

# Between Empowerment and Objectification: Female Character Sensuality in Garena Free Fire

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## ABSTRACT:

The rapid growth of digital gaming has transformed games into interactive environments shaping meaning, identity, and social interaction. This study examined the representation of female character sensuality in Garena *Free Fire*, and how such representations were interpreted by players. Using a qualitative approach, this research combined Fiske's semiotic analysis to identify how visual elements such as body proportion, costume, and character design construct meanings of femininity and sensuality, alongside Hall's encoding/decoding model through semi-structured interviews with five active players. Findings revealed that female characters were consistently represented through standardised visual patterns emphasising slim bodies, aesthetic attractiveness, and sensual elements, even when narratively positioned as strong and competent. This reflects the persistence of the male gaze in game design, where female bodies function as objects of visual consumption. Audience responses were not uniform, as male players interpreted these representations as neutral aesthetic elements, while female players were more critical, associating them with broader social implications. These results affirm that meaning in digital games is not fixed but negotiated through interaction between media texts and audiences. This study contributes to communication research by bridging visual representation and audience reception, demonstrating that digital games operate as dynamic spaces where ideology, aesthetics, and user experience intersect.

## KEY WORDS:

audience reception, digital games, female representation, male gaze, semiotics, sensuality.

## DOI:

10.34135/actaludologica.2026-9-1.52-65

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# Introduction

The development of digital technology over the past two decades has significantly transformed the way people interact with media, including in terms of entertainment consumption and daily communication practices. In Indonesia, this transformation has been heavily influenced by the increasing use of Android-based smartphones, which enable easy access to various digital platforms, including online games. Games are no longer understood as merely recreational activities but as interactive communication spaces where individuals engage in the exchange of meaning, identity formation, and social interaction within a virtual environment (Deuze, 2013; Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Jin, 2017).

This phenomenon is supported by statistical data showing the high penetration of online gaming in Indonesia. At least 52 million Indonesians actively play online games. As many as 82% of players state that they play because they can connect with others virtually, while 62% spend between one and three hours per day playing. Additionally, 69% of users prefer smartphones as their primary device for gaming (Bungin, 2022). Data from We Are Social & Meltwater (2023) also indicates that 46% of internet users in Indonesia engage in gaming activities, while another 36% enjoy game-related content, such as watching gameplay. These figures demonstrate that games have become an integral part

of digital culture, as well as a communication medium with a strong influence on shaping users' experiences and perspectives (Jin, 2017).

Unlike conventional media such as television or film, games possess an interactive nature that allows users to be not merely spectators, but active participants in the world constructed by the medium. This interactivity creates an immersive experience that strengthens players' emotional and cognitive engagement. Thus, games can be understood as a communication medium that not only conveys messages but also shapes perceptions, values, and social reality constructions. In this context, visuals become a primary element in conveying meaning, as character design, environments, and visual aesthetics function as a sign system that shapes players' interpretations (Deuze, 2013; Chandler, 2017).

One prominent aspect of game visuals is the representation of women. Female characters in games are often designed according to specific visual standards, such as a 'slender body', tight or revealing clothing, and visually appealing expressions. This representation cannot be understood merely as an aesthetic choice, but rather as part of a visual communication practice that carries ideological content. In communication studies, this phenomenon can be analysed through the concept of the *male gaze* introduced by Mulvey (1975), which explains that visual media tend to represent women as objects of gaze from a heterosexual male perspective. In the context of digital games, this concept is relevant because character design and visual elements are often aimed at creating visual appeal oriented toward the pleasure of looking (Mulvey, 1975; Gray, 2014, 2016; Gill, 2016).

However, this approach cannot be understood in isolation. Contemporary feminist studies indicate that the audience plays an active role in interpreting media representations. Women are not always passive objects but can interpret, negotiate, and even reject the meanings presented by the media. Therefore, an analysis of the representation of women in games must consider not only visual aspects, but also how such representations are received and interpreted by players (Hall, 1980; Gray, 2014; Richard, 2016; Kafai et al., 2016).

In this context, *Garena Free Fire* (111 dots Studio & Garena, 2017) serves as a relevant subject of study, since it is one of the most popular battle royale games in Indonesia, and features various characters with diverse backgrounds and abilities. Developed by 111 dots Studio and published by Garena for Android and iOS, the game places up to 52 players on an island where they must search for weapons, gear, and supplies, while surviving a shrinking safe zone, with the goal of being the last player or team standing. A central element of the game is its character system, in which each character possesses a unique special ability that players can select and combine strategically, depending on the game mode. The game is played from a third person perspective and is notable for its fast-paced matches, typically lasting 10-15 minutes, making it particularly well-suited for mobile play.

Overall, the representation of female characters in *Garena Free Fire* reveals a consistent pattern of presenting the female body as the visual focal point. Although female characters are portrayed as strong and capable figures, their visual construction continues to emphasise sensuality. This suggests that the representation of women in games is not only related to empowerment, but also to the reproduction of visual standards that have long been present in the media (Richard, 2016; Gray, 2014). Previous research has shown that female characters in digital games are often commodified through visual designs that emphasise physical attractiveness. However, most of this research has focused on visual analysis, without linking it to the audience's experience. In fact, in interactive media such as games, meaning is shaped not only by visual design but also by how players interpret and respond to these representations during gameplay (Hall, 1980; Deuze, 2013).

Based on this, this study aims to determine how the sensuality of female characters is represented in *Garena Free Fire* and how these representations are interpreted by players. Grounded in a domestic feminist perspective, this study foregrounds the socio-cultural context of Indonesian society, in which norms surrounding femininity, bodily representation, and gender expectations shape both the production and reception of media content. By combining semiotic analysis and an audience perspective, this study is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between visual representation, ideology, and communication processes in digital media (Fiske, 2010; Chandler, 2017). In doing so, it contributes to the growing body of feminist media scholarship in Indonesia, offering a locally situated analysis rather than relying solely on Western feminist frameworks.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach aimed at interpreting the meanings embedded in the visual representations of female characters and understanding how those meanings are constructed and perceived by players. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study does not seek to measure causal relationships quantitatively, but rather to examine the phenomenon in depth through the interpretation of signs, symbols, and users' subjective experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In this study, analysis is conducted through two complementary main approaches: semiotic analysis and audience reception analysis. Semiotic analysis is used to examine how meaning is constructed through visual elements in character design, such as costumes, body shapes, expressions, and visual styles. This approach draws on Fiske's (2010) framework, which views media as a system of signs operating through cultural codes. Through this analysis, female characters in *Garena Free Fire* are understood as visual texts containing denotative and connotative meanings, as well as reflecting specific values and ideologies in gender representation (Chandler, 2017).

Meanwhile, to understand how these meanings are received and interpreted by players, this study employs an audience reception approach, based on the encoding/decoding model proposed by Hall (1980). From this perspective, the audience is not positioned as a passive recipient but as an active subject capable of engaging in dominant readings, negotiation, or even opposition to media messages. This approach allows the study to examine how gaming experience, social background, and gender position influence how players understand the representation of female characters' sensuality (Hall, 1980).

The research focuses on five female characters out of a total of around 60 game characters in *Garena Free Fire*: Laura, Kapella, A124, Moco, and A-Patroa (Table 1). Character selection was conducted purposefully, considering popularity levels, visual design clarity, and the diversity of character backgrounds. Thus, these characters are considered representative of general patterns in the representation of women in this game (Richard, 2016; Gray, 2014).

The data in this study were obtained from two main sources. First, visual data in the form of in-game character appearances and official promotional materials, analysed using a semiotic approach. Second, qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews with five respondents who are active *Garena Free Fire* players, consisting of two women and three men. Respondents were selected purposefully based on the criteria of having sufficient gaming experience and being able to articulate their perspectives on in-game characters (Fiske, 2010; Chandler, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Table 1: Demography of selected Garena Free Fire characters

Character	Gender	Age	Cultural/national background	Occupation
Laura	Female	29	Western/European	Special agent
Kapella	Female	21	East Asian (Korea)	Singer, influencer
A124	Female	18	N/A (inspired by Western/Euro-pean type)	AI battle robot
Moco	Female	20	Latin American	Hacker
A-Patroa	Female	28	Latin American (Brazil)	Runs a music store

Source: own processing based on character details published on the Garena Free Fire website ("Laura", n.d.; "Kapella", n.d.; "A124", n.d.; "Moco", n.d.; "A-Patroa", n.d.)

The interviews were conducted using open-ended questions aimed at exploring players' perceptions of female character design, their in-game interaction experiences, and their views on the elements of sensuality within those characters. This semi-structured approach allowed for flexibility in exploring the respondents' experiences, resulting in data that is both more in-depth and contextual. Data analysis was conducted in several stages. The first stage was a visual analysis to identify patterns of sensuality representation in character design using a semiotic approach. The second stage was a thematic analysis of the interview results to identify patterns of interpretation emerging from the respondents. The third stage involved integrating the results of these two analyses to examine the relationship between visual representation and audience interpretation (Fiske, 2010; Chandler, 2017).

Through this approach, the study not only reveals how sensuality is represented in female characters, but also how such representations are understood and responded to within the communication practices occurring in the game. Thus, this methodology enables a more comprehensive analysis of the relationship between media, ideology, and the audience within the context of digital games.

According to Banet-Weiser (2018), representations of women in contemporary popular culture often present a paradox between empowerment and commodification. Women are presented as strong, independent and confident, but at the same time they are still constructed through standards of beauty and sexual attractiveness that benefit market logic and industrial media. In the context of female characters in *Garena Free Fire*, character sensuality can be understood as a form of 'popular feminism' that offers an image of empowered women, but at the same time maintains the purpose of the female body as a visual commodity.

Sarkeesian (Feminist Frequency, 2016a, 2016b) argues that representations of women in digital games are often shaped through various tropes or representational patterns that position women as visual objects for players. In many games, female characters are not only designed to fulfil specific functions within the game's narrative, but also to fulfil aesthetic expectations that emphasise beauty, sensuality, and sexual attractiveness. As a result, women's bodies often become the primary focus of representation, rather than their own characteristics, abilities, or the complexity of their identities.

In the context of *Garena Free Fire*, female characters are depicted as figures with fighting skills, intelligence, and active roles in the game. However, the use of costumes that emphasise body shape, visually appealing character poses, and certain beauty standards indicate that sensuality remains a significant element in character design. Sarkeesian's (Feminist Frequency, 2016a, 2016b) perspective helps explain how such representations can create conditions in which women appear empowered, while simultaneously being constructed as visual objects consumed by players.

# Portrayal of Selected Female Characters in *Garena Free Fire*

The selected female characters in *Garena Free Fire* – Laura, Kapella, A124, Moco, and A-Patroa – are portrayed as strong figures who play important roles in the game (Picture 1). However, behind this narrative lies a relatively uniform visual pattern in body representation and aesthetics:

- Laura is portrayed as a professional sniper with exceptional combat skills. Narratively, this character embodies strength, resilience, and strategic intelligence. However, from a visual perspective, her costume is designed with cuts that accentuate her body shape, such as tight-fitting clothing and details that highlight specific body areas. This indicates a tension between the representation of women as strong subjects and a visual construction that continues to position the female body as an aesthetically appealing object, consistent with Gray (2014, 2016) and Richard (2016), who argued that female characters in games are frequently designed to prioritise visual appeal over narrative agency, reinforcing gendered stereotypes despite their heroic roles.
- Kapella is depicted as a singer with the ability to heal teammates. This character embodies gentleness, empathy, and emotional support. However, her visual design still incorporates elements of sensuality through form-fitting attire and visually appealing expressions. The sensuality in this character is not explicitly portrayed but rather conveyed through a more subtle approach, such as a cute style and soft expressions, which continue to draw attention to the visual appeal of the female form.
- These findings correspond to the view of heroines described by Gray (2014, 2016) and Richard (2016), who argue that female characters in games, despite being framed as powerful or technologically advanced, continue to be designed with idealised body proportions and sexualised aesthetics that conform to male-oriented visual standards. As seen in A124, whose cyborg identity conceptually suggests a transcendence of traditional gender constructs, her visual representation nonetheless retains an exaggerated female body shape and revealing clothing, reinforcing the notion that even futuristic or post human female characters remain constrained by conventional beauty and bodily norms rather than being defined by their power or agency.
- Moco is portrayed as a smart and independent hacker. This character represents intelligence and technological prowess. However, her visual design still features elements of sensuality through clothing that reveals certain parts of her body. This demonstrates that even characters focused on intellectuality are still constructed within a visual framework that emphasises physical attractiveness.
- A-Patroa is a character who embodies self-confidence and cultural identity through collaborations with public figures. However, her visual design still highlights sensuality through clothing choices and poses that reveal more of the body. This demonstrates that even culturally based representations remain within the same aesthetic framework.



Picture 1: Selected female characters from the game Garena Free Fire: Laura (top), Kapella (middle-left), A124 (middle-right), Moco (bottom-left), A-Patroia (bottom-right)

Source: own processing based on official visuals published at the Garena Free Fire website ("Laura", n.d.; "Kapella", n.d.; "A124", n.d.; "Wallpapers", n.d.; "A-Patroia", n.d.)

# Results and Discussion

The representation of female characters in *Garena Free Fire* demonstrates that visual design functions not merely as an aesthetic element but as a system of signs that actively produces and disseminates meanings regarding femininity, the body, and attractiveness within the digital space. Through an analysis of the characters Laura, Kapella, A124, Moco, and A-Patroa, a consistent visual pattern can be identified, in which the female body is constructed through specific aesthetic standards that emphasise slender body proportions, clothing that follows the curves of the body, and visual expressions designed to attract attention. Within Fiske's (2010) semiotic framework, these elements can be understood as signs operating at the denotative level – as character design – and the connotative level – as representations of what is considered the *ideal female body* in contemporary visual culture (Chandler, 2017).

At the denotative level, the character Laura is portrayed as a professional sniper with high proficiency in strategy and combat. However, at the connotative level, Laura's slender body and tight-fitting costume shift the focus from function to the visual form of the body. This indicates that representations of female strength are not entirely detached from aesthetic demands regarding the body. Within the framework of the male gaze, this condition reflects how women remain positioned as visual objects even when they hold a strong narrative subject position. In other words, female power in games does not stand alone but is framed within an aesthetic that can be visually enjoyed by the audience (Mulvey, 1975; Gill, 2016).

Kapella exhibits a more subtle yet no less significant form of representation. As a singer and healer, she is not associated with physical strength but rather with gentleness, empathy, and affection. However, her visual design still features a proportionate body with clothing that follows the curves of her body and visually appealing expressions. In this context, sensuality is not present in an explicit form, but through an aesthetic that is 'soft' and 'alluring', which still directs attention toward the female body. Gill (2009) refers to this phenomenon as a form of sexualisation within postfeminist culture, where objectification is no longer displayed in a vulgar manner, but through an aesthetic that appears natural and is even regarded as an expression of individual choice.

The character A124 adds a more complex dimension by combining human and technological elements. As a cyborg, A124 has the potential to represent a body free from biological limitations and traditional gender constructs. However, its visual design still adheres to the ideal standards of the female body, with clothing that accentuates certain body parts. This indicates that even in a futuristic context, the representation of women remains bound by the same aesthetic norms. Thus, technology does not function as a tool to liberate the body from social constructs, but rather becomes a new medium for reproducing established body aesthetics (Richard, 2016; Gray, 2014).

Lynch et al. (2016) found that the representation of women in digital games has changed significantly over time. Modern female characters tend to be depicted as stronger, more independent, and more active than in previous periods. However, sexualisation remains a significant part of female character design. This finding suggests that the increased representation of women as competent figures is not always accompanied by a decrease in the objectification of women's bodies.

A similar pattern is evident in the character Moco, who narratively represents intelligence and technological prowess. As a hacker, Moco should emphasise intellectual aspects and digital competence. However, her visual design still emphasises physical appeal through clothing and a visual style that reveals the body. This indicates that within the

game's visual construction, even a woman's intelligence is insufficient to serve as the central focus of representation without being accompanied by bodily aesthetics. Thus, the body remains the primary focal point in the production of meaning, while other aspects such as intellectuality function as supplementary elements that do not displace visual dominance.

A-Patroa demonstrates how sensuality is also linked to the commodification of culture. This character not only represents women but also carries elements of cultural identity through associations with public figures. However, its visual design still emphasises the body through revealing clothing and attention-grabbing poses. This indicates that cultural identity does not eliminate the logic of objectification; rather, it is integrated into visual strategies aimed at enhancing the character's appeal. In other words, the female body serves as a medium where various elements – aesthetics, culture, and commerce – converge and reinforce one another.

When viewed as a whole, these five characters reveal a homogenisation in the representation of the female body. Despite having different backgrounds and abilities, they are still constructed within relatively uniform visual standards. This indicates that narrative variation is not accompanied by variation in bodily representation, thus limiting the concept of femininity within a specific aesthetic framework. From a communication perspective, this condition reflects how media not only convey messages but also regulate the boundaries of representation deemed 'normal' or 'ideal'.

However, the meaning of such representations is not deterministic. Interview results indicate that players do not uniformly accept these representations: "When I play a female character, sometimes other players immediately comment on my character's appearance, even making over-the-top jokes. I think this shows that female characters are perceived differently than male characters" (Participant #1, woman, 18 years old). "I feel like the female character designs in *Free Fire* are more visually appealing. However, sometimes that makes other players focus more on the character's appearance than my playing ability" (Participant #2, woman, 22 years old). Female players tend to have a higher awareness of the social implications of character design. They report experiences of receiving inappropriate comments or being treated differently when using female characters in the game. This suggests that visual representations have a tangible impact on communication practices, particularly in player-to-player interactions.

Consalvo and Paul (2019) explain that digital games are cultural products that represent various social values, including the construction of gender identity. Through character design, gameplay mechanics, and player interactions, games serve not only as a means of entertainment but also as a space where social norms and meanings are produced and negotiated. In the context of *Garena Free Fire*, the representation of sensual female characters can be understood as part of a digital cultural practice that shapes how players interpret femininity, attractiveness, and female power within the gaming environment.

Conversely, male players tend to view character design as part of the game's aesthetics that has no significant impact on social reality. They see female characters as neutral visual elements that do not influence their views of women in the real world. This difference indicates variations in the process of meaning-making, which aligns with Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model. In this model, the audience is not positioned as a passive recipient, but as an active subject capable of producing dominant readings, negotiations, or oppositions to media messages.

In the context of this study, the dominant interpretation was observed among players who accepted the depiction of sensuality as something normal and unproblematic. A negotiated interpretation emerged among players who were aware of the sensual

elements but still accepted them as part of the game. Meanwhile, an oppositional reading is evident among female players who associate such representations with negative experiences in social interactions. Thus, the meaning of sensuality in the game is determined not only by visual design, but also by players' experiences and social positions.

These findings indicate that *Garena Free Fire* functions as a space of communication where meanings regarding gender and the female body are not only produced but also negotiated. Visual representations do not remain mere texts but become part of social practices that influence players' interactions, perceptions, and experiences. In this sense, the game serves as a medium through which ideologies operate, not only via representations, but also through the communicative practices taking place within it.

On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge that representations of sensuality are not always interpreted negatively. For some players, the aesthetics of the body can be understood as part of an appealing visual design or even as a form of identity expression. This demonstrates that digital media opens up space for various interpretive possibilities. Nevertheless, the dominance of certain visual patterns still indicates a structural tendency within the gaming industry that continues to place the female body at the centre of attention.

Thus, the findings of this study indicate that the representation of women in *Garena Free Fire* exists in a tension between empowerment and objectification. Female characters are portrayed as strong and competent figures, yet at the same time remain constructed within an aesthetic framework that emphasises sensuality. This tension reflects broader dynamics in digital media, where representation cannot be simply understood as a form of domination or resistance, but as the result of complex interactions between industry, culture, and audience in the communication process (Richard, 2016; Gray, 2014).

Shaw (2015) argues that gender representation in digital games is not solely related to the presence of female characters, but also to how gender identity and sexuality are constructed and interpreted by players. The presence of strong female characters does not automatically result in inclusive representation if those characters are still shaped by narrow standards of beauty and sexual attractiveness. This perspective helps explain how female characters in *Garena Free Fire* can be viewed as both symbols of empowerment and visual objects constructed to attract players' attention.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the representation of female characters in *Garena Free Fire* cannot be understood merely as visual elements in game design, but rather as part of a communication process that produces, disseminates, and negotiates meanings regarding femininity, the body, and attractiveness within the context of digital media. Through a semiotic analysis of the characters Laura, Kapella, A124, Moco, and A-Patroa, it was found that the visual design of female characters consistently features slender bodies, attractive aesthetics, and elements of sensuality integrated into costumes, poses, and visual expressions. This pattern indicates that the female body is central to visual construction, while also serving as the primary medium for conveying meaning (Fiske, 2010; Chandler, 2017).

Within the framework of the male gaze, these findings indicate that women in games are still frequently positioned as visual objects designed to attract attention and generate aesthetic pleasure. Although female characters are portrayed as strong, competent figures with significant roles in the game, their visual construction still aligns with specific

aesthetic standards that emphasise physical attractiveness. This highlights a tension between narratives of empowerment and representational practices that remain tied to a visual logic of objectification (Mulvey, 1975; Gill, 2016).

Nevertheless, this study also demonstrates that the meaning of such representations is not singular or deterministic. Interview results reveal that players have diverse perspectives on interpreting female characters. Male players tend to view character design as part of the game's neutral aesthetics, while female players are more attuned to the social implications of such representations, particularly regarding in-game interaction experiences. This difference indicates that audiences do not merely accept the meanings produced by the media but actively interpret, negotiate, and even reject those meanings in accordance with their experiences and social positions (Hall, 1980).

Thus, this study confirms that digital games such as *Garena Free Fire* function as dynamic spaces of communication, where representation and interpretation occur simultaneously. In this context, the concept of the male gaze remains relevant for explaining the visual patterns that emerge, yet it must be understood within a broader framework that accounts for the audience's role as active subjects. The integration of semiotic analysis and audience reception approaches in this study contributes to bridging the gap between visual representation studies and user experience – an area that has often been separated in previous research (Mulvey, 1975; Hall, 1980; Fiske, 2010; Gill, 2016; Chandler, 2017).

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of communication studies by demonstrating that representations in digital media operate not only at the textual level, but also within communicative practices involving user interaction. By combining semiotic and audience reception perspectives, this study expands our understanding of how media meaning is not only produced by content creators, but also shaped through audience experience and interpretation (Fiske, 2010; Chandler, 2017).

Practically, these findings have implications for the gaming industry, particularly in character design, to better consider the diversity of representations of women's bodies and identities, and to reduce reliance on homogeneous aesthetic standards. More diverse representations can not only enhance the quality of the user experience, but also contribute to the creation of a more inclusive digital environment that is sensitive to gender issues.

However, this study has limitations, particularly regarding the relatively small number of respondents and its focus on a single specific game. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve more participants with more diverse backgrounds, and expand the scope of study to other games to determine whether the same representation patterns also emerge in different contexts. Additionally, further research could explore the dynamics of in-game interactions more deeply, including how visual representations influence broader communication practices within the player community.

Overall, this study demonstrates that the representation of women in *Garena Free Fire* exists in a tension between empowerment and objectification, as well as between the production of meaning by the media and interpretation by the audience. This tension reflects the complexity of digital media as a space where ideology, aesthetics, and user experience interact to shape meaning in everyday life (Richard, 2016; Gray, 2014). Bateman (2021) explains that characters in digital games are narrative instruments designed to convey specific identities, motivations, and experiences to players. Therefore, the visual aspects of characters, including costumes, expressions, and physical appearance, are inseparable from their inherent narrative functions. In the context of *Garena Free Fire*, the sensuality of female characters can be understood as a design strategy that contributes to the formation of character identity, while strengthening the narrative's appeal to players.

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