

# The effect of social capital on community loyalty in a virtual community: Test of a tripartite-process model

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing upon social capital theory and social exchange theory, this study attempts to elaborate the effect of social capital on community loyalty in a virtual community by proposing and assessing a tripartite-process model. Online gaming communities were selected as the research context for testing the model. After collecting 347 usable responses from a globally leading Massive Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG), this study confirms that a player's social capital in an online gaming community affects his or her community loyalty through normative, relational, and utilitarian processes. The results also show that resource accessibility has a positive impact on perceived game utility, which in turn affects community loyalty. Finally, we conclude with research limitations and theoretical and managerial implications.

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## 1. Introduction

The Pew Internet and American Life Project reported that almost 84% of U.S. Internet users belong to certain online communities [65]. An online community is defined as an online group of people who interact with each other, share norms of behavior, and even act in a collective way [26,43,53]. Past research has indicated that online communities have impacts on Internet users' activities, such as social [36,31,85], knowledge [12,39,84,87], consumption [44], and gaming [20,21,33]. Recently, online service providers have created virtual communities to strengthen inter-customer exchange with the intent of increasing individual transactions [15,44]; customer loyalty toward the communities may affect the revenues of these providers.

Online communities create a new context for an individual to develop and accumulate social capital [65,86]. Although free riding appears to be a problem in virtual communities, online social capital serves as an intangible force that binds members together and increases their commitment to the community [51]. Social capital encompasses any aspect of a social structure that generates valuable consequences and facilitates an individual's actions within that social network [13]. Specifically, an actor's structural social capital is associated with either utilitarian benefit as resource accessibility [46,70] or relational affect as interpersonal

trust [34,54]. To maintain social capital, an actor in a social network is likely to engage in resource and relational exchange with other members [1]. Relational exchange often contains both affective and normative aspects [13,54]. Such distinction is important to link social capital research to recent virtual community studies [7,19]. However, researchers have paid more attention to resource benefits than relational outcomes [70,80]. In addition, past online community studies have examined the direct effects of social capital on users' behaviors, including knowledge sharing [12,84,87], the use of social networking websites [24,77], community participation [31], and Wikipedians' performance [59]. Relatively few studies have tested the relationships between online social capital and its consequences that lead to an individual's community loyalty. The distinction between the sources and consequences of social capital is consistent with recent advances in social capital research [1,54,70].

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to develop and examine a tripartite-process model of how an individual's social capital affects his or her community loyalty. Drawing upon social capital theory and social exchange theory, we differentiate the normative, relational, and utilitarian processes of social capital on community loyalty. We expect that these processes mediate the relationship between social capital and community loyalty. We investigate this with empirical data collected from online gaming communities. Online gaming communities are fundamental social units in the context of a Massive Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG). With the rapid growth of the MMOG market, the development of online gaming communities will strongly determine the success of an MMOG company.

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## 2. Research setting

This study evaluates the proposed model in an emerging and dynamic virtual community context - that is, online gaming communities. In the world of MMOGs, an online gaming community is often called a “guild,” which refers to a social system in which a player’s important relationships are formed and frame his or her social life [20,21,40,69]. Although individuals can play alone in an MMOG, a number of difficult tasks and challenges are designed for team play [88]. Players tend to develop long-term guilds to assemble team members and undertake complex adventures efficiently. In addition, players can obtain other advantages from their guilds, such as meeting new friends, exchanging resources, and receiving social support. With these positive expectations, most MMOG players have a guild membership [20,90] and often engage in community activities.

MMOGs have three characteristics of an online gaming community. First, the character that a player assumes in an MMOG can belong to only one guild at one time. Membership exclusiveness allows players to interact and exchange more often with guildmates than with non-affiliated players. Second, each guild has its own text-based chat channel in MMOGs. Collective norms and actions can be formed easily via the guild channel. Third, a player has his or her own guild rank. Guild rank, which represents the player’s position in a guild, affects the power to allocate guild resources and recruit new members [55].

According to Nielson Entertainment’s [56] report, active game players spend more than 5 hours a week playing games socially. As the social element of online gaming has become significant, the importance of online gaming communities has started to draw scholars’ attention [20,21,33,49,69,88]. Guilds manifest the vitality of online social dynamics, as they help each player develop social capital and facilitate social exchange in MMOGs. Therefore, online gaming communities present an excellent context in which to study virtual community behavior.

## 3. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

Our conceptual framework describes the indicators and effects of social capital in an online gaming community. The model draws upon social capital theory [1,13,35,54] and social exchange theory [9,37,78]. As shown in Fig. 1, individual centrality and social interaction ties serve as two indicators of social capital in a guild. Social capital has positive impacts on a player’s community loyalty (i.e., intention to stay in the guild) through perceived social norms, perceived community trust, and resource accessibility. Finally, since game utility is one of the major

reasons that a player stays with an online game [38,45], the partial mediation role of perceived game utility of an MMOG is also examined in our research.

### 3.1. Social capital in a virtual community

Coleman [13] suggested that “social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structure, and they facilitate certain actions of actors within the structure.” Nahapiet and Ghoshal [54] suggested that social capital exists within networks of relationships that are possessed by an individual or social unit.

This study defines social capital as a player’s structural properties in a virtual community. We focus on structural social capital in a guild for two reasons. First, social capital theory is concentrated mainly on how the social structure of an entity serves as a productive resource [13,54]. Structural capital reflects the fundamental form of social capital. Second, Coleman [13] and Granovetter [34] suggested that structural embeddedness can generate other aspects of social capital. This study attempts to extend online social capital literature by examining the effect of structural properties on relational capital in online gaming communities.

This study conceptualizes social capital as a high-order representation of individual centrality and social interaction ties in a virtual community. Individual centrality refers to the extent to which a focal individual is connected to others in a network [2,73,84], whereas social interaction ties represent the frequency of participation in community activities, the amount of time spent, and the frequency of interaction with members [12]. These constructs have been used as structural social capital in past studies [12,42,73,75,79,80,84].

### 3.2. Integrating social capital into social exchange theory: toward a tripartite-process model

Furthermore, the concept of social capital covers not only its sources, but also its consequences that facilitate certain actions of an individual [1,51]. This study elaborates the impact of social capital on community loyalty by incorporating social capital theory into social exchange theory. Blau [9] defined social exchange as a process of central significance in social life and underlying the relationships between individuals and groups. We argue that social capital theory and social exchange theory are not mutually exclusive, but can be integrated together. Social capital theory indicates the structural antecedents of individual actions [13],

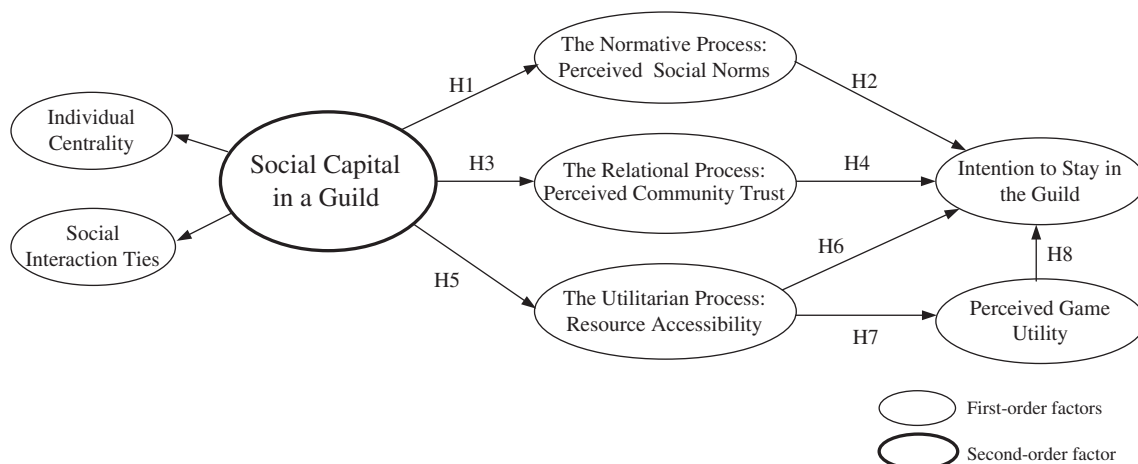


Fig. 1. Research model.

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