

THE EXPERIENCE OF APATHY IN SIMULATED LEISURE ENVIRONMENTS

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Introduction

Technological innovations have tremendous significance for leisure (Godbey, 1997; Smith, 1993). They permeate our homes, our daily schedules and habits (Cairncross, 1997), and may bring about profound and unexpected changes in the way we live, work and recreate (Neef, 1998). Technological advancements have led to the simulation of many of our natural leisure environments including dry slope skiing surfaces, indoor rock climbing walls, artificial wave parks, artificial human-made white water rivers, and indoor virtual golf simulators. These environments have experienced steady growth over the past decade, and as a result, artificial adventure environments will likely dominate in the future (Priest & Gass, 2000). There has been little, if any, empirical research investigating simulated leisure environments (SLEs). The research problem of this study was to understand how individuals experience leisure in a simulated environment and to develop a substantive theory explaining this experience.

Methods

Two simulated leisure environments were chosen for this study based on their level of fidelity (realism): an indoor golf simulator and an indoor rock climbing wall. Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory method was utilized to explain how individuals experience leisure in a simulated environment. Corbin and Strauss (1990) noted that the, "procedures of grounded theory are designed to develop a well integrated set of concepts that provide a thorough theoretical explanation of social phenomena under study" (p.5). Multiple data collection techniques were utilized in this study including documents analysis (operations manual for the golf simulator and an operating policies and procedures manual for the indoor rock climbing wall), observations (eight groups consisting of three to six individuals were observed for two to four hours during a round of simulated golf and , indoor rock climbers were observed for approximately 30 hours over a two month span) natural field group interviews, and individual interviews. Upon completion of the natural field group interviews, all notes were coded and categorized according to the canons and procedures of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978) and used to develop the protocol for the individual interviews.

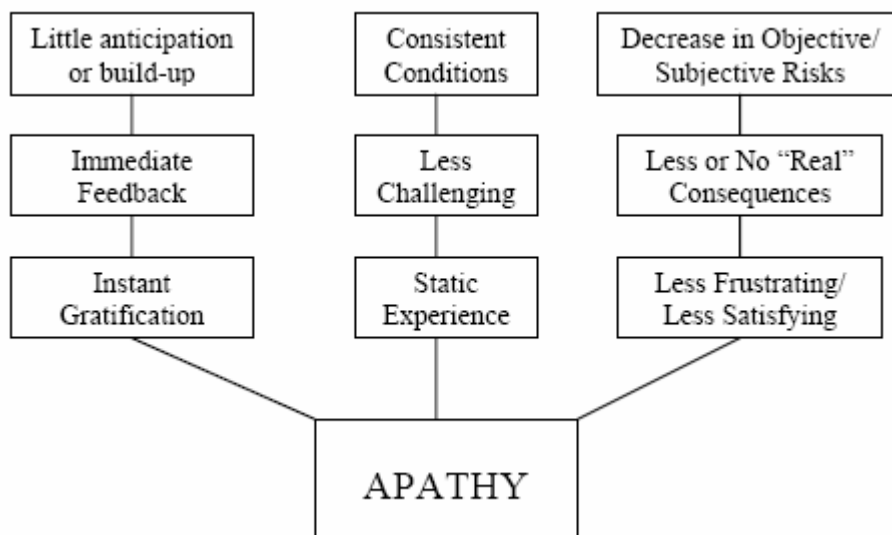
Approximately 18 simulated golfers and 13 indoor rock climbers were interviewed individually after the natural field group interviews. Once the data was unitized, open, axial, and selective coding were used to code the data. The constant comparative method was used to compare incident to incident, looking for similarities and differences, while also examining these incidents for categories and their properties and the theoretical codes that connected them. Several techniques were employed to establish the trustworthiness of the findings that Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued made it more likely that credible findings and interpretations would be produced. The data was triangulated using multiple methods (analysis of documents, observations, natural field group interviews, and individual interviews). Member-checks were conducted in which I discussed my interpretations with the study participants and two peer debriefers were also

used to help establish the trustworthiness of the findings by providing an external check on the inquiry process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

The interplay between the fidelity of the SLEs and the consistent conditions persistent in the two SLEs in this study combined to produce a less challenging, easier experience for the individuals recreating in these environments. The SLEs in this study filtered all of the hazards out of the natural experience and just distilled those parts of the experience that were positive and danger free. As a result, both objective and subjective hazards were minimized in both SLEs and the risk versus reward paradigm was less consequential. The relationship between, and interaction of these aspects of the simulated leisure experience, produced a more static episode in which individuals were more apathetic. The relationship between these constructs leading to the experience of apathy in simulated leisure environments is depicted below.

Model of the Factors Contributing to the Experience of Apathy in Simulated Leisure Environments



No Anticipation or Build-Up, Immediate Feedback and Instant Gratification

Recreational climbers often find themselves in environments that tend to be remote, in order to seek solitude, or escape from the crowds. The anticipation of getting there is often a key part of the experience as one indoor climber commented, “experiencing the height, experiencing the scenery, and sharing the experience with people that have the same interests as you do is awesome”. Indoor climbers did not have this same sense of anticipation or build-up in terms of getting to the indoor rock climbing wall nor did they experience the mounting anticipation of ‘summitting’ a long and arduous climb. They reached the top easily and often experienced immediate feedback and instant gratification. Golfers also experienced the same lack of anticipation or build-up of getting to the golf course (simulator) as well as a lack of anticipation or build-up

while playing each hole. A diagnostics screen continually popped up after each shot telling simulated golfers how far their ball went and where it landed (fairway, rough, sand, hazard, etc...). As a result of the instantaneous feedback from the golf simulator after each shot individuals were instantly gratified.

Consistent Conditions, Less Challenging/Easier, Static Experience

Golfers experienced consistent conditions in that every putt was flat. Each putt was just an average putt on the golf course, as one simulated golfer commented, "When you're putting you're putting repetitively from the same position most of the time. You see, greens don't have the contours so if you're in the bunker and it's a downhill green you normally couldn't stop the ball, but here it's not a problem." As a result of the consistent conditions in the simulated golfing environment and the perfect hitting conditions, the simulated golf was less challenging and therefore easier. There were no contours, breaks, or slopes in the green. Sand traps and the rough were much easier to hit out of and simulated golfers always had a perfect lie with no uphill, downhill, or sideways stances creating a more static experience leading to feelings of apathy. Similarly indoor rock climbers climbed many of the same routes repeatedly. There were only a certain number of beginner and intermediate routes on the wall as one climber observed, "Once those students have mastered those few beginner routes they move on to the intermediate routes. Then it's a big jump to go from those intermediate routes to go to the hard and more challenging routes. So you might see a lot of apathy because they have tried a lot of the harder routes and they've been unsuccessful. So they go back and do a route they know so they can get some climbing in or maybe they're working on their conditioning so they can then build up to that next route." The consistent conditions of both simulated environments combined to produce less challenge for the participants in this study resulting in a relatively static experience leading to feelings of apathy.

Decreased Objective/Subjective Risks, Less Consequences, Less Frustrating/Satisfying

There were not very many actual risks in the indoor environment as one indoor rock climber commented, "You're biggest concern in the indoor environment is human error between you and your partner so they're all definitely human error related (subjective risks). You have a lot of objective hazards out in the natural environment. Almost every element that can be controlled in an indoor gym is controlled. The temperature, the weather, the lights, you don't have to deal with insects indoors, you don't have to deal with the weather. Almost all of the risks are taken out of the way. I mean the only risk you really face is denial." There were also less consequences of making a mistake while simulated golfing as one golfer observed, "Here (indoor golf) it's very forgiving ... the punishment for screwing up out there (outdoor golf) is losing a ball in the water, knocking it into the trees and not being able to find it and just making bad shots." When asked why they think they don't get that same feeling here, informants indicated, "I guess because it's really not that real. The water isn't there. I guess we just really weren't worrying about it. Whereas if you put it in the water you have to tee it up again, so that's reality. That fear factor that's there on a real course just isn't here so the intimidation of seeing the real water in here is pretty much eliminated." Participants also experienced less satisfaction while simulated golfing as one golfer observed, "I could tell I hit a good shot because I felt pretty good with some of them. I got some satisfaction out

of it but it's a little different when you see it go 270 yards compared to when the meter tells you it went 270 yards." Another simulated golfer commented, "It's definitely not as exciting dropping a putt here....you make a 20 footer on the golf course, that's a big deal (agreement) , you know, you make a 15, 20 footer here and you know so what? It's a straight putt we all should have made it. The adrenaline is not the same, on a real putt, I'm shakier. But here ...it's not really that challenging to me because I know it's a flat putt." Lastly, another golfer observed, "If I were on this course, the real course, and I landed my ball on that island green I'd be jumping up and down, 'high-fiving', hooting and hollering. But here it just seemed like it wasn't a big deal." In this context, apathy was manifested in the combination of decreased risks, consequences and a generally less frustrating and satisfying experience.

Discussion

The decreased consequences (or benefits) of the risk versus reward paradigm, the lack of anticipation, the controlled consistent conditions, and the lack of objective hazards combined to produce a less exciting, less satisfying, and less frustrating experience. This consequently resulted in an overall feeling of apathy experienced by the individuals in this study. On a conceptual level, some of Denzin's (1984) interpretive framework of emotions are useful to consider when interpreting these findings. Denzin's four modes of lived emotions include: sensible feelings, lived body feelings, intentional value feelings, and self and moral feelings. The findings of apathy in this study have particular relevance for Denzin's sensible feelings. According to Denzin, sensible feelings are physical sensations located in the body that can be experienced as part of an individual's immediate activity. For example, during sailing individuals experienced sensible feelings of: fear, dryness of mouth, sense of weakness, tenseness, and pounding heart (Bass, 1990). Although not explicitly investigated in this study, indoor rock climbers and simulated golfers likely did not experience these same sensible feelings at least when compared to the natural experience outdoors since the range of emotions was very low and experiences of apathy were continually observed and reported. The results of the simulated leisure experience from this study both support and refute previous findings from the leisure experience literature which would be elaborated upon should this presentation be accepted.

Practical Implications

There are a number of implications for programmers of simulated leisure experiences as a result of this study. Programmers should be aware that the controlled nature of SLEs can facilitate feelings of apathy and therefore programmers should plan to incorporate experiences that are more conducive for experiencing a broader array of emotions in order to better reflect the experiential needs of customers. Since people experience different levels of intensity depending on the activity or situational differences (Lee, 1999), and since the simulated leisure experience tended to be more apathetic, when delivering services, programmers should provide opportunities geared towards enhancing the likelihood of more intense emotional experiences.

ABSTRACTS
of Papers Presented at the
Eleventh Canadian Congress on Leisure Research
May 17 – 20, 2005
Hosted by
Department of Recreation and Tourism Management
Malaspina University-College
Nanaimo, B.C.
Abstracts compiled and edited by
Tom Delamere, Carleigh Randall, David Robinson
CCLR-11 Programme Committee
Tom Delamere
Dan McDonald
Carleigh Randall
Rick Rollins
and
David Robinson



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ISBN 1-896886-01-9



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