

## When New Feels Good. Enhancing Variety Seeking by Using Subtle Priming

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### ABSTRACT

The literature shows that consumers can be characterized by their brand purchasing patterns. While some tend to repeat purchase, others seek variety in their purchases. In this article we examine the role of subtle situational cues (priming) in breaking through the buying patterns of consumers. Can we enhance people's tendency to seek variety? In two experiments we investigate whether priming can enhance variety seeking behavior in a simulated shop environment. The results indicate no overall effect of priming; the likelihood of choosing a new or less well known brand is very low, certainly when the preferred brand is available. Only young women without preferred brand in the target category are influenced by the prime. We conclude that situational cues are not able to turn consumers into variety seeking in general but only under specific conditions.

\* The authors thank Piet Vanden Abeele for his insightful comments.

## I. INTRODUCTION: CONSUMER CHOICE BEHAVIOR

Both 'brand loyalty' and 'variety seeking' are concepts with a long history in the marketing literature. Although these seem to be conflicting concepts, both are of high managerial importance. Companies aim to make their customers more committed, loyal, or at least habitual buyers of their brands. But it is sometimes more desirable to attract consumers who prefer variety. Only in this way it is possible to sell new products and to snatch away customers from competitors. Afterwards, one can again focus on making these customers more brand loyal. This shows that both concepts are relevant for management. In this article, we focus in particular on the question of how to break the fixed buying patterns of consumers and to coax them to seek variety. We will explore whether the use of subtle situational cues (priming) can influence variety seeking. We will discriminate between consumers with and without fixed brand preference because, as we will discuss, variety seeking is lower among people with fixed brand preferences.

First, we take a look at the choice behavior of the consumer in general and frame our topic in a broader perspective. Not all purchases receive careful attention of customers: as the involvement with the purchase becomes higher, the process of decision-making becomes more complex. Hawkins, Best and Coney (1992) illustrate this in their choice model that discriminates between three purchase situations. Although purchase involvement is a continuum, they consider habitual, limited, and extended decision making as general descriptions of the types of processes that occur along various points on the continuum.

### A. *Habitual Decision Making*

One cannot consider this as a real decision process, although it frequently drives purchases. The reason is that consumer involvement with the purchase is too low. Often, this occurs when the long-term memory offers the preferred brand whenever the need is present. This is the case with brand loyal customers. Once they might have been very involved in choosing the right brand, but now they stick to that brand. When you do not really care about the right product choice (e.g. you once bought a brand and you liked it enough to repurchase it afterwards.), this type of decision-making also dominates. A typical property of 'habitual decision making' is that one does not evaluate the brand, unless one has had a negative usage experience.

### B. Limited Decision Making

This process occurs when the consumer is more involved with his purchase decision. Here, after a limited search, he/she takes a few brands in consideration and evaluates these on the basis of simple decision rules (f.e. the lowest price). After this evaluation, he/she chooses the brand that fits him/her best.

### C. Extended Decision Making

When consumers are highly involved with their purchase, they search for valuable alternatives via both internal and external information. These alternatives are evaluated extensively, before as well as after the purchase. Although cars, houses... are bought in this manner, only few purchase decisions achieve such a level of complexity.

FIGURE 1  
*Assael's (1995) classification of purchase decisions*

	<i>High Brand Involvement</i>	<i>Low Brand Involvement</i>
<i>Extended Decision Making</i>	<b>Complex Decision Making</b>	<b>Variety Seeking</b>
<i>Habitual/Routine Decision Making</i>	<b>Brand Loyalty</b>	<b>Inertia</b>

According to Assael (1995) variety seeking only occurs when the involvement with a certain brand (but not necessarily with the decision) is rather low (see Figure 1). Further, decision-making under variety seeking is rather extended: consumers search for information about the different brands before they make a choice. Brand loyalty is the opposite of variety seeking in two respects. First, decision making is habitual. Second, brand involvement is high. Consumers make purchases with little deliberation because of past satisfaction and a strong commitment to the brand as a result. Inertia occurs when consumers choose a certain brand habitually (like brand loyalty) but without high brand involvement. Extended decision making occurs when consumers have high brand loyalty, but cannot rely on their habits (e.g. because they have to choose among more than one highly

appreciated brand). In what follows, we explore whether it is possible to enhance variety seeking among inert purchasers. The latter will repurchase the brand if it achieves a certain minimum level of satisfaction. Assael (1995) and others refer to this process as spurious loyalty, because repetitive purchases may make it appear as if the consumer is loyal to the brand while actually no such loyalty exists.

## II. BRAND LOYALTY AND VARIETY SEEKING: DEFINITIONS

After giving an indication of the situations in which brand loyalty and variety seeking occur, we now take a closer look at the concepts themselves. In the literature, the meaning of these concepts is rather broad and diverse. We focus on variety seeking, but first review brand loyalty to make it clear that brand loyalty is not the exact opposite of variety seeking.

Although the definitions of brand loyalty in literature are very similar, we cannot ignore some small differences. According to Assael (1995) brand loyalty is 'repeat buying because of commitment to a certain brand'. Jacoby and Chestnut (1978), however, also consider the variation between a few brands as brand loyalty (see also Dyson, Farr, and Hollis (1996)). So, they claim that one can also be loyal to more than one brand. Keller (1993), in his definition, focused on the involvement needed for brand loyalty. The view of brand loyalty adopted here is that it occurs when favorable beliefs and attitudes for the brand are manifested in repeated buying behavior. Giddens and Hofmann (2002) add to the brand loyalty concept that it serves as a base of purchase habits. From now on, we define brand loyalty as the repeated purchasing of one or more brands, with which one is involved because they fit one's preferences and wishes best. This definition allows consumers to be loyal to more than one brand.

The definitions of variety seeking behavior differ in the weight given to behavior and, again, not in the definition of the concept itself. For example, Givon (1981) defines variety-seeking behavior as the phenomenon of an individual consumer switching brands (or repeat buying) induced by the utility (or disutility) he/she derives from the change itself, irrespective of the brands he/she switches to or from. So, the motive to seek variety is the utility one gains because of the change per se. Kahn, Kalwani and Morrison (1986), in contrast, focus

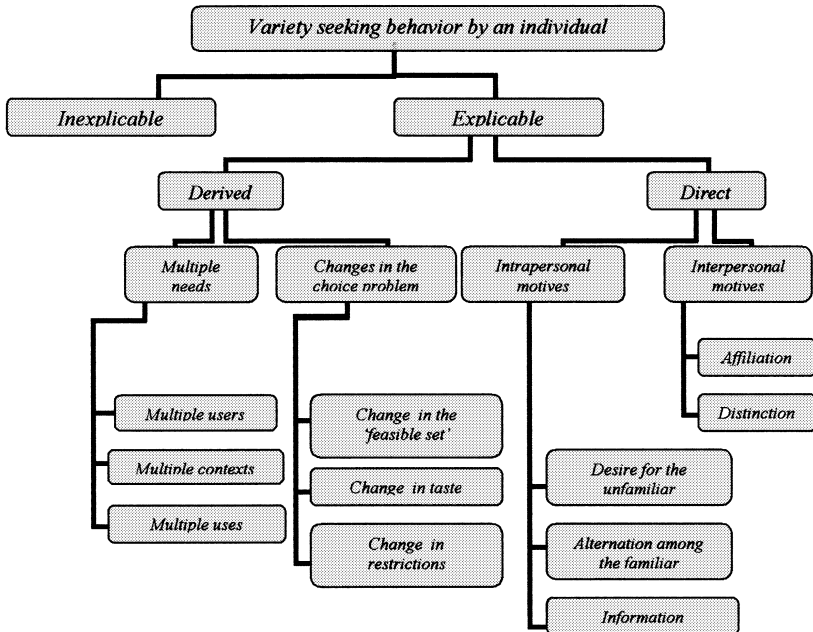
less on the motives, but rather on the behavior. They state that variety-seeking behavior is characterized by a reduction in the repeat purchase probability. In other words, variety seeking reflects that the probability of purchasing a given brand that is purchased on the last purchase occasion is lower than the probability of purchasing that brand given that it was not purchased on the last purchase occasion. Although this definition seems also to apply to brand loyal people who switch regularly between 2 or more brands, this is not the case. Switching in brand loyal people is not driven by the previous purchase choice. In line with Assael (1995), we include the low brand involvement requirement in the definition to differentiate it from brand loyalty. Further, in contrast to Assael's classification, we do not consider variety seeking as restricted to extended decision-making. The behavioral definition (augmented with the low brand involvement requirement) does not imply that the decision is extended. Given Hawkins et al.'s (1992) classification of decision making complexity (see above), we allow variety seeking to occur in limited decision making, an option Assael did not incorporate in his model. Consistent with this, Read and Loewenstein (1999) showed that variety seeking might be related to simple heuristics rather than to extended decision-making. In sum, we focus on a differential (decreased) probability of repeat purchasing for low involvement decisions.

At this point, it is important to note that we are pessimistic about the existence of techniques that turn brand loyal people into variety seekers for a given product category. The main reason for this pessimism is the moderating role of brand involvement. Probably, once a bond is created with a brand, variety seeking becomes very unlikely. That is, positive reinforcement based on satisfaction with the brand leads to repetitive behavior. This is the reason why, in our research, we concentrate on possible ways to turn inert people, instead of brand loyal consumers, into variety seekers (i.e. the right column in Assael's classification).

### III. LITERATURE REVIEW: TYPES OF VARIETY SEEKING BEHAVIOR

As we pointed out, there are several motives why consumers would seek variety in purchased brands. McAlister and Pessemier (1982) developed a taxonomy to classify most of the possible motives.

FIGURE 2  
 McAllister and Pessemier's (1982)  
 classification system of variety seeking behavior



Source: McAllister and Pessemier (1982)

### A. Derived variation

According to McAllister and Pessemier (1982), we should discriminate between derived and direct reasons for variation. *Derived variation* refers to changes in behavior that result from external or internal forces that have nothing to do with a preference for variety per se. Derived variation occurs for example when different members of a family have divergent preferences that makes it desirable to vary the product choice. This is referred to in the model as 'multiple users'. It is also possible that the behavior is determined by the situation. In this context Laurent (1978) states that situations can be different in many respects, like the social context of consumption, the location of consumption, time constraints on consumption, the quantity consumed or usage convenience. Besides, a product can be used in different manners, and in this way it can have different functions. Varied

behavior can also occur because of changes in the choice problem: the feasible set of the consumer can change, for example, when new products are launched on the market and old ones removed; one's taste can change through external or internal forces like advertising or maturity. Finally, changes in a consumer's restrictions (e.g. an increase in income), can invite him or her to change brands. Notice that all these phenomena meet our definition of variety seeking (both the behavioral criterion as well as the low brand involvement requirement). However, they are not driven by the motive to change. Because the techniques we use probably affect motives, we mainly focus on variety seeking that is motivated by the change in itself (direct variation).

### B. *Direct variation*

According to McAlister and Pessemier (1982) *direct variation* refers to behavior that is the result of external (interpersonal motives) or internal (intrapersonal motives) forces, which refer to a preference for variety itself. In general, *intrapersonal motives* have to do with the optimal level of stimulation (Driver and Streufert (1964)) that people need. The basic notion of OSL is that the relationship between a person's affective reaction to stimulation and the stimulation (from the environment or through internal means) follows an inverted U-shaped function, with intermediate levels of stimulation perceived as most satisfying. When stimulation falls below the ideal level, the individual seeks to increase stimulation from any source in the environment (e.g. exploration, novelty seeking). As stimulation increases beyond the ideal level, the individual seeks more moderate situations by reducing or simplifying input from the environment by means such as avoidance of novelty or variety. We now briefly taken a look at the relevant literature.

King (1964), Robertson (1971) and Hirschman (1980) invoked the desire for the unfamiliar and the optimal stimulation level to explain the purchasing of new products. Venkatesan (1973) and Faison (1977) note that the level of stimulation can be raised even by switching from one product variant to another, even if the variant to which one switches is familiar (Tucker (1964); McConnell (1968); Brickman and D'Amato (1975)). Further, acquiring information can also be linked to varied behavior. It is possible that people change to a new, unknown brand just to receive information about that brand (Keon (1980); Raju (1980)). Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1992)

researched the relationship between OSL and variety seeking. They found that individuals with higher OSL exhibited more variety seeking behavior in a product category than individuals with lower OSL. Earlier, Pessemier and Handelsman (1984) found evidence for the relation between variety seeking behavior and two variables related to OSL, age and innovativeness. Furthermore, Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1992) investigated the relation between variety seeking and innovativeness, but did not find support for the hypothesis that individuals with higher OSL are more willing to try out new brands. Menon and Kahn (1995) investigated whether variety seeking in a certain product category could be reduced by increasing the variation in another product category (the context), that is bought at the same moment. It turned out that this is the case, but only to a certain extent: when the need for variation is too high, variation in another product category can no longer compensate for this. Finally, Van Trijp, Hoyer and Inman (1996) tried to explore in which situations direct varied purchase behavior occurs more than repeated purchase behavior or derived varied purchase behavior. They found that variety seeking behavior occurs more with products with which the consumer has a low product involvement than with products with which the consumer has a high product involvement. Furthermore they found that behavioral variables (i.e. purchase frequency and purchase history) make an important contribution in determining variety seeking intensity. A last important finding was that direct variety seeking behavior occurs more when consumers perceive the brands as similar. This is plausible: people choose the brand with attributes that fits their needs the best. So, when two brands are very similar as to their attributes, one tends to consider them as substitutes.

In the class of *interpersonal motives* we distinguish affiliation and distinction. Affiliation reflects people's desire to feel connected with a group. As a consequence, people also change their behavior when that of their group changes (Veblen (1899); Robinson (1961)). So, the desire to affiliate will lead to imitation. Distinction refers to people's desire to be unique, to have an individual identity (Szybillo (1973); Fromkin (1976)). People often buy rare products to distinguish themselves from others. According to the Uniqueness Theory (Snyder and Fromkin (1980)), persons are motivated to maintain a sense of specialness as they define themselves on various important self-related dimensions relative to others. However, Fromkin (1976) points out that social pressures for conformity create the need to

express individuality in a subtle way. Ratner and Kahn (2002) conducted a series of experiments that are relevant in this context. According to their results people incorporate more variety into their consumption when their behavior is subject to public scrutiny. Consumers expect others to evaluate their decision more favorably if they choose variety and this sometimes leads individuals to incorporate more variety into their public than private decisions.

We now briefly describe a type of variety seeking that is direct, but does not easily fit in McAllister and Pessemier's (1982) scheme. In their taxonomy of varied behavior, McAlister and Pessemier (1982) focused on sequential choices of a product within a certain product category. Read and Loewenstein (1995), in contrast, were more interested in what happens when one has to buy different products within that product category at the same point in time. They introduced the term 'diversification bias' to refer to the excess variety seeking in simultaneous choice. That is, during simultaneous choice, people opt for more brand variety than is good for them. The reason for this is twofold. First, when making simultaneous choices, people underestimate the interval that separates each consumption occasion and consequently overpredict how satiated they will become. Second, consumers consider a simultaneous choice as a portfolio. Both predictions were confirmed by Read, Antonides, van den Ouden and Trienekens (2001). It follows that simultaneous choices often lead to outcomes that are worse than sequential choices, where "worse" is defined in terms of the degree to which participants like what they choose and in the objective value of their choices. Read et al. (2001) confirmed this too. Although their findings are not directly related to our research, they support our suggestion that variety seeking does not necessarily imply extended decision-making. A simple diversification heuristic might lead to variety seeking as well, and hence be relevant in the choice of fast moving consumer goods. Further, the diversification bias research is related to ours with respect to the general underlying goal of triggering variety seeking by simple situational cues.

#### IV. THE PRESENT RESEARCH: THE EFFECT OF PRIMING ON VARIETY SEEKING BEHAVIOR

As we already mentioned, the main purpose of this research is to find out how we can induce consumers to seek variety. In two

experiments we investigated whether subtle situational cues can enhance variety seeking. We used a technique called priming (e.g. Meyers-Levy (1989)). By exposing participants several times to words related to a certain concept, the concept becomes activated in the long-term memory (usually below awareness threshold) and can affect behavior. In general, priming can have two effects: biasing interpretation or goal activation (Bargh and Chartrand (1999)). First, it can affect the interpretation of a current situation. For instance, activating the concept of ‘cooperative behavior’ can lead selfish people to exploit opponents in economic games (Smeesters, Warlop, Van Avermaet, Yzerbyt and Corneille (2003)). Priming can also activate behavioral goals. For instance, activating the concept of achievement can induce people to put more effort in a task not usually considered an achievement task (Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar and Trotschel (2001)). In our case, the prime of ‘exploration’ might activate the goal of seeking variety. Hence, using McAllister and Pessemier’s classification, our prime might enhance (1) intrapersonal motives to seek variety, by activating the goal of seeking optimal stimulation, and (2) interpersonal motives to be unique. This leads to the following hypothesis:

*H1: people primed with words related to exploration will be more likely to choose a brand they do not know (well) than people primed with neutral words.*

As we mentioned above, variety seeking is higher among people without fixed brand preferences, that is, people who do not repeatedly buy the same brand(s). This leads us to the following hypothesis:

*H2: We expect an interaction effect between the prime and fixedness, i.e. the effect of the exploration prime will be larger among people without fixed brand than among people with a fixed brand.*

## A. Study 1

### Participants

Forty-nine participants completed the experiment as part of a course requirement in marketing or as a volunteer. All participants were students at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. Their ages ranged from 19 to 23 years.

## Procedure

The experiment consisted of two tasks. In the first task words were shown on the computer screen; the subjects had to decide whether these were existing words (a so-called lexical decision task). Outside their awareness, the prime words were flashed on the screen subliminally (i.e. 30 ms), which prevents them from noticing them consciously.

In one condition these prime-words were related to adventure, novelty, and experimentation (e.g. experimental, adventurous, unknown). We selected a list ourselves based on semantic criteria. In the other condition the words were neutral with respect to novelty (e.g. green, dark, small).

Afterwards the participants had to shop in a small simulation shop in the lab. To complete this task, they received a shopping list with 7 product categories: juice, coffee, milk, ketchup, spaghetti, detergent and cornflakes. Those products were chosen because all participants were students who buy such products on a regular basis. Of each product category three brands were available in the shop: two well-known brands (the market leaders in Belgium) and one unknown (Dutch) brand. Because the choice of an unknown brand indicates the tendency to seek variety, we checked per product category whether the participant had chosen the unknown brand. The total number of unknown brands per participant was taken as a measure of variety seeking in his/her purchase behavior. In the last task, all subjects had to fill out a questionnaire. The purpose of this measurement was twofold. First, it was a priming check: the subjects were asked if they had noticed the subliminal primes (no one had). Second, we asked questions about their purchase behavior. They were asked how often they bought the chosen product. We also verified, for every product category, whether they usually buy a fixed brand (and if so, which one). Furthermore, we checked whether they sometimes do their shopping in the Netherlands; one person who regularly shopped in the Netherlands was omitted from the analysis.

## Results and discussion

For each participant, we calculated the proportion of new brand choices (i.e. the unknown, Dutch brand), once relative to the number of products for which the preferred brand was available (average

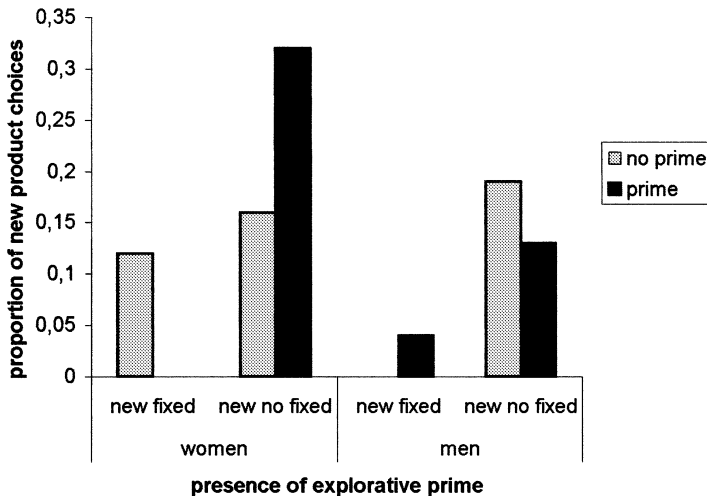
1.98 out of 7), and once relative to the number of products for which there was no preferred brand or for which the preferred brand was not among the choice set (average 5.02 out of 7). The former measure is referred to as ‘new fixed’ and the latter as ‘new no fixed’. Eight participants did not have a preferred brand for any of the seven product categories. As a result, there was no ‘new fixed’ measure for them.

We first conducted a repeated measures ANOVA with ‘new fixed’ and ‘new no fixed’ as repeated measures and with prime and gender as independent variables ( $n=41$ ). Although we didn’t expect any effect for gender, we included the variable in the analysis. We found a main effect for the within subject factor: subjects were more likely to choose the new brand when they had no preferred brand (available) than when their preferred brand was available:  $F(1,37)=9.83, p<.005$ . The main effects for prime, gender, and their interaction were not significant ( $F_s<1.42, p_s>.20$ ). The three-way interaction between the within factor and gender and condition was marginally significant:  $F(1,37)=3.35, p<.08$ . Figure 1 shows that women who had no fixed brand in a certain category were influenced by the prime but not men.

We further conducted an ANOVA focusing on ‘new no fixed’ as a dependent variable ( $n=49$ ). There were no main effects for prime

FIGURE 3

*Proportion of choices for the new product as a function of prime, gender, and presence of preferred brand*



and gender ( $F_s < 1.03$ ) but the interaction was marginally significant:  $F(1,45) = 3.00, p = .09$ .

To further test the relationship between new no fixed on the one hand and the interaction between prime and gender on the other, we looked at the influence of the prime for the four conditions (gender crossed with prime) for each product choice. If the preferred brand was not available, women were more likely to choose the new brand when primed. Out of seven comparisons, the effect of the prime was seven times in the right direction. By means of a binomial test, we found that this is unlikely when the prime had no effect in this condition ( $p < .02$ ). For the three other conditions, the influence of the prime was less consistent.

These findings suggest that the prime has an effect only for women in case their preferred brand is not available. Overall, the likelihood of choosing a new brand is very low, certainly for those people whose preferred brand is available. Further, it is remarkable that the present sample's preferred brand was available for only 2 out of 7 products on average (no gender differences). In the second study, we want to test the reliability and the generality of these findings by (1) improving and reinforcing the priming procedure, (2) using housewives as participants, and (3) including a smaller but known brand in the choice set to explore whether it might be easier to enhance variety seeking towards a less well known (but not unknown) brand rather than towards a completely new brand (e.g. Van Trijp et al. (1996)).

## B. *Experiment 2*

### Participants

For this experiment we cooperated with a research agency (ROGIL), which allowed us to conduct the research in their facilities and to use their panel of housewives. In total, 52 housewives between 22 and 65 participated in the experiment in return for a shopping bag filled with everyday household products (value €15). The average age of the participants was 43 years. We decided to work with housewives because we assumed that these are more brand loyal than students, we based ourselves on the findings of Ratchford (2001) who came to the conclusion that consumer experience and brand knowledge leads to brand loyalty. Furthermore, we wanted to learn about the external validity of the findings of study 1.

## Procedure

The second experiment consisted of two tasks. The purpose of the first task was again to prime the subjects. Because we didn't have computers at our disposal in the research agency, we worked with a 'scrambled sentences' test to prime the subjects. Here, participants have to form correct sentences of four words with five given words. In the experimental condition half of the 30 sentences contained a word related to the target concept. In this study, these words all had to do with 'seeking variety'. In the control group the target words were neutral. To make sure that the weak effects of study 1 were not due to the prime, we conducted a pilot study to select the best prime words. In this pilot study, we asked 30 students to give a few personality traits of a person that was previously described as someone who liked to try out new products. After this association task, another 30 students rated the words in terms of 'relatedness with the concept of variety seeking'). The 15 words with the highest ratings were used as prime words. After the scrambled sentences task, participants were asked to shop for a few products in a simulation shop. For reasons of comparability, we used the same product categories as in the first study. However, besides two well-known brands (identified in a pretest on 30 participants as the market leaders in brand awareness) and an unknown (Dutch) brand, we also offered a less known Belgian brand in our shop. According to Van Trijp et al. (1996), variety seeking is higher if the brands are substitutes. Because participants do not know the fourth brand at all, this might inhibit their exploration motive. In addition, stimulation from a completely new brand might be higher than optimal (consider the inverted u-shape relation between stimulation and pleasure referred to above, (Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1992))). For these two reasons, we included a minor brand to find out whether subtle influencing by means of a priming procedure could incite people to buy a less known brand rather than a completely unknown brand. Finally we asked the participants to fill out the same questionnaire as in the first experiment.

## Results and discussion

As in study 1, we calculated the proportion of new brand choices (i.e. unknown Dutch brands), once relative to the number of products

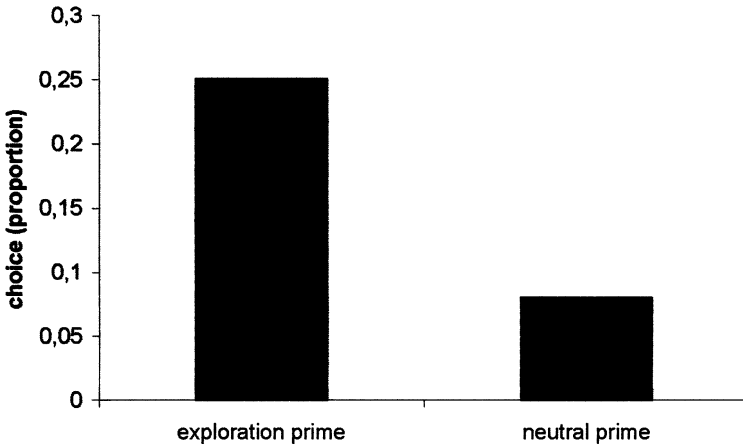
for which the preferred brand was available (average 3.92 out of 7), and once relative to the number of products for which there was no preferred brand or for which the preferred brand was not available in the shop (average 3.08 out of 7). We did so for each participant. Again, we referred to these measures as ‘new fixed’ and ‘new no fixed’. We further calculated analogous measures for the less known brand, (referred to as ‘small no fixed’ and ‘small fixed’). Four participants either did not have a preferred brand for any of the seven product categories or had a preferred brand for all categories. As a result, some of the proportions could not be computed for them.

We first conducted a repeated measures ANOVA with ‘new fixed’ and ‘new no fixed’ as repeated measures and with prime as the independent variable ( $n=44$ ). Again, we found a main effect for the within subject factor: people were more likely to choose the new brand when they had no preferred brand (available) than when their preferred brand was available:  $F(1,37) = 12.21$ ,  $p < .002$ . Interestingly, *none* of the participants with a fixed brand actually chose the unknown brand, which confirms the suggestion that unknown brands might be too stimulating. The main effect of prime was not significant, nor was its interaction with fixedness, i.e. whether or not one has a fixed brand ( $F_s < 1$ ).

Further, we substituted ‘small no fixed’ and ‘small fixed’ for ‘new no fixed’ and ‘new fixed’ in the preceding analysis, but there was no evidence for priming or fixedness effects. Because we know that a priming effect often only occurs on short term (Meyers-Levy (1989)), we also looked at the first choice only (orange juice) and combined the proportion of unknown and less known brands. A chi-square test relating prime condition to choice of new or less known brands (combined) showed a marginally significant relationship ( $\phi = 0.23$ ,  $\chi^2(Df = 1, n = 44) = 2.87$ ,  $p < .10$ ). A related logistic regression with fixedness included confirmed that pattern, but showed no main or interaction effects for fixedness of the brand. Figure 2 shows the effect.

The findings are strikingly different from those of study 1. Although the procedure has been improved on several dimensions (market research facilities vs. lab; housewives vs. students, pretested primes, scrambled sentences vs. subliminal priming), the effects were almost non-existent. We found a small tendency on the first choice only, and only if we combined the new and small brands.

FIGURE 4  
*Likelihood of choosing the less or unknown brand for  
the first product category as a function of prime*



### *C. General discussion*

Because explorative tendencies are important determinants of many consumer behaviors (Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1992)), these should be of major interest to consumer researchers and managers. In this study we tried to investigate whether subtle situational cues can succeed in breaking the buying patterns of consumers. Although the procedure may look artificial on first sight, we believe it is not. In real life situations (e.g. in the supermarket, in malls, etc.) people often are bombarded with such cues, for example, displays in shops which invite us to be more adventurous, to try something 'different' and so on. In our experiments we explored whether these cues are able to influence the consumer's openness to new and less known brands. Because we know that such influence often works below awareness, we used the priming technique to find out whether this could enhance intra- or interpersonal motives to seek variety.

Our results indicate that there is no main effect of the prime. People that are primed, either by the subliminal words or by the scrambled sentences test, are not more willing to try a less known brand than those who were not primed. So, we found evidence that situational cues are not able to turn consumers into variety seeking in

general. Overall, the likelihood of choosing a new brand is very low; however, although the effect is very small, it is still possible that this results in a market effect if we consider it on a large scale. Nevertheless, an ex post facto analysis of the results of the first study reveals that women who have no fixed brand in a certain product category are influenced by the prime. Still this finding could not be confirmed in the second study. In the second study, the prime only had a slight effect on the first purchase decision. A possible explanation for the lack of priming effect in the second study, could be that, as in the study of Simonson and Tversky (1992), adding an extra choice option might make the superior brand (in this case the well known brand) appear more attractive to consumers (i.e. an attraction effect). Moreover, confirming the finding of extremeness aversion of Simonson and Tversky (1992), none of the participants with a fixed brand chose the unknown brand. In general we can conclude from this study that priming is not a very effective manner to promote new, unknown brands. In practice, this means that one has to stick to traditional ways to coax people to try new products, for example by offering free samples, gifts and so on. However, we should be careful with this conclusion; it is possible that with other product categories (e.g. products with high signaling value, like clothes or with high stimulation value, like music) or in another purchase context (i.e. in a real shop or on the internet instead of a simulation shop) there might be an effect. Future research on this topic should focus on the external validity of the findings with the young women and find out whether variety seeking could be enhanced for specific targets (e.g. people with a strong goal to be unique or innovative people) or specific product categories (e.g. with a high stimulation level like games) by means of subtle situational cues.

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