

SITUATIONAL AND INDIVIDUAL VARIABLES AFFECTING CONSUMER PREFERENCE FOR INTERPERSONAL INFORMATION SOURCES

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ABSTRACT

Past research has clearly demonstrated the importance of information search within the consumer buying process (e.g., Thorelli et al., 1975). Scholars have identified several sources used by consumers in order to obtain information relevant to their purchase situation. The rich literature dealing with this topic has also suggested that, in general, people tend to use only a limited number of the sources available to them in an effort to keep the search costs low (Midgeley, 1983). Among the various information sources, interpersonal non-commercial sources seem to play an important role in consumers' choice decisions (e.g., Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Price and Feick, 1984). The purpose of the present study is to investigate possible influencers of consumer preference for interpersonal information search. This preference refers to consumers' tendency to favour the use of interpersonal, non-commercial, sources as a means of obtaining product-related information.

Building on existing literature in marketing and social psychology, a model, suggesting individual and situational factors as possible influencers of consumer preference for interpersonal sources, was proposed. The individual factors include an individual's susceptibility to interpersonal influence, his or her need for cognition and his or her self-confidence. The situational factors include an individual's product knowledge and his or her perceived risk associated with the purchase of a specific product. Of course, other unexplored factors may also act as antecedents of preference for interpersonal sources. However, the proposed factors are thought to be of primary relevance and are perfectly in line with the existing research.

Using structural equation modelling on survey data (419 respondents), six hypotheses – describing relationships between the diverse variables of the model – were tested. Hypothesis 1, which predicted a positive relationship between an individual's informational susceptibility to interpersonal influence and his or her preference for interpersonal information search, was clearly supported. It seems that highly influenceable consumers trust the information provided by a personal source as accurate and sufficient. Therefore, they are less motivated than the less influenceable consumers to search for further information and explore other sources.

Hypothesis 2 was also supported. A negative and statistically significant relationship was found between need for cognition and preference for interpersonal sources. Individuals with low need for cognition are known to be only marginally motivated to engage in effortful thinking and extensive information processing. They may favour interpersonal sources because of the minimal effort required in gathering the desired information. Low NFC individuals may also find personal sources attractive because the raw information has already been processed by the source and is usually presented to them in a concise form.

Hypothesis 3, which predicted a positive relationship between individuals' self-confidence and their preference for seeking information from interpersonal sources, was also supported. The rationale was that self-confident consumers would have enough assurance to discuss product-related information freely with others.

The results did not support Hypothesis 4, which predicted a positive relationship between perceived risk and preference for interpersonal sources.

The results showed a significant negative relationship between product knowledge and individuals' preference for interpersonal information search, giving full support to H5. Perhaps, those consumers who consider themselves knowledgeable in a certain product category are not willing to publicly admit any lack of knowledge. In this case, if they are missing any piece of information, they will be more likely to search for it using impersonal sources than asking other people.

Finally, hypothesis 6 was also entirely supported by the data. A significant negative relationship was found between product knowledge and perceived risk. In this case, the study replicated the well-established findings on the relationship between product knowledge and perceived risk.

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