



Curiosity motivated vacation destination choice in a reward and variety-seeking perspective

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ABSTRACT

Most research in marketing and consumer behavior is focused on inexpensive products and customer loyalty, rather than on experience-centric services and variety-seeking behavior. This paper aims to address that gap by focusing on what drives European consumers' variety-seeking vacation behavior. Europeans maximize their utility (happiness) through leisure (Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2011). It is therefore reasonable to assume that rewards drive variety-seeking vacation-behavior in Europe. The proposed and tested model integrates neuro-research with research in marketing to provide new ways of thinking about the variety-seeking phenomenon.

1. Introduction and purpose

Consumers are constantly tempted by new products and services that could give them new experiences. Digital platform firms make it easy to buy whatever they want from anywhere in the world. That phenomenon is part of what is called a switching economy. Higher disposable incomes make it easier to do more, often for much less money than before. For example, Europeans don't go on vacation one time per year but several times with an EU-28 average of 4 trips per year (Eurostat, 2017). There are however big differences within the EU with the Finns (8.2) and Danes (8.0) making the most trips and the Greek (1.6) and Bulgarians (1.7) making the least number of vacation trips. All these new developments promote variety-seeking among consumers. But all consumers are not equally tempted to choose variety. They must want to experience new things. Without wanting there is no desire for new experiences, no approach behavior towards new opportunities. This study is about such differences between people, and what makes them more prone to choose variety as opposed to consistency when they choose vacation destinations.

Consumers' vacation destinations offer a complex combination of multiple experience-centric services. Experience-centric services are different not only from products but also from traditional services (see Voss et al. (2008) for more details). Traditional services may have no or little experiential content, whereas destinations have a strong experiential positioning. Most experiences are characterized by a relatively short duration involving one major activity or visit (e.g., a meal, a movie, a ball game), but tourist destinations are designed around many attractions and for longer durations over extended periods. There are several reasons to investigate whether variety-seeking is the same for

experience-centric services as it is for products. Variety-seeking behavior seems at least partially to be a product category specific phenomenon, in which consumers may seek variety in one product category but not in another (Van Trijp et al., 1996). A vacation destination offers a package of different experience-centric services with far more diversity and stimulation capability than homogeneous supermarket products with no experiential content. Consumers may thus look forward to their repeat visits, as they never know exactly what to expect the next time. Vacations are important to European consumers. They maximize their utility through leisure as opposed to work, and working less makes them happy (Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2011). The major motivation for EU-consumers' choice of their main holiday was 'rest and recreation' (37%), 19% wanted a 'sun and beach' vacation, and for 17% the main objective was to visit friends or relatives (Eurobarometer, 2010). That indicates that vacations are rewarding in a number of ways.

Consumers' choice of where to go on their vacations is a substantive phenomenon, both in a social and economic sense. Many countries, regions and places depend on the tourism sector for their economies. Tourism is the third largest socio-economic activity in the EU. As a consequence it is a real theoretical contribution to put structure on such a phenomenon (Lynch, 2012). With a better understanding of what motivates variety-seeking we will know when it is possible to persuade variety-seekers to return and what would make them willing to return again. Variety-seeking could be either intrinsically or extrinsically motivated (van Trijp et al., 1996). This study is limited to intrinsically motivated behavior tendencies, which are curiosity-motivated (e.g., Kashdan et al., 2004). Curiosity-motivated behaviors are exploratory because consumers engage in them primarily for the pleasure (reward) inherent in changing the stimulus field by for example going to different

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places for vacations (see Raju, 1980; Baumgartner and Steenkamp, 1996 for a review). What is rewarding to different consumers varies. Research on mindsets (Dweck, 2008; Murphy and Dweck, 2016) help to clarify the difference between variety-seekers and consistency-seekers. The willingness to put effort into learning something new varies between individuals. Variety-seekers who have a growth mindset are positive to effort and learning, while consistency-seekers who have a fixed mindset are less eager to make an effort to learn new things. Consumers with a growth mind-set view effort as the fuel that makes the engine run, and they want to stretch and develop themselves (Murphy and Dweck, 2016). They want a lot, and they are process oriented. Consumers with a fixed mindset believe that human traits are relatively fixed. They don't believe that people develop and change in significant ways. They have a lower level of wanting than the growth-minded. These two groups differ in the information they attend to and the benefits they seek from different products and services. Thus, their outlook on life is quite different. Variety-seekers are assumed to have a higher level of intensity in their need for stimulation. Their optimum stimulation level (OSL) is higher than that for consistency-seekers. Current arousal can be greater, equal or less than OSL, and the discrepancy results in attempts to reduce or augment stimulation (Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 1992; Wahlers and Etzel, 1985). Consumers' needs for stimulation may also be met by providing variety in a different product category or in other aspects of the choice context (Menon and Kahn, 1995). They may for example choose the same place for their vacation, but choose different hotels restaurants, excursions, etc. This study deals only with their choice of destination (place).

The purpose of this study is to propose new ways of thinking about the variety-seeking phenomenon in relation to consumers' choice of experience-centric services in general and in particular their choice of destination (place) for their vacations. The revised view is based on an integration of research findings in marketing and neuro-research by for example Berridge and Kringelbach respectively Litman (see references). Neuro-researchers have worked extensively with curiosity-motivated exploratory behavior as well as with rewards, and the integration of such studies provides different and deeper insights into curiosity-motivated exploratory behavior in a reward perspective. Integration provides a simple and parsimonious perspective that accommodates complexity, and draws on literature from multiple sciences (see MacInnis, 2011, for details). The need for conceptual and theoretical contributions has never been greater in the fields of marketing and consumer research (Belk et al., 2017). Such contributions have dramatically decreased, making our thinking narrower, and as a consequence our research has become impoverished (Belk et al., 2017). The new holistic view is presented in a model that is tested on a non-student sample. The theoretical frame of reference suggests several reasons why there are differences between variety-seekers and consistency-seekers in terms of what they like and what is rewarding to them. It is likely that variety-seekers prefer an anticipated reward rather than an instant reward. An anticipated reward requires more effort and could be a collectible experience (climbing a mountain, preparing for and visit museums or art exhibitions). An instant reward could be for example a hedonic experience from a charter trip to a beach hotel. That could be further developed in future studies. The analysis in this study is limited to the differences between these groups in terms of the intensity of their wanting new experiences and the relative importance of different drivers of variety-seeking.

This study makes several contributions to the marketing literature. It puts structure on a substantive phenomenon, variety-seeking for experience-centric services such as vacation destinations (Lynch, 2012). It gives a conceptual contribution by integrating the marketing literature on variety-seeking as well as the mind-set theory with neuro-research literature, which gives a much deeper understanding of what drives variety-seekers versus consistency-seekers to behave as they do (see MacInnis, 2011). It is an advantage to look at exploratory experience seeking as a process with the components wanting-liking-reward

learning from studies in neuro-science. That makes it possible to quantify the differences between variety-seekers and consistency-seekers, which hasn't been done before. The intensity of desires (wanting) is higher for variety-seekers than for consistency-seekers. They are more curious, more novelty seeking, and more adventurous and risk willing. Prior studies on supermarket products may not be relevant for conclusions about more complex and expensive products and experience-centric services. The latter have a high stimulation capability which consumers enjoy during an extensive time period when they plan, experience, and later remember them. Finally, as a by-product rather than the focus of the study, the main analysis is on a theory-based sample rather than the total sample. Results for both are reported, but theories (e.g., the Elaboration Likelihood Model by Petty and Cacioppo (1986)) are based on the most typical individuals despite the fact that the real world isn't as polarized as the theories indicate. That is in line with the parsimony and the holistic perspective characteristic of integrative frameworks (see MacInnis, 2011). This research consists of two parts. First, a theoretical framework on exploratory experience seeking tendencies (EEST) is proposed. Then a model based on the theoretical framework is tested with structural equation modeling on a representative sample of consumers from a European country.

2. Theoretical frame of reference

Prior studies have suggested that there are two major reasons for variety-seeking behavior: consumers' exploratory experience seeking and their productivity orientation. The majority of studies in the marketing literature are based on student samples and experimental design. That homogeneity creates large gaps in our understanding of the field. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that the focus in almost all studies is on very simple supermarket products such as snacks, soft drinks, etc. Quantitative market studies (Feinberg et al., 1992; Inman, 2001; Kahn et al., 1986; Seetharaman and Che, 2009; Simonson and Winer, 1992), don't distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Such studies are therefore less useful in the present study. Vacations differ from supermarket products in many ways. Their stimulation capability is high to very high (vs. very low for simple supermarket products such as cookies, sweets, and soda), which makes it less likely that variety-seeking is driven by boredom and satiation (escaping from). Rather, in a vacation situation variety-seeking and the stimulation it brings is a result of curiosity-motivated behavior tendencies (van Trijp et al., 1996) and expectations of different kinds of rewards (Kringelbach and Berridge, 2009) such as looking forward to the next vacation based on the memories of rewarding experiences from earlier ones. Consumers' choice of supermarket products may depend more on their predecessors, which leads to preference for items rich in different attributes at different points in time (McAlister, 1982). Thus, they may escape from the satiation of the daily vanilla yoghurt for breakfast but escape to new vacation experiences. A vacation could provide as much enjoyment during the planning phase as during and after the consumption phase. Consumers are highly involved in vacations, whereas supermarket products are low-involvement products. Consumers may buy supermarket products on impulse, whereas most vacations have a longer planning horizon. The frequency of consumption is fairly low for vacations (vs. very high for supermarket products). As an example, when time passes, the stimulation capability of a familiar vacation provider may increase again, and in the end variety-seekers may not always try new providers (Sánchez-García et al., 2012).

A number of studies have manipulated the internal desire for change by changing consumers' mood states or by inducing positive affect and by changing the frequency or intensity with which they approach the product decision (Kahn, 1995). Consumers prefer variety when they are in a good mood (Kahn and Isen, 1993), when thoughts about loyalty (as opposed to boredom) are activated (Fishbach et al., 2011), when their progress toward goal attainment is low (as opposed to high), (Etkin and Ratner, 2012), when high (as opposed to low) self-monitors but also

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