

The Impact of Video Games on Female Players' Identity Formation and Expression of Power: A Case Study of Honor of Kings

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Abstract

This study takes Honor of Kings as its research subject and, combined with questionnaire surveys, analyzes the challenges faced by female players—including role designs catering to male preferences and verbal discrimination during gameplay. It examines how female players construct identity and express feminine empowerment through various means, such as creating profiles and engaging in virtual consumption, and proposes improvement strategies for enhancing their gaming experience from three perspectives: boosting competitive skills, participating in rule-making processes, and building a player community.

Keywords

Honor of Kings, female players, identity, female empowerment.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Online gaming represents an emerging industrial format in the entertainment sector driven by the advancement of internet technology, featuring attributes such as entertainment, social interaction and competitiveness. Honor of Kings, a national-level MOBA mobile game developed by TiMi Studio Group of Tencent, was officially launched in 2015. It now boasts a daily active user base of over 100 million, emerging as a phenomenal game in China's domestic market.

Notably, female players account for as high as 54.1% of all users of Honor of Kings.[1] This figure has overturned the traditional stereotype that video games are predominantly male-dominated, with women now constituting a major participant group in gaming.

1.2. Research Problem

Safeguarding women's equal rights has become a key issue attracting widespread social attention nowadays. Nevertheless, the outdated ingrained ideology that regards women as "the Second Sex" handed down from patriarchal clan society remains deeply entrenched. As a result, women still suffer from unequal treatment in terms of their right to subsistence in numerous social spheres.

Such inequities are also prevalent in the gaming field. Influenced by inherent social prejudices and the relatively lower average competitive proficiency of female players under current circumstances, women gamers frequently encounter a range of unfair treatments, including in-game match discrimination, verbal abuse via voice chat, and restrictions on hero selection.

1.3. Research Significance

Female players gradually explore the social attributes of games through a series of behaviors such as setting game IDs, choosing main heroes, purchasing in-game skins and customizing homepage decorations. Via the electronic gaming platform of *Honor of Kings*, they seek identity recognition, convey the power of women in the new era, and even participate in the discursive construction of hero skins and voice lines in the game.

In addition, with the growing number of female players, the symbolic design of female characters in games no longer caters to the traditional male gaze, but shifts toward the construction of female subjectivity. Taking *Honor of Kings* as a case study, this paper focuses on the gender issue of equal rights within the field of video games to expand the research scope of women's rights. Adopting a mixed research method combining qualitative and quantitative research, it explores the specific survival dilemmas female gamers encounter in gaming, their efforts to pursue identity recognition and express female empowerment, as well as diverse feasible approaches to addressing current predicaments.

2. Research Methods

Due to a range of issues undermining female players' gaming experience in *Honor of Kings* concerning game design and community governance, female gamers still face severe challenges in their in-game living environment. In the form of questionnaires, this paper designs survey questions targeting female players' gaming experience, the contributing factors to negative gaming experiences, and respondents' suggestions for optimizing the gaming environment.

During the investigation, the author distributed questionnaires to 50 randomly selected female players of *Honor of Kings* via online and offline channels. Descriptive statistical analysis was adopted to sort out questionnaire results, and pie charts as well as feature word cloud graphs were generated according to the proportion of each option chosen by respondents.

3. Current state of the gaming experience for female players

Approximately 44.68 percent of female gamers rate their current gaming experience at an "average" level; approximately 31.91 percent at a "poor" level; while approximately 17.02 percent find the gaming experience for females to be "very poor." Therefore, based on these statistics, female gamers generally feel their gaming experience in *Honor of Kings* has been unsatisfactory (Figure 1).

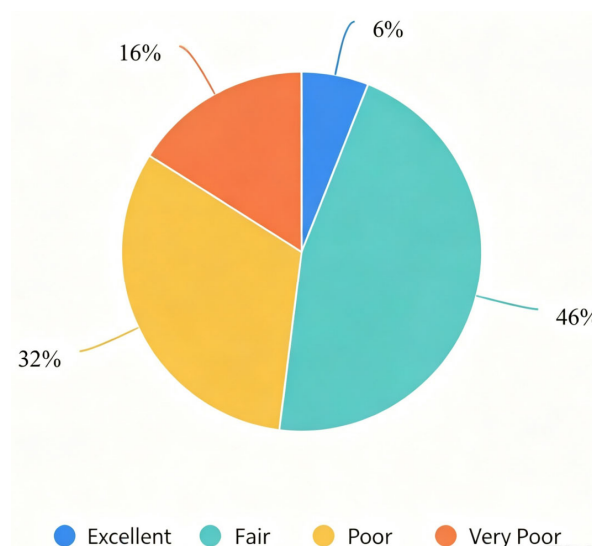


Figure 1. Survey results on female players' gaming experience

Based on prior studies as well as female players' present day gaming experiences, it can be concluded that the primary reason for a negative gaming experience of female players is due to the stated factors.

Firstly, the typical female character in video games is designed primarily according to the male aesthetic. Secondly, video game stories, which are a form of narrative, focus on the idea of competition and confrontation, gunfights and violence, all of which are commonly associated with male aesthetics. Since the beginning of esports, male players were the ones who dominated the scene, so there was an overwhelming presence of female characters that were designed according to traditional stereotypes perceptions of sexual appeal and voluptuous physical attributes. In recent times however, the number of female players in Honor of Kings (a popular MOBA style game) has exceeded the number of Male Players and this way of designing games using the "male gaze" has created negative gaming experiences for female players. As examples of what we mean by "male gaze," female players have expressed their dissatisfaction towards the representation of beloved female characters such as Arke and Daji because they both show clear evidence of being designed according to the "male gaze", thus creating discomfort. The present study also reviews the debate about the lines that women in video games say in their dialogues through various types of media including Xiaohongshu (a Chinese social media platform) and Tiktok (A worldwide short-video social media platform). We found that many respondents agree that when it comes to the lines that women say in videogames, those lines are rarely similar to how the woman is portrayed in the videogame. Most respondents agreed that the lines said by female videogame characters are typically too delicate or vulgar. To give you a better understanding of this point, let's use Wang Zhaojun one of the four great beauties of ancient China. Wang Zhaojun traveled far beyond China's frontiers to facilitate economic and cultural exchanges between China and the Xiongnu people and at the same time promote peace on China's borders. Therefore, she should be represented in videogames as resilient and proud to her country.

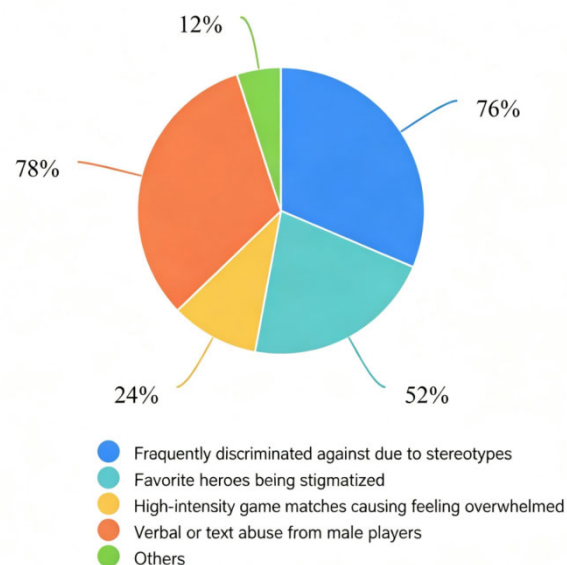


Figure 2. Survey findings on the causes of poor gaming experiences

Second, women suffer a lot in the form of personal harassment from male opponents -- such as with sarcastic comments and verbal abuses -- when they play games. According to Xu Lei's research article titled "A Study on Stereotypes of Female Esports Players Based on Social Representation Theory: A Case Study of Honor of Kings", he used social representation theory to analyze the stereotypes in a word-cloud diagram of attributes; he found out that people have

preconceived notions about female gamers are lazy, quiet, short-tempered, bad at video games and vain, which were all predominantly negative stereotypes. Xu then built upon this study by looking into how female gamers experienced other forms of discrimination in addition to stereotypes. Results from surveys indicated that approximately 76.6 percent of participants often experienced stereotypes-based discrimination during game-play, and another 76.6 percent stated they had been verbally abused or insulted by male opponents. Finally, 51.06 percent mentioned rumors surrounding their favorite heroes were a factor in creating a poor gaming experience (Figure 2). These results indicate that nearly all female gamers encounter an incredible amount of detrimental effects from male opponents' stereotypically-driven attitudes, verb and behaviors while playing.

4. Methods for Female Players to Enhance Their Sense of Identity and Express Their Power

In response to the survival challenges that face women in the game Honor of Kings; female players are using a variety of methods to protect themselves. By utilizing this method for the long-term it aids in strengthening their identity as well as demonstrating women's empowerment.[4]

4.1. At the level of female identity recognition

The ways that the Honor of Kings gaming platform enhance female identities are divided at the level of female identity recognition to include two categories: self- presentation as a result of the game's homepage and self-presentation as a result of virtual consumption.

① Self-presentation based on the game homepage

In addition to how female gamers represent themselves through their choice of hero or play style and rank level and emblem content on the game home page, our study also examined the reasons why female players prefer certain heroes, which are the most frequently selected and the characteristics of those heroes, based on power and visual appeal.(Figure 3). These findings indicate that female players have a tendency to use their chosen heroes as symbolic representation for themselves; and therefore, as an expression of both "beauty from without", and "inner strength".



Figure 3. Cloud diagram of characteristic terms selected by the preferred hero

In addition, female players focus more on their profile ranking in-game and are much more likely to spend their time and energy to decorate their profiles. For example, when creating her in-game profile, she will dress it up with the spirit treasure which matches the style of her clothes. She will also choose an appropriate frame for her avatar and choose an avatar which fits the style of her character. In addition, she will customize the border around her avatar. She will add her favorite heroes to her profile. The above behaviors show that female player don't see Honor of Kings just as a competitive or entertaining platform, but also a channel for expressing themselves and representing their own beauty and femininity.

② Self-presentation based on virtual consumption

Here are a couple of ways that self-presentation can be manifested using virtual consumption. Those include nickname customization and skin purchasing. The nickname is used by a gamer to identify themselves in the virtual world. There have been studies done which reflect two different types of nicknames being used by female gamers. Some females have chosen to use nicknames that represent who they truly are in real life. Examples include "Princess Mi Yue", "Empress Wu". While other female gamers choose funny nicknames, examples of funny nicknames include "Muscle Man Zhang Fei", "Sensual Sikong Zhen". These funny gamer nicknames display the same type of individuality found in female gamer nicknames. Additionally, both of these show that females have become resistant to the social pressures of having assigned gendered roles placed upon them. This resistance has shown females ongoing quest for true expressions of themselves. Skin purchases are another way that female gamers express their selves. Typically, skin purchases made by females include beautiful skins. Females view this as a form of pleasure and satisfaction with respect to self-exploration. Also, because many skins typically portray what females perceive about their physical appearance and aspirations toward an ideal self-portrait, skin purchases are also representative of how females see themselves.

4.2. In terms of women's expression of strength:

The emergence of female game designers, along with rising consciousness among female gamers, has had profound effects upon the depiction of heroes in Honor of Kings over its ten-year development. The representation of female characters has diversified significantly. Male characters have transitioned into being the object of "the gaze." The shift toward female character diversity is a direct reflection of the combined voices of women in society and female gamers. More diverse representations of female characters now exist than ever before. Examples can be found in the character, Goya, an archer female character who roams deserts via a sand boat. Another example can be seen in Jing, a mysterious female assassin. By providing females with a greater array of options regarding how to express themselves, and by increasing their self-awareness, game developers are adopting more female centered approaches to developing games. Through female narrative, this enables them to create independent character development story lines that provide insight into the individuality, charm and allure of women. [5]

Female players have also seen their spending money increase to buy skins for games. According to Honor of Kings' Radiance Points Leaderboard (which measures total in-game spend) nearly every one of the top spenders each month is a female player.[6] This indicates that the design for Honor of Kings' characters is now largely focused on how female players want to express themselves visually; which suggests that there is a strong link between what they need and what the company is doing. Perhaps most interestingly, during the design process of Honor of Kings, the designers made a conscious effort to remove gender differentiation in character designs. The designers removed outdated stereotypes about female characters being support roles. For example, when the assistant character was originally Daji she became an assistant

character named Spriteling who had no gender indicators. Also new gender neutral characters such as Dunshan and Guiguzi were added.

5. Multiple approaches for female players to enhance their current gaming experience

The growing trend of women using video games as an emerging medium to build their identities and showcase their power and confidence. As such, female gamers can now make use of their own customized ID names when playing games, play with their favorite heroes, modify their profile settings. All these actions allow the expression of their individuality in virtual environments, at the same time displaying feminine power in gaming scenarios. They have made it very clear that they will no longer accept malevolent stereotypes of female characters in games and therefore are providing a strong female perspective/voice while having a positive impact. However, Honor of Kings still continues to exhibit numerous existing biases against female players. Consequently, this research utilizes questionnaire surveys to suggest solutions to address these gender disparities.

First, women gamers need to create a new type of identity for themselves — one that is independent of societal expectations. [7]By increasing their knowledge about games and improving their ability to compete in those same games, women can reduce the number of unreasonable actions taken by male players against them. For example, when playing team-based games, women may be able to provide specific locations of enemies rather than simply providing general information. Women may choose to play more independently and position their heroes in ways that are different from how they would have positioned them had they been relying upon teammates. Additionally, women may develop more efficient strategies for killing and competing in games, which will help to demonstrate their competitive prowess and garner respect from their peers. Competitively demonstrating this type of skill will help to reduce the existing social stigma associated with females competing in video games.

Secondly, women should engage in the design of games and the governing of online communities. A recent survey has identified a couple of areas where Honor of Kings fails. The first area is the current matchmaking system, which does not adequately match opponents based on skill levels. The second area is that there is no adequate mechanism for penalizing players who are guilty of harassment. As such, players can communicate with each other using either text messages or voice chat without fear of consequences related to violating these rules. In fact, users interviewed through an in-depth conversation revealed that the audio function could not be disabled. Therefore, women should go beyond just participating in online communities and become active contributors to the development of rules and management practices within online gaming communities.

Thirdly, creating space for female-centered creative contributions to the game development process needs to occur. At present, women are underrepresented among the ranks of professional game designers. However, if we were to encourage greater participation among women in the game design process, then we would likely see a much broader range of female characters available within our favorite games.[8]

At last, we expect that all the female players in Honor of Kings will gather together in their own "community" to fight against the issue of male domination in Honor of Kings. As a typical example for the "community" resistance by female players, there is a Douyin group called "Women Player's Federation," which was founded on Apr 18, 2020. By Aug 01, 2023, the total number of registered members has reached more than 47,000. And during the time period from Aug 01, 2023 to Jul 31, 2024, the group had an average of about 1067 daily active topics and 147 daily new topics. [9]Therefore, "Women Player's Federation" is a very popular women oriented community on the internet. With these bases, we hope that female players in Honor of

Kings can be organized to gather in their own communities in such social media platforms as Xiaohongshu and TikTok. Female players can then express their unpleasant experience when they play games and suggest how game designers could improve their designs to make games more enjoyable and propose better ways to manage their playing environments. Through collective action, female players' voices are amplified, therefore increasing the effectiveness of their individual appeals for gender equality and demonstrating the power of modern women. In addition, these actions will also promote the game to provide equal opportunities for female players to enjoy the game and increase the overall degree of satisfaction among female players.

6. Conclusion

The methodology used in this study is a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods. The data collection method was through the use of questionnaires. This study investigated the gaming experience of female Honor of Kings gamers, which may have contributed to her negative gaming experience and how she believes the gaming community can improve its gaming environment. Research samples were collected during the process. As a result of the research conducted, it has been found that despite Honor of Kings currently having a majority of female player participation, the gaming platform still needs to further develop its strategies to provide equal opportunities for all female gamers, such as game match-making systems, voice recognition capabilities and penalties to users who display abusive/inappropriate voice communications. Although there is definitely potential for improvement in the gaming environment provided to female Honor of Kings gamers, female gamers have taken steps towards seeking self-recognition, and attempting to empower women throughout the ten-year history of Honor of Kings.

In terms of how women recognize themselves as individuals, women players express who they are through a variety of methods including creating personal web pages about themselves and virtually spending money. Women create an individualized sense of identity in the context of the game by choosing their primary heroes, purchasing digital skin for their hero that reflects their own aesthetic style or fashion taste, making their unique ID's visible from other player's view, and establishing their social networking presence in gaming. Female empowerment is expressed in opposition to the male gaze reflected in many of the game characters and advocating against the emphasis of masculinity in video games, which has had a significant impact on optimizing the gaming environment. This research attempts to find ways for women to express their identity and convey their strength, using a wide range of strategies. Therefore, we have proposed three viable options. These include: enhancing their own competitive position with respect to e-sports, influencing or formulating rules and regulations with regard to platforms and developing communities of women.

Despite these limitations, there are many avenues for future study. A larger sample could provide greater depth in the analysis. Additionally, the scope of this study is limited to the game itself. Therefore, when studying female player's identity formation and power expression within Honor of Kings, it would be important to consider other related areas of study, including participation of all-female teams in the King Pro League (KPL). The media constructed image of female esports commentators; and how female characters are portrayed in offline experiences that derive from the game's intellectual property. In addition to these areas, the author plans to continue her research on the bias and derogatory portrayal of female esports commentators in future studies [10], which will contribute to existing literature regarding gender equality in gaming and expand the boundaries of research for women's rights.

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