



Enhancing Brand Loyalty through Brand Experience: Application of Online Flow Theory

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Introduction

Flow, “the state in which people are so involved in an activity” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991, p. 4), occurs only when formidable challenge is manageable by a person’s skills. Because navigational skill and challenge influence online flow (Novak et al., 2000), experiencing flow during online shopping may be determined by the level of a consumer’s skill and challenge related to the online task. Brand experience refers to cumulative consumer experiences in interacting with brand-related stimuli (Brakus et al., 2009). Considering that a brand’s Website is a brand-related stimulus affecting brand experience, online flow on the brand’s Website is expected to contribute to the consumer’s overall brand experience. Furthermore, brand experience is thought to enhance brand loyalty (Biedenbach & Marell, 2010) or a consumer’s belief in the priority of a brand over other brands and subsequent behavioral intentions (Oliver, 1999). Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine how consumers’ online shopping skill and perceived challenge related to a given shopping task on an apparel brand’s Website lead to their online flow, brand experience, and brand loyalty. Specifically, this study tested a positive influence of skill on online flow (H1), a moderating effect of perceived challenge for the relationship between skill and online flow (H2), a positive influence of online flow on brand experience (H3), which in turn positively influences brand loyalty (H4).

Methods

Data were collected using an online survey from a national sample of 500 women, 20 to 34 years old. Respondents performed a given online browsing task on a brand’s Website randomly assigned to them among eight brand websites selected through content analysis of top vertically-integrated apparel brands. Then, they completed a questionnaire which included measures of skill and challenge, which were developed by the researchers, as well as measures of online flow, brand experience, and brand loyalty, which were adapted from existing scales. Construct validity of all multi-item measures was assessed before testing hypotheses through exploratory factor analysis (EFA), followed by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Convergent validity was established by the average variance extracted method, and discriminant validity was confirmed through two approaches: factor correlation confidence intervals and chi-square

difference tests. Cronbach's alphas verified measurement reliability. Single-group structural equation modeling (SEM) with maximum likelihood estimation was conducted to test all hypotheses but H2. H2 was tested using multiple-group CFA with the high and low challenge groups created by participants' perceived challenge scores.

Results

Based on the results from SEM analysis, the more skillful the consumers, the more likely they were to reach online flow on their assigned brand's Website ($\beta = .544, p < .001$), supporting H1. Further, the relationship between skill and online flow was stronger for consumers who perceived high challenge about the given shopping task ($\rho = .756, p < .001$) than for those perceiving low challenge ($\rho = .498, p < .001$), supporting H2. This result supports the flow theory that flow occurs when high skill is matched with high challenge. Further, online flow positively influenced overall brand experience ($\beta = .569, p < .001$), which in turn positively influenced brand loyalty ($\beta = .803, p < .001$), supporting H3 and H4, respectively.

Discussion & Implications

The findings shed light on flow theory in the context of shopping on a brand's Website by demonstrating that skill and challenge are critical determinants of online flow. Further results reveal that experiencing flow indirectly enhances brand loyalty by improving consumers' brand experience. Findings of this study can aid marketers and brand managers in achieving their marketing goal of enhancing brand experience and brand loyalty. Using a national sample allows findings of this study to be generalizable to a large population of female consumers, although the exclusion of men in the sample limits the applicability of the findings to male consumers. This study used specific apparel brand Websites and shopping task, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other products and shopping task contexts. Future research is recommended to address the online flow phenomenon and its relevance to brand experience and loyalty using different product categories and shopping tasks and a male sample.

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