Rank Symbols and Player Behavior: An Analysis of MOBA Game Motivation Based on Social Identity and Social Comparison

Jiatong Han[1,a,*]

[1]*School of English and International Studies, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, China*
a. 202320201051@bfsu.edu.cn
*corresponding author

Abstract: Since the early 2000s, MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena) games have gradually become one of the mainstream types in the global game market. This study explores how the ranking system in MOBA games, such as "Honor of Kings", drives players' long-term participation and behavior through symbolic effects, especially in the game motivation, social behavior, and its impact on the self-identity of high-ranking players. This study uses semi-structured interviews to explore how the ranking system of "Honor of Kings" drives players' behavior as a symbol. The study shows that although high-ranking players believe that the sense of achievement brought by the ranking itself gradually weakens over time, the ranking, as a symbolic symbol, continues to drive players' participation. Through the analysis of players' goal setting, social comparison, and identity, this paper reveals how the ranking system drives players' behavior as a goal and strengthens players' self-cognition and social status through social identity and social comparison. Future game design should optimize ranking systems to balance competitiveness with entertainment, ensuring a healthy gaming environment.

Keywords: Ranking System, Social Identity, Social Comparison, Player Behavior, MOBA Games

1. Introduction

With the growing popularity of MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena) games, players' participation motivation and behavior patterns have become an important topic in game research. MOBA games attract a large number of players with their competitiveness, teamwork, and strategy. In particular, the introduction of the ranking system provides a clear skill evaluation standard and drives players to continuously pursue higher competitive goals.

"Honor of Kings" is a multiplayer online battle arena game launched by Tencent, a Chinese company. With its optimization for mobile terminals, simple and easy-to-use gameplay, rich and diverse hero selection, and highly competitive ranking system, the game has quickly occupied the market share and become one of the most popular MOBA games. Similar to other MOBA games, one of the core attractions of this game lies in its ranking system. The rank system forms a simple assessment of the player's technical level while carrying symbolic significance for the player's efforts and achievements. With the development of the game's achievement system and the continuous

expansion of the player base, the rank has become a social symbol for players to communicate with each other. Players regard the rank as a kind of social capital to gain social recognition and social comparison. Driven by the rank system, climbing the rank ladder has become an important gaming motivation for players [1,2]. However, although "Honor of Kings" has received widespread attention, existing research mainly focuses on pathological game addiction, player social motivations, and game design. There is still a lack of research on the deep motivations of how players continue to pursue high ranks in this system, especially the social identity and social comparison implied by high ranks.

This study uses the interview method to explore the rank as the core motivation to promote long-term participation. The research question is: Why is high rank the main motivation for the continued participation of "Honor of Kings" players? The symbolic meaning of high rank to players and the relationship between rank and player identity are the key issues to be explored in this study. This study aims to comprehensively understand the behavior patterns of players in MOBA games such as "Honor of Kings", especially the psychological and social mechanisms behind the motivation of pursuing high rank, to provide theoretical reference and practical guidance for future game design and player research.

2. Methodology

In the current research on game behavior motivation, player motivation can usually be explored in depth from the perspectives of emotional motivation and cognitive motivation. Affective motivation is usually immediate and short-term driven, while cognitive motivation focuses more on long-term participation intention and intrinsic satisfaction. The two are intertwined and complementary. Affective motivation usually covers factors such as pleasure, excitement, and emotional investment. From the perspective of emotional motivation, daily pressure in real life (such as work pressure and academic pressure) and negative emotions such as anxiety and confusion are usually important triggers that drive players to participate in online games, driving players to seek pleasure and emotional regulation through games and pursue fantasy, escape, enjoyment, and excitement in the virtual world, thereby alleviating these negative emotions [1,3,4,5]. From the perspective of cognitive motivation, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a relatively effective framework for explaining players' long-term participation in MOBA games. The theory believes that players' motivation is influenced by three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When basic psychological needs are met, players' intrinsic motivation will be enhanced, prompting them to maintain their interest and involvement in the game in the long term [6,7]. Autonomy refers to the degree to which an individual feels autonomous and voluntary in their behavioral choices, and the freedom of choice that players experience in the game (such as choosing roles and strategies). Competence refers to the sense of accomplishment and effectiveness that individuals feel in activities, especially the sense of accomplishment that players gain in completing tasks, improving skills, or advancing in the process of leveling up. Belonging refers to the sense of connection and belonging that individuals feel in their interactions with others [8]. The core of SDT is to promote intrinsic motivation, believing that individuals will have more intrinsic motivation when their autonomy, sense of competence, and sense of belonging are satisfied. However, player behavior is often not only driven by internal factors, especially in MOBA games where team competition is the core gameplay, external factors often play a key role in players' long-term participation and long-term motivation maintenance.

Based on the above theories, this study uses semi-structured interviews, through the analysis of the interview data from active players with existing theories such as symbolic interaction and social identity, to explore the game motivation and behavior of MOBA game players, especially how rank as a symbol of social identity and social comparison affects players' behavior and reveals players' perception of their own gaming abilities.

This study conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 "Honor of Kings" players, and the interview time for each player was 30 to 60 minutes. Interviewees will be recruited voluntarily, and all interview content will be strictly confidential to ensure that the privacy of the interviewees is fully protected. The interviews will be conducted online or face-to-face, and the interview content will be recorded by audio recording. All interviewees are players with certain ranking experience, and basic information such as age and gender is relatively balanced. The interview content revolves around the players' game motivations, the importance of ranks, and the cognition of social identity and social comparison. Through open-ended questions and guiding questions, interviewees are encouraged to freely express their cognition of ranks, emotional reactions to ranking matches, and behavioral strategies in the game.

The interviews mainly focus on players' motivations for participating in the game "Honor of Kings", the impact of the ranking system, the relationship between the rank and the player's gaming behavior, and the social recognition and social comparison brought by the rank. First, the interview will explore basic information such as the player's gaming level, game time, and playing preferences. In addition, it will also focus on the player's motivation for participating in the game and the role of the rank. Secondly, the interview will focus on the significance of the rank to the player, the player's cognition of personal ability and the ranking system, and the spread of the rank as a symbol among the player group.

Through these interviews, the study hopes to deeply explore the player's behavior patterns in "Honor of Kings", the symbolic role of the rank and the psychological mechanism behind it, and finally reveal how the ranking system affects the player's gaming experience and its role in promoting social interaction.

3.   Analysis

3.1.   Gaming Motivation and Rank-Driven Behavioral Patterns

3.1.1. Gaming Motivation: Social Motivation and Achievement Motivation

When talking about "motivation", the interviewees considered "social needs" and "sense of achievement" as the main motivations for playing. In MOBA games, social motivation is an important factor affecting players' gaming behavior. Many players choose to play games with friends or netizens and establish social connections through cooperation and competition. This social need becomes the driving force for players to participate in the game for a long time. When playing games with friends, the interviewees said that they can "enjoy the fun of interacting with others", "relieve the frustration of the game", and "gain satisfaction through teamwork and competition". At the same time, a sense of achievement is also an important driving force for many players to continue to participate in the game, but its source and experience show certain differences among players of different ranks. Some low-ranking interviewees believe that the improvement of rank is a "relatively fulfilling thing". Players achieve self-transcendence and demonstrate their abilities by constantly "score-up" (a popular term for climbing up the rank ladder) to achieve higher ranks. This "score-up" mechanism often becomes one of the driving forces for their continued play [9]. When asked whether the rank brings a sense of accomplishment, all high-ranking players interviewed said that reaching the preset rank is "normal", "a little bit of accomplishment" or "no sense of accomplishment". This group believes that the sense of accomplishment comes from more challenging content, such as turning the tide against the odds, winning the game through high-level skills, or tactical cooperation in an evenly matched game.

3.1.2. Rank as a Goal-Driven Motivation

As an external evaluation standard, the ranking system provides players with a stable and clear standard. This standard not only reflects the player's technical level but also serves as a source of motivation for goal-oriented behavior. This goal-oriented behavior shows a cyclical satisfaction pattern: setting goals for each season, working hard to achieve the goals, obtaining short-term satisfaction after achieving the goals, and finally entering a new season to continue setting similar goals [10]. In this process, the symbolism and stability of the ranking play a crucial role. The ranking is not only a reflection of the player's technical ability but also a symbolic symbol with social recognition value. The high ranking itself has become a link of recognition between players and others, especially players of the same ranking [2]. The existence of the ranking provides players with an operational and measurable "success" standard, and this success is not only based on personal competitive performance but also on the social recognition brought by the ranking. For many players, the symbolism of the ranking system gives them a sense of "recognition" of their gaming ability and drives their continuous pursuit of goals.

As a goal, the ranking enables players to demonstrate strong subjective initiative and self-regulation in the process of pursuing a high ranking. Goals can motivate individuals to show more effort and more proactive behavior [10]. In the process of pursuing a high ranking, the respondents said that they usually make positive adjustments and improvements based on the difficulty of the game and their performance. In particular, when facing difficult situations, players will actively seek new strategies to improve their performance in the game. Most respondents said that "practice makes perfect", and they tend to believe that through continuous practice and adaptation, they can break through the current bottleneck and achieve success. This self-regulatory behavior reflects the individual's continuous efforts and reflection in the pursuit of goals [11]. In addition, the ranking also has an important impact on the social behavior of players. In MOBA games, players' social activities often revolve around competitive needs and teamwork. Some respondents said that "the main reason for playing with friends is that teammates can cooperate better", that is, they tend to team up with friends or strangers, mainly to obtain better cooperation and support in the game. The improvement of the ranking not only reflects the improvement of personal skills but also strengthens the importance of teamwork.

3.2. Rank as a Symbol: Social Identity and Social Comparison

Symbolic interactionism provides an important theoretical framework for understanding how the ranking system has transformed from a simple numerical system to a symbol of social significance. The theory emphasizes that individuals construct self-cognition and social identity through symbols in social interaction [1]. The competitiveness and sociality of MOBA games provide such an interactive platform. The ranking system (such as bronze, gold, and honorable king in "Honor of Kings") was given symbolic meaning from the beginning of its design. It not only represents the player's competitive level but also strengthens the dissemination of this meaning through visual symbols (such as unique badge designs and specific titles) [12]. The ranking symbols are internalized as part of the game culture through these mechanisms and gradually form a consensus among players. According to research, the improvement of ranking often becomes a driving force for players to participate, especially when the ranking is used as a social symbol, it can stimulate the players' desire to compete and form their social identity through their relationship with the group [9]. Once individuals form an identity with their group, they begin to make social comparisons within and outside the group [13,14]. According to Xia et al., players establish cognition and evaluation of their skills through social comparison during the game, which in turn affects their motivation to continue playing the game. In particular, the level of rank has become part of the social identity of players.

When compared with low-rank players, high-ranking players often gain more recognition and superiority, which increases their motivation to continue to participate in the game [2]. In this process, rank is not only a symbol of the player's technical level but also a reflection of their social status in the gaming community. This is further supported by the research of Esteves et al., who found that upward identification and downward contrast are key social comparison elements in continued game participation [15].

During the interview, high-ranking interviewees showed high confidence in their gaming skills, which came from consciously or unconsciously comparing themselves with other players. Almost all interviewees showed that they believed that their abilities were better than most players. When answering the question about the difficulty of the game, some interviewees said that "the game is not difficult but there is a certain threshold", and a small number of interviewees said that "I don't believe that practice makes perfect because I need to use my brain", and they believe that they are more capable of overcoming the threshold than others. Players generally believe that the matching mechanism is inadequate, believing that it "matches them with players with lower technical levels", resulting in a very poor gaming experience. Correspondingly, players' recognition of the bonus mechanism also reveals the existence of social comparison. They believe that the bonus mechanism is an effective compensation for the matching mechanism, and they are the beneficiaries of the bonus mechanism because the bonus mechanism can effectively "distinguish the level of players" and give high-level players extra rewards. Through these comparisons, players not only strengthen their sense of self-efficacy but also tend to pursue and identify with high ranks, thereby promoting their long-term participation in the game. These social comparison processes and the symbolic meaning of ranks make the rank system of MOBA games an important social identity tool, affecting players' gaming behavior and related social behaviors.

4. Discussion

The ranking system, as the core mechanism in MOBA games, has long surpassed the simple technical level scale and developed into a powerful symbol that profoundly affects the players' motivation to participate. Rankings, as symbols, drive players to participate in games and deepen players' identification with their own identities through social recognition and social comparison. Although it promotes players' continuous investment and social interaction to a certain extent, it may also bring some potential negative problems, especially in terms of online violence and human alienation.

First, the continuity of the sense of achievement may be insufficient. The sense of achievement cannot constitute the main motivation for players to participate in the game for a long time. First, in the cognition of most players, the sense of achievement mainly comes from "defeating powerful opponents", "balanced game experience", and "excellent game skills and teamwork". However, most respondents said in subsequent answers about playability and game difficulty that the game is "relatively boring" (low playability), the game difficulty is "average" (relatively simple), and the game matching mechanism is relatively poor. Secondly, the long-term game participation of players is subject to the setting of ranking goals. Specifically, high-ranking players will set reaching a specific ranking as the goal of each season, such as reaching the strongest king or the glory king, and they tend to set the same goal. Before their goals are achieved, they usually significantly increase their investment in the game, both in terms of time and energy. Once these goals are achieved, their gaming frequency tends to drop significantly. Rank-driven gaming participation is at odds with game challenge/fun-driven gaming participation. The former tends to significantly decrease gaming participation after a rank is achieved, while the latter should further increase gaming participation after a rank is achieved because higher ranks often guarantee higher quality and more challenging matches.

Second, social comparison in the ranking system may lead to cyberbullying. As players' competitive awareness gradually increases, especially among high-ranking players, competitive pressure and winning-losing mentality may arouse hostility and even lead to verbal attacks and malicious behavior. Many players use ranking as a criterion for judging the gaming ability and value of others, which may cause them to feel frustrated or dissatisfied when facing low-ranking players or teammates with poor performance, and vent their emotions through cyberbullying. This situation is particularly obvious in MOBA games. Many players seek psychological comfort by insulting or mocking others after failure, which exacerbates the negative interactions in the game. Cyberbullying not only affects the players' gaming experience but may also hurt the healthy development of the gaming community.

In addition, as a symbol of social recognition, the rank may lead to the alienation of players. In this case, the rank is not only a reflection of the players' efforts but also an important basis for their self-cognition. In the pursuit and dependence on high ranks for a long time, players may gradually pin their values and identity on the virtual game world, ignoring other dimensions of real life. High-ranking players are particularly prone to this alienation phenomenon. They closely link the victory or defeat in the game with their values and are prone to form a strong sense of arrogance or inferiority. On the one hand, this over-identification with the game identity may cause players be out of touch with real social life and even affect their mental health; on the other hand, players may ignore the entertainment and leisure functions that the game should bring, and turn the game into a tool for pursuing rankings and winning recognition, resulting in the gradual loss of the original intention of the game.

Although the rank as a symbol drives the participation and behavior of players, it has its positive side, driving players to constantly challenge themselves and integrate into the game community, but it may also breed cyber violence and alienation of players under the influence of social recognition and social comparison. Therefore, how to balance competitiveness and entertainment in the ranking system, keeping players in healthy social interactions, and avoiding over-reliance on the virtual identity brought by the ranking is an urgent problem to be solved in future game design and community management.

5. Conclusion

This study uses Honor of Kings as a case study to analyze how the ranking system in MOBA games drives players' long-term participation, especially in terms of the game motivation and social behavior of high-ranking players. Although high-ranking players believe that the sense of achievement brought by the ranking itself is gradually weakening, the ranking still drives the players' behavior as a goal and becomes an important symbol of their self-identity. On the one hand, through goal setting and the ranking system, the ranking prompts players to constantly pursue and achieve their goals, and reset their goals every season, showing a goal-oriented behavior pattern. On the other hand, as a symbol, the ranking strengthens the players' identity and self-worth through social recognition and social comparison. Among high-ranking players, the ranking becomes a standard for mutual recognition and confirmation of their social status. This process of enhancing self-confidence through comparison encourages players to continue to invest in the game, even though the challenge and fun of the game itself have gradually decreased. However, the ranking system may also lead to negative effects, such as cyberbullying and player alienation, especially when players' over-reliance on the ranking may affect their real social and mental health.

Although this study reveals the profound impact of the ranking system on player behavior, it also has some limitations. First, the sample is mainly concentrated on high-ranking players, which may ignore the motivation and behavior of low-ranking players. In addition, the study mainly used interviews and failed to fully combine behavioral data for further verification. Future research can

use large-scale quantitative surveys and behavioral data analysis to explore the motivation differences of players at different levels and further reveal the multi-dimensional impact of the ranking system on player behavior and social interaction. In addition, how to optimize the ranking system to balance competitiveness and entertainment and avoid over-reliance on the virtual identity of the ranking remains an important topic in future game design and community management.

References

[1] Shi, Y., Xu, L., & Tang, K. (2024). Loss of Meaning: a Qualitative Study on the Root Causes of Rural Students' Game Addiction Using "Honor of Kings" as a Game Sample. Global Education Outlook (02), 57-75.

[2] Xia, T., Lin, X., Mo, X., Su, Q., & Ding, S. (2024). Players' Continuous Willingness to Play in MOBA Game Ranking Mode: Through the Lens of Self-Determination Theory and Social Comparison Theory. Humanities & Social Sciences Communications, 11(1), 1398–11.

[3] Bae, J., Koo, D. M., & Mattila, P. (2016). Affective Motives to Play Online Games. Journal of Global Scholars of Marketing Science, 26(2), 174-184.

[4] Abbasi, A. Z., Rehman, U., Fayyaz, M. S., Ting, D. H., Shah, M. U., & Fatima, R. (2022). Using the Playful Consumption Experience Model to Uncover Behavioral Intention to Play Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) games. Data Technologies and Applications, 56(2), 223-246.

[5] Hussain, A., Mirza, F., Sarker, M., & Ting, D. H. (2024). From Play to Pay: Exploring Imaginal and Emotional Virtual Item Retail Experiences in Online Game Environment. International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction, 1–15.

[6] Ryan, R. M., Rigby, C. S., & Przybylski, A. (2006). The Motivational Pull of Video Games: A Self-Determination Theory Approach. Motivation and Emotion, 30, 344-360.

[7] Vallerand, R. J. (2008). On the Psychology of Passion: In Search of the Dualistic Model of Passion. Psychological Inquiry, 19(1), 1-9.

[8] Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being. American Psychologist, 53(1), 25-43.

[9] Lai, L., & Xiong, T. (2023). Excessive Desire to Win: The Behavioral Impact of Competitive Game Players and Their Resistance Practices. Beijing Cultural Creativity, (05), 90-96.

[10] Locke, E. A., & Latham, G. P. (2002). Building a Practically Useful Theory of Goal Setting and Task Motivation. American Psychologist, 57(9), 705–717.

[11] Bandura, A. (1997). Self-efficacy: The Exercise of Control. W. H. Freeman and Company.

[12] Chen, Z., & Tang, Y. (2024). Research on the Causes of Addiction to "High Scores" in "Honor of Kings" from the Perspective of Symbolic Communication. Science and Technology Communication, (07), 144-147.

[13] Festinger, L. (1954). Theory of Social Comparison Processes. Human Relations, 7(2), 117-140.

[14] Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin (Eds.), Psychology of Intergroup Relations. Nelson-Hall, 7-24.

[15] Esteves, J., Valogianni, K., & Greenhill, A. (2021). Online Social Games: The Effect of Social Comparison Elements on Continuance Behaviour. Information & Management, 58, 103452.