Introduction

The travel industry is not only economically important but also highly susceptible to disasters and crises (Ritchie et al. 2013). This is because travel demand is highly vulnerable to external factors, such as changes in international political situations and epidemics (Cavlek 2002; Ioannides and Apostolopoulos 1999; Sönmez 1998) and is particularly sensitive to health and security concerns (Blake and Sinclair 2003). As infectious diseases can directly affect travel behavior and the choice of travel destinations (Cartwright 2000), the hospitality and travel industry perhaps is most hard-hit by COVID-19 (Nicola et al. 2020). For example, efforts to control the pandemic, such as social distancing, banning mass events, and restrictive lockdowns, have disrupted most leisure and recreational activities in many countries (Niewiadomski 2020). With most hotels and resorts experiencing fewer travelers or being closed, travel revenue has substantially declined (Gössling, Scott, and Hall 2020).

Facing this unprecedented situation, businesses have recognized the necessity for drastic changes in the travel and travel industry. As soon as the current restrictions are lifted, there will be an urge to go back to business as usual, perhaps to recover losses by even more aggressive growth. However, there is a lack of clear guidance and understanding of how the pandemic is changing the travelers' preferences, choices, decision-making and behavior. To provide useful guidelines for the travel industry during and after the pandemic period, this paper examines how COVID-19 poses perceived threats to individuals, which in turn affect their travel choices. Variety seeking refers to the tendency to seek diversity in selecting goods and services (Kahn 1995). Travel research has made few efforts to understand what influences consumers' variety-seeking tendencies, although it has examined the concept of variety seeking with regard to individuals' propensities or traits in switching destinations/service providers (Assaker and Hallak

2013; Ha and Jang 2013; Jang and Feng 2007; Jung and Yoon 2012; Kim, Kim, and Kim, 2018). However, research suggests that external situational factors, such as spatial constraints imposed by movement restrictions, crowding or servicescape design elements, lead individuals to engage in variety seeking as a means of seeking freedom (Levav and Zhu 2009).

Measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic have created substantial freedom restrictions in various aspects of daily life, such as travel, socialization and association (Meier, Habibi, and Yang 2020). These measures and their subsequent restrictions on freedom reflect companies' practices as enforced by government regulations rather than companies' strategic initiatives and decisions. Consumers also accept such restrictions, even if they are against their freedoms and human rights, in the name of health and safety. Importantly, as consumers' perceptions of crowding, private and social space, and social distancing are being re-set and re-formed during the pandemic (Hazée and Van Vaerenbergh 2020), new service environments and standards during and after the pandemic may create new habits, preferences and expectations (Sigala 2020). Hence, prior research in this field cannot accurately predict how consumer choice and behavior will change.

In addition, past research has mainly focused on examining the impact of consumers' traits on their variety-seeking behavior at the expanse of understanding and unraveling the potential impact of contextual factors, such as those imposed by COVID-19, on this behavior (Kim et al. 2018). This study aims to further expand our understanding of the influence of freedom restrictions on consumers' behavior by examining their impact on travelers' choices and actions within the pandemic context. Building on previous research, we argue that travelers' perceived threat of COVID-19 will increase their variety-seeking as a way to restore their limited

freedoms. Furthermore, we aim to extend the literature by demonstrating important moderators in a series of studies.

Four studies show that the perceived threat of COVID-19 increases variety-seeking intentions and that it is more likely when consumers have prior travel experience. However, the positive effect of perceived threat on variety-seeking is attenuated when communication messages (i.e., images of travel options) illustrate large numbers of travelers. These findings provide important theoretical and managerial contributions. First, our research reveals how disasters and crises change individuals' behavior in the context of travel choices. The findings reveal that the perceived threat affects consumers' travel choices by increasing their variety-seeking tendencies to regain constrained freedom. Second, our studies advance research on variety-seeking in the hospitality and travel literature, which has paid limited attention to variety-seeking despite its important role in consumer behavior. Furthermore, prior research on variety-seeking behavior has primarily focused on individuals' traits, ignoring the impact of external factors. Therefore, our findings add to prior research (e.g., Levav and Zhu 2009) by identifying and confirming perceived threat as an important determinant of variety-seeking behavior. Last but not least, our research offers specific guidance for product and communication strategies. Increased variety-seeking tendencies under a threat suggest that businesses should develop and offer more varied travel options when consumers' freedom is constrained, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, given that portrayal of a large number of travelers in marketing messages attenuates variety-seeking intentions, companies should tailor their communication messages to match the range of their offerings.

Literature Review

Impact of COVID-19 on Travel

Among the diverse risks that arise due to travelers' personal or destination-related issues, health risks generated by a variety of diseases, including SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), avian flu, encephalitis, African swine fever, Ebola, AIDS, Zika virus and Dengue fever, play a role in counteracting travel demand and travelers' choices (Romagosa 2020). When the repercussions of these diseases on international travel demand were limited to the disease-affected region or country, international travel demand was resilient and the impact on travel choice or preference was not substantial (Brouder 2020; Otoo and Kim 2018). However, COVID-19, which was first revealed in mainland China in late 2019 but quickly developed into an unprecedented global pandemic, has annihilated international travel flows, as a result of the mobility and travel restrictions imposed by international and domestic governance bodies. But, more importantly, the measures adopted for addressing COVID-19 (e.g. crowd management, mobility tracing and restrictions, health and sanitary protocols) are changing not only the numbers but also the 'quality' of travel demand. Reflecting on the causes and implications of COVID-19, consumers and suppliers alike re-think, re-set and re-shape their practices, such as why, where and when they travel, as well as what they experience and how they experience it when traveling (Sigala, 2020). Some of these changes may be temporary, but others may generate long-term impacts on consumer behavior. Moreover, as we might need to live with COVID-19 or with any other future virus, a re-set of consumer behavior is more likely than a simple temporary disruption of it.

Indeed, the persistent pandemic outbreak has shaken the extant paradigm or principles relating to both the demand and supply aspects of travel (Ateljevic 2020; Brouder 2020). After global health risks, new patterns in travel occur, including preferences for private automobiles

over flights or buses, rural tourism over urban tourism, individual tours over package tours, less crowded places, hygienic and safe places, and sustainable practices over mass tourism practices (Brouder 2020; Gössling et al. 2020; Romagosa 2020; Zeng, Chen, and Lew 2020). Recent studies also document changes in consumer preferences in consumption experiences during the pandemic. For example, consumers prefer digital services over human delivered services, individual service over group service, delivery over in-restaurant dining, and personal experience over shared experience (Ateljevic 2020; Jiang and Wen 2020).

The paradigm change triggered by the impacts of the prolonged pandemic has fundamentally changed travel businesses with regard to keeping abreast of the newly surfacing global trends (see Sigala 2020 for details). For example, the importance of experiential value will be downgraded according to the popularity of digitalized services such as smartphone applications, digital machines, virtual devices, robots, and IT programs (World Economic Forum, 2020). Virtual or vicarious experiences will be considered more important because of limited accessibility and mobility (Zeng et al. 2020). The prolong use of digital (travel/hospitality) services and the extended exposure and adaptation to the new leisure, work and daily social life have also led consumers to form and get used to new habits, new routines and preferences that will eventually convert and crystalize to new 'normal' behaviors and expectations (Sigala, 2020). Recently, Zhang, Hou, and Li (2020) found that contagious diseases such as COVID-19 generate negative emotional responses to price differential practices in travel settings. Specifically, travelers showed increased negative responses towards different price payments between themselves and others (e.g., the same airline ticket - $610 for themselves and $544 for others). In addition, Kim and Lee (2020) found that a high (vs. low) perceived threat of COVID-19 increased the preference for private (vs. public) facilities in restaurant settings.

In sum, as the pandemic prolongs unexpected circumstances worldwide, travel demand dynamically changes by being shaped and re-shaped in new forms. Those who enjoyed outdoor activities or overseas travel have been obliged to adopt limited approaches during the global pandemic, such as participation in indoor activities and activities requiring less experience, less mobility, more dependence on technology for providing services, and more individual activities. Therefore, it is hypothesized that people are likely to have a strong pent-up motivation to seek diverse travel activities under the pandemic and will eagerly anticipate participation in actual travel activities. However, although the impact of COVID-19 on the travel industry is very significant, empirical studies so far are quite limited. This study extends our understanding of the impact of the pandemic on travelers' behavior, especially with regard to variety-seeking when traveling.

Variety-Seeking in Marketing

Variety-seeking is one way to attain diversity in one's choice of goods and services (see Kahn 1995 for a review). Its influences on consumers are wide-ranging, from everyday choices, such as what to eat, to more important decisions, such as what to do during a vacation (Broniarczyk, Hoyer, and McAlister 1998; Kahn 1995; McAlister, and Pessemier 1982; Redden and Hoch 2009). Variety-seeking has taken two forms in the literature. The first is the degree of switching between different options in sequential choices (Bass, Jeuland, and Wright 1976; Givon 1984; Huber and Reibstein 1978; Kahn, Kalwani, and Morrison 1986; Lattin and McAlister 1985; McAlister and Pessemier 1982). Research examines consumer decisions over time, such as when a consumer chooses different products over a sequence of shopping occasions. The second form is the number of different items selected within a single purchase or

an assortment (Ratner and Kahn 2002; Ratner, Kahn, and Kahneman 1999; Read and Loewenstein 1995; Simonson 1990; Simonson and Winer 1992; Sevilla, Lu, and Kahn 2018). For instance, consumers may choose either multiples of their favorite option (e.g., three strawberry yogurts) or a variety of options (e.g., strawberry, peach, and vanilla yogurts).

Research on variety-seeking has provided multiple reasons why people seek variety. Consumers may seek variety because of their internal need for variation. Variety-seeking is an effective means to counteract actual or anticipated satiation or satisfy one's desire for additional stimulation (see Sevilla, Lu, and Kahn 2019 for a review). For example, a consumer may feel satiated with a certain attribute (e.g., flavor of yogurt) after repeated consumption and then seek another option that provides higher utility (McAlister 1982). Some individuals have greater needs for stimulation, leading them to seek more variety to satisfy their needs (Pessemier and Handelsman 1984). Consumers may also seek variety to hedge against future taste uncertainty. A varied portfolio of options (e.g., 5 different flavors of yogurt) may provide a higher likelihood of satisfying future preferences than a portfolio with less variety (e.g., 5 yogurts of the same flavor).

Consumers also seek variety to fulfill needs other than preventing satiation and hedging against future uncertainty. For example, when feeling powerless, people seek variety to satisfy their need for autonomy (Wang, Raghunathan, and Gauri 2018). Also, lower socio-economic status (SES) consumers who perceive lower economic mobility tend to engage in more variety-seeking behavior to regain a sense of personal control (Yoon and Kim 2018). Variety-seeking is also useful in fulfilling the need to promote a good image. For example, individuals seek variety to present themselves as more interesting (Ratner and Kahn 2002), nonrigid (Drolet 2002), expressive (Kim and Drolet 2003), and having more expertise (Sela et al. 2019). Variety,

however, is not always useful: it can also decrease one's sense of self-continuity and undermine future-self connectedness (Rifkin and Etkin 2017).

More relevant to our research, consumers' variety-seeking can be affected by external situational factors. Marketing strategies such as price discrimination (Shaffer and Zhang 2000) and price promotions (Kahn and Louie 1990) affect consumers' variety-seeking behaviors. Furthermore, people select more variety when their behaviors are under public scrutiny than when they remain private or anonymous, to signal that they are interesting and open-minded. (Ratner and Kahn 2002). Similarly, more variety is sought when people choose in a group setting (rather than a private setting), so as to appear unique and interesting (Ariely and Levav 2000). This effect, however, is reversed in more collectivistic Eastern cultures (Yoon et al. 2011). Desire and hunger increase variety-seeking behavior by expanding consumers' consideration set (Goukens et al. 2007). Odors that are congruent with the product category under consideration prompt consumers to choose more variety (Mitchell, Kahn, and Knasko 1995). Physical space has also been shown to affect variety seeking. Levav and Zhu (2009) show that the threat posed by physical confinement leads to psychological reactance aimed at regaining freedom, and consumers use variety-seeking as a way to do so. In a similar vein, we expect that the pandemic threat, which limits individuals' freedom of movement, assembly, and travel, will influence variety-seeking.

Variety-Seeking Intention in the Travel and Hospitality Literature

Variety-seeking also appears as an important factor in consumer travel choices. In the hospitality and travel literature, variety-seeking has been most studied in terms of individuals' traits in switching/revisiting travel destinations or restaurants (e.g., Assaker and Hallak 2013;

Hong and Desai 2019; Jang and Feng 2007; Niininen, Szivas and Riley 2004). Individuals who value variety-seeking actively locate and try different experiences. Thus, variety-seeking affects behavioral loyalty (Kim, Ok, and Canter 2010) and satisfaction with, for example, a new restaurant (Lee, Chua, and Han 2020). A study of Beldona, Moreo, and Mundhra (2010) show that consumers who desire variety tend to try different types of cuisine and restaurant experiences. Similarly, Assaker and Hallak (2013) show a moderating effect of variety-seeking in the relationship between satisfaction and revisit intention, such that satisfied travelers are less inclined to return to a given destination as they value variety to a greater extent. Also, research indicates that when evaluating a vacation destination, consumers often place importance on the variety of activities offered, as well as the novelty of the destination (Hong and Desai 2019).

In addition to individual traits, the innate motivation of exploring new things and fresh stimuli can promote variety-seeking behavior. Consumers can feel less satiated by engaging in a number of discrete activities (Antón, Camarero, and Laguna-García 2018). Thus, to escape mundane routines, people may prefer vacations or activities that offer new, stimulating experiences. In addition, preference uncertainty can be another driver of variety-seeking (Simonson 1990). When consumers travel to an unfamiliar place and feel uncertain about their travel preferences, they prefer to experience more activities to increase the likelihood of enjoyment (Hong and Desai 2019).

Another line of research examines how variety influences travelers' experience and behavioral intentions. Research shows that travelers' participation in activities and events positively influences their experience and evaluation of the destination (e.g., Antón, Camarero, and Laguna-García 2018; Lu, Chi, and Liu 2015). Travelers who participate in a broad range of activities may have a greater chance to learn and benefit from their visit. Therefore, prior work

generally supports the idea that individuals tend to pursue variety and novelty to increase their pleasure while engaging in leisure activities (Hong and Desai 2019).

Although the travel literature documents that variety-seeking intentions affect consumers' choices of travel options and service providers, it focuses primarily on individual traits and still lacks understanding of what factors determine consumers' variety-seeking intentions (Kim, Kim, and Kim 2018). External factors, such as those imposed by COVID-19, should substantially change the travelers' choices, but their influence on consumer psychology and behavior has been unaddressed. Therefore, investigating how external factors affect consumer psychology and, in turn, their travel choices, will deepen our understanding of consumer behavior in travel.

Threat of COVID-19 and Travel Variety-Seeking

In this paper, we investigate the relationship between the COVID-19 threat and variety-seeking intention in the travel setting. Building on several theoretical considerations, we expect that the threat of COVID-19 will increase variety-seeking. First, as we reviewed previously, variety-seeking is related to seeking freedom (e.g., Levav and Zhu 2009). If so, the COVID-19 pandemic situation will increase variety-seeking intentions. During the pandemic, most countries have enforced lockdowns or limited social interactions to maintain social distancing. In this situation, most people will feel restrictions or reduced self-control. Therefore, people may seek variety in other domains to restore their limited freedom. Terror management theory (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon 1986; Maheswaran and Agrawal 2004) also supports the relationship between the salience of deaths and subsequent behavior with regard to restoring self-esteem or self-worth. Recently, Brooks et al. (2020) have also used reluctance theory in order to explain people's reactions to recover freedoms compromised, limited or threatened during the COVID-

19 lockdowns (e.g. movement control orders) by overcrowding places like parks, open public spaces and hiking trails. This is because according to reluctance theory, if people cannot freely choose behavior, they will react to recover this freedom. In this vein, reluctance theory also postulates that consumers' self-determination to seek variety is a way to restore freedom and to remedy the psychological anguish felt because of the pandemic restrictions. Overall, several theories co-align and co-predict higher variety-seeking tendencies by consumers when their freedom is constrained during the pandemic.

Second, Nørfelt et al. (2020) suggested xenophilia (i.e., the extent to which individuals are attracted to the perceived foreignness of destinations) as an important cause for travel. Building on evolutionary psychology, the authors argued that the human motive for exploration, which enabled our ancestors to increase their survival fitness by exploring new places and engaging with out-group members (Kock, Josiassen, and Assaf 2018a; Crouch 2013; Hawking 2018; Navarrete 2013), has developed into modern-day xenophilia (Kock, Josiassen, and Assaf 2018a; Tuschman 2013). Indeed, travel motivation researchers have treated the motive for exploring new and unknown places as an important variable in understanding travelers' behaviors (e.g., Dey and Sarma 2010; Figler et al. 1992; S. Kim and Kim 2015; Ooi and Laing 2010; Pearce and Lee 2005). Importantly, innate motivation for novelty and future preparedness are also central underlying drivers of variety-seeking (e.g., Kahn, 1995). Obviously, the current preventive measures during the pandemic suppress people's fundamental motivation for exploration by significantly restricting their mobility and will create pent-up motivation that needs to be satisfied later by seeking diversified experiences.

Third, the threat of the virus threat evokes negative emotional reactions. It is obvious that the prominence of the pandemic, the news of deaths and the (mis)-information being spread

(online) globally about the virus (Depoux et al., 2020) have increased people's perceived threats of catching the virus, causing severe and rippling psychological problems (e.g. mental illness and health problems). This is also well reflected in increased people's negative feelings such as depression, anxiety, stress and loneliness (Pfefferbaum and North, 2020). For example, Galoni, Carpenter, and Rao (2020) provided empirical evidence that the threat of contagious disease generates negative emotions such as fear or disgust. Studies even provide evidence of a global mental health crisis caused by the pandemic (Kam, 2020).

In a negative (vs. positive) emotional state, people attempt to manage their emotions. One emotional management strategy may be variety-seeking (e.g., Chuang, Kung, and Sun 2008; Jeong and Drolet 2016). Psychology research also confirms that seeking alternative solutions is one of the most important emotional coping strategies adopted by people aiming to regulate negative emotions. For example, Trzebiński et al. (2020) showed that to compensate for social distancing and self-isolation during the pandemic, people have sought and increased their level of use of social media platforms, and virtual social words in order to find and have more and different ways of socializing and of experiencing leisure. Thus, the negative emotions in response to the pandemic may promote variety-seeking intentions.

Finally, the literature on risk management suggests that choosing various options (e.g., high variety-seeking) may be one of the most typical risk-reduction strategies. For example, White et al. (2013) found that high mortality generated high levels of diversification patterns, especially in individuals with lower socio-economic backgrounds. Similarly, Huang and Sengupta (2020) also found that the level of prominence of disease cues increased the preference for atypical (vs. typical) options.

It may seem counterintuitive that people who perceive a greater threat of COVID-19

would seek more variety in travel situations, as opting for variety would mean having contact with a greater number of people, which is likely to increase one's chance of catching the virus. Indeed, when the perceived threat of catching COVID-19 is extremely high, the potential costs (i.e., catching the disease) of variety seeking will overpower its potential benefits (i.e., freedom). In such cases, perceived threat will no longer predict the choice of variety. As people become accustomed to "living with" the pandemic, however, the perceived threat tends to decrease. When the level of perceived threat is low to moderate, we expect the benefit of variety to exceed its cost, and our prediction should hold. This will be the situation once travel is resumed and is the basis on which we make our predictions.

Based on these theoretical considerations, we predict that the travelers' variety seeking will be higher when the awareness of disease is high (vs. low):

H1: *Travelers' variety-seeking intentions will be higher when the COVID-19 pandemic threat is perceived as high (vs. low).*

Moderating Role of Travel Experience

We further predict that the relationship between disease threat and variety-seeking intention is moderated by two factors: visiting experience and crowding. Previous travel experience could affect variety-seeking intention because travelers usually have a strong motivation to seek novelty in new destinations and are less willing to revisit the same destinations (Assaker and Hallak 2013; Hong and Desai 2019). This can be explained as a motivation for travelers to boast about their experience to others by showing photos, talking to friends, or leaving comments/photos on social media about their experiences of new destinations

or new activities (Lee et al. 2020). As a consequence, variety-seeking intention increases when consumers are motivated to alleviate boredom incurred in their previous consumption or experiences and seek new experiences (Ha and Jang 2013; Line and Hanks 2019; Sevilla, Lu, and Kahn 2019).

Travel experience, however, changes the motivation for travel. According to specialization theory and motivational ladder theory (Kim, Kim, and Ritchie 2008; Pearce and Lee 2005; Ryan 1998), travel experience begins with a preference for near destinations or simple activities in the places visited and develops to include participation in travel to unfamiliar places or activities that may involve higher levels of risk (Kim et al. 2010; Li et al. 2013). Accumulated evidence also suggests that traveler satisfaction reinforces destination brand loyalty and destination attachment and increases revisit intention (Alegre and Cladera 2006; Kim, Choe, and Petrick 2018). In other words, travelers with more experience have a stronger desire for travel and will feel more restricted if not allowed to travel. However, international bodies and governments have advised residents to avoid unfamiliar places and simplify their activities during the unprecedented health risk of COVID-19 (Huang, Dai, and Xu 2020). The disease threat has reduced tourism and travelers' willingness to participate in activities in tourist destinations (Galoni, Carpenter, and Rao 2020; Gössling et al. 2020; OECD 2020). In this context, travelers with more experience are expected to feel more restricted and have pent-up motivation to seek freedom through variety in a destination. Thus, we expect the impact of COVID-19's threat on variety-seeking to be higher for those who have (vs. do not have) previous travel experience.

H2: *Travelers' variety-seeking intentions during the COVID-19 pandemic will be stronger for travelers who have (vs. do not have) previous travel experience.*

Moderating Role of Crowding

During the pandemic, travelers will tend to avoid the diverse risks incurred during travel and at crowded destinations or attractions at which many other travelers are present, due to stringent social distancing measures (OECD 2020). Most individuals' 'behavioral immune systems' advise that environmental threats require protection or safety (Griskevicius and Kenrick 2013; Murray and Schaller 2016). In a similar manner, Huang and Sengupta (2020) provided empirical evidence that the severity of disease cues increases travelers' preferences for atypical (vs. typical) options because atypical options have an implicit association with being chosen by fewer people, whereas typical options are explicitly associated with popular choices. Consequently, we propose a moderating effect of the crowdedness of the destination (i.e., the number of other travelers) presented in a communication message between the disease threat and variety-seeking intention.

H3: *Travelers' variety-seeking intentions during the COVID-19 pandemic will be stronger when the crowdedness of destination is low (vs. high).*

Overview of Empirical Studies

In order to provide empirical evidence of the hypotheses above, we conducted multiple studies, allowing us to provide convergent evidence from different replications. First, we used two different methods to assess the COVID-19 threat: measuring individual's perception of the threat of the virus, and manipulating the level of the perceived threat. Second, we operationalized

variety-seeking as either the number of different activities within a travel occasion or the number of different types or categories, with fixed numbers of choices. Finally, the moderating variables were measured (i.e., previous travel experience) or manipulated (e.g., crowdedness).

We test our predictions of the impact of COVID-19 on the variety-seeking tendencies and moderators in four empirical studies. Specifically, Study 1 provides initial evidence that perceived threat of the COVID-19 pandemic affects variety-seeking intentions (H1). Studies 2 and 3 test the moderating role of prior visiting experience across different travel situations (H2). Finally, study 4 examines the moderating role of the crowdedness (i.e., number of other travelers) of the destination on the activities chosen (H4).

We collected data from only one country (i.e., the US) to reduce country-specific effects of the pandemic. In addition, we conducted all of the studies between May and June of 2020. Due to the difficulty of collecting data in face-to-face interactions during the pandemic, we mainly used online panels. Specifically, we used Amazon MTurk for this empirical package for two reasons. First, many previous studies have indicated that participants in Amazon MTurk tend to be highly representative of the US general public (e.g., Buhrmester, Kwang, and Gosling 2011; Garrow et al. 2020). Second, the use of MTurk is currently popular in travel and hospitality journals (e.g., Giroux et al., 2021; Kim and Lee, 2020; Park, Kim, and Kim, 2020).

The theoretical framework, including the three hypotheses and the four empirical studies of this study, is presented in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Study 1: Showing Empirical Evidence for the Main Hypothesis (H1)

Study 1 investigated the main hypothesis. Specifically, we expected that the higher perceived threat during the COVID-19 pandemic would increase variety-seeking intentions in a travel consumption situation. Specifically, we focused on the number of different activities chosen during travel to Chicago.

Method: Subjects, Design, and Procedure

One-hundred and seventy-six US adults (47.2% female, average age = 35.66, *SD* = 11.43) recruited from an online panel (Amazon MTurk) participated in this study for a nominal payment. At the beginning, we informed participants that this study involved several unrelated tasks. A half of the participants were first exposed to information about COVID-19 from the World Health Organization, as shown in Figure 1, and were asked to rate their perceived threat of the virus with a 2-item scale (i.e., '*what are the chances of you getting infected with COVID-19?/ what are the chances of an average person getting infected with COVID-19?*' based on Jaramillo 1999) on a 7-point scale (1 = extremely low, to 7 = extremely high, Cronbach's $\alpha = .785$). Then, they were asked to imagine that they visited Chicago for a vacation and that they had only few days available before leaving Chicago. Then, they were exposed to 9 different travel activities (such as a Chicago architecture river cruise or a Downtown Chicago walking tour, as shown in Figure 1) and asked to choose any activities that were of interest to them. They were informed that they could choose from 1 to 9 activities. We counterbalanced the order of the two measures by asking the other half of the participants to choose the travel activities first and then rate their perceived threat of the virus. We did not find an order effect for the main dependent variable (i.e., number of different activities they chose, $p = .949$), and we thus ignored the ordering factor in further analyses.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Results and Discussion

We first counted the number of different activities (M = 3.41, SD = 1.82, range = 1~9) selected as the key dependent variable (i.e., variety-seeking intention). Then, we ran a regression analysis with variety-seeking as a dependent variable (DV) and the perceived threat as an independent variable (IV). The results showed that the overall model was significant (Adjusted R^2 = .020, F (1,174) = 4.55, p = .034). Specifically, the perceived threat positively affected variety-seeking (β = .160, t = 2.12, p =.034). To test whether demographic factors influenced the number of chosen activities, we conducted an additional regression analysis after adding age and gender as additional IVs. The result was similar in that variety-seeking increased as the perceived threat increased (F (2,172) = 2.61, p = .056, β = .155, t = 2.07, p =.034)

In sum, study 1 provides initial empirical evidence of the impact of the threat of COVID-19 on travelers' variety-seeking.

Study 2: Testing the Moderating Effect of Previous Travel Experience (H2)

Study 2 differed from study 1 in several respects. In Study 1, we measured variety seeking by counting the number of activities participants chose to do. While variety often lies in greater amounts of consumption, we expect travelers' preference for variety to be manifested even when holding the amount of consumption constant. Thus, Study 2 fixed the total number of activities for participants across different conditions and measured how varied the chosen options were. This alternative operationalization enabled a stronger test for our proposed effect. Second, study 2 investigated the moderating effect of prior visiting experience. Specifically, we hypothesized

that the positive effect of perceived threat on variety-seeking would be stronger for those who had previous travel experience of the travel destination (i.e., Paris, France). Third, we did not rotate the measurement order of threat perception and variety-seeking choice. Finally, we tried to control the general mood effect.

Method: Subjects, Design, and Procedure

Two-hundred and thirteen US adults (54.0% female, average age = 37.43, *SD* = 12.15) recruited from an online panel (Amazon MTurk) participated in this study for a nominal payment. First, using the same information and measures as study 1, we asked participants to review the information about COVID-19 and report their perceived threat (Cronbach's α = .805). Then, we asked participants to imagine that they were visiting Paris for a vacation and they planned to visit 5 out of 15 different places, as shown in Figure 2. Fifteen places were categorized into 5 sub-places such as 'look out (e.g., Eiffel tower),' museum (e.g., The Louvre),' 'bridge (e.g., Pont Neuf),' 'church (e.g., Notre Dame Cathedral),' or 'shopping (e.g., Galeries Lafayette).' After choosing 5 places, participants reported whether they had made a previous visit to Paris (yes = 73 [34.3%] vs. no = 140 [65.7%]). Finally, they were asked to rate their mood on a 7-point scale (1 = very bad, to 7 = very good).

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Results and Discussion

First, we calculated the number of different sub-categories chosen as the variety-seeking intention. Then, we used Hayes' (2017) macro process with model #1 with 5,000 bootstrapping (i.e., IV – perceived threat, Moderator – visiting experience, DV – variety-seeking). The result

showed a significant main effect of the perceived threat (β = .244, se = .11, t = 2.26, p =.025, 95% confidence interval [CI]: (.031, .458), supporting H1 as well as replicating the result of study 1.

Furthermore, we found a significant interaction effect between prior travel experience and perceived threat (β = -.140, se = .06, t = -2.19, p =.030, 95% CI: (-.267, -.014)). Specifically, when participants had previous visiting experience, the variety-seeking intention was higher for those who recorded a high (estimated M = 3.77 for +1 SD of the perceived threat measurement) versus low perceived disease threat (M = 3.42 for -1 SD of the measurement, p = .040, 95% CI: (.005, -.203)). On the other hand, perceived disease threat did not vary variety-seeking intentions for participants who did not have previous visiting experience ($M_{_high\ threat}$ = 3.55 vs. $M_{_low\ threat}$ = 3.67, p = .362, 95% CI: (-.115, .042)), as shown in Figure 3. Further analysis with mood, gender, and age as covariates also showed similar interaction effects. The effect of the covariates was not significant (all ps>.10), whereas the interaction effect was still significant (β = -.123, se = .07, t = -1.89, p =.061).

We conducted a similar analysis using the percentage of participants who chose all 5 sub-categories (i.e., choosing one item from each sub-category). The overall interaction effect in the logistic regression analysis (DV: choosing 2~4 sub-category [low variety-seeking] vs. 5 sub-categories [high variety-seeking] was significant (β = -.140, se = .06, t = -2.19, p =.030, 95% CI: (-.267, -.014)). Similar to the results of the previous analysis, the variety-seeking intention of travelers with previous experience of the destination was higher for those who reported a high (estimated M = 7.4% for +1 SD of the perceived threat measurement) versus low perceived disease threat (M = .1% for -1 SD of the measurement, p = .017, 95% CI: (.256, 2.659)). However, there was no significant difference between high and low threat for inexperienced visitors (M = 10.6% vs. M = 13.2%, p =.650, 95% CI: (-.397, .247)), as shown in Figure 3.

In sum, this study demonstrates the significant moderating role of previous visiting experience.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

Study 3: Testing H2 using a Different Method

Although studies 1 and 2 provide converging evidence of the significant, positive impact of the perceived threat of disease on variety-seeking, measuring perceptions is limited to make a causal inference. To overcome this weakness, we manipulated the salience of the threat directly by asking participants to describe their own experience of lockdown in study 3. We also used a different method of measuring variety-seeking. In contrast to study 1, which allowed participants to choose 1 activity, we asked participants to choose at least two activities in study 3. Finally, about 34% of the participants said they had already visited Paris in study 2, resulting in unbalanced sample sizes. To have similar percentages of prior visiting experience, we chose Chicago as the travel destination in study 3.

Method: Subjects, Design, and Procedure

One-hundred and seventy-two US adults (46.5% female, average age = 37.98, *SD* = 13.40) recruited from an online panel (Amazon MTurk) participated in this study for a nominal payment. Two additional participants who did not follow the instructions (e.g. poor writing) were excluded from the main analysis. Participants were randomly assigned to one of a 2 (manipulation of threat: control condition [no writing task] vs. high-threat condition [writing lockdown experience]) between-subjects design. First, half of the participants were asked to write down their lockdown experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas the other half

were not. Then, all of the participants completed the travel-activity choice task as in study 1. In contrast to study 1, we asked participants to choose at least 2 activities. Finally, participants reported their previous experience of visiting Chicago (yes = 88 [51.2%] vs. no = 84 [48.8%]).

Results and Discussion

We first calculated the number of different activities chosen as the variety-seeking intention. Then, we conducted a 2 X 2 analysis of variance (ANOVA) using the manipulation of threat as an IV, previous visiting experience as a moderator, and variety-seeking as a DV. Two main effects were not significant (all *p*s > .366), but the interaction effect was significant (F (1, 168) = 4.08, p =.045, η^2 = .024). For participants who had previous visiting experience, variety-seeking intention was higher in the high-threat condition (M = 3.78, SD = 1.64) than in the control condition (M = 3.08, SD = 1.20; F (1, 168) = 4.41, p =.037, η^2 = .026). In contrast, variety-seeking intention was indifferent regardless of the threat manipulation for the participants with no previous visiting experience ($M_{\text{high threat}}$ = 3.28, SD = 1.60 vs. M_{control} = 3.54, SD = 1.70; F (1, 168) = .61, p =.438, η^2 = .004), as shown in Figure 4.

[Insert Figure 4 about here]

Study 4: Testing the Moderating Hypothesis (H3)

In this study, we tested the moderating role of the crowdedness of the destination (i.e., number of visitors shown) on the activities chosen. We expected that the positive directional effect of the high threat on variety-seeking would occur only for travel destinations illustrated with few (vs. many) other travelers. In order to extend the generalizability of our empirical findings, we chose another travel destination, New Zealand.

Method: Subjects, Design, and Procedure

One-hundred and eighty-eight US adults (51.1% female, average age = 38.36, *SD* = 13.05) were recruited from an online panel (Amazon MTurk) participated for a nominal payment. We employed a 2 (crowdedness of destination: low [Few travelers] vs. high [Many travelers]) between-subjects design, and participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions.

The overall procedure was similar to that of study 2 except for a few modifications. First, participants reported their perceived level of Covid-19 threat using the same scale (Cronbach's α = .795) as that used in study 2. Then, they were asked to imagine that they were visiting New Zealand for a vacation and to choose any activities from 8 different ones (adapted from Kim and Seo 2020). The crowdedness of the destination was manipulated by varying the number of visitors that appeared in the illustrations of each activity, as shown in Figure 5.

[Insert Figure 5 about here]

Results and Discussion

First, we calculated the number of different activities chosen as the variety-seeking intention. Then, we used Hayes' (2017) macro process with model #1 with 5,000 bootstrapping (i.e., IV – perceived threat, Moderator – crowdedness of destination, DV - variety-seeking). The results indicated a marginally significant main effect of the perceived threat (β = .182, se = .11, t = 1.68, p =.096), providing further support for H1.

More importantly, the interaction effect was significant (β = -.308, se = .16, t = -1.99, p =.048, 95% CI: (-.614, -.003)). Specifically, when the destination illustrated a few travelers, the variety-seeking intention was higher for those who had high (estimated M = 3.63 for +1 SD of

the perceived threat measurement) versus low perceived disease threat (M = 3.10 for -1 SD of the measurement, p = .096). In contrast, the variety-seeking intention was not different between the high- and low-threat responders when the destination illustrated many travelers ($M_{\text{high threat}}$ = 2.95 vs. $M_{\text{low threat}}$ = 3.31, p = .255), as shown in Figure 6.

In sum, study 4 replicates the results of studies 1 and 2. Importantly, we found a significant moderating role of the crowdedness of the destination in the impact of the perceived threat on travelers' variety-seeking intention.

[Insert Figure 6 about here]

General Discussion

Summary of the Findings

This research examines how COVID-19 influences the travelers' intention to seek variety and what moderates the influence. A series of studies showed that the perceived threat of COVID-19 increased variety-seeking in travelers' psychological context. Study 1 documented our main prediction: individuals who perceived a greater threat of COVID-19 tended to do more varied activities during their travel. Supporting the moderating role of prior visiting experience, study 2 showed that the main effect existed only for individuals who had previously visited the destination. The threat of COVID-19 did not affect variety-seeking intention for those with no prior visiting experience. We also varied the dependent variables (i.e., number of places to visit) to increase the robustness of our results. The inclusion of age and mood as covariates did not change the results. Study 3 replicated the moderating effect of visiting experience using a different way to manipulate the perceived threat of COVID-19. Specifically, making the threat of COVID-19 salient by having participants write about their lockdown experience (vs. not writing)

increased variety-seeking. We observed this effect for those with prior travel experience. Finally, study 4 tested the moderating impact of another important factor: the number of travelers depicted in the communication messages. The impact of the threat on variety-seeking was stronger when the number of people enjoying activities in the communication messages was small rather than large.

Taken together, our results overall support the proposed effect of COVID-19 on travelers' variety-seeking intentions. They were robust across different operationalizations of the threat of COVID-19 (measured in studies 1, 2, and 4 and manipulated in study 3), variety-seeking measures (activities and places to visit) and target destinations (Chicago, Paris, and New Zealand). The moderating effects of prior travel experience and the number of people depicted in the communication messages further improve our understanding of the proposed effect.

Theoretical Contributions

This research has several theoretical contributions. First, our research adds to the literature on variety seeking (e.g. Kim et al., 2018) by examining the influence of contextual factors. COVID-19 has created a new context imposing several restrictions to consumers' freedoms, which, in turn, can affect their variety-seeking behavior. This study uses the COVID-19 travel context as a fertile and new ground for initiating and expanding research in this field. This is because in contrast to previous research focusing on freedom restrictions created by companies' initiatives (Levav and Zhu, 2009), the COVID-19 restrictions represent freedom constraints that are governmental-legislation imposed and they are also socially accepted because of the threat to private and public health. Hence, the study also contributes to both the generic and the travel literature by introducing COVID-19 as an interesting and significant situational

factor affecting travelers' variety-seeking behavior. While previous research has investigated several situational factors that influence the desire to seek varied activities, no research has yet established the role of variety-seeking under the impact of the current global pandemic. By confirming that consumers' motivations, pent up by the pandemic, result in greater variety-seeking, our research also reinforces the findings of previous studies: consumers use variety-seeking as compensatory consumption (Beldona, Moreo, and Mundhra 2010; Lee et al. 2020).

Second, experienced travelers have a stronger intention to travel even during the pandemic period. Studies 2 and 3 reveal different variety-seeking tendencies during the pandemic depending on prior destination experience. The findings of Studies 2 and 3 are also supported by specialization theory, in that, like career development, people's travel experience begins with a preference for travel destinations near their home region and simple activities in the places visited, and develops to include participation in travel to unfamiliar places or activities that may involve higher levels of risk (Kim et al. 2010; Li et al. 2013). The tendency can be also accounted for using a travel career model or tourist motivation ladder theory (Pearce and Lee 2005; Ryan 1998).

Third, the literature indicates that relational self-threat may reduce variety-seeking in consumer choices (e.g., Finkelstein, Xu, and Connell 2019). However, the current research found the opposite pattern; that the situational threat posed by the pandemic increased variety-seeking intentions even though consumers could not participate in travel activities. Interestingly, critical differences between two papers exist in the underlying mechanisms. For Finkelstein, Xu, and Connell (2019) the recovery strategy for relational threat was important in that self-affirmation under a high situational threat could drive less variety-seeking because choosing a favorite option could directly enhance damaged self-image or self-concept. In contrast, this paper mainly

focused on the recovery strategy relating to feelings of freedom or the response to negative emotional reactions. Therefore, future research needs to investigate the impact of the pandemic on choosing a product or an activity in a travel setting.

Practical Contributions

This research shows that consumers who perceived a greater threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic showed a high level of intention to participate in diverse travel activities, compared to those who perceived a lower threat from the pandemic, as a means of regaining constrained freedom. This finding leads to several marketing strategies. For instance, tailor-made tour programs for people who have recovered from infection may help them gain relief from physical constraints and psychological exhaustion. In the promotional message strategy, companies should emphasize recovery from fear and mental illness, while also suggesting traveling as a compensation and a return of endurance following difficult times. For example, a communication message might be: “Have you been stressed by the pandemic? Now is the time to travel and enjoy freedom”. Marketing messages should also promote traveling not only as a reactive solution to mental health and well-being, but also as a pro-active measure to ensure mental and psychological health. For example, “Do working from home and new working models intensify your stress levels? Why not book a holiday to avoid going crazy.” Also, travel marketers can enhance the variety of their offerings, such as travel packages including a variety of either activities or destinations, to help consumers regain their limited freedom during the pandemic.

Our result is closely linked with the finding that those who were experienced travelers showed a higher intention to engage in diverse activities. Therefore, travel businesses need to develop plans to solicit potential travelers differently in the post-COVID period, according to

their previous travel experience or level of specialization (Pearce and Lee 2005). The more experienced they are in previous travel, the higher their intention is likely to be to enjoy a variety of travel activities. That is, as soon as the threat of COVID-19 diminishes, the demand from those with the 'travel bug' and from specialized travelers will bounce back quite rapidly. Therefore, travel businesses need to maintain a good rapport with their previous clients, because they are likely to be repeat customers in the post-COVID era, seeking diversified options such as untraveled destinations, new food menus and novel activities.

The impact of the threat of disease on variety-seeking was stronger when a smaller number of people enjoying activities was included in a communication message. This finding is different from previous studies showing less sensitivity to crowding for city travelers because crowdedness increases the chance of encountering new people and creates a bustling ambience as a benefit of city travel (Neuts and Nijkamp 2012). However, the findings of this study indicated a desire to participate in variety-seeking activities in less densely populated places following the pandemic. This is not surprising, as preliminary findings show that due to COVID-19, people prefer to avoid crowded places, and prefer to travel outdoors rather than in cities (Sigala, 2020). However, it will be interesting for future studies to investigate whether people's perceptions of crowdedness have changed due to the COVID-19 situation and restrictions. Overall, the findings confirm that as a communication message strategy, advertisements including fewer people or simpler designs are likely to be more effective in attracting potential travelers' attention. Additionally, museums in travel destinations need to have open exhibition space or offer machine-aided interpretation of exhibits, rather than human interpreters. The traditional market needs to provide less densely populated photos in adverting materials, rather than crowded photos.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Even though this study provides significant contributions to understanding the hidden demand for varied travel activities, it does have some limitations. Here, we discuss the limitations and suggest avenues for future research. First, this study implemented a series of experimental design studies using hypothetical scenarios because of the impossibility of conducting actual surveys during the pandemic. Therefore, future research can provide further support using in-depth interviews or actual travel behaviors during and after the pandemic. Second, our study tested for the moderating role of age, gender (Study 1 & 2), and mood (Study 2) and did not find an effect. Future research needs to investigate whether there are factors that can moderate the relationship between perceived risk and variety-seeking. For example, Nørfelt et al. (2020) suggested that individuals have different levels of tourism xenophilia (i.e., the extent to which they are attracted to the perceived foreignness of destinations), which predicts their actual number of trips to foreign destinations. We expect people high in tourism xenophilia to be particularly sensitive to freedom restrictions, and thus to display a strong tendency to seek a variety of experiences once travel is resumed. Similarly, travelers' resilience (e.g., Prayag, 2020) during the pandemic may influence travelers' behaviors, including variety-seeking. Future investigations may enhance our understanding of this relationship.

Third, the attractions presented in this study are related to city travel. Therefore, future research may include rural tourism and/or ecotourism because preferences for travel attractions differ with variables such as psychographics (Plog 2002), sociodemographic variables (Otoo and Kim 2018), and motivation (Wen et al. 2018). Relatedly, we measured variety-seeking tendencies using travel activities rather than travel destinations. When the external threat is

extremely severe, consumers may prioritize safety-seeking over variety-seeking and limit their travel destinations. Future research could examine how variety seeking differs for travel activities versus travel destinations under different degrees of threat. Future research should re-test the existing hypotheses and relations in a post-COVID-19 context, in which the consumers' expectations and interpretations of 'freedoms', threats, restrictions and crowdedness will have been recalibrated and re-set to a new normal. Depending on this future study result, we can better conclude whether COVID-19 has actually created a new 'service' experience context and consumer behavior. Despite these limitations, this study empirically established that despite the lingering health threat of a resurgence of the global pandemic, there is a potential demand for travel.

Finally, our empirical results support the prediction that our proposed effect will be stronger for travelers with previous visiting experience. However, the situation may unfold differently. Compared to new (or less experienced) travelers, repeat (or more experienced) travelers are more likely to have experienced major activities in the destination. Because the activities provide lower marginal utility, repeat travelers may seek less variety. This prediction is equally valid. Here, we briefly discuss the potential factors that drove our empirical results. The first factor is confidence. Confidence comes from experience. Previous travel experience may have given some confidence to repeat travelers that they can somehow navigate the various experiences without falling prey to the disease. New travelers, on the other hand, may have felt less control over the situation because the destination was still foreign to them. Thus, prior vising experience may have been a factor that enabled repeat travelers to freely follow their inner urges. We encourage future research to investigate the role of confidence in the impact of previous travel experience. The second factor is the threat strength. An extreme threat will erase the effect

because, regardless of the experience, the potential costs of travel will prevail over the potential benefits. Or, the effect may reverse, because repeat travelers who derive lower marginal utility from each experience will be quicker to give up the activities. We believe that our participants assumed a low to moderate level of the threat. Under such circumstances, more experienced travelers—those who feel more confined during the pandemic—will effectively satisfy their desire for freedom thorough variety-seeking. We expect this will be the case once the pandemic subsides and travel resumes. People will still feel threatened, but will not be overwhelmed. We recommend future research to explore the moderating role of the threat strength. The last factor is frequency. Although a destination can provide novel experiences up to a certain number of visits, it will eventually run out of 'new' experiences. A traveler visiting the destination for the second time may demonstrate different behaviors compared to one visiting the same destination for the tenth time. A lower variety-seeking intention is expected for the latter, especially if the consideration set consists of popular attractions. Our studies did not vary the degree of previous experience. We leave this job to future studies.

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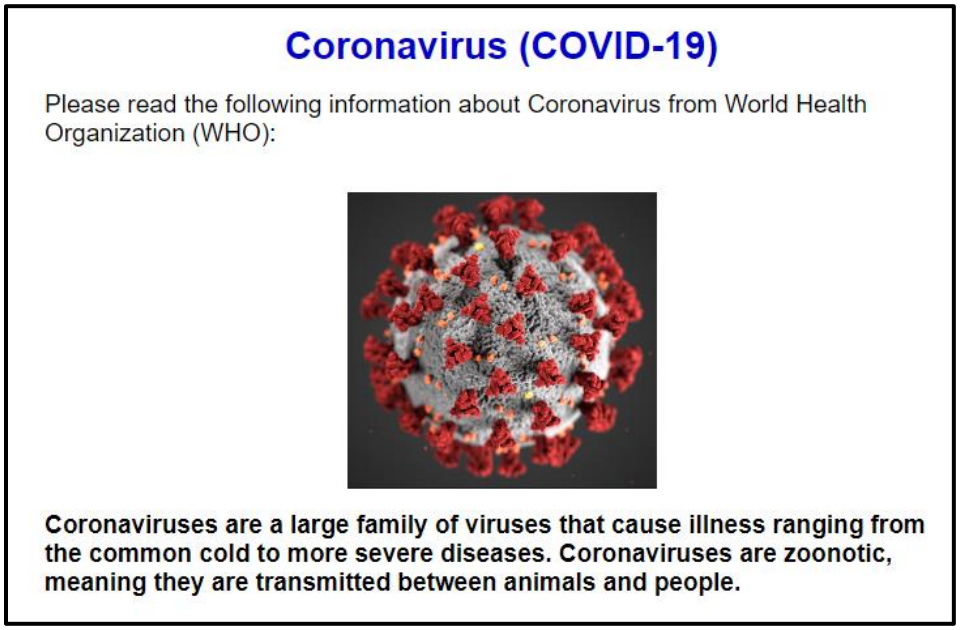
Figure 1.

Stimuli of Study 1



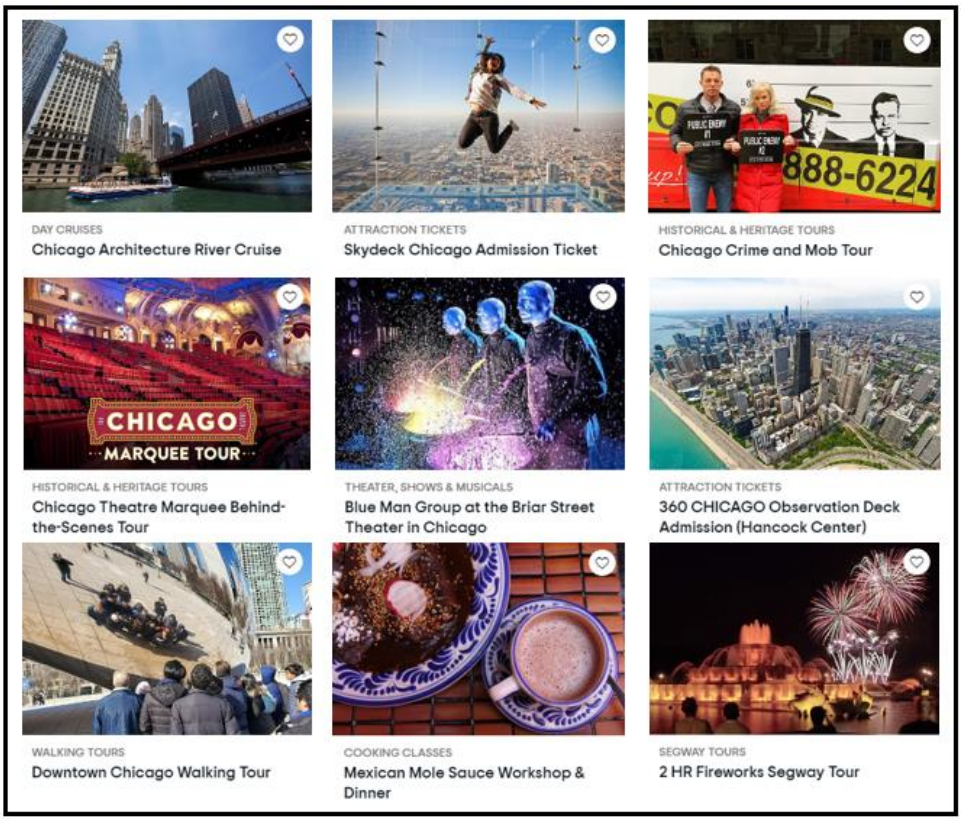
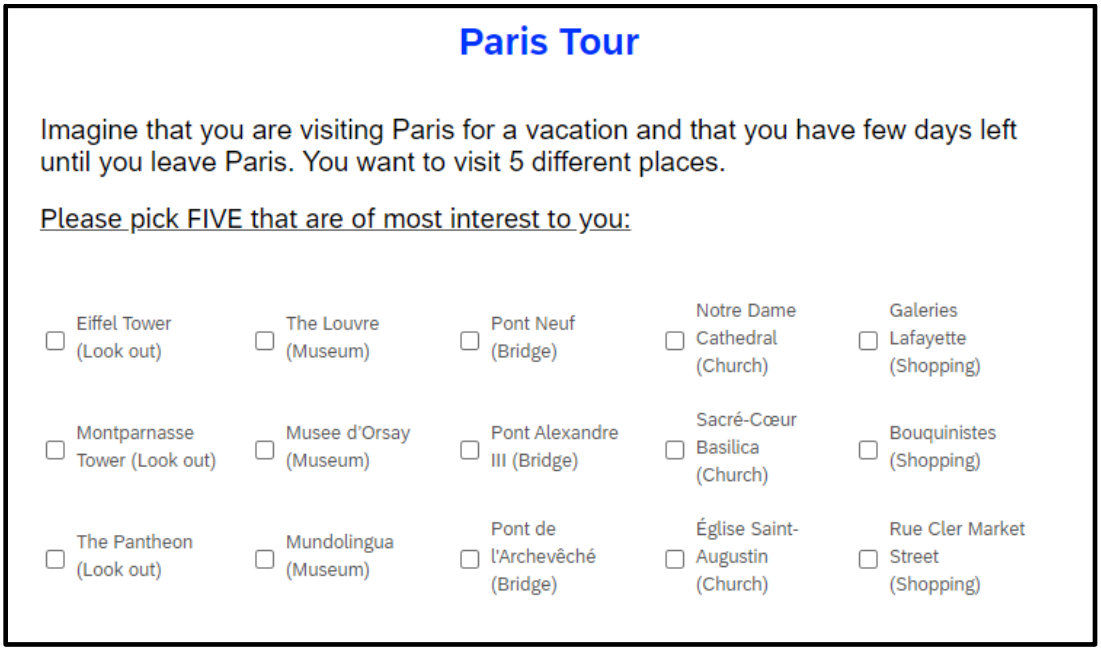


Figure 2.

Stimuli of Study 2



Paris Tour

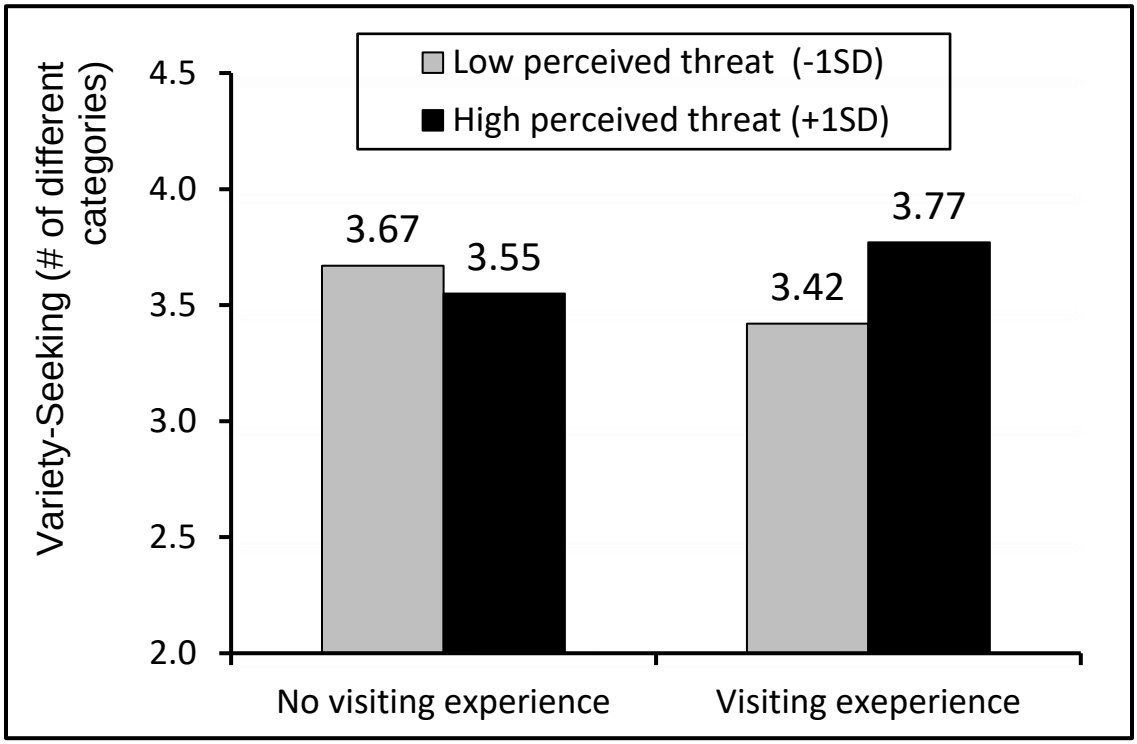
Imagine that you are visiting Paris for a vacation and that you have few days left until you leave Paris. You want to visit 5 different places.

Please pick FIVE that are of most interest to you:

☐ Eiffel Tower (Look out)	☐ The Louvre (Museum)	☐ Pont Neuf (Bridge)	☐ Notre Dame Cathedral (Church)	☐ Galeries Lafayette (Shopping)
☐ Montparnasse Tower (Look out)	☐ Musee d'Orsay (Museum)	☐ Pont Alexandre III (Bridge)	☐ Sacré-Cœur Basilica (Church)	☐ Bouquinistes (Shopping)
☐ The Pantheon (Look out)	☐ Mundolingua (Museum)	☐ Pont de l'Archevêché (Bridge)	☐ Église Saint-Augustin (Church)	☐ Rue Cler Market Street (Shopping)

Figure 3.

Results of study 2



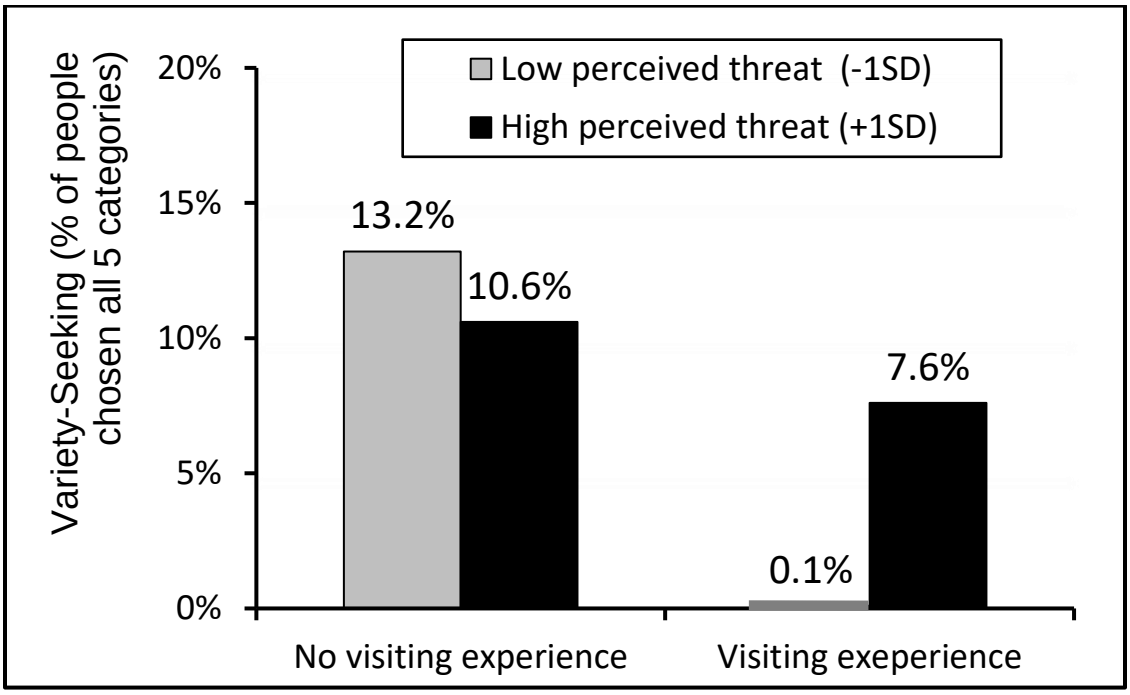


Figure 4.

Results of study 3

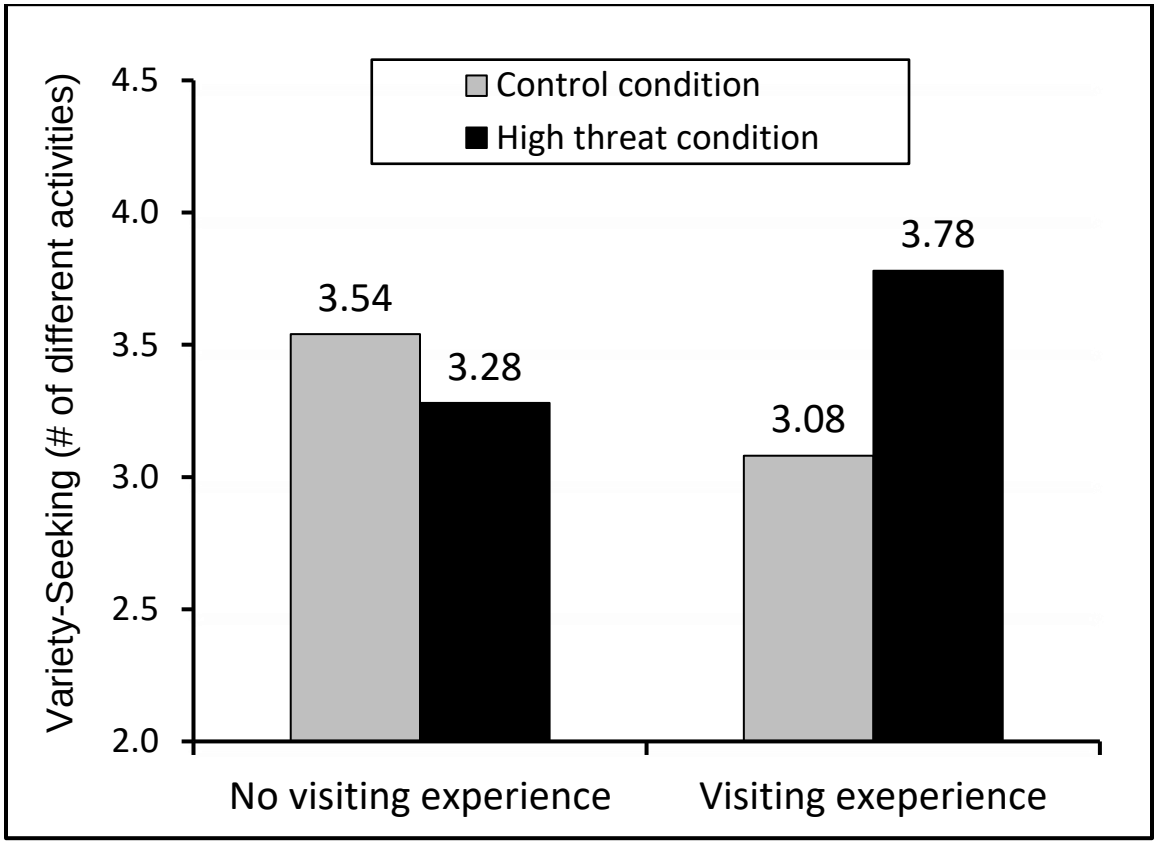
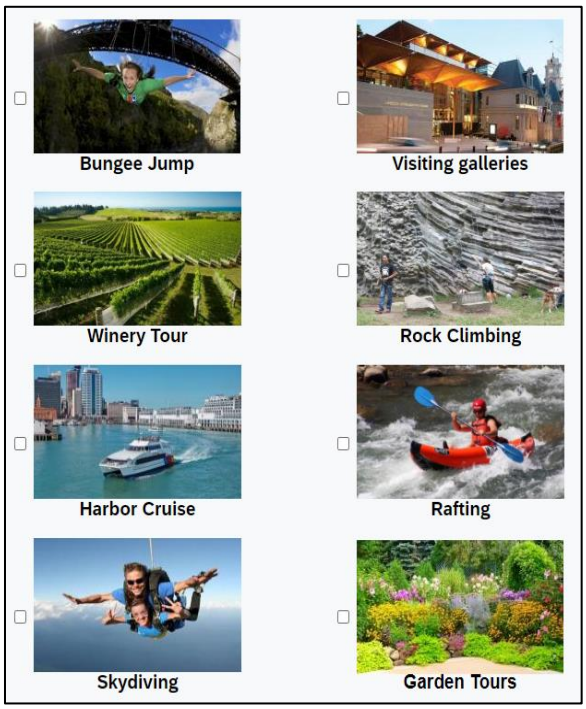


Figure 5.

Stimuli of Study 4

Low crowding condition



High crowding condition

Figure 6.

Results of study 4

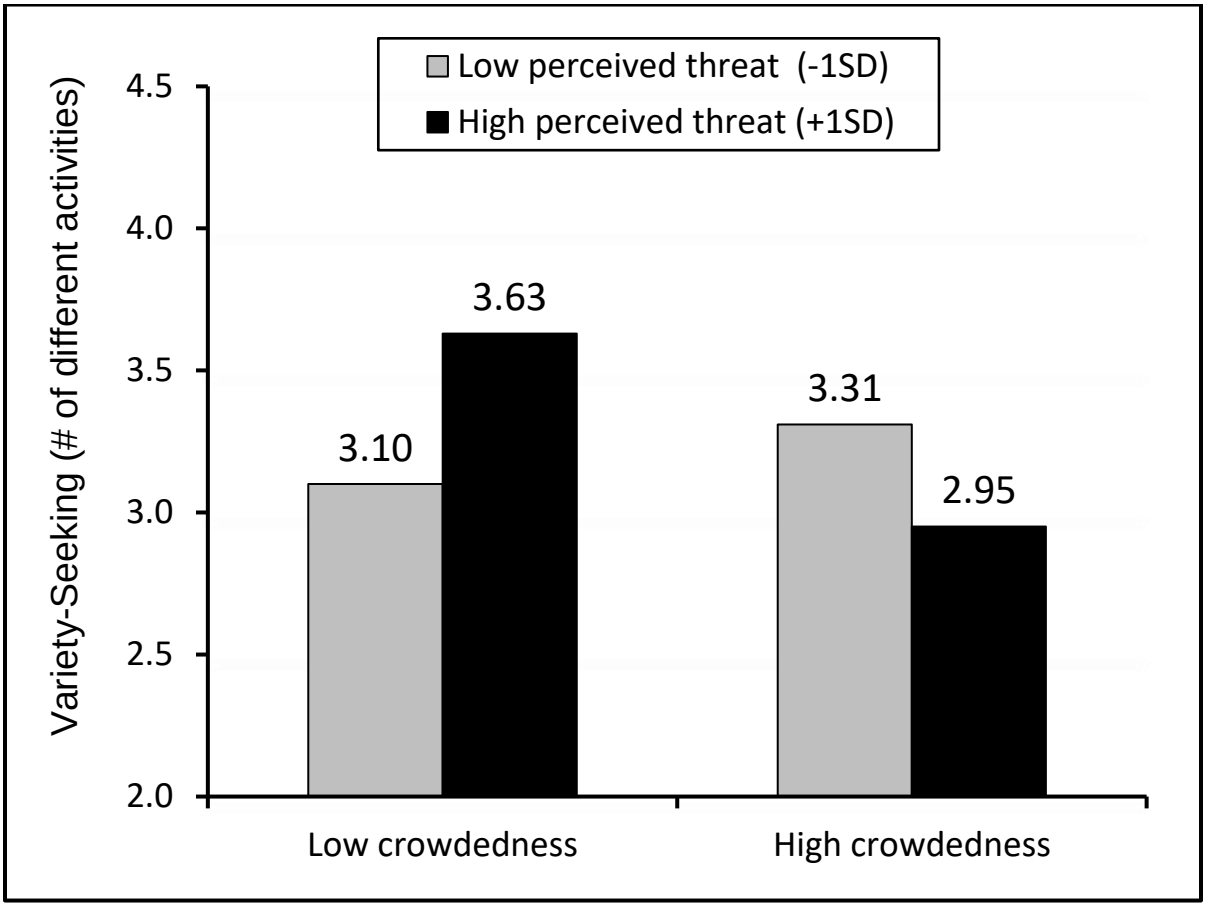


Table 1.

Summary of Hypotheses and Empirical Studies.

Study	Objective	Research Design	Sample	Research Findings
Hypothesis 1: Travelers' variety-seeking intentions will be higher when the COVID-19 pandemic threat is perceived as high (vs. low).				
Study 1	To examine whether perceived threat of COVID-19 influences traveler's variety-seeking intention	IV: perceived threat (measured) DV: variety-seeking	n = 176 Online panel (Amazon MTurk)	Higher perceived threat of COVID-19 increase the variety-seeking intention **(H1 supported)**
Hypothesis 2: Travelers' variety-seeking intentions during the COVID-19 pandemic will be stronger for travelers who have (vs. do not have) previous travel experience.				
Study 2	To test the moderating role of previous travel experience on the effect of perceived threat on variety-seeking	IV: perceived threat (measured) Moderator: previous travel experience (measured) DV: variety-seeking	n = 213 Online panel (Amazon MTurk)	The effect of perceived threat of COVID-19 on variety-seeking was stronger for travelers who have (vs. do not have) previous travel experience **(H2 supported)**
Study 3	To further validate the causal relationship between perceived threat and variety-seeking through the manipulation of perceived threat	IV: threat manipulation - 2 (high threat vs. control) Moderator: previous travel experience (measured) DV: variety-seeking	n = 172 Online panel (Amazon MTurk)	Participants in the high threat condition sought more variety than those in the control condition and their previous travel experience moderated the effect **(H2 supported)**
Hypothesis 3: Travelers' variety-seeking intentions during the COVID-19 pandemic will be stronger when the crowdedness of destination is low (vs. high).				
Study 4	To test the moderating role of the crowdedness of the destination on the effect of perceived threat on variety-seeking	IV: crowdedness manipulation - 2 (high vs. low) Moderator: perceived threat; measured DV: variety-seeking	n = 188 Online panel (Amazon MTurk)	The effect of perceived threat of COVID-19 on variety-seeking was stronger when the crowdedness of destination is low (vs. high; **(H3 supported)**

* IV = Independent Variable, DV: Dependent Variable, n = sample size.

COVID-19 Restrictions and Variety-Seeking in Travel Choices and Actions: The Moderating Effects of Previous Experience and Crowding

Abstract

This paper investigates how the perceived threats caused by COVID-19 affect consumers' travel choices and actions by influencing their intentions to seek variety. Four studies show that the perceived threat of COVID-19 increases variety-seeking in travel choices. Study 1 finds that travelers who perceive a greater threat of COVID-19 tend to undertake more varied activities during their travel. Study 2 shows that the main effect exists only for individuals who have previously visited the destination. Study 3 replicates the moderating effect of previous visiting experience by using a different way to manipulate the perceived threat of COVID-19. Study 4 illustrates the moderating impact of another important factor; the number of travelers included in the companies' communication messages. The paper concludes by discussing the theoretical and managerial implications of the findings.

Keywords: COVID-19, crowding, perceived threat, variety-seeking, visiting experience