

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MARKET MAVENISM AND EXPLORATORY BEHAVIOUR TENDENCIES

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Research in the area of information search has been dominated by work examining a consumer's pre and post-purchase information search behaviours (Katona and Mueller, 1955; Thorelli, 1971; Kiel and Layton, 1981; Brucks, 1985). Limited work has profiled and measured the information search and acquisition behaviours of non-marketer controlled intermediaries. These include opinion leaders, early adopters and market mavens. The role of these interpersonal influencers has been recognised as being important to the dissemination of market and product related information, consumer decision making and purchase behaviour (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Dichter, 1966; Arndt, 1967; King and Summers, 1970; Kiel and Layton, 1981; Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel, 1989; Herr, Kardes and Kim, 1991).

The focus of this paper is the information search behaviour of the market maven. The market maven's attention and behavioural response to stimuli is discussed and his/her exploratory search behaviour is therefore examined in the context of optimum stimulation levels (here after OSL). This research therefore extends the body of knowledge regarding the behaviour of marketplace influencers. It is also intended to provide further information for marketing practitioners to aid in targeting consumer influencers.

### **Research Problem**

Consumers acquire information from various sources to aid in purchase decision making. External and internal search activities are the main behaviours involved in information acquisition (Neuman and Lockeman, 1975; Walters, 1978; Bettman, 1979; Schiffman, Bednall, Watson and Kanuk, 1997). This section presents a brief overview of the information search behaviours of external information sources, specifically sources independent of the marketer's activities.

Information sources independent of marketer or producer activities, are claimed to have more authority and to be more impartial, objective and highly credible in their information content and transfer by consumers (Katz and Lasarsfeld, 1955; Dichter, 1966; Arndt, 1967; Kiel and Layton, 1981) . Research in this area has been dominated by studies regarding the opinion leader and the early adopter, and has concentrated on interpersonal informational influence specific to product categories (as summarised in Feick and Price, 1987). However, Feick and Price (1987), document the presence of a third interpersonal influencer, the market maven. This individual is distinct from opinion leaders and early adopters in that he/she acquires and disseminates market and product information across product categories.

### The Market Maven

Feick and Price (1987) define market mavens as 'individuals who have information about many kinds of products, places to shop and other facets of markets, and who initiate discussions with consumers and respond to requests from consumers for market information' (Feick & Price, 1987:85). The literature suggests that market mavens are recognised by other consumers, that they have an early awareness of new products, a greater participation in market activities, are heavy media consumers and are influential in consumer purchase and decision making behaviours (Feick & Price, 1987; Higie, Feick and Price, 1987; Williams and Slama, 1995). A major limitation in the application of this theory is a failure to identify clear demographic, psychographic or socio-economic characteristics of the market maven.

The market maven's information search behaviour could be used to guide message design and media selection for reaching these unique influencers. The determinants of consumer attention and response to market stimuli and product attributes, has been seen as critical to media and information selection (Goodwin, 1979). OSL is a property that characterises an individual in terms of his/her general response to environmental stimuli (Raju, 1980).

### Optimum Stimulation

The principle of optimal stimulation was formulated by Hebb (1955) and Leuba (1955). They argued that every organism prefers a certain amount of stimulation which can be termed optimal stimulation. OSL is an individual's unique preferred level of environmental stimulation (Berlyne, 1960). As a property that characterises an individual in terms of his/her general response to environmental stimuli, OSL is further defined as the level or amount of novelty or complexity that individuals seek in their personal experiences (Raju, 1980). A distinction exists between a person's 'actual stimulation level' and his/her 'optimum stimulation level'. This discrepancy between current and ideal levels results in attempts to reduce or augment stimulation (Raju, 1980). However, as result of the difficulties inherent in taking into account actual stimulation, previous research deals with an individual's OSL. Consumer research has examined how such variations in 'need for stimulation' may be influenced by selected personality traits, and how in turn, specific stimulation levels may be related to consumer behaviour (Raju, 1980, Joachimsthaler and Lastovicka, 1984, Steenakmp and Baumgartner, 1992).

General agreement exists specifying that 1) optimum amounts of stimulation are at some unspecified intermediate level, 2) there are stable individual differences in this perceived ideal level of stimulation, and 3) that deviations from the optimum level leads to attempts to reduce or augment stimulation (Berlyne, 1960; Fiske and Maddi, 1961; Streufert and Driver, 1970). An individual's OSL is a key construct that underlies many types of exploratory behaviours, such as information search or variety seeking (Raju, 1980; Price and Ridgeway, 1982).

### Exploratory Behaviour

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The idea that human behaviour is sometimes instigated by the mere desire to attain a satisfactory level of stimulation has figured prominently among theories investigating motivational tendencies for behaviour (Berlyne, 1960; Fiske and Maddi, 1961; Streufert and Driver, 1970). Exploratory behaviour refers to non-purposeful behaviour with no easily discernible motives (Raju, 1981). Examples of such behaviour are variety seeking and curiosity. The term exploratory behaviour can thus be used to describe such behaviours that result from motives that do not seem to conform to general expectations.

Raju (1980) suggests that certain exploratory behaviour tendencies are present in the consumer context. These dimensions were proposed in order to gain more insight into the exploratory behavioural tendencies of consumers that are 'non-purposeful.' This model suggests that exploratory behavioural tendencies are characterised by seven fundamental dimensions: 1) interpersonal communication, 2) exploration through shopping, 3) information seeking, 4) repetitive behaviour proneness, 5) brand switching, 6) innovativeness and 7) risk taking. Raju's (1980) exploratory behavioural tendencies are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Exploratory Behavioural Tendencies: Raju (1980)**

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1. **Innovativeness:** Eagerness to buy or know about new products and services
2. **Risk Taking:** A preference for taking risks or being adventurous
3. **Repetitive Behaviour Proneness:** the tendency to stick with the same response over time
4. **Brand Switching:** Switching brands primarily for change or variety
5. **Exploration through Shopping:** A preference for shopping and investigating brands
6. **Interpersonal Communication:** communicating with friends about purchases
7. **Information Seeking:** Interest in knowing about various products and brands mainly out of curiosity

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Source: Raju, P. S. (1980) 'Optimum Stimulation Level: Its Relationship to Personality, Demographics and Exploratory Behaviour,' *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 7 (Dec), 272-282.

Raju (1980) suggests that these exploratory behavioural tendencies are motivated by the central constructs of risk taking, variety seeking and curiosity.

Curiosity motivated behaviour is the desire for knowledge for intrinsic reasons. With regards to the seven dimensions proposed by Raju (1980), the behavioural dimensions of information seeking, interpersonal communication and exploration through shopping are curiosity-motivated exploratory behaviours.

Variety seeking is a means of obtaining stimulation in purchase behaviour by alternating between familiar choice objects (eg. brands or stores), simply for a change of routine (Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 1992). For example, consumers may find themselves in a state of boredom and consequently may complicate the behaviour to seek variety. Raju (1980) presents the behavioural tendencies of brand switching and repetitive behaviour proneness as variety motivated exploratory behaviours that a consumer may undertake to alleviate boredom.

Risk taking motivated exploratory behaviours are defined by Raju (1980) as comprising the behaviours of innovativeness and risk taking. The conception of risk taking is based on some notion of 'loss'. Schiffman, Bednall, Watson and Kanuk (1997) define perceived risk as 'the uncertainty that consumers face when they can not fore see all the consequences of their purchase decision' (Schiffman et al., 1997:531). Innovativeness, as discussed earlier, is the degree to which an individual is relatively early in adopting an innovation, more so than other consumers.

Each behavioural dimension, or motivational category, provides the consumer with the means of increasing or adjusting environmental stimulation. As discussed, research confirms that individual differences exist in the amount of stimulation perceived to be optimal. Therefore, it is presented that the amount and tendency of exploratory behaviour is a function of the consumer's optimal stimulation level.

Exploratory behaviour is behaviour with the sole function of changing the stimulus field either to increase or decrease arousal (Berlyne, 1960:288). Understanding the determinants of consumer attention to stimuli and attributes, is a key to understanding media and information selection. The consensus in the literature is that individuals with high OSLs participate in more exploratory behaviour than individuals with low OSLs. Research confirms that individual differences exist in the amount of stimulation perceived to be optimal and that exploratory behaviour is a function of the consumer's optimal stimulation level.

### Summary

A market maven's OSL and exploratory behaviour tendencies are examined in this study. These relationships are examined in order to profile the market maven's attention to stimuli and stimuli response behaviours. This should aid in reaching these consumers and extending our knowledge of their marketplace behaviours. The research question examined in this paper is, therefore:

'What is the relationship between market mavenism and exploratory behavioural tendencies in the context of optimum stimulation?'

The Hypothesis tested to examine this question are:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** An individual's propensity to be a market maven will be positively related to his/her OSL.

**H<sub>2</sub>:** An individual's OSL will be positively related to his/her exploratory behavioural tendencies.

**H<sub>2a</sub>:** An individual's OSL will have a weak positive relationship to his/her curiosity seeking exploratory behavioural tendencies.

**H<sub>2b</sub>:** An individual's OSL will be positively related to his/her variety seeking exploratory behavioural tendencies

**H<sub>2c</sub>:** An individual's OSL will have a strong positive relationship to his/her risk taking exploratory behavioural tendencies

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**H<sub>3</sub>:** An individual's propensity to be a market maven will have a positive relationship to his/her exploratory behavioural tendencies

**H<sub>3a</sub>:** An individual's propensity to be a market maven will have a strong positive relationship with his/her curiosity seeking exploratory behavioural tendencies

**H<sub>3b</sub>:** An individual's propensity to be a market maven will have a weak positive relationship to his/her variety seeking exploratory behavioural tendencies

**H<sub>3c</sub>:** An individual's propensity to be a market maven will be negatively related to his/her risk taking exploratory behavioural tendencies

### **Methodology**

A quantitative, single cross-sectional research design was used to test the relationship between market mavenism, OSL and a market maven's exploratory behavioural tendencies. A direct survey approach was the sole means of data collection. The study reported is a partial replication and adaptation of earlier work by Feick and Price (1987) and Raju (1980). The sample frame was a convenience sample of respondents from a second year marketing subject at Griffith University. Selection was non-random and should not be generalised to the Australian population. However, any supported relationships indicate a need for further research.

The questionnaire was divided into four parts: market mavenism, arousal seeking tendency, exploratory behaviour and demographic information. It was designed in accordance with the three established scales drawn from the literature, to wit: Feick and Price's (1987) Market Mavenism measurement, Raju's (1980) Exploratory Behavioural Tendency measurement and Mehrabian's (1978) Arousal Seeking Tendency scale. These scales all use Likert type measures, where the respondent identifies levels of agreement or disagreement with established statements. The scales were summated prior to analysis.

Results were obtained from 1) a descriptive analysis of the sample (demographics and market mavenism propensity), 2) a reliability and structural assessment of the measurement scales, and 3) examination of the strength and direction of the relationships between market mavenism, OSL and exploratory behavioural tendencies. All scales were subjected to an internal consistency analysis. A principal component factor analysis was applied to Raju's (1980) scale. Correlation and simple regression analyses were used to test the hypotheses developed.

### **Findings and Conclusions**

The results of this study indicate that an individual's OSL, and market mavenism propensity are systematically related to curiosity seeking, variety seeking and risk taking motivated exploratory behaviours. These relationships are, however, of different strengths.

#### **Market Mavenism**

The construct of market mavenism was supported in this research. Table 2 compares the original Feick and Price (1987) study of market mavenism with the current study.

As the table shows, the distribution of market mavens is similar to that reported in the original study. Based on the sample's high percentage of younger respondents ( 83% under 25), and in the first income bracket (63.1% earn \$0-9999), the construct of market mavenism was not explored with these dimensions. However, the sample's gender distribution, and tertiary education does suggest important findings about the market mavenism construct.

**Table 2 Comparison of Market Mavenism (%) between Feick and Price (1987) and Current Study**

| <i>Market Mavenism</i> | <i>Feick and Price (1987)</i> | <i>Current Study</i> |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------|
| High*                  | 32                            | 29.6                 |
| Medium                 | 37                            | 34.5                 |
| Low                    | 31                            | 35.9                 |

\* Referred to as Market Mavens

Source: Analysis of Data (September 1997) and Feick, L. F. and Price, L. L. (1987) 'The Market Maven: A Diffuser of Marketplace Information,' *Journal Of Marketing*, Vol. 51 (Jan), 83-97.

In summary, the demographic profile of the market maven is inconclusive in this study. Market mavens are reported as not being predominantly female, and not predominantly of a lower education, as shown by the tertiary sample chosen and the reported maven score distribution.

#### Research Problem: Market Mavenism, OSL and Exploratory Behaviour

This paper was designed to determine the relationship between market mavenism and OSL, and the relationship between market mavenism and exploratory behaviour. The central objective was to extend our knowledge of the market maven's attention to stimuli and behavioural responses (i.e. curiosity seeking, variety seeking or risk taking). Furthermore, support for the proposed relationship between OSL and exploratory behaviour from past literature in the consumer context was sought.

To measure the proposed relationships between these constructs, three broad hypotheses were established: Market mavenism will have a positive relationship with OSL; an individual's level of optimum stimulation will have a positive relationship with their exploratory behavioural tendencies (i.e. curiosity seeking, variety seeking, and risk taking); and an individual's market mavenism propensity will have a positive relationship with the consumer's motivation to participate in exploratory behaviours and have a negative relationship with and risk taking motivated exploratory behaviours. The findings of these hypotheses were:

- no significant relationship was found between a consumer's propensity to be a market maven and his/her reported level of optimum stimulation.
- an individual's level of optimum stimulation demonstrated a significant positive relationship with exploratory behavioural tendencies. Specifically, OSL was reported to be more significantly correlated with risk taking exploratory behaviours, than variety seeking and lastly correlated with curiosity seeking exploratory behaviours.

- exploratory behavioural tendencies were found to have a significant positive relationship with the individual's propensity to be a market maven. The results reported that market mavenism has a stronger relationship with curiosity motivated behavioural tendencies, than variety seeking and risk taking exploratory behaviour.

These findings are consistent with the literature. A major finding is the structure of Raju's (1980) exploratory behaviour scale.

#### Raju's (1980) Exploratory Behavioural Tendency Scale

To measure general exploratory tendencies, Raju's (1980) 39-item lifestyle type instrument was included in the questionnaire. Raju's (1980) contention that the scale reflects seven dimensions or types of exploration appears open to question. An internal reliability analysis and an exploratory principal component factor analysis with a restricted 7 factor solution based on Raju's (1980) 39 scale items shows that: 1) thirteen items reported factor loadings lower than 0.4, 2) numerous items cross-load onto different dimensions and, 3) only the three dimensions of information seeking, exploration through shopping, and innovation are reliable measurements ( $\alpha > 0.7$ ). Based on these findings, the factor structure of Raju's (1980) seven dimensions do not appear to be supportable. In this research, Raju's (1980) seven dimensions were reduced to a more reliable and stable three factor solution.

The initial finding that Raju's (1980) seven dimensions were unstable, with only information seeking, exploration through shopping and innovation having reliable measurements, is consistent with Joachimsthaler and Lastovicka (1984). The reduction of Raju's (1980) seven exploratory behaviour tendencies to a more reliable and stable three dimensions that describe differing exploratory behaviour motivational tendencies seems to present a stronger indicator of motivations underlying various exploratory behaviours. It is also consistent with the three exploratory behaviour dimensions of Price and Ridgeway (1983) and the exploratory behaviour discussion of Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1992). This finding is important to the study of exploratory behavioural tendencies as 1) it may be a more stable and reliable measurement, 2) it is not based on subjective means in development, as were Raju's (1980) seven dimensions and 3) it is consistent with previous literature.

#### Summary

In summary, a more stable and reliable measurement of exploratory behaviour was found by refining Raju's (1980) exploratory behaviour scale to three dimensions. Support was found for the construct of market mavenism and it is suggested that market mavenism has a weak positive relationship with the female gender and a questionable relationship with a respondent's education level.

The research indicates that a consumer who reports a high OSL tends to be motivated more by risk than by curiosity. Market mavens report a higher tendency to be motivated by curiosity seeking as opposed to risk and innovation. From this it would seem that market mavens have low levels of optimum stimulation with which they need to satisfy. The relationship between market mavenism and OSL is inconclusive

in this research. Further research therefore is required to ascertain the market mavens relationship with OSL beyond mere suggestion.

### **Implications for Theory**

The major implication for theory found in this study lies in the measurement of exploratory behaviour. The refined version of Raju's (1980) exploratory behaviour scale provides for consumer researchers a more stable and reliable measurement instrument for measuring the three central motivations underlying exploratory behaviour.

Overall, this research suggests that the constructs of market mavenism and OSL, are related to the exploratory behavioural tendencies of risk taking, variety seeking and curiosity seeking. The examination of the relationship between market mavenism and OSL was inconclusive and thus the relationship between these two constructs can only be suggested at this stage.

The test of the hypothesis which examined the relationship between market mavenism and exploratory behaviour indicates that curiosity seeking motivated exploratory behaviours are strongly dependent on an individual's propensity to be a market maven. This finding supports the construct of market mavenism as proposed by Feick and Price (1987). The research also found that market mavenism has a weak relationship with risk taking and variety seeking motivated exploratory behavioural tendencies. This extends our knowledge of the market maven, as it provides empirical support for the suggestion that a market maven rarely switches brands or stores for variety, and is less likely to take risks or be innovative.

### **Implications For Practice**

For the practitioner, the results of this study have significant implications. The study provides insight into promotional and communication objective in reaching market mavens.

Feick and Price (1987) suggest that market mavens appear to be good targets for general messages about marketing mix changes, messages spanning multiple product categories and messages about products that may not have much inherent consumer interest. Feick and Price (1987 and Abratt, Nel and Nezer (1995) further presented that market mavens may be especially important to retailers as they often attempt to communicate information about a large assortment of goods. Market mavens may also be good targets for information programs on low involvement products (Elliott and Warfield, 1993). Despite the clear benefits of focusing attention on market mavens, targeting the market maven with communications was seen as difficult as no clear demographic information has yet been identified.

This study examined the relationship between market mavenism, OSL and exploratory behaviour. Theories of exploratory behaviour can be used to explain many facets of consumer behaviour such as buying new products, brand switching, information search and response to advertising. This study reported findings consistent with past research that OSL is directly related to different motivations of exploratory behaviour. Risk taking motivated behaviour had the highest correlations

with OSL, variety seeking had intermediate correlations and curiosity seeking motivated exploratory behaviour had the least correlations. These results have important implications for the promotion of new products and for segmenting consumers based on their responses to new products and marketplace stimuli. For example individuals with high OSLs are more willing to try new products, take risks and be innovative to satisfy their high levels of optimum stimulation.

For marketing management and advertising there are implications for both message content and message repetition. Advertising messages can be designed to contain specific characteristics to maximise the attention of the consumer. Howard and Sheth (1969) suggest that once arousal is raised above an individual's OSL, sensory receptors open and attention is thereby increased. Therefore, promotional messages should be designed in accordance with OSL. For example, the promotion of novel and high risk products, would evoke attention in individuals with high OSLs. These consumers are motivated by risk taking behaviours to satisfy their high 'need for stimulation'. By placing promotional emphasis on perceived risk in promotional campaigns, the message design would increase the probability of attention in consumers with high OSLs. This promotional campaign may have adverse affects on individuals who have reported lower levels of OSL and are therefore more comfortable with familiarity in promotion.

In this research, market mavens reported a stronger relationship with curiosity motivated exploratory behavioural tendencies than variety seeking or risk taking motivated behaviours. This relationship would suggest that market mavens have lower OSLs. Therefore, to increase the propensity of gaining a market maven's attention to marketing stimuli or product attributes, less risk and more familiar, functional and objective information should be communicated in promotional messages. For targeting the market maven, it is also suggested that emphasis should be placed on the reduction of perceived risk or ambiguity of the brand or product. Increasing deals and premium offers may also evoke trial or purchase and promotion of functional information. It is therefore suggested from these findings and the literature, that low risk products or services be the primary areas that target market mavens in promotional efforts. Retail outlets and low involvement consumer goods utilising direct mail catalogues that promote low risk items would be best suited to targeting market mavens.

### **Limitations**

It should be noted here that the relationships reported here are exploratory in nature. There are three major limitations of this research: sampling technique, the reliability value of the OSL construct, and the self-report measurement design.

The use of a second year student convenience sample in a limited geographical area is a major limitation of this research. University students at Griffith University are not expected to be representative of the broader community due to their lower income levels, distinct social backgrounds and high education levels. Therefore this sample may be subject to high amounts of sample error. However, the objective of this research was to partially replicate Feick and Price's (1987) market mavenism construct and Raju (1980) exploratory behaviour study. Due to the convenience

samples used, the relationships between the construct need to be validated in future studies.

The second limitation is concerned with the measurement techniques employed to measure the constructs of exploratory behaviour, market mavenism and OSL. Self-report measures are problematic as they rely on the respondent to give an accurate judgement as to their association with the statements indicated. Consumers may give a more favourable or unfavourable response based on their perceived behaviours and not their actual behaviours. For example, an item that measures market mavenism propensity is 'my friends think of me as a good source of information when it comes to new products and sales.' A consumer's response to this statement may be biased by what they want the answer to be and not what it is.

The reliability coefficient calculated for Mehrabian's (1978) AST-II scale, which operationalised the OSL construct obtained a value of 0.6, which is a major limitation for this study. As this value is below 0.7, any conclusions made in relation to this variable should be considered cautiously. This low reliability may be attributable to the sample examined, however further testing of the structure and validity of Mehrabian's (1978) scale is recommended.

### **Future Research**

The areas of future research are central to the important findings and the inconclusive relationships reported in this study. The primary area of further research is the replication of this study. As this study used a convenience sample, the result obtained may not be able to be generalisable outside the student population. This sample may also have had adverse affects on the reliability measures reported in this study, giving reasoning for the low reliability measures of Mehrabian's (1978) AST-II scale. Further research using a random sampling technique could add to the external validity of this research.

Research central to the refined version of Raju's (1980) exploratory behaviour scale and Mehrabian's (1978) AST-II instrument is also suggested. This study refined Raju's (1980) exploratory behavioural scale from seven behavioural tendencies to three exploratory behaviour motivational dimensions. The reduced 26 items, from Raju's (1980) 39 items, should be replicated within differing populations to examine the reported reliability and validity of this scale. Mehrabian's (1978) AST-II scale should be subjected to a structural analysis to examine the dimensions underlying the 32-items that Mehrabian suggests measures an individual's level of OSL.

Additional studies central to the market mavenism construct are also suggested based on the findings in this study. Firstly, the relationship between market mavenism, gender and education should be explored. It is further suggested that the construct of market mavenism be tested against other measurement instruments that operationalise the construct of OSL. These may include Mehrabian and Russell's (1973) AST-I scale, or Zuckerman, Kolin, Price and Zoob's (1964) SSS-V instrument. This may provide further evidence as to the relationship between market mavenism and OSL. Research should also be conducted, exploring other possible motivations for the market maven's marketplace activities, such as social reference and employment involvement.

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