

Research on the Display of Female Elements by Chinese Online Game Female Players on the Social Media Platform Xiaohongshu

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Abstract. With the progress of science and technology, games have become a common entertainment item. Traditionally, the vast majority of games have been designed for men. However, in recent years, women are no longer a marginal group among the game audience. They are active in different game communities, especially Xiaohongshu platform. Compared with other game communities, the posts of female users on Xiaohongshu show different characteristics and tendencies. This research first uses the participant observation method to select the posts of three games and the search results of the keyword “online games”. Through analysis, it is concluded that the content of Xiaohongshu game community is mostly casual games, and users are used to combining their personal life with games when creating and sharing contents. However, this also exposed some disadvantages including one-sided content and imperfect system and search mechanism, which requires Xiaohongshu to develop more complete measures and create more activities to enrich the content of the platform. This research is aimed at making the design of game manufacturers and the development of game communities more meet the needs of female consumers by studying the content shared by female players in Xiaohongshu game community, emphasizing the status of women in the game field, and fill the gap of feminism about games.

Keywords: Xiaohongshu, Game community, Female players.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the game industry has continued to develop in China. China Game Industry Report (2021) showed that the actual sales volume of Chinese game market in 2021 was 296.513 billion yuan, up 6.40% year on year [1]. That means gaming is no longer a niche hobby, but an entertainment that connects with the daily life of people. Especially, with the development of mobile phone and 5G, digital games are no longer only played on computers, and are more accessible to ordinary people, which makes game a fragmented pastime [2].

Globally, mainstream digital games are considered as a space with hyper-masculine gender role norms [3]. Ever since video games were invented, male teenagers have been the industry’s primary target audience [4]. The vast majority of games are designed for men, they tend to focus on linear level mechanics or complex gameplay, giving players a sense of accomplishment in completing complex maneuvers [5]. In the world of online gaming, women have always been marginalized [6]. However, as technology advances and the platforms of games move from PC to mobile, the audience for games has shifted, with more female gamer joining the field. According to the 2020 China Game Industry Report, from 2015 to 2019, the market size of mobile games for female users in China expanded from 8.4 billion yuan to 36.2 billion yuan. Meanwhile, the proportion of female users has been on the rise in the past three years, with the proportion of female game users increasing from 42.20% to 43.68% by 2020 [7]. Female consumer spending continues to grow and has become an important force driving the rapid growth of the game market.

Meanwhile, with the continuous development of China’s economy, the economic conditions and cultural thoughts of the new generation have reached a new height, that is, they have a new demand for lifestyle beyond the traditional cognition, which leads to higher consumption demand and the emergence of content communities [8]. For future Internet consumers, the community has the ability to meet their needs of segmentation and circle, which brings people with common interests and cultural attributes together [9]. In China’s content communities, Xiaohongshu, which aimed to create

a social platform for users to record and share their lives, became a new star. According to the 2019 Xiaohongshu Community Trend Report, as of December 31, 2019, Xiaohongshu had more than 3 billion exposures per day and more than 100 million users live per month [10]. By 2020, 90.41% of Xiaohongshu's active users were women [11]. Therefore, the culture and contents of this community showed features of focusing on women, which including clothing, make-up, cooking, and traveling [12]. It is worth mentioning that in the past two years, the position and potential of Xiaohongshu in the game field cannot be ignored. By 2021, more than 20 million users had watched game content on Xiaohongshu, and 480,000 creators had posted game notes, which had been viewed 2.11 billion times. In addition, there are more than 11,000 game topics, covering thousands of popular games, can be found here [13]. Compared to other gaming communities (for example, Bilibili and NGA), users in Xiaohongshu had more distinctive characteristics and tendencies. Compared with many game communities where people are more inclined to publish hardcore content and guide tutorials, female users of Xiaohongshu always share and show different female factors (for instance, dressing, face and cosplay), which is a relatively rare phenomenon.

This research will first pick three popular games on Xiaohongshu and analyze the characteristics of post in Xiaohongshu game community. Then, the participant observation method will be used to evaluate the strengths and limitations of Xiaohongshu game community which reflected the female element. Finally, through the study of the female content in Xiaohongshu, this research will speculate the possibility of the content in this community to promote the development of feminism.

2. Literature Review

Gaming as a pastime was rapidly gaining popularity among more people, especially women. Many scholars had studied female in games. James D. Ivory believed that despite the growing popularity of video games, the majority of users were still men. One reason for this might be that character presentation in video games was predominantly for male players [14]. However, Aphra Kerr proposed that even when access was very difficult and the media, console design and representation in games were very masculine, female can challenge and utilize technology and participate in these video games in their own way [15]. Furthermore, one research had shown that male and female hardcore gamer tend to have similar gaming preferences [16]. Tingting Liua and Zishan LAIb studied King of Glory and LoveR to critically analyze how the participation of female digital gamer in China had taken on a unique shape in the context of emerging local online games as an extension of the market mechanism [17]. Also, it is worth mentioning that male players in games tended to have emotional attachments to female characters [18]. Jingsi Wu and Mia Consalvo found that the tendency to choose female characters in games was not so much an expression of identity as a strategic choice of code by players in this digital space [19]. However, Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz and Dana Mastro argued that playing a sexy heroine in a video game can have a detrimental effect on how people perceive women in the real world [20].

While there was little research on the Xiaohongshu game community, a lot of research on other game community platforms could be found. Chen Shaoling studied the DOTA game community based on the use and satisfaction theory and concluded that players with the same game preference were clustered in the community to a certain extent [21]. Zhang Qilin found that fans on the NGA platform who created virtual community culture in the process of creation and development and other cultural groups have significant differences because of fans group culture and group identity uniqueness. That means game fans identity was not widely recognized in real life, which made them gather on the Internet to find their own identity [22].

Another point of the theme was the relationship between Xiaohongshu platform and women. Xiaohongshu billed itself as a young lifestyle sharing community and had attracted more than 200 million mostly young female users. As an important consumption carrier in the context of female consumerism, Xiaohongshu had achieved certain marketing success in China. Based on the theory of participatory culture, Sun Yihan proposed that Xiaohongshu had preliminarily built a female-

dominated community participation cultural group [23]. Keyin Lian, Zu Chen and Haomiao Zhang believed that its success stems came from its emphasis on female consumption, as it was highly related to feminism in terms of cultural concepts, media integration and marketing [24]. On this basis, Xiaohongshu showed unique advantages in China's highly competitive media environment and outperforms other similar products. In short, Xiaohongshu provided a new space for young women to share their ideas and become a "park" for their cultural participation.

The above studies and theories will add some background information in advance. However, there were still some research gaps in this area. While there was a lot of literature on the content of game communities, little research had been done about Xiaohongshu game community. Also, in the Xiaohongshu study, female users in the gaming community were not the focus. In addition, there were few researches on the content about female factors released by female players, which was of great significance for the neglected status of female players in games and the development of feminism, which needed to be paid more attention to. The purpose of this research was to study the content shared by female players on mainstream games, so that game manufacturers can better understand the needs of women, so as to formulate more perfect design and marketing strategies, catering to consumer preferences. Moreover, other communities can learn from this to encourage users to create more posts and enrich the platform. In addition, this study aimed to fill the gap of feminism in the field of games, which was conducive to emphasizing women's social status and promoting the spread and development of feminism.

3. Methodology

Participatory observation is a research method in which researchers establish a close and intimate familiarity with a particular population and behavior over a period of time. Researchers participate in a variety of activities, observe the daily lives of members of the culture, and participate closely in their lives to promote a better understanding of these behaviors and activities. Participate observation has proved to be a useful tool for generating research, facilitating the development of research questions or hypotheses. Therefore, participate observation can be used in this research.

This research will take Xiaohongshu game community as the main research object to understand the characteristics of Xiaohongshu platform through direct observation. In the process of qualitative research, the characteristics of Xiaohongshu game content can be found more intuitively. In addition, through purposeful and systematic content observation and recording, the strengths and limitations of the female's post can be found. Referring to the top 10 games of the Xiaohongshu 2021 list, three of games (Honor of Kings, Animal Crossing: New Horizons, PUBG Mobile) were selected, and 10 post with the most likes about the three games and digital games were used to analyze the female factors reflected in the content shared by female in the game community.

4. Results

The first part is Honor of Kings, which is a MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena)-type mobile game launched by Tencent in 2015 and has been well received by players since its launch. According to the data, it has over 200 million registered users and 80 million daily active users, which means one out of every seven Chinese plays it [25]. Unlike traditional MOBA types of games, it is no longer blindly pursue the western game features or extend the game time painstakingly. It focuses on the re-creation and remodeling of Chinese historical figures, taking full advantage of mobile users' need for fast-paced life and fragmented time, which has made Honor of Kings one of the most popular mobile games among teenagers. In November, 2020, Honor of Kings officially announced that the daily active players of the game exceeded 100 million, which proved its extremely wide coverage and strong user stickiness. When searching for Honor of Kings in Xiaohongshu, sorted by popularity, the top 10 results show up as following table 1:

Table 1. Search results of Honor of Kings

| Likes (thousand) | Category | Title |
|------------------|-----------------|--|
| 120 | Gaming skill | All characters' basic skills in Honor of Kings (reject playing sup). |
| 95 | Game ID | Couple ID of Honor of Kings. |
| 92 | Video clip | I miss playing Honor of Kings with my friends. |
| 75 | Game feature | Female characters' voice and lines. |
| 71 | Game feature | Jungle characters' voice collection. |
| 65 | Game skin | Four steps to getting a game skin for free. |
| 63 | Beauty products | Co-branded eyeshadow by Perfect Diary and Honor of Kings. |
| 62 | Game feature | Who are your favorite game couple characters? |
| 61 | Cosplay | Xiaoqiao is coming. |
| 60 | Gaming skill | How to play well when you are a jungle? |

According to the above statistics, among the top ten posts, one of the game skills categories, which is for people who are not master players, has the highest number of likes, while the game features category has the highest proportion. In general, non-hardcore content accounts for 80%.

Secondly, Animal Crossing: New Horizons is Nintendo's seventh generation game in the franchise, which was released in 2020. With the opening of "No Man's Island Relocation Project", it opens a game world where people live together with animals. The main storyline of Animal Crossing is very simple, but every day after the end of the story, players can continue to beautify the island by collecting a wide variety of furniture, clothing and landscape decorations, transforming the island's topography, building ramps and bridges. Players can also interact with resident islanders, staff and NPC. As a sandbox game, Animal Crossing is different from the traditional construction simulation games, which has a key function is to design. In general, this game mechanics are more open as the player can decide more. In addition, the game time is synchronized with the real time, and the nonlinear narrative structure is more obvious, so there is no real sense of "game ending". Therefore, these open and free rules of the game attract more players. Similarly, when searching for Animal Crossing in Xiaohongshu, top 10 results can be found in following table 2:

Table 2. Search results of Animal Crossing

| Likes(thousand) | Category | Title |
|-----------------|-----------------|--|
| 40 | Gaming Strategy | 22 Practical tips collection (for gamenovice) |
| 21 | Gaming Strategy | Full price list and schedule |
| 17 | Gaming Strategy | Identification of works of art/ authenticity and falsity of famous paintings |
| 16 | Design sharing | Island planning and design drawings and ideas |
| 15 | Gaming Strategy | What shall we do the first week on the island? |
| 15 | Design sharing | With this floor tile design, the room instantly becomes a small duplex house |
| 13 | Design sharing | Own a Animal Crossing Nook mobile (Apple 14) |
| 11 | Gaming Strategy | 6 essential tools for gamer |
| 10 | Design sharing | The island design plan |
| 10 | Design sharing | Indoor design: warm cabin |

It is obvious that in the game community of Xiaohongshu, the posts about Animal Crossing are basically divided into two types, including design sharing and gaming strategy, which may be determined by the type and mechanics of this game.

The third part of the results is PUBG Mobile. In recent years, battle royale has become the mainstream of the network game types, which in essence is a kind of survival game. PUBG Mobile (which is named as Hepingjingying in Chinese) is development in 2019 by Tencent as a subject of anti-terrorism military competition shooter mobile game, which is also the representative of mobile terminal battle royale game. PUBG Mobile offers players the freedom to choose their gender, design, and play styles, which is different from traditional FPS games and attracts more female players (figure 3).

Table 3. Search results of PUBG Mobile

| Likes(thousand) | Category | Title |
|-----------------|--------------|---|
| 60 | Video clip | A group of players who get the clothing of inspector dance together |
| 58 | Clothing | To be a proper lurker, you need three pieces of clothing |
| 47 | Video clip | I'm playing games with AI gamer in PUBG Mobile |
| 44 | Gaming skill | Hardest trick: Find the flare gun exactly |
| 38 | Clothing | Use the code to get free clothing |
| 38 | Gaming skill | The three least popular types of bullets in PUBG Mobile |
| 32 | DIY face | Character customization collection |
| 30 | Gaming skill | Four places with the most resources to survive on Holiday Island |
| 27 | Clothing | When the heroine of a romance novel walks into PUBG Mobile |
| 25 | Painting | Picture of the characters of PUBG Mobile |

It is found that clothing and gaming skill account for the same proportion of these ten posts. And the rest of the posts, which includes video clips, paintings and DIY face, are not hardcore content related to game mechanics, this does not seem to fit very well with the feature of FPS games.

Finally, when online games are searched in Xiaohongshu, the following results are found in following table 4:

Table 4. Search results of online games

| Likes(thousand) | Category | Title |
|-----------------|--------------------|---|
| 83 | Casual game | Party Animal: online scrimmage/ cartoon style |
| 80 | Computer equipment | Game Girl's full set of pink mainframe and peripheral equipment |
| 77 | Casual game | Girl style and romantic game recommendation |
| 70 | Handheld game | Nintendo NS: The entry-level Switch game that girls must play |
| 64 | Casual game | Wechat couple online game recommendation |
| 52 | Tea set | Favorite tea set which matches my character's skin |
| 40 | Makeup | Imitate Yao's makeup |
| 37 | Game collection | 64 free games on Steam |
| 32 | Dress up | When I dress like a game character in daily life |
| 31 | Dress up | Wear sporty clothes to watch KPL games |

When searching for computer games, it is obvious that in the game community of Xiaohongshu, female players tend to discuss casual game and connect their daily life with games, such as choosing makeup and clothes style according to their favorite games or sharing their feelings of playing some games and recommending them to other people.

5. Discussion

As a gathering place for female, Xiaohongshu has a large number of female players. These female users are far more concentrated and diverse than other platforms, which allows people to find more three-dimensional female image. According to the official data released by Xiaohongshu, among Xiaohongshu users, the ratio of men to women who love games is 1:3 [26]. More and more original users regard games as an important part of life and entertainment. At the same time, all kinds of players also come to seek fashion and travel knowledge, and produce game content here, which makes the content of the game community richer. According to the investigation, there are two characteristics of content posted by female users in Xiaohongshu game community, including more popular causal games and combination of games and life. This makes Xiaohongshu different from other platforms and also forms a distinct female atmosphere.

On the one hand, one of the striking features is more popular causal games. According to official survey data, male users in Xiaohongshu often search for keywords such as “chaoran (very exciting in English)” and “pandian (collection in English)”, which is roughly the same as the general perception, but female users search for content focused on romantic and cute. When searching for game recommendations in Xiaohongshu, people will be able to obtain a wide variety of casual games, including but not limited to dress-up and management game. Casual games that are more likely to be favored by female players are generally more popular in the discussion and sharing in Xiaohongshu. For example, games with cute style and simple rules, such as Animal Crossing, have more than 100,000 related contents in the game community. In addition, there are many users sharing their in-depth research on some otome games with romantic and girls-style features, such as LoveR and the SIMS. As for MOBA and FPS games with hardcore gameplay and mechanics, such as Honor of Kings and PUBG Mobile, which require high levels of player operation, female players are more likely to share non-hardcore content including game features, character voice and skin, as well as DIY face and clothing matching. There are even some girls looking for lovers or teammates of games in Xiaohongshu game community. It is not difficult to see that for many female players, Xiaohongshu game community already has the function of sharing, displaying, and exchanging ideas, as well as finding walkthrough and gaming strategy. For those games with a relatively high proportion of female players, Xiaohongshu is undoubtedly a community that cannot be ignored.

However, this situation also leads to the inevitable lack of hardcore content. The results show that even the posts of MOBA and FPS games have a large part of non-hardcore content, which will bring some problems. On the one hand, the lack of hardcore content is not so much a characteristic of Xiaohongshu game community as it is a sign that the community is not yet complete. A successful game community should have a multifaceted content, so that all types of players can communicate with each other, search for knowledge, and share ideas there. If users could not find content they are interested in in a community, they will gradually not be active there, which eventually leads to the loss of players who need hardcore content. Over time, this community will give players a fixed non-professional impression, just like the overall feeling of Xiaohongshu which is just a young female platform APP with less male users. On the other hand, part of the profit of Xiaohongshu platform is the publicity and cooperation of brand and companies, which means that if there is little hardcore content in the game community, some specific types of game manufacturers will not consider promoting their products on Xiaohongshu, which will be a big loss. This requires Xiaohongshu official to actively carry out reward activities to encourage users to publish more content in other aspects. In addition, the promotion on other platforms is also important, which helps attract more types of players to the community to generate content.

On the other hand, people tend to combine games and life on Xiaohongshu. Most people's impression of Xiaohongshu is a group of enthusiastic female users discussing makeup, skin care and dress. In the game community, these contents are also integrated with the games and characters that people love. Girls share photos of themselves mimicking the looks of their favorite characters, talking about similar makeup and outfit. In addition to cosplay, in the past two years, they have also developed a new way called style wear, which means this is not exactly the same as the game characters wear, but to show the same aesthetics in the design. For example, when some girls go to watch KPL game competitions, they would dress up appropriately, or they will buy clothes that are consistent with the style of their favorite game characters. For the female players of Xiaohongshu, similar dress up or cosplay is another way to express their love for the game.

In addition to the appearance, peripheral equipment and computers that female players pursue in Xiaohongshu is also reflected in this community. If you search for mainframe and peripheral equipment recommendations, you will find countless photos about pink princess rooms. For them, the beauty of the game peripherals must be equivalent to comfort, and even they require the color of the keyboard and the overall room to be harmonious and unified. Around games and life, female players find a delicate balance in Xiaohongshu game community, which can be summarized that games should also be an important part of life.

Furthermore, Xiaohongshu provides people with a lot of new perspectives on female gamer. Many users in Xiaohongshu will patiently write a clear and detailed analysis of the game experience and recommend them. This allows people to see how women feel about many different genres of games. Many female users will describe their cognition and evaluation of the game from a lived point of view, for instance, how they approached the game, and what elements of the game they are appealed. Compared with the hardcore and professional and even harsh user reviews of some platforms, their sharing is obviously more focused on feeling and sharing. This kind of emotional feedback offers a lot of new perspectives than a systematic game review.

Nevertheless, this also brings some problems. On the one hand, some malicious people will harass female players who send selfies on Xiaohongshu, especially some girls who like cosplay. At the same time, there will be users who do not know the game, just to attract attention and publish some pornographic and naked photos of game characters, which is harmful to the order and atmosphere of the whole community. To solve this problem, the community needs to formulate flexible and reasonable rules, and set up community administrators to strictly supervise and implement them. On the other hand, unprofessional ideas will make Xiaohongshu's posts own too much personal emotion and subjective feelings, which means that users could hardly find suitable recommendations or games they are more inclined to play in a short time. In this case, the back-end staff could rigorously assign labels to each post. For example, they should tag casual games for posts that recommend games for women, and tag hardcore content for some gaming strategy. In this way, the content will be recommended to the corresponding users by the algorithm, which can greatly shorten the time for players to find the content they are interested in.

6. Conclusion

In general, female gamer already have significant presence in the gaming space, and they are more likely to share game-related content on social platforms. This research analyzes the posts generated by female users of Xiaohongshu game community to study the display of female elements by Chinese female online game players on social media platforms. With the method of qualitative research, the study selected 10 posts of four key words (Honor of Kings, Animal Crossing: New Horizons, PUBG Mobile and online games) search results, and summarized categories, finally concluded that the characteristics of female player's posts are owning more casual elements and the combination of life and games. While these characteristics appeal to certain players, they also have some negative effects, including too much casual content could shape people's impression and make the community monotonous. In addition, when users get used to blending their lives and games, their content

becomes more personal and subjective, which exposes their own lives and affects the judgment of other users. Although the female factor displayed by female players in Xiaohongshu has enhanced the status and voice of women in the game field, more measures including develop more complete measures and create more activities need to be taken to further develop Xiaohongshu to create a better community atmosphere.

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