

Staying productive through Animal Crossing video game during the Malaysian Movement Control Order 2020-2021

Menjaga Produktiviti melalui permainan video Animal Crossing semasa Perintah Kawalan Pergerakan Malaysia 2020-2021

Tengku Intan Maimunah Tengku Sabri^{1*}, Md Azalanshah Md Syed² & Rosya Izyanie Shamshudeen³

^{1,2,3} *Department of Media and Communication Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia;*

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*Corresponding author:

Tengku Intan Maimunah
Tengku Sabri, Department of
Media and Communication
Studies, Faculty of Arts and
Social Sciences, Universiti
Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur,
Malaysia;
Email: intansabri@um.edu.my

Abstract: During the tumultuous COVID-19 Movement Control Order (MCO), many Malaysians turned to video games to improve their mental health, to reduce stress, and to unwind. Local news reported on the active engagement of players, particularly through the creative productions inspired by their gaming experiences. In light of this phenomenon, this study investigates the ways players engage in such creative productions to fulfil their fundamental needs for agency and authorship which were affected during the pandemic lockdown. A qualitative textual analysis was conducted on a local gaming Facebook group, focusing on creative productions for Nintendo's Animal Crossing: New Horizons (2020). The game was selected due to its outstanding commercial success, its critical acclaim, and the presence of an active local community with over 14,000 members. Through the analysis of 87 Facebook posts, the findings suggest that Malaysian players remained productive during the restrictive MCO period by producing custom designs to preserve cultural meanings, creating fan art to upskill, and selling fan art to generate income. These creative productions elevated the players to the status of producers, enhancing their standing within the gaming community through the acquisition of gaming capital. The study highlights the importance of staying productive through creative productions as an active and integral approach to alleviating the negative effects of the MCO period.

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

Abstrak: Semasa Perintah Kawalan Pergerakan (PKP) COVID-19 yang penuh cabaran, ramai rakyat Malaysia beralih kepada permainan video untuk meningkatkan kesihatan mental, mengurangkan tekanan, dan melepaskan ketegangan. Berita tempatan melaporkan tentang penglibatan aktif pemain, terutamanya melalui produk kreatif yang diilhamkan oleh pengalaman permainan mereka. Berikutan fenomena ini, kajian ini menyiasat cara pemain terlibat dalam pengeluaran kreatif untuk memenuhi keperluan asas mereka untuk agensi dan pengarang yang terjejas semasa sekatan pergerakan pandemik. Analisis teks kualitatif telah dijalankan ke atas sebuah kumpulan Facebook permainan tempatan, dengan fokus kepada pengeluaran kreatif untuk permainan Nintendo Animal Crossing: New Horizons (2020). Permainan ini dipilih kerana kejayaannya yang cemerlang di pasaran, pujian kritikal yang diterima, dan kewujudan komuniti tempatan yang aktif dengan lebih 14,000 ahli. Melalui analisis 87 kiriman Facebook, dapatan menunjukkan bahawa pemain Malaysia kekal produktif semasa

tempoh PKP yang terhad dengan menghasilkan reka bentuk tersuai untuk memelihara makna budaya, mencipta seni peminat untuk meningkatkan kemahiran, dan menjual seni peminat untuk menjana pendapatan. Pengeluaran kreatif ini mengangkat pemain kepada status pengeluar, meningkatkan kedudukan mereka dalam komuniti permainan melalui perolehan modal permainan. Kajian ini menekankan pentingnya kekal produktif melalui pengeluaran kreatif sebagai pendekatan aktif dan penting untuk meringankan kesan negatif tempoh PKP.

Kata kunci: produktiviti, budaya permainan video, COVID-19, Perintah Kawalan Pergerakan, Malaysia;

Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 has prompted Malaysian government to enforce the lockdown measures of Movement Control Order (MCO). The strict and unprecedented MCO period has severely impacted the citizens' quality of life, notably of adverse mental health effects (Bahar Moni et al., 2021).

As Malaysians struggled with the negative effects of MCO, most turned to video games for improving their mental health, alleviating stress, and unwinding (Rajaendram, 2021). This is in line with the positive role of video games during challenging times of the lockdown, including escapism, cognitive stimulation, and mental health benefits, as demonstrated in international studies (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2022; Boldi & Rapp, 2021). Evidently, a notable consumption of video gaming was reported during the MCO (Musa, 2021; Yeoh, 2020) leading to the identification of the country as one of the largest gaming markets in Southeast Asia with 20.9 million players and US\$876 million in games market revenue (Allcorrect Games, 2021). Across online spaces, the popularity of video gaming in Malaysia has given rise to the number of local gaming content creators, broadcasters, and live streamers, with interactive spectatorship playing an important role in income generation (Elliott, 2020; Tan, 2021). The popularity of video gaming was also amplified by the worldwide campaigns of #PlayApartTogether (Business Wire, 2020), #YANA (Webb, 2020), and the localized hashtag of #JomMainBersama. All these have established video gaming as an important part of Malaysia's COVID-19 and MCO social imaginary.

Notably, local news outlets reported that playing video games can encourage players' productivity during the lockdown as they actively produced and shared their gaming paratexts on social media (Ashaari, 2020; Mahyuni, 2020b; G. Tong, 2020).

Considering the reports, it is important to uncover an in-depth and more nuanced understanding of players' production practices. Minimal empirical work has been done to assess this MCO phenomenon in detail. Therefore, in this qualitative study, we aim to uncover the ways Malaysian video game players produce, particularly to fulfil their fundamental agency and authorship needs that were affected during the pandemic lockdown. In the global context of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, video gaming has become a valid substitute for creative pursuits, viewed as an agentic response in times of crisis to produce creative outcomes (Beghetto, 2021). Players seek for distraction from life difficulties and to fulfil the desire of a sense of competence and achievement (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2022; Caro & Popovac, 2021). These point to the fact that video gaming is a productive practice. Therefore, we consider video games as capable in providing the players with interactive affordances in challenging life situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

In this line of thinking, we argue that Malaysians could produce creative output through video games to address their productivity deprivation. Their creative productions are to be considered vital while living during the stringent MCO. By producing through and around video games, it offers Malaysians many ways to rethink forms of work. Specifically, we study Malaysian players of the video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020a) also known as *ACNH*, which became a pandemic-era gaming phenomenon. The game *ACNH* sits in the genre of social simulation and sandbox, allowing players to focus on the exploration aspect to attain meaningful outcome. The game was described as a space to "create your personal getaway and customize your character, home, decorations, and even the landscape itself" (Nintendo, 2020a) giving players the freedom of creating. Therefore, we conducted textual analysis to reveal the aspect of creative productions among Malaysian *ACNH* players during the MCO

period. We seek to answer the research question, ‘How do Malaysian players utilize the *Animal Crossing* video game as a site of productivity and labor?’ In doing so, we argue that Malaysian *ACNH* players engaged in creative productions to stay productive during the restrictive lockdown, thus alleviating some of the negative effects of the MCO period.

Literature Review

Video game paratexts as creative productions

In the wider context of gaming practice, creativity is related to creative productions – a variety of artifacts or paratexts players created based on video games, such as fan fictions, guides, modifications, streaming, cosplays, and game art. The relevant domain skills, motivations, and cognitive processes of the creative person coalesce into a creative product, making it the most valid way to measure creativity. Recent research found that players conceptualized their creativity by creating content they have carefully planned and relished the sense of achievements when their creations worked out well (J. Hall et al., 2020).

Pearce (2006) introduced the term ‘productive play’ which is described as “the metamorphosis from play to creative output or work-like activities” (C. Pearce, 2009, p. 141). Play is deemed productive when it creates products, whether tangible or intangible, that produces the feeling of being productive in the player involved. Pearce further argues that through productive play, players of ordinary people could challenge the ‘hegemony of play’ by corporations that owned, published, and distributed video games. In this sense, players get to have authorship and agency to their own creations.

The value of paratextual inquiry lies in questioning the centrality of a text, that equal attention should be made towards the paratextual elements. Consalvo (2019) argues that one of the importance of paratextuality was its value for players to acquire gaming capital – a variation on Bourdieu’s cultural capital – to ‘succeed’ in the gaming culture. For example, by producing and disseminating game guides, players can gain a notable status within a gaming community. For this study, we adopted the understanding of gaming paratextuals from Švelch (2020) who recommends treating paratextuality as a link between a text and the surrounding socio-historical reality, without implying that they are less important or subordinate. Therefore, paratexts are

seen as integral to the experience and enjoyment of a game. Video games like *Minecraft* are seen not just as ‘placing blocks’ but also as a platform for storytelling (Newman, 2019). Similarly, Roth (2022) considered the paratexts of *Let’s Play* gaming videos on YouTube and argues that future research on the various practices that combine game worlds with other digital spaces may foster better understanding on the relation between them.

Recent discourses on Malaysian gaming community and gaming paratexts are noticeably absent. Loh (2013) studied the Malaysian guilds in the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* and Shifa (2017) studied Malay women players of the now defunct Facebook game *The Sims Social*. Therefore, this study will expand the literature of Malaysian gaming culture by focusing on a gaming community of *ACNH* and the paratexts of creative productions produced. To distinguish such manifestations of creativity, we view the action as little-c (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009) of personal hobby and everyday creativity. Researchers have been calling for a balanced and effective approaches to video gaming during the restrictive time of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown to support players’ well-being (King et al., 2020). Amid the fallout of MCO period, it is hoped that staying productive through the creations of video game paratexts can fulfil this role.

Instances of creative productions in and around Animal Crossing: New Horizons

The video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020a) (hereinafter *ACNH*) was launched in March 2020, coincides with the global pandemic lockdown. The game became the biggest gaming hit of the coronavirus era as it achieved 30 million global sales (Nintendo, 2020b), received multiple accolades (BAFTA, 2021; Golden Joystick Awards, 2020; The Game Awards, 2020), and was discussed extensively on social media (Khan, 2020). Its basic premise is a simulation of everyday life and social dynamics while living on an island, making it an escapism utopia amid the restrictive circumstances. The primary goal is to boost the island’s star rating, but as a sandbox game, players can freely shape their gameplay without a definitive end.

Based on local news reports, thousands of Malaysian *ACNH* players were active on social media to communicate about their gameplay (Ashaari, 2020; Mahyuni, 2020b; G. Tong, 2020). Existing empirical research on *ACNH* – whether in general context or

specifically on the topic of creative productions – have largely focused on Western and East Asian players and contexts (K. E. Pearce et al., 2021; Roth, 2022; X. Tong et al., 2021), thus may or may not be generalized or able to explain gaming practices in regions such as Malaysia. Studies have found instances of creative productions in and around *ACNH*, although they did not explicitly emphasize the word ‘productivity’ or ‘creative productions’. For example, Moreno (2020) analyzed *ACNH* fan arts based on ideologies such as neoliberalism and sexism. Tong and colleagues (2021) focused on player-generated narratives or scenarios. Building on all these studies, our findings will contribute to the existing literature of creative productions in *ACNH*, specifically by focusing on the Malaysian region and the context of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

Methodology

The relevance of studying *ACNH* as part of MCO video gaming culture is due to three reasons: commercial success, critical acclaim, and active local community on the internet (Mahyuni, 2020a; Najmi, 2020; G. Tong, 2020; Yeoh, 2020). The game became an MCO gaming phenomenon with over 14,000 members on the Facebook group ‘Animal Crossing Malaysia’ engaged in daily discussions as they produced and shared their own paratexts (Chapree, 2021). Understanding this productive gaming culture requires recognizing the surrounding paratextual contexts. We adopted the interpretive approach by taking into account Stuart Hall’s (1980) idea of ‘encoding/decoding’ in understanding the gaming paratexts, and a gaming community as a site where Malaysians players distributed the creative productions. We performed a textual analysis on the Facebook group as the method is most suitable to capture the cultural phenomenon occurred within the time when the texts were created. The unit of analysis is the pre-existing paratexts in the forms of textual data (text posts) as well as visual data (photo posts and video posts). The time frame of the chosen Facebook group posts is between 1st April 2020 – 31st March 2021, that is when *ACNH* was first available to purchase, and the first year into and at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through purposive sampling, we identified relevant data using two methods: (1) keyword-based search; and (2) manual search on the group’s ‘Media’ tab. A set of keywords were used, including ‘COVID-19’, ‘Movement Control Order’, ‘productive’, and ‘custom designs’ in both English and Malay. In this sense,

custom designs mean player-generated designs. The manual search was done to cover posts that could not be identified with keywords but had related nuances in the visual.

A number of 87 posts made by 70 unique players related to creative productions were collected and kept for analysis. As the posts were made during the actual months of MCO lockdown, they offered valuable explorations in the actual unfolding of the events. We conducted textual analysis of the posts and carried out open coding for the construction of analytical categories. Any posts that are written in the native Malay language are recorded verbatim and translated into English in the final write up for readability. Any personal information was removed that could potentially result in a breach of anonymity and privacy of the group members. To answer the research question, we employed the analytic method of Reflexive Thematic Analysis of data familiarization, coding, generating initial themes, developing themes, refining themes, and writing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

Findings and Discussions

Our analysis shows that Malaysian *ACNH* players produced paratexts as a way of staying productive during the restrictive period. This can be regarded as an active and integral approach to alleviate some negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, addressing individuals’ needs of authorship and agency. The players turned into producers through their various creative products, making the game a significant site of productivity and labor. We identified three themes as follows.

Theme one: Custom designs as preservation of cultural meanings

We identified this theme from 55 posts that illustrate the cultural meanings related to player’s real-life ideas, customs, and way of living. These cultural meanings demonstrate that creativity is culturally mediated, that “creativity and culture are intertwined: the former uses the signs and tools made available by the latter to produce new cultural resources that go on to facilitate future creative acts” (Glăveanu et al., 2019, p. 742). Therefore, the cultural meanings contribute to representations and nuances of the players’ regional and ethnic diversity.

As *ACNH* was made by a Japanese developer, the game largely depicts a Japanese lifestyle and offers

stereotypical content from the region. However, many Malaysian players would rather have their own particular reality or factual regional living environment in the game. In doing so, these players challenged the ‘hegemony of play’ by the game developer Nintendo through their small forms of resistance. Instead of merely playing or consuming, the players creatively adapted to the limitations of the game content by inserting their own cultural meanings, provoking and illuminating the need of representations, thus showing the perspective of the locals.

Traditional or cultural outfits

Traditional clothes or cultural outfits express one’s identity. Inundated by the Japanese *hakama* and *kimono*, Malaysian *ACNH* players adapted their own traditional clothes in the game. To create a custom design, players draw or colour pixels by pixels using the in-game application ‘Custom Design Editor’, either using the Nintendo Switch console buttons or using of the console’s touch screen.

One player shared her creations of *baju kurung*, a loose-fitting dress consists of a blouse and a skirt commonly worn by Malay women (Post 3). This inspired others to follow through in designing and sharing their creations, particularly, in conjunction with the Eid al-Fitr celebration which was fast approaching in the month of May 2020. More designs were made and shared in the group, including *baju kebaya* (Post 9), *baju kebarung* (Post 18), and *baju songket* (Post 17). The players also incorporated patterns of batik, and accessories of necklaces and shoulder scarves into their designs.

There were also creations of *baju Melayu* of Malay men which consists of a collared long-sleeved shirt and a pair of trousers (Post 10, 24, and 36). The cloth is typically adorned with *kain samping* or *sarong* which are loops of fabric that are folded around the waist. Players donned the *baju Melayu* for photoshoot sessions and runway modelling. Others were encouraged to share pictures of their avatars wearing the designs, motivating the creators to create more clothes.

The inspirations in designing these virtual clothes vary. Some players cited their real-life Eid festive clothes as inspiration (Post 21 and 30). Others were inspired by local legends, myths, and historical fictions. The cloth designs were named in many ways; some were color-based descriptive such as Red

Kebaya (Post 9), others stayed true to Malay-words naming convention such as *Tuah*, *Jebat*, and *Melati* (Post 10), as well as *Puteri Gunung Ledang* and *Che Siti Wan Kembang* (Post 17).

To complete these outfits, Malay women typically wear a head covering called *hijab*. Meanwhile, Malay men typically wear a *songkok* or *kopiah* as headdress. Although Nintendo does not offer any of these in *ACNH*, Malaysian players were quick to adapt the available in-game items to their own needs. One player discovered an in-game headwear called *Magic-Academy Hood* that can be adapted as a *hijab* (Post 67). The hoods came in various colors, thus can be matched with any outfits. Although glad to learn about the potential adaptation, another player commented that “Sadly, this is probably the closest thing we can get to a *hijab*” in the game. Meanwhile, other players adapted the in-game sushi chef hat as *songkok* and the knit hat as *kopiah* for their male avatars to complement the traditional clothes look (Post 26 and 31).

Other Malaysian ethnicities also get to wear their traditional clothes in the virtual world of *ACNH*, particularly of Bornean people when the natives themselves took charge of the representation. The abundance of these clothes designs was noted particularly around the festive period of *Kaamatan* (late May 2020) and *Gawai* (early June 2020) harvest festivals. One player designed ethnic clothes of *Baju Bidayuh* and *Baju Ulu* of indigenous peoples of Sarawak (Post 4). As a Sarawakian native, the player could not travel home from the capital city of *Kuala Lumpur* due to the MCO restrictions. Similarly, other players designed ethnic clothes of *Ngepan Iban*, *Batik Sarawak*, *Baju Kadazan*, *Baju Rungus*, *Baju Lundayeh*, and *Baju Murut* (Post 8, 22, 25, 32, and 33). The colourful garments were a hit in the group, with many praising the detailed designs. One player expressed her appreciation to the creators for sharing their designs and wrote “I really miss my hometown.” Clearly, by having these ethnic clothes in the game, it helped players in easing homesickness, as well as to connect with others from similar cultural backgrounds.

By and large, Malaysian players have taken advantage of the custom design feature in *ACNH* to productively showcase their cultural heritage and identity in the virtual world. Although disappointed with the pre-existing clothing items in the game, the players could generate their own designs independently, thus giving them a sense of freedom

and control over their creative gaming. By disseminating the traditional clothes designs to others, their heritage could be digitally preserved and enjoyed by all.

Festivities decorations

Vibrant decorations and ornaments were used to enliven the festive mood of players in the game. For the Muslim Eid celebration, one player decorated his virtual house with images of mosques, *ketupat* (cooked rice compressed and wrapped in woven coconut leaves), as well as the iconographic star and crescent symbols (Post 5). Another player hosted a virtual open house by organizing a *bakar lemang* session (cooking glutinous rice in bamboo) with her friends using bamboo pieces near campfire (Post 27). She also adapted in-game items to represent Malaysian delicacies such as *bubur lambuk*, *kek lapis*, and *ais kacang*. Meanwhile, another player used Tiki torches for festive lights and captioned the photo with a wordplay “Happy Cov-Eid 19” (Post 28). Similarly, another player decorated his house lawn with oil lamps and lighted them up at night to celebrate *malam tujuh likur* to symbolize hope and spiritual light as the Eid month approaches (Post 29).

During the Lunar festive, several decoration items in the auspicious color of red were announced in an official update by Nintendo – all believed to bring good fortune. One player was ecstatic, “We can celebrate CNY in *Animal Crossing* during MCO!” (Post 77). Another player decorated a Chinese eatery in her island with items such as a Lazy Susan turntable, steamer basket, and paper lanterns (Post 78). She wrote “Whether it’s CMO or CMCO or whatever O’s... Please come to my island to dine in!” referring to the many and often confusing variations of movement restriction in Malaysia which affected local businesses’ operating hours. Using similar items, players also decorated their house to resemble a CNY reunion dinner (Post 80). Clearly, by producing and appropriating these decorations in the game, players could enliven their festive mood amid the MCO restrictions.

National symbols and historical events

The players adapted their national symbols in the game, such as the national flag of *Jalur Gemilang* (Stripes of Glory) to be flown as their island’s flag (Post 43 and 58). They also banded together in a crowdsourcing effort to design all 14 flags of

Malaysia’s states and federal territories for anyone to use (Post 44). This allows players to embed the nation or state identity in their gameplay.

The national symbol was also incorporated in a form of fireworks displays lighting up the night sky in the month of August 2020 (Post 57). The weekly fireworks displays were a seasonal event by *ACNH* to close out the summer season. Coincidentally, this celebration falls on Malaysia’s Independence month, as the nation geared up to celebrate *Hari Merdeka* on the 31st of August.

Additionally, the players also designed *Merdeka*-inspired outfits such as t-shirts, hoodies, and dresses from *Jalur Gemilang* pattern (Post 56 and 62). In another instance, one player set a vast flower garden of *Jalur Gemilang* with red, white, yellow, and blue colored flowers (Post 59). With a record of almost 700 ‘likes’ by the group members, it became one of the most successful postings. Clearly, the national flag has inspired many players to design their own visual creations for their gameplay.

Besides that, the nation’s coat of arms or *jata negara* is also incorporated in the game. One player designed the coat of arms that comprised a shield, two tigers, a crescent, and fourteen-pointed star for a crest and a motto (Post 53). The player wrote that she designed it as best as she could, as the hardest part is to make each state visible on the coat of arms. Others praised the impressive details of the design, considering the tiny size of *ACNH* custom design canvas at 32x32 pixels.

Meanwhile, in a rather unique post, one player changes her island tunes into a series of Malaysian-themed songs (Post 61). For context, the game allows players to customize their island tunes for seven seconds long and in limited range of notes. Despite these limitations, the player was able to compose the snippets of classic and iconic tunes including the Malaysian anthem *Negaraku*, as well as patriotic songs of *Jalur Gemilang* and *Keragaman Malaysia*, much to the amusement of the group members.

The historical event of Independence Declaration was also recreated. One player recreated the parade stand with an image silhouette of Malaya’s first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman shouting “Merdeka!” (Post 63), marking the end of British rule and celebrating independence. The player dressed her avatar in a navy uniform, ready to march, thereby igniting patriotic spirit by reenacting this historical event in the virtual world.

Evidently, these creations of national symbols and historical events has bridged collective integration among Malaysian *ACNH* players, thus signifying a sense of belonging above any ethnic or cultural differences.

Our findings, therefore, uncovered players' creative productions of custom designs. By adapting cultural meanings in their gameplay, Malaysian players were able to simultaneously showcase and preserve their regional and ethnic diversity. This in turn, challenges and complements the pre-existing content of the game. By default, the way of playing *ACNH* is by replicating the mundanity of everyday life in the real world into the digital realm. However, within the pre-determined narratives, Malaysian players generate new ones based on their own cultural meanings that opens new ways of playing the game.

Theme two: Fan art as an upskilling activity

We generated this theme from 13 posts that revealed the engagement of players in the production of fan art as an enjoyable activity or hobby, and in some cases, mirroring game behaviours in real-life. Consequently, this contributes to their upskilling in various creative domains. These instances of fan art demonstrate how “creativity is constituted to a great extent by the situation and domain in which it is expressed”, thus makes “creative acts unique – given that no two people and situations are completely alike” (Glăveanu et al., 2019, p. 743). Therefore, players produced unique fan art from their respective *ACNH* gameplay and stayed productive during the MCO lockdown.

To increase proficiency of skills, one should practice, get feedback, and make adjustments. Such is the case of Malaysian *ACNH* players who created fan art to upskill. In the creative domain of drawing, several players took the opportunity during the MCO period to improve their drawing skills by illustrating characters and sceneries of *ACNH*. One player posted his color pencil comic depicting an imagined origin story for the *Animal Crossing* game (Post 83). Another player shared an artwork of her 14-year-old niece made using poster colours (Post 45). The neat drawing and colouring depict a scene at the island plaza, where the residents are distributing face masks and hand sanitizers to each other. A slogan at the bottom reads “COVID-19: Stay Safe and Play *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*.”

Besides analogue drawing, players also engaged in

digital drawing activity. One player shared a digital drawing of her favourite cat neighbour, Punchy (Post 19). Another player shared digital drawings of various *Animal Crossing* characters, citing the abundance of leisure time during the MCO which allowed her to rekindle the lost hobby of drawing (Post 34).

Digital drawings also were done inside the game itself. Some players encouraged their island visitors to leave notes or drawings on their island bulletin board. One player posted a compilation of bulletin board content made by his island visitors (Post 11 and 14), ranging from ‘Thank You’ notes and funny doodles of cartoon characters and stick figures. He praised the drawings, especially considering how difficult it was to draw smoothly on the touchscreen of the Nintendo Switch console. Some players began offering bulletin board drawing commissions. One player shared a series of adorable drawings as a portfolio to attract commissions thus helping to improve her digital art skills (Post 70). Instead of real money, she accepted payment in rare in-game items, resources, and currency. These drawing commissions are ideal for players wanting a curated, consistent style for their island bulletin board or for those who simply appreciate polished, stylized drawings. In a similar vein of digital fan art, players created *ACNH*-inspired pixels arts (Post 20 and 23) and product designs of luxury watches (Post 40).

In the creative domain of music, one player shared a one-minute video clip of her young daughter playing piano to the tune of *ACNH* theme song (Post 6). The player applauded *ACNH* as an important game for her family as “it is exactly what we need during a time of stress and anxiety” of the MCO period, and thus reiterated “We love *Animal Crossing* so much.” The clip garnered almost a hundred ‘likes’ with many commenters praising the child’s musical skill, and most sharing the same sentiment on the significance of *ACNH* in their lives.

In another instance of fan art, costume plays or cosplays were also identified in the gaming group. One player cosplayed the game character Tom Nook in Aloha t-shirt (Post 37). Another player cosplayed the game character Isabelle as she posed with themed makeup, a wig, a dog ears headband, and a yellow sweater (Post 13). She wrote “I’m on 350 hours now”, signifying her growing addiction to the game. By cosplaying, the player could improve her hands-on skills such as sewing, prop construction, hair styling, photography, and performance art. Her detailed cosplay gained almost 200 ‘likes’ from the gaming

group members.

Our findings, therefore, uncovered unique and situational fan art by the players. Producing fan art could contribute to the Malaysian *ACNH* players' upskilling in various creative domains, especially at a constraining circumstance such as the MCO period.

Theme three: Fan art as an income generation

We constructed this theme from 19 posts in the group that revealed the creativity of Malaysian players in generating income, however big or small. In doing so, these creators' income depended on the interests of prospective buyers in the gaming community. This demonstrates how "audiences play the vital role of evaluators [of creative judgements] and thus come to constitute what is called creative in our communities and societies" (Glăveanu, 2013, p. 75). Consequently, this contributes to players staying productive during the restrictive lockdown.

One player generated income by baking themed cakes. In April 2020, she posted a photo of a vanilla cheesecake decorated with Easter eggs like those in the Bunny Day game event which earned nearly 100 'likes' (Post 1). Later that month, she uploaded photos of a patterned roll cake featuring the character Tom Nook (Post 7). The post received a quadrupled 'likes' of over 400, making it one of the most successful posts in the gaming group. Due to MCO restrictions, the cakes were sold online in limited quantities. Additionally, customers could purchase a tutorial video to bake similar cakes at home. The player included her social media accounts in both posts to reach a wider audience, and customer testimonials further boosted public interest. One player shared a photo of her tasty purchase, although she couldn't bear to eat it as "I don't want to ruin Tom Nook's face... This cake is too precious!" (Post 12). Another player simply reviewed, "THIS IS AMAZING!" (Post 15). Evidently, the game *ACNH* can be a source of income when one is creative. In this case, the skills and creativity of baking, digital marketing, and online teaching were combined, thus contributing to one's entrepreneurship.

Another notable way of income generation is through art commissions. Players showcased their art portfolio in the gaming group, mostly illustrations of the game characters (Post 73). One player even had to create a waiting list, considering the huge amount of commission requests from clients (Post 76). Digital artists often offered their services to produce custom

art of *ACNH*, citing reasons such as earning money for upgrading their drawings tablets (Post 52 and 64) and other gadgets (Post 66). For example, player of Post 64 advertised her service, "I will draw for you in exchange for a cup of bubble tea at only RM8. Times are tough and I'm looking for ways to earn some income".

Art commissions also occurred from producing and selling non-official merchandise of *ACNH*. Handmade knitted and crocheted merchandises were popular among the players. One player sold her handcrafted game item of yellow bell pouches (the in-game currency), although she could only make them in limited numbers due to upcoming school exams (Post 38). Other players knitted *Amigurumi* dolls (Post 35) and colourful key holders (Post 39) based on *ACNH* characters. Other types of handmade merchandises range from beadworks (Post 55 and 74), plush toys (Post 71 and 72), plastic keychains and enamel pins (Post 41), as well as polymer clay buttons (Post 46 and 85). These players also advertised their social media and e-commerce platforms of Instagram and Etsy for further catalogue browsing.

It is unknown how much income these players generated from making and selling *Animal Crossing*-themed fan arts. Selling petty commodities and taking short-term 'gigs' contracted from the internet are neoliberal forms of overcoming precarity. Most of these experiences are a direct result of the pandemic, but some are a pre-existing condition made apparent by the MCO period. For example, one player has been selling fan art drawings of various media for a long time to help pay her tuition fees, and she had to ramp up her efforts during the MCO to increase her income (Post 52). Even so, a minor income from passion projects or interests such as creating *ACNH* fan art could be fulfilling enough for the creators, especially at a financially challenging time such as the MCO. The creators have a steady following not just from local *ACNH* players, but also around the world as digital commerce transcends beyond geographical borders. Our findings, therefore, unveiled that in creating these fan arts, not only do these players get to stay productive by flexing their creative muscles, they also could gain some income by filling in a niche market demand of a particular fandom. Meanwhile, fans could purchase handmade items, one that is not uniformly mass produced, thus unique and special. However, the legality of selling and buying these fan arts is contested due to copyright issues, hence most creators used advertising keywords such as 'non-official' and 'inspired by'.

By producing these creative products, Malaysian *ACNH* players get to stay productive during the restrictive lockdown. The players have produced creative products, both inside and outside their gaming sessions. Some creative products are notable for their novelty and ambition, while others impress with their precision and innovative use of the in-game features. These players have turned into creators or producers by designing and sharing their work with the rest of the group members, thus gaining gaming capital (Consalvo, 2019) of higher status in the process. The source of such feelings of productivity may be social in nature and come from the broader gaming community. The findings show that players are active constructors of their responses to the pandemic lockdown, as they were finding innovative ways to stay productive and adapting to new forms of work to comply with the physical distancing measures. In doing so, they also reject the notion of being passive video game players, vulnerable to the harmful addiction and other associated problems of constant gaming during the MCO period (BERNAMA, 2021).

Conclusion

This empirical study presents the Malaysian socio-cultural perspective of creative productions through the paratexts of *ACNH* players. Importantly, resorting to creative productions when dealing with life difficulties can have beneficial outcomes to the sense of productivity by addressing individuals' needs of authorship and agency. This study has revealed how Malaysian *ACNH* players turned into producers through their various creative products, as depicted in the significant examples discussed. We have uncovered the answers to the Research Question: How do Malaysian players utilize the *Animal Crossing* video game as a site of productivity and labor? Particularly, we have shed light through the themes of custom designs (or player-generated designs) as preservation of cultural meanings, fan art as an upskilling activity, and fan art as an income generation. In doing so, we have confirmed the significance of the *Animal Crossing* virtual world for Malaysian players to stay productive by engaging in creative production at the time of adversity. These instances of creative productions did not occur only in the isolation of the individual experience, but also as a shared experience in the gaming community. Therefore, this reiterates the cultural significance of video gaming during the MCO period.

The relevance of this study is linked to the various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the United Nations. Firstly, the SDG3 of Good Health and Well-being whereby creative productions through video games could promote players' productivity and mindfulness amid the chaotic period of pandemic lockdown. Secondly, the SDG10 of Reduced Inequalities in which the creative productions can be used to promote cultural diversity and inclusion through the various custom designs and storytelling players have produced. This study makes an original and novel contribution to knowledge by featuring in-depth production practices of Malaysian *ACNH* players. Practically, we also extend the research on video games and their potential in fulfilling the fundamental need of human productivity, especially in contexts where such needs may be restricted. Our study is limited by the textual analysis method and the *ACNH* title, as such, future research may consider other qualitative methods and other popular titles to extend multifaceted understanding on pandemic lockdown gaming practices.

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