

# **Roll up, roll up! The effect of social crowding on consumer enjoyment of special event entertainment**

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## **Abstract**

This study focuses on consumer enjoyment of special event entertainment (SEE) in shopping centres. SEE consists of free entertainment events such as school holiday entertainment, fashion shows, celebrity appearances, live concerts, and community events. A unique characteristic of SEE is social crowding as SEE is typically consumed by a mass of people in one location at one point in time, and for the purpose of pleasure or fun (Ng, Russell-Bennett & Dagger 2007, Pons, Laroche & Mourali 2006). Hence, the main purpose of this study is to examine the possible positive effect of social crowding on consumer enjoyment of SEE. The results of this study reveal that not only can social crowding have a positive effect on consumer enjoyment of SEE but it can also have a positive effect on their shopping behaviour. Contributions to marketing theory and practice are discussed.

## **Introduction**

Shopping centres offer many entertainment attractions and one of them is special event entertainment (SEE) (ICSC 1996, ICSC 1998, Sit, Merrilees & Birch 2003). SEE consists of free entertainment events that are offered on a seasonal, temporary and intermittent basis such as school holiday entertainment, fashion shows, celebrity appearances and community events (ICSC 1996, ICSC 1998). SEE represents a key strategy in contemporary shopping centre marketing. Using SEE, shopping centre managers seek to provide their patrons with a reason to visit, visit more often and stay longer at their retail precincts (Gentry 2004, Haeberle 2001). Subsequently, more frequent visits and longer duration of stay are anticipated to generate more sales opportunities for the tenant retailers at shopping centres such as eating in at a cafe and purchasing at a homeware store (Gentry 2004, Haeberle 2001).

A unique characteristic of SEE is social crowding as it is typically consumed by a mass of people in one location at one point in time, and for the purpose of pleasure or fun (Ng & Dagger 2006, Ng *et al.* 2007). Despite the wide use of SEE, very few studies have investigated if social crowding is conducive to consumer enjoyment of SEE. An investigation of the relationship between social crowding and consumer enjoyment of SEE should provide a valuable insight to shopping centre managers in staging and delivering the experience of SEE, particularly through the management of social crowding.

## **Prior research on social crowding**

Broadly, social crowding is conceived as consumer perception of the number of individuals and the extent of social interaction among those individuals (Eroglu, Machleit & Barr 2005, Machleit, Eroglu & Mantel 2000, Machleit, Kellaris & Eroglu 1994). The treatment of social crowding has been inconsistent in the marketing literature as some studies have treated it as a negative factor of consumer experience (Eroglu *et al.* 2005, Machleit *et al.* 2000, Machleit *et al.* 1994), and other studies have promoted it as a positive factor of consumer experience (Pons *et al.* 2006, Wickham & Kerstetter 2001). The inconsistent treatment of social crowding

has suggested that the effect of social crowding on consumer experience may be context specific.

In the retail environment literature, social crowding have constantly been treated as a negative factor of consumer experience (Eroglu *et al.* 2005, Machleit *et al.* 2000, Machleit *et al.* 1994). Social crowding has been measured with negative items such as ‘the store seemed very crowded to me’, ‘the store was a little too busy’, and ‘there were a lot of shoppers in the store’. The negative effect of social crowding on consumer experience may be attributed to the common focus on solitary and/or utilitarian shopping activities such as grocery shopping (Eroglu *et al.* 2005, Machleit *et al.* 2000). As a result, social crowding has been associated with negative shopping outcomes such as stressed feelings, shopping dissatisfaction, and avoidance shopping behaviour (Eroglu *et al.* 2005, Machleit *et al.* 2000, Machleit *et al.* 1994).

On the other hand, studies of event marketing have suggested that social crowding can enhance consumer experience particularly in the context of collective hedonic events (for example, festival and sporting events) (Ng *et al.* 2007, Pons *et al.* 2006, Wickham & Kerstetter 2001). A collective hedonic event refers to an event that is delivered and consumed simultaneously by a large number of people in one location at one point in time, and for the purpose of enjoyment and pleasure (Ng *et al.* 2007). In collective hedonic events, consumers generally expect the presence of other individuals and indeed desire social interaction with those individuals (Ng *et al.* 2007, Pons *et al.* 2006). Hence, social crowding is expected to help creating enjoyment for consumers in the context of collective hedonic events including SEE. For example, in 2004 International Olympic Committee (IOC) officials were worried by the television images being shown around the world of athletes competing in near empty stadiums, and thus told the Athens Games organisers to give away free tickets to the public. The strategy was to attract maximum crowds and create ‘lively’ experiences for the television audience as well as the athletes (ABC-Sport 2004).

Empirical studies investigating the possible effect of social crowding on consumer experience with collective hedonic events have been scarce (Pons *et al.* 2006, Wickham & Kerstetter 2001). In this study, SEE (for example, school holiday entertainment and community events) can be considered as a form of collective hedonic event (Ng *et al.* 2007). Hence, this study aims to fill the literature gap by examining the possible positive effect of social crowding on consumer enjoyment of SEE. While an examination of the negative effect of social crowding from SEE on consumer experience is certainly relevant to shopping centre marketing, it is beyond the scope of this study. Furthermore, there have been ample studies investigating the negative effect of social crowding on consumer experience (Eroglu, Machleit & Barr 2005, Machleit, Eroglu & Mantel 2000).

### **Conceptual Model and Hypotheses**

Figure 1.1 presents the conceptual model of this study and it is developed from the theoretical framework of Stimulus-Organism-Responses (S-O-R) (Mehrabian & Russell 1974). From the conceptual model, two research hypotheses are developed and they are related to the positive effect of social crowding on consumer enjoyment of SEE (Hypothesis 1), and also the positive effect of consumer enjoyment of SEE on shopping behaviour (Hypothesis 2). In the context of SEE (collective hedonic event), consumer perception of social crowding will be positive in nature and thus will have a positive effect on their enjoyment. Subsequently, consumer enjoyment of SEE will have a positive effect on their shopping behaviour (for example, longer duration of stay, and purchase of food and non-food items).

**Figure 1.1: A conceptual model of the effect of social crowding on consumer enjoyment of SEE**



Source: developed for this study

## **Methodology**

In this study, the main methodology involved mall intercept surveys with shoppers during the occurrence of SEE. Such methodology was chosen as we aimed to capture shoppers' direct experience with SEE as opposed to their retrospective or recalled experience. Further, a directory or database (a sampling frame) registering all shoppers who had participated in SEE did not exist, and thus we could not pre-identify or pre-select shoppers prior to the occurrence of SEE. The sampling unit of this study was 'any shopper who was aged 18 years and above, and who had participated in any SEE'. The minimum age of 18 years was set because it was the age limit where young people in Australia could be interviewed without the consent of their guardian or parents (MRSA 1995).

The measurement scales of social crowding, enjoyment, and shopping behaviour were compiled from different sources. In particular, five items of social crowding (*I enjoyed the crowd, the crowd added to the experience, the crowd created a pleasant experience, it was crowded and I could move around easily*) were adapted from Wickham and Kerstetter (2001), six items of enjoyment (*it was enjoyable, entertaining, appealing, fun, exciting and interesting*) were sourced from Eliashberg and Sawhney (1994), and three items of shopping behaviour (*I stayed at the centre longer than I had planned, I bought some food and/or drinks that I didn't plan to, and I bought some non-food items that I didn't plan to*) were derived from Mathwick, Malhotra and Rigdon (2001).

These measurement scales of these three constructs were then converted into a survey instrument, and it was pre-tested with shoppers at a school holiday event (Dora the Explorer) to: a) check the clarity of item wording and instructions, and b) determine the time needed to sufficiently complete the questionnaire. Subsequently, the survey instrument was administered at two SEE offered by two different shopping centres. One was a community event (Family Week concert) and one was a school holiday entertainment event (Dance Factory contest). During the mall intercept survey at both SEE, shoppers were randomly selected and personally approached to complete a self-administered questionnaire. In this study, the data from the two SEE were analysed as a unified whole (N = 281) as both were targeted to a similar shopper segment, notably family shoppers with young children. In this study, the majority of respondents was females (78%), aged between 31 and 50 years (49%), and had young or school-aged children living at home (49%).

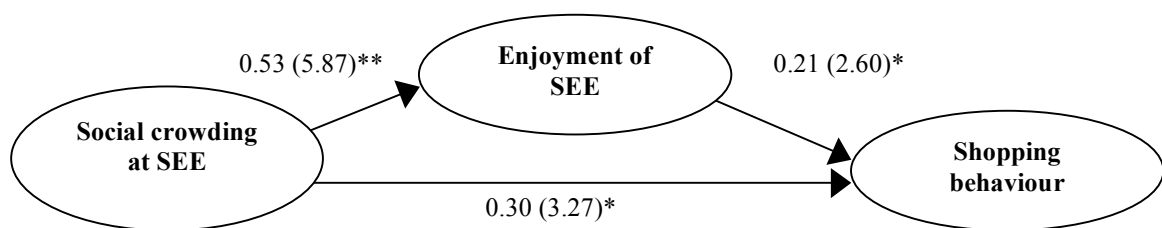
## **Results**

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using AMOS 7 was initially conducted to test the unidimensionality of each key construct. In the first run of CFA, two items were found to demonstrate poor convergent validity with their key constructs ( $t\text{-value} < 1.96$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) (Bagozzi & Yi 1988). They were 'it was crowded' and 'it was exciting'. Both items were removed from further analysis. Once the items were removed, the unidimensionality of all key constructs (social crowding, enjoyment, and shopping behaviour) was confirmed. The discriminant validity among the three factors was also supported as their average variance extracted were higher than their correlation coefficients ( $AVE > 0.80$ ,  $R^2 \leq 0.05$ ) (Fornell & Larcker 1981). Moreover, all three constructs were also found to have acceptable levels of reliability with Cronbach's alpha above 0.70 (social crowding,  $\alpha = 0.84$ , enjoyment,  $\alpha = 0.90$ , and approach behaviour,  $\alpha = 0.74$ ) (Kline 1998).

After the validity and reliability of the key constructs were supported, the measurement model was tested and it was found to demonstrate acceptable fit ( $\chi^2 = 97.95$ ,  $df = 51$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $GFI = 0.95$ ,  $AGFI = 0.92$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.06$ ,  $SRMR = 0.05$ ). In this study, good fit indices ( $GFI$  and  $AGFI$ ) fulfilled the recommended benchmark of 0.95 and beyond, and misfit indices ( $RMSEA$  and  $SRMR$ ) achieved the recommended level of less than 0.08 (Anderson & Gerbing 1988, Bagozzi & Yi 1988). Then, the structural model was tested and it was also found to provide a reasonably good fit to the data ( $\chi^2 = 112.01$ ,  $df = 52$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $GFI = 0.94$ ,  $AGFI = 0.91$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.06$ , and  $SRMR = 0.08$ ). Good fit and misfit indices fulfilled the recommended benchmarks (Anderson & Gerbing 1988, Bagozzi & Yi 1988). The significant  $p$ -value was not unexpected due to the large sample size ( $N=281$ ) (Kline 1998). The results from the structural model supported both H1 ( $\beta = 0.53$ ,  $t\text{-value} = 5.91$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and H2 ( $\beta = 0.38$ ,  $t\text{-value} = 4.93$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

A review of the modification indices suggested that a structural path should be added from social crowding to shopping behaviour ( $MI = 9.17$ ). This new path slightly improved the goodness of fit of the model ( $\chi^2 = 97.95$ ,  $df = 51$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $GFI = 0.95$ ,  $AGFI = 0.92$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.06$ , and  $SRMR = 0.05$ ). Hence, the structural model was re-specified as illustrated in Figure 1.2. The revised standardised coefficients and  $t$ -values (in brackets) were also presented in Figure 1.2.

**Figure 1.2: A revised model for the effect of social crowding on consumer enjoyment of SEE**



Notes: \*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*  $p < 0.05$

## Discussion

In this study, not only was social crowding found to have a positive effect on consumer enjoyment of SEE, but it was also found to have a positive effect on shopping behaviour. The positive effect of social crowding on shopping behaviour was unexpected and it could be due to the measurement of social crowding as the only key characteristic of SEE. Nevertheless,

the results supported the notion that social crowding could enhance consumer experience particularly in the context of collective hedonic events (Pons *et al.* 2006). The results of this study make several contributions to theoretical knowledge and managerial practice, and they will now be discussed.

**Theoretical contributions.** The results of this study were consistent with the event marketing literature but in contrast to the retail environment literature. The results suggested that consumer perception of social crowding was positive in the context of collective hedonic events like SEE. Hence, social crowding could have a positive instead of negative effect on consumers' emotion as well as approach behaviour related to collective hedonic events. This study has also presented a positive measurement scale of social crowding (I enjoyed the crowd, the crowd added to the experience, the crowd created a pleasant experience, and I could move around easily). While the positive measurement scale of social crowding requires further validation, it has been found to demonstrate acceptable levels of reliability and validity in this study.

**Managerial contributions.** The results of this study would also provide a valuable insight to shopping centre managers in staging and delivering the experience of SEE. The results suggested that shopping centre managers should encourage social crowding if they wished to create an enjoyable experience of SEE for passing shoppers. Hence, shopping centre managers should use different promotional incentives to encourage people attendance at SEE such as free gifts, free food vouchers or free discount coupons. Having a mass of people at SEE would also draw the attention and curiosity of non-participants, and in turn encourage their 'ad-hoc' participation in SEE. Nevertheless, this social crowding strategy should be practised with caution as a mass of people at SEE could concurrently discourage other people from visiting a shopping centre, especially when they were not interested in SEE. Hence, shopping centre managers should designate a specific area for the occurrence of SEE, which would least hinder the normal traffic flow and shopping patterns of other individuals. This strategy would allow shopping centre managers to direct the mass of people to the designated area and create a vibrant SEE experience. Indeed, many shopping centres in Australia have built a specific entertainment area for this reason such as the Piazza at Hyperdome Shopping Centre (Brisbane) (Hyperdome 2008).

### **Limitations and future research**

Given the exploratory nature of this study, the results should be interpreted in light of several limitations. Firstly, this study primarily surveyed shopping centre patrons who had participated in SEE. Future research should also survey shopping centre patrons who have not participated in SEE, especially their perception and emotion related to social crowding at SEE. Secondly, this study was confined to family-oriented SEE and thus future research should explore if the positive effect of social crowding on consumer enjoyment would sustain in other family-oriented and other types of SEE (for example, fashion shows and celebrity appearances). Thirdly, social crowding was the only determinant of consumer enjoyment of SEE in this study. Future research should explore the existence of other determinants (for example, entertainment atmosphere and value), and then investigate if the positive effect of social crowding on consumer enjoyment would sustain when those other determinants were introduced. Next, future research should conduct an experimental study to test if consumer enjoyment of SEE differs between socially crowded and uncrowded situations.

### **Conclusion**

This study aims to explore the possible positive effect of social crowding on consumer enjoyment of SEE in shopping centres. SEE is a form of collective hedonic event that is consumed by a mass of people in one location at one point in time and for the purpose of enjoyment. In this study, the results revealed that not only could social crowding have a positive effect on consumer enjoyment of SEE, but it could also have a positive effect on their shopping behaviour. This study has presented a positive measurement scale of social crowding and also has provided a starting point for future research that seeks to investigate the positive effect of social crowding on consumer experience with other collective hedonic events (for example, celebrity appearances).

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