



Retail customers' self-awareness: The deindividuation effects of others



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ABSTRACT

The presence of others often affects retail shopping behavior. Other customers tend to increase one's self-awareness and cause negative self-conscious emotions. This research's findings suggest fellow customers also mitigate focal customers' evaluative concerns. Deindividuation theory, which posits that other customers create anonymity and reduce self-awareness, helps explain this phenomenon. A laboratory experiment and a quasi-experimental field study in a retail setting support the notion that the presence of other customers creates a deindividuation effect on a focal customer during unwanted social evaluation from salespeople. Results show a small group of other customers resulted in lower levels of emotional discomfort and behavioral inhibition than either an empty store or a larger group size, suggesting a U shape relationship.

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1. Introduction

An increasing number of studies investigate how the presence of other customers influences shopper behavior in the retail environment (Eroglu, Machleit, & Barr, 2005; He, Chen, & Alden, 2012; van Rompay, Krooshoop, Verhoeven, & Pruyn, 2012). Primarily, these studies focus on how other customers negatively affect shopping experiences. For example, previous work shows that fellow customers elicit evaluative concerns and cause negative self-conscious emotions (e.g. embarrassment) or even more severe social anxiety (Grace, 2007; Lau-Gesk & Drolet, 2008). Social psychology research suggests that the mere presence of others is a sufficient condition to increase the awareness of oneself as a social object and drive concerns about how other patrons perceive and evaluate one's own public self (Buss, 1980; Leary, 2005). The marketing literature also supports this notion. For example, Dahl, Manchanda, and Argo (2001) find that the mere presence of other shoppers affects purchasing embarrassing products.

While sharing the retail environment with other customers creates social evaluation situations, this research suggests fellow customers also mitigate evaluative concerns. The present research focuses on situations where the store's sales personnel are the primary social evaluation source. Customers often browse without immediate intention to purchase and no desire for salesperson contact (Xia, 2010). These customers often are reluctant to interact with salespeople. Observation by salespeople is likely to increase customer's public self-awareness: a

state occurring when people focus on the impressions they make on others and usually causes emotional discomfort and behavioral inhibition (Buss, 1980). Deindividuation theory (Diener, 1980), suggests that other customers' presence in this situation provides anonymity and reduces the customer's public self-awareness: the deindividuation effect.

This research uses a laboratory experiment and a quasi-experimental field study to examine deindividuation effects to: (a) demonstrate the effects of other customers' presence on a focal customer's public self-awareness when the customer is exposed to undesired social evaluation by salespeople and (b) examine this effect's consequences on the customer's emotions and actual in-store behavior. This study offers several important contributions to the extant literature. The study is the first to examine deindividuation effects as an explanation for positive customer presence effects in retail environments. Results extend previous findings by showing that other customers are not always a focal customer's evaluative concern. In some cases other customers mitigate such concerns involving sales personnel. The paper also contributes to the literature by refining deindividuation theory. Across two studies, deindividuation effects occur only for low customer density. For high customer density, the results do not support the deindividuation effect. These results suggest a curvilinear effect consistent with prior studies of retail customers' emotions (Argo, Dahl, & Manchanda, 2005; Pan & Siemens, 2011). Further, this research demonstrates how different sources of social impact (i.e. salespeople and other customers) combine to affect a focal customer's retail experience. The results also provide managerial implications. Why do customers feel uncomfortable when shopping alone? Reducing customers' public self-awareness is likely to increase the time customers spend browsing in a store. The findings assist managers designing salesperson training and provide insights for recruiting new personnel. In addition this study's implications for store design suggest public self-awareness is dependent upon how

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exposed the customer feels. The customer service desk's location and the layout of fixtures and fittings are important to reduce this exposure.

2. Background and development of hypotheses

2.1. Overview of related literature

Previous research shows customer's psychological and behavioral responses to retail environments are influenced by exposure to others. For example, the presence of fellow customers creates social awareness in shoppers. This awareness stimulates impression management behaviors to maintain or restore one's desired self-image (Argo et al., 2005; Lee, Kim, & Vohs, 2011). Such behaviors occur during social interactions and when exposed to the mere presence of others (van Rompay et al., 2012). Studies also show the presence of others evokes individual's evaluative concerns. These studies conceptualize other customers as causing negative self-conscious emotions such as embarrassment, guilt and shame (Dahl, Honea, & Manchanda, 2005; Dahl et al., 2001; Grace, 2009; Lau-Gesk & Drolet, 2008). Grace (2007, 2009), for instance, finds other customers can cause consumer embarrassment by performing awkward acts, damaging one's desired image or violating one's privacy. However, customer presence effects, including the impact on a focal customer's evaluative concerns, are diverse (van Rompay et al., 2012). For example, Yan and Lotz (2004) show potentially embarrassing situations can be reduced by customers deterring even unacquainted other customers from complaining. Argo et al.'s (2005) research on mere social presence effects in retail stores identifies lower self-conscious customer emotions when exposed to intermediate numbers of other customers compared to either a small or a large size of social presence. Other studies reveal that a person's reaction to others' presence depends on an individual's public self-consciousness. Research in this area shows that high (versus low) public self-consciousness results in a more pronounced tendency to enhance one's public image (Bushman, 1993), produces stronger intentions to purchase products aimed at preventing future embarrassment (Lau-Gesk & Drolet, 2008), increases efforts to avoid association with dissociative reference groups (White & Dahl, 2006) and alters people's reaction to audience characteristics (Froming, Corley, & Rinker, 1990).

Overall these previous findings emphasize that the presence of others customers affects shoppers' self-awareness. Yet, no study has investigated how a focal customer's public self-awareness is affected by the presence of other customers in situations where salespeople are primary sources of social evaluation in a store.

2.2. Public self-awareness

Public self-awareness describes an increased focus on those aspects of the self observable by other people: that is, the externals of appearance and behavior. Depending on the context and individual differences, the construct can have a positive or a negative orientation. The majority of researchers assume a negative orientation, reflective of Buss' (1980, p. 36) definition of public self-awareness as an "uncomfortable state, often accompanied by social anxiety, lowered self-esteem, or attempts to escape the situation".

Public self-awareness is a transient state unlike, the dispositional tendency, public self-consciousness (Buss, 1980). The most important causes of public self-awareness are the actions or mere presence of others. Being observed by others is a sufficient condition to elicit concerns about one's public self (Buss, 1980). In a state of high public self-awareness, people often worry about other's impressions of their appearance and behavior resulting in emotional discomfort and behavioral inhibition (Buss, 1980) because of feeling obliged to conform to the norms and expectations of their social environment (Baumeister, 1982).

2.3. Interactions with the service personnel and customers' public self-awareness

People are generally concerned about being observed by those in authority or of high status (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). As salespeople are important others in the social context of a store, observation by them is likely to increase shoppers' public self-awareness.

Empirical evidence in the marketing literature indicates the presence of salespeople and awareness of being observed by them can be a psychologically disturbing experience resulting in behavioral inhibition. For example, Grace (2007) finds that 66% of all embarrassing incidents in consumption settings are due to service personnel causing customer embarrassment, mostly through nonverbal criticism such as making the customer the focus of attention. Being the center of the salesperson's attention represents a psychological and behavioral constraint for customers because it pressures them to conform to expected customer roles (Buss, 1980; Uhrich & Luck, 2012). This pressure to conform stems from the salesperson's expectation that customers purchase something (Dahl, Honea, & Manchanda, 2005). Hence, behavioral inhibition results from the customers' feeling that they cannot just browse in a store but must spend their time purposefully. The customer may then feel obliged, for instance, to pretend serious interest in the products even when they have no immediate intention to purchase (Uehara, 1995; Uhrich & Luck, 2012). Dahl et al. (2005) show that leaving a store without purchasing, following verbal interactions with a salesperson (versus no interaction), can trigger the feeling of guilt. Thus, customers who simply browse the store with no intention to purchase are likely to avoid verbal interaction with, or mere observation from, the salespeople as they will feel that they do not fully conform to the salesperson's expectations. Kirmani and Campbell's (2004) study of salesperson–customer interactions provides support for this view by identifying both *seeker* and *sentry* strategies customers use in personal selling situations. While seeker strategies reflect attempts to get involved and interact with the service personnel (e.g. asking questions and accepting assistance), sentry strategies (e.g. ignoring or hiding from the salesperson) guard against undesired influence from salespeople when no interaction is wanted. Drawing on deindividuation theory, the next section proposes that the presence of other customers can also function as a protection from unwanted evaluation by salespeople and thus mitigate the psychological and behavioral consequences of this evaluation.

2.4. Deindividuation effects through the presence of other customers

Deindividuation theory embraces a number of theoretical approaches to describe, explain and predict antinormative and disinhibited behavior in groups. This theory explains how circumstances typically occurring in group situations (e.g., anonymity, loss of individual responsibility, attention being group and not individual focused) result in a deindividuated state that is antecedent to antinormative and disinhibited behavior (Postmes & Spears, 1998). Deindividuation involves being "lost in the crowd" and is commonly conceptualized as a state of reduced self-awareness (Diener, 1980).

In a retail environment, single customers often become the center of salespeople's attention. However, this individual attention becomes less focused when other customers are present. The social identity model of deindividuation suggests being aware of oneself as a group member shifts a person's awareness from the personal self to a social or group level of identification (Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995). In a study of customer to customer attraction in cafés, Tombs and McColl-Kennedy (2010) identified individual customers' tendency to sit near others thus avoiding being seen as a lone individual but rather a member of a larger social group. In the context of a busy retail store, this group level becomes the social category *customer*. As such, individuals become less identifiable and more anonymous within a group.

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