Experience Management in Restaurants: Examining The Flow Experience

Abstract

Prior research examines the experience of flow in person-to-machine/technology, yet researchers have not examined the role of flow in the context of a restaurant. Therefore, this study investigates the role of flow during the guest’s experience with restaurant elements, including service interactivity experience, product quality, and atmospheric quality, while examining the mediating effect of flow on the consumers’ subsequent attitude and behavior. The study assists researchers by expanding the experience management literature in hospitality by introducing the experience of flow to understand the overall dining experience. Additionally, the research may assist restaurateurs who want to enhance the guest’s experience.

Keyword: Flow experience, Product Quality, Service Interactivity, Atmospheric Quality, PLS-SEM.
Introduction

Over the past decade, research on the theory of flow optimal experience (i.e., flow experience) suggests that in various contexts including human-computer interactions (Mathwick & Rigdon, 2004) such as internet shopping (Hoffman & Novak, 2009) and behavior using social network sites (SNS) (e.g., Kang et al., 2018), that entrepreneurs, now, more than ever must engage in experience management. While flow experience in the context of marketing positively influences consumers’ subsequent attitudes and behaviors (Novak et al., 2000), empirical research suggests that researchers, in the context of restaurants, have not investigated the role of flow experience in restaurants.

Previous research indicates that flow experience heightens performance-based activities (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), ranging from a dance to a sport or daily activities such as shopping (Hoffman & Novak, 2009) since consumers engage with flow experience when they entirely engage in those activities. As such, flow experience is not merely a passive time or a relaxing time (Cziksentmihalyi, 1990).

Given this, these considerations raise questions in that whether flow experience occurs during a dining activity, given that a dining experience is often viewed as a relatively passive and less-involved activity on behalf of the guest. Moreover, it is essential to note that dining in a restaurant forms experiential elements that create both cognitive and psychological immersion (Ding et al., 2010; Mathwick & Rigdon, 2004), thereby creating flow where restaurant service systems (e.g., service interactivity, product quality, and atmospheric quality) form the flow experience. Against this background, the purpose of this study is to introduce the concept of flow experience in the context of a restaurant to develop and test a model which explains the
theoretically based concept in the context of a restaurant and the extent to which there is a mediating effect of flow experience on the guest’s subsequent behavior.

**Conceptual Background**

**The theory of flow optimal experience**

The *theory of optimal experience* is defined as “the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 36), and the theory mainly surfaces in comprehending internet-based consumer behaviors such as SNS usages (Kwak et al., 2014). Primarily, flow refers to one’s optimal experience, which makes an individual continue with an activity (Hoffman & Novak, 2009), in that, the flow becomes an intrinsically motivating act because the act often becomes pleasant and fun (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Prior research has shown several predictors of flow experience in various contexts. For example, Chang (2013) presents contextually specific results in a variety of studies.

A prior study has shown that flow was influenced mainly by curiosity, interest, attention, and control (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). For example, Kang et al. (2018) use skill, challenge, time distortion, and telepresence as the antecedents of flow experience in consumer SNS behavior whereby flow experience occurred in online leads to offline purchase in restaurants. Ding et al. (2010) showed that service quality, process features, and product variety influenced flow experience in investors who sought financial services online that directly related to their levels of satisfaction. Although possible antecedents of flow experience are context-specific, previous studies have agreed on two perspectives in that flow (a) positively affects a guest’s behavior and attitude, and that (b) guests are intrinsically motivated by the feelings of challenge or the feelings of seeking attention. **Thus, flow experience positively influences a consumer’s subsequent behavior and attitude in restaurants (H1).**
Service System and Flow Experience

Service interactivity

Service interactivity refers to the interaction quality between the participants of a service encounter (Parasuraman et al., 1988) and often becomes one of the most critical factors determining customer experience (Ha & Jang, 2010). When a guest interacts with a frontline employee, the guest expects timely responses, competent knowledge, and courteous behavior from the employee (Froehle, 2006). The interactive components assist the guest by focusing her attention on the experience by increasing a sense of perceived control (Ding et al., 2010). Hsu and Lu (2004) argued that flow is a subjective experience derived from the interactions between person-to-person or person-to-technology (Wu & Chang, 2005). From a social interaction perspective, consumers may feel involvement and enjoyment during the interactions which occur during a service encounter (Kim et al., 2005). Furthermore, the better-quality interaction during a service encounter, the more likely the guest positively perceives flow experience. Therefore, service interactivity positively influences flow experience in restaurants (H2).

Product quality

Restaurants attract and retain consumers by offering high-quality food products (Susskind & Chan, 2000), and food quality in restaurants can be challenging and beyond the immediate control of the guest. Seemingly, consumers would not know the product’s quality until they experience it, and the experience may present a specific increase in the level of challenge (Ding et al., 2013). Adequate challenges often accompany enjoyment and have positive effects on consumers’ flow experience (Novak et al., 2000). Therefore, product quality positively influences flow experience in restaurants (H3).

Atmospheric quality
Restaurant atmospheres sustain consumers’ attention to their dining experience, leading to flow experience (Cheng et al., 2016). For example, atmospheric quality in a themed restaurant captivates the attention of guests, thereby enabling them to have a fully immersive state (i.e., flow experience) (Klasen et al., 2012). Skadberg and Kimmel (2004) contend that a website’s design induces telepresence, thereby leading to the flow of the site for users. Therefore, the restaurant’s atmospheric quality positively influences flow experience in restaurants (H4). Figure 1 shows a proposed model of this study.

**Methods**

**Sample and Procedure**

This research uses convenience sampling, and its target population is consumers who frequently dine out in restaurants. Restaurants in the downtown area of a medium-sized southeastern city in the United States are selected and requested for the participation of this study. Upon their approvals, researchers distribute the developed survey and collect completed ones. Survey items derive from well-established research per construct.

**Data Analyses**

Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) will be used to analyze the data because the major goals of this study are (a) to predict the key construct (i.e., flow) and (b) to identify drivers of the flow construct (Hair et al., 2011) in focusing of the restaurant context. Further, given the fact that flow has not been used in restaurants, flow experience examined in this particular study has an exploratory nature rather than a confirmatory nature. In other words, this study is prediction-oriented, preferring to use PLS-SEM (Dijkstra & Henseler, 2015).

**Expected Results**
Due to the early stage of this study, the researchers report the expected results. This study expects to predict positive relationships between the three antecedents (e.g., service interactivity, product quality, and atmospheric quality) and flow experience. Also, the researchers expect positive effects of flow experience on guests’ attitudes and behavior (e.g., mediating effect) in the restaurant context.

**Conclusion or Summary**

In the past decade, researchers started to recognize the crucial aspects of experience management (Palmer, 2010). The research advocates for further understanding of the guest experience in restaurants. The present study expands theories in consumer-experience research related to foodservice business by testing the role of flow in terms of creating experience. The managers/owners of restaurants may develop more practical experience in managing systems using this study.

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Figure 1. Proposed Model of Flow Experience in Restaurants