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A Study to Examine Whether Crowding Affects the Customers of Exclusive Brand Outlets (Ebo's)

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Abstract

Exclusive brand outlets is been a top agenda for the retailers and brand marketers. Therefore, the promotional efforts aiming to estimate EBOs traffic in the store is now a great concern for setting the strategy. Importantly, such aggressive sales promotion strategics results into higher customer traffic at retail outlets which affect the store image. Retail managers are concerned about retail crowding now than ever because of increasing footfalls with increasing population. Store crowding is a concept that generates many associations in consumers' mind, often very different ones.Therefore, the purpose of the study is to investigate the effect of crowding on customers EBOs. The usable sample of 290 customers were analysed for testing the hypotheses. The McNemar test was used to analyze pre-test and post-test results. it was found that atmospheric cues like crowding affects positive store image. It is clear from this study that perception of consumers do change towards crowding even in EBO's during crowded situations in such stores like in EOSS. Both male and female have similar feeling towards crowding. It is interesting to note from this study that while consumers feel crowded during EOSS in EBO they try to cope with such feeling and try to ignore the fellow crowd. It would be interesting to find out the reasons for that.The insights help to understand the shopping experience in the retail outlets. Research in other cities with other customers may be conducted to examine the validity and reliability of the identified store attributes.

Introduction:

Most of the research on the effects of retail environments on consumer behavior owesmuch to the work of Kotler (1974). Kotler (1974) arguedthat purchase probability amongst shoppers can be increased if the buying environments can be purposefully designed to produce specific emotionaleffects in shoppers. However it is Donovan and Rossiter (1982) who popularize research in this area. They introduced the Mehrabien – Russell Model (1974) that provides a description of environments, interveningvariables and behaviours that are relevant to retail settings. Several authors (Baker et al., 1992; Donovan et al., 1994; Kaltcheva and Weitz, 2006;Sherman et al., 1997) have explored how retail stores can affect the emotional

states andsubsequent purchasing behaviour of consumers on the basis of this model. Retailers across the world are increasingly recognising the impact of store atmospherics on retail sales. This has motivated research on several store atmospheric variables, such as, music, colour, odour, crowd, and so on.

Retail managers are concerned about retail crowding now than ever because of increasing footfalls with increasing population. Store crowding is a concept that generates many associations in consumers' mind, often very different ones. On one hand store crowding is associated with long queues at cash counterand on the other handit is also associated with high sales and profits.Also, the store managers have no control over the consumers behavior.That is why store managers are focusing on inducing the customer as much as possible towards improving sales and profit, without drastically affecting their shopping experience. Past researchers have mentioned thatfavorable atmosphere is likely to increase the positive buying experience and customer satisfaction as well as customer time spend in the store and the amount spent (Babin et al., 2003; Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Eroglu and Machleit, 1990). Bearden (1977) found that atmosphere, location, parking facilities and friendliness of salespeople affect store choice. Effects of atmospheric factors on consumers have been studied in different store formats like grocery stores, discount stores, hypermarkets, traditional supermarkets etc.

In the grocery sector (Fox et al. 2004) store promotion efforts and product assortmentinfluence format choice. While Hansen and Solgaard (2004) identified that product assortment as the single most influential variable affecting the choice of retail format across three formats: discount stores, hypermarkets and conventional supermarkets. Lee and Johnson (1997) found that customers did not expect much customer service at a discount store while they expect extensive service from a speciality store. Even though extensive research has taken place in this field, most of the crowding related research has focused on MBO's and hypermarkets (Mehta et.al.2013, Hasan et.al.2015), not on EBO's and specialty stores. There is clear dearth of research about effect of atmospheric factors in specialty stores while at the same timeLeszczyc & Timmermans (2001) found that consumers tend to choose a variety of stores and overall preference to shop at speciality stores (including EBO). Furthermore, consumers were likely to select a single store when prices were lower, parking charges were less, better assortment was offered, travel time was reduced and checkout lanes were shorter.

EBO's in Malls usually provide all the above except lower prices. However at the time of EOSS (End of Season sale), store inaugurations and festivals they are able to offer lower prices as well in the form of discounts. However it is interesting to note that during such times the check out lanes are no longer short as found in the pre-test.

This paper focuses on EBO's of apparel brands only. EBO's are also like specialty stores as they focus on a certain category of products, with simple layouts, easy product displays, convenient shopping formats and shorter queues. Consumers usually expect shorter queues and less crowd in such formats. However what happens when such store are running promotions in the form of attractive discounts during festivals, EOSS or store openings to attract large crowd in their stores.

Past research indicates that people usually associate retail crowding with large multi-brand outlets like hypermarkets or supercenters as evident from the previous researchers propensity to do their research in similar environment. However exclusive brand outlets (EBO) also sometimes witness large number of people inside their comparatively smaller stores especially during the time of opening, off sales and festivals. It would be interesting to find out if the customers who go to or prefer such stores, which are

synonymous with less crowd, are affected by the phenomena of crowding when such stores witness large number of people inside the store.

The purpose of this paper is to study the effect of crowding, as an atmospheric factor experienced in a retail environment, on the behavior of consumers towards a retail experience. Present paper aims to find out the relevance of retail crowding as a phenomenon in such shopping environment.

Objective

- To analyse consumer feeling towards crowding in EBO during EOSS
- To find out if all consumers shopping in EBO irrespective of their gender feel similarly towards crowding
- To identify how much the shoppers are bothered when they feel crowded.

Literature Review

MBO and EBO

Multi brand formats put the brand and its product right in the middle of its competitors. New offerings are showcased in a way, facilitating the consumers to compare and decide. The sheer volume of shoppers stepping in MBOs makes it essential; not to be ignored.

Exclusive brand outlets are vendor centric models. They provide complete fashion solution keeping clothes both fashionable, and functional. A branded outlet includes the exclusivity of a brand and creates a store image to convey its brand image. It enables the brand to choose the location, size, and configuration of the store. Unique promotional strategies are followed. An exclusive retail store maintains uniformity in store design, interiors, products, store size, promotions undertaken, and its product pricing. They also get more discounts and incentives comparatively over multi brand retailers. This enables to offer heavy discounts for fashionable products to customers at the end of the season making it very attractive for shoppers to flock to the stores.

Atmospheric factors and its effets

Different researchers have tried to find out the effect of atmospheric variables such as music (Milliman, 1982; Morin et al., 2007; Yalch and Spangenberg, 2000), colour (Bellizzi and Hite, 1992), odour/scent (Hirsch, 1995;), lighting (Areni and Kim, 1994) and crowding (Machleit et al., 2000) on consumer behaviour in retail store environments. A small number of studies have also started to examine the interaction between these variables, such as Baker et al. (2002) who explored the interaction between store design, employees and music on perceptions of a retail store.

However, the literature on these issues is stillsparse, especially in the case of some important retail variables such as crowding.Retail crowding is a very important and recognized atmospheric variable that hasimportant implications for researchers as well as retail managers (Eroglu &Machleit,1990; Machleit, Eroglu, & Mantel, 2000).

Crowding, its causes and effects

The information-overload theory of crowding defines it as a high-density condition when the rate and amount of environmental stimuli exceed the capacity to cope with them (Milgram, 1970; Saegert, 1973). Among the numerous aspects of the retail environment examined crowding due to high density, have been shown to be particularly critical in influencing customer responses in both positive and negative ways (see, for example, Eroglu & Machleit, 1990; Machleit, Eroglu, & Mantel, 2000; Machleit, Kellaris, & Eroglu, 1994). Shoppers perceive retail crowding when density (the number of people and objects in a limited space) restricts or interferes with their activities and shopping goals (Eroglu & Machleit, 1990). When the

retail environment is judged to be dysfunctionally dense, shoppers are likely to experience crowding, which then affects their attitudes toward the store and the shopping environment (Betts & McGoldrick, 1996; Eroglu & Machleit, 1990; Johnson-Hillery & Kang, 1997; Machleit et al., 2000). If and how much retail crowding influences shopping behaviors, however, has yet to be determined. Density is the root cause of the crowding experience (Eroglu & Machleit, 1990; Rapoport, 1976). Stokols (1972) identifes two components of crowding: (1) a physical condition, and (2) an experiential state. The physical condition, density, involves the restriction of movement imposed by limited space, while the experiential state, crowding, encompasses the individual's perception of the restrictive aspects of limited space. The challenge for the manager is to increase density without triggering the experiential state of crowding among shoppers.

In the highly competitive retailingenvironment with the high cost of retail space, sustaining a high density of shoppersand effective space utilisation are important for maintaining profitability. However,perceived crowding due to high shopper density may adversely affect consumers'behavioural responses or satisfaction as reported in some studies (Machleit, Kellaris, & Eroglu, 1994). In the retail context, dense, crowded environments may induce tension and confusion, leading to less favorable evaluations of the shopping experience (Eroglu & Harrell, 1986; Harrell et al., 1980). High levels of perceived retail crowding are found to reduce customers' satisfaction with the shopping experience and the store, depending on their prior expectations and tolerance for density (Machleit et al., 2000). Significantly, and contrary to thesefindings, Eroglu et al. (2005) report a positive relationship between human crowdingperceptions in a store and shopping satisfaction. Pons, Laroche, and Mourali(2006) demonstrate that a crowded hedonic situation produces positive responsesfrom consumers. Onefactor that can explain the seemingly contradictory findings in these earlier studiesis the shopping context. While the negative effects of crowding have been mostlyobserved in utilitarian settings (e.g. Hui & Bateson, 1991; Machleit et al., 1994),the positive effects have been observed in hedonic situations (e.g. Pons et al.,2006). Considering that several authors acknowledge that most shopping trips involveexperiential as well as utilitarian motives (Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994), Mehta et.al (2013) believe that while too much crowding would not be preferred by mostconsumers in a retail store, having too few fellow shoppers in the same environmentmay also not be a preferred situation.Mehta et. al 2013 suggested that there may be an 'optimum'level up to which perceived shopping pleasure of a consumer mightincrease, after which it may decline.

Need for research

It is very hard to find any research that has yet been done to understand crowding and its influence in the Indian retail environment especially in specialty stores or EBO's. Due to the unique characteristic of high and growing population, increasing urbanization and increase in spending power of consumers, crowding can have completely different implication for the Indian retail stores. Roy's (2005) study on factors governing consumers' choice of supermarkets identified that add-on benefits, general services, convenience and variety influence store choice. Steenkamp (2001) observed that by default, research in marketing has mainly focused on developed economies. It is important to note that in the area of retailing, there is a dearth of studies in the Indian context that analyze the parameters the shoppers consider important when they decide which store format they want to shop in and what are the parameters that they derive maximum utility from (Sinha et al., 2005).

India is the second fastest growing economy in the world. It is third largest economy in the world in terms of GDP and fourth largest economy in terms of Purchasing Power Parity. Standing on the threshold of a retail revolution and witnessing a fast-changing retail landscape, India is all set to experience the phenomenon of global village. India tops in the list of emerging market for global retailer and India's retail

sector is expanding and modernizing rapidly in line with India's economic growth. These facts make it all the more important to research and understand the different factors affecting different aspects of retail in India.

In the Indian context, Prasad and Aryasri (2011) found that demographic factorshave a significant influence on grocery store format choice. Varshney (2006) found thatsmall town Indian shoppers shop for pleasure and to seek variety. Mulky and Nargundkar(2003) identified that convenience and merchandise assortment were the most importantfactors influencing grocery store choice behavior. Sinha and Banerjee (2004) foundthat store convenience and customer service positively influence consumer store choice. The study of Mehta, Sharma and Swami (2013) was restricted to study one hypermarket and they focused on finding relations between perceived crowding and pleasure level of shoppers.

Hypothesis

H1: there is significant difference in the proportion of shoppers who feel crowded when they visit EBO prior to and during EOSS.

H2a: There is significant association between gender and being concerned about fellow crowd during shopping in EBO

H2b: there is significant association between gender and feeling of crowding.

H2c: There is significant association between feeling of crowding and being concerned about fellow crowd while shopping.

Method

Analysis consists of secondary research and primary research. Primary research was done in two stages. First a pre-test was done using qualitative technique with semi-structured interviews that were conducted with 10 target consumers. This was followed by a quantitative technique using survey with structured questionnaire administered to target consumers in predetermined shopping environment and at different time intervals during a 3-month study.

It was necessary to do an in-depth study of all aspects of atmospherics including crowding. So a comprehensive literature survey was conducted through detailed study of all the published research reports and books and journals on retailing and store environment. The literature survey was primarily aimed at understanding the concepts related to retail stores like MBO and EBO, store atmospherics, crowding and its factors. A review of relevant literature was used to develop an initial pool of items for all scales which were then adapted to the context of the study. The hypotheses are formed on the basis of existing literature. The study used questionnaire with dichotomous as well as multi-item scales to interpret consumer intention. The questionnaire was pretested to ensure that the questions were understood and to verify the length of the questionnaire. Questionnaires were distributed to 10 individuals that included students of a large educational institute who are frequent shoppers in both MBO and EBO. The respondents were requested to fill out the questionnaire immediately after their next shopping trip to an EBO. On the basis of the feedback of the respondents it was found that the length of the questionnaire was appropriate. A few items were reworded or dropped to provide better clarity and understanding.

Pretest also included an observation study to ensure that the right store is selected for study in terms of location and time. Through the observation study it has been found that retail stores environment changes during different time zones. During weekends and evening time the store environment looks messy. Finding merchandise, sales staff, signages etc. all look difficult. Some people look dissatisfied when there is too much crowd (during Holi, off sale etc.)EBO's in Malls attract significantly large crowd than their standalone counterparts.

To interpret the effects of store crowding the study used the survey method applied through a structured questionnaire. The context in which this study wasconducted is the fashion sector. The rationale behind choosing this is that ithas a proportionally larger number of stores in shopping centres than any other retailsector (West, 1992).The direct effects of crowding have been analysed on the customers shopping from EBO's. The study has been conducted in 2 EBO's selling fashion apparels operated by a large, nationally known brand in the most popular mall of the city. Due to the conditions of conducting this study on-site, the researcher directly approached all patrons within the mall. Given this constraint, a combination of judgement and convenience sampling approach was adopted where in the mall was selected on the judgement of published matter and expert opinion about the most successful mall in Ahmedabad while consumers where approached as per convenience during pre-determined time. All participants also had to meet the criteria of aged between 18 and 50 (consistent with the target age demographic of the mall). The stores are located in Ahmedabad (aprox. population 6 million). The study spanned a 3 month period between July to September, 2017. All data were collected exclusively during rush hours (on weekends) majorly during EOSS. Shoppers were intercepted after entering the check stand (while roaming) and asked to respond to a brief questionnaire. Approximately, ten percent of the intercepted persons declined to be interviewed. The final sample consisted of 290 customers.There was a slight age bias towards younger participants, which may have been an effect of the sampling process, with younger people potentially being more willing and/or having more time to participate in this study. A separate experiment was conducted to fulfill the primary objective of finding out whether people feel crowded in EBO's during EOSS. 30 participants were recruited belonging to the same age group as that of the primary research. Each participant was made to visit the same store twice once before the EOSS and once during the EOSS. Both the times they were made to visit on Saturday evening between 7 pm to 9 pm. They were asked question regarding their feeling towards crowding before and after the visit. Hypothesis1 is analysed on the basis of the experiment using the McNemar test which is used to determine if there are differences on a dichotomous dependent variable between two related groups. It can be considered to be similar to the paired-samples t-test, but for a dichotomous rather than a continuous dependent variable. However, unlike the paired-samples t-test, it can be conceptualized to be testing two different properties of a repeated measure dichotomous variable. The McNemar test is used to analyze pretest and post-test study designs.

Hypothesis 2a,b and c have been analysed with the help of the data collected from the primary research using the chi-square test for independence, also called Pearson's chi-square test or the chi-square test of association, which is used to discover if there is a relationship between two categorical variables.

Results and Discussion

Hypothesis1

before visit during EOSS

		Frequency	**Percent**	**Valid Percent**	**Cumulative Percent**
Valid	No	28	93.3	93.3	93.3
	Yes	2	6.7	6.7	100.0
	Total	30	100.0	100.0	

after visit during EOSS

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	7	23.3	23.3	23.3
	Yes	23	76.7	76.7	100.0
	Total	30	100.0	100.0	

It is evident that the percentage of respondents feeling crowded increased substantially from 6.7% to 76.7% after they were made to visit the same store during EOSS.

Descriptive statistics are reported in order to get a 'feel' for data, as well as to provide an appropriate description. One important measure that can be reported is the change in the proportion of participants feeling crowded before and after the intervention

before visit during EOSS * after visit during EOSS Crosstabulation

			After visit during EOSS		
			No	Yes	Total
before visit during EOSS	No	Count	7	21	28
		% within before visit during EOSS	25.0%	75.0%	100.0%
		% within after visit during EOSS	100.0%	91.3%	93.3%
		% of Total	23.3%	70.0%	93.3%
	Yes	Count	0	2	2
		% within before visit during EOSS	.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% within after visit during EOSS	.0%	8.7%	6.7%
		% of Total	.0%	6.7%	6.7%
Total		Count	7	23	30
		% within before visit during EOSS	23.3%	76.7%	100.0%
		% within after visit during EOSS	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	23.3%	76.7%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	Exact Sig. (2-sided)
McNemar Test		.000[a]
N of Valid Cases	30	

a. Binomial distribution used.

Thirty participants were recruited to take part in an intervention designed to check whether feeling of crowding increases in EBO's during EOSS. A McNemar's chi-square test determined that there is a statistically significant difference in the proportion of people feeling crowded pre- and post-intervention, $p < .05$; that is significantly more people feel crowded in EBO's during EOSS.

Hypothesis 2a

Gender of the respondent * Are you concern of the fellow crowd during shopping Crosstabulation

			Are you concern of the fellow crowd during shopping		
			yes	No	Total
Gender of the respondent	male	Count	50	60	110
		% within Gender of the respondent	45.5%	54.5%	100.0%
		% within Are you concern of the fellow crowd during shopping	33.3%	42.9%	37.9%
		% of Total	17.2%	20.7%	37.9%
	female	Count	100	80	180
		% within Gender of the respondent	55.6%	44.4%	100.0%
		% within Are you concern of the fellow crowd during shopping	66.7%	57.1%	62.1%
		% of Total	34.5%	27.6%	62.1%
Total		Count	150	140	290
		% within Gender of the respondent	51.7%	48.3%	100.0%
		% within Are you concern of the fellow crowd during shopping	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	51.7%	48.3%	100.0%

This table allows us to understand that almost 50% of both males and females are concerned and not concerned about fellow crowd during shopping. So it can be said that both males and females are equally distributed (undecided) while showing concerned about fellow crowd during shopping.

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. 2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	2.790[a]	1	.095		
Continuity Correction[b]	2.400	1	.121		
Likelihood Ratio	2.792	1	.095		
Fisher's Exact Test				.115	.061
Linear-by-Linear Association	2.780	1	.095		
N of Valid Cases [b]	290				

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 53.10.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

We can see here that $\chi = 2.790$, $p = .095(>.05)$. This tells us that there is no statistically significant association between Gender and concern about crowding; that is, both Males and Females equally undecided when it comes to being affected by crowding.

Hypothesis 2bChi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. 2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	14.466[a]	1	.000		
Continuity Correction[b]	13.410	1	.000		
Likelihood Ratio	14.137	1	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test				.000	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	14.416	1	.000		
N of Valid Cases [b]	290				

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 26.55.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

The following table depicts the relationship between gender and feeling of crowding:

Gender of the respondent * do you feel crowded in EBO during EOSS, festivals etc. Crosstabulation

			do you feel crowded in EBO during EOSS, festivals etc.		
			yes	No	Total
Gender of the respondent	Male	Count	70	40	110
		% within Gender of the respondent	63.6%	36.4%	100.0%
		% within do you feel crowded in EBO during EOSS, festivals etc.	31.8%	57.1%	37.9%
		% of Total	24.1%	13.8%	37.9%
	Female	Count	150	30	180
		% within Gender of the respondent	83.3%	16.7%	100.0%
		% within do you feel crowded in EBO during EOSS, festivals etc.	68.2%	42.9%	62.1%
		% of Total	51.7%	10.3%	62.1%
Total		Count	220	70	290
		% within Gender of the respondent	75.9%	24.1%	100.0%
		% within do you feel crowded in EBO during EOSS, festivals etc.	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	75.9%	24.1%	100.0%

This table allows us to understand that both males and females feel crowded in EBO's during EOSS, festivals etc. and more females feel crowded in EBO's than males.

We can see here that $\chi = 14.466$, $p<0.05$. This tells us that there is statistically significant association between Gender and feeling of crowding; that is, significantly more females feel crowded in EBO's than males.

Hypothesis 2c

do you feel crowded in EBO during EOSS, festivals etc. * Are you concern of the fellow crowd during shopping Crosstabulation

			Are you concern of the fellow crowd during shopping		
			yes	**No**	**Total**
do you feel crowded in EBO during EOSS, festivals etc.	yes	Count	120	100	220
		% within do you feel crowded in EBO during EOSS, festivals etc.	54.5%	45.5%	100.0%
		% within Are you concern of the fellow crowd during shopping	80.0%	71.4%	75.9%
		% of Total	41.4%	34.5%	75.9%
	no	Count	30	40	70
		% within do you feel crowded in EBO during EOSS, festivals etc.	42.9%	57.1%	100.0%
		% within Are you concern of the fellow crowd during shopping	20.0%	28.6%	24.1%
		% of Total	10.3%	13.8%	24.1%
Total		Count	150	140	290
		% within do you feel crowded in EBO during EOSS, festivals etc.	51.7%	48.3%	100.0%
		% within Are you concern of the fellow crowd during shopping	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	51.7%	48.3%	100.0%

This table allows us to understand that people who feel crowded are equally divided (almost 50%) about being concerned about fellow crowd.

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. 2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	2.905[a]	1	.088		
Continuity Correction[b]	2.456	1	.117		
Likelihood Ratio	2.909	1	.088		
Fisher's Exact Test				.100	.058
Linear-by-Linear Association	2.895	1	.089		
N of Valid Cases [b]	290				

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 33.79.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

We can see here that χ = 2.905, p=.088 (>.05). This tells us that there is no statistically significant association between feeling of crowding and concerned about fellow crowd; that is people who feel crowded may or may not be concerned about fellow crowd during shopping This is an interesting finding. This means that a substantial percentage of people (45.5%) are not concerned about fellow crowd during shopping.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the importance of understanding consumer behavior by store owners towards atmospheric cues like crowding to create a positive store image. This paper helps in understanding how crowding is able to influence the overall shopping experience in EBO's, giving a completely new perspective to the area of study.

It is clear from this study that perception of consumers do change towards crowding even in EBO's during crowded situations in such stores like in EOSS. Both male and female have similar feeling towards crowding. It is interesting to note from this study that while consumers feel crowded during EOSS in EBO they try to cope with such feeling and try to ignore the fellow crowd. It would be interesting to find out the reasons for that.

Limitation

Due to paucity of time and resources the study has been conducted on a limited sample size, on just 2 stores and in a single mall. Study was also limited to fashion sector especially apparels. It cannot be ignored that specialty stores and EBO's operate in variety of products in different sectors. the study is limited to the survey ofcustomers in EBO of Ahmedabad. Although Ahmedabad is a large city the findings may not entirely reflect theviews of customers of the country in general, and the results may vary in case the surveyis conducted in other parts of the country. Present study could not elaborate on the reasons for consumers decision to cope with feeling of crowding.

Future research

Research in other cities with othercustomers may be conducted to examine the validity and reliability of the identified storeattributes. Another direction can be to identify the reasons for consumer decision to cope with feeling of crowded.

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