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Effect of the fitting room environment on older clothing shoppers



Kyungnam Seo, Ann Marie Fiore*

Iowa State University, 31 Mackay Hall, Ames, IA 50010, United States

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ABSTRACT

Given the age-related physical challenges and social needs of older consumers, a randomized field experiment with 72 females aged 65+ was conducted using fitting room areas of two stores that varied in levels of Universal Design features and service. Based on ANCOVA, the fitting room area accommodation level had a significant effect on physical environment and social environment psychic costs and shopping satisfaction. Multiple regression confirmed the interaction effect of competence level and accommodation level on psychic costs and that psychic costs affected shopping satisfaction. Satisfaction influenced patronage intentions. The importance of the fitting room area should not be underestimated.

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1. Introduction

According to a recent U.S. Census publication (*"A Profile of," 2012*), 13.3% of the population was over the age of 65 in 2011, more than 20% of the population will be over 65 by 2030, and older women will far outnumber older men. The older consumer (65+ years of age) market is growing in size and in buying power with half of the nation's discretionary income (*DeNavas-Walt et al., 2013*).

Older consumers may be stereotyped as inactive and uninterested in clothing products and shopping, but it is not the case. They participate in diverse leisure and social activities (*Carrigan et al., 2004*) and demand a wide range of goods and services (*Moye and Giddings, 2002; Myers and Lumbers, 2008; Rocha et al., 2006*). In fact, many older women remain keenly interested in their appearance and enjoy shopping for and spending money on clothing (*Birtwistle and Tsim, 2005; Graham, 2007; Jung and Miller, 2007; Kozar, 2005; Myers and Lumbers, 2008; Nam et al., 2007; Thomas and Peters, 2009*). Moreover, older adults consume more aggressively than in the past, and their spending habits are not significantly different from those of their younger cohorts (*Moye and Giddings, 2002; Timmermann, 2005; Thomas and Peters, 2009*).

Yet older consumers have been largely underserved in the apparel market (*Moschis, 2003; Nam et al., 2007*) and underrepresented in apparel retailing/consumer behavior studies. Existing research has concluded that quality, good fit, comfort, design, and ease of care are important to older women, with good fit being most important of all (*Holmlund et al., 2011; Shim and*

Bickle, 1993; Thomas and Peters, 2009). The inability to physically evaluate many of these product aspects online has deterred older consumers from switching to non-store shopping alternatives (*Sooperamanien and Robertson, 2007*); brick-and-mortar retail remains a dominant outlet for shopping for older adults (*Cole et al., 2008; Moschis et al., 2011; Thomas and Peters, 2009*). However, little research has looked at older consumers' brick-and-mortar store experience preferences (e.g., *Moye and Giddings, 2002*), particularly as they pertain to the fitting room experience (*Birtwistle and Tsim, 2005*).

This scant amount of scholarly literature parallels the general tendency among retailers to overlook the store's fitting room environment (*Amato-McCoy, 2007; Grant, 2007; Laney and Laney, 2014; O'Donnell, 2007; Peccei and Rosenthal, 2001*). As potential evidence of the neglected nature of the fitting room area, only one in 10 British customers were found to be satisfied with their fitting room experiences (*"Fitting Room Fatigue," 2015*). Recently, industry professionals have begun to assert and document the importance of the fitting room area to increasing in-store sales, reducing returns, and enhancing a brand image and customer loyalty (*"Fitting Room Fatigue," 2015; Laney, 2014; Laney and Laney, 2014; Smith, 2015*). Because of this potential impact on retailers, some professionals have called this area the "most valuable real estate" in the store (*Laney and Laney, 2014*).

The predominant strategies to improve the fitting room experience have been increased staff presence and training (e.g., *"Are Retailers Under-Valuing," 2009; Laney and Laney, 2014*) and the use of technology to facilitate customer service and to allow customers to virtually try on garments (e.g., *Essick, 2014; Smith, 2015*). Recently, literature has begun to address the role of ambient features (e.g., lighting; *Baumstarck and Park, 2010*) and typical physical design features (e.g., mirrors; *"Perfect Fit," 2007*) of the fitting room area in improving consumer experience. However,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: kyungnam415@gmail.com (K. Seo), amfiore@iastate.edu (A.M. Fiore).

only a few studies have focused on the features' impact on the functioning of customers with physical limitations (e.g., Kaufman-Scarborough, 1999; 2000; Yu et al., 2015), which describes more than 60% of individuals 65 and older ("Health, United States," 2015).

The age-related physical challenges many older consumers face may lead to a stressful situation when trying on garments. These challenges may exacerbate the negative effect of a fitting room area's poor physical design and customer service on consumer experience and consequent approach-avoidance behavior (e.g., returning or not returning to the store). Because customer surveys have recently revealed that impressions of a store's fitting room area have a significant impact on overall satisfaction ratings and the brand image associated with a retailer ("Fitting Room Fatigue," 2015), more attention should be focused on optimizing this consumer experience. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to examine (a) whether physical accommodations and service levels of the fitting room environment affect older consumers' perceived stress, (b) whether the level of physical limitations, or competence level, of the consumer moderates this effect and (c) whether this perceived stress affects shopping satisfaction and consequent patronage intentions.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Conceptual framework

Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model described how an environmental stimulus (S) leads to cognitive and affective responses within the organism (O), which affect approach or avoidance responses toward the stimulus (R). These responses may be moderated by characteristics of the individual. In line with the S-O-R model, theorists in the field of environmental studies and aging (e.g., Lawton, 1980) have posited that physical and social environments (S) affect an older individual's sense of wellbeing (O) and behavior (R). These theorists also postulated that response to the environment is moderated by an individual's level of physical limitations or competence. The Person-Environment fit theory illustrates that congruence between environmental characteristics and an older individual's needs and abilities (e.g., level of competence) leads to a sense of wellbeing and greater functioning (Kahana, 1982; Lawton, 1980; Verbrugge and Jette, 1994). In line with the Person-Environment fit theory, the present study examines the effect of physical and social aspects of the fitting room environment (S) on psychic cost (i.e., stress from environmental elements that do not meet their needs/abilities) (O), shopping satisfaction (O), and the consequent effect on patronage intentions (R).

2.2. Stimulus: aspects of the fitting room environment

Researchers (Baker et al., 2002a; Bitner, 1992; Turley and Miliman, 2000) have developed different categorizations for elements of the brick-and-mortar store environment or servicescape (Bitner, 1992) that nevertheless encompass the same stimulus variables. Baker et al.'s (2002a) parsimonious categorization, consisting of *ambient* (e.g., lighting, temperature), *design* (e.g., seating, size of space, hooks, mirrors), and *social* factors (e.g., presence of and assistance by sales staff), demarcates aspects of the fitting room environment (stimulus) that may shape an older consumer's cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses. Industry literature (Amato-McCoy, 2007; Grant, 2007; Laney and Laney, 2014; O'Donnell, 2007) maintains that the fitting room area affects a shopper's perception about the store and purchase decisions. However, the impact of ambient, design, and social factors of

product trial areas on consumers is seldom examined empirically (e.g., Baker et al., 2002b; Hyllegard et al., 2006). The following subsections review aspects of the fitting room area that may affect older consumers.

2.2.1. Ambient factors

Poor lighting has a considerable impact on the appearance of garments for consumers, and for older shoppers in particular it negatively affects the ability to discern colors, care instructions, and price ("Shoppers Notice Lighting," 2007). Color-correcting Metal-Halide or fluorescent bulbs improve color rendering and enhance physical attractiveness (Wilson, 2003), and wall sconces or lights around the mirror provide a more flattering look than overhead lighting ("All Dressed Up," 2006; Wilson, 2003). Good lighting is said to increase shoppers' confidence in their purchase selections, reduce return rates, and increase the amount of time and money spent ("True Lighting," 2002; Moye and Giddings, 2002). Hence, lighting may have an effect on the quality of the fitting room experience.

Normal aging is associated with vision and mobility impairments, which may significantly impact the retail experience of older consumers. In general, older consumers require two or three times more light intensity than their younger counterparts when evaluating products (Holmlund et al., 2011). Falls are attributed to visual impairments and poor lighting (Slay, 2002). When designing retail environments for older consumers, lighting is a main consideration for making their retail experiences effective, comfortable, and safe ("Making Stores Accessible," 1996).

2.2.2. Design factors

Shoppers trying on apparel have also complained about fitting room mirrors; they cannot see how they look from various angles (Begole et al., 2008). A sufficient number of mirrors and a three-way mirror rimmed with lighting facilitate more accurate assessments ("Perfect Fit," 2007). The small size of fitting rooms, their narrow doorways, and the narrow width of store aisles detract from the shopping experience for consumers in general (Holmlund et al., 2011; O'Donnell, 2007; Poggi, 2008). Particularly for old consumers for whom shopping is an important means of socialization, fitting room areas may need to be large enough to accommodate friends or relatives (Burt and Gabbott, 1995; Myers and Lumbers, 2008).

Age-associated mobility impairments often prevent older consumers from reaching task-surface heights and affect their accessibility to many built environments (Petermans and Van Cleempoel, 2010). In the fitting room, hook height is an obstacle for people with physical challenges (Kaufman-Scarborough, 1999) particularly when trying on heavy items. In fact, physical access within a store has been cited as one of the most important factors for aging consumers when deciding where to shop ("Making Stores Accessible," 1996).

2.2.3. Social factors

The appearance, number, friendliness, and presence of sales staff have been identified as social cues that positively affect consumers' perceptions of the retail experience (Baker et al., 1992; Grewal and Sharma, 1991). As people age, their social networks diminish, and thus, older consumers place greater importance on the social aspect of shopping, including staff-customer relationships (Moye and Giddings, 2002; Myers and Lumbers, 2008). These relationships contribute to the social (Kang and Ridgway 1996) and psychological value (Patterson, 2007) of the shopping experience. Older consumers also depend on well-trained and knowledgeable sales staff to provide product information and to reduce the uncertainty involved in product selection and purchase (Thomas and Peters, 2009). Personal service becomes more

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