



The effects of perceived online justice on relational bonds and engagement intention: Evidence from an online game community

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 16 March 2018

Keywords:

Social exchange theory
Perceived justice
Relational bonds
Engagement
Online community

ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, playing an online game has become one of the most popular leisure activities. Hence, more and more people have spent time interacting with other players in an online game and its online community. Responding to this trend, this study examined the development of online game community members' engagement intention based on their perceptions of justice and relational bonds. Based on the well-established frameworks of organizational justice and relational bonds, this study formulates and empirically tests a research model attempting to understand interrelationships between four dimensions of perceived online justice (i.e., distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational), three dimensions of relational bonds (i.e., financial, social, and structural), and online community engagement intention. This study collected and analyzed data from 348 members of an online game community with frequency, reliability, confirmatory factor, and correlation analyses, and used the structural equation modeling method. The verified model indicated that financial bonds were significantly influenced by informational justice. However, social bonds were significantly affected by procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice dimensions while structural bonds were significantly impacted by distributive and interpersonal justice dimensions. Lastly, online community engagement intention was significantly influenced by financial, social, and structural bonds. In light of these empirical findings, a thorough understanding of the antecedents of online community engagement intention is critical in building a strong relationship between members and the online community.

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1. Introduction

For the past few decades, the Internet has significantly and progressively influenced the daily lives of individuals (Chou, Lin, & Huang, 2016). With the evolution of the Internet, which has generated countless online communities worldwide, more and more users have relied on online sources to obtain useful data and information rather than offline ones (Anderson, 2005; Yen, Hsu, & Huang, 2011). Furthermore, through online channels, an increasing number of users have now connected with others to share their interests in online communities (Blanchard, 2008; Tonteri, Kosonen, Ellonen, & Tarkiainen, 2011). The rapidly growing popularity of virtual and online games has also enabled both game companies and users to establish and promote a strong user-game relationship via online game communities (Hsu & Lu, 2007). Game

companies have utilized online game communities as a versatile tool for communicating with users, and users have accessed such online game communities to obtain strategies as well as information about how to play a particular game (Park & Chung, 2011). Users often establish and manage a successful online game community by leading other members to voluntarily engage in online community related behaviors, including positive word-of-mouth communication, support, active participation, recommendation, and offering information about the game to others (Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2011; Park & Chung, 2011). Despite the benefits of such interactive behaviors among online game community members, previous research in the online community context has ignored the cyber-social interaction process motivating other users to participate in engagement behaviors.

This research formulates and tests a hypothesized model of online game community engagement integrating social exchange theory and organizational justice theory. Since an online community generates virtual interactions demonstrating a multi-sided interaction between members, members form justice perceptions

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by participating in the online community (Chou et al., 2016). As the basic component of maintaining and sustaining relationships in a social exchange, justice has been considered an effective mechanism for explaining the online community context (Fang & Chiu, 2010; Lind & Van den Bos, 2002). Chou et al. (2016) and Chiu, Hsu, and Wang (2006), for example, call for studies that investigate whether online community members' justice perceptions affect their behaviors toward the community. Responding to the need for research on perceived online justice, this study adopts social exchange theory to identify multiple dimensions of perceived online justice, including as distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Previous research suggests that relational bonds are psychological outcomes in a virtual relationship context (Chen & Chiu, 2009). For example, the interactivity of online community members creates a special opportunity for a relationship that is practiced on a one-on-one level (Chen & Chiu, 2009). Hence, an online community needs to understand which relational bond (i.e., financial, social, or structural) is the most valuable to members and provided to them (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991; Chen & Chiu, 2009). Since relational bonds can result in positive outcomes for an online community (Chen & Chiu, 2009; Lin, Weng, & Hsieh, 2003), it is essential to examine the mediating role of relational bonds on the proposed relationship between perceived online justice and online community engagement. With data collected from 348 active online game community members of "LoL INVEN," one of the most reputational online communities of the "League of Legends" (LoL) in South Korea, this study formulates, validates, and tests a model investigating the influences of four dimensions of justice on their relational bonds and engagement intention toward the online game community. The engagement intention construct is much more important to the online game community than to other types of online communities, such as brands, because the communities tend to be designed for the particular brands' commercial purpose (Hsu, Chiang, & Huang, 2012). An online game community is based on the voluntary interaction of its members without any commercial purpose. As a result, the online game community needs its members' engagement for their game community, which in turn brings competitive advantages to the community in the long term.

Since 2009, LoL has been one of the most played games in the world, and in 2016 the number of its monthly active players exceeded 100 million from over 145 countries (Forbes, 2016). In the LoL INVEN, members can discuss their personal strategies and provide guides for how to win the game. In addition, players can subscribe to e-sports news about the LoL World Championship as well as receive information about game patches and updates. LoL's extensive game community has a global online platform (i.e., www.invenglobal.com/lol) as well as a regional website in each language (i.e., Korean: <http://lol.inven.co.kr/>). Due to the game's popularity and the online activities of its players, the LoL INVEN was selected as the context of this study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical background and perceived online justice

In the online community context, community members can perceive their impact on other members based on the other members' favorable attitudes (Koh & Kim, 2003). Social exchange theory has been viewed as a fundamental theory for understanding behavior between group members since comparison offers the standard against which all relationships are evaluated and is also a significant part of social exchange (Blanchard, 2008; Ward & Berno, 2011). Equity theory (Adams, 1965), which adapts social exchange theory, evaluates fairness or justice in interpersonal interactions

from different perspectives. Justice is based on an individual's perceptions of assessment and fairness of appropriateness of processes or consequences, making justice a cognitive appraisal concept and an important part of maintaining a relationship in a social exchange (Cropanzano & Greenberg, 1997; Lind, Kulik, Ambrose, & de Vera Park, 1993). The fundamental notion of equity theory is that individuals' perceptions of an exchange relationship's fairness may be formed by comparing their own output/input ratio with a reference group's ratio (Adams, 1965). A sense of justice or fairness is usually established by a fair balance between output and input (Cropanzano & Greenberg, 1997).

In the online context, online game community members' participation is marked by social exchanges among members, and one of the motivational factors, perceived justice, gives members the feeling of equity (Hsu et al., 2012). The primary purpose of being a community member is to give and take information about the game to ultimately accomplish the game's task and goals (Ang, Zaphiris, & Mahmood, 2007). The offering of help or knowledge needs to be equal to that which is received along with the exchange's equity when members engage in value exchange in their online community (Wasko & Faraj, 2000). Therefore, it is necessary to understand how perceived online justice drives online community members' participation. Regarding previous literature, this study categorizes perceived online justice into four dimensions: distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational (Chou et al., 2016; Colquitt & Rodell, 2011). Online community members take part in their community to have fun, gain support, meet other people, attain a sense of belonging, and stay connected with friends (Chiu et al., 2006; Chou et al., 2016). The quality of online communities' fairness or justice can influence their members' attitudes and behaviors toward their community (Chen & Hung, 2010).

Distributive justice is defined as "the allocation of costs and benefits in achieving equitable exchange relationships" (Smith, Bolton, & Wagner, 1999, pp. 358–359). In an online community context, this aspect of perceived justice is based on online community members' perceptions of fairness about outcomes or returns regarding their participation (Chou et al., 2016). The online community members assess the degree to which the proportion of their output to input is equal to a reference group's proportion (Cloutier, Denis, & Bilodeau, 2013). This means they attempt to sustain an equitable relationship so that the proportion of output to input remains equivalent to the associated members (Olivera, Goodman, & Tan, 2008).

Procedural justice is defined as "the perceived fairness of policies, procedures, and criteria used by decision makers to arrive at the outcome of a dispute or negotiation" (Blodgett, Hill, & Tax, 1997, p. 189). In the online community, members can discuss and share various ideas and related opinions through bulletin boards. Online community members must follow the stipulated guidelines or rules to ensure effective communication. For instance, a member's posting may lead to a ban from the online community if he or she fails to follow its specific processes or rules. Usually, the members evaluate the level to which processes were obeyed and followed to maintain fairness (Chou et al., 2016).

Interpersonal justice refers to the perception of how members were treated with dignity and respect and if members refrained from improper comments or remarks during the enactment of processes (Greenberg, 1990). In the online community context, interpersonal justice is defined as online community members' evaluation of fairness with respect to how they are treated by other members during community participation (Chiu, Wang, Shih, & Fan, 2011). For example, the way online community members are treated while sharing information influences perceptions of interpersonal justice (Chiu et al., 2011). This means online community members should demonstrate respect and concern for other

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