

Virtual Love Constructed Across Dimensions Emotional Attachment Patterns and Identity Formation among Fictosexual Individuals

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Abstract:

Digital media environments have created new possibilities for emotional engagement. One example is fictosexuality, which describes individuals who experience romantic or emotional attraction primarily toward fictional characters. While discussions of this phenomenon have become increasingly visible in online communities, systematic academic analysis remains relatively limited, especially in Chinese research contexts (Sun, 2024). Through semi-structured interviews with participants active in online communities, this study explores how fictosexual individuals describe their emotional attachments and how these experiences influence their sense of identity. The findings suggest that attachments to fictional characters can share several features with conventional romantic relationships, including affection, emotional support, and long-term commitment (Liebers, 2020). At the same time, the fictional context allows individuals to construct relationships that feel emotionally meaningful while remaining psychologically safe. Online communities also play an important role by providing spaces where individuals can discuss experiences and receive validation (Liao & Hao, 2024). This research contributes to a broader understanding of emerging forms of intimacy in digital culture.

Keywords: Fictosexuality; Virtual intimacy; Emotional attachment; Digital culture

1. Introduction

The expansion of digital media has significantly transformed how individuals interact with cultur-

al content. Through animation, video games, on-line novels, and virtual idols, audiences encounter fictional characters that can become emotionally meaningful figures. In some cases, these connections

develop into strong romantic or emotional attachments. Such experiences are often described as fictosexuality or fictoromance (Sun, 2024). Although these relationships exist within fictional contexts, they may still carry genuine emotional significance for individuals (Asano, 2024). Despite increasing visibility online, fictosexuality is often misunderstood or dismissed as mere fantasy. Scholars have therefore begun to examine it as a legitimate form of mediated intimacy within contemporary digital culture. Therefore, this study contributes to the existing literature by focusing on fictosexual individuals in online communities and examining the relationship between emotional attachment and identity formation from a qualitative perspective.

2. Literature Review

One useful framework for understanding emotional engagement with fictional characters is parasocial interaction theory. Horton and Wohl originally described parasocial relationships as one-sided connections that audiences develop with media personalities through repeated exposure. Later research demonstrated that these relationships can evoke emotional responses similar to real social interactions (Liebers, 2020). Studies have also explored how fictional characters can fulfil psychological needs such as companionship and identity exploration (Doran-Stout, 2022). More recent work specifically addresses fictosexuality, highlighting how digital communities allow individuals to share experiences and form collective identities around attraction to fictional characters (Liao & Hao, 2024).

3. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach in order to explore the subjective experiences of fictosexual individuals. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants recruited from online communities where discussions about fictional relationships frequently occur. The interviews explored how participants first developed emotional connections with fictional characters, how they interpret these relationships, and how they relate them to their personal identities. Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis in order to identify recurring patterns in participants' narratives.

4. Findings

Participants often described their attachments using language associated with romantic relationships, including commitment, affection, and emotional support. Many ex-

plained that fictional characters provided a stable source of comfort during periods of loneliness or stress. These findings align with previous research suggesting that parasocial relationships can produce meaningful emotional experiences (Liebers, 2020). Participants also emphasised the creative dimension of fictosexual attachment. By interpreting characters in personalised ways, individuals could construct relationships that reflected their own emotional needs.

5. Discussion

The results suggest that fictosexual relationships should not simply be interpreted as escapist behaviour. Instead, they can be understood as part of broader changes in how intimacy is experienced within digital environments. Online communities allow individuals to share narratives and validate their experiences, which contributes to identity formation (Liao & Hao, 2024). In this sense, fictosexuality represents an emerging form of mediated relationship shaped by digital culture.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how fictosexual individuals describe their emotional attachments to fictional characters and how these attachments influence identity formation. The findings indicate that such relationships can provide companionship, emotional comfort, and a sense of belonging. As digital media continues to evolve, further research will be necessary to understand how new forms of virtual intimacy influence social and psychological experiences. However, this study also has certain limitations. The sample size is relatively small and mainly drawn from specific online communities, which may limit the generalisability of the findings. Future research could expand the sample scope and adopt mixed methods to further explore the diversity and complexity of fictosexual experiences across different cultural contexts.

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