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Do Unto Others As You Would Do Unto Yourself: Variety-Seeking Motives in Gift Giving

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Is consumer variety-seeking behavior limited to one's own purchases, or might it also extend to purchases made for others? Prior research has provided considerable support for variety-seeking tendencies in purchase behavior (McAlister and Pessemier 1982; Ratner and Kahneman 1999). Researchers have also distinguished between variety seeking as an internal trait versus variety seeking triggered by external stimuli such as price promotions (Kahn and Louie 1990; Kahn and Raju 1991; van Trijp et al. 1996). More recently, researchers have also investigated the role of contextual variables (e.g., public vs. private decisions) in variety-seeking behavior (Ratner and Kahn 2002).

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Is consumer variety-seeking behavior limited to one's own purchases, or might it also extend to purchases made for others? Prior research has provided considerable support for variety-seeking tendencies in purchase behavior (McAlister and Pessemer 1982; Ratner and Kahneman 1999). Researchers have also distinguished between variety seeking as an internal trait versus variety seeking triggered by external stimuli such as price promotions (Kahn and Louie 1990; Kahn and Raju 1991; van Trijp et al. 1996). More recently, researchers have also investigated the role of contextual variables (e.g., public vs. private decisions) in variety-seeking behavior (Ratner and Kahn 2002).

We focus here on variety seeking as a trait-like, individual-difference variable (Baumgartner and Steenkamp 1996; van Trijp et al. 1996). Several researchers have studied this variable in regard to individuals' own purchase behaviors. For example, van Trijp et al. (1996) find that the "intrinsic" variety-seeking trait interacts with product-level characteristics (e.g., hedonic vs. non-hedonic attributes) in determining whether consumers switch between brands or repeat purchase.

Notwithstanding, prior research has not explored whether a person's own variety-seeking trait might actually extend into buying products for others. We explore this issue in the context of gift decisions by investigating the composition and diversity of products (or lack thereof) in consumers' consideration sets. More specifically, the key issue in our research is the degree of product *heterogeneity* in a consideration set, i.e., the extent to which the choice alternatives in a consideration set span distinctly different product categories (Desai and Hoyer 2000; Johnson 1984; Ratneshwar et al. 1996).

The setting for our research is gifts bought online. We take into account in our theorizing the fact that online consumer decision-making processes are likely influenced by information presentation formats or "menus" that are unique to the Web (Haubl and Trifts 2000; Huffman and Kahn 1998; Lynch and Ariely 2000). A distinctive aspect of the Web environment is that it is possible for a retailer to make products available to the consumer in a *choice* of Web menu formats. The consumer can then go back and forth between these different menu formats while making an online purchase decision. Thus, for example, a consumer shopping for a gift online at *gifts.com* can browse through different product alternatives by clicking on menus that display only products in a specific category (e.g., only wristwatches), products in the same price range (e.g., diverse products from \$25 to \$50), products for a specific gift occasion (e.g., diverse products for a birthday), products for a specific gift recipient (e.g., diverse products for a brother), etc.

Further, the choice of a specific Web menu format (e.g., product-category based vs. non product-category based) should influence how consumers process information about different product alternatives. We expect that in general, product-category based Web menus should yield somewhat similar choice alternatives, thereby producing relatively homogenous consideration sets. In contrast, non product-category based Web menus (e.g., price-based, occasion-based, or recipient-based) should engender relatively dissimilar choice alternatives that cut across different product categories.

We propose that a high (vs. low) variety-seeking individual will be more motivated to improve his/her stimulation level by seeking novelty in the decision-making process (van Trijp et al. 1996). Further, this same individual will try to achieve an improved stimulation level even while buying gifts for others and thus might look for more variety in choice alternatives for stimulation. Consequently, such an individual will seek diverse choice alternatives by browsing different Web menus, especially non product-category based menus such as occasion- or recipient-based menus. Even if a high variety-seeking individual starts the search process with a product-category based menu, the need for variety and increased stimulation should eventually cause this person to switch to non product-category based menus. As a result, a high (vs. low) variety-seeking individual will be more likely to browse diverse product categories, which in turn is more likely to produce a heterogeneous consideration set.

Based on our theorizing, we examined in an online decision-making experiment the joint effects of variety seeking and gift buyer-recipient relationships on the composition of gift consideration sets. Subjects (N=83) shopped for products from actual e-tailer Web sites on the basis of hypothetical gift-giving scenarios. Individual differences in the variety-seeking trait were measured in a session two weeks prior to the main study. The results provide fairly consistent evidence that gift buyers project their intrinsic variety-seeking tendencies onto purchases made for others by considering a wider range of product categories as gifts. Variety seeking also interacts with the effects of distant (vs. close) relationships on the extent to which gift buyers consider heterogeneous product categories. For example, the variety-seeking trait seems to exert sufficient pressure so as to counteract the knowledge gift buyers likely have of gift recipients' specific product preferences (e.g., in the case of close relationships).

In sum, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to demonstrate that the variety-seeking trait might influence purchase behaviors beyond one's own self-consumption. Our study also extends literature in the area of two-stage choice models by demonstrating the role of variety seeking in producing consideration sets with heterogeneous product categories (i.e., across-category consideration). Implications, limitations, and future research directions are discussed.

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