

CONSISTENCY VERSUS VARIETY SEEKING BEHAVIOR: SITUATIONAL EFFECTS

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Abstract

Consumers sometimes behave in a manner predicted by cognitive consistency theories. At other times, they exhibit variety seeking behavior. This report summarizes a number of studies which demonstrate that variety needs differ by situation, sex, and age.

Introduction

Within recent years a number of studies have shown that consumers desire novelty or variety (Maddi, 1968; Venkatesan, 1973; Faison, 1977). Variety seeking behavior is commonly observed in our daily lives. We like to vary the foods we eat, the clothes we wear, and the things we do. Without variety in these things we often become bored. In contrast, there are many theories of cognitive consistency which are based on the need for tension reduction. Balanced theory and cognitive dissonance theory belong to this category. The basis of tension reduction is the need or drive for consistency. This is just the opposite of the need for variety.

The purpose of the present paper is to explore situations under which these opposing theories operate. A little reflection reveals that most of us have these opposing needs for variety and consistency operating simultaneously. Consider our common food habits. We may prefer to vary our daily dinner entrees, while at the same time insisting that coffee or bread and butter be served at every meal. The Chinese want a number of different meats, poultry or seafood served at each meal, but they always insist upon rice. In the field of pop music the most popular piece is constantly changing, while in the field of opera the most popular performances tend to be the old familiar scores.

Method

The paper draws upon six related studies undertaken by graduate students at the University of Hawaii. Each study is based on interviews with thirty to sixty respondents of different types including paratroopers, army officers, Protestant Bible class members, suburban adults, and department store shoppers.

Results

Variety seeking varies as a function of situation. With shampoos and deodorants two-thirds (64%) of the respondents would consistently buy the same brand week after week. When respondents were asked whether they preferred to eat at new or familiar restaurants, 52% preferred to go to new restaurants. In social gatherings 45% preferred to meet new friends, while 55% preferred to converse with old friends. In regard to food consumption, 40% wanted to eat the same breakfast each morning, but 100% wanted to vary their dinner entrees from night to night.

What can we conclude from these findings? It appears that there is an interaction between the need for variety and the importance of the activity to the individual. Such activities as attending to daily grooming habits can be routinized. Such activities can become subcortical habits which require little attention. On

the other hand such activities as food consumption appear to be more important to individuals, although this importance tends to vary by time of day. In the morning consumers are not as concerned with savoring their food as with stoking their bodies. Eating is more of a necessity rather than an activity to be enjoyed. Dinner is another matter. Individuals have more time, and the process becomes a social activity. Under these conditions the many subtleties become important and variety seeking increases.

In addition to these studies based on consumption habits, two other studies were completed which demonstrated situational differences. One study was conducted in a department store which demonstrated that a significantly greater number of T-shirts were sold in a newly created department than had been sold in a nearby established department four times the size. Results indicated that the novelty or variety of the new department attracted customers to investigate the wares more carefully. Finally, the appeal of Christmas music was investigated before and after Christmas. As expected, the desire to hear Christmas music declined as the customers became satiated.

Variety seeking behavior and sex. There appears to be an interaction between the type of activity and the extent to which the sexes are affected. It was found that females were significantly more consistent in their purchases of the same shampoo brand, while males were significantly more consistent in their desires for the same breakfasts.

Variety seeking behavior and age. While most of the situations revealed no differences, in the desire for different types of breakfast fruit drinks people over thirty-five were significantly more consistent in their desires than those under thirty-five.

Summary

This study demonstrates there are many ramifications to variety seeking behavior. Variety seeking may vary by situation, sex, and age. There also appears to be a temporal dimension that the need for variety is related to satiation. Variety also influences department store sales. Departments with novel signs or designs attract more attention which improves sales.

References

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