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# Managing gamer relationships to enhance online gamer loyalty: The perspectives of social capital theory and self-perception theory

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## ABSTRACT

Online games are a popular communication media, yet how the relationship between online gamers and the game impacts gamer loyalty is still a fertile area for exploration. Hence, the objective of this study was to examine how relationship characteristics—length (duration), depth (increased usage), and breadth (cross-buying)—impact online gamer loyalty, and the role of relational switching costs and gaming habits (i.e., natural and automatic gaming behavior) in such impacts. The social capital theory and the self-perception theory were used to elucidate the underlying mechanism. This study collected responses from 5159 online gamers and analyzed the data using structural equation modeling methods. The analytical results indicate that relationship characteristics are positively related to relational switching cost and gaming habit, which are further related to online gamer loyalty. This study is one of the first examining how gamer-game relationships can contribute to gamer-gamer relationships (in terms of relational switching cost) and subsequently gamer loyalty. The findings provide the insight that developing relationships between gamers should fuel their continued play via two interwoven routes.

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## 1. Introduction

The global online gaming market's \$101.1 billion value in 2016 (NewZoo, 2017a) is evidence of the ongoing popularity of online games. A single online game, *Diablo III*, achieved record sales of 3.5 million copies on the first day of its release (Statista, 2017) and, with continued upward projections for the global popularity of online games (NewZoo, 2017a), further research is warranted into the medium.

The number of game providers has increased dramatically. For example, in the United Kingdom it increased by 22% annually to more than 2100 gaming firms. (UKie, 2017). The top 25 global gaming companies have experienced sharp changes in annual game revenues (i.e., from a worst fall of 27% to a best rise of 57%) in a year, i.e., from 2015 to 2016 (NewZoo, 2017b). Such figures indicate the relevance of gamers' loyalty.

The literature on online gaming has examined gamer loyalty (the intention to repeatedly play a game), which fosters continual

engagement in gaming and contributes to the sustainability of game providers. The identified antecedents of online gamer loyalty include enjoyment (Hsu & Lu, 2007; Merikivi, Tuunainen, & Nguyen, 2017), flow (Hsu & Lu, 2004), novelty, design aesthetics (Merikivi et al., 2017), customer preference, social norms (Hsu & Lu, 2007), interdependence (Teng, Chen, Chen, & Li, 2012), a sense of community, and relational switching cost (the cost related to interpersonal relations if users switch to another game) (Tseng, Huang, & Teng, 2015). Such literature has explained how the gaming experience and the games' social activities impact online gamer loyalty. However, the literature has not yet examined whether and how gamer-game relationships may contribute to gamers' social activities, or gamer-gamer relationships, and subsequently to online gamer loyalty, indicating a research gap.

Research filling this gap is important for online game providers as it helps them enhance online gamer loyalty, which builds corporate competitive advantage, in the face of sharply fluctuating revenues (NewZoo, 2017b). Research filling this gap could contribute alternative routes for gamer-game relationships to formulate online gamer loyalty, indicating the importance to both practitioners and scholars.

To fill the gap, we began with the features of the gamer-game

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relationship. A good customer relationship (i.e. the relationship between the customer and the firm, or herein the gamer-game relationship) increases the usage of the core service (Lemon & Wangenheim, 2009). Hence, strong gamer-game relationships should increase gaming usage, which helps accumulate and strengthen gamer-gamer relationships, i.e., social capital in gamer communities. Social capital theory (Putnam, 1995) can explain how social capital contributes to user loyalty to information systems (e.g., Chen, Huang, & Davison, 2017), justifying the adoption of this theory. The link between social capital and loyalty may be explained by “the costs associated with leaving” (Chen et al., 2017, p. 1567), implying the important role of relational switching cost.

Customer relationship (with a firm) is related to service usage (Lemon & Wangenheim, 2009). Usage can also be linked to favorable user evaluations (Kim & Malhotra, 2005) and that link can be explained by the self-perception theory (Bem, 1967). As usage is key for describing gamer-game relationships, the self-perception theory should be applicable to the current research issue. This theory can be used to explain how usage formulates users' favorable evaluations, e.g., regarding gaming as a habit. That is, the self-perception theory was used to identify gaming habit as a potential consequence of gamer-game relationships, justifying the inclusion of gaming habit.

The objective of this study was to examine how relationship characteristics, i.e., length (duration), depth (increased usage), and breadth (cross-buying), impact online gamer loyalty and the role of relational switching costs and gaming habits (i.e., natural and automatic gaming behavior) in such impacts. This study makes several contributions to the literature. First, Merhi (2016) examined a framework for explaining gaming intention and verified that social interactions are important for forming gaming intention. In line with Merhi (2016), this study also examined how social interactions form gaming intention, but introduced gamer-game relationships as additional sources for social interactions, i.e., suggesting an alternative means of facilitating social interactions and thus gaming intention.

Second, Lukavská, Hrabec, and Chrz (2016) examined how gaming habits contribute to online game usage. The present study differs in asking for self-reported gaming habits and providing additional sources for those habits, i.e., relationship length, depth, and breadth.

Third, Moon, Hossain, Sanders, Garrity, and Jo (2013) used the psychological ownership theory and the social identity theory to explain the sources of online gamer loyalty. In contrast to theirs, this study explained gamer loyalty by using alternative theoretical perspectives, i.e., the social capital theory and the self-perception theory. Such perspectives further clarify the various sources and complex mechanisms of the formulation of online gamer loyalty.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Online gamer loyalty

Online games are popular research foci in various disciplines, e.g., communication (Tseng et al., 2015), electronic commerce (Kaptein, Parvonen, & Pöyry, 2015; Lehdonvirta, 2009), and social psychology (De Grove, 2014; Merhi, 2016). Online gamer loyalty has become a recent research focus (Teng, 2017a, 2017b; Tseng et al., 2015) and is defined as the intention to repeatedly play an online game (Teng et al., 2012). Such intention is important in enhancing the sustainability of game providers, as gamers' engagement contributes to associated sales revenue (Cheung, Shen, Lee, & Chan, 2015).

Online gamer loyalty has a related but distinct term, i.e., addiction. Addicted gamers have been shown to exhibit conflict and

withdrawal symptoms and thus not all high-engagement gamers can be said to be addicted (Charlton & Danforth, 2007), while loyalty indicates merely the intention to repeatedly play a game (Teng et al., 2012). Addiction was used as a construct distinctive from online game loyalty (Lu & Wang, 2008), supporting that addiction differs from loyalty. The present study has a focus on gamers' intention to repeatedly play a game (i.e., loyalty), thus justifying the choice to use the term loyalty.

Online gamer loyalty has various antecedents, including personal and interpersonal ones. Personal sources include a sense of control, entertainment (Huang & Hsieh, 2011), challenge (Huang & Hsieh, 2011; Teng et al., 2012), expectancy disconfirmation (Liao, Huang, & Teng, 2016), motivation to attain gaming goals (Teng, 2017a), and enjoyment (Hsu & Lu, 2007). Enjoyment is further associated with collaboration skills (Baek & Touati, 2017), indicating the importance of gamer-gamer interactions. Interpersonal sources include interdependence (Teng et al., 2012), team participation (Teng & Chen, 2014), social presence, participation in gaming communities, (Teng, 2017b), a sense of community, and relational switching cost (Tseng et al., 2015). Additionally, positive group appraisal of womanhood is important for strengthening the gamer identity among female gamers (Vermeulen, Van Bauwel, & Van Looy, 2017), further supporting the importance of interpersonal factors. That is, both personal and interpersonal factors may contribute to online gamer loyalty.

The intention to repeatedly play a game was defined as online gamer loyalty (Teng et al., 2012), which motivates future game play, which has been known to be fueled by autonomy, competence, and relatedness perceptions (Ryan, Rigby, & Przybylski, 2006). These three perceptions could comprise a useful taxonomy in addition to a previous taxonomy of game play motivations (Yee, 2006). The taxonomy includes three major motivations (i.e., achievement, social, and immersion) and ten themes, i.e., advancement, mechanics and competition (representing “achievement”); socializing, relationship and teamwork (representing “social”); and discovery, role-playing, customization and escapism (representing “immersion”) (Yee, 2006). Additionally, a recent study (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017) provided an alternative summary of the reasons for playing online (sports) games. One recent meta-analysis further summarized reasons for playing games (Hamari & Keronen, 2017). These taxonomies and summaries are useful for comprehensively explaining the reasons for playing games and indicate that online gaming issues are highly popular, warranting further research.

### 2.2. Social capital theory

Social capital is defined as the resources in social organizations (Putnam, 1995), including trust among the members of relationship networks (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Social capital can create user satisfaction (Huang, Chen, Ou, Davison, & Hua, 2017) and loyalty (Chen et al., 2017). The social capital theory states that social capital facilitates cooperation and coordination for mutual benefit (Putnam, 1995). This theory is one of the most widespread and has thus resulted in an enormous amount of literature, restraining any single article from fully reviewing it and motivating the inclusion of the recent theoretical advancements.

Social capital theory has been widely applied in various contexts (e.g., Chung, Seaton, Cooke, & Ding, 2016; Tseng et al., 2015). For example, social capital can encourage employees in a virtual organization to share their knowledge with colleagues (Chung et al., 2016). Social capital can also help employees achieve career success (Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001), i.e., social resources provide access to the information, resources and career sponsorship that are key to career success (Seibert et al., 2001). In addition to organizational contexts, the social capital theory has also been applied to

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