

## Antecedents of consumer relative preference for interpersonal information sources in pre-purchase search

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### Abstract

*Past research has demonstrated clearly the importance of pre-purchase information search within the buying process. Scholars have identified several sources used by consumers in order to obtain information relevant to their purchase situation. Among the various information sources, interpersonal non-commercial sources seem to play an important role in consumers' choice decisions. The present study examines potential antecedents of consumer relative preference for interpersonal information search. The proposed antecedents include personality traits such as individuals' susceptibility to interpersonal influence, their need for cognition and their self-confidence, as well as individual differences in product knowledge and perceived risk associated with the purchase of a specific product.*

*Using structural equation modelling on survey data (419 respondents), seven hypotheses — describing relationships between the diverse variables of the model — were tested. The results indicate that consumer relative preference for interpersonal information search was significantly influenced by consumers' susceptibility to interpersonal influence, their need for cognition, their self-confidence and their product knowledge. Consumers' product knowledge also influenced their perceived risk, which did not affect their preference for interpersonal search significantly. Copyright © 2005 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Pre-purchase information search is a critical step in the buying process of consumers, especially in the case of highly involving products and services. Over the years, marketing researchers have devoted considerable efforts to investigating consumer information-seeking behaviour (eg Beatty and Smith, 1987; Moore and Lehmann, 1980; Punj and Staelin, 1983). The extent of pre-purchase search, in particular, has enjoyed substantial interest from scholars. As early as 1987, Beatty and Smith identified over 50 studies that dealt with the possible antecedents of information search extent. They also listed approximately 60 variables that have been studied empirically as determinants of external search.

While it is commonly accepted that consumers may engage in pre-purchase information search before making a buying decision, it is suggested that the amount of external search tends to be limited rather than extensive. Midgley (1983: 74) proposed that consumers tend to 'rely on a small subset of all available information sources (personal, neutral, and advertising)'.

The relatively limited pre-purchase search activities undertaken by consumers raise an interesting question regarding whether a consumer's preference for one source of information could be ascertained and its antecedents identified. The body of literature on information search has often recognised interpersonal information search as one of the preponderant types (eg Brown and Reingen, 1987; Herr *et al.*, 1991; Price and Feick, 1984). Interpersonal sources refer to the non-commercial personal sources used by consumers to gather any product-related information. These sources include family, friends, colleagues etc and exclude sales personnel and various sales representatives. One of the main distinctions between interpersonal sources of information and commercial sources of information, according to

Arndt (1967a), concerns the perceived motives of the communicator. In interpersonal exchanges, unlike commercial advertising, the communicator is perceived to be independent of the seller and his recommendations are not considered biased or exaggerated. In addition, interpersonal sources provide an opportunity for clarification and immediate feedback. These particularities make them a favoured source in consumers' acquisition of product-related information. The idea of the predominance of interpersonal information search is widely shared by marketing scholars. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), for example, found that word-of-mouth information was seven times as effective as newspapers and magazines, four times as effective as personal selling and twice as effective as radio advertising in influencing consumers to switch brands. Similar results were reported by Price and Feick (1984), who found that 91 per cent of their respondents were likely to use knowledgeable friends, relatives or acquaintances as sources of information in their product purchases.

Although interpersonal sources generally appear to be more preferred than non-personal sources, individual consumers are likely to differ in their relative preference for interpersonal sources (Furse *et al.*, 1984; Gilly *et al.*, 1998). Identifying individual and situational differences in consumers' relative preference for interpersonal sources could have significant theoretical and practical implications. Indeed, given the early positioning of information search in the buying decision-making process, if marketers can identify which segment in their market relies more heavily on others' opinions and which other segment is likely to give these opinions, they can tailor their communication strategies to suit both segments. For instance, marketers could focus more on persuading those likely to give opinions and benefit from the

eventual positive and powerful word-of-mouth information these persons are likely to pass on. This strategy offers the benefits of lowering communication costs as well as increasing the credibility of the message.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Schmidt and Spreng (1996) propose that the extent of an external search is essentially driven by two phenomena: motivation to search and perceived ability to search. The authors argue that these two psychological processes ultimately mediate the effects of most known antecedents of external information search.

If motivation and perceived ability to search drive the extent of total search, then what motivates consumer relative preference for interpersonal information search? The authors propose that consumers could have a higher preference for interpersonal sources for three reasons: because of individual differences in interpersonal communication style, a lack of motivation to search various sources and high situational uncertainty.

Individuals differ in the way they relate to other people. Some people are inherently more comfortable than others in interpersonal interactions. These people are expected to have a greater

preference for interpersonal information search. Moreover, people vary in their susceptibility to social influence. Influenceable people are expected to have a greater preference for interpersonal information search than less influenceable people. The two described facets of interpersonal communication style are illustrated by personality traits such as susceptibility to interpersonal influence and self-confidence (see Figure 1).

Motivation to search is supposed to have a negative impact on consumers' relative preference for interpersonal sources. Highly motivated consumers tend to search various sources extensively and therefore have a lesser preference for interpersonal sources than unmotivated consumers, who are likely to prefer concise information given to them by trusted personal sources. Motivation to search is illustrated by consumers' need for cognition.

Finally, situational uncertainty is thought to have a positive effect on consumer relative preference for interpersonal sources. The rationale is that interpersonal sources help to reduce uncertainty by providing immediate feedback and opportunities for clarification. Uncertainty may occur because the consumer lacks the necessary knowledge about the product

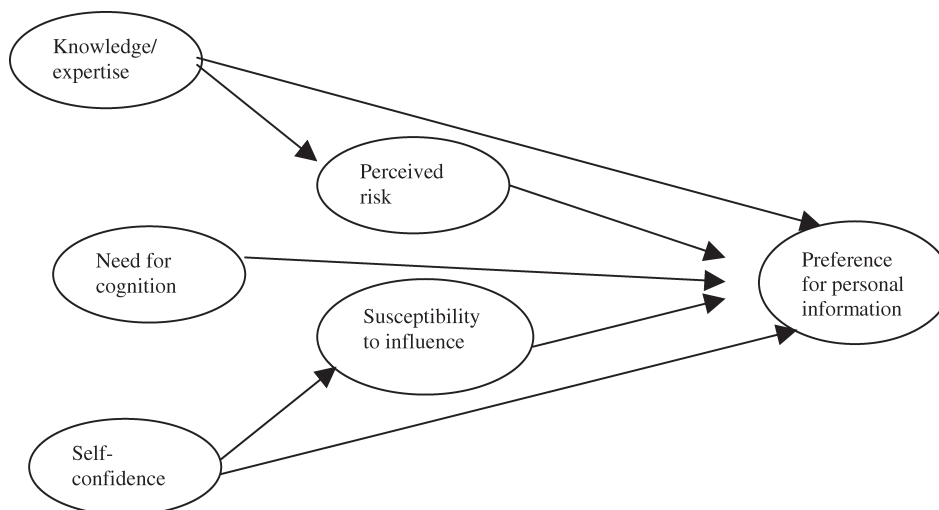


Figure 1: Conceptual model of consumers' preference for interpersonal information sources

category to make a confident decision, or it may be due to a high perception of risk associated with the purchase situation. Situational uncertainty is therefore illustrated by product knowledge and perceived risk.

Next this paper examines each antecedent of preference for interpersonal sources. These proposed antecedents do not represent an exhaustive list, since a number of other unexplored variables could act as antecedents of relative preference for interpersonal sources. High costs of search and low product involvement, for instance, are likely to reduce consumers' motivation to search and ultimately favour their relative preference for interpersonal sources. Similarly, factors such as opinion leadership and density of social networks are likely to influence consumers' interpersonal communication styles and, hence, their preference for interpersonal information sources. The authors acknowledge the importance of such variables, but also believe that the proposed variables provide a good and parsimonious representation of the three processes underlying consumer relative preference for interpersonal information search.

### **Informational susceptibility to interpersonal influence**

Individuals may differ in their responses to social influence. The underlying concept of 'susceptibility to interpersonal influence' (Bearden *et al.*, 1989) was proposed as a general trait that varies across individuals. Bearden *et al.* (1989: 474) define this construct as 'the need to identify with or enhance one's image in the opinion of significant others through the acquisition and use of products and brands, the willingness to conform to the expectations of others regarding purchase decisions, and/or the tendency to learn about products and services by observing others or seeking information from others'.

Deutsch and Gerard (1955) suggested that interpersonal influence can be

manifested through either normative or informational influences. They defined informational influence as the tendency to accept information from others as evidence of the reality. On the other hand, Burnkrant and Cousineau (1975) defined normative influence as the tendency to conform to the expectations of others.

Bearden *et al.* (1989) developed a two-dimensional measure of informational and normative interpersonal influence. The normative dimension reflects the need to identify with or enhance one's image in the opinion of significant others. It is closely related to 'attention to social comparison information' (ATSCI) (Lennox and Wolfe, 1984). The informational dimension reflects the tendency to learn about products and services by observing others or seeking information from others.

Based on the above definitions, it is expected that susceptibility to informational influence will be closely related to consumers' relative preference for personal sources. Furthermore, it is important to note that the two constructs are conceptually distinct. Indeed, unlike susceptibility to interpersonal influence, relative preference for personal sources is not viewed as a general trait, but rather as a variable choice, which is contingent on individual and situational factors. Consumer X, for instance, might be highly susceptible to informational influence and yet have no preference for interpersonal sources in a situation where they have an extensive knowledge of and expertise in the product category.

*H<sub>1</sub>: The informational dimension of susceptibility to interpersonal influence will be positively related to consumers' relative preference for interpersonal sources.*

### **Self-confidence**

Relatively few studies have looked at the effect of self-confidence on information search. Nevertheless, the findings of these studies have been inconsistent. Arndt (1967b), for example, found a

positive linear relationship between self-confidence and being exposed to word-of-mouth communication. Individuals higher in self-confidence received more word-of-mouth information than those lower in self-confidence. The rationale was that 'those higher in self-confidence would have sufficient assurance to discuss products freely with others' (Arndt, 1967b: 312). In contrast, Kiel and Layton (1981) found a negative linear relationship between self-confidence and search.

In this paper it is posited that self-confident consumers are likely to have a warmer interpersonal communication style than less-confident consumers, which makes them more comfortable interacting with others, and more likely to prefer interpersonal information search than less-confident consumers.

*H<sub>2</sub>: Individual's self-confidence is positively related to their relative preference for interpersonal sources.*

In addition, self-confidence has been proposed as one of the probable antecedents of people's susceptibility to interpersonal influence (Bearden *et al.*, 1989). Self-confident individuals were posited to be less susceptible to interpersonal influence. This suggests an additional, negative, indirect effect of self-confidence on consumer preference for interpersonal search through susceptibility to interpersonal influence, which would reduce the total effect of self-confidence.

*H<sub>3</sub>: Individuals' self-confidence is negatively related to their susceptibility to interpersonal influence.*

### Need for cognition

Cacioppo and Petty (1982) proposed that the need for cognition was a stable individual difference in people's tendency to engage in and enjoy effortful cognitive activity. Low need for

cognition is defined as the relative absence of motivation for effortful cognitive activities that characterise the high need for cognition.

In the marketing literature, individuals with a high need for cognition have been shown to process and evaluate advertising information more thoroughly than those with a low need for cognition. They tend to be influenced by message-relevant thoughts rather than peripheral cues such as endorser attractiveness (Haugtvedt and Petty, 1992), spokesperson credibility (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), humour (Zhang, 1996) or the number of arguments presented (Cacioppo *et al.*, 1983).

In an extensive literature review of the subject, Cacioppo *et al.* (1996) found that individuals with a high need for cognition tended to process information more thoroughly and tended to engage in more extensive information search than those with a low need for cognition. This suggests that individuals with a high need for cognition might use a wide range of information sources, which reduces their relative preference for interpersonal sources. On the other hand, individuals with a low need for cognition are less motivated to gather and process extensive raw information and are more likely to accept already processed information given to them by trusted personal sources. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed.

*H<sub>4</sub>: The lower an individual's need for cognition, the greater their relative preference for interpersonal sources.*

### Perceived risk

Murray and Schlacter (1990) defined perceived risk as a multidimensional construct. It represents consumers' pre-purchase uncertainty related to the type and degree of expected loss resulting from the purchase and the use of a product or service. Possible loss categories are financial loss, performance



loss, psychological loss, social loss and convenience loss (Arndt, 1967b; Bansal and Voyer, 2000).

Past research has consistently recognised perceived risk as a fundamental concept in consumer information search (Arndt, 1967b; Chaudhuri, 2000; Murray and Schlacter, 1990). Arndt, for example, found that 'to cope with the hazards of buying, consumers tend to develop risk-handling strategies. One such strategy . . . would be to seek additional information from a number of sources' (1967b: 303). Bansal and Voyer (2000) found a negative influence of product expertise on perceived risk, and a positive influence of perceived risk on word-of-mouth information actively sought. In addition, Murray (1991) proposed that word of mouth is the most important source of information when the goal is to reduce the perceived risk. He argues that this is because word of mouth offers great opportunities for clarification and feedback.

Because of the feedback and clarification opportunities offered by interpersonal information exchange, the following hypothesis can be proposed.

*H<sub>5</sub>: There is a positive influence of perceived risk on consumers' relative preference for interpersonal sources.*

### **Product-class knowledge**

Familiarity and expertise are the two dimensions of product knowledge (Alba and Hutchinson, 1987). In the information search literature, Brucks (1985) found that prior knowledge of a product class facilitated the acquisition of new information and increased search efficiency. Past research generally supports a negative relationship between subjective knowledge and total external search for information (see Beatty and Smith, 1987; Brucks, 1985 for reviews). The theory suggests that those with high subjective product knowledge engage in less information search than those with lower subjective product knowledge

prior to purchase because the former are confident in their ability to make a good decision. In contrast, those low in product knowledge tend to doubt their ability to make an optimal choice decision and, therefore, are likely to engage in more information search (Bloch *et al.*, 1986).

Furthermore, knowledgeable consumers tend to rely less on interpersonal sources for product-related information. In their cluster analysis, Kiel and Layton (1981) found that the group of consumers who tended to rely on interpersonal sources had little experience with car purchasing. Because perceived product knowledge reduces situational uncertainty, the authors propose that a negative relationship exists between perceived product knowledge and relative preference for interpersonal sources.

*H<sub>6</sub>: The higher a consumer's subjective knowledge about the product, the less likely they are to prefer interpersonal sources for obtaining product information.*

The marketing literature also provides support for a negative relationship between product knowledge and perceived risk (Bansal and Voyer, 2000; Srinivasan and Ratchford, 1991), that is, the greater the consumer's subjective knowledge about the product, the less risky the product will be perceived to be. Consequently, it is proposed that there is an indirect effect of product knowledge on preference for personal sources through the perceived risk.

*H<sub>7</sub>: The greater the consumer's subjective knowledge, the lower the perceived risk.*

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Sample**

Data were collected from residents of a large North-American city. Seventeen census tracts were selected and one or two streets were randomly chosen within each of these census areas in which to proceed with a door-to-door distribution

of the questionnaire. Questionnaires were distributed by trained field workers, who were required to explain the purpose of the study and ask respondents whether they were willing to participate. About 20 per cent of the initially contacted households either refused to participate or had no one at home. Respondents who accepted to participate only had to mail their questionnaires back using pre-stamped envelopes provided by the field workers. In total, 1,000 self-administered questionnaires were distributed. Of these, 431 questionnaires were mailed back, but only 419 of them were usable. The response rate of 41.9 per cent was judged satisfactory. Nearly half of the respondents were females (48 per cent), 64 per cent were married, and the majority (67 per cent) were between 30 and 59 years old. The respondents' income and education levels were slightly higher than the population average.

### Measures

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. In Part A, respondents were asked to think about a scenario in which they were faced with the decision to purchase a laptop computer. They were then asked questions about how they would go about handling the search for relevant information (brand selection, model selection etc). A laptop computer was chosen because it is a highly involving product for which information search is likely to take place. Part A also included items measuring product knowledge and perceived risk. Part B contained measures of the need for cognition, self-confidence and susceptibility to interpersonal influence. Finally, Part C was designed to assess demographic variables.

All the variables in the model have been studied previously, which provided a large pool of existing valid items to draw upon. The most appropriate measures for each concept were selected from the literature and

adapted to meet this study's needs. Product knowledge, for example, was measured by an adapted scale from Mishra *et al.* (1993). A three-item, nine-point semantic differential scale was used to measure the degree of knowledge and experience that a respondent reported to have about laptop computers.

Perceived risk was measured using a four-item, nine-point, differential semantic scale adapted from Murray and Schlacter (1990). The items reflected both the financial and the performance components of risk.

The short need for cognition scale (18 items) developed by Cacioppo *et al.* (1984) was reduced to nine items and was measured on a nine-point, Likert-type scale. Informational susceptibility to interpersonal influence was measured using a three-item, nine-point, Likert-type scale adapted from Bearden *et al.* (1989). Self-confidence was measured using a four-item, nine-point, semantic differential scale adapted from Wells and Tigert (1971). Finally, relative preference for interpersonal sources was measured as an index of seven different items adapted from the scale used by Gilly *et al.* (1998).

The preference for interpersonal information sources was computed by dividing amount measuring the likelihood of using interpersonal sources to gather relevant information by the sum of the scores of all seven items measuring the likelihood of using seven different sources of information (interpersonal, print advertisements, consumer reports, the internet, speciality magazines, salespeople and shopping around). Reliability measures of all the scales used in this study as well as sample items are provided in Table 1.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data analysis was carried out using the EQS structural equation modelling software of Bentler (1992). The overall indices suggest a good fit of the measurement model to the data. Indeed,

**Table 1** Sample items and reliability measures

Scales	Reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha$ )	Sample items
Informational susceptibility to interpersonal influence (3 items)	0.83	To make sure I buy the right product, I often observe what others are buying or using
Need for cognition (9 items)	0.81	I would prefer complex to simple problems
Self-confidence (4 items)	0.82	I think I have a lot of personal ability
Product knowledge (3 items)	0.90	In general, would you consider yourself familiar or unfamiliar with laptop computers?
Perceived risk (4 items)	0.89	Given the expense involved with purchasing laptop computers, how much risk would you say is involved with purchasing the new laptop computer?

the  $\chi^2$  was equal to 366 for 217 degrees of freedom. The probability value associated with the  $\chi^2$ , however, was less than 0.001 (NFI = 0.92, NNFI = 0.96 and CFI = 0.96). Furthermore, all the factor loadings were significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). Indeed, the  $t$ -values for the factor loadings range from 7.03 to 28.27, well above the 1.96 required, and Lagrange multiplier tests revealed that no item loaded significantly on a factor for which it was not intended. These results reflect satisfactory convergent and discriminant validity.

Following the assessment of the measurement model, the full structural model of preference for interpersonal sources, such as depicted in Figure 1, was tested. Here again the results indicate an excellent fit of the model to the data:  $\chi^2 = 389.7$  for 240 degrees of freedom; NFI = 0.91, NNFI = 0.96 and CFI = 0.96. In addition, an  $R^2$  value of 0.29 indicates that the predictor variables explain 29 per cent of the variance in consumer

relative preference for interpersonal information search. Table 2 illustrates the standardised values of the regression coefficients and their statistical significance.

H<sub>1</sub> predicted a positive relationship between consumers' informational susceptibility to interpersonal influence and their preference for personal sources when seeking product-related information. The results support H<sub>1</sub>. The path coefficient between SUSCEP and PREF is indeed positive and statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). This clearly suggests that the more an individual is influenceable—that is, the more they tend to accept information from others as evidence of the reality—the more they tend to favour interpersonal sources when seeking product-related information. Highly influenceable consumers trust the information provided by a personal source as accurate and sufficient. Therefore, they are less motivated than the less

**Table 2** Statistical significance of regression coefficients' estimates

	H	Standardised regression coefficient	Standard error	Test statistic
SUSCEP $\rightarrow$ PREF	H <sub>1</sub>	0.189*	0.003	3.78
NFC $\rightarrow$ PREF	H <sub>2</sub>	0.170*	0.004	−2.52
CONF $\rightarrow$ PREF	H <sub>3</sub>	0.127*	0.003	2.02
CONF $\rightarrow$ SUSCEP	H <sub>4</sub>	−0.094 ns	0.055	−1.64
RISK $\rightarrow$ PREF	H <sub>5</sub>	−0.064 ns	0.002	−1.25
KNOW $\rightarrow$ PREF	H <sub>6</sub>	−0.327*	0.002	−5.94
KNOW $\rightarrow$ RISK	H <sub>7</sub>	−0.338*	0.035	−6.26

\*significant for  $p < 0.05$ .

ns: non-significant for  $p < 0.05$ .



influenceable consumers to search for further information and explore other sources.

These findings also support  $H_2$ , which predicted a positive relationship between consumers' self-confidence and their relative preference for interpersonal information search. The rationale was that self-confident consumers would have a warm interpersonal communication style, making them comfortable in discussing product-related information freely with others.

$H_3$  predicted a negative relationship between self-confidence and susceptibility to interpersonal influence. It was thought that more confident consumers would be less susceptible to others' influence. The results failed to support this hypothesis. The relationship between the two concepts, although going in the predicted direction, did not reach statistical significance.

$H_4$  was supported. A negative and statistically significant relationship was found between the need for cognition and relative preference for interpersonal sources. Unlike individuals with a low need for cognition, those who display a high need for cognition are known to favour extensive information search. Consequently, individuals with a high need for cognition tend to use all available sources to form an attitude or a judgment and thus display a lesser relative preference for interpersonal sources. On the other hand, individuals with a 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. Individuals with a low need for cognition also may find personal sources attractive because the raw information has been processed already by the source and is usually presented to them in a concise form.

Perceived risk was also thought to influence an individual's relative

preference for interpersonal information search. It was hypothesised in  $H_5$  that a positive relationship would prevail between perceived risk and preference for interpersonal sources. The results did not support  $H_5$ . There was no significant relationship between perceived risk and relative preference for interpersonal sources. It was argued that the opportunity for clarification and immediate feedback provided by personal sources would make them particularly appreciated in situations of relatively high perceived risk associated with the purchase of a certain product. The results, however, suggest that in a situation where the consumer perceives a great deal of financial and/or performance risk, they will not necessarily favour personal sources. One possible explanation for this lack of perceived risk effect might be the lack of variation in perceived risk, due to the study's focus on a single product. To test this hypothesis, the authors compared their current model to one in which the variance of perceived risk was constrained to zero. The  $\chi^2$  difference of 4.2 with one degree of freedom indicates that the variance of perceived risk is significantly different from zero and thus rules out this explanation. Another possible explanation might be that in a high-risk situation, the consumer will tend to engage in an extensive search and explore a wide variety of sources. The accumulation of diverse and complementary information sought from a variety of sources will be used by the consumer as a risk-reducing strategy. This argument implies a positive relationship between perceived risk and total information search. An index of total information search was constructed by averaging the scores of consumers' likelihood of using the seven different sources of information. A significant positive correlation ( $r = 0.14, p < 0.05$ ) between total search and perceived risk gives initial support to this explanation.

The results show a significant negative relationship between product

knowledge and consumer relative preference for interpersonal information seeking. This gives full support to H<sub>6</sub>. By reducing the uncertainty associated with the purchase situation, product knowledge also reduces the need to rely on interpersonal sources.

Finally, H<sub>7</sub> 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. Perceived risk stems from the uncertainty inherent to the purchase decision. Knowledge reduces that uncertainty and therefore the perceived risk.

### CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Existing literature on information search suggests that consumers use only a limited number of the sources available to them in an effort to keep the search costs low. Among the various information sources, interpersonal sources seem to play an important role in consumers' choice decisions. The present study investigated potential antecedents of consumer preference for interpersonal information search. It was found that people differ in their relative preference for interpersonal sources and that this relative preference is influenced by some of their personality traits as well as their familiarity with the product category. The proposed antecedents were selected because they offered a good representation of the three broader determinants of consumer preference for interpersonal information search, namely individual differences in interpersonal communication style, motivation to search and situational uncertainty.

From a theoretical standpoint, this research provides additional insight into an important phenomenon in consumer information search behaviour. Furthermore, the proposed model introduces several relationships that

have not been studied before. The negative influence of an individual's need for cognition on their relative preference for interpersonal information search, for example, is an interesting result both for marketing scholars and for social psychology researchers. Indeed, Cacioppo *et al.* (1996) identified over 100 empirical studies dealing with the concept of the need for cognition. This study confirms the theoretical importance of this variable by relating it to yet another important variable in consumer behaviour: consumer relative preference for interpersonal information search.

From a managerial viewpoint, this study provides marketing practitioners with insights into some of the individual variables that influence consumers' selection of their information source. The findings generally indicate the types of consumer more likely to seek product-related information from interpersonal sources and under which circumstances.

### LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The major limitation of this study pertains to the fact that not all possible antecedents were included in the model. The potential influence of variables such as cost of search, product involvement, opinion leadership and density of social network have been discussed already. In addition to these variables, other factors can be identified as antecedents to consumer relative preference for interpersonal information search. For example, the study considered a scenario where consumers were faced with the decision to buy a new laptop computer. One can argue that consumers' information search behaviour would differ across different products and services. Here, the length of the questionnaire did not allow for testing of the influence of product category. Furthermore, it was thought that some of the differences expected between various products could be captured under differences in perceived risk and product knowledge.

Gender is another important variable missing from the proposed model. Preliminary results indicate that women have a significantly higher relative preference for interpersonal sources than men ( $t = 4.19$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Further research would benefit from investigating how gender affects the various processes (motivation to search, interpersonal communication style and perception of situational uncertainty) leading to consumer relative preference for interpersonal search. Additional qualitative research also might prove useful in exploring other potential influencers which may have been unanticipated or overlooked by the researchers.

In this paper, consumers' relative preference for interpersonal sources was measured as a ratio of the likelihood that a consumer uses interpersonal sources to the likelihood of them using several other sources of information. Although this measurement strategy proved reliable in this study as well as in previous ones (eg Gilly *et al.*, 1998), the concept of preference might not be fully captured by this single indicator. Future research therefore would benefit from developing and validating a scale to measure consumers' preference (as opposed to a relative preference) for interpersonal information search. Another important question for further investigation relates to the role of culture in consumers' preference for interpersonal information search. The present study was conducted in an individualistic cultural context. Based on the known theoretical differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures, one would expect differences in the way people from individualistic and collectivistic cultures collect relevant product information. For example, Eastern countries like China are recognised for the emphasis put on family and close relatives, which is not always the case in Western countries. Supporting the collectivistic orientation, Eastern cultures are likely to make a heavier use of this close network as

sources of personal help when making a purchase decision.

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