

**It's Not A Game: A Dramaturgical Analysis of
An Illicit Online Consumption Community**

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ABSTRACT**It's not a Game:
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Using a sociocultural approach, we explore an illicit consumption community online. There are several thriving consumption communities that exist online that exchange illicit commodities without scrutiny from regulatory structures. Despite the large sums of money spent on this practice and the potential problems associated with illicit commoditizing, the online environment remains loosely regulated. A netnography of one such community, online poker players, is the central focus of this research. We propose a dramaturgical model that explains the macro-environmental factors of illicit consumption communities and the individual motives of online poker players. The online poker forum selected for this study is vibrant, rich with data and frequented often by online poker community members. By examining discussions held within this online community, we uncover insights on the illicit consumption of online poker players and their motives. We explore these varying factors and motives and discuss the public policy implications of our findings.

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Introduction

Why and how are illicit commodities exchanged online? Illicit consumption communities have formed online averting the regulations of traditional offline transactions when exchanging illicit goods and services. Where else, but the world wide web, would a prospective consumer so easily purchase, find information or even sell an illicit good or service?

These questions gain in importance when we consider the rapid increase of consumption of illicit commodities online. There are a plethora of counterfeit goods available on eBay and other consumer-to-consumer websites that are sold without being moderated (*Wall Street Journal*, July 12, 2011). More unsettling are the covert prostitution advertisements and online prostitution rings on the classified advertising websites Craigslist.com and Backpage.com (*Reuters*, April 18, 2011). Even more perturbing are the mail-order narcotics and quasi-legal synthetic, designer drugs being distributed on the web through disguised orders (e.g. bath salts) (*New York Times*, July 16, 2011). The growth of the Internet and computer-mediated communications has enabled the development of a myriad of illicit consumption communities online.

Multiple web forums operate where computer-mediated communications allow illicit consumers and sellers to connect virtually, without the need for offline interactions, and minimize exposure to law enforcement and other regulatory entities. Exploring an illicit consumption community has significant benefits as we may begin to understand the relationships that drive illicit consumption communities online.

Illicit Commoditizing

The Internet has provided a means for illegal activity to flourish. Computer-mediated communications enable the formation of illicit consumption communities to proliferate. The open nature of online forums led to consumers freely discussing illegal or possibly immoral behavior. Recent news reports of online prostitution rings, quasi-legal stimulants, luxury counterfeits, and other illegal goods and services online being traded across international borders signals a need for research in how these illicit consumption communities form and what helps them facilitate illicit commoditizing.

For clarity, I define *illicit commodities* as forbidden or illegal goods or services, freely chosen by the consumer. *Illicit commodities* are goods and services that are forbidden by norms, customs, laws and rules. *Commoditizing* is the transformation of goods and services into a commodity. Therefore, *illicit commoditizing* is the rendering of illicit commodities widely available. This research explores the factors that facilitate illicit consumption communities from forming online by analyzing a burgeoning illicit online community of online poker players.

There is a paucity of consumer research on the development of illicit commoditizing. Only a few marketing studies have examined illicit consumption through the examination of purchase risk in counterfeit goods (Albers-Miller 1999) and customer satisfaction in illicit drugs (Fitchett and Smith 2001). Our research context is centered on the practice of illicit commoditizing which we study through the examination of the illicit consumption community of online poker players.

This research is specifically concerned with the motivations of individual poker players and the macro-level factors that facilitate illicit consumption online. What defines and separates this practice of illicit commoditizing from legal transactions and exchanges? What is the meaning of illicit consumption via the Web? Why can individuals freely trade illicit commodities online?

We chose online poker as our primary empirical venue used to explore illicit consumption because: (a) of its obvious prominence as an illicit consumption activity and (b) its defined and accessible socio-cultural structure. Our objective is to examine illicit consumption using online poker playing as our primary empirical focus. Our specific objectives are: (1) to examine at a macro level, what factors facilitate illicit consumption communities online and (2) to examine the motives of individual poker players. Factors external and internal to the individual synchronize to facilitate illicit consumption. At the macro-environmental level, factors resulting from the technological advancements of online trading, media acceptance and other social and cultural complexities create a context that facilitates illicit commoditizing.

The Context: Online Poker

Despite its questionable legality in North America, online gambling has gained impetus since the introduction of online casinos in 1994 (Griffiths 1999, 2003; Cotte and Latour 2009). Canadians are spending an estimated \$1 billion on online gambling annually and the Manitoban provincial government is considering adopting an online gambling platform through their provincial lottery corporation just as British Columbia, Quebec and the four Atlantic provinces have (*Winnipeg Free Press*, 05/04/10). New

Jersey, California, Florida and Connecticut also have active bills that propose the legalization and taxation of online gambling (Siemens and Kopp 2011). The intention of a government run gambling website is to keep money within the province (state) as many online gambling websites are housed in foreign countries (i.e. outside a country's legal jurisdiction) where online gambling is legal such as in many European and Caribbean nations. The accessibility of online poker has led to international, national and provincial regulations on control, access and availability of online gambling sites (Siemens and Kopp 2011). It is suggested by previous studies that online formats are more problematic to individuals than traditional casino gambling (King, Delfabbro and Griffiths 2010; Labrie, Kaplan, LaPlante, Nelson and Shaffer 2007) and issues with online gambling such as underage gambling (Griffiths and Wood 2000; Derevensky and Gupta 2007) and consumer fraud (McMullan and Rege 2010) point to a need for government regulation of online gambling. In the following discussion, we present a brief description of the current state of online gambling from regulatory, public health and social perspectives.

Theoretical frameworks and research related to the context (e.g. online gambling) including consumption community practice theory, gambling typologies, online gambling factors and poker are reviewed thereafter to give credence to our theory development.

Regulatory Issues of Online Gambling in North America

Generally in North America, gambling is illegal unless regulated by the government. In 2006, online gamblers illegally spent an estimated \$2.4 billion on over 2,000 online gambling sites headquartered in under-regulated nations. For example, one of the most popular poker websites *Party Poker* (partypoker.com), is headquartered in the disputed state of Gibraltar and yet another common website, *Poker Stars*

(pokerstars.com) finds its home in Costa Rica. Hundreds of online gambling sites are clustered in Malta, the Dutch Antilles, the Kahnawake Mohawk Territory, Gibraltar and the UK as well as dozens situated in countries in the Caribbean (McMullan and Kervin 2010). Therefore, any attempt to prohibit online gambling in any country is likely to be unsuccessful (Parke and Griffiths 2004, Eadington 2004).

To make matters worse, the legality of online gambling in the United States and in Canada is not clear-cut. In North America, the laws apply only to those “engaged in the business of betting or wagering” and therefore there are no penalties or deterrents for the individual gambler. Only the operators of these online websites would be guilty under these laws (Thompson 2001). In contrast, the individual user or gambler definitely has no legal disincentive to participate in online gambling (Thompson 2001).

In Canada, online gambling is in a grey area of person-to-person wagering under the Canadian Criminal Code. Currently, only operators and owners of online gambling sites can be legally tried in Canada (Messerlian, Byrne and Derevensky 2004). Laws related to gambling online differ from nation to nation and make it even more difficult to apply any prohibiting statutes. Some suggest reassessment of US congressional efforts to prohibit online gambling while others (Watson, Lidell, Moore and Eshee 2004) recommend the legalization and regulation of online gambling through existing land-based casinos such as the MGM Grand or Caesar’s Palace or through existing governmental bodies.

In the US, laws that apply to online gambling including the Interstate Wire Act (1961) and the Foreign Travel or Transportation and Aid of Racketeering Enterprise Act (1952) have many loopholes that website operators can exploit (Watson et. al. 2004;

Parke and Griffiths 2004; Siemens and Kopp 2011). Moreover, even the structure of credit card companies (e.g. Visa and MasterCard) is based on a two-tier system where multiple parties (e.g. PayPal, NeTeller and other online payment services) share liability and make prosecution near impossible (Parke and Griffiths 2004). The recent passage of the Unlawful Internet Gambling Enforcement Act (UIGEA) on June 1, 2010 makes it illegal for American financial institutes to accept, distribute and honor online gambling-related transactions (Siemens and Kopp 2011). American financial institutions, such as banks, should now take initiative to identify, code, and block the transfer of credit card payments earned through online gambling sites and at the date when the UIGEA took effect, many European online gambling operators restricted bets from American players (Siemens and Kopp 2011). Nevertheless, online gambling is a global affair and many online gambling firms come from lesser-developed, regulatory lax nations out of the reach of enforcement stateside.

Despite the ambiguous laws in North America, it is apparent that online gambling is proving to be a highly profitable market with governmental-run websites operating in Canada, Holland, New Zealand and Australia. Some researchers have cautioned that as a source of government tax revenue, online gambling presents a significant public health issue (Messerlian et. al. 2004).

Public Health Issues with Online Gambling

As the prevalence of online gambling increases, interestingly, online gambling legislation is not catching up at the same rate. In an early online gambling prevalence study, Griffiths (2001) found that less than 1% of people gambled online in the United Kingdom. The most current findings from a study done in 2007 in the UK report 8.8%

gamble online (Griffiths, Wardle, Orford, Sproston and Erens 2009). This study is the first analysis ever made of a representative national sample of online gamblers and the study suggests that the medium of the Internet is likely to contribute to problem gambling (Griffiths et. al. 2009). Their study shows a number of significant socio-demographic differences between online gamblers and offline gamblers. In comparison to offline gamblers, online gamblers were usually male, young, single, well educated, and in professional or managerial employment (Griffiths et. al. 2009). Problem gambling was also significantly more likely amongst online gamblers in comparison to offline gamblers (Griffiths et. al. 2009).

Some researchers suggest a disturbing and difficult relationship between online gambling and gamblers with gambling problems (McBride and Derevensky 2009). McBride and Derevensky (2009) demonstrated that problem gamblers were significantly more likely than social gamblers to spend more time gambling per session, gamble alone, gamble from school, gamble with a cell phone, gamble with more money, gamble online while drinking alcohol or taking illicit drugs, and lose more money gambling online (McBride and Derevensky 2009).

Public health researchers have organized longitudinal, epidemiological studies on online gambling (Labrie et. al. 2008; Laplante et. al. 2009) and they suggest that online gambling behavior results in modest costs for most players, though some, roughly 5%, have larger losses. This extreme minority did not show any signs of moderation. Their findings show need to consider time spent (time loss) as an additional and separate measure of problem gambling (LaPlante et. al. 2009).

Public health concerns ranging from problem gambling to addiction to financial despair, as well as adolescent gambling (Derevensky and Gupta 2007), alert a need for further research in the area of online gambling to raise awareness of these issues to the public and help prepare for and prevent future problems that arise from such an illicit activity. To better understand this and the illicit commoditizing of online poker, we turn to our context of online poker players.

The Social Acceptance of Online Gambling

From a social marketers' perspective, there are many societal issues that are associated with the online poker industry (Griffiths and Parke 2002; Smeaton and Griffiths 2004). Good policy and market practice begins with in-depth qualitative and quantitative understanding of the issues with online poker. By understanding the motives of individual online poker players, we can generate insights on how to direct interventions for potential problem online gamblers. Online gamblers are especially uninformed of the potential problems due to the unique nature of this illicit online environment.

Media exposure impacts gambling attitudes and behavioral intentions both positively and negatively. For instance, Humphreys (2010) has shown that changes in public discourse affects the acceptance of a consumption practice. Her historical discourse analysis of newspaper articles from *USA Today* and *New York Times* from 1980-2007 has shown that casino gambling has been legitimized through media acceptance (Humphreys 2010). On the other hand, Turner, Fritz and Zanegenah (2007) studied the major themes within 65 popular gambling films and displayed how gambling-

related movies depicted and distorted information about gambling to the general public: emphasizing crime, casino heists and problem gambling.

In the past decade, the mass media has become saturated with gambling. There has been a significant increase in gambling television shows, gambling films, online gambling websites, and advertising for these websites. Many casino gambling related shows such as the World Series of Poker (ESPN), Celebrity Poker Showdown (Bravo), the World Poker Tour (Travel Channel), Las Vegas (NBC), and others are aired regularly across sports, entertainment, and travel channels. These programs depict gambling and its outcomes favorably (Lee, Lemanski, and Woo 2008). Through these vehicles, gambling has recently been portrayed as an entertaining and socially acceptable activity. The media glamorizes gambling through casinos, Las Vegas, televised poker tournaments on sports networks (e.g. World Series of Poker on ESPN) as well as star-studded films such as *21*, *Casino*, *Rounders* and *Ocean's Eleven*. On the net, online gambling websites that are advertised widely with flashy and enticing banner and pop-up advertisements are commonplace.

Given the increase in online gambling activity and in particular, online poker, the associated public health concerns, as well as the media exposure towards such activities, I sought to understand what the underlying motivations of online poker players might be and the factors that facilitate an illicit consumption community to proliferate online. I chose to study the concept of illicit commoditizing within the context of an online poker forum.

Online poker is a gambling game of skill not based entirely on chance like roulette or keno. In comparison to other gambling games, online poker is increasing in

popularity and social and regulatory acceptability (media exposure and government cooperation) and this subsequent increase in popularity has increased prevalence and use of online gambling websites, increasing gamblers chances and opportunities to reap large monetary rewards. Due to recent popularity, online poker communities and commentaries have formed extensively online. In this research, I studied the types of exchanges that occur within such forums. Informed by literature within the areas of consumption communities (Schau et. al. 2009), traditional gambling typologies (Smith and Preston 1984; Cotte 1997; Neighbors et. al 2002; Stewart and Zack 2008) online gambling research (Griffiths 2003; Wood, Williams and Lawton 2007; Griffiths et. al. 2006; Cotte and Latour 2009) and poker research (Shead et. al. 2008; Siler 2009), I sought to better understand: (1) macro-level factors that influence illicit commoditizing online, (2) individual online poker player motives and (3) implications for social marketers and public policy makers based on insights garnered here.

Conceptual Framework

This research draws from previous gambling research as well as research from the broader fields of consumer research, sociology, anthropology, public health and law. The research orientation here is interpretive in nature. Most quantitative studies on online gambling are criticized for smaller samples sizes, being culturally specific and using experimental methods in artificial settings. There have been a variety of quantitative studies on online poker playing but there is an absence of qualitative studies on online poker players.

Online poker forums can provide rich and readily accessible insights into the mindsets and behaviors of an illicit consumption community, specifically, the community

of online poker players. Literature on consumption communities, traditional gambling typologies, online gambling factors and poker research will be reviewed to give credence to the context of study. Thereafter, a description of the methodology and dramaturgical framework will follow and will describe the manner in which we analyze and interpret discussions contained here.

Consumption Community Practice Theory

The study of subcultures in context has gained credence in recent years (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Several consumer culture researchers have published studies on various subcultures such as the gay male community (Kates 2002), fans of Star Trek (Kozinets 2001) or fans of Apple products (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2005). For example, Kates (2002) studied urban gay men in the downtown of a major Canadian city. His findings shed light upon their (urban gay men) oppositional consumption practices and their contestation of gender differences (Kates 2002). Kozinets (2001, 2002 and 2006) has done substantial ethnographic research as a Star Trek fan or Trekkie, the popular name devoted to Star Trek fans. His findings vary from the Utopian meanings of the subculture in the commercialized marketplace (Kozinets 2001) to descriptions of their use of specialized language around their consumption practices (Kozinets 2006). Using netnography, the online ethnographic research method also employed in this study, Kozinets (2006) uncovered the nuances, language, traditions and customs of true fans of this consumption community. Muñiz and Schau's (2005) research on consumers of the discontinued Apple Newton product, an early portable palm organizer, elaborated on the consumer constructed brand meanings in terms of supernatural, magical and religious

motifs. In 2007, the authors used ethnographic data from the same brand community (Apple Newton users) to conceptualize vigilante marketing, or consumer-generated content where customers create their own advertisements or brand content (e.g. folk ads, homebrew ads) (Muñiz and Schau 2007).

As such, various definitions of *consumption communities* have emerged. Initially, marketing scholars have roughly defined *consumption communities* as groups with a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001). These consumers within the community share a culture: a system of values, standards and representations and recognize bonds of membership with each other and with the whole community. This emerging concept of *consumption communities*, which is defined as collectives determined even less by geography, pedigree, race or religion, but instead, these consumer communities are determined largely by lifestyle (age, education, income level, occupation and so on) and they are manifested by the things we consume (i.e. online poker). According to McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig's conceptualization (2002), a *consumption community* would thus be a group of crucial relationships including those between the consumer and the marketers, between the consumer and other consumers, between the consumer and the product in use *but not specifically* between the consumer and the brand. Many *brand* community studies revolve around iconic, niche brands such as Apple and Volvo (Muñiz and Schau 2000), Harley (McAlexander et. al. 2002) or Star Trek (Kozinets 2001) as well as consumer products such as Nutella (Cova and Pace 2006). *Consumption communities* (e.g. smokers or surfers) have a community connection that does not revolve around a brand itself (i.e.

Star Trek, Apple or Saab) but a product or group of products that are being consumed (Canniford and Shankar 2007).

In the online poker context, online poker players gamble on their preferred website(s), play in their preferred tournament(s), choose a favorite game (No Limit Texas Hold ‘Em, Pot Limit Omaha) and wager amount (micro, small, medium, high stakes), some travel to Las Vegas, some upgrade their computers with better technology and some perhaps even purchase poker merchandise such as cards, poker chips, guidebooks and other products that non-gamblers would not normally. Likewise, surfers buy surfboards, wax, beach clothing and share a lifestyle unlike no others (Canniford and Shankar 2007).

There is an absence of studies on *consumption communities* as a distinct concept separate from the current concept of *brand* community (Schau et. al. 2009). Schau, Muñiz and Arnould (2009) recently synthesized the idiosyncratic differences of fifty-two previously studied brand communities, varying in context and size, and uncovered four general themes of collective consumption practices that consumption communities engage in:

- (1) *social networking practices* (welcoming, emphasizing, governing),
- (2) *impression management practices* (evangelizing, justifying),
- (3) *community engagement practices* (staking, milestoneing, badging, documenting), and
- (4) *brand usage practices* (grooming, customizing, commoditizing).

Schau, Muñiz and Arnould (2009) have yet to provide empirical evidence to support their postulation, but they posit that the stronger the brand community, the more the community members will be engaged in these twelve practices under their four

consumption community themes. Through the metaphor of ‘anatomy,’ they demonstrate that these twelve practices work closely together and drive one another in a process of collective value creation (Schau et. al. 2009).

This current study uses the four themes (and twelve subthemes) described above as a framework to study the illicit consumption community of ‘online poker players.’ Given the relevance of these themes to our research, we discuss these twelve practices that Schau, Muñiz and Arnould (2009) discovered in their meta-analysis, in more detail in the section that follows.

Social networking practices include creating, enhancing and sustaining ties among community members. These practices highlight the similarities across community members and the normative behavioral expectations of the community (Schau et. al. 2009). *Welcoming* is a practice where members create opportunities to greet new prospects. *Empathizing* enhances relationships within community members by perhaps lending emotional or physical support. *Governing* is defined as the maintenance of these social relationships. Community members welcome, empathize and govern, thus reinforcing the moral and social bonds within the community.

The second theme is that of impression management practices. *Impression management practices* have an outward focus on creating favorable impressions of the community. *Evangelizing* and *justifying* practices often overlap but to specify, *evangelizing* is defined as being an ambassador of good will by sharing positive community news, while *justifying* is defined as deploying rationales to justify membership despite possible extant stigmas. Community members evangelize and justify

their behavior to manage the existing stigmas on overt reliance to their consumption behavior, in this study: the illicit commodity of online poker.

Practices that fall under the third theme of *community engagement practices* are those that include the reinforcement of members' engagement within the community. These practices (including *staking*, *milestoning*, *badging* and *documenting*) are competitive and provide community members with social capital. This social competition enables community members to establish their status in comparison to consumers within the community and creates a social hierarchy that the community members can refer to strategically (Schau et. al. 2009). Community members gather social and cultural capital by accumulating a diverse set of intricate practices (Schau et. al. 2009). *Staking* is recognizing variance within community members' domain of participation whether it is measured with variables such as years of involvement or amount of consumption. *Milestoning* is noting standout experiences of seminal events in individual consumption or consumption of the community as a whole. *Badging* is translating these milestones into symbols, tangibles or semiotic signifiers. *Documenting* is turning these milestones or badges into stories or rich narratives. These practices stake the domain of engagement of the community member.

The last theme is *brand usage practices* including practices that simply change methods to improve or enhance use. *Grooming* is defined as caring for your consumption by for example, maintaining additional devices. *Customizing* is the practice of modifying consumption to individual or group needs. And distancing or approaching the marketplace if any restrictions or limitations on distribution or availability of products occur is defined as *commoditizing*.

In this study, we look to Schau and her colleagues' (2009) conceptualization of *commoditizing*. In order to examine a wider array of consumption communities and develop theory for a broader set of practices, we explore the concept, or practice, of *illicit commoditizing* in an illicit online consumption community. What factors facilitate and create value in an illicit online consumption community? We intend to examine the novel strategies that illicit consumption community members use to leverage the collaborative tendencies of marketplace actors and commoditize illicit goods and services (Schau et. al. 2009). The next section of the literature review will cover gambling research to give a sense of the context used in the examination of this illicit consumption community. First, we will describe traditional modern gambling typologies from various fields of research, followed by a review of recent online gambling and poker research.

Gambling Typologies

A review of traditional gambling typologies was conducted to examine whether previous categorizations accurately depict the motives of current online poker players. Established categorizations of gamblers within gambling research have been created broadly based on *motives* that instigate gambling (Smith and Preston 1984; Cotte 1997; Neighbours et. al. 2002; Stewart and Zack 2008). These traditional categorizations were never consolidated in order to mitigate the redundancies as well as the technological advancements of online gambling. Moreover, these typologies fail to take into account more recent shifts in the regulatory and social environments surrounding online gambling. While the literature on gambling typologies can explain reasons why people gamble (including economic, hedonic, symbolic or social reasons), the existing literature

fails to integrate the technological advancements as well as regulatory issues of online gambling to assess how these advancements augment or curtail gambling motivations. This review will focus on modern gambling typologies found predominantly in the field of gambling research. These typologies overlap substantially in concept and content.

In modern times, Smith and Preston (1984) compiled all previous gambling motives and typologies from the past 100 years of research and synthesized their findings into 11 distinct gambling motives: monetary profit, leisure, prestige, sociability, excitement (boredom), decision-making, curiosity, learned, escape frustration, masochism (guilt), and belief in personal luck. Cotte (1997) used ethnographic methods with casino gamblers and was a participant in a casino milieu. She uncovered 8 consumption motives of traditional casino gamblers including self-definition, cognitive self-classification, emotional self-classification, communing, competing, risk-taking, rush and learning and evaluating. In another study on gambling motivation, Neighbours and colleagues (2002) listed: money, fun, sociability, excitement, boredom, winning, conformity, competition, risk taking, interest, challenge, skill, chasing, escaping, luck and drinking as gambling motives in a survey of college students.

More recently, gambling scales with a variety of focuses have been developed and tested. Stewart and Zack (2008) used the components of the popular Drinking Motives Questionnaire to develop and test their Gambling Motives Questionnaire (GMQ), which includes the subscales of gambling enhancement, social and coping motives. Dechant and Ellery (2010) suggest that the psychometric qualities of the GMQ when used on a population of moderate gamblers may be considerably strengthened with only minor

modifications such as the inclusion of a monetary motive item. Since gambling is rated as more available or accessible than alcohol and marijuana and less risky than alcohol and cigarettes (Wickwire, Whelan, West, Meyers, McCausland and Leullen 2007), Moore and colleagues developed the gambling accessibility scale which examines whether gambling accessibility and accessible retreat were adequate subscales for the new Gambling Access Scale (Moore, Thomas, Kyrios, Bates and Meredyth 2010). In a culturally-specific context, Tao and colleagues (2010) examine the gambling motives, attitudes and behaviors of Chinese gamblers in Macao, a special administrative region near Hong Kong that houses world-class casinos. They conducted focus groups and telephone interviews to develop their Gambling Motives, Attitudes and Behavior scale (Tao, Wu, Cheung and Tong 2010).

The variety and functionality of these gambling typologies and scales were initially used to inform the analyst when iteratively analyzing the online forum discussions by online gamblers (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Spiggle 1994; Brown, Kozinets and Sherry 2003). The next section will describe the how gambling has changed in the online environment.

Online Gambling Factors

To gamble online is rather simple. A prospective gambler needs only to register an online gambling account and log on to an online casino with any online gambling site. To activate an account, all one needs is to enter a name, mailing address (and valid email address) and most importantly, provide funds for an account. Funds are usually transferred from credit cards (so that play can begin immediately) or by mailing certified

checks or money orders. Once the funds are secured, the website operator allows the gambler to begin gambling in the online casino. Player losses simply decrease the amount in one's account, while any money won increases this amount (Thompson 2001).

Payment methods used for online gambling include the use of personal credit cards, family or business credit cards, debit cards, personal checks, wire transfers and bank transfers (Derevensky and Gupta 2007).

Mark Griffiths' vast body of online gambling research (Griffiths 1998, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2006) has elaborated that *accessibility*, *affordability*, *convenience*, *anonymity* and *asociability* as well as the structural characteristics of online gambling facilitate its use (Griffiths 2003). These listed factors benefit gamblers in the aversion they encounter when playing at traditional offline gambling venues such as casinos. Gamblers can enjoy the *accessibility* of the online gambling everywhere: at home, at school and even on their smart phones. In comparison to traditional betting in casinos, online gambling is quite *affordable* with bets as low as \$0.01. Online gambling is also *convenient* for gamblers as they can gamble in their own bedrooms without anyone even knowing. Also with use of online names, or avatars, online gambling is strengthens this *anonymity* and increases feelings of control, comfort and approval. In addition, these online names, or avatars, provide *asociability* thus averting a real social aspect involved with casino gambling.

Griffiths (2003) demonstrated how additional salient factors facilitate online gambling such as *escape*, *immersion*, *disinhibition*, *event frequency*, *interactivity* and *simulation*. Online gambling can present an emotional or mental *escape* from the stress and strain of reality. Further *escape* or *immersion* in online gambling can cause gamblers to lose track of time. The online environment facilitates *losing your inhibition* and this

can lead to a larger loss of money as well. The *pace* of online gambling is quick enough that a new game can begin as soon as every few seconds, so that the loss period and the time needed to reflect on losses is brief and thus, winnings can be re-gambled almost instantaneously (Griffiths 2003). In addition, online gambling enjoys an *interactivity* component that is psychologically rewarding as an active form of entertainment in comparison to television, which is a passive form of entertainment. Online gambling sites also offer practice sites or modes that *simulate* real gambling to prospective customers that can access these sites and play with no real money involved (Griffiths 2003).

Griffiths and Parke (2002) suggested that other more advanced developments are likely to facilitate online gambling including: (a) sophisticated gaming software, (b) integrated e-cash systems (e.g. PayPal), (c) multilingual sites, (d) increased realism (e.g. webcams, player/dealer avatars), (e) live remote wagering and (f) improving customer care systems. More recently, studies in the UK by Griffiths and Barnes (2008) introduced additional characteristics of online gambling that are impacting particularly student gamblers including familial influence, larger choice of online venues, peer group influence, demo/practice games, increased amount of gambling opportunities, flexibility, increased event frequencies, bonuses, smaller intervals between gambles and instant reinforcements and the ability to forget gambling losses by gambling again immediately (Griffiths and Barnes 2008). About 80% of online gamblers considered the online gambling as trustworthy (Griffiths and Barnes 2008). Online gamblers prefer to gamble with online sites who also had other separate corresponding offline gambling venues and more importantly, the majority of online gamblers considered online gambling easier to

conceal than offline gambling with about a third of respondents hiding their online gambling from family members (Griffiths and Barnes 2008).

In a similar Canadian study, Wood, Williams and Lawton (2007) conclude that those who gamble online may also prefer the pace and nature of online game-play as well as those who gamble online may also dislike the gaudy atmosphere and eclectic clientele at traditional offline venues such as casinos. A survey of 1920 online gamblers resulted in 4 main reasons why gamblers prefer online versus offline gambling: (1) convenience, comfort and ease, (2) aversion to clientele/atmosphere of land-based venues, (3) preference of pace and nature of online game-play and (4) potential for higher wins and lower expenditures online (Wood, Williams and Lawton 2007). Their exhaustive list of reasons for preferring online gambling versus offline gambling included: convenience, ease, comfort, distance from casino, privacy, dislike land-based clientele, dislike crowds, dislike noise, dislike smoke, high speed of game play, leisurely pace of game play, lower overall expenditure, fun, preference of interface, higher potential wins, safety concerns, lower secondary costs, aversion to casino atmosphere, land-based gambling is illegal and disability (Wood, Williams and Lawton 2007).

In a recent qualitative marketing study on online gambling, Cotte and Latour (2009) conducted image-based interviews with 30 Las Vegas gamblers. Only 5 of the gamblers interviewed were under 30 years old, with the average age of respondents being about 48. In their sample, 10 of the respondents were online gamblers and 20 were offline gamblers and they played a variety of games including both gambling games based on chance (e.g. slots) and gambling games based on skill (e.g. poker). Cotte and Latour's (2009) findings shed light on how the consumption experience of gambling changes as it moves from the

casino to the home. They suggest gambling moves: (1) from out of control (casino) to in control (at home), (2) from separation (casino and home life) to integration (gambling in home life) and (3) from conviviality (at casino with social connections between other players and employees) to battle (lack of physical presence and anonymity create a context where players are competitive, aggressive and rude) (Cotte and Latour 2009). They noted that most online gambling sites, like their offline land-based counterparts (i.e. casinos), used attractive brightly colored decor to evoke a spirit of conviviality, to inspire engagement and convey an arousing impression of pleasurable consumption (Cotte and Latour 2009).

Online gambling sites are known to use icons, chips, cards, tables, logos, signs, human images, banners, landscapes and pop-ups to cultivate a pleasurable atmosphere and comfortable environment. These features can communicate a mood that might be perceived by online gamblers as enjoyable and likeable. They also use a variety of promotional techniques, incentives and gaming features including deposit bonuses, reward programs, affiliate programs, free-rolls, practice games, free play programs and tutorials to entice beginners to hone skills and learn winning strategies and techniques. Tournaments, competitions and referral programs attract and retain seasoned, online poker players and these players in turn encourage others to join the fold.

Online gamblers differ from traditional casino gamblers, as online poker players in North America, have to gamble somewhat covertly in order to avert regulatory structures. Despite the regulatory issues in North America, online gambling is proliferating because of the advantages it offers economically, hedonically and

symbolically. The following section will distinguish poker as a unique game, a game of skill, different from other forms of gambling, online and offline.

Poker

Gambling games are categorized into two groups based on chance or skill.

Gambling games based on chance include lotteries, keno, craps, roulette, baccarat, bingo and slots. Gambling games based on skill include horse race betting, sports betting, blackjack and poker. For instance, while lotteries require a gambler to simply purchase a ticket and hope to win; poker, in contrast, involves skill in relation to your opponents' skill. Turner and Fritz (2002) concluded that less skilled players are often better off playing a game of chance than a game of skill.

The poker game that is the most popular amongst online poker players is No-Limit Texas Hold'em. Dubbed the Cadillac of poker, No-Limit Texas Hold'em is a famous variant of poker game. The simplicity of the rules alone of No-Limit Texas Hold'em allows beginners to adopt the game quickly and easily. In No-Limit Texas Hold'em, a single poker hand can influence a player to risk their entire stack of chips. Due to the social nature and control aspects of the game, No-Limit Texas Hold'em has significant social-psychological components (Siler 2009). The game play of No-Limit Texas Hold'em is structured as such: No-Limit Texas Hold'em is a popular poker game where up to 10 players can play at the same time. Dealers simply deal cards and handle the money while players play against each other. Each player is given two cards face down. The remaining cards are dealt face up in the middle of the table in succession (3 cards at first (the flop), then the fourth card (the turn) and then the fifth and last card (the river))

and these five cards are considered the community cards. Players make poker hands by creating the best five-card combination, or poker hand, of their own two cards and the five community cards. Each poker game has four rounds of betting increasing chances to bet as well as pot totals. Unlike gambling games based on chance, the exact odds of poker cannot be statistically quantified. In gambling games of chance like roulette and keno, the concrete mathematical disadvantage is readily proven. With poker, all the variables are not and cannot be known (Shead et. al. 2008).

It is evident that the online environment has redefined what poker and poker skills are all about. As a gambling game, poker is both competitive and social. It is game of both luck and skill and it presents poker players with numerous challenging strategic and interpersonal decisions (Siler 2009). Poker players understand that good poker players evaluate the probabilities, analyze their opponents, utilize deception (in the form of bluffs) and possess excellent money management and emotion management skills (Siler 2009). Experienced poker players analyze the way another player looks around the room and plays with their chips, the way their opponents' neck pulses and eyes light up when they see their cards as well as the way other poker players' talk, blink, gesture, sneeze, smile and act. These intricacies (and many more) of traditional offline poker rooms are eliminated online. Online poker relies on using pure statistical strategy when deciding which hands to play and how to play them. An experienced online poker player can beat their opponents and slowly gain a sizeable bankroll simply by deciding whether the hands they are playing and the bets they are making are statistically sound.

Parke, Griffiths and Parke (2005) examined poker as a transferable skill. Their

exploratory research uncovered skills that excellent poker player possess: critical evaluative, numerical, pragmatism, interpersonal, problem-solving, goal orientation, learning, higher-order analytic, strategic, flexibility, face management, deception, self-awareness and self-control skills (Parke, Griffiths and Parke 2005). Linnet and his colleagues (2010) classified poker players as inexperienced and experienced based on their estimation bias and decision bias. They suggest that experienced poker players make better decisions in comparison to inexperienced poker players (Linnet, Gebauer, Shaffer, Mouridsen and Meller 2010). Using *Poker Tracker* software, Siler (2009) examined 27 million hands of Poker of all types of stakes (small and high). His results show that competitive advantages, and therefore player skills, attenuate as one move ups from small to medium to high stake games (Siler 2009). These studies suggest that poker is a game that requires skill and that winning in overall games played is based on strategy, skill, patience, experience and some luck (Parke, Griffiths and Parke 2005; Siler 2009; Linnet et. al. 2010).

Using focus groups in Sweden, Wood and Griffiths (2008) uncovered motivations of two subgroups of online poker players: casual players and professional players. Casual players played because of the convenience, easy adoption, low stakes, enjoyment, and sociability of online poker (Wood and Griffiths 2008). Professional poker players played for monetary incentive. They used psychological tactics and played several tables at once (Wood and Griffiths 2008). Griffiths and colleagues (2010) conducted an online questionnaire on online gambling success factors with university students. Those likely to have financial success were: (1) disciplined and avoided spending over their monthly gambling budget; (2) played at higher stake poker games; (3) knew that poker was a

game of skill and (4) perceived themselves to be more skillful (Griffiths et. al. 2010). Steven and Young (2010) examined the socioeconomic status and demographic of chance and skill game players. Notably, respondents under 35 years old were significantly over-represented in the high skill, low chance group (Stevens and Young 2010). Another study specifically examined the differences between poker players and non-poker players and concluded that poker players were more likely to be male, younger, have higher score on an index of alcohol abuse, spend more time gambling and gamble more frequently compared to non-poker players (Shead, Hodgins and Scharf 2008). Most who participate in online gambling were more likely to be male between the ages of 18–34 years (Griffiths et. al. 2009). Other recent poker research has indicated that male college students are at high risk for online gambling problems because of its accessibility, their technological sophistication and their flexible time schedules (Derevensky and Gupta 2007). These aforementioned poker studies (Griffiths et. al. 2009; Derevensky and Gupta 2007; Shead, Hodgins and Scharf 2008; Stevens and Young 2010) suggest online poker players are young, male, tech-savvy and educated.

Online poker is one of the fastest growing forms of online gambling (Griffiths, Parke, Wood and Parke 2006). One of the largest sites, PartyPoker.com, operates at an annual financial level on par with most prosperous casino chains in Las Vegas, Nevada. Smart marketing and sharp advertising has played a significant role in re-branding online poker as an exciting experience (McMullan and Kervin 2010). There also has been a recent increase in the popularity of live poker: in 2000, the World Series of Poker main event had a mere 512 entrants and by 2006, the main event had 8,773 entrants.

This shift in gambling game preference has also caused an increased interest in poker research. There are many reasons why online poker has increased in popularity including (1) poker being shown through various media, (2) playing for free or on practice sites, (3) playing for low stakes, (4) accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week and (5) the celebrity endorsements (Griffiths et al. 2006; Wood, William and Lawton 2007). Online poker has many advantages in comparison to offline gambling such as convenience, source of income, playing for free, the sociability, and ability to multi-task while gambling (Griffiths, Parke, Wood and Rigbye 2010). Some disadvantages that online poker has include losing income, lack of trust, lack of regulation, inability to read opponents, electronic money and the loss of time (Griffiths et. al. 2010).

Online poker, distinct from other forms of online gambling, is promoted using a plethora of aggressive promotional techniques including huge pots, allowances, consumer goods, exotic holidays, easy wins, showcasing top prize winners, celebrity and professional endorsements, bonuses, incentives, commissions, free games, practice sites, training programs, peer endorsements and depictions that winning at poker is possible and likely to be life changing.

Online poker is also highly attractive to youth. Younger males have grown up with colorful and fast-paced video games. They have the knowledge, technological know-how and accessibility to the Net that makes it an ideal venue for the younger generations to gamble online. Online poker, like online gaming, can relieve boredom and provide a potential exciting means of entertainment. Structural characteristics like those featured within video games may promote initiation, development and maintenance of online

gambling. Structural characteristics that influence gambling frequency and expenditure in slot machine gambling can be compared to the rewarding elements in video gaming (King, Delfabbro and Griffiths 2009). King and colleagues (2009) developed a taxonomy on video gaming which includes five features: (1) social features: such as leader boards and a support networks, (2) manipulation and control features: such as save features, (3) narrative and identity features: such as avatar creation and storytelling devices, themes and genres, (4) reward and punishment features: includes event frequency and event duration and (5) presentation features: which is the visual and auditory presentation of video games (King, Delfabbro and Griffiths 2009). These structural features of video games are also features that facilitate online poker. Similar to the demographics of online poker players (Griffiths et. al. 2009; Stevens and Young 2010; Shead, Hodgins and Scharf 2008), Griffiths gathered primary data on the basic demographic factors of online video game players. His results showed that 81% of online gamers were male and that the mean age of players was 28 years (Griffiths, Davies and Chappell 2004).

In sum, online poker is a gambling game of skill not based entirely on chance like roulette or keno. In comparison to other gambling games, online poker is increasing in popularity and social acceptability (media exposure and government cooperation) and this subsequent increase in popularity has increased prevalence and use, increasing gamblers chances and opportunities to reap large monetary rewards.

The background literature from research on consumption communities, traditional gambling typologies, online gambling factors, and poker research that was reviewed helped provide a rich understanding of the issues pertinent to this research. In the section that follows we describe netnography, the method used to select and collect data, and the

dramaturgical framework, which is used to organize, analyze and interpret our netnographic findings.

Methodology

The methodology here applied the socio-cultural procedure of constant comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967) which included (1) netnography and (2) multi-staged data collection which was iterative and guided by emergent design (Lincoln and Guba 1985). This method allowed the author to build theory grounded in data (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Qualitative researchers have sometimes stopped short of making theoretical contributions while settling for identifying themes and patterns (Spiggle 1994). It is often misunderstood that consumer ethnographers study consumption contexts when in fact they study consumption contexts to generate new constructs, concepts and theoretical insights, extending extant theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005). This research design allowed hypotheses, themes, and inferences to develop from naturalistic observation of forum discussions (Wallendorf and Belk 1989; Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993). It challenged the author to seek a construct or concept (i.e. illicit commoditizing) that is transferable to other research settings and that extends beyond the specific context studied here (Wallendorf and Belk 1989; Spiggle 1994).

In this manner, data was continually analyzed and collected as themes emerged, which was then used to guide and inform further data collection (Celsi et. al. 1993). This iterative process permitted for movement back and forth between data collection and data inference which aid in induction, or the development of concepts from the data (Spiggle

1994). Here, an iterative process was applied to online ethnographic study of an illicit consumption community: online poker players.

Drawing from anthropological methods, ethnographies are not uncommon when studying illicit communities (Venkatesh 1997; Murphy and Venkatesh 2006) or gambling communities. Griffiths (2010) conducted a non-participant observation study on slot machine players in the UK to develop a typology of these particular gamblers (Griffiths 2010). Lalander (2006) completed an ethnographic study on Swedish electronic gambling machine players to also develop a gambling typology. He discusses the gambling types developed by earlier typologies and relates those traditional typologies to their ethnographic findings. He also developed new gambler types and strongly suggests that gambler typologies developed by previous academic and empirical researchers need to be updated in the new online gambling environments (Lalander 2006). Parke and Griffiths (2006) also applied an online ethnographical research design, essentially a netnography, to study poker skill development in an online poker player community and to examine the factors associated with problem online gambling. Blevins and Holt (2009), ethnographers who studied an online community of *johns* (sex deviants), suggest as is with most illicit online consumption communities, online poker players are a difficult subculture to examine by traditional methods. Wood and Griffiths (2007) suggest that collecting online data from online populations might be highly advantageous. They recommend online research methods as appropriate methods for online poker players (Wood and Griffiths 2007).

This study employs a netnographic and dramaturgical approach to this research of illicit consumption communities. This research requires spending substantial time

immersed in an online poker forum reading posts of the consumers whose behavior is under study as prescribed by netnography. Kozinets (2002, 2006, 2008, 2010) is credited for his efforts to conceptualize 'netnography,' or online ethnography. He explains that online communities' discourses can be investigated for market and consumer research purposes. Netnographic studies have been used successfully in consumer research and some of the excellent applications include Kozinets' study of Star Trek fans (2002, 2006), Cova and Pace's study of a Nutella community (2006) and Giesler's studies on the Napster music downloading community (Giesler 2006, 2008).

The Internet is rich with detailed, complex textual content that is invaluable to consumer researchers interested in specific experiences of particular individuals, in this case, those who trade and consume illicit commodities (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Griffiths 2010; Kozinets 2010). Online poker players share experiences, perceptions, beliefs, fears and feelings online. They utilize interactive forums to discuss gambling and gambling-related topics. These forums are often dedicated to specific types of gambling (i.e. poker) and forum topics range from hints, tips and strategies, to concerns about addiction, discussions around poker legislation, beginner poker, off-topic discussions as well as videos and pokercasts (Wood and Griffiths 2007). Membership and participation in such online poker player communities provided players with the opportunity to benefit from acquiring poker gambling knowledge, skill, strategy and support (Moisio and Beruchashvili 2010). Fundamentally, this online community engages in all of the twelve practices outlined in consumption community practice theory that were described earlier (Schau et. al. 2009).

Textual content in these online poker forums contain naturalistic data that can be collected without identifying oneself as a researcher (Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1988; Wallendorf and Belk 1989; Wood and Griffiths 2007). In this study, the author did not participate in any online discussion nor did he gather information in the form of online surveys or email interviews. The form of web-based research used here is considered is passive and unobtrusive. Privacy issues become more complicated if the researcher is actually involved in online participant observation. These online forums are a medium where online poker players can elicit rich and detailed data in sensitive areas such as gambling motives and illicit commoditizing (Griffiths 2010). On these online poker forums, online poker players lose inhibition and thus social desirability is lessened. Consumers minimize their fear of speaking honestly and they deliver self-reports with higher validity (Griffiths 2010).

Online communication is known to lead to more emotional discourse than interviews. The participants of these online forums explore things they cannot or dare not say in public conversations with non-members of their tribe or community (Schau et. al. 2009). To describe it concretely, using anorexia nervosa as an example: it is likely that an anorexic will divulge personal consumption information to another anorexic in her or his anonymous online forum rather than a trained psychiatrist someone who isn't facing the same problems (Lapinski 2009).

When unobtrusive access to informants is difficult, netnographic procedures can be applied in a cost-effective analysis of cross consumer online-communications (Langer and Beckman 2005). As it may be difficult to obtain similar, *untainted* data in another

way, a non-participant observational approach rather than a participatory approach was administered. This approach is a relevant choice when analyzing communities where access based on conventional research methods such as interviews, focus groups, experiments and surveys is difficult or inappropriate (Langer and Beckman 2005). Netnography can also be used to conduct covert research on sensitive research topics (Langer and Beckman 2005). And as a qualitative research tool, it can help generate theory about new and emerging areas (i.e. illicit consumption communities) (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Kozinets 2010). Thus due to these aforementioned advantages, this current study took an unobtrusive and non-participant observational approach to netnography (Kozinets 2010).

To recap, guided in part by the background literature (consumption community practice theory, gambling typologies, online gambling factors and poker research) presented earlier, this research sought to understand what the individual motivations of online poker players were and what this illicit consumption community meant in the broader scheme of illicit commoditizing. In the context of this study we sought to: (1) determine and understand the motives of online poker players, and in doing so (2) elaborate upon the factors that facilitate illicit consumption communities online.

The first stage of this study comprised of a 1-year non-participant observational analysis of three independent online poker communities: *TwoPlusTwo.com*, *DeucesCracked.com* and *PocketFives.com*. The second stage reports data collected, analyzed and interpreted over approximately 120 hours of observation on the online forum: *TwoPlusTwo.com*, during the period between March 1, 2011 – June 30, 2011.

The *TwoPlusTwo* forum is accessible 24 hours a day from anywhere. The forum and its members were unaware of the author's status as a researcher. In fact, there was probably little to no way for forum members to detect the presence of the primary author whilst lurking the forums. The research began with the 'big net' approach where the researcher searched for interesting interactions in as many diverse topics and threads as possible. An exhaustive list of topics was developed and refined after successive readings of the data. The author generated themes regarding specific behavioral concepts based on an accumulative analysis of community discussions. In all, online poker discussions were observed, collected and analyzed according to netnographic procedures (Kozinets 2010) and interpreted through a dramaturgical framework (Moisio and Arnould 2005).

In sum, to observe, monitor, collect and analyze data, we followed the procedures of a netnography recommended by Kozinets (2010)—specifically, *entrée*, *data collection*, *analysis*, and *interpretation*. The following section will describe the methodological stages and procedures of netnographic research: including *entree*, *data collection*, *analysis and interpretation* (Kozinets 2010), and is followed by a description of the dramaturgical framework we use to organize our interpretive findings.

Entrée (Kozinets 2010)

The first step in a netnography is identifying preliminary research questions. Our preliminary research question was: What are the motivations of online poker players? To examine this research question and in order gain deeper insights into current consumption motives, concerns, and experiences of online poker players, we began by examining all available online venues. Initially, websites devoted to online poker playing were analyzed using traditional search engines (e.g. Google). Over several hundreds of online poker

websites were analyzed that ranged from poker rooms, poker player blogs, poker forums to poker articles. Popular poker website services of the time included *Ultimate Bet*, *Poker Stars*, *Absolute Poker*, *Full Tilt Poker*, *Party Poker*, *Ultimate Bets*, *Pkr.com*, *Cake Poker* and *Bodog*. After exhaustively surveying all relevant online poker websites, sites consisting of online groups, forums, popular press articles and independent websites such as blogs were identified. Many of these online gambling sites and forums were cluttered—with immense amounts of data. Eventually, a vibrant poker community, *TwoPlusTwo.com*, was selected as the source of data after observation of several online forums over a period from 2009-2010. *TwoPlusTwo.com* was identified as the primary community of interest as it best met all six recommended criteria of being relevant, active, interactive, substantial, heterogeneous, and data-rich (Kozinets 2010). Non-participant observation online has been ongoing since September 2009. As all with other online forums, on this website all contributions are accessible with simple registration. Therefore, the forum and its content can be characterized as public communication. In summary, the cultural *entrée* to these forums corresponds with Kozinets' (2010) recommendations.

Data collection (Kozinets 2010)

As part of an ongoing research project on online poker players, the author followed the aforementioned online forum and downloaded noteworthy online discussions during 4 months in early 2011 (and performed follow-up data collection in summer 2011). Downloading notable online posts is akin to purposive sampling in market-oriented ethnography (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Brown, Kozinets and Sherry 2003). The investigator began with the 'big-net' approach and collected a diversity of discussions as

he intended the theoretical sampling to focus on analytic depth in providing rich exemplars of individual motives and illicit commoditizing within an illicit consumption community. Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative processes allowed theoretical sampling, or purposive sampling (Lincoln and Guba 1985), and the observation of online discourses was guided by our research objective.

Online discourses are the data that are automatically transcribed suited to the procedures of analysis and interpretation (Kozinets 2010). Data gathering included the direct copy from the computer-mediated communications (CMC) of online poker player community members and observations and interactions of the community and its members. A large portion of the data for this study is based off the posts and comments of poker players that post on the *TwoPlusTwo.com* forum. The forums consist of extremely large sets of data whereby copies of all the computer-mediated communications held within these forums would fill literally millions of pages of text.

As a researcher who has been immersed in the context, data was chosen on themes that were salient issues. The researcher here focused on threads that had many references to motives, goals and objectives and illicit consumption or commoditizing. Many discussions were read and reread and reflexive notes and records were taken (Spiggle 1994). Data was saved as certain discussions and threads were chosen as highly relevant (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). Focus was narrowed to particular themes and sub-themes of online poker players and illicit consumption communities that were theoretically interesting and relevant to our central focus, such as those relating to illicit consumption community practices, online poker player motives and public policy implications. Examination of a smaller set of discussions that were previously identified

was conducted thereafter and relevant discussions were examined more closely. In sum, the threads, discussions and posts were collected into one large Microsoft Word document. In total, 1120 pages in 12-point, double-spaced, Times New Roman font was collected. This manageable amount of text was hermeneutically analyzed (Thompson 1997).

In regards to this study, the author compiled the necessary data using multiple data collection methods:

- (1) compilation of sociological, anthropological, legal, public health and marketing studies on consumption communities, gambling typologies, online gambling and poker research
- (2) Repeated online browsing of the *TwoPlusTwo*, *DeucesCracked* and *PocketFives* online poker forums for one year,
- (3) Non-participant online observation of *TwoPlusTwo* for four months (March 1st, 2011-June 30th, 2011) following community discussions in relevant sections and
- (4) Online compilation of more than 100 pictures, videos posted by forum users

Data analysis and interpretation (Kozinets 2010)

During the netnography, the author preserved observational field notes on the discussions of online poker players (Spiggle 1994). These reflexive memos include insights, ideas, and inferences that the investigator generated. In general, the researcher sought to understand the drives for online poker playing. Textual analyses of the above-mentioned online venue, the *TwoPlusTwo* poker forum, was conducted and ‘illicit commoditizing,’ in terms of professional poker players loan sharking to other disadvantaged gamblers, within the community was a common practice recorded from

observation of their online discussions (Kassarijan 1977). The author identified key patterns of meaning that emerge across these illicit consumption stories and discussions on these forums as expressed by different online poker players. To achieve this pattern identification, an iterative process was followed.

After several months of data collection, a focused review of the current marketing, sociological, psychological and anthropological theories of gambling was conducted. These readings were integrated with readings on consumption community practice theory, traditional gambling typologies, online gambling factors and poker. Patterns were in part informed by the background literature and the analyst derived broader conceptual and public policy implications from the analysis of these discussions (Thompson 1997). Comments were read twice over to see if any main themes emerge from the responses to the primary research question and emergent concept. The iterative collection, analysis and interpretation revealed interesting and contributive motives of online poker players and insights on illicit consumption communities (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). The netnography demanded that the data provided an empirical ground for the etic representation developed through the investigator's analysis. The netnography therefore went beyond its expectation of merely categorizing emic understandings of a consumption community (i.e. motives of online poker players) and data collection halted when theoretical insight (i.e. online illicit commoditizing factors) was built from emic perspectives (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994).

The salient topics of these forum discussions were read through several times to gather relevant information to strengthen provisional themes. Emergent categories and themes were altered on successive readings to their final analytical form and definition.

The data was structured and summarized. Thereafter, it was explained and interpreted through a dramaturgical framework. Thus, the analysis and interpretation of data corresponds with Kozinets (2010) recommendations. The research process was thus iterative (Spiggle 1994) and hermeneutic in nature (Thompson 1997). The netnographic findings that follow are rich descriptions of exemplars of interesting textual discourses found on these online forums (Kozinets 2010) told within a dramaturgical framework (Moisio and Arnould 2005).

By constructing a thick description (Geertz 1973), the author relates his understanding of the emic point of view (individual motives of online poker players) to the etic cultural meaning found within this context (illicit commoditizing) (Wallendorf and Brucks 1993). The concept of 'illicit commoditizing' emerged as theoretically relevant when examining conflicts between marketplace actors on the forum after a dramatic regulatory shift occurred on April 15th, 2011 (Belk et. al. 1988).

All told, our approach falls within the procedures of modern mainstream qualitative inquiry (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Thompson 1997; Brown, Sherry and Kozinets 2003). In the case of this current study on online poker players, our research purpose is to determine the motivations of online poker players and the factors that facilitate illicit consumption communities and commoditizing online.

For interpretation purposes, the drama metaphor is used as a model to represent how illicit commoditizing and its system works online; two conflicts between marketplace actors are portrayed as the drama performances in this context (Grove and Fisk 1992; Moisio and Arnould 2005). The section that follows will provide a succinct description of the dramaturgical framework that is utilized in this study to outline the

netnographic findings. The dramaturgical interpretation of the netnographic findings will follow thereafter.

Dramaturgical Framework

Dramaturgical modeling is common in qualitative market research (Celsi et. al. 1993; Giesler 2008). Researchers (Grove and Fisk (1992)) have suggested that non-participant observation is well suited to dramaturgical analysis. Indeed, upon immersion in the process by the researcher, it was found that this framework was well suited to represent how the illicit commoditization of the online poker experience could be portrayed (Goffman 1959; Grove and Fisk 1992).

Moisio and Arnould (2005) outline an innovative dramaturgical framework that provides a rich theoretical framework for understanding consumption experiences. They delineate the dramaturgical framework and distinguish the differences between the concepts of the *drama structure* (formal components of drama), the *drama interaction* (consumer roles in performances) and the *drama content* (the performance). These three concepts will be used here to describe two events (Act I and Act II) of illicit commoditizing within the online illicit consumption community of online poker players (Moisio and Arnould 2005).

The *drama structure* is defined as the set of the theatre performance including the *setting*, the *actors*, the *audience* or any other formal components. The *drama interaction* includes the level of consumer involvement (passive to active) through marketplace roles that shape, direct or structure the performance (Moisio and Arnould 2005). Consumption community practice would suggest that the more active the community is, then the more active the marketplace actors are (Schau et. al. 2009). The performance is defined as the

drama content, which highlights and portrays the acts that support the conceptual development of this study: that of illicit commoditizing. The *drama content* organizes the conflicts into coherent performances (Moisio and Arnould 2005).

Dramaturgical Findings

This section reports a Geertzian thick description (1973) of the *TwoPlusTwo* forum including the *drama structure*, the *drama interaction* and the *drama content* of the illicit consumption community of online poker players. First, a description of the setting (the *TwoPlusTwo* forum), its audience and actors is reported as the *drama structure*. Within the description of the actors, offered is an elaboration on the individual motives of online poker players and a concise description of the potential negative aspects of online poker. A section entitled the *drama interaction* follows and narrates the roles of actors that compose this illicit consumption community. Lastly, the *drama content* section offers a depiction of two particular events (Act I and Act II). The drama that unfolds here is two rich exemplars of illicit commoditizing within the online poker community. Following the dramaturgical analysis, the salient factors that facilitate illicit commoditizing within online illicit consumption communities are presented.

Drama structure: the formal components of the theatrical performance

The drama structure includes the formal components of the theatrical performance including the *setting*, the *audience* and the *actors*. The description of the *actors* will include an interpretation of the individual motives of online poker players followed by a brief analysis of the potential negative issues of online poker play (*segregation*).

The Setting: The *TwoPlusTwo* Forum

TwoPlusTwo is not an actual online poker service where one can wager money and play poker but it is chiefly a website where experienced online poker players convene to discuss online poker, poker strategy and poker-related topics. The non-physical setting in this study (*TwoPlusTwo.com*) includes the online environment or stage where these two acts of illicit commoditizing unfold (Grove and Fisk 1992). The website is positioned to attract a specific clientele. The setting design is simplistic and the décor consists of traditional casino colors of black, white, red and green with minimal outside advertisements. Throughout the discussions in the forums, it is inferred that the community members have formed favorable impressions of this forum (Grove and Fisk 1992):

“The coolest thing I found about this website is that it essentially is the poker community. Many top pros, whom are millionaires, post here regularly. The players the fish see on television, post here regularly amongst the low limit grinders. It's also amazing to know how many professional players there actually are in the world. There are people that I play against at 25nl who are pros, relying on this as an income, which is crazy to think about.

Among my discoveries on this site was also the fact that poker is not rigged, I just sucked... Then I realized that when people say you should spend "x" amount of time reading *twoplustwo* to better your game, that's not what they meant. I spent a good amount of time reading the beginners forum, the micro stakes NL forum and the theory forum. After reading these forums I realized that the amount of intelligence of these forums is pretty much unparalleled by any other forum or pocket of the Internet I've ever been apart of. It amazed me how by using math you can come to a conclusion of folding/calling/raising based on my equity vs. certain ranges. This is when I started to take poker more seriously and try to better my game.” (RobFurha, 20, male, 1732 posts)

This young, male online poker player describes the forum for what it essentially is: an online community of online poker players who discuss to acquire skill in aspiration of becoming a professional poker player. The setting, the *TwoPlusTwo* online forum, is utilized by this specific subculture of online poker players to their advantage. Online poker players remark their discovery of the *TwoPlusTwo* forum as a milestone in their

career (Schau et. al. 2009). The *TwoPlusTwo* online forum is the leading poker forum with frequent participation.

TwoPlusTwo is a private company founded and owned by professional poker player and statistician Mason Malmuth. In addition to running a popular poker website, *TwoPlusTwo* Publishing has sold over two million poker strategy books under 39 different titles. The website also hosts blogs from six professional poker players. Most significantly, the *TwoPlusTwo* poker website operates an online forum for discussing poker, gambling and related topics. This forum is where the company also publishes the *TwoPlusTwo* monthly electronic magazine and the weekly *TwoPlusTwo* Pokercasts. *TwoPlusTwo* forum topics include poker, other gambling games, and general gambling theory and various musings on life.

According to Bigboards.com, a website that provides statistics and rankings of the top online forums, the *TwoPlusTwo* forum has over 290,000 registered members with over 40 million posts on almost one million unique topics (as of August 2011). It is ranked as the 30th most active online forum and as the most active online gambling forum on the World Wide Web. Of the 290,000 members, about half log on from the United States, followed by Germany (20%), United Kingdom (5%) and Canada (3.6%).

The Audience

This online community lists almost 290,000 participants. Here, the comments and posts of online poker players affect the outcome of the dramatic events (Grove and Fisk 1992). Beyond the regulars who frequent the forums and post comments (usually 10,000-20,000 total posts per day), it is suggested that lurkers make up the majority of viewers of these online communities and that perhaps a majority of online poker players that visit

the website, seek answers on *TwoPlusTwo* without even actually publicly registering, logging in or posting (Nonnecke and Preece 2003; Preece, Nonnecke and Andrews 2004). The *TwoPlusTwo* forum is indefinitely a powerful venue for acquiring knowledge on everything poker. Its vast influence is difficult to quantify.

The Actors

The online poker players that frequent this forum generally visit this forum to gain knowledge and acquire skill to improve their poker strategy. Most of the forum participants, often self-titled ‘twoplustwoers’ or ‘degens’ (short for degenerates), intend to supplement their present income or replace their present job with online poker play. As previously stated in the review of online gambling research, the online poker forum participants here are typically young, educated and tech-savvy male gamblers. A male, professional player and avid user of the *TwoPlusTwo* forum thoroughly depicts the initiation and adoption traditionally experienced by young poker novices:

“Most of us took up poker during university as a way of killing those extra hours at night when no parties, beer pong contests, or Mario Kart battles were taking place. It fit so well into our schedules; play any time we liked, for as long as we wanted, squeezing it in before, after, and even during class (if you count skipping!). If a buddy of yours sends you a text about a party that’s just starting, no problem. ‘Sit out next big blind’, empty your pee bottle, and throw on that dirty shirt that you forgot to wash again, but hey, it’s ok, the games were too good to leave. Somewhere along the line, we started making money... One day ... we notice something; our hourly, after hundreds of thousands of hands is somewhere around \$40 per hour. We open up windows calculator, punch in the figures, and the arithmetic tells the story – that we could make around \$70k a year playing poker. You begin to recall conversations you’ve had about careers after university, with the average salary being a mere \$35k a year. Thoughts begin to cross your mind. “Why work a 9-5, static, freedom-lacking and soul sucking job when I can work my own hours, make twice as much money doing something I love? ... This story is very familiar to many of us. It bears resembles aspiring athlete, other people given a gift that allows them to earn a higher than average salary. Athletes grind too; they train to get better, move up a level, compete in a stronger field.” (ArturiusX, male, 19,075 posts)

This narrative chronicles the general path a twoplustwoer takes in their young adulthood.

Although there are of course exceptions and anomalies, the forum participants are normally male, post-secondary educated and technologically sophisticated. It is generally discussed amongst twoplustwoers that they have a particular personality type. Often, they are self-described as lonely, moody, depressed, bipolar, introverted and unsociable in the real world and they tend to cling to the twoplustwoer subculture online. They habitually mention that online poker players', especially twoplustwoers', minds work differently than recreational players and they utilize the forums to challenge each other. One poker player insists:

“Online players have the reputation of being the best because there are so many resources for them to learn from, and they learn at an exponential rate. I know it's hard for you to imagine some kid feverishly grinding away at 25/50c all day could be any match for you, but you need to accept the fact that it's an entirely different genre of players.” (Chivas Regal, 4 posts)

This genre of devoted players share strategies, offer advice, create software, use expertise all in order to take their opponents money in online poker play. Sklansky, a well-known professional poker player, divulges on the skill factor of poker and an over-arching belief that the marketplace actors have within this community:

“Basically, the skill is assigning probabilities and assigning thoughts. Although, the cards that are dealt cannot be changed, assigning to the cards the chances that they will win is no easy task. You not only have to figure out the mathematical chances of winding up with the best hand, you need also come up with chances that you or your opponent might fold a hand for a bet that would have otherwise won. And then after doing that, you need to translate your results into the best decision as to whether and how much to bet, raise, or possibly check or fold. In other words, you must somehow come up with the chances that you think your hand will win, the chances that you think your opponent is assigning to his hand, and integrate all of that in to the best poker play. If you can't do these things well, you will lose fairly quickly to those who can.”

Twoplustwoers are thus a subculture of online poker players that exhibit interesting motives. Moreover, they leverage their current online position when trading illicitly. In the section that follows, an abbreviated typology of twoplustwoers interprets the

individual motives of online poker players. Three dichotomies (*recreation and occupation*; *status quo and reputation* and *integration and segregation*) are discussed as the salient motives of online poker players. Online poker players in this forum may fall on either side or somewhere in the middle of these dyads.

Recreation and occupation

Online poker sites often convey online poker as a potential replacement for a typical nine-to-five job. They deliver messages that playing online poker is considered ‘overtime hours’ and that poker players can generate income in the form of ‘generous commissions,’ ‘fabulous bonuses’ or ‘additional budgets.’ In practice, this has led to many online poker players considering online poker as a “job” that requires serious attention and dedication (Wood and Griffiths 2008). A Hopley and Nicki study of online poker players had 19% of their sample earning their living solely through online Texas Hold’em poker and that a further 15% of their sample supplemented their incomes via online Texas Hold’em play (Hopley and Nicki 2010).

Percolating on this stage is an ongoing debate between the marketplace actors discussing what exactly defines a ‘professional poker player?’ Is it hours, hands, games, money won, or another measure that can quantify what defines ‘professional’ in terms of an online poker playing? In general, the analysis of these discussions has shown that most online poker players who participate on this forum use online poker as a means of generating income. Whether they play part-time, full-time or overtime (i.e. after their day job) differs depending on their level of engagement. With increased volume, online players patiently win small pots and can earn a decent living. Online poker has become a game where anyone can gain experience and get skilled enough to consistently win.

Online poker players are often motivated by the stories they hear about average players (at times their friends, family members, co-workers or other twoplustwoers) striking it big on the Internet. Some posters claim they play for recreational purposes and others insist that online poker is their sole means of income. On this stage, playing professionally is an often-discussed, subjective issue with no precise answer. Typical discussions around this topic included poker players deliberating on their version of what certifies a poker player as professional: "'pro" can mean someone whose primary source of income is poker....it doesn't have to mean famous poker player" (pezbaby, female, 571 posts) or "I have noticed that most pros have been playing at least 3 years." (Leonardo101, male, 318 posts)

Online poker is definitely a source of employment for a large portion of these forum participants and many tell 'rags to riches' narratives documenting their role transition from hobbyist to professional (Schau et. al. 2009): "Anyways, wanted to start this new thread to chronicle my move from a winning part time player to become a volume whore who is destroying the games as a full time player." (BAE Ventures, Blake, male, Illinois, 1904 posts)

The actors here tend to play long sessions (from 5-17 hours per day), playing up to 24 tables simultaneously. Twoplustwoers play on a variety of stakes (from micro stakes of \$0.01 to exuberant \$1000 stakes) and play heads-up (one-on-one) or on a table against up to ten opponents (full ring). Although debated throughout the forum, it is often suggested that a 5-8 hour session is optimal, multi-tabling 6-8 tables simultaneously with 6 players maximum on each table. One player suggests: "The best approach imo is to learn the best/ most profitable days/times to play and create a "work" type schedule

around that. I play on average 50 hours a week. My intent is to play 8hr sessions each day I play.” (NineDollars, male, Cincinnati, 53 posts)

Online poker players call their profession ‘a grind.’ “It’s ridiculous the amount of hours u have to put in.” (IamPro, 13106 posts) Professional poker players are grinders who work long hours slaving in front of an illuminated computer screen, risking not only their wealth but their mental health as well.

“Grinding is not much fun, but you may find it hard to put in the hours. Many otherwise successful players fail at playing professionally because they cannot force themselves to stick to a routine and put in the hours without a boss or other authority figure looking over their shoulders. With a regular job at least the routine forces you to get out, interact with people and manage your time.” (MathEconomist, male, 276 posts).

Some professional poker players regret their lifestyle choice and suggest poker remain recreational:

“twice as bad as laboring, long long ass days grinding, eating poorly, sleeping patterns fucked fucked up, emotions affected by swings variance and bad beats. Its not lifestyle everyone thinks it is. Get another job and live a normal life. play poker for fun whenever you want, playing as a profession takes the fun out of it.” (deegerwoods, male, 275 posts)

But it seems that as with many professions, only those who acquire experience and skill tend to succeed and prosper:

“My point is you MUST look at this and approach it just like any other job. Playing for an hour here and 2 hours there isn't going to work in the long run. You have to maximize each win and minimize each loss... Playing poker professionally is just like any other career, you will be as successful as you allow yourself to be... Discipline and bankroll management are the two MOST important traits of a successful player.” (NineDollars, male, Cincinnati, 53 posts)

In the next section, three aspects of professional poker players will be interpreted from the dialogues of the actors: they have *skill*, have an *exit strategy* and have *ambition*.

Their *skill* includes the combination of various traits, techniques and strategies. Of all the traits that online poker players consider to be significant to a professional’s

success, the traits mentioned repeatedly within this context are *discipline*, *emotional management*, *bankroll management* and *technological adeptness*. *Discipline* includes proper work ethic and a willingness to learn through experience: “I might add, that the thing that works best for me, in the sense that it gives me temporary confidence in my game, is studying a lot - reading, analyzing videos, reviewing hands, opponents and making precise notes post-session, etc.” (Killer Hare, Warsaw, Poland, 79 posts) Online poker players often recommend books, instructional videos, pokercasts and other series that successful, professional poker players have created (e.g. the Harrington books or the *DeucesCracked* videos). Poker theory is a comprehensive field on its own with various researchers, statisticians and practitioners contributing knowledge and strategies all in order to understand the game of poker. And in the end, if you lose your money, “Consider your losses tuition, and start learning to play the game correctly.” (Nerdrage, PA, 1629 posts) To learn, some advise to play “5 games a day... until you can firmly grasp concepts. Otherwise it is just a case of bad decisions, bad beats, tilt, give up, rinse and repeat.” (razor25, male, 86 posts)

After poker players develop skill from *discipline*, they should develop *emotional management skills*. During play, poker players should keep a balanced mind despite if unbelievable losses occur, what insiders fittingly call ‘bad beats,’ and refrain from emotional unbalance caused by ‘tilting.’ ‘Tilt,’ in poker parlance, is an emotional state that every professional poker player admits dealing with on a frequent basis especially after an unexplainable loss or ‘bad beat.’ Tilt is emotional confusion that results in adoption of a less optimal strategy of over-aggressive play:

“I don't think there is anyway of avoiding tilting. It's an emotional state and taking a break from the table is the healthiest way to deal with it into your logical state comes

back. A friend told me after I gave him a bad beat story that there's no way I can play poker when I am angry and in tilt. It causes irrational decisions and you don't want to be in that state when you are at the table. All the hard-gained money you accumulated with rational thought disappears easily with tilted irrational actions.” (dlam, male, 40 posts)

If a poker player possesses *discipline* and *emotional management*, *bankroll management* (BRM) is another skill that is effective to increase income. Actors suggest playing with a bankroll that is 30-50 buy-ins of the specific poker game you intend to play. The higher the stakes you play online, the better the players get. “The reason why playing with such BRM is suggested is because the higher your skill level compared to the rest of the field, the less variance will affect you. If you are barely beating the limit you are at, your swings will tend to be bigger.” (semesa, 217 posts) Therefore, to be successful, you must be a couple steps above the average player at the stakes you choose to play.

Beyond *discipline*, *emotional* and *bankroll management skills*, *technological tactfulness* helps online poker players gain an advantage as well. Some player multi-table their poker sessions: “First learn how to play, then start adding up tables. Playing more tables lowers your win rate but there is a point where your \$/hour will be the max, that's the number of tables you should play. It starts to get easier with time.” (Ten shin zaga, 1046 posts) Poker players typically play six tables or more and improve their hourly rate without the need of playing higher stakes. Professionals decisively select their stakes because it is most likely that higher stake tables house other professional players. Lower stakes tables probably house less skilled players and more beginners, what twoplustwoers call donks (i.e. slow like donkeys), calling stations (i.e. always calling their hands) or fish (i.e. eaten by sharks), and are therefore less risk to the skilled player. Such a playing

strategy was not possible until poker was introduced online. After online poker players start winning by multi-tabling, some quickly dispense disposable income towards technology, both hardware and software, to improve their game. To improve their 'grindstation,' some purchase big screen monitors (20-27"), better processors for quicker game play, better control devices and keyboards, and furniture such as lamps, chairs and desks, "Wow, just got my 27" and it completely dwarfs the two 23" monitors I had before. 12 tiled tables fit perfectly without overlap and they are just the right size." (Kaput_25, 130 posts)

Third party software also helps give professional players an insider's edge. Poker tracking software such as *Hold 'Em Manager* (HEM), *Poker Tracker*, *Leak Buster* and *Shark scope* help players keep statistics and rankings to find faults and improve their game play. *Table Ninja* and *Heads Up Display* help online poker players organize and execute commands on their monitors. "you create an attachment to money/your winnings/your graph/your win rate/yearly/monthly/daily results, etc." (50kHands@400-600, 24 posts) These graphs, the output of the poker tracking software, clearly demonstrate the skill a poker player possesses. "I literally sat in bed all day playing micro-stakes, thinking that if I could just run well, I would be on the path to greatness. I could quantify exactly how I felt about myself - all I needed to do was look at my HEM graph." (Lyncho, male, UK, 423 posts) Without these technological advancements, recreational poker players are at a disadvantage.

Lastly, the *exit strategy* is a sensitive aspect that many poker players talk about but also have no precise answer for. Often, the actors plan to continue to play for a specific time period (from months to years) and then plan to relinquish to a 'real' job:

“Once I get some investing done then I'm switching to just doing it as a hobby. 1-2 years longer, hopefully.” (Klever187, male, 1078 posts)

“Quit when you have to pawn your laptop ... then buy your laptop back from pawn shop, redeposit and play.” (provotrout, male, 2016 posts)

“The degen in me still wants to play poker especially since I saw how bad the players are live, but long term. I'd probably be much happier with a more stable career. Time to grow up and start building a life. And if I get any spare time, I'll go gamboool.” (tgo007, male, 343 posts)

These preceding quotes provide insight into the thinking processes of online poker players, and it can be interpreted that either they think online poker will not last or they will not last playing online poker. Often, when online poker players divulge on exit strategies, there is usually a sense of urgency to reach this goal.

Their *ambition* includes the goals and challenges a professional poker player place upon themselves and the roles they tend to absorb once they are considered a professional poker player. For instance:

“I was super happy with my results last year but this year has been different ... need to refocus back into the money making grind. I would love to make \$200k this year and will do whatever I can to try and get there.” (Newmanmi, Perth, Australia, 969 posts)

“I will be 24 years old in 2 month, and my main goal is to make \$3 million in profit before I'm 30 years old (July 2017).” (ForexTrader, 182 posts)

After being dubbed a professional, either officially or unofficially, poker players tend to generate income from a variety of ambitious, offshoot occupations. Some famous poker players, coach novices and intermediates, and charge high hourly rates, some over \$300 per hour. Some develop blogs and write books on their autobiographical tale to riches or on general poker theory and strategy itself. Others take in the fame that comes with the fortune and accept sponsorship deals from online poker operators. Online poker venues sponsor “big-names here like Ivey, Antonius, Durrrr and Helmuth.” The more an online

poker player plays, the more incentives and bonuses are offered (e.g. Supernova Elite Status on *Poker Stars* which entitles bonuses, higher rakeback percentages, merchandise and access to exclusive tournaments). Online rakes are a % or a fixed rate per poker game that online poker services charge to online poker players. Membership in networks of online poker sites or membership in particular online poker forums may qualify online poker players for a rakeback, a % savings on online rakes (usually between 20-35% depending on games and stakes played). “Barring some government monopoly or some other strange regulation in the market rakeback will always exist. Every site with any amount of players gives back 35%+ of rake to its high volume players (regardless of whether they call it rakeback).” (TheJacob, male, 1326 posts)

Below, an online poker player is considering playing long hours with a tight-aggressive strategy just to break even to make a living off the rakeback they can receive:

“If I am aiming to win by doing this, I just have to break even. I work a standard 40-hour a week job which means an additional 21 hours a week will be no sweat. On average you play 1000 raked hands each 5 hours, that means I will be involved in 4000+ raked hands per week. Is it possible to make a living off your rake back? Is it right to change the strategy to break even?” (thechern, 2 posts)

In this case, the poker player has created an occupation online that functions similar to a prop player at a traditional casino where a player is paid a wage to play tight-aggressive strategy poker at live casino higher stakes tables to encourage participation in high stakes games.

Status quo and reputation

Without the competitive elements of games including video games and online poker, players would not enjoy game play. Similarly, without the monetary incentive of poker, poker players would not be motivated to gamble. Beyond the monetary rewards of

being a professional poker player, on this stage, some posters maintain the status quo, win a decent amount, and don't seek to obtain the fame and stardom from online poker. But there are also those who cannot avoid the allure of the Internet celebrity. The latter seek the status, fame and reputation that often come hand in hand with the monetary rewards. *PocketFives* as well as other websites and software function as leader boards, feedback mechanisms common in video games (King, Delfabbro and Griffiths 2009). Updated regularly, these leader boards give poker players an overall rank that is usually a position number, based on rank (dollar or chip amount) on all online poker operators. They encourage players to play frequently and for longer lengths of time to compete with other players for more prestigious ranks (King, Delfabbro and Griffiths 2009). The *TwoPlusTwo* forum also provides an outlet for experts to receive appreciation and recognition from other players and to feel increased self-efficacy (King, Delfabbro and Griffiths 2009).

Some twoplustwoers confirm their identity as a professional when other poker players admire their gambling skills. Some state that money is not the goal and that they strive to be skillful players in order to gain respect in the poker community. They confirm their status by displaying badges such as their HEM graphs, ROI (return on investment) graphs, *Shark Scope* stats, and *PocketFives* rankings. (Schau et. al 2009). They achieve status and respect from less experienced followers and can leverage this fame into sponsorships or coaching and staking operations. After accumulated winnings become sizeable, some professional poker players care less about the money and more about the score and creating memorable triumphs. Like kids in an arcade, or online gamers on *World of Warcraft*, mastering the machine proves their worth to others and brings them

steps closer to becoming the next poker superstar.

Many poker tales are about young men from small towns that win big, get signed, travel to Vegas and are sponsored by some of the largest online poker operators such as *Full Tilt*, *Absolute Poker*, *Poker Stars* and *Ultimate Bet*. One actor, when questioning online poker player participation in the live tournament *World Series of Poker*, posted:

“why would any smart player want to go to where the other best players are and compete with them? I know, I know, that's how you prove you yourself are one of the best, but poker players are supposed to be looking for the fish, correct? looking for an edge, no? why go looking for sharks and trying to play them when there's dead money in other card rooms/cities? ... people do it to sound cool and stroke their own ego.” (Foxy Woods, Connecticut, 389 posts)

Newer poker websites such as *Victory Poker* make consumers a part of the website storyline and to encourage them to add authenticity to their brands. This innovative peer to peer within community advertising sells online poker and creates experiential depth for these online poker websites by inviting customers to join stories and refer the websites to others (Cotte and Latour 2009). Many famous poker players such as Joe Sebok, sponsored by *Absolute Poker* and *Ultimate Bet*, has 1.1 million Twitter followers and exhibits huge influence below the radar of mainstream culture. These Internet celebrities uphold online images to facilitate the development of blogs, books, videos, coaching services and staking services that generate supplemental forms of income. In one interesting instance, Nutsinho (male, Boston, 606 posts), a known professional offered this position:

“I am looking for a live-in assistant who would perform standard duties such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, random errands, booking reservations etc. for me + 2 other roommates. This probably constitutes like 20 hours of pretty easy work per week. The payment would be room and poker lessons from me.”

This Internet celebrity is offering room in his Boston Harbor Condo and poker lessons to a female, personal assistant and cook who is “6-8” in appearance on his scale, “knows a little about poker, I mean able to beat ~\$5 turbo SNGs online” (play \$5 stakes quick-pace, sit and go poker games) and is willing to learn.

It seems that when monetary incentives are no longer relevant, online poker totals, akin to actual chips at casinos, are an abstraction of actual cash money. One player suggests: “At the end of every month I will make a review of the month that passed, and will set goals for the coming month. I will never set monetary goals (like: make \$500 this week, but instead will set volume goals, study goals, etc).” (ForexTrader, 182 posts)

Online poker is essentially gambling with electronic money, or e-money. The psychological value of e-money is less than cash and can lead to a suspension of judgment, temporarily disrupting the poker player’s financial value system and encouraging further gambling (Griffiths and Parke 2002). Consumers tend to spend more on credit and debit cards because of the ease of the transaction and absence of real money. Similarly, chips are used in casinos and tokens are used in video game arcades to disguise money’s actual value (Griffiths and Parke 2002). Cotte and Latour (2009) suggest that online gamblers felt like they had better control over their finances online versus at casinos but the online actors on this community seem to point out that perhaps, we are facing a new breed of problem gambler:

“Now maybe it could be because I started my poker journey playing all live games. Where I could always actually touch the money I won without having to wait a month to get it out of the site. I have also noticed that this same thinking process has affected my online play... When I play Live the money just feels like money. And not like some video game I have been playing all day that says you have this many points in your account. Though who knows maybe I am just another degen online poker player.” (ShortButSoSweet, 147 posts)

Integration and segregation

In this setting, the discussion of online poker players seamlessly integrating poker into their daily lives is often overshadowed by the negative issues plaguing online poker players. These negative aspects segregate online poker players from their offline reality.

Many actors in this forum admitted to playing recreationally, to playing part-time to supplement their income or to playing professionally. Whatever their level of involvement is, some play after work, school, college, and smoothly integrate online poker into their daily lives. Some even professed that they played during work hours or at school, university or college.

Online poker and online poker forums can be used as a way to communicate and meet people and some posters confess to originally meeting their spouses or romantic partners in the online poker community. More and more people are discovering how exhilarating online poker can be and are incorporating it into their daily lives:

“...I try to get in at least two hours a work day, and four hours a day on my weekend. How can I do this with full time job, two kids, and a wife? I have cut out my considerably vast amounts of hobbies and use the time I used to douche around with stuff like video games and masturbation on poker.” (Grrr34, male, 385 posts)

This quote shows how online poker players can gamble at specific periods in their daily routines as some researchers suggest online gambling play is fully integrated into a daily lifestyle (Cotte and Latour 2009). The pace of online gambling allows gamblers to multitask, jumping from doing household chores to online gambling while answering the phone (Cotte and Latour 2009). In this setting, actors describe online poker players as very organized and having superior time management skills. Therefore, it can be interpreted that some online poker players, whether they play recreationally or professionally, or whether they play to build a reputation, have the ability to blend their

online life with their offline reality.

Online poker players construct identities by associating themselves with digital representation through avatars, screen names, signs and symbols (Schau and Gilly 2003). These identities can make players feel more personally invested in the game (King, Delfabbro and Griffiths 2009). Avatars are a sophisticated form of computer-mediated communication, as they are a digital representation of the player (without necessarily resembling the player in any way) (Schau and Gilly 2003; King, Delfabbro and Griffiths 2009). Avatar creation online includes a variety of character customization options and the intention of these options is so that players can form an emotional attachment to their personalized online character (King, Delfabbro and Griffiths 2009). Some online poker players discuss using brightly flashing and offensive gif files as their avatars on the forum and on online poker sites to annoy and attempt to ‘tilt’ their opponents.

The analysis also demonstrated the negative aspects of online poker that cause online poker players to segregate themselves from normalcy and the status quo. Some online poker players blot out the pressures of daily life and are enthralled by their online identity in computer-mediated environments. They escape from friends, work, business or their family. One actor reveals online poker’s immersive qualities:

“The last year or two, I’ve felt increasingly cut off emotionally from the world... I think poker encourages you to emotionally neuter yourself to a large extent to handle the swings, and that this process actually hurts your emotional health, ability to empathize with others, and your overall happiness.” (Floating4Fun, male, 13 posts)

Online poker players segregate from their offline realities and experience *time loss* and *stigmatization*, deal with *bad beats and tilt*, commit *degenerate acts* and it can be argued that online poker is essentially *immoral*. The next section will provide exemplars of instances where these negative aspects have affected actors in this online community.

Time Loss. Online poker players, those who are earning a portion of their income from online gambling, are facing other problems related to time spent on poker (Griffiths et. al. 2010). Time spent, or time loss, causes online poker players to experience detachment from real life, loss track of time, and to play longer than intended. This following quote shows the immersive properties of online poker that causes detachment in some online poker players:

“My day would consist of waking up about 2pm, before even leaving my bedroom, my computer is turned on and I’m sat in a lobby, an hour later, 5 games in, I make way to the toilet, my next decision is to go downstairs or back to my room. F**K it I’m back in my room, in another lobby, ill eat breakfast later, what the hell I play better without food in me anyway. Another 5-10 games later and it's 5pm - S**T I need breakfast, so I’m downstairs, bypass my Sister who has already got up, been to school, and back home, completely ignore my Dad along the hall way and head straight to the kettle and toaster. Then back to my room. I wonder if they have realized I’m getting up so late, what ever they won’t even understand it ... I was pale, skinny and out of touch with the real world.” (Mr. Wray, male, England, 1398 posts)

Some poker players gamble to forget the social world and as some researchers suggest increased participation within online worlds provide fewer opportunities for connection with people in the real world (Castranova 2005). Here, the negative effect of time loss also affects the breakdown of friendships and relationships and commitments. A student, saddened by his progress online and academically, posted:

“Total profit from 6 hours play: approx \$0.30. I missed all my lectures. My grades slipped. I was unhappy. There were some times when I would lose so much, and keep losing, to the point where I was literally in tears (times I've cried due to poker: 3). But I didn't want to stop playing, so I fired up 12 tables of FR and played monotonically, soothed by the constant alert and chip sounds of Full Tilt.” (Lyncho, UK, 423 posts)

Some poker players admit to neglecting hygiene, sleep, nutrition, work, and school due to excessive online poker playing, and some confess possessing “a pee bottle and lack of desire to do something meaningful in your life.” (Jiub, Central Europe, 312 posts) Some actors feel like they are not members of society in general.

Stigmatization. Online poker players feel stigmatized when should be empowered:

“The lifestyle of a live/online grinder is very "special" and I have found it challenging to explain to normal people. I used to not tell people what I did for a living, but then I would have to make up excuses for my bizarre schedule and personality traits.” (katie75013, female, US, 405 posts)

Many discussions within the forum question how and whether to include poker experience, winnings and graphs when applying for a traditional offline job or in application to a graduate, medical or law school. Most actors agree that this is not an advisable strategy. Poker is stigmatized and is generally not considered a secure and stable occupation. The following quotes show how actors in this forum tend to keep poker discussion discreet and within the community:

“I don't really like to bring up poker around anyone who I feel I might have to discuss it with, and the second I bring up the word "online" forget it.” (tom10167, 8811 posts)

“I usually find when girls ask me what I do for a living that it does not attract a positive response. I have tried to say I run my own own business or invest in things but then they ask what I invest in and or what my business is and I can only stretch it so far before It comes out that I play poker for a living. The thing is most don't understand this is possible and seem to think that, I am just a deluded gambling addict who got lucky one or two times.” (LukeSilver, male, 23 posts)

Bad Beats and Tilt. Tilt is when a poker player gets emotionally upset and suffers mental frustration that leads to a less optimal strategy and poor play and performance.

“When we take a beat, there is an instant in our brain where we make a decision to ignore the anger or to let it take over. Letting it take over is very seductive, but obviously bad for our game. Pay attention after you take a bad hand - there is an instant where you choose to become angry or not. It may be hard to see at first, but it's there.” (bgbg, male, Brooklyn, 56 posts)

When online poker players suffer a loss that is unexpected, some react to their losses by physically lashing out by breaking “monitors, mice and keyboards,” throwing “laptops into pools” or punching “a light switch.” Others understand that bad beats seldom occur and are due to variance, an uncontrollable factor in online poker play.

Degenerate Acts. Actors in this setting jokingly call others in the community ‘degens,’ a poker term short for degenerates. Excessive online gambling can lead to problem gambling. O’Guinn and Faber (1989) define compulsive consumption, such as excessive online poker consumption, as an uncontrollable drive or desire to experience an activity that ultimately leads to an individual repeatedly engaging in that activity regardless of the potential harm caused to the individual or others. But as one actor describes it:

“The term "Gambling Problem" or "Addiction" is a completely subjective assessment. It just can't be quantified by \$ amounts or frequency of bets or anything like that. It's all a spectrum and that spectrum varies vastly... Every single person who has played poker has lost money they'd rather have not lost, played past BRM restrictions, exceeded their stop loss, tilted, etc.” (canoodles, 2952 posts)

In this setting, actors share narratives of excessive gambling behavior that lead to degenerate acts. These ‘degen’ stories seem to be encouraged in these forums as players justify and evangelize that their own gambling behavior as reasonable and acceptable in comparison to the behavior of other ‘degens’ (Schau et. al. 2009). Typical quotes from degenerates include:

“I’ve decided to sell my living room set and start my bankroll with \$500.” (Gummybearz, male, 21, Georgia, USA, 98 posts)

“I collect cans in and around nyc to pay for my pokerz, I have two overdrawn credit cards and a month behind in rent ... FML and ultimate dgen.” (DOH!_28, male, 1905 posts)

“Should I sell my left kidney to play higher? Having two is a waste anyways.” (Yasawa, 835 posts)

Never Was Been (male, 439 posts), a degenerate poker player who has influenced others with his story, is an extreme version of this encouraged, exaggerated version of a degen:

“I have taken a fairly drastic step... I agreed to enter a medical facility for 42 days and

become a human guinea pig for experimental drugs. Why? For money I do. It's a pretty strange experience. As I write all this I'm wired up with a halter monitor, telemetry, e.c.g. cables, and have a cannula sticking out of my arm for taking blood samples without the need of a needle... Despite being incarcerated in a medical facility with total strangers and being drugged and being poked daily with needles, I have been fortunate enough to draw a bunch of fellow poker players as my roommates! Day and night the sound of virtual chips clicking and splashing is standard, and it's funny ... I have to wait a few days before getting paid, but when I do I'm going to deposit a hundred and grind mtt's." (Never Has Been, male, 439 posts)

Immoral. To conclude this section of the drama structure, the analyst selected two dialogues of actors within the community that question the normative nature of online poker:

"In my opinion poker is immoral. You are trying to take money from people who do not know better. They are called 'fish', and most of the money won by the 'sharks' comes from the 'fish'. Some people claim that everyone ought to know what they are doing, but from the way people talk about 'fish' it becomes very clear that everyone knows full well that these fish just don't know what they are doing, and that the sharks take advantage of that." (BartJ385, male, 2638 posts)

Using strategy, professional poker players pursue specific types of players such as VPIP or VP\$P (players with aggression and Voluntary Put money In Pot), calling stations (players that always call), fish and donks.

"It's tough, though, because of course poker is entirely centered on getting money from others, and on tricking people out of their money. It's the only game I can think of where the playing pieces *are* money, and money is the measure of success. I also question it's place in the world. Sometimes it seems like a self-serving pyramid scheme with no reference to the world except by sucking in money at the bottom and spitting it out at the top to finance yachts, mansions and coke habits. Like a hurricane fueled by a sea of cash." (CoronaAndLime, Philadelphia, 989 posts)

Online poker is an illicit commodity due to the fact that it is counter to the norms and customs of society in general. In online poker, consumers are technically using knowledge, strategy and technology to outsmart other consumers into losing their money and therefore, in some jurisdictions (i.e. USA), online poker still remains illegal.

Drama interaction: the roles of marketplace actors

The drama interaction includes the level of consumer involvement (passive to active) through marketplace roles that shape, direct or structure the performance (Moisio and Arnould 2005). Consumption community practice theory would suggest that the more active the community is, the more active the marketplace actors are (Schau et. al. 2009). The consumption community practices of online poker players are manifested by their strong community vitality. Market researchers agree that number of threads, posts, replies, and views evince participant interest in online sites (Schau et. al. 2009). The *TwoPlusTwo* forum is one of the most active forums on the Internet with almost 20,000 new posts daily. The practices of stronger consumption communities, such as the *twoplustwoers*, are more complex and require more insider knowledge than the practices of weaker, less cohesive communities (Schau et. al. 2009).

The drama interaction discussed here comprises consumer roles in these performances. From our observations, online poker players have discipline, are committed to learning their part and seek to avoid making mistakes that might compromise the consumption community. Online poker players, or specifically *twoplustwoers*, engage in all the practices that are identified in consumption practice theory. This analysis utilized the four themes (and twelve subthemes), described in the earlier review, as a framework to study the illicit consumption community of online poker players (Schau et. al. 2009). The interpretation below exemplifies where members of this illicit consumption community engaged in all consumption community practices.

The *TwoPlusTwo* website, itself, is primarily a *social networking* site to connect avid online poker players. *TwoPlusTwo* complemented by its vibrant forum encourages

“newbies” by *welcoming*, *emphasizing*, and *governing* among stigmatized poker players.

Posters never skimp when offering advice to a newcomer and well wishes such as GLGL

(or good luck, good luck) are common amongst community members:

“GLGL. If I can offer suggestions: Play a lot more than 200 games/month. 100 games a week is pretty easy, even for someone busy. You cant move up without experience.”
(mjwhit, male, 654 posts)

“Just to make sure you have your options/buttons/sounds and stuff configured right, start at 1/2 cent just to get the feel of the software. Then you could probably move up to 25c/50c to see how you fare against the average thinking newbie. You'll be surprised at how tough these games can get. If you're doing well then go ahead and jump to \$1/\$2 and see how you're progressing. Doing well does not mean you quadrupled your buyin in 50 minutes playing 100 hands. Be honest with yourself before jumping several levels until you reach your peak, which I imagine will probably be 50c/1 or 1/2 anyway.” (Javi, 2501 posts)

Online poker players *welcome*, *empathize* and *govern*, reinforcing the moral and social bonds within the *TwoPlusTwo* community:

“ok, this is going to be kinda long and kinda depressing for you to read but I have nowhere else to turn to and I need some good advice from some of you who may have been in a similar situation. 23 years old, dropped out of college to pursue online poker for the time being, and am now in a spot where I am contemplating suicide. . I am a very attractive young man, very athletic, played 3 sports in high school, was always popular in high school and college, never had a problem getting girls, was valedictorian of my graduating class in high school, went to college for pharmacy but decided I didn't want to go to school for 4 more years and have made good money MTTing online so I figured that was the direction I wanted to go with my life.” (offconstantly20, male, 23, Kentucky, USA, 40 posts)

On this stage, this depressed online poker player deliberates on his poker experience through the years, no detail spared, and is seeking to alleviate his problems associated with his over-consumption of online poker that he turns to therapeutic confession online (Moisio and Beruchashvili 2010). In response, *Twoplustwoers* are swift to offer assistance, someone to talk to via phone, email or video chat, or someone to play with live at traditional gambling venues: “I'm happy to talk about this on Skype or something

if you want as it is something I am really trying to work on also (my approach to poker as a long term endeavor is far far from perfect).” (50Khands@400-600, male, 24 posts)

Generally, players exchange strategies and tips about poker games. Beyond poker discourse, on this forum, threads about a multitude of topics including politics, business, finance, investing, travel, science, math, philosophy, religion, god, theology, health, fitness, student life and humor encourages *empathizing*. In the online forum, online poker players talk about generally anything. They share ideas on strategy, life and even digress on sensitive topics like drug abuse, alcohol abuse, virginity and addiction. They talk freely about personal problems and opinions online so often that these forums for online poker function as a support network (Moisio and Beruchashvili 2010). Many affiliated online poker sites, such as *PocketFives*, also display leader boards, common in video games, to rank their best poker players (King, Delfabbro and Griffiths 2009). On forums, online poker players organize “sweat sessions” using third-party software such as *Skype*, *Team Viewer* or *Mikogo*, whereby 2 or more players play a single game together. They leverage the technology that permits screen sharing and observe, or ‘ghost’ (in poker terms), another poker player’s game play. They watch and discuss situations through hand analysis techniques. Some organize 2 or more sweat sessions per week with other community members they have never met in person. Some sweat sessions are intrinsic in nature if players are at a similar skill level, or at times, one player is usually a coach charging an hourly rate. Online poker players get reinforcement from others and share feelings of encouragement, excitement or frustration through this forum (King, Delfabbro and Griffiths 2009; Schau et. al. 2009; Moisio and Beruchashvili 2010).

The second theme that emerges from consumption community practice theory is that of impression management practices. Community members *evangelize* and *justify* in order to manage existing stigmas on overt reliance to their consumption behavior, in this study: the illicit commodity of online poker. Online poker players feel stigmatized about their profession and *justify* their behavior by feeling comfort from their winnings or by the fact that other well-known professional poker players have struck gold online and that they too might be ‘the next poker star’. They *evangelize* that this fortune and fame is possible by sharing ‘rags to riches’ narratives and reading the experiences of many other posters.

Community engagement practices are those that include the reinforcement of members’ engagement within the community. These practices (including *staking*, *milestoning*, *badging* and *documenting*) are competitive and provide these illicit online community members with social capital. Poker encourages social competition and enables community members to establish their status in comparison to other actors within the community. These practices create a social hierarchy that the community members can refer to strategically (Schau et. al. 2009). By setting up sub-forums based on stakes (micro, small, medium, high) and other sub-forums based on game preference (No Limit Hold ‘Em, Limit Hold ‘Em, Pot Limit Omaha, Multi-table Tournaments, Sit-N-Go’s, Stud, Draw), the community encourages *staking* and social differentiation among online poker players. “So ranking 'poker players' is sorta like ranking 'athletes'. To get any sort of accuracy you'll want, at minimum: Best NL cash players, Best NL MTT player, Best PLO cash players, Best LHE cash players, Best mixed game cash players (with best lists of each individual game).” (HC82, 1994 posts)

In this online forum, online poker players often speak of community *milestone* events such as the ‘*Party Poker* days,’ when the competition was soft or ‘the Moneymaker effect,’ when an influx of new online poker players joined after an online poker player won the quintessential Poker tournament, the *World Series of Poker*, in 2003:

“Most kids who found out about poker several years after the Moneymaker Effect may be trying to mimic the success that durrrr had in his early teenage years, but aren't realizing the soft spots that were present during the party poker days.” (SpunkyM0nk3y, male, 11 posts)

Milestoning is also noting standout experiences of seminal events in individual consumption (learning about a technique or winning a certain amount or event):

“I used to read a lot about poker, and slowly became a better player as I learned about bankroll management, win rates, ranges, and general poker theory. Finally, in the summer of '07 I started playing a lot in addition to my job delivering pizza, with the goal of winning a MTT before the summer's end.” (Floating4Fun, male , 13 posts)

Actors gather social and cultural capital by accumulating a diverse set of intricate skills such as: acquiring poker knowledge (e.g. reading the Harrington books), learning about the *TwoPlusTwo* forum, installing third party software (e.g. *Table Ninja*), obtaining status (e.g. Supernova Elite on *Poker Stars*) or winning ‘x’ amount or ‘x’ event. Online poker players *badge* their success by translating these milestones into symbols, tangibles or semiotic signifiers, which in their case are the HEM graphs, ROI graphs and statistic output that project their triumphs. They share autobiographical consumption stories or milestones, such as their first win, their discovery of the *TwoPlusTwo* forum, winning their first multi-table tournament or breaking 50K by *documenting* rich, descriptive narratives that rival chapters in novels in length. These practices stake the domain of engagement of the actor in this illicit consumption community.

The last theme is *brand usage practices* including practices that simply change methods to improve or enhance use. Poker players *groom* their skills and strategy by installing additional software (e.g. *Poker Tracker*) and learning advanced techniques (e.g. multi-tabling). Through tips and suggestions on how to keep track of personal poker statistics, online poker players inspire *grooming*. They *customize* their play to their preferences (game type, stakes, number of opponents, number of tables):

“there are people successfully grinding 2, 3, 4 and more HU sngs at a time, but you should note that multitabling different villains in HU sngs is a very different skill from multitabling other forms of poker, I have 16-tabled 9-man SNGs but I couldn’t handle more than one table of HU sng profitably.” (cwar, male, Las Vegas, USA, 8754 posts)

On this stage, some illicit community members have thought of ingenious approaches to apply to online poker to circumvent any normative or regulatory restrictions. Often, they illicitly *commoditize* services online that operate undetected or more specifically, unregulated. Through the roles of the actors in this marketplace of the *TwoPlusTwo* forum, this interpretation explored the concept, or practice, of *illicit commoditizing* in this online consumption community. In the *TwoPlusTwo* forum, through collaborative tendencies of these marketplace actors, community members commoditize illicit *services*. The illicit consumption community of online poker players has pursued *illicit commoditizing* through (1) directing illegal online poker activity to unrestrictive sites and (2) through the role of loan sharking to other community members. In the following section, the drama content will describe two acts (Act I and Act II) where online poker players are commoditizing illicit services to other community members.

Drama content: the cultural meaning of the performance

The drama content is defined as the drama performance, which highlights and portrays the acts that support the conceptual development of this study: that of *illicit*

commoditizing. The drama content organizes the conflicts into coherent performances (Moisio and Arnould 2005). This section will describe two separate acts of illicit services online within the community of twoplustwoers.

Act I: Black Friday (April 15th, 2011)

“If you go to fulltiltpoker.com it will have an image saying the name was confiscated by the FBI. ... But check the whois for pokerstars.com and fulltiltpoker.com and you will see both nameservers have been updated today and they are the same for both. UB.com and absolutepoker.com too” (bye_stars_tilt, 9 posts)

“holy ****...” (Wires, 3602 posts)

Friday, April 15th, 2011 is dubbed the ‘Black Friday’ (BF) of the online poker industry. In 2006, the US Congress passed the Unlawful Internet Gambling Enforcement Act, a law that made processing online gambling payments a crime. At that time, online operators remained in the U.S. market under the general belief poker is a game of skill not a game of chance and is therefore not considered gambling. Although on this unfortunate Friday, millions of American players had access to their favorite sites (Pokerstars.com, Fulltiltpoker.com, Absolutepoker.com, Ultimatebet.com and UB.com) stripped away from them. The US Congress is prosecuting these operators for tricking banks (bank fraud) and setting up dummy accounts (money laundering) from offshore locations (e.g. *Poker Stars* in Isle of Man, *Full Tilt Poker* in Ireland, *Absolute Poker* and *Ultimate Bet* in Costa Rica) to gather billions of revenues from their customers, including American online poker consumers (25-40% of the market). Immediately, *Poker Stars* and *Full Tilt* halted their operations to their U.S. consumers. The prosecutors look to jail the 11 criminal defendants including the poker website owners, executives, U.S. payment processors, and a bank executive who were engaged in an elaborate criminal fraud scheme of gambling transactions that are counter to the 2006 UIGEA. Accounts of

American poker players were frozen and after several months, some online poker operators have returned respective funds to their American consumers while some American poker players were left in limbo waiting to withdraw. Subsequently, popular televised poker programs and professional poker players' blogs cease to operate. Phil Ivey, *Full Tilt Poker's* star sponsored professional poker player issued this statement in response to these frozen accounts:

"I am deeply disappointed and embarrassed that Full Tilt players have not been paid money they are owed. I am equally embarrassed that as a result many players cannot compete in tournaments and have suffered economic harm. I am not playing in the World Series of Poker as I do not believe it is fair that I compete when others cannot. I am doing everything I can to seek a solution to the problem as quickly as possible."

In their plight, the American online poker players turned to their support network, the *Twoplustwo* poker forum, and due to inconceivable, heavy traffic, crashed the forum within hours. According to the Bigboards.com, the *TwoPlusTwo* forum had the most users ever online with 15,471 members on April 15, 2011 at 3:59 PM and over 150,000 unique visitors and 2,000,000 page views throughout the day. Community members and audience members visited the forum simultaneously and in haste to seek more information and support after the unexpected shutdown (Moisio and Beruchashvili 2010). On these online forums, many discussions focused on the possible outcome of these prosecutions, what should American professional online poker players do, and what sites are still available currently for Americans to play poker. Possible outcomes for American members included:

(1) quit online poker and get a new job to replace their poker income:

"I'll probably actually end up getting a job because of the sketchiness of US poker."
(BustoFish, 129 posts)

"In light of uncertainty, I for one am getting the resume ready and want to send some out

to job postings I've found.” (mtndewrules, male, 60 posts)

“You may call online poker a job, but you cant call it a career, the recent events have proven how vulnerable online poker is. I am not suggesting someone should take a job in macdonalds, but that they should try and find a career they love doing and gain valuable experience, otherwise they may find themselves 30 years old with no career and online poker.” (Deuc3s, male, 117 posts)

(2) play live poker at traditional, brick and mortar, offline venues,

“Since those of us in the USA can't play online for money now, I'd like to get your take on playing for a living at BandM Vegas casinos... “For example there's a lot more online guys like me going to BandM casinos post-black Friday for real money action...” (uncleholdem, male, 103 posts)

(3) remain in the States and play on poker websites without American restrictions:

“I am willing to play on any site still open to U.S. players.” (WorstoLagTard, male, 1084 posts)

“Get in all the SnG's while you can. Just a matter of time before Merge, Bodog, and Cake also are indicted.” (Got Bars?, 26 posts)

“black chip poker (merge network). I like it a lot, although obviously not as good as PS or FTP.” (BustoFish, 129 posts)

(4) or, move to another country (such as Canada, Thailand, Mexico, Costa Rica) to

play online poker ‘legally’ there:

“I am willing to move out of country to be able to grind in a poker house of some sort.” (WorstoLagTard, male, 1084 posts)

“if you really are interested in poker and things get even worse for Americans consider going to school abroad and then you can have a fallback/keep playing legally/pay for school.” (mdm13, 3563 posts)

Actors on this stage were left uncertain about their future and now coerced to decide their path “post-Black Friday.” Some discourses offered advice on how to acquire a job without any real-world experience in years:

“One way you might be able to "prove" yourself to a potential non-poker playing employer if it comes up, is to be able to present them with your graphs. It will a.) add merit to your claim of not just being a degenerate gambler, and b.) show that you are

circumspect about your work.” (robohead, Boston, US, 32 posts)

Through the forum, poker players were quick to refer American players to other lesser-known poker websites such as the *Merge Network*, *Carbon Poker*, *Cake Poker* and *Bodog* that are not facing current prosecution. Sharing this insider information on where to continue to access the illicit commodity of online poker was exhibited throughout many conversations in the forum immediately after Black Friday.

Actors in the forum consider this unforeseen event, Black Friday (BF), to have transformed online poker both in North America and globally:

“Flash forward 2 years. The UGIGA, or whatever the hell that worthless group of dream crushers is called, had to ruin the party and steal all the online fish. Well, once the dead money morons left the scene, as Darwin predicted, the strong survived. Like many around this time I came to the realization that I was not one of them. After a year of break even to slightly losing poker... I quit the online world and started focusing on school.” (MooreMoney19, male, 232 posts)

It is a *milestone* event in the online poker community as they speak of times: pre-, post-BF and compare the climate before BF and after BF (Schau et. al. 2009). And despite monetary losses, those poker players who played for a reputation lost more.

“A lot of us lost more than just \$ on BF. The only thing I truly ever wanted from online poker was to reach \$100nl, at least in the short term. In the days surrounding BF I finally started taking shots at \$100nl and seeing my dream crushed was hard to bare; compared to this, the money meant next to nothing. A lot of players worked very, very, very hard to get to where they are. And yes all of us winners are in the top 10% of players at our stake level.” (Somsoc, male, 259 posts)

Ambitious professional poker players with high hopes to begin offshoot sources of income from their poker fame and fortune, had their dreams shattered from this litigation:

“Poker is a hobby of mine and my sole source of income. Over the last four months I've been focusing on running a coaching and staking operation, but Black Friday really killed business... a timely reminder of just how fickle poker can often be.” (Tim, 21, male, Brisbane, Australia)

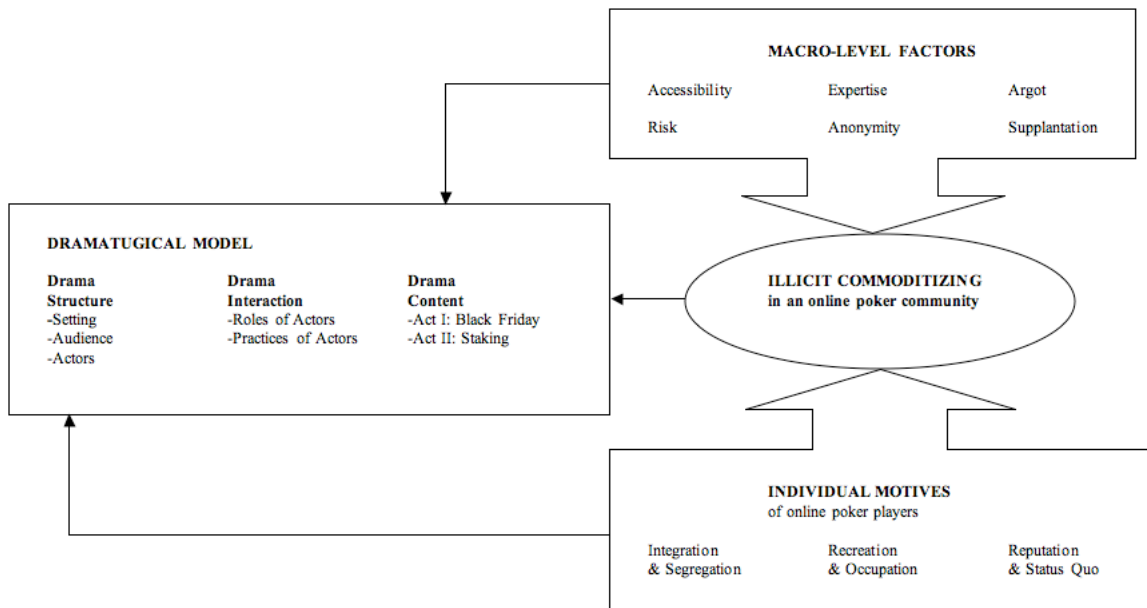
Act II: Sharking or Staking

Tim, the online poker player in the above quote, mentions a ‘staking operation’ that is essentially an *illicit service* that online poker players transition to offering once they have achieved reputation as professionals. ‘Staking’ is a secondary source of income for some professional poker players. In essence, the staking industry within the online poker community is a pyramid scheme of loan sharks. While loan sharking is an offering of an unsecured loan at a high interest rate, staking, in poker vernacular, is the act of one person backing up another poker player with cash to play with in hopes that the player wins. Profits are split on a predetermined ratio between the backer and the player, to the staker and the stakee (or horse). The backed player will then use the borrowed money to play in a tournament or for a set amount of time, hands or games: “usually the deal is 50/50 including rakeback/bonuses etc etc and the stake is either for a set period of time or for a certain amount of hands.” (SI-KICK, 1222 posts) This is an *illicit service* that professional poker players offer on online venues, specifically the *TwoPlusTwo* forum and *Part Time Poker* web service. The latter site claiming to have connected online poker stakers and stakees for over \$15 million in unregulated transactions. At times, this lending exploits the vulnerable players who recently lost their bankroll through ‘tilting’ off a ‘bad beat’ and is chasing losses. These staking trades are inherently predatory lending practices as they are typically unfair, and at times deceptive or fraudulent practices. Many North American laws at both the national and provincial government level are aimed at preventing predatory lending. Here, actors use their *badges* such as their HEM graphs and ROI graphs as their reputation, their CV, resume or credit score in their search for potential backers. Reputation is key and interviews,

graphs, referrals and reviews are usually mandatory. Through the forum, stakess and stakers share wanted ads:

“I am looking for a small stake. Willing to talk strategy on AIM or via PM to prove knowledge. I've been around 2+2 forums and archived posts for a while, but hadn't registered to start posting until recently. Also, we can go over the terms of any potential deal via AIM.” (2SHAE, male, 3576 posts)

FIGURE 1
A DRAMATURGICAL MODEL OF ILLICIT CONSUMPTION



Illicit Commoditizing Factors

Through the key exemplar of online poker, we demonstrate that illicit consumption communities have formed online, exchanging illicit goods and services and averting the regulations of traditional offline transactions. Beyond online poker and counterfeit goods, other more unsavory, illicit commodities such as the online sex and drug trade operate often undetected. Computer-mediated communications have greatly facilitated the development of these illicit consumption communities online. In this study, through the

example of online poker, we present the macro-level factors that facilitate illicit consumption and commoditizing online. Through our discussion, we hope to show that these factors have broad implications for other online illicit consumption communities as well. Figure 1 depicts the macro-level factors and how they influence illicit commoditizing. In the section that follows, we will describe these six factors (*accessibility, argot, expertise, risk, anonymity and supplantation*) in greater detail.

(1) Accessibility

Computer-mediated communications have provided a means for illegal activity to burgeon online (Blevins and Holt 2009). The open nature of the Web has led to consumers freely discussing illegal or possibly immoral behavior to other consumers across demographic, regional and international bounds. The *accessibility* of the Internet facilitates illicit commoditizing because of the Internet's ability to connect consumers and sellers discretely, at any time of the day, and without the need for face-to-face discourse. Actors otherwise unable to procure illicit commodities, in a traditional offline manner, can venture online and access entities unavailable to them in their city or country.

In the context of online poker, after Black Friday (Act I), online poker players approached the market with the practice of illicit commoditizing and suggested other online venues available to American players who were frozen out of the dominant online services (*Poker Stars, Full Tilt Poker, Ultimate Bet and Absolute Poker*) due to current prosecution. Furthermore, some professional poker players have moved to other countries where online poker may be still 'illegal' but is not seen as a priority of law enforcement.

Professional players are “playing poker for monies and staying in Mexico for now, getting a bank account set up so I can get on some euro sites” (amurophil, male, 22, 2288 posts). In other accounts in this setting, actors claim to have traveled to Costa Rica, Canada and Thailand to name a few countries visited, to gain access to their illicit service of online poker after Black Friday.

(2) Argot

In illicit communities, a particular vernacular, or argot, is used to communicate information to other community members without outsiders comprehending. Argot also provides boundaries of inclusion and exclusion into the community and describes the community structure, practices, rituals, conduct and norms that define their marketplace (Johnson, Bardhi, Sifaneck and Dunlap 2006; Blevins and Holt 2009). Argot, a language usually in criminal subcultures, is usually somewhat secretive in nature to cloak illicit activity. The poker community converses in a abbreviated mélange of English, slang, poker abbreviations and online acronyms that would be difficult to decipher for a newcomer: “FWIW I'm a 100NL FR player playing 4-6 tables @~10bb/100 (rakeback included) for 37k hands so far. Grinded my way up from micro's.” (Tendo, male, 49 hands) This online poker player is succinctly describing his poker career thus far: giving his rank (\$100 stakes No Limit Full Ring Player), experience (37,000 hands starting from the micro-stakes of <\$1) and win rate (about 10 big blind wins per hundred) in order to convince a staker to back his game play (Act II). By using common poker terminology, this online player is also displaying his expertise as an insider in the poker community.

The consumption community literature demonstrates that communities share a

specialized language (Kozinets 2006; Schau et. al. 2009). Online poker players speak in a language that only community members are quick to understand although it is quite accessible to those who wish to learn. Some online poker websites also offer online dictionaries to educate poker players in using a specialized language within their community. These online dictionaries include glossaries with definitions of common terminology such as all-in, flop, turn, river, kicker, nuts, fourth street, fifth street as well as definitions to common online chat phrases such as lol (laugh out loud), brb (be right back) and poker-specific acronyms like BRM (bankroll management), EV (expected value) and yhs (your hand sucks). Some online poker dictionaries describe coded references to poker hands with clever names such as pocket rockets or American Airlines (two aces), Baskin Robbins (Ace-three) and big chick (Ace-Queen). This linguistic repertoire facilitates trading especially in illicit consumption communities (Schau et. al. 2009). For instance, to successfully go through a staking or backing agreement (Act II), both the staker and the stakee would need knowledge of the correct argot terms for the deal. Due to the illegal nature of these transactions and stigmatization by society in general, the online poker community, maintains an efficient mode of communication with other online poker players and insulates itself from regulatory bodies and outsiders.

(3) Expertise

In consumption communities, just like in the professional poker community, procedures, understandings, and hedonic engagement are all evinced (Schau et. al. 2009). The online poker community has expectations, or norms, that govern their behaviors (regarding game play, forum etiquette, staking deals, sweat sessions, etc.). Professional

poker players make definite choices to register, transfer funds, play online poker, and learn strategy and skills as well as to adhere to the community's norms and rituals. Involved community members display their expertise and their use of argot can categorize community members and distinguish the beginners from the professionals. To trade within these illicit consumption communities, a consumer usually should be able to prove knowledge of argot and procedures that supports their claim as a qualified, community member and not an outsider. In the online poker community, to enter into a staking deal: "References a MUST. Graphs a MUST. Knowledge of PT, PAHUD a MUST. Terms will start at 50/50 + stakeback/make up with potential to improve in backee's favor with proven results." (mikeymer, male, 2840 posts) A staker will only accept a deal with a stakee if they can produce evidence of their membership in the community of professional poker players. The community has set up guidelines that they must follow such as no email, only "PM" (personal messages) on *TwoPlusTwo* and absolutely "No *PayPal* trades are permitted." In illicit consumption communities, there are unspoken rules of conduct that moderate these trades. If an actor does not play their respective role, the performance is compromised. Similar to procuring an illicit commodity offline, a level of *expertise* or industry know-how is somewhat imperative.

Expertise is also related to the accessibility factor. For example in other acts of illicit commoditizing, to purchase drugs offline, in a traditional sense, a consumer would need to have access or know a drug dealer. Or to engage in the sex trade, a *john* would have to know discreet location (online or offline) where service providers are available (Blevins and Holt 2009). Similarly, websites that provide these illicit commodities are not exactly visible and easy to find online. These illicit businesses typically operate below the

mainstream.

(4) Risk

Risk is an over-arching factor that is usually implied in illicit commoditizing and “all transactions instigated herewith are made entirely at your own risk.” Illicit commoditizing is the exchange of goods or services that are counter to norms, customs, regulations or laws and any of the parties involved in the exchange are at risk of a loss, either monetary or punitive. As a consumption community, poker players used online discussions to share information, reviews and referrals of excellent backers and stakees and also to post warnings about scammers (Act II):

“Warning: Many staking deals lead to hard feelings and lost funds... there is no guarantee that you will not lose your money if you follow the guidelines herein.”

“Warning: Staking is a high risk activity. There is no guarantee that the advice in this thread will protect you from being scammed/losing your investment.” (Cornell Fiji, 6876 posts)

The open nature of the forums coupled with the discussion of illicit commodities and immoral behavior, led to online poker players, especially stakers and stakees, to carefully manage and disguise their discussions when needed. Participants definitely recognized that their actions are not generally accepted by society as a whole (e.g. their parents, employers, partners and friends) and maintained a level of seclusion of their poker behavior from their offline reality.

In Act II, online fraud is a recurring problem in staking operations. Scammers register fake accounts, send unsolicited emails, talk via Skype, and impersonate forum moderates all in order to scam a staker out of their funds:

“Please read all earlier warnings. Either we ban all mentions of transfers, period, or you

must accept that they are entirely at your own risk; people are trying to scam you... How to Protect Your Money, 2 of every 3 victims sent first to scammers who has no previous trades, many scammers like to get you off-site and trade using e-mail, Skype, AIM, etc. This way they avoid public disclosure and scrutiny of their known shady accounts. They will convince you that you are the risky trader and they are safe.” (Mike Haven, male, 9670 posts)

(5) Anonymity

To maintain a level of secrecy, online poker players go to great lengths to protect their privacy. Outside of the illicit consumption, actors maintain their privacy from the audience. “But that's actually completely besides the point here on 2+2. You do know that we're anonymous on here right?” (surfinillini, 9067 posts). Like with most online forums, anonymity is a factor that benefits most users. In this setting, poker players use avatars and screen names to disguise their offline identity.

“I will be reporting strictly to this forum because of all the relationships with people I've grown close with, without ever sharing our real first names. Truthiness, Biuzz, Wackjob, mezzomix, pred, etc.” (drnkyourmlkshk, male, Denver, US, 425 posts)

“I was nostalgic in a way to see this same person there, and sit at the table with him... But he was a complete stranger.” (AirshipOhio, male, 1230 posts)

Illicit commodities are traded online to non-community members using fake handles (screen names or nicknames) and often times, actual names are never traded: “I think people get a little lost because poker funds sometime seem like fake E-money, but people are sending hundreds\thousands of dollars to strangers.”

(6) Supplantation

An illicit commodity will be and usually is easily replaced by a supplant operation. When *Napster* shut down, *LimeWire* and *Kazaa* were quick to take the place of the inaugural music downloading application. In the online poker community, American players concerned with the indictment of online poker operators have replaced

playing at the most popular websites and resorted to play at mid-level or smaller online poker operators. In any illicit consumption community, if the illicit commodity becomes unavailable, another operation will expeditiously serve the demand. In the online poker context, there are many fake staking operations: “scammer accounts are new, and they try to scam as many people as they can in a short period of time, before their account becomes known or is closed.” Then, the scammer supplants their closed account with a fresh account. Unless there is regulation and legalization, this factor will always facilitate illicit commoditizing online.

The discussion so far has centered on the six macro-level factors that we believe facilitate the development of illicit consumption communities such as online poker. The other key aspects of Figure 1, the dramaturgical model and individual motives, have been discussed in some length earlier and are hence not repeated here. The individual motives of online poker players are specific to this particular context and future research can examine whether these motives or other over-arching motives drive consumers in a similar manner to trade illicitly online within other product categories.

Implications for Social Marketers and Public Policy Makers

The insights garnered here have implications for public policy makers in the general area of online poker. Findings of this research have implications for: (a) social marketers (e.g., designing responsible gambling messages that take into account emergent online poker motivations); and (b) public policy makers (e.g., development on stricter laws for online gambling fraud, implementation of self-limit programs for problem gamblers, and institution of stricter age restrictions for underage gamblers).

Griffiths and colleagues (2009) offer some practical advice regarding gambling online: (1) beware 'practice' and 'free-play' modes, (2) gamble with well-known companies who advertise heavily, (3) gamble at places recommended by reputable friends and colleagues, (4) set your limits, (5) beware of 'bogus' players, (6) disregard rumors, (7) read the rules and policy page, (8) select sites with secure servers for financial transactions, (9) check the site's privacy policy, (10) avoid gambling sites that do not make it easy for the gambler to contact them, (11) know the pay-out rates, (12) look for third-party approval of the gambling site, (13) check out the small print for using free credit, (14) play openly and (15) avoid gambling sites with offers that seem too good to be true (Griffiths, Wood and Parke 2009). To counter problem online gambling, there are a growing number of online gambling sites devoted to provide information and support to problem. These sites offer information (e.g. signs and symptoms of a problem gambler) and where to go for treatment and support. The *TwoPlusTwo* forum also acts as a form of online support network whereby the interactivity (immediate or delayed) of the forum offers online poker players support and help 24 hours a day, 7 days a week (Cooper and Doucet 2002; Moio and Beruchashvili 2010).

Our findings also suggest that because of the nature of play and the popularity of online poker there should be a significant amount of attention paid to it in comparison to other forms of online gambling such as online blackjack, online lotteries and online sports betting. Policies should be decided on a game-by-game basis rather than all under the same 'gambling' umbrella. The degree of control the governments can apply related to payment security, exclusion of children and compulsive gamblers, is still in question

and is yet to be developed (Siemens and Kopp 2011). Major areas that we discuss hereafter include online fraud, self-limit programs and adolescent gambling.

Online Fraud.

Criminologists, McMullan and Rege (2010), suggest that conventional understandings of offline gambling-related criminal relationships are different online due to the digital nature of the environment (McMullan and Rege 2010). They explain that the main area that is of concern regarding online crime is fraudulent online gambling activities (McMullan and Rege 2010). Their paper outlines how frauds and scams have found home online and explains that: (1) lottery scams, (2) fake gambling site scams, (3) betting software scams, (4) gambling ‘bonus’ scams, (5) ‘twofer’ scams and (6) prize scams are not new to the online gambling industry. They conclude that online gambling fraud is not unusual because many gamblers themselves want to get a huge reward from a small outlay (McMullan and Rege 2010; Griffiths 2010). In this study, we uncover an additional form of online gambling fraud: scammers within the staking community that encourage anonymous person-to-person bank or PayPal transfers via unsolicited emails or Skype chats. These transactions are commonplace and they typically occur when a community member does not follow appropriate protocol and engages in an unstructured illicit exchange where often, funds are lost and eventual conviction is highly unlikely.

Self-Limit Programs.

In certain countries where online gambling is legal and regulated, online gambling operators have sometimes provided means by which individuals can self-exclude from the websites and/or place deposit limits on their accounts (Siemens and Kopp 2011). The gambling industry has offered self-limit and self-exclusion programs at traditional

casinos for some time. These programs were developed to limit access to gambling opportunities and provide problem gamblers with the help they need to limit or stop gambling. Two-thirds of online gambling websites offer voluntary self-limit and self-exclusion programs for problem gamblers (Nelson, LaPlante, Peller, Schumann, LaBrie and Shaffer 2008). Since they were first introduced in a traditional live casino in Manitoba, Canada in 1989, self-limit programs have been a promising addition for at-risk problem gamblers. Similar programs run in other Canadian provinces, in the US and in many other nations. When a gambler signs a self-limit or a self-exclusion agreement, they agree to set a monetary limit to their gambling activity or not to step foot in a casino or log on to an online gambling website for a specified period of time (from one month to indefinitely) (Tremblay, Boutin and Ladouceur 2008). Gamblers in these programs strongly believe that this course of action has helped them. Perhaps they perceive the self-limit or self-exclusion agreement to be a symbolic commitment and are thus, they are more motivated to refrain from gambling again (Ladouceur, Sylvain and Gosselin 2007).

It is recommended that if North American governments chose to implement their own online poker venue, self-limit and self-exclusion programs similar to those programs implemented at offline venues and some existing online gambling must be a part of the development plans. To counter the negative aspect of *time spent (time loss)*, self-limit programs should consider setting limits on hourly consumption as well as deposit limits.

Adolescent Gambling.

Researchers and policy makers acknowledge that there exist prevalent issues with adolescent gambling (Wiebe, Cox and Mehmel 2000; Hardoon and Derevensky 2001, 2002; Cotte and Latour 2009). On the *TwoPlusTwo* forum, for instance, posts about

adolescent gambling are so frequent that asking for homework help (in the forum entitled, 'Student Life') is banned and moderators immediately remove underage discussions on homework. Below are example quotes of typical underage poker players:

"As most of you know, I turned 18 years old yesterday. I've been playing poker online since I was 11. I started off at the Poker Room play chip tables, then gradually moved up to free rolls. I got my first taste of real money play around 12 and loved it. I was pretty much instantly hooked." (CompleteDonk, male, 7157 posts)

"so I'm 19 years old this year I have grown to be a decent good player online my problem obv is all the regulation against online poker I have built my roll from scratch since black Friday on merge but should I just take break and get regular job at least until I'm 21?" (RosePedal, US, 102 posts)

Online poker among adolescents clearly represents new challenges and problems. From a prevention and public policy standpoint, there is a growing need to examine and respond to gambling problems in adolescents (Messerlian et. al. 2004). Given online poker's greater accessibility, availability, and promotion, many adolescents are becoming attracted to the perceived excitement, entertainment, potential fame and financial freedom associated with online poker. The potential for future problems amongst adolescents is high due to the fact that they have grown up with videogames, computers, and the Internet (Messerlian et. al. 2004).

Thompson (2001) points out with online gambling there is the potential for children to access gambling sites and set up an account themselves under false pretenses and with the use of their parent's credit cards. It is difficult for website operators to verify a gambler's age thus, adolescents can easily begin playing illegally (Thompson 2001). Correspondingly, gambling researchers, Griffiths and Barnes (2007) found that 85% of online gamblers think that online gambling is easier to hide than offline gambling and that one-third of the online gamblers hide their gambling from other family members.

It was also noted that online gambling amongst adolescents and young adults remains extremely popular (Derevensky and Gupta 2007). When asking youth why they gamble online, the most popular reasons were: for the competition (60%), convenience (40%), 24-h accessibility (33%), privacy (33%), high speed of play (33%), good odds (33%), fair/reliable payouts (33%), bonus money (27%), graphics (20%), sex appeal (20%), and anonymity (20%) (Derevensky and Gupta 2007).

However, it is unfortunate that few safeguards exist for protecting underage youth from accessing these online gambling sites. Online poker sites give online poker players a heightened sense of control and skill and are particularly attractive to adolescents because the lack of safeguards or warning signs (Smeaton and Griffiths 2004). Smeaton and Griffiths (2004) noted that most of the websites that had age warnings (less than 50% in a UK sample of 30 online gambling sites) had them buried away in fine print (Smeaton and Griffiths 2004). It is often practice and trial games that entice younger poker players luring them with colorful graphics as well as seductive photos of sponsored celebrities (e.g. Nikki Cox and Pamela Anderson) (Derevensky and Gupta 2007). Given the unregulated nature of the Internet, regulating this type of enticement presents a challenge.

Online gambling problems may not only exist for adolescents, but universities and colleges are filled with young, tech-savvy males. Brown (2006) recommends that practitioners on campuses, such as campus student services, take notice of the growth of online gambling on campus. Brown (2006) recommends that campus student services actively prevent problem gambling amongst their student body. Measures and prevention techniques should be employed to promote awareness. Campus student services should:

- (1) introduce the problems associated with online gambling at new student orientations,

(2) involve staff to hold workshops on campus, (3) review institutional conduct codes on online gambling, (4) publish campus gambling policies in student handbooks, (5) inform at parent orientation programs (e.g. parent newsletters or parent-oriented websites), (6) utilize of counseling service professionals and (7) stop campus sponsored casino nights and poker tournaments (Brown 2006).

“You're young and have a lifetime ahead of you. If anything you should have learned from all this mess how unreliable poker can be as a profession. Take this as a chance to live life and develop other life skills that you can fall back on in tough times. Poker will always be there but your youth won't. Poker will eventually be legalized and regulated, go ahead and find yourself a job.” (TBadr, 2884 posts)

Limitations

No study is without limitation. There are several obstacles to obtaining quality data from the online gambling population which can make gambling research a challenge. Such obstacles such as lack of anonymity and falsifying self-reports limits the validity of most gambling research. This research overcomes the issues with anonymity and self-reports by basing the research on the experience of online poker players themselves. While it may be possible that some posters may have falsified posts, given that the forum's primary purpose is to share poker insider information, participants have little to gain in sharing inaccurate information. In addition, community members were quick to reveal scammers and falsifiers. There is some evidence that data collected via computer-mediated communications are often a more truthful medium of communication than face-to-face conversations (Wood and Griffiths 2007). For a sensitive and illicit product such as online poker we believe the method employed here, while not perfect, offered some key benefits.

Our non-participant observation approach did not permit direct questioning of the respondents about their motives. The author had to infer motives and factors from the discussions that online poker players typed on to an online poker forum. The inference of the motives here can be substantiated by the fact that the research and data collection were guided by informed grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The observations guide the researcher to inferences about underlying motives and thereafter, factors of illicit commoditizing which can later be further substantiated with other approaches and analytical techniques.

The qualitative findings of this study cannot be generalized. This study emphasized the collection of rich, elaborate and meaningful data through an online poker forum. The validity of ethnography is criticized within the social science enterprise as there is a lack of objectivity and the fact that data are represented interpretively. As a limitation, netnographic research findings do not enjoy the same generalizability that probability sampling does and therefore these online poker players, those that post and participate in online discussions about poker are most likely an extreme group of online poker devotees and insiders and are not representative of an average online poker player (Kozinets 2002). Kozinets (2002) suggests that it is possible that online communities, such as the twoplustwoers are full of devoted, enthusiastic, actively involved and sophisticated insiders, therefore online poker players here on the online forum most definitely represent professionals or devotees of online poker. The data set was gathered on the basis of purposive sampling and is not intended to be representative of either gamblers or online poker players in general. As a non-participant observing these online poker forum discussions, it was imperative that the specialized language and terminology

of poker players is clearly understood and is not misinterpreted. Data analysis and interpretation of netnographic data depended heavily on the skill of the netnographer.

General Discussion and Future Research Directions

This present study examined the textual content of an online poker site using consumption community practice theory (Schau et. al 2009), traditional gambler typologies (Smith and Preston 1984; Cotte 1997; Neighbors et. al 2002; Stewart and Zack 2008) and gambling frameworks (Griffiths 2003; Wood, Williams and Lawton 2007; Griffiths et. al. 2006; Cotte and Latour 2009) to understand contemporary online poker motivations and the factors that facilitate illicit commoditizing. A major contribution of this study is the introduction of the concept of *illicit commoditizing* based on consumption practice theory (Schau et. al. 2009). We examined the notion of illicit commoditizing in the context of an online illicit consumption community that centers around the consumption of a generally new, illicit and unregulated product: online poker.

By means of our dramaturgical model, this study has attempted to situate illicit commoditizing within online consumer behavior. The qualitative nature of the study enabled an in-depth analysis of online poker players' perceptions. The online forum allowed for the development of qualitative accounts that provided information about specific key aspects of online poker playing and illicit consumption communities.

As such, with online poker as our key illicit exemplar, our findings center on the development of emergent themes of professional poker players and their motivations and practices, as well as the development of factors that facilitates illicit commoditizing online. These findings are independent, occur simultaneously and overlap. The current study found 3 dichotomous, salient micro-level motivations for playing poker online and

six macro-level factors that facilitate illicit commoditizing with an online poker forum.

The macro-level findings may be applicable to other illicit consumption communities and should be subject to empirical testing.

Future research can provide validity to these findings and help us better understand the antecedent factors and drivers of illicit consumption and commoditizing online.

Additional research could help establish generalizability of our framework in other, more illicit community contexts such as the online sex trade, the online drug trade or the trade of counterfeit goods and pharmaceuticals. While the individual motives of online poker players are specific to this particular context, future research can also examine whether these motives or other over-arching motives drive consumers in a similar manner to trade illicitly online within other product categories.

Researchers should also explore forces behind the proliferation of online poker content. It is possible that online poker communities may receive significant support from companies that benefit from their loyalty. Poker blogs or other data sets from the forum could also be analyzed before and after Black Friday to examine whether motivations have shifted after such a seminal event for the online poker industry. A larger data set from this abundant forum (perhaps with assistance with computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software such as *Nudist*, *N.Vivo* or *Atlas.ti*) can be used in an content analysis to analyze trends in online poker motivations as well the legitimization of online poker as a socially, regulatory and normatively legitimized commodity (Humphreys 2010).

Further research might employ survey methods and supplementary long interviews to determine the extent to which these findings apply to the online poker players and

illicit consumption communities in general. To fully explore the robustness of these theoretical findings, supplementary methods can compare illicit consumption communities with licit consumption communities. The main distinction between illegal commoditizing and other, more legitimate trade is the possibility of financial and legal troubles.

The study analyzed how the online community of poker players used online poker forums to gain skill, to have fun, to engage in community participation, to impress, to earn a living and to vent. This study also provided detailed accounts of poker players' day-to-day lives and how they integrated or segregated online poker into their lives as a hobbyist or professional. Our findings show that some professional poker players integrate online poker into their lives with often little adverse social effects on their daily lives. These results demonstrated that some professional poker players transitioned into playing for the fame when money was no longer a motive and general poker play has also transitioned into multiple, lucrative offshoot occupations such as poker blogger, coach, staker and spokesperson.

The evidence is clear, millions of poker revenues are still being played illegally from Canada and the United States and millions have been traded through predatory lending measures online despite the government's sanctions, general stigmatization from society and potential harm mentally and financially that online poker players deal with in its current state. The emergence of online poker as a source of revenue for North American governments has lead to a number of questions regarding its legitimacy and legality. It is still uncertain what can be seriously done about online poker in the future given its questionable legalization. The introduction of online poker as a legislatively

accepted form of entertainment is likely to lead to the social ills that have plagued gambling throughout its history. Are these social issues worth the potential benefits obtained through legalization (i.e. tax revenues)? This remains an important but as yet unanswered question. If the main reason to legalize online gambling is to provide governments substantial tax revenues, keeping it illegal, billions of dollars will be lost each year in North America and these profits will go to offshore website operators who continue to evade the law. If online poker were legalized in North America, governments can generate millions of dollars of revenue annually can be used to subsidize government programs to improve schools, roads, and the communities. The question is: to protect the community from the social harms that result from permitting online poker or to reap the economic benefits received from online poker revenues? The Canadian government sponsors casinos in Canadian provinces with success. The next logical step for online poker is to be legitimized in North America through government organizations in Canada and legitimate gambling corporations in the United States.

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