

SOCIAL FACILITATION AND THE MERE PRESENCE OF OTHERS: IMPACT ON BUYING BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

In the field of experimental social psychology, social facilitation, the theory, originated as a means of explaining individual's behavior in social situations. Social facilitation is described as enhancing one's dominant response simply by being in the presence of others. Social facilitation, while not widely applied to consumer behavior, holds hope of becoming an interesting and useful tool in attempting to predict consumers' behavior, specifically, behavior in particular buying situations. This paper examines social facilitation theory, where the presence of others is central, as a good predictor of consumer behavior in buying situations, like: store crowding and waiting in line. Thus, this paper seeks to explore the impact of the mere presence of others on buying behavior. The paper explores topics, like: distraction-conflict, evaluation apprehension, and crowding. Before these areas can be applied, it is necessary to investigate the origin of social facilitation, the theory.

INTRODUCTION

Experimental social psychology originated the social facilitation theory as a means of explaining individual's behavior in social situations. Social facilitation is described as "the enhancement of an organism's dominant response by the simple physical presence of other species/mates" (Sanders, 1980). Social facilitation, while not widely applied to consumer behavior, is becoming an interesting and useful tool in attempting to predict consumer behavior, specifically, behavior in particular buying situations. This paper examines social facilitation theory, where the presence of others is central, as a good predictor of consumer behavior in shopping situations, like: store crowding and waiting in line. Thus, the following critical areas of social facilitation are explored: mere presence of others, distraction-conflict, evaluation apprehension, and crowding. Before these areas can be applied, it is necessary to investigate the origin of social facilitation, the theory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Facilitation, the Theory

Social facilitation originated in experimental social psychology where social psychologists questioned whether or not the mere presence of others influenced a person's behavior. It is not surprising that social psychologists have been interested in the sources of influence on behavior for some time. As social facilitation refers to the arousal that humans experience as a result of the presence of others, research was undertaken to show that this arousal effect has both positive and negative consequences on behavior (Zajonc, 1965).

Norman Triplett is credited with the origination of the social facilitation theory resulting from his 1898 article on pace and competition. Triplett first investigated the influence of the presence of others on adolescents winding their fishing reels. He found that adolescents wound their reels more quickly when in the presence of other adolescents (Sanders, 1980). Triplett wanted to see if older children were influenced by the mere presence of their peers. His hunch was correct as the adolescents wound their reels much faster while in the presence of other adolescents. Triplett, enthused by his findings, sought to study cyclist's performance, alone and in groups. Triplett realized that cyclists seemed to ride faster against others than they would by themselves (Triplett, 1898). This observation corroborated his previous research and led him to conduct further experiments on social facilitation in social psychology.

Another widely cited early researcher of social facilitation was Robert Zajonc. In 1965, Zajonc's eloquent article concluded that performance is linked to a person's arousal state while in the presence of others. Zajonc and two associates conducted a study with cockroaches in 1969 that showed that cockroaches ran a *simple* maze faster when in the presence of other cockroaches than when alone (Zajonc, Heingartner, and Herman, 1969). Interestingly though, the cockroaches ran a *complex* maze more quickly alone than when in the presence of others. Zajonc attributed his research results to the context of the Hull-Spence drive theory in that "task performance varied systematically with the difficulty of the task" (Zajonc, 1965). Drive theory, through classical conditioning, anticipates that an increase in the respondent's drive will energize the dominant responses to the stimulus. Further, Zajonc stated that dominant responses are 'correct' for easy uncomplicated tasks, but 'incorrect' for difficult and complicated tasks. Thus, the presence of others increases drive level and arousal, which facilitates the dominant response. Robert Zajonc concluded that in simple situations, increased arousal could help performance. On the other hand, in more complex situations, increased arousal hurt performance.

Mere Presence of Others

The mere presence of others does not necessarily affect all people in the same way. In fact, the mere presence of others can have quite different effects on different people. An assertion made by Blommel Michaels and others in 1982 proved that the presence of others could have both positive and negative effects. Michaels watched pool players at a university student union to observe the effects of social facilitation. He found that good players were affected positively by arousal [presence of others] in social facilitation; their performance increased by 9% when a group of people watched them play. Average pool players were affected negatively by arousal in social facilitation as their performance decreased by 11% when others were watching (Sanders, 1980, Guerin, 1993). The same can be said when analyzing consumer behavior. Depending upon the shopping situation, social facilitation can have both positive and negative consequences in persons' buying behavior. Additionally, the mere presence may not produce arousal in social facilitation, especially if there is minimal emphasis on evaluation and competition. In this instance, the presence of others does not attract much attention. It should be noted that, having others in the same room is different from perceiving those 'others' as evaluators of you and your purchases.

N.B. Cottrell, a researcher, argued against Zajonc's theory of arousal and the mere presence of others as increasing drive (1972). Cottrell claimed that it is through socialization that one learns to respond to stimuli and anticipate outcomes. Socialization, not the presence of others, leads to generalized drive and heightened drive is generated by others who are in a position of evaluating one's performance (Cottrell, 1972). Cottrell's later work summarized 55 studies that showed human and individual drive theories under the auspices of evaluation criteria. One such study cited by Cottrell included the roles of distraction and conflict in social facilitation.

Another study by Luo in 2005, stresses that the presence of others in a purchase situation has a normative effect. If one expects others' presence to be problematic or a source of negative influence then his/her purchase pattern will be thusly affected. One normative expectation may be that another or others will influence a purchase and apply undue pressure on a buyer. While holding an item in a grocery aisle, a buyer hears from another, "I wouldn't buy that brand if you paid me; I had a terrible experience with it." One's motivation may be to comply, with such external pressure to "not buy the brand," if that influencer is deemed credible. Luo (2005) sees two factors as influencing motivation to act: (1) susceptibility to social pressure; and (2) the nature of the interaction between individuals (individual-to-individual, a cohesive group, a non-cohesive group). Also, Luo states that the motivation to comply with others' depends upon one's relative 'liking' of that other person. If one 'likes' the potential influencer, then one is more motivated toward general susceptibility (i.e., succumbing to pressure).

Arousal Theory of Motivation

Motivation is the force that initiates, guides, and maintains goal-oriented behavior. It is what causes us to take action, like: grabbing a prepackaged snack at the grocery check-out in order to reduce perceived hunger. Forces that underlie motivation can be biological, social, emotional, or cognitive-in-nature (Guerin, 1993). Researchers have developed a number of different theories to explain motivation but each theory is limited in scope. The arousal theory of motivation suggests that it is human nature to take certain actions to either decrease or increase levels of perceived arousal. When arousal levels get very low, an individual might go to a thriller movie. When arousal levels are very high, one might look for ways to relax or meditate. Accordingly, people are motivated to maintain a stable, even optimal level, of arousal. This stable or optimal level of arousal varies individual to individual and by situation. In consumer behavior, the mere presence of others may induce a state of 'arousal discomfort' in a shopper, causing him to flee the store without a purchase, in an attempt to rid himself of that perceived discomfort.

Distraction-Conflict in Social Facilitation

Distraction-conflict theory, which has considerable empirical support, is built upon the premise that the mere presence of others can cause distraction and attention conflict leading to task completion complexity (Sanders, 1980). In other words, thinking about others, listening to others, and/or monitoring others can distract consumers from accomplishing a task, thus producing incompatible consequences for task completion. Cohen and Davis' study in 1973 examined the role of distraction-conflict in social facilitation. In this study, the subjects were told that an audience hidden behind a one-way mirror was evaluating them. Additionally, while performing the given task, the subjects heard a considerable amount of noise, unrelated to the experiment, from subjects in another room. The subjects, knowing that others were evaluating their task performance and hearing considerable noise from another room, were driven to distraction and conflict resulting in a lesser focus on the task at hand. Cohen and Davis surmised that the knowledge of being evaluated and the observed distractions produced attention conflict, which led to heightened arousal and lesser quality task performance (Cohen and Davis, 1973).

Evaluation Apprehension in Social Facilitation

Evaluation apprehension is described as the fear of being judged (Sanders, 1980). Both Zajonc and Cottrell's studies in social facilitation explored the origination of arousal, but it was the results of Cottrell's works that led support for the evaluation-apprehension theory of social facilitation. Cottrell felt that it was the inclusion of evaluative others not simply the mere presence of non-evaluative others that caused arousal. Simply put, it was the fear of having one's performance and/or behavior evaluated by others that affects attitudes and actions. It is this premise that has direct applicability to the field of consumer behavior. Waszak and Obrist's 1969 study had subjects being told that their performance would be compared for accuracy with the

work done by previous subjects in the experiment. This introduction of evaluative instruction had no effect on the subjects' drive level or social facilitation. This research on evaluation apprehension shows that when individuals must make a choice, subjects desire to present themselves in the most favorable light. This is often referred to as the "good subject role" in psychological testing (Cottrell, 1972). Concern with giving a positive self-presentation is also implicit in the social desirability realm where tested subjects offer what they deem a socially desired response, which threatens the validity of test results (Dahl, Manchanda, & Argo 2001).

In buying situations, evaluation apprehension suggests that the presence of others makes us more concerned about what others think about us and/or our purchases. The fear of being judged can increase arousal and apprehension. Evaluation apprehension also presupposes that individuals want to be valued, included, and accepted. For example, while standing in line at a drug store, a customer may be uncomfortable holding a box of suppositories. This 'embarrassing item' may cause the customer in-line apprehension and fear that others in-line may have a negative opinion of him. Another example of evaluation apprehension occurs when consumers are in-line to purchase an item, such as a camera, that is always stored behind a counter. While in-line, a consumer gets into a discussion with a fellow patron also waiting in-line. The other store patron raves about a particular brand of camera behind the counter. The pressure of acceptance may motivate the consumer to buy the brand favored by his fellow patron.

Crowding and Social Facilitation

Crowding generally refers to people's psychological response to density, that is to their feelings of being crowded and experiencing a lack of privacy or an increase in unwanted interactions, thus psychological distress (Luo 2005, Dahl et al 2001, Crothers et al 1993, Gove et al 1979, Jazwinski 1998). One's perception of crowding is "individual in nature" (Machleit, Eroglu, & Mantal, 2000). A subject in a crowded supermarket makes her way to the cereal aisle in order to purchase a 'no-name' cereal. Once in the aisle, she notices that there are many customers, none of whom were looking at the no-name cereals or generic brands. The subject decides to purchase a name brand cereal so as not to seem 'cheap' in front of others in the crowded aisle. Here crowding has influenced the subject's purchase behavior, hence her consumer behavior. Additionally, store crowding can intensify positive or negative emotions. For example, while in a crowded well-known video game store, poised to purchase a video game for her son, the subject hears many conversations around her regarding the various games available in the store. The subject's internal excitement in preparation of the purchase is building. By the time the subject reaches the counter, she has become so aroused and excited that she soon finds herself purchasing two or three video games, two were previously untended purchases. According to social facilitation theory, this subject's enthusiasm grew because the store crowding intensified her positive emotions toward the purchase experience.

Conversely, crowding can intensify negative emotions and stress, such occurs when waiting in a long store line that seems to be moving extremely slowly. As the other patrons in line grow more

agitated, one finds himself getting more aroused and frustrated. The conditions are set: the crowding feels like an invasion of personal space, the long wait time exacerbates one's feeling of unimportance, and the crowd's growing discontent intensifies a subject's negative response. That consumer, who would not ordinarily become aggressive or openly rude, is now finding himself acting so. This understandable outcome is accentuated when high levels of crowding are not expected and an individual has a low tolerance for crowding, in general (Oliver, 1993). This phenomenon is called deindividuation, where individuals take on the personality or mentality of the crowd, positive or negative. This may help to explain those instances reported by the media where crowds act in destructive and violent ways, such as breaking retailers' windows and looting stores. "Our behavioral reactions to situations develop early and can affect perception, cognition, motivation, and behavior" (Izard, 1993, pg. 638). Lastly, shopper tolerance for retail crowding varies across retail outlets (a discount store versus a department store).

IMPLICATIONS FOR RETAILERS

Socially induced arousal is a necessary ingredient of social facilitation and shopping is one of the greatest social venues for engendering arousal or heightened awareness or emotion. As retailers pack stores with patrons in pursuit of sales, shoppers increasingly face retail crowding and perceived evaluation. This heightened awareness of others, mere presence of others, and a sense of being watched or evaluated is a key component of social facilitation affect in consumer behavior. This also has implications for the sales force that staffs and wanders the retail outlet.

While shopping satisfaction is increasingly important to retailers, due to the competitive nature of the retailing industry, it becomes critical to understand consumers' experiences or perceived experiences while engaging in consumer endeavors. According to Machleit and Mantel, the impact of consumer emotions while shopping is integral to the shopping experience (2001). Their study shows that consumers, who perceive the store as attempting to eliminate the human density or crowding in the store, have more positive emotions toward the shopping experience and transfer those positive feelings to the store. Sommer, Wynes, and Brinkley found in their 1992 study that consumers shopping in groups have more positive feelings toward the shopping experience, as more of a social event, hence these individuals in shopping groups spend more time shopping in the store and make larger purchases. According to social facilitation theory, shopping experiences and the presence of others produce an arousal effect, which heightens emotions [positive or negative] in the shopper.

CONCLUSION

Experimental social psychology's social facilitation theory seems to explain some of the many effects that the mere presence of others has on consumer behavior. Real world and experimental situations, previously described, seek to explain the effects of social facilitation and arousal on consumer attitudes and behaviors in a social environment. Whether standing in line with an

'embarrassing' item, anxiously waiting in a crowded slow-moving line, or being driven to distraction while in a buying situation, social facilitation affects consumer decisions and buying experiences both positively and negatively. There is a decrease in shopper satisfaction due to crowding that can be mediated by expectations and one's tolerance for feeling 'crowded' or feeling influenced. The effects of the presence of others are likely to be greater when a group of individuals is cohesive. Such cohesive groups may include family, neighbors, close acquaintances, and friends.

As for the research, Zajonc (1965) found that the mere presence of non-evaluative others is sufficient to increase drive and impair performance, which is consistent with the social facilitation literature. Cottrell, on the other hand, found that mere presence of others is not sufficient in his learned-drive analysis where evaluative others increase a subject's drive and affect performance (1972). Regardless of the existence of others, if consumers perceive others as evaluating them, studies show that they will behave differently. Consumers may purchase items that they normally would not; they may refrain from purchasing items that they normally would (out of fear of being evaluated negatively); or may buy more than originally intended due to the arousal and intensity felt while in the consumer situation. As social facilitation becomes more fully integrated into the consumer behavior discipline, much insight will be gained. Retailers will have access to empirical studies that test crowding and waiting in line for the effect on subsequent shopping satisfaction and consumers will be able to participate in shopping experiments designed to better elicit information about motivation, influence, and the effect of others.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

At the meta-level, this research proposes a theoretical relationship between a social psychology construct, the mere presence of others, and its link to consumer behavior marketing. The next logical step is empirical work to examine the validity and depth of the relationship. Empirical research will involve hypothesis testing and construct measurement, which in turn must be operationalized. It is the researchers' hope that future empirical and theoretical research will advance the relationship. Finally, this research suggests that the presence of others will impact shoppers' motivation, attitude, satisfaction, and behavior, but we do so in a cursory, exploratory manner. Much more rigor in thought is needed to better understand how different consumer behavior scenarios, involving the presence of others, influence shopping outcomes. Future conceptual and empirical research may also wish to investigate the impact of crowding on shopping outcomes.

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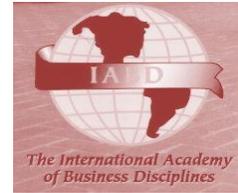
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