Pressing the Play Button: 
What Drives the Intention to 
Play Social Mobile Games?

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ABSTRACT

Due to the penetration of the Internet, social mobile games have become one of the most popular entertaining virtual activities and hence, created a new market for online social networking. In this project, the authors examine the factors that drive consumers' intentions to play social mobile games and spread positive word-of-mouth about the games. Expanding the Uses and Gratifications Theory, a research model is developed to test six factors, including perceived entertainment, social interaction, pass time, game popularity, usability, and trust. The research model was tested with 387 responses from online participants using SmartPLS. The results revealed that four factors - perceived entertainment, game popularity, usability and trust - significantly influenced both intentions to play social mobile games and spread positive word-of-mouth. Social interaction was found to influence intention to spread word-of-mouth only. Practical implications and theoretical contributions of the study findings are discussed in the context of social mobile networking.

Keywords: Behavioral Intention, Entertainment, Game Popularity, Pass Time, Social Interaction, Social Mobile Games, Trust, Usability, Uses and Gratifications Theory, Word-of-Mouth

INTRODUCTION

On the road, on the bus, at work, at school, or even at home, these ubiquitous sounds can be heard: “sweet,” “tasty,” and “delicious.” However, these terms are not referring to cake or ice cream as we normally assume. They are from a well-known and the most played social mobile game called Candy Crush Saga. Another notable example is Clash of Clans by Super Cell. Both games became a phenomenon not only by the number of daily active users, but also by the amount of revenues they generate. For example, Clash of Clans, ranked at the top, generates daily revenue of $1.1 million with nearly 4 million active users, and Candy Crush Saga, the second top-grossing game, has daily revenue of $0.9 million with more than 6.9 million daily active users (Statistica, 2014). In fact, social games have become a new area for online social networking because it enables businesses to advertise their products...
and services via social and mobile gaming platforms (McKinsey, 2012). By using in-game ads through banner popups, full-page images, and video ads on those platforms, businesses can reach mass audiences, leading to more brand recognition and possible more revenue (Gupta, 2013). The mobile marketing industry is booming and expected to generate $400 billion by the end of 2015 (Entrepreneur, 2014).

Social mobile games are defined as casual games that are designed to play on portable devices such as smartphones or tablets in existing social networks (Wei & Lu, 2014). Today, social media (e.g., Facebook) and mobile devices (e.g., smartphones) are the most common entrances into the gaming world (Harnandez and Volter, 2014; Gartner, 2013). Just like checking emails or Facebook news feeds, playing games is also becoming one of the daily habits. On average, 375 million people play at least one Facebook connected game every month and people aged between 18 and 44 are the core players of social games on Facebook in the U.S. (Facebook, 2014). Lately, the rise of the smartphone usage has also driven 44% of the world’s online population into gaming as well (Spilgames, 2013). According to research conducted by PopCap (2010), among the total 115.6 million mobile gamers in the U.S., four out of five people consider gaming as one of their regular weekly activities. It is therefore not surprising that social networking and gaming apps make up half of the total time spent on mobile apps by an average U.S. consumer (ComScore, 2014).

While the social mobile game industry continues to grow, expecting to reach 162.4 million social mobile gamers (more than half of the U.S. population) by the end of 2015 (Spilgames, 2013), it becomes even more essential for game developers to understand gamers’ behavior and the main factors that drive them to play social mobile games. As stated in Goodereader and Lambrechts (2014, p. 1), “[b]eing in the right place at the right time to influence consumer behavior and offer discerning customers precisely what they want – and more – will be key to leveraging the cash benefits of social gaming for big firms.” Hence, this project is designed to understand key factors that affect gamers’ intentions to play social mobile games and to spread positive word-of-mouth. Previous studies have focused on online games and social network games and examined the initial adoption of games (e.g., Hsu and Lu, 2004), intention to play (e.g., Lee, Lee, & Choi, 2012), continuance intention (e.g., Chang, Liu, & Chen, 2014), and game loyalty (e.g., Chang, Zhu & Wang, 2011). However, only a handful of studies focus on social mobile games and reveal factors that affect intentions to play social mobile games and spread word-of-mouth (e.g., Wei & Lu, 2014). In this project, we build a research model, consisting of both users’ psychological needs for playing social mobile games and the characteristics of the game and game platform, and examine their impacts on behavioral intentions. The psychological factors are perceived entertainment, social interaction and pass time, which are derived from the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) Theory (McQuail, 1983 & 1992; Whiting and Williams, 2013); and the game and game platform factors are game popularity, usability, and trust. The contributions of this project lie in three areas. First, by viewing gaming as a new form of media application, we provide evidence for how gaming coincides with usage of traditional mass media to fulfill consumers’ hedonic and social interactive needs. Thus, we expand the applicability of U&G Theory to a new context - social mobile media. Second, by considering both individual gamers’ psychological needs and the characteristics of games and game platforms, our project contributes to the ongoing understanding of what drives users to play social mobile games. Third, findings from this project with respect to perceived entertainment, usability and trust, for example, help game developers to design and market their gaming services. Next, we review the past studies on games and gaming, introduce our conceptual framework, explain the six key factors and establish our research model.
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