



## Predicting guild commitment in World of Warcraft with the investment model of commitment



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### ABSTRACT

Many MMORPG offer players the possibility to become a member of a guild, a hierarchical organization of characters with common objectives. Guild membership can be beneficial to game progress, and offer opportunities for social interaction. In the current study we focus on the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (WoW), with the main aim to examine whether guild commitment and players' intention to remain in their guild can be predicted by players' satisfaction, investments, and perceptions of alternatives to their guild. To this end, 165 WoW players completed an online questionnaire and answered questions related to their guild membership. They also completed the investment model scale which was reworded so all questions pertained to their guild and their fellow guild members. Results show that satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size significantly predict commitment level ( $p < .001$ ), which in turn predicted likelihood of participants' staying with their current guild ( $p < .001$ ) and the number of guilds they had been a member of in the past ( $p < .001$ ). Moreover, high levels of guild commitment were indicative of better mental health, whereas weekly hours of game play was negatively related to mental health. In the discussion, we conclude that interdependence theory and the investment model of commitment are applicable to online gaming environments, and we argue that commitment to one's guild is one factor that could prevent the risks associated with online game play (i.e. problematic use).

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### 1. Introduction

Over the last decades *Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games* (MMORPG) became increasingly popular, with *World of Warcraft* (WoW), the leading game in the genre, exceeding nine million subscribers worldwide. To a large extent, the popularity of MMORPG can be attributed to its social aspect (Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2004; Yee, 2006), as it enables millions of people around the world to connect and interact while playing. Player interaction is highly encouraged at the onset of the game and becomes indispensable to facilitating progress as the challenges and tasks in the game become more difficult. For example, defeating powerful opponents requires the collective effort of several players, which creates the necessity for players to form groups. In WoW, players are offered the choice to create and join pre-formed groups called *guilds*, which are organized in-game groups with

their own set of rules, that players can become a member of and which function in similar ways to a small community or a small organization.

Guilds are very diverse, starting with the number of members, which can range from a handful to hundreds (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006). Furthermore, guilds can be differentiated from one another based on their preferred game style (e.g. questing, defeating monsters or other players), as well as in terms of goals and the approach to attaining them. With respect to the approach to goal achievement, guilds can be divided into two major types: casual, and hardcore (Chen, Sun, & Hsieh, 2008). Casual guilds have minimum expectations from and minimum requirements for its members; such guilds strive to eventually reach their set goals while having fun, but not at the expense of neglecting other aspects of their life. Hardcore guilds, on the other hand, require members to be present in-game several hours per day for several days a week, with fun often being sacrificed for the sake of progression in the game. Nevertheless, there are also guilds that do not have any specific goal, and whose sole purpose is to provide players with a group to identify with (Nardi & Harris, 2006).

Being part of a guild can be a highly interactive, sociable and enjoyable experience for players. Guilds often organize guild-only activities in which members group up to achieve objectives of a

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varying degree of difficulty. Moreover, guild members have access to a guild channel, which is an online chat service visible only to guild members, in which players discuss a range of game and non-game related topics. Overall, exploring the virtual world that WoW offers within the context of a group provides a multidimensional experience that can offer greater entertainment than solo playing.

While players join guilds for various reasons, the main reason is usually related to the game and how the players want to progress within it, which can be greatly facilitated by guild membership (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2007). Players within the same guild can create a sense of loyalty amongst one another, which may stem from the development of interdependence between the players, which is needed to overcome gaming challenges (Teng, Chen, Chen, & Li, 2012). However, belonging to a guild can potentially create several additional responsibilities for the person, e.g. commitment to be available in-game on specific times and days every week to participate in the guild's preplanned activities (Ducheneaut et al., 2006), which can result in a feeling of obligation (Pearce, 2008). The survival of a guild is dependent on the members' involvement with and commitment to the group (Ang & Zaphiris, 2010; Butler, Sproull, Kiesler, & Kraut, 2002; Chen et al., 2008), which is often reflected in players' investments of resources – i.e. time, in-game goods and money – into the guild.

The concept of commitment has been suggested to be a key variable to understand interpersonal relationships, and more specifically, the reason why some persist and others do not (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). In the current paper, we propose that commitment is a key factor to explain why players remain in guilds even if they no longer receive any benefits. The persistence of relationships, or stay/leave decisions, has been studied most using the investment model of commitment (Rusbult et al., 1998). This model is based on Interdependence Theory (Rusbult, 1980a, 1980b), which focuses on the structure of interdependence found within an interpersonal relationship. Commitment to one's relationship is predicted by one's level of dependence on the relationship and the partner, which is the degree to which a person depends on the specific relationship to attain some outcome or fulfill a need while at the same time minimizing costs (Le & Agnew, 2003). Dependence in turn is mediated by the levels of satisfaction the person attains from a relationship, and the availability as well as quality of alternative relationships that could satisfy one's needs (Le & Agnew, 2003; Rusbult et al., 1998). However, as an addition to interdependence theory, Rusbult et al. (1998) suggested that a second factor that predicts commitment is investment size, which refers to the magnitude and importance of resources that have been invested in the relationship, and which could be lost or devalued if the relationship ended (Le & Agnew, 2003; Rusbult et al., 1998). By increasing dependence, commitment to the relationship also increases, which in turn increases the likelihood that one will persist in maintaining that relationship (Rusbult et al., 1998). Indeed, a meta-analysis by Le and Agnew (2003) on the investment model of commitment shows that it can predict stay/leave decisions quite successfully for romantic relationships (Impett, Beals, & Peplau, 2001; Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986; Rusbult & Martz, 1995), friendships (Rusbult, 1980a) and in organizational settings (Rusbult & Farrell, 1983; Van Dam, 2005). However, to the best of the authors' knowledge, this model has never been used to predict commitment to an online gaming environment. The main aim of the present study was therefore to investigate whether it is possible to predict players' commitment to their guild using the investment model, and whether commitment in turn would relate to stay/leave decisions.

In addition, research has shown that group memberships, and more generally, social support, promote psychological well-being and physical resilience (e.g. Jones & Jetten, 2011), and that inter-

personal relationships can be beneficial to physical as well as mental health (e.g. Holt-Lunstad, Birmingham, & Jones, 2008). However, little to no research has studied whether the above findings can be also applied to online group membership. Therefore a second aim of the present study is to investigate whether commitment to one's guild could also be beneficial to mental health. If it is indeed the case that online commitment to one's guild parallels commitment to interpersonal relationships, perhaps the positive effects that have been reported by Jones and Jetten (2011) and Holt-Lunstad et al. (2008) could also apply to guild membership. This seems especially relevant since in recent years, especially MMORPG's have been the subject of investigations into problematic game play and its negative psychological consequences (e.g. Charlton & Danforth, 2007; Yee, 2006; Zanetta Dauriat et al., 2011). In the current research we will include a measure of mental health, the 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12; Goldberg & Williams, 1988) which is aimed at the detection of minor psychiatric disorders and psychological problems. Based on interdependence theory and research on the beneficial effects of having committed relationships, we expect that commitment to one's guild will be associated with less psychological problems.

To sum up, in the current study we apply the investment model to predict commitment to an online gaming environment. We hypothesize that the investment model will successfully predict players' commitment to their guild, as indicated by high scores in Rusbult's Investment Model Scale (*H1a*) and there will be a positive relationship between commitment and stay/leave decisions (*H1b*). Furthermore, we hypothesize (*H1c*) that the guild history of the participants (i.e. the amount of guilds the participant has been in the past) will also be a reflection of the participants' guild commitment: the more guilds the participants have been in, and thus the more switching between guilds took place in the past, the less likely they are to commit to their current guild.

Moreover, we will examine the effect of guild membership and guild commitment on the participants' mental well-being. Specifically, we expect that players who belong to guilds have a higher psychological well-being (*H2a*), as indicated by lower scores in GHQ-12. We also expect that the participants' mental well-being will be negatively associated with the hours devoted to playing the game (*H2b*).

## 2. Material and methods

### 2.1. Participants

One hundred and sixty-five active WoW players, 92 females and 73 males (mean age = 27.31, SD = 8.57), were recruited by advertisements on bulletin boards aimed at WoW players (e.g. <http://eu.battle.net/wow/en>) and participated voluntarily, with the option to participate in a raffle to win a gift token to spend in-game. Six participants indicated they were not currently part of a guild and were therefore left out of further analyses, making the final sample  $n = 159$  (90 female, 69 male).

### 2.2. Materials and procedure

All materials and procedures were approved by the local Ethics Committee of Psychology. Upon entering the online survey site, participants were informed that the study investigated in-game preferences and behaviors related to WoW. After giving their informed consent, the participants were then presented with the questionnaires.

First, they provided some demographic data: age, gender. Next, they answered questions related to general game aspects and grouping up. The general section contained items such as the num-

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