The Effect of Unintended Information Acquisition

Lan Xia, Department of Marketing, Bentley College
Kent Monroe, University of Richmond, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Research on consumer information acquisition primarily has focused on direct information search, which assumes consumers know what products they are seeking. In this paper, we propose that consumer information acquisition should also include information acquired through casual, unstructured, or even nonconscious acquisition activities. Two studies demonstrate that people acquire information when there is no immediate purchase goal and people also acquire information that is irrelevant to their current purchase tasks. Such acquired information further influences their subsequent purchase behaviors.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12545/volumes/v34/NA-34

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Most research in consumer information search assumes that consumers know what product they want and the purpose of search is to acquire information to help them choose. However, information acquisition is a much broader activity than mere direct search. Indeed, information acquisition is a collection of activities through which consumers obtain product and service information, voluntarily or involuntarily, consciously or non-consciously (Xia and Monroe 2005). In addition to direct search, people can and do acquire information unintentionally through casual browsing such as looking at a retail display window, scanning an advertisement, skimming through a catalog or website, or even when walking through a store. Searching and browsing are two conditions under which consumers acquire information. While information regarding the search target is acquired under the searching condition, additional information regarding non-targets may be acquired unintentionally while browsing or searching. We propose that consumers acquire information both directly and indirectly, with and without intention, and yet such information may be available to them when facing a purchase task.

The difference between information acquired through different exposure conditions (e.g., searching and browsing) may show in consumers’ recollection of the exposure. We use the remember versus know paradigm to examine these differences. Remembering and knowing are two subjective states of awareness (Gardiner and Richardson-Klavehn 2000). Remembering refers to past personal experiences and events that people can recreate with a mental awareness of reliving these experiences and events. Knowing refers to other past personal experiences and events that people are aware of, but in a more impersonal way. Knowing includes a general sense of familiarity and awareness of previous events but without reliving them mentally. Ample evidence shows that this sense of knowing is enough to influence people’s subsequent judgments and choices (Gardiner, Ramponi and Richardson-Klavehn 1998; Holden and Vanhuele 1999; Rajaram 1993). Remember and know responses are sensitive to different manipulations (see Gardiner and Richardson-Klavehn 2000 for a summary). Remember responses are more sensitive to manipulations that facilitate conceptual and elaborative processing. On the other hand, manipulations facilitating perceptual processing affect knowing but not remembering (Rajaram 1993; Gardiner and Richardson-Klavehn 2000).

Using browsing and searching as two different encoding conditions and “remember” and “know” as the memory tests, we hypothesize that participants will “remember” more target items in the searching condition that in the browsing condition and will “remember” more non-target items in the browsing condition than in the searching condition due to different attention and processing resource allocation. However, there should be no difference in the number of “know” items since “know” responses are not sensitive to attention and processing resource allocation. Further, both searching and browsing conditions should reduce need for further information search when a purchase occasion arises due to the information acquired. Finally, we propose that the influence of information exposure, in both searching and browsing conditions should carry over to future unrelated purchase tasks.

Two studies were conducted. In the first study, participants were exposed to a simulated online store with various product categories, product names, pictures, and brief product information. One group was asked to search for a target product with a purchase intention (searching). Another group was asked evaluate the effectiveness of the website design (browsing). A control group was exposed to a different website with the instruction of evaluating the design. After the exposure and a distracter task, participants were given the memory test where they tried to recognize previously exposed products from a mixture of old and new products and indicate whether they “remember” or “know” the product. Finally, they were asked to make a purchase decision on the target product category and we measured their choice confidence and desire for further information. Results supported our predictions.

In study 2, we used the same stimuli and instruction but changed the dependent measures. After exposure and the distracter task, we gave participants a choice task where they were told it was a completely new task. In this task, they were to buy a graduation gift for their best friend from a list of product categories (a mixture of old and new) and then specific brands within the categories (a mixture of old and new). Results showed significant effect at the product category level but no effect was found at the brand level.

Overall, our research shows that consumers acquire information during both searching and browsing. In the “browsing” condition, participants acquired information through exposure although they had no intention to buy. And, browsing in one occasion may reduce the need for direct search when a purchase intention occurs later. In the “searching” condition, while participants searched the target product, they incidentally browsed other products either to figure out the information structure of the website or to locate the target product. Such browsing of the non-target products occurred without either purchase intention or full attention. Thus, even though participants may not clearly recall the exposure event, there was a sense of familiarity based on that exposure. Our studies showed that this sense of familiarity is sufficient in to influence certain choice tasks.

By examining information acquisition under a variety of conditions, we have broadened the scope of research on consumer information search. Since information acquisition is a crucial element of consumer decision making, our efforts in understanding browsing behavior and its potential influences on consumer decision making contributes to the existing knowledge of consumer information acquisition as well as consumer decision making.

REFERENCES


The Effect of Unintended Information Acquisition


