



Motivation profiles of online Poker players and the role of interface preferences: A laddering study among amateur and (semi-) professionals



Bieke Zaman^{a,*}, Kristof Geurden^b, Rozane De Cock^b, Bob De Schutter^c, Vero Vanden Abeele^d

^a CUO | Social Spaces, KU Leuven – iMinds, Parkstraat 45 bus 3605, 3000 Leuven, Belgium

^b IMS – KU Leuven, Parkstraat 45 bus 3605, 3000 Leuven, Belgium

^c School of Education, Health & Society, Armstrong Institute for Interactive Media, Miami University, 501 East High Street, Oxford, OH 45056, United States

^d e-Media Lab, Groep T – KU Leuven, A. Vesaliusstraat 13, 3000 Leuven, Belgium

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ABSTRACT

Online Poker has become an increasingly popular form of gambling. In this study, the qualitative method of laddering interviews based on means-end chain theory was used to offer new insights in online Poker players' psychological motives, and the way in which Poker website characteristics shape gambling preferences. A total of 18 Belgian young adults, experienced in Poker playing, were recruited via snowball sampling, of which 6 professionals (relying on online Poker as the sole source of income), 6 semi-professionals (playing for money, but not relying on it as a sole source of income) and 6 amateurs (not relying on Poker money for income). We focused on 2 Poker websites, PokerStars and Facebook Zynga Poker. Results revealed that an increase in the dependency on Poker profits shifted motives from learning towards monetary incentives. Yet, playing for real money could not be considered as a purely extrinsic motivation as it greatly determined the game play dynamics and experiences, and this both in the (semi-) professionals and amateur players. Finally, our study indicates that responsible gaming features should reconcile monetary worth with values of control, trust, entertainment and game play action.

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1. Introduction

In the last decade, the popularity of online Poker has surged. From the different types of gambling games played on the Internet, Poker is the fastest growing form (Griffiths, Parke, Wood, & Rigby, 2010). In general, the rise of Internet gambling has resulted in a number of recent studies, of which many have investigated how new forms of gambling online differ from their offline counterpart (see, e.g., Cotte & Latour, 2009; Gainsbury, Wood, Russell, Hing, & Blaszczynski, 2012; Jiménez-Murcia et al., 2011; MacKay, Bard, Bowling, & Hodgins, 2014; Szabó & Kocsis, 2012; Wardle, Moody, Griffiths, Orford, & Volberg, 2011; Wood & Williams, 2011; Wood, Williams, & Lawton, 2007). Additionally, an increasing number of studies have assessed or predicted the potential risks of online gambling (see, e.g., Clement et al., 2012; Cotte & Latour, 2009; Dickson, Derevensky, & Gupta, 2008; Dragicevic, Tsogas, &

Kudic, 2011; Griffiths, Wood, & Parke, 2009; Hopley & Nicki, 2010; Jiménez-Murcia et al., 2011; Johansson, Grant, Kim, Odlaug, & Götestam, 2009; Lloyd et al., 2010; Matthews, Farnsworth, & Griffiths, 2009; Szabó & Kocsis, 2012). These insights have fuelled the debate on how to define and implement responsible gambling policies, regulation and consumer protection (see, e.g., Gainsbury, Parke, & Suhonen, 2013; Gainsbury & Wood, 2011; Griffiths, Wood, et al., 2009; Haefeli, Lischer, & Schwarz, 2011; Khazaal et al., 2013; Smeaton & Griffiths, 2004).

Although the number of studies on online gambling is on the rise, only a few have focused on online Poker (Palomäki, Laakasuo, & Salmela, 2013). Most studies have drawn conclusions with respect to the more generic phenomenon of online gambling instead (see, e.g., Griffiths, Wardle, Orford, Sproston, & Erens, 2009; Haefeli et al., 2011; Jolley, Mizerski, & Olaru, 2006; LaBrie, Kaplan, LaPlante, Nelson, & Shaffer, 2008; LaBrie, LaPlante, Nelson, Schumann, & Shaffer, 2007; Lloyd et al., 2010; McBride & Derevensky, 2009; McCormack & Griffiths, 2012), and therefore need to be complemented with studies particularly dedicated to unravelling how online Poker players construct their own experiences (Woolley, 2003, p. 17). In this article, we will show that

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +32 16 32 36 51.

E-mail addresses: Bieke.Zaman@soc.kuleuven.be (B. Zaman), Kristof.Geurden@gmail.com (K. Geurden), Rozane.Decock@soc.kuleuven.be (R. De Cock), b@bobdeschutter.be (B. De Schutter), Vero.Vandenabeele@kuleuven.be (V. Vanden Abeele).

the existing literature on the differences in motivations endorsed for playing Poker between amateur and professional players has not yet yielded univocal results, and therefore may benefit from further work. Hence, our first research question is the following:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): “What are the dominant motivations endorsed for playing online Poker in amateur, semi-professional and professional players?”

Additionally, more research is needed to understand the role of website features, and the way these are being perceived and experienced in shaping online Poker motivations. Even though it is being acknowledged that website characteristics can be decisive factors for gambling behaviour (Dragicevic et al., 2011), how online Poker motivations are being mediated by both website characteristics and player characteristics remains a void in the research field. Therefore, our second research question reads as follows:

Research Question 2 (RQ2): “How do online Poker motivations relate to interface preferences in amateur, semi-professional and professional players?”

In sum, the contribution of this study lies within its focus on the scarcely studied subfield of online Poker. To our knowledge, this is the first study that analyses motivations of online Poker players in relation to the design characteristics of Poker websites. It hereby provides a qualitative, in-depth understanding of the online Poker experience in amateur and (semi-) professional players, which complements the majority of quantitative studies that have focused on assessing or predicting risk effects for online gambling in amateur players. By analysing the actual experiences with Poker websites, we will throw a more nuanced light on instances of what is likely to be a priori considered as problematic Internet behaviour, and formulate well-informed suggestions for responsible gaming features. Eventually, we will show that Poker players esteem legality and trust, and argue that responsible gaming features should cleverly respond to the players' need to reconcile monetary worth with values of control, entertainment and game play action.

2. Literature review

2.1. Motivations for (online) gambling and (online) Poker

Table 1 provides an overview of previous work on the motivations endorsed for (online) gambling in general and (online) Poker

in particular. It reveals six main motivations that have repeatedly been reported on, namely the mitigation of negative emotions, financial gains, stimulation of positive emotions, occurrence of sociality, the possibility for practice and improving skills, and the convenience of being online. While these motivations are shared across (online) Poker and other forms of (online) gambling (see Table 1), the skill factor inherent to Poker seems to be the most important reason why certain players, and especially the professional ones, prefer Poker to other kinds of gambling.

Focusing on the studies that have reported on the motivations for (online) Poker, Shead, Hodgins, and Scharf (2008) have found in an online survey on gambling that undergraduate student Poker players preferred Poker to other forms of gambling because of four main reasons: the skill factor, sociality, entertainment, and the fact that Poker is easier or has better odds of winning. The majority of the respondents reported having started playing Poker because their friends were playing. Further, the results have suggested that professional players, or the ones who spent greater proportions of time playing Poker online, were more likely to prefer Poker to other forms of gaming because of the skill factor, whereas the casual players were more likely to prefer it for the socializing benefits (Shead et al., 2008).

In an online questionnaire that was distributed among university students who played online Poker, Griffiths et al. (2010) have found that convenience (i.e., aspects related to easy-to-use software), source of income, learning environment/playing for free, social elements, and the ability to multitask with non-Poker related activities were important motivations for playing online Poker. Wood, Griffiths, and Parke (2007) have also focused on the motivations endorsed for playing online Poker. The results of an online survey in a self-selected sample of about 400 UK student online Poker players revealed that players engaged in the online Poker game for reasons of relaxation, excitement, for monetary reasons, to escape from problems, to relieve boredom, develop skills or feel lucky (Wood et al., 2007).

In 2008, Wood and Griffiths published a study in which 24 Swedish online Poker players were researched via focus groups (Wood & Griffiths, 2008). The researchers did not only focus their attention on the motivations but also on the differences between casual and professional players. Comparing these results to Shead et al. (2008) observed differences for casual gamblers, Wood & Griffiths added, next to social factors, reasons related to convenience, ease of learning, low stake size, and relief from boredom.

Table 1

An overview of the main motivations endorsed for (online) gambling, incl. Poker.

| Motivation (Online Gambling) | Aspects | References |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| Mitigation Neg. Emotions | Mood regulation, relaxation, escape from problems, relieve anxiety, avoidance, relieve boredom | (Online) Gambling (Lee, Chae, Lee, & Kim, 2007; Lloyd et al., 2010; McBride & Derevensky, 2009) – (Online) Poker (Wood & Griffiths, 2008; Wood et al., 2007) |
| Financial Gains | Source of income, playing for money, better odds of winning | (Online) Gambling (Lee et al., 2007; Lloyd et al., 2010; McCormack & Griffiths, 2012) – (Online) Poker (Griffiths et al., 2010; Shead et al., 2008; Wood & Griffiths, 2008; Wood et al., 2007) |
| Positive Emotions | Enjoyment, fun, thrill, excitement, entertainment, amusement, feel lucky | (Online) Gambling (Lee et al., 2007; Lloyd et al., 2010; McBride & Derevensky, 2009) – (Online) Poker (Shead et al., 2008; Wood et al., 2007) |
| Sociality | Because friends/family members do, to be with friends or to make new friends | (Online) Gambling (Griffiths & Barnes, 2008; Lee et al., 2007; Lloyd et al., 2010; McBride & Derevensky, 2009) – (Online) Poker (Griffiths et al., 2010; Shead et al., 2008; Wood & Griffiths, 2008) |
| Practice & Skills | To learn strategies, to practice, having the opportunity to gamble, develop skill, learning environment, ease of learning | (Online) Gambling (McBride & Derevensky, 2009; McCormack & Griffiths, 2012) – (Online) Poker (Griffiths et al., 2010; Shead et al., 2008; Wood & Griffiths, 2008; Wood et al., 2007) |
| Convenience | Ease of access, flexibility, 24-h availability, anonymity, greater variety of games, large gambling choice, because it is easier, because of time and software, because you can play for free, because of the low stake size, because of the ability to multitask with non-poker related activities | (Online) Gambling (Griffiths & Barnes, 2008; McCormack & Griffiths, 2012) – (Online) Poker (Griffiths et al., 2010; Shead et al., 2008; Wood & Griffiths, 2008) |

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