The Anxious Customer Journey:

Scale Development for CCI-Induced Social Anxiety While Grocery Shopping

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Extended Abstract

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Introduction, Phenomenon, and Study Context

In the context of retail customer relationship marketing, relationships and interactions between customers and retailers, as well as between customers and other customers, are the means for creating customer (experience) journeys and, thus, ultimately, value co-creation (Agrawal et al., 2015; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The customer-to-firm relationship constitutes, therefore, only part of the customers' experience. In many brick-and-mortar retail service instances, several customers are present simultaneously, creating customer-to-customer interactions ("CCI"), verbal, non-verbal, or just through proximity or crowding. Multiple customers share the service space, whether waiting in a check-out queue or shopping in grocery store aisles. As such, CCI is inevitable, even when experienced in a predominantly non-verbal fashion (Nicholls, 2010). Customer-to-customer interactions are additional to retailers' efforts to create direct customer interactions and a shopping environment that builds positive customer experience journeys (Martin & Pranter, 1989). Customer-to-customer interactions are thus an integral part of the service experience. Differently stated, CCI is an element of service execution and, by extension, a determining factor for customer satisfaction. This reality is the impetus for a growing body of research into the impact of CCI on customer experience and satisfaction (Colm et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2005; Nicholls, 2010).

Grocery shopping is an especially relevant setting for investigating CCI phenomena, as food and fast-moving consumer goods retailers represent the most extensive retail sector in the world (Deloitte, 2021, p. 34). Visiting the grocery store is unavoidable for many

consumers. Existing CCI research consists mainly of studies examining the impact of crowding on consumer behavior (Tomazelli et al., 2017, p. 341). Considering the grocery store context, it seems intuitive, based on extant research, that crowded grocery stores result in lower customer satisfaction and, by extension, weaker customer relationships. However, the number of other customers may not be the only aspect impacting the perceived customer experience. Consumer behavior research underlines that individual personality traits also play a role in evaluating CCI experiences and, thus, the customer experience (Becker & Pizzutti, 2017, p. 399).

This study investigates social anxiety as a personality trait that introduces, by definition, (clinical) anxiety resulting from CCI (Trower & Gilbert, 1989, p. 20). Social anxiety impacts people across genders, cultures, and socioeconomic statuses. Included are clinical and non-clinical cases in which individuals suffer from varying levels or forms of social anxiety. Social anxiety manifests as extreme discomfort or even fear in social situations (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 189). Of course, all people assess and estimate others' evaluation and judgment of their behavior, appearance, or other traits. However, social anxiety sufferers experience a state of constant self-consciousness and awareness of others' evaluations and opinions (Trower and Gilbert, 1989, pp. 29 f.)—clinical social anxiety results in serious adverse effects on functionality and quality of life for those affected. Practically speaking, everyday tasks like grocery shopping become a mental and physical challenge.

From retailers' perspective, understanding social anxiety has practical implications as it is seemingly integral to customers' experience journey and consequent shopping and loyalty behavior.

Gap Analysis

Extant literature suggests that positive customer-to-customer interactions add customer value (Harris and Baron, 2004, 299 f.), On the other hand, negative CCI results in an unsatisfying shopping experience (Grove & Fisk, 1997, p. 75). Especially in retail research, the adverse effects of CCI garner the most academic attention. Based on the underlying theoretical framework, it is self-explanatory why a high customer density and a crowded store will negatively affect customer satisfaction (Hui & Bateson, 1991, p. 181).

Vice-versa, positive CCI experiences cause positive customer experiences and improve customer satisfaction and loyalty. (Harris and Baron, 2004, 299 f.). Positive customer-to-customer interaction includes a short conversation, a handshake, or non-verbal interaction. The effects of positive CCI can seemingly overcome deficiencies in the service environment or staff service failures.

Social anxiety is one of Germany's most common mental illnesses (seven to twelve percent of the population suffer from it, according to the Robert Koch-Institut (Wittchen et al., 2010, p. 12). Social anxiety patients can experience physiological symptoms such as; stress, nervousness, or even panic attacks Hartman (1986, p. 266). The American Psychiatric Association (1994, p. 411), in their "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders," defines *social anxiety* as "(…) a marked and persistent fear of social or performance situations in which embarrassment may occur (…)". The fear of being observed, analyzed, and subjected to critical comments in interpersonal relationships is a prevalent theme throughout definitions of social anxiety. Underlying the phenomenon are so-called dysfunctional beliefs that incite social anxiety in vulnerable individuals.

Research Questions and Study Design

This research examines CCI in grocery shopping, considers the role of social anxiety, and develops a conceptualization and measurement of social anxiety in retail. We are looking to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent does social anxiety influence customer-to-customer interaction in brick-and-mortar grocery shopping?

2. How is social anxiety in brick-and-mortar grocery shopping measurable?

3. What dimensions does social anxiety in brick-and-mortar consist of?

Method and Results

The research design here is scale development. The objective is to provide a relevant and robust representation of social anxiety in retail shopping. The scale development presented here is the first step in a research program into CCI and its effects on grocery shopping behaviors and consequent store operations management. A questionnaire was developed based on existing scales, mainly from clinical patient studies, adopted for retail shopping. Therefore, scale adaptation is based on psychological measurement items already existing in the literature.
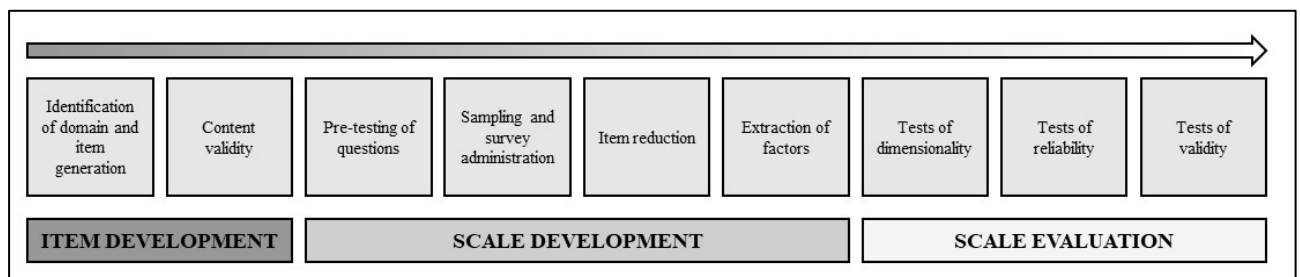
Following established scale development procedures, we developed the final measurement model and scale items below based on an analysis of 353 questionnaire responses.

Measurement Model
Cmin/Df = 2.460
RMSEA = .064
CFI= .950
NFI = .919
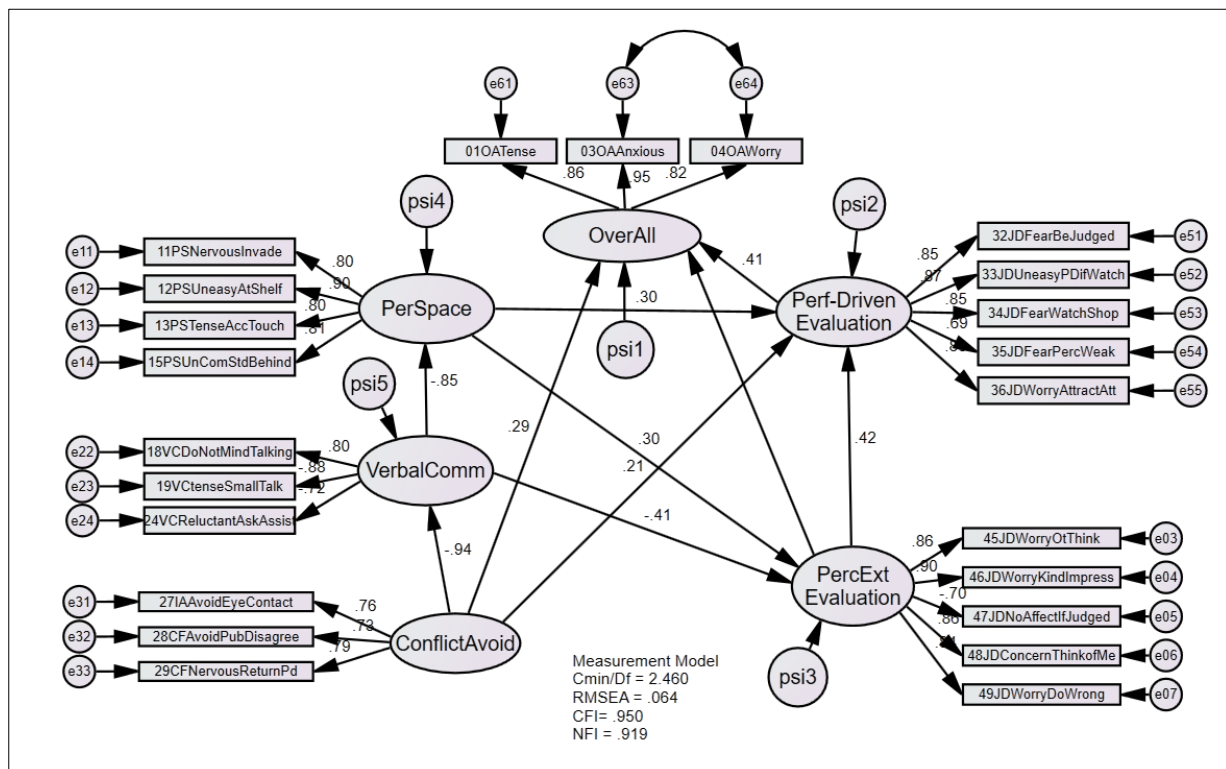
Dimension	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha
Overall	01 "I get tense when I think about going to the grocery store."	2.88	1.78	
	03 "I feel anxious about going to the grocery store."	2.46	1.69	0.91
	04 "I worry a lot when I go to the grocery store."	2.17	1.46	
Personal Space	11. "I am nervous when another shopper invades my personal space."	4.33	1.69	
	12 "I feel uneasy when another shopper stands beside me at the shelves."	3.94	1.75	0.90
	13 "I tense up when another shopper touches me, even when it is accidental."	3.82	1.91	
	14 "I avoid busy store times when I go grocery shopping."	4.35	1.80	
Verbal Communicatio n	18 (inv) "I do not mind talking to other shoppers."	4.0453	1.701	
	19 "I tense up when another shopper starts small talk with me."	3.8130	1.86	0.85

	24 " I am always reluctant to ask another shopper for assistance."	4.6997	1.92	
Conflict	27 "I avoid eye contact with other shoppers."	4.48	1.69	
Avoidance	28 "I avoid publicly disagreeing with other shoppers or store staff."	4.37	1.66	0.81
	29 "I get nervous returning purchases to the store."	4.72	1.92	
Performance-	32 "I fear being judged by other shoppers."	3.37	1.81	
Driven	33 "I feel uneasy selecting a product when other shoppers watch me.	3.57	1.91	
Evaluation	34 "I fear that other shoppers are watching my shopping."	2.80	1.75	0.91
	35 "I fear that other shoppers may perceive me as weak or ill."	2.33	1.63	
	36 "I worry that I may do something that attracts attention from other shoppers."	3.59	1.91	