

An Exploration of Cozy Games as Coping Mechanism to Manage Mental Well-being

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INTRODUCTION

This research contributes to the understanding of the dynamic sector of gaming and its role in promoting mental well-being, specifically focusing on the new and under-investigated genre of cozy games. Recent studies have indicated that mindful engagement with games can positively influence mental well-being such as reduction in anxiety and stress (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2022). Consequently, healthcare professionals are advocating for the integration of gaming into healthcare practices (Schijven & Kikkawa, 2024).

Cozy games represent a genre celebrated for their calming, warm, and soft characteristics, offering players a wholesome gaming experience exemplified by titles like *Animal Crossing: New Horizon* (Nintendo, 2020) (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2022). The term 'wholesome' encapsulates concepts of moral virtue, physical well-being, innocence, and upliftment (Stevenson, 2010; Waite, 2012).

Recognizing the potential of cozy games as a therapeutic tool (Chan et al., 2022), this study addresses the research question: How do gamers utilize cozy games as a coping mechanism for managing their mental well-being?

This feeling of "coziness" is built upon three foundational pillars: safety (absence of threats or penalties), abundance (plentiful in-game resources), and softness (comforting aesthetics and sounds). By satisfying physiological and safety needs virtually, cozy games enable players to concentrate on achieving higher-level aspirations, such as self-actualization, accomplishment, and relationship building (Cook et al., 2017). The theoretical framework here employed concepts mainly from uses & gratifications theory, as well as interactivity and agency theory. Relating to uses & gratification theory, the operationalization part included what players seek (gratification sought), such as hedonic benefits, including relaxation, and what they actually receive (gratification obtained), such

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as unexpected utilitarian or social benefits, including managing stress (Menon, 2022; Shin et al., 2021). Moreover, interactivity grants gamers a sense of control, competence, and autonomy as they navigate virtual environments (Lee & Chen, 2023). Another related psychological mechanism is agency. Bodi (2023) suggests that the agency granted to gamers in cozy games provide a sense of control, facilitating an escape from real-life anxieties. We posit that this agency allows for a shift from passive coping to active problem-solving.

METHOD

This study employed semi-structured interviews, recognized as an ideal tool for gathering rich data on personal experiences, opinions, and meanings, especially regarding a deeply personal topic like mental well-being (Brennen, 2017; Kvale, 2011). A total of ten semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom, each lasting 45-60 minutes, with a sample fitting the rationale of this research (Braun & Clarke, 2021). After those ten interviews, saturation of themes was reached. The sampling strategy was purposive, targeting participants who engaged with cozy games weekly or more frequently and fell within the age range of 18 to 34 years old. Participants were recruited from large community groups on Discord.

Data analysis utilized thematic analysis to organize and report patterns in the collected data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). The analysis was deductive and inductive, following a six-step process from data familiarity to final theme generation (Joffe, 2011).

FINDINGS

The research findings revealed that cozy games provide gratifications that extend beyond mere hedonic pleasures, leading to a more profound and meaningful escapism that fosters growth and healing. Based on that, we found three main themes.

Theme 1: Fulfilments & Drivers. Participants sought cozy games primarily for hedonic gratifications, including like relaxation, effortlessness, and captivating aesthetics. However, their experiences exceeded expectations, resulting in unexpected utilitarian gratifications (autonomy, lightness, sense of control) and social gratifications (socialization, happiness). Fulfilment is achieved when the obtained gratification aligns with or surpasses initial expectations (Menon, 2022). To sustain continuous engagement, players appreciate a balance between both lower-level (gentle challenges) and higher-level motivators (accomplishment). While distinct from "hardcore" gaming challenge, players emphasized that complete passivity is demotivating; they require "gentle friction" to feel a sense of agency.

Theme 2: Coping & Crafting Well-Being. Gamers consciously turn to cozy games during challenging times due to the structural certainty that the games provide. Cozy games are appreciated for their dual functionality, serving as a tool for both emotion-focused coping by providing immediate stress relief and mood regulation, and problem-focused coping by enabling rational thinking and effective problem-solving after gaining a clearer mind. Post-gameplay, all participants reported feeling relaxed, relieved, recharged, and mentally lightweight. These benefits include short-term effects, such as like immediate stress reduction, and long-term effects, such as mental resilience and a healthier reflective approach to stressors.

Theme 3: Creative Agency as Restoration Beyond Simple Escapism. Cozy games facilitate "restorative agency." Immersive aesthetics and music aid coping (Di Cesare et al., 2023), but it is the active construction of the world that distinguishes this genre. This autonomy

and ownership allow players to craft personal narratives and indulge in unattainable aspirational play (Bodi, 2023b). Unlike passive media consumption, the act of tending to a virtual environment provides a tangible sense of order and efficacy often missing in real-life crises.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The research supported Maslow's notion that individuals can focus on higher-level needs only once their lower-level needs are satisfied (Maslow, 1943; Mcleod, 2018). Participants reported engaging in activities like building relationships, self-discovery, and self-actualization because their in-game basic needs (physiological needs like food and safety needs like security) were readily and easily fulfilled through the cozy game pillars. The findings aligned with U&G theory by confirming that players engage with cozy games with purposeful motives seeking hedonic gratification (relaxation, effortlessness, aesthetics).

The research challenged the assertion by Cook et al. (2017) that an over-implementation of lower-level mechanics (e.g., survival or responsibility) in cozy games is consistently demotivating. Instead, the findings suggest that players appreciate a balance between both lower-level (gentle challenges) and higher-level motivators to sustain engagement. Furthermore, the study found that the misuse of higher-level motivators (like broken character relationships or lack of content updates) can have a more severe negative impact on players compared to misapplied lower-level motivators, which are easily replenished due to the cozy pillars.

Crucially, the research challenged the strict classification of coping mechanisms into either purely emotion-focused or problem-focused (Lee & Chen, 2023). Participants simultaneously employed cozy games for dual functionality: immediate emotion-focused coping (stress relief) and later, problem-focused coping (gaining mental clarity). This suggests that cozy games act as a "psychological airlock," transitioning players from a high-stress state to a regulated state where they can address real-world problems.

In conclusion, cozy games are a vital component of the coping repertoire for managing mental well-being, providing a therapeutic experience that fosters both immediate stress relief and long-term mental resilience.

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