



## Full length article

## Identity formation in adolescent and emerging adult regular players of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG)



Dario Bacchini\*, Grazia De Angelis, Angelo Fanara

Department of Psychology, University of Campania "Luigi Vanvitelli", Viale Ellittico 31, 81100 Caserta, Italy

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to investigate the process of identity formation in adolescent and emerging adult regular players of massively multiplayer online role-playing games. Moreover, considering the association between involvement in these games and addiction, we took into account also the role of internet addiction. A total of 176 regular players and 239 controls, not playing massively multiplayer online role-playing games, aged between 15 and 30 years completed: the Utrecht-management of identity commitments scale, evaluating three identity processes, i.e. commitment, in-depth exploration and reconsideration of commitment; and the dependence subscale from the use abuse and dependence on internet questionnaire, in order to evaluate internet addiction. A multivariate analysis of variance evidenced that controls were higher on commitment and in-depth exploration, whereas players were higher on reconsideration of commitment and internet addiction. A structural equation model in which the three identity processes affected simultaneously internet addiction and regular involvement in massively multiplayer online role-playing games showed that reconsideration of commitment was positively associated with internet addiction and the probability to be a player, whereas in-depth exploration was negatively associated only with the probability to be a player. Being a regular player of massively multiplayer online role-playing games seems to be associated with a troubled path in the process of identity formation.

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## 1. Introduction

Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (henceforth, MMORPG) are virtual worlds in which players interact with each other in the online gaming environment (Cole & Griffiths, 2007). In these games, "the player is represented by an avatar characterized with an egocentric perspective, stereoscopic 3-D visualization, real-time interactivity, immersion and multisensory feedback" (Stanney, Hale, & Zyda, 2015, p. 12). There are millions of players all over the world. World of Warcraft, one of the most popular MMORPG, had a total of 5.5 million subscriptions in October 2015 (Tassi, 2015).

Beyond the graphically rich gaming environment, these games show increasing success since they seem to meet many social and psychological needs of the players. Up to now, psychological research has investigated the personality traits of the players

(Graham & Gosling, 2013; Worth & Book, 2014), the cognitive functions involved in the game (Ang, Zaphiris, & Mahmood, 2007), the underlined motivational factors (Yee, 2006), the nature of the social interactions among players (Cole & Griffiths, 2007), the players' psychopathological profiles mainly associated with the risk of game addiction (Lee & Leeson, 2015).

To our knowledge, just a few studies have investigated the relationship between MMORPG and identity (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Martin, 2015; Bessière, Seay, & Kiesler, 2007; Borca, Bina, Keller, Gilbert, & Begotti, 2015; Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Elund, Clayden, & Green, 2010; Guegan, Moliner, & Buisine, 2015; Israelashvili, Kim, & Bukobza, 2012; Lee & Leeson, 2015; Yee, 2006; Yee, Ducheneaut, & Nelson, 2012) and none of them has been carried out within the perspective of the identity formation approach (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008) involving adolescents and emerging adults. Nevertheless, "identity" is a sort of a keyword in this kind of game; indeed, while playing MMORPG, players assume a virtual identity (avatar) and interact with each other embodying this virtual identity. Since most players are adolescents and emerging adults, whose main developmental task is

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [bacchini.dario@gmail.com](mailto:bacchini.dario@gmail.com), [dario.bacchini@unicampania.it](mailto:dario.bacchini@unicampania.it) (D. Bacchini), [grazia.deangelis@libero.it](mailto:grazia.deangelis@libero.it) (G. De Angelis), [angelo.fanara@hotmail.it](mailto:angelo.fanara@hotmail.it) (A. Fanara).

the construction of a defined personal identity (Crocetti, Scrinaro, Sica, & Magrin, 2012), and most of them spend a lot of time playing – on average 22 h per week, according to a survey involving over 35,000 MMORPG players (“Hours of Play per Week”, 2004) – it seems a promising area of research to investigate the identity formation process in MMORPG adolescent and emerging adult players.

In the light of these considerations, our study aims to fill one of the gaps in the literature on MMORPG, comparing the identity formation process in young regular players and controls, adopting the identity paradigm based on the three key processes of commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of the commitment (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx, & Meeus, 2008; Meeus, 1996), that represent a recent evolution of Marcia's classic (1966) identity paradigm. Moreover, different studies evidenced that a variable percentage of MMORPG players show signs of addiction (Hussain, Williams, & Griffiths, 2015), encouraged by the characteristics of the games themselves and by the large amount of time spent on average in playing (Young, 2009). Thus, as MMORPG are played online, we are also going to consider the role of Internet Addiction (IA), first comparing regular players and controls, and then proposing a model aimed to explain how identity formation processes affect regular involvement in MMORPG and IA.

### 1.1. Identity formation processes in adolescence and emerging adulthood

The Identity formation is the core process during adolescence and emerging adulthood. Literature is based on the seminal contributions by Erikson (1950), who believed that the construction of the identity was the main developmental task during adolescence, and Marcia (1966), who developed the Eriksonian theory focusing the process of identity formation in adolescence on the two key concepts of exploration and commitment, where exploration consists of actively questioning various identity alternatives and commitment involves making a relatively firm choice and engaging in an identity domain. In recent years, Meeus (1996); Crocetti, Rubini, and Meeus (2008) and Crocetti, Rubini, and Luyckx et al. (2008) expanded Marcia's paradigm and developed a model of identity formation, with commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment as pivotal identity processes. Specifically, commitment refers to the choices made in areas that are relevant to identity and represents the extent to which one feels certain about or identifies with these choices (Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006). In-depth exploration refers to the extent to which individuals actively deal with current commitments, reflect on their choices, look for new information, and talk with others about these commitments (Meeus, Iedema, & Maassen, 2002). Reconsideration of commitment refers to the comparison between current commitments and other possible alternatives, and to individuals' efforts to change their present commitments. These identity formation processes are considered to go on beyond adolescence, throughout all of emerging adulthood, that in European countries proved to last longer than elsewhere, ending conventionally at age 30 (Douglass, 2007).

Commitment, in-depth exploration and reconsideration of commitment were found to be differentially associated with adolescents' adjustment (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008). Commitment was positively correlated to a clear and stable self-concept, extraversion, emotional stability, and warm parent-adolescent relationships. In-depth exploration was an ambivalent dimension. Indeed, while it was positively associated with agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience, it was also related to internalizing problems when adolescents, and even more so,

emerging adults, tend to ruminate over their commitments (Luyckx, Klimstra, Duriez, Van Petegem, and Beyers (2013)). Finally, reconsideration of commitment represents the crisis-like aspect of identity formation, as it was negatively associated with self-concept clarity and with the various adaptive personality dimensions. In addition, reconsideration of commitment was positively associated with depression, anxiety, involvement in delinquent behaviors, and poor family relationships (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008).

### 1.2. Identity and massively multiplayer online role-playing games

Research investigating the positive or negative outcomes resulting from online games involvement with respect to the identity-related processes reached inconsistent findings, also because several theoretical paradigms have been taken into account in defining identity.

Being a MMORPG player is assumed to exert a significant role in the processes of identification, according to the theory of social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which posits that individuals define their self-concept through the associations with social referents, such as ethnicities, work groups, and organizations. In MMORPG players, the feelings of belonging to the group of players, in particular as a member of a guild (a group of players sharing common purposes in the different phases of the game), proved to contribute to define players' sense of identity (Badrinarayanan et al., 2015; Guegan et al., 2015) that emerges in a strong in-group favoritism based on the guild membership. Authors affirm that “although virtual, guilds are not artificial because they become social identities and shape the perception of self and others in the game context” (Guegan et al., 2015, p. 354). In accordance with this perspective, studies (Yee, 2006; Yee et al., 2012) found that the social dimension of MMORPG and the immersive experience they propose are the chief motivations for the use of these games, which seem to activate a sort of dual system of identification (Badrinarayanan et al., 2015): online, during the in-game engagement and offline, as a member of a game's community communicating on different topics beyond the game.

In the light of the Marcia's theoretical model, Borca et al. (2015) argue that, for modern adolescents, experiences in online environments promote the phase of exploration of identity that can take several forms, including the name or avatar assumed, and the types of information revealed. The possibility that online games offer of being whoever they choose to be is considered a way to fulfill the need for self-affirmation, typical of adolescence (Hellström, Nilsson, Leppert, & Åslund, 2012). The online identity can be considered a sort of extension of the real identity and not an “other” identity. Indeed, adolescents do not tend to present their online identity with different characteristics with respect to their real identity; rather, they negatively judge their peers who alter their identity to present themselves in a better or ideal light (Borca et al., 2015).

These findings seem in line with studies evidencing that MMORPG avatars provide socially anxious individuals with a mechanism through which to express their true self (Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Elund et al., 2010; Lee & Leeson, 2015). Adopting the construct of “self-concept clarity” (Campbell et al., 1996), defined as the extent to which the contents of the self are clearly and confidently articulated, consistent, and temporally stable, Israelashvili et al. (2012) found that, at least in part, the use of the internet (including online games) in adolescents promotes self-concept clarity and self-consciousness, which, in turn, help youngsters to gain a sense of uniqueness and unity in the world.

Less optimistic points of view came from other studies (Bessière et al., 2007) evidencing for instance that “virtual worlds offer the

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