

**THE EFFECTS OF WAIT EXPECTATIONS, STORE ATMOSPHERE AND MERCHANDISE VALUE
PERCEPTIONS ON STORE PATRONAGE INTENTIONS**

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ABSTRACT

Waiting for service in a retail store is an experience that can lead to consumer dissatisfaction (Katz, Larson and Larson 1991), which in turn can result in negative effects on store patronage behavior (Hui, Dube and Chebat 1997). Previous studies on the effects of waiting have tended to focus on consumer responses to delays under conditions of actual or simulated waits (e.g., Hui, Dube and Chebat 1994; Taylor 1994). In these studies, subjects actually experienced a wait situation. However, before retail customers choose to wait, they are likely to estimate how long that wait will be based on cues they observe in the store environment. If their observations lead to an *expectation* that the wait will be too long, they may not even enter the store, or stay long enough to experience a wait. Thus, there is a need to understand the antecedents of wait expectations and the role of these expectations on patronage intentions. We use inference theory as a conceptual foundation for building our model, and generating hypotheses to test the model.

Our study empirically examined the effects of three in-store cues - number of visible employees, number of customers and the presence (versus absence) of music - on wait expectations and store patronage intentions. These three cues were experimentally manipulated in videotapes of a jewelry store that simulated a store environment experience. In a jewelry store, customers typically require help from salespeople, increasing the likelihood that other customers will have to wait. Measured constructs included merchandise quality, price and value, perceived crowdedness, store atmosphere evaluation, wait expectations and store patronage intentions. Subjects watched the videotape, and then completed a questionnaire. The model was tested using LISREL.

Results generally supported the conceptual model. The model explained 40% of the variation in merchandise value, with price having a direct negative effect, quality having a direct positive effect, store atmosphere having an indirect positive effect, and crowdedness and wait expectations having indirect negative effects. The presence of music had no significant effect on value perceptions, but did have a positive effect on store atmosphere. The model also explained a high percentage of the variation in store patronage intentions. The two strongest positive predictors were merchandise value and store atmosphere. Merchandise quality perceptions had a direct, positive effect, and price perceptions, perceived crowdedness and wait expectations all had negative effects on store patronage intentions.

Our findings suggest that wait expectations are important in store patronage decisions. Therefore, it is important that store patronage models include wait expectations. Future research needs to test other antecedents to wait expectations, examine other types of store contexts, and perhaps use other methods to more fully understand consumer wait expectations. Retail managers can also benefit because our findings provide ideas about how they can proactively manage wait expectations using elements under their control, such as number of visible employees and store atmosphere.

REFERENCES

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