

Perceived Retail Crowding, Emotional Distance, and Consumer Response in Fashion Stores

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Introduction: The needs of modern consumers are becoming increasingly diverse, and consumers make decisions every day about purchasing products that meet these needs. Store selection is an important decision in the product purchase stage, and consumers are influenced by various consumption environments when they visit stores. The number of consumers that enjoy shopping has increased, however, physical space limitations mean that the perception of store crowding is increasing. Store crowding is an important factor that can affect consumers' decision-making processes and behavior when in stores. Therefore, understanding the behavioral consequences of crowding is important to people who manage stores. The same degree of crowding can be perceived differently by different people depending on the consumers' individual characteristics. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to consumers' emotions and perceived values, which could change in crowded store situations.

Background: Similarity refers to the degree to which the attributes of a pair of members are similar (Smith, 1998), and is defined by the extent to which a customer feels that they are similar or identical to other customers in the service environment (Brocato et al., 2012). People tend to feel more comfortable when they are with other customers with whom they feel they share characteristic. (Martin & Pranter, 1989). Interactions between people with similar attitudes, values, activities or experiences are easy and less challenging (Smith, 1998), and people have a more favorable attitude towards perceived groups that have similar attitudes, positions, and educational levels (Turner et al., 1987). In the situation where service facilities are shared with other customers, consumers prefer to be around consumers with similar characteristics. It is likely more compatible and positively evaluated by other identifiable customers in retail environments (Brocato et al., 2012). Therefore, it can be predicted that perceived congestion may differ according to the perception of their similarity with other customers in the store.

Method: The purpose of this study is to investigate the influence of crowding degree and perceived similarity with other customers in a store on the in-store emotion state and purchase intention. Virtual store image stimuli were created for experimental design. In total, six stimuli were presented: crowding degree (low, medium, or high) \times ages to measure the perceived similarity to other customers in the store (middle-aged or young). Multivariate covariance analysis was conducted to control for store conformity, which is a variable that may affect crowding, using the data

measured by the experimental design method. The questionnaire method was used for the empirical survey of this study, and the survey was conducted on adult consumers in their 20s to their 50s. In total, 236 responses were used for the analysis.

Results: The effect of the crowding degree and perceived similarity to other in-store customers on emotional state and purchase intention was investigated. A lower perceived crowding degree resulted in a higher pleasure emotion state ($F=4.861, p<.01$), and a higher perceived crowding degree, led to a higher arousal emotion state ($F=3.091, p<.05$). There was no significant difference in the dominance emotion state ($F=2.516, p=.083$) and the purchase intention ($F=1.630, p=.198$). The pleasure ($t=7.560, p<.001$), arousal ($t=6.230, p<.001$), and dominance ($t=6.835, p<.001$) emotion states and the purchase intention ($t=11.357, p<.001$) were found to be higher in the group that perceived a high similarity with other in-store customers. Thus, it was found that customers felt more positive emotions and had more positive behaviors when they perceived that they were similar to others in the store environment.

Discussion and Conclusion: The higher the perceived similarity to other in-store customers, the higher the purchase intention regardless of the store-crowding degree; this shows that the presence of other customers who were highly similar to themselves is an important factor in customers' shopping behavior. Thus, it may be effective to segment target consumers and conduct intensively targeted marketing. Therefore, marketers should attract consumers through store promotion events that target specific groups. This study aims to investigate the effect of crowding degree and perceived similarity to other in-store customers on the emotional state and purchase intention of fashion store consumers. This has academic significance, as it identifies consumer responses and behaviors according to novel physical environment variables. In addition, this is of significance for marketing research and practice, in that it provides useful information that could be help to refine store management strategies.

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