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## PARASOCIAL PHENOMENOLOGY OF *LOVE AND DEEPSPACE* PLAYERS THROUGH THE GACHA SYSTEM

Araiya Madani Sholawati <sup>1</sup>

Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta  
1100220163@student.ums.ac.id

Sidiq Setyawan <sup>2</sup>

Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta  
ss122@ums.ac.id

### Abstract

The otome game phenomenon, *Love and Deepspace*, has evolved into a space for both emotional and financial investment among players. The primary objective of this study is to analyze how players form and maintain parasocial interactions (PSI) and parasocial relationships (PSR) with game characters, which are subsequently reinforced through the gacha system. Utilizing a qualitative method with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, four players were interviewed. The findings reveal that immersive features and daily routines effectively cultivate emotional attraction. This intimacy is then commodified through the gacha system to unlock further romantic narratives. Furthermore, the study identifies real-world relationship status as a key differentiator: single players often utilize these interactions as a primary coping mechanism, whereas players with real-life partners maintain distinct boundaries. This study concludes that parasocial relationships in modern gaming have transitioned into transactional activities that exploit emotional needs via the gacha mechanism

**Keywords:** Gacha, Love and Deepspace, Otome Game, Parasocial Relationship

### Abstrak

Fenomena game bergenre otome *Love and Deepspace* telah berevolusi menjadi ruang investasi emosional dan finansial pemain. Tujuan utama dari penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisis bagaimana pemain dengan karakter game dapat membentuk serta memelihara interaksi parasosial (PSI) dan hubungan parasosial (PSR) yang diperkuat melalui sistem gacha. Menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) terhadap empat pemain. Temuan menemukan bahwa fitur imersif dan rutinitas harian dapat menciptakan ketertarikan emosional. Keintiman ini kemudian di komodifikasi melalui sistem gacha untuk membuka narasi romantis lain. Penelitian menemukan temuan khusus dimana status hubungan pada dunia nyata dapat menjadi pembeda utama, pemain lajang menjadikan interaksi tersebut sebagai mekanisme koping utama, sedangkan pemain yang memiliki pasangan nyata memiliki batasan tegas. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa hubungan parasosial dalam game modern bergeser menjadi aktivitas transaksional yang mengeksploitasi kebutuhan emosional melalui sistem gacha.

**Kata kunci:** Gacha, Cinta dan Luar Angkasa, Game Otome, Hubungan Parasosial

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## INTRODUCTION

Video games, particularly *otome* games, are rapidly growing in popularity among women (Gao et al., 2025). The *otome* genre, specifically designed to fulfill emotional needs, has significantly captured the attention of the female demographic, particularly in Indonesia (Hidayat & Gietty Tambunan, 2025). Within this genre, players can select story routes featuring different characters, experiencing distinct narrative plots based on their choices.

In January 2024, the Chinese video game company Papergames released a 3D *otome* game titled *Love and Deepspace*, which integrates sci-fi, visual romance, and RPG elements. Prior to this, in 2017, Papergames released a similar title, *Mr Love: Queen's Choice*. According to Shine, a Shanghai-based news outlet, *Love and Deepspace* has generated over 5.8 billion Yuan (approximately \$826 million) globally and amassed more than 50 million players since its launch (Lu Feiran, 2025). The game's design, centered on romantic interactions with male protagonists, makes *otome* games highly appealing to women (Y. Zhang, 2024).

In tandem with the current popularity of mobile gaming, developers are fiercely competing to capitalize on the market by introducing *gacha* mechanisms to attract players (Hidayat & Gietty Tambunan, 2025). *Gacha* operates on a concept where players spend in-game currency to gamble for a chance to obtain items or characters, with probabilities depending on their rarity (Ismail et al., 2021).

The parasocial phenomenon within interactive games has become a compelling subject for researchers. A study by Gao et al. (2025) highlights that players emotions and intimacy are crucial in establishing parasocial interactions with game characters. Another study by Y. Zhang (2024), utilizing the Uses and Gratifications theory to examine the motivations of *Mr Love: Queen's Choice* players, indicates that players are driven by emotional and romantic needs, as well as escapism. Furthermore, research conducted by Hidayat & Gietty Tambunan (2025) in Indonesia emphasizes that *Love and Deepspace* provides companionship for players and inadvertently drives consumptive behavior through its *gacha* system.

Within *otome* games, the *gacha* system is not merely an economic mechanism it functions as a form of affective communication that strengthens the emotional closeness between players and virtual characters. Research by Pradhipta (2021) explains that game developers leverage parasocial interactions as an emotional catalyst to prompt repetitive *gacha* participation. Similarly, Gong et al. (2024) demonstrate that parasocial interactions in mobile games enhance player engagement and loyalty towards characters, primarily through randomized reward systems akin to *gacha* mechanisms. Although several studies have examined the emotional engagement and consumptive behavior of *otome* game players, there remains a lack of research explicitly investigating how the *gacha* mechanism serves as a trigger or amplifier for parasocial interactions.

The urgency of this research lies in the importance of understanding the parasocial phenomenon of *Love and Deepspace* players, amplified by the *gacha* system, through the lens of parasocial theory. This theory provides a relevant framework to analyze how players and game characters form and maintain parasocial interactions (PSI) and parasocial relationships (PSR) that are reinforced through *gacha* mechanisms. To comprehend and interpret this phenomenon, the

researcher utilizes an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, which emphasizes individuals subjective experiences. This phenomenological approach was selected due to its focus on subjective encounters and deep personal meaning-making. The uniqueness of the subjects lies in Indonesian players who do not merely play the game but actively participate in the *gacha* system (top-ups and pulls) to strengthen their parasocial relationships (PSR) with favorite characters. Based on the previously outlined gaps, the main objective of this study is to examine the phenomenology of *Love and Deepspace* players in Indonesia in building emotional closeness reinforced by the *gacha* system. Consequently, this research is expected to broaden the understanding of parasocial interactions in interactive games and illustrate how digital consumption shapes players emotional proximity to virtual characters.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Previous Studies

A study by Y. Zhang (2024) employed the Uses and Gratifications theory to analyze the motivations of *Mr Love: Queen's Choice* players, revealing that these motivations are primarily driven by emotional and romantic needs. Furthermore, research by Gao et al. (2025) examined parasocial relationships within *otome* games, specifically highlighting the dimensions of parasocial intimacy and emotional engagement. Their findings emphasize that players emotional intimacy serves as a fundamental basis for establishing long-term parasocial relationships. Although this research enriches the understanding of player-character dynamics, it does not address the role of *gacha* mechanisms.

Additionally, a study conducted by Hidayat & Gietty Tambunan (2025) highlights how *Love and Deepspace* cultivates parasocial interactions between players and virtual characters through its interactive features and *gacha* system. Building upon these prior works, the current study aims to bridge the existing literature gap by explicitly investigating how *Love and Deepspace* players form and maintain parasocial interactions (PSI) and parasocial relationships (PSR) that are reinforced by the *gacha* system, particularly within the Indonesian context.

### Parasocial Relationship Theory

Parasocial interaction was initially defined by Horton & Richard Wohl (1956) as a "simulacrum of conversational give-and-take" experienced by users in response to a media performer during media exposure. Expanding on this foundation, Tukachinsky (2011) reconceptualizes parasocial relationship (PSR) as a multidimensional phenomenon that includes 'para-romantic love' which is driven by intense emotions and attraction, paralleling real life romantic bonds. Conceptually, Dibble et al. (2016) distinguish between parasocial interactions (PSI) and parasocial relationships (PSR). Briefly, Parasocial Interaction (PSI) is an illusive experience that occurs during an episode of media exposure. It constitutes the user's intuitive "gut feeling" of participating in a normal social interaction with the performer. PSI is characterized by a perceived sense of mutual awareness, attention, and mutual adjustment during the media consumption process.

Conversely, a Parasocial Relationship (PSR) represents a more enduring, long-term socio-emotional bond, such as when an audience member perceives a performer as a close friend or harbors a desire to meet the persona over time. In the context of interactive games, particularly *Love and Deepspace*, Hartmann (2008) active paracommunication model becomes highly relevant to the modern gaming experience. This model shifts the focus from the traditional, passive, and one-sided concept of PSI to a more active framework. This transition is crucial, as the game is specifically designed to cultivate a strong illusion of reciprocity through interactive features—such as virtual chats and *gacha* mechanisms—thereby overcoming the inherently non-interactive nature of conventional mass media (Pradhipta, 2021). Within interactive media like *otome* games, the concept of PSR intensifies significantly because players do not merely observe rather, they actively engage and interact with the virtual characters.

### **Love and Deepspace as an Interactive Media**

*Love and Deepspace* is an *otome* game a dating simulation genre targeted primarily at a female audience that allows players to freely explore romantic and platonic relationships with virtual characters, often fulfilling emotional needs that may be unmet in their real lives (Z. Zhang, 2024). The game distinguishes itself by utilizing 3D modeling, a rarity within the *otome* genre, and introducing several male protagonists, namely Caleb, Zayne, Sylus, Rafayel, and Xavier. Furthermore, it integrates a Role-Playing Game (RPG) combat mechanism alongside these romantic interests, providing it with a competitive edge over other *otome* games.

The core gameplay immerses the player as the female protagonist, enabling them to select specific story routes with their preferred male characters. Each route offers distinct storylines, unique character personalities, diverse backgrounds, and intricate romantic plots (Hidayat & Giety Tambunan, 2025). Notably, these male leads serve not merely as romantic targets but also as combat partners during battles, with each character possessing unique elemental abilities known as "*Evol.*" Ultimately, the game is meticulously designed to foster a strong illusion of reciprocity. By incorporating interactive features such as virtual chats and *gacha* mechanisms, it successfully transcends the inherently non-interactive nature of conventional mass media (Pradhipta, 2021).

### **The Gacha System in the Formation of Parasocial Relationship**

*Gacha* involves purchasing in game content with real money, a mechanism that shares distinct characteristics with gambling (Pradhipta, 2021). In *Love and Deepspace*, players are required to participate in the *gacha* system to unlock exclusive content such as cutscenes, voice lines, and side quests. According to the parasocial theory developed by Hartmann (2008), interaction intensity is a crucial factor in building emotional closeness between audiences and media personas. Through the *gacha* system, players cultivate a more intimate emotional experience when they obtain highly-ranked cards containing exclusive scenes of their favorite characters. Every instance where a player performs a "*gacha* pull" and experiences joy indicates a clear manifestation of parasocial interaction (PSI).

A study by Pradhipta (2021) asserts that game developers strategically leverage players parasocial interactions (PSI) to drive *gacha* activities. Players develop an emotional closeness to virtual characters, which subsequently compels them to make microtransactions and perform repeated pulls to acquire exclusive content. Consequently, the more frequently players engage in this behavior, the stronger the resulting emotional bond becomes. In the long term, repetitive *gacha* activities specifically top-ups and pulls constitute a profound form of both emotional and financial investment (Gong et al., 2024). This behavior is driven by an underlying need to maintain and deepen "Romantic Parasocial Attachments" within the game, successfully fulfilling the romantic fantasies desired by the players (Feng, 2024). Thus, Parasocial Relationships (PSR) are manifested and continuously strengthened through various interactive in-game activities, most notably amplified by the *gacha* system.

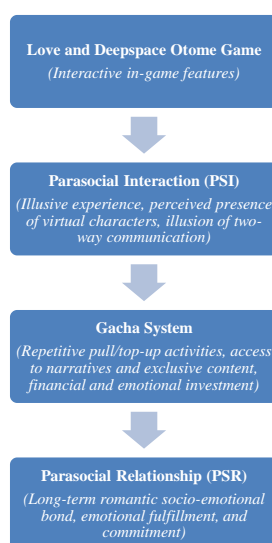


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach utilizing the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method to examine players experiences and investigate how their parasocial interactions with *Love and Deepspace* characters are reinforced through the *gacha* system. The selected phenomenological method is based on Smith et al. (2022), which focuses on how individuals deeply make sense of and experience their lived phenomena. To further reinforce this approach, Pietkiewicz & Smith (2014) emphasize that IPA is particularly effective for exploring complex and novel human experiences through an idiographic lens, focusing on the particular meanings attributed by individuals to their personal world. Utilizing the phenomenological method to analyze digital media environments is considered highly effective for profoundly exploring the subjective meanings of the informants. This aligns with a previous phenomenological study conducted by Amelianda & Irawaty (2021) concerning interactions within virtual and digital worlds, which demonstrates the method's capability to interpret human experiences within digital platforms. Consequently, this approach is deemed highly suitable for

interpreting the emotional experiences of *Love and Deepspace* players. The primary objective is to uncover the subjective experiences of the players and understand the amplification of parasocial interactions (PSI) via *gacha* mechanics.

The subjects of this study are *Love and Deepspace* players who actively participate in *gacha* and exhibit an emotional attachment to the game characters. The age range of the subjects was deliberately selected as they fall into the young adult category a demographic actively exploring their self-identity, navigating financial instability, and forming emotional relationships (PSR). The uniqueness of these subjects lies in their affective experiences through virtual interactions, which are cultivated by gameplay and subsequently reinforced via the *gacha* system to fulfill emotional needs. Furthermore, this study consistently utilizes the term "players" rather than "gamers" to refer to the subjects, drawing upon Feng (2024) research on romantic games. This terminology is applied because the focus remains on the activity of building parasocial relationships through avatar control and narrative immersion, without requiring the subjects to adopt a "gamer" identity. Previous literature also indicates that *otome* game players are predominantly young adult women who actively consume digital media and possess a high degree of emotional attachment to virtual characters (Gao et al., 2025).

Utilizing a purposive sampling technique, the inclusion criteria were established as follows: individuals aged between 17 and 30 years old who have played *Love and Deepspace* for approximately six months, have performed *gacha* pulls more than once, feel a deeper emotional connection with the characters, have a favorite in-game character, actively make in-game purchases (top-ups) or subscriptions, and are willing to participate in an in-depth interview. These criteria were strictly selected to ensure that the participants genuinely experience the parasocial phenomenon with the virtual characters.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with four participants. This specific sample size was chosen in accordance with the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, which prioritizes the depth of individual meaning-making over the broad generalization of findings. The interviews were conducted online via Zoom meetings. Furthermore, the researcher utilized supplementary instruments such as audio-visual recording devices and interview transcript logs. Finally, data validity was established and verified through source analysis.

Tabel 1. Informant Profiles

No.	Informant Name	Age	Background	Length of Play
1.	Hafidah	21 Years Old	Undergraduate Student	± 1 Year
2.	Cahya	25 Years Old	Private Sector Employee	1,5 Years
3.	Eva	29 Years Old	Former Game Industry Employee	2 Years
4.	Regina	21 Years Old	Undergraduate Student	2 Years

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

The *Love and Deepspace* game features an interactive "Tête-à-Tête" mode, which provides a space for players to interact more intimately with the characters. This includes touch-and-drag features in empty areas to observe the character's gaze following the player, as well as a "Heartbeat" mode where players can listen to the character's heartbeat through these features, players can effectively increase their affinity with the characters. Based on the in-depth interviews conducted with the four informants, this study categorizes the findings into five main themes that represent the relationship between players and the characters of *Love and Deepspace*:

### Gameplay Patterns and Duration

The findings of this study indicate that all informants have been playing *Love and Deepspace* since last year within relatively similar timeframes, effectively integrating the game into their daily routines. Although the intensity varies among the four informants, they consistently engage with the game by completing daily quests, interacting with characters, or following narrative updates.

*"I'm not sure about the exact duration, but maybe over 4 hours." (Hafidah, Informant 1)*

*"Regarding time, at the very least, it's 15 minutes just for the dailies. But if I'm working on content, it can take up to 2 or 3 hours." (Regina, Informant 4)*

Meanwhile, Cahya's gameplay pattern adjusts to her working hours, utilizing the game to fill her leisure time:

*"...when I'm working, it's about one to two hours a day. If I'm off, it could be around 4 hours." (Cahya, Informant 2)*

These repetitive gameplay routines suggest that *Love and Deepspace* serves both as a daily ritual and a coping mechanism for the informants. Analysis reveals differing motivations among the participants some are driven by romantic-emotional needs and environmental influences. For instance, Hafidah admitted that her motivation was influenced by her social circle and emotional satisfaction:

*"My initial motivation was FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out) because I saw my friends having so much fun. Then, when I looked into it, I found the characters were very handsome. As a 'hopeless romantic' teenager at that time, I started playing because of them." (Hafidah, Informant 1)*

Similarly, Regina stated that environmental influence and visual appeal were her primary drivers:

*"I was introduced to this game by a friend. There was one love interest that made me think, 'Oh, he's so cute, he's totally my type.' So I tried playing, and here I am now..." (Regina, Informant 4)*

In contrast, Informant 3 (Eva) presented a distinct perspective. Her motivation was not rooted in loneliness but was driven by professional demands related to market research on visual novel games. Her background as a former employee in the game industry creates a "critical distance" during gameplay.

*"I didn't have a specific motivation other than doing research with my colleagues at that time. After that, I just played because I wanted to; I've always enjoyed playing otome games." (Eva, Informant 3)*

Overall, gameplay motivations can be categorized into the fulfillment of emotional affection and an interest in the narrative. Most informants view the game as a "safe space" to experience validation and affection. These differing motivations ultimately determine the depth and complexity of the parasocial relationships that develop.

### **Character Preferences and the Concept of an Ideal Partner**

Based on the findings, each informant has a specific favorite character. This preference is not solely based on physical appearance but also on the character's nurturing persona and the sense of freedom they provide. Informant 2 (Cahya) specifically explained that while Sylus is her favorite, Caleb serves as an older brother ("*abang*") figure who provides a distinct type of support.

*"Sylus, but lately I've been swaying slightly towards Caleb... Sylus is the type who gives the MC freedom to grow, without being too restrictive. Caleb is more of an older brother figure, I guess? A real older brother... The support he gives is just different, both in terms of support and adjustment." (Cahya, Informant 2)*

Informant 3 (Eva) echoed a similar sentiment regarding Caleb, though her reasons were more narrative-driven. She expressed interest in complex relationship dynamics, such as the pseudo-incest trope, which she believes adds uniqueness and depth to the story.

*"Caleb. I tend to choose characters with a brotherly nature... but for me, characters who are 'relatives' in quotes—like the pseudo-incest trope here—are much more intriguing to explore further... personally, the conflict makes it more interesting than regular dating. In normal dating, you start as strangers... and if it ends, you just become strangers again." (Eva, Informant 3)*

Meanwhile, Informant 1 (Hafidah) and Informant 4 (Regina) base their preferences heavily on romantic appeal and visual aesthetics. Hafidah chose Zayne because he represents an ideal partner rarely found in real life.

*"My favorite character is Zayne. Because he's like a soft boy... basically a walking green flag. If he were real—even though in my mind he is real—yeah, he's exactly what I want." (Hafidah, Informant 1)*

On the other hand, Regina prefers Xavier, feeling that the character effectively conveys emotions through eye contact, triggering a strong emotional attraction.

*"...wow, he is totally my type, especially when he expresses his emotions through his eyes. It's like his eyes can speak, and I just find it so endearing." (Regina, Informant 4)*

The majority of the informants agreed that *Love and Deepspace* characters significantly influence their conception of an ideal partner. Hafidah and Regina admitted to frequently comparing real-life men to these virtual characters, both physically and personality-wise.

*"It definitely has an impact. Like I said earlier, I don't really look at real guys anymore because I inevitably compare them, thinking, 'Ah, he's not as much of a green flag as Zayne, he's not as handsome as Rafayel.'" (Hafidah, Informant 1)*

*"...if there's a guy or someone trying to approach me, I think, 'Why isn't he like Xavier?'... the difference is just too vast. So I think, 'Hmm okay, he's probably not my type.' It starts with the visuals, like, 'Oh, why doesn't he look like Xavier?'" (Regina, Informant 4)*

Echoing this, Cahya revealed that the characters have become her ideal standard, often lamenting that they are not real. She attributed this deep attachment partially to her past trauma in relationships with real men.

*"As an ideal, yes, like I said earlier, they are totally my type... sometimes I think, 'Oh God, why aren't they real?' If not, I just hope my future partner has a character like theirs... because there is a trauma factor [with real men]." (Cahya, Informant 2)*

However, a sharp contrast was found in Eva. She explained that the game characters do not influence her real-life relationships or partner standards. Eva maintains a realistic outlook, occasionally noting that her real-life husband reminds her of a game character in specific moments, while firmly distinguishing fiction from reality.

*"No. Sometimes there's a fleeting thought like, 'Oh right, my husband is so handsome, just like Caleb when he acts like this.' But in reality, it's not actually like that... Because ultimately, I will always revert to being realistic." (Eva, Informant 3)*

Ultimately, a player's favorite character is closely intertwined with their ideal partner standards. These characters are evaluated not merely on visual appeal but on their ability to provide security and affection, thereby fulfilling the players romantic fantasies. Consequently, players with strong parasocial bonds project these ideals onto the real world, often perceiving virtual characters as more emotionally understanding and reliable than real-life partners.

### **Parasocial Depth and Emotional Validation**

Intense and repetitive interactions between players and in-game characters cultivate emotional attraction. *Love and Deepspace* provides various features that create a strong illusion of intimacy. Specifically, the "Tête-à-Tête" feature, menstrual cycle reminders, message notifications, and virtual chat functions serve as sources of emotional validation for the informants. Informant 2 (Cahya) admitted that these features comfort and validate her, especially when she is exhausted from work. She also confessed that she would genuinely miss this feature if she ever stopped playing the game.

*"...there's that touch feature, the Tête-à-Tête, right? When I'm tired from work, I sometimes tap on it, and it just makes me feel validated." (Cahya, Informant 2)*

This depth of interaction is felt even more profoundly by Informant 4 (Regina) due to the menstrual cycle tracker and sleep reminder features. These functions

make her feel as though the game characters act like real-life partners, creating a highly personal illusion of "care and attention."

*"Because I often... forget my menstrual dates. So when that new feature came out, it was like, wow, this is so helpful for a girl... As for the sleep reminder, it affects me when I lose track of time playing; either I miss the notification or it doesn't pop up, so I end up playing too long, staying up late, and oversleeping, hehe." (Regina, Informant 4)*

On the other hand, Informant 1 (Hafidah) developed an emotional attachment through the characters' specific responses to the player's absence. She feels that if she rarely logs in, the *Love and Deepspace* characters will "sulk", leading her to perceive emotional consequences and a two-way affective bond.

*"Usually, there are these notifications... it's like they are paying attention to us. And sometimes, if we haven't played in a long time... when we open the lobby, they kind of sulk. Because we haven't visited them in a while." (Hafidah, Informant 1)*

In stark contrast to the other informants, Informant 3 (Eva) firmly maintains an emotional distance from the game characters. She rejects the notion that a game character could ever replace genuine, real-life attention.

*"But if you ask if I feel emotionally cared for, it's not like that... Maybe my mindset is already fixed that this is just a game. Reality is reality. Why should it be intertwined with a game?" (Eva, Informant 3)*

Overall, features within *Love and Deepspace* such as *Tête-à-Tête*, the menstrual cycle tracker, message notifications, and sleep reminders act as powerful mediums in generating an illusion of intimacy. These personalized features successfully blur the boundaries of reality between the player and the virtual characters. For several players, these game notifications are internalized as genuine acts of care from a partner, rather than mere automated system alerts. Although some players are able to clearly delineate between reality and fantasy, the personalization of these in-game features strongly dictates how parasocial interactions feel tangibly real and emotionally binding.

### **The Role of the Gacha System in Reinforcing Parasocial Relationships**

The *gacha* system in *Love and Deepspace* creates a highly complex dynamic. In this study, the *gacha* system serves as a medium that facilitates and reinforces Parasocial Relationships (PSR) between players and virtual characters. Acquiring cards through the *gacha* system grants players exclusive access to content unavailable in the main storyline, thereby deepening the illusion of emotional intimacy.

*"Of course, it has an impact. We get to know their individual stories, right? Sometimes if I don't get Zayne, I even feel like, 'Ugh, why am I cheating on him?'... You could say [the main story] is just scratching the surface. Once we do the gacha, we enter the deepest layers of his life." (Hafidah, Informant 1)*

Exclusive content obtained solely through *gacha* creates the perception that the character is actively opening up to the player. Furthermore, Informant 2 (Cahya) emphasized that although the stories from these exclusive cards can be watched for

free on YouTube, the emotional experience is vastly different compared to actually owning the card in-game. Thus, the *gacha* system fosters a strong illusion of ownership that reinforces the validation of the player's feelings.

*"In my opinion, if I miss even one card, it feels like I'm missing out on a piece of his backstory. So, I try to get it as much as possible... Honestly, you can just watch it on YouTube, but the feel is completely different from owning it yourself." (Cahya, Informant 2)*

The ownership of this exclusive content is intrinsically linked to the in-game "affinity" system between the player and the virtual character. Informant 4 (Regina) revealed that the affinity gained through *gacha* makes her feel closer to the character while simultaneously serving as a benchmark for her competitive drive against other players.

*"...Because the game has this affinity system, right? So there is some content that is still locked behind that affinity system... Then, there's also my competitive side, like if there are other players whose love interest is also Xavier..." (Regina, Informant 4)*

In other words, the time and money informants spend on *gacha* serve as a testament to how close they are to their favorite characters. However, this affection frequently morphs into a motivation for continuous, impulsive financial investment. As this emotional attraction strengthens, players feel bound by commitments such as loyalty, treating the virtual character as a real romantic partner. This is evident in Informant 1 (Hafidah), who feels as though she is "cheating" when she pulls a card of a different character.

*"...I feel I have a 'real' attachment to Zayne, so if I feel like I'm cheating on him, I have to 'coax' Zayne specifically, I usually have to keep doing the gacha until I get the card I want." (Hafidah, Informant 1)*

Meanwhile, Eva experiences an adrenaline rush that drives her to participate in *gacha* to pursue romantic narratives, which ultimately leads to financial regret.

*"When doing the gacha, my heart definitely races, especially for the Myth ones... the Caleb with the... apron. Honestly... I really wanted to get that. I was like, 'Whatever, just top up.' Initially, I didn't want to... But then, ugh, I couldn't resist, I had to have it... That's why my adrenaline was pumping, I just wanted to have it." (Eva, Informant 3)*

Eva also explained that if she were to ever stop playing *Love and Deepspace*, the only thing she would miss is the money she had spent. She is fully aware that her actions constitute impulsive financial behavior.

*"I would just miss my money. I spent too much. This is true, I spent too much in the game... The only thing I would miss is the money I've wasted on it all this time..." (Eva, Informant 3)*

These findings confirm that the *gacha* mechanism operates not merely as an economic transaction, but as a profound emotional investment. This investment makes players feel emotionally bound to the virtual characters, frequently causing them to abandon rational financial decision-making.

## Discussion

The majority of the informants in this study are young adult women with diverse romantic and psychological backgrounds. This study identifies two contrasting motivational patterns based on the informants' real-world relationship statuses. The first group consists of three single informants Cahya, Hafidah, and Regina who utilize the game for emotional validation. Cahya disclosed a trauma factor regarding real-life men, making the game a safe space for her. On the other hand, Hafidah labels herself as a "hopeless romantic" who requires validation and affection through the game. The second group comprises Eva, who is married and treats the game purely as an entertainment medium to fill her leisure time. Mapping these informant profiles is crucial to understanding that the depth of a player's parasocial relationship (PSR) heavily depends on the level of affection they receive in the real world.

These motivational differences align with research by Gao et al. (2025), which asserts that through *otome* games, players parasocial interactions (PSI) with virtual characters serve as a medium to fulfill emotional needs for those who feel a lack of real-world affection. For single informants like Hafidah, Cahya, and Regina, the game becomes a space to attain romantic intimacy unavailable in their real lives. Cahya's profile, acknowledging past trauma with real men, significantly influences the emotional depth she experiences while playing. Consequently, this demonstrates how the positive emotional experiences provided by the game can blur the boundaries between the real and virtual worlds for vulnerable individuals driven by unfulfilled emotional needs. Conversely, Eva, being married, maintains strict boundaries with reality. She does not rely on game characters to fulfill her emotional needs, as these are already met by her real-life partner. To her, the game characters serve merely as objects of narrative entertainment. This confirms that parasocial relationships (PSR) within the game are not entirely detached from reality but remain constrained by the players real-life romantic backgrounds (Gao et al., 2025).

Based on the collected data, players parasocial interactions (PSI) in *Love and Deepspace* are initiated through game features that successfully present a realistic illusion of character presence. The use of a first person perspective and human voice actors effectively enhances the sense of presence, allowing players to genuinely experience the virtual reality (Feng, 2024). These features cultivate a condition where players perceive an illusion of two-way communication through combined visual and audio stimuli (Feng, 2024). According to Hartmann (2008), such repetitive parasocial interactions (PSI) eventually solidify into long-term parasocial relationships (PSR).

The illusion of intimacy in *Love and Deepspace* is further reinforced by a messaging feature designed to simulate characters sending personal texts to the player. Through this feature, players feel emotionally validated. Field findings indicate that message notifications appearing on players smartphones trigger parasocial interactions (PSI) with virtual characters, thereby blurring the lines between the game and reality. This phenomenon is termed the "illusion of conversational give-and-take" (Hartmann, 2008). The resulting parasocial interactions (PSI) become increasingly potent when the media successfully presents the illusion of reciprocal, two-way communication (Hartmann, 2008).

The findings of this study demonstrate that *Love and Deepspace* players engagement extends far beyond merely completing daily quests and the main narrative storyline. Instead, they consciously and consistently invest both time and financial resources into the in-game *gacha* system to acquire their favorite characters cards. The players parasocial interactions (PSI) with the characters do not occur in a vacuum rather, they are embedded into their daily lives through consistent game interactions (Gao et al., 2025).

The research data indicate that players exhibit a high level of commitment to routine *gacha* investments aimed at obtaining exclusive cards. Players do not simply enjoy daily quest they actively pursue exclusive card content available only during limited events. Such actions drive impulsive behaviors, compelling players to perform top-ups and pulls to complete the romantic narratives with their favorite characters. This phenomenon signifies that the players parasocial interactions (PSI) have evolved into parasocial relationships (PSR), establishing a deep-seated commitment within the players. Furthermore, the *gacha* mechanism in *Love and Deepspace* is not merely an economic transaction but has become an emotional catalyst that blurs the boundaries between reality and fantasy. This is evident in Eva's gameplay experience although she is married and maintains strict boundaries between the real and fictional worlds, she admitted that the adrenaline rush compels her to continuously pursue cards of her favorite character, Caleb. According to Hartmann (2008) theory, this phenomenon falls under active paracommunication as an advanced manifestation. The adrenaline experienced during *gacha* pulls is not just a sensation derived from a random reward system, but an anticipation of a "reward" in the form of an illusion of give-and-take from her preferred character. Consequently, upon successfully acquiring the exclusive card, the game system manipulates the moment as if the virtual character is opening up personally to the player. Ultimately, this financial and time sacrifice engenders a profound sense of "ownership."

Research by Ar Rahim & Prasastiningtyas (2024) proves that interpersonal communication within games is highly crucial in forming psychological attachments and closeness among players. In the context of *otome* games, the dynamic of attachment in virtual spaces has shifted. Players fulfill their social and emotional interaction needs through virtual characters rather than fellow humans. The *gacha* mechanism facilitates this transition by transforming fleeting parasocial interactions (PSI) into long-term, transactionally bound parasocial relationships (PSR).

The exploitative nature of this monetization becomes evident when examining the psychological mechanics of the *gacha* system. Fundamentally, *gacha* operates as a 'loot box' mechanism that employs a variable-ratio reinforcement schedule, functionally mirroring gambling mechanics. According to Zendle & Cairns (2018), this randomized reward structure manipulates players cognitive biases, driving impulsive financial expenditure. When players like Eva experience an 'adrenaline rush' during *gacha* pulls, they are responding directly to this psychological conditioning, chasing the emotional high of a potential reward rather than making a rational economic transaction.

Furthermore, in the context of *otome* games, this financial exploitation is intricately tied to emotional vulnerability. The *gacha* system actively monetizes parasocial intimacy by locking crucial romantic narratives and character backstories behind a paywall. For players deeply invested in their virtual partners, such as Hafidah who feels a sense of 'cheating' or guilt when missing a specific character's card, continuous financial investment becomes a mandatory proof of loyalty. This dynamic traps players in a sunk-cost fallacy, where they feel compelled to keep spending to validate their existing emotional attachment, effectively transforming a safe escapist space into an exploitative transactional environment

This high level of financial investment aligns with research conducted by Hidayat & Gietty Tambunan (2025), which argues that game developers intentionally exploit players' illusions of intimacy through *gacha* mechanisms and limited banner systems. This exploitation is effective because virtual characters can provide profound emotional support to players (Y. Zhang, 2024). Although players experience emotional satisfaction upon acquiring their desired cards through the *gacha* mechanism, the data in this study reveal that the randomized nature of the *gacha* system frequently induces mental pressure and distress among players.

The parasocial relationships (PSR) in this study are also reinforced by the emotional satisfaction players derive from game characters that reflect their ideal partner standards. Field data demonstrate that players frequently compare these game characters to real-world romantic interactions. These findings are consistent with Y. Zhang (2024) analysis that *otome* games serve as a safe space for women to explore romantic relationships without the fear of rejection from virtual characters, ultimately positioning the game as an effective coping mechanism.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the phenomenological study of *Love and Deepspace* players' parasocial interactions through the *gacha* system, it can be concluded that parasocial interactions (PSI) and parasocial relationships (PSR) do not merely occur passively. Instead, they are deliberately cultivated and maintained through the personalization of in-game features, which successfully create an illusion of presence and two-way communication. Furthermore, the resulting parasocial relationships (PSR) are maintained and significantly influenced by the players' real-world relationship backgrounds. Single players utilize game characters as a primary source of emotional validation, whereas players with real-life partners tend to establish strict, clear boundaries between the game and reality.

These parasocial relationships (PSR) are heavily reinforced through the *gacha* system, which grants exclusive access to content outside the main storyline, such as additional narratives, limited items, and increased character affinity. This dynamic demonstrates that the *gacha* system, initially designed as a mere economic transaction, has transformed into a profound emotional investment, subsequently driving impulsive behaviors to maintain the established parasocial relationship (PSR). Ultimately, these findings reveal that emotional needs have been commodified through the game, shifting its primary function into an affective

escapist space that blurs the boundaries between emotional fulfillment and digital consumption.

Based on these findings, it is highly recommended that players maintain rational thinking to assert clear emotional boundaries between reality and the game. This is crucial to prevent players from becoming ensnared in financial exploitation driven by the illusion of intimacy. For future research, it is recommended to expand upon this study utilizing a quantitative approach to measure the correlation between specific variables, such as the relationship between a player's level of loneliness and their total financial expenditure within the *gacha* system.

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