Abstract
Online information search is often seen as a highly utilitarian task but consumers’ 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 in the light of eWOM utilization. Using survey data from 1660 customers of two travel agencies, the study finds that, unlike utilitarian information search, hedonic information search promotes the utilization of eWOM in buying decisions.

1. Introduction

Hedonic and utilitarian online consumer behaviors have been studied extensively [13, 27, 32, 41] but in online information search related literature the distinction has been used scarcely. As information found online increasingly influences consumer purchase decisions [6, 18, 26, 28] and online communities are to some extent replacing the use of commercial information sources [35], the evolving impact of information search on purchasing needs to be understood thoroughly.

By definition, hedonism means maximizing pleasure and utilitarianism maximizing utility [3, 29]. A hedonic consumer seeks aesthetic, experiential and enjoyment-related benefits [5, 14, 20] whereas a utilitarian consumer is task-related and rational [3, 5], and seeks functional, instrumental and practical benefits [14, 54]. Hedonic information search, in turn, is experiential whereas utilitarian information search is purposeful [27]. The different ways of searching information arguably lead a consumer to browse different kinds of online contents in different kinds of ways, and the behavioral outcomes are expected to be different [30].

Word-of-mouth (WOM) 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 [23, 8]. Alongside the rise of online communities and interactive online environments—a space later widely called social media [36]—WOM now takes place online as well and it is often referred as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) [6, 28, 51].

This study focuses on consumers’ search for eWOM because consumers rely on eWOM in their purchase decisions in ever larger scales [28]. 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, and type of media, all of which can be argued to link to hedonic and utilitarian information search patterns [38]. 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 holiday resorts on Facebook, or ask restaurant recommendations on Twitter. Every consumer approaches information search differently and the end results in the form of a purchase vary accordingly.

While the web has become increasingly necessary for consumers from the utilitarian point of view [13, 41], hedonic online consumer behavior has received less attention [15] and this study makes a timely contribution to this discussion. Specifically, we identify a research gap in the differences between hedonic and utilitarian online information search, and their relationship to the amount of eWOM search, eWOM usefulness and utilization of eWOM in
purchasing. The amount of eWOM searched, referred here as the use of eWOM, is defined as the degree of information acquisition from the internet [48]. The usefulness of eWOM refers to the perception that following an opinion given online will enhance one’s buying decision [12]. The utilization of eWOM consists of two parts: first, influence of eWOM on purchase decision refers to the perceived impact of found eWOM messages on the final purchase decision [4] and, second, information adaption, which indicates the degree of understanding and utilization of the given piece of information [12].

The primary research question is: “What is the influence of hedonic and utilitarian information search on utilization of eWOM in consumer decision-making?” 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.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. 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 [3, 5, 54]. For example, shopping can produce both task-related and experiential benefits and it can be viewed from the perspectives of fun and work [3]. Lately, the general role of hedonic and utilitarian values has been discussed in the online context as well; both online environments and online consumer behavior have been seen to represent either or both hedonic and utilitarian values [13, 15, 27, 31, 43, 44].

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 [53], web sites can be categorized based on the enjoyment they bring to the user [40], and interactive shopping environments can produce both utilitarian and hedonic benefits [13]. While online, utilitarian benefits are mostly due to the efficiency and information-density of the internet. For example, efficient 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 [13].

Web consumption can be analyzed based on its experiential and purposeful nature. Consumers’ values—openness to change and self-enhancement in particular—influence the person’s innovativeness, which in turn makes them consume the web in an either hedonic or utilitarian manner [27]. Online information search, specifically, can be split between directed searching and exploratory browsing [44]. These behavioral models can also be called goal-directed and experiential navigation behaviors [31] or simply searching and browsing [11]. 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, diversified curiosity, general seeking of stimulation or novelty, leads to ill-defined goals and to exploratory browsing [44].

The internet has changed the dynamics of information search as a massive amount of information has become available for a relatively low cost. Optimally, consumers perform online information search until the perceived search cost exceeds the perceived benefit brought by a new piece of information [34]. It is argued here that so far such cost-benefit comparisons have assumed at least a rationalistic, if not utilitarian, standpoint [13, 15]. This research claims that both utilitarian and hedonic online information search patterns need to be understood in the light of two variables: degree 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 [26, 48]. 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. Research suggests that internal cognitive processing and motivational factors (1–4) have a greater impact upon the degree of online search than external market-driven factors (5–6) [48].
Based on an integrated approach of information adaption [52], both argument quality and source credibility affect information adaption through the construct of *information usefulness* that is derived from the technology acceptance model [17]. 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" [17]. 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 community context, information usefulness has a strong impact on consumer’s decision to adapt new information [12].

2.2. Electronic word-of-mouth

As numerous studies have shown, recommendations made by family members and friends influence consumers’ purchase decisions to large extents [23, 8]. Research indicates that consumers rely on this information, i.e. WOM, especially to reduce their perceived risk related to a purchase [42]. Like WOM, also eWOM has more credibility, relevance and empathy than marketer-generated information [6]. The main differences between WOM and eWOM relate to the asynchronous nature of electronic communication, audience sizes, and to the message receiver’s ability to assess the credibility of a message sender [51].

There are several ways in which WOM-related factors influence purchase decisions. These include WOM parties’ expertise, perceived risk, active search of WOM, and sender’s and receiver’s tie strength [4, 25]. When translating these factors into the eWOM context, tie strengths between message senders and receivers vary. Whereas the tie strength is quite easy to determine in real life (family members vs. friends vs. acquaintances), the digital tie strength is determined by the nature of the information source (i.e. web site) [51] and by the supposed motives behind a comment [49]. Digital 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 [7].

3. 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. The conceptual model of hedonic and utilitarian eWOM search is presented in Figure 1.

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 [13]. The dichotomy is derived from the desired end states from each activity and, thus, is based on hedonic and utilitarian motives [15, 27]. 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 [3].

Hedonic information search is pleasant and adventurous whereas utilitarian search is instrumental and time-conscious [27]. Thus, hedonic information search is claimed to lead a consumer to content that pleases him or her and that evokes positive emotions. More specifically, we describe hedonic information search as experiential information search. It relates to the concept of flow; Sometimes people experience a feeling of flow, a state of consciousness when they are deeply involved in an enjoyable activity [16, 30]. Exploratory browsing [44] 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, we assume 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 useful information is taken into consideration [15]. 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 [15, 27]? 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 [44]. Relating to the degree of eWOM search, usefulness is seen to be associated with the utility of the information [12], as a utilitarian information seeker is expected to optimize the degree of the search and the usefulness of the information [34]. Thus, we state 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 a piece of information useful, he or she will probably adopt it and utilize it for the ultimate purpose, which in this context is the purchase decision [12]. 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 all the found information becomes 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 leads him or her in a more confused, less confident and less satisfied state of mind [39]. Furthermore, the more one searches for eWOM, the more he or she is likely to find mixed reviews. As mixed eWOM evidence is counterproductive [21] and negative eWOM is proportionally more influential on eWOM utilization than positive [46, 49], higher use of eWOM is argued to lead to less utilization. These considerations make us hypothesize:

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.

To summarize, we identify a number of information search related variables that affect utilization of eWOM in purchasing. Next, the research methodology and results are discussed.

4. Methodology

4.1. 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 [50, 47]. 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 [9, 10]. Secondly, eWOM has been very powerful in the travel industry, with both global eWOM-centered companies (e.g. TripAdvisor, Hotels.com) and small local dialogues being common [9].

Information search forms a key variable in travel service buying due to the inherent nature of services: they are intangible, heterogenic, experiential, and inseparable, and thus difficult to assess and compare [45]. Furthermore, holiday trips are the most expensive items purchased regularly by households around the world [9], which increases the need for information. From the perspective of partitioning hedonic and utilitarian information search, the versatile nature of leisure travel offers a fruitful empirical arena. In past research, holiday resorts have been found to reflect both hedonic and utilitarian dimensions [5, 54].

4.2. 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 private customers and focus on packaged holiday trips to destinations like the Canary Islands, Greece, Thailand, and many others. The companies represent the mid-market price range and have slightly different clientele demographics, which can be considered an advantage.
The sample of the study was formed from customers who had bought a trip within a 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 problem, 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 good for email consumer surveys [33]. The research questionnaire was pretested first with 52 university students and then with 98 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. A clear majority of the respondents (89%) 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 [2]. No significant differences were found using t-tests at the .05 level.

4.3. Measurement and results

The items for each construct in the questionnaire were formulated to fit the online information search and eWOM contexts using Likert-type scales. Hedonic and utilitarian information search items were derived from Hartman and colleagues’ [27] web consumption items. EWOM usefulness items were adapted from the information usefulness scale [12] and use of eWOM from the degree of online consumer information search scale [48]. Utilization of eWOM in purchasing is based on previous research [27, 48, 49].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>CR</th>
<th>AVE</th>
<th>Loadings*</th>
<th>Items**</th>
<th>Based on</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hedonic information search</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.826</td>
<td>Browsing the Internet was fun</td>
<td>Hartman et al.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.809</td>
<td>Browsing the Internet was like adventure</td>
<td>(2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.919</td>
<td>Time spent online was nice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.856</td>
<td>Browsing the Internet was fun considering what else I could have been doing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Utilitarian information search</strong></td>
<td>0.368</td>
<td>0.300</td>
<td>0.609</td>
<td>Did not want to waste time</td>
<td>Hartman et al.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.747</td>
<td>Disappointed if had to browse several sites</td>
<td>(2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EWOM usefulness</strong></td>
<td>0.865</td>
<td>0.699</td>
<td>0.880</td>
<td>The online discussions I found were valuable</td>
<td>Cheung et al.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.928</td>
<td>The online discussions I found were informative</td>
<td>(2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.944</td>
<td>The online discussions I found were helpful</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Use of eWOM</strong></td>
<td>0.752</td>
<td>0.576</td>
<td>0.756</td>
<td>Total number of occasions went online during search</td>
<td>Rose &amp; Samuel (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.742</td>
<td>Estimate of total time spent searching</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.732</td>
<td>Number of websites visited during search</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Utilization of eWOM in purchasing</strong></td>
<td>0.815</td>
<td>0.469</td>
<td>0.793</td>
<td>Online discussions had significant influence</td>
<td>Bansal &amp; Voyer (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.845</td>
<td>Online discussions really helped</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.831</td>
<td>Online discussions provided different ideas</td>
<td>Cheung et al.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.859</td>
<td>Online discussions mentioned helpful things</td>
<td>(2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.845</td>
<td>I followed the suggestion given in online discussions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.810</td>
<td>I agreed with the opinion given in online discussions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* All loadings are significant at $p < 0.01$

** All items measured on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 = strongly agree to 7 = strongly disagree
on two different scales: influence of WOM on purchase decisions [4] and information adaption [12]. Table 1 reports the final items for each construct.

Amos 19.0 was used to test the confirmatory factor model and to evaluate the measurement data on a consistent sample of 1660 cases. To assess the measurement model, 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 [24]. Next, the composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) were investigated. Most measures are above the recommended values of .70 and .50, respectively [24]. To prove discriminant validity of the model, we used the Fornell and Larcker procedure [24] and compared the square root of AVE for a given construct (presented on the diagonal on bold in Table 2) to the absolute value of the standardized correlation of the given construct with any other construct in the analysis. The discriminant validity of the model is good except for the correlation between utilization of eWOM in purchasing and eWOM usefulness. This should be taken into account when interpreting the results. Summary statistics for the measurement model are presented in Table 2.

The data fit the research model well as reflected by several fit indicators. The comparative fit index (CFI) shows satisfactory fit with an index of .965. The acceptable level is > .90. Tucker-Lewis indexes (TLI) for the model is acceptable, .952. Additionally, the normed fit index (NFI) shows good fit with .959 (threshold > .90) [37]. After the initial model assessment for the proposed model, we conducted a structural equation model analysis (SEM) to test the proposed hypotheses by estimating the structural coefficients for the model. The final model and the standardized path estimates are presented in Figure 2.

The results of the model suggest that hedonic information search is strongly and positively related to eWOM usefulness (H1: $\gamma = .50$, $p < .01$). In addition, utilitarian information search was seen to be strongly and positively related to use of eWOM as hypothesized (H3: $\gamma = .47$, $p < .01$). These relations give support to the idea that hedonic information search leads a consumer to content that is perceived useful while utilitarian consumers 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: $\gamma = -.19$, $p < .01$). Therefore, the hypothesis must be rejected. EWM usefulness has a strong and positive effect on utilization of eWOM as hypothesized (H5: $\gamma = .79$, $p < .01$) but, due to the strong correlation between these items, the result should be dealt with concern. Use of eWOM relates negatively with utilization of eWOM (H6: $\gamma = -.14$, $p < .01$) as hypothesized. Next, we discuss the results in more detail.

5. Discussion

The present study contributes to the research on the online information search and eWOM by offering insights into the factors that contribute to utilization of eWOM in consumer decision-making. The results suggest that hedonic information search relates positively with search for useful eWOM, as expected, but negatively with use of eWOM, contrary to the hypothesis. Even though hedonic information search is

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Hedonic information search</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>0.729</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Utilitarian information search</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>0.548</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. EWOM usefulness</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>0.489</td>
<td>0.077</td>
<td>0.836</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Use of eWOM</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>-0.175</td>
<td>0.472</td>
<td>-0.150</td>
<td>0.759</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Utilization of eWOM in purchasing</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>0.469</td>
<td>0.035</td>
<td>0.798</td>
<td>-0.252</td>
<td>0.685</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Square-root of AVE on the diagonal on bold; Correlations off-diagonal

* = sig. at $p < .01$

Figure 2. Hedonic and utilitarian eWOM search
fun, pleasant and adventurous [27], 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 [15, 30]. On the contrary, they seem to have an ability to interpret the credibility of online information sources and arguments to assess the overall usefulness of eWOM [12] and therefore find the information they feel like using in less time. 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 [48].

An intriguing finding is the relationship between utilitarian information search and use of eWOM. The items measuring utilitarian information search are both related to time-consciousness 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 is contradictory as time-urgency is relevant in all information search [44]. However, as we 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 and thus ends up spending a lot of time in searching for new information.

Another intuitively somewhat paradoxical but theoretically plausible finding is that use of eWOM is negatively related to 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 support to the concept of information overload [39]. It is also notable that in online community interactions consumers are rarely unanimous and provocation is common. Thus, the ambiguous nature of eWOM is a hindering factor of its utilization—especially if various and unknown sources are used [21]. Furthermore, as the power of negative confirmations exceeds the power of positive messages [1, 46, 49], utilitarian who seek a lot of eWOM are particularly prone to come across negative eWOM that confuses them. While utilitarians try to optimize time use and purchase quality [34] they can actually be running themselves into a corner with the confusing evidence. Hence, they end up spending even more time, which paradoxically is a disutility.

E WOM usefulness and utilization of eWOM relate positively with each other, as expected, and the finding supports the information adaption model [12]. 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 [19, 28]. As the perception of usefulness is a combination of source credibility and argument quality [12, 52], eWOM can be compared with the dynamics of WOM that is also utilized in everyday purchase decisions.

6. 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 [35]. 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 online services like Hotels.com and TripAdvisor that effectively combine customer reviews and electronic sales and thereby transforming into 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 combining eWOM in marketing or integrating eWOM in sales channels. In addition, development of metrics to identify hedonic and utilitarian consumers based on their online information search behavior is needed. There are already several metrics and methods to predict sales based on online product reviews [18] and to measure eWOM in different online communities [22], and metrics on information search style could add companies’ knowledge on their customers’ digital footprint.

7. Limitations and future research

Naturally, there are limitations in our study, some of which are inherent to the research method used while some relate to the context of the study.

Theoretically, there is a lacking understanding of the 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 missing 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 buying behavior. There is, however, no evidence of this relationship. This problem partly arises from the research context decision; consumers, who search for travel related information in a hedonic manner, might act differently when searching for another type of information because the search style might depend on the searched good. The question of the relationship between the used web sites and search patterns remains also unanswered—does a particular site force one into a specific type of information search or does the consumer use his or her own search style regardless what the site is like? We assume the latter as we believe that the search style reflects the consumers’ values and attitudes that remain unchanged during the search.

Furthermore, the sample (existing customers of two travel agencies in one country) omits non-buyer behavior and geographical generalizability. However, to our benefit, the companies differ on many other aspects. We acknowledge also the potential limitation of the self-completed survey. This may restrict external validity and should be kept in mind when interpreting the results. Future research should therefore investigate online information search behavior 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. We believe 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 [9], the findings are expected to be relevant in most B2C contexts.

8. Acknowledgements

Authors thankfully acknowledge the helpful comments of the reviewers of this paper and are grateful for the financial assistance of the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovations.

9. References


