



# Lonely consumers and their friend the retail salesperson

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## ABSTRACT

Store-based retailers face constant challenges in trying to lure shoppers, extend shopping visits, and convert patrons. With shopping options galore (e.g., native online sellers, mobile commerce, automatic replenishment), experts might inquire whether store-based retailers still offer enough value for today's consumers. Some stores have found success through format diversification, self-checkout, in-store pickup, and so on. In this study, we assert that store-based retailers could find success via in-store salespersons capable of satisfying the social needs of consumers experiencing loneliness. Despite purported “connections” to friends, followers, and devices, consumers of all demographics feel undesirable shortcomings in their personal relationships. Delving into this largely unexplored area, we find that two varieties of loneliness—*social* and *emotional*—influence the degree to which consumers use in-store sales personnel for social interaction. We also ascertain that consumers' *predisposition to comply with salesperson input* affects their *trust in the salesperson*, *purchase intention*, and *retail store patronage*.

## 1. Introduction

As consumers have become increasingly reliant on technology and are seemingly constantly connected through mobile devices and social media (Pew Research Center, 2014, 2015), the more people are on-line and use social media, the lonelier they become (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006). Indeed, people are now alone more and have fewer frequent gatherings with other people, thus leading to a reduction in quality of social connections (Hampton, Sessions, & Her, 2011; Jayson, 2009; Marche, 2012; Snell, 2017). In 1985, for example, people's network of personal confidants was reported to be 2.94 but declined to 2.08 by 2004. Similarly, 25% of surveyed Americans reported in 2004 that they had no one to talk to about important matters compared with only 10% in 1985 (Marche, 2012). More recently, a survey found that 72% of Americans feel lonely (The Harris Poll, 2016). In fact, assertions are being made of a current epidemic of loneliness (Griffin, 2010; Korinek, 2013; Matthews et al., 2016; Snell, 2017; The Harris Poll, 2016; Turkle, 2012). The prevalence of loneliness extends beyond an unpleasant emotional experience. Researchers have discerned that loneliness is associated with medical issues related to mental health and physical ailments, which can lead to early mortality (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014; Cacioppo, Grippo, London, Goossens, & Cacioppo, 2015).

As individuals experience loneliness, they seek venues and/or activities to attain a desired level of meaningful social connection (Peplau & Perlman, 1979). Keefer, Landau, and Sullivan (2014) suggest that a given place (e.g., physical retail store) could be utilized to achieve social interactions that offer social support. Other scholars support this notion, hinting that engaging with a retail salesperson can provide an appropriate intervention/remedy (Conaway, 1994; Forman & Sriram, 1991; Kang & Ridgway, 1996). Imagining a retailer as a possible social outlet, a retail salesperson might well offer a combination of friendship, attentive listening, interpersonal rapport, and other social/relational value to a customer (Gwinner, Gremler, & Bitner, 1998; Harrison, Beatty, Reynolds, & Noble, 2012; Lee & Dubinsky, 2017; Mick, DeMoss, & Faber, 1992; Reynolds & Beatty, 1999). By providing these benefits, “... retailing establishments can present a relatively nonthreatening environment for an individual to initiate social contacts.... [After all,] finding a familiar face in these stores may be reassuring.... [As such,] retail personnel might actually act as a last line of defense against the experience of the psychologically negative affect of loneliness” (Forman & Sriram, 1991, pp. 221, 231).

Given the pervasiveness of loneliness (Korinek, 2013), there may be opportunities in today's high-tech social world for physical store retailers to reach consumers who lack sufficient numbers of and meaning in existing social relationships. If so, then present-day decisions to

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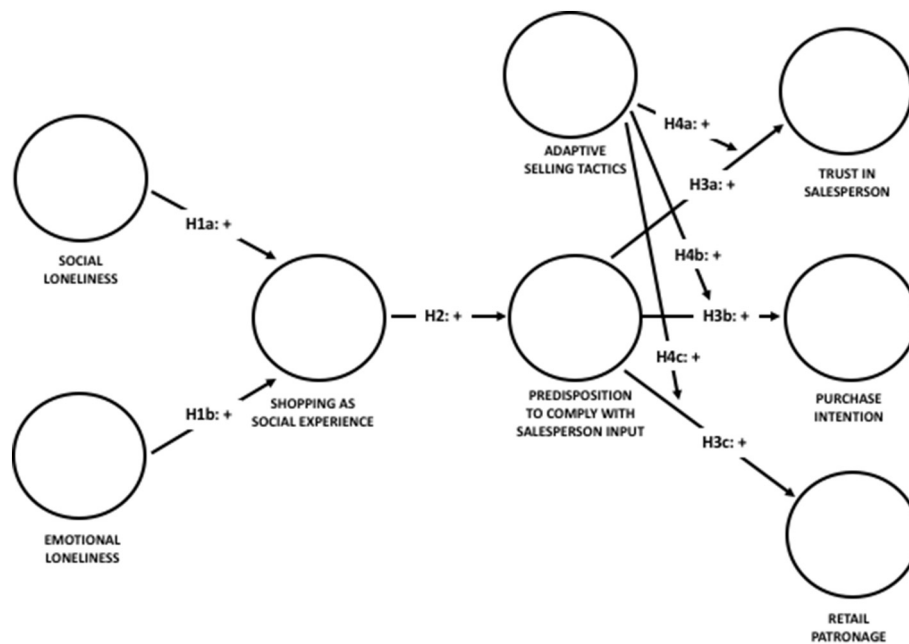


Fig. 1. Path model showing constructs and hypothesized relationships.

consolidate and reformat retail stores should be accompanied by moves to improve stores' experiential offerings vis à vis encounters with well-trained, helpful, and sociable sales personnel. Shopping mall closings and store consolidations have been occurring at record rates (Fung, 2017; Loeb, 2016; Retailer, 2016; Timmermann, 2017), yet consumers still show significant demand for physical stores and some of the in-store experiences they provide. As managers of these stores look forward, they must not overlook any opportunity or prospect for engaging with consumers that might value what they offer (e.g., personal interaction with a salesperson).

## 2. Focus of study

The foregoing phenomena led to the current study, whose conceptual model is undergirded in theory from psychology and sociology (Fig. 1). Although the retail store can provide a venue for social experiences, what remains opaque are the underlying mechanisms that afford retail environments the capabilities of addressing issues faced by lonely consumers. Consistent with Wang, Zhu, and Shiv (2012), we posit that some consumer decisions (or behaviors) are influenced by feelings of loneliness, conditions which derive possibly from chronic personality traits, momentary life experiences, or other factors. Whatever their sources, however, these feelings are more complex than a mere dichotomy (e.g., lonely versus not lonely), and pervade age categories, genders, ethnic groups, and nationalities (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Griffin, 2010; Korinek, 2013; Liu, Liu, & Wei, 2014; Turkle, 2012).

As such, this study posits that, as consumers experience loneliness, they are motivated to seek remedies by shopping at a retail store for a social experience—that is, rely on in-store sales personnel for social interaction. Consumers with such feelings are also conceivably susceptible to a salesperson's sway. That effect, in turn, is proposed to have a positive impact on three outcomes—a consumer's trust in the salesperson, purchase intention, and patronage of the retail store—and all three linkages are purported to be moderated by a salesperson's use of adaptive selling. Justification for inclusion of the above variables will be discussed subsequently.

## 3. Study contributions

The contribution of this investigation is multi-fold. This empirical effort contributes to research voids by exploring loneliness outside the typical confines of senior citizen samples. Concomitantly, it partially answers calls for more empiricism to enhance understanding of strategies for combating loneliness (Gardiner, Geldenhuys, & Gott, 2016), as well as the role of marketplace relationships in dealing with loneliness (Whelan, Johnson, Marshall, & Thomson, 2016). As such, we investigate whether distinct types of loneliness—social and emotional—influence consumers' use of shopping as a social experience—an issue heretofore virtually ignored in the retail store literature.

The study also makes a contribution to the sales and retailing literature, as it is one of the few that has considered trust in the salesperson in a *retailing* context. Indeed, only three previously published works were found that investigated the construct in a retail store setting (Bateman & Valentine, 2015; Orth, Bouzdine-Chameeva, & Brand, 2013; Sirdeshmukh, Singh, & Sabol, 2002). Traditionally, trust has been explored in field sales.

This work also makes a contribution by considering the linkage between consumers' use of shopping as a social experience and their tendency to accept a salesperson's selling efforts and input in the buying process. This is the initial empirical attempt to examine the issue. Similarly, it represents the first essay to explore the impact of a customer's predisposition to comply with salesperson input on his/her trust in the salesperson, purchase intention, and retail patronage.

The investigation further acknowledges adaptive selling, which arguably has received comparatively less attention in retail contexts than in industrial ones (Simintiras, Ifie, Watkins, & Georgakas, 2013). It does so by reconnoitering the *moderating effect* of adaptive selling on the nexus between a customer's predisposition to comply with salesperson input on the foregoing three outcome variables. Guenzi, De Luca, and Spiro (2016) discerned that most work on adaptive selling has assessed it generally with samples of sales personnel and/or sales managers. Indeed, they discovered that few studies concerning adaptive selling accounted for *buyer* views of the salesperson's adaptive selling behavior—the perspective adopted here.

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