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Research in Consumer Misbehaviour: A Simulation Game Approach

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Abstract

Misbehaving consumers are pervasive during service encounters (Fullerton & Punj, 1993; Powers, 1993; Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998). Therefore, consumer misbehaviour has become an interesting area of research owing to its adverse psychological, financial, and social impacts on organisations, their employees and other consumers (Fullerton & Punj, 1993; Harris & Reynolds, 2003). However, attempting to collect data on consumer misbehaviour is hindered by current research techniques that are low in involvement for respondents. Methodological research suggests that the optimal technique to increase the level of respondent involvement with a scenario is an elaborate simulation game (Greenberg & Eskew, 1993). This paper therefore examines how simulation games might be used to accurately elicit realistic cognitive, emotional and behavioural consumer responses.

Introduction

Mounting evidence suggests that service encounters are often marred by consumer misbehaviour (Harris & Reynolds, 2003, 2004). However, attempts to collect quantitative or qualitative data from consumers to examine the extent to which they misbehave and their reasons for this behaviour are hindered by current research techniques. Traditional research in consumer misbehaviour has been conducted using written role playing scenarios (e.g., Smith & Bolton, 1998), which are criticised for being low in respondent involvement (Greenberg & Eskew, 1993). This low level of involvement means that research results are often questionable. Methodological research, however, suggests that the optimal technique to increase the level of respondent involvement with a scenario is an elaborate simulation game (Greenberg & Eskew, 1993). The aim of this paper therefore is to examine how simulation games might be used to elicit and capture accurate and realistic cognitive, emotional and behavioural consumer responses. We argue that this is a potentially useful research technique that takes advantage of innovative technological developments.

Consumer Misbehaviour

Traditionally, marketing researchers have assumed that consumers behave in a rational and compliant manner when they purchase, use, and dispose of products and services (Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel, & Gutman, 1985). However, misbehaving consumers are fast becoming pervasive during service encounters (Fullerton & Punj, 1993; Powers, 1993; Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998). Consumer misbehaviour is defined as ‘behavioural acts by consumers which violate the generally accepted norms of conduct in consumption situations’ (Fullerton & Punj, 1997, p. 336). These acts include verbal and/or physical abuse, theft, creating a cost/loss, vandalism, and trashing (Huefner & Hunt, 2000), but are conceptually distinct from other more appropriate (but negative) behaviours such as making a legitimate complaint, switching, or exit.
Consumer misbehaviour is pervasive: Statistics Canada report that almost a third of nurses are assaulted by their patients (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2007). Other recent examples include an enraged high-profile actor who assaulted a hotel concierge over a phone fault (CNN, 2005) and a disgruntled tenant who fatally wounded an Australian real-estate receptionist over a discrepancy in his bill (Bilowol & Marszalek, 2007). As these examples imply, consumer misbehaviour has adverse psychological, financial, and social costs for organisations, their employees and other consumers (Fullerton & Punj, 1993; Harris & Reynolds, 2003). The severity of these outcomes of consumer misbehaviour highlights the necessity of understanding and managing misbehaviour in order to lessen its impact.

What are the Challenges of Investigating Consumer Misbehaviour?

Currently, our understanding of consumer misbehaviour is hindered by the limitations of traditional research methods, which typically include written scenarios followed by self-report surveys. Social desirability bias, however, makes consumers reluctant to admit to misbehaviour, even in an anonymous or confidential survey (Keeffe, 2005). Aside from these self-report issues, consumer misbehaviour is a sporadically-occurring (low base-rate) phenomenon, which renders observational techniques highly inefficient and impractical. Furthermore, it would also be highly unethical for researchers to fabricate a “real” situation that would prompt misbehaviour from consumers. Thus, there is a need for measurement instruments that can more accurately elicit emotional responses and consumer misbehaviour in a resource-efficient and ethical manner.

Given these issues, a popular alternative to investigate consumer misbehaviour is the use of role playing, where respondents are asked how they (or someone else) would feel or behave in certain situations (Greenberg & Eskew, 1993). Traditional research has been conducted using written role playing scenarios (Smith & Bolton, 1998), which are often criticized for being low in involvement and thus producing questionable results (Greenberg & Eskew, 1993). Methodological research indicates that the optimal technique to increase the level of respondent involvement with a scenario is an elaborate simulation game (Greenberg & Eskew, 1993). A simulation game allows the researcher a level of control over the situation that is very difficult to achieve in other media. Moreover, it takes advantage of player involvement to capture of more accurate cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses.

Using a Simulation Game to Ethically Explore Consumer Misbehaviour

Research in consumer misbehaviour is plagued with challenges. However, we propose that these challenges could be resolved by developing a simulation game to explore consumer behaviour (Drennan, Keeffe, Russell-Bennett and Drennan, 2007). A simulation game provides a controlled environment that is ethically responsible but will support the investigation of the full range of consumer (mis)behaviour. While simulation games have traditionally been created solely for entertainment, serious games are increasingly being developed for a number of significant purposes. These serious games include military games, government games, educational games, corporate games, healthcare games, and political or religious games (Michael & Chen, 2006). Examples of serious games include Brain Training, which was developed to assist the elderly retain or improve their cognitive function (healthcare game) (Nintendo, 2007); Markstrat, which was developed to teach students how
marketing decisions affect simulated marketplaces (educational game) (StratX Simulations, 2007); and America’s Army, which was developed as a training and recruitment tool for the United States army (military game) (United States Army, 2007).

Given these developments in serious simulation games, it is fruitful to consider how gaming technology could be further applied to disciplines such as consumer behaviour. We suggest that considered game development provides consumer behaviour researchers an innovative approach through which to explore consumer misbehaviour. One of the major concerns with the current methods used to explore consumer misbehaviour is the low involvement levels of respondents. Our proposal for addressing this concern is to exploit the cognitive and emotional involvement of players in a simulation game. For example, the simulation game might involve a player being instructed to interact with an obstreperous front line staff member to return faulty merchandise. As frustration mounts for players attempting to achieve the task in the light of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, they will be free to behave as they choose. This may evoke verbal abuse, physical reactions coupled with emotional distress. These reactions will be captured through the interactive mechanism of the game as well as cameras videoing the player's real world behaviour.

Gaming researchers, Sweetser and Wyeth (2005), have addressed the issue of player involvement through their model called GameFlow, which is based on Csíkszentmihályi’s (1990) seminal work on the psychology of flow states. Flow is an experience 'so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it, even when it is difficult or dangerous' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Flow consists of eight elements: (1) a task that can be completed; (2) the ability to concentrate on the task; (3) that concentration is possible because the task has clear goals; (4) that concentration is possible because the task provides immediate feedback; (5) the ability to exercise a sense of control over actions; (6) a deep but effortless involvement that removes awareness of the frustrations of everyday life; (7) concern for self disappears, but sense of self emerges stronger afterwards; and (8) the sense of the duration of time is altered (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Most flow experiences occur with activities that are goal-directed, bounded by rules, and require mental energy and appropriate skills (Sweetser & Johnson, 2004). The GameFlow model applies these elements of flow to a person's participation in game. These elements can thus be used to inform and evaluate game design, and provide a framework for ensuring that a participant is cognitively and emotionally involved in the game, which is necessary for eliciting realistic consumer responses.

At this point, it is important to note that the different purposes of the game must be balanced. The purpose of the simulation game for the researcher is to elicit behavioural responses from the player. However, the purpose of the game as it is presented to the player must incorporate an element of fun and challenge (Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005). If the game is not fun or does not allow for immersive play, the response of the players does not approach the level of involvement required to accurately assess consumer behaviour (Greenberg & Eskew, 1993). Given this, we suggest that a graphical simulation game be created that contains a series of tasks that players must complete in order to achieve consumption-related objectives. The challenge for researchers is to ensure that the tasks are difficult enough that players are free to engage in misbehaviour, but are compelling enough to keep the player immersed in the game.
Flow and Engagement

Using elements of player enjoyment that were identified in the GameFlow theory (Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005), we can evaluate whether a simulation game will create feelings of flow and engagement in players. It is critical to create player engagement in simulation game, as this state of mind will allow players to access the combination of cognitive and emotive evaluation of situations that is required to study consumer misbehaviour. However, making the game challenging in order to provoke the negative thoughts and emotions associated with consumer misbehaviour deliberately contradicts some elements of the Game Flow model, such as having clear goals and providing feedback (Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005). Part of the process of generating frustration, anger or helplessness within the player is to make the goals less clear and presented at a relatively late point in the game. Feedback should be provided sporadically or with insufficient detail. This is a deliberate choice by the researchers that is designed to affect players differently than they would be affected by a game that is solely focused on entertainment. The lack of clear goals and appropriate feedback must be balanced by carefully addressing the other elements of the GameFlow model, such as immersion, challenge, control and player skills (Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005). At the time of game implementation, player immersion would be addressed by using affective, realistic visual and audio that acts to keep the player involved in the game environment (Sweetser & Johnson, 2004).

Within the simulation game, each player participant will be represented by a specific character. The game will be designed so that players have control over their character and its interactions within the simulated environment. Taking control of the character away from the player might provoke a lack of control that lessens the effect of other elements of the game. One notable aspect of simulation games is that players simultaneously identify with their characters while considering them a separate entity. Players often refer to their character in the first person, indicating that they feel that what happened to their character in the game also happened to themselves (Taylor, 2002). Somewhat contrarily, players also seem to separate their character from themselves, and they play the simulation game visualising the action “through” their character (Young, 2005).

We propose that this duality of self with respect to the character can promote a state of mind in the player that allows them the freedom to become cognitively and emotionally engaged in the game, as well as maintaining a level of separation that creates a feeling of safety (Drennan et al., 2007). This balance between engagement and remoteness from the events allows players to engage in misbehaviour without feeling that they are hindered by moral judgments or socio-cultural taboos. They are able to misbehave, if they choose, without fear of reprisal or judgment on the part of the researchers.

Therefore, it is critical that the design of the game allows players to maintain this balance of engagement and separation. The game should use a first person view, so that the character is not seen, and therefore removes the player’s ability to identify with a specific representation of them in game. However, they should be able to see their hands taking action (as many first person games allow), so that they can develop a sense of agency and emotional immersion in the actions that they take. The game will be challenging, and even difficult, but the opportunities to misbehave will allow alternate routes to successfully completing a task. Therefore, the player will always have the requisite skills to progress through the game and enough control over their character and the world to be able to complete their objectives.
Proposed Simulation Game Testing

Initial testing stages will involve the design and implementation the simulation game based on qualitative data collected in previous unpublished research. Game-based simulations might include scenarios such as getting a haircut, going to the bank, going to the doctor, eating in a restaurant, or shopping for consumer goods. We intend to provide a range of scenarios that will appeal to targeted audiences. These scenarios will be combined into a game to form escalating progressive challenges that will elicit a range of consumer cognition, emotion and behaviour. The next step is to pilot the simulation game by sourcing respondents to test the validity of the research technique. Following the initial pilot testing, we aim to conduct wide-scale investigations of consumer misbehaviour via the simulation game. This step involves allowing respondents to play the simulation game in order to provide researchers with information about consumer misbehaviour. We propose that a representative sample of consumers be recruited so that the researchers can observe their behaviour as they complete the tasks of the simulation game. Any incidences of misbehaviour will be noted and discussed with the respondents during their debriefing session. Once data has been captured on typical consumer misbehaviour in these scenarios, we intend to reverse the scenarios to incorporate this misbehaviour for simulation games targeted at frontline service providers. This should provide an excellent training tool for service organisations.

Ethical Responsibility

The development of a simulation game to elicit realistic consumer responses is primarily motivated by a need to address the ethical issues that plague research in misbehaviour. Naturally, any socially undesirable behaviour needs to be investigated in an ethically responsible way. We propose that a simulation game will increase respondent involvement while reducing the need for respondent deception. This will provide researchers with an ethically responsible but accurate and realistic understanding of consumer misbehaviour.

Conclusion

In this paper, we address the inherent difficulties of researching consumer misbehaviour and propose that a more innovative approach is to employ an alternative research method. As discussed, this involves using a simulation game to provoke accurate and realistic cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses in respondents. This simulation game has both practical and methodological implications for the marketing field. Practically, a better understanding of consumer misbehaviour will assist marketing managers to develop suitable policies to deal with misbehaving consumers, as well as creating more effective training systems for service employees. These changes have the potential to decrease the incidences and/or escalation of misbehaviour, which in turn may increase service employee wellbeing owing a safer and more agreeable work environment. Further, this game could be modified to act as job training tool for front-line employees who deal with consumer misbehaviour. Methodologically, the significance of this research lies in the development of a more contextually-accurate and flexible method of assessing the drivers and outcomes of consumer misbehaviour. These benefits combine to provide more insight into consumer misbehaviour than traditional research methods, thereby presenting simulation games as a valuable tool for marketing researchers.
References


