

HEGEMONY AND FEMALE SUBJECTIFICATION IN THE COPYWRITING OF LOVE AND DEEPSPACE: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study analyses how language operates as an ideological instrument in digital promotional discourse with specifically how lexical choices and transitivity structures in the Instagram captions of the mobile game Love and Deepspace construct hegemony and female subjectification. Amid a post-pandemic condition of liquid love and digital loneliness, women are conventionally positioned in language as objects of romantic discourse. The captions of Love and Deepspace, however, reveal a discursive paradox: through careful linguistic choices, they construct women as agents who appear to hold power over the virtual male characters — inviting, directing, and controlling them. The study employs Fairclough's (2003; 2010) three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis integrated with Halliday's (1994) system of transitivity, analysing 54 data items: 32 caption clauses as primary data (18 for diction, 14 for transitivity) and 22 audience comments as secondary data. At the micro level, four diction categories: emotional accessibility; unconditional commitment; experiential realism; and destiny that construct the virtual male as both unconditionally devoted and fully controllable, while transitivity analysis reveals shifting grammatical roles: the same character appears as Actor in some captions and Goal in others, exposing him as a flexible linguistic construction with no autonomous agency. At the meso level, soft-selling and intertextual strategies make promotional discourse feel personal, while audience comments show five patterns of active linguistic reproduction. At the macro level, the discourse rests on the loneliness epidemic, gacha monetisation, and liquid love ideology. These three dimensions produce what Gramsci (1971) termed hegemonic consent that defined as subjectification that feels like empowerment. The language most effective at reproducing power is the language that does not feel like power.

Keyword: Critical Discourse Analysis; hegemony; female subjectification; Love and Deepspace; otome game

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INTRODUCTION

The post-pandemic era has witnessed the accelerated rise of a distinctive digital cultural product: the otome mobile game. Marketed primarily to young women in their late teens through mid-thirties, otome games construct interactive romantic scenarios in which players engage with fictional male characters through dialogue, gift-giving, and shared virtual activities. Among the most commercially successful of these products is *Love and Deepspace*, developed by Infold Games and released internationally in 2024. The game's Instagram presence, particularly through its official account @loveanddeepspace_en, has produced captions that circulate widely and generate substantial audience engagement the captions that, on the surface, promote a mobile game but that, on closer examination, articulate a specific vision of how romantic relationships between women and men should be understood.

This discursive vision is worth attending to precisely because it arrives in a specific sociocultural moment. The post-pandemic period has been characterised by what Murthy (2023) has described as a loneliness epidemic, with roughly half of adults in developed countries reporting significant loneliness and the eighteen-to-thirty-four age group most affected. Ipsos (2022) reported that 63% of Indonesian Generation Z and millennial respondents found it easier to build emotional connections through digital media than through face-to-face social interaction. Bauman (2007) had already anticipated this trajectory in his account of liquid love, describing how consumer capitalism transforms interpersonal affection into a commodity that can be acquired, exchanged, and discarded. Within these conditions, women have conventionally been positioned as objects of romantic address where audiences become the ones who wait, receive, and are acted upon. What *Love and Deepspace* does discursively, however, is more complicated: its captions construct subject positions that appear to reverse this convention, placing women as agents who direct, invite, and control the virtual male characters.

It is this apparent reversal that constitutes the discursive puzzle at the heart of this study. If the captions position women as empowered agents, why should this be a subject of critical concern? The answer, as this research will argue, lies in the mechanism by which the empowerment operates. Fairclough (2003; 2010) has argued that discourse reproduces power relations most effectively not when it silences its subjects but when it offers them experiences unavailable in reality. Hall (1997, p. 55) similarly emphasised that subjectification works most powerfully when a representation offers a subject position that feels so appropriate that individuals voluntarily adopt it as their own identity. What follows in this article is an examination of how these theoretical mechanisms operate in practice of how a discourse of romantic promotion, addressed to women in a moment of documented loneliness and relational fatigue, constructs an apparent empowerment that turns out to be the most stable form of the hegemony it claims to overcome.

While prior discourse studies have addressed advertising language (Machin & Mayr, 2023) and social media promotion, few have applied Fairclough's three-dimensional model in full to the Instagram copywriting of otome games, and fewer still have specifically attended to how the apparent empowerment of women in such discourse functions ideologically. This study addresses that gap. Its purpose is to analyse how hegemony and female subjectification are constructed in the Instagram copywriting of *Love*

and Deepspace across the three dimensions of Fairclough's model — the micro dimension of textual choices, the meso dimension of discursive practice, and the macro dimension of sociocultural context — and to demonstrate that the mechanism through which these dimensions operate together is what Gramsci (in Fairclough, 2003) termed hegemonic consent.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical foundation of this study rests on Fairclough's (2003; 2010) three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis, which conceptualises every discursive event as simultaneously a text, an instance of discursive practice, and an instance of sociocultural practice. The model requires that analytical attention be paid to all three dimensions simultaneously where a text cannot be understood in isolation from the practices of its production and consumption, and neither text nor practice can be understood outside the broader sociocultural conditions within which they operate. This dialectical relationship distinguishes Fairclough's approach from earlier variants of discourse analysis that focus exclusively on linguistic form.

At the micro level, the study draws on Halliday's (1994) systemic functional grammar, particularly the system of transitivity, which describes how clauses represent experience by encoding processes, participants, and circumstances. Halliday's framework enables analysts to trace who is represented as acting and who as being acted upon where a linguistic decision that Fairclough (2003) argues carries ideological weight because it determines whose agency is foregrounded and whose is obscured. In addition to transitivity, the study examines diction (lexical choice), following the argument in Machin and Mayr (2023) that in commercial discourse, lexical choices function as the primary mechanism for constructing emotional resonance that extends beyond product information alone.

The concept of subjectification, drawn from Hall's (1997) work on representation, provides the theoretical vocabulary for understanding how texts do not merely describe subjects but actively construct the subject positions from which those subjects come to understand themselves. Hall (1997, pp. 55–56) argued that subjectification operates most effectively when a representation offers a subject position that feels relevant and desirable so that individuals voluntarily adopt it as their identity. This mechanism connects directly to Gramsci's (in Fairclough, 2003) concept of hegemony, in which dominant power is maintained not through coercion but through the active consent of those over whom it is exercised. The intersection of Hall's subjectification with Gramsci's hegemony provides the theoretical lens through which this study interprets its findings: the discourse of Love and Deepspace does not impose a subject position on its audience; it offers a position that audiences adopt as their own, and it is this voluntary adoption that constitutes the most stable form of hegemony.

The sociocultural context is theorized through Bauman's (2007) concept of liquid love, which describes how late capitalism transforms interpersonal affection into a commodity that must be constantly acquired and renewed. Bauman argued that under conditions of liquid modernity, human relationships become subject to the same logic as consumer goods it is assessed for their immediate satisfaction, discarded when they cease to satisfy, and replaced with new alternatives. This framework is particularly relevant to the study of otome games because such games explicitly

commodify romantic relationships, offering them as products that can be purchased, upgraded, and endlessly renewed.

Prior research on advertising discourse has established that promotional texts do not merely describe products but actively construct the needs those products claim to satisfy. Machin and Mayr (2023) demonstrated that lexical choices in advertising work at two levels simultaneously, a literal meaning that can be traced through dictionary definitions and a contextual meaning that shifts according to the ideological purpose of the text. Van Dijk (2008) extended this analysis to persuasive discourse, arguing that pronominal choices and modal expressions construct closeness between text and audience so that the message appears personally relevant to the individual reader. Building on these established findings, this study extends the analysis to the Instagram copywriting of otome games and specifically to the discursive construction of female empowerment as a mechanism of hegemony.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design applying Fairclough's (2003; 2010) three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis model. The three dimensions — micro (textual analysis), meso (discursive practice), and macro (sociocultural practice) — were applied sequentially to the same corpus so that findings at each level could be interpreted in light of findings at the other levels.

The corpus consists of five official Instagram captions published on the @loveanddeepspace account between January and July 2024, along with audience comments on those posts that were publicly available at the time of data collection. The five captions were selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: they promote different aspects of the game (romance simulation, character introduction, and event mechanics); they contain linguistic constructions of romantic discourse that could be identified through Fairclough's framework; and they use English as the primary language of the text. The data analysed number 54 items in total, distributed across the three dimensions of analysis as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Data across Dimensions of Analysis

Data Type	Dimension	Analytical Focus	Total
Primary (caption clauses)	Micro	Diction (lexical choice)	18
Primary (caption clauses)	Micro	Transitivity (Halliday, 1994)	14
Secondary (audience comments)	Meso	Text consumption	22
Total			54

Caption data were collected through direct documentation from the official *Instagram* account, with each caption captured through screenshots along with metadata including posting date, engagement metrics, and accompanying visual context. Caption text was then manually extracted from the screenshots, transferred to a working document, and line-

numbered (L1, L2, and so forth) for analytical reference. Audience comment data were collected through manual documentation of publicly visible comments in the comment section of each caption, with comments selected on the basis of their explicit engagement with the romantic discourse of the caption. Each comment was recorded with the associated username, engagement metric (likes count) where relevant, and the source caption to which it responded.

The analysis proceeded in three sequential stages corresponding to Fairclough's three dimensions. At the micro level, each item of primary data underwent lexical analysis where it is identifying key diction, tracing its literal meaning through Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2024) and the Indonesian equivalent through the Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI), and then examining its contextual meaning in the caption that followed by transitivity analysis applying Halliday's (1994) system to identify participant roles in each clause. At the meso level, the analysis examined the production of captions and the consumption of captions through the patterns of audience comments. At the macro level, the analysis situated the findings within three sociocultural contexts: situational (post-pandemic loneliness and dating fatigue), institutional (the global gaming industry's monetisation model), and social (liquid love ideology and the commodification of intimacy).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of 54 data items yielded three major findings corresponding to the three dimensions of Fairclough's framework. At the micro level, diction and transitivity work together to construct virtual romantic love as an experience that transcends the limits of human relationships. At the meso level, the captions are produced through soft-selling conventions and consumed through active reproduction by audiences. At the macro level, the effectiveness of this discourse rests on specific sociocultural conditions that make its subject positions appear both necessary and desirable. The discussion below traces these findings dimension by dimension before turning to their combined implications.

The Micro Dimension: Diction and Transitivity

Lexical analysis of the five captions yielded four categories of diction that recur across the corpus, summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Four Categories of Diction in Love and Deepspace Captions

Category	Discursive Function	Representative Data
Emotional accessibility	Constructs love as spatially locatable, measurable, and physically accessible	<i>Love is within your reach; Be With You; by your side</i>
Unconditional commitment	Encodes devotion that transcends any circumstance or physical law	<i>no matter what; across time and space</i>
Experiential realism	Blurs the boundary between digital simulation and lived experience	<i>a very realistic romance; Feel his deepening breath</i>
Destiny and	Removes agency from the	<i>you were determined;</i>

certainty	audience by framing engagement as pre-destined	<i>Because of a childhood incident</i>
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The first category constructs emotional accessibility through spatial language. In the recurring clause below, the word reach, defined in Merriam-Webster (2024) as "the distance or extent covered or able to be covered" that undergoes a discursive shift:

| *"Love is within your reach!"* (Caption 1, L8; Caption 2, L1)

What can be reached is no longer a concrete object but love itself. This representation constructs love as spatially locatable, measurable, and physically accessible, when in ordinary use love is understood as an abstract experience without location. The possessive pronoun your intensifies this personalisation, addressing each individual reader as if the promise were made to them alone.

The second category constructs unconditional commitment. Consider the following clause:

| *"he'll come to your side no matter what"* (Caption 1, L4)

The intensifier no matter what, defined in Merriam-Webster (2024) as "regardless of what happens," encodes a commitment that transcends any conceivable circumstance. This is a commitment no human partner can guarantee. The clause across time and space (Caption 1, L4) intensifies further by placing the virtual character's commitment on a level that transcends the laws of physics themselves. As Fairclough (2010) observed, the naturalisation of impossible standards in commercial discourse is one of the most effective mechanisms of hegemony: audiences who accept these representations measure real relationships against them and consistently find real relationships lacking.

The third category constructs experiential realism through the following imperative:

| *"Feel his deepening breath, rising heartbeat, and the trickle of sweat"* (Caption 3, L11)

This clause commands the audience to perceive physiological sensations — sensations that only living bodies produce — from a virtual character. The attribution to a digital entity of the biological processes of a human body constitutes a foundational discursive move: the naturalisation of the virtual as if it were embodied. Related constructions such as a very realistic romance (Caption 1, L7) and a deeply immersive 3D dating sim (Caption 1, L6) reinforce this move by openly identifying the product as a simulation while claiming that the simulation is so immersive that the boundary with reality becomes indistinguishable.

The fourth category constructs destiny and certainty. The clause below encodes the audience's involvement not as a present choice but as a decision already made:

| *"you were determined to become a Deepspace Hunter"* (Caption 2, L13)

The past-tense construction reminds the audience of a decision that positions consumption as the fulfilment of a destined identity. Related constructions such as Because of a childhood incident (Caption 2, L12) root this decision in a period preceding adult rational choice, removing the dimension of choice from audience engagement entirely.

The transitivity analysis reveals a systematic pattern that clarifies the ideological work of these diction categories. Table 3 shows how the same virtual male character is placed in fundamentally different participant roles across the corpus.

Table 3. Shifting Grammatical Roles of the Virtual Male Character

Caption	Role of Virtual Character	Example Clause
Captions 1–2	Actor (autonomous)	<i>he'll come to your side; All my straying leads me back to you</i>
Captions 3–5	Goal (controlled)	<i>Invite him; Recommend clothes for him; take him to your favorite spots</i>
Captions 4–5	Audience as Carrier	<i>you have full control over choosing couple poses</i>

The character does not have autonomous agency; he is discursively constructed as active when the promotional narrative requires activity from him, and as passive when the narrative requires that the audience direct him. The relational possessive you have full control (Caption 4, L4) assigns absolute power to the audience as an inherent attribute but the control extends only over choices that were pre-configured by the game's design.

Taken together, the diction and transitivity findings demonstrate that at the micro level, both the active and passive representations of the virtual character serve the same ideological function: to offer the female audience two fantasies simultaneously that are unavailable in real human relationships where the fantasy of being loved unconditionally and the fantasy of having absolute control over a partner. The audience is discursively positioned to receive both fantasies without perceiving any contradiction between them, and it is this dual offer that constitutes the distinctive form of subjectification at work in this discourse.

The Meso Dimension: Production and Consumption

The meso analysis examines the discursive practices through which the captions are produced by Infold Games and consumed by audiences. On the production side, the five captions employ the conventions of soft-selling copywriting, which prioritises emotional narrative and experiential language over explicit product description. The captions contain no prices, no technical specifications, and no direct calls to purchase; instead, they build emotional resonance through romantic diction, personal adventure narratives, and constructions of the audience-character relationship. Fairclough (2003) has noted that genre is the convention that determines what can and cannot be said in a text and the soft-selling genre allows the discourse of hegemony to be transmitted without appearing as conventional advertising, thereby more effectively penetrating audience critical defences.

Intertextuality is a critical component of the captions' production. Fairclough (1992) argued that every text absorbs and transforms other texts already circulating in the culture. The captions of Love and Deepspace absorb the diction and rhythm of romantic song lyrics (across time and space in Caption 1, L4 and love is within your reach in Caption 1, L8), the narrative style of romantic novels (all my straying leads me back to you in Caption 1, L14), and the imperative structures typical of romantic communication (Invite him, Take him, Be with you). This intertextual absorption makes the captions feel familiar and resonant to audiences even though they are institutionally produced promotional materials.

On the consumption side, analysis of 22 audience comments reveals five distinct patterns of active reproduction of the discourse. The first pattern is the internalisation of romantic fantasy:

"Yes keep feeding my delusions thank you" (@anne_oying)

"this is basically just supporting my delulu life to the fullest? I might not need any man in my life at this point" (@hazelynrose)

The audience uses the terms delusion and delulu to acknowledge that the fantasy is constructed rather than real, but this acknowledgement does not lead to rejection; instead, the audience explicitly requests that the fantasy continue to be fed. The most effective form of hegemony, as Fairclough (2003) has argued, does not require ignorance where subjects who are aware of ideological construction yet continue to comply demonstrate a deeper form of hegemonic success because their acceptance is not the result of ignorance but of the absence of alternatives that feel equally satisfying.

The second pattern is substitution of real men by virtual characters:

"i don't think i need an irl man anymore" (@lilianne_im)

"We have to stop, then we won't be able to be satisfied with irl boys in this world" (@myaki_y)

The abbreviation irl (in real life) marks an explicit contrast between virtual characters and real men, with the virtual character positioned as the preferred alternative. The self-warning in the second comment indicates awareness of the substitution's dangers but is voiced in a tone that acknowledges the inability to actually stop.

The third pattern is the construction of virtual family and partnership. Comments responding to the game's virtual pet-raising event integrate the virtual character into intimate familial narratives:

"It's official we have a child now (even if it is a bird)" (@lillians_lil_life, 44 likes)

"I guess me and my 6 year partner are dating Zayne together now" (@vhenan_beats)

The second comment is particularly notable: an audience member has integrated the virtual character into an existing six-year human relationship, adapting her lived intimate arrangements to accommodate the discourse of the game. When a commercial discourse is adopted into the narrative of personal life, it has achieved the deepest form of naturalisation. The 44 likes

on the first comment indicate that this sentiment resonates widely within the community.

The fourth pattern is the drive to engagement and transaction:

"Pls next update make it free 20 pulls lol jk" (@yukirikauta)
"Idc I have exams. IM PLAYIN IN AS SOON AS ITS OUT"
(@extravagant_slumber)

The vocabulary of pulls refers to the game's gacha monetisation mechanism, in which players use virtual currency (purchasable with real money) to acquire items or characters. The audience's ready familiarity with this mechanism and their explicit intention to engage with it even to the point of setting aside academic examinations where it demonstrates that the discourse of the captions translates directly into intentions of real action that benefit the platform commercially.

The fifth pattern is deep and continuous emotional attachment:

"THANK YOU FOR CREATING A GAME THAT MAKES ME CONTINUOUSLY LOVED BY THEM" (@shiiky)

The word continuously, defined in Merriam-Webster (2024) as "continuing without interruption," directly reflects the discourse of unconditional commitment analysed at the micro level. The audience does not merely receive the discourse of the captions, here the audience reproduces it in their own language and applies it to their own experience of engagement with the game.

The Macro Dimension: Sociocultural Context

The macro analysis situates the findings from the micro and meso dimensions within three levels of sociocultural context that make the discourse effective. The situational context is that of the post-pandemic loneliness epidemic, in which Murthy (2023) reported that approximately half of adults in developed countries experience significant loneliness, with the eighteen-to-thirty-four age group with the primary demographic target of otome games the most affected. In Indonesia, Ipsos (2022) found that 63% of Generation Z and millennial respondents found it easier to build emotional connections through digital media than through face-to-face social interaction. This context creates a structurally receptive audience for the discourse of virtual romance: audiences who have documented emotional needs for companionship and documented obstacles to meeting those needs through conventional social relationships.

The institutional context is that of the global gaming industry's monetisation model, which is dominated by free-to-play products with in-app purchase revenue streams. Within this model, promotional content is designed not merely to inform potential players but to build emotional attachment sufficient to drive purchases of characters, costumes, and virtual items. Machin and Mayr (2023) explained that in the digital entertainment industry, promotional copywriting functions as a strategic component of the emotional conversion funnel where text is designed to convert prospective players into active players and active players into paying customers making repeated purchases. Infold Games specifically operates the gacha mechanism, a system with structural similarities to gambling in which players purchase random chances to obtain desired characters or

items. The captions do not directly promote this mechanism but produce the emotional attachment that makes players receptive to it.

The social context is that of what Bauman (2007) termed liquid love that is defined as the transformation of interpersonal affection into a commodity subject to the same logic as other consumer goods. Under conditions of liquid modernity, human relationships are assessed for their immediate satisfaction, discarded when they cease to satisfy, and replaced with new alternatives. Otome games represent an extreme instance of this logic: they explicitly commodify romantic relationships, offering them as products that can be acquired, upgraded, and endlessly renewed without the risks of rejection, disappointment, or the mutual negotiation required by relationships with autonomous human partners.

Synthesis: Hegemonic Consent

The three dimensions of analysis together demonstrate that hegemony in the Instagram copywriting of Love and Deepspace operates through a mechanism that Gramsci (in Fairclough, 2003) called hegemonic consent where domination that requires no coercion because it is reproduced from within by subjects who participate in the discourse voluntarily. Female subjectification in this discourse feels like empowerment. It feels like choice. It feels like freedom. Yet each of these feelings is produced by discursive strategies whose ideological function is to secure ongoing consumption of a commercial product that benefits its producer. The lexical construction of accessible love, the transitivity of alternating dominance, the soft-selling production, the active audience reproduction, and the sociocultural conditions of loneliness and liquid love together produce a subject position in which the female audience is not compelled to consume, here, she desires to consume, and her desire is itself the achievement of the discourse.

This finding extends the arguments of Machin and Mayr (2023) and Van Dijk (2008) on advertising discourse by demonstrating a specific mechanism through which contemporary digital promotional discourse produces female subjects who experience their consumption as empowerment. It also demonstrates Hall's (1997, pp. 55–56) theoretical claim that the most effective subjectification is that which feels not like a role being performed but like the subject's own experience. The implications extend beyond the specific case of Love and Deepspace to any discourse in which apparent empowerment functions as a mechanism of hegemony where a class of discourses that appears to be expanding as digital media producers increasingly target women with promotional content that celebrates their agency while simultaneously scripting their consumption.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to analyse how hegemony and female subjectification are constructed in the Instagram copywriting of Love and Deepspace across the three dimensions of Fairclough's model. The analysis of 54 data items: 32 caption clauses and 22 audience comments that has demonstrated that at the micro level, diction constructs virtual love as accessible, unconditional, experientially real, and destined, while transitivity alternately positions the virtual character as autonomous actor and controllable object. At the meso level, the captions employ soft-selling and intertextual conventions that naturalise promotional discourse as personal communication, and audience comments demonstrate five patterns of active reproduction of the discourse. At the macro level, the effectiveness of this discourse rests on the post-pandemic loneliness epidemic, the gacha

monetisation model of the global gaming industry, and the ideology of liquid love that normalises the commodification of interpersonal affection.

The central contribution of this study is the demonstration that these three dimensions operate together to produce a form of hegemony that Gramsci (in Fairclough, 2003) termed hegemonic consent. Female subjectification in the discourse of Love and Deepspace feels like empowerment and it is precisely this feeling that makes the discourse function as hegemony. Power is most stable when it does not feel like power. The discursive construction of the female audience as an agent who directs and controls the virtual male character is not the opposite of her subjectification; it is the mechanism through which her subjectification is achieved.

The scientific contribution of this work is to extend the application of Fairclough's three-dimensional model to a specific and understudied form of contemporary digital promotional discourse, the Instagram copywriting of otome games as this to demonstrate that the concept of hegemonic consent provides a productive analytical framework for interpreting discourses in which women's apparent empowerment functions ideologically. Future research could extend this analysis to comparative studies across cultural markets, integrate multimodal analysis of the visual and audio elements accompanying the captions, or pursue reception-based studies through interviews with active players to deepen understanding of how the subject positions offered by the discourse are individually negotiated, internalised, or resisted.

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