FOSTERING YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND MENTAL RESILIENCE: THE ROLE OF ANIME, MANGA AND GAMES IN MALAYSIAN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how engagement with anime, manga, and games (AMG) influences the psychological and emotional needs of Malaysian youth and impacts their overall motivation and well-being. Using Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a theoretical framework and hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodological approach, this research investigates how AMG consumption fulfills the fundamental psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twelve Malaysian youth, this study reveals that AMG engagement positively contributes to these core psychological needs. Participants reported enhanced self-identity exploration, skill development, emotional resilience, and social connection through their AMG engagement. The findings suggest that AMG can be a valuable resource for psychological development and well-being, challenging prevailing negative narratives about these media forms. The findings offer actionable insights for diverse stakeholders including mental health practitioners who can utilize these media as therapeutic tools, youth development organizations that can structure AMG-related activities to build transferable skills, and industry professionals who can develop marketing strategies, retail experiences and content that both meets psychological needs and supports positive development.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The popularity of anime, manga, and games (AMG) has extended far beyond Japan, creating a global cultural phenomenon. They represent Japan's most powerful soft power tool which the government actively promotes worldwide through its Cool Japan initiative (Rahim & Razali, 2022). The importance of Japan's content-production export sector - encompassing gaming, anime, and manga - is undeniable. In 2022, it earned approximately ¥4.7 trillion in overseas revenue, almost matching the ¥5.7 trillion garnered by Japan's microchip exports (The Japan News, 2024). The presence and consumption of Japanese pop culture in Asia Pacific is very strong. For one, anime marketing in Malaysia generated a revenue of USD 190.9 million in 2024 and is forecasted to reach USD 398.2 million by 2030 with distribution of content via the Internet becoming the fastest growing sector (Horizon Grand View Research, 2025). The population segment driving this growth can be attributed to the youth.

In Malaysia particularly, AMG has become a significant part of youth culture. The youth are particularly drawn to AMG because of its ability to fulfill psychological needs for identity exploration, emotional connection and escapism (Yamato, 2013, 2016a, 2016b). Youth are still at their formative years where they are discovering themselves and they can succumb to mental well-being issues such as depression, anxiety, emotional distress, loneliness, antisocial behaviours and low self-esteem (Omar & Mohd Nasir, 2020). Based on the statistics released from the Malaysian Youth Mental Health Index 2023 (MyMHI'23) study carried out by the Institute for Youth Research Malaysia (IYRES) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Malaysia, 1 in 10 youth reportedly experience high stress; 3 in 10 have moderate to severe anxiety symptoms and; 6 in 10 experience mild to severe depressive symptoms (IYRES & UNICEF, 2024).

AMG spans countless genres, themes or narratives, many of which offer positive psychological benefits that challenge negative stereotypes. For instance, the *iyashikei* genre (e.g. Studio Ghibli's *Totoro* and *Kiki's Delivery Service*) specifically incorporates soothing, healing elements designed to provide comfort and relaxation to consumers while manga exploring coming-of-age themes support youth development and personal growth (e.g. *Naruto*, *March Comes In Like A Lion*). Despite this rich variety of content, the constructive roles and psychological benefits of AMG remain underexplored in academic literature. While emerging research is beginning to acknowledge that these media forms can fulfill important psychological needs and foster personal development (Ren, 2020; Yamato, 2016a, 2016b), previous research has primarily examined the commercial and cultural dimensions of Japanese pop culture, including studies on global popularity and branding power (Garcia, 2013; Simeon, 2006), tourism impacts (Severino & Silva, 2023) and the origins and consumer responses to *kawaii* culture (Granot et al., 2014; Lieber-Milo, 2021; Nittono, 2021). There remains a significant gap in understanding how Japanese pop culture specifically contributes to psychological well-being and personal development among the youth.

Thus, this study explores how engagement with AMG influences the fulfillment of psychological and emotional needs among Malaysian youth and examines the impact of this fulfillment on their overall motivation and well-being. Using Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2017) as the theoretical framework, this research investigates how AMG consumption satisfies three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness—elements that SDT

identifies as essential for optimal human functioning and well-being. Through a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this research seeks to understand the lived experiences of Malaysian youth who engage with Japanese AMG and explore how these experiences contribute to their psychological development. The study focuses specifically on Japanese AMG due to Japan's position as the originating source and primary cultural influence within the global AMG landscape. The findings aim to provide insights into the potential of AMG as a resource for psychological health while challenging prevailing negative narratives surrounding these media forms.

2.   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1.   *Youth Generation in Malaysia*

The classification of youth in Malaysia encompasses those who fall within the 15 to 30 year old age bracket under the Youth Societies and Youth Development (Amendment) Act 2019 which is due for nationwide enforcement in 2026. Despite their immense potential, youth remain particularly vulnerable to negative influences and risky behaviors that can derail both their personal growth and their capacity to contribute meaningfully to society. Today's youth are especially vulnerable to depression, anxiety and stress, largely due to pressures from problem-solving, everyday tasks and coping with stigmatized identities (Machin et al., 2019; Samsudin et al., 2024).

Good mental health enables individuals to cope with stress, work productively, sustain relationships and pursue personal goals (Diener et al., 2003). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the youth turned to AMG via platforms like Netflix as coping strategies for emotions such as frustration and anxiety. Popular culture engagement offered them joy, creativity and belonging, hence positioning AMG as a meaningful avenue for healing and self-care (Jenkins, 2006; Yoon & Vasudevan, 2021).

2.2.   *Anime, Manga and Games (AMG)*

In the years after Covid-19, the popularity of AMG among the youth particularly Generation Z skyrocketed swiftly with dedicated fan events, conventions, exhibitions and consumption spaces emerging across the country (Yamato, 2016). Much like in Japan, the popularity of AMG has spawned fan subcultures where young people group together, united by their shared interest. The subculture is further enriched by Malaysian influencers and content creators who promote AMG culture through platforms like YouTube, Instagram and TikTok (Sin & Yuet, 2025). Researchers have noted that although anime and manga can provide creative outlets, they may also reinforce aggressive or antisocial behaviors, loneliness, depression, suicidal ideation, anxiety, and eating disorders among young consumers (Anderson & Dill, 2000; Forsythe & Mongrain, 2023; Hajek & König, 2024; Xia & Cui, 2024).

In contrast, other studies have emphasized the positive potential of AMG. Yamato (2012) contends that the human aspects of the characters in AMG are what inspired or impressed the youth in Malaysia. More importantly, the youth's consumption of Japanese popular cultural products provides opportunities for them to reflect on their lives or explore the world they live in (Yamato, 2012). Yamato (2016a; 2016b) also found that ACG (anime, comics, and games) fan events serve as developmental grounds for Malaysian youth, fulfilling psychological needs and fostering

personal growth through creative and social engagement. Ren (2020) explored how *iyashikei* films—a genre of anime focused on emotional healing, simplicity and reconnection with nature and family—provide audiences with a sense of peace and encourage self-reflection, helping them cope with the pressures of contemporary life.

Hajek and König (2024) also found a positive association between a strong interest in anime/manga and favourable subjective well-being and positive affect outcomes. For example, engagement with anime/manga narratives may provide individuals with a form of escapism which may help them to cope with stressful situations in daily life and this eventually could increase subjective well-being. This was supported by Hajek et al.'s (2025) study, who observed that engaging in cosplay at comic conventions and live-action role-playing games (LARPs) offers participants a means of escape from daily pressures which may positively impact their overall well-being.

AMG narratives frequently explore concepts of perseverance, companionship, and character development (Born, 2010; Cooper-Chen, 2011). These narrative elements can motivate audiences - who typically form strong connections with beloved characters (Reysen et al., 2022) - to approach personal difficulties with enhanced resolve and hopefulness (Ramasubramanian & Kornfield, 2012). Another particularly significant aspect is how AMG communities foster belonging and inclusion among fans (Reysen et al., 2024). These communities establish welcoming spaces, both digital and physical, where members can express their enthusiasm and share experiences in non-judgmental environments (Krishnamurti et al., 2023). This shared understanding and fellowship can enhance psychological well-being through connections with others who appreciate the same cultural content (Reysen et al., 2024). Overall, engagement with AMG typically promotes positive mental health outcomes by satisfying fundamental psychological needs and supporting individual development.

2.3.   *Self-Determination Theory (SDT)*

SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2017) provides a useful framework for understanding how AMG might contribute to psychological well-being. SDT posits that human motivation and optimal functioning depend on the fulfillment of three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy (the need to feel in control of one's actions and choices), competence (the need to feel capable and effective in one's activities), and relatedness (the need to feel connected to others).When these needs are satisfied, individuals experience enhanced motivation, engagement and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Conversely, when these needs are thwarted, individuals may experience diminished motivation and psychological well-being (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). The youth face developmental challenges in constructing their identities, establishing independence, and forming meaningful social connections. SDT's three needs align precisely with these growth areas, positioning it as an optimal theoretical framework for understanding how AMG engagement contributes to mental resilience during this critical life stage. Though SDT has been applied to various domains including education (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009), work (Gagné & Deci, 2005) and leisure activities (Vallerand, 2007), its application to AMG consumption among society especially the youth remains underexplored.

Though few, there are several studies which have examined experience with AMG from the perspective of SDT. Ryan et al. (2006) used SDT to focus on fundamental psychological needs

that make games attractive across the board rather than merely analyzing specific games or genres. The authors believe this broad psychological approach is more practical than studying individual games since the gaming landscape changes so rapidly and varies so widely. They found that players who experienced autonomy and competence while gaming showed more positive outcomes which helps explain why games can be both enjoyable and psychologically restorative for many people. In this sense, games are appealing because they fulfill basic human psychological needs, regardless of what specific game someone is playing. In another study, Leung and Cho's (2024) findings align with SDT by demonstrating that people write more detailed anime reviews when their psychological needs are satisfied - particularly competence (from writing experience and positive feedback) and autonomy (expressing strong personal emotions about shows they care about).

There are also findings from other studies on AMG whereby the findings reflect the core psychological needs espoused in SDT. For instance, Chen (2007) asserted that anime/manga fandom serves as more than escapism - it functions as a meaningful outlet for self-expression, artistic achievement, and community building where fans engage in creative activities like manga drawing and cosplay that enhance their well-being through learning, collaboration, and the formation of supportive relationships based on shared interests. This engagement satisfies all three basic psychological needs: **autonomy** through opportunities for free self-expression and creative pursuits driven by personal passion; **competence** through the development of artistic skills and ongoing learning; and **relatedness** through community connections that provide feedback, mutual support and collaborative relationships within what fans perceive as a welcoming and inclusive social environment.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. *Hermeneutic Phenomenology*

This study employs hermeneutic phenomenology as its qualitative research methodology. Hermeneutic phenomenology, developed from the philosophical works of Heidegger (1962) and later refined by scholars such as Gadamer (1975) and van Manen (1990), seeks to interpret and understand the lived experiences of individuals within their specific contextual situations. Unlike descriptive phenomenology, which aims to bracket out the researcher's preconceptions, hermeneutic phenomenology acknowledges that interpretation is inevitably influenced by the researcher's pre-understanding and theoretical framework (Laverty, 2003). While ethnographic methodology examines collective cultural behaviors within communities, hermeneutic phenomenological research focuses on understanding how individuals interpret and make sense of their lived experiences (Yamato et al., 2011).

The choice of hermeneutic phenomenology for this study is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration of how Malaysian youth experience their engagement with AMG and how these experiences relate to their psychological needs and well-being. This method involves comprehensive interviews where participants share their stories and explain what their AMG experiences mean to them personally. This approach recognizes that the participants' experiences are embedded within cultural, social, and personal contexts that shape their meaning-making processes. The hermeneutic circle - a continuous process of moving between parts (individual experiences) and whole (broader contexts and theoretical frameworks) - guides the interpretive

analysis in this study (Gadamer, 1975). Due to its effectiveness in understanding subjective meanings and interpretive experiences**,** previous studies involving AMG have applied this approach (Yamato, 2012, 2013; Yamato et al., 2011).

3.2. Participants

Using purposive sampling, this study recruited Malaysian youth aged between 18 to 30 years who actively engage with at least one component of AMG. The participants were recruited via three methods namely (1) AMG events (such as expo, convention and festivals) as well as anime or *kawaii* character themed cafes; (2) social media and; (3) referrals. These multiple recruitment channels helped ensure diversity in participant demographics, including age, gender, ethnicity, and occupation. Data saturation was achieved after 12 participants, as subsequent interviews yielded no new themes or patterns regarding psychological experiences with AMG, with participants consistently describing similar engagement experiences.

The 12 participants' demographics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of Participants

Name*	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Occupation
Amos	27	Male	Chinese	Controlling accountant
Kok Meng	22	Male	Chinese	Student
Siva	23	Male	Indian	Student
Aaliyah	23	Female	Malay	Student
Zhi Long	22	Male	Chinese	Student
Victor	24	Male	Chinese	Student
Suhaila	24	Female	Malay	Student
Isaac	24	Male	Chinese-Indian	Senior consultant
Kaylee	21	Female	Chinese	Student
Addison	24	Male	Chinese	Engineer
Nora	23	Female	Chinese	Nurse
Ravena	21	Female	Malay-Indian	Student

Pseudonyms are used to protect participants' privacy

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted online to accommodate participants' schedules. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participant's consent. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in exploring participants' unique experiences while ensuring that key areas related to the research questions were addressed. Example of questions asked during the interview include "How did you first get introduced to anime, manga and games?", "What are your favourite characters? Why do they appeal to you?", "How has engaging with Japanese pop culture merchandise (e.g. comic books, video games, soundtracks and music albums) had an impact on or affected your self-identity (who you are as a person)?". Follow-up questions were also used to probe deeper into participants' responses and encourage reflection on the meaning of their experiences with AMG.

This study was conceptually grounded in SDT, which posits that psychological well-being and motivation are influenced by the fulfillment of three basic needs: autonomy, competence, and

relatedness. While SDT served as the foundational theoretical framework, the interview protocol was designed with open-ended, exploratory questions that prioritized the participants' own meaning-making processes. Rather than structuring questions strictly around the three SDT dimensions, the interview protocol invited narratives about participants' personal engagement with AMG. This flexible, inductive approach allowed for emergent insights while avoiding the risk of imposing theoretical categories prematurely. During the data analysis phase, the SDT framework was employed as an interpretive lens to examine how participants' experiences aligned with the concepts of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data analysis followed the hermeneutic circle process, involving repeated engagement with the interview transcripts to develop a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences. The analysis involved several interconnected steps:

1. **Familiarization**: Each interview transcript was read multiple times to gain a holistic understanding of the participant's experience.
2. **Thematic analysis**: Significant statements and phrases that directly relate to the participants' experiences with AMG were identified and organized into preliminary themes.
3. **Interpretive analysis**: These themes were then interpreted within the context of SDT, examining how they reflected experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.
4. **Integration**: The interpreted themes were integrated into a comprehensive description of the phenomenon, showing how AMG engagement fulfilled psychological needs and contributed to participants' well-being.

Given the interpretive nature of hermeneutic phenomenology, this study acknowledged the researcher's role as an active participant in the meaning-making process. To enhance analytical rigor and minimize potential bias, reflexivity was practiced throughout the research. This involved keeping a detailed reflective log to track evolving thoughts and positionality, as well as engaging in peer discussions to test and refine emerging interpretations. All thematic insights were closely tied to the participants' own expressions and lived contexts to ensure that the analysis remained grounded in their experiences, rather than imposed by the researcher's assumptions.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Universiti Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC). All participants provided informed consent before participating in the interviews and were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and all data were stored securely.

4. FINDINGS

The analysis of the interview data revealed that engagement with AMG fulfilled the three fundamental psychological needs outlined in SDT: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The

findings are organized according to these three needs, with sub-themes illustrating how AMG engagement contributes to each need.

4.1. Autonomy: The Need to Feel in Control of One's Actions and Choices

Character Identification and Alignment

Participants reported identifying with characters in AMG who embodied autonomy and independent decision-making. This identification allowed participants to explore and affirm their own values and sense of self.

Raveena described her connection with *Lady Oscar*, a character from the anime and manga *The Rose of Versailles* who subverts gender norms:

"Do I aspire to be like her? In certain ways, I do. I like her values that she holds, like bravery, and I guess she subverts some gender norms. In the setting of the story, during the French Revolution, and in France at that time, women were expected to act a certain way, and she's completely opposite. Obviously, it's not as extreme now, but I feel like there are still values, like societal expectations. I guess I would like to be myself and subvert those expectations. Being heroic, being brave, overall being kind is something that I aspire to be as well, just like her."

Similarly, Siva expressed admiration for characters who demonstrate unwavering commitment to their principles:

"The main character in the game is Kiryu Kazuma… So he's a really interesting character in the world of Yakuza. Because if you think of Yakuza, you think they are very bad people…But Kiryu has his own set of morals that he will always follow. The first thing he won't do is to kill another person. So throughout the whole entire series, he follows his morals very closely. And the second thing, he won't hurt anybody that is weaker than him. He won't go bully other people or do anything to them."

This identification with autonomous characters reflects participants' desire to maintain their own sense of autonomy by staying true to their values and making independent choices, even in challenging circumstances.

Self-Directed Coping Mechanism

Participants described using AMG as a deliberate and self-directed coping strategy during difficult times. This autonomous choice of coping mechanism gave them a sense of control over their emotional well-being.

Isaac explained how anime provided an escape during the COVID-19 lockdown:

"And early university was still all right because I was still having fun. But when COVID hit, the lockdowns came, I felt like I was robbed of my freedom, right? I was looking forward to the college

life, the university life that, you know, enjoy parties, enjoy friends, go out with friends. And I never got that. I was resentful, very angry, full of hate, I would say. Hate towards everything in the world. Like, why can't I just go out? Why the hell must the lockdown and pandemic happen now? So the only escape I had was anime, music and my car, right? So I would go out for drives around my 'taman' one (residential neighbourhood). But mostly I would watch anime. And a lot of the anime were romance animes, animes about friends, animes about enjoying. And a lot of those self-insert, make yourself feel very good animes, those isekai, those power fantasy animes. It really helped me get through a tough time mentally. So that's why I have a very strong connection."

Aaliyah similarly described using anime as a therapeutic tool:

"So, maybe most of the times when I'm a bit over the place and I feel like there are so many things happening that I need a break. Then, I will just watch my anime. It just brings me into some other realms. So, I just forgot about it for a while and it just rebuilds my energy."

By consciously choosing to engage with AMG as a way to manage stress and emotions, participants exercised autonomy over their coping strategies and emotional regulation.

Choice in Media Engagement

Participants emphasized the importance of having control over what, when, and how they engaged with AMG. This freedom of choice enhanced their sense of autonomy.

Addison described his selective approach to choosing anime:

"Try to find a genre that you like because in a single genre, there are many different stories. So if you just go to the top list, it may not be what you're looking for. So maybe if you like comedy or if you like romance, you can start there and then go see the top list for that genre, like top romance anime or top comedy anime. Then you can read the synopsis. But usually, those lists like on this website called MyAnimeList, it's very, it's trustable. It's a trustable website. The rankings are ranked by people who actually, consumers who actually watch the anime."

Kaylee highlighted her autonomy in deciding when to engage with AMG:

"I would say because of my busy schedule now, I only like watch them during my sem break. I would binge watch an entire series when I'm free in my sem break."

This ability to make choices about their media consumption reinforced participants' sense of autonomy and control over their leisure activities.

Ownership and Control of Space

Some participants created personalized physical spaces filled with AMG-related items, which provided them with a sense of ownership and control over their environment.

Suhaila described the satisfaction she derived from her anime-decorated room:

"You know, the fact that I go inside my room and I see this, the posters on my wall and then the figurines on the shelves... I feel excited, and I feel happy and sometimes I feel calm, you know, having this kind of room decoration."

These personalized spaces served as extensions of participants' identity and provided them with environments where they felt a strong sense of autonomy and self-expression.

4.2.   Competence: The Need to Feel Capable and Effective in One's Activities

Skill Development and Application

Participants reported developing various skills through their engagement with AMG and applying these skills in real-world contexts, thereby enhancing their sense of competence.

Isaac described learning driving skills from anime:

"Watching Wangan Midnight, watching Initial D, how they drive. Eventually, I picked it up, and it's surprising how many actual driving lessons you learn from the anime in Wangan Midnight as well as Initial D, right? And I apply it in real life as well."

He also mentioned how Japanese video games helped him develop strategic thinking:

"PSP, I played games like Street Fighter, all from Namco, Bandai Namco... So, Nintendo, those kinds of games, Super Mario, you know, Sonic the Hedgehog."

Through these experiences, participants developed new competencies and applied them in ways that increased their sense of effectiveness and capability.

Inspiration to Improve Competence

AMG often inspired participants to develop new skills or improve existing ones, motivated by characters who demonstrated growth and mastery.

Victor explained how the volleyball anime *Haikyu!!* motivated him to improve his physical skills:

"After I'm watching the anime for the Haikyu!!, so, actually, it's like having the motivation, oh, I want to go play volleyball."

Zhi Long found inspiration in characters like *Kazuma* who overcome challenges through effort and perseverance:

"Yeah, there's another character that I really like. It's called Kazuma. It's from another anime. The anime is a comedy kind of anime. I really like that character because the character used to be a nobody in his previous life. But once he's in a new world, he tries his best to improve on his personality and also his lifestyle. That really motivates me."

These narratives of growth and improvement in AMG provided participants with models for their own development and inspired them to enhance their competencies.

Mastery of Language

Several participants developed Japanese language skills through their engagement with AMG, providing them with a tangible sense of competence and achievement.

Aaliyah described her language acquisition:

"I can actually hold a daily life conversation with the Japanese now. So, my circles also with Japanese people are expanding."

Nora shared a similar experience:

"I picked up on Japanese quite easily after continuously watching and listening to Japanese dubbed anime. In fact, when I went to Japan about five years back, I suppose, I could actually communicate with some locals there. Yeah, that's the way we guided ourselves around sometimes, because we don't follow a tour."

This incidental language learning represented a significant competence development that participants valued and could apply in real-world situations.

Mastery of Self

Participants reported that AMG helped them develop emotional intelligence and self-understanding, enhancing their sense of competence in managing their emotions and interpersonal relationships.

Amos described how an emotionally impactful anime (i.e. *Assassination Classroom*) changed his emotional awareness:

"So this show, what happened was it basically made me so emotionally invested. And it made me cry really badly at the ending. And from that point on, what happened to me was I basically became more open with my emotions and my EQ increased, I would say. So, me as a person now is very emotional compared to before. So I would say it benefited me to help me understand myself better and understand other people a bit easier as well."

This enhanced emotional competence enabled participants to navigate their inner experiences more effectively and develop more meaningful relationships with others.

4.3.   *Relatedness: The Need to Feel Connected to Others*

Bonding with Family

AMG provided opportunities for participants to strengthen family bonds through shared activities and interests.

Kok Meng described playing *Pokémon* Trading Card games with his brother:

"I'm playing with my younger brother... after that, I will feel like it's not so tiring, and maybe for me, that is a type of rest also."

These shared experiences created meaningful connections with family members and enhanced participants' sense of relatedness.

Social Connection through Shared Interests

Participants reported that their AMG interests facilitated social connections with peers, providing common ground for conversations and relationships.

Siva explained how anime expanded his social circle:

"I have more friends. After I watch anime, I can talk to my friends about anime topics because they also watch anime. So, I feel like it increases my social circle."

Victor highlighted how shared gaming interests facilitated communication:

"I'm playing this game, right? So, you're also playing this game, so we have the same topic to communicate."

Kok Meng emphasized the social benefits of shared hobbies:

"It's more easier for you to social or communicate with them when people have the same hobby."

AMG thus served as a social catalyst, helping participants develop and maintain connections with others who shared their interests.

Emotional Connection with Characters

Participants formed deep emotional connections with fictional characters, which satisfied their need for relatedness and provided models for interpersonal relationships.

Aaliyah described her emotional investment in anime characters:

"Most of my experiences [with Japanese pop culture] would be sad...every single character that I like... it died, and it left a big impression on me."

Kaylee expressed a strong bond with complex characters:

"Goro Akechi is basically this outwardly friendly detective and princely character… but he's also a serial killer. The reason he's been doing all this is because when he was a child, he was abandoned by his father... So it's his whole revenge plot."

These parasocial relationships with fictional characters provided participants with emotional experiences that enhanced their understanding of human connections and relationships.

Tolerance and Acceptance

Engagement with AMG broadened participants' understanding and acceptance of diverse perspectives and identities, enhancing their capacity for relatedness across differences.

Aaliyah reflected on how anime influenced her perspective on LGBTQ+ individuals:

"I have a few friends who are actually gay. So it just makes me feel like it's okay. But personally, because I'm a Muslim, I do not condone it."

While maintaining her personal religious boundaries, Aaliyah's engagement with AMG helped her develop a more nuanced understanding of diversity and fostered tolerance that facilitated connections with people different from herself.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed how AMG consumption contributes positively to all three needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, thus challenging prevalent negative narratives about these media forms.

5.1. *AMG and the Fulfillment of Psychological Needs*

The findings demonstrate that AMG engagement supports **autonomy** through character identification, self-directed coping, media choice and environmental control. Participants exercised agency in their media consumption and used AMG as tools for self-expression and identity exploration. This aligns with research by Rigby and Ryan (2011) who found that narrative media can support autonomy by allowing consumers to explore different identities and make meaningful choices. The use of AMG as a deliberate coping strategy during difficult times, as described by participants like Isaac and Aaliyah, illustrates how media consumption can be an autonomous choice that contributes to emotional self-regulation. This supports previous findings that autonomously chosen leisure activities can enhance well-being and stress recovery (Weinstein & Ryan, 2011).

Participants' experiences of **competence** through AMG engagement manifested in skill development, inspiration for improvement, language acquisition and enhanced emotional intelligence. These findings echo research by Przybylski et al. (2010), who found that video games can satisfy competence needs by providing optimal challenges and opportunities for mastery. The inspiration for self-improvement drawn from AMG as described by Victor and Zhi Long, illustrates the motivational power of narrative media. Characters who demonstrate growth and overcome challenges serve as models for personal development, supporting the competence need through vicarious learning and aspiration. This aligns with Bandura's (1977) social learning theory and suggests that AMG can provide valuable models for competence development.

AMG consumption supported **relatedness** through family bonding, peer connections, emotional engagement with characters and increased tolerance for diversity. These findings support research by Jenkins (2006) on fan communities as spaces for social connection and belonging. The finding that AMG facilitates social connections through shared interests aligns with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) which suggests that shared interests and group memberships contribute to a sense of belonging and social identity. For participants like Siva, Victor, and Kok Meng, AMG provided common ground for forming and maintaining social relationships, enhancing their sense of relatedness. The emotional connections that participants formed with fictional characters, as described by Aaliyah and Kaylee, represent parasocial relationships that can fulfill relatedness needs (Derrick et al., 2009). These emotional engagements provide opportunities for empathy, emotional processing, and social learning that contribute to participants' sense of connection and belonging.

5.2   *Cultural Context and AMG Engagement*

The Malaysian cultural context shapes participants' experiences with AMG in important ways. Malaysia's multicultural society with its diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, influences how participants interpret and engage with Japanese cultural products. For example, Aaliyah's negotiation of LGBTQ+ representation in anime within the context of her Muslim identity illustrates how cultural and religious values mediate media engagement. Furthermore, the growing popularity of AMG in Malaysia, evidenced by fan events, exhibitions, and themed cafes, creates a cultural environment that supports engagement with these media forms. This supportive context enhances the potential of AMG to fulfill psychological needs by providing opportunities for community engagement and shared experiences.

5.3   *Mental Resilience Among Malaysian Youth*

The fulfillment of psychological needs through AMG engagement fosters mental resilience among the youth. Youth with strong mental resilience can express emotions effectively, think constructively, use healthy coping strategies, make informed decisions, and build positive relationships that lead to flourishing lives. According to MyMHI'23, youth's mental well-being depends on seven factors influencing their transition to adulthood: lifestyle, surrounding environment, personal characteristics, life experience, social support, coping mechanisms and a healthy mind (IYRES & UNICEF, 2024). Table 2 shows how the fulfillment of psychological needs through AMG engagement directly supports psychological wellness and mental health maintenance across the seven mental health domains.

Table 2: AMG engagement and mental resilience across various mental health domains

Mental health domain	AMG engagement & mental resilience
Personal Characteristics	Builds self-esteem and self-efficacy through creative practices (fan art, cosplay, fanfiction); fosters autonomy via character/genre choices aligned with values; nurtures life purpose through meaningful story arcs.
Social Support	Strengthens bonds with friends and peers through shared fandoms, online communities, and conventions; enhances belonging in networks that value AMG interests.
Coping Mechanism	Supports stress relief through healthy escapism; promotes resilience and problem-solving via character journeys; aids emotional regulation as characters model coping strategies.
Lifestyle	Improves social interaction skills (e.g., language use, fan discussions, role-play); integrates AMG leisure to restore balance alongside daily responsibilities.
Surrounding Environment	Provides positive online platforms for creative sharing; fosters inclusive communities that embrace diversity and alternative interests.
Life Experience	Normalizes *otaku* culture, reducing stigma; promotes empathy, tolerance, and acceptance of diverse identities.
Healthy Mind	Helps manage depression and anxiety through uplifting narratives and comforting, familiar AMG content.

6. IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to theoretical understanding of youth media engagement by demonstrating how SDT operates within transcultural media contexts. The findings illustrate how AMG engagement satisfies fundamental psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness through culturally specific mechanisms. This study challenges simplistic media effects models by highlighting the active, meaning-making processes through which youth selectively engage with and internalize media elements that support their developmental goals. Additionally, this study advances theoretical perspectives on transcultural identity formation, suggesting that engagement with foreign cultural products like AMG represents not mere consumption but a sophisticated process of negotiating between global and local identities in increasingly connected societies.

6.2 Practical Implications

First of all, AMG content creators should balance entertainment with narrative development that supports psychological well-being. As the findings suggest, young consumers deeply engage with complex characters and moral dilemmas. Production teams incorporating expertise from education and psychology can enhance developmental impacts without compromising appeal. Localization efforts should preserve cultural nuances while providing context for international audiences, acknowledging that cultural learning represents a significant engagement motivation. Strategic transmedia storytelling employs multiple media formats to foster different aspects of youth development while simultaneously constructing integrated brand ecosystems that maintain engagement across platforms.

Secondly, AMG marketers should highlight psychological benefits in promotional materials, emphasizing how content supports identity exploration and social connection. Cross-promotional partnerships between AMG brands and educational resources can expand market reach while increasing perceived value. Furthermore, retailers can transform their approach by creating community spaces that foster the social dimensions of AMG engagement. Stores functioning as community hubs can host events that mirror the conventions valued by AMG consumers. Staff training should emphasize knowledge sharing over sales tactics, reflecting the mentorship dynamics observed in AMG communities where experienced fans guide newcomers. This approach builds loyalty while creating authentic connections with consumers who value belonging within these interest communities.

Mental health practitioners can incorporate carefully selected anime or manga into therapeutic contexts, using them as emotionally resonant discussion prompts. This study shows many youth already use these media for emotional processing thereby suggesting formalization of this tendency could benefit therapeutic relationships. Therapists working with young clients might explore their AMG interests to build rapport and understand their values and emotional needs. Character identification processes revealed in this study provide a glimpse into psychological functioning and self-concept that clinicians can therapeutically leverage.

Finally, youth organizations can structure AMG-related activities to intentionally develop transferable skills while meeting psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Community programs hosting manga drawing workshops or cosplay events can foster artistic and technical skills within motivating social contexts. Leadership initiatives might analyze different leadership styles portrayed in popular anime as frameworks for discussing approaches to influence and responsibility. The character identification patterns based on the findings suggest fictional role models significantly impact youth aspirations, making thoughtful AMG integration valuable for developmental programming.

7. CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study examined how AMG support Malaysian youths' psychological and emotional needs through the lens of SDT and hermeneutic phenomenology. Findings show AMG

foster **autonomy** (media choice, self-directed coping), **competence** (skill development, language learning, emotional intelligence), and **relatedness** (family bonding, peer connections, tolerance for diversity). Rather than sources of addiction or isolation, AMG emerge as tools for identity exploration, resilience, and well-being, offering accessible avenues for youth to grow, connect, and cope. Integrating these media into mental health initiatives could create more engaging, youth-centered approaches that enhance motivation, resilience, and quality of life.

One notable limitation of this study is the lack of direct alignment between the interview questions and the specific constructs of SDT (autonomy, competence, and relatedness). Although SDT was used as the guiding theoretical framework, the interview questions were not explicitly categorized according to these dimensions. As a result, the mapping of participant narratives to SDT constructs occurred primarily during the thematic analysis stage, rather than being embedded from the outset. While this approach allowed for a more open and participant-led exploration of experiences, future research could benefit from a more structured interview protocol that includes targeted prompts for each SDT need. This would enhance conceptual coherence and provide more direct evidence of psychological needs fulfillment.

Additionally, future research could explore how different patterns of AMG engagement relate to psychological outcomes, how cultural factors moderate the relationship between AMG consumption and well-being, and how AMG-based interventions might support youth mental health. Such research would further enhance our understanding of the potential of popular cultural products to support psychological health and well-being.

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