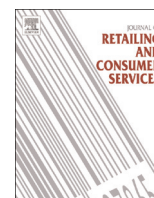




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Consumers between supermarket shelves: The influence of inter-personal distance on consumer behavior



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ABSTRACT

Recent research underlines the important influence on consumer behavior of the mere presence of consumers on other consumers in retail businesses. While these results mainly relate to overall behavior, it is largely unknown how consumers behave in stores and how they react to customers present around them. This study examines the impact of an encounter between two consumers, directly in front of the same shelf row, on diverse consumer behavior. By means of two pilot studies we gained initial insights into the mutual influence. An image-based scenario study shows that the proximal distance is important for consumers' emotional state. In addition, the results indicate that these triggered negative and positive emotions mediate the effects of the distance on shopping satisfaction, aversive behavioral tendencies, willingness to buy, and number of alternatives considered.

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1. Introduction

Up to 80% of all retail buying decisions are made directly at the point of sale (POS) and in front of the shelf (Pornpitakpan and Han, 2013). Research shows that consumers react – consciously or unconsciously – to the smallest changes at the POS and are influenced by the attributes of a consumption area (Baker et al., 1994). Hence, analysis of consumer behavior at the POS has been an important field of research for a number of years. From the early 1970s, research initially focused on the influence of physical surroundings, such as light, color, design, or music (Turley and Miliman, 2000). Besides physical attributes in retail business, shopping is usually an activity that takes place with other customers “who are in the service facility simultaneously with – and who are unacquainted with – a focal customer” (Brocato et al., p. 385), whereby customer-to-customer contact – primarily non-verbal – is unavoidable (Nicholls, 2010). This being the case, it is surprising that this important factor has largely been neglected in academic research (Brocato et al., 2012; Söderlund, 2011; Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2013).

It is commonly known that the presence of other consumers in retail businesses can affect the perception of consumption (Grove and Fisk, 1997; McGrath and Otnes, 1995), because other

customers can significantly influence their behavior (Söderlund, 2011; Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2003). Previous research shows that the influence of other consumers on buying behavior is multifaceted. According to Baker et al. (1994), this influence can be determined mainly by three dimensions. A limited number of studies have addressed the appearance (Argo et al., 2008; Brack and Benkenstein, 2012, 2014; Dahl et al., 2012), the behavior (Argo et al., 2006; Grove and Fisk, 1997; Martin, 2012; Söderlund, 2011), and the number of other consumers (Argo et al., 2005; Eroglu and Harrell, 1986; Hui and Bateson, 1991; Pan and Siemens, 2011; Uhrich, 2011; Uhrich and Luck, 2012) as a consequence for buying behavior. The results of these studies relate primarily to the overall shopping experience in a store. In contrast, there is a lack of research regarding specific consumer behavior within stores between the shelves where consumers look for products and where they ideally make a purchase decision (Hui et al., 2009; Sorensen, 2003). A few studies have shown that the mere presence of another consumer in the immediate vicinity can affect the emotions of fellow customers in a positive (Argo et al., 2005) or negative (Dahl et al., 2001) way in certain circumstances. Recent research suggests that the mere presence of other consumers in special areas of a shop increases interest in an offer but at the same time reduces the inclination to enter these areas (Hui et al., 2009). The fact that customers are not rigid objects and that they constantly move around in a store, means that between shelves is the place where they steadily encounter each other. To date, relatively little is known about which behavior is caused by these encounters. Initial insights in this research area are provided by the field

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experiments of [Martin \(2012\)](#). This research examines how consumers respond to inappropriate behavior in the form of an inadvertent touch by other customers. However, little is known about how consumers react and behave to the mere presence of another customer in front of the same shelf.

The emphasis of our contribution to this research gap is to investigate the influence of other consumers between the shelves to broaden the knowledge of this academic research field. Specifically, the goal is to examine which purchase-related behaviors will be influenced by the mere presence of the first other consumer in the same shelf row. In contrast to previous studies, we do not investigate the influence of the behavior of other customers. Instead, we focus on the consequences for the consumer's own behavior of encountering another consumer next to him or her. It has been shown in research on crowding that consumer density, which results from the number of other customers, is the most important component of crowding, exerting an influence on consumers ([Michon et al., 2005](#)). However, our study goes a step beyond crowding research as we examine the presence of only one other consumer and focus on the behavior of individuals who respond to the mere presence of the first other consumer in front of a shelf, without interacting with this other customer.

Due to the availability of only a few and rudimentary research findings in this field, we conducted two consecutive exploratory pilot studies as a first step toward achieving this goal. In a second step, the resulting insights were embedded in a theoretical framework to shape our research hypotheses, which were then tested empirically. Our outcomes broaden knowledge of social presence in a commercial context. Our results underline the relevance of encounters of consumers between the shelves for consumer behavior. They also show that management should not underestimate and should pay more attention to the presence of other customers. These research findings provide the first substantial insights into the effects of social interaction in front of the shelf and reveal a plethora of other research opportunities. Even though this is only an initial step in this research field, a few management implications can be derived.

2. Pilot studies

Due to the lack of research concerning social presence in the consumption situation directly in front of the shelf, this research initially combines two exploratory pilot studies. In our first pilot study, the behavior of consumers in situations with the social presence of another customer was observed using video-based observation. In a second study, we used the method of “shopping with consumers” ([Lowrey et al., 2005](#)) to gain a greater understanding of the behavior exhibited in the presence of other consumers, especially in front of the shelf.

2.1. Pilot study 1: Video-based observation

In our first pilot study, we observed situations with and without the social presence of another consumer in a real consumption area. To exclude the influence of the researcher, who also represents a social presence, we employed video-based observation as a non-reactive process of inquiry. This method allows the accurate and objective capture of modes of behavior ([Dodd et al., 1998](#)). Video-based observation is particularly suitable for collecting real data on the subject area ([Belk and Kozinets, 2005](#)). Using video recordings of shelf rows on different weekdays, we were able to observe and capture the behavior of consumers in front of the shelf.

Standardized observation reports were employed so that the observable behavior of consumers could be used for later analysis.

The reports followed ethical policies. The anonymity of consumers was ensured through pixelating the footage. The focus of the data collection was only on exhibited and observable behavior ([Belk and Kozinets, 2005](#)). Within this pilot study, we solely gathered data on the duration of stay in front of the shelf in the particular row, as well as the removal and consideration of purchase alternatives from the consumers' perspective. The gathered data were only accessible to the researchers and were destroyed after the data analysis ([Carrigan and Kirkup, 2000](#)). As a key criterion for the applicability of a recorded situation, the consumer had to come to a stop within the row and select at least one product. Thus, we ensured that consumers who just walked by were excluded from the analysis. A further condition was the social presence of one other consumer throughout the whole period, with no other consumers walking by. Based on this latter condition, we collected 207 situations that could be evaluated. In these 207 cases, approximately 20% made a choice in the presence of another consumer.

Due to the lack of existing knowledge in this research area, we were unable to make a priori assumptions concerning how consumers would react in a situation with other consumers. Therefore, at the beginning of our pilot study, we assumed an indefinite coherence between the behavior exhibited and the presence of other consumers, and simply expected a difference in the parameters. Using ANOVA, we examined the differences in means for the groups (social presence vs. no social presence) for the variables “duration of stay in the row” and “number of alternatives considered.” The duration of stay in the row is measured in seconds and is the time from entering to leaving the aisle. The number of product alternatives considered refers to the physical removal of the products from the shelf before a decision is made. The groups differed significantly in relation to these two variables. Consumers in the group with no social presence stayed significantly longer in the row concerned ($M_{\text{no social presence}}=46\text{ s}$) compared to those consumers who made their choice while other consumers were present ($M_{\text{social presence}}=29\text{ s}$; $F(1,204)=8.089$, $p < .01$). Before consumers chose a certain product, they considered significantly fewer product alternatives with other consumers around ($M_{\text{social presence}}=1.15$) than when no one was present in the same row ($M_{\text{no social presence}}=1.39$; $F(1,205)=4.461$, $p < .05$).

In keeping with the assumption of [Hui et al. \(2009\)](#) that areas with other consumers present are increasingly avoided, the results of our first pilot study show a negative impact caused by the presence of other consumers in the same row. This finding is very interesting but it still cannot be explained and requires further investigation.

2.2. Pilot study 2: Shopping with consumers

To deepen our research, we used the method of shopping with consumers at the POS. To gain further insights, we engaged a convenience sample of nine students and employees. These participants suited the study purpose well as no special knowledge was required (the purchase context involving everyday products) and furthermore because they represent usual consumers from the general public. [Table 1](#) gives an overview of these participants' demographic data ($M_{\text{age}}=26.11$ ($SD=3.65$); male=56%).

The research method of shopping with consumers connects the observation and questioning of consumers in real consumption settings ([Lowrey et al., 2005](#)). It also presents an excellent opportunity to capture consumer behavior and to let the participants directly describe and explain their actual behavior ([Zaltman, 2003](#)). Using this procedure, it is possible to obtain more comprehensive information in terms of the thoughts and feelings experienced by consumers within these particular situations than can be gained from other methods ([McGrath and Otnes, 1995](#)).

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