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Companion shopping: the influence on mall brand experiences

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the influence of a shopping companion on mall brand experience.

Design/methodology/approach – The quantitative multi-group structural equation model study contrasts three shopper types: those shopping alone; those shopping with friends; and those shopping with family. Two categories are shoppers in a group. Nine hypotheses evaluate the impact of shopping with a companion.

Findings – The results show that companions enhance the emotional brand experience. Further, shoppers with family companions are most able to enhance brand evaluation from mall brand experience. Shopping companions help co-create the shopping brand experience.

Research limitations/implications – The findings are limited to Australian shoppers and contrast with Canadian studies, emphasizing friends. Alone shoppers place priority on price and only the alone shoppers are price-sensitive. The findings help address the gap in the literature, namely, understanding focal retail consumers in a group situation.

Practical implications – Retailers and mall managers in planned shopping centers could consider developing different retail strategies and brand experiences, which address the specific types of customer groups or alone shoppers.

Social implications – The paper is explicitly about social influences.

Originality/value – This original research contributes new perspectives to understanding the role of companion shoppers as co-creators of the focal shopper's mall brand experience.

Keywords Co-creation, Companion shopping, Experiential branding, Mall brand experience, Shopping experiential value

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Shopping malls dominate Australian retailing, with growth from refurbishments rather than building new malls. The largest malls have more than 300 tenants and cater for extensive shopping needs, including fashion, homewares and services. Malls have replaced department stores as "cathedrals of consumption" (Backes, 1997; Howard, 2015). Increasing attention focuses on a "total shopping experience" rather than merchandise alone. Management enables the mall experience by investing in interesting architecture, lighting, color, ambience and an appealing retail tenant mix.

Greater attention on consumer experiences compared with merchandise transactions is consistent with the Marketing Science Institute (2014) research priorities, which signaled the need for more such research. This paper responds to that call by studying consumers' mall brand experiences, and explicitly focusing on the social context of mall brand experiences by researching the companion shopper's role. The social context is particularly relevant in the mall situation because conceivably the mall is a community hub bringing the community together. The study responds to broader calls (Bagozzi, 2000; Verhoef *et al.*, 2009) for research into how the social environment influences the customer experience. Despite the apparent domination of mall shopping in several countries and the evident preponderance of companion shopping, few studies on the effects of companion shopping exist.

Therefore, the paper responds to twin research needs: understanding consumer experiences, and the social context influence, by addressing the research question:

RQ1. Does shopping with a companion enhance the mall brand experience?

The paper is situated within the broad literature of social influences on consumer behavior, with particular focus on the social influence of shopping companions during the actual offline mall brand shopping experience.

The situation for the study is a sample of Australian shoppers in a mall environment. The study contrasts three shopper types: those shopping alone; those shopping with friends; and those shopping with family. Of those categories, two are shoppers in a group. To what extent does the mall brand experience vary across these three types of shoppers? *A priori*, the study presumes that group shopping is more interactive, experiential and interesting. Shopping with someone, either a friend or a family member seems likely to enhance the mall brand experience, hence the reason for empirical investigation.

The study contributes to the broader experiential brand literature by showing that companion shoppers influence mall brand experience. In cases of friends, or family as shopping companions, the finding is that a companion does enhance the mall brand experience. The results indicate that the influence is slightly greater for family compared to friends as companions, perhaps indicating that closer ties are more influential than looser ties (kinship vs friendship). Consumer-to-consumer interaction facilitates shopping experience; that is, shopping companions help to co-create the mall brand experience.

The paper next canvasses the extant literature and proposes a conceptual framework and nine hypotheses. The methodology explains the design and conduct of the study. The presentation of the structural equation modeling (SEM) results creates the basis for the ensuing discussion. Finally, the theoretical contributions and practical implications are explored, and future research agenda explained.

The literature

Two broad literatures are relevant, social context and shopping companions. The first, social context, belongs to a broader consumer behavior literature, but sets the scene for studying social influence. More directly relevant to this study's perspective, is the second literature, companion shopping, with three sub-literatures: experiential branding; the link between brand experience and brand evaluation; and companion shopping. Overall, while the extant literature investigates the impact of companion shopping on the shopping experience, a more nuanced understanding is yet to emerge.

Social context literature

As Dahl (2013) observes, social influence on consumer decisions has a long and varied research history. Sometimes, mere (non-interacting) social presence can be influential (Argo *et al.*, 2005). Social presence makes it more likely that respondents will identify and act in socially desirable ways (Puntoni and Tavassoli, 2007). Conversely, the purchaser's product familiarity (Dahl *et al.*, 2001) can mitigate the impact of social presence. Consumer research continues to develop on how group factors can explain individual choices. For example, Quester and Steyer (2010) examine how group opinion can explain consumers' individual (food) choice in a group setting.

The current study considers the effect of companion shoppers, not the mere presence of other shoppers either crowding, or being similar or not, to the shopper (Kwon *et al.*, 2016). Further, the study makes no assumption about who is buying what and for whom. Thus, the difference of shopping for oneself vs shopping for someone else (Gillison and Reynolds, 2016) is not germane to this study. Mall purchases tend to cover the spectrum of hedonic and utilitarian products, and often a mix of both.

There is some relevance to broader studies of peer-to-peer customer co-creation. It is pertinent to consider the motives of consumers, who help in the form of customer citizenship behavior. Oyedele and Simpson (2011) show that altruism and enhancement are the strongest motives for helping. Rosenbaum and Massiah (2007) suggest that

customers helping other customers often operate in reciprocal mutual exchange. In the more specific contexts of kinship (families) and friendship (friends), the motives, which these two studies identified, are amplified, and perhaps institutionalized, hence the direction of the current project.

The social interaction between the focal shopper and family members or friends is studied in this paper within the experience of the retail mall domain. Mall factors, like atmospherics, entertainment and flow, are complex and unique to each mall brand, and provide a multi-sensory environment, which can be both exciting and challenging. Regards excitement, companions can help shoppers optimize the positive emotions and responses to the stimuli as the group navigates the mall (Chebat *et al.*, 2014). Regards the challenges, companions can provide support to alleviate stress when the mall stimuli become overwhelming (Lucia-Palacios *et al.*, 2018).

The social influence literature is in the consumer behavior domain. The detailed mechanisms of why and how social influence works in the companion shopping situation is beyond the scope of the current study. However, this study complements the larger pursuit of understanding the role of social influences on individual consumers.

Experiential branding literature
In traditional retailing, Machleit and Eroglu (2000) demonstrate that atmosphere and atmospherics in shopping environments can evoke emotional responses in consumers. Numerous articles support the same notion, including Babin and Attaway (2000) and the Turley and Milliman (2000) literature survey. The same nexus between atmospherics and emotional responses is demonstrated in the online shopping world (Kim and Forsythe, 2009). Atmospherics can be measured generally (Merrilees *et al.*, 2016) or very specifically (Kim and Forsythe, 2009; Turley and Milliman, 2000). However, despite a considerable body of literature on the topic of understanding the link between retail atmospherics and emotional responses, the branding consequences are less-researched.

Role of brand experience and its impact on brand evaluation
The Brakus *et al.* (2009) seminal article, on measuring brand experience and its impact on brand evaluation, proposes and measures four dimensions of brand experience: sensory; emotional; intellectual; and physical. They demonstrate the consequences of high levels of brand experience especially in terms of loyalty. The Brakus *et al.* (2009) paper is the benchmark for subsequent work. Foster and McLelland (2015) employ an alternative approach, comparative case studies, to examine the use of branded experiential themes in various retail contexts. They show that the use of branded themes can increase shopping enjoyment. In an online context, studies show a connection between positive brand experience and subsequent brand evaluation (Merrilees and Fry, 2002; Sicilia *et al.*, 2005).

Role of friends and family influencing the shopping experience
Limited research examines the role of friends and family influencing the shopping experience. Customer experience is the focus for the Verhoef *et al.* (2009) literature review, which indicates a major gap showing the lack of research in understanding how the social environment influences the customer experience. Specifically, following Bagozzi (2000), Verhoef *et al.* (2009) call for future research to examine the way customers act in groups, such as with friends and families.

Previous research indicates that shopping with a companion, compared to shopping alone, is likely to increase the retail spend (Granbois, 1968; Hart and Dale, 2014; Sommer *et al.*, 1992; Woodside and Sims, 1976). Although limited, studies do span many decades and consistently support a positive relationship between having a shopping

companion present and total shopping spend. These studies make a simple comparison between shopping alone and with a companion or pal, without differentiating whether the companion is a friend or family member. Other studies offer a possible reason for the additional expenditure arising from shopping with a companion. It may be that a companion encourages greater expenditure through less perceived risk related to a purchase decision (Kiecker and Hartman, 1993), or by giving the focal shopper more self-confidence (Kiecker and Hartman, 1994).

Compared to shopping spend, there is less research on the impact of a shopping companion on the shopping experience. Hart and Dale (2014) indicate a positive impact of companion shopper on a satisfactory shopping experience for restaurant diners and for male general retail shopping. Similarly, two Canadian studies, Borges *et al.* (2010) and Chebat *et al.* (2014), suggest a positive role of the shopping pal on the mall experience. It is especially pertinent that the two Canadian studies extend earlier research by delineating the companion shopper into two categories, friend or family. This important advance allows for the differential effect of the companion shopper depending on whether they are friend or family. Both studies explicitly compare three categories of shoppers: shopping alone and two types of companion (friends or family), and thus relate to the current study. The Canadian studies find that shopping with friends has a positive influence on mall arousal.

A corollary to the effect of a shopping companion on shopping experience and total spend is consideration of the effect on price sensitivity. If companion shoppers are enhancing the shopping experience in a hedonic type situation, then it is possible that alone shoppers are focusing more on the functional aspects of shopping, such as price or service. Such an impact is demonstrated by Wakefield and Inman (2003) and Jeong *et al.* (2019), who show greater price sensitivity for alone shoppers. Similarly, alone shoppers might rely more on the service attribute of retailers because to an extent, the companion shopper provides advice to the focal shopper (Prus, 1993), which becomes a substitute for the salesperson. Consumer-to-consumer advice becomes a substitute for retailer to consumer advice. In a qualitative American study, Lindsey-Mullikin and Munger (2011) show the companion shopper performs many duties traditionally performed by the salesperson, thus enhancing the customer's retail experience.

Gap in the literature
The major gap in the literature to address is the discovery of how the patron mall experience is moderated by the presence of a shopping companion. The research questions are whether the presence of a shopping companion is able to: first, moderate (enhance) the relationship between mall atmospherics and the mall brand experience; and second, moderate (enhance) the relationship between mall brand experience and mall brand evaluation. No known studies have addressed these questions. The previous literature on the effects on companion shopping has emphasized either shopping expenditure (Granbois, 1968; Hart and Dale, 2014; Sommer *et al.*, 1992; Wakefield and Inman, 2003; Woodside and Sims, 1976), or shopping experience (Borges *et al.*, 2010; Chebat *et al.*, 2014; Kiecker and Hartman, 1993, 1994; Prus, 1993). Apparently, none has an explicit branding orientation. Thus, the branding implications of the effects of companion shopping are relatively untraversed.

Conceptual framework
To understand the differential effect of having a companion when shopping at a mall, it is necessary initially to provide a framework explaining how mall experience is built in the consumer's mind. At one level, mall experience is the total experience of the mall patron, especially driven by mall atmospherics, but also by merchandise, service and price. Mall satisfaction represents the overall level of a satisfactory mall experience. A recent

study (Merrilees *et al.*, 2016) provides such a framework, with the added component of the consequences of mall satisfaction on consumer-mall brand attitudes. That is, mall experiences can build brand preferences, as measured here in the form of patron's mall brand attitudes – a powerful way of measuring consumers' overall evaluation of a mall brand.

Building on Merrilees *et al.* (2016) and consistent with Kumar and Kim (2014), the following two-equation model is presented as a base platform for effectively explaining mall satisfaction and consumers' mall brand attitudes:

$$MBS = f(MM; MA; MP; MS), \tag{1}$$

$$MBA = f(MBS; MM), \tag{2}$$

where MBS is the shopping mall patrons' perceived mall brand satisfaction; MM the patrons' perceived quality of mall merchandise; MA the patrons' perceived quality of mall atmosphere; MP the patrons' perceived level of low mall prices; MS the patrons' perceived quality of mall service; and MBA the patrons' level of mall brand attitudes.

Equation (1) captures the role of atmospherics affecting the mall brand experience, primarily through the path from atmosphere to mall brand satisfaction. Other potential influences on mall satisfaction include merchandise quality, service and price. Equation (2) captures the role of brand experience influencing the mall brand evaluation primarily through the path from mall brand satisfaction to mall brand attitudes.

The two-equation model is influenced by whether the focal shopper is alone or with a companion. The group type moderates the model. Using this foundation, specific hypotheses are developed as follows.

First is the question of whether shopping with a companion influences the role of service in building the mall experience. The standard service greeting used by many retailers is arguably ideally directed to consumers who are shopping alone. As various authors note (Lindsey-Mullikin and Munger, 2011; Prus, 1993), consumers, who are shopping with friends or family, tend to rely more on each other and less on the retailer. Thus, the standard service approach is most relevant for alone shoppers. A less active and less intrusive approach is necessary for groups. Thus, the first hypothesis is as follows:

H1. Alone shoppers are more service sensitive than focal shoppers with companions.

Second, the role of price influencing the shopping experience is a major consideration. Does shopping with a companion influence the role of price in shaping the mall experience? Given the magnitude of studies examining either price elasticity or price sensitivity (for one recent interesting study see Ramirez and Goldsmith, 2009), surprisingly, there is a paucity of studies addressing the impact of having a shopping companion on price sensitivity. The work of Wakefield and Inman (2003) is a notable exception. Their study found that alone shoppers were more price sensitive than shoppers with companions were. Recent research (Jeong *et al.*, 2019) supports the notion that alone shoppers are more price sensitive. The current authors draw on these two studies, inferring that companions will make the focal shopper more reluctant to give up quality and fit-for-purpose in favor of a lower price. It is more likely that the alone shopper, unfettered by the norms and expectations of other (companion) shoppers, is more able to place greater weighting on price. Thus, the second hypothesis is as follows:

H2. Alone shoppers are more price sensitive than focal shoppers with a companion.

Third, the role of atmospherics influencing the shopping experience is a further major consideration. Does shopping with a companion enhance the mall brand experience?

A fundamental feature of shopping with a companion is that the interaction stimulates pleasure. To an extent, shopping journey with a companion is an end itself; to be enjoyed for its own sake and not purely to make consumer decisions. Emotional utility could indeed be the raison d'être of companion shopping. There might be other motives such as risk minimization, but pleasure-seeking seems a probable primary motive for shopping with a companion. Despite the likely key role for emotional benefits, only a limited number of studies address the issue. Hart and Dale (2014) demonstrate a positive influence of a companion on shopping experience in a restaurant context, and also for males (but curiously not for females in this context) in a retailer context. Further, Lucia-Palacios *et al.* (2018) demonstrate that Spanish mall customers with companions feel less stress while shopping. Essentially, companions help reduce negative emotions, which could be construed as equivalent to increasing positive shopping emotions and hence a more enjoyable mall experience. Two Canadian mall studies examine the direct effect of companionship on positive shopping emotions and experience (Borges *et al.*, 2010; Chebat *et al.*, 2014). Both studies support the notion that a companion enhances the emotional shopping experience, but only for friends, and not family. Notwithstanding, the current study maintains the expectation that pleasure-seeking experiences is a primary motive shopping with a companion. Specifically, mall atmospherics will be important for building mall brand experiences for shoppers with companions. Thus, the third and fourth hypotheses are as follows:

H3. Focal shoppers with a friend as a companion, imbue a greater weighting than alone shoppers on mall atmospherics to build mall brand experiences.

H4. Focal shoppers with a family member as a companion, imbue a greater weighting than alone shoppers on mall atmospherics to build mall brand experiences.

A further set of hypotheses considers the relative role of different antecedents of mall brand attitudes. Does shopping with a companion influence the relative weighting of different antecedents? Comparing merchandise and mall satisfaction, arguably mall brand satisfaction will have a greater weighting or role for shoppers with companions, because mall brand satisfaction is more experiential, which in turn is more relevant for shoppers with companions. Thus, the fifth and sixth hypotheses are as follows:

H5. Mall brand experience (mall satisfaction) will have a greater influence on mall brand attitudes for focal shoppers with a friend as a companion, than alone shoppers.

H6. Mall brand experience (mall satisfaction) will have a greater influence on mall brand attitudes for focal shoppers with a family member as a companion, than alone shoppers.

These first six hypotheses compare one shopper type with another, whereas *H7* applies to all shoppers. On one hand, mall atmospherics are just one part of the total mall experience for patrons, along with other parts such as merchandise, service and price. On the other hand, mall atmospherics has a potentially primary role in creating experience, given that it reflects the ambience, mood and overall milieu of being in the mall. Malls, more than single stores, have built an image as the "cathedrals of consumption," where the shopping journey (experience) is valued for its own sake, even relative to the merchandise being sought (Gardner and Sheppard, 1989; Underhill, 2004). Compared to the other parts of mall experience, mall atmospherics is almost purely "experiential" and likely to be the dominant influence in building a positive mall experience. Thus, the seventh hypothesis is as follows:

H7. Mall atmospherics will have the greatest influence on mall satisfaction, for all types (groups) of shoppers, both those with or without a companion.

The final two hypotheses examine the impact of having a companion on the total shopping expenditure. Earlier studies demonstrate that shopping with a companion, compared to shopping alone, is likely to increase the retail spend of the focal shopper (Granbois, 1968; Hart and Dale, 2014; Sommer *et al.*, 1992; Woodside and Sims, 1976). However, the earlier research did not examine family and friends separate as companions. Thus, the eighth and ninth hypotheses are as follows:

H8. Focal shoppers with a friend companion will spend more than alone shoppers.

H9. Focal shoppers with a family companion will spend more than alone shoppers.

Methodology
The current study adopts a quantitative approach using a consumer perspective. A survey instrument was developed using factors from the literature known to influence consumers' retail brand attitudes. The personally administered survey included questions about the four major retail-marketing elements: product (merchandise), pricing, atmosphere and service. Further items asked consumers for their perceptions of mall brand attitudes and mall satisfaction. The source of the scales is Merrilees *et al.* (2016). Each item is measured on a five-point Likert scale, anchored at 5 (strongly agree) and 1 (strongly disagree). All variables are reliable and valid. The trained interviewer collecting data asked whether the respondent was shopping alone or with a friend or with a family member, enabling allocation of the respondent to one of the three categories.

The context for the study was a large Australian shopping mall, which caters to a wide cross-section of the community, enhancing the representativeness of the sample. By way of contrast, the two Canadian studies combine malls from two extreme situations, upscale and downscale. The researchers trained survey administrators, who collected responses directly within a major, large, Australian shopping centre (mall). Potential respondents were approached using an intercept method. Face-to-face surveys tend to have higher response rates than other modes and thus potentially, less nonresponse bias (Hox and De Leeuw, 1994). A relatively high response rate of 50 percent was achieved. To ensure a greater diversity of responses and further reduce potential nonresponse bias, interviews were spread over several weeks and over various days and times.

A broad cross-section of shoppers participated, 59 percent female, typical of most Australian mall patronage (e.g. Bailey, 2013). The age distribution was skewed to younger groups, with a median age of 31 years. In total, 48 percent were in the 18–29 group; 25 percent in the 30–39 group; 13 percent in the 40–49 group; 9 percent in the 50–59 group; and 5 percent in the 60 years and older group. Gender and age differences were minimal across the mall retail mix variables of merchandise, price, service and atmosphere. The final sample was 755 shoppers. Respondents shopping with a companion comprised 75 percent of the sample, divided between family companion 47 percent and friend companion 28 percent. The three shopping types had low correlations with the mall retail mix variables.

The data analysis uses reflective scales within multi-group SEM with AMOS software. A structural model is estimated incorporating two dependent variables: customer mall brand satisfaction and customer mall brand-attitudes. The current study follows Dabholkar *et al.* (1996) in using a partial disaggregated method of analysis. Thus, two composite variables are created for each construct by randomly selecting indicator items and then averaging them. The advantages of such an approach include the reduction of measurement error, lessening the chances of spurious correlations among scale items, and achieving more stable structural co-efficient estimates (Little *et al.*, 2002).

Results

Initially, the data are examined to see if there are any differences in the purpose of the shopping trip for the three categories. There is a difference in the pattern of purposes across groups ($\chi^2 = 25.68$, significant at $p < 0.05$) and interestingly. Interestingly, focal shoppers with a family companion do seek shopping experiences and variety of stores somewhat more than the other two categories.

The SEM model was run with three groups: alone shoppers; shoppers with a family companion; and shoppers with a friend companion. Each group is a fully defined, binary mutually exclusive categorical variable. Thus, the model can be estimated as a multi-group SEM model. The SEM measurement model is satisfactory, with a good fit with the data: GFI = 0.97, AGFI = 0.94, CFI = 0.99, NFI = 0.97, $\chi^2 = 119.4$, χ^2/df = 1.59, RMSEA = 0.03. The good fit of the measurement model indicates construct validity, i.e., validity of the constructs. Further validity testing examined discriminant validity using the Fornell and Larcker (1981) test, namely, whether the square of the correlation of each pair of constructs is less than the average variance extracted (AVE) of each construct. Table I shows the results, with all constructs discriminately different to all other constructs.

The initial Multi-Group structural SEM model estimation was not optimal for two reasons. First, the service variable was not statistically significant for any of the three groups of mall patrons. Second, a number of outliers were identified. The SEM model was re-run, without the service variable and with the outliers removed (n is reduced from 755 to 742).

The resulting multi-group structural model has a good fit with the data, with GFI = 0.97, AGFI = 0.94, CFI = 0.99, NFI = 0.97, $\chi^2 = 122.53$, χ^2/df = 1.51, RMSEA = 0.03. The Bollen Stine bootstrap value is $p = 0.26$, which is insignificant at the 5 percent level, and also demonstrates a good fitting model. The R^2 magnitudes are large, including a high ability to explain the variance in each sub-model. In terms of the sub-models explaining mall brand satisfaction, the R^2 values are 0.82, 0.77 and 0.69, respectively, across the groups of alone shoppers, with a family companion and with a friend companion. Regarding the mall-brand attitude sub-models, the R^2 values are 0.69; 0.57; and 0.67, respectively, for the same three groups.

Table II shows the detailed structural parameter estimates. One striking difference is that the price coefficient is relatively large (0.29) and significant (0.01 level) for those

Table I.
Squared bivariate correlations and average variance extracted (AVE)

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Mall prices	0.86					
2. Mall atmosphere	0.21	0.70				
3. Mall merchandise	0.32	0.30	0.83			
4. Mall service	0.29	0.29	0.28	0.92		
5. Mall satisfaction	0.22	0.34	0.38	0.32	0.87	
6. Mall brand attitudes	0.17	0.31	0.31	0.18	0.37	0.82

Notes: Diagonal shows AVE for each scale. Other numbers are squared inter-scale correlations

Table II.
Models of mall satisfactory brand experience and brand attitudes across three shopper categories (standardized coefficients and t-values)

Path in structural model	Shopping alone $n = 187$	Shopping with family $n = 348$	Shopping with friends $n = 207$
Merchandise → Satisfactory brand experience	0.15 (1.07)	0.24 (2.01)*	0.22 (0.62)
Pricing → Satisfactory brand experience	0.29 (2.87)**	−0.09 (1.23)	−0.09 (0.56)
Atmosphere → Satisfactory brand experience	0.56 (4.24)**	0.74 (6.09)**	0.69 (2.09)*
Merchandise → Brand attitudes	0.41 (2.88)**	0.20 (2.30)*	0.41 (3.37)**
Satisfactory brand experience → Brand attitudes	0.46 (3.23)**	0.61 (7.55)**	0.47 (3.87)**

Notes: *,**Significant at 0.05 and 0.01 levels, respectively

shopping alone, but small and insignificant for the two groups. That is, only the alone shoppers are price sensitive. Another major difference applies to the atmosphere coefficient in the mall brand satisfaction sub-model. For alone shoppers, the influence of atmosphere on satisfaction ($\beta = 0.46$) is the lowest of the three shopper categories; with family companion shoppers having the highest coefficient, 0.74, and friend shoppers next at 0.69.

A further major difference arises in the last two links in Table II, in terms of the influence of both merchandise and satisfactory brand experience on brand attitudes. Comparing the shopping alone group with shopping with family group, merchandise has a greater influence for the alone shoppers, whereas a satisfactory experience has a greater influence for the shopping with family group.

In terms of hypothesis testing, each hypothesis can be considered sequentially. As explained earlier, the service variable was dropped from the model because it was always statistically insignificant. Thus, *H1* is not supported.

H2 is supported, with a strong and statistically significant price coefficient for alone shoppers in Table II. *H7* is supported in that the mall atmosphere coefficient is clearly the largest influence on mall satisfaction for all three types of shoppers. *H5* is not supported, as evident in Table II. The coefficients linking mall satisfaction and mall brand attitudes are almost identical for alone shoppers and focal shoppers with a friend, namely, 0.46 and 0.47, respectively.

Focusing on the focal shopper with a family companion, several hypotheses can be taken jointly. Multi-group model comparisons one pair at a time seems to be the best way of analyzing multi-group SEM (Hair *et al.*, 2017). Starting with a comparison of alone shopper and shopper with a family companion, the statistical differences comparing the metric equivalence of the parameters are the greatest. Four of the parameters can be jointly tested for equivalence: the parameters are the price coefficient in the brand satisfaction sub-model; the ambience coefficient in the brand satisfaction sub-model; the merchandise coefficient in the brand attitude sub-model; and the brand satisfaction coefficient in the brand attitude sub-model. When the parameters are jointly constrained to equality for both alone shoppers and those shopping with a family companion, the difference in the χ^2 value between the two SEM models (unconstrained and constrained) is noted. The change in χ^2 is 15.61 (4 degrees of freedom because of four imposed constraints). This magnitude exceeds the critical value of χ^2 of 9.49 (4 degrees of freedom) at 0.05. Thus, we reject the null hypothesis of equality of the four parameters across the two groups: alone shopping and shopping with a family companion. Consequently, *H2, H4* and *H6* are supported.

Focusing next on the focal shopper with a friend as a companion, the study compares the pair of groups to be analyzed as alone shoppers and those shopping with a friend. Because both coefficients are very similar in the brand attitude sub-model, constraints were only applied in the brand satisfaction sub-model. Specifically, two parameters were constrained: the price coefficient and the atmosphere coefficient. Comparing the difference in the χ^2 value between the unconstrained and the constrained SEM models, the change in χ^2 is 7.36, exceeding the critical value of χ^2 of 5.99, with two degrees of freedom at 0.05. Thus, we reject the equality hypothesis for these two coefficients (price and ambience) across the two groups: alone shopping and shopping with a friend companion, supporting *H2* and *H3*.

Information was also collected on mall dollar expenditure for each focal shopper respondent. The average dollar spend per focal shopper varies from AU\$121 for alone shoppers; AU\$126 for shoppers with friends; to AU\$191 for shoppers with family. *H8* is not supported as there is little difference between the dollar expenditure of alone shoppers vs those shopping with a friend. However, focal shoppers with family, spend more than 50 percent more than alone shoppers, supporting *H9*.

Discussion

Shopping with a companion seems a more emotionally enriching shopping experience than shopping alone. Mall atmosphere is the key experiential variable in the study and the results indicate that both groups shopping with a companion have a greater atmosphere coefficient in the mall brand satisfaction sub-model compared to those shopping alone.

The findings highlight that companions enhance emotional experience, which is consistent with the two key Canadian studies (Borges *et al.*, 2010; Chebat *et al.*, 2014). Most of the other related companion shopping literature concerns the effect on total shopping spends. However, Hart and Dale (2014) also demonstrate that companions can elevate the emotional shopping experience. Combining the current results with the earlier literature provides a consistent and compelling case that shopping with companions contributes to a more stimulating and enjoyable shopping experience. A subtle difference in the present paper is the emphasis on the mall brand experience, slightly more specific than just the shopping experience.

In terms of the differential effect of shopping companion on emotional shopping experience depending on the type of companion, the two Canadian studies are the only known prior studies to consider this aspect. Both studies ascertain that, using the shopping alone benchmark, a companion enhances the emotional shopping experience only in the case of friends. The current Australian study finds that both types of shopping companions, family and friends, enhance the emotional shopping experience. It is difficult to compare the current Australian results with the Canadian studies. Possibly the Australian result is somewhat more representative of the population of mall shoppers as it uses a large, broad range mall, compared to two more polar-positioned malls in Canada. Another explanation is that shopping with a family member may be the norm in Australia; a possibility that is consistent with the sample characteristics, where the numbers of family and friends are about equal in the Canadian studies, but families are much more present in the Australian sample. Yet another explanation may be cultural, with the particular Canadian studies having a strong regional French-Canadian emphasis. More research is needed to better explain the Canadian-Australian differences.

Apart from examining the effect of shopping companions on emotional shopping experience, another consideration is the relationship between mall brand experience and evaluation of the brand through mall brand attitudes. As argued in the literature review, some studies have examined this question (e.g. Merrilees and Fry, 2002; Sicilia *et al.*, 2005) in general, but few in the context of shopping with companions. In the brand attitude sub-model, the mall satisfaction coefficient is similar for both alone shoppers and those shopping with a friend companion. However, the mall satisfaction coefficient is much greater for those shopping with a family member. The difference is statistically significant when comparing the alone shoppers with focal shoppers with a family companion. The results indicate that those shoppers with family companions are most able to drive brand evaluation from mall brand experience.

A final consideration of the discussion concerns the alone shopper. The Australian alone shopper is markedly different from the two companion types, with only the alone shopper having a significant role for price in shaping mall brand satisfaction. Thus only the alone shopper demonstrates any overt price sensitivity, a finding that is consistent with the literature (Jeong *et al.*, 2019; Wakefield and Inman, 2003). Alone shoppers do place credence on atmosphere, but less so than the two groups do. Conversely, shopping with a companion seems to places more emphasis on the ambience and enjoying the experience, diverting attention away from functional matters like minimizing price paid.

Theoretical contributions

The paper and the results are a major response to the Bagozzi (2000) and Verhoef *et al.* (2009) challenge to understand better the impact of shopping in a group context. In particular, the paper contributes to an understanding of shopping with a companion in a mall situation.

The contributions are embodied in the testing of nine hypotheses emphasizing the impact of having a companion shopper.

A major contribution is that the paper demonstrates alone shoppers are more price sensitive than both groups of focal shoppers with companions. Wakefield and Inman (2003) and Jeong *et al.* (2019) demonstrated such a trait, with the current study becoming one of a small number of studies to do the same. Another major contribution is demonstrating that shopping with family or friends does enhance the emotional aspects of the mall brand experience. The primary way that this works is the link between the ambience/atmosphere of the retail environment and a satisfactory brand experience, which is greater for those shopping with either friends or family. The results build on two related Canadian studies. However, the current study takes a more branding rather than pure shopping perspective and is able to control for price, which the Canadian studies did not attempt to do.

A further contribution of the study, mainly for those shopping with family, the satisfactory brand experience has a relatively greater weighting in influencing consumer shopping mall brand attitudes. Mall brand experiences are most relevant for those shopping with family, as judged by the role of mall experiences in evaluating the mall brand. Another way of interpreting the results is to say that co-shoppers, through consumer-to-consumer interaction, facilitate shopping experiential value, that is, shopping companions help co-create the shopping brand experience.

Finally, the study contributes to a better understanding of the role of a shopping companion on the dollar expenditure on the focal shopper. Shoppers with family members tend to spend considerably more money compared to both those shopping with friends or alone. Previous studies have not differentiated the impact of family vs friend companions on dollar expenditure.

Practical implications
Malls serve as a community hub, so mall managers should recognize their social responsibility in enhancing the satisfactory mall experience of all shoppers, including alone and lonely shoppers. The results show that mall brand ambience increases mall satisfaction for all shoppers, including alone ones. Alone shoppers can be supported in other ways, via low prices in particular due to their greater price sensitivity, and perhaps through retail salespeople acting as quasi social support providers.

Conversely, experience means even more to consumers shopping with companions. For this segment of consumers, it is essential for retailers to create a congenial shopping atmosphere. The shopping brand ambience must both stimulate and comfort the process for the shopper. The full set of atmospheric tools, including visual merchandising, colors and layout flow, all need to be harnessed and harmonized. Retail service is still needed, to reinforce the group decision and to conclude the sale. The objective is to give high priority to creating an overall, holistic, pleasant and powerful, brand experience that engages with consumers shopping with companions in the mall.

Scope and future research agenda
The study is limited to Australian shoppers. Further testing of the hypotheses in other countries may generate alternative results. Already, the current Australian results contrast with the two Canadian studies. Why do the Canadian studies emphasize shopping with friends while the Australian study highlights shopping with family? The reasons for the differences could be explored, with further benefit of including other countries/cultures in the comparison. Future studies might also include an explicit cultural dimension. Additionally, qualitative studies such as Lindsey-Mullikin and Munger (2011) could usefully provide insight into a more detailed and nuanced understanding of why the mall branding experience is different for those shopping with companions.

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