Brand Switching As a Function of Variety Seeking Behavior and Product Characteristics: Testing the Hoyer and Ridgway Model

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This paper examines brand switching propensity as a function of variety seeking levels and product characteristics (objective and perceived) in the context of apparel purchases. A number of measures are developed to capture variety seeking levels and the perceived product characteristics which include involvement, perceived risk, brand loyalty, brand similarity and hedonism. Multiple regression is used to test the hypothesis that brand switching propensity in apparel is a function of variety seeking and product characteristics. Findings indicate that variety-seeking and product characteristics do not seem to explain brand switching propensity, and highlight the need for further research.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumer behavior research examines brand switching as a result of internal satiation with a brand’s attributes, yet disregards the possible effect of other internal or external factors (e.g., McAlister 1982). Hoyer and Ridgway (1984) developed the only theoretical model which distinguishes between internal (e.g., variety seeking) and external (e.g., out of stock conditions) factors and which addresses the mediating role of product class. These authors suggest that a number of objective and perceived characteristics mediate brand switching in a specific product category. Little other research has been undertaken to examine this area. The research in this paper addresses this gap by exploring brand switching in the context of apparel purchase, as a function of variety seeking levels and product characteristics.

Variety seeking behavior has been previously found to affect brand switching behavior (Raju 1980, 1983). Variety seeking or novelty seeking behavior is manifested by an individual’s drive which itself is determined by certain personality traits. For example, an individual who is authoritarian or dogmatic is likely to exhibit an aversion towards change or novelty. On the contrary a person characterized as extrovert or creative is likely to look for change or novelty in daily activities (including shopping behavior). Variety seeking behavior has been captured in consumer research via the notion of Optimal Stimulation Level (OSL), which maintains that individuals have a preferred (or optimal) level of environmental stimulation. Individuals attempt to adjust the level of environmental stimulation if it falls below or above their optimal by engaging in variety seeking or avoidance behaviors (Raju 1983).

According to Hoyer and Ridgway (1984), certain product characteristics are likely to mediate brand switching in a specific product class. Objective product characteristics such as inter-purchase frequency and the number of choice alternatives are said to determine the product category in which brand switching is likely to occur. For example, brand switching is likely to occur in a product class with many alternative brands and types and where inter-purchase frequency is relatively short. Perceived characteristics, which include involvement, perceived risk, brand loyalty, brand similarity and hedonism, are based on subjective consumer perceptions which vary across consumers in a particular product context.

Using the purchase of apparel as the context, measures were developed to capture variety seeking levels, product characteristics and brand switching propensity. Apparel was chosen because it is a medium-priced product appropriate to both men and women, there are many different brands and types of apparel, and inter-purchase frequency is short (Goldsmith 2000). The apparel sector is also relevant to researchers because it attracts opinion leaders and serves a symbolic function for self image and social identity. Variety seeking levels were measured using the notion of OSL, applying the arousal seeking tendency scale of Mehrabian and Russell (1974). This scale has been preferred by many consumer researchers (e.g., Joachimsthaler and Lastovicka 1984; Raju 1980) because it is concise, easy to administer and has high reliability and validity levels. A number of measures were developed to capture involvement, perceived risk, brand loyalty, brand similarity and hedonism in apparel purchases. While involvement, perceived risk and brand loyalty were operationalized as multidimensional constructs, brand similarity was treated as a uni-dimensional construct, and hedonism (or pleasure), as a dimension of involvement (Kapferer and Laurent 1985a; Peter and Ryan 1976; Spangerberg, Voss, and Crowley 1997; Uncles and Laurent 1997).

An online questionnaire was sent to a sample of three thousand individuals randomly derived from a large customer database. A response rate of 19% was achieved. Regression analysis was used to examine the hypothesis that brand switching propensity is a function of variety seeking levels and product characteristics. Prior to the regression analysis, data reduction of the OSL, involvement and perceived risk variables was carried out. Four new OSL factors and 8 new product factors were derived as a result of the analysis. Multiple regression was used to investigate whether variety seeking and product characteristics explain brand switching propensity. Due to the large number and complex variables involved, two linear models were derived to assess the effect on brand switching propensity of each independent factor.

The results of both regression models suggest that OSL and product characteristics do not explain brand switching propensity in apparel purchases. While apparel may, in theory, be a suitable context for brand switching to occur, product characteristics appear to affect its occurrence. Similarly, while relatively high levels of variety seeking have been found in this research, these levels do not explain brand switching propensity.

Of course, these findings cannot be generalized to other product categories. On the contrary, the results of this research indicate the need for further research into the extent to which product characteristics mediate brand switching propensity.

REFERENCES


