

Hedonic and Utilitarian Search for Electronic Word-of-Mouth and Implications on Purchase Value

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Online information search is often seen as a highly utilitarian task but consumers' increasingly diverse ways of using the Web have brought forth more hedonic information search patterns. At the same time, the impact of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on consumer purchase decisions is increasing. The purpose of this study is to investigate the differences between hedonic and utilitarian eWOM search patterns in the light of purchase value. Using survey data from 1660 customers of two travel agencies and structural equation modeling, the study finds that hedonic information search promotes the utilization of eWOM in buying decisions and that eWOM has a greater influence on buying among high-spenders. The findings suggest that hedonic information seekers form an important and valuable customer group and, thus, should be at the focus of online marketing and selling. Companies should encourage customers to search for valuable and experiential eWOM content and create metrics to identify consumers that do so based on their online information search behavior.

Keywords: Online information search, electronic word-of-mouth, hedonism, utilitarianism

HEDONISTINEN JA UTILITARISTINEN KULUTTAJATIEDONETSINTÄ JA SEN MERKITYS OSTOARVOON

Virtuaalista tiedonetsintää on usein pidetty ainoastaan utilitaristisena tehtävänä, mutta kuluttajien entistä monipuolisemmat tavat käyttää Internetiä ovat tuoneet esille myös hedonistisia tiedonetsintätapoja. Lisäksi Internetistä löydettävän kuluttajatiedon (”elektronisen word-of-mouthin”, eWOM:in) on nähty vaikuttavan yhä enemmän kuluttajien päätöksentekoon. Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on tutkia hedonistisen ja utilitaristisen tiedonetsinnän eroja eWOM-kontekstissa ja vertailla teoreettista mallia ostoarvon suhteen. Rakenneyhtälöanalyysi kahden matkatoimiston 1660 asiakkaan kyselydataan pohjautuen paljasti, että hedonistinen tiedonetsintä lisää eWOM-tiedon hyödyntämistä ostopäätöksissä, ja että eWOM-tiedolla on suurempi vaikutus niiden kuluttajien keskuudessa, joiden oston arvo on suuri. Löydösten perusteella voidaan sanoa, että hedonistiset tiedonetsijät muodostavat tärkeän ja arvokkaan asiakasryhmän, joka kannattaa ottaa markkinoinnin ja myynnin keskiöön. Yritysten tulisi myös kannustaa asiakkaitaan etsimään hyödyllistä ja kokemuksellista eWOM-sisältöä sekä luoda mittareita, joiden avulla hedonistiset tiedonetsijät voitaisiin tunnistaa.

Avainsanat: Virtuaalinen tiedonetsintä, elektroninen word-of-mouth, hedonismi, utilitarismi

INTRODUCTION

Hedonic and utilitarian online consumer behavior has been studied extensively (Childers et al., 2001; Hartman et al., 2006; Hoffman & Novak, 1996; Novak et al., 2000) but in research concentrating on online information search, the distinction has been used scarcely. As information found online increasingly influences consumer purchase decisions (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Dellarocas et al., 2007; Grant et al., 2007; Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2004) and online communities are to some extent replacing the use of commercial information sources (Jepsen, 2006), the evolving impact of information search on purchasing needs to be understood thoroughly.

By definition, hedonism means maximizing pleasure and utilitarianism maximizing utility (Babin et al., 1994; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Hedonic consumer seeks aesthetic, experiential and enjoyment-related benefits (Batra & Ahtola, 1990; Chitturi et al., 2008; Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000) whereas utilitarian consumer is task-related and rational (Babin et al., 1994; Batra & Ahtola, 1990) and seeks functional, instrumental and practical benefits (Chitturi et al., 2008; Voss et al., 2003). Hedonic information search, in turn, is experiential whereas utilitarian information search is purposeful (Hartman et al., 2006). The different ways of searching information arguably lead a consumer to browse different kinds of online contents in different kinds of ways, which is expected to have a number of behavioral outcomes, including purchasing (Hoffman & Novak, 2009).

Word-of-mouth has long been recognized to influence consumer decision making, and the opinions and recommendations of others have been seen to have a significant impact on purchase decisions (Engel et al., 1969; Brown & Reingen, 1987). Alongside the rise of online communities and interactive online environments - a space later widely referred as social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) - word-of-mouth communication now takes place online as well (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Hennig-Thurau &

Walsh, 2004; Steffes & Burgee, 2009). This form of communication is often called electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), and can be viewed as a part of a larger concept of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). EWOM has been defined as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2004).

This study focuses on consumers’ search for eWOM because consumers rely on eWOM in their purchase decisions in ever larger scales (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2004). From the perspective of hedonism and utilitarianism, eWOM provides a fruitful area of research. EWOM is extremely varying in many respects such as style, credibility, type of media and cultural background, all of which can be argued to link to hedonic and utilitarian information search patterns (Kozinets, 2002). In the travel industry, for example, eWOM has expanded to information available to customers in key decision-making situations as they can browse hotel reviews on TripAdvisor, screen holiday photos on Flickr and videos on YouTube, discuss which holiday resorts suit families best on Facebook, or ask for recommendations of where to eat in New York on Twitter. Every consumer approaches information search differently and the end results in the form of the purchases are argued to vary accordingly.

While the Web has become increasingly indispensable from the perspective of the necessity of its utilization (Childers et al., 2001; Novak et al., 2000), the more hedonistic online information search, behavior and purchasing have received less attention (Cotte et al., 2006). Particularly in the long-term, experiential paths and thereby hedonic online consumer behavior has received increased recognition (Childers et al., 2001; Hartman et al., 2006; Hoffman & Novak, 2009), and this study makes a timely contribution to this discussion. Specifically, this study identifies a research gap in the unknown differences between hedonic and utilitarian online information search, their relationship to the amount

of eWOM search, eWOM usefulness and utilization of eWOM in purchasing, and their links to the value of the purchase. The amount of eWOM searched, coined here “use of eWOM” is defined as the degree of acquisition of information from the Internet (Rose & Samouel, 2009). The usefulness of eWOM refers to the perception that following an opinion given online will enhance one’s buying decision (Cheung et al., 2008). The utilization of eWOM consists of two parts: first, influence of eWOM on purchase decision refers to the perceived impact of found eWOM messages to the final purchase decision (Bansal & Voyer, 2000) and, second, information adaption, which indicates the degree of understanding and utilization of given piece of information (Cheung et al., 2008).

The primary research question is: “What is the relationship between hedonic and utilitarian information search on the use, perceived usefulness and utilization of eWOM?” The secondary research question is: “How is the hedonic and utilitarian information search related to the value of a purchase?” From the perspective of management and marketing, online information search is potentially one of the most prevalent impacts of digitalization establishing a nuanced understanding of the relationships between iterative and interactive phases of the purchasing process. This is necessary for uncovering how hedonism and utilitarianism operate under the fast and easy availability of online information. Dwelling on this key issue of the dynamics of eWOM information search and utilization, this article also opens up new avenues for going deeper into research of hedonic online consumer behavior. Here, identification mechanisms and metrics for hedonic and utilitarian online behavior and information-behavior outcome patterns represent key opportunities.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Hedonic and utilitarian online information search

In consumer behavior and marketing research, various behavioral patterns and purchase decisions have been seen to reflect hedonic and utilitarian dimensions (Babin et al., 1994; Batra & Ahtola, 1990; Voss et al., 2003). For example, shopping can produce both task-related and experiential benefits and it can be viewed from the perspectives of fun and work (Babin et al., 1994). Lately, the general role of hedonic and utilitarian values has been discussed in the online context; both online environments and online consumer behavior have been seen to represent either or both hedonic and utilitarian values (Childers et al., 2001; Cotte et al. 2008; Hartman et al., 2006; Hoffman & Novak, 1997; Mäenpää et al., 2006; Pace, 2004).

Online environments can be categorized based on their hedonic and/ or utilitarian features or based on the benefits they bring to a consumer. Information systems can be considered as either productivity- or pleasure-oriented (van der Heijden, 2004), Web sites can be categorized based on the enjoyment they bring to the user (Lin et al., 2008), and interactive shopping environments can produce both utilitarian and hedonic benefits (Childers et al., 2001). While online, utilitarian benefits are mostly due to the efficiency and information-density of the Internet. For example, effective information search and comparative features are traditionally seen as satisfying utilitarian needs, whereas hedonic benefits result from immersive and experiential features like video, humor, and games (Childers et al., 2001).

Web consumption can be analyzed based on its experiential and purposeful nature. Consumers' values, openness to change and self-enhancement, influence their innovativeness that in turn makes them consume the Web in either a hedonic or an utilitarian manner (Hartman et al., 2006). Online

information search, specifically, can be split between directed searching and exploratory browsing (Pace, 2004). The same behavioral models can also be called goal-directed and experiential navigation behavior (Hoffman & Novak, 1997) or simply searching and browsing (Catledge & Pitkow, 1995). Specific curiosity, desire for a particular piece of information, helps consumers to define their information search goals, which leads them to directed searching. On the other hand, diversive curiosity, general seeking of stimulation or novelty, leads to ill-defined goals and to exploratory browsing (Pace, 2004).

The Internet has changed the dynamics of information search as a massive amount of information has become available for relatively low cost. Optimally, consumers perform online information search until the perceived search cost exceeds the perceived benefit brought by the new information (Jepsen, 2007). It is argued here that so far such cost-benefit comparisons have assumed at least a rationalistic, if not utilitarian, standpoint (Childers et al., 2001; Cotte et al., 2006). This research claims that both utilitarian and hedonic online information search need to be understood in light of two variables: amount of online consumer information search and information usefulness.

The amount of online consumer information search is determined by personal factors and external market-driven factors (Grant et al., 2007; Rose & Samouel, 2009). More specifically, the factors are 1) consumer's ability to search online, 2) motivation to search online, 3) prior memory structure, 4) usable prior knowledge, 5) size of consideration set, and 6) perceived cost of online search. The research suggests that internal cognitive processing and motivational factors (1–4) have a greater impact upon the amount of online search than external market-driven factors (5–6) (Rose & Samouel, 2009).

According to the heuristic-systematic model of persuasion (Chaiken, 1980), people evaluate message validity based on either the argument of a message (systematic view) or on the source of the message

(heuristic view). Thus, systematic information processing demands more cognitive effort than heuristic information processing, in which the validation is made with the help of simple decision rules. The elaboration likelihood model (Cacioppo & Petty, 1984) is a close conceptualization as it presents a model for how an attitude changes. According to it, persuasion can happen through “central route” (argument quality) or through “peripheral route” (superficial qualities of the message such as source credibility).

Based on an integrated approach of information adaption (Sussman & Siegal, 2003), both argument quality and source credibility affect information adaption through the construct of *information usefulness* that is derived from the technology acceptance model (Davis, 1989). Called originally “perceived usefulness”, the construct can be defined as "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance" (Davis, 1989). In the information adaption context, “the system” can be regarded as “the piece of information” that is perceived as useful or not. In the online context, information usefulness has a strong impact on consumer’s decision to adapt information within online communities (Cheung et al., 2008).

Electronic word-of-mouth

As numerous studies have shown, recommendations made by family members and friends influence consumers’ purchase decisions, and in many cases the personal recommendation is the strongest single factor influencing a purchase decision (Engel et al., 1969; Brown & Reingen, 1987). Research indicates that consumers rely on this information, i.e. WOM, especially to reduce their perceived risk related to a purchase (Murray, 1991). Like WOM, also eWOM has more credibility, relevance and empathy than marketer-generated information (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). The main differences between WOM and

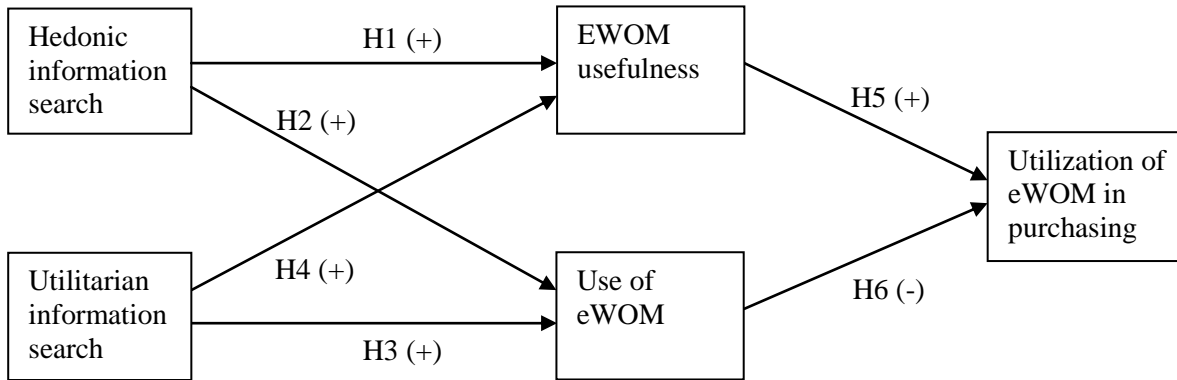
eWOM relate to the asynchronous nature of electronic communication, size of audiences, and to the ability to assess the credibility of a message sender (Steffes & Burgee, 2009).

There are several ways in which WOM-related determinants influence purchase decisions. These include WOM parties' expertise, perceived risk, active search of WOM, and sender's and receiver's tie strength (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Gilly et al., 1998). In research, active search of WOM and tie strength have been seen to influence purchase decisions the most (Bansal & Voyer, 2000). When translating these factors into the eWOM context, sender-receiver tie strength can change. Whereas the tie strength is quite easy to determine in real life (family members vs. friends vs. acquaintances), digital tie strength is determined more by the source of a comment (i.e. which Web site) (Steffes & Burgee, 2009) and by the supposed motives behind a comment (Sen & Lerman, 2007). Online tie strength can be defined as "the intensity of an interactive and personalized relationship between an individual and a Web site" and it has been found that consumers perceive Web sites as primary actors in online interactions (Brown et al., 2007).

RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

The proposed model of hedonic and utilitarian eWOM search explores the relationships between the hedonic/ utilitarian information search, eWOM use, usefulness and utilization. Further, the research compares these relationships between two groups based on the value of purchase. The conceptual model of hedonic and utilitarian eWOM search is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Conceptual model of hedonic and utilitarian eWOM search



Hedonic and utilitarian Web consumption patterns arise from different motives to use the Internet and they produce different kinds of benefits to a Web user (Childers et al., 2001). The dichotomy is derived from the desired end states from each activity and, thus, is based on hedonic and utilitarian motives (Hartman et al., 2006; Cotte et al., 2006). The idea is brought here further with the concepts of hedonic and utilitarian online information search, which rely on the principle that consumer behavior is linked to both hedonic and utilitarian benefits (Babin et al., 1994).

Hedonic information search is pleasant and adventurous whereas utilitarian search is instrumental and time-conscious (Hartman et al., 2006). Thus, hedonic information search is claimed to lead a consumer to search content that pleases him or her and that evokes positive emotions. More specifically, hedonic information search is described as experiential information search. It relates to the concept of flow: consumers sometimes experience “flow”, a state of consciousness when they are deeply involved in an enjoyable activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Hoffman & Novak, 2009). Exploratory browsing (Pace, 2004) is close to hedonic online information search as they are both experiential - as a concept hedonic information search is, however, more goal-directed and related to information search, not just spending

time online. Still, as exploratory browsing is a type of navigation behavior that may lead to flow, it is assumed that hedonic information seekers can also get absorbed in the search as they start “reveling” the information. In light of these arguments, the following is anticipated:

H1: Hedonic information search is related positively to eWOM usefulness.

H2: Hedonic information search is related positively to use of eWOM

Utilitarian information search, on the other hand, arguably leads one to browse as many relevant sites as possible to optimize the utility of the purchase and to ensure that all the relevant information is taken into consideration (Cotte et al., 2006). What is contradicting here is the time-consciousness of utilitarian consumers - if one is concerned of the time spent, why would he or she want to conduct a lot of information search (Cotte et al., 2006; Hartman et al., 2006)? However, research suggests that time urgency is one of the information-seeking goals of most Internet users and it relates especially to individual times going online not the overall information search process (Pace, 2004). Relating to the degree of eWOM search, usefulness is seen to be associated with the utility of the information (Cheung et al., 2008), as a utilitarian information seeker is expected to optimize the degree of the search and the usefulness of the information (Jepsen, 2007). Thus, it is stated that:

H3: Utilitarian information search is related positively to use of eWOM.

H4: Utilitarian information search is related positively to eWOM usefulness.

If a consumer finds information useful, he or she will probably adopt it and utilize it for the ultimate purpose, which in this context is the purchase decision (Cheung et al., 2008). Use of eWOM, on the other hand, is a more complex variable. A vast amount of information makes the decision-making

easier in principal but when a consumer spends a lot of time online searching for information, the utilization of that information might become difficult. In the Internet, the supply of information seems endless and there are always new links and routes available. A consumer can encounter information overload, which results in more confused, less confident and less satisfied consumers (Lee & Lee, 2004). Furthermore, the more one searches for eWOM, the more he or she is likely to find mixed reviews. As mixed eWOM evidence is counterproductive (Doh & Hwang, 2009) and negative eWOM is proportionally more influential on eWOM utilization than positive (Park & Lee, 2009; Sen & Lerman, 2007), higher use of eWOM is argued to lead to less utilization. These considerations lead to the following hypotheses:

H5: EWOM usefulness is related positively to utilization of eWOM in purchasing.

H6: Use of eWOM is related negatively to utilization of eWOM in purchasing.

Hedonic information search directs one's focus to content that evokes excitement, fantasy or self-fulfillment (Childers et al., 2001) that arguably comes on average at a higher price. Further, information related to that kind of content makes a hedonic purchase more probable - one starts dreaming of an exotic getaway instead of a nearby holiday destination. For instance, impulse buying has been linked to hedonic consumer behavior (Chunling & Bastin, 2010). Similarly, utilitarian information search makes the cost-feature optimization more central and thus leads the consumer to plan a sensible holiday trip where the cost component is habitually given considerable weight (Batra & Ahtola, 1990; Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000).

In research also eWOM has seen to influence consumer purchasing and purchase decisions (Dellarocas et al., 2007; Dhar & Chang, 2009; Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2004). As an example, a consumer who

consults online product recommendations selects the recommended product twice as often as a consumer who does not consult recommendations (Senecal & Nantel, 2004). From an online retailer's point of view online recommendations make a difference: an improvement in online reviews of a product accelerates its sales on that site (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). Based on these considerations, it is assumed that the relationships between hedonic and utilitarian information search and eWOM utilization change in light of high and low purchase value. Thus, the following is argued:

H7: Hedonic and utilitarian eWOM search differs by the value of purchase.

To summarize, the study has identified a number of information search related variables that affect utilization of eWOM in purchasing and finally the value of purchasing. Next, the research methodology and results are discussed.

METHODOLOGY

Selection of empirical setting

The study investigates the research question in the travel industry context. The particular industry was selected as the subject of research due to a number of reasons. Firstly, the travel industry has been a forerunner in electronic buying and selling since the early 1990s (Sheldon, 1997; Poon, 1993). Due to its early adoption and rapid global diffusion of e-commerce, the travel industry has been a benchmark for other industries in how industry transformation takes place when particularly consumer behavior is influenced by the shift to digital channels (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Buhalis & O'Connor, 2005). What happens in the travel industry can be argued to both predict and shape the future of e-commerce in other industries and therefore the investigation of travel agency customers is particularly appealing.

Also, eWOM has been very powerful in the travel industry, with both global eWOM-centered companies (e.g. TripAdvisor, Hotels.com, Booking.com) and small local dialogues being common (Buhalis & Law, 2008).

Information search forms a key variable in travel service buying due to the inherent nature of services: they are intangible, heterogenic, experiential, social and inseparable, and thus difficult to assess and compare, which makes information a major issue (Parasuraman, 1985). Furthermore, travel and holidays are one of the most expensive items purchased regularly by households around the world (Buhalis & Law, 2008) and prices between different service choices and vendors vary tremendously (Brynjolfsson & Smith, 2000), which increases the need for information.

From the perspective of partitioning hedonic and utilitarian information search, the versatile nature of leisure travel in general offers a fruitful empirical arena. In past research, holiday resorts have been found to reflect both hedonic and utilitarian dimensions (Batra & Ahtola, 1990; Voss et al., 2003) and leisure travel can indeed be considered an optimal dialogue between hedonic and utilitarian. Hedonic benefits are central to travel services but their utilitarian dimensions, like time consuming nature and high price, are inevitable. The empirical material was collected specifically on packaged holiday travel with the motivation that productized service offerings yield clearer information search, decision-making and value-of-purchase findings. Here, it is easier to track down the entire information search process to a single purchase and a single service provider. Furthermore, the packaged leisure travel business is fairly homogenous globally so the results offer good generalizability.

Data collection

Data were collected from customers of two major travel agencies in a European country. The agencies operate within rather similar markets offering a wide range of travel services to consumers and focus on packaged holiday trips to destinations like the Canary Islands, Egypt, Greece, Thailand, Turkey, and many others. The companies represent the mid-market price range and have slightly different clientele demographics, which can be considered an advantage. One is also a foreign owned subsidiary while the other is a domestic company. All of the respondents were private consumers.

The sample of the study was formed from customers who had bought a trip within one year so that memorization of their purchase process was assured. A survey of the total population of 7951 customers was conducted via email. The survey yielded 1875 sufficiently completed responses, representing a 24% response rate. Due to the nature of the research model, only those who had used the Internet for information search (1660 respondents) were accepted for the analysis, resulting in a final response rate of 21%, which can be considered very good for email consumer surveys (Hooley & Greenley, 2005). The research questionnaire was pretested first with 52 university students and then with 98 of the travel agency customers to ensure technical functionality. Only very minor changes were made to the wording of the questionnaire based on the pretests. The survey went out in four versions with randomized order of questions.

The respondents' distribution was 66% and 34% between the two travel agencies (company-specific response rates were 31% and 16% accordingly). 65% of the respondents were women and 35% men. The average age was 44 years and the biggest respondent cohorts were the 46–55-year-olds (27%) and less than 25-year-olds (26%). A clear majority (89%) of the respondents had used the Internet for

information search regarding the upcoming purchase. However, not all of the online information seekers had bought the trip online; 72% had bought the trip online and the rest from other sales channels, mainly physical travel bureaus, phone, and travel fairs. Non-response bias was tested through analysis of mean scores on the survey items for early versus late respondents (Armstrong & Overton, 1977). No significant differences were found using t-tests at the .05 level.

The study compares the impact of hedonic and utilitarian eWOM search among high- and low-spenders. The groups were determined based on the self-reported price of the last trip. “High-spenders” were those whose trip had cost more than 1000 euros and “low-spenders” were those whose trip was less than 1000 euros. There were 712 respondents belonging to the low-spender group and 916 to the high-spender group. The price was measured on a 5-point scale with mean of 2,84.

Measurement and results

The items for each construct in the questionnaire were selected on the basis of an extensive literature review. The items were formulated to fit the online information search and eWOM contexts using multiple-item, Likert-type scales. Hedonic and utilitarian information search items were derived from Hartman’s et al. (2006) Web consumption items. EWOM usefulness items were adapted from the information usefulness scale (Cheung et al., 2008) and use of eWOM from the degree of online consumer information search scale (Rose & Samouel, 2009). Utilization of eWOM in purchasing is based on two different scales: influence of WOM on purchase decisions (Bansal & Voyer, 2000) and information adaption (Cheung et al., 2008). Table 1 reports the final items for each construct.

Table 1. Measurement scales

Construct	High-spenders			Low-spenders			Items**	Based on
	CR	AVE	Loadings*	CR	AVE	Loadings*		
<i>Hedonic information search</i>	0,801	0,539	0,833	0,784	0,519	0,806	Browsing the Internet was fun	Hartman et al. (2006)
			0,816			0,796	Browsing the Internet was like adventure	
			0,929			0,905	Time spent online was nice	
			0,857			0,856	Browsing the Internet was fun considering what else I could have been doing	
<i>Utilitarian information search</i>	0,369	0,300	0,623	0,366	0,301	0,599	Did not want to waste time	Hartman et al. (2006)
			0,743			0,743	Disappointed if had to browse several sites	
<i>EWOM usefulness</i>	0,874	0,714	0,882	0,853	0,681	0,878	The online discussions I found were valuable	Cheung et al. (2008)
			0,936			0,920	The online discussions I found were informative	
			0,958			0,921	The online discussions I found were helpful	
<i>Amount of eWOM search</i>	0,780	0,605	0,793	0,717	0,543	0,709	Total number of occasions went online during search	Rose & Samouel (2009)
			0,766			0,718	Esimate of total time spent searching	
			0,754			0,701	Number of websites visited during search	
<i>Utilization of eWOM in purchasing</i>	0,818	0,473	0,815	0,810	0,463	0,764	Online discussions had significant influence	Bansal & Voyer (2000)
			0,859			0,829	Online discussions really helped	
			0,822			0,844	Online discussions provided different ideas	
			0,862			0,854	Online discussions mentioned helpful things	
			0,844			0,843	I followed the suggestion given in online discussions	
0,807	0,808	I agreed with the opinion given in online discussions						

* All loadings are significant at $p < 0.01$

** All scales were measured on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 = strongly agree to 7 = strongly disagree

Amos 19.0 was used to test the confirmatory factor model and evaluate the measurement data on a consistent sample of 1660 cases. To assess the measurement models for both high- and low-spender groups, the item loadings were inspected to evaluate convergent validity. All items load on the

construct they are intended to and exceed the threshold of .60 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Next, the composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) were investigated. Most measures are above the recommended values of .70 and .50, respectively (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). To prove the discriminant validity of the model, the Fornell and Larcker (1981) procedure was used and the square root of AVE was compared for a given construct to the absolute value of the standardized correlation of the given construct with any other construct in the analysis. Summary statistics for the measurement model are presented in Table 2.

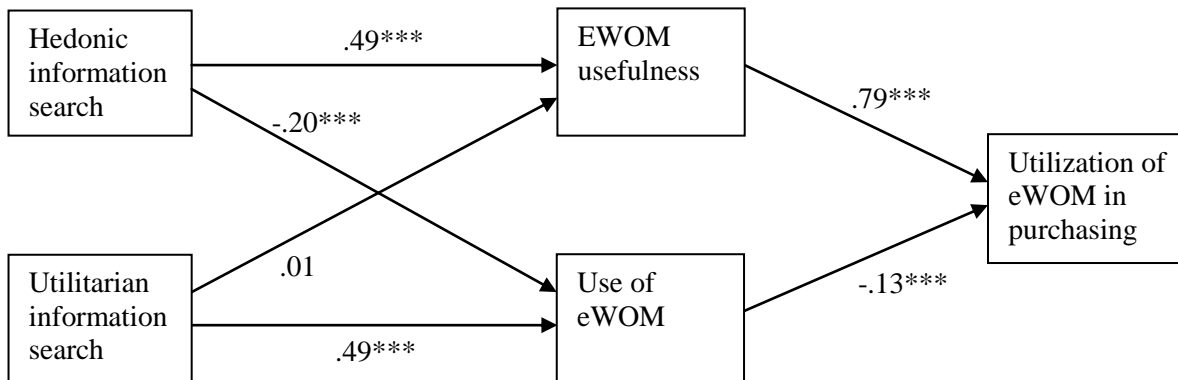
Table 2. Measurement information and correlation matrixes

Construct	High-spenders					Low-spenders								
	Mean	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	Mean	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Hedonic information search	3.41	1.50	1.00					3.22	1.45	1.00				
2. Utilitarian information search	3.33	1.48	.042	1.00				3.28	1.45	-.014	1.00			
3. EWOM usefulness	3.34	1.52	.482	.056	1.00			3.24	1.43	.486	.105	1.00		
4. Use of eWOM	3.21	.94	-.167	.482	-.179	1.00		4.86	1.34	-.175	.460	-.109	1.00	
5. Utilization of eWOM in purchasing	4.03	1.51	.484	.011	.799	-.258	1.00	3.86	1.47	.432	.049	.794	-.245	1.00

The data fit the research model well as reflected by several fit indicators. The comparative fit index (CFI) shows satisfactory fit with indexes of .966 and .957 for the high- and low-spender models. The acceptable level is > .90. Tucker-Lewis indexes (TLI) for the two models are acceptable, .953 and .941. Additionally, the normed fit index shows good fit with values of .956 and .943 (threshold >.90) (Kline,

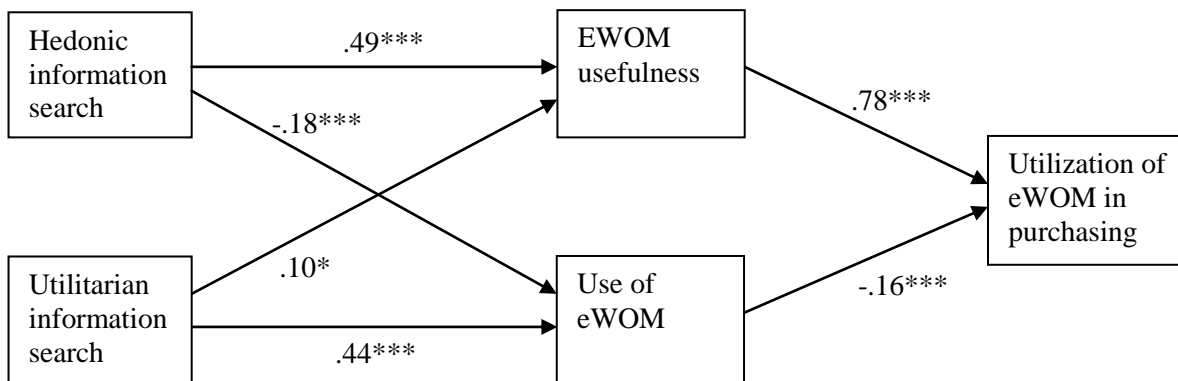
2005, 137–145). After the initial model assessment for the proposed models, a structural equation modeling (SEM) was constructed for high- and low-spenders to test proposed hypotheses by estimating the structural coefficients for the different consumer groups separately. The final models and the standardized path estimates are presented in Figures 2 and 3.

Figure 2. Hedonic and utilitarian eWOM search by high-spenders



*** = sig. at $p < .001$

Figure 3. Hedonic and utilitarian eWOM search by low-spenders



*** = sig. at $p < .001$, * = sig. at $p < .05$

The results of the model suggest that hedonic information search is strongly and positively related to eWOM usefulness (H1: $\gamma_h, \gamma_l = .49, p < .01$). In addition, utilitarian information search was seen to be strongly and positively related to use of eWOM as hypothesized (H3: $\gamma_h = .49, p < .01$; $\gamma_l = .44, p < .01$). These relations give support to the idea that hedonic information search leads a consumer to content that is perceived useful while utilitarians focus on finding as much relevant information as possible. When comparing the cross-relationships of these variables, we can see that, contrary to the expectations, hedonic information search is related negatively to use of eWOM (H2: $\gamma_h = -.20, p < .01$; $\gamma_l = -.18, p < .01$). Utilitarian information search, however, is very weakly related to eWOM usefulness (H4: $\gamma_l = .10, p < .05$) and is statistically significant only for the low-spenders. Therefore, the hypothesis must be rejected. EWOM usefulness has a strong and positive effect on utilization of eWOM as hypothesized (H5: $\gamma_h = .79, p < .01$; $\gamma_l = .78, p < .01$) and use of eWOM relates negatively with the same construct (H6: $\gamma_h = -.13, p < .01$; $\gamma_l = -.16, p < .01$). When comparing the differences between the high- and low-spenders (H7), we can see that four of the six relationships are stronger for hedonic information seekers and the biggest change is in the relationship between utilitarian information search and eWOM usefulness.

DISCUSSION

The study contributes to the contemporary research on the online information search and eWOM by offering insights into the factors that contribute to utilization of eWOM in consumer purchase decision-making and how hedonic and utilitarian information search influences purchase value. The results suggest that hedonic information search relates positively with the search for useful eWOM, as expected, but negatively with use of eWOM, contrary to the hypothesis. Even though hedonic information search is fun, pleasant and adventurous (Hartman et al., 2006), the hedonic information

seekers do not get absorbed in the search by investing a lot of time in it. The flow sought by hedonists does not necessarily imply using a lot of time (Cotte et al., 2006; Hoffman and Novak, 2009). On the contrary, they seem to have the ability to interpret the credibility of online information sources and arguments to assess the overall usefulness of eWOM (Cheung et al., 2008) and therefore find the information they feel like using in less time. More specifically, the researcher claims that hedonic information search might imply that one is confident of the kind of purchase he or she wants to make and, thus, does not need to go online as many times as someone who was more insecure of the purchase. The adventurous nature of hedonic information search could also imply of familiarity with the product category in question, which is a predictor of reduced information search (Rose & Samouel, 2009).

An intriguing finding is the relationship between utilitarian information search and use of eWOM. The items measuring utilitarian information search were both related to time-consciousness (“Did not want to waste time while searching information” and “I would have been disappointed if I had had to search a lot of Web sites”) but still the relationship with the amount of eWOM used was strong and positive while hedonic information search related negatively to the same construct. This finding can be seen as contradictory as time-urgency is relevant in all information search (Pace, 2004). However, as said, it is assumed that the reason why a consumer engages in utilitarian information search in the first place reveals the need to be confirmed that the purchase decision is rational and well prepared. A utilitarian consumer is argued to be more likely indecisive over e.g. two different holiday destinations and go back and forth in comparing them and thus ends spends a lot of time in searching for new information. Consequently, the consumer visits several different sites and goes online many times before making the final choice.

Another intuitively somewhat paradoxical but theoretically plausible claim is that use of eWOM is negatively related to the utilization of eWOM in purchasing. In other words, the more one searches for eWOM, the less he or she actually uses it. This finding gives strong support to the concept of information overload (Lee & Lee, 2004). Additionally, in the context of this study notable is that in online community interactions consumers are rarely unanimous and provocation is common. Thus, the ambiguous nature of eWOM is a hindering factor of utilization - especially if the eWOM is drawn a lot and/or from various and unknown sources (Doh & Hwang, 2009). A consumer ends up more puzzled than he or she was before the search. As the power of negative confirmations is greater than positive (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993; Park & Lee, 2009; Sen & Lerman, 2007), utilitarianists who seek a lot of eWOM are particularly prone to come across some negative eWOM which confuses them. While utilitarianists try to optimize by gathering information (Jepsen, 2007), they can actually be running themselves into a corner with the confusing evidence and can end up spending even more time, which paradoxically is a disutility.

EWOM usefulness and utilization of eWOM relate positively with each other, as expected, and the finding supports the information adaption model (Cheung et al., 2008). Based on the finding and previous research, valuable and informative eWOM messages influence consumer purchasing and, arguably, gives the consumer a better basis for the purchase decision (Dellarocas et al., 2007; Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2004). As the perception of the usefulness is a combination of the source credibility and argument quality (Cheung et al., 2008; Sussman & Siegal, 2003), eWOM can be compared with the dynamics of WOM that is also utilized in everyday purchase decisions.

When comparing the travel service high- and low-spenders, we can see a clear yet delicate pattern between the two groups in terms of their eWOM search, use and utilization processes. The most

significant difference in the relations between the two groups is the relationship between utilitarian information search and eWOM usefulness, which somewhat implies that low-spending utilitarians perceive eWOM more useful than their high-spending peers. The Web has a lot of tips on how to save money and get things cheaper so searching for useful information pays off. At the same time, as the negative relationship between the hedonic information search and use of eWOM intensifies for the high-spenders, it is argued that the high-spenders are more inclined towards time whereas the low spenders see eWOM content in better light due to the information on savings.

The observation that there is no large difference between low- and high-spenders is actually an interesting one. From a behavioral point of view and from a marketing audience perspective, they are not yet distinct and/or discriminated in eWOM. Everybody can see the same public online forums and everyone can use Facebook (even if friend networks are different). As eWOM evolves and travel companies may start paying increasing attention towards eWOM related marketing on high-spenders, this divide can become more prominent.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Based on the existing knowledge, consumers are increasingly accessing online content created by other consumers and diminishing the use of commercial and marketer-generated content (Jepsen, 2006). Even though eWOM may seem like a random collection of content all over the Web that cannot be controlled by companies, there are ways to capitalize on it - consider for example Hotels.com and TripAdvisor that are growing online services effectively by combining customer reviews and electronic sales and thereby creating an “eWOM travel agency”. Their early understanding and commitment to

eWOM has helped them gain ground on companies that have relied more on traditional travel information and/or been slower to react (e.g. Lonely Planet).

Companies need to concentrate on finding hedonic information seekers and make consumers' utilization of eWOM more favorable for them. Customers should be encouraged to search for valuable and experiential eWOM content and eWOM should be an integral part of sales and marketing. This can be done by for example combining eWOM in marketing (sharing consumers' exciting travel videos from YouTube) or integrating eWOM in sales channels (creating an online customer community that leads the user easily to buy). Practices and benefits of searching, using and utilizing eWOM hedonistically need to be actively promoted by companies. As hedonic vs. utilitarian behavior can be context-related (Voss et al., 2003), travel marketers should work together to shape the institutions (norms, rules, traditions, practices and cognitions) of eWOM to include, represent and emphasize hedonism.

In addition, development of metrics to identify hedonic and utilitarian consumers based on their online information search behavior is needed considering the differences between the two search fashions. Linking these metrics to eWOM's impact on sales is the obvious follow-up. There are already several metrics and methods to for example predict sales based on online product reviews (Dellarocas et al., 2007) and to measure eWOM in different online communities (Dwyer, 2007).

In case there is a need to increase eWOM regarding one's own product or service, it is not as straight forward as one may think. Contrary to previous research (Graham & Havlena, 2007), traditional advertising has been seen to reduce the eWOM communication regarding the brand in question (Feng & Papatla, 2011). It is however suggested that efforts towards online advertising and viral and

interactive marketing do increase the overall amount of eWOM (Feng & Papatla, 2011; Graham & Havlena, 2007). There have also been suggestions of online community manipulation (Mayzlin, 2006; Miller et al., 2009) but consensus has not been reached (Dellarocas, 2006). Based on the results, promoting a hedonist-friendly eWOM scene and concentrating on identifying and serving hedonists with true consumer-generated eWOM online might be preferable to eWOM manipulation. Particularly those consumers that use eWOM know what true eWOM content is usually like and are likely to be able to identify those messages that really are useful and credible.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Naturally, there are limitations in the study, some of which are inherent to the research method used while some relate to the context. The survey questionnaire focused only on the online information search behavior currently known while the area could benefit from a more exploratory approach. Based on the literature review, the research in this area is limited especially in respect of hedonism; information search is conceptually attached to utilitarian motivations, which is not always the case. Consumers can find the information search adventurous - as the paper has shown - but there are no relevant metrics to be used in analysis yet. To understand and identify hedonic online information search patterns better, an experiment studying hedonic and utilitarian information seekers' browsing routes could enhance our understanding in the matter. As a future research avenue, creating operational measures to analyze hedonic online information search behavior would simultaneously benefit academic ambitions as well as marketers.

A limitation within the theory of the research is the lacking relationship between hedonic and utilitarian consumers and hedonic and utilitarian information search. Do hedonic consumers also conduct hedonic

information search or are these variables unrelated? This lacking theorization makes the thorough understanding of the different information search patterns difficult as it is tempting to assume that a certain type of information search equals with similar consumer behavior. There, is, however, no evidence of this relationship. The potential limitation of the self-completed survey is also acknowledged. This may restrict external validity and should be kept in mind when interpreting the results.

The sample, existing customers of two travel agencies in one country omits non-buyer behavior and geographical generalizability. The reasons presented above for choosing the empirical setting make up for some of this. Information search and eWOM are particularly interesting in relation to e-selling - marketers need to understand how consumers end up to their Web site and why the purchase processes in online stores are so often cut short. Thus, online consumer behavior should be studied *while* the purchase is planned and processed and so that non-buyers could also be reached. Additionally, the digital information-behavior-outcome patterns should be studied more thoroughly as e-selling, not just e-marketing or e-retailing, becomes increasingly important to businesses. It is believed that the hedonic vs. utilitarian distinction brings a central factor to this equation and to the general integration of e-marketing and e-selling that is characterized by buyer-seller interaction and influence psychology. The generalizability of the results outside the travel industry is unknown but with traveling being a frontrunner in digitalization of commerce (Buhalis & Law, 2008) the findings are expected to be relevant to many service companies operating in the B2C context that differ in terms of hedonism and utilitarianism.

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