

Consumer Information Search Behavior for Experiential and Material Purchases

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Abstract: The objective of this study is to determine whether sources of information consulted and the extent of information search differ between experiential and material purchases. For this purpose two experimental studies were conducted. It is demonstrated that moving along the experiential-material purchase continuum; consumers' reliance on personal sources, especially personal independent sources intensifies towards experiential purchase pole and decreases towards material purchase pole. In addition, for material purchases; direct observation is preferred more compared to personal sources of information. Finally, it is revealed that the total amount of search is greater for experiential purchases than material purchases. The results suggest that experiential and material purchases require different types of search conduct due to their distinct natures.

Keywords: *Consumer search, information sources, consumer behavior, experiential purchases, material purchases*

1. Introduction

The distinction between experiential and material purchases is a prevailing topic within psychology research, which mainly focuses on the varying impacts of experientialism and materialism on individuals' happiness and well-being (Van Boven, 2005; Hsee, Yang, Li & Shen, 2009; Howell & Hill, 2009; Rosenzweig & Gilovic, 2012). This dichotomy is a fruitful yet neglected research stream within consumer literature. Even though it is reasonable to expect that consumer responses vary for experiential and material purchases, there is not much information about these differences. Differential effects of purchase types on every stage of decision processes provide important avenues of research for consumer studies. Especially, a clear understanding of differences of individuals' information search behavior for experiential and material purchases offer valuable insight for both academics and marketing practitioners. In this article, consumers' search for information for either an experiential or a material purchase is investigated. Specifically the amount of total search and information sources consulted for these two types of purchases are examined. The rest of the article is organized as follows. In the first section, the theoretical background on information search and nature of experiential and material purchases is explained. Then two studies that test whether consumers rely on different information sources for different types of purchases are presented. Moreover the differences of extent of information search between experiential and material purchases are examined. Finally a discussion of the findings, their managerial implications and suggestions for future research are provided.

2. Conceptual Background

Experiential purchases are defined as intangible events with an expiry that one experiences whereas material purchases are tangible objects with physical presence that one owns (Van Boven, 2005). The experiential/material purchase distinction is placed on a continuum. Even though it is crystal clear to classify some purchases that are located close to either end of the continuum, the purchases located in the middle are not so discernible (Nicolao, Irwin & Goodman 2009). Therefore, the experiential/ material distinction is based on the variance of people's intentions when making a purchase (Van Boven, & Gilovic, 2003; Thomas & Millar, 2013). It is indicated that when people have the main intention of getting a life experience they make experiential purchases. On the other hand when their main purpose is to gain a physical possession they make material purchases (Van Boven, 2005). Several studies investigated the distinguishing characteristics of experiential versus material purchases and their effects on psychology and behavior. Specifically, these

studies found that experiential purchases are more intrinsically motivated, produce more favorable impressions, create more positive interactions when conversed about and induce more happiness and well-being (Van Boven, Campbell & Gilovich, 2010; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003; Van Boven, 2005; Howen & Hill, 2009; Carter & Gilovic, 2010; Thomas & Millar, 2013). Moreover, it is demonstrated that individuals who have a tendency for habitual experiential purchases are more extravert and open with a greater appreciation for beauty in their environments (Howell, Pchelina & Iyer, 2012).

Previous studies examined whether information sources consulted and the amount of information search is divergent between purchases involving hedonic goods, which are mainly consumed for pleasure and fun, and utilitarian goods, which are mainly consumed for their practical value (Babin, Darden & Griffin, 1994; Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000; O'Curry, Suzanne & Strahilevitz, 2001; Okada, 2005). In general, prior studies found that consumers invest more time searching for purchases of hedonic goods. Prior research also examined whether consumer information search efforts differ between purchases involving search goods, i.e. goods that can be easily evaluated before the purchase and those involving experience goods, whose characteristics are difficult to observe and evaluate in advance (Franke, Huhmann & Mothersbaugh, 2004; Huang, Lurie & Mitra, 2009; Mitra, Reiss & Capella, 1999; Weathers, Sharma & Wood, 2006). In general, it was found that people tend to conduct extensive search in purchasing hedonic search goods. However, consumers with higher subjective knowledge tend to search more for experience goods (Pingjun & Rosenbloom, 2013). A further study, investigated the impact of tangibility and intangibility in pre-purchase processes (Hellen & Gummerus, 2012). It was suggested that tangibility urge consumers to make more comparisons which decreased the chances of a positive search experience. More recently, a distinction was made for search in purchases of niche products i.e. products with high dispersion vs. generic products, i.e. products with low dispersion. When firms offer niche products, this induces more search (Larson, 2013). On the other hand, the impact of experiential/material purchase classification, which is based on individuals' intentions for gaining an experience or acquiring a material possession, on search behavior did not receive any attention in the previous literature; which is a gap the present study attempts to fill.

Within search literature it was revealed that different purchase types generate variance in information search conduct due to the divergence of the risk associated with different purchase types (Mourali, Laroche & Pons 2005). It is suggested that degree of perceived risk stimulates external search. Furthermore, different sorts of risk (such as financial, performance, physical, social, and psychological risk) created by differences in product types (namely hedonic, utilitarian, symbolic), lead to disparate search strategies (Midgley, 1983). Based on these findings, we expect information search strategies to be divergent between experiential and material purchases since different types of risks are involved. Specifically, performance risk is more significant for material purchases, and social risk is more essential for experiential purchases (Van Boven, 2005). In order to assess differences in search activities, Andreasen's classification of information sources is employed in this research. Andreasen (1968) classified the sources of information initially into four groups based on whether the sources are advocate or independent and whether the nature of information provided is personal or impersonal and added direct observation as a fifth source of information:

- Personal Independent (PI) - opinions of friends, family members
- Personal Advocate (PA) – opinions of sales personnel
- Impersonal Independent (II) - consumer reports,
- Impersonal Advocate (IA) - mass media advertising (magazine ads, radio commercials, TV commercials, point-of-purchase displays)
- Direct Observation (DO) - product trial

Moving along the experiential-material continuum reliance on these different sources of information sources is expected to be disparate. Similar to search goods, experiential purchases are difficult to assess prior to purchase therefore individuals will be inclined to acquire information from those who purchased similar experiences. Besides, experiential purchases have strong social connotations and therefore call for seeking information from other individuals instead of relying on impersonal sources (Midgley, 1983). As a result, we expect that personal sources are more preferred in experiential purchases. In particular, personal independent sources provide a more meaningful guidance for experiential purchases as consumers favor advisory from well-known acquaintances (Mourali, Laroche & Pons, 2005). Thus the difference between experiential and material purchases regarding dependence on personal sources is likely to be more pronounced for independent sources. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H1: Personal sources of information, including both personal independent and personal advocate sources, are preferred more for experiential purchases than material purchases.

H1a: Personal independent sources of information are used more for experiential purchases than material purchases.

Direct observation as a search strategy is not applicable to experiential purchases. Still it is a useful source for material purchases since it helps to eliminate some of the uncertainty associated with the purchase. Moreover, direct observation is even more valuable than information gathered from other people as individuals trust their own opinions more than those of others. Hence our second hypothesis is:

H2: For material purchases, direct observation is preferred more compared to personal sources of information.

We also expect differences in the total amount of search between material and experiential purchases. Previous literature found that experiential purchases are discussed more and favored more than material purchases since they induce more positive impressions (Van Boven, Campbell & Gilovic, 2010). Hence, individuals tend to assess experiential pursuits with others. Another point is that experiential purchases entail higher risk than material purchases since the former cannot be returned if individuals are not satisfied. However for material purchases generally the purchased items are returnable. Moreover, the amount of financial risk associated with experiential purchases is greater than material purchases as it is difficult to compare one experiential purchase with another and decide whether the experience was worth the price (Carter & Gilovich, 2010). Based on this evidence, the third hypothesis is generated as follows:

H3: Total amount of search made for experiential purchases is more than the total amount of search made for material purchases.

Given the hypotheses of the study, an experimental approach was selected. First a pretest was conducted to operationalize the variable “purchase type”. Then two experiments were designed to test the hypotheses.

Pretest: To operationalize the variable “purchase type”, an extensive pretest was conducted with 43 people. A list comprising 78 different purchases in a random order was presented to the respondents. Next, they were given the definition of experiential and material purchases respectively, stating that some purchases may share the characteristics of both types. Based on these definitions, respondents were asked to rate the 78 purchases on the experiential-material continuum employing a 7-point scale. Items which received ratings closer to 7 were rated as experiential purchases, while items with average ratings closer to 1 were considered material. Items with ratings in the middle were considered representative of mixed purchases, sharing the qualities of both types (Murray, 1991). In order to further refine the choices, respondents were also asked to rate the purchases according to their perceived riskiness. After ranking the 78 products on the material-experiential continuum, 5 items for each of the three purchase categories were determined based on their mean ratings. Within these 5-item subsamples, the ones with similar perceived riskiness were chosen. As a result, a calculator and a kettle were chosen to represent material purchases, and a massage and a vacation were chosen to represent experiential purchases. A piece of furniture and a bicycle were chosen as examples of mixed purchase type. The use of dual product examples was intended to contribute to the generalizability of the results.

3. Method

Experiment 1: This experiment tests the first two hypotheses. The goal is to examine whether purchase type affects usage of different information source categories. It is expected that moving on the experiential-material continuum the types of sources that individuals relied on differ significantly.

Experimental design: 60 undergraduate students participated in the study. There were three within subject conditions: material purchases, experiential purchases and mixed purchases, sharing both material and experiential characteristics. Participants were presented with three hypothetical scenarios, one for each purchase type. Respondents were asked the following: “Imagine you are planning to buy... Assess how much you will rely on the sources mentioned below.” An 11-item scale was employed to evaluate participants’ choice of information source. The five different categories of information sources, namely (1) personal

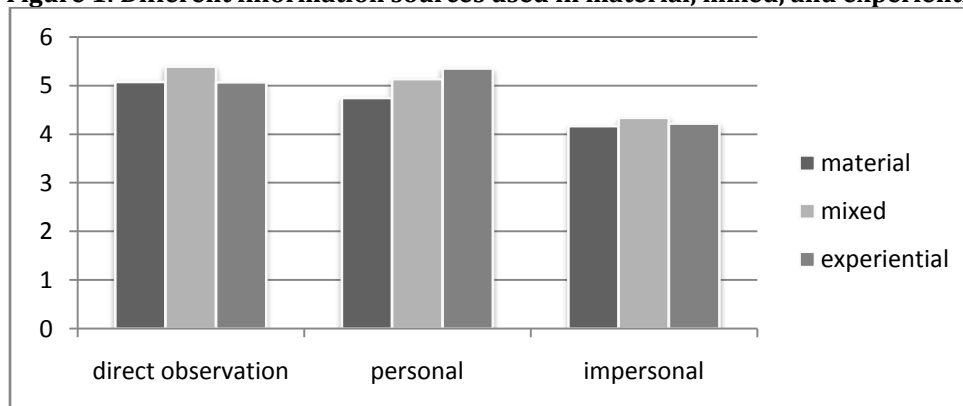
independent, (2) personal advocate, (3) impersonal independent, (4) impersonal advocate and (5) direct observation were represented with these items. The experiment design was a 3 factor (purchase type: material, mixed, experiential) within subject design.

Manipulation check: Even though the stimulus material was determined based on the pretests, a manipulation check was made to make sure the purchase types are perceived in the way that they were intended. Participants rated the three different purchase types on a material-experiential continuum with a 7-point scale from 1 (completely material purchase) to 7 (completely experiential purchase). Following that participants answered several questions addressing probable confounds. The time constraints felt by respondents and their tolerance for ambiguity was assessed using 3 and 5-item scales, respectively. As expected, participants rated the calculator and the kettle ($M=6.40$, $s=1.14$) as more material than the piece of furniture and bicycle ($M=4.01$, $s=1.72$) to a significant degree ($t=4.86$, $p<.01$). In addition, the piece of furniture and the bicycle were rated as more material compared to the vacation and massage ($M=2.62$, $s=1.91$) to a significant degree ($t=8.35$, $p<.01$).

Analysis and results: First, data were analyzed by the SPSS ANOVA procedure for repeated measures. As expected, the analysis revealed a significant interaction between purchase type and information source ($F = 6.10$, $p<.01$) meaning that depending on the type of the purchase, the sources that consumers rely on differed. In order to investigate nature of these differences post-hoc comparisons were performed. H1 stated that personal sources of information, including both personal independent and personal advocate sources, are preferred more for experiential purchases than material purchases. T-tests results comparing the amount of personal information used for different purchase types, revealed significant differences between experiential and mixed types ($t= 2.63$, $p= .01$) and mixed and material types ($t= 1.70$, $p= .09$). The difference between the experiential and material types was also significant ($t= 3.87$, $p< .01$). These results supported the stated hypothesis, showing that as consumers move from the material to the experiential side of the purchase continuum, their reliance on personal sources of information increases significantly. This can be seen on figure 1 which shows that personal sources are preferred over impersonal sources for all three types of purchases but the effect is most pronounced in experiential purchases.

A related hypothesis, H1a, predicted that personal independent sources of information are used more for experiential purchases than material purchases. Similar to the first results, t-tests showed significant differences between experiential and mixed types ($t= 3.10$, $p< .01$), mixed and material types ($t= 2.51$, $p= .02$) and experiential and material types ($t= 4.64$, $p< .01$) in terms of reliance on personal independent sources. Thus, the data support the prediction that as respondents move towards the experiential side from the material side, their usage of personal independent sources of information increases, which is similar to the pattern shown in figure 1. H2 stated that for material purchases; direct observation is preferred more compared to personal sources of information. The result of the t-test showed that reliance on direct observation is significantly greater than reliance on personal sources ($t= 1.74$, $p= .09$), providing support for H2. Regarding the probable confounds, no significant effect of tolerance for ambiguity and time constraint on information search was found.

Figure 1: Different information sources used in material, mixed, and experiential purchases



Experiment 2: In Experiment 1 respondents' reliance on various information sources for hypothetical purchases on the material-experiential continuum were examined. Experiment 2 instead utilized actual purchases made by the participants. This way participants' real experiences and memories were used in testing the third hypothesis regarding the amount of information search made.

Experimental design: 78 undergraduate students participated in the study. There were two between subject conditions: material purchases and experiential purchases. Participants were initially asked to recall either an experiential or a material purchase that had cost between \$150 and \$300. The price range of the purchase is established in order to make sure participants chose purchases of significance that had stimulated some sort of search activity. The price cap is determined to avoid selection of a wide range of purchases with divergent risk levels. Before choosing a purchase, participants were given a description of a material or an experiential purchase. Material purchases were defined as: "material purchases are made in order to possess a tangible object" and experiential purchases were defined as: "experiential purchases are made in order to acquire a life experience" (Van Boven, 2005). After reading the description participants were asked to recall one similar purchase that they made recently and provide some details about purchase such as what was bought, where it was bought from and how much it cost. The descriptions were required to ensure participants understand and respond to purchase type definition correctly, and also to help them remember the purchase activity.

Following this part respondents were asked about their reliance on different source types using the same 11-item scale that was employed in the first study. In addition to that, the extent of total search made for this purchase was measured by asking respondents the number of stores visited, number of websites visited, the number of features considered, and the number of alternatives examined (Moorthy, Ratchford & Talukdar, 1997). Finally, the knowledge level of the respondents for the mentioned purchase was assessed in order to address potential confounds. The 5-item subjective knowledge scale developed by Flynn and Goldsmith (1999) was employed. The study employed a 2 factor (purchase type: experiential, material) experimental design. In contrast to the first experiment which employed a within subject design, the second experiment used a between subject design. Although within subject designs have the advantage of reducing errors related to individual differences, they also involve the drawback of carryover effects such as practice and fatigue. Thus, a between subject design is employed to check the sensitivity of the results.

4. Analysis and results

The purchase descriptions were checked to make sure participants understood the definitions of material and experiential purchases correctly. 9 ambiguous responses were eliminated, resulting in a final sample of 33 material and 36 experiential purchasers. First, data were analyzed by the SPSS ANOVA procedure. The analysis showed that personal sources of information, including both personal independent and personal advocate sources, are used more in experiential purchases compared to material purchases ($F = 6.62, p = .01$), supporting H1. This can be seen on figure 2 which shows that personal sources are preferred over impersonal sources for both types of purchases but the effect is more pronounced in experiential purchases. Similarly, H1a was also supported by statistical analyses which showed that personal independent sources of information are more preferred for experiential purchases than material purchases ($F = 13.05, p < .01$). The second hypothesis stated that in material purchases; direct observation is preferred more compared to personal sources of information. The result of the t-test showed that the amount of information gathered by direct observation is significantly higher than the amount of information from personal sources ($t = 3.09, p < .01$), providing support for H2.

To sum up, the results of the experiment 2 are similar to the results of experiment 1 in terms of the first two hypotheses. Another hypothesis which was not tested in the first experiment due to its hypothetical design is related to the extent of information search. H3 stated that the extent of search is greater for experiential purchases than material purchases. ANOVA results showed that for all four measures of "extent of search", the amount of information gathered is greater for experiential purchases as predicted by H3. For search items related to the purchase medium, a statistically significant difference was observed. Specifically, for experiential purchases, more websites ($F = 3.88, p = .05$) and more stores are visited ($F = 20.18, p < .01$). However, for product related items such as the number of alternatives considered or the number of attributes evaluated the differences in terms of the amount of information gathered were not statistically significant (see figure 3). In addition, no confounding effect of product knowledge on information search was observed.

Figure 2: Different information sources used in material and experiential purchases

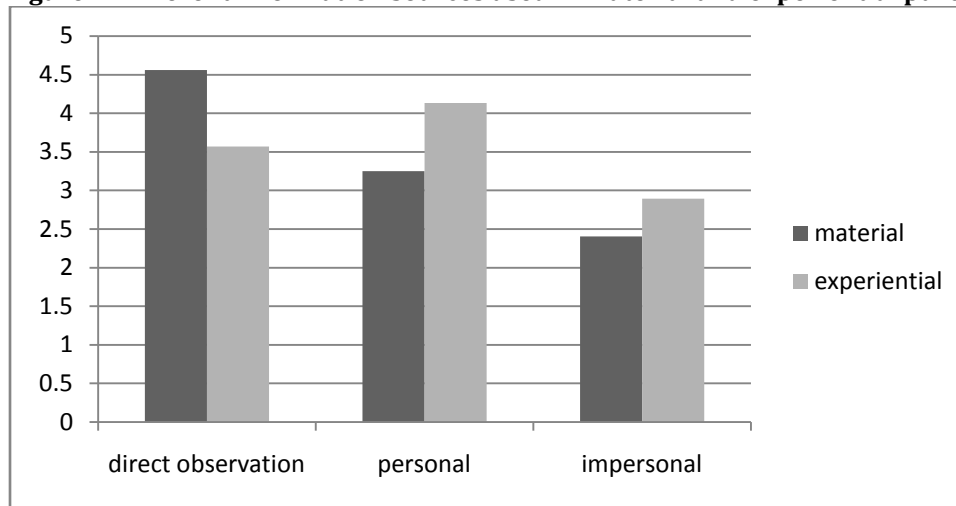


Figure 3: Total amount of information search



5. Discussion and Conclusion

The objective of the two experiments conducted was to determine whether there is a difference in the sources of information used between material and experiential purchases. The analysis showed that moving along the experiential-material purchase continuum, consumers' reliance on personal sources increases towards experiential purchase pole and decreases towards material purchase pole. It is also found that usage of personal independent sources intensifies towards experiential purchase pole compared to material purchase pole. The results of the two experiments point to the distinctive nature of experiential and material purchases, requiring different information needs. Experiences are strictly personal and subjective, and involve emotional and intellectual components. The enjoyment and satisfaction consumers get from experiential purchases depend mostly on consumers' characteristics rather than objective criteria. Also, it is not possible to reduce the uncertainty associated with experiential purchases with pre-purchase trials or direct observation. Therefore for experiential purchases, personal sources of information become more relevant. Moreover, since the opinions of colleagues, friends or family members tend to be more valued, the effect is more pronounced for independent sources.

Another finding is that in material purchases, direct observation is preferred more as a source of pre-purchase information compared to personal sources. Material purchases tend to be more objective and comparable. Instead of relying on opinions of other consumers, individuals place more weight to their own observation and assessment. Therefore, personal sources of information become less dominant for material purchases compared to direct observation which becomes an important source since it lets customers eliminate several alternatives. In addition, the second experiment demonstrated that the number of visited websites and stores is significantly higher for experiential purchases. The number of examined alternatives and product features was also higher for experiential purchases, but the difference was statistically insignificant. The finding that consumers who are involved in experiential purchases seek additional pre-purchase information points out to their ephemeral and irreversible nature, which leads customers to search more information in order to reduce their risk. Moreover, opinions regarding material purchases are not commonly discussed in social settings due to unfavorable impressions for materialistic tendencies. As a result, experiential purchases are discussed in everyday life inducing several opportunities for comparison and information search. These results have several implications for marketing practitioners. The finding that personal sources of information, including opinions of friends, family members and sales personnel are more preferred, points to the importance of word of mouth, especially for experiential purchases. Hence marketers and managers should take active steps to provide word of mouth information to consumers. In line with that, social media which is a magnifying platform for word of mouth should be given necessary importance and managed accordingly. These findings also indicate an important role for opinion leaders and reference group members who may be early adopters, for marketers of experiences. Another implication is that pre-purchase trial opportunities should be created for material goods since direct observation is more preferred compared to personal sources of information for these types of purchases.

This study examined how the usage of information sources differs between purchase types. However, we did not examine the underlying reasons why consumers engage in different types of search activities for experiential and material purchases; which could be a fruitful area for further research. These reasons could be investigated thoroughly especially using qualitative research methodologies. Second, we only tested tolerance for ambiguity and time constraint as potential confounding factors affecting information search. However, additional factors such as consumer involvement, self-confidence, life style, or socio-demographics could have an impact on information search behavior (e.g. Loibl, Soo, Diekmann & Batte, 2009; Moorthy, Ratchford, & Talukdar, 1997; Schmidt & Spreng, 1996). Future studies could investigate these additional factors as control variables affecting differences in information search between material and experiential purchases. In addition to internal factors, it is known that external market related factors such as price dispersion and the size of the consideration set have a positive impact on information search effort (Rose & Samouel, 2009). Hence, these factors could be investigated as additional control variables affecting information search behavior for experiential and material purchases.

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