Aided Information Retrieval on Content-Based Websites: Learning Faster Or Learning Less?

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Consumers are increasingly turning to the internet to obtain information for their decisions. In response, many websites offer aids that facilitate information retrieval. These aids typically save valuable time but their impact on consumer knowledge formation is less clear. This study demonstrates that aided information retrieval may in fact harm consumer learning and lead to lower levels of website loyalty. We find that this latter effect is fully mediated by the influence of content-oriented learning. Finally, unaided information retrieval leads to higher lock-in towards the mode of acquiring the information compared to aided information retrieval mode.

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Consumers are increasingly turning to online based searches to obtain information on a wide variety of subjects. For example, in 2008, 80% of US adult internet users searched at least once for information about products, health issues, or other topics. For almost 60% of internet users, the internet constitutes the main means of searching for information (Jones & Fox 2009).

The key objective of such online information searches for consumers is to learn more about a certain topic. As a result it is very relevant to examine how knowledge formation can best be supported by various information retrieval modes that can be applied by websites. The main research question of this study therefore is how different ways of acquiring information through a given website affect consumers’ learning and their intention to revisit the website. Online aids offered by websites help people save time (Peterson & Merino 2003) but the amount of learning remains unclear. Therefore these aids may be beneficial for transactional websites (i.e. when looking for a specific product) but not necessarily for content-based websites where consumers aim to acquire new knowledge.

Research on learning and education suggests a greater effectiveness of active learning practices compared to traditional passive learning techniques (McLeod 2003; Bonwell and Eison 1991). Evidence has shown that active learning practices are more effective in terms of learning outcomes and can lead to better student attitudes and improvements in students’ thinking and writing (Bonwell and Eison 1991, Laws et al., 1999). The online environment structure offers an immense opportunity for applying active learning techniques through its interactive capabilities. Many studies on e-learning environments showed that e-learning is more effective than traditional teaching mainly due to the crucial role that interactivity plays in knowledge acquisition and the development of cognitive skills, leading to higher learning outcomes and evaluations of the content and structure of the learning process (Khalifa 2002). There is a difference between e-learning and information search on the internet. E-learning constitutes a structured environment with a specific focus and content which is mainly led by the instructor. Online information search comprises a goal oriented task which is led by an individual’s need to solve a recognized problem. Past research so far has been focusing on the importance of knowledge formation modes in teaching environments and the beneficial effects of active learning techniques. We expect that this differential effect between active and passive modes also applies in the case of online information retrieval from a website. Therefore, we propose that the use of different information provision modes (aided or unaided search) can influence the retrieval effectiveness of the visitors on a website.

Since learning leads to goal achievement we also propose that it is a key driver of website evaluation and loyalty. Based on goal setting theories, goal achievement leads to higher degrees of satisfaction and attitude towards the medium (Locke & Latham 1990). Consequently, learning plays an important role in the formation of a positive attitude towards content-based websites as well as on the intention of repeated visits. Previous studies have focused on process-oriented learning and the acquisition of skills that could lead to a state of lock-in due to cognitive barriers (Haubl & Murray 2002) but have largely neglected the role of content-oriented learning (Mittal & Sawhney 2001). In this study, we provide an additional complementary explanation of website loyalty by highlighting the importance of content learning in the context of a content-based website.

Finally, we hypothesize that there is an asymmetric effect of aided versus unaided knowledge formation on mode loyalty. Website visitors who are engaged in unaided (active) search modes are expected to be more willing to remain loyal to their initial search mode because they invested cognitive effort in their initial search task and they are expected to be more reluctant to abandon this investment compared to searchers in the aided (passive) knowledge formation mode where no substantial cognitive effort was endowed. This difference can be attributed to the sunk cost experienced by the visitors of the website (Arkes & Blumer 1985). In addition, differences in mode loyalty could be explained by the increased perceived feeling of control as well as enjoyment that the active search mode offers to the visitors (Dellaert & Dabhholkar 2009).

Based on an experimental study using a website for health information, we explore how different ways of acquiring information through a given informational website have a different effect on the intention to revisit the website. We manipulated the ways of acquiring information from a website in aided (passively distributed recommendations) and unaided (actively sought information). Based on process and evaluation data from 190 respondents, we find support for our expectation that active information seeking behavior leads to higher retention effects through the greater learning and positive evaluations towards the website and the search experience. We show that the effect of active knowledge formation on website loyalty is fully mediated by its effect on content learning outcomes. Finally, the hypothesized asymmetric effect of active knowledge formation mode of acquiring the information compared is also confirmed, with a higher lock-in state towards the unaided than to the aided information retrieval mode.

From a consumer behavior perspective, it is insightful to investigate how different knowledge formation modes can lead to differences in terms of learning and loyalty. From an online information provider perspective, it is important to understand the ways that several features of a website can lead to repeated visits over time. There is a trade-off between speed of retrieval and learning. Therefore, it really depends on the objective of the visitors, which type of information retrieval mode will lead to the greatest revisit intention.

References
A Research of the Spillover Effect of Gift Promotion—Its Forming and Fluctuation
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Recently, gift promotion is taken as an important issue for firms. Because the gift is free, consumers tend to discount gift’s value. Does this discounting evaluation spill to other products belonging to the same category of the gift so that these products also be devaluated by consumers? The research was going to investigate whether the discounting perception toward gift would spill to other product categories with the same brand of the gift, or spill to the same product category with other brands. In this study, we defined the phenomenon as a “spillover effect of gift promotion”.

Reviewing relevant literature, spillover effect was discussed in the field of brand extension or brand alliance; however, little discussions about spillover effect of gift promotion were found. Therefore, it is necessary to deeply investigate the forming and fluctuation of spillover effect of gift promotion. In brief, this research consists of two studies. Study one focuses on the forming of spillover effect of gift promotion. Assimilation and contract effect (Herr, Sherman and Fazio, 1983) was taken as the main theory to infer the formation of spillover effect of gift promotion. Study two further examined its fluctuating factors, including an antecedent factor—promotion depth of gift promotion, two consequent factors—perceived value of spillover effect on the same product with other brand and on the same brand with other product category, and two moderating factors—brand awareness and involvement of gift. Anchoring and adjustment theory (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974?Lola, 1982?Yadav, 1994) was taken as the theory to infer the influence of promotion depth on perceived value of spillover effect.

Experiment design was adopted in the two studies. Subjects were college students by convenient sampling. Subjects of the two studies were different. Study one adopted a 2 (gift promotion: present/absent) groups between-subject design. 50 valid questionnaires were gathered. Study two used a 2 (promotion depth of gift promotion: high/low) x 2 (brand awareness of gift: high/low)=4 groups between-subject design. 324 valid questionnaires were analyzed. Besides, involvement of gift were measured and picked out two parts of sample—high and low score of involvement—to test hypotheses.

In the two studies, measurement of perceived value of spillover effect was as below. For example, the gift in the gift promotion was Adidas running shoes, and we would like to measure perceived value of spillover effect on Puma running shoes. In the first step, subjects were asked to answer this question “before” reading an ads of gift promotion: “If you have a budget to buy a pair of running shoes, how much money (NT$X) would you like to pay it?” Following, “after” subjects reading an ads of gift promotion, they were asked to answer another question: “if you have a budget to buy a pair of running shoes, how much money (NT$Y) would you like to pay a pair of “Puma” running shoes?” Then, the perceived value of spillover effect on Puma running shoes were (Y–X)/X. If the score was negative, spillover effect did appear. This is the measurement method of perceived value of spillover effect on the same product with other brand. And, same method was used to measure perceived value of spillover effect on the same brand with other product category of gift.

After statistical analysis, study one found that when gift promotion presented, it had negative effect on relative products with the gift according to significant result of a t-test. In other word, gift promotion caused negative score of spillover effect on relative product with the gift. This study found out the formation of spillover effect of gift promotion.

Following, study two further found that the spillover effect of gift promotion would show up on other products with the same brand of the gift as well as on the same product category with other brand. In addition, based on results of two three-way ANOVAs, as deeper the promotion depth was, the stronger the spillover effect of gift promotion was. Furthermore, brand awareness of gift did play a moderating role on the spillover effect. That is, under high brand awareness of gift, the difference between spillover effect caused by high and low promotion depth of gift promotion was smaller than the difference under low brand awareness. Finally, involvement of gift also did play a moderating role on the spillover effect. That is, under high involvement of gift, the difference between spillover effect caused by high and low promotion depth of gift promotion was smaller than the difference under low involvement.

Research contributions comprised three points. First, this research discussed background theory of spillover effect of gift promotion and offered a reasonable inference for the phenomenon of spillover effect of gift promotion. Second, finding of this research including two studies make gift promotion research much richer. Moreover, this research, based on experimental results, also offered significant managerial implications for managers.