Subculture and Otome Games

Early subculture research saw important contributions from the Chicago School and Birmingham School. The Chicago School viewed subculture as a product of societal deviation, wherein marginalized groups create subcultures through cultural symbols and norms to seek recognition in response to social change and urbanization challenges [3]. In contrast, the Birmingham School saw subcultures as a form of resistance to class hegemony and mainstream culture. They focused on how youth groups express class resistance and identity through style, symbols, and rituals [4].

In this context, otome games, as a quintessential youth subculture phenomenon, construct a female-centered gaming space through interactive narratives and virtual emotional experiences. Existing studies primarily focus on the game's internal narratives, character settings, and emotional mechanisms, emphasizing their unique roles in gender identity construction and the emotional experiences of female players. Some research suggests that establishing virtual intimate relationships in these games serves as a critical pathway for players to form self-identities.

For instance, Chen and Zhang (2024) [1] argue in their study that otome games offer female players opportunities to form self-identity through virtual emotional connections. Similarly, Wu, Sun, Zhu, et al. (2020) [15] examine how otome games shape female players' perceptions of romantic relationships, indicating a significant influence on constructing parasocial relationships and ideal views of love. Zhao (2023) [18] further critiques how these games reflect gender disciplining and stereotypes in portraying female characters.

Within the context of youth subculture, otome games closely interact with other subcultural forms, such as ACG (Anime, Comics, and Games) culture, fan fiction culture, and Cosplay culture. As Cosplay increasingly integrates offline participation and threshold, otome game culture has extended to offline cultural practices, exemplified by emerging COGC and cosplay commissions. [12]

However, most existing studies on otome games focus on narrative and symbolic analysis within the game, with limited attention to the real-world cultural practices and interactions derived from these games. Although otome game players have established unique discursive spaces on social platforms, the impact of their offline extensions on community belonging, cultural identity, and identity reconstruction remains to be explored and perfected further.

2.2. The Connotation and Application of the Triple Articulation Theory

The Triple Articulation Theory, proposed by British scholar Maren Hartmann, builds upon the Double Articulation Theory, focusing on the complex interaction between media technologies and social culture [6]. The Double Articulation Theory originated from linguistic analyses of natural language by linguist André Martinet and was later adapted to media studies by Roger Silverstone. Initially, the theory focused on the dual articulation of media: the production, marketing, and practical use of technological artifacts, as well as the reception and interpretation of media symbolic texts.The Double Articulation Theory initially emphasized media's dual properties: media as physical objects and media symbols as texts. [13]

However, researchers have realized that the Double Articulation Theory is not entirely applicable

in practice. Drawing from the Double Articulation Theory and Samarajiva's perspectives, Hartmann extended this theory by introducing a third dimension: the role of media within social spaces. This dimension emphasizes how media technologies are used and understood within specific social contexts, forming the foundation of the Triple Articulation Theory. [13] The Triple Articulation Theory outlines three dimensions of media connecting with everyday life: media as objects, symbolic texts, and as components of specific social spatial contexts. [6]

The theory has been widely applied in the study of new media technologies, particularly in media consumption in the digital age. For instance, it has been used to explore how audiences select and experience films across various screens, analyzing the impact of different screens on viewing behaviors in specific temporal and spatial contexts. [5]

In China, the Triple Articulation Theory has gained traction in communication and cultural studies in recent years. Examples include studies on rural internet practices and the cultural functions of the matchmaking corner at Shanghai's People's Park. [7,2] By applying this theory to analyze the offline cultural practices of otome games, this paper aims to bridge the gaps in existing research regarding the community sense of belonging and identity construction pathways among participants. It seeks to uncover the bidirectional relationship between individuals and communities within this unique subcultural domain.

3. Research Methods and Case Selection

This study employs a combination of online participant observation and in-depth interviews.First, the researcher conducted a month-long covert participant observation in four regional Guo Yi convention official QQ groups, collecting real-time data on player interactions before, during, and after the convention. Additionally, ten female players (including regular participants, cosplayers, and organizers) were interviewed in semi-structured interviews. The goal was to explore how players build and influence their sense of community belonging and identity through their interactions at the convention. The detailed information of the interviewees is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Basic information of interviewees.

No.	Alias	Age	Occupation	Role at convention	Years Engaged in Otome Games (as of 2024)	Region	Interview Date
1	A	20	Student	Coser	4 years	Shenzhen, Guangdong	October 25, 2024
2	B	19	Student	Participant	6 years	Shanghai	November 1, 2024
3	C	18	Student	Participant	3 years	Changsha, Hunan	October 24, 2024
4	D	19	Student	Coser	3 years	Nanchang, Jiangxi	October 22, 2024
5	E	20	Student	Participant	6 years	Beijing	October 15, 2024
6	F	24	International convention Organizer	Organizer	6 years	Nanjing, Jiangsu	November 3, 2024
7	G	23	E-commerce Operator	Participant	1 year	Shanghai	October 27, 2024
8	H	25	Game Planner	Host	8 years	Tianjin	October 19, 2024
9	I	20	Student	Coser	4 years	Yancheng, Jiangsu	October 17, 2024
10	J	22	Student	Participant	4 year	Beijing	October 20, 2024

4. Research Conclusions

4.1. Media Objects: Ritual Connections from Physical to Digital

In the cultural context of COGC, exchanging "muryou" as a meeting gift constitutes a unique ritual. The term "muryou" originates from Japanese, meaning "free" or "no charge." Before the convention, participants voluntarily create game-related postcards, stickers, key chains, badges, holographic tickets, standees, and other items, which are then distributed free of charge to other attendees.

Marcel Mauss [9] introduced the concept of the "spirit of the gift", positing that recipients, when accepting a gift, also accept a part of the giver. This process ensures the circulation of gifts and the maintenance of social relationships. In the context of the COGC, individuals seek subcultural identity through the exchange of "muryou", thereby constructing and reinforcing interpersonal relationships. In such gifting rituals, the significance and emotions carried by the gift matter more to both parties than the physical content itself [16]. As one participant shared, "Most of the 'muryou' are handmade or drawn by other fans, and I keep them as a sort of memory capsule." (Participant C, October 24, 2024)

Beyond the exchange of "muryou", mutual support and care among female participants in the COGC serve as another key community bond. This ritual of female solidarity is reflected in the sharing of essentials like sanitary products, makeup items, portable lighting, hairnets, and emergency supplies such as adhesive bandages, hot water, candy, and heatstroke medications.

In the era of new media, the construction of collective memory is no longer confined to traditional physical spaces. [10] Still, it can also occur through broader social interactions and memory sharing enabled by new media technologies. The physical artifacts exchanged at the COGC serve as a mechanism for horizontal interactions, fostering extensive contact and interaction among participants. At the same time, electronic devices equipped with photography and communication functions facilitate the establishment of deeper connections. Devices like smartphones and cameras act as "memory catchers," aiding participants in completing their" stamp collection" ritual. The next step of this ritual involves "photo sharing", where individuals share group photos. Participants extend their offline interactions into the digital space by exchanging social media handles or other contact information during this process, a practice referred to as "expanding contact lists." This form of interaction not only promotes vertical relationship development among players but also lays the groundwork for a stronger sense of community belonging. After the convention, participants can continue their engagement online, sharing experiences and maintaining emotional connections. [11]

4.2. Symbolic Texts: Emotional Construction through Static and Dynamic Interplay

Static communication in the COGC is primarily reflected in organizers' one-way dissemination of visual symbols and textual information to participants. During the preparation phase, organizers encode specific cultural meanings into meticulously designed symbolic texts, such as promotional materials on social platforms and announcements in attendee groups. These texts include but are not limited to introductions of official cosplayers, the convention's themes and schedules, and detailed gameplay instructions. Together, these elements form the convention's static symbolic texts, conveying the event's framework and expected content and igniting interest and anticipation among potential participants through the integration of visuals and language.

Within the convention, symbolic cultural elements strongly tied to otome games, such as promotional videos, dialogue walls, life-sized character standees, and banners, provide visual focal points for attendees. These symbols recreate iconic scenes and character images from the games,

allowing players to visually relive the narrative allure of the games, thereby deepening emotional resonance and fostering a sense of belonging. This ritualization of symbols physically gathers players in the convention venue and achieves a psychological "symbolic aggregation" of the community through a shared cultural language. [7]

After the convention, announcements in attendee groups serve dual roles of information dissemination and community management. Notably, some organizers publish financial records to enhance transparency, build trust with participants, and strengthen community cohesion. For example, one organizer shared, "Due to unexpected circumstances, the second convention did not meet expectations and incurred a slight loss. Nevertheless, I plan to organize a third convention based on feedback from participants to give back to the supporting fans (players)." (Participant F, November 3, 2024). Such actions convey the ethos of a "shared community", where the convention's core lies not in economic returns but in the emotional value of co-creating a cultural experience.

Dynamic symbolic texts in the convention place significant emphasis on social interaction. Online discussion platforms, such as attendee groups created by organizers, Red Note, and Weibo, provide participants with venues for communication that transcend physical space, enabling shared interests and emotions to converge and spread in virtual spaces. This social interaction can be seen as a form of "disembedding" from existing social relationships, allowing individuals to reconstruct emotional energy in new forms of social engagement. [8]

Collective expression is another vital form of dynamic interaction at the convention. For example, signature walls placed near the entrance encourage attendees to write or draw. Participants leave their thoughts and creations and comment on others' messages, creating layers of interaction that transform the wall into a collaborative artwork. Other activities, such as random dance performances, group singing, and night parties, serve as additional forms of collective expression. Through synchronized rhythms and physical movements, activities like random dances and group singing focus participants' attention on shared emotional expressions, creating highly cohesive interactive moments. The collective effervescence generated through such dynamic interactions allows participants to carry forward emotional energy even after the event, fostering a lasting sense of community and identification with otome game culture.

4.3. Inside and Outside the Field: Immersion and Disengagement from Temporal and Spatial Perspectives

At the COGC, the scheduling reflects a thoughtful consideration of the practical needs of female participants. For instance, "night events" are typically held in the afternoon and end early to ensure attendees' safety during travel. From a spatial perspective, the division between physical and symbolic spaces transforms the convention into a utopia of interaction between virtuality and reality. On one hand, gender serves as a significant factor of distinction at the convention, defining the identity boundaries of participants. The female-exclusive nature of the event naturally orients participant behaviors and interactions around female experiences and needs. Features like the "women-only zones" and mechanisms of mutual assistance among women create implicit community norms that reinforce recognition and support among female players. On the other hand, the venues for the convention—ranging from wedding art centers to international convention centers, luxury hotels, and private villas—combine real-world physical settings with cultural symbols from otome games, constructing an immersive experience that bridges the virtual and the real.

Moreover, the creative design of interactive spaces endows every participant with a sense of agency as a central figure in the event. As Coser A remarked, "Sometimes people think the focus of

the convention is the guest on stage or the cosplayer, but I believe the true protagonists are every single fan (player)." Through decentralized interactive formats and emotional resonance, the convention transcends traditional showcase-type events to become an "atmosphere-driven" space of community connection. [17]

The convention constructs an immersive cultural experience for female players through its temporal and spatial dimensions and extends its impact to post-event behaviors and interactions. Post-event withdrawal reflects the psychological and emotional effects experienced by players along the temporal dimension, while external connections demonstrate how relationships among players persist in broader online and real-world contexts. Post-Event Withdrawal refers to the psychological reaction players experience after disengaging from the highly immersive cultural activity of the convention. This phenomenon parallels the "post-ritual state", where individuals returning from the "sacred time-space" of collective activities to the "mundane time-space" of daily life may experience a psychological gap. [14] For some players, the strong sense of community belonging and cultural identification experienced during the convention cannot be sustained in their post-convention environment. This emotional void may prompt them to actively engage in online interactions, such as participating in social media discussions, sharing convention photos, or creating fan works. Such behaviors serve as emotional compensation and reproduce the convention's memories, further reinforcing participants' cultural identity.

The impact of the COGC extends beyond the physical venue of the event itself and continues through external connections in both online spaces and real life. In the digital realm, players maintain their connections through interactions such as private messaging, likes, and comments on social media platforms. These online interactions enable players to sustain the emotional bonds formed during the convention and further strengthen the collective emotional sharing within the group.

5. Conclusion

By examining the COGC as a subcultural field, this study reveals how the "Triple Articulation Theory" collectively constructs players' sense of community belonging and further influences their gender and subcultural identity. From media objects and symbolic texts to temporal and spatial dimensions, the convention provides female players with a multilayered cultural landscape, leading to varying degrees of "withdrawal responses" after the event concludes. Short-term withdrawal primarily reflects the establishment of localized community belonging within the convention, with a limited impact on player identity that gradually stabilizes over time. In contrast, long-term withdrawal reflects and further strengthens players' overall sense of belonging to the otome game subcultural community. Its influence on player identity is more profound, promoting the construction of social relationships and producing fan fiction culture.

This study expands the application of the "Triple Articulation Theory" in subculture research, providing a new perspective for understanding the identity construction of female players at the intersection of the virtual and the real. However, the research sample has limited coverage, and the data collection did not track long-term changes in participants' attitudes and behaviors. Future studies could employ longitudinal research to explore the sustained impact of convention participation on community belonging and identity construction. As otome game culture continues to develop in China, the COGC and related subcultural activities will significantly shape female-oriented player identity and cultural community building. Future research could further investigate the social significance of this cultural phenomenon, paving the way for new academic spaces in subculture and gender studies.

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