

Work and Fun on the Internet: The Effects of Utilitarianism and Hedonism Online

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Abstract

Consumers may act on the spur of the moment, driven by fun and curiosity, or be goal-oriented, task-focused utilitarians. This study investigates the effects of consumers' hedonic and utilitarian orientation online on price consciousness, frequency of purchase, purchased amount, intention to re-patronize a Web site and expertise with the Internet. It specifically considers purchasing, not mere browsing, basing on data collected on customers of one of the largest Italian online retailers for electronics. The data show significant differences between hedonic and utilitarian orientation online with regard to past purchase frequency, the amount purchased and the intention to re-patronize the Web site in the future. The findings suggest that utilitarianism is strongly present online, and is valuable, thus utilitarian consumers should not be neglected, but hedonism is even more profitable, impacting on the number of items purchased and the intention to come back to the Web site. No differences are found in the level of price consciousness or in the degree of expertise with the Internet.

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Introduction

Consumers have different personalities that might influence how they approach shopping. Some consumers are goal-oriented: they shop based on rational necessity, seek cognitively oriented benefits and consider shopping a necessary task or an instrumental means to an end. By contrast, other consumers shop for fun, namely because they enjoy it, they want to be immersed in the shopping experience and they pursue sensory gratification and fun rather than efficiency (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Wang, Minor, and Wei 2011; Wolfenbarger and Gilly 2001). These different orientations toward shopping are usually classified in terms of utilitarianism and hedonism.

Thus, retail environments can be created with a specific kind of consumer in mind. This research investigates which orientation is more valuable for Internet operators and what the consequences are of a hedonic or utilitarian orientation toward the Web site, because the Internet offers exceptional opportunities and unique features such as the ability to quickly search for

information and entertainment by viewing videos and images (Deng et al. 2010; Varadarajan et al. 2010).

The present research context is a Web site for the sale of electronics products such as MP3 players, DVDs and USB pens, and specifically considers purchasing behavior, not mere browsing, because the latter may not translate into buying.

This research does not address what makes people have a hedonic/utilitarian orientation online nor the reasons why people buy online rather than offline. Instead, it investigates what happens when people have a hedonic or utilitarian orientation on the Internet, analyzing the impact of hedonism and utilitarianism on five variables of key theoretical and managerial relevance, namely: price consciousness, frequency of purchase, purchased amount, intention to re-patronize the Web site and expertise with the Internet.

Theory

Shopping orientation refers to the general predisposition of consumers toward the act of shopping. This may be manifested by information searches, product selections and alternative evaluations, and it is operationalized by a range of attitudes, interests and opinion statements related to shopping (Brown 2000; Brown,

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Pope, and Voges 2003). The roles of emotions, fun and pleasure in consumer behavior are today widely recognized as being very important, and shopping orientation is usually discussed in terms of ‘experiential’ and ‘goal-oriented (Wolfinger and Gilly 2001) or ‘hedonic’ and ‘utilitarian’ (e.g. Griffin, Babin, and Modianos 2000).

Hedonism is the festive, ludic or even epicurean side of shopping; it is related to fun and playfulness rather than to task completion, and thus it reflects the experiential side of shopping, comprising pleasure, curiosity, fantasy, escapism and fun. By contrast, utilitarianism is described as ergic, task-related and rational, meaning that a product is purchased efficiently and rationally; it is related to necessity rather than to recreation, and is often described in terms commonly used to evaluate work performance (e.g. success, accomplishment) (Chaudhuri, Aboulnasr, and Ligas 2010; Griffin, Babin, and Modianos 2000; Hirschman and Holbrook 1982).

If convenience is the main benefit expected from shopping online, then the Internet may best suit ‘utilitarian’ consumers, who perceive the act of shopping as a necessary task to be performed as quickly as possible. By contrast, consumers who enjoy spending time shopping and have a ‘hedonic’ attitude could derive added value from the Internet because it allows them to browse (Hoffman and Novak 2009; Sénécal, Gharbi, and Jacques 2002), enjoy videos, listen to music, personalize and see a huge array of products (Bianco 1997; Montgomery and Smith 2010). A hedonic consumer could enjoy buying online because of the unique features of this form of shopping (such as videos, animations, etc.) and because of the fun and the curiosity of this relatively new and unusual way of purchasing (Dall’Olmo-Riley, Scarpi, and Manaresi 2005; E-marketer 2010). ‘Recreational’ shoppers, namely those who enjoy shopping as a leisure activity, have a more positive attitude toward web retailing than do ‘economic’ shoppers, who either dislike the experience of shopping or feel neutral toward it. Consequently, there is a positive relationship between the experience of ‘flow’ and the hedonic value of consumers’ online shopping experiences (Chaudhuri, Aboulnasr, and Ligas 2010; Chiu et al. 2010; Fenech and O’Cass 2001; Kim, Fiore, and Niehm 2010; Lee and Tan 2003). However, the two orientations co-exist on the Internet (Deng et al. 2010; Hung, Tsang, and Liu 2010; Koo, Kim, and Lee 2008; Sénécal, Gharbi, and Jacques 2002), and the two largest clusters of Internet browsers are recreational and task-oriented consumers (Brown 2000; Brown, Pope, and Voges 2003; Delafrooz, Paim, and Khatibi 2009).

From a utilitarian perspective, good design provides fast, uncluttered and easy-to-navigate sites, so that consumers attempting to shop online find the Web site easy to use and simple in content, context and infrastructure (Burke 2002; Chiu et al. 2010; Szymanski and Hise 2000; Watchravesringkan, Hodges, and Kim 2010). This has been found to be an important driver of the repeated use of the site. A simple layout, with easy sequential steps and straightforward information, which ‘remembers’ anything that requires repetition, such as passwords, credit card numbers and addresses, increases consumers’ perceptions that the web is a useful and convenient way of shopping, positively correlating with utilitarianism (Lawler and Joseph 2007).

At the same time, a ‘pleasurable’ online shopping experience should satisfy the requirements of consumers who have a more hedonistic orientation toward shopping, stimulating exploration, curiosity and entertainment using colors, music, videos and other sensory features of the Web site. Users’ gratification from using the Web site is in fact suggested to be an important driver of its repeated use (Chiu et al. 2010; Joines, Scherer, and Scheufele 2003; Kim, Fiore, and Niehm 2010). For instance, the personalized hedonic-oriented site management of Landsend.com has attracted about 15 million visitors, thereby doubling its Internet sales in just one year and attracting a 20% share of new customers (Cross and Neal 2000).

Virtual environments can generate changes in the affective states of consumers’, influencing their attitude toward the firm and their participation in value creation (Nambisan and Baron 2007). Retailers and other organizations that either have an online selling facility or are considering creating one would benefit from a better understanding of the consequences of specific orientations toward Internet shopping. This understanding would help managers plan their selling strategies better, design and implement virtual environments that facilitate positive interaction experiences for customers, and further segment online consumers.

Previous research has defined and measured hedonism and utilitarianism, assessed their existence offline and online and found that both can lead to satisfaction and to positive attitudes toward the store. Table 1 provides a summary of previous empirical studies on hedonism and utilitarianism, online and offline. In summary, the investigation of further consequences of hedonic and utilitarian orientation besides satisfaction and purchase intention has been neglected in comparison, and contradictory findings emerge for re-patronage intentions (Hung, Tsang and Liu 2010; Nguyen, Nguyen, and Barrett 2007).

Compared with Scarpi (2006), the present study takes into consideration the rapid development of the literature in these years and sets out to analyze the online context: few studies have attempted to link hedonism and utilitarianism with actual consumer behavior in online retailing. By contrast, for the present study data are collected from a large online retailer for electronics, rather than from small offline specialty shops for fashion clothing. In addition, a share of the information — for instance, data on past purchases by a specific customer — was made available to the researcher by the retailer itself, rather than being self-reported by the customer from memory. Furthermore, different and relevant constructs are considered in the present analysis and related with hedonism and utilitarianism online, namely price consciousness, purchase frequency and expertise with the Internet, as discussed in the following section.

Price Consciousness

Earlier studies described a number of shopper types (see Lesser and Hughes 1986), and among them the ‘economic’ shopper was identified early in the literature (Bellenger and Korgaonkar 1980; Lesser and Hughes 1986). This shopper is mainly concerned with buying at the lowest price. This segment is frequently juxtaposed to the segment of recreational

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