Embracing Crowds: Increasing your Brand Attachment in Asia

Professor Gemma Calvert, Director for Research & Development, ACI; Professor of Marketing and International Business at Nanyang Business School, Nanyang Technological University
Koh Juan Zhen, Research Assistant, ACI

An unfortunate truth of shopping nowadays is that crowds are inevitable. Crowded shopping environments are all too common in daily life. Congestion in these public spaces is influenced by a number of factors. To list a few examples: thrift stores are more likely to be crowded than high-end department stores; weekends tend to see more shoppers than weekdays; and malls are generally more crowded before Christmas than after. What then, is the impact of crowds on consumer behaviour?

Previous literature addressing this question has mainly focused on the undesirable consequences of crowdedness – namely that it dulls perception and decreases feelings of control. In the context of a shopping environment, this can lead to diminished customer
satisfaction, shorter shopping durations, and negative product evaluations. Anyone who has ever been in a packed shopping mall can attest to its unpleasantness. Nevertheless, recent research suggests that there may be some rather unexpected benefits to brands of overcrowded environments.

A recent study published by Dr. Irene Huang, Fellow of the Institute on Asian Consumer Insight, and her colleagues, found that while overcrowding leads consumers to avoid interacting with one another, it nonetheless inclines them to become more attached to brands, as an alternative way of maintaining their basic need for belonging.

Crowds in Asia

Countries in Asia rank among some of the most densely populated in the world. Many countries and cities in Asia are notoriously crowded, with population densities reaching the thousands, and even tens of thousands, of people per square kilometre. The five most densely populated cities in the world are all located in Asia and have population densities ranging from 73,000 to 107,000.

The most congested places in the region include Singapore and Hong Kong, as well as parts of India, China, the Philippines and Indonesia, among others. A careful analysis of these locations reveals that very often, the most crowded places coincide with major cities. Given that the retail sector is likely to be larger in these cities due to higher affluence, it is clear that companies and brand owners would do well to understand the effects of crowdedness on consumers in order to improve brand image and maximise profits.

Dr. Irene and her colleagues surveyed a total of 1,949 people from around the world. They derived several interesting results with important implications. For instance, they found that when people are put in a crowded store that sells a brand they frequently use, their attachment to that brand increases. This is because as consumers try to avoid interacting with one another, they suffer an unfulfilled need to belong, which they reconcile by becoming more attached to the brand.

Factors affecting this interesting phenomenon include the customer’s aversion to the surrounding crowd; if the crowd consists of familiar faces or the customer is generally tolerant of close social distances this effect is diminished.

On the flip side, this also means that when a customer has fulfilled their need to belong, crowdedness has no effect on brand attachment. This is the case when the customer is shopping alongside friends. Moreover, if a brand reminds the customer of its use in a social context, brand attachment may actually decrease instead of increasing.
Managers and brand owners should take into account these effects when planning marketing strategy, particularly in Asia due to the ubiquity of crowds. For instance, they may make use of crowded places to engage their target audience and thereby strengthen the relationship between brand and consumer. An example of this could be advertising loyalty programs in congested areas, as customers will likely feel more inclined to join due to their heightened brand attachment.

In addition, with rapidly advancing technology, consumers’ real-time locations may be tracked as well. To an extent, this is already occurring, as in Supermal Karawaci, in which targeted ads set off by environmental triggers are sent to patrons’ mobile phones. These environmental triggers range from crowdedness to temperature. Supermal Karawaci is one of the largest malls located in Jakarta, which has a population density of almost 15,000 people per square kilometre. Use of such technology could therefore prove incredibly useful for retailers looking to bolster their bonds with customers.

In today’s saturated markets in which brands must compete fiercely with one another in order to attract customers, taking advantage of crowdedness is an important tool that every brand should keep in its arsenal. In order to stay ahead of the curve, marketers should make use of this overlooked dimension of brand attachment. After all, in the end, once everything is said and done, the brands left standing will be those who manage to foster strong relationships with consumers.

**References**


**About the Authors**

Gemma Calvert is Professor of Marketing at Nanyang Business School, and Director for Research & Development at the Institute for Asian Consumer Insight, NTU Singapore. A pioneer of neuromarketing, she helps companies to break into Asian emerging markets through deeper understanding of Asian consumers.

Koh Juan Zhen is a Research Assistant at ACI. Prior to joining ACI, she was an Assistant Marketing and Business Development Manager in the tourism industry and led various integrated marketing campaigns and partnership initiatives to drive reach and sales. Her research interests lie in the area of consumer behaviour and how emotions and subconscious mental processing influence decision-making.