Escaping Reality into Flow

Flow within Four Realms of Web-based Virtual Experience

TITLE PAGE

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ABSTRACT

The Master thesis takes its point of departure in the field of Web-based virtual experiences and centres on experiences from the perspective of the Experience Economy, including experiences in general consumption situations and in a more specific tourism related virtual environment; and the concept of flow as a psychological side of experiences after Csikszantmihalyi (1975). Attention is in particular directed at flow construct in the ways it may be applied to the Experience economy and discussed within the four realms of experiences in web-based virtual environment. The thesis has an explorative purpose in the sense that it seeks to understand Web-based virtual experiences and achievement of flow within the four realms of experiences in the particular website.

According to circular methodology approach, the study of Web-based virtual experiences in a tourism context was taking its point of departure from secondary data, presented in theoretical chapter. Theoretical predictions were set up based on theoretical insights and reflected in own model of graded relationship between flow and experience dimensions. Theoretical predictions have served as entrance keys into the empirical research consisting of a review of the River Cottage website and interview studies. Hereby, it was intended to answer the following questions: (1) How immersion constituting the deep esthetic and/or escapist experience relates to the immersion involved in the state of flow when visiting travel destination virtually? (2) How does flow establish itself on the four realms of experiences presented on the website?

From the theoretical discussion it was suggested that in the context of experience dimensions by Pine & Gilmore (1999), immersion constituting the esthetic and escapist experience is considered a start-up of optimal experience, the deepest extent of which may lead to a state of flow. Furthermore, analytical argument was made for flow construct in which it may be applied to the Experience economy and discussed within the four realms of experiences in virtual environment. As a result of this our own model illustrating a graded relationship between flow and four realms of experiences was developed. According to it escapist dimension is more fruitful for achievement of flow when in virtual environment, as immersion needed to experience escapism is as well present in all virtual contexts. The state of immersion coupled with active participation in experiences makes the escapist dimension more universal type of experiences for achieving a state of flow. Nonetheless, the state of flow is possible in the other three dimensions under the conditions of targeting experiences

for the “right public” when the pre-conditions of flow (clear goals meeting immediate feedback and match between challenges and skills) are present.

Data from the empirical part consisting of the Website River Cottage review and interview analysis revealed that flow experiences occurred mainly on the escapist dimension when navigating of the website which appears well in line with our former theoretically based conceptions. Imagining oneself in another time and place was an often immerging outcome of high involvement/immersion that inevitably led interviewees to achieving flow. Dimensions of flow were easier to materialize within escapist experience due to combination of immersion into activity while actively participating in it and escapistic nature of the touristic virtual reality.

Occurrence of flow in educational context was as well present. Enjoyment arising from the educational context while actively engaging the mind and/or body turned the respondents to escape from/into (other) reality, which means that they absorbed the events unfolding before them simultaneously immersing in an immersive escapist virtual environment. Hence, optimal experience/state of flow in educational dimension succeeded from escapistic immersion into other reality provided by the enjoyment arising from learning contexts when viewing videos and/or reading educational information. On this background it was suggested that the types of experiences cannot be isolated and immersion as a pre-stadium of flow in escapist and/or esthetic dimension might turn into real flow experience in educational contexts.

Related to the esthetic and entertainment dimensions on the website (the occurrence of flow was either vague in esthetic or not detected on entertainment context); the study gave some indications for situational nature of flow, depending on the right match between challenges and skills. An example of higher seeing and listening skills of interviewees encountering lower level of challenges provided by the website, as those of poor design, weak visual and auditory appeal -referring to the sensorial richness of the website - resulted in boredom and/or apathy instead of flow. Lack of inner goals and perceived subject of the website River Cottage among interviewees considered being not entertaining by its nature, set the limits for the achievement of flow. The right balance between skills and challenges was suggested to be of paramount importance for achievement of flow within esthetic and entertainment dimensions in the Web-based virtual reality.

The thesis gives suggestions for future research and practical implications for experience providers.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Web-based virtual experiences in the tourism context, as an overall theme of this paper, were studied by one of the authors through internship activities, which triggered interest for the subject in the first place, and previous semester project, that elaborated on the concept from the supplier's point of view. In the course of that project, an explicit focus on the marketers' role in creation of virtual experiences and a more implicit part of individual psychological aspects of the users of the computer mediated environment were discovered through a theoretical perspective. It was therefore suggested for further research to conduct a deeper investigation of the individual aspects of web-users through an empirical study. Choosing this topic for a master thesis, stretching over a longer time scale then a semester project can offer, was therefore a possibility to pay a required amount attention to the empirical study. In order to gain an insight into abovementioned users' psychological aspects a notion of state of flow was found as an important aspect for understanding consumer behaviour on the World Wide Web, and as a way of defining the nature of compelling online experiences (Novak et al. 2000). Researchers suggest that development of a compelling online experience for virtual customers is critical to creating a competitive advantage for commercial web providers (Ibid.).

As for the experiences in tourism, researchers have suggested that tourists often make a decision under a substantial uncertainty regarding the benefits of visiting a particular destination (Vogt & Fesenmaier 1998, Fesenmaier & Jeng, 2000, Maser & Weiermaier, 1998). Nelson (1970) in Cho et al. (2002) referred to these uncertainties as 'experiential attributes' because they can be identified only through experiences. Therefore, prior to taking the risk, tourists actively seek travel information to create a clear understanding of the benefits offered by the destination. However a large part of tourism information is experiential information that can only be delivered through experiences at a destination, while forming a mental image of a destination (Gartner, 1993). As it is impossible to have direct trial experiences in tourism activities, 'virtual experiences', using environmental simulations could, therefore, successfully create and communicate an image of a destination (Cho & Fesenmaier, 2001), that is the most important criteria for potential tourists for selecting to visit or not to visit a destination (Buhalis 2000).

With the traditional communication of mass media using a variety of media channels – television, advertisements, brochures and etc. tourists were passive observers or receivers of the given information, however with the emergence of the Internet and Web-based virtual reality they are able to become "players" (active virtual participants) actively choosing what they want to experience, so that they can better assess the destination (Cho et al. 2002, Cho & Fesenmaier, 2001). Today, the Web has the potential to deliver product information in a form such that consumers may interpret the information like information obtained from their own direct experience (Klein 2003, Li et al. 2001). That is, the Internet makes it possible to deliver various types of information through online communication and enables users to have a quality virtual experience which is unavailable through traditional media.

'New" (i.e. Internet–enabled), sophisticated and demanding travellers are actively seeking information which enables them to experience the destination instead of simply obtaining facts about 'how the destination is' and, hereby, through the virtual experience tourists are able to gain a considerable amount of experiential information before actual travel and they are, therefore, in a better position for decision making under the reduced level of uncertainty, (Cho & Fesenmaier, 1998, Cho et al. 2002). Hence Web-based virtual experience can be considered an effective emerging tool for destination marketing.

Cho et al. (2002) define virtual experience as "the experience of flow within a virtual environment" while visiting a travel destination virtually. Therefore, to describe *virtual experience*, this paper utilizes concept of *flow* (for elaboration on this see the chapter on Conceptualization of Virtual Experiences), where *flow* is a state in which one concentrates so much on an activity that becomes 'unaware' of stimuli outside of the activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Hereby the strength of the virtual experience is a function of the extent to which a person feels present in the computer mediated environment, rather than in his/her immediate physical environment (Cho et al. 2000).

In this state of intensive involvement, when a person looses consciousness of self and of passage of time, one can say he/she experiences complete *immersion* into the activity.

The idea to combine flow and four realms of experiences, developed by Pine & Gilmore (1998, 1999): educational, escapist, entertainment and esthetic (see figure 6 on p.47) materialized after coming across suggestions for further research by Oh et al. 2007, who

measured experience economy concepts in tourism context. The four realms of experiences, according to Pine & Gilmore, are located between 2 axes: one reflecting the level of participation of the consumer in the experience (active/passive) and the other reflecting the type of relation the consumer has to experiences, being either immersion or absorption.

Pine & Gilmore suggest that the ideal combination of four realms leads to the optimal experience (i.e. a sweet spot). The placement of a sweet spot right in the middle of the Experience Realms Model raises questions about soundness of staging all 4 types in one experience for it to be memorable and therefore optimal. In the present paper we will thus replace the concept of a sweet spot with the concept of "flow", which refers to those optimal, extremely enjoyable experiences when an individual engages in an activity with total involvement, concentration, enjoyment, time distortion and etc. (Csikszentmihalyi). So, regardless of the type of experience (or within a mix of several types) an optimal virtual experience have to lead to a state of "flow" conceptually, but hard to imagine practically during the experience in online environments, as absorption in *entertainment* and *educational* experiences do not meet the condition of immersion, which is essential for the occurrence of "flow". Therefore we would expect to find occurrence of "flow" experiences present in esthetic and escapist experiences when visiting travel destination virtually. Theoretically, achievement of esthetic or escapist experiences should be related to or lead to a state of "flow" (Oh et al. 2007).

1.1 PROBLEM FORMULATION

As mentioned in the preceding paragraph of introduction, esthetic and escapist experiences presented on the Web might be the most beneficial of four realms of experiences for achievement of optimal virtual experience and inducing a state of flow, due to tourist's immersion into activity. For the paper to explore the soundness of this statement we will focus on the factors mediating optimal virtual experience on the Web.

Research questions raised in this project are:

- ***How immersion constituting the deep esthetic and/or escapist experience relates to the immersion involved in the state of flow when visiting travel destination virtually?***

- ***How does flow establish itself on the four realms of experiences presented on the website?***

  Due to the lack of investigation on the concept of flow and experience types in virtual touristic environment (Oh et al. 2007), the nature of the present paper is mainly explorative. Given the limited time frame for carrying out the examination, the discussion is mostly theoretical, that is reflected in the first research question. Though an empirical investigation of achievement of flow on chosen gourmet- tourism related web-site River Cottage will be conducted in order to seek some indication for theoretical predictions developed in the course of theoretical discussion. The choice of the web-site will be elaborated in the methodological chapter. Our second research question is an empirical one and will be answered by means of interviews (For more on that – see the next chapter).

2. METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

2.1 METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND DESIGN OF THE PAPER

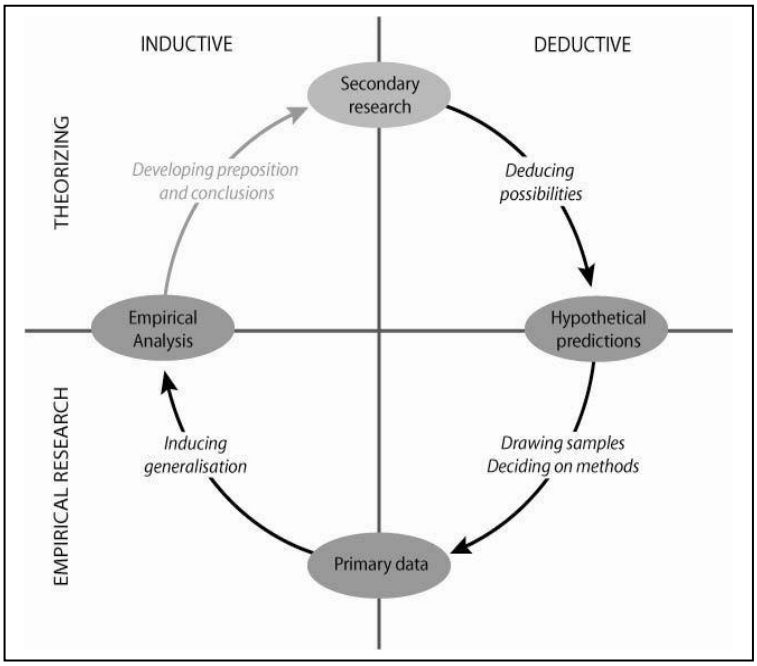
Due to the lack of investigation on the concept of flow and experience types in virtual touristic environment, the nature of the present paper is mainly explorative. Given the limited time frame for carrying out the examination, the discussion is mostly theoretical, though an empirical investigation of achievement of flow on a chosen tourism related web-site will as well be conducted. The later was believed to add an extra dimension to the paper, which would lack visions for practical implication of purely theoretical knowledge without an empirical investigation of theoretical findings.

To clarify the methodological considerations of the paper the interaction between theories discussed in the paper and empirical data collected in the course of interviews will be presented in form of a model (Figure 1, p. 6) developed with an inspirational input from cyclical stages of research combining inductive and deductive research strategies in social sciences introduced by Wallace (1971).

A brief explanation of induction and deduction would suggest they both styles of reasoning consist of two main kinds of statements: particular statements and general statements (Blaikie, 2003). An inductive argument starts with particular statement and ends up with general, where a deductive argument does the reverse: moves from the general statement to a particular one. These two research strategies were opposing each other for a long time in a quest for *the* right theory production process. (Ibid.) Whether one should start with observing the particular without any prejudices in mind in order to form a theory or make a hypothesis about the particular on the basis of already known and accepted theory?

Going from general to particular and to general again, where general would be theory and particular would be testing theory in practice – sometimes in an endless loop in search for objectivity – a research in applied social science would then have a circular structure. The choice of the circular approach gives an idea of the research structure, but should not be mistaken as defining the mode of understanding and knowledge production, which will be addressed later in this section with respect to objectivity matters. It is therefore important to underline, that inductive/deductive approach is used here in its broad sense of moving from general to particular and from particular to general. How it is practically implemented to research structure will be graphically shown on the Figure 1 and explained in following.

Figure 1: Research cycle. *Inspired by Wallace (1971) in Blaikie (2003)*



The point of departure is taken from the *secondary research* (Weaver & Lawton, 2006, pp. 391-394), namely the theories on the Experience economy, experiences in general consumption situations and in a more specific tourism related, virtual environment; the concept of flow as a psychological side of experiences and behavioural aspect in internet settings. Within these two approaches – Flow and the Experience economy, the intention is to achieve a deeper understanding of the nature of experiences, experience types according to Pine & Gilmore and their relevance for virtual experience and to develop some conceptualisation for the four realms of experiences and flow.

The analytical discussion of mentioned theories is *deducing the possibilities* for acquisition of flow within 4 realms of experiences in virtual environment.

The outcomes of this deductive approach will be *theoretical predictions* about the favourable type(s) of virtual experiences (if there is/are any) enabling the consumer to achieve a state of flow. The possible case of absence of such type(s) will be elucidated. On the research cycle model (Figure 1), the predictions are called *hypothetical* as the outcomes of deductive theorizing are traditionally referred to. Yet, the term theoretical is more precise for the paper, as there will not be any hypothesis in its usual sense.

The next step in the research cycle concerns with *drawing a sample* for qualitative investigation. The aim of the investigation is to seek some practical evidence for the developed hypothetical predictions. On this stage of the research cycle, *deciding on methods* for collection of primary data is as well done. In the empirical part we decided to investigate a case study of website for gourmet travelling – River Cottage. The choice of a case study as a strategy for collecting primary data seems appropriate per definition. Yin (2003, p. 9) states that in social science research when *"how" and "why" questions are being asked about a contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control*, the conditions for the case study are met. The case study will be investigated by review of the website done by authors in relation to theory used in the paper (see p. 8 and p. 15 for more on methods of website review) and interviews with a chosen sample of interviewees (for elaboration on sampling technique and interview method see p. 10-15). A single case study presenting findings from a single website might raise a critique of validity which will be addressed on p. 9 alongside with elaborations on the choice of the website.

The next stage of the research is the *collection of primary data* with the help of chosen methods. Moving on in the cycle of research, inductive generalizations (to the extent allowed by methodology, see pp. 7-8) will be made from the analysis of interview findings about the conditions for acquisition of flow within different experience types in virtual environment. The results of the empirical analysis *could* lead to the development of a new theory, which *could* be used in further researches as a secondary source of research. Yet, due to the limitations in scope and validity of the qualitative data and the explorative, not normative, nature of the paper, the research cycle for this paper will stop in the transitional stage between "doing empirical research" and "theorising" in the inductive hemisphere of the model.

As it was several times mentioned above, the nature of the paper is explorative, which means that our findings cannot be claimed universal laws. As was mentioned before, the choice of induction/deduction as research strategies should not be understood as the mode of knowledge production. Even though these approaches to research are traditionally used in quantitative research within positivistic (for induction) and falsificationist (for deduction) domains, this paper is not intended on arriving at, for instance, statistical generalizations in the positivistic spirit of knowledge production. In other words the paper's results are not normative despite

the choice of inductive/deductive lines of reasoning. We comprehend the fact that our findings can be "regarded as nothing more than summaries of observed uniformities" as Merton (1957) put it. Making this point clear is important in order to avoid possible ontological and epistemological confusions about the value of the results, about their validity and objectivity. The knowledge we gain from the results is not wrong and the chosen approach is not pointless. Benton & Craib (2001) advise on the other hand "to be careful about ***explaining*** the findings that they produce". According to them, even though the investigation utilises positivistic approaches it gives a start for a theorizing process that can be in epistemologically different line of social thought (e.g. Interpretivist or Social Constructionist). It is therefore necessary to bear in mind that the results of the paper's empirical research are looked upon in a constructionist paradigm. It means we make an effort to construct a bit of our view on the world with a rather provisional objectivity which ought to be questioned and investigated by others in order to *approach* objectivity.

One can say this problem is of a minor practical character for the given paper, as the research process is ending in the transitional stage between "doing empirical research" and "theorising" in the inductive hemisphere of the model, as it was mentioned earlier. However it might become a limitation for our suggestions for further research, as future investigations will have to choose the way how to utilize our findings as they are rather suggestive than definitive. They might be either taken as a ground for theorizing (if so, then considerations about methodological approach should be done) or for making a new hypothesis, which might be tested further.

2.2 METHODS OF INVESTIGATION

2.2.1. DATA COLLECTION

Website study

The website for gourmet travelling www.rivercottage.net was chosen as a case study of the paper. Being acquainted with the website in advance, we believed it was suitable to satisfy our research purpose. This example from 'real life' will be used in order to seek some practical indications for developed theoretical predictions. The choice of the gourmet website is based on Cho & Fesenmaier (2001) argument that the destinations that are less known in the world providing many different types of attractions usually have greater uncertainty than well-

known destinations and the maximization of virtual experiences in the chosen destination provide greater value of 'virtual experience'.

The selected destination River Cottage provides different types of attractions with very unique and exotic experiences from collecting mushrooms, gardening and fishing to tasting wine and learning to cook. Thus it is especially difficult for tourists to form and accurate destination image. The development of virtual experience can, according to Cho & Fesenmaier (2001), help potential tourists to develop expectations about what they can experience at the destination. We assume, that River Cottage is less known in the world and consequently have a greater level of uncertainty than well-known destinations, therefore, we believe, that the development of virtual experience in this destination may provide greater value of 'virtual experience' when providing more experiential information for the potential tourist and reducing the level of uncertainties. Furthermore, Csíkszentmihályi (1990) suggests that a cultivated taste may provide many opportunities for flow *if one approaches eating - and cooking - in a spirit of adventure and curiosity, exploring the potentials of food for the sake of the experience itself rather than as a showcase for one's expertise* (ibid. pp . 115).

The Website River Cottage represents interactive environment providing all 4-types of experiences (educational, esthetic, escapist and entertainment), thus it has been chosen for the paper as an example of a destination providing an opportunity for the potential tourist to be immersed into Web-based activity and achieve a state of flow. Additionally, as the subject of the thesis turns around flow and 4 types of experiences, the website suits well in answering the second research question aiming at capturing a state of flow perceived by potential tourists in the 4 realms of experiences presented on the website.

As was mentioned before, a single case study presenting findings from a single website might raise critique of its validity. This critique is usually concerned with a fact that single cases offer a poor basis for generalizations (Yin, 2003). But the critique might be sound if one is concerned about statistical generalizations, applicable to a larger universe according to probability theory. It is not the case for this paper. The intention is therefore to make so-called analytical generalizations (Ibid.) which generalize to the broad theory used in the paper. So, the purpose is not to validate theories on a universal scale, but to study their suitability in a given situation. To increase validity of the case study findings, future research might be done in order to test suitability of the theories in other situations.

Another concern about quality of the case study is its reliability. In this paper it will be addressed by making as many research steps clear and transparent as possible.

Interview study

In this section we will elaborate on the sampling technique for the eight interviews and sample description, interview style and design as well as reliability and validity concerns.

In the light of explorative nature of the paper, without a need for production of statistical generalizations, the choice of a sampling technique is a nonprobability sampling that is not *random* (Trochim, 2000). The selection of sample is not driven by concerns of representativeness in the general population, but rather a wish to see if there are any indications of operational activity of our theoretical predictions and explore the concepts they represent. In relation to this purpose and the choice of the website representing gourmet travelling destination, a target group for sampling should be defined. This target group is outlined by a criterion of possessing interest in culinary matters in general and gourmet travelling in particular. Therefore, our nonprobability sampling is *purposive*, as we bear in mind a purpose of reaching out to our target group (Ibid.).

Furthermore, in order to achieve effectiveness of the research the following step in selecting the interviewees was undertaken. Before potential interviewees, who satisfied the criterion of interest in gourmet travelling, were invited to participate in the interview process, they were via e-mail presented with a written description of flow and asked if they have ever experienced such a state while using the web as described in a flow description by Pace (2004, pp7) and in three quotations devised by Csíkszentmihályi (1975). The descriptions provide a general explanation of the state in non-technical language. These definitions of flow were used in some other studies (Chen, et al. 1999, Pace, 2004) to describe flow phenomenon. Individuals who answered positively were invited to participate in an interview. The descriptions of flow used for the selection of the interviewees are provided below:

The word flow has been used by psychologists to describe a state of mind experienced by people who are deeply involved in an activity. For example, sometimes while surfing the Net, people become so focused on their pursuit that they lose track of time and temporarily forget about their surroundings and usual concerns. Flow is not only experienced by Web users.

Many people have reported experiencing this state of mind while playing games, participating in sport, engaging in hobbies, or working (Pace, 2004, pp. 7).

Here are three descriptions, taken from a rock climber, a composer, and a dancer, respectively:

My mind isn't wandering. I am not thinking of something else. I am totally involved in what I am doing. My body feels good. I don't seem to hear any- thing. The world seems to be cut o. from me. I am less aware of myself and my problems.

My concentration is like breathing. I never think of it. I am really quite oblivious to my surroundings after I really get going. I think that the phone could ring, and the doorbell could ring […] or something like that. When I start, I really do shut out the whole world. Once I stop, I can let it back in again.

I am so involved in what I am doing. I don't see myself as separate from what I am doing.

Many researchers investigating flow have employed this technique of presenting participants with a description of the phenomenon before eliciting their experiences (Pace 2004, Novak, et al. 2000, Chen et al. 1999) to achieve effectiveness of the research process and avoid confusions resulting from engaging potential informants in a discussion about flow without first explaining the meaning of the term in non-technical language. Before actual interviews the respondents were by e-mail introduced with the River Cottage website and given a goal they should pursue while surfing on the website. The goal was to get acquainted with the destination River Cottage through its website as a potential visitor of the destination.

As the nature of the paper is explorative, an exploratory interview style, with some open-ended questions and little structure (Kvale, 1996), were adopted. In contrast to structured interviews, semi-structured interviews are less rigid and there is no need to strictly getting answers to all the questions. The interview covers the number of general ideas and leaves freedom to adapt the questions during the interview or change their order (Esterberg, 1999). The goal of semi-structured interview is to explore the topic in general and encourage the interview subjects to express the opinions and ideas freely (ibid.). According to Kvale, 1996 semi-structured interview has a sequence of themes to be covered, as well as suggested questions and there is openness to changes. It means that interview begins with some basic

ideas about what the research area will cover, later on the interviewees responses shape the order and structure of the interview. If the respondent does not understand the question, interviewer has the possibility to rephrase it in more understandable manner. However, partly structured interview is not spontaneous, natural and free flowing like in a real conversation and therefore cannot be used in observation studies and is particularly useful for exploring a topic in detail or in constructing theory (Esterberg, 1999).

A total of eight interviews were conducted, each lasting an average of 15-30 min. The interviewees have different educational backgrounds and interest in culinary and gourmet travelling. The informants were our acquaintances, but we have no reason to believe that association had any significance to the interview data. The interviews did not involve any questions that the respondents would have been tempted to avoid because of their impact on our association.

In order to make the interview situation as comfortable as possible, following Kvale (1996), the interviewees were introduced to the topic of the investigation and ongoing research procedures. The interview for the study were conducted in private locations where participants could talk without interruptions, and with an Internet connection which will be needed to help participants to get acquaintance with the River Cottage Website once more. Before actual interview respondents have had as much time as they needed to deal with the Website in order to get immersed into the Web-based activity and possibly achieve a state of flow

As mentioned above, the questions are open-ended and turning mostly around the overall subject – virtual experiences with the focus to get the overview about the subject itself. (For Interview Guide see Appendix. 1) The structure of the interview guide was firstly based on the questions targeted at grasping occurrence of flow, participants' enjoinment of this particular web activity, their perceived challenges of the computer mediated environment, their sense of control over the activity, and their perception of time distortion, followed up by open-ended questions in order to get a folded picture of achievement of flow. The next cluster of questions was concerned the four realms of experiences, namely the perceived location of different types of experiences capturing a state of flow within those experiences: entertainment, esthetic, educational and escapist presented on the website.

Another issue of interview design – recording interviews for further analysis – needs to be addressed here. Taking notes was chosen as a method of recording in this research. It is believed to be sensitive to immediate interview context (Kvale, 1996. pp. 166-168), in contrast to for instance audio recording, where the transcribing of the interview presents an out-of-context utterances. As a transition from the oral discourse to the written is in itself an interpretive process, it was desired to take all situational contexts into consideration in order to produce a more accurate construction of the interview reality.

Selected method of recording has as well its drawbacks. Taking notes relies on the immediate evaluation of the answers; one cannot go back to the recorded interview for relistening again and again. This shortcoming of the chosen method will be eliminated to some extend by the presence of both authors at the interviews and the possibility to discuss findings immediately after the interview. At the interviews, roles were distributed between the authors, so that one could take notes and the other could concentrate on the topic and dynamics of the interview. As an immediate extension of the interviews, discussions between the authors had as well a practical purpose of summarizing the notes, made during the interviews. In this way, the authors might contribute to each others' understanding of the answers, both from notes and from utilizing their immediate memory of the interview situation. Another argument for taking notes instead of audio recording is the purpose of the paper, which is not concerned with linguistic analysis of the findings. Therefore, production of a verbatim transcription of the interviews was not regarded necessary (Ibid.). As mentioned earlier, interview sessions were summarized from notes; giving the authors material for analyzing in a form of summaries included in Appendix (See Appendix 7). Taking into consideration the explorative purpose of the paper, such method of the conveyance of meaning extracted from the interviews was practical, as meaning will be in the centre of interest in the later analysis of the interviews. (For more on the methods of analysis of interview findings see pp.17-18)

It should as well be mentioned here, that the authors considered the fact of asking interviewees about their inner thoughts and perceptions. It might be a limitation to the results of interviews as some people can have difficulties with expressing their personal thoughts. This shortcoming was believed to be reduced by taking notes during actual interview, as it is then possible to observe the reaction of an interviewee to questions asked.

The private data identifying the subject will not be reported with respect to maintain the anonymity of the interviewees. Numbers: 1, 2, 3 and gender indications with F for females and M for males will be used to facilitate differentiation of interviewees in the course of analysis.

Another aspect of the interview design that deserves attention here is reliability. Reliability refers to the degree of the consistency of the research findings (Hemmersley, 1992a in Kvale, 1996) and is often presented as a domain of reproducibility; it means that another research should be able to reach the same conclusions by using the same approach. As the qualitative interviews is highly dependent on contexts, the persons involved and the connection established between them, the demand on reproducibility seems rather fruitless. Instead reliability depends basically on clearly described observational procedures, which means openness about all the details in the research process: detailed description of all aspects of the study – theory, data, data collection method, and method of analysis.

Another means of ensuring consistency of the interviews highlighted by Pace (2004) is the selection of the interviewees. As mentioned previously, before actual interview process, informants were via e-mail presented with the description of flow and asked if they have ever experienced such a state while using the Web. Positively answered individuals were selected for an interview. This technique of presenting study participants with the description of the phenomenon before eliciting their experiences does ensure a certain degree of consistency in that the same overall topic is covered in all of the interviews. Moreover, it facilitates effectiveness of the research, as the time scope for its conduction is limited.

Finally, pertaining to all the phases of the research process from the initial designing to the final reporting of the study, validity in view of the data collection method refers to the trustworthiness of the respondents and the quality of the interviewing itself (Kvale, 1996). Attention should be paid to a number of features both on part of the interviewer and the respondent as this will enable the researcher to counter these during interview and to use these as explanatory variables in the analytical phase of the study. The quality of interview is dependent on quality criteria for interview and interviewer qualifications (Kvale 1996). Although interview quality and qualification of the interviewer criteria *might seem to be unreachable ideals, they can serve as guidelines* (ibid.). Attention was therefore paid to these guidelines (see Appendix 2) with the purpose of improving the interview.

When conducting qualitative interviews there is a risk of asking leading questions thereby directing the respondent in a certain direction. However, Kvale holds that *deliberately leading questions are probably applied too little in qualitative interviews*. It means that for checking the trustworthiness of the respondents' statements and for verifying the interviewer's interpretations, leading questions are a well-suited tool. Nonetheless these questions should not be used in a manipulative manner leading the respondents to conclusions that fit the hypotheses, on the contrary, some open-ended questions in the thesis, were helpful to avoiding direct influences of the interviewer to the data.

2.2.2. DATA ANALYSIS

WEBSITE REVIEW

The subject of the paper – web-based virtual experience - is a very complex area, including experiences in tourism in general and specific virtual contexts as well as flow in those experiences. Multidimensional approach to the website review is therefore applied. The review is divided into three main parts:

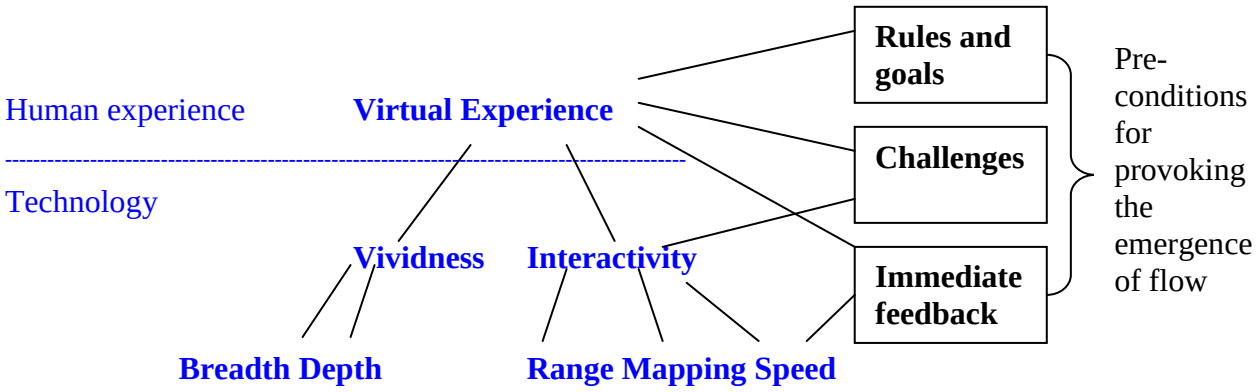
In **the first** part of the website review we will discuss types of experiences in the realms of the Experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, 1999) presented on the website. The approach to defining the experiential profile of the website was the authors' implementation of the theoretical insights from the theory chapters. It might therefore be regarded as subjective in the light of individual approach of experience perception, yet necessary as a so called "trying tour" before letting interviewees walk the same path.

The second part will deal with technological variables enabling telepresence on the website as these are essential for the achievement of a state of flow (Steuer (1995) theoretical model and Lombard & Ditton (1997) theoretical insights will be applied). This part will be present as follows: (1) Firstly we will detect mediated representations both relating to our sensory channels (i.e., media sensory outputs) and the quality of the sensory information available in each perceptual channel and (2) secondly we will determine interactivity, enabling the potential user to modify the computer mediated environment. The choice is categorized by Steuer (1995) theoretical model of technological variables influencing telepresence (see figure 2 in blue colours.) and involves 5 stimulus-driven variables. Two of them contributing to media richness – sensory breath and sensory depth will be used to point out the mediated

representations related to our sensory channels and the quality of each perceptual channel. We will also try to determine visual and aural characteristics using some theoretical insight by Lombard & Ditton, 1997. And then we will proceed with interactivity of the website trying to foresee the extent to which users can participate in modifying the form and content of mediated environment in real time. The other 3 stimulus driven variables: speed, range and mapping, enabling interactivity, will be used to consider whether computer mediated environment on the selected Web site enable potential tourist to become immersed into Web-based activity and perhaps achieve a state of flow.

Finally **the third** part will deal with the pre-conditions of the computer mediated environment described by Chen et al. 1999 (see chapter on antecedents stage of flow experience on p. 33), as these are the most important in creating the compelling on-line experience. Immediate feedback, clear rules, goals, and challenges of the website will be discussed in order to elucidate prerequisites for provoking the emergence of the optimal experience/the state of flow on the website (see Concept map depicting variables influencing virtual experience for the website review - Figure 2.

Figure 2: Variables Influencing Virtual experience:



Concept map depicting variables influencing virtual experience for the website review.
Adapted from Steuer, J. (1995).– in Cho et al (2002: 7) and Chen et al, 1999.

INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

The aim of the interview analysis is to understand and condense meaning. In accordance with the second research question that is dependent on the purpose and problem attended in the present thesis, meaning units will be extracted from the interviews. The process of analyzing is though not limited to meaning condensation method, but rather utilize ad hoc method (Kvale, 1996). As mentioned earlier, interview findings were transformed from notes taken during interviews into summaries of each interview, which would then be analyzed. Firstly, a method of categorization was used to underpin the occurrence/non-occurrence of the state of flow within four dimensions of experiences as they were *perceived* by interviewees on the River Cottage website. It should be noted here, that, according to personalized approach to experiences (see p. 44) the four dimensions of the experiences on the website as they were perceived by the interviewees might differ from the suggested (read *subjective*) location of experiences presented by the authors in the chapter Website Review on pp. 56-64. Categorization of the results was practically done by comparison of the answers to the flow-related questions to the answers to experience-dimensions questions. Further on, the condensation of meaning was undertaken on interview summaries by logical abridgement of the answers into short thematic statements, which would grasp the main sense of what was said. Those statements were later on used to support and explain the results of categorization produced previously. This measure was believed to facilitate understanding of achievement of flow within four realms of experiences that was reflected in the second research question.

Following Kvale (1996) in order to achieve a certain amount of control over the analysis and make the process more transparent to the reader, multiple perspectives are included, that means that both authors will independently analyze the interviews. Therefore the possibility of avoidance of randomness is achieved. Different meanings found by the two interpreters are worked together into a dialog leading to an intersubjective agreement, whether differences in interpretation should be dissolved by agreement or reported as such side by side (ibid.). The discussion between the two interpreters leads to further clarification and refinement of the study. Further on, the working papers of both researchers are included in Appendix 7, illustrating summaries with handwritten thematic statements on which the analysis was based. The different findings of the interview investigation will be interpreted on the basis of the theory we include and the website review.

It is difficult to determine the validity of the interpretation of interview data, because the texts are open to plurality of interpretations (Kvale, 1996.). It is not essential that another reader agrees with the interpretation made (as we all construct our own view of reality), rather it is important to emphasize that he/she understands the logic of the interpretation made by the researcher.

It is important to emphasize that the two kinds of primary data – analysis of the website and the interviews involved in the answering the research questions are not interpreted at the same level. The validity of interpretation of the selected web site, which is analyzed on the basis of relevant theory, will depend on whether it follows logically from the theories applied (Ibid.). Applying the method of website analysis expresses our own understanding of theory and is clearly researchers that constitute the validating community here.
The interview of potential tourists where it is the intention to elicit virtual experiences when visiting the particular Website is the self-understanding of the respondent that sets the limits of interpretation. However, we also seek to understand these experiences in view of theories on flow and the Experience Economy. Thus, it is not only the respondent but also the community of scholars that may determine the validity on our interpretations.

2.3 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

In chapter 2, **Methodology**, we accounted for the scientific theoretical considerations we have had during the compilation process of the thesis. Additionally, we accounted for the choice of methods used in the thesis and in continuation of this we will present and discuss different problematic regarding the chosen methods.
Theory Chapter 3 constitutes the theoretical foundation of the thesis. In this chapter general theory on virtual experiences, flow and the Experience Economy is presented with the purpose of putting this in a tourism context. This chapter elaborates on the concepts of flow and experiences in a virtual tourism context, the point of departure being a theoretical discussion and analysis. In order to relate the theories of flow and virtual experiences within the four realms, theoretical predictions are made.

Analytical Chapter 4 is divided into review of the website www.rivercottage.net from the authors point of view based on the body of the theory, where we presented the types of experiences identified on the selected Website, as well as instrumental insights in human-computer interactions and pre-conditions for provoking the emergence of a state of flow and the analysis of the interviews. We have analysed the interviews with the purpose of answering the second research question.

The **Conclusions** will constitute chapter 5 and here we draw some conclusions in relation to the questions presented in the problem formulation and lastly we make some implications for future research.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Within this chapter we will present general theory on virtual experience in tourism context and conceptualization of virtual experience in order to better understand the factors enabling virtual experience and the effects of a web based virtual experience on tourism marketing. Next section will deal with optimal experience or flow model followed by a section on flow in human computer interaction. Flow stages in human computer interaction will be discussed seeing as a main purpose of the thesis is to understand the online experiences from the consumer's point of view in a tourism context. And lastly, the theory on Experience Economy will be presented including the historical outline, which will facilitate understanding of the further discussion of the structure and meaning of experiences, their relevance for virtual experience and conceptualizations for the four realms of experiences and flow.

3.1 CONCEPTUALIZATION OF WEB-BASED VIRTUAL EXPERIENCE

Li et al. (2001) conceptualized virtual experience as "*psychological and emotional states that consumers undergo while interacting with products in a 3-D environment*" (p.2). Virtual experiences conceptualized by Li et al. 2001 examined the content of virtual experience in e-commerce, verbalized by a sample of participants while interacting with 3-D products. However, 3-D products consisted almost entirely of visual cues, without any additional attention to auditory system.

Cho et al. 2002 developed a more comprehensive and rigorous approach to virtual experience. They conceptualized more useful definition of the concept of virtual experience, as they do not confine the concept of virtual experience with the visual cues, but focuses on the virtual environment presenting information to all the senses (see the chapter on telepresence on pp. 35-37). According to it virtual experience is the experience in virtual environment using computer mediated surroundings and is based on concepts of 'presence' and 'telepresence'. 'Presence' refers to the sense of being in a natural environment or natural physical surroundings and 'telepresence' is the experience of presence in a mediated environment (Steuer, 1995). In other words,

*"presence refers to the natural perception of an environment, and telepresence refers to the mediated perception of an environment." (*pp. 36).

When perception is mediated by a communication technology one perceives according to Steuer, 1995) two separate environments simultaneously: the physical environment in which one is actually present and the environment presented via the medium. Hereby, the strength of virtual experience is

the extent to which a person feels present in the computer mediated environment, rather than in [his/her] *immediate physical environment (pp 36).*

Cho et al. (2002) explains the notion of telepresence within the context of personal psychology adopting Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) concept of flow. The 'flow' experience is a state in which one concentrates so much on an activity that becomes 'unaware' of stimuli outside of the activity including awareness of self and the passage of time. He describes the flow as

the state in which people are so intensively involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, pp. 4).

The theory of flow suggests that involvement in a playful exploratory experience is self motivating because it is pleasurable and encourages repetition. The experience of flow in an activity is a highly desirable goal and individual who enjoys an activity will probably want to repeat it (Csikszentmihalyi (1975). Cho et al. (2002) suggest that flow and telepresence are similar because of a high degree of involvement in a task or activity. In both cases concentration on the 'now' excludes distracting stimuli to the point of loss of self-awareness. Hereby, **virtual experience** according to Cho et al. (2002) **is**

the experience of "flow" within a virtual environment (ibid. p. 4) **while visiting a travel destination virtually**.

3.1.1 VIRTUAL EXPERIENCES IN A TOURISM CONTEXT

Tourism has been concerned with the tourist experience of visiting, seeing, learning, enjoying, and living in a different mode of life (Stamboulis & Skayanis 2003). In this sense everything

tourists go through at a destination can be experience. Buhalis (2000, pp. 97) supported this argument defining the destination. He argues that "*destinations are amalgams of tourism products, offering integrated experience to consumers"*. In essence what tourists primarily want to consume at destination is engaging experiences accompanied by the goods or service of the destination. Hence, entire tourist's destinations are beginning to be positioned as "experiences" (Oh et al. 2007). The nature of tourism, thus, makes the virtual experience important. When tourists are seeking information about travel destination is not about physical characteristics of the site; what they want to know is not how the destination is, but rather what they can do and experience at the destination (Cho & Fesenamier, 2001, Cho et al. 2002). Vogt & Fesenmaier (1998) examined tourist information search process and found that tourists seek functional information, reducing the level of uncertainty in most buying decisions as well as esthetic (imagery and fantasizing) and hedonic (pleasure seeking sensory experiencing – taste, sound, aroma, touch impressions and pictorial images) information. However, it is impossible to reach all the needed information about the destination because 'travel experience' cannot be experienced before the trip (Cho et. al 2002). Hereby experience itself according to Cho et al. (2002), Cho & Fesenmaier (2001), Pine & Gilmore (1998, 1999) has a value and virtual experience created by marketers through the computer mediated environment may increase the value of their tourism product.

Although the virtual experience is available via various types of media (TV-based, virtual reality based, Web-based (Cho et al. 2002)) we, as mentioned in the introduction, turn our attention to the Web-based virtual environment because it appears to offer a number of advantages as a tool for communication in a tourism context. Researchers have found that marketing in electronic media is more flexible than the traditional media such as magazines and television as it is faster, less expensive (in comparison to creating new traditional brochures and catalogues) and offering the possibility to update information immediately (Werthner & Klein, 1999). Secondly, web-based virtual environment offers higher level virtual experiences. Hoffman and Novak (1996) suggest that the web has a great diversity in terms of both sensory richness and interactivity in that it delivers a variety of data ranging from texts to multimedia. Thus, the Web is an alternative to real world environments, where consumers may experience telepresence (Klein 2003, Lombard & Ditton, 1997, Steuer, 1995), the perception of being present in the mediated, rather than real world environment. As such it

allows users of the medium to be immersed into the virtual environment, and instead of simply receiving information, become active participants, actively choosing what they want to experience. Thirdly, the development of information technology changes the marketing environment into many-to-many communication (Hoffman & Novak, (1996, 1997), thereby blurring formal distinction between producer and consumer and suggesting the primary relationship is not between the sender and the receiver, but rather with mediated environment with which they interact. The organization is no longer broadcasting a single communication to many consumers, but is sending its communications according to consumers' varied interests and needs (Hoffman & Novak, 1997). The unique process of navigation in which the potential tourist chooses what information to receive enables him/her to confirm more experiential attributes of the destination prior to the trip.

As mentioned previously because of the intangible nature of tourism product tourists make decisions about travel under a substantial uncertainty which in travel decision-making has been studied using the perceived risk theory (Fesenmaier & Jeng, 2000, Maser & Weiermaier, 1998, Vogt & Fesenmaier 1998). Travelers therefore tend to consider personal information source more reliable and useful. Traditional mass media sources (television, newspaper, brochures and etc.) do not provide sufficient experiential information and therefore are more useful in providing awareness than providing information useful for travel planning and decision making (Cho & Fesenmaier, 2001). However, Web-based virtual environment brings more chances to access the experiential information through virtual communities. Tourists can collect experiential information from other members of the virtual community who have actually experienced a particular destination. Tourists can therefore create personal expectations of travel through the active and interactive information search because they can "virtually experience" a particular destination (Cho & Fesenamier, 2001). Virtual experience thus could be a personal medium enabling the tourist to have his/her own virtual experience. This is the most compelling advantage the web-based virtual environment has over traditional multimedia such as TV and video.

Web-based virtual experience could more closely resemble direct experience (Smith & Swinyard 1983, Li et al. 2001) as it has been found to influence higher-order effects on consumer judgments from product trial (Smith & Swinyard 1983) and hereby can be

considered the most important source for information that can reduce uncertainty about a destination in the choice process. Cho & Fesenmaier (2001) provide an example of the performance of the virtual experience in the evaluation of the quality of hotel that is one of the risky factors in the choice of package travel. When the hotel does not have brand loyalty, tourists mostly have to rely on subjective imagery and the experiences of friends or relatives in order to be convinced with the hotel quality. However with emergence of the virtual experience tourists become able to virtually visit the hotel and have experiential information and confirm how nice the hotel is through his/her own experience. The example illustrates, that virtual experiences that closely simulate experiences are likely to be the best available information source to tourists. That is, when tourists experience the virtual destination in their own way, they have an opportunity to identify the particular types of experiential attributes they want to examine (Cho et al. 2002).

The usefulness and importance of web-based virtual experience for destination marketing is based upon the ability of potential tourists to experience the destination, thereby enabling virtual tourist to evaluate the value of actual travel experience more accurately. Cho et al. (2002) suggests that virtual experience (1) Enable tourists to effectively identify and evaluate experiential attributes of the destination into 'objective' evaluation criteria prior to actual travel; (2) Provide the basis for information search and facilitate the search for experiential information; (3) Provide more extensive information thereby increasing the quality of destination image; (4) Enable tourists to become confident about their trip and (5) increase visitor satisfaction with actual travel experiences.
The theory above described that tourists have to travel to the place of consumption, they are not normally able to test the product in advance; and they have to choose the destination and agree upon the contract before consuming the product. Information thus is the only means to close this gap.

The abovementioned discussion has conceptualized the notion of web-based virtual experience, the nature and impact of a Web-based virtual experience and its usefulness and importance for tourism marketing. Next section will deal with the concept of flow and/or optimal experience as a psychological side of experiences within the context of personal psychology.

3.2.OPTIMAL FLOW EXPERIENCE

As mentioned in the introduction, Csikszentmihalyi's theory of optimal experience explains the psychological nature of experience within the context of personal psychology. Csikszentmihályi is shifting the focus to the individual because optimal experience depends on the ability to control what happens in consciousness moment by moment, arguing that each person is able to achieve it on the basis of his/her own individual effort and creativity (Csikszentmihályi 1990).

Csikszentmihályi (1975) originally developed a theory of flow based on the basis of extensive interviews. According to him flow is

*the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it (*Csikszentmihályi (1990: 4)

As a result, when an activity produces such enjoyable experiences even without any extrinsic motivation or material reward, individuals are willing to repeat their experience whenever possible.

His study participants described their experiences when engaged in their best and enjoyable leisure (rock climber, basketball players, recreational dancers, chess players), and work (surgeons) activities. People in a state of 'flow' are those who feel they are engaged in a creative unfolding of something larger: athletes call it 'being in the zone', mystics have described as 'ecstasy', artists and musicians as 'aesthetic rapture' Csíkszentmihályi (1997: 29). Flow is generally reported when a person is doing his/her favourite activity – gardening listening to music, bowling, cooking a good meal (ibid.). These activities can be recognizes in flow experiences as simply those activities which seem to make time stand still. Very rarely people report flow in passive leisure activities, such as watching television or relaxing. Nonetheless almost any activity can produce flow as long as clear goals, immediate feedback, skills balanced to action opportunities and the remaining conditions of flow are as much as possible a constant part of everyday life (Csíkszentmihályi, 1997).

The flow theory provides insight into how the activities can be invested with meaning and experienced as optimal (Havitz & Mannel, 2005). According to Csíkszentmihályi, the optimal

state of inner experience is one in which there is order in consciousness. This happen when physic energy, or attention, is invested in realistic goals, and when skills mach the opportunities for action. The pursuit of a goal brings order in awareness because a person must concentrate attention on the task at hand and momentarily forget everything else. These periods of struggling to overcome challenges are what people find to be the most enjoyable times of their lives (Csikszentmihályi, 1990). Thus the state of flow can be used to describe the best feelings and the most enjoyable experiences possible in people's life. Involvement in playful, exploratory experience (i.e. the flow state) is pleasurable and encourages repetition and therefore is self motivating (Trevino & Klebster, 1992).

The two characteristics of flow are (a) total concentration in an activity and (b) the enjoyment which derives from an activity. According to Csíkszentmihályi (1990), flow is completely focused motivation, a single-minded immersion into an activity where emotions are not just contained and channelled, but positive, energized, and aligned with the task at hand. The hallmark of flow is a feeling of spontaneous joy, even rapture, while performing a task (ibid.).

3.2.1 DIMENSIONS OF FLOW

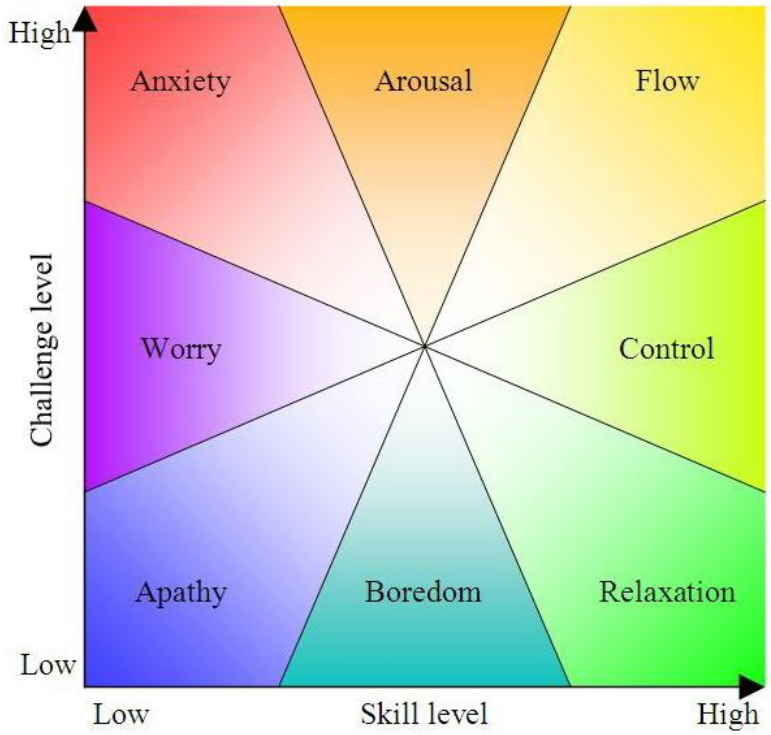
Csíkszentmihályi distinguished certain dimensions indicating the occurrence of flow:
(1) A clear set of goals, (2) match between the challenges presented by an activity and the participant's skills/knowledge in the activity, (3) immediate feedback about his/her actions, (4) merger of action and awareness (5) concentration on the activity (6) Sense of Control (7) loss of self awareness, (8) transformation of time, (9) experience becomes autotelic.

(1) Flow tends to occur when a person faces a ***set of goals*** that are clear and require appropriate responses. It is easier to enter game or any other activity, that have clear goals and rule for action that makes it possible for the player to act without questioning what should be dome, and how. The same clarity of goals is present in performing religious rituals, playing a musical piece, writing a computer program, climbing a mountain or performing surgery. Csikszentmihályi (1975, 1982, 1988, 1990, 1997 and 2002).

(2) Another factor affecting the experience of flow activities is that they provide ***clear feedback*** which makes it clear how well you are doing. After each move of an activity one can tell whether one has improved his/her position or not. (Csikszentmihályi 1997).

(3) Flow tends to occur when a person's skills are fully involved in overcoming a challenge that is just about manageable. Csikszentmihályi (1975, 1982, 1988, 1990, 1997 and 2002) referred to the flow state as a situation where the perceived ***challenges of an activity are matched by the person's perceived skills***. At a given moment, individuals are aware of a certain number of opportunities challenging them while they are assessing how capable they are to cope with the challenges. See Figure 3. If the challenges of an activity are beyond the individual's skill level, demanding more than the individual can handle, one gets frustrated, then worried and eventually anxious. On the contrary, when the challenges are lower than the individual's skills level, relaxation than boredom may be the result. But when high challenges are matched with high skills, then the deep involvement that sets flow apart from ordinary life is likely to occur. However, when challenges and skills are perfectly balanced, but an individual's perceived challenges are less than his/her experience and an individual's skills are underutilized, he/she might feel apathy, not flow. Reaching the flow state requires a balance between a high level of challenges perceived in a given situation by an individual and a high level of skills an individual brings to that situation.

Figure 3. **The quality of experience as a function of the relationship between challenges and skills. Optimal experience or flow occurs when both variables are high.**



Sources: Csikszentmihályi 1997. Addapted from Massimini & Carli 1988, Csikszentmihályi 1990.

(4) ***Concentration on the task at hand*** *i*s one of the most frequently mentioned dimensions of the flow experience. While it (flow experience) lasts, he/she is able to forget all the unpleasant aspects of life. The feature of flow is the fact that enjoyable activities require a complete focusing attention on the task at hand, thereby leaving no room for irrelevant information. Only a very select range of information can be allowed into awareness. Concentration is so intense, that daily anxieties and preoccupations are ruled out. This is one reason why flow improves the quality of experience: clearly structured demands of the activity impose order, and exclude the interference of disorder in consciousness (Csikszentmihályi 1990). The concentration of the flow experience together with clear goals and immediate feedback provides order to consciousness, including the enjoyable condition of physic energy (ibid.)

(5) When the person's attention is completely absorbed by the activity one of the most relevant and a distinctive feature of optimal experience takes place (Csikszentmihályi 1990). ***The merging of action and awareness*** occur at the height of enjoyment, in peak of optimal experience. It is a concentration that temporarily excludes irrelevant thoughts, feelings from consciousness. This means that stimuli outside the activity at hand have no access to

consciousness; past and future do not exist. People become so involved in what they are doing, that the activity becomes spontaneous, almost automatic; they stop being aware of themselves as separate from the actions they are performing (Csikszentmihályi 1975, 1982, 1990).

(6) **A *sense of control*** over one's environment while participating in an activity. The flow is typically described as involving a sense of control or, more precisely, as lacking a sense of worry about losing control that is typical in many situations of normal life (Csikszentmihályi 1990). Researches on human-computer interaction indicate that one of the most frequently cited explanations for why people find computer games so captivating is the powerful sense of control these games give their players (Ghani & Dehpande, 1994). Csikszentmihályi (1990, pp. 3) in determining the determinants of the flow experience, noted, that *we all do fell in control of our actions… (on such occasions) we feel a sense of control of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment.*

(7) Because of the total demand on physic energy, a person in flow is completely focused. There is no space in consciousness for distracting thoughts and irrelevant feelings. The activity becomes automatic, the right thing just happens without any thinking of it (Csikszentmihályi 1990). *Immersion* in the activity or conscious focus on the present produces ***a loss of self-consciousness*** - loss of the sense of a self separate from the world around sometimes occupied by a feeling of union with the environment and

(8) ***a distortion of time perception*** – when time seems to pass much faster. Clock time is replaced by experiential sequences structured according to the demands of the activity (Csikszentmihályi 1982). Although it seems likely that losing track of the clock is not one of the major elements of enjoinment, freedom from time does add to the exhilaration we feel during a state of complete involvement into an activity (Csikszentmihályi 1990).

(9) ***Autotelic experience*** refers to a self-contained activity, one that is done not with the expectation of some future benefit, but simply because the doing itself is the reward (Csikszentmihályi 1990). It is possible once a person had a taste of the exhilaration produced by the ordered interaction, he/she will continue the involvement for intrinsic reason. Thus

optimal experience is autotelic, or intrinsically rewarding, the person is paying attention to the activity for its own sake.

These nine dimensions have become important determinants of flow, as they point out the factors relating to internal experience and external environmental factors, including the dynamic linkage and interaction between a task at hand, person's motivation and ability (Chen et al. 1999).

Nevertheless personal characteristics such as ability to control consciousness and focus attention have to be mentioned. According to Csikszentmihályi 1990, 2002 people vary in the number of external cues they need to accomplish the same mental task. For example, people who need a few external cues to represent events in consciousness are more autonomous from the environment, have a more flexible attention that allows them to restructure experience more easily, and therefore achieve and enjoy optimal experience more frequently. People reporting more flow was able to screen out stimulation and to focus only on what they decide are relevant for the moment. The neurological evidence does not however prove that some individuals have inheritated a genetic advantage in controlling attention and therefore experiencing flow. Some people are born with a more focused and flexible neurological endowment or a fortunate to have had parents who promoted unselfconscious individuality. But it is ability open to cultivation, a skill that could be increased through training and discipline.

Having introduced optimal experience and/or flow through general psychological perspective, we would like to turn our attention into more specific behavioural aspect in internet settings and discuss flow construct in human-computer interaction.

3.3 FLOW IN HUMAN-COMPUTER INTERACTION

During the last decades more and more researches with a variety of backgrounds have sought to apply flow construct to different activities. For example researchers Hoffman & Novak (1996), Chen et al. (1999), Novak et al. (2000) have started shifting their focus to the flow phenomenon in the web environment. As pioneers of flow studies on the web Hoffman, Novak (1996) provided a conceptual framework for applying the flow construct to the web. They distinguished four properties that define flow during network navigation. Flow is the

state occurring during network navigation which is: (1) characterised by a seamless of responses facilitated by machine interactivity (the clicks and keyboarding that characterize interacting with the computer), (2) intrinsically enjoyable, (3) accompanied by a loss of self consciousness, (4) self-reinforcing.

The consequences of flow in computer mediated environment (Hoffman & Novak, 1996), including increased learning, increased exploratory and participatory behaviours, and more positive subjective experiences, are important because they suggest that a critical objective of a commercial web site is to facilitate the flow experiences. The construct is important to online marketers because it underlies what makes for a compelling online experience. As such it has implications for web site design, online advertising and Internet marketing strategies (Novak et al. 2000).

Pace (2004) presented a grounded theory of the flow experiences of Web users engaged in information-seeking activities. Many of the concepts and relationships that emerged from the data during his study are identical to the dimensions of flow described by Csíkszentmihályi. However, his study has taken a more holistic approach of understanding the experiences of Web users, exploring concepts such as enjoinment, frustration, discovery, curiosity, aesthetic gratification and guilt. The researcher noted that curiosity and interest play a vital role.

Novak et al. (2000) described flow on the web as a cognitive state experienced during navigation that is determined by (1) high levels of skills and control, (2) high level of challenge and arousal; (3) focused attention, and (4) is enhanced by interactivity and telepresence (defined by Steuer, 1995 as the experience of presence in an environment by means of communication medium). This cognitive state has been characterised as an "optimal experience" defined by Csíkszentmihályi that is intrinsically enjoyable. Flow comprises the complete involvement of the actor with his activity (Csikszentmihályi).

Novak et al. 2000, using the data from a survey of more than 1600 web users, developed, refined and validated a structural equation model that brought together "the components of what makes for a compelling online experience". Despite the complexity of Novak et al. (2000) model, the large size of their sample, and the sophistication of their analysis techniques, their study was criticized for the fundamental problem to failing to operationalize key concepts such as flow, challenge and skill in terms of specific Web activities (Pace 2004).

Past operationalizations of flow have employed measures that ask subjects about challenges they perceive and their skills in overcoming the challenges. Because the web is multi-activity medium environment which is very complex, Web-users' interpretations of challenges and skills are likely to become confused.

Furthermore, the concept of challenges and skills tend to play an important role in flow investigations because a recognized pre-condition for the flow experience is that the challenges an individual perceives in a particular activity are equal to the skills he/she uses in meeting those challenges (Chen et al. 1999). However the Web is rich interactive environment that facilitates many different activities, including searching and browsing for information, uploading and downloading files, reading and sending e-mail, reading and posting newsgroup messages, listening to audio clips, viewing animations and video clips, playing games, chatting with friends, converting verbally via internet telephony, creating web pages and more. Since different activities present different challenges and call for different skills, Chen et al 1999 argue that the Web should be viewed as a multi-activity medium, and that concepts such as flow, challenges and skills should be operationalized in terms of specific Web activities. In addition, Novak et al. (2000) suggest that research efforts could be fruitfully directed at distinctions between task oriented and experiential navigation behaviour (which is more likely to induce a state of flow (Hoffman, Novak, 1996)), the role of consumer demographic variables and specific elements of commercial website design that facilitate a compelling consumer experience.

As the information presented in the selected Webpage River Cottage consists mostly of functions of searching for the information and/or browsing, activities of reading and viewing video clips, the concepts of perceived challenges and skills should be described in terms of these activities. The function of reading and viewing video clips usually provokes low level of challenges and skill needed to cope with these challenges (Chen et al. 1999). However, reading an article fits into flow model, as skills required into reading prefer "*some prior knowledge of the topic of the text or sufficient interest while reading it*" (McQuillan & Conde, 1996, in Chen et al. 1999, pp. 603*)*. Challenges refer to the texts that usually contain some new unfamiliar aspect, providing the challenges to sustain flow, which in turn usually caused perceived benefits from increased knowledge" (ibid.). The skills involved in reading include the ability to translate words into images, to recognize historical and cultural contexts, to

evaluate the author's style, and etc. In this broader sense any capacity to manipulate symbolic information is a skill (Csikszentmihályi 2002). Similarly watching video clip may induce flow experience, if the subject provided on it is full of information that the viewer has specific interest in. Thus the activity of reading intriguing information and/or viewing video clip with some educational information may easily create flow experience. Hereby, it is not only the technologies of the medium, but also situational conditions inherent in the respondents' interests and goals (Chen et al. 1999) can be associated with challenges of Web-based activity. This will be elaborated in the next chapter in the discussion of the flow stages.

3.3.1 FLOW STAGES

Chen et al (1999) categorized the nine dimensions of flow (described above on pp.26-30) into three stages: *antecedents*, *experiences* and *effects.* The *antecedent* stage includes the *perception of clear goals and immediate feedback* and *match between challenges and skills*. This stage includes components and prerequisites for provoking the emergence of the optimal experience, i.e. the state of flow.

The *experience* stage is a stage of actual experience and describes those characteristics which are perceived when entering the flow state. These are *merger of action and awareness*, *concentration on the task at hand* and a *sense of potential control*. Nonetheless flow experience will not be fulfilled without entering the third and final effect stage.

The third *effect* stage describes an individual's inner experience and reflects experiential outcomes after entering the state of flow. The effects stage includes *loss of self consciousness*, *altered sense of time* and *experience which becomes autotelic*.

3.3.1.1 ANTECEDENT STAGE

The first *antecedent* stage was developed for the Web-based activity. In the Web environment the antecedent stage suggests the pre-conditions for a Web environment (clear goals, immediate feedback and challenges created by computer mediated environment) and the pre-existing capacity of a Web user (skills require to mach perceived challenges). The antecedent stage is the only one stage that depends on the computer mediated environment (created by

marketers with the help of technology and information) and can thereby be managed in order to create a compelling on-line experience. According to flow theory in order to facilitate the occurrence of flow, Web-based activity should provide a relatively clear goal. A person cannot be immersed into an activity in which he/she does not know what needs to be done (Csikszentmihályi 1988). On the one hand on-line activity should provide clear rules with a way to assess performance; this activity must provide enough information in real time for the person to recognize his/her current status, such as how much he/she has achieved, how well he/she has progressed or how the activity is proceeding. According to Chen et al (1999) if these preconditions do not exist, the possibility to a Web user to be immersed into this activity and experience a state of flow is minimal. On the other hand, the individual itself has to have a goal of finding some item of specific interest with the shortest time possible (Pace, 2004).
Furthermore, a Web user's pre-existing capacity – skills - required to engage in a web activity must be in equilibrium with perceived challenges provided by the activity. In the computer mediated communications flow is likely to result when the technology provides optimal challenges for the individual (Chen et al. 1999, Hoffman, Novak, 1996, Novak et al. 2000, Pace, 2004). For example, technologies, that are too demanding may result in anxiety rather than flow, whereas technologies that are not challenging enough may result in boredom. Nonetheless, not all of the challenges were associated with communication, rather with the situational conditions inherent in the respondent's interests and goal (Chen et al. 1999). Thereby, the challenge relates to the complexity and dynamic of action itself and includes any opportunity for action.

Designing, therefore, of virtual experience with the specific focus to technological factors and effects of multimedia in achievement of virtual experiences may be overemphasized. Richness of sensory information as well as interactivity has potential to help users to be immersed into the virtual environment (Cho et al. 2002, Cho & Fesenmaier, 2001). However, it does not always result, as it partly depends on the personal ability to perceive experiences. To reach the state of flow, an activity should provide its users with varied and controllable challenges commensurate with the users' skills level, and the complexity of that activity should not be easily exhausted (Chen et al. 1999). Therefore in order for a person to experience flow on the Web, design criteria of a Website according to Csikszentmihályi (1996) should focus on what users are trying to do, where they are trying to go. Most

importantly Web site must provide challenging environment and feedback to its users in order to encourage the occurrence of flow.

3.3.1.2 EXPERIENCE STAGE

[4]

The experience stage is the stage of entering the flow experience. With computer mediated technologies individuals have the potential to control not only their own actions, but also the interaction with the technology itself. For example, computerized word processor provides far more control than a traditional electric typewriter in that it allows text to be moved, deleted, copied and stored in a multiple ways. Another way of the technology can provide the individual with control is by explicit choices among alternatives (Trevino & Webster, 1992). Consumers' sensory curiosity is aroused through surprising stimuli such as colours and sound. Participants who achieve flow on the Web and perceive the online experience to be compelling are so acutely involved into an act with Web-based activity that thoughts and perceptions not relevant to navigation are screened out and the consumer focuses entirely on the interaction (Novak, et al. 2000). Concentration on the navigation experience is so intense that there is little attention left to consider anything else, that other events occurring in the consumer's surrounding lose significance.

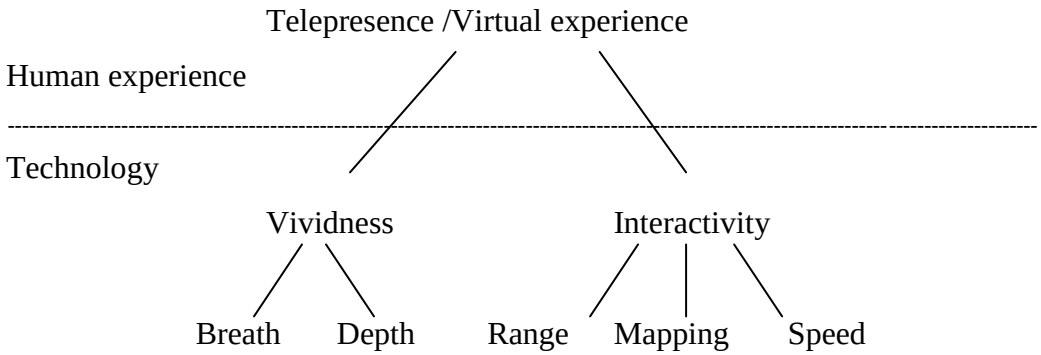
Telepresence

The above-mentioned chapter on antecedent stage of flow has described that computer mediated environment created by marketers (i.e. technical factors) as well as situational conditions and personal characteristics that influence an individual's propensity to experience flow while seeking information on the Web influence the overall quality of virtual experience. Therefore we consider important to give theoretical framework of telepresence and to discuss technical factors determining the flow state.

Telepresence is defined as "*the experience of presence in an environment by means of communication medium"* (Steuer, 1995). By its nature telepresence is similar to a state of flow (see the Conceptualization of Web-based Virtual Experience on pp. 20-21) and is used in sciences of communication. The environment may be a real environment such as a distant space viewed through a video camera, or non-existent environment such as an animated world in a video game. Steuer (1995) envisioned *interactivity* and *vividness* (media or sensorial

richness) as two critical characteristics for enabling telepresence (virtual experience) and a state of flow figure 4).

Figure 4. Technological Variables Influencing Telepresence /Virtual experience:



Source: Steuer, J. (1995). Defining virtual reality: Dimensions Determining Telepresence – in Cho et al 2002: 7.

Vividness is the sensory richness of a mediated environment, *"that is the way in which an environment presents information to the senses"* (pp. 42) and includes *sensory breadth* (number of sensory dimensions simultaneously presented) and *depth* (resolution of each perceptual channel). Lombard & Ditton (1997) envisioned visual and aural characteristics encouraging a sense of telepresence. These are image quality; image size and viewing distance, which together determine the proportion of a user's visual field occupied by an image; motion and colour; variables related to the perception of dimensionality; and the use of a variety of camera techniques, aural dynamic range (variations in loudness), and signal to noise ratio, aural dimensionality, volume (loudness) of mediated audio stimuli and etc (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). *Interactivity* is defined as the degree to which users can participate in modifying the form and content of a mediated environment in real time (Steuer 1995). An interactive medium is one in which user can influence the form and/or content of the mediated presentation (ibid.) or experience. The researcher construed interactivity as having three components: *range* (the number of possibilities for action at any given time), *mapping* (the ability of a system to map its controls to changes in the mediated environment in natural and predictable manner) and *speed* (the range at which, input can be assimilated into the mediated environment). Interactivity with the potential for user to modify his/her environment is the essence for user control of the experience stage. Kim & Biocca (1997) studied the effects of telepresence in the context of a television advertisement for a consumer good and explained that 'being there' (in a context of non-interactive television) can make a

viewer only a spectator, that is not the same as 'being there' as an actor. The transfer of control to the user - enabling him to become an actor is a necessary condition for the creation of a sense of telepresence (Klein, 2003) leading to a state of flow.

One important determinant of telepresence that is not mentioned in Steuer's model is focused attention (Pace, 2004). Individuals using the Web perceive two environments simultaneously: the real environment in which they are physically present and the virtual environment presented by the computer. As mentioned previously, during the flow state total concentration on the task at hand reduces the web user's awareness of his/her physical surroundings, where all irrelevant thoughts disappear. Consequently it can be argued, that if the strength of a telepresence experience depends on the extent to which an individual feels present in the virtual environment rather than in his/her physical environment, then focused attention (or concentration) must be a key determinant of telepresence (ibid.). Thus, telepresence can be interpreted as a state arising from attentional resources to the computer mediated environment.

3.3.1.3 EFFECT STAGE

Concentration on the activity leads to the third - **the effect** - stage reflecting individual's inner experience and experiential outcomes after entering the state of flow. One of the consequences of a web user's attention being focused on a searching or browsing activity during flow is that there is no room left over in one's consciousness for irrelevant thoughts (Pace 2004). Informants reported having a reduced awareness of their physical surroundings, interaction with other people, their usual worries and concerns, their physical needs and even their original reason for using the web (ibid.). Self-consciousness disappears, the consumer's sense of time becomes distorted, and the state of mind arising as a result of achieving flow on the web is extremely enjoyable (Novak et al 2000). Enjoyment is common factor in all flow experiences, however among web users it appears to be linked to discovery – finding, learning or observing something for the first time. "*The reason we enjoy a particular activity is not because such pleasure has been previously programmed in our nervous system, but because of something discovered as a result of interaction* (Csikszentmihályi 1993, in Pace 2004, pp 21).

Immersion

The chapter on flow stages introduced the "anatomy" of flow however the place of immersion in the context of optimal experience still remains vague and indistinguishable. Therefore we will take a look at the meaning of immersion in the flow theory.

General concept of immersion in Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary is the state of being completely involved in something. It is the state of consciousness where an immersant's awareness of physical self is diminished or lost by being surrounded in an engrossing total environment; often artificial (Nechvatall, 1999). This state is frequently accompanied by spatial excess, intense focus, a distorted sense of time, and effortless action (The Escapist, 2006). The sensation of total immersion in virtual reality might be as well described as losing a critical distance to the experience, getting emotionally involved and feeling the experience as a "real" one even when knowing it is not (ibid). Surfing on the Net inspires a kind of immersion and/or a kind of brain-state. Caught up in an activity with computer mediated environment one is incessantly active or in a state of flow, that is "the zone", "the groove" - an enjoyable feeling of oneness with the activity (The Escapist, 2006). Nonetheless, immersion and flow is not the same and have to be conceptualized as such.

In flow theory, immersions into the Web-based activity starts with the experience stage entering the flow experience were the intense focus into the activity produces the merger of action and awareness. This concentration temporarily excludes irrelevant thoughts and feelings from consciousness. Hereby, immersion and flow experience would overlap when concerned to merging of action, awareness and intense focus, a sense of time distortion and effortless action in the transition from the experience to the effect stage. However if there are no other characteristics of the third, the effect, stage of flow it is immersion rather than flow. Therefore optimal experience starts with immersion into an activity, when other conditions of flow from the effects stage are present. When in flow, because of the total demand on physic energy, a person is completely immersed, focused and concentrating mostly due to inner curiosity where is no space in consciousness for irrelevant thoughts and feelings (Csikszentmihályi 1990). Immersion in the activity produces a loss of self-consciousness - loss of the sense of a self separate from the activity and timeliness - thoroughly focused on present; do not notice time passing (ibid). A sense of being outside everyday reality produces

a sense of enjoyment. This exhilaration would encourage a person continue the immersion for intrinsic reasons, it means that the person is paying attention to the activity for its own.

To summarise, the concept of virtual experiences implicates that consumers skills in functioning in the virtual environment in equilibrium with challenges posed by environment, as well as telepresence, situational conditions and personal ability to perceive experiences create an immersion in an interactive computer mediated environment leading to a state of flow. Immersion in human-computer interaction is rather a start-up the deep extent of which leads to a state of flow providing enjoyment that appears to be linked to discovery – finding, learning or observing something. We believe that flow phenomenon may be applied to the Experience economy and discussed due to enrich our limited understanding of the immersion within the 4 realms of experiences. Since applying flow construct to the Experience economy is a new research issue and not much has been done, there is a need to establish some groundwork. The second part of the theory concerned with the Experience Economy aims at achieving this.

3.4 THE EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

In the following subchapter another point of view on experiences will be elicited, namely the theory of Experience Economy. We will have a closer look at the historical causes for its emergence – both from the founders' standpoint (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) and from the critics'. This will be done in order to obtain a better understanding of experiences as a phenomenon, its nature and structure, which will be elucidated afterwards. Such approach might facilitate a more consumer-driven utilization of the experience theory in marketing practice and can be legitimized by the widely accepted (by both Pine & Gilmore and critics) impression of experiences as highly *personal* entities. It seems therefore appropriate to bring along the personal, unique, individual into the discussion. The discussion on the structure of experiences will be followed by presentation of four realms of experiences according to Pine & Gilmore (1999), but in the context of tourism. Some conceptual considerations related to four realms and state of flow will as well be presented.

3.4.1 THE EXPERIENCE ECONOMY – A NEW ECONOMY FORM OR AN OLD ONE IN DISGUISE

Being pioneers of the Experience Economy, Pine & Gilmore (1999) put the claim of responsibility for emergence of a new economy over the shoulders of technology, productivity, competition, affluence growth and, as a result, need for product differentiation. In a linear development line of the progression of economic value, the shift from natural assets and raw materials over to goods is dated by Pine & Gilmore to the second part of the 18th century marked by Industrial Revolution. Technological development re-distributed majority of employment from the agriculture to manufacturing sector leading to urbanization of the industrialized societies. That was the move from the Agrarian Economy to the Industrial Economy. Technological development, according to Pine & Gilmore, led further on to the shift in economic value from mere goods to services as more and more people could afford paying for them. This process started with overproduction of goods that led to unemployment in manufacturing sector. Yet, it raised as well affluence level among population which provided people with means for paying for services. So, those unemployed from factories could find jobs in the Service Economy that took over the Industrial one. As a recent step in the linear line of progression of economic value, today's consumers are believed to demand more than mere services and goods. This phenomenon is thought to be caused by ever topping technological development and need for product differentiation. An added value consumers are seeking is believed to be found in experiences, staged for consumers by the providers of services or goods. Pine & Gilmore call that emerging new economy – the Experience Economy.

The line of development is therefore going straight up from raw materials over goods to services and finally to experiences. The main driving force for this development is technology. Such a viewpoint, even though making sense in an isolated study of production development, is highly criticized (Jantzen & Rasmussen, 2007). Critique is based on the idea that not only production was emancipated through that course of time it took to shift from Agrarian Economy to Experience Economy, but also public mind and thought. Even though Pine & Gilmore state that experiences are highly personal, there is not much focus on the role of people's inner alongside with technological factors in emergence of a new economy. The role of people's changing needs is therefore *reactive* rather than *proactive* in relation to production. The whole theory might thus seem rather shallow and one-dimensional as it only

targets experience providers and merely gives marketers a new tool to stimulate ever-expending consumerism.

Nevertheless, it is questionable whether this new emerging economy is indeed a novel phenomenon as Pine & Gilmore present it. Critics (Jantzen & Rasmussen, 2007) argue that consumers demand for an added value of products was a pre-form of the Experience Economy caused by modernity. Modernity had a significant influence on consumption as a social phenomenon. Shifting classes and affluence growth led inevitably to the changes in the public thought. Financial and mental surplus in peoples' lives effected satisfaction of needs: the basic needs for food and shelter were no longer a lifelong project; self-expression and self-actualisation became essential needs for a bigger cluster of society. Modernity had therefore an identity constructing consequences on peoples' lives. Individualization was (and is) one way to reflect upon inner self (Giddens, 1999), so people started buying things for what they mean to them, not for what they can do (Østergaard, 2007). Surplus of products and high affluence level resulted in more and more people could afford to buy products only available before to prosperous ones. Consumption of products differentiated only by price could therefore no longer satisfy identity constructive purposes. An added value (or customization) of commoditized products was, as a result, expected by the consumers.

So, one can say that the new form of consumption suggested by consequences of modernity is thought to ease inner discomfort in consumers that is *caused* by the *same* consequences of modernity. Consumerism became a form of identity construction in the modern world affected by lack of authenticity in consumed products (Jantzen & Rasmussen, 2007), as those products become highly commoditized.

This discussion points that experience targeted consumption is not a new issue in nowadays economy and suggests that there is an underlying layer of meaning in consumption of experiences. This meaning, that puts consumer in the driver's seat of the whole experience machine, is either overlooked or neglected by Pine & Gilmore. Therefore, in the next section we take a closer look at the meaning and structure of experiences from consumers' point of view. It is believed to facilitate conceptualization of the consumers' role in the experience production and consumption.

3.4.2 STRUCTURE OF AN EXPERIENCE

Seen from abovementioned historical overview of emergence of experiences, such approach is believed to be lacking deeper insight in the *structure* and *meaning* of experiences for consumers. In other words, we would like to imply a consumer-driven approach to experiences.

In critical academic literature, one can find evidence for the efficiency of psychology, neurophysiology and cognitive theories for understanding the nature of experiences (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 1982, 1990, 1997, 2002; Jantzen 2007, Jantzen & Rasmussen 2007, Jantzen & Vetner 2007). Pleasure as a physiological side of experiences, state of flow as an optimal experience on a subconscious level and cognitive processing of experienced information after the happening are claimed to be quite important facets of human experiences.

In this light of complex structure of experiences, giving them autonomic status as products, that is the point of departure in Pine & Gilmore's work, will demand another theoretic ground than the paradigm of satisfaction of needs. Be it a need of existential (as self-actualization) or physiological (as food and shelter) character. To illustrate this demand one might consider paradoxical consumption behaviour ruled by other (sometimes regarded as pathological) motives than satisfaction of needs. Cases of consumption of food after satisfying need of hunger or continuing buying expensive products even after satisfying both physiological and existential needs are well known (Jantzen, 2007). These cases suggest that the experience of buying a product is a primary reason for its consumption; and satisfaction of either physiological or existential need is a possible side-effect of it.

Another indication of the paradigm shift might be seen if the situation "after satisfaction of needs" will be investigated closer than it has been done before. By this Jantzen (2007) means how consumers evaluate the act of consumption, what they learn from it and how it might affect the further acts of consumption. All that might be essential to explain a feeling of disappointment that sometimes follows consumption experience. In the light of Experience Economy, disappointment can then be caused by the experiencer himself and not only those who provide experiences for him. He (or she) might be in a wrong mood up to the moment of experiencing or might have inadequate expectations for the experience. Disappointment might

as well be caused by wear-out effect or getting used to a particular experience, which both might happen when one consumes (or *experiences*)the same product for several times.

One more suggestion to shift from the paradigm of satisfaction of needs in the Experience Economy is the fact that nowadays consumption for satisfaction of needs (at least in the western world) happens *anticipatorically* (Ibid.). It means the act of consumption occurs before the actual need is registered; in other words – to prevent a need, rather than to satisfy it.

Three abovementioned arguments for a shift from satisfaction of needs paradigm make ground for another theoretical base of the experiences as independent consumption products. The old paradigm was built upon the so called "instinct or drive theory", which rule human motivation (Jantzen, 2007). This theory suggested that unsatisfied human needs of different character create drives in order to satisfy those needs and that is the main motivation force for human consumption. Theory of drives was initiated by early work of Sigmund Freud on the unconscious levels of human mind, dedicated to explain human motivation within psychoanalytical framework (Bateman & Holmes, 2002).

Nevertheless, recent research in neurophysiology presents another view on human activities that might be successfully applied to outline the structure of the human consumption experiences. The results of the research is profoundly presented and merged into economic theory in the work of Tibor Scitovsky (1976, 1991) – The Joyless Economy. It will be elucidated in the following paragraphs how neurophysiologic paradigm might shape theoretical ground of experiences as consumption products. This paradigm is based on the fact that human brain is in constant activity, but the impulses from nerve cells might differ in strength, dependent on the type of activity human body is involved in – weak impulses while sleeping, strong impulses while being tense. In this way organism is responding on the outer stimuli by changing the level of its arousal. Too low or too high levels of arousal in accordance with actual situation are not beneficial, as they make concentration difficult and decrease ability to perform. In psychology it is a long know concept of an optimal level of arousal, developed by Yerkes & Dodson (1908). Optimal level is not too high or too low, but the one where organism feels good in order to respond efficiently to an actual stimulus from outside.

The insight into neurologic activity of human organism gives therefore another explanation to motivation than paradigm of satisfaction of needs, which suggests that motivation is only

activated in a situation of shortage (for example shortage of food gives feeling of hunger that needs to be satisfied). In a new paradigm – paradigm of arousal – organism is motivated by inner urge for homeostasis (that is the ability of organism to maintain stable environment in itself). Too high or too low levels of arousal cause pain and various forms of discomfort as tension, restlessness, irritability, stress and boredom, lack of stimulation respectively. Therefore, an organism will try to keep as close to the optimal arousal level as possible in order to reduce *discomfort*, which will be replaced by *comfort*.

From neurological research it is also known that responses to outer stimuli are *additive* (Jantzen, 2007), that is raising arousal level of the organism in general, and *substitutable*, as they interchangeably can alter levels of arousal in both direction – up or down. The substitutability in other words means that a response to modify a particular discomfort can modify other discomforts simultaneously. For instance, smoking can pacify nicotine shortage in blood stream, but might as well assist on hunger. This ability is rather peculiar in relation to consumption, as it might explain "comfort eating" or "power shopping" or "impulse buy".

In support for our aspiration for a more individualistic approach to experiences as consumption products, the arousal paradigm can be linked to the concept of personality dimensions, known since Jung (1923) and mentioned in work of Scitovsky (1991). The latter has introduced neurological insights into marketing theory with a help of dichotomy of extravert/introvert personality dimensions developed by Eysenck (1999). This dichotomy is based on the differences in ground level of arousal in people with different personality dimensions. So, extraverts would possess lower levels of ground arousal than introverts would. It further on explains that some people would need to raise their arousal level by hyperactivities to reach the optimal level (extraverts) and others would prefer to immerse into activity or seek other forms of security (introverts). The perception of optimal experience would therefore be opposite for those two personalities. For more on extravert/introvert dichotomy see Appendix 5.

The abovementioned neurologic relation between discomfort and comfort is yet only a half of the whole experiences concerned picture. As pleasure is often linked to perception of a good experience (Jantzen, 2007) being a physical side of it (Jantzen & Rasmussen, 2007), there is a need to present a neurologic background for feeling of pleasure as well. That might be done by opposing feeling of comfort and feeling of pleasure, since they are both related to feeling

of discomfort within the same neurologic system of arousal levels, yet are independent of each other.

Feeling of comfort occurs when discomfort decreases, in other words the level of arousal reaches the optimal level. On the other hand, pleasure occurs when the level of arousal is changing in any direction – either raising or being reduced. So, comfort is concerned with the *result* of arousal change, while pleasure is the actual *process* of arousal change. It explains why it is in some situations possible to have feeling of pleasure without finally reaching feeling of comfort. The only mutual factor for comfort and pleasure feelings is presence of discomfort as a starting point. It is therefore problematic to experience pleasure when the act of consumption is not initiated by some kind of discomfort, like hunger or other basic needs. As was mentioned previously, the consumption in the western world of today is mostly anticipatoric, which gives a new ground for discomfort, namely, discomfort caused by lack of discomfort.

The abovementioned neurological perspective on experiences is presented in critical literature as a neurological level of experience structure (Jantzen & Vetner, 2007), which can be shown as a model in Figure 5.

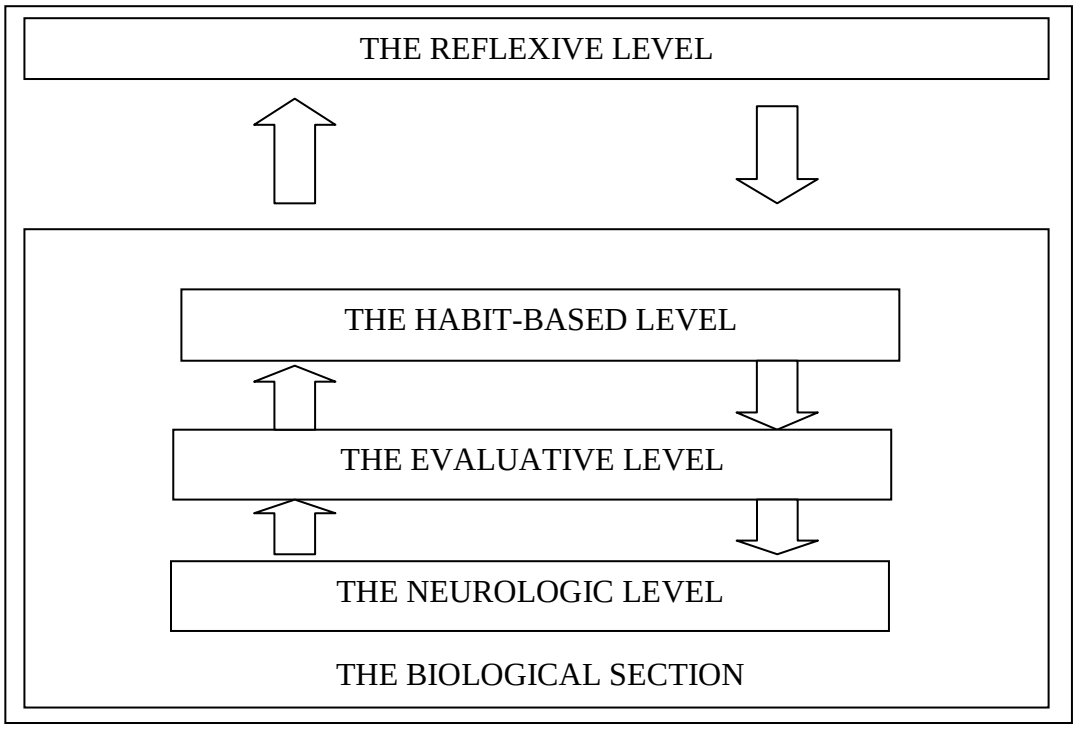


Figure 5. Experience structure. Source: Jantzen & Vetner, 2007.

The model presents the order in which experiences are process by humans. On the first level, neurologic, it is the brain and nerve system that are responsible for processing by changing arousal level with a result of feeling comfort and/or pleasure.

On the next level, evaluative, experience is processed by organism into emotions, which reflect evaluation of the situation triggering changes in arousal level as good or bad.

The habit-based level consists of routines and behaviouristic automatisms that build up a system of preferences in person's mind. It happens by a cognitive process of relating "me" to the "others", resulting in lifestyle formation or feeling of belonging to a group.

The three abovementioned levels of experiencing are operational on the subconscious level, without engaging consciousness: forming preferences without inference (Zajonc, 1980 in Jantzen & Vetner, 2007) or logical deduction on the basis of already known experiences. It happens on the bodily level, therefore, constructing a biological section of experiences. Yet, in case of highly social creatures as humans, each possessing an identity, the processing of experiences is not stopping in the biological section, but goes on through *communication* with others. This level, reflexive on the Figure 5, is fully conscious and concerned with creation of meanings by explanations and interpretations of stimuli rooted in social identity of the individual. (Jantzen & Vetner, 2007) On this level of experience structure, narration plays a vital role as it makes bodily and emotional experiences from the biological levels *communicable* for others.

A certain amount of academic literature perceives experiences as an isolated reflexive level from the above presented model of experience structure. Experiences are dealt with as if they were no more than identity constructing stories of an activity (for instance, in Lund et. al, 2005). To some extent, popularity of this view is rather understandable: it makes life easier for marketers as research on experiences can be done by relatively inexpensive methods as interviews or blogs. In relation to a complex investigation on various levels of experiences, that might as well include controlled laboratory experiments to measure biological variables of experiences, conducting only interviews might seem tempting.

Nevertheless, a more holistic approach to experiences might be worthy to apply in order to close those gaps in understanding consumer behaviour that occur when experiences are treated one-sided, for instance as mere narrations.

The above discussion of the complex structure of experiences, that laid ground for a deeper understanding of experience as a phenomenon, will now be followed by the concept of

experience realms developed by Pine & Gilmore in their controversial work "The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage".

3.4.3 THE EXPERIENCE REALMS

According to Pine & Gilmore (1999), the supplier of experiences can stage experiences that engage consumers on different dimensions, the most important two are considered to be the level of participation in experience and the form of relationship between experience and consumer (or guest, as they put it). Schematically, it is presented as on the Figure 6 vertical axis depicts the form of relationship between experience and consumer ranging from *absorption* to *immersion*.

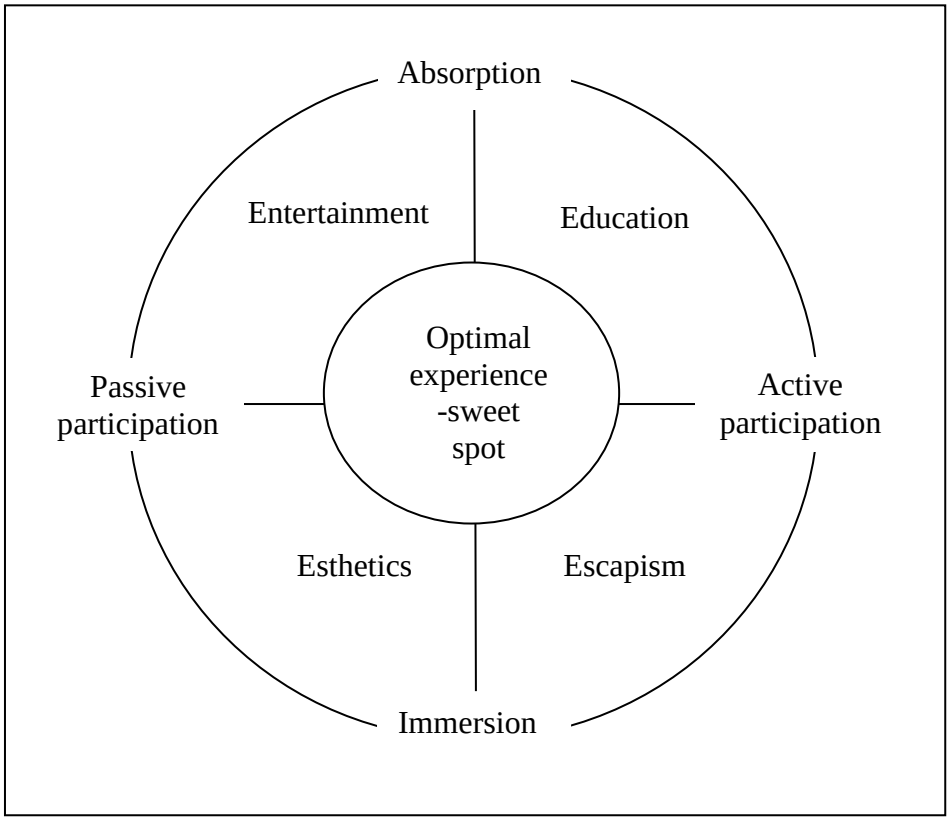


Figure 6. Four realms of experiences and sweet spot. Adapted from Oh et. al (2007), p. 121

Absorption occurs when an experience goes into consumer, "*occupying a person's attention by bringing the experience into the mind*" (Ibid. p. 31), while immersion – when consumer goes into an experience or by "*occupying a person's attention by bringing the experience into*

the mind" (Ibid. p.31). Horizontal axis in the figure 6 represents the level of participation of a consumer in an experience that might range from high to low participation. When collaborating, these two axis outline four dimensions of experiences – or four realms of experience, as Pine & Gilmore named it – entertainment, education, esthetics and escapism. Along the customer participation axis, passive participation of the customer in an experience characterizes the entertainment and esthetic dimensions, whereas educational and escapist dimensions reflect active participation. Applying these four realms onto tourism context, they might be explained as follows: The tourist who passively participates in destination activities does not directly affect or influence the performance of the destination, while an active participant might personally affect the performance or event that becomes part of his or her experience. Along the absorption-immersion axis, the tourist typically "absorbs" entertaining and educational offerings of a destination and "immerses" in the destination environment resulting in esthetic or escapist experiences.

During an experience in education realm, a tourist would absorb an event staged for him at a destination while actively participating in it with his mind and/or body. As a result he might increase his skills and knowledge in general or in one specific field:

…visitors to an art festival may learn the historical background of knitting and weaving presented in various ways (brochures, conversations with the artist, etc.) and may increase their skills by trying to weave on a simple loom following the artist's instructions.(Oh et. al, 2007. p. 121)

As opposed to educational experience, an entertaining one would engage the mind of a tourist, but would not demand his active participation. Merely observing others performing at a destination in real time or just reading for pleasure would be common examples of entertaining experiences for tourists.

Watching and listening to an Elvis Presley impersonator singing at a local music festival or watching a clown ride a tall unicycle at an amusement park are examples of the entertainment experience. (Ibid. p. 121)

Esthetic experiences would mean passive enjoyment of being at the destination without altering its environment or participating in diverse activities. Sightseeing is one common example from the esthetic realm. Physical settings at a destination, its atmosphere and service are of a paramount importance for defining an esthetic experience in that given destination.

Tourists… may come to Cape Cod just to enjoy the serenity of the beach and rhythm of the Atlantic Ocean. (Ibid. p. 121)

The realm of escapism in experiences in tourism context is most peculiar. It demands high level participation and great immersion into experience, co-shaping the experience tourist is partaking in. It is further on preconditioned that tourist is leaving his "usual" environment and "travelling" to a specific one – physically or virtually. (Pine & Gilmore, 1999)

What is peculiar is that the experience of tourism is escapistic in itself. Even though academics in tourism research might not agree on what tourists seek by travelling, be it authentic otherness to oppose their inauthentic daily life to (Boorstin, 1964; MacCannell, 1973) or "self centre" and meaningful life away from the daily one (Cohen, 1979), it centres around *escaping* from their regular environment. So, theoretically, any touristic experience would be escapistic per definition.

Defining the realm of escapism, Pine & Gilmore (1999, p. 211) refer to the state of flow – *process of total involvement* – as being equal to that state of immersion and participation required for achievement of escapist experience. It is, therefore, believed appropriate here to discuss terms relevant for this paper and concepts behind them in order to avoid conceptual confusion. As Pine & Gilmore (1999) equal the state of total involvement in escapist experiences to the state of flow, it would hypothetically lead to a conclusion that all experiences in the realm of escapism are flow experiences. Yet, as it was extensively elucidated in the section on flow, pp.25-30, this concept, developed by Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 1982, 1990, 1997, 2002), refers to an optimal experience. So, it becomes questionable whether all escapistic experiences can be defined as optimal. As was mentioned earlier on pp.26-30 , flow has nine components: high degree of concentration; a loss of the feeling of self-consciousness (sense of serenity); clear set of goals; distorted sense of time; direct and immediate feedback; balance between ability level and challenge; sense of personal control; intrinsically rewarding. In an attempt to apply these components of flow to some of the examples of escapist experiences given by Pine & Gilmore (1999), it might be complicated to call them truly flow experiences. For instance, visiting a theme park or a casino might indeed be an escape from reality of daily life, yet losing sense of serenity or achievement of personal control over experience is rather questionable due to the nature of those attractions. Other examples of escapist experiences from the same source (Ibid.) with virtual reality as a

common denominator (be it chat room, computer games, virtual reality headsets etc.) might as well be problematic to call flow experiences. The source of the problem lies in the interchangeability of terms flow and immersion in escapist experiences within Pine & Gilmore's framework of the experience economy. In virtual context, which is of interest for this paper, there are several concepts used to define engaging experience as immersion, flow, cognitive absorption, (tele)presence etc. (Jennett et. al, 2008) Yet, they all have their peculiarities and should be used as substitutes for each other with some considerations. (Ibid.) Flow and immersion would indeed overlap when concerned with the sense of time distortion and providing challenge that involves a person in a task. It would be more right to state that immersion is a pre-cursor for flow, as an optimal experience would start off with immersing into activity. Yet, not all immersive activities/experiences are flow experiences. For instance, in videogames research (Brown & Cairns, 2004), strong indications were found that a person can be immersed into playing, but still remember about a bus to catch in 15 minutes. In other words, being immersed in the game to some extent but not immersed to the exclusion of all else and therefore not in flow. Immersion then possesses a graded character, where flow would be an extreme, highest level of immersion.

Making these distinctions clear might imply that immersion necessary for escapist experiences is not the same as flow, but rather a pre-stadium for it. So, achieving flow would start with becoming immersed, accompanied with fulfillment of other dimensions of flow discussed on pp. 26-30

Turning back to the model of experience realms by Pine & Gilmore, one more concept in their theory needs to be introduced – sweet spot. These two American pioneers of the experience economy claim that the most compelling experience combines dimensions of all four realms. They graphically place this optimal experience right in the middle of the model, where the two axes of participation and absorption/immersion cross each other (See Figure 6). To support their claim they present several examples of the enterprises encompassing all four realms in their offerings. What seems to be polemical is that they omit mentioning other enterprises as successfully operating in some or only one of the experience realms. The reason might be that in such case they would be expected to elaborate on the reasons for different choices of experience realms, as targeting a specific customer segment, organizational vision and/or mission and so on.

Moreover, the graphical disposition of the experience realms model suffered from criticism of the logic: if the sweet spot integrates all four realms, the axes must logically converge back to the centre of the model whereby the model will collapse (Jantzen & Rasmussen, 2007). It might therefore be beneficial for the model to elaborate on the notion of sweet spot as an optimal experience. That is intended to be done in the next subchapter, which will utilize knowledge generated so far in the theory sections.

By the previous discussion of terms and concepts, link between immersion within experience realms and state of flow was established. In order to be able to answer the first research question, a more profound discussion of how flow relates to experience realms will be undertaken in the following subchapter.

3.5 THE EXPERIENCE REALMS AND FLOW REVISITED

The abovementioned conceptualization of experiences as independent consumption objects raises questions about soundness of the sweet spot notion according to Pine & Gilmore. As they claim it to be an optimal experience, placement of the sweet spot statically in the middle of the experience realms model makes the whole model inflexible and static. From the neurological insights of the previous subchapter on the experience structure we might argue for a more holistic view of the experiences in general and an optimal experience in particular. As mentioned on pp. 43-44, individual preferences for a certain type of experiences is defined by the average level of arousal, being higher than middle for introverts and lower for extraverts. It explains in the first place why different people seek different types of experiences, so they can establish an optimal arousal level and experience pleasure. For the second, it explains why an optimal experience is perceived differently by different consumers. The existing model of experience realms might therefore neglect natural, inborn, differences between consumers. In order to embrace those differences here, improvement of the model is thought to be done with assistance of psychology, which provided arousal theory by means of neurological research. From a psychological viewpoint, optimal experience for an individual is extensively elaborated by Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 1982, 1990, 1997, 2002) as presented on pp. 25-30 He termed it “flow” and referred to an experience, when nothing else matters. It is therefore suggested to make a conceptual and terminological switch from “sweet spot” to “flow” for defining optimal experience within experience realms model. See figure 7.

We believe that random placement of flow – optimal experience – within the four realms would make the model more flexible and utilizable to different personality types. Based on the discussed theories all four types of experiences might provoke a state of flow but in different ways, which will be examined in the following paragraphs. Graphically, differences in the way of achieving flow within certain experience realms are interpreted ranking the flow circles up/down by colour shades and thickness of the contour – see Figure 7.

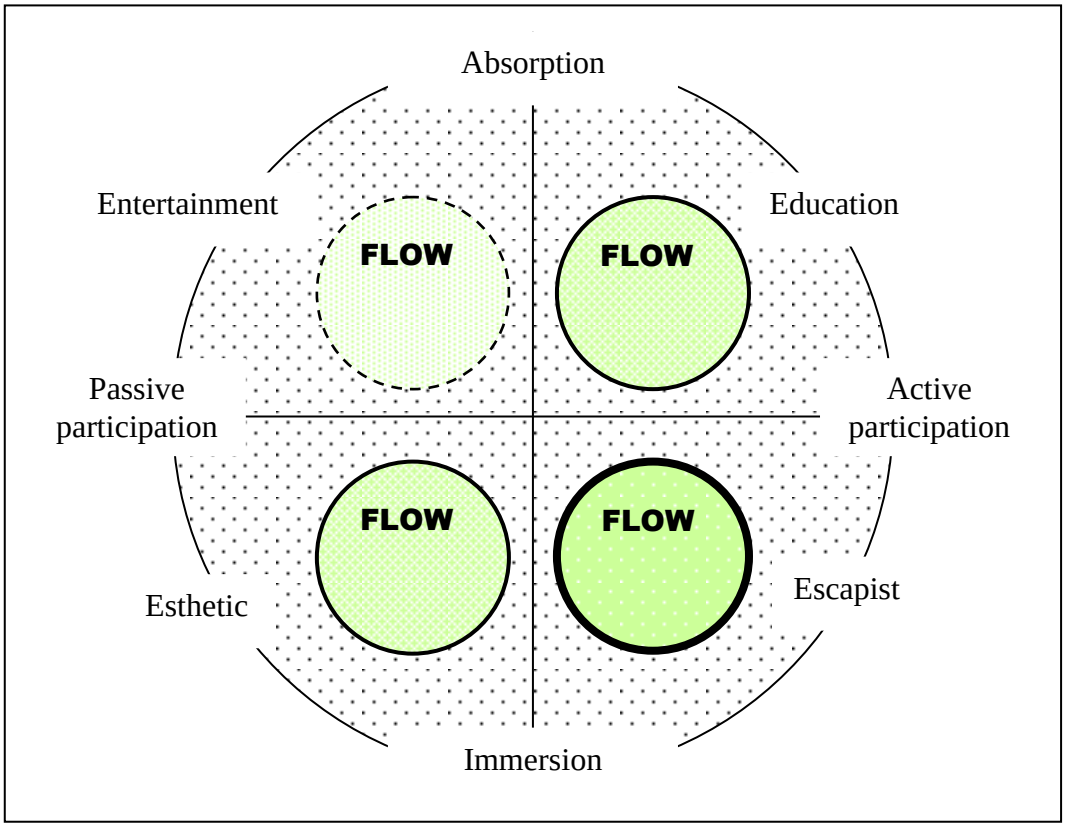


Figure 7. Own model: Flow as optimal experience within experience realms of Pine & Gilmore (1999).

As was suggested in introduction, there might be a relationship between immersion concerned with flow and immersion within certain realms of experiences. From the preceding theoretical subchapters it can be argued, that immersion constituting the deep esthetic and escapist experience relates to the immersion involved in the state of flow in that sense that immersion

into esthetic and escapist experience creates the pre-stadium of flow, as an optimal experience starts off with immersing into activity.

Through the escapist dimension virtual experience such as participating in forums with possibilities to ask people questions online as well as reading the comments involves both *active participation* and *immersion* in the experience. Rich and interactive virtual environment providing clear goals and challenges appropriate to the skills of the consumer in online escapist experiences might enable the user to be an active participant of a computer mediated environment, creating immersion into a web-based activity that might end with its highest level – optimal experience or flow. Escapist dimension involving both active participation and immersion might therefore provoke optimal flow experience more frequently than the rest of the dimensions. (see new model in figure 7)

In esthetic experiences (as shown on new model in figure 7) consumers and participants are *immersed* into in an activity or an environment but *passively participate* in activities and do not directly affect or influence the performance–like a virtual visitor of an art gallery. Conceptually, passive participation in esthetic experience does not match determinants of flow experience where active participation in coping with challenges, that virtual environment provides, is the necessary condition, although one might be totally immersed into an activity. However, we believe that with the help of interactive media esthetic experiences might help each tourist compose the virtual experience with their favorite attractions and enjoy the virtual experience. For example, virtually visiting an art gallery tourists have to use some minimal interactive elements, such as clicking for the web site or manually enlarging pictures on the art gallery. These minimal elements of interactivity in equilibrium with user skills might enable potential tourist to achieve a state of flow. Furthermore, challenges are by no means confined to physical activities. Csikszentmihályi (1990, p. 51) states that *even the passive enjoyment one gets from looking at a painting or a sculpture depends on the challenges that the work of art contains.*" Attending art gallery requires visual skills that can, in fact, provide constant access to enjoyable experience. One must invite physic energy in looking at beautiful sights and at good art before one can recognize the quality of it. Hence, challenges in esthetic experience might result in flow experience even in situations where one would not expect them to be relevant.

Turning now the attention to educational experience, through which tourists *absorb* educational offerings on the destination, this dimension according to Pine & Gilmore 1999 does not meet the conditions of immersion. However in virtual environment one is acting according to the rules of the given educational experience within the computer mediated environment and is *active participant* that enables the Web user to cope with physical challenges presented on the website as well as situational challenges related to the activity. Reading texts or viewing video clips with some educational content may easily create flow experience, as reading include the ability to translate words into images and in its broader sense to manipulate symbolic information require skills (Csikszentmihályi 2002, Chen et al, 1999). Thus the activity of reading intriguing information and/or viewing video clip with some educational information might, as well, create an optimal flow experience.

And finally entertainment experiences, involving *passive participation* and *absorption* conceptually do not meet the requirements for the achievement of a state of flow. Tourist may attend a concert virtually i.e. using the computer mediated environment, and, however, tourists passively observe the performance of others they are not able to change the process of a concert, except for on and off the program. Nonetheless, passive enjoyment derived from entertainment experiences, again, can be discussed within the flow theory. *Listening to music* for instance usually starts as a sensory experience, where one responds to the qualities of sound that induce the pleasant physical reactions (Csikszentmihályi 1990). The next level of challenge music presents is the analogic mode of listening (one develops skill to evoke feelings and images based on the patterns of sound) and analytic listening, which involves the ability to recognize the order underlying the work, and the means by which the harmony was achieved. Csikszentmihályi suggests that the opportunities to enjoy music increase geometrically if one develops analytic listening skills. The same can be said about fun shows, where one needs to develop a sense of humor to understand these performances. One is true about all flow activities: "*without cultivating the necessary skills, one cannot expect to take true enjoyment in a pursuit*" (Csikszentmihályi 1990: 108). Thus, entertainment experiences might also provoke a state of flow – when staged for the "right public".

From the above discussion, one can state that escapist dimension is more fruitful for achievement of flow when in virtual environment, as immersion needed to experience

escapism is as well present in all virtual contexts. The notion of telepresence presents the escapistic dimension of virtual reality, when the person is escaping his daily life by immersing into virtual environment. Therefore, most experiences in virtual context might have an escapistic touch. The state of immersion coupled with active participation in experience makes the escapist experience most universal type of experiences for achieving state of flow.

The state of flow is nevertheless possible in the other three dimensions under the conditions of targeting experiences for the "right public". It is furthermore possible to establish a graded relationship between flow and four realms of experiences that is graphically done on the Figure 7.

To conclude, the theoretical chapter suggests the answer to the first research question of the thesis, in that it offers theoretical insights in which flow construct may be applied to the Experience economy and discussed within the four realms of experiences. At the core of the discussion is placed immersion into an activity, which is considered to overlap with flow experience when concerned to merging of action, awareness and intense focus, a sense of time distortion and effortless action in the transition from the experience to the effect stage of flow. Therefore optimal experience starts with immersion into an activity, when other conditions of flow are present. In the context of Experience Economy, immersion constituting the esthetic and escapist experience is rather a start-up of optimal experience, the deepest extent of which may lead to a state of flow. Holistic aspect holds a special position in the discussion as it points to the significance of a personality type, situational challenges, as well as inborn or developed skills to cope with them.

4. EMPIRICAL PART

4.1 WEBSITE REVIEW: VIRTUAL EXPERIENCES ON THE RIVER COTTAGE WEBSITE

Within this chapter we will make a discussion of a chosen website River Cottage through different theoretical perspectives. Firstly we will present types of experiences presented on the website in the realms of the Experience Economy. Then we will proceed with technological variables influencing virtual experience as these are essential for the achievement of a state of flow. And finally we will deal with the pre-conditions of the computer mediated environment – including conditions and prerequisites for provoking the emergence of the optimal experience/the state of flow on the website. For more details on Website Review see the Methodology chapter on pp. 15-16.

4.1.1 TYPES OF EXPERIENCES

Taking into considerations insights from the theoretical sections of the paper, a review of a website in order to determine its experiential profile is a subjective matter. Such review would inevitably bear a touch of a person in charge for completion of the review. As mentioned in theory, evaluative process of experiences is individual and is therefore not a subject for generalizations. Nevertheless, a review of the site might provide some insight into reasons for selection of that particular website. Moreover, such review is a construction of authors' reality that might not be generalizable, but rather a discussable issue, that might facilitate understanding of the interview results further in the research process.

The River Cottage website does not seem to position itself exclusively as a travelling website, yet it represents a destination that has a "pull factor" in relation to its visitors. It means the River Cottage itself is a motivation for the trip, and not only diverse "push factors", which might motivate tourist to escape from their daily life by travelling to a different mode of life. It is therefore important that experiential information about the attraction is explicitly available on the website that represents it. When dealing with a virtual experiences in the tourism context experiential information about the destination is merging with a virtual experience of surfing on that website. It might be defined as double escape: Escaping from daily life by immersing into virtual mediation of the destination that might become a further

escape from daily life as an actual trip. This argument supports the suggestion, mentioned in theoretical chapter, that all experiences in tourism context might embrace escapistic dimension of experiences. It further leads to a suggestion that experiences on tourism related website (in our case – The River Cottage website) might have even stronger relation to escapism realm of experiences as virtual reality on the website facilitates escaping from regular environment.

On the River Cottage website escapistic feeling seems to be increased by use of video clips presenting the locations and team members, united under the common website. Videos of backing team working on the daily bread creation with exposition of newly backed loafs simulates (mediates) a sensation of texture, smell, consistence and even sour taste of rye bread. Background noises of a busy canteen with kitchen staff visible in the picture performing their tasks facilitate immersion into environment on the website.

Another mode to immerse into virtual environment of the website is to participate in *Community* activities as blogs, forums and possibilities to ask people behind the River Cottage questions online as well as reading comments of those who experienced the place in real life. That might as well be counted for escapist experiences on the website.

Educational realm of experiences seems as well be extensively present on the website due to the nature of the attraction. The head quarters of the River Cottage offer a broad range of culinary and grow-self courses on the premises, so the real life experience would have a strong educational value. On the website, educational dimension gives the impression to be presented by on-line courses and vast amounts of information relevant to the topic: organic life style, seasonality of vegetables, recipes and edible projects everyone can start out at home.

Entertainment dimension of experiences is usually referred to watching others perform (Oh et. al, 2007; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Watching videos portraying professionals from the River Cottage cook might therefore be charged as entertainment. It seems to be enhanced by the humor accompanying their performance that is as well referred to as entertainment booster (Pine &Gilmore, 1999).

Concerning esthetic experiences, atmosphere of the destination, its physical settings (in the case of a website – its layout and design) are of primary importance. Those parameters should encourage visitors just *to be* at the destination. Evaluating esthetic dimension of the experiences on the River Cottage website seems therefore to be a rather subjective matter as

tastes differ. Making an effort of staying open minded and neutral in our evaluations, the website might be labeled as having simple layout and design, involving no other ways of decorations than photographs. On one hand, such minimalistic design of the website might provoke negative emotions of boredom from those seeking novel or extraordinary sensual stimulation within esthetic dimension. On the other hand, true color professional photographs of food might be the right esthetic background for an attraction as the River Cottage, for it is know that esthetics in food is one of components of nourishment it provides.

Summing up the experiential profile of the River Cottage website, we can suggest that its experiential value lays mostly within escapism and education dimensions of experiences according to Pine & Gilmore's model. It rooms as well experiences in the entertainment realm and might provoke some esthetic experiences from the "right" public. Yet the latter two might be defined as "side-effects" to the former two, which seem to be the core experiences of the destination itself as well as be present on its website

4.1.2 Technical factors

As the special features for computer mediated environment in the context of Web-based virtual experience is technical factors enabling telepresence leading to the state of flow, these factors on this website review will be discussed in the following chapters on Sensorial Richness and Interactivity.

Sensorial Richness

As illustrated by Figure 8, the River Cottage homepage is divided into 2 horizontal parts and consists of three elements in addition to the navigational tools:

- Nine alternating pictures with River Cottage and additional information of the River Cottage at the top of the page which change whenever the page is loaded.
- Links to the information about the sender (including Facts about River Cottage, News, Online courses and additional information of the website content and online shop.
- Latest news and events in the middle of the Website 'Seasonal Recipes' and 'Recipes of the new series' as well as video clip at the bottom of the page.

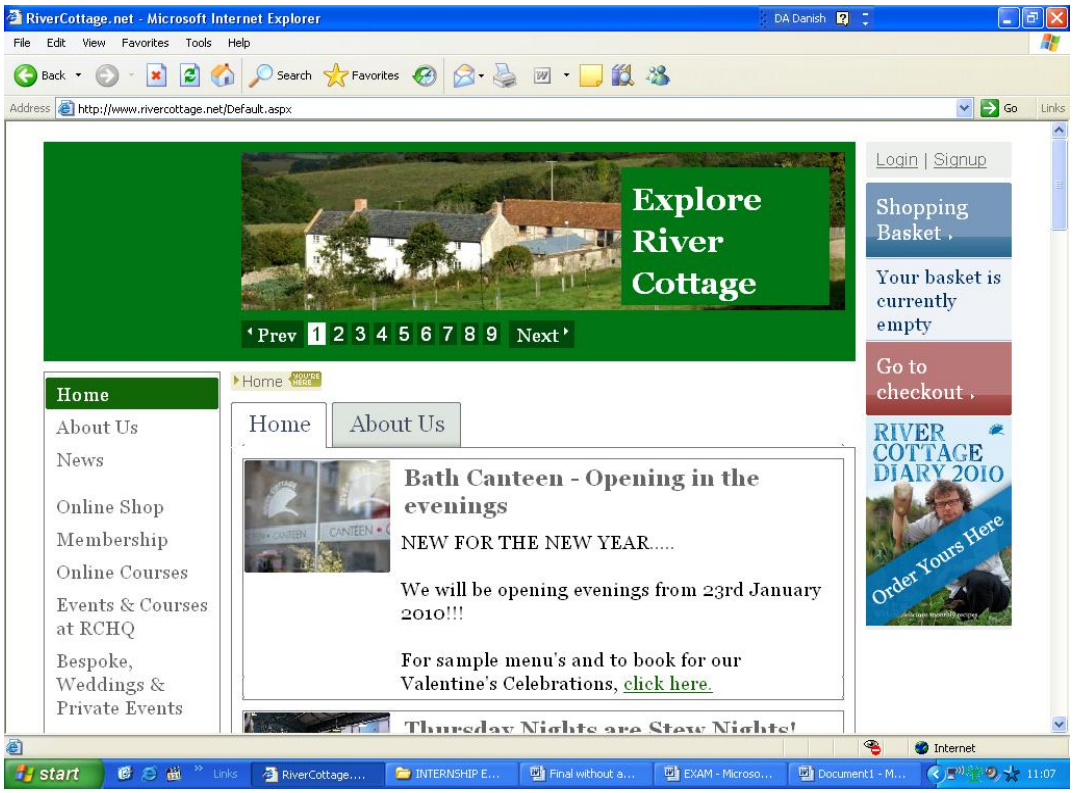


Figure 8. River Cottage homepage, January 2010

Turning to Steuer (1995) model of technological variables influencing telepresence/virtual experience (see p. 36) *sensory breadth* on www.rivercottage.net on the front page relates on the only one sensory channel – visual. Auditory system is given less priority. Auditory channel is being utilized only in video presentations. Nine alternating pictures of the website at the top of the page as well as smaller ones on latest news and events are presenting visual system on the home site. Photorealistic images of the front page created with photographs of live-action scenes rather than an animated scene or a drawing, according to Lombard & Ditton (1997) provoke a greater sense of presence. However visual appeal is not accompanied by a sound and the media richness on the home site is lesser in breadth.

According to Lombard & Ditton (1997) the perceived quality of an image or *sensory depth* depends on many characteristics, size, colour sharpness, contrast, the absence of "ghost" and other noise. The images of the front page of River Cottage's home site (see Figure 8) are different in size: nine large, containing two thirds of the space at the top of the page and some others smaller underneath, representing latest news, seasonal recipes and etc (see Appendix 3) These large images might evoke a variety of more intense presence-related responses;

however the others smaller images are too small to evoke a sense of presence on the mediated environment and create a rather fragmented impression.

Images on the front page however are still (not moving). Motion related depth cues may provide an illusion of continuous action and create presence (Lombard & Ditton, 1997); however as for now the sense of presence can hardly be established. Images are colourful hereby evoking more presence than those in case of black and white and three dimensional and hereby might help to create a sense of reality on virtual experiences when visiting the Website. In terms of colour sharpness and contrast of the photorealistic images at the top of the front page are very clear, natural background sharpens colour contrast and brightness of the images (see Figure 8) However the other smaller images are too small and extinguish colour contrasts and brightness of the images (see Figure 8 and Appendix 3). Consequently the visually perceived quality of the images on the front page can hardly be perceived as being realistic.

The same tendencies of presenting visual information can be established during the whole site. Images inside the navigational channels for events and courses (under the channels *Online courses, Events and Courses at RCHQ, Bespoke, Weddings and Private Events, Seasonal Recipes, What is Good Now, Edible Projects and etc.* are photos. Photorealistic colourful images of the River Cottage surroundings, raw products and ready meal as well as people preparing and enjoying the meal are being used when presenting experiences. The virtual experiences thus can be perceived as being less mediated as photorealistic images create a greater sense of telepresence. Images on these navigational channels are very realistic indeed (see Appendix 4). Three-dimensional, colourful and bright images extend colour contrasts and brightness of the images and create an illusion of visually perceived stimuli being more realistic. However all the images are still (there is no any movement at all) and small and cannot be enlarged manually. Thus the virtual experiences created on these pages, can be perceived as being less realistic and consequently cannot engender a greater sense of presence.

Bigger part of experiences on the navigational channels *Online Courses, Local Produce Store/Canteen, Community, Seasonal Recipes* and etc. are being supplied with video films promoting real experiences. Visually appealing stimuli on video films promoting amusements involve some "tricks" and techniques, such as making distant objects smaller, making near objects block parts of objects "behind" them and reducing detail and texture in distant objects,

enhancing a sense of three dimensional spaces Lombard & Ditton (1997). The video film promoting a day trip to the River Cottage (at the bottom of the *Home* channel*)* is being especially appealing; the action is being presented though the eyes of a consumer. The intended effect at least could be to make the viewer experience a sense of presence by becoming part of the scene, seeing through the eyes of an implied or actual character. A potential tourist is able to see what he/she is going to experience if he/she will by a trip to the destination: a day starts with making dough, building clay ovens, proceeds with preparing meal and baking and ends with lunch and a dessert. Visual presentation is created using some tricks that make the action to be presented through the eyes of a consumer. Visually appealing stimuli are being accompanied by a sound. These perceptions occur simultaneously - the constantly changing view to the environment from the River Cottage and its surroundings, a voice of a narrator and a sound of music supplied by laughing and enjoying experiences people – thereby a sense of participation in the actions is nearly generated. The vividness of the presented experience scenes is generated by simultaneous juxtaposition of these two sensory inputs.

As discussed above the page utilizes only one visual channel and the possibilities to increase the quality of the visual presentation (sensory depth) is not fully used, therefore the page seems not to be high in depth as well as in breadth.

Interactivity

Turning now the attention to the interactivity of the webpage, the *range* of interactivity (the specific dimensions that can be modified (Steuer, 1995)) on the River Cottage's home page is entirely based on haptic inputs, that includes the knobs and buttons of the computer and computer mice that record user commands via object manipulation. In the virtual environment of the selected website user can open and close the channels for information at one's will. However there is no any possibility to make some spatial organizations where objects appear, as well as change brightness and colour of the page in terms of intensity and frequency. The pictures are strictly determined in size and their size cannot be changed. The promotional videos presenting the River Cottage and its products are on or off (continuous play), programs can be paused at any time (start-stop), and the portions may be skipped or repeated at the whim of the viewer. There is a capability by allowing random-access jump to any portion of

the programs in a matter of seconds. The page permits a possible action to change intensity of volume in video clips, but there is no possibility to change frequency characteristic such as timbre. In the other words, these videos increase the amount of change that can be affected of the mediated environment and thereby increase the range of interactivity, enabling a consumer to modify the mediated environment in which they interact. Nevertheless, the page does not allow any actions to pick up, feel, and move many different objects each with different textures. Consequently the virtual experience on the Rive Cottage actually permits interactions with the environment as whole rather then interactions with objects *in* the mediated environment in real time, which means that the environment on the Website provides fewer control options. In situations where fewer control options are available, consumers might perceive their experiences as being less challenging and therefore the on-line experience may result in boredom rather than flow (Csikszentmihályi).

Related to *mapping* that refers to the way in which human actions are connected to actions within a mediated environment (Steuer, 1995), the actions on the home page of the River Cottage are completely arbitrary. For example, wiggling one's finger might open and close channels. The click of a left computer mice button might change the volume of a sound in the videos and etc. Typing arbitrary commands on the *Community* channel may help to write questions; however it does not allow making any natural writing movement to initiate writing on the virtual environment. Since our perception systems are optimized for interactions with the "real world" (Steuer, 1995), mapping on the website is not increased by adopting controllers to the human body, as the programs on this website are not natural at all. However even an arbitrary system enable user to become an active participant of the mediated environment (ibid.).

In terms of *speed* (*immediate feedback*) - the ideal interactive medium responds in "real time" to user input; the response time is not noticeable (Steuer, 1995). This home site is quite interactive in terms of speed and/or provides feedback to the actions performed by the user immediately and thereby enables mediated experiences to amplify perception of the world in real time: the amount of change of short video (start-stop-pause), ordering a book and/or video (in the *Online Shop*), typing questions and chatting in the *Community* channel is indeed not noticeable. Lombard & Ditton (1997) notes, that when forced to choose between responsiveness to motion and resolution of images, virtual reality developers are choosing responsiveness as more important factor. It means that high speed of interactivity or

immediate feedback engenders a sense of presence even if the stimuli in these systems are quite low in depth. Therefore virtual environment on the River Cottage website may help the potential tourist to become immersed into the computer mediated environment leading to a state of flow.

4.1.3 Pre-conditions of the computer mediated environment

Having analysed technical factors influencing virtual experience of on the webpage we would like to turn our attention to the conditions and pre-requisites for provoking the emergence of the optimal experience/the state of flow on the website. As mentioned in the theory chapter (see on pp. 33-35) the pre-conditions (immediate feedback, clear goals and rules as well as challenges) constituting the antecedents stage is managed by marketers in order to create a compelling on-line experience.

Seen from abovementioned paragraph on the Speed of Interactivity the website produces *immediate feedback* to the activities (see the paragraph above on pp. 62) which means that the first pre-requisite of the computer mediated environment - immediate feedback - may create the conditions for the occurrence of flow.

Related to the second pre-condition of the website, The River Cottage provides *rules* with a way to assess performance and some information in real time for the person to recognize his/her current status, such as how much he/she has achieved, how well he/she has progressed or how the activity is proceeding. For example, when visiting *Friends Directory* when sharing information to other people the website provides clear rules of how to type and place information and pursue *Online Course*, and *clear goal* providing with the information of what needs to be done in order to help a person to find some old information, presented, for example, two weeks before, and/or to pursue the on-line products (to buy a recipe book and video or to book a service with an experience). The content of information is structured in the way that the things website user finds the most interesting is supplied with additional links and information. In means, that the website focuses on what users are trying to do, where they are trying to go leading the consumer to his/her own personal experience, which is more likely to induce a state of flow.

Related to the *challenges* created by the computer mediated environment or technologies of the webpage (just described on the Interactivity chapter) are not too demanding therefore may result in boredom rather than flow, however as mentioned in the theory not all of the challenges were associated with communication, rather with the situational conditions inherent in the respondent's interests and goal (Chen et al. 1999). Thereby, the challenge relating to the complexity and dynamic of action itself and including any opportunity for action may lead to a state of flow. The information presented on the webpage River Cottage consists mostly of functions of searching for the information and/or browsing, activities of reading, writing and viewing video clips. The function of reading and viewing video clips usually provokes low level of challenges and skills needed to cope with these challenges. Nevertheless, challenges referring to the texts usually contain some new unfamiliar aspect, providing the challenges to sustain flow, which in turn usually causes perceived benefits from increased knowledge. The activities of participating in Community activities as blogs, forums and possibilities to ask people behind the River Cottage questions online require skills with capacity to manipulate symbolic information and creative thinking. Similarly, the activities watching video clips may induce flow experience, if the subject provided on it is full of information that the viewer has specific interest in. Thus the activities of reading intriguing information and/or viewing video clip with some educational information as well as typing questions and debating on the *Community* channel provokes creative thinking and according to Chen et al. (1999) may easily create flow experience.

Having accomplished the website review from two different points of view – the experience economy and more instrumental insights of human-computer interaction as well as pre-conditions for provoking the emergence of a state of flow – we believe the background for the selection of the River Cottage website is elucidated. The experiential value of the website embraces primarily escapist and educational experiences, yet esthetic and entertainment are situationally possible. That might indicate possibilities of answering our second research question. From the point of view of instrumental insights of human-computer interaction, we believe that virtual experience on the webpage River Cottage through sensorial richness, interactivity, challenges, rules and goals presented by the computer mediated environment may lead to a state of flow, but we bear in mind that the meaning of challenges and appropriate skills to cope with these challenges are situated in time and space, dependent on

what it is that the user is doing and the goal that he/she is pursuing as well as personal characteristics and ability to perceive experiences and achieve a state of flow. The next chapter on the analysis of consumers' point of view to the experience will therefore deal with personal ability to perceive experience. It is intended to answer the second research question.

4.2 INTERVIEW ANALYSIS: FLOW WITHIN FOUR REALMS OF EXPERIENCES

4.2.1 INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview guide (enclosed as Appendix 1) should ensure that the same overall topics are covered in all interviews and all of the interviews are structured around the subsequent general guidelines. Yet, the possibility to ask questions not covered by Interview Guide was present, when the dynamics of conversation led us beyond the outlined structure.

The interview started with a brief account of the research project and the way in which the answers of the respondents would be used. Respondents had a possibility of revisiting the website just before the interview if they felt it was necessary.

Two themes are covered in the interviews: occurrence of flow in respect to the website and respondents perceived types of experiences – escapist, esthetic, educational and entertainment.

The reason of including these themes is, firstly that we wish to get a folded picture of achievement of flow in general and, secondly, we wish to capture a state of flow within different types of experiences, namely – escapist, esthetic, educational and entertainment.

Our strategy was, firstly, to find out the occurrence of flow by providing interviewees with the descriptions of flow phenomenon in the beginning of each interview, and asking them if they had an experience when navigating of the website River Cottage as described in the quotations. Secondly, we tried to elicit experiential outcomes after entering a state of flow, categorized by Chen et al. 1999 (see chapter on Effect Stage on p. 37), as these are essential in evaluating individuals inner experience when reaching the level of optimal experience. We asked the respondents to explain the feeling of perceived enjoyment and perception of time distortion and etc. These questions were used because they provide a general overview of the

experience of flow and a more detailed understanding of people's perception of the optimal experience.

As a next sub cluster of questions, pre-conditions of flow, categorized by Chen et al. (1999) (see chapter on Antecedent stage on pp. 33-35) were also considered as important basis for the achievement of flow; therefore questions identifying these dimensions were involved into the interview guide. Here, respondents were asked to consider perceived challenges when navigating on the website, like contextual and situational conditions as difficulties within technological, information retrieval, language and other dimensions. Since perceived skills are the counterpart of perceived challenges we can then evaluate the meaning of skills when navigating on the website. Questions of challenges included references to inner goals, immediate feedback and being in control as positive experience of these may influence the willingness to cope with challenges. It was important to uncover, as the willingness to cope with challenges might indicate achievement of flow experience.

Furthermore, the next cluster of questions was concerned the four realms of experiences, namely escapist, esthetic, educational and entertainment (after Pine & Gilmore, 1999) with the aim to find out whether the respondents have encountered these experiences when navigating on the Website. They were asked to point out channels of the website inspiring concrete type of experience. This gave us a possibility to compare those parts with channels where flow was evident from the answers to previous cluster of questions about dimensions of flow.

The following analysis of the interviews will follow the structure outlined in the abovementioned.

The interview guide is enclosed as Appendix 1

4.2.2 GENERAL PERCEPTIONS OF FLOW ON THE RIVER COTTAGE WEBSITE

To begin with, the analysis of eight interviews resulted in five persons with flow experiences within escapist, esthetic and educational dimensions of the River Cottage website. For the tables of occurrence of flow in the interview findings – see Appendix 6. Three out of those five respondents could report the resemblance of their perception of flow with the three descriptions provided in the beginning of each interview (See Methodology chapter pp. 10-11

and Interview Guide in Appendix 1) Two remaining respondents could not associate their perceptions of flow with the given descriptions, yet in the course of interviews their perceptions were counted for as sequence of short occurrences of flow, though not that extreme as the given descriptions. It was done by firstly analyzing their answers about experiential outcomes and preconditions of flow and concluding that their experiences might have been termed as flow experiences, as they both answered positively to questions about enjoyment, time distortion, feeling of control and positive challenges.
As one interviewee described it when asked if time was going too fast:

"No, I was not involved to the extent when time stops and I could suddenly look at the clock 3 hours later, no… maybe I am too aware of my time limits… it's like I's coming back from the universe of the site from time to time to check up the clock, but then I went straight back, even I knew I didn't have more time for that… I just couldn't help going on reading and I wanted more!!" (M8)

His perception of surfing on the website was not as strong as in three descriptions, yet the above quote gives an indication of short periods of total immersion into the "universe" of website accompanied by loosing ability to track the time. The last sentence in the quote also suggests that the activity became autotelic, as he wanted more and more of it. Together with his perception of full control, intrinsic enjoyment from the activity and challenges, that he could overcome, (further on called *positive challenges*) it gives strong indications of achieving state of flow for short periods of time.
Even though the three descriptions of flow, we used to introduce the concept to our interviewees, were widely utilized by flow researchers (Pace 2004, Novak et. al 2000, Chen et. al 1999), they turned out as not always easy to associate with for our interviewees. It might be explained by the fact that those three descriptions were taken from the persons experiencing flow during their work and leisure situations (Csikszentmihályi, 1975). So, the activities were not new for them, the rules were clear and they could stick to their goals. In our investigation the respondents were set up to fulfill an activity (surfing the River Cottage website) by our choice, which they could not influence. So, the goal was "artificially" created to fit the purpose of the paper, that fact might have influenced the extent of the flow state for some respondents.

4.2.3 FLOW IN ESCAPIST EXPERIENCES

As it was hypothetically suggested in the subchapter on flow and experience types revisited on pp.51-55, the most fertile dimension for achievement of flow within virtual environment in tourism context is escapist dimension. In the course of explorative interview investigation conducted within this paper, there were registered indications for relative soundness of that prediction.

Turning back to the five respondents, which experienced flow in the virtual reality of the website, four have achieved it within escapist dimension of the experiences available. It must be stated here, that the dimension was identified as escapist according to the respondents own perceptions, which might differ from each other's and from those of authors, presented in Website Review chapter, pp. 56-65. For instance, one of the respondents (F1) was in flow state while being on the channel of *Edible Projects*, where she managed to escape from reality into the world of her fantasies about her own garden, inspired by that channel:

I imagined myself in my own garden behind my own house growing my own food. So yes, I was in another place. I would call this the feeling of flow; because I lost track of time and space and my attention was absolutely absorbed by the site. (F1)

Her own perception of flow on that channel could be reinforced by her positive answers to the questions about enjoyment, time distortion, feeling of control and positive challenges on the same channel (*Edible Projects*), which all are essential for achievement of flow. Consider the following:

I forgot time, and when I was looking at the watch, 2 hours were gone, but these two hours didn't at all feel like two hours. I had expected half an hour to be passed … (F1 about time distortion)

I wouldn't say there are some parts of the website I suddenly gained control over. It was more like it took some time until I found out how the website is constructed. (F1 about challenges of the website and feeling of control)

The other three respondents with flow in escapist dimension experienced it on the *Community* channel, namely Dig Your Dinner campaign videos. So, different interviewees perceived

different channels as escapist experiences. An interesting finding was that even though they all escaped *from* their immediate reality, some of them escaped *into* their fantasies, inspired by the page, the others – *into* the virtual reality of the page:

[…] On the page community videos made me think how to make my own garden, and imagine how to harvest my own beans... I felt opportunities, a good way to get help in growing my own vegetables." (M8)

[…] The first sensing like "flow" I experienced in greenhouse, since I felt how warm it was there. When I've seen preparing basil I even felt smell of it. I stood on the other side of head chefs table and felt smell of basil."(M5)

[…] It's a kind of being there in a River Cottage in a course of making dough, preparing stuffed Roast turkey breast even enjoying meal with other people as it was on a Day at River Cottage. (F3)

The above examples suggest that experience providers' expectations about the perceptions of experience types they stage for the consumers can fluctuate from the actual perceptions by those consumers. As on the River Cottage website, where the respondents perceived activities on different channels of the website as escapistic.

Another finding of the interviews concerning escapist experiences was related to videos on the website. As was mentioned in the Website Review chapter, pp. 56-65, videos are believed to be a great facilitator of the escapist experiences due to their technical characteristics enabling sensual experience and therefore greater involvement into activity, consequently, possibilities of achieving an optimal experience/flow . From the interviews that suggestion received a considerable support as three of the respondents that experienced flow within escapist dimension mentioned videos recipes as a flow provoking channel:
You not only read the texts, but also watch videos, that make you to be immersed more into an activity. It's a kind of being there in a River Cottage in a course of making dough, preparing stuffed Roast turkey breast even enjoying meal with other people as it was on a Day at River Cottage. (F3)

Video is a great way to give information about how to grow and make food. It's mostly because it's difficult to read how to make a dish, with picture and explanations the information is given in the best way. And they are doing it good. The videos are shown in a nice design, colures referrer to the topic. The green for vegetables and the brown for soil… (M8)

[…] I had a feeling of being welcomed to the canteen and that they were willing to show me around and get a good idea what I can experience there if I come there in real life… I think I managed to feel a scent of freshly baked bread in one of the videos; they are really good at letting you imagine it! (M8)

[...] Like I previously noticed I even felt the smell of basil and heard the sounds of working kitchen. I felt on summer time again, I felt like sitting and tasting cider with Hugh and his cider making friend.... (M5)

Another interesting finding from the interviews is the fact that every interviewee who had an escapist experience on the website did as well reported achievement of an optimal experience/flow within the same dimension of experiences, namely escapist. In other words, there were no interviewees who would not call there escapist experience as optimal, in contrast to for instance the interviewees with educational experiences. (See pp. 75-83)
Among those interviewees who did not have an experience within escapist dimension one person reported experiencing activities in the other three dimensions, yet the escapist dimension was not appealing to him. According to his own words he was really immersed into the site, but could still not imagine himself in another time and space:

[…] well… I don't remember I thought of myself out there. River Cottage was still just a website, very nice one, but just a website. I really enjoyed all the information – I think I came up in a high gear from page to page and to another page, reading… but it was more like getting information, not sensing it like you do in real life… " (M7)

Through the conversation it was established that he had other urgent things on his mind while surfing the website. That might be the reason of a lower level of immersion into the activity than is necessary for escaping from reality in the first place and subsequently achieving an optimal/flow escapist experience.

Along with the abovementioned reason for failure to experience an escapist experience on the website, the other explanations were found in the course of the interviews with three remaining interviewees. Crucial factor for getting immersed and achieving flow was the amount of time accessible for surfing the website. Interviewees that did not report any types of experiences are those who spend least time on the webpage, either due to lack of free time.

[…] I could still feel that I'm at home, and could here that the postman has come with post and I still was worrying of the last New Year's presents that I have to buy and some other things…"(F6)
or due to *"[…] website did not 'click' with my inner me* (F4).

Those two interviewees were considered to misunderstand the goal, which was stated for them before they surfed the website (See methodology chapter on p. 11). In relation to achieving flow the crucial character of a clear goal was already discussed in the theory chapter on pp. 33-35. Clear goal is related to the pre-conditions of flow together with immediate feedback to the actions within virtual environment and challenges appropriate to the skills. In the course of the interviews it was established that the two interviewees did not understand the goal of potential tourists interested in gourmet travelling – searching for information on either cooking or eating at the destination. One of them clearly concentrated her attention on exclusively the channels of web shop, where the most of information was "for sale":

Even in the parts of the site which were very interesting for me (like 'Food matters', reading on different topics) I felt that there is a commercial aspect hidden: please here you go, it is bullet points of my very interesting book, which you can buy… Having this commercial aspect throughout the website you feel like first of all that the site visitor is a potential customer of products or services provided by River Cottage Website. This stopped me from getting truly involved…
Secondly, everything is so commercial. Very often one gets treated a walking wallet, instead of as a person who might be really interested in matter. That obviously limits the access to wanted information. (F4)

Through the whole interview she mentioned commercial nature of the website as something that prohibited her in feeling involvement, feeling of control, time distortion and consequently

state of flow. The other of those two interviewees had as well some expectations to the website that illustrated her misunderstanding of a goal, which she should have pursued on the website:

[…] I liked diversified information. It was interesting to read forums and recipes, but I it didn't stimulate my curiosity. At least I didn't expect that I have to learn something from it. (F6)

The analysis of an esthetic dimension will be addressed in the following subchapter.

4.2.4 FLOW IN ESTHETIC EXPERIENCES

According to own model presented on p. 52, flow within esthetic dimension of experiences in virtual environment is possible due to the state of immersion characteristic to partaking in esthetic experience. It was as well argued that the participation level should not be limited to physical activity, but should embrace the types of activity undertaken to overcome challenges of virtual environment and esthetical enjoyment. Here, skills become important for the user of virtual environment to respond to challenges and in this way perform a sufficient level of activity, which is needed to achieve flow. By the skills needed here it is suggested to understand web/computer user skills and skills of evaluation of esthetic dimension of a given experience.

In the course of the interviews, one person presented indications of flow within esthetic activities on the River Cottage website. He experienced an esthetic dimension within the same channel that gave him escapist experiences, namely *Community* channel. Here, to the question about attractiveness of the website, that is the core feature of esthetic experiences, the interviewee expressed a positive evaluation of the physical look and atmosphere of the website. His answer reflected analogic and analytic types of thinking (see p. 54) as a response to that sensory experience of observing the graphics and videos on the River Cottage website. We can therefore say that his skills match challenges of an esthetic dimension on the website:

… The videos are shown in a nice design, colures referrer to the topic. The green for vegetables and the brown for soil. It's also a calmer page to look at because of more colures

and the layout is good. Rest of the website is too white… The feeling of being calm, down to earth. (M8)

We cannot say a clear distinction between an esthetic and escapist dimensions of the same activity – it was not possible to detect where an escapist dimension ends and where an esthetic one begins. It might again be an indication for the individual manner of experience perception conceptualized in the theoretical part of the paper.
As an opposite experience – of boredom, instead of flow, within esthetic dimension of the website – one of the interviewees should be mentioned. Through that interview "a red thread" of dissatisfaction with esthetic challenges of the website was regularly present. Consider the following sequence from that interviewee:

The website itself is not that appealing to me – colorwise and designwise..." (M2 to the question about general perception of flow on the website)

[…] *the site is okay – it is well put together and intuitive. But again – I didn't like the colors and the design".* (M2 about challenges of the website)

I don't like the colors and the way they designed it. Maybe it's because they want to tell stuff and sell stuff at the same time. (M2 about esthetic experience on the website)

The explanation might lie in the fact that the interviewee has a hobby related to graphics in painting. From the above quotes it is seen that esthetics plays a significant role in his perceptions of the website. Knowing about his hobby, we can assume that his esthetic skills are higher than skills of those interviewees who has positively evaluated esthetic dimension of the website. In the case of mismatch between his skills and the esthetic challenges of the website the interviewee would conceptually become bored instead of achieving flow experience. Analysis of his answers might give indications of soundness of the assumption. From his answers we could conclude that esthetic dimension was so significant for the interviewee that it might have prohibited him in achieving flow on all four dimensions of experiences available on the website. In the course of interview it became uncovered that interviewee could not stick to the goal of a gourmet interested potential visitor when surfing on the website. He continued primarily evaluating esthetics of the site as it was coherent with his inner goal. It was considered as one of the main limitations of our research – the fact that

we could not control inner goals of interviewees. Yet, it might as well indicate once more how individually consumers evaluate an experience and how interconnected four realms of experiences are in practice. In the abovementioned case, satisfactory esthetic experience is the one that would facilitate optimal/flow experience within other types of experiences on the website. So, **if** the website would like to target a group with that specific high level of esthetic skills, it could be advisable to develop esthetic dimension more.

The rest of interviewees reported perceptions of underdeveloped esthetic dimension of the website. Videos, which constitute a part of "physical" look (read esthetics) of the webpage, were accepted with a great enthusiasm in all four dimensions of experiences. Yet, the photos were not evaluated as positively as videos:

Some of the photos are nice some others are quite dim and small. I would like there to be more images and big images if they want to appeal to somebody. Videos are more or less okay. (F6)

"Photos are small; the whole site is lacking colors… (F3)

The design was as well criticized for lacking colors and being poor:

[..]. so poor that it was never a pleasure using it. (F1)

All those drawbacks of esthetic dimension related to its sensory depth were clearly obstacles for some interviewees to have a positive esthetic experience. Yet, there were interviewees who could report en occurrence of positive esthetic experiences. Those persons did not evaluate the website as a whole when asked about esthetics, but could differentiate between channels and underline those perceived esthetically positive:

The videos are shown in a nice design, colures referrer to the topic. The green for vegetables and the brown for soil. It's also a more calm page to look at because of more colures and the layout is good. Rest of the website is too white. (M8)

[…] Also the composition of "Local produce Store/Canteen" including the videos… It has a bit warmer feel to it, and kind of made me feel "at home (M7)

The last example comes from the interviewee who had a positive esthetic experience, yet not an optimal or flow experience as the preconditions of flow were not detected on the same

channel as esthetic experience, namely *Local Produce Store/Canteen*. The fact that there was not a clear indication of conditions for occurrence/non occurrence of flow within esthetic dimension in our research might be related to importance of situational challenges (clear inner goal, immediate feedback, match between skills and challenges) for this dimension of experiences, which were not met during interaction of interviewees with virtual environment of the website.

4.2.5 FLOW IN EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Educational experiences are not highest profile experiences for the occurrence of flow. This has been established by the theoretical part of the present paper. A virtual tourist absorbs an event staged for him while actively participating in a virtual environment with his mind and/or body (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). However in virtual environment one is acting according to the rules of the given educational experience within the computer mediated environment. On the website, educational dimension is presented by on-line courses and vast amounts of information relevant to the topic: organic life style, seasonality of vegetables, recipes and edible projects everyone can start out at home.
Related to this type of experience an emergence of flow established in the interviews is quite obvious. Three of eight respondents have experienced a state of flow when viewing video recipes and reading educational information on the website. This can be exemplified by the quote reflecting interviewee's inner experience:

"I was looking video presentations and I think I forgot everything in my life. It was only recipes and the activity of jumping from one recipe to another. During this activity I was saving some videos on my computer – for the nearest future. And what is interesting - after I got back to the reality I realized that children are making a noise, but I couldn't hear anything while I was enjoying the recipes. It was time for them to go out for a walk and our baby sitter has already dressed them (usually it is my duty to dresses them before they go), but this time I forgot everything. (F3).

Csikszentmihályi dimensions of entering the flow stage materializes clearly here: concentration on the activity of viewing video and saving recipes on the personal computer

temporarily excluded irrelevant thoughts and feelings from consciousness – she didn't hear her noisy children and forgot about the duty she usually does. The sense of time became distorted; the interviewee was so intensively involved in reading and looking videos that she didn't notice time passing:

"…after I realised that it is time for my children to go for a walk, I thought that it was just ten minutes while I was navigating on the website, but it was almost an hour passed (F3).

And here are other respondents' expressions of the feeling of time going too fast:

I didn't think that two hours were past, but it was right. Fortunately, I haven't had any other plans and haven't missed something important." (M5).

The feeling of time going too fast means for me that I forget about time. This happens when something is very pleasant. In school, for example, you look at the watch all the time and wonder why time goes so slow. It is because you don't enjoy being there at all. The faster time goes, the more you enjoy what you are doing. (F1)

Although it seems likely that loosing track of the clock is not the major element of enjoyment, freedom from time or the state of mind arising as a result of achieving flow on the web add to the exhilaration during a state of complete immersion:

"It's amazing! You can not only read the recipes, see how the prepared meal look like from the pictures as it is in the books for cooking, but you can even see the process of it. I have never experienced it before. […] You're not here, but there in surroundings of the River Cottage. […] It was enjoying!" (F3)

"I think idea of showing how to make usual, daily food is also very appealing and it is easy to identify with it. It is a big contrast to all those sites, where they show recipes, which one you will never make, since they are complicated and require variety of ingredients, impossible to find. That's why I particularly enjoyed this website, because it's is so close to me and close to my kitchen." (M5).

Enjoyment arising from the state of mind after entering a state of flow is common factor in all flow experiences, however among web users it appears to be linked to discovery (Chen et al.

1999). It provides a creative feeling of transporting a person into a new reality. In the first example enjoyment appeared as a result of viewing the process of cooking that transported the web user into the surroundings of the River Cottage while the other illustrates concrete interaction with some 'other', an interaction that according to Csikszentmihályi (2002) produces a rare sense of unity with the foreign entities that is so close to the self. Enjoyment arising from the educational context while actively engaging the mind (reading and watching videos) and/or body (saving the recipes on the personal computer) turned the respondents to escape *from/into* the (other) reality, which means that they absorb the events unfolding before them simultaneously immersing in an immersive escapist virtual environment. Hence, educational dimension in the virtual environment is no more pure absorption, when a person is taking an experience into (him/her)self, but rather a combination of the two - absorption and immersion. Thus it might seem consequential that flow in educational dimension succeeds from escapistic immersion provided by the enjoyment arising from multiple learning contexts. On this background it is reasonable to suggest that the types of experiences cannot be isolated and immersion as a pre-stadium of flow in escapist dimension might turn into real flow experience in educational contexts.

Furthermore, the present research makes apparent that differences in understanding of what the flow experience is exist. Naturally personal experiences from immersion into the stage of flow are perceived differently. The next example illustrates it. The interviewee felt like being in a River Cottage:

The first sensing like "flow" I experienced in greenhouse, since I felt how warm it was there. When I've seen preparing basil I even felt smell of it. I stood on the other side of head chefs table and felt smell of basil. Same with tasting the cider "movie" when I felt sitting with Hugh and his friend and looking at the color of the cider. Strong feeling of being carried away I haven't felt, but I submerged from time to time. I used approximately 2 hours when surfing on the site it's also the sign of being "taken" by the site" (M5)

According to flow theory immersion into activity with flow experiences lasts from several minutes to several hours. From the statement above it becomes apparent that the respondent did not have a strong feeling of being 'carried away', but submerged into an activity of viewing videos from time to time. The episodes of deep immersion – flow - therefore were

followed by one another yet helping him to stay immersed into an activity accompanied by other dimension of flow – sense of time distortion and enjoyment.
Other Csikszentmihályi's dimensions of flow (described by Chen et al. (1999) as the pre-conditions for provoking the emergence of the optimal experience/the state of flow) - clearly materializes here: both clear goals with immediate feedback and challenges appropriate to the skills of the web user are present, in particular goals. These two respondents had a clear goal of learning new things on cooking and growing their own vegetables in the garden:

I had a goal to find the seasoning for specific meal, as I'm always confused what is best for some kind of products. And I found something for me, my knowledge was improved. I am also very keen on soups, thus I found delicious soup recipes that I'm going to prepare in the nearest future. I think the activity made me more knowledgeable. (F3)

I am a vegetable man so videos with planting, growing vegetables and afterwards preparing them hit me. […] I have learned some new recipes of how to cook vegetables and I got some good stuff for growing them in my own garden. (M5)

In addition to this the interviewee F3 states that the website responded to the actions she took. She could easily jump from one recipe into another, and repeat video presentation from the beginning; it was very easy to be in control when navigating on the website.

What was surprising that the website provides the information you have a specific interest and leads you to this information with additional links. And that is great! You know what you want and you lead the information on the website. (F3)

Success in achievement of the goal created order in consciousness providing enjoyment. In connection to this is the fact that according to Csikszentmihályi's (1988) a person cannot be immersed into an activity in which he/she does not know what needs to be done and if the activity does not provide enough information for the person to recognize his/her current status.

Related to challenges the website provides, technical factors or interactions with the computer mediated environment among the interviewees that have experienced flow in the educational context were not regarded as demanding; difficulties were associated more with information

retrieval. The interviewee M5 could not say that he had any feeling of being in control over the activity, as it was difficult to understand the structure of the page, find needed information as well as understand given information on the recipes (names of the recipes written in non understandable language):

And also the names of the recipes written in non understandable language. When it is basil I know that it is basil, where it is tomatoes I know that it is tomatoes, but […] if you don't know the meaning of these recipes you will naturally avoid seeing them. And that is challenging to open all the time new recipe with the aim to find out what is it about. (M5).

Regardless of his obvious difficulties of finding needed recipe the interviewee continued the activity of navigation on the website by finding some new angles with new interesting information. Interviewee F1 described the difficulty of tracking information not as real challenge, but as "*pleasant difficulty*". Difficulties related to the language were mentioned by the interviewee F3: "*sometimes I used a dictionary, it helped me a lot and it didn't make me stop reading."* Challenges that leaded to pursuit respondents' goals on the website though could be called positive as they reached optimal level and helped the interviewees to be immersed into the activity. It means that respondents' pre-existing capacity – skills - required to engage in a web activity: general computer skills of surfing on the website, skills of reading and understanding the meaning of written texts, skills of viewing video clips with some educational information were sufficient to cope with the challenges provided by the given virtual experience. Enjoyment appeared at the boundary between boredom and anxiety, when the challenges were just balanced with person's capacity to act.

Success in flow achievement is dependent on the Chen et al (1999) preconditions of flow experiences that materialize in these three cases: clear goals that the website provides by leading virtual tourist to what he/she wants to achieve supplied with personal goals and expectation and immediate feedback to the actions as well as skills in equilibrium to challenges ended with a state of flow. However let's turn our attention to the interviewees that were interested and/or immersed in experiences with educational context which did not reach its peak – optimal flow experience.

Despite the lack of deep involvement into the experience on the education profile, there is clear evidence that respondents' curiosity to learn something new from the website was

stimulated. Three of eight interviewees had interest in learning something new, or the information stimulated their curiosity and they continued reading and/or viewing video clips. Being very salient on the website parts on food from selecting raw products, to preparing and cooking them as well as organic life style among a number of respondents had a strong educational value. Consider the flowing sequence:

Page on "Food matters" was especially appealing. Although Information presented is a subjective opinion of Hugh, presentation of it is very attention-grabbing: he talks about people, sustainability, ecology, vegetarianism and etc. It gives and alternative viewpoint and adds a little to our commitment to and enjoyment of good meal. For example, I especially liked the paragraph on meat, how to select, what to turn attention to before you buy it, how to cook, how to serve and etc. When you keep in mind those things you don't need to be afraid when eating it. It gives a very fresh viewpoint into the things. (F4).

It was most interesting on the Community page, where you could learn and enjoy at the same time. […] Especially the videos of how to grow and afterwards cook the same vegetables… (M8).

The quotes above illustrate the statement, the respondents undoubtedly were interested and to some extent immersed into an activity of reading as it were accompanied with a *feeling of happiness for the future and for the plans for growing own things in the garden* (M8). It means, that information contain provided by the virtual experience were sufficient to rise interest in the subject.

When in the flow state people feel enjoyment from the activity itself. Regardless of the perceived experience without entering a state of flow, a sense of enjoyment appeared to interviewees M7 and F4 when viewing video clips and/or reading the information on the Food Matters (i.e. following educational information:

I felt pleased that those talented chefs have the same view on the quality of food as I do. I do also believe that the talent is not enough when you make food – the quality of the raw products is important. So yeah, it was enjoyable to read about their food philosophy and realize I share the same views. (M7).

"Although it was not a" super-duper" feeling, it was interesting. Especially Food matters providing the owners subjective knowledge about the products. It was interesting to read the articles, go through recipes, and learn about courses […] (F4)

Although interviewees could not express exactly the feeling of enjoyment some manifestation of the experience being pleasant can be established. Enjoyment appeared as well among other interviewees, but as the feeling of exhilaration were perceived not in educational context, we dot not attach it to the realm of this experience.

Concerning the feeling of time going too fast - some individuals perceived a feeling of time distortion while others did not have, but it is interesting to discuss the feelings of the interviewee M8:

No, I was not involved to the extent when time stops and I could suddenly look at the clock 3 hour later, no… maybe I am too aware of my time limits… it's like it's coming back from the universe of the site from time to time to check up the clock, but then I went straight back, even I knew I didn't have more time for that… I just couldn't help going on reading and I wanted more!! (M8).

Regardless of his negative answer, the activity of reading texts with educational information helped him to be immersed into the environment with some short periods of losing a track of time.

Challenges perceived among the interviewees who did not experience a state of flow during the activity were associated with hardware or software problems, individual's ability to manipulate computer mediated environment; challenges can be captured in the context of individual interests and other intellectual sources, such as tracking or retrieving information:

If the internet or PC is slow, you get distracted and maybe even frustrated when opening the next page, especially if it takes ages. This really can serve as distracting factor from the feeling when one loses the track of time. (F4)

[…] everything is so commercial. Very often one gets treated a walking wallet, instead of as a person who might be really interested in matter. That obviously limits the access to wanted information. (F4)

[…] most of products are reserved to members, one needs to register. This didn't help me to get involved into the website. I would like to get things easier without any registration, but this time it was frustrating. I lost my interest of the site and couldn't concentrate because of this. (F6).

I was challenged by the language; it was an obstacle to feel a seamless cross from page to page. And sometimes the text was too compressed together, too compact. It would look better and be more readable if they use bigger types and divided text into clear paragraphs. I felt because of that eager to click further, without getting all info from the page. One can be stopped in desiring for more info… (M8).

I had few problems with the English language, but when not recognizing them at first, trying to eliminate know possibilities or simply "Google" it was enough. (M7)

Interviewees F4 and F6 related challenging the interaction with computer mediated environment (slow speed of interactivity with no immediate feedback as well as commercial aspect of the website) that kept them apart from being involved into the activity afterwards. By contrast respondents M7 and M8 reported some difficulties with English language and information disposition. Hence the balance between challenges provided by the virtual experience and respondents pre-existing capacity – skills were not in equilibrium in the cases F4 and F6 which ended up in frustration rather than flow, and in balance resulting in involvement close to a state of flow among interviewees M7 and M8.

Related to the other preconditions of flow (Chen et al. 1999) the goals were created to fit the purpose of the paper (the respondents were set up to fulfill an activity by our choice) which undoubtedly influenced the results of the research in that the interviewees felt lack of user involvement. Interviewee's F6 internal goals in respect to this website were not associated with the educational context, i.e. she did not expect to learn something:

I liked diversified information. It was interesting to read forums and recipes, but I it didn't stimulate my curiosity. At least I didn't expect that I have to learn something from it. (F6).

The extract above clearly illustrates that perceived challenges and skills are dependent on the situational conditions, in this case the internal goals of the user, as it was suggested by Chen et al. (1999). Consequently Web-based virtual experience perceived by F6 ended with superficial immersion into the activity.
By contrast interviewee M7 had a clear goal and was led by the website to stick the goal. Consider the following:

I felt more curious as to what the whole website was all about I felt it had an interesting background and I wanted to know what kind of courses and dinners they had to offer. Which lead me to further into the "Food Matters" section where the author had some interesting points and it's easy to feel his passion for these subjects. And inevitably I started to feel more interested in these subjects. (M7).

Hence, clear goal the interviewee had of finding out courses and dinners and the direction the website offered to be followed to reach the goal, as well as balance between challenges and skills stimulated his curiosity. As an outcome of human-computer interaction in the virtual experience helped the respondent feel more interested in the presented information. Perceived enjoyment and a sense of time distortion turned the experience to become autotelic, it means, that he continued the activity of navigating on the website for its own sake. Although he was not sure if he experienced a state of flow, it is obvious that some short episodes of deep immersion close to the optimal experience or even real flow experience can be captured.

Thus, the present discussion has indicated that educational dimension on the virtual experience may inspire the Web users immersion into an activity turn into real state of flow

4.2.6 FLOW IN ENTERTAINMENT EXPERIENCES

And finally, let's turn our attention to the last type of experience – entertainment which in our theoretical conceptions were suggested as providing least possibilities in achievement of optimal experience (see figure 7 on p.52). The interesting finding on the research is that the

interviewees did not relate their perceived flow experience within the entertainment realm, however some manifestation of being entertained when navigating on the website are obvious. People perceive their entertainment experience as others perform passively absorbing the experience through the senses as according to Pine & Gilmore (1999) generally occur when viewing a performance. Some of the examples from the research included at least some momentary entertainment by making the respondents to smile or enjoy themselves. A couple of examples:

I don't know it the word "entertained" could be used, but I enjoyed visiting this site, I had smile on my face and time passed by without noticing. Video clips caught me in the first place. Especially recipes, but I also enjoyed seeing videos of the team work, projects to support local community, even enjoyed seeing the clip, where Hugh visits local cider maker, where they sit outside on the bright summer day and talk about cider, like it was the most expensive wine. (M5)

Things are presented in a rather professional way, they are thought through and sometimes rather humorous. It's not like you are laughing and laughing, but more that you don't feel for criticizing what was said or click further from the page… […] (M8).

Clearly entertainment experience occurs when watching videos portraying professionals from the River Cottage cook. An element of enjoyment is also detectable here (in M5) and this becomes even more obvious considering that the respondent had an experience of flow in other dimensions: escapist and educational which might have influenced his state of mind and a level of immersion when navigating on the other parts of the website. Interviewee M4 thinks that

it was more spiritual entertainment when getting new fresh insight into the information containing vegetables, fruits, herbs, meat, fishing and etc. on "Food matters". I really became interested into these things. (F4).

Spiritual entertainment occurred when reading Food Matters from the educational information. However none of virtual experiences perceived through entertainment or educational contexts turned F4 into a real flow experience mainly because of the website's too commercial aspect.

It was entertaining to watch video clips, when other people are presenting some tricks with meal. It looks like you are sitting nearby the computer and somebody else is making a show. But … I wasn't blown away. I guess the subject itself sets some limits as to how crazy the site can be. If I lived close by, I would definitely come and visit – and eat some of their yummy foods. (M2)

General impression of the subject itself being not for entertainment context at all is considered by interviewee M2. Therefore it sets the limits for development of the website in the entertainment dimension to that extent that web user might end the experience with a state of flow. Nonetheless the limitation of the website contain did not affect his choice: if he lived closer, he would definitely come and visit the destination.

Related to challenges occurring in the contexts of entertainment dimension again were mostly related to the information retrieval (structure of the page, difficulties with English language, commercialized page and etc.) The case of the respondent M7 attracted our attention as it exemplifies a bit different level between challenges and skills. The interviewee M7 was entertained by watching the chefs of the River Cottage 'perform' their art. It was associated with his newly started education as chef. He thought it easy to be taken away by watching someone skillful at what he knows from his own experience is difficult:

Watched the clips for Tim's Lemon Trickle Mash Cake and Leftover Lamb and Spelt Salad (at "Local produce Store/Canteen")… It was quite fast paced, and compelling to watch. But would like to have a bit more of it, if it had been more detailed. (M7).

Situational challenges encountered on the virtual environment were associated with superficial information on videos and did not match his skills on the knowledge obtained on newly started education. Hence, the challenges of the virtual experience in the entertainment context were lower than the individual's skills level, which resulted in relaxation and/or boredom, but not flow.

The final example we wish to give of the importance of sensorial richness of the website in the achievement of flow. As tourists absorb the events held before them through their senses

in entertainment dimension it is obvious that some auditory and visually appealing scenes may influence Web users' optimal experience. As discussed previously in the esthetic dimension big part of respondents thinks that the website is not sensory appealing (poor design, bad quality of photos, videos and etc.). The interviewee F6 thinks that

Some of the photos are nice some others are quite dim and small. I would like there to be more images and big images if they want to appeal to somebody.

Whether her opinion of the webpage stems from esthetic or entertainment contexts is difficult to say, it is more likely a combination of the two. In any case her experiences in respect to this website include a need for more sensorial appeal. Poor sensorial richness of the website on the one hand and lower level of interviewees' skills on the other hand may create a challenge-skill balance. However when challenges and skills are perfectly balanced, but an individual's perceived challenges are less than his/her experience and an individual's skills are underutilized, he/she might feel apathy, not flow. This is obviously present in the last example.

All in all educational context in respect to the Website River Cottage did not affect the level of immersion in to the activity to the extent of optimal flow experience.

IN CONCLUSION

Returning to the research question related to this chapter the aim of which was to find out how flow establishes itself on the four realms of experiences presented on the website we have found indications that the most fruitful for the achievement of flow on the River Cottage website is escapist dimension. Among interviewees that experienced flow on the website all of them achieved it within escapist activities combined with other types of experiences. This finding indicates as well an indistinguishable nature of the experience dimensions – it was not possible within interview analysis to draw a clear line between, for instance, perceived escapist and educational experiences, when they occurred on the same channel of the website. Yet, the escapist dimension on the website was obviously facilitating achievement of flow by providing conditions for immersion and active participation, also when transferring flow to

other dimensions. This conclusion was supported by idea, expressed in theoretical chapter, that virtual environment in tourism context would in itself have an escapist nature.
Through the analysis of the interviewees who did not achieve flow on the website or even failed to get a positive experience within escapist (as well as within the other) dimension, evidence of the importance of clear goals and match between challenges and skills was found.

As for the esthetic experiences and flow within them on the River Cottage website, there was one interviewee with an optimal esthetic experience. Some other interviews indicated through dissatisfaction with layout, design and other features of "physical look" that an esthetic dimension might be underdeveloped on the website. Interviewees' dissatisfaction might be explained with their skills being higher than challenges of the website. Analysis of both interviews with and without occurrence of flow in esthetic dimension suggested that match between esthetic skills and challenges of esthetic character on the website were of high importance. When they were in balance, interviewee could experience flow, but when there was a mismatch (skills higher than challenges, in one interviewee's case) a state of boredom instead of flow was detected. Yet, absence or lack of esthetic experiences seemed not to prohibit all interviewees from achieving flow in other dimensions. In order to explain this finding we can utilize what was as well suggested in Website review, that esthetic dimension does not constitute the "core" experience type.

Educational experiences are considered useful for the achievement of flow. Optimal experience in educational dimension succeeded from escapistic immersion from/into the other reality provided by the enjoyment arising from learning contexts – viewing videos and reading texts with some educational information. And this appears well in line with our former theoretically based conceptions. On this background it is again reasonable to suggest that the types of experiences cannot be isolated and immersion as a pre-stadium of flow in escapist and/or esthetic dimension might turn into real flow experience in educational contexts.

Furthermore, flow experience in entertainment contexts were not captured mainly because of the subject of the website being not entertaining by its nature that sets the limits for the achievement of flow. Although watching videos portraying professionals from the River Cottage cook inspired the interviewees to be immersed into an activity, lack of visual and

auditory appeal – referring to the sensorial richness of the webpage established in the website review and interview analysis (resulting in mismatch between challenges and skills) - can be considered the main obstacle in achievement of flow.

Furthermore, interesting differentiations materialize between the respondents that experienced flow when navigating of the Website and those who did not. Related to the Chen's et al. (1999) pre-condition for the achievement of flow perceived challenges and skills are dependent of situational conditions of flow experience that mainly include internal goals. Respondents that had interest in the subject itself could easier stimulate their curiosity and cope with challenges provided by the virtual environment.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Web-based virtual experiences have been central to the thesis – namely experiences from the perspective of the Experience Economy, experiences in general consumption situations and in a more specific tourism related virtual environment; and the concept of flow as a psychological side of experiences. The possibilities for acquisition of flow within four realms of experiences in virtual environment has been scrutinised in this thesis.

According to circular inductive-deductive methodology approach, the study of Web-based virtual experiences in a tourism context was taking its point of departure from secondary data, presented in theoretical chapter. Theoretical predictions were set up based on theoretical insights and have served as entrance keys into the empirical research consisting of a review of the River Cottage website and interview studies. In that process some theoretical predictions received confirming indications, which have led to a deeper understanding of Web-based virtual experiences.
Related to the first research question, the efforts have been employed in answering:

How immersion constituting the deep esthetic and/or escapist experience relates to the immersion involved in the state of "flow" when visiting travel destination virtually?

The concept of immersion is dealt from the perspectives of personal psychology – optimal flow experience and the Experience economy, and this demonstrates that immersion is considered to overlap with flow experience when concerned to merging of action, awareness and intense focus, a sense of time distortion and effortless action in the transition from the experience to the effect stage of flow. Therefore optimal experience starts with immersion into an activity, when other conditions of flow are present. In the context of Experience Economy, immersion constituting the esthetic and escapist experience is considered rather a start-up of optimal experience, the deepest extent of which may lead to a state of flow. Holistic aspect holds a special position in the discussion as it points to the significance of a personality type, situational challenges, as well as inborn or developed skills to cope with them.

Furthermore, an analytical argument was made for flow construct in which it may be applied to the Experience economy and discussed within the four realms of experiences in virtual

environment. As a result of this, our own model was developed to illustrate a graded relationship between flow and four realms of experiences. (See that model on p. 52) The model is suggesting that escapist dimension is more fruitful for achievement of flow when in virtual environment, as immersion needed to experience escapism is as well present in all virtual contexts. The state of immersion coupled with active participation in experience makes the escapist experience more universal type of experiences for achieving state of flow. Nonetheless, the state of flow is possible in the other three dimensions under the conditions of targeting experiences for the "right public" when the pre-conditions of flow (clear goals meeting immediate feedback and match between challenges and skills) are present. Therefore, development of an experiential profile of the chosen target group might be beneficial for destinations when developing their experience offerings.

Turning to the second research question

How does flow establish itself on the four realms of experiences presented on the website?

which relates to the empirical part, optimal flow experience within the four realms of experiences presented on the website River Cottage was investigated through website review and interview analysis. The website review highlighted that experiential value of the website embraces primarily escapist and educational experiences, yet esthetic and entertainment are situationally possible. From the point of view of instrumental insights of human-computer interaction it was suggested that virtual experience on the webpage River Cottage through sensorial richness, interactivity, challenges, rules and goals presented by the computer mediated environment may lead to a state of flow.

Interview analysis revealed that flow experiences occurred mainly on the escapist dimension when navigating of the website. And this appears well in line with our former theoretically based conceptions. State of immersion in escapist experiences that was believed to be a pre-stadium for immersion in flow was as well explored in interviews analysis. Interviewees with flow experiences were indeed immersed into activity through escaping their reality into either fantasy reality or into virtual reality of the website. Imagining oneself in another time and place was an often immerging outcome of high involvement/immersion that inevitably led interviewees to achieving flow. All interviewees who had a positive escapist experience either explicitly reported themselves or became analyzed as ones with flow experience. It means that dimensions of flow were easier to materialize within escapist experience due to combination

of immersion into activity while actively participating in it and escapistic nature of the touristic virtual reality.

Occurrence of flow in educational context is as well present. Enjoyment arising from the educational context while actively engaging the mind (reading and watching videos) and/or body (saving the recipes on the personal computer) turned the respondents to escape from/into other reality, which means that they absorb the events unfolding before them simultaneously immersing in an immersive escapist virtual environment. Hence, optimal experience in educational dimension succeeded from escapistic immersion into other reality provided by the enjoyment arising from multiple learning contexts when viewing videos and/or reading educational information. On this background it was suggested that the types of experiences cannot be isolated and immersion as a pre-stadium of flow in escapist and/or esthetic dimension might turn into real flow experience in educational contexts.

Related to the esthetic dimension on the website, the study gave some indications for situational nature of flow, depending on the right match between challenges and skills. An example of higher esthetic – seeing - skills of interviewees encountering lower level of challenges provided by the website, as those of poor design and weak visual appeal, resulted in boredom instead of flow. So, the right balance between skills and challenges was suggested to be of paramount importance for achievement of flow within esthetic dimension in virtual reality.

Flow experience in entertainment context through the interviews was not captured. Situational challenges perceived by interviewees, especially those of sensorial richness of the website being lesser than their skills, again ended up with boredom or apathy. In addition to this is the fact that subject of the website among interviewees were considered being not entertaining by its nature that set the limits for the achievement of flow. The choice of the website hence created limitations for the research as challenges provided by the website River Cottage were lower than the interviewees' skills level that finally ended up with boredom not flow in both esthetic and entertainment contexts.

The other limitation of this study is the fact that the goal for the interviewees was "artificially" created to fit the purpose of the paper. That might diffused the perception of a clear inner goal and in that sense shifted the balance between challenges and skills, resulting in the absence of flow experience for some respondents.

The study should be seen as an explorative piece of research – a preliminary understanding of Web-based virtual experiences and achievement of flow within the four realms of experiences on the particular website. To be able to conclude more generally, the study should be expanded to a larger qualitative and/or quantitative investigation with generalizable findings where point of departure might be taken from this research.

Suggestions for Future Research and Practical Implications

Own model proposed in theoretical chapter of the paper and illustrating a graded relationship between flow and four realms of experiences awaits further validations through different consumption situations and staged experiences in virtual contexts. The results of the empirical investigation in support for the model has limited generalizibility, as the study was based on a single destination Website and a limited number of interviewees (in total 8).

Relating to the limitation of this paper, we suggest that future research should focus on website(s) providing experience dimensions in question of the particular research in order to capture a state of flow within particular dimension. Such efforts would contribute to the empirical development of the suggested model of graded relationship between flow and four realms of experiences. In order to embrace dimensions of flow as clear inner goals the sample for future research should be chosen among the existing visitors of the website in question. In this way it might be possible to receive more accurate data from interviews, as interviewees would have already surfed on a given website led by their inner goal and not be instructed by researchers before actual surfing.

Furthermore, future research aiming at development and validation of the present paper's results might benefit from conducting empirical investigation of a sample with broader generalizablility. In order to achieve that another sampling technique might be used, than in the present paper.

Moreover, it might be interesting to design a research that would investigate how personality dimensions influence individual approach to perception of an experience. This area was touch upon in the theoretical chapter of the paper, yet the empirical part was not designed to investigate it in practice. Both time limits and limited professional psychological insights necessary for conducting investigation within personality dimensions of interviewees contributed to that area remained merely theoretical in this paper. Nevertheless, indications

for soundness of our theoretical predictions about individual manner of experience perceptions were found. It might therefore be a possible area for future investigation – for instance in collaboration with representatives of psychological studies – to examine the role personality dimensions play in perceiving an experience and preferring one type of experiences rather than the other.

As for possible practical implications of the research results, experience providers might benefit from considering individual manner of experience perceptions and personality dimensions of the consumers, all of which might influence the providers' choice of the experience dimension to develop within their offerings. By narrowing down to the desired target group for their experiential offerings, the practitioners might be able to develop so called "experiential profiles". Possessing such profiles would mean that providers of experiences would not blindly try to stage all types of experiences in their offerings, but rather concentrate on their "core" dimensions that are demanded by their target group. Wishing to satisfy as many customers as possible by developing all dimensions of experiences might turn the main target group down and give a confusing image.

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Appendix 1: Interview Guide

1. Demographics: age and gender, educational level.
2. General perceptions about state of flow on the website based on the descriptions of flow (see pp. 10-11 in Methodology chapter).
3. Dimensions of flow and channels of the website within which they occurred:
   - 3.1. Experiential outcomes of flow:
     - 3.1.1. Feeling of enjoyment
     - 3.1.2. Feeling of time going too fast
   - 3.2. Preconditions of flow:
     - 3.2.1. Challenges on the website
     - 3.2.2. Feeling of control over activity
4. Dimensions of experiences and channels of the website within which they occurred:
   - 4.1. Educational dimension: curiosity to learn new things, become more knowledgeable or learn a lot
   - 4.2. Esthetic dimension: website appeal as attractive or pleasant by design or information exposition
   - 4.3. Entertainment dimension: feeling of being entertained or having fun
   - 4.4. Escapist dimension: escape from reality or imagining oneself in a different time and/or place

Appendix 2: Guidelines for Interview

Quality Criteria for Interview

- The extent of spontaneous, rich, specific, and relevant answers from the interviewee.
- The shorter the interviewer's questions and the longer the subject's answers, the better.
- The degree to which the interviewer follows up and clarifies the meanings of the relevant aspects of the answers.
- The ideal interview in to a large extent interpreted throughout the interview.
- The interviewer attempts to verify his or her interpretations of the subject's answers in the course of the interview.
- The interview is "self-communicating" – it is a story contained in itself that hardly requires much extra descriptions and explanations.

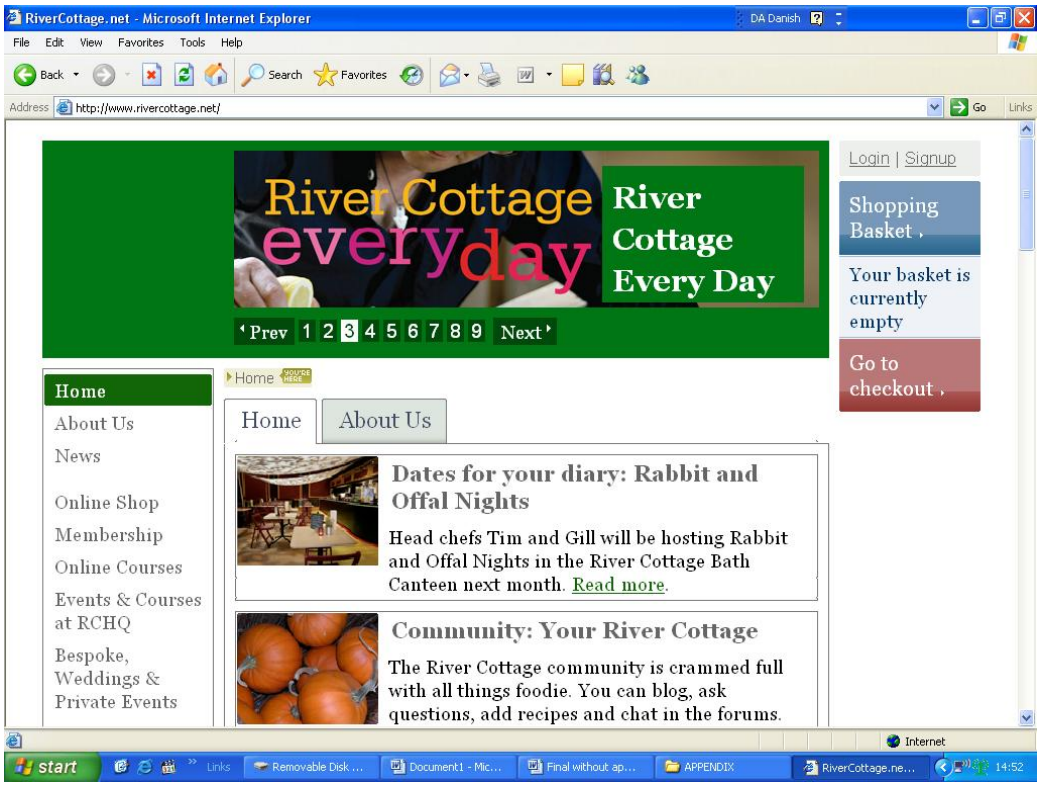
Qualification Criteria for the Interviewer

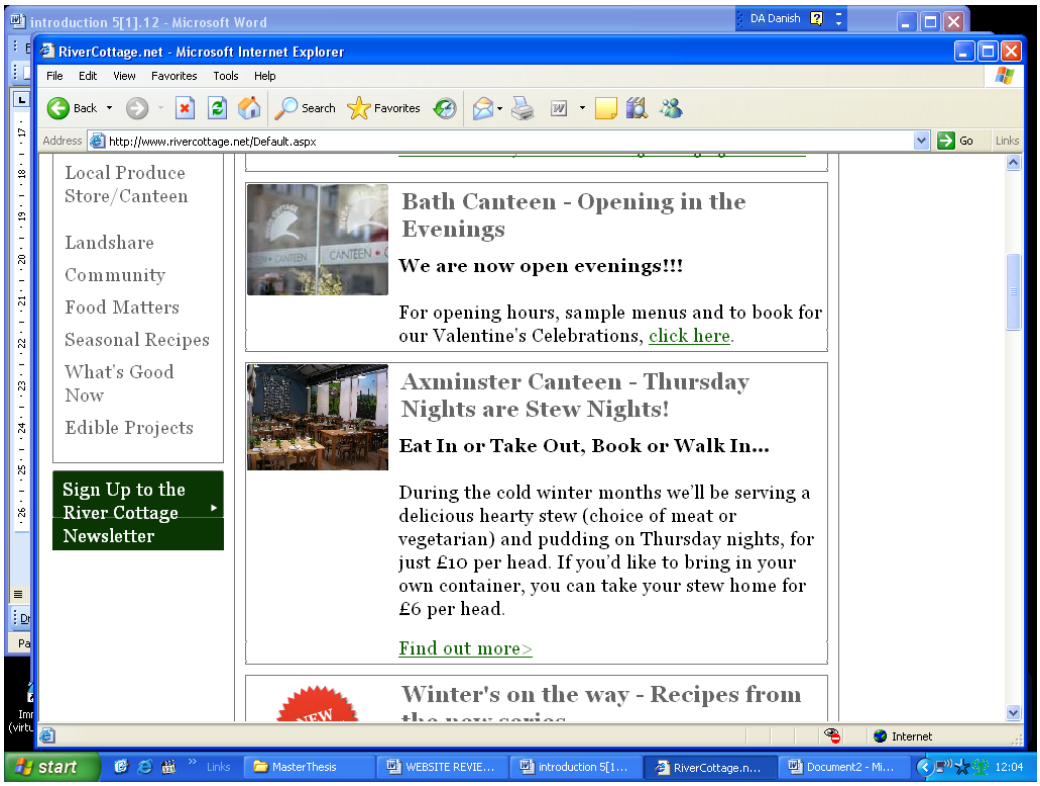
- *Knowledgeable:* Has an extensive knowledge of the interview theme, can conduct an informed conversation about the topic; being familiar with its main aspects the interviewer will know what issues are important to pursue, without attempting to shine with his or her extensive knowledge.
- *Structuring*: Introduces a purpose for the interview, outlines the procedure in passing, and rounds off the interview by, for example, briefly telling what was learned in the course of the conversation and asking whether the interviewee has any questions concerning the situation.
- *Clear*: Poses clear, simple, easy, and short questions; speaks distinctly and understandably, does not use academic language or professional jargon. The exception is in a stress interview: then the questions can be complex and ambiguous, with the subjects answers revealing their reactions to stress.
- *Gentle*: Allows subjects to finish what they are saying, lets them proceed at their own rate of thinking and speaking. Is easy-going, tolerates pauses, indicates that it is acceptable to put forward unconventional and provocative opinions and to treat emotional issues.
- *Sensitive*: Listens actively to the content of what is said, hears the many nuances of meaning in an answer, and seeks to get the nuances of meaning described more fully. The interviewer is emphatic, listens to the emotional message in what is said, not only hearing

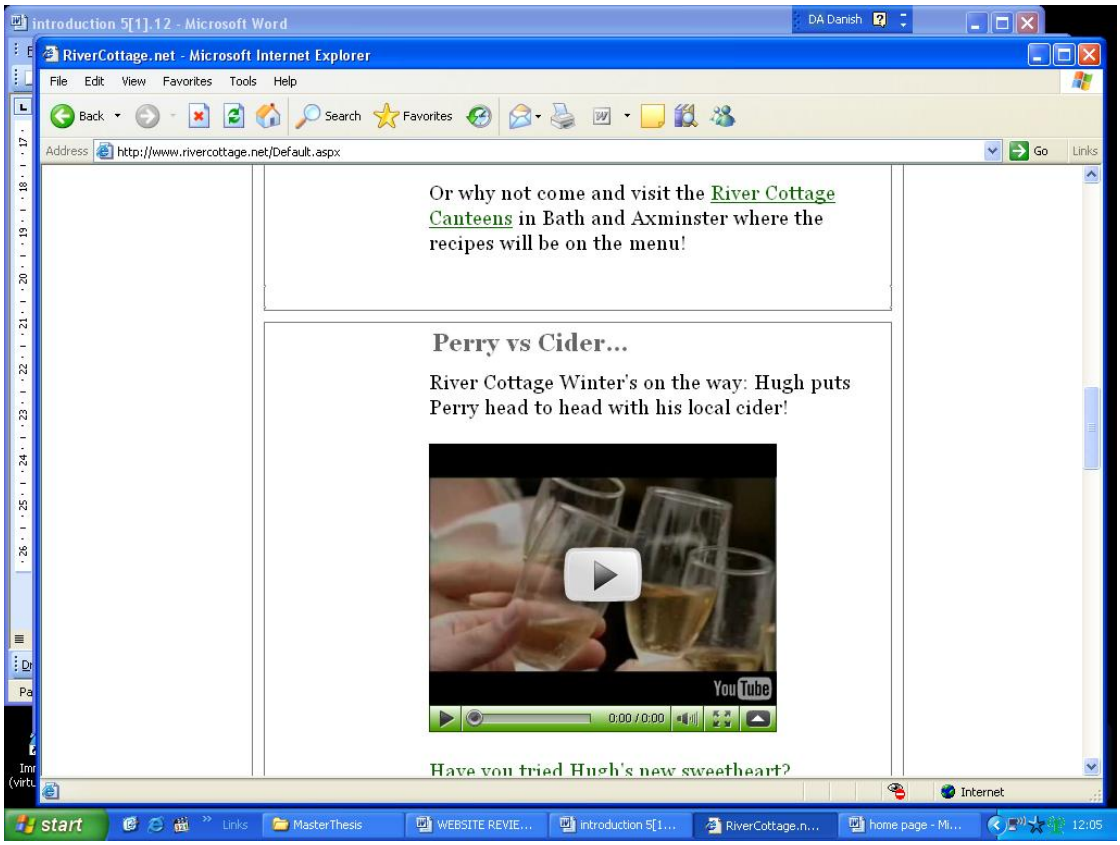
what is said but also how it is said, and notices as well what is not said. The interviewer feels when a topic is too emotional to pursue the interview.

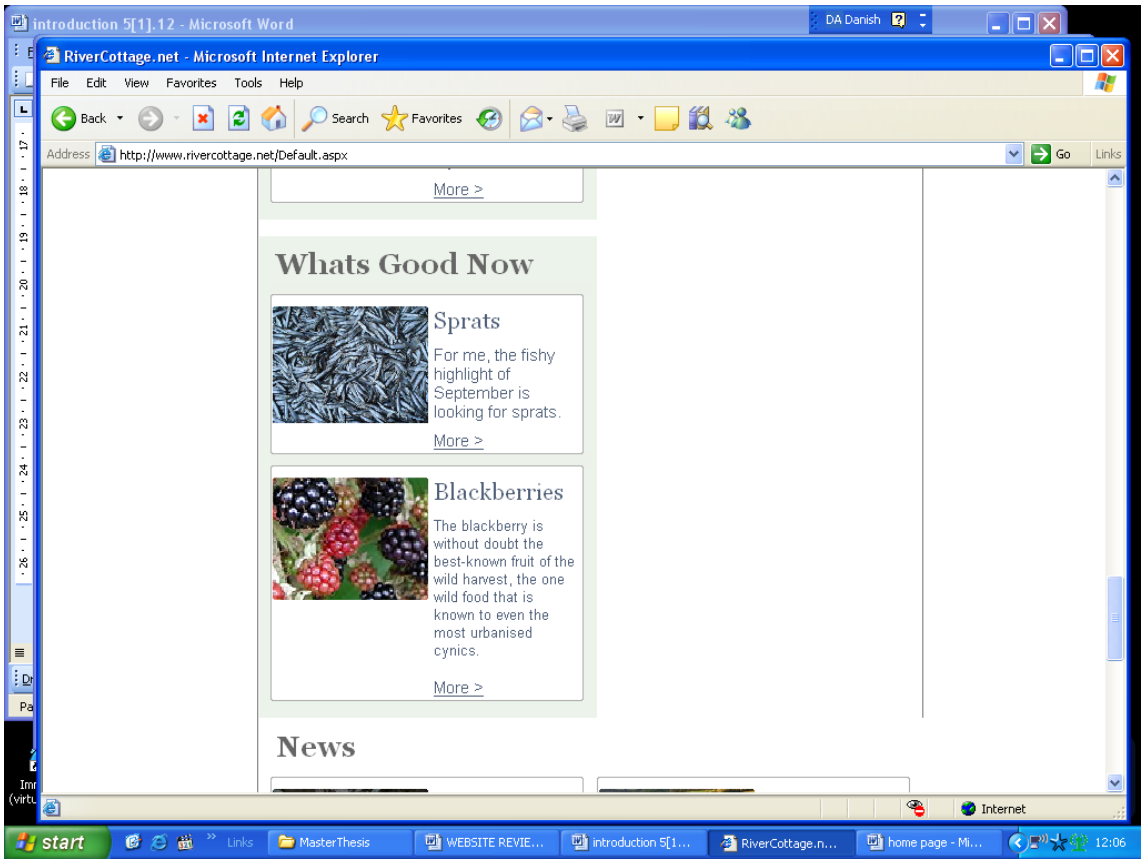
- *Open*: Hears which aspects of the interview topic are important for the interviewee. Listens with an evenly hovering attention, is open to new aspects that can be introduced by the interviewee, and follows them up.
- *Steering*: Knows what he or she wants to find out: is familiar with the purpose of the interview, what it is important to acquire knowledge about. The interviewer controls the course of the interview and is not afraid of interrupting digression from the interviewee.
- *Critical*: Does not everything that is said at face value, but questions critically to test the reliability and validity of what the interviewees tell. This critical checking can pertain to the observational evidence of the interviewee's statements as well as to their logical consistency.
- *Remembering*: Retains what a subject has said during the interview, can recall earlier statements and ask to have them elaborated, and can relate what has been said during different parts of the interview to each other.
- *Interpreting*: Manages throughout the interview to clarify and extend the meanings of the interviewee's statements; provides interpretations of what is said, which may then be disconfirmed or confirmed by the interviewee.

Appendix 3: River Cottage Front Page Visual Presentations






introduction 5[1].12 - Microsoft Word
RiverCottage.net - Microsoft Internet Explorer
http://www.rivercottage.net/Default.aspx
Or why not come and visit the River Cottage Canteens in Bath and Axminster where the recipes will be on the menu!
Perry vs Cider...
River Cottage Winter's on the way: Hugh puts Perry head to head with his local cider!
Have you tried Hugh's new sweetheart?


introduction 5[1].12 - Microsoft Word
RiverCottage.net - Microsoft Internet Explorer
http://www.rivercottage.net/Default.aspx
More >
Whats Good Now
Sprats
For me, the fishy highlight of September is looking for sprats.
More >
Blackberries
The blackberry is without doubt the best-known fruit of the wild harvest, the one wild food that is known to even the most urbanised cynics.
More >
News

Appendix 4: River Cottage Visual presentations

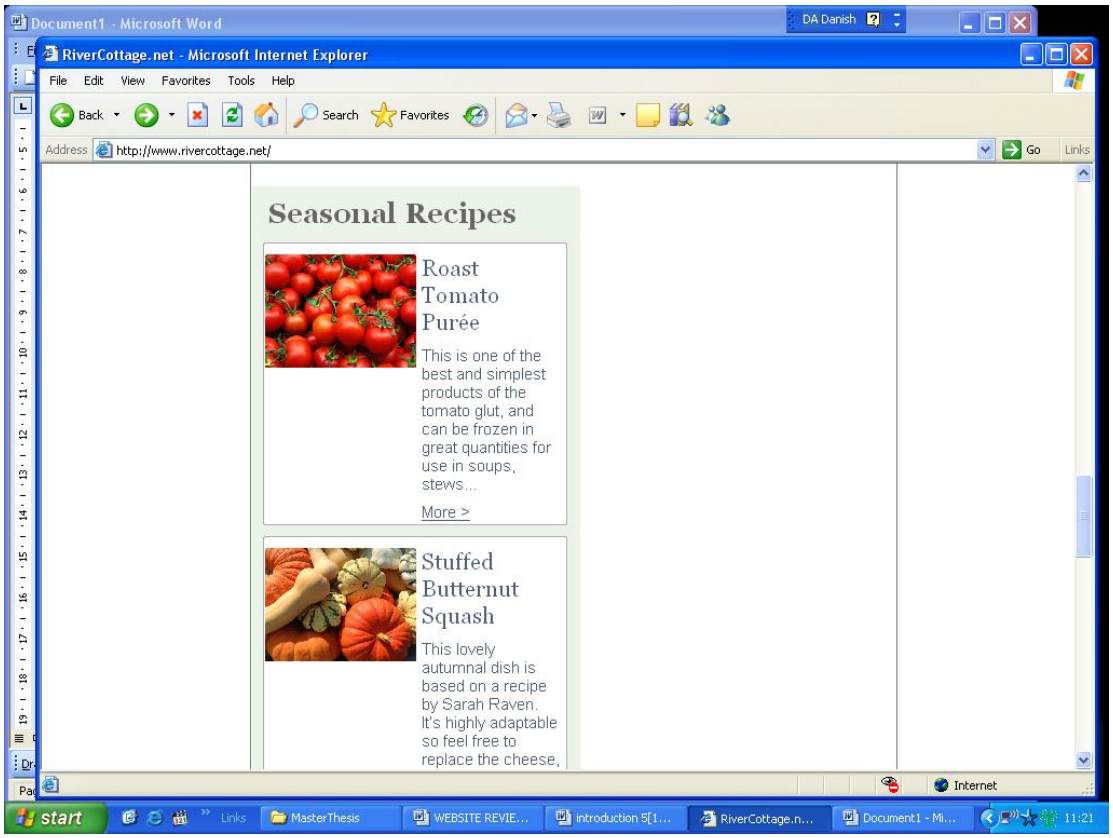
River Cottage News: **Food matters:**

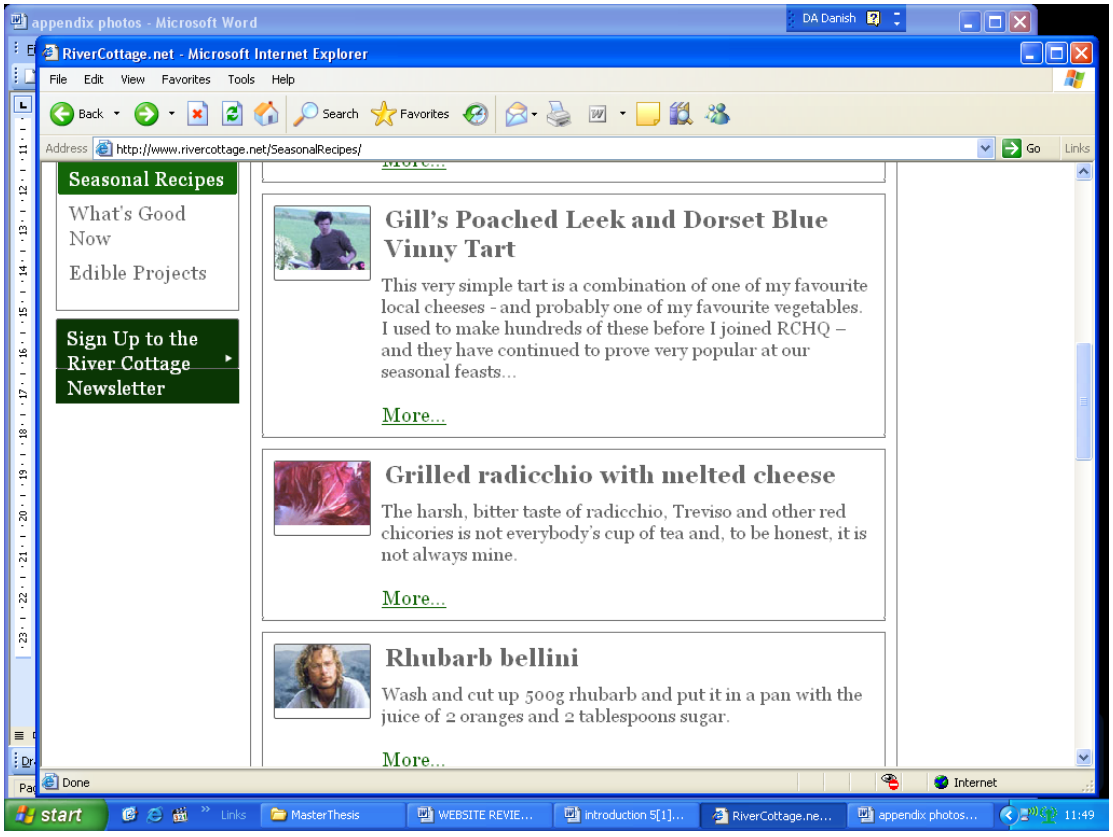


New: A snowy day at Park Farm




Seasonal Recipes:


Document1 - Microsoft Word
RiverCottage.net - Microsoft Internet Explorer
http://www.rivercottage.net/
Seasonal Recipes
Roast Tomato Purée
This is one of the best and simplest products of the tomato glut, and can be frozen in great quantities for use in soups, stews...
More >
Stuffed Butternut Squash
This lovely autumnal dish is based on a recipe by Sarah Raven. It's highly adaptable so feel free to replace the cheese,


appendix photos - Microsoft Word
RiverCottage.net - Microsoft Internet Explorer
http://www.rivercottage.net/SeasonalRecipes/
Seasonal Recipes
What's Good Now
Edible Projects
Sign Up to the River Cottage Newsletter
Gill's Poached Leek and Dorset Blue Vinny Tart
This very simple tart is a combination of one of my favourite local cheeses - and probably one of my favourite vegetables. I used to make hundreds of these before I joined RCHQ – and they have continued to prove very popular at our seasonal feasts...
More...
Grilled radicchio with melted cheese
The harsh, bitter taste of radicchio, Treviso and other red chicories is not everybody's cup of tea and, to be honest, it is not always mine.
More...
Rhubarb bellini
Wash and cut up 500g rhubarb and put it in a pan with the juice of 2 oranges and 2 tablespoons sugar.
More...

River Cottage Visual Presentations (2)

Bespoke events

Axminster Local Produce Store and Canteen

RIVER COTTAGE
store&
canteen Axminster

Appendix 5: Extravert-Introvert Dichotomy Table

TABLE TWENTY-NINE

	Introversion.	*Extraversion.*
Clinical syndrome	Anxiety, depression. Autonomic dysfunction.	Hysterical conversion.
Personality traits	Irritability, apathy, obsessional tendencies.	Little energy, narrow interests, hypochondriasis.
Self assessments	Feelings easily hurt, keeps in background on social occasions, moody, daydreams, self-conscious, nervous, inferiority feelings.	Accident-prone, troubled by stammer or stutter, off work through illness, disgruntled, aches and pains.
Constitution	Physique: Leptomorph.	Physique: Eurymorph.
	Effort response: poor.	Effort response: good.
	(high oxygen uptake	low oxygen uptake)
	(high lactate level	low lactate level)
	(high pulse rate	low pulse rate)
	High choline esterase.	Low choline esterase.
	Salivary secretion inhibited.	Salivary secretion non-inhibited.
Intellectual functions	High intelligence.	Low intelligence.
	Intell./vocab. ratio low.	Intell./vocab. ratio high.
Persistence	Good.	Bad.
Speed/accuracy ratio	Low.	High.
Performance on "Tweezers" test	Good.	Bad.
Level of aspiration	High.	Low.
Past performance	Underrated.	Overrated.
Rigidity	High.	Low.
Inter-personal variability.	High.	Low.
Intra-personal variability.	Low.	High.
Aesthetic preferences.	Distinctive.	Distinctive.
Mosaic construction	Compact design.	Scattered design.
	Concrete design.	Abstract design.
Sense of humour	Does not appreciate jokes.	Does appreciate jokes.
	Dislikes sex jokes particularly.	Likes sex jokes particularly.
Graphology	Special type of handwriting.	Special type of handwriting.

Source: Eysenck (1999), p. 245

Appendix 6: Occurrence/Non occurrence of Flow Experience among Interviewees

Appendix 7: Interview Summaries

Interviewee 1

Interviewee 2

Interviewee 3

Interviewee 4

Interviewee 5

Interviewee 6

Interviewee 7

Interviewee 8