



Lonely consumers and their friend the retail salesperson

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Consumer loneliness
Retail salesperson
Adaptive selling
Shopping as a social experience
PLS-SEM

ABSTRACT

Store-based retailers face constant challenges in trying to lure shoppers, extend shopping visits, and convert patrons. With shopping options galore (e.g., native online sellers, mobile commerce, automatic replenishment), experts might inquire whether store-based retailers still offer enough value for today's consumers. Some stores have found success through format diversification, self-checkout, in-store pickup, and so on. In this study, we assert that store-based retailers could find success via in-store salespersons capable of satisfying the social needs of consumers experiencing loneliness. Despite purported “connections” to friends, followers, and devices, consumers of all demographics feel undesirable shortcomings in their personal relationships. Delving into this largely unexplored area, we find that two varieties of loneliness—*social* and *emotional*—influence the degree to which consumers use in-store sales personnel for social interaction. We also ascertain that consumers' *predisposition to comply with salesperson input* affects their *trust in the salesperson*, *purchase intention*, and *retail store patronage*.

1. Introduction

As consumers have become increasingly reliant on technology and are seemingly constantly connected through mobile devices and social media (Pew Research Center, 2014, 2015), the more people are on-line and use social media, the lonelier they become (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006). Indeed, people are now alone more and have fewer frequent gatherings with other people, thus leading to a reduction in quality of social connections (Hampton, Sessions, & Her, 2011; Jayson, 2009; Marche, 2012; Snell, 2017). In 1985, for example, people's network of personal confidants was reported to be 2.94 but declined to 2.08 by 2004. Similarly, 25% of surveyed Americans reported in 2004 that they had no one to talk to about important matters compared with only 10% in 1985 (Marche, 2012). More recently, a survey found that 72% of Americans feel lonely (The Harris Poll, 2016). In fact, assertions are being made of a current epidemic of loneliness (Griffin, 2010; Korinek, 2013; Matthews et al., 2016; Snell, 2017; The Harris Poll, 2016; Turkle, 2012). The prevalence of loneliness extends beyond an unpleasant emotional experience. Researchers have discerned that loneliness is associated with medical issues related to mental health and physical ailments, which can lead to early mortality (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014; Cacioppo, Grippo, London, Goossens, & Cacioppo, 2015).

As individuals experience loneliness, they seek venues and/or activities to attain a desired level of meaningful social connection (Peplau & Perlman, 1979). Keefer, Landau, and Sullivan (2014) suggest that a given place (e.g., physical retail store) could be utilized to achieve social interactions that offer social support. Other scholars support this notion, hinting that engaging with a retail salesperson can provide an appropriate intervention/remedy (Conaway, 1994; Forman & Sriram, 1991; Kang & Ridgway, 1996). Imagining a retailer as a possible social outlet, a retail salesperson might well offer a combination of friendship, attentive listening, interpersonal rapport, and other social/relational value to a customer (Gwinner, Gremler, & Bitner, 1998; Harrison, Beatty, Reynolds, & Noble, 2012; Lee & Dubinsky, 2017; Mick, DeMoss, & Faber, 1992; Reynolds & Beatty, 1999). By providing these benefits, “... retailing establishments can present a relatively nonthreatening environment for an individual to initiate social contacts.... [After all,] finding a familiar face in these stores may be reassuring.... [As such,] retail personnel might actually act as a last line of defense against the experience of the psychologically negative affect of loneliness” (Forman & Sriram, 1991, pp. 221, 231).

Given the pervasiveness of loneliness (Korinek, 2013), there may be opportunities in today's high-tech social world for physical store retailers to reach consumers who lack sufficient numbers of and meaning in existing social relationships. If so, then present-day decisions to

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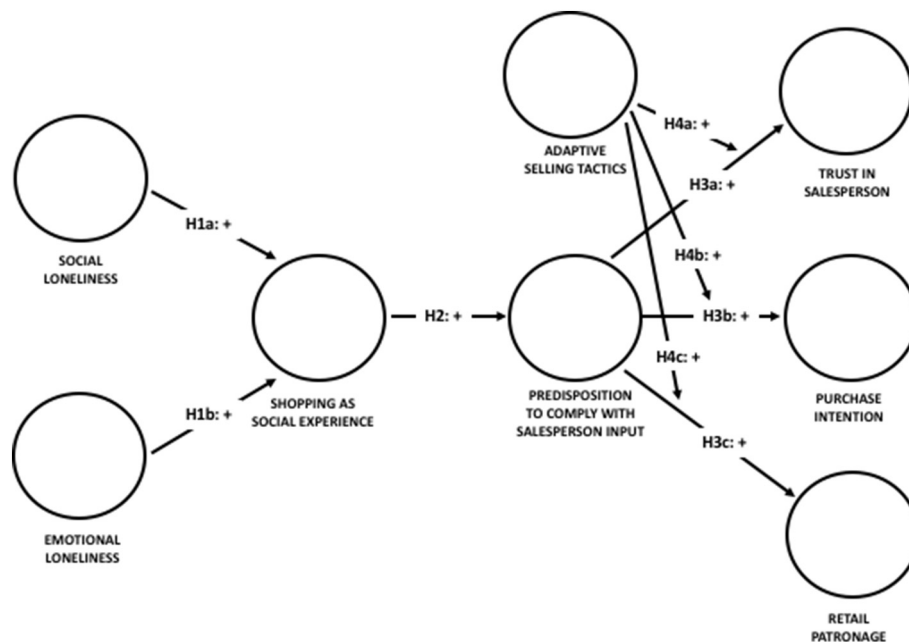


Fig. 1. Path model showing constructs and hypothesized relationships.

consolidate and reformat retail stores should be accompanied by moves to improve stores' experiential offerings vis à vis encounters with well-trained, helpful, and sociable sales personnel. Shopping mall closings and store consolidations have been occurring at record rates (Fung, 2017; Loeb, 2016; Retailer, 2016; Timmermann, 2017), yet consumers still show significant demand for physical stores and some of the in-store experiences they provide. As managers of these stores look forward, they must not overlook any opportunity or prospect for engaging with consumers that might value what they offer (e.g., personal interaction with a salesperson).

2. Focus of study

The foregoing phenomena led to the current study, whose conceptual model is undergirded in theory from psychology and sociology (Fig. 1). Although the retail store can provide a venue for social experiences, what remains opaque are the underlying mechanisms that afford retail environments the capabilities of addressing issues faced by lonely consumers. Consistent with Wang, Zhu, and Shiv (2012), we posit that some consumer decisions (or behaviors) are influenced by feelings of loneliness, conditions which derive possibly from chronic personality traits, momentary life experiences, or other factors. Whatever their sources, however, these feelings are more complex than a mere dichotomy (e.g., lonely versus not lonely), and pervade age categories, genders, ethnic groups, and nationalities (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Griffin, 2010; Korinek, 2013; Liu, Liu, & Wei, 2014; Turkle, 2012).

As such, this study posits that, as consumers experience loneliness, they are motivated to seek remedies by shopping at a retail store for a social experience—that is, rely on in-store sales personnel for social interaction. Consumers with such feelings are also conceivably susceptible to a salesperson's sway. That effect, in turn, is proposed to have a positive impact on three outcomes—a consumer's trust in the salesperson, purchase intention, and patronage of the retail store—and all three linkages are purported to be moderated by a salesperson's use of adaptive selling. Justification for inclusion of the above variables will be discussed subsequently.

3. Study contributions

The contribution of this investigation is multi-fold. This empirical effort contributes to research voids by exploring loneliness outside the typical confines of senior citizen samples. Concomitantly, it partially answers calls for more empiricism to enhance understanding of strategies for combating loneliness (Gardiner, Geldenhuys, & Gott, 2016), as well as the role of marketplace relationships in dealing with loneliness (Whelan, Johnson, Marshall, & Thomson, 2016). As such, we investigate whether distinct types of loneliness—social and emotional—influence consumers' use of shopping as a social experience—an issue heretofore virtually ignored in the retail store literature.

The study also makes a contribution to the sales and retailing literature, as it is one of the few that has considered trust in the salesperson in a *retailing* context. Indeed, only three previously published works were found that investigated the construct in a retail store setting (Bateman & Valentine, 2015; Orth, Bouzdine-Chameeva, & Brand, 2013; Sirdeshmukh, Singh, & Sabol, 2002). Traditionally, trust has been explored in field sales.

This work also makes a contribution by considering the linkage between consumers' use of shopping as a social experience and their tendency to accept a salesperson's selling efforts and input in the buying process. This is the initial empirical attempt to examine the issue. Similarly, it represents the first essay to explore the impact of a customer's predisposition to comply with salesperson input on his/her trust in the salesperson, purchase intention, and retail patronage.

The investigation further acknowledges adaptive selling, which arguably has received comparatively less attention in retail contexts than in industrial ones (Simintiras, Ifie, Watkins, & Georgakas, 2013). It does so by reconnoitering the *moderating effect* of adaptive selling on the nexus between a customer's predisposition to comply with salesperson input on the foregoing three outcome variables. Guenzi, De Luca, and Spiro (2016) discerned that most work on adaptive selling has assessed it generally with samples of sales personnel and/or sales managers. Indeed, they discovered that few studies concerning adaptive selling accounted for *buyer* views of the salesperson's adaptive selling behavior—the perspective adopted here.

4. Literature review

Although there are several theories that support the lonely consumer's outreach and the retail store's ability to meet the needs of lonely and socially isolated consumers, one that is especially apt here is relational theory. Relational theory (e.g., [Center for Progressive Development, n.d.](#); [Jordan, 2009](#); [Miller, 1986](#)) posits that healthy psychological development occurs within the context of relationships. It regards isolation as a primary origin for individuals' suffering at a personal level. It emphasizes positive interpersonal factors—for example, growth-fostering relationships and mutual empathy—as means for mitigating individual isolation ([Jordan, 2009](#)).

The theory espouses that individuals are a part of a network of relationships and are thus perpetually impelled by a need for relationships ([Mitchell, 1988](#)). Such associations foster “mutual affirmation,” as well as “authentic relational connection” ([Fromm, 1976, 1992](#)). As such, humans have a fundamental need to be connected with others. To create any relationship is an endeavor to found and retain an interpersonal connection. Such interconnectedness has been ascertained to enhance one's relational sense of value and efficaciousness ([Miller, 1976, 1984](#)).

In essence, relational theory implies that through human interaction, relationships are sought where the parties view each other as individuals having a bi-directional effect on and recognition of the other. Such interaction serves to augment mutual affirmation ([Center for Progressive Development, n.d.](#)). Work in loneliness proposes that individuals apply societal norms and values, sometimes discovering or feeling deficiencies in the kind and quality of relationships they have ([De Jong Gierveld, 1989](#); [Peplau & Perlman, 1979](#); [Peplau & Perlman, 1982](#); [Shankar, McMunn, Demakakos, Hamer, & Steptoe, 2017](#)). The present study applies relational theory to the relationship between a customer and salesperson.

5. Loneliness

According to [Perlman and Peplau \(1981\)](#), loneliness is a subjective state marked by “the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relationships is deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively.” Loneliness is a result of the “discrepancy between what one wants from interpersonal affection and intimacy, and what one gets; the greater the discrepancy, the greater the loneliness” ([De Jong Gierveld, 1989, p. 216](#)). As people perceive this discrepancy, they often attempt to resolve it by pursuing discrete opportunities to be social with others (e.g., going to the retail store). Loneliness is self-indicative assessment of one's “social participation” ([De Jong Gierveld & Tilburg, 2006](#)). As loneliness is a perceived, not objective, phenomenon ([Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010](#)), it reflects one's distress over a gap in desired versus actual relationship quality with others (e.g., associate, friend, significant other) and tends to be negatively valenced ([Forman & Sriram, 1991](#)).

Individuals have an innate need for social belonging and emotional connectedness; when that need goes unfulfilled for a time, they can experience loneliness ([Pieters, 2013](#)). There are essentially two kinds of loneliness—social loneliness and emotional loneliness—both of which can vary in magnitude (rather than being binary in nature). *Social* loneliness signals an absence of an intimate relationship/attachment, possibly due to a life event (e.g., spouse dies). *Emotional* loneliness embodies absence of a social network—such as friends and colleagues (e.g., young person moves to a new city) ([Weiss, 1973](#)). Admittedly, some individuals “feel good and sufficiently embedded” with few social contacts ([De Jong Gierveld & Tilburg, 2006, p. 583](#)). By and large, though, a dearth of social contacts has inimical psychological and behavioral effects ([Rehman, 2016](#)).

6. Social aspects of shopping

According to [Ryan and Deci \(2000\)](#), individuals tend to pursue substitutes when a basic need is impeded. Accordingly, research suggests that lonely people may seek places for comfort ([Keefer et al., 2014](#)). This thus implies that the greater they are feeling lonely (social, emotional), the more likely they are to seek such venues. Indeed, people may go to the retail store as an outlet in search of social connections ([Kim, Kang, & Kim, 2005](#); [Tauber, 1972](#)), where they receive “social stimulation and support” ([Kim et al., 2005](#)). [Tauber \(1972\)](#), in fact, avers that a “social experience outside the home” is a key motive for shopping; similarly, [Donavan and Rossiter \(1982\)](#) note that “talking with sales personnel” (as a social activity) is a key driver of shopping. As [Kim et al. \(2005, p. 996\)](#) espouse: “Retailing establishments provide...consumers who feel isolated with an outlet for social participation or interpersonal activities, thereby alleviating emotional isolation....”

Recent work by [Lee and Dubinsky \(2017\)](#) ascertained that some shoppers wish to interact with retail sales personnel for social reasons (i.e., an “autotelic desire to interact with a salesperson”). Such consumers undertake in-store shopping for interpersonal reasons to receive social benefits ([Gwinner et al., 1998](#); [Kim & Kim, 2014](#); [Lee & Dubinsky, 2003](#)). That is, they feel that they receive value from social relations because they inherently attach importance to interactions with others. Indeed, “[t]he process of shopping should bolster the ego of shoppers through the enactment of a socially affirming role,” thus affording salespeople opportunity to utilize “referent power” ([Goff & Walters, 1995, p. 917](#)).

Shopping as a social experience was included in the present study because previous investigations have considered the social aspects of shopping chiefly *prior* to consumers' (a) keen embrace of web-related communication and e-shopping and (b) their increased likelihood of eschewing face-to-face interactions in their personal lives (as noted above). The term “shopping as a social experience” is multifaceted and vague. It could refer to, for example, a consumer's people watching, observation of a store or mall's frenetic activity, dining activities, showrooming with friends, and interaction with salespeople, among other activities. Because this study's constructs pertained to *salesperson-related* issues (e.g., adaptive selling) vis-à-vis lonely consumers, only one aspect of a shopping social experience was examined—the *use of shopping as a social experience (SSE)* ([Forman & Sriram, 1991](#)).

The preceding discussion leads to the following hypotheses:

H₁. The more a consumer experiences (a) social loneliness and (b) emotional loneliness, the more he/she will use an in-store salesperson for social interaction.

7. Consumer's predisposition to comply with salesperson input

When people seek connections with others, they often visit marketplaces or retail stores—popular gathering places ([Forman & Sriram, 1991](#); [Long, Yoon, & Friedman, 2015](#); [Tauber, 1972](#); [Youn-Kyung, Jikyeong, & Minsung, 2005](#)). Indeed, [Rehman \(2016\)](#) suggests that marketers adapt a page from the entertainment marketing industry's marketing book to help individuals select an activity that can foster their connectedness; this would entail encouraging a social experience as an alternative for shoppers. Going shopping for purposes of social interaction would include interacting with retail sales personnel.

[O'Shaughnessy \(1971-1972\)](#) portrays retail selling as an interpersonal process, as the retail salesperson can have the facility to impact a punter's decision via use of attractiveness and credibility. *Informational* ([Mourali, Laroche, & Pons, 2005](#)) and *recommendational* ([Goff, Bellenger, & Stojack, 1994](#); [Goff & Jackson, 2003](#); [Goff & Walters, 1995](#)) interpersonal influence are of special concern here. They refer to an individual's tendency to accept information and recommendations from the salesperson. Such sway can lead individuals (e.g., shoppers) to

consider advice or input from “knowledgeable others” (e.g., sales personnel) as having veracity and thereby accept rather than refute it. Thus, a retail salesperson may interpersonally influence consumers with germane gen and recommendations—à la “expert power” (Goff & Walters, 1995). In the present work, following Rippé, Weisfeld-Spolter, Yurova, Dubinsky, and Hale (2017), such efforts were labelled *consumer's predisposition to comply with salesperson input (PCSI)*.

PCSI refers to a shopper's tendency to accept a salesperson's selling efforts in the buying process (Rippé et al., 2017). The greater a customer's proneness to a salesperson's persuasion, the more likely the shopper feels that the seller is focused on a customer orientation (Goff & Jackson, 2003), thus being customer focused. Furthermore, research has found that salesperson characteristics can affect the propensity for a consumer to truckle to persuasion efforts of a purveyor (Jin & Hong, 2004).

If individuals regard retail salespeople as a possible source of social interaction, perhaps they will be accepting of the sellers' influence. After all, such consumers view the interaction as a means of connecting with people, providing social stimuli, and supplanting bereftness of relatedness needs (e.g., Forman & Sriram, 1991). The nature of such interaction might make these individuals particularly malleable to flattery, coaxing, or persuasion by the retail salesperson. This tendency may soften their skepticism and mistrust of others, thus leading them to be accepting of salesperson selling efforts. The foregoing disquisition leads to the following hypothesis:

H₂. The more a consumer uses an in-store salesperson for social interaction, the greater will be his/her predisposition to comply with salesperson input.

8. Outcome variables

The study included three outcome variables: consumer trust in the salesperson, purchase intention, and patronage of the retail store. The focus is on the impact of PCSI on these three variables, as well as the moderating influence of adaptive selling on these three linkages.

8.1. Trust in salesperson

This construct was investigated because of its long tradition in the marketing and sales literature (e.g., Hawes, Mast, & Swan, 1989; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Swan, Bowers, & Richardson, 1999; Wilson, 1995) and its relative paucity of studies in retail selling (for exceptions, see Bateman & Valentine, 2015; Orth et al., 2013). Trust is requisite for generating interaction with others (e.g., Czepiel, 1990) and a key component in establishing solid relationships in the buyer-seller dyad (e.g., Hawes et al., 1989; Kumar, 1996; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Wilson, 1995). Kamran-Disfani, Mantrala, Izquierdo-Yusta, and Martínez-Ruiz (2017) found that trust was an important component in customer loyalty. Furthermore, in high trust situations, buyers have increased propensity to retain a relationship with the salesperson, even with incertitude about the future (Hawes et al., 1989). Also, it can have a favorable impact on retail consumers' purchase intention (e.g., Bateman & Valentine, 2015).

Admittedly, trust is enhanced over time as a relationship between the buyer and seller evolves. Jolson (1997), however, argues that even in short-term, transactional-oriented selling contexts (e.g., a one-time sale), trust is requisite and must be extant early on to achieve success. To foster it, salespeople must adopt relationship selling even when the temporal selling period is truncated. Moreover, as Bateman and Valentine (2015, p. 128) propound: “Research indicates that trust may strengthen or weaken over time, but its foundations are built in the initial sales encounter” Given the foregoing, examining trust in the present context seemed justified.

8.2. Purchase intention

Consumer purchase intention (PI) was examined because intention is considered the *immediate precursor* of an individual's behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Moreover, it is regarded as an especially critical construct in the study of consumer behavior. In addition, the construct has received much research attention in recent work in retail selling (e.g., Bateman & Valentine, 2015; Kim, Wang, & Malthouse, 2015; Rippé, Weisfeld-Spolter, Dubinsky, Arndt, & Thakkar, 2016; Rippé et al., 2017; Yurova, Rippé, Weisfeld-Spolter, Sussan, & Arndt, 2016).

8.3. Patronage of retail store

Pan and Zinkhan (2006) state that consumers manifest loyalty to a particular retail outlet predicated on three factors: product relevancy, (b) market relevancy (e.g., store-related attributes [such as helpful salespeople]), and (c) shopper personal characteristics. Somewhat analogously, Rajamma, Pelton, Hsu, and Knight (2010) model patronage in their study to consist of market-relevant factors (e.g., helpful sales personnel and the ensuing relationship with them), store image, convenient access to the store, and store familiarity. In the current study, *patronage of a retail store* referred to the extent to which a consumer returns to a particular store *owing to the nature of that store's sales personnel*. Doing so is consistent with Rajamma et al. (2010, p. 390) assertion that “... ‘friendly and communicative’ sales personnel establish a relationship with the consumer, resulting in patronage of that retail establishment by the consumer.” Moreover, it is compatible with an earlier argument that the constructs in the current study pertained to *salesperson-related* issues (e.g., predisposition to comply with salesperson input) vis-à-vis consumers. Therefore, viewing patronage solely through this lens seemed justified.

8.4. Impact of PCSI on trust, purchase intention, and patronage

Recall that PCSI pertains to a customer's propensity to accept a salesperson's selling efforts during the buying process (Rippé et al., 2017). It thus instantiates salesperson influence. Such sway can be manifested in various ways and have a direct impact on buyer responses.

Olshavsky (1973) asserts that salesperson influence (power) can direct a customer's ultimate purchase decision. Brown (1990) promulgates that sales personnel must use their sway to close a sale. Milliman and Fugate (1988) articulate that salespeople try to get customer acquiescence to information they impart to consummate the sales transaction. Furthermore, Goff and Walters (1995) aver that customer susceptibility to salesperson influence will have an effect on customers' buying behavior. Funkhouser (1984) posits that persuasion (à la influence) entails diligent use of flow of information to lead a buyer to take action. Moreover, Goff et al. (1994) propose that customers have a desire to establish relationships with sales personnel, which provides sellers a form of influence on their punters.

The previous dialectic leads to the following hypotheses:

H_{3a}. The greater a consumer's predisposition to comply with salesperson input, the greater his/her trust in the salesperson.

H_{3b}. The greater a consumer's predisposition to comply with salesperson input, the greater his/her purchase intention.

H_{3c}. The greater a consumer's predisposition to comply with salesperson input, the greater his/her patronage of a retail store.

8.5. Moderating impact of adaptive selling

Some individuals are likely to experience doubt about the veridical comments of others (Luhmann, Bohn, Holtmann, Koch, & Eid, 2016).

However, given that adaptive selling entails the salesperson's customizing the interaction to the specific customer's situation, that behavior may well induce the shopper to view a salesperson's adaptive selling as an attempt to genuinely attend to the consumer's concerns. As such, he/she could perceive such selling endeavors to be desirable, thus conducing to a favorable impact on the customer's trust in that salesperson.

Work on the effects of adaptive selling in retail settings is relatively limited compared with industrial settings (Simintiras et al., 2013). Recent omni-channel studies, however, have revealed its significance in affecting consumers' in-store purchase intention (Rippé, Weisfeld-Spolter, Yurova, Hale, & Sussan, 2016; Yurova et al., 2016). Moreover, salespersons employing adaptive selling during consumer interactions have been found to be more effective in fostering purchase intention than their counterparts who applied a uniform sales approach (Rippé, Weisfeld-Spolter, Yurova, et al., 2016). Thus, adaptive may well increase purchase intention for lonely and socially isolated consumers who enjoy shopping as a social experience and seek out interactions with retail salespersons.

Adaptive selling is likely to induce consumers to continue patronizing a given retail store because the sales staff seeks to tailor interactions with each customer, especially those unsure of what they want (Simintiras et al., 2013), thus catering to his/her unique set of needs, concerns, predilections, personality, and requirements. If consumers regard the store's sales personnel as truly being solicitous of their distinct shopping situation—owing to their altering their behavior with those individuals—seemingly there is increased likelihood that such customers will return to the particular store to have enjoyable social attachments.

The foregoing leads to the following hypotheses:

H_{4a}. Adaptive selling will augment (moderate) the relationship between a consumer's predisposition to comply with salesperson input and his/her trust in the salesperson.

H_{4b}. Adaptive selling will augment (moderate) the relationship between a consumer's predisposition to comply with salesperson input and his/her purchase intention.

H_{4c}. Adaptive selling will augment (moderate) the relationship between a consumer's predisposition to comply with salesperson input and his/her patronage of a retail store.

9. Method

9.1. Sample

The sample included 301 respondents representing over 40 states from the United States of America. Respondents were obtained via Qualtrics, a respected provider of panel recruitment and management services. They were qualified based on loneliness (e.g., "In general, do you feel lonely much of the time?") and a recent shopping experience that involved salesperson interaction (e.g., "In the past week, I shopped in a retail store where I interacted with a salesperson who answered questions, described merchandise, recommended items based on my needs, and convinced me to make a purchase.").

The sample had the following profile:

- Sex: female = 38.11%; male = 61.89%
- Age: average = 36.11 years; range = 18–71 years; 18–24 = 21.9%; 25–29 = 18.6%; 30–39 = 28.5%; 40–49 = 14.7%; 50–59 = 9.4%; ≥ 60 = 6.9%
- Highest level of education: 28.34% = did not attend college; 27.69% = some college; 33.55% = associate's or bachelor's degree; 10.4% = graduate/professional degree
- Income range: ≤ \$20,000 = 16.29%; \$20,000–\$39,999 = 25.08%; \$40,000–\$59,999 = 25.41%; \$60,000–\$79,999 = 17.26%; and ≥ \$80,000 = 15.96%

10. Measures

Social loneliness (SL) and emotional loneliness (EL) (De Jong Gierveld & Tilburg, 2006) were measured with multi-item 7-point Likert-type scales, anchored by 1 (Strongly disagree) and 7 (Strongly agree). We ultimately treated these feelings as continuous, not categorical variables, avoiding an oversimplified and inaccurate casting of individuals as lonely versus not lonely or socially isolated versus not socially isolated (see Wang et al., 2012). Consumers' use of an in-store salesperson for social interaction (SSE) was measured with items from the shopping as social experience scale by Forman and Sriram (1991). Consumer predisposition to comply with salesperson input (PCSI) was measured utilizing items from the customer susceptibility scale developed by Goff et al. (1994) and adapted following Rippé et al. (2017). Adaptive selling (AS) was measured with the scale developed by Robinson, Marshall, Moncrief, and Lassk (2002). Trust in salesperson (TRUST) and purchase intention (PI) were adapted from Bateman and Valentine (2015), and consumer retail patronage (PATRON) was adapted from Rajamma et al. (2010). Measurement items are listed in Appendix A. Mean values for variables are shown in Table 2.

11. Measurement procedures and evaluation of outer model

We evaluated the research model and hypothesized relationships using partial least squares (PLS), a component-based form of structural equation modeling (SEM) (Chin, Marcolin, & Newsted, 2003; Lohmöller, 1989; Wold, 1982, 1985). We utilized SmartPLS M3 (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2015) to estimate parameters for the outer model and inner model with a path-weighting scheme. PLS-SEM maximizes explained variance of endogenous latent variables by estimating partial model relationships via a series of ordinary least squares regressions.

We assessed all constructs using reflective indicators that and evaluated the quality of their psychometric properties (Tables 1 and 2). In terms of construct reliability and convergent validity, all constructs' exhibited values for composite reliability well above 0.70 and average variance extracted (AVE) > 0.50, clearly satisfying requirements for both metrics (Chin, 1998; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Of note, composite reliability is regarded as superior to Cronbach's α for testing reflective structural equation models (Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle, & Gudergan, 2017; Peterson & Kim, 2013). With regard to discriminant validity, the square root of the AVE for each construct exceeds all paired correlations including that construct (Chin, 1998).

12. Evaluation of inner model and research hypotheses

Following evaluation of the outer model, research hypotheses within the inner model were evaluated. As PLS-SEM focuses on maximizing the degree of explained variance, its primary criterion for evaluating a structural model is R^2 , the coefficient of determination. As shown in Table 3, the structural model relationships exhibited satisfactory R^2 values of 0.297 (SSE), 0.427 (PCSI), 0.483 (TRUST), 0.273 (PI) and 0.412 (PATRON). Per Hair et al. (2017) and Kock (2015), we reviewed inner variance inflation factors for the study's constructs; each value was below the threshold of 3.30, suggesting no serious evidence of common method bias within the model.

Path coefficients indicate the relative impact of a latent exogenous construct on a latent endogenous construct. Following Chin (1998), we performed nonparametric bootstrapping using 5000 samples (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011) to determine the statistical significance (t -value) for each path coefficient (β). In addition, we tested the model's predictive validity using the Stone-Geisser Q^2 cross-validation redundancy measure (Geisser, 1974; Stone, 1974), which is essential for proper PLS-SEM assessment of an inner model (Chin, 1998; Henseler, Ringle, & Sinkovics, 2009). Using blindfolding procedures (Tenenhaus, Vinzi, Chatelin, & Lauro, 2005), all Q^2 values exceeded zero, ranging from 0.178 to 0.301, thus indicating satisfactory levels of relative

Table 1
Loadings and cross-loadings for items measuring latent constructs.

	SL	EL	SSE	PCSI	AS	TRUST	PI	PATRON
SL1	0.902	-0.092	0.355	0.382	0.355	0.293	0.327	0.318
SL2	0.901	-0.105	0.336	0.423	0.418	0.298	0.300	0.311
SL3	0.889	-0.210	0.342	0.428	0.383	0.331	0.349	0.328
EL1	-0.248	0.842	0.187	0.053	0.236	0.033	-0.034	0.072
EL2	-0.201	0.801	0.227	0.119	0.219	0.080	0.090	0.136
EL3	-0.016	0.876	0.351	0.292	0.369	0.231	0.145	0.211
SSE1	0.249	0.317	0.786	0.470	0.467	0.383	0.272	0.544
SSE2	0.276	0.201	0.787	0.395	0.502	0.379	0.257	0.509
SSE3	0.396	0.276	0.886	0.686	0.612	0.568	0.391	0.594
PCSI1	0.378	0.164	0.485	0.814	0.588	0.589	0.573	0.561
PCSI2	0.353	0.169	0.469	0.773	0.557	0.602	0.441	0.423
PCSI3	0.379	0.116	0.481	0.822	0.523	0.552	0.524	0.470
PCSI4	0.408	0.171	0.617	0.845	0.620	0.580	0.440	0.566
PCSI5	0.407	0.174	0.559	0.822	0.573	0.512	0.351	0.432
PCSI6	0.326	0.245	0.510	0.749	0.502	0.356	0.208	0.382
PCSI7	0.260	0.191	0.488	0.716	0.410	0.342	0.178	0.406

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

PCSI8	0.335	0.161	0.505	0.733	0.495	0.392	0.242	0.424
AS1	0.314	0.305	0.462	0.461	0.731	0.359	0.267	0.474
AS2	0.284	0.329	0.525	0.523	0.826	0.461	0.247	0.437
AS3	0.394	0.226	0.550	0.629	0.863	0.598	0.443	0.501
AS4	0.339	0.319	0.510	0.509	0.809	0.454	0.280	0.443
AS5	0.380	0.250	0.562	0.612	0.807	0.608	0.466	0.496
TRUST1	0.273	0.088	0.383	0.489	0.478	0.842	0.583	0.468
TRUST2	0.301	0.152	0.479	0.540	0.544	0.862	0.530	0.543
TRUST3	0.335	0.109	0.488	0.548	0.546	0.869	0.522	0.541
TRUST4	0.254	0.147	0.468	0.544	0.511	0.886	0.512	0.458
TRUST5	0.260	0.179	0.485	0.535	0.531	0.702	0.372	0.393
PI1	0.352	0.081	0.360	0.430	0.371	0.552	0.915	0.429
PI2	0.321	0.104	0.351	0.479	0.434	0.564	0.935	0.476
PATRON1	0.315	0.122	0.507	0.478	0.497	0.586	0.434	0.757
PATRON2	0.266	0.166	0.469	0.412	0.423	0.441	0.386	0.778
PATRON3	0.240	0.111	0.546	0.490	0.454	0.418	0.441	0.848
PATRON4	0.301	0.205	0.580	0.465	0.480	0.393	0.329	0.733
PATRON5	0.231	0.095	0.455	0.402	0.364	0.360	0.270	0.707

impact on predictive relevance (Chin, 1998; Henseler et al., 2009).

As shown in Table 4, we found support for most hypotheses. We report below coefficients and associated t-values for each path. We also report effect size (f^2), which indicates the relative impact of each latent variable's contribution to R^2 . Per Cohen (1988), f^2 values of 0.02, 0.15,

and 0.35 indicate small, medium, and large effect sizes, respectively.

Regarding H_1 , our results show that a consumer's social loneliness (SL) and emotional loneliness (EL) are associated with greater usage of an in-store salesperson for social interaction (SSE). SL exhibited the expected sign and medium effect size (H_{1a} : $\beta = 0.443$, $t = 10.282$,

Table 2

Latent constructs' average variance explained, composite reliability, and correlations.

		\bar{x}	α	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	SL	4.47	0.879	0.925	0.805	0.897							
2	EL	4.04	0.803	0.878	0.706	-0.151	0.840						
3	SSE	4.41	0.761	0.861	0.674	0.384	0.324	0.821					
4	PCSI	4.54	0.912	0.928	0.617	0.458	0.216	0.653	0.785				
5	AS	4.59	0.868	0.904	0.653	0.429	0.346	0.649	0.685	0.808			
6	TRUST	5.45	0.889	0.919	0.697	0.343	0.163	0.555	0.640	0.629	0.835		
7	PI	5.45	0.832	0.922	0.856	0.362	0.384	0.384	0.493	0.437	0.604	0.925	
8	PATRON	5.10	0.823	0.876	0.587	0.356	0.184	0.671	0.590	0.584	0.579	0.491	0.766

AVE = average variance explained; CR = composite reliability; AVE square roots are on diagonal.

Table 3
Summary of explained variance (R^2) and predictive relevance (Q^2).

	R^2	Q^2
SSE	0.297	0.178
PCSI	0.427	0.241
TRUST	0.483	0.301
PI	0.273	0.211
PATRON	0.412	0.217

Table 4
Summary of hypothesis test results.

Hypothesis	Sign	β	t-Value	f^2	Support
H _{1a} : SL → SSE	(+)	0.443	10.282	0.273	Yes
H _{1b} : EL → SSE	(+)	0.391	7.996	0.213	Yes
H ₂ : SSE → PCSI	(+)	0.653	18.341	0.745	Yes
H _{3a} : PCSI → TRUST	(+)	0.391	5.961	0.156	Yes
H _{3b} : PCSI → PI	(+)	0.360	5.106	0.095	Yes
H _{3c} : PCSI → PATRON	(+)	0.361	5.504	0.117	Yes
H _{4a} : AS → (PCSI → TRUST)	(+)	-0.056	1.017	0.010	No
H _{4b} : AS → (PCSI → PI)	(+)	-0.083	2.039	0.016	No
H _{4c} : AS → (PCSI → PATRON)	(+)	0.039	0.782	0.004	No

$f^2 = 0.273$). EL showed similar results, with a slightly smaller effect size (H_{1b}: $\beta = 0.391$, $t = 7.996$, $f^2 = 0.213$).

As hypothesized, greater SSE corresponded with increased consumer predisposition to comply with input from an in-store salesperson (PCSI). The relationship exhibited a large effect size (H₂: $\beta = 0.653$, $t = 18.341$, $f^2 = 0.745$).

The next set of hypothesized relationships extended from PCSI. In all three relationships, PCSI exhibited the expected sign as follows: trust in the salesperson (TRUST) (H_{3a}: $\beta = 0.391$, $t = 5.961$, $f^2 = 0.156$), purchase intention (PI) (H_{3b}: $\beta = 0.360$, $t = 5.106$, $f^2 = 0.095$), and retail patronage (PATRON) (H_{3c}: $\beta = 0.361$, $t = 5.504$, $f^2 = 0.117$). As noted, the magnitude of effect sizes was greatest for PCSI to PATRON and PCSI to TRUST.

The final set of hypotheses concerned the moderating role of adaptive selling (AS) on PCSI's direct relationships with TRUST, PI, and PATRON. First, AS was not shown to exhibit either the expected sign or significance as a moderator of PCSI to TRUST (H_{4a}: $\beta = -0.056$, $t = 1.017$, $f^2 = 0.010$). Next, AS showed significance, but not with the expected sign, as a moderator of PCSI to PI (H_{4b}: $\beta = -0.083$, $t = 2.039$, $f^2 = 0.016$). Last, AS showed the expected sign, but not significance, as a moderator of PCSI to PATRON (H_{4c}: $\beta = 0.039$, $t = 0.782$, $f^2 = 0.004$).

13. Discussion

In this study, the degree of a consumers' social loneliness (SL) and emotional loneliness (EL) was proposed to influence use of shopping as a social experience (SSE), à la shopping for social interaction with an in-store salesperson (Rajamma et al., 2010). Key values for variance explained (R^2), relationship strength and direction (β), effect size (f^2), and predictive relevance (Q^2) underscore the quality of the model presented. As posited and supported, the two varieties of loneliness were shown to be positively associated with SSE. Results suggested that SSE is influenced more strongly by SL than by EL.

In terms of in-store engagement between consumers and salespersons, our results indicated that SSE plays an important role in a consumer's predisposition to comply with salesperson input (PCSI). Regarding the three outcomes, findings suggested that PCSI's most salutary effect would be apparent in its relationships with consumer trust in salesperson (TRUST) and retail patronage (PATRON), and less so with purchase intention (PI).

A retail salesperson's application of adaptive selling tactics (AS) did

not moderate PCSI's relationship with TRUST and PATRONAGE, though it did moderate PCSI's relationship with PI. The effect sizes for all AS-moderated paths did not exceed 0.16, suggesting that AS generally has a marginal impact on PCSI's relationships with the foregoing outcomes. The generally non-augmenting effect of AS within these three relationships may reflect the nature of AS. As Chakrabarty, Brown, and Widing (2013, p. 254) postulated: "...salespeople can adapt to selling situations without the customers' best interests in mind. Consequently, adaptive selling can be construed [by buyers] as a tactical [questionable] selling behavior..." thus perhaps muting its moderating impact. Alternatively, perchance the specific influence tactics a salesperson uses to manifest AS with a given customer (McFarland, Challagalla, & Shervani, 2006) supersedes the global notion of AS (the focus here), thus attenuating the latter's influence.

Overall, the study's findings suggest that social loneliness and emotional loneliness can lead consumers to seek social experiences that deliberately involve visiting stores *and* interacting with salespersons in those stores. Additionally, given consumers' realization of a store's function and a salesperson's primary purpose, conceivably consumers anticipate their own willingness to be influenced by product recommendations and other inputs from sales personnel. If, over time, social relationships develop between consumers and salespeople, early discrete transactions can evolve or graduate into more regular interactions that enhance trust, purchase intention, and retail patronage.

14. Managerial implications

Physical retail stores face an opportunity, or challenge, to reset themselves as consumers consider the myriad multi-channel shopping alternatives now available to them. The unrelenting increases in online retailing have neither obsolesced nor replaced *every* retailers' ability to meet a consumer's needs, wants, or desires for in-store interactions with retail salespersons. Although many consumers have abandoned traditional, brick-and-mortar for trendier internet-native rivals in the e-commerce space, this study's findings suggest that the future of competitiveness in retail will be driven not only by lower price, faster shipping times, algorithms, and machine learning but also valuable face-to-face, human-to-human interaction. So, for example, while Amazon.com has found ways to take a lead in online apparel retail, Macy's, Target, and even smaller local stores still must identify scope and scale opportunities that align with their own identities and objectives as differentiated creature-competitors (Smith, 2010).

Thus, retailers of all kinds must somehow address the unrelenting contest to draw consumers who will shop and socialize in their stores with the anticipation of enjoyable experiences (Penz & Hogg, 2011). Achieving such outcomes could be effective for managing customer lifetime value (e.g., recency, frequency, monetary, and duration models). After all, some consumers engage in-store salespersons to gather information for products that they will buy online. Yet, the opposite also occurs, where consumers may browse product reviews at online retailers only to purchase and later buy products at a nearby store.

Aside from product information, recent research also suggests that online retailers are disadvantaged by consumers' perceptions that they cannot provide interesting social and family experiences (Kacen, Hess, & Chiang, 2013). Such findings underscore the importance of connectedness and engagement in modalities that are live and in-person, not asynchronous and virtually-mediated. For young adults, working professionals, and others, high counts of online friends, followers, and likes certainly have their place, but also valued are today's presently more rare interactions with people willing to entertain direct, personal conversation/consultation about what products best fit their bodies, match their homes, or even reflect their personalities (as consumption is a reflection of their identity (Sharma & Jha, 2017)). Indeed, many individuals may see in-store shopping experiences as one of few available ways to mitigate their loneliness (Griffith, 2003), thus providing an

opportunity for retailers. Enter the lonely consumers looking for their friend, the retail salesperson. Because retail salespersons cannot be in the business of fixing customers' psychosocial issues (e.g., loneliness), however, they and their employers might help afflicted customers by recommending appropriate third-party resources (e.g., counseling).

15. Limitations and future research

Although this study does offer a good rationale and set of findings, it could be improved by considering a larger and more diverse sample of consumers. For example, an interesting issue would be to examine whether group differences based on gender, race, ethnicity, income level, or geography explain levels of and coping options for loneliness. Likewise, exploring how urban, suburban, and rural consumers deal with their loneliness from a shopping perspective might be beneficial. Alas, we found no published work that specifically compared lonely versus non-lonely consumers in terms of shopping frequency, in-store social interaction, money spent, or products purchased. Investigation of such comparisons would seem appropriate for future research.

Examining how consumers' value consciousness, skepticism, and cynicism influence their chosen behaviors related to in-store shopping experiences could offer valuable insight. Future research could consider how the retail salesperson-customer interface is affected by dispositional, cognitive, and affective trust (Sekhon, Roy, Shergill, & Pritchard, 2013) or by operational competent, benevolent, and problem-solving trust (Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002). Indeed, these subdimensions of trust

may, as antecedents, relate differently to relationship behaviors, perceptions, and outcomes. Additionally, cross-cultural comparisons may shed light on how different types of loneliness are related to shopping for in-store social experiences, compliance with salesperson inputs, and other in-store shopping variables. Exploring shopping for needs versus shopping for fun (Scarpi, Pizzi, & Visentin, 2014), as either or both of these behaviors may signal how situational factors might drive a consumer's attempt to cope with loneliness, may be worthwhile.

Also, consumers are making increased use of their mobile devices to obtain information during interaction with retail sales personnel (Rippé et al., 2017), and firms are adopting disruptive technologies to facilitate consumer decision making (e.g., Amazon's use of machine learning). Accordingly, subsequent empirical work could explore the impact of these two phenomena on the degree and nature of a retail salesperson's selling behavior and on lonely consumers' cognitive, conative, and affective responses. Finally, with increasing changes in the B2C environment allowing more negotiations between the customer and retail salesperson (Holmes, Beitelspacher, Hochstein, & Bolander, 2017), future work can reconnoiter the ethics of using sales techniques to exploit a consumer's loneliness for negotiation advantage.

Acknowledgments

This effort was supported by a Tarleton State University Organized Research Grant.

Appendix A. Scale items

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- SL1: There are plenty of people I can rely on when I have problems. (reversed)
 SL2: There are many people I can trust completely. (reversed)
 SL3: There are enough people I feel close to. (reversed)
 EL1: I experience a general sense of emptiness.
 EL2: I miss having people around.
 EL3: I often feel rejected.
 SSE1: I like when salespeople know my name.
 SSE2: I spoke to the salesperson about things other than my purchase.
 SSE3: I enjoy talking to store personnel.
 PCSI1: I consider salespeople to be a good source of information.
 PCSI2: I think salespeople are usually very professional.
 PCSI3: I trust the information that I get from salespeople.
 PCSI4: I enjoy talking to salespeople about the product I am considering for purchase.
 PCSI5: I want salespeople to help me make decisions.
 PCSI6: I depend on salespeople to help me choose the best product to purchase.
 PCSI7: I prefer to purchase a product that a salesperson has recommended.
 PCSI8: I feel some obligation to please salespeople.
 AS1: When the salesperson's sales approach does not work, the salesperson changes to another approach.
 AS2: The salesperson likes to experiment with different sales approaches.
 AS3: The salesperson is very flexible in the sales approach used.
 AS4: The salesperson easily used a wide variety of selling approaches.
 AS5: The salesperson understands how one customer differs from another.
 TRUST1: The salesperson was friendly.
 TRUST2: The salesperson was sincere.
 TRUST3: The salesperson was honest.
 TRUST4: The salesperson was knowledgeable.
 TRUST5: The salesperson knows more than I do.
 PI1: Before meeting with the salesperson, I would purchase the product.
 PI2: After meeting with the salesperson, I would purchase the product.
 PATRON1: I try to buy from salespeople who are helpful.
 PATRON2: People who work in the store determine if I return.
 PATRON3: I will go back to the store where my favorite salespeople work.
 PATRON4: I have relationships with salespeople at my favorite store.
 PATRON5: The person who assists me will determine whether or *not* I return to a store.
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