

User Research on Chess Players' Needs and Motivations

1. Introduction

This document follows Stage 1: Empathize – Research Users' Needs from the Interaction Design Foundation design thinking framework. The purpose of this research is to deeply understand chess players as users: who they are, how they engage with chess, their motivations, frustrations, and unmet social needs.

This research was conducted for a client, Troyan, a former high-school-level professional chess player who has extensive experience competing, studying, and engaging with chess communities. Troyan was interviewed as a primary research participant and domain expert, providing firsthand insights into the social and emotional realities of chess players across skill levels.

Rather than focusing on designing a specific solution, this stage aims to build empathy for chess players and explore why a socially oriented, chess-focused digital space could be valuable. Any mention of a potential website is intentionally high-level and suggestive, not prescriptive.

2. Research Objective

The primary goals of this user research are to:

- Understand different types of chess players and their contexts
- Identify emotional, social, and practical needs related to chess
- Explore how chess players currently interact with others around chess
- Identify gaps and frustrations in existing chess-related platforms
- Understand why a dedicated chess-focused social environment may be needed

3. Research Methods

This research is centered around a primary qualitative interview with the client, Troyan, supported by secondary and assumed research methods to strengthen empathy and contextual understanding.

- One-on-one, semi-structured interview
- Troyan is a former high-school professional chess player
- Has experience with: Competitive tournaments. Chess clubs and coaching environments. Online chess platforms and communities

Interview focus areas:

- Social experiences within chess communities
- Emotional challenges of competitive chess
- Gaps in current chess platforms
- How chess players communicate, learn, and form identity

Sample interview questions:

- How did chess shape your social life during your competitive years?
- Where did you feel most connected—or disconnected—from other players?
- What was missing from the platforms you used?
- How do chess players express themselves outside of games?

3.2 Supporting Research Methods

While Troyan served as the primary interview subject, additional user understanding was informed by:

- Secondary Research: Articles, forums, and community discussions within chess spaces
- Observational Insights: Informal observation of behavior on online chess platforms and in chess clubs
- Comparative Analysis: Review of how chess-related conversations appear on general social media

These supporting methods helped validate and contextualize Troyan's insights.

4. User Groups Identified

Based on Troyan's interview and supporting research, it became clear that "chess players" are not a single homogeneous group. Troyan's experience interacting with players of different levels helped identify the following user segments: Research indicates that "chess players" are not a single homogeneous group. Key user segments include:

4.1 Casual Players

- Play for fun or relaxation
- Often self-taught
- Interested in puzzles, short games, and improvement tips
- Feel intimidated in highly competitive environments

Needs:

- Friendly interaction
- Encouragement and recognition
- Low-pressure social engagement

4.2 Competitive / Club Players

- Play regularly and track improvement
- Participate in tournaments or leagues
- Analyze games seriously

Needs:

- Meaningful discussion about games
- Peer feedback and validation
- Opportunities to share insights and achievements

4.3 Learners and Improvers

- Actively trying to improve
- Watch tutorials, read articles, analyze games
- Ask many questions

Needs:

- Safe spaces to ask "basic" questions
- Mentorship and guidance
- Constructive feedback without judgment

4.4 Content Creators and Educators

- Share lessons, analyses, or commentary
- Often use multiple platforms to reach audiences

Needs:

- Audience that understands chess deeply
- Tools to discuss and explain games socially
- Recognition for expertise

5. Key User Insights

The following insights emerged primarily from Troyan's interview, supported by broader observations across chess communities: From research across methods, several core insights emerge:

5.1 Chess Is Deeply Social, but Often Feels Lonely

- Chess is traditionally a two-player game, yet many players experience isolation
- Online play often lacks meaningful human connection
- Interactions are frequently limited to short chats or anonymous encounters

5.2 Existing Platforms Prioritize Gameplay Over People

- Most chess platforms focus on matches, ratings, and puzzles
- Social features are secondary, fragmented, or transactional
- Players struggle to express identity beyond ratings and usernames

5.3 General Social Media Does Not Fit Chess Culture Well

Chess discussions on mainstream platforms are often:

- Oversimplified
- Lost in unrelated content
- Misunderstood by non-players

Players feel they must "translate" chess ideas for broader audiences.

5.4 Players Want Recognition Beyond Winning

Many players value:

- Improvement progress
- Well-played losses
- Creative ideas or learning moments

Current environments emphasize outcomes rather than journeys.

5.5 Learning Chess Is Emotionally Vulnerable

- Players fear looking "stupid" when asking questions
- Toxic behavior and elitism discourage participation
- Psychological safety is a major unmet need

6. User Needs (Empathy Findings)

Based on the research, the following core needs were identified:

Functional Needs

- Share games, ideas, and experiences
- Discuss chess without leaving the chess context
- Find others with similar skill levels or interests

Emotional Needs

- Belonging to a chess-focused community
- Validation and encouragement
- Feeling seen as a person, not just a rating

Social Needs

- Long-term connections with other players
- Mentorship and peer learning
- Identity expression within the chess world

7. Problem Framing (User-Centered)

From Trojan's perspective as a competitive player, the core problem is not a lack of chess platforms, but a lack of human-centered social spaces within chess culture:

Chess players lack a dedicated social environment that reflects the emotional, cultural, and communal aspects of chess, rather than focusing solely on competition and performance.

This framing reflects Trojan's lived experience and emphasizes empathy over technical solutions.

8. Early Opportunity (Without Designing the Solution)

While avoiding specific design decisions, research indicates opportunities such as:

- A space where chess identity matters
- A community-first approach to chess interaction
- Social structures that reward learning, sharing, and connection

These are opportunities, not solutions, and will be explored further in later design stages.

9. Conclusion

This empathy-focused research, grounded in an interview with Trojan—a former high-school professional chess player—highlights that chess players are motivated not only by winning, but by learning, sharing, and belonging. Trojan's experiences reveal that current chess ecosystems often prioritize performance while neglecting social connection, emotional safety, and identity.

By centering the research on a real client and lived experience, this document fulfills Stage 1: Empathize by prioritizing user voices, emotions, and context before any design decisions are made. These insights will serve as a strong foundation for defining the problem space in later stages of the design process.