



## Loyalty Versus Variety in Hotel Selection Patterns: Evidence from Australia

Maduka Udunuwara<sup>1</sup>

Department of Marketing, Faculty of Management and Finance, University of  
Colombo, Sri Lanka

Hugh Wilkins

School of Business and Law, Edith Cowan University, Australia

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### Abstract

*This study explores the hotel selection patterns of leisure travellers to understand their loyalty or variety seeking intentions and profile them through their key characteristics, factors that influence their hotel consumption patterns. While data were collected via focus groups, twenty-two participants were purposively sampled based on the criteria-Australian travellers who have been to the same international destination three times or more for leisure. Data analysis used the thematic approach, which commenced with coding by identifying themes. The findings reveal that leisure travellers do seek variety in their hotel selection. It also identified three types of international leisure travellers based on their hotel selection within the same destination. Firstly, the same location within the destination and the same hotel as previous visits. Secondly, the same location within the destination and a different hotel to previous visits and finally, different location within the destination and a different hotel (rather than sticking to a hotel chain). The findings of this study further enrich the understanding of loyalty and variety-seeking behaviour in the accommodation sector. This paper extends the concept of variety seeking behaviour to micro level consumption choices—hotel selection at a destination.*

**Keywords:** Loyalty, Variety-Seeking Behaviour, Hotels, Leisure Travellers

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: [maduku@mkt.cmb.ac.lk](mailto:maduku@mkt.cmb.ac.lk)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3221-2257>

## **INTRODUCTION**

Building loyalty and retaining customers for a lifetime is essential for all businesses, including those in the accommodation sector. Several studies explored the factors perusing the intention of generating loyalty, whereas variety-seeking behaviour (VSB) could impact generating loyalty (Bansal et al., 2005; Sánchez-García et al., 2012) has been given scant attention. While there has been significant scholarly interest in VSB in the 1980s and 1990s in the consumer goods sector only scant attention has been paid to VSB, which may impact loyal behaviour to date. In addition to the limited studies in general, research on the service domain, including the accommodation sector remains less comprehensive and predominantly is quantitative in nature. While research on VSB to date adopts the definition of VSB from the scholarly articles in the 1990s it is commonly referred to as “the tendency of individuals to seek diversity in their choice of services or goods” (Kahn, 1995, p. 139). Overall, it has been found to be more significant for low involvement products which are less expensive, frequently bought, and homogeneous, with utilitarian rather than hedonic value, and which involve less risk to the buyer in changing their purchase decision (Van-Trijp et al., 1996).

While variety-seeking behaviour has been a concern for a limited number of sectors, this study explores variety-seeking behaviour in the accommodation sector. It specifically examines the applicability of VSB to the accommodation sector, the inclination of leisure travellers for variety as an alternative behaviour for familiarity and the differences between leisure travellers who seek different degrees of variety/familiarity. Even though studies to date have shown an interest to understand this continuum of variety and familiarity in the destination context, its applicability and importance in micro-level consumption choices at a destination—particularly in accommodation seem to have been neglected. Thus, the key concern of this study is to explore how people seek variety in hotel selection by investigating the consumption patterns of leisure travellers and the key factors influencing such consumption patterns.

Due to the complexity of research of this nature involving consumption patterns in the accommodation sector and its multifaceted nature with a large number of categories encompassing quality, location, style and usage (Chon & Maier, 2010), this study involved the exploration of the VSB of leisure travellers in relation to accommodation choices based on past consumption

patterns to avoid complexities. Moreover, due to the importance of understanding the complication of destination and location choices that co-exist with hotel selection, the study adopted the sample frame —Australian leisure travellers who have been to the same international destination three or more times in the last five years. The significance of this study is apparent due to the ongoing discussions on the dichotomy of customer loyalty and variety in the accommodation sector and the lack of research exploring variety-seeking behaviour as a factor influencing switching and loyal behaviour (Udunuwara et al., 2019). Following this introduction, the paper provides a brief review of variety-seeking behaviour. It then presents an outline of the methods and the key findings, concluding a discussion and potential practical applications and recommendations for future research.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Despite the contradictory findings on the success of loyalty programs in generating loyalty, scholars' interest in hotel loyalty continues to grow. While the seminal article by Shoemaker and Lewis (1999) have illuminated the importance of loyalty as part of hospitality marketing, it is considered a key determinant of long-term business success (Shirin & Puth, 2011). The loyalty of the customer is evident when the consumer continues to purchase the same brand and does not consider purchasing any other brand (Hong et al., 2009). Research highlights numerous benefits of loyal customers such as repeat purchasing, increasing purchases (Malthouse & Blattberg, 2005) and customer retention (Hallowell, 1996; Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000). While repeat purchase and loyalty have often been used, interchangeably, repeat purchase behaviour is one way of observing loyalty (Shirin & Puth, 2011).

Variety seeking is an essential influence on loyalty and intention to switch, whereas the lack of customer loyalty can be explained by variety-seeking behaviour (Bansal, et al., 2005; Sánchez\_García et al., 2012; Legohérel et al., 2012; Zikmund et at., 2003). Following the pioneering work of Bass et al. (1972), variety-seeking has been identified as influencing consumption choices in both the goods and services contexts (Kahn, 1995). Variety-seeking behaviour includes activities such as: choosing a completely new product that has not been purchased before (Menon & Kahn, 1995), selecting amongst familiar brands (Ratner & Kahn, 2002), choosing an item different from that immediately previously purchased (Givon, 1984), or selecting something that has not been chosen recently (Faison 1977).

The literature on VSB reveals that it is related to novelty seeking behaviour (NSB). Even though the purpose of this study is not to investigate NSB per se, it has importance to this study. While the opposite of NSB is familiarity-seeking behaviour this study concerns travellers who have been to the same international destination and are generally referred to as familiarity seekers in destination literature (Assaker et al., 2010). Based on destination marketing literature, this study extends the understanding of familiarity-seekers at the destination level by investigating hotel selection patterns of leisure travellers. Moreover, the literature reveals that NSB and VSB are often referred to interchangeably. This could be mainly due to the similar definitions of NSB and VSB. For example, Pearson (1970) explained novelty as a degree of contrast between present perception and past experience. Novelty seeking is also referred to as a curiosity drive, sensation seeking, and an exploratory drive (Jang & Feng, 2007). While novelty and familiarity are considered opposite constructs (Lee & Crompton, 1992; Pearson, 1970), the degree of novelty and familiarity also vary on a continuum (Lee & Crompton, 1992). Novelty and familiarity are considered key dimensions in classifying international tourists (Lepp & Gibson, 2008).

Numerous scholars have studied traveller behaviour through various typologies in the international travel context and have identified diverse segments of travellers based on their degree of novelty-seeking behaviour during international travel (Cohen, 1972; Plog, 1974). Cohen (1972) identified four classes of tourists, based on their novelty and familiarity seeking behaviour during international travel, namely: organised mass tourists, individual mass tourists, explorers, and drifters. Cohen (1972) explained traveller behaviour through the term 'environmental bubble', which refers to travellers who prefer to maintain the same conditions as the home environment.

The organised mass tourists prefer a holiday close to the environmental bubble and prefer packaged holidays and therefore are the least adventurous. The individual mass tourists also prefer elements of the environmental bubble; however, compared to organised mass tourists, individual mass tourists have their preferences rather than being limited to the packaged tour. Explorers, however, show a preference for the local culture and factors similar to their home environment to a certain extent. Drifters show an extreme preference to experience local cultures and move away from the environmental bubble. Among the four types, the drifters seek a high level of novelty, while the organised mass tourists avoid novelty and are inclined towards familiarity.

Individual mass tourists prefer more familiar elements, whereas explorers prefer novelty elements (Cohen, 1972).

Therefore, the allocentrics/venturers can be referred to as novelty seekers, while the psychocentric/dependables travellers can be referred to as familiarity seekers. The midcentric category comprises both groups and forms the largest group among the three types. The midcentric travellers seek well known established destinations, and are likely to visit the destinations populated by allocentrics/venturers travellers (Plog, 1974, 2002). In comparison with Cohen's (1972) concept of the environmental bubble, while psychocentric/dependable maintain their choices within their environmental bubble, the allocentrics/venturers make their choices away from the environmental bubble.

Based on the above characteristics, NSB has been extended to numerous levels. Mo et al. (1993) divided novelty into three categories: the macro level, micro-level, and social contact dimensions. The novelty at the macro level relates to the culture, people, language, and tourist establishment. The novelty at the micro-level refers to the different services provided in the international context, such as transportation, hotels, and food. The social contact level refers to the extent to which travellers prefer to have social contact with local people. Cohen (1972) studied travellers in an international context and incorporates all three levels pointed out by Mo et al. (1993), namely: accommodation, the type of travel companions and the language of the host community in order to understand the extent of the NSB. Moreover, Plog (2002) has also pointed out the importance of extending his typology to other products and services.

Adapting Cohen's (1972) conceptualisation, Basala and Klenosky (2001) extended the theory of NSB to the accommodation context. They explained the concept of novelty by referring to the types of accommodation selected which explains the risk-taking behaviour of travellers in an international context. The same conceptualisation of NSB concerning accommodation has been used by Legohérel et al. (2012) to determine VSB in the hotel context. Their conceptualisation of VSB was focused mainly on the nature of hotel selections, risk-taking behaviour, and the characteristics of the choices. Thus, in this study, Legohérel et al. (2012) study is not regarded as a study on VSB but rather as a study on NSB. It reveals the interchangeable reference to NSB and VSB by some researchers. Interestingly the literature highlights the possibility of making variety seekers brand loyal through the

concept variety, including; introducing variety in the purchase context (Menon & Kahn, 1995, Kahn 1998) and developing new products and advertisements (Faison 1977).

Some studies have investigated the moderating role of VSB on the relationship between customer satisfaction and loyalty, reporting a significant influence of VSB on switching intent and loyalty (Jung & Yoon, 2012; Woratschek & Horbel, 2006). The recent study conducted by Udunuwara et al. (2019) exclusively on the VSB in the accommodation domain found the impact of VSB on generating repeat visitation and identified the significant impact of VSB on customer relationship management activities of hotels. Legohérel et al. (2012) included accommodation in their study of international travellers' VSB, evidenced in their preferences for local experiences and international services in the selection of restaurants, with a sample of a combination of leisure and business travellers. They identified VSB through the preferences for hotel chains with localised products, international hotel chains with standardised products and, local hotels with local characteristics. Godbey and Graefe (1991) mention 'abandoning their tourist hotel for bed and breakfasts as a form of variety seeking. Given the proliferation of accommodation types and providers, an investigation to establish whether switching behaviour between brands is caused by variety seeking is considered necessary in this study. This study adopts the definition of Udunuwara et al. (2019) switching to a "*new or different brand of the hotel from the last visited when visiting the same destination or different location at the same destination.*" (P.12)

## **METHODS**

A qualitative approach was considered appropriate for this research due to limited research on variety-seeking behaviour in accommodation selection (Stewart et al., 2007). While focus groups were used for data collection, it facilitated in-depth exploration of VSB, resulting in richer data and ensuring that participants' interaction will help recall travel experiences when listening to other focus group members' experiences (Jennings, 2010). Participants were recruited using Google Groups of a University in Australia and personal contacts based on the filtering criteria; Australian travellers, who have been to the same international destination three or more times for leisure purposes (Weaver & Lawton, 2010). Purposeful sampling was used as the researchers did not intend to generalise findings to a larger population (Stewart, et al., 2007). Data were collected through five, 50 to 60 minute focus groups. Each

group comprised three to six participants with a total of 22 participants, including four male and 18 female respondents.

At the start of each focus group, a brief questionnaire was distributed. It collected the information related to the country visited by the participants three or more times, the hotels selected for accommodation, and the future preference to stay at the same hotel. The main intention of distributing this brief questionnaire was to facilitate the grouping of the participants in later analysis based on their degree of variety or familiarity seeking behaviour. A semi-structured interview guide assisted the overall data collection through focus groups in line with the research questions.

All focus group discussions were digitally recorded. Transcribing the data was commenced by following the first focus group. Before transcribing, the focus group interviews were heard several times by the researcher to become familiar with the data. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. According to Saldana (2011), even though recruiting a professional transcriber is an option, transcription by the researcher provides cognitive ownership and helps gain an insight into the data. Therefore the transcription was carried out by the researcher.

The qualitative data analysis began with coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014), which is the main categorising strategy in qualitative research (Maxwell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). The inductive method of coding (or in other words, open coding) was adopted (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Open coding facilitated categorising data under important themes and helped identify essential paragraphs, sentences, and words important for the study under investigation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Even though the researcher had an a priori notion of the themes employing the literature review, the coding was not restricted to a predetermined list of codes.

After transcribing, the data were uploaded onto NVivo 10 software. The identification of codes commenced from the first focus group transcription and was based on open coding (Maxwell, 2013). This study reports the focus group results based on individual themes identified across all groups, including the level of VSB, influencing factors in hotel selection and holiday characteristics. Understanding and reporting the themes was considered more important than group consensus for this study that involves people's life experiences (Stewart et al., 2007).

The focus group data was reported based on the ideas, perceptions, experiences, and motivations (Stewart et al., 2007) of individual respondents rather than the collective data of the group. Reporting focus group data corresponding to an individual was a difficult task due to tracking the respondents. The focus groups being smaller and one of the researchers being the moderator eliminated the difficulty of identifying individual respondents' voices in a group setting. Nevertheless, as a backup plan, the researchers recruited a third party to note down the names in the order of discussion. The validity of the data was assured through frequent debriefing (Creswell, 2003), which involved among the researchers

## **FINDINGS**

The findings can be categorised into three groups identified based on the initial brief questionnaire given at the beginning of the focus groups: those who visited the same location and the same hotel; same location but different hotels and different locations and different hotels. Participants were identified based on gender (M/F) and the Focus group (FG 1,2,3,4, & 5). The groups were named based on their hotel selections. The same location or same hotel was substituted with the term 'familiar' (F), whereas different locations or different hotels were substituted with the term 'variety' (V).

- 1) FF: Leisure travellers who visited the same location, and the same hotel
- 2) FV: Leisure travellers who mostly visited the same location, but different hotels
- 3) VV: Leisure travellers who mostly visited different locations and different hotels

### ***Group 1: Same Location, Same Hotel (FF)***

Six participants belonged to this cluster. There were four female and two male participants. Those who belonged to this cluster had visited countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, Hong-Kong, China, South Africa, England, France, the USA and Tunisia three or more times. Three participants had visited only one country three or more times, whereas the other three had visited a range of countries more than three times. The participants who have visited more than one country three times were asked to select one for the discussion. The hotels they stayed at in their three or more visits were also listed. The main

reason for the travel participants in this group was to relax with family or friends. For the most part, two participants travelled alone, whereas the other four participants travelled with family and friends.

The participants in this cluster showed a preference for familiarity in their hotel selection. This was identified through the hotels listed by the participants and their statements. For example, Mary expressed her selection of hotels in her three visits as: *“we have stayed in the same hotel, all three times”* [FG: 5]. Gloria explained her repeated visits to the same hotel in Bali as: *“I’ve been to Bali 5 times, and stayed at the same hotel”* [FG: 4]. Ben has been visiting two hotels regularly. He stated *“In Thailand I tend to keep to the 2 hotels that I’ve used for the last 10 years I don’t tend to differentiate because they always looked after me and provided good service”*.

Indicating his future preference for familiarity, Ben expressed his interest in returning to the same hotel in the future. He stated: *“once I pick the hotel, I don’t tend to change, so I don’t think I’ll be flexible with my hotel. Once I find the one that suits me, I stay with it”* Further confirming his interest to visit the same hotel he stated: *“they [the other hotels] have to drag me out for a real reason”*. Similarly, Joanna, Gloria, Joyce and Mary also expressed their interest in visiting the same hotel in their future visits to the same destination. For example, Mary said: *“I would go to that hotel again, it was beautiful* [FG: 5].

The participants, who have been to more than one destination three or more times also indicated a similar preference—a familiar hotel in the countries they have visited. For example, Gloria stated:

*In London I want to stay at the same place. Apartments in London are very difficult to find, and I know the hotel and I know it is clean and close to the tourist station and so I will stay there* [FG:4].

Similarly, Ben also stated his preference for a familiar hotel in the other countries he visits. He indicated his preference for staying at the same hotel in other countries such as South Africa and Hong Kong. He says: *“once I find the one that suits me, I stay with it”* [FG: 2]

Despite the consensus of the majority of the participants to visit the same hotel, Stanley explained his choice of a different hotel due to the boredom of visiting the same hotel repeatedly: *“some hotels in Bali, I’ve been to 5 times. We did not go the 6<sup>th</sup> time because we thought ‘lets go somewhere different”*

[FG: 2]. Stanley's statement indicates that even though participants incline to repeat visits, some may change hotels due to a preference for variety. Ben mentioned his visits to two hotels alternatively. Even though alternating among a few options can be considered due to an inclination to seek variety, Ben explained his reasons for having two hotels as the necessity to have a backup plan if his regular hotel is full. Explaining his interest in staying in familiar hotels, Ben stated: *"I tend to be very conservative in my approach these days"*

### ***Factors Influencing the Degree of Familiarity***

The main reason participants in this cluster visit the same hotel is their overall impression of the hotel and specific customer relationship management (CRM) related factors. Stanley explained how his overall experience influenced him to visit the same hotel. *"If you go to a hotel, and you have a nice experience, you always go back there again because you know what's happening and everything there"* [FG: 2]. Many CRM factors have also influenced the participants. Gloria highlighted the factors that influenced her to go to the same hotel many times. *"They remembered me every time I went. They are just lovely people. They do things specially for you"* [FG: 4]. Mary stated her reasons for repeat visitation: *"the staff is absolutely wonderful, the food is fantastic"* [FG: 5]. Joyce responding to Mary's statement stated that:

*I went there over and over again...because the service was nice, someone would be at your door the minute you rang the bell. I like it. And they recognise you around, the grounds how you are doing, that sort of thing.* [FG: 5]

Stanley explained the factors that influenced him to visit the first five times. *"The first five times were because they had really secure good standards nice and clean, and you know everything they said they did, so that's another factor why you become a return customer—so they give you a special deal you know"* [FG: 2]. Stanley's overall experience with CRM also seems to have provided him with an assurance for the safety of his children. He explained his reason for visiting the same hotel as: *"I think I am looking at security. When my kids go and play I can forget about it. I don't have to worry about it"* [FG: 2].

Many non-CRM factors have also influenced the hotel selection of this group. Even though CRM is the main factor that influenced them to repeat visits, it has been often been combined with other factors such as location and value for money.

### ***Characteristics***

The main motivation for travel of the respondents categorised under this cluster was relaxation. Gloria stated: “*[I go for a] relaxing holiday I don’t go to see 101 different things*”, *I am going for a simply sit down and relax and stay in one place holiday*” [FG: 4]. Joyce stated that: “*mine was sun-seeing and rest. When I went on holiday three times nothing else was important except the local culture and the beach and the sun...*” [FG: 5]. Megan stated that her main activities were “*watching the dances of various countries and taking part in that...we just enjoyed lying around and doing nothing*” [FG: 5]. Ben indicated a different reason for his holiday. He explained: “*I’ve got friends so I go back to see them. For me a holiday is part of seeing my friends and being to places I know*” [FG: 2]. He further added that the hotel is a meeting place to meet up with his friends.

The activities of many participants in this cluster were related to the hotel. They also seemed to enjoy the comforts of the hotel and also enjoyed staying at the hotel premises. This cluster places very high importance on the quality of people serving at the hotel and the customer service. It seems to have given preference to the accommodation rather than activities outside the hotel. However, a few participants also tended to rely less on food served in the hotel. Ben stated:

*I use restaurants. The whole point of being there is going to different restaurants. I wouldn’t want to be stuck with what they provide in the hotel. But breakfast has always been exactly as Stella said. It is important since at the start of the day you don’t want to go looking for something for breakfast. Breakfast in a hotel is important whereas other meals are not so important.*  
[FG: 2]

Many highlighted the importance of the breakfast provided by the hotel and their experiences of it. For example Mary stated: “*breakfast at hotels in Bali is phenomenal. You have food from all parts of the world*”

Many participants in this cluster organise their holiday themselves. However, Joyce expressed her preference for packaged tours. She explained, “*I prefer to go on a completely arranged holiday*” [FG: 5], whereas Mary said “*I have never been on a packaged holiday*” [FG: 5]. Similarly the other respondents in this group had also not been on packaged tours.

### **Group 2: Same Location, Different Hotel (FV)**

Four participants were categorised in this cluster. All were female. The countries visited three or more times by this group were limited to Bali and Vanuatu. Out of the four respondents, three had visited Bali. Even though they had travelled extensively in various other countries, no one had visited more than one country three or more times. The hotels they visited are also listed. The respondents in this cluster showed a preference for a relaxing holiday. The activities they were involved in were mainly confined to the hotel. However, they did indicate a preference for some activities outside such as shopping and beach related activities. They also had travelled for the most part with their partner, family and/or friends.

#### ***Level of Variety Seeking***

The participants in this cluster expressed their interest in visiting different hotels even when they visit the same location. Beth stated “*In Bali we do all different [hotels], I like to see what all of them are like, I prefer a change*” [FG: 3]. She further added that preference of her main travel party was to visit a different hotel: “*I change, my husband does not like to go to the same place [hotel] twice*” Similarly, Anne who has visited Bali many times also mentioned the same interest, and said that she had visited different hotels in all her visits to Bali. She stated “*In Bali we do different things. I like to see what all of them are like. I prefer change* [FG: 5]” Similarly Stella said, “*I have stayed in lots of different hotels*” [FG: 1]. Thus, unlike the previous cluster, this cluster shows a passion for experiencing numerous hotels even if they visited the same location.

#### ***Factors Influencing the Degree of VSB***

The reason for changing hotels for some respondents in this cluster was an interest to experience a variety of hotels. They indicated their inclination to select a variety of hotels, even when they visit the same location. They

specifically stated their interest in seeing different hotels. It was explained in terms such as: *“I like to see what all of them are like”*. *“I prefer change”* [FG: 5]. In addition to the preference for change and a desire to experience a wide range of hotels, there were also factors influencing hotels' change. One such reason was identified as the availability of options of a range of hotels. While the competition between hotels has led to competitive pricing, some participants had used this advantage to select the best deal. This competition had consequently led them to choose different hotels. Stella indicated her interest in a range of hotels. *“... new hotels pop up and there are loads of hotels. I made a point of going round and having a look* [FG: 1]. She further added that:

*I spend days and days and put much effort ... lot of effort in choosing my hotel...I've chosen one this time that is a villa with a plunge pool, so I am going for something quite different this time. So yeh I put a lot of effort in and research the hotel. I go through loads of them. I try to get the best deal, try to get one that's near the beach, near the shops ... I research thoroughly.* [FG: 1]

Another reason for changing accommodation was highlighted as travelling with different parties. Beth explained further:

*I'd rather go with my husband, or on my own, with girlfriends or with our family. So it has changed each time depending on whom I go with...with my husband we just want a pool and nice accommodation, so it changes whom you go with.* [FG: 3]

Jane added a unique factor and stated:

Our reason for changing hotels has totally been for the people [of the country], you know, if we are going to a poor country we like to split the money around. If we stay in the same hotel we only support one person, but if we go to different hotels we are supporting more than one person in the island. [FG: 2]

### ***Characteristics***

Similar to cluster one, the main motivation for travel for many in this cluster was relaxation. Beth added: *“Luxury. I wanted to stay in the most luxurious hotel we could afford. I guess it is very different to be waited on but I*

*do like it, yeh, so I want the most luxuries we can afford”* [FG: 3]. Anne explained the same aspect. She indicated her selection of only star class hotels as *“I go for four [star] and above, I like more comfort”*. The key features they enjoyed in the hotel were indicated by Ann: *“I like good service. I like a nice pool area, good food, balcony” ... prefer more hotel and the pool”* [FG: 5]. While this cluster seems to prefer more comfort, they also tended to spend more time in the hotel during their holiday. However, in comparison to the previous cluster, this cluster tended to be involved in a few activities outside the hotel such as shopping and beach related activities.

The participants in this cluster also tended to select their accommodation first when planning their holiday. Anne said *“I first select accommodation”* [FG: 5]. This selection was also evident from Stella’s statement about her extensive research on hotels when planning her holiday. All respondents in this cluster have arranged their holiday themselves rather than through travel agents.

### **Group 3: Different Location within the Same Destination, Different Hotel (VV)**

Twelve respondents were identified in this cluster. Among them, many respondents had visited different locations more than once in their three or more visits to the same destination. There were ten females and two males in this cluster. Among them, only one has visited Bali three or more times whereas all other respondents have seen many other countries. All have visited different hotels. Even though some participants recalled the hotels they have stayed in, some only stated that they went to different hotels in different locations and did not remember the names of the hotels. Moreover, except for one participant, all other participants have visited multiple countries more than three or more times. Compared to both former clusters, this cluster reflected a preference for the activities outside the hotel, rather than being confined to enjoying the comforts of the hotel.

#### ***Level of Variety Seeking***

The participants categorised in this cluster have mostly visited different locations each time they visited the same country. Their main intention was to seek variety at the destination. They also indicated an interest in a variety of accommodation. Thus they tended to stay at different types of

accommodation rather than being confined to one type of hotel. Bella explained her interest in visiting various accommodation and the interest in visiting the same location.

We never really go back to the same one [hotel] for what reason I don't know. I think to get a different experience, yes just check them all out. We probably stay in about 10 different places during the whole holiday, then next time we go back we might not go to those same places but we would just choose other accommodation in the same area. [FG: 4]

Bella also added *"We tend to stay in different accommodation every time we travel; just to see what is best; just to see a bit of a range I guess"* [FG:4]. The same idea was highlighted by Nadene *"We would go one more time for some reason, more than twice would get a little bored I think"* [FG:3]. Strongly justifying his interest in visiting different hotels each time he visited the same destination, Sam stated that: *"I think if you are a bit nervous then you tend to go with your known hotels"* [FG:4]. Marshal expressed his interest in staying in different accommodation as:

I can see myself in a small place going back to the same place that I have gone to in fact this year. But for the most part when I go to a location like Singapore each time I want to stay in a new hotel. So it does not become a routine. It's all part of the experience as you've said staying in a different place, okay, may be a similar three or four star hotel, but it's a new one you know, let's try something different. [FG: 2]

Compared to the other two clusters, the participants in this cluster sought higher stimulation levels to seek variety in both the location and the hotels they select. Marshal explained:

*Oh I go to different places. I love to try something new I suppose. I've not been so many times as you guys to the same place, but 3 would be my maximum. I can imagine that after a few times I would then go—all right I've tried a few now I'm going to focus on a new one, that I've not tried and then go back to the same one because otherwise you get into a routine. I know a friend of mine who travels quite often on business to the same place and he goes to the same place each time. There is a pressing plan in his head, there's a script that he evokes. I haven't done that. I haven't travelled enough to get into that routine, I think.* [FG: 2]

Jena supported Marshal's statement:

*That's an interesting quote. I have friends who go to the same place and it is because they like to be recognised, you know, as a special customer. They made them feel special, that is one of the reasons they do go back to the same place. I have not been so much to the same place to build that sort of rapport.*  
[FG: 2]

Based on the above evidence this group can be identified as one seeking the highest degree of variety by visiting different locations and different hotels.

### ***Factors Influencing the Degree of VSB***

This cluster's main reason to select lots of different accommodation was due to their visits to different locations, which reflect their preference to seek variety even when they visit the same country. Sue stated her visits as: *"I hopped to different regions each time"* [FG: 1]. In addition, participants in this cluster also showed an inclination for various hotels and liked to try different types of hotels. Their activities mainly determined the selection of accommodation during their holiday. The accommodation selected was based on the proximity to the activities they would be involved in during their holiday.

### ***Characteristics***

The respondents in this cluster indicated their interest in exploring the destination rather than experiencing the comforts of the hotels. The accommodation was the least important factor for this group. They explained their reasons in numerous ways. Sonya explained: *"We will stay less in the hotel and spend more time in exploring the country"* [FG: 4].

While the former groups explained that their holiday was related to the hotel atmosphere, many of the statements of this group were related to the country they visited. They showed an interest in understanding the other cultures, other histories and also in gaining knowledge about people's lives all around the world. Nadine stated her interest in experiencing different cultures as: *"[I like] experiencing different cultures. I like to see things that are not here"* [FG: 3]. Lucy stated her interest in experiencing different aspects of cultures as: *"I like to go and see churches I like museums and churches and stuff like that I absolutely like doing."* [FG: 5]. Some also indicated their interest in sports

activities during their holiday. Jelena stated that “*my last two holidays have been golfing holidays*” [FG: 5]. Marshal also stated his keenness on activities such as scuba diving.

The participants belonging to this cluster seemed, in general, to be more active when they were on holiday. Juliet explained: “*I think I will be doing a lot of moving around and seeing stuff mainly the hotel is to um...sleep and shower and everything*” [FG: 3]. Nadene also stated:

*I don't like to stay in a hotel I am you know like an action figure. I like to do lots of different things. If you stayed around the pool reading a book that is a really important factor but for me it's somewhere to shower, so if it's just clean, I am happy.* [FG: 2]

While many participants in the former groups stated their interest in the beach and the sun many belonging to this group seemed to place less importance on the beach. For example, Juliet explained:

*I don't worry too much about the beach and things because we've got the most beautiful beaches in the world. So I don't think I look for that to fly to the other side of the world to sit on the beach.* [FG: 2]

A similar idea was stated by Ramona:

*I just don't see the point I mean WA [Western Australia], Perth must have the most beautiful beaches on earth. Why would you want to go to a dirty syringe filled beach in ... from here? I just could not see the point.* [FG: 3]

Due to the importance given to activities, the participants in this group also stated their priority in selecting the location and the activities rather than their accommodation. Juliet stated: “*I choose the location first, and then I choose the location for a change as I want to see something different*”. She further explained that:

*Accommodation is just one aspect of holiday, you know, I can't see that the accommodation is the heart. That's where we stay in, but then you know the location becomes your choice because you think you want to go and see this and that particular hotel [you choose] is largely to get to these places more easily.* [FG: 2]

Jena further explained her selection of hotel as:

I don't do that for the sake of change. I choose the location first and then I choose the location for a change as I want to see something different. I go to somewhere different and then I choose the accommodation, not the accommodation first. [FG: 2]

The hotel selection of the respondents in this group was further understood by the statement of Bella: “ *how we do this is make a mud map of where we are going and then check in with your accommodation afterwards*” [FG: 4].

The cost of the accommodation seemed to be very important to the participants belonging to this cluster. This cost was mainly due to their keen interest in exploring the country rather than spending time at the hotel. Whereas the former groups expressed their interest in the comforts of the hotel, this was not a key concern for this group. Sonya explained: “ *Taking a sailing boat to see what is there, large 5 star hotels we don't really look at, because it's just so much money for a bed*” [FG:4]. Sam added “*it's no use paying a lot of money and then being out exploring*”.

While the previous groups indicated their preference for the comforts of the hotel this group mentioned their preference for basic accommodation, only for “*sleep and shower*”. This group was more concerned about the facilities around the hotel, such as restaurants. Their expectation of the hotel facilities were basic aspects such as toasters, microwaves and refrigerators and Wi-Fi. However, there are exceptions to these findings due to some participants indicating their preference for well-known hotels as a safety prediction. For example, even though Juliet's main reason for the holiday was to see the country, she also seemed to enjoy some aspects of the hotel and she seemed to look for family-owned smaller hotels. Her interest in a good hotel, however, was due to her safety concerns. She explained:

*Probably no.1 for me is safety, and that encompasses your physical safety. I've had my passports stolen twice in my life so I am particular about safety. So safety and location are reasons. The proximity to where I am going [is a preference] and one of my criteria is actually to avoid tourist hotels and these great big chains. I just avoid them, I hate them. I go more for authentic boutique hotels which are owned by family and they are much smaller and they give me a different experience. I mean I can stay in you know western*

*type hotels any time. I prefer to go more authentic and it depends on the type of the holiday. I think I will be doing a lot of moving around and seeing stuff. Mainly the hotel is to sleep and shower and everything. It is a very different experience for me [to sit] by the pool drinking cocktail or you know going to the spa or doing something like so that I don't worry too much about the beach and things because we've got the most beautiful beaches in the world. So I don't think I look for that to fly to the other side to sit on the beach. [FG: 4]*

Juliet's statement summarises much of the findings concerning this cluster: the interest in exploring the country, minimum concern about spending time at the hotel, preference for different types of accommodation other than luxury hotels and also a lack of preference for the beach.

The majority in this cluster arrange their holiday themselves rather than using packaged tours. Sam expressed their holiday arrangements as:

*I mean, we go on Internet. If we are on Internet we choose what we want. We do not go through travel agents so we decide where we are going to go to. Yes we are going to go to um... KL [kuala Lumpur] you go on this site and have a look at some of the hotels in KL or you go to some of the booking sites Spedio, hotel club. [FG: 4]*

## **Summary of Findings**

To summarise, this section identified leisure travellers based on their degree of variety seeking in the hotel context. Based on the themes that emerged, it was determined that leisure travellers could be clustered as: FF, FV and VV. The characteristics of these clusters were probed in-depth through: the level of variety-seeking, factors influencing accommodation and the key characteristics.

Based on the qualitative results numerous differences between the three clusters were identified. The analysis revealed that while travellers belonging to cluster one (FF) seek familiarity, those belonging to cluster two (FV) and cluster three (VV) seek variety in the hotel context. When visiting the same location and the same brand was also considered a possibility, no participants opted to stay at different locations and the same brand/ chain. In addition to the above vital differences, numerous other differences between the groups were also identified. The main purpose of the holiday for the cluster FF was

relaxation. They enjoyed the comforts of the hotel and the purpose of their holiday was mostly to obtain a real hotel experience. This was evident from their holiday arrangements, where they first selected the hotel when planning their holiday. Due to their interest in the comforts of the hotels they can be identified as those who seek more hedonic values in hotel selections. They give very little importance to the activities outside the hotel. The participants belonging to this cluster have mostly visited Asian countries such as Thailand and Bali.

Moreover, the proximity of the country also seems to be a common concern for this group. They tend to travel to closer countries. This cluster can be considered to be comprising of loyals who seek relaxation.

Cluster FV reflected similar interests to cluster FF. This cluster also indicated their preference for the hotel and a real hotel experience. They also are less concerned about the activities outside the hotel. However, they seemed to enjoy more beach-related activities than the first cluster. They expressed their interest in a luxurious hotel experience and indicated their interest in comfort, good food and features such as a balcony with a nice view, and cocktails. Similar to the former cluster they also researched the hotels first. Many respondents belonging to this cluster have visited Bali and preferred countries close to their home country. Even though this cluster is similar to the first one, the respondents preferred to select different accommodation each time they visited the same destination. Nevertheless, this cluster also preferred more hedonic attributes in the hotel rather than utilitarian attributes. Based on this premise, this cluster has been named 'variety seekers who seek relaxation'.

The main intention of cluster VV was to see different locations at the same destination and as a result, they selected different hotels. They reflected less interest in accommodation but were more concerned about their activities during the holiday. They indicated that their main purpose of the accommodation was just for a 'sleep and shower'. This cluster expressed their interest in selecting clean, cheap and safe accommodation. Therefore, their hotel selections involve more utilitarian values rather than hedonic. The participants belonging to this cluster have visited various countries three or more times. They also seem to have travelled more extensively than travellers belonging to the other two clusters and have covered different types of countries compared to the other two clusters. Their least preference has been for beach related activities. Their interest to visit cultural and historical sites and reflected

a desire to learn more about other countries. They seemed to seek variety in the hotel context by visiting numerous accommodation types such as boutique hotels and bed and breakfasts. They avoided tourist hotels. Star class hotels are selected for assurances of safety rather than to enjoy their comforts like the former cluster. This cluster selects the hotel last after deciding all the activities for a holiday. Due to their interest in visiting different locations and their interest in exploring the chosen destination, this cluster was named ‘variety-seeking explorers’. Table 1 lists the key characteristics of the three groups.

**Table 1:** Characteristics of Focus Group Participants According to the Grouping

<b>Group</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Key character</b>
Same location, same hotel (Cluster 1-FF)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expects a more relaxing holiday</li> <li>• Seeks more facilities related to the hotel</li> <li>• Seeks a high standard of experience</li> <li>• Expects good customer service and proper treatment</li> <li>• Looks for security e.g., for children</li> <li>• Likes good food, facilities such as balcony, spa and pool</li> <li>• Wants to be recognised as a repeat customer</li> <li>• Hotel is selected first when organising the holiday Is involved in fewer activities outside the hotel</li> <li>• Is concerned about the distance of the country</li> </ul>	Seeks a real hotel experience
Same location, different hotels (Cluster 2-FV)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expects a more relaxing holiday</li> <li>• Seeks more facilities related to the hotel</li> <li>• Seeks a more high standard experience</li> <li>• Expects good customer service and proper treatment</li> <li>• Looks for security e.g., for children</li> </ul>	Seek a real hotel experience with a combination of a few activities mostly beach related and shopping

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<p>Different locations, different hotels (Cluster 3-VV)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Likes good food, facilities such as balcony, spa and pool</li> <li>• Likes to be recognised</li> <li>• Hotel is selected first when organising the holiday</li> <li>• Is involved in a few activities in and outside the hotel such as going to the beach and enjoying the sun and shopping</li> <li>• Is concerned about the distance to the country</li> <li>• Prefers exploration rather than relaxation</li> <li>• Seeks to explore the country very actively</li> <li>• Prefers to explore the culture and history and has a keen interest in learning about the country</li> <li>• Is not interested in the beach, instead admires the beaches in their own country</li> <li>• Concerned about essential factors such as: cleanliness, Price, location</li> <li>• A hotel is considered a place to ‘sleep and shower.’</li> <li>• Prefers authentic resort style hotels</li> <li>• Star class hotels are preferred only in countries where safety is a factor</li> <li>• Selects accommodation last after selecting the activities during the holiday</li> <li>• Is not concerned about the distance to the country visited</li> </ul>	<p>Prefers enjoying the country and places no importance on accommodation. Hotel is considered just a place to sleep and shower</p>
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The above identified differences provide a profile of leisure travellers based on their hotel selection.

## **DISCUSSION**

The degree of variety/ familiarity seeking behaviour was identified by observing hotel selection in visits to the same destination. The findings revealed that leisure travellers seek different degrees of variety/familiarity in their hotel experience. Whilst previous studies have investigated repeat visitors to particular hotels and have further clustered visitors based on their attitudinal loyalty (Tideswell & Fredline, 2004), to the knowledge of the authors, this is the first study that has clustered visitors to the same destination based on the influence of variety on hotel selections.

The data analysis revealed three clusters: 1) leisure travellers who visited the same location and same hotel (location in this study has been defined as the city, town, village or area visited by the participants) (6 respondents) 2) leisure travellers who mostly visited the same location but different hotels (4 respondents) 3) leisure travellers who mostly visited different locations and different hotels (12 respondents). Based on the visits to locations and hotels, the groups were named FF, FV and VV, respectively. Group FF seeks the highest degree of familiarity by visiting both familiar locations and selecting the same hotels; the FV group sought familiarity and variety by visiting a familiar location but a different hotel. The group VV sought the highest level of variety by visiting different locations and also different hotels.

Many cluster FF participants indicated their preference for a familiar choice in their future visits to the same country and their visits to other countries. Nevertheless, as gathered from some participants even familiarity seeking travellers may prefer to visit different hotels after visiting the same hotel several times to avoid monotony and boredom. This findings supports the existing findings in numerous other domains that routinisation leads to monotony and boredom and satiation (Givon, 1984; Kahn, 1995; Menon & Kahn, 1995). It influences even familiarity seekers to look for diversity in the purchase decisions (Beldona et al., 2010; Shirin & Puth, 2011), due to the decrease in utility of continuous use (Toyama & Yamada, 2012).

Another participant belonging to cluster FF also stated his preference to alternate between two hotels when he visits the same destination. According to McAlister and Pessemier (1982) alternating among a set of alternatives reflects VSB. However, this participant indicated that alternating between the hotels was mainly due to one hotel being full. He firmly stated his lack of interest in

seeking variety in a hotel setting. Notably, this participant has travelled extensively in the past and has been to numerous hotels. After acquiring much experience he seems to have selected the best alternatives and now tends to alternate among the best hotels he has experienced in the past. It reveals that leisure travellers may seek variety until they are assured that they have found the best alternative.

Cluster two was named FV due to its participants' visits to different hotels, even when they visited the same location. They preferred mainly to stay at different accommodations for variety. Even though the respondents in this cluster were satisfied with the hotels previously visited, they selected different hotels in their repeat visits. Participants expressed their desire to experience various hotels, see a range of hotels, and try them all out. This finding is consistent with the statement of Bowen & Shoemaker (1998) that even travellers who visit the same location may visit different hotels.

Cluster three was named VV. The participants in this cluster seek the highest level of variety by changing the location, and as a result, the hotel. Even though selecting a different hotel when visiting a different location may sound obvious, their interest in seeking variety in the hotel domain was further tested by noting down their preference to stay in a known brand of hotel/chain if available. They indicated a lack of interest in staying at the same brand and their preference for a different hotel. Bowen and Shoemaker (1998) have also indicated that even travellers who visit the same destination may visit different locations due to VSB, which ultimately results in selecting a different hotel.

The VSB of cluster VV was also indicated by their inclination to visit different types of hotels. Many indicated their preference for smaller hotels, which are more 'authentic'. Some stated an interest in bed and breakfasts. They specifically indicated their desire to avoid tourist hotels. A participant explained Their inclination for exclusive hotels as their interest in '*more character*' in the accommodation. Although Dioko et al. (2013) and Godbey and Graefe (1991) stated that variety seekers may abandon tourist hotels for bed and breakfasts, their statements lack empirical evidence.

Based on the observations of the three clusters, it can be argued that VSB takes place during hotel selections. Some travellers seek familiarity in their hotel selection by visiting the same location and the same hotel. Some who seek familiarly at the destination by visiting the same location, seek variety in

their hotel selections. The majority of the participants have sought a high level of variety by selecting different locations and hotels. Supporting Kahn's (1995) statement, VSB was found to be a significant factor influencing leisure travel rather than business travel.

Factors influencing the degree of VSB varied according to the cluster. Cluster one (FF) consists of familiarity seekers. Many CRM practices of hotels have influenced their repeat visits. While cluster two (FV) participants seek familiarity in the destination by visiting the same locations, they seek variety in the hotel context. Many intrinsic and extrinsic factors have influenced the VSB of this cluster. Cluster three (VV) seeks the highest level of variety by visiting both different locations and different hotels. Similar to cluster FV, this cluster has also been influenced by numerous intrinsic and extrinsic factors.

The key reasons that motivate cluster FF to repeat visits were explained in terms such as: *"nice experience"*, *"being recognised"*, *"you are known as a special customer"*, *"they made me feel special"*, *"built sort of a rapport"*, *"everything they said they did"*. Another major factor that contributed to their repeat visits were people. This feature can be summarised through such statements as: *"staff were absolutely wonderful"*, *"they remembered me each time I went"*, *"they do things specially for you"*, *"personal touch"*, *"caring"*. Some also indicated the benefits they received by patronising the same hotel such as: *"special deals"*. Rather than attributing their reasons for repeat visitation to a single CRM dimension, some respondents explained their overall experience as a factor influencing them to repeat visits. This group has been more influenced by encounter stage CRM practices rather than pre-encounter or post-encounter CRM. Despite their high satisfaction with CRM it was evident that even loyal customers may be influenced by boredom and satiation to seek variety after repeated visits.

The key reason for the cluster FV to visit different accommodations was their desire for VSB. They indicated their preference in various terms such as: *"I like to see what all of them are like"*, *"I prefer a change"*. The key reasons are inclination for curiosity and change stimulation which are considered causes of true variety-seeking behaviour (McAlister & Pessimier, 1982; Van Trijp, 1995; Ha & Jang, 2013). In addition, numerous extrinsic factors have also influenced the selection of different accommodation, such as different purposes of travel, place of travel, travel party, life cycle stage, access to information,

upgrading to higher standards and even social concerns such as visiting different hotels to ensure that many people receive the benefits of their visits.

The key reason for the VV cluster to vary their accommodation was their visits to different locations due to their desire to seek variety at the destination. This cluster also indicated their interest in seeking variety in the hotel context. This group further reflected their VSB by their interest in staying at different accommodation types rather than hotels. Dioko et al. (2013) have also stated that travellers may switch among hotel categories due to VSB. Explaining the same point Godbey and Graefe (1991) also note that variety seekers may abandon tourist hotels for bed and breakfasts. Thus novelty-seeking behaviour can be considered the key influencing factor for this cluster. Nevertheless, the participants do tend to select star class hotels when the assurance of safety is required.

As discussed earlier, the literature suggests that true VSB is explained by intrinsic factors rather than the extrinsic factors. Van Trijp (1995) classified derived varied behaviour into three categories: problem-solving motives (dissatisfaction, new/specific consumption problem, price-based choice tactics and multi brand loyalty), situational/normative motives (change in the feasible set, out of stock, an assortment of outlets chosen, group affiliation and social context consumption), and habit (reversion). Going by the above categorisations, it is evident that some of the factors which have influenced VSB are extrinsic and that they do not reflect true VSB. While many such contentions have been made in the consumer goods domain, the importance and applicability of separating intrinsic and extrinsic factors are critically evaluated in this study.

According to Van Trijp et al. (1996) consumers with a high intrinsic desire for variety are more likely to engage in VSB unless it is mitigated by the presence of strong extrinsic motivation in the choice context. The findings of this study indicate that the intrinsic desire for variety is positively supported by extrinsic factors. In contrast, factors affecting true variety seeking are not independent of extrinsic factors. In this study it is argued that consumers make rational decisions in their selections. Although leisure travellers are intrinsically motivated to seek variety in their accommodation because they want to try out different options, these travellers may also consider some extrinsic factors such as value for money, safety, and previous visitors' evaluations before they visit a different hotel.

Based on these premises in this study, it is concluded that in addition to curiosity, novelty and change stimulation (Ha & Jang, 2013), the availability of several options, travelling with different people, interest in upgrading accommodation and even social concerns also have an indirect influence on VSB.

Leisure travellers in an international travel context are classified in numerous ways. According to Plog (1974; 2002) travellers can be classified as psychocentrics/dependables, allocentric/venturers and midcentrics. While psychocentrics/dependables have shown a preference for comfortable accommodation such as luxury hotels, the allocentric/venturers travellers do not seek comfortable accommodation, but rather adequate accommodation. Based on destination marketing literature (Basala & Klenosky, 2001; Cohen, 1972) it is evident that while psychocentrics/dependables show similar preference to cluster FF, allocentric/venturers show similar characteristics as cluster VV. While cluster FV has opted for both familiarity and variety by visiting the same location but different hotels, they can be considered as midcentric.

Leisure travellers have also been profiled based on loyalty. Tideswell and Fredline (2004) identified that even travellers considered loyal due to repeat visitation have varying degrees of attitudinal loyalty: extreme loyalty, high loyalty, moderate loyalty and low loyalty. In a general context, Dick and Basu (1994) have also identified four levels of loyalty. As stated above, while existing studies have profiled travellers based on their degree of loyalty, this study attempted to profile travellers based on their hotel selection behaviour. While it has been contended that VSB is a factor that can be used to understand loyalty (Shirin & Puth, 2011), understanding numerous groups of travellers based on their degree of VSB contributes to understanding loyalty in the hotel context.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on purchase experience rather than behavioural intentions, this study identified three different groups of leisure travellers in the accommodation selection context. It reveals that some leisure travellers do seek variety in their hotel selections. Variety-seeking behaviour was found to be influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. This study highlights that in the accommodation context, loyalty and variety-seeking behaviour may vary on a continuum and should be further investigated as such rather than treated

dichotomously. Whilst the qualitative approach of this study limits the ability to make generalisations, it does provide valuable insights for accommodation managers on the role of variety-seeking behaviour within different groups of leisure travellers. It alerts that even the most loyal customers may seek variety after several repeat visits. Thus, further research exploring loyalty and variety-seeking behaviour using a quantitative approach is recommended to further enhance the understanding of loyalty and VSB in the accommodation sector.

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## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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