Consumer behaviour and personal space

Lesson 4.2.3 | Consumer psychology

Core ideas

Personal space is the area around a person that they prefer others not to enter without permission.

In consumer settings, personal-space invasion can increase discomfort, stress and avoidance behaviour.

Crowding is partly subjective because the same number of people may feel comfortable or intrusive depending on context.

Interpersonal distance can affect service interactions, such as how close staff stand to customers.

Culture, age, relationship, gender norms, purpose of visit and setting can change preferred distance.

Design choices such as aisle width, seating layout and queue spacing can protect or reduce personal space.

Key terms

Personal space: The area around a person that they prefer others not to enter without permission.

Interpersonal distance: The physical distance between people during interaction.

Privacy: Control over access to oneself, one's information or one's space.

Territoriality: Feeling ownership or control over a space or object.

Crowding: The feeling that there are too many people or too little room.

Approach behaviour: Moving toward, staying in or engaging with a setting.

Avoidance behaviour: Leaving, withdrawing or reducing interaction with a setting.

Cultural norm: An expectation about behaviour shared within a cultural group.

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Further detail and evidence

Key study: Robson et al. (2011) investigated how table spacing and dining context affect perceived privacy, emotion and intended behaviour.

A web survey yielded 1,013 valid responses from an American sample obtained through a professional sampling company; 53% reported being female.

Random assignment presented a photograph showing tables 6, 12 or 24 inches apart and a business, friend or romantic dining scenario: nine combinations.

Questionnaires used seven-point agreement ratings. These were imagined experiences and intentions, not observed purchases.

Closer tables produced poorer comfort/privacy reactions and stronger avoidance intentions, especially in the romantic context. Women were less comfortable with tight spacing.

Link to individual/situational explanations and cultural differences; an intention to leave does not establish that somebody actually left.

Hall's four interpersonal-distance zones are intimate (very close relationships), personal (ordinary contact with friends), social (more formal interactions) and public (addressing an audience). Preferred distances vary with culture, relationship and context; the zones are a framework, not fixed biological rules.

Personal space can regulate overload (too much social/sensory input), arousal (uncomfortable stimulation) and behaviour constraint (feeling movement or action is restricted). Explain which function a restaurant layout threatens, rather than treating all discomfort as identical.

Example study - Milgram, Liberty, Toledo and Wackenhut (1986): confederates intruded into 129 real New York waiting lines. The field experiment varied one versus two intruders and the presence of passive confederate buffers; observers coded physical, verbal and non-verbal objections.

In Milgram et al., people behind the intrusion objected more often than those in front; two intruders elicited more objections, while passive buffers reduced reactions. Queue defence was local to the intrusion point rather than coordinated across the whole line. Natural behaviour supports ecological validity, but unwitting participants and possible confrontation create ethical concerns.

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Continued

Distinguish this 1986 queue study from Milgram's 1963 obedience study in AS. It provides evidence about defending a place in a queue and its social structure; it is not a second obedience experiment.

Hall's distance zones are intimate, personal, social and public. Approximate conventional US boundaries are up to 18 inches, 18 inches-4 feet, 4-12 feet and beyond 12 feet; these are culturally variable conventions, not fixed biological limits.

Explanations of crowding: overload means demands exceed processing capacity; arousal concerns stimulation/activation; behavioural constraint concerns blocked goals and reduced freedom. Each can predict discomfort, but suggests a different mechanism.

Queue intrusion: Milgram et al. (1986) used confederates to enter real queues and observed objections. Reactions could be verbal/nonverbal, and people close to the intrusion were especially affected. A queue is also a social rule about legitimate position, not only a distance arrangement.

Applying the ideas

Robson measures imagined restaurant spacing and intentions. A close table during an intimate meal may feel more intrusive than during an ordinary business lunch. Milgram records real responses to a rule violation. Neither permits treating every person's preferred space as identical.

Evaluation and connections

The conclusion concerns the fit between space and dining purpose: maximising seating capacity can conflict with customer comfort and willingness to return.

Standardised photographs and random assignment aid comparisons. Online self-report, uneven demographics, banquette seating and one national context limit realism and cultural generalisation.

A large online sample supports comparisons but hypothetical judgements can differ from real dining. Covert queue observation reduces demand characteristics but raises consent and distress concerns. Define objections clearly and check observer agreement. Personal-space explanations should include culture, relationship and task.