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Article

The Hyperreal Gambler

On the Visual Construction of Men in Online Poker Ads

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Abstract Online poker, like gambling in general, is predominantly a male activity. Thus, poker ads most often depict men as their protagonists. According to Jean Baudrillard, advertising can be seen as a ‘plebiscite whereby mass consumer society wages a perpetual campaign of self-endorsement.’ Ads often use stereotypical imagery for establishing a shared experience of identification with the consumer, and since their role is to sell rather than to portray the realities of life, they often have an exaggerated and monolithic – or, hyperreal – way of representing gender. This article offers an analysis of the ways in which men are portrayed in the ads of *Poker Magazine Finland* in the volume of 2009 (all six issues), at the peak of the so-called online poker boom. Theoretically, the article draws on postmodern theorists such as Jean Baudrillard and particularly on his concept of hyperreality (exaggerated and media-saturated reality) to analyze the way males are portrayed in the ads in question.

Keywords hyperreality, media, advertising, poker, online poker, Jean Baudrillard, masculinity, males, poker players

Examining Men in Poker Ads

When I began to conduct ethnographic research on online poker, more than a decade ago, its everyday reality seemed to me curiously relaxed, even languid and mundane. Physically, internet poker was like most online computer games: people sit in front of their computers, click and press keys to play against other people. It was best played in an environment free of distractions, but it could be also played very casually while having a coffee break, putting children to bed, or when in bathroom. For most players, it was a hobby, but for some it was a source of rather significant additional income or even a profession. In poker, one could lose or gain a fortune, but most players I knew seemed to play with relatively small amounts of money for the occasional excitement and/or in hope of some extra money, the value of which was rather symbolic.

That was the ethnographic reality of the game, but the players and the game represented in poker advertisements on television, poker websites and special poker magazines seemed like another world: there, elegant players with high sex appeal are surrounded by luxury and women, and battle with each other in a context saturated with masculine connotations. This was not particularly surprising, as most poker players offline or online are young males (Mäyrä and Ermi 2014) and advertising, while being known to exaggerate, is an important cultural factor reproducing gender, among other things, through images and language (Romaine 1999, Schroeder and Zwick 2004). Images in advertising reflect the coding system embedded in our societal, cultural, and ideological environment. However, in the case of poker, the ads seemed like a condensed



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reality in which collective narrative elements such as clichés, stereotypes, aesthetics, morality, irony, and gender manifested in a hyperreal form (Kurpiers 2009, O'Donohoe 2001, 96-97, Schroeder and Zwick 2004). The advertisements were not misrepresentations of the poker culture, let alone fake, but rather, as Jean Baudrillard would put it (Baudrillard 1994, 81, Berger 2014, 15), 'more real' than the real. By looking at the advertisements, an anthropologist could learn what is considered hegemonically significant or essential in a culture – or even what *is* this culture. As Baudrillard argued, advertisements do not just 'reflect culture' but are an intrinsic part of it:

[A]ny analysis of the system of objects must ultimately imply an analysis of discourse about objects – that is to say, an analysis of promotional 'messages' (comprising image and discourse). For advertising is not simply an adjunct to the system of objects; it cannot be detached therefrom, nor can it be restricted to its 'proper' function (there is no such thing as advertising strictly confined to the supplying of information). Indeed, advertising is [...] an irremovable aspect of the system of objects [...] (Baudrillard 2005, 178).

We shall analyze here the advertisements for online poker sites published in the 2009 volume of *Poker Magazine Finland* (henceforth: *PMF*), which used to be the leading poker magazine in Finland during the so-called poker boom (Bjerg 2011, 114, Google Trends 2017). Most of the content of the magazine was translated from the international *Poker Magazine* published in the United States, but some articles and columns were written by Finns. Most of the advertisements were translated from their Scandinavian, Western European or American originals. Hence, the magazine under examination was international with a strong American emphasis, and can thus be interpreted as representing 'Western' poker culture with a Finnish touch. The readers of the magazine, like online poker players in general, tended to be young men (*Poker Magazine Finland* 2010). Most of the articles in the magazine featured professional poker players, poker tournaments, and columns by gaming specialists, and its advertisements portrayed mostly male poker professionals or other celebrities who had been known to play poker. Hence, *PMF*'s articles portrayed the hegemonic representational elite (Fron et al. 2007) of poker culture. My approach to the advertisements in question is explorative and essayistic (Cornelissen et al. 2012, 198-199). I aim to present and discuss the typical visual content (Lister and Wells 2011) of the poker ads, and to show how men and, to some extent, women are portrayed in them. For the analysis, I have examined all the ads that featured a person and took up at least one whole page. To analyze the visual construction of online poker in the ads and its relationship to the actual playing of online poker, I will draw on Jean Baudrillard's notions of hyperreality (Baudrillard 1994, 2005).

If one were to summarize the meaning of hyperreality in Baudrillard's thought, it could be described as something 'more real than the real itself' (Baudrillard 2005, Eco 1986). However, one should not understand the description in a strictly literal way, but more as a heuristic concept to make sense of the representational techniques that affect our perception of what is meaningful in the world. As Nick Perry explains, the concept of

hyperreality can be defined as culturally valuable situations where the copy (or the derivative/representation) is actually more significant and important than its original (Perry 1998, Prasad 2005, 229). Perry's example of hyperreality is a televised baseball match where a great catch is filmed from many angles and broadcast in slow motion so that viewers can enjoy it fully in its enhanced reality. Thus, the copy (or in this case, copies) of the incident becomes 'more real' – more significant and more fulfilling – than its original. In the same vein, Merkhofer describes how, for example, a well-groomed garden is a copy of nature but 'better' or 'more real' than nature itself; or how pornography is a sort of condensed reality of 'regular' sex and thus 'sexier than sex itself'; or how film stars, super models and Olympic athletes in their media-saturated representations are 'excessively real', or hyperreal, manifestations of their counterparts in everyday, 'plain' reality (Merkhofer 2007, Baudrillard 1994, 28). A tourist in an exotic land gazing at an organized 'authentic' local dance performance can be seen as consuming hyperreality; the carefully orchestrated experience conducted by professionals is a highly refined version of its everyday counterpart, and an enhanced and 'better' (or 'more than real') version compared to what one can experience in a mundane reality. One can also see televised soap operas as hyperreal - in their fantastic plots the problems and challenges of everyday human relationships have been condensed into exaggerated archetypes (Perry 1998, 28).

Often, Jean Baudrillard's understanding of the hyperreal can seem extreme or cynical compared to that of Umberto Eco (1986), who thought that the real functions as a reference to the hyperreal (or, to the condensed representations of reality). Baudrillard – at least in his most postmodernist mode – seems to think that the connection between the hyperreal representation and reality has actually vanished and was replaced by *simulacra*, a world of copies without originals (Baudrillard 1994, 2005). This seems to be his view especially in the case of media. In this polemic sense, the media (understood broadly), including advertisements, do not only exaggerate reality but are themselves the state of reality that has meaning. To Baudrillard, everyday ordinary life is 'the desert of the real' (Baudrillard 1994, 1), short on or entirely empty of meaning. People gaze at the hyperreal, tap into it for values, norms, aesthetics, morals and so on; the hyperreal is the saturated icon, or a model from which everyday lives derive their meaning. Therefore, hyperreality resembles a system of meaning, an ideological formation, and/or an abstract dimension of a culture.

According to my interpretation of Baudrillard, a minimal example of hyperreality would for instance be a retrospective narrative of what I did last summer. Because I would not be able to *re*-present every detail of my summer, I would have to select issues and events that are significant and valuable and I would thus end up condensing or exaggerating reality by leaving out a huge amount of what I feel are insignificant details. This would make the narrative 'more real' than the real. If I were to include selected stills, video and hyperlinks to illustrate my narrative, it would make it even more (hyper)real. In the Baudrillardian sense, only this hyperreal condensed re-presentation would hold any meaning to anyone because the world itself without being narrated, mediatized, represented or condensed in some way is not significant. It would be 'the desert of the real;' only a selective representation would give it meaning. This interpretation of hyperreality is to some extent similar to Botz-Bornstein's concept of *culturéalité* (Botz-Bornstein 2006), or Hanson's understanding of hyperreality, in which

the signifier dominates or improves the representation process so much that it becomes more effective, more memorable and thus 'more real' than what is represented (Hanson 1992). Thus, I suggest that a close equivalent to the concept of hyperreal would be *self-consciously media-saturated* (Tajbaksh 2001, 'media' here meaning any kind of mediated act from a verbally narrated story to ads for Hollywood movies). As a crystallized expression of the values of the system of meaning in question, I view the ads portrayed in this article as hyperreal manifestations.

Perhaps a simpler way of defining advertising would be to say that it is a communication from a vendor to a potential buyer, about a certain product. It provides essential 'information' about a product in an inviting form. Often, it draws on emotive stimuli such as the charisma of a celebrity promoting the product, romantic imagery associated with the product, assumed positive emotions (enhanced gender identity, happiness etc.) that would be experienced as a result of obtaining the product, or other cultural elements not directly connected to the product (Malefyt and Moeran 2003.) In Baudrillardian sense, advertising is hyperreal in that it is a relatively systemized and large-scale phenomenon where reality is condensed and selectively filtered to focus on particularly significant, key elements.

As advertisements can contain only a limited amount of information and associations, they seem to be written in shorthand, producing stereotypical images of low semantic resolution. The economics of advertising rarely allows the individuals depicted in the ads to transgress the limits of their caricatures, and where there is no room for complexity, stereotypical or mythological archetypes must be used for impact (Rubin and Sander 1991, 15, Romaine 1999, 253). Despite the fact that advertising content is very selective, over-representing some aspects of society while under-representing (or concealing) others, it does correspond to existing values in society. In other words, even though ads may be 'fake,' fantastic and highly exaggerated, advertising and its gender imagery cannot go too much against the grain of the hegemonic values of the surrounding culture (Wiles et al. 1995, 36-37).

PMF Ads: Men of Danger and Battle

Although professional poker players might be as easy-going and convivial as the boy next door, the traditional stereotype has them as serious people with 'poker faces' meant to hide feelings that might give away any information about the player's cards. In advertisements, the stereotypical seriousness associated with poker is evident, sometimes extending itself into aggressiveness and suggestions of violence. This is not unique to poker ads; in general, men in ads have been associated with more seriousness and violence than women (Lucas, 2010, Gentry and Harrison 2010, 81). In the ads in *PMF*, this tendency is most evident when the ad is carefully staged, stylized, and illustrating either a real-world poker champion or a fictional character that looks like a professional poker player. Thus, it seems that when an advertiser has carefully considered what kind of image and mood they want to construct to represent poker, they most often go for images traditionally associated with masculinity: seriousness, gravity and power or aggression. As we shall see further in this section, a man portrayed in such an ad is usually wearing dark-colored clothes and black sunglasses, the symbols of a professional player. His mouth is a tight line and he might be holding a pile of chips, the size of

which does matter as it is the most commonly used symbol of poker and the measure of a player's skills. The way the character is composed implies that poker is a competition for no-nonsense, tough men (van Ingen 2010, Jouhki 2010, 65).



Tee ensitalletus
ja pelaa
tiesi huipulle!

Kaksi tapaa aloittaa
huipun valloitus:

400\$

Ensitalletuksestasi lähtien tienaat jokaisesta Summit Pointsista 7 senttiä aina 400\$ asti. Ansaitsemasi bonus talletetaan vähitellen pelitilillesi jokaisen tienatun Summit Pointsin yhteydessä.

Bonuskoodi:
PMAGAZINE400

300\$

Kerää ensitalletuksestasi 30 vuorokauden sisällä 3.000 Summit Pointsia ja tienaa 300\$. Ansaitsemasi bonus talletetaan poistitillesi, kun olet saavuttanut tarvittavan Summit Points määrän.

Bonuskoodi:
PMAGAZINE300

Pelaajat ansaitsevat jokaisesta osakilillä (rake) kerätyistä yhdestä dollarista (1\$) yhden (1) Summit Pointin.

Lataa ilmainen pokerisoftia ja aloita pelaaminen. Lisätiedot Everest Pokerin kotisivuilta.



Image 1. Heavy rock and online poker (PMF, 3/2009, 85; see also 3/2009, 4-5 for another heavy rock musician endorsing poker.)

Perhaps the most serious poker player in the 2009 volume is portrayed in an ad (Image 1) by *Everest Poker*, an online poker cardroom owned by GigaMedia Ltd., based in Singapore. The ad presents Voitto Rintala, a Finnish heavy rock musician and poker professional. He is wearing a black leather jacket and black jeans and is shown against a black/grey background. Rintala is staring at the camera with a look sharpened by contact lenses that make his eyes appear beast-like. The text encourages the reader to make an initial deposit and *Play your way to the top!* Although Rintala's figure is visually dominant, as celebrity endorsers go, his role is rather passive (Awasthi and Choraria 2015, 215). The text merely informs the viewer about the rules of the gaming site and does not refer to Rintala in any way. However, the viewer is encouraged to feel that the combination of shades of black and grey, the heavy rock habitus, the leather, and the eyes of a beast make Rintala an ominous figure, hinting at danger (Vaisman 2016, 300), which is also associated with online poker.

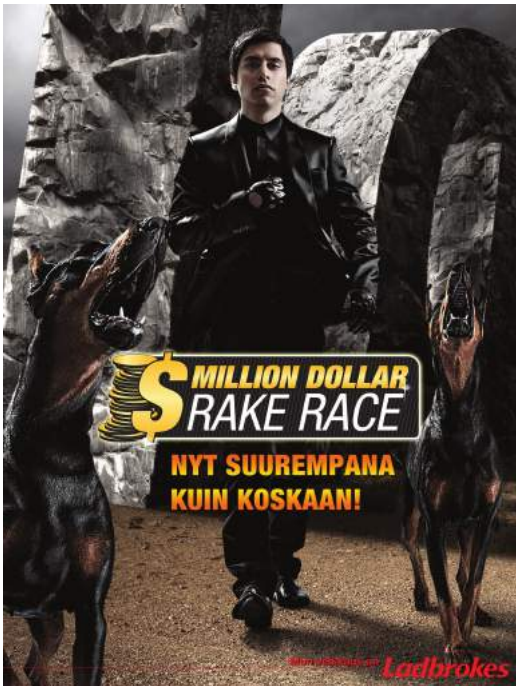


Image 2. Player with rocks and dogs (PMF 2/2009, 31).

Another ad hinting at danger is one by *Ladbrokes*, a London based international online betting company. In the ad, the Swedish poker champion Jonas 'Nebuchad' Danielsson (see e.g. *PokerWorks*, 8 July 2008) walks towards the camera, treading firmly on gravel, surrounded by rocks, and looking straight at the viewer (Image 2). Like Rintala, he is wearing only black, but he is also wearing leather driving gloves. The ad introduces a '10 million dollar rake race *now bigger than ever*'. The number 10 is made of a stack of chips and a dollar sign in the text, and of rocks in the background. Two black bloodhounds are barking on either side of Danielsson. Knowing Danielsson's real life genial appearance (e.g. *PokerRed*, 11 January 2010), it is evident that his habitus

has been made more menacing for the ad (Crawford 2006). The dogs, gloves, rugged terrain and dark colors reinforce Danielsson's dark and serious appearance. On the surface level, the ad connotes determination, if not physical threat, although the symbolic message seems to be that the rake race has determined competitors.

In some ads, the elements of gravity and danger are created by making explicit references to fighting and battles. In an ad (Image 3) by *PokerStars* on a spread, the title states that ‘*tournament poker is a battle of minds*’ and ‘*a duel is an endurance battle where the last man standing will win.*’ The ad goes on to challenge the reader: ‘*If you love a battle, the biggest and the best tournaments are played at PokerStars.*’ The reverse page shows the Canadian poker professional Daniel Negreanu, a multiple world champion (see <http://danielnegreanu.com>), staring solemnly in the camera, raising his bet at a poker table. Behind him there is a boxing ring with a boxer staring in the camera at least as solemnly as Negreanu. The manner in which the poker table and the boxing ring are positioned suggests a similarity between the two practices, both being games where (mostly) men engage in battle and where only one man emerges victorious. In real life, Negreanu or ‘KidPoker’, as he calls himself in online poker, is well known for his friendly appearance at poker tables, but to reflect the mood of online poker he has been turned into a fighter.



Image 3. Battle of minds (PMF, 1/2009, 4-5; for a similar slogan see 4/2009, 4-5; for another ad referring to poker as boxing, see 1/2009, 15).

Sometimes the signs of danger have to be even more explicit, like in the ad by *Pokeri*, a magazine about online and live poker (Image 4). The textual side of the ad lists *Pokeri*’s services and campaigns with its affiliate online poker sites, and remains strictly informative, with no slogans or suggestive emotional statements about poker. However, the shadowy picture in the background portrays a man with a short beard and intricate tattoos on his arms. Again, the tone is dark, as he is wearing a black tank and the background is dark grey. The man brings to mind a member of a heavy metal band. What might be puzzling to the viewer is why he is shouting. There is no explanation for it in the text but it seems like the man’s emotional outburst has something to do with the

intensity of the game. Maybe he is in pain after losing, or it is his war cry. Either way, the viewer is led to feel that some strong emotion, if not some form of aggression, is to be associated with poker.

KATTAVIN SISÄLTÖ SEKÄ NETTI- ETTÄ LIVEPOKERIIN

POKERI

- Highstakes Database nettipelien pelaajatilastot
- Päivittäiset alan uutiset
- Pokerikauppa
- Liveturnauskalenteri
- Kaikki maailman korttihuoneet
- Suomalaisten pelaajien liveturnaustilastot
- RawVegas-videouutiset päivittäin
- Pokeritarjouksia
- Raportointia turnauksista paikan päältä

Pokeri.com raportoi paikan päältä EPT-kiertuetta. Seuraa liveinä suomalaispelaajien turnausmenestyksiä ja katso tuoreimmat videohaastattelut. EPT-kiertueen tarjoaa PokerStars.

KAMPANJAT

- Mermaid Poker, Boss-verkko, 30% rakeback + 200% bonus €500 asti
- NoiQPoker, iPoker-verkko, 100% bonus \$600 asti
- NordicBet, Prima-verkko, 100% bonus \$500 asti
- RedKings, OnGame-verkko, 500% bonus \$5000 asti
- Pokerihuone, Entraction-verkko, jopa 60% rakeback + bonus
- William Hill, Crypto-verkko, 30% rakeback + bonus \$500 asti
- Betfair, itsenäinen, 30-37% rakeback + bonus \$1500 asti

WWW.POKERI.COM

Image 4. Shouting (PMF, 1/2009, 53; see also 1/2009, 6-7 for another ad where intimidating male look is used for effect).

The ad by *NordicBet* (Image 5), a Scandinavian online gambling company providing online poker services, promotes a ‘superweekend’ of live poker hosted by the company in Tallinn, Estonia. In the picture, a man wearing a black suit, black glasses, and a red cape is flying over the Tallinn cityscape towards the viewer. The man has raised his right fist and it seems to be aimed at the viewer, coming straight at him or her. On his ring finger he is wearing a ring with the symbol of a spade on it. The man brings to mind a mix of Superman, because of the red cape, and the character Agent Smith or Neo from *The Matrix* (1999), the suggestion heightened by the similarity between the grey background in the ad and the shade of green employed throughout the movie. The man’s face is as grim as Agent Smith’s, and the fist implies battle. The ad suggests that only the most qualified will be allowed to take part in the fight between supermen.



Image 5. Superman ready to fight (PMF 1/2009, 30-31).

It is evident that the advertisements presented for analysis might exhibit various degrees of irony – a notion that I will discuss in the last section of the article. But it is clear that the next ad, by the Swedish online betting company *Betsson*, does so most definitely (Image 6). It asks if the reader has ‘bad gaming friends,’ and offers ‘free and safe online poker.’ Illustrating the consequences of bad gaming, the image portrays the bottom of a lake and the lower half of a person whose feet have been sunk into a block of concrete, suggesting a clichéd mob-style punishment. In another Bettson ad (PMF 2/2009, 89), there is also a reference to a hyperreal mafia – a room with a bed and a horse’s head in it just like in *The Godfather* (1972). The ads seem to humorously suggest that the online poker service in question is trustworthy and has no connections to organized crime – unlike some other online poker companies, according to recurring claims (Spapens 2014, 411, Wood and Griffiths 2008).



Image 6. Bad gaming friends (PMF 1/2009, 33).

What About Happy People?

In *PMF*, there are also online poker ads that show people who are not serious or aggressive and do not connote violence, but are happy and smiling. They are most often female, and if they are men, they are poker players who have just won a game (Image 7) or have been photographed outside of a game room, or they are clearly not poker players themselves.

There was no smiling man portrayed playing poker in any of the ads in *PMF* in 2009. Women players were portrayed smiling, however; they were either luring potential players into a game room or playing strip poker almost naked (see lower left-hand corner of Image 8). The latter was depicted in an image that was a part of a *Ladbrokes* ad and included four images framed like poker cards on a red background. Three of the pictures showed people with smile on their faces, while the fourth showed nobody, just a boat on a beach. In one image (top left-hand corner) there were two smiling women wearing evening dresses and a serious man – not smiling because he was the player – wearing a suit and sunglasses. The man was holding a woman’s hand and was throwing



Image 7. PokerStars ad has winners smiling (PMF, 3/2009, 19, partial image of an ad; for more ads portraying victory and joy see 3/2009, 11-12; 4/2009, 2-3).

a deck of cards into the air. Although he is in the background, and there is a woman in the foreground, in terms of poker it is he who is the agent in the image, as he holds the sunglasses and the cards, both essential symbols of poker.

In another image of the same ad (the lower right-hand corner), there is a peephole through which two men, in real life former Finnish *Big Brother* contestants and comic sidekicks for the online poker company, are wearing top hats and black suits. They are carrying walking sticks and are holding a bottle of champagne and a plate of gaming chips and cards. The men are smiling cheerfully but they are not poker players; rather, they seem to be croupiers of some kind, and are offering the viewer cards. The title of the ad declares that the poker room is ‘The gaming man’s paradise.’ The term for a gaming man in Finnish is *pelimies*, which can also be translated as a man who has

PELIMIEHEN PARATIISI

1.5.-30.6.2009



Mun veikkaus on **Ladbrokes**

Image 8. Smiling people on cards (PMF, 1/2009, 65; see also 1/2009, 67; 3/2009, 65).

frequent simultaneous sexual relations and/or is otherwise skilled and cunning in social relations and negotiations.

In the last ad presented here (Image 9), by the Malta-based poker company *NoiQ*, we see what could be called a prototypical male poker player and his female companion. The

man in dark glasses and a black suit is sitting at the poker table and staring soberly at the viewer. The woman, in a red evening dress, is leaning toward the man but is facing the viewer, *smiling*. The viewer can tell that the man is the player because he is holding playing cards, wearing sunglasses and there is a stack of chips next to him, both symbols of poker. Moreover, he is *not* smiling. Again, it is the serious man who is the player and the central agent in poker (DuBrin 2011, 2); the woman who is not playing, is free of responsibility and seems to be a spectator. The text of the ad suggests that the man is one of the 'European Masters of Poker.'



NoiQ tarjoaa:
Pokerikoulun ja jopa 225€ aloituskassan
100% up to 5000€ ensitalletusbonuksen
Suurimmat rakeracet
Jopa 45% kuukausittaisen VIP Bonuksen

MASTERS
EUROPEAN MASTERS OF POKER™

European Masters of Poker
Pelaa NoiQlla ja voita palkka Matilla järjestettävään EMOP Finaaliin. Paketteja jaossa useissa kampanjoissa.
>>> Tutustu etuihin kotisivuillamme
Rekisteröidy koodilla **CPSUOMI** ja olet oikeutettu kalkein niihin etuihin

NoiQ
POKER CASINO SPORTS BETTING

Image 9. Serious man, smiling woman (PMF, 5/2009, 89; see also 1/2009, 2-3 and 35 for more prototype pictures).

Discussion

According to Wiles et al., advertising is a method of using stereotypical imagery for 'establishing a shared experience of identification with the consumer,' and it has a special and, at least at times, monolithic way of representing gender (Wiles et al. 1995, 36). This is because the purpose of advertising is not to problematize or to portray the complex realities of life but, simply, to sell products. As Benwell argues, the traditional representation of masculinity in the media celebrates attributes like physicality, violence, autonomy, and silence (Benwell 2003, 153-160). This is evident in the *PMF* advertisements most of which portray serious males dressed in black, against a black or other dark background which conveys the message of poker being a serious business to be handled by specialists (De Groot et al. 2016, 188, 195). Also, the mood often suggests danger or combat, as if poker was about men fighting each other in a way that can be seen as normalizing masculine danger and the atmosphere of violence (Katz 2003). Perhaps depicting poker as a fierce battle (Messner 2012, 116) or at least as a solemn activity makes it more attractive to the young men who play the game and who are the primary audience of the ads.

Hence, it may be safe to say that the modern expansion of the male role in advertisements (Schroeder and Zwick 2004, 26) has not influenced poker ads – or at least, had not done so by 2009 – and the hegemonic masculinity which is nowadays more flexible and contested in ads than ever (Jackson et al. 2001, 13, 43-47) is rather stable, if not stereotypical in poker. In other words, there is no hint at 'masculinity in crisis' (Gauntlett 2002, 250-251) in the ads: the gaming men are rock solid, and operate in the 'masculine mode of exigency and competition' (Barthel 1988, 183). However, it might be precisely the actual crisis of masculinity that demands the advertisers to 'man-up' and dispel the contested and jeopardized masculinity in reality by producing a hard-rock masculinity (Cheryan et al. 2015). Regardless of whether a crisis is a recent phenomenon or if it has always been a part of masculinity (or femininity), particularly for young adult males in search of an identity, manliness seems to be compressed into an inviting and comfortingly intact form in advertisements. This hyperreal male is a lucid and powerful compensatory model for young male gamers, the online poker players in the real world, who acknowledge that being 'a gamer' might be associated with stereotypes that go against traditional images of masculinity (Beynon 2002, 75–97, Weaver 2016).

Irony is one likely interpretation for some of the ads examined here and a plausible interpretation for all the images that seem overly stereotypical and reactionary. On the other hand, even if the ads are supposed to be ironic (Jackson et al. 2001, 8), they could still be seen as manifesting masculine fantasies. A viewer of an exaggeratedly masculine advertising image can justify enjoying the image by narrating it as irony. Moreover, even ironic images can uphold traditional gender roles.

When the setting is less formal and/or the greatest heroes are not portrayed in action, there is room for smile and even play in the poker ads. This is possible for women, 'lesser' (non-specialist) men, or poker champions who are shown outside of the game. However, the role of women seems to be mostly limited to being a companion to a male poker player. Also, there seems to be a '(sun)glass ceiling' for female poker players.

Curiously, in the ads in *PMF*, women never wear sunglasses, the ultimate symbol of a cold, serious, player in charge (Hochschild 2003, 45).

Baudrillard sees advertising as a totemic system, or ‘a plebiscite whereby mass consumer society wages a perpetual campaign of self-endorsement’ (Baudrillard 2005, 198). In the Baudrillardian view, postmodern consumption – of which online poker is a perfect example – is about culture in the process of commodification (Prasad 2005). In this realm, advertising is a peculiar kind of production of significance influencing (if not infiltrating) the structures of thought and language where everything is subordinate to economics. There is no doubt that commercial imagery influences how we interpret our experiences, what we desire, and the way we define ourselves. In online poker marketing, the model for identity construction is rather straightforward:

The most important thing in poker is playing. Nothing compares to the gaming experience and the sharp psychological gaming skill that comes with it, and the ability to manipulate one’s opponents. It is extremely important that instead of twiddling one’s thumbs and mulling over questions like ‘do I dare - do I not dare’ one just jumps right into the game (A Finnish online poker site Nettipokeri.info in 2009).

Poker players are accustomed to use their chips also outside of the poker tables, and are willing to invest in their style (Poker Magazine Finland 2010 describing the magazine’s readership).

Advertising, as a hyperreal phenomenon, dominates the central stage of postmodern life, and functions as a new linguistic system where words are linked with objects with which they have had no relation before. Jean Baudrillard used to be amused by how, in a televised commercial, floor wax was promoted by associating it with a couple dancing romantically on a shiny floor coated with the product (Prasad 2005, 253 referring to Baudrillard 1975). In other words, the ad linked floor wax (signifier) with romance (signified) in the same way that a dog is symbolically linked with loyalty. In the same way, advertisements link cars with adventure, career success and sensual pleasure, or link financial institutions with the warmth and comfort of a family. Even shoes manufactured for jogging are linked with youthful rebellion. Advertising imagery thus attempts to change our system of meaning by combining and fusing fantasies (romance, adventure etc.) with banalities (floor wax, car etc.). According to Baudrillard, these connections affect our cognitive and emotional structures. That is how an object (a product) in the everyday ‘desert of the real’ is given meaning from the hyperreal plane of selectively emphasized or even invented significance. In the same vein, masculine poker advertisements connoting battle can be seen as hyperreal sources for the desert of the real that is the clicking of a computer mouse and playing a game of cards to pass the time.

Real online poker, in the Baudrillardian view, is empty of meaning until it is provided with a feeding tube, the source of which is the ‘more-real-than-real,’ hyperreal plane of advertising or another mediated realm. Even though Baudrillardian hyperreality and the way it has been used to theorize postmodern society might sound too abstract, polemic or even fantastic, as ‘fashionable nonsense’ (Sokal and Bricmont 1999, Turner

1993, 151-152), if we understand hyperreality as an exaggerated, selective, media-filtered way of amplifying the representation and meaning given to cultural phenomena, it is certainly useful for empirical research.

The selected attributes of poker are often amplified by profiled celebrities or other iconic heroes whose habitus is, in turn, boosted by symbols of battle in advertisements. Exaggeration is certainly a recurring technique in most poker advertising, and advertising in general, because advertising is after all about adding elements to enhance the image of the promoted object, or to compensate a lack of a desired attribute. In my discussion, I am not attempting to criticize any commercial construction of culture on moral grounds. However, it is evident, and curiously interesting, that the advertisers set out to impress young males by referring to rather reactionary connotations of battle and aggression when they have countless other and perhaps more convincing options for reproducing iconic manhood available to them. Maybe the explanation is more biological than cultural, and despite recent renegotiations of gender in advertising and in modern society in general, male evolutionary psychology still draws on and finds solace in personality traits and physical abilities that are less and less useful in contemporary society, where everyday life is increasingly automated, domesticated and peaceful. The new political economy of masculinity has made traditional masculinity obsolete (Connell 1987, Edwards 2015, Sandu 2017, Van Vugt and Grabo 2015, 487–8). Perhaps the longing for the relic of the physical man materializes in the hyperreal, where it is optimized for neoliberal marketing purposes to produce the most effective reservoir of male imagery, the kind that as many young male poker-players as possible find either desirable or ironic and thus relatable to and enjoyable (Dyer 1984, Firat 2012).

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