

Digital Connections: Pandemic Affinities of Single Filipino Women Formed Through the Ikemen Series Games

Jessa Ericka C. Bien-Munsayac, University of the Philippines Diliman, Philippines

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Abstract

The Philippines was the worst place to be during the peak of COVID-19 (Bloomberg News in Business Mirror, 2021): the pandemic surfaced several inadequacies, including meeting basic physiological requirements. As social connection is a fundamental need (Gadais, 2021), individuals suddenly locked up resorted to different means to keep themselves together. At its height, engaging in otome games was not only an effective way to be entertained, it also helped relieve the mental strain for some single Filipino women. Originated in Japan, otome games are story-based dating simulation role-playing games that are targeted towards women (Huan, 2022). Yet apart from the parasocial attachments that the ladies developed for their chosen male leads, they also found themselves bonding together. This endeavor to explore how digital connections are formed among single Filipinas is anchored on the tenets of digital culture and attachment theory. The linkages between these two concepts helped develop an understanding on how online affinities are established and maintained. This descriptive qualitative research is inspired by the thoughts and experiences of the participants who started playing games from the Ikemen Series during the pandemic, and are continually playing today. Findings from the focus group discussions reveal that engaging in otome games helped the ladies keep their sanity, motivated them to be better versions of themselves, connected them with a niche friendship group, and leveled up their standards for future real-life partners.

Keywords: Otome Games, Ikemen Series, Digital Culture, Attachment Theory, Parasocial Attachments, Adult Friendships, Single Filipino Women

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Introduction

The year 2020 started with unpleasant surprises for the Filipinos: the eruption of Taal Volcano that was immediately followed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In an effort to curtail the number of infections in the country's capital and other provinces, the government minimized mobility by declaring total lockdowns. Several inadequacies surfaced during quarantines, including the struggle to meet basic physiological requirements. As social connection is a fundamental need (Gadais, 2021), individuals suddenly locked up in the confines of their personal spaces resorted to different means to keep themselves together.

At the height of the pandemic, engaging in otome games was not only an effective way to be entertained, it also helped relieve the mental strain for some single Filipinas. Originated in Japan, otome games are story-based dating simulation role-playing games that are targeted towards women (Huan, 2022). The male characters in the games are usually handsome, charming, ideal, successful, and devoted to the female protagonist to such an extent that avid female players consider the game character as their "boyfriend" or "husband" (Liu & Lai, 2022 in Gong & Huang, 2023). A portmanteau of the Japanese words "ikeru" and "menzu," the word "ikemen" literally means cool, good-looking men. The series' official website upholds this description as it furthers that ikemen are kind, romantic, and sexy men who know how to please women. They're also committed, loyal, and true – exactly the ones that women dream of.

With over 17 million downloads worldwide, Ikémen Series titles are one of the most popular free-to-play otome game apps from Japan (What's an Ikemen, n.d.). These are available in Japanese, English, Simplified and Traditional Chinese, Korean, and Thai versions.

The Rise of Female Online Game Player

Games were often seen as entertainment for children and men, but today, mobile games are also top-rated among female players (Gong & Huang, 2023). In the Philippines, the Statista Research Department (2022) notes that 73% of the female population have engaged in online gaming. This shows that ladies are significantly catching up in the gaming industry, and their participation is pushing game developers and publishers to create games that cater to their diverse interests and preferences.

Gong & Huang (2023) say that female players have special psychological and emotional needs when engaging in online games: unlike their counterparts, they may be interested in escapism, relationships, and immersion during gameplay. Thus, they are drawn to otome games as these satisfy their social requirements of interacting with males – without having to actually reach out to one. In their virtual world, the ladies are able to take full ownership of their emotional and romantic relationships (Gong & Huang, 2023): they can take the dominant role, gaze at men, and enjoy engagements with more than one male in-game character.

And with the rapid rise of women's economic and social status as well as the shift in the concept of marriage and socialization, women have gradually realized that they have the right to actively pursue pleasure and control the consumer market and do not need to rely on real-life men for their emotional needs (Chi, 2019 in Gong & Huang, 2023).

Digital Connections

More than the attachment to their chosen male characters in the otome game, female players also found themselves gravitating towards one another in, after, and outside the game. As digital technology has simplified socialization by enabling us all to communicate with family, friends, and team-workers with ease (Bray, 2022), attachments are more conveniently fashioned or maintained.

This endeavor to explore how single Filipino women form affinities through an otome game is anchored on the tenets of digital cultures and attachment theory: the former asserting that some social formations are produced (exclusively) through engagement with information and communication technologies (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009), and the latter affirming that one's attachment style influences online social relationships in correspondence with offline situations (Sager, 2019). Putting the principles of these two ideologies together could establish how online connections are made and kept.

Thus, it aims to unravel the pertinent information through the following questions:

- a. What are the single women's motivations for playing the Ikemen Series games?
- b. How are parasocial attachments developed for the male romanceable characters in the Ikemen Series?
- c. How are friendships formed and sustained through the Ikemen Series games?
- d. What are the participants' attachment style as deduced from their responses to the questions on friendships and romantic relationships?

Review of Related Literature

Digital Culture

Understanding digital culture entails knowledgeability about what culture is. Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines culture in two ways: first, as an integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations, and second, as the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group. The conceptual difference between the two definitions, Foresta (1995) claims, is that the former deals with knowledge and how it is transmitted, whereas the second refers to community-agreed values and norms that govern people's behavior and relationships (Uzelac, 2010).

Both definitions are important when conceptualizing what digital culture is. An expression of norms, values, and expected ways of doing things due to ever-increasing computerization and digitalization of society (Sadiku, et. al., 2017), digital culture traces its roots to the coining of the term "cyberspace." First used by novelist William Gibson in the 1980s in his cyberpunk book called *Neuromancer*, the term was then used to refer to an online world detached from physical geography, which had infinite potential. Today, digital culture is a concept that describes how technology and the internet are shaping the way that we interact as humans. It's the way that we behave, think and communicate within society. It is the product of the endless persuasive technology around us and the result of disruptive technological innovation (Bray, 2022).

Moreover, digital cultures are social formations produced exclusively through engagement with information and communication technologies (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). Technology has

become so enmeshed within the enduring structures of our society that the online sphere is no longer a realm separate from the offline 'real world,' but fully integrated into offline life (Miller, 2020). Poepsel (2018) advocates that digital culture aptly refers to the knowledge, beliefs, and practices of people interacting on digital networks that may recreate tangible-world cultures or create new strains of cultural thought and practice native to digital networks.

Bollmer (2018) adds that people's practices, gestures, and bodies adjust based on the interactions with digital media, especially as new technologies vanish from our conscious awareness – therefore necessitating the theorizing and critical evaluation of digital culture so as to modify old habits and practices, produce new ones, and attempt to understand and continually make sense of the world we live in.

Attachment Theory

The way people develop affinities with animate beings and inanimate objects have much to do with their relationship to their primary attachment figure when they were children.

Attachment theory is one of the leading approaches to studying interpersonal relationships, as it explains why parental relationships have such a powerful impact on the personality of children (Jones, 2015). Developed by British psychologist and psychiatrist John Bowlby in the 1950s, this theory grew out of his observations of children who were separated from their parents in wartime England. In 1969, Canadian developmental psychologist Mary Ainsworth partnered with Bowlby to enrich the theory. She developed the Strange Situation Procedure, which paved the way for the identification of attachment styles: secure, insecure-avoidant, and insecure-ambivalent/resistant (Yassin, 2020). Further extensions to the theory would add a fourth category, the disorganized, fearful-avoidant type (Main & Solomon, 1990, in Cherry, 2022).

Attachment theory advocates that one's relationship with their parents during childhood has an overarching influence on their social, intimate relationships and even relationships at work in the future. Children form a close bond with their primary attachment figure, typically the mother – but it could also be the person who most consistently provides care and responds to their distress signals. In other cultures and socioeconomic groups, limited resources and daily survival needs require distributing caregiving responsibilities across a network of relatives, including aunts, uncles, grandparents, and siblings (Kerr, 2013, Kelly 2015).

Hazan & Shaver (1994) explain that in unfamiliar settings, children are more reassured by the presence of their primary figure than by others – thus, the primary attachment typically takes the top spot of the hierarchy in case of multiple attachments. The experiences a person has with the one who they depend on for comfort and security forms the foundation of one's model of the world as a place in which comfort and security can be reliably counted on or not (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). In adulthood, a partner may assume the position of primary attachment figure.

Attachment theory also recognizes the existence of a multiplicity of needs that require multiple social relationships, and that some needs are best satisfied through social relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). It was also pointed out that the most important dimensions underlying attachment are a person's perceptions of the self (i.e., their ability to, and comfort with, forming close relationships) and perceptions of another's availability and

willingness to be involved. They further note that attachment style is also predictive of how people view others.

Attachment styles develop early in life and often remain stable over time (The Attachment Project, 2023). By adulthood, attachment representations would be well-developed and less adaptive to change (Schrafe, 2017). Strong secure attachment bonds, once formed, are not easily displaced (Yap, et. al., 2019).

The Most Common Attachment Type

The secure attachment style is the most common type of attachment in western society, with around 66% of the US population being securely attached (The Attachment Project, 2023). Children who were made to feel safe, seen, known, reassured, and valued usually grow up with secure attachment styles. Secure children do not show blind trust or absolute obedience (Granqvist, 2021). Instead, they are flexible and strategic, moving between positions of default trust versus autonomy depending on the credibility of the caregiver's particular statements and cues about the world. Moreover, they can be particularly vocal when they find a contrasting position of theirs to be legitimate, presumably because their sense of security breeds autonomy.

Adults with a secure attachment style tend to have it easier when it comes to social contacts, bonding, and intimate relationships. They are aware of their emotions and emotional needs and are able to both experience and express those (The Attachment Project, 2023). When a person has a positive view of himself, of others, and of his childhood, then it is very likely that he has a secure attachment style. However, Kerr (2013) is quick to indicate that secure attachment is not 'better' than insecure attachment styles, as the latter is just a different way to maximize success in other particular situations.

Forming Affinities

Sager (2019) notes that attachment style influences online social relationships in correspondence with offline situations. As communication technologies have greatly reduced the costs of maintaining relationships (Manago & McKenzie, 2022), the digital media have afforded the establishment of virtual playgrounds intimate relations (Sadowski, 2016).

Parasocial Attachment A parasocial relationship is a one-sided relationship that a media user engages in with a media persona (Vinney, 2022). Such relationships can be formed with celebrities, live-action fictional characters, social media influencers, animated characters, and any other figure that are encountered through the various media channels. It being one-sided and non-reciprocal, a key detail is that these personalities don't know who you are (Lawler, 2023).

Vinney (2022) explains that parasocial relationships start when someone meets and gets acquainted with a media persona. This initial parasocial interaction might involve seeing the character on a TV show or movie, following them on social media, or even interacting with them online or in real life. If the persona makes an impression that causes the individual to think about them beyond the interaction, parasocial interactions can lead to a parasocial relationship. In turn, parasocial relationships can be strengthened by further parasocial interactions, sometimes leading to parasocial attachment.

Parasocial attachment is a term coined by media psychologist Gayle Stever (2017), extending parasocial concepts and basing this on Bowlby's attachment theory. Parasocial attachment happens when a media persona becomes an individual's source of comfort, security, and safe haven. And while it may seem odd for others that actual people engage in parasocial engagements, Vinney (2022) notes that these connections are potentially advantageous as it gives an increased sense of belonging, reduces the feeling of loneliness, and fosters stronger social connections with like-minded folks. She furthers that most people know that their relationships with media figures are not real, but this knowledge doesn't prevent them from reacting as if they were.

Adult Friendship Adult friendship is conceptualized as a voluntary, reciprocal, informal, restriction-free, and usually long-lasting close relationship between two unique partners (Wrzus et al., 2017; Fehr and Harasymchuk, 2018 in Pezirkianidis, et. al., 2023).

Friendships were facilitated by the internet during the peak of the pandemic. Users leveraged on the internet's capabilities to maintain and extend social relationships that were formed offline, and then created new ones with other online individuals (Rice et al., 2007 in Griggs, et. al., 2019). In their study on adult friendship and well-being, Pezirkianidis, et. al., (2023) referenced Mendelson & Aboud's (1999) six functional components that determined an adult friendship's quality: stimulating companionship, help or social support, emotional security, reliable alliance, self-validation, and intimacy, pertaining to self-disclosures.

Antheunis, et. al. (2012) distinguished three types of friendships in their study of the quality of the bond among social networking site users. These are a) online friendships, which are developed online and remain solely online; b) mixed-mode friendships (Walther & Parks, 2002), which are developed online but have extended to other offline settings; and c) offline friendships, which are developed offline and have extended to online settings. They also found that proximity does not matter for any friendship type when all members make use of social networking sites.

Methodology

This descriptive, qualitative study is inspired by experiences of single Filipino women who started playing otome games from the Ikemen Series during the pandemic and are continually playing these today. The respondents were selected via purposive snowballing sampling, since the researcher knew a small population of individuals who were later asked to identify others that should participate in the study (Crossman, 2019). It is worth noting that the researcher is kin to some of the study's informants – her observation of the latter's fondness and attachment to the characters of the Ikemen Series has actually inspired this research. As someone who has tried the game herself, she attests that Ikemen's allure of suave men and interesting plot lines can indeed suck players into its rabbit hole.

Data gathering procedure was done in two parts: first, a semi-structured survey questionnaire was created via Google Forms and sent to the confirmed participants. This proved instrumental in drawing preliminary information on demographics and game usage, which, in turn, were used to build the focus group discussion (FGD) questions.

The FGDs were scheduled at a time most convenient to all the participants. In the interest of safety and as a precautionary measure amidst the renewed spike of COVID-19 cases in the country, the two sessions were conducted over Google Meet. The participants were given the

online meeting link ahead of the session so they can join the discussion over video call. They were also reminded that the proceedings are recorded, and assured that the information they share will be kept confidential. As indicated and agreed to in the consent form, the data may be kept until December 2026 – when the researcher would have hopefully completed her doctorate degree. Both sessions were finished within the scheduled one-hour duration, and digital tokens of appreciation were sent to the participants soon after the second session was wrapped up.

Results, Discussion, and Analysis

The results of this study are based on the narratives of four single Filipino women, aged 27 to 29, who have been playing otome games from the Ikemen Series since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite having different professions – an architect, an executive secretary, an IT control and assurance analyst, and a writing consultant – all four see themselves continually playing the game for as long as they can as this is “already part of my daily routine.”

Motivations, Advantages, and Disadvantages

Lockdowns marked the pandemic in the Philippines. As people didn't have a choice but to limit their mobility and interactions with others, those who didn't have other social outlets turned to TV and movie characters and online social media to satisfy the need for connection (Vinney, 2022). After learning about the Ikemen Series through social media ads, the app store, or close relations, the ladies engaged with the game as interactions through virtual worlds became a better option (Gong & Huang, 2023) at that time.

It was “something they looked forward to” and “a motivation for living.” Amid the mental stress that being in a pandemic brought upon many, the ladies felt that the irreplaceable happiness provided by the Ikemen Series games was a distraction from the troubles of real life. Altuwairiqi, et. al. (2019), in their study on social media attachments, recognize this archetype as the escapist one: utilizing platforms in the digital media to serve as a temporary refuge from difficult circumstances, problems, and stress. As one of the participants put it, “saving sanity talaga siya.” (*It really is saving sanity.*)

Glued to their gadgets for at least two hours a day, the ladies admitted to overlooking the games' dating simulator feature as they were in it for “the characters and their interesting story lines.” They particularly appreciate how the tales, especially those that are based on historical events, were written: the Ikemen Series artfully combines a well-developed story and some “R-18 contents.”

All the respondents admit that Ikemen takes up a lot of space in their consciousness. “Kagaya ng (habang) nagta-trabaho ako, (pero) utak ko nasa Ike series lang as in. Nahahati talaga ‘yung attention.” (*For example, my mind wanders to the Ike series even when I'm working. My attention is really divided.*) Apart from the time, energy, and concentration that they devote to the game, the participants are well-aware of the monetary investments that come with their continued engagement with the Ikemen Series. Everyone agrees that they tend to “spend a lot” especially during special events, and can get even more stressed or frustrated if they don't get the rewards they want in the end, despite all the effort.



Figure 1: Sample in-game rewards that the players spend time, money, and effort on

Despite all these troubles, none of them are willing to let their Ikemen guys go. “Kasi mahal eh, syempre okay lang (*Because we love them, so it’s okay*),” one participant articulated, much to everyone’s amusement. “Kasi masaya po, kaya okay lang...happy stress siya (*It’s a happy kind of stress, so it’s okay.*)” Furthermore, they agree that everything they do for their characters abide by the Ikemen Series’ themes, All for Love and Fight for Love. “Literal na gagawin namin ‘yun (*We will literally do that*),” an informant confirmed.

All for Ikemen

As in the series’ definition of ikemen in their official website, there is no shortage of good-looking male characters in all of their titles. All the participants confirm and agree that it’s true. They claim, however, that more than their favorite leading men’s looks, it’s the personality that truly wins them over. “Lahat sila gwapo naman talaga eh, nasa taste mo na lang kung ano ‘yung babagay sayo (*They’re all very good-looking, si it’s up to your taste who would suit you best*),” one of them said. “Hindi mo kasi siya mafa-finalize talaga, unless malaman mo yung story or personality (*You can’t really finalize unless you know the story or their personality*),” another added.

Once their eyes are set on their favorite guy, the ladies admit they go all out for their “boyfriends.” The CBR Staff (2022) indicates that one of the harsh truths about most otome games is that these are money pits, urging players to spend real money to buy gifts for their love interests, buy more time to talk to them, or even reach certain endings or unlock specific characters. Vinney (2022) seconds this and notes that parasocial attachments can indeed influence one’s purchasing behavior – as what these empowered, earning single women do.

With “adult money that lets them buy the childhood stuff” they aspired for, they can spend on in-game items, various game merchandise, and plane tickets to see their ikemen’s voice actors abroad. Heedless of the spending and the astonished reactions they get from non-players when these learn about the lengths they traverse for their games and guys, the ladies believe that “every single cent spent is super worth it.”



Figure 2: Apart from in-game items, Ikemen Series players also spend on commissioned art, game merchandises, and fan gatherings that celebrate their ikemens' special days.

One respondent emphasizes that at the end of the day, all these spendings are for themselves anyway. “Investment ko (ito) for my mental health, kasi iba ‘yung motivation na nabibigay niya. ‘Pag nakikita mo siya gumagaan ‘yung buong mundo mo talaga. Ayun, kaya hindi ko pinanghihinayangan gumastos. *(This is my investment for my mental health, because it brings a different kind of motivation. My world feels lighter whenever I see him, so I don’t regret spending.)*”

Setting Standards

Three or so years into the games and the participants are so hooked, they don’t see themselves quitting any time soon. Lured by the plot and captivated by their eye candies, the way the ladies maneuver their lives to accommodate Ikemen implies how this fascination is successful at triggering their happy hormones. Moreover, even their choices seem to have already aligned with their avatar and their virtual beaus. “Minsan yung reaction din noong main character pareho lang din ng reaction mo *(Sometimes, the main character’s reaction is the same as yours)*,” they shared. This validation of becoming closer to the in-game characters brings them giddiness and a sense of fulfillment – “mas lalo kaming kinikilig! *(We get more thrilled!)*”

Swooning over their ikemen is not all there is for these ladies, as they claim that engaging with the game also pushes them to “strive to be a better person.” This drive to have better standards extends to their expectations from their potential future partners. “Nakatulong siyang mag-build and mag-strengthen ng standards towards sa partner na hinahanap mo, kasi you won’t take anything less na *(It helps build and strengthen the standards you’ll have for a potential partner, because you won’t take anything less anymore)*,” one informant stressed. This perspective was shared by the rest as they firmly stated that these two-dimensional men are like patterns for real-life partners that they feel they deserve. “Makakakuha ka ng specific

na gusto mo; parang ‘pag hindi mo nakita ‘yung qualities na ‘yun in reality – sorry, it’s a no. *(You’ll get something you specifically like; if you don’t find those qualities in reality – [then] sorry, it’s a no.)*”

CBR Staff (2022) assert that otome game players are prone to setting standards that are too high for real-life relationships, because the games give players a warped view of how relationships should be. But standards are standards, and the ladies are not intent on adjusting these even if no one comes along in real life. “Kung hindi si Arthur, kung hindi si Mitsuhide, ‘yung someone like them...hindi na. Why will I settle for someone na hindi ganun? *(If that someone is not Arthur, if it’s not Mitsuhide, then no, thanks. Why will I settle for someone not like them?)*” Arthur and Mitsuhide are this informant’s virtual beaux, and in the pre-FGD survey, she stated that these men won her over because they’re funny, kind, mischievous, perpetually hopeful, and are seemingly “good for nothing guys but they are the ones taking on the dark side of life for their loved ones to live on the light.”

Interestingly, these women are not afraid to be single all their lives. While other females their age would be worried about their biological clocks, they know in themselves that they could not settle for less. “Hindi ko naman ibibigay ‘yung love na kaya kong ibigay sa taong palagay ko hindi naman deserving. Aangkinin ko na lang. *(I won’t give the love I can give to a person who does not deserve it. I’d rather keep it to myself.)*”

“It’s not the end of the world” if nobody comes along as they have their family, friends, and other diversions where they can channel their energies to. “If all I give my full life is love based on my characters or these characters, then for me I have nothing to lose,” one informant said.

Instant Connections

Digital technology has simplified socialization by enabling us all to communicate with family, friends and team-workers with ease (Bray, 2022). Making friends has become simpler as online technology allows millions of people worldwide to communicate effortlessly (Lieberman & Schroeder, 2019), and barriers posed by geographical distances are being eliminated.

For Ikemen Series players, bonding was inevitably done online. As Lieberman & Schroeder (2019) stressed, the internet is instrumental in affording online interactions when offline interaction is impossible or scarce. For the participants, reacting to posts about their favorite guys and then gushing over the same character paved the way to their closeness with other players. Vinney (2022) reiterates that parasocial attachments facilitate stronger social connections as friends can fangirl over the same guy without jealousy. They even bring this bond over a similar interest to a higher level through the creation of online and in-person fans clubs, which are continually made possible by the internet (Lieberman & Schroeder, 2019).

Coming together with like-minded individuals who understand otome games and appreciate the same attractive characters is a sure way to win friends and eventually be welcomed to your own circle of ladies. Players get introduced to each other through a friend of a friend, and finding a common interest was not a challenge. “Naging close kami kasi bonded agad by the same interest...kaya siguro mabilis ‘yung friendship. *(We became close because we were bonded by the same interest...so being friends was swift.)*”

The camaraderie built between the participants is almost effortless as their in-game connection naturally transcends to their “real-life” moments. Their connectedness is ensured through frequent chats and conversations through networking apps such as Facebook, Messenger, Twitter, Instagram, or WhatsApp. They have become so attached that when a huge fire broke out in one of the ladies’ neighborhood, her fellow Ikemen girl immediately called for firefighters. “Ganun ako ka-thankful for this friendship kasi hindi lang talaga sila naging friends – they’re family (*I am so thankful for this friendship because they’re not only friends – they’re family.*),” the participant from the fire incident disclosed.



Figure 3: The Ikemen ladies enjoy their mixed-mode friendship as they meet in person for fan gatherings or cosplay conventions.

The internet has provided opportunities for developing new offline relationships (Lieberman & Schroeder, 2019) – relationships that have begun online but persist in the actual, face-to-face encounters. For the Ikemen Series players, their online interactions led to strengthened personal connections. And with pandemic restrictions easing up, attending cosplay conventions and fan gatherings or catching flights to meet voice actors abroad have become regular themes in the real lives of the ladies’ Ikemen Series adventures.

Everybody Happy

The participants’ responses to questions on parasocial attachments vis-a-vis their future real-life romantic engagements and the friendships they’ve formed through the otome games point to their secure attachment styles. The Attachment Project (2023) states that people who have developed this type of attachment are self-contented, social, warm, and easy to connect to, as exemplified in the ladies’ narrations of their experiences. As skilled communicators who are able to engage in a variety of topics for both relational partners and relative strangers (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009), it does not take rocket science to discern how they’re able to build deep, meaningful, and long-lasting relationships.

The Ikemen Series ladies proved this as they strategize with their fellow players and fuel each others' obsessions. They even go out of their way to help out other relatively low-ranking players by giving them a boost in the game. The participants clearly enjoy the Ikemen titles, their parasocial relationships with their online beaux, and their mixed-mode friendship with their cliques – and they want to extend this experience to other women outside their circle.

Conclusions

The participants affirm that more than the aesthetics, the Ikemen Series has heavily influenced their lives starting with the mental health support it provided during the pandemic. While engaging in the games demand emotional, monetary, and psychological investments, the ladies did not mind doing so as they believed this is part of their self-care. Not only did this game allow them to “know themselves better,” it was also instrumental in establishing personal standards on real-life romantic relationships. It led to them winning actual friends – fellow ladies in their niche, with whom they are able to share life events and cherish parasocial attachments with. Due to the investments they've made and the benefits they reap from the Ikemen Series, the participants confirm that they don't see themselves stopping these virtual engagements and will continue playing the games as long as they could – or until the game developers shut the servers down.

While the findings in this study are robust enough to inform inquiries on single Filipino women's pandemic affinities through the otome games, it would be advantageous to involve more participants who could provide insights about their experiences of the game. This could lead to more varied findings on single females attachment styles, and their attitudes toward the games.

Next, a study that focuses on the feminist lens could unravel and provide better understanding on the other aspects of womanhood covered in the game. The mention of a gender in the study title itself begs for that angle, but as this research is focused on the affinities they formed during the pandemic, that part was only covered in passing.

Lastly, as discussions on culture and relationships are prone to magnanimous scopes, related studies could delve into cultural attachment (Yap, et. al., 2019), the theory of love (Sternberg, 1986 in Myers, 2023) and the concept of intimacy (Timmerman, 1991). It would also be interesting to conduct a mixed-method research on the same topic.

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