Pleasure and Enjoyment in the Consumption Experience: the Case of ICT-Based Services
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Concepts
Pleasure as felt during a consumption experience can range (Eccles et al., 2006) from a reflex response of the senses to an optimal state of contentment called “flow” (enjoyment). Some studies have revealed the existence of a kind of sub-category of the flow experience, one based on a less total and more ephemeral type of enjoyment, the so-called “small victories”. Consequently, we consider in this research three modulations of pleasure/enjoyment: excitation, small victories and flow. In experiential marketing approaches, it would seem that the consumer is supposed to gain an immediate access to the experience. However, the access to experience is neither obvious nor systematic and requires competencies that the consumer does not necessarily possess. Two models are on offer as ways of understanding the process for accessing experience: the “flow model” by Csikszentmihalyi (1997) that describes the ways of accessing a flow experience; and the “appropriation model” that Carù and Cova (2006) developed to describe ways of accessing a pleasurable/enjoyable consumption experience. The flow model emphasizes two components of the access to experience: control and concentration. The appropriation model describes three operations in order to access the experience: nesting, investigating, stamping. These appropriation operations are as it follows:

Nesting: the individual feels at home after isolating part of the experience, being the aspect with which the person is already familiar due to his/her accumulated experience and existing foothold;
Investigating (Exploration): starting from the nest that has been built up in this fashion, the individual will try to explore and identify new products or activities so as to develop certain points of anchorage and control (signposts);
Stamping: a person will attribute a specific meaning to an experience or a part thereof. This meaning will not be the one that is commonly ascribed to the experience but instead a personal one, rooted in the individual’s own referents, history, etc.

The overall aim of our research is to compare the flow model and the appropriation model and analyze how their access operations impact on the three pleasure/enjoyment modulations.

Method
We choose to concentrate on virtual or online experiences (achieved through Internet) and especially on experiences lived with three types of ICT-related services (Siddiqui and Turley, 2006): Social Interaction Directed websites (the photo-blog Wanadoo Photo and the personal pages system MyMSN); Information Rich website (Google Earth); Service Oriented websites (MSN Shopping). Consumers were asked to freely browse one the service websites chosen by them for a period of around 40 minutes. The study was based on a sample of novice, average and expert Internet users, geographically split between large and medium-sized cities. The sample was comprised of 60 subjects from France and Italy. We used an approach based on retrospective introspection: subjects were required to write a narrative report of her/his experience, without any particular frame to follow. Each report was 1 to 2 pages long. Each narrative report drafted by a subject was coupled with an ethnographic type of description drafted by the researcher who observed the Internet navigation. Analysis covered the 55 narratives/observations deemed valid. The analysis and interpretation of the introspective narratives’ contents involved both an intra-textual and an inter-textual approach. Analysis focused on the temporal structure of the reports. A quantitative data processing based on the frequency of each component/operation/modulation’s appearance was applied to each narrative/observation. As additional analysis, a statistical processing of all data was then executed in order to verify the causal
relations between the variables considered and the impact of the level of expertise of the subjects and the type of website on the subjects’ behaviour.

Findings

Our study first shows that enjoyment is not so frequent whenever experiences with ICT-related services are involved: 27% of the subjects experienced enjoyment and it is also a quite rare state during a navigation. The access to this kind of state must not be the sole aim of a marketing programme. When we tried to use existing models to describe and/or specify the processes for accessing pleasure/enjoyment in a consumption experience, we found out that the appropriation and flow models each account for at least part of this process. If we concentrate on appropriation model, the more one goes from simple excitation to small victories and then to flow states, the greater the nesting operations’ relative weight and the smaller is the role played by exploration operations. Translated into managerial terms, these results confirm the idea that to achieve immersion, it is not enough for companies to over-stimulate consumers’ senses and imagination. This should involve mechanisms helping consumers to nest in their context (stability exercise) and to control it (developing stability).

Looking at the two components of the flow model and how they relate to pleasure/enjoyment, one can note the primacy of positive control in accessing small victories. Control in its extreme manifestations seems to play the role of a component that “vetoes” access to pleasure/enjoyment during an experience. Too much control means suppressing all challenges and preventing any access to enjoyment. Finally, our results also show that unlike what has been observed with off-line services (Ladwein, 2002), in the case of on-line services immersion is not facilitated by expertise. The inter-textual analysis seems to show that in the ICT-related services sector, a flow state is something of an exception that seems to depend more on the type of site involved and less on the individual’s skills level. The total sum of these findings should be put into context so that we can understand their impact and limitations. First of all, with respect to participants’ level of familiarity with Internet, the sample features an over-representation of average users (28 individuals) as opposed to experts (17) and novices (10). Second, this familiarisation concerns the Internet as a whole and not a specific acquaintance with ICT-related services. Third, our thematic analysis does not cover every single theme that the narratives and observations raise. Further research might involve investigating which elements of an ICT-related service can have a positive or a negative experiential impact on the operations/components of the immersion process.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

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References