



Shaping Managerial Identity Through Live-Action Role-Play

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Shaping Managerial Identity using Live-Action Role-Play: Non-Western perspectives

Abstract

Purpose: This study reports the findings of a phenomenographic study exploring the use of Live-Action Role-Play (LARP) through the lens of managerial identity development.

Design/methodology/approach: We employ a contextualised approach involving participant observation and auto-driven photo elicitation interviews (PEI) to collect data from a cohort of early-career managers, aged 19-30, employed at a high-tech company in China.

Findings: Two key insights reveal LARP as an innovative tool for management development, demonstrating (i) its positive influence on developing managerial identity development, while extending its effects to participants’ real-life identities, and (ii) the urgent need for policy-makers to regulate LARP game organisers with ethical guidelines, age limits, duration restrictions, and content certification.

Originality: Theories of management development derived from western experiences and ideologies of the 20th century may not explain or address management identity development in non-western countries. This study contributes insights that can inform non-Sino managers intending to work in China or with Chinese managers, and therefore has relevance for academic and practitioners worldwide.

Keywords: Live-Action Role-Playing games (LARP), managerial identity development, photo elicitation interviews (PEIs), China

Introduction

This study presents the findings of a phenomenographic investigation into the use of Live-Action Role-Play (LARP) as a novel tool for fostering sustainable management skills, with a focus on developing *managerial identity*. In response to rapid evolution in business and society, scholars stress the need to adapt and modernize management development approaches (Esposito and Scicchitano, 2020; Egan, 2024) and training methods (Agarwal, 2019; Panagiotakopoulos, 2020; Fischer and Dobbins, 2024), with greater emphasis on sustainable impact (Faludi, 2020). Set in China, our study contributes to the literature on managerial identity development (Dhar, 2021). We acknowledge that individuals often ‘play’ with their identities by experimenting with various temporal selves (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016), evolving their sense of self throughout their careers (Wang, 2020). This process is context-specific (Lichy and Ng, 2022).

The theories of Piaget (1921) and Erikson (1962) offer valuable insights into identity development that can be adapted to understand management identity evolution. Although not originally designed for a Chinese context, these frameworks provide a basis for exploring managerial identity. However, their focus on individualistic cultures limits their applicability in China, where identity development is shaped by social roles, collective expectations and Confucian values, which emphasize duty, family and social hierarchy over individual exploration (Tang and Calafato, 2024).

We propose that in the Chinese context, participation in Live-Action Role-Playing (LARP) games can serve as an effective approach for management development, as it fosters identity development and the exploration of different roles. In line with studies of management development advocating building group identity and personal growth (Vorobyeva, 2015), LARP is understood as ‘personal development training’ (Andersson, 2012). We explore Chinese managers’ participation in LARP (known as *Jubensha* in China), drawing from

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3 concepts of identity theory. LARP involves immersion where participants work collaboratively
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5 to solve puzzles and overcome challenges (Bacon and Stewart, 2021), such as escaping from a
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7 locked room (Menon, Romero and Viéville, 2019; Harviainen et al., 2018). Through LARP,
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9 individuals can practice and improve decision-making skills including conflict resolution,
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11 communication, negotiation, leadership and customer service training (Johansson et al., 2024).
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14 China presents a unique case for this study for two reasons. First, it is an understudied context
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16 in Anglophone studies of management development. Second, compared to other countries,
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18 China has been slower to embrace LARP for management training. We focus on early-career
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20 managers (aged 19-30) in China – an underexplored cohort in the existing literature. Drawing
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22 from concepts of ‘learning by doing’ (Experiential Learning) and ‘learning by discussion’
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24 (Social Learning) (Clapp-Smith and Wernsing, 2014), we argue that LARP offers a micro-level
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26 intervention (Toomey, Zhou and Yan, 2020) that can play a key role in helping managers dal
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28 with uncertainty (Roulet and Bothello, 2022). The following sections outline the literature
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30 review leading to the development of the research question, which is followed by the
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32 methodology, findings, discussion and concluding remarks.
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40 **Literature Review**

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42 *Managerial Identities: The Interplay of Work and Non-Work Selves*
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44 Scholarship on managerial identities emphasizes their fluidity, shaped by social contexts
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46 (Foucault, 1979) and evolving labour markets (Lichy and Khvatova, 2019). Dhar (2021) posits
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48 that younger managers adopt more career-oriented identities than older cohorts, yet this claim
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50 risks oversimplification, as it neglects cultural and structural factors, such as China’s
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52 competitive ‘996’ work culture, that coercively shape identity performance. While studies
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54 acknowledge incremental identity restructuring through ‘trying on’ professional roles (Ahuja,
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56 2023; Chen and Reay, 2021), they often frame identity as a linear, context-neutral process,
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sidelining the non-work self as a critical variable (De Vos et al., 2020). This oversight is particularly glaring in sustainable management discourse, where frameworks for sustainable careers (Shaik et al., 2020; Hagqvist, 2020), leadership (Fry and Egel, 2021) and uncertainty preparedness (Roulet and Bothello, 2022) treat non-work identities as peripheral rather than constitutive of professional behaviour. In China, for instance, familial obligations and Confucian ideals of harmony profoundly influence managerial conduct, a dimension absent from current management research (Egan, 2024). By integrating the non-work self, scholars could advance more holistic theories of identity that reconcile personal values with workplace demands (Pöllänen and Arjoranta, 2021), particularly in understudied contexts like China.

Live-Action Role-Play (LARP): Bridging Gaps in Management Development

LARP, an immersive social experience (Owen, 2019; Sinha and D'Souza, 2022), enables participants to experiment with identities and problem-solve collaboratively (Menon et al., 2019; Zhang and Rui, 2021). However, its application in management studies in China remains underexplored. LARP fosters creativity, cross-cultural empathy (Mao et al., 2024), and psychological relief (Tian, 2021), yet transformative potential depends on participants' willingness to engage vulnerably, a barrier in hierarchical Chinese workplaces where *miànzǐ* (face-saving) ranks conformity over experimentation (Wang, 2020). For China's post-80s/90s managers, who seek self-expression and new experiences (Zhu et al., 2015), LARP offers a platform to reconcile professional roles with personal growth (Wu and Zhou, 2023). Yet its naïve adoption risks clashing with cultural norms; Feng (2024) highlights LARP's role in mediating historical narratives, but China's regulatory environment may limit its capacity to nurture creativity.

The integration of gamification into management training (Nair, 2022; Alrehaili and Al Osman, 2022) further complicates LARP's utility. While gamified tools enhance engagement, they

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3 often prioritize metrics over ethical outcomes, thus reinforcing performative pressures (Dessus
4 et al., 2020; Gawel et al., 2022). For example, digital LARP in language training (Ng et al.,
5 2022) risks marginalizing minority dialects in Mandarin-dominated settings (Mao et al., 2024).
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7 Moreover, claims that LARP accelerates learning (Sogunro, 2004; Agarwal, 2019) lack
8 empirical rigour in workplace contexts, relying instead on small-scale educational studies.
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17 *Toward a Culturally-Adjusted Research Agenda*

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19 The literature leaves critical gaps: (1) LARP’s role in management identity development
20 remains anecdotal, particularly in non-Western contexts; (2) gamification’s alignment with
21 sustainable leadership goals is underexamined; and (3) methodologies bridging work/non-work
22 identities are scarce. Our study addresses these gaps by investigating LARP’s potential to foster
23 sustainable leadership in China’s Agri-Tech sector, where ecological and cultural complexities
24 demand innovative training methods. Drawing on sensorial (Kamm, 2019) and affective
25 (Bowman, 2024) dimensions of role-play, we develop the following research question (RQ):
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27 *How can LARP reconcile the interplay of work and non-work selves to innovate management*
28 *development for early-career managers in China’s Agri-Tech sector?*
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40 This RQ challenges techno-optimistic narratives, urging scholars to explore how LARP might
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46 **Methodology**

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48 Given the exploratory nature of our research question, we used an inductive, qualitative
49 approach (Van de Ven and Huber, 1990). This method has been widely used in Sinophile
50 scholarship to examine management practices in China (Zhang, 2021; Lichy and Ng, 2022).
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52 Interestingly, in Chinese, ‘qualitative research’ is more accurately understood as referring to
53 the ‘nature’ or ‘essence’ of a phenomenon, rather than ‘quality’ in the Western sense (Li, 2019).
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We adopted an exploratory qualitative methodology, using the structured approach of Dana and Dana (2005) for data collection and analysis. This framework, widely applied in qualitative research on multilingual populations (Haq et al., 2024), enhances rigour and reliability by following a systematic process for gathering and interpreting data.

Following the approach of Skavronskaya et al. (2020), we used WeChat to identify professional networks within China's Agri-tech sector, targeting industry associations. From these networks, we compiled a list of key professional contacts, who subsequently recommended additional participants from their own social and professional circles. As demonstrated by Milroy and Milroy (1992), individuals tend to engage more naturally and authentically when participating within familiar networks.

Consequently, we employed a snowball sampling method, recruiting participants through these professional networks. Initial contacts played a crucial role in identifying and introducing potential participants who met the predefined selection criteria, which included:

- Holding a managerial role in the Agri-tech sector in China
- Actively engaging in decision-making or strategic planning
- Experiencing commercially-organised LARP for at least one hour per week
- Willingness to participate in our study on developing managers

Data collection spanned eight weeks, applying two key methods: (i) participant observation and (ii) photo elicitation interviews (PEI) (Gubrium and Holstein, 2003). These methods were employed with a purposive sample of managers in an Agri-Tech consortium in Mongolia, recruited through a private market research agency. Twenty-eight participants were selected based on the criteria aligned with our research question (Willig, 2001). Anonymity was assured for all participants (see Figure 1 for participant profiles). The sample size aligns with the recommendations for qualitative research, which state that a sample size of 15-20 participants

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is adequate to achieve data saturation (Labafi, 2017; Creswell and Poth, 2018). Nevertheless, we acknowledge the context-specific sample, and the rapid evolution of Chinese business and management development (Lichy and Ng, 2022) which limits generalisability.

Both participant observation and PEI are inherently subjective, as researchers’ interpretations of the phenomenon can influence findings (Couto and Wu, 2010). However, qualitative research emphasizes a professional commitment to presenting observations as objectively as possible. This paper adheres to that standard by following with the ethical guidelines issued by the *Academy of Management* (AoM) regarding appropriate responsibility, integrity, professional conduct, respect for people’s rights and dignity (Academy of Management, 2021).

Recognizing the potential for researcher bias in participant observation, we remained vigilant in maintaining objectivity throughout the study. We employed strategies such cross-referencing data sources, and also integrated continuous self-reflection and notetaking to critically examine our assumptions, values and potential oversights. These reflexive practices helped mitigate bias by ensuring a more transparent and systematic approach to data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2017).

Phase 1: Participant Observation

Following Gergen and Gergen (2007), participant observation was selected on the basis that it is often used to gather ‘inside’ knowledge by studying everyday life and spatial phenomena. According to Merriam (2009), participant observation research should be viewed on a continuum that illustrates the varying roles and relationships between the observer and the observed. It involves the researchers interacting with individuals in day-to-day life while collecting information and is recognised as a unique method for investigating the immensely rich, complex, conflictual, problematic and diverse experiences and activities of human beings and their meanings (Laurier, 2016).

Our observation process was systematic. We designated specific sessions for observation, ensuring a mix of different scenarios and participant groups. During these sessions, the researchers took detailed notes, focusing on participant interactions, decision-making processes and any emergent patterns of behaviour. The use of audio recording devices (with participants' consent) complimented notetaking, ensuring we captured verbatim exchanges that proved crucial during data analysis. Written permission was obtained from the participants to share their photographic evidence. The researchers adopted the role of an 'observer-as-participant'. While present and visible during the LARP sessions, the researchers involvement was minimal, ensuring that the natural dynamics of the session were not disrupted. This level of involvement allowed for detailed observation while minimising the researchers' influence on the participants' behaviour.

To enhance the reliability of our observations, we employed triangulation, cross-referencing our participant observation data with feedback from participants and other qualitative data sources such as publicly available corporate documents and annual reports. This comprehensive approach ensured that our findings were grounded in a robust, multi-faceted understanding of the participant experience.

Phase 2: Photo Elicitation Interviews (PEI)

Using the same sample, we collected data using PEI to gain further insights into the data collected in phase 1. PEI offer an effective means of gathering information by encouraging interviewees to share their experience and insights (Fletcher, 1995), integrating participatory, visual-based approaches (Zhang, 2021) that facilitate the generation of quality data (Prosser, 2012). The participants were asked to take a photo of LARP, then bring it to the interview.

Each interview was conducted in a quiet, private setting within the manager's office, ensuring a comfortable environment for the participants. The choice of the setting was strategic, aiming

to foster open dialogue and capture genuine insights into the participants' experiences with LARP. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes, following a standardised format to maintain consistency across sessions; each participant was asked to discuss their experience of LARP and describe their photo. This informal approach developed understandings to enhance the data (Arnould and Price, 1993). The authors drew upon broad interview guidelines that invited participants to speak about their routine LARP experience. Further questions were prepared to probe deeper into how LARP may facilitate the development of self-identity, social identity (Tian, 2021) and group identity (Vorobyeva, 2015), but the participants were enthusiastic about discussing their LARP experience, without the need for prompting.

Three overarching interview questions were prepared to explore our research question:

Q1 How do you feel about LARP, generally and personally?

Q2 Tell us about the photo you have brought along

Q3 How do you see the evolution of LARP over the next few years?

The interviews were recorded and transcribed; all transcripts were anonymized. Each participant received a copy of their transcript to review and elaborate on their responses, ensuring fine-grained data (Gubrium and Holstein, 2003). To ensure validity and reliability, participants were given their transcript and asked four comments, recommended by McKim (2023, p.46) for member-checking:

1. After reading through the findings, what are your general thoughts?
2. How accurately do you feel the findings captured your thoughts/experiences?
3. What could be added to the findings to capture your experiences better?
4. If there is anything you would like removed, what would that be and why?

Participants' comments were thematically analysed using the approach of King, Horrocks and Brooks (2019), which involves systematically coding and organising qualitative data to identify

meaningful patterns or themes. The process began with familiarisation, where interview transcripts were read multiple times to gain an in-depth understanding of the content. Initial coding was then applied to label important segments of the data, which were subsequently grouped into broader themes. Overall, this approach yielded evidence suggesting that participation in LARP can enhance managerial identity development, reported in the following sections.

Findings

Phase 1: Participant Observation – Aligning with and Extending Identity Theory

Consistent with Menon et al. (2019) and Pöllänen and Arjoranta (2021), our participants affirmed LARP's capacity to foster self-identity, social identity and group identity through immersive role experimentation. This aligns with Foucault's (1979) conception of identity as a socially constructed performance, where managers 'try on' professional roles (Ahuja, 2023) to operate in China's competitive labour market (Lichy and Khvatova, 2019). However, our findings extend prior work by demonstrating how LARP bridges work and non-work selves (De Vos et al., 2020), enabling participants to reconcile familial obligations (e.g., Confucian harmony norms) with workplace demands, a dimension overlooked in Western-centric studies (Shaik et al., 2020; Fry and Egel, 2021).

Notably, participants' emphasis on LARP as a tool for sustainable career development (Hagqvist, 2020) somewhat challenges the individualism inherent in Chen and Reay's (2021) identity restructuring model. By fostering collaborative problem-solving (Harviainen et al., 2018) and community cohesion (Bowman, 2024), LARP aligns with collectivist cultural values in China, offering a counterpoint to Ibarra and Obodaru's (2016) individualistic 'adaptive

identity’ framework. This underscores the need to contextualize identity theories within cultural and regulatory environments, particularly in understudied regions like China (Egan, 2024).

We note also that while our participants valued LARP’s escapism (Zhang and Rui, 2021), critics argue that role-playing risks reinforcing workplace alienation by encouraging detachment from ‘real’ professional selves (Andersson, 2012). This tension invites further exploration of whether LARP’s benefits may outweigh its potential to normalize disengagement.

Phase 2: Photo Elicitation Interviews – Balancing Well-Being and Regulation

Guided by King et al.’s (2019) thematic analysis, the PEI revealed various psychological benefits of LARP, including enhanced self-esteem (Kamm, 2019) and de-stressing (Lichy and Ng, 2022), which align with Orazi and Cruz’s (2019) findings on affective interaction. Two participants called for stricter regulation of “bloodied incest drama” and “gothic, gory scripts” (Interviewees 3 and 12), which complicates Bowman’s (2024) optimistic portrayal of unregulated role-play. This tension mirrors the wider debate in gamification literature, where techno-optimism (Nair, 2022) often clashes with ethical concerns about exploitative design (Dessus et al., 2020).

However, the remainder of the participants spoke very positively about LARP, emphasizing its psychological benefits, including feelings of “togetherness” and “mindfulness”. This reflects Bowman’s (2024) imagination-boosting benefits, collaboration among players and social interaction (Ng, Azizie and Chew, 2022). The image below (Photo 1) illustrates these points.



Photo 1: ‘getting into character’ in LARP (Source: *The Economist*, 2022)

The participants’ emphasis on social value and harmony (De Vos et al., 2020; Faludi, 2020) reflects China’s socio-political context, where state-led narratives prioritize collective needs over individual needs (Wang, 2020). For instance, while LARP’s cultural/historical immersion (Feng, 2024) resonates with government efforts to promote heritage, its potential to subvert dominant narratives, as seen in “bloodied incest dramas”, raises questions about its compatibility with state censorship (Zhang and Lu, 2018). We note that, contrary to the regulatory appeals of these two participants, Vorobyeva (2015) argues that organic, community-driven norms (i.e., not top-down policies) best safeguard player well-being. This suggests a need for hybrid governance models that balance creativity and safety.

Emerging Themes and Theoretical Implications

Participants’ optimism about LARP’s potential as “edutainment” aligns with gamification studies (Alrehaili and Al Osman, 2022), but it also challenges Panagiotakopoulos’ (2020) scepticism about the efficacy of informal training methods. For example, the emphasis on ‘thinking outside the box’ (Menon et al., 2019) could address gaps in traditional management courses, which often prioritize technical skills over ethical reasoning (Fry and Egel, 2021).

However, the demand for better quality scripts and rising fears of over-regulation highlight a critical limitation: LARP’s efficacy hinges on contextual factors (e.g., cultural relevance, narrative depth) that are often absent in one-size-fits-all gamification models (Gawel et al., 2022). This underscores the importance of cultural-adaptation, particularly in multilingual settings like China (Mao et al., 2024).

Discussion

Following King et al.’s (2019) iterative process of refining and reviewing the PEI data, we identified five key themes that captured the respondents’ LARP experiences: *Self-Esteem, De-Stressing, Mental Health & Well-Being, Interpersonal Interaction* and *Social Value*. These themes were defined and illustrated using the participants’ verbatim narratives, aligning with studies that support LARP as a contemporary method to innovate management training and development. Our thematic analysis ensured a structured yet flexible approach to capturing the kaleidoscopic perspectives of the participants. We discuss each theme below.

1. **Self-Esteem** – in line with Kamm (2019) and Fischer and Dobbins (2024).
“Role-playing is more than just entertainment; it helps me overcome my painful shyness... I’ve made good friends and become more confident, both socially and at work... I can now comfortably say ‘no’ when I need to”. (Interviewee 2)
2. **De-Stressing** – in line with Lichy and Ng (2022) and Johansson et al. (2024).
“Most of us work over 300 hours a month, which is very stressful... LARP helps me to de-stress and forget about work... The toxic work culture is hard to handle, but we have to endure it for financial reasons”. (Interviewee 5)
3. **Mental Health & Well-Being** – in line with Orazi and Cruz (2019) and Egan (2024).
“Role-playing gives me the freedom to be who I want and a sense of inner happiness that

strengthens my body, mind and soul... it helps me grow personally and professionally”.

(Interviewee 9)

4. **Interpersonal Interaction** – in line with Tian (2021) and Bowman (2024).

“My generation has no siblings, and few relatives, which can be very lonely... LARP helps me learn people skills and teamwork skills, how to work interactively and share ideas – which is critical”. (Interviewee 13)

5. **Social Value** – in line with De Vos et al. (2020), Faludi (2020) and Mao et al. (2024).

“We need to be ready for constant change while maintaining social harmony... LARP teaches us to adapt to new situations, improving flexibility and increase productivity at work”. (Interviewee 18)

Participants’ comments in response to reflect the fluidity of identity (Foucault, 1979; Dhar, 2021), self-development (Andersson, 2012), group identity (Vorobyeva, 2015), social influence (Clapp-Smith and Wernsing, 2014), and the impact on non-work selves (De Vos et al., 2020). The themes echo the difficulty of balancing creative freedom and safeguarding player well-being in LARP, highlighting its role as a change-agent in management development.

The findings from Q1 (“How do you feel about LARP, generally and personally?”) and Q2 (“Tell us about the photo you have brought along”) provided rich insights, with illustrative excerpts (Figure 2a) and photos (Figure 2b) – see Appendices. The participants’ photo annotations revealed seven further themes:

1. **Entertainment/Escapism** (Zhang & Rui, 2021): Participants highlighted LARP as a source of enjoyment and a way to escape the stresses of work and daily life. The immersive nature of the games extended their professional identities, offering a release from their everyday selves.

2. **Scenario Engagement** (Zhu et al., 2015): Participants appreciated the well-developed LARP storylines, including suspense, grand narratives and intricate plots, which kept them fully engaged.
3. **Psychological Benefits** (Menon et al., 2019; Pöllänen & Arjoranta, 2021; Bowman, 2024): LARP was reported to positively impact participants' well-being, fostering feelings of togetherness, mindfulness and increased confidence through role-playing and interaction. In doing so, it could reduce employee absenteeism.
4. **Cultural/Historical Immersion** (Feng, 2024; Mao et al., 2024): The scenarios offered opportunities for immersion in both Chinese and international cultural and historical settings. The distinctive themed environments enhanced the sense of being transported to another time and place.
5. **Social Interaction** (Orazi & Cruz, 2019; Ng et al., 2022): Participants valued the social aspects of LARP, enjoying the chance to meet new people, form friendships and experience interactions different from their daily routines.
6. **Strategic Thinking/Problem-Solving** (Menon et al., 2019; Johansson et al., 2024): Scenarios involving problem-solving, such as murder mysteries or conspiracies, were particularly appealing, providing participants with a sense of accomplishment.
7. **Sense of Identity** (Wang, 2020; De Vos et al., 2020): LARP enabled participants to temporarily adopt different identities, offering a break from routine life and allowing them to explore new aspects of themselves.

Integrating these elements into management development can create a more engaging and immersive experience for early-career managers, enhancing skills such as self-improvement, leadership (Fry and Egel, 2021) and managing uncertainty (Roulet & Bothello, 2022; Wang et al., 2023). Ultimately, this can lead to more effective managers and support the development of sustainable management practices (Hagqvist, 2020) and careers (Shaik et al., 2020).

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3 Lastly, the findings from Q3 (“How do you see the evolution of LARP over the next few
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5 years?”) revealed six emerging themes that were not widely reported in the existing literature:
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- 8 1. **Development Potential:** Participants expressed optimism about the future of LARP,
9 highlighting its growth potential. They viewed it as a promising means to fill the
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11 ‘digital void’ by fostering genuine offline communication and interpersonal
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13 interaction.
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- 16 2. **Demand for Quality Scripts:** The success and continued popularity of LARP were
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18 seen as heavily dependent on the quality of scripts and content. Participants stressed
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20 the need for innovative, engaging narratives to sustain player interest and ensure
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22 immersive experiences.
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- 25 3. **Popularity and Growth:** Participants anticipated continued growth in LARP’s
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27 popularity, attracting a broader audience in coming years. However, they recognise
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29 that this expansion would necessitate stricter regulation and quality control to maintain
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31 standards.
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- 34 4. **Work-Life Balance:** LARP continues to be seen as an educative-constructive form of
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36 escapism, offering a healthy alternative to using digital devices, by encouraging
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38 participants to engage in real-world interaction and explore new identities.
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- 41 5. **Policy Considerations:** While participants recognised the need for tighter policies to
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43 enhance quality and safety in the industry, they also voiced concerns that excessive
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45 regulation could stifle the creativity and improvisation central to the LARP
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47 experience.
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- 50 6. **Pedagogical Applications:** Participants foresaw the potential for LARP to be adapted
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52 for educational and training purposes, highlighting its versatility for various learning
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54 contexts and its capacity to enhance personal and professional development.
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These themes suggest lend credibility to LARP as a form of ‘edutainment’ (combining education and entertainment) for personal growth and professional development. To harness these benefits, attention must be given to script quality, appropriate regulation and careful integration into management development programmes.

Based on our analysis, we put forward a diagram (below) to illustrate the aggregate benefits of LARP for management development.

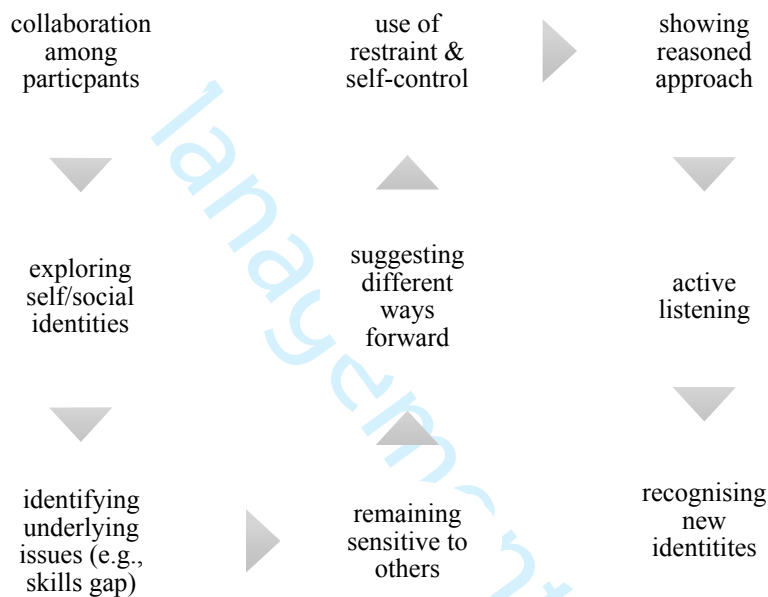


Diagram 1: Aggregate benefits of LARP

Overall, the findings support the notion that LARP can contribute to the development of skills in both professional and personal domains.

Implications

Our study provides insights for companies considering LARP as a tool for management development. LARP facilitates training by immersing participants in realistic business scenarios, enabling them to practice management skills through ‘learning by doing’ and ‘learning by discussion’ (Clapp-Smith and Wernsing, 2014). The simulated environment allows

trainees to safely develop and apply new skills, making them more potentially effective in real-world situations. By participating in diverse roles, they can explore different personal and professional goals, contributing to a sustainable career and healthier work-life balance.

We propose LARP as a versatile tool for management training at three different levels: (i) individual level: to enhance specific skills, such as public speaking; (ii) pair level: for simulating interactions, like appraisal meetings; and group level: for larger-scale exercises, such as departmental meetings and crisis communication.

In terms of potential pitfalls, despite the proven benefits of LARP, some participants may feel uneasy assuming certain characters. To mitigate this, the LARP facilitators should: (i) clearly explain the purpose and structure of the LARP; (ii) ensure participants understand their roles and expectations; (iii) monitor for any issues and intervene as needed; and (iv) conduct thorough debriefings to provide constructive feedback and avoid discomfort.

Understanding the benefits and risks of LARP is crucial for informing policy. Regulating LARP service providers may include establishing age limits, certifying content and setting maximum duration for sessions to prevent excessive engagement. We recommend categorising LARP by age suitability, time and content to protect vulnerable groups.

Our study also provides fresh insights for researchers exploring the effects of disruptive innovation (Roulet and Bothello, 2022), given that management theories rooted in Western ideologies may not fully capture the complexities of non-Western contexts (Lichy and Ng, 2022).

Limitations and Further Research

This study focuses on early-career managers in the Agri-Tech sector and is based on a modest sample, which limits the generalisability of the findings to non-tech industries, other regions or older managers. The use of participant observation may pose certain limitations, including

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potential observer effects and challenges in collecting peripheral data. Ethical considerations and micropolitics unique to the Chinese context also required careful attention. Future research could address these limitations by employing mixed-method approaches and comparing different socio-spatial contexts (e.g., rural versus urban) to gain broader insights into the areas of managerial skill development, in the light of new government policies (Wei et al., 2024).

Conclusion

LARP offers a valuable tool for helping managers adapt to and facilitate change, by providing an immersive experience that extends beyond traditional role-playing exercises. By allowing participants to step outside everyday realities and explore new social and cultural perspectives, LARP can be a practical and realistic method for management training. This immersive approach fosters creative problem-solving and strategic thinking, which are essential for management identity development.

To ensure participants’ well-being, clear ethical guidelines and regulations are crucial. We advocate for government involvement in policy-making to protect individuals from potential risks, such as the manipulation of moral boundaries or exposure to societal ridicule. While LARP provides opportunities for managers to explore unfamiliar roles and perspectives, the well-being of participants must remain a top priority when used in management training. To finish, LARP has significant potential as an instrument for management development, but needs to be culturally-adapted to each specific context.

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APPENDICES

Figure 1: Interviewee profiles

<i>Profile</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Department</i>	<i>Age</i>
1	Male	Export	29
2	Male	Export	21
3	Female	Export	24
4	Female	Export	19
5	Male	Accounts	25
6	Female	Accounts	25
7	Male	Accounts	25
8	Female	Accounts	27
9	Female	HRM	19
10	Female	HRM	19
11	Female	HRM	24
12	Male	HRM	26
13	Male	Customer services	30
14	Female	Customer services	27
15	Female	Customer services	28
16	Female	Customer services	25
17	Male	Production	30
18	Female	Production	25
19	Male	Production	27
20	Female	Production	26
21	Male	International strategy executive	25
22	Female	International strategy executive	27
23	Female	International strategy executive	19
24	Male	International strategy executive	26
25	Female	Marketing Analyst	24
26	Male	Marketing Analyst	26
27	Female	Marketing Analyst	23
28	Female	Marketing Analyst	27

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Figure 2a: Representative excerpts from interviewees

Profile	Q1. How do you feel about LARP, generally and personally?	Q2. Tell us about the photo(s) you have brought along	Q3. How do you see the evolution of LARP over the next few years?
2	These games are a rare offline social activity. We live in a connected era. Young people’s live life online, causing us to withdraw from the real world. LARP attract young people to leave their gadgets and join in face-to-face social life and make new real-life friends. For me, this is beyond a game, it’s a way to morph my identity by exercising new expressions, logical reasoning and social skills.	<i>Please refer to Figure 2b</i>	LARP fills the gap of offline communication, especially in the Internet era, so it’s an area with great development potential.
3	LARP offer a unique mode for getting in touch with players from different backgrounds. I feel like one of the characters in the script; I can experience different lifestyles, get immersed in the culture of different histories, and enrich my knowledge. Unfortunately, we need to weed out LARP with immoral content such as physical contact and verbal mocking in the script. Some friends have reported negative experiences such as obscenity and aggression in LARP.		I like role-play very much and hope the industry can develop new product ideas to provide us with new scripts and themes, and develop social networking with others.
5	I have mixed feelings about roleplay, mainly because of the lack of supervision. Scripts need to be reviewed, many are often full of pornography and extreme violence, and there’s no age limit imposed on players so it holds a risk for younger players.		It’s an emerging field. The development of any new business has to go through irregularity and chaos... even with greater regulatory measures, I believe this field has much to offer.
7	It’s a good offline communication activity that unites interesting people and knowledge, with ornate costumes and props to enhance the experience. There’s a wide choice of scripts to help you relax, many different themes and timelines, ancient and modern, to create a unique experience each time.		I hope more players and script writers can join in and work together to develop the industry by creating higher quality scripts.

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8 I don't think there's any good script worth enacting. The
main reason is that the content needs to be updated more
frequently.
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- 8 I don't think there's any good script worth enacting. The
main reason is that the content needs to be updated more
frequently.
- 9 Guidance and plot is paramount, having the right setting to
give positive energy to the participants. The 'psychodrama'
of role-play has positive impact on participants to release
mental pressure, enrich imagination and strengthen
interpersonal communication. But if the content is too
extreme, the participants get dazed and confused... then
disconnect.
- 10 The LARP experience is excellent – I like the stories and
experience feelings in the plot and make many friends. This
practice is good for me and my mental state.
- 12 It's a promising industry, which helps people blow off
steam after a long day at work. It offers all-round
entertainment, calling for psychological, reasoning,
knowledge and other attributes.
- 13 The potential of LARP is looking very positive... very
much in line with the psychology of young adults (and
young-at-heart) so it attracts them to have fun!
- 14 LARP enable me to enter into a novel role, it makes my life
more colourful, and effectively reduces the pressure of
work by soothing my mood after a long day.
- 15 LARP are rich and varied, they promote social interaction
and play a key role in helping people understand themselves
and their identity. Current developments are good, but they
lack collaborative efforts to innovate the industry.
- 16 Many people can play together... LARP can help increase
personal knowledge and skills, as well as helping us to
make new friends.
- In the next few years, content will be the deal-breaker... no-
one is willing to play if there's no rich script.
- Online LARP surpass offline LARP. Games with limited
props and costumes will weaken the sense of escape; online
LARP rely solely on reasoning; they can't create the
atmosphere and communication flow that players need.
- In the next few years, LARP will become more entertaining
and intriguing. Suspense classics have been enacted too
many times... but I love the experience.
- It needs a lot of innovative and changeable role-play,
otherwise it's easy to get bored. Players like the new scripts
and hate the old ones in this fast-changing industry.
- It's a very healthy way for people to put down their digital
devices and get interacting in person, and there's always
room for self-improvement!
- I think LARP will grow in popularity in the next two years.
It's done very well so far and is deeply loved by the majority
of people!
- LARP attract a wide audience and have become the
mainstream game of the public. There's great potential. It
just needs more publicity so more people can hear about it
and participate.
- As more and more people join in, regulators will strengthen
surveillance, and the industry will gradually move down the
road of specialisation and industrialisation.

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17	The script is rich, entertaining and joyful, and the global feeling is very comfortable – but the plot guidance is sometimes quite dense. It’s important to get detailed instructions to create good vibes for the players.	In future, the industry will be shaped by directives to ensure better quality... then, more people will find out about LARP and we’ll get better scripts.
19	I think it’s perfect for me... it’s very interesting and helps to relieve stress.	The general trend is very good and I can play different roles.
20	The reasoning and suspense help people from all walks of life to temporarily forget the pressure of work and daily routine.	More and more LARP businesses will be created and be loved by an ever wider public.
21	It’s fresh and new... I’ve experienced many different roles and challenged myself in a safe setting... and switched off from work.	Develop better, produce more good scripts and educate younger players about how to get involved.
22	The quality of scripts is very hit-and-miss, there’s a lot of chaos. We should rectify this weakness in order to develop them better.	There are many poor imitations on sale without any creativity. This needs attention so we can continue to enjoy the escapism.
23	A meeting of minds among like-minded players... a fantasy world and on-site control.	It’s still an emerging industry that needs to be promoted to tier 4-5 cities and rise steadily.
24	More professionals are joining in... it’s perfect for team-building activities and training events in any line of work.	Script content is gradually improving and more people are learning how to play. Script updates should be strengthened to grow market share and increase user stickiness.
27	It exercises my brain-power, logical thinking and reaction ability, which is worth promoting to foster learning.	The future of LARP is very worthy of developing into management and education, it’s only a matter of time.
28	I’m not very comfortable doing role play but I see the benefits when I walk into a room of people who I don’t know well; I’m less nervous about meeting strangers.	It’s likely that some form of regulation needs to be introduced to curb some of the more extreme and violent games but too much state control will hinder the creativity and improvisation of role playing...

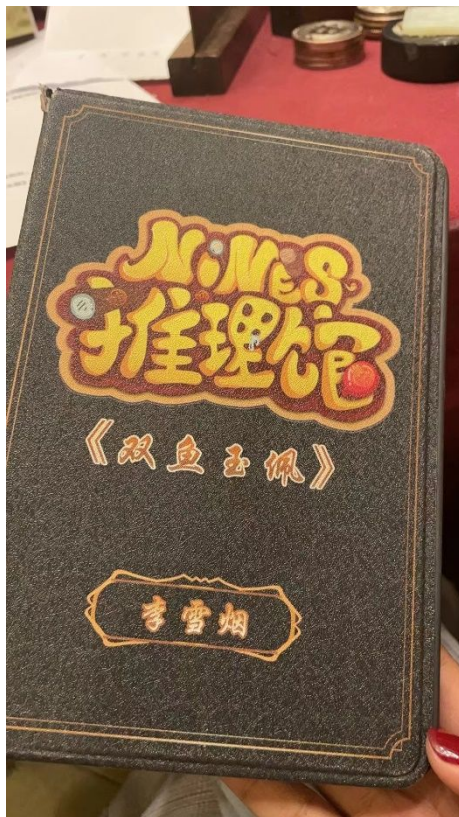
Figure 2b

Q2 – A selection of photos and comments from interviewees



From Interviewee 1:

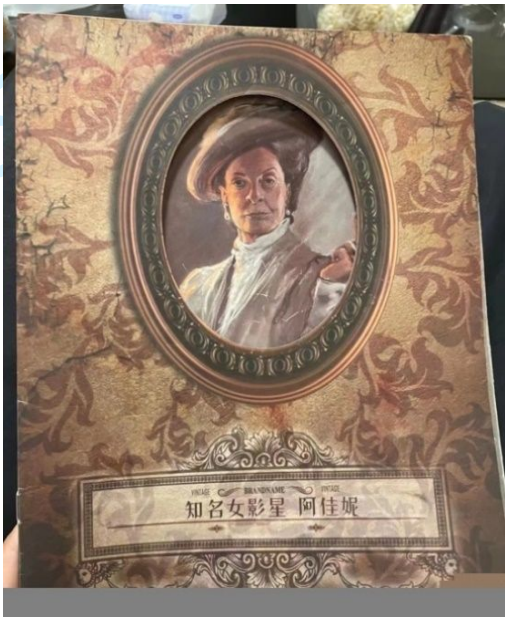
“the description of the characters in the story is hilarious. This is a very popular script right now. The length of it is reasonable, so it isn’t difficult to read, and I find the title is very attractive... the whole story has ups-and-downs, and the rhythm is comfortable. It conveys a message to people: *all you can believe is yourself* – but above all, it helps me to switch off from the stress of my job”.



From Interviewee 4:

“As a real-life theme, "Pisces jade pendant" explains a pretty grand story. From a treacherous auction to the game of major forces, gratitude and resentment, and the ancient past of the mysterious family. It’s just total escapism for me”.

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From Interviewee 6:

“This role-play is about a series of strange and treacherous things that happened on the night of a famous painting auction. It focuses on suspense reasoning... I lose myself in this; it’s perfect for people who are quite timid and don’t like things being too scary”.



From Interviewee 7:

“This has great symbolic value... in 1989, on the eve of the 40th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China, a group of primary school students in Tianjin Heping District were selected to interview a retired veteran. As the materials and objects on the table were opened one by one, a dark war covered by history quietly surfaced. Then there was betrayal, concealment, assassination, theft... one after another bizarre events occur – but we, the players, don’t know when we become the pawn of others”.



From Interviewee 8:

“In this one, we have to solve a murder mystery. A new product been created and launched, and a pharmaceutical factory has settled the expenses. Two years after the new drug was put on the market, many drug users rapidly deteriorated, and several people died. Your company has been accused in court, and hospitals, patients and non-governmental organizations have condemned you, which has become the focus of social news. The clock is ticking to find out who is behind all of this... it's a great experience”.



From Interviewee 12:

“This is a good escape... it isn't complicated to enact but it involves a bit of strategic thinking and business knowledge. It brings people together in the real world to act out characters by dressing up in costumes and improvising stories... and that must be beneficial for the individual, isn't it?”.



From Interviewee 14:

“The rhythm of this script is very compact, it carefully builds up layer by layer, interspersed with a small amount of reduction parts, focusing on several methods of reasoning... I like it because it helps me to switch off from work and be a different person with a different identity”.



From Interviewee 15:

“The game experience is very good. I like the carefully-planned environment of each themed room in the game, with distinctive and unfamiliar styles – European, Japanese and Chinese styles have their own characteristics; it’s like being somewhere else and being someone else”.



From Interviewee 19:

“This is a typical Chinese-themed room, very suitable for the more traditional LARP that are based on Chinese ancient scripts. It has a strong sense of togetherness and immersive feeling, which takes the players to a higher level of existence”.



From Interviewee 21:

“There are a number of things that I enjoy about this. The service provided by the store is very good... they set out drinks and snacks for the players, as well as fancy decorated rooms. Best of all, the game experience is very good for building my confidence”.



From Interviewee 25:

“Each theme in the script has its corresponding character and costume. I temporarily withdraw from my true identity in real life to experience a life of another person. I can be someone entirely different and experience a new identity... this *release* is what I most appreciate”.



From Interviewee 28:

“This is what I enjoy the most – the social side of coming together with other people... LARP helps me to escape from my job and thinking about work... I meet new people that I wouldn’t usually bump into and make many new friends. I like this aspect very much”.