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Flow Theory and Online Marketing Outcomes: a Critical Literature Review

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to provide a critical review of flow theory - a psychological state - and its marketing outcomes in online environments. Despite the strong interest of researchers from various disciplines, adapting the flow theory to online environments has been problematic. Based on a careful examination of the literature, we identified conceptual challenges confronted when studying flow online. The paper further discusses some possible solutions for challenges and underlines the need for more studies in this research area. Finally, marketing outcomes of applying flow theory in online environment were examined.

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1. Introduction

The growing importance of technologies in today's information economy has created a significant interest among academia and industry worldwide for understanding and delivering compelling experiences to online consumers. Flow is an important construct for companies and worthy to be considered for understanding and improving customer relationships in online environments.

Many researchers have studied flow in different contexts (Agarwal and Venkatesh, 2000; Chen et al., 1999; Chen, 2000, 2006; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1992, 2000, 2004, 2005; Hoffman et al., 1996; Huang, 2003; Koufaris, 2002; Novak et al., 2000, 2003; Trevino et al., 1992; Webster et al., 1992) such as sports (Jackson, 1996), reading (McCuillan and Conde, 1996) or in work environments (Allison et al., 1988). Flow was

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recognized to be a useful variable for explaining online consumer behavior (Hoffman et. al., 1996; Koufaris, 2002). Siekpe (2005) showed that "flow construct [...]" is important "for understanding the nature of the consumer experience."

Flow is a hedonistic construct, whose importance has been widely recognized as having a major impact on the user's behavior of information systems (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). According to Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 1988), flow is a "crucial component of enjoyment" and is "the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement". In a flow state, the consumers perceive an effortless action, loss of time and a sense that the experience stands out as being exceptional compared with daily activities (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Flow is a continuous variable that in different levels of flow can occur, ranging from none to an intense (or complete) state (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). The research to dates studied flow experience as an independent variable, as a dependent variable, and lately, as a mediator variable.

Since 1996 (see Hoffman and Novak) the universal applicability of flow theory was extend to online environments and scholars suggested that the success of online marketers depends on their ability to create opportunities for consumers to experience flow. Despite the strong interest in adapting the flow theory for online environments, the literature shows inconsistency and discrepancies. Many studies are hampered by conceptual ambiguities and a confusion about construct dimensions. Conceptual and empirical models of flow still need to clarify the relationship between the construct and its dimensions.

Based on an extensive review of existing research on flow theory, we emphasize possible solution to clarify the theoretical framework of studying online flow.

This paper is structured as follows: in the beginning, we present the origin and meaning of the flow construct and differenced it from similar experiences. Then, different conceptualizations of flow and construct dimensions. Further, we continue with the review of the most important conceptual and empirical models of optimal experience, both in online and offline environment and undertake a comparative analysis of them. Finally, we present the marketing outcomes of online flow and other consequences that may affect consumer behavior in the online environment.

2. Flow Theory

Flow theory received a growing attention in the last years as a basis to understand the facilitators for develop compelling experiences in online environments. The origin of this theory can be traced back in the papers of Csikszentmihalyi. While interviewing certain professional and amateur dancers, chess players, rock climbers, surgeons, and many others that expressed a deep devotion for their preferred sort of activity, Csikszentmihalyi selected a special feeling, called "optimal experience". During the interview sessions, Csikszentmihalyi found that individuals verbalize it as "being in the midst of a flow". Csikszentmihalyi (1975; 1990) called this holistic experience flow.

Flow theory is one of the two theories of intrinsic motivation developed in positive psychology paradigm (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The other theory (Self-Determination Theory) was developed and presented by Deci and Ryan (1985). In fact, the theory of optimal experience or flow is not only motivational. Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues were engaged in serious efforts to present flow experience as: (1) an cognitive artifact (the starting point is the center of attention), applied for the description of holistic personal development (Csikszentmihalyi, 1978, 1975), (2) an important factor in the evolution of bio-culture and selection (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Massimini and Delle Fave, 2000), (3) a theory of creativity, work well done and talented adolescents (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde and Whalen, 1993; Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi and Damon, 2001), (4) a psychological theory of development (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1984); (5) a basis for psychological rehabilitation practice (Delle Fave and Massimini, 2004, 2005).

Despite the variety of interpretations, in this study the flow experience is discussed as a motivational paradigm. Flow theory was first applied to online environments by Hoffman and Novak (1996). They extended the universal applicability of flow to computer-mediated environments and suggested that "optimal experience" can contribute to the success of online marketers by creating exciting experiences to consumers. Because the Internet is an interactive environment, it provides opportunities to customers to experience flow during their navigation (Chen

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