



Breathing Down Your Neck! The Impact of Queues on Customers Using a Retail Service

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Abstract

While a rich body of research has examined the psychological costs and benefits of queuing, this research focuses on the customer currently using a retail service and examines how this customer is affected by lines forming at his or her back. Drawing on Social Impact Theory, we postulate that customers feel pressured by people waiting behind them and that this feeling of social pressure leads to more negative affective experiences, poorer participation in co-creation settings, and lower perceptions of service quality. Five field and controlled experimental studies tested these predictions and also explored how retailers can reduce the adverse impact of queues. Studies 1A and 1B show that the customer's experience deteriorates as queue length increases and that perceptions of social pressure mediate this effect. Studies 2A and 2B show that this effect is moderated by customers' own waiting time such that customers are more affected by queues forming at their backs when their own waiting time decreases. Finally, study 3 identifies two strategies to attenuate the negative effects of waiting lines, namely explicitly reassuring the focal customer that she need not feel pressured to be efficient and removing the waiting customers from the line of vision of the focal customer.

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Introduction

Queuing is a common phenomenon in retailing. Consumers frequently have to queue up when seeing a clerk at a bank, booking a trip at a travel agency, using an ATM, or paying for their groceries. At the same time, however, queues may significantly deteriorate customers' retail experience. For instance, a recent study indicates that 59% of shoppers are actually not willing to wait in line; in fact, 32% would instead buy through online retailers, while 18% would visit an alternative store (YouGov 2012). Moreover, 75% of retailers report wait-related issues when asked to state the main reason for why they lose customers (TimeTrade 2013), suggesting that managing the detrimental effects of queues is of strategic concern to retailers.

Reflecting this managerial relevance, research on queuing has sought to understand how consumers respond to having to wait in line and has yielded mixed effects. While several studies

have confirmed that waiting in line is an aversive experience that entails psychological costs (e.g., Hui and Tse 1996; Pruyn and Smidts 1998; Taylor 1994), other studies have revealed that queues may have beneficial effects. For instance, consumers may infer that a product or service is of higher quality when there is a line of people waiting (Koo and Fishbach 2010; Zhou and Soman 2003).

One important limitation of existing research is that it has focused on customers standing somewhere in the middle of the queue and has not considered what may happen once a customer finishes waiting and starts using a service (e.g., Koo and Fishbach 2010; Rafaeli, Barron, and Haber 2002; Zhou and Soman 2003). In this research, we address this gap and examine how customers that are currently using a retailer's services are affected by queues forming at their backs. Arguably, understanding how customers that are at the front of a line respond to the people waiting behind them is of crucial concern for assessing the total effect of queues. That is, the process of actually using a service is a critical determinant of the customer's overall retail experience. Hence, the effects of queues at this stage of the customer's experience may offset the effects of queues at earlier stages of the waiting process.

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Against this background, this research pursues three interrelated aims. First, we aim to understand how customers using a service are affected by queues forming at their backs and—in light of existing research that has revealed mixed effects of queues—if these effects are positive or negative in nature. Second, we want to shed light on the underlying cognitive processes behind these effects. Third, we aim to identify managerial interventions that help retailers enhance the experience of the customer at the front of the queue. To reach these aims, we conducted a total of five studies that focus on different retail contexts and employ different empirical designs.

Overall, our research makes four contributions to the literature. First, by considering the customer at the head of the queue, our studies contribute to research on customer experience management (Grewal, Levy, and Kumar 2009; Grewal et al. 2017). That is, we show that lines forming at a customer's back trigger negative affective experiences and adversely affect downstream variables such as customers' performance in co-creation settings and perceptions of service quality. Second, we identify the mechanism—feelings of social pressure—through which these effects operate. Specifically, we show that customers respond negatively to lines behind their backs because they feel pressured to adhere to a tacit norm that is salient in a queuing environment, that is, the norm of being efficient. Moreover, we show that this effect differs from a simple crowding effect. Third, we find that the extent to which customers make reference to the efficiency norm is affected by their prior experiences. That is, the longer the customer has to wait herself before being able to use a service, the less pronounced is the negative effect of the queue forming at her back. Finally, we identify two means through which retailers may reduce the negative impact of queues, namely reassuring the focal customer that she need not feel pressured by the customers waiting in line (thereby delegitimizing the efficiency norm) and removing the waiting customers out of the line of vision of the focal customer.

Conceptual Development

Behavioral research on queuing has mostly considered waiting in line as an aversive experience that entails psychological costs for consumers. Waiting in line causes the experience of unpleasant emotions such as stress, boredom, or anger (Pruyn and Smidts 1998; Taylor 1994; Zakay 2014). Of concern to retailers, the *waiting* experience forms part of the *service* experience and may thus affect evaluations of the retailer (Hui and Tse 1996; Pruyn and Smidts 1998; Taylor 1994). Put differently, the negative affect generated by the waiting experience may spill over to the retailer. However, more recent research has also argued that queues may be associated with psychological benefits. For instance, Zhou and Soman (2003) find that consumers engage in a process of downward social comparison with those waiting behind them and may thus experience more positive affect as the number of people behind increases. Similarly, Koo and Fishbach (2010) find that consumers waiting in line to buy a product or service infer that this product or service is more valuable as the line of people behind them gets longer.

These studies, however, have typically focused on customers standing somewhere in the middle of the queue and thus provide limited insight on how customers that are currently using a retailer's services are affected by queues. As such, reaching the head of the queue marks the point where a customer turns from passively waiting in line to actively using a service. One important implication of this change is that the customer at the head of the queue affects the time the remaining customers have to wait through the time it takes her to complete the transaction with the retailer. Assuming that the customer is aware of the relationship between her own behavior and the progress of the customers standing in line, she may feel that these customers are "breathing down" her neck and expecting her to be as efficient as possible. In the following sections, we will draw on Social Impact Theory (SIT) to develop a framework outlining how customers using a retailer's services respond to lines forming at their backs.

Social Impact Theory

SIT argues that people are impacted in their "physiological states and subjective feelings, motives and emotions, cognitions and beliefs, values and behavior [...] as a result of the real, implied, or imagined presence or actions of other individuals" (Latané 1981, p. 343). Specifically, the impact of other people results from three "social forces", namely number (i.e., the number of other people present in the environment), immediacy (i.e., the physical distance of other people), and strength (i.e., the importance or status of other people) (Latané 1981). Furthermore, SIT delineates three basic working principles. First, the impact of other people increases as a power function; for example, a high (vs. low) number of high-status (vs. low-status) people in close (vs. far) proximity has the greatest impact on a person. Second, the impact function increases with a decreasing growth rate. Third, the impact of other people on the target individual will decrease as the number, immediacy, and/or strength of other targets increase, resulting in an inverse impact function. That is, the impact of social forces is divided amongst all targets (Latané 1981; Latané and Wolf 1981).

Applying SIT to the current context, we propose that the number of people waiting in a line will negatively affect the emotions of the customer at the head of the queue. This prediction is supported by research on stage fright showing that people experience more negative emotions as audience size increases (Jackson and Latané 1981; Latané and Harkins 1976) and research demonstrating that a noninteractive, social presence (i.e., the mere presence of other customers) may trigger less positive feelings (Argo, Dahl, and Manchanda 2005). While SIT provides a promising framework for our context, it remains silent on *why* customers using a service would be affected by queues in the first place. Next, we will address this question in more detail.

Social Norms in a Queuing Environment

Past research has noted that queues may be viewed as auto-regulatory social systems that follow implicit norms (Grove and

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