Chapter 9
Telepresence, Flow, and Behaviour in the Virtual Retail Environment

Said Ettis
University of Gabes, Tunisia

ABSTRACT

Flow theory, as a basis to facilitate the development of compelling experiences, has received growing attention over the past two decades. Facing this plethora of interest, it is obvious that telepresence and flow in human-computer interactions are important issues. The objectives of this chapter is to review and empirically analyze the relationships among flow theory, the telepresence concept, and online behaviour. Particularly, this research investigates the impact of telepresence and flow on Websites visitors’ visit time, perceived visit time, and number of visited pages. An online survey was conducted. The findings indicate that telepresence has a positive effect on the flow state, as measured by concentration and enjoyment. The consumers’ level of concentration positively influenced their visit time, perceived visit time, and number of visited pages. Enjoyment has a positive effect on perceived visit time, but no significant effect on actual visit time and number of visited pages. Discussion and implications of these results are exhibited. Suggestions concerning future research are also presented.

INTRODUCTION

Mediated Communication Technology has undergone significant development over the past decades. They tend to utilise multiple media and richer graphical interfaces to excite and engage the user. Recently, new forms of communication and technology are emerging such as virtual reality display function, 3D graphics, video, interface avatars, online chat, and recommendation tools (Zhao & Dholakia, 2009). One key advantage of these Web 2.0 interactive technologies is that they provide users with a higher level of telepresence (or presence) within their virtual environment (Siriaraya & Ang, 2012). This heightened level of telepresence could potentially result in a more satisfying and immersive experience. This experience allows users to perceive an augmented sense of flow; a state of total concentration and enjoyment (Jahn, Drengner, & Furchheim, 2013; Koufaris, 2002; Novak, Hoffman & Yung, 2000; Wang, Baker, Wagner, & Wakefield, 2007).

Practitioners and academics alike have recognised telepresence and flow as a key attribute of the user interaction experience with new media (Mollen & Wilson, 2010; Tikkanen, Hietanen,
Henttonen, & Rokka, 2009; Wang, Yang, & Hsu, 2013), making these environments valuable as tools for use in purposes such as educational, entertainment, and e-commerce activity. Despite the growing importance of these new media and their adoption, the special characteristics of virtual worlds and their impact on user behaviour needs to be further explored (Domina, Lee, & MaGillivray, 2012; Kober & Neuper, 2013; Rose, Clark, Samouel, & Hair, 2012; Tikkanen et al., 2009).

The objective of this chapter is to review the flow theory, the telepresence concept and their interrelationship with the online behaviour. We apply this framework to Web stores. Hence, this research empirically investigates the impact of telepresence and flow state experienced during online shopping, on e-commerce Websites visitor’s behaviour. Understanding factors that influence use of a virtual world for shopping will help e-retailers create compelling virtual environments and develop better marketing strategies to enhance the consumer shopping experience in the virtual stores, while positively influencing purchase and return intentions.

The chapter is organised as follows. We first review the literature on flow and telepresence and their impact on the online consumer’s behaviour. Next, we summarise the theoretical foundations of relationships between the multiple conceptual models’ constructs and develop our hypotheses. The empirical study’s methodology is described and the results are presented on the observed relationships. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the findings and suggestions for further research.

OVERVIEW OF CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Flow Experience

Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 1990) developed a theory of flow: “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 4). According to Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 1990), in this dynamic state, individual’s attention is fully concentrated on the task at hand, elevating cognitive processing capacity beyond normal level and making intellectual performance easier and more pleasant.

This cognitive state has been characterised as an “optimal experience” that is “intrinsically enjoyable” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Flow occurs when someone is participating in an activity for its own sake. The experience stands out as being exceptional compared with activities in everyday life (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). In flow, the persons are fully absorbed in what they are doing, feel motivated, happy, and cognitively efficient (Särkelä, Takatalo, May, Laakso, & Nyman 2009), and they are intrinsically motivated to repeat the activity continually (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988).

While flow does refer to a specific state, it is a continuous variable in that different levels of flow can occur, ranging from none to an intense (or complete) state (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). The components of such intrinsically rewarding flow experiences are a clear goal, balance between the challenge and the skills required to meet it, the feeling of full control over the activity, immediate and efficient feedback, concentration and focus, loss of self-consciousness, loss of a sense of time, and an activity that becomes autotelic (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

While there is still some debate, inconsistencies and discrepancies concerning the definition of flow, it is widely accepted that the balance between skills and challenges, and a sufficient level of control and playfulness, are the main antecedents of flow (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Novak et al., 2000; Särkelä et al., 2009).

The flow is linked to behaviour. Flow experience may enhance increased learning, increased perceived behavioural control, increased exploratory and participatory behaviour, and positive subjective experiences (Hoffman & Novak, 1996).
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