Finding Flow in Sport

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Flow is the state of full concentration and complete immersion in an activity, which is considered the ‘optimal’ experience for the epitomized positive psychological state engendered from strong momentary engagement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Kimiecik & Stein, 1992). Sport can provide ideal context to experience flow and enhance well-being (Jackson & Hanin, 2000). For example, 44% of US teenagers experience the state of flow during sporting activities reporting greater enjoyment and satisfaction (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Martin & Cutler, 2002). However, despite flow’s salience and significance in sport, there is a paucity of research on flow in sport management. In modern days, an individual’s experiential perception (i.e., the ‘experience economy’ or ‘sensory economy’) and well-being (Cohen & Fredrickson, 2009; Diener, 2009) is becoming the key concern in business industry and in everyday life (Achrol & Kotler, 2012; Pine II & Gilmore, 1998). Sport industry is no exception. It is also, if not more, critical to understand and enhance the sport consumer’s experience and well-being (Mannell, 1984). In this sense, focusing on the sport consumer's positive psychological state of flow would make valuable contribution in both theory and practices. Thus, to better understand sport consumers’ experience of flow and its effective utilization in the sport business context, the main objective of this study is to offer an overview of theoretical concept of flow and to discuss the potential benefits and needed consideration of applying flow theory into the sport business context.

Flow theory holds significant place in positive psychology whose central purpose is to build thriving individuals, families, and communities (Lopez & Snyder, 2011). Through the intense ‘momentary’ engagement of flow, positive emotions such as pleasure, fun, satisfaction, and enjoyment are engendered, which leads to happiness, self-esteem, creativity, self-actualization and skill mastery (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). Flow ‘happens’ (i.e., the occurrence cannot be manipulated) during various activities (e.g., work, drive, socializing, watching TV, doing house chores), and tends to repetitively occur among those with previous flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Jackson, 1992, 1996). According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), flow more frequently occur when there is (1) balance of challenge and skill level, (2) merger of self-awareness and action, (3) clear goals, (4) immediate feedback, (5) complete concentration, (6) feel of comfort and control, (7) free from self-consciousness, (8) time warp, and (9) ‘autotelic’ experience (i.e., focus on intrinsic motivation). Active leisure such as sport, art, music, and games are identified as one of the most optimal settings for flow (Martin & Cutler, 2002).

Through literature review and consult with experts of the content area, we identified three facets of sport management that can benefit most from better knowledge and application of flow. First, the experience of flow can be utilized as the indicator and enhancer of the consumers’ experience quality. Flow engenders positive emotion deriving satisfaction and contentment (Fredrickson, 2001), which improves experience quality perceived by the consumers (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989; Stavrout, Zervas, Karteroliotis, & Jackson, 2007). Experience of flow can be understood as a signal of a good quality experience and can be nurtured to maximize psychological benefits of the sporting experience, which is critical for consumer retention (Novak & Hoffman, 2009). In support, several studies in the business domain highlighted flow’s positive influence on consumers’ quality of shopping experience transferring into marketing outcomes (e.g., attracting consumers, diminishing price sensitivity, deriving positive attitude and behavior; Mathwick & Rigdon, 2004; Novak, Hoffman & Yung, 2000). Thus, the utilization of flow for consumer’s experience quality management can be suggested, and referring to and targeting for Csikszentmihalyi’s optimal setting of flow (1990) would be effective.

Second, the focus on flow brings consumer’s psychological well-being into attention. As previously discussed, flow engenders positive emotion (e.g., pleasure, enjoyment) leading to happiness (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). Flow also garners creativity and skill mastery leading to personal growth (Csikszentmihalyi, 1979; Jackson, 1996), which is intrinsically rewarding and fulfilling higher levels of human needs such as self-actualization and value development (Maslow, 1970; McDonald, Milne, & Hong, 2002). Through the concept of flow, positive emotion, mental health and need fulfillment—one of the key benefits of sport, art, and entertainment consumption
(Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) can be better understood and targeted. The emphasis of consumer’s well-being is especially novel and significant for its focus on the consumer’s psychological gains as a benefit beyond narrow emphasis on the corporate’s commercial gains. This approach establishes a mutually beneficial sport consumer-sport entity relationship, which is critical in the relation-oriented paradigm in sport management (Kim & Trail, 2011).

Third, the unique aspect on flow’s ‘momentary’ engagement brings novel insights. Distinctive to commonly used engagement-relevant constructs in sport management (e.g., identification, relationship quality), flow emphasizes more on the immediate, temporary and intermittent psychological state of the consumers rather than the static state (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Stein, Kimiecik, Daniels & Jackson, 1995). The importance of flow is highlighted as short-term engagements can accrue and evolve into long-term engagement with the consumers (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Flow can be treated as the foundation or facilitator of long-term engagement, considering the tendency of flow to repetitively occur among people with previous experience. Additionally, as flow occurrence is beyond manipulation but ‘happens to occur’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), the consumer’s intensely engaged condition can be acutely evaluated based on flow, eliminating the intentional or unintentional misjudgment of the consumer’s own understanding of their engagement level.

To better benefit from the advantages of applying the concept of flow into the sport business context, there are considerations to be made. First, although the salience of flow in participant sport is more intuitive and empirically supported, the frequency and influence of flow in spectator sport (especially when watching through TV) should not be overlooked and needs further investigation. Second, the unique aspects of sport should be considered in applying flow theory into the context (e.g., flow’s outcome of ‘time warp’ may differently apply as time is a critical factor in sport). Third, the difficulties in measurement need consideration as flow can be easily interrupted from data collection during the experience. Experience sampling method, interview, and questionnaires are most commonly used (Marsh & Jackson, 1999; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009), but with limitation in accurately gauging the momentary experience of flow (cf. the best measure of ‘happiness’ in experience is by tracking momentary feelings; Kahneman, 1999). Further efforts for precise measure are needed.

In summary, based on flow’s unique insights focused on experience quality, psychological well-being, and momentary engagement, applying the concept of flow into the sport business context is suggested to ‘optimize’ the consumers sporting experience and to achieve mutual prosperity for both sport organizations and consumers. Further empirical research on flow with particular focus on spectator sport, unique aspects of sport, and precise measurement is suggested.