



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

European Management Journal

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/emj

Work and shopping overflow – Consequences and differentiation among selected psychological and demographic characteristics

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 December 2016
Received in revised form
18 May 2017
Accepted 7 June 2017
Available online xxx

Keywords:

Work overflow
Shopping overflow
Cognitive control
Sensation seeking
Experience economy
Boundaryless career

ABSTRACT

Contemporary individuals are forced to deal with excessive stimulation, which causes an overload in the cognitive and emotional areas. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the possible factors differentiating the perceived level of work and shopping overflow experienced by individuals and consequences of these states. Two psychological variables: cognitive control and sensation seeking, are chosen as potential factors differentiating the perceived levels of overflow. We assume that individuals with high cognitive control and sensation seeking will report lower levels of both types of examined overflows. Experiencing low overflow levels may manifest in the search for additional stimuli, rather than in the desire to limit them. Two indexes of behavior connected to seeking extra stimulation are selected: one belonging to the area of consumer behavior (readiness to participate in the experience economy) and one belonging to vocational behavior (choosing a boundaryless career). The quantitative study is conducted on a sample of 297 management students who are currently employed. The research results support the relation between cognitive control and perceived level of work and shopping overflow. Individuals who can cognitively control the situation and the incoming stimuli report lower levels of overflow. No significant relationship between sensation seeking and the level of overflow is found. The demographic variables that influence the perceived overflow are age and salary for work overflow and age for shopping overflow. As far as consequences of overflow are concerned, a low level of shopping overflow is related to readiness to participate in the experience economy. However, there is no link between work overflow and preferred career pattern. The managerial implications for human resource management and marketing strategy design are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The experience of overflow, which is associated with the need to cope with excess, seems to be an inherent feature of modern societies (Löfgren, 2007). The increasing number of products, technologies, duties, social relations, and amount of information are not balanced by sufficient time to address them (Löfgren & Czarniawska, 2012). Research indicates that two-thirds of managers associate information overload with tension and reduced job satisfaction; 42% believe that information overload negatively affects their health, and another 43% state that it impairs their decision-making ability (Misra & Stokols, 2012; Sacks, McAuley, & Waddington, 1997).

At the same time, such phenomena as “the boundaryless career” and “the experience economy” have become more common. Both are connected with individuals seeking additional stimuli instead of avoiding them. The boundaryless career has been described as one in which the individual has many employers over his or her working life and prefers short-term employment to a permanent contract (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Arthur, 1994). The theory of the experience economy envisions consumers as bored with market offerings and suggests providing them additional experiences and stimuli in shopping situations (Pine & Gilmore, 1999, 2011). Do these phenomena mean that individuals who have boundaryless careers and participate in the experience economy do not experience the feeling of overflow?

In the field of overflow research, three main themes can be distinguished: the types of overflow, the factors that differentiate the levels of overflow, and the consequences of overflow. **Different types** of overflow can be recognized based on their intellectual (Dumaine, 2014) or emotional nature (Ahmad & Saud, 2016). In

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addition, diverse types of overflow can be distinguished according to the source of the stimuli. For example, [Misra and Stokols \(2012, p. 739\)](#) describe cyber-based sources of stimulation. These sources include “information transactions that are mediated by electronic technologies (e.g., computers and cell phones)” and place-based sources of stimulation, which refers to “stimulants that originate primarily from place-based settings (e.g., work places and home environments) and are not mediated by electronic technologies.” In turn, in the field of organization theory, [Solberg and Wong \(2016\)](#) analyze perceived role overload. Another differentiation can be made between overflow in private and professional life ([Misra & Stokols, 2012](#)).

Among the **factors that can be associated with different levels of overflow**, psychological factors, such as adaptive capabilities ([Solberg & Wong, 2016](#)) and consciousness ([Block, 2011](#)), have been researched. Two additional groups of possible causes are social factors connected to the development of new technologies ([Misra & Stokols, 2012](#)) and managerial factors, such as leaders' need for structure ([Solberg & Wong, 2016](#)).

Potential **consequences of overflow** have been analyzed from the social and psychological perspective ([Misra & Stokols, 2012](#)). In addition, researchers have investigated consequences in the organizational behavior context, such as the organization citizenship behavior of workers who experience overflow ([Ahmad & Saud, 2016](#)). Another stream of research has studied costs and methods of overflow prevention in multi-project management ([Dumaine, 2014](#); [Karrbom Gustavsson, 2016](#)).

For the purpose of this study, we assume that overflow can occur across different areas of the individual's functioning and be associated with different factors, depending on the source of stimuli. We operationalize overflow as a psychological term, narrowing its possible understanding to one dimension connected with the feeling of being overwhelmed. We focus on two manifestations of overflow, at the workplace and in a shopping situation, as the most common examples in contemporary society. Regarding the factors related to overflow, we concentrate on psychological factors related to the individual's physiological (i.e., temperamental) and cognitive functions. The consequences of overflow are studied indirectly by measuring the behaviors that can lead to controlling the intensity of the upcoming stream of stimuli. Among these phenomena are a boundaryless career and participation in the experience economy.

Our study develops the idea that each individual seeks the optimal intersection of overflows and underflows ([Czarniawska & Löfgren, 2013a, p. 8](#)). If the experienced level of flow is too low, individuals tend to seek additional stimuli (e.g., a boundaryless career, participation in the experience economy). If it is too high, they try to avoid stimuli. There are many negative consequences attributed to overflow, which must be controlled. These negative consequences may affect the management process, for example in the area of human resources or marketing communications. Controlling overflows may contribute to the elimination of potential sources of costs and may facilitate increasing organizational efficiency. Investigating the possible relation between perceived level of work and shopping overflow might invite the conclusion that because of the complexity of this phenomenon and because different overflow types influence one another only focusing on one area in which the individual experiences overflow might be insufficient. We also try to support with empirical evidence the idea of [McCloskey \(2012\)](#) that overflow is not new. This author demonstrates that individuals have experienced different types of overflow in all historical eras. We seek to determine if personal characteristics might be more important in experiencing overflow than external environmental factors. The study of possible factors associated with overflow that considers individual differences may also indicate the need for a different approach to employees and

customers of different age, gender or employment situation.

Previous studies on overflow are based on qualitative research and focus on describing various examples of the phenomenon and strategies for addressing it in the described context. To a limited extent, these studies take into account that overflow may have different causes and individuals may experience varying degrees of overflow ([Czarniawska & Löfgren, 2012, 2013b](#)).

In this study, we demonstrate that overflow can be the subject of quantitative research, to which end we develop measurement tools for work and shopping overflow and subject both to psychometric analysis, which constitutes the methodological aim of our study. The **research questions** that we seek to answer are as follows:

- 1) What are the physiological and cognitive factors that differentiate the perceived level of work and shopping overflow? Are they the same or different for each of these constructs?
- 2) Is there a relationship between work overflow and a boundaryless career?
- 3) Is there a relationship between shopping overflow and participation in the experience economy?
- 4) Is there a mutual relationship between work overflow and shopping overflow?

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: In Section 2, we conceptualize work and shopping overflow. In Section 3, the research hypotheses are developed. Section 4 is devoted to describing the methodology, after which the research results are reported in Section 5. The results are followed by discussion in Section 6. The conclusions, recommendations for organizations to manage overflow, limitations, and further research directions are also presented in this section.

2. Conceptualizing work and shopping overflow

We chose to examine the professional and consumer areas of overflow because most individuals today are forced to play these two roles. The opportunities to withdraw from these two fields of human activity are highly limited. Every individual is both a producer and consumer ([Bauman, 2007](#)) and must cope with the stream of stimuli that arrive simultaneously as a result of professional contacts and consumer behavior.

In the professional field, the individual may experience **work overflow**, defined as a subjective sensation of feeling an excess of information, relations, and tasks to complete in the work environment that surpasses the natural capacity of intellectual and emotional processing. The strategies that individuals use to cope with this state can cause difficulties in generating adequate reactions and decisions, which may result in reduced effectiveness. This concept has a broad scope that includes different types of stimulation in the workplace. For comparison, [Misra and Stokols \(2012\)](#) concentrate only on perceived information overload, while distinguishing cyber-based and place-based overload.

Regarding **shopping overflow**, it is assumed that the contemporary consumer is subjected to too many stimuli, which might be the cause of the overload experience. For most of human history, scarcity has been more common than excess, and the struggle to fulfill basic needs has been essential for survival ([Czarniawska & Löfgren, 2013a, p. 4](#)). However, after World War II, in Western societies and after 1989 in Poland and other post-communist countries, the overflow of goods started to be perceived as a problem, particularly from the consumer perspective ([Bauman, 2007](#); [Czubaj, 2013](#); [Ekström, 2013](#); [Scitovski, 1992](#)), e.g., in the form of “*affluenza*” ([De Graff, Wann, & Naylor, 2001](#)) and conspicuous or compulsive consumption ([Cahill, 2001](#); [Dittmar, 2005](#)). Note that on the organizational side the flow of goods delivered to the market

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