



Controlling information flow in online information seeking: The moderating effects of utilitarian and hedonic consumers



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ABSTRACT

Information control has been deemed one of the most prominent features of the Internet for online consumers searching product information. This study examined how information control affects the online information seeking processes of consumers and how the effects are moderated by shopping purposes (utilitarian vs. hedonic). This study recruited 292 respondents to participate in our experiment. The empirical results reveal that information control significantly increases consumer involvement in information seeking, enhances attitudes toward products, and elevates the degree of satisfaction toward commercial websites. Furthermore, the effects of information control on consumer involvement and product attitudes are moderated by their shopping purposes. The results support most of the proposed hypotheses, suggesting that information control works more effectively for utilitarian consumers than for hedonic consumers. The findings of this study offer online practitioners useful recommendations regarding personalization strategies of website design.

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1. Introduction

Electronic commerce (e-commerce), particularly the business-to-consumer types such as Alibaba, has grown rapidly in recent years. Online stores attract consumers to shop because of characteristics unique to the Internet, such as easier price comparisons, wider selections, a higher level of convenience, and greater access to information compared with brick-and-mortar stores (Jarvenpaa and Todd 1996, Peterson et al. 1997). However, these characteristics pose two challenges to online retailers: low switch cost, which refers to consumers' effortlessly comparing prices from different providers and quickly switching to other online stores; and information overload, which overwhelms online consumers and complicates their information seeking and decision making (Hwang and Lin 1999). Thus, it is strategically crucial for online retailers to offer consumers effective assistance in searching information and making purchase decisions efficiently.

One of the most prominent features of the Internet is information control, which refers to the level of regulating the content, display order, and display time of information online (Ariely 2000). Under a high information control condition, consumers can actively manage the information seeking process and freely choose

information content, display order, and reading time according to their preferences (Liu and Shrum 2002). For instance, consumers can use keywords in search engines and retrieve and read the relevant information that they query. By contrast, under the condition of low control, consumers are passively fed information provided by sellers. For example, pop-up ads are a typical example of low information control, under which the content, order, and time for consumers to read are predetermined. As previous studies have shown, information control facilitates the process of prepurchase information seeking and the purchase decisions of online consumers, by enhancing cognitive involvement (Jiang et al. 2010), attitudes toward websites (Chung and Ahn 2007, Hwang and McMillan 2002, Teo et al. 2003), confidence in judgments (Ariely 2000), intention to use a self-service technology (Collier and Sherrell 2010), and trust in mobile commerce (Lee 2005).

Although information control generally has positive effects, recent studies have demonstrated that such effects are not the same for all consumers (Sicilia et al. 2005, Wu and Lin 2006, 2012). Increasingly more researchers have advocated the contingency view of information control, which argues that the effects of information control depend on contingent conditions such as need for cognition (Sicilia et al. 2005), expertise (Wu and Lin 2006), and motivation (Wu and Lin 2012). Because information control is a prominent feature of the Internet, it is worthwhile to determine how user factors serve as critical contingent conditions

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for the effects of information control. Shopping purposes affect many aspects of online consumers behavior such as search intention (To et al. 2007), decision making (Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000), preference toward online retailers (Overby and Lee 2006), satisfaction with retailers (Jones et al. 2006), and intention to repurchase (Kim et al. 2012). Therefore, this study aims to investigate the moderating effects of shopping purposes on the effects of information control.

Similar to consumers in brick-and-mortar stores, online consumers may also have two shopping purposes: utilitarian or hedonic. Utilitarian purpose is described as a mission that is critical, rational, decision-effective, and goal-oriented (Batra and Ahtola 1991, Hirschman and Holbrook 1982, Wolfenbarger and Gilly 2001). Utilitarian consumers shop because of a specific goal or task, and the benefits of shopping depend on whether the goal is achieved or not, or whether the task is completed in efficiently (Babin et al. 1994, Batra and Ahtola 1991). Therefore, they primarily adopt a directed search behavior that is deliberate and mainly focused on the information related to the goal (Hoffman and Novak 1996, Janiszewski 1998, Novak et al. 2003). By contrast, hedonic purpose is defined as shopping for amusement, enjoyment, fantasy, novelty, variety, surprise, awakening, or sensuality (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982). In contrast to utilitarian consumers, the benefits of hedonic consumers are not related to achieving the physical objective or completing the task. By definition, hedonic consumers enjoy shopping and acquire experiential and emotional benefits during the process (Babin et al. 1994). In contrast to utilitarian consumers, hedonic consumers use an exploratory search behavior that is undirected, less deliberate, and less focused when browsing information (Hoffman and Novak 1996, Janiszewski 1998, Moe 2003, Novak et al. 2003). In summary, utilitarian consumers differ from hedonic consumers in their information search behavior online.

Thus, information control may have different effects on utilitarian and hedonic consumers in facilitating their information seeking processes. High information control allows utilitarian consumers to search for relevant product information actively and directly, and spend as much time as necessary to read the relevant product information. Hence, a higher level of information control could facilitate the decision making of utilitarian consumers in obtaining and processing useful information efficiently. Regarding hedonic consumers, information control can also facilitate their information seeking processes by offering them the freedom to process information. However, the benefits of information control for hedonic consumers may be fewer than those for utilitarian consumers. Hedonic consumers are undirected and less deliberate when browsing information online and do not need to control the information content or the time of information seeking as much as utilitarian consumers do. Thus, we argue that the positive effects of information control are stronger for utilitarian consumers than for hedonic consumers.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the hypotheses and research model, and Section 3 demonstrates the method, with results presented in Section 4. Finally, Section 5 offers the conclusion, theoretical contribution, managerial implications, discussion, limitations, and future research.

2. Hypothesis development and research model

2.1. Shopping online: controlling information flow

As discussed in the previous section, information control can help consumers improve their shopping experiences. Information control offers consumers freedom and flexibility to select the information they seek (Kleinmuntz and Schkade 1993, Schkade and

Kleinmuntz 1994). Thus, information control may benefit consumers by satisfying their various information needs (Beatty and Smith 1987, Furse et al. 1984, Hauser et al. 1993), which may be based on particular motivations, knowledge background, and personal preferences. Furthermore, during the process of information search, consumers may acquire new knowledge and change their focus of information seeking occasionally. A higher level of information control could also provide the opportunity for consumers to search for information according to their evolution of knowledge. Hence, information control is a useful feature for online retailers to support the information seeking and decision making of consumers.

In contrast to traditional media, various levels of information control are able to be simultaneously observed on the Internet (McMillan and Hwang 2002). As mentioned, high information control (e.g., search engines) and low information control (e.g. pop-up ads) are common in e-commerce and can exist simultaneously in the same online stores. By contrast, traditional media (e.g., magazines, TV) offer merely one level of information control: either high or low. For instance, magazines have high information control, whereas TV has low information control. When people read a magazine, they can freely select the reading time, order, and information to read. Conversely, when people watch TV, they are merely able to decide to switch the channel or turn off the TV. Because different levels of information control are present on the Internet, the following question remains: How can online retailers leverage the different levels of information control to offer consumers personalized assistance in facilitating their information seeking and decision making behavior?

Notably, low information control does not mean that consumers do not have any control at all. The condition of low information control on the Internet is passive control, under which consumers can avoid reading information only by clicking a button or closing a window. Passive control allows consumers to ignore irrelevant or uninteresting information, but it does not provide them with chances to search for relevant or interesting information (Hwang et al. 2003).

The concept of information control can refer to either physical or perceived control. Physical control refers to the hardwired opportunity of information control embedded in objective features of information systems (IS) offered to users for making choices regarding information presentation (Liu and Shrum 2002). By contrast, perceived control is defined as “the feeling of the amount of control that people have over the process or outcome” (Bateson and Hui 1987). The current study primarily focused on the effects of physical control because website operators can directly manage it. However, for cases in which physical control is offered, consumers may not experience equivalent levels of perceived control (Bucy and Tao 2007, Song and Zinkhan 2008, Voorveld et al. 2011). For instance, the presence of search engines may not result in an increase in users' perception of control when they do not have motivations to use search engines. Previous research has shown that physical control and perceived control may be incongruent because of personal and situational factors (Bucy and Tao 2007, Lee et al. 2004, Liu and Shrum 2002, Tremayne 2005). Most importantly, perceived control may mediate the effects of physical control (Bucy and Tao 2007, Wu 2005). Therefore, the current study simultaneously assessed the effects of physical control and perceived control on the shopping experiences of online consumers.

Shopping experiences may include product information search, product evaluation, and purchase decision stages. When consumers shop online, they first seek product information and determine the information that they require. After gathering relevant information, consumers process the information and spend time on evaluating products. Finally, they make a purchase decision

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