

## Cohesiveness as a Symbolic Power of Mobile Legends Online Game Community

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### Abstract

*Online games played in groups require cohesiveness and effective coordination among team members for successful cooperation. The sociological study of cohesiveness remains necessary because the analysis of interactions found in number of studies has not been sufficiently in-depth. These studies have failed to reveal the social significance of the term “cohesiveness” or the importance of good coordination as a symbolic force within a group. Several Mobile Legends players in Gorontalo are part of a community renowned for their remarkable reputation in winning matches worldwide. This success has led to the expansion of the group into 3 squads (sparring groups). This research aims to explore how community cohesiveness can serve as a symbolic force, employing qualitative methods with a narrative approach to provide detailed analysis. As a symbolic force, cohesiveness develops through three processes: the initial emergence of cohesiveness, its progression towards community superiority, and finally how the community maintains its cohesion. The symbolic power of community cohesiveness encompasses role symbols and attitude symbols among its members.*

**Keywords:** *Cohesiveness; Community; Mobile Legends; Superiority; Symbol; Role; Attitude.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Mobile Legends is a MOBA game developed and published by Moonton in 2016, specifically designed for smartphones. MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena) is known as an action real-time strategy (ARTS). In this genre, the players assume the role of a single character within a team or squad, engaging in battles against other squads. The goal is to destroy the main structure of the opposing squad with the help of computer-controlled units. Both squads engage in combats with the objective of reaching and destroying the opponent's base. However, they must also prioritize the defense of their base to maintain control over the "three-lane" path, commonly referred to as "top", "middle", and "bottom", which connects the bases.

In MOBA games, battles are fought by controlling a designated character, known as heroes, who can be equipped with various equipment. One of the most outstanding advantages of Mobile Legends is that the hero characters are designed to come from various countries and dozens of these have a diverse range of hero characters, originating from various countries. With dozens of hero characters available, each possesses unique skills that make them more interesting for players to play. There are heroes like Bruno from Brazil, YinShun Shin from Korea, Kagura from Japan, Chou from China, and more. Indonesia has also introduced its hero in the game, namely Gatot Kaca. This game is also easy to play for people who have never played similar games, thanks to its straightforward gameplay and abundance of tutorials for newbies (beginners) when they first launch the game. Mobile Legends is intriguing because of its fair game system, where it is not easy for a single hero to eliminate five enemy heroes simultaneously. Unlike other MOBA games that can kill all enemies singlehandedly without the help of teammates. Mobile Legends requires teamwork and strategy. Without these elements, it is very difficult to win the game.

This game has successfully created trends worldwide, including in Indonesia. In 2017, Mobile Legends has been downloaded 35 million times, with 8 million daily active users in Indonesia (Yogatama et al., 2019). One of the contributing factors to the popularity of Mobile Legends is its accessibility as free and playable from a smartphone, so it is more portable and convenient. People who have smartphones will be easily affected by this game so the time that should be used for work or rest tends to be used to have fun playing Mobile Legends.

Strategy games in Mobile Legends encompass gameplay that necessitates effective teamwork, with each team consisting of three to five players competing in an arena. The duration of the matches can be quite lengthy, it can be up to half an hour during intense battles. The victory results achieved will be felt by every player who participates in the battle with

the squad, as it yields rewards in the form of stars, which are essential for increasing rank levels and advancing to higher divisions, and battle points (BP), which serve as in-game currency for purchasing heroes. The probability of winning increases as players reaches higher levels, motivating them to compete and advance to higher divisions. One of them is by being active in rank activities, as it leads to the accumulation of more stars and showcases the squad's prowess in Mobile Legends.

The Mobile Legends game appears to have been deliberately designed to encourage players to form associations and create game teams called a squad. Members of these squads collaborate and work together to achieve victory in the game. It seems that the interaction that occurs in this squad develops into a feeling of mutual support because of the mutual desire to get victory over other squads in a match.

This Mobile Legends game model fosters strong connections among squad members, enabling them to remain united during every match. One such squad that has emerged as a community of Mobile Legends enthusiasts in Gorontalo Regency is Commenters (CMT). CMT has a dedicated gathering place and gaming hub at Wi-Fi Corner, located in Limboto, precisely in Hepuhulawa Village, Limboto District, Gorontalo Regency. They chose this place due to its high-speed internet access. Wi-Fi Corner has transformed into a coffee shop, providing them with a more comfortable environment to engage in prolonged Mobile Legends gameplay sessions. The game model and comfortable playing situation can make every player to lose track of time and develop a desire to play continuously.

This study aims to explore how the process of cohesiveness of members in CMT is formed and can continue to survive. Despite being a busy community with members who have work and school commitments, their shared desire to play continuously and the necessity to work and go to school certainly cannot be run at once, but Mobile Legends is a game that is followed by the whole world, so they must make an effort so that cohesiveness in the game can continue to bring CMT members to victory against various squads in the world. Therefore, this study also aims to understand the role of the CMT squad in maintaining a winning reputation in various matches. The urgency of this research is to understand how human interaction that occurs through online game symbols can foster strong interpersonal skills and promote group cohesion.

## **Literature Review**

### **Assumptions of Symbolic Interactionism Regarding the Formation of Mobile Legends Squad Cohesiveness**

A study explains that game-design factors have endowed Mobile Legends with social

influence. These factors include the excitement of playing with friends, the ability to spend free time and eliminate boredom together, and the game's popularity, which attracts others to join (Yogatama et al., 2019). Another study further explores the social power dimension of Mobile Legends by examining the game's value as perceived by its players. The research identified three categories of players: *hobbyist gamers*, who play because they like to play MOBA; *communal gamers*, who play to expand their social circle and engage with teammates and player communities; and *professional gamers*, who make Mobile Legends their primary occupation or source of income. Professional players are usually the leaders and role models in the Mobile Legends squad (Soesanto et al., 2020). In another study, it was found that several important problems arise when playing, which can interfere with interactions between players and squad members. These problems include the use of disrespectful and inappropriate words, squad members who are selfish and reluctant to give in choosing hero characters to be different from teammates during competition, difficulty in using other heroes in rank mode, and the issue of squad members leaving the game while the match is in progress (away from keyboard or AFK) (Septianawati et al., 2021).

These studies show that Mobile Legends has evolved into a social space that facilitates diverse human interactions, both online as well as in the real world. Initially, from just interaction because they just want to know what is happening and can be obtained until finally learning and becoming an expert in a field who is able to recommend improvements to the system so that social interaction runs well and the process of rewards and sanctions/punishments can happen fairly. Even a study conducted in the UK has highlighted the negative impact of toxic squad communities on players. This toxicity includes experiences of feeling attacked or humiliated for more than 60 minutes while playing video games by other players. Such feelings can significantly reduce motivation after losses and contribute to a lack of cooperation among team members. Additionally, the study found instances of people who committed cheating to reach the top ranks. Consequently, many players decide to stop playing MOBA games (Morris, 2019). These findings further emphasize that MOBAs, including Mobile Legends, reflect real social dynamics, where rewards and sanctions coexist with discrimination, exclusion, and marginalization.

MOBA has been categorized as an eSports, and one aspect related to superiority is the division of professional and amateur eSports teams, often referred to as “pro” and “newb” or “noob” (who play MOBA games only as fun or hobbies). This division exists because professional eSports athletes can achieve expertise in executing 400 keyboard and mouse movements per minute, which is four times faster than the average player. The movement is asymmetrical because both hands are moved at the same time and different parts of the brain are

also used at the same time. The intensity of these movements has never been observed by scientists in other sports (Marelić & Vukušić, 2019). The squad in Mobile Legends is constantly competing with each other to establish themselves as the strongest and most skilled. This shows that within the professional category, professional MOBA players are increasingly becoming specific as athletes and non-athletes.

The phenomenon of social interaction among players within a squad is become increasingly intriguing to study, given the market interventions that attract a substantial player base. Direct economic power does not waste such a large number of active players to become consumers for the virtual products offered in the Mobile Legends game. Moonton's gross revenue through Mobile Legends, quoted from the Sensor Tower website, in 2019 was USD 214.1 million and increased sharply in 2020 to USD 502.5 million (Wiratri et al., 2021).

According to a study conducted by Google and Niko Partners, Mobile Legends has been identified as the most successful game in leveraging community and competition through live events and tournaments to enhance its appeal (Bhushan, 2020). Based on the typology of digital game experience, Mobile Legends places a strong emphasis on interaction symbols related to process, teamwork, self-expression, and social elements, all of which contribute to the construction of game meaning (Friess, 2012). The collaboration among players within a squad is aimed at achieving shared goals and aspirations, which primarily involve pursuing significant prizes and bonuses (Voulgari & Komis, 2015). The greater the acquisition of prizes and bonuses means greater resources that will allow members to level up their divisions faster.

At this point, we can assume that a squad is a cooperative and cohesive system built by players to enhance their enjoyment of playing Mobile Legends, primarily by achieving numerous victories and advancing the hero's superiority. In Mobile Legends, players generally perceive and interpret superiority as attaining higher ranks for their chosen heroes (avatars/fantasy characters) and winning multiple competitions (Mawalia, 2020). Interaction can not only be used through in-game symbols to understand and complete game missions but virtual interaction and communication that occurs between Mobile Legends players can be more important than real social interaction. This interaction is not just a socialization process to become a superior player, but can also help win many Mobile Legends competitions (Mawalia, 2020).

We can construct a conceptual framework for patterns of social organizing between active players and squad founders using George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism approach (Turner et al., 2012: 331). Mead explains that in order to understand this, we need to isolate the variables that influence (1) the accuracy of role-taking by squad members and (2)

the convergence of generalized others (they are role models: squad founders and pro players who often contribute to the squad's existence). Based on the aforementioned studies, the variables that affect role-taking and convergence/cohesiveness in squad members refer to the interactions to win various competitions and achieve higher ranks and hero status.

The interaction process, which prioritizes the ability to play a role and contributes to maintaining cohesiveness among squad members, serves the function of forming a common attitude within the community. This common attitude serves as a guide to regulate the ongoing actions of each member, requiring frequent restructuring of interaction patterns to allow for mutual adjustment. Mead provides an explanation for this phenomenon:

*“Society is just a term for the processes of role-taking with varieties of specific and generalized others and the consequent coordination of action made possible by the behavioral capacities of mind and self... Thus, as diverse individuals come into contact, role-take, and adjust their responses, they create a community of attitudes, which they then use to regulate their subsequent actions. As more actors are implicated, or as their roles become more differentiated, they generate additional perspectives to guide their actions. Similarly, because actors possess unique self-conceptions and because they role-take with potentially diverse perspectives, they often must restructure existing patterns as they come to adjust to one another.”* (Turner et al., 2012: 332).

Mead's perspective suggests that the formation of the squad by active players aims to create a community with a shared attitude that can accommodate increasingly diverse roles and perspectives among squad members. This allows all members to contribute effectively and foster cooperation and cohesiveness within the squad, ultimately leading to success in various competitions.

The founders of the squad maintain the community attitude by ensuring that common attitudes are upheld in interactions with both old and new members. This is essential because maintaining coordination among team members' attitudes and actions requires preserving their collective honor. In this context, the self-referred to is the social self. Mead explained that,

*“We do belong to the community and our self-respect depends on our recognition of ourselves as such self-respecting individuals. But that is not enough for us, since we want to recognize ourselves in our differences from other persons. We have, of course, a specific economic and social status that enables us to so distinguish ourselves. We also have to some extent positions in various groups which give a means of self-identification, but there is back of all these matters a sense of things which on the whole we do better than other people do.*



*It is very interesting to get back to these superiorities, many of them of a very trivial character, but of great importance to us.” (Mead, 1972: 204-205).*

Mead's explanation provides an understanding that communities and the individuals comprising them recognize and distinguish themselves from other communities and individuals based on factors related to the superiority of individuals, which in turn influence community attitudes.

Mead, in his book “Mind, Self, and Society,” explains how superiority can be characterized as a social advantage for both individuals and communities. He further elaborates on this concept by stating:

*“The sense of superiority is magnified when it belongs to a self that identifies itself with the group...The feeling of group superiority is generally explained in terms of the organization of the group. Groups have survived in the past in so far as they have organized against a common enemy. They maintain themselves because they have acted as one against the common enemy...If one does have a genuine superiority it is a superiority which rests on the performance of definite functions. One...can pride himself on his superiority-but it is a superiority which he makes use of...when the sense of superiority goes over into a functional expression, then it becomes not only entirely legitimate, but it is the way in which the individuals do change the situations in which they live. We change things by the capacities which we have that other people do not have. Such capacity is what makes us effective. The immediate attitude is one which carries with it a sense of superiority, of maintaining one’s self. The superiority is not the end in view. It is a means for the preservation of the self.” (Superiority and Self in Mead, 1972: 208).*

*“The superiority which the person now has is not a superiority over the other, but is grounded in that which he can do in relation to the functions and capacity of others. The development of the expert...the person who is competent in any particular field has a superiority which belongs to that which he himself can do and which perhaps someone else cannot do. It gives him a definite position in which he can realize himself in the community... In the one case you realize yourself in these personal relations that come back to the superiority of yourself to others, or to the group superiority over other groups (It is on this basis that war-fare is carried on. Hate comes back to the sense of superiority of one community over another); in the other case you come back to the intelligent carrying-out of certain social functions and the realization of yourself in what you do under those circumstances (in this realization of yourself you do not have to have somebody else who is inferior to you to carry it out. You want other people to fulfil their functions as well. You may feel that you are better*

*than your neighbor who did not do his job, but you regret the fact that he did not do it. You do not feel yourself in your superiority to somebody else but in the interrelation necessary in carrying out the more or less common function).*" (Superiority and Society in Mead, 1972: 285; 315).

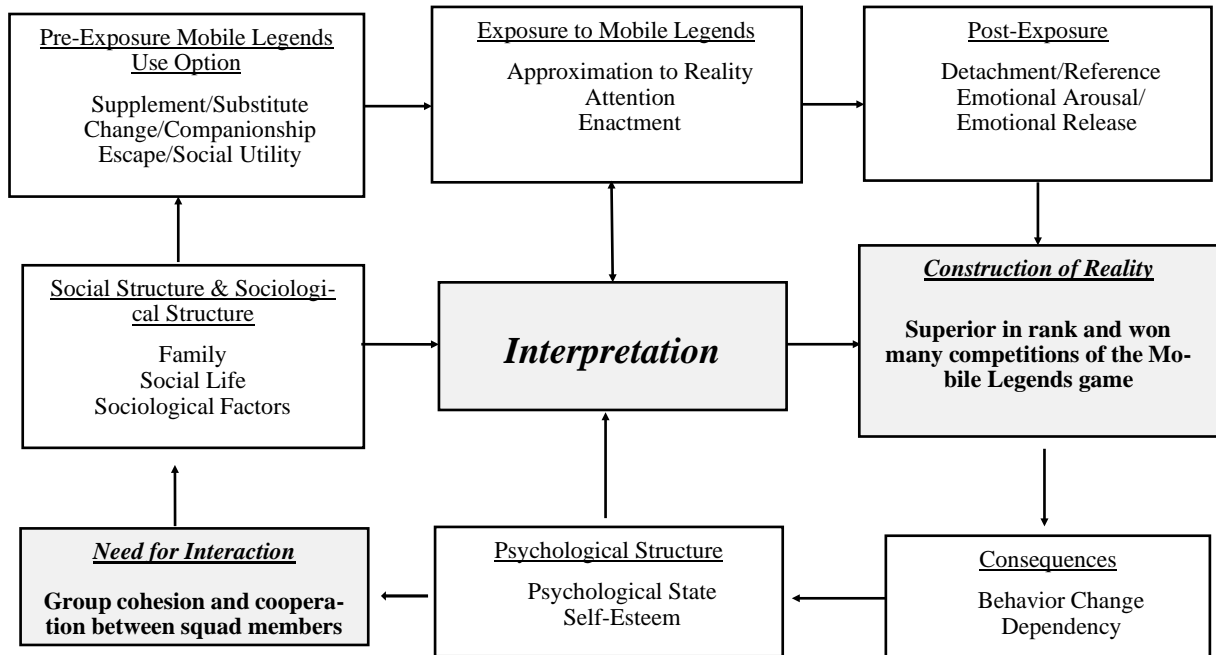
Mead's concept of social superiority explains several aspects. Firstly, it highlights how an individual's recognition of their superiority in certain competencies and capacities can hold significance for their personal growth and sustainability within their community. The superiority of competence and capacity does not merely symbolize an individual's social status but also serves a functional purpose in transforming their environment. Hence making his attitudes effective for self-preservation, self-survival, and to distinguish himself from others by doing something that others cannot do or cannot do well. Secondly, this concept also explains how an individual's realization of the superiority of their community. When an individual's superiority is related to utilizing the functioning capacity and competence of others, then that superiority serves to assert himself as an expert within their community, and furthermore, this can serve to increase the superiority of his community over other communities.

A video game interaction model (VGIM), proposed by Nevsal Tiryakioglu, with a symbolic interactionism approach, demonstrates how video games can fulfill the requirements of human interaction and influence social interpretations of reality. These video games can be evaluated as if they were real and incorporated into social reality assessments (Tiryakioglu, 2001). Mobile Legends fulfills the need for interaction as players discover that their desire for competitive engagement can be easily satisfied through smartphones. Additionally, they can expand their social circle by adding friends through their Mobile Legends squad. As players immerse themselves in the community, they are encouraged to process becoming a professional player. They will also give an interpretation to the public that being a superior professional player is an important fact because he can win many competitions whose results are beneficial for himself and his social environment in real life.

A study conducted on a number of literatures found various impacts of online games, such as individuals ignoring important priorities in their personal and social lives. These impacts include neglecting rest, sacrificing study time, and showing indifference toward social interactions (Haidar, 2022). But in reality, this game continues to survive and grow. This indicates that players continue to get the desire to excel in the Mobile Legends game through the squad they follow.



Figure 1. Variables of VGIM (Tiryakioglu, 2001) applied to Mobile Legends



Source: Application of VGIM by the author

We combine Mead's concepts of superiority, convergence/cohesive and cooperation into the variables of Tiryakioglu's (2001) VGIM model to produce the Mobile Legends inter-action model (Figure 1.). This model was formed to help us as a guide in determining sam- ples, collecting data and analyzing data. This model has the power of properties that exist in each category of changing player conditions, starting from the beginning of his acquaint- ance with the Mobile Legends game (pre-exposure) to the stage where he is very emotion- ally at- tached to his group (post-exposure). Based on this model, we can develop the process of forming cohesiveness into several categories determined by data from informants of differ- ent classes.

This Mobile Legend Interaction Model emphasizes that the study of cohesiveness in the community is the study of how the stages of the community develop not only because there is a mission and goals to be achieved, but there is a maintenance of various complex interactions in maintaining interdependence between community members to maintain their superiority in achieving the mission and goals of the community. This model distinguishes this study from previous research on cohesiveness in virtual communities. Previous research only wanted to see the experience of cohesiveness felt by online game players (Bozanta et al., 2016). This study can at least provide a more detailed sociological explanation of the definition of group cohesiveness given by Carron (1982), namely "a dynamic process that is reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its goals and objectives" (Mudrack, 1989). This research provides a new explanation that the tendency of members to maintain togetherness with other members of their community is

due to the factor of superiority that is very unfortunate if not maintained as long as the mission and goals of the community are still very attractive.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The use of the perspective of symbolic interactionism necessitates the inclusion of life experiences as conveyed through the subjective explanations of research informants. The processes of complete CMT community cohesiveness encompass both the establishment and maintenance of cohesion. Based on the concept of cohesiveness formation described above, this study must obtain data with the following categories: (1) the formation of initial cohesiveness, which involves interactions between players to form communities and adjust roles between players to improve their chances of winning competitions; and (2) the formation of community advantages, which includes an increase in community members due to the reputation of community members' superiority in winning and the rank of heroes used. Furthermore, researchers must also obtain data related to the ways in which the community maintains cohesion. This includes investigating how community attitudes consistently align with the attitudes of its members, ensuring that member roles consistently strive to uphold the reputation of community superiority in the competition arena.

The consequence of using the perspective of symbolic interactionism and its implications for these data categories is that this research must employ qualitative research with narrative methods. Barbara Czarniawska explains that the narrative research method is a means to attain a comprehensive understanding of the lives of informants. This method involves organizing the narrative of their experiences in a way that facilitates comprehension of their social actions, particularly how they navigate and in transform their encounters with very unpredictable conditions, including failures. By doing so, these experiences are elevated to the status of important achievements in their lives (Czarniawska, 2004). Leslie R. Bloom categorizes the functions of personal narratives as data, social criticism, and deconstruction (Bloom, 1996). The narratives generated from in-depth interviews serve as valuable data, providing materials for constructing an understanding of the transition into an active player and the processes involved in becoming an active player in the CMT squad community. Subsequently, these narratives can be utilized as critical review and deconstructive instruments to conceptualize the cohesiveness of the squad community in Mobile Legends.

The informants in this study consisted of seven active members of the CMT squad, including squad founders, professional players, and regular active players. Additionally, two former CMT members were also included in the study.

**Table 1.** List of informants

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Employment Status</b>	<b>Status in the Community</b>
Apin Nangili	Male	Employed	Founded
Dewi Yulan Potale	Female	Employed	Member of CMT 3
Rachmat D. Taha	Male	College student	Member of CMT 2
Ayu Potale	Female	College student	Member of CMT 3
Ahmad Ismail	Male	Highschool student	Member of CMT 3
Noval Posangi	Male	College student	Co-founder, leader of CMT 1
Kiki Potale	Male	College student	Member of CMT 1
Raifou Ntou	Male	Employed	Ex-member of CMT 1
Budi	Male	College student	Ex-member of CMT 2

*Source: Purposive sampling by author*

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **a) The Beginning of the Formation of Cohesiveness**

CMT squad founder, Apin Nangili, provided details regarding the date and place of the squad's formation. The CMT is a squad in Mobile Legends online game that was established on October 18, 2016. It currently consists of 22 players who come from diverse backgrounds in terms of age, residence, job, and education. Every night, they gather and play Mobile Legends at the wifi corner located in Hepuhulawa Village, Limboto District, Gorontalo Regency. They specifically chose this place due to its fast internet access. Moreover, each member of the CMT squad has their own wifi.id accounts to log in to the internet network provided by the wifi corner. The wifi corner also serves as a coffee shop, so playing Mobile Legends games for them becomes more comfortable and exciting.

All members of the CMT squad come from the Gorontalo area and they were all close friends in other communities before CMT. In terms of employment status, the squad comprises 6 working individuals, 15 students, and 2 high school students. In terms of gender, gender the squad consists of 19 men and 3 women. Based on interviews with 5 informants, it was discovered that their initial process of becoming active players was different. However, they all shared one common reason for choosing to become an active player, which was the enjoyment they derived from playing with their friends.

**Table 2.** The initial process of getting to know the game and becoming an active player of Mobile Legends

<b>Names</b>	<b>Games Before Trying Mobile Legends</b>	<b>Early Socialization of Playing Mobile Legends</b>	<b>Main Reasons to Actively Play Mobile Legends</b>
Apin Nangili	Rules of Survival ( <i>online</i> )	Watch friends play in groups of Commenters (before becoming CMT squads) and learn on their own through tutorials	Interested in the variety of heroes that exist and try to acquire and use many heroes to play with his friends
Dewi Yulan Potale	Onet ( <i>online</i> )	Invited by her friends since she was in college and taught herself through tutorials	Discover the joy of playing online MOBAs from being able to play together with close friends
Rachmat D. Taha	DOTA 2 ( <i>online</i> )	Tired of playing DOTA 2, he looked for other games that were more exciting to play	Found the graphics equally attractive as DOTA 2 and added more friends to their group
Ayu Potale	Zombie ( <i>offline</i> )	Seeing her brother playing and asking to be taught how to play	Interested in various heroes and happy to be able to play together with friends
Ahmad Ismail	Non-specifics	Seeing classmates play and asking to be taught how to play	Find joy in closer relationships with friends from playing together

*Source: Author's analysis from data interview*

Apin Nangili explained that “Commenters” is the name of a community formed by individuals who frequently gather at the wifi corner provided by Telkom, a wifi service provider company. Nine active Mobile Legends players from the Commenters community then formed the CMT squad. The presence and reputation of the CMT squad players eventually attracted friends of squad members to join CMT, leading to the development of three squads: CMT 1, CMT 2, and CMT 3. When it comes to accepting new members, CMT's founders collaborate with existing squad members to determine the acceptance of the next member, which must be approved by the squad members. The purpose of forming a squad is to foster cohesiveness and cooperation in playing and create relationships that are expected by each member, with the aim to make them able to help each other and effectively play their role in every Mobile Legends game competition.

As a member of the CMT squad, he is required to be an active player. They need to invest a significant amount of time to engage with other active players. Every day, they can spend 9 hours in the evening, from 9 or 10 pm to 6 am, gathering and playing together at the

Wi-Fi corner. On Saturdays and Sundays, the gaming sessions will be even longer, starting from 11 a.m. and lasting until at least 9 p.m., and often exceeding that time, depending on the commitment of each member. It is the commitment of the members that shapes and maintains the superiority of the CMT squad, which will be discussed in the next section regarding the formation of community superiority.

Mobile Legends provides an opportunity for players to form a squad of a maximum of 9 people. Since CMT has 22 members, they have to be divided into 3 squads. CMT 1 and CMT 2 squads each have 9 members, while CMT 3 consists of only 4 people. The game uses community resources or squads in 5 different modes, including Classic, Brawl, Rank, vs A.I., and Custom modes. The Rank mode is the most different from the other four. In Classic, Brawl, vs. A.I, and Custom modes, players can participate individually, since according to them the final result of the game, whether winning or losing, has no impact on the players' division and star rankings. Therefore, they consider these modes as opportunities for practicing specific hero roles. On the other hand, the Rank mode requires all 5 players in the squad to participate.

The rank mode is the most important mode pursued by every player. Winning in this mode leads to an increase in their stars and divisions. New players can play in this mode once they reached level 6 in Classic mode and have 5 or more heroes. In addition to being able to invite friends to play in Rank mode, players will also compete with other players of the same rank, ensuring a fair matchup without any significant differences in abilities. Each match in Rank mode can only be participated by 5 players from the entire squad, and it is crucial for them to understand that their roles need to complement each other as a cohesive unit. This aspects makes the game in Rank mode interesting, because it challenges the ability to cooperate, strategize as a squad, and the outcome of the game determines the rise or fall of division levels and stars. Winning in Rank mode provides an advantage for members who are still in lower divisions, enabling them to progress swiftly to higher.

Custom mode becomes as enticing as Rank mode only when the match is organized by sponsors who offer attractive prizes after the match ends. Usually, Custom mode serves as a training ground where squads can practice against other teams they proactively invite before entering Rank mode. It is also used as a training ground for CMT members. At this stage, the members will expand their circle of friends and opponents, along with the intensity of the interaction that occurs. They will engage in conversations using the in-game chat feature, both with friends and opponents. This feature will make the relationship among players in the same squad closer, while interactions with enemies can vary, ranging from closer connections to more hostile encounters. For squad members, Custom mode serves as a tool to familiarize themselves with the rules that apply within the squad, allowing them to gradually

understand and internalize them. Eventually, each member begins to recognize the main rule within the group, which aims to maintain cohesiveness, and they start to fulfill their designated roles within the squad.

The main rule referred to here is the requirement for every member of the CMT community to actively participate in playing at least 3 times per week. Failure to comply with this rule will result in expulsion from the team. This rule was made by two CMT squad founders, Apin Nangili and Noval Posangi. Apin further explained that,

“...aturan harus aktif terus atau minimal 3 kali aktif dalam satu minggu memang sudah diberlakukan diseluruh CMT, kalau tidak aktif untuk apa membentuk squad tapi orang-orangnya tidak aktif sama sekali seakan squad yang mati saja, hanya nama tapi didalamnya tidak ada aktivitas sama sekali. Masing-masing kami sudah berkomitmen, jika salah satu anggota melanggar aturan utama ini, apalagi yang tidak aktif, ia akan dikeluarkan melalui leader squad.”

(“... the rules of being consistently active or at least being active for a minimum of 3 times per week has been implemented throughout CMT. It is believed that forming a squad without active participation defeats the purpose, as it gives the impression of a lifeless squad where there is no activity taking place despite the squad's existence. Each member of the squad has made a commitment, and if any member violates this main rule, especially in terms of inactivity, they will be expelled under the leadership of the squad leader.”)

The purpose of this main rule is to cultivate professional players within the squad, with professionalism being measured by their level of activity in playing together with the squad.

Noval Posangi, who is also the founder and squad leader of CMT 1, added that:

“Dampak dari keaktifan yang penting itu adalah kerja sama dalam tim supaya terbentuk kekuatan tim. Saya, sebagai leader, bukan orang yang berkuasa tapi saya juga harus bisa mengatur dengan menerima masukan teman-teman squad supaya pas kalah bermain tidak saling menyalahkan. Intinya kami semua menikmati bermain permainan ini yang penting tidak merusak pertemanan, walaupun kami semua orang-orang yang saling maki-memaki. Kalau ada yang melanggar aturan ini tidak langsung dikeluarkan. Hanya saja anggota yang seperti ini tidak banyak di undang dalam pertandingan push rank.”

(“The impact of this important activity is the formation of teamwork and the strengthening of the team. As a leader, I do not hold absolute power, instead, I must be capable of managing by listening to input from my squad friends. In the event of a game loss, we avoid blaming each other. The main point is to prioritize the enjoyment of playing the game and not let it ruin our friendship, even though we sometimes swear at each other. Violation of



this rule does not result in immediate expulsion; however, they may be invited often in push rank matches.”)

He understands that games have the potential to ruin friendships. Only with active members will bring fluency in communication between CMT members and get used to the harsh game culture to the point of cursing at each other. Professional players in the CMT squad are those who can accept the opinion of fellow members, show mutual respect, and refrain from damaging existing friendships. When a member joins the squad, these rules and objectives will be communicated beforehand, prior to their official entry.

Activeness is not only demonstrated in Rank mode matches but also in training sessions, both within the same squad and across different squads. Joint training fosters positive cooperation within the CMT team, resulting in enjoyable Rank mode matches where members can approach them as practice sessions. This approach ensures that regardless of the outcome, friendships remain intact and unaffected. As shown in Table 2 above, the initial process of acquainting themselves with Mobile Legends is unlikely to make these players become active players in a short period of time without training alongside professional players. It is natural for the five informants remain active Mobile Legends players, because they are in a fun place to play, and for them CMT is not just a game community, but also as a platform where friends support each other's efforts to become professional players.

#### **b) The Formation of Community Superiority**

CMT has gained a reputation for superiority at the global level. This advantage can be seen from the level (rank) of the Mobile Legends player division. The game consists of seven divisions, ranging from the lowest to highest: warrior, elite, master, grand master, epic, legend, and mythic. Warrior is a division obtained by players when they first play, they must achieve various competition targets to progress into higher divisions. Mythic is the highest level of division. Within the CMT community, there are 6 people with Mythic and Legend division levels (see table 3). These players are considered professional players, with some even being the initial founders of the community.

Rank mode games can only be participated in by players within the same division or at least one level below. These superior division rank matches offer significant prizes, especially when sponsors are involved. The reputation of superiority is achieved because players can maintain their division positions stronger and more attractive heroes through features obtained from prizes for winning matches. These factors contribute to the growing appeal of CMT as a community, attracting other players to join and play together.

**Table 3.** Superior Players in CMT

<b>Name</b>	<b>Division</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Reputation</b>
Kiki Potale	Mythic	<i>Tank</i>	60% win rate
Fendi Habuke	Mythic	<i>Assassin</i>	60% win rate
Ridho	Mythic	<i>Mage</i>	64% win rate
Uyi Buhungo	Legend	<i>Marksman</i>	60% win rate
Noval Posangi	Mythic	<i>Fighter</i>	60% win rate
Ayi Buhungo	Legend	<i>Support</i>	54% win rate

*Source: Informant explanation during interview*

The warrior, elite, and master divisions are primarily occupied by players who are still learning and may not have a full understanding of the game’s rules and cooperation within the community. The grand master, epic, legend, and mythic divisions, on the other hand, are occupied by players who can apply the rules without needing reminders, and they exhibit strong teamwork as they prioritize winning with the squad over individual hero preferences. Players who are already in the grand master division and above have demonstrated their game development because they have mastered almost all the roles of heroes in matches.

The players listed in table 3 excel at using specific hero roles in rank mode matches. They are expected to consistently fulfill their designated hero roles in matches, even though they also master the role of other heroes. These advantages enable them to perform effectively in various match situations, ensuring contributes to maintaining the superiority of the squad's reputation. Kiki and Noval explained that, based on their experience in rank mode, heroes with tank and marksman roles hold the utmost importance. Kiki takes charge of operating a tank-type hero to defend the squad, while Uyi Buhungo handles a marksman-type hero to destroy the enemy squad’s base. In these two roles, only Kiki and Uyi have achieved significant success in repelling enemy attacks and winning battles.

The best players from the top two divisions are included in the CMT 1 squad. They have developed a strong sense cooperation with each member's playstyle and formulating strategies and tactics together. Prior to each match, they engage in discussions to determine the five players who will represent the squad and devise their strategy. In terms of achieving more victories, the 5 CMT 1 players who often represent are Kiki Potale, Fendi Habuke, Ridho, Uyi Buhungo and Ayi Buhungo. Occasionally, other players in CMT 1 substitute for certain members in this lineup, but the number of wins was still lower. The cooperation continues as the game progresses through symbols in the game such as forward and other backward symbols, attack and so on, which all members can see and listen to the symbols.

Through these symbols, all members will work together and accept each other's suggestions so that team cohesiveness is maintained.

The worldwide reputation of the six players, with winning rates consistently above 60%, indicates their superior capacity compared to the others. However, this advantage does not diminish the other members of the Commenters community. The community has expanded from only one squad to three squads, reflecting the inclusiveness of community members. As it welcomes individuals who initially play Mobile Legends just for hobbies but want to enter the group to become accustomed to playing (communal players) and eventually become professional players by practicing directly with players who excel in the community. The superior players in this community do not perceive their superiority as a means to dominate other players, such as where they need each other to win rank matches, so with players who are less superior or have not reached the higher division stage they will explain about how their capacity is able to excel in training together. approach has a positive impact on their reputation and foster the growth of the community through new players in the community.

**c) Maintaining Community Superiority and Cohesiveness**

Mobile Legends has 4 seasons in one year. During each season, players from around the world compete for the reputation of the division and have the opportunity to win prizes in the form of battle points, tickets, and exclusive hero skins. This is the reality construction of the Mobile Legends game. Apin Nangili, the founder of the Commenters community, offers tips to help members maintain excitement, superiority, and cohesiveness throughout each season of play.

Based on scheme 1.1 above, the construction of reality in video game play is influenced by two key factors: (1) the individual's exposure to the Mobile Legends game, and (2) their daily social life. These two aspects can either support or hinder each other. Individual who has active social interactions certainly have to allocate a certain amount of time for playing Mobile Legends. On the other hand, the founders and professional Mobile Legends players they must really be able to allocate a lot of time to play, such as in the CMT community which has rules that must be able to play at least 3 times a week, then the minimum time allocation if playing on weekdays is 27 hours a week, and it can even be 32-37 hours a week, if playing on Saturdays and Sundays. The amount of serious playtime demands makes the community founders take actions that keep members active while prioritizing playing Mobile Legends.

The exposure of the Mobile Legends game to the CMT community is strengthened by social actions from the founder, such as providing incentives at the beginning of every Mobile Legends season. Apin Nangili explained his role as a founder to ensure that members

remain excited from the end of each season until the start of the next one.

*“Saya menyediakan tantangan kepada squad setiap 1 atau 2 minggu sebelum Season Mobile Legends, yaitu bagi anggota CMT squad yang mencapai divisi Mythic atau Top Lokal atau Top Global akan saya kasih skin. Skin yang saya kasih paling yang harganya 100 ribuan sampai 300 ribu paling tinggi sebagai bentuk apresiasi saya, dan tidak ada sponsor dari pihak manapun. Saya melakukannya supaya mereka senang dengan squad yang saya dirikanini, supaya ada semangat untuk mereka.”*

("I provide challenges to squads every 1 or 2 weeks before the Mobile Legends season, specifically for CMT squad members who reach the Mythic, Top Local, or Top Global divisions. As a token of my appreciation, I reward them with skins. The skin that I give the most costs 100 thousand to 300 thousand at the most as a way to show my gratitude, and there are no sponsors from any party. I do it to ensure the squad member are happy with the squad that I founded, so there will be enthusiasm for them.")

Skin is an alternative outfit that can change the appearance of a hero and also boost a little status in it because the skin given by the founder is not a lucky skin (clothes obtained because of luck when playing), founder-provided skins are purchased using diamonds which is an in-game currency in Mobile Legends which requires real money to purchase the skins. The Founders required to buy diamonds online to get the number of diamonds needed to buy some skins that will be used as gifts. The impact of using skins purchased with diamonds is that the heroes used by players will look more elegant and seem to emphasize the greatness of their players to other players both in the same squad and not.

The founder's action became an encouragement for the members, resulting in six members receiving this prize within two years. Kiki Potale explains her interpretation of the founder's actions.

*“Saya pernah mencapai Top Global dengan Franco dan Natali, dan saya pernah mendapatkan skin dari founder, karena memenangkan tantangannya dan ini membuat semangat anggota lainnya. Saya suka itu, karena skin ini mahal dibeli, kalau hanya puluhan ribu bisa saya beli sendiri, tapi ini ratusan ribu, sudah saja lebih baik ikut tantangan founder dapat skin gratis, dan juga divisi naik jadi top lokal dan global, keren kan!”*

("I once reached Top Global with Franco and Natalia, and I received a skin from the founder for winning the challenge and this made the other members excited. I like it, because this skin is expensive to buy. If costs only tens of thousands, I can buy it myself. However, costs hundreds of thousands, it's better to participate in the founder's challenge to get free skins, and also the division will rise to become top local and global, isn't that cool?")

As a professional player, Kiki has shown that her ability to play various types of hero roles,

as evidenced by winning the prizes twice using different heroes, namely Franco (a hero with a tank role) and Natalia (a hero with an assassin role). This challenge not only encourages the superior players, but Kiki and the winners of the challenge will also become mentors for other members who want to learn to play these heroes. During gathering, other players will receive explanations about advanced gameplay techniques, engage in collaborative training sessions, and watch live matches led by these mentors.

The incentive from the founder have significantly increased the exposure of the Mobile Legends game to players in the community. However, it is not enough to maintain group cohesion and cooperation among the group members can be maintained. The CMT community is currently facing this problem due to two outstanding members who are unable to fully commit and collaborate effectively. The first is Raifon Ntou, works as a photographer and has been part of the community for 1 year and 4 months. Unfortunately, he cannot fulfill the increasingly high demands of work, so he cannot commit to the rule of playing three times a week. Raifon says,

*“Saya sekarang berhenti main karena aktivitas kerja, lupa aktif main, akhirnya leader keluarkan (saya) dari squad. Tapi saya sadar dengan apa yang saya lakukan melanggar aturannya Apin Nangili, yaitu aktif 3 kali minimal dalam 1 minggu. Tapi tidak apa-apa, walaupun tidak bergabung di squad tapi masih tetap menjalin hubungan baik, mau bergabung juga masih diperbolehkan, tapi kalau melanggar langsung dikeluarkan lagi.”*

(“I have stopped playing now due to work commitments and, as a result, I became inactive. Eventually, the leader decided to removed me from the squad. But I realized that my actions violated Apin Nangili's rules, which require active participation at least 3 times in 1 week. But that's okay, even I no longer part of the squad, I still maintain good relations. If I want to join, they still allow me, but I must adhere to the rules, as any violation will result in immediate removal.”)

Raifon found out he had been expelled on his way to play, he found himself no longer in the CMT community.

After Raifon, cooperation within the CMT community was further disrupted due to a member named Budi. Budi has been part of CMT for a year, but had also joined other squads and achieved professional status there. Although this action is not a violation; it posed a problem because community members noticed that Budi less involved in playing with the CMT squad and seemed more dominant in playing with the other squad. The number of reprimands and comments from CMT squad members, made Budi leave the community. He stated,

*“Saya keluar dari squad karena tidak tahan banyak ocehan dan bacotan dari anggota CMT.*

*Mereka tidak setuju saya punya squad 2. Masalahnya saya terlalu dominan dengan squad luar, jadi masalah ini dipermasalahkan kembali. Karena sudah banyak perbedaan pendapat dan karena saya sudah emosi, jadi saya terpaksa keluar sendiri tanpa menunggu leader mengeluarkan saya.”*

(“I left the squad because I couldn't stand the constant chatter and swearing from the CMT members. They didn't agree with my involvement in squad 2. The problem was that I was too dominant within the other squad, and this problem kept resurfacing. Because there were so many different opinions and my own emotional state, I had to go out on my own without waiting for the leader to let me out.”)

Both cases highlight the importance of maintaining community cohesiveness by fostering a positive atmosphere in the community. As discussed in the study by Kou and Gui (2020) a positive atmosphere during matches played together is crucial. This atmosphere can be disrupted by actions that violate the rules and low expectations of among the members who have high capacities who often refuse to play an active role.

Cohesiveness, as a symbolic force within online gaming communities, has been explored in other studies. These studies demonstrate that online MOBA games can contribute to the development of virtual communities. Players unite, find solidarity, and develop shared habits and identities through collaborative gameplay. This shared experience ultimately make them able to share the same emotional attachment, enthusiasm, and common awareness to carry out goal-oriented task (Novianti & Lawanda, 2023; Zakaria et al., 2022). Our research has provided further analysis of how cohesiveness is formed within the Mobile Legends community, specifically through the analysis of symbolic interactionism. The analysis has revealed that the function of the community is serves a dual function, namely as a role symbol and an attitude symbol. Within the CMT community, role symbols are established and understood by its members. The cohesiveness between founders and early professional players will make member roles accurate for the types of heroes that will be used in rank mode matches, so that all members can understand the roles needed by the squad when competing together. The CMT community also has a symbol of the attitude needed by its members, namely a shared understanding of the roles of all sections of the community in achieving goals. This understanding will strengthen actions oriented towards maintaining community rules and coordination between members.

This research also suggests that this concept of maintaining excellence may complement the goal of community cohesiveness research that is still very new (Kim et al., 2023), namely “build managerial actions, such as prioritising their limited business resources to increase community members' active participation, for the success of virtual communities.” This research has exposed some data on the managerial actions of the founders and leaders of the



CMT community in order to maintain excellence and cohesion. In addition to the community founder using his resources to attract member participation to actively play, he also uses the cohesiveness of the community formed to create a different attitude to members who cannot follow the pattern of regular interaction and are not fully committed.

## **CONCLUSION**

Mobile Legends is a reality that can encourage the formation of virtual communities. The CMT community is sustained due to the consistency of its founders, active or professional players, and other members who commit to community rules and customs. This coordination is frequently tested in joint practices and matches. The founder is indispensable for maintaining the spirit of the players to continuously improve their competitive ability and winning reputation. Professional players are crucial in prioritizing the community's interests and setting an example for other players in terms of winning reputation and coordination in matches. Other members are needed to continue learning to use various types of hero roles at different mentors according to their skills and reputation using these types of heroes.

The creativity of the founder is extremely important to ensure that the players are consistently engaged and eager to play. The founder of the CMT community pay attention and creativity that keeps the players in a good emotional state, fostering a sense of meaning and connection with each other in the community. Therefore, any disturbances that occur in the community, originating from the members themselves, are quickly addressed collectively by the members themselves so as not to have a great impact on coordination and cooperation between members. The consequence of such disruption is that the disruptive member will be removed from the squad or the member will leave the community voluntarily.

The Mobile Legends game community serves as a gathering place for diverse individuals and educate individuals about the values of interaction and group to achieve task-oriented goals. This fosters a person always feel the need to be close and interact with other members of the community. Interacting within the community has become an essential for interaction because it has embedded role symbols and attitude symbols in its members.

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