Flow as Sports Consumer Experiences in the Sports Media: A Conceptual Model

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Previous studies have shown the role of flow in predicting consumers’ need fulfillment (Kim, Kim, & Kim, 2015), satisfaction (Shin, 2006; Woszczynski, Roth, & Segars, 2002), attitudes (Hsu & Lu, 2004; Kim, Kang, & Kim, 2014), and purchase intentions (Bridges & Florsheim, 2008; Smith & Sivakumar, 2004). Flow experiences have also been discussed in terms of individuals’ happiness and psychological well-being (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikzentmihalyi, 1991). As such, the concept of flow can be utilized to explain a plethora of sports consumer behaviors. Flow is defined as the “state in which people are so involved in an activity and experience that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost for the sheer sake of doing it” (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikzentmihalyi, 1991, p. 4). Although the concept of flow has been the subject of considerable studies in sport settings, it has been mainly applied to direct experience settings such as participative or elite sports due to the fact that individuals can experience flow when their skills and challenges are balanced. However, it has been argued that sport fans can also experience flow while watching sporting events (Jang, Kim, Lee, & Hur, 2012; Kim et al., 2015; Madrigal, 2006). Despite the significance of the concept, there are limitations to understanding the flow experience in a sports media setting because flow is an elusive construct that is difficult to define and utilize in practice (Hoffman & Novak, 2009) and existing frameworks are mostly based on direct experiences. To fill this void, this study explores the underlying characteristics that constitute sports media consumers’ flow experiences. This concept is very important as it can be utilized as a barometer and enhancer of the quality of sports media consumers’ experiences and psychological well-being. Such experiences become a foundation and catalyst for developing long-term relationships by repeatedly offering momentary engagement in optimal sporting experiences (Kim, Kim, & Kim, 2014).

The concept of flow in the context of sports media consumption can be conceptualized as unidimensional or multidimensional. The authors in the current study views the flow experience as a multidimensional construct following Hoffman and Novak’s (2009) recommendation because this 1) allows for a holistic conceptualization of flow that can be statistically tested in a structural model, and 2) permits the testing of diverse theories and existing empirical findings in regard to flow by analyzing a variety of higher-order factor structures. Previous studies have suggested several constituent dimensions of flow experience in diverse contexts. For example, Jackson and Marsh (1996) proposed nine constructs of athletes’ flow experiences. In other contexts (e.g., computers, education, management information systems, marketing, and tourism), scholars have suggested several approaches to multidimensional flow operationalization (Agarwal & Karahanna, 2000; Drengner, Gaus, & Jahn, 2008; Hoffman & Novak, 1996; Huang, 2003; Jiang & Benbasat, 2004; Lee & Yoo, 2011; Pace, 2004; Skadberg & Kimmel, 2004). While scholars agree on the multidimensional nature of flow experiences, they offer different perspectives on the constituent constructs. For instance, Jackson and Marsh (1996) consider challenge–balance skill to be a subdimension of flow, but other researchers (Hoffman & Novak, 1996; Shin, 2006; Skadberg & Kimmel, 2004) specify it as the antecedent condition of flow.

The authors suggest constituent constructs of flow experiences in the context of indirect sporting experiences (e.g., sports media consumption) based on extant literature. Our proposed model consists of six first order factors including Cognitive Absorption, Time Distortion, Telepresence, Enjoyment, Catharsis, and Interest, two second order factors including Cognitive Flow and Affective Flow, and a third order factor of Global Flow. First, Cognitive Absorption is one of the most commonly used constructs to represent flow experiences (Chou & Ting, 2003; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikzentmihalyi, 1991; Koufaris, 2002). That is, when sports media consumption forms conditions for a flow state, a sports viewer exerts maximum cognitive effort on the game he or she is watching to process all relevant information from the game. Second, Time Distortion is among the most common descriptions of flow in sports media consumption. When sports viewers watch a game, time may no longer pass normally for them (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikzentmihalyi, 1991). Typically, they feel that time passes faster than it actually does.
when the sports media consumption experience is compelling. Third, the idea of Telepresence was introduced by Hoffman and Novak (1996) to explain flow experiences. Steuer, Biocca, and Levy (1995) define telepresence as the extent to which an individual feels present in the mediated (e.g., via TV) environment (e.g., a stadium or arena), which could be temporally or spatially distant. That is, sports viewers lose self-awareness as a social actor in the immediate physical environment (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002) and feels a sense of being in the venue of the mediated environment. Taken together, this study argues that these cognitive factors including Cognitive Absorption, Time Distortion, and Telepresence constitute a second-order factor (i.e., Cognitive Flow) of Global Flow.

Based on the four-channel model of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Ellis, Voelkl, & Morris, 1994), four psychological states (i.e., Flow, Anxiety, Relaxation, and Apathy) could occur depending on an individual’s skill and the level of challenge of a task. Enjoyment is one of the most powerful indicators of a flow state. For example, sports viewers could feel enjoyment when their team’s or athletes’ skills are balanced against those of the opposing team or athletes (i.e., challenge). This condition (i.e., Balance between high skill levels and high challenges) also generates Interest in the sporting event, which is opposite to the state of apathy resulting from the balance between low skills and low challenges. Additionally, Catharsis, the sense of release of anxiety and tension, could be an aspect of flow experiences because it could replace the anxiety that results when the challenges exceed the skills. Sports viewing can be cathartic and is a vehicle for escape from the mundane life, which is often full of tension and anxiety (McDonald, Milne, & Hong, 2002), and because some researchers define the motivation to escape as a flow experience (Trail & James, 2011). As such, Catharsis could be a manifestation of flow experiences in the context of sports media consumption. Taken together, these affective factors, including Enjoyment, Interest, and Catharsis are indicative of another second order factor (i.e., Affective Flow) of Global Flow.

The proposed conceptual framework offers several meaningful theoretical and managerial implications. This study allows us to measure flow experiences through a third-order factor structure in the context of vicarious experience (i.e., sports media consumption). Future research is necessary to empirically test the proposed model of flow. Once empirically tested, this concept can be used to predict other important consumer variables such as well-being and happiness. Identifying antecedent conditions to flow experiences in the context of sports media consumption is also recommended in future research. Sport managers in major spectator sports can utilize this framework to evaluate, plan, and track their marketing efforts to maximize their fan experiences in a more systematic manner.