

JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Virtual Socialisation among Malaysian *Animal Crossing* Players During Movement Control Order

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ABSTRACT

During the COVID-19 lockdown of Movement Control Order (MCO), many Malaysians reportedly turned to video games for socialisation purposes. Drawing upon the sociocultural framework of media ecology, this study aims to explore in-depth how players engage in such virtual socialisation. Against the backdrop of the MCO, this study argues that Malaysians could perform socially meaningful actions through video games, just like they were in the real world, to address their social deprivation. The method employed is a qualitative textual analysis of paratexts published in a local gaming Facebook group, focusing on Nintendo's *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020). The findings indicated that Malaysian players sought companionships through reciprocal gaming interactions during the lockdown measures by playing as a single player, multiplayer, and community. In the gaming community, they built networks, interpersonal connections, and resources of mutual social support to enrich their gameplay. The findings highlighted the significance of virtual socialisation through the interactive medium – an effective approach to cushion the isolating effects of the MCO period. The study is relevant in showcasing the role played by virtual socialisation and gaming communities for the Sustainable Development Goals of SDG3 Good Health and Well-being and SDG16 of Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions.

Keywords: socialisation, video game culture, COVID-19, Movement Control Order, Malaysia

Received 15 April 2024, **Accepted** 30 July 2024, **Published** 27 January 2025

Introduction

The global pandemic of COVID-19 in early 2020 prompted the Malaysian government to enforce a containment measure of lockdown known as Movement Control Order (MCO). The MCO was first implemented on 18 March 2020 (New Straits Times, 2020) after a spike in COVID-19 community cases linked to a religious gathering (Che Mat et al., 2020). The strict and unprecedented MCO period has

severely impacted the citizens' quality of life, notably in adverse mental health effects (Bahar Moni et al., 2021; H. Hassan, 2020; Hassandarvish, 2020; A. Yee et al., 2021).

As Malaysians grappled with the negative effects of MCO, they turned to video games, with most being found to have positive emotional experiences from gaming (Dasan et al., 2022). Others lauded its importance for improving mental health, alleviating stress, and unwinding (Rajaendram, 2021). This is in line with the positive role of video games during challenging times of the lockdown, including escapism, cognitive stimulation, and mental health benefits, as demonstrated in international studies (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2022; Boldi & Rapp, 2021; Marston & Kowert, 2020). Evidently, a notable consumption of video gaming was reported (Musa, 2021), with 42.8% of internet users in Malaysia engaging in online video gaming (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2020, p. 44). Approximate RM2.7 billion in revenue was recorded from Malaysian players, an increase from RM2.5 billion in 2019 (M. S. Hassan, 2021). The popularity of video gaming was also amplified by the worldwide campaigns of #PlayApartTogether (Business Wire, 2020), #YANA (Webb, 2020), and the localised hashtag of #JomMainBersama. All these have established video gaming as an important part of Malaysia's COVID-19 and MCO social imaginary.

Importantly, as reported by various local news outlets, playing video games together was suggested to encourage socialisation among Malaysians during the MCO (Ibrahim, 2020; Jacob, 2021; Shah, 2021). Considering these reports, uncovering an in-depth and more nuanced understanding of players' socialisation practices is important. Minimal empirical work has been done to assess this MCO phenomenon in detail. Therefore, in this qualitative study, we aim to uncover the ways Malaysian video game players socialise through the interactive medium, particularly to fulfil their fundamental social needs that were affected during the pandemic lockdown. Earlier scholarships have highlighted the need to study how internet users create social links and foster communities (Gauntlett, 2018). In the global context of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, video gaming became a valid substitute for real-life socialisation (Ballard & Spencer, 2022; Petrosino et al., 2021). At the micro level, players regarded the in-game characters as real to maintain a sense of normal connection (Kleinman et al., 2021). At the meso level, playing online or through local cooperatives can achieve a sense of belonging, although it also depends on how well the game is designed (Kaye, 2021). At the meso level, interaction with others in virtual communities could bring positive societal connections for players (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2022). All these point to the fact that video gaming is a pro-social practice. Therefore, it is evident that video games can provide its players with interactive affordances in challenging life situations like living during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

In this line of thought, we argue that Malaysians could perform socially meaningful actions through video games, just like in the real world, to address their social deprivation. Their virtual social engagement is considered vital while living during the stringent MCO. Interacting through and around video games offers Malaysians many ways to rethink socialisation. Specifically, we study Malaysian players of the video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020a), also known as *ACNH*, which became a pandemic-era gaming phenomenon. The game *ACNH* sits in the social simulation genre, allowing players to focus on interactions to attain meaningful outcomes. The *Animal Crossing* series itself has been dubbed as a "communication game" by Nintendo (Gallant, 2002), with its core themes of "family, friendship, and community" (Newton, 2011). Research has found that *ACNH* players were motivated to spend their time socialising with both the in-game characters and other players (X. Tong et al., 2021). In the case of Malaysia, *ACNH* reportedly has facilitated companionship of its players as they form communities online to share gaming tips, designs, and various recreations of real-life experiences (Mahyuni, 2020a). This prompts curiosity on what other social actions performed by the players, similar to those in the real world. Following this, we use textual analysis to reveal the aspect of virtual socialising among Malaysian *ACNH* players during the MCO period. We seek to answer the research question, "To what extent do Malaysian players leverage the *Animal Crossing* video game as a platform for connectivity and community development during the Movement Control Order?" In doing so, we argue that Malaysian *ACNH* players engaged in virtual socialising as a substitute of real-world socialisation, thus serving to cushion the isolating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

Literature Review

Video Game Paratext and Socialisation

Video game players often produce paratexts or supporting texts around their gameplays, many of which have been shared online. The paratexts include streaming, walkthroughs, mods, fan arts, wikis, cosplays, and many more. The value of paratextual inquiry lies in questioning the centrality of a text, and equal attention should be paid to the paratextual elements. Consalvo (2017) suggests a decentring of game 'texts' to gain a more thorough understanding of video game culture and practices. Consalvo (2019) further argues that one of the important aspects of paratextuality is its value for players acquiring gaming capital – a variation of Bourdieu's cultural capital – to “succeed” in the gaming culture. For example, by producing and disseminating paratext of game guides, players can gain a higher or notable status within a gaming community. For this study, we adopted the understanding of gaming paratextuals from Švelch (2020), who recommends treating paratextuality as a link between a text and the surrounding socio-historical reality without implying that they are less important or subordinate. Therefore, paratexts are considered integral to the experience and enjoyment of a game. They are important, not only for players but also for the success of the game. A recent study by Roth (2022) considered the paratexts of *Let's Play* gaming videos on YouTube and found that game text has been decentred or pushed to the background in favour of a gaming practice of paratext production and reception. Consequently, Roth (2022) argues that future research on the various practices that interweave game worlds with other digital spaces may foster a better understanding on the relation between them.

Recent discourses on the Malaysian gaming community and gaming paratexts are noticeably absent. In the context of gaming consumption, the Southeast Asia region is recognised as “the world’s fastest-growing games market”, with Malaysia being prominently regarded as one of the “Big 6” countries, alongside Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam (Wong, 2023, p. 50). Given the importance of Malaysia as a key player in the rapidly growing gaming market, it is essential to study the players to understand their gaming habits and experiences. Arguably, one of the earliest studies of Malaysian-focused video game communities was by Loh (2013), who studied the genre of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). Loh focused on Malaysian guilds in the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, where the community also organised weekly offline gatherings, thus tying the ephemeral online community to a local and physical locality. Another example of extensive research was by Faizal (2017), who found that Malay women who played the social network game *The Sims Social* formed a Facebook group for discussions, and in doing so, they negotiated aspects of local culture such as gender roles and religion when participating in a globalised media context. Therefore, this study will expand the literature on Malaysian gaming culture by focusing on a gaming community and the paratexts of socialisation produced. We seek to examine the popularity of *ACNH* in Malaysia further, focusing on its affordances for socialisation in particular and the countless paratexts it inspired. Researchers have been calling for a balanced and effective approach to video gaming during the restrictive COVID-19 pandemic lockdown to support players' well-being (King et al., 2020). Amid the fallout of MCO period, virtual socialisation through video gaming is hoped to fulfil this role.

Instances of Socialisation in and around Animal Crossing: New Horizons

The video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020a) (hereinafter *ACNH*) is the latest franchise of Nintendo’s simulation series *Animal Crossing*. *ACNH* was launched in March 2020, coinciding with the global pandemic lockdown. Thus, it became the biggest gaming hit of the coronavirus era with over 30 million copies sold globally (Nintendo, 2020b), multiple accolades (BAFTA, 2021; Golden Joystick Awards, 2020; The Game Awards, 2020), and high social media fanfare (Khan, 2020). Its basic premise is a simulation of everyday life and social dynamics while living on an island, making it an escapism utopia amid restrictive circumstances (Zhu, 2020). The primary goal is to increase the island’s star rating, although as a sandbox game, there is no definitive end as players are free to shape their own gameplay.

Based on local news reports, thousands of Malaysian *ACNH* players were active on social media to communicate their gameplay (Ashaari, 2020; Mahyuni, 2020b; Syafiq, 2021; G. Tong, 2020; Yap, 2020). Existing empirical research on *ACNH* – whether in a general context or specifically on the topic of socialisation – has focused mainly on Western (e.g. Gandolfi & Gandolfi, 2021; Pearce et al., 2021) and East Asian (e.g. Roth, 2022; X. Tong et al., 2021) players and contexts, thus may or may not be generalised or able to explain gaming practices in other regions such as Malaysia. Several studies have found instances of virtual socialisation and paratexts in and around *ACNH*, although they did not explicitly emphasise the word "socialisation". For example, Vossen (2021) examines social media conversations surrounding the game and argues the radical social potential of *ACNH* to facilitate large-scale real-world conversations on socio-economic problems. In another study, Akbar and Kusumasari (2021) investigate how *ACNH* players utilise video games to communicate political issues, thus arguing that *ACNH* could be a rhetorical tool for pressing real-life issues. Gandolfi and Gandolfi (2021) conducted a 6-month ethnographic research on a teenage player, focusing on the importance of online communities for social interactions and understanding current events. This scope can be expanded to a larger audience to collect more evidence regarding the game during a crisis such as the Malaysian MCO. Meanwhile, through online surveys and remote interviews, Tong et al. (2021) uncovered real-life social behaviours among *ACNH* players in the game. Investigations of Malaysian *ACNH* players will thus provide insights into their real-life social behaviours when living under MCO restrictions. Building on all these studies, our findings will contribute to the existing literature on social gaming in *ACNH*, specifically by focusing on the Malaysian region and the context of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

Methods

The relevance of studying *ACNH* as part of MCO video gaming culture is due to three reasons: commercial success, critical acclaim, and active local community on the internet (Mahyuni, 2020a; Najmi, 2020; G. Tong, 2020; Yeoh, 2020). The game became an MCO gaming phenomenon, with over 14,000 members gathered in the Facebook group "Animal Crossing Malaysia" as they engage daily in producing and sharing their own paratexts (Chapree, 2021; G. Tong, 2020). Understanding this social gaming culture requires recognising the paratextual contexts that constellate around it. We adopted the interpretive approach by considering Stuart Hall's (1980) idea of "encoding/decoding" in understanding the gaming paratexts and a gaming community as a site where Malaysian players gathered. We performed a textual analysis on the Facebook group as the method is most suitable to capture the cultural phenomenon that occurred when the texts were created, thus avoiding problems such as participant recall and recall bias. The unit of analysis is the pre-existing paratext in the forms of textual data (text posts) and visual data (photo posts and video posts). Through purposive sampling, we identified relevant data using two methods: (1) keyword-based search across all group posts and (2) manual search on the group's "Media" tab. A set of keywords were used, including "COVID-19", "Movement Control Order", "MCO", and "socialise" in both English and Malay. The manual search was done to cover posts that could not be identified with keywords but had related nuances in the visual.

The time frame of the chosen Facebook group posts was between April 1, 2020, and April 30, 2021, when *ACNH* was first available to purchase, and the first year into and at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The 110 posts made by 85 unique players related to socialisation were collected and kept for analysis. As the posts were made during the actual months of MCO lockdown, they offered valuable explorations into the actual unfolding of the events. All posts written in the native Malay language were recorded verbatim and translated into English in the final write-up for readability. Any personal information that was removed could potentially result in a breach of the anonymity and privacy of the group members. To answer the research question, we employed the analytic method of Reflexive Thematic Analysis of data familiarisation, coding, generating initial themes, developing themes, refining themes, and writing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

Discussion

Virtual Socialising amid Spatial Distancing

In this section, we will answer the research question posed in the study: To what extent do Malaysian players leverage the *Animal Crossing* video game as a platform for connectivity and community development during the Movement Control Order? We analysed the evidence of virtual socialising through 110 posts made in the gaming group. Our analysis shows that Malaysian *ACNH* players performed socially meaningful actions, just like in the real world. The players' socialisation and companionship anchor on the notion of *ACNH* as the “third place”, the ideal virtual world to be regularly at during the physically isolating MCO period. We identified three themes: playing as a single player, playing as multiplayer, and playing as a community.

Playing As a Single Player

We identified this theme from instances of players engaged in the single-player mode that relies upon human-computer interaction (HCI) from 13 posts made by players in the gaming group. Our findings reveal that players may create connections of parasocial with the non-playable characters (NPCs), provided the NPCs have a deep characterisation.

One of the notable single-player socialisation experiences is the players' annual birthday party hosted by the island neighbours. Assuming that players keyed in their actual birthdates at the start, they will get a special socialisation experience upon logging in to the game on this day. During this event, players will be invited to a neighbour's house for a surprise celebration. The house will be furnished with party decorations of balloons, birthday signs, cakes, and gifts. There are multiple instances of Malaysian players celebrating their birthday virtually with the island neighbours. This can be read as a substitute for the real-world social events restricted by the MCO. For example, one player celebrated his birthday in the game with hashtags of mixed emotions “#sadmoment #happymoment” instead of going out (Post 8). Another player posted a short clip of her avatar smashing a star-shaped pinata while the neighbours cheered. Reflecting on the experience, she wrote, "This is the best birthday party during CMCO, hosted by Bonbon, Flurry and Grizzly" (Post 76). Two players discovered that they share the same birthday with the bull neighbour, Rodeo (Post 77) and cat neighbour, Kitty (Post 106).

In the single-player mode, players developed “friendship” with their neighbours. The social interaction loop consists of talking, gifting, or writing to the neighbours to learn about their personalities and preferences. To symbolise the highest level of friendship, the neighbours will present their special framed photograph, which is regarded in the gaming community as players' most sought-after and prized possession in the game. Consequently, this led to multiple instances of players' affection and emotional attachment to their neighbours. Notably, when the neighbours were to move out from the island after some time, the players were saddened by the separation. For example, one player uploaded a screenshot of his anteater neighbour, Antonio, who would leave his island the next day. The player wrote,

“Although Antonio will be leaving tomorrow, he still waters the flowers I planted around his house, sweeps the lawn, and even wears his favourite muscles suit that I gave him the other day. This game wasn't supposed to make you hurt a little inside, was it?” (Post 14).

The player further wrote that the screenshot reminds him of saying farewell to his real-life friends after graduating from university, an emulation of the player's real-life social experiences. In a follow-up emotional post about Antonio, the player wrote “Thank you for your companionship for almost three weeks on my island. I'm a wreck!” (Post 15). Similarly, another player posted some pictures of a farewell party for her mouse neighbour, Penelope (Post 110). In another post, a player drew her penguin neighbour, Wade, on her island's bulletin board with the text “I'll see you later! Goodbye, Wade” (Post 51).

All these posts with touching sentiments were made to remember players' 'friendship' with their neighbours. This sparked a discourse among players in the gaming group on the topic of separation, particularly when the island neighbours were to move out. After moving out, the neighbours remembered living on the previous island. This could be an emotionally touching experience for the players. For example, a player let go of her frog neighbour, Diva, to move into a friend's island (Post 19). When the player visited her friend's island, Diva recognised and welcomed her with the question, "It's me, Diva! You didn't forget me, did you?" Diva also said that although she was enjoying the new island, she missed the previous island sometimes. The experience left the player melancholic, as she wrote in the post "I wanted to cry so bad haha..."

Considering the deep characterisation of the island neighbours, some players get drawn to them based on their personalities. One player spent a lot of in-game resources of Nook Miles Tickets to search for a specific tiger character, Tybalt (Post 58). Tybalt, who is often energetic, has a jock personality and an interest in physical fitness. The player, presumably athletic, wrote that he could then play football with Tybalt on his island. Another player wrote about her cat neighbours Kabuki, Raymond, and Ankha, all of which resemble the personalities of her real-life cats: cranky smug, and snooty (Post 77).

However, not all actions of the island neighbours can be participated by the players. For example, one player cried "Can I have some?" when her neighbours were having a barbeque party at the town plaza without inviting her (Post 69). The player could just hang around and act as if they were together, but there is no option to participate in the activity. This is a limitation of playing as a single player as some actions by the neighbours, although creating a lively island atmosphere, may feel socially alienating to the player. The parasocial relationship explains the unreciprocated or one-sided connections the player formed with the island neighbours.

Evidently, playing *ACNH* as a single player can be entertaining because of the deep characterisation of the island neighbours. Players created meaningful connections and feelings towards the characters and experienced them as close friends, even though they were aware that the relationship was imaginary and based on simulated interactions. This artificial companionship and affection could be a comforting social surrogacy, especially during a physically isolating period such as the MCO. Although it should be noted that parasocial relationships have ill effects such as aggression, problematic real-life relationships, media addiction, and dependency (Jarzyna, 2021) and, therefore, should only supplement social needs, not replace real relationships. Malaysian *ACNH* players seem not to fall into extreme parasocial relationships because they also focus on playing multiplayer, as explained in the next section.

Playing As a Multiplayer

We generated this theme from the evidence of players engaged in multiplayer mode that emphasises the human-human interaction from 66 posts made by players in the gaming group. Our findings reveal that players used multiplayer mode to play with their family and friends, and forge new friendships. The multiplayer mode supports both local and online cooperative gameplay, allowing players to get together across geographical locations and time zones. This led the game to be a virtual "third place", a substitution for players' social events, thus contributing to camaraderie and companionship among players during the pandemic lockdown. We identified two subthemes of playing to hang out and playing to celebrate.

Playing to Hang Out

Malaysian players notably used *ACNH* as a virtual place to hang out and spend time together through synchronous and online play. Island visitations can be made by taking flights at the airport. Players often host island tours whereby friends and members of the community can visit their newly decorated islands, thus sharing creative visions for aesthetic improvements (Post 29 and 108). In these island tours, players also organise interactive activities, such as diving, hanging out at the beach, and even recreate scenarios from childhood memories, such as attending a Quran recitation class (Post 64).

In a more micro setting, some players went on virtual dates in *ACNH* with their partners (Post 4, 18, and 75). They praised the calming atmosphere and music of the game while they were hanging out on

a park bench, having drinks at a coffee shop, or butterfly watching together. One player noted how the in-game tasks can be rapidly overwhelming, and it is nice to reflect on their gaming progress. Although *ACNH* is a sandbox game meant to be played at players' own pace and volition, there are certain structured elements of tasks, mini-games, and storylines that upon completion will allow for further in-game progressions. However, ultimately, all these can be ignored by players, as they consciously opt out and exercise their freedom of shaping their own gameplay. Realising this, the player posted a picture of his and his partner's avatars hanging out at the aquarium, admiring the sea creatures they have accumulated in the game. He wrote,

"I remember the day when our aquarium was first opened. It was on Sunday, at the end of March 2020. Ever since we progressed in the game, it's always been terraforming, decorating, trading, etc... How about spending some time to reminisce the precious moments? We are having a date in the aquarium today" (Post 18).

As per one player, *ACNH* is more enjoyable to be played with friends (Post 5). She wrote,

"I have been playing this game for a few days. I got this game with a friend during the MCO. I can truly say that I enjoy this game so much! I think it's more enjoyable when you play with friends as you tend to find out about things together. I hope I can find more people to play with and visit your amazing islands!" (Post 5).

Some players might not have family members or friends who play the game, hence turning to Facebook groups to find gaming buddies. One player reflected on her solo gaming experience as "awfully lonely", in contrast to playing with newfound friends from the community as "so much fun!" (Post 93). Similarly, parents also found *ACNH* playmates and arranged their children's playing sessions as their children felt lonely playing the game alone (Post 26 and 54).

A common socialisation activity among players is to organise themed parties and gathering in the game. Players usually dress their avatars in matching dress ups, for example, of a Harry Potter-themed gathering (Post 24), astronaut-themed gathering (Post 46), and star-head-themed gathering (Post 53). Other themed gatherings include superhero costumes (Post 65) and light blue pinafores of Malaysian secondary school uniforms (Post 96). The themed gathering also ties in with competitions that players creatively devise for their own "gaming rules". For example, a player hosted a frog race, in which contestants dressed up in green frog costumes for a race of hopping through an obstacle course (Post 60). There is also a similar game of Leap for Speed whereby players compete to leap into treasures or fall into traps (Post 30). Another game is to spin the fortune wheel and dig up treasures (Post 28). Other games include musical chairs and pitfall sumo (Post 55), solving a murder mystery (Post 56), and photography contests (Post 68). These players' made-up competitions deviate from the official ludology and narratology of the game. In this sense, players leveraged the multiplayer feature of *ACNH* and created whole new ways of playing the game.

Additionally, some players built their own casinos in the game, allowing them to organise casual gambling sessions with others (Post 12, 20, and 25). The host set up roulette wheels, as well as floor designs with numbers on them for players to bet on. With the in-game currency of bells at stake, this essentially created a fully functioning casino, thus replicating a whole slew of a real-life function. While gambling through video games is one of the main concerns in Malaysia during the MCO (BERNAMA, 2021; Meikeng, 2021), our findings suggest that this was undertaken in *ACNH* in a positive manner and the spirit of camaraderie, which may indicate that it is not harmful. Clearly, the multiplayer mode allows players to hang out with each other, making the virtual world the "third place" during the MCO period.

Playing to Celebrate

Malaysian players also utilised *ACNH* to celebrate social rituals or cultural festivals. The pandemic lockdown may have stopped large physical gatherings, but birthdays, weddings, graduations, cultural and religious celebrations still needed to take place.

One player had a surprise birthday party organised by her friends, as they were restricted from traveling and meeting in person during the MCO (Post 78). Meanwhile, two players recreated their beachfront wedding ceremony complete with the reception area (Post 50). According to the bride, “Thanks to *ACNH*, we had the chance to take some wedding photos again”. Another player celebrated his convocation day by recreating the attire of a robe, hood, and mortarboard of his university (Post 6). Similarly, another player recreated a convocation ceremony for her sister, whose real-life ceremony was postponed due to the MCO restriction (Post 57). The player dressed the avatars in robes and mortarboards, seated amid rows of chairs, with a caption that reads “Congratulations Class of 2020”.

Cultural celebration and holidays also have their place in the virtual world. In April 2020, the players celebrated Easter, which is dubbed in-game as 'Bunny Day'. Keeping to the idea of Easter, the Bunny Day event revolves around an Easter egg-hunting competition and the appearance of a unique bunny character called Zipper. Players gathered and dressed in colourful egg costumes and egg decorations (Post 3). Players celebrated the Islamic holy month of Ramadan at the end of April. Unlike Bunny Day, an official event by game developers, Ramadan is purely organised by players. Ramadan has always been a social time of the year for Muslims, bringing together families at their local mosques, community centres, and each other's homes for congregational praying and communal eating. However, all these have been lost to the MCO for those living alone. In *ACNH*, one player celebrated the arrival of Ramadan month by dressing his neighbours in kurta shirts while emoting hungry faces as if from fasting (Post 11).

Following Ramadan month is the celebration of the Islamic month of Syawal or Eid al-Fitr at the end of May. It is a celebration of victory after a month of fasting. During this time, players emulated real-life Eid cultural practices to spread festive cheer and merriment in the game. One of the examples is cladding their avatar with colourful traditional outfits. Players expressed their appreciation for others who shared their custom designs of *baju raya* (Post 37), citing reasons such as the virtual outfits “really meant a lot to us at times [of restricted MCO] like these” (Post 38). Another player commented her appreciation of the custom designs in the group as she had been searching for *ACNH* Eid outfits on Google to no avail. It is unclear whether Facebook groups get to be indexed by Google. In this case, the custom designs shared in the gaming community did not appear on the popular search engine results.

Wearing these Eid clothes, players organised gatherings or open houses with Eid decorations and traditional dishes in the digital realm. In jest, one player wrote about his open house arrangement, "Don't worry, it's less than 20 people" (Post 32). This refers to the real-life MCO Standard Operating Procedures for the Eid visits that allows an arbitrary maximum number of 20 people in attendance at any one time. Players organised open house for their families, friends, and gaming buddies for photography sessions (Post 9, 33, 36, 41, and 42). Players also incorporated group games during the virtual open house, such as musical chairs (Post 39) and treasure hunt (Post 43). Due to the travel restrictions, some Malaysian players who live abroad could not get home for Eid. Hence, they celebrated it in the game (Post 35). Reflecting on this virtual celebration, one player noted that this year's Eid for her was “extra special” (Post 34). One player – who was undergoing mandatory COVID-19 quarantine in a hotel room – organised an open house in the game and offered his visitors the in-game currency bells as *duit raya* (Post 44). As per one player, “I have to say, attending open houses in *Animal Crossing* is a good way to socialise” (Post 31). Although prolonged physical separation from loved ones during the Eid was lamented, many prayed for a chance to be reunited anytime soon (Post 38).

The following cultural celebration is Malaysia's National Day on August 31, 2020. On this day, players gathered to celebrate *Hari Merdeka*. One player livestreamed her gameplay to the group, as she hosted a treasure hunt race on her island (Post 63). Entertaining and informative livestreams such as this often receive monetary donations by the audience. One player celebrated *Hari Merdeka* by wearing the Malaysia's national contingent sports jacket in the game (Post 59). Others organised parties on their islands as they wore matching shirts of Malaysian flag images, held colourful balloons, and enjoyed the fireworks displays (Post 66 and 67). Accordingly, the players prayed for unity and harmony of “Bangsa Malaysia” (Post 67).

In November, players celebrated Deepavali or the Festival of Lights. One player gathered her friends and island neighbours, all wore colourful kurtas and sarees to celebrate the occasion (Post 79). Additionally, players also celebrated Turkey Day in *ACNH*, which is equivalent to American Thanksgiving on the fourth Thursday in November. One player celebrated the occasion by gathering with his friends and island neighbours to recreate a Thanksgiving meal with a turkey as the centrepiece (Post 81). In December, the main celebration in *ACNH* is Toy Day, the equivalent of Christmas Day which takes place on the 24th of the month. It is a day for players to accumulate toys, ornaments, and gifts. To celebrate, some players dressed up in matching red Santa Claus suits and white beards to take photos around the island with the festive decorations (Post 84). Following Toy Day is the New Year's Eve celebration. To ring in the new year, a countdown event with a giant timer was held at the island plaza. One player noted that this celebration in-game is a "new normal" for her in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, while praying for a better year ahead (Post 85). She also reflected on the past year and appreciated having virtual friends of gaming, "thank you for the gifts and trades". Another player set up a party on her island with colourful balloons and invited her friends to come over; everyone wore flashy party hats. She noted, "I feel blessed to have known all of you here" (Post 86).

The next celebration is the Chinese New Year or the Lunar New Year. Players dressed up their avatars and decorated their islands with the auspicious colour of red that signifies good fortune and prosperity (Post 97). Reunion dinners with family members were simulated – this time replaced with the gathering of island neighbours and gaming friends (Post 98, 100, 101, and 103). Open houses were held, with friends flying to islands to celebrate together (Post 105). Players also wrapped money in red packets or angpows and hand them to the island neighbours as tokens of good wishes (Post 102). Realising the importance of the game at a time like this, one player wrote "Happy Reunion Dinner! Wishing all of you and your family an abundance of health, wealth, happiness, food, and *Animal Crossing!*" (Post 99). The New Year celebration continues with the Jade Emperor's birthday on the ninth day and Chap Goh Mei on the 15th day; all of them were celebrated in-game by the players with various food, decorations, and firecrackers (Post 107). Due to the MCO restrictions, these players could not return to their hometowns; hence, celebrating in-game was a viable option for them. While the excitement of celebrating Chinese New Year was still abuzz, Valentine's Day was also celebrated. Players exchanged affectionate cards and gifts to celebrate Valentine's Day on February 14 with family, friends, and the island neighbours (Post 104). The gifts included heart-shaped chocolates and flower bouquets, signifying the celebration of love to each other.

Amid the MCO restrictions, Malaysian *ACNH* players made the best of the situation by organising and attending celebrations in the virtual world. In this sense, they focused on human-human interactions as they valued the importance of human connection. Players got together with existing connections of family and friends for bonding. They also forged new and broader connections with gaming community members, turning from strangers into buddies. They got creative in decorating and themed gatherings, thus creating new narratives or scenarios while playing the game. This could help reduce feelings of isolation. As indicated by Lewis et al. (2021), it is not gaming per se but also particular ways of *ACNH* gaming that can lead to the positive effect of socialisation. In contrast, players who received visitors in their virtual worlds reported less self-perceived loneliness.

Playing As a Community

We constructed this theme from the evidence of players engaged in community interactions from 31 posts made by players in the gaming group. Our findings reveal that players leveraged the community interactions to enrich their gameplay experience. Consequently, this contributes to the opportunity for socialisation and companionship in the game, particularly in an isolating period such as the MCO. We identified three subthemes of community announcement, community support, and community reflection.

Community Announcement

The first type of community announcement is competitions, often organised by the gaming community leaders or volunteers, such as the Best Island Decoration (Post 45), to increase engagement among the members. To participate in the competition, players opened their islands for judges to visit and rate the decorations. The winners were then announced with gifts of in-game rare items and resources. Other community competitions were also held, particularly in thematic photography, including fireworks and landscapes.

The second announcement is community exchange. As a member of the gaming community, players get to participate in various exchanges, for example by adopting an island neighbour. Whenever a neighbour is planning on leaving an island, it will take them a whole day to 'pack up' their belongings. To describe this moment, players use the colloquial term of a neighbour as "in the box" or "in boxes". One player wrote about her pig neighbour, "Peggy is in the box! Please send me a private message if you are interested to adopt her" (Post 17). To adopt, other players can visit the island and invite the character to move into their islands. If the character is not picked up by someone else on move-out day, it may or may not vanish into 'the void' or obscurity of the game mechanics. In a rather sombre tone, one player regarded this situation as regretful, as the characters "will never be seen again..." (Post 52). Another player posted about her deer neighbour called Deirdre (Post 23). According to the player, Deirdre had been in the family for so long; initially on her sister's island, then her mother's island, and now on her island. When the player accidentally agreed to Deirdre's request to move out, she was understandably saddened by it. As such, she was doing her best to ensure Deirdre got adopted by anyone in the community who wanted and appreciated the character. Another type of community exchange is through item exchange, trade, or barter. Players often offer items to each other for exchange, usually ones that they have in abundance or in no use (Post 2). As storage capacity might be limited, especially early in the game, players engage in item exchanges to better manage their storage. Item exchange happens when players offer an item, in exchange for a particular item they were looking for. Sometimes, they were willing to pay with the in-game currency of bells (Post 13).

The final type of announcement is giveaways. Giveaways are done without anything needed in return. They are often done to give back to the community, usually when a player is advanced enough in the game and has accumulated many items. For example, players collaborated for a giveaway of star-themed items, which included zodiac furniture, crescent-moon chairs, and nova lights (Post 71). Giveaways are also done in the spirit of festivities. For example, in conjunction with the CNY celebration, one player held a giveaway of gold nuggets, a rare crafting resource in the game (Post 94). To join these giveaways, community members often must answer quiz questions creatively or follow the basis of first come, first serve.

Community Support

Approaching *ACNH* as part of a community lends the players various community support. The first type of support is through information asking and sharing, particularly on gameplay tips. For example, one player shared his discoveries that frequently interacting with his neighbours could unlock more socialisation features in the game, such as playing treasure hunts with them and setting up their nicknames and catchphrases (Post 21). Meanwhile, another player sought counsel from the community members, particularly on what in-game economic activities to do to clear the exorbitant home loans (Post 83).

Additionally, the information on etiquette in *ACNH* gaming was shared and discussed extensively in the community. Early on, a player was caught and shamed for stealing in-game items from others (Post 16). He was later banned and removed from the gaming community. Stealing, in this sense, happened when an island host purposely left items lying on the ground as gifts, and the island visitors took the gifts more than what they were allowed to or without the host's permission. Rampant stealing led to trust issues, thus deterring players from opening their islands for visitations, especially to strangers. However, such etiquette may not be observed out of being in the unknown, especially among new players. Realising this, one player shared an infographic on Etiquette When Visiting Other Islands,

among others, that visitors should ask for the host's permission first before taking or doing anything (Post 62). One player highlighted another important aspect of the island visiting – reliable internet connection (Post 82). Visitors with patchy internet connections might cause the island host and other visitors to experience disconnection. Disconnections might reset everyone's visiting session, thus leading to the loss of acquired items and gameplay progress. As such, having a reliable internet connection makes the visitation smooth and courteous to everyone else. By sharing this information, tips, and etiquette, the community members kept a harmonious state of affairs and established mutual understanding.

The second type of support is on ways of *ACNH* gaming, particularly on ending the game. Upon unlocking the milestone of having in-game celebrity K.K. Slider's concert on the island, one player wrote, "Finally, it's done... Yeah, I'm a bit slow" (Post 1). As he shared this gameplay progress, another player commented that he should not feel inferior as this is a sandbox and, thereby, a self-paced game. He was advised, "Don't let the internet determine your play style". Another player shared a similar screenshot of K.K. Slider's debut concert on his island, with a simple caption of "Finally..." (Post 91). Some might find that the concert and the rolling credits are the way of ending the game, but post-credit actually unlocks more in-game features, allowing players to explore and do more in the game. As such, it could be argued that there is no end of the game in sight.

In a stark contrast of ending the game, there is also a notion of restarting. Some players might feel like restarting their gameplay out of frustration from seeing other 'better' decorated islands. However, one player advised that such comparisons were unfounded, as "even houses in real life can look very different with one another" (Post 27). The player further wrote, "Put some love and make it a home. You do you!" to encourage individual expressions in decorating one's island instead of merely copying others' ideas. Another player shared a meme of the raccoon dog characters Tom Nook, Timmy, and Tommy giving a presentation on embracing the individuality and uniqueness of players' own islands (Post 74). The caption reads, "Your island is unique to you. Don't compare it to others. It is beautiful. You have worked hard. You better gosh darn appreciate it." The meme, in a guise of a seemingly humorous image, is a serious statement on validation that players' hard work done on their islands should be appreciated on its own merits.

This brought up the community discussion on the ways of *ACNH* gaming. One player shared her experience of 'time travelling' in the game, whereby she skips ahead in time instead of following the real-time clock (Post 61). By doing so, the player admitted that she enjoyed the game lesser, as she already knew which events or surprises would occur in the future. As a simulation game with realism aspects, *ACNH* is a simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1983), an imperfect replica of reality that hosts a certain degree of uncertainty and unknown. As players acquired all knowledge of the once uncertain and unknown, the game had no more stimulus or surprise to discover. Arguably, by altering the time synchronisation mechanics, the player has removed herself from the communal shared experience of the in-game seasons and time passing among the gaming community. Other players commented in agreement that the action took away the enjoyment of the *ACNH* "slow gaming", as it is a much more satisfying experience to see the island develop in real-time. Slow gaming stemmed from the idea of slow living during the pandemic lockdown. As people across the globe were confined within their homes, many were forced to slow down and break from the dominant "busy culture". Busyness indicates liquid modernity that emphasises individualisation, productivity, and living a "hurried life" (Davis, 2013). The increased free time during the MCO period has provided players with longer playtime and more sustained gaming experiences, allowing for deep attention, reflection, and contemplation. However, some *ACNH* players have no qualms about time travelling, especially those who were pressed for time or did not prefer the wait-time restrictions. The beauty of the game is that it is up to players to enjoy playing however they prefer. By manipulating the time to go forward or backward, players do not have to schedule themselves around the game but rather schedule the game to fit their needs and preferences.

The third type of support is through managing gaming fatigue. It is worth noting that this finding has revealed that although the popularity of *ACNH* attracts many Malaysians to play the game, such

popularity finally leads to gaming fatigue. This issue of *ACNH* gaming fatigue or exhaustion was discussed extensively among gaming community members, for example, by the player of Post 47. The discussion was posted in early June 2020, almost three months since the game was launched. After decorating the house and the island, the player felt like doing nothing else in the game. The game was perceived as lacking in replay value (colloquially known as “replayability”) or continued play value, which led some players to drop the game after completing the milestones and unlocking most features. This aligns with previous research findings that playing *ACNH* helped satisfy various psychological needs. Conversely, players stopped playing the game when they found that their needs were thwarted or better met through other activities (A. Z. H. Yee & Sng, 2022).

All these types of support made Malaysian *ACNH* players feel grateful, as they often expressed their appreciation towards the community. In particular, one player praised the community members as “courteous, helpful, and respectful” compared to other gaming communities she was in (Post 90). Many players agreed, as they often received help from the community members, either for gaming tips and tricks or for accumulating bells and items to progress in-game (Post 92).

Community Reflection

The first type of community reflection is through prompts or questions asked in the gaming group to encourage engagement and conversations between the members. Usually, members of the community were asked to share their gaming experiences and opinions. For example, one player uploaded a photo of his avatar with a painting exhibit in the museum. The player posed a question to the community, “What was the first painting you acquired and later donated to the island museum? Mine was the “Twinkling Painting”, also known as “The Starry Night” by Vincent van Gogh” (Post 10). In doing so, he encouraged other players to reflect on their gaming experiences, particularly on the moments when they first started playing the game.

Another player posed the question, “Who is your favourite low tier neighbour that you currently have on your island?” (Post 22). In this sense, “low tier” means the not-so-popular and less sought-after characters based on public perception and rankings posted on social media and gaming websites. The factors vary in the neighbour's looks, rarity, and personality. In answering this prompt, most players in the community named their loved “low tiered” neighbours for their sweet, adorable, and caring traits. Even neighbours with less desirable traits of being cranky and being a jock were someone's favourites, not underappreciated. As such, the idea of a “low tiered” neighbour is non-encompassing. It is not necessarily held by the *Animal Crossing* Malaysia community members, as each neighbour brings personal and unique experience to the players. Another prompt that garnered extensive responses from the community is the question, “What inspired you to decide on your island’s name?” (Post 72). The answers vary from childhood favourite desserts, name generators, puns, and TV shows to random words. Some players also named their islands based on Malaysian states, such as Kedah and Pulau Pinang.

Conclusion

The socialisation and companionship of Malaysian *ACNH* players are significant, as evidenced by their reciprocal gaming interactions. Through our findings, we discovered that players regularly performed socially meaningful actions just like they were in the real world. The community connection anchors on the notion of *ACNH* as the “third place”, the virtual world to be at during the MCO period. It is a place that welcomes not only veterans but also new players to dip their toes in the *Animal Crossing* franchise. However, as players progressed and unlocked most in-game features, the game became a replication of the reality without any stimulus or surprise to discover. This is where the social aspect comes in as the stimulus. That is not to say that socialisation took the back seat, as some players prioritised this feature early on. Players developed their own social norms of customs and etiquette through interactions with family, friends, and even with NPCs. They built networks, interpersonal connections, and resources of mutual social support, also known as players' social capital (Domahidi et al., 2018). Players with gaming capital (Consalvo, 2019) who acquired deep knowledge of how the game is best played gained a higher status within the community when they actively communicated

gaming guides. All these supplemented social needs and decreased loneliness during the MCO lockdown, whereby the social deficits were invoked externally. Previous studies have shown how video games facilitated social connections and interactions during the pandemic lockdown (e.g. Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2022). Our study expanded on this understanding by presenting the breadth of possibilities in which *ACNH* can foster virtual socialisation.

The relevance of this study is linked to the various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the United Nations. Firstly, the SDG3 of Good Health and Well-being, whereby socialisation through video games could promote players' mindfulness amid the chaotic pandemic lockdown. Secondly, the SDG16 of Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, in which multiplayer mode of video games can promote unity and cultural understanding by connecting players across different backgrounds in collaborative scenarios. Additionally, through community interactions, players could discuss and promote fair play and civil behaviour in the digital realm. This study makes an original and novel contribution to knowledge by featuring in-depth socialisation practices of Malaysian *ACNH* players. Practically, we also extend the research on video games and their potential to fulfil the fundamental need for human socialisation, especially in contexts where such needs may be restricted. Therefore, we consider that the analysis of virtual socialisation through video games in a pandemic lockdown is especially relevant to building knowledge that contributes to developing projects and policies that promote interconnectivity and well-being. Ideally, the usage of video games for socialisation should be accompanied by active gaming communities to foster a sense of belonging to a larger community. Our study is limited by the textual analysis method and the *ACNH* title; as such, future research may consider other qualitative methods and video game titles to extend a multifaceted understanding of Malaysian social gaming practices.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank the administrators of the Facebook group 'Animal Crossing Malaysia' for allowing us to conduct this research. Ethics approval was obtained from University Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC) with the reference number UM.TNC2/UMREC_2016. The research was done in accordance with the University Malaya Research Ethics Guidelines. The authors also would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback on the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Author Contribution Statement

TIMTS: Conceptualisation, Data Curation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – Original Draft Preparation

MAMS: Project Administration, Writing – Review & Editing

RIS: Project Administration, Supervision, Writing – Review & Editing

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Ethics Statements

This journal adheres to the ethical standards set by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

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