



# Can social support alleviate stress while shopping in crowded retail environments?

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to find out whether sales associates and shopping companions, as two factors of the social servicescape, can help customers alleviate their levels of stress while shopping in crowded retail scenarios. Social Impact Theory is used to build a theoretical framework that is tested on a sample of mall shoppers. The findings demonstrate that sales associates can reduce customers' level of stress in crowded situations by employing their task and interaction competences. Customers with shopping companions feel less stress while shopping. When the companions are similar to the customer in shopping preferences, they can create boundaries to stress created by crowding. Finally, this research offers important implications for store managers as well as for sales associates.

## 1. Introduction

Stressful situations while shopping in crowded retail environments are important because stress can lower customers' satisfaction, willingness to pay and repatronage intentions, and increase impulsive behavior and store abandonment (Albrecht, Hattula, & Lehman, 2017; Maier & Wilken, 2014; Rychalski & Hudson, 2017). A crowded environment is the main source of stress in retail settings and it is the cause of other stressors such as waiting times, long queues, messy shelves and service failure (Baker & Wakefield, 2012).

Retail literature on stress in shopping contexts is scant (Albrecht et al., 2017; Ruvio, Somer, & Rindfleisch, 2014). Current findings indicate that stress can be reduced by managing physical cues of the store servicescape like music, light and temperature (Mehta, 2013). However, other in-store factors may be also relevant to reduce stress while shopping, such as the social servicescape (Hanks, Line, & Kim, 2017; Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2003). The social servicescape refers to the interactions among people in a service setting and consists of two main factors, employees and other customers (Nguyen, DeWitt, & Russell-Bennett, 2012; Rosenbaum, Kelleher, Friman, Kristensson, & Scherer, 2017). Previous research on social servicescape considers that unacquaintance customers, measured as crowding, can create stress. However, there is no research about the possibility of employees and acquaintance shoppers to help customers cope with stress in crowded retail settings.

Social-emotional support and social-instrumental support are generally important stress-reducing factors (Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2007;

Whiting, 2009). Social-emotional support implies that people can obtain support from others that are there to listen, care and share an activity, and instrumental support refers to others' practical help, assistance or financial aid (Rosenbaum et al., 2017). However, still research has not clarified which factors of the social servicescape can help customers cope with stress in crowded retail settings and how.

Sales associates (as employees) and shopping companions (as acquaintance customers) are two social servicescapes factors that could provide both types of support because they help customers to accomplish their shopping goals and can influence their feelings and emotions (Chebat, Haj-Salem, & Oliveira, 2014; Kim & Choi, 2016; Zboja, Clark, & Haytko, 2016). Shopping companions are shoppers that the target customer knows and that go shopping with him or her. Sales associates are frontline employees that are directly in touch with customers.

As a consequence, this research aims to analyze whether social servicescape factors can alleviate customers' stress due to crowding. This objective entails two specific goals: (1) to study the impact of sales associates on the stress experienced while shopping and their ability to reduce the generation of stress due to crowding; and (2) to examine how shopping companions can help customers regulate the stress they experience in crowded servicescapes. Data were collected via a survey conducted among 567 consumers during their shopping experience at a Spanish mall in June 2015.

Our contribution to the marketing literature is twofold. First, the present research has identified a new type of stress-alleviating factors that are part of the store social servicescape instead of its physical dimension. Second, it finds that similarity in shopping preferences is a

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key characteristic of shopping companions to influence the target customer's feelings.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. In the next section, we carry out a literature review. [Section 3](#) develops our hypotheses. [Section 4](#) describes the empirical setting and methodological procedures used to test the proposed relationships. [Section 5](#) outlines our main results. The article concludes by discussing our main findings and implications for both theory and practice.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Stress and its alleviators in crowded servicescapes

Stress is a subjective psychological state that entails emotional responses characterized by their negative affect and high arousal (Moschis, 2007; Russell & Pratt, 1980); physiological reactions, such as sweating, increased blood pressure, and rapid pulse; and behavioral responses, such as hurrying or avoidance behaviors (Lazarus, 1993; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

In retail environments, stress may appear because of loud ambient music, long queues, messy shelves, lack of personnel, parking hassles, crowding or service failures (Chebat, G  linas-Chebat, & Therrien, 2005; Eroglu & Machleit, 1990; Sengupta, Balaji, & Krishnan, 2015; Sujan, Sujan, Bettman, & Verhallen, 1999). Among these causes, the literature has focused especially on crowding, as it is the main stressor in shopping situations (Aylot & Mitchell, 1998). In fact, crowding is the main cause of queuing, long waiting hours and parking hassles. Crowding refers to the customer's perceptions about the number of people present in a given space, such as a commercial setting (Eroglu, Machleit, & Barr, 2005).

Previous research on stress alleviating factors in servicescapes has focused on physical cues of the store that can reduce shoppers' perceptions of crowding. For example, a softer and less saturated lighting and music with a reduced tempo can diminish customers' perceptions of agglomeration (Mehta, 2013). Likewise, the collocation of the merchandise and the store layout can mitigate the shoppers' perceptions of crowding (Machleit, Eroglu, & Powell-Mantel, 2000). Retailers have more personnel and check-out counters to deal with the greater number of shoppers during peak shopping times (Machleit et al., 2000; Mehta, Sharma, & Swami, 2012).

### 2.2. Social support as a coping strategy in servicescapes

Besides the management of physical cues to reduce perceptions of crowding, the social servicescape can also help customers cope with stress through social support (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Rosenbaum et al., 2017; Whiting, 2009). The literature has conceptualized various types of social support (Rosenbaum et al., 2017; Rosenbaum, Ward, Walker, & Ostrom, 2007; Sengupta et al., 2015). Emotional/informational support is needed by people who seek to express their emotions after a negative event. It requires the presence of others to listen to, care about and sympathize with them. Instrumental/tangible support implies seeking advice and assistance from friends or sales associates. Affectionate support implies that people seek to feel loved and wanted by their relatives and friends.

Social support can help people cope with stress in, for example, learning activities, recreational tours and medical waiting areas (Rosenbaum et al., 2007; Swickert, Rosentreter, Hittner, & Mushrush, 2002). Whiting (2009) suggests that consumers in crowded servicescapes use social-emotional support as a stress coping strategy. However, this author does not identify the specific social factors that can give customers emotional support, and fails to provide evidence of the role of instrumental support derived from the social resources that are present in the retail scenery.

There are two main factors in servicescapes that can provide stressed customers with social support, employees and other customers

(Rosenbaum & Montoya, 2007; Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2003). The present article considers sales associates, as they are frontline employees that can influence shoppers' purchase decisions and feelings (Du, Fan, & Feng, 2011; Zboja et al., 2016). In addition, it addresses other customers in two different ways, since their role in stress generation differs widely between the target customer's acquaintances and unacquaintances (Kim & Choi, 2016; Zhang, Li, Burke, & Leykin, 2014). While unacquaintance shoppers are prone to increase negative feelings and contribute to the generation of stress (Baker & Wakefield, 2012), acquaintances, mainly shopping companions, can assist the target customer in the purchase activity and contribute to a more pleasurable experience (Hart & Dale, 2014; Nguyen et al., 2012).

Both sales associates and shopping companions provide clients with self-confidence, security and comfort. They increase customers' satisfaction with service (Adelman & Ahuvia, 1995), help them escape from loneliness (Ng, 2003), create place attachment to a restaurant (Rosenbaum et al., 2007), improve cooperation and loyalty (Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2007), mitigate the effects of service failure on customer satisfaction (Sengupta et al., 2015), and improve customers' wellbeing (Rosenbaum et al., 2017). However, none of these studies has tested whether social support can help shoppers regulate stress due to crowding.

## 3. Hypotheses development

### 3.1. The influence of sales associates on stress in crowded retail environments

Sales associates can influence customers' feelings and reactions mainly through their skills and competencies, which can be classified into two broad categories: task competence and interaction competence. The former refers to the sales associate's product knowledge and ability to assist shoppers, while the latter concerns the assistant's social and communication capabilities (Brexendorf, M  hlmeier, Tomczak, & Eisend, 2010; Van Dolen, Lemmink, de Ruyter, & de Jong, 2002).

Through task competence, sales associates can provide customers with instrumental support, assisting them in fulfilling their shopping goals and facilitating their shopping experience (Reynolds & Beatty, 1999; Rosenbaum et al., 2017; Sharma & Stafford, 2000). In addition, sales associates can reduce the stress generated as a consequence of crowding because they can make the shopping experience quicker and more efficient. Social Impact Theory (SIT), formulated by Latan   (1981), provides a useful theoretical reasoning that supports this argumentation. This author argues that people around us can influence our thoughts, feelings and behavior. One of his propositions states that this impact varies with the strength of the social factor, that is, its importance, prominence, or power for the target individual. This strength depends on the status of the influencer. Furthermore, in the presence of several social factors, if the strength of one of them increases, the impact of the rest diminishes. In the present research, the level of task competence can be understood as the strength of this social factor and, as a result, it will reduce customers' stress and moderate the stress generated by crowding.

Interaction competence, characterized by the sales associates' communication ability and friendliness, can increase pleasure (Mattila & Wirtz, 2008) and transmit positive emotions to customers, offering emotional support (Du et al., 2011; Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2003; Zboja et al., 2016) and, thus, directly reducing customers' stress. Furthermore, we can state that interaction competence will reduce the negative consequences of crowding, such as stress (Mattila & Wirtz, 2008), which is consistent with SIT. Hence, the following hypothesis is formulated:

**H1.** Sales associates' task competence will (a) reduce the target customer's stress and (b) mitigate the effects of perceived crowding on the target customer's stress.

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