Chapter 3

Team Identification, Team Performance and Leader–Member Exchange Relationships in Virtual Groups: Findings from Massive Multi–Player Online Role Play Games

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ABSTRACT

While previous research has identified group identification as an important factor in affecting relevant outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, turnover, commitment) in face-to-face environments, this paper provides initial evidence to support the proposition that group identification also matters in virtual environments. In particular, the authors found that team members' perceptions of the leader-member exchange relationship and the team's past performance are related to individuals' identification with the virtual team and that identification affects satisfaction and behavioral intentions. Individuals who perceive leader-member exchange as high (e.g., the leader displays a willingness to help the team member solve problems and the leader recognizes the member's potential) and who report that their teams perform well had stronger identification with the team. Individuals who reported strong identification with their team were more satisfied with the team and had greater intentions to perform positive behaviors in the future.

INTRODUCTION

As communication and collaboration technologies continue to evolve the number and variety of geographically- and temporally-dispersed groups have also increased. Virtual teams, for example, have grown in popularity among organizations for such tasks as project management and problem solving (Kirkman, Rosen, Tesluk, & Gibson, 2004), and formal and informal communities of
practice have capitalized on the functionality of telecommunication and information technologies to bring together individuals for the purposes of knowledge sharing and learning (e.g., Lesser & Storck, 2001). In addition, many computer-game developers have purposefully made virtual groups part of their games, requiring players to collaborate in ‘guilds’ in order to succeed in the games, and social networking sites such as Facebook most often serve as a virtual space where individuals can strengthen their relationships with individuals from their place-based community (Lampe, Ellison & Steinfield, 2006). The success or failure of these virtual groups in the variety of settings may be in large part a function of the extent to which individuals in the groups come to identify with the group. However, little is known about identification in virtual groups (Yu & Young, 2008).

Social identification has long been an important construct in the study of individual behavior in groups. First introduced by Tajfel (1982) and developed in collaboration with Turner (1982), Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals categorize themselves (and others) according to characteristics of groups to which they belong. For example, an individual may identify with a religious organization, an age group, a political party, or a work group. When individuals “define themselves with attributes that overlap with the attributes they use to define the (group), they are strongly identified with the group” (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994, p. 256), and they will perform behaviors in support of the group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000).

The goal of this study is to extend our understanding of the identification concept by looking at specific antecedents and consequences of group identification in a virtual environment. We propose and test a model of group identification in virtual teams that suggests that the team’s past performance and an individual’s relationship with his or her team leader impact the individual’s identification with the group, and an individual’s level of identification with the group will impact his or her intentions about future behavior and the individual’s level of satisfaction with the group (see Figures 1 and 2).

Identification. Social Identity Theory states that individuals seek to define themselves within the context of a social environment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; van Knippenberg & Schie, 2000; Mael & Tetrick, 1992), forming a self-concept that includes personal attributes (e.g., physical traits, interests, skills) and social attributes (e.g., the goals, values, processes of a specific group).

Figure 1. Proposed model
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