

Sexual Objectification on Female Character for Mobile Game Advertisement Critics on Z-Girls Mobile Game Advertisement

Daniel Kurniawan Salamoon

Petra Christian University, Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya, INDONESIA

ABSTRACT

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Mobile game nowadays is a part on human activities. Gaming activities became a norm on human activities on various ages. Easy access for internet and the advancement on technology especially on smartphones, helps gaming activities as part of daily human activities. We can find thousands of mobile games on Android platforms and people can access those games as long as they have internet access and proper smartphone on their hand. On the other hand, to ensure their business on gaming will continue, game developers usually using ads on social media platforms to introduce their game. By using ads, they looking for user and promote their games usually using clip or images from their in-game applications so people can understand about what kind of game is that. This study will try to analysis especially about how some developers put their visual on their advertising. This study will also try to criticize about visualization on that advertisement especially when those games try to reach the audience.

INTRODUCTION

The development of society always goes hand in hand with developments in technology. In various aspects, nowadays human life generally went together with the need for the existence of smartphones. Human activities have generally been dominated by the presence of small smartphone devices in various activities. Read the news, socialize with each other, watch favourite shows to fill our free time by playing (gaming activities). Human play activities through smartphones have become normal activities carried out communally (Gezerer, 2015). Nowadays, games offered by various developers are quite a lot based on MMO (Massive Multiplayer Online) where users can play together with their colleagues at one time and can meet various players from various cities and even different countries.

In general, the definition of a game is a software application software that is created as an entertainment medium. According to experts, Schell (2019) in his book says that *games* are more complex than toys. Toys is a game object that provides a sensation of excitement when played. While the game, according to Greg Costikyan, is an interactive structure that requires players to achieve a goal. Schell also explained that the definition of a game is a game that is played voluntarily, has goals or targets, has difficulty achieving these goals and there are rules that make uneven results, where there are players who will win the game, some lose. This will provide experience to players when playing a game (Schell, 2019).

Video games are complex and multisided phenomena that have become objects of research in various sciences: philosophy, culture studies, media and literary studies, semiotics, anthropology, ethics, aesthetics, history, sociology, psychology, neuroscience, economics, computer science, and others. All that illustrates the significance of video games in different spheres of our life. Video games are popular not only with kids and youth, but also with representatives of all ages and social strata. The industry itself is quite young; however, it is rapidly developing. It is becoming the driver of the entertainment business on the whole being ahead of cinematography in terms of sales. Moreover, the gaming industry is going beyond the borders of its initial entertaining purposes. According to Shaw (2010), “video game permeate education, mobile technologies, museum displays, social functions, family interactions, and workplaces.”

According to Deloitte’s research, gaming has become the most prominent form of entertainment among millennials and Gen Z, exceeding the popularity of streaming television and movies. In 2023, gaming industry revenues grew by 2.6 percent to \$187.7 billion, according to Newzoo — far more than more established channels such as music (\$26.2 billion) and print media (\$47.2 billion) (Lee, 2023). Pandemic conditions also became a factor that helps gaming needed on society. People trying to find another activity that will help them through pandemic conditions.

Easy access to find an entertainment media from PC, laptop or smartphone is also the key to gaming activities nowadays. The effect that has occurred still brings gaming activities as an option for people to find alternative entertainment other than watching in the context of their activities using smartphones. Related to this, the game industry requires media activities, especially in advertising. Data from Deloitte research notes that in the United States, in 2022 a total of \$8.6 billion was spent on gaming advertising and is likely to continue to rise to \$11.5 billion by 2027. The purpose of this advertisement is clearly that to maintain existence and be able to get new players in a game.

Games as a Social Activity

Jeffrey Rosseau wrote for article on Game Industry, that the East Asia PC and mobile game markets will hit \$29.8 billion in 2023. The study comprises of Japan, South Korea, and Chinese Taipei. It adds that Japan will account for over 60% of consumer spending for the region. Meanwhile, the Korean PC games market makes up over 55% of East Asia's games revenue. The gaming population for the region is also projected to reach 110.6 million by 2027 (Rosseau, 2023).



Figure 1. East Asia games market

Source: www.gamesindustry.biz

From that data, at least we learned that Asia, by general means, is a mature market for game industry, and gaming becomes a part of daily culture for Asian. Moreover, Rosseau wrote especially that East Asia is a home for game industry market. It is functionally different from the 2000 era where the function of a mobile phone is purely to communicate more quickly and effectively. Current technological developments cause the existence of mobile phones, which have evolved into smartphones, to allow general community activities to be done. The existence of media today enable smartphones to reach various human activities, from communication to entertainment.

In her research, Cary Tilds (2021) found that men and women in the age range of 18-25 and 26-35 years have leisure activities that are playing more games than watching television shows. At that age, the recorded gaming time is around 7.5 hours per week.

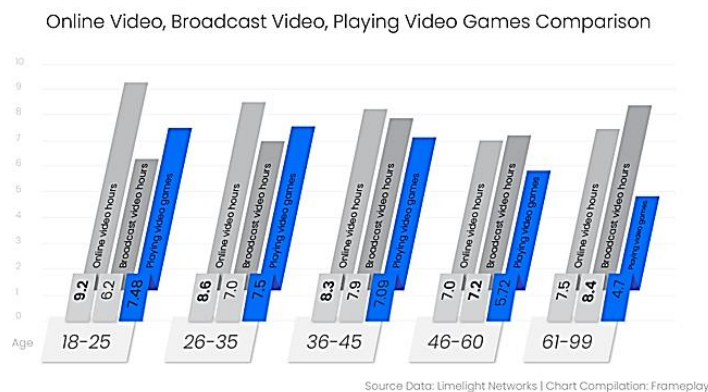


Figure 2. Comparison data Activities of watching online videos, television broadcasts and playing games

Source: www.mediavillage.com

According to this data, gaming activities are no longer related to stigma or reference to the word that games are attached to children or adolescents but also have a general position in society in the productive age range and can be said to be of adult age. It is understood that the variety of titles and genres that emerge allows for a variety of new players who were not previously interested, but because of easy access and variety of options, create preferences that can meet the desires of various age ranges.

Theoretical Approach

Advertising

Advertising can be defined as a tool used in marketing and advertising to promote or sell a product, service, or idea. It allows brands to get the word out to potential customers (Knezovic, 2024). Advertisements are created to communicate messages, arouse curiosity, and create a lasting impression for certain brands and usually they are designed to influence and persuade. Many definitions can be found about advertising, but the existence of advertising generally refers to the way brands build a communication for audience using media. Depending on the culture of the country, advertising can be found in many forms. The birth of social media give advertising a new way to approach audience, especially in visual context.

In a certain understanding, advertising can be said to be a visual rhetoric where the actual visual displayed has the main power to influence. In the concept of communication, advertising

brings out in the mind of the audience a certain motive that later has an influence in the sense of use or the act of consumption (Hackley, 2005). An advertisement has multiple layers of communication, where often more implicit things appear visually than explicit things about the context or information in the ad. Furthermore, Hackley (2005) wrote that advertising is actually a rigid and complicated organization of various visual elements and text presented to the audience, creating space for argumentation for the ad to place itself in the minds and interests of the audience.

Video Games and Semiotics

In semiotics, video games with their various elements are a collection of signs that will provide meaning to their users. These signs will create a gaming experience. Quoting Kirkpatrick (2011), video games are objects that can be played freely to give the impression and meaning of the gaming experience. Semiotics is derived from the Greek word *semeion*, which means sign. Semiotics, as explained by Ferdinand de Saussure, is to studies the role of signs as part of social life. Semiotics will try to study the structure, types, typology, and relationship of signs in their use in society. The semiotic tradition consists of a set of theories about how signs represent objects, ideas, states, situations, feelings and conditions beyond the signs themselves (Littlejohn, 2009). Human life is never separated from the daily meaning of signs. Signs cannot stand alone; signs become meaningful when interpreted by others, so this meaning is the key in an understanding of the representation of signs.

Gender Representation on Media

Media have the power to shape opinions in society. The community's need for the flow of information positions mass media as suppliers of information as well as disseminators of ideology. The easiest example is commercial advertisements that often appear. The image of a woman is generally associated with things that define women in society such as cooking, serving husbands or positions that are imaged as subordinate (Handoko, 2005). Media are consumed by public nowadays because it conveys information to people nowadays who have different daily behaviour. In his journal, Rachmat Kriyantono (2007) stated that media organizations distribute messages that not only influence but also reflect the culture of a society. So, what happens in the media describes what is happening in the community (Kriyantono, 2007). This condition is ideal in regard to information that is now a necessity in society. So, anything in the media can become a business. Anything that can be media content will be exposed fiercely in order to meet the needs of the community or its audience.

In this era, the media plays an important role in the social conditions of society. The variety of content and the ease with which people have access to these contents make the need for media high (Ritzer, 2012). We can see those conditions especially in how young generation attached to social media-related things. Related to this, the community also gets easier access to be exposed to media and supports this behavior. Games are one of the media that show changes in its course of development. The various genres offered give people the option to choose what kind of game they want to enjoy. Internet access also makes gaming activities a common thing to encounter today, especially using smartphones.

Visual images that appear in the media can create an understanding of certain beliefs or ideologies. In various media, content about the existence of women becomes a special attraction. As part of the visual element, the presence of women becomes something that can add aesthetics. According to Tamagola (as cited in Liestianingsih, 2002), women are often placed as sexual objects or also often as “decoration” for certain model of design. This happened when women were displayed by biological beauty, such as smooth skin, long hair, slender body, and so on (Liestianingsih, 2002). Video game media also feature female leads. For example, the character Lara Croft in Tomb Raider tells the story of an archaeologist, Lara Croft, who is a clever, independent person and even has martial arts skills. On the other side, gamers can see a sexual side of Lara Croft from the way she been framed by video game cover or in advertising using her “sexiness” with big breast and skin like a model, not like an adventurer as we play the game.



Figure 3. Lara Croft visualization on Tomb Raider

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/>

This digital game later became a feature film played by Angelina Jolie. However, Helen W. Kennedy (2002) in her journal said that the presence of Lara Croft does not open up space for female role barriers. Instead, there is an element of presenting a character who becomes a heroine figure for players. This view arises because the figure of Lara Croft is shown to have exotic skin, thick lips that give a sensual impression, has a protruding chest and a slender body even though she is also able to do martial arts and rock climbing (Kennedy, 2002).

METHOD

This research was conducted based on image-based research, namely researching and revealing visual image as the basis of research. In the process of interpretation, the researcher will carry out the dialectic process with the text as the object. The research steps to be carried out are as follows:

1. Z-Girls mobile games as the object of research will be documented, especially on advertising impressions that aim to offer games to potential players.
2. Observing and selecting scenes from Z-Girls mobile game commercials by using a visual methodology approach, specifically in the site of image itself area to obtain articulated signs. Researchers will interpret, interpret and understand the observed visual objects.
3. This study uses the point of view of the image itself (the site of the image itself), this is very related to the active subject (single and not as an audience) in interpreting the visual image displayed from advertisements that appear for the promotion of Z-Girls mobile game.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

About Z-Girls Mobile Game

Z-Girls is a game that available on mobile phone, and players can download it from Google Play or Apple Store. This game offers an adventure in a post-apocalyptic theme. The premise of the game is to defend against zombies and the player will take role as a commander on a battlefield. The player will have an army which consists of girls, and the player can collect them with “gacha” system. Player will have a headquarter to develop some weapons or gain some experience (EXP) points to level up the characters so they can be stronger and have higher stats. The battle will provide by system and the player can deploy the characters they had to battle, and if they won, they could get EXP points and some items that can be used in the game.

To add some interaction, the player can enjoy some of the storyline that this game brought on. At the beginning, Z-Girls 3 offer some based story. The player is like a Commander and try to build an army to fight against invasion by zombies.

At some points of game, the player can also give some equipment for the character which will increase certain statistics point like war ability, defense, etc. Because this game is about war and battle, it is obvious that stronger character and equipment will help the player to keep winning on the battle. This research will not put my focus on gameplay or in-game visual storytelling. My focus will be on visual advertisement.



Figure 3. In game screenshot for headquarter and battle mode view
Source: Z-Girl mobile

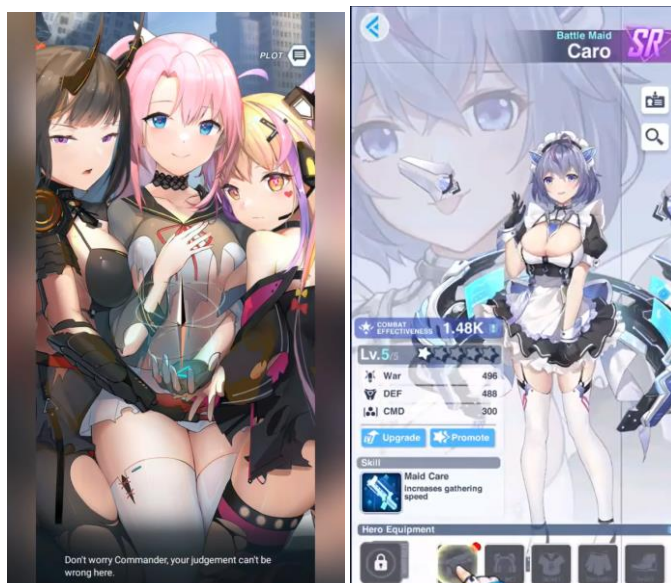




Figure 4. Story page on Z-Girls 3 mobile game
Source: Z-Girls mobile game

Visual on Advertisement for Z-Girls 3 Mobile Game

The key element for an advertising is the message for the audience. That message usually consists of text elements and pictures or images elements. By using semiotics as background studies, the visual elements on Z-Girls mobile game advertising can be analysed using the context of images and signs.

Table 1. Visual analysis on ZGirl visual advertising

Image	Sign	Analysis
	<p>There is a bar with blue color.</p> <p>Inside it, there is a text “choose your AI girlfriend”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - As an advertisement, this message has an approach method for audience to have an active role by using word “choose” as the message. - By using the word “girlfriend”, this text is dedicated for men audiences. The word “girlfriend” also can have a meaning on a relationship which can be decoded as an effort to build relationship between the game and the player.
	<p>A young girl with long pink hair on standing pose. She has blue eyes. Her hand gesture looks like to play with her hair.</p> <p>She wears grey and with dress. The grey part is like a short blouse with red ribbon on the centre.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - This picture tries to depict the image of a girl that “you will get” because you play the game. It is more like a poster girl than an image to promote the game. - You can find “seifuku” concept which means school uniform on this image. It signifies a young girl or gives you a glimpse of school correlation in this game.
	<p>This is an image of the option boxes from the advertisement on social media. These boxes consist of text and can be classified as two options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Your dating type and options written - Character and personality options 	<p>From a certain point of view, the text on the box was created for man audience because the options are clearly given the context of “girl option” on dating option.</p> <p>Also, from what is written there, you can find a tendency to build on romantic relationship context and because it is a game, the tendency is to offer some fantasy context on what kind of girl the player can get from this game.</p>

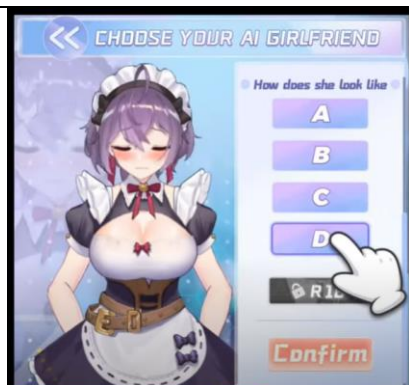


Image of a girl with purple hair and maid costume. The gesture looks calm and quiet. There is a blush tone on the cheeks. The costume shows a part of her chest. There is a look alike icon of hand with white color that can be moved around to pick on option box with A, B, C, and D written on it.

From this context, what we can see is the game try to promote the game through visualization of a girl who looks like “pick me”. This context shown by a girl in a battle game but using maid costume which looks sexy and nothing to do with battle. The gesture and expression show some calm and obedient gesture mainly because of maid costume which can have context of submission.



This is an image of to inform about the game. We can see 5 female characters with different clothes and gestures. Beside it, there is an icon of a smartphone and under the image of the smartphone, we can find a logo of Z-girls 3.

From this image, the context can be read as: by playing this game, which is available on the mobile phone, you can meet with the girls in the image. The importance is on the girls, not the gameplay and the game experiences, because we cannot see the context where the images show how to play the game.

Discussion on ZGirls Advertising on Women Representation

According to table above, ZGirls advertising needs to be criticized for abusing the context for girls on their own characters to become what we called “clickbait” for someone who did not know about this game. The context for their advertising is clearly to put term “girl” into an object that players need to have on their account. By saying that the game provides “girls” as characters to play with, they use these words to attract players.

This can be seen on the table where their advertising asked the audience to select a girl they want to be with. Their narratives also asked audience about their “dating type”, which convicted audience about having some relationship with the character. This context, on a study from Handoko (2005), put girls or women on a passive position just to be picked by someone. Because advertising is created to persuade someone on certain things, this context on ZGirls advertising can create meaning on social life also where women will wait to be picked.

Next discussion is how this advertising put visual images and how they relate to objectification. On Table 1, there is an image of a girl with what we called “maid costume”. This context for “maid costume” is usually close to someone who served. That is why the visual is girl with closed eyes and her hand gestures showed respect. This image will create “expectation” for what kind of game Zgirls is and it is clearly the way the game creators are creating a semiotics situation where someone will interpret that he or she will get the girl on that game. From that visual image, there is no clear message about what the players will play in the context of ZGirls game. They only provide audience with girls in certain pose, clothes and gesture with no relevancies to the game experiences. Those advertising is simply attracting audience with the concept of “collecting” girls, which, again, only put girls and women into second class just to be a trophy for men.

CONCLUSION

From the studies conducted, it can be said that the game industry is currently one part of the creative industry that has great economic potential globally. The rise of e-sports matches, easy access to playing games on various devices, internet access for the existence of online games to gaming communities show that gaming activities have become a common activity and seem to have a certain schedule for individuals today. Social potential like this raises the movement of how a game will be launched to the community in the hope that the game becomes an option to play.

Advertising as a form of promotional media is also developing due to the flow of change and disruption, such as the presence of social media so that it is easy for various brands to display advertisements about their brands on social media. Ads that basically aim to provide persuasion to the audience about something bring up tempting visualization actions. The more crowded and rampant advertisements that appear, the more the urgency to attract the attention of the audience to what is offered. This condition gives rise to a variety of visuals that can be said to be extreme visual exploitation. In the ad study on the case of Z-Girls 3 mobile game, what is seen is to highlight things that can even be explicitly said to be female sensuality. Ads that are interactive but use words that are seductive, positioning women as "goods" that must be chosen in detailed specifications.

In this era of technological advancement, it turns out that things that utilize female sensuality to support persuasion of something can still be found. Of course, Z-Girls mobile game ads are not the only ones. However, considering the visual gameplay offered, there is a gap where the game's ads can appear for viewers who are still at a young age. It is not new that children and

adolescents today already have their own devices for the reason of ease of communication. Visual exploitation that contains elements of female sensuality is certainly not only a negative thing in visual order but also can have an impact on further social contexts, where it can lead to stigma and improper behavior towards women. Hopefully, this study can be a warning that the games offered may be "normal" games, but advertisements utilizing various inappropriate visuals are raised for reasons of economic potential and can cause controversy socially.

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