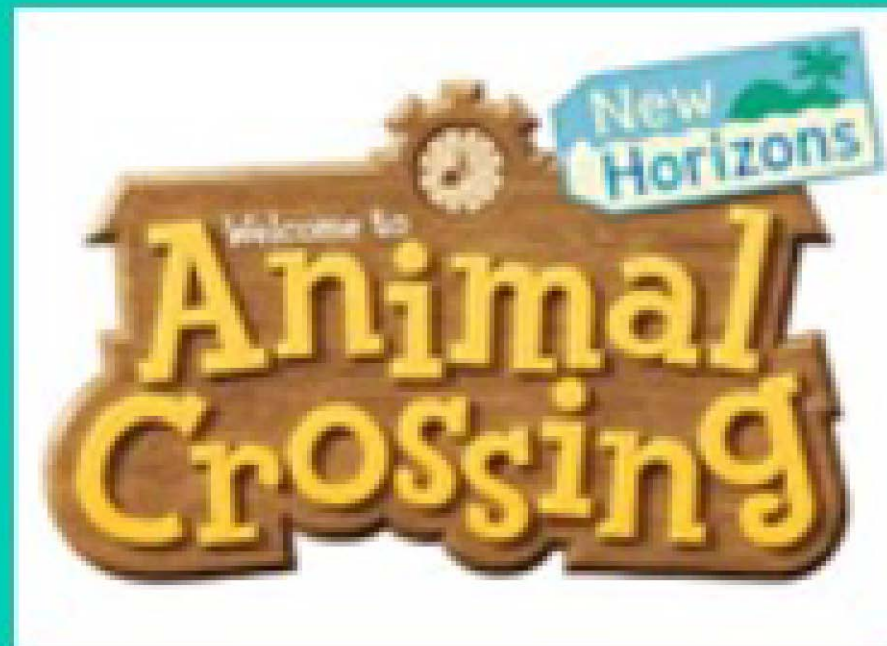




The Consumer Experience of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*



Players During COVID-19 Lockdowns

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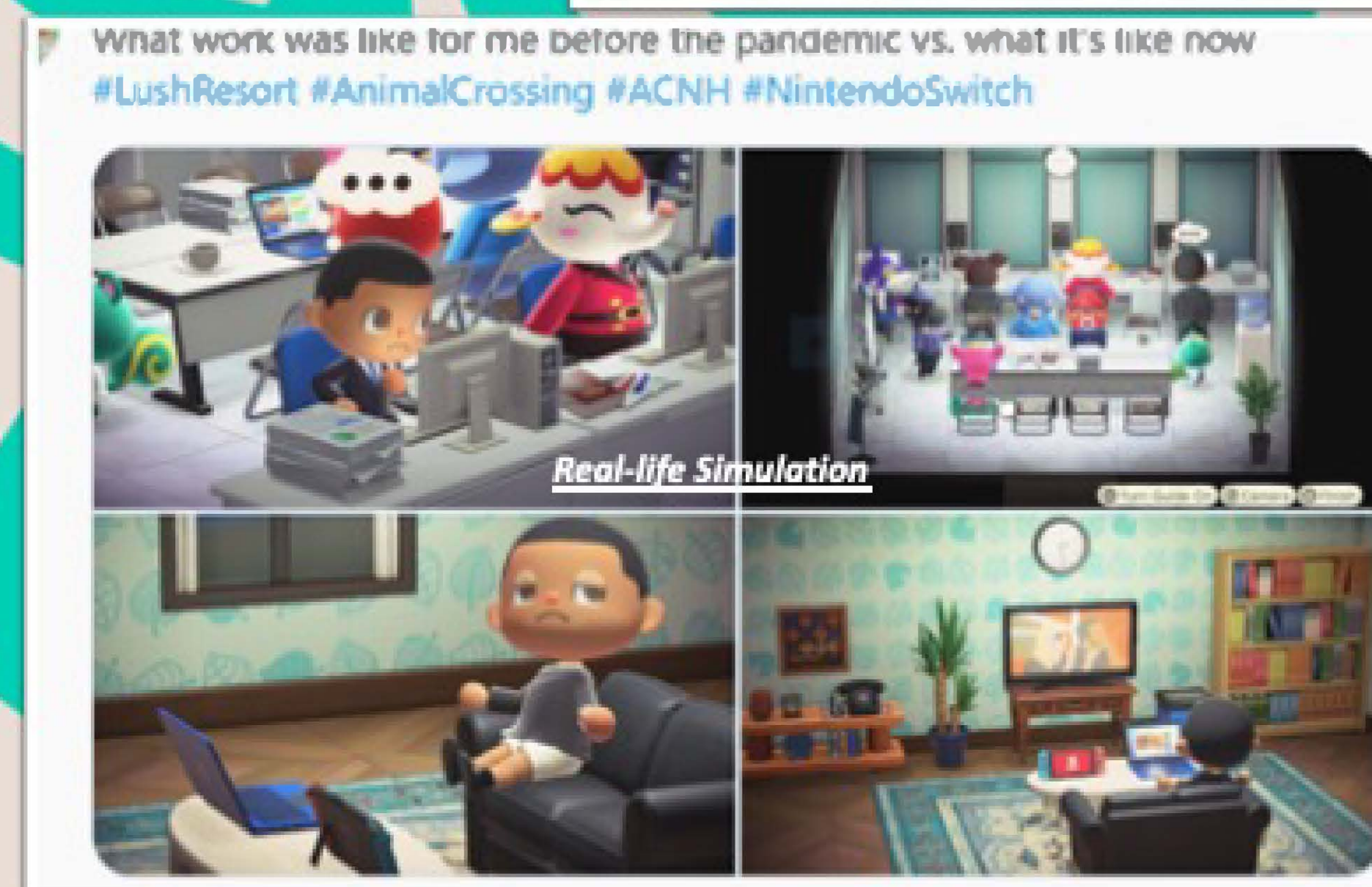


Introduction

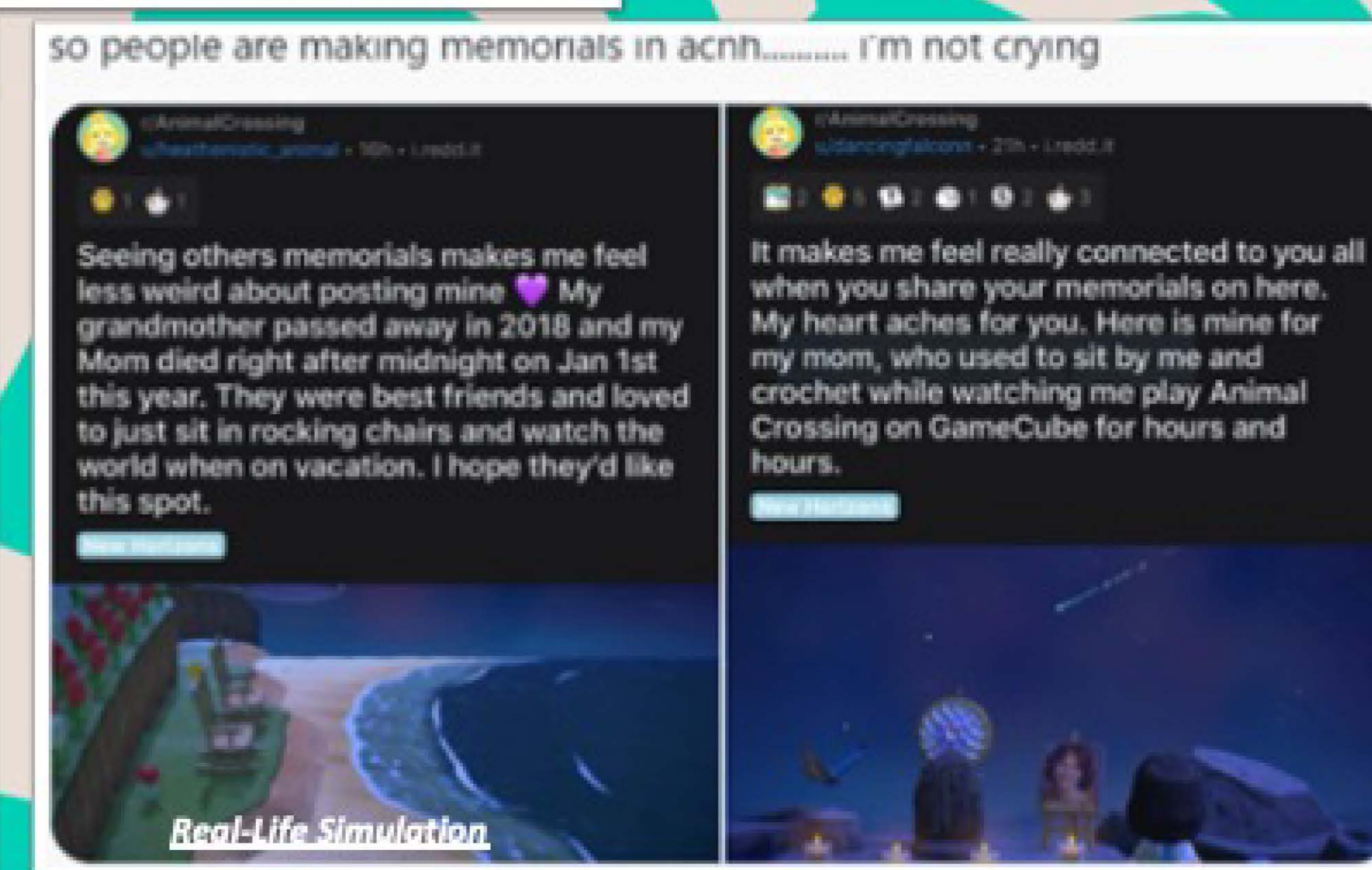
Due to COVID-19 global lockdowns in March 2020, Nintendo's spring release game, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (ACNH), garnered massive popularity and unprecedented sales. The simulation game involves creating a new life on an island. As life events were cancelled such as high school and college graduations, proms, weddings, and consumers experienced anguish due to isolation, consumers took to ACNH to recreate the same life events within a digital world. The game attracted the attention of faithful gamers and also lured new consumers seeking social outlets due to isolation and boredom. Instant success led to broad acceptance with consumers sharing examples of replicated life events in gameplay on social media sites. In this study, we investigate the influence of ACNH on culture, how consumers engage in co-creation and socialization within ACNH, and the role extended-self plays in the gameplay among consumers. These inquiries center around digital virtual consumption, which is heightened during a time of a global pandemic lockdown.



Extended-Self



Real-life Simulation



Real-life Simulation



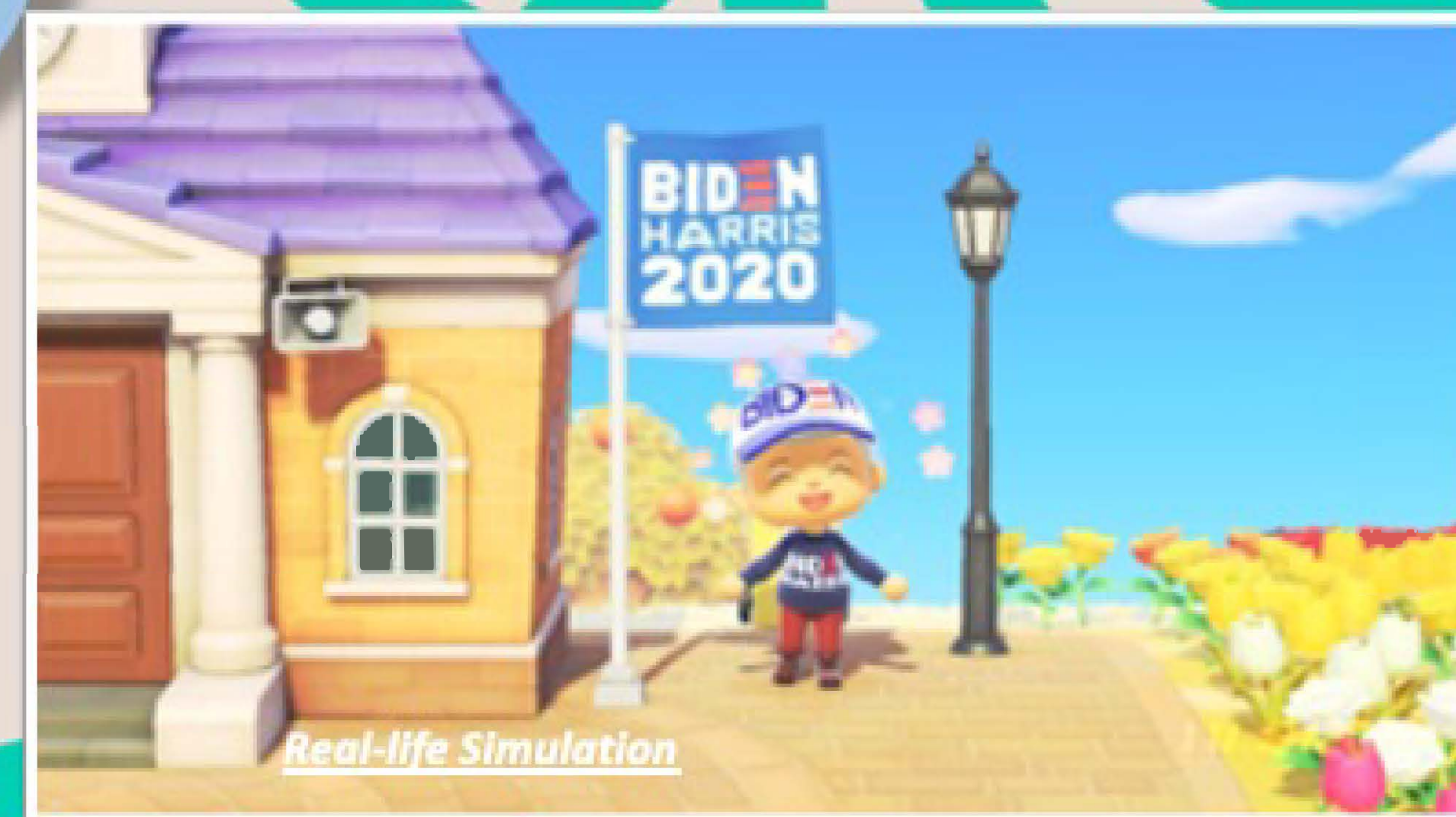
Real-life Simulation



Real-life Simulation

Method

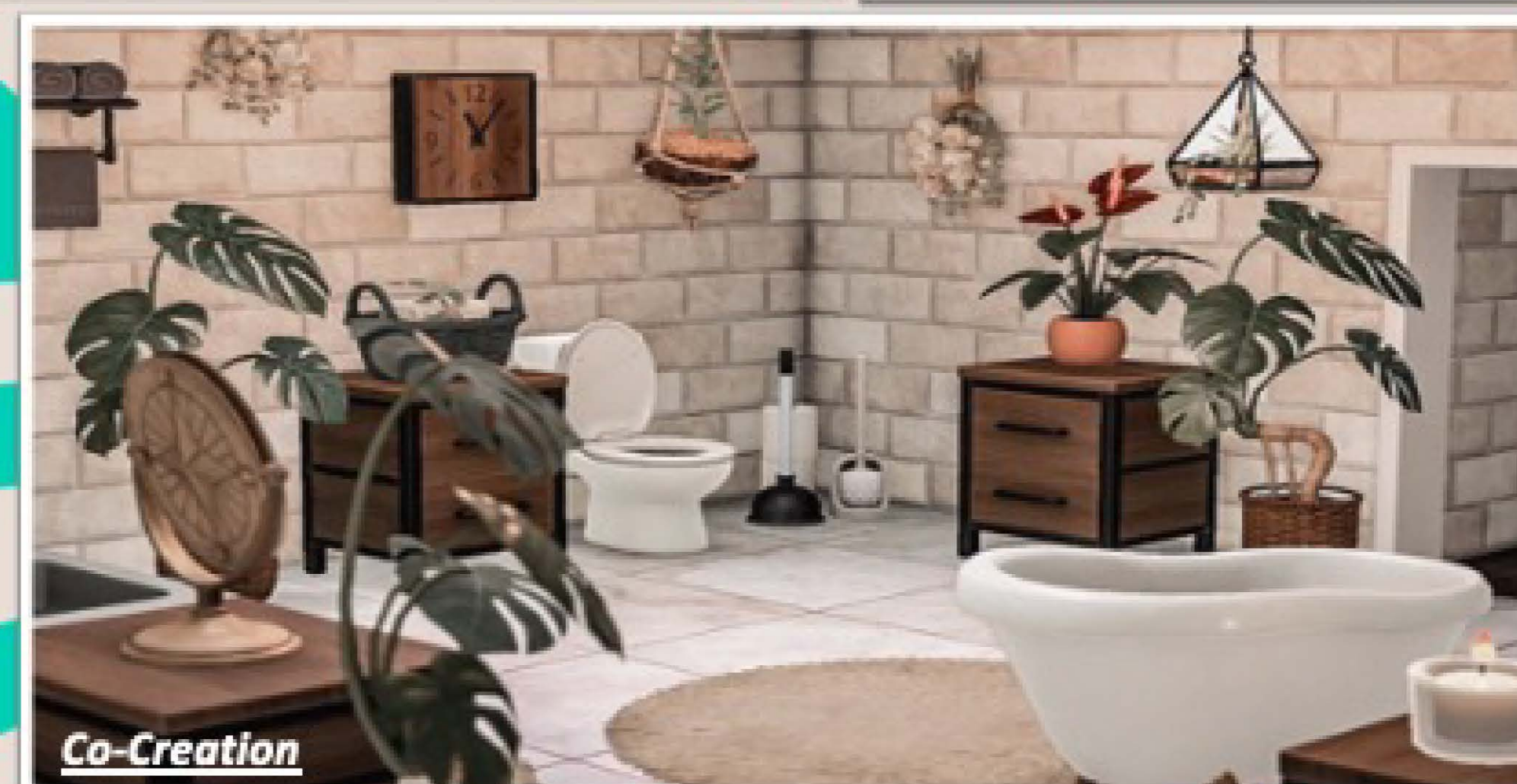
Using hashtags such as #AnimalCrossingNewHorizons, #ACNHDesigns, #ACNHWedding, #ACNHLockdown, #ACNHHalloween, among numerous others, thousands of tweets were extracted from Twitter users, related to Animal Crossing: New Horizons between 3/20/20-12/31/20 during COVID-19 lockdowns. After the collection, thorough data mining commenced to select a sample of 1,000 tweets best related to the research. Tweets were coded and analyzed in reference to a coding book developed by the researchers. Major themes found reflect the most prominent and recurring insights noticed in the data.



Real-life Simulation



Real-life Simulation



Co-Creation

Results

Extended-Self:

- Players shared photos and videos on Twitter of their avatars and islands which portrayed their extended-self.
- Players show off who they are and their interests, some dressing their avatars identical to themselves or even as Disney princesses such as Elsa and even Hogwarts students. By using in-game tools people can express themselves and create a fantasy world.

Co-Creation:

- Players use Twitter as a channel and hashtags to connect with other players and trade inventory or giveaway recipes created in-game.
- ACNH encourages players to co-create in order to have the best and easiest playing experience.
- Two twitter users connected and helped create a bathroom on one users' island.

Real-life Simulation:

- Many players used the games flexibility and freedom of creation to replicate real life events.
- Data showed simulations of weddings, birthdays, and holidays, and smaller occasions like starlit walks with friends and beach days.
- An unexpected result was the introduction of real-world politics and business into the game; President Joe Biden used ACNH during his election campaign to meet and shake hands with other islanders; Fast food chain KFC created their own island where players could visit a simulated KFC or search for the colonel on the island to win free chicken in real life.
- During the pandemic players had their avatars wear masks.

Conclusion

It is easy to believe all conclusions drawn from this research are direct results of the environment COVID-19 created in the world, but users rarely pinpointed this, specifically in their tweets. You can infer however, when looking at the dates of these tweets and the state of the world at that time, people were in fact missing their lives and used ACNH as a way of playing out the things they would be doing if they were not under mandatory lockdown. It is the small things like users having their avatars wear masks or mentioning working from home that blatantly reflect the impact of the pandemic, but it is also people connecting with their real-world friends in-game to do things they would normally do in real life that shows just how players benefited from this game during an uncertain time. *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* was a way for people to still divulge in real-world activities, interact with their friends, and express themselves and their interests during a time when they could not see anyone; highlighting the three main themes found (extended-self, co-creation, and real-life simulation). An unexpected revelation was the act of businesses advertising in-game and politicians using the platform to reach voters. It will be interesting to see how advertising in video games will progress further and to wonder if the pandemic was the reason for these innovative decisions. Lastly, we have seen how Digital Virtual Consumption has become a method by which consumers use a tool, such as ACNH, to create their desires and daydreams and live them out in some capacity. From this research, we conclude that ACNH is a blank canvas gamers enjoy using to express who they are and maintain total control over their own small world which was a feeling heavily desired during the COVID-19 lockdown when many felt a total lack of control.

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