

# Cozy Gaming: Investigating How Gamers Use TikTok for Digital Resistance

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## Research Article

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# Abstract

Cozy games are a genre marked by elements designed to evoke feelings of safety, abundance, and softness. The rising popularity of this genre is often misattributed to increased desires for escapism and avoidance of the real world. However, TikTok cozy gaming influencers reimagine gameplay as a vehicle for community care, identity expression, and digital resistance in the face of systemic oppression on digital platforms. This study examines how TikTok's algorithmic governance affords unique avenues of self-expression and collective mobilization for women of color gamers, particularly how they negotiate the tensions between coziness as self-care and its commodification. We employed a mixed-methods approach, content analysis with a semi-structured interview of a prominent cozy gaming content creator. After a systematic search for cozy videos on TikTok, we were left with a final sample of 52 TikTok posts. Videos were coded for aesthetic and production elements, identity markers, and activity affordances related to emotional well-being and digital connection. The interview data provided qualitative contextual insights into the motivations, experiences, and community practices of creators. Our content analysis developed three primary themes: identity and representation in the cozy gaming community, cozy gaming as a therapeutic practice, and the commodification of coziness. Explicit references to race (17%,  $N = 9$ ) and gender (35%,  $N = 19$ ) appeared less frequently but were discussed more directly and in greater detail in the interview. Findings from this study suggest that women of color utilize cozy gaming to foster online communities, while also managing tensions between authenticity, community, and digital labor.

## Introduction

Initially labeled as mere escapism, cozy games have been mischaracterized as passive retreats from reality. In truth, the rising popularity of cozy gaming reflects a deliberate and strategic engagement with media that centers care, creativity, and control, especially during times of social and emotional upheaval. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, audiences have increasingly sought media experiences that foster comfort and connection. While this shift towards mindful media use includes nostalgic films, comfort television, and positive digital media engagement, cozy video games stand out as unique interactive spaces where players actively construct meaning and practice resistance, particularly when wanting to protect their mental and emotional well-being. This manifests not only within the gameplay and aesthetics of the cozy games themselves, but also in the digital expressions, representations, and interactive practices of cozy gaming communities on social media.

On TikTok, cozy gamers are not simply escaping or disconnecting; instead, they are reimagining play as a site of community care, identity expression, and subtle forms of digital resistance. We argue that this intentional engagement with cozy gaming and the industry response to its growth is not an isolated trend but a meaningful response to the evolving needs of underserved gaming communities. Video games have long privileged white gamers and white-centered narratives, as Brock [1] notes, "Video games construct exotic fantasy worlds and peoples as places for White male protagonists to conquer, explore, exploit, and solve" (p. 429). Research supports this statement, as the default video game protagonist is often a white character [2]. These underrepresentations in gender and race/ethnicity have

contributed to the marginalization of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) gamers, especially amongst women and femme-identifying individuals.

In response, the cozy gaming community has fostered digital spaces hosted on social media platforms to prioritize inclusive representation and lived experiences with game culture [3]. Cozy gaming is not only distinctive as a genre but also extended as a subculture through digital expression defined by intentional participation and curation of gameplay, prioritizing creative expression, resistance to dominant videogame discourse, and engaging in care-centered values.

Our research investigates the digital expression of BIPOC women and femme-identifying cozy gaming content creators on TikTok. Using a grounded approach, we explore two central research questions: (1) **What does cozy gaming possibly offer or afford BIPOC-identifying gamers, specifically women of color?** and (2) **How is coziness in cozy gaming negotiated, represented, and discussed by these content creators on TikTok?** We focus specifically on TikTok content that prioritizes this population, given reports of heightened experiences of online harassment, gatekeeping, and underrepresentation in the broader gaming industry and community [4].

### **“Welcome to My Cozy Corner”: Cozy Gaming as Intentional Media for Comfort, Emotional Resilience, and Mental Health**

Classic literature on the effects of video games emphasizes adverse outcomes, such as increased levels of aggressive behavior and affect [5]. Studies within this area of literature broadly fall under two main theoretical frameworks. Bandura’s [6] social cognitive theory (SCT) has been widely used to model the potential effects of violent video games on players’ aggression, with the key assumption being that players are rewarded for aggressive and violent acts in-game (e.g., winning after killing all enemies). In a related line of research, the General Aggression Model (GAM) [7] has been employed to examine the effects of violent video games. The GAM, building on SCT, specifies that violent video games can increase aggression via a player’s cognitive, affective, and physiological state. Specifically, learning processes influence an individual’s knowledge structures, such that each violent media episode becomes an additional example of the world being a dangerous place. Over time, this reinforces the belief that aggression is an appropriate response, which can ultimately contribute to the development of a more aggressive personality [8].

The dominance of aggression-centered models like the GAM has shaped much of the discourse around video games as potential sources of harm, particularly through these associations with aggression and antisocial behavior. However, they have also faced significant criticism, particularly for overstating the influence of media violence [9], given the small effect sizes and multiple moderating variables [10]. For example, age plays a role in the selection of different emotional gaming experiences, with older adults found to select more positive video games [11]. Additionally, gaming can provide a unique means of emotional expression and awareness for neurodivergent individuals who struggle to form meaningful social connections in the real world [12].

This focus on aggression not only overlooks cross-cultural differences in media reception and emotional regulation but also obscures alternative genres, such as cozy games, that foreground emotional regulation, relaxation, and mental well-being. This genre, largely overlooked among media effects scholars, refers to games that emphasize soft, warm, aesthetic signals, low-risk challenges, and little to no imminent threats of danger (Waskiewicz & Bakun, 2020). According to industry experts, the element of coziness in these games relates explicitly to “how strongly a game evokes the fantasy of safety, abundance, and softness” [13] (pg. 1). Through specific design choices such as color palette, in-game objects, and simple gameplay, these games increase player immersion in worlds crafted with safety, softness, and tranquility in mind [14–16].

The cozy gaming genre subverts the continued emphasis on the adverse outcomes of video games by lacking typical features of mainstream video game titles, such as first-person shooters, competitive mechanics, and patriarchal narratives [17–18]. Rather than focusing on violence and competition, cozy games offer a reprieve from the stressors of daily life through intentionally soothing gameplay experiences [19]. However, it is important to note that cozy gaming titles are not solely driven by escapism but also designed to facilitate improved emotional well-being and mental health outcomes. Games like *Stardew Valley* (2016) also serve as digital third spaces, providing players with opportunities for social connection and thereby supporting broader emotional well-being [20]. Research on the positive impacts of cozy gaming is still burgeoning, but emerging literature supports the need for studies that investigate the potential positive impacts of video games in greater depth, particularly through social connection [21–22]. From a practical perspective, the use of video games as therapeutic tools is becoming a more popular intervention among mental health practitioners, with studies finding that video game play can decrease stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms and aid in life satisfaction [23–26].

### **“Stress-Free, Rest-Oriented, Belonging”: Identity, Representation, and Resistance in Cozy Games**

Coziness in video games has emerged as more than an aesthetic or genre because it functions as a mode of inclusivity and resistance against an industry historically shaped by masculine and exclusionary norms. Scholars have noted that games such as *Stardew Valley* foster feminist and inclusive spaces within a broader gaming culture that has often marginalized women and non-dominant identities [27–28]. As Bódi [29] proposes, “cozy agency” allows players to distinguish between games that reproduce rigid binaries and exclusionary norms from those that cultivate empowerment, belonging, and meaningful play. This rising popularity of cozy gaming, driven by its aesthetics, gameplay mechanics, and emotional affordances, shifts the focus from the games themselves to the users who are drawn to and sustained by these spaces, particularly because of how cozy games engage aspects of identity, representation, and inclusion [30].

Research across video games more broadly underscores the persistence of representational inequities. Women and femme-identifying characters have long been stereotyped, underrepresented, and exploited. In a content analysis of mainstream games in Spain, Del la Torre-Sierra and Guichot-Reina [31] found that female characters were significantly less visible than their male counterparts and were often relegated

to secondary roles, having unrealistic body and personality traits, and subjected to various forms of violence. James [32] highlights the violence particularly directed toward Black women in popular zombie dystopian games, but underscores how real-world racialized and gendered violence is replicated in gameplay in ways that normalize or trivialize harm toward this group. Similarly, Smith and Thakore [33] argue that negative stereotypes of racialized groups circulate within and beyond games, shaping players' perceptions of marginalized communities. In response, plays frequently rely on imaginative strategies and user modifications to craft more accurate or empowering representations of themselves within game spaces [34].

These patterns of exclusion are not unique to video games but reflect broader media trends. Williams et al. [2] note the persistent overrepresentation of white men and underrepresentation of women and racialized groups across media forms, including film and television. This body of work suggests the need to examine not only how games reproduce these disparities but also how diverse gamers create alternative spaces that affirm their identities alongside their gaming experience. Cozy gaming communities extend this representational work beyond gameplay, particularly through social media platforms, such as TikTok. Here, cozy gamers use platform-specific tools to cultivate digital spaces where their identities, personhood, and communities are represented on their own terms. Importantly, examining how TikTok's affordances shape the nature and reach of these cozy gamers' resistance practices clarifies not only what cozy games are but also why they appeal to players on a mental and emotional level rather than just for entertainment. Importantly, examining how TikTok's affordances shape the nature and reach of these cozy gamers' resistance practices clarifies not only what cozy games are but also why they appeal to players on a mental and emotional level rather than just for entertainment [35]. TikTok features such as short-form video creations, live streaming, aesthetic curation, algorithmic tailoring, and community building allow cozy gamers to respond to dominant gaming discourses, amplify marginalized voices, and collaboratively build counternarratives that contest exclusionary representations [36]. At the same time, algorithmic biases and content moderation systems may constrain the visibility of these resistant practices, reproducing inequities even within seemingly inclusive spaces [37]. Therefore, resistance in cozy gaming must be understood as situated not only within gameplay but also within the technological and cultural logics of platforms like TikTok, which both enable and limit the visibility of marginalized gamers' creative and political practices.

### **“Slow Weekend Rituals & Cozy Game Recs”: Negotiating Resistance, Branding, and Platform Labor**

The emotional and psychological experience of *coziness* is not limited to the gameplay itself, but is also shaped by the curated environments and communities surrounding it. Cozy games have been described as low-stress and healing, positioning the gaming experience as not only a casual entertainment but also an act of “rest as resistance” [38]. This resistance subverts hegemonic gaming culture as well as the cultural norms surrounding the commodification and exploitation of labor by women of color [39]. Yet, “rest as resistance” can carry a similar burden: the act of championing self-care practices places marginalized communities, particularly women of color, in a position where their labor is still commodified and exploited in their effort to maintain visibility and resist platforms governed by

algorithmic filtering [40–42]. We are therefore interested in how minoritized gaming communities balance this act of resistance within dominant, commodified spaces.

As Zhou [26] notes, gaming has evolved from a recreational pastime to productive endeavours. By incorporating a “women’s work” studies approach, they argue that digital labor must be recognized within the domain of video games, where monetization strategies impose demands on players while the labor embedded in interactions often goes unrecognized. This labor is not limited to gameplay itself but also extends to the psychological and emotional dimensions of play—a burden disproportionately placed on marginalized gamers [43]. When gameplay intersects with social media and other digital platforms, questions emerge about how gamers navigate their experiences across multiple spaces. This context requires players to continually negotiate their identities, labor, and interactions with platform-specific commodifications [41–42]. Scholars have noted growing concerns about how digital users, including gamers, develop coping strategies for balancing online practices (e.g., gaming, livestreaming, maintaining profile, etc.) and their offline well-being [44]. The rising importance of commodities such as digital popularity, monetization, and community engagement creates tension between empowerment and resistance, as players must operate within and against the very platforms that profit from their labor [45–46]. Therefore, it is vital to examine how marginalized game players, particularly women and femme-presenting creators of color, discuss and represent cozy gaming on TikTok. Doing so helps us understand not only the affordances of the games themselves but also the evolving industry and digital infrastructures that profit from acts of rest, resistance, and self-preservation.

## Materials and Methods

While we primarily relied on a content analysis of TikTok videos, we adopted a mixed-methods approach by pairing these data with a semi-structured interview. This design allowed us to connect broad patterns observed from content analysis with rich, contextual insights from a prominent cozy gaming influencer, Cozy K.<sup>[1]</sup> She is considered one of the top cozy gamer content creators online, with a following of 303k subscribers on YouTube, 467k followers on Instagram, and 692.1k followers and 19.7 million likes on TikTok as of August 2025. Cozy K is a full-time cozy gamer content creator and has continually represented her community at gaming conventions, speaking sessions, and gaming industry collaborations. Her work has also been sourced by several public-facing news articles about the emergence of the cozy gaming genre [47–50]. The one-hour paid (\$50 USD) Zoom interview provided an opportunity to explore how her motivations and experiences with cozy gaming inform her content creation and engagement with the cozy gaming community via digital media. By integrating qualitative interview data with content analysis of TikTok videos, we offer a more nuanced and layered understanding of how cozy gaming operates as both a personal practice and an extension to digital curation on TikTok.

### ***Content Analysis Sample Selection***

We conducted a comprehensive search on TikTok using the terms “cozy gaming,” “BIPOC cozy gaming,” “cozy gamer,” and “cozy gamer girl” to identify the top TikTok videos posted by cozy gaming content creators. From there, we selected the first 20 videos that appeared in the results for each of the search terms. Searches were conducted across three different accounts: two of the researchers’ personal accounts, and a brand new, neutral account that had not yet been subject to TikTok’s personalized “For You” algorithm. Data were collected across three weeks (October 5th - 20th, 2023) to account for variations in video popularity over time. We collected 720 videos using this process (20 videos × 4 search terms × 3 accounts × 3 weeks). However, we were only interested in videos that had appeared in the search results for all three TikTok accounts, as those were the videos that were likely to have the broadest reach. After removing duplicate videos and videos that did not appear for three accounts, we were left with a final sample of 52 videos.

### ***Coding Procedures and Analysis***

Theoretical positions on aesthetics, digital labor, mood management, and cozy agency drove the development of our codebook. Three trained undergraduate coders tested the codebook (Appendix A) across three rounds of intercoder reliability testing. Krippendorff’s Alpha was used to assess intercoder reliability. Coders evaluated the same 12 TikTok videos (~23% of the sample) independently across these rounds. After each round of coding, the research team met to discuss disagreements and refine the codebook. The final reliability coefficient was  $\alpha = .68$ , which meets the minimum acceptable threshold for exploratory research [51]. Although this value reflects moderate agreement, it is sufficient for the analytic aims and scope of the present study. Once acceptable reliability was established, coders proceeded to assess the remaining videos individually. Interview data were then used to supplement our codes as part of our analysis (see Appendix B for the interview guide). By employing this mixed-methods approach, we can provide more robust and in-depth findings through triangulation [52].

### ***Sample Characteristics***

In addition to our theoretical codes, we also measured the social engagement of each video to better understand the size of the cozy gaming community on TikTok. To do this, we recorded likes ( $Mdn = 41550$ ,  $M = 87119$ ,  $SD = 114576$ ), comments ( $Mdn = 244$ ,  $M = 485$ ,  $SD = 756$ ), bookmarks ( $Mdn = 5136$ ,  $M = 22871$ ,  $SD = 52022$ ), and shares ( $Mdn = 1052$ ,  $M = 9060$ ,  $SD = 29455$ ) of each video. These numbers suggest that, while cozy gaming videos garner meaningful engagement, the community remains relatively small in comparison to more mainstream video game genres. Through our content analysis and discussion, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning ascribed to the community by those who actively participate in it, while also considering how TikTok’s algorithmic dynamics influence the size and nature of this engagement.

## **Results**

After coding was completed, we analyzed our raw codes to extract broader meanings and patterns, identifying three primary themes: identity and representation in the cozy gaming community, cozy

gaming as a therapeutic practice, and the commodification of coziness. The generation of our themes was informed by both existing literature on cozy gaming and our research questions, which centered on the affordances of cozy gaming communities and the negotiations of coziness among women of color. The analysis of our codes was additionally informed by interview findings from Cozy K. This approach allowed us to contextualize surface-level findings with testimony from a member of our sample. For a breakdown of our themes, subthemes, and example codes, see Table 1.

Table 1  
Primary themes and subthemes from content analysis

| Primary Theme                         | Subthemes                                  | Occurrence         | Examples                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Finding Each Other in Cozy Spaces     | Community Through Racial Identity          | Post description   | "Where is my BIPOC community?"                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|                                       |                                            | Video narration    | "Where are all the sistas that play <i>Stardew Valley</i> , Sims games...?"                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|                                       | Gendered Language as Signals for Community | Post description   | "POV: You're a #cozygamer gworl"                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|                                       |                                            | Video text overlay | "Calling all femme-identifying, BIPOC, LGBTQ+ streamers/gamers/creators..."                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Cozy Gaming as a Therapeutic Practice | Anxiety/Stress Management                  | Video narration    | "The cozy genre has helped so many people like me who have anxiety to just calm down and feel good about their day... for a lot of people who have anxiety, cozy games are a way to have some sort of semblance of control or just relaxation from a hard day" |
|                                       | Escapism                                   | Video text overlay | "Games that will cause me to disappear from society"                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|                                       | Mood Improvement                           | Post description   | "DDV [ <i>Disney Dreamlight Valley</i> ] instantly raises the serotonin"                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| The Commodification of Coziness       | Curated Physical Spaces                    | Video              | Gaming setups as the focus of video                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|                                       | Cozy Ritual as a Performance               | Video              | Displays of personal routine when cozy gaming                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |

## Identity and Representation in the Cozy Gaming Community

*"A lot of women of color - at least in America - grew up not having a sense of belonging or feeling a little bit out of place. We found solace and comfort in different hobbies, and gaming was one of those for me. It doesn't have to be this very clear 'I was excluded' thing. You can have friends and be welcome into a space, but still feel a little bit different, and I think gaming was this space where we could go and just 'be' and not*

*feel that little difference, like that little discomfort. A lot of us learned from a young age to create these other worlds for ourselves.” – Cozy K.*

*“I feel a responsibility to continue to show that women of color are multifaceted, women of color show up in the gaming space in different ways, women of color have varied interests and deserve to be in certain places unapologetically.” – Cozy K.*

Our analysis centered on the experiences of women of color within the cozy gaming community. To capture how identity is made visible on this platform, we coded for explicit mentions of race and gender in these videos. Explicit references to racial identity occurred in 17% ( $N = 9$ ) of the videos in this dataset. These mentions typically appeared in hashtags (e.g., #blackgirlgamers, #poccreators, #blackgirlgaming) and in overlay video text or the video description. These references to race in the video descriptions directly invited other BIPOC women gamers to connect with the original video creator, though motivations for connection vary. For example, while one creator was searching for “like-minded individuals/gaming brands” to collaborate professionally with, another creator was searching for “chill BIPOC gamers” to “band together” with. These two instances exemplify the tension between the commodification of play and the need for empowerment through authentic community building.

In contrast, explicit mention of gender identity occurred in 36% ( $N = 19$ ) of the videos in this dataset. Much like mentions of race, these mentions of gender primarily occurred in hashtags (#girlgamer, #thatgirl, #womenintech, #cozygamergirl) as well as in overlay video text and the video description. Creators used this video text to directly invite femme-identifying or LGBTQ+ people to connect with them. Interestingly, creators also often framed femininity through the lens of cozy aesthetics. For example, one creator discussed how “aesthetic gaming girls” buy expensive PC setups to play cozy games. Another creator, in a humorous post, remarked about being a “gamer wife” who disappears to play *Genshin Impact* (2020) in her cozy den.

These data demonstrate the use of hashtags and video text as signals for engagement with other users who share similar racial and/or gender identities. Explicit mentions of race rarely occurred in the video narration itself. One notable example of this happening features the creator speaking directly to her audience and asking, “Where are all the sistas that play *Stardew Valley*, Sims games, [who] don’t play a lot of first-person shooter games because it gives them anxiety whenever they try to play *COD* or anything like that?” In this video, the creator explicitly searches for other BIPOC women to connect with over cozy games, which she features in direct opposition to more popular first-person shooter games, such as *Call of Duty*. These results underscore Cozy K’s observation that women of color gamers are multifaceted and show up in gaming spaces in subversive ways. These gamers and creators use TikTok not just as a platform to share and discuss their favorite games, but also as a space to locate other users with shared identities and interests. Through the strategic use of hashtags, descriptions, and even narration, creators make their identities visible, and in doing so, form a sense of community with other users.

## Cozy Gaming as a Therapeutic Practice

*“[Cozy gaming] is definitely an act of self-care for me because it is something that you can make a very solitary, very mindful moment where you are shutting out all the stressors of your day and fully creating this space where you can focus on one thing or turn your brain off.... You are engaging with this form of media that allows you this form of escapism.... It is definitely an act of self-care, and it has 100% helped with [my] mental health.” – Cozy K.*

Cozy K’s reflections on coziness as an act of self-care mirror a broader trend observed in the dataset. The dataset revealed a recurring emphasis on emotional well-being across multiple videos. A quarter (25%,  $N = 13$ ) of the videos referenced the use of cozy gaming to manage anxiety, improve mood, or to escape from stressors. These raw codes suggest that creators frame cozy gaming as more than just entertainment, but also as a tool for coping and self-care, exemplified by Cozy K’s own experiences in managing her well-being through play. Taken together, we derived the theme of cozy gaming as a therapeutic practice.

Creators explicitly highlighted the calming or mood-lifting benefits of cozy play. In a post caption, one creator described playing *Disney Dreamlight Valley* as an activity that “instantly raises the serotonin.” This underscores how creators communicate cozy gaming as an accessible form of instant self-care to their audiences. In another example, one video featured a creator expressing the following sentiment to her audience:

The cozy genre has helped so many people like me who have anxiety to just calm down and feel good about their day... for a lot of people who have anxiety, cozy games are a way to have some sort of semblance of control or just relaxation from a hard day.

Many creators positioned cozy play as a means of escape from the real world. For instance, in one video, a young woman approaches her cozy gaming setup, puts on a soft blanket, and plays her Nintendo Switch. At the same time, a voiceover narrates, “I used to think I was introverted because I love being alone, but it turns out that I just love being at peace.” In another video, another creator plays a pizza-making simulator on her desktop computer with the overlay text, “POV: when you turn to gaming as an escape.” Another video shows several game titles playing on a desktop monitor, with the overlay text, “Games that will cause me to disappear from society,” emphasizing immersive engagement as a form of stress relief.

Across these examples, soothing background music and recurring cozy signals – such as blankets, plush toys, and soft lighting – reinforce the idea that withdrawing into cozy play is not avoidance, but an intentional act of cultivating calm and peace. Creators framed cozy gaming as an intentional practice for managing anxiety, regulating mood, and creating a sense of emotional safety.

## The Commodification of Coziness

*“When you are a gaming creator, there is this sense of like, if I’m playing this game, I could be playing it for content. Like, I could be recording a YouTube video, or I could be streaming this instead.... There was a point*

*where I wouldn't play a game if it wasn't on stream.... I'm sitting here at night wanting to play a game because that's what helps me destress, and I feel like I can't because I would have to play it on stream to a community that I'm telling, 'this is how we should destress' by playing this game. I kind of had a wake-up call of like, 'you need to be okay with some stuff not being productive and not everything being a work product or a content product.'"* – Cozy K.

In her interview, Cozy K described the tension between gaming for pleasure versus gaming for content creation. While this tension was not directly addressed by creators in the video dataset, it was apparent in the ways coziness was manufactured and displayed in these videos. The aesthetic choices, narrative framing, and visible routines of cozy gaming suggest an underlying performance, where leisure is both a personal practice and a vessel for social media engagement.

For instance, an overwhelming majority (73%,  $N = 38$ ) of videos featured technology such as computers, consoles, keyboards, headsets, and similar accessories, which contributed to the overall visual and aesthetic experience of coziness. These items not only serve a functional purpose but also act as visual displays of the creators' cozy gaming identity. In addition to technology, these setups also featured non-technological accessories such as plants, plushies, books, warm drinks, wall decor, mood lighting, and comfortable furniture (54%,  $N = 28$ ). Together, these components directly contribute to identifiably warm, soft, pastel aesthetic signals (31%,  $N = 16$ ) associated with cozy gaming. The prevalence of these accessories in creators' curated spaces reinforces a specific aesthetic influence driven by the commodification of coziness.

Approximately one-third of the videos (34%,  $N = 18$ ) featured personal routines and rituals related to gaming. Camera angles and production choices suggest that these visible routines present a sense of manufactured authenticity. In these videos, the creators are shown walking up to their desktop setups, sitting down, and playing a game, often while drinking a warm beverage or curling up into a blanket. In these cases, coziness is a performance and positioned as both an aesthetic and consumable product for their viewers. In a similar vein, many of the videos (33%,  $N = 17$ ) feature video game recommendations for viewers to purchase and play for themselves. These choices demonstrate underlying themes of monetization and performance, where creators like Cozy K are motivated to advertise their gameplay and physical environments to their online community.

## Discussion

Findings from this analysis suggest that digital cozy gaming spaces promote individual self-care practices and community-building efforts through various aspects of content production, including aesthetic choices, narrative framing, and engagement tactics such as the use of hashtags [29, 15]. Cozy gaming communities are positioned as subversive spaces that actively resist dominant norms of hypermasculinity, violence, and competition in the broader gaming community [29, 17, 18]. The integration of qualitative content analysis and an interview allows us to examine not only how cozy gaming is represented on TikTok but also why creators curate and engage with this particular digital

aesthetic and messaging. This mixed-methods approach enables us to analyze public-facing digital content while incorporating reflections from a prominent creator whose widespread social media presence has helped shape the expectations of how cozy gaming is made visible on digital and social media. In doing so, we explore how creators negotiate identity, visibility, and labor in their content. Given that TikTok often obscures creators' intentions through its algorithmic structures, the interview offers valuable context that enriches our understanding of cozy gaming as a practice and an industry. It also reveals how platform-specific dynamics influence content creation and emotional labor – factors that may not be fully evident in content alone.

The tension between creator empowerment and commodification is apparent in our dataset. While these spaces offer avenues for personal and collective empowerment for BIPOC women and femme-identifying creators, they also face challenges with mobilization, given the constraints of TikTok's algorithm. This is reinforced by previous work that theorizes "rest as a resistant form of healing from toxic capitalist systems" [37] (p. 122), but is also made complicated by the platform's incentive structures, which prioritize algorithmic optimization, engagement metrics, and content visibility over community-centered practices. Under these structures, creators are placed in a position where they must carefully balance authenticity and community-forward mobilization efforts with labor-intensive content production that leverages the platform's political economy [36, 39, 40].

While cozy gaming can foster individual self-care practices [20], these spaces also facilitate mobilization. Creators signal alternative ways to participate in gaming culture by sharing routines, aesthetics, and narratives that prioritize inclusion and emotional well-being. By inviting audiences into their personal routines and environments, cozy creators promote a broader culture of rest and resilience, thereby cultivating communities grounded in care and solidarity. This aligns with prior work on marginalized gaming communities, where collective mobilization rooted in affect challenges exclusionary norms and builds resistant communities [4, 53]. Furthermore, these practices build upon Constanza-Chock's [54] framework of design justice, where marginalized groups must play an active role in shaping digital platforms through alternative structures of belonging in order to resist online systems of oppression.

## Implications

The intersection of identity, community, and digital labor raises important considerations for future work in human-media interaction and platform design. Cozy content creators invest significant labor into producing aesthetically pleasing content while simultaneously performing affective labor for their audiences. This labor involves curating routines and aesthetics, recommending game titles, and engaging viewership through narrative voice-overs, text, hashtags, and interactive comments. As Bódi [29] and Buergi [19] note, these practices reflect the tension between the enjoyment of leisure and the commodification of affective labor in these digital media spaces. This raises considerable concerns about the exploitation of women of color and other marginalized groups on the very same platforms they derive enjoyment and community from. As such, platform designers must consider the affordances that

enable marginalized creators to share their interests and be visible without reinforcing the exploitative dynamic between the platform and the user.

## Limitations and Future Work

This study is limited by its relatively small sample size and reliance on a single interviewee, as well as its focus on one platform (TikTok). Additionally, our findings are subject to temporal limitations, as TikTok trends are known to shift rapidly. We also acknowledge that our synthesis of the content analysis and interview reflections is subject to a layer of researcher subjectivity; however, we mitigated this through the development of a detailed codebook, as well as several rounds of intercoder reliability checks. These methodological limitations present several promising avenues for future research, including cross-platform analyses, longitudinal studies, and in-depth investigations into how platform affordances and algorithmic structures impact visibility, representation, and engagement. Future work should also consider the intersections of other marginalized identities (such as LGBTQ + or disabled gamers) to provide a more comprehensive and robust understanding of inclusivity and representation in cozy gaming communities. We also encourage future research to investigate how subgenres such as dark cozy gaming facilitate emotional healing and recovery among players.

## Conclusion

This work demonstrates that digital cozy gaming communities function as sites of affective and social labor where women of color negotiate visibility, identity, and community. By sharing routines, providing game recommendations, and curating cozy experiences, creators craft content that is both engaging and meaningful. This content serves as building blocks for larger community efforts aimed at resisting dominant gaming narratives and offers a model for inclusive and identity-conscious digital practices.

## Declarations

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## Author Contribution

K.L. and A. M. wrote the main manuscript text. A.M. conducted statistical analysis and prepared table 1. K. L. conducted the interview and A.M. and K.L. collected and coded the TikTok videos. All authors reviewed the manuscript.

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## Footnotes

1. Cozy K was informed of the study’s ethical procedures to ensure confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity, but she consented to the inclusion of her name and social media handle in this paper.