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Cultivating Timeflow: Can Consumers Shape How They Experience Time?

Why does time seem to crawl if you're waiting in line at the post office, but hours can fly by in minutes when you're doing something fun? A new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#) examines the factors that determine how consumers experience time.



“Consumers lie happily on the beach for hours despite the uneventfulness of the activity, but they can become impatient and extremely frustrated after just a few minutes of waiting in line. This puzzled us, and we wanted to know more as this phenomenon poses a number of challenges for businesses,” write authors Niklas Woermann (University of Southern Denmark) and Joonas Rokka (NEOMA Business School).

To understand the factors shaping our experience of time, the authors studied two extreme sports (freeskiing and paintball) that involve long stretches of waiting and “hanging around” followed by short bursts of intense activity. They identified five elements that need to be in balance for consumers to experience a balanced flow of time: technology, consumers’ skill, their plans and moods, rules and regulations, and cultural understanding. If these five elements are not aligned or “in tune,” time does not seem to flow at the right speed and consumers experience rush or drag.

If we stand in line at an airport, for example, politeness or local laws force us to wait even though we are already thinking about finding the gate and boarding. As a result, time seems to pass very slowly. But when freeskiers wait for their next jump, they are not impatient or annoyed. They have accepted waiting as a part of their sport and use the time to prepare their mind and body for the task ahead.

These findings offer insight into how companies and consumers can optimize activities and consumption experiences to ensure a smooth timeflow. If consumers experience time to rush or drag, this is a sign that the five elements are out of alignment.

“Our research is helpful for consumers to understand why they sometimes feel under time pressure or why time passes too slowly. It also shows that businesses aiming to ensure an optimal customer experience should be attentive to a possible misalignment of the different elements that influence timeflow,” the authors conclude.

Niklas Woermann and Joonas Rokka. “Timeflow: How Consumption Practices Shape Consumers’ Temporal Experiences.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: April 2015. For more information, contact Niklas Woermann (nikl@sam.sdu.dk) or visit <http://ejcr.org/>.

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