"Find Ways to Cope:" Games and Gamification Supporting College Student Mental Health During the Pandemic

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Abstract: The COVID- 19 pandemic has created challenges for student mental health in higher education. Emerging literature documents the various challenges that today's college students encounter, but students' coping strategies are understudied. Our work examines how college students utilize gaming as a tool to transition into a new campus environment and address mental health. Using a grounded theory approach, our analysis of interviews with freshmen on UC Davis campus during Fall 2021 revealed that college students use mental health apps and games in response to pandemic-related stress and anxiety. Students also articulated connecting to their peers as well as to themselves. We argue that gaming plays a critical role in this historic time by supporting students in their pandemic-lives on a college campus under stressful circumstances.

Introduction

The disruptive impact of the 2019 Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) has drawn global attention and posed a severe threat to people's physical and psychological health. College students have been significantly affected through having to shift to online learning, campus closures, and the absence of social opportunities, all of which results in lack of motivation, stress, anxiety, and isolation (Anderson, 2020; Hamza et al., 2021; Son et al., 2020). Although studies documenting the various effects of the pandemic on college students certainly allow us to understand the adversities students face, there is little known about how college students respond and cope with these challenges.

To explore how students adapt during the pandemic, our work examined the gaming and mental health apps that students use to cope and navigate. A sociocultural framework and ethnographic method are required that reveals people's meanings and the context of their game experience (Hung, 2007; Squire, 2005; Steinkuehler, 2006). We cannot study exergaming or mental health app experiences solely as a health intervention or via a user testing model, because situated learning outcomes are relational, and they are specific to the particular environment and historical time.

Data Collection and Analysis

The overall research agenda investigates how freshmen college students use gaming to alleviate anxiety and adapt to a new college campus. Rather than assuming what types of technology would help, 15 college students (female = 9, male= 6) were asked to choose an embodiment technology and engage for ten weeks during a freshmen-seminar course. Over ten weeks, we collected various reflections of students' experiences with their chosen technology, such as product reviews, weekly journals, and summative reports with their thematic groups. Afterwards, individual interviews were conducted to further understand students' reflections and how their experience changed. The data analysis process for this paper used a modified Grounded Theory approach by creating codes that reflected common patterns and themes (Charmaz, 2014).

Results

Theme 1: When do you use it? To lower anxiety

The first prominent theme was students noting the mental challenges of adapting to a new environment during the pandemic. Students emphasized how they needed to relax and meditate more during the pandemic. The following example is taken from an interview with Sam (pseudonym), who had just transferred into her first quarter on campus, about her use of mental wellness apps:

> Sam: Yeah, my main goals were just to improve my anxiety because sometimes I have
> anxiety issues, especially with social anxiety, and especially since I'm in a new campus or a

> *new academic environment… also with stress because I've also found myself putting a lot on my plate. So I just want to try to just find ways to cope with that stress.*

In the segment above, Sam demonstrates how she utilizes these mental wellness apps to ease her anxiety from adjusting to a new school and the additional stressor from COVID. As a college student looking to improve mental health, the challenge does not end with just using the app more often. Later in the interview Sam also described navigating between priorities that work for her academic schedule by squeezing in mental health sessions between her classes. This indicates the reality of how students struggle to establish a routine that allows them to accommodate to a different setting.

Theme 2: Why do you use it? To connect with others and oneself

The students comprising this theme were largely playing *Pokemon Go*, a GPS-based augmented reality mobile game. Many students said they played *Pokemon Go* to connect to their friends, either on campus or back home. Many reported they first started playing back in 2016 when the game initially launched, but they had stopped and returned to it for the course project during the pandemic. Whether they are playing with friends or bridging relationships with their family, the game serves as a medium to provide social support during stressful times. Not only did *Pokemon Go* help students to get closer to others, but it also offered a way to connect back to oneself. In the following episode from Sally's (pseudonym) interview, she describes how playing *Pokemon Go* again brings back familiar memories:

> *Sally: Pokemon was really popular, like when I was a kid. Yeah, so then like, it gives that nostalgic feeling for people.*

Furthermore, many students used *Pokemon Go* as a guide to entering an unfamiliar social physical environment. Because they had to walk all around the university anyway in between classes, it was a fun, gamified (rather than stressful) way of getting to know the large campus.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study analyzed how gaming such as self-tracking apps and *Pokemon Go* serve as mental support to substitute the gap that students experience during the transition to college during the pandemic. Through analyzing the transcripts of student discourse from the reflections and interviews, it became apparent how these technologies helped the students with their need for social connection and managing anxiety. In a time of stress, reducing the unfamiliarity of a new campus and shaping positive experiences through gaming can promote a healthy transition to college.

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