



Exploring Psychological Safety and Salient Experience in Suicide-Related Virtual Reality: A Qualitative Analysis

Sarah Awwad, Dr. Thomas Joiner, Sara Prostko | Florida State University, Department of Psychology

Introduction

Background

Studying suicide ideation and suicide-related experiences is key to understanding prevention, but traditional research methods are very limited due to ethical and methodological constraints. In particular, when assessing emotional and physiological responses to suicide experiences. The use of virtual reality equipment (VR) offers a controlled approach that allows researchers to examine suicide while maintaining participant safety and ethical guidelines. The qualitative analysis of this data comes from semi-structured interview data collected from individuals who completed suicide-related VR scenarios to identify commonly experienced themes, evaluate perceived psychological safety, assess whether participation elicited distress, and if participants had an altruistic motivation.

Objective

The purpose of this study is to examine participants' experiences during suicide-related VR scenarios and identify themes related to psychological safety, distress, and salient environmental elements.

Learn more about the Joiner Lab!



Methods

Participants

- The sample included 24 participants who completed suicide-related virtual reality scenarios.
- Participants participated in semi-structured interviews designed to capture their emotional reactions, perceptions of psychological safety, and reflections on the experience.
- Responses were subsequently analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis.

Interview Protocol and Coding

- Interviews were conducted using Zoom audio recording, automatically transcribed, reviewed for accuracy by an undergraduate research assistant, and independently coded by two researchers.
- The following questions were asked to participants:

Section 1: General Experience

1. Can you describe what the VR scenario(s) was like for you?
2. What were your initial emotional or physical reactions during or after the experience?
3. Was the experience what you expected? Why or why not?

Section 2: Scenario-Specific Reactions

1. Did any of the scenarios feel more intense or distressing than others? If so, why?
2. Were there particular moments or elements (visuals, sounds, physical sensations) that stood out to you or felt particularly impactful?

Section 3: Psychological Safety and Impact

1. Did you experience any distress during or after the scenario(s)? If yes, please describe.
2. Did you feel psychologically safe during the scenario(s)?
3. Do you feel that participating in the scenario(s) had any lingering emotional or cognitive effects?
4. "Some participants have said they take part in studies like this to help others who may be struggling. Does that resonate with you at all?"
5. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience?

Figure 1.

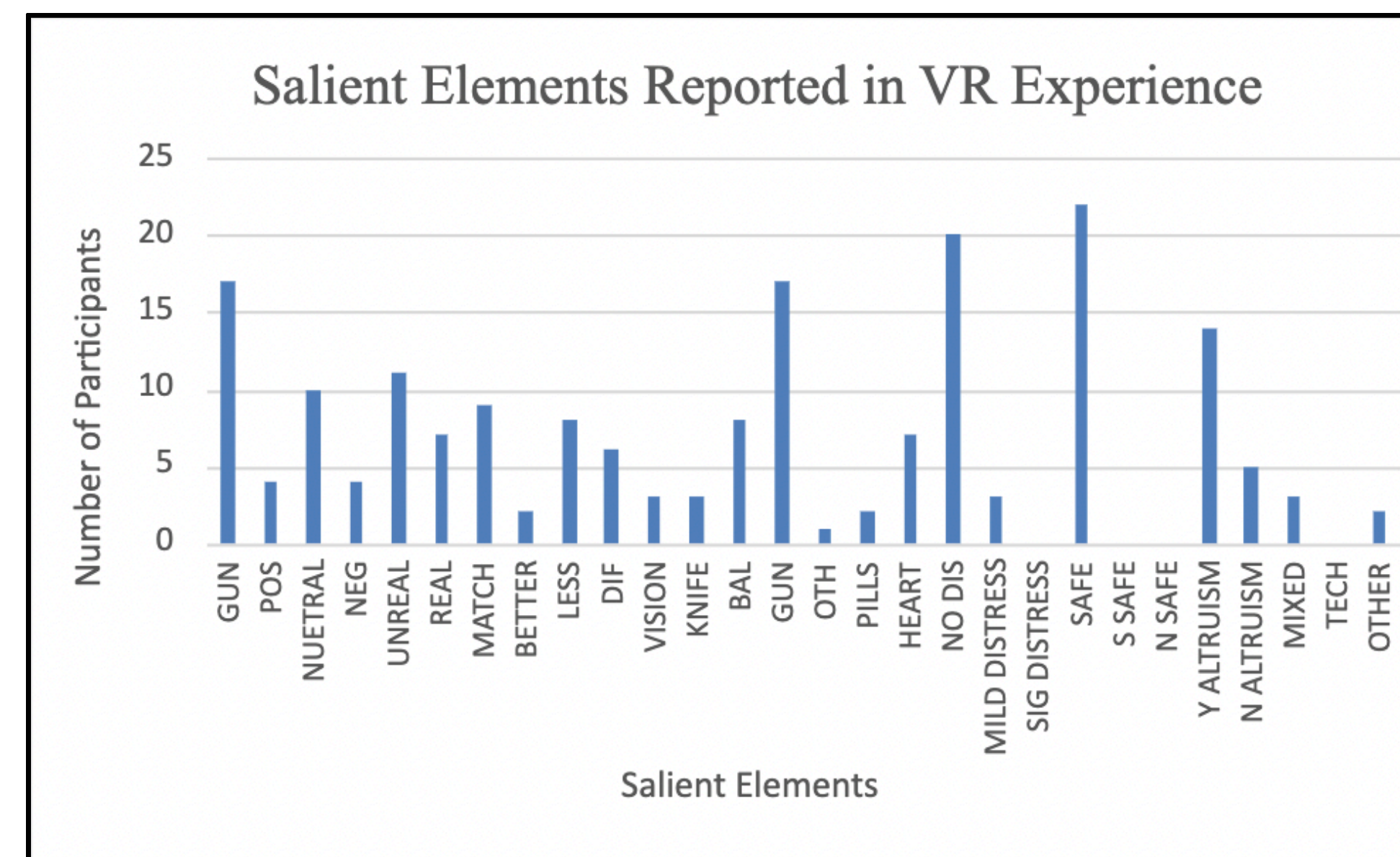


Figure 1. Salient Elements Reported in VR Experience

Participants most frequently identified the presence of the gun as the most salient feature of the virtual reality scenario. Other commonly noted elements included the balcony and awareness of heartbeat sensations. Fewer participants mentioned knives or pills.

Identified Themes

Qualitative analysis of participant interviews revealed several consistent themes across responses.

- Consistent Psychological Safety
- Low Distress
- Salient Presence of a Gun
- High Altruistic Motivation

Qualitative Coding Process

- Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic coding
- Multiple coders independently coded responses
- Codes were grouped into themes including:
 - Psychological safety
 - Distress levels
 - Salient sensory elements
 - Participant motivation

Discussion

Analysis

- Most participants reported feeling psychologically safe during the VR experience, suggesting the simulation did not compromise participant well-being.
- Consistent patterns emerged across participants' responses in the qualitative data.
- Certain sensory and contextual elements were described as especially salient, particularly the presence of a gun.
- Participants also reported heightened awareness of bodily sensations, such as noticing their heartbeat.
- While some participants reported brief discomfort, most indicated no lasting distress after the experience.
- Several participants reported altruistic motivations, noting they participated in the study to help others or contribute to suicide prevention research.

Limitations

- Small sample size of primarily undergraduate students
- Reliance on self-reported interview responses
- Findings may not generalize to broader populations

Future Directions

- Expand sample size and participant diversity
- Examine physiological responses during VR exposure

Acknowledgments

I would like to sincerely thank the Joiner Lab at Florida State University for their support throughout the completion of this project. I am especially grateful to my graduate advisor, Sara Prostko, for her invaluable guidance, feedback, and mentorship.