



# Understanding perceived retail crowding: A critical review and research agenda



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## ABSTRACT

Perceived retail crowding is an important, but under-researched construct in marketing research. It has been found to influence a number of retail outcomes. However, the limited empirical studies in this area have not just produced seemingly contradictory results, but have also used different conceptualizations of the construct. This paper provides an explanation of the construct of perceived retail crowding and reviews the empirical studies in the area so as to integrate the knowledge that may help in understanding of consumer behavior in crowded retail settings. The paper also presents directions for future research and managerial implications.

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## 1. Introduction

Perceived retail crowding, also termed as perceived crowding or crowding in the literature on retailing is an important element of store atmospherics (Baker, 1986; Turley and Milliman, 2000). It has attracted attention under social factor or human variable of store atmospherics (Turley and Milliman, 2000). It has been shown to influence a number of retail outcomes such as consumers' satisfaction (Eroglu et al., 2005; Machleit et al., 2000), attitude towards the store (Mehta et al., 2012; Pan and Siemens, 2011), and behavioral responses (Hui and Bateson, 1991; Pan and Siemens, 2011), to name but a few. Aylott and Mitchell (1998) identified crowding and queuing, a function of crowding, as the two major stressors for grocery shopping.

The fact that many retailers use a number of strategies for crowd management implies that they too acknowledge the fact that consumers' perceptions of crowding can influence their behavior. Designing the layout of the retail space, specific placement of different products, deciding on the number of sales-support personnel and check-out counters are some of the ways adopted by retailers to control the level of consumers' perceived crowding.

Harrell and Hutt (1976) introduced the concept of perceived crowding in the retailing literature. Since then many studies have

been reported that try to explore the phenomenon of perceived crowding and understand its effects in the retail environment. These studies, however, lack consistency on the use of the term, the conceptualization of the construct, and seem to have produced contradictory results. Lam (2001) and Turley and Milliman (2000) provide a review of the effects of various atmospheric variables, including crowding, on shopping behavior. More than a decade has passed since these two reviews got published, and issues in the area of retail crowding have advanced considerably.

The recent developments in the retail space also call for renewed attention in the area of retail crowding. There has been a growth in the number of shoppers and consumption especially from the emerging economies. Globally, retailers are expanding their businesses in emerging markets to avail the opportunities arising from the growing middle class and the rising disposable incomes in these regions. These developments have led to greater importance to the issue of retail crowding. Another interesting development during the last decade is the proliferation of social media and online retailing. This phenomenon could imply that consumers feel lonelier now and consumers' preferred level of crowding might have changed over the period. All these reasons stimulated this study and provided motivation to comprehensively review the research in crowding till date.

This paper aims at achieving the following objectives: (1) providing a conceptual clarification of the construct of perceived retail crowding, (2) synthesizing the findings and methodologies of more than three decades of empirical investigation in the area of crowding in the marketing literature, and delineate the possible

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sources of discrepancy in the findings, (3) identifying possible avenues for future research. Thus, the paper will serve as a comprehensive source of information for researchers as well as marketers who are interested in understanding consumer behavior in crowded retail environments.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, the paper discusses the conceptual background of perceived retail crowding and differentiates between the terminologies of perceived crowding, perceived density, and density that are sometimes used interchangeably in crowding literature. Subsequently, based on the literature review, it discusses the findings and comments on the methods adopted in the empirical studies on perceived retail crowding. Finally, it draws implications for future research as well as practice.

## 2. Perceived retail crowding: the evolution of the concept and conceptual clarification

Perceived crowding in the retailing literature attracted attention from researchers in the 1970s when super stores and shopping centers became increasingly popular. The rise in the number of recreational shoppers during that period (Bellenger et al., 1977), along with growing number of working women having limited shopping hours, and cluttered merchandising in stores contributed to the need for inquiry into the concept of crowding in retail settings (Harrell and Hutt, 1976).

Prior to the introduction of the concept of crowding in retailing literature, several theories from environmental psychology and social psychology provide insights into the phenomenon of crowding.

### 2.1. Theories to explain the phenomenon of crowding

The stimulus overload theory suggests that crowding is experienced when environmental stimulation exceeds one's capacity to cope (Desor, 1972; Milgram, 1970). This theory emphasizes on cognitive overload associated with high density. Interference theories suggest that crowding is a result of dysfunctionally dense environment (Stokols et al., 1973; Sundstrom, 1975). When the level of density interferes with an individual's activities and achievement of goal, crowding is experienced. Control model attributes crowded feeling to loss of perceived control in high-density conditions (Sherrod, 1974). This loss of control can be due to excessive unwanted interactions or lack of behavioral freedom in the environment. Social intrusion perspective views invasion of privacy as the cause of feeling crowded (Altman, 1975). Thus, the construct of crowding is generally associated with negative evaluation of too many people in the same environment. Whether these effects are salient or not depends on a number of personal, situational, and social variables (Stokols, 1972).

The above stated approaches help to explain the phenomenon of crowding in the context of retail settings.

### 2.2. Conceptual clarification: density, perceived density, perceived crowding

Most of the empirical work on crowding in retail settings makes use of three interrelated terms of density, perceived density, and perceived crowding. These terms have been used interchangeably in many of these studies, but it is important to differentiate between these concepts. These concepts have been derived from literature in psychology (Rapoport, 1975; Stokols, 1972). Stokols (1972) contended that while density is a physical state involving spatial limitation, crowding is an experiential state that refers to the restrictive nature of the limited space as perceived by the individuals. Crowding is experienced when

restrictive aspects of spatial limitation become prominent and aversive. McGrew (1970) suggested that there are two types of density: social and spatial. Social density refers to the actual number of people in a given space and spatial density refers to the amount of space per person. Rapoport (1975) used the term perceived density to refer to the subjective estimate of the number of people, the space available, and the organization of the space. He termed perceived crowding as the subjective experience of certain density levels. Thus, density is an objective measure, perceived density is subjective and neutral as it does not have any positive or negative connotation, while perceived crowding is subjective and evaluative in nature.

The above discussion leads us to adopt the following definitions on the three constructs for the purpose of this article. "Density" is a function of number of individuals and amount of space available. One can examine "human density" by varying the actual number of individuals keeping the retail space constant, or look at "spatial density" by varying the space available through the amount and placement of objects and merchandise keeping the number of individuals constant. There is only one study (Harrell et al., 1980) that uses the construct of density and uses actual number of shoppers in the store as a measure of density. Alternative ways to capture shopper density are number of transactions in a given duration, sales in a given duration, or actual waiting time at the checkout counter (Harrell and Hutt, 1976).

"Perceived density" is the respondents' assessment on the number of shoppers (termed as perceived human density) or space available to the shoppers (termed as perceived spatial density). The human and spatial aspects of perceived density can be captured using statements on respondents' assessment about absolute number of people in the store or number of people per unit area, and amount of space available per person, respectively (Hui and Bateson, 1991; Machleit et al., 2000).

The third construct, most frequently used in the literature on retail crowding, "perceived crowding" is a consumer's evaluative assessment of the restrictive aspects of the retail space. It is a complicated construct because the same density or perceived density level may or may not result in same discomfort for all individuals. A person can feel crowded even in a less dense store and vice versa. It depends on a number of factors, including personal (Machleit et al., 2000), situational (Eroglu and Machleit, 1990; Machleit et al., 2000), and cultural variables (Pons et al., 2006; Pons and Laroche, 2007). There has also been an issue with the dimensionality of the construct of perceived crowding with some researchers treating it as a unidimensional construct (Eroglu and Machleit, 1990; Hui and Bateson, 1991), while others as a two-dimensional construct (Eroglu et al., 2005; Harrell et al., 1980; Machleit et al., 1994; Machleit et al., 2000). Machleit et al. (1994) through a series of laboratory experiment and field studies identified two dimensions of perceived retail crowding: human and spatial dimensions. The two-dimensional approach is consistent with the environmental psychology literature that suggests two types of density: spatial and social density (McGrew, 1970) as discussed earlier in the section. Many of the subsequent studies on retail crowding recognize the importance to distinguish between the two dimensions (Eroglu et al., 2005; Machleit et al., 2000; Pan and Siemens, 2011). The operationalization of the two dimensions is discussed next.

### 2.3. Operationalization of perceived retail crowding

Harrell et al. (1980) developed a six-item, seven-point semantic differential scale based on the literature on crowding from different disciplines. The scale items were: too many shoppers–too few shoppers, restricts movement–allows free movement, can move at my own pace–must move at a pace set by others,

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