

The role of exploratory buying behavior tendencies in choices made for others

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Abstract

We examine whether the consumer trait of exploratory buying behavior tendencies (EBBT; Baumgartner, H., and Steenkamp, J.E.M. (1996). Exploratory consumer buying behavior: Conceptualization and measurement. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 13, 121–137.) can influence even choices made for others. The results of three experiments in a gift-giving context show that high (vs. low) EBBT individuals have greater salience of hedonic search motives and consequently form more diverse consideration sets while purchasing a gift. Further, when working with a specific gift budget, high EBBT consumers are more likely to diversify their gift choices by buying a greater number of relatively lower-priced gift items. We also find that the effects of the EBBT trait are significantly attenuated when the regulatory focus of the person making the gift decision is one of prevention rather than promotion. Discussion focuses on implications and future research directions regarding the relationship between exploratory buying behavior tendencies and consumer decision-making.

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Variety-seeking behavior is an important and well-known construct in consumer research. It has been defined and measured by the degree of change or diversity in what a person purchases and consumes (Goukens et al., 2007; Kahn and Ratner, 2005; McAlister and Pessemier, 1982). Behavioral as well as modeling researchers have provided substantial support for variety-seeking patterns in consumer choice (e.g., Chintagunta, 1999; Ratner and Kahn, 2002; Ratner, Kahn, and Kahneman, 1999). Researchers have also distinguished conceptually between variety-seeking behavior as a chronic, individual-difference variable vs. variety-seeking that is triggered by state variables such as hunger or external stimuli such as price promotions (Baumgartner and Steenkamp, 1996; Goukens et al., 2007; Kahn and Raju, 1991; Van Trijp et al., 1996).

When variety-seeking behavior is considered at a dispositional or individual-difference level, prior research suggests that it is strongly associated with the consumer trait of *exploratory buying behavior tendencies* (i.e., EBBT; Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 1992). The theoretical link between the two is that high (vs. low) EBBT individuals are thought to be motivated by the need for increased sensory and cognitive stimulation and thus are more likely to purchase and consume diverse products (Kahn and Ratner, 2005; Raju, 1980; Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 1992). Empirical support for the hypothesized relationship between EBBT and variety-seeking consumption behavior has been provided by Baumgartner and Steenkamp (1996).

The central question we pursue in the current research is as follows: Can EBBT influence even choices made for *others*? By pursuing this question, we seek to make four key contributions to the literature. First, we wish to show that EBBT can influence decision-making processes and choice outcomes even when someone else's satisfaction with the chosen product is the objective. Note that this is in contrast to prior research on EBBT and variety-seeking behavior, where the consumer's own utility function and satisfaction with the chosen option usually have been the central focus (see Kahn and Ratner, 2005 for a recent review). Evidence that EBBT can impact choices even when the

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¹ This study has a lot of relevance to our research. Replicating the study results with an interval between the individual difference variable measurement and the dependent variables of interest in the experiment adds more validity to our findings.

² This study also has a lot of significance as it ruled out any multicollinearity issues with regards to the two independent variables of interest.

decision-maker knows that he or she is not going to personally benefit from consuming the product would shed light on EBBT's wide-ranging and potent nature.

Second, and again unlike prior studies in this area, we examine whether EBBT can influence diversity not only in choices, but also in choice consideration sets. The composition of a consideration set indicates potentially substitutable alternatives and thereby points to a product's marketplace competitors (Desai and Hoyer, 2000; Hauser and Wernerfelt, 1990; Ratneshwar, Pechmann, and Shocker 1996; Roberts and Lattin, 1991). An important issue here is the degree of diversity or heterogeneity among the options in a consideration set, when assessed by the extent to which these alternatives come from distinctly different product categories (Chakravarti and Janiszewski, 2003; Johnson, 1984; Park and Smith, 1989; Ratneshwar et al., 1996). For example, while shopping for a gift in a department store, individual A might create a consideration set that encompasses three different product categories (e.g., two different wristwatches, a leather purse, and a perfume), whereas individual B's gift consideration set might be composed only of alternatives within a single product category (e.g., four different wristwatches). In the context of the present research, the issue is whether EBBT can help explain this difference between the two individuals' consideration sets.

Third, we attempt to shed light on whether the relationship between EBBT and diversity in consideration sets is mediated by the search motives that are salient during the buying process. Prior research has distinguished between utilitarian and hedonic search motives. The former refers to search that is driven by the goal of acquiring information that is useful and decision-relevant, whereas the latter refers to search that is motivated by the desire for pleasure and fun during the purchase process (see, e.g., Babin, Darden, and Griffin 1994). In brief, we theorize that hedonic search motives will be more salient among high (vs. low) EBBT individuals, which in turn should lead to more diverse consideration sets. Evidence on the mediating role of hedonic search motives in the relationship between EBBT and the composition of consideration sets helps to support our conceptualization and adds to the body of knowledge about the specific processes by which EBBT can impact consumer decisions.

Fourth, we explore whether the effects of EBBT are moderated by an important situational variable, namely, regulatory focus. Regulatory focus refers to strategic means of self-control in pursuing goals such as the purchase of a product (see Pham and Higgins, 2005 for a recent review). Regulatory focus theory has emerged as an important theoretical paradigm in recent consumer research (see, e.g., Aaker and Lee, 2001; Jain et al., 2006; Zhou and Pham, 2004). The theory's fundamental proposition is that regulatory focus can be thought of as a dichotomy between a promotion focus and a prevention focus (Higgins, 1997). A promotion focus indicates risk-taking and openness to change, whereas a prevention focus signifies risk-avoidance and stability in preferences. Prior research has not examined the joint effects of EBBT and regulatory focus. But this is an important theoretical and empirical issue. Consider, for example, the case of a high EBBT individual, who presumably has a chronic urge to seek stimulation and out-

of-the-ordinary products in the purchase process, confronted with a decision situation that warrants a conservative, prevention focus. Given that there is a conflict between an innate desire and a strategic need for self-control, it is an interesting question as to which will win.

We present here three studies that explore the aforementioned issues in a gift choice context. We chose this context for our empirical studies since buying a gift is a common and familiar instance of choice of a product where another person's preferences have to be kept in mind. The gift buyer in addition might be expected to focus mainly on whether the gift signals love, friendship, or regard for the recipient (Ruth et al., 1999). Given such conventional wisdom on the kinds of factors that presumably influence gift choices, it is not obvious that EBBT should have any role at all in the decision-making process, thereby underscoring the value of the present line of inquiry.

Study 1 investigates whether high (vs. low) EBBT individuals create more diverse consideration sets when buying gifts for others and whether hedonic search motives mediate this relationship. Study 2 examines whether the relationship between EBBT and diversity in consideration sets is moderated by situational variations in regulatory focus. Finally, study 3 extends the scope of the research from the composition of consideration sets to final gift choices. The specific question is that given identical budget constraints, whether high vs. (low) EBBT individuals are more likely to diversify their choices by buying a "basket" of several moderately priced items for a gift rather than fewer, more expensive products.

Study 1

There is strong evidence that people have an inherent need to maintain an optimal level of internal stimulation and that when the level of stimulation is lower than the optimal threshold, the individual actively tries to enhance it (Berlyne, 1960; Raju, 1980; Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 1992). Further, Baumgartner and Steenkamp (1996) have argued that people can differ in the amount of stimulation deemed to be optimal, such that high (vs. low) EBBT individuals are those with higher thresholds of optimal stimulation. Thus, motivated by the desire to increase their level of stimulation to optimal levels, high EBBT consumers on average are more likely to display curiosity and pursue diversity in the products they consume (Baumgartner and Steenkamp, 1996).

We propose that even when an individual is buying products for others, the high (vs. the low) EBBT individual will have a stronger need to increase his/her internal stimulation level. Consequently, *hedonic search motives* should be more salient for the former. Hedonic search motives are related to the experiential view of consumer behavior, which argues that people often seek recreation and fun while shopping for products (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). Whereas utilitarian search motives are task-oriented and focus on product quality/value, shopping convenience, etc., hedonic search motives apply to consumers who approach shopping as a playful and potentially pleasure-filled experience (Babin et al., 1994; Cotte et al., 2006). Hedonic search motives should be more salient

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