The Sweet Escape – A Research Agenda on Escapism in Information Systems Research

Anna Zeuge[1]

Contact: Anna Zeuge, University of Siegen, anna.zeuge@uni-siegen.de

[1] University of Siegen, Siegen, Germany

Abstract. Escapism is often defined as temporally getting away from unpleasant situations or thoughts. Since technology creates new opportunities to escape from something unpleasant, the interest in studying escapism has recently increased in information system (IS) research. However, despite growing interest on escapism, research is still in its very beginning stages. To explore IS phenomena more comprehensively this paper proposes a research agenda that highlights current shortcomings and the need to address these shortcomings. Thus, this paper provides a point of departure for future research on escapism and encourages IS-research to further investigate the effects of escapism in IS-related settings.

Keywords: Escapism, Escaping, Information System Research, Research Agenda, Technology Use

1   Introduction

Popular forms of daily escaping-activities are watching TV, listening to music, reading books or online gaming (Warmelink et al., 2009). They all allow us to go from somewhere we don't want to be, to somewhere we do (Evans, 2002). Since Germans spend an average of 236 minutes per day watching TV, 36 minutes per day listening to music, 26 minutes reading books and 30 minutes per day with gaming (SevenOne Media 2019), they are escaping a lot of their waking time (Warmelink et al., 2009).

Literature defines escapism as a way to escape from unpleasant realities or distract attention from problems (Li et al. 2013; Young et al. 2017). Since escapism is often referred as unhealthy, it is considered as negative, both within academic and popular views (Calleja, 2010; Warmelink et al., 2009). More current literature shows that escapism also includes positive aspects. This literature suggests that escaping provides a way for transient mental retreat (Siricharoen, 2019; Vorderer et al., 2004) and therefore can be stress relieving (Kuo et al., 2016; Warmelink et al., 2009). Evans (2002, p. 75) notes that "as escapism appears to be a natural mechanism, the mind must have need for it".

Technology offers new opportunities to escape (Siricharoen, 2019) and therefore allows us to escape from situations one could not escape from without it (Cahir & Werner, 2013). For example, using the mobile phone to play online games allows to escape from unpleasant situations such as being preoccupied with unpleasant thoughts. Since escaping from specific situations is a natural and omnipresent behaviour, IS researcher started to acknowledge the ubiquity and relevance of escapism and

demonstrated that escapism can influence acceptance, adoption and use behaviour of technology (Hartl & Berger, 2017; Holsapple & Wu, 2007; Li et al., 2013; Yee, 2006).

Despite the first valuable efforts to show that the concept of escapism is relevant in various domains in the context of IS, research is still in very beginning stages. This paper aims to develop a research agenda that seeks to shed further light on current shortcomings and the need to address them. Therefore, this work provides a point of departure for further research and encourages IS-research to investigate the effects of escapism in IS-related settings including technology acceptance, adoption and use behaviour in more detail.

In order to address the objective, the subsequent sections are structured as follows: In section two, existing research is briefly described. In section three, the research agenda is proposed. In section four, contributions of this research are highlighted.

2   Theoretical Background

There is no established definition of escapism so far (Evans, 2002; Kuo et al., 2016). Escapism is oftentimes defined as a behaviour to escape or distract oneself from something unpleasant (Hirschman, 1983; Young et al., 2017). Escapism is also understood as "get [temporally] away from it all", often involving an element of "pretend" (Huizinga 1949 as cited in Mathwick et al. 2001, p. 44). More current literature describes escapism as the need to avoid thinking about real life problems (Xu et al., 2012; Yee, 2006). Since there is no established definition, we refer to Yee (2006), Xu et al. (2012) and Young et al. (2017) and define escapism as a behaviour that occurs when individuals use information technology (IT) to temporarily escape from uninteresting or unpleasant aspects of reality and instead think about or do more pleasant things.

There are two motivation types to escape from reality: Cause-based   and   effect-based

motivations (Warmelink et al., 2009). Caused-based motivations serve the purpose of negating an element in life (Warmelink et al., 2009). For example people escape due to their desire to get out of their routine or demands of the day to day world (Li et al., 2013; Wu & Wang, 2011) or to release stress (Kuo et al., 2016). Another cause-based motivation is to distract attention from real-life problems or avoid thinking about real-life problems (Hartl & Berger, 2017; Korkeila & Hamari, 2018; Weiss, 2011; Yee, 2006). Effect-based escapism (e.g., pleasure seeking or imagination conjuring) allows people to transcend reality by pursing an activity or fantasy (Warmelink et al., 2009).

Escapism is often used in a highly negative discourse (Warmelink et al., 2009) because it is considered to be a contributing factor for alcohol and substance abuse (Aldwin & Revenson, 1987; Chambers et al., 2005). Moreover, it has been associated with unhappiness, isolation, high anxiety levels, dissatisfaction, and addiction (Hirschman, 1983; Meier et al., 2018; Warmelink et al., 2009; Xu et al., 2012). More recent literature demonstrates that escapism also provides a way for mental relaxation and therefore can release stress (Kuo et al., 2016) and improve mood (Hoffmann et al., 2017). Evan (2002, p. 55) notes that escapism is often seen as a "voluntary way of getting to the part of their brain that is most happy, pleased and relaxed, whether through activity or by not doing nothing". In line with this positive understanding, escapism can lead to positive feelings and amusement (Jung & Kang, 2009).

Escapism can be operationalized as a state and trait because it is both a personality trait to tend to engage escape from something unpleasant, but also a pattern of escaping in respect to a given situation (Hartl & Berger, 2017; Warmelink et al., 2009).

Existing literature distinguishes four types of escaping-activities (Evans, 2002; Kuo et al., 2016; Siricharoen, 2019; Warmelink et al., 2009): Evasive escape-activities comprise all

activities to avoid another activity e.g., walking out of an argument. Active escaping-activities e.g., playing computer games, describe a participative or collaborative form of escapism requiring an actual input from the escapist. In contrast, passive escaping-activities denote a non-participative form of escapism i.e., the escapist acts as passive observers from a third-person perspective. The fourth form are extreme escape-activities: They denote a problematic form of escapism as they encompass dangerous and challenging activities e.g., excessive computer gaming.

Escaping-activities can significantly differ in their duration. The time horizon can range from the short-term postponement of an action to the medium-term postponement or avoidance of feelings to the lifelong suppression of certain questions (Kohler, 2014).

Emerging technologies allow us to withdraw problems from reality into the virtual world and therefore offer new opportunities to escape (Siricharoen 2019). For example, virtual reality (VR) glasses induce presence, a sense of being in another environment, and therefore offer escapists an enjoyable experience by immersing them in an arguably more favourable virtual environment (Hartl & Berger, 2017). Thus, IS-research has recently acknowledged the relevance of escapism and first attempts have been made to demonstrate that escapism can influence acceptance, adoption and use behaviour of technology. For example, Holsapple and Wu (2007) identified escapism as an emotional factor underlying an individual's intention to accept virtual worlds. Hartl and Berger (2017) showed that escapism as a distinctive personal trait determines the adoption of VR glasses. Parker and Plank (2000) found that escaping predicted internet usage. Li et al. (2013) demonstrated that escapism strengthens influence on an individual's continuous intention to use social network games. Figure 1 summarizes the different dimensions of escapism embedded in a technology related-context.

Despite the valuable first efforts to investigate escapism in IS context, research is still in it very beginning stages.

Therefore, in order to assist future research in this field, a research agenda is developed, highlighting current shortcomings and the need to address these shortcomings.
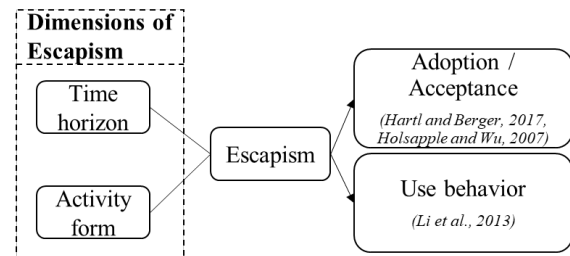

Figure 1. Escapism in technology related context

3   Research Agenda

Although IS-research is increasingly considering escapism, there is a lack of conceptual clarity. For example Young et al. (2017, p. 25) define escapism as "a behaviour employed to distract oneself from real life problems". In turn Thiruchselvam et al. (2011, p. 84) define distraction as a state of "deploying attention away from the emotionally salient aspects of an emotion-eliciting event". Since both definitions imply that attention is diverted away from something unpleasant, the definitions overlap and it remains unclear how escapism and distraction can be separated. Furthermore, Evans (2002) defines procrastination as an unhealthy form of escapism. In contrast Meier et al. (2018) define escapism as "a dysfunctional avoidance coping response to negative life circumstances" while the authors define procrastination as "a self-regulatory failure rooted in low self-control". Therefore, it remains unclear if procrastination is an unhealthy form of escapism or if escapism and procrastination are two distinct concepts.

The lack of conceptual clarity impedes theory development. Therefore, it is important to separate escapism from related constructs including distraction and procrastination. Consequently, we raise the following research question:

Question 1: What are the idiosyncratic characteristics of escapism and how can escapism be separated from related constructs including distraction and procrastination?

With an increasing body of knowledge, two dimensions of escapism have been identified: the escaping-activity form (e.g., evasive, active, passive, extreme) and the time horizon (e.g., short-, middle-, long-term). Since, research on escapism is still at its beginning stages, there could be more dimensions that are not considered yet. For example, there could be a differentiation between hedonic and utilitarian escaping-activities. Most escaping-activities listed in literature are hedonic, for example gaming or watching TV. However, Evans (2002) gave the example that escaping could also mean to do more pleasant tasks before pressing ones, which could be considered as an utilitarian escaping-activity. Moreover, there is a lack of literature investigating if individuals are always aware of their escaping behaviour. Investigating and understanding the diversity of escapism is an important step to study the effects of escapism on IS-related phenomena in more detail. In this context we raise the following research question:

Question 2: Are there any additional dimensions of escapism?

IS research has started to acknowledge the mentioned dimensions. For example Kuo et al. (2016) developed a conceptual framework for active escapism, which comprises antecedents, processes and consequences of active escapism in the context of video game consumption. Warmelink et al. (2009) developed a framework that assigns cause-based and effect-based escaping motivations to the different escaping-activities. Despite these valuable first efforts to understand the different escaping dimensions, there is a lack of literature, investigating the influence of the different dimensions on IS-related phenomena. To fill this gap is an important step to a better understanding of acceptance, adoption and use behaviour.

Against this background, we raise the following research question:

Question 3: How do the different dimensions influence IS-related phenomena including acceptance, adoption and use behaviour?

First valuable attempts have been made to measure escapism. For example Lee et al. (2004) developed a measurement instrument to study escapism in the domain of tourism. Chung et al. (2012) adopted and refined this measurement instrument by adding the item "Getting a change from a busy job." Xu et al. (2012) developed a measurement instrument to investigate escapism as functional need that drives online game playing and addiction. Hoffmann et al. (2017) introduced the concept of escapist Facebook use and developed a measurement instrument to investigate escaping-behaviour while using Facebook.

However, an established measurement instrument that accounts for the richness of escapism is still missing so far. Existing scales are limited in terms of addressing the stability (i.e., state or trait) and the different dimensions (i.e., escaping-activity and time horizon). These shortcomings are critical, as valid and reliable measurement instruments are a prerequisite for theorizing and theory development (Gregor, 2006, 2014; MacKenzie et al., 2011; Moore & Benbasat, 1991). A valid and reliable measurement instrument encourages IS-research to further investigate the effects of escapism in IS-related settings. In this context we raise the following research question:

Question 4: How should existing instruments be modified to consider the different dimensions of escapism?

4   Contribution

This work aimed to advance research on escapism by developing a research agenda highlighting current shortcomings and the need to address these shortcomings. Since escapism is a natural and omnipresent behaviour, our

research will contribute to theory and practice alike:

From a theoretical perspective, future research on escapism in technology-related settings can benefit from this research agenda as a point of departure. The investigation of escapism is an important step to a more holistic understanding of IS-related phenomena in various domains, such as use behaviour, acceptance, and adoption research. Moreover, research on important job-outcomes (e.g., productivity) can benefit from investigating escapism in more detail.

Investigating escapism is also beneficial from a practical perspective. It provides important insights in the usefulness of escaping-activities. Therefore, it contributes to a better understanding, how organisations should take escapism into consideration when designing future workplaces. To be more precisely, research on escapism extends knowledge how to give more room for escapes, for example by including hedonic aspects in employees working environment.

5   References

Aldwin, C. M., & Revenson, T. A. (1987). Does coping help? A reexamination of the relation between coping and mental health. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *53*(2), 337–348.

Cahir, J., & Werner, A. (2013). Escaping the everyday: Young people's use of text messages and songs. *Youth Studies Australia*, *32*(2), 59–66.

Calleja, G. (2010). Digital games and escapism. *Games and Culture*, *5*(4), 335–353.

Chambers, M., Connor, S. L., & McElhinney, S. (2005). Substance use and young people: The potential of technology. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, *12*(2), 179–186.

Chung, N., Koo, C., & Kim, J. K. (2012). The impact of booth recommendation system on exhibition attendees' unplanned visit behavior: An extrinsic-intrinsic dichotomy perspective. In *Proceedings of the 16th Pacific Asia Conference on Information Systems,* Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Evans, A. (2002). *This virtual life: Escapism and simulation in our media world*. Fusion Press.

Gregor, S. (2006). The nature of theory in information systems. *MIS Quarterly*, *30*(3), 611–642.

Gregor, S. (2014). Theory - still king but needing a revolution! *Journal of Information Technology*, *29*(4), 337–340.

Hartl, E., & Berger, B. (2017). Escaping reality: Examining the role of presence and escapism in user adoption of virtual reality glasses. In *Proceedings of the 25th European Conference on Information Systems,* Guimarães, Portugal.

Hirschman, E. C. (1983). Predictors of self-projection, fantasy fulfillment, and escapism. *Journal of Social Psychology*, *120*(1), 63–76.

Hoffmann, C. P., Lutz, C., Müller, S., & Meckel, M. (2017). Facebook escapism and online political participation. In *Proceedings of the 11th Conference on Social Media & Society,* Toronto, ON, Canada.

Holsapple, C. W., & Wu, J. (2007). User acceptance of virtual worlds. The hedonic framework. *The DATA BASE for Advances in Information Systems*, *38*(4), 86–89.

Jung, Y., & Kang, H. (2009). An exploratory study of users' purposes for social virtual worlds. In *Proceedings of the 15th Americas Conference on Information Systems,* San Francisco, California.

Kohler, S. (2014). Procrastination and media use as escapism. In *Proceedings of the 5th European Communication Research and Education Association,* Lisbon, Portugal.

Korkeila, H., & Hamari, J. (2018). The relationship between player's gaming orientation and avatar's capital: A study in Final Fantasy XIV. In *Proceedings of the 51st Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences,* Waikoloa Village, Hawaii, USA.

Kuo, A., Lutz, R. J., & Hiler, J. L. (2016). Brave new world of warcraft: A conceptual framework for active escapism. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, *33*(7), 498–506.

Lee, C.-K., Lee, Y.-K., & Wicks, B. E. (2004). Segmentation of festival motivation by nationality and satisfaction. *Tourism Management*, *25*(1), 61–70.

Li, H., Liu, Y., Xu, X., & Heikkila, J. (2013). Please stay with me! An empirical investigation on hedonic IS continuance model for social network games. In *Proceedings of the 34th International Conference on Information Systems,* Milan, Italien.

MacKenzie, S. B., Podsakoff, P. M., & Podsakoff, N. P. (2011). Construct measurement and validation procedures in MIS and behavioral research: Integrating new and existing techniques. *MIS Quarterly*, *35*(2), 293–334.

Meier, A., Meltzer, C. E., & Reinecke, L. (2018). Coping with stress or losing control? Facebook-induced strains among emerging adults as a consequence of escapism versus procrastination. In S. E. Baumgartner, M. Hofer, T. Koch, & R. Kühne (Eds.), *Youth and Media* (pp. 167–186). Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG. https://doi.org/10.5771/9783845280455-167

Moore, G. C., & Benbasat, I. (1991). Development of an instrument to measure the perceptions of adopting an information technology innovation. *Information Systems Research*, *2*(3), 192–222.

Parker, B. J., & Plank, R. E. (2000). A uses and gratifications perspective on the Internet as a new information source. *American Business Review*, *18*(2), 43–49. http://search.proquest.com/openview/372f43 43b6c475e09bee8556a027f4cc/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=31895

Siricharoen, W. V. (2019). The effect of virtual reality as a form of escapism. In *Proceedings of the International Conference on Information Resources Management,* Auckland, New Zealand.

Thiruchselvam, R., Blechert, J., Sheppes, G., Rydstrom, A., & Gross, J. J. (2011). The temporal dynamics of emotion regulation: An EEG study of distraction and reappraisal. *Biological Psychology*, *87*(1), 84–92.

Vorderer, P., Klimmt, C., & Ritterfeld, U. (2004). Enjoyment: At the heart of media entertainment. *Communication Theory*, *14*(4), 388–408.

Warmelink, H., Harteveld, C., & Mayer, I. (2009). Press enter or escape to play deconstructing escapism in multiplayer gaming. In *Proceedings of the Digital Games Research Association International Conference,* Dundee, Scotland, United Kingdom.

Weiss, T. (2011). Fulfilling the needs of eSports consumers: A uses and gratifications perspective. In *Proceedings of the 24th Bled eConference,* Bled, Slovenia.

Wu, H.-L., & Wang, J.-W. (2011). An empirical study of flow experiences in social network sites. In *Proceedings of the 15th Pacific Asia Conference on Information Systems,* Brisbane, Australia.

Xu, Z., Turel, O., & Yuan, Y. (2012). Online game addiction among adolescents: Motivation and prevention factors. *European Journal of Information Systems*, *21*(3), 321–340.

Yee, N. (2006). Motivations for play in online games. *Journal of CyberPsychology and Behavior*, *9*(6), 772–775.

Young, N. L., Kuss, D. J., Griffiths, M. D., & Howard, C. J. (2017). Passive facebook use, facebook addiction, and associations with escapism: An experimental vignette study. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *71*, 24–31.