

Let's Play in the Public Sphere of Bilibili: Constructing a Playful Discursive Space for Gender Politics in China



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Research Master Thesis

RMA Media, Art and Performance Studies

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Abstract

Let's Play videos are records of playing-through of games with the player's personal annotations. They provide a new channel for game enthusiasts and potential game enthusiasts to achieve an entertaining gaming experience. The public video-sharing sites where the LP videos are published become platforms for the playful practices that host the LP format. In such a public platform, the public participates in a diverse discourse and discusses social issues. The LP videos posted on the Chinese video site Bilibili have attracted a large audience due to their playfulness and the diverse personalities of the LPers. In addition, LP videos may have a specific potential to contribute to Bilibili as a digital public sphere in China due to the content of the games presented in the LP videos and the comments added by LPers.

In this thesis, building on the three-dimensional model proposed by Fariclough (1992), I discuss and analyse how LP video in China has contributed to the construction of a public sphere that accommodates gender political issues, starting from the intersection of the fields of gaming and gender politics. In the first chapter, the Chinese Otome games represented by *Light and Night* will be analysed as texts, and the patriarchal hegemonic frameworks, binary gender divisions and sexist gender norms embedded in the Otome games will be analysed. In the second chapter, several discursive practices in the form of LPs will be used as case studies to analyse how LP videos perform a rebellion against patriarchal hegemony in the society that the game texts fail to achieve. In the third chapter, online groups created by female game enthusiasts and the discussions and activities that take place within them will be analysed as social practices to explore the extent to which the practices that emerge from the intersection of gender politics and games challenge the patriarchal framework in Chinese society.

Introduction

Introduction and justification of relevance

Let's Play (LP) videos are recorded playthroughs of games published online, usually accompanied by the player's commentaries and reactions towards the game's content throughout the video. In LP videos, what was once private gameplay becomes a mediated act of public entertainment, where players show their actions to the public on the internet and manipulate them through actions such as editing, while allowing viewers to comment and discuss the content of their videos. LP has many features and implications to discuss as a playful practice that will enable elements of mediality, performativity, and interactivity to be integrated into the gaming experience. Studies focusing on these characteristics of LPs are listed in the next section on academic positioning. In comparison to those earlier studies, this thesis explores the hypothesis that along with the selection of games on particular themes and the comments made about them in LP videos, LPs obtain the potential to function as part of the digital public sphere in today's mediated society. More precisely, the discursive practices in the form of LPs that emerge from the Otome games as texts constitute a part of the digital public sphere, housing the discourse on the political issues of gender in China. This thesis will focus primarily on the potential and ways in which LP videos on Bilibili, China's leading video-sharing platform, provide a discursive space for gender politics and feminist topics.

Academic Positioning

Current research on LPs covers a wide range of aspects regarding performativity, audience participation, play experiences, and social communication in the media sphere. Some studies discover LP's potential as a paratext and educational tool. For example, Burwell and Miller examine the mechanics of Let's Play as paratext to the meaning-making of play practices (Burwell & Miller, 2016), and Derritt Mason's research points out that "cognitive and affective "think-and-feel-aloud" activities such as the LP exercise, which allow students to dwell momentarily in bad feelings and silence, create rich teaching and learning opportunities" (Mason, 2021, p.1). Mason's study provides a glimpse into the positive emotional effects of LPs from the perspective of the video creators by having students take on the role of LPers. Other researches focus more on the audience experience or LP videos' storytelling and film-like aspects. Rene Glas discusses how audiences engage with this mediated

playful practice by applying early film studies theory to the LP phenomenon (Glas, 2015). Sari Piittinen's article focuses on the personal moral stance of LPers in LP videos through their comments on the game and its impact on the audiences (Piittinen, 2018). Tero Kerttula's article focuses on the game experience LPers provide to the audience as storytellers. Tero Kerttula enumerates seven narrative elements and points out their role in collectively constituting the narrative experience LPers provide to the audiences (Kerttula, 2016). In comparison, this thesis focuses on the potential of LP videos as part of the public sphere of the digital media environment to bring attention to and provide an online discursive space for discussion on specific social topics, including gender politics.

Several studies have discussed the characteristics of LPs, such as their mediality, interactivity and performativity. In his thesis, Kristoffer Fjællingsdal analyses how Let's Play, as a video game-centric entertainment media product, attracts viewers and contributes to satisfying their psychological need for Internet entertainment (Fjællingsdal, 2014). In her chapter, Ingrid Richardson uses LP as an example of participatory media in contemporary culture to discuss how multimodal content is composed in digital media, and the changing ways in which people engage with communicating and constructing social worlds in the process (Richardson, 2018). In his article, Josef Nguyen focuses on how LPers perform in LP videos to form a specific experience for their audience and analyses the formation and characteristics of LP's fan communities (Nguyen, 2016).

At the same time, as public media platforms that accommodate LP content, platforms including YouTube and China's Bilibili give space for LPs to become part of the digital public sphere. A number of studies have discussed and explored how YouTube, a representative social media platform, functions as a public sphere on the internet. And these studies of social media platforms as public spheres allow for a similar consideration relating to LPs. In a study by S. Edgerly et al. (2009), the theory of the "public sphere" developed by Jürgen Habermas (1989) is applied to the analysis of YouTube as a public sphere. In his article, Christian Fuchs summarises the many criticisms that have long been levelled at Habermas's 'public sphere' (Fuchs 2014, 62), including the concept's lack of plurality (Lunt & Livingstone 2013, 90) and its inability to adapt to the complexities of modern society (Lunt & Livingstone 2013, 92). It is therefore essential to pay attention to the application of Habermas's 'public sphere' to modern public media, which is the foundation for the discussion of the digital public sphere incorporating LP content in this thesis. In the article, S. Edgerly et al. coded and analysed videos posted on YouTube related to street protests and explored the potentially

transformative role of digital media such as YouTube in protest and activism. The authors argue that the public sphere, represented by YouTube, is characterised by its low threshold and interactivity and is a contemporary site for the construction of public discourse spaces. Meanwhile, scholars like Colin Sparks have suggested the need for a new global public sphere (Sparks, 2001). Victoria Tur-Viñes and María José González Río's study explores the factors and extent to which YouTubers exert influence as managers of specific online communities and as opinion leaders within their fan groups (Tur-Viñes & González-Río, 2019). Natasha Szostak's article explores the potential of YouTube as a public sphere to provide a discursive space for gender politics (Szostak, 2014), while Julie Uldam and Tina Askanus discuss the potential of YouTube to provide a deliberative public communicative space for climate change activism in their article (Uldam & Askanus, 2013). In their research, these scholars have analysed the potential and function of YouTube as an online public sphere from different focuses, which involve the way different social public agendas are presented and discussed on the internet. Christian Fuchs critically examines online social platforms, including YouTube and Instagram, from a more macro perspective, with Habermas' concept of the public sphere as its core (Fuchs, 2014). While these cited studies demonstrate the potential of social media platforms, including YouTube, as online spaces where public agendas occur nowadays, as noted above, there is a gap in academic discussion on the role of LPs as a subset of the many types of videos on the YouTube platform. The necessity of filling this gap lies in taking the playful practices of LP. This media form is becoming increasingly popular in recent years as a starting point that can provide a more detailed and unique perspective than the analysis of the YouTube social platform. As the demand for entertainment media increases and the mode of online socialisation becomes more widespread, the study of the potential of LPs as a part of the digital public sphere could enrich research at the intersection of the digital public sphere and entertaining and playful media practices. Unlike some videos that directly address socially focused topics, LP videos focus on showing the playing of specific games by LPers. Since the emergence of LP videos as a media form, the range of games covered has broadened, including games that address socially significant issues such as gender inequality and environmental sustainability. In his article, Gerald Voorhees states, "Digital games are not only a medium that hosts multiple modes of communication, they are enmeshed in the circulation of discourse in public culture." (Voorhees, 2012, 2). Building on this, I argue that LP Video enhances the characteristics of discursive games as media, accompanying LPers' commentary with the visual and aural elements of the games, putting a stronger emphasis on the discursive aspects of video games. Thus enabling LPs to acquire the potential of being a discursive public sphere in digital media. This thesis explores the extent to which LPs have the potential to function as part of the online public sphere or as an extension of it. I wish to focus particularly on the LP videos on the Bilibili platform and the attention paid by its audience in the

comments section to issues of gender politics, including sexism, stereotypes and prejudice in the games and the speeches of LPers. Several LP videos based on the dating simulation game genre and other videos that have provoked heated discussions about gender inequality among the audience will be used as case studies to explore the potential of LP as an under-attended area of the digital public sphere.

Research questions

Main research question: How does Let's Play, as a mediated playful practice, contribute to Bilibili as a digital public sphere for gender politics in China?

Sub-question 1: What are the specificities and limitations of video games like Otome games as '*texts*' around which LPs revolve in terms of constructing discursive spaces?

Sub-question 2: How do Chinese LPers curate the LP videos through commentary and video editing in order to carry out discourses about gender politics and stimulate discussion among the audience in China?

Sub-question 3: How do Chinese audiences and gamers engage with and enact feminist social practices around games and LP videos via social media?

Based on the main and sub-research questions, this thesis will be divided into the following chapters:

- Introduction
- Chapter I: Games in LP videos: gender frameworks and the limitations of games
- Chapter II: LPs as discursive practice: the construction of discursive public sphere and the performances of LPers
- Chapter III: Social practices around LPs: discourses and social implications
- Conclusion

Theoretical framework

The main research question of this thesis combines knowledge and perspectives from multiple fields such as game, media, performance and gender studies. Centred around the main research question of the potential and functions of the LP's role as a public sphere, various theoretical perspectives will be introduced into the different chapters of this thesis to progressively answer the sub-research questions, including the gender script (van Oost, 2003) and gender representation in video games (Kondrat, 2015) cultural ludification in digital culture (Frissen et al., 2015), etc.

The main theory around which the discussion and analysis in this thesis revolve is the '**public sphere**' (1989) proposed by Jürgen Habermas and its extension to the digital internet sphere in today's media age. In his article, Peter Dahlgren applies the concept of the public sphere to the modern digital media environment, using affection as an essential aspect of political participation in the digital public sphere. Dahlgren analyses online media as a public sphere for participation in three dimensions: power relations, affection and collective configurations, and the online environment (Dahlgren, 2018).

Habermas states that within the private sphere lies civil society in the narrow sense (Habermas 1989, 30). Games, as a once private practice, have the opportunity to become part of the digital public sphere in today's media age, with LP videos of different kinds of games being watched by viewers on video-sharing platforms. The discursive site created around video game content extends from solely between the game and the player to the online media space that can accommodate audience participation. As a result, discourses related to socially public issues that are being discussed and addressed in the videos are triggered by the intentional or unintentional comments of LPers. Naturally, unlike traditional media, the mechanisms by which modern social media functions in assuming its role as a public sphere can be imperfect and limiting, as they lack effective self-regulation and face the danger of a media monopoly (Christian Fuchs, 2014). However, as social media platforms are becoming an important forum for public discourse, their accessibility and interactivity undoubtedly enable their potential to construct participatory sites of public debate. In this thesis, the factors in LP videos that give rise to participatory public discourse, especially about gender inequalities and feminist issues in China, will be analysed with several LP video cases around the concept of 'public sphere'.

Another concept central to this thesis is '**cultural ludification**' developed by Johan Huizinga in his book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1938), in which he suggests the importance of looking at more aspects of media and society through the lens of play. This fits perfectly with the research theme of this thesis, as LP provides the digital social space to engage with and interrogate politicised issues in multiple aspects of society through the lens of play, or more specifically, a media-based play practice. In Valerie Frissen et al.'s book *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures* (2015), the concept of cultural ludification is used to examine the complex relationship between play, media and identity in contemporary culture and suggests that a ludic dimension exists in all digital media and that there is a strong link between it and qualities such as the virtual, interactive nature of the medium. In their book, Valerie Frissen et al. stress that:

(...) play is both an individual and collective activity. Although the player is absorbed in his own private play-world, in most cases he plays with or against other players in a shared play-world, often before an audience. Even when one plays a solitary game, it is played before an imagined audience. (Frissen et al. 2015, 17)

As mentioned earlier, in LP, gaming as an individual activity becomes a collective activity presented to the audience, and the medial and interactive qualities of LP determine that the issues addressed in what Voorhees calls 'discursive games' are presented in a public sphere, and that the audience can participate in the discussions related to them. And nowadays, more and more sexist content in games is being noticed by LPers and audiences and is being widely and heatedly discussed on the internet, which is why this thesis has chosen the theme of gender inequality among the various social discourses taking place around LPs.

Judith Butler, in her *Gender Trouble* (1990), suggests that **gender identities are constructed through continuous performance** and that definitions of gender identity are often based on heteronormative social frameworks and gender binaries. The LPs uploaded on the Chinese video-sharing platform Bilibili, both in terms of the video games they are based around and the strategies and commentary displayed by the LPers, are not exempt from the binary gender identity divisions and patriarchal social frameworks that are deeply rooted in Chinese society. As a result, while watching the LPers operate as vicarious players, the audience is subliminally reinforced by the content of the games and the LPers'

performances, which continue to deepen their imposed gender identities. Several recent studies have applied Judith Butler's performance theory to research related to gender framing and gender performance in gaming. For example, Lina Eklund has followed Judith Butler's performance theory to analyse the representation of gender identity in the online game *World of Warcraft* (WoW) (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) (Lina Eklund, 2011). In their article, Marke Kivijärvi and Saija Katila illustrate the existence of masculine hegemony in the existing games industry and introduce Judith Butler's theory of performative identity construction to explore how female gamers participate in patriarchal masculine gamer discourses and how they negotiate their gamer identities in games (Kivijärvi & Katila, 2021). In this thesis, Judith Butler's theory of performativity will be used as a part of the theoretical framework to support the analysis of the gendered discourses presented and carried by LPs as part of the digital public sphere. The Butlerian perspective on the construction of performative gender identities will be used not only in the analysis of LP videos as *texts*, but also in the analysis of the ways in which LPers perform themselves in the videos and how the audience position themselves in terms of gender while participating in the public discourse in relation to gender issues.

Methodologies

To explore the potential and ways in which LP functions as a part of the digital public sphere, I will use 'critical discourse analysis' summarized by Marianne W Jørgensen and Louise J Phillips (2002) on the basis of Fairclough's model as the main research method to be applied in the analysis of this thesis. Jørgensen and Phillips point out that there is a general tendency to analyse visual textual material with an emphasis on its semiotic dimension of meaning and function, but that there is a tendency in critical discourse analysis to interpret visual material as a linguistic text. Furthermore, based on Fairclough's model, Jørgensen and Phillips propose three crucial dimensions that should be included when undertaking critical discourse analysis:

- it is a *text* (speech, writing, visual image or a combination of these);
- it is a *discursive practice* which involves the production and consumption of texts;
- and it is a *social practice*.

(Jørgense & Phillips, 2002, 7)

This thesis will follow this three-dimension model beginning with an analysis of games as 'texts', which LP videos focus on, and a discussion of the limitations of games themselves in constructing an open and inclusive discursive space. The analysis of LP videos as discursive practices will be the central section of this thesis, where LPers' performances around game texts in LPs and the characteristics of LP videos as production and consumption of game texts will be analysed. In the end, the thesis will explore the audience engagement and participation with the LP videos, with observation and discussion of the socially transformative practices of gender politics in China made by the audience on this basis.

This thesis will consider LPs as a discursive practice and analyse the producers of LPs, i.e. LPers. The analysis will focus on the approaches used by LPers in creating this discursive practice of mediated and public gameplay, which includes both the technical means of media and the performative self-presentation that takes place in online spaces. In addition, the thesis will analyse the audience's perception and reaction to the gender issues accommodated in the LPs, as well as the influence and function in the socio-political debates around the LP content.

Finally, Jørgensen and Phillips emphasise that 'discourses are socially embedded'; therefore, a key principle of critical discourse analysis is to observe the dialectical relationship between discursive practices and other social practices. They point to the need for critical discourse analysis to develop a research design based on the project's specificity. Critical discourse analysis aims to expose the unequal power relations latent in social discourse systems and to fight for social change. Therefore, in this thesis, the potential for analysing LPs as part of the digital public sphere to accommodate debates and discussions about gender discourse will be analysed in the context of China's heteronormative social framework based on this framework. The practice of gaming will be used as a lens to examine the patriarchal framework of present-day Chinese society and the resulting gender biases and inequalities.

Literature survey

In his *Discursive Games and Gamic Discourses* (2012), Gerald Voorhees argues that games should be seen as rhetorical artefacts par excellence, which participate not only in multidimensional

representations that encompass textual, visual, and narrative dimensions but also in the discourses of contemporary cultural construction (Voorhees, 2012, 1). Drawing on the academic intersection of the two fields of gaming and communication, Voorhees suggests that games can be a site for stimulating reflection in the communication process. Noting that games as 'remediated cinema' in their visual, aural, textual and procedural representations confer on games the ability to tell stories, Voorhees further emphasises the capacity of games to make arguments and stimulate communication.

Digital games are not simply catalysts for the conversations that emerge around them. By taking up contemporary issues, both allegorically and directly, games communicate. As sites where culture and identity are contested, politics are debated, and knowledge is produced and disseminated, digital games are ripe for intervention by critical scholars of communication investigating the intersections of discourse, power and social action. They are a convergent medium par excellence, capable of conveying several different means of representation and host to multiple modes of discourse. (Voorhees, 2012, 6)

Voorhees highlights the potential of digital games as sites of discourse production and communication, and points to their diversity and richness in terms of the ways they are represented and the modes of discourse they carry. Building on Voorhees' argument, I wish to point out how LPs can extend the communicative qualities of games even further by situating their play on public media sites. The framework of rules embedded in the game appears to wobble as a result of the LPers' existence when presenting the content of the game, and the LPers' manual processing determines the way the game is presented to the audience (perhaps as potential players) and has an impact on the extent to which they receive and process the stories and arguments being conveyed.

Voorhees notes that the line between entertaining games and 'serious games' is blurring, and that games that are not designed primarily for entertainment are becoming more common. As a result, the variety of games associated with different social subjects has increased, and the discourses based on the content of games have become more affluent. In this way, the entertaining and media-oriented nature of LPs breaks through the limitation of these discourses within the confines of the games and players, and expands the participants of the discourses around games to include the audience as users of the media.

On video sharing platforms such as Bilibili, a large amount of LP content is published and watched every day, and the discussion about it sometimes extends from Bilibili to other social media platforms. Among the many topics discussed, the discussion of sexism, gender stereotypes and feminism in games is becoming one of the most popular discourses. Critical opinions about gender politics triggered by games may be deliberately highlighted by LPers or inadvertently mentioned during game-play, thus triggering the audience to engage with the discussion. This thesis aims to extend from the 'discursive game' proposed by Voorhees to explore the potential of LPs to transmit and host participatory discourses as part of the online public sphere.

Chapter I: Games-as-texts in LP videos: gender frameworks and the limitations of games

For a long time, most games in the video game industry have been designed primarily for male players in terms of content and modes of operation. The majority of video games are either about killing monsters and defeating enemies or contain elements of mechanical combat, car racing, heists and warfare. However, a genre known as Otome games has become popular in some Asian countries in recent years. The term Otome (乙おと女め) originated in Japan, and the narrative of the Otome culture often describes the idealised imagination of a romantic relationship in Japan. There are various types of cultural products derived from Otome culture, including manga, anime, video games and more. In Otome games, the player takes on the role of a female character who generally encounters a number of male characters in the game's story, all of whom are potential subjects for the heroine to develop an intimate relationship with. Each male character in the game has a different physical appearance and personality traits, and the player playing as the heroine needs to increase the favorability value of her favourite character by choosing the right options in order to reach a potential "best ending". The first Otome game is considered to be *Angelique* (アンジェリーク), released in 1994 (Kim, 2009).

In the *In-depth Research and Development Forecast Report on the Current Situation of China's Female-oriented Game Market (2022-2029)*¹, a survey was conducted on the needs of Chinese female gamers as consumers, and three primary needs of female gamers were identified: a) emotional needs, b) aesthetic needs and c) companionship needs. In Leticia Andlauer's article *Pursuing One's Own Prince: Love's Fantasy in Otome Game Contents and Fan Practice*, Andlauer points out that video games are a form of media that perpetuates underlying gender stereotypes and gender biases (Andlauer, 2018). Andlauer argues that otome games provide a lens through which one can examine how the player's gender identity is constructed in the game and how it affects the player's perceptions and practices of their gender identity (Andlauer, 2018, 168). In otome games, there are multiple male characters who are usually portrayed as very different from each other. This might have been a commercial attempt

to expand the game's player Base since they could manage to meet the diverse imaginations of female players in terms of male partners. Over time several typical male character types have emerged in Otome games, such as the successful businessman, the outgoing and athletic man, etc. As the equivalent of male-oriented dating simulations, Otome game is designed to be a female-oriented game that can fulfil players' imagination of dating the perfect man. As Andlauer argues, the narratives in Otome's cultural products, including games, are derived from the gender framework in reality. Therefore, they inevitably follow gender stereotypes in their portrayal and presentation of gender roles. Like the Japanese shojo manga, Otome continues to stereotype the appearance and characterisation of its female protagonists. Furthermore, Henry Jenkins, in his Chapter *Complete Freedom of Movement: Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces* (Jenkins, 1998), suggests that video games have the potential to become a space for people to question existing gender frameworks and gender identity mechanisms in societies that are reflected in the dominant cultural industries. Although Henry Jenkins' argument was presented at a time when otome games were not as prominent as they are today, it is possible that otome games, as a genre of games that perpetuate gender bias in the dominant culture of society, could also become the questionable space Jenkins describes.

As stated in the introductory chapter, the focus of this thesis is not on games per se and their ability to be critical and reflexive spaces for society but rather on the potential for playful practices around games such as Let's Play to function as online public spheres. The main social issues occurring within the LP field that this thesis focuses on are the topics of gender politics and feminism in China. Therefore, in order to provide a more thorough and more in-depth study of the potential of LPs as a public sphere for gender politics and feminist discourses in China, this thesis will begin in the first chapter with an analysis of one of the main genres of games that are included in LP videos that deal with gender politics as a social discourse before moving on to LP videos created based on these games in the following chapter. Here, a case study of Otome game will be introduced in the first chapter of the thesis. This video game will be analysed as an example of the first key element, 'text', in the critical discourse analysis summarised by Marianne W Jørgensen and Louise J Phillips (2002). There are various reasons why the genre of Otome games has been chosen as a case study for this chapter. Firstly, Otome games are highly discussed in the gaming culture community of Chinese society. Many Otome games, including *Light and Night*, have attracted a large number of gamers and generate a wide range of cultural products within the gamer community, including videos based on the content of the games, comics that are added with personal interpretations to the narrative of the games, and fan articles created by players, to name a few. Secondly, as a rather popular genre in some Asian countries, including Japan and China, Otome games exhibit the patriarchal social framework and the

binary gender identity division that exists in society in its narrative and characterisation. Orthodox Otome games tend to strictly follow the heterosexual matrix proposed by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*(1990), emphasising heterosexual gender norms and relationship norms. As the foundational 'text' in Fairclough's three-dimensional model (Fairclough, 1992a), the content of otome games, which reflect problematic social frameworks, serves as a stimulus for discursive and transformative social practices.

Current academic research on Otome games involves studies related to Japanese Otome culture, studies on the construction of female characters in Otome games (Huan, 2022), and the marketing of Otome games and their users (players) (Andlauer, 2018), etc. In the article *Female Representation in Chinese Otome Games: Comparative Research on Three Famous Games from 2017 to 2021* (2022), Yining Huan examines the female protagonists in three popular Chinese Otome games, *Love and Producer* (Papergames, 2017), *Tears of Themis* (miHoYo, 2020) and *Light and Night* (Tencent Games, 2021). Huan's article reveals how the portrayal of female protagonists in these Otome games might influence female players because of the gender stereotypes and the socially restrictive imagery of idealised female roles they presents. In addition to this, Huan also suggests that there is a growing trend toward the diverse portrayal of female characters in Otome games, with the heroines being financially independent or successful in careers, for example. Yet the Otome games in china still fail to escape the heterosexual social framework and stereotypical gender roles characterisation of males being more robust and better than females (Huan, 2022). In the article *Pursuing One's Own Prince: Love's Fantasy in Otome Game Contents and Fan Practice* (2018), Leticia Andlauer examines how the construction of gender roles in Japanese Otome games perpetuates the underlying gender prejudices and norms in the social framework is examined. Andlauer analyses the narrative and gender role construction in a number of typical Japanese Otome games, noting that the fantasies of gender identity and gender relations embodied in Otome games often include vulnerable women and powerful male characters who are overprotective of the heroine. Furthermore, Andlauer examines the broader Otome culture industry and its interpretation and acceptance by its fans and suggests that female fans of Otome culture in Japan tend to experience elements of typical gender stereotypes such as heterosexual masculinity as part of their idealised heterosexual relationships to fantasy. Fans embrace and play their own vulnerable female figures in the game whilst having different expectations in reality (Andlauer, 2018).

In order to understand the significance of the game genre Otome game, which has become popular mainly in Asia in recent years, as a game text, it is essential to first analyse the social and cultural

contexts in which it is produced, since the gender bias embedded in the game and its shaping of 'standardised' gender identities are constructed based on the gender framework that exists within the society. In her *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1991), Donna Haraway notes, ' Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism' (Haraway, 1985, 72). In some Asian countries, such as Japan and China, the binary framework of gender identity and patriarchal social institutions are deeply rooted in history. In Japan and China, women's socially accepted identity values have been formulated around the family since ancient times, such as being perfect, or at least qualified, wives and mothers. Haraway points out that the distinction between binary gender identities is based on socially prescribed differences. To maintain the patriarchal hegemonic gender framework based on this binary differentiation of genders, girls are constantly shaped and reshaped from an early age by social life and culture, which allows them to deepen their perception of their gender identity and thus to continue to play their role as 'women'. Leticia Andlauer points out in her article how Japanese girls grow up with a continuous baptism of Otome culture, learning and participating in this socially constructed imaginary of the perfect relationship between two genders (Andlauer, 2018, 168). However, Bogost notes that the medium of play can also have the potential to be subversive to embedded social frameworks, as the player is actively acting as a co-creator of the meaning of the game in the process of playing it (Bogost, 2008). In their article, Kilian Biscop, Steven Malliet and Alexander Dhoest argue that in most games, the player must take on a prescribed heterosexual role based on the heterosexual matrix described by Butler (1990). These games are seen as perpetuating and reinforcing the influence of patriarchal social frameworks on cultural products and their consumers' perceptions of gender roles (Biscop et al., 2019, 26). But on the other hand, the game's subversive potential lies in the fact that it invites the player to take on the role of someone else. The player has the freedom to refuse to play that role perfectly while playing the game (although this also depends on how much space the game itself has to allow the player to deviate from the 'established narrative and identity'). In other words, the reality-based subjectivity of the player's personality in taking on the role of the game, and the degree of narrative and operational immobility and freedom that the game offers the player, gives the game the potential to subvert the established frameworks of the real world through a process of 'co-creation' with the player. However, Leticia Andlauer points out that the subversive potential of Otome itself is very limited, as the girl players are well aware of the enormous gap between the virtual world of the game and the real world of Japan, which makes girls' expectations and demands for men and romantic relationships differ in the real world and the virtual world of the game. As a result of the girls' different moral imperatives for real and in-game romantic relationships, there is a lack of voices questioning heterosexual norms of reality in the virtual

space constructed by the game. (Andlauer, 2018, 177). This gap between the virtual and the real allows female players of Otome games to make choices in the game and to perceive their gender identity as women in a very different way than in reality. In other words, players allow themselves to play a woman in Otome that they would not want to be in real life, and do not feel ashamed, blamed or in danger for doing so, because everything happens virtually. The gap between game and reality and the 'safe imaginary space' that the game creates for female players thus limits the game's potential to subvert hegemony.

1.1 Case Study: *Light and Night*

With the expansion of the Chinese game player base and the development of the game market, an increasing number of Chinese game companies are releasing games that attract a large number of players. Among the many popular game genres, Otome game is a genre that attracts a large number of female players in China due to its mobile phone accessibility and low difficulty level. Otome enthusiasts who once only had access to Japanese Otome games and gamers who have never played Otome games before are starting to play Chinese Otome games. At the same time, the popularity of Otome games in China coincided with the rise of feminist ideology in the country at almost the same time; Otome games, which are based on a strict gender binary and often have many gender stereotypes in their traditional style, have attracted a large number of female players and stimulated a lot of discussion and criticism around the content of the games. One of the relatively popular Otome games in the Chinese gaming market at the moment is an Otome game called *Light and Night* (Tencent Games, 2021), which is generating a lot of discussions in many quarters. To understand the limitations of Otome games, a relationship simulator designed primarily for female players, in breaking down inherent gender frameworks and becoming a subversive site for patriarchal hegemony, this section presents a case study of an original Chinese relationship simulator called *Light and Night*. The reasons for selecting *Light and Night* among the many games of its kind are multiple. Firstly, the games and playful discursive practices researched in this thesis are primarily situated within China's patriarchal hegemonic and binary gender frameworks. *Light and Night*, as the latest of several mainstream relationship simulation games that have been available in China since its online release in 2021 and up to the time of this thesis research, is therefore one of the most popular games that are being discussed on the internet. Secondly, *Light and Night* shows a degree of breaking through social gender stereotypes in the portrayal of the female protagonist and male characters compared to the typical Otome games that originated in Japan. However, while *Light and Night*'s characterisation challenges

gender stereotypes within Chinese popular culture, particularly within the gaming industry, the game still fails to escape the large gender identity gap between male and female characters typical of traditional Otome games. Although the heroine is set up to be professionally successful and characteristically independent, her appearance and other characteristics, as well as the framing of gender relations and plot development in the game, are still subject to the traditional and foundational limitations of a typical Otome game. Finally, as a first step in following Fairclough's three-dimensional model in the CDA approach, i.e. analysing the game as a text, it is necessary to select texts with sufficient discursive and social practices as the object of study. The discursive practices in the form of Let's Play videos around the game *Light and Night* will also be examined as case studies in the second chapter of this thesis. Due to the high popularity of the game *Light and Night* in China, a large number of LP videos have been created on Bilibili, the main video sharing platform in China, using *Light and Night* as the main textual content. In addition, there are numerous player discussions around *Light and Night* on various types of social and gaming forums example(s). As such, *Light and Night* is a valuable textual material for analysis, both in terms of the characterisation and narrative features of the game itself, and its unique value within the Chinese Otome gaming field. In this chapter, I will present a case study of *Light and Night* in terms of its characterisation and narrative construction, as well as its breakthrough and limitations in attempting to challenge and subvert China's patriarchal socio-cultural system and binary gender framework.

Firstly, the appearance of *Light and Night's* female protagonists and male characters shows that the game's design caters to the aesthetic needs of female players of Otome games. In terms of the male characters' appearance, the five male protagonists have typical Chinese female-oriented aesthetics in terms of body shape and look. They are tall, masculine, good-looking, and very different but all stylish tastes in clothing. Although the appearance of each male character varies somewhat given their different occupational settings and personality traits, they generally continue the style of the idealised male character portrayed in Asian Otome culture. The differences in dress between the male characters also reveal a diversity of players with different aesthetic preferences. *Light and Night* has five main male characters, all of whom the game's heroine can choose to pursue. They are called Osborn, Evan, Sariel, Charlie and Jesse, and they have different personalities and physical characteristics, some of which are typical iterations of the male characters in the Otome games. For example, Osborn, the first male character to appear in the game, dresses in dark colours and has a sporty, mechanical style, as he is set up as a cheerful, sporty motorcyclist. The other male character, Evan, dresses in a distinctly different style from the former. As the CEO of the company where the heroine works, he wears a complete suit and glasses for most scenes, revealing maturity and elegance.

The third male character, Sariel, with his silky white hair, is set in the form of a white fox who is considered very spiritual in both Chinese and Japanese religious cultures, and except for work hours, he generally wears clothes with a distinctly ancient Chinese folk style, a style known in Chinese as “古风” (Gufeng). This style is an essential element in Chinese female-oriented pop culture. Various works of ancient Chinese culture, including TV dramas, novels and games, often devote a certain amount of space to carefully depicting the details of the protagonists' outfits. In the Chinese Otome games represented by *Light and Night*, cultural stereotypes are invoked in the appearance of the characters involved. Settings of ancient Chinese mythological systems of gods and spirits are frequently incorporated into pop culture products and have a critical mass of cultural enthusiasts as fans, and Otome games are no exception. For the game character, Sariel's ancient Chinese style character design and stereotypical impression of the indifferent nature of the ancient Chinese spirit in human form was successful in terms of marketability, as it made the character one of the key factors in the game's appeal to fans of this subculture.

The fourth male character in the sequence is Charlie, who also has white hair but, in contrast to Sariel, usually wears exaggerated, colourful clothes and often shows up with sunglasses. The fifth male character, Jesse, has brown hair and an everyday style of clothing, but occasionally wears flamboyant performance costumes as he is set up as an opera singer.



(Figure 1.1.1. *Light and Night*'s male characters: Charlie, Evan, Osborn, Sariel, Jesse)

The five male characters are designed to look and dress differently so that female players with different aesthetic preferences have various choices. The appearance of the five male characters represents, to some extent, the ideal image of the real-life Chinese heterosexual woman. Evidence of the popularity of these portrayal styles is the overall pattern of similarity in male appearance character design across multiple Chinese Otome games. These recurring similarities in male character traits across multiple Otome games reflect the presence of the *female gaze* (Bracha L., 1995) that is directly and visibly allowed in Otome games against men. The term *female gaze* is coined by feminist scholars as opposed to Laura Mulvey's 'male gaze' (Mulvey, 1975) to refer to the feminine aesthetic perspective that female writers, directors and audiences bring to the production and interpretation of cultural works. In the Otome games represented by *Light and Night*, the satisfaction of the female gaze is a fundamental requirement, and one could even argue that the satisfaction of the aesthetic female gaze in the design of male characters is one of the most important reasons for the success of Otome games in the gaming market. When an Otome game is about to be released, the game company usually registers its official accounts for the game on mainstream social media platforms and starts posting pictures of the male character designs. Within a few months of the game's launch, the company will distribute an evaluation questionnaire within the game, which will include a section asking players to rate their satisfaction with the male character's design. Although this questionnaire

is not available anymore, it is certainly an extension of the game's paratext, which emphasises the core element of the game *text* as an Otome game focusing on the attractiveness of the character's portrayal of gender identity and appearance features. Here, the aesthetically pleasing male character design is the first step towards attracting players and developing the game's market, retaining original players and attracting new ones as the game's plot continues to evolve.



(Figure 1.1.2. The heroine in *Light and Night*)

At the same time, the heroine played by the players is short, thin but curvy, fair-skinned and with long pink hair. One could argue that the design of the character's appearance appears to be more oriented towards the male gaze of women within the framework of Chinese patriarchal society, but the fact is

that the positive comments from female players about the design of the female characters in the game indicate that women are content with the image of their in-game avatar. In comments posted on the internet, female players have commented that "the expressions the heroine makes in her conversations with the male characters are very cute", "the heroine is really attractive", and "the heroine is very pretty". I argue that the sweetness and beauty of the game's heroine's exterior features fit surprisingly well with the gaze of the female player because she represents, to some extent, the idealised image of femininity as defined in Chinese society. While the positive acceptance of beauty and cuteness is gender-neutral, *Light and Night's* heroine's appearance does not offer options beyond her original style designed in the game, even when some of the appearance details could be changed by the players. In this way, *Light and Night*, a female-oriented game, is embedded in China's patriarchal society's aesthetic tendencies, which subliminally influence female players. Furthermore, in the game, players can also change and dress up their avatar by using virtual currency or by completing specific quests to earn additional cosmetics, clothing and jewellery. However, the freedom of portrayal of the heroine is very limited, as the overall perception of the heroine's style is 'sweet', and there are very few options for a wide range of make-up and clothing options that deviate from this style. The details of the heroine's appearance that players can change include clothes, makeup, jewellery and hairstyle, but custom changes do not set off any changes in dialogue or plot.

Among the many critics of the female gaze in mass media productions, Caetlin Benson-Allot points to the lack of rich group representation of female characters, i.e. the fact that female characters in films that show the female gaze are not designed with minority groups in mind, or do not offer the freedom of choice to meet the needs of different groups of audiences (Benson-Allot, 2017). In the case of *Light and Night*, the heroine's body features cannot be altered, and *Light and Night* does not offer the same body-adjustment options as, e.g. *The Sims 4* (Electronic Arts, 2017). Although the conventions of different genres of the game are different, the portrayal of the heroine in *Light and Night* in an attempt to appeal to both male and female aesthetic gazes of femininity reflects the patriarchal nature of the female gaze, i.e. the high degree of similarity between women's imagination of their ideal image and the aesthetic preferences of society's men for women. Scholars and commentators, including Michelle Juergen, have called this 'patriarchal gaze' (Juergen, 2013), which embodies an aesthetic system that is strictly based on a patriarchal and heteronormative gender framework and therefore excludes heterosexual women's groups and groups with an aesthetic different from that of the dominant gender.

Within the game, players can repeatedly participate in specific activities to accumulate currency that circulates in the virtual world, and use the currency to purchase cards at different levels that can trigger storylines with different male characters. In most card designs, the male characters differ significantly in height and size from the female protagonist. This difference in appearance between strong males and thin females is a common and fan favourite element in Otome culture and is known in Chinese as "Size Gap(体型差)". The size gap highlights the gender gap between men and women on the most obvious level, as opposed to personality traits or social status.



(Figure 1.1.3. 'Size gap' between the heroine and male character in *Light and Night*)

While *Light and Night*, as a typical Otome game, caters to the heteronormative aesthetic standards of a patriarchal social framework in the appearance of its male characters and heroine, *Light and Night* also clearly demonstrates an attempt to break away from the typical female stereotypes of Otome games in terms of character and plot design. In her article, Leticia Andlauer concludes that in Otome games, the heroine, who is operated by the player, is often described as 'kind', 'unobtrusive', 'submissive' and 'fragile'. Because of her vulnerability, the male characters usually can not resist their will of helping and saving her from danger.

Andlauer criticises the vulnerability of women and the heroic portrayal of men in Otome as extremely stereotypical, but it is in the distinction and contrast between male and female characters that the narrative in Otome is developed, and thus “the world of the Otome celebrates this fantasy with its heterosexual norms in a very specific love story” (Andlauer, 2018, 175). However, in *Light and Night*, the heroine is characterised as ‘strong’, ‘brave and ‘independent’, which is also one of the reasons that the male characters fall in love with her. This design is rather different from the traditional and standard Otome characterisation of heroines, and it is easy to see how *Light and Night* has made a tentative change to the collective gender ideal of being a strong, independent woman that is becoming popular among Chinese women (gamers). For example, at the beginning of the story, the heroine comes second in a national fashion design competition, and later in the story, she represents the company in numerous fashion design competitions. In addition, the heroine's backstory is that she escaped to study abroad in order to refuse a business marriage arranged for her by her father, and refused his request for her to inherit the family estate. These narratives and character backgrounds included in the game manifest the heroine's exceptional career abilities, independent personality and wealthy family circumstances. Some female players have posted positive comments on social media about the independent and strong character of the heroine.



萧逸是我的是我的是我的

4-15 光与夜之恋超话



💎光与夜之恋超话 我真的觉得光夜的女主有点可爱 坚强又勇敢 还是个很厉害的设计师（没有别的意思 就是觉得光 10 万设置的这个女主真的很好 没有女主党 从剧情来说 就是单纯的觉得她性格真的不戳！ 🍡

隐藏翻译

(Figure 1.1.4. Player commenting online about the heroine's personalities: [translation:]“I really think Light Night's heroine is kind of cute and strong and brave and an excellent designer”)

One of the highlights of *Light and Night* that players have mentioned is the combination of conventional and innovative character and plot design that it achieves as an Otome game. On the one hand, *Light and Night* inherits many aspects of the characters' basic settings from the Otome games, including the romantic relationships of multiple male characters and a single female character, sweet female character and strong male characters. On the other hand, *Light and Night* also breaks a certain amount of ground with the conventions of the typical Otome game setting, in the form of the aforementioned successful heroine in the professional workplace and the resistance to be able to deal with the lack of freedom of marriage assigned by the family.

The strong and independent character of the heroine, praised by many female players, is also on display in the game's narrative and conversations with other characters. In the narrative setting of the game, the heroine chose to study abroad a few years ago in order to refuse and avoid the marriage partner arranged for her by her father. The reason why such a story setting is preferred by female players is that women have long faced a lack of freedom of choice in marriage under the influence of traditional marriage conventions in Chinese society. In ancient China, there was a tradition of "the order of parents and the word of matchmakers". This phrase means that parents have the right to decide on their children's marriage partners and that children should follow their parents' arrangements. The influence of this tradition on Chinese women is still present in Chinese society today, as evidenced by the fact that after graduating from university, women are arranged by their parents to go on blind dates and are frequently pushed to get married. As a rebellion against the restrictions on women's marriage freedom, contemporary Chinese women are beginning to consider and pursue non-maritalism. In a game that focuses on presenting women's fantasies of romantic relationships, *Light and Night* adds to the narrative the heroine's rejection of the marriage arranged by her father, and brings this up from time to time in her conversations with other characters. I believe that part of this is due to the game's efforts to cater to the changing perceptions of marriage among contemporary Chinese female players.

In addition, *Light and Night* has a richer gameplay design than the traditional Otome games. Rather than just developing a romantic relationship with a male character, *Light and Night* also includes music, costume design and the option for the heroine to upgrade to become a more advanced fashion designer with in-game materials. In a conversation with a friend I met through the game, she said she

was more focused on upgrading her career rank in the game than developing a romantic relationship with a male character. She stated that the workplace atmosphere created in the game (including the heroine's participation in design contests and competition with other designers) reminded her of the workplace pressures she faces in real life. In the main storyline of the game, the heroine also expresses her motivation and pursuit in her career several times in the dialogue, stating that she has a dream and is competent enough to realise it. This is a feature of the heroine that is neglected to be portrayed in many Otome games. However, in contrast to most other Otome games that portray the heroine in an unexpected role other than that of the romantic relationship, Light and Night makes several references to this aspect of the game to achieve a portrayal of the game's heroine that is more independent, career-minded and more in tune with the preferences of contemporary Chinese female gamers.



(Figure 1.1.5. Screenshot of the heroine refusing in the game the arranged marriage)



(Figure 1.1.6. Screenshot of the section in about the heroine's level as a designer)

However, even though the game deliberately highlights the strong and independent characteristics of the heroine in much of the dialogue and storyline, Light and Night as an Otome game still fails to detach the heroine from the cliché of being 'saved by men'. Throughout the different chapters of the game, five male characters save the heroine at various points in the plot, whether by using their physical strength, finances or social power. Osborn comes to rescue the unconscious heroine during

a fire in her flat, Evan helps her escape from her stalkers when they first meet. In his article 'First we invented stories, then they changed us': The Evolution of Narrative Identity, Dan P. McAdams examines the relationship between narrative storytelling in modern society and the In his article '*First we invented stories, then they changed us': The Evolution of Narrative Identity* (2019), Dan P. McAdams analyses the relationship between narrative storytelling and the construction of individual human identity in modern society.

In his article, P. McAdams cites Charles Taylor's argument that a narrative is a reflexive tool of modern self-representation (Taylor, 1989), and P. McAdams notes that the stories that are created in society about individual lives "would appear to be a cultural construction that resonates to be a cultural construction that resonates well with the sensibilities of the modern world" (P. McAdams, 2019, 13). I argue that in *Light and Night*, an Otome game, the characterisation of the female protagonist and her contrast in appearance and ability with the male character form a narrative that represents a social imaginary and constructs in which the collective imagination of an idealised romantic relationship is portrayed as the male being more powerful than the female, and that this narrative could, as P. McAdams suggests, have a constructive effect on the human individual in society. The inheritance of Otome's classic 'men as heroes and saviours' formula somehow makes its groundbreaking characterisation of the heroine seem implausible. The heroine, an intern in a fashion design company, appears mediocre when faced with male characters who are CEO, celebrity or the richest man in the world. *Light and Night's* characters' appearance, characterisation and plotting perfectly reproduce the gender gap between men and women. The characters in *Light and Night* still adhere to the gender scripts imposed on each individual in Chinese society, and in the romantic relationships, the women still look up to the almost perfect male specimens who are powerful, intelligent and have far more power, money and privilege than the heroine as van Oost has mentioned. The heroine is the idealised but default setting for the female players in reality - a beautiful, young and talented woman, who is still at the start of her career, and of course, heterosexual. The reason why this game is limited in its attempt to break the conventions of the patriarchal social framework of Otome games is even more obvious. For even such strong women cannot escape the narrative of the "rescued female character" being assigned in Otome games. In Otome games such as *Light and Night*, the pre-determined gender script is hard to resist. From the game designer's point of view, the heterosexual gender matrix is the basic framework to which the relationship simulation has to adhere in the current social context. While the game texts represented by *Light and Night* are unable to breach the established narrative approaches in society, LP videos as discursive practices can have a more groundbreaking and subversive effect on social frameworks due to their mediated nature and the personal involvement of

LPers in the construction of game narratives and meanings. This will be analysed in detail in the second chapter of this thesis.

Ellen van Oost points out that gender scripts can be embodied and embedded in products (van Oost, 2003), either explicitly or implicitly, from the original pink mobile phones designed for female consumers to the 'size gap' and social status gap between male and female characters in today's Otome games. The social construction of gender has permeated from the real world to the virtual world of games, assigning each virtual character and real players their own sample gender roles to perform. Female players are playing virtual avatars of themselves in a virtual world, while at the same time learning about their assigned gender identity. Due to the aforementioned perception of the gap between the virtual world and the real world in the game, and the freedom given to players to 'refuse to perform perfectly', players do have the right to question and critically examine the social framework (especially the gender framework) of the embedded game, both within the game space and beyond. As Andlauer puts it in her article: "This performance allows girls to 'play' their own fictional relationships and, through this, question norms about heterosexual love built by the culture in which they have been raised" (Andlauer, 2018, 178). As scholar H  l  ne Sellier has done in her attempt to create a feminist Otome game (Sellier, 2019), giving players enough freedom in the Otome game could go some way toward preventing them from being passively influenced by the hegemonic ideology embedded in the Otome game. In her presentation, Sellier said that in order to achieve the goal of feminism in the Otome game she created, she was offering players choices to ignore or respond in their own way to gender-biased comments about women made by the male characters in the game. Players are allowed not to make the choices that the Otome game dictates that 'brave' female characters should make. This prompted me to consider whether the increased freedom of choice for gamers meant that Otome could be more rejectionist and rebellious to the idea of the 'ideal romantic relationship' defined by society. I believe that an exploration of freedom in Otome games means that there will always be more 'freedom' that is not addressed and covered, considering the inconsistencies and individual tendencies of each individual in society. As a result, Otome games, when designed for a myriad of different female players, are unable to reconcile the satisfaction of each player's individual tendencies towards freedom with the compulsory substitution of the heroine to ensure narrative integrity and rationality. This is why it is necessary to introduce a discussion of the discursive and social practices based on the game as a text that achieves subversive rebellion. The LP videos with LPers' personal annotations are more subversive than the Otome games because they are critical discursive practices that consider Otome games as cultural products influenced by a patriarchal social framework,

and are therefore more capable of expressing and enacting a rebellion against the framework than the game texts themselves.

However, it is worth noting that the limitations of Otome games, including *Light and Night*, in becoming spaces of subversive discourse lie not only in the failure of their character designs to escape existing gender construction and gender scripts, but also in the enclosed space that is created between the game and the player. The lack of openness, participation and the necessary media for a wider audience and potential players as a site of voice limits the potential of the game itself to subvert gender hegemony and provoke players and potential players to examine and discuss existing gender stereotypes critically.

Although, as Valerie Frissen et al. argue in *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures* (2015), games are firmly grounded in everyday reality and are a key feature of our understanding of contemporary culture, as well as a means by which we reflexively construct our identity. However, based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model, the various video games, including Otome, function only as the first aspect of the communicative event, i.e. the 'text' (de Lange, Michiel, et al., 2015). Games as texts are here a combination of visual images and speeches that overt media practices have not yet transformed into discursive practices, a genre that enables discursive practices to take place with a broader audience and participants, and where discursive practices function as mediators before further social practices can take place and take on a greater social dimension than the texts themselves. As Andlauer puts it in her article: "This performance allows girls to 'play' their own fictional relationships and, through this, question norms about heterosexual love built by the culture in which they have been raised" (Andlauer, 2018, 178).

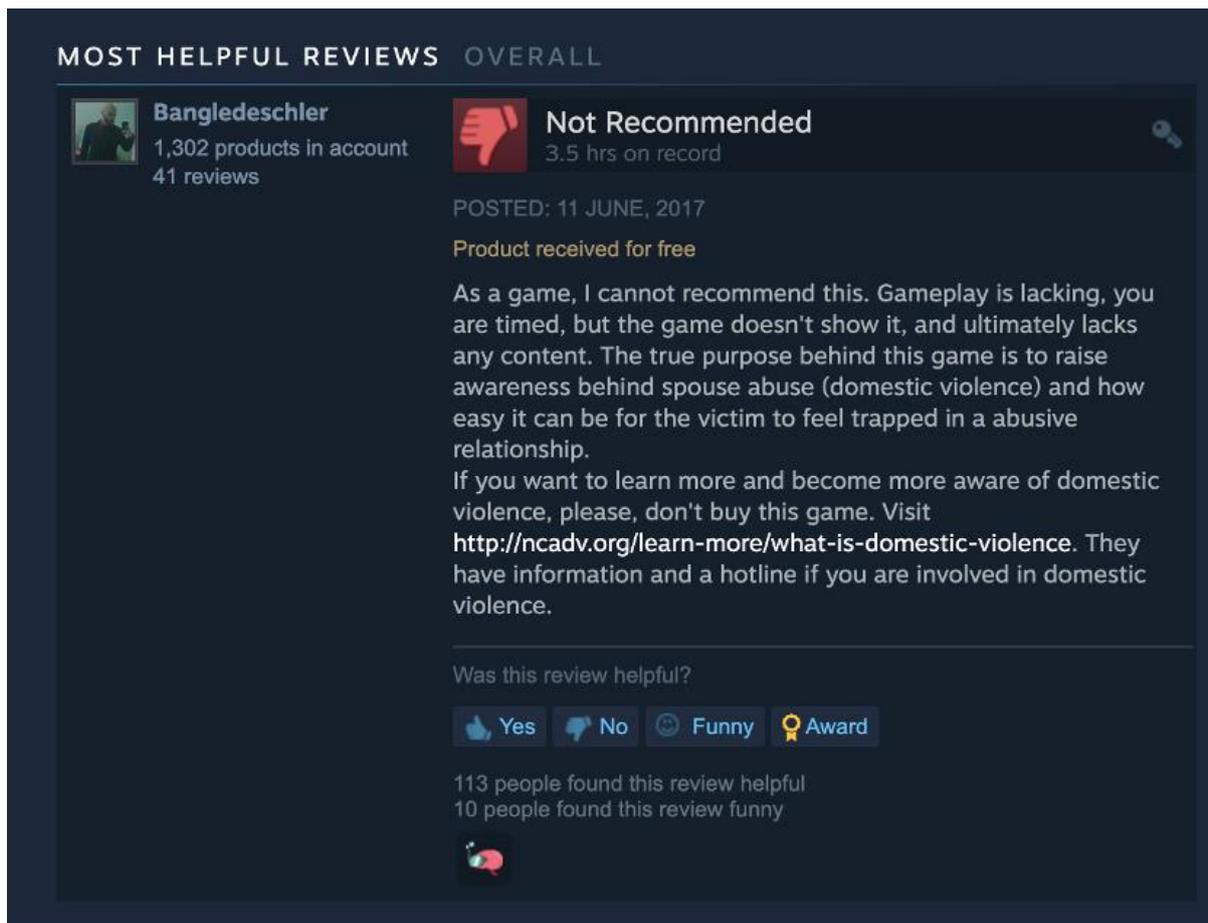
1.2 The other games

In fact, not only in Otome games, but in the gaming industry as a whole, the neglect and devaluation of female players and the stereotypical character design in games have been the norm. The questioning and rebellion against real-world social frameworks and gender inequalities generated by players, especially female players, is not only directed at (or derived from) games like Otome games, which assign fixed gender roles to in-game and real individuals based on a binary gender framework, but also the majority of contemporary games in the industry that follow heteronormative gender scripts and patriarchal social frameworks. In addition to Otome game mentioned here as *Light and*

Night, which is primarily aimed at a large group of female players, there are other types of game texts used by LPers to create discursive practices with that could stimulate their performances around gender identities and agendas and provoke discussions of gender politics among the audience. At the end of this chapter, two types of game texts that will be referred to and analysed in the second chapter of this thesis will be listed in order to provide a more detailed analysis of the discursive practices surrounding these game texts in the next chapter. The reason these games might be used as cases in the next chapter is that their potential to accommodate subversive discourses and practices within the spaces created by the games is limited, or the games themselves contain discriminatory and patriarchal gender frames and gender scripts that LPs as discursive practices point out and provide critical discursive feedback on.

a) Games that point out and critically re-present sexism and gender inequality in society in the game text

Games that are explicitly 'anti-sexist' are rare in the current gaming market, but games that try to avoid sexism in their gender representation are becoming more common. A prime example of this is *The Sims 4*, where players can customise their gender identity and appearance without the usually embedded stereotypical gendered scripts. Binary gender identity boundaries are broken down, and stereotypical gender identity-based clothing styles are removed with more gender-neutral clothing items available for purchase in the game. At the same time, games that raise awareness and criticise real-life gender inequalities have not been as popular with most players, such as *The Housewife* (Back to Basics Gaming, 2016), which aims to raise awareness of domestic violence by allowing players to simulate a day in the life of a housewife. At the end of the day, the housewife's husband returns home and begins to abuse her. Although the theme and main content of the game are to simulate and fight against real-life gender inequality, the majority of players on steam gave it a 'Not Recommended' review due to its lack of entertainment and gameplay.



(Figure 1.2.1. Review on the game *The Housewife*)

However, although the game itself cannot be described as a successful game product, as a text in Fairclough's three-dimensional model, it provides material for the discursive practices that develop around it. In the case used in the next chapter of this thesis, the discursive practices of the LP form around the game *The Housewife* communicated the values that the game itself failed to convey through the annotations and interpretations added by the LPer, and provoked discussion among the audience.

b) Low-cost Otome-like games produced by folk authors

In addition to Otome games like *Light and Night*, which are published by professional game development teams, there are also some Otome games designed by folk game creators in China. These homemade games are generally published on the *Orange Light Games* platform. These games are often in the visual novel genre and are not as rich in gameplay as games designed by professional game development teams, but are favoured by LPers because of their entertaining nature and the relatively fewer cultural regulations they are subjected to. A couple of representative examples are

How Many Episodes Can You Last (Orange Light Games, 2022) and *Hello Miss Persuader* (Orange Light Games, 2018), published on the Orange Light Games platform.

In Otome games like *Light and Night* and two other types of games listed above, whether they inherit or oppose the gender frameworks of the real world, the feedback and opinions of the players remain within the players' own community. And the power that the games provide to the players to rebel against the gender frameworks and gender inequalities and to make critical voices heard remains within the virtual worlds created by the games, or within the community of players. Thus, both from the perspective of the games themselves and from the perspective of the players they are intended for, there is a limit to the transformative practices that can be extended into reality. The transformative power of practice that video games as texts can exert is limited by their genre, and the transformative power of video games in terms of gender politics cannot be reached by a wider range of participants or exerted with greater force due to a lack of wider openness and participation. In contrast, LP video, as a media creation around the text of video games paratext, presents the content of video games on video sharing platforms with a wider audience, and thus breaks out of the relatively closed space of communication confined to games and players, expanding the space for transformative discourses to take place and further giving space and opportunity for the social practices inspired by the discursive practices.

Chapter II: LPs as discursive practice: the construction of discursive public sphere and the performances of LPers

On the basis of Fairclough's three-dimensional model, Marianne W Jørgensen and Louise J Phillips (2002) point out that three dimensions are often included in instances where language is used, namely text, discursive practices and social practices. As illustrated in the previous chapter, video games themselves can be understood as texts, combining visual images, writing and speech. Video games construct a narrative within themselves and the virtual world in which the narrative is embedded, and players are granted access to this virtual world, participating in the game's narrative and becoming co-constructors of its meaning (Bogost, 2008). In his paper, Espen Aarseth references Wolfgang Iser's term "the implied reader" (Iser, 1978) and points out that there is also "the implied player" in games (Aarseth, 2017). Aarseth goes on to suggest the existence of transgressive behaviour towards the implied player, i.e. when the player does something that the game does not expect the player to do, but is also not forbidden by the settings of the game. Aarseth argues that such transgressions sometimes represent a rebellion against the game's control over the player, and is a way for the player "to regain their sense of identity and uniqueness through the mechanisms of the game itself" (Aarseth, 2007, 132). In this sense, LPers achieve a transgressive construction of the meaning of the game text by presenting to the viewers their own adaptations and annotations of the game's original narrative and gameplay. At the same time, the text as a game has limitations in becoming a site of subversion, as it lacks adequate openness, mediality, interactivity and inclusivity. In other words, the sites of discursive meaning constructed by games can hardly accommodate the participation of a public other than the players. The world within the game is opaque to potential players from outside, who are isolated from the world and narrative constructed by the game by the threshold of 'being a real player'. On this basis, in the production and consumption of video games (*texts*), a more inclusive discursive practice has emerged that could reach a wider group of audience and participants, that is, the LP (Let's Play) videos. In his article, René Glas proposes to consider the LP creators as vicarious players and suggests that through their performances, they present the audience with the ideal players they imagine, allowing the audience to be more than mere spectators of the videos and providing with an experience of vicarious play (Glas, 2013). In this vicarious gaming experience, viewers are also allowed to enter the game world through the viewing access provided by the open video sharing platform and the commentary methods employed by LPers as if they were

engaging in a dialogue with the viewers. Furthermore, by means including commenting on LP videos and discussing their content, viewers can protest against the social framing of discourses and discourses in the virtual game world. And before the audience joins in as participants in the discursive space that the LP expands based on games, the LP videos already exist primarily as a discursive response to the *texts* (games). Discursive practices around the games as texts begin to emerge when the content of the games is processed and represented by LPers through filtering, recording, editing, dubbing and commenting. This discursive practice is posted on social platforms in the form of media products for a wider audience than players. When LP videos are posted on video-sharing platforms, they are made accessible to a wider range of people who can participate in the production of discourse in the online public space due to the open and interactive nature of the platforms. This is where the attributes of the video-sharing platform and the level of openness and interaction it creates become essential. Before discussing the potential of LPs to function as part of the public sphere as a discursive practice, a necessary precondition is whether the social media platforms that host LPs already have the characteristics and functions of a public sphere themselves. In this thesis, the study of LPs will be primarily placed in the Chinese social context in order to discuss the potential of Chinese LP productions for constructing a public discursive space on feminism and gender politics in China. Therefore, in this chapter, this thesis will first look at Bilibili, the most mainstream video-sharing platform in China and the main platform for the distribution of LP videos in China.

This chapter will first explore how social media platforms in online environments function as digital public spheres. It will also analyse the unique features and advantages of the Chinese video-sharing platform Bilibili that enable it to act as a site for contemporary Chinese youth to engage with social discourses. Secondly, the chapter will use some Chinese LP videos posted on Bilibili as a case study to analyse how LP videos appear in cyberspace as discursive responses to game texts, according to Fairclough, and to analyse the ways in which LP videos present game content and how discourses on gender politics in relation to China are motivated in LPs. This chapter will then examine how the creators of the LP videos, i. e. the LPers, perform in and curate the LP videos, and how the way the LPers perform and curate affects the connection between the LP video content and the game texts, and relates the game texts to the topic of gender politics and feminism in China, will be the focus of this section of the study. Finally, in conjunction with an analysis of the characteristics of Bilibili's platform, the LPers' performances, and the ways in which the digital public platform constructed by LP functions, this chapter will look at audience feedback on this discursive practice of LP on the Bilibili platform, and the comments emanating from the audience will be used as material for analysis.

2.1 Social media as digital public sphere

Some scholars have extended their research on the public sphere to online social media platforms such as YouTube, and have explored the qualities of YouTube as a video-sharing platform to facilitate communication and social activism. For example, Yochai Benkler et al. consider the public spheres formed on the internet as providing more accessible channels of communication, giving the former passive recipients of information the opportunity to become potential speakers and participants in the dialogue (2015). S. Edgerly et al. coded and analysed videos posted on YouTube related to street protests and explored the potentially transformative role of digital media such as YouTube in protest and activism (2009). In her article, Szostak uses YouTube as a case study to explore whether the new media represented by YouTube can function as a public sphere and act as a remedial mechanism to patriarchy, allowing women's voices to be heard (Szostak, 2014). In his article, Christian Fuchs summarises some of the limitations of Habermas's 'public sphere' (Fuchs 2014, 62), such as the lack of plurality and its inapplicability to the complexity of modern society (Lunt & Livingstone 2013, 92). As the development of the internet enabled online social networks to begin to qualify as a digital public sphere, the public platforms represented by YouTube began to manifest their more diverse and modern characteristics, thus constructing a digital public space capable of accommodating broader public participation and more multidimensional discourses. The low barriers and ease of interaction have allowed online social platforms to develop even further on a social level, allowing the digital public sphere they construct to accommodate a wider range of public participation.

Moreover, in his article, Christian Fuchs emphasises the importance of the sociality dimension of social media, which can be interpreted as the three-fold interconnection of cognition, communication and cooperation (Fuchs, 2014). Firstly, the Internet takes on the role of collecting and disseminating information to users, which provides them with a cognitive channel that needs to be combined with a text that reflects a specific social context. Secondly, the acts of sending emails, messages and commenting on media content are all based around or dependent on specific texts for online communication. Thirdly, due to the sociality of social media, different forms of cooperation could be initiated and practised within the online environment (Fuchs, 2014, 58). In the interconnection and co-action of these three layers of elements, an overlap between the political, economic and cultural spheres of society is formed within the online public sphere constructed on the Internet (Fuchs, 2014, 61). At the same time, diverse social circles or groups emerge in the online space as a result of people's interests or stakes in various domains. Different social platforms may also have different functional

focuses and priorities. For example, Facebook is more focused on building its functionality to provide users with the ability to communicate with each other online (Eliza Leong et al., 2016), while Google focuses more on providing a variety of ways to meet people's cognitive needs (Segev & Baram-Tsabari). Video-sharing platforms, represented by China's Bilibili and the more international YouTube, are slightly different from the social platforms mentioned before that have a clear focus on the development of functionality. As social platforms whose primary function is video sharing, they are more representative of the attributes of cognition and communication at play in the fusion of the two. If we consider the videos posted on video-sharing platforms as text information, then the boundaries between the publisher and the receiver of text information here become breakable. Users on the site can interact both as creators and distributors of video texts (through functions such as re-posting or sharing via links to others) and as recipients of video texts and the information and values they contain by commenting, clicking on *like* or *dislike*, etc. On video-sharing social platforms, the power relations in the chain of communication are loosely framed, rather than from the top down or vice versa, and the way information travels among people is more akin to a horizontal relationship. In addition, social media provides a space for digital labour, online consumption and discursive responses around different types of texts, including entertaining texts such as games. Due to their social nature, social media, especially video-sharing social platforms, are characterised by relatively open, equal and pluralistic information generation and dissemination. Even though video sharing platforms such as YouTube and Bilibili have as one of their key objectives the dissemination of entertaining online cultural products, the above-mentioned qualities allow for an upgrade in the way the public participates in digital discourse as users of the sites. Studies on YouTube by scholars such as S. Edgerly have explored the qualifications and potential of this globalised video-sharing platform as a site for the occurrence of reflexive discursive practices that carry the public's social agenda from numerous perspectives, which in turn contribute to participatory democracy to a certain extent (Fuchs, 2014, 65). At the same time, video-sharing sites on the Internet often meet the criteria of the public sphere that Habermas traditionally emphasises, such as accessibility. The media nature and popularity of video-sharing sites give the content they host relatively equal and broad accessibility.

2.2 Bilibili as the Chinese digital public sphere

Compared to YouTube, the similar video-sharing platform Bilibili does not have an international reach, but has developed primarily in the Chinese internet environment. In their study, Peiren Shao and Yun Wang point out that to explore the relationship between social media and democratic politics in

China's unique socio-political system, it is necessary to analyse China in a way that separates it from "others" (Shao & Wang, 2016). They note that this is because social media in China has developed in a relatively closed internet environment compared to globalised social media. This, in turn, may lead to the development of Chinese social media platforms as an online public sphere being characterised differently from those within Western contexts. When Bilibili was created in 2009, it was primarily a platform for anime, manga and game enthusiasts to access resources and interact with each other. Initially, its content was mostly focused on ACG (Animation, Comics and Games) themes, providing a platform for online sharing of ACG content and the fan culture surrounding it. From the end of 2010, Bilibili gradually increased its content section and expanded into more online themes to enrich its content and attract more users to the site. Nowadays, the main sections of Bilibili's website homepage include anime, dance, movies, knowledge and games. Among these sections, anime and games are the two that have remained very active since the site's inception. The site now has exclusive broadcast rights to many popular animes from around the world (Wang & Xiao, 2021, 679), and has begun to invest in and release some Chinese and Japanese games, showing that its original intention of building a dedicated online platform for fans within the ACG community has not been erased during its development. On the contrary, as more and more users have joined the ranks of Bilibili's users, the site has accommodated an increasing number of layers and richness of self-generated video works in terms of fan creations around anime and games. Among other things, Let's Play video content generated around games has also become one of several major video categories for Bilibili. Bilibili has been able to enrich its platform content rapidly over the past decade with its abundant ACG content rights and reward mechanism for user creation, allowing the platform to break through the ACG community and become the most popular mainstream video sharing platform among young people in China. However, Bilibili, with its primary focus on ACG culture, is not exempt from government regulation of culture, and as Bilibili's user base has grown, the variety of videos appearing on the platform has also become more diverse, leading Bilibili to begin to more strictly review and manage the content of videos uploaded to the platform. According to QuestMobile, Bilibili is the most popular app for young people under 24 years old in China, with 1.1 million monthly active content creators and 3.1 million monthly contributions. With the gradual expansion of its user base and the improvement of its features in recent years, Bilibili provides a space and channel for more and more video creators and viewers to communicate with each other (QuestMobile, 2018). This is partly due to the youthful and creative nature of Bilibili's main user base. According to existing statistics from relevant reports, by 2020, over 60% of the revenue of China's online entertainment market will be contributed by the post-90s and post-00s. As the main users of Bilibili, this generation has excellent communication and creativity skills and is characterised by a high level of cultural education, creativity

and expression, and a strong sense of willingness to consume cultural products, which make the cultural community on Bilibili very inclusive and diverse. (QuestMobile, 2020).

As a video-sharing platform with public sphere potential, the online space constructed by Bilibili has many qualities that provide the basis for it to become a public discursive space that accommodates the rich digital discursive practices of the online age. Firstly, Bilibili delivers a platform for users to post self-generated videos in the Chinese online environment. While China has several video platforms with the same level of competition in terms of film and television resources, such as iQiyi and Tencent Video, the primary function of these video platforms is to provide viewers with access to cinematic productions. Although video platforms, including iQiyi, have features that allow users to upload videos they have filmed and edited, there is no section on the homepage of these sites dedicated to self-generated videos. Only when users search for specific keywords will they find videos that have been unofficially purchased by the platforms and uploaded by users. On these Chinese video-sharing platforms, users' videos often do not receive comments from other users, and it is naturally difficult to trigger a discourse between users on the site using their own videos as a medium. However, Bilibili has enabled the distribution of original videos since 2010 and attracted more and more users to join the in-platform discourse built by Bilibili as video creators over the following years. As of today, Professional User Generated Video (PUGV) has become the most dominant part of Bilibili's content composition, and according to the BILI Financial Report for the Third Quarter of 2019, PUGV content accounts for 90% of overall video views on Bilibili. In the third quarter of 2019, the average number of monthly active video creators on Bilibili reached 1.1 million and the average monthly PUGV work submissions reached 3.1 million. In 2016, Bilibili launched the Recharge Program, which allows creators of self-generated videos to receive a certain amount of profit based on the number of likes and virtual 'coins' they receive for their videos. A year later, Bilibili launched a rights protection programme for video creators to help them protect their rights and video copyrights. From the perspective of public sphere preservation, such copyright protection initiatives guarantee that people's rights are protected when they receive benefits through PUGV, and that the originality of statements and opinions expressed on the site are respected. When someone uses a video made by someone else and labels it as their own creation, or does not indicate the source, users can report the video to Bilibili and the user who steals the video from others will be warned or blocked. These projects exemplify Bilibili's efforts to maintain a positive environment for the creation of its PUGV content, and it has indeed proved successful in building a platform ecosystem capable of generating a constant flow of quality content.

Secondly, based on the supportive environment for PUGV creation that Bilibili has built, it also has the important quality of openness that Habermas emphasises as an essential quality of a public sphere (Habermas, 1989). At its launch, Bilibili focused on building a platform mainly for cultural content in the ACG community. At that time, the main content within its platform consisted of official video resources related to anime, manga and games and user-created videos (such as recommendation and evaluation videos of ACG works). Since 2013, Bilibili has changed its user participation system from an invitation code to a registration question-and-answer system. To become an official member to gain additional viewing access, users need to complete a questionnaire containing one hundred questions and are required to answer a sufficient number of questions correctly to become an official member. The questions include those related to ACG culture and the norms to be adhered to when interacting with others on the platform. This questionnaire draws the attention of the platform's users to the importance of sensible and friendly interaction with others before they participate in the online discourse space constructed by Bilibili. In this respect, the membership filtering system, which is predicated on the construction of a friendly online community communication environment, has laid part of the foundation for Bilibili to become a qualified digital public sphere. However, this questionnaire membership mechanism has now been removed and replaced by the option to buy membership access by charging money. In their article, Lingyu Wang et al. suggest that the questions on ACG culture in the questionnaire used by Bilibili caused the site, which was initially focused on providing specific works within the ACG community, to create a barrier within the user community, isolating viewers and users outside of that cultural community, which contributed to maintaining the order of communication within the Bilibili platform (Wang et al., 2022). This point made by Wang et al. illustrates the lack of inclusivity and openness of the Bilibili website, which is now fixed by the changes to the mechanism for obtaining membership privileges. Users who are not fans of ACG culture are somewhat hindered in participating in the site's online communication and discursive practices. However, with the continuous development of Bilibili in recent years and the joining of more video creators, the PUGV content uploaded to the Bilibili platform is becoming more diverse and inclusive. Bilibili now covers over 7,000 interest groups with multicultural videos. Although the questionnaire required to become an official member still contains questions about ACG culture, Bilibili has expanded its content sections to become more inclusive and open in terms of its content and audience groups, based on the creation of an online space for cultural exchange mainly around the ACG community.

In addition to these two points, the communicative nature of Bilibili is also a crucial quality for it to become a digital public sphere. In the online discourse space built by the Bilibili platform, apart from

features such as 'like' and 'favourite' similar to other video sharing platforms, there is a special feature that allows Bilibili to make the communication among users and between viewers and video creators more interesting, called Dan Mu(弹幕), which means real-time on-screen comments. When watching a video, viewers can send their own comments on the screen at random points in the video, which will appear in a scrolling right-to-left format. Other viewers watching the video will see the on-screen comment sent by others and are able to 'like' the comment by clicking on it. The option for users to dislike or report on-screen comments is set up to maintain compliance with specific rules in this online public sphere and provides a mechanism for such public deliberation that the values and codes of the conduct underlying the sphere are protected by group consensus. In their article, Albert W. Dzur and Rekha Mirchandani highlight the importance of the role of punishment mechanisms in the online public sphere as public deliberation. On Bilibili, users will receive warnings from the platform if their comments and on-screen comments are reported for violating the platform's conventions and laws. Live on-screen commenting can also be reported if it is offensive or contains inappropriate language, and the person who sent the comment will receive a warning from the platform. Unlike YouTube's live comment section on the right side of live videos, the live on-screen commenting feature used by Bilibili is not designed for live videos, its "real-time" feature refers to comments posted by other users that viewers can see at specific points in the video as they watch it, and viewers usually send these comments to comment on particular parts of the videos specifically. Live on-screen comments sent by users are retained in the video and will appear when other users watch it, although users also have the option to turn off on-screen comments while watching the video. In her article, Shuyue Wang argues that the live on-screen comments included in videos on the Bilibili platform are a reinvention of the video text, and that videos embedded with live on-screen comments are a new form of text that incorporates feedback from the video viewer into the video text. Wang then further argues that the embedding of live screen comments into the video text may result in the information that the video creators intended to convey to the viewer through the video being altered and deconstructed, or provide new points of interest for other viewers on top of the information contained in the original video. Wang argues that the existence and use of on-screen commenting contributes to the construction of the public sphere within the Bilibili platform, as it embodies the collective community language and values of video creators, comment senders and viewers, and enriches the ways and channels of communication for users within the Bilibili platform (Wang, 2021, 100).

In his study, Yiran Wei summarises several features of live on-screen commentary, including its hyper-temporal interactivity and timeliness, the fragmented and folkloric nature of commentary, and subcultural language patterns (Wei, 2017). Wei points out that in contrast to other video-sharing sites

where viewers can only comment and follow-up after watching a video, on-screen comments prevent viewers' comments from being ranked according to chronological order or the hierarchical order of being shown, which amplifies the audience's equal right to discourse. Even if there are a large number or even an excessive number of on-screen comments, all comments will be displayed on-screen as long as the user watching the video does not choose to turn off the display of on-screen comments or block comments containing specific keywords. Secondly, as viewers often choose to send on-screen comments when commenting on a particular detail of a video, the language used in these comments tends to be fragmented and does not have a relatively holistic and macro-level evaluation of the video. Thirdly, the language used in on-screen comments has a tendency to be entertaining and exhibits subcultural characteristics. Wei suggests that the appropriation and semantic alteration of mainstream cultural language in people's on-screen comments on Bilibili, a platform where subculture enthusiasts gather, is a unique negotiation, a resistance to cultural hegemony.

However, in relation to the relationship between on-screen commentary culture and the public sphere, Wei argues, contrary to Wang, that the on-screen commentary could, to some extent, dismantle the construction of the public sphere, but could also help to reconstruct it. According to Wei, one of the most important manifestations of the disintegration of the public sphere by screen commentary is its lack of involvement in public discourse. By way of example, Wei points out that screen commentary is characterised by irrationality and emotional expression. Because the time screen commentary is displayed and left for viewers to read is short, so the language used in screen commentary is often shallow and fragmented, which may lead to a lack of critical and public discourse in the public sphere constructed within the Bilibili platform (Wei, 2017, 13). However, some scholars have pointed out the emphasis on fully rational discourse and the neglect of non-emotional discourse as a flaw in the public sphere as suggested by Habermas (Burgess et al., 2016). Therefore, I argue that the more specific reason why on-screen commentary on the Bilibili platform has a disruptive effect on the formation of the public sphere should lie in the fact that on-screen commentary focuses more on the interesting and funny details of the videos rather than on deeper concerns and discussions on public discourses and agendas. The second point Wei raises about the dismantling effect of on-screen commentary on Bilibili's public sphere is reflected in the absence of opinion leaders. Wei points out that while there are a large number of participants in screen commentary, relatively few people are indeed able to offer critical and influential commentary (Wei, 2017, 14).

Despite all that, Wei highlights the role of live on-screen commentary as an essential element that makes the public sphere of the Bilibili platform unique and attractive. Bilibili, as a space for the online

expression of the culture and hobbies of China's youth, gathers diverse groups of people and stimulates creativity in discussing social discourse through media topics that are not only entertaining but also professional. Wei points out that Bilibili is a new and innovative platform for free voice and expression of opinion, and its openness and equality have increased people's motivation to participate in online discussions of public agendas, as well as helping the public to develop a collective consciousness and providing a promising foundation for the future construction of a more rational digital public sphere. On-screen commentary plays an important role in the public sphere constructed by Bilibili, as it breaks with authoritative media discourse and instead empowers the public with an equal voice and engages more people with its creative, amusing and anonymous qualities (Wei, 2017, 21-22).

Within the digital public sphere constructed by the Bilibili video sharing platform, benefiting from its egalitarian, diversity and highly communicative qualities, discussions around several social public topics emerge. Social agendas including global political topics, environmentalism, anti-cultural hegemony and anti-patriarchal social frameworks are all discussed in videos or comments on Bilibili. These discussions often emerge as feedback to the discursive practices of video formats, which are themselves often discursive responses to texts of different genres. For example, the ACG-related videos that have been a staple of the Bilibili platform since its launch have subsequently spawned several Bilibili video sections, including anime recommendations and storyline explanations, or Let's Play videos in which video creators perform their gameplay as the vicarious players. I believe that these approaches of presenting ACG culture and related content in the form of videos have somewhat broken the limits of the public discourse that manga, anime and games as texts are under due to their non-mainstream nature in terms of communication and the public discourse they can generate.

2.3 Let's Play as discursive responses to game *texts*

As one of the main content sections in the digital public sphere built by Bilibili, game-themed videos have been an invaluable part of this online video-sharing platform, resulting in a variety of game-themed videos, including Let's Play videos that present the play-through of games from the perspective of LPers to the audience. The LP videos currently popular on Bilibili include a variety of genres, such as tutorial LP videos that teach viewers the tricks of the trade without too much personal commentary, LP videos that focus on the narrative of the game and added with entertaining commentaries by the LPers, which are aimed at a more 'non-expert gamer' audience, and LP videos

that focus on the deeper meanings and biases of games that provoke thoughts and discussions among players, which often contain the LPer's personal opinions toward certain socially discussed topics, etc. Not all types of LP videos generate discussion on specific social topics, and comments from the audience on certain types of LP videos often do not include discourse on specific social issues. Whether viewers' comments and discursive interactions with LPers and other viewers on LP videos address socially controversial topics depends on a number of factors, such as the way in which the content of the game is presented in the LP video, the opinions expressed by LPers in the video, the narrative of the game text itself and the biases it contains, or the events and topics that are being actively discussed in society, and so forth.

Marianne Jørgensen and Louise Phillips, in their research on critical discourse analysis, state that when using Fairclough's three-dimensional model, it should be noted that the text and discursive practices represent two different dimensions, and the analysis of discursive practices should focus on two aspects. One aspect is how texts are created based on existing discourses and genres, and the other is how the discourses and genres contained in texts are being applied in their consumption and interpretation (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, 7-8). In the analysis of games as texts in the first chapter, we can see that in otome games and various other games, prejudices against women and the unequal status of genders in society are reflected in many aspects of the games. Gender stereotypes and hegemonic masculine culture, deeply rooted in patriarchal societies, can be found in many of the game's constituent elements, including the appearance of the characters, the design of their personalities and the narrative logic of the game. These factors, which may lead to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes or cause resentment among players, stem from the social framework and inherent prejudices based on gender inequality in real life. However, resistance to real-world gender biases fails to take place in games in a truly effective way, as games lack the openness, mediality and interactivity that characterise a public sphere that can provide players with a venue for subversive discourses to take place, as argued in the first chapter of this thesis. Another crucial reason is that products within the games industry are still often created by male-dominated development teams, and the consumer base that games are aimed at is frequently pre-defined as predominantly male, while the economic potential of female players and audiences is often overlooked (Prescott & Julie, ed., 2013, 28-30). In contrast, the LP video uses the game as the base text and the video as the discursive practice as per Fairclough's model, combining visual and aural effects with commentary and explanation by LPers, and post-editing and publishing on the online platform to provide a richer and more multi-layered experience for the audience. The platform where the LP videos are posted acts as a mediator, and due to its inclusiveness, diversity and openness, it is able to attract a wider audience to engage with the discussions on the social agendas involved in the LPs.

Firstly, when choosing games to play and record, LPers usually choose games that fit their style of play (e.g. LPers who mainly play horror games tend to choose horror games) or more topical games (currently popular or long-standing classics). The growing popularity of the Otome game genre in China's game market has led many LPers inclined towards an entertaining style to choose this game to record their LP videos. On the one hand, the games themselves have several topical elements and their popularity makes them appealing to a wider audience, on the other hand, these games do not require too much skill in game-play, but often afford LPers to deliver a lot of voice-over acting for the dialogues between the characters, which provides room for LPers to present their entertaining style and attractive personalities in front of the audience. For example, Xiaoyao Sanren (逍遥散人, or XYSR), an LPer with 5.823 million followers on Bilibili, is loved by fans for his fun style of presenting otome games.

In addition to the Chinese Otome games released by professional game companies, LPers including Xiaoyao Sanren also like to record and release many low-cost Chinese otome games. These low-cost otome games are often less complicated in terms of gameplay, and they focus more on building a linear narrative into the game than the Otome games released by professional game companies. Players can often complete the game by simply clicking the mouse. Most of the low-cost Otome games in this category are published on a Chinese language game production website called Orange Light Games. In terms of genre, most of the games released on the Orange Light Games platform are visual novels. Thematically, most of the games on Orange Light Games are Otome games (see *Figure. 2.3.1*), but unlike the Otome games developed by professional game companies, they do not have a rich game-play and the player often just follows the plot and chooses from the options offered by the game.



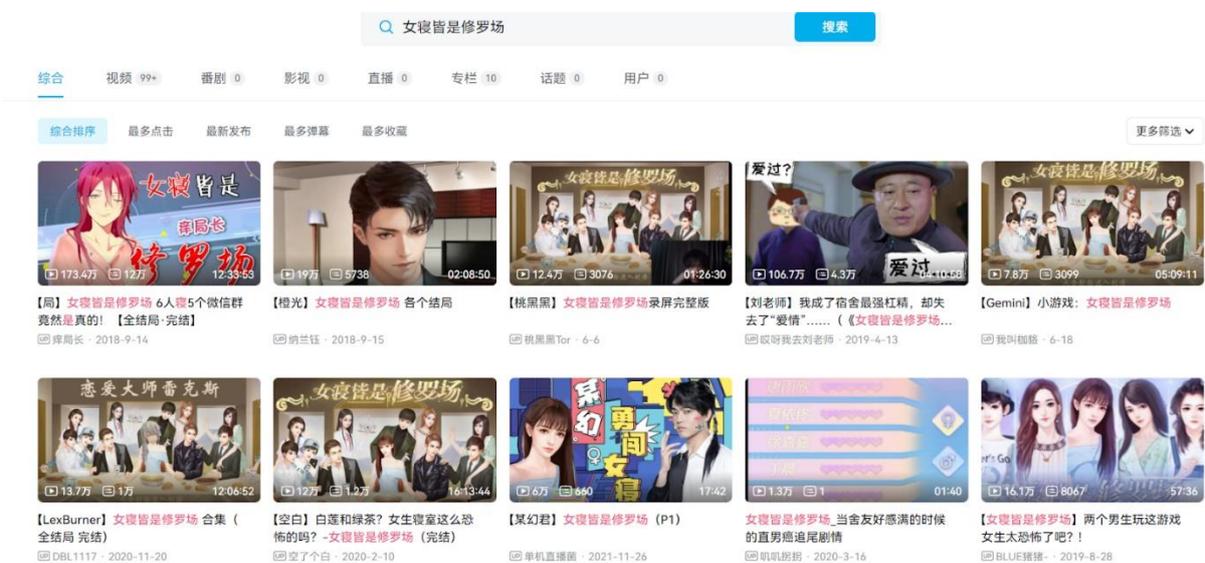
(Figure. 2.3.1. Main page of Orange Light Games, most of the popular games presented are Otome games.)

Orange Light Games offers the opportunity for many people who are not working in the games industry to make their own games. Many private game writers post their games on the platform, and the Otome games they produce tend to be more dramatic and controversial than those produced by professional game companies. Their dramatic and controversial nature is due to the fact that they are not subjected to the excessive cultural regulation that professional game companies are subjected to, and therefore have more freedom to touch on more socially sensitive issues in their plots. These low-budget games retain the basic setup and formula of Otome games, including a player-controlled heroine and a number of different types of male characters as potential dates. While this prevents these low-budget Otome games from escaping the gender stereotypes inherent in Otome games, the high level of interestingness they possess, including the numerous humorous, dramatic and folkloric uses of language in inter-character dialogues, leads LPers to choose them for display as video content. For example, the game *All the Girls' Dormitories are Shura Fields* (Orange Light Games, 2018), which has 484.1 million players in Orange Light Games (see Figure. 2.3.2), tells the story of the friendship and conflicts between the heroine, who has just entered university, and her roommates, who have very different personalities. Naturally, the game also incorporates the traditional elements of Otome games, where the heroine has romantic relationships with multiple male characters. However, the dramatic female university roommate relationships portrayed in the plot used in this game make it topical and engaging, as it is a life experience that almost all female university students in China share.

The entertaining and topical nature of the game has led many LPers on Bilibili to choose it to create LP videos. When searching for the game's name on Bilibili, "All the Girls' Dormitories are Shura Fields", one finds over 100 LP videos related to it, some of which have over 1 million views (see *Figure. 2.3.3*). Moreover, the producers of these games tend to design more dramatic and conflicting plots to make the games more interesting, which provides LPers with the opportunity to add elements to the LP videos through voice-overs, for example, based on elements that are already present in the games, and to interact with the audience. Being somewhat free from the strict rules of cultural production regulations, these low-budget otome games contain relatively more elements that could stimulate discussion of social issues among LPers and audiences. Its appeal to viewers and players as an Otome game and its obvious controversial and topical nature is part of the multitude of reasons that prompt LPers to willingly choose it as the game to be recorded and presented, as it could potentially drive more viewers to their videos.



(Figure 2.3.2. The game *All the Girls' Dormitories are Shura Fields* on Orange Light Games)



(Figure 2.3.3. LP videos showed when searching *All the Girls' Dormitories are Shura Fields* on Bilibili)

The professional and low-cost Otome games, as well as some other kinds of games that involve the political agenda of gender in society, attract LPers to process them into LP videos for presentation because of their topicality and entertaining nature as game texts. The LP videos, created and represented by LPers through editing, voice-over and commenting on these game texts, are exhibited to the audience as a form of discursive response to the game texts, acting as a bridge between the games, the players and the audience. This bridge expands the once relatively closed space between games and players, and relying on the social nature of the video-sharing platform Bilibili, a level of openness and inclusiveness that is not present in-game texts is added to LP videos, creating a unique public sphere in which social discourse is explored through the lens of games on Bilibili.

2.4 LPers' performances

As mentioned above, the topical and entertaining nature of Otome games has attracted many LPers to choose them as the main content for their LP videos, which at the same time attracts an audience group who may not be real gamers in real life and is therefore more interested in LP videos that present games that do not require sophisticated gameplay techniques and contain entertaining game narratives. Due to my personal interests and about four years of experience watching LP videos, including Otome and gender-related games, it was found that in most of the LP videos in this genre, LPers tend to comment on controversial elements during the gameplay in order to demonstrate their 'correct opinion' as LPers. In this context, 'correct' refers to the discursive tendency of LPers to refrain from making disparaging or insulting remarks about women and to display disapproving gestures towards gender stereotypes and gender inequality in gaming. LPers appear to comment on and act out controversial elements of Otome games in an amusing and humorous way, and wish to maintain a friendly atmosphere and environment of communication among their audience and fan base. Radical and realistic comments rarely come from the LPer side, but are more often found in the comments section or on-screen comments by the audience. Using a series of videos by LPer XYSR on Bilibili about a popular Otome game published on the Orange Light gaming platform as a case study, the analysis will be made about how the content of the game is being presented in LP videos and the way political issues about gender politics in China are incorporated into the video content and discussed by the audience.

2.4.1 The selection of games

XYSR, one of the famous LPers on Bilibili, has been releasing LP videos about the game *Hello, Miss Persuader* since December 5, 2019. Due to the overwhelmingly positive reception, XYSR began a 3-month-long continuous LP video release of the game. By February 29, 2020, XYSR presented viewers with the whole storyline of the game in a 10-episode LP series of nearly ten hour-long content. The main narrative of *Hello Miss Persuader* revolves around the work of the non-maritalist heroine, who works for a company that helps its clients maintain their marriages and is responsible for getting the third party in the relationship to leave the cheating partner in the marriage in various ways. In the course of her work, the heroine meets several male characters, including her workmates and friends she has grown up with. Like almost all the male characters in Otome games, these male characters are potential romantic partners for the heroine to develop a romantic relationship with.

This series of LP videos is chosen as a case study to explore how LPers present the content of the game and LP videos construct a public discursive space about gender political issues in China because of its representative strengths in three ways. Firstly, from the perspective of the game, *Hello Miss Persuader* presents the contradictions in gender relations based on binary gender roles division and the socially defaulted status of gender inequality in the narrative of the game. One of the contradictions contained in the game, based on the binary division of gender identity, is manifested in the portrayal of the institution of heterosexual marriage prominently in the plot as if it was the only option. With over 1,091,000 players on the Orange Light platform, *Hello Miss Persuader* is ranked in the platform's top 50 most popular games. Secondly, from an LPer's perspective, XYSR is one of the most popular LPers on the Bilibili platform with 5.832 million followers, having been awarded the 2021 Bilibili Top 100 Content Creators and Most Active On-Screen Comments. Professional and low-budget Otome games have always been a vital content component of XYSR's LP videos, resulting in XYSR gaining an immense female fan base. In his numerous Otome Games LP video series productions, XYSR plays the heroine of the game as a male player, engaging in the narrative of the game from both a male and female perspective to provide the audience with a performative gaming experience. Although XYSR has never explained his passion for playing Otome games in interviews or his own videos, it can be seen on his Bilibili profile that of all the videos he has uploaded, the most played and collected videos are LP videos about Otome games. The series of LP videos about an Otome game called *Star of Rebellion Shine* (Orange Light Games, 2014) that XYSR was constantly updating between 2014 and 2020 received about 31,436,000 views and 333,000 likes and 374,000 coins, which is a testament to the amount of heat and revenue that LP videos related to Otome games have brought to XYSR. Thirdly, from the

audience's perspective, XYSR's LP video viewers have a high level of enthusiasm to engage in discussions on gender issues inspired by LP video content due to his preferred gaming choices and his humorous but neutral comments on sexist and gender inequality elements in games. In the comments section below and in the on-screen comments of many of XYSR's Otome game LP video series, many audience members can be found offering opinions and discussions on gender politics in relation to real-life social situations.

【散人】捍卫婚姻手撕小三 我是最强劝退师 (1.踢爆拜金女)

全站排行榜最高第40名 > 219.3万 3.1万 2019-12-05 10:30:27 未经授权, 禁止...



(Figure. 2.4.1. Screenshot of the LP video about the game *Hello Miss Persuader* by XYSR)

2.4.2 The humorous tone and funny accent

In his many LP videos featuring Otome games, XYSR's commentary style is usually humorous and neutral, often pointing out elements of gender inequality he encounters as a female protagonist in Otome in a relatively mocking and humorous tone, but not actively commenting on real-life incidents of sexism. For Otome games, which are inherently based on the gender binary and the heteronormative gender matrix described by Judith Butle (1990), most LPers on Bilibili, including XYSR,

have taken to interspersing personal comments related to gender politics into their gameplay, but often only in relation to the content of the game. As LPers, they are more concerned with representing the narrative of the game for the audience in their own way and adding their annotations to it, and the LPers' annotations and almost uninterrupted commentary on the game are a way of inviting the audience to participate in this discursive practice. As René Glas argues in his essay, for the audience, the LPers' play and reactions to the game are somewhat a realisation of the audience's imagination of the 'ideal player' (Glas, 84). LPers, as the *ideal players* in the audience's imagination, have professional gameplay skills and the ability to add to the narrative of the game in a personal way. In the *Hello Miss Persuader* series of LP videos, XYSR plays the role of a vicarious player and highlighter of key points.

Throughout this series of 10 episodes, XYSR occasionally uses a local Chinese accent, the "Tianjin accent", to narrate and comment on the game's narrative. This "Tianjin accent" is often used in China in stage performances similar to talk shows and is known throughout the country for its hilarious accent and humorous content. XYSR's Tianjin accent is often used when he gets emotional about the content of the game, which adds a touch of amusement to some of the game's infuriating and unexpected sexist content, making it a little less heavy-handed. For example, at around 16 minutes of the first video episode in the series (XYSR, 16'13''), when the female protagonist played by XYSR is helping a client talk to a marital interloper and expose her lies about her pregnancy, he uses his Tianjin accent to show his anger and disdain. Here, the effect expressed by such an accent can be seen as an entertaining and disapproving rhetoric. This hilarious use of accents is one of the performative techniques used by LPers in LP videos, through which LPers make their commentary on the game funny and humorous, allowing the audience to experience pleasure from watching the video. Glas compares the presentation of the LPs, interspersed with the LPers' personal annotations and emphases, to that of early cinema, and notes that through a series of performative emphases, the LPers provide a spectacle for the viewer, emphasising the content of the video. Furthermore, Glas notes that the LPers' personal responses and performances not only entertain the audience, but also allow the audience to engage with the LPers in a unique way by occasionally or constantly reminding the audience of their presence as creators of LP videos (Glas, 83). For XYSR's audience, the Tianjin accent that occasionally appears in his LP videos is a unique feature of the LPer, something that marks him out from other LPers and a tool that allows those familiar with his style to feel in the same collective or discursive space with him. Tianjin's accent is often used when XYSR encounters horrific images in horror games and situations in Otome games that make him feel emotions such as anger, serving as an entertaining colloquial expression for the audience to alleviate the unpleasant viewing experience of horrific images and offensive comments. The emotive accent makes some of the

comments XYSR makes in his LP videos a gesture of inviting the audience to participate in shared emotions. When he uses this accent, it often triggers a large number of viewers to send their own comments on screen, such as imitating his accent by text, or making follow-up comments on the content of the game he is commenting on using the accent.



(Figure. 2.4.2. Screenshot of XYSR using the Tianjin accent to voice over the character of the female nanny to tell the male character about what his mistress has done to his kid. In the on-screen comments, there are comments saying his voice-over acting is hilarious)

2.4.3 LPers' personal annotations to the game and the audience's responses

Furthermore, XYSR, and some other LPers, do not hide their existence as LPers outside of their role in the game narrative, but rather, they often step outside of their role in the game and express their opinions as themselves. In this way, the audience may not merely perceive the LPer as a vicarious player playing the game in their place, but at the same time watch the LPer's performance around the content of the game as a spectator existing outside the game. In his article, Alex Gekker suggests that the act of delegating the agency of playing the game to the LPer while watching the LP allows audience to "avoidance and disengagement, which in turn may allow for a critical examination of the system as a whole" (Gekker, 2018, 219). In his article, Gekker refers to the act of watching LP videos as 'backseat gaming' and argues that LPers act as an 'emotional compass' for viewers, who can free themselves from the need to be fully engaged while consuming cultural products. Around minute 12 of the second

episode of the Hello Miss Persuader LP video series, XYSR breaks away from his role as the female protagonist in the game and speaks to the audience as the creator of a video beyond the confines of time and space, giving his personal opinion on the content of the game. Meanwhile, LPers including XYSR are aware of the existence of the viewer's sense of detachment from the identity of the player they are representing. Around minute 33 of the second episode of the video series, addressing the plight of the mother character in the game who is unable to divorce her cheating partner due to a lack of personal financial resources, XYSR has a personal exchange of views with the viewer on the other end of the screen in the video, saying, "Viewers from the other side of the screen, if you're still a student right now, please focus on your studies. If you're already working, then develop your career. If you're in a marriage or a relationship, take care of your own values as an independent individual and don't be totally financially and mentally dependent on your partner like this character in the game" (XYSR, 33'34"). This commentary by XYSR not only separates himself from the game and gives an outsider's perspective on the content, but also emphasises that the audience is not just a 'player' who is replaced by himself in the game, and transmits to them his own thoughts on the independence of women in marriage. This section of the game and the comments made by LPers were actively commented on the screen to give feedback. Some said, "Take XYSR's advice and do your homework now" (XYSR, 36'29"), while others lamented the content of the game in the video and said that their own mother had been divorced because she had no independent source of income after marriage, resulting in their father receiving a share of all the family's assets (XYSR, 37'02"). In response to the personal comments sent by XYSR detached from the game characters, viewers actively posted responsive comments not only on the video screen, but also in the comments section below the video. In these comments, viewers tend to mention XYSR by name, treating him as himself rather than the character he plays in the game, and making follow-up comments or responses to his personal opinions. In another LP video released by XYSR for the low-budget Otome game *How Many Episodes Can You Last* (Orange Light Games, 2022), released on the Orange Light Games platform. The audience discussed the inequality between men and women in marriage in the game's storyline in relation to real-life social examples and critiqued gender inequality in society. Among the audience members who posted critiques of gender inequality in real-world marital relationships, there were even comments from the game's author.



一直不更新的墨璃儿 刺儿 1

总觉得一直留言解释不太好但是.....其实就是为了大家阅读方便，很多繁琐的设定没有写出来，因为没有剧情性只是纯粹的背景介绍，太多的话很影响阅读的节奏。每个案例我都是有完整的设定的，比如这一章的章洁，他们只有一套房子，是徐晓光婚前财产，也就是说离婚房子她一点也拿不到。婚后两人财产基本都是徐晓光在投资，到底有多少钱只有他知道，他每个月给章洁生活费，章洁基本都用在孩子身上，自己没有多少存款。说离婚对半分的，只是婚后财产对半分，还要看你究竟掌握你家多少财产，章洁这样的家庭主妇不被徐晓光做假共同债务欺骗就不错了.....只是这些没有都写出来，很单调。现实真的没有那么容易。

还有一点，我发现居然直到现在还有那么多妹子不知道，出轨是不能让男方净身出户的！不能！哪怕你有证据也不能！连三七开、四六开都基本做不到！

所以章洁在这种情况下离婚，一定争取不到孩子！她可以离婚，但不能在这个时候离婚！至于说把孩子留给男方的.....这我也没法说了，绝大多数女人宁可不要财产，自己的孩子是绝对舍弃不掉的。

其实，男方出轨以后，真的有能力的女性，不愿意原谅的女性，早就直接走离婚程序了，根本不会到女主公司来劝退。所以能在这个作品里出现的女性，必然都是不愿意、或者不能离婚的。但能说出“男人出轨就离婚啊”、“这种还忍什么”的妹子，都是幸福的妹子，这样是最好的，希望你们永远不会理解我写的这些女人为什么这么选择。

2019-12-08 05:38 4380 回复

(Figure 2.4.3.1. comment below the LP video of XYSR's)

In the comment, the game's author states that many of the game's initial settings have been simplified for ease of reading for the players, including the mother character who was cheated on in this episode's LP video. Jørgensen and Phillips, in their article summarising the research method of critical discourse practice, say: "In every discursive practice – that is, in the production and consumption of text and talk – discourse types (discourses and genres) are used in particular ways" (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, 7). *How Many Episodes Can You Last* needs to inherit the traditional dialogue style and options of the Otome games in order to fit itself within the sensible context of that type of game. Furthermore, the introduction and application of ancient Chinese frameworks of cultural and gender relations in the game by the author of this game text exemplify the application and consumption of pre-existing discourses and genres by the creators and recipients of discursive practices as highlighted in Jørgensen and Phillips' analysis based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, 8). In the deleted section of the game, the author highlights the fact that the female character is virtually unable to share the marital property with her husband in the event of a divorce, as in real life, cheating does not result in the male partner in the marriage gaining fewer rights and benefits than the female. Like this female character in the game, many real-life women, even if they have evidence of their husband's cheating, still cannot be awarded a share of the property in a divorce and, because they have no financial resources, cannot get custody of their children. The author also points out that some viewers have suggested in on-screen comments that the game character should not come to

the heroine's company to seek a way to keep the marriage going, but should instead be determined to get a divorce, which is said to be a very idealistic but unrealistic idea by the author of the game, as women would not get any benefit if something like this happened in real life. Furthermore, the author of the game also stated in the comments section of another episode of this series of LP video productions that numerous story plots in the *Hello Miss Persuader* games have references to real-life cases in China, including the names of many of the characters in the game that draw on names of characters from some well-known public events of gender inequality in China. In his article, Gerald Voorhees introduces the notion of discursive games and stresses that games should be seen as a rhetorical artefact and that “they not only engage in multiple levels of representation– textual, visual, aural, narrative and procedural – but also are woven into and through the discursive formations that give shape to contemporary culture.”(Voorhees, 2012, 1). In this case, the author of the game *Hello Miss Persuader* interweaves the game text with the discourses and social realities of contemporary culture through referencing and drawing on real-life cases, and through the dissemination of the game content and the author's and the LPer's interpretation, the critique of the real-life cases embedded in the game is transmitted to the audience and the player. For example, in the first episode of the LP video (the first chapter of the game's content), the male name of the cheating party is pronounced very similarly to the name of a male public figure in China, Yu Minhong. In the comments section of XYSR's LP video, the game's author states that this is not a coincidence, as during the creation of this episode, Yu Minhong, an influential public figure, made a discriminatory and derogatory statement about women, saying "China's degradation is due to the degradation of women in China", and was therefore criticised by a large number of female netizens in China. In the second episode of the LP video (the second chapter of the game), the name of the male character on the cheating side is pronounced the same as the name of the famous Chinese actor Yu Xiaoguang, who in reality has been cheating on his wife for years after marrying a famous Korean actress. By adding links to real-life social examples in the game and commenting below the LP video, the game's authors increased awareness among players and LP video viewers of the relevance of the game's content to incidents of gender inequality in society. The comments from the game's author also generated numerous follow-up posts from the video viewers. Some viewers said they would advise women to learn more about Chinese marriage laws to protect their rights, while others said they realised from watching this episode of the game video that in China, even if a male partner in a marriage cheats on his wife or commits domestic violence against her, the law protects his interests more strongly than a woman's.

Compared to his other Otome game LP series, in the *Hello Miss Persuader* LP series, XYSR clearly expressed more personal views on the patriarchal hegemonic framework and gender inequality in

traditional Chinese culture, and provided a certain amount of guidance to the audience in discussing the gender inequality elements in the video series. This is probably because, as an LPer for a primarily female audience, XYSR is certainly aware of the importance of expressing the "right" values in his play-throughs and commentaries on Otome games and presenting an image of himself that is attractive and likeable enough for his main audience group. I suggest using Erving Goffman's "impression management" theory to analyse the performance strategies of LPers represented by XYSR. In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman emphasizes that impression management is an effective way to influence others' perceptions of oneself and is an essential part of social interaction. Among the many techniques of impression management, one that is often used by LPers is the rational expression and control of personal emotions. For example, anger at the cheating partner in a marriage in the game is expressed in a relatively less radical way by XYSR. Such a presentation of emotional involvement allows XYSR to portray how much he values equal marital relationships and gender relations to the audience. In addition, through his cross-screen communication with the audience, XYSR emphasises the importance of being a financially and mentally independent and strong woman, and urges the audience to study hard as students. The emphasis on the importance of studying is a recurring theme in XYSR's different LP videos, resulting in viewers referring to him as the "study supervisor of the Bilibili game section". This relates to another key impression management technique that many LPers use in their performances, which is to keep the performance consistent, highlighting the need for performers not to undermine their established characters and not to act in a way that is inconsistent with their image. By shaping and maintaining their image over time in multiple videos, LPers customise the perfect images of themselves in front of their audience.

2.5 Voice-over and gender performativity

2.5.1 XYSR: Entertaining and 'correct' performances in LP videos

In addition to XYSR's skilled Tianjin accent, which is a personal factor, he also uses a variety of different tones and accents to voice the different characters in the game. Almost all LPers, including XYSR, perform voices for different characters during games, and a common performance strategy is to use distinct and dramatic voices for different gender characters, a strategy that is used particularly frequently in LP videos featuring Otome games. In LP videos, a public and open media product, LPers dedicate themselves to interpreting gender identities, as most people do on a daily basis in their everyday lives. In this respect, LPers' performances are invariably firmly grounded in the binary gender divisions that exist in Chinese society. In XYSR's video series of LPs containing 14 episodes based

around *Light and Night*, a representative of the popular Chinese Otome game mentioned in Chapter 1 of this thesis, he provides dramatic and feminine voices for several of the game's supporting female characters. For example, at around 41'30" of episode 7 of the LP series, XYSR voices a female character named Kang Lai, a rival of XYSR's heroine in the workplace, who is jealous of the heroine but at the same time admires her for her ability and talent in fashion design. For this part of the game, XYSR uses a very sharp voice and a mean tone to voice over Kang Rai's lines. In contrast, at around 42'45" seconds in episode 6 of the LP series, XYSR uses an arrogant and relatively more overtly masculine voice and tone to voice a male character who accosts the heroine in the game. During the play-through of *Light and Night*, which is nearly 15 hours long, XYSR often tries to put himself in the 'female perspective' and comments on the appearance and personality of the game's five male characters. Although he rarely voices the heroine he plays as feminine, he has been active in showing the choices he is expected to make as the *heroine* in the game's narrative, including the kind of clothing and make-up he uses to groom the heroine's appearance, etc. This is partly to provide a more immersive and comedic spectatorial gaming experience for the audience, but partly to perform a performance that follows the norms of binary gender divisions and heterosexual gender matrices within the game. This performance is understood in Judith Butler's terms as an act of performing gender in the mode of belief (Gurrieri & Drenten, 2019, 102). In relation to the performativity of gender, Judith Butler makes the point that gender identity is socially defined and maintained through verbal acts and performative non-verbal acts. In Chinese society, due to the strict gender binary division and the patriarchal social framework, it is difficult for media and cultural products, including games, to escape from the pattern of regulating one's gender identity through language and behaviour. The socially imposed gender identities and norms of gender behaviour are not only imposed on individuals in reality, but are also extended to the digital online space. In this online space, LPers express their feminist views on the game's text, authentically or performatively, but fail to break out of the confines of gender identity stereotypes. Indeed, while LP viewers actively engage in discursive discussions on the topic of gender politics in the on-screen comments and the comments section below the videos, no one seems to point out the possible negative effects of LPers' performances that strictly adhere to binary gender norms, which is the impact of such performances on viewers' perceptions of gender identities and gender-based norms of behaviour.

In another LP video released by XYSR for the low-budget Otome game *How Many Episodes Can You Last* (Orange Light Games, 2022), which is also released on the Orange Light Games platform, rather than actively expressing clear dissatisfaction with gender inequality, as in the *Hello Miss Persuader* LP series, XYSR takes a more subtle approach to conveying his opinions to the audience. The main plot of

(Figure. 2.5.1. The introduction of the worldview setting of the game *How Many Episodes Can You Last*. It says: “The heroine's name is Lu Huo and she was born in the Cloud Country, a country where women are considered beautiful with small breasts. Hint: The initial setting does not determine the final story direction. The heroine calls for women to have the right to make their own choices about their bodies and for men and women to be equal.”)



(Figure 2.5.2. A screenshot of XYSR playing the game *How Many Episodes Can You Last*, in which four indicators are shown about the heroine.)

Although a literal statement with a straightforward emphasis on gender equality is placed at the beginning of the game to make its claim, *How Many Episodes Can You Last* is conspicuously unsuccessful in its quest to become a game text free of gender stereotypes and sexism against women in Otome games. This is not because of the ‘unavoidable’ gender binary and heteronormative matrix in which Otome games are framed in their worldview, but rather a more shallow and failed attempt to reverse gender stereotypes and rewrite gender scripts. As the figure above shows, in the personal data of the heroine controlled by the player (LPer), in addition to health, knowledge and reputation, there is an abrupt numerical value of the size of her breasts (the upper right one of the four values), and underneath this value appears a description of the breasts that infuriates the audience immensely: "two cherries". The emphasis on the numerical size of breasts and the teasing metaphors for female body parts make the sexualisation of women more visible in the game as an "Otome game for female players" and more likely to offend players and viewers (potential players). However, in the LP video,

XYSR does not comment on this obvious element, or even mention it at all. Instead, YYSR strives to improve his knowledge as a metric throughout the game, consistently choosing the option to study rather than meet male friends among multiple options in order to take first place in the imperial examination and repeatedly emphasising to the audience that the ability to gain knowledge and independence through studying is much more crucial and valuable than getting married to someone. When YYSR chooses to study hard over other options offered by the game and causes the system to lower the heroine's health value automatically, YYSR angrily criticises in the video, saying, "The messages sent by this game are definitely wrong" (YYSR, 10'05"). Later on, when the player is given the option to choose whether he should continue studying or get married, YYSR firmly rejects the option of marriage, saying that "the heroine's life will be ruined" (YYSR, 17'05). At 19'23" of the video, YYSR jumps out of the game again and says to the audience as himself, "In reality, we also have to study hard to have enough abilities to change our fate". In contrast to associating and critiquing the sexist elements of the game with the unequal gender framework of reality, YYSR adopts an alternative strategy that is more moderate and implicit, leaving the opportunity to critique and rebel against the existing society in the game and in reality in more direct and radical discourses to the audience, while he presents a gesture of being on the same side as the audience himself. Rene Glas compares the LPers' commentary on the game and emphasis on specific content to the way earlier films addressed and engaged their audiences. In this case, it is seen on YYSR as making a "pointing at" gesture without giving a specific evaluation. On the topic of gender politics, which has been particularly sensitive and prone to opinion disputes in China in recent years, YYSR tends to do his best to avoid discursive tendencies that might cause disagreements among viewers. While portraying himself as an objective and upright neutral, YYSR uses his usual humour and playful tone to maintain a friendly atmosphere in the public discourse space created by his LP video content. Instead of establishing a connection between gender stereotypes in games and the patriarchal hegemony of social frameworks and criticising them with feminist overtones, YYSR chooses to stress to his audience the ways to avoid being toxified by such social frameworks, which is the opinion he repeatedly delivers to his audience in several Otome game-themed LP videos: to study hard and become independent females. In this case, YYSR does not synthesise and observe collective opinions and provide political advice to policymakers, as is traditionally done in the public sphere. Instead, YYSR chooses to avoid a direct link to politics and instead emphasises the transformation 'from within' to the audience. Such avoidance of defiant expressions of political opinion may be motivated by compliance with the content censorship mechanisms on the platform and the avoidance of potentially unpleasant disputes with the audience. This way of handling the situation not only allows YYSR to successfully establish an image of integrity and love of learning in front of the audience, but also to not prevent the audience from

achieving a more subversive discourse in the process of watching and commenting on the LPs. For example, in the comments section of the LP video created by XYSR about the game *How Many Episodes Can You Last*, the following comments appeared:

- “XYSR’s values are so comforting to hear”



骏逸逸逸 LV5

散人价值观真的让人太舒服了hhh

2022-02-03 06:41 👍 35 💬 🔁

- “The game has the wrong values, it makes the heroine's health lowered when she chooses to study hard, and although she comes first in the imperial examination at the end of the game, she only becomes a female bureaucrat who helps make clothes for the concubines in the harem. XYSR has tried very hard throughout to emphasise the importance of studying, and after the heroine has come first in the imperial examination he stops playing, trying to turn the game into an inspirational game.”



散文鱼饭团 LV5 刺儿 18

这游戏真的三观不正，读书减大量健康不说，最后考上状元也就在后宫做了个做衣服的女官，散老师真的有在尽力劝学了，视频也做到考上状元就完结，生生玩成了励志游戏

2022-02-03 06:09 👍 13837 💬 🔁

- “Two cherries”

I don't really understand how the disrespectful "two cherries" can appear in a game in which female is the main audience and player group and how the "gender equality" claimed at the beginning of the game is reflected. Is it reflected in the very small percentage of female attending the imperial examination? Or the fact that the heroine, as a woman, can only be a somehow useless bureaucrat even though she is the first in the examination? Has the author of the game ever thought about what the actual job of the heroine's in the game means?



兰馥 LV5 剩儿 7

真不知道那么猥琐充满戏谑色彩的“两颗樱桃”是怎么堂而皇之的出现在以女性为主要受众群体的游戏平台的；以及游戏开头的“男女平等”体现在哪里，是极小比例的女性科举上榜率体现男女平等？还是女主作为女性即使考上状元也只能出任内臣从而体现男女平等，作者有没有想过女性在游戏中实际从事的“宦”的本意是什么？有谁会吧“家里的臣”当作真正的官员去对待

2022-02-05 10:38 👍 9237 🗨️ 👤 回复



琪露诺今天洗脑了吗 LV5+ 姐妹好牛👍! 我虽然觉得这个游戏并没有实质性做到男女平等，但是无从下口，讲不出所以然

2022-02-05 11:49 👍 835 🗨️ 👤 回复



Dewbt LV5 其实真要女男平等的话，根本不会关注女性胸部的大小。

2022-02-06 05:29 👍 751 🗨️ 👤 回复



冰幻剑 LV5 回复 @Dewbt :是啊，为什么追求平等就是要胸平？

2022-02-07 02:46 👍 209 🗨️ 👤 回复

2.5.2 @FortyEightHours: Direct expression of opinions in LP videos

Nevertheless, LPers, including XYSR, do not take a completely ignorant attitude towards gender inequalities in gaming, but choose different techniques to deal with them. In contrast to XYSR, other LPers choose to use different performance strategies to interpret their play-through and attitudes towards gaming content. For example, LPer @FortyEightHours, who also enjoys Otome games as their main content, takes a more direct and aggressive approach to expressing their views on gender politics in their performances. In an LP video playing a game set in ancient China, @FortyEightHours criticises the serious son preference issue in ancient China presented in the game, and at around minute 7 to 11 of the video takes the initiative to extend the conversation to the issue of gender politics in modern China. @FortyEightHours compares the son preference issue shown in the game to a sexist incident in China shortly before the release of the LP video, in which a mentally challenged woman in the Chinese province of Shandong was abused to death by her husband and his family, who later sold her ashes to a family who was trying to have a posthumous marriage for their dead son. In the video, @FortyEightHours states that the man who killed his wife does not seem to have been sentenced seriously in reality, and expresses his displeasure with this state of affairs. He pauses the game-playing process to remind viewers of the existence of gender inequality in traditional Chinese perceptions and its ongoing impact on modern society, and expresses his hope that female viewers will make themselves increasingly strong and independent in order to try to escape the negative effects of the gender discrimination in the society that is so difficult to eradicate, such as enhancing their professional abilities to make themselves more competitive in a sexist society. In addition,

@FortyEightHours highlights his criticism of the growing popularity of extreme feminists, stating that we need to look at many things with a dialectical mindset. His arguments against sexism in traditional Chinese thought and against extreme feminism as reflected in the game also drew a positive response from the audience in the on-screen comments and comments section. Some on-screen comments echoed his sentiments: "True feminism should seek equality between men and women, not the power of one over the other". Many viewers also sent on-screen praise to @FortyEightHours for his "very satisfying comments" made from a male critical view on gender inequality in Chinese society. In the comments section below the video, someone following @FortyEightHours' comments connected the gender preference carried over from traditional Chinese culture within the game and the real-world case.

- “Although I grew up in the urban areas, many of my classmates in high school grew up in the rural areas as children. The idea of son preference in Shandong province is extremely severe in rural areas. (...) In conclusion, the view expressed by @FortyEightHours is right, women should become strong on their own first, both financially and spiritually, and not be an appendage to others.”



喻文州的太太  老公主 2

四八说的确实没错，虽然我从小在城市长大，但高中的时候班里大多都是农村的同学。山东的重男轻女观念尤其是在农村地区特别严重。洋洋的那个事情特别特别苦，结了婚以后被他殴打致死，死了以后洋洋她家还给她结了阴婚收了彩礼。而且她妈妈还是舅舅在火车站捡来的.....那个新闻里让我泪崩的一句话就是“洋洋的妈妈精神有些问题，但提及自己女儿的事情又特别清醒。”呜呜，她们母女都特别苦。总之说得没错，女孩自己先要强大起来，无论是经济还是精神上，不要做别人的附属品。

2020-12-03 14:35  184  回复



久那绫  唉。。。

2020-12-20 10:20   回复

- “Domestic violence against women is happening all the time. A documentary tells of a real-life case in which an elderly rural man bought a girl from Sichuan province as his wife from a woman trafficker. The girl was young, beautiful and well educated. (...) The girl was found several times when she tried to escape and was subjected to domestic violence multiple times as punishment.”



亚莉安娜格兰德 

把女人关在房里还施暴的情况是有的，有个纪录片一农村老头从人贩子手里几百块钱买了个四川女孩子做老婆。那个女孩子十几二十岁长得漂亮还是大学生识字，被人贩子拐走卖给老头了。老头每天把她关在房里，不能说是房间，他们睡猪圈，老头天天叫女孩老婆，太yue太恶了，女娃多次想跑想逃都被老头抓回去然后毒打。后来女生四五十岁的时候父母终于找到她了，把她接回去回家团圆，可是女人早就被虐待到神智不清精神紊乱了。世界很恶的，大家保护好自己，这种情况应该发生过很多次只不过我们没看到罢了。包括电影盲山也是相关题材的。

2020-12-03 18:57  43  回复

The analysis of the above examples shows that the discourses produced in the digital public sphere constructed by LPs have more subversive power than the discursive practices of LPs produced by game texts themselves, specifically because they are formulated in opposition to the simplistic or sometimes even sexist views built into the games themselves. In this discursive practice of the LP form around the game text and the discourse around the topic of gender politics that it provokes among the audience through the lens of the game, the LPer is able to respond discursively to the game text, to playfully and artificially annotate the narrative of the game, and to have the audience extend the discussion of gender politics further, to connect with the problematic social framework of reality, and to offer questioning and subversive perspectives. Underneath many of XYSR's LP videos featuring Otome games, there are audiences who point to content in the games that reflect the reality of the unequal treatment and implicit and explicit sexism that women experience in all aspects of society, and draw parallels to their own experiences and social realities. The rebellious and subversive comments were more likely to come from the audience who are inspired by the content of the games in the LP videos or the comments of the LPers than from the LPers who have a leading fan base on Bilibili, like XYSR.

In addition to LP videos that focus on Otome games, LPers and viewers may also address topics related to gender politics in their comments on other types of games. This conversation area may be partly due to comments made by some LPers about gender politics, or inadvertent comments that provoke viewers to think about the topic. Another factor is still related to the games chosen by LPers. As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, some LPers choose games that are inherently anti-sexist and oppressive to women for their videos, and due to the lack of medality and openness of the games themselves, there are inevitable limitations to the construction of a public sphere that assumes a real discursive and social practice as a text. This is where the LPer's selection and interpretation of the

game's subject matter to a broader audience can expand the dissemination of the ideas embedded in the game text and make its subversive potential more likely to be realised. For example, @Hua Shaobei (花少北), a well-known video content creator in the gaming section with 591.4k followers on Bilibili, has posted an LP video featuring a game against domestic violence against women: *The Housewife*. The game has not received high ratings on Steam, with most players rating it negatively due to its lack of gameplay and the unsatisfactory way in which the game presents and delivers the ideas against domestic violence. However, by re-creating and re-presenting the game in the form of an LP, @Hua Shaobei has given the game a richer perspective and has generated a lot of discussion among viewers about domestic violence and feminism in their lives. In the LP video, @Hua Shaobei does not intersperse the discussion with gender politics into the process of playing the game, but instead concludes the video with a summary of the overall quality of the game and an extra emphasis on his views against domestic violence. He says: "It's a bad game, but it made me as a player realise that there are women in the real world who face such injustices repetitively in their lives every day". By comparing *Train* (Brathwaite, 2009) and *Playing History 2: Slave Trade* (Serious Games Interactive, 2015), two games with similar procedural rhetoric, Sebastian Deterding argues that the meaning and realisation of procedural rhetoric in games depends to some extent on external conditions and frameworks (Deterding, 2016). In the multiple LP video examples used in this thesis, games with similar challenges and rebellions to patriarchal gender frameworks and social status are added with different meanings and receive different reactions from the audience due to differences in how LPers interpret and perform the games. For example, in the comments section of this LP video by @Hua Shaobei, many audience members also made references and comments about domestic violence in the game and reality:

- “The first two chapters of the game seem absurd but illustrate the reality of the housewife's situation, (...) In reality, the status of housewives is very low, most men and even some women take it for granted that as a woman, it is a housewife's responsibility to take care of the housework, and some even say things like 'you stay at home all day and do nothing' to housewives. Ultimately, women need to be strong and independent, not to tolerate when you shouldn't, and when you are strong enough, you will be able to protect yourself.”



庄蝟 LV5

前面两关看起来很沙雕但其实也是在说明家庭主妇的处境，整天在家收拾家务，一天很快就过去了，可是要做的活儿那么多，那么麻烦。而且现实中家庭主妇地位很低，大部分男性甚至女性都会认为女人收拾家务做家庭主妇是应该的，甚至会说出“你成天待在家里什么都不干”之类的话。说到底，姑娘们要经济独立啊，做一个独立的强大的人吧，不要在不该忍让的时候忍让，当你强大起来时，你就有能力保护你自己啦。

2019-12-21 07:14 👍 11510 💬 回复

- “A male friend of mine believes that most domestic violence is caused by women being too nagging and mortal, which is what his father told him. This leaves me speechless and I am not sure what the real answer to this question should be. My father brought his cheating partner home when my mother was pregnant and threw the wedding photo of him and my mother out of the window. I found out about this when I was five years old and it became a psychological trauma that I have never been able to escape. (...) My dad's cheating partner, who had talked about killing me at my school, is now doing well in life and went to America and had given birth to a boy not long ago.”



dteydryub LV5 少北 1

我现在的男同桌说家暴大多数都是因为女方太能叨叨才引起的，这还是他爸告诉他的，我真的无语...也不知道真正的答案是什么。

我爸在我妈怀孕的时候就把小三带回家，把我妈的结婚照扔在窗外，我五岁就知道这个事了，一直是摆脱不了的阴影。我爸还让我叫那个小三于老师（她是我们这的艺校声乐老师）。那个小三曾经在学校里扬言要弄死我，现在过的照样很舒坦，前不久还去美国生了个男孩..我真****

2019-12-22 13:56 👍 72 💬 回复

Similar comments abound in the comments section, where people empathise with the content in the game and relate and discuss their personal experiences in reality with the content in the game. Collective affects and experiences are shared within the digital public sphere constructed by the discursive practices (LPs) produced by using games as texts. Such discursive practices compensate for the presence of the affective dimension lacking in the public sphere described by Habermas (1959), and pave the way for the social practices that may follow.

It is important to clarify that not all LP videos on the theme of the Otome game can stimulate discursive discussions on the patriarchal social frameworks and gender politics among viewers. The guidance and emphasis that LPers put on discourse in LP videos and their open and friendly communicative discursive space within the audience is an important driver that allows for the discussion and critique of the reality of gender frameworks through the lens of the game to be constructed and functional. Several studies have explored the mechanisms and ways in which celebrities on social networks act as opinion leaders to influence viewers' purchasing behaviour and values. In her article *Social Communication and Modern Opinion Leaders - Youtube Bloggers* (2018), Marinask Terikh conducts a case study of several YouTube videos to discuss the influence that opinion leaders in social networks play on viewers and the linguistic strategies they use in engaging in commercial and social advertisements, which allows the repeated viewpoint to become a statement that is introduced into the consciousness of the recipient (Terskikh, 2018, 2).

This is similar to the linguistic strategy used by XYSR, who, in repeating the "study hard" message to the audience, not only creates a positive personal image of himself in front of the audience, but also gradually deepens the audience's understanding and acceptance of the idea that studying hard to become more independent and competitive is an effective way to escape the negative effects of gender discrimination. In Amanda Gonzalez et al.'s paper, they liken opinion leaders on video social networking sites and the self-image they portray to viewers as the 'personification of values' (Gonzalez et al., 2016). Through interviews with LP viewers, they find that viewers initially perceived LPers as 'a fellow gamer' and that viewers consider them approachable and trustworthy. These LPers, as an individual within the same community as the audience, are constantly presenting views and emotions that allow the audience to resonate with them. Within their community, an opinion leader is considered someone who can represent the views and values generally shared within that group (Gonzalez et al., 2016, 41-42). As mentioned earlier, LPers perform in their presentation of playing-through and commenting on the game, and these performances contain both the values and personal expressions of opinion that they manifest, as well as their seemingly subconscious expressions of emotion (e.g. raising the volume to show anger, etc.). In his book *Interaction ritual* (1967), Erving Goffman argues that performance is an important way for people to engage socially and to gain positive feedback and positive social values in social activities. Goffman points out that an essential purpose of impression management is to maintain communication and interaction on a social level. Performances in social interaction require the participation of both the performer and the audience, and these performances are regulated by 'rules of conduct', including social and moral constraints. In the context of the examples presented in this thesis, the LPer's self-presentation in the LP video

contains expectations of how they are perceived by the audience, as well as the audience's expectations of the LPer as a 'personification of values'. Through repetitive discursive emphasis and the appropriate presentation of specific emotions, the LPers drive and influence the discourse on gender politics in China that is generated around the game text. The reason why it is so important to use Goffman's theory of dramaturgy to analyse discursive practices in the form of LPs is that the theory allows us to observe the ways in which game texts are transformed into discursive practices and presented to a wide range of audiences. Goffman's theory about performance allows us to observe the performances carried out by LPers and the different approaches they take. It also helps us explore how the discourses formed in Bilibili's gaming section, a digital public sphere, are directed and take place.

In his article, Christian Fuchs uses the example of a teahouse in Chengdu, China, to demonstrate the importance of the existence of a public space where people can interact on an equal footing in order to engage in a discourse of resistance (Fuchs, 2014). The platform Bilibili's unique mode of distribution and communication, including anonymous on-screen commentary, provides a platform for citizens to engage with socio-political issues online. In several LP videos, mainly featuring the Otome game, the LPers contribute to the discussion of gender inequality in society through their humorous performance style, and neutral and 'correct' value statements. Furthermore, through the selection of different Otome games that discuss gender inequality in society based on China's patriarchal social framework and binary gender divisions, the LPers provide a relatively open, pluralistic and egalitarian public sphere for discursive exchange among audiences, LPers and the game creators. This public sphere is resembling the online and digital version of the Chengdu teahouse mentioned by Fuchs, with its 'multi-class orientation' and 'relative equity' similar to that of the teahouse (Wang, 2008, 241), allowing issues of feminist discourse and gender politics in China being discussed around games and LP videos.

Chapter III: Social practices around LPs: discourses and implications

In the third chapter of this thesis, the social practices that constitute the third part of Fairclough's three-dimensional model (1992) will be discussed and analysed. These social practices take place outside of the game text and as an extension of the discursive practices of LP form within the Bilibili platform on other popular Chinese social media platforms. In their article, Jørgensen and Phillips conclude that discursive practices should be considered as a form of social practice that can reflect unequal power relations. They also point out that a technique Fairclough calls *critical language awareness* can be used in critical discourse analysis to make people aware of the discursive practices they engage in when they use language and consume texts, and the social frameworks and power relations that shape these discursive practices (Fairclough, 1992, 239). Critical language awareness (CLA) is a research method that considers language as a social practice and can be used to analyse how language features reinforce or challenge certain ideologies and power frameworks. In this way, people can become aware of the possibility of engaging in practices of resistance and actively challenging and changing unequal power relations that exist in society (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, 23). The first two chapters of this thesis look at games (especially Otome games) and LP video and the public sphere they construct. These correspond to the *text* and *discursive practices* dimensions of Fairclough's three-dimensional model, respectively. According to Jørgensen and Phillips in their paper, the purpose of critique of the discursive practices that surround the text is to reveal and investigate its role in maintaining unequal power relations. In the first chapter of this thesis, games, as texts in Fairclough's three-dimensional model, embody their gender stereotypes and sexism based on patriarchal social frameworks and binary gender divisions in society at the level of their character design and narrative logic, exposing their lack of openness and potential to become spaces that host discourses of resistance. The second chapter of this thesis analyses Let's play video, a media product produced around the game *text*, which is seen as a *discursive practice* in Fairclough's three-dimensional model, recreated on the basis of the game text with its artificial treatments of annotation, commentary and voiceover added by LPers. The performances of LPers and audience responses to LP video content around the topic of game content and gender politics take place in a digital online space. As argued in the first chapter of this thesis, games as texts do not have the potential to constitute a complete public domain in themselves. Therefore, external platforms like Bilibili are required to enable the construction of a game-based public sphere. By their openness and inclusiveness, social

media platforms, including Bilibili, provide more space for players and viewers to develop discursive and social practices about gender politics in China through the lens of games. There is also a more profound discursive practice taking place with the topic of gender politics in games and LP videos as a starting point than the comments and connections made by LPers and viewers to the content of games and LP videos. The discourse around gaming and gender politics within the digital public sphere constructed in Bilibili's gaming section has spread from that platform to many other Chinese public media platforms, including Douban, WeChat and Weibo. On these platforms, however, the discourse on games and gender politics seems to be more radical in tone, broader in content and more realistic in the cases to which it relates. Examples of this are the discourses in China on the Douban and WeChat platforms, which will be mentioned and analysed later in this chapter. In the discussions on gender issues in society that take place within the discursive spaces on these platforms, through acts such as the establishment of strict space access mechanisms and rules of language use, new discursive orders are established, and the relationship between gender roles and power is re-discussed, and social practices that challenge inherent social frameworks and positions of power are implemented.

In this section, examples of the extension of discursive practices around LPs that occur on the Bilibili platform to other social media platforms will be presented as case studies. This chapter will continue to use the CDA method summarised by Jørgensen and Phillips (2009) based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model (1992) as the research methodology and will scrutinise and explore the cases to analyse why the composition of the extended discursive spaces from the discursive practice of LP within the public sphere of the Bilibili platform can be seen as social practices. Furthermore, how do these social practices challenge the social framework of patriarchy and gender inequitable power relations in society through the lens of game? Firstly, several discussion groups around games that have emerged on the Douban platform and that only allow female players to join will be used as cases for analysis. The strict rules of access and language use set out in these groups will also be discussed to analyse the implications of the construction of these gender-exclusive discursive spaces as social practices. Afterwards, the discussions and boycotts that take place on the Weibo platform around LPers and the opinions they express about gender politics will be analysed, and the dramaturgical theory proposed by Erving Goffman will be introduced to analyse how the backstages of LPers' lives are presented and intruded upon, and the implications of it. Thirdly, a chat group of female gamers around gender politics and gaming created on WeChat will be used as a case for analysis. The gender-exclusive rules of access to the chat group on WeChat, similar to those of the group on Douban, and the rules of language use that differ from them will also be analysed. It is worth clarifying that the discussions that take place within the not entirely open group spaces of these platforms can still be

seen in part as discursive practices. However, the construction of these group spaces, the setting of strict group rules, and some of the actions taken by members of the groups, individually and collectively, could be considered and analysed as social practices in Fairclough's three-dimensional model (1992). As will be shown in the analysis below, they are more rebellious than the discourses generated in and around the LP videos on the Bilibili platform. I should clarify that some of the examples used in this section will be presented and analysed from an autoethnographic perspective, as I have partly participated in and observed the discourses of these groups and the social practices they engage in personally as an academic observer. While applying for access to these group spaces as a female game player, I emphasised my interest as an academic observer in the discourses and social practices within the spaces and was approved by the administrators.

3.1 Example: digital group space built for female gamers on the social platform (Douban)

Douban is a Chinese-language social networking service launched in 2005, which is considered similar to Reddit as a site for people to discuss books, films, games and other media works. Most of Douban's users share, review and rate the cultural and media works they want to or have already read/watched/played as readers, viewers and players. The majority of descriptions and reviews of cultural and media works published on Douban are UGC (User-generated content) provided by users. Douban also offers a variety of services such as book and movie recommendations and in-group discussions. Launched in 2005, Douban's group feature aims to be a "gathering place for people interested in the same topic", and to date, over 300,000 groups have been created by users, with over 55 million users using the site's groups feature. The groups created on Douban have a number of different sections with a variety of content ranging from those dealing with Asian film culture to Steam game recommendations and numerous other areas. Users can post in the groups they join to share their common interests with other users, and to interact and communicate with each other. Among the many groups with a large number of users, there are some "female only" gaming-related interest groups, such as the "Female Gamer's Association" and the "ACGN Male Character Critique Centre". The common denominator between these two groups is that only female users are allowed to be members of the groups, and before they can successfully join a group, users must submit an application in which they identify themselves as female and as a gamer or someone who is very interested in gaming culture. The regulations, including rules of access and specific requirements for the use of language, reveal the social implications of the formation of these groups and their procedural setup. The establishment of discursive spaces that are exclusive to female players ensures

that the spaces are completely dominated by females by denying access to male players. In most of China's open social media platforms, the establishment of such gender-exclusive discursive spaces has been made possible by the will and efforts of female players. I argue that the construction of such a closed discursive space and its procedural set-up is a gendered challenge to the patriarchal social framework and power relations in which men hold the power of discourse. The challenge is not a direct subversion but rather an alternative route that makes it possible and implementable to escape, to a certain extent, the discursive spaces owned or invaded by men. This is the reason why these cases can be seen as social practices in Fairclough's three-dimensional model. For example, the entry requirements for the "Female Gamer's Association" clearly state that:

“This group is exclusively for female friends to discuss games on topics including but not limited to games themselves, gamers, LPers, game consoles, game developers, and producers. (...) This group exists due to the fact that most gaming forums are predominantly male, which can often make females feel uncomfortable. Players of the biological sex of male are not welcome to participate in the discussions in this group, only real ‘sisters’ are allowed to enter the group. To ensure that this group is an all-female community, admins will randomly initiate gender verification requests from group members, who should respond to random checks by admins within 72 hours or they will be kicked out of the group.” (reference: [group rules](#))

When applying to join the “Female Gamers Association”, users may even need to fill in their Steam user account to prove that they are indeed gamers. When applying to join the ACGN Male Character Critique Centre, users will need to write the name of the Otome game they have played or are currently playing, as this group is dedicated to trolling and discussing male characters and their behaviour in various Otome games. Both Douban groups have clear group rules that members of the group need to follow when posting and communicating with others. The group rules of the Female Gamers Association state what is not allowed to be said in the group (including comments and posts).

本组违规的发言（包括评论和发帖）：

1. 和小组主题无关
2. 嘲讽或贬低女性和女性权益
3. 在未标注剧透的帖子里剧透
4. 谈论豆瓣没有条目的游戏
5. 人身攻击其他组员或其家人（包括但不限于诽谤、侮辱、喷脏、诅咒、讥讽、嘲笑、谩骂）
6. 讨论政治（请避免政治或意识形态的讨论）
7. 讨论盗版游戏平台、或发布“现阶段在内地可通过正规游戏平台购买未删减中文版本的游戏”的资源
8. 广告或引流
9. 刻意混淆交流主题只为恶意举报他人的引导性话术

(Figure 3.1. Screenshot of the group rules of “Female Gamers Association”)

Among the nine rules that will be reported and banned as infractions by the administrators, in addition to "no personal attacks on other group members" and "no discussion of national politics and ideology", which are also common in other group rules, there is also a rule saying that "It is forbidden to ridicule or degrade women and their rights" (rule 5 in *Figure 3.1*). The "ACGN Male Character Critique Centre" states in its group rules that "those who do not have a strong pro-female stance are not recommended to join the group", and that group members who glorify male characters in games or degrade female characters will be removed or banned from the group. A question worth debating is in which dimensions these female-only discursive spaces conform to the characteristics of the public sphere as proposed by Habermas, and in which dimensions they do not. It is clear that the openness and inclusiveness required by the public sphere are discarded from the very beginning of the creation of these group spaces, and Gerard Hauser, in his book *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres* (1999), states that the rhetorical public sphere must have *permeable boundaries* and *tolerance*, i.e. the property of allowing people and their opinions outside a particular group to enter the discussion (Hauser, 1999, 79-80). In this respect, the gender-exclusive access mechanisms of the groups “Female Gamers' Association” and the “ACGN Male Character Critique Centre” on Douban are closed. Furthermore, the rhetorical public sphere described by Hauser also emphasises the importance of *contextualised language*, which requires participants to adhere to the rhetorical norms of contextualised language in order to share collective experiences and interests (Hauser, 1999, 79-80). In this dimension, the “Female Gamers' Association” and the “ACGN Male Character Critique

Centre” groups clearly define the norms of language use and the discursive themes on which both groups focus. This ensures that the members of the space share a common political orientation (in terms of gaming and gender agendas), a collective interest, and the thematic focus of the discourses that take place within the space.

It is obvious that groups such as the Female Gamers' Association and the ACGN Male Character Critique Centre, which are constructed around female gamer-centred discussion of game texts and game-related discursive practices (including LP videos), tend to exclude males and attempt to resist the intrusion and influence of misogynistic societies within this space. Most of the posts in these groups are on gaming-related topics and can be very broad, depending on the thematic orientation of the group. Discussions among members of the " Female Gamers Association " will not only focus on the content of games, but also on content related to LPs and LPers, and even on the broader issues of sexism in relation to games. In that sense, they can be regarded as direct societal ‘extensions’ of the LPs analysed in the previous chapter.

a) Posts and discussions around game texts

Among the top popular posts in the group, ranked by the number of responses, are cases of making game recommendations and using a particular game as a text to reflect on the existence of gender stereotypes and sexism. For example, a female gamer stated that she had always thought she had no gender stereotypes until she started playing the game *Spiritfarer* (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020) and then realised that there were gender stereotypes ingrained in her mindset. She said that *Spiritfarer* has a cheerful and short-haired female heroine whose job is to drive a ship and build houses, while the player herself subconsciously thinks of her as a male character because of her "leadership + enthusiasm + workmanlike qualities". Below this post, a number of other group members responded, saying that they too had realised in playing the game that they had not completely escaped the influence of gender stereotypical thinking. For example, one group member replied that she also mistook the main character for a male character at the beginning of the game, and then realised that she was a female character and thought, "it's great that it's a game with a female character as the main character", but only after passing the game did she realise that considering a game is rare and better than other games because of the fact that it has a female leading character is no less gender stereotypical.

玩了灵魂旅人 (Spiritfarer) 意识到自己性别刻板意识很严重



来自: septima 2022-07-10 00:17:32

⚠️!!此贴的本质为安利贴! 求求大家都快去玩! (另: 有关于性别的剧透)

之前看过的一个关于性别刻板印象的故事: 父亲儿子发生车祸。儿子重伤被送往医院。开始手术时, 主治医师哭着说我没法给他进行手术, 因为他是我的儿子。请问为什么?

当时上高中的我愣了很久才反应过来, 是因为主治医师是妈妈。而我却因为印象里面的主治医师都是男性而忽略了这个问题。

自以为经过五六年的成长, 已经不太会 (频繁) 犯这种错误了。

直到我玩灵魂摆渡人的时候, 这种错误又再次高强度出现在我身上。

=====

一、斯黛拉 (主角)



(Figure 3.2 screenshot of the post talking about the game Spiritfarer)



大葫芦! 2022-07-10 00:40:20

dd...我在最开始见到主角的时候也第一反应是个小男孩, 还有“哇这个是一个女性主角的游戏哎不错”的想法, 其实后来通关之后仔细想了想, 斯黛拉做看护无私奉献直到生命尽头, 还有共情拥抱这一些, 也许男性并不能做到 (可能这也有一些刻板印象了)。还有后面出现的一只小蘑菇, 其实我最喜欢他, 但是因为我个人感情方面 (我厌男) 一直真切的把他当成女孩子, 到了比较后面才知道原来是个男孩子。

其实uu你能在游戏的时候思考并意识到自己的刻板印象已经非常棒了! 个人感觉灵魂摆渡人的确是个好游戏, 情感的触发以及思考真的十分宝贵! 也很赞同uu说的[艺术承载着情感]这个观点...对我来说就是歌曲可以带我回到一些再也回不去的美好时光...

对了uu如果想更了解人物的话可以去搜一下这个游戏的设定集, 不过是全文的, 当课外资料补充一下一些人物背景还是可以的

投诉 不喜欢 赞 (19) 回应

(Figure 3.3. Screenshot of the comment to the post about Spiritfarer)

At the end of the post and in the comments section, the members of the "Female Gamers Association" actively encouraged gamers to get rid of their gender stereotypes and reflect on themselves while playing the game, and recommended the game to other members. In their chapter, Yi Mou and Wei Peng examine gender stereotypes in mass media, especially in games. They point out that male characters tend to show more leadership than female characters, while women are often set up as subordinate and passively dependent on men (Mou & Peng, 2009). In this group, as shown in this post, players will not only point out the gender stereotypes latent in games, but also reflect on their own gender stereotypical perspectives and mindsets while playing games as consumers and experiencers of this cultural product from a player's perspective.

There are many similar posts in the group, such as questioning why multiple games on the same theme designed by the same game developer focus on wealth and power for male players, while games for female players require players to dress up or wear makeup to achieve a successful ending. A group member shared the list of games in her post "Buy 792 Indie Games for \$10 to Support Women's Abortion Freedom", inviting people to buy the games on the list to help the Collective Power Fund of National Network for Abortion Fund in the US, which provides financial support to more than 20 states in the US where abortion freedom is difficult to obtain.

In the "ACGN Male Character Critique Centre", the group members adopt a more aggressive approach to criticism of games, viewing Otome's male characters as real men and critically examining them in terms of morality in real life. The very act of examining male characters in Otome games with real-life moral standards and codes of conduct by the participants in the group 'ACGN Male Character Critique Centre' is different from the female audience of Japanese Otome culture that Leticia Andlauer describes in her article. In Andlauer's article, the Japanese fans of Otome culture she interviewed seemed to have a collective attitude toward scrutinising virtual male characters with a strict distinction from men in reality (Andlauer, 2018). However, in this female-only group with the Otome game as its main focus, the participants seemed to perceive the male characters in the game as stand-ins for real-life males, and in doing so, extended the discussion of gender framing and gender relations in society. Members of the group are keen to take screenshots of conversations between male and female characters in the game and post them in the group, criticising the 'standardised' masculinity of the male characters. For example, in a post titled "Tears of Themis from a real-life working perspective", the poster commented on the way the four main male characters in the game Tears of Themis treat the female protagonist at work and the fact that players are used to the idea that "men tend to be

more successful than women in the workplace", which drew many positive responses from other group members.

In these cases, the members of the group took a more realistic view of the gender scripts and gender stereotypes faced or held by players as a foundational setting in the game text and resisted them critically. This resistance may be in the form of positive calls to purchase and play games that support women's rights, or it may be in the form of directly pointing out and exposing sexism and gender stereotypes that are common in games. Either way, resistant social practices are taking place among these gaming-related Douban groups, which are centred on women's voices and the pursuit of women's rights. In their summary, Jørgensen and Phillips reiterate a point highlighted by Fairclough: that in analysing the production and consumption of texts, it is essential to observe how the text and the discourse it generates reproduces and transforms knowledge, identities and social power relations. In the discourses cited within the Douban groups, social power relations in society, where male groups occupy positions of power, are challenged. Such challenges to the power relations of patriarchal societies are manifested not only in the establishment of gender-exclusive rules of access to the groups, but also in the refusal to promote the consumption of cultural products with a masculine hegemony that takes place in the group space. While this may only affect a certain proportion of game consumers (such as the members of the group) at the moment, in the long run, such an appeal and awareness could play a role in the future in terms of the general awareness of the gaming industry and players. The formation of these groups and the feminist voices posted by female players existed in the form of what Fairclough calls 'the communicative event' (Fairclough, 1992). Here, patriarchal hegemonic social frameworks, cultural norms and gender identities are challenged through the lens of games and players. However, the discussion in Douban groups goes far beyond the game texts themselves to include the LPers and the LP videos they create in the Bilibili game section.

b) Posts and discussions about LPs and LPers

In the "Female Gamers Association" group on Douban, there are many posts by group members about LPs and LPers, most of which are not related to specific games or game content, but rather focus on LPers' gender identities and the statements they deliver to the audience in relation to gender politics. This section of posts focuses more on the LP videos that exist as discursive practices and the discourses produced by their creators than it does on games, as the textual level in Fairclough's three-dimensional model. In these posts, some posters recommend or ask for recommendations about LPers of a

particular gender and the LP videos they create, while others share screenshots of videos of LPers who make sexist remarks and criticise them. For example, an LPer in the Bilibili game section named @ChinaBOY-Super-Gorilla was criticised by the group for posting inappropriate comments in one of his videos. In the video, @ChinaBOY-Super-Gorilla received a message from a male fan saying that a girl he was pursuing had a boyfriend and had expressed a clear rejection of him, which made him feel embarrassed and thus, he sought advice from @ChinaBOY-Super-Gorilla. In a reply to the male fan from @ChinaBOY-Super-Gorilla and his friend who worked together to create this video, they used several pronoun terms with insulting connotations towards women and suggested him to spread negative words about the girl to their friends around her in order to destroy her reputation as a revenge for her rejection. Such comments immediately drew the ire of a large number of fans and female internet users. In the comments section below the post, some suggested that the statements made by @ChinaBOY-Super-Gorilla were similar to the mindset of a male perpetrator in a real-life case at the time, who committed violence against multiple women after being rejected for dating invites. A member of the group also replied with a piece of emphatic advice to "stay away from male LPers in the gaming section". In this case, the famous LPer who was criticised for his discriminatory comments about women did not even mention anything about gaming in the video, but was only noticed by the group members because of his status as an LPer. This is in line with the rules of the "Female Gamers Association" group, as topics related to LPers, especially when they also involve gender discrimination, are one of the many heated topics allowed to be discussed within the group.



(Figure 3.4. Screenshot of the comments)

In addition to such specifically targeted posts, there are also posts in the "Female Gamers Association" that categorise and recommend LPers by their gender identities. For example, there are posts asking members of the group to recommend female LPers who are not male-promoting and male LPers who have not made sexist comments in their videos to watch. The advice given by the members of these groups about games and LPers based on gender equality and feminist political pursuits could lead to these groups being seen as a kind of gatekeeper. The existence of such groups and the discourses of advice could partly counter the male hegemony in the games industry and the LP field.

有没有安利的女生游戏up呢?

也不要求技术好啥的, 搜索过群里感觉都不是满意的 不看直播, 只想看别...

有哪些没在性别问题上翻过车的男性游戏up主

我看游戏视频看得不多, 就我的认知来说稚嫩的魔法师算一个? 小秦也还行...

(Figure 3.5. Screenshots of the posts asking for recommendations of LPers)

In these cases, the members of the "Female Gamers Association" group often put extra emphasis and attention on gender identity when it comes to topics related to LPs and LPers, as well as on positive or negative statements made by LPers related to gender politics.

c) Posts around the broader issue of gender inequality

In addition to discussions about game texts and discursive practices of LPs and their creators, there is no shortage of discussions about broader issues of gender politics among the groups established by the primary labels of female-oriented and game-related. For example, concerns about the previously revealed cases of sexism in the workplace of video game company Blizzard Entertainment, the sharing of videos that discuss the general masculinity of games, and the sharing and recommendation of academic work on sexism in online gaming. These posts do not focus on specific games, LP videos or LPers, but rather share and discuss the events and topics of gender politics within the field of game-related topics through the lens of game-play. Among these posts, there is a post titled "A female

gaming PhD student encounters..." by a female PhD student working on gender politics and gaming, in which she shares links to some of the articles she has written, as well as a video she made that was posted on Bilibili. In the post and the video, she talks about her experiences of sexism as a female gamer and academic researcher in the field of gaming, and shares some of the comments and reflections she has received since the release of her video. This post exemplifies the very important point that within the groups on the Douban platform there is not only a social practice in the form of communicative events (critiques of games and LPers), but also a social practice that encompasses video creation and academic research.

It can be said that the male-excluded group space represented by the "Female Gamers Association" is a space where the gaming and gender political spheres overlap and converge. In this space, women gather together for similar interests and political ideas, observing cultural phenomena and social implementations through the overlapping perspectives of gaming and feminism, and engaging in a series of social practices such as discussion, information sharing and creation. In the overlapping space between gaming and gender politics, the group members' enthusiasm for gaming and their concern for gender politics as feminists collide and spark off a series of critical discourses and social practices.

3.2 Analysis: about the game-topic female space built on Douban

In an article posted by Jiaying Li, he mentions that many groups on Douban are predominately composed of females, and since the number of females in the group is much higher than that of males, and the topics discussed in the groups often involve issues related to gender politics, the female users active in many Douban groups are tended to be labelled by some male users as "radical feminists" (Li, 2022). Li also mentions that women in the Douban group forums often refer to each other as 'sisters', a friendly and affectionate term that symbolises the harmonious relationships and supportive attitudes among female members in the group. However, as mentioned above, the groups, including the "Female Gamers Association" and the "ACGN Male Character Critique Centre" do not accept *non-sister* members. That is, users whose biological sex is male, as indicated in the group rules of the "Female Gamers Association". This is the reason why the Douban group cannot be considered as a public sphere like Bilibili, because the space it constructs is exclusive and does not conform to Habermas's description of a public space that is open to all, and there is a rather restrictive contractual principle in the mechanism of speech (the forbidden words indicated in the group rules). The purpose of prohibiting male groups from entering the discursive space within the Douban groups is to construct

and maintain a pure female discursive space, and within such a discursive space as referred to in this chapter, the link between gaming and feminist claims is central to the discursive order that sustains the space. In his article, Fuchs emphasises that "In the public sphere, humans organise around specific interests as social groups' (Fuchs, 2014, 61). Whereas in the two Douban groups cited in this thesis, group members gain access to the space with their identities as players and females, males are then relatively denied access to the discourses and social practices that counter the patriarchal social framework. However, even though the two Douban groups do not fit the definition of the public sphere in the traditional sense, they do function to some extent as a public sphere in terms of creating a discursive space for female gamers to discuss topics at the intersection of gaming and gender politics. In his thesis, Fuchs cites Habermas' theory of the public sphere to emphasise that the establishment of power structures is an important constitutive foundation of modern society, and that different roles in society are constituted by and linked to power relations (Fuchs, 2014, 61). Within the social power structures of China, the identity of women as a gender role often means being belittled and suppressed. The stigmatisation of the female gender role in games and the cultural output and consumption surrounding them is reflected in the multiple aspects of gender stereotyping and strict gender scripts in games mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis. In the Douban group space, however, women have more access to discourse than in reality, benefiting from a different framework of power than the social reality established in this digital online space. This power structure ensures that women can engage in the social practice of information sharing and creativity in a space that has escaped the hegemonic discourse of patriarchy to some extent.

3.3 Discourse and social practice across platforms

Apart from the discursive space built around the intersection of gaming and feminism, discussions and social practices on gaming and gender politics have also extended to other social platforms such as WeChat and Weibo in China. In this section of the thesis, discussions and the establishment of discursive spaces about games, LPs, LPers and gender politics that take place on two platforms, Weibo and WeChat, will be used as case studies to analyse the extension of discourses and social practices inspired from game texts and discursive practices in the form of LPs on several major Chinese social media platforms besides Bilibili. WeChat, a free application launched by Tencent on 21 January 2011 to provide instant messaging services for smartphones, also has a 'moments' feature that allows users to post photos or texts of their lives and view photos, texts, etc., posted by their friends on moments. WeChat's software positioning and functional DNA is similar to that of WhatsApp and Instagram combined. Its main feature is to provide users with small social circles and privacy, as WeChat users

can essentially only see messages and content posted by people with whom they have established friendships within the application. However, WeChat also has the ability to create group chats. In a group chat, people from different places who do not know each other in real life can be in the same chat group due to common hobbies or interests and interact with each other. In contrast, the Weibo platform, which became available in 2009, is a more open platform for sharing, disseminating and accessing information. Weibo has some similarities to Twitter in that celebrities on Weibo have their own official credentials, such as some of the famous LPers in the gaming section of Bilibili mentioned in this thesis, who are credited on Weibo as content creators in the gaming section of Bilibili, with a significant proportion of their followers following the LPers' Weibo accounts. Unlike Twitter, Weibo does not have the ability to send requests to see specific accounts or specific content posted by accounts. As a result, Weibo is arguably more open and low-barrier to interaction than WeChat or the Douban group. As a result of the low barrier to interaction on Weibo and the fragmented mode of verbal communication on WeChat, the intersectional discourses and practices on gender politics and gaming on Bilibili and Douban have been extended to the two social platforms with the broadest reach of users in China. Identifying whether the participants in related discourses and social practices on different platforms are the same group of people is difficult, as users may have different names on different websites. However, these discourses and social practices across different digital platforms and spaces share similar themes and values, which is where feminism and gaming overlap. Furthermore, the games and LPers being discussed on different platforms often overlap because of their popularity and the heat of certain events related to them at a specific time.

3.3.1 Example: criticism towards LPers in their back stage (Weibo)

Weibo is often used by LPers as a platform to post about their daily lives and communicate with their fans, whereas LPers' fans rarely comment on games and LP videos, but rather interact with LPers on a more personal level. In this space, LPers present their fans with a more personal and lived-in side of themselves, such as what they had for lunch today, or sharing photos of their pets. In his *The Presentation of Self In Everyday Life* (1959), Erving Goffman introduced the concept of the 'front stage' and 'back stage' of life, noting that people perform in a social environment where they are scrutinised by others (the front stage) and conform to social norms and group conventions, while the back stage is where performers can put down their scripts and is often the private sphere of people's lives. In the article by Erynn Masi de Casanova et al. (2020), they observed and interviewed anime and game fans who participated in cosplay and found that cosplayers had difficulty distinguishing and switching between the virtual character they were playing and the performance of being 'themselves' when

participating in cosplay activities. Although de Casanova et al.'s use of Goffman's concepts of front and back stage is not specific to the communication situation on social media, it certainly exposes the tendency for the line between front and back stage to become increasingly blurred in contemporary life, where people's personal identities are more closely linked to cultural consumption in society. Although the situation of cosplayers is different from that of LPers in many ways, they are similarly expected to play a specific 'role' in public. Unlike cosplay that takes place in real life, LPers are not required to wear a specific real costume in the online space in order to be a certain character, but they are required to play themselves in the foreground through specific performing techniques. In their paper, Farid Pribadi et al. point out the interpenetration of the boundary between people's front-stage and back-stage in social media, including WhatsApp, and state that the images and texts people send in WhatsApp groups reflect the blurred identity of people's personalities between the real and virtual worlds (Pribadi et al., 2018). On the social platform Weibo, the same blurring of the front and back stage boundaries between the performances Goffman describes people performing in their everyday lives is evident, with LPers presenting themselves as professional, humorous and neutral game commentators to the audience of LP videos, while on Weibo giving fans more of a peek into the back stage of their personal lives. Even when presenting their private lives, LPers are not entirely abandoning performing in front of the public. After all, Weibo is still an open and public social platform. LPers on Weibo often have the same or very similar user names as they do on Bilibili, which makes it easy for their fans to find them on the platform. Although the content they post on Weibo is not necessarily linked to the LP videos published on Bilibili, they still play a specific role and perform themselves to some extent. I argue that the self-presentation performed by LPers on the Weibo platform can be seen as a social practice as described in Fairclough's three-dimensional model, as such performances allow the role of LPers to continue from the Bilibili platform to other social media platforms. In such cross-platform self-presentation, the LPers present different aspects of their lives to the audience. The audience and fans thus gain an additional channel that begins with the discursive practices generated around the game's texts and leads to broader discussions and social practices around the politics of gender.

However, the blurring of the boundary between frontstage and backstage and the opportunity that fans are given to peek into the backstage of LPers' lives also brings with them the danger that mistakes caused by LPers during their frontstage performances may permeate into the backstage of their lives. A typical example of this is the LPer @ChinaBOY-Super-Gorilla on Bilibili mentioned earlier in this chapter. He was criticised by many netizens for his demeaning remarks about women in a video that had little to do with games, and was perceived by viewers to be similar in nature to the male

perpetrators of violence against women in the real-life event *2022 Tangshan restaurant attack*. Below his apology letter posted on the Weibo platform about his comments in the video, approximately 45,000 people commented, mostly criticising his inappropriate attitude towards women, while some said that as women they did not accept his apology and would not watch his videos again. Ironically, his apology letter, posted on Weibo on 13 June, came after his repost on 12 June about the 2022 Tangshan restaurant attack and his expression of outrage. However, after the video he sent caused an outrage among the audience, a large number of fans and netizens expressed their unremitting attitude toward his statement before that and mocked him for not being qualified to make such criticism. To this day, when searching for the keyword "China-Boy" on Weibo, one can still see many people sharing screenshots of his deleted video and critical discussions about it. In addition to @ChinaBOY-Super-Gorilla, when searching the names of LPers with over one million followers on Bilibili, such as @ChinaBOY-Super-Gorilla and XYSR on social media platforms like Weibo and the keyword "female", one would find many fans censoring and criticising them for their many nuanced comments from a feminist perspective. The cross-platform attention and criticism towards LPers by viewers and netizens takes on a feminist perspective, with a harsh tone that intrudes into the back stage of LPers' lives. In her article, Bernie Hogan challenges the use of the dramaturgy theory proposed by Goffman in the study of online social engagement. Hogan points out that the filtering and presentation of what people post and the populating of their profiles on social platforms is more in line with the behaviour of a curator of an online exhibition than the metaphor of front and back stage. Hogan suggests using the metaphor of online exhibition and curator to examine and investigate people's online participation in events and presentation of their lives on social media platforms. If we use the metaphor suggested by Hogan to look at the scrutiny and criticism the LPers have received on different social media platforms, then we can see the comments they have made about gender politics, which fans consider to be inappropriate, as a failed exhibition. In this exhibition, the wrong exhibits were displayed and noticed by the exhibition's audience, which led to the curator being criticised and influenced the other exhibitions they curated. Such scrutiny and criticism will not just stop at the Douban and Weibo platforms, but will continue to spread to other platform domains.

3.3.2 Example: the WeChat group chat "Otome"

In contrast to Douban and Weibo, social practices within the small community of game enthusiasts on WeChat are characterised by several different features, including **a)** fragmented and aggressive verbal exchanges; **b)** strict gender identity norms and interpretations; and **c)** engagement with broader gender issues in the society. In a WeChat group chat called "Otome", where 90 female gaming

enthusiasts gather, in addition to discussing games and LP videos or LPers, the members of this chat group have a more intense focus on social issues than gaming enthusiasts on other platforms. Members recommend LPers and Otome games to each other in the group chat, but gender equality is often the most critical factor in evaluating the games and LPers when making recommendations. It can be argued that within this chat group, members follow different rules than on other platforms and have a particularly strong focus on gender politics and more radical attitudes. Rather than discussing how game fandom reinforces a particular unequal gender frame, the discourses generated around gaming in these groups redefine and map out the norms of game-play and use gaming as a catalyst to construct and present their own identities as part of that group.

a) Fragmented and aggressive verbal exchanges

In her thesis, Ruohua Wang investigates the group of undergraduates in order to analyse the impact of their fragmented language patterns on information dissemination and communication in the online environment (2021). In her thesis, Wang uses college students' communication on WeChat as a case study and points out that the language they use on WeChat is characterised by its fragmentation, which refers specifically to the broadness, plurality and lack of rigour of language and information (Wang, 2021, 38). Yiran Wei also refers to the frequent use of fragmented language in the digital public sphere and its characteristics in his study of Bilibili as a public sphere, even Wei is not focusing on games and LP videos on Bilibili specifically, Wei notes that fragmented language can often be strongly emotional and has a demotivating effect on the public sphere, as it lacks a deep engagement with social issues and specific cases, and instead tends to be an emotional outlet (Wei, 2017, 13, 17). In the WeChat group named "Otome", members of the group often discuss game-related and gender-politics-related social issues with an apparent affect of anger and resentment. The negative affect shown is not only directed at the sexism and suppression of women in games and social events, but also at the deep resentment of the broader and deeper patriarchal social framework as feminists. The group members in "Otome" share in fragmented language games, LP videos and social events that constantly remind them of the existence of gender inequality in the society. They criticise and sometimes even curse the men, women and the overall framework of this society associated with the event. Ann Cvetkovich emphasises the importance of collective negative affects in her book *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012). Cvetkovich states that the goal of collective negative affects is to build a communal affective base necessary for future political action (Cvetkovich, 2012, 2). It is worth noting that the public sphere, as proposed by Habermas (1989), does not include affect as a factor, as

what he envisages is a public space of communication with completely idealised rationality. The attention to affect as a factor in the research that this paper focuses on is necessary because affect is not only present as a feature of language use in these discussions of play and gender politics, but may be a deep underlying stimulus for these discursive spaces and social practices that are taking place. Negative affects towards gaming industries and cultures that are invaded by hegemonic male cultures, as well as collective dissatisfaction with gender inequalities on a larger societal level, could be expressed through these social practices that aim to explicitly point out and oppose gender inequalities in cultural products such as games and LP videos. In this case, unrestricted by the language norms of a platform like Douban, it is possible for members of the WeChat group "Otome" to communicate with others in a more personal and emotional language, expressing one's negative affects about gender inequality and the oppression of women as expressed in games, LP videos and social events. The collective expression of negative affects in such small communities and the empathy of the group members with each other is a social practice that constructs a consensual affective basis against the hegemonic social framework of patriarchy. Such a social practice manifests itself in the form of a civilian and fragmented language, and takes place in a private online space. Although there are only 90 members in this WeChat group "Otome", the affects they express should still not be ignored as there might be more, similarly fragmented groups that share similar sentiments and practices. In her book, Cvetkovich stresses that one of the principles that feminism has always valued is that 'the personal is the political', and Cvetkovich argues that a necessarily partial position is a key factor in helping intellectual claims to promote political claims and projects (Cvetkovich, 4). Here, the 90 voices in the "Otome" WeChat group represent female game enthusiasts from different geographical locations in China (possibly even around the world), and their radical rage may still not be loud enough, but it is worthy of being heard, as it can be seen as the first social practice to overturn China's unshakeable patriarchal hegemonic social framework.

b) Strict gender identity norms and interpretations

Like the "Female Gamers Association" group on Douban, the WeChat group "Otome" also requires a certain level of access control. When requesting access to the group chat, one is supposed to send a voice message, using one's own voice to prove her female gender identity. Such a rule is similar to that of the groups on Douban, and is meant to guarantee an entirely female-only discourse space. Furthermore, in the group notice section of the Otome WeChat group, it is explicitly stated that "misogynistic swear words and other words containing insults to women are forbidden". This rule

exists because, in Chinese slang, many curse words contain female pronouns or references to female body parts, which reflects the presence of misogyny in Chinese usage habits from a linguistic perspective, and the social framework of patriarchy and the presence of misogyny in many aspects of society and culture. The phenomenon of misogyny in Chinese society is both political and historical. In ancient China, the term '红颜祸水'(with almost identical meaning to the term Helen of Troy) could be used to refer to or describe women, a term that saw women as harmful and disruptive to the mind. It attributed the loss of money, honour and family ruin that many men have suffered in China since ancient times, and even war between nations, to the presence of women. I argue that the rule against the banning of misogynist terms in the WeChat group "Otome" can be seen as a revolt against the historical and political misogyny, as well as the atmosphere of misogynism in today's society and online spaces. In this space, participants can experience how discourses could operate in a different way from social reality. These discursive spaces created on digital platforms form a public sphere that does not exactly fit Habermas' description, allowing the participants to discuss existing societal problems and imagine and design an alternative society based on them. Such a revolt is not hard to find in other areas of cyberspace, and it is worth noting that when society and culture are examined through the lens of games, it becomes clear that the revolt against misogynists in the social framework not only makes games and discursive practices about games an object of scrutiny as well, but also because this sense of revolt overlaps with the culture of games to form a (and perhaps even multiple) discursive space that brings together people who may not be related geographically or in their lives to engage in such rebellious social practices.

In fact, the chats in the Otome group not only attack misogynistic cultural products and social phenomena, but also use aggressive language against misogynistic men and women. What is noteworthy is the awareness and criticism from people in the "Otome" chat group about people who are women themselves but are demeaning and discriminating against women. In a conversation I had with a friend who introduced me to the chat group, she mentioned the neglect of the internal self-loathing that some women in Chinese society have towards the female community. She said that "Many people may not be aware that so many misogynistic women exist, as feminists that are fighting against misogynistic men becoming more and more common, which can make people overlook the hatred, misogyny and discrimination that women harbour towards other women". However, members of the "Otome" chat group have noticed this and have criticised this social phenomenon and the people related to this situation. A phrase that is often mentioned and criticised by members of the Otome group chat is "我女我也", which means "I'm female but I agree", and people who use this phrase usually agree with the derogatory and discriminatory comments that others (mostly men)

make about women on the internet. The consensus opposition and resistance to the phenomenon of misogynist within the Otome group are not only reflected in the prohibition of certain words, but also in the resistance to marriage and maternity. A basic consensus opinion within the Otome group is that marriage and maternity duties are an important aspect of the oppression of women in modern society, that they impose specific responsibilities on women because of their biological sex, and that they subject women to social and political coercion. I suggest that we use Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to analyse the recurrence of topics such as resistance to marriage and maternity in the "Otome" chat group. Judith Butler first developed the theory of the gender performativity in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), where she argued that the concept of gender is a behavioural or expressive style that encompasses rituals and norms of speech and movement, and that people standardise gender norms through repetitive performance. In this private chat group of 90 members, new rules are added to the normative interpretation of the female gender. These norms, which are seen as consensus in the Otome group, are initially intended to practice feminist beliefs, to demand and interpret what it means to be a feminist woman, and to standardise and practise them through repetitive discourse and collective performance. In this regard, my view is that such collective performances and practices are undoubtedly feminist and subversive, but they are still confined to a small digital space, hardly capable of generating wider collective participation and awakening in society. While the discussion of the phenomenon of misogyny in society is not always closely linked to gaming, but may involve broader social cases, the intersection of gaming and gender politics is always one of the starting points of the discussions that take place in a group that was initially formed because of the shared love of Otome games among female gamers. Here, I suggest that future scholars make a connection between the misogynistic tendencies present in Chinese cultural products and the patriarchal social framework, and examine the misogynistic perspective of the consumption habits of consumers of cultural products.

c) Engagement with broader gender issues in the society

The chat in the "Otome" WeChat group involves not only criticism of games and LPs, but also discussions and concerns about broader social events. Firstly, on games, members of the Otome group often discuss the behaviour and dialogue of male characters in "Otome" games such as *Light and Night* and *Tears of Thermes*, and like the group members of the "ACGN Male Culture Critique Centre" on Douban, examine and criticise them according to real-world norms and standards. Additionally, they will cite Otome games that contain severe sexist and gender stereotypical content and advise other

group members to avoid such games while playing. Secondly, regarding LPs and LPers, members of the Otome group will share LPers who have posted misogynist comments and encourage members of the group to report these LPers on the Bilibili platform or to avoid and boycott similar LPers. José van Dijck et al. introduce the concept of a *platform society* and point out that the online platforms we access are not just technological tools, but that one should be aware of the systems hidden and embedded within these platforms, and that the logic and framework of these systems actually shape the way we live, and the way society is organised. Furthermore, central to justice in a platform society is how the public interest is negotiated with the system, such as whose interests are protected by the activities on the platform and which values are endangered (van Dijck et al., 2018). One of the issues of interest in the discourses and social practices listed in this chapter is how the formation of these groups and the members within them have challenged the framing of power in multiple social platforms in China by calling for and leading social practices. For example, through actions such as boycotting and reporting LPers who have made derogatory remarks about women, the group members have in fact questioned the structure and public values of the Bilibili platform: does the public value that Bilibili upholds include the pursuit of gender equality? Are women one of the beneficiaries served by Bilibili? Following up on these questions, I found that Bilibili's options for the reasons to report a video did not include the option of "demeaning/disrespectful to women", but only a non-gender-specific option of "personal attack". Although Bilibili's reporting mechanism also does not explicitly show protection for male users, gender is an area that Bilibili has clearly chosen to ignore and avoid. Although platforms, including Bilibili, do not have mechanisms in place to defend women's rights within their platform systems, the social practices adopted by female gamers and their challenge to the problematic frameworks of the platform society mentioned in this chapter point the way to future social practices.

你觉得这个稿件有什么问题？

- | | |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> 违法违规 | <input type="radio"/> 色情 |
| <input type="radio"/> 低俗 | <input type="radio"/> 赌博诈骗 |
| <input type="radio"/> 血腥暴力 | <input type="radio"/> 人身攻击 |
| <input type="radio"/> 与站内其他视频撞车 | <input type="radio"/> 不良封面/标题 |
| <input type="radio"/> 转载/自制类型错误 | <input type="radio"/> 引战 |
| <input type="radio"/> 不能参加充电 | <input type="radio"/> 青少年不良信息 |
| <input type="radio"/> 有其他问题 | <input type="radio"/> 侵权申诉 |

(Figure 3.3.2.1. Reasons one can choose when reporting a video work on Bilibili)

Finally, while most of the topics covered are similar to those discussed in the Douban groups, the “Otome” WeChat group is much more concerned with social gender inequality than the other Douban groups. It can be argued that the audiences gathered on different platforms because of their enthusiasm and attention to games are engaged in discursive and social practices that strictly follow the rules and regulations of the space they belong to and are active in. The fact that the “Otome” WeChat group does not restrict the discussion of real-life cases, combined with the fragmented language habits and emotional expressions of people on the WeChat platform, makes the discussion of real-life cases more frequent than on other platforms. In the “Otome” chat group, members have discussed numerous real-life cases including the Xuzhou chained woman incident, 2022 Tangshan restaurant attack, Nth Room case, Yulin iron cage girl incident, Alibaba employee molestation and many more. Some of these cases took place in China and some outside of China, but all drew the attention and sparked heated discussions among “Otome” group members about the oppression of women in real life by the prevailing patriarchal hegemonic social framework. In the “Otome”, female gamers and viewers gathered for their enthusiasm for the (Otome) game used a feminist lens to sharply examine and emotionally critique media productions and social reality. I argue that the creation of such a gender-exclusive, rebellious online space capable of accommodating collective female negative affects towards gender-unequal social frameworks is precisely the subversive social practice referred to in Fairclough's three-dimensional model.

3.4 Conclusion

Across China's various social media platforms, the discursive concerns and critical voices of LPers are spreading across audiences and netizens, regardless of platform divisions, each with different practices and interpretations of gender identity. A clear trend in Chinese online discourse today is the increasing focus on the social context of misogynist and other gender political issues. Within a digital discursive space formed on the basis of a focus on game *texts*, such a trend is reflected in the particular sensitivity and attention of LP viewers to the content of the games, the gender identities of LPers and their discourses on feminism and gender politics. Such a discursive trend stems from the persistent gender inequality within China's social framework. With the awakening of contemporary Chinese women's awareness of their pursuit of gender equality, more and more people have begun to examine media works with a feminist gaze, and actively discuss and criticise them in the multi-dimensional online space. While such discourse exists and circulates in cyberspace mainly in the vehicle of text, the participants of the discourse are mostly practising socially as women's game enthusiasts through such means. The social dimension of this type of practice is not only reflected in the strong relevance of the topics being discussed in these spaces to social reality, but also in the establishment of the discursive spaces with stronger feminist beliefs that are different from the public sphere. Whether it is the members of the Douban and WeChat groups, the fans of LPers, or the Weibo users who simply have an interest in games and feminism, social practices are implemented in the form of discourses and textual vehicles within the online space. These social practices include an emphasis on the binary gender identities that others engage in when speaking, a feminist focus on games (texts), LPs (discursive practices) and LPers (creators of discursive practices) in the content of discourses that fit into Fairclough's three-dimensional model, and the creation of exclusive groups and in-group communication.

A point that should be re-emphasised is the role of LPs as discursive practices in enabling the construction and social practice of these online spaces. As an intermediate component between text and society in Fairclough's three-dimensional model, the LP form of discursive practice has many attributes that make it pivotal. For example, the entertaining and mediating qualities of LPs allow them to attract a large audience, which provides the participant base for the group spaces that are later constructed on other platforms and the discursive and social practices that take place within them. In addition, the introduction of playful game texts by LPers in LP videos in order to attract viewers has made Otome games one of the most popular game materials in many LP videos. The link to gender

politics in the Otome games themselves and the comments and annotations made by LPers about the gender politics of the games out of a desire to portray themselves as perfect and righteous have also brought the intersection of the gaming field and gender politics to the attention of the audience. As a discursive practice based on game texts, the LP videos, with their content, themes and the LPers' personal commentaries, allow for a variety of interpretations and expansions of the game texts and pave the way for social practices that observe and critique the existing problematic gender frameworks in society through the lens of games. An essential focus that deserves constant attention in the analysis of these social practices is the key point of Fairclough's methodology that Jørgensen and Phillips highlight in their summary of critical discourse analysis:

“(...) discourse is an important form of social practice which both reproduces and changes knowledge, identities and social relations including power relations, and at the same time is also shaped by other social practices and structures. Thus discourse is in a dialectical relationship with other social dimensions.” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, 4-5)

From the perspective of this central point made by Fairclough, both discursive practices in the form of LPs as media works and online discourses that integrate gender issues around games (texts) and LPs (discursive practices) are inextricably and dialectically linked to social practices. The construction of these discourses and discursive spaces is both derived from social realities and can be seen as the building of consensual cognitive and affective foundations for achieving more subversive social practices and radical social change in the future. However, it is undeniable that we should also be aware of the limitations of these social practices, including their weak intervention in public discourse, their lack of awareness of and resistance to the binary criteria of gender identity that are at the root of the social framework they resist, the exclusivity and closure of the discursive space, as well as the dependence on game texts at the level of discursive themes and practices and the difficulty of transcending the limits of a specific cultural field, etc. Nevertheless, the social practices that take place at the intersection of play culture and gender politics continue to exert a significant influence in China's multidimensional digital space as the basis and precondition for more radical and transformative social practices.

Conclusion

The gaming industry has a long-standing framework of male hegemony, which is reflected in a neglected female consumer base, a pervasive male gaze in the portrayal of female characters in games, gender-biased elements such as strong men and weak women, etc. (B. Kafai, 2008). With the rising trend of feminism in China (Xu, 2022), more and more players are beginning to notice the gender bias that exists in games. However, as discussed in Chapter 1, the games often do not have the potential to be a site where subversive discourses occur. In order to achieve a questioning and rebellion against China's patriarchal hegemonic gender frameworks, arenas that could accommodate more open discursive practices are needed. In this thesis, following the three-dimensional model proposed by Fairclough (1992) and the critical discourse analysis summarised by Jørgensen and Phillips (2002), games, Let's Play videos and a wider range of social practices are cited and analysed in order to explore the extent to which LP videos fulfil the role of constructing a public sphere capable of hosting discussions on social agendas, especially about gender issues.

In the first chapter, Otome games, represented by the iconic *Light and Night* as well as smaller supplementary examples, are analysed as **texts**. Features of the game *texts* such as binary gender divisions, heteronormative matrices, stereotypical gender biases and gender scripts contained in Otome games represented by *Light and Night* are analysed in terms of the characters' physical appearance, personality traits and the narrative of the game. However, the game text itself, due to its lack of openness and the space in which the discourse takes place, is hardly able to achieve a rebellion against the patriarchal hegemonic social framework that exists in the micro game products and the macro social reality. In the second chapter, LP videos are discussed and analysed as **discursive practices** in Fairclough's three-dimensional model, which defines discursive practices as the production and consumption of texts. Discursive practices around games are taking place as LP creators, LPers, record LP videos based on games and as viewers watch and comment on LP videos. Before presenting in-depth case studies of discursive practices in the form of LPs, I first introduce Bilibili, the main website where LP videos are published in China, and the digital public sphere it constructs. In Bilibili, an online public sphere built around ACG culture, video creation around games is one of its several major sections. In this section of the site, there are LP videos based on a wide range of games and themes, and Otome is one of the most popular games chosen by LPers to present due to its entertaining nature and the low skill requirement of the game. In the case studies of several LP videos that follow in the second chapter, the dramaturgy theory proposed by Erving Goffman(1959)

is adapted to contemporary digital culture and used in order to analyse the performances conducted by the LPers around the game texts in the LP videos. In these performances, different LPers adopt different approaches to comment on the gender issues addressed in the game texts. Through the annotations added by the LPers based on the game texts and the interpretations they present to the audience, they become co-constructors of the game's meaning and vicarious players for the audience. In the process, the LPers use the LP video as a medium to implement a discursive practice based on the game text and in this way stimulate the audience's participation in the discursive practice. In the on-screen comments and the comment section below the LP videos, the audience not only discusses the gender inequalities presented in the LP videos, but also critiques the reality of gender oppression in relation to social realities and their personal experiences. In the digital public sphere of Bilibili, as an engagement to the discourse of gender issues in China through the lens of games, LP contributes to Bilibili's function as an online public sphere by constructing a space for discursive practices and further social practices in relation to gender agendas in China. The discursive practices in the form of LPs produced around the Otome game texts implement discursive practices related to gender issues in China through the lens of gaming. In the third chapter, the **social practices** that derive from the Otome game texts and LP discursive practices are discussed and analysed. These social practices include the formation of discussion groups with gender-exclusive access mechanisms and strict linguistic norms. Within these groups, the intersectional domains of Otome games and gender issues that emerge from both domains become the subject of discourse and social practice of the groups. In the female-only groups formed on platforms such as Douban and WeChat, female gamers, who are brought together by their love of Otome games, critique gender stereotypes in the game and examine and comment on the male characters in Otome games as the very embodiments of real-life masculinity. The penetration of the feminist gaze into the virtual world reflects the friction and intersection between the gaming sphere and gender politics, resulting in social practices that go beyond the discursive level. In addition to the creation of discussion groups on multiple social media platforms accessible only to female Otome players, the internal introspection of group members about their own inherent gender biases as players, their calls for and resistance to the consumption of particular games, and their boycotts and criticisms of LPers who have delivered demeaning messages about women are all social practices described in Fairclough's three-dimensional model.

However, there are still topics not yet touched upon in this thesis that need to be explored by future scholars. For example, from the perspective of games, is there a possibility that the conventional framework and narrative style of patriarchal hegemony in which Otome games are embedded will be broken in the future, or already, for that matter? How can one achieve a feminist transformation

within the games industry? More research on feminist game design is needed, as the scholar H  l  ne Sellier has attempted to do with the design of a feminist Otome game. Furthermore, why does the games industry need a feminist transformation? These questions have not been addressed in this thesis, but are worthy of future research. From the perspective of discursive practices in the form of LP, a limitation of this thesis is that it focuses primarily on gender politics. However, discursive practices in the form of LPs may in fact be involved in the discussion of more socio-political issues. Therefore, in order to provide a more comprehensive focus on the political discursive practices in which LPs are involved, it is necessary to use comparative discourse analysis to examine whether LPs are also involved in other relevant social issues. Apart from Bilibili, are there other digital public spheres that are built around games, and what are the different approaches taken to discourse and social practice in these public spheres? Finally, in terms of social practices, the social practices observed in this thesis around the Otome game and the issue of gender politics in China do not reach a wider social impact in reality. In other words, the groups that are actually involved in or affected by these social practices are still not large enough to engage in widespread and powerful acts of subversion against the patriarchal social framework of Chinese society and culture. The question that merits further research is therefore whether game texts and the other forms of discursive and social practice they inspire can, in the future, genuinely destabilise and subvert the hegemonic cultural framework of masculinity in China.

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