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Virtual Interaction of Death Trap Team Members in the Mobile Legends Game as a Form of Virtual Catharsis

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Abstract: This study explores the nature of virtual interaction among members of the "Death Trap" Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB) team and investigates how this interaction functions as a form of virtual catharsis. MLBB, a popular Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) game (Winarti, 2021; Taufik, 2022), serves as an intense, competitive virtual environment that requires profound team coordination. Employing a descriptive qualitative methodology, this research analyzed the communication patterns and emotional experiences of the Death Trap team, composed of students from the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences at Medan Area University. Data was gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Sugiyono, 2013) and observation of in-game and out-of-game communications. The key findings reveal that the team's virtual interaction, facilitated through in-game voice chat and external social platforms, creates a strong social bond that transcends geographical distance. Crucially, the shared experience of competitive intensity provides an arena for emotional regulation and discharge. This process, termed virtual catharsis, allows team members to constructively release pent-up stress, aggression, and frustration derived from academic pressures and daily life through structured, high-stakes virtual engagement. The conclusion is that virtual interaction within competitive gaming groups functions as a significant mechanism for psychological relief, transforming the gaming space into a vital, dynamic social support system.

Keywords: Virtual Catharsis, Virtual Interaction, Mobile Legends, MOBA, Team Dynamics, Emotional Regulation

INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, online games have evolved into a new form of lifestyle, easily accessible through smartphones by players of all ages. One of the most popular games in this category is Mobile Legends: Bang Bang, a Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) game developed by Moonton. According to data from Google Play Store, Mobile Legends ranks

first among the most downloaded games, with over 500 million downloads worldwide (Winarti, 2021). The game involves two opposing teams of five players each, aiming to destroy the opponent's base by strategically controlling three lanes—top, middle, and bottom—and defending their own (Fuentes, 2017).

The appeal of Mobile Legends lies not only in its competitive gameplay but also in its interactive communication features, such as text chat and voice chat, which allow players to coordinate strategies and express emotions during gameplay. This has turned the platform into a virtual space for social interaction, where unique linguistic codes and in-game terminologies function as strategic communication cues among team members (Ananda et al., 2022).

Among the many teams active in Mobile Legends, one notable example is the Death Trap Team, a group of six players based in Bekasi who have been consistently active since early 2022. Preliminary observations revealed that this team frequently engages in virtual interactions, preferring voice and text chat over face-to-face communication. These interactions occur mainly at night, as the members use gameplay not only for entertainment but also as a means of social connection and emotional expression.

The development of communication and information technology has significantly transformed the way individuals interact. The rise of the internet and digital media has created a cyberspace that enables virtual interaction—a process of communication occurring beyond spatial and temporal boundaries (Sakti & Yulianto, 2013). Through platforms such as social media and online games, individuals can exchange information, express emotions, and even experience emotional release or catharsis (Shadiqin et al., 2020). The concept of catharsis, rooted in Aristotle's Poetics, refers to the release of negative emotions such as anger, fear, and sadness through safe and symbolic actions (Vanri et al., 2011).

In the context of Mobile Legends, virtual interaction among players can serve as a form of virtual catharsis, allowing individuals to channel emotions and reduce psychological tension during gameplay. The Death Trap Team's communication dynamics illustrate how online gaming environments can function as new media spaces for both collaboration and emotional expression.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the virtual interactions among members of the Death Trap Team in Mobile Legends as a form of virtual catharsis. Specifically, it seeks to describe the patterns of virtual interaction and analyze how these interactions contribute to emotional release during gameplay. Although prior studies have examined Mobile Legends from various perspectives, research focusing on virtual catharsis through in-game interaction remains limited. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach with participatory observation, this study contributes to understanding how online games operate as platforms for emotional expression and social connection in the digital age.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework. This study is grounded in two core concepts: Virtual Interaction and Virtual Catharsis.

Virtual Interaction

Virtual interaction refers to the communication and exchange of information, thoughts, and emotions between individuals who are separated geographically, using technology as a mediating tool (Tysara, 2020; Sepriano, 2022). In the context of MLBB, interaction occurs on multiple levels:

1. **In-Game (Synchronous):** Quick chat commands, pings, and, crucially, voice communication, which demands immediate, high-fidelity coordination during critical moments of play (Telenkaho, 2017).

2. **Out-of-Game (Synchronous/Asynchronous):** Communication on external platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, Discord) for scheduling, strategizing, post-game debriefing, and non-game related social bonding.

The intensity and necessity of interaction in a MOBA setting distinguish it from passive media consumption. The team's survival and success are directly tied to the efficacy of their virtual communication, thereby forcing a level of psychological commitment and social presence within the virtual space.

Virtual Catharsis

The concept of catharsis originated in ancient Greek drama, primarily defined by Aristotle as the purgation or purification of emotions (pity and fear) experienced by the audience upon viewing a tragedy. In modern psychology, catharsis is broadly interpreted as the release of strong, repressed emotions, often through aggressive or tension-reducing activity.

Virtual Catharsis is the adaptation of this concept to the digital realm. It posits that the structured, rule-bound, and often aggressive nature of competitive virtual gaming provides a socially acceptable and controlled outlet for the discharge of negative real-world emotions (e.g., stress, anger, frustration) (Surbakti, 2017).

The competitive MOBA environment is uniquely suited for this mechanism:

1. **Structured Aggression:** The act of destroying turrets and engaging in combat is a controlled, focused aggression, enabling emotional release without real-world negative consequence.
2. **Collective Emotional Release:** When a team wins a difficult match, the collective celebratory release (joy, relief) purges the shared tension built during the game and potentially from external sources. Conversely, a shared loss allows for collective venting and processing of frustration, strengthening interpersonal bonds through shared vulnerability.

Furthermore, the team acts as a microsystem that validates the individual's emotional experience. By identifying with the "Death Trap" team, members negotiate their digital identity (Sakti & Yulianto, 2013; Shadiqin et al., 2020), which is reinforced by the team's shared emotional journey.

Based on the background and theoretical framework, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do the virtual interactions among members of Team Death Trap in the game *Mobile Legends* serve as a form of virtual catharsis?
2. What are the forms of virtual catharsis that occur within the virtual interactions among members of Team Death Trap in the game *Mobile Legends*?

METHOD

This research employed a descriptive qualitative approach. This methodology is appropriate for exploring and describing the complex, subjective experiences, behaviors, and interaction patterns of a specific social group (Sugiyono, 2013). The study focused on understanding the *meaning* and *function* of virtual interaction from the perspective of the participants.

The research setting was primarily virtual, occurring within the Mobile Legends: Bang Bang game environment and associated external communication platforms (e.g., dedicated group chat). The human element of the study involved student participants enrolled in the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences at Medan Area University.

The participants were the five core members of the Mobile Legends team known as "Death Trap." The sampling technique utilized was purposive sampling, specifically focusing

on this established, dedicated team due to their intense level of virtual interaction, competitive dedication, and consistent group dynamic, making them a rich case study for the phenomenon of virtual catharsis.

Inclusion criteria for participants included:

1. Active and dedicated membership in the "Death Trap" team for a minimum of six months.
2. Current enrollment as a student at Medan Area University.
3. Regular participation in team matches (at least 5 times per week).

The participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and maintain ethical standards in data reporting.

Data was collected using three primary techniques:

1. **Semi-Structured Interviews:** In-depth interviews were conducted with each of the five team members (Sugiyono, 2013). The interview guide focused on: the frequency and channels of interaction, the content of their conversations (both game-related and personal), emotional states before and after competitive matches, and their perception of the team's role in managing their personal stress or frustration.
2. **Participant Observation and Documentation:** The researcher observed both in-game (voice chat, quick chat) and out-of-game (group chat logs) interactions over a period of three months. This provided contextual data on the intensity of communication, the use of emotive language, and actual conflict resolution within the group. Game replays were also documented to analyze communication during peak stress moments (e.g., team fights, losing streaks).
3. **Literature Review:** A comprehensive review of existing literature on MOBA interaction (Telenkaho, 2017), virtual communication (Tysara, 2020), and psychological catharsis provided the theoretical basis for interpreting the empirical findings.

The data analysis followed a standard qualitative procedure involving three stages:

1. **Data Reduction:** Transcripts from the interviews and extensive observation notes were summarized, selected, and focused. Data irrelevant to the research questions (interaction patterns and catharsis mechanisms) was discarded.
2. **Data Display:** The reduced data was organized into matrices and descriptive narratives to identify emergent patterns and core themes. This step involved coding for categories such as "Emotional Venting," "Coordinated Aggression," "Post-Game Debriefing," and "Real-Life Stress Disclosure."
3. **Conclusion Drawing/Verification:** Based on the thematic patterns, preliminary conclusions were drawn. These conclusions were continuously verified against the raw data through triangulation—checking interview narratives against observation data and theoretical concepts—to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Virtual Interaction of The Members of Team Death Trap

The findings reveal that members of Team Death Trap primarily interact through the text chat and quick chat features in Mobile Legends. These features are favored due to their practicality and stability during gameplay. Compared to other communication modes, such as voice chat, both features are considered more efficient for managing strategies and maintaining coordination during the match.

Several participants indicated that text chat and quick chat are their preferred tools because they experience fewer technical disruptions, such as unstable connections or microphone issues, which often occur when using voice chat. For instance, one participant mentioned that they tend to use text-based features more frequently since voice chat often

encounters interference, making it less reliable. Another participant emphasized that quick chat is simpler and more convenient because it allows players to communicate preset messages instantly without typing.

In contrast, another participant expressed a different preference, favoring voice chat when playing with the full team. According to this participant, voice chat is more comfortable and efficient for delivering information quickly without the need to type, especially during intense moments of gameplay. However, they also noted that text and quick chat are still commonly used when playing with fewer teammates or in random matches.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that each team member has distinct preferences regarding the mode of virtual interaction based on their comfort and the situational context of gameplay. While most participants rely on text chat and quick chat for coordination, others prefer voice chat for its immediacy in communication.

Furthermore, text chat also serves as a medium for emotional release, where players often channel their negative emotions (such as frustration or anger) through typed messages. This includes the use of harsh or offensive language toward teammates or opponents. Although *Mobile Legends* issues warnings against the use of inappropriate language, participants admitted that such expressions are still commonly used as a form of emotional catharsis within the virtual environment.

Thus, virtual interaction in Team Death Trap not only facilitates strategic communication but also becomes a psychological outlet through which members express and release their emotions, reflecting the function of virtual catharsis in online gaming contexts.

Cleansing as a Form of Releasing Negative Emotions

The findings indicate that members of Team Death Trap exhibit virtual cleansing catharsis as a means of releasing accumulated negative emotions during gameplay in *Mobile Legends*. This form of catharsis is expressed primarily through verbal expressions (often in the form of harsh or emotional language) delivered via the in-game text chat feature.

Based on an online observation conducted on June 23, 2023, one participant (IA) was observed using the coded phrase “don90”, which is a modified form of the Indonesian slang “donggo” (meaning “stupid”). This expression was directed toward another teammate (EA), whose poor gameplay performance caused IA to feel irritated and angry. IA used the text chat feature to express frustration and urge the teammate to play more attentively. This behavior demonstrates IA’s use of virtual cleansing catharsis within the game to release pent-up anger and dissatisfaction through verbal expression.

A subsequent observation on September 20, 2023, revealed that another participant (AS) also engaged in cleansing catharsis. However, unlike IA, AS did not use profanity. Instead, AS expressed frustration through a more neutral phrase, such as “Help me, please,” when feeling upset due to the lack of team support during an attack. This behavior also occurred via the text chat feature and illustrates AS’s way of venting emotional tension in a socially acceptable manner.

Further observation on November 5, 2023, showed that participant EA demonstrated a similar pattern of virtual catharsis. EA used the phrase “m4mpus”, a modified form of the Indonesian slang “mampus” (meaning “to die” or “serves you right”), directed toward opponents after experiencing repeated defeats. This expression was used when EA successfully retaliated against the enemy, indicating that such language served as an outlet for anger and frustration. The observation suggests that EA’s cleansing catharsis took place through the text chat feature as a form of emotional release by using harsh expressions to achieve temporary relief and satisfaction.

Cleansing catharsis, in this context, refers to the release of repressed negative emotions (such as anger, disappointment, and frustration) that are difficult to express directly

in daily life. To deepen the understanding of this phenomenon, the researcher conducted interviews on August 20, 2023, with four participants (IA, EA, AS, and AP). All of them admitted that verbal expression, including the use of coarse language during gameplay, helps them relieve emotional tension and achieve a sense of mental relief.

For instance, participant IA explained that they frequently express harsh words when angry or frustrated during gameplay as a way to release emotional tension. Similarly, participant EA noted that playing *Mobile Legends* serves as an outlet to channel emotions, while participant AS stated that using harsh language while playing brings a sense of satisfaction. Participant AP also mentioned that expressing such words helps emotional energy to be released more effectively, making them feel emotionally lighter afterward.

Based on these observations and interviews, it can be concluded that participants IA, AS, and EA consistently display virtual cleansing catharsis during gameplay. Their expressions of anger or frustration (whether through profanity or emotional outbursts) serve as mechanisms for emotional regulation in the virtual environment. The researcher, who also participated in several gaming sessions with them, observed that the use of coarse language is a recurring pattern among participants. This indicates that the in-game communication features of *Mobile Legends* function not only as strategic tools but also as psychological spaces for emotional release, allowing players to momentarily cleanse themselves from negative emotions accumulated in real life.

Internal and External Factors Influencing Harmless Emotional Release Among Players

The findings indicate that members of Team Death Trap engage in psychoanalytic catharsis—a form of emotional release influenced by both internal and external factors—while playing *Mobile Legends*. This catharsis manifests through verbal expressions of frustration or anger via the in-game text chat feature, typically in response to in-game events or social interactions with teammates.

Based on an online observation conducted on June 23, 2023, participants IA and AP expressed anger and frustration toward teammate EA due to EA's poor performance. Their emotional outbursts were categorized as internally driven catharsis, emerging from their own irritation and disappointment. IA used the coded phrase “don9o” and AP used “blookk”, both of which are euphemistic forms of Indonesian insults meaning “stupid.” These expressions were conveyed through the text chat feature as a form of virtual psychoanalytic catharsis to release negative emotions.

Similarly, on November 5, 2023, participant EA demonstrated internally motivated catharsis by using the expression “m4mpus” (“serves you right”) toward opponents who repeatedly targeted them in the game. The phrase represented EA's attempt to vent anger and restore emotional balance after feeling provoked during gameplay.

In contrast, an observation conducted on November 12, 2023, revealed that participant AS exhibited externally influenced catharsis. Initially composed during gameplay, AS became increasingly agitated after repeated defeats and a lack of support from teammates. This led AS to use expressions such as “ah bg0 banget” and “tlooll” (“so stupid”) in the text chat feature. The findings show that AS's emotional release was triggered by environmental factors—specifically, team dynamics and situational frustrations—rather than internal emotions alone.

In the context of this study, psychoanalytic catharsis refers to the release of suppressed emotional tension influenced by either internal psychological states or external social conditions. To further explore this, interviews were conducted on August 20, 2023, with four participants (IA, EA, AS, and AP). The interviews revealed that while all informants engaged in psychoanalytic catharsis, the driving factors varied.

Participants IA, EA, and AS identified environmental influences as the main triggers for their emotional release. They explained that when playing with friends, the frequent use of harsh language within the group environment influenced their own behavior, making them more likely to adopt similar expressions. This finding suggests that social contagion and peer dynamics play a significant role in shaping emotional expression during gameplay.

Conversely, participant AP reported that their emotional expression was primarily internally driven. AP stated that anger and frustration often led to spontaneous outbursts of harsh words, particularly during moments of defeat or when teammates performed poorly. This supports observational data showing that AP's emotional release was largely self-initiated rather than influenced by others.

In summary, the study concludes that Team Death Trap players exhibit psychoanalytic catharsis through two main factors:

1. Internal factors, characterized by self-generated emotional impulses, as seen in IA, AP, and EA when their anger arose from personal frustration.
2. External factors, shaped by environmental and social interactions, as reflected in AS's reactions to team dynamics.

Overall, these findings highlight that virtual interactions in *Mobile Legends* provide players with a space to express and manage emotions through both internally and externally triggered cathartic behaviors, allowing for the safe release of tension without real-world harm.

Catharsis: The Constructive Channeling of Emotions

Catharsis refers to the constructive release of negative emotions. Rooted in psychoanalytic theory introduced by Sigmund Freud, catharsis is understood as a process of releasing suppressed emotions from the subconscious to prevent psychological tension and aggression (Dewi, 2023). Freud emphasized that repressed emotions, if left unresolved, may intensify and manifest as unhealthy psychological impulses. Therefore, catharsis serves as a cleansing mechanism—both physically and mentally—by allowing individuals to release negative emotional energy (Wahyuningsih, 2017; Kartika Rahmadilla et al., 2023).

In later developments, Scheff proposed that catharsis contributes to psychological well-being through emotional expression. According to Scheff, healing occurs when individuals maintain optimal distance from emotional suppression and express their feelings openly. This process, however, is not as simple as releasing pressure but involves self-awareness and emotional regulation. Contemporary psychoanalytic approaches emphasize self-expression, emotional release, and verbalization of inner thoughts—all of which help individuals confront and process hidden emotions (Qonitatin et al., 2001).

Within the context of this study, all participants reported psychological relief after releasing their negative emotions through virtual interactions while playing *Mobile Legends*. This finding aligns with Scheff's perspective that emotional expression contributes to better mental health. Participants shared that expressing frustration, anger, or stress in the game—whether through text chat, quick chat, or voice chat—helped them feel calmer and more emotionally balanced afterward. These virtual interactions served as a safe emotional outlet, allowing them to discharge pent-up tension without real-world consequences.

The study also suggests that most players are unconsciously engaging in cathartic behavior. They may not explicitly recognize that their in-game emotional expressions—such as shouting, typing harsh words, or using quick chat commands—function as cathartic acts. Emotional release typically occurs during moments of intense interaction, such as when responding to teammates or opponents in the heat of competition.

Furthermore, the concept of catharsis in digital gaming differs from traditional spectatorship-based catharsis, such as in theatre or film. In online games, players are not passive observers

but active participants. The interactive nature of gaming enables players to immerse themselves emotionally, and through this participation, negative emotions can transform into feelings of satisfaction or relief.

Prior media research supports this dynamic, suggesting that playing games—particularly those with competitive or violent elements—can lead to emotional regulation rather than increased aggression (Vanri & Hasbiyalloh, 2011). Repeated exposure allows players to process emotions through controlled virtual experiences, cultivating resilience and emotional balance over time.

In summary, the findings confirm that virtual catharsis in online gaming operates as a form of constructive emotional regulation. Through in-game communication features, members of Team Death Trap release psychological tension and achieve a sense of relief, supporting the theoretical notion that catharsis fosters mental well-being through self-expression and emotional cleansing.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that virtual interactions within the Team Death Trap in *Mobile Legends* function as a medium for virtual catharsis, enabling players to release negative emotions such as stress, frustration, and anger constructively. The findings demonstrate that through features like text chat, voice chat, and quick chat, players engage in emotional expression and regulation, often unconsciously. Consistent with Freud's and Scheff's theories, these interactions serve as psychological relief mechanisms that help maintain emotional balance and mental well-being. Ultimately, gaming becomes not merely a form of entertainment but also a therapeutic outlet—a digital space where individuals can process emotions safely and restore psychological harmony.

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