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Sense of community, social identity, and social support  
among players of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs): A qualitative analysis.

SHORT TITLE: Social relationships between MMOG players.

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### Abstract

The majority of research examining Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG) based social relationships has used quantitative methodologies. The present study used qualitative semi-structured interviews with 22 Australian World of Warcraft (WoW) players to examine their experiences of MMOG-based social relationships. Interview transcripts underwent thematic analysis, and revealed that participants reported experiencing a MMOG-based sense of community (a sense of belonging within the gaming or WoW community); discussed a number of different MMOG-based social identities (such as gamer, WoW player, and guild or group member); and stated that they derived social support (a perception that one is cared for and may access resources from others within a group) from their relationships with other players. The findings of this study confirm that MMOG players can form gaming communities. Almost all participants accessed or provided in-game social support and some gave or received broader emotional support. Players also identified as gamers and guild members. Fewer participants identified as WoW players. Findings indicated that changes to the game environment influence these relationships and further exploration of players' experiences could determine the optimal game features to enhance positive connections with fellow players.

**Key words:** Research article, MMOGs, online games, cyberpsychology, sense of community, social identity, social support, qualitative.

## Sense of community, social identity, and social support

among players of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs): A qualitative analysis.

'Virtual world' is a catch-all term for a variety of persistent, multi-user, virtual environments in which users are represented by avatars, 3D representations of the user which mediate their interactions with the virtual environment and other users. Some virtual worlds, such as Second Life, are open ended virtual environments in which user action and interaction is not directed by the creators, but instead is entirely determined by the users (Boellstorff, 2008). These virtual worlds often contain tools through which users can create and share content (e.g., new types of avatar or virtual real estate).

Massively-Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs), such as World of Warcraft (WoW), can be viewed as a type of virtual world, in that they are multi-user virtual environments in which users are represented by 3D avatars. However, user action within MMOGs is more directed, existing within the context of a role-playing game. These games create a series of activities and goals for players; however, unlike single-player and multi-player games (games with between two and sixty-four players in a non-persistent virtual space), there are not set pathways or stages for the player to complete. The game does not end when predetermined goals are achieved. Instead, player goals change and evolve over time. Players cooperate with each other, forming temporary and permanent alliances to achieve both directed and self-determined goals. These functional alliances (facilitated by mechanisms such as text and voice chat) often develop into social relationships.

WoW is played in an online fantasy-style environment with stone-built structures, swords, and armour. Players are represented by the characters they create, selecting the "race" (species, such as Troll or Gnome), "class" (profession, such as Priest or Warrior), and faction (Horde or Alliance) of their character. Each type of character has different strengths

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and weaknesses. The rules of the game become apparent through the restrictions and opportunities provided by the environment and non-player characters (controlled by the game). For example, mining tools are required to mine; avatars are not able to simply dig up the ground with their hands. The game involves defending oneself from enemies (both non-player characters and other players) and completing quests, while developing their character's skills and abilities by gaining experience points (XP). Characters start at level 1 and, through experience, may develop to level 90. Players control their characters within a live setting with other players. Quests are set sequences of challenges, issued by the game, that result in rewards, such as useful resources. Larger scale group challenges, called raids, can provide highly valued resources, such as magical armour. Players do well by completing quests but also by engaging others through online communications (e.g., chat) to develop temporary groups to perform raids or by joining more permanent social structures called guilds. Guilds are formal structures within the game that allow members, or guidmates, to pool resources in a communal guildbank. Players can also engage in organised or ad-hoc combat with players from the opposing faction to their character (player versus player or PvP).

Yee (2006) likens the experience of this cooperative play to that of a boot camp with players having to rely on each other to succeed in variety of scenarios, with failure leading to the loss of considerable amounts of effort invested by the players. This bonding under pressure within the unique virtual environment of MMOGs may lead to social relationships that are different in nature to other on- and off-line relationships. Further examination of these social relationships through frameworks (such as social support), established in other contexts, is required to determine the similarities and difference these relationships may have with offline social relationships and the applicability of theories from other contexts.

The present study aims to use a qualitative methodology to determine the applicability of three theoretical constructs drawn from the social psychology literature to the social

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relationships between MMOG players: psychological sense of community (PSOC), a person's sense of being part of group of people with whom they have something in common (Sarason, 1977); social identity, how a person feels about their membership of a social group (Tajfel, 1978); and social support, the tangible and intangible resources available to someone through their relationships with others (Cohen & Hobermann, 1983). Further, this study aimed to understand the lived social experience of WOW players by examining the qualities of the examined theoretical constructs in this applied setting.

These constructs have been demonstrated to be robust and applicable to a wide variety of offline contexts (e.g., Pretty, Andrewes, & Collett, 1994; Hornsey, 2008; Allgower, Wardle, & Steptoe, 2001). PSOC and social support have also been applied successfully to various online contexts (eg., Blanchard, 2007; Coulsen, Buchanan, & Aubeeluck, 2007) and MMOGs (Caplan, Williams & Yee, 2009; Longman, O'Connor, & Obst, 2009). PSOC, social support, and social identities have been demonstrated to be interrelated, with an individual's social identity being shown to impact the degree to which they feel part of a community (Obst, Zinkiewicz, & Smith, 2002a, 2002b) and a greater PSOC being associated with greater levels of social support (Obst & Stafurik, 2010).

### **Psychological Sense of Community in MMOGs**

The concept of Psychological Sense of Community (PSOC) has been defined as a "...feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure" (Sarason, 1977, p. 157). These communities can be geographically based, such as schools or neighbourhoods (e.g., Pretty et al., 1994); interest based, with people forming a community around a shared passion, such as science fiction fandom (Obst et al., 2002a, 2002b); and can exist online (Blanchard, 2007; Obst & Stafurik, 2010). A number of studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between offline PSOC and social support (e.g., Pretty et al., 1994). Online PSOC

has been associated with improved wellbeing (e.g., Obst & Stafurik, 2010; Sum, Mathews, Pourghasem, & Hughes, 2009) and greater levels of social support (Obst & Stafurik, 2010).

As MMOGs are online interest based communities with defined membership, it is possible that the construct of PSOC would be relevant in understanding MMOG-based social relationships. Few studies (Caplan et al., 2009; Fong & Forster, 2009) have examined the PSOC experienced by MMOG players.

Caplan et al. (2009) used single-item measures to assess seven thousand Everquest 2 players' senses of Internet-based, school/work-based, and neighbourhood-based community. Results revealed that higher levels of online community contributed to higher scores on a measure of problematic Internet usage; higher levels of offline community were associated with lower problematic usage scores.

Fong and Forster (2009) examined the online PSOC experienced by players of single-player, multi-player and MMOGs. All three types of gamers reported experiencing an online PSOC related to their game of choice. While these studies indicate the presence of PSOC in MMOGs, they have failed to examine it in great depth (Caplan et al., 2009). Given that MMOGs are newly emerged and potentially unique form of online community, it is possible that the construct of PSOC, as currently conceptualized, may not be applicable to the social relationships between MMOG players or that existing measures of PSOC are not suited to the online context. The purpose of this paper is to determine, through a qualitative methodology, the applicability of this construct to the social relationships between MMOG players. Evidence for the existence of PSOC in this context will be based on the emergence of themes congruent with Sarason's (1977) construct.

### **Social Identities formed around MMOGs**

Social identity theory posits that people's self-concept is comprised of both individual and social identities (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). A person's individual identity

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consists of all the unique traits and idiosyncrasies that are unique to them. A person's social identity is, on the other hand, defined by the social categories that they belong to. These social categories can be based on any distinction that divides people into two or more discrete groups (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Hornsey, 2008).

Obst et al. (2002a) examined the social identities and PSOC of science fiction fans. The participants identified as science-fiction fans and experienced a PSOC associated with fandom. Further, the more strongly science fiction fans identified as fans, the greater the PSOC associated with fandom they experienced. Additionally, fans identified more with fandom and experienced a greater sense of fandom-based PSOC than they did with their local neighbourhoods. As science fiction fandom is an interest based Internet community which is arguably similar to MMOGs, MMOG players may identify as such and these social identities may play a role in their experience of PSOC in MMOGs.

Bessiere, Seay, and Kielser (2007) used an online survey to confirm that WOW players created avatars that they perceived as being closer to their ideal selves than the players were themselves. While this study examined how players identify with their characters, it did not examine if players had formed social identities around WoW. If players do have social identities based on the MMOGs they play, the salience of these identities would change over time and in different contexts, such as playing the MMOG itself or interacting with a fellow player in an offline setting. Should they have these identities, players would talk about 'being' a member of a group and draw lines separating themselves from non-players.

### **Social Support drawn from MMOGs**

Social support can be viewed as the resources that people are able to call on through the relationships they have with others (e.g., Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Haber, Cohen, Lucas, & Baltes, 2007). Numerous studies have established a relationship between high levels of



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offline social support and greater psychological wellbeing (e.g., Allgower et al., 2001; Cohen & Hoberman, 1983).

Social support can be drawn from online sources such as bulletin boards (Coulsen et al., 2007), forums (Whitlock, Powers, & Eckenrode, 2006), and mailing lists (Obst & Stafurik, 2010) and has been shown to be associated with improved wellbeing (Fogel, Albert, Schnabel, Ditkoff, & Neugut, 2002; Swickert, Hittner, Harris, & Herring, 2002; Beaudoin & Tao, 2007; Obst & Stafurik, 2010). Fewer studies have examined social support derived from MMOG players' social relationships. Williams, Ducheneaut, Xiong, Yee, and Nickell (2006) conducted a series of 48 online guided interviews with players and determined that players exchanged social support with other guildmates. A quantitative study (Longman et al., 2009) of WoW players found that higher levels of WoW-derived social support were correlated significantly with lower levels of negative psychological symptoms.

The body of literature examining MMOGs has grown rapidly in recent years. Researchers have examined the demographics of MMOG players (e.g., Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2003; 2004; Yee, 2006); players' motivations for playing (e.g., Ryan, Rigby, & Przybylski, 2006; Yee, 2006, 2007); the nature of guilds, permanent in-game social groups (Williams et al., 2006); the social relationships between players (Longman et al., 2009); and Internet and MMOG overuse (Caplan et al., 2009). However, the majority of these studies have used quantitative methodologies and, as such, there is a dearth of qualitative studies (with some exceptions; Williams et al., 2006; Hussain & Griffiths, 2009).

The literature suggests that a consideration of PSOC, social identity, and social support may provide a useful means of understanding MMOG based social relationships, how they may be similar to offline social relationships, and how they may be shaped by the unique context of MMOGs. The research applying these constructs to MMOGs has largely been quantitative in nature (e.g., Caplan et al., 2009; Fong & Forster, 2009; Longman et al., 2009)

and has used measures of PSOC and social support that were created for use in offline settings (e.g., Longman et al., 2009) or for online settings other than MMOGs (e.g., Fong & Forster, 2009). It is possible that these quantitative measures have not successfully tapped the unique nature of MMOG players' social relationships or that these constructs are not applicable to MMOGs.

A qualitative examination would allow for an in depth exploration of players' experiences of the social relationships they have with each other. This exploration would provide a deep understanding of these relationships, providing a perspective more authentic to the experiences of the players. It would provide a means of determining the applicability of the constructs of PSOC, social identity, and social support to the context of MMOGs. Should the results of the analysis confirm the presence of a PSOC, that players form social identities around their games of choice, and that players exchange social support, this study would confirm these quantitative findings and provide the basis for future research using these constructs. Additionally, the analysis may uncover ways in which these constructs operate or are experienced differently within the context of MMOGs and, thus, inform the future theoretical development of these constructs and of quantitative measures to assess them.

The current study, as part of a broader qualitative examination of MMOG-based social relationships, attempted to answer four research questions. First, what are MMOG players' experiences of a MMOG-based PSOC? Second, do MMOG-players identify as MMOG-players or as members of MMOG-based social groups? Third, what are MMOG players' experiences of MMOG-derived social support? Fourth, how are these constructs experienced within WoW?

### **Method**

The study ran from August 2009 to May 2010. The study received ethical clearance from the University Human Research Ethics Committee.

## Participants

Twenty-two current ( $n = 10$ ) and former ( $n = 12$ ) WoW players (15 males, 7 females) ranging in age from 18 to 51 years ( $M = 27.6$ ,  $SD = 10.3$ , median = 23) participated in the study. Participants played or had played WoW for between three and 85 hours per week ( $M = 25.5$ ,  $SD = 19.19$ , median = 20) and had been playing WoW for between 6 months and 6.5 years. Table 1 summarises participants' occupational status, educational background, and relationship status. All participants were guild members and Australian residents.

\*\*Insert Table 1 about here \*\*

## Procedure

Purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to recruit current and former WoW players via snowball sampling and flyers distributed on an Australian university campus. Participants were offered a \$AUD20 gift voucher in appreciation of their voluntary participation.

One-on-one interviews were conducted by the second author in person or by phone at the participant's convenience. Interviews were semi-structured and consisted of open ended questions designed to examine participants' experiences of a MMOG-based PSOC (e.g., "Do you feel there is something that connects WoW players?"), MMOG-based social identities (e.g., "Would you say that being a WoW player is a part of who you are?"), and MMOG-derived social support (e.g., "Have you ever spoken to other players about issues that are going on in your life?").

The interview structure and questions were allowed to evolve in response to themes that began to emerge during the interviews and preliminary analysis. Most interviews were approximately 50 minutes long and all were audio recorded.

## Analysis

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Analysis began after the first interview and was conducted simultaneously with data collection. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and then de-identified before being entered into QSR NVivo version 8, a qualitative analysis program. After being reviewed several times by the second author, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted, with line by line coding identifying key words, phrases, and sentences. This analysis was not open and unstructured but was instead guided by the research questions, with the central themes of PSOC, social identity, and social support serving as an *a priori* framework for analysis. Coding was iterative, with the basic themes contained within the organising themes of PSOC, social identity, and social support evolving over the course of the analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

### Results

While the interviews covered a number of different areas, participants' experiences of a MMOG-based PSOC, MMOG-based social identities, and MMOG-derived social support are presented below. Figure 1 describes the thematic network which was developed through the analysis.

\*\*Insert Figure 1 about here \*\*

#### Organising theme: Sense of Community

*Extract 1:* ... a sense of community. A sense of belonging. Because you have that community of WoW players, and you know that you can always go to them..."(female, 18 years, current player).

All participants reported experiencing a sense of community associated with WoW, a feeling that there was something that connected WoW players with each other. This sense of community was perceived as one of the best things about the game, providing them with a sense of belonging that may have been lacking in their offline lives.

**Extract 2:** Because before I didn't really feel like I had a community that I was part of, and playing WoW has given me a sense of, "I have friends online", and it's kind of like, wow they're over in America or God knows where, and we can still be friends."  
(female, 18, current player).

**Basic theme: WoW as common ground.** Participants reported that membership of this WoW-based community allowed them to form new friendships with other WoW players.

**Extract 3:** I asked her [another player] a serious question. How do you feel as a person who is used to playing single players, to playing a game online and meeting new people around the world? She said very openly to me that it's a good feeling. (male, 26 current player).

**Extract 4:** In our case, it was the main guild, but then we also had a custom chat channel that we'd set up. Which was just, where a whole lot of people that we'd met, through playing the game, would just gather. So that could have been someone that was in a guild we were in a few months ago, or someone we ran a good group with and we just thought, "Hey you're a nice guy, I'm going to keep in contact with you."  
(male, 18, former player).

Extract 4 also illustrates the importance of the various in game and external communication methods, such as custom chat channels, forums, and voice over internet protocol (VoIP) servers, to generating and maintaining an MMOG-based PSOC. Participants also reported that the common ground of WoW allowed them to form friendships with other players they met offline.

**Extract 5:** I don't know how this guy knew who I was, but someone mentioned that I was a WoW player to the truck driver, he came wandering in specifically to talk about, well, Warcraft. (male, 35, former player).

*Extract 6:* Amongst other WoW players, like when I got a new job, or I can pretty much go anywhere and if I find someone that has played WoW and does play WoW, you find you've immediately got a conversation point that you could talk about. (male, 18, former player).

**Basic theme: Other MMOGs.** Some participants reported that, as well as feeling part of a community of WoW players, they also felt a part of a broader community of MMOG players, such as players of the MMOG "Dungeons and Dragons Online".

*Extract 7:* the IT manager was a Dungeons and Dragons geek, online, and y'know it was a starting point for a good friendship. (male, 35, former player).

However, participants who had played other MMOGs reported that they felt a greater PSOC among WoW players.

*Extract 8:* There's a lot more of a sense of a better community. (male, 22, former player).

*Extract 9:* People are more willing to talk to you and more willing to have a laugh with you, and that's what I found kept me. (female, 18, current player).

**Basic theme: The good old days.** Whilst all participants felt there was a sense of community associated with WOW, some participants reported that they felt it had diminished over the years.

*Extract 10:* I started playing just after Beta and it was fresh. There was more community. A tighter community. As opposed to the general population that now plays it. (male, 22, former player).

This change was attributed to changes to the game that had made it more accessible to a wider audience.

*Extract 11:* Oh yeah. It's not as tight-knit a community as it used to be back in vanilla [the original version of WoW, without any of the expansion packs]. Because I think

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everything in the game, it's sort of all been nerfed [made easier conferring an unfair advantage] down, so it's a lot easier to solo it. Whereas back in the day it was a lot more, it was a lot more intrinsic to actually succeed in the game if it was through cooperation only. (male, 22, former player).

It was felt by participants that these changes to the game had reduced the sense of community among players and had led them to becoming less helpful.

*Extract 12:* People would help you. It was easy to get help back then. I found, when I started my priest, it was very difficult to get any help. You'll have people, because you've got the general chat for the area that you're in, and you'll type in there, "Hey, how do I find this?" Everyone's response is, "Use Google, dickhead." Instead of going, "Oh yeah, it's over here." (male, 22 years, former player).

These extracts highlight the role that the mechanics of the game play in fostering a sense of community. Gameplay mechanisms that force or reward cooperation can facilitate the formation of a community; however, when players can "solo" (complete tasks on their own), their sense of community associated with the game appears to be reduced.

**Organising theme: Social Identity**

Participants reported identifying as members of MMOG-based social groups; however, these social identities varied considerably in nature and importance. Among the participants, three key social identities emerged.

**Basic theme: The gamer identity.** Some participants identified as "gamers" rather than WoW players. These participants tended to split their leisure time between a variety of games rather than playing WoW the majority of the time. Gamers also participated in wider videogame culture such as listening to game and game-inspired music, dressing in clothing and accessories with videogame logos and related designs, attending conventions, and dressing up in costumes of their favourite game characters ('cosplaying').

*Extract 13:* Whereas I play a lot of other games and WoW's kind of one that's just in amongst it. So I'd say being a gamer is but not just necessarily a World of Warcraft player. (female, 22, former player).

**Basic theme: WoW player identity.** Some participants viewed WoW as a hobby they enjoyed but not an essential part of who they were.

*Extract 14:* I know I can live without it because I stopped for about three months, when I was having my little boy. But I do really like it. I wouldn't say it's part of who I am, I'd say it's something that the person that I am enjoys doing. That type of thing. But I can definitely do without it. (female, 24, current player).

However, many participants identified as WoW players, and felt that WoW was an important part of who they were.

*Extract 15:* Researcher: "Would you say that being a WoW player was a part of who you were?"

Oh, yeah, absolutely (male, 35, former player).

These participants felt that there was something unique about being a WoW player and indicated a sense of separation between their friends who were gamers and those who were not.

*Extract 16:* Yeah. There's a very big separation. These are my friends from high school. This is how I know them. We used to play Counterstrike [another game] originally and then they moved up to WoW. Then my uni friends, my friends from work, who don't play at all, the attitude of it is the huge contrast. I think the WoW players, they like WoW, they like the game, and their personality traits, I'd say they fit into a category. (male, 22, former player).

**Basic theme: Guild member identity.** Participants identified as members of their guilds. This identity was particularly important for players who were part of player versus



player (PvP; as opposed to player versus environment or PvE) and raiding (groups of 5 or more players engaging in aggressive and organised PvE activities) guilds. For these players, being a member of one of the highest ranked on the server guilds [guilds are informally ranked on external websites] was a source of great pride and being a member of that guild was a badge of honour.

*Extract 17:* It was important because your guild shows on your character. It's a way that someone can tell, just by looking at your character, "That person's in a good guild, they must be good". (male, 18, former player).

### **Social Support**

**Basic theme: In game help and advice.** Participants reported that it was common to give and receive help with practical in game assistance, such as defeating difficult monsters, assistance in completing tasks, and gathering resources.

*Extract 18:* If somebody hops on and goes, "Can I get a run through?" you'll have several people putting their hands up, "Sure I've got time." (female, 24, current player).

*Extract 19:* I was generally helping people level up early on in the guild. (male, 35, former player).

While this sort of help was mostly often received from and given to guildmates, participants also reported that it was common to receive and give this kind of support from players with whom there was no prior relationships, or "randoms".

*Extract 20:* Yeah. And it's also just a common occurrence, ... outside of a guild. Just in a general area, you'll start talking to other players, and they'll go, "Yeah we can run an instance." And then you just go off and do that. (female, 18, current player).

Guildmates and "randoms" were also sources and recipients of advice and information about the game.

*Extract 21:* ... a guildie asks you for help, you go, “Oh yeah, okay. This is what you should be looking at” (male, 26, current player).

*Extract 22:* Or like, ask a question about how, if this item’s better than that item or, how this stat works, or just, yeah, everyone was willing to help everyone else out to better their character. (male, 18, former player).

**Basic theme: Offline advice.** Participants reported giving and receiving advice about offline issues, whether how to deal with personal conflict, relationships issues, and workplace disagreements.

*Extract 23:* ... a lot of the guys used to talk about relationships, I remember. A lot of them were young guys, and there was a couple, myself, and there was only a couple of us that were older. You know, in our twenties. They used to ask us for advice, quite a bit. Girls, and that sort of stuff. School, even. A couple of the guys I helped out with school work. (male, 22, former player).

*Extract 24:* There’s this one fella that I’ve still kept in contact with after I quit and we were always talking. If he was having some troubles, he’d talk to me and vice versa. There’s a fair few of those. There’s actually a fair few people that I kept in contact with that I met through the game that, we would have that kind of conversation with.

**Basic theme: Emotional support.** As well as giving advice on how to deal with offline issues, participants reported giving and receiving emotional support about offline issues, acting as “shoulders to cry on”.

*Extract 25:* When I was going through a rough time, a rough patch during year 12, in some cases, I could talk to people that I knew in the game that, they may have gone through the same thing and they could help me. I knew that I could talk to people in the game if I was having trouble at something and just needed to talk. (male, 26, current player).

*Extract 26:* There was one fellow I know, who he was going through a break through at the time, and I was just being a shoulder for him to cry on. (female, 24, current).

**Basic theme: Trusting guild mates.** While game-related help and advice was available from all, players only gave emotional support to, and received emotional support from, other guildmates and close friends. Participants likened this to the differences between intimate friendships and casual acquaintances offline.

*Extract 27:* You wouldn't go to a complete stranger and ask them about relationship advice. (female, 18, current player).

Participants reported that the relative anonymity of WoW-based relationships facilitated seeking emotional social support.

*Extract 28:* Yeah, there were a couple events that happened in my life, and in the other guys, in their lives too, and I guess I felt safer at home with a microphone behind a screen. Letting something out, getting it off your chest, talking about something when you're in a room by yourself seems a lot easier than when you're sitting down with a couple of friends. (male, 22, former player).

Participants also reported the WoW-based social relationships provided social support to those who were socially isolated offline.

*Extract 29:* I think there are people who play WoW who don't have a lot of friends outside of WoW, and that may be the only place that they can ask people, and they may feel like they can't ask those sorts of questions face-to-face with someone. (female, 18, current player).

*Extract 30:* Well, it was interesting in that, he suffered from, I guess, nervous disorder. Y'know, like, didn't interact well with people. I never spoke to him on TS, on Teamspeak [voice chat] or anything like that. Um, so it was always typed. Fortunately,

him and I both can type. But, yeah, we'd talk about a whole range of, of subjects.

(male, 35, former player).

### **Discussion**

This study examined the applicability of three established social psychological constructs to the context of MMOGs by answering four research questions: What are MMOG players' experiences of a PSOC in MMOGs? Do MMOG-players identify as MMOG-players or as members of MMOG-based social groups? And what are MMOG players' experiences of drawing social support from their relationships with other MMOG players? The study also aimed to uncover the experienced nature of these theoretical constructs.

The present study has confirmed previous quantitative findings (Fong & Forster, 2009) that suggested that MMOG players experience a MMOG-based PSOC. The present qualitative research revealed that this sense of community is based on the common ground of WoW, with players from all walks of life being able to meet (both on- and offline) and bond over the game. While this study examined WoW, there is also evidence suggesting a sense of community can be found in other MMOGs (Caplan et al, 2009) and online groups based on other multiplayer and single player games (Fong & Forster, 2009).

The reported diminishment in WoW-based PSOC due to the "nerfing" of the game indicates the role that the games themselves have in generating the associated PSOC. Further research examining which game features promote or diminish the growth of this community could lead to significant changes as to how games are made. Since the collection of these data, there have numerous updates and a major expansion, Cataclysm, released for WoW. It would be interesting to see if these changes to the gameplay had altered the nature of the community associated with WoW.

The identification of several different social identities among the participants reveals the potential importance of social identities in governing how MMOG-based social

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relationships operate. As demonstrated by Obst et al. (2002a), the extent to which a person identifies as a member of a community influences the degree to which they feel a part of that community. Accordingly, different MMOG-based social identities may influence the nature of the MMOG-based PSOC experienced by players. Thus, a gamer's MMOG-based PSOC may be part of a broader gamer community, across different games and mediums. Similarly, someone who is less a gamer and more a WoW player may instead experience an online community centred around WoW, whereas a member of an elite guild may not feel they have much in common with most players yet feel a close bond with their guild mates.

Almost all participants reported drawing social support from their relationships with other players. While providing help with difficult tasks and advice about the game was common, so too was asking for advice about offline issues and seeking emotional support, confirming previous quantitative research (Longman et al., 2009).

For all participants, other guild members provided the majority of the advice about offline issues and emotional support. This finding indicates the importance that guilds play in the social landscape of MMOGs. Of course, this finding may be due to the fact that all participants were guild members; however, quantitative research reveals that guild membership is the norm for MMOG players (e.g., Longman et al., 2009). While a body of research exists examining MMOG guilds (e.g., Williams et al., 2006), given the important role these social structures play in MMOG-based social relationships, further research into guild operation is important.

This study's use of a qualitative methodology has allowed a deep understanding of the experience of MMOG-based social relationships. One of the key aspects of the "WoW experience" was the breaking down of traditional social and geographical borders which allowed a greater diversity of relationships to develop.

The qualitative methodology enabled the study to confirm the findings of previous quantitative research and to explore the phenomena of MMOG-based PSOC and MMOG-derived social support in greater depth. To the authors' knowledge, this study was also the first to apply social identity theory to MMOGs and has provided valuable insight into MMOG players' social identities. Purposeful sampling allowed the selection of a sample that was representative of WoW's player base in terms of age, gender, occupational and educational background, playing time, and playing history.

However, WoW is an international phenomena and the present studies sample consisted entirely of Australian players. Also, while research has indicated that most WoW players are members of guilds (e.g., Longman et al., 2009), the current sample consisted entirely of guild members and, therefore, it is unknown how players who are not in guilds experience MMOG-based social relationships. Potentially, the greatest weakness of this study was the use of existing theoretical constructs. While the selection of these constructs can be theoretically justified and the aims of the present study were as much confirmatory as exploratory, it is possible that other themes contained within the data were overlooked.

This study demonstrates the applicability of the three constructs of PSOC, social identity theory, and social support to the social relationships between MMOG players. By doing so, this study provides a solid grounding for further study of these constructs as applied to the social relationships between MMOG players. Taken together, these three constructs may form a cohesive model of the social relationships between MMOG players at an individual level (social identity), at a macro level (sense of community), and at a relationship level (social support). Further research would be required to determine the utility of this model and examine its applicability across MMOGs, other online communities, and offline.

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This study confirms that MMOG players form communities around and within their games. Further, the social connections in WoW form part of the appeal of MMOGs and contribute to the longevity of these games.

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Table 1

*Demographic data*

Occupation*		Education level		Relationship status	
Full time work	10	Year 10 certificate	1	Single	5
Part time work	2	Year 12 certificate	9	Dating	4
Casual work	6	Diploma	1	Online dating	1
Student	7	Undergrad. degree	8	De-facto	2
Home duties	1	Postgrad. degree	1	Married	7
				Separated	2

\* some participants listed more than one occupation (e.g., full time students in casual employment, full time workers undertaking studies).

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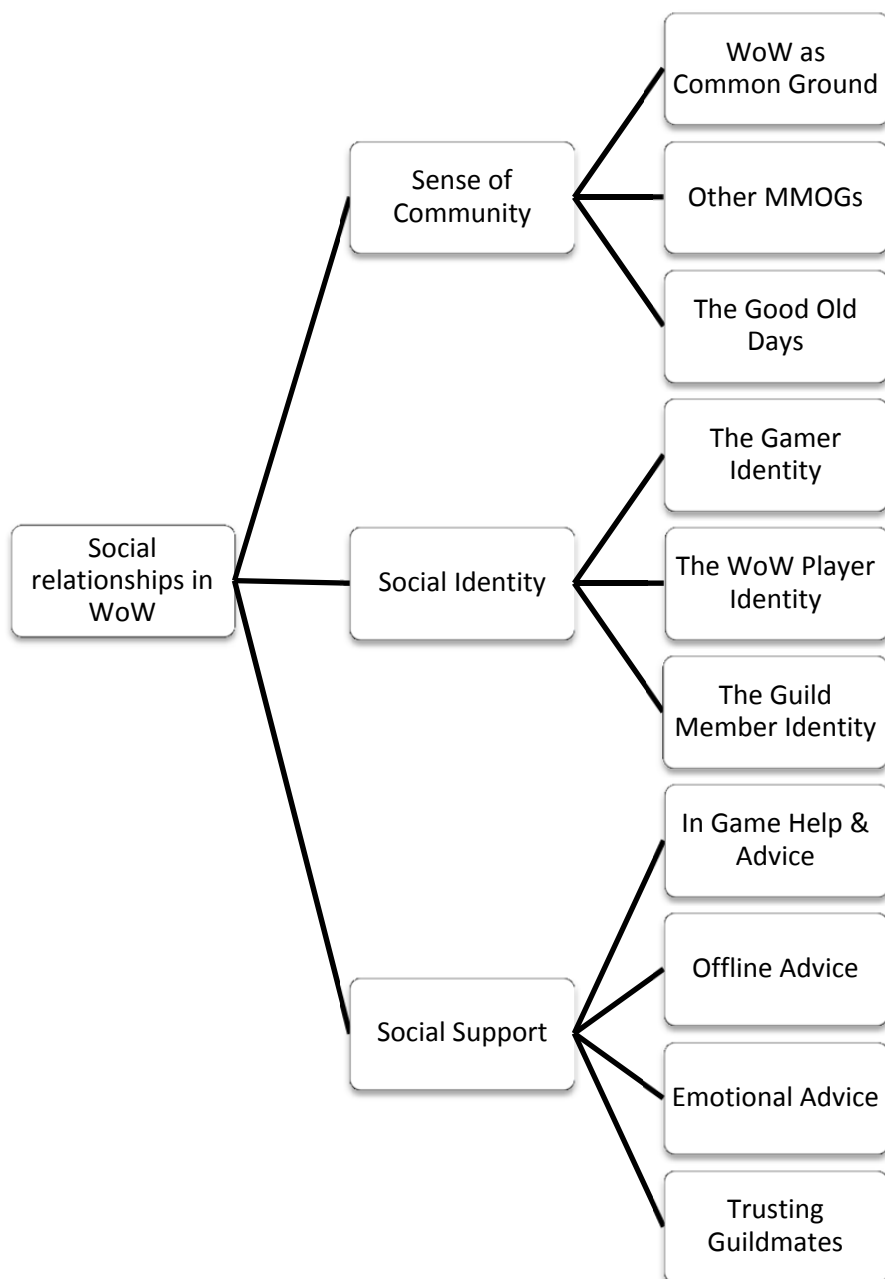


Figure 1. The thematic network generated by the analysis.