

Evaluating the Potential of Interactive Media through a New Lens: Search versus Experience Goods

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The burgeoning growth of interactive media, and more specifically the Internet, as communication vehicles has inspired a flurry of market research that attempts to measure the impact of advertising in the new media, utilizing traditional advertising measurement methods. However, the full impact of these new media will not be realized unless we engage in more thorough research into how to evaluate their potential in terms of their influence on information search behavior. This article seeks to provide direction for such exploration by proposing a new model of consumer information search that integrates the principles of information economics and a goods classification model based on the search/experience/credence paradigm. This model will facilitate a greater understanding by marketers and academics of how a medium can influence consumer information search through its impact on the critical information consumers have access to prior to product usage. J BUSN RES 1998. 41.195-203. © 1998 Elsevier Science Inc.

The current hype about the potential impact of the new interactive media (the information superhighway) is bombarding almost every field of management, attracting attention from managers and business academics in all functional areas. Amidst the predictions of the broader impact these new technologies will have on business is a growing concern among firms over the specific role the new interactive media will play in the marketing mix. These new media have the potential to serve as advertising, communication, merchandising, and/or distribution channels. Although marketers are eager to take advantage of the multitude of opportunities afforded by interactive media, there is a dearth of research into: (1) how to evaluate the media's potential prior to investment and (2) how to evaluate its effectiveness as an advertising and communication vehicle relative to existing media. (Throughout this article, the Internet and the World

Wide Web (WWW) will be used interchangeably to represent "interactive media" in general since the WWW is currently the dominant example of this medium as an accepted communication vehicle by advertisers and consumers. However, it is recognized that other forms of interactive media, yet to be tested, may also embody these characteristics.)

Although existing advertising vehicles, such as TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines, are evaluated both a priori (e.g., CPM, GRP) and post-exposure (e.g., recall, recognition), based on generally accepted, albeit widely debated, standards of measurement, little is understood about the critical criteria to use at either time for the new media. Complicating the problem of evaluation is the sheer amount of data that will be made available to assess the WWW's potential and performance. This research attempts to provide insights into these evaluation issues by examining the media's influence on consumer information search processes. It presents a classification scheme that categorizes products by the incremental benefits interactive media offer relative to traditional communication vehicles. Specifically, this research will examine the magnitude of the influence of this new medium on consumer purchase behavior by exploring the medium's effect on the underlying product attributes that drive consumer prepurchase information search.

Theoretical and Empirical Background

Why do we need new measurement systems for these new interactive media? The simple application of traditional tools, such as CPM, exposure, or reach, may overlook the most substantial impact of these media. Interactive media may belie traditional measurement systems because they have the potential to alter consumer behavior through direct impact on both prepurchase and ongoing consumer information acquisition processes. (Previous research on external search has distinguished between these two types of search behavior. See Bloch, Sherrell, and Ridgeway, 1986.) Use of these media has the

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potential to alter multiple dimensions of a consumer's information search process, including amount of total search, the number and types of sources consulted, and the distribution and weighting of information gathered from these sources (Newman, 1977; Moore and Lehman, 1980; Punj and Staelin, 1983; Srinivasan, 1990).

Moreover, it is likely that the nature of the information gathered will undergo a basic transformation if we view information according to the classic economic framework of search, experience, and credence attributes (Darby and Karni, 1973; Nelson, 1974, 1976, 1981). Nelsons' goods classification scheme, which will be discussed in greater detail below, may be a useful framework for understanding media influence in this environment. Unlike other classification schemes, such as Copeland's (1923) convenience, shopping and specialty goods, and Krugman's (1965) low-involvement/high-involvement systems, Nelson's scheme relies primarily on the fundamental attributes of the product itself and not the buyer's perceptions of it (Norton and Norton, 1988). Nelson's theory predicts, among other things that information search for experience goods will be characterized by a greater reliance on word-of-mouth ("guided sampling") and advertising. Overall, consumers will undertake less total search because of the inability to obtain the most valuable product information prior to use and will rely more heavily on product experience—their own or others'.

Technology may now make it possible for experience to occur prior to purchase through what I label "virtual experience." The change in the nature of the information communicable by advertising may affect both the prepurchase search and the resulting decision processes. For example, visitors to the WWW site CDNow (<http://www.cdnnow.com>) can download sound and video clips from artists they are interested in. Thus, through the provision of this experiential information, formerly classified experience goods can become search goods in the sense that consumers now obtain this critical product information prior to purchase. From an economic perspective, these transformations will be driven by changes in consumers' perceived costs and benefits of search for different types of information. Thus, the appropriateness of the WWW as a new medium for a given product may be assessed on the basis of the "information content" of the product or its balance of search and experience attributes and the medium's potential to alter the communicability of this information (Calfee and Ford, 1988; Ford, Smith, and Swasy, 1988; Nelson, 1970, 1974).

The following sections will review the theoretical foundations of both the search/experience paradigm and the cost-benefit theory of information search. Within each section, I will review the recent empirical tests of these theories, highlighting how this new integrated framework can combine and extend existing research. Finally, I will present some empirical evidence of such "transformations" and then propose a series of hypotheses, generated by these observations, which can be

tested through laboratory and natural experiments. See Figure 1 for an overview of the model to be described.

Categorization of Goods: Search versus Experience

Economic Foundations

In his seminal work on the economics of information and advertising, Nelson (1970, 1974, 1976, 1981) differentiated between search and experience goods, which he later refined as search and experience attributes in which a good's classification was determined by its balance of the two types of attributes. Search goods are defined as those dominated by product attributes for which full information can be acquired prior to purchase; experience goods are dominated by attributes that cannot be known until purchase and use of the product or for which information search is more costly and/or difficult than direct product experience. Darby and Karni (1973) added credence attributes, defining them as those attributes that the consumer cannot verify even after use. Ford, Smith, and Swasy (1988) expanded on this scheme by redefining credence goods as dependent on the level of expertise of the average consumer. Nelson calculated the total cost of a good as the sum of search and product costs. Experience goods are considered so because their dominant attributes are either too difficult or too costly to sample prior to purchase. Norton and Norton (1988) extend this classification by segmenting experience goods into durables and nondurables. Because these goods differ in the frequency of purchase, the value of word-of-mouth and experience differ.

Note that sampling costs are critical in this categorization; consumer will always sample goods when sampling via purchase (or free trial) is cheaper than search. When search is more expensive, the good is considered an experience good. Thus, automobiles are classified as search goods although a large part of the critical attributes are experiential (e.g., driving in the snow, long trips) because it is less expensive to search for information on these attributes (via test drives, word-of-mouth, *Consumer Reports*) than to sample via purchase.

Empirical Tests

Surprisingly little empirical work on the viability of the search/experience/credence framework can be found. The specific applications have been weighted heavily toward the public policy issues associated with advertising credibility (Calfee and Ford, 1988; Ford, Smith, and Swasy, 1988, 1990). Ford, Smith, and Swasy (1990) tested whether consumers' reliance on advertising claims varied for search, experience, and credence attributes. The authors found that consumers gave more creditability to search than experience and to experience than credence claims, supporting Nelsons' theory that consumers correctly interpret the value of advertising for different products. Laband (1986) and Norton and Norton (1988) examined

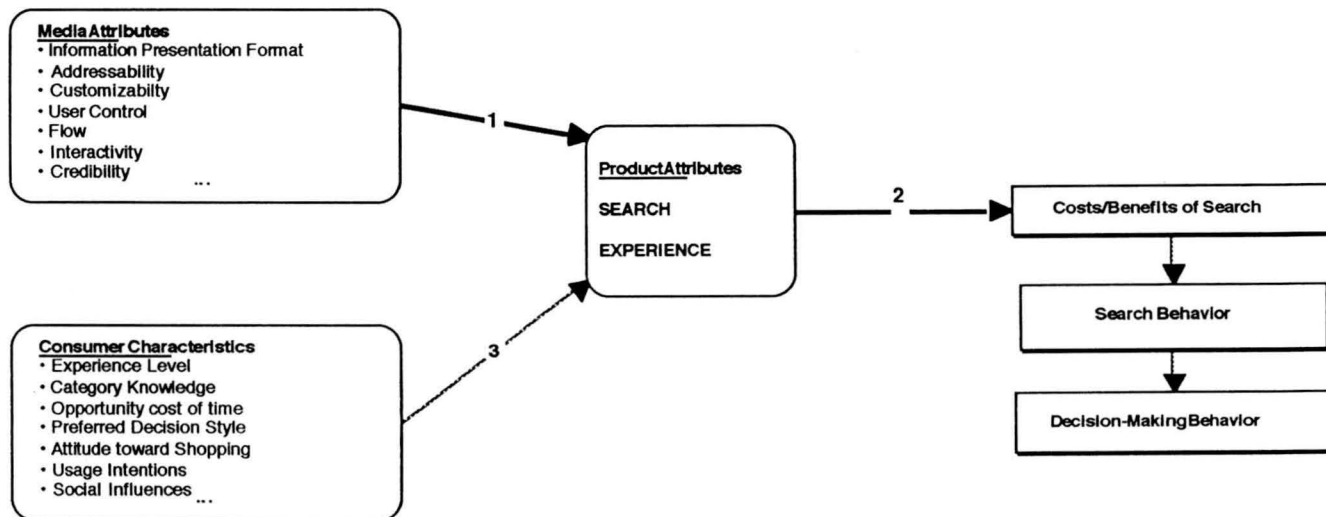


Figure 1. An interaction model.

the content of advertising in the Yellow Pages in terms of specific types of informational cues to test the differences in advertising information content between search and experience goods. They found support for Nelson's scheme across different consumer environments, with some exceptions based on a distinction between durables and nondurables.

Little rigorous testing of the applicability of the search/experience framework to the information search process has been conducted. In one of the few examples found, Maute and Forrester (1991) model search, experience, and credence qualities as moderators of the link between search determinants and external search effort. The rationale here is that consumers discount the value of advertising sources and claims according to their own ability to verify them. In an empirical test using expert judgment to classify advertising claims for banking services, the authors found that search for experience attribute information was greater than for search attribute information. Given that the "product" used in the study, banking services, is an experience good, it is understandable that consumers would devote more time to the acquisition of experience attribute information. But we might not expect this to hold for a search product, such as a clock radio. Whereas this study did not incorporate an examination of media source effects, their initial support for the validity of this framework is promising. By extending this to the study of the influence of the medium on search behavior across product categories, we can expand on Maute and Forrester's conceptualization of these product information attributes as moderators of the information search process.

Cost-Benefit Framework

Economic Foundations

Traditional information economics contends that, relaxing the assumption of perfect market information, a consumer's search

for information is guided by a trade-off between the perceived costs of additional search and the expected benefits of that search (Stigler, 1961). According to this theory, a consumer engages in active search until the perceived marginal cost of an additional unit of search exceeds the expected marginal benefit. The costs encompass both direct dollar outlays and indirect costs associated with the time and effort spent searching. The benefits to search include the likelihood of finding a superior alternative to those already considered and the reduction in risk achieved from eliminating inferior, but a priori uncertain, alternatives. A schematic description of this information search model is shown in Figure 2.

Empirical Tests

Since Stigler's seminal work, a number of extensions to this simple model have been proposed and empirically tested. One stream of researchers has attempted to incorporate the importance of *perceptions* of search benefits and costs by examining the determinants of a consumer's total amount of search. The differences in individuals' perceived benefits and costs of search help explain the wide variation observed in individual search behavior (Beatty and Smith, 1987; Katona and Mueller, 1955; Newman and Lockeman, 1971; Newman, 1977; Srinivasan, 1990; Srinivasan and Ratchford, 1991; Wilkie and Dickson, 1985; Schmidt and Spreng, 1995). A second stream has attempted to classify consumers by their dominant search strategies and amount of search effort expended, finding distinctive clusters of consumers with varying needs for information (Claxton, Fry, and Portis, 1974; Furse, Punj, and Stewart, 1984; Kiel and Layton, 1981).

The research that focuses on examining the determinants of the perceptions of search benefits and costs most often segments these factors on a broad level into market, situational, and individual variables. Beatty and Smith (1987) defined seven

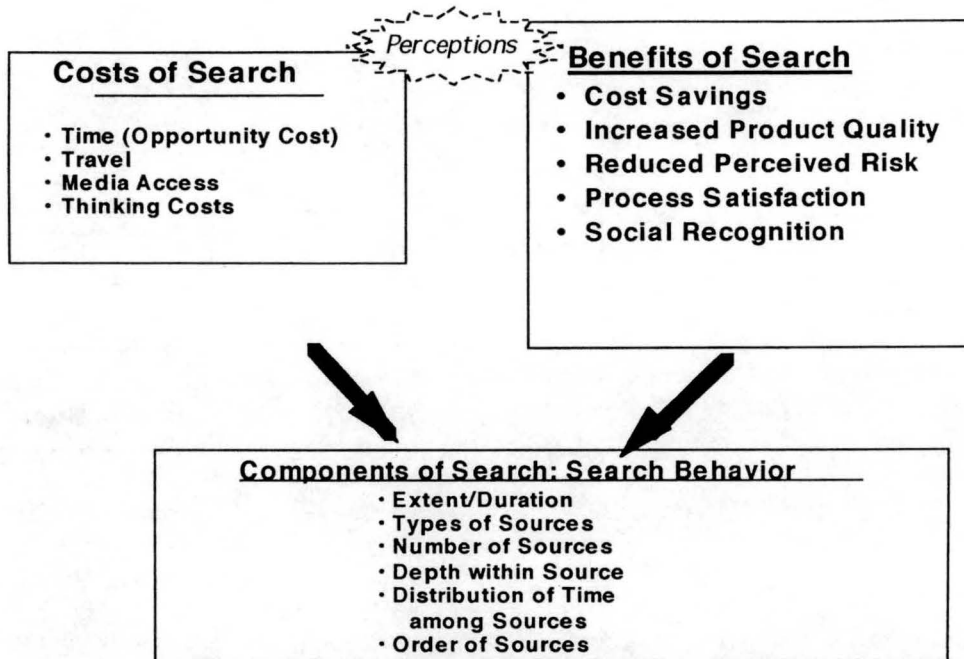


Figure 2. The search process.

categories of variables that influence search: market environment, situational variables, potential payoff, knowledge/experience, individual differences, conflict and resolution, and costs of search. They also divided search sources into four distinct types: retail, media, interpersonal, and neutral. Conspicuously absent in their comprehensive review of this research are any studies that directly examined the impact of the media source on information search processes. In addition, the factors that I propose to be most affected by interactive media are not limited to any one of these traditional categories. Instead, I propose that the use of interactive media influences market and situational factors, as well as individuals' direct and indirect (perceived) costs of search. Moreover, the four distinct source types blur as information sources merge into virtual locations that can be accessed in parallel.

In addition, most of these studies have focused on total effort as the dependent variable, with only secondary attention to the actual and perceived outcome. Whereas most of the earliest research used single measures of total search, more recent attempts have used multiple measures. Kiel and Layton (1981) used expert assessment of extended effort to create a total search index. Beatty and Smith (1987) developed a search index as a linear combination of the four types of search, weighting each according to findings from past studies. But little empirical work has focused on the distribution, direction or patterns of search, and the interrelationships among the variables or on the dynamic weighting of source information (Srinivasan, 1990; Srinivasan and Ratchford, 1991).

Most importantly, few have examined how the mix of media or information sources accessed (i.e., retail, interpersonal, advertising) affects the pattern, direction, or duration

of information search and the weighting of information in the decision process. Hauser and Urban (1993) conducted an examination of how the order of search affects time allocation. Their computer simulation offered consumers the opportunity to access multiple media as information sources within one environment. They did not, however, explore the underlying reason why different sources, and the communication modalities they embody, affect the search process.

Early work on information display boards (IDBs) showed that information presentation format affects decision-making (Jacoby et al., 1976; Bettman and Kakkar, 1977; Brucks, 1985; Petty, Unnava, and Strathman, 1991). Recent experimental work by Widing and Talarzyk (1993) tested these theories in the new on-line environment. Their results support their hypotheses that the information display capabilities of these new services alter the decision-making process by influencing the decision heuristics chosen by users. We can use the cost-benefit framework to conclude that this change in processing is a function of the changes in the costs and benefits of information search. Whereas they thus recognize the potential effect of the formats on search processes, they test only the medium's impact on decision strategies and outcomes in a normative sense. The unique context, modality, and presentation formats of different media may affect not only the decision heuristics used at the final stage of the decision-making process but the information search strategies adopted in the earlier search stages, including the types of information sought, breadth of sources consulted, and duration of the search (Stewart and Ward, 1994).

This stream of research establishes the basis for our expectations of how and why consumers choose the amount and type

of information to gather prior to purchase. Little research has however examined the influence of the modality of information transmission on such information search. With the introduction and growth of interactive media, these questions become more important. Based on our findings from this previous research on consumer information search, we would expect that the impact of consumer use of interactive media on information search processes and purchase behavior will not be the same across all consumers or all product categories. Although the impact of individual and contextual heterogeneity is a ripe subject for investigation, this article focuses on the differences in media influence across product categories, as characterized by the types of information which advertising is able to convey. Thus, referring back to Figure 1, the focus of this research will be on the dynamics in the arrows labeled 1 and 2.

The preceding discussion assumes that interactive media use will profoundly affect consumers' information search—traditionally dominated by retail, media, interpersonal, and neutral sources. What are the unique capabilities of these media, as currently embodied in the WWW, which make it capable of intervening in the search process (see Figure 1, arrow 1). The extant literature on information search processes has not made comparisons across media nor attempted to understand how the medium of communication influences the information gathering and integration process. As Stewart explained (Stewart and Ward, 1994).

A general recognition that there exist qualitative differences among media that may influence response to advertising has not brought with it substantial skill in identifying and accommodating these differences, however. Not only is there some debate as to how to characterize different media across various dimensions, rather little is actually known about how people interact with different media (p. 324).

Characteristics such as addressability (Blattberg and Deighton, 1991), user control and flow (Hoffman and Novak, 1995), and customizability (Widing and Talarzyk, 1993) have been shown to influence how product attributes are learned about, evaluated, and weighted in consumers' decisions. What is critical is how the combination of media capabilities influences consumer interaction with the media. To study the nature of the interaction between media and product categories we discussed, it is critical to understand the capabilities of the new media technologies that distinguish them from traditional media advertising and from direct experience, and enable them to have such a differentiating influence as information conduits.

Implications: The Impact of the Transformation Process

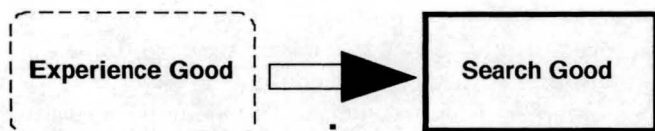
Given the potential for these new media to expand the types of the information accessible prior to purchase, we would expect that the impact of advertising via these media will be

influenced by the good's balance of search, experience, and credence attributes. Moreover, the categorization of these attributes themselves may be influenced by the new capabilities of the communication medium. By examining the mediating impact of the search/experience/credence attribute scheme on the degree, direction, duration, patterns, and distribution of search processes across media, we may be able to understand better how the value of information is affected by the context in which it is presented and by the interaction effects between the individual and the situation (Punj and Stewart, 1983). For example, Hoffman and Novak (1995) provide strong rationale for the potential for user experience to be influenced by the *process* of interaction with and through the medium, offering yet another avenue for alteration of decision processes.

For search goods, the incremental value of the new media will be the provision of information in a more accessible, less costly, and more customizable format. We would expect this to reduce the costs of search directly (e.g., time, travel) and to increase the expected benefits through the improved processability of new information. These improvements can derive from information-processing aids, the reduction of irrelevant information, and improved information organization (Widing and Talarzyk, 1993), resulting in a reduction of what Shugan (1980) labeled the "cost of thinking." An ideal example of this is the WWW site for CUC (Shopper's Advantage at <http://www.cuc.com>), a membership shopping club where visitors can search for products according to price, features, brand name, or merchant recommendations. Consumers then choose among a list of products that meet only their pre-specified criteria, selecting the information presentation format that offers the most value for them individually.

On the other hand, for goods dominated by experience (or credence) attributes, which are traditionally not known with certainty prior to purchase, the new interactive media may provide the greatest value through what I label "virtual experience." That is, by allowing the consumer to experience product performance prior to purchase, the marketer can "virtually" turn an experience good into a search good. When consumers can obtain important product performance information prior to actual purchase, the product can be considered a "search good." In doing so, the marketer alters the consumer's weighting of criteria by reducing the relative cost of those experience attributes which may be more diagnostic. How can this be done? First, Nelson (1974) defines these two types of goods as follows:

- A good is defined as a "search good" when full information for dominant product attributes can be known prior to purchase.
- A good is defined as an "experience good" when either condition holds:
 1. full information on "dominant" attributes cannot be known without direct experience.
 2. information search for "dominant" attributes is more costly/difficult than direct product experience.



Three Potential Routes

Figure 3. The transformation process.

Note that these “dominant” attributes can be both search and experience attributes. If full information on critical product attributes can be offered prior to purchase at a cost that is lower than direct product experience (purchase), the consumer can consider this a search good. Applying these definitions to the communication processes observed on the WWW, we can identify three “routes” by which experience goods can be transformed into search goods, which are shown in Figure 3.

Some examples can help describe this process. First, in the software category, at a number of WWW sites for software purchase (e.g., Software.net at <http://www.software.net>) this transformation is possible via any or all of these three routes.

1. First (Route 1), information search for certain product attributes, whereas possible before, is made much easier and less costly. For example, ascertaining whether a new software product or upgrade performs a specific desired function is now much simpler using searchable, on-line databases and user forums, where users can discuss the software in great detail.
2. Secondly (Route 2), the format of the information presentation may alter the weighting consumers give to different attributes. For example, the site may provide extensive third-party software reviews and, in doing so, may persuade customers that this information is more critical than other attributes like product packaging.
3. Finally (Route 3), the consumer can download a demonstration version of the software and thus gain direct knowledge of how the product functions on his or her own computer. Or the consumer can read about others' experiences through user bulletin boards, gaining indirect usage experience or engage in “vicarious learning” (Murray, 1991). In addition, if the consumer evaluates the simulation (“virtual experience”) as she would direct experience, she may assign more weight to its diagnosticity in the choice process (Route 2).

A second example can be given in the wine category—another experience good. Several wine sites currently on the WWW (e.g., Virtual Vineyards at <http://www.virtualvin.com>) offer visitors a broad range of information, including: wine taste profiles and glossaries, winery histories, reviews, and easily searchable product databases.

1. First (Route 1), a consumer's information search can be made less costly in terms of both time and computa-

tional effort, by improving the availability and processability of search attribute information.

2. Secondly (Route 2), by emphasizing the importance of the information provided on the vineyards, such as history, and personality, the wine marketer can attempt to increase the weight consumers give to these attributes in the decision process, especially absent the direct contact with the packaging and display information.
3. While a site dealing with wine cannot offer true simulated product experience for the most important attribute—taste—it may provide such experience indirectly (Route 3) through the experience of other “expert sources.” For example, the CorkDork at Virtual Vineyards shares his tasting notes with consumers who can then compare these recommendations to their own expressed taste preferences.

Previous research has demonstrated the greater relative importance of direct experience over advertising in consumer decision processes (Hoch and Ha, 1986). In addition, the interaction of advertising and experience may predispose consumers to use experience to confirm product claims made by advertising, thus making advertising itself more powerful (Deighton, 1984). In analyzing this “virtual experience,” we need to understand whether it can function in the same way as true experience. Prior to the birth of the WWW, Ford, Swasy, and Smith (1988) had speculated that “third-party” information itself (e.g., *Consumer Reports*) could serve as a vehicle for transforming experience into search attributes.

By providing experience without actual product ownership, the marketer may also reduce a consumer's perceived risk, thereby decreasing the perceived benefits of *continued* search and altering the weighting of different types of product information. Srinivasan and Ratchford (1991) found perceived risk to be positively related to the amount of search. Murray (1991) examined how perceived risk in the purchase of services influenced the types of information sources sought. He found that the higher the perceived risk, the more importance consumers placed on direct experience, because of the unavailability of search attribute information. Thus, if virtual experience is treated by consumers as direct experience, it can help to reduce purchase risk. If such risk can be reduced through the provision of a simulated experience, consumers may choose to search less overall, devoting more search effort to such experiential information and weigh these attributes more heavily in the decision process (Feldman and Lynch, 1988). Experience goods may thus be transformed into search goods by a provision of simulated experience unavailable, unfeasible, or too costly through traditional media. With this transformation, the advertising for this product is also transformed in both value and content from that available through traditional media.

The service literature has distinguished between extrinsic and intrinsic attributes. Extrinsic cues are those which are observable “outside of the product” such as price, brand,

advertising, and packaging. Intrinsic cues are physical attributes of the product, often unobservable prior to purchase, and include flavor, color, size, and texture (Zeithaml, 1988). Consumers rely more on intrinsic attributes than extrinsic attributes in situations where intrinsic attributes are search attributes and where the intrinsic attributes have high diagnostic value. Kirmani and Zeithaml (1993) identified a distinction between the purchase decisions for goods and services based on the relative importance of extrinsic and intrinsic attributes. Service buyers relied more on extrinsic attributes due to the high costs of and evaluation barriers in assessing intrinsic attributes prior to product purchase. If intrinsic attributes were made knowable via search and the costs to obtain them were reduced via this medium, we might expect an increased reliance on those "intrinsic" attributes, which could be made available via the technology of the WWW.

Interactive media can also increase learning, perceived user control, exploratory behavior, and positive experience through feedback (Hoffman and Novak, 1995). These mechanisms may thus indirectly influence the perceived costs and benefits of searching for different types of information, based on interactions between media and user characteristics.

Consumers themselves appear to recognize and value the power of the information delivered in this new medium. In a recent study, Eighmey and McCord (1995) surveyed a group of consumers subsequent to their exploration of five predetermined web sites. These consumers gave more favorable ratings to the food site (an experience good) than to the athletic footwear site (a search good), finding it not only more entertaining and involving, but also more *informative*, suggesting that consumers believed they could obtain critical information on experiential attributes via the Web site. Intentions to revisit the food site were also greater than that of the footwear site. If the hypothesized transformation process (as described above and in Figure 3) is occurring, visitors to the food site may be evaluating the information the site provides, even without a "virtual experience," as more important in their decision. Whereas the creative differences in the two sites used in this study make general conclusions difficult to draw, these findings are consistent with the transformation hypothesis and further support the need for similar types of research.

In this new medium, such a transformation may alter the relative value of alternative information sources for these "experience-cum-search" goods. These new media may thus provoke a reclassification of products as search goods whose dominant or intrinsic attributes are now available to consumers prior to purchase. The increased scope of attribute information changes the balance of search, experience, and credence attributes, which comprise a good or product bundle. In this new environment, advertising for experience goods, which Nelson explained as serving value only as a signal, may now be valuable as an information source because of the expanded scope of information such advertising can transmit.

Summary and Conclusions

These hypothesized changes in information search behavior should be verifiable, not only at the individual level, but in aggregate purchase patterns as revealed in firm-level Web log data. Exploration of these issues would benefit from a research design that examines the impact of the media at these two different levels. We also expect that purchase decisions made on the basis of the altered trade-offs described above would yield quite different patterns of purchase behavior. These changes would be observable in data measuring individual choice strategies, repeat purchase patterns, price sensitivity, and brand loyalty.

To accomplish these research objectives, hypotheses need to be generated for the investigation of the effect of the media use on individual information acquisition behavior. These must subsequently be tested through (1) empirical data collection and analysis from Web session and transaction files and (2) recall-based surveys and computer-simulation experiments conducted at the consumer level. The medium offers unparalleled opportunities for experimental manipulations in "store" environments and unobtrusive data collection on information search processes.

Research that builds upon and clarifies Nelson's categorization scheme would have value to both academics and marketers. Identification of the critical factors that define search and experience attributes across products, consumers, and media will enable more comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of the new interactive media. Whereas prior research has endeavored to use product and consumer segmentation schemes to evaluate alternative marketing communication programs, none have investigated how the medium itself may alter product attributes that influence decision processes.

Managerial applications are numerous. For example, once the value of the information delivered for different classes of products can be measured, firms can begin to distinguish between the optimal use of these new media in customer acquisition and retention strategies (Blattberg and Deighton, 1996). Whereas the interactive medium enables greater ongoing dialogue that increases the benefits of loyalty for the customer and decreases the costs of retention to the marketer, it also has the potential to vastly lower customer acquisition costs, especially for marketers of experience goods that can be transformed via this media (Peppers and Rogers, 1993; Schultz, Tannenbaum, and Lauterborn, 1994). Thus, competition may be driven not only by the post-purchase value-added but by the competition for first purchase through the provision of simulated experience.

Building on this search/experience framework, we can renew the field's attempts to merge the economic theories of information with theories of consumer behavior (Bloom, 1988). Using this categorization scheme as a foundation, we can begin a program to empirically test the mediating impact of the media form on the determinants and outcomes of the

search process for a range of goods, besides the high-ticket durables like automobiles and appliances most often used in research on external search. Other relevant factors to add to the model as potential moderators would include: perceived risk, evoked set size, attributes toward shopping, individual beliefs about the value of search, and most importantly in this new environment, perceived heterogeneity of the marketplace (Duncan and Olshavsky, 1982; Srinivasan, 1986).

This stream of work can contribute to marketing theory by building on the long stream of attempts to classify goods according to categorization schemes that could simplify marketing communication decisions (Aspinwall, 1958; Bucklin, 1963; Copeland, 1923; Porter, 1976). Whereas the early attempts at such a classification scheme were rejected in favor of more complex contingency models for deriving optimal marketing mixes, Nelson's search/experience paradigm appears to offer a potent framework for assessing the influence of media on consumer search processes. In addition, it will provide an opportunity to test the theories of information from the economics schools in a new marketing environment (Schmalensee, 1972; Stigler, 1961; Telser, 1966). Applying the search/experience categorization scheme, in combination with complementary theories of information economics, should enable us to develop a marketing communication evaluation model that is tenable and robust in the new media environment.

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