



Key factors in the triumph of Pokémon GO



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KEYWORDS

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Abstract The mobile app market, particularly the app game sector, is a multibillion-dollar space. This study conducted in-depth interviews and two large-scale surveys with a total 1,437 respondents to investigate the consumer behavior of mobile app game players. The app game Pokémon GO became a worldwide phenomenon not only as a social sensation but also as a high profitable business model. Taking the theoretical lens of telepresence theory and social capital theory, this develops a framework to explicate the success factors of Pokémon GO. The theoretical framework also provides guidelines for practitioners who plan to enter the lucrative app game market.

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1. The bandwagon of Pokémon GO

Pokémon GO came as a shock to the world. The Pokémon GO app is a multiplayer, location-based augmented reality game that brings fictional creatures known as Pokémon into the real world via smartphone technology. As of August 24, 2016, \$3 million a day were spent on in-app purchases and \$222 million were earned, with 21 million daily active users and 700,000 downloads per day (Gerencer, 2016). The game quickly rose to become a worldwide phenomenon. Within hours of its release, the game shot up to number one in all app stores. Major media outlets regularly published

content related to the game and Pokémon GO managed to become the number one most-searched term—even beating ‘porn,’ which held the title for decades (Cuthbertson, 2016). Pokémon GO has undoubtedly amassed a user base that other companies can only dream about. It is likely that the mobile app game business will grow enormously in the near future. Using the theoretical lens of telepresence theory and social capital theory, this article aims to shed light on the critical success factors of Pokémon GO and provide a valuable reference to practitioners who plan to enter and succeed in the lucrative app game market.

1.1. About the research

This study investigated the consumer behavior of players in mobile app games with a three-phase study. It began with focus group interviews to gain first-hand

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insights about how and why study participants were addicted to app games, and was followed by a large-scale questionnaire survey with 990 respondents. One year after the first survey and 3 weeks after the official release of Pokémon GO, an additional survey was conducted focusing on the players of Pokémon GO with 447 responses received from Hong Kong, the U.S., Australia, Japan, and other nations.

2. Theoretical framework: Telepresence theory and social capital theory

Telepresence theory defines *telepresence* as the experience of presence in an environment by means of a communication medium (Steuer, 1992). The theory suggests that the structure of the medium affects the interactivity of the users, resulting in the medium's usage (Song & Zinkhan, 2008). Scholars in the social capital research field, on the other hand, postulate that social capital is the aggregate of the norms, values, and understandings that formulate the rules by which people coordinate their actions along with systems of sanctions and incentives that ensure consistency in those actions (Reimer, Lyons, Ferguson, & Polanco, 2008). There are three dimensions related to social capital: the cognitive dimension, the structural dimension, and the relational dimension (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). As illustrated in Table 1, this study consolidates and offers the three success factors of Pokémon GO grounded in the key concepts of the two theories.

2.1. Tapping into nostalgia

Business literature has long identified the influence of nostalgia in the success of certain products.

People tend to have a favorable view of the past (Holbrook & Schindler, 1996). Each generation possesses a distinctive imprint from events occurring during their shared childhood and youth so that memories will be structured along the age dimension resulting in cohort effects (Schuman & Scott, 1989). One of the key success factors of Pokémon GO is its success in tapping into the childhood memories of a large number of young adults.

The nostalgia begins with the long history of Pokémon. Pokémon has existed for over 2 decades with hundreds of thousands of fans worldwide. First starting out as a series of video games for Nintendo's popular handheld Game Boy console in the late 1990s, Pokémon expanded over the years into a trading card game, comic books, movies, and other merchandise. The Pokémon animated TV series further contributed to the childhood attachment. It was first broadcast in Japan in 1997 and in the U.S. in 1998, introducing children to a male protagonist named Satoshi (Japanese version)/Ash Ketchum (English version). This male protagonist was presented as someone who had big dreams of becoming a Pokémon Master while developing relationships with friends and enemies. Satoshi/Ash became a character who audiences could consider as a friend, someone to look up to, or simply someone relatable.

Stories are fundamental to memory and preserving rich sets of meaning (Lesser & Storck, 2001; Read & Miller, 1995). The animated television series depicting the adventure story loved by many fans led to the foundation of the success of Pokémon GO. The app came to the world, therefore, not only as a game but also as a childhood dream-come-true for young adults. Everyone could now become the hero of the story. The emergence of Pokémon GO triggered these fond memories from childhood, fulfilling intrinsic feelings of pleasure. Social capital

Table 1. Theoretical framework grounded on telepresence theory and social capital theory to explicate the success factors of Pokémon GO

		Telepresence theory		
		Interactivity	Structure of the medium	Medium usage
Social capital theory	Cognitive dimension	Shared codes and languages and shared narratives to cultivate the interactivity among users		
	Structure dimension		Configuration and the organization of the medium, how the network ties together	
	Relational dimension			Norms, obligation, identification
	Key success factors of Pokémon GO	Tapping into nostalgia	Adopting technologies in transmedia storytelling	Normative influence to be in the cult

theory suggests this nostalgia linked with memories and dreams form a shared code among the players. The shared narratives and the terms of the game become the common language that cultivate interactivity among players. This research found that among the group perceiving high enjoyment in the game, 68.5% agreed they played the game because of the animated TV series and 53.0% agreed this game made their childhood dream come true—specifically that of becoming the hero of the story to catch all the Pokémon in real life.

2.2. New technologies adoption in transmedia storytelling

One salient feature of Pokémon GO is the use of augmented reality (AR) and global positioning systems (GPS). Indeed, the concept of combining both AR and GPS is nothing new as previous games have already implemented similar technology in the past. The term AR has been around since 1968, and in 2011, products like Takara Tomy's Virtual Master Reel, an AR fishing reel that uses a built-in camera to insert your real surroundings into a fishing game, were already available in the market. Geocaching, an activity wherein participants use GPS devices to discover caches or containers around the world and write their names inside log-books within them, has been around since early 2000. Niantic released a game for Android devices in 2013 called Ingress, which combined AR and GPS technologies, and later released it for iOS in 2014.

Pokémon GO stands out not because of the technology alone but due to the perfect fit of the technology into the story itself—the idea of roaming around the world and having random encounters with creatures. Pokémon GO utilizes real world maps, locations, and settings during play and requires players to go outside to fulfill the aims of the game. The marriage of computer-generated elements with the real world creates immersive storytelling experiences. The game utilizes real life environments as part of gameplay when players encounter creatures and attempt to capture them. A telepresence medium is assembled from the physical and the virtual environment. This correlates with the concept of telepresence theory that a medium's structure influences users' sense of perception and usage, leading to a great sense of satisfaction. In this research, 67.1% of respondents agreed that the game appealed to them aesthetically and 53.3% liked the AR technology of the game. More interestingly, those with a high opinion of the game's aesthetic appeal enjoyed interacting with other players significantly more than did those with a low opinion of the game's aesthetic appeal.

2.3. Pokémon GO as social capital: You have to be in 'the cult'

The social usage and structure of Pokémon GO comes via two routes: norms and network. The social epidemic of Pokémon GO spread widely across the media (both online and offline) from influencers (celebrities playing the game) through to ordinary users. Pokémon GO seemed to have attained cult status in a short time. What made the phenomenon even more noteworthy is that the game encourages players to go outside as part of its mechanics, so even individuals who are not active online can see the effects of Pokémon GO in society, opening up the potential for those who are not digital natives to experience the effects. Because of its high exposure, both online and offline, and its mass participation, it can be easy for non-players to feel left out.

On the other hand, current players are experiencing reciprocity expectations and group enforcement of the network. Social capital literature suggests the members may carry out various types of collective action to facilitate their assets and network. They may give referrals, which are the processes of providing information regarding available opportunities to people or actors in the network, hence influencing the opportunity to combine and exchange. People who have not seen the animated TV series may be affected by fans of Pokémon and thus be induced to play the game. This study indicated that among those who played the game for a reason other than the animated TV series, over half said that most people in their social group play the game frequently (36.1% strongly agree, 19.4% agree). On the other hand, fans of Pokémon tend to get together and spread information about the game, thus enlarging their game networks. This study found that 60.8% of respondents who played the game because of the animated TV series indicated they would recommend the game to others, as compared to only 29.9% that would give a recommendation from the group of people who did not watch the animated TV series.

3. Conclusion and message to practitioners: Reciprocal factors contributing to the game's success

In the case of Pokémon GO, its success actually came from the amalgamation of the three factors instead of any one factor alone. For instance, as mentioned previously, the use of AR and GPS technology in the game is not anything groundbreaking.

Its success is due to its perfect match, in that it allows players who had childhood fantasies of becoming Pokémon trainers finally to have a platform where they can fulfill their dreams in reality through the telepresence medium. The role-playing in the game further creates another level of interactivity with cooperation and competition among gamers. Afterward, normative influence is formed when a huge number of people are interacting in the game, drawing in non-fans to play. Gradually, the game has evolved to become a social norm. The whole process of configuring the structure of this Pokémon GO universe is consistent with the telepresence medium concept espoused in telepresence theory as well as the social capital formulation, in that a process is evoked through the cognitive, structural, and relational dimensions. Pokémon GO provides lessons in successfully launching an app as well as insights into the future development of technologies and products. If an app is well executed with consideration for emotional attachment and the harmony of technology and reality in transmedia storytelling, another epidemic outbreak of gaming could be seen in the near future.

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