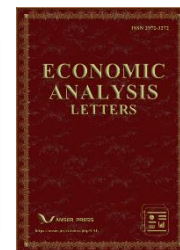




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Hedonic and utilitarian online shopping: A preliminary investigation

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ABSTRACT

This research letter investigates hedonic and utilitarian orientations to Online shopping. The data highlight a positive correlation of hedonism with both the length and the frequency of connection to the Internet. It considers two products, jeans and personal computers, that previous literature had identified as being characterized by utilitarian and hedonic features. The results show that consumers prefer to buy products and brands on the Web if they have already seen and experienced them Offline.

KEYWORDS

Hedonism; Utilitarianism; Online shopping; Purchase intention

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1. Introduction

Peterson et al. (1997) note that the Internet channel has advantages when the value proposition is intangible or informational. Additionally, differences in consumers' shopping orientation may affect channel choice. Indeed, as Babin, Darden, and Griffin (1994) suggested: "shopping consists of both rational and emotional motives". Some consumers might perceive the act of shopping as an enjoyable experience (hedonic consumers), but others can see it as a duty to be accomplished (utilitarian consumers). Hedonic consumers might prefer traditional retail channels since they enjoy the entertainment value of shopping per se, with or without purchase. On the other hand, utilitarian consumers who value getting the job done as efficiently as possible may appreciate the savings in time and effort that the Internet can offer.

When put into the context of the hedonic-utilitarian research framework, the features of the Internet as a distribution channel gain new depth and relevance: on the one hand, for utilitarian consumers who view shopping as a joyless chore and prioritize time efficiency, the Internet offers an unprecedented value proposition. On the other hand, hedonic consumers, who find delight in shopping itself, discover a different form of value Online because of the novelty of this form of shopping, the fun, and the curiosity of a different way of making purchases (Coelho et al., 2023; Indrawati et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022). Therefore, this research letter delves beyond convenience, illuminating the complex interplay between shopping orientation and context. It sheds light on the dynamics introduced by Online shopping, making it a crucial endeavor for a comprehensive understanding of modern consumer behavior in digital commerce.

A noteworthy gap has emerged amid a substantial body of contemporary literature delving into the impact of emotions, amusement, and delight on purchasing behavior (see Coelho et al., 2023 for a review). This gap pertains to exploring consumers' shopping orientation as it intersects with the embrace of Web retailing among Internet users. Strikingly, scant attention has been directed towards contrasting consumer hedonism during traditional in-store shopping vis-à-vis the digital realm of Online shopping. This void in the research landscape underscores a pressing need for an inquiry into hedonism in Online shopping. Such investigation can potentially unveil profound insights into the Internet's pivotal role as a distribution channel. Despite the recent surge in scholarly activities (e.g., Indrawati et al., 2022), this realm's systematic and comprehensive examination remains conspicuously absent. Bridging this gap enriches our comprehension of the intricate dynamics shaping consumer behavior in the evolving retail landscape.

2. Aims and hypotheses

This research letter aims to investigate the attitude of consumers towards the Internet, particularly Online shopping. The purpose is twofold:

- Verify if and how far the utilitarian and hedonic approaches exist and combine on the Internet
- Examine the attitude toward Online shopping

Hedonic shopping orientation refers to a consumer's tendency or preference to engage in shopping activities primarily for the intrinsic enjoyment and emotional fulfillment they derive from the shopping experience. In other words, individuals with a hedonic shopping orientation are motivated by the pleasure, excitement, and emotional satisfaction they experience during shopping rather than just the functional aspects of acquiring products. This concept is closely related to the idea that shopping can provide entertainment, relaxation, and even self-expression. Thus, hedonism influences how businesses design retail environments and e-commerce platforms, select and present products, create marketing strategies, and engage with customers. It also affects consumers' emotional gratification, escape and relaxation, and self-expression while shopping and through the act of shopping.

Some customers may attribute a hedonic value also to browsing and purchasing on the Web: such customers,

who are probably curious about computers and new technologies, might appreciate electronic purchasing as an experience providing pleasure and hedonic feelings. Similarly, other customers, more practical towards the Web, might consider it to save both the time and the trouble of embarking on a shop expedition. Thus:

H1: A hedonic approach to the traditional distribution channel negatively correlates with the probability of buying Online (H1a), whereas a utilitarian approach to the traditional distribution channel positively correlates with buying Online (H1b).

H2: A hedonic approach to the Internet is positively correlated with the average connection time of the consumer.

A buying experience on the Internet could happen completely Online or have some connections with the traditional physical buying context (e.g., the consumer could decide to buy Online after seeing the product in a shop Offline). Visiting a brick-and-mortar shop could have a functional meaning, like a product trial and the building up of a reference point for the price; it could also have a social meaning, like the interaction with the shop assistants and other customers. Moreover, Offline stores are still the distribution channel that is best known to consumers. Based on these considerations, the following hypothesis is advanced:

H3: Consumers prefer to purchase a product on the Internet after having been to an Offline service provider.

3. Method

Scholars have suggested that the Internet could add unique value to consumers (e.g., Peterson et al., 1997; Indrawati et al., 2022). This research letter follows Holbrook and Corfman's (1985) definition of value as a preference experience characterizing a subject's interaction with some object. Hence, the utilitarian value "depends on whether the particular need stimulating the shopping trip was accomplished", meaning that the product is purchased deliberately and efficiently. On the other hand, hedonic value is more subjective and "results more from fun and playfulness than from task completion" (Babin et al. 1994; p. 645) and reflects shopping's potential entertainment and emotional worth.

3.1. The questionnaire

The questionnaire was split into four parts:

The first part asked respondents how likely they would be to buy a certain product immediately on the Internet or after having been to a shop. The survey used a five-point scale ranging from 1 ("I would certainly buy") to 5 ("I would certainly not buy"), first for a known brand, then for an unknown brand.

The second part of the questionnaire asked respondents to recall a recent shopping experience in a traditional store and to express their agreement or disagreement with several sentences related to that shopping experience. Babin et al.'s (1994) five-point Likert scale for measuring utilitarian and hedonic shopping value was used.

The third asked respondents to recall a recent web browsing experience and to express their agreement (or disagreement) on a similar list of sentences adapted for the Web environment. Because of the many characteristic features of the electronic channel compared to the traditional channel, the shopping environment becomes quite different when consumers are Online. Thus, the concepts of hedonism and utilitarianism need to be reshaped accordingly. In adapting the measurements to the Web, "shopping" was replaced with "browsing": the act of shopping is different from the act of buying (one could go shopping without buying), as well as browsing does not automatically imply the act of buying. For example, the original item of Babin et al. (1994), "I continued to shop, not because I had to, but because I wanted to", was adapted for the electronic channel: "I continued to browse, not because I had to, but because I wanted to".

Finally, the questionnaire asked respondents how often they had connected to the Internet in the last week,

how long their latest connection had lasted, whether they had bought Online in the last 6 months, and if so, which product(s).

This questionnaire allowed recording data for four constructs: hedonism in the traditional channel (HEDOSHOP), utilitarianism in the traditional channel (UTISHOP), hedonism in the Web (HEDOWEB), and utilitarianism in the Web (UTIWEB).

3.2. The sample

The questionnaire was administered in 2003 to 250 British students enrolled in a British University in management courses. The respondents were between 19 and 27 years (mean: 22.3; median: 23.5); 65% were females, and 35% were males. Participants were from various cultural backgrounds, though the majority (approx. 88%) were British. They were in their first year of study. The questionnaire was administered in person, and respondents were invited to fill it out, but there was no monetary or credit incentive.

Using students was justified not only because of convenience but also because students are shoppers of the products considered in the study and are likely to have access to the Internet either from home or from the University.

4. Results and discussion

In the final scales, 3 items that failed to load highly were dropped in the traditional shopping version, and 2 in the version adapted for the Web. All scales displayed acceptable reliability: .868 for hedonism in the traditional channel (11 items); .851 for hedonism in the Web (11 items); .738 for utilitarianism in the traditional channel (6 items), and .735 for utilitarianism in the Web (7 items). This evidence confirms previous studies on the traditional hedonic and utilitarian value of shopping (e.g., Babin et al., 1994; Griffin et al., 2000) and highlights the presence of internally consistent constructs for such concepts on the Internet.

First, results confirmed that hedonism and utilitarianism exist on the Internet and how they are compared to their Offline counterparts. Results are summarized in Table 1:

Table 1. Hedonism and utilitarianism in the two distribution channels.

	HEDOSHOP	UTISHOP	HEDOWEB
HEDOSHOP	-		ns
UTISHOP	0.275*	-	
HEDOWEB		ns	-
UTIWEB	ns	ns	0.334*

Notes: * = Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

Hedonism and utilitarianism are not orthogonal constructs, as they show some positive correlation: the results of this research letter align with previous studies regarding the Offline context (see, e.g., Babin et al., 1994).

But Table 1 also illustrates that hedonism and utilitarianism exist on the Internet and exhibit a correlational structure similar to their Offline counterparts. Moreover, it is looking at the relationship between the constructs, not merely at the construct in themselves, that differences emerge between the two distribution channels. No significant correlation emerges between any behavior in the traditional channel and any behavior in the Web: the two channels are independent and fully capable of evoking any behavior.

A t-test confirmed that consumers perceiving a high value from shopping in the traditional channel are less prone to switch to the Internet: hedonism and utilitarianism levels significantly differed among consumers who purchased on the electronic channel and those who did not. Results are summarized in Table 2:

Table 2. Offline approach and buying Online.

	Buy	Mean	t-value
HEDOSHOP	Yes	3.25	-2.854*
	No	2.89	
UTISHOP	Yes	3.23	-1.414
	No	3.17	

Notes: * = significant at the .01 level.

Electronic channel customers show a significantly less hedonic attitude toward the traditional brick-and-mortar shop; consumers who have never purchased through the Web perceive a high degree of hedonism in the traditional shopping environment. On the contrary, no significant difference emerged regarding utilitarian attitude: the degree of utilitarianism is about the same for Internet buyers and non-Internet buyers. These results support Hypothesis H1a but reject H1b: a hedonic approach to the traditional distribution channel negatively correlates with the probability of buying Online, but a utilitarian approach to the traditional distribution channel does not correlate with the probability of buying Online.

Results from the analysis of the relationship between the approach to the Internet and the use of the Internet exhibit the following correlations among hedonism toward the Web, utilitarianism toward the Web, number of connections, and length of connections (Table 3):

Table 3. Internet usage.

	Number of connections	Length of connections
HEDOWEB	0.293*	0.329*
UTIWEB	ns	ns

Notes: * = significant at the .01 level.

The data show a significant correlation between hedonism on the Web and the length of connection and their number. Not only are these the only significant correlations, but they are also by far the highest (the other non-significant correlations do not exceed .03). This supports Hypothesis H2: consumers behaving hedonically surf more frequently and longer than consumers approaching the Internet in a practical, goal-oriented way. They seem to enjoy the Internet in itself: this aligns with the idea of hedonic consumers being experiential, curious, and trying to exploit the hedonic potential of their shopping environment (Choelho et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022).

Finally, the preferred modality of buying Online was investigated, considering the options of buying straight from the Internet or Online after seeing the product in a shop. Different brands (Known vs. Unknown) and products (Jeans and Computers) were considered. In fact, according to the product categorization approach (Bloch et al. 1986; Roggeveen et al., 2015), products can be divided into two main groups: hedonic products (like clothes, chocolates, and perfumes) and utilitarian products (like computers). Results are summarized in Table 4 (the higher the value, the higher the reluctance toward buying):

Table 4. Preferred Online buying modality.

	Online only	First Offline, then Online
Jeans of a known brand	3.761	2.183
Jeans of an unknown brand	4.280	2.876
Computers of a known brand	3.631	2.382
Computers of an unknown brand	4.192	3.474

Notes: 1= would certainly not buy; 5= would certainly buy.

Reading Table 4 vertically (columns), one can see that -all else equal- consumers prefer to buy a known brand over an unknown brand (3.761 vs. 4.280 for Jeans and 3.631 vs. 4.192 for Computers). This result is expected

because of the very meaning of branding and a known brand's capability to reassure consumers about product quality. Reading Table 4 horizontally (rows), one can see that consumers prefer to buy Online after visiting a physical store (2.183 vs. 2.876 for Jeans and 2.382 vs. 3.474 for Computers).

5. Conclusions

This research letter addresses a critical void in the existing literature by offering an in-depth analysis of consumers' shopping orientation in both Online and Offline contexts. While the inherent advantages of the Internet as a distribution channel have often been acknowledged in terms of ease and convenience (see Kumar and Kashyap, 2022, for a recent metanalysis), this research letter reframes these advantages within the hedonic-utilitarian framework, revealing their implications.

This research letter discerns the intricate interplay between shopping orientation and context, making a theoretical contribution to our understanding of consumer behavior by navigating the territories of utilitarian and hedonic shopping, considering how consumers' preferences manifest differently in the digital and physical shopping realms. By shedding light on the dynamics introduced by Online shopping, this research letter illuminates a deeper comprehension of modern consumer behavior, establishing the Internet's role as a transformative distribution channel. This endeavor bridges the gap in the current research landscape, thus enriching our insights into the evolving dynamics that mold consumer behavior in today's retail landscape. Furthermore, this letter shows that hedonism and utilitarianism also exist on the Web: they display correlation patterns similar to those already known in the traditional brick-and-mortar world but are independent of them: they are not merely transposed from the Offline world to the Internet but originate specifically for the Web, which can evoke both behaviors.

Managerial implications can be discussed for both Web managers and traditional channel managers. One first implication is that hedonism systematically impacts the probability of buying Online; moreover, hedonic experiences are emerging specifically for the Web and can originate in strongly hedonic and utilitarian consumers. Shoppers may, for example, derive pleasure from 'hunting for bargains' on the Internet.

Traditional channel managers should reinforce hedonic and pleasant experiences in shopping expeditions through product displays, shop layouts, and events for customers. Also, managers should consider that the specific product does not influence Online buying preferences substantially. Consumers prefer to buy after a visit to the traditional brick-and-mortar shop. Moreover, how consumers behave Online and how they approach the Web seems related: hedonism correlates with connecting to the Internet for longer and more frequently.

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Conflict of interest

The author claims that the manuscript is completely original. The author also declares no conflict of interest.

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