

# Human Crowding and Store Choice: The Role of Communal Orientations and Dense Social Networks in Subsistence Consumers



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*The social dimension of the retail store atmosphere leads to perceptions of human crowding in the store. Retail crowding has been shown to have an inverted U-shaped relationship with store satisfaction. Extant literature has reasoned that the variances in this relationship are due to differences in tolerance for crowding by virtue of culture. But crowding perceptions may be contingent upon individual traits and store format. In this conceptual study, we propose the under-researched impact of communal orientations and dense social networks in the crowding perception of subsistence consumers, and their evaluations of mom-and-pop stores.*

**Keywords:** Retail Crowding, Subsistence Marketplaces, Human Crowding perceptions

## 1. Introduction

The store atmosphere is also composed of the element of crowding. Crowding perceptions in the store by customers impact their evaluations of the store. These evaluations lead to customer satisfaction (Eroglua et al., 2005) and store loyalty (Urich, 2011) and negatively moderates behaviours like impulse buying (Bandopadhyay, 2020). The store atmosphere has been known to negatively moderate the relationship between store satisfaction and store loyalty (Francioni et al., 2018). This illustrates that crowding can affect store loyalty. While crowding has been found to have two dimensions, spatial and human (Mehta, 2013), customers have differential propensities towards crowding judgments. Understanding these nuances can help retailers to design, manage and control crowding perceptions in their stores.

There is rich extant literature on crowding perceptions at several store formats. The store formats and their product category can impact crowding perceptions (Mehta, 2013). For example, crowding at restaurants can lead the customer to positively evaluate the same. At the same time, a similar crowding scenario at a general store may invoke evaluations that may be much less positive. Crowding perceptions may be contingent upon individual traits instead of cultural factors, as previously assumed by Bandopadhyay (2020). In the context of this study, the subsistence marketplaces offer unique individual and group-level traits which could impact retail crowding perceptions. These traits are often more pronounced in subsistence consumers (Bertrand, Mullainathan, & Shafir, 2006; Kistruck & Shulist, 2021).

Much of India's retail grocery shopping occurs at small mom-and-pop general stores, locally known as *kiranas*. The Indian retail industry is valued at \$900 billion, with the *kirana* stores dominating the landscape (NDTV Profit, 2021). Mom and Pop retail stores have not received much attention in crowding literature. This is especially confounding when many *kiranas* serve a customer base primarily known as subsistence consumers in varied geographical and cultural milieus. Given the different formats of these stores and that they serve individuals within societies with traits higher in communal orientations and dense social networks, human crowding perceptions at these stores need some explication.<sup>1</sup>

This paper aims to conceptually establish and propositionally explore the moderating effects of these meso-level traits on human crowding perceptions and store choice in subsistence marketplaces. Focusing on particular micro-level factors, including the social dimensions contributing to store atmospherics, increases such studies' prescriptive power (Francioni et al., 2018).

## 2. Theoretical Foundations: Retail Crowding

Crowding at a store is perceived when the customer either visually or physically encounters it from a distance or in proximity. Different individuals may perceive the same crowded scenario differently (Eroglua et al., 2005). Hence perceived crowding is a psychological state that occurs when a person's demand for space exceeds the supply (Stokols, 1972). The two dimensions of crowding are human and spatial crowding. Human crowding is the perception of crowding based on the number of people and the extent of social interaction in each space (Santini, et al., 2021). In contrast, spatial crowding refers to the perceptions of layout, merchandise, and fixtures (Eroglua et al., 2005). Perceived crowding and customer satisfaction have been shown to have an inverted-U relationship (Bandopadhyay, 2020; Eroglua et al., 2005; Urich, 2011). These studies have shown that customers seek social stimulation and have positive evaluations of the store from intermediate levels of crowding. While Eroglua et al.,

(2005) were the first to show the positive effects of crowding on customer satisfaction, crowding's negative impact on the customer has been much discussed. But some empirical studies have also found no negative impact of crowding on customer satisfaction. Bandopadhyay(2020) explains the lack of support for the adverse effects of human crowding on impulse buying with the customers' tolerance for crowding. Cultural variations in tolerance for crowding have gained momentum in literature (Mehta, 2013). But there is a lack of consensus regarding the effects of crowding on customers. Positive and negative effects aside, explanations have regarded contextual and individual factors as incidental to crowding evaluations. Supporting the notion of cultural variations in tolerance for crowding has inevitable downfalls. Evans, Lepore, & Allen (2000) show that tolerance for crowding does not vary culturally and causes similar physiological distress in people regardless of culture. While crowding perceptions may differ culturally, tolerance for crowding may not be an adequate explanation in retail crowding literature. Social and cultural moderators exist in the relationship between crowding perceptions and customer satisfaction (Santini, et al., 2021). While these moderators, like social needs and social similarity, have been explored previously, Mehta (2013) opines that personality traits have received scant attention in the context of retail crowding. Through this study, we attempt to address this concern.

### 3. Hypotheses development

#### Crowding and Subsistence contexts

Individuals in collectivist cultures desire more proximate and frequent social interactions. These tendencies for strong group affiliations, conformity, and positive interrelations have been explored in the literature (Evans, Lepore, & Allen, 2000). The subsistence context strongly draws attention to the strength of social capital and crowding perceptions. Individuals in these contexts have a higher propensity toward communal orientations and a higher dependency on social networks (Viswanathan M. , 2017). Retail crowding perceptions and the role of social conformity and similarity have received cursory attention in subsistence marketplaces literature (Mishra et al., 2021; Gupta & Srivastav, 2015; Das, 2014). The subsistence literature being ripe with findings about the personal and group level traits of consumers can give us new insights about retail choices and crowding perceptions. These personal indicators can serve as a better means to study consumer evaluations of human crowding and help elucidate retail store choice.

#### Communal Orientations

As mentioned earlier for subsistence contexts, there is a higher tendency for group conformity. Subsistence contexts further result in more pronounced communal orientations in individuals. Subsistence actors have a higher tendency to locate one's self-image within the collective identity of the community, leading one to engage in more dense and frequent social interactions (Viswanathan, et al. 2017). Such high tendencies to approve of and identify with what the social kin participates in may impact store image and affect store choice. Shoppers are also protective of their identities and seek this protection from social spaces like retail stores where their communal linkages can be further established(Sirgy et al., 2000). Hence we posit that:

**Proposition 1: Higher Communal Orientations in individuals may lead to more positive store evaluations in the presence of human crowding at the retail store.**

#### Dense Social Networks

With cohabitation being a norm, there are higher dependencies on the immediate family and kin, especially in subsistence contexts (Kistruck & Shulist, 2021). Dependence on dense social networks has been previously linked to social constraints in retailer selection compulsion (Gupta & Srivastav, 2015). This has been explained by the fact that community patrons of a store elicit positive evaluations of the store from the subsistence consumer. This occurrence has been described by exploring crowd similarity (Santini, et al., 2021) and sense of lineage (Gupta & Srivastav, 2015). A customer may develop better trust and positive evaluations about the store if it is crowded by certain persons of their kith and kin, leading them to choose the crowded store instead of an alternative. Higher human crowding perceptions in this scenario might lead to better store evaluations. Thus, we posit;

**Proposition 2: Higher dependence on Dense social networks leads to more positive store evaluations in the presence of human crowding at the retail store.**

### 4. Conclusion

Human crowding perceptions in retail stores for subsistence marketplaces have received scant attention in the literature. This study aims to change that and explicate the roles of group-level traits in human crowding and store choice. Cultural differences have often been termed as a reason for different crowding perceptions in consumers for far too long. Cultural differences in tolerance for crowding may not significantly impact how consumers perceive crowding at the retail store (Evans, Lepore, & Allen, 2000). It is time to explicate the role of more granular, individual traits in crowding perceptions. Such micro-level can be used as a prescriptive tool for retailers to profile their customers and understand the implications of retail store crowding on evaluating their stores. This article could further aid in empirical studies on these issues. Crowding perceptions for individuals high on Communal orientations and having Dense social networks may also be tested for more affluent customers instead of subsistence consumers.

## 7. References

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