



Mediating roles of self-presentation desire in online game community commitment and trust behavior of Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games

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ABSTRACT

Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), which allow simultaneous participation of several gamers, have attracted a great deal of attention recently. Since MMORPGs can be categorized as a type of online community, the behavior of MMORPGs users needs to be considered as the general behavior in online communities. However, previous studies of online communities did not pay enough attention to MMORPGs, in which users can express themselves by interacting actively through games and game avatars. Understanding the characteristics of MMORPGs as online game communities where users communicate and interact will allow games to be vitalized and users to be immersed in games in a more positive way. Hence, using self-presentation theory and social identity theory, this study examined the factors influencing self-presentation desire and the mediating role of self-presentation desire examined in terms of trust of and commitments to online game communities. The results showed that the interactivity in the spaces of MMORPGs had the biggest impacts on self-presentation desire; personal innovativeness and game design quality also was influential. The results also indicated that self-presentation desire caused trust of online games and eventually led to even stronger commitments to gamers.

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1. Introduction

The advances in the internet and computer networks enable people to communicate without the constraints of physical space and time. Generally speaking, people have a continuous interest in self-images, and they expect to build images in self-satisfying or socially desirable ways (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). These expectations also apply to online spaces; people expect others to see themselves as the images they want in online activities, and thus invest time, costs, and effort to form positive online images (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Superficially, self-presentation on the internet are tools people use to express themselves, but ultimately, they are also symbolic self-identification subjects. For example, people tend to symbolically identify themselves with avatars, which basically are for self-presentation (Mitchell, 1999). For this reason, online users try to make their avatars exhibit the images they desire by dressing their avatars in clothes and accessories as if they were adorning themselves. In addition, people tend to compare themselves socially with others to judge their abilities. They may compare their “mini-hompies” (mini-homepages) with those of others and try to express themselves in a different way using mini-hompie skins, background music, or other digital items. Such

self-presentation desire in online spaces is a key driver that induces commitments to online communities or instills trust in online games (Bauer, Grether, & Leach, 2002; Brignall & Valey, 2007). Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), which allow simultaneous participation of several gamers, have attracted a great deal of attention recently. MMORPGs are characterized by their enabling of easy self-presentation in online spaces. Moreover, users cannot only entertain themselves playing games but also interact socially and be involved in monetary exchange activities. The cyberspaces of MMORPGs, where all relevant activities take place, endure continuously regardless of users' login status, and there are no constraints on changing the gender, age, or appearance of game participants (Yee, 2006). In other words, users can choose the spaces as they want, generate any activities or events they want, and form a story in which they play the main roles of the game characters. In short, avatars, as characters of MMORPGs, offer enjoyment and fulfill self-presentation desire at the same time.

However, most previous studies did not consider MMORPGs as a type of online community where self-presentation and interactivity take place using the game as a communication tool, but rather as one of many types of online games. Considering the characteristic of MMORPGs as enabling multilateral social activities, the behavior of game users needs to be examined in relation to that of online community users in general.

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People are willing to be involved in MMORPGs because they believe the games offer common values to individuals, “guilds,” and “clans.” Playing games provides their players with many benefits—fun, which is a direct reward—and self-contentment and fame, which are a reward for self-presentation, and other benefits such as sharing information about the games or participating in relevant game communities (Hall & Graham, 2004). With respect to these benefits, the most important component of MMORPG is a “guild,” where users generate social values by interacting with others (Kang, Ko, & Ko, 2009).

Users will be more actively involved in expressing themselves when MMORPGs are designed to display the above benefits and to allow smoother interactivity as if users were not innovative enough already (Dominick, 1999; Schau & Gilly, 2003). Those who express themselves actively in MMORPGs are likely to trust online games and be immersed in online game communities such as guilds.

To this end, this study suggests the following objectives based on self-presentation theory (Leary, 1995; Schlenker, 1975) and social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). First, factors influencing self-presentation desire will be examined. Second, the mediating role of self-presentation desire will be examined in terms of trust of and commitments to online game communities. In addition, theoretical interpretations of the results and practical implications of MMORPGs providers will be suggested.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical background. Section 3 describes the research model and hypotheses. Section 4 presents the research methodology, and Section 5 describes the analysis and findings of our research. Section 6 shows the discussion and concludes with limitations and suggestions for further research.

2. Theoretical backgrounds

This study is based on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-presentation theory (Leary, 1995). Social identity theory is concerned with self-concept-ideas and images of oneself. Studies on self-concept report that it is composed of real self, ideal self, social self, and ideal social self; consumer consumption attempts to realize the ideal self (Sirgy, 1982). Self-presentation includes performing certain roles while exposing self to others (Trammell & Keshelawli, 2005). It is a process where people control and manage information for the purpose of delivering certain self-images to others continuously (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). In other words, self-presentation involves expressing self-image.

People tend to have attachments to those who receive their self-images, which are thus expressed effectively (Onkvisit & Shaw, 1987). Having a psychological linkage or emotional attachment toward specific others is called identification in social psychology. The emotional attachment to specific others is caused by the combination of personal identity and social identity (Long & Schiffman, 2000; Underwood, Edward, & Robert, 2001). Personal identity is generated when people discover similarities in others by reflecting a built self-consciousness. Therefore, people invest time, money, and effort to build a positive online image, expecting others to see them as the images they present (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Dressing avatars in clothes and accessories is one example of presenting self-identity. On the other hand, social identity is generated when people identify themselves with members of groups they belong to, symbolically reflecting self-consciousness, which is built by evaluating themselves and interacting with others through social comparison with others. For example, people may compare their own minihomies with those of others who express their online

images better or seem to have a similar lifestyle, and form *Ilchon* (friendship) with them. People tend to behave in accordance with their own identity. Moreover, they support groups that can assist them in actualizing the identity. The sense of unity in a specific group increases according to the following factors: when the satisfaction of the group is high, distinctions between groups are many, the images and reputation of the group are favorable, interactivity within the group is positive, and the similarity and homogeneity level is high (Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glynn, 1995; Lau, 1989; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). In addition, the sense of unity that is formed within a group promotes financial commitments to the group, teamwork among the members, and reduces the rate of member transfers to other groups (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986; Shamir, 1990). MMORPGs also allow people to express their self-identity through self-presentation. In addition, the identification that is built in guilds or clans generates a psychological attachment that resembles a sense of belonging and promotes commitments to the guilds or clans.

3. Research model and hypotheses

Self-presentation on the web is accomplished by a user interface, which is a communication tool and helps build a self-fulfilling presentation. Web design can promote more commitments to group web sites by enhancing rapid reaction and controls (Hoffman & Novak, 1996; Novak, Hoffman, & Yung, 2000), which may both influence the evaluation of individualized contents expressing self and serve as a foundation of active interactivity among individuals. MMORPGs, particularly, allow users to be immersed in the games since they offer spaces where many users can gather and similarities to the real in order to increase self-presentation. Moreover, online game characters like avatars enable users to reproduce new visual images and interact with others using them. These game characters include avatars that carry unique emotional images, which can serve as a self-presentation tool. Therefore, self-presentation desire may increase as the game design becomes more favorable—that is, the user interface or characters of the games are associated with users' identity.

Hypothesis 1. Online game design quality has a positive effect on the self-presentation desire of online identity.

Self-presentation involves expressing one's identity to others (Kim & Chan, 2007; Leary, 1995). Controls, mutual communication, reactivity, participation, and interactivity are essential to express one's identity in online spaces (Chen & Yen, 2004; Lee, Lee, & Yoo, 2005; Liu & Shurm, 2002; McMillan & Hwang, 2002). In other words, since self-presentation includes all goal-oriented behaviors that seek positive evaluation from others and avoid criticism from others (Baumeister, 1998; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 1980), the characteristics of interactivity-simultaneity, controls, reactivity, and participation should be reflected to enable such goal-oriented behaviors. People use many types of resources to exhibit themselves in images that they want other people to see them as (Dominick, 1999; Schau & Gilly, 2003). Since such images are consistent and maintained by selectively and deliberately (Schlenker, 1975; Schneider, 1981), people try harder to improve self-presentation when they place a premium on social interactivity (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). For example, interaction frequency, activity diversity, and relational influence are required for close relation between users and avatars (Zhao, Wang, & Zhu, 2010).

Hypothesis 2. Interactivity has a positive effect on the self-presentation desire of online identity.

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