



## Underlying factors of social capital acquisition in the context of online-gaming: Comparing World of Warcraft and Counter-Strike



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### ABSTRACT

The present study examines how players' behaviors within gaming-communities (clans and guilds) influence the acquisition of social capital in online-gaming. In contrast to most existing studies, our study asks for crucial underlying factors of social capital acquisition and thereby includes players of online-games of different genres to allow comparisons. We hypothesize that frequently playing together (familiarity), participating in offline events (physical proximity) and being involved in clan/guild administration (social proximity) lead to more communication with fellow players and foster self-disclosure towards fellow players, which together facilitates the formation of bridging and bonding social capital. A sample of 682 clan/guild players of the games Counter-Strike and World of Warcraft was recruited via Internet and was asked to fill out a questionnaire. Results of a path analysis support our assumptions and enhance previous findings that players of online-games especially gain positive social outcomes, when they go beyond the game and join game-related groups, engage in clan/guild administration and participate in offline events. By revealing the crucial role of self-disclosure and communication frequency as underlying factors of social capital acquisition in online-gaming, our results provide a deeper insight into these mechanisms than existing studies. Our findings have implications of general importance, since the tested model worked well for player samples stemming from online-games of different genres.

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years, computer- and videogames have more and more turned into a mass phenomenon. Simultaneously, they became a very important research area within media and communication studies and related fields like media psychology or media sociology. While early empirical research often concentrated on the negative outcomes of gaming like delinquency or aggressiveness (e.g. Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Dill & Dill, 1998; Gentile, Lynch, Linder, & Walsh, 2004), the upcoming of complex online-games like World of Warcraft (WOW) or Everquest changed the focus of research during the last years. In comparison to traditional videogames, online-games are social environments, where up to several thousands of players interact, communicate and play with each other. Therefore, more and more research has recently been conducted on social aspects and outcomes of playing. For example, social interactions with fellow players have often been identified as important motivation factors for playing online-games (e.g. Williams, Yee, & Caplan, 2008; Yee, 2006a, 2006b). Other studies

addressed the potential of online-games to serve as starting points for network building and friendship formation (e.g. Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Götzenbrucker & Köhl, 2009; Shen, 2010).

In the tradition of socio-scientific research on impacts of Internet usage (e.g. Kraut et al., 1998, 2002), our project focuses on social effects of using online-games. We are especially interested in the formation of social capital (Putnam, 2000; Williams, 2006b, 2007) in online-gaming and how it gets influenced by players' behaviors within gaming-communities like clans and guilds. Although quite a few studies have already been conducted on social capital acquisition in gaming-worlds (e.g. Huvila, Holmberg, Ek, & Widen-Wulff, 2010; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006; Williams, 2006a; Williams et al., 2006), only little is known about underlying psychological factors. Further, nearly all existing studies concentrate on only one specific game or games belonging to one specific genre, no attempts have been made to create a general model of social capital acquisition. In order to fill this gap, we constructed a path model with 5 underlying factors of social capital acquisition that is based on the work of Trepte, Reinecke, and Juechems (2012) and tested it with player samples stemming from two different games (World of Warcraft and Counter-Strike).

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### 1.1. Social capital theory and the internet

The concept of social capital has gained wide-spread attention in the past years and has frequently been referred to in scientific research of various fields (Trepte et al., 2012). It is often associated with Putnam (1995, 2000) who discussed disintegrative tendencies in the American society. Social capital can be defined as the benefits (for example information or emotional support) people obtain from their social networks (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Trepte et al., 2012; Williams, 2006b). In empirical research, authors often refer to Putnam's distinction between two major types of social capital: Bridging social capital and bonding social capital (e.g. Ellison et al., 2007; Trepte et al., 2012; Williams, 2006b, 2007). Bridging social capital arises from rather tentative or casual relationships and may "[...] broaden social horizons or world views, or open up opportunities for information or new resources", but is commonly not useful in terms of gaining emotional support (Williams, 2006b, para. 14). Bonding social capital arises from deep or strong social ties that give emotional support and persist over a longer period of time, like close friends or family (Ellison et al., 2007; Trepte et al., 2012; Williams, 2006b).

In his book "Bowling Alone" Putnam (2000) deals with the question, whether the increasing use of electronic media like television contributes to less time spent in social and civic activities and thereby threatens social capital. In the early years of the Internet, a lot of researchers asked similar questions about the social effects and outcomes of Internet usage. The findings of these studies were very diverse (e.g. Lee, 2009; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006) and revealed negative (e.g. Kraut et al., 1998; Nie & Erbring, 2002; Nie, Hillygus, & Erbring, 2002), as well as positive (e.g. Kraut et al., 2002; Lee & Kuo, 2002) social effects of Internet usage. These inconsistencies in the findings can partly be explained by the fact that using the Internet allows a wide spectrum of activities, which makes asking for overall effects rather unsuitable (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). Accordingly, some forms of using the internet are fairly social and might have the potential to amplify social capital (e.g. writing e-mails, chatting), while others might displace social interactions and contribute to isolation (e.g. online shopping, online banking, viewing videos). As also pointed out by Trepte et al. (2012), recent studies take the diversity of the Internet into account and concentrate on effects of using specific services like social network sites (e.g. Burke, Marlow, & Marlow, 2011; Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010; Ellison et al., 2007; Sciandra, 2011; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009), chats and instant messengers (e.g. Bryant, Sanders-Jackson, & Smallwood, 2006; Lin, 2011), blogs (e.g. Ko & Kuo, 2009; Marlow, 2006) or online-games (e.g. Ducheneaut, Moore, & Nickell, 2007; Huvila et al., 2010; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006; Williams, 2006a).

For online-games, several studies demonstrated positive effects on bridging social capital (Trepte et al., 2012). For example the studies on massively multiplayer online-games (MMOs) conducted by Steinkuehler and Williams (2006) revealed that online-games are well suited for getting to know people with diverse worldviews and thereby especially foster bridging social capital. Williams et al. (2006) interviewed a representative sample of World of Warcraft players about their memberships in gaming-communities (guilds) and about the social outcomes they received. Players were found to use the game to meet new people and extend their social networks. Based on a survey study with Japanese participants Kobayashi (2010) argues that online-games could serve as sources for bridging social capital and foster social tolerance, since they have the potential to connect heterogeneous populations. The potential of online-gaming to create strong ties and bonding social capital is being discussed controversially (Trepte et al., 2012). Although most studies confirm the possibility of gathering bonding social capital in online-gaming, it has to be seen rather as an exception than

the normal case. For example Steinkuehler and Williams (2006) found some players of MMOs building up strong relationships; however these cases were very rare. Similar findings were reported by Williams et al. (2006) for World of Warcraft. Siitonen (2007) found that at least some players of online-gaming communities built up meaningful, strong relationships. Skoric and Kwan (2011) found a significant connection between the usage of MMOs and online bonding social capital, though the authors cannot completely rule out that this effect might be influenced by the specific setting of their study in the city-state of Singapore.

However, none of the previously mentioned studies aimed at finding underlying psychological factors of social capital acquisition, all of them followed a more or less explorative attempt. In the following paragraph, we will concentrate on a study by Trepte et al. (2012), being the first effort to link social psychological knowledge and theories about friendship formation to social capital acquisition in the context of online-gaming.

### 1.2. Underlying factors of social capital acquisition in online-gaming

Trepte et al. (2012) surveyed 811 members of online-gaming clans and developed a model of social capital acquisition in gaming-communities. Referring to social psychological research, they detected three underlying factors of social capital formation: physical proximity, social proximity and familiarity.

Referring to Furnham (1989), Trepte et al. (2012) describe physical proximity as the "availability and accessibility of others for interaction" (p. 833). Physical closeness fosters individuals' social affiliation and enhances the chances of friendship formation (Trepte et al., 2012; based on Fehr, 2008; Regan, 2011). Although "physical proximity does not guarantee attraction", "[...] affiliation and attraction are more likely to occur for physically proximate than for physically distant interaction partners." (Trepte et al., 2012, p. 833)

Trepte et al. (2012) argue that players of online-games are reachable for fellow players within the virtual world, "[...] but they usually are physically distant" (p. 833). For Steinkuehler and Williams (2006) this is a key argument, why playing online-games is less suitable in terms of gathering bonding social capital (Trepte et al., 2012). However, one should notice that several studies suggest the importance of offline events like LAN-parties as social facets of gaming, where players meet face-to-face for competing and playing together, but also for socializing and taking part in a wide spectrum of activities that go far beyond the mere gaming experience (e.g. Jansz & Martens, 2005; Jonsson & Verhagen, 2011; Taylor & Witkowski, 2010). Trepte et al. (2012) measured physical proximity by items referring to the participation in clan offline events. They found a positive relation between physical proximity and the development of bonding social capital, while bridging social capital was negatively associated with physical proximity. Trepte et al. (2012) suppose that online interactions more likely contribute to building up loose social ties, while participation in offline events might be especially important for building up deeper social bonds.

Based on the work by Furnham (1989) and Regan (2011) Trepte et al. (2012) describe social proximity as "the closeness of social networks" (p. 834). Referring to social psychological literature, it can be argued that people who are easily accessible for many members of their social network (especially people in central positions within their networks), are more socially proximate, which fosters social attraction and affiliation (Trepte et al., 2012; based on Parks, 2007; Arriaga, Agnew, Cappelz, & Lehmillier, 2008; Regan, 2011). Trepte et al. (2012) conclude that players who hold a central position within their online-gaming community and for example help in terms of administrating the group, generate more bridging and bonding social capital within their clans than less dedicated members. And indeed they found significant positive

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