

Willing Suspension of Disbelief Implications for Marketing

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Willing, suspension, disbelief, impulse, impulse buying

Abstract

Poetry and drama, for a long time now, have been utilizing a celebrated phenomenon of 'willing suspension of disbelief' to make a setting for awe-struck poetry and rapt drama performances. There is an element of believability in the thread of imagination that runs through fantasy, poetry, drama and the human wish to seek and revel in pleasure. This thread is tied around human ability to suspend disbelief to accept the fancies.

This article explores the literature on the phenomenon and further proposes a link of the same with a well known marketing phenomenon - impulse buying. The article is structured in three sections- first section deals with a discussion on origin of the phenomenon. Second section deals with epistemology of the phenomenon and identifies a conceptual convergence of the thoughts on the process of suspended disbelief and third section explores the possibility of 'willing suspension of disbelief' as a powerful motivator to the act of impulse buying. The article concludes with implications and future research directions.

Literature review

The origin of the phenomenon

Though labeled later, the initial application of the phenomenon can be dated back to Aristotle (384 BC - 322 BC) (Mateas, 2002), he suggested that suspension of disbelief makes drama and tragedy valuable because through suspension, they provide the audience a catharsis, a purging of emotions. Audience members are able to experience the emotions (fear, disgust, revulsion, joy, etc.) of the "tragic hero" and to gain understanding of life from this experience without; however; having to actually endure the troubling events the tragic hero suffers through.

The phenomenon was used by many dramatists and poets including Shakespeare, but this agreement between audience and the theater or reader and the poetry was taken forward by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a celebrated poet of 18th century, who summarized the entire interplay as 'willing suspension of disbelief'. Coleridge defined it as an aesthetic theory that characterizes people's relationships to art (Coleridge, 1817). It refers to the willingness of a person to accept as true the premises of work of fiction, if they are fantastic and even if they are

unreal or impossible. Coleridge further elaborated on it in the context of drama and stated that drama is a willing suspension of disbelief for the moment as in the audience knows that everything that's happening is not real, but the playwright, the actors and the audience all enter into a conspiracy "of poetic faith" in an attempt to fully live the act that is played out on the stage. This original turn of the phrase (Millburn, n.d) was in reference to the reader's response to the work of poetry or drama wherein, for brief periods, *the reader is not to disbelieve the improbabilities but this undisbelief constitutes a kind of imaginative belief.*

Poets like John Keats, Walter Scott, and Robertson (O'Neil, 2004). used this concept of 'willingly suspended disbelief' as creative space in which unexpected and otherwise impossible connections were made, and it started to signal the reader's capacity to entertain and enter into unexperienced states of thought and feeling.

Epistemological Overview

This phenomenon originated in literature, but it was soon recognized as an apt epitomization of many a human experiences. Its understanding and relevance has been discussed in different theoretical domains.

Exploration in Psychology

This phrase has been further studied by psychologist Norman Holland (1961), who states that 'willing suspension of disbelief' is a regression to an oral merger of infant and the nurturing other, when the child feels the boundaries between itself and the mother are blurred, uncertain and permeable. Extending the understanding to the use of the phrase, the readers and spectators, when engaging in willing suspension of disbelief did not feel separate from the movie or book that was giving them satisfaction and pursuit for pleasure. Holland (1983) further observed that the viewers of an enjoyable movie would describe it as a 'piece of cake' and an interesting book was described as 'treat' or 'delicious'. This led him to comment on the 'oral imagery' that fits well with the regression to an undifferentiated union of mother and child.

Marga Speicher (2005) offered a related perspective wherein it was stated that when a person enters the imaginable world of fiction through willingly suspending disbelief, the person tends to relax defenses and loosen boundaries between ego and non-ego; inner and outer; past, present, and future; thought and emotion.

This concept of merged boundaries offers an explanation to vicarious pains and pleasures that one goes through in the context of media or literature, again linking it back to an emotional scene inducing tears or a pleasant scene inducing a mood changeover.

Philosophical Underpinnings

Coleridge's creation of this phrase was much in link with works of German philosopher Immanuel Kant (Rader, 1967), who postulated the idea of "transcendental faculty of imagination," and regarded aesthetic creation as a special case of the generic imagination which essentially talked about the power of the human mind without which it would have been impossible to reproduce the image of an object. This was followed by Coleridge's focus on mid-point of the ideal and actual, the intellectual and empirical (Coleridge, 1817). And in his attempt to discover an acceptable interaction to the processes of imagination, he worked further on it called it poetic faith which further got redefined as willing suspension of disbelief.

Evolution of the phenomenon

From the premises of literature, 'suspended disbelief' was increasingly used in the related paradigm of storytelling through many modes of entertainment industry and there are quite a few examples of the use of the same in movies, novels and videogames, where the semblance of truth makes the process of suspension of disbelief, a willing possibility and certainly enhances the interest of the audience in the literary depiction.

Application of the Phenomenon in Movies

Suspension of disbelief, wherein the participatory act on the part of the audience enhances the media offering and makes it enjoyable through letting the audience sink into the seemingly unrealistic plot of a real life story or a mind expanding fiction. It could range from a good guy who has been blessed with an ability to be invisible to a character who does not age over the course of a series but the actor eventually does. Hence this fundamental intellectual underpinning of entertainment industry, that successfully makes many a million cry over a tragic death in a movie, has the ability to create a deeper connect with the human mind (Ferri, 2007).

However, the entire constructed reality, as suggested earlier has to have a semblance of truth to make the initial mental engagement with the audience. And that's where Superman's vulnerabilities form the foundational premises for the audience to accept his abilities. They did not accept a persistent inability for otherwise normal characters to recognize a close colleague solely because of changes in clothing.

Mental Construction in Videogames

Photorealism of videogames offers consumers an immersive experience that creates suspension of disbelief. Players readily immerse themselves, in exchange of a promise of entertainment, where empowerment for the time being. It is the cars that move at the speed of light and it's the shot guns that can fire several miles that create the enjoyable experience of the master of the universe, which offers a stark contrast to the real world where powers and abilities are limited.

Expected gratification from suspended disbelief

The real world constraints, - limited resources and social restrictions, tend to contradict with the consumer's unlimited desires (Ben Ze'ev et al., 2008) and he find a relief in either catharsis or escape. An objective look at the phenomenon tends to link it with a need for catharsis or escape that happen through self-indulgent activities. Taking the paradigm of self-indulgent activities a little further, certain aspects of marketing, tend to do just that and following section discusses the link between suspended disbelief and marketing.

Relevance of Willing Suspension of Disbelief in marketing

The phenomenon of wilfully losing oneself in the depths of literature can best be described as a subconscious and yet conscious journey from reality to a state of quasi reality where the world that one enters is uninvasive in one's personal life and thereby guaranteeing a state of suspended disbelief, with a promise of entertainment (Coleridge, 1817), catharsis of pent-up emotions (Aristotle, as cited in Safire, 2007) or an escape from reality (Hunter, 2009).

Even though we have entered into postmodernism, this celebrated and much used concept has not been used less in marketing and so has not been explored much in link with marketing.

Through many recent studies, the present day consumer is established as someone who has limited resources but unlimited desires and many aspirations. The load of desires and unlimited aspirations do not interfere with his unrelenting desire to seek pleasure (Freud, 1920). This imbalance makes him suspend his better judgment in quest for pleasure. There can be many modes of seeking this pleasure through suspended judgment, however the following discussion looks into one:-

The state of consciously suspended judgment is likely to provide a respite from the mental state of emptiness or stress, and is likely to urge a person to relieve himself of the negative psychological state. This urge can manifest itself in many ways. One of it can be impulsive action. The 'impulse' has been studied and discussed by many psychologists, and one of the interesting explanations was offered by Freud (1920), he suggested that the instinctive action of any individual at any point in time is *to maximize pleasure* and that calls for a less thought through and a nearly a kinetic action at times, the impulse.

The above discussion on impulse, leads the paper to a manifestation of this in the form of 'impulse buying, which is understood as an action that takes place when passion takes over deliberation (Dittmar & Halliwell, 2008). The argument presented below outlines the possibility of a relation between the phenomenons of 'willing suspension of disbelief' with a well studied marketing phenomenon of impulse buying.

As used in literature and observed in link with theatre and media consumption (Ferri, 2007), suspended disbelief *presents an individual with an opportunity to momentarily modify the 'present moment' through delinking from the reality of that situation and allowing oneself to go with the flow, so as to psychologically expand the enjoyable moment, in an effort to live it to the hilt.* This driving force behind suspended disbelief can be straightaway linked with an unrelenting desire to maximize pleasure through fully living the moment.

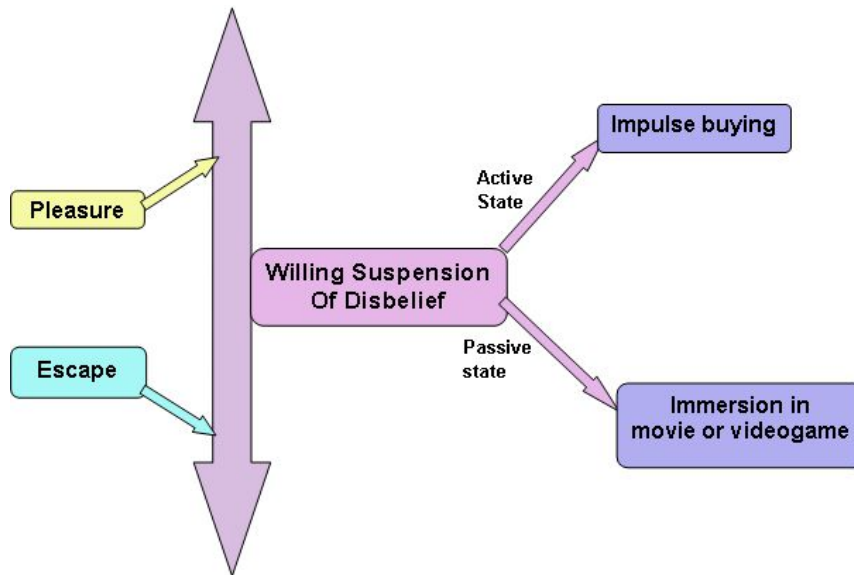
With this premise of 'willing suspension of disbelief' making an allowance for enjoying the moment through keeping aside the skepticism, it make immense sense to link this to the phenomenon of impulse buying which involves a similar thought process of knowing and yet ignoring the rational reasons, blurred boundaries between thought and action and yet indulging into buying and making an allowance for emotions to dominate the buying process.

As the studies on 'impulse buying' suggest, this is done so as to provide oneself the pleasure of indulgence and not just an act of acquisition (Bayley & Nancarrow, 1998) that has a higher order gratification (Hausman, 2000), which makes the moment special. Researchers have agreed in many studies that buying on impulse may at times defy the paradigm of need (Kollat and Willet, 1967) and so this phenomenon offers a plausible understanding of why the defined and well explained definitions in buying behavior take a back seat while deconstructing the phenomenon of impulse buying. It is likely that it's not about the need of the product but it is more about the internal logic, which as suggested earlier, may deviate from the logic of real world, but it does dominate that moment because it links itself to willingly suspending the disbelief into actual utility of that purchase. This can be further explained by the fact this suspension allows a person to have an experience which he might not otherwise have. It tends to give that person a more interesting and emotionally richer life and a *perceived or real lack of it might become an antecedent to impulse buying* (Sneath et al, 2008). Also, this bubble that one may create through suspending disbelief, allow a person to live through emotions that have not, for some reason, found an expression in real lives.

Another possible explanation of impulse buying is a ‘will to escape’ from the reality (Stern, 1962). This is when, what reality is bounded by commitments, expectations and rules of society that possibly lead to monotony. To break this monotony, once in a while, the individual might escape into another world where the rules of one’s lived reality don’t apply. ‘Willing suspension of disbelief’ takes us away from ourselves for a while and so indulging in purposeless impulse shopping may provide an easy avenue for escape from negative affective states, depression, and low self-esteem (Silvera et al., 2008), that is socially acceptable, tangible and justifiable activity, unlike many others modes of escape.

The above discussion can be summarized as below –

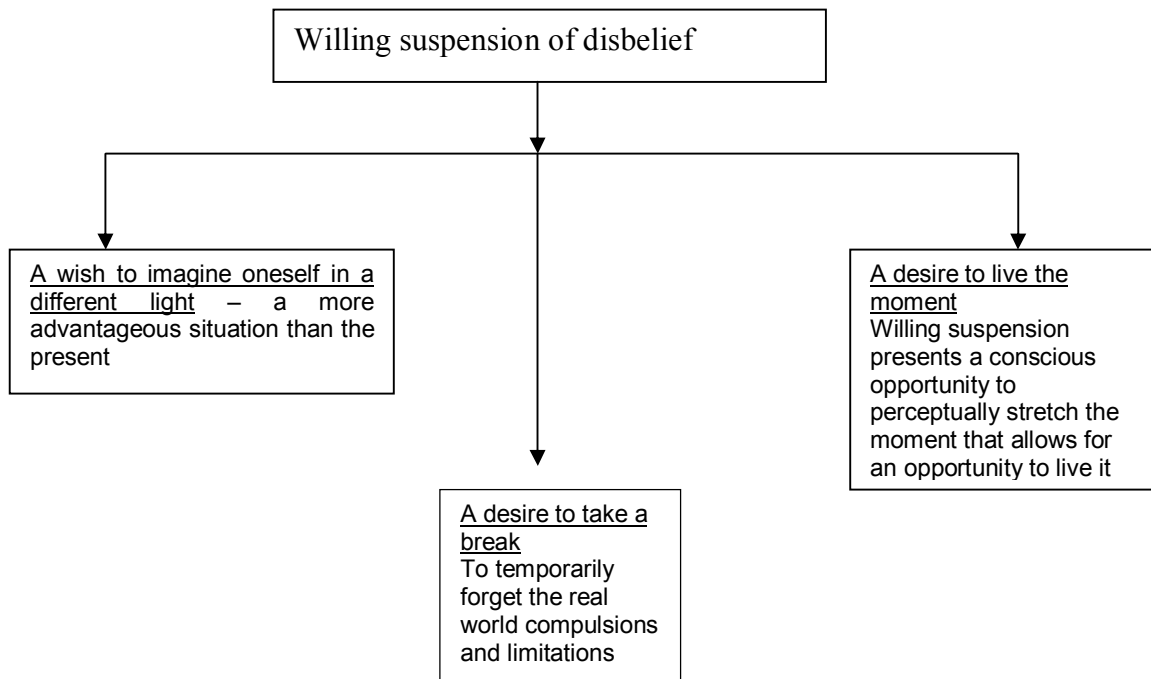
Fig.1: **Suspended disbelief and Impulse Buying**



Through the above presentation of the concept of ‘willing suspension of disbelief’, it can be said that though the shoppers may visit the shopping places with an intention to buy but not all the time, he or she knows what to buy, who to buy for and whether at all to buy. Though the purpose may be shopping but the overriding emotion is to seek pleasure through indulgence. Since the act of buying is a rational decision and rationality is less lenient of indulgence (Frede & Striker, 1994), the shopping set-up has to provide avenue for suspension of better judgment and has to work towards making an allowance for extravagance. Though more research is required before anything can be claimed in this area, but a joyful treat for senses achieved through sights, sounds and smell of splendor, vibrancy and activities that are characteristic to celebratory mode of life, can help achieve a willing suspension of disbelief and may lead to consumer’s act of indulgence into impulse buying.

Taking the understanding a little further, ‘willingly suspending disbelief’ can be linked with three aspects (fig.2) wherein its ability to invoke an emotional result is of immense consequence to the marketer.

Fig.2: Gratification Achieved From Suspended Disbelief



This repertoire of consumer desires can lend itself to marketer’s intervention, wherein willing suspension of disbelief can enhance the consumer’s wish to indulge.

Conclusions and Future Research Directions

This paper proposes a link between a literary phenomenon of ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ and the process of ‘impulse buying’. Through presenting the origin and evolution of the phenomenon, the paper sets the note for discussion on relevance of the phenomenon in marketing. It further presents a proposed link between the suspended disbelief and impulse buying. It explores it further through expected gratifications of suspended disbelief, which is seen as having a bearing on the thought process of consumers. Based on the discussion on expectations and relevance, the paper provides implications for marketers. This paper proposes a theoretical link and needs to be explored further through research in the area. Also, the implications for marketers could be many and a qualitative research on the phenomenon would help complete the list.

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