How Store Employees Influence Consumer Choice Under Retail Crowding – a Social Overload Perspective

Johanna Palcu, University of Vienna
Janet Kleber, WU Vienna
Arnd Florack, University of Vienna

In one field experiment and two laboratory studies, we show that store employees influence consumer choice differentially depending on whether the choice is made under conditions of low vs. high retail crowding. Specifically, high retail crowding (compared to low retail crowding) leads to less preference of socially promoted choice options.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Retail crowding has been shown to influence several aspects of the retail outcome. With only few exceptions (e.g., Van Rompay et al., 2008; Li, Kim, & Lee, 2009) the majority of previous studies have highlighted the negative consequences of crowded store environments from both a consumer perspective as well as a managerial standpoint. For instance, prior research has demonstrated that perceived crowding generates negative emotions and reduces positive emotions (Byun & Mann, 2011) leading consumers to adapt to this decreased level of comfort by reducing their shopping time, engaging less in exploratory shopping behavior or postponing their purchase decisions entirely (e.g., Harrel et al., 1980; Eroglu, Harrell, 1986; Michon, Chebat, & Turley, 2005).

Given the extensive literature on the negative outcomes of retail crowding and the apparent demand for adequate crowd management strategies, it is surprising that one important factor, which is an essential part of the shopping environment has largely been neglected in prior research: the role of store employees. In the present research we address this gap and investigate how store employees influence consumer choice in crowded compared to less crowded store environments.

Previous literature allows for two contrasting predictions on the importance of store employees for consumers’ choice outcome under retail crowding: Stimulus overload theory assumes that experienced social crowding increases environmental stimulation and the degree of complexity and difficulty of the choice situation (Desor, 1972; Milgram, 1970). Consequently, people are forced to adapt their information processing strategies to be able to process incoming information more effectively (Langer & Saegert, 1977). As a consequence, store employees should influence consumer choice more strongly when retail density is high, because they are expected to simplify the decision-making process. This assumption is in line with a recent study by Maeng et al. (2013) showing that crowding induces a preference for safety-related choice options, one of which could be relying on store employee recommendations (cf. Florack, Palcu, & Friese, 2013).

Behavioral constraint theory (Stokols, 1972), on the other hand, posits that consumers experience retail crowding as an intrusion into their personal space and as a loss of personal control. This leads individuals to take actions that minimize further social stimulation and restore their personal control (Stokols, 1972). This suggests that store employees should not only be approached less when shopping environments are crowded, but also that choice options that are particularly promoted by store employees should be selected less frequently because consumers are less motivated to engage in social interactions.

To offer initial insight into the question of how consumers’ choice outcomes are influenced by store employees, we conducted one field experiment and two laboratory studies.

Study 1

In Study 1, we presented passers-by on a shopping street with a choice between two product samples, whereby a sales promoter promoted one of the two samples. We assumed that consumers’ tendency to minimize social simulation would reflect in their preference to pick a choice option that is not promoted by a sales promoter. By contrast, if the avoidance of social contact is of less priority, then the choice outcome should not reveal a stronger preference for the choice option that is socially promoted. Our results support the assumption that retail crowding leads to avoidance of social stimulation and this avoidance reflects in consumers’ choice, χ²(1, N = 200) = 5.83, p = .016. On the less crowded shopping day, 65.08% of the participants picked a product sample from the bowl that was hold by a confederate. This number decreased to 46.72% on the crowded shopping day.

Study 2 and 3

In Studies 2 and 3 we presented participants in a laboratory setting with a shopping scenario that described a choice between two products in either a crowded or an almost empty supermarket. Additionally, we varied the type of information that was presented with one of the choice alternatives (social promotion or non-social promotion) between participants. The results of Study 2 and 3 replicate our findings from Study 1. More specifically, in Study 2, we found a significant interaction between the crowding condition and the type of sales promotion on the choice frequency of the promoted product, χ²(1, N = 115) = 9.696, p = .003. In the crowding condition, participants chose the product more frequently with a non-social compared to a social promotion, χ²(1, N = 59) = 12.850, p = .001. By contrast, in the no crowding condition, there was no difference in choice frequency for the differently promoted choice options, χ²(1, N = 56) = 0.553, p = .566. Similarly, in Study 3, we found a marginally significant interaction between the crowding condition and the type of sales promotion on the relative choice preference for the two choice options, F(1, 191) = 2.794, p = .096. Again, in the crowding condition, the product with the non-social promotion (M = 11.21, SD = 22.00) was preferred more than the product with the social promotion (M = 2.43, SD = 22.10), t(98) = 1.987, p = .050, while in the no crowding condition, we did not find any differences between the different promotion types, t(93) = 0.451, p = .653.

Overall, our results support the idea that perceived retail crowding negatively affects consumers’ preference for choice options that are promoted by store employees. We believe that our findings have considerable implications for both future research approaches as well as the development of future crowd management strategies. Inherent to our research is the idea that store employees should not be used as means for controlling negative effects of retail crowding without further investigations of the conditions under which they might positively influence consumer behavior. It is conceivable, for instance, that sales employees are given more weight in crowded situations after longer exposure to the crowded environment (Eroglu et al., 2005), when consumers’ expectations of crowding are in line with their experiences (Machlet et al., 2000) or when consumers have an increased need for affiliation (Van Rompay et al., 2008).

REFERENCES


