

# Internet search expertise and online consumer information search: more effective but less efficient

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## Extended Abstract

We present a concept called Internet search expertise, which is proposed to have an effect on the objective and perceived outcomes of online searches. Using structural equation modeling, we find that Internet search expertise increases the relative variety of the information that online seekers have at access. However, it also decreases the relative efficiency with which consumers locate information perceived to be satisfactory.

Results of a field experiment with student sample indicate that Internet search expertise has a positive effect on the effectiveness of search for online information (i.e. improvements in search outcomes, indicating the level of objective productiveness of the search). At the same time, it appears to reduce the efficiency of the search (i.e. perception of achieving sought goals with least necessary effort).

Thus, Internet search expertise is significant from the effectiveness perspective. One-fifth of the diversity of options in the searches is attributable to the level of Internet search expertise. However, while the connection between Internet search expertise and the efficiency of the search is significant, it is of the opposite sign as proposed.

How can Internet search expertise both increase the effectiveness and reduce the efficiency of search? The controversy is to some extent axiomatic. Efficiency as a search objective assumes a purchase optimization approach of the consumer. However, consumers have other motivations besides “getting the best product” when they search for information for a purchase, e.g. hedonic ones. Efficiency as an objective may be in contrast with these significant motivations of online seeking. Consequently, it is possible that while those subjects who rated highest in Internet search expertise had the most options to consider in search, they were also the *most motivated* to seek. As the termination of the search was left to the decision of the subjects, it is conceivable that the subjects had quite different cutoff levels for search.

The relation of medium-specific (Internet search expertise) and domain-specific expertise (product class knowledge) in online search is an intriguing issue. Some research findings indicate that the two have a compensatory relation, while others suggest an additive effect.

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Interestingly, neither of the models involving the effect of product class knowledge passes the significance test. The model comparisons suggest that Internet search expertise is more significant in explaining search outcomes than product class knowledge is. When Internet search expertise is included as an antecedent, the results indicate no statistically significant relation between product class knowledge and the effectiveness or the efficiency of online search. This does not, however, indicate that the role of product class knowledge would be insignificant in Internet search. It is axiomatic that the consumer's prior knowledge in the product class determines the information that the consumer needs. Consumers with different levels of domain knowledge search for different *objectives*, and may also have different perceptions of what is "sufficient" information, even though the results may not apply to the kinds of search behavior consumers perform.

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