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How Do Mobile Games Connect Us? A Perspective on Social Media Affordances

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ABSTRACT

Games as a "third place" for public interaction have attracted growing academic attention, particularly with their integration into the new media environment, which grants them enhanced media functions and deeper social significance. This study explores how and under what conditions mobile games effectively connect player communities, drawing on the perspective of *Social Media Affordances*. A walkthrough method and in-depth interviews with 19 *Honor of Kings* players were employed to examine this phenomenon. The findings indicate that mobile games utilize interface interactions, platform algorithms, and voice media affordances to provide conditions for identity perception, relational connectivity, and contextual imagination, thereby facilitating social interactions. However, these conditions are not universally applicable to all players. Instead, they are influenced by individual media usage behaviors and subjective agency, characterized by variability, instability, and reciprocal relationships. This study highlights the co-construction of social affordances in mobile games by media technologies and player interactions. It uncovers the intrinsic logic and value of mobile games as emerging social media platforms and extends the application of affordance theory to the domain of game-based social interactions. By examining the interplay between technological affordances and user practices, this research provides a deeper understanding of mobile games' role in shaping social connectivity in the digital age.

Keywords: *Mobile games, social media affordances, identity perception, relational connectivity, contextual imagination.*

INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s, Chinese youth were introduced to video games, and China has become one of the largest esports markets globally (Loh et al., 2024). Notably, mobile game users in China totaled 657 million (Game Production Committee of the China Audio-video and Digital Publishing Association, 2023). The rapid increase in user numbers has transformed mobile games into a crucial element of modern youth culture, granting them new media roles and sociocultural importance (Tang, 2023).

Currently, the social aspect of gaming goes beyond mere entertainment (Loh et al., 2024). Multiplayer online mobile games have become a major platform for virtual socialization in the video game industry (Cai et al., 2022). The integration of social networking and instant messaging features in mobile Internet technology has surpassed the limitations of network geographic borders (Tao & Zhai, 2021), revolutionizing players' gaming experiences and introducing novel ways to socialize within games. The introduction of this new feature shows

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how games are changing interpersonal and social communication patterns and pushing us to reevaluate the logic and value standards of gaming as a new kind of media ingrained in the broader mobile media ecosystem.

The communication field of video game socialization encompasses various prominent subjects, including gaming behavior, gender studies, media influence, and gaming experience (Zhao et al., 2023). Although studies that incorporate a relational viewpoint into gaming have hinted to the utility of video games as a kind of social media (Dong et al., 2022; Zhang, 2021), there remains a research gap that must be addressed. Prior studies on game socialization have primarily concentrated on online games played on computers, neglecting the new contexts and opportunities for social experiences in mobile gaming (Wei & Lu, 2014). Although prior research has examined the technical features of mobile games (Ha et al., 2007; Wei & Lu, 2014) and user experiences (Huang et al., 2017; Su et al., 2016). But they have overlooked the influence of player attributes and contexts on the use of mobile games (Li et al., 2022). Additionally, the majority of studies on gaming sociality adopt quantitative methods, which are limited in exploring how players perceive and rely on different social relationships (Zeng Skovhøj, 2021). In contrast, qualitative research strategies can provide more contextualized information (Dong et al., 2022).

Therefore, viewing mobile games as a new field for social research, the theory of social media affordances offers a novel perspective for inquiry. This study focuses on *Honor of Kings* players as the research subject, employing qualitative methods such as the walkthrough method and in-depth interviews to investigate how mobile games facilitate connections and interactions among players. The theory of *social media affordability* emphasizes three core attributes of social media: perception, relationality, and contextuality (Ronzhyn et al., 2023). These attributes exert profound and complex influences on player behavior.

Based on this theoretical, the central research question of this study is: How do mobile games provide players with a new mode of social connection? Furthermore, how do players establish social connections with others under the influence of perception, relationality, and contextuality, and what unique impacts do these dimensions reveal during interactions?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Affordance Theory in Communication

Affordances, introduced by Gibson (1966) in ecological psychology, refer to the interaction between animals and their environments. Wellman et al. (2003) integrated this concept into communication studies to examine how technology enables everyday behavior. This functionalist perspective disproportionately highlights technological attributes, overlooking user-technology interactions (Hu & Ma, 2022). To overcome these limitations, Lievrouw (2014) with Nagy and Neff (2015) introduced a constructivist perspective, emphasizing that affordances are dynamically co-constructed by technology and users. This perspective emphasizes that affordances have both enabling and constraining features. To reduce the conceptual ambiguity surrounding affordances in media studies, Ronzhyn et al. (2023) proposed a unified definition of social *media affordances*:

> Social media affordances are the perceived actual or imagined properties of social media, emerging through the relation of technological, social, and contextual, that enable and constrain specific uses of the platforms.

Affordances have shifted from a static, functionalist perspective to a dynamic, relational one. The interplay of technological attributes and social contexts in social media constructs three core dimensions: perception, relationality, and contextuality. The dimensions offer behavioral potential in dynamic contexts while imposing constraints on users' actions (Ronzhyn et al., 2023).

Perception: Actual or Imagined Properties

Perception refers to players' understanding and experience of the social functions within games, encompassing both actual properties (e.g., interface design, feature settings) and imagined properties (e.g., the social potential) (Ronzhyn et al., 2023). Research indicates that players interact with game environments through various perceptual channels, including visual (Chen et al., 2024; Nobaew, 2015), auditory (Collins, 2008; Yadegari et al., 2024), and tactile (embodied) (Jakubowicz, 2025; Keogh, 2018; Shin, 2022). Game prompts and symbols reinforce players' perception of these functions, significantly enhancing the social potential of games (Fang & Li, 2021). For example, game avatars as a communication nexus connecting games and players (Purnomo et al., 2019), and players acquiring virtual items to enhance their social standing in the gaming community (Hamari et al., 2020). This perception reflects the functional attributes of the items and significantly impacts players' self-image (Kuo et al., 2009; Sharma et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2024). Evidently, players develop an understanding of social rules and strategies by perceiving technological features or observing the behaviors of others. This process shapes their recognition of the social potential embedded within games (Treem & Leonardi, 2013).

Relationality: Interaction of Technology and Player Behavior

Relationality focuses on how technological features influence players' social interactions (Ronzhyn et al., 2023). Studies have shown that games, through the design of specific social mechanisms, provide diverse opportunities for players to establish, filter, and optimize social connections (Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Perry et al., 2018). In team-based games, players are required to collaborate with friends or other players, devise strategies, and work together to achieve shared objectives (Bian & Yang, 2025; Freeman & McNeese, 2019). For instance, in MOBA games, role specialization and strategic communication reflect not only trust among players but also a balance between competition and cooperation (Gonçalves et al., 2023). These cooperative dynamics are supported by interactive connections facilitated by the game, which may include in-game actions (e.g., combat missions) or multi-channel communication (e.g., voice and text chat) (Emmerich & Masuch, 2017; Meng et al., 2015). Furthermore, intelligent matchmaking systems expand players' social networks by recommending potential teammates, thereby fostering the dynamic development of virtual team relationships (Gonçalves et al., 2023; Jia et al., 2015).

Contextuality: How and When Relationships Unfold

Contextuality emphasizes how technological features dynamically shape player relationships across time and space (Ronzhyn et al., 2023). As a form of social activity, games often create short-term, high-intensity interaction scenarios for players through mechanisms such as time-limited tasks, seasonal events, and regional matchmaking (Tang, 2023). Additionally, real-time interactive technologies (e.g., live chat functions) are not only used for functional collaboration but also play a role in constructing interactive contexts and fostering emotional

connections among players (Collins, 2008; Meng et al., 2015; Yadegari et al., 2024). Environmental factors (e.g., whether players are in the same physical location) and participant characteristics (e.g., age and cultural background) further influence how these contexts unfold (De Kort & Ijsselsteijn, 2008; Gonçalves et al., 2023).

METHODOLOGY

This study selects the mobile game *Honor of Kings* (referred to as *HoK*) developed by Tencent, a Chinese company, as a case study because of its unique representation and typical characteristics: *HoK* is a five-on-five mobile multiplayer online arena (MOBA) game. Since its inception in 2015, *HoK* has gained widespread recognition as the epitome of worldwide mobile gaming (Statista, 2024a). With over 100 million daily active players, the game has been downloaded around 10.86 million times globally (Statista, 2024b). *Honor of Kings*, China's most popular mobile gaming app, is the best-case study for studying the cultural generation of gaming interactions.

The primary method used for data gathering was a qualitative research approach that involved a combination of the walkthrough method and in-depth interviews. The walkthrough method, developed by Light et al. (2018), is a foundational method that combines technological and cultural research. This method encourages researchers to directly enter into the interface of mobile game apps to test their technological mechanisms and cultural indications through hands-on practice, which can effectively examine the inter-embeddedness of game ecosystems and players' life practices (Cao & Cao, 2021). In January 2022, the researcher created an account on the game *HoK* and regularly utilized, explored, and engaged with the app over a period of 12 months. The purpose of this activity was to investigate the influence of the platform's interface and content on users' initial perceptions and behaviors, with the aim of comprehending how it directs and molds the user's experience. In-depth interviews are done due to the substantial variability in participants' gaming routines and the abundance of intricate details. Individual interviews provide a more comprehensive understanding of players' perspectives, motivations, attitudes, emotions, and other aspects of game socialization.

The informants were primarily acquired through purposive sampling (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). The researcher conducted interviews with 19 players of varying levels of game social experience in *HoK*, based on the parameters of player age, gender, game time, and game experience (as shown in table 1). There were 8 females and 11 males, with a relatively wide age range. The interviews were conducted using a combination of online and offline methods. The researcher prepared a semi-structured outline beforehand and adjusted the questions based on the informant's responses during the interviews. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes each. The interviews were recorded and transcribed with the informant's permission to offer supporting documentation for the subsequent research.

Table 1: Informants' basic information

No.	Gender	Age	Occupation	Game Length	Interview method
M-01	male	22	Accountant	4 years	online
M-02	male	19	Undergraduate	1 year	online
F-03	female	20	Undergraduate	8 years	offline
F-04	female	26	Civil service	3 years	online
F-05	female	19	Undergraduate	7 years	offline
M-06	male	23	Communication	6 years	online
M-07	male	20	Undergraduate	8 years	online
M-08	male	19	Undergraduate	9 years	online

F-09	female	28	E-commerce	8 years	online
F-10	female	21	Education	4 years	offline
M-11	male	20	Undergraduate	6 years	online
M-12	male	21	Self-media	8 years	offline
M-13	male	20	Undergraduate	3 years	offline
F-14	female	23	Unemployed	8 years	online
F-15	female	21	Undergraduate	2 years	online
F-16	female	23	Postgraduate	5 years	online
M-17	male	26	Director	4 years	online
M-18	male	25	Civil service	5 years	online
M-19	male	26	Police	6 years	online

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Identity Perception Affordances: Self- Presentation Through Interface Interactions

In the theory of social media affordances, the first focus is placed on the perceived quality of affordances. As Nagy and Neff (2015) point out, affordances can derive from attributes of the system that are only "imagined" by its users. The psychological process described by player M-06 in forming connections with strangers in the game illustrates this point:

> I think she plays very well, so I first checked her game profile. If her profile shows that she is a girl, looks pretty, and her game skills are good, I might have other thoughts... (M-06)

M-06 indicates that their positive perception of a stranger arises from the visible information presented by the system interface (e.g., avatar, character, rank). This information does not directly correspond to the actual identity of the other party; rather, it represents a blend of M-06's subjective imagination and socialized cognition. This indicates that the visibility of the game interface serves as a prerequisite or constraint for player actions (Greeno, 1994), and the establishment of social bonds is based on visual content (Arymami et al., 2024).

Game Characters: Personality and Temperament

The perceptions of players regarding game characters are a significant factor. *HoK* is a multiplayer online battle arena game featuring a diverse array of hero characters. As of April 2024, *HoK* has introduced 119 hero characters. Players can select different characters based on their preferences and needs. The interface presents these choices, as seen in the frequently used characters section of player M-19's profile card (Figure 2), providing cues for understanding their personality and temperament.

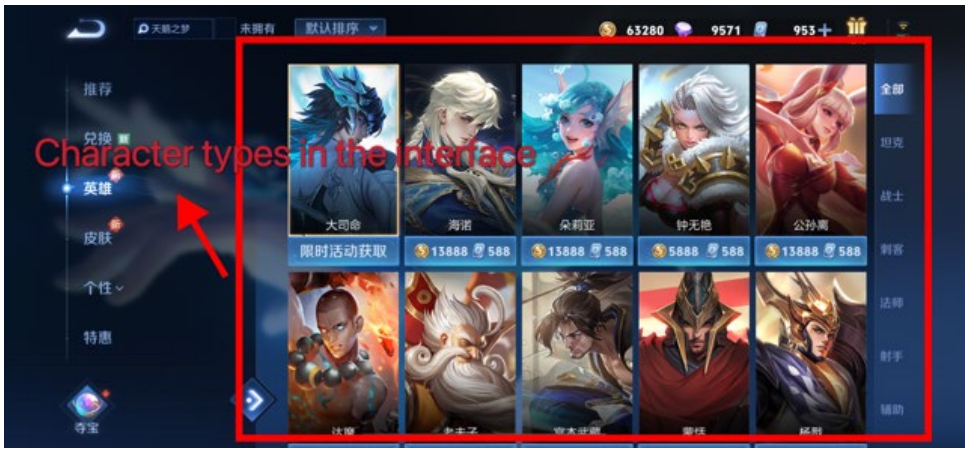

Figure 1: The Hero Mall in the Honour of Kings game UI

Personality and temperament should not be interpreted as objective or factual descriptors of a player's characteristics. They are perceptual constructs influenced by subjective interpretations and cultural assumptions. The selection of heroes by players, including their appearance and skin styles, is frequently perceived by others as reflective of personal traits that correspond with their real-life personality or social style. Player F-16 indicated that her selection of *Support* roles transcends gaming strategy and is viewed by others as a manifestation of her readiness to cooperate and collaborate.

> The positions I often play are *Mage* and *Support*, and choosing *Mage* or *Support* often requires me to go to the top and bottom lanes to support my teammates. If I'm playing with my boyfriend, I usually pick *Support* to follow him and support him. (F-16)

The perception of personality and temperament, although somewhat linked to the player's self-intent, is predominantly influenced by the observations and interpretations of others. Player M-19 highlighted a preference for the *Assassin* and *Archer* roles:

> The common heroes I set on my personal homepage are a few of the most skilled *Assassin* and *Archer*... The background used is the skin of one of the *Archer* heroes, *Eagle Wood*, which I think is very nice and domineering. (M-19)

Figure 2: The game card of Player M-19

In this context, "nice" and "domineering" reflect M-19's subjective evaluations of virtual characters, associated with roles characterized as "decisive" or "highly aggressive". The display of heroes on the interface externalizes M-19's aesthetic and personal style as symbols of personality, enabling an identity portrayal that can be interpreted by others within the game's social context.

The game's virtual environment often reflects players' ideal selves through character representation, with gender frequently remaining ambiguous or concealed. The personality and temperament exhibited by frequently used visible characters do not reliably serve as definitive indicators of gender. The male player M-13 frequently chooses *Female Mage* characters and is regarded by his peers as "gentle".

> All of us who play this game will have a common sense perception that those who play *Mages* or pretty roles are usually played by girls... because in real life I'm a relatively gentle, good character... (M-13)

It is clear that the game character, as a projection of the player's sense of self, extends into the daily experience of the real self (Liu et al., 2021). Player M-13's awareness of his own "gentle" characteristics aligns with others' stereotypical views of female characters as "gentle and cute", resulting in a perceptual congruence. The development of personality and temperament is influenced not only by individual choices of players but also by external evaluations regarding the compatibility of character and player, alongside socially constructed perceptions of identity and temperament.

a. Game Ranks: Skill and Ability

The game ranking serves as the most significant display information in multiplayer competitive games (Dick et al., 2005; Kou et al., 2016), and *HoK* is no exception. *HoK* consists of ten levels: Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum, Diamond, Master, King, Mythic, Epic, and Legends. Players are categorized into segments according to their win totals in qualifying matches, with each segment publicly displayed in the game. The game rank determines the teammates and opponents' players encounter, as well as the game modes available to them. It serves as a direct indicator of players' skills and abilities, significantly influencing their social value within the game. In the interview, informants F-04 and F-15 stated that they would proactively seek friendship with high-ranking players in the game, aiming to improve their own rank through collaboration. Some players hire paid companions or utilize "boosting" (Conroy et al., 2021) to enhance their perceived gaming skills.

> I can't advance because I'm not good at solo play. I'll ask a "boosting" expert to play up for me at the end of the season if I didn't make the desired rank. (F-15)

Respondent F-15 shows how rankings in the player community involve "goal" and "pressure". High ranks allow players to be perceived as skilled. However, some players hire paid teammates or engage in cheating, like account boosting to maintain this image or reach an ideal rank. Former paid gaming teammate F-14 noted similar phenomena:

> Apart from those who hire teammates for a better gaming experience, there is another type of client in the game: wealthy but inept players who want to rise in rank for vanity. (F-14)

The visible game ranking has developed into a status symbol within the gaming community as well as an unspoken reference standard for players to understand one another's ability levels (Duan, 2022). Through the symbol of ranking, players can quickly identify and perceive the skill level, potential social value, and even a sense of honor or respect associated with others.

Game Skins and Membership Levels: Financial Strength

In many free-to-play MOBA games, such as *HoK*, players frequently must pay to acquire special heroes, skins, and items (Zeng & Tao, 2023). The game system offers identifiable rewards for paying players through features like membership levels and exclusive badges (Figure 3). A player's membership level correlates positively with in-game spending and the quantity of skins acquired. The top membership tier in the HoK system is VIP10, providing players with exclusive badges and avatars, as well as privileges like sharing limited skins with teammates and enhanced in-game benefits. These privileges are perceived in the player community as indicators of financial prowess, garnering considerable attention and admiration from peers.

> I myself want VIP because I just came to read the university, dormitory roommates are not familiar with, so we will play this game together to open up the topic, they will say that I'm a member, very rich this kind of, may make me a little bit of that kind of vanity to satisfy, it sounds like feel like a very kind of (rich) feeling. (M-13)

M-13's statement indicates that dormitory roommates view membership levels as signs of financial capability, subtly fulfilling players' vanity and social needs. F-05 emphasized the unique position of high-tier members in social interactions:

> Since he's upgraded to VIP10, he must have spent a lot of money; basically, all of the money in there is spent on skins, and joining up with him is a means to share his skins... (F-05)

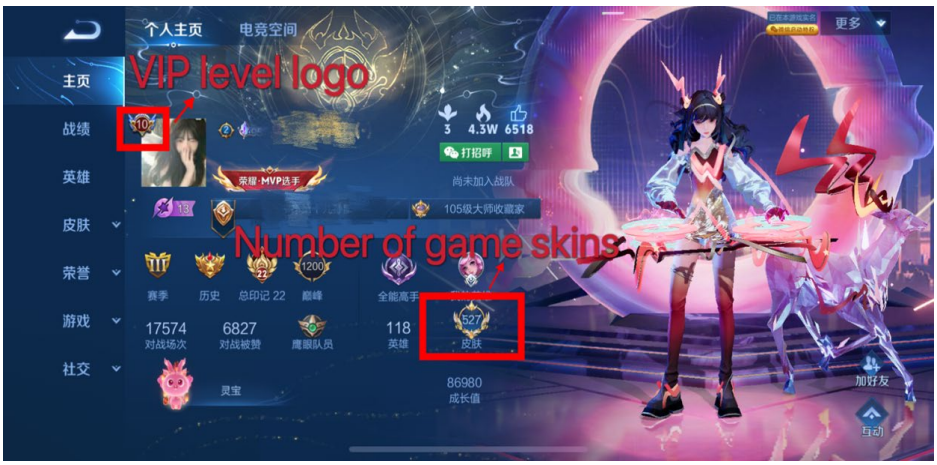

Figure 3: The gaming interface displays skins and membership levels

The interview with player F-05 supports the notion that the perception of financial prowess linked to high-level memberships can yield social benefits, including prioritized attention and associated resources (e.g., team recruitment, shared skins). This indicates that membership levels and rare skins contribute to a symbolic "virtual hierarchy" in the game (Song, 2021).

On the other hand, the display of membership levels and skins enhances the aspects of game character personality and temperament. Utilization of costly or limited-edition skins by players enhances their character's exclusivity and scarcity, prompting differentiated aesthetic and social evaluations from others. For example, F-09, a VIP10 player, frequently uses the expensive, limited-edition skin *Really Hertz* (the name of the hero's skin) of the *Support* character *Yao*.

> When compared to other skins, I believe the *Really Hertz* skin displays a vibrant, colorful, and adorable image of Yao, and the texture and special effects design is rather great. So I bought it the moment it went on sale… (F-09)

For F-09, unique skins represent not only skill or financial means but also function as a display of self-expression and aesthetic pursuit. Yee and Bailenson (2007) noted that avatars serve as a method of self-presentation in virtual environments, allowing others to perceive and conceptualize the identity or characteristics they represent through digital means. The interviews indicated that visible elements in games, like membership levels and skin displays, are frequently perceived by players as essential tools for their frontstage performances. Male participant M-18 noted:

> My high rank and skill level in the game increase my willingness to speak, positioning me as a leader of opinions. In reality, I often speak less. (M-18)

M-18's viewpoint corresponds with Goffman's (2002) notion of *Impression Management*, indicating that individuals modify their behavior based on the frontstage and backstage of various contexts to conform to anticipated identity representations (Yue & Zhang, 2023). Game characters, ranks, skins, and membership levels obscure players' social identities and visual markers, significantly diminishing their recognizability and value in gaming interactions. This allows players to create an ideal self and envision ideal others. The visual elements form a multidimensional perceived identity in the mobile gaming social context, acting as essential symbols for players to express their self-narratives.

Relational Connectivity Affordance: Co-Playing Under Platform Algorithms

When studying *HoK*, the researcher must focus on multiplayer and games. The former reminds researchers of the game's compulsory multiplayer teaming requirement, which underpins its social affordances. The latter alerts researchers to the characteristics of games that distinguish them from social software for strangers, such as Facebook, in terms of "the way they connect with their users". It is this way characteristic that determines how players will interact with others.

Through observation, it has been determined that there are often two prevalent types of multiplayer connection in *HoK*: Systematic random matching by the platform algorithm and free teaming by players' multi-channel. Players' multi-channel free teaming is mainly

implemented through linked accounts, team system and LBS technology, and the specific structure is shown in Figure 4. Within the game, these two types of multiplayer connections work together to enhance the player's in-game social interaction. On one hand, they assist the player in establishing a stable in-game social structure and personal values. On the other hand, they enable the player to autonomously select appropriate long-term teammates based on their individual in-game social requirements.

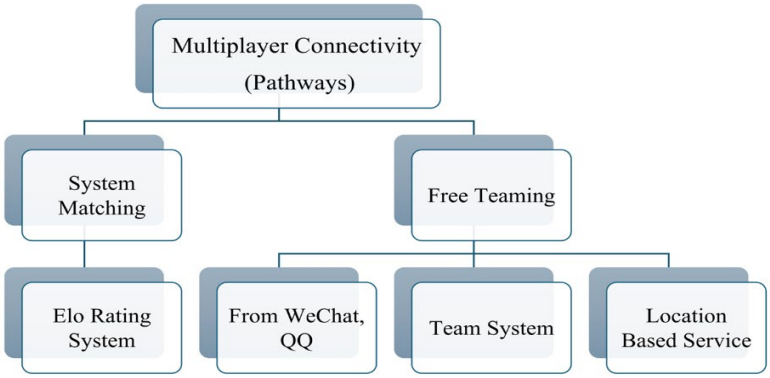

Figure 4: Social connectivity structure in *Honor of Kings*

Random Matching for Platform Algorithms

In the game *HoK*, if a player chooses the Random Match option and leaves the selection of teammates to the game system, the system will use the Elo rating algorithm to find a suitable teammate for the player. The Elo rating system, originally designed for chess, has subsequently been widely used in a variety of competitive games (Caplar et al., 2013). The fundamental concept behind the Elo rating algorithm is to assign a numerical score to each player that accurately reflects their level of expertise (Prakannoppakun & Sinthupinyo, 2016). Hence, the system utilizes the Elo algorithm to evaluate players by considering their past performance, ranking, recent success rate, and other extensive data. It also prioritizes the principle of "similarity of game strength" by matching players with similar scores as teammates. This ensures that players are closely matched in terms of skill level and promotes fair competition. In addition, the matching algorithm will match players with teammates who have complementary roles in different positions, guaranteeing balance teamwork and preventing any complications that may arise from having players in the same position. For example, player F-15 mentioned in the interview her desire to be led by high-ranking players in the game:

> To play the game with me, I need at least two kings rank. Because if we have excellent ones on our side, the game will match awesome ones on the other side (enemy team). (F-15)

The statement indicates that F-15 recognizes her team is competing against opponents of comparable skill levels as determined by the system. This comprehension of the Elo algorithm guides her strategic employment of relational connections in gameplay: to enhance her win rate or competitive experience, she seeks to "find a few strong players," aiming to counterbalance the challenges presented by the system's algorithm through a numerical advantage. A different participant (F-10) articulated her understanding of the Elo algorithm concerning system tendencies and game activity levels:

> It's not a mechanism that says you can score (raise your rank) if you play it every day, it wants you to play it at longer intervals, it's easier to score (raise your rank) because it detects that you haven't been online for a long time… (F-10)

F-10 posits that players actively analyze the game system's algorithm tendencies and modify their login frequency and gameplay strategies to attain a more advantageous matchmaking environment. Players explore and utilize the dynamic rules of the platform algorithm to enhance performance or manage relationships. A micro-process of "human-machine interaction" develops between players and the platform algorithm, influencing the relational connectivity among players and their teammates or opponents.

As players engage in more matches and gather data, the system consistently updates and reassesses based on recent performance, rank, and win rate. In situations where players form teams with varying skill levels, the platform's algorithm matches opponents according to the team's average composite score. As a result, the random matchmaking mode introduces the core dimension of "similarity of game strength" in shaping player relationships. This not only provides a stable metric for player interactions but also elevates rank and win rate to the status of "social currency" in the game (Kowert, 2016). Furthermore, the platform's algorithmic value inclination for "complementary roles" secures and raises the possibility of successful teamwork among players.

Multi-Channel Free Teaming

The random matching system in *HoK* is not preferred by all players. Players tend to favor engaging with acquaintances, utilizing the game to sustain friendships (Dong et al., 2022). Player M-02 joined the game at friends' invitation and stated:

> Good synergy is only achieved when playing in a team with friends. (M-02)

This phenomenon illustrates the dependence of certain players on social relationships to enhance connections with real-world companions or existing social networks via the game. In this context, free team mode has emerged as a key approach to addressing these social needs. In this mode, *HoK* eases the restrictions on skill level differences among players, permitting "no rank limitations for five-player teams". This indicates that a Bronze player can collaborate with a King player. As such, the game's competitive aspect takes a backseat to social needs, emphasizing the relational connectivity function of the game over its competitive nature.

HoK utilizes mobile media technologies to strengthen relational connectivity among players by integrating the game with real-life interactions. The most straightforward method involves integrating social media accounts with gaming accounts. *HoK* integrates friend networks from WeChat and QQ, China's leading social media platforms, allowing players to invite friends from these social media platforms to join their teams with a single click. The case of player M-12 exemplifies this integration:

> I frequently see my classmates and colleagues playing the game on the list… I'll invite them to join me. (M-12)

This feedback reflects how players strengthen connections with friends through the game and highlights their preference for acquaintance-based social interactions in this context. Conversely, to fulfill the need for new friendships, respondent F-07 indicated:

> Add unfamiliar teammates on QQ directly via the game platform. (F-07)

This illustrates the potential for "media transfer" between gaming and social media accounts (Dong et al., 2022), allowing players to form deeper friendships and sustain long-term relationships.

At the same time, the game improves the perception of reality by using LBS (Location-Based Service) technology to invite players who are physically close to one another in real life to join the game. This function has long been used on many social platforms (Bao et al., 2015; Wilken, 2014). *HoK* has borrowed it and applied it to in-game free teaming, which not only allows players to see the specific distance to nearby players, but also their game rank and recent online time, and mastery of various information facilitates the selection of the player's own social object to carry out in-game social interaction. Also, the close physical distance in the actual world makes it easier for online relationships to transition into offline interactions. As an illustration, M-11, who portrays the character of Archer, explains that when he experiences ennui, he actively seeks out someone to engage in gameplay with him on the Nearby Person interface.

> Sometimes their own play is not interesting, go to find Nearby Person there is no paragraph rank similar to the girl Support can be together double ranked…After all, it is a Nearby Person, maybe play familiar can also meet in reality as a good friend. (M-11)

It is evident that for players whose primary goal is social extension, geographical proximity not only facilitates online gaming but also creates opportunities for offline gatherings or further interaction.

Additionally, within the game, players can free to form battlegroups or teams, resulting in a pattern of group interaction. According to F-14, a game depth enthusiast, teammates that perform exceptionally well are those who are members of the game's fixed team. Due to the game's capacity to bring people together, technology, and ability to match exceptionally well, everyone eventually formed their own team group and frequently interacted with it. Obviously, the in-game battle group system allows teams of people with similar backgrounds, interests, or hobbies to interact on a regular basis within the game, providing a communal space for them and reinforcing the players' sense of identification and belonging (Zhao & Chen, 2021).

It is interesting to note that in the context of multi-channel free teaming, there is a distinct filtering mechanism that affects players' socialization in the game. This mechanism takes into account various factors such as winning the game, silently collaborating, being of the opposite sex, and the other party's level of interest or strengths. This consideration often exists in two ways: First, as player F-15 expects, there are excellent players on his side of the team who excel in their abilities and can help raise the rank. The second is that, as a player, F-14 has put together a small team of evenly matched players with complementary strengths who specialize in various in-game character positions. It is evident that in the multi-channel free teaming mode, the primary objective of interpersonal connection remains the

achievement of victory in the game, regardless of whether it involves acquaintances playing together or cooperative gameplay.

Contextual Imagination Affordance: Co-Presence Experience Through Voice Media

Mobile games exhibit greater contextuality and dynamism in relational connectivity than traditional social media (Tang, 2023). In-game voice communication signifies a notable change in social behavior for players transitioning from solo mode to team mode. Interview data indicate that most respondents use voice chat as their main communication method while playing. This voice medium enhances competitive coordination and fosters immersive social interactions among players. For many players, the primary aim of voice communication may not be to socialize. According to M-01:

> Voice communication is for better team coordination to secure competitive victories. (M-01)

Similarly, M-08 emphasized:

> Voice gives you real-time feedback, unlike typing, where you have to wait for a response… (M-08)

However, regardless of the initial motivation for using voice communication, it often fosters a sense of intimacy and co-presence. F-03 shared that she and her friends often play games together offline during vacations, but during the school term, they maintain their closeness through voice communication:

> During summer vacation, I would go to my friend's house to play games together. But when school starts, and we can’t meet, we play online games together and chat via voice. (F-03)

Real-time voice in games addresses the communicative gap caused by "physical absence" (Straughan et al., 2021). Auditory cues, including voice, tone, and rhythm, enhance players' perception of co-presence (Shen, 2023). Voice serves as a medium for communication and facilitates a diverse interaction experience, allowing players to envision and build a collective sense of presence beyond physical space.

It is worth noting that when players offer their "voice" as a social cue (Hong, 2020; Knapp & Daly, 2011), they are engaging in a higher degree of self-disclosure, taking on greater social risks in exchange for deeper intimacy. The emphasis on social risk arises because players can perceive emotional information, such as timbre, tone, and intonation from each other’s voices. This emotional richness far surpasses the emotional imagination enabled by text communication, offering a more authentic and nuanced connection. The dynamic "authentic self" frequently complements, modifies, or challenges the player's static "ideal self," significantly reshaping social interactions. In the interviews, player F-04 noted that the voice system poses a risk to social relationships by disclosing players' real-time emotions.

> When it comes to ranked matches, such as making mistakes, there are some friends who are more concerned about winning or losing; they will appear to have some of these voices, that is, a very fierce tone of voice: 'I said don't go over there!, and then I would feel how playing a game seems to have affected the friendship kind of feeling. (F-04)

A similar situation occurred in the interactions between player M-17 and his girlfriend. M-17 shared:

> Sometimes, when the game isn't going well, I tend to get emotional and yell a bit. Girls are more sensitive, so she gets upset, and we end up arguing. (M-17)

The cases of F-04 and M-17 demonstrate that voice communication, in certain contexts, can heighten tensions among players. Significant emotional fluctuations among players lead to more direct and explicit conflicts through the voice medium, affecting trust and relationship stability. Simultaneously, when players find that the voices of their teammates match their own expectations of the "ideal person", it significantly enhances social interactions among players.

> For me, having a voice on is one of the requirements for adding a friend. Because the voice provides a general description of the individual's look. When the voice is a little sweeter, it's more likely to have a little bit of feelings, which is why I'll go ahead and add friend with her... (M-11)

This statement indicates that voice serves as an important criterion for players to filter and approach others. Informant M-11 also suggested that sound in games might bring players closer together and generate a sense of familiarity. At the moment, it appears that they are all in the same space, creating an imaginary "physical accompanying", which increases the level of intimacy in the relationship and may create a transference effect (Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2006), where the desire to replicate this intimate in-game experience extends to real life.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study aims to explore how mobile games facilitate social connections by examining the affordances of identity perception, relational connectivity, and contextual imagination through three key aspects: interface interactions, platform algorithms, and voice media. The study delves into the interaction conditions and mechanisms of mobile games as a unique form of social media.

First, the interface interactions in mobile games provide players with opportunities for self-presentation and the formation of identity perception. This perception is not only based on visible elements within the game interface (such as characters, ranks, and skins) but also shaped by players' subjective imagination and socialized cognition. By continuously utilizing interface features, players enhance their social value within the game, which serves as an intrinsic motivation for building interactive relationships between players.

Second, mobile gaming platform algorithms provide players with the possibility of social connections. The platform's random matching algorithm generates a connection logic based on "similarity of game strength" and "complementary roles within the team", offering players with a "pure" connection that differs from the traditional social value system. The

multi-channel free team allows players to establish social connections with acquaintances and strangers via social media embedding, LBS positioning technology, and the free formation of battle groups, but the complementary mechanism of differentiated roles remains an important consideration for players' game social interaction.

Third, the real-time voice media in mobile games creates possibilities for players to engage in contextual imagination. The voice serves as an index for players as they go from the virtual gaming environment to the actual world. When players' real voices are heard by one another, the virtual characters they construct change from static to dynamic, and the real persons behind the virtual characters become more concretely comprehended. This sense of familiarity and the imagined "physical co-presence" brought by voice enhances the immersive quality of the context, creating a virtual intimacy experience.

The above findings provide key evidence for our understanding of how mobile games create connections. However, the existence of this key evidence does not mean that there is a simple causal logic between players' in-game co-play and the establishment of social relationships. The study also found that players' socialisation within the game was not a consequence of the game being "imprinted" on them.

To begin, the social affordances of games vary depending on the individual. Players' social goals and previous experiences all influence their game social behaviours and outcomes (Reer & Krämer, 2019). For example, player M-12 emphasized:

> I no longer have any social desire while playing games and have disabled all in-game friend-adding features. (M-12)

Players with no social motivation will avoid all social interaction within the game and view it as a purely competitive arena. In addition, the social affordance of games is unstable for the same individual. We observed changes in players' perceptions of games' social affordances. For instance, F-10 said:

> I started playing this game with friends. After becoming a teacher, I played with students to understand them. (F-10)

Clearly, players saw game playing as less socially utilitarian in their early years, but as they grew older and their social identities changed, game socialization became more utilitarian. It is evident that players' social perceptions change according to their social identities and life circumstances.

Furthermore, the game's social affordances and player requirements are mutually beneficial. *HoK*, for example, broadens the rank disparities and levels of free grouping among players in order to boost players' social reach and game stickiness outside of competitive gameplay. This logic of capital operation permits the game's material qualities to vary in response to the requirements and preferences of the players.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that games function as a form of social media, facilitating connections between individuals who are unfamiliar with one another. It allows players to form relationships that transcend the limitations of reality and extend beyond the game through the three layers of identity perception, relational connectivity, and contextual imagination. This possibility is also dependent on the players' subjective initiative in using personal media. It is the interaction of a game's mediating technology with its users that

constitutes the game's social media affordances as a social medium. This study applies the theory of *social media affordances* to the study of gaming socialization, explores it discursively in terms of perceptual, relational, and contextual traits, and suggests a new value judgment system for this phenomenon. Also, this study provides empirical proof of mobile gaming's potential as a new social field for developing relationships.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has certain limitations. During the interviews, the researcher discovered that players' previous experiences, social identity changes, and the game's capital operation would influence the players' social behavior and outcomes in the game. However, these factors were not specifically analyzed in this research due to the limitations of the theories employed. Future research seeks novel theoretical advancements in current theories and integrates variables such as players past experiences, social identities, and gaming expertise to further analyze the worth and importance of gaming socialization.

This study exclusively focuses on the mobile game *Honor of Kings* in the MOBA category as a case study. It is important to note that the findings may not be universally applicable to other categories of mobile games due to potential differences. One way to further explore this issue is by doing comparative research with other types of games, such as First Person Shooter (FPS) and Role-Playing Game (RPG).

Given that the majority of the participants in this study are individuals with prior experience in socializing through mobile games, there is a potential issue of survivor bias. In order to respond to and test the findings of qualitative study, future research could employ an experimental or longitudinal research design to gain a deeper understanding of the causal relationship and dynamic changes between game social outcomes and game media affordance.

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