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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Keywords: flow theory; online environment; marketing outcome; consumer behaviour.

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.


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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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