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Patrick Legohérel
Granem University of Angers

Bruno Dauce
Granem University of Angers

Cathy H.C. Hsu
School of Hotel & Tourism Management The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

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Divergence in Variety Seeking: An Exploratory Study among International Travelers

Patrick Legohérel
Granem
University of Angers (France)

and

Bruno Daucé
Granem
University of Angers (France)

and

Cathy H.C. Hsu
School of Hotel & Tourism Management
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (Hong Kong SAR, PRC)

ABSTRACT

In this study, we analyze the influence of variety seeking and exploratory buying on travelers' consumption behavior in an international context. The study also compares Asian travelers with Western travelers. Several factors which help to explain divergence in variety seeking are included in the analysis. Results demonstrate that variety seeking and exploratory tendency have a significant relation with travelers' consumption behavior (both Asian and Western travelers). Specific results emerged, such as: customers who have a high tendency for novelty seeking are less loyal. However, no significant difference has been identified between Asian and Western tourists.

Keywords: *variety seeking, exploratory buying behavior, international travelers, Asia.*

INTRODUCTION

Variety seeking behavior has received much attention in marketing literature (McAlistair and Pessemier, 1982; Kahn, Kalwani and Morrison, 1986; Kahn, 1995; Baumgartner and Steenkamp, 1996; Van Trijp et al., 1996). Variety seeking is defined as a tendency for the consumer to alternate between the different makes of the same item (Kahn et al., 1986) or the quest for diversity in the choice of goods and services (Kahn, 1995). Variety seeking provides consumers with novelty and relief from boredom in their purchasing experiences (Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 1992).

McAlistair and Pessemier (1982) explained that variety seeking is viewed by some authors as a derived motivation, a behavior that has nothing to do with a preference for novelty; while other theories consider variety seeking as a direct motivation. But true variety seeking is intrinsically motivated and not due to the instrumental value of the alternatives (Van Trijp et al., 1996).

The origin of variety seeking is the individual's need for stimulation (Leuba, 1955). Baumgartner and Steenkamp (1996) consider that variety seeking relates positively to optimum stimulation level. Novelty-seeking helps the consumer to reach an optimum sensation level, characterized as an individual trait, which explains the divergence in variety seeking at the individual's level.

Goukens et al. (2007) studied the relation between desire and variety seeking. An active desire increases the value of any items that may satisfy the desire and, if an active desire increases the perceived value of goods it could also influence a variety seeking tendency. For instance, the authors "found evidence that hungry participants opted for more variety in their food choices, and that participants eager to go on holiday preferred a more varied list of travel activities" (Goukens et al. 2007, P. 386).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several factors help to explain divergence in variety seeking: product category, cultural orientation, specific forms of purchase behavior, satisfaction and loyalty.

Product category

Authors posit that product category has an influence on variety seeking (Givon, 1984; Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 1992). Hoyer and Ridgway (1984) suggest that variety seeking is related to a product-specific situation (product characteristics, different alternatives available). Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) demonstrate that the variety seeking tendency is higher when the product has more hedonic attributes and that tourism is driven by hedonic motivations. Therefore the specificities of tourism and hospitality amenities might be considered as key factors, explaining the divergence in variety seeking. Kemperman et al. (2000) argued that consumers are inclined to seek a degree of variety in their theme-park choice; for instance, consumers visit different parks on different occasions. They demonstrate that variety seeking effects significantly the influence on consumers' choices of theme parks.

Two dimensions help to explain the variety seeking behavior in travel and tourism: Temporal and spatial variety, which are often mixed together. For example: a consumer has his/her dinner in a restaurant, but decides to look for a different restaurant for the next dinner, just to try an other restaurant. A tourist chooses a destination for his/her holiday, but plans the next holiday elsewhere, mainly to avoid boredom and to be sure of experiencing different activities and sceneries. Hu et al. (2002) studied the variety seeking behavior of the U.S. visiting friends and relatives (VFR) market. They showed evidence of differences between groups of VFR travelers, explained by variety seeking behavior (namely destination patterns and trip purposes). The four identified groups were significantly different in travel distances, duration, and commercial accommodation, the results also confirmed the influence of variety seeking on tourists' consumption.

Similar results have been identified with consumers' choices of food, driven both by personal and situational factors (Lähteenmäki and Van Trijp, 1995) and refer to hedonic dimensions (do you like the food?), but also to more basic needs (if you are hungry, you need to eat). Price, availability or food alternatives and diversity all have an impact on the consumer's decision to purchase an item, but variety seeking also has an impact on this process. This influence is explained both by external and internal factors (i.e. need for variety, escape from boredom – as food products are usually chosen repetitively...). Lähteenmäki and Van Trijp

(1995) studied the relationship between the level of appreciation and the variety tendency in sandwich choices. The hypothesis proposed was that high variety seekers would opt for an increase in options in their choices. This hypothesis was not confirmed for this type of purchase and the variety seeking tendency was found to confirm the prediction hypothesized, only for some products. Variety seeking has been considered as an independent determinant of food choice, not interacting with level of appreciation.

Culture

Lin and Mattila (2006) argued that culture plays an important role in influencing consumers' switching intentions and their search for variety. They studied Taiwanese consumption versus U.S. consumers' habits. They hypothesized that Taiwanese consumers, living in a country where the culture remains unchanged, are more willing to search for novelty in restaurant providers than U.S. consumers since they have been exposed to Western influence (i.e. new brands, new products). The results indicate that cultural differences play an important part in moderating college-aged consumers' switching and exploratory behaviors. Taiwanese subjects had higher ratings on exploratory behaviors such as variety-, novelty-, and curiosity seeking than their U.S. counterparts.

Type of purchase behavior

Variety-seeking is not strongly associated with a specific form of purchase behavior. It was categorized as low involvement (Van Trijp et al., 1996) and not always a spontaneous behavior (McAlistair and Pessemier, 1982). Baumgartner (2002) hypothesized that variety-seeking was a feeling-based, high involvement and spontaneous exploratory behavior. Sharma et al. (2009) investigated the relation between different forms of purchase behavior: variety seeking and impulse buying. Firstly, they demonstrate that OSL (optimum stimulation level) has a stronger influence on variety seeking than on impulse buying and secondly they confirmed Baumgartner's (2002) typology of purchase behaviors in which variety seeking is defined as a feeling-based and spontaneous purchase behavior.

Satisfaction and loyalty

The relationships between variety seeking and both satisfaction and loyalty have been highlighted in the literature (Bigné et al., 2009, Berné et al., 2001, 2005, Van trijp et al., 1996). The fact that satisfied customers decide to switch providers might be explained by the variety seeking tendency (Bansal et al., 2005). Berné et al. (2001) studied the effect of variety seeking on customer retention performance, in the restaurant industry. They identified a negative effect of variety seeking tendency both on the satisfaction level and on intention to return to the company. Therefore, loyalty programs could prove to be inefficient in the services industry with consumers with high tendency to seek variety, even if those consumers were fully satisfied by the service provided. Niininen et al. (2004) indicates that tourists with a high variety seeking tendency are not regular consumers of a single destination, but instead prefer novelty in their destination choice. Confirmed by Barroso et al. (2007)'s identification of a significant influence of variety seeking tendency on tourists' future behavioral intentions. Jang et al. (2007)'s research shows evidence that variety seeking has a direct effect on mid-term revisit intentions for a particular destination. Reinforced by Bigné et al. (2009)'s studies: demonstrating that specific

variety seeking has a relevant influence both on short and long term intention to return to the destination.

Service providers could then consider that variety seekers are lost consumers, despite all the efforts provided to satisfy them. But Woratschek and Horbel (2005) indicate that variety seekers might also be viewed positively. They demonstrate that variety seekers and opinion leaders have similar characteristics due to their willingness to engage in communication and their great influence on other consumers. Results also reveal that the positive influence of satisfaction is stronger than the negative influence of variety seeking tendency. Therefore efforts to satisfy customers, even variety seekers, prove to be valuable.

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

Very few studies on variety seeking issue have been conducted within an international context. Sharma et al. (2009) open the door to this research direction: "Future research on impulse buying and variety seeking behaviors may benefit from the inclusion of cultural orientation as an important variable" (Sharma et al., 2009, p.7). Lin and Mattila (2006) show evidence of the significant influence of culture on switching intention and variety seeking. However, respondents of this study were college students (i.e., 17- to 25-year-olds) from two universities and the study concentrated on a specific segment of the restaurant industry (trendy restaurants). A new study is needed with a sample consisting of consumers with a diversity of profiles (age, nationality...), and based on a wider range of consumption habits.

In this study, we analyze the influence of variety seeking (measured by the Varseek scale – Van Trijp and Steenkamp, 1992) and exploratory buying behavior (measured by the Exploratory Buying Behavior scale – Baumgartner and Steenkamp, 1992) on travelers' consumption behavior in an international context. The study is conducted at the Hong Kong international airport, which allows us to compare Asian travelers versus Western consumers.

Following the definition of variety seeking (i.e. Kahn, 1995), in this study we concentrate on one aspect of variety seeking, that is the tendency to seek novelty in the choice of goods and services. Variety seeking tendency will lead the consumer to try goods and services other than those usually considered. An illustration of this behavior could be an international traveler who intends to try new services relating to the culture of the country he is visiting. On the other hand, a traveler who does not want to experience the local culture (showing a preference for international services or services related to his or her own culture) will be considered as a low novelty seeker. The measure of novelty seeking will focus on specific categories of products: restaurants, food and accommodation.

As explained above, the objectives of the present paper are to understand the relation between variety seeking, exploratory buying behavior, loyalty, cultural characteristics and travelers' consumption behavior:

H1: A significant relation is identified between exploratory behavior, novelty seeking, and travelers' consumption behavior.

H2: A significant relation is identified between cultural orientation, novelty seeking and travelers' consumption behavior.

H3: A significant relation is identified between loyalty, novelty seeking and travelers' consumption behavior.

H4: Exploratory tendency and novelty seeking help to explain both Asian and Western travelers' behavior.

METHOD

A survey was conducted in the departure hall of the Hong Kong International Airport by a team of 14 interviewers. Filtering questions were asked to exclude residents of Hong Kong and transit passengers who did not leave the airport terminal.

The research analyses consumption behavior, especially the search for variety. This dimension of consumption behavior may be emphasized in a cross-cultural context; for example, does an international traveler look for culturally related products (i.e. local food and or local restaurant) or for more international products or products related with his/her culture? Variety seeking behavior is measured by the type of food sought, the restaurants visited and general hotel purchase preferences during their current trip to Hong Kong,. Characteristics of respondents are also identified (i.e., nationality, language, country of residence, and gender) and individuals could choose between two languages in which to answer the questionnaires (English or Chinese).

In order to evaluate exploratory buying tendency and variety seeking, two scales are submitted to respondents. The first one called the VARSEEK scale (Van Trijp and Steenkamp, 1992) measures consumers' variety seeking tendency with respect to food. It has been used for instance, to explain some of the diversity in cheese consumption (Van Trijp et al., 1992) and the interaction between the level of appreciation and variety seeking (Läthenmäki et al., 1995). The second scale (Baumgartner and Steenkamp, 1996) measures general variety seeking tendency. This scale provides a two-factor conceptual model of exploratory buying behavior in which Exploratory Acquisition of Products (EAP) is distinguished from Exploratory Information Seeking (EIS). The first factor (with 10 EAP items) is related to purchase experiences that can satisfy the need for sensory stimulation via, for example, risky, varied, or innovative product choices. The second factor (with 10 EIS items) takes account of the consumers' need for cognitive stimulation. A five-point Likert-type agreement scale was used, where 5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree.

A previous validation of the scales has been conducted successfully (authors, 2008). Results show that the EBB scale can be reduced to a 4 EAP and 3 EIS item. Data collected from both language versions are considered as fitting the model adequately. A multi-group analysis confirms the validity and the consistency of these dimensions across language categories. Measurements such as exploratory buying behavior, composed of acquisition and information seeking, appear to be universal in their dimensionality. Similar results confirm the validation of the Varseek scale. This scale has already been applied successfully to several researches (Van Trijp and Steenkamp 1992, Lähteenmäki and Van Trijp 1995).

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

A total of 476 interviews were carried out and after deletion of respondents with missing answers, 441 cases remained. Respondents' cultural and behavioral characteristics are shown in Table 1. As one would expect, distribution of nationality is similar to distribution of country of origin. Over one-third of respondents represented North America, followed by China/Taiwan and Southeast Asia with almost to two-thirds (63.9%) of respondents choosing to answer the English version of the questionnaire and the other 36.1% responding to the Chinese version. The gender distribution is quite even, with 57.1% men and 42.9% women answering the questionnaire. In terms of food and lodging variety seeking behavior, the majority (86.3%) visited local Chinese restaurants and 66.7% sought local Chinese food since their arrival to Hong Kong. Lodging

behaviors reported did not reflect as much variety seeking spirit, with 35.6% preferred a hotel chain with localized products and 31.7% preferred an international hotel chain with standardized products. Only 24.0% indicated a preference for a local hotel with local characteristics.

A canonical analysis has been conducted to compare the relative influence of novelty-seeking and exploratory behavior both on travelers' behavior and profile (including culture and loyalty). This analysis was used because non-linear canonical correlation analysis enables the relationships between several series of variables to be assessed. This method is similar to the non-linear analysis of main components, but its field of application extends to many series of variables. The objective therefore consists of determining the degree of similarity between the sets of variables. Several types of variables may be used when implementing a canonical analysis (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, and Black, 2002), and different types of variables are accepted when using non-linear canonical analysis.

Three groups of variables have been created for the purpose of the canonical analysis. The first one concentrates on exploratory behavior and novelty seeking. The second group relates to the travelers' profile (including cultural characteristics measured by nationality and loyalty measured by belonging to a Frequent Flyer Program). The third group corresponds to consumption behavior (such as type of food sought, restaurants visited and hotel preferences) as declared by the survey individuals. In the present study, the interaction between these three groups of variables is modeled using, a non-linear generalized canonical analysis (non linear canonical correlation) (Gifi, 1990). This analysis enables the study of the contribution of each group to the structuring of the phenomenon. In addition, it also allows the determination of the variables within these groups who contribute the most to the declared behavior. No outlier variable is identified from the graphical analysis.

The two dimensions account for 56.2 percent of the total variance (goodness of fit: 1.123) (Table 1) and the structure of the model is explained well, by the groups. When looking closer at the contribution of each group, we note that group 1, corresponding to the exploratory tendency and novelty seeking, has a greater contribution (explaining 66.9 percent of the total variance, goodness of fit: 1.337) than group 2, including culture and loyalty (explaining 42.2 percent of the total variance, goodness of fit: 0.844). Then group 3 (travelers' behavior, with regards to food, restaurant and hotel) and group 1 (exploratory tendency and variety seeking) contribute significantly to the explanation of the structure of the model. These results contribute to the validation of H1.

Table 1: Canonical Analysis Result Summary

Loss Index	Dimension		Sum	Goodness of Fit
	1	2		
Group 1: Exploratory behavior and variety seeking	0.319	0.344	0.663	1.337
Group 2: Travelers' profile (including culture and loyalty)	0.419	0.737	1.156	0.844
Group 3: Travelers' consumption behavior	0.439	0.372	0.811	1.189
Mean value	0.392	0.485	0.877	
Eigen- value	0.608	0.515		
Goodness of Fit			1.123	

The multiple and single fits (Table 2) show that the variables accounting for the best relationship between the sets of variables are in the following order of importance: Nation (0.643), Type of food sought: local/Chinese food (0.392), food from your own country (0.302), Varseek item (My curiosity is awakened by dishes on a menu when I have never tasted them before) (0.217) and the belonging to a frequent flyer program (0.198).

On the first dimension, type of food sought (food from my own country) interacts with nationality and consumer's curiosity. A link is established between travelers' behavior, variety sought and culture therefore these results support H2. On the second dimension, type of food sought (local/Chinese food) interacts with belonging to the frequent flyer program. But no relation is confirmed with variety seeking/exploratory tendency, thus these results do not support H3.

The analysis of the most significant variable supports the idea hypothesized in H2, of the importance of culture (nationality) and loyalty (belonging to a frequent flyer program) in explaining travelers' behavior.

When considering the contribution of each group, group 2 including Nationality has the lowest contribution to the explanation of the structure of the model. But, in the other groups, the variable Nationality has the strongest contribution, far ahead of all other variables even those related to exploratory behavior and variety seeking.

Table 2 Multiple and Simple Fits of Canonical Analysis

Group	Multiple fit			Single fit		
	Dimension		Sum	Dimension		Sum
	1	2		1	2	
1 Types of restaurants visited - local/Chinese restaurants ^a	.107	.006	.113	.107	.006	.113
Types of restaurants visited - other typical restaurants related to specific culture ^a	.010	.058	.068	.010	.058	.068
Types of restaurants visited - more international type of restaurant ^a	.003	.186	.189	.003	.186	.189
Types of food sought - local/Chinese food ^a	.000	.392	.392	.000	.392	.392
Types of food sought - more international food ^a	.101	.007	.108	.101	.007	.108
Types of food sought - food from your own country ^a	.301	.001	.302	.301	.001	.302
Your preference on hotels ^a	.000	.068	.068	.000	.066	.066
2 NationB ^a	.618	.025	.643	.607	.000	.607
Sex ^a	.004	.070	.074	.004	.070	.074
Age ^a	.003	.117	.119	.000	.116	.117
Do you belong to any frequent flyer programs? ^a	.001	.197	.198	.001	.197	.198
3 When going out to eat, I like to try new dishes even if I am not sure I will appreciate them ^a	.014	.059	.073	.014	.058	.072
When cooking meals, I like try out new recipes ^a	.065	.022	.087	.061	.019	.080
I think it is amusing to try dishes we are not used to eating ^a	.033	.021	.054	.031	.020	.052
I would really like to know how people in other countries eat ^a	.093	.004	.097	.092	.002	.094
I like to eat exotic dishes ^a	.054	.006	.060	.054	.004	.058
My curiosity is awakened by dishes on a menu when I have never tasted them before ^a	.181	.036	.217	.181	.035	.216
I prefer to eat products that I am used to consuming ^a	.007	.017	.024	.005	.015	.020
I feel curious about food products that I don't know ^a	.007	.034	.040	.004	.033	.037
Even though certain food products are available in a number of different flavors, I tend to buy the same flavor ^a	.032	.078	.110	.029	.075	.104
I would rather stick to a brand I usually buy than try something I am not very sure of ^a	.066	.079	.145	.062	.075	.137
When I go to a restaurant, I feel it is safer to order dishes I am familiar with ^a	.003	.101	.104	.001	.099	.100
If I like a brand, I rarely switch from it just to try something different ^a	.028	.012	.040	.027	.010	.037
I like to go window shopping and find out more about the latest styles ^a	.044	.059	.103	.043	.059	.102
I like to browse through mail order catalogs even when I don't plan to buy anything ^a	.052	.057	.110	.051	.056	.107
I like to shop around just out of curiosity ^a	.102	.048	.151	.101	.046	.147

a. Optimal coding: Ordinal

In this study, we intended to investigate further the analysis of Asian consumers, compared to Western travelers. We have split the entire sample in two sub-samples on the basis of the variable Nationality. All travelers from China and Southeast Asia have been included in the first sub-sample, labeled Asian consumers. Travelers from North America (Americans and Canadians), Oceania (Australians and New Zealanders) and Europe are part of the second sub-sample, labeled Western consumers. The item “others” has been excluded because customers

have different nationalities from Middle East, Africa and South America and do not reflect a homogenous cultural orientation.

The Asian sample has proven to be the best in explaining the structure of the model: the two dimensions account for 60 percent of the variance (Goodness of Fit: 1.2) compared to 56.2 percent for the entire database, and 55.9 percent for the Western travelers sample.

For both samples, group 1, corresponding to the exploratory tendency and novelty seeking, has a greater contribution (Goodness of Fit: 1,226 for Asian travelers, and 1.236 for Western travelers) than group 2. This result brings support to H4, and confirms the significant contribution of exploratory tendency, novelty seeking, and consumption behavior in explaining the structure of the model. But no evidence is shown of any difference between Asian and Western travelers.

The multiple and single fits show that the variable best accounting for the global relation between the sets of variables for the Asian travelers are: belonging to a frequent flyer program (0.626), age (0.578), type of food sought – food from your own country (0.409), an EAP item (0.394), a Varseek item (0.333). The first dimension, Age (0.565 – 62.4 percent of consumers are under 40 years old) is linked with the item “I would rather stick to a brand I usually buy than try something I am not very sure of (0.358). 35 percent of consumers agree, while 26.7 percent do not agree. However there is a large proportion of neutral answers which makes it difficult to conclude whether consumers are more or less variety seekers. The second dimension, belonging to a frequent flyer program (0.616) and the item “I would really like to know how people in other countries eat” (0.323 – 76.7 percent of consumers agree with this statement) are the variables best accounting for the relation between the set of variables. The relation between loyalty and variety seeking is confirmed in the context of Asian culture.

DISCUSSION AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The objective of the study was to analyze the relative influence of exploratory tendency and variety seeking, along with loyalty and cultural orientations on travelers’ consumption behavior. The importance of exploratory tendency and variety seeking in explaining consumers’ behavior is confirmed. At the level of product category, type of food is more closely associated with exploratory tendency and variety seeking than type of restaurant and choice of hotel. This confirms that variety seeking has an impact on the consumer’s choice for food. As it has been demonstrated, in previous studies, that the variety seeking tendency is higher when the product has more hedonic attributes (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), then, should we consider that food refers more to hedonic attributes than restaurants and hotels? A limit of the study (and perspective for future research) is that 55.3 percent of the respondents are Business travelers. For those travelers, the choice of restaurant, and especially of hotels, is definitely not associated with pleasure and hedonic attributes.

We might also consider that results of the present study, related with food (and to a certain extend, with restaurant) are consistent with the Baumgartner’s typology (2002), confirmed by Sharma et al. (2009), in which variety seeking is defined as feeling-based and spontaneous purchase behavior. The choice of food falls into this category (whatever the context, leisure or business), whereas restaurant, and hotels will not be a feeling-based and spontaneous purchase behavior (except for restaurant, when the context is not exclusively business-related). The obvious implication for restaurants is on their menu design and choices of products offered. Once customers are in the restaurant, their ordering behavior could be stimulated by their novelty

seeking desire. Thus, the menu could be designed to satisfy such a desire; consequently, customers' expenditure could increase.

Culture has an influence on travelers' behavior; but the link between culture and the quest for variety has not been demonstrated. Even if the variable Nationality has a greater influence, the group Exploratory tendency and Variety seeking remains stronger in explaining the model. Moreover, any difference is found between the exploratory and variety seeking tendency of Asian travelers versus Western travelers. Thus we do not confirm Lin and Mattila (2006)'s results in which American and Taiwanese consumers were compared. The conclusion reached was that culture plays an important role in influencing consumers' switching intention and their search for variety. The differences between the findings of Lin and Mattila (2006)'s study and those of this study could be due to the sample characteristics because this study used international travelers whereas Lin and Mattila's study used a student sample. As individuals gain travel experience and exposure to other surroundings, cultural assimilation is more likely to occur. Thus, respondents in this study, whether they are from Western or Asian societies, have merged their consumption behaviors and become similar.

Relation between loyalty and variety seeking is highlighted both for the entire dataset and for the Asian travelers' sample. The findings emerging from the analysis of Asian travelers are consistent with previous studies: customers, who are not loyal, also have a high tendency for novelty seeking. However, the reverse could also be true: those who have a high tendency for novelty seeking are less loyal.

The strong relation between loyalty, type of food and novelty seeking is highlighted as followed: customers who do not belong to a frequent flyer program (60.4 percent of respondents) are not looking for food from their own country. They are willing to accept the following statement: "I would really like to know how people eat in other countries" and "I like to eat exotic dishes".

A limit of the study is that loyalty is measured with only one variable. Moreover, we consider loyalty regarding one service provider (airlines); and we know that loyalty identified through a kind of membership (the belonging to the FFP) is sometimes different from a "real" loyalty (frequency of purchase).

The same limit occurs with culture which is also measure with only one variable: nationality. Even if it is considered has a key variable, representative of the consumer's cultural background (Usunier, 2000), other variables might be taken into account.

Our study shows evidence of the strong relationship between exploratory tendency, variety seeking and travelers' behaviors. Specific results emerged, such as less loyal consumers tend to be novelty seekers. But more studies are needed in order to explain the influence of exploratory tendency and novelty seeking as a moderator variable on the travelers' decision making.

Further investigations could also be carried out in order to analyze the degree of influence of novelty seeking between different cultural groups. No significant difference has been identified in our study between Asian and Western travelers, but this result should be confirmed by further studies.

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Corresponding author Patrick Legohérel, ESTHUA – University of Angers, 7 allée François Mitterrand, BP 40455, 49004 Angers Cedex 01, France; Tel : 33 (0)2 41 96 22 29 (E-mail : patrick.legoherel@univ-angers.fr).

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