Does variety-seeking at the attribute level vary between utilitarian and hedonic products? An experimental study

Introduction

Variety-seeking behavior has received considerable attention in the consumer behavior literature. The concept of an optimal level of stimulation (OSL) is central to theories that have been put forward to explain variety-seeking tendencies in consumers (McAlister & Pessemier, 1982; Raju, 1980). When consumers feel satiation on attributes provided by a specific brand, their level of stimulation drops below OSL and behavioral response by means of variety-seeking is initiated to optimize stimulation to the preferred level (Jeuland, 1978; McAlister, 1979, 1982).

Variety-seeking behavior at the attribute level is related to the level of satiation on desired attributes at a given point in time. Satiation on the product attributes offered by a specific brand could be occurring because consumers may not find a single option that satisfies all of the attributes of an ideal point. Moreover, consumers may seek a balance of attributes to maximize utility (Farquhar & Rao, 1976) or need to balance current consumption according to the impact of past consumption (Lattin, 1987). However, these theories do not offer guidance on the specific product attributes that are more possible to stimulate variety-seeking.

Variety-seeking behavior and hedonic product characteristics

Besides interpersonal differences in variety seeking behavior, there are intrapersonal differences in the way that the same individual seeks variety for specific product categories whereas exhibiting brand inertia for other. Apart from OSL, every person has an actual stimulation level (ASL). OSL refers to the level of stimulation that a person prefers in general, from all possible internal and external sources across all possible situations and over time whereas ASL refers to the amount of stimulation from all sources that a person experiences at a specific time (Steenkamp, Baumgartner & Van der Wulp, 1996; Wahlers & Etzel, 1985). Variety-seeking behavior connects the two stimulation levels by offering the necessary stimulation to restore the correspondence between ASL and OSL. In this way, consumers with high OSL who are expected to seek variety in all their choices, will exhibit variety-seeking behavior only for specific product categories where the actual stimulation is lower than the optimal.

This observation has led many researchers to link variety-seeking behavior with the product category that the consumer is about to purchase. VanTrijp et al. (1996) suggest that variety-seeking behavior is related partially to product characteristics, whereas Hoyer and Ridgway (1984) characterize it as a product category specific phenomenon.

According to Batra and Ahtola (1991), every product is placed cognitively on two dimensions: a utilitarian dimension of instrumentality (how useful or beneficial it is) and a hedonic dimension of the experiential effect associated with the product (how pleasant or fun it is). The overall evaluation of a product is based on these two dimensions, in differing degrees. Venkatraman and McInnis (1985) characterize these two dimensions of consumer attitude with the terms “epistemic” and “sensory” and thus divide consumers into “cognitive” and “hedonic”.

It has been suggested that variety-seeking behavior is explained by experiential or hedonic motives rather than by utilitarian aspects of consumption (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Many researchers (Hoyer & Ridgway, 1984; Kahn & Lehmann, 1991; Van Trijp et al., 1996;
Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 1992) suggest that products that are highly dependent on neural or effective sensations facilitate a variety drive. Consumers tend to seek variety for “hedonic” products such as food products (VanTrijp, 1994). This is explained by the fact that repeated consumption of hedonic products is more likely to lead to satiation or boredom (Rolls, 1986).

Van Trijp et al. (1996) have identified the hedonic feature as one of the six (along with involvement1, purchase frequency, perceived brand difference, strength of preference and purchase history) product category related factors that stimulate variety-seeking behavior. The hypothesis tested was that variety seeking behavior is more likely to occur for products that are higher rather than lower in hedonic characteristics. Their research was based on computerized panel data and they used a scale consisting of two items that could measure only the perception of the participants on the hedonic characteristics of the products, without taking into account the overall perception of the consumers on the nature (utilitarian or hedonic) of the products.

Inman (2001) examines the relevance between variety seeking behavior at the attribute level and sensory specific satiety. He found that consumers sought variety more intensively on sensory attributes such as flavor than on nonsensory attributes such as brand. Moreover, Kahn (1995), in her theoretical framework, suggests that consumers are more likely to be satiated by particular attributes of a service or good if they relate to the primary aspect being consumed, rather than the secondary aspect being consumed. For instance, if bread is thought of as the primary product, consumers are more likely to be satiated on specific attributes and to seek variety among different types of breads. On the other hand, if bread is thought of as the outside of a sandwich (secondary aspect), the attributes of the filling in the sandwich (the primary product) are more likely to cause satiation.

Extending the theories of Kahn (1995) and Inman (2001), we propose that consumers are likely to experience satiation for a hedonic attribute of a product that is perceived as dominant in hedonic characteristics (“hedonic product”) whereas they are less likely to experience satiation for a hedonic attribute of a product that is perceived as dominant in utilitarian characteristics (“utilitarian product”). If satiation is experienced by the consumers, their level of stimulation drops to a low level (i.e., below the OSL) and variety seeking is initiated to optimize stimulation to the preferred level. Consequently, satiation on specific product attributes is related to the degree of variety sought by consumers.

The present experimental study was designed to test the hypothesis that consumers will seek less variety for a sensory attribute (flavor/odor) of a utilitarian product compared to the variety sought for a similar sensory attribute of a hedonic product.

Method

Subjects: Fifty individuals (29 females, 21 males) participated in the study.

Product categories: Two product categories were used for the purpose of the study: yogurts and dish detergents. Both categories have been used in past studies concerning

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1 The literature is inconclusive regarding the relationship between involvement and the hedonic and utilitarian dimensions of attitude. Kapferer and Laurent (1985) introduce a five-dimensional conceptualization of involvement in which one dimension is labeled hedonic. VanTrijp et al. (1996) suggest that hedonic features and involvement are two different factors that interpret the occurrence of variety-seeking behavior. This approach is the one that we adopt here and thus we contend that the involvement construct is distinct from the hedonic and utilitarian attitude dimensions.
variety-seeking behavior (Simonson & Winer, 1992; Crowley et al. 1992). Yoghurts were expected to be perceived as a hedonic product whereas dish detergents were expected to be perceived as a utilitarian product. By selecting these categories and products of the same brand within each category, we tried to control the confounding effect of other product related factors that stimulate variety-seeking behavior: consumer involvement with both categories is low, both product categories have the same purchase frequency and there are no brand differences. The products varied only in the sensory attribute of odor/taste.

**Procedure and manipulations:** The process of data collection was based on Simonson’s (1990) experiments on variety-seeking behavior. Subjects were told to imagine they were going to the supermarket with a shopping list that included two items: yogurt and dish detergents. Within each category, different product alternatives such as different yogurt flavors or different dish detergent odors were listed, and subjects were asked to choose a bundle of three products for each product category - in any combination - that would consume on their own. This remark was made because consumers are expected to seek more variety when they choose products that will be consumed by other persons (Ratner & Kahn, 2002; Choi et al., 2006). Participants were presented with a booklet that contained all the possible bundles for each category and were instructed to make their choice, after taking into consideration all the possible combinations-bundles. Finally, they were asked to fill in a questionnaire which included the measures of the dependent variables.

The main hypothesis was tested by comparing the degree of variety sought between the hedonic (yogurt) and the utilitarian (dish detergent) product. The degree of variety sought for each product category was the dependent variable. If a subject chose a bundle consisting of three different items then this behavior was regarded as high variety-seeking and was coded with number 3. If he or she chose a bundle of three same items, this behavior was regarded as low variety seeking and was coded with number 1. In addition, a medium variety seeking behavior was coded with number 2.

The participants’ perception of the nature of a product category (hedonic or utilitarian) was the independent variable. It was measured with the HED/UT scale, developed by Voss, Spangenberg and Grohmann (2003). The HED/UT is a 7-point (scored from +3 to -3) semantic differential scale, that is divided into two subscales, one measuring the hedonic and one measuring the utilitarian dimension.

**Measures:** The HED/UT scale was used- as described above- in order to confirm that the participants perceive yogurts as a “more” hedonic product than dish detergents and dish detergents as a “more” utilitarian product than yogurts.

In order to measure the OSL of the subjects and consequently their intrinsic desire for variety, the food specific VARSEEK scale (VanTrijp & Steenkamp, 1992) and the OSL scale developed by Raju (1980) were used. These are both 5-point Likert scales for intrinsic desire for variety. Both of these scales have been used and validated by other researchers (Beldona et al., 2009; Meiselman et al., 1998; Wahlers, Dunn & Etzel, 1986; Kahn & Menon, 1995; Orth & Bourrain, 2005).

The internal validity, as it was measured with Cronbach’s alpha, was good and is reported for each scale in the following table.

**Table 1**

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<th>Scale</th>
<th>Cronbach’s alpha</th>
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Analysis: In the beginning, which product was perceived primarily as hedonic and which one as utilitarian had to be identified. Using the relevant subscales of the HED/UT as dependent variables and a dummy variable representing each product category as factor, we conducted analysis of variance-ANOVA. The mean hedonic factor for yogurts (mean=0.23) was significantly higher (F=43.92, p<.001) than the mean hedonic factor for dish detergents (mean=-1.40), whereas the mean utilitarian factor for dish detergents (mean=2.28) was significant higher (F=47.16, p<.001) than the one for yogurts (mean=0.95). Consequently, yogurts were perceived as a “more” hedonic product while dish detergents were perceived as a “more” utilitarian product.

The main hypothesis was tested by examining differences in the degree of variety sought between the hedonic (yogurt) and the utilitarian (dish detergent) product. The mean variety sought for yogurts (mean=2.22) was significantly (F=8.57, p=0.004) higher than the mean variety sought for dish detergents (mean=1.84), thus the participants sought more variety for the sensory attribute of the hedonic product in comparison with the sensory attribute of the utilitarian product.

Finally, as a confounding check, ANOVA was used in order to indicate if the OSL of the subjects had an effect on the variety sought for each category separately. Using the Raju’s scale, subjects were classified into two groups, high-OSL and low-OSL, on the basis of a median split of their scores which was 15. We found that there was no significant difference in the variety sought between high OSL and low OSL subjects (F=1.12, p=0.29 for yogurts and F=0.03, p=0.85 for dish detergents).

Moreover, using the 33 and 67 percentiles of the distribution of the scores on the Varseek scale, subjects were divided into high, medium and low in variety seeking tendency for foods. The impact of this factor on the different level of variety sought for the two categories was examined and no significant difference was found (F=0.74, p=0.48).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to test the hypothesis that consumers will seek less variety for a sensory attribute (flavor/odor) of a utilitarian product in contrast with the variety sought for a similar sensory attribute of a hedonic product. The results of our experiment indicate that consumers tend to seek more variety for hedonic attributes of a product primarily perceived as hedonic compared to a product perceived as utilitarian.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time that the consumer’s hedonic or utilitarian perception of the nature of a product category is related to variety-seeking behavior at the attribute level. Past research investigated the relationship between attribute level variety-seeking behavior and hedonic product attributes. In this study, the overall perception

We had to delete one item in order to increase the validity of the scale.

This procedure for using VARSEEK scale was suggested by VanTrijp et al.,(1992).
of a product is linked with variety-seeking behavior for specific attributes and provides a new perspective for studying attribute level variety-seeking behavior.

However, the present study has specific limitations. Due to the small number of participants, measurements of dependent variables were conducted with few observations. Therefore it was essential to use well-established scales and test their internal consistency. In addition, only two product categories were used and the products selected were clearly utilitarian or hedonic.

The finding that consumers will seek more variety on sensory attributes if the product is perceived as hedonic has important practical implications. If the product is perceived as hedonic, extending the product line with products that differ in sensory attributes will be an appropriate strategy. In this way, variety seeking behavior will be stimulated and the firm may attract new customers. Moreover, the hedonic or utilitarian dimension of consumer attitudes, as measured with the HED/UT scale, can be used as an important segmentation variable. Finally, our findings are instructive for designing promotional offers and, in particular, product bundling. If the product category is perceived as hedonic, sensory variation among the items of the bundle will stimulate variety seeking.

Future research can consider specific hedonic or utilitarian attributes on which consumers seek variety and also investigate differences in sensory-specific satiety between the human senses. For example, do individuals feel satiety and seek variety faster for a food product (taste), a movie (sight) or a song (hearing)?
References


