



# The role of users' motivations in generating social capital building and subjective well-being: The case of social network games



Chang-Hyun Jin \*

College of Business Administration, Kyonggi University, San 94-6, Iui-dong, Yeongtong-gu, Suwon-si, Gyeonggi-do 443-760, Republic of Korea

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## ABSTRACT

Social network games (SNGs)—which operate on a small scale and allow players to enjoy gaming with close friends—have exploded in popularity on the online social media scene in a very short time. This study explores the motivations that drive players to SNGs. The study investigates whether social capital serves as a moderating factor between these motivations and subjective well-being. Based on survey data ( $n = 560$ ), the results show that SNG players seek entertainment, fantasy, the challenge of competition, and escapism when playing SNGs. The study finds that although social capital does not moderate the relationships between three motivations to play SNGs—entertainment, the challenge of competition, and escapism—and subjective well-being, it does moderate the relationship between the fantasy motivation and subjective well-being. Theoretical and practical implications and limitations are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

The technology research firm Gartner reports that the global social gaming population includes at least 750 million players and is expected to double to 1.5 billion players by 2015 – a compound annual growth rate of 29 percent (GamblingData, 2012). Social network games (hereafter SNGs) have exploded in popularity on the online social media scene in a very short time (Casual Games Association, 2012). The explosive growth in popularity of social network sites (SNSs) such as MySpace and Facebook serves to highlight the value of rich social context in mediated environments (Kirman, 2010). SNGs represent a new media channel that amplifies social interaction between online users (Wohn, Lee, Sung, & Bjornrud, 2010). SNGs combine the entertainment function of existing mobile games and SNSs by connecting and stimulating interaction among users. This new media platform has opened the door to an era of SNG use that encompasses all socioeconomic classes (Yook & Ko, 2012). Marketers interested in leveraging these rapidly growing industries to attract customers seek to understand what motivates users in order to craft effective messages.

Although there is a rich and rapidly growing body of literature on game players' characteristics and motivations (Caplan, Williams, & Yee, 2009; Dunne, Lawlor, & Rowley, 2010; Huffaker et al., 2009; Wohn et al., 2010; Zhong, 2011), there has been very little research that focuses on the role of social capital as a

moderating variable for subjective well-being in this environment. Building on a wide range of studies in the literature, this study builds a theoretical model to explain how factors that motivate individual SNG players reinforce their subjective well-being and also how social capital moderates the effects of these motivation factors on subjective well-being.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

### 2.1. The social network games environment

SNGs operate on a small scale and allow players to enjoy gaming with close friends (Casual Games Association, 2012). Wohn, Lampe, Wash, Ellison, and Vitak (2011) defined SNGs as game applications made available through SNSs, where users play games with members of their social networks, as articulated on the sites (p.3). They pointed out that SNGs often take advantage of the social features of SNSs, including access to a list of Facebook Friends. Players using SNGs can create contact lists for their in-game networks (Wohn et al., 2011). SNGs provide users with a range of experiences, modes of enjoyment, and information-sharing channels. The burgeoning variety of communication methods has rapidly expanded the means of player interaction and game participation (Kim, 2011; Kim & Rye, 2010). SNGs include multi-player, real identity, and casual gaming (Hou, 2011). SNGs are appealing also because they are relatively easy to begin and end at players' leisure (Chang & Chin, 2011). Some research on SNGs that tests the effects of social game playing on the structure of

\* Tel.: +82 31 249 9427.

E-mail address: [chjin@kgu.ac.kr](mailto:chjin@kgu.ac.kr)

social interactions on Facebook (the most popular SNS) has found that providing information about the structure of the network increases engagement in game playing (Kirman, 2010).

SNSs, on which SNGs are based, are “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211). Social networks are critical to psychological well-being (Durden, Hill, & Angel, 2007), and so SNSs are designed to “foster social interaction in a virtual environment” (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009, p. 228), providing web-based services that allow individuals to form “groups of people with whom they are not otherwise acquainted who willingly interact with them over the Internet” (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211). SNSs typically allow a user to build and maintain a network of friends for social or professional interaction. The core use of an “SNS consists of personalized user profiles” (Trusov, Randolph, & Pauwels, 2009, p. 92).

Wohn et al. (2010) confirm that SNGs are a popular and rapidly growing feature of several existing SNSs. These SNSs typically require that SNG players be online, that their SNGs be embedded applications on the SNSs, and that the SNGs use social features as deeply integrated game-playing elements (Casual Games Association, 2012). More broadly, there is evidence that users play SNGs to create a joint area of interest for future social interaction rather than seeking direct interaction in the game itself. They might seek the benefits of community membership among gamers, but when they are playing a game the competition is more important (Wohn et al., 2010). Regarding the playing features of SNGs, there is very little in the way of collective, synchronous play that runs against the traditional concept of social play. Nevertheless, SNGs are simple and easy to play, popular, and based on existing personal connections.

The term “gamification” denotes a trend that has become popular across a wide range of industries and in academia in the area of game-based marketing studies. The marketing industry defines gamification as the integration of game-related dynamics into a site, service, community, content, or campaign in order to drive participation (Xu, 2011). That is, gamification is the process of adding game mechanics to processes, programs, and platforms to which such features are not traditionally applied. “The goal is to create incentives and a more engaging experience. In other words, it’s about fun” (Swan, 2012, p.13). Swan (2012) observed that gamification establishes a participation-and-reward system that focuses on users’ sharing information within their networks. Gamification employs game-based mechanics, aesthetics, and thinking to engage people, motivate action, promote learning, and solve problems. “Gamification provides designers or trainers with tools that enable them to think about instruction from the perspective of engagement and activity without large-scale investment in the development of a full-blown instructional game” (Kapp, 2012, p.65).

Some research has focused on differences between SNGs and other gaming platforms. Yee (2006) mentioned that SNG players mainly play with real-life friends, which differentiates them from most so-called massively multiplayer online (MMO) games, whose players are mostly virtual friends who have never met in real life (Nardi & Harris, 2006). SNGs should also be distinguished from role-playing games (RPGs), in which players assume the roles of fictional characters in a fantasy setting, because with SNGs players represent themselves since most SNSs require real names at registration (Hou, 2011).

Some research has indicated that Facebook use positively influences a form of social capital known as bridging social capital based on the finding that such use has significant predictive power

regarding the generation of bridging social capital using online SNSs (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Joinson, 2008; Steinfield, Dimicco, Ellison, & Lampe, 2009). Moreover, the intention to continue using an SNS is related to social interaction, shared values, and trust (Lin & Lu, 2011). Sheldon (2008) found that people use SNSs to pass the time in a way that they perceive to be trendy (exhibiting “coolness”) and entertaining. The entertainment factor represents a strong form of gratification that is sought in Facebook use. For their part, SNG players are motivated to play games in order to create common ground, experience reciprocity, cope, or simply pass the time (Wohn et al., 2010).

Previous articles have focused on the social and psychological impacts of social media and traditional media (Pfeil, Arjan, & Zaphiris, 2009; Song, Larose, Eastin, & Lin, 2004; Steinfield et al., 2009; Vorderer, Hartmann, & Klimmt, 2003), but there is very little extant research on the relationship between SNG players’ motivations and the building of social capital and subjective well-being. Therefore, analysis of this relationship is needed for a comprehensive understanding of the social and psychological implications of SNG use. This study also posits a theoretical and systematic model that can be applied to SNG marketing by examining the effects of these motivation factors on post-behavioral outcomes when using SNGs. The study therefore also examines the relationship between motivation factors, social capital, and subjective well-being, particularly to determine whether social capital is a moderating factor in generating subjective well-being.

Although many studies on game playing have focused on game players’ characteristics and motivations (Dunne et al., 2010; Huffaker et al., 2009; Williams, Yee, & Caplan, 2008; Wohn et al., 2010; Yee, 2006; Zhong, 2011), the relationship between motivations to play and the intended outcomes of SNG usage has not been explored. In particular, this study explored the extent to which motivation factors affect players’ subjective well-being as well as whether social capital building serves as a moderating variable between motivations to play SNGs and subjective well-being.

## 2.2. Uses and gratification theory

Media research has long applied uses and gratification theory to a range of media vehicles to predict how readers and viewers use the content presented to them via various media outlets as well as to understand consumers’ motivations to use such media (Dunne et al., 2010; Jin & Villegas, 2008; Stafford, Stafford, & Schade, 2004). Several studies on the relation between media usage (e.g., television, radio, the Internet, mobile phones, SNSs, and SNGs) and users’ motivations have posited a wide range of such motivations: social escapism, transactional security and privacy, information-seeking, interactive control, socialization, non-transactional privacy, interpersonal utility, passing the time, convenience, fantasy, the challenge of competition, and entertainment (Dunne et al., 2010; Ebersole, 2000; Jin & Villegas, 2008; Korgaonkar & Wolin, 1999; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Song et al., 2004; Stafford et al., 2004; Vorderer et al., 2003). The traditional perspective on motivation provides the basis for identifying the motives behind SNGs. Such a theoretical perspective helps to explain the relationship between the motives to use these games and the outcomes or consequences of users’ behavior.

## 3. Theoretical model

### 3.1. SNG motivations, social capital as a moderating variable and subjective well-being

Social capital theory purports to explain the formation and effects of social networks on human activity at both the individual and social levels (Putnam, 1993; Putnam, 2000; Helliwell &

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