



## Variety seeking in restaurant choice and its drivers

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify variety drivers in restaurant settings and to examine their influence on diners' variety seeking intentions. More specifically, this study considered perceived quality, customer satisfaction, overall boredom, and boredom with restaurant attributes as variety drivers and examined how they affect customers' variety seeking intentions. Further, this study investigated the moderating role of personality characteristics and overall loyalty level toward a restaurant in the relationship between variety drivers and variety seeking intentions. The results showed that atmospheric quality, overall boredom, and boredom with atmospheric attributes significantly influence variety seeking intentions. Personality characteristics reflecting optimal stimulation level also played a moderating role in the relationship between overall boredom and variety seeking intentions. Theoretical and managerial implications are provided in the conclusion.

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### 1. Introduction

The restaurant industry is continuously growing worldwide. In the United States, there are currently over 8 million outlets ranging from small family owned units to large multinational chains operating thousands of stores worldwide. As the number of restaurants increase, people have many options for choosing a restaurant. When service does not meet a customer's expectations at a particular restaurant, they may seek another restaurant. By seeking variety they can choose better alternatives among a number of options. People may also want new dining experiences and seek novel alternatives to provide a change in their daily lives. In other words, customers might seek variety when choosing a restaurant. Indeed, people often choose among several alternatives when they purchase certain products or services. Many people have multiple loyalties toward several alternatives and continuously seek a variety of options in their choice contexts, a situation in which customers choose one product or service among various alternatives. This reflects that variety seeking is part of consumer nature in consumption situations.

Prior studies on consumer variety seeking behavior suggested that the need for variety is based on past purchase experiences, which influence decision making in choice situations. The optimal stimulation level (OSL) theory argues that repeat purchases induce boredom with consumption experiences, purchased brands

or products/services. This triggers variety seeking in choice situations to reduce boredom and increase stimulation to the preferred level (Raju, 1980; Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 1992; Jang and Feng, 2007). Prior studies have also postulated that boredom with specific attributes of products or services leads to variety seeking (Johnson et al., 1995; Inman, 2001). Indeed, customers might be bored with either the dining experience itself or specific restaurant attributes. Both could be reasons to go to another restaurant for a change.

When customers dine out at a restaurant, they cognitively evaluate what they experience. Prior studies on perceived quality and future behaviors suggested that the perceived quality of a product or service is a critical factor determining future behaviors, especially loyalty related behaviors (Chiou et al., 2002; Bell et al., 2005; Fullerton, 2004; Gonzalez et al., 2007). Satisfaction with the dining experience also affects customers' future behavioral intentions (Fornell et al., 1996; Jones et al., 2006; Oliver, 1980, 1997). Accordingly, a higher perception of the quality of product and service attributes and satisfaction with the dining experience induce more favorable behavioral intentions. Hence, if a consumer's perception of quality or satisfaction level is low, he or she will seek better choices among various alternatives.

Beyond variety drivers associated with the dining experience, other factors such as personality characteristics, affective state, product category-level characteristics, and loyalty are also involved in variety seeking in choice situations (Chuang et al., 2008; Roehm and Roehm, 2005; Choi et al., 2006). In particular, personality characteristics related to variety seeking are highly associated with an individual's optimal stimulation level. Personality characteristics reflecting optimal stimulation levels are positively related to

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variety seeking, such that people with higher optimal stimulation levels are more likely to seek variety in choice situations. Accordingly, responses to stimuli such as variety drivers differ depending on personality characteristics related to one's optimal stimulation level. Loyalty levels might also influence variety seeking in the same context because loyal customers are less likely to switch their behavior. Even though a customer can have loyalty toward several alternatives, loyalty levels within the same product/service category differently influence a customer's decision-making in choice situations.

From a restaurant operator's perspective, it is important to determine why customers seek variety in their restaurant choices in order to better understand customers in choice situations and develop effective management strategies. In the competitive restaurant industry, it is unrealistic to expect customers to be loyal forever-sticking with one alternative among the numerous options from which they can freely choose. Indeed, people tend to have several preferred restaurants or multiple loyalties toward several restaurants. Accordingly, customer variety seeking, especially in terms of restaurant choice, needs to be examined in order to understand actual choice behaviors and the fundamental reasons why customers seek variety in the same choice category.

Prior studies on variety seeking in consumption situations have focused on variety seeking behavior in product or brand choice situations. Unlike product or brand choices, customer variety seeking in service environments, such as restaurants, is affected by personal relationships between customers and employees. Unique restaurant attributes including employee services, foods, and environmental dining factors are also involved in decision making in the restaurant service setting. Therefore, specific factors related to dining-out and restaurants must be considered in order to understand variety seeking in restaurant choice situations. This study examined customer variety seeking intentions in restaurant service settings considering all of the above factors.

The purpose of this study is to examine diners' variety seeking intentions in terms of restaurant choice based on their prior experiences at a particular restaurant. More specifically, following the definition of variety seeking in consumer choice situations this study considered variety seeking intentions as two distinct choice intentions: alternating among familiar alternatives and seeking new alternatives. Specifically, the objectives of this study were: (1) to examine the influences of perceived quality and customer satisfaction on variety seeking intentions; (2) to test the effect of boredom or satiation with dining-out at a particular restaurant on variety seeking intentions; (3) to investigate the impact of boredom or satiation with restaurant attributes on variety seeking intentions; and (4) to identify the moderating effects of personality characteristics and overall loyalty on the relationships between variety seeking drivers and variety seeking intentions in terms of restaurant choice.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Defining variety seeking

Variety seeking, the tendency of individuals to seek diversity in their choice of services or goods (Kahn, 1995), is considered a key factor of consumer choice in the consumer behavior literature (Bigné et al., 2007; Galak et al., 2009; Inman, 2001). McAlister and Pessemier (1982) classified variety seeking behaviors as either derived or direct. The distinction between derived varied behavior and direct variety seeking depends on whether the switching behavior is extrinsically or intrinsically motivated (McAlister and Pessemier, 1982; Kahn, 1995). Derived varied behavior refers to variety seeking that is triggered by changes in the external environment rather than internal motivation.

In contrast, direct variety seeking is intrinsically motivated and is explained by the optimal stimulation level (OSL) theory (Menon and Kahn, 1995; Van Trijp et al., 1996; Jang and Feng, 2007). The OSL theory postulates that each person needs a certain level of stimulation to function effectively and the preferred level of stimulation varies across people. Thus, when stimulation is below the optimal level an individual is bored and desires to increase his or her stimulation. In the consumer context, repeatedly choosing a product reduces a buyer's potential stimulation level because the choice is no longer novel or complex to the consumer (Berlyne, 1960). This can lead to a perception of boredom, and the consumer may attempt to increase stimulation by choosing another alternative.

This study identified diners' variety seeking intentions as responses to variety seeking drivers in restaurant choice situations. Based on the idea that variety seeking in consumption situations is represented by choosing another alternative among a number of different brands or services, the current study viewed variety seeking in a restaurant choice situation as seeking a different alternative the next time a customer dines-out. As stated above, customers may choose an alternative they are already familiar with or a novel alternative they have never experienced before. Accordingly, in this study variety seeking intentions are defined as the intention to choose either a different restaurant among familiar alternatives (alternation) or a new alternative (novelty seeking).

### 2.2. Theoretical foundations of variety seeking

There are several theories that explain variety seeking from a psychological perspective: cognitive dissonance theory, arousal theory, and optimal stimulation level (OSL) theory (Festinger, 1957; Berlyne, 1960; Raju, 1980; Jang and Feng, 2007). These theories focus on psychological mechanisms engaged in variety seeking. From a psychological view, individuals seek to maintain cognitive consistency between their knowledge, beliefs or attitudes and actual phenomena. Thus, when inconsistency exists among these aspects it is considered psychologically uncomfortable, which motivates individuals to reduce the inconsistency. Motivation theories such as balance theory (Heider, 1958), congruity theory (Osgood and Tanenbaum, 1995), and cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) explain this cognitive dissonance from a psychological perspective. Balance theory, suggested by Heider (1958), postulates that individuals prefer balanced states to imbalanced states. Accordingly, imbalanced states motivate individuals to move toward a more balanced state. In a similar vein, Osgood and Tanenbaum (1995) proposed the congruity theory, which suggests that individuals maintain a certain attitude toward the concepts or sources related to any assertion. Further, Festinger (1957) proposed the theory of cognitive dissonance, which is similar to balance theory and congruity theory. Balance theory is more interpersonally focused, and congruity theory postulates attitudes change due to an incongruity between sources and concepts, whereas cognitive dissonance theory is considered more flexible. Therefore, it has been adopted in a number of empirical studies (Venkatesan, 1973; Timmermans, 1990). Festinger (1957) defined dissonance as the psychologically uncomfortable state resulting from related but inconsistent cognitions. When dissonance occurs, the individual is aroused to reduce the dissonance in various ways. For example, an individual might change cognitions, add new consonant cognitions, change attitudes or behaviors, or decrease the importance of the relevant cognitions (Festinger, 1957, 1964; Venkatesan, 1973; Bourne and Russo, 1998). Previous studies related cognitive dissonance theory to consumer behaviors such as novelty seeking and variety seeking in a consumption situation (Timmermans, 1990; Venkatesan, 1973). Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that if consumers experience dissonant elements of a purchase decision, such as negative aspects of products/services that differ

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