Show Me Your World

An in-depth analysis Chinese Animal Crossing: New Horizons players regarding their sociability and the values internalised.

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Abstract

The fast-changing mediascape is changing how people entertain, how people virtually interact with each other, and how they would present their own identities. This research aims to investigate the sociability of, and the values internalised by Chinese players in the case of Animal Crossing: New Horizons. The most relevant findings in this research are based on the theoretical understanding of community, sociability and values. These three theoretical concepts are all derived from the 19th century and have developed into the virtual realm, and the serve special roles in gaming industries. Hence, how sociability contributes to the internalisation of values in Animal Crossing: New Horizons is the aim of this research. It is designed to answer the question: *How do Chinese gamers jointly socialise to contribute to the values embedded in Animal Crossing: New Horizon in its community?*

A thematic analysis was conducted to investigate how the sociability and values relate to each other in the gameplay and daily interactions among Chinese Animal Crossing: New Horizons players. A mixture of 7 interviews and 200 online posts were collected as data. with the two kinds of data supplementing each other, considerate findings were investigated.

The analysis has brought about findings that depict the sociability of these players and the values they have internalised. The analysis of sociability has shown that most players would socialise with each other out of practical reasons related to money and rare objects. Additionally, they would also interact to deal with loneliness and check on each other's progress. Besides, Chinese player still prefer to interact with their close friends or play alone. Moreover, most findings showed that the

interactions and communications among players are mostly weak and fast. On the other hand, values related to capitalist ideologies were heavily manifested in the analysis, and this is led by the practical desire for money and rare objects in gameplay. Moreover, the Asian collectivism idea in China has led to a tendency of conformity among Chinese players. This could also result in inertia of interaction at the ending stages of Animal Crossing: New Horizons gameplay. Lastly, findings also indicate that the players stress the value of freedom, considering Animal Crossing: New Horizons as a single-player game. This has resulted in a reflection of their true identities in the gameplay, including the real identities and the fabricated ones.

KEYWORDS: *Community, Sociability, Values, Videogames, Virtual*

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Introduction

The former title for this paper was “Show me *the* world”, instead of *your* world. The choice of the word *the* intended to conceive the community as a unit where the perceptions and playing status are reaching the level of homogeneity. However, the original expectation for this research has neglected the complexity of virtual communities, in which how players’ identities affect their gameplay plays a huge role. Indeed, players’ own gameplay and the privacy of them is closely associated with their identities. Towards the end of this research, it was found that the word no longer fits in the findings, whereas “show me your world” indicates that it is the heterogeneity within the Animal Crossing community that adds up to the information exchange and different interaction among players. It turned out to be that after over 250 hours of gameplay, when my island was fully constructed, differences between me and other players was identified because of the varied aesthetic appreciation and identities of us.

Animal Crossing: New Horizon is a life simulation game developed and released by Nintendo for the Nintendo Switch. It is the fifth game in the Animal Crossing series. In this game, players are offered an empty island and are asked to control an avatar that could construct the whole island. Players can gather materials, craft manuals, and customise the island and spend time with a bunch of animal citizens. This game was made available to play in March 2020, and it immediately became a hit within gaming industries, especially in the East Asia (BBC, 2020). Nowadays Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, and other connection technology made possible remote communications that used to be considered impossible (Bruhn, 2011). This is also the advantage that multi-player games try to promote to strengthen the interactions between players within and outside the games (Kim, 2014; Stenros, Paavilainen, & Mäyrä, 2009). Moreover, Animal Crossing: New Horizons was released during the initial period of COVID-19 pandemic when many needed socialisation more than ever before. This game provides international players with a platform to enjoy interesting

game play and interact with their acquaintance and meet potential friends. Even though there have been games that stressed the importance of multi-player gaming through cooperation and combat, Animal Crossing's uniqueness lies in its pure intention of making players simply visit each other and enjoy the touring time together. This is one of the reasons why this game became a central topic in the gaming community.

The focus of this research is to look for a connection between the real world and the virtual game realm. In particular, the research focusses on Chinese players. As one of the main targeting markets and biggest player groups, China is a country that deserves special attention. With a large number of players, China is destined to be treated with care by Nintendo. Moreover, as a vast country, it makes a huge difference on the forming of Asian culture, so the study on Chinese gamers could reflect insights taking place in East Asia. Therefore, the theses aims to investigate what socio-cultural values were embedded in the game and internalised by the players, and it also tries to explore how players' sociability adds to the internalisation of these values. This research will mainly look at the in-game and out-game socialisation among gamers, in which their personal sharing of gameplay and communications in online forums are the main focus. In the designing process of games, developers and creators endeavor themselves into implanting certain values in the games to increase depth and reflect social issues, whether positive or negative (Flanagan, & Nissenbaum, 2014). Among the members of the gaming community, these values are then enhanced and internalised by gamers (Kim, 2014). Therefore, the research question is as follows: *How do Chinese gamers jointly socialise to contribute to the values embedded in Animal Crossing: New Horizon in its community?* Moreover, in order to provide a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of the research data, this research also aims to answer some sub-questions. For example, how do Chinese gamers participate in the discussion within the Animal Crossing online community? What are the motivations and preference of the players to interact with each other in- and outside the gameplay? What values were internalised with Animal Crossing gamers within its community? What is the

relationship between the values identified and the identities of Animal Crossing gamers? In order to answer these nuanced questions, several steps were taken theoretically and analytically.

Societal and academic relevance

This research is worthy of being conducted for its social relevance. To begin with, video games are considered a part of the media landscape that is becoming larger and larger, and its scale and revenue are higher than that of other creative industries. Unquestionably, the gaming industry has earned its place in the media landscape culturally and economically (Gough, 2019). Moreover, creative industries, including game industries, are stressing more importance on social and connection technologies to boost interactions among users (Stenros et al., 2009). This research focuses on how Nintendo Switch gamers socialise with each other in related communities and enhance the values in Animal Crossing. Hence, the connections between the real world and gaming realm are manifested, in which the game sphere and the cultural sphere place interconnected effects on each other. Most importantly, it is important to contextualise the special time of COVID-19 pandemic, which is when this game was released. With physical isolation, the pandemic could be an important factor that influences gamers' sociability in Animal Crossing (Cesar, 2020).

This research also reflects its scientific relevance. Firstly, it is valuable to examine the different sociability in the gaming industry specifically under the classic fundamentals of community and online community by Bruhn (2011). Former research has indicated the importance of sociability in multiplayer and massive multiplayer games (Stenros et al., 2009), but the players of Animal Crossing: New Horizons certainly conduct their unique way of interaction. Hence, seeing the differences between Animal Crossing and the generalised multiplayer games is worthy of exploration. Secondly, most previous studies focused on the gamers in South Korea (Kim, 2014) and Japan (Cesar, 2020) which is Animal Crossing's original country. China is one of the most targeted markets of Animal Crossing, so a focus on Chinese

gamers could bring more representative and patent findings. Moreover, with the launching of Nintendo Switch Chinese version, certain restrictions were placed by the agency company Tencent (Qiu, 2019). This could be a disturbing situation for the Nintendo Switch gamers in China, because there are going to be fewer purchasing opportunities in Chinese market and the connecting functions could be affected by Tencent. Hence, looking specifically in the demographic of Chinese players could bring about more unique findings.

Thesis structure

This thesis will start by presenting a theoretical framework, in which the terms of community, sociability, and value are going to be explored from its early definition to their application on games. The understanding of virtual communities will also be presented, together with different sorts of sociability conducted in real life and online. The highlight of the theoretical framework will also be focused on the possible values which might be identified in Animal Crossing: New Horizons community. This could supplement more theoretical implications and can link more to the findings regarding values. Secondly, the methodology part of data collection and data analysis will be illustrated with argumentations. In this sector, the choice of mixed interviews and online posts will be presented with supporting reasons, and thematic analysis will be substantiated. Besides, the entire collection and analysis of data and every decision making during this research will be illustrated with transparency. Third, the in-depth analysis of interview transcript and online data will be presented. This section will be separated into a number of themes, which reflects and describes the main pattern and important findings are highlighted. Lastly, in the conclusion section, the research question is answered, and the main findings of this research will be illustrated.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1 Community and game communities

1.1.1 Defining community

Community, as a complicated and broad concept, can be approached in varied ways, because the genesis of its definition derives from different cultures and regions, for instance, Bruhn (2011) has exemplified the European and American distinctions of conceptualising community. This concept also branches into countless different communities, even in the gaming industry alone: game specific communities, live-streaming communities, competitive communities, and so forth (Diets, 2020). However, before diving deeper into the specific game communities, it is vital to discuss the many reaches to the general definition of community. As Bruhn (2011) stated, there is no certain definition of community that is agreed by all, but community generally indicates that there are relationships between groups of people in a certain geographical or cyber space.

However, in history, scholars from different cultures have conducted different focuses when trying to touch upon community. In terms of Europe, Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies, and Georg Simmel contributed to the definition of community (Bruhn, 2011). These scholars have stressed the role that urbanisation plays in forming community and the conflicts between common good and individualism. Tönnies (1957) indicated the growing individualism derived from the Industrial Revolution and was concerned that the “we-ness” and common tradition of community might vanish. Simmel (1903) also argued city life could directly result in indifference, and freedom brought by cities would develop individuality, making it more difficult for communities to be built. On the other hand, Weber (1970, as cited in Bruhn, 2011) and Durkheim (2014) argued that new forms of interpersonal bonds based on common goals would emerge, and the economic and political uniqueness of each city would bring about different urban communities.

From the perspectives of the USA, scholars also indicated the unbalanced social classes within urban communities. Park (1952) saw the city as a living laboratory, and communities are formed based on self-interest or necessity rather than likeness in urban areas (Macionis, & Parrilli, 2004). Moreover, Robert and Helen Lynd studied a representative American community and identified a division of communities based on social classes, in which economic and political power play vital roles (Bruhn, 2011). It is indicated that it is men's relations to the other individuals in the society that contribute to the forming of community (Robert, 1915, as cited in Bruhn, 2011).

To sum up, both European and American scholars focus on the impact of urbanisation on communities. However, European scholars focused more on conflicts between individuality and collectivity, while American ones stressed the importance of social classes and the economic factors within. In common, both schools of thought highlight that the structure and forming within a community differ between different regions, in which social constraint plays an important role. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss Asian, especially Eastern Asian society with its unique social structure.

Even though the idea of community can be dated from the early Confucius' theory of the five fundamental relationships (Bahm, 1992), there is a gap in Chinese scholarship conceptualising community. However, several studies have been conducted researching Asian society. In current society, East Asian countries represent themselves as a "mixture of liberal consumerism and Asian traditionalism with rigid social structures" (Lehdonvirta, & Räsänen, 2011, pp.95), especially Japan. In other words, these countries are open to any economic opportunities, but they still stick to the rigid traditions that stress collectivity and family. Therefore, the conflict between individuality and collectivity in a community is more intense in Asian culture. Moreover, different from the western ideologies of stressing personal achievement and preserving positive perceptions of oneself, East Asian socialisation is based on prioritising filial piety and deference to social rank (Hsu, et al., 2012). Parents have total control over their next generations, and people of lower positions in a company must obey the orders from the higher ones. Therefore, to conclude, based on the

cultural differences, the strong influence of social structure on Asian communities is manifested with present hierarchy and collectivism (Lehdonvirta, & Räsänen, 2011).

1.1.2 Game community

With the emergence of social media and more innovatively interactive mechanisms online, the concept of virtual community gained more attention. The understanding of this term is complicated because the internet is decoupling community and geographic propinquity (Bruhn, 2011). Bruhn (2011) also indicated that there are fewer people willing to inhabit in a location where everybody knows their names and personal situations. Instead, they would locate themselves socially and spatially online, so as to seek information, offer and receive help virtually. This phenomenon is evident in the gaming industries. Gaming communities are similar to virtual communities and are defined as “communities of play” by Pearce (2011). Pearce (2011) stated that communities of play are neither unique nor new to society. Social play is a rapidly growing topic in the mediascape, and it has existed for long, starting from the early chess game to the recent video games. Pearce (2011) is in favour of Tönnies’s indication that community is an association of collective will which is generated through individual efforts, because gaming community members mostly gather due to a specific game. Therefore, videogames communities amplify the scale, progression, and regional reach of communities, but they are merely just extensions of real gameplay (Pearce, 2011), bringing local interactions to global ones.

Additionally, since game communities derive from the virtual communities, some central issues of virtual communities could also be applied to game communities. It is argued by many scholars that the virtual communities are closely linked to computer mediated communication (CMC) (Rheingold, 2000; Tardini, & Cantoni, 2005). They also stated that virtual communities are social aggregations born from the Net, with sufficient human emotions, to build webs of interpersonal relations in cyberspace (Tardini, & Cantoni, 2005). Virtual communities emerged thanks to computer

mediated communication, and CMC utilises electronic technologies and virtual environments to foster communication processes and break down the geographical barriers (Lechner, & Schmid, 2000). Moreover, there are other definitions of virtual communities that focus on other related factors (Lechner, & Schmid, 2000). Lechner & Schmid (2000) argue that virtual communities are recognised for varied features. Firstly, they provide a shared communication environment; secondly, interpersonal relationships emerge and are maintained by means of online interaction; thirdly, a sense of belonging to and internal structure of the group are manifested in virtual communities; lastly, a symbolic common space is represented by shared norms, values, and interests in virtual communities (Lechner, & Schmid, 2000; p. 373).

The advanced CMC has led to the emergence of varied online communication platforms, among which Reddit is a typical case. It is a social media platform categorised into different groups for different communities to communicate among their members. In terms of games, there are endless topics for discussion. Based on the research of Jørgensen and Bogers (2020), metadata topic that includes hardware, release date, and availability is the most discussed one in their dataset. Also, a game's narrative, design, and structure are other well-discussed topics. However, social media such as Reddit are also considered as platforms that consist of both positive and negative themes (Robards, 2018). It is recognised as a place for identity exploration and connection because of people similar to each other, while it is also found to be a "hub for anti-feminist activism" (Robards, 2018). People of all interests can find their place in Reddit, but it is up to them to distinguish the good and bad side of it.

Within the different factors that help constitute the understanding of virtual communities, there are three main features that can be seen as central issues in both virtual and gaming communities: *belonging*, *identity*, and *interest*. The factor *belonging* can be divided into two aspects: aware and voluntary. Sometimes one is required to formally subscribe to a certain community, while sometimes one's belonging depends on the awareness of other members' caring (Lechner, & Schmid, 2000). For example, belonging to a family is more aware and less voluntary, and

belonging to an interest club is more voluntary and less aware. The nature of virtual communities, which means they are mostly conducted with CMC, might pose a threat to the strength of the social ties among virtual community members (Granovetter, 1973; Lechner, & Schmid, 2000; Wellman, 1997). There are few or no physical interactions, emotional empathies, or the tradition of mutual help offered by virtual communities. Hence, this critical situation of virtual communities might not foster members' sense of belonging (Lechner, & Schmid, 2000). However, it does not imply that the interaction and engagement between community members are evidently weaker. There are cases showing some deep and intimate relationships between members, which indicates the usefulness of weak ties for the capacity of bridging people (Constant, Sproull, & Kiesler, 1996; Lechner, & Schmid, 2000; Wellman, 1997), and other evidence shows that it is easier for people to find where they belong in online platforms such as Reddit (Robards, 2018).

The second aspect of virtual communities is *identity*. The understanding of identity becomes ambiguous in terms of virtual ones (Donath, 1999; Merchant, 2006), because many of the basic cues of interpersonal and social roles in the physical world are absent (Lechner, & Schmid, 2000). This phenomenon is more apparent in gaming industries where players create avatars to present themselves. According to Gee (2003), the gameplay from the gamers could result in three types of identities in gaming communities. The first type of identity is the real person, who stands for the players' real persona and identity in the society. Some parts of this identity might be hidden by the players, but it certainly affects the choices made in the gameplay. The second type of identity is the virtual character, which refers to the identity that players assume themselves to be in the gaming realm, and it is usually presented by the avatars. The last identity is specially named projective identity, which is the reflection of both the real person and virtual character. Besides, gamers could also explore their identities on game-related social media (Robards, 2018). These are platforms where similar people gather together. With the exchange of information, more connections between them can be found among a certain community (Robards, 2018).

Players of video games usually create an avatar as a projective identity that reflects both players' real identity and their fictional identity, because of the distance created by cyber space and the freedom offered by video games. This phenomenon is often seen in MMORPG (massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) (Pearce, 2011). In the realm of virtual communities, how people communicate and tell stories are the key elements that construct their online identities. Therefore, the internet users are free to hide or reveal their true identities in cyber space. This means that sometimes the characters in virtual gaming communities are completely fabricated by the players (Merchant, 2006; Tardini, & Cantoni, 2005). A created avatar is seen as the combined work of both the game designers and players (Pearce, 2011). Gamers are required to create the avatar based on a certain set of aesthetics. Moreover, with the development of graphic hardware and CGI technology, more options are given for gamers to create avatars with their own imagination. Moreover, the issue of gender is also another central topic among gamers when creating their avatars. Some male gamers even create female avatars because female avatars are considered more attractive, and players' interactions among female avatars can easily be conducted with depth (Pearce, 2011). In terms of Animal Crossing and its franchise, the idea of an avatar is extended to the whole island. Every player could build their own island with a larger set of designing elements than that of a single character. The unique island designed by Animal Crossing players can be seen as avatars on a larger scale, and with more options and larger space for designing, players' personal interests and real identities are more easily manifested.

Additionally, based on the different environment where gamers communicate with each other, Lechner and Schmid (2000) indicated two types of gaming communities. The first one is named the playing community, which mostly involves the direct interaction between gamers during gameplay. Gamers interact with each other with their avatars, and they cooperate or conduct combat. In this type of community, gamers' projective identities lean more to the fictional side. On the other hand, another community is called the players' community. This type stands for the

out-game realm such as game forum and social media community. Players' projective identities reveal more of their real personality. Because of this, the gamers' community helps shape and modify the game's environment (Tadini, & Cantoni, 2005).

The last feature of the virtual community is *interest*. According to Tadini and Cantoni (2005), virtual communities arise originally due to the discussions about topics of interest, and they function to gather members of similar passions. This feature has broken the traditional origin of community, which was regional proximity. In the virtual communities, shared interests and self-identification are the determining factors rather than geographical closeness (Clodius, 1997; Lechner, & Schmid, 2000). The case of Animal Crossing also proves this statement, in which people unite together in a game community because of the same passion about the franchise. However, online communities, such as Reddit and Douban, could also be considered as virtual locations where gamers interact outside the games. This also causes a sense of closeness, and gamers depend on the virtual communities to share information (Diets, 2020).

1.2 Sociability and gamers' sociability

1.2.1 Defining sociability

Like community, the definition of sociability can be traced back to the 18th century and has since experienced a long history of development. Different from community, sociability has been analysed globally, so the differences caused by geographical locations can be put aside. The very first scholar that raised and tried to define the term sociability was George Simmel. He defines sociability as follows:

> "a distinct social form that distills out of the realities of social life the pure essence of association, of the associative process as a value and a satisfaction ... sociability extracts the serious substance of life leaving only "togetherness," the sheer pleasure of the company of others … Freed of

connection with the serious contents of life, sociability is truly a social game, and end in itself" (Simmel, 1949, p. 255)

According to Simmel (1949), sociability can be easily manifested from the various playful conversations that take place within a community, such as anecdote, humor, witticism or flirting, and these conversations usually emerge from recreational activities. Because of its recreational nature, sociability is seen as a play-form of association between community members, and it is considered as one of human's basic impulses other than rational and economic interests (Simmel, 1949).

Based on Simmel's theory of sociability, Oldenburg (1989) has built upon the space where the social association would take place. With his analysis, Oldenburg (1989) raised the term "the third place" to describe such space. He defined it as "a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happy anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work" (Oldenburg, 1989, p.16). From Oldenburg's perspective, apart from home and work, humans need social associations with each other in the spaces, which is also the reason why it was called "the third place". These places are usually informal, as locations like cafes, bookstores, and hair salons all have the potential for sociability to take place (Ducheneaut, Moore, & Nickell, 2007).

Addition to the mere definition of sociability and the space it occurs within, it is also important to discuss symbolic interactionism. This term is essential to the communications between community members, especially for the virtual "third places" where there is a lack of physical proximity. In general, symbolic interactionism is seen as a micro-level sociological perspective and framework that focuses how society is built and perpetuated through repeated interactions among individuals (Carter, & Fuller, 2015). Moreover, the key to symbolic interactionism is the understanding of the linguistic and symbolic interpretations among individuals. Moreover, four basic tenets of symbolic interactionism were concluded by Blumer (1969). For a start, personnels act based on the meanings that symbols and objects connotate for them. Besides, interactions take place within a certain cultural context, hence, making the physical and social objects, persons, and situations within the

contexts all essential to be well defined based on individual meanings. Apart from that, meanings emerge from the interactions among members and between members and the society. Lastly, meanings are being created and recreated constantly during the interpretation process in the interactions among individuals.

To sum up, from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the social context of a culture makes a difference to the interpretation of the same symbol. Moreover, language and symbols are the carriers of meanings, but the interpreted meanings must be based on the clarification of the culture's situation. This term adds special meaning to virtual sociability, because text and symbols are the most common communicative tools for internet users to interact with each other.

1.2.2 Sociability in the virtual world

Apart from the physical "third place", cyberspace could also significantly influence human's affect and be considered as an important space for human sociability and communities. In cyberspace, users' mind experience is stressed, because it is impossible to separate body and mind experience (Fragoso, 2015) in any space. Also, Tuan (1979) have conceptualised place as a central meaning and field of care that stresses human sensation and relationships, which means sociability could make a difference to human relations. Besides, Fragoso (2015) also raised the fragmentation of spaces which associate the physical and virtual: imagined space, utterance space, and material space, and this categorisation could be of use to the study of gaming industries. Imagined space stands for the fictional and immaterial space that users experience; utterance space refers to the space of the representation itself, which include all the virtual elements of an image; material space is where the physical display devices make a difference. In terms of games, these three spaces operate together to offer players the immersive gaming and social experience, because the game world and actions in the playing world are synchronous and are known to be real and unreal at the same time (Brown, & Bell, 2005). Material space determines the quality of game display, while utterance space

and fictional space are left for game developers to design. All three kinds of spaces combined can be considered as the “third place” that Oldenburg (1989) raised, because it is the place where most communication and socialisation take place among gamers. Moreover, there are three stages of gamers’ immersion: engagement, affect investment, and when reality no longer matters (Brown, & Cairns, 2004). The more immersion gamers invest in the virtual world, more virtual communication and socialisation are being conducted among players.

With the emergence and development of digital technology, the virtual communities now offer internet users to interact online. Similarly, the cyber space outside of home and work can also be considered as “the third place” where sociability takes place (Brown, & Bell, 2005; Rheingold, 2000; Steinkuehler, 2005). Social media, as new forms of interactive platforms in the Web 2.0 era, is indicated to play a vital role in the development of sociability (Skoric, & Kwan, 2011). Based on the study of Facebook, Resnick (2001) stated that the specific technological affordance of social media could assist promote productive sociability more efficiently than before. In the online realm, sociability is manifested and maintained via viewing of profiles and the extent of social networks, which is one of the advantages that social media bring about to the world. Eventually, social networks build a sense of shared context among certain users (a community), and vice versa, it is fairly easy for the shared context to bring about closer social ties (Skoric, & Kwan, 2011). Additionally, social media brings possibilities for users to stay updated with the current events, share multimedia such as videos and photographs, and coordinate various social activities that take place within virtual communities (Skoric, & Kwan, 2011).

1.2.3 Sociability in gaming community/culture

Furthermore, the sociability discussed can also be manifested in gaming industries, because games can also be seen as a “third place”, where people view each other’s profiles, communicate, and conduct interactions (Skoric, & Kwan, 2011),

providing vitally new space for socialising and community building (Brown, 2009). Nowadays, games are a key source of entertainment for younger generations, so the sociability and interactions between gamers are more often manifested among this age group. An American research conducted by Jones et al. (2003) indicates that 2 percent of American students believe gaming would help widen their social realm, and nearly two third of the students play games to kill time in the absence of friends (as cited in Skoric, & Kwan, 2011). This implies that at the same time of being a tool for socialising, games also play a vital role when the social ties are missing in the offline world. Furthermore, games bring together gamers of various backgrounds beyond one's intimate social network (Steikuehler, & Williams, 2006), because game players are searching for the same goal: to be entertained and seek excitement during gameplay. This phenomenon is similar to the other virtual media platforms, such as social media, but it was found that in the gaming industries, more tolerance is manifested between gamers than in other media industries (Kobayashi, 2010). The heterogeneous populations of gamers have cultivated tolerance for other gamers through gaming, and gaming skills matter more than race and other ethnic factors of a player. This would specially thanks to the possibility of sociability that games have brought about.

Similarly, games act as carriers of civic discourses (Bers, & Chau, 2006). As what was understood, games usually mirror the realistic issues and bring about deep thinking (Skoric, & Kwan, 2011), hence, triggering gamers to participate in social and political discussions. This phenomenon is related to gamers' civic interests in current social and political events, which makes civic discourse another way of sociability in games.

With the understanding of the role that games play in sociability, the discussion of different sociability in gaming industries were raised by several scholars. Even though it is possible, it is difficult to imagine games are played without any kinds of social engagement among players (Zagal, Nussbaum, & Rosas, 2000). Moreover, Myers (2009) tried to explain social video game play as an extension of individual gameplay, thinking it is more reasonable than considering individual gameplay as an

incomplete form of social gameplay. The element of play is also separated into three forms by Myers (2009): 1) play with body (locomotor play) as all physical playing; 2) play with conceptual objects (object play), in which virtual and real-life games play a central role; 3) play with others (social play) as the extension of both the other types of plays.

Additionally, sociability differs when the number of gamers are different. Stenros, et al. (2009) have distinguished single player games, two player games, multiple player games, and massive multiplayer games. Single player games are considered to be played for the benefit of oneself. However, few single player games are free of social interactions. Often, sociability is manifested in the out-game realm, and social connections are closer in the acknowledgement of others' playing status (Consalvo, Begy, Ganzon, & Scully-Blaker, 2018). Also, gameplay is often used as forms of performance in single player games. This can be conducted in the co-location situation, where players and audiences are in the same space. Dance Dance Revolution is considered as the example that illustrates play as performance (Konami, 1998, as cited in Stenros et al., 2009). This game requires gamers to move their body in real-time, making this performative and visible for others to watch. Moreover, co-location could be virtual as well, which implies the live-streaming industry of single player games. Because single player games lack direct sociability with other players in game, the game capital is manifested in the ranking of playing skills, knowledge of cheat codes, connections to other skillful players, and so on.

In terms of two player games, sociability is manifested in more forms. Players can play games simultaneously with others or play the same game in turn (hot seat playing). Communications within two player games can be both direct and indirect, being part of the social play. Moreover, although some games offer the communication functions between users, it is more often for players to utilise third-party software to communicate via voice or texts (Stenros et al., 2009).

When the number of players increases, more possibilities of sociability could take place. In multiplayer games, players place direct causal effects on each other, and their sociability is manifested not only in the collaboration and competition, but

also in co-operation, which refers to that players band together to reach short-term tactical missions even if their ultimate goals conflict (Dechant, Poeller, Johanson, Wiley, & Mandryk, 2020). Counter Strike is a typical example of this game type, where two players from different competitive teams could be placed in the same team in the next round (Stenros et al., 2009). Therefore, it is a designing challenge for developers to balance different forms of sociability in multiplayer games. Meanwhile, in massive multiplayer games, only a few players have causal effects on others. Hence, communication is less necessary in massive multiplayer games (Depping, & Mandryk, 2017). However, there are other approaches for social interactions, where players witness each others' gameplay, provide a sense of inhabited space, and offer gameplay to be looked at (Stenros et al., 2009).

However, sociability around a game and sociability contained within a game should be separated analytically, which means when conducting research, researchers need to distinguish in-game sociability and out-game social interactions (Stenros et al., 2009). In-game sociability refers to the game-sphere collaborations, co-operations and competitions among gamers, and the voice and textual chat during gaming is also included. On the other hand, many other software, such as Reddit, help players to communicate outside the gameplay in the cultural sphere. Within these virtual communities, as what they do in other virtual communities, gamers meet people of similar game preference, exchange information, and contact each other. However, these two types of sociability can be detected in almost all gamers, and they are not completely separated. It is important to realise that sociability in the game-sphere and cultural-sphere mutually construct each other (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & De Peuter, 2003; Lima, 2019), which means the actions taken in games and the decision-making process in real life could mutually affect each other. As people might play games with their real-life friends, players could also meet other local gamers offline (Skoric, & Kwan, 2011). The in-game and out-game sociability could lead to and affect each other, while they should be analysed separately in order to investigate the relationships between each other.

1.3 Values and games

1.3.1 Defining values

The application of values in the sociological realm has suffered the absence of reliable conceptualisation and empirical measurement that was agreed upon by all (Hitlin, & Piliavin, 2004). In the 20th century, the theoretical developments (Schwartz, 1992; Berry et al., 1997) in sociology have led to a “resurgence of research on values” (Schwartz, 2012. p. 3). This means the discussion of the term value is relatively recent. Hitlin and Piliavin (2004) state that the most influential definition of value can be dated back to Kluckhohn (1951, p. 395): “A value is a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable, which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of an action”. This definition focuses on both action and reward, and it covers both perspectives from individuals and groups. However, other scholars also have questioned this definition. Moors (2000, as cited in Hitlin, & Piliavin, 2004) argued that Kluckhohn’s proposition only takes a functionalist and deterministic view, in which it is considered that values necessarily lead to certain actions. Furthermore, Rokeach’s (1973) definition supplemented the definition of value: “Values are enduring beliefs that specific mode of conduct is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence” (Rokeach, 1973, p. 5). The combination of Kluckhohn and Rokeach presents a wholesome understanding of value, because Kluckhohn focused on acting, while Rokeach gave meaning to action.

Additionally, Schwartz developed a wholesome understanding of values, making it more recognisable for all cultures, and he has raised some features of values. Firstly, values are considered as beliefs. Therefore, one’s stress on values is associated with their affect. Secondly, values refer to desirable goals. Values sometimes become people’s goals to be achieved, stimulating their further actions. Thirdly, Values transcend specific actions and situations. This feature distinguishes

values from norms and attitudes, because values represent something beyond that. Fourthly, Values serve as standards or criteria. This feature illustrates the function of values to guide people's choices and evaluation of certain objects and actions. However, the selection process in everyday life is not conscious. The only time it becomes conscious is when different values embedded within one individual are conflicting with each other. Fifthly, values are ordered by importance according to the societal factors that place on individuals. Sixthly, the relative importance of multiple values guides actions. (Schwartz, 2012). In other words, different ranking of values could lead to different actions in life.

However, scholars also stressed that value is not an internationalised formation. Values have important roles in action and are linked closely to the forming of society (Hitlin, & Piliavin, 2004). In terms of sociology, Dewey stated that: "as far as valuation and the theory of values are concerned, any theory which isolates valuation of ends from appraisal of means equates the spoiled child and the irresponsible adult to the mature and sane person" (Dewey, 1939, p. 218). This means that it is meaningless to isolate values, individual actions, and the whole society. Both the valuations of values and the societies that these values are included should be discussed together. Dewey (1939) also indicated that we do not choose value commitments by ourselves, and the values are rooted in us and are the basis of our goals.

Looking into gaming industries, games offer more than entertainment and sociability that was just discussed. Gaming is also a medium of learning, communicating, being a noticeable sector of the current social landscape (Gough, 2020; Watson, 2018). Games are scrutinized as often as, if not more than, television shows and Hollywood movies. For instance, games are often condemned by people who do not play them, and these people would adopt a familiar perspective, calling games as misinformed and intentionally misleading (Flanagan, & Nissenbaum, 2014; Hilgard, Engelhardt, Rouder, Segert, & Bartholow, 2019). This means the boundaries between gamers and non-gamers exist to play an important role in the misunderstanding of games. Just like many movies and television shows, games sometimes contain a certain amount of sexual and violent scenes, which makes

people criticise the negative influence of a game because of its interactive mechanism (Ferguson, & Wang, 2019). However, Mcluhan (1994) has argued that media are the messages, and all media emerge to invest our life with artificial perceptions and arbitrary values. Hence, there are always values implanted in games by the developers, waiting for gamers to internalise and naturalise. Games offer an enchanting world where players play out their personal beliefs and ideas. Because of the different society where everyone was brought up, different sets of values are to be detected by them in games (Flanagan, & Nissenbaum, 2014).

Flanagan and Nissenbaum (2014) also indicated that games play a role as cultural snapchat, in which beliefs from a certain culture, time and location are perceived and understood. Therefore, it is a challenge for game developers to implant values in a game. Designer understanding refers to the broader range of values existing in the creation of a game. Apart from this, developers also have to consider economic and commercial constraints. This is similar to the conflict between art cinema and commercial films, in which developers hold contradictory struggles of making money and being in-depth. Moreover, business plan, stakeholders, and consumer insights are all factors that could have an impact on the selections and implant of values in games (Flanagan, & Nissenbaum, 2014). Among these factors, consumer insight is the most relevant one, because it is the gamers who the developers are going to deal with eventually. Hence, developers are required to bring pre-existing values to their work and assume the values of their target audiences (Flanagan, & Nissenbaum, 2014). Also, players' perceptions are different because it is determined by the personal, cultural, and situational factors.

Flanagan and Nissenbaum (2014) argue that there are three main reasons for studying values in game industries. Firstly, the study of the gaming industry enriches our understanding of how players internalise the socio-cultural values in everyday participation, gameplay, and communication in games. Secondly, the rapid growth of digital media and the expanding cultural significance of gaming provide an opportunity for the game developers to reflect on the values that are naturalised in games (Gough, 2019; Watson, 2018). Thirdly, games have developed to become a

media paradigm of the 21st century, excelling film and television in popularity, and they are believed to shape work, learning, healthcare, and more sectors in a society (Flanagan, & Nissenbaum, 2014, p. 3).

1.3.2 Values in Animal Crossing and its franchise

Looking specifically into Animal Crossing: New Horizons and its franchise, there has been some research studying its values and how players communicate with each other inside and outside of the Animal Crossing series. As a result, many neoliberal values have been noticed (Cesar, 2020; Kim, 2014).

Consumerism is the most noticeable value in the Animal Crossing and its franchise (Kim, 2014). Most Animal Crossing games start with the gamers paying off debts that they use to buy a house. Paying off this debt is usually the initial goal of most Animal Crossing players. With the accomplishment of daily missions, players would pay off several rounds of mortgage. Moreover, shopping in Animal Crossing is another way for players to interact with the game. People usually collaborate with each other or compete with others, to obtain the full collections of certain furniture and decorations. However, the players are fully aware of the boundaries between consuming in games and shopping in real life (Kim, 2014). The endless desire for shopping in games is rarely influencing their consuming desire in real life. Additionally, repetition is also detected by Kim (2014). In order to pay off the mortgage, players need to accomplish endless simple actions, such as picking grass and cutting down trees. However, these players are usually too busy to discuss the meaning of mundane repetition, because they are occupied with the thoughts of consumerism. Hence, a sense of game as labour is built (Kim, 2014), requiring high commitment from the gamers.

Cesar (2020) has also noticed consumerism in Animal Crossing. However, Cesar has evaluated his findings under the branch of neoliberalism. Indeed, the Animal Crossing series links itself very closely to capitalist concepts such as consumerism, materialism, commerce, and debt, but it is important to dig into the

deeper reasoning of how these values were formed. One key factor is the freedom that Animal Crossing series have offered for the players (Cesar, 2020; Kim, 2014). Most of the stimulation and open-working games claim to bring total freedom to the player, giving all of the elements in the game to the gamers to interact with at any stage of the game. The most significant current case is Zelda: Breath of the Wind. This game is following a plot, but players can challenge themselves to beat the ultimate boss and rescue Zelda at the beginning of the game, and there is a world ranking of the quickest all-clear record. These games have constructed the sense of agency among gamers, making them feel they have the control, freedom, and responsibility over all the options and actions in games, linking itself to neoliberal values of risk-taking and individual accountability (Muriel, & Crawford, 2020). However, these video games like the Animal Crossing series have created an illusion of players' control (Cesar, 2020). Every game is governed by a system of algorithms that reacts to players' choices. After all, Animal Crossing's engagement with its reflections of current society is the skeptical exploration and stimulation of the neoliberal culture landscape (Allison, 2015).

2. Methodology

This chapter entails the decision making of each step to conduct this research and the argumentation behind these decisions. For a start, it illustrates the research design and gives grounds for the choice of qualitative research. Then, it will present the sampling methods and process, focusing on the choice of criterion and snowball sampling, explaining the rationale behind these decisions. Furthermore, the determination of data collection of a mixed method will be explained, in which interviews and textual content on software are both collected. Afterwards, the detailed analysis methods will be illustrated with the operationalisation of key concepts of this research. This is followed by a justification of the credibility and validity of this research, in which the data collection and research design play vital roles. At last, the ethics of this research will be stated, explained by the conduction of confidentiality and anonymity.

2.1. Research design

The aim of this research was to investigate the values that were naturalised among Chinese *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* players in their community and how they interpret these values based on their gameplay. Moreover, this research targeted to explore the social patterns and players' sociability in their daily interaction with other community members. Because of the purposes of this research, a qualitative research method was decided. Schreier (2013) stated that qualitative analysis stands for "a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative data" (p. 170). The textual data and interview transcript gathered for this research was considered qualitative, and this research method could bring about rich results because of its systematic mechanism. Qualitative research method was determined for mainly three reasons. Firstly, with the systematic and thorough analysis of the data, this specific research method would lead to in-depth conclusions from the data (Schreier, 2013), and it is suitable for analysing expressions, feelings, and perspectives (Matthews, & Ross, 2010). Secondly, every element in the data was

analysed, so as to be applicable to all the theoretical components in the research question. Hence, all the aspects brought by the data were investigated with little missing information. Thirdly, compared to quantitative analysis which focuses on correlations based on a huge amount of data, qualitative analysis is suitable for answering exploratory questions that focus on depth and patterns, and it is flexible when dealing with different types of textual data (Boeije, 2010).

Furthermore, this research aims to explore *Animal Crossing* players' sociability in both in-game and out-game worlds, with the aim to investigate how players interact with each other during gameplay and how they communicate the values with other community members on Douban, which is a Chinese community smartphone application. Therefore, a mixed qualitative research method combining interviews and textual content analysis was utilised in this research. That is to say, it is vital to investigate both how players interact within AC: NH gameplay and how players communicate and socialise in AC: NH related social media platforms. The mixed research method can play a role of investigating these two realms. This is decided because (Kline et al., 2003; Lima, 2019). Interviews offered researchers the opportunities to conduct face-to-face communication with participants, and results were drawn from the direct expressions of interviewees. Besides, the content analysis of Douban posts brought richer results because players would spend other leisure time to socialize with each other on the platform, therefore offering more perspectives and player-to-player conversations that could not be gathered just via interviews. Comparing both sets of data proved helpful during the analysis. A thematic analysis was used to draw conclusions. This method helps describe, understand, and explain aspects of social life (Boeije, 2010). Moreover, thematic analysis is theory sensitive (Boeije, 2010) and flexible. This analysis method can adjust its categorisation based upon the paradigms of a theory, which allows more space for creativity and solutions when dealing with recent topics and materials (Braun, & Clark, 2006).

2.2. Data collection and sampling

The main data source of this research were interview transcripts and the posts collected on the *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* subgroups on Chinese social application Douban. However, these two types of data were gathered separately with different approaches. This sector entails how data was collected, including data size, sampling method, and time span.

In total, 7 interview participants were invited to help conduct this research. This number was decided, based upon the combined research methods of this thesis, to meet the quantity established in the Methodological Guidelines. Both direct and indirect investigation on players' sociability were conducted, in which interviews were responsible for the direct communication with players for their perspectives on their interactions with each other and the values internalised during gameplay. All participants were selected through criterion sampling, a method that set several criteria to limit samples (Flick, 2018). In general, this research intended to select Chinese players that have played *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* extensively (over 200 hours approximately). 200 hours of gameplay guarantees their island to reach a 5-star level, and it also ensures that players would have enough island designs to share with other community members and enough communication skills to conduct deals with other players. Furthermore, snowball sampling was used to reduce researcher's proximity to the participants. Participants were asked to introduce players that they knew to the interview, which eliminated the effect that the researcher could place on the results.

The researcher looked for participants by posting hiring posts on Chinese social media platforms, such as Weibo, Douban, and Wechat with personal connections (see Appendix A). After posting posts with specific required criteria on Weibo and Douban and asking directly in Wechat groups, the researcher received several participating requests. Even though gender is not the focus of this research and would not make a huge difference to the results, the researcher tried to balance the ratio of male and female participants. At last, four females and three males were

selected as interview participants. Furthermore, all interviews were conducted through online instant communication software, such as Zoom and Skype. The interviews were recorded and filed, and personal information of the participant was deleted or saved as confidential.

The content analysis only extracts data from the community smartphone application called Douban. Players of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* mostly communicate under the group called 集合吧！动物森友会 (*Animal Crossing: New Horizons*). Under this group, there are five subgroups in total: 生活记录 (record my life), 经验攻略 (tips and strategies), 小组公告 (group announcements), 互助互动 (help each other), and 设计分享 (share your island). In the “record my life” subgroup, players share their experience of daily activities such as fishing, inviting animal residents, and island construction. Besides, they also share daily outfits, short stories, and interesting encounters. The posts under this subgroup are mostly in text, while images are used for better clarification. However, there are a small number of posts mostly in images, with texts introducing the topic. In the “tips and strategies” subgroup, players would share some tips regarding meeting Non-player Characters (NPCs), flower hybrids, tips for beginning players, and so on. Images and texts are equally important in this subgroup, because both types of information significantly help demonstrate certain strategies. The subgroup “group announcements” is designed only for Kabu price announcements. Kabu (株 or かぶ), is an imitated object that is similar to the stock system in real life. It is a radish-like plant that is sold every Sunday morning. On other days of the week, the price of Kabu will be changed, based on which players could make money out of the price change. However, Kabu will expire after one week, so players have to sell them within 6 days. Players would comment their own Kabu price under certain daily posts, and interpersonal communications would directly transform into personal ones. Questions are often posted in the “help each other” group. Different from the “tips and strategies” group, players would directly ask for help in this group when they encounter problems during gameplay, and interactions are closer in this subgroup. Lastly, players share their unique islands under the “share your island” subgroup,

where images take place the most. Players' interactions are mostly compliments and questions for designing details.

These subgroups have made the *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* Douban group a convenient site for the data collection. However, the subgroup "group announcements" was less relevant because the interactions between community members would turn personal and private very quickly. Players only need to post their Kabu price under this subgroup when there is a high price on their island, and other players will contact them in direct messages, discussing the details of the Kabu transactions. Under this situation, researchers are able to find the public posts containing only the prices. The personal communications between players on Douban is harder to be collected.

Besides, most of the posts were sampled purposely, which guaranteed a space for flexible selection of the posts (Flick, 2007). All posts needed to adhere to several limitations, while the researcher tried to ensure a variety of the post topics. All the posts sampled from Douban needed to be followed with over 20 comments, which ensured a certain level of interactions between players. Moreover, posts from each subgroup needed to be equal, which in a way protected the variety of data. Moreover, the consideration of sampling is also linked to the theory. Since the players' interactions on Douban are already embedded with out-game sociability, the researcher tried to detect different values in the first place of sample selection. For example, consumerism is manifested in posts that shared unique clothing on one's island and others were trying to visit his/her island, and repetition is manifested in the posts that shared the accomplishment of fossil collection. With the theories in mind, the research could gather more samples with more flexibility, theory-sensitivity, and variety.

The discussion on online community platforms, including Douban, has been active ever since *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* was released in March, 2020. The researcher decided to extract posts that were posted between March 2021 and May 2020. March 2021 was the one-year anniversary of this game, which suggests that most players in the community have already fully experienced the game and have

played the game for over 100 hours on average. All content collected from Douban and analysed were labeled as “posts”, and a distinction is made between the varied types of posts. However, it is difficult to group the posts based on their lengths, because posts of the same size could regard different themes of this research. Hence, the 200 posts collected were categorised based on the subgroup they were collected on Douban. Posts under “record of my life” mainly described players’ life on their island, which consist of a great proportion of the data; posts from “tips and strategies” are mostly long posts explaining certain strategies, and these posts are rarely seen in the data because of their length; posts in “help each other” consists of another large proportion of the dataset, containing long and short one that ask for and offer help among members; posts from “group announcements” are constructed the same, so only a few were collected; posts under “share you island” contain different fantastic designs, but they are also constructed similarly. From the posts of helping each other and showing off, interactions and communications are significantly discovered from the comments. Therefore, at least 10 comments were also extracted under each post, which ensures that the interactions in the out-game realm are collected and analysed as well. As a summary, the outline of the posts collected is presented in the table below.

Type of post	Contents	Number of posts	Exemplary post
Record my life	The record of players’ daily gameplay, the stories they have experienced.	69	See appendix B: record my life example
Tips and strategies	Some tips suggested by the experienced regarding hidden gameplay and how the game proceeds.	12	See appendix C: tips and strategies example
Help each other	Offering and asking for the troubles encountered in the gameplay and need for game objects.	92	See appendix D: help each other example
Group announcements	Only posts of high Kabu prices.	5	See appendix E: group announcements example

Share your island	Mostly posts accompanied by images, sharing players' beautiful island designs.	22	See appendix F: share your island example

Table 1: Post categorisation

The main focus of the dataset is the textual content in the posts and comments. However, the images attached in the posts and emoji in the comments also supplement the interpretations of the data, playing the role as exaggeration of emotions and demonstration of issues raised. Therefore, the visual elements attached to the textual content are also collected in case of being used. Moreover, their existence will also be considered as supplemented information that adds up to the findings of this research.

2.3. Operationalisation

The theoretical framework was used to draw clear distinction to identify different kinds of sociability conducted by players and different values internalised. These two theories are the keys to answer the research question. The concept of sociability, for example, entails how certain values in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* were internalised, and it also reflects how active the interactions are within the community of this game. In order to investigate players' sociability while playing *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and when communicating with other players, this research utilised the different layers of sociability in gameplay introduced by Stenros et al. (2009). Stenros et al. (2009) have categorised sociability in gameplay into in-game sociability and out-game sociability. With different means of sociability, ideologies and values proposed by players could vary. Lima (2019) also paid special attention to the distinction of gaming-sphere and cultural-sphere of gaming cultures, stating that these two spheres could make a difference to each other. However, a clear distinction between in-game and out-game sociability could be drawn from players' activities. In-game sociability is manifested in the questions asking players about their daily gameplay in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. For example, participants were asked about the frequency, time period, and situations where they would turn

on their Nintendo Switch and play the game, and the interview also asked the interviewees regarding their experience when visiting each other's islands (see Appendix G). Out-game sociability was identified through players' interactions on online community platforms and daily real-life connections. For instance, participants were asked about their daily gameplay with their real-life friends and whether they had made new friends locally.

Moreover, this research was designed to identify two central values discussed in the theoretical framework: repetition, and consumerism. The repetition in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* was manifested in the experience sharing of the accomplishment of daily missions on Douban subgroup, and players' perspectives on repetition were investigated through asking how they think of such repeated work in the daily gameplay of this game. Besides, consumerism could be manifested from many aspects. The most significant identifier was participants' daily consumption of clothes and furniture from their own and others' islands. Also, their perspectives on such consuming activities are linked to consuming in real life. Moreover, the deals of Kabu, as an important financial income for most players, were used to investigate consumerism. This has stimulated the communication of information among players, in order to prevent the loss of possessions and earn more money. Participants were asked to share their experience on purchasing and selling Kabu, and their feelings when gaining a large amount of income. Apart from those, other values were deductively discovered in the posts gathered from Douban. By analysing and investigating different values naturalised by players, the link between this game and the reality became apparent.

2.4. Analysis

In order to analyse the gathered data, Thematic Analysis was utilised to probe the values internalised by the players and participants' perspectives on these values, because Thematic Analysis is known for its flexibility and suitability to analyse qualitative dataset (Braun, & Clarke, 2006). Thematic Analysis is described as "a

method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data " (Braun, & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). This analysis method is hence used to investigate and categorise the values naturalised by the *Animal Crossing* players. The flexibility of coding and grouping of codes gives rise to clearly leveled results from the data, from which the macro-level of specific values and micro-level of details embedded within these values are all coded (Braun, & Clarke, 2006). Thematic Analysis was also suitable for this research for its applicability to any type of data regarding qualitative research data (Clarke, & Braun, 2017). This research gathered both interview transcripts and online community post content, hence, making Thematic Analysis fit for this research to analyse data under one mechanism.

Generally speaking, Thematic Analysis is constituted by six continuous phases: data familiarisation, initial code generation, theme searching, reviewing potential themes, defining, naming themes and report production (Braun, & Clarke, 2012), in which the stages of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding raised by (Boeije, 2010) are included as central steps. The data familiarisation stage refers to the initial perceiving of data and making first assumptions (Braun, & Clarke, 2012). In order to become familiar with all data collected and scripted, the researcher would familiarise himself with the data by reading it repetitively. Also, notes are taken continuously during this stage. If a word, sentence, or paragraph is found helpful to the output of results, a brief note would be made for special attention to reflect in the following phases. The second phase of initial code generation, which can also be referred to as open coding, gives labels to the meaningful pieces of data that have been collected. Codes are considered as the centre of Thematic Analysis (Braun, & Clarke, 2012), because no matter how long the pieces of data are, they are all coded into small tags that could be further categorised and ranked. This phase descriptively and interpretively gives meaning to the data and breaks the data into a library of concise and

Comprehensible codes. However, because this stage of analysis could be extensive and rough, codes could be deleted or merged in the following steps (Boeije, 2010). After the different pieces of data were given meanings to, in the

theme searching phase, all the codes were ranked based on their importance and relevance to the research question. Codes with little relevance to the theories and research topic are deleted, and those of similar representativeness emerge into one general code. Moreover, codes related to each other are put into one category. Next, the understanding of central theories comes into play in selective coding. Different categories of cods are then constructed into themes that assist to interpret the different elements of central theories.

The phases of theme searching, and theme generation are active processes, and the themes constructed are not merely conclusions or summaries of the dataset. Instead, the themes generated create the central point of understanding of the dataset that could be related to the theories (Braun, Clarke, & Hayfield, 2019). Hence, the themes are viewed and examined on their quality and representativeness with the assistance of a theoretical framework. Based on Braun and Clarke (2012), the generated themes need to be concise, related to each other and the research question, and they also should provide a cohesive narrative that entails the different segmentations of the theories. After the data is coded, and the themes are named and defined, the data are reconstructed in a clearer manner, and theories can be easily reflected in the outcome.

2.5. Execution

As discussed earlier in this section, this research is constructed by a mixture of both interviews and online posts. Due to the situation of the pandemic, all interviews were conducted on Zoom, an online meeting software. The interviews lasted between approximately 50 minutes and 75 minutes, and they were all recorded after the consent forms were signed by the interviewees. All recorded interviews were then uploaded on https://www.iflyrec.com/, an audio transcription website that can transform the recorded interviews into textual files. The research then adjusted several mistakes in the transcriptions and divided the sentences spoken by interview and the interviewees. On the other hand, 200 posts were extracted from Douban by

copying their original web link and all textual and visual content. All the transcriptions were documented into 7 Word files, and the posts were collected into one Word file. All 8 files were then gathered into one atlas.ti project, in which the interviews and posts were analysed separately yet under the same structure. In order to specifically describe the dataset, every meaningful content was labeled, using codes that are only applicable to one piece of content. Hence, altogether 459 codes were created. In order to create a structure that is more coherent to the theoretical framework, all codes were merged and categorised into meaningful themes that describe different sections in the findings. Eventually, 19 code groups were created, within which 5 were linked to players' sociability and 14 were associated with the values internalised. The analysis is based on the different code groups and detailed codes that consist of the groups.

2.6. Ethics

When researching and discussing content exacted from interviews and online forums, the questions and concerns of ethical decision are always raised. The interviews involved the basic information and demographic description of the interviewees. Therefore, a consent form was signed before each interview, stating that the interviewees were aware of the study topic of this research and their answers regarding the research questions will be used in the writing of this paper, whereas their personal information, including their names, genders, occupations, and so on, will be confidential and only known between themselves and the interviewer. Moreover, after the accomplishment of this thesis, all saved files of interviews will be deleted. All 7 interviewees gave consent to recording their voices and this was also stated at the beginning of each interview. Meanwhile, although the interviewees were aware of the fact that the observation was taking place, when content is posted on a public sphere, the consensus is that it is acceptable to quote the content as long as they do not contain personal information that can be easily identifiable (Angrosino, 2007). There are no official instructions for extracting online content, but there are

scholars and associations that have provided suggested supportive documents regarding ethics in the collecting of online data which were respected in this thesis (Franzke, Bechmann, Zimmer, & Ess, 2019).

3. Analysis and discussions

The analysis of Chinese Animal Crossing: New Horizons players and their community is separated into two main sections: players' sociability and the values identified. Firstly, the sociability of these players will be presented by discussing the motives, situation, preference of their socialisation during in-game and out-game experience. The acknowledgement of these parts of players' sociability could lead to better understandings of the possible third place where Animal Crossing players internalise and naturalise certain values. Apart from that, the "weak socialisation" that interviewees brought about during interviews will be stressed, and this feature can be considered as the most obvious feature of the Animal Crossing franchise in terms of sociability. Secondly, a number of values were identified during the analysis of interview transcripts and Douban posts, among which some noticeable values were mentioned by most of the interviewees. These values have constructed varied ways of gameplay, and sometimes also have been affected by players' real identities and by the community. The summarized result of this analysis is presented in the table below.

Sociability	Reasons for sociability	
	Preference of sociability	
	Weak socialisation	
Values	Capitalist ideologies	Consumerism, fast enjoyment of entertainment, remedy of real-life regret
	Collectivism	Emotional connection to animal citizens, conformity
	Inertia	Repetition, inertia, immersion
	Freedom	Freedom, identity, perseverance of details

Table 2: Summarised results

3.1. Sociability

3.1.1. Motivations for socialisation in Animal Crossing

In Animal Crossing: New Horizons (AC:NH), interaction, communication and exchange are considered to be inevitable parts in gameplay, and this statement is

indicated by all interviewees and most of the Douban posts, as one interviewee stated directly: “the possibility of socialisation that this game has brought alive is essential to us” (interviewee 7). From the perspectives of interviewees, the interactions with other AC:NH players have guaranteed them considerable recourse to survive and start constructing their islands. Surprisingly, instead of emotional connections, practical needs are the prior motivation for these players to interact with each other. For example, an interviewee has stated: “The reason why I desire for the full collection is that when you have some rare objects, such as piano and laptop, people will come to you. If I have more rare and expensive objects, it increases the possibilities of the exchanges of objects with others” (interviewee 6).

Even though Nintendo has presented detailed instructions for beginners, there are still latent rules and gameplay for players to investigate, so as to achieve certain goals. AC:NH designers have developed a large number of hidden rewards, which leads to a situation of unbalanced information between those who know the hidden rewards and those who do not. Hence, most AC:NH players would look for contact with the experienced ones through social media and in real life, so as to exchange information. On Douban, most of the posts in AC:NH group are seeking help, such as how to cultivate golden roses and how to climb up a cliff. The needs of Douban users vary from simple to complicated. In most cases, the seek-help interactions would take place in an out-game environment, and lots of troubles encountered and helping comments are described in detail and sometimes accompanied with images as additional remarks. For example, Figure 1 illustrates a seek-help post that asked about why some trees on the island would not grow.

Figure 1: Example of a seek-help post

This post is accompanied with an image that demonstrates the problem clearly. With that in mind, commenters have quickly identified the cause of this issue and offered solutions to the problem.

Another information that is exchanged the most is the Kabu price. As mentioned previously, Kabu is similar to real-life stock that players can purchase and sell to earn large amounts of money. It stimulates the exchange of information because Kabu prices could vary from island to island. By constructing their own social circles and exchanging the highest selling prices, the efficiency of earning money is fastened, and the risk of bankruptcy is lowered. For better convenience, the Animal Crossing Douban group has set up a subgroup only for the exchange of Kabu prices. The out-game interaction in this subgroup is extremely fast and short, with players only commenting with high Kabu prices and others expressing their intention of selling Kabu. However, even though Kabu prices is a topic that all players care about, only a few people would post high prices in the Kabu Price subgroup on Douban. Most interview interviewees have indicated the problems of communicating with strangers

regarding transactions and deals. In terms of Kabu, the interviewees would prefer discussing it with their friends and acquaintances, because they would avoid unnecessary formal and polite greetings and risk of scam when dealing with strangers.

Apart from seeking gameplay help and the exchange of Kabu price, players would also exchange possessions, ask for information regarding updates, and so on. Players' strong demand for practical tools and information has indicated that the most important element of this game for AC:NH players is the well-experienced gameplay, in which money and information matter the most. Moreover, as indicated by an interviewee (interviewee 6), some players would protect the safety of their possessions, hence, conducting out-game socialisation mainly with their friends. This finding goes in line with the indications of Lechner and Schmid (2000) that sociability is often manifested in out-game realm, but the closeness of players' connections is related to the acknowledgement of each other's social background and playing status (Stenros et al., 2009). In other words, the more the players know each other, the more likely they will conduct deeper interactions that involve more personal information and possessions. This also echoes the indication that the game's community helps shape the game's environment (Tadini, & Cantoni, 2005). Stranger-players usually exchange each other's personal information after they become closer by playing games, and this helps them conduct closer connections to each other (Diets, 2020; Robards, 2018). Moreover, the closeness between gamers is determined by the repeated interactions within community members. The more people communicate with each other (no matter in-game or out-game), the more structured the community will be. This goes in line with the statement of symbolic interactionism that society is formed based on the repeated interactions among individuals (Carter, & Fuller, 2015).

Besides, the features of out-game platforms, such as Douban, are identified through the analysis. It is an out-game environment where players can communicate with each other efficiently without turning on the console. Also, with the community web that could cover players in the whole country, these platforms, such as online

forums and social media, play a role as a mini reflection of the community, in which generous players and pretentious gamers both exist. This analysis is consistent with Lechner and Schmid (2000), where they stated that gamers' real projective identities are revealed more in the out-game realm, shaping and modifying the game's environment (Robards, 2018; Tadini, & Cantoni, 2005). Besides being a place for information exchange (Diets, 2020), a virtual community is a place for members to forget about their worries of being identified (Bruhn, 2011), and it is also a place without the effect of game avatars which is connected to gamers' identities of virtual characters (Gee, 2003). Hence, gamers' true inner selves are revealed more in the virtual communities, with their generous sides and vicious sides all being manifested.

The players of AC:NH also socialise with each other due to the need for emotional connections. Three of the interview interviewees have mentioned the pandemic of COVID-19, during which the game was released. The interviewees stated that the pandemic made a difference to the success of AC:NH, because people were asked to stay at home without the possibility of going anywhere or meeting anyone. A sense of loneliness emerged among many citizens, especially those who were living in the epidemic regions. The interviewees, who are all Chinese, used to have deep feelings in terms of loneliness, and they have indicated the advantage of AC:NH to interact with their real-life friends virtually: "The game was released during pandemic, so I was kinda glad that it brought about some possibilities of socialisation" (interviewee 5).

Also, the AC:NH community has offered players chances to meet new friends. Most interviewees shared their experience of being introduced by their friends to others in a social circle. This analysis goes in line with the statement that games can be considered as the "third place" where players' mind experience is stressed (Fragoso, 2015). This game has indeed comforted gamers' sense of loneliness, and this is inseparable with the combination of what is going on in their minds during gameplay and their physical gameplay collaborating fingers and eyes. AC:NH is seen as a "third place", which, as Tuan (1979) stated, emphasizes human relationship and

sensations. In the special time of quarantine, people's need for social connections is satisfied by AC:NH.

3.1.2. Preference of socialisation

Although the situations could vary among individuals, the preferences of socialisation of AC:NH players still share some similarities, especially regarding the persons they are interacting with and when they deal with communications with strangers. Most interviewees would only exchange information and tools and visit islands of the friends they know very well. As a matter of fact, the first and the most profound in-game interactions that all interviewees encountered were all those they had with their real-life friends: "at the beginning I played this game with my friend, and then we introduced a lot of other friends that were also playing this game. Then we played it together" (interviewee 3). Moreover, most interviewees would only spend time playing AC:NH with a fixed group of people. This is also manifested in Douban posts dataset. There are plenty of posts sharing members' experience of meeting impolite and pretentious strangers on their islands. These strangers would step on and destroy flowers, pick up objects without permission, refuse to leave the island, and so forth. Such an unpleasant experience has made these community members upset and promised that they would never greet new players. The fear of such a situation taking place, as most interviewees stated, is the main reason for AC:NH players to play this game with their friends. This finding has added to the implication that the interaction conducted by computer mediated communication could pose a threat to the strength of social ties among virtual community members (Granovetter, 1973; Lechner, & Schmid, 2000; Wellman, 1997), and again goes in line with Stenros et al. (2009) that in out-game realm, the connections among community members is related to how much they know about each other. Because the virtual communication lacks physical interactions and contains more insecurity, players would turn to their friends because of their trust in each other.

However, even when dealing with the same group of people, varied preferences of interacting methods are manifested. Half of the interviewees would prefer face-to-face connecting functions that the Switch offers. This function allows different Nintendo Switch consoles to connect through Bluetooth if they are physically close to each other. Nintendo membership is not needed for face-to-face connection, so many people prefer this connection method. This method guarantees the opportunity of meeting their friends in real life, and they could communicate more efficiently with talking and facial expressions. Moreover, they could save money because Nintendo Switch Membership is not necessary in face-to-face connection. Also, some players would publish posts on Douban asking for offline meetings with local AC:NH players. On the other hand, some interviewees prefer the online connection because this method makes it possible to interact with friends that they cannot meet physically in real life. The avatars in the gameplay are considered as the replacement of themselves, which could bring about more possibilities of interaction such as actions, visiting, and memory documentation. The variation of interaction preferences has implied the abundant possibilities for multi-player games that Nintendo Switch offers. AC:NH has provided a place for both physical and virtual communication, and a sense of belonging can be created through the many possible socialisation methods. This finding also goes in line with the features of virtual communities that Lechner and Schmid (2000) raised, which are breaking down geographical barriers, creating shared norms and consensus within communities, and building social ties. Also, this finding adds to the statement of virtual communities being a “third place” outside of work and daily living (Brown, 2005; Rheingold, 1993; Steinkuehler, 2005). Even though virtual communities bring convenience to the members, physical proximity is still a determining factor of players’ passion for socialisation. Therefore, some of them will try everything to seek physical possibilities to meet each other in real life.

Even though players’ preference of interaction could vary, most interviewees also stressed the role of messages as carriers of information and meanings in online communications. During the virtual interactions, AC:NH players mostly use signs and

texts to express meanings. Some misunderstanding could take place during the text communications because of the different interpretations of the same piece of text. For example, a Douban post was published informing that there are distinctions between “big bears” and “small bears”. Some viewers thought it was talking about the teddy bear toys in the game, but the publisher was actually talking about the animal citizens on the island. This micro-level analysis adds to the implications of symbolic interactionism by Carter and Fuller (2015), which states that cultural backgrounds could make a huge difference to the interpretations of texts and symbols. Language is considered one of the most important elements in one’s cultural background (Blumer, 1969), and communications conducted online could lead to a loss of translation where meaning cannot be precisely conveyed. This could be seen especially in virtual communication where physical proximity is dismissed and text and symbols are the only carriers of messages.

3.1.3. Weak socialisation in Animal Crossing

Apart from the motivations and preference of socialisation, most interviewees have stated that their sociability often deals with short and fast interaction and communication during the gameplay of AC:NH. This special way of interaction is called “weak socialisation” by most of the interviewees, which implements and adds to the theoretical framework. According to the interviews, interviewees would attribute this situation to their prior needs of interactions during gameplay: “Actually, the interaction possibility of this game has become a centralised resource replacement” (interviewee 1). As stated in the previous section, most interactions in AC:NH are the exchanges of information and game tools, in which no further interaction is needed. Players would visit each other’s islands, exchange tools and information, and then leave the island. Such a phenomenon is also manifested in Douban posts. A large number of posts are about experienced players giving away tools and objects that they no longer need, and the comments under these posts are usually short and simple. Figure 2 demonstrates an example of an experienced

player intending to give away several presents. The comments below this post are mostly about the indication that they would come.

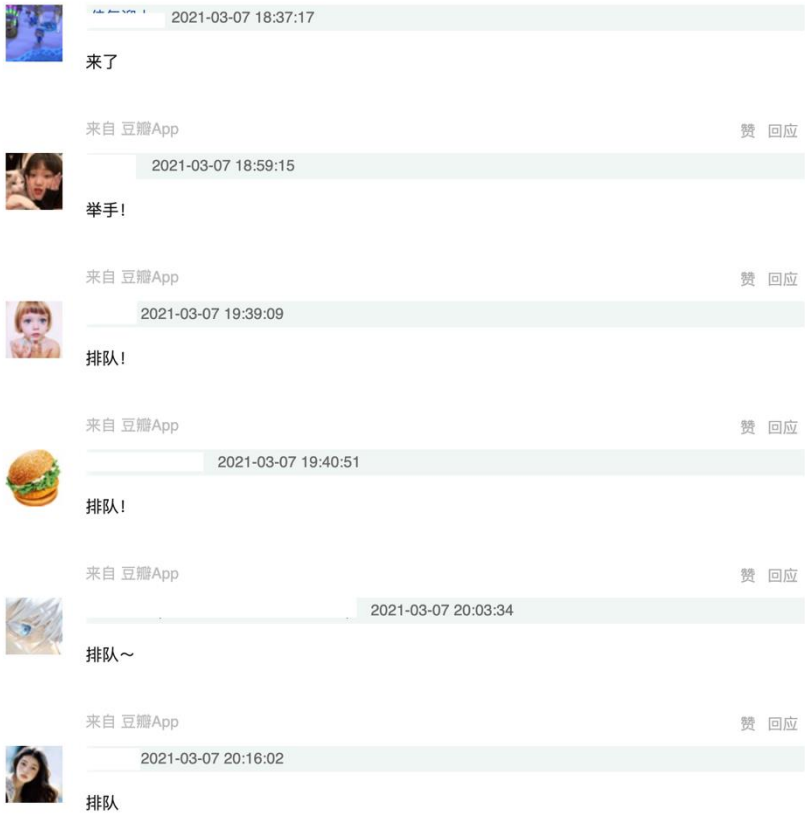

Figure 2: Example of short socialisation on Douban

This finding slightly goes against the understanding of multiplayer games from Stenros et al. (2009). They indicated that in multiplayer games, interactions among players are complicated, including cooperation, collaboration, and combat. However, AC:NH, as two interviewees stated, is different from the combat games such as Overwatch and League of Legends. In combat games, players collaborate with and fight against random gamers through a matching mechanism, in which other players are an essential part of the games. On the contrary, AC:NH has set up several barriers that stop players from visiting each other's islands. Players need to be Nintendo friends and go through plenty of procedures in order to visit. Moreover, there is no collaboration work for players to construct an island together. As one interviewee stated: "Animal Crossing is actually a single-player game to me. There are only a few things you could do with your friends. I think this game has weakened

the presence of cooperation between players" (interviewee 1). Indeed, AC:NH has offered the opportunities for players to communicate, while it also stresses the importance of self-accomplishment and treats every island as a private space for players.

3.2. Values internalised by players of AC: NH

Games usually play a role of carrier of messages, because plenty of values are embedded within the gameplay and narratives, which is often conducted by the game developers. In terms of AC:NH, certain values have evidently been internalised by the players. The analysis of the dataset has identified some conspicuous values that were mentioned frequently in the interviews and in the interactions on Douban. These values are separated into four sectors that regard 1) capitalist ideologies, 2) collectivism, 3) inertia, and 4) identity.

3.2.1. Capitalist ideologies

In-game money plays a major role in the gameplay of AC:NH, which makes consumerism the most noticeable value in the analysis. Most interviewees shared their early struggle of paying off the mortgage, and their desire for money is manifested significantly during the interview. Kabu, as the way that could bring players the most income, was mentioned from time to time by the interviewees. Many interviewees consider Kabu as a reflection of commercialisation in real life. People tend to earn, collect, and manage their income with care, which guarantees them enough money to purchase clothes and furniture. This goes in line with Kim’s (2014) finding of consumerism in previous Animal Crossing series, in which debt and consumption were stressed. What adds to the previous theoretical framework is that all interviewees were aware of the distinctions between reality and games. In real life, players would consider consumption with care, because it is real money they are dealing with. Whereas in the game, interviewees tend to purchase clothes with exaggerated elements and expensive furniture. Moreover, real-life investments tend

to be long-term and interviewees would care for their interest in the future, while in games they prefer earning a large amount of money within a short period of time. This also goes in line with the consumerism, materialism, and commerce values identified by Cesar (2020).

Another additional finding of this analysis is that some AC:NH players would bring the business and commerce to real life and link them with currency. Some players would publish some rare game tools such as clothes and manual handbooks on online stores, and these tools are merchandised with real-life money. From the perspectives of the interviewees, this phenomenon is common in a market, especially Chinese ones. The longing for rare tools creates a specialised business opportunity for some people in need of money, which also, although still immature, stimulates a parallel market where transactions are only conducted among players. In other words, some people (maybe not even AC: NH fans) have found business opportunities in others' longing for game objects. The interviewees have also stated that there are more business opportunities for games in Chinese market. Any objects, including games, online currency, gaming tools, and so on, could all be merchandised. This finding also indicates one of the reasons why value study is needed in game industries by Flanagan and Nissenbaum (2014): it enriches our understanding of how players internalise socio-cultural values in gameplay. Not only this, gamers are also likely to bring elements in game to the daily practice of real-life values, such as consumerism.

In order to realise the need of in-game money, it is a common operation for players to conduct time leaps. Because AC:NH would synchronise the time on the console, some players would adjust the time on Switch and accomplish work that needs to be done for days. Some interviewees would leap time to fasten their construction work, and some have earned lots of money within a few days. From their perspective, time leap is a convenient way for them to accomplish a sense of achievement: "I have earned 8 million bells within an hour. At first I laughed out loud with my friends, and when I have earned 50 million, my life is accomplished" (interviewee 2). On Douban, there are also posts that teach players how to conduct

time leap, and they have listed things to be considered when leaping. Besides, enjoying seasonal content ahead of time is another reason for the time leap. This desire for fast accomplishment of entertainment enjoyment reflects one of the features of values as desirable goals stated by Schwartz (2012). Values sometimes would become people's goals in the future, waiting to be achieved. The gameplay of simulated work might sound interesting in games, but it is an issue that has troubled most people in real life, especially work. People's work takes them the whole day and sometimes they wish the working hours could be fastened so that they can immediately go home and have some rest. The process sometimes can be struggling. Time leap is a good metaphorical example-experience of people's wishes for their working hours to be fastened.

As a result of fulfilling goals of life in games, a sense of remedy of real-life regrets is identified among gamers. This is stated by several interviewees (interviewee 2; interviewee 1; interviewee 5; interviewee 7), in which they wish to finish work and study quickly so that they can have time for themselves. Moreover, people often earn a limited amount of money in real life, while there is endless money for them to spend in games. The action of purchasing whole selections of garments and furniture makes up for the regret of not being able to possess everything wanted in real life. This adds to the statement of virtual world being a "third place" (Carter, & Fuller, 2015; Ducheneaut et al., 2007). The "third place" is now not only limited for sociability among different members. It is also a place for individuals to achieve their real-life regrets and wishes.

3.2.2. Collectivism

Even though AC:NH offers only short and fast interaction for its community members, players would still look for opportunities for social connections. Surprisingly, players have conducted more practical interactions with their real-life friends, while they are more emotionally dependent on the animal citizen NPCs (non-player characters) on their islands. This finding is the reflection of parasocial

relationships. It is a term that depicts a relationship experienced by media audiences with the mediated encounters in media productions. Audiences would consider the mediated individuals as friends who have direct communications with themselves. It is considered as an illusion that audiences have with media personas. The term parasocial relationships was raised and stated by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl in 1965 (Morgan, 2017). These animal citizens are exactly the ones players would meet and communicate in the daily gameplay, and these animals could offer them new rewards according to their closeness with the players. One interviewee has stated that the interactions with animal citizens have deepened his immersion of AC:NH: “When I was playing Animal Crossing, I would imagine myself being on the island. I would also imagine how the animal citizens would feel when living on my island” (interviewee 2). Moreover, one of the interviewees (interviewee 7) has also transferred his emotions for his friend to one of the animal citizens, because the animal looks similar to his friend. As a result, he would treat the animal citizen just as how he would treat his friend. All evidence has indicated the existence of parasocial relationships in AC: NH.

During the interaction with the animal citizens, players would blur the boundaries between the real world and the cyber space, leading their own mind into the virtual world and NPCs. There are several posts on Douban sharing experience regarding the daily quarrel, personality, and interactions with animal citizens. These interactions include giving nicknames, verbal quirk, and presents to each other. This situation goes against most situations of NPCs serving as functional roles in other games. In AC:NH, the NPCs also contribute to the forming of an “island community” in players’ minds. This adds to the statement of Pearce (2011) that community is associated with the collective will of individuals, while this finding includes the efforts of NPCs (and, by proxy, of the game developers) in the forming of game communities. Nevertheless, AC:NH players are also aware that the animal citizens are only formed by data and virtual graphic design. The contradiction of virtual awareness and emotional dependence for animal citizens also indicates the blurred boundaries between virtual and real world. This argumentation goes in line with the

three stages of immersion stated by Brown and Cairns (2004): engagement, affect investment, and reality no longer matters. In terms of animal citizens, most players have invested their affect to the animals, while some even would treat them as real-life friends and relatives. This finding goes in line with the statement of Morgan (2017) that parasocial relationships are commonly identified in the virtual realm. In the past, these illusional relationships were mostly identified in TV talk shows, radio, and TV dramas, but with the development of technology, this relationship is more common in the online world and in videogames, and AC: NH is using this to deepen players' immersion.

The interviewees also indicated the existence of "influencer animals". Those are the animal citizens that are cute and good-looking with popular characteristics. Many players would spend much effort just to meet the popular animals and welcome them to their islands. Some of the interactions regarding influencer animals could lead to real-life transactions. Some interviewees condemned this phenomenon because they would doubt if their passion for animals is true love.

Moreover, this phenomenon of conformity is not only limited in the pursuit of popular animal citizens. Conformity is an action of people matching their own attitudes and beliefs to the group norms and politics so as to be like-minded (Bailes, 2018). Several interviewees have stated that their main purpose of visiting others' island is comparing their own designs with the others': "if you are really experienced in AC:NH, and you have this little trick that seems to be super cool, most of the players would follow your lead and try to be as close as possible to you" (interviewee 1). Also, they would learn from the great designs of the other AC:NH influencers, copying their designs and pasting them on their own islands. Some interviewees have also criticised the phenomenon of worshiping players with stunning island designs. These people are being treated differently, and they also consider themselves as those with higher social status in the games' community. Indeed, there are plenty of posts on Douban sharing pictures of island design, and comments are mostly compliments. Hence, as some interviewees stated, most players will try

their best to be as “cool” as possible, and they would share their own island design on social media, so as to satisfy their vanity.

Such a phenomenon of conformity indicated the collectivism of Chinese players. Most people are afraid of being left behind, so they need to follow the mainstream aesthetic and fit in as one of the public. This is identical in most East Asian ideologies, especially Chinese ones. It is already discussed that in this era of fast development of the internet and economic imbalance among different countries, East Asian countries are represented as a combination of liberal consumerism and Asian traditionalism (Lehdonvirta, & Räsänen, 2011). Even though there are conflicts between individual agencies and collective restaurants, collectivism still plays a huge role in Asian people’s life.

In terms of China, a country especially famous for prioritising filial piety and deference to social rank (Hsu, et al., 2012), the ideology of collectivism is reflected in its culture, society, and politics. This is also reflected in the gameplay among Chinese AC: NH players. Even though AC: NH is designed for individuals showing off their own thoughts of design, the phenomenon of conformity is still manifested among Chinese AC: NH community. This is reflected on Douban, where there are always comments asking about the design thoughts and design codes when there is an experienced player showing off his/her designed island. Conformity is also reflected in players’ longing for popular animals, in which there are endless topics regarding animal citizen influencers on Douban. Hence, a sense of belonging is created within the AC:NH community. This adds to the statement of Lechner and Schmid (2000), who argued that the decrease of physical proximity could lead to the shrinking of a sense of belonging. However, with certain people leading the mainstream aesthetic, other members would create the sense of belonging by imitating the mainstream. Under this circumstance, in the pursuit of popular designs, some players could have lost their identity. This goes in line with the implication of Gee (2003) about how some players would hide their true identity, which certainly affects their choices made in the gameplay, sacrificing their true identity in exchange for the sense of belonging to a collective of Chinese AC players.

3.2.3. Inertia

Inertia refers to a state of gameplay in which players have no tendency to do anything. It could be led by the difficulty of gameplay, accomplishment of all game content, or the exhaustion that game could bring about. At the beginning of the gameplay, AC:NH players would have to conduct several repeated tasks, including picking up branches, cutting down trees, catching insects, and fishing. According to the interviewees, almost all of the players have experienced this period. The main reasons for them to repeatedly finish daily missions are the need for raw materials and the need to explore the island. At the beginning phase of AC:NH, wood, branches, and insects are needed to construct furniture and tools. Therefore, these materials are essential to the further exploration of the island. Moreover, beginners are unfamiliar with the distribution and structure of the island. By accomplishing daily missions, players have to travel around the island and tour to other islands. The study of Kim (2014) has identified repetition in Animal Crossing gameplay, and most players were occupied with consumerism thoughts and they were too busy to discuss the mundane life in AC:NH. However, even though the Chinese players were also occupied by the consumerism thought which could bring them loads of money, in this analysis, they are also fully aware of repetition in the beginning phase of this game. Moreover, with the awareness of repetition, Chinese players hold open attitudes towards this experience. All interviewees were not getting bored by repetition, and they would consider repetition as a necessary part of the gameplay: “this phase helps me relax myself. I would feel released, and I will go to work with full energy” (interviewee 5).

Based on the analysis, the reason for the open attitudes towards repetition are listed. Firstly, Nintendo has designed several unexpected rewards when certain goals are finished. These include bells (money), travel tickets, and so on. These rewards will pop up all of a sudden, and these are considered as surprises which stimulates players’ passion for conducting repeated work. Secondly, the raw materials players collected will be used in the near future for decoration. Hence, the

expectations for the future is another motivation for repeated work. Lastly, the simple and repeated actions on the console do not need much practice or thinking, which could be the relaxation after one day's work. This finding adds to the essential role of material space raised by Bateson (1990). It determines the quality of gameplay, and together with the utterance space and fictional space, the effect of a game on players' affect and immersion is manifested. The repeated actions of pushing the same buttons on the consolle is the actions in material space, and together with the manual furniture (utterance space) and expectations for the future (fictional space), AC:NH have attracted players with daily repetition. Hence, at the beginning of AC: NH experience, players have shown full tendency of doing everything, hence, resulting in no trace of inertia at the beginning stages of the new AC:NH.

However, when the gameplay proceeds towards the end, when the island is fully constructed, inertia is manifested. When being asked whether they would delete everything and construct their islands from the start, most interviewees resisted doing so: "yeah I just do not understand. These are all constructed based on my thoughts, and it would be a pity if I tore it all down" (interviewee 1). Based on the analysis, most interviewees and users of Douban were all reluctant towards starting all over again. According to the interviews, the first experience of game content plays an important role in their reluctance. Most gamers would only enjoy the whole content for once, from the start to the end. Hence, re-built of the island means playing AC:NH all over again. Even though repetition of the simple first-phase content stimulates players' future expectations, gamers hold no expectations for the coming content because there is little hope for big updates. Moreover, some of the interviewees had clear plans for the island design, considering different functional areas, designing details, and overall style. This makes it nearly not possible for them to adjust the inner logics of their island. Another interviewee, who was a late player that started playing this game after its one-year anniversary, indicated the importance of timeliness. When the game first got released, most players were at the synchronised status of construction. The longer after it was released, the more unbalanced the in-game social status among players. The fact that the gameplay

status of most players is already finished made the late players reluctant to proceed with their island construction.

AC:NH was released in March 2020, and the situation now, in June 2021, is that less people are still playing this game (Webster, 2021). This phenomenon is manifested on Douban where community members started to reminisce the "old times" when they played AC: NH with friends and now pity the loneliness on their island because most of their friends have quit the game. Another manifestation is that more posts are regarding their expectations of new updates. Douban users would imagine new content that is likely to be in the updates, which is mostly about more interactions with animal citizens, more manual possibilities, and new maps. According to the interviewees, the reasons for them to re-open AC:NH now are reunion with friends, new content, and emotional dependence on animal citizens. This finding goes in line with the important role that fictional space is playing that determines gameplay. The fictional space is the imagined world of gamers, but it is left for game designers to stimulate by adding values and narratives in the game (Bateson, 1990; Fragoso, 2015; Nissenbaum and Flangan 2014). Even though AC:NH provides delicate utterance space design and abundant material space, players will still reach the status of inertia when there is nothing left for fictional space.

3.2.4. Freedom and identity

This analysis has also identified the freedom among AC:NH players. As discussed in the previous sectors, many interviewees still consider AC:NH as a single-player game. Despite the conformity of great designs, interviews have indicated that most of the construction work needs to be conducted by players on their own, and players have full control over the decisions of island design. As Cesar (2020) stated, most games seem to offer players full control over the narratives, but these are governed by a series of algorithms that react to players' choices. However, the seeming freedom is also manifested in different sorts of games. interviewees

have distinguished the difference between simulation games (such as Animal Crossing) and open world RPGs (such as Zelda: Breath of the Wind). The open world RPGs follow a clear narrative in the game. Although gamers can be distracted during gameplay, the main narrative is always manifested and leading players to proceed. After accomplishing the main narrative, players are free to conquer the world with high-end equipment and skills. On the contrary, simulation games, especially AC:NH, offer gamers the freedom to explore after the beginner instructions, and the narrative is hidden. The freedom provided by simulation games usually starts at the beginning of the gameplay, because it does not need mature equipment or skills to accomplish most missions. Moreover, AC:NH is open to many methods of the gameplay, even including time leaps. Even though it is considered as operations against regulations, Nintendo has never done anything to prevent players from conducting time leaps. Although every player has the same goal, which is having a fully constructed island, there are diversified ways to accomplish the ultimate goal. Meanwhile, there are other elements that players could stick to or abandon, such as collection of insects.

Nevertheless, no matter whether it is open world RPGs or simulation games, these games famous for offering freedom for players all require abundant details in them. Nintendo's perseverance to details was mentioned in the interviews and on Douban. These details usually require abundant work, from which the logic of the simulated game world makes sense from the perspective of the real world. The designed details are usually used to help make sense of some physical and biological logic, and they are sometimes unnoticeable. Some Douban users were surprised by the considerate details designed by Nintendo, and other members would also share other details they have noticed in the gameplay. This is also a sort of information that is well discussed within AC: NH community, which goes in line with the feature of information exchange of sociability (Diets, 2020). It also shows how the exchange of information, which is conducted in games, could lead to forming of communities (Kline et al., 2003).

The different ways of accomplishing things in AC:NH have reflected players' identity in real life. As Lechner and Schmid (2000) have indicated, players' identities could affect their choices in the gameplay. Also, Pearce (2011) also agrees that avatars games can reflect players' real identities and fictional identities, which means usually in multiplayer games with avatars, players' characters are combinations of their real identities and fabricated ones. This is manifested in the interview. For example, one interviewee would plan every detail before island construction, and he would not change afterwards because of the inner logics embedded within the design. In real life, he is a person who sticks to a regular working style. Similarly, most of the other interviewees have reflected their own true persona into the gameplay. On the other hand, some interviewees have reflected their imagined identities on the gameplay:

> "I planned very slowly. I started from imagining what I wanna do after purchasing an island. My first thought was that I need to put my house near the sea, and I can place a cycle near it. I actually did not have a clear construction plan. I just imagined life on Animal Crossing island" (interviewee 2).

The virtual realm of this game plays a role of space where players could do what they fear of doing in real life. This style of gameplay reflects the imagined persona of AC:NH players. Also, players would live an ideal life on the island, spending countless money, having game room theme houses, and so on. According to these interviewees, the distance between real life and the virtual world has brought about a sense of safety, which made them care less about saving and consequences. This finding goes in line with the real identity and virtual identity that Gee (2003) raised. In simulation games, the role of real identity is bigger than other types of games, affecting their gameplay. Meanwhile, players' imagined identity is manifested in the virtual avatars they control. However, this finding slightly goes against the statement that sometimes in games with avatars players' identities are completely fabricated (Merchant, 2006; Tardini, & Cantoni, 2005). This indication does not apply for the simulation games, because more or less, simulation games are a reflected production of real life which involves so many elements regarding daily life. Hence,

avatars in simulation games are more considered as representations of real identities and fabricated identities combined. This is also stated by another interviewee:

> "I think both identities in real life and my imagined identities are all reflections of my real identity. I might act one way in daily communications with others, but the things I do not dare to do in real life are also reflecting myself. So, I would consider the avatar as a real me" (interviewee 4).

3.3. Conclusion of analysis

Based on what have been discussed in this section, it is proved that players' sociability and the values they internalised in gameplay and in real life mutually affect each other, and this is closely linked to their identity and sense of belonging (Lechner, & Schmid, 2000; Merchant, 2006). First of all, the practical reason for sociability within AC: NH indicates the heavily manifested consumerism, fast enjoyment of entertainment, and remedy of real-life regret. Because of the practical needs of socialisation in the gameplay, certain business is stimulated. AC: NH players are so occupied with their longing for money and rare objects that their interactions with each other are mainly consists of the exchanges of information, money and objects. Secondly, on the other hand, the traditional Chinese ideology of collectivism has led to a series of values, including parasocial relationships with animal citizens, and conformity with other Chinese AC: NH community members. These values is borrowed from real life, and they heavily affected the gameplay of Chinese AC: NH players. Chinese people are brought up in an environment that stresses the importance of unity, collectivism, and the interest of collectives (Hsu, et al., 2012). Therefore, Chinese players would stress their relationships with animal citizens, having parasocial relationships with them. Also, there is a trend of homogeneity in the aesthetic of island designs among Chinese players. One of the goals for Chinese players to visit each other's islands is that they would like to learn from the others, so that they could borrow others' designs. Eventually, most Chinese players imitate the popular styles and designs from influencers, and some of the

interactions on online forums are regarding how to build a certain style of design. This connect demonstrates how real-life ideologies and values could make a difference to the sociability of players.

In addition, the weak socialisation manifested in AC: NH could lead to inertia in gameplay. Because players would socialise with each other mainly aiming for practical reasons, sociability is no longer needed at the last stage when everything on the islands is settled. The main reason for socialisation could lead to the inertia of socialisation, hence, reflecting a sense of organic solidarity, which can simply be understood as everyone being connected based on practical needs and common goals (Weststar, 2015). When the goal is achieved, the solidarity is going to be weakened, causing inertia of socialisation even though the community still exists.

4. Conclusion

The main purpose of this study is to investigate how players of Animal Crossing: New Horizons conduct their sociability in the communication and interaction with other members in the same community, and it also aims to explore what values have been internalised and naturalised by the Animal Crossing players out of their socialisation in this game. As specified in the previous sections, it is of vital importance to discuss the game sphere and cultural sphere when conducting studying regarding game communities (Lima, 2019), in which sociability is also categorised into in-game and out-game ones (Stenros et al., 2009). Therefore, a thematic analysis was conducted to analyse a mixed dataset of both interviews and posts extracted from online forums. Throughout this study the analysis became clear how these players conducted sociability that contributed to their internalisation of socio-cultural values.

4.1. Main findings

The analysis of this research indicated that within the Animal Crossing community, players would interact with each other out of main practical motives. The need for information, tools, and money have stimulated the interactions between players, because different players are in possession of different furniture, and to accomplish a full collection, they must exchange with each other. Meanwhile, the needs for emotional comfort and comparison are hardly noticeable in the analysis. These needs of socialisation all imply the role of a “third place” that Animal Crossing is playing. It is a vital term linked to community and sociability (Oldenburg, 1989; Simmel, 1949), and physical proximity is dismissed in the virtual realm (Carter, & Fuller, 2015). However, most socialisation in Animal Crossing gameplay is short and fast, which involves only meeting, exchange of information, and touring. This results from the weak socialisation possibility that Nintendo provides for the players. Most construction work can only be done by individuals, and the limited performance of Nintendo Switch has also restricted further possibilities of interaction. Therefore,

even though Animal Crossing offers varied ways of communication and interaction, most interview participants would still consider it as a so-called single player game, and they stressed the privacy that this game has provided for them. Besides, players are connected with little emotional dependence, while practical motives such as information and furniture exchange could stimulate more interactions in Animal Crossing. After the exchange of information and tools, players would directly turn to their individual construction of islands.

In addition, through the socialisation among Animal Crossing players, this analysis also identified several values that they internalised and naturalised.. These values are mostly associated with capitalist ideologies, collectivism, inertia, and identity. Values of consumerism and fast enjoyment of entertainment reflected the capital ideologies among players, in which the need for money is significantly manifested. In order to earn considerable money and accomplish full collections of insects, fishes, and furniture, some players would conduct time leap. This has fastened their game progress extensively, which made them jump to the last progress of Animal Crossing within a short amount of time. Hence, consumerism and desire for fast enjoyment of game content are associated with capitalist ideologies. These have made players consider their gameplay as an investment, which was also raised by Cesar (2020).

Besides, players' emotional connections and parasocial relationships with the animal citizens and conformity to the game influencers are linked to collectivism. Animal Crossing players socialise with other players mostly due to practical motives, while they interact with animal citizens out of emotional dependence. Also, the great island designs are imitated by most gamers, which leads to the phenomenon of ranked social status within the Animal Crossing community. These findings indicate the vital role of NPCs in the forming of virtual communities, which supplements the implication of Pearce (2011) that every individual's effort makes up for the whole community. Also, a sense of belonging is created by imitating the mainstream aesthetic. Additionally, inertia was identified during analysis. This is not perceivable at the beginning stage of repeated work, including fishing, mining, and logging. This

finding is out of the researcher's prediction, because most players have found repetition quite relaxing and entertaining. Nintendo try to ensure this by offering surprising rewards that react to players' actions and depicting blueprints for future gameplay. Therefore, players could receive rewards from almost every action and start planning island design in the early repetition. This is a vivid example of the combination of utterance space and fiction that Bateson (1990) raised. By creating a fantastic fictional space for players, Animal Crossing avoided inertia in the early gameplay. However, at the end of the process, considering the exhausting work that has to be done and the inner logic of island designs, most players refused to reconstruct their islands. At this stage, inertia is manifested among gamers. Less players would go back to Animal Crossing for construction, while the reunion with real friends and animal citizens are the reasons for them to re-open this game. This is also connected to fictional space indicated by Bateson. When there is nothing left for expectation, the motives for playing would shrink.

The many values internalised by players have reflected their true identities. The identities of gamers could largely affect their choices in gameplay (Lechner, & Schmid, 2000; Robards, 2018). Meanwhile, the imagined identities of players were also manifested in their playing, in which the avatars in Animal Crossing are considered as another self, doing what players fear of doing in real life. This also provided players a sense of freedom in simulation games. However, with the hidden algorithms that react to players' choices, such freedom all lead to the same results of gameplay, which is the full construction of islands. Hence, the false freedom that Cesar (2020) indicated in his study of previous Animal Crossing versions is linked. However, no matter how madly players have played in Animal Crossing, they would eventually realise the boundaries between real world and virtual realm. What is undeniable is that both actions in real life and games have constructed a player's wholesome identity.

4.2. Limitations and suggestions for further research

This research has focused on the sociability of Animal Crossing: New Horizons players and the investigation of values internalised in the gameplay. The findings of this study adds to the understanding of identity, sociability, and values in simulation game among Chinese players specifically. Especially for the future research of simulation games on Nintendo platform, the results and analysis of this study could be useful. However, this research is not without limitations. An extended research of Animal Crossing: New Horizons could bring its focus on more than only Chinese players. The study of players from American, European, and other continents could bring about more cultural implications to the gameplay of Animal Crossing. Hence, a comparative or constructive analysis is suggested, in order to investigate the similarities and differences of gameplay between cultures. In addition, the study of other countries from East Asia could also lead to abundant findings that are associated with linguistic and minor cultural differences. Moreover, limitations to age, occupation, and social status could also be supplemented in future study, which could result in deeper understanding of the socio-cultural homogeneity of a certain social group.

Besides, the analysis data of this research is only limited to one specific online forum, Douban. This is a forum that consists of all kinds of topics, including movies, dramas, daily life, and so on. Future research is suggested to focus on social media and online forums that are dedicated to only gaming industries. More experienced gamers would go to those forums, which would add more implications from their side. Moreover, the thematic analysis was also purely observative, neglecting the depth of the research. Even though interviews have added to the personal understanding of sociability and values and Douban posts supplemented the findings from the interviews, more data is needed in further research because of the mixture of data.

At last, further research could focus on one specific sort of values investigated from this study, exploring understanding and interpretation of certain values from Animal Crossing players. This type of study could uncover a deeper exploration of

gameplay and real-life reaction. For example, consumerism could be identified from players' purchasing and income. Future research could focus on details of how players earn money in Animal Crossing and how they would spend and distribute their money on different goods and constructions. Different consumption behaviours could be identified and compared, with the perceptions of players on other consumption habits as supplemented findings. This value could also lead to the revealing of players' consumption in real life, in which their income and living expectations play vital roles. The comparison of the consumption in real life and the virtual realm could also result in the role of games in daily consumption in real life. Scholars of finance and economy could also conduct analysis on whether games could be the factor that affect people's daily consumption.

5. Literature

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6. Appendixes

Appendix A: Hiring posts for the interviews (translated into English)

All the Animal Crossing: players: is there any of you willing to participate in my interview? I need someone who has played this game over 100 hours and have played frequently with your friends and other people using the connecting function on Nintendo Switch!

Hello everyone! I am a Master student studying Media & Creative industry in the Netherlands! I am now hiring interviewees for my Master thesis research! My research is about the sociability and values internalised among Chinese Animal Crossing: New Horizons community! The interviews are probably going to take place in March, and it will cost you around 30 to 45 minutes! If you are interested just dm me!

Appendix B: Recording my life example post (translated into English)

<u>"My grandma passed away, and I made a tomb for her in Animal Crossing"</u> Today is Mother's Day, I wish every mom in the whole world a pleasant Mother's Day! My grandma is spending her Mother's Day in heaven

Appendix C: Tips and strategies example post (translated into English)

<u>"Mining with high efficiency"</u> I have learned how to mine with high efficiency! 1. Tools needed: axe or pickaxe. 2. Take the stone as the centre and dig three parallel holes behind you. 3. Take all the grasses and flowers away.

4. Stand between the stone and holes, and push A consistently for 8 times. don't stop!

Ps: If you eat fruits before mining you will crush the stone!

Appendix D: Help each other example post (translated into English)

"How many pearls I can get from the sea for a day?"

I was so lucky today. I've got several crabs and got 3 pearls from the sea! Altogether I had 4 pearls, including the one that Ata gave me this morning. I crafted 2 mermaid DIY. I don't know if I can get more pearls from the sea today.

---------- It's 8pm now, I got the fourth one.

Appendix E: Group announcements example post (translated into English)

"Sharing of high Kabu price for April 28th"

Waiting.

Appendix F: Share your island example post (translated into English)

"The record of my socialist island construction"

These are my animal citizens.

I feel sad that except for Chacha, other animals do not wear the clothes that I gave them. Ok I'll continue. I just started this game, so I don't understand a lot of things. I gave the animal citizens some garments. I remember giving Xiaorun a pair of shoes, and he would put them on the wall. Oh right! Don't sell insects or fishes to

them, or they'll hang them on the wall, too. Chacha is the best. Later, I learned to check their interests, and realized Chacha likes yellow and white, and he also gave me blue shirts and green hoodies. 555 (crying). Speaking of Chacha, I think he and Xiaorun are together. Also, I was talking with Erguang today, and he talked about Kabuki. Kabuki heard about our conversation, said: "I think you're complicating me for some reaons." And then Erguang would shout out: "Kabuki is the coolest!" and he would ask for my opinion. Well I think he was trying to get Kabuki.

Appendix G: Interview Guide

- Welcome to the interview, and appreciation for participation
  感谢参与，欢迎接受采访
- Simple demographic questions: age, occupation, major
  简单的个人信息问题：年龄，职业，专业方向

Intro questions:

- How many stars have you got for your island?
  你的岛屿现在是几颗星？
- How many hours have you spent on AC: NH?
  你大概玩动森多久了？
- Can you describe the design, the animal neighbours on your island with a few sentences?
  你可以大概描述一下你的岛屿和上面的小动物吗？
- Did you have a clear picture before constructing your island? Why?
  在建造你的岛屿之前，你有一个清楚的规划吗？为什么？

Community related questions:

- When and where do you usually turn on your Switch and have a ply of AC: NH?
  你通常在什么哪里、时候打开 switch 玩动森呢？
- Who do you usually play AC: NH with?
  你经常和谁一起玩动森？
- Have you made any new friends because of AC: NH? How did you meet them?
  你因为动森解释了什么新朋友吗？你是怎样认识他们的？
- Do you keep regular contacts with them on social media and in AC: NH?
  你和动森的朋友会有固定、规律的活动时间吗？在哪里？
- Have you introduced your friends in real life to play AC: NH?

你有推荐你朋友玩动森吗？

- Do you also play AC: NH with your real-life friends?
  你有和现实生活中的朋友一起玩过动森吗？
- Do you also utilise other apps to keep in touch with the information about this game and people you wish to know because of this game?
  除了用 switch 之外，为了这款游戏的各路讯息，你有用过其他社交软件吗？

Sociability related questions:

- How often do you communicate with your AC friends?
  你通常多久和你的动森伙伴沟通交流一次呢？
- What do you usually seek for using these apps (like Douban and Weibo)? What topics are you interested in when using these apps?
  在社交软件上（豆瓣，微博），你经常都会搜寻怎样的讯息呢？会关注怎样的话题呢？
- What do you usually post on these apps?
  你在这些软件上面会发布一些讯息吗？
- What do you think of these apps regarding their usefulness to your gameplay?
  对于你玩动森的帮助上来说，你觉得这些软件怎么样？
- Do you always play AC: NH with the same group of people or you would switch to different people to play with?
  你经常和同一群人一起玩动森，还是会不断交换一起玩动森的伙伴？为什么？
- How do you guys meet? Online linking or face-to-face link? Which method do you prefer?
  你和动森伙伴一般怎么见面呢？网上链接还是面对面联机？哪一种方式你更喜欢？
- When you are playing AC with community friends, whose island do you prefer to visit first, your own or your friends' ? why?
  当和对方联机的时候，你一般会选择先去对方的岛上还是先让别人来你的岛上？
- When visiting others' islands, which part of the islands do you pay most of your attention on?
  当你去别人的岛屿的时候，你会关注哪些点？
- Other than playing AC with each other, what else would you do with your AC community members?
  除了一起玩动森，你和你的动森伙伴还会一起做什么？

Value related questions

- Can you describe a daily routine of playing AC at the beginning of playing this game?
  你能描述一下刚开始玩动森的时候，你每天都会做些什么吗？
- Do you usually finish all the daily missions?

你经常完成那些每日任务吗？

- What do you think of the daily missions? (boring? useful?)
  你觉得哪些任务怎么样？
- How do you find the situation that at the beginning of playing AC, you have to accomplish all the repeated daily missions to pay off the debt?
  当大家开始玩动森的时候，都需要反复完成每日任务来赚钱还房贷，你觉得这种青款怎么样？当时感受怎样？
- What are your feelings when you have to experience such repetition in AC?
  当经历这种反复重复的时候，你是什么感觉？

After the debt is paid off, you would start to invest in Kabu, to earn more money to purchase furniture and decoration.

- Would you spend all of your money on Kabu every week? Why?
  你每周都会画所有的钱去买大头菜吗？为什么？
- What help can you get from Douban and Weibo when purchasing and selling Kabu?
  你在豆瓣和微博上面能够得到哪些卖买大头菜的信息呢？
- The system of Kabu is similar to that of the stock market. What do you think of it?
  大头菜的买卖就像炒股一样，你觉得设计出这样的系统怎么样？
- How would you spend the money?
  你卖出大头菜的钱会怎样花？
- Do you usually want the full collection of every piece of garment and furniture? why?
  你买衣服和家具的时候，一件衣服的所有花色和颜色你都会想要买下吗？为什么？
- What do you think of the consuming experience in AC and in real life?
  你是怎样看动森里面的消费和现实生活中消费的关系的？
- Do you conduct time-leaps in AC?
  你玩动森的时候穿越过吗？
- What do you usually do by conducting time-leaps?
  你改时间穿越，一般是做什么呢？
- Why do you want to accelerate the speed of time?
  问什么你要穿越呢？
- Are you aware of the time/season/year differences after time-leap? How does that make you feel?
  当你穿越久了，你能够感受到动森里的时间和现实中的时间发生了天/季节/年份的变化吗？这让你有什么感觉？
- Why do you want to get everything done before others?
  为什么你想要在别人之前把所有的事情做完呢？
- Time-leap vs. finishing tasks day by day, which one do you prefer?
  穿越或者按部就班完成任务，你喜欢哪种？
- When you spend one week to finish something that should have been accomplished within one month, how do you feel?
  当你花一周就完成了一个月的工作量，你的感受是怎样的？

There are several updates and new seasonal activities for AC, which means there are always going to be new collections of designs and furniture.

- When the new collection is around the corner, how do you feel?
  当新的季节/活动到来，就会有新的家具和服饰，遇到这种情况你的心情怎样？
- What would you do with the new collection?
  你一般怎样度过新的季节性活动呢？
- But your island is already 5 star and fully constructed and decorated, and you really like the new collection. What would you do?
  你的岛屿都是 5 星了，也完全建造好了，但是你很喜欢新的家具和服装，你会怎么办？
- When the construction of your island is finished, how often would you play AC?
  当你的岛屿已经完全建造好了，你一般多久玩一次动森？
- At this time, what are the drives of you playing AC?
  这个时候，是什么原因让你打开动森呢？

Concluding questions

- Other than the factors that we discussed (consumerism, vanity, and enertia), what are the other things that you would like us to pay attention to?
  除了我们刚才讨论过的话题，你还有什么想要分享的嘛？
- What do you think of AC?
  你觉得动森这款游戏怎样？
- What do you think of the AC community?
  你觉得动森有关的社群以及里面的玩家怎么样？
  - Thank again for participating

Appendix H: Coding tree

Code Group: discussion of sociability					
Reasons for sociability			Preference for sociability		Weak socialisation
Practical reasons	Emotional reasons	Conformity	Meeting real-life friends	Playing alone	“AC offered me a sense of weak

“It prevents the situation where we don’t have the same colours of televisions. We can always exchange.”	“It was released during the pandemic. So, it offered the possibility for socialisation”	“I wanna check on others’ designs and learn from them.”	“We knew each other before. The game made us closer.”	“I prefer the privacy that AC bring me.”	socialization where most of us cannot collaborate with each other on the construction”

Code Group: discussion of values							
Capitalist ideologies		Collectivism		Inertia		Freedom	
Consumerism	Fast enjoyment of entertainment	Emotional connections with animal citizens	Conformity	repetition	Inertia at the end	Freedom	identity
“I have to make sure I don’t take any risk in the Kabu transactions.”	“I was wondering if I could finish all the work in one afternoon.”	“I would consider my feeling in the gameplay. I would consider what happens if the animal have really settled on my island.”	“I would compare my island to theirs. Haha.”	“This is really a relaxation moment after work.”	“I have spent all these hours constructing my island. Why would I have to change?”	“For me AC is a single-player game. I can construct my island however I want”	“In a sense, my gameplay of AC really reflects my habits in real life.”

Appendix I: Interview summaries

The interviews are summarised because the original interviews were conducted in Mandarin.

Interview 1

Interviewee 1 is a female aged 25. In real life, she is an organized person who pre-schedule every work under certain logic, so that she could prepare for what is coming next. The reason why for her to play AC: NH is that she has settled most issues for the living, and she can finally enjoy life and work after the pandemic. Moreover, she is also a Pokemon player, so she had searched for Nintendo-related information for long. Her lifestyle is also reflected upon her gameplay. Before constructing the island, she would search for tips and strategies and make a whole detailed plan on Excel, including the design, construction, and the distribution of functions. She remembers all animal citizens very well, and she regrated not having some particular animals. She prefers an organized squared island design, because she cannot accept free-minded designs that do not seem to have logic.

She was introduced to an offline community in local city and has played AC: NH with these community members ever since. She prefers having interactions with friends in real life, and she is reluctant to meeting new friends online. Usually, she would exchange information and send money to her friends, and she has also realised the struggling work at the beginning of AC: NH. Besides, she also uses Wechat, Bilibili, and Weibo to follow new information and exchange practical tools with other players. Moreover, she pointed out the weak socialization among players: they would only exchange practical objects, and nothing more will take place.

The repetition is not a problem for her, because she would consider the repeated work as relaxation. When everything is well planned, she would feel secured and would worry about nothing else. Also, she is not someone who care about virtual currency. On the other hand, she is bothered to set alarms and notifications for the AC: NH money, which will increase her anxiety. Moreover, she dislikes people's treating Kabu as real-life commercials which can make them money and additional advantages. Therefore, she is not keen on the consumerism. However, she realised that it is normal for Chinese market to boost such consumerism, because

everyone here needs the opportunities to earn livings. Additionally, she raised the issue of conformity, in which experienced people are treated as the god. This is often seen in Chinese culture where most people would do anything to satisfy their vanity. At last, because she is so stubborn on her basic logic of her island, she would not change anything when construction is finished.
Interview 2 Interviewee 2 is a 20-year-old male student. He had already played Nintendo Switch for a long time, so he is interested in all well-known game franchises such as Animal Crossing. He has only played AC: NH for around 125 hours, but he has already accomplished full collection of museum exhibits, insects, and fish. He is open to any animal citizens, no matter how they look like. Also, he will let go of those animal citizens if they intend to leave the island. His island is made of varied styles, while the connection between these styles is lacking. He did not have a clear plan for the design before construction. Moreover, he usually play AC: NH with close friends and schoolmates who have real-life connections with him, and he would recommend this game to other friends. He would check Douban and Weibo for practical Kabu price and object exchange. Due to the visiting mechanism, he would only conduct simple and fast interaction with strangers, while he spent most of the time playing AC: NH with real-life friends. Besides, he prefers connecting through the internet, because this is more convenient and practical. Time leap is an important part of his gameplay. He has once earned 80 million bells within one hour by conducting time leap. With this, a huge satisfication arise within his mind, because he can earn considerable money in a limited time and finish full collection. Additionally, repetition is not a problem for him, because he would consider the early repeated work as preparation for the near future. Moreover, a sense of achievement is also the reason why he would repeatedly finish daily missions. Conformity was also identified in the interview, because the reason why he would conduct time leap is because he saw everyone else was

doing the same thing, and he did not want to be left behind. Full collection of furniture and clothes is his goal, because this can satisfy his spiritual pursuit instead of material one. Moreover, he has parasocial relationships with his animal citizens, even though he is aware of that they are virtual. At last, he sees AC: NH as a place to truly express his own ideal identity and emotions, in which he could imagine the life of another identity.
Interview 3 Interviewee 3 is a 26-year-old male who works for film and television drama industries. He is an experienced Switch player, and AC: NH is the game that he continued playing. He had a clear plan for the style of his island, but it turned out to be too difficult to construct. Therefore, he went online to learn from others' designs and to find the one he is interested in. besides, he is open to any kind of animal citizens, not sticking to desiring for influencer animals. He usually played AC: NH with his real-life acquaintance, including friends, colleagues, and mutual friends. Without considering any practical factors, he prefers face-to-face gameplay with friends for the convenience. The initial reasons for him to interact with others are practical, including information exchange. In order to gather information, he would use different media platforms such as Douban, Bilibili, and Weibo. Repetition is not a problem for him, since the materials are eventually needed for construction. He is keen on search for Kabu prices online, but he would not risk all money on Kabu. Moreover, he considers life on the island another real life, because AC: NH stimulates some important schedules of real life. Also, he is interested in collection, because they might be used in the near future. However, he is also aware of the boundaries between money in games and real life: more things are taken into consideration when it comes to real life. He is likely to re-construct his island, because he might be tired of his original design, and he would not see this troublesome, because he thinks this is the fun part of AC: NH.
Interview 4

Interviewee 4 is a 22-year-old male who works in the finance industry. At the beginning he was a casual player, but after seeing some beautiful designs, he started to spend most of his leisure time on AC: NH. From the start, he envied the beautifully designed islands, but then he became a “beggar” who asked for money from others. He is good at copying others’ designs and paste on his island accordingly. He did not have a detailed plan for the whole island, but he would adjust according to the practical situation. He usually played AC: NH with his real-life friends. In terms of people known online, he would only be limited to play with those in the same group chat. Also, he raised that in order to boost communication and interaction between different players, AC: NH has designed a lot of opportunities. One of them is the exchange of exclusive furniture. The unbalanced procession of furniture and information has stimulated communication. Besides, he is a collector who wants full collection of insects and fish. Therefore, his construction process was super slow. He did not experience the early repetition of work, because he found a way to ask for money and tools. Besides, both fictional identity and real identity are reflected into his gameplay, but he considered these two parts of his own identities, as in who he really is. Moreover, he sees Kabu as a very simplified system of stock in real life. From his Perspective, the commerce of game content is a natural phenomenon in China, and the desire for different objects depends on different people. For the purpose of full collection, he would time leap, which means he wants to finish missions as soon as possible. Al last, he stressed the diversity of AC: NH, which mean everyone could find his/her ow way of gameplay.
Interview 5 Interviewee 5 is a 33-year-old male who has played AC: NH for over 700 hours. He is keen on casual simulation games, and the design for the island is casual where the buildings are sparsely distributed. He is not strict on the animal citizens, so he would invite any animals to his island. He conducted a very casual way of gameplay, considering no plans for the future.

He would use most of his leisure time alone for gameplay, and he would stick to playing AC: NH with only a few friends in real life. However, he is open to weak socialization with people online, such as from NGO and group chat. He is also open to any topic when searching on social media, which in a way comforted his loneliness during pandemic. However, he is a person who would not conduct deep interactions with others, this is also reflected in his gameplay. The early excitement has reduced some dullness resulted from repetition, and the surprising rewards is also helping. A casual way of living is his own style of gameplay, so he is not keen on making a large amount of money. However, he would also record his information into a table for future use. The consumption in AC: NH could be a remedy of real-life regret for him, because he can purchase something he would not dare to buy in real life. Moreover, he stressed the term of waiting for the work to be done, so he would not conduct time leap. At last, his island is only 25% finished, but he will constantly change construction, and he sees this as an interesting part of AC: NH.
Interview 6 Interviewee 6 is a 24-year-old female who works in the auditing industry. She prefers a simple designing, and the island is constructed from the centre. Also, she would construct according to the original terrain. She casually decided the buildings and constructed paths that connect all buildings. She prefers playing AC: NH with group chat friends who she knows of, and the interactions among them are decided by the practical needs for collections and money. Weibo and Wechat are the social media that she looked up for information and meet new friends, and she would also search for tips and strategies. She only actively shares her information with her friends, such as high Kabu prices, and she prefers staying trading relationships with other players without any personal exchange. She has also stated that AC: NH can be played as a sing-player game where everything is conducted on one’s own. There is no matching mechanism for AC:

NH, so collaboration is not necessarily need for it. Moreover, she is not bothered by the repetition, because she is used to conducting repeated work at the beginning of games. However, she is reluctant to re-construct her island, because she would not experience such a tough work again. If there is a different experience, she would definitely go for it. Therefore, new content is necessarily needed for her returning this game.
Interview 7 Interview 7 is a 23-year-old male who is still a student. His preference of animal citizens is that he tried to make sure every animal on his island is with unique characteristic. His island is constructed block by block, and he tried to link these blocks with different paths. Different from other interviewees, he started playing AC: NH after its one-year anniversary. He did not have a clear plan for the design, which made the styles of different blocks conflict with each other. The only friends he made with AC: NH were all introduced by his real-life friends, and the number is very limited. Therefore, it is very difficult for him to connect with each other online. Another barrier for his poor connection is that he started the game when everyone else started to lose interest in this game. Besides, he rarely went to social media for information search. Instead, he would go to YouTube and Bilibili to watch influencer videos for tips and strategies. Therefore, his most connection to others are the one with influencers with one-to-many distribution style. Moreover, he stressed the importance of meeting friends face-to-face where physical interaction also makes huge difference. He has parasocial relationships with animal citizens, in which he would send gifts to them with care, even though he knew they are digitised characters. From his perspective, the connections with animal citizens are purer that that with real-life players. Moreover, repetition is seen as an opportunity to explore the unknown in AC: NH, so it would not be a burden for him. He has also distinguished the difference between open world RPGs and simulation games: the freedom after the accomplishment of the main narratives in RPGs is less than the freedom given at

the beginning in simulation games. Besides, he sees Kabu system as a way to stimulate connections between players. However, Kabu trades is not necessary for him, because he can also rely on catching fishes and insects to earn money. Because of the poor connections with others, he has experienced same risks as stocks when trading Kabu. Without the worries of money, he also tried to buy full collections of clothes and furniture, which remedies his real-life regrets. He would conduct time leap. Different from others, he did this so as to experience what he missed for the absent year, since he is a late player. His connection to animal citizens is also a regret of time leap, because leaping a long time could lead to his animals' missing him. Lastly, he would definitely re-construct his island, because he thinks of it as an essential part of the gameplay that could make him experience different design styles.

Appendix J: Interviewee information

Interviewee	Age	Gender	Industry
Interviewee 1	25	Female	Rather not tell
Interviewee 2	20	Male	Administration
Interviewee 3	26	Male	Film
Interviewee 4	22	Male	Finance
Interviewee 5	33	Male	Product
Interviewee 6	24	Female	Auditing
Interviewee 7	23	Male	Marketing