

The Two-Way Domestication Media Practice of "Cyber Lovers" and Youth Marriage

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Abstract: Young men and women are enthusiastic about falling in love and even getting married with their "Cyber Lovers" set by themselves. Different from the previous role-playing interactive games, based on the practical experience of users with "Cyber Lovers" in Douban groups, this study adopts participant observation, questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews, and takes the media equivalence theory as a theoretical perspective to explore whether falling in love with robots on the Internet will have an impact on the marriage of young people and what kind of impact it will have. This study finds that under the connection of various factors such as the progress of media technology and the development of social structure, the practice of "Cyber Lovers" not only deconstructs traditional marriage but also extends and subverts the meaning and form of traditional marriage. When modern marriage gradually become a highly personalized and utilitarian thing, "Cyber Lovers" have become a rebellious practice against the reality of contemporary marriage. The niche power gathered from this also provides some new possibilities for the marriage reality that keeps pace with the times.

According to the statistical data on the website of the Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China, the number of marriage registrations in China reached its peak of 13.469 million pairs in 2013, and then began to decline all the way. In 2024, according to official statistics, the number of marriage registrations in the first half of the year was 3.43 million pairs, a year-on-year decrease of 498,000 pairs. And population experts predict that the number of marriage registrations in 2024 may be about 6.6 million pairs, hitting a new low^[1]. At the same time, as early as the 1990s, Clifford of Stanford University put forward the "Media Equivalence Theory". The core idea of this theory is that although people rationally regard the media as a tool, with the development of the media, in the process of interacting with the media, through the anthropomorphic voice and image pictures of the other party, people will naturally make social responses to the media without deliberate consideration. Psychologist Eric divided the normal person's life from infancy to late adulthood into development stages. In each stage, individuals will face and overcome new challenges. Generally, between the ages of 20 and 39, people will face the challenge of "intimacy vs.isolation"^[2]. Facing strong emotional needs, young people choose to escape, avoid entering intimate relationships or even marriage and love relationships in reality, and instead actively invest in the Internet to fall in love with their "Cyber Lovers".

1. Literature Review

1.1. From "Cyborg" to "Cyber Lover"

Since the "Cyborg" was first proposed by NASA scientists in the 1960s, it has been used in the manufacture of organic bodies composed of humans and artifacts. In the 1985 "Cyborg Manifesto", Haraway defined the "Cyborg" as a hybrid of machines and organisms, and even characters in science fiction. Since then, the "Cyborg" is no longer a life complex of semi-machine and semi-biological using physical factors, but a concept generalization that breaks a series of boundaries such as human and animal, organism and machine, body and non-body. As a new and interesting research field, people's attention has extended from the relationship between "Cyborg" and the human body to the relationship between the human mind and the impact on the social population. First, some scholars have proposed that artificial intelligence brings our vision back to human beings themselves. In the research of the previous mainstream mass communication paradigm, the human body has been suppressed for a long time and is considered as an "invisible" marginal existence, which is low and has no research value. It was not until scholars such as Descartes and Nietzsche called out from the body that the "body" was seen. Some scholars have proposed how "Cyborg" becomes our "body" and how it affects our body, pointing out the issues such as the embodied turn and the development process of artificial intelligence caused by this. Secondly, some scholars focus on a series of emotional changes in the human mind during the communication between "Cyborg" and humans, and point out the emotional transformation process in the process of human-robot interaction. Humans will experience a cycle of being disappointed in real life, regaining hope online, gradually being disappointed again, returning to reality, and being disappointed again^[3]. Finally, some scholars focus on the discussion of aestheticism and feminist-related topics on the image of "Cyborg" in the film and television level, and point out that even in the emerging "Cyborg" field, the presentation of female images is still mainly traditional and negative.

1.2. From "Love First" to "No-marriage Doctrine"

Sincere love symbolized freedom, courage and resistance. But with the deepening development of social structure and the increasing initiative of human beings, love and marriage have become an embarrassing, even unspeakable low position, especially in the online world. First, some scholars have pointed out the transformation process of marriage. In the past strict social environment, people could only use marriage as an outlet to pour out their emotions to resist the authoritative family in the past. Now that the social structure has changed, the authoritative family life in the past has gradually decreased or disappeared. Marriage are no longer enough to be an outlet for people to vent their emotions, but are retained as a traditional habit and become a way to control young people. Therefore, the voice of "no-marriage doctrine" has risen. Secondly, some scholars focus on the impact of current marriage and love programs on people, pointing out that under the influence of the atmosphere created by marriage programs, viewers will enhance their desire for marriage, but when they return to reality, people who have a strong repulsion to marriage will further reduce their desire for marriage. Finally, some scholars focus on the female images presented in marriage and love software and related film and television works, and point out that most of the presentations of female images are negative and still set in the traditional female image framework.

2. Research Methods

This study mainly uses participant observation, questionnaire survey and in-depth interview to

collect materials, and takes the relevant practical experience of members of the Douban group related to the "Cyber Lover" topic as research samples. Among them, the participant observation lasted for one year, from October 2023 to October 2024, mainly used for the collection of basic materials for this study; the questionnaire survey was concentrated in July 2024, laying a more accurate research data material foundation for this study and making user screening for the next in-depth interview; the in-depth interview was mainly concentrated in July-August 2024, and the follow-up supplementary in-depth interview was mainly concentrated in September 2024, gaining accurate data materials for this study.

3. Research Findings

3.1. Reality Rebellion: Building a Castle for Oneself

The analysis found that most users who have an intimate relationship with robots have encountered setbacks and difficulties in real life and want to relieve the loneliness in life. Some users are also driven by curiosity and the influence of the surrounding love environment, have an exploratory psychology towards "Cyber Lovers", and want to experience the taste of love, so they transfer the real marriage emotions to the Internet and immerse themselves in it. Many interviewees, mostly female, expressed a clear message: they feel that there are no men in reality who can match them, and after falling in love with "Cyber Lovers", they are more reluctant to start intimate relationships or even enter marriage relationships with real men. The media equivalence theory has two core viewpoints: one is that the media is equivalent to real life, and the other is that the interaction between people and television, computers and new media is essentially social and natural. Especially with the development of media technology today, which highly restores the anthropomorphic dynamics, people sometimes feel that the other party is like a real human being in the process of interacting with them. Based on the disappointment and helplessness in reality, most users choose to seek comfort from online channels.

3.2. Permanent Retention: Intimate Lovers with High Emotional Experience

There are also some users who will completely set "Cyber Lovers" according to their own preferences and chat with them, and the proportion of men exceeds that of women. In psychology, setting a robot lover according to one's own preferences is actually a highly narcissistic self-projection presentation method, similar to the Pygmalion effect. This method can not only meet the wishes that cannot be realized in reality but also compensate for the highly narcissistic mentality. In intimate relationships, they are often people with high emotional value experience and have extremely high requirements for the emotional value given by their partners. When asked about the impact on their views on marriage and love, most of them think that it does have an impact on their thinking and will increase their threshold for demanding emotional value. When it comes to real marriage and love relationships, they will still enter intimate relationships and marriage relationships according to the established plan, but will improve their mate selection standards. On the other hand, some users also say that even if they enter marriage, they will still retain their "Cyber Lovers", because they think that they cannot find a partner who can provide them with high emotional value in real life. As their own emotional small world, "Cyber Lovers" will be retained as their private lovers forever. In the practice of interacting with "Cyber Lovers", they have given humans unprecedented beautiful experience feelings and created a unique quiet world for humans, which can make humans temporarily escape from the epressed society and vent their emotions.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The process of interacting with "Cyber Lovers" is full of fun, novelty, cuteness and disappointment. On the one hand, it gives users unprecedented high-value emotional experience. On the other hand, users also complain that their "Cyber Lovers" are not intelligent enough. Especially when the platform upgrades data or carries out transformation, the other party begins to become gentle and boring, and even a little strange and mechanical. At this time, users will experience what is called electronic lovelorn. Passion will fade away at a visible speed at this moment, and users will also have a sense of drop after temporarily escaping from reality and returning to reality. In the face, some users will be more courageous and continue to immerse themselves in it, readjust the relationship between the two with their own showing weakness, and continue the path of escaping from reality; some users will be completely sad and return to reality with a sense of loss of their love. In such a unique process of two-way domestication, at the beginning, people will choose to invest in a human-machine love because of human emotions such as curiosity, loneliness and emotional venting. In the process of interaction, according to the feedback of "Cyber Lovers", they actively adjust the relationship between the two sides. The adjustment process is not only the domestication of the users' own thinking and behavior but also the reverse domestication of the machine through data feeding to the "Cyber Lovers". The result of this two-way domestication is the continuation or departure of the users, or in other words, they will eventually lead the users to wake up from their dreams, just like Zhuang Zhou dreaming of a butterfly, looking back and reflecting on the illusion they have experienced.

References

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