Social Influence and Willingness to Pay for Online Video Games

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Research-in-Progress

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Abstract

Social influence is an important factor in guiding individual behavior, including purchase decisions. The online gaming industry has demonstrated itself to be one of the most successful business sectors to integrate the Internet into its business models. The purpose of the study is to investigate the influence an individual’s social environment has on willingness-to-pay a subscription fee for an online video game. Specifically, social influence is conceptualized as occurring on three levels within an individual’s social environment: the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. Using a survey research methodology, this study examines the effects that these influences have on expected benefit, willingness-to-pay, and each other.

Keywords: Social Influence, willingness-to-pay, online video games
Introduction

Despite the dot.com bubble bursting at the turn of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, the Internet remains a viable medium for organizations to conduct transactions and provide services to customers. This is not surprising, as 24.7\% of the world’s population and 73.9\% of North America’s population were users of the Internet as of June 30, 2009 (Internet World Stats, 2009). Many business models have incorporated the Internet into their revenue generating activities by advertising, selling products or services, gaining commissions from selling others’ products or services, or accepting donations through their websites with great success. For instance, Forester Research estimates that sales revenues for online retailers will reach $248.7 billion by 2014 (Schonfeld, 2010), which will represent 8\% of all US retail sales.

In particular, providing online content for subscription fees has emerged as a promising business model, with the online gaming industry experiencing remarkable success. According to a Strategy Analytics research report, online games are forecasted to generate $11.8 billion in revenue globally in 2011 (Brightman 2007). Online games allow individuals to play video games with other individual players and are most commonly played over the Internet. “Online gaming is a technology rather than a genre; a mechanism for connecting players together rather than a particular pattern of gameplay” (Adams and Rollings 2006: pp. 670). As a consequence of its rise in popularity, substantial research has resulted which investigates the phenomenon (e.g. Castronova 2005; Jansz and Tanis 2007; Klimmt et al. 2009; Koo 2009; Lim and Lee 2009; Meredith et al. 2009). Interestingly, many online games require that consumers initially purchase the video game itself in addition to subscription fees to play online. Insight into the online gaming industry’s ability to motivate consumers to purchase their online content has the potential to benefit other provisioners of online content by providing a better understanding of how to develop viable Internet fee-based business models.

One factor potentially affecting consumers’ willingness to pay for online video games is social influence. Social influence occurs when the behavior of other people has a strong influence on the behavior, as well as sense-making (i.e. thoughts or memories) of a focal individual (Aarts and Dijksterhuis 2003; Turner 1991). This influence can occur both directly, such as through tactics like overt statements, but most commonly occurs indirectly and in subtle ways. As observed by Forgas and Williams, “all interpersonal behavior involves mutual influence processes, and coordinated interaction by larger social units, such as groups, and even whole societies, is only possible because our behavior is guided by pervasive and shared forms of social influence” (2001: pg. 3). Research in the field of marketing has long recognized the effect that social influence has on behavior (e.g. Algesheimer et al. 2005; Bourne 1957; Burnkrant and Cousineau 1975; Sheth and Parvatiyar 1995) and it is considered one of the core issues of importance in the field of psychology (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004; Forgas and Williams 2001). Moreover, sociologists have also observed that social influence is an important motivation for individual consumption (Lichtenberg 1996), while information system (IS) researchers have found it to be an important factor for technology adoption and use (Fulk et al. 1990; Konana and Balasubramanian 2005; Shepers and Wetzels 2007; Venkatesh and Davis 2000; Venkatesh et al. 2003).

In examining social influence, a concern for researchers is the level at which the influence occurs. Three levels which have been discussed in social influence literature are the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels (see Pettigrew 1996). Influence can occur within or across levels and, importantly, that influences at different levels often aggregate to become “more than the sum of their parts” (Pratkanis 2007: pg. 8). Consequently, social influence is more powerful in controlling individual actions and thought than intuition might suggest (Ross and Nisbett 1991).

Therefore, to gain a better understanding of how social influence affects willingness to pay for online games, we attempt to identify causes within each level of influence and examine the affect these have across levels. This study is expected to make several contributions. In the area of information systems, the results of this study will expand social influence from a single construct, as it is commonly conceptualized in the IS literature (e.g. social norms), to a multi-dimensional construct which has influence between levels. Additionally, the results of this study will hopefully provide empirical evidence on how these different levels of social influence affect an individual’s evaluation of value and each other. Lastly, the results of this study will provide further insight into what motivates individuals to pay for online content.
Literature Review

Online Video Games

A video game is a computerized game in which an individual uses an interface device, such as a joystick or keyboard, to control images on a video screen. Using the Internet, online games allow a user to interact with other individuals at distributed locations playing the same game. Players are able to act cooperatively or in competition against each other. Genres of online games that have grown in popularity include role-playing, first-person shooters, and strategy games.

Academics have begun to examine online games and what motivates individuals to play them. For example, Choi and Kim (2004) examined factors which would lead an individual to continue playing a specific online game, instead of playing another game. Their study suggests that a significant relationship exists between customer loyalty and optimal gaming experience, which they term as “flow.” Furthermore, they found that personal interaction, consisting of goal, operation, and feedback, along with social interaction, consisting of communication place and communication tools, positively influence optimal gaming experience. Another example is provided by Hu and Lu (2004), who extended the Technology Acceptance Model to predict intentions to play an online game. Their study suggests that attitude towards playing online games, flow experience, and social norms positively influence intention to play online games. Additionally, critical mass, perceived usefulness, and perceived ease of use positively influenced attitude towards playing online games, while perceived ease of use has a positive effect on both perceived usefulness and flow experience. Yee (2006) developed an empirical model of individual motivations to play online games. He found that three major components motivate online gamers: achievement, social, and immersion. Subcomponents of achievement motivation included advancement, mechanics and competition. Subcomponents of social motivation included socializing, relationship, and teamwork. Subcomponents of immersion motivation included discovery, role-playing, customization, and escapism. Wu et al. (2009) examined factors which would lead an individual to continue playing a specific online game, instead of playing another game. They found evidence that the second order constructs of gratification, which is made up of the first order constructs of achievement, enjoyment, and social interaction, in addition to online game service mechanisms, which is made up of the first order constructs of fairness, incentive, and security, influence an individual’s motivation to continue playing a given online game.

Our research will focus on massively multiplayer online games (MMOG), which have recently received attention in the IS-related literature (e.g. Chen et al. 2008; McKee and Porter 2009). A MMOG is a large multi-player online video game which is capable of supporting hundreds of thousands, or even millions of individual players at the same time. These games are accessed using personal computers, as well as with modern video game consoles. The most frequently used method for large commercial MMOGs to create revenue has been charging subscription fees. One example of a MMOG is World of Warcraft, which as of April 2010 boasted 11.5 million subscribers. It is estimated that the Blizzard division of Activation (the firm that developed and provides World of Warcraft) generated $1.04 billion dollars in revenue from subscription fees in 2009 from the game (Suria 2010). These statistics highlight the potential viability of firms offering online video games.

The Theory of Social Influence

The social world in which a person resides profoundly affects the development of individual values, attitudes, and behaviors (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004; Fulk et al. 1990; Venkatesh et al. 2003; Wood 2000). Bem (1972) argues that cognitive processes are subjective and retrospective in nature. Consequently, information obtained through the interaction with others has an effect on these cognitive processes.

Social influence has been found to be an important motivation for consuming behavior; the acquisition of a good or service by others is a powerful stimulus in creating a desire to consume (Lichtenberg 1996). Consumers of products and services experience what Strader and Shaw (1999) refer to as search costs, which occur prior to making a purchase. These include time and effort used to identify potential sellers and gather price and quality information. One way to reduce search costs is to seek information from trusted individuals, such as peers. In the context of the Internet, Smith et al. (2005) found that individuals who make purchases online seek out peer evaluations for use in the purchase decision making process. They argue that this behavior is in part a result of consumers feeling overwhelmed by the number of product choices and amount of information provided by the Internet. These results
are congruent with early marketing research, which has suggested that consumers often use recommendations of others in their purchase decision because they do not have the motivation or aptitude to process the information (Olshavsky 1985; Rosen and Shavsky 1987).

The significance of social influence for understanding behavior has consequently precipitated in its widespread examination across academic disciplines, such as social psychology, consumer behavior, and marketing. Of particular importance, social influence has been an important concept to IS research. For example, many of the most commonly utilized theories in IS literature, such as the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen and Fishbein 1973), the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen 1991), the diffusion of innovation theory (Rogers 1962), the technology acceptance model 2 (TAM2) (Venkatesh and Davis 2000) and the unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (Venkatesh et al. 2003) recognize the importance of social influence. Of particular relevance to this research are recent studies which have examined the effect of social influence in the context of the Internet. For instance, Dholakia et al. (2004) found evidence that social influence is a significant motivator for participation in virtual online communities. Hsu and Lu's (2004) research demonstrated that factors of social influence can have significant direct effects on attitudes and intentions to participate in online gaming. Wu and Liu (2007) used an extended TRA to examine which antecedents predict individuals’ intentions to play online video games. Their research suggested that subjective norms have a significant positive relationship with the development of intentions to play online video games.

In examining social influence, a concern for researchers is the level at which the influence occurs. Three levels which have been discussed in social influence literature are the micro-, meso, and macro-levels (see Pettigrew 1996). The micro-, or cognitive-level, is concerned with the influence that an individual person’s traits has on their behavior. In the context of the Internet, an individual’s beliefs and preferences would largely determine the perceived overall quality or expected benefits from a particular site. The meso-, or interpersonal-level, which has been observed to be the most commonly researched level of social influence (Pratkanis 2007), is concerned with how people influence each other. The notion that the norms of a personal communication network (PCN), or peer group of friends, can affect an individual’s behavior and cognitive processes is an example of influence occurring at this level. The macro-level is concerned with the influence which occurs from the culture or social structure in which an individual resides. For instance, reputation would be considered a macro-level phenomenon which can have influence on individuals or groups. It should be noted that the causes of influence can occur within or across levels and, importantly, that influences at different levels often aggregate to become “more than the sum of their parts” (Pratkanis 2007: pg. 8). Consequently, social influence is more powerful in controlling individual actions and thought than intuition might suggest (Ross and Nisbett 1991). Therefore, to gain a complete understanding of how social influence affects WTP for online video games, we identify causes within each level of influence, examine the effect these have across levels, and determine whether an interaction effect exists between influences occurring at different levels.

**Willingness-to-Pay**

Willingness-to-pay (WTP) can be described as the maximum monetary amount a consumer would spend to obtain a given product or service (Ajzen and Driver 1992; Cameron and James 1987; Mooradian and Oliver 1997). As observed by Pearce (1983), individual preference is expressed in the market as offers of money for some product or service. This can be interpreted as a display of WTP for the expected benefits that a product has to offer that individual. Pearce therefore conceptualizes WTP as what a consumer is willing to pay in excess over the price paid for the good, not simply what consumer actually paid. Conceptualizing WTP in this way is useful, because it suggests that investigation into consumers’ WTP for a product or service which the individual is already purchasing could result in a higher WTP than the price which is currently being sacrificed.

WTP, in the form of the contingent valuation method, has been frequently utilized in medical decision-making literature to determine benefits for medical procedures (see Olsen and Smith 2001), in environmental-related research to estimate the value of ecological initiatives (e.g. Wiser 2007; Johnston et al. 2005), and in the marketing literature to determine the monetary value consumers attribute to a good or service (e.g. Fuchs et al. 2010; Sinha et al. 2010). Related to our research, WTP has been examined in the context of products and services offered via the Internet, including online sports content (Lopes and Galletta 2006) and competition in online auctions (Chan et al. 2007). In the context of this study, willingness-to-pay is conceptualized as the monetary expression of the summation of gains or utility that an individual anticipates experiencing as a result of playing an online game. As Lopes and Galletta (2006) observe in their research, determining a consumer’s WTP is an important step in
calculating the appropriate subscription fees for online content; such research might in fact reveal charging fees may not be possible. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, willingness-to-pay will be our dependent variable.

**Expected Benefits**

In the context of this study, expected benefits can be defined as the summation of gains or utility that an individual anticipates experiencing as a result of playing an online game. Thus, expected benefits represent a micro-level factor. Research has demonstrated that one benefit which users seek when accessing a website is enjoyment (Vander Heijden 2003). For online games, the notion of enjoyment, or fun, is captured in Sherry et al.’s (2006) study of gratifications as predictors of game use and preference, where it was found that challenge, competition, diversion, arousal, fantasy, and social interaction were significant benefits motivating individuals to play video games, respectively. The literature examining video games, both on- and offline, generally support the results found by Sherry et al. (Steinkurhler and Williams 2006; Sweetser and Wyeth 2005; Vorderer, Hartmann, and Klimmt 2003; Yee 2006).

Pearce (1983) argued that expected benefits can be measured using the WTP of an individual, suggesting these two constructs are positively correlated. In the context of the Internet, Lopes and Galletta (2006) found that expected benefits had a significant positive relationship with WTP for online content. We therefore suggest that expected benefits will have a positive relationship with consumers’ willingness to pay for online video games.

**H1:** Expected benefits from playing an online video game will have a significant and positive relationship with willingness-to-pay a subscription fee.

**Overall Technical Quality**

Research has suggested that perceived quality plays an important role in affecting decisions of individuals about purchasing goods and services. Because this research is concerned with the role of quality in consumer behavior, we take a marketing approach in defining perceived quality as “the consumer's judgment about a product's overall excellence or superiority” (Zeithaml 1988: pp. 3). Perceived quality is different from objective quality (Garvin 1983; Zeithaml 1988) and can be based on personal beliefs and preferences, the consumer’s peer group, or the providing firm’s public image and reputation.

Various quality attributes of video games, both online and offline, have been examined in the literature, including online gaming latency (Claypool and Claypool 2006), image quality (Bracken and Skalaski 2005), storyline (Shelly 2001), and overall game usability (Cornett 2004). However, researchers commonly view quality as an overall, or global, attribute of a product (Everard and Galletta 2006; Lopes and Galletta 2006; Olshavsky 1985). In the context of the Internet, Wathen and Burkell (2002) argue that quality belief (credibility assessment) of a website will be based on prominent features, such as appearance, the organization of information, and the ease of which consumers can use the site’s interface, while not focusing on the details of any specific attribute. Empirical research examining perceptions of website quality suggest that it has a significant influence on both customer satisfaction (Ethier et al. 2006; Flavian et al. 2006) and trust (Everard and Galletta 2006; Flavian et al 2006; McKnight et al. 2002). In turn, this results in increased loyalty to a website (Flavian et al. 2006; Srinivasan et al. 2002) and a greater willingness to conduct business transactions with that website (Everard and Galletta 2006; Liao et al. 2006; McKnight et al. 2002; Srinivasan et al. 2002). For the purposes of our study, we adopt the view of perceived website quality as an overall assessment and not attributable to any single element.

When a customer perceives a product or service to be of higher quality than that of a competing product or service, that individual will expect to pay a higher price for the product or service (Zeithaml 1988). This relationship between quality and willingness-to-pay has been examined previously in the literature (e.g. Homburg et al. 2005; McCluskey et al. 2007), including in the context of content provided via the Internet (Lopes and Galletta 2006). We therefore suggest that an individual’s overall perceived quality of an online game will influence consumers’ willingness to pay a subscription fee to have access to that game.

**H2:** Perceptions about the overall technical quality for an online video game will have a significant and positive relationship with the expected benefits from playing that online video game.
Personal Communication Network Norms

One theory which examines social influence in the IS context is the social influence (SI) model of technology use (Fulk et al. 1990; Fulk and Steinfield 1990; Schmitz and Fulk 1991). It argues that perceptions of media are, to some degree, subjective and socially constructed. Specifically, social influence is exerted through “overt statements” (Salancik and Pfeffer 1978), “vicarious learning” (Bandura 1986), “norms for behavior”, and “social definitions of rationality”. The SI model further posits that social influence is most likely to occur within a personal communication networks (PCN), or “ego network” (Rogers and Kincaid 1981). A PCN is a small social network which is comprised of a focal individual and those people with whom the focal individual frequently associates, such as close friends. Therefore, the values, attitudes, and behaviors of those within a personal communication network help to shape the perception and use of communication media. This is congruent with the notion that shared reality is a significant factor in the developing, sustaining, and functioning of groups (Levine and Higgins 2001). Moreover, Festinger (1954: pp. 124) has posited that “the existence of a discrepancy in a group with respect to opinions or abilities will lead to action on the part of members of that group to reduce the discrepancy.”

Research utilizing the SI model has found empirical evidence supporting its theories. For instance, Schmitz and Fulk (1991) found that social influence variables had both direct and indirect effects on total use of e-mail within an organization. In particular, it was demonstrated that individual media assessments and use were linked with those co-workers with which an individual communicates most frequently. Campbell and Russo (2003) found evidence that the perceptions and uses of mobile phones within PCNs were significantly less variable in comparison to other individuals within their research sample. While the SI model of technology use was developed to specifically address issues of technology use in communication media within an organization, its robust theoretical foundations allow us to extend its framework to analyze the effect of social influence of a PCN on WTP for online video games, which are also considered a type of media. We therefore posit that that social influence from an individual’s PCN will influence WTP.

H3: PCN norms will have a significant and positive relationship with expected benefits from playing that online video game.

H4: PCN norms will have a significant and positive relationship with perceptions about the overall technical quality for an online video game.

Reputation

Reputation is defined as “stakeholders’ perceptions about an organization’s ability to create value relative to competitors” (Rindova et al. 2005). It has been observed that a good reputation is developed when customers believe a company offers products of a high quality (Shapiro 1983). In the instance where imperfect information is available about a product, quality cues, such as reputation, are used to predict the quality attributes of a product prior to purchase (Monroe 2003). One view of how reputation is developed suggests that the quality of a firm’s products produced in the past is used by consumers judge the quality of products available in the present (Shapiro 1983; Weigelt and Camerer 1988); it is therefore a reflection of organizational performance over time. A different perspective to how reputation emerges, as discussed by Rindova et al. (2005), draws from institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Scholars who adopt this position argue that as a result of imperfect information, individuals look to high-status actors, whom they believe have greater ability to judge providers of products and services, for queues on how to act or think (Rao 1998).

Despite disagreement among scholars on the origins of reputation, research has repeatedly demonstrated that reputation exerts influence on an individual’s actions and beliefs. For instance, Davies et al. (2003) reported that reputation can affect an organization’s ability to attract consumers, generate positive media coverage, create interest from investors, attract high-caliber employees, and increase overall job satisfaction. Furthermore, Dawar and Parker (1994) found that reputation, in the form of brand name, was relied on more heavily for signals in judging product quality than price or physical appearance, regardless of cultural differences. Chu et al. (2005) found evidence that the reputation of online retailer acts as a signal to individuals about the reliability of transactions over the Internet. Their research suggests that having a well-known retailer reputation positively affects consumer purchase intentions, particularly for goods from manufacturers that were considered to have weak brand names. In research on WTP, Landon and Smith (1997) found evidence that brands with reputations for high-quality products induced consumers to higher levels of WTP. Lopes and Galletta (2006) found evidence that reputation has a direct effect on both the
expected benefits derived from paying a subscription fee for online content and the overall perceived quality of a web site.

_H5: Reputation will have a significant and positive relationship with expected benefits from playing an online video game._

_H6: Reputation will have a significant and positive relationship with perceptions about the overall technical quality for an online video game._

_H7: Reputation will have a significant and positive relationship with PCN norms._

**Interaction Effects**

The theory that social influences occurring at different levels interact in such a way that their effect on individuals’ behaviors is greater than merely the sum of their individual parts has not received much attention in the IS literature. However, one stream from the psychology literature offers some explanation to why interaction might be expected. The contingent-consistency hypothesis (Acock and Defleur 1972) argues that perceived norms of the larger environment act to reinforce or inhibit the relationship between attitudes and behaviors. As articulated by Liska (1984), when consensus occurs in the social environment in which an individual resides about the norms of that social environment, that individual is more likely to possess “well-formed” attitudes, as reality has been clearly defined for this person (Sherwood 1967). In turn, personal attitudes which are well-formed have been demonstrated to have stronger effects on individual behavior than those developed under more uncertainty (Fazio and Zanna, 1978; Schuman and Johnson 1976)

While not being examined extensively, some empirical evidence has offered support the contingent-consistency hypothesis (e.g. Grube and Morgan 1990). For instance, Povey et al. (2000) investigated the role of perceived social support as a moderator in the context of the theory of planned behavior. This meso-level social construct moderated the relationship between attitude and behavior intentions such that the attitude-behavior relationship became stronger as perceived social support increased.

Based on this theory, we posit that there will be a three-way interaction effect between reputation, PCN norms, and expected benefits from playing an online video game. We expect that as an individual perceives the social environment to be characterized by increasingly positive norms with regards to a given online video game, that individual will develop more well-defined attitudes about that game. Consequently, these attitudes will have a stronger effect on that individual’s behaviors.

_H8: Reputation and PCN Norms will moderate the relationship between expected benefits from playing that online video game and willingness-to-pay a subscription fee such that the positive effect that expected benefits has on WTP will be stronger as reputation and PCN norms increase._

![Figure 1. Research Model](image-url)
Methodology

To investigate our hypotheses, a survey research design will be used. The first step was to develop our instrument. We used an extensive literature review to identify previously validated measurements for our constructs of interest. To measure our dependent variable, willingness-to-pay, a contingent valuation (CV) method will be used. Specifically, we utilize an open-ended, sealed-bid second price auction elicitation technique to inquire about individuals’ maximum WTP. For the construct of reputation we adopted a modified version of an instrument developed by Lopes and Galletta (2006). To measure expected benefits, we adopted a modified version of Sherry et al.’s (2006) paradigm for gratifications as predictors of game use and preferences. It is important to note that all users might not have the same motivations for use or preference of online video games (Crawford 1984; Sherry et al. 2006). Consequently, we will use a formative scale to measure expected benefits. To measure PCN norms we adopt the approach used to test the theory social influence (SI) model of technology use, which measured perceived PCN use and usefulness (Fulk et al. 1990; Fulk and Steinfield 1990; Schmitz and Fulk 1991). Thus, PCN norms will be a second-order construct which we posit has two contributing first-order constructs: perceived PCN usage frequency and perceived PCN enjoyment. To measure perceived PCN usage frequency, we adapted items which measured perceived technology usage and level of system utilization (Hsu and Lu 2004; Igbaria et al. 1995). To measure perceived PCN enjoyment, we adapted items which measured game enjoyment and perceived fun (Sun and Zhang 2006; Wu et al. 2009). We will model this second-order construct using a procedure outlined by Wetzels et al. (2009). To measure overall technical quality, we developed candidate items based on an extensive review of the video game literature focusing on dimensions of video game quality. All items in our instrument utilized a 7-point Likert scale.

We next conducted several pilot tests. We first had our instrument examined by a panel of experts, five professors and five PhD students in the areas of IS and management, to assess face validity. Based on the feedback elicited from these individuals and from an additional review of the literature, we made refinements to the instrument. We then conducted a second round of instrument examination involving a different set of individuals from an undergraduate IS course with individuals who play online video games. Based on the additional feedback, we made additional refinements to our instrument.

At this point, the instrument has gone through the initial stages of pilot testing. The next steps which need to be carried out in our research project are statistically verifying our measurement model (convergent validity, discriminant validity, and instrument reliability) and hypothesis testing. To conduct data analyses, component-bases structural equation modeling, of partial least squares (PLS), will be used. We will gather data via an online survey. A link to our study will be posted on message boards for popular MMOGs. For incentive to complete our survey, all participants will be entered into a raffle for gift certificates from an online video game retailer. Five different versions of the survey instrument will be created; each will be specifically tailored to inquire about the WTP for a specific MMOG, depending on which message board the link is posted. Data will be gathered in two phases: the first phase will survey individuals from a single web site and will be used to assess the measurement model. To accomplish this, we will follow the procedure outlined by Gefen and Straub (2005). The second phase will survey individuals from four additional websites; that data will be aggregated to assess the research model. To test for an interaction effect among our independent variables, we will use the procedure outlined by Chin et al. (2003). We anticipate gathering and analyzing the data over the summer of 2010.
References


