The Effect of Gender and Product Categories on Consumer Online Information Search

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This article analyzes clickstream data collected from a popular online retailer to observe actual consumers’ information search behavior considering both gender and product categories. The results show, compared with males, females tend to be comprehensive processors, searching for more product information such as customer reviews and using various types of decision tools more while shopping online. Besides, unlike males, females searched more information and used decision tools significantly more when shopping for experience goods than when shopping for search goods. These results will help theorists and practitioners to better understand and predict consumer behavior in the online context.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

There is no doubt that the Internet has become a significant shopping channel. As more and more consumers visit the Internet to shop, researchers have explored some characteristics of the Internet to observe their influences on consumer behavior, especially information search behavior while shopping online. Although prior research explains many aspects of consumer behavior in the online context, less is known about how consumer information search behavior varies depending on gender and product categories in the shopping process online.

Profund research has centered on gender differences in various perspectives. First, the selectivity model (Meyers-Levy 1989; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1991; Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1991) suggests gender differences in information processing: females are more likely to be comprehensive processors, whereas males are likely to be selective processors. Second, researchers have shown gender differences in goal orientations and their influence on information processing. Carlson (1971) said that men are more likely to be guided by agentic goals, whereas women may be guided by communal goals. Besides, males are said to be independent or assertive (Venkatesh and Morris 2000), while females are more aware of other’ feelings and concerned with group harmony (Briton and Hall, 1995). In this regard, Brannon (1999) suggests that females are generally more willing to share personal information and change their behavior through interaction with others than males. Lastly, several researchers addressed that in the online context, females are found to perceive greater risks toward online purchasing. Previous studies state that males would perceive the characteristics of online shopping more favorably than women (Slyke, Comunale, and Belanger, 2002), whereas females are less willing to purchase online and spend less money than men (Allen, 2001).

Not only personal factors, but also product characteristics are found to influence consumers’ intention to shop online influenced by the perceived risks. In the online environment where direct touching or feeling products are limited, Kargaonkar, Silverblatt and Girard (2006) said that the perceived risks are greater for experience goods than for search goods. Therefore, consumers are less willing to purchase experiential products, whose qualities a consumer has difficulty of determining prior to purchase (Nelson, 1974). In the Internet (Kargaonkar and Wolin, 2006).

Based on these findings from previous studies, we hypothesized gender differences in information search behavior in the shopping processes online. Specifically, we observed gender differences in the variety of information search and the use of interactive decision aids, such as customer reviews and an assistant agent, considering product categories.

For a better predictability of results, we observed consumers’ actual shopping behavior online by analyzing clickstream data collected from one of the most popular online retailers in Korea. The clickstream data includes all records of pages customers viewed during a month from July 1 through July 31 in 2006. We went through several steps of preprocessing to make the data usable for our research. Then, we compared the number of product pages visited, the number of clicks on customer reviews and an assistant agent in a session between males and females.

According to the results, compared with males, females tend to search for various information including both product and customer reviews and use an assistant agent more in the online shopping process. Consistent with the selectivity model (Meyers-Levy 1989; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1991; Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1991), the results imply that females are more likely to be comprehensive processors than males in the online environment as well. Based on previous studies on perceived risks in the online context, we also expected the interaction effect of gender and product categories on consumer information search behavior in the online retailers where physical contact with products or services is limited. Actually, females read customer reviews and used an assistant agent more when shopping for experience goods than when shopping for search goods. On the other hands, males showed no significant differences in information search depending on product categories. This implies that the influence of product characteristics on consumers’ information search differs according to gender.

The findings of the present study have significant theoretical implications. Foremost, unlike most behavioral studies that examined consumer’s perception or attitudes, this article has observed actual behaviors by analyzing data derived from a popular online retailer. Therefore, by keeping track of every behavior in the shopping process, the present research is helpful in more accurately predicting consumer behavior in the online context. Besides, the present research expands theorists’ understanding of online consumers in terms of both personal factors and product categories.

Direct observation also helps practitioners apply the results directly to their online retailers. Considering the evidence that females perceive greater risks toward online shopping, practitioners should improve more reliable online retailers by providing various information sources, such as customer reviews. Our research also suggests that consumers’ desire for interactive experiences differs according to gender and product categories in the online context. We recommend that online retailers furnish various interactive website features, such as real-time interaction with salespersons, to make the online shopping experience comparable to the traditional shopping experience especially for females who shop for experience goods.

REFERENCES

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