Toward an Understanding of Consumer Experience on the Internet: Implications for Website Design

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Abstract

The Internet is a fast growing medium that is quickly becoming a hub of communication, entertainment, and commerce. As the Internet’s importance grows, marketers are eager to understand the medium in order to use it effectively to promote exchanges. First, the paper reviews the flow construct as a means to describe online consumer behavior. The author proposes a new paradigm for looking at the Internet by comparing the Internet to both traditional ways of communicating information and marketplace mechanisms, which are traditional means used to perform marketing functions. The scheme presented uses criteria commonly found in communications literature and criteria developed specifically for this comparison. Thus, the paper opens a new line of thought by recognizing that the Internet is not only a form of media and a method of communication, but a marketplace instrument in itself. The comparison exercises show that the Internet shares many similarities with marketplace mechanisms, and validates the need to use a broad perspective when thinking about the Internet. Also, the comparison exercise helps demonstrate what characteristics of the Internet facilitate the flow state, and offers suggestions for optimal website design.

This paper examines established principles and builds new paradigms in attempting to understand the Internet. First, it discusses the flow construct, which has been proposed by Hoffman and Novak as a means of describing online consumer behavior. [7] The flow construct is useful to marketers because consumers in flow report a rich, fulfilling experience which could be harnessed through marketing activities.

This paper then aims to build Internet understanding by constructing a new paradigm for thinking about the medium. The paper recognizes the need to look at the Internet from angles that cross academic boundaries, embracing the multi-activity nature of the medium. The thinking here is new because it considers traditional ways of both communicating information and marketing goods and services in order to create a rich environment to facilitate understanding of the Internet. The paper is opening a new line of thought by recognizing that the Internet is not only a form of media and a method of communication, but also a marketplace instrument in itself. Thus, this comparisons in this paper build a foundation for future insight while expanding upon past work that shows the Internet’s characteristics. Comparison schemes in the paper help isolate which fundamental characteristics of the Internet potentially allow it to facilitate the flow experience.

The comparisons presented here are truly speculative in nature. Upon examining the comparisons presented here, construct your own and compare them with what is presented in the paper. The new way of thinking is presented not with the hope of proving the absolute validity of the comparisons presented here, but to stimulate broad discussion on the types of questions scholars should consider when thinking about the Internet.

The flow construct

The flow construct characterizes an internal state that people experience when they fully utilize and extend their capabilities. Flow is a process that leads to optimal experience. Csikszentmihalyi and Moneta write that flow is “a psychological state in which an individual feels cognitively efficient, motivated, and happy”. [10] In the flow state, people “shift into a common mode of experience when they become absorbed in their activity.” [4] Flow is an internal state that results from an interaction with an external environment.

Hoffman and Novak have introduced the concept of flow as a means of explaining consumer behavior in hypermedia computer-mediated environments such as the World Wide Web. [7] They operationalize the flow state as consisting of “a seamless sequence of responses that are facilitated by interactivity with the environment, intrinsically enjoyable, accompanied by a loss of self consciousness, and self reinforcing.” [7] Hoffman and Novak point out that the effects of flow, such as increased learning and positive affect, are of interest to marketers;
accordingly, “the marketing objective during the trial of an online environment should be directed toward providing flow opportunities.” [11] Support for Hoffman and Novak’s claims has been garnered from empirical research. [2, 3]

The descriptors of flow can further be broken down into three categories: antecedents of flow, experiences of flow, and effects of flow. In order for flow to occur, the following antecedents must be present in the environment. The participant must have a clear perception of goals, the environment must offer immediate feedback to the participant, and the participant’s perceived skills to complete the task must be roughly equivalent to the challenges present in the environment.

The experiences of the flow state can be described by three factors. A person in flow experiences a merging of action and awareness, where one maintains control over but loses awareness of the actions of the body. Also, when in the flow state one focuses his or her concentration solely on the stimulus associated with the flow activity. Finally, the sense of perceived control over the environment increases when the participant is in flow.

Those who experience flow describe several effects related to the flow state. When in the flow state, the following effects are often described by participants: a loss of self consciousness, a sense of time distortion, and an autotelic experience, which is when the experience itself acts as a primary intrinsic reward. For example, rock climbing may be considered an autotelic experience in that the reward is not only the reaching of an ultimate destination (the summit of a mountain) but the journey (the climbing process) itself. An experience can be autotelic even if extensive external rewards are present. Surgeons are highly paid for their work; however, many surgeons describe the experience of performing surgery to be more rewarding than payment for their services. Additionally, other outcomes of flow are positive affect, increased time spent in an activity, and increased learning. [3, 4]

In order to reach the flow state a person must judge his/her ability to perform an activity to be relatively equal to the challenges he or she associates with that activity. Two points are very important here. First, the perceptions of skills and challenges are from the perspective of the individual, and these perceptions can change over time. Secondly, the overall level of perceived skill and challenge must be above a threshold of the level of skills utilized and challenges present in performing everyday activities. This insight leads to a four-channel model of flow (See Figure 1). Only when skills and challenges are congruent and above a critical threshold can flow exist. Empirical research has shown the four-channel model of flow to be an effective depiction of the results of various skill challenge combinations. [5, 8]

![Figure 1: Four channel model of flow](image)

Consumers in flow have more compelling, engaging experiences than those not in flow. Thus, marketers who understand how to build an online experience that facilitates flow will be able to delight consumers by delivering a superior experience. Hoffman and Novak report that consumers in flow may be more likely to engage in purchase behavior. [11] The key to understanding how to design this environment is discovering what attributes of the web allow it to enable flow. The comparison exercises that follow attempt to do this by discovering the Internet’s nature as a medium.

The Internet and comparative studies

As the Internet has rapidly grown into a legitimate medium, scholars have attempted to gain an understanding of it through comparative studies. Basically, two comparative methods have been used in this pursuit: comparing the Internet to “traditional media” and comparing the Internet to other communicative devices. Jonathan Steuer classified the Internet, traditional media, communicative devices such as answering machines, and new media such as interactive TV on their ability to achieve telepresence, where telepresence is “the extent to which one feels present in a mediated environment.” [14] Hoffman and Novak compared 35 different forms of mass media, interactive media, interpersonal communication, and computer-mediated communication devices on seven objective dimensions, including interactivity, communication model and content, media feedback symmetry, and temporal synchronicity. Essentially, these works attempt to develop new insights on media such as the Internet through a comparison with what academia already knows about traditional communication media and interpersonal communication.

During this beginning period of understanding the Internet as a medium, care must be taken to avoid being too narrow when thinking about the Internet. Rogers
writes that in the beginning period of understanding and adopting a new technology, innovators basically do what they are used to doing and apply that knowledge to the emerging technology. [3] Also, the Internet is more than just a communication medium; it is used for a variety of purposes. [2] Many people are on the Internet for purposes that are mainly communicative in nature, such as email, chat, and posting to bulletins and newsgroups. However, a large amount of web activity cannot be explained by communication needs alone: 80% are online to conduct research, 33.7% for game playing, and 17.8% to shop. [6]

This paper creates innovative comparative methods for a better understanding of the Internet. The following three principles guide thinking in this matter. First, the goal is to develop comparisons that not only break from traditional thinking, but are also of interest to marketers. Second, the work must embrace the multy-activity nature of the Internet. Finally, the importance of traditional media as a portion of this comparison are recognized; therefore, traditional communication media are also used in the discussion.

The guiding principle of a marketing perspective invites consideration of traditional marketplace mechanisms, which are currently used to perform functions that are important to marketers. Marketplace mechanisms are considered in addition to traditional communication mediums in order to provide a broader perspective and help build a new paradigm. The specific marketplace mechanisms chosen are:

- **Shopping mall.** This mechanism was chosen because of its rich environment and its importance in the contemporary marketplace.
- **Open-air market.** This mechanism was chosen because of its rich environment and the fact that it has relatively low barriers to entry, similar to the Internet. Examples of an open-air market are a county fair, a flea market, and an outdoor produce market.
- **Direct mail.** This mechanism was chosen because of its importance in the marketplace and the potential to customize the message to individual consumers, unlike mass marketplace mechanisms such as those above. [7]
- **Professional salesperson interaction.** This mechanism refers to a consumer talking to a salesman about a high involvement, enduring product such as an automobile, appliance, or musical instrument. It does not refer to an interaction with any store employee. This was chosen due to the uniqueness of each salesperson-consumer interaction, the intimacy and richness of the interaction, and the high level of product knowledge present with the salesperson.

**Comparison exercises**

The comparison exercises presented here have two goals. First, they attempt to show that the Internet shares similarities and differences with both marketplace mechanisms and communication media, thus validating the new paradigm. Second, the authors hope to identify characteristics of the Internet that enable the flow experience.

The following assumptions help define the realm in which this comparison takes place. First, the perspective of analysis is from the consumer who uses these media. Given a situation such as a pre-purchase search for a product, how would a consumer evaluate well-executed examples of the various choices listed in this paper? Second, the media and non-media options are compared as they exist today. This rule is necessary given the ambiguity over what these mediums may look like in the future. Using a present-day timeframe makes it easier to understand and discuss the comparisons being made. Finally, it is recognized that within each medium being compared, variations exist as to purpose and design of the communication. Therefore, the figures that are presented display comparisons as a range on a scale rather than an absolute point to help account for variations in purpose and design.

Figures 2 through 6 represent classifications of the Internet, marketplace mechanisms, and traditional media based on criteria proposed by Rogers. [13] Two forms of communication media (face-to-face interpersonal communication and mass media-TV, from Rogers’ work), four marketplace mechanisms (direct mail, an open air market, a professional salesperson interaction, and the shopping mall), and the Internet are compared. Five comparison criteria are borrowed from Rogers’ work: communication model, source knowledge of audience, segmentation, level of feedback, and control of communication.

**Communication models**

Figure 2 shows the differing communication models utilized by the Internet, other forms of media, and marketplace mechanisms. This comparison is from the perspective of the receiver (consumer); therefore, the models shown here may differ from what is commonly found in the communication literature. For example, television is not seen as simply a one-to-many communication approach, as denoted by the size of the “television” circle and its position in the figure. When thinking of television, the receiver of the message does not contemplate only a one channel universe. Instead, there are several available television channels which are, essence, competing for the viewer’s attention. Therefore, television is slightly broader than a one-to-many communication model. This same logic applies to a...
modern shopping mall and open air market. For instance, the “senders” in a mall are actually each store. Direct mail can vary from a one-to-few to a one-to-many medium, depending on the effort that has been made to customize the message to the individual receiver. A professional salesperson interaction is an form of interpersonal communication, thus a one-to-one or one-to-few model exists. Finally, the Internet operates using a many to many model, as many consumers are able to communicate not only with each other, but with the many websites that exist. [7]

Direct mail varies greatly on the dimension of source knowledge of the receiver. Some direct mail is simply sent in mass quantities with rudimentary knowledge of the receivers; for example, coupon mailings which are simply mailed to every college student on a campus. However, other forms of direct mail are formed based on extensive knowledge of a specific receiver. The Internet varies much like direct mail. Some sites have immense knowledge of their receivers, as users register and offer personal information in order to use the site. Other sites have very little knowledge of their receivers. Finally, the professional salesperson interaction features the highest source knowledge of the receiver, as the salesperson is able to interact with the customer and learn specific facts about the person and his/her product needs.

Segmentation

Analyzing the segmentation criteria shows the demassification of a medium, where Rogers defines demassification as the extent to which a special message can be exchanged with each individual in an audience. [12] A clear continuum exists (Figure 4: Segmentation), with the professional salesperson interaction at one pole (very demassified) as a salesperson tailors his/her message to each customer depending on their particular needs. (Demassification can also be thought of as personalization of a message)

The Internet and another marketplace mechanism, direct mail, are slightly demassified in that they can send slightly different messages to different users. For example, direct mail marketers use their knowledge about the receiver to tailor sales offerings based on past purchases. Internet sites often use the knowledge they have about the receivers to display different banner advertisements to different people. A wide range of demassification exists in the execution of direct mail and the Internet, as some marketers do not take advantage of the opportunity to tailor the message.

On the other end of the spectrum, print media and television are massified, as those who watch a particular TV program or read a magazine article are all receiving
the same message from the sender. A shopping mall is also relatively massified; however, it is placed to the right of print media and television on the continuum because store employees and store direct marketing programs may help to demassify consumer experiences within the store.

The Internet is similar to interpersonal communication in that it features the opportunity for immediate feedback. Internet webmasters can track users as they navigate a website, thus gathering important real-time information about the consumer experience. Also, the Internet is a rich enough medium that a website can prompt a consumer for information. This is an active feedback mechanism that is possible within the medium; in addition, tracking navigation allows feedback to be received without any additional effort by the receiver of the message.

The open air market is also similar to the Internet in that it features immediate feedback of varying quantity. Feedback in a shopping mall is slightly less immediate. While one can give feedback in a marketplace mechanism quickly by, for example, talking to a store employee, that employee often has to relay the feedback to a supervisor such as a store manager, thus reducing the immediacy of feedback. Also, many stores receive delayed feedback from items such as satisfaction surveys.

Control of communication flow

Finally, the “control of communication flow” criteria, displayed in Figure 6, is used to measure the extent to whether either the sender or receiver influences the course of the communication. The sender of the message mostly dominates the communication flow in television, print media, and direct mail. The user has little ability to intervene and change the flow of communication; usually his/her only option is to “opt out” of the communication by not watching a TV program or reading the direct mailing.

Either the sender or receiver can control the communication flow in a professional salesperson interaction. For example, a salesperson may control the communication flow in circumstances where the consumer has little knowledge about the product he/she is interested in, but a knowledgeable consumer may control the dialogue with the salesperson by asking specific product-related questions.

Finally, the receiver has significant control over the communication flow in the open air market and shopping mall environments. While everyone visiting a certain store hears the same music and sees the same items for sale, each receiver can explore the environment at will, thus partially controlling the communication flow. The Internet also has a high user control of the communication flow, since he/she can have a significant effect on the communication through navigational choices such as clicking on links. In both of these environments, the user’s perception of control of his/her experience is very important.

Rogers’ criteria are a good starting point when comparing the Internet to not only traditional communication mediums but marketplace mechanisms as
well. However, the thought behind Rogers’ comparison is rooted in communication theory. This work thinks of the Internet as more than just a communication device, so it would be appropriate to introduce new criteria that are not rooted in communication theory. Figures 7 and 8 compare four marketplace with two forms of traditional media and the Internet. They are compared and contrasted by new constructs: the fluidity between and within subjects in the medium and the breadth and depth of scope of subjects found in the medium.

Figure 6: Control of communication flow

Fluidity

The fluidity measure in Figure 7 measures the ability of a medium to facilitate easy movement within its own context. In this case, fluidity is considered within the context of subject matter. Important elements of fluidity are that the receiver be able to obtain additional information within the medium, that he/she receives a complete communication after moving within the medium, and that the movement not be extremely difficult. An aesthetically pleasing, graceful transition from one particular communication to another is not an element of fluidity. Easy movement within the same general category (ie looking at different backpacking tents) is classified under “fluidity within a subject” while movement from one category to a different category (ie computers to auto parts) is classified under “fluidity between subjects.” Fluidity within subjects is shown on the y axis of Figure 7, and fluidity between subjects is displayed on the x axis.

The Internet, a professional salesperson interaction, a shopping mall, and an open air market all feature high fluidity within subjects. The Internet allows users to explore related subject matter through the use of links to other websites. For example, amazon.com offers several links that enable a consumer interested in buying a book to examine other books about similar subjects, or search for other books related to a particular book.

The other three marketplace mechanisms are “real-life” environments; therefore, fluidity within subjects is easily facilitated by the environment. A consumer can converse with a salesperson about the various features of a car, and ask the salesperson to compare those features with other cars the consumer is interested in. Similarly, a consumer can compare similar items in other marketplace environments. Department stores in malls are organized into various departments (cookware, linens, etc) to make fluidity within subjects possible. Consumers also experience within between subjects at open-air markets such as a farmer’s market, where a consumer can compare two tomatoes at one farmer’s stand, and even browse other stands for the same purpose.

Television, print media, and direct mailings feature less fluidity within subjects than the mediums described above. While a TV program is often very fluid (flows easily) from beginning to end, this is not the fluidity being compared here. Television lacks fluidity within subjects because it cannot offer avenues within the medium for a user to acquire additional information, since a television communication is linear in nature. A user could switch from one TV program to another in an attempt to learn more about a specific game, but the other program may already be in progress, thus disrupting fluidity. Print media and direct mailing can overcome the “additional information” stumbling block by offering sidebars with additional information alongside the main text, and several articles about the same subject, so their circles are higher than television’s.

Figure 7: A comparison of fluidity

The Internet has high fluidity between subjects in addition to high fluidity within subjects. Web surfers can move from a site with information about one subject to another site about a different subject either through the use of a search engine or by typing in a URL (website address) stored in the consumer’s or computer’s memory. The shopping mall and open air market share similar fluidity in this regard, as a consumer either walks to a different store that he/she knows from memory or uses an aid such as a map (or another person) to find a store.
The professional salesperson interaction mechanism has little fluidity between subjects. The salesperson circle in Figure 7 is an oblong one, as the dynamics of a conversation can provide fluidity between subjects. However, consumers do not expect salespeople to provide fluidity between subjects. For example, an insurance salesperson is not likely to provide a customer information about fine food and wine, except as a pleasantry.

Direct mail and print media also have ovals in roughly in the middle of Figure 7. The ovals are wide on the x axis to recognize the variability in the content of these mediums. For example, movement between subjects in a variety catalog is relatively easy. However, movement from one specialty catalog to another is more difficult, and a consumer incurs additional search costs. The same phenomenon is present in other print media such as magazines.

Finally, television lacks fluidity between subjects. Again, the characteristics of the television communication prevent one from easily moving between subjects, since the television program will likely be in progress when it is found by the person, therefore preventing easy fluidity as the person has to “jump in” in the middle of the program.

Scope

Scope refers to the range or extent of information available within a medium. The comparison in Figure 8 operationalizes scope in two ways: breadth and depth. Breadth of scope compares the range of subject matter easily accessible within the medium, while depth of scope refers to the quantity of information about a particular available subject. Quantity can be thought of in terms of the amount of data presented, the richness of the information, and the sensory/emotional content presented.

The World Wide Web has an extremely high breadth and depth of scope. A high quantity of websites can be found for a variety of very different goods and services. Also, research databases, government institutions, and community groups (organizations that are not active in a commerce framework) are also present on the Internet. High depth in scope is also present, as a number of websites are available for any given topic. Also, depth is present as the Internet has the ability to present richer information through the use of video and sound. This is similar to television, but the richness of video and sound cannot compare to a live interaction. Also, the Internet is able to convey considerable quantity and depth of data, much like print media.

Print media and direct mail have the potential for high breadth, as one can assemble a collection of printed media or direct mail to cover almost any conceivable subject. However, physical barriers must be overcome through search in order to assemble this collection, such as searching a library for resources or calling companies for magazine subscriptions. Depth in these mediums is variable due to the purposes behind the message. For example, some direct mail offers, such as coupons, do not feature depth by design—the objective is to grab the consumer’s attention with one or two quick points. Print media such as magazines usually feature a decent level of depth in the subjects they cover, although it must be noted that variability exists between different magazines. Overall depth of scope in these mediums is hampered by the inability to use video, which conveys a great deal of sensory information. Print media and direct mail have a potential for both breadth and depth.

Television features variable breadth and depth of scope. The limited number of channels received by a typical US household currently limits the breadth of scope. Depth of scope varies upon the programming goals. A 30 minute infomercial can achieve more depth of scope in conveying product information than a 30 second commercial. The overall level of depth of “hard data” information communicated in television usually falls below printed media, but the presence of video allows depth of scope to rival print media.

**Figure 8: A comparison of scope**

Of the marketplace mechanisms being compared, the open air market has the highest possible combination of breadth and depth of scope. For example, a county fair often features displays of livestock, a gallery of art projects done by 4-H members, a wide variety of foods, booths from area organizations such as political parties, and displays from many area merchants such as car dealers, all in one “market.” The open air market conveys a great deal of sensory information, such as the smell of food being cooked, etc. Perhaps the open air markets and the Internet are similar in that low barriers to entry and
the diverse crowd they attract help the mediums achieve high breadth and depth of scope.

The sales experience features extensive depth of scope, as a proficient salesperson has the knowledge to talk about any specific feature of the product being sold. Breadth of scope is not necessarily present in an interaction with a salesperson. The consumer is usually concerned mostly in talking about the product or service at hand. These comparisons are done from a consumer perspective, and a consumer simply doesn’t look to salespeople for an extensive breadth of knowledge. While many salespeople may be able to talk about a breadth of subjects, it is not required by the consumer.

Finally, a shopping mall features extensive depth of scope. For example, several clothing stores can be found in an average mall. Also, the environment present within stores is very rich, and conveys sensory input that excites virtually all of the senses. However, breadth of scope is limited. For example, a shopping mall has less breadth of scope than the Internet due to the many non-commercial websites present on the medium, such as college websites, research databases, community organizations, and governmental institutions.

Analysis

This comparison schemes show that the Internet shares similarities and differences with each of the communication media and marketplace mechanisms studied. This finding demonstrates the need to use a broad perspective when thinking about the medium.

Furthermore, differences between the Internet and other comparison subjects show characteristics of the medium that may be harnessed to facilitate flow. Earlier, it was mentioned that in order for the flow experience to occur, the consumer’s perceived skills must equal perceived challenges and clear feedback must be present in the environment. The communication exercises show how the Internet’s characteristics can facilitate these antecedents of the flow state.

A consumer can only achieve flow if the perceived skills to perform an activity equal the perceived challenges. The comparison exercises show how an Internet site can act upon customer feedback to modify the consumer’s experience in real-time, similar to an ideal salesperson interaction. The ability of the Internet and the consumer to modify the communicated message in real-time creates the possibility of designing an environment and modifying it for individual consumers to a level that suits their perceived skills and challenges.

Also, the depth and breadth of scope of the Internet create an environment that possesses challenges, and requires a particular level of skills from consumers for them to be successful in the environment. Also, depth and breadth of scope create challenges that are dynamic, and not easily exhausted. Due to the scope of the Internet, the skills and challenges necessary to be successful in the environment can fall above the “critical threshold” in Figure 1, thus making a flow experience possible.

Clear feedback also must be provided in order for one to reach the flow state. Figure 5 shows that the characteristics of the Internet allow feedback to occur within the medium. This data can then be acted on to generate the user experience. The fluidity comparison shows the Internet’s proficiency in allowing fluid movement within and between subjects. This fluidity creates a comfortable environment for the feedback to take place and the consumer experience to be modified.

Limitations

These comparisons are intended to facilitate easy understanding by using marketplace mechanisms and communication media with which academics and practitioners are familiar. This level of understanding is useful in making a case for a broadening of perspective when thinking of the Internet. However, it also leads to several limitations of the comparisons themselves. For example, the constraint of only thinking about communication media and marketplace mechanisms in their present day reduces the applicability of findings since both communication media and marketplace mechanisms are changing at a rapid pace. While the tools of communication and marketing will change rapidly in the future, the underlying issues discussed here will still be relevant. Also, the comparisons are subjective. The large range of possibilities within any one medium being compared enhances this subjectivity. For instance, huge variations exist in different forms of direct mail. A great deal of this variation is caused by the goals of the particular direct mail piece, thus making the conception of “direct mail” as a whole very broad. Finally, access speed of the Internet was not considered when comparing it to other mechanisms. This was done due to the high variability of Internet access speeds that currently exist.

Implications for website design

Marketers can use the comparison exercises presented here to develop strategies for website design that result in a website facilitating the flow state. This involves a heavy customer focus, centered on an assessment of the consumer’s individual skill-challenge level in creating an experience specific for that user. The optimal website experience will vary from user to user, depending on his/her perceived skills and challenges not only with using the Internet, and in dealing with the task at hand, such as a product search. This results in the creation of a skill matrix, which measures the product and Internet skills of a consumer (Figure 9). Each consumer requires a
different experience to reach flow, based on his/her place in this matrix.

The feedback received from a consumer makes his/her placement on this matrix possible. This feedback could be received in several ways. Consumers could answer a brief questionnaire about their Internet/computer skills and product knowledge, and be classified in the matrix and given a website experience based on those responses. Or, a consumer’s position on the matrix could be inferred by following his/her clickstream. However, these scenarios are unlikely in today’s world.

A better approach would be to design a website experience that consumers could manipulate to suit their own level of skills and challenges. For example, research in computer sciences focuses on visual querying systems, which are representations of information that people can manipulate in different ways based on their skill level with computers and their product knowledge needs. To someone with little computer skill, this system may appear as a simple chart. A consumer with greater computer skills/product knowledge would be able to manipulate this system to produce more in-depth information. The ideal system creates neither anxiety nor boredom in any type of user. [9] By design, the system is instantly customizable by each user depending on his/her skills and needs.

Website designers should take note of the possible role of scope of the Internet in facilitating the flow state. Several activities performed on the web are of interest to marketers and also autotelic. For example, planning a vacation is of interest to those selling accommodations, airline tickets, sightseeing packages, etc. However, the experience of planning a vacation may be intrinsically rewarding for the traveler. The wide variety of information on the World Wide Web about travelling could easily make a flow experience possible. Website designers must make intelligent decisions about incorporating the scope of the Internet into their strategies to encourage flow in ways that benefit their business. In what way can websites be linked that would facilitate information gathering and lead to a flow state? A consumer may not reach flow by simply buying airline tickets on a website; however, the website could include intelligent links to other tourist information at the destination site of the traveler. The consumer could reach the flow state while planning a vacation using these links, and then return to the original website to purchase the other elements needed to plan his itinerary. In this example, facilitating the flow experience makes purchasing a product an autotelic activity. More products were purchased due to the nature of that experience.

Concluding remarks

As the World Wide Web develops and changes, marketers who are able to understand the nature of the medium will have a clear advantage in building relationships with customers in the next century. The flow construct and a broad perspective in thinking of the new media will continue to be valuable tools to marketers as they build businesses on this medium. The authors have attempted to consider the internet from a very broad perspective using concepts familiar to marketers. Researchers should strive to develop similar new paradigms from broad yet different perspectives to help marketers further understand the medium.
References


