



**IJMRBS**

ISSN 2319 - 345X  
Vol. 3, No. 2, April 2014

**International Journal of**  
Management Research and  
Business Strategy



[www.ijmrbs.com](http://www.ijmrbs.com)

# VARIETY-SEEKING CHOICE BEHAVIOR: CONSUMERS' OPTIMAL STIMULATION AND LIFESTYLE EXPERIENCE LEVELS

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This research paper examines the congruence between the decision maker's enduring optimal stimulation level need related to arousal and his/her lifestyle-related stimulation level obtained from work and leisure. The relationship is investigated between this congruence between Optimal Stimulation Level (OSL) and environmental Lifestyle Stimulation Level (LSL) and the individual's exploratory behavior in making product/brand choices. The study's findings suggest that consumers whose enduring optimal stimulation levels exceed their lifestyle stimulation levels are prone to stimulation/variety seeking and exhibit significantly lower levels of brand loyalty for some products than do consumers whose lifestyle-related stimulation exceed optimal, preferred stimulation needs. To the extent that consumers attempt to modify their behaviors vis-à-vis altering exploratory behavior and development of varying brand loyalty patterns as means of maintaining a homeostatic balance between preferred stimulation and stimulation provided by the environment, the findings of this study have marketing implications worthy of further research.

**Keywords:** Consumer Behavior, Variety Seeking, Brand Loyalty, Optimal Stimulation, Lifestyle

## INTRODUCTION

The arousal concept has been of continuing interest to marketing researchers since the early writings of Freud. The construct has been incorporated within a variety of behavioral theories (Hebb, 1949; Duffy, 1957; Leuba, 1955; Malmö, 1959; Berlyne, 1960; Fisk and Maddi, 1961; Driver and Streufert, 1965; Pearson and Maddi, 1966; Mehrabian and Russell, 1974) to explain the relationship between the decision maker's state and his or her reaction to environmental stimuli.

A common thread running through these theories holds that a decision maker's behavior is influenced by the stimulus choice object, the level of arousal experienced by the individual at the time of the choice decision, and the individual's preferred optimal level of stimulation.

Berlyne (1960, 1963) proposed that all stimulus situations exhibit varying degrees of novelty, uncertainty, conflict, and complexity. These characteristics collectively interact with the perceived reward or punishment of a given

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stimulus to create the situation's arousal potential. Individuals are thought to adjust their behavior such that when environmental arousal potential is too low increased stimulation is sought. Likewise when environmental arousal potential is too high individuals seek ways to reduce stimulation. Thus, the relationship between situational arousal potential and the individual's level of arousal can be thought of as an inverted "U" in which low levels of environmental arousal potential when increased stimulate greater arousal in the individual up to some optimal level. Beyond that optimum, further increases in environmental arousal potential result in lower levels of arousal as the individual seeks a more moderate situation. Berlyne (1960, p. 211) suggests that whether the arousal potential of the environment is perceived as either too low or high is shaped by "personality attributes, cultural factors, learning, and psychological states" and thus determines the individual's optimal level of stimulation or ideal arousal.

Within the marketing literature, arousal has been incorporated as an endogenous construct in most of the seminal consumer behavior models in the discipline (Howard and Sheth, 1969; Hansen, 1972; Hirschman, 1984; Bettman, 1975; Markin, 1974; Goodwin, 1980; Joachimsthaler and Lastovicka, 1984; Venkatraman and MacInnis, 1985). Howard and Sheth (1969) suggest that the individual seeks a comfortable optimal level of stimulation. In situations where the environment adversely affects this homeostatic level, the individual's behavioral response will seek to reestablish congruity between actual and optimal stimulation. A specific category of this response to incongruity between actual and optimal stimulation is stimulation seeking behavior which has been described in the marketing literature as

novelty seeking, exploratory behavior, and variety seeking (Raju, 1980; Venkatesan, 1973, 1974; Faison, 1977; Rogers, 1979; Hirschman, 1980; Raju and Venkatesan 1980).

The optimal stimulation construct has been the subject of limited and sporadic research in marketing. In a marketing context, the consumer's need for high levels of stimulation has been examined relative to the acceptance of new retail facilities (Grossbart *et al.*, 1976), new product trial (Mittlestadt *et al.*, 1976) risk taking, innovativeness, and information seeking (Raju, 1980, 1981) fashion apparel brand switching (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2005), recreational shopping behavior (Boedeker, 1995), consumers' receptiveness to product scents (Orth and Bourrain, 2005), and vacation behavior (Etzel and Wahlers, 1984; Wahlers and Etzel, 1985; Wahlers *et al.*, 1986). These studies suggest a link between optimal stimulation and behavior such that individuals exhibiting high Optimal Stimulation Levels (OSL) are more prone to seek stimulation than those possessing low OSL.

While this early research has focused on the link between the individual's *absolute* optimal stimulation level and resulting stimulation modulating behavior, it appears more meaningful to consider the *relative* magnitudes of OSL and actual environmental arousal and the link with behavior. Regardless of the individual's absolute OSL, actual environmental arousal may be greater, equal, or less than OSL. If both are equal, the individual is satisfied. Alternatively, if OSL is greater than actual arousal, theory would suggest that the individual will be bored with his/her surroundings and thus seek environmental stimulation to restore congruity. In contrast, if OSL is less than actual stimulation being experienced from the environment, that individual is receiving

too much stimulation, and he/she would be expected to avoid or moderate the stimulation in order to restore satisfactory balance.

These conditions involving the relative interplay between OSL and environmental stimulation are graphically illustrated in Exhibit 1. In a marketing context, the two axes are the individual's OSL and Lifestyle Stimulation Level (LSL), the latter reflecting experienced stimulation from his/her environment. The vector drawn at a 45-degree angle from the origin reflects the homeostatic condition of balance in which  $OSL = LSL$ . The area in which  $OSL > LSL$  reflects a condition in which the individual's preferred OSL exceed that received from the environment creating an imbalance resulting in variety seeking as a manifestation of a need for environmental stimulation necessary to restore congruity. In contrast, the area corresponding to the imbalance in which  $OSL < LSL$  would tend to result in limiting variety or other means of environmental stimulation avoidance. This condition reflecting either form of relative imbalance between OSL and LSL would have marketing implications regarding consumers who could be expected to moderate environmental stimulation via acceptance of new novel products, brand

switching, shopping patterns, and other forms of exploratory consumer behavior.

Given these conditions incorporated within this framework, this paper addresses the following hypotheses:

*H<sub>1</sub>: Individuals whose optimal stimulation levels exceed their lifestyle stimulation will demonstrate a preference for a more active, varied, and stimulating alternative.*

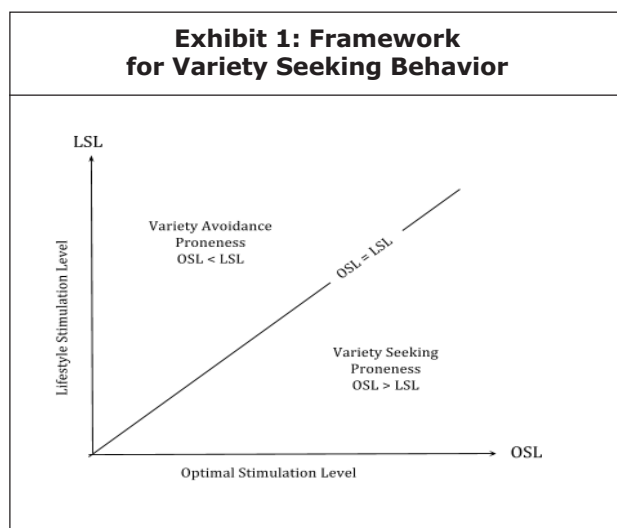
*H<sub>2</sub>: Individuals who optimal levels of stimulation are less than their lifestyle stimulation levels will demonstrate a preference for a more passive, less varied and stimulating alternative.*

## RESEARCH METHODS

To test the hypotheses, the OSL and environmental arousal levels (LSL) were measured within a sample of decision makers, and the difference between OSL and LSS were calculated as a proxy indicator of variety seeking proneness. This difference was then used to classify respondents as either variety seekers ( $OSL > LSL$ ) or avoiders ( $OSL < LSL$ ). Mean reported brand switching likelihood was subsequently compared across groups for five product choice categories.

## MEASURING OPTIMAL STIMULATION AND LIFESTYLE STIMULATION LEVELS

OSL was operationalized using Version V of the Sensation Seeking Scale (Zuckerman, 1979; Zuckerman *et al.*, 1964). Zuckerman describes sensation seeking as a "trait defined by the need for varied, novel, and complex sensations and experiences and the willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of such experience" (1979, p. 10). The 40-item Sensation Seeking





Scale has demonstrated positive correlation with Garlington and Shimota's (1964) Change Seeking Index (Acker and McReynolds, 1967; Farley, 1971; McReynolds, 1971) and Penney and Reinehur's (1966) Stimulus Variation Seeking Scale (Looft and Baranowski, 1971). Satisfactory scale validity and reliability have been reported by Zuckerman (1979) and Ridgeway and Russell (1980).

For purposes of this study, (LSL is defined as the stimulation level perceived by an individual in his/her normal work and leisure activities and was operationalized using a 14-item scale developed by Wahlers and Etzel (1985). This scale shown in Exhibit 2 is scored such that high scores indicate the individual is experiencing a stimulating environmental lifestyle and vice versa. The LSL

**Exhibit 2: Lifestyle Stimulation Level Scale Items**

1. A\* My job/typical work schedule is usually challenging and exciting.  
B My job/typical work schedule is often dull and boring.
2. A\* My job/typical work schedule requires me to be physically active.  
B My job/typical work schedule doesn't require much physical activity.
3. A\* My job/typical work schedule schedule is fairly hectic.  
B My job/typical work schedule schedule is fairly relaxed.
4. A\* My hobbies and leisure pursuits often involve a lot of physical activity.  
B My hobbies and leisure time pursuits do not require much physical activity.
5. A\* My hobbies and leisure time pursuits are mentally challenging and stimulating.  
B My hobbies and leisure time pursuits don't involve many mentally challenging activities.
6. A\* My "after hours" lifestyle involves a variety of socially stimulating activities.  
B My "after hours" lifestyle usually involves spending time at home relaxing.
7. A I am usually bored doing my chores around the house.  
B\* I often find new and varied ways of doing my chores around the house.
8. A After my daily work is done, I don't have time for other activities I enjoy.  
B\* My daily schedule usually allows me ample time to do other things I enjoy.
9. A\* Overall my life is exciting and involves many stimulating activities.  
B Overall my life is fairly boring and monotonous.
10. A\* In my daily routine I come in contact with many interesting people.  
B In my daily routine I seldom come in contact with interesting people.
11. A\* Overall my life is more stimulating than the average person's.  
B Overall my life is less stimulating than the average person's.
12. A\* Overall my life is more stimulating than I would like it to be.  
B Overall my life is less stimulating than I would like it to be.
13. A\* The people around me are unusual.  
B The people around me are ordinary.
14. A My home life is very structured and organized.  
B\* My home life is frequently unpredictable.

**Note:** \*Asterisk indicates higher stimulation experience within each pair of item choices.

scale's validity, supported by a significant inverse correlation with Pearson's (1970) Desire for Novelty Scale, has been reported by these authors along with satisfactory reliability.

## PRODUCT CHOICE STIMULUS CATEGORIES

The stimulus activity of concern in this study consisted of five different product-choice categories each thought to reflect a potential for exploratory search or brand choice behavior among respondents. These categories included: casual dining restaurants, fast food outlets, cellular providers, vacation destinations, and beer brands.

Respondents within each of five subsamples corresponding to each of the five product choice categories were asked to identify top choice alternatives reflecting their *evoked* consideration sets in addition to choice alternatives comprising their *awareness* sets. Additionally, respondents were asked to report *loyalty* and *satisfaction* with respect to last purchase choice within each category, the degree of *choice freedom* typically characterizing product choice, and the likelihood of varying from last purchase as a measure of *switching proneness*. Data for these variables were collected via a 7-point Likert scale, and responses were then normalized to result in a 0-100 point scale value for each.

## SAMPLING CONSIDERATIONS

Data were collected via an online survey targeted at randomly selected junior and senior undergraduate students at a large Midwestern US University. Use of a student sample was justified on the basis that the product-choice categories serving as stimulus objects reflected viable

consumption categories of current relevance to students as consumers. The total usable sample ( $n=361$ ) was distributed among each of the five product-choice category subgroups as follows: (1) casual dining restaurants  $n_1=61$ , (2) fast food outlets  $n_2=96$ , (3) cellular provider  $n_3=72$ , (4)  $n_4=79$ , (5) beer brands  $n_5=53$ . Within the total sample, respondents were distributed in approximate proportion to those within the overall student population regarding gender, class rank, and academic study discipline. Given the length of the online questionnaire, an incentive promised to a randomly selected respondent was offered to enhance participation. This resulted in a 31% overall response rate viewed as satisfactory for purposes of the study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

OSL scores using the Sensation Seeking Scale were scored for all 361 respondents. These scale values with a maximum of 40 were normalized to a 0-100 point scale. Likewise, LSL scores for respondents otherwise having a maximum value of 14 were normalized to a 0-100 point scale to enable comparison with OSL. Using the normalized 0-100 point range OSL and LSL scores, the difference was computed for each subject. Using the mean OSL-LSL difference scores, respondents were classified into two groups: *Stimulation Seekers* for those individuals whose  $OSL > LSL$  and *Avoiders* whose  $OSL < LSL$ . With respect to these two groups, the seekers would be expected to exhibit variety seeking proneness, and the avoiders would be expected to exhibit variety avoidance behavior.

Selected characteristics of the variety seekers and avoiders were examined and contrasted for each of the product choice categories involved in

this study suspected of potentially offering respondents an opportunity for exploratory behavior. Results of this contrast are shown in Exhibit 3.

For the subject subsample responding to questions about casual dining restaurant choice ( $n_1=61$ ), seekers reported a significantly higher ratio of evoked-to-awareness set restaurants. This was interpreted to reflect a greater awareness of potential restaurant options consistent with variety seeking proneness. While

seekers and avoiders did not exhibit a significant difference with respect to reported satisfaction with their usual restaurant choice, avoiders were found to show both a significantly higher reported loyalty level and a lower likelihood to brand switch than for the seekers.

For both the subsample of subjects responding to questions regarding choice of fast food outlets ( $n_2=96$ ) and the subsample questioned about cellular service provider choice ( $n_3=72$ ), no statistically significant differences

<b>Exhibit 3: Characteristics of Variety Seekers &amp; Avoiders Across Choice Categories</b>										
					Switching Proneness	Choice Freedom	Satisfaction	Loyalty	Evoked/ Awareness Set Ratio	Choice Category
Avoiders	Seekers	Avoiders	Seekers	Avoiders	Seekers	Avoiders	Seekers	Avoiders	Seekers	
.448	.817	.801	.821	.782	.776	.463	.301	.589	.733	Casual Dining
					Signif.2	Not Signif.1	Not Signif.1	Signif.2	Signif.2	
Avoiders	Seekers	Avoiders	Seekers	Avoiders	Seekers	Avoiders	Seekers	Avoiders	Seekers	
.717	.722	.796	.800	.652	.645	.491	.488	.539	.543	Fast Food Dining
					Not Signif.1	Not Signif.1	Not Signif.1	Not Signif.1	Not Signif.1	
Avoiders	Seekers	Avoiders	Seekers	Avoiders	Seekers	Avoiders	Seekers	Avoiders	Seekers	
.412	.427	.598	.607	.503	.496	.449	.432	.879	.901	Cellular Provider
					Not Signif.1	Not Signif.1	Not Signif.1	Not Signif.1	Not Signif.1	
Avoiders	Seekers	Avoiders	Seekers	Avoiders	Seekers	Avoiders	Seekers	Avoiders	Seekers	
.399	.884	.517	.522	.902	.893	.658	.429	.322	.481	Vacation Destination
					Signif.2	Not Signif.1	Not Signif.1	Signif.2	Signif.2	
Avoiders	Seekers	Avoiders	Seekers	Avoiders	Seekers	Avoiders	Seekers	Avoiders	Seekers	
.486	.731	.858	.899	.809	.816	.798	.513	.753	.540	Beer Brand Choice
					Signif.2	Not Signif.1	Not Signif.1	Signif.2	Signif.2	

**Note:** <sup>1</sup> T-test difference between means not significant using criterion of  $p > .05$ .  
<sup>2</sup> T-test difference between means significant at  $p < .05$ .

between seekers and avoiders were found with respect to evoked-to-awareness set ratio, loyalty, reported satisfaction, or brand switching likelihood. A possible explanation for a lack of differences in exploratory behavior regarding fast food outlet choice may be that this product category is less related to variety/stimulation seeking and more heavily influenced by other factors such as location, time availability, or pricing. A possible explanation in the case of cellular service providers may be that respondents do not attached much perceived variation among providers capable of offering variety coupled with the difficulty of brand switching associated with contract time commitments. Both product choice categories thus offer opportunities for deeper inquiry concerning the role of OSL when additional factors are considered.

For the subsample of subjects responding to questions regarding choice of a vacation destination ( $n_4=79$ ), seekers exhibited a significantly greater evoked-to-awareness set ratio and lower level of loyalty to their typical destination than was the case for the avoiders. Since vacation choice reflects a classic opportunity for stimulation seeking behavior, not surprisingly the seekers were found to report a significant and substantially greater likelihood of switching proneness.

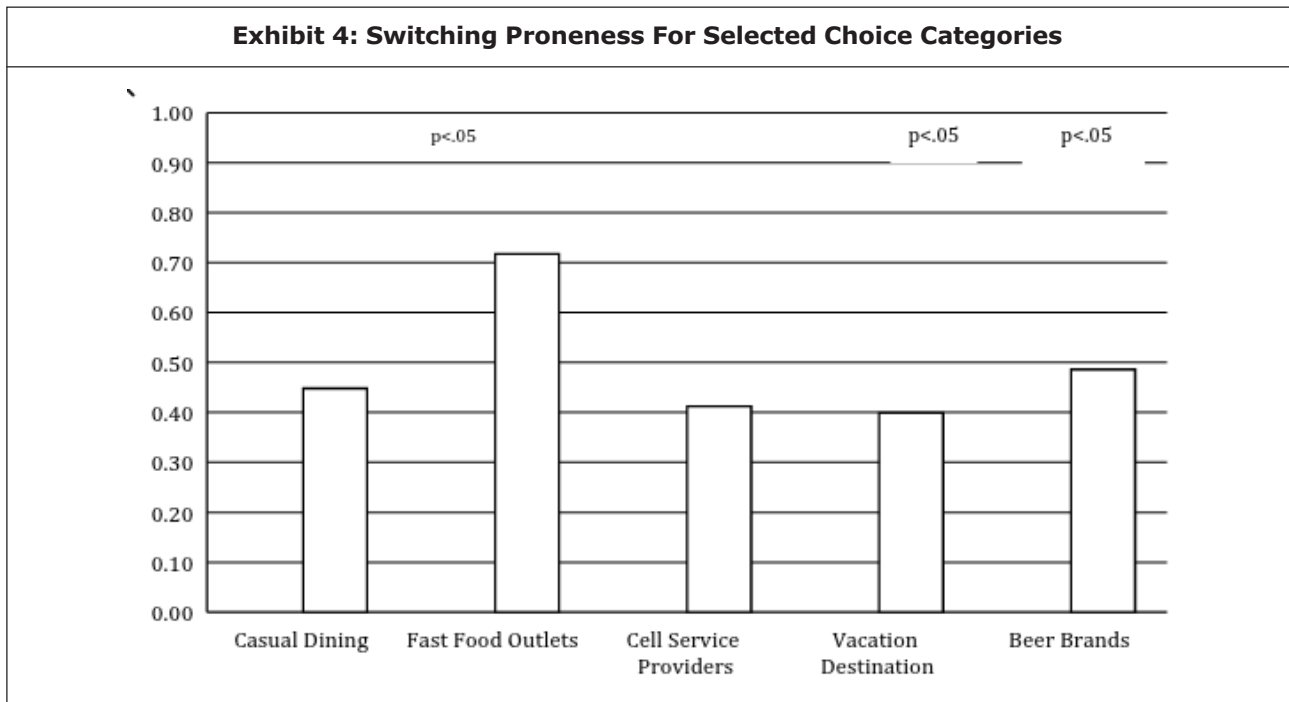
Regarding the subsample of survey participants responding to questions dealing with beer brand choice ( $n_5=53$ ), a similar pattern was observed between seekers and avoiders. Seekers reported a significantly higher evoked-to-awareness choice set ratio, lower level of

reported brand loyalty, and substantially higher likelihood for brand switching behavior.

With respect to switching proneness presumably linked to subjects' perceived variety seeking needs across all five product-choice categories, the differences exhibited between stimulation seekers and avoiders are highlighted graphically in Figure 4. Consistent with data reported in Exhibit 3, these findings suggest a positive link between individuals' need for variety as measured via the relative difference between OSL and LSL and expected brand/product choice alternative switching behavior for casual dining experience, vacation destination choice, and beer brand selection categories.

Interestingly, the findings did not disclose any statistically significant differences between seekers and avoiders in reported satisfaction levels regarding their typical, most recent purchase decision for any of the product-choice scenarios. Yet the seekers exhibited a significantly higher likelihood to switch brands/choice objects in the areas of casual dining, vacation destination, and beer brand choice. A possible explanation may be that decision makers view these three categories as inherently offering a higher potential for variety seeking given a high perceived differentiation level among choice alternatives within each of these categories. While seekers and avoiders reported no significant difference in switching likelihood for fast food outlets and cellular providers, a similar explanation may be plausible to the extent that choice alternatives within these two categories may not be perceived by subjects to offer enough differentiable variety to merit switching behavior. Further research to address this issue for these and additional product categories is clearly needed.





## CONCLUSION

The present study examined the relative difference between individuals' optimal stimulation levels (OSL related to their enduring need for stimulation and arousal) and individuals' lifestyle stimulation levels (LSL related to the stimulation arousal levels provided by their work and leisure environments) and the link between this difference and their likelihood to engage in different patterns of arousal-related exploratory behavior as measured by intention to switch brands/choice alternatives. Data supported a positive relationship for subjects' exhibiting high stimulation seeking and switching proneness for choices of casual dining restaurants, vacation destinations, and beer brands. A negative link was observed for those showing a low stimulation seeking or avoidance need. These findings support the notion that consumers have varying enduring needs for stimulation and engage in arousal-related exploratory behavior, such as brand switching, to bring their environmental stimulation

levels in line with preferred optimal stimulation to achieve a comfortable balance.

One interesting implication of this study relates to the notion of brand loyalty as a common marketing goal. Marketing practitioners invest countless dollars in various marketing communications programs each year to create a profitable market share base and enhance consumer loyalty for their respective brands. To the extent that higher ROI for marketing resource expenditures is generally associated with maintaining existing market share once achieved in contrast to massive spending aimed at developing new customers, consumer brand loyalty continues to be a nearly universal objective among consumer goods marketers. One factor that complicates this marketing focus on brand loyalty is the observation that some consumers exhibiting a high stimulation need tend to be resistant to developing brand loyalty patterns even though satisfied with their purchase decisions. As suggested by this study, this variable linkage

between consumers' stimulation needs and exploratory behavior may differ substantially among various classes of consumer products. That is, for some consumer product categories offering individuals a high potential for variety-seeking satisfaction, high levels of brand loyalty may not be nearly as achievable as would be the case for more mundane products offering consumers a limited stimulation-related differential. Product involvement, a construct not addressed in this research, may well be an intervening variable affecting the link between optimal stimulation level and exploratory behavior. Further research involving improved methods to measure stimulation needs, addition of more product categories, and control for possible intervening variables such as product involvement is needed to fully understand this relationship. Given the marketing importance of developing profitable levels of brand loyalty and the limited amount of systematic research conducted in this arena, extending this research stream represents many opportunities for the marketing researcher.

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