

AN EXPERIENCE MEANT TO BE SHARED?

A public discourse analysis of dyad gaming experiences within ACNH during self-isolation

Anna Aleksieva - s2119102

Bachelor Thesis in Communication Science (BSc)

Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences (BMS)

Supervisor: Dr. Ruud S. Jacobs

University of Twente

July 1st, 2022

Acknowledgments

I would like to express how grateful I am to my supervisor Dr. Ruud S. Jacobs who supported my decision to choose this game for my bachelor thesis assignment. The discussions I had with him were always inspiring and reassuring, while his patience was simply impressive. Without his insightful feedback, helpful advice, and moral support this graduation project would not have been possible.

I would also like to thank my family, friends, and partner who showed interest in my thesis and motivated me to do my best.

Abstract

Aim: This research aimed to reveal how dyadic gaming was experienced within ACNH during times of self-isolation. Nintendo Switch's bestselling game for 2020, also called the pandemic game, was Animal Crossings New Horizons (ACNH). During times of self-isolation and disconnect, people were dire to find a way to remain socially active and reduce stress. The social network simulator offered players an immersive and carefree gaming experience, and many people utilized this virtual environment to maintain and even create relationships with other players.

Method: Obtaining information on how players talked about their dyad gaming experience called for the qualitative research method of public discourse analysis. The corpus consisted of three types of sources: videos, Reddit posts, and gaming journalism articles. The developed coding scheme consisted of 42 codes, organized into six groups, and was based on high intercoder agreement.

Results: The results revealed that dyad gaming experiences during lockdown took the form of island visits, going on dates, and celebrations of real-life events. In addition, players enjoyed the shared experience, joked, laughed, and were kind to each other. Parents and couples described dyad gaming as a meaningful and bonding activity that strengthened their relationships. Although players found the befriending process to be bothersome, other technical aspects such as the game designs' cute visuals and 'emote' functions brought people positive feelings during dyad gameplay. Technical difficulties influenced dyad gaming as players noted the bothersome befriending process and functional limitations when being a visitor.

Conclusion: Overall, the main aspects of dyad gaming within ACNH during the pandemic revealed a positive culture stimulating socialization. The research adds to the literature focused on positive gaming influences on well-being while considering social factors such as peer, familial, and romantic relationships.

Keywords: ACNH, dyad gaming, public discourse analysis, self-isolation, socialization

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	5
2. Theoretical Background.....	8
Humans as Social Beings	8
Socialization via gaming	9
Dyad Gaming and Relationships	11
Discourse Analysis	13
3. Methods and Data collection.....	14
Research Design	14
<i>Procedure & Instruments - Corpus composition</i>	15
Data Analysis	17
<i>Coding Scheme</i>	17
4. Results	19
Source Type	20
<i>YouTube Video</i>	20
<i>Reddit Posts</i>	20
<i>Gaming Journalism Articles</i>	21
Code Groups.....	21
<i>Dyad Gaming</i>	21
<i>Game-related</i>	24
<i>Positive</i>	25
<i>Technical Functions</i>	28
<i>Real-life</i>	29
5. Discussion	31
Main Findings.....	31
Strengths and Limitations.....	34
Future Research Recommendation	35
Practical Implications	35
6. Conclusion	36
References.....	37
Appendix A	42
Appendix B	45
Appendix C	47

Introduction

The growing popularity of video games and therefore their impact on society has recently become more evident. Despite being labeled isolating and lonesome technologies, video games continue to be a well-liked form of social entertainment where sociality implies well-being because closeness during gaming reportedly causes short-term joy (Bowman et al., 2022). In their research Verheijen et al. (2018) state that video games are a factor influencing the development and maintenance of friendships, notably for males, as 42% play games with friends on a weekly basis and 34% found friendship during online gaming. Moreover, a large body of literature has confirmed the importance of peers in shaping adolescents' behavior (Brechtwald & Prinstein, 2011, as cited in Verheijen et al., 2018). Friends communicate and shape each other's interests and video games offer a unique podium for this interaction to take place. Furthermore, as pointed out by the World Health Organization, the pandemic has distinguished video games as fundamental tools for bonding and community forming, reflecting the lack of social interactions and human contact that COVID-19 imposed (Gandolfi & Gandolfi, 2021).

The most successful initial release for a Nintendo Switch game is the one of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (ACNH), released on March 20, 2020, with more than 13.41 million copies sold within the first six weeks (Carpenter, 2020) and growing (Hsieh et al., 2021). Since its release, it has been among the most discussed games, with Twitter data implying that “conversation volume since launch has grown over 1,000 percent and the number of people tweeting about the game has grown over 400 percent” (Khan, 2020).

Interestingly, the Covid-19 pandemic offered a unique opportunity for ACNH as a social network simulation game to demonstrate its impact on individuals' well-being in times when in-person communication lacked. For instance, the huge popularity of *Animal Crossing: New*

Horizons has previously been attributed to escapism as imposed by the loneliness of lockdown life (Zhu, 2020), which corresponds with research that quickly framed the lockdown as a radical historical interruption of work and leisure events (Seller, 2021). Likewise, while others acclaimed ACNH as an escapist's dream, Annamarie Fertoli at The Wall Street Journal labeled it "coronavirus therapy." (Foreman, 2020). In like manner, the customization and easy-going nature of New Horizons are why The New York Times named it "The Game of the Coronavirus Moment" (Khan, 2020). The desire for escapism may have driven the sales of ACNH in its first month of release, nevertheless, as reported by Hsieh et al. (2021) the game proceeded retaining large number of players more than a year following its launch.

Overall, Animal Crossings: New Horizons is a game that offers a lot of interesting fields for research since it got released at the beginning of the pandemic and people were playing it during the lockdown. Game immersiveness, escapism, and shared gaming undoubtedly had an impact on individual wellbeing, especially during the time of self-isolation when people had limited in-person communication and therefore turned to social-simulation games to stay socially active. Studies stated that a balanced amount of playing corresponds to enhanced mood and emotional control, and lower levels of stress and relaxation (Raith et al., 2021).

Considering the games' popularity, lockdown circumstances, and the increased amount of conversation volume, it would be interesting to analyze the public discourse surrounding the shared gaming experience within ACNH. The importance of studying dyad interactions in a virtual environment has been argued in previous research. For instance, in their paper Lewis et al. (2021) have given the following future research recommendation: "Finally, continued exploration of the role of social games such as ACNH in psychological well-being should continue with attention to the role of other social factors such as peer, familial, and professional relationships." (p. 6). In

addition, Bowman et al. (2022) stated that research which: “specifies more nuanced mechanisms connecting the social nature of video games with specific well-being outcomes is still lacking.” (p. 3). Friendship pairs, marital couples, business partners, and parent-child all exemplify dyad forms (Becker & Useem, 1942, p.13). For the current study, the focus lies on understanding how people are talking about their dyad gaming experiences on different online platforms. Investigating the public conversations surrounding the culture of dyad gaming within ACNH during the pandemic has not been performed and would contribute to the body of knowledge focused on social aspects of gaming. Therefore, this paper would attempt to provide valuable insights into the culture of ACNH dyad gaming by paying attention to different types of relationships as a social factor. Moreover, Giardina et al. (2021) state that the currently available evidence regarding the effects of gaming on anxiety and depressive symptoms in the context of a pandemic is limited. By dwelling into the public discourse surrounding dyad gaming experience within ACNH this study could provide theoretically valuable insights regarding shared gaming in self-isolation and its effects on well-being. Therefore, the main research question guiding this study was formulated as:

RQ: “What does the public discourse reveal regarding dyad gaming experience within ACNH during self-isolation?”

The purpose of this discourse analysis is to provide a better understanding of how the public communicates about dyad game experiences in the challenging times of self-isolation and therefore distinguish the culture that is formed and the main aspects surrounding it. Zhang et al. (2021) state that research on unique contexts is essential in that society can learn and apply it, later on, to help deal with similar problems in the future. Therefore, analyzing society’s take on the phenomenon that ACNH is, would prove beneficial for future game developments in the social network simulation sphere and provide valuable input for the modern entertainment industry by

uncovering what people talked about their shared gameplay experiences during times of self-isolation.

Theoretical Background

This section of the report is going to review scientific literature exploring relevant to the context of ACNH topics. Gaining an in-depth understanding of network-simulation games is an important step toward revealing the public discourse surrounding dyad gaming within ACNH. First, the concept of humans as social beings is introduced to tackle the self-isolation aftermath. Second, socialization via gaming demonstrates how the process occurs in a virtual environment. Third, the concept of a dyad, gaming experiences with friends or romantic partners, and making new connections in the virtual world is reviewed. Respectively, three sub-questions are introduced based on the reviewed concepts to assist in answering the main research question. Lastly, the lack of existing discourse analysis on the topic of ACNH is elaborated and another public discourse study conducted within the sphere of gaming is discussed.

Humans as Social Beings

In their article Lewis et al. (2021) describe humans as inherently social beings and state that extended periods lacking social interaction can be harmful to both mental and physical health. Specifically, this is the situation in which individuals found themselves during the Covid-19 pandemic.

During those challenging times, many people turned to the virtual world, motivated by the desire to remain in touch and experience connectedness. In their article, Zhang et al. (2021) refer to the work of Wee (2006), who summarized ten motivation factors for online gaming and grouped them into three overall components (achievement, social, and immersion). More specifically, the social component has three elements: socializing, as in seeking to help and chat with other players,

relationship, which focuses on the desire to establish long-term, meaningful relationships with others, and teamwork, which revolves around the idea of drawing satisfaction from contributing toward a group effort. Furthermore, Giardina et al. (2021) state that having gaming-related social capital and being intrinsically motivated to play for social reasons have regularly been reported as guarding factors and a sign of healthy engagement with video games. In like manner, Benti and Stadtmann (2021) considered Maslow's pyramid to reflect on ACNH as a tool for satisfying needs in the real world by engaging in the virtual world. They elaborated on how peoples' love needs, as part of deficiency-motivated needs, are fulfilled by the game and reported that lower levels of loneliness are observed among gamers, who received visitors on their island. Overall, the study confirmed that the positive associations from the virtual video game world do transition into the real world. The experiences people made while playing together although virtually did impact their emotions in the real world. The activities players perform while playing in a pair potentially reflect their real-world desires and expectations. Hence, exploring the different types of dyad gaming experiences within ACNH would provide useful information to tackle the main research question. Based on these expectations, the following sub-question was posed:

SQ1: "What forms of dyadic gaming experience did players have within ACNH?"

Socialization via gaming

The opportunities that digitalized environments present to our increasingly globalized society are aiding connectedness among people. Tong et al. (2021) argue that multiplayer online games (MOGs) and virtual worlds allow players to interact and socialize with one another for entertainment or professional purposes. Additionally, the paper states that game research implies that playing video games reinforces families and friends to stay connected, enhances players' positive emotions, and facilitates social activities with fellow players. Likewise, in their research

Benti and Stadtmann (2021) elaborate on how those virtual platforms have become crucial for establishing friendships and coping with emotions surrounding isolation caused by the lack of social interactions and support. Overall, these positive emotions and social interactions in games contribute to players' happiness and psychological well-being (Tong et al., 2021). As a social network simulation game, ACNH offers gamers a field to involve themselves in social interactional processes. In like manner, one of the focal features that brought fame to the ACNH game is social interaction because it is highly related to ones' psychological well-being to eliminate loneliness (Zhu, 2020). For instance, communication in social media groups for ACNH reinforced players to travel to each other's islands and exchange in-game text messages. In their reflections on Maslow's hierarchy of love needs, Benti and Stadtmann (2021) gave the example of a couple who began their real-life friendship on Twitter and continued pursuing it in ACNH. Hence, it is evident that the game holds great potential for fulfilling socialization to take place. Another example elaborating how ACNH satisfies deficiency-motivated love needs concerns another pair who initially met on a Facebook group and subsequently got to know each other better in ACNH and eventually decided to get married (Steinbrecher, 2020, as cited in Benti & Stadtmann, 2021).

Specific aspects of virtual worlds reportedly make them more appealing to people than the real-world conditions. As an example, a boundless virtual environment, which characterizes online games, is considered by Giardina et al. (2021) as offering a safe space for meeting individual needs such as social affiliation and competence that would otherwise be difficult to achieve during times of a pandemic-imposed self-isolation. In their research, Giardina et al. (2021) speculate that gaming possesses an emotional protective quality that is supposedly connected to a compensatory function, particularly fulfillment through the games' basic needs related to competence, autonomy,

and social affiliation. More specifically, on an individualistic level according to Lewis et al., (2021), people can easily find peace in ACNH and escape from the suffering of reality to relieve psychological anxiety and depression. The virtual world of ACNH is seemingly designed to stimulate social interactions, hence the following sub-question was developed to provide insight on what game design features or functionalities people related to their shared gameplay:

SQ2: “How is the game design of ACNH linked to dyadic experiences?”

Dyad Gaming and Relationships

A dyad group could be seen as friendship pairs, marital couples, business partners, and parent-child dyads (Becker & Useem, 1942). Therefore, in this section, several types of dyadic relationships would be reviewed in the context of ACNH gameplay. Becker and Useem (1942) reported that a high number of studies eighty years ago were focused on the dyad or pair. A more recent study confirmed that dyadic-based interventions had a positive effect on physical activity and are a promising tool for achieving behavior change (Carr et al., 2018). Additionally, Bowman et al. (2013) concluded that social aspects of video gaming such as co-located gaming are relevant technical dimensions in research studies. For instance, Verheijen et al. (2018) performed a dyadic analysis to inspect peer influence in best friend dyads. Their longitudinal research confirmed that adolescents’ shared exposure to violent games resulted in aggression within the pair one year later among male players. Another interesting statement made by Becker and Useem (1942) is that the more intimate a dyad is, the more conflicts could arise between them (p. 15). It would be interesting to test this tendency, eighty years later, especially in the context of ACNH network simulation dyad gaming experiences. Although, the authors described that face-to-face communication is required to classify the relations as dyadic, current technological advancements facilitate the creation of long relationships lasting enough for personality interaction to take place.

Some research indicates that when both romantic partners partake, online gaming might be associated with improved health among women as well as higher numbers of relational satisfaction in comparison to relationships where only one of the partners is engaging with video games (Norton et al., 2020). Similarly, Musick et al. (2021) address the fact that although limited, literature focusing on parent-child co-playing experiences argues that such gaming activities could potentially improve family relationships. In their research Jia et al. (2015) explore the concept of socializing via gaming by revealing the social relationships observed in MOG. Their findings confirm that friendship has a positive influence on user interactions, and they propose SAMRA, a socially aware match recommendation algorithm that considers social relationships as a factor. The outcome of the study demonstrated that this model helped players to enjoy the games to a higher extent (Jia et al., 2015). Moreover, Raith et al. (2021) noted that research focusing on well-being aspects of gaming was promising, however, limited. Based on those considerations, the following sub-question was formulated to help answer the main research question:

SQ3: “How are people enjoying dyadic experiences?”

Forming and maintaining relationships in a virtual environment is an intriguing topic. Research, focused on digital gaming and friendship, is mostly aimed at how gamers get together in games with players sharing similar leisure interests and therefore how gaming facilitates friendship creation (Eklund & Roman, 2018). In addition, gamers playing with their ‘real’ friends have been found to be able to transfer in-game experiences to their social networks outside gameplay (Snodgrass, Lacy, Dengah, & Fagan, 2011 as cited in Eklund & Roman, 2018). Moreover, studies report that indulging in conversation concerning games improves relationship quality (de Grove, 2014) and advise that future research aiming to evaluate both positive and negative aspects of digital games should consider issues going beyond the direct effects. Based on

this, in the following section, a study utilizing public discourse analysis as a research technique is reviewed as a source of inspiration. As de Grove (2014) implied, this research goes beyond the direct effects of gaming by exploring the social constructs and culture expressed and created via public discourses surrounding a specific aspect of gaming.

Discourse Analysis

In their research, Anderson and Schrier (2021) conducted a discourse analysis based on a corpus of 60 articles from games journalism to better understand discourses around accessibility and disability in-game culture. They state that the chosen research method helps to describe how members of a subculture both impose and mimic the standards concerning any given topic. Moreover, this qualitative method does not simply conduct a text analysis but also describes how social constructs are formed and replicated (Anderson & Schrier, 2021). Considering that there is no evidence of a conducted public discourse analysis surrounding the ACNH during the pandemic, it can be concluded that research aiming to uncover the culture and communication related to the game is scarce, if not completely lacking. The phenomenon Anderson and Schrier (2021) aimed to explore is culture, and they evaluated it by analyzing how cultural texts describe disability and accessibility. Similarly, this research would attempt to analyze the culture surrounding dyad gaming ACNH, which stems from and is actively formed by communication (discourse) about the game. The phenomenon to be explored within this research is the communicated gaming culture of shared gameplay experiences in ACNH during the unique period of self-isolation. A public discourse analysis would provide useful insights into how people communicate about their dyad experience during times of self-isolation. Dyad gaming experiences insights, UX feedback, potential improvements in network simulation gaming developments, and overall impact on well-being are among the envisioned topics of public discourse. Gaining more insights into those

aspects surrounding the games culture could provide useful insights for the development of network simulation games such as ACNH that offer a solution for dealing with negative aspects of self-isolation such as loneliness and depression.

Methods and Data collection

Research Design

Based on the research question concerning how individuals experienced dyad gaming during self-isolation in the context of Animal Crossings New Horizons, a discourse analysis based on a broad spectrum of sources and different communication channels was decided upon.

In their book, Sullivan, and Forrester (2018), describe discourse analysis as a qualitative approach that offers unique and powerful insight into the use of talk and text in all forms of social interactions. Moreover, the authors state that the central argument regarding DA is that discourse constructs reality, instead of reflecting it. According to Sullivan and Forrester (2018), this methodology allows the questioning of common-sense understandings about the world and to discover how they are applied in interaction to construct specific versions of the world that have consequences for what individuals can think, say or do. Therefore, the aim of this research is to collect knowledge from several media in order to get an overview of how people communicated about their ACNH experience with duo gaming during the period of lockdown. Moreover, this qualitative approach would provide us insights into how ACNH gamers as a subgroup perceive the world how they interact within the game, and most importantly, what meaning they attach to their dyad interactions in this medium. This research technique would uncover the culture that ACNH gamers are constructing by communicating about their dyad experience in both spoken and written form. Overall, this qualitative method does not simply conduct a text analysis but also describes how social constructs are formed and replicated (Anderson & Schrier, 2021).

Procedure & Instruments - Corpus composition

The corpus on which the DA was based consisted of three different types of sources (Reddit Posts, YouTube videos, and gaming journalism). The logic behind this selection was to build a corpus covering a wide range of data, varying in its' scope and purpose. YouTube video sources were chosen due to their high information density and the fact that communication and gameplay took place simultaneously. Reddit was selected due to the platform hosting a lot of ACNH communities where players shared a lot. Gaming journalism was selected as a source type due to its perceived trustworthiness, objective speech style, and high information density. This source selection would provide a realistic and reliable view of what the public communicated regarding their dyad gaming experience in different media outlets. The researcher selected the sources based on their suitability to the dyadic context and applied a specific search strategy for the different types of sources as described below.

Firstly, in regard to gathering Reddit sources, communities within the website were searched for as shown in Figure A1, and afterward selected based on their number of members and description (see Appendix A). Subsequently, search queries included specific search terms entered on Reddit that can be seen in Table A1 (see Appendix A).

Secondly, the search for gaming journalism took into account the steps applied in a study by Anderson and Schrier (2021), who gathered this type of source through keyword searches on a third-party search engine—meaning a search engine not hosted on the websites themselves. In this study, Google was the chosen search engine and the settings in the Chrome browser were set to a 'guest mode' to avoid obtaining personalized results. Overall, gaming journalism sources were found among two of the most popular games journalism outlets: Kotaku.com and Polygon.com

(Anderson & Schrier, 2021). An example search query is depicted in Table A1 and the outcome is depicted in Figure A3 (see Appendix A).

Thirdly, the video search was performed within YouTube itself since there is no existing search engine that would offer more objective outcomes than YouTube itself. The videos were chosen based on the researchers' assessment of their suitability for the research purpose. An example search with the applied filters in the video-sharing platform is depicted in Figure A2 (see Appendix A).

Table 1

Corpus Configuration

Source Type	Number of sources	Relative size
Reddit post	22	- Total 335 comments - 15 comments on average per post
YouTube video	12	- Total 111 minutes of speech - 9:29 min average dialogue length
Gaming Journalism article	13	- Total of 9945 words - 765 words on average per article

Overall, the final corpus consisted of 47 entities of data as it can be seen in Table 1. It is worth noting that the video format offered a wide range of data points in comparison to Reddit posts, which would typically contain fewer data. Moreover, video sources arguably provided 'naturally-occurring' speech gathered during the gameplay, while Reddit posts and gaming articles are written in retrospect. Furthermore, gaming journalism publications implied more detailed and rich information, whereas data obtained from Reddit posts were expected to be more practically orientated, less detailed, and lacking non-verbal cues.

Data Analysis

Already during the data collection process, the analysis had begun since the researcher was simultaneously listening to the videos and taking notes. The researcher selected relevant parts of data for both video and article sources and the notes were listed and organized in Table B1 and Table B2 (see Appendix B). Afterward, the suitable parts of the gathered data were fully transcribed. The Reddit posts were fully analyzed together with the comment sections. Especially for the video and Reddit posts sources, the researcher paid attention to describing the context as well, since the transcripts alone could not fully illustrate what is being visually communicated. Afterward, the written transcripts were inserted in the qualitative data analysis and research software Atlas.ti, where they were manually coded.

Coding Scheme

An inductive approach was adopted to determine a suitable coding scheme and prevent selective coding. The method of open coding was applied for the purpose of this DA study. The researcher coded all of the data and came up with a coding scheme consisting of 42 codes as can be seen in Table C1 (see Appendix C). Examples for each code are presented in Table C3 (see Appendix C). Furthermore, axial coding was applied in order to logically categorize the codes and outline the main topics surrounding dyad gaming within ACNH. There were 37 codes deemed as relevant and organized into five code groups as shown in Table 2. Additionally, there were five codes gathered in a group named *Meta-Communication* since they were quotations such as exclamations, context descriptions, and observations that did not contribute for answering the research question.

The fifth code group named Game-related was the most frequently occurring code group. Game-related untied all of the game-specific topics that players discussed. The reasoning behind

the group Positive is to gather all the codes possessing a positive sentiment. Technical Functions collected the codes mentioning technical matters related to the user experience, functionalities, and limitations concerning dyadic gaming. The group Real life has collected information on how people utilize ACNH for real-life situations such as celebrations, dating, and gift exchange.

Table 2

Coding scheme and Code groups frequency of assignment as a percentage

Code Group Positive 28.18%*	Code Group Technical Functions 16.45%	Code Group Dyad Gaming 17.38%	Code Group Real-life 6.73%	Code Group Game-related 31.26%					
Approval	6.2%	UX	4.1%	Approval- Seeking	1.2%	Real-life reference	3.3%	Game Item	5.6%
Banter	4.8%	Functional	4.8%	Disagreement	2.5%	Event	1.6%	Villager	6.1%
Compassion	1.4%	Technical Difficulties	2.4%	Dyadic Experience	3.5%	Gift	0.8%	Interior/ Exterior	5.7%
Compliment	4.1%	Technical Explanation	2.9%	Dyad Parent	2.5%	General Knowledge	1.1%	Game Question	4.9%
Cuteness	2.7%	Visits	1.2%	Dyad Partner	2.5%			Outfit	2.1%
Gratitude	2.1%	Emote	1.1%	Suggestion	0.8%			Game Plans	4.0%
Happiness	1.3%			Swear	0.4%			Game Task	1.8%
Humor	3.1%			Directions	2.2%			Game Talk	1%
Laughter	2.7%			Decision- making	0.5%				
				Show-off	1.6%				

Note. *Calculated frequency of assignment based on 2148 codes in these groups

An example of a developed code would be “banter”, which is defined as a “Light, playful, and friendly exchange of teasing remarks” or “event”, which would refer to: “Dates, celebrations, or any real-life occasion that has been taken to ACNH”.

Subsequently, in order to validate the reliability of the developed coding scheme, a fellow researcher was asked to act as an assistant and independently code approximately ten percent of the data selected on a random principle. The second coder was familiarized with the coding scheme, and he managed to understand everything as he is also familiar with the ACNH game. After he completed coding, the two researchers came together to discuss any questions, compare, adjust, and decide upon the final version of the coding scheme. The Intercoder Agreement was calculated in Atlas.ti using both Krippendorff Alpha and Simple percentage agreement. Overall, the analysis showed that the coding scheme is reliable with a Krippendorff Alpha α of .78 and a Simple Percent Agreement of 88.9 %. The intercoder agreement was also calculated per code group as depicted in Table C2 (see Appendix C). Additionally, in order to ease the process of writing the result section, the researcher generated a ‘code-document table’ within Atlas.ti for each code group that demonstrated how many times each code within a group was assigned across the three different source types. Moreover, code occurrence rate was calculated in Atlas.ti by selecting the column or row-related frequencies box. The outcome of the analyzed data could be found further in the result section of the report.

Results

In this part of the research report the main findings, contributing to answering the research question were analyzed and interpreted. The results were first interpreted in general per document type and secondly more in-depth per code group. The category Dyad Gaming was reviewed first due to its codes containing the most significant data for answering the formulated sub-questions and the main research question. Results from the other groups contributing toward revealing the dyadic experience were also interpreted.

Table 3*Code group frequencies rate per source type*

Variables	Gaming Journalism (13)	Reddit Posts (22)	Videos (12)	Total assignments (group)
Dyad Gaming	29.02%	15.95%	15.59%	375
Game-related	15.03%	20.51%	37.17%	670
Positive	0.7%	42.78%	29.54%	605
Technical functions	41.96%	15.19%	11.91 %	355
Real-life	13.29%	5.57%	5.79%	145
Totals assignments (source)	286	393	1469	2148

Source Type***YouTube Video***

In video sources, dyad communication and actual dyad gameplay happened simultaneously which provided a lot of game-related speech, revealed genuine dyadic moments and expressions of emotions. For instance, most of the videos cover island visits where one player explores the island of another. The positive aspect of shared gaming also prevailed in the dialogs as players were having fun, laughed, engaged in banter, and appeared happy to bond over the game.

Reddit Posts

Overall, as Table 3 shows, the information obtained from Reddit communities was dominated by the positive sentiment, which meant players' joy from the gameplay was experienced in the long term as well. Compassion was expressed regularly in this medium and

together with the often use of compliments and gratitude represented Reddit communities as a safe and supportive environment: “I love this group because other kindred souls love this silly game as much as I do and learn so many new things!” (Comment from User 3, Post 12). On Reddit people posted about their shared experiences and typically other users described their own as a response in the comment section: “I love it! I’ve been helping my sister make a mermaid room! I totally forgot about the pearl coloring for the shell furniture, so I’m definitely going to copy!” (Comment from User 23, Post 9). The supportive environment stimulated people to seek advice and exchange knowledge regarding the technical functionalities of the game. For instance, a player was having difficulties befriending her boyfriend and a user replied: “I didn’t add anyone in quite a long time but if I remember correctly, you have to use the nook phone for adding friends in game :)” (Comment from User 4, Post 4).

Gaming Journalism Articles

Generally, the journalism sources were informative and lacked positive expressions potentially owing to the authors’ attempts to inform the audience in an objective style. Elaborations on technical aspects and functionalities of the game were often mentioned in the articles as it can be seen in Table 3. Several gaming journalism articles provided a lot of valuable insights because they represented a collection of dyadic experiences within ACNH that authors gathered from players.

Code Groups

Dyad Gaming

Dyadic Experience was the most popular code within the group (see Table 2), which was applied when something specific to playing together in a pair, such as sharing or helping was mentioned. A player asked her friend for help with digging up her numerous flowers: “Help me

get rid of them...Please, just do it, please.” (female friends, Video 6). Some game journalists described the dyad gaming experience of sharing an island as sharing a home:

This opens up the possibility of seeing your mutual home flourish when you're not around (other users can share the load when it comes to daily chores, for example, or leave messages and gifts for you to come back to). (Article 4)

Another journalist made the following statement after hearing players' stories about dyad gaming:

Most were excited about having a space to share — whether they were playing separately or apart. But the thing that was common across any of these stories was boundaries: Each of these groups of players had them, some strict and others very laid back. But boundaries they were, still. (Article 2)

Dating, as in meeting someone for the first time and getting to know them, was another topic occurring within the code dyad experiences and one player described hers as a “Super pure interaction” (Article 10) and others stated: “I used Animal Crossing to grow closer to someone, which was reflected in real life.” (Article 5). Benefits of dating in the game were mentioned “I think the nervousness and anxiety of meeting someone face to face fade away while playing” (Article 10).

The public talked about child-parent dyads within the game and many within Reddit communities shared the belief that playing together in a dyad offered a meaningful way to spend quality time together: “What a nice way to bond with your daughter!”. The stories summarized in Article 12 discussed the benefits of playing in a child-mother dyad and such as the fact that the game allowed parents to explore creative connections with their children. There was a daughter-mother dyad pair in Video 11 and the mother was only observing her daughter play as she was

shown around the island. The pair had a great time discussing the daughters' island and the mother was very supportive of the game her daughter was playing and even expressed willingness to purchase the console for herself: "I might have a switch, I could play Animal Crossing". In Video 12 there was a daughter-father dyad that went on a search for the fathers' dreamies and had a lot of fun at the expense of animal characters they saw during their so-called 'villager hunt'. In Video 10 a son went to visit his mothers' island, who had advanced designer skills and amazed her son throughout the whole video with the arrangements and ideas she had for seasonal decorations.

As Table 2 shows, a significant amount of the held conversations focused on the dyad experience between romantic partners. Players were eager to show their significant other parts of their island they expected them to appreciate: "Oh wait I know what part of my island you'll really like." (girlfriend, Video 8). The notion of sharing was present in gaming articles elaborating on dyad gaming: "Plenty of others, too, simply want to share an island, an extension of their real lives with their partners" (Article 2). Similarly, while playing together from one account a boyfriend suggested to his girlfriend to play as well and stated: "I think it's only fair if we pass off the controller." (Video 1). Additionally, a user on Reddit mentioned that her boyfriend would give her "all his fruit and flowers" (User 3, Reddit post 15). When preparing to go on a virtual date with their partners, players put effort into their appearances: "I need to look nice for my girlfriend, okay?" (boyfriend, Video 1). On the other hand, some players talked about setting boundaries when sharing an island: "My boyfriend is chaotic and I can't have that on my half of our island" (Article 2). Likewise, during her husbands' visit to her island, the wife warned her husband not to shake her money trees or ruin her flower garden: "No! Don't run through it, don't you dare!" (Video 7).

Game-related

Talking about game items and villagers took a significant amount of the conversation dyads would have. In videos, players mostly engaged with island visits during their shared gaming experience. Island tours typically involved the owner showing the other player what they have been working on, their set up, and their neighbor villagers. As an example, a girl introduced one of her residents to her friend who was visiting: “This is Teddy. He's my villager, he's a bear” (girlfriends, Video 6). During island tours the guest would either compliment or ask the host about a specific item they possess: “Oh, a pinata! Where'd you get this?” (son asks mom, Video 10).

Another popular topic of discussion within dyads was the interior design and overall island arrangement, as players in video sources often steered the gameplay into house tours and show-offs of their favorite spots on their island: “next stop, uh this is one area over here that I’m really proud of okay this is my little nook...uh nooks’ cranny area and” (Brother Sister dyad, Video 9). The following quote further illustrates exterior design talk: “So this is just where I’m breeding flowers, so nothing extravagant.” (wife to husband, Video 7). Additionally, players often had a game-specific question to ask in search of expertise since in most cases one of the people in the dyad was more familiar with the game details. To illustrate: “How do you grab stuff from the ground?” (boyfriend asks girlfriend, Video 8). In the case of Reddit posts, players wondered how to enjoy time with their friends in ACNH “What do you do for fun w/ friends in ACNH???” (Reddit, Post 7).

When playing together people would discuss their plans for the shared gameplay. One player shared what he intended to do as a dyadic experience with his partner: “Maybe one day we'll do a relaxing stroll through the museum.” (boyfriend suggests to girlfriend, Video 3).

Likewise, on Reddit individuals shared their experiences and knowledge about game activities suitable for two or more players:

I did a hide and seek game on someone's island, plus there was game trivia and there were lots of prizes. ... I've also seen people make board game/obstacle course set ups, costume parties, races to catch a certain number of fish, etc. (User2, Reddit post 7)

The outfits players' avatars wore were often discussed within a dyad in the video sources, since then players could see their characters. People were commenting on each other's appearances "You're so cute!!", whether they matched "Wait, Yvonne, our sweaters are kind of matching. Wait! Oh my god we're wearing the same shoes and pants!" (female best friends, Video 6) or if their clothes fit the islands' theme or activity the avatar is performing "It does not fit the theme of this island but your choice" (wife to husband, Video 7). Picking out an outfit was even part of the ACNH date that two partners had "So we're gonna pick our little outfits because Megan said that the people might appreciate that" (boyfriend and girlfriend, Video 1). This code group outlined that when playing in a dyad the game-specific things people wanted to discuss were villagers, outfits, overall island appearance and the shared gameplay strategy.

Positive

Approval was often expressed during dyad gaming speech as it can be seen in Table 2. Support and appreciation were the essence of dyad gaming communication that took place in videos and on Reddit, however, completely lacked in the articles. An example of a son being appreciative of his mother's game accomplishments: "I like that you have also uh coordinated the flowers to her coloring" (son to mom, Video 10). On Reddit, other players were reassuring less-experienced newcomers to ACNH with words of approval such as: "Oh! You've encountered your first mole cricket! Looks like someone already gave you good advice" (reply

from User 2, Reddit post 12). A Reddit user, who was not afraid to ask for advice, appreciated the suggestions that fellow dyad players gave for a Valentine's Day dyadic experience: "That's an amazing idea! Definitely doing that" (Reply User 1, Post 22).

Good-natured banter was observed almost exclusively in video sources while gamers communicated during playing the game. When players had their dyad partner as a guests over to their island they joked by being overprotective of their items such as this player referring to her money tree "This is mine. Don't touch!" (girlfriend warning boyfriend, Video 3) or this players' joke after her friend attempted to dig out her blue rose: "If it's gone, I'll know who fucking took it!" (female best friends, Video 6). Humor occurred predominantly in video conversations like this dad being disappointed that his search for specific villagers was uneventful: "I'm still hopeful... that Siana takes her shovel digs a hole and lets me jump into it since I did not find any of my dreamies." (Dad and daughter, Video 12). In Reddit posts, although scarce, jokes appeared such as: "You're playing the game with the love of your life? But what if your wife finds out???" (comment by user 29, Reddit post 15). On multiple occasions both players in the dyad were laughing and this was observed almost entirely in videos. A friend dyad of two girls laughed the most Video 6 (32%), followed by two romantic couple dyads Video 1 (20%), and Video 8 (13%).

Compliments were appearing mostly in Reddit conversations and also in videos, while completely absent from articles. Players were not holding back flattering comments and were praising other players' dyad achievements such as the desired by many mermaid room setup that a father-daughter duo created together: "I love how you arranged everything!" (User 10, Post 9), or "so wholesome! you're such a great parent!" (User 28, Post 9). Cuteness was also mentioned withing gamer pairs on multiple occasions in both videos and Reddit posts and was meant as a

compliment or way to describe something within the game such as the way this player reacted to the poses their characters stand in: “OOOH, NOO, it’s too cute! Why game? Awh, adorable” (boyfriend and girlfriend, Video 1). A dyad of two girls were in adoration while talking about how cute the duck villager named Molly is: “Aren’t you excited? She’s so freaking cute.” (girl friends dyad, Video 6). Gratitude was expressed often toward other dyad players, especially in Reddit comment sections, where it was used about twice as often as in videos. The following is an example of the way other players appreciated a user for opening up and sharing a heartfelt dyadic experience story: “Thank you for posting. You made this random person’s day.” (User 4, Reddit post 10), or: “Thats great! Thanks for the laugh and a smile. Hope you guys have a lot of fun together” (User 20, Reddit post 15).

As mentioned previously, Reddit posts provided a lot of storytelling and openness from players who shared tough personal stories about their dyad partner such as breakups and missing their loved ones due to long distances. Members of the communities expressed compassion and understanding in such situations “I know it’s not the same, but we could always play together if you want, breakups are hard.” (User 4, Post 12) or “I’m sorry you missed your mom and nanny this Mother’s Day. I hope you get to see them both soon” (User 1, Reddit post 5). Happiness was discussed in situations where players demonstrated the feeling or referred it. For instance, a player described his girlfriend as being happy after sharing the gameplay for her birthday, for which he asked other players to send her birthday wishes in the game: “We had a blast! She was so happy” (User 1, Reddit post 20). One player expressed happiness regarding his dyad experience of going on a date in ACNH: “Oh, dear diary, I am so full of joy” (Boyfriend and girlfriend, Video 1). Playing ACNH in a pair brought players a lot of fun and positive emotions.

Furthermore, support and compassion that were expressed by fellow dyad players contributed to the favorable culture surrounding shared gameplay.

Technical Functions

A significant part of the public communication focused on technical aspects of shared gaming as Table 1 shows. Functionalities in the game were often asked about or explained within a dyad as follows: “Apparently you can customize them. I learned that yesterday.” (mother-son dyad, Video 10). Similarly, gaming journalists raised awareness about online multiplayer technicalities and cautioned others: “Be careful who you choose as your Best Friends. Any Best Friends will have full access to wreck shop in your town, cutting down trees, and swiping whatever they want” (Article 2). In Reddit communities, a player tried to help a woman to befriend her fiancé in the game with the following advice:

I think you need to visit by connecting online and not through local play! My friend and I always played locally and it didn’t give us an option to become friends but once we connected via online play it worked. (Comment from User 2, Post 4).

The user experience that stood out for players while gaming in a dyad was excitement. One player assumed that his girlfriend had a duck villager and screamed with enthusiasm: “I’m so excited! Oh my god! I’m so hyped!” (boyfriend-girlfriend, Video 8). One dyad discussed how exciting it was for them to catch the bigger fish and others mentioned how they felt that they were in control of their actions “Yeah, also like no gods, no laws” (Son-mother, Video 10). In Article 6 there a player described her dyad gaming user experience as follows:

At some point, I realized how strange yet endearing it was that these two little video game characters that somewhat resembled us in real life were just sitting next to each

other in a virtual space as we had a mundane conversation. We couldn't see each in person, but we could hang out by proxy through Animal Crossing. (Article 6)

Players talked about technical aspects of dyad gaming such as switching the lead player and visitor status restraints. A user commented the following about dyad gaming functional limitations: "Massive missed opportunity in not letting people decorate together! There's really not much else to do in Animal Crossing when playing with others, I can't believe they didn't foresee this." (User 4, Post 8). The information shared in articles elaborated on difficulties concerning the process of visiting someone: "Bringing people to your island is a little tricky at first" (Article 1); "You simply head to the airport and open the gates. You can allow only your friends in or, using a limited-time password called a Dodo Code, invite anyone and everyone." (Article 11). Moreover, the author of Article 11 shared that she hopes Nintendo adjusts island visits by allowing skipping of cutscenes and item placing. In Reddit communities, users discussed the lead players' role when sharing an island "Are you the resident representative on your island? if not then thats why" (Reddit, Post 18). When playing in a dyad some players wanted to demonstrate their feelings to the other player through the 'emote' function: "I had so many emotes ready like I was going to be nervous while I was waiting for you to reply and if...and if you said 'no' I already had my aggravation ready" (boyfriend to girlfriend, Video 2). According to the interpretations above, the dyad gaming experience is influenced by technical aspects such as the troublesome befriending process and game functionalities like 'emoting'.

Real-life

Conversations within dyads mentioned real-life occasions or events such as celebrations and dating. Additionally, some players made references to real-life movies: "Dude, this is like a fucking Harry Potter Museum." (Boyfriend and girlfriend, Video 1), "My ninja turtle outfit! So,

this is Michelangelo.” (Boyfriend and girlfriend, Video 8), “Okay, Indiana Jones.” (Son and mom, Video 10). The topic of the Covid-19 pandemic and times of self-isolation were also brought up in regard to shared gaming as in the following examples: “One couple forced by coronavirus to cancel their wedding ended up being thrown a surprise ceremony in Animal Crossing instead.” or “it’s a fitting game for students during this time, especially during the pandemic” (Article 13).

Festivities were also taking place in the game and Reddit posts revealed that dyad players were celebrating Mother’s Day, Valentine’s Day, cannabis-oriented celebration ‘4/20’, anniversaries, and birthdays in the game. Additionally, dyad partners were exchanging gifts, bringing flowers, and making gestures toward each other throughout the shared game. To illustrate: “Me and my boyfriend leave gifts in front of each other's houses every day” (User 3, Post 11) and “I brought you flowers.” (boyfriend to girlfriend, Video 1). One player even proposed to his girlfriend during their shared gaming experience: “I would like to ask you, in Animal Crossings, if you would marry me.” (boyfriend to girlfriend, Video 2). Another player was excitedly sharing her wishes to have an ACNH wedding with her boyfriend while playing together: “I want an Animal Crossings wedding...Oh! I want an animal crossings wedding [...] Animal Crossing music, Animal crossing wedding cake. Jonny, are you taking notes or are you staring at the camera in fear?” (girlfriend to boyfriend, Video 4). Overall, while engaged in dyad gaming players gladly celebrated important events and exchanged gifts as they would in the real world.

Discussion

Main Findings

The goal of this research was to uncover how people experienced shared gaming of ACNH during the pandemic, by posing the following research question: What does the public discourse regarding dyad gaming experience within ACNH during self-isolation reveal? As previous literature proposed that socialization through gaming is beneficial for well-being, this study aimed to investigate how players talked about interacted in duos in a virtual environment. The result interpretations provided answers to the 3 sub-questions introduced in the theoretical framework and will be discussed in greater detail.

The first sub-question focused on determining what the different forms of dyad gaming within ACNH that players experienced were. The results of this study showed that visiting each other's islands, going on dates, and sharing an island were popular dyadic activities gamer duos engaged in. In the virtual environment, players performed activities that they would typically do together in person if it were not for Covid-19 restrictions. Romantic dyads even considered the game as an extension of their real-life with their partners. This is supported by a statement from Paul et al. (2022) who mentioned that social virtual worlds (SVWs) serve users as an extension of the real world instead being purely an imaginary realm (Paul et al., 2022). The parent-child dyad gaming experience was considered as a meaningful way to bond over the game and connect on a creative level. These findings are aligned with findings from Musick et al., (2021) who concluded that modern digital games reinforce interactions and dialogue between parents and children while and after gameplay.

The second sub-question regarded how the game design influenced the dyad gaming experience of players. Cuteness was one of the ACNH game design aspects that players adored

and excitedly discussed within a dyad. Similarly, Dale (2017, as cited in Reay, 2021) claimed the following: “expressions of cuteness, whether they emanate from animals, objects, or people, comprise a form of agency: namely, an appeal aimed at disarming aggression and promoting sociality” (p. 142). Additionally, the ‘emote’ function provoked positive feelings among gaming pairs. Yee et al. (2022) found that ACNH’s game design and mechanics reinforced the sense of agency among players whose autonomy was suppressed by the lockdown measures. This is aligned with findings from the present research that players felt in control during gameplay and desired to set boundaries when co-habiting on an island. Furthermore, functional limitations such as visitor restraints, lead player affordances, numerous cutscenes, and bothersome befriending process influenced the dyad gaming experience. Hsieh et al. (2021) mentioned that newer editions of the game pay more attention to the creative aspect and land customization, which is not aligned with findings from this study that players were unable to place items on other islands and decorate when playing together.

The third sub-question aimed to determine how players enjoyed their dyad gaming. The results indicated that the shared experience brought joy and laughter to players. Most importantly, players considered their interactions in the game to be meaningful and beneficial for the relationship with their dyad partner. In alignment, Maloney et al. (2020) noted that previous studies have: “highlighted that collaboration between two or more members whether in a group, guild, or dyad may create substantial emotional bonds of friendship, intimacy, affection, and online romance, which makes online activities meaningful and enjoyable to some users.” (p. 511). Moreover, due to the lockdown circumstances players were gladly utilizing ACNH as a tool for experiencing real-life events such as dating, celebrations, or gift exchanging. Players liked making references to real-life movies and cherished gestures and gifts they received from

their partner in the game as in reality. This is supported by Tong et al. (2021) who reported that ACNH offered players a calming and friendly virtual atmosphere that opened the doors for real-life social events such as birthdays, virtual concerts, graduations to take place during the lockdown. The supportive communication observed in Reddit ACNH communities indicated the positive culture of socialization that the game advocates. Those findings are aligned with the findings discussed by Tong et al. (2021) who stated that ACNH game world stimulates “positive behaviors with explicit and implicit rewards that reinforce social interactions and foster a friendly atmosphere in players’ communities.” (p. 13). The often occurrence of compliments, gratitude, and compassion could be owing to the described above stimuli nudging people toward socialization.

Based on the answers to the three sub-questions the main research question could be dealt with. The public discourse revealed that island visits, dating, and co-habiting an island were typical activities for dyad gaming in ACNH. Moreover, both parent-child and romantic dyads considered that the shared gameplay strengthened their relationships and was a meaningful way to spend time together. Gamer duos enjoyed having fun while playing the game and were kind to each other. Friendly banter, laughter and jokes appeared often in speech during the gameplay. The supportive atmosphere in Reddit ACNH communities unveiled how positive and welcoming the dyad gaming culture is. Although some functional limitations were bothersome for dyad gaming, ACNH game design stimulated people to socialize and thus positively impacted individual well-being by offering a virtual alternative to spend time together and celebrate during times of self-isolation. This is supported by findings from Raith et al. (2021) whose literature review concluded that massively multiplayer online games improved “one’s perceptions of social support, social interactions, and marital satisfaction” (p. 10).

Strengths and Limitations

The main strength of the research at hand is that it is among the few, if not first, to analyze dyad gaming experiences that players had within ACNH during self-isolation. In their research Hartanto et al. (2021) discuss the ambiguity of findings in the video gaming research domain and note that overall, a problematic perspective on video games such as causing poor psychological outcomes has been widespread. Therefore, the study at hand follows the advice of (Halbrook et al., 2019) to focus on “the positive impacts video games can have on well-being, furthering our knowledge and demonstrating that video games are not solely “good” or “bad.” (p. 1097). Accordingly, this study contributes to the body of literature focusing on the positive effects of gaming on well-being. Furthermore, this study contributes to the body of knowledge exploring social aspects of gaming and human relationships in the virtual environment by focusing on the dyadic aspect.

Although this study provided valuable insights regarding dyad gaming experiences, it also has limitations and aspects for improvement that could serve as a guide for future research recommendations. To begin with, the number of gaming journalism articles was less than what the researcher aimed for and eleven of them were published between March and May 2020, while only two of the sources were written in 2021. However, the content from the obtained articles was suitable for answering the research question and managed to reveal important aspects related to the technical functionalities of the game and a broad overview of dyadic experiences accompanied by multiple examples. Another limitation that will be addressed concerns the analysis of Reddit posts, where emoticons were applied very often, and their meaning could have been considered as well. Also, the upvote system in the platform could have been taken into account and coded during the data analysis.

Future Research Recommendation

The present research provides guidance for future research based on the distinguished limitations and information obtained from reading literature in the field of gaming focusing on MOGs and SVWs. Overall, this discourse analysis outlined that dyad gaming experiences helped players to strengthen relationships and bond with each other. The number of people who identify as gamers will supposedly proceed growing as technological innovations such as VR become more widely accepted in the gaming industry. Therefore, future research should focus on analyzing human interactions in virtual environments and how they impact individual well-being. Additionally, future research could explore the topic of romantic/intimate relationship development through playing ACNH in greater detail. This study also outlined the culture of support and compassion observed in Reddit communities. Arguably, being part of such a group during the pandemic influenced individual well-being and anxiety levels and presumably drew out positive emotions among members. Thus, future studies could focus on analyzing various aspects of communication in online gaming communities.

Practical Implications

The outcome of this research provides useful information for people wondering whether to play ACNH and for individuals looking for a way to bond and spend quality time together with their loved ones. People who are in long-distance relationships could especially benefit from engaging in dyad gaming within ACNH. Likewise, Yang and Liu (2017) stated that social interaction is an important motive in gaming literature and suggested that the outcomes from such studies could aid health practitioners and users to distinguish between the benefits and concerns associated with gaming. Hence, ACNH could potentially be recommended by experts as a tool for socialization and maintenance of long-distance relationships. Additionally, this study could

benefit game creators by providing them with valuable information on how players experienced dyad gaming within ACNH.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to reveal dyad gaming experiences within ACNH during the pandemic by performing a public discourse analysis. The relevance of exploring how people interacted in SVWs while in isolation was motivated by previous research investigating gaming effects on social well-being and relationships as well as by the need for studies focusing on the positive impacts of gaming rather than the negative. Based on the distinguished findings, it can be concluded that the public discourse surrounding dyad gaming in ACNH reveals a positive culture, where players are able to spend meaningful time together and bond. Players enjoyed being able to remain socially active during times of self-isolation and successfully utilized the game for celebrations and dating. The welcoming tone in Reddit ACNH communities, combined with parents' and couples' approval of dyadic gameplay all argue for the socialization benefits of shared gaming experiences in the game. Moreover, game design elements such as the cute visuals and 'emote' function provoked positive emotions in gamer duos and stimulated socialization. This public discourse analysis was a suitable approach to reveal the main aspects of shared gaming in ACNH in the context of self-isolation. Nevertheless, further research should investigate human interactions in SVWs such as ACNH in greater detail while considering both positive and negative impacts on individual well-being. Overall, the outcomes of this study position ACNH as a favorable game to play in a pair, especially for people dealing with long-distance relationships. The socialization benefits of engaging with shared gaming outline ACNH as a promising tool for dealing with social anxiety and the negative impacts of self-isolation.

References

- Anderson, S. L., & Schrier, K. K. (2021). Disability and Video Games Journalism: A Discourse Analysis of Accessibility and Gaming Culture. *Games and Culture*, 17(2), 179–197. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120211021005>
- Becker, H., & Useem, R. H. (1942). Sociological analysis of the dyad. *American Sociological Review*, 7(1), 13–26. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2086253>
- Benti, B. S., & Stadtmann, G. (2021). Animal Crossing: New Horizons meets “Maslow’s pyramid.” *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies*, 3(5), 1172–1179. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hbe2.288>
- Bowman, N. D., Rieger, D., & Tammy Lin, J. H. (2022). Social video gaming and well-being. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 45, 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101316>
- Bowman, N. D., Weber, R., Tamborini, R., & Sherry, J. (2013). Facilitating Game Play: How Others Affect Performance at and Enjoyment of Video Games. *Media Psychology*, 16(1), 39–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2012.742360>
- Carpenter, N. (2020, May 7). Nintendo sold 13.41M copies of Animal Crossing: New Horizons in six weeks. *Polygon*. <https://www.polygon.com/2020/5/7/21250384/animal-crossing-new-horizons-sales-nintendo-switch>
- Carr, R. M., Prestwich, A., Kwasnicka, D., Thøgersen-Ntoumani, C., Gucciardi, D. F., Queded, E., Hall, L. H., & Ntoumanis, N. (2018). Dyadic interventions to promote physical activity and reduce sedentary behaviour: systematic review and meta-analysis. *Health Psychology Review*, 13(1), 91–109. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17437199.2018.1532312>

- de Grove, F. (2014). Youth, Friendship, and Gaming: A Network Perspective. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, *17*(9), 603–608.
<https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2014.0088>
- Eklund, L., & Roman, S. (2018). Digital Gaming and Young People’s Friendships: A Mixed Methods Study of Time Use and Gaming in School. *YOUNG*, *27*(1), 32–47.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1103308818754990>
- Gandolfi, E., & Gandolfi, S. (2021). Playing across the social zone - Animal Crossing, gaming communities and connectedness in a time of crisis. *Academicus International Scientific Journal*, *12*(23), 41–51. <https://doi.org/10.7336/academicus.2021.23.03>
- Giardina, A., Di Blasi, M., Schimmenti, A., King, D. L., Starcevic, V., & Billieux, J. (2021). Online Gaming and Prolonged Self-Isolation: Evidence from Italian Gamers During the Covid-19 Outbreak. *Clinical Neuropsychiatry*, *18*(1), 65–74.
<https://doi.org/10.36131/cnfioritieditore20210106>
- Halbrook, Y. J., O’Donnell, A. T., & Msetfi, R. M. (2019). When and How Video Games Can Be Good: A Review of the Positive Effects of Video Games on Well-Being. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *14*(6), 1096–1104. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691619863807>
- Hartanto, A., Lua, V. Y., Quek, F. Y., Yong, J. C., & Ng, M. H. (2021). A critical review on the moderating role of contextual factors in the associations between video gaming and well-being. *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*, *4*, 1–8.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2021.100135>
- Hsieh, M., Hammad, N., Harpstead, E., & Hammer, J. (2021). Understanding Player Retention Strategies in Animal Crossing: New Horizons. *Extended Abstracts of the 2021 Annual*

Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play.

<https://doi.org/10.1145/3450337.3483483>

Jia, A. L., Shen, S., Bovenkamp, R. V. D., Iosup, A., Kuipers, F., & Epema, D. H. J. (2015).

Socializing by Gaming. *ACM Transactions on Knowledge Discovery from Data*, 10(2),

1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2736698>

Khan, I. (2020, April 7). Why Animal Crossing is the game for the coronavirus moment. *The*

New York Times. [https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/arts/animal-crossing-covid-](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/arts/animal-crossing-covid-coronavirus-popularity-millennials.html)

[coronavirus-popularity-millennials.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/arts/animal-crossing-covid-coronavirus-popularity-millennials.html)

Lewis, J. E., Trojovsky, M., & Jameson, M. M. (2021). New Social Horizons: Anxiety, Isolation,

and Animal Crossing During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Frontiers in Virtual Reality*, 2.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/frvir.2021.627350>

Maloney, D., & Freeman, G. (2020). Falling Asleep Together: What Makes Activities in Social

Virtual Reality Meaningful to Users. *Proceedings of the Annual Symposium on*

Computer-Human Interaction in Play. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3410404.3414266>

Musick, G., Freeman, G., & McNeese, N. J. (2021). Gaming as Family Time. *Proceedings of the*

ACM on Human-Computer Interaction, 5(CHI PLAY), 1-25.

<https://doi.org/10.1145/3474678>

Norton, A., Brown, C. C., Falbo, R., & Hogan, B. (2020). Video Game Use, Acceptance, and

Relationship Experiences: A Moderated Actor-Partner Interdependence Model.

Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 23(7), 453–458.

<https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2019.0258>

- Paul, I., Mohanty, S., & Sengupta, R. (2022). The role of social virtual world in increasing psychological resilience during the on-going COVID-19 pandemic. *Computers in Human Behavior, 127*, 107036. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.107036>
- Raith, L., Bignill, J., Stavropoulos, V., Millear, P., Allen, A., Stallman, H. M., Mason, J., de Regt, T., Wood, A., & Kannis-Dymand, L. (2021). Massively Multiplayer Online Games and Well-Being: A Systematic Literature Review. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.698799>
- Reay, E. (2021). Cute, cuddly and completely crushable: Plushies as avatars in video games. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds, 13*(2), 131–149. https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw_00033_1
- Seller, M. (2021). Ever-Lockdown: Waiting through Times of Playbour and Pandemic in Animal Crossing. *Networking Knowledge: Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network, 14*(1), 100–116. <https://doi.org/10.31165/nk.2021.141.635>
- Sullivan, C., & Forrester, M. (2018). *Doing Qualitative Research in Psychology: A Practical Guide* (Second ed.). SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Tong, X., Gromala, D., Neustaedter, C., Fracchia, F. D., Dai, Y., & Lu, Z. (2021). Players' Stories and Secrets in Animal Crossing. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction, 5*(CHI PLAY), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3474711>
- Verheijen, G. P., Burk, W. J., Stoltz, S. E. M. J., van den Berg, Y. H. M., & Cillessen, A. H. N. (2018). Friendly fire: Longitudinal effects of exposure to violent video games on aggressive behavior in adolescent friendship dyads. *Aggressive Behavior, 44*(3), 257–267. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.21748>

- Yang, C. C., & Liu, D. (2017). Motives Matter: Motives for Playing Pokémon Go and Implications for Well-Being. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 20(1), 52–57. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2016.0562>
- Yee, A. Z. H., & Sng, J. R. H. (2022). Animal Crossing and COVID-19: A Qualitative Study Examining How Video Games Satisfy Basic Psychological Needs During the Pandemic. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.800683>
- Zhang, Q., Onita, C. G., Ray, D. A., Banks, M. S., & Zhang, X. (2021). Understanding antecedents of online gamers' negative emotions during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Issues In Information Systems*, 22(4), 21–32. https://doi.org/10.48009/4_iis_2021_22-33
- Zhu, L. (2020). The psychology behind video games during COVID -19 pandemic: A case study of Animal Crossing: New Horizons. *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies*, 3(1), 157–159. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hbe2.221>

Appendix A

Data Collection

Figure A1

Searching for Suitable Communities within Reddit using the Search Term “Animal Crossing”

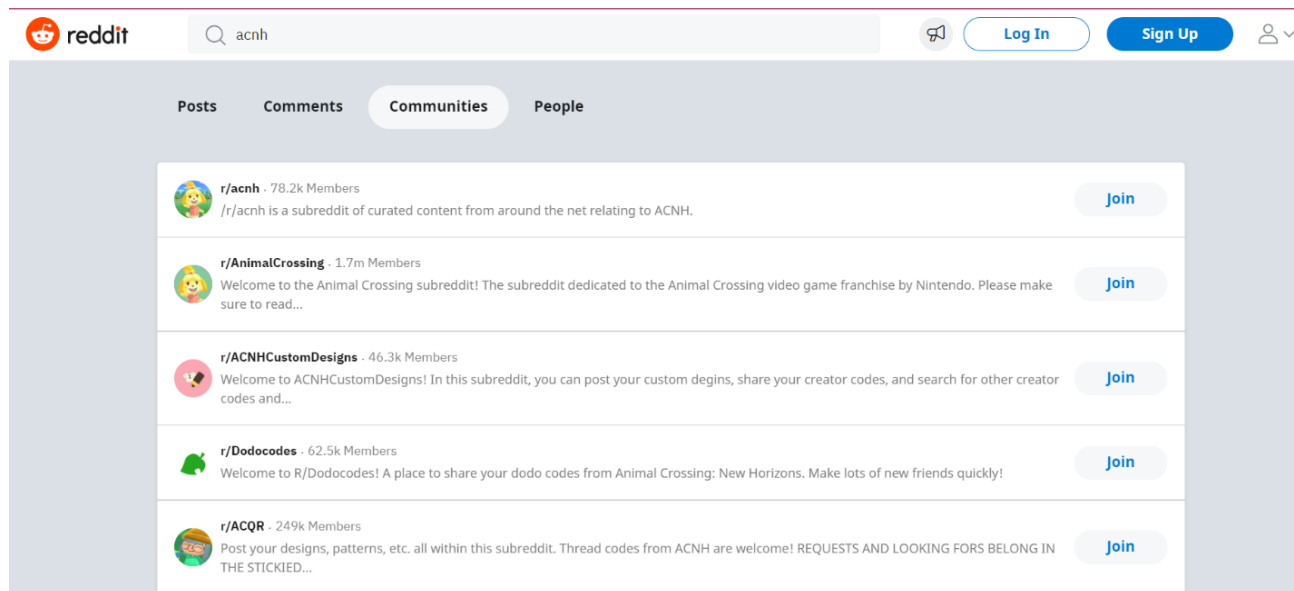


Table A1

Examples of Search Terms for Data Collection on Reddit

Search №	Platform	Search Term	Results (Examples)
1.	Reddit	Playing ACNH with girlfriend/Playing ACNH with boyfriend	https://www.reddit.com/r/AnimalCrossingNewHor/comments/lehf8w/i_had_gotten_a_switch_to_play_acnh_with_my/
2.	Reddit	ACNH relationship	https://www.reddit.com/r/ac_newhorizons/comments/hqkty7/acnh_i

			s_causing_tension_in_my_relationship_with/
3.	Reddit	ACNH gaming romantic relationship	https://www.reddit.com/r/BuddyCrossing/comments/szkkxc/am_i_the_only_one_who_uses_the_room_mate_feature/
4.	YouTube	Playing ACNH with girlfriend	https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Playing+ACNH+with+girlfriend&sp=CAASBggFEAEYAQ%253D%253D
5.	Google	playing acnh with girlfriend gaming journalism	291.000 search outcomes

Figure A2

Filters Applied in YouTube Example Search in Guest Mode in Chrome Browser

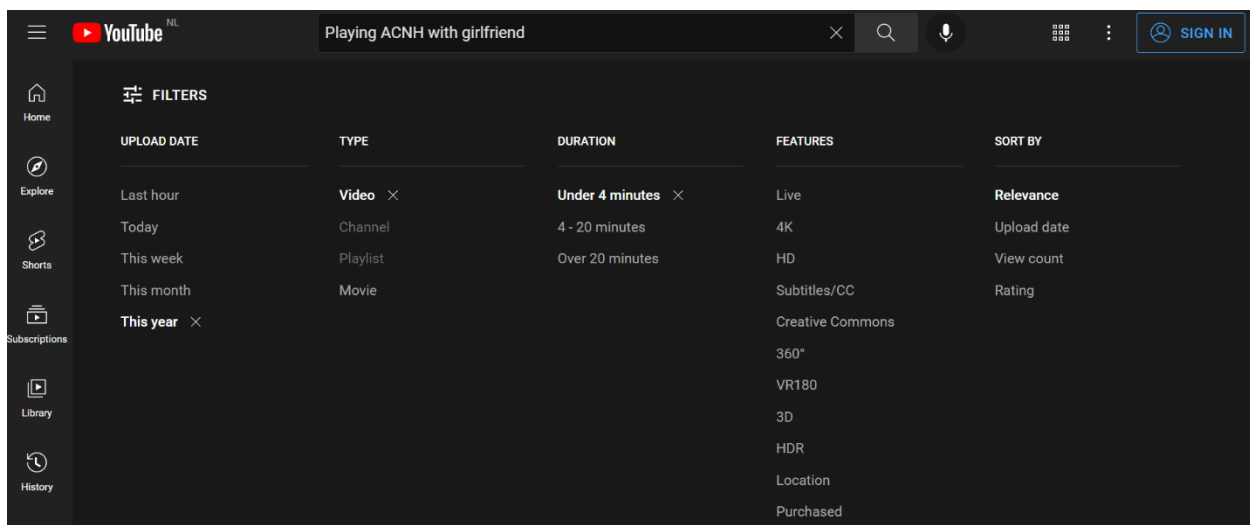
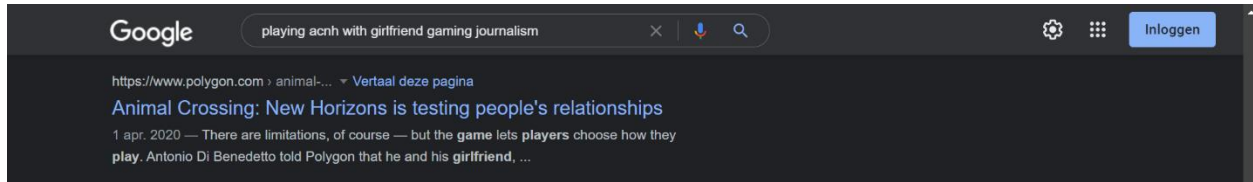


Figure A3

Gaming Journalism Outcome in Guest Mode in Chrome Browser



Appendix B

Researchers notes

Table B1

Researchers' Notes Regarding Videos

Video No	Setting	Relevant part	Video highlight	Notes
1	Distanced partners; two avatars	26:37-37:23	Date	Positive sentiment
2	In person partners; two avatars	1:23- 5:24	Proposal	Visiting other ppl's islands
3	Date in game, two avatars	00:00-10:57 11:02-16:47	Museum date, dress up	Review of museum
4	Gf visits Bf island	4:59- 8:05	Gf gets mad at bf	Short but rich video
5	Bf and Gf start new game together, one avatar	Relevant parts	Get along really well	Long video
6	Female friends play	00:26-5:10; 7:06-10:44	A lot of laughter	A lot of swearing
7	Mom and dad play together	00:20- 6:52	Older ppl	Visiting mom island
8	Gf makes Bf play, visit her island	Until 16th	Bf's humor and outfits	Very skilled player; Frog theme
9	Brother visits sister island	00:43 – 8:22	Nice time	'roast' of her island
10	Son visits Mom island	All, 19 minutes	Mom's cool ideas	Very cool ideas
11	Mom watches daughter play	Relevant parts	Mom is interested	Calm, supportive parent
12	Dad and daughter look for dreamies	00:46-6:45; 8:06- 10:09	Villager hunting	Daughter explains a lot; Dad jokes

Table B2*Researchers' Notes Regarding Gaming Journalism Articles*

Article №	Author	Date	Topics	Highlight	Source
1	Russ Frushtick	October 27, 2021	Multiplayer guide	Step-by-step explanation how to play with others	Polygon.com
2	Nicole Carpenter	April 1, 2020	ACNH is testing peoples' relationships	Sharing an island, dyad experience	Polygon.com
3	Dave Thier	April 3, 2020	Warning about gameplay	Acnh-meltdowns, technical details, limits	Forbes.com
4	Tom Philips	March 24, 2020	Main player leading	Gameplay fact, first player importance	Eurogamer.net
5	Isaiah Colbert	November 11, 2021	Playing ACNH after breakup	Personal story; In-game closure helped her	Kotaku.com
6	Colin Campbell	May 2, 2020	Part of article	How friends spend time together during Covid-19	Polygon.com
7	Keza MacDonald	May 13, 2020	Behind the game info	Creators, developers share goals and desires	theguardian.com
8	Tom Philips	March 27 2020	Celebrating events in ACNH	Many twitter post examples; celebrations	Eurogamer.net
9	Kirsten Carey	March 25, 2020	How to play with friends	Technical details	Thrillst.com
10	Patricia Hernandez	April 15, 2020	ACNH as Tinder	How ppl have dates	Polygon.com
11	Heather Alexandra	April 16 2020	Annoying aspects of visits in ACNH	What issues arise when playing with others	Kotaku.com.au
12	Amanda Farough	May 8, 2021	How kids and Mothers bond over ACNH	Multiple examples, experiences shared	The Washington Post
13	Samantha Cabeza	May 13, 2020	Students playing	Info about ACNH gaming culture	The Observer

Appendix C

Data analysis

Table C1

Final Coding Scheme

	Code Names	Definition
1	approval	Whenever someone approves or agrees with something or someone
2	villager	Whenever a character in the game is concerned or spoken of
3	gameitem	Talking about a specific item in the game
4	compliment	When someone compliments or says a positive thing to someone else
5	interior/exterior	Design talk related to the arrangement of items anywhere on the island
6	dyadicexp	Something related to a dyad experience
7	banter	Light, playful, and friendly exchange of teasing remarks
8	gamequestion	Questions concerning something in the game
9	context	Description of visual details, setting, information regarding authors of articles
10	gameplans	Explanation of what activities can, will, or have been performed in the game
11	functionality	Ways of working in the game
12	exclamation	remark expressing surprise, strong emotion, or pain.
13	ux	Anything related to the user experience that is shared by players
14	irlcomparison	Referencing something from the real world and/or applied in the game
15	explanation	Whenever someone is explaining themselves
16	humor	Whenever someone is making jokes
17	Laugh	Every time someone laughs
18	cuteness	Whenever something is referred to as cute
19	techexplanation	Elaborations or knowledge sharing on how to deal with a technical issue
20	gratitude	When someone says ‘Thank you’ or expresses gratitude in some form
21	disagreement	When players don’t agree on something
22	techdifficulties	Technical issues that players experienced related to the game/console
23	directions	Whenever a player is navigating someone else or giving them instructions
24	dyadso	Dyad gaming experience with significant other
25	outfit	Whenever someone talks about an outfit in the game or appearances
26	gametask	Whenever someone talks about tasks in the game such as watering flowers
27	event	Dates, celebrations, or any real-life occasion that has been taken to ACNH
28	irrelevant	Information deemed irrelevant to research purpose
29	dyadparent	Dyad gaming experience with parents
30	observation	When someone makes an observation during gameplay
31	compassion	When someone demonstrates support toward other players

32	showoff	When a player is showing their items or arrangement off to another player
33	gametalk	Discussions of the game itself or arranging to play
34	emote	Whenever someone uses the emote function or talks about it
35	happiness	When someone expresses that they are joyful or what makes them happy
36	approvalseeking	When a player seeks approval from others
37	visits	When someone is talking about visiting each other's islands
38	general knowledge	Whenever general 'common' knowledge is demonstrated during gameplay
39	gift	When someone brings or gives someone something in the game or in real life
40	kindsuggestion	When someone suggests something to other player in a nice way
41	descisionmaking	When the player is making decisions together
42	swear	Whenever uncensored language is used; curses;

Table C2*Code Groups and Inter-Coder Agreement*

Code group name	Codes in the group	Total: Krippendorff $\kappa = 0.775$	Total: Simple percentage of agreement 88.9 %
Positive	Banter; compassion; compliment; cuteness; gratitude; Happiness; Humor; Laugh; approval;	0.932	85.8 %
Technical functions	Emote; functionality; techdifficulties; techexplanation; ux; visits;	0.974	95.4 %
Dyad gaming	approvalseeking; descisionmaking; directions; dyadicexp; dyadparent; dyadso; kindsuggestion; disagreement; showoff; swear;	0.939	90.5 %
Real life	Irlcomparrison; event; general knowledge; gift	0.953	84.7 %
Game-related	gameitem; gameplans; gamequestion;	0.927	88.0 %

Meta Communication	gametalk; gametask; outfit; villager; interior/exterior; irrelevant; explanation; exclamation; context; observation;	0.821	71.6 %
-----------------------	--	-------	--------

Table C3*Examples of Codes*

	Code Names	Examples
1	approval	“This is a very good museum. I rate it good out of ten”; “I mean that’s all of us. I understand.”; “Oh, awesome”
2	villager	“This is Teddy. He’s my villager, he’s a bear”; “Yeah, I got Lolly too. She’s moving in”
3	gameitem	“Oh, a pinata! Where’d you get this?”; “Look at the blue butterfly- an Emperor butterfly.”
4	compliment	“Oh, that’s a good one. You’re really good at this!”; “That’s cool, that’s a cool idea. Good job!”
5	interior/exterior	“So, this is just where I’m breeding flowers, so nothing extravagant.”
6	dyadicexp	“I didn’t want anyone touching my island”; “Quarantine tests relationships in all sorts of ways.”
7	banter	“I’m gonna end the session. You’re getting out of here.”; “You fool”
8	gamequestion	“Can I mail you stuff?”; “Can you make me the leader inside?”;
9	context	“They enter the insect part of the museum”; “Game starts, flying over island”
10	gameplans	“I’m gonna go visit her island”; “Uhm, we’re going for like a little casual date night”
11	functionality	“I think we can also face each other.”; “Yeah, blue ones make blue ones.”
12	exclamation	“Oh my god! YES!”, “Oh no, not again!”
13	ux	“Oh, I feel rich..in the game.”; “Who wants to kick off their road?! So dumb.”
14	irlcomparison	“better than half the IRL dates I’ve gone on.”; “...so I am a lot more of a ‘dress how I actually would in real life’ kind of person”
15	explanation	I have Bam, my little reindeer a basketball hoop because he likes basketball
16	humor	“The meteor. This is the thing that killed all of them.”; “My daughter and I play axe murderer. She laughs her head off when I chase her. Edit: this is not AC related /s”
17	Laugh	“Haha”; “[Laughter]”; “giggles”; “Gf laughs a lot”
18	cuteness	“OOOH, NOO, it’s too cute! Why game? Awh, adorable”; “Awh, cute!”
19	techexplanation	“I do have to make you the leader so you can get changed.”

20	gratitude	“Why thank you kind sir.”; “Thank you.”; “I appreciate your help!”
21	disagreement	“No, you don't. I'm not fighting with you on the date night.”; “Not the blue one!”
22	techdifficulties	“Oops, I almost accidentally chose an island. What do you think?”
23	directions	“But [Person X], I need you to come down here”; “Right in front of you.”;
24	dyadso	“Plenty of others, too, simply want to share an island, an extension of their real lives with their partners”; “I need to look nice for my girlfriend, okay?”
25	outfit	“I enjoy seeing what other people pick as their outfit, maybe some of you will like that too.”; “I really like green dresses”
26	gametask	“I gotta dig up this uh... fossil”; “I finished paying off my loan!”
27	event	“I would like to ask you, in Animal Crossings, if you would marry me”; “I'm just really bored and lonely due the whole quarantine.”
28	irrelevant	“Sorry, I have the hiccups guys.”
29	dyadparent	“Ha-ha. Red mum? Is that because you're my mum?”; “I wish my mom would play with me, but she got bored with it”
30	observation	“Speaking of Bam, I think that's him up there”; “[Person X] has so many clothes.”
31	compassion	“oh, i'm sorry for you :(“; “I'm with ya buddy”
32	showoff	“This bridge is brand spanking new. Quite proud of it. It took a long time to build.”
33	gametalk	“Facebook groups have been created since the game has been out to help players trade goods they own for Bells”
34	emote	“I had this one (demonstrates heartbreak emote).”
35	Happiness	“Yeey!”; “She must be really happy”; “I am so happy for the both of us, cheers to new gamers friend!”
36	approvalseeking	“Aren't I the cutest?”; “Do you like it?”
37	visits	“Can I come to your town and sell all of these cherries?”
38	general knowledge	“...if you see the big green and blue fish it's called dolphin. You can order dolphin on a menu but it's mahi-mahi.”
39	gift	“I brought you flowers.”; “Me and my boyfriend leave gifts in front of each other's houses every day”
40	kindsuggestion	“You wanna sit on the bench? We could take a little picture?”
41	descisionmaking	“All right, the most important choice. The most permanent of choices when it comes to this game - what do we name our island?”
42	swear	“Get to work b*tch!”; “What the f***?”
