

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ONLINE POKER

Professor **Mark Griffiths** of the International Gaming Research Unit at Nottingham Trent University provides some insight into the psychological factors involved in online poker.



GIVEN THE FAIRLY recent explosion in the online poker market, the amount of psychological research on Internet poker has been very limited. However, one of the most important psychological factors that online poker companies and affiliates should consider is getting potential players to play in the first place. Here, trust is of paramount importance in getting people to play poker online. Online poker players are more likely to gamble online with those companies that are well established, such as Harrah's, than a little known company operating out of the Caribbean.

Trust is an historical concept because customers need repeated interactions coupled with positive feelings to build it. Branding experts claim it takes at least three years to establish the feeling of goodwill among consumers. The good news for companies – including the online poker industry – is that customers do not have to have experienced the product. Potential customers might play online poker because others have done it. Although little studied in empirical gambling investigations, trust is thought to be an important variable in both the initial decision to gamble and the maintenance of the behaviour. In a recent study carried out by our research unit on nearly 11,000 online gamblers, four-fifths of our sample (79 percent) considered the Internet a trustworthy medium of gambling. However, most Internet gamblers preferred to gamble on websites of well-known and trusted 'high street' names (90 percent).

One of the most crucial things about brands for the online poker industry is that they help players define their self-image and who they are – at least on some psychological level. For some people, this 'personal branding' may be more important than their social identities within a

community. For example, the car they drive or the newspaper they read, are particularly strong cultural indicators of what sort of person they are. Where they play online poker can be an extension of this.

So, how can poker sites establish trust? Initially, it was argued that the Internet would provide a level playing field for small and large companies alike. However, given the need to establish trust, research seems to suggest that organisations with an existing reputation are at an advantage. The reason for this is that increased size and reputation appears to lead to higher trust, which, in turn, influences the perception of risk and the willingness to spend money online.

Although there has been a small amount of scientific research on the psychology of traditional poker, online poker and offline poker are obviously not synonymous. Most previous research has concentrated on the poker player's ability to 'read' their opponents' body language and verbalisations. When playing online poker, a player is denied this advantage. Online poker players must, therefore, seek to manipulate their poker-playing opponents by using the psychological tools at their disposal. Put simply, a player must use the non-transparency inherent in the situation to their advantage.

Online poker permits players to create a false identity. Players can portray (if they so wished) the façade of being a young attractive novice female player when, in fact, they are actually a very experienced recognised pro. In one of our studies, our research unit found that 20 percent of female online poker players and 12 percent of male online poker players had gender swapped online. Male online poker players were significantly more likely than female online poker layers

to do this for a strategic advantage. On a psychological level, the key for online players to 'hustling' or manipulating other players is by projecting a character and hiding their identity. Essentially, it is about representing a façade, whether it is for one hand or the whole of the game. While playing Internet poker, an online player can adapt any 'character' they wish to suit any game in which they engage in. For instance, if an online poker player is playing with novices it may be profitable to portray an experienced professional in order to intimidate the other players into submission.

Using the online chat facilities, it is easier for online poker players to develop their persona(s). The tone and pitch of what a player 'says' is not revealed in the text on the screen. At a fundamental level, all players are acting with their most unemotional 'poker face'. In these situations, players can exude confidence as they go all-in on a psychological bluff, when in reality, they may have shaking hands and be sweating like a pig. The key to winning on a psychological level is by inducing emotional reactions from other players, so with knowledge of the opponent, it is possible to 'tailor' interactions to induce the desired response.

There is obviously still much to learn about the psychology of the online poker player but hopefully, this article highlights what online poker companies and affiliates need to be thinking about in attracting poker players.

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