Chapter 7.10
Redefining Web Users' Optimal Flow Experiences in Online Environments:
An Empirical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The article highlights a research study on consumer navigation behavior through the Web users' optimal Flow experiences in the online environments. The research study establishes the empirical groundwork for measuring Web users' Flow experiences in the Web environment. The article proposes a comprehensive definition of Flow on the basis of Comprehensive Process (Flow) Model of Network Navigation, considering that the Flow concept is a multidimensional concept in the "multi-activity" medium of the Web. Flow has been defined as a multi-dimensional and context-specific concept. Furthermore, the research article proposes that there are 10 Flow constructs (also called "the antecedents of Flow") along with the three states of Flow, namely, Perfect Flow, Imperfect-Intensive Flow, and Imperfect Flow. Consumer Behavior on the Web is studied using the Flow concept for three categories of Flow users, namely, Perfect and Imperfect-Intensive Flow (PIIF) users, Imperfect Flow (IF) users, and Non-Flow (NF) users. These users achieve Flow depending on 10 Flow-constructs and three Flow states. Empirical results suggest a direct relationship between the Flow states and the Flow user categories and between expected Web user in the future (EXPUSE) and the Flow user categories. This research study provides a basis for future researchers to study consumer navigation behavior on the Web using the Flow concept for three categories of Flow users through 10 Flow constructs and three Flow states. The research has significant implications for theory and practice.

THE FLOW CONCEPT IN THE "MULTI-ACTIVITY" MEDIUM OF THE WEB

The idea of Flow was conceptualized by Csikszent-mihalyi (1977, p. 36), who defined "Flow" as "the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement." Researchers have suggested that Flow can be used to study consumer behavior on the Web, especially the way consumer perceives the Web environment and engages himself/herself in the process of network navigation, and that the Web is an activity that can facilitate the occurrence of Flow (Chen, Wigand, & Nilan, 1998; Hoffman & Novak, 1996; Novak, Hoffman, & Yung, 1998). By definition, Flow is a psychological state in which an individual feels cognitively efficient, motivated, and happy (Moneta & Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 277). When in the Flow state, people become absorbed in their activities, while irrelevant thoughts and perceptions are screened out. If Flow were absent in humans' experience, "there would be little purpose in living" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1982, p. 13). Saxena, Kothari, Jain, and Khurana (2003) demonstrated Flow as a combination of hypertext, telepresence, machine interactivity and time distortion. In terms of consumer navigation behavior or analyzing the buying patterns of consumers on the Web, the principle of "duplication" results in repeat visits to the Web environment and hence, repeat consumption behavior (RCB). This has a direct impact on expected Web use in the future (EXPUSE).

This research study aims to analyze "Flow" in the online environments and presents "Flow" as a context-specific concept with multiple Flow states (and not a single Flow state, as described by previous researchers) within the multi-activity medium of communication of the Web. The objective of redefining Flow is two-fold: 1) to establish and develop a conceptual framework (Comprehensive Process Model of Network Navigation) for the understanding of Consumer Navigation Behavior (CNB) in online environments, and 2) to measure Flow on the basis of the Flow constructs and Web use variables derived from the Compre-hensive Flow Model of Network Navigation for investigating CNB in online environments. Flow should be considered as a complex multidimensional context-specific concept, characterized by relationships among a large set of unidimensional constructs of Flow. Also, the Flow constructs can be neatly categorized into sets of antecedents and consequences of Flow.

OPTIMAL FLOW EXPERIENCE

Flow is defined as the congruence of high skills and high challenges of the users above a critical threshold level (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988), and the rationality behind the concept of "multi-activity" applies to the dynamic perceptions of challenges perceived in a given situation and the skills a person brings to it. Web as a multi-activity medium of communication was established by Chen et al. (1998). In addition to the concept of "multi-activity" for Flow concept, there is a need to address the problem of conflict between generic and context specific Web Flow. All the researches in the area of Web Flow demonstrates Flow as a concept occurring during network navigation where the person is engrossed in the process of navigating the Web or the mediated perception of the environment called "telepresence" (Steuer, 1992) rather than being present in his / her physical world of tensions, anxieties and frustrations. Hence, network navigation becomes an intrinsically enjoyable and self-reinforcing source of mental relaxation accompanied by the loss of self-consciousness and characterized by a seamless sequence of responses facilitated by machine interactivity (Hoffman & Novak, 1996). Thus, previous research has defined Flow as a generic concept rather than a context specific one. There is no clarity whether e-mail, Internet chat sessions, or Web conferencing are the Flow activities or whether using Web for a specific purpose of searching information for business or educational purposes are the activities that result in Flow. This problem or dispute area of the conflict between generic and context specific Flow is addressed in this empirical study and the

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