

Motivating Marketing Research Respondents to Provide More Elaborated Answers

Michał Ścibor-Rylski

University of Warsaw, Faculty of Management

Email: mscibor-rylski@wz.uw.edu.pl

ORCID: [0000-0002-0594-492X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0594-492X)

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ABSTRACT

Modern marketing research faces a challenge how to increase the respondents' productivity and encourage them to give more elaborated answers in the open-ended questions. It's relevant both for CAWI quantitative projects and the qualitative approaches. The initial research in this area shows that gamified tasks including storytelling enhancements might be a solution to the stated problem.

The research project was aimed at the verification of effectiveness of the gamified methods, i.e., questions including a storytelling context, with the use of a bigger, quantitative sample of the regular marketing research respondents – participants of the professional research panel.

The research was conducted with the use of the CAWI method on a nationwide sample of 300 people aged 18–40 in an experimental scheme with one control and one experimental group with a gamified task. The participants' task was to watch TV commercials and fill out a form with an open-ended evaluation of various aspects of the advertisement. The word count was used as the indicator of the respondents' engagement.

The results of the initial experiments in this field were replicated: application of the storytelling elements to the regular marketing research questions resulted in significantly more elaborated answers in comparison to the traditional approach. However, this effect was valid only for the first impressions check and not for the more detailed evaluation of the commercial.

This research project proves that storytelling can be an effective tool to increase the engagement of marketing research participants. It's a first step in the search for motivating techniques that can be used in different research approaches.

JEL classification: M310 Marketing; M370 Advertising; M300 Marketing and Advertising: General

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1. INTRODUCTION

Arousing and maintaining respondents' engagement is one of the greatest challenges of modern market research. External motivators such as money seems enough to encourage people to take part in the focus group or CAWI survey, but it does not guarantee that respondents will make the best possible effort to share his or her ideas. The data obtained from unengaged respondents is often superficial – an observation valid in terms of both the depth of qualitative discussion and the length of the answers in the open-ended questions.

Marketing research needs tools that could trigger participants' engagement by increasing their intrinsic motivation. Gamifying the tasks is one of the ways to achieve this goal. Gamification, defined by Deterding et al. (2011) is 'the use of game design elements in non-game contexts'. This concept is widely used in various fields where it is crucial to motivate people. In education, turning the process of learning into a game, using narrative tasks or simply adding some game elements such as leaderboards, badges, etc., improves student's engagement and motivation (da Rocha Seixas et al., 2016; Homer et al., 2018; Kapp et al., 2013; Mader et al., 2019; Seaborn & Fells, 2015). Marketing uses gamification to enhance customer engagement, motivation and finally, loyalty (Blohm & Leimeister, 2013; Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011).

Despite its wide presence in related disciplines, gamification is still a not fully explored area in marketing research. My preliminary research in the field of communication market research showed that adding a narrative context to the open-ended questions of the questionnaire results in significantly longer answers, which might be an indicator of the respondent's engagement (Ścibor-Rylski, 2020a; Ścibor-Rylski, 2021).

The goal of this paper is to verify the hypothesis that the use of storytelling-based techniques as an element of the questionnaire questions enhances research participants' productivity. It presents the results of the experiment replicating the initial research in the field of gamifying the questionnaire. The professional research panel was used to ensure that the effect is valid not only in academic reality but also in the real market research situation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Motivation and engagement

The human behaviour is driven by different types of motivation depending on the level of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Intrinsically motivated activities are those that one engages in for the sheer pleasure of doing them. Further along the continuum are externally motivated activities regulated by rewards of willingness to avoid some kind of punishment. In this case the activity is not performed for itself but as a means to achieve some external goal. Deci (1971) showed that engaging the participants in an interesting activity in order to receive money as a reward resulted in decreasing the level of situational intrinsic motivation toward the activity. The concept of situational motivation seems crucial for an understanding of an individual's current self-regulatory processes (Guay et al., 2000). It refers to the motivation of the participants that are currently engaged in the activity. Since the concept of self-determination has been associated with enhanced psychological functioning (Ryan et al., 1995), it can be concluded that inducing intrinsic motivation might eventuate in more positive outcomes of the undertaken activity due to increased persistence and engagement. Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) suggests that intrinsic motivation is fostered when basic psychological needs are satisfied, i.e.: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. In conclusion – people would be more self-determined and therefore more engaged by the activity that gives positive feedback and shows progress, provides choice and finally, offers a significant depth of connection with the other users.

2.2. Gamification as a Key to Enhance User Engagement

Gamification enhances user engagement by leveraging psychological principles and game design elements to make tasks more enjoyable, motivating, and immersive. This concept taps into intrinsic motivation, the abovementioned internal drive to perform activities for their inherent satisfaction rather than for external gratification. Gamification elements such as achievements (competence), choices

(autonomy), and social features (relatedness) increase the intrinsic motivation level and transform often emotionally neutral activity to be a reward in itself. Such enhancement can create a positive experience – research results show that the participants consider such processes more enjoyable (Triantoro et al., 2020). Motivated participants who enjoy taking part in the gamified processes are more involved in these activities. Paharia (2013) links this effect with the concept of the customers' loyalty, where gamification is considered as one of the most effective way to increase emotional engagement with the brand.

The use of different game elements also leads to the enhancement of the participants' performance. According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), feedback is crucial for learning and motivation. Immediate feedback in gamified systems keeps users informed about their progress, thereby maintaining their engagement by allowing them to adjust their behaviours in real time.

Well-designed games can create a state of flow, where users become fully absorbed in the activity, losing track of time and external distractions. Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) describes flow as a state of optimal experience characterised by deep immersion and enjoyment. Gamification elements such as balanced challenges and skill requirements help induce flow, thereby enhancing engagement.

Morschheuser's research on gamification provides valuable insights into how game design elements can be leveraged to enhance user engagement and motivation (Morschheuser et al., 2015). The primary goal of the study was to investigate whether gamification could improve the usage and user experience of an internal corporate intranet within a banking institution. Gamification led to observable changes in user behaviour. Employees showed increased activity levels, spent more time on the intranet, and utilised a broader range of functionalities. This indicates that gamified elements can drive users to adopt desired behaviours more readily. Participants reported a more enjoyable and satisfying experience when using the gamified intranet. The elements of fun and competition introduced by gamification made routine tasks feel more engaging and less monotonous. One of the significant outcomes was an increase in knowledge-sharing among employees. Gamification encouraged users to contribute more content, share insights, and collaborate, thereby enhancing the overall value of the intranet as a knowledge management tool.

2.3. Gamifying the Marketing Research Process

The abovementioned review provides a framework for understanding the impact of gamification on user engagement and behaviour. Applying these insights to marketing research can enhance participant motivation, improve data quality, and provide richer behavioural data.

Gamification in marketing research involves integrating game design elements into research processes. It leverages the motivational aspects of games to make research activities more appealing and interactive. Numerous experiments confirm that the use of gamified tasks make the respondents more engaged, more open for discussion and the sharing of their thoughts, and results in the obtaining of deeper and more elaborate data (Harrison, 2011; Bailey et al., 2015).

Gamification also changes the marketing research process into an appealing experience. Harms et al. (2015) conducted research utilising the game elements implemented into online surveys. The results show that the users perceived the entire process as a fun experience. The use of gamification increased the average time spent on completing the questionnaire as well as the participants' willingness to use and to recommend the survey, without introducing a strong bias in survey results. The only drawback was a lower overall response rate.

2.4. Storytelling as an Effective Way to Make the Participants More Engaged

Storytelling in marketing has become an essential strategy for brands looking to connect with their audience on a deeper level. It involves crafting and sharing stories that communicate the brand's values, mission, and the benefits of its products or services. Storytelling helps brands build emotional connections with their audience. By sharing relatable and emotionally charged stories, brands can evoke feelings such as joy, empathy, excitement, or nostalgia. This emotional engagement makes the brand more memorable and fosters customer loyalty.

Escalas (2004) indicates that narratives may create a link between a brand and the self and enhance emotional responses and improve the persuasiveness of marketing messages. Stories that

elicit emotions such as happiness, surprise, or empathy are more likely to engage consumers and lead to positive brand attitudes and behavioural intentions.

Storytelling provides an immersive experience called narrative transportation – the phenomenon in which consumers mentally enter a world that a story evokes. Research by Van Laer et al. (2014) demonstrates that narrative transportation fosters engagement by making the audience feel part of the story. This process enhances persuasion and brand attachment.

Encouraging customer engagement through storytelling is supported by a rich body of scientific literature. Emotional resonance, memory retention, narrative transportation, social sharing, user-generated content, and cognitive and affective processing are all mechanisms through which storytelling enhances engagement. By integrating these insights into their marketing strategies, brands can create compelling narratives that deeply engage their audience and foster lasting connections.

2.5. Storytelling in Marketing Research

The connection between the role of narratives in marketing and market research lies in the ability of storytelling to capture attention, evoke emotions, and foster a sense of involvement. Both domains benefit from the principles of storytelling to enhance engagement and data quality.

Storytelling can be used in many aspects of marketing research. Escalas (2007) suggests that narratives can shape consumer behaviour by providing a meaningful context. In marketing research, stories that outline the purpose and importance of the study can motivate respondents to engage actively and provide high-quality data. Starting a survey with a short, engaging story related to the research topic can capture interest and contextualise the questions. During a focus group, storytelling techniques can be used to frame discussions, making them more engaging and prompting deeper insights.

The principles of storytelling can significantly enhance respondent engagement in marketing research by capturing attention, evoking emotions, fostering relatability, aiding memory, and influencing behaviour. By incorporating storytelling techniques, researchers can design more engaging studies that yield richer and more reliable data.

The use of storytelling in marketing research applies primarily to qualitative research and the use of ingenious projection techniques or their more complicated versions – research games. 'Our City' is an example of a research game dedicated to study customer journeys and customer experience in multiple touchpoints with a brand. It utilises various narrative techniques and smooths out the process of obtaining complex decision process data from marketing research respondents (Ścibor-Rylski et al., 2019).

While qualitative research uses the benefits of storytelling, its use in quantitative research is negligible. The first attempts to test the effectiveness of this approach involved adding context to open-ended questions in questionnaires about reactions to marketing communications (Ścibor-Rylski, 2020a; Ścibor-Rylski, 2021). The results of this preliminary research showed that when given narrative tasks, the respondents tend to use significantly more words to describe their first impressions after watching a TV commercial than in a regular question condition. The effect manifested both in the offline and online conditions, but in the latter case the manipulation resulted in a significantly greater increase in the number of words used than in the case of the face-to-face study.

The study described in this text is a continuation of the abovementioned approach.

3. DATA AND METHODS

3.1. The Research Goal and Operationalisation of the Dependent Variable

Preliminary research on the effect of adding narrative context to the questionnaire included only question about first impressions after watching a commercial. Also, the research sample was rather small and consisted of a specific group – students. The experiment presented in this paper had two main goals:

- to replicate the effect of the preliminary research with the use of standard, marketing research sample. Such approach allows to simulate the real situation of marketing research,
- to check whether the observed effect is extended to other standard questions used in the communication research – not only regarding first impressions but also about the story, emotions, message and brand itself.

The same method of gamifying the task was used as in the previous research – a narrative context was included in the question regarding watched commercial. The dependent variable was defined as the respondents' engagement operationalised as a number of words used in their answers.

3.2. The Hypothesis and the Research Question

Similarly to the previous experiments, a general hypothesis was formulated:

Hypothesis: employing the storytelling technique based on adding a context to a question improves engagement of the research participants, resulting in better productivity operationalised as a length of the answers to the open-ended questions.

Additionally, a research question was asked to include new approach extending the questionnaire to new areas of interest:

Research question: Will the effect of increased engagement persist when answering subsequent questions about the tested commercial?

3.3. Research Method

The experiment was conducted with the use of CAWI approach. The participants were recruited from Norstat Research Panel used in regular marketing research. The sample was random and included N=300 adult Poles from bigger cities (100K+), aged 18–40 with even gender split.

The participants were randomly split into two groups:

- control (no gamified techniques were used)
- experimental (with a gamified question – a narrative context added)

In this experiment the participants were asked to watch two commercials sequentially:

1. TV advertisement of Castorama – a DiY retailer (Castorama Polska, 2018). The ad lasted 45 seconds and its plot was focused on a story of two neighbours falling in love. The brand inspired the male character to undertake a project – create a roof garden that helped him charm his female neighbour. It was the same material as used in the preliminary research.

After watching the commercial, the participants were asked to fill out a form with only one question. Its content was different in the control and in the experimental group.

The control group was simply asked about their first impressions. They received the following instruction:

'Watch the commercial and write down what you think about it.'

In the experimental group, a narrative context was introduced to the question. They received the following instruction:

'Imagine you work for an advertisement agency, and you are working on a new campaign. Your biggest rival working for a competitor's brand has just created a new ad – somehow you managed to watch it before the official premiere. You need to react as soon as possible to design a relevant commercial as a response and not to fall behind. You want to share your thoughts with the creative team and your management. Watch the commercial and write down what do you think about it.'

2. TV advertisement for Żywiec – a Polish beer brand. (Żywiec Piwo, 2020). The ad lasted 30 seconds and it was related to Covid-19 and focused on the brand's tips for the pandemic times. It's worth mentioning that the research was conducted in 2020 – during the pandemic. After watching the commercial, the participants were asked to fill out a form with several questions. Its content was different in the control and in the experimental group.

The control group received the following instruction:

'Watch the commercial and write down, what do you think about it by completing the points below:

First impressions – your thoughts and associations after seeing this ad.

Story – what story does this ad tell, what scenes do you remember?

Your emotions – what did you feel after watching this ad, what was the atmosphere of this ad?
Advertising message – what was it trying to say?
Brand – what do you learn about the brand from this ad? What can you say about this brand?’

In the experimental group, a narrative context was introduced to the question. The respondents received the following instruction:

‘Imagine that you are a juror in the famous competition for the best advertisement. You have just watched one of the spots, and when you go out for coffee you meet a colleague from the jury who has not seen it yet. He asks you to tell him what you think about this ad. You want to convey your impressions as accurately as possible. Watch the ad and write what you think about it by completing the points below.’

The same set of questions was used as in the control group.

The next subchapter presents the results of the comparison between two groups. The word count in each participant’s statement was used as the indicator of the effectiveness of gamification.

3.4. Results

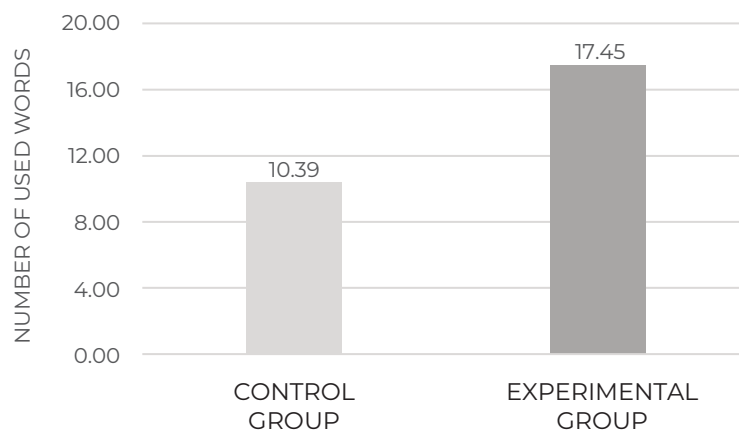
3.4.1. Castorama commercial – first impressions only

The average word count of the statements was calculated in each group. The experimental group (N=150) used more words: M = 17.45; SD = 18.01 compared to the control group (N=150): M = 10.39; SD = 10.24.

T-test was used to analyse the significance of the difference. It revealed a statistically significant difference and medium effect size: $t(236) = 4.17$; $p < 0.001$; $d = 0.48$. The results are presented in Chart 1.

Chart 1

Differences in the average number of words used by the control and experimental groups – Castorama commercial



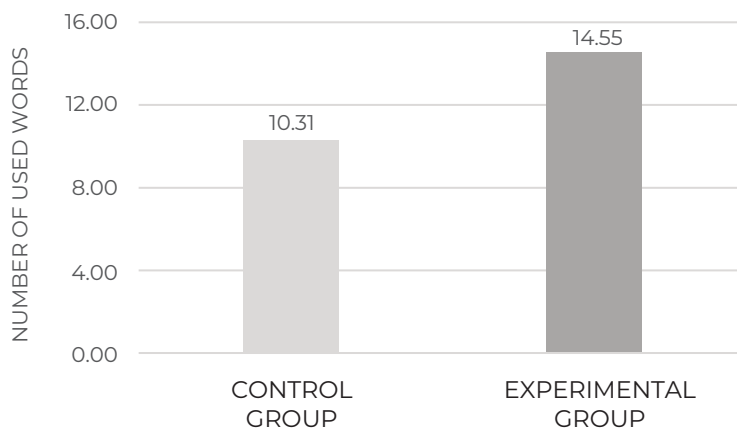
The group with the narrative context added to the question generated significantly longer statements than the control group. The original effect was replicated.

3.4.2. Żywiec Commercial – Full Set of Questions

The average word count for each answer was calculated both in the control and the experimental groups. A series of separate t-tests were calculated. Only for the first impressions the difference was statistically significant with a small effect size: $t(282) = 2.87$; $p = 0.002$; $d = 0.33$. The experimental group (N=150) used more words: M = 14.55; SD = 14.29 compared to the control group (N=150): M = 10.31; SD = 11.17. The results are presented in Chart 2.

Chart 2

Differences in the average number of words used by the control and experimental groups – *Żywiec* commercial, first impressions



Such result constitutes another replication of the original effect. However, it doesn't last beyond the first impressions. The results for the other questions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Differences in the average number of words used by the control and experimental groups – *Żywiec* commercial, other questions

Question	M _{control}	SD _{control}	M _{experimental}	SD _{experimental}	t-test
Story	16.77	14.45	18.45	19.74	$t(298) = 0.84; p = 0.200$
Emotions	5.89	5.88	6.39	6.14	$t(298) = 0.71; p = 0.240$
Message	8.90	5.84	8.19	5.23	$t(298) = 1.11; p = 0.134$
Brand	7.97	6.18	7.69	7.13	$t(298) = 0.36; p = 0.358$

The length of the answers for the subsequent questions regarding story, emotions, message and brand does not differ significantly between the groups.

3.4.3. Within group comparisons

In addition to the main results comparing the two groups in their evaluation of individual advertisements, an analysis examining the length of first impressions statements within the groups was conducted. It was not included in the main analysis since the questions for each commercial were slightly different and it was impossible to run a fully legitimate repeated measures analysis. The results for the control group show lack of significant differences ($M = 10.39$ vs. $M = 10.31$): $t(149) = 0.10; p = 0.921$. In the case of experimental group, the statements for the first commercial are longer than for the second one ($M = 17.45$ vs. $M = 14.55$). Statistical tendency is observed: $t(149) = 1.94; p = 0.054; d = 0.16$.

3.5. Results discussion

The results of the analysis of differences in the length of statements in the case of first impressions for both commercials confirm the Hypothesis: Adding a narrative context to a question make the respondents write more, which is interpreted as an indicator of engagement in the marketing research process. Such finding addresses a common problem of the modern marketing research. Adamou (2019) indicated eight side effects of low participant engagement. It influences negatively not only the response and completion rates but also presents the risk of degrading the quality of the entire panel by discouraging the respondents from taking part in boring, repetitive surveys. Uninvolved market

research participants increase the fieldwork duration and generate bigger costs for a company. Finally, the data obtained in such research might not be reliable due to the 'speedrunning effect', i.e., moving quickly through the questionnaire without deeper reflection. Typical ways of externally motivating participants – incentives – may affect the willingness to participate in the study, but not necessarily the level of engagement during the study itself. The problem with the respondents' intrinsic motivation triggers serious changes in the approach to the research design. The use of game elements is becoming a common practice among researchers interested in increasing the attractiveness of quantitative questionnaires (Harteveld et al., 2018) as well as individual interview and focus groups discussion guides. Protasiuk and Gorączka (2020) distinguish three levels of applying research design changes to make the participants more involved: *surveytainment* consisting in making the appearance of the questionnaire more attractive: introducing interesting scales and graphic elements; *soft gamification* which uses the game elements such as feedback, narration or competition, and *hard gamification* which means research by gaming. Adding storytelling elements to the survey questions falls into *soft gamification*. Adamou (2019) underlines the role of the narrative context and role-play elements in designing gamified marketing research – *'In every story, there is trouble to overcome. This can help your participant feel valued.'* (p. 58). A story implemented into a survey might be a powerful engagement triggering tool. And the results of the research described in this paper confirm that statement.

It is worth noting that the results are very similar despite some differences in the way the questions were asked. In the case of the first advertisement (Castorama), the respondents were asked to simply write what they thought about the material they had watched. In the case of the second advertisement (Żywiec), the question was more specific and concerned first impressions – thoughts and associations after watching the commercial. The research results prove that in both cases the task was treated in a similar way, i.e., as a request to share a general opinion about the watched advertisement. A slight difference in statement lengths for the experimental group might be explained by the more general and less restrictive character of the question asked for the first commercial. The narrative task might be more effective in such condition. An alternative explanation may lie in the different narrative content added to the question. Also, shorter statements in the case of the second advertisement may also be the result of the fact that the respondents performed a similar task for the second time – which was revealed only in the case of more productive, experimental group. This issue requires further examination in the future research.

Answering the additional research question, the results of the analysis of the responses for specific areas of the second commercial evaluation show that the effects of increased engagement do not persist. This may be explained by the fact that the effect of the narrative used created a context only for the first question, and then the respondents returned to the standard mode of answering questions in the marketing research process. In the planned experiment I intend to extend the story to the entire questionnaire linking all the questions into one narrative plot.

The results of the conducted study are consistent with the results of previous experiments in the field of using storytelling in open-ended questions. The experimental group always provided more elaborated answers. It opens up new perspectives related to planning marketing research – both quantitative and qualitative. In the latter case, the potential seems to be much greater. This is related to the nature of the tasks and the possibilities of using supporting narratives and projective techniques.

Lastly, an interesting comparison is the length of statements made by respondents from previous studies. The group of students in the online setting obtained averages: $M = 38.97$ in the control group and $M = 96.82$ in the experimental group. In the case of a study involving respondents from a professional research panel, the averages were several times lower. This shows that in a real situation simulating a marketing research, respondents are much more frugal in their statements than students accustomed to writing regularly. This result proves that using techniques that increase engagement is crucial to receiving more extensive responses.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Storytelling can transform otherwise mundane survey questions into engaging narratives that capture the respondents' imagination. Integrating it into marketing research leverages respondent's engagement to enhance productivity. Stories are engaging – both on emotional and cognitive level. Depending on their type, they can help to satisfy important psychological needs: competence,

autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985), boosting participants self-determination, which makes their motivation intrinsic and increases their perseverance. When respondents are emotionally engaged, they are more likely to invest effort and provide thoughtful, detailed responses. Hence, the researchers can obtain higher quality data, and improved overall completion rates. This innovative approach not only benefits the researchers but also creates a more positive and rewarding experience for the respondents (Ścibor-Rylski et al., 2019).

Obviously, it is wise to exercise caution when planning a successful gamification in the marketing research. Incorporating narrative and gamified elements requires careful design to ensure that the story is coherent, engaging and linked to the main theme of the research. The game mechanics should be motivating without being distracting. Maintaining a balance between entertainment and the gathering of information is crucial to maintain data quality.

The experiment described in this paper has some limitations that should be addressed in future studies on the use of storytelling in marketing research. First, it is necessary to focus on the evaluation of a single piece of material. The sequential evaluation of the ads could have some influence on the quality of the assessment of the second material. For this reason, it is necessary to examine the duration of the impact of using storytelling in a separate, dedicated experiment. Also, the used indicator of engagement – the number of words used – can be treated as a certain limitation of the described study. However, the study of the quantity and not the quality of responses was dictated by the desire to check the raw potential of using storytelling. Proving that experimental manipulation affects the productivity of the respondents opens up further research possibilities including the analysis of the cognitive depth of the answers in more elaborated, qualitative research methods, e.g., in online communities.

Planned research with the entire questionnaire transformed into a story is based on the assumption that storytelling piques respondents' curiosity by presenting scenarios that unfold as they progress through the questionnaire. This narrative progression can sustain interest and motivate respondents to continue answering questions to see how the story develops.

Communication, and more generally, material evaluation research is not the only area in which storytelling elements can be used. Narratives can have a positive impact on memory processes by providing a coherent structure that helps respondents organise and retrieve information. In the case of research that requires recalling elements from the autobiographic memory (Tulving, 1972) adding a frame to the study in the form of a story may improve respondents' recall of, for example, key elements of the decision process. The first experiment exploring this area have been conducted (Ścibor-Rylski, 2020b) and further research is planned in the future. The games using narrative elements are regularly used in modern marketing research, and scientific study of the mechanisms behind their effectiveness is imperative.

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Declaration about the scope of AI utilization

The authors did not use an AI tool in the preparation of the article.

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