

Perception of Crowding in Apparel Retail Environment and Its Behavioral Consequences

- Its Influences across Retail Types -

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The purpose of the study is to examine the theoretical and strategic aspects of how shoppers perceive and are influenced by crowding in apparel retail environment. Crowding is a state of psychological stress that results when one's demand for space exceeds the supply (Stokols, 1972). It is a subjective experience of an excessively high rate and amount of environmental stimuli (Stockdale, 1978). All spatial and social stimuli determine the level of density that prevails in a retail store. The traditional crowding literature has presented little information about commercial domains that has been used to help the retailing executive. Because shopping occurs in a spatially defined environment within a relatively short time, both the stimuli that give rise to crowding and the consequences of experiencing it can be measured and sometimes even manipulated by retailers and researchers. The study explores the consequences of retail crowding in terms of shoppers' perception of store image, shopping enjoyment, and repurchase intention across two retail types, department stores and wholesale markets.

A convenience sample of 637 adult consumers responded to the survey. The measures were adapted from the existing scales except repurchase intention: Perception of retail crowding (Machleit, Kellaris, & Eroglu, 1994), store image (Manolis, Keep, Joyce, & Lambert, 1994), and shopping enjoyment (Reynolds, & Beatty, 1999). The scale reliability measured by Cronbach's *alpha* ranged from .72 to .85 meeting the conservative criteria of

internal consistency.

The result showed that the effect of types of retail stores on shopping behavioral consequences existed. Significantly, shoppers perceived lower level of crowding, better store image, and spent more time in department stores than wholesale markets when shopping for clothing. However, no differences were found in shopping enjoyment and repurchase intention between two types of retail stores.

Interestingly, retail crowding was found to affect store image negatively when shopping in department stores but it didn't influence store image of wholesale markets. In addition, positive store image influenced shopping enjoyment of shoppers in department stores while it didn't in wholesale markets. Rather, if shoppers perceive higher level of crowding in wholesale markets, they have higher level of shopping enjoyment and repurchase intention in wholesale markets. This can be interpreted as shoppers consider the crowding of retail environment as a token of attractive shopping places in terms of better deals and good quality in case of wholesale markets. For both department stores and wholesale markets, shopping enjoyment was found to be a determinant of repurchase intention.

The findings about the effects of retail crowding suggest several implications for retail management. Crowding perceptions are context dependent. The shoppers' tolerance for retail crowding may differ across types of retail establishments. For the wholesale markets, retail crowding could be regarded as rather positive stimuli.