

**Understanding the flow
experiences of Web users**

Steven Pace

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Declaration

I certify that this thesis is my own original work. It does not contain any material previously published or written by another person where due reference is not made in the text.

Steven Pace

Acknowledgments

Completing a doctorate has been a long-standing goal of mine, which could only have been achieved with the support of some generous people.

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Abstract

This thesis presents a grounded theory of the flow experiences of Web users engaged in information-seeking activities. The term *flow* refers to a state of consciousness that is sometimes experienced by individuals who are deeply involved in an enjoyable activity. The experience is characterised by some common elements: a balance between the challenges of an activity and the skills required to meet those challenges; clear goals and feedback; concentration on the task at hand; a sense of control; a merging of action and awareness; a loss of self-consciousness; a distorted sense of time; and the autotelic experience.

Researchers have recently proposed Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory as a useful framework for understanding the enjoyment experienced by Web users, but they have struggled to operationalise key constructs such as flow and challenge in their quantitative models. This study aimed to address that problem by providing a better understanding of the nature of flow as experienced by Web users engaged in information-seeking activities. The theory that was developed during this study encompasses the following topics:

- the role that curiosity and time urgency play in the formation of a Web user's information-seeking goals and subsequent navigation behaviour;
- the challenges that Web users face when seeking information, the skills they use in meeting those challenges, and the relationship that exists between challenges and skills;
- the important role that focused attention plays in the flow experiences of Web users, elements that help to focus a user's attention, and elements that are distracting; and
- various dimensions of the flow experiences of Web users, which include a joy of discovery, a reduced awareness of factors that are irrelevant to the task at hand, a distorted sense of time, a merging of action and awareness, a sense of control, mental alertness, and telepresence.

The grounded theory research method that was employed in this study is a primarily inductive investigative process in which the researcher formulates a theory about a phenomenon by systematically gathering and analysing relevant data. The purpose of this research method is building theory, not testing theory. The data that was gathered for this study primarily consisted of semi-structured in-depth interviews with informants of varying gender, age, educational attainments, occupations and Web experience who could recall experiencing flow while using the Web.

An important distinction between this study and other investigations into the flow experiences of Web users is the way it goes beyond sheer associations to propose

explanations for how and why certain events occur—explanations that are grounded in the data rather than deduced from the literature. This study is the first of its type on this subject, and as such, it provides a useful counterpoint to previous quantitative studies.

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