



Return to Gender



Professor Mark Griffiths of the International Gaming Research Unit at Nottingham Trent University explores the concept of gender swapping in online poker.

One of the more psychologically interesting things about online poker is the way that players can create any identity purely by what they type on screen. The very nature of the online medium means it is easier for poker players to develop different online personas. Players can misrepresent information about their gender, their age, their ethnicity, and/or their poker-playing ability. At a basic level, players can pretend to be a twenty-something female that is new to the game instead of the skilful thirty-something male

in five female online poker players (20 percent) and one in eight male online poker players (12 percent) reported they had swapped their gender while playing poker online. Typical reasons that female participants gave as to why they did this were that they believed other males would not take them so seriously if they knew they were playing against a woman. They also reported that it gave them a greater sense of security as a lone woman in a predominantly male arena. Typical responses from female poker players included things like:

them to potentially win more money. Responses in our survey included admissions such as: "People are more likely to try and power play a woman - intimidate her with big money. Therefore, you can sometimes win bigger pots" and "Men usually think women cannot bluff, and so will usually not believe that you are capable of bluffing properly." On a psychological level, the key to a 'hustle' or manipulating other players in poker is by projecting a character and hiding your identity. To some extent, poker itself is about representing a façade, whether it is for one hand or the whole of the game.

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player that they actually are, or pretend to be an experienced professional in order to intimidate players into submission.

The tone and pitch of what a player 'says' online is not revealed in the online screen text. 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. In reality they may be shaking like a leaf and 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. This is one of the reasons why gender swapping online is so interesting.

Our survey says...

Some of my colleagues and I at Nottingham Trent's gaming research unit decided to carry out an online survey into the phenomenon of gender swapping in online poker. Our results were interesting though, perhaps, not that surprising. We found that one

"Males have a better reputation. Females are not as respected in the gaming circles" and "I gender swap to be taken more seriously".

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the male players in our survey agreed that females were not taken as seriously as males. They believed that pretending to be female would give them a strategic psychological advantage. Different male players reported that the advantage arose for one of two reasons. The first reason was that they believed other male players were less aggressive in their play toward female players. Typical comments from the male players included: "I thought it would give me an edge and my opponents wouldn't play back at me as hard if they thought I was a female", "Being a girl makes you appear less competitive and, therefore, taken less seriously. It's a huge advantage" and "Some people think that women don't have a clue about gambling".

The second reason given by some males was that they believed other male players felt that they could intimidate female players, and so they could lure those males into a false sense of security allowing

Motivation

Clearly, our research shows that gender swapping is highly prevalent among a significant minority of players and that the motivations for doing so are different for males and females. For males, gender swapping was a tactical move to give them a strategic advantage, whereas for females, it was much more about acceptance or privacy in what they perceived to be a male-dominated environment. We have found similar behaviour in our research into online computer game playing. For example, we found that men were more likely to pretend to be women to get more help in a game, whereas women were more likely to use gender-neutral names in order to avoid unwanted sexual attention. We have also found that gender swapping frequently occurs in online role-playing games such as 'Everquest'. Data from our online poker survey highlights that these tactics are also used in online poker games, although it may be the traditional male domination of this activity (i.e., poker), rather than the medium (i.e., the Internet) that precipitates it. In more general terms, the Internet appears to make gambling more acceptable for women because it is seen as a less alienating and stigmatising medium when compared to gambling environments such as casinos and betting shops. In essence, the Internet is gender-neutral. ■

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