

# Visual Novels as Anxiety Interventions: Visual Storytelling and Emotional Engagement in Young Adults

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## ABSTRACT

Anxiety disorders are a common mental health challenge experienced by young adults, especially university students who face academic pressure and tend to overthink. Visual novel is a narrative-based interactive media that has potential to help users understand and manage their emotions, thought, and reflect on their coping styles through an immersive and more personal gaming experiences. This study aims to identify and design visual novel design principles that support adaptive coping mechanism strategies for young adults. The focus is directed toward visual storytelling, and emotional interactive experiences as design elements that can help users manage anxiety in a more empathetic and intuitive way. This study uses a qualitative method with data obtained through a literature review, interviews with a psychology expert, and three young adults aged 21-22 who enjoy playing visual novel games to better understand their visual preferences and responses toward coping systems in game. Furthermore, an analysis of the narrative and visual elements within visual novels was conducted. The findings reveal that the application of adaptive coping mechanisms, particularly problem-focused coping and positive reappraisal in dialog choice systems, are proven to be able to increase players understanding of healthy coping strategies and encourage them to reflect on their efforts to deal with anxiety in everyday life.

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Respondents also stated that the use of cute art style and soft pastel colors created a calming atmosphere for players, making the gaming experience more comfortable without causing excessive stress or tension. Interactive narration also contributes to increased emotional engagement, which supports players in reflecting on the consequences of their choices. Therefore, visual novels have the potential to serve as entertainment media that are not only attractive but also effective in helping young adults recognize coping mechanisms as a form of anxiety intervention. However, further research is still needed by involving more respondents and conducting long-term effectiveness testing to assess the application of adaptive coping in real life through visual novel games.

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the most common mental health problems experienced by young adults is anxiety disorder. According to Sherlina (Sherlina, 2024), anxiety is a condition where a person fears an event that may not necessarily happen, such a condition causes discomfort and physical tension. Young adults aged 17–24 are individuals in a transitional phase from adolescence to adulthood. Individuals in this phase are highly vulnerable to stress, such as overthinking, academic pressure, difficulty managing emotions, and various other negative thoughts. Many people in Indonesia still hold negative views toward psychological assistance, causing people hesitate to seek help from psychiatrists due to fear of being considered to have a mental disorder. This situation becomes an obstacle in handling anxiety, making it important to provide educational intervention media that are accessible and do not create a discriminatory impression. Individuals who experience obstacles in self-development tend to use social media intensively as a form of coping because it is considered helpful in expanding social networks (Maghfirah & Mardhiyah, 2025). However, social media is not the only coping medium, some people also use games as an escape from stress and psychological pressure (Ricky,

Muhammad Achsani, 2022). Games can serve as engaging media to improve a person's understanding and awareness of various types of information presented (Desai et al., 2021). Games also has high interactivity, making them feel more immersive and enjoyable compared to books that only involve reading text. This is particularly relevant for individuals with visual learning styles, as students tend to understand and remember information more quickly through the use of colors, shapes, and other visual elements (Hidayah, 2023).

Through visual media, information can be conveyed more effectively because it helps stimulate thoughts, evoke emotions, and maintain the audience's attention (Wardaya, 2019). Games that focus on storytelling are commonly associated with visual novels, a genre of digital games that focuses on interactive narratives and visual elements such as backgrounds, characters, music, and sound effects. Through branching story structures and dialogue choices, players become more personally involved, creating a more immersive gameplay experience (Camingue et al., 2021). Visual and narrative communication design play an important role in determining the effectiveness of visual novels as a medium for anxiety intervention. Visual communication design conveys messages through graphic elements, signs, symbols, illustrations, and typography in a creative and communicative way to inform, influence, and provide solutions to certain problems (Fitri et al., 2022). This shows that visual novels have the potential to be used as a medium for anxiety intervention because they combine narrative, visuals, and interactivity to create an immersive experience. Over time, visual novel genres has become increasingly diverse, including horror because it provides an intense, suspenseful, and atmospheric gameplay experience that is appealing to some players (Dharmawisesa et al., 2024). This condition presents its own challenge for developers who wish to use visual novels as psychological intervention media, particularly in applying coping mechanism material for players who experience anxiety disorders. The challenge lies in how to ensure that the narrative and form of interaction created are not only entertaining but also educational, so that the elements of entertainment and therapy remain balanced and the playing experience does not worsen the anxiety condition.

From previous research on anxiety intervention among university students, several forms of intervention have been found to be effective in helping reduce anxiety, such as cognitive therapy, behavioral therapy, art therapy, and aromatherapy (Aninda Cahya Savitri & Luh Indah Desira Swandi, 2023). However, research that integrates these approaches into interactive game media, particularly visual novels, is still very limited. There is also a lack of discussion on how the use of visual elements, storytelling, interactive narratives, and coping mechanism materials in visual novels can be designed to create a reflective and calming experience for users. This issue is important because young adults are highly connected to digital media, including playing games in their daily lives. However, most people, especially those suffering from anxiety, mainly use games for entertainment, to fill their free time, or even as a form of escape without gaining meaningful positive benefits from them. The main problem in this study is how visual novels and their visual elements can function as intervention media to help young adults overcome anxiety disorders caused by academic stress, overthinking, and other factors. Therefore, the research question proposed is: How can visual communication design aspects and narrative interaction in visual novels support effective coping mechanism training in order to reduce anxiety levels among young adults in Indonesia?

This study aims to develop a conceptual model of a visual novel that can function as an effective anxiety intervention medium for young adults, with focuses on how visual communication design can influence players emotions and encourage self-reflection. This research contributes by applying visual storytelling, coping strategies, and interactive narratives to visual design. It not only considers visual aesthetics and interactivity, but also how gameplay experience can help young adults better understand, reflect on, and practice more adaptive coping responses when dealing with anxiety. Thus, the conceptual development of the visual novel is expected to grow into an alternative solution that is accessible and relevant for young adults in Indonesia in dealing with anxiety.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The research method used in this study is a qualitative method, which focuses on the collection and analysis of descriptive data to deeply understand the processes, meanings, and perspectives of the subjects (Fiantika et al., 2022). This method was used so that the author could explore further and evaluate the effectiveness of narratives and response options in the visual novel as an anxiety intervention medium.

Data collection was carried out through three methods. The first method was a literature review, which involved gathered and reviewed relevant academic sources to strengthen the theoretical foundation and support the development of coping-related content within the game. This was followed by interviews with four respondents, one respondent was a psychology expert with extensive knowledge and experience in psychological theory, enabling them to provide valid evaluations and professional perspectives regarding the coping concepts applied in the game. The interview with the psychology expert was conducted through Zoom Meeting. The other three respondents were female young adults aged 21–22 who enjoy playing visual novels and have personal experiences with anxiety. These respondents were selected to gain different perspectives and real-life experiences from visual novel players, as well as to examine the relevance of the anxiety-related issues discussed in this study. Unlike the psychology expert, the interviews with the three visual novel players were conducted face-to-face. Finally, content analysis was conducted on the game's narrative elements and dialogue choices to evaluate the suitability of the coping materials, along with psychological theory, and their effectiveness in conveying them to players. The data obtained from the literature review and interviews were then analyzed and integrated to better understand the relationship between visual novel design, players emotional experiences, and the implementation of coping mechanisms within the game.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

This study focuses on how narrative and visual design such as character illustrations, color usage, and other visual elements are used to represent both adaptive and maladaptive coping choices in order to influence the player's emotional experience. This section presents the data collected through a literature review as well as interviews with experts and young adults, which were then analyzed based on theoretical framework.

### **Anxiety and Coping Mechanism**

Anxiety is a very common human experience, marked by feelings of discomfort, restlessness, fear, and worry accompanied by physical symptoms (Walean et al., 2021). Psychological coping explains how individuals with anxiety manage stress effectively. When a person faces stress or a situation that can trigger anxiety, they will consciously or unconsciously apply coping mechanisms to reduce emotional pressure and stress (Cahyaningrum et al., 2023). However, coping mechanisms are divided into two categories: adaptive coping, which helps individuals deal with stress in a healthy way, and maladaptive coping, which can worsen the stress condition (Cahyaningrum et al., 2023). Adaptive coping has various strategic forms that can help a person face stress more positively, such as seeking social support from family or close friends, problem-solving, and managing emotions in a healthier way. Meanwhile, maladaptive coping tends to be less effective and may even be harmful. Examples include avoiding problems, denial, substance abuse, and even self-harm (Prameswari, 2025). If both forms of coping can be represented through dialogue choices in a visual novel, players can observe and practice the consequences of each decision they make.

### **The Role of Educational Games and Visual Novels**

Educational games are media that combine narrative, visuals, and interactivity to create an engaging learning experience. Although games are basically designed as entertainment media, they become more meaningful when used as learning media (Suryadana & Deli, 2024).



Figure 1. EDDA Cafe Visual Novel  
Source: sea.ign.com, 2021

Games have many genres, one of which is visual novels. This game genre emphasizes stories accompanied by images, text, music, and sound, offering various choices, paths, or story endings to players. Through the player's freedom to make decisions when selecting response options, the game becomes less monotonous and can involve emotion, self-reflection, and empathy toward situations in the game that players may never have experienced directly in real life (Cantrell & Zhu, 2022; Naratama et al., 2023). In the context of digital narrative, Interactive Digital Narrative (IDN) combines narrative elements such as stories, culture, and history with digital technology that supports user engagement and interaction in narrative delivery (Rifki Riza Alfiansyah et al., 2023). Through this technology, user experience is enhanced, making it effective in the aspects of education and social intervention. The use of interactive narratives has the potential as a medium for conveying mental health issues such as anxiety, with a more personal and non-patronizing approach.

### Visual Design

In addition to narrative, interactive design plays an important role because it focuses on how a design can interact with users through the technical arrangement and utilization of visual communication media. This design aims to respond to various digital behaviors triggered by both humans

and machines. Therefore, interactive designers need to combine technological knowledge, aesthetic skills, and empathy based on user data (Adiwijaya, 2023). One visual approach that is effective for audiences is visual storytelling. Humans generally absorb information more quickly with visual support than through text alone. Visual storytelling combines aesthetic aspects and effectiveness in reducing cognitive load while increasing audience engagement (Pertiwi & Sanusi, 2023). Thus, delivering information through this method is more effective because messages are conveyed in a more attractive and easily understood way.



Figure 2. Character visual  
Source: artstation.com, 2021

Characters in games represent players or become part of the story, either as avatars or NPCs. These characters add emotional depth and allow players to interact with the game world (Handoyo, 2025). Character visuals also play an important role in strengthening the impression of the story. Characters are not limited to humans; they may also be animals, monsters, plants, and others. In addition, the clothing worn by characters can strengthen identity and make it easier for players to recognize them, while character traits play a role in enhancing players' emotional experience (Febyanti et al., 2022). To create characters that are liked by many people, realistic traits and characteristics that are close or similar to the audience should be developed. Characters who have similar feelings and problems can make it easier for the audience to feel empathy (Audrey Roseline Waluyo & Surya Patria, 2022).



Figure 3 Pastel Color Palette  
Source: vecteezy.com, 2024

In addition to character design, color can represent emotions or the psychological condition of a character as well as the atmosphere of the story in the game. The use of pastel colors can create a calming and positive atmosphere, such as a sense of safety, comfort, non-threatening or non-tense feelings, and enjoyment (Beatrice & Febe, 2021). Pastel blue has a positive calming effect. Pastel green provides health-related benefits, especially for eye health. Purple creates a peaceful atmosphere and helps calm the nerves. Meanwhile, pastel pink symbolizes love and affection in friendship (Fitriasari et al., 2024). In addition, there are many other colors that have their own meanings and psychological effects on each individual. If pastel colors are used in visual novel design, which aims to help users manage anxiety more calmly, this color type can create a more stable emotional experience for them. Character designs that are engaging and relevant to the audience will also make it easier for players to empathize with the characters and story in the game.

The literature review shows that visual novel games containing coping mechanism material can become an innovative solution in helping young adults recognize, evaluate, and apply healthier coping strategies when facing anxiety. Interactive narratives and choice options in games can encourage players to reflect on themselves through the outcomes of their

decisions. Visual design principles such as visual storytelling, strong character design, and the use of calming pastel colors can make the playing experience more immersive and create user comfort that supports emotional well-being.

Table 1. Interview Responses from Psychology Expert (YR) on Visual Novels as Anxiety Coping Tools

| No | Question   | Answer  |
|----|--|---|
| 1  | How do you view the effectiveness of games, particularly visual novels, as educational media for psychology?                 | It is an engaging medium that could potentially serve as an educational tool.   |
| 2  | Within the age range of 17–24 years, what forms of coping are considered the most effective in helping them manage anxiety?  | Problem-focused coping, which directly focuses on solving the problem, and positive reappraisal, which involves adopting a more positive perspective in viewing the problem. This is more related to emotions and thoughts.                     |
| 3  | Is the delivery of coping mechanisms through narrative and interactive choices in game media effective as a learning medium? | Yes, as long as it realistically reflects anxious behavior, incorporates appropriate and relevant coping strategies for the problems faced. This can also be shown through the behaviors and actions of the characters when confronting issues. |

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| 4 | How should coping mechanisms be represented in a game so that they do not cause negative effects on players?   | This can be done by showing the consequences of their choices, for example by prioritizing what is more important, whether it is something they want or something that truly needs to be done. Therefore, if they choose a poor option or make a bad decision and receive a negative outcome or ending, it can become a lesson and a point of reflection for them. Late adolescents at that age already have sufficient awareness and freedom in making their own choices. |
| 5 | To what extent can visual elements such as color, character illustration, and visual atmosphere influence players' emotions, particularly in calming users or triggering reflection? | They definitely have an influence. A calming atmosphere can be created using pastel colors, or blue, green, and other bright colors, while still keeping them soft. Character illustrations can be adjusted according to each character's personality, such as incorporating traits that indicate whether they are introverted or extroverted.   |
| 6 | Are there any particular visual or narrative forms that should be avoided because they may trigger anxiety or excessive emotional responses?   | Dark and overly intense colors. Narratives that excessively corner or blame a certain party should also be avoided.  |
| 7 | Does this type of visual novel model have the potential to become an effective supporting tool for anxiety intervention learning in Indonesia?                                       | Yes. Through learning about decision-making and the consequences obtained, it can be used as a form of reflection.   |

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Source: author's documentation  
 Note. Interview conducted with psychology expert YR.

Psychology expert explain that problem-focused coping and positive reappraisal strategies are the most effective forms of adaptive coping for young adults experiencing anxiety. This align with the theory stating that implementing adaptive coping strategies allows individuals to resolve problems and emotions in a healthier manner (Prameswari, 2025). In addition, the use of visual elements like pastel colors and relevant character designs can enhance the individual's emotional experience while playing. This is consistent with color psychology theory, which explains that pastel colors have a calming effect and creating relevant characters for the audience to increase empathy (Beatrice & Febe, 2021). Experts also confirm that visual novels have the potential to serve as anxiety intervention tools by implementing consequence-based learning mechanisms and self-reflection, which aligns with IDN principle where user interaction can be enhanced by combining narrative and digital media (Rifki Riza Alfiansyah et al., 2023).

Table 2. Interview Responses from Visual Novel Fans on Mental Health and Gameplay

| No | Question  | Respondent 1<br>(TS)  | Respondent<br>(TC)   | Respondent 3<br>(FM)   |
|----|---|---|--|--|
| 1  | Age   | 21  | 22   | 21   |
| 2  | Have you ever played a visual novel? How was your experience when playing it? | Yes. I only played it to fill my spare time, and I usually only played the early stages without finishing the game. | Yes. I have played many kinds, and it was very fun because I could choose the storyline based on the decisions I made. | Yes, but not many. I only played them to fill my spare time, and the games were enjoyable. |

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| 3 | Do you feel more comfortable learning about emotion management through media such as games rather than books or podcasts?         | Maybe, because if it is in the form of a game, the learning process would become more interesting and less monotonous. | Yes, because it is more exciting and allows me to experience it directly, even though it is through an online simulation. | Yes. I get bored easily if the content only consists of text or audio without visuals.                |
| 4 | Are you interested in playing a game that combines mental health education and entertainment, such as by adding fantasy elements? | If the game is simple and interesting, I might try it.   | Yes, because it would become more entertaining.   | Yes. I usually play romance games, but I would also try other genres to explore them if they are fun. |
| 5 | Can games help you understand certain feelings or ways of dealing with particular problems?                                       | If there is a story that I can relate to, then yes.  | Yes, they can, depending on the game and the scene.   | Not really, because I clearly separate games from reality.  |

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| 6 | Are the narrative and response options realistic and relevant to your daily experience of anxiety?                        | Some are relevant, because games will certainly add dramatic effects to make the story concept more interesting, and not everyone experiences exactly the same problems. The response options are quite realistic, but I think I would try choices that are opposite to the decisions I would make in real life. | They are quite relevant. The response options are realistic because I am the type of person who prefers to directly face the problems that happen to me, since I personally do not like accumulating more problems. | The sample choices are realistic, but in real life I tend to avoid problems, so I relate more to that side. In the game, however, I would choose to face the problem because I feel braver in exploring different choices. |
| 7 | Can the decisions make in the game help you learn to deal with anxiety by applying better coping strategies in real life? | As a learning process, yes. However, I am not sure that I could apply it 100% in real life when facing anxiety or certain conflicts.   | Yes, because from those choices we can see the branching storyline and the consequences of choosing decision A or decision B. From there, we can use it as a reference or learning material.                        | Yes, because if it is applied when anxiety appears, I think it would help.   |

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| 8  | Do visual appearances such as color and illustration style affect the comfort or tension you feel while playing? | Yes, especially color choices. They have a strong impact on the image and atmosphere presented. If the image is meant to show happiness but the colors used are dark or gloomy, then it does not really represent happiness well. | Yes. Personally, if the colors are too bright or intense, I automatically feel dizzy and tired more quickly, which makes it difficult to continue playing. As for the illustration style, as long as it is visually good, I can enjoy it. | Yes, definitely. If the visuals are poor or the colors are unpleasant to look at, I become less interested in playing. |
| 9  | What visual style do you think is most suitable for a game themed around healing or self-reflection?             | Anime or chibi style, with pastel colors, perhaps blue and green, to create a calming effect.   | An anime art style like visual novels in general, using a pastel color palette and other soft colors.   | A cute and simple style, with soft and non-striking colors.  |
| 10 | Are the character and background designs appropriate in representing the characters' backgrounds,                | Overall, the visuals are good, the style is consistent, and the colors used are comfortable to look at, although they are still not pastel enough, perhaps  | Yes. The expressions match the characters' personalities, and the atmosphere, such as night or evening scenes, is also represented quite well. However, the   | Yes. The visuals look interesting, and the lighting colors are not too intense.  |

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| personalities, and the scenes in the story? | because the setting is dark. | daytime or brighter backgrounds could use more pastel colors. |
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Source: author's documentation

Note. Data obtained from interviews with three visual novel players aged 21–22 years.

According to the respondents, learning can become more engaging if packaged in the form of game media because it is less boring and more interactive. An interesting finding emerged from the interview results, where there were differences in how respondents viewed the relationship between games and real life. TS felt that although the choices in the game were relevant, they admitted that they would make different decisions in the real world. TC tends to have a coping style that confronts problems directly. Meanwhile, FM still separates games from reality and prefers to avoid problems in everyday life. This shows that even though the narrative in the game is realistic, the level of player connection to the game and the application of learning to everyday life remains different and depends on each individual (Rifki Riza Alfiansyah et al., 2023). This also aligns with IDN theory, which states that user engagement in digital narratives increases the educational effectiveness, although the level of effectiveness is still influenced by each player's personality [18]. In the context of color, TC stated that using colors that are too bright or intense actually causes headache and fatigue. All three respondents agreed that pastel or soft colors are more comfortable to look at, which aligns with color psychology theory (Beatrice & Febe, 2021).

### Content Analysis

From the analysis results, response choices containing adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies that display consequences in the story can create an experience where players can explore various responses in dealing with anxiety-triggering situations. Through this method, players feel more involved in the story and can understand the consequences of their decisions, thereby encouraging the process of self-reflection. This finding supports the

research objectives in evaluating the effectiveness of narratives and dialogue choices in visual novels as an anxiety intervention medium. With the choice-consequences mechanism, visual novels prove capable of prompting players to engage in self-reflection. From the expert interview provide validation that problem-focused coping and positive reappraisal are the most effective strategies for young adults, aligns with Prameswari's theory which states that adaptive coping can manage emotions more healthily (Prameswari, 2025). From the user's perspective, the three respondents stated that games are more engaging than other media with less interactivity such as books or podcasts games can connect players emotionally with characters and stories. This is consistent with previous research stating that using games as a learning medium makes it more meaningful (Suryadana & Deli, 2024). One respondent also stated that the simulated situations in visual novels encouraged them to explore various options they might not make in real life. This prove that visual novels can be serve as a safe space for users to learn coping strategies without fearing real world consequences.

In terms of visuals, the use of soft pastel colors and character designs relevant to the audience can increase emotional engagement, making the gameplay experiences more enjoyable and calming (Audrey Roseline Waluyo & Surya Patria, 2022; Beatrice & Febe, 2021). From the expert interview, they also recommended pastel colors like blue and green, which psychologically can have a calming effect and other positive effects. However, dark colors are not recommended and should be avoided to prevent excessive anxiety if the intended atmosphere is comfort. Respondents also felt that pastel colors pleasing to the eye and less tiring when playing for long periods. Based on the literature review and interviews, visual design is not merely aesthetic but can help reduce stress, allowing players to focus more on the content. The results from all three data sources indicate that visual novels have potential as an anxiety intervention medium. The coping strategies implemented in the game was deemed effective by expert, while the choice-consequence mechanism was seen as supportive of reflective learning by both the expert and respondents. Furthermore, the use of pastel-tones visuals was rated as calming. However, interview data also shows that applying the coping material to real life

situations is still influenced by each individual's personal insight and experience with anxiety. Therefore, visual novels are more suitable as an initial educational and reflective intervention medium, but not as the sole form of digital anxiety intervention.

## **CONCLUSION**

Visual novels can serve as a powerful alternative medium to help young adults overcome anxiety in an educational and reflective way through visual storytelling, adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies within interactive narratives, and choice-consequence mechanisms. Interviews and content analysis shows that adaptive coping strategies such as problem-focused coping and positive reappraisal are suitable for implementation in visual novels. Players can observe the impact of their decisions throughout the game, which can ultimately encourage self-reflection on how to deal with anxiety. In terms of visuals, the use of pastel colors and calming tones has proven effective in creating a calm and comfortable atmosphere. Attractive and relatable character designs also make players more emotionally engaged.

This demonstrates that visual communication design is not merely aesthetic, it can also support emotional comfort and user interactive experiences in visual novels that address mental health themes. The contribution of this research lies in integrating coping theory into visual novel design, enriching the field of visual communication design and interactive media. The research findings are expected to guide local indie developers who want to support young adults mental health through educational and entertaining interactive digital media. However, this study has limitations in the number of respondents and lack of testing on the long-term effectiveness in applying coping strategies to players real life situations. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve more respondents and examine the impact of visual novels as an intervention medium in greater depth, and compare them with non-digital media.

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