Be/Longings: Consumption and Flow

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Whilst most consumers shop for belongings, many also have longings to shop, irrespective of any material gain. This paper explores the reasons why some consumers describe their shopping experiences as a “buzz” or a “high” or sheer escapism. The findings from ongoing interpretive research conducted by the authors into shopping behaviour and the role of shopping in people’s lives are examined here in the light of Csikszentmihalyi’s (1988) model of ‘flow’. The authors contend that the ‘flow’ model is appropriate for furthering our understanding both of consumer behaviour and the role and meaning of consumption in the 21st Century in the light of the subjectivity of the postmodern consumer with whom postmodern marketing (Brown, 1995) must deal.

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**The Concept of ‘Flow’**

Csikszentmihalyi (1988) traces the development of his concept of *flow* to work he undertook in the mid-sixties, at which time, he notes, few psychologists were interested in intrinsic motivation; the predominant focus was still the explanation of behaviour in terms of extrinsic rewards. Csikszentmihalyi identified Maslow’s work as exceptional in this context, especially his notion of ‘self-actualisation’. However, whilst Csikszentmihalyi found Maslow’s ideas “compelling” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p.5), he also found it wanting in the sense that:

“...it left many questions unanswered. For example, could any kind of process—or activity—give intrinsic rewards, or only a few chosen ones, like the making of art? Did all intrinsically rewarding experiences feel the same; were the intrinsic rewards from art the same as those one gets from sports, or from writing poetry? Did all people have the same propensity to be intrinsically motivated, or did one have to be born an artist to enjoy the making of art?” (p.5)

Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of *flow*—the term given to a common autotelic experience, one that is rewarding in and of itself—has been influential in psychology and has had an impact on the work of social psychologists in the study of leisure and sport, in particular, and in cultural anthropology. He argues that the self represents its own interests as goals; each self develops its own hierarchy of goals which become, in effect, the structure of that self:

“Whenever a new experience enters consciousness it is evaluated in terms of the goals of the self and it is dealt with accordingly. A bit of information that fits these goals strengthens the structure of the self, whereas one that conflicts with them creates disorder in consciousness and threatens the integrity of the self.” (p.22)

Csikszentmihalyi uses the term ‘psychic entropy’ to refer to those states that produce disorder by conflicting with individual goals (Csikszentmihalyi, 1978, 1985):

“Psychic entropy is a condition where there is ‘noise’ in the information-processing system. It is experienced as fear, boredom, apathy, anxiety, confusion, jealousy, and a hundred other nuances, depending on the nature of the information and the kinds of goals the information is in conflict with.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p.22)

Csikszentmihalyi (2000) has also drawn a link between *psychic entropy* and contemporary consumption behaviour which is acutely pertinent to this paper:

“The experiential need to keep consciousness tuned is responsible for a great deal of consumer behaviour. It could be said of shopping, as McLuhan said of television, ‘the medium is the message’. In other words, it often does not matter what we are shopping for—the point is to shop for anything, regardless. It is a goal-directed activity, and thus it fills the vacuum that leads to depression and despair. The fact that we have to pay, that is expend the equivalent of psychic energy, for what we acquire lends an additional importance to the activity...thus, consuming is one of the ways we respond to the void that pervades consciousness when there is nothing else to do. Shopping and surrounding ourselves with possessions is a relatively easy way to forestall the dread of non-being, even though it may have serious consequences in terms of increasing entropy.” (p.270)

At the opposite extreme to psychic entropy is the condition which Csikszentmihalyi terms ‘psychic negateflow’. Optimal experience or ‘flow’ arises when the contents of consciousness are in harmony with each other and with the goals that define the person’s self. According to Csikszentmihalyi, these are the subjective conditions described as pleasure, happiness, satisfaction and enjoyment:

“Because the tendency of the self is to reproduce itself and because the self is most congruent with its own goal-directed structure during these episodes of optimal experience, to keep on experiencing flow becomes one of the central goals of the self. This is the teleology of the self, that is, the goal-seeking tendency that shapes the choice we make among alternatives.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p.24)

In describing the dimensions of the ‘flow’ experience, Csikszentmihalyi suggests that when a person’s skill matches the demands of a situation (and when, compared to everyday life in general, these demands are above average), then the quality of experience improves noticeably whether or not the person wanted...
to do the activity or anticipated any enjoyment in doing it. Csikszentmihalyi suggests that even a frustrating job “may suddenly become exciting if one hits upon the right balance” (p.32), provided that the activity has relatively clear goals and quick, unambiguous feedback (it is difficult to become immersed in an activity in which one does not know what needs to be done, or how well one is doing). In addition to an equilibrium of challenges and skills, clear goals and immediate feedback, Csikszentmihalyi suggests, the ‘flow’ experience reported by people involved in enjoyable activities shares other common characteristics; focused concentration, a “merging of activity and awareness” (p.32), the effective exclusion of other everyday preoccupations, the sense that the outcomes of the activity are within the person’s control and a distorted sense of time. A further dimension of the ‘flow’ experience is not just that the person forgets his or her immediate problems but “loses temporarily the awareness of self that in normal life often intrudes in consciousness and causes psychic energy to be diverted from what needs to be done” (p.33). Escape from the self (e.g. Baumeister, 1995) suggests focusing one’s attention very narrowly on the ‘here and now’, however, Csikszentmihalyi notes a further depiction of this concept; the transcendence of self experienced at the most challenging levels.

Whilst Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of ‘flow’ initially explored people’s experiences of extremely challenging or technically demanding activities such as mountain-climbing, as suggested earlier, the concept has influenced a great deal of research in a variety of fields. Mitchell (1988) notes that, while it might seem sensible to assume that ordinary people’s day-to-day lives tend to lack the remotest parallel with experiences like climbing a mountain, yet ‘flow’ is possible in everyday events:

“Invisible mountains surround us all. They are hidden in stamp collection albums, in paints and brushes, in the well-written lines of a letter to a dear friend or an irritating politician, in making a fine souffle, in delivering a convincing speech, or in performing delicate surgery. Flow is not reserved for leisure in the limited sense of sport or recreation, but is possible whenever commitment, energy and will find meaningful and effective application in the world of social experience” (p.58)

Indeed, Allison and Duncan (1988) have studied the ‘flow’ experiences of professional and ‘blue-collar’ working women in their working lives while Massimini and Carli (1988) have conducted a specific study of ‘flow’ in daily experience. Wells (1988) studied the association between ‘flow’ and self-esteem in the daily lives of working mothers. The key to developing an understanding of the ‘flow’ experience (Massimini, Csikszentmihalyi and Delle Fave, 1988) is listening to the ways in which people—even from very different cultures—describe the ‘flow’ experience in terms of its onset, its continuation and how it feels while it lasts. More recently, researchers have turned to ‘flow’ as a useful construct for explaining consumer behaviour in the context of computer-mediated environments and it has been used in the study of user online internet experiences (Novak et al, 2001) and internet shopping behaviour (Smith and Sivakumar 2004), while Senecal et al (2002) explored how flow influences consumers’ hedonic and utilitarian online shopping experiences. Clearly some of this emerging area of research may be of considerable future interest for all consumer researchers with an interest in shopping behaviour but the research presented in this paper is based on real-life shopping experiences rather than virtual ones.

A perspective which may be useful in interpreting and identifying ‘flow’ is given in the study undertaken by Macbeth (1988) who looks at the reasons people give for enjoying an activity and how these contribute to the ‘flow’ experience. These reasons include: the activity itself; the pattern, the world it provides; enjoyment of the experience and use of skills; development of personal skills; friendship and companionship; measuring self against own ideals; emotional release; competition, measuring self against others (Macbeth, 1988, p.218). Csikszentmihalyi (1988) summarises the main dimensions of ‘flow’ as intense involvement, deep concentration, clarity of goals and feedback, loss of a sense of time, lack of self-consciousness and transcendence of a sense of self, leading to an autotelic, that is, intrinsically rewarding experience.

**METHODOLOGY**

This research is interpretive (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), based on the existential phenomenological interview as the main tool for engaging with lived experience (Thomson et al., 1989). Sample decisions were based on purposive methods as characteristic of qualitative research where individuals are sought for whom the processes being studied are most likely to occur and where the sample should be information rich (Patton, 1990). Volunteers were solicited through the use of personal networks, appeals in the local press and via word of mouth. The interviews generated a total of 83 individual case studies. Consumers taking part ranged in age from 19 to over 60 and included undergraduate students and some executive programme students but most were in full-time employment. To ensure confidentiality, participants’ real names are not used. As far as possible the sessions were “interviewee guided” (Sandelowski and Pollock, 1986) and there was no set list of questions, although the researcher’s prior knowledge, self-experience and awareness of emerging themes from previous interviews allowed for certain questions to be asked, or issues raised during the course of the dialogue.

The interviews were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed. The interviewees were offered the opportunity to read the transcript of their interview if they wished. The resultant phenomenological descriptions were interpreted in line with the criteria noted by Thompson et al. (1989) and interpretation was conducted via a form of iteration described by Hirschman (1992) and Thomson et al (1989). The iterative process took the form of a back-and-forth procedure between each interview and the entire set of interviews following the analysis of each interview where the back and forth is between passages in the interview and the entire interview (Spiggle, 1994).

**FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS**

Many aspects of the ‘flow’ experience discussed previously can be seen to emerge from the individual accounts of compensatory consumption and shopping in this research. The escapist element of the shopping activity was a particularly strong theme which came through in individual accounts, where ‘the awareness of self’ is lost temporarily (Csikzentmihalyi, 1988), as these two excerpts show:

Lynn:
“Yeah I have say something hasn’t gone my way like an essay mark then I go out, it probably makes me feel better but it’s more a case of displacement. I’m not thinking about what’s gone wrong I’ve cleared my head of all negative thoughts I’m just getting on with the act of shopping. I haven’t gone out there thinking God I’ve got a bad essay mark blah blah. I don’t walk in the shop feeling negative about that, I completely forget about that.”
Christine:
“I like Southport. Always better than, say, an Arndale shopping centre or a big place where it’s claustrophobic and there’s piped music. But I do like those sort of places because you can amuse yourself in them can’t you...you can just go in them and disappear really and then come out...it’s magnificent the centre of London, you feel so small next to all these wonderful big buildings-then there’s lovely cafes and restaurants-you can go in the really really big shops and be very anonymous-be part of it but not be obvious-to go to a big city like that you can lose yourself.”

Rachel’s account illustrates that what she is experiencing seems to go beyond Baumeister’s (1995, p.84) view that people try to escape from self-awareness by “restricting one’s attention to an extremely narrow focus on the here and now” and into a mode of being where she is transcending self, in line with the ‘flow’ concept.

Rachel:
“In some respects I kid myself because I think well that’s really nice I like that I’ll come back and get that knowing full well that I’ll never come back and get it because I can’t really afford it—it’s like you put yourself into like a false sense of security sort of thing wandering around....Some days I used to feel a bit depressed there were things we wanted and we couldn’t really afford them, it took my mind off the problems and I was able to wander around like a dumb blond sort of thing and I had no responsibility and I had no problems I could just wander round here and just look at all these really nice clothes and think that would be really nice for going to a do”

Susan describes feeling “hypnotised” when shopping which also captures the idea put forward by Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of ‘transcendence of self’:

“It’s almost as though it’s the buying that’s important, whether I need it or don’t need it. And in fact, I will become almost hypnotised in the shop with having to buy something...and I’m just sort of wandering round touching and looking. It’s as though I’m looking for something. I don’t know what it is necessarily—but I know when I see it.”

In the following passage, Stephanie links the escapism with the whole experience and it can be seen that the activity itself, in terms of the pattern and the world it provides, plays a role:

“I just like the way that you can escape reality, it’s like you are completely on your own, even though there are loads of people around you, you can get lost in it.”

(Interviewer) “So you can escape from reality and you can get lost in it. Tell me about a shopping experience that you have had where you have felt like that and that you have particularly enjoyed because of that, where do you like going?”

Stephanie:
“Well when I am at home I have got a particular set of shops that I always go into when I go on a shopping trip and I go round them all probably twice before I decide to buy something and then I usually go back to the one I went to first, because it is a sort of set pattern you’re looking at loads of different thing.”

Paul discusses the shopping experience in terms of excitement, a challenge (to find something ‘nice’), emotional release (a ‘buzz’) and feedback (in terms of taking the items to his girlfriend’s home and trying them on):

“I get quite excited when I first go into a shop particularly if I haven’t been in there for a couple of weeks, and you know that they’ve got new stuff in and you’re scanning through and you think I’m going to find something really nice in here, like often you see something and you think well I’ve got to have it, whereas other things might take a little bit more deliberation. When you are flicking through the rails, that gets me going. Because I think right if I spot something now that I really like then I’m going to have it straight away.”

(Interviewer) “So you actually feel physically excited?”

“Yeah I get a buzz out of it definitely. When you see something you know you really want even if you go round and have a look somewhere else before you buy it, and then you’re thinking that was it, that’s it, so you go back and hope that they haven’t sold it or anything. So you get it put it on the counter get your Switch card out or whatever and pay for it, you look in the bag straight away don’t you...Oh yeah, it’s the whole process of getting it and it’s like when you pay for it and they fold it up and put it in the bag and like he says, you look in the bag soon as you get outside. So the next step for me is that I can’t wait to get home or back to my girlfriends and try it on. In front of the mirror trying it on with all your different trousers and jumpers and shoes, do the total combination thing even with my bloody socks. It’s pretty sad but it gives me a good feel.”

The excitement or the ‘buzz’ that seems to accompany the shopping experience comes through in a number of accounts. Julie talks about it here:

“...actually I get a buzz more when I go and look for, and like unusual ornaments or something like that, I love looking round furniture shops or interior designs and wallpaper and I absolutely love that ten times better than I would ever for clothes or basically going shopping. It’s not actually for the clothes that I go shopping it’s to go out for lunch or to go for breakfast somewhere and just sit and relax without being interrupted and thinking oh I’ve still got a couple of hours just to mill round and do what I want and that, that’s lovely that’s really good...”

Graham describes the escapist element of shopping in IKEA, in particular:

“If I’m anywhere near a particular IKEA then I can go in and basically let my mind wander, and fantasise and dream about things; I can do this to the house, that to the bedroom etc. And end up walking out the door with a catalogue and continue when I get home and think about maybe I’ll go back at some point and make a purchase of that, or maybe when I’m there I’ll make a small purchase of something...it’s the one place I can go and wander and spend quite a few hours”

However, his account of the excitement he craves in relation to his compensatory consumption shopping activities is so vivid, he actually likens it to the extreme sports he used to do:
“Having to come back and justify a purchase in almost an obscene way is almost a bit of a strange thrill. That you’re going to spend £500 pounds on a piece of clothing, or a pen, or 4/5 CDs knowing damn fine that you need to buy something for home...foods or whatever. Or you’re saving for a holiday or something and you think, what on earth are you doing spending money like that frivolously when it’s required to fulfil part of the budget? Again having to go of down the road of escapism thinking about how on earth am I going to justify this when I get home and get told off sort of thing. To hell with it I’m going to do it anyway. I don’t know it’s quite strange...I used to have extreme sports a long time ago I don’t have it anymore, this may be a different bizarre way of fulfilling the excitement of things like that, extreme sports maybe”.

(Interviewer) “Is there a physical feeling that goes with the excitement?”

“Yes definitely. I get an adrenaline buzz”

(Interviewer) “What does that feel like?”

“I suppose it’s just exciting knowing that you either come up with a story which sounds fantastic and is a good piece of work. Or you’re travelling down that particular path of trying to come up with the story, and maybe as you approach home and you haven’t come up with a story, you think wow I’m going to get there in a minute and the story just does not hold water at all. I’m really in for it this time and then maybe as you’re literally getting out of the car and taking your briefcase and things to go into the house, a light bulb comes on in your mind and you think that’s it. You walk in the door and you’re blushing away at something that you’ve thought.”

Janet’s description of her shopping experiences frequently focus on the concentration and involvement in the task, the “merging of activity and awareness” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) and loss of sense of time:

“I prefer to go on my own. I have no problem with going back to the same shop like five times if I need to look at something to decide, cos I can’t buy something unless I know it’s the best, say it’s a black top, it’s got to be the black best top in the whole town, cos I don’t want to buy it, go in the next shop and find one that I think is better or reduced cos I’d be really upset about it. So I need that time to go around on my own. I don’t want to drag people around while I go back and forth...So generally I’m better on my own. I mean I don’t mind if I’m there for hours and hours cos I’m not holding anybody else up you know so if I don’t get back till six or seven it doesn’t make any difference cos it’s only me that’s paying extra for the parking or only me that’s got blisters on my feet or anything.”

Lynn’s descriptions of shopping on a “good” day also show a similar focus:

“But if I’m feeling good, if I feel good about myself and it’s a nice sunny day -the wind’s blowing in the right direction- then shopping’s hugely exciting and I’ve got some money to spend and I know that I’m not using the plastic. If I’ve got money in my wallet and rather than using the card then shopping’s normally better for me. Often if I use my card and not know how much money is on it, but I know Barclays bank will let me go over the limit. Lots of people go out shopping and make a day of it and go for lunch or something, but if I’m feeling good then there’s no point in going to lunch because I just want to get on with the shopping and that will be it. I wouldn’t spend the whole day in town and go to the cinema and do something after, I’d much spend from 9 am to 5pm just purely shopping and finding everything that I want.”

An interesting dimension of the shopping experience which emerged several times in the interviews was the individuals’ accounts of the anticipation of (and even early enjoyment of) the shopping trip in terms which really fitted various descriptions of the ‘flow’ experience and which were then thwarted for various reasons, thus stifling the ‘flow’ and leading to expressions of disappointment and even distress. These examples may be seen to illustrate Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of ‘psychic entropy’ or states that produce internal disorder, discussed earlier.

For example, as Stephanie describes these feelings when the shopping activity fails to bring the desired rewards:

“I was actually here, and I wanted to buy a top because I don’t know I just got it into my head that I wanted to buy a top and I wasn’t feeling top of the world anyway because I had had a bad day lecture wise and stuff, so I went into town and had a mooch round all the shops couldn’t find anything I liked at all. You can feel it creeping up you know when you have been round a few shops that you are not going to find anything that you want and it just creeps up on you. A real anticlimax.”

Julie describes disappointment in terms of the ‘buzz’:

“Where I was the clothes were really really boring yesterday...err everything was like...and that was disappointing, thinking...I think you build yourself up you think ooh well I might find something really exciting today, and you get like this, bit of a high don’t you? And sometimes, I mean when, when I’ve done the shopping-like I’ve had a day out and it’s when you come home and the buzz has gone and you’re slightly, slightly sad inside, not sad...I think you build yourself up to have this fantastic day and you go and find this brilliant thing this...this dress that’s gonna make you feel fantastic, and it makes you feel good...and it doesn’t happen and it’s all an imaginary dress and there’s no bloody dress out there like the dress that you’ve got in your ‘ead, and that’s disappointing and you come home do...you do sometimes come home feeling disappointed.”

Christine also describes particularly poignantly her feelings when her husband spoils the excitement for her:

“I like going with my daughter more because she enjoys every single part-she likes doing more what I want to do. If you take B. (my husband) to Oxford Street he walks from one end with his hands in his pockets and then he’ll turn and walk back down the other side. I actually got him as far as Hamleys once and he absolutely nearly died because you queue up to get in I’m not queuing up to get in a shop” he said “I’ve never queued up to get in a shop and I’m not going to start now!” So I said well I’ll queue up, you go and wait over there so but he did very grudgingly queue up to get in. My daughter would have said “great mum, there’s only 49 people in front of us!” and she would have seen it as part of the excitement-but B. spoiled it for me-I had a little bubble and it deflated before I went in-I bought what I wanted to buy and he did very grudgingly come in with me but by then it had spoiled it for me
because the excitement had gone then, going to Hamleys because I bought the earrings and then I came out. If I hadn’t been deflated if I hadn’t been shot down in flames before I got in the shop I would have done the whole 5 floors... these days, it doesn’t take much to burst my bubble”

Both Christine’s and Julie’s account illustrate themes from the ‘flow’ literature such as intrinsic motivation (Julie’s ‘high’ or Christine’s ‘bubble’); they both focus on the involvement and engagement with the shopping activity itself; they both bring in the need for feedback from other family members and they both show the sometimes enduring disappointment or dissatisfaction which comes when their strategy fails to afford the outcome they desire.

DISCUSSION

Whether making choices in the shop (where they are matching their skills as a consumer with the challenge of achieving the ‘best’ possible purchase), or ‘losing’ themselves in the whole shopping process, or experiencing the sheer exhilaration and ‘buzz’ that shopping can offer, these consumers appear to be taken into the autotelic state described by Csikszentmihalyi (1992: p. 67). This is not mere pursuit of pleasure however, but is part of a conscious process of self-development where the individual is seeking to create and maintain an identity that is founded upon engagement with shopping. As Csikszentmihalyi (1988) comments, “because of the deep concentration on the activity at hand, the person in flow not only forgets his or her problems, but loses temporarily the awareness of self that in normal life often intrudes consciousness” (p. 33). It certainly seems that consumers enjoy and benefit from the positive feelings that being in a state of flow imparts upon them. The positive reinforcement that is provided by the achievement of flow and the construction of existential meaning may be a key attraction of “Retail Therapy”.

Csikszentmihalyi (1992) describes the ‘autotelic self’ as being able to translate potential threats into enjoyable challenges or opportunities for action. The term literally means ‘a self that has self-contained goals’ (p. 209). The examples of activities he cites may range from ‘dangerous’ sports such as hang-gliding or rock-climbing, through to less strenuous sports or hobbies, to everyday decisions about work, social activities and so on. ‘A person who is never bored, seldom anxious, involved with what goes on, and in flow most of the time may be said to have an autotelic self’ (p. 209). Whilst it is not argued here that these consumers are in a state of flow all the time, there is certainly some evidence from their reports that, within the parameters of the shopping encounter, these individuals experience ‘flow’.

There are, suggests Csikszentmihalyi, four criteria required in order to experience flow: setting goals; becoming immersed in the activity; paying attention to what is happening; and learning to enjoy immediate experience. All of these appear to be present in the accounts of the individuals who participated in this research. Goal setting may be in the long or the short-term, and centres around selecting a goal that is related to recognition of the challenges. So, in terms of the shopping experience, the goal setting may be looking for and deciding upon that ‘perfect’ item. However, such goal setting is seldom articulated in these precise terms, although expressions such as ‘challenge’ and ‘looking for something’ may be used. In Julie’s case, she talked about the “dress that’s gonna make you feel fantastic” even though she concealed this might be “all an imaginary dress”. Paul talked about the thing that would make him think “well I’ve got to have it...When you see something you know you really want”. However, other forms of goal setting suggested that individuals would deliberately set themselves goals which would enable them to enter a state of ‘flow’—notably the desire to “disappear”, to “lose yourself” or, as Stephanie says, to “escape reality”. There seems to be little doubt that these consumers meet the other three criteria. They are fully immersed in the shopping activity, shifting away from thoughts of or attention to the self to total involvement in their shopping task. Through concentrating on this, they are paying attention to what is happening at that moment in time and are wholeheartedly committed to the ‘mission’ or challenge. Finally, they enjoy the experience—this is not a demanding or involving activity that they find unpleasant or difficult. They gain real pleasure from being in the retail environment, immersed in and concentrating on the activity. As Csikszentmihalyi states: “Optimal experience [i.e. flow] is not the result of a hedonistic, lotus-eating approach to life. [...] One must develop skills that will stretch capacities. [...] Flow drives individuals to creativity and outstanding achievement.” (p. 231)

It is argued here that the participants’ accounts from the interviews demonstrate that these consumers choose to engage deliberately in various forms of shopping activity and are able to understand their behaviour and control it by utilising their skills and knowledge to enter a state of ‘flow’ and gain satisfaction, excitement and/or escape from the ennui or stress of their personal daily lives. Csikszentmihalyi’s ‘flow’ model has enabled us to demonstrate here that:

“For the postmodern consumer, consumption is not a mere act of devouring, destroying or using things. It is also not the end process of the (central) economic cycle, but an act of production of experiences and selves or self-images. In effect, it is the process of producing one’s life, not mere maintenance or sustenance of life.” (Firat and Dholakia, 1998, p.6)

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