Exploring the relationship between information satisfaction and flow in the context of consumers' online search

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ABSTRACT

The study investigate the subjective aspect of consumers' online information satisfaction within the frame of flow experience in two processes: ongoing and goal-directed information search. A total of 391 samples for ongoing processes and 415 samples for goal-directed processes obtained in this study were analyzed with structural equation modelling. Flow is conceptualized in the study with Enjoyment, Time Distortion, Curiosity, Perceived Control and Concentration dimensions. The results indicate that flow experience has significant effects on consumers' online information satisfaction in both processes. Enjoyment, Time distortion, Curiosity and Perceived Control dimensions affect online information satisfaction positively in the ongoing process, which is largely carried out with hedonic urges. In addition to Enjoyment, Perceived Control and Concentration dimensions have positive and Curiosity dimension has negative effects in goal-directed online information satisfaction, which is largely carried out with utilitarian urges. In addition, the results indicate that Enjoyment, Time distortion and Curiosity dimensions have significantly stronger positive effects on online information satisfaction in ongoing search processes compared with goal-directed processes, and Concentration dimension has significantly stronger positive effects on online information satisfaction in goal-directed search processes compared with ongoing processes.

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1. Introduction

Today, it is known that most consumers search the Internet concerning products or services with motivations such as low cost (Porter, 2001), the opportunity to compare among options regardless of physical boundaries (Chiang, Dholakia, & Westin, 2005) and quick-access opportunities to information concerning products (Klein & Ford, 2003). Consumers largely benefit from this information before a purchase decision when necessary (Branco, Sun, & Villas-Boas, 2015; Smith & Sivakumar, 2004). Current studies indicate that more than 50% of the users in the world look for online information and that this ratio can increase to 83% for technologically developed countries such as South Korea (Google consumerbarometer, 2014). Furthermore, approximately 1.200 billion websites are available today for users. This number increases rapidly every day (http://www.internetlivestats.com/, 2015). Those numbers clearly indicate the importance of the Internet for consumers seeking information.

In addition to those statistics, studies point out that users also consider searching for information the most important activity in the Internet environment (Bhatnagar & Ghose, 2004) and related to the information search process, information satisfaction is accepted as one of the most important determinants in the phenomenon. First of all, it is noticeable that the consumer online information satisfaction is the main determinant that terminates the related search process (Hayden, 2004). Furthermore, according to the related research, it indicates that online information satisfaction has significant effects on commitments to websites (Park & Kim, 2006), usefulness (Wixom & Todd, 2005), overall satisfaction from system (Bliemel & Hassanein, 2007), continuance intention (Limayem & Cheung, 2008), online purchase intention (Shim, Eastlick, Lotz, & Warrington, 2001; Zhou, Dai, & Zhang, 2007) and positive attitudes toward websites (Chung & Ahn, 2007; Teo & Pok, 2003). Therefore, it is evident that obtaining in-depth understanding of information satisfaction is essential. However, limited studies focusing the effect of cognitive experience that consumers

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have during the process were encountered. In spite of this, the results of the study on web search and satisfaction context indicate that the cognitive experience that individuals have obtained has significant effects on the information search process (Homburg, Koschate, & Hoyer, 2006). When the level of consumers' information satisfaction is considered as the total of both objective and subjective experiences within the process (Al-Maskari & Sanderson, 2010; Dholakia & Bagozzi, 2001; Oliver, 1993, 1997), the fact that research mostly focuses on objective variables effects yet there are limited studies on the effects of cognitive experience on online information satisfaction stands out as an important gap in the literature. It is stipulated that the flow, a subjective mental experience which consumers frequently experience during the online information searching process (Chen, Wigand, & Nilan, 1999; Rettie, 2001), has been proven to lead to satisfaction in a computer-mediated environment and has a vital importance for consumers to understand the behavior in the online environment (Novak, Hoffman, & Yung, 2000), can contribute to fill this gap.

Flow is an intrinsically motivated cognitive experience when the challenge and the skill related to the activity of individuals reach a balance (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), individual experience flow by dismissing the concept of time and concentrating on what s/he does; by having control perception in every interaction concerning the action; and by being curious about the action. Studies suggest that it is a useful phenomenon to understand consumer behavior within the subjective context in a computer-mediated environment (Bilgihan, 2016; Chen, Wigand, & Nilan, 2000). In addition to that, the results of the studies indicate that flow is a phenomenon that leads to satisfaction in a computer-mediated environment (Deng, Turner, Gehling, & Prince, 2010; Gao & Bai, 2014; Martin, Mortimer, & Andrews, 2015; O'Cass & Carlson, 2010; Rose, Clark, Samouel, & Hair, 2012; Zhou & Lu, 2011). Consumers' interaction with computer-mediated environment during the search process is seamless (Hoffman & Novak, 1996) and this seamless navigation implies that consumers likely evaluate the entire experience holistically (Dholakia & Bagozzi, 2001). Therefore, the consumers who have clicked many links, visited different websites and accessed different information during the information search process will evaluate the collected information during the related process considering the entire experience they have obtained instead of the discrete elements in the intended satisfaction process. Accordingly, it is stipulated that the flow experienced by consumer may explain the subjective aspect of online information satisfaction.

The results of the studies in the literature indicate that the consumers' information searching processes regarding the products are divided into two main groups as on-going and goal-directed referring to whether their ultimate purpose is to purchase or not. Although such a dichotomy is simple, it is theoretically and empirically comprehensive (Wu, Wang, Wei, & Yeh, 2015). Since the hedonic values of the consumer's fundamental motivation are dominant in the going process, whereas utilitarian values stand out to be dominant for the consumer in the goal-directed process (Janiszewski, 1998; Moe, 2003; Novak, Hoffman, & Duhachek, 2003; Smith & Sivakumar, 2004). The results of the studies in the literature indicate that this hedonic and utilitarian motivation-based difference has significant moderating effects on satisfaction during information searching processes (Dickinger & Stangl, 2012; Mariarcher, Ring, & Schneider, 2013; Wu et al., 2015). Therefore, as also stated by Novak et al. (2003), it is necessary to consider the effect of hedonic and utilitarian motivation within the scope of this fundamental difference while approaching the phenomenon regarding the information searching processes of the consumer. A similar discussion is also taking place in the flow theory literature. The researchers point out that the main reason for the contradicting results regarding the effects of the flow in the

literature is that hedonic value and utilitarian value has dominance in different sub-dimensions and this domination moderates the sub-dimensions effects of the flow vary in hedonic and utilitarian processes (Senecal, Gharbi, & Nantel, 2002). Therefore, it is obvious that the studies that examine the effects of the flow should consider the hedonic and the utilitarian elements regarding the context. However, little prior research has investigated how to differentiate the effects of the sub-dimensions of the flow within the dominance of hedonic and utilitarian patterns (Bridges & Florsheim, 2008; Deng et al., 2010; Huang, 2003; Lowry, Gaskin, Twyman, Hammer, & Roberts, 2012; Senecal et al., 2002). Furthermore, none of these limited numbers of studies have tested the effects of the flow on its sub-dimensions comparatively within two different processes in which hedonic and utilitarian motivation vary. It is obvious that more research is needed in the literature on this aspect in order to reach more accurate information regarding the subject matter. To address this gap, our study has stipulated that the effects of the flow of information satisfaction in terms of sub dimensions would vary during the on-going and goal-directed process and the hypotheses on these differences have been tested separately.

In the light of the explanations above, the aim of this research is to explore the effects of flow experience on consumers' satisfaction with the information concerning products that they obtained in on-going and goal-directed online information search processes. With purpose, the study is considered to provide a theoretical contribution in two aspects: First, it fills an important gap in the literature as the study aims to explain the cognitive aspect of the consumer's satisfaction with online information. The second contribution of the study is oriented to flow theory. It is stipulated that the study may contribute to discussions regarding the fact that the flow may have different effects in hedonic and utilitarian aspects that are approached, from a new view by handling them comparatively in two processes for the first time.

With this purpose, the first section of the study will explain the concepts concerning the subject and discuss the previous studies on this subject within the literature. This is followed by Research Model section in which arguments supporting the hypothesized relationships between Flow and Online Information Satisfaction and differentiation of those relationships between on-going and goal-directed information search processes. In the Methodology section, information will be provided about the data collection and analysis period. In the final section, the theoretical and practical contributions of the study will be discussed.

2. Concepts and theoretical background

2.1. On-going and goal-directed information search

Information searching by consumers concerning products is considered a part of consumer's total decision-making models (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004). Engel, Blackwell, and Miniard (1995) has defined information searching as "the motivated activation of knowledge stored in memory or acquisition of information from the environment". When searching for information, people tend to refer to their own experiences and memory. If no results are obtained at this phase, the individuals search for information from external sources (Bettman, 1979). In this sense, we encounter the Internet as one of the primary external sources through which the consumer searches for information (Zhang, Chen, & Wei, 2016).

On this subject, Janiszewski (1998) classified consumers as on-going (without a purchase plan) and goal-directed (with a purchase plan) in the information search process. Goal-directed consumers search to collect desirable product information, whereas exploration-oriented (on-going) consumers who have no specific targets in mind search solely to browse general product information.