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The multiplayer effect: assessing social capital in videogame-playing communities

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Abstract. Social connection is crucial for mental health, enhancing self-esteem and quality of life. The rise of videogaming, with the inclusion in modern videogames of opportunities to interact socially, necessitates examining its impact on forming and maintaining social connections. Social capital within gaming, while researched, shows varied effects, influenced by game genre and community dynamics, highlighting the need for further exploration to inform policies and practices. This article presents early findings from a mixed methods study on the effects on how videogamers engage with one another and develop social capital on videogaming platforms. Participants reported a spectrum of relationships, from strong, family-like bonds to superficial connections. The longevity of these relationships also varied, with some lasting long-term and others being more transient. Shared interests in gaming were consistently highlighted as a foundational element for forming and maintaining these connections.

Keywords. Social capital, connectedness, communities, videogames, videogamers

1. Introduction

Mental health is an established area of importance for governments and healthcare sectors around the world. Social connection is one factor that has been found to be beneficial for an individual's psychological wellbeing [1]. For example, having a support network has been found to increase self-esteem [2] and improve individuals' self-reported quality of life [3].

Videogaming has become increasingly popular, with a predicted 3 billion players worldwide in 2020 [4]. In the last 15 years, some videogames have advanced to incorporate features for players to interact with each other, providing opportunities to make friends [5]. A thorough examination of increased online interaction through gaming is paramount to understand how social connections are formed, and how these connections change over time.

Social capital refers to the resources, relationships, and networks that individuals or groups possess within a social structure [6]. It is considered an asset as it facilitates social interactions, enhances social cohesion, and contributes to individual and

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collective well-being. Gaming may offer opportunities for bonding (creating close relationships within gaming communities) and bridging (establishing connections with individuals from different backgrounds) social capital [6]. Understanding the nature of social capital in gaming contexts can provide insights into the potential benefits and challenges associated with these relationships. This knowledge can inform interventions, policies, and practices aimed at maximizing the positive impact of gaming on social connections.

Social capital within the gaming community has been widely researched [7 – 10]; however, the results are varied as to the effect of gaming on social capital. Some studies suggest that gaming is associated with increased social capital [7] with benefits particularly for shy or introverted individuals [8]. Other studies suggest that this is not the case, and relationships through online gaming had no relationship with reduced feelings of loneliness, a core component of social capital [9]. The complex nature of social interactions in gaming communities, influenced by factors such as game genre, community dynamics, and individual preferences [8, 10], contributes to the lack of a definitive consensus on the impact of online gaming on social capital.

The current study considered the relationships individuals formed through videogaming. This project has two components, a longitudinal study considering the stability of relationships over time, and a qualitative exploration of the perception of these relationships. This publication will focus on a component of the qualitative results. Initial results from the analysis of one of the qualitative questions, “How would you describe the relationships you've forged with others through gaming?” are reported.

2. Methods

The study recruited individuals internationally meeting the following criteria: over 18 years old, self-identified as videogame players and who could write fluently in English.

This study adopted a mixed methods approach which involved completing an online survey over three time periods. Survey 1 contained the full questionnaire with the quantitative and qualitative questions. Surveys 2 and 3 contained only the quantitative components. The full survey was comprised of six sections: (1) a demographic questionnaire, (2) questions on the participants gaming behavior, (3) a measure of social capital: the Internet Social Capital standardized scale [11], (4) a scale measuring perceived wellbeing, the GHQ-12 [12], (5) a measure of the quality of online and offline relationships, based on the standardized McGill Friendship Questionnaire [13], and (6) Social connectedness qualitative questions. Sections 2 to 5 were repeated one month later in Survey 2 and Survey 3 was repeated two months after the completion of Survey 1. This aimed to understand the changing dynamics of relationships over time. This paper will only discuss a subset of the findings from section 6, the qualitative questions regarding social connectedness.

Participants were recruited through advertisements on social media (Twitter and Instagram). Posters were also placed on university noticeboards across campus. Approval for the study was granted by the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC 2023/877).

Demographic information was analysed to give an overview of the sample. Open-ended questions were then thematically analysed [14] by authors EvdS and RF. Recruitment is ongoing which means that only preliminary findings are reported in this publication. As of June 13th, a total of 39 qualitative responses had been analysed.

3. Results

3.1. Demographics information

A total of 93 surveys were started; of this total, 17 were removed for not completing the full survey. As the qualitative component of the survey was not compulsory, a total of $n = 39$ responses (who answered at least one of the optional qualitative questions) were analyzed of 76 completed survey responses. The 39 individuals included in these results were 23.3 years of age on average, with 69.2% of the respondents identifying as female, 28.2% as female, and 2.6% as gender non-conforming. Of those who completed the survey, 28.2% identified as being part of the LGBTQI+ community. Most of the participants reported that their current country of residence was Australia (92.3%). The highest level of education reported was either completing or completed a university degree (84.6%).

Participants reported spending an average of 15.6 hours videogaming per week, with them gaming most days in the week (60.0%) or every day (36%). Valorant, Overwatch, and Fortnite were the three games most identified as being played, though a variety of games were identified (including Call of Duty, League of Legends, Among Us, Minecraft, Halo, and Mario Kart).

3.2. How the participants described their relationships with other videogame players

The following are initial results from analysis of one of the qualitative questions, “How would you describe the relationships you've forged with others through gaming?”. The question was answered by 29 respondents. In exploring the relationships between one another, the participants described a range of experiences characterized by varying strengths, depths, and durations. They reported that their relationships were underpinned by a shared interest in playing videogames.

3.2.1. Strength and depth of their relationships

Participants described their relationships with other gamers either as strong and robust or as superficial in nature. One participant noted that their relationships were “strong, consistent, [and] reliable”. A further participant described the relationships as “unbreakable” and another stated “they’re my best friends”. These statements suggest that individuals have strong relationships with peers in the videogame community. One participant likened the relationships with other gamers to that of family stating, “the gaming people feel like my family”.

The development of these relationships over time was also highlighted in the responses; one stating “not very close at first but very close now”. These relationships are noted to have evolved into meaningful connections. The strength of videogaming relationships is demonstrated in the description of the relationships as, “true friends I feel safe with”.

While some participants reported deep and meaningful connections, others identified that their relationships were superficial, for example: “not good friends, just people I play games with”. In contrast another participant stated that “sometimes they [friendships] could be superficial, and you may not see them again but some...stay and keep in touch with you for a long time are the true friends”. This depth is also reflected in the statement: “in some relationships we become good friends and learn each others personal lives”. These claims suggest a spectrum of relational depths in the videogaming community.

3.2.2. Duration and shared mutual interests

The participants noted variability in how long their relationships extended with the individuals they play videogames with. Longevity was noted in some responses, describing their relationships as “long lasting” and stating that “we have kept in touch... for a long time”. This is contrasted by other participants statements which indicated that their relationships are shorter in nature, stating: “I meet people through friends when gaming together but rarely forge a relationship them”. Individual participants also noted having both types of relationships simultaneously: “some are transient but others are long and we become good friends”.

Participants noted that central to their relationships was their shared interest in the videogames. This was evident in statements such as “[we have] things in common” and “[gaming] gives [us] something to talk about”. Videogaming was noted as a basis for connection, “with a good foundation on the shared interests of different games. There is always something to talk about when conversations dry up”. This suggests gaming acts as a conduit for individuals to interact and develop relationships.

4. Discussion

Videogaming platforms have been identified as significant mediums for fostering social connections and building social capital through shared interests and community engagement [7-10].

These results have briefly shown how gamers use popular videogame platforms to form and maintain relationships. These platforms facilitate a range of interactions – from developing strong, familial bonds to more superficial connections. Our findings indicate that gamers utilize the social functionalities of these platforms to engage with peers, creating both short-term and long-lasting relationships grounded in a mutual interest in gaming. Our ongoing analysis demonstrates that gamers are interested in engaging with the various functionalities of different gaming platforms to connect with their peers, fostering a sense of community and enhancing their social well-being.

The authors acknowledge that these are the preliminary findings and that more responses will provide more detail and nuance to the results. Recruitment for this study is ongoing and the authors look forward to presenting a more comprehensive analysis of the qualitative data at the conference.

5. Conclusions

Online gaming platforms are emerging as significant sites for fostering social connections and mental well-being. Our preliminary findings suggest that gamers are keen to engage in these platforms to build and maintain relationships, ranging from strong, familial bonds to more superficial connections. The shared interest in gaming acts as a foundation for these interactions, highlighting the potential of gaming communities to facilitate meaningful social connections. Understanding the varied nature of these relationships can inform future interventions and policies aimed at maximizing the positive social impacts of online gaming.

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