



Applying Flow Theory to the Online Booking Experience: The Role of Utilitarian and Hedonic Features

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Abstract

The transformations experienced in the tourism industry along with developing internet technologies are bringing out new distribution channels. The presentation of tourism products through these channels has also been rapidly accepted by the tourists. Online travel sales exceeding 690 billion dollars together with developing mobile payment options have made online purchasing behaviors an important issue. Although Flow Theory had been previously used in the fields such as adventure and sports, in the course of time it has started to be used also for understanding online consumer behaviors and it was seen that it has positive effects like trust, and e-loyalty in users. Therefore, determination of the factors that will provide consumers with flow experience in online environments, has also become an important issue. In this study, the features of a booking site that will provide consumers with flow experience were examined and which factors are more effective in the flow theory was searched. Consequently, it was determined that the flow experience is affected by utilitarian and hedonic features offered to consumers. Additionally, it was also observed that hedonic features offered to the consumers during the purchasing process affects the flow experience more than utilitarian features.

Keywords

Flow theory, Online rezervation, Online purchase behavior, Utilitarian and hedonic features

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Introduction

Developing technology has led to major transformations also in the tourism industry as in every field of life from past to present. One of the most obvious examples of this interaction between technology and tourism is the changes which have resulted from the central reservation systems (Sabre, Amadeus, Galileo etc.) that appeared in the industry during the 1980s. A series of elements from the business administration practices to the industry's structure together with global distribution channels have been reshaped during this process (Buhalis and Law, 2008). Afterwards, internet technologies, which were developed and became widespread, have offered unparalleled opportunities to both consumers and suppliers by affecting deeply once again the tourism industry. Evolving internet technologies have allowed suppliers to reach directly to the consumers by filling the gap between the suppliers and consumers and have weakened the loyalty to traditional travel agencies. Online travel agencies (booking.com, expedia.com etc.), which emerged towards the end of the 1990s, have substantially changed the touristic purchasing behaviors (Amaro and Duarte, 2015; Buhalis and Law, 2008) and have made it compulsory for traditional travel agencies to employ developing internet technologies in terms of their survival (Kamau, 2015). Now online distribution channels have reached an important point in the tourism industry. Nowadays, online travel purchasing has reached 694 billion dollars globally owing to the improved mobile payment options and online travel agencies and this figure is expected to rise to 931 billion dollars until 2022 (Emarketer, 2018). This increase in online travel sales and the predictions that this increase will continue have ensured both the industry and academic studies focus on this field by causing the increase of this importance attached to this issue. While the internet has been gaining importance as a new marketing channel that gradually increases the market share in terms of the industry, has both caused a transformation in traditional travel agencies (Kamau, 2015) and paved the way for the emergence of new online travel agencies (Liu and Park, 2015). Meanwhile in the academic circles, with a growing number of studies (Buhalis and Law, 2008), both existing theories (Flow Theory, Planned Behavior Theory) have been adapted to the online distribution channels and new theories (Online Shopping Acceptance Model) have been put forward in line with the developing technologies.

Today, online distribution channels emerged with internet technologies, have resulted in large conversions gradually in the tourism industry, which are being rapidly accepted (Muneta et al., 2013) by both consumers and suppliers (Nusair and Parsa, 2011). Bilgihan (2012) states that tourism products is one of the products which are mostly accepted by consumers among the products sold over the internet. Meanwhile, it is expressed in a study conducted by Tripadvisor (2016) that 86% of the travelers prefer online resources for accommodation (Tripbarometer, 2016).

The rise of online channels to a significant point in the tourism industry has brought up the subjects such as online consumer behaviours (Amaro and Duarte, 2015) online comments (Tengilimoğlu at all, 2017; Çuhadar at all, 2018; Sunar at all, 2018; Ak and Dinçer, 2019), hotel scoring systems (Liu and Park, 2015; Akgöz and Tengilimoğlu, 2015), ease of use, quality and functionality of the websites (Liu and Zhang, 2014), user security and privacy (Schubert and Henseler, 2018). Moreover, the online purchase experience offered to the consumers has also been one of the most frequently emphasized issues (Novak at all, 2000; Obada, 2013; Özkara at all, 2017) and it has been associated with concepts like online purchasing intent, e-loyalty and trust (Bilgihan, 2012).

Bilgihan (2015) remarks that 24% of annual online revenue is lost globally because of poor online customer experiences while stressing the importance of online booking experience for consumers. The influence of online purchasing experience on consumers' subsequent purchasing behaviors was extensively examined and various studies have supported the opinion that positive experiences create trust, re-purchases and loyalty (Koufaris, 2002; Hsu at all, 2013; Bilgihan and Bujisic, 2015; Özkara at all, 2017). While this kind of results enables marketers to have interest in this issue (Lopez and Ruiz, 2015), it has also caused the increase of studies explaining the online purchasing behaviors in academic circles (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Noort at all, 2012). Right at this point, the Flow Theory developed by Csikszentmihalyi in 1975 started to be used also in order to examine the interaction with human and computer in online environments (Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Bilgihan, 2012; Obada, 2013) as well as subjects such as sports, adventure and education (Barış, 2015). It is stated in many studies that the flow theory is a convenient instrument to understand the online consumer behaviors (Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Novak at all, 2000; Hsu at all, 2013; Esteban at all, 2014). The shopping experience in online environments expresses the purchasing process realized between the website and consumer. Meanwhile, the flow experience during this process can be expressed by an engrossing and hedonic experience (Bilgihan, 2012) when the consumers behave with full interest and concentration.

Novak et al. (2000) expresses that it is necessary to compose websites allowing flow experience in order to convince consumers to purchase in online environments. Bilgihan (2015) remarks that consumers give importance to both hedonic and utilitarian features which will provide them with flow experience during the online purchasing process. Hedonic and utilitarian features of the websites are the most frequently addressed subjects in the studies conducted on online shopping (Nusair and Parsa, 2011; Bilgihan, 2012; Lopez and Ruiz, 2015). Meanwhile, this study examines the effect of the consumers' preference reasons of online channels which are determined by Liu and Zhang (2014) for hotel reservation, booking websites' hedonic

based features which have been composed by Bilgihan (2012) and consumers' web skills described by Koufaris (2002) in his study on the flow experience by means of the perceived usefulness, shopping enjoyment and ease of use.

Hypotheses Development and Theoretical Research Model

Online travel sales with an increasingly growing share in the market makes the comprehension of consumers' online shopping behaviour an important issue. One of the theories preferred for the purpose of understanding online consumer behaviour is the Flow Theory (Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Novak at all, 2000). *The word "flow" is used to describe a state of mind that is sometimes experienced by people who are completely engaged in some activity. One example of flow is when a user is shopping online and achieves a state of mind where nothing else matters but the shopping; you engage in online shopping with total involvement, concentration and enjoyment. You are completely and deeply immersed in it. Many people report this state of mind when browsing webpages, chatting online and word processing* (Bilgihan, 2015:671). Consumers' flow experience during the online shopping process is affecting their purchasing behaviors, e-trust and e-loyalty (Koufaris, 2002; Hsu at all, 2013; Bilgihan and Bujisic, 2015; Özkara at all, 2017). These kind of results shown by the studies make the flow experience an important study field about online shopping.

It is seen that the consumers' flow experience in online environments is related to both hedonic and utilitarian features when the studies and the definitions about the flow experience are examined (Koufaris, 2002; Nusair and Parsa, 2011; Bilgihan, 2012; Lopez and Ruiz, 2015). Besides, the skills of an individual and the difficulty of the work are among the factors affecting the flow experience (Koufaris, 2002). In this context, users' Flow Experience can be explained by dimensions of the Perceived Usefulness through the influence of utilitarian features of the websites, the Shopping Enjoyment through the influence of hedonic features of the websites and the Perceived Ease of Use through the influence of payment facilities offered and the web skills of an individual. The following study model has been developed on the basis of this thought.

Generated hypothesis are listed below.

H1: The perceived usefulness positively affects the flow experience of consumers.

H2: The perceived ease of use positively affects the flow experience of consumers.

H3: The perceived hedonic level positively affects the flow experience of consumers.

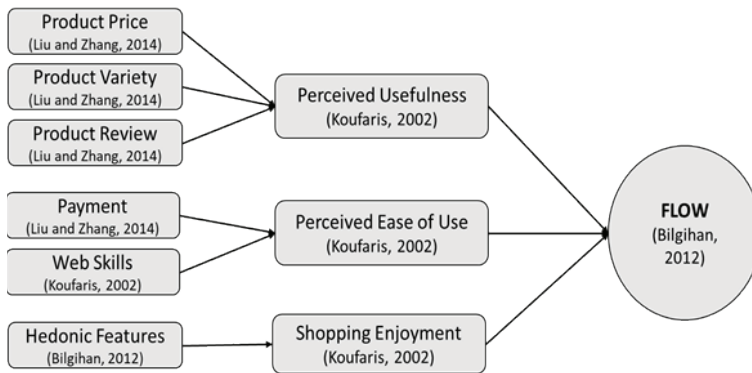


Figure 1. Research model

Method

The purpose of this study is to examine which features of booking sites are more important for the flow experience in online environments. In this context, previous studies have been examined and it was seen that the flow experience is usually associated with utilitarian and hedonic features of booking websites (Bilgihan, 2015). In addition, it is also stated that the ease of use and web skills are effective variables in the flow experience (Koufaris, 2002). In this context, a questionnaire was in compliance with the purpose of the study. Product Price, Product Variety, Product Reviews and Payment scales in the questionnaire have been taken from the study conducted by Liu and Zhang in 2014. Hedonic Features scales relating to the Flow Experience have been obtained from the study of Bilgihan (2012). Finally, Web Skills, Perceived Usefulness, Shopping Enjoyment and Perceived Ease of Use scales have been taken from Koufaris (2002).

The target respondents of the study consists of the people who have already made an hotel booking online. The questionnaire was on google in December 2018. Compliance with target respondents, the questionnaire was sent via social media to individuals and groups who may be interested in online hotel booking. It is recommended to send the survey via internet for the purpose of reaching the target respondents if they are internet users (Liu and Zhang, 2014; Bilgihan, 2015). The first question of the questionnaire is “Have you ever made an online hotel booking?”. The participants, who answered ‘yes’ to this question, continued to reply to the next questions and if they answered ‘no’ then the following questions were not asked to them. Thus, it has been ensured that only the people who had experience on this subject participated in this survey.

Table 1
Online Booking Experience

Question	Answer	N	Percent
Have you ever made an online hotel booking?	Yes	139	76,0
	No	44	24,0
Total		183	100

It is presented in the table whether the participants have already experienced online booking by the number of people. Based on the results, 76% of 183 participants, namely 139 participants have made online booking, and 24% of 183 subjects, namely 44 participants have not made. 44 participants who have not online booking experience were excluded from the study for the subsequent parts. Demographic characteristics with regard to 139 respondents who have experienced online booking are given below.

Table 2
Demographic Characteristics

Question	Answer	N	Percent
Are you male or female?	Male	87	62,6
	Female	51	37,4
What is your age?	24 or Younger	25	18,0
	25-34	56	40,3
	35-44	37	26,6
	45-55	19	13,6
	55 or Older	2	1,4
What is your level of education?	Primary School	1	0,7
	High School	8	5,8
	Associate degree (2 year)	10	7,2
	Bachelor's Degree (4 year)	59	42,4
Please indicate your occupation.	Postgraduate	59	42,4
	Academician	47	33,8
	Government occupations	28	20,3
	Student	15	10,8
	Private Sector	20	14,4
What is your approximate personal monthly income?	Others	29	20,7
	1.000 TL or Less	16	11,5
	1.001 TL - 2.000 TL	11	7,9
	2.001 TL - 3.500 TL	30	21,6
	3.501 TL - 5.000 TL	27	19,4
5.001 TL or More	55	39,6	

Male participants comprises more than half (62%) of the people who participated in the research. The most intensive age range is 25-34 (40%) of the people who participated in the survey. With regard to education, the participants who have Bachelor's Degree (42%) and Masters' Degree (42%) stands out. Academicians (33%) are prominent in terms of occupation. It is observed that the participants who have an income of 5001 TL and above (39%) with regard to income level distribution depending on the occupation is quite high.

In the study, the structural equation model was established by employing the Smart PLS package program. It is set forth that the sampling size of 10 times of the proposition number of the variable having a maximum proposition number in the PLS path model is sufficient (Hair et al, 2014). In our study, the variable which has the highest proposition is Hedonic features with 7 propositions. Therefore, the sampling number must be at least 70 according to this calculation. In our study, the sampling size is 139.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis, Reliability and Validity Tests

It is recommended to carry out Confirmatory Factor Analysis in PLS, to examine Composite Reliability and AVE values for the purpose of evaluation of results and determination of reliability and validity of the structural equation model (Hair et al, 2014). Confirmatory Factor Analysis results, Composite Reliability and Average Variance Extracted values are shown in the table below.

A calculation above 0.7 is generally accepted for item loads. When the table above is examined, it is seen that all item loads have been calculated higher than the acceptable value of 0.7.

It is more appropriate to use Composite Reliability for measurement of PLS internal consistency reliability. The values between 60 and 70 is adequate for composite reliability for the studies. It is seen in the table above that composite reliability values have been calculated higher than the generally accepted rates. The other matter that must be taken into consideration after the internal consistency test is AVE values. AVE values are expected to be higher than 0,5. When the table is examined, it is seen that this condition is provided, too.

Lastly, Discriminant Validity values have been examined. The correlation with relevant variables of the values representing the square roots of AVE values is expected to be higher than the correlations with other variables. Upon reviewing of the values, it was seen that the study provided Discriminant Validity.

Findings and Conclusion

In the study, the model was run after the reliability and validity tests were done. Structural equation model involves developing measurement models to define latent variables and then establishing relationships or structural equations among the latent variables. (Bilgihan, 2015). The latent variables measured and the values expressing their interrelation are given in the following research model.

The values in the middle of the circles in the model represent R²s and give the description ratio of relevant dimension. In this context, 38% of the change appeared in the Perceived Usefulness dimension is expressed by Product Price, Product Variety

Table 3
Item Loadings and Reliability Scores

Factors	Items	Factor Loadings	Composite Reliability	AVE
Flow Experience	F1	0.860	0,913	0.638
	F2	0.831		
	F3	0.812		
	F4	0.826		
	F5	0.781		
	F6	0.703		
Shopping Enjoyment	SE1	0.876	0.945	0.812
	SE2	0.914		
	SE3	0.916		
	SE4	0.897		
Perceived Usefulness	PU1	0.793	0.871	0.693
	PU2	0.861		
	PU3	0.842		
Perceived Ease of Use	PEU1	0.869	0.934	0.779
	PEU2	0.872		
	PEU3	0.919		
	PEU4	0.870		
Hedonic Features	HF1	0.702	0.905	0.577
	HF2	0.789		
	HF3	0.731		
	HF4	0.703		
	HF5	0.811		
	HF6	0.825		
	HF7	0.767		
Web Skills	WS1	0.896	0.892	0.734
	WS2	0.865		
	WS3	0.807		
Payment	P1	0.860	0.879	0.784
	P2	0.910		
Product Price	PP1	0.815	0.776	0.635
	PP2	0.778		
Product Review	PR1	0.937	0.868	0.768
	PR2	0.811		
	PR3	0.937		
Product Variety	PV1	0.707	0.854	0.595
	PV2	0.836		
	PV3	0.775		
	PV4	0.761		

and Product Reviews. Meanwhile, 58% of the Perceived Ease of Use is expressed by Payment and users' Web Skills. And 34% of the Shopping Enjoyment is expressed by Hedonic Features of the website. Finally, 41% of the change appeared in the flow experience is expressed by Perceived Usefulness, Perceived Ease of Use and Shopping Enjoyment. The path coefficients expressing the interrelation of variables and p values showing whether these coefficients are significant, are shown in the following table.

The table above shows the coefficients of the paths generated and p values of these coefficients. Upon reviewing of the table, it is observed that two of the ten paths generated have no significant effect and other eight paths are significant.

Table 4
Discriminant Validity

Factors	F	SE	PU	PEU	HF	WS	P	PP	PR	PV
Flow	0.799									
Shopping Enjoyment	0.556	0.901								
Perceived Usefulness	0.527	0.508	0.833							
Perceived Ease of Use	0.466	0.369	0.643	0.883						
Hedonic Features	0.582	0.584	0.680	0.607	0.760					
Web Skills	0.488	0.278	0.448	0.725	0.515	0.857				
Payment	0.184	0.353	0.446	0.415	0.503	0.259	0.886			
Product Price	0.418	0.338	0.445	0.424	0.521	0.458	0.329	0.797		
Product Review	0.402	0.386	0.549	0.693	0.597	0.551	0.572	0.321	0.876	
Product Variety	0.410	0.216	0.462	0.546	0.558	0.613	0.365	0.578	0.533	0.771

Table 5
Hypotheses, Path Coefficients and P Values

Hypotheses	Path Coefficient	Std. Dev.	T Value	P Value	Result
H: Product P. → (+) Perceived U.	0.258	0.076	3.422	0.001	Yes
H: Product V. → (+) Perceived U.	0.091	0.094	0.969	0.333	No
H: Product R. → (+) Perceived U.	0.417	0.081	5.139	0.000	Yes
H: Payment → (+) Perceived Ease of U.	0.244	0.075	3.268	0.001	Yes
H: Web S. → (+) Perceived Ease of U.	0.662	0.054	12.297	0.000	Yes
H: Hedonic F. → (+) Shopping E.	0.584	0.066	8.842	0.000	Yes
H1: Perceived U. → (+) Flow	0.215	0.109	1.965	0.040	Yes
H2: Perceived Ease of U. → (+) Flow	0.189	0.101	1.869	0.062	No
H3: Shopping E. → (+) Flow	0.377	0.075	5.040	0.000	Yes

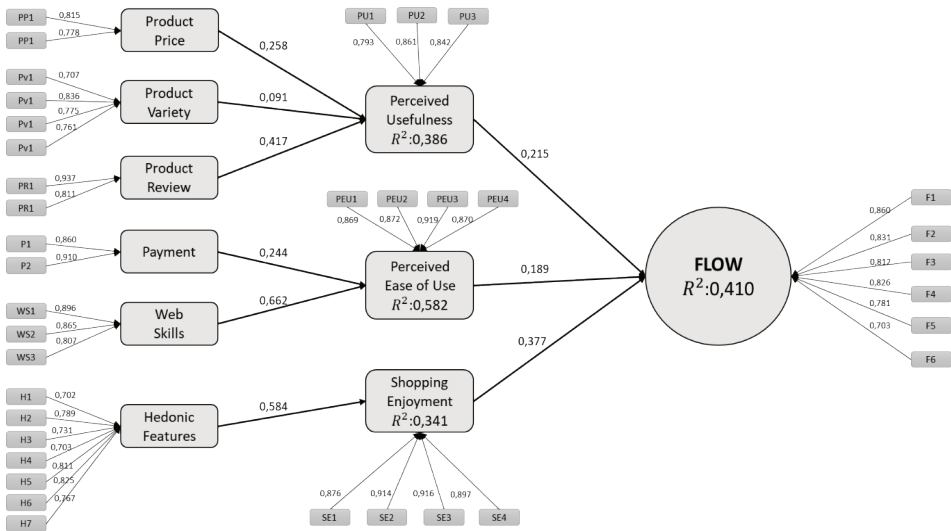


Figure 2. Results of model

At the same time, path coefficients express the impact level of a variable on the respective variable. In this context, it is possible to determine which variables have a larger effect on the flow experience through the coefficients of the paths going the flow experience. When the coefficients are examined, it is seen that the Perceived Usefulness has been calculated as 0,215, the Perceived Ease of Use as 0,189 and the Shopping Enjoyment as 0,377. It was stated that the insignificance of the coefficient calculated for the perceived ease of use was due to the calculation of p value above 0,05. Therefore this coefficient value is not significant. However, the p values (path coefficient) calculated for the Shopping Enjoyment (0,000) and Perceived Usefulness (0,040) shows its significance. When the coefficients are compared, it is seen that the Shopping Enjoyment (0,377) has greater impact than the Perceived Usefulness (0,215). In this context, the hedonic level perceived by users on booking websites becomes an issue more important than the perceived usefulness with regard to the flow experience. This result has also been supported by similar studies (Bilgihan, 2015). Hedonic features (0,584) of the websites affect the Shopping Enjoyment level. In this context, it gains importance for booking websites to turn the booking process into a more entertaining activity by attaching importance to hedonic features in terms of providing users with the flow experience.

Availability of some factors giving benefits (price, comparison, product variability etc.) to the users, may enable consumers to prefer a certain channel (Liu and Zhang, 2014) but it is only possible to create loyalty in consumers towards a specific channel particularly in the environments containing computer human interactions and covering a certain process such as researching, receiving information, comparison like online booking purchases through offering some features which entertain (Bilgihan, 2012) the users (consumers). At this point, the websites' hedonic features, which express as well as the offering way of utilitarian features to consumers by online channels gain importance.

Utilitarian features which are quite close to each other are presented by many alternatives in online booking websites but the websites' hedonic features can be seen as an important strategy for the purpose of differing with regard to uniqueness. In consideration of the impact of the hedonic features, which are also supported by this study, on the flow experience and the positive effects of the flow experience, which are showed by former studies such as e-loyalty, e-purchasing and brand equity; the hedonic features of the websites are a matter of subject that must be highlighted with regard to online booking. In this study, the importance of hedonic features of the booking websites were emphasized, and its effect on the flow experience was mentioned through the shopping enjoyment.

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