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## Commitment to multiplayer online games: An investment model approach



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## ABSTRACT

Multiplayer online games have highly committed players who continue playing these games for years. In the present study, commitment to multiplayer online games was examined from an investment model perspective. The investment model was originally developed to explain persistence in romantic relationships, ultimately identifying the three predictors of commitment as satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and investment size. Furthermore, commitment has been linked to greater accommodation (i.e., constructive responses) in relationship conflicts. The present study extended the model to the context of multiplayer online games. Participants ( $N = 176$ ) who regularly played a multiplayer online game completed modified versions of the investment model and accommodation scales in an online questionnaire. Structural equation modeling analyses showed that satisfaction and investment predicted greater game commitment, which in turn predicted greater accommodation toward the game's problems (i.e., lower endorsement of exit behaviors, greater endorsement of voice and loyalty behaviors). Findings showed that the investment model provides a valid framework for examining game commitment.

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## 1. Introduction

Multiplayer online games have committed players who continue playing these games for years. For instance, in a large sample of World of Warcraft players, 70 percent reported that they had been playing the game for over three years (Debeauvais, Nardi, Schiano, Ducheneaut, & Yee, 2011). Moreover, this type of commitment is also evident in other genres of games that have persistent worlds, such as League of Legends or Clash of Clans. It is likely that long-term commitment to games will become more common in the future, as different genres of games have also begun using persistent world features. Therefore, it is important to understand commitment to games from a theoretical perspective.

In this paper, I used the Investment Model (Rusbult, 1980) to examine commitment to multiplayer online games. The investment model is a social psychological model originally developed to explain factors predicting commitment in romantic relationships. Specifically, the model identified satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size as the three independent causes of commitment. Although the model was originally developed to examine commitment in romantic relationships, it also provides a

highly validated framework that is applicable to commitment in other contexts (Rusbult, Agnew, & Arriaga, 2012). The model can provide a new perspective to game commitment, because studies on this topic tend to focus on game enjoyment as the primary motivating factor of game usage (see Boyle, Connolly, Hainey, & Boyle, 2012, for a review). However, the investment model suggests that investment size and quality of alternatives are also important predictors of commitment.

Furthermore, an extension of the investment model suggests that being committed results in more accommodating behaviors toward one's partner during conflicts in the relationship (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). Accommodation refers to the willingness to respond constructively when there are problems. This aspect of the model can also provide a framework for examining player responses to a game's problems. Players may also begin experiencing problems with a game because multiplayer online games frequently undergo updates or expansions that transform the game in certain ways. Players may perceive these changes as problematic or frustrating, and their commitment level may predict whether they respond in a more accommodating way toward these issues, such as trying to find solutions instead of quitting. Thus, I also examined whether committed players are more accommodating of a game's problems.

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### 1.1. Investment model

According to the investment model (Fig. 1, Rusbult, 1980; 1983), there are three predictors of relationship commitment, namely, satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size. Satisfaction level refers to the positive feelings that result from being involved in the relationship (Rusbult et al., 2012). People are more likely to persist in relationships when they are satisfied. Quality of alternatives refers to the availability and attractiveness of alternatives to a relationship (Rusbult & Martz, 1995). In the relationship domain, alternatives could include a relationship with another potential partner, as well as alternative arrangements, such as living with one's parents after a divorce, or not being in a romantic relationship. People are more likely to feel committed to their relationships if such alternatives are lacking, or if these alternatives are less desirable than being involved in the current relationship. Therefore, low quality of alternatives increases commitment. Finally, investment size refers to the magnitude of material or psychological resources that are tied to a relationship, such as money, time, or children. High investment means a higher cost to ending a relationship, as these investments would be lost or devalued if the relationship were to end. Thus, higher investment increases commitment. The investment model does not identify a primary predictor of commitment; instead, it suggests that all three factors uniquely predict commitment (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). A meta-analysis of the investment model also suggests that all three predictors are uniquely associated with commitment (Le & Agnew, 2003).

The investment model has important implications for relationship persistence, as it suggests that satisfaction level is not the single predictor of commitment. People may still remain committed to their relationships, even when they are not satisfied with said relationships, because they might not have desirable alternatives or may be too invested in their relationships to quit. For example, people may still have strong intentions to stay in abusive relationships, either because non-involvement may not be feasible and other alternatives are lacking, or because they feel that they have too much to lose (Rhatigan & Axsom, 2006; Rusbult & Martz, 1995).

The investment model has also been tested in contexts outside of interpersonal relationships and has been shown to provide a valid framework for other types of commitment (for a review see Rusbult et al., 2012). For instance, the investment model was used to predict employees' organizational and job commitment (van Dam, 2005; Oliver, 1990; Ping, 1997). Employees who reported

fewer job alternatives, more satisfaction with their jobs, and greater investment in their jobs had more negative attitudes toward changing their jobs (van Dam, 2005). In the health context, researchers suggested that commitment to adhering to a medical regimen could be improved by strategies based on the investment model (Putnam, Finney, Barkley, & Bonner, 1994). In the sports domain, athletes who were involved in the activity because of entrapment-related reasons (e.g., low satisfaction, high investment, and low quality of alternatives) were more likely experience burnout (Raedeke, 1997; Schmidt & Stein, 1991). Similarly, in the marketing domain, customers' brand loyalty was predicted positively by their satisfaction and investment and negatively by the quality of alternative options (Li & Petrick, 2008).

More recently, the model has been applied to digital environments. For example, researchers examined the associations between investment model variables and maintaining contact with potential relationship alternatives via social networking applications (Dibble & Drouin, 2014). More relevant to the current study, the investment model was used to investigate guild commitment in World of Warcraft players (Odrowska & Massar, 2014). It was found that guild members who were more satisfied with their guild, who had lower quality of alternatives to their guild, and who had greater investment in their guild were more committed to and more likely to stay with their guild. Although both of these studies tested the model in a digital environment, they still investigated it in the context of interpersonal relations, as their focus was on romantic or group (i.e., guild) commitment.

In the present study, I used the investment model to examine game commitment. In the game context, satisfaction involves satisfaction with the game or the enjoyment level of the players. Quality of alternatives refers to the desirability and availability of alternative games or activities, such as playing other multiplayer online games or spending time with friends. Investment can include monetary investments (e.g., monthly subscription fees, in-game purchases), time investments (e.g., mastering the game, leveling up a game character), or relational investments (e.g., online friends). Finally, commitment refers to whether the players feel psychologically attached to the game and want to continue playing the game long-term. Games with online multiplayer features and persistent world features, such as massive multiplayer online games (MMO), multiplayer online battle arena games (MOBA), or multiplayer online strategy games tend to have highly committed players. Furthermore, some of these players may remain committed to the game - even after their satisfaction level decreases - due to their high degree of investment and lack of

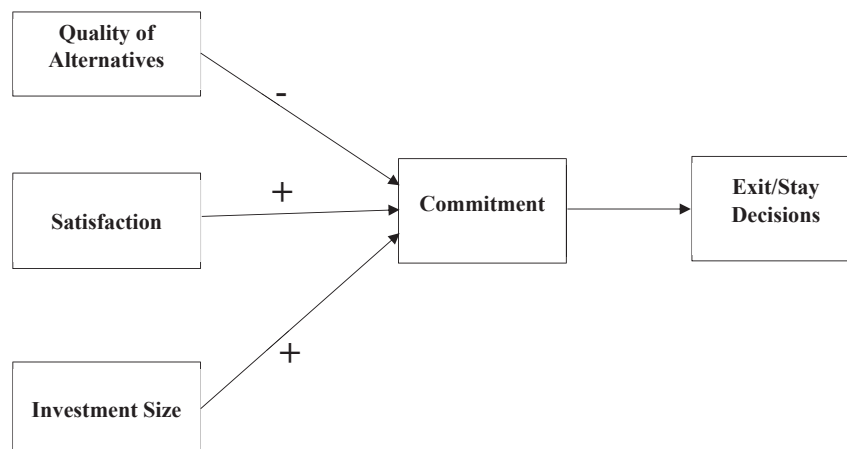


Fig. 1. The investment model.

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