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THE FACTORS AFFECTING SOCIAL NETWORK PLAFORM ENGAGEMENT FOR ONLINE INFORMATION SEARCH AND COLLECTION

MASTER'S THESIS

ÇİĞDEM MUTLU

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ABSTRACT

THE FACTORS AFFECTING SOCIAL NETWORK PLAFORM ENGAGEMENT FOR ONLINE INFORMATION SEARCH AND COLLECTION

Mutlu, Çiğdem

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In today's conditions, both companies and Internet users intensely carry on their online existence. Being present on the Internet is especially important for companies. Yet there isn't enough information available on how they will position themselves in the social platforms that are rapidly growing in recent years and how they will manage the flow of information about themselves. This study focuses on the factors affecting social network platform engagement for online information search and collection and what kind of information Internet users trust and what information they disregard, in spite of the tons of information available in the online world.

Since the dawn of time, communication has played a very important role in mankind's historic progress. After beginning to speak and write, mankind aggregately used mass communication methods and went on to exercise mass communication as a result of technological developments. The Internet changed mass communication, which marked a new era in communication history, by making communication interactive. The Internet also brought with it radical, far-reaching changes for every industry. Social platforms, on the other hand, caused companies' approach to communication flow to change drastically by paving the way for innovation, transparency and one-on-one communication.

Prior to the Internet, consumers conducted information search via offline communication tools such as newspapers, magazine advertisements, television commercials and word-of-moth. The Internet, however, allowed consumers to form their own communication groups, called virtual communities, based on their interests and needs. Meanwhile, social platforms took the information flow between consumers one step further and gave people the ability to receive accurate information, services and products directly, or firsthand, from users.

Research was done on what different consumer groups paid attention to and what they cared about when receiving information. Factors that shape consumers' method of getting information and social media engagement are anxiety level, the Internet usage capacity, personal involvement with online information search, openness to social platforms, perceived credibility of online information, perceived benefit of Social Platforms and the Internet.

Following detailed examination of the academic literature and keeping in mind the elements stated above, this study was conducted to determine the factors that determine the factors affecting consumers' engagement in social platforms that they already use intensely. The factors that affect the research done via social platforms were found, and whether these factors lead to engagement with social platforms was examined as a result of findings. A quantitative research method was used to set forth the factors that affect social platform engagement, and a questionnaire was compiled based on items that measure these factors' effects on social platforms. Participants answered the prepared survey on the Internet.

The first fundamental finding that as consumers' interest in the service they research and their Internet usage capacities increase, the credibility they feel for online information sources also increases. Secondly, consumers' positive approach to social platforms allows them to perceive the information they receive from online information sources as beneficial. Lastly, an increase in consumers' anxiety level towards a service they will purchase affects their social platform engagement negatively, while the sense of credibility they feel towards online information sources affects their social platform engagement positively. Additionally, the benefits consumers experience via the Internet and social platforms positively affect their social media engagement, as well.

Since a Web-based survey was used, the study's limitations could be summarized as very little control over participants as well as the fact that participants' attention could easily be diverted during the survey. In order to enhance the credibility and validity of the theoretical model, the findings of this study could be further researched using one of the qualitative methods of research, and the results could be considered together.

Keywords: Social media engagement, online information search, information collection, perceived credibility of online information, marketing.

ÖZET

ONLINE BİLGİ ARAŞTIRMASI VE EDİNİLMESİ İÇİN SOSYAL MECRALARA BAĞLILIĞI ETKİLEYEN FAKTÖRLER

Mutlu, Çiğdem

Pazarlama Yönetimi

Tez Danışmanı: Yrd. Doç. Dr. Elif Karaosmanoğlu

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Günümüz koşullarında gerek firmalar gerekse internet kullanıcıları online olarak varlıklarını yoğun olarak sürdürmektedir. İnternette var olmak özellikle firmalar oldukça önemli olsada son yıllarda hızla yükselen sosyal platformlarda kendilerini nasıl konumlandıracakları, kendileriyle ilgili bilgi akışını nasıl yönetecekleri konusunda yeterli bilgi bulunmamaktadır. Bu çalışma ve online bilgi araştırması ve edinilmesi için sosyal mecralara bağlılığı etkileyen faktörler ve online dünyada tonlarca bilgi olmasına rağmen kullanıcıların elde ettikleri bilgilerden hangisine güvenip hangisini göz ardı ettiği üzerinde durmaktadır.

İlk çağlardan bu yana iletişim insanların tarihsel gelişiminde çok önemli bir rol oynamıştır. İnsan'ın konuşması ve yazmasını takiben kitlesel olarak gerçekleştirilen toplu iletişim yöntemleri kullanan insanlık, teknolojik gelişmeler neticesinde kitlesel iletişime geçebildi. İletişim tarihinde çığır açan kitlesel iletişimi değiştiren İnternet, iletişimi interaktif bir hale sokarken tüm sektörler için sarsıcı ve kökten değişiklikler getirdi. Sosyal mecralar ise firmalar için yeniliğe, açıklığa, birebir iletişime yönelterek bilgi aktarma mantığının tümden değişmesini sağladı.

Tüketicilerin yaptıkları bilgi araştırması internet öncesinde gazete, dergi ilanları, televizyon reklamları, WOM gibi offline iletişim araçlarıyla olmaktaydı. İnternet ise tüketicilerin ilgileri ve ihtiyaçları doğrultusunda kendi iletişim gruplarını kurmalarına olanak verdi, virtual communities. Sosyal mecralar ise tüketicilerin kendi aralarında edindikleri bilgi akışını bir adım daha öteye götürerek doğru bilgiyi, hizmeti ve ürünü direk kullanan kişiden yani birinci ağızdan bilgi edinmeye olanak sağladı.

Tüketicilerin bilgi edinirken farklı tüketici gruplarının neye dikkat ettiği, neyi önemsediği araştırıldı. Tüketicilerin Online bilgi araştırması ve edinilmesi için sosyal mecralara bağlılıklarını etkileyen faktörler ve bilgi edinme biçimini şekillendiren unsurlar, algılanan risk, müşterilerin internet kullanma kapasitesi, online bilgi araştırmasına kişisel bağlılık, **s**osyal platformlara karşı açıklık, online bilgiye karşı algılnan güven, sosyal mecralar ve internetten algılanan yararlardır..

Bu çalışma akademik literatür detaylıca incelendikten sonra yukarıda sayılan unsurlar göz önünde bulundurularak tüketicilerin hali hazırda yoğun bir biçimde kullandıkları sosyal mecralara karşı bağlılıklarını etkileyen faktörleri ortaya çıkarmak için yapılmıştır. Sosyal mecralar üzerinden yapılan araştırmayı etkileyen faktörleri bulmak ve bulgular neticesinde bu faktörlerin sosyal mecralara karşı bir bağlılık yaratıp yaratmadığı incelenmiştir.

Sosyal mecralara bağlılığı etkileyen faktörlerin ortaya çıkarılması için niceliksel araştırma yöntemi kullanılmış olup bu faktörlerin sosyal mecralara olan etkisini ölçen maddeler oluşturularak anket formu hazırlanmıştır. Katılımcılar hazırlanan anketi internet ortamında yanıtlamışlardır.

Bu çalışmadan elde edilen en temel bulgulardan ilki tüketicilerin araştıracakları hizmete karşı olan ilgileri ve internet kullanma becerileri arttıkça online bilgi kaynaklarına karşı duydukları güvenin artmasıdır. İkinci olarak tüketicilerin sosyal mecralara karşı olan olumlu tutumu online bilgi kaynaklarından elde ettikleri bilgiyi faydalı olarak algılamalarını sağlamaktadır. Son olarak tüketicilerin satın alacakları hizmete karşı hissettikleri kaygı seviyesinin artması sosyal mecralara olan bağlılıklarını olumsuz; online bilgi kaynaklarına karşı algıladıkları güven hissi sosyal mecralara bağlılıklarını olumlu; internet ve sosyal mecralar aracılığıyla elde ettikleri fayda ise sosyal mecralara bağlılıklarını olumlu yönde etkilemektedir.

İnternet tabanlı bir anket kullanıldığı için katılımcılar üzerinde kontrolün az olması ve anket süresince katılımcıların düşebilecek olan dikkatleri çalışmanın kısıtlılıkları olarak özetlenebilir. Teorik modelin güvenilirliğinin ve geçerliliğinin arttırmak için araştırmadan elde edilen bulgular kalitatif araştırma yöntemlerinden biri kullanılarak da araştırılabilir ve sonuçlar birlikte değerlendirilebilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyal mecralara bağlılık, online bilgi araştırması, online bilgiye karşı algılanan güven, pazarlama.

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Expressive Attributes	:	E
Functional Attributes	:	F
Consumers' Internet Usage Capacity	:	CUIC
Level of Anxiety	:	LA
Openness to Social Platforms	:	OSP
Price	:	P
Perceived benefit of the Internet	:	PBI
Perceived Credibility of the Internet	:	PCI
Perceived Benefit of Social Platforms	:	PBSP
Perceived Ease of Use Online Environment	:	PEU
Personal Involvement to Online Information Search	:	PI
Social Media Engagement	:	SME
Turkish Statistics Institute	:	TÜİK
User-Generated Content	:	UGC
Uniform Resource Locators	:	URL
Word-of-Mouth	:	WOM
World Wide Web	:	WWW

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to reveal the factors affecting social network platform engagement for online iInformation search and collection of the younger Turkish population who is between 18 – 39 years old.

To better examine the variables, information collection methods have been clarified. How information gathering has evolved throughout history; the radical changes that have taken place in line with the telecommunications revolution; and the rise of virtual communities with the emergence of the Internet have all been investigated. Following this section, factors influencing individuals' information search behavior and what causes those behaviors to vary from individual to individual have been examined.

Previous studies in the literature indicate that individual involvement, demographics, price and risk perception and the Internet usage experience appear as the primary drivers that can significantly affect information search behavior. Later, to extract meaningful results from this study, the difference between information search behavior for products and services have been examined and highlights of anxiety level while buying a product and service have been presented. The theoretical model for social media engagement for consumer decision making with regard to services industry, composed with findings in the literature. Using a theoretical model, the measurement items (independent variables) of the study have been taken from the literature, modified in some cases, and collected to compose a questionnaire. The design, data collection and sampling of the survey will be explained in detail.

1.1 COLLECTING INFORMATION

Communication has always played a significant role for human beings in collecting information and conveying this information others their surroundings. Primitive communication methods were not meant to convey massive amounts of information to the public as we do in the 21st century. But the more we scrutinize how information

was conveyed in the past the more we understand how collecting information evolved into speaking and writing and eventually into telecommunications.

> *Communication* [is] *transfer of information, such as thoughts and messages, as contrasted with transportation, the transfer of goods and persons. The basic forms of communication are by signs (sight) and by sounds. The reduction of communication to writing was a fundamental step in the evolution of society for, in addition to being useful in situations where speech is not possible, writing permits the preservation of communications, or records, from the past (Communication, Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, p.1).*

1.2 TOWARDS SPEECH AND WRITING

Before examining how information collection has evolved throughout history, it is essential to understand how communication collection - the most important information source has evolved. This section covers in detail the evolution of the communication process.

1.2.1 The Primitive Era

Though writing in human history has only existed for approximately seven thousand years, the real meaning of communication goes back two hundred millennia with the evolution of speech (History of Communication, Wikipedia, 18/04/2010). Therefore, as the initial form of communicating, speech itself was the beginning of human communication. Speech has tremendous sociological effects and has made people more alert to their surroundings, giving them more understanding and the desire to learn even more. "Like apes and other primates, humans have a system to convey very basic information about emotional state using signals such as crying, laughter and cries of pain or joy. However, parallel to this system, humans use speech to convey complex abstract information" (Bart 2006). On the other hand, to be able to speak, human beings went a step further by conveying their sorrow, happiness, intellect, and even complex moods to other people.

> *Speech is unique to the human species. It is a means by which a people's history can be handed down from one generation to the next. It enables one person to convey knowledge to a roomful of other people. It can be used to amuse, to rouse, to anger, to express sadness, to communicate needs that arise between two or more humans (Speech - Evolution of speech, the physiology of speech, the brain, speech impediments, Science Jrank, http://science.jrank.org/pages/6374/Speech.html).*

Of special note, human beings started living together in clans and chose leaders as history evolved. These leaders rendered their messages through speech to keep their clans together, which made the leaders even more powerful. One clan leader also communicated to another via speech, even if a translator was needed. ". . . The individuals still heard speeches of their leaders, or they voiced their own opinions in tribal meetings. The spoken words of tribal leaders were viewed with respect and were obeyed without any objections" (Carlin [no date]). With the invention of writing, the golden rules of communication changed. Moreover, the formal means of communication turned into mass communication tools, a topic discussed further in this study.

1.2.2 Other Steps before Speech

"…. adaptations for speech must have first appeared in the common ancestor of Homo sapiens and Homo neanderthalensis and that complex speech must have had at least 400,000 years to evolve" (Bart 2006). Previous steps in human communication may be summarized first as cave paintings and petroglyphs, further developing into pictograms and ideograms. These steps were milestones for *Homo sapiens* before the advent of speech.

Even though specific evidence is not available, countries that had amicable relations presumably used visual and audio signs to communicate and to give warnings of danger. Beacons, smoke signals, fire, drums, and horns depict some of the methods used to pass on information. In Ancient China, smoke signals alerted soldiers on the other side of the Great Wall in case of enemy attacks. Other examples of information conveyed through smoke signals include the following:

a) The Native Americans in North America communicated with smoke signals; each tribe had their own signaling system and meanings.
b) The Australian Aborigines would send up smoke signals to notify others of their presence, particularly when entering lands that were not their own.
c) The Yámanas sent messages by smoke signals, for instance, when a whale drifted ashore. Since whales produced a large amount of meat, many people needed to be notified so that the meat would not decay (Smoke Signals, Wikipedia, 17/04/2010).

1.2.3 Writing

Even though the first examples of writing would originally be logographic, this advanced method is still a big leap in history. The first examples were writing through pictures; though unlike contemporary writing, these examples still give us insight on the living conditions of that era. Actually this method was unique and formed the basis of research for history, anthropology, sociology, and so on.

> *[…] 30,000-40,000 years ago, people started by drawing graffiti and paintings on rocks and walls of caves. It is more or less from the same period that the oldest fragments of bones and pebbles with notches have been found. Unfortunately, we do not know with certainty what was the purpose of these beautiful images of animals painted on caves, nor the purpose of repeated signs (Carboni 2006).*

The main purpose of this method is seemingly to regulate agricultural information; the Sumerians and Egyptians had known agriculture for some millennia and felt the need for a system of notation for agricultural products (Carboni 2006). With veritable writing systems, history began to be recorded and conveyed information to the next generation more easily. Prehistory was based on stories before the dawn of recorded history.

The invention of writing was the beginning of literature, giving birth to cultures throughout the world. In ancient times, written literature was a means to publicly express bravery, heroism, friendship, loss, or the quest for eternal life, while oral literature told of great sagas, proverbs, and epics to a wide audience. However used,

literature was a significant communication method for people to share their common interests, needs and desires along with describing to the masses the meaning of a meritorious life in moral messages.

Other means of communication included mail pigeons and the hydraulic telegraph. Trained pigeons carrying the mail, dropping off messages and returning was a very common way of communicating.

Another important way of communication was in the form of ambassadors, perhaps the first mass communication method, with diplomats carrying messages from their own countries to other countries. Though neither electronic nor fast, nations could, nevertheless, sign pacts or find out what neighboring countries were doing and provide information in turn. This demonstrated that mass communication could not be accomplished without some kind of mass media since messages carried by a single person arrived after lengthy periods of time. Nonetheless, this centuries-old method was widespread and seemingly worked as a form of mass communication.

1.3 AFTER TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENTS

This section covers the way in which communication and technological developments have opened a new era in how individuals live.

1.3.1 Telecommunications

Technological developments throughout history have further facilitated communication when compared to the era of prerecorded history and the era after the invention of writing. By definition telecommunication means transmitting signals to distant locations. In this respect, message transmissions or telecommunication was accomplished by various means such us smoke signals or horns. However, technological developments widened the scope of both the definition and usage in terms of receiving information from other people in distant countries. Even more significant

is the speed of communicating and the quality of transmitting. What one wants to communicate is much clearer.

One such technological development was the telegraph invented by Charles Wheatstone and Sir William Fothergill Cooke in 1839. Mohanbir Sawhney tells us about the reaction to the telegraph in the 1860s: "The media and industry experts were declaring that the telegraph would embrace the whole world, bringing with it peace and prosperity. Similarly, in 1877 Western Union refused to purchase the Bell patents, seeing no future in them" (2001). However, the reaction was not altogether positive but the surge in wanting to learn about and hear from others prevailed. Hence, the telegraph was widely used and became a stepping stone to other transmission methods such as the radio, telephone, television, and finally the Internet.

1.3. 2 The Printing Revolution

A printing press is simply a teletype ink machine to print texts on cloth or paper. With this machine, the production process was shortened and turned into publishing. Beginning in Europe, the printing revolution spread across the world with Gutenberg's invention of the printing press. The rapid publication of books is one of the reasons why revolutionary ideas flourished publicly.

> *In the early days of the Reformation, the revolutionary potential of bulk printing took princes and papacy alike by surprise: Just in the short period from 1518 to 1524, the publication of books in Germany alone skyrocketed sevenfold; between 1518 and 1520, Luther's tracts were distributed in 300,000 printed copies (Printing Press, Wikipedia, 17/04/2010).*

This development alone signified that the sharing of ideas and feelings with people was edifying; people learned to interact with each other, eventuating in reformist activities.

1.3.3 Newspapers

Rapid printing production facilitated the daily conveyance of information to the public. Because of political and sociological changes in society in that era, newspapers became a common way of sharing political ideas. "The rapidness of typographical text

production, as well as the sharp fall in unit costs, led to the issuing of the first newspapers which opened up an entire new field for conveying up-to-date information to the public" (Weber 2006). From 1900 to 1990, newspapers were commonly used by the masses. In fact, people had their complaints over products printed in the consumer columns of newspapers, long before the invention of the Internet. Newspapers were also a platform for classified advertising to sell cars or homes or to even rent homes. And the unemployed found jobs through newspapers. Losing your ID card meant that you could announce the loss in a newspaper to prevent your ID from being misused.

On the other hand, newspapers were never interactive, with their one-way communication dependent on current events and on what people wanted to read. When compared to the decades following the Internet, the print media decided what news to report whether on governmental issues or on famous people. Today with so much news, the coverage of daily events and of more interesting people is much higher statistically.

1.3.4 The Internet

"You may associate the Internet with electronic mail and business applications – but it came into being with global thermonuclear war in mind" (The Internet: The Promise and the Perils, The Church of Scientology International, http://www.freedommag.org/english/vol2704/EVOLVE.HTM).

The Advanced Research Project Agency (ARPA) of the U.S. Department of Defense was looking for a way to strengthen the communications of military personnel in times of national emergencies. They were definitely seeking solutions to rapid, instant messaging, and therefore communications. In the 1960s, computers were not able to share information. "In 1969, the Department of Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) developed an experimental network called ARPAnet to link together four supercomputing centres for military research" (History and The Evolution of The Internet, Bizymoms, http://www.bizymoms.com/computers-and-technology/evolution-of-the-internet.html). However, the system was neither reliable nor fast and

cumbersome to use but became a good starting point for sharing information. Finally, the beginning of the Information Age started with this development.

Today, the Internet has diverse means of information sharing from texts, documents, graphic files and sound and video files to downloadable games and software or demo games and software to mass data storage. "Internet uses can be simply categorized as publishing and getting information on various subjects like marketing, management, science, new technologies, training materials, jobs, higher education, mathematics, music, games, software, etc. and E-Commerce" (History and The Evolution of The Internet Bizymoms, http://www.bizymoms.com/computers-and-technology/evolution-of-the-internet.html).

The Internet cannot be defined by a single word or concept. It has changed the face of people, and therefore the face of the globe. A single event or situation can either cause an enormous disturbance or stimulate gratitude. You can become famous with your 140-character blog or Twit in a matter of seconds. Companies are suddenly ousted in less than thirty minutes because of news spreading so quickly across the globe. "Today, although far from its original concept, the Internet satisfies far more needs and wants than ever envisioned. It is a true example of technology that can help mankind move into the future" (The Internet: The Promise and the Perils, The Church of Scientology International, http://www.freedommag.org/english/vol2704/EVOLVE.HTM).

1.4 THE TRANSFORMATION

Nightly Business Report partnering with Knowledge@Wharton conducted research to glean the top 30 innovations of the last thirty years. According to their research, ranking at the top of the list were the Internet, broadband, and the World Wide Web (browsers and html pages). In fact, the Internet has definitely transformed our lives by closing the gap with fast, reliable and close-knit communications.

> *The nature of communication has undergone a substantial change in the past 20 years – and the change is not over. Email has had a profound effect on the way people keep in touch. Communications are shorter and more frequent than when*

> *letters were the norm; response time has greatly diminished; we are even surprised if someone we wish to contact does not have an email address (Social Networking, the "Third Place," and the Evolution of Communication, The New Media Consortium, 2007, p. 2).*

Parents can now go online and watch their children with their nannies. Moreover, children essentially use their home computers like telephones to chat and exchange instant messages with their school friends. When anyone needs any kind of information, they can Google it to find out the answer. Furthermore, new technologies provide online information on where you are, including the street, via GPS. In addition to television and newspapers, companies now use the Internet to reach the populous. People go online and gather in social communities to participate in life, to shop or gamble, or to express their feelings and desires on personal blogs or they join Facebook or participate in microblogs such as Twitter – all online.

ScienceBuzz is a website where people share their ideas, post articles, create new communities, and so on. On May 9, 2007, a person named Gene started a discussion on "How the Internet Has Changed Our Lives (The Free Library, 28/04/2010)." Here are some of the comments posted by readers:

> *Anonymous says: I couldn't do my job without the Internet. Literally. I live in Michigan, but work for the Science Museum of Minnesota. Everything I do is via e-mail, FTP site, or shared server.*
>
> *Anonymous says: I keep in touch with family and friends all over the country, through e-mail and a personal photo blog. In fact, I maintained a long-distance relationship with a girlfriend in another country, thanks to e-mail.*
>
> *Toria says: I use the internet for everything.. i don't know what i would do without it. I find information that can help me with my assignment work and to meet knew people. It's amazing how easy it is to find exactly what your looking for.*
>
> *Karan says: I like the way in which internet has changed our lives. We get everything that we want at home. We don't have to go to malls for shopping or to pay electricity bills. It's just cool to have internet.*

On December 29, 2003, the Nielsen NetRatings issued a press release on "How the Internet Has Changed Our Lives," which started eight years ago (Nielsen-Net Ratings, 2003). This report chose ten websites that had affected our lives the most. These sites included Google, eBay, Microsoft Outlook, AOL Instant Messenger, Nepster, Amazon, Friends Reunited, Easyjet, Kelkoo and Blogger. The article was written in view of what

was happening at that time but could not have foreseen up and coming trends such as Wikipedia and YouTube. Friends Reunited, "the first and eponymous website, was created by a husband and wife team in the classic back bedroom Internet start-up; was the first online social network to achieve prominence in Britain; and it weathered the dotcom bust" (Friends Reunited, Wikipedia, 17/04/10). In this respect, the report got caught up in the microblogging frenzy and found Friends Reunited entering the world of blogs.

While influencing the way our lives have evolved sociologically, the Internet has also set up its own rules for user profiles. In fact, the Internet and users altogether define the rules of engagement. Right now, standardization on how to communicate and what to say is on the horizon, with its own unique language.

> *The Internet has also generally changed our lifestyle and culture. The way that we communicate off-line has been impacted by IM lingo. You may have already heard someone say ?lol? or ?brb? in person. If you haven't, you probably will soon. There was even a national ad campaign where someone asked another person what they were doing, and they said ?Idk, talking to my bff.? These abbreviations are out of control! Who would have thought that we would start saying abbreviated phrases in our everyday lives, verbally!? When people meet new friends, they often give out an email address instead of a phone number. People might even say ?myspace me? (meaning to message them on their Myspace page) (How the Internet Has Changed Our Everyday Lives, The Free Library, 28/04/2010).*

The Internet is used for both person-to-person and individual-to-public interfacing, which has become a unique means to communicate, greater than any other human beings have used in the past. "[Internet] is interactive: Like the telephone and the telegraph (and unlike radio or television), people can overcome great distances to communicate with others almost instantaneously. It is a mass medium: Like radio and television (and unlike the telephone or telegraph), content and advertising can reach millions of people at the same time" (Bargh and McKenna 2003, p. 573).

1.5 THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS

Web Designer Depot reviewed the evolution of social networks, noting several milestones. For example, bulletin board systems (BBS) were the first attempt for users to login and interact with others. "After BBS came "online services" like CompuServe

and Prodigy which were the first real "corporate" attempts at accessing the Internet" (The History and Evolution of Social Media, Web Designer Depot, http://www.webdesignerdepot.com/2009/10/the-history-and-evolution-of-social-media/). ICQ was the first real instant messaging and probably the most important milestone in people getting used to the online world via the Internet, though with limited access because of dial-up technologies.

Internet discussion forums and blogs are the next comers to the online world. They are basically platforms where people can come together to ask questions, network, gossip, talk about love, and share ideas, experiences and happiness. "World of Warcraft, often referred to as WoW, is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG)" (World of Warcraft, Wikipedia, 19/04/10). Within MMRGPG forums, participants interact in games or on other platforms related to the games on any topic in which players may want to engage. "LinkedIn allowed users to post a profile (basically a resume) and to interact through private messaging. They also work on the assumption that you should personally know the people you connect with on the site" (The history and Evolution of Social Media, Web Designer Depot, http://www.webdesignerdepot.com/2009/10/the-history-and-evolution-of-social-media/). While MySpace differs from others by having a feature that enables users to customize their profiles and post videos from other websites, Facebook allows users to post videos and photos and to update the contents. On the other hand, Flicker is another online community that lets users host images and videos. As a micro-blogging platform, Twitter users may update their status daily, hourly or even every second via "twits." YouTube is also a video sharing website.

While these platforms are the most popular and take in a wide range of people from all over the world, the number of online platforms is increasing day by day. From Levy Cohen's perspective, *social circles* are those that bring people together around very specific topics, diseases, technological developments, recipes, home employment, politics, economic crises, and so on. These social circles tie people together as one in the online world. "A decade ago, we began expanding our networks by joining list serves, forums, chats and specific destinations where sharing tools were available. Our

connections could happen whenever we wanted and they also became bi-directional. The very act of joining interests groups was born back then" (Cohen 2008).

Beyond the changes of the Internet in people's lives, all of these social networks have been seen as a way of coming together and living an online community life. Social platforms are not only the way of revealing of our lives but also the way of living a commune life all together in terms of reacting to the issues of life, politics, and social problems and so on. That kind of a union is being called as virtual community which has a function of binding people, creating a group of people within the same interest and ideas. In the next section, what the virtual communities are will be explained in a detailed way.

1.6 VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

Without any geographical barriers, online platforms have allowed people who share the same interests, desires, and future goals to connect. "Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold 2000). Steve Jones defines virtual communities by comparing them to the offline way of life in his book, Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cyber Society. The Internet would . . . make the community better. It was to result in a community free of the constraints of space and time, and so us to engage with fellow humans irrespective of geographic proximity and the clock, and it would construct the community from communication, rather than inhabitance and being, which do not guarantee communication" (Jones 1997, p. 10). These types of communities began to form after the use of the Internet expanded rather rapidly in mid-1990s. Web 2.0 technologies also triggered information sharing among people, i.e., feelings, new trends, habits, and complaints, love life, and so on. A virtual community can even form an emotional support group: "I was in the Parenting conference on the WELL, participating in an informational and emotional support group for a friend who just learned his son was diagnosed with leukemia" (Rheingold 2000).

To some extent, who you are, what you look like or what you do is not so important in a virtual community. As long as you have something to say within the context of a particular community you can join the "neighborhood."

> *People in virtual communities use words on screens to exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot if idle talk. People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind. You can't kiss anybody and nobody can punch you in the nose, but a lot can happen within those boundaries (Rheingold 2000).*

Online communication is also found to be "more effective, productive and therefore more enjoyable" as noted by Licklider and Taylor in 1968 when the computer-mediated communication (CMC) concept first took shape (cited in Jones 1997, p. 31).

It is observed that, in addition to the changes virtual communities cause in our personal lives, they also alter people's lives in a societal sense, within specific measures and in different forms. It is widely accepted that the biggest example of this is in the share or flow of information. For example, at the New Media Order Conference (Istanbul, 2010), which is a platform that brings together all journalists, news people shared their discomfort and worries about all of the information sharing that has occurred in an adverse direction due to the Internet and all social platforms. It was discussed that, in the face of a social mass that adheres to the logic of "Share is a new search," each individual is a "journalist" with a small column. It is observed that, even if it is not within the context of official "journalism," each individual has a serious contribution in the accumulation and spread of information and the reactions to it. With technological advances, it is now possible for us to reach information every second of every moment. It is certain that, as of this point, information will not be distributed single-handedly and that control is no longer possible. Media has a brand new face in the 21st century, and the name of this new face is The New Media.

1.7 THE NEW MEDIA

The New Media Consortium, a non-profit organization that researches how new technological developments support our learning and effect our lives, clarifies the

differences in our communication since the 1990s to 2000s in their article, "Social Networking, the Third Place and the Evolution of Communication".

> *Online communication tools also have the potential to increase our awareness of the movements of our professional or social contacts. Twitter, for instance, offers an at-a-glance update of things people we know happen to be doing: who is outside cleaning their gutters, who is writing a new blog post, who is about to have lunch with a friend (2007, p. 2).*
>
> *Tools like Facebook and LinkedIn help to relieve the additional social burden of these ties by making it easy to keep track of contacts and keep a record of when we last "touched" them (2007, p. 4).*

Conclusively, the way human beings communicate with each other has grown leaps and bounds. Thanks to the Internet, communication in terms of how people gather information from their surroundings has a new face due to digital technology – faster, more compact and interactive. However, before we focus on interpersonal communication with the Internet being a part of everyday life, the new media concept should first be defined to understand how we obtain information and process it in contemporary life, being surrounded by high-tech products.

The new media concept came about after the Internet. Undoubtedly, our acceptance of this new media was influenced by the personal computer and new technologies supporting the use of the Internet. According to Wikipedia, as of June 2008, the number of personal computers in use worldwide hit one billion, which means that at least one billion people have personal computers. In the modern world, businessmen and women usually have more than one PC. Thanks to technological developments, even the scope of what defines a PC is much wider than five years ago. A PC is a telephone, netbook, palmtop, tablet PC or even a television soon to be adapted to the Internet – all of which connect you to the entire world. Perhaps the second reason we have accepted this new media concept is the decreasing cost of connecting to the Internet but with greater speed compared to five years ago. Right now, anyone can connect to the Internet and get information from a regular cell phone via Edge, 3G, 4G or even GPRS.

Along with these technological developments, the services offered to people have evolved in terms of being open and interactive in these new systems. For example, at any given time, you can find your location with your cell phone or learn an enormous amount of information by playing Planescape: Torment, a computer role-playing game, or read your newspaper or the daily news from your iPad.

All these changes have aroused people's curiosity, so much so that they want to be more connected to life. To know the most current tidbit, to do the newest thing, to keep up with new trends, and to contribute to the flood of information on the Internet are much more significant and stimulating nowadays. Companies whose missions are to be innovative excite even more curiosity in people by using new technologies via the newest communications tools.

The use of mass media channels like television and newspapers have undergone a tremendous change because of the Internet. Greater use of the Internet in everyday life and our exposure to digital marketing are on the rise. As a result, the Internet is now used as a channel for marketing and advertising products and services. One telling example is how U.S. President Obama used the Internet so effectively in his 2008 election campaign.

2. INFORMATION SEACRH BEHAVIOR

"Though humans were anciently dubbed the 'speaking animal' by Aristotle, only since the late nineteenth century have we defined ourselves in terms of our ability to communicate with one another" (Peters 1999, p. 1). For time immemorial, communication has been a functional tool binding people together while sharing their feelings, love, passions and thoughts. Furthermore, communication has consistently been bidirectional with at least two participants: receiver and speaker, whose interaction has been an indispensable feature of communication. "With interaction, interpersonal communication is contextual. That means communication does not happen in isolation" (Four Principles of Interpersonal Communication, http://www.pstcc.edu/facstaff/dking/interpr.htm).

2.1 REASONS FOR CONSUMER INFORMATION SEARCH BEHAVIOR

When the subject matter becomes consumer behavior discipline, "people" as a term should be defined as consumers who seek information about products or services. In a world of multi-screened media, with advertising skyrocketing and diverse products and services offering so many choices, consumers sometimes find it difficult to make decisions. For consumers to decide what to choose or to make a good purchase or "to make a good purchase" (Bloch et al. 1986, p. 119) is a difficult matter that has been scrutinized for many years by retailers and academicians (Beatty and Smith 1987; Bloch, et al. 1986).

Information seeking is a result of unsolved consumption problems involving a pre-purchase, a post-purchase or an ongoing search for information. Bloch et al. (1986) argue that "consumer search behavior is an extended process that lasts before pre-purchase and after ongoing search which does not occur in order to solve a recognized and immediate purchase problem" (p. 119). On the other hand, according to Murray, risk avoidance is also one of the most important motives behind consumer search behavior while researchers have identified risk aversion as the fundamental reason

behind information search. “Risk aversion is a consumer’s natural predisposition to avoiding losses e.g., financial, performance, social through purchase activity” (Bauer, Cox, Jacoby and Kaplan in Murray 1991, p. 525).

Basically, the two main ways describing consumers as information seeking models are internal and external searches covering price, difference between product or service, product type, personal involvement and the role of experience that consumers play. Beyond these two information-seeking models – internal and external – other reasons as already mentioned such as search differentiation among consumers, under these two models as well, is discussed in the next section.

> *By definition, internal information search involves memory and occurs prior to external information search. External information search refers to everything but memory when searching for information (Merino and Peterson 2003, p. 101).*
>
> *The internal search refers to the activity that retrieves information stored in long-term memory. It is the information that was created from previous experience, past information searches, and repeated exposure to marketing stimuli (Jang 2004, p. 42).*

This means that consumers first go to their memories and experiences; however, if sufficient information cannot be gathered, they look for alternative sources (external search).

On the other hand, other researchers think that internal search is not actually a search activity but a processing of stored information. “[Internal search] may be more closely related to processing than to search” (Moore and Lehman 1980, p. 296). Otherwise, the combination of both internal and external information is accepted by researchers. In other words, information processing does not develop separately but through both internal and external information. “Although internal and external information search behaviors are conceptually distinct, in reality they are related in that external information search is dependent on memory and the overall information search process is iterative” (Merino and Peterson 2003, p. 101).

There is one more derive for consumers to search to decide what to choose. The meaning of product or service to consumers shape the source of searching and Lee et al.

(2001) prepared a table to show the marginal benefit of sources for information collecting, in which both traditional and online searching instruments are combined.

Table 2.1: Effect of Increases in Attribute Importance Weights on Marginal Benefit of Source

	Attribute type		
Source	**F**	**E**	**P**
Salesperson	M	M	M
Dealer/retailer inspection	L	H	M
Television/radio ads	L	H	L
Print ads in national media	H	M	L
Print ads in local media	H	L	H
Direct mail ads/catalogs/brochures	H	M	M
Friends/relatives	M	H	M
Nonadvocate impersonal sources (*Consumer Reports*)	H	L	M
Internet ads	H	L	M
Internet stores	H	L	H
Internet information	H	L	H

H = high effect.
M = Medium effect.
L = Low effect.

Lee et al. 2001, p. 9.

Lee et al. summarized the benefit of information as functional attributes (F), which are more related to a product's physical features and are measured objectively from external information sources (traditional or online); expressive attributes (E), which meet the self-satisfactory needs of searchers in that the meaning of the product is more important than its utility; and finally the price (P) of the alternative choices, which is related to comparing the prices of different sources (2001, p. 8).

According to these information sources, online and offline sources may be categorized as follows:

Offline information Sources: Salesperson, dealer/retailer inspection, television/radio ads, print ads in national media, print ads in local media, direct mail ads/catalogues/brochures, friends/relatives (word-of-mouth).

Online information Sources: Internet ads, Internet stores, Internet information, non-advocate impersonal sources.

According to this table, there are some specific results to be touched on.

I. While the Internet is a highly accepted and an applied source for obtaining functionality information, it is not acceptable for expressive attributes. This means that for products in which high involvement is required or for prestigious products in terms of social acceptance, the Internet is not an effective source and cannot be applied to these kinds of products.

II. Another significant result of online information searching is that Internet sources are the most widely accepted sources for collecting price information and comparing prices among alternatives.

III. On the other hand, television and radio ads are the most important offline information sources and the most applied sources for expressive attributes. But to obtain information on functionality and prices, television and radio ads are not reliable.

IV. More acceptable by society is information from relatives and friends about products whose importance is high in terms of social norms.

V. "Currently the Internet is a source that can be paged through and referred back to, but is not (yet) comparable to television in presenting sound and picture. Consequently, despite the advantage of being able to provide customized information in real time, the Internet has more in common with, and is a substitute for, local print media, direct mail, and impersonal sources" (Lee et al. 2001, p. 11).

2.2 FACTORS AFFECTING INFORMATION SEARCH BEHAVIOR

Behind any kind of information search, there are generally unresolved problems; beyond this, the factors, personal differences or product type or meanings of products

affect the type and extent of search activity. These factors have been described by Jang (1996) such a new product's similarity or dissimilarity to categories already stored in the memory; the prices and quantities purchased; level of income, age, education, health status, previous experience, time constraints, presence of children, fulltime work and marital status (p. 157 – 159). However, the main factors shaping search activities focus on **personal involvement, price, the role of experience, risk and the difference between product and service.**

2.2.1 Personal Involvement

Kapferer and Laurent (1985) define involvement in that "[it] stems from the individual's very personal and central values"; another explanation is that "involvement is an unobservable state of motivation, arousal or interest. It is evoked by a particular stimulus or situation. It has drive properties: its consequences are types of searching, information processing and decision-making" (1985, p. 42*).* As explained by Kapferer and Laurent (1985), personal involvement relates to the personal interests of consumers, with these two factors binding consumers together.

If personal involvement is high, consumer interest will focus on searching for products and services that interest them, meaning that the need is not necessarily an urgent need to satisfy but depends on how much the consumer is motivated to obtain information about a product. "The need of consumers to satisfy their information needs relating to product knowledge is the primary motivator for consumer information search" (Clarke et al. 2007, p. 524). Because of continuous search activities, consumers have information about a product or service they decide to buy in terms of product involvement and their interests. On the other hand, Bloch et al., argues that "consumer search behavior is an extended process that lasts before pre-purchase and after ongoing search which does not occur in order to solve a recognized and immediate purchase problem" (1986, p. 119). While pre-purchase search is more related to a consumer's short-term involvement and fulfillment of urgent needs, ongoing search is described as a continuous search activity more related to long-term involvement and the consumer's interests. In other words, visitors to specific stores and subscribers to magazines are

thought to have a broader knowledge of more products than other people, so the possibility of these consumers shopping at these stores or through these magazines is higher compared to that of other people.

Similar to Kapferer and Laurent, Clarke et al. supports the fact that personality has great impact on differentiating consumers' searching activities even on the same product group. "... Personal factors lead to different search behavior for a common product" (Clarke et al. 2007, p. 520). For instance, a research conducted for student shopping orientation clarifies that brand or fashion consciousness and interest along with the joy of shopping are significantly and positively related to the information search of the youth of today (Bailey and Seock 2008, p. 118).

According to researchers, consumers with low involvement in products think that these products are not very critical. Therefore, the purchase decision for these product groups is relatively easier than products in which they are interested. At the same time, the perceived risk of low-involvement purchases is very little.

> *Low-involvement purchases are purchases that the consumer does not regard as very important, have very little relevance to the consumer, have little perceived risk associated with them and are characterized by little motivation to expend cognitive effort and time on processing information associated with a message (Boshoff, 2005, p. 4).*

Otherwise, consumers with high-involvement are expected to search more and store gathered information in their long-term memory; consequently, this information becomes an internal information source and is tapped into by consumers first, especially when the needed information is close at hand. "High-involvement conditions cause the experience of a high level of motivation, arousal or interest that causes greater searching, information processing and decision-making by individuals" (Boshoff 2005, p. 5).

2.2.2 Self Oriented Factors

In this section, the personal factors in terms of personal skills and individual demographics will be scrutinized in terms of reaching information.

Personal Skills and Capabilities

Clarke et al. conceptualized information search behavior in terms of "individual skills in search and information processing" (2007, p. 523). According to this view, consumers actually shape their search by their personal skills. Moreover, they have suggested three primary skills that shape the search activity: **technology skill**, referring to "the consumer's ability to engage with varied electronic networks and data processing"; **search skill**, or "the consumer's knowledge regarding information access", and the main consumer skill to reach required information more efficiently and faster; and **information processing skill**, meaning "... the ability of consumers to extract and process information that will satisfy their information needs" (Clarke et al. 2007, p. 524).

Individual Demographics

Age Effect on Search Behavior

Notwithstanding discussions and the current status quo of the Internet, young people are the central point of every new trend, not precluding the Internet. While senior users are prejudice toward the Internet, young people embrace it as an ardent user group (Graeupl 2006). To illustrate the point, Kim and Park's study addresses college students and shows the statistics of Internet usage among adults and young people:

> *59% of all US adults access online websites to obtain information; however, 86% of college students use online sources for their own purposes. In addition, apparently, about 20% of college students began using the Internet between five and eight years ago; 47% of them began utilizing the Internet the first time at home before attending college, and 85% possess their own computers (2010, p. 50).*

However, projections of increased Internet usage have caused academics to predict that

with this increase, young people will continue to be the target market segment for any organization's online shopping model. "As the use of the Internet increases and continues to develop as an important shopping medium, college students are becoming particularly active and heavy Internet users with greater access to the Internet than most other population segments" (Bailey and Seock 2008, p. 113).

> *College students' heavy usage of the Web can be understood as a function of their familiarity with the Internet and Web, their ample opportunities to witness its use and experiment with it, and the resultant comfort they gain with this tool. Indeed, today's college students have ''grown up'' with the Internet and thus may perceive it as very easy to use (Flanagin 2003, p. 275).*

According to Kim and Park, college students are the major users of the Internet for tourism purposes, and they search online more than any other age group (2010, p. 50). Moreover, Lee et al. argues the same issue by saying, "Internet use will be highest among younger age groups because the investment in the required skills can be spread over the longest time horizon, and because they are most likely to have access to computers and be skilled at their use" (2001, p. 14). Kim and Park also propose that "in the case of tourism, the study conducted by Bai et al. (2004) revealed that about 80 percent of college students answered that they prefer online travel agencies when making trip plans, and 86.7 percent of students have experience in purchasing online products" (Kim and Park 2010, p. 50).

In addition, Harris Interactive suggests that technology and the media have been the most important interests of younger groups (Bailey and Seock, 2008, p. 113). The result of their search shows that the young spend most of their spare time on the Internet and in shopping online. "According to Cassis (2007) at The Daily Free Press, college students spend hours surfing the Internet each day, and are among the most eager consumers to make online purchases" (Bailey and Seock 2008, p. 113).

Similarly and more in the context of social change across the globe, Darley and Johnson contend that young people are now more involved in the decision-making process than ever before, especially with the increase of "single-parent families and working mothers world-wide" (1993, 149-150). This means that the younger generation has been learning the rules of general decision making and can think more like their family members who

would normally make decisions concerning household products. On the other hand, Paxton and John state that young people have a different searching mechanism than older consumers. They tend to decide based on their perceptual insights about products.

> *... younger kids tend to use fewer dimensions to compare and evaluate brands, use simple choice mechanisms based on single attributes rather than employing compensatory choice strategies, and tend to rely on dominant perceptual features (vs. functional features) of products in gathering information and making choices (Paxton and John 1995, p. 567).*

Both Peter and Olson (1990) and Darley and Johnson (1993) indicate that young people are more brand loyal. Darley and Johnson also have found that "American female teenagers prefer a small store shopping experience" (1993, 160). With this preference, the enjoyment of shopping takes a higher precedence. Since this consumer group cares more about being social and belonging to a group they are more likely to shop together. In addition, another factor in young consumer search behavior is that female teenagers do not prefer to pre-plan their shopping trips and "are less likely to exhibit fashion innovativeness, less likely to be fashion opinion leaders, less likely to desire fashion-related information and less likely to search for fashion-related information" (Darley and Johnson 1993, 160).

According to research conducted by Flanagin et al., (2003) to understand the search behaviors of American college students, they discovered that college students trust heavily on Web-based information for a wide range of subjects. The main purposes of college student searches are summarized as entertainment (leisure time spent in chatting, playing games, and so forth); non-academic research (looking for medical information, driving directions, travel tips, and so forth); news and current events; and business transactions (purchasing products and services, online banking, and so forth) (Flanagin et al. 2003, p. 278). However, "[they] do not find it particularly credible in relation to traditional information sources and do not verify it very diligently" (Flanagin et al. 2003, p. 286). Furthermore, the participants in the research display agreement on verifying online information. If the information has subjective judgment or if there is an easy way of cross-referencing the information *(e.g., checking the "date stamp" at the bottom of many Web pages)*, they tend to verify the information obtained online (Flanagin et al. 2003, p. 286).

Flanagin et al.'s research (2003) defines how college students verify the information obtained online. These are the strategies:

a) *Check to see if the information is current*
b) *Check to if the information is complete/comprehensive*
c) *Consider whether the views represented are facts or opinions*
d) *Seek out other sources to validate the information online*
e) *Consider the author's goals/objectives for posting information*
f) *Check to see who the author is*
g) *Look for a stamp of approval or recommendation*
h) *Check if contact information is provided for the author*
i) *Verify the author's qualifications or credentials*

The results of this verification strategy of college students show that the most common verification strategy is to check whether the information on the website is correct, complete, and comprehensive while "considering whether the views represented by the author are facts or opinions, seeking out other sources to validate online information, and considering the author's goals or objectives in posting information to the Web" (Flanagin et al. 2003, p. 285). According to this research, the less common strategies are to check who the author is, whether the contact details of the author are given, and whether an approval is provided, all of which basically relate to the physical status of the information source. But the most common strategy concerns the subject's content and its verification.

According to Lynn Phillips and Brian Sternthal, the elderly population in the U.S. will increase over the next decades. "If the current trend of low fertility and mortality rates persists, almost half the growth of the American population in the next half-century will be attributable to the increase in the number of aged persons" (Phillips and Sternthal 1977, p. 444). The more important point is the enormous gap in information processing between younger consumers and senior consumers who have the most purchasing power.

Some of their findings on elderly people and consumer search behavior show that elderly people have a greater reliance on mass media than do younger consumers. The

main reason behind this finding is because the elderly (approximately 45 percent are 65) spend most of their leisure time on mass-media channels (Phillips and Sternthal 1977, p. 445).

On the other hand, Erdem et al. states that senior consumers tend to use all information sources but prefer retail, general, and advertising channels over computer and word-of-mouth sources (2004, p. 100). According to Phillips and Sternthal, senior consumers 65 and over "tend to develop friendship patterns with persons who are similar in age, sex, marital status, and social class" (1977, p. 446).These facts show that senior consumers prefer more traditional information sources as opposed to online sources and external sources to some extent. They do not prefer external information sources because of the trust factor regarding these information sources, so they are more likely to prefer information from people or sources they can fully trust.

Consumer experience on the Internet increases online consumer searches in that the more experienced consumers are the more they are open to other information sources and will use them more effectively. Furthermore, senior consumers cannot keep up with the most recent ways of collecting information as can younger consumers, primarily because of fast technological developments. As Erdem et al. (2004) also argued, senior consumers care more about people with whom they have close relationships, internal sources, prior knowledge, or past experiences in terms of searching information. Moreover, information processing for senior consumers is slower since they are not at the forefront of technological developments, e.g. the Internet merely directs them to information sources with which they are already familiar (Erdem et al. 2004, p. 100; Phillips and Sternthal 1977, p.448). Jang who researched tourism and search patterns in senior consumers concluded the same facts: "According to Javalgi et al. (1992), senior travelers engage less in external search, so they tend to buy more pre-packaged tours than non-seniors" (Jang 2004, p. 43). Despite the trust problem senior consumers have toward innovative information searching, according to Phillips and Sternthal, they are open to searching about a product's functionality, expressive attributes, and price. The main issue is that they prefer internal sources of information, more so than younger consumers: "One common problem is that older persons are more likely to refuse to

participate in research than younger individuals" (Phillips and Sternthal 1977, p.452). This substantiates that senior consumers will employ more traditional ways of searching to protect themselves against information in an unknown world, unless they come to grips with technology.

Gender Differences on Search Behaviors

Gender is the one factor that creates remarkable differences between female and male search behaviors, everything from trust to tendencies for shopping online to the ability to reach information easily. "Research has indicated that gender is a discriminating factor in the frequency of online shopping (Wells and Chen 1999), probability to shop online (Kwak et al. 2002) and attitude towards online shopping (Rodgers and Harris 2003)" (Bailey and Seock 2008, 114).

For instance, as stated by Graeupl (2006), while female participants in the research who were given the same directory as the males could find the information they wanted while male participants could not (55 percent vs. 61 percent). Furthermore, female participants trusted the information obtained online more than male participants (50 percent vs. 36 percent). According to Erdem et al., the male consumers were found to be more experienced Internet users; they observed that males were more likely to use all information channels (2004, p. 100). The reason may be because experienced consumers tend to search other information sources as Lee et al indicated in his article (2001, p. 15).

However, according to Bailey and Seock (2008), when compared to traditional information sources, male perception in online searching is higher than women's (2008, 114). According to same research, while men find compatibility, relative advantage, and trustworthiness in online shopping advantages with online searching, women find Internet searches more complex.

Here is a summary of the results of their research on male and female online information searches over the past 12 months:

a) *Female consumers are more likely to buy such items as home furnishings, apparel and jewelry online, and are an important online shopper segment for these items (Allen, 2001; Chiger, 2001; Elkin, 2001; Shop.org, 2002) (Bailey and Seock 2008, 114).*

b) *Female consumers showed greater online purchase intentions for clothes, jewelry and accessories than male consumers (Bailey and Seock 2008, 114).*

c) *Female students had higher shopping enjoyment, brand/fashion consciousness, price consciousness and shopping confidence than male participants (Bailey and Seock 2008, 117).*

d) *They are also brand and fashion savvy, and may be sensitive to product price (Bailey and Seock 2008, 119).*

e) *Male participants showed higher convenience/time consciousness than female participants. They tend to shop for clothes where it saves time, and they usually buy their clothes at the most convenient place (Bailey and Seock 2008, 119).*

f) *... [During the research] female participants conducted a greater number of online information searches and had a greater number of purchase experiences for apparel products than male participants (Bailey and Seock 2008, 119).*

From all the sources analyzed, despite any negative findings, females are keen on searching information online for certain products such as furnishings, clothes and jewellery. On the other hand, more than females, males tend to search for technological and durable goods. Though compatibility, relative advantages, and trustworthiness of online shopping are the major reasons that males search online, female consumers do not seem to search online because of the enjoyment of shopping and the satisfaction derived from traditional shopping activities. The results also clarify that while female consumers tend to search prices, male consumers do not seem to search in the same way.

These highlights from the literature, below, can summarize these self-oriented factors:

According to Lee et al. (2001), Bellman et al. (2001), Graeupl (2006), and Lee and Ward (2000), an experienced Internet user is used to searching more and going into greater depth, compared to the novice.

Furthermore, Lee et al. emphasises that Internet uses generally search more and use more sources. "[...] Internet users are likely to have more incentive to search in general, and thus be relatively heavy users of all sources" (2001, p. 15).

On the other hand, Lee and Ward suggest that experienced Internet users tend to purchase online and have less trust in brand names, which is the novice's most probable search indicator (2000, p. 12).

Furthermore, "educated people are more experienced users and more proficient at searching, which leads them to be less brand reliant" (Lee and Ward 2000, p. 14).

As long as the brand information is trustworthy and gives insight to consumers, it will lead consumers to search more about "price and brand availability" during their searches (Balasubramanian et al. 1997, Lee and Ward 2000).

Here is a summary of Graeupl's research results on tourism:

Table 2.2: Summary of information search behavior habits for tourism

There is a prevalent usage of information gained through the Internet as the recipients always cross-reference their information with other information sources such as travel guide books and brochures.
While most of the older participants (88 percent) do not need to cross-reference online information, young participants need to confirm this information.
"... The information search is a process of knowledge acquisition and changes with the experience and age of the user" (2006, p. 241).
Participants in the research think there is enough information online for everyone, and the experience is the most important factor in determining search capability.
Older generations are more interested in health issues and probably more cultural and historical information as well.
For online purchases, participants do not trust giving out their financial information and some of them prefer telephone bookings.
In terms of gender, 55 percent of the females and 61 percent of the males are able to find the information they want on the Internet.
"As expected, travel guidebooks are a significant source of information for respondents of all age groups (62 percent), by far beating off the competition with brochures in 2nd place (45 percent)" (2006, p. 245).
Female participants (50 percent) have more trust in the information obtained from the Internet than male participants (36 percent).

Summarized from Graeupl's study on 'Silver Surfers' and their online information search behavior in 2006.

2.2.3 Price

Widely accepted is the fact that consumers have a reference price, which "provides useful information, and that consumers learn to discount reference price claims and, thus, protect themselves from deception" (Bearden et al. 1988, p. 95). Similarly, Kapferer and Laurent (1985) argue in favor of the price factor in terms of consumer involvement. Their approach is that "price is probably the most commonly used indicator of involvement. Because the risks of a mispurchase are high when the price is high, consumers are likely to be [highly] involved" (1985, p.42). That means when the anxiety occurs from the relationship between price and quality, the probability of search activity will increase. "In the 1970s, price and utility were the most important criteria to look at for an information search. ... [The information search] is to evaluate the utility of each option" (Nelson 1970, p. 312). Information about quality is gained from several sources, but the search cost is high for this information; consumers will try using less expensive information sources. Again in the 1970s, the most popular way to obtain information on price or quality was search (Nelson 1970, p. 312). "Consumers with price consciousness may visit Internet web sites to find out about sales or promotional deals or to compare prices from different companies' web sites. Low prices may be a critical factor causing consumers to select one web site over another" (Bailey and Seock 2008, 118).

2.2.4 Experience

Experience gives us another estimate of price evaluation and search behavior. Especially, for goods considered risky – generally searched internally and externally – the price can become the most important indicator or the most underestimated indicator of purchase decisions. In other words, price may not be an estimator of information search, if past experience of the product or service was satisfying or vice versa. "After using a brand, its price and quality can be combined to give us posterior estimates of the utility of its purchase" (Nelson 1970, p. 313).

Another important factor is that experience combines experimenting and prior knowledge, known as post-purchase experience. Kim and Park (2010) suggest that past experience is vital to a new purchase and that prior knowledge, gained in various ways, determines selection among brands and increases the quality of the information by cross-referencing.

> *... Past experience is a main factor affecting purchase intention, behavior and the future destination decision. Prior knowledge positively affects not only consumer purchase decisions and brand choice tactics but also assessment of product quality on the assumption that knowledge increased as a result of past experience with a product (Kim and Park 2010 p. 54).*

Similar to Kim and Park (2010), Murray (1991) contends that past experience or post-purchase experience is an internal searching activity and applied first among other information seeking sources.

> *When faced with a purchase decision, the consumer first examines information in memory about past purchase experience, including experiences in a product class and previous learning about the environment. Experience creates knowledge, which in turn leads to internal search in subsequent decision situations (p. 11).*

An additional issue argued by Nelson (1970) is the cost of a new experience and search. According to Nelson, when the experience is costly, consumers prefer searching rather than undergoing a new experience. "Consumers can prefer information by way of experience rather than by way of search even when experience is expensive" (1970, p. 312). Nelson adds that this is valid for any type of product or service, and consumers have the freedom to choose searching or experimenting to gather information about the quality of various products and services, within the limits of the consumer's threshold for costs related to experimenting. "The cost of experimenting sets an upper limit to the cost of search that a person is willing to undergo" (1970, p. 317).

2.2.5 Perceived Risk

Risk means uncertainty, therefore stimulating anxiety. Uncertainty intensifies the perceived risk of consumers, so much so that consumers tend to search to eliminate this

anxiety (Locander and Hermann 1979, p. 269). “The measures were based on the well established notion that consumers do seek information from different sources when faced with risk or uncertainty” (Locander and Hermann 1979, p. 270). Chaudhuri (2000) argues that risk “defined as a determinant of information search and mediator of the effect of product involvement on the information search” (p.1) is consistently higher with experimental products, implying that services among all others carry the most risk in terms of purchasing. According to Locander and Hermann’s research conducted in 1979, “as risk increases, the search pattern for information expands and the tendency simply to buy without pre-purchase deliberation decreases, internal search and observation become the first preferred sources among search sources” (Murray 1991, p. 12).

According to Jacoby and Kaplan (1972), “risk is multidimensional with suggesting elements of financial, performance, physiological, psychological and social risks in a product specific hierarchy for each consumer” (Clarke et al. 2007, p. 525). Chaudhuri (2000) divides the concept of risk into two parts: functional risk (financial, performance and physiological) and emotional risk (psychological and social). In the evaluation stage of any product or service that one is informed about, what that product or service means to the user determines the attitude towards that product or the trust one has towards the information one gathers about the product. This outlook means that, in a research phase where personal value is attached to the product, the product is evaluated based on more emotional factors, while an x product held outside of the bounds of worries about meaning is evaluated in a more rational research. So this division proves that these two types of risk shape both consumer research behaviors and consumer reactions to information sources.

2.3 ONLINE VERSUS OFFLINE INFORMATION SEARCH BEHAVIOR

Consumers equally weigh both objective and subjective data – subjective data for searched products and objective data for experienced products (Clarke et al. 2007). An example of this is evident when purchasing a car.

> *To satisfy their information needs, consumers require objective search type data on specifications and performance as well as subjective information on the experience of driving the car and opinions of design aesthetics or the overall "image" of the car (Clarke et al. 2007, p. 528).*

On the other hand, different types of products will lead to various search behaviors (Clarke et al. 2007, p. 520). Clarke et al. (2007) categorized the term "product" as search products and experience products, because every product has a utility and value to consumers. A search product "tends to be standardised with strong expectations of performance based on prior experience" (Clarke et al. 2007, p. 527). Accordingly, looking to buy a CD is a searching activity for a search product, especially technological products for which the cost of experience is relatively high while the risk is low compared to other products categorized as search products. Products purchased through an immediate decision are often described as search products as well. On the other hand, experience products are described as products for which information is gathered through experimenting, thus called products of internal search activity such as "wine, restaurants, travel experiences" (Clarke et al. 2007, p. 528).

For high technology products, consumer search is also seen a required activity; therefore, the extent of the search is high, compared to other products, because of rapid change.

> *Given the inherent complexity and rapid pace of technological change in these categories, this type of product information [**High Technology]** is not only difficult to communicate, but also continuously changing (Erdem et al. 2004, p. 96).*

Supporting Clarke et al. (2007), Kapferer and Laurent have the same opinion about the relationship between search and product type; different product types require different searches. For instance, durable goods are expected to be used for many years, so the decision-making process is considered risky: "Durable goods also have been used to create conditions of high involvement because, in case of mispurchase, one is stuck with a poor product for a long time" (Kapferer and Laurent 1985, p.42).

Having considered consumer search behavior in terms of price, personal involvement, service and product differentiation, and experience and risk, the ways of collecting

information pertaining to the services industry and durable goods also requires examination. In essence, the search for experience goods or search goods is quite different in the services and durable goods industries.

As Clarke et al. (2007) classified products as search and experience goods, Nelson (1970) points out that recommendations from other consumers is more meaningful and more widely used for experience goods than search goods. He also highlights this difference within the concept of guided and unguided samplings. Nelson asserts that guided sampling, even though not for every product, results from the "... recommendation of friends or consumer magazines. The preferences of consumers tend to be positively correlated. In consequence, the expected utility of a sample suggested by a friend will be greater than the expected utility of a random sample" *(*1970, p. 321). On the other hand, Nelson simplifies this concept by explaining that unguided sampling is inexpensive and more practical while guided sampling is not necessarily used by consumers. Furthermore, unguided sampling has been found to be less costly for both experience products and products that are frequently purchased (1970, p. 321).

In light of the information shared above, one may reach a definite conclusion about experience and search products. "Product," which is divided into two as search and experience, is actually evaluated in light of three main factors: price, expressive and functional attributes (Phillips and Sternthal 1977). The "product" evaluated in light of these three basic characteristics is, in summary, either a search or an experience product as also shown in Figure 2.3.1. Again, as stated in detail above, one prefers to try experience products, as they carry high risk due to their characteristics, yet one researches them more due again to their high search cost. On the other hand, search products are in a lower risk group in light of the user's evaluation. Since a little research is sufficient instead of experience, they lead to less search behavior.

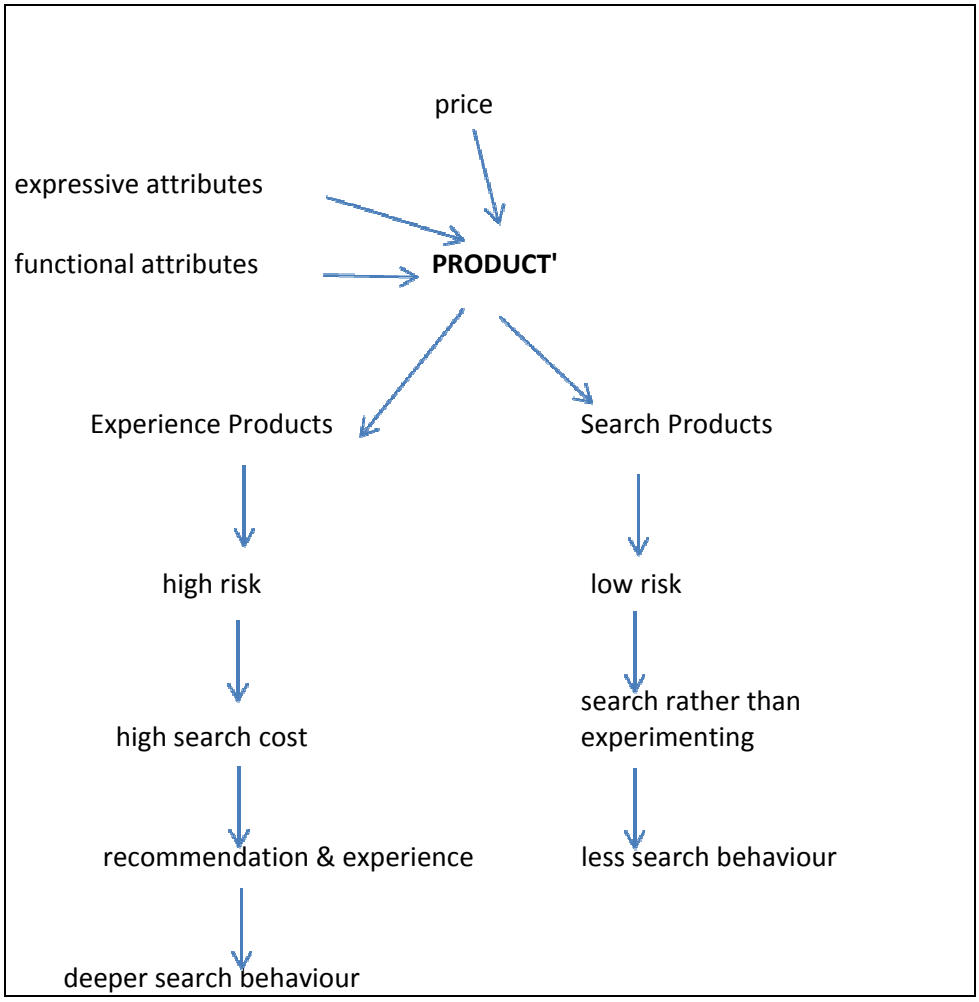

Figure 2.1: Product types and projected search behavior

2.4 INFORMATION SEARCH IN PRODUCT VERSUS SERVICE CONTEXTS

In this section the differences between information search behavior for services and products will be scrutinized.

2.4.1 Ways of Collecting Information on Services

Along with the risk factor related to services, the environment of the services industry itself is risky, in that consumers carry out strategies to overcome or lessen this risk (Murray 1991, p. 12). For example, since tourism is accepted as an experience product,

“it has a big influence since the quality of the 'product' is not certain until it is experienced, therefore a more in-depth information search can reassure the prospective traveller in their decision” (Graeupl 2006, 237).

Products in the services industry are also elusive, so the information search behavior differs to a greater degree.

> *Due to the intangible nature of tourism products, a critical aspect of travellers' awareness is sufficient information about the products and services they will purchase. Thus, information search behavior is a significant factor influencing tourism behavior such as selecting destinations, spending money, visiting duration, experiencing attractions, and so on (Kim and Park 2010 p. 50).*

Since the services industry is exceptionally risky, information search becomes the common strategy in order to lessen perceived risk caused from the nature of this industry. Researchers like Perry and Hamm (1969) propose that any amplification in perceived risk related to purchase decision-making is affected by personal influence. All the facts related to the services industry make external search an indispensable method in risk reduction. Therefore, not surprisingly, word-of-mouth becomes a highly significant “source of risk-reducing information and has a greater impact on consumers than mass media communications because of clarification and feedback opportunities” (Murray 1991, p. 12). Word-of-mouth and its function in searching activity is also described by Murray as “[Among] various information sources external to the individual, word-of-mouth is particularly useful and independent impersonal sources may be preferred under conditions of high performance risk” (1991, p. 12).

Because of the nature of the services industry – risk, intangibility, an experiment product – consumers are inclined to do an internal search first , using prior knowledge gained from past experiences or a new experience considering the cost of experience. Moreover, considering that when internal information is not satisfying other sources for information searching inevitably pop up, Beatty and Smith (1987) classified ways of collecting tourism information in four groups, with respect to analyzing external information sources:

a) Personal (e.g., friends, relatives, and colleagues)
b) Marketer-dominated (e.g., advertisements and promotions)
c) Neutral (e.g., third-party such as travel agents and travel guides)
d) Experiential sources through direct contacts with retailer

Similar to their approach, the views of other researchers follow the same pattern. External information search sources are “interactions with travel agents and other consultants and previous experiences” (Gursoy and McCleary 2004, 360). “In general, it has been noted that travellers utilise various types of external information sources in order to make plans for their trips: family and friends, prior visits, destination specific literature, media, and travel consultants” (Kim and Park 2010, p.50).

2.4.2 Ways of Collecting Information on Products

Even if information search behavior develops differently for the service industry, one cannot speak of a completely different search modeling for products. According to the results of Punj and Staelin's study of the research methods consumers employ prior to purchasing a new car, it was determined that, similar to the service industry, the research demonstrated external and internal search behavior (1983, p. 368). At this point, the product's characteristics are the most important clue in terms of the differentiation of search methods. Clarke et al. (2007) divided the general term 'product' into two categories and emphasized that the service industry was more of an 'experience product.' Even though it was expressed that search products are applicable to low-risk products that require low involvement, the product's characteristics demonstrate how deep the research is. The most important factors that shape the consumer's method of research are what the product is, what it will be used for, what it means to the consumers, what the consumer’s expectations of the product are, after-sales services, the product's price, all of the information the consumer previously had about the product (external or internal) and the time period during which the product will be used. (Punj and Staelin 1983, p. 368; Sheth 1973, p. 52). Punj and Staelin(1983, p. 369) clarify this difference as; “Although some consumers may get some intrinsic value from collecting

information, for most people, the ultimate goal of external search is to obtain tangible consumer benefits, such as more value for their money and overall satisfaction with the product".

In Newman and Staelin's (1972, p. 251) study of the research methods employed for cars and home appliances, it was seen that the brand has an important place in research patterns. Consumers show a tendency to continue with brands that they have known, tried and that bring satisfaction to them. The same research has demonstrated that consumers who would be purchasing home appliances had more of a tendency to do research as the product's cost increased, while the same scenario demonstrated a difference in consumers who would be purchasing a car. It was observed that consumers who focused on one brand of car at the beginning of the study did less research as the price rose, while consumers who considered more than one brand of car at the beginning of the study did more research as the cost increased.

These findings clearly show that search activity for buying a car is a sign of what is needed actually. If a family's needs to be satisfied, features of cars are searched in terms of satisfying the family's needs, on the other hand a person who looks for social acceptance and a meaning from the car, will search more exterior features such as design, colour, model, brand, etc.

Beatty and Smith (1987) conducted a search on variables of search behavior for various products. The most important point is the difference in the search attitudes of the two different products, televisions and automobiles. For instance, as an information search source, consulting a salesperson and advertisements/brochures are more frequent when searching for TVs; however, discussions with one's spouse and children are more frequent when searching for automobiles (84). On the other hand, recommendation of others are applied at the same degree for both TV sets and automobiles but its importance as an information source is low comparing to other sources.

Although products are categorized as both search and experienced products (Clarke et al. 2007), durable goods should be approached in a different way. Decision making for

these kinds of products is more difficult than decisions making for impulse products such as food, beverages, CDs, and so forth. “When searching for high technology durable goods, consumers face a search environment composed of a large variety of information channels” (Erdem et al. 2004, p. 96). As with experienced products, guided sampling becomes a significant source as an external information search. “Advice will also be used more for durable than nondurable goods” (Nelson 1970, p. 327). According to research conducted by Erdem et al. (2004, p. 96), the ways of collecting information on durable goods consist of the following:

a) Retail stores
b) Articles in computer-specific sources including magazines, books, and mail-order catalogues
c) Articles in general purpose sources including consumer guides
d) Advertisements
e) Word-of-mouth.

There is a common and significant fact of product searching is that they can be tested in a store. Consumers need to see the products that they will buy. Home appliances or cars or durable goods are displayed at stores in which consumers go and search. Bloch et al. conceptualize *“**retail store browsing**”* for products according to product interest, product knowledge, and word-of-mouth activity concerning the product (1986, p. 119). Retail stores play a pivotal role in products as the only place where consumers can actually see the products, touch them and test them physically. The “**retail channel**” is the only information source available to consumers to physically test products, but searching this channel requires relatively more time and effort than other information channels” (Erdem et al. 2004, p. 99).

The searches of Erdem et al. (2004) and Betty and Smith (1987) on the ways of collecting information on service industry and products, it is clear that internal and new experiment are more valuable in service industry than product search. While consumers tend to get information about products from retails stores first, they tend to trust their experiences and recommendations of others. There are two main reasons of this finding: Service industry is intangible, risk and experience type of ‘product’ so the general thought is to get information from an experience. Because the cost of experience is sometimes high, recommendation of trustable person is more valid for service industry.

The second reason is services cannot be tested anywhere because its production and consumption happen simultaneously. That is way retail stores have a great significance for products in terms of testing them in reality. Nevertheless, word-of-mouth greatly influences durable goods by increasing the quality of the information, with a greater probability of researching, through alternative channels, a brand they have heard about (Erdem et al. 2004, p. 99).

On the other hand, researches shows that consumers' product categorization shape their online information search behavior on the Internet, The first study conducted by Bellman et al. focused on online search for books, CDs and travel. The results of this research indicated that while the extent of online search for books and CDs was low, the extent of research in the travel category was a little higher. The reason is explained by Bellman et al. as "The fact that search in the travel category is actually more than the amount of search seen in the books or CD categories may seem logical given that the size of purchase is large, and prices are dynamic" (2001, p. 305). On the other hand, another finding in this research showed that CD and book shoppers were more loyal to only one website where they could successfully obtain information. In other words, "70 percent of the CD shoppers, 70 percent of the book shoppers, and 42 percent of the travel shoppers were observed as being loyal to just one site throughout the duration of our data" (Bellman et al. 2001, p. 302).

2.5 SEARCH BEHAVIOR IN THE ONLINE WORLD

In the past, information was conveyed in one direction from mass media to the general public, such as by newspapers or television, accounted for the vast majority of information. Having already touched on the evolution of information throughout history, information before the invention of writing, and information after developments in telecommunications during the Industrial Revolution, these developments were tools that turned communication into mass media communication. "[…] the Internet, of which the World Wide Web (WWW) is the current implementation, as new marketing medium has the potential to radically change the way firms conduct business with their

customers by facilitating interactive multimedia many-to-many communication with consumers" (Boshoff 2005, p. 2).

Finally, having examined the Internet to show the evolving of communication into a two-way interaction, the change in the way we communicate, and the direction of communication in creating its own rules, the Internet has changed consumer shopping behavior and information search behavior as well. "It provides a nearly limitless repository for information that is available at all times and is accessible on demand from almost any point on the planet (and some in space)" (Merino and Peterson 2003, p. 103). Consequently, after its invention, the Internet became a sales and marketing distribution channel for businesses (Jang 2004, p. 42).

Even further, the Internet and the rapid development of information technology (Jang, 2004) have had great impact on consumer search behaviors in the decision-making process. Merino and Peterson describe the relationship between the Internet and the decision-making process in that the "Internet can provide with minimal effort and cost, information that facilitates better decision making and makes the decision-making process more efficient" (2003, p. 99).

The Internet offers multifarious advantages for both marketers and consumers who look for information, for example,

> *[...] enormous computing and data storage capacity; availability 24 hours per day, seven days a week; ease and convenience of accessibility from any connected location; absence of physical constraints such as floor space, shelf space, limited product/brand ranges and attribute information; real-time publishing providing automated updating of information, such as availability and inventory levels; cost reductions of up to 25 percent in setting up and maintaining an electronic channel, compared to a 'bricks-and-mortar' outlet; increased personal safety, through secured home delivery systems; and reduced consideration sets through electronic search agents (Alba et al. 1997 p. 41).*

To Graeupl, like Alba et al. (1997), the biggest advantage of the Internet is *being 'open' 24/7.* Additionally, she points out that, with the aid of the Internet, consumers enjoy easy, fast, and instantaneous searching activity. "It can also be used as a real-time communication tool, especially when considering new tools like live chats, etc." (2006,

p. 237). This instant source of information on the Internet is impossible in offline searching. Any kind of information gathering takes time, if using an offline search method. For example, expanding either the benefits or deficiencies of a product or service via word-of-mouth, going to a retail store for searching, or seeing an advertisement or an article in a magazine published periodically all take time or happen by chance or over a span of time. This means that an urgent need for information is not satisfied with the results of offline searching methods.

Right now consumers can search online, with the environmental obstacles to searching removed by the Internet and its virtual aspect. While Erdem et al. highlight the importance of retail stores for consumer search, they also criticize their limitations. "[…] searching this channel [retail stores] requires relatively more time and effort than other information channels, this result may suggest that if the retail channel provides an acceptable level of basic product information; it is unlikely that consumers will use this channel in the future to obtain other types of information" (Erdem et al. 2004, p. 99). Understandably, the Internet has become an alternative to limited information sources for consumer search. "The Internet provides a proxy of both word-of-mouth and to some extent a retail store search environment" (Erdem et al. 2004, p. 99).

On the other hand, Internet search as a marketing tool is now being used for one-on-one, one-to many, many-to-one and many-to-many interactions (Graeupl 2006; Boshoff 2005; Merino and Peterson 2003). "The Internet is a powerful tool that marketers may use to individualise their offerings and move closer to the ideal of one-on-one marketing" (Boshoff 2005, p. 1). It provides both interaction with consumers through live chats or e-mails, as both Boshoff and Graeupl have pointed out, and provides customised information to the targeted segment, ease of product comparisons, virtual community platforms and 24-hour access to consumers searching for information (Graeupl 2006; Boshoff 2005).

The event called research now takes place within the frame of information Internet users gather about one another. What is called WOM in the classical sense now develops faster due to social platforms. One of the most important reasons for this, in addition to

the fast increase in individuals' use of the Internet, is the interest in social platforms and the frequent use of these platforms. According to Buckley, the actions of those around us have become much more important in comparison to the past. Now we share what we do and what we like or don't like in a fairly "liberal" framework (Buckley & Cooke 2008, p. 274). "... We are witnessing the emergence of a population that is evermore willing to record, and share, their experiences: mash them up and submit them to their friends and other community members for evaluation, and allow their 'reputations' to be built via these assessments" (Buckley & Cooke 2008, p. 274).

Again according to Buckley's article, there are social channel users who affect people within the framework of trends they create themselves. These are persons who like to market the trends they create to the society and spread mass ideas (Buckley 2008, p. 275). The reason behind the fast spread of this phenomenon and its emergence as a societal decision mechanism is this: '10 percent of Americans determine how the rest consume and live by chatting about their likes and dislikes' (Buckley & Cooke 2008, p. 275).

Bright et al. likewise emphasize that Internet users utilize media alternatives and media sources that they've selected and find trustworthy themselves to gain information (2008, p. 17). Bright et al. express that, similarly, users consciously consume the media content towards their personal needs and that personal necessities are behind this "internal motivation." In light of all of these reasons, users utilize 'user-generated content (UGC)' platforms whose content they can control or create their own content in order to reach information towards their own psychological tendencies. They defend that there are platforms such as YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, Wikipedia, Flickr, Blogger and personal Web pages among UGC. As academic research supports, experienced Internet users are not biased towards social channels, and they not only reach information via these platforms, but they also tend to share the information and experience they've gained via these channels. It is suggested that the very foundation of this societal approach is people's giving meaning to their surroundings, giving meaning to themselves in front of society, or in a sense knowing themselves and being happy about this (Bright et al, 2008).

The Internet is an enormous help to marketers to reinforce the concept of fast moving consumption. With the Internet, consumers can follow price information and price promotion of marketers online (Clarke et al. 2007; Lee et al. 2001). Marketers also use the advantages of the Internet by regularly sharing up-to-date price and price promotion information. Furthermore, the marketers provides cross-links and advertise their promotions on other websites, with free coupons for sampling, special outlet websites for announcing price promotions, and websites offering discounts to groups. "[A website's utility] is magnified by the ability to offer further links to external information sources. This expanded search feature caters to the information preferences of consumers who become engaged in a "reactive" rather than their initial planned search across sites" (Clarke et al. 2007, p. 521).

Most academics agree that the Internet provides 24/7 availability, eliminates physical barriers, offers fast updates, uses price promotions in a more effective way, and so forth. Furthermore, Merino and Peterson (2003) clarify one more distinguishable feature of the Internet in that beyond its empowerment provided to consumers, the Internet offers more information, therefore facilitating better decision making. "Although the Internet may well empower consumers, there is a paucity of systematic conceptual, analytical, or empirical research indicating that the Internet will in fact lead to more and better information, which in turn will lead to better consumer decision making" (2003, p. 100).

In keeping with their classification of products as search and experience, Clarke et al. (2007) define the information gathered for these categories in two ways: objective vs. subjective information from online or offline information sources. While objective information is the source of the "search" information such as prices, product specifications, and so forth, subjective information is more related to gathering information in terms of personal "experience" based on quality and personal taste, for example, information on wine, restaurants and travel experiences (Clarke et al. 2007, p. 522). According to this approach, the information gathered through the Internet, i.e., in forums or blogs or the media are blurred. Contrary to their approach, Merino and Peterson advocate that subjective information for more personal "products" can in fact

be gathered via the Internet. They do, however, share a similar concern about where the information comes from, for example, marketer-controlled sources or independent sources. Their main view is that the Internet can be a substitute for every offline search source.

> *Consumers can acquire information from Web sites that is similar to information available from traditional mass-media advertising. They can acquire (marketer-controlled) information directly from retailers or manufacturers – information that mimics the information they could acquire from a salesperson or customer service representative. Moreover, they can acquire information similar to that which could be obtained from face-to-face word-of-mouth communications, whether from friends, family members, customers, or experts. Further, consumers can obtain information from disinterested, independent third-party providers, such as news media, university institutions, non-profit organizations, and the like (2003, p. 105).*

As most academics have recently pointed out, there is an enormously growing interest in online shopping. Bailey and Seock clarify these findings accordingly: "[…] Online shopping is preferred over in-store shopping by some Internet users because of its convenience and time-saving capabilities and … online purchasers are more likely to be economic and recreational shoppers, compared with single-channel offline purchasers" (2008, 114).

From 2000 to 2010, the population growth and Internet usage ratios in the U.S. (Internet Usage and Population Growth in U.S., Internet World Stats, http://www.internetworldstats.com/am/us.htm) shows that while population growth is in a normal growth cycle, the ratio of Internet usage has increased year by year. According to the latest data, by the end of 2010 the ratio of the U.S. population using the Internet will be 77.3 percent. Similar to U.S. Internet usage, the same growth figure holds true for the entire globe (World Internet Users and Population Stats, Internet World Stats. http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm). On the other hand, when the Internet usage ratio is handled in Turkey, the results have similarities with general trend happening in the global arena. The latest research conducted by April, 2010 summarizes that the usage of the Internet among 16 -74 aged people increased by 22, 8 percent from 2004 to today (Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), http://www.tuik.gov.tr/VeriBilgi.do?tb_id=60&ust_id=2). Internet usage rates have skyrocketed in the last years. All these findings clearly show that, by the end of 2010,

the Internet will increase its existence in our lives more than ever, as it continues to be used frequently and effectively for information search or online shopping, because of all the advantages and easy applications the Internet will soon bring to consumers in the future.

When literature about consumer search behavior and the Internet are reviewed, the general impression is very positive regarding the many advantages the Internet offers consumers. On the other hand, consumers still have concerns about the Internet as a distribution channel, a search source and an online place to shop.

One side argues that the Internet is still primarily a go-between for obtaining information and for searching and not necessarily for shopping.

> *People visit travel websites mainly for information purposes and less than 5 percent actually buy tourism 'products' online. This is an important argument for this study as it builds on the hypotheses that although often seen as a distribution channel by the supply side, the Internet as such is still mainly used as an information tool by the demand side (Graeupl 2006, p. 238).*

The other side advocates that the Internet is not widely used for shopping because of non-standardised information on individual websites, which causes confusion in the minds of consumers and creates an inconsistent information pool. “Unfortunately for the consumer this often frustrates their search efforts by presenting them with non-standardised information” (Clarke et al. 2007, p. 521). Similarly, Weber and Roehl’s approach to the Internet’s limitations is basically consistent with Clarke et al.’s approach. Graeupl (2006) explains that the Internet is still seen as an information intermediary because of “technical difficulties, credit card security, no assessment of product quality, and privacy issues” (p. 238).

However, the interaction derived from offline search behavior may not be satisfying or reliable for online searchers. “One another reason for this is especially senior consumers’ prejudice to the Internet” (Graeupl 2006, p. 238). Senior consumers are especially prejudiced toward the Internet itself and the perceived risk of Internet searching, primarily because of the lack of trust. When evaluated, the information “is obscure, from unidentified sources and thus limiting the value derived from such online

sources" (Clarke et al. 2007, p. 522). Regarding online shopping, again the need for social interaction in offline shopping negatively affects any propensity to engage in Internet shopping (Bailey and Seock 2008, 114). Another reason why online shopping is not widespread is that this kind of shopping may not be as entertaining as offline shopping, especially for consumers who enjoy browsing around retail stores. They find that online shopping is incapable of any physical interaction with the products. "Consumers who enjoy the shopping process are unlikely to buy online because purchasing via the Internet is a poor substitution for the leisure experience associated with traditional shopping at physical stores" (Bailey and Seock 2008, p. 114).

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ON SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

In accordance with this study's objective of determining the conditions that influence consumers' social media engagement as dependent variables, limiting or extending conditions are determined by an examination of the literature.

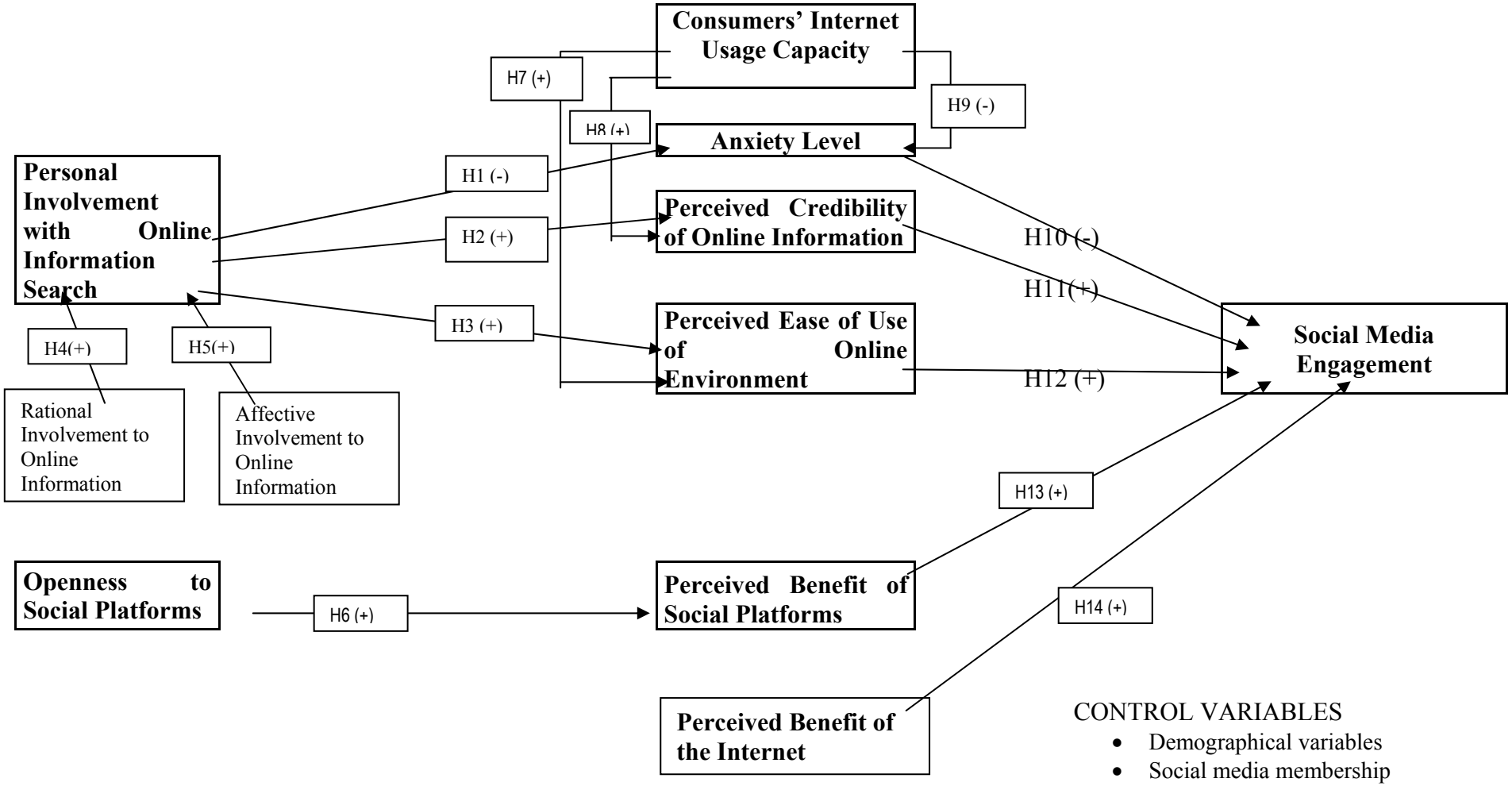

Figure 3.1: Conceptual Framework on Social Media Engagement

3.1 PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT with ONLINE INFORMATION SEARCH

Personal involvement of consumers, which is a necessary factor in their product or service choice, is evidence of being related to consumer search. "The need of consumers to satisfy their information needs relating to product knowledge is the primary motivator for consumer information search" (Clarke et al. 2007, p. 524). It is not only critical to reduce the perceived risk for consumers but also crucial to reduce the level of anxiety derived from the selection phase. "The choice and resulting perceived risk bring about an anxiety-producing situation" (Hermann & Locander 1979, p. 269). The most important reason in reducing the anxiety of personal involvement is so that consumers who are interested in online searching activity can access the information they need about a product or service. This indicates that consumers who are more involved in their search have less anxiety. Another issue is that consumers who are actively engaged in online search have more trust in the process and tools, since they better understand how online searching works, they know where to search and they have more awareness of which sources are reliable. Yoon (2002, p. 50) summarizes the online trust concepts as below:

- *Security assurance: Performs the role of instilling assurance of transaction security, such as VeriSign or Visa logos*
- *Brand: Enables confidence in a firm's credibility based on the firm's reputation and past experience of web visitors*
- *Search: Provides convenience in locating desired service or product*
- *Fulfillment: Provides accurate information on order processing and problem resolution should a problem occur*
- *Presentation: Design attributes signify quality and technology*
- *Technology: Technical superiority and up-to-dateness*

According to Yoon (2002), these are the tools that consumers see at first glance. After some time, they learn more about the service, the type of information offered and which sources are reliable; and so they do not need further information about a service, product, web site security, after-sales services, or financial risk that may derive from online purchase. Beyond the concept of trust is an element related to personal involvement; here, the technology and search skill concepts of Clarke et al. (2007) step in. Search skill refers to how easy and quickly the searcher can access

sought information; technology skill refers to what extent consumers use technological tools like the Internet. These two advanced skills indicate the perceived ease of use online environment.

H1: The more involved a consumer is personally with online information search, the lower their perceived anxiety about the service.
H2: The more involved a consumer is personally with online information search, the more they perceive online information as credible.
H3: The more involved a consumer is personally with online information search, the easier it is for them to navigate an online environment.

1.2 RATIONAL vs. AFFECTIVE INVOLVEMENT to ONLINE INFORMATION SEARCH

There are two dimensions of social media engagement with regard to personal involvement. The first concerns consumers who are rationally involved in the online information search (Murray 1991, Capella et al. 1999). The second group includes those who evaluate and use online information sources because they enjoy the process and being online; this is an affective involvement with online information search (Mathwick & Rigdon 2004). Likewise, Fullerton (2005, p. 99) describes affective commitment as [it] is rooted in shared values, identification, and attachment. It is pointed out that dynamics of services situations that are shaped by emotional forces that rational ones barely come into play (Stern 1997, p. 8). Furthermore affective commitment is linked to the trust- and friendship-based relationship in a consumer services environment, which 'exists between a hairstylist and a client' (Fullerton 2005, p. 99).

For information search concept, if the website is confusing or boring in terms of navigation or if the information is unreliable compared to other sources, consumers end their involvement, do not search that particular website and exit the site altogether. However, entertaining websites attract consumer attention, increasing the probability of online consumer searches. "When a site is entertaining, surfers develop more arousal and/or pleasure early in online browsing, becoming more involved in

the site and keener to search for information (exploratory behavior), affecting positively their attitudes" (Richard 2005, p. 1639).

Beatty and Smith's research in 1987 indicates that "search is also influenced by individual factors, such as the perceived benefits of search (e.g., enjoyment, self-confidence, and role), demographic aspects, and product knowledge possessed". Beatty and Smith's finding is very similar, overlapping those of other academics such as Bailey and Seock 2008; Clarke et al. 2007; Boshoff 2005; Kapferer and Laurent 1985.

H4: The more a consumer needs to find rational information, the more they personally involved to online information search.
H5: The more a consumer needs to find affective information, the more they personally involved to online information search.

3.3 OPENNESS to SOCIAL PLATFORMS

Social platforms and new trends around them have previously been scrutinized in detail. It can be summarized that they are not just a vehicle for revealing our lives but also a method of living a communal life, in terms of reacting to issues around personal life, politics, and social problems, etc. With the expanded usage of social platforms, it has been said that 'Share is a new search'. Sociological research regarding this interactivity also defines that people in contemporary society feel the need to show and tell. Now, we share what we do and what we like or don't like in a fairly "liberal" framework (Buckley & Cooke 2008, p. 274). "... We are witnessing the emergence of a population that is evermore willing to record, and share, their experiences: mash them up and submit them to their friends and other community members for evaluation, and allow their 'reputations' to be built via these assessments" (Buckley & Cooke 2008, p. 274). From the marketing perspective, all the details in consumers' lives may emerge into their Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, etc. Even Google attempts to increase the search percentage of these social platforms in a search. These indicators clearly support the premise that individuals

use social platforms, to a greater extent, more than ever. Gu et al. advocate in their study that 'the effect of consumer reviews on books at www.Amazon.com and www.Barnesandnoble.com, and found that WOM can significantly influence book sales' (2009, p. 180). Individuals who are more open to these social platforms are exposed to on-going search in a cycle in which they voluntarily participate. While they post something important or unimportant, they read something already posted by their friends. This becomes a natural cycle of 'impulse search' (Bloch et al. 1986) that becomes an accumulative information base that may be used at a later time.

H6: The more open consumers are to social platforms, the more benefits they will perceive with regard to using social platforms.

3.4 CONSUMERS' INTERNET USAGE CAPACITY

As previously stated, there is a strong relationship between consumers' technology skills and their Internet usage capacity (Clarke et al. 2007). Beyond being the new era's technological revolution, the Internet has also changed individual attitudes towards communication and life in an online world. It is challenging to keep up with the world without the Internet now; it will be even more difficult in the near future. As a marketing tool, it is a fruitful source of information, also covering offline information acquisition methods. "The Internet provides a proxy of both word-of-mouth and to some extent a retail store search environment" (Erdem et al. 2004, p. 99). In addition to the Internet's contributions to information acquisition, consumers who use the Internet regularly continue to learn and experience an increased sense of ease and comfort in using the tools.

As previously stated, these consumers know how to make online purchases, where to search, what parameters to define, and which sites are trustworthy (Yoon 2002, p. 51). Likewise, Balasubramanian et al. (1997, 340) advocates online information that provides greater detail; because these products can be sampled, tested or distributed via the Internet, the information online is more adequate and satisfactory, thus more effective. These findings indicate that there is a negative correlation between consumers' Internet usage ability and their anxiety level. Mathwick and Rigdon also support this view: "Internet usage levels and decisional control are two variables

associated with the combination of challenge and skill that induces flow and related states of mind" (2004, p. 325). Because regular online consumers know which sources are reliable, they give greater credibility to online sources than consumers who use the internet less regularly or comfortably.

One additional criteria that influences increasing the Internet usage capacity is experience. Experienced consumers are the group of individuals with high Internet usage ratios. Again, with experience, trust in online sources increases and the cost of searching decreases (Lee et al. 2001); experienced consumers with high Internet usage capacity have greater trust in online sources, and also perceive the online environment as easy to use and easy to use for search. Graeupl's study in 2006 supports this finding; participants in the study believed that there is enough information online for everyone, and that experience is the most important factor in determining search capability.

H7: The higher the Internet usage capacity consumers have, the easier the perceived use of online environment.

H8: The higher the Internet usage capacity consumers have, the more credible consumers perceive online information sources.

H9: The higher the Internet usage capacity consumers have, the less anxiety consumers feel.

3.5 LEVEL of ANXIETY

While perceived risk is uncertainty, anxiety refers to unsolved issues in the mind. While they are closely related concepts, anxiety tends to be more related to the decision making process. The difference lies in the sources for information seeking. It is highly probable that when a consumer has high perceived risk about a service or product, they will search more from multiple information sources (Beatty and Smith 1987, Kapferer and Laurent 1985; Nelson 1970). When the anxiety levels about making a decision is high, information seeking sources differ. Previously mentioned, Lee et al. summarized the benefit of information as functional attributes, expressive attributes and the price (2001, p. 8). Lee et al. says that while the Internet has enormous advantages, it is still not a subsidiary of expressive attributes, like

prestigious products or services that have social meaning for consumers. It has been shown that consumers who feel anxiety refrain from using the Internet as a trustable information source because the information source is ambiguous for them. Instead, they use offline information sources that have more meaning and coverage for them, like friends and relatives.

H10: The more anxiety felt by the consumer, the less they engage in social media

3.6 PERCEIVED CREDIBILITY of ONLINE INFORMATION

Consumers who have more Internet usage capacity and more experience also have more trust in online information sources than consumers with less experience. The tools for checking the credibility of a source are defined by Yoon (2002) as: security assurance, brand, search, fulfillment, presentation and technology; it is also stressed that after exposure to and learning about trustable online information sources, and positive experiences from their choices, consumers develop more trust in online information sources. Another tool for checking the validity of sources is a cross-check between online sources. Generally, online sources are sharpened even more, according to other research, especially when the online information is accurate, up-to-date and satisfying; consumers tend to search more in greater depth. If sources produce different information, consumers will usually turn to other sources, i.e., friends, relatives. Before the creation of widespread social media platforms, these search methods were performed offline; now, they can be achieved via social platforms. In these cases impulse search, and communities interested in that service or product, help consumers to decide. Similar to Yoon, Greer advocates that experience is the most significant factor in trusting online sources (2009, p. 13). While novice consumers check the validity of 'brand, price' and also cross-check with other sources, experienced users can turn to more complex tools, like 'check layout, visual quality, the origination of Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) and examine the site for authority and bias' (Greer 2009, p. 12).

Social networks are seen as more reliable than other sources, i.e. a firm's direct web site, advertisements and print ads, as the information in social platforms like Facebook, Twitter or any blog or forum is individual and belongs to an individual's real experience. For the information seeker, this is invaluable information; the level

of trust is much higher compared to other, perhaps biased information sources. This fact is supported by Metzger; "… there are many other types of Internet-based information that have serious credibility implications, such as blogs, wikis, social networking sites, chat groups, and e-mail. Each of these forms of communication is somewhat unique and carries with it specific credibility concerns" (2007, p. 2079). Her article also states that online information credibility is evaluated by consumers with 'seal programs, rating systems, vetted databases, digital signatures, and collaborative filtering' (Metzger 2007, p. 2079), and platforms that allow posting comments. Metzger's statement supports the idea that consumers who perceive online information sources as more credible also get more validation from social platforms than those who not trust online information sources. "…social networking sites such as MySpace or Facebook, might be a more practical way for users to discern whether some information they find online is credible. Peer review allows Internet users to provide feedback about the products, information, or source of some information offered on Web sites" (Metzger 2007, p. 2086).

H11: The more credibility a consumer assigns to an online information source, the more likely they are to be engaged in social media.

3.7 PERCEIVED EASE of USE

Consumers who have higher Internet usage capacity perceive the online environment as easier to browse and search. The perceived ease of use is described as 'the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free of effort' (Fenech 1998, p. 1). This description correlates with Clarke et al.'s (2007) technological and search skill concepts, asserting that those skills are the means that make easier Internet usage as an information searching. Consumers who can adapt themselves to the online environment use more than one source to search and validate those sources' credibility. The adaption of consumers to this environment is not difficult and the eagerness of consumers to use various channels for search direct them to find more web-based and interactive information sources; their knowledge of the Internet environment increases and leads them to know better which sources are more reliable than others. Consumers who perceive the online environment as easy to

use are also aware of their searching cost, and their search performance is better than that of the novice consumer. Lai et al.'s statement confirms this as "Perceived ease of use refers to the degree to which the prospective user expects the use of the target system to be free of effort" (1998, p. 26).

H12: The easier consumers perceive the online environment, the more they engage with the social media.

3.8 PERCEIVED BENEFITS of SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Beyond the changes of the Internet in people's lives, all of these social networks have been seen as a way of coming together and living an online community life. Social platforms are not only the way of revealing of our lives but also the way of living a commune life all together in terms of reacting to the issues of life, politics, and social problems and so on. That kind of a union is being called as virtual community which has a function of binding people, creating a group of people within the same interest and ideas.

As Levy Cohen (2008) describes social media platforms, they are 'social circles' in which the most important element is to know and to be known. In terms of a marketing perspective, for a consumer to engage with a social platform in order to collect information, there must also be an engagement with that product or service for which they desire information. That means, it must have a meaning for the consumer, i.e. fun, enjoyment, career, pleasure, etc. Factors in using social networks include the need for individuals to make known their preferences, what they want to see and learn. Any information source that consumers follow in Twitter; "like" on Facebook; subscribe to Google Academics, any forums, any blogs, etc.; or click into links during browsing create a strong relationship between social media engagement and impulse online search because they create a chance to 'share'.

H13: The more benefits of social media platforms that are perceived by consumers, the more engaged they become in social media.

3.9 PERCEIVED BENEFIT of THE INTERNET

Research conducted in 1997 found that Internet usage was not as high as it is today and indicated, that traditional retail channels were widely used for products infrequently bought, and that consumer involvement was higher (Balasubramanian et al. 1997, 340). Finding its place in our lives more and more, the Internet is being further defined and becoming more and more comprehensive day by day. Even further, more research conducted on how the Internet affects consumer search behaviors and how significant online searching is becoming in the online world. For instance, while Balasubramanian et al. (1997) defines the Internet as "[It] is the antithesis of the centrally organized and managed electronic sales channels and electronic markets previously discussed" (p. 331) and "the availability of powerful and inexpensive means of searching, organizing, and disseminating such information (p. 333), Brannback (1997) explains that [It] is growing in importance since the product is becoming more information based and offers the opportunity to separate information about a product from the product itself" (Richard 2005, p. 1632).

Because consumers tend to be more connected via the internet more than ever, offline communication tools do not satisfy the interactivity needs of the consumers. Offline tools for communication are not current with the Internet any longer. Even the Internet and its commodities are consumed in the very act of production. On the other hand, the Internet marketers are favoured more than traditional ones (Balasubramanian et al. 1997, 340). Because online information gives more details and because these products can be sampled or tested or distributed via the Internet, online information is found to be more sufficient and very satisfying, especially when the information is efficacious. Being indispensability of the Internet provides more advantageous information source than ever for the consumers.

H14: The more benefits of the Internet that are perceived by consumers, the more engaged they become in social media.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN

The primary aim of this research is to validate the twelve hypotheses indicated in the previous section. The following items will be disclosed in detail in the research design section: scope of the research; sampling and data collection methods; and survey design and scenario development.

4.1 AIM and the SCOPE of the STUDY

The primary aim of the study is to examine the factors of changing social media engagement in the service industry. The main object of the study is to reveal the extent of Turkey young population does search in online platforms.

4.2 SAMPLING and DATA COLLECTION

Within the objective of the study, the literature has been reviewed in a detailed manner in order to construct theoretical model and measurement items. By considering all elements of that affect social media engagement in online information search, questionnaire has been constructed.

To enable validation of the variables of social media engagement in an online information search, previous relevant studies have been evaluated and a theoretical model has been composed in which independent variables have been determined as personal involvement, openness to social media engagement, consumers' Internet usage capacity, level of anxiety, perceived credibility of online information, perceived ease of use of online environment and perceived benefit of impulse search.

All the independent variables indicated above have been featured to develop a solid questionnaire (See Appendix 1).

Consistent with the theoretical model of the study, related independent variables of social media engagement, personal involvement to online search, openness to social platforms, consumers' Internet usage capacity, level of anxiety, perceived credibility of the Internet, perceived ease of use online environment, perceived benefit of the Internet and perceived benefit of social platforms have been characterized (See Appendix 1).

Secondly, the items representing the constructs have been generated by using the highly reliable items collected from the literature. In this study, multiple-item five-point Likert type scales have been used and while some items were adopted from previous studies in the literature, some of them have been used without any changes.

The items measuring personal involvement to online search have been adapted from the studies of Murray (1991), Capella et al. (1999) and Mathwick & Rigdon (2004). For this measurement 4 items have been generated. The items measuring openness to social platforms have been adapted from the studies of Kuntaraporn et al. (2006), Riegner (2007) and Lai et al. (1998). For this measurement 15 items have been generated. The items measuring consumers' Internet usage capacity have been adapted from the studies of Mathwick & Rigdon (2004), Hoffman et al. (2000), Camarero & Martin (2008) and Lee et al. (2001). For this measurement 7 items have been generated. The items measuring consumers' level of anxiety have been adapted from the studies of Balasubramanian et al. (1997), Nelson (1970) and Murray (1991). For this measurement 6 items have been generated. The items measuring perceived credibility of the Internet have been adapted from the studies of Kiousis (2001), Metzger (2007) and Flanagin et al. (2003). For this measurement 5 items have been generated. The items measuring perceived ease of use online environment have been adapted from the studies of Lai et al. (1998). For this measurement 4 items have been generated. The items measuring perceived ease of use online environment and perceived benefit of the Internet have been adapted from the studies of Lai et al. (1998). For perceived ease of use online environment, 4 items have been generated and for perceived benefit of the Internet, 3 items have been generated. The items for perceived benefit of social media have been adapted from the studies of Riegner

(2007) and Kuntaraporn et al. (2006). For this measurement 11 items have been generated. Totally 68 items have been generated to measure independent variables.

To understand the controlled variables on participants and to have more meaningful results from the study, the questions on demographical variables (age, gender, occupation, marital status and education level), which social media channels are preferred, and the frequency of checking social media channels, the Internet usage reasons of the participants, have been generated. Besides demographical and dependant variables, one more question has been added to eliminate people who are not using any social platforms to be able to reach the meaningful targeted database for the study.

Last but not the least, 9 items created to measure the social media engagement of the young Turkish population as the dependant variable. While 3 of the 9 items have been adapted from the studies of Fullerton (2005) and Doorn et al. (2010), the rest of the items have been generated by the researcher.

To determine which samples to use in the study, the literature have consulted. Two major efforts of the sample are to represent the Turkish young consumers' attitude to the internet and to be open to all information sources as online and offline. The young are heavy users of the Internet and more open to all information sources. Lee et al.'s study indicated that "Internet users are likely to have more incentive to search in general, and thus be relatively heavy users of all sources" (2001, p. 15). Lee et al. (2001) simply explains that since younger users are more familiar with the Internet and their cost of online searching is lower, they invest more in online searching than general Internet users. Moreover, research conducted in April 2010 indicates that the usage of the Internet among individuals aged 16 -74 in Turkey increased by 22.8 percent from 2004 to today (Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), http://www.tuik.gov.tr/VeriBilgi.do?tb_id=60&ust_id=2).

According to the Turkish Statistics Institute (TÜIK), half of the Turkish population is younger than 29.2 years of age (TÜİK, http://www.tuik.gov.tr/PreHaberBultenleri.do?id=8428). The ratio of Turkish

population to working population aged 15-34 was 33.5 percent in 2009 (TÜİK, http://www.tuik.gov.tr/PreHaberBultenleri.do?id=8373). Taking into account these facts about Internet, the younger population's Internet usage and the nature of selected service sectors, the target group for this study has been selected as youths between the age of 18 and 39, who use Internet and social channels.

4.3 SURVEY DESIGN

The conceptual framework and the proposed hypotheses have been tested with web-based surveys, beginning with a scenario that queries the consumers' online information search via social networks. After consumers confirm their participation in the survey, they may complete the questionnaire. The web-based survey site software checks for missing responses and prompts users to answer them. The questionnaire was originally in English and is now translated into Turkish, and edited for respondents to answer in their language. The survey's duration was two weeks. Respondents were randomly mailed to the targeted group to fill out the survey. The main of collecting data has been to reach to a varied group of people who is more open to social platforms and not very open to them.

5. ANALYSES and RESULTS

This section presents demographics of the respondents, factor analysis and correlation analyses, regression analyses. The analyses were carried out with the help of 243 questionnaires which are valid.

Research data was analyzed through SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) 17.0. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations were used to analyze the data.

Explanatory Factor Analysis is employed to reveal elicit construct validity by handling asked questions separately. To research with many variables may not provide healthy results. If the variables are the actual measurement values of more general variable, general variable value may be used to work easier on data set and to interpret in a more simple way. Factor analysis is the form containing data set and the form of creating general variable, named as factor (Akgül and Çevik 2004, p. 417). Factor analysis, the name of a group of multivariate statistical method, reduces some data and summarizes data set to get meaningful results. This method analyse interrelation in multivariate variables and explains common features (factors) of these multivariate variables.

With the aim of conducting factor analysis, tests of Kmo and Barlett, showing sufficiency of the sample of the research, were employed. After the tests, Kmo value is expected to be close to 1 and when Bartlett test reveals a p-value less than 0, 05, the factor analysis is acceptable. After the Kmo and Barlett tests, to define the scale's lower dimensions, factor analysis is conducted and all the emerged factors were individually subjected reliability analysis. Additionally, the percentage of factors' variance description was scrutinized.

On the other hand, reliability analysis of scales' internal consistency was conducted. Reliability is the consistency between independent measurements of the same variable (Ergün, no date). That means reliability enables to eliminate random errors while the research conducted. To study on reliability, widely used method is Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. For Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, when it is greater than the threshold value of 0.70, it is accepted that the scales have high reliability (Nunnally 1978).

To detect relation between factors, Pearson Correlation Analysis was employed. Correlation Analysis is a statistical method that is used to test linear relationship between two variables and to measure the degree of this relationship if there is one. The aim of conducting correlation analysis is to see in which way the dependent variable changes when independent variable changes (Şeref 2005, p. 115).

To test the effects of independent variables on dependent variables, linear regression was employed.

The results have been evaluated bidirectionally in a 95 percent confidence bound with a significance level of $p<0.05$.

5.1 FACTOR ANALYSIS and RELAIBILTY TEST

After Kmo and Barlett analyses, Kmo value was as 0,854 and Barlett value was less than 0,05, which means factor analysis could be conducted. At the end of factor analysis, 8 factors were found with a 68, 33 percent total variance. Items discarded in factor analysis are listed in Table 5.2.

Table 5.1: Factor analysis and reliability test

Variable	Items	Factor Loading	Variance	Cronbach's Alpha
Consumers' Internet Usage Capacity	I have good navigation skills.	0,872	14,008	0,941
	Browsing is easy for me.	0,866		
	I consider myself knowledgeable about good search techniques on the Web.	0,856		
	I know how to find what I am looking for on the Web.	0,854		
	I can easily find what I need.	0,846		
	I am extremely skilled at using the Web.	0,815		
Social Media Engagement	I am a very experienced user of social platforms.	0,842	10,121	0,887
	I am a heavy user of social platforms.	0,807		
	I use social platforms for any communication I need to do.	0,788		
	I cannot do without checking what is happening on the social platforms I am a member of.	0,749		
	I spend quite a lot of time in social platforms to seek for new service information.	0,645		
Openness to Social Platforms	I like forwarding interesting emails about the service from one group of my friends to another.	0,837	9,804	0,877
	I like to forward my friends' emails containing information or opinions about the service that we both like.	0,834		
	I tend to forward my friends negative reviews on the service.	0,819		
	I tend to forward my friends positive reviews on the service.	0,804		
	I tend to use the ''Send this site to my friend'' function in a web site when I find interesting news about services we both are interested in.	0,593		
Perceived benefit of Social Platforms	Since getting on the social platforms, I have become more connected to people who share my hobbies/recreational activities through them.	0,877	8,298	0,866

	Since getting on the social platforms, I have become more connected to people like me.	0,864		
	I can meet other people who share my interests.	0,787		
	I have become more connected to people in similar life situations through the social platforms.	0,673		
Level of Anxiety	I talk to my family and my friends to get their opinion, to make the best choice.	0,784	7,002	0,739
	I definitely ask questions of individuals who have previously purchased that service.	0,765		
	I try to recall what I have heard about that company.	0,69		
	I approach the company offering service, in person (to get more details).	0,646		
Perceived benefit of the Internet	Since getting on the internet, my work productivity increased.	0,883	6,605	0,873
	Since getting on the internet, my work performance improved.	0,868		
	The information base of the Internet helped me take better decisions.	0,7		
Perceived Credibility of the Internet	I believe that online sources always provide complete and comprehensive information	0,88	6,428	0,798
	I believe that online information sources are always up-to-date	0,865		
	I trust online news when I need information about a service.	0,654		
Personal Involvement to Online Information Search	I could collect knowledge or information about this service before using or purchasing the service on the Internet	0,833	6,068	0,777
	I pay attention to what previous customers had to say about the service.	0,766		
	I search some web sites; especially I am interested for the pure enjoyment of it.	0,703		
Total Variance 68,33 percent				

Although most of the items were adapted from empirical studies, some items needed to be excluded after factor analysis. One construct, Perceived ease of use Online Environment, had to be taken away from the theoretical model because all of its items were excluded after factor analysis. On the other hand, with the extracted items the study turned to be a strong form because irrelevant items are taken away.

After these revisions, evidently, all of the constructs except perceived ease of use online environment – consumers' internet usage capacity, social media engagement, openness to social platforms, perceived benefit of social platforms, level of anxiety, perceived benefit of the Internet, perceived credibility of the Internet, personal involvement to online information search, – received high reliability assessments by Cronbach alpha measures which are, 0,941, 0,887, 0,877, 0,866, 0,739, 0,873, 0,798, and 0,777, respectively (See Table 5.1).

All of the scales have reliability because all reliability values are bigger than 0,70 threshold value (Nunnally, 1978).

Table 5.2: Excluded items and constructs

Construct	Item
Consumers' Internet Usage Capacity	I can share these findings to my own Internet pages.
Level of Anxiety	I search for any information relevant to that service
Perceived benefit of Social Platforms	People specifically ask me for my opinion
	I know a lot about the topic
	When i am bored, I have something to do
	I can disagree with a review or rating
	I and my friends find something to talk
	I think the social platforms are the best and easiest way to search for information
	I have become more connected to people in my family through the social platforms.
Perceived Credibility of the Internet	Online information services seem more reliable to me if they are generated by other users
	I believe that one should always seek out other sources to validate online information.
Perceived ease of use Online Environment	Learning to use the Internet would be easy for me.
	It would be easy for me to become skilful at using the Internet.
	I would find the Internet easy to use.
Personal Involvement to Online Information Search	I enjoy the Internet search for its own sake, aside from any services I may eventually purchase.
	I pay attention to what previous customers had to say about the service.
Social Media Engagement	I will recommend the service company, I have experienced, to someone who seeks information on social platforms.
	If I am satisfied with the service, I tend to share my experiences about the service company on the social platforms I am a member of.
	I tend to share what is happening recently on the social platforms I am a member of.
	If I am not satisfied with the service, I tend to share my negative experiences about service company on the social platforms I am a member of.

Based on reasons such as communality being lower than 0.50, theoretically wrong factor loading, double-factor loading and single item factor, these items have been removed from the study (See Table 5.2).

5.2 FINDINGS RELATED TO DEMOGRAPHICS

In this section, demographical distribution of the sample will be examined in detail.

Table 5.3: Gender

		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	**Female**	167	68,7
	Male	76	31,3
	Total	243	100

Table 5.3 shows gender status of the sample. 69 percent of the respondents were female (n=167), 31 percent of the respondents were male (n=76). More than half of the sample is female which proves that women are more reluctant to join studies on the Internet (See Table 5.3).

Table 5.4: Age

		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	**18-29**	161	66,3
	30 - 39	63	25,9
	40 - 49	11	4,5
	50 and above	8	3,3

Table 5.4 clarifies that 66 percent of respondents were 18 – 29 years old (n=161), 26 percent of them were 30-39 years old (n=63), 5 percent of them were 40 – 49 years old (n=11) and 3 percent of them were 50 and above years old (n=8). As the aim of the study to reach Turkish young population between the ages of 18 – 39, the study could reach the targeted sample because 93 percent of respondents were 18 -39 years old. Young population's great interest to study, conducted on the Internet, is a great sign that younger generation is more open to any activities carried out on the Internet.

Table 5.5: Marital status

		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Marital Status	**Married**	72	29,6
	Single	171	70,4

While 30 percent of the respondents were married (n= 72), 70 percent of them were single (171). Findings of the study did not aim to reach the impact of being married or not being engaged to social media and the Internet but single respondents had more tendencies to join the Internet activities (See Table 5.5).

Table 5.6: Education level

		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Education Level	**Elementary**	1	0,4
	High School	31	12,8
	Associate Degree	23	9,5
	Undergraduate	138	56,8
	Post Graduate	43	17,7
	PHD	7	2,9

Table 5.6 shows that only 1 respondent got an elementary school degree, 13 percent of the respondents got a high school degree (n=31), 10 percent got an associate's degree (n=23), 57 percent got an undergraduate degree (n=138), 18 percent got a master's degree (n=43) and 3 percent got a PHD degree (n=7). As stated before while the degree of education increases, the probability of using the Internet and benefitting from its advantages increases.

Table 5.7: Occupation

		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Occupation	**Employed**	206	84,8
	Unemployed	5	2
	Student	30	12,3
	Housewife	2	0,8

Table 5.7 summarizes the occupation distribution of the data. 85 percent of the respondents were working, 2 percent were not working (n=2), 12 percent of them were student (n=30), and 1 percent of them were housewives (n=2). Working population and the students were the group who participate this study.

Table 5.8: Social media membership

Social Media Membership	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Facebook Membership	239	98,4
Twitter Membership	91	37,4
Linkedin Membership	40	16,5
Friendfeed Membership	11	4,5
Myspace Membership	19	7,8
Tumblr Membership	7	2,9
Flickr Membership	12	4,9
Foursquare Membership	11	4,5
Blogs	3	1,2
Youtube Membership	1	0,4
Donanım Haber	1	0,4
Ekşisözlük	1	0,4
Formspring	2	0,8
last.fm	2	0,8
MSN	2	0,8
Netlog	1	0,4
Online journals	2	0,8
Sosyomat	2	0,8
Stumbleupon	1	0,4
WAYN	1	0,4

All the respondents were at least a member of a social platform (See Table 5.8). This data clarifies that young Turkish Internet users are very open to social platforms, but there are some popular social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. When the

ratios of using social media platforms in Turkey are scrutinized, the importance of Facebook for Turkish young population reveals one more time. While there are 8 billion Web pages on the Internet, only Facebook, by itself, provides 12,73 percent of web traffic(http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=230108337030128).

To support this information, 98,4 percent of the respondents (239 person) is member of Facebook.

While Twitter comes second after Facebook with the ratio of 37,4 percent (91 person), Linked-in comes third with the ratio of 16,5 percent (40 person). Rest of the distribution is as follows:

1. 7,8 percent of the respondents is a member of Myspace (n=19),
2. 4,9 percent is a member of Flickr (n=12),
3. 4,5 percent is a member of Frienfeed (n=11),
4. 4,5 percent is a member of Foursquare (n=11),
5. 2,9 percent is a member of Tumblr (n=7).

Table 5.9: The frequency of checking social media channels

		Frequency	**Percentage (%)**
How often do you check social platforms you are a member of?	Once a day	82	33,7
	A bunch of times in a day	135	55,6
	Once a week	22	9,1
	Once a month	4	1,6
	Total	243	100,0

34 percent of the respondents check their own pages once a day (n= 82), 56 percent of them check their own pages a bunch of times in a day (n=135), 9 percent of them check these pages once a week (n=22) and 1 percent of them check these pages once a month (n=4). The ratio of respondents, checking their own pages a bunch of time in a day, in total shows that respondents follow social media platforms, want to be update and communicate through these pages (See Table 5.9).

Table 5.10: Purposes of the Internet usage

	N	%
Job	84	34,6
For Social Platforms	53	21,8
To shop	4	1,6
To chat	12	4,9
To do academic research	12	4,9
To search for products and services	10	4,1
To read news	38	15,6
To kill time	7	2,9
To have fun	10	4,1
To follow forums and blogs	8	3,3
To get information about medical	5	2,1

At the end of respondents' ranking of the Internet usage purposes, respondents use the Internet for their job at first choice with the ratio of 35 percent. Because the distribution of the respondent consists of young and employed, this result is not surprising. When the respondents were asked their attitude with regard to the Internet and whether or not they perceive any benefits gained by using it, the majority of the respondents think that their work performance improved since getting on the internet. As this study support, social platforms that respondents are a member of have a significant place among users' purposes of Internet usages. The study reveals that 22 percent of the respondents use the Internet for their own pages at first choice (n=53). The third priority of using the Internet is to read news with the ratio of 16 percent (n= 38). Respondents use the Internet to chat and to do academic research with the ratio of 5 percent each (24 person in total). The Internet is used primarily; by 4 percent of the respondents to have fun (n=10), by 3 percent of them to kill time (n=7), by 2 percent of them to get information about medical (5), by 2 percent of them to shop (n=4). 3 percent of the respondents' using the Internet to kill time is being the strongest evidence that users are not aimless any more when they are 'surfing'.

Table 5.11: Pearson correlation matrix of variables

	Consumers' Internet Usage Capacity	Social Media Engagement	Openness to Social Platforms	Perceived benefit of Social Platforms	Level of Anxiety	Perceived benefit of the Internet	Perceived Credibility of the Internet	Personal Involvement to Online Information Search
Consumers' Internet Usage Capacity	**0,941**							
Social Media Engagement	0,366**	**0,887**						
Openness to Social Platforms	0,128*	0,370**	**0,877**					
Perceived benefit of Social Platforms	0,117	0,432**	0,327**	**0,866**				
Level of Anxiety	-0,127*	-0,266**	-0,319**	-0,199**	**0,739**			
Perceived benefit of the Internet	0,436**	0,347**	0,269**	0,246**	-0,247**	**0,873**		
Perceived Credibility of the Internet	0,281**	0,321**	0,186**	0,291**	-0,167**	0,305**	**0,798**	
Personal Involvement to Online Information Search	0,348**	0,274**	0,306**	0,086	-0,381**	0,287**	0,218**	**0,777**

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
Reliabilities are shown in bold.

5.3 HYPOTHESES TESTING

In this section, hypotheses and correlation matrix will be scrutinized in detail.

5.3.1 Relation of level of anxiety with personal involvement with online information search and consumers' internet usage capacity

H1: The more involved a consumer is personally with online information search, the lower their perceived anxiety about the service.

H9: The higher the Internet usage capacity consumers have, the less anxiety consumers feel.

The relationship between personal involvement with online information search and anxiety level is statistically significant as a result of correlation analysis conducted to determine the relationship scores in 38.1 percent negative direction. ($r=-0.381$; $p=0.000<0.05$). According to this result, as personal involvement with online information search increases, the level of anxiety decreases. Based on this information, it could be said that, as the study suggests, the more people are involved and talented in terms of searching, the less risk they feel towards information they derive from the internet.

The relationship between anxiety level and consumers' Internet usage capacity is statistically significant as a result of correlation analysis conducted to determine the relationship between scores in 12.7 percent negative direction ($r=-0.127$; $p=0.049<0.05$). According to this, as the level of anxiety increases, the consumers' Internet usage capacity decreases. This result confirms the information that the research defends. The more anxious people are, the less they will be directed to use online sources. We see that, instead of consulting online information, they are more inclined towards offline sources of information.

Table 51.12: Regression analysis of the effect personal involvement with online information search and consumers' Internet usage capacity have on anxiety level

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	ß	t	p	F	Model (p)	R^2
Level of Anxiety	Constant	3,962	13,524	**0,000**	20,436	**0,000**	0,138
	Personal Involvement with Online Information Search	-0,399	-6,030	**0,000**			
	Consumers' Internet Usage Capacity	0,006	0,110	0,913			

The regression model to test the relationship between anxiety level and personal involvement with online information search and consumers' Internet usage capacity is statistically significant (F=20.436; p=0.000<0.05). When personal involvement with online information search increases by 1 unit, anxiety level drops by -0.399 unit (ß=-0.399; t=-6.030; p=0.000<0.05). On the other hand, consumers' Internet usage capacity does not statistically influence anxiety level (t=0.110; p=0.913>0.05). Personal involvement with online information search and consumers' Internet usage capacity express an anxiety level of 0.138 (R^2=0.138). (*H1 is supported; H9 is not supported).*

5.3.2 Relation of perceived credibility of online information with personal involvement with online information search and consumers' Internet usage capacity

H2: The more involved a consumer is personally with online information search, the more they perceive online information as credible.

H8: *The higher the Internet usage capacity consumers have, the more credible consumers perceive online information sources.*

The relationship between perceived credibility of online information and consumers' Internet usage capacity is statistically significant as a result of correlation analysis conducted to determine the relationship between scores in 28.1 percent positive

direction (r=0.281; p=0.000<0.05). According to this result, as the perceived credibility of online information increases, so does consumers' Internet usage capacity.

The relationship between personal involvement with online information search and perceived credibility of online information is statistically significant as a result of correlation analysis conducted to determine the relationship between scores in 21.8 percent positive direction (r=0.218; p=0.001<0.05). According to this result, as the study defends, when personal involvement with online information increases, the perceived credibility of online information also increases.

Table 5.13: Regression analysis of the effect personal involvement with online information search has on the level of perceived credibility of online information

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	ß	t	p	F	Model (p)	R^2
Perceived Credibility of Online Information	Constant	1,476	4,524	**0,000**	12,650	**0,000**	0,088
	Personal Involvement with Online Information Search	0,154	2,085	**0,038**			
	Consumers' Internet Usage Capacity	0,232	3,565	**0,000**			

The regression model to test the relationship among the level of perceived credibility of online information, personal involvement with online information search and consumers' Internet usage capacity is statistically significant (F=12.650; p=0.000<0.05). When personal involvement with online information increases by 1 unit, perceived credibility of online information increases by 0.154 unit (ß=0.154; t=2.085; p=0.038<0.05). When consumers' Internet usage capacity increases by 1 unit, perceived credibility of online information increases by 0.232 unit (ß=0.232; t=3.565; p=0.000<0.05). Personal involvement with online information search and consumers' Internet usage capacity express perceived credibility of online information at a level of 0.088 (R^2=0.088) *(H2 and H8 are supported).*

5.3.3 Relationship between Personal Involvement with Online Information Search and Perceived easiness and Perceived Ease of Use of Online Environment

H3: The more involved a consumer is personally with online information search, the easier it is for them to navigate an online environment.

Perceived ease of use of online environment does not appear in the study because all of its factors have been taken out in factor analysis.

5.3.4 Relation of Personal Involvement with Online Information Search with Rational Involvement to Online Information and Affective Involvement to Online Information

H4: The more a consumer needs to find rational information, the more they personally involved to online information search.
H5: The more a consumer needs to find affective information, the more they personally involved to online information search.

Personal involvement with online information search has not created two separate dimensions as rational and affective but rather unified them in a single dimension. In this framework, hypotheses H5 and H6 were not able to be tested.

5.3.5 Relationship between perceived benefit of social platforms and openness to social platforms

H6: The more open consumers are to social platforms, the more benefits they will perceive with regard to using social platforms.

The relationship between perceived benefit of social platforms and openness to social platforms is statistically significant as a result of correlation analysis conducted to determine the relationship between scores in 32.7 percent positive direction ($r=0.327$; $p=0.000<0.05$). According to this result, as perceived benefit of social platforms increases, so does openness to social platforms. It could be said that users' stance towards social platforms is very much related to their perceived benefit from social

platforms. The more open users are to social platforms, the more perceived benefits they receive from social platforms.

Tablo 5.14: Regression analysis of how the level of openness to social platforms affects the level of perceived benefits of social platforms

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	ß	t	p	F	Model (p)	R^2
Perceived benefit of Social Platforms	Constant	2,195	10,751	**0,000**	28,786	**0,000**	0,103
	Openness to Social Platforms	0,322	5,365	**0,000**			

The regression model to test the relationship between perceived benefits of social platforms and openness to social platforms is statistically significant (F=28.786; p=0.000<0.05). When openness to social platforms increases by 1 unit, perceived benefits of social platforms increases by 0.322 unit (ß=0.322; t=5.365; p=0.000<0.05). Among factors that determine perceived benefits from social platforms, openness to social platforms expresses perceived benefits of social platforms at a level of 0.103 (R^2=0.103) *(H6 is supported).*

5.3.6 Relationship between Perceived Ease of Use of Online Environment and Personal Involvement with Online Information Search

H7: The higher the Internet usage capacity consumers have, the easier the perceived use of online environment.

Perceived ease of use of online environment dimension does not appear in the study because all of its elements have been taken out during factor analysis.

5.3.7 Relation of Social Media Engagement with Level of Anxiety, Perceived Credibility of Online Information, Perceived Benefit of Social Platforms and Perceived Benefit of the Internet

H10: The more anxiety felt by the consumer, the less they engage in social media.
H13: The more benefits of social media platforms that are perceived by consumers, the more engaged they become in social media.

H14: The more benefits of the Internet that are perceived by consumers, the more engaged they become in social media.
H11: The more credibility a consumer assigns to an online information source, the more likely they are to be engaged in social media.

The relationship between anxiety level and social media engagement is statistically significant as a result of correlation analysis conducted to determine the relationship between scores in 26.6 percent negative direction ($r=-0.266$; $p=0.000<0.05$). According to this result, as the level of anxiety increases, social media engagement decreases. In the framework of the hypothesis the research defends, users who have a high level of anxiety for the information they receive from social platforms generally display less social media engagement.

The relationship between perceived benefits from social platforms and social media engagement is statistically significant as a result of correlation analysis conducted to determine the relationship between scores in 43.2 percent positive direction ($r=0.432$; $p=0.000<0.05$). The result of this correlation, which is one of the main research questions of the study, supports the study's hypothesis. According to this result, as the perceived benefits of social platforms increases, so does social media engagement.

The relationship between perceived benefit of the Internet and social media engagement is statistically significant as a result of correlation analysis conducted to determine the relationship between scores in 34.7 percent positive direction ($r=0.347$; $p=0.000<0.05$). According to this result, when users' perceived benefits of the Internet increases, their social media engagement increases, as well.

The relationship between perceived credibility of online information and social media engagement is statistically significant as a result of correlation analysis conducted to determine the relationship between scores in 32.1 percent positive direction ($r=0.321$; $p=0.000<0.05$). According to this result, as perceived credibility of online information increases, so does social media engagement. Previous studies were based on the concept of the Internet rather than social platforms, and they defended that as faith in online information sources increased, so did Internet engagement. Based on the result of this correlation analysis, however, social platforms replace Internet to put forth meaningful results along with other information in the literature.

Table 5.15 Regression analysis of the effect independent variables have on social media engagement

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	ß	t	p	F	Model (p)	R^2
Social Media Engagement	Constant	1,514	4,345	**0,000**	23,756	**0,000**	0,273
	Level of Anxiety	-0,156	-2,288	**0,023**			
	Perceived Credibility of Online Information	0,164	2,519	**0,012**			
	Perceived Benefit of Social Platforms	0,290	5,371	**0,000**			
	Perceived Benefit of the Internet	0,187	3,224	**0,001**			

The regression model to test the relationship between independent variables and social media engagement is statistically significant (F=23.756; p=0.000<0.05).

When anxiety level increases by 1 unit, social media engagement decreases by -0.156 unit (ß=-0.156; t=-2.288; p=0.023<0.05).

When perceived credibility of online information increases by 1 unit, social media engagement increases by 0.164 unit (ß=0.164; t=2.519; p=0.012<0.05).

When perceived benefit of social platforms increases by 1 unit, social media engagement decreases by 0.290 unit (ß=0.290; t=5.371; p=0.000<0.05).

When perceived benefit of the Internet increases by 1 unit, social media engagement increases by 0.187 unit (ß=0.187; t=3.224; p=0.001<0.05).

Anxiety level, perceived credibility of online information, perceived benefits of social platforms and perceived benefits of the Internet express social media engagement at a level of 0.273 (R^2=0.273) *(H10, H13, H14 and H11 are supported).*

5.3.8 Relationship between Perceived Ease of Use of Online Environment and Social Media Engagement

H12: The easier consumers perceive the online environment, the more they engage with the social media.

Perceived ease of use of online environment does not appear in the study because all of its dimensions have been taken out in factor analysis.

5.4 DISCUSSION and IMPLICATIONS

This study conducted to find out the factors affecting social network platform engagement for online information search and collection. The main aims of the study can be summarized as follows:

a- What are the primary reasons to use the Internet?
b- What are the platforms that social platform users primarily prefer?
c- What are factors that influence social media engagement?
d- What factors affect young people's methods of acquiring information via online information sources?

First of all, as the aim of the study to reach Turkish young population between the ages of 18 – 39, the study reaches the targeted sample because 93 percent of respondents were 18 -39 years old. This information shows that the sample used is the same one that the study aims to reach and that the information acquired is quitely right.

Since a majority of social platform users are employed, it has been seen that the primary use of Internet is for work. 22 percent of participants use the Internet primarly for social platforms of which they are members. Another 57 percent of social platform users check

social platforms more than once in a day as the study suggests. This is a very important conclusion that consumers have an already engagement with social media channels whether or not related with information collection.

Based on these two findings, it could be said that social platforms have an intense effect on the daily lives of the sample group selected. In this sense, it could also be said that social platform users pay attention to the information or status updates posted by people they follow.

The findings that the study suggests about Turkish users' preferred social platforms have also been found to be accurate. The study suggested that Turkish users intensely used Facebook. As the research defends, 98 percent of participants have Facebook membership.

Whether the hypotheses given in the study's theoretical framework are supported by the analyses has been summarized in the table below.

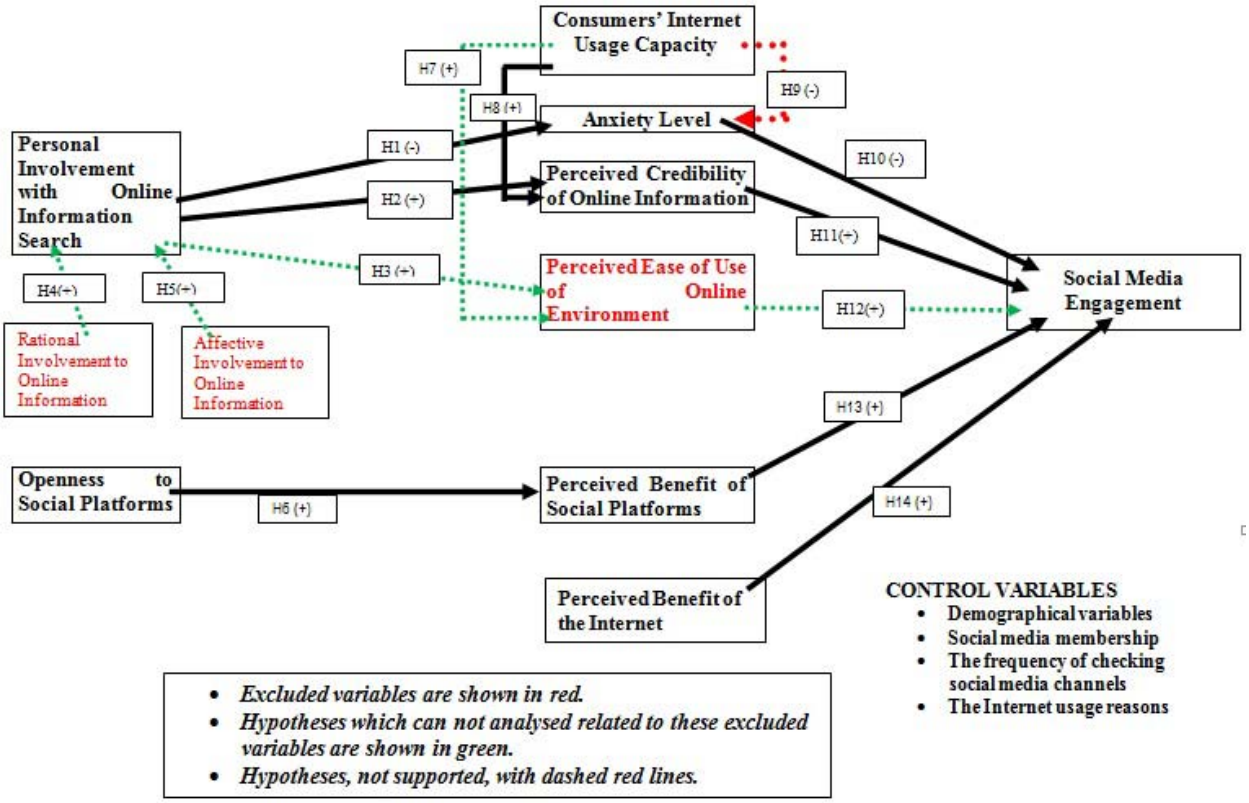

Figure 5.1: Summary of Hypotheses

Unexpectedly, all of the elements pertaining to the perceived ease of use of online environment variable had to be taken out during factor analysis. Since the 4th, 8th and 13th hypotheses were removed at the end of the factor analysis, they are not supported. For this reason, there is not any significant relationship between Internet users' perceived ease of use of online environment and their personal involvement with online information search, social media engagement and consumers' Internet usage capacity.

H3: The more involved a consumer is personally with online information search, the easier it is for them to navigate an online environment.

H7: The higher the Internet usage capacity consumers have, the easier the perceived use of online environment.

H12: The easier consumers perceive the online environment, the more they engage with the social media.

Considering the results of the analyses, it can be briefly stated that most of the hypotheses proposed in the theoretical model have been supported except for the relationships between:

1. Level of anxiety with consumers' internet usage capacity
2. Personal Involvement with Online Information Search and Perceived easiness and Perceived Ease of Use of Online Environment
3. Personal Involvement with Online Information Search with Rational Involvement to Online Information and Affective Involvement to Online Information
4. Perceived Ease of Use of Online Environment and Personal Involvement with Online Information Search

In contrast to theoretic information, it has been observed that consumers' ability to use the Internet well does not lower their anxiety level.

Accord with academic findings, the personal involvement with online information process variable was divided into two as rational and affective involvement. Since factors pertaining to academic model were taken out as a result of factor analysis, personal involvement with online information search did not constitute two dimensions as rational and affective but was instead unified in a single dimension as personal involvement with online information process.

The hypotheses that were not supported based on this result are given below.

H9: The higher the Internet usage capacity consumers have, the less anxiety consumers feel.
H4: The more a consumer needs to find rational information, the more they personally involved to online information search.
H5: The more a consumer needs to find affective information, the more they personally involved to online information search.

As expected, it has been seen that the important findings researched within the theoretical framework are supported. When the relationship between personal

involvement with online information search and anxiety level, which is one of the most important findings of the study, is examined, as consumers' level of anxiety increases, their tendency to acquire information from online information sources also increases. This finding is the backbone of the study; it expresses the dependent variable of social media engagement and tendency to search for information online as an anxiety level. Based on this finding, there is a strong relationship among the credibility of online information sources, personal involvement with online information search and consumers' Internet usage capacities.

When the relationship between the approach to social platforms and the perceived benefit of social platforms is examined, the theoretic information is supported in that consumers' positive approach to social platforms allow them to interpret the information they derive from online sources as beneficial.

Except the relationship between perceived ease of use of online environment and social media engagement, the results of the analyses on the relationship between the social media engagement variable and independent variables support theoretic findings. It is not surprising to see that because consumers' levels of anxiety are high, their social media engagement levels are low and that they do not prefer online sources for information. It has also been seen that the benefits consumers derive from the Internet and social platforms positively affect their social media engagement. Based on this, offline communication methods are still important for consumers when it comes to services that have high anxiety level or that are expensive.

Another one of the study's important findings is that consumers' perceived credibility in online information sources increases their social media engagement.

The supported hypotheses are summarized below:

H1: The more involved a consumer is personally with online information search, the lower their perceived anxiety about the service.
H2: The more involved a consumer is personally with online information search, the more they perceive online information as credible.

H8: *The higher the Internet usage capacity consumers have, the more credible consumers perceive online information sources.*

H6: The more open consumers are to social platforms, the more benefits they will perceive with regard to using social platforms.

H10: The more anxiety felt by the consumer, the less they engage in social media.
H13: The more benefits of social media platforms that are perceived by consumers, the more engaged they become in social media.
H14: The more benefits of the Internet that are perceived by consumers, the more engaged they become in social media.
H11: The more credibility a consumer assigns to an online information source, the more likely they are to be engaged in social media.

Online information services were summarized before in the study. At the end of the result of the study, social media channels needs to be added to this category as an online information source.

Online information Sources: Internet ads, Internet stores, Internet information, non-advocate impersonal sources.

5.5 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

When the relationship between the approach to social platforms and the benefits derived from social platforms is examined, the theoretic information is supported in that consumers' positive approach towards social platforms allows them to perceive the information they will receive from these sources as beneficial. This important information will shape the approaches of ever-expanding Turkish firms to inform, solve problems or carry on customer services via social platforms. When the national population's Internet usage and social platform usage levels and frequency are taken into consideration, it is seen that consumers frequently use online information sources. This is why it is recommended that services such as providing information via social platforms should be increased and carried out more effectively.

On the other hand, in the online world where consumers' Internet usage capacities are increasing each day, consumers can easily distinguish healthy information. It is recommended that firms keep their information located on social platforms and the Internet consistent and provided from a primary source.

Similarly, when the close relationship between social media engagement and the benefits consumers derive from the Internet and social platforms is considered, the information that firms provide consumers with should be timesaving, qualified and consisting recommendations and convince them that the information they receive is truly beneficial.

Since offline communication tools are still important to consumers when it comes to services with high perceived risks or great expense, firms that offer these types of services should use a mixed marketing communication method for consumers with high anxiety level.

Lastly, there is a direct relationship between consumers with social media engagement and the credibility they feel towards information they will derive from these sources. Based on this finding, it is recommended that, following the results of researching the demographic characteristics of their target audiences, firms intensely focus on social platform alternatives to provide online information for consumers.

5.6 RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

The restrictions of the study can briefly be described as, the utilization of convenience sampling method and the difficulty of measuring social media engagement without any real case study. As the next step of the study, it will be healthy for real case studies and observations to be held based on examples selected from among service types.

Because the surveys were conducted via web-based surveys, a trade-off between broader accessibility to target sample and low control over respondents emerged.

Since the study is an academic one, due to the length of the survey form prepared, participants' attention may have been diverted during the process of responding to the survey.

Even though it is discussed frequently, the fact that social media engagement is a new factor, as well as the fact that the engagement dimension of social platform usage and which factors affect it is only recently being studied, may have led to false interpretations.

Although perceived risk defines the limits of searching activity and is a factor affecting social media engagement, this study does not include perceived risk variable. The perceived risk, one of the factors of information search behaviour, needs to be included in the further studies.

In order to prevent these situations and increase the credibility and validity of the theoretic model, the findings of the study may be researched using one of the qualitative research methods too and the results may be evaluated simultaneously.

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