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Influence of Social Facilitation and Gender Differences on Purchasing Behavior of Consumers in a Mall

Consumers were observed in order to investigate whether it is more likely that lone or group shoppers will make a purchase and to what extent gender differences in purchasing behavior exist. As shoppers exited a Georgia mall, variables such as gender, group orientation, and the presence or absence of a package were recorded. Observations revealed that of 1269 shoppers, nearly 54% of lone shoppers made purchases, compared to 41% of group shoppers, and women carried packages more often than did men. Both the comparison of lone versus group shoppers and the difference in men's and women's buying showed $p < .05$ from a test for significance between two proportions. Contrary to the social facilitation theory, group shoppers did not consume more than lone individuals. This study suggests that social facilitation effects may be unique to particular environments.

The theory of social facilitation states that certain activities are increased by the presence of another organism of the same species (Reben, 1995). The influence of the mere presence of others on human behavior has been a recurring theme in social psychology since the 19th century (Sommer, Wynes, and Brinkley, 1992). Previous studies have suggested that groups tend to consume more, work faster, and spend more time in their environment than do lone persons. For example, observational studies in natural, social settings by R. Sommer (1965), and Geller, Russ, and Altomari (1986) concluded that patrons of bars tended to drink more while in a group than if they were alone (as cited in R. Sommer et al. 1992). In addition, R. Sommer and B. A. Sommer (1989) established that groups in coffeehouses stayed longer than did unaccompanied patrons (as cited in R. Sommer et al. 1992). In both of these studies, increased time in the setting was positively correlated with increased consumption (Sommer et al. 1992).

As related to shopping, the presence of others might inhibit the purchase of a deeply personal or controversial product while increasing the purchase of products associated with social activity (Sommer et al., 1992). Wells and Lo Sciuto (1966) suggested that shopping behavior varied depending on the type of store and its general shopping environment. Past observational studies of shopping behavior as a function of social facilitation have taken place in drugstores, discount stores, and grocery stores (Sommer et al. 1992). Granbois (1968) interviewed shoppers in drugstores and found that groups spent more time in the store and were more likely to make impulsive buys than were lone shoppers (as cited in Sommer et al. 1992). R. Sommer et al. (1992) found that group shoppers in supermarkets and discount stores stayed longer and purchased larger loads than did lone individuals.

Jackson and Holbrook (1995) contend that consumption is not an isolated, impersonal, and

momentary act but rather a social process including a wide range of activities whose meanings vary with many aspects of human identity. We chose to record shoppers' genders in our observational study and restricted our subjects to adults and adolescents. A study in which consumers were interviewed about their spending habits revealed that women frequently bore the responsibility of shopping for their families, and often felt guilty buying items solely for themselves while not making purchases for the rest of the family (Jackson & Holbrook, 1995). Men interviewed in this same study expressed concern that they would be seen as lazy if they were shopping and not at a job during the day, and expressed the view that shopping was "women's work" (Jackson & Holbrook, 1995). It was hypothesized that for our observational study, more women would carry packages than would men.

In this study, we observed shoppers at an indoor shopping mall on various days of the week. We felt that the social aspects of shopping would be stronger at indoor shopping centers than they would be at supermarkets or discount stores, thus increasing the effect of socially facilitated purchasing. In indoor shopping malls, shoppers have a wide range of products and services from which to choose, and malls are designed with common areas in which to gather and socialize. We hypothesized that, as previous studies have found, those in groups would consume more than would lone individuals.

As we observed shoppers exiting the mall, we checked for the presence or absence of a package and whether the shopper was alone or in a group. Our specific hypothesis was that shoppers in groups would make purchases more often than would lone shoppers and that women would be observed carrying packages more often than would men. The times and locations of the observations were recorded, although no specific predictions were made with respect to these factors.

METHOD

Participants

One thousand two hundred sixty-nine shoppers were observed as they exited an indoor

shopping mall. Subjects were included in our data only if they were adults or teenagers unaccompanied by an adult. The observer noted whether the shopper was alone or in a group. For the purpose of this study, a group was defined as two or more people shopping together. A parent accompanied only by small children was considered alone. The shopper's gender was also recorded.

Materials

This naturalistic observation took place in a shopping mall. The observers utilized benches available in the mall and were supplied with coding sheets and pencils.

Procedure

The observations were conducted at Town Center Mall in Kennesaw, Georgia, over a two-week period in February, 2000. There were four observation sessions with one occurring on a weekday evening, two on weekday afternoons, and one on a weekend afternoon. During each hour-long session, two observers positioned themselves on benches, each near separate mall exits. The observer seated on the bench was relatively inconspicuous in the mall setting and did not seem to influence the buying habits of the shoppers in any way.

Each observer was equipped with coding sheets in order to record the shopper's gender, whether the shopper was alone or in a group, and whether the subject was carrying a package. As each shopper exited the mall, the observer used a checklist to characterize the shopper based upon the above criteria. The observer recorded only the presence or absence of a package. The number of packages carried by one individual was considered irrelevant. For the purposes of this study, a package was defined as an object contained in a shopping bag from a store in the mall. Consumable items such as drinks and cookies were not considered packages.

Acknowledging the fact that certain stores might draw a certain population of shoppers and that time of day could influence consumer behavior, data was collected at different locations in the mall, on both weekends and weekdays, and at different times of the day. This was done to reduce the chance that the results would be peculiar to a certain set of conditions such as the presence of a restaurant near one particular exit or a change in group behavior on a certain day of the week.

TABLE ONE

Numbers and Percentages of Shoppers Making Purchases as a Function of Gender and Group Dynamics					
		Made Purchase			
		Yes	%	No	%
Shopping Alone					
Females		157	57.7	115	42.3
Males	120	49.4	123	50.6	
Total Alone	277	53.8	238	46.2	
Shopping in Groups					
Females		209	45.5	250	54.5
Males	96	32.5	199	67.5	
Total Group	305	40.5	449	59.6	
Total Shoppers	1269				

RESULTS

It was found that of the 1269 shoppers observed, 53.8% of those shopping alone made a purchase, compared with 40.5% of group shopper (see Figure 1). Overall, most shoppers (54.1%) left the mall without making a purchase. More shoppers traveled in groups than alone (59.4% vs. 40.6%).

Women represented 57.6% of total shoppers, and men represented 42.3%. Women purchased more than did men, making 62.9% of all purchases compared with men only making 37.1%. 50.1% of the women observed left the mall with a package, whereas 40.1% of observed men carried packages.

In total, a higher percentage of lone shoppers exited the mall carrying packages than did group shoppers. This general trend also held

true when broken down by gender (see Figure 1). Both men and women shopping alone made purchases more often than did men and women shopping in groups (see Table 1).

A test for significance between two proportions showed that the difference between observed variables was significant in both the group orientation and gender comparison cases with $p < .05$. For lone versus group shoppers, the z-score was 4.68. The z-score was -3.50 in the comparison of men versus women shoppers.

DISCUSSION

Our findings did not support our hypothesis that shoppers in groups would make purchases more often than would lone shoppers. We expected group shoppers in the highly social setting of an indoor shopping mall to be more likely to leave the mall with a purchase. However,

FIGURE ONE

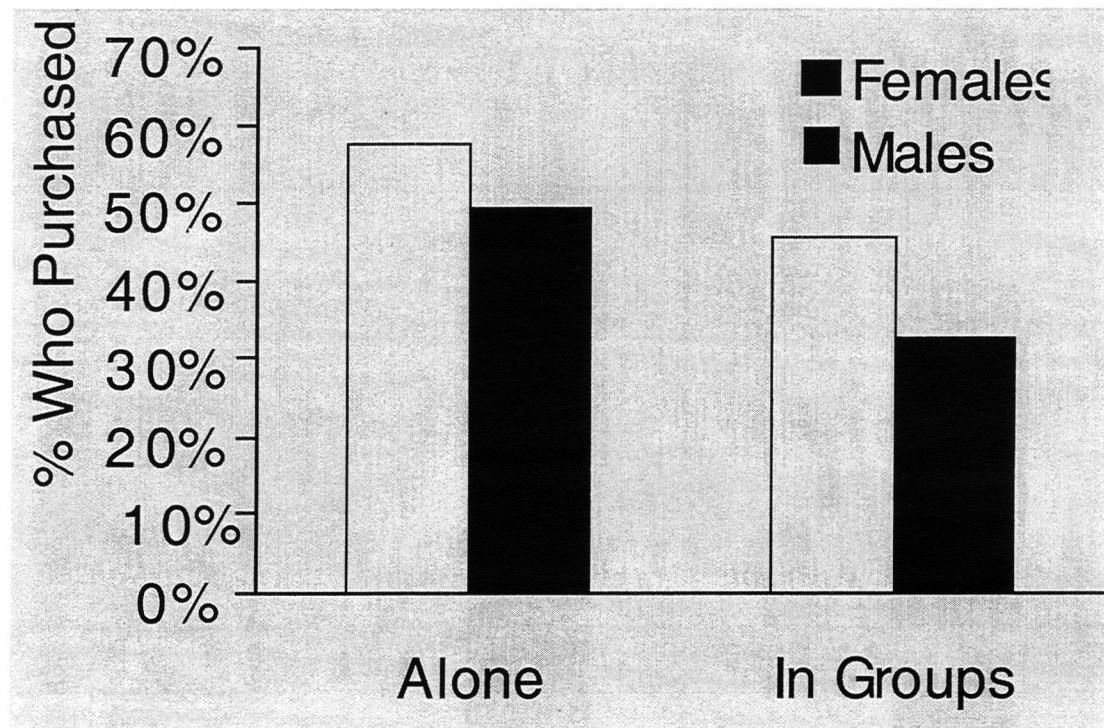


Figure 1. Percentage of male and female shoppers who purchased goods as a function of group dynamics.

our results showed that lone shoppers left the mall carrying a package more often than did shoppers in groups.

Although our main hypothesis dealt with the presence or absence of a package and whether or not shoppers were in a group, we also recorded the gender of shoppers as well as the time of day the observation occurred. Our findings for these variables did support previous research. Similar to the results from the direct observation by Wells and Lo Sciuto (1966), our data showed that the probability of a shopper making a purchase was higher during our weekend observation than during weekday observations. Our data is in accordance with past findings (e.g. Jackson & Holbrook, 1995) where female shoppers are concerned, both in that women were present in greater numbers at the mall and that they appeared to purchase more items than did male shoppers. In one U.S. study of 500 married shoppers with children under 13, 90% of the women were the primary shoppers for the family's goods (Sommer, Wynes, & Brinkley, 1992). The hypothesis that women would be more likely than men to have a package in hand when leaving the

mall was supported.

Our choice to use direct observation rather than retrospective reports such as surveys or interviews allowed us to provide a record of what the shoppers actually did rather than merely what they might have said or remembered. In this way, our results did not rely on a subject's memory or ability to interpret a questionnaire and were not influenced by a subject's desire to rationalize their behavior or impress the interviewer. Although direct observation has the disadvantage of misinterpretation, we were able to compare our findings with past research and show that the social facilitation theory may be limited in regards to shopping. From our observations, the influence of others on one's purchasing behavior may be inhibitory when the setting is a shopping mall.

Purchasing goods may not be the primary motivation for many going to the mall. Even though our results showed that the majority of shoppers were with a group, less than half of all shoppers made a purchase in the mall. This seems to indicate that social behavior could be the primary motivation for a trip to the mall. Future

studies in this area could incorporate surveys and interviews of patrons in an attempt to discern the motivational differences between group and lone shoppers.

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