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Do adolescent gamers make friends offline? Identity and friendship formation in school

Lina Eklund ^{a,*}, Sara Roman ^b^a Stockholm Internet Research Group¹, Department of Sociology, Stockholm University, Sweden^b Department of Sociology, Stockholm University, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Today adolescents grow up and make friends in an increasingly digital society, which has led to the study of potential effects of digital gaming on youths' friendships. To date studies have tended to focus on online settings with a knowledge gap concerning the role of gaming identity for friendship formation in offline settings. The current study addresses this, applying a longitudinal social network approach—to investigate whether being a gamer impacts adolescent friendship formation.

Data was collected by questionnaire from an entire cohort ($n = 115$) of pupils (age 16–18) on three occasions during their first year in a Swedish high school. Data was analysed using a stochastic actor-oriented model, developed for testing hypotheses concerning social network changes.

Results show that being similar in terms of identifying as a gamer at the later part, but not the start, of the school year makes a friendship 1.5 times more likely. We conclude that shared identities related to digital gaming influence individuals' offline, everyday social relationships as, in the analyses of changes over time to youths' school networks, digital gaming seems to motivate friendship formation.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Youth friendship formation in a digital era

Today adolescents grow up and make friends in an increasingly digital society. Friendships are integral to individual well-being (Hartup & Stevens, 1997; Porter & Tomaselli, 1990), particularly for youth (Buhrmester, 1990). Friendship has been seen as central in research on adolescents as having more friends and higher quality friendships has been linked to better adjustment and fewer social problems (Fletcher, Darling, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1995; Hartup, 1993; Waldrip, Malcolm, & Jensen-Campbell, 2008). Additionally, friendships are key to developing an adult identity by gaining autonomy from parents (Bradford, 1990), as well as being important in predicting adult adjustment (Bagwell, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 1998). Adolescence is a time of change for social relationships, peers become more important while not necessarily subsuming family ties (Collins, 1997; Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth, & Jang, 1994). Currently, studies of digital technology use such as

computers, games, and the internet has shown how increased time spent on these has a potentially negative impact on children and youth's social circles (Cuihua & Williams, 2011; Li, Palonen, Hietajärvi, Salmela-Aro, & Hakkarainen, 2016; Pasquier, Buzzi, D'Haenens, & Sjöberg, 1998; Subrahmanyam, Kraut, Greenfield, & Gross, 2000).

Playing digital games—video and computer games—is one area where researchers have asked whether digital technology has an adverse effect on youths' social lives and networks (De Grove, 2014). At the same time research on games has shown how both young and old make friends in online spaces such as game worlds (Kolo & Baur, 2004; Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015; Taylor, 2009); and the culture around gaming that exists there (Consalvo, 2009). However, a majority of studies have looked at time spent on gaming, and focused on online gaming (Cuihua & Williams, 2011; Cummings & Vandewater, 2007; Hellström, Nilsson, Leppert, & Åslund, 2012; Kolo & Baur, 2004). Less research has focused on identifying with the activity, which is not necessarily directly correlated with time spent (Eklund, 2015a; Juul, 2010; Kallio, Mäyrä & Kaipainen, 2011). We know that youths tend to befriend others based on similarity in cultural tastes and social identity (Akers, Jones, & Coyl, 1998; Wimmer & Lewis, 2010), but to our knowledge few studies have looked at how identifying with digital

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: lina.eklund@sociology.su.se (L. Eklund).¹ www.sirg.se.

activities, such as gaming, affect adolescent friendship formation *offline*. The purpose of this study is thus to shed light on adolescent friendship patterns in a digital era, by studying youths' social networks and the impact of social identity. The study aims to investigate whether being a gamer impacts adolescent friendship formation.

We draw on longitudinal data concerning friendship formation and gamer identity collected from a Swedish cohort of adolescents ($n = 115$) over their first high (upper secondary) school year, to test—using social network analysis—whether adolescents tend to befriend others with a similar gaming identity. Our study suggests that shared identities related to digital gaming influence individuals' offline, everyday social relationships, as our analyses of changes to youths' school networks indicate that digital gaming act as a motivator for friendship formation.

1.2. Friendship formation in adolescence

In social psychology it has been argued that a desire for comparison and self-affirmation leads people to prefer friends who are similar to themselves (Berndt, 1982; Festinger, 1954), believed to partly result from an innate human desire for similarity (Heider, 1958). Such group identifiers—or memberships—offer individuals a sense of belonging in the social world; as defined in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2001). Belonging to the same groups create affinity and a sense of fitting in among individuals (Tajfel & Turner, 2001). Accordingly, research into educational environments suggests that both socio-demographic similarities and common interests can influence adolescent friend selection (Goodreau, Kitts, & Morris, 2009; Urberg, Degirmencioglu, & Tolson, 1998; Wimmer & Lewis, 2010). Moreover, it has been asserted that it is more difficult for people to change their identities than their friendships, and therefore that selection of similar friends is likely to be a more common source of homogeneity in identity among friends than social influence processes (friends influencing each other) (Urberg et al., 1998; Vaisey & Lizardo, 2010). In line with this, recent studies have found that adolescents select friends with similar moral intuitions (Vaisey & Lizardo, 2010), cultural preferences such as taste in music (Austin & Thompson, 1948; Lewis, Kaufman, Gonzalez, Christakis, & Wimmer, 2008; Wimmer & Lewis, 2010) and opinions on schoolwork and “anti-social” behavior (Stark & Flache, 2012; Urberg et al., 1998). What types of group identifiers that facilitate friendship formation in a particular context is likely to depend on what characteristics are perceived as important by the individuals involved. Thus, if gaming is an important social identity factor, it could be expected to matter for friendship formation.

1.3. Digital gaming and youth

Today the vast majority of children and adolescents in the West play digital games (ESA, 2014; Swedish Media Council, 2013). Some of these individuals take part in game culture by consuming magazines, reading reviews, participating in online forums, and talking to others about games; they are, in other words “gamers”; gaming matters for their self-perception (Consalvo, 2009; Juul, 2010; Taylor, 2009). In today's media saturated world individuals draw on media use for identity creation, gaming is no different (Crawford, 2012). While performing gaming in everyday life, e.g. talking about games or wearing clothing with gaming motives, individuals create themselves as gamers for themselves and others (Crawford, 2012). However, research has shown how game enthusiasts, while performing gaming identities, are often reluctant to call themselves gamers, even though gaming is a significant part of their identity (Eklund, 2012; Shaw, 2013). Research on Swedish youth showed that even individuals for whom gaming is part of

their identity, use terms like “hobby” and “ordinary player” to describe themselves (Aarsand, 2012). This resistance to the label gamer might come from the negative connotation this identity carries (Shaw, 2013), studies have shown that gamers are often considered unpopular, unattractive, lazy, and socially inept (Kowert, Griffiths, & Oldmeadow, 2012). In this study we use the term gamer to refer to individuals for whom gaming is part of their social identity, but recognize that while analytically useful, it might not be the preferred nomenclature of enthusiasts themselves. Thus we draw on previous studies on how youth define a gamer identity and here define a gamer as an individual who is dedicated to digital gaming and thus considers it to be a serious hobby of theirs (Aarsand, 2012; Juul, 2010; Shaw, 2013).

Previous research on gaming and friendships has mostly addressed how online gaming affects social relationships within gaming contexts. Some studies indicate that participating in online gaming builds community online (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006) where people make friends (Kolo & Baur, 2004; Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015). Existing studies of offline settings suggest that online life and gaming lead to a loss of social life offline as it takes time away from offline social relations (Cuihua & Williams, 2011; Kraut et al., 1998) but also that strong social ties can form, if players engage socially offline as well as online (Trepte, Reinecke, & Juechems, 2012). Furthermore, online gaming has been shown to help shy individuals find friends (Kowert, Domahidi, & Quandt, 2014) at the same time as online play has been linked to smaller social circles offline (Lo, Wang, & Fang, 2005).

In sum, we know that gamers can make friends online (De Grove, 2014; Kolo & Baur, 2004; Li et al., 2016; Pasquier et al., 1998) but we know less about offline settings such as school, as studies on games have tended to focus on online spaces (Lehdonvirta, 2010; Williams, 2006). Moreover, most studies have focused on time use and not identity, which are not necessarily linked (Consalvo, 2009; Juul, 2010; Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015; Taylor, 2009). Finally, there are also very few studies looking at digital gaming and friendship formation over time.

2. Current study

2.1. Research question

This study investigates, using social network analysis (Marin & Wellman, 2011; Otte & Rousseau, 2002), whether shared gaming identities are related to making friends in school. We focus on the school setting, as it is one of the primary social environments where youths reside, and a clearly bounded offline social setting. As previous studies have shown that similarity in cultural interests can motivate friendship formation (Akers et al., 1998; Berndt, 1982; Cummings & Vandewater, 2007; Goodreau et al., 2009; Heider, 1958) we hypothesize that:

H1: Adolescents who are gamers will be more likely to befriend other gamers in school.

We undertook a longitudinal study to assess the relationships between gamer identity and friendships by studying changes in friendships over one year among a full cohort of students starting high school.

2.2. Sample

Data was collected from a public school in a Swedish big city area, a country where digital gaming is widespread (Eklund, 2015a; Findahl, 2011) and practically all youth continue to three years of high schooling (grades 10–12, ages 16–19). The school in question caters to students mainly interested in theoretically oriented

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