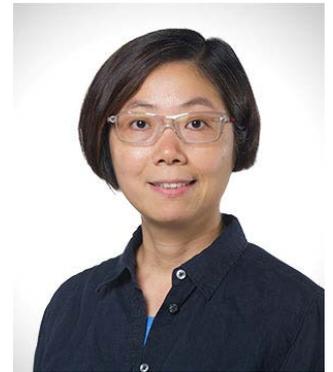


FROM ONLINE STRANGERS TO OFFLINE FRIENDS

LAI, Gina

Key implications

1. Friendship often occurs as a by-product of other purposeful activities.
2. The development of online friendship is a rational decision to balance the cost and benefit of doing so.
3. Despite the advancements of information and communication technology, online interactions cannot completely replace face-to-face contact in the development of enduring friendship.
4. The game world, virtual world, and physical world are interconnected.



Background

The social nature of video games has attracted much research attention in recent years. Research findings show that online video games, similar to social media platforms, facilitate players to develop new social ties in the virtual space and some of these virtual ties can become offline social relationships after an extended period of online social interactions. However, previous studies have largely adopted a static approach in the investigations and offer limited understanding about the development process of social ties through video-gaming over time. This study aims to fill the above research gap by conducting a qualitative exploratory investigation of the formation and transformation processes of social ties through video-gaming.

Focus of study

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do online social relationships form and develop through video-gaming?
2. How do online social ties become offline relationships?
3. How stable are these online social relationships over time? What are the factors affecting the stability?

Research methods

Qualitative data were collected from 22 former players of Nintendo DS (NDS) games in Hong Kong. NDS is a game console first launched in 2004 and later replaced by 3DS in 2011. The fact that NDS is no longer available in the market allows us to examine whether or not social relationships created through online video-gaming remain when players are no longer engaged in the game that has brought them together in the first place.

Respondents were recruited through researchers' personal networks and online discussion groups on NDS games. A total of 22 players were recruited as a result and interviewed between mid-2016 and early 2017. Each interview took an average of 40 minutes.

The interview covered five areas, including (1) video-gaming experiences, (2) impact of video-gaming on pre-existing social relationships, (3) formation of new social ties via video-gaming, (4) changes in the relationships with fellow video game players over a 10-year period, and (5) personal characteristics.

Key findings

- The game play platform effectively functions as a social media platform for friendship formation.
- Homophily lays the foundation for online friendship. Homophily in the virtual setting is developed through regular Internet-mediated exchanges, based on which participants identify common personal interests, life experiences, and/or compatible personality traits.
- Individuals who are satisfied with their existing social relationships are less motivated to develop online friendship.
- Compared with men, women tend to perceive more privacy risks associated with harassment and surveillance on the Internet, and are less likely to develop online relationships.
- Online relationships can be transformed into offline ones in the physical world, upon the deliberate efforts of the parties involved.
- Online communication and face-to-face interactions are equally important for fostering interpersonal relationships. While online interactions generate the feeling of social presence and foster perceived trust and intimacy in a relationship, face-to-face interactions give people the sense of realistic existence, validate the perceptions they have for each other on the Internet, and develop shared real-life experiences that help strengthen and sustain the relationships over time.
- Virtual space seems to be compartmentalized for exchanges among partners of varying degrees of similarity and closeness. Some areas are more 'public', such as discussion forums and game websites, in which exchanges with unrelated, similar others take place. Some areas are more 'private', such as social networking websites and instant messaging applications, and are reserved for more personal exchanges with familiar others.

Significance of findings for practice and policy

- For game developers: Video games may include features that can promote positive online-offline social interactions.
- For policy-makers and practitioners in youth services: Online community programs or activities may be developed to identify socially-isolated young people and their needs so as to provide suitable follow-up services.
- For parents and guardians of minors: Parents and guardians need to provide a supportive environment for children and young people, and also pay special attention to the video games and gaming communities that they are engaged in so as to prevent children and young people from falling prey to criminal activities.



RELATED PUBLICATION

Lai, Gina and Ka Yi Fung. 2019. "From Online Strangers to Offline Friends: A Qualitative Study of Video Game Players in Hong Kong." *Media, Culture & Society, Online First Version*, 1-19.

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REQUEST FOR MORE DETAILS

Please contact Prof. Gina Lai at ginalai@hkbu.edu.hk for more information about the project.

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY, HKBU

website: <http://socweb.hkbu.edu.hk>