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An Examination of female poker players

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AN EXAMINATION OF FEMALE POKER PLAYERS

by

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Bachelor of Science
University of Maryland
2001

A professional paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

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**Graduate College
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

MSN Encarta defines gambling as the wager “of money or other items of value on an uncertain event, dependent either wholly or in part on chance.” The major types of gambling are lotteries, sports betting including horse racing, and casino games including slot machines and table games (2007). A look at PokerUK.com’s Famous Gamblers of the 18th century to present shows thirteen men and zero women (2007). This gender division has experienced a recent change.

In 1999, CNN.com reported that women who gambled increased 20% between 1994 and 1998. This figure doubled the percentage growth for male gamblers. The e-Commerce Online Gaming Regulation and Assurance organization polled 11,000 online gamblers from 96 countries and found that the average online casino player is 54.8% likely to be female (“Biggest-ever study,” 2007). This trend is mirrored by an influx of women’s gambling websites and the creation of the ladies’ events World’s Series of Poker.

On WomanPokerPlayer.com, top 10 female players are featured alongside their winnings. From Kathy Liebert to Melissa Hayden, the winnings ranged from \$3,987,433 to \$871,641 (2007). The World Series of Poker Academy boasts that their alum, Sally Anne Boyer, took the title at the Ladies World Champion at the 2007 World Series of Poker, beating out 1,286 players, merely a day after attending the Academy. The latest international poker sensation, Annette Obrestad, has won numerous titles in co-ed tournaments to

accumulate \$2,303,408 in total prize money (PokerPages.com, 2007). The amazement is in her birth year, 1988. She is still too young to legally gamble in the United States.

Many scholars, like John Rosecrance, attribute the rise of gamblers to the legitimization of the casino industry (1988). He saw an image change after World War II. In his book, *Gambling without Guilt*, he states “Some of the reasons for this improvement can be traced to gambling’s continual contribution to charitable pursuits, the lessening of bookmakers’ dependence on criminal syndicates, the incorporation of gaming operations, and the growing realization that gaming operators don’t have to cheat their customers to realize substantial profits.” Now, gambling is appropriate for anyone with a budget.

This research was intended to explore the phenomenon of increasing women gamblers, clearing up the misconceptions and assumptions. One factor that may have specifically influenced women’s exposure to gambling could be the rise of women’s socio-economic status after the feminist movements of the 1960s. After all, if one does not have money for leisure, one cannot gamble. In 1963, Betty Friedan published her famous book The Feminine Mystique expressing the dissatisfaction of middle-class American homemakers, prompting change in the traditional female role. That same year, Congress passed Equal Pay Act, prohibiting employers from paying women less wage than their male counterparts. In 1964, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act established Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to prevent employment discrimination due

to race and gender (Imbornoni, 2007). These measures allowed, for the first time, the same economic and career opportunities for men and women.

The effect of the movement is seen in empirical data a generation later. The following table is constructed using data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (Rix 1990):

Table 1 Occupational Distribution of Employed Women and Men (in percentages)

| Occupation | 1972 | | 1988 | |
|--|-------|------|-------|------|
| | Women | Men | Women | Men |
| Executives, administrative, managerial | 4.6 | 11.5 | 10.8 | 13.6 |
| Professional specialty | 12.4 | 9.7 | 14.4 | 11.9 |
| Technicians, related support | 2.4 | 2.3 | 3.3 | 2.9 |
| Sales occupations | 11.1 | 10 | 13 | 11.1 |

The percentage increase of women in each category almost always exceeded that for the men with the exception of the “professional specialty” category.

The 21st century showed more promise for women workers (Costello & Stone, 2001). Women make up almost half of the work force, and more women than men are earning Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees. Women also increased their representation in the “executives, administrative, and managerial” position to 39%. It is also reported that “over half of Fortune 500 companies have more than one female corporate officer.” More than ever, females are in high-power positions in the gambling industry. As Lloyd D. Levenson, announced in “The

right choices,” “[there] is clearly a major change in gaming regulation ... Two women in adjacent states have been selected in the critical role of chief regulator ... if there ever was a glass ceiling in the upper echelons of gaming regulation, they have shattered it for all time” (2007).

In the last five years, there is an understandable reason why PricewaterhouseCoopers found a 40% decline in the number of female senior executive positions in the stock market’s 350 biggest companies (Robb, 2007). Women, aligning with the entrepreneurial spirit of Generation Y, are forgoing the corporate ladder to take control over their own careers and personal fate. Government survey shows “there are one million self-employed women in the workplace and the number of self-employed women has increased by 18%.” With social changes that throw out tradition, gender specific roles and activities become blurred (Morin & Rosenfeld, 1998). Despite these efforts in the past 30 years, women’s perception in the gambling industry did not improve in mass media. The following examples will show that gambling is still considered a leisurely activity for males.

Askmen.com, a men’s entertainment website that claims five million readers a month, picked its top 10 card playing movies. The ones produced in the 1990s are #6 *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998), #4 *Rounders* (1998), and #3 *Maverick* (1994). None of them featured a female lead character. *Casino Royale*, the highest grossing James Bond installment to date (McNary, 2006), carries the stereotype that women are gambling men’s ornaments. The female lead character, Vesper Lynd, is introduced as an educated, independent

accounting professional overseeing Bond's bankroll. However, during the tournament, she is asked to sashay across the room in a sexy evening gown and kiss Bond on the neck as a mark of masculinity for him. At the table, only one female gambler is seen (2006).

Society does not know how to accept female gamblers. In 2006, Jamie Gold won \$12,000,000 in a World Series of Poker event, a purse that is higher than the Masters, Kentucky Derby, and the Wimbledon combined (PRWeb, 2006). A year later, the winner of the World Series of Poker's Ladies' Event won \$262,077 (a purse comparable to the tournament turnout), courtside seats to a WNBA Sparks game, a makeover at Rio Hotel & Casino's spa, and a date with the pit boss (Shen, 2007). Some contestants found the prize to be patronizing. As Shen questions in her reporting, "Today's lady-laden Amazon Room brings up the discourse that quandaries many a poker player's mind: In the world of poker, where does a woman stand?"

The limitation of this research is that there is very little academic literature on this subject. Co-incidentally, documentations confirm the rise in female participation is echoed in other male-dominated leisure activities such as motorcycle riding, martial arts, computer gaming, etc (Henderson & Hickerson, 2007; Obenour, 2005; Roster, 2007). When interviewed, these women expressed a common theme of empowerment when describing their participating in the activities. Social scientists then theorized that those women use leisure as resistance to social constraints. As a result, this research will examine if more

women are partaking in gambling, a traditionally male-dominated field, as a way to resist social constraints to seek, ultimately, empowerment.

Because gambling is a broad subject, poker was chosen as the game of choice for a variety of reasons. Firstly, because of its coverage on NBS, Discovery Chanel, and ESPN, it is the most documented gambling event outside of sporting events (Dalla, 2002). Secondly, poker reflects the leisure activities mentioned above in that it is an individual game played in a socially interactive environment. Lastly, poker is a gender-neutral, easy to learn game that does not require background knowledge such as team statistics in sports betting that could favor male gamblers.

The future implications of this research are beneficial to the academic and practical world. There will be a more clear understanding of the motivations behind why women seem certain types of leisure. More research could focus on the resistance model of leisure discussed in the literature review. Socially, the public could forget conventional gender roles to accept both woman as a gambling man's trophy and woman as an empowered gambler herself. For the casino industry, being able to explain and predict female players' rationale and behavior will be priceless. As stated before, there is few research directly studying women gamblers. Better understanding of this population will aid gaming executives on how to market to this population. Lastly, knowing why women gamble could lead to more suitable treatments for women suffering pathological gambling.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Throughout contemporary women's history, there is a theme of resistance. Although women have improved their status economically and politically, many still argue that equality is not achieved. In the early nineties, the term glass ceiling was coined to describe women's feelings that they have to work twice as hard to achieve the same amount of status or respect as their male counterparts. In 1991, the U.S. Department of Labor officially defined glass ceiling as "those artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization into management-level positions" (Morrison, et al., 1987). A study commissioned by the Department showed that women and minorities suffered from this phenomenon.

According to Woody's and Weiss' account of the white women's experience in the work force, although legislation has benefited some women, "gains in entry level management by white women failed to result in promotions to positions of authority and power at the top of corporate America." Translation, women are disproportionately represented at positions of prestige. Betty Buck's rise to the top is an illustration of this concept. She is the first female chairwoman of the National Beer Wholesalers Association (Kaplan, 2006). She recalled attending a Miller training course in Milwaukee with a class full of men. She was singled out to build a draft system and "they didn't require any of the guys to do that... I guess that was their way of ensuring that I had the qualifications that they thought I needed."

Slowly this perception is changing. McMann discusses the changing dynamics of golf, a traditionally male-dominated sport favored in the work place (2006). In his many professional acquaintances, there has been a noticeable trend of favoring male activities in business dealings. Some managers have even been known to take their golf buddy clients to strip clubs. However, the publication that McMann writes for has found that the business/pleasure environment is evolving. He holds that “many golf tournaments over the years for planners and suppliers, and the enthusiastic, delighted participation of women has been crucial to those events’ success.”

Outside of the work force, *The Washington Post* has found that gender equity is felt by the general public. In “With More Equity, More Sweat,” Morin and Rosenfeld discover that the war of the sexes is over (1998). A majority of those surveyed believed that gender equality “enriched both sexes.” Traci Hughes-Velez, a corporate director, explains, “I think men are beginning to get it.” Instead of using gender as a difference, men and women are coming together to share their concerns over stress and family. So while it is uncertain if the glass ceiling still exists, women have received proven results to become more equal to men through their resistance of gender biases.

Another explanation for the disintegration of the glass ceiling could be explained by a new generation of workers. Forbes digs deep into consulting firm Accenture’s 2006 study of 12,000 executives gathered from eight countries (Clark). It seems as if women were almost as satisfied as men in their professions. One executive coach interviewed for the article, Carol Gallagher,

attribute the absence of the glass ceiling to Generation Xers and Yers. In 2000, when most baby boomers were planning for their retirement, Gallegher found that more men than women were seeking her advice about corporate success. As she says, "There [isn't] a need for as much of the women's group stuff."

Deloitte Consulting LLP resonates this thought in its in-depth examination of this crowd, also known as the Millennials. Loosely defined as anyone born between 1978 and 1995, there are certain characteristics belonging to the Millennials. These are people who received the fruits of social change in social and government institutions and experienced both maternal and paternal parenting. They believe that education is valuable and civic duty is good. Because of the advance in technology, e.g. the internet and cellular phones, information is readily available and innovations are possible. This generation is very independent and challenge loving. They value freedom of expression and individuality. Because there has been relative peace as compared to the previous generations who went through world wars and economic depression, this new generation is very optimistic and entrepreneurial.

Prepared Foods, a culinary publication, supports the above notions (2003). It states that Millennials are an intelligent, self deciding group who do not celebrate "the accidental success of airheads" like previous generation. Echoing Deloitte's findings, "the success of such programs as affirmative action and the gender-equity sports program Title IX reduced the gaps between genders and cultures for Millennials." Even the younger members of this group are feeling more responsible. The kids write letters to the Walt Disney Corporation about its

recycling program. Also, they forego celebrity endorsement for advice from their parents or respected members of their community.

Employers are feeling the effects of the new generation. Because the Millennials know what they want and they have the entrepreneurial spirit to seek after their demands, there is an increase in turnover in undesirable work environments (Grill FS, 2007). Traditionally, workers stressed the importance of longevity with one company and complying with work policies. The new idea of questioning authority has human resources managers puzzled. This is another example of how people are resisting conventional methods. Following this logic, it is easy to see how a female would seek alternative employment to meet her needs if her needs are not met by her present company.

A driving force for bridging the gap between genders in the new generation could be explained by modern psychology. In 1974, researchers Eleanor Maccoby and Carol Nagy Jacklin dispelled the age old belief that men are superior to women at certain brain functions and found that there are no noticeable differences in each gender's cognition. They attributed to any disparity in analytical abilities to individual upbringing and social pressures for men to be better at mathematics and women at languages. This scientific breakthrough put an end to the question which gender is better?

Mirroring what has been happening in society, social scientists started to look at leisure as a form of resistance. Resistance, in this context, is defined as activities that challenge "social and material conditions of people's lives, such as living with social stigmatization" (Shaw, 2007). As Shaw notes, leisure is the

perfect platform for expressing resistance because there are fewer formal restrictions and more choices. Also, because leisure activities are social in nature, it is an excellent method for the spread of new ideas challenging traditional ways of thinking.

She presented six suggestions for applying leisure as resistance:

1. Become familiar with the concept of resistance so that you can recognize it and respond with understanding and empathy.
2. Provide a supportive environment for individuals who choose to use leisure for resistance or who choose to adopt non-conforming personal identities through their leisure.
3. Become aware of leisure that reinforces constraining ideologies, such as negative attitudes towards marginalized or stigmatized groups.
Work within your own environment to avoid and minimize these forms of leisure.
4. Thinking about the images that are perpetuated through leisure activities, for example through promotional materials, tea uniforms, etc.
Work to minimize images that perpetuate stereotypes.
5. Find opportunities to discuss issues related to resistance (and reproduction) with participants of recreation programs, and especially with young people. In particular encourage young people to think about which leisure practices empower and which practices perpetuate constraints.

6. Think about the possibility of becoming more involved in public debates about issues related to the political aspects of leisure, including the role that leisure plays as a catalyst for social change.

More specifically, researchers began looking at women and leisure activities. Raisborough and Bhatti, among others, believe that “leisure can become a source of empowered, self-determined identities with which women can resist and undermine constructions of traditional and normative femininity” (2007). Three separate studies on female backpackers, independent travelers, and Harley riders help explain this theory (Obenour, 2005; Wilson & Harris, 2006; Roster, 2007). Each study performed qualitative, in-depth interviews with its subjects to seek the motivation for women’s participation in this traditionally male-dominated recreation. A common theme of empowerment erupted.

A subject from the backpackers’ study responded: “When I turned fifty, a few years ago ... and the wonderful experience of menopause came knocking at my door ... I took a look at my life. [I] said this is a wonderful life. I’m leaning ... [and] I decided that I wanted to start traveling ... I was free of children, parents and a relationship at that point ... I need[ed] some time, freedom and space to figure out what is next in my life” (Obenour, 2005).

Another response from the women independent travel study: “It was very empowering, on every single level ... the fact that I would make my own decisions. You know, I had to make some fairly full on choices, even the choices like what countries I would go to, you know ... It’s such a security with inside

yourself as well, like I'm okay, I'm surviving, I'm okay, I'm having a great time, I made these decisions myself" (Wilson & Harris, 2006).

Excerpts from the female Harley riding article provided similar feedback (Roster, 2007). The researcher found that her twelve subjects found empowerment through claiming leisure space, reconstructing self identity, claiming leisure community, resisting social stereotypes, and developing knowledge and skill. Roster believes that the interviewed riders are role models to other riding or non-riding women and they thrive on positive effects of their riding. By further exploration of gender resistance and empowerment facilitators, women would be less likely to feel negative when exploring an unfamiliar leisure activity. Using Roster's words, "disadvantaged members of a society can successfully redefine the entire playing field and eliminate these obstacles."

The literatures cited above only offer a cursory view of women and leisure activities. There is limited exploratory research focused specifically on women and gambling. When a study deals with gender and gambling, women are usually described by statistics and generalization. The popular books describing poker players' experiences usually focus on celebrities or participants of major tournaments who tend to be men. This research is intended to duplicate the qualitative approach used in the three studies mentioned above to uncover the story of the female poker players without multiple choice answers and Likert scales. This is their story as told by them.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

There will be two qualitative methods used in this study. The first method will include ethnographic recordings of different poker tables. Through the observations, female players will be asked to participate in an in-depth interview. This second method will borrow some of Gerald Zaltman's ZMET techniques to use sensory images and metaphors to expose the players' hidden feelings about their gambling experience. This hybrid approach documents thoughts and behaviors of female players. The anticipated result is that there will be a common theme of empowerment as found in other studies.

Observations will take place at three randomly selected poker rooms during tournaments and one hour of live no-limit play and live limit play. 39 poker tournaments were listed on Vegas.com and each hosting casino was assigned a number as follows:

Table 2 Assigning Las Vegas casinos numeric values

| | |
|----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 - Bally's | 21 - Monte Carlo |
| 2 - Bellagio | 22 - The Orleans |
| 3 - Binion's | 23 - Paris |
| | 24 - Planet Hollywood |
| 4 - Boulder Station | Resort |
| 5 - Caesars Palace | 25 - Plaza |
| 6 - Circus Circus | 26 - Red Rock Resort |
| 7 - Excalibur | 27 - Rio |
| 8 - Fiesta Henderson | 28 - Riviera |
| 9 - Fitzgeralds | 29 - Sahara |
| 10 - Flamingo | 30 - Sam's Town |
| 11 - Gold Coast | 31 - Silverton |
| 12 - Golden Nugget | 32 - South Point |
| 13 - Green Valley | |
| Ranch | 33 - Stratosphere |
| 14 - Harrah's | 34 - Sunset Station |

- | | |
|----------------------|----------------------|
| 15 - Hooters | 35 - Treasure Island |
| 16 - Imperial Palace | 36 - Tropicana |
| 17 - Luxor | 37 - Vegas Club |
| 18 - Mandalay Bay | 38 - The Venetian |
| 19 - MGM Grand | 39 - Wynn |
| 20 - The Mirage | |

A free online research randomizer selected properties number 16, 26, and 37 on December 12, 2007 (randomizer.org). Thus, the selected poker rooms are from Imperial Palace, Red Rock Resort, and the Vegas Club.

Imperial Palace, located on the Las Vegas Strip, hosts daily tournaments at 12:00pm and 8:00pm. Red Rock Resort, a local casino in Summerlin, hosts only one daily tournament at 10:00am. The Vegas Club, located downtown, hosts the most number of tournaments at 10:00am, 5:00pm, 7:00pm, and 12:00am. Tournament times from both Imperial Palace and the Vegas Club were assigned numeric values to randomly generate the time of tournament play:

Table 3 Assigning tournament times numeric values

| <u>Imperial Palace</u> | <u>Vegas Club</u> |
|------------------------|-------------------|
| 1 - 12:00pm | 1 - 10:00am |
| 2 - 8:00m | 2 - 5:00pm |
| | 3 - 7:00pm |
| | 4 - 12:00am |

Using same generator as before, tournament time for Imperial Palace was set at 12:00pm and 12:00am for the Vegas Club.

Lastly, every day of the week was assigned a number to randomly determine the day of visit:

Table 4 Assigning days of the week numeric values

| | |
|---------------|--------------|
| 1 - Sunday | 5 - Thursday |
| 2 - Monday | 6 - Friday |
| 3 - Tuesday | 7 - Saturday |
| 4 - Wednesday | |

The generator selected Saturday. These visits will take place between January and March of 2008. Lastly, time periods through the day were assigned numbers to see what time of the day these visits will take place:

Table 5 Assigning time of the day numeric values

| 1 - Day (9:00am - 5:00pm) | 2 - Swing (5:00pm - 1:00am) | 3 - Grave (1:00am - 9:00am) |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|

The generator selected the “Swing” shift of the day. Each of the visits could be fairly compared to other visits because of randomization.

During the observational phase, group interactions will be recorded. What types of topics were covered in the conversation, if any? What roles do women play in conversations? The environment will also be documented from the television programming to cocktail waitress uniforms. Players’ chip stack and betting behavior will also be noted. This process will take place without the players’ knowledge to keep the naturalness of the environment. The information will be gathered later to see if there are any behavioral differences between female and male players and if the differences can be explained in their conversations.

At the end of each visit, all the female players (a maximum of 9 excluding the researcher) will be asked to participate in a 45-minute, in-depth interview. The directions and method of contact will be detailed in a letter authorized by the Institutional Review Board. Prior to each interview session, the subjects will be asked to bring images, trophies, or other objects that reminds her of gambling. Also, they should be prepared to talk candidly about their history of gambling.

The interviewees' consent will be voluntary throughout the interview process and their confidentiality will be in tact throughout this study.

Because this research is considering gambling as a recreational activity, each interviewee is asked to perform the following self-checklist prior to the start of the interview to eliminate pathological gamblers. Those who agree with five or more of the following statements obtained from the DSM-IV will be referred to Gamblers' Anonymous:

1. I have frequent thoughts about gambling experiences (past, future, or fantasy).
2. I require larger or more frequent wagers to experience the same "rush."
3. I become restless or irritable when trying to stop or reduce gambling.
4. I gamble to improve mood or escape problems.
5. I try to win back gambling losses with more wagers.
6. I hide my gambling from close ones.
7. I steal to fund my gambling.
8. I have unsuccessfully tried to reduce or stop gambling.
9. I have broken the law to support my gambling.
10. I have lost a relationship, job, or other significant opportunity because of my gambling.
11. I have turned to others for financial support because of gambling.

After the interviewee successfully passes the pre-screening, a researcher trained in the ZMET interview format conducts an in-depth question and answer session.

Here is a sample interview questionnaire:

1. Age:
2. Marital Status:
3. Occupation / Income:
4. List all living immediate family members and their ages:
5. When and how did you start gambling, legally or with family and friends?
6. What was the outcome of the first gamble? How did you feel?
7. How often do you gamble? Are there describable frequencies?
8. What types of gambling do you participate in? Why these games?
9. What is your usual strategy in gambling? Do you have one?
10. How do you feel when you are winning and losing?
11. What do you like the most and least about gambling?
12. What would you compare gambling to in terms of other recreational activities?
13. Why do you prefer gambling over other activities?
14. Do any of the listed relatives gamble?
15. Why do you think people choose not to gamble?
16. What people or factors have influenced your opinion of gambling?
17. What is your favorite gambling story?
18. What is your gambling fantasy, if you have one?
19. How does gambling relate to your life? Or does it?
20. Please describe the images you brought with you.
21. Do you have any questions or concerns about this research study?

RESULTS

All the responses will be analyzed for patterns and similarities. Roster's Harley riding article will serve as a model for breaking down different ways to achieve empowerment. If the theme of empowerment is not found, then the response will be organized to determine if any constructs can be formed. If none of the answers match each other, then there is either an error in the research method or there is no explainable reason for the phenomenon of rising number of female gamblers.

LIMITATIONS

The limitations of this study come from time and monetary constraints. The results would be more reliable if the observation period is extended to longer than three months. Also, limited monetary resources restrict the research to low-limit live action games and tournaments. Women who participate in high-limit games and tournaments may be characterized differently. Gambling itself is a sensitive subject that is not comfortably discussed by everyone. The purpose of not providing a gift for participating in the interviews is to only attract those who genuinely want to speak about their gambling. However, there is no method to know when a subject is lying or stretching the truth.

Finally, gambling is a very broad umbrella of activities that cannot be explained by one simple game of poker. Even within poker, there are different variations not covered by this study such as Omaha, 7-card Stud, or Crazy pineapple. Women who play Texas Hold'em may differ from women who play other forms of poker. Also, online poker players may behave differently from live

poker players. This study will only offer a cursory look at a small segment of the female gambling population.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for further research are to continue probing the area of women's participation and motivation in gambling. With enough information, scholars can duplicate Shaw's guide for applying leisure as resistance to extend to gambling. Casinos can incorporate the findings into improving their marketing strategies to please both genders. The players would benefit because the gender barrier is broken and the playing field will finally be leveled for healthy competition. Scholars could use this as another building block in their theories of women and leisure.

CONCLUSION

There are many misconceptions and assumptions about women gamblers. This proposed research is one of the few papers aimed to dissect the psyche of women gamblers. With the numbers showing that women gamblers represent the fastest growing segment in the gaming world, this population can no longer be ignored despite the fact that gambling is traditionally considered a male – dominated leisure activity. Insight into this unique group will be gainful to both the academic and commercial groups. Social psychologists can dig deeper into the motivation and behaviors of women and gaming operators can provide services for women better. Women gamblers benefit from forming their own identity instead of fading into the idea of a stereotypical gambler.

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