The Influence of Strangers on Consumer Behavior in a Retail Environment

Journal of Consumer Behaviour

WILEY

RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

The Influence of Strangers on Consumer Behavior in a Retail Environment

Tabitha S. Thomas[1] | Dolphy Abraham[2] | Sara Quach[3] | Felix Septianto[1] | Park Thaichon[4]

[1]The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia | [2]Independent Researcher, Bangalore, India | [3]Griffith University, Queensland, Australia | [4]University of Southern Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

Correspondence: Tabitha S. Thomas (tabitha.thomas@business.uq.edu.au)

Received: 20 January 2025 | **Revised:** 29 May 2025 | **Accepted:** 13 July 2025

Keywords: consumer behavior | emotion | retail | social exchange theory | social influence | stranger interactions

ABSTRACT

When consumers visit a store, they often find themselves interacting with fellow shoppers they do not know. These social exchanges—defined as stranger interactions—can impact consumers' shopping experiences by eliciting positive or negative emotions that can ultimately influence buying behavior. The primary objective of this article is to investigate: (1) What factors lead to stranger interactions in physical retail environments? (2) What are the potential positive and negative outcomes of these interactions? And (3) Why do positive interactions with strangers, in particular, tend to increase consumers' purchase intentions? Study 1 identifies three primary drivers of stranger interactions: store characteristics, the traits of fellow shoppers, and the traits of the focal consumer. Study 1 also highlights both the negative and positive outcomes of these interactions. Negative outcomes include upward social comparisons, competitive behaviors, unsolicited advice, and crowding—each of which may lead consumers to leave the store without making a purchase. However, Studies 1, 2a, 2b, and 2c show that when consumers enjoy the company of strangers, they are more likely to engage in social exchanges, including receiving purchase-related advice. This advice induces feelings of reassurance about their buying decisions, eventually increasing the likelihood of making a purchase. The practical implication of these findings is that, by creating environments that foster stranger interactions, managers can improve front-end store operations and enhance consumers' overall social experience.

1 | Introduction

Even the smallest act of kindness from a stranger can brighten someone's day, spark an unexpected connection, or help foster a more compassionate society (Boothby and Bohns 2021; Boothby et al. 2021). People often share stories of strangers stepping in to help during routine shopping trips—whether by covering the cost when someone's card is declined (The Washington Post 2023), offering a thoughtful compliment (The New York Times 2024), or comforting a parent overwhelmed by a child's meltdown (BuzzFeed 2018). Retail stores are more than just places to buy goods; they serve as social hubs where people mingle, share brief moments, and sometimes even form lasting bonds (Yang et al. 2025). These interactions—whether short exchanges with fellow shoppers or longer conversations with store employees—can shape a consumer's experience in both positive and negative ways (Argo and Dahl 2020; de Azambuja et al. 2023). While uplifting encounters with strangers can make shopping feel more human and joyful, unpleasant ones can leave consumers feeling angry, stressed (Kristofferson et al. 2017) or even taken advantage of (Echo 2025).

Despite the significant influence that strangers can have on individuals (Bohns 2016; Deri et al. 2019; Roghanizad and Bohns 2017), this topic has been largely overlooked in the consumer behavior literature—particularly within the context of retailing—with scholars emphasizing the need for further research (see review by Argo and Dahl 2020). Therefore,

the primary objective of our research is to address this gap by exploring the following questions: (1) What factors lead to stranger interactions in physical retail environments? (2) What are the potential positive and negative outcomes of these interactions? and (3) Why do positive interactions with strangers, in particular, tend to increase consumers' purchase intentions?

We contribute to the existing literature by introducing a novel conceptual framework that offers a deeper understanding of how interactions with strangers affect consumers in brick-and-mortar retail settings. This framework was developed based on insights from our qualitative research, particularly the semi-structured interviews conducted in Study 1 (see Figures 1 and 2). Our framework is divided into two parts. In the first, we identify three critical factors that shape interactions with strangers: (1) store characteristics, (2) traits of the fellow consumer, and (3) traits of the focal consumer (see Figure 1). The second part explores both the positive and negative outcomes of these interactions (see Figure 2).

Negative outcomes include: (1) consumers making comparisons to others in-store, leading to negative self-perception; (2) heightened competition for products, which can trigger aggressive behavior; (3) unsolicited advice or criticism from strangers, prompting consumers to reconsider their purchases; and (4) crowding, which can lead to social discomfort and cause consumers to leave the store. In contrast, we find that positive interactions with strangers can enhance social experiences and increase the likelihood of purchasing products. These positive outcomes follow a four-step sequential process (see Figure 3). First, (1) consumers must enjoy the company of other shoppers. This enjoyment leads to the next step, where (2) consumers engage in social exchanges with strangers—ranging from casual conversations to more meaningful interactions, such as offering compliments or asking for product recommendations. Receiving advice on potential purchases leads to the third step: (3) consumers feel reassured about the products they intend to buy. Finally, the fourth step, (4) this reassurance increases the likelihood of making a purchase.

We tested this four-step sequential process—our main hypothesis—in three retail contexts: clothing stores (typically female-targeted), electronics stores (typically male-targeted), and grocery stores (a gender-neutral context), using quantitative research conducted in Studies 2a, 2b, and 2c. The results confirmed that our hypothesis was supported in all three contexts.

Our work offers valuable insights for managers. We find that consumers are more likely to engage with strangers when the store layout encourages shared interactions. Key areas—such as waiting zones, communal mirrors, fitting rooms, and checkout counters—naturally create opportunities for social exchange. Since positive interactions with strangers can drive sales, we advise retailers to design their stores in a way that facilitates these connections. Our research also shows that when consumers struggle to find a sales representative to assist with purchase-related questions, they are more likely to seek help from other shoppers. This suggests that in understaffed stores, retailers could consider encouraging stranger-to-consumer assistance to fill the gap. Additionally, when there is a noticeable age difference between the consumer and the sales assistant, the consumer tends to feel more comfortable engaging with a stranger of a similar age rather than the sales assistant. Overall, by fostering social interactions with strangers, managers can gain valuable insights that help improve front-end store operations, refine marketing efforts, and elevate consumers' shopping experiences.

2 | Social Interactions in Physical Stores

Social interactions in physical retail settings generally involve exchanges between consumers and those around them (Naeem and Ozuem 2021; Pecoraro and Uusitalo 2014). These interactions may be non-verbal—such as observing or mimicking others based on social cues—or verbal, including actions like asking for information, sharing opinions, or exchanging greetings (Argo et al. 2005; Dahl 2013). There are three primary types of social interactions that occur in a brick-and-mortar retail environment (Argo and Dahl 2020).

The first type involves interactions between the focal consumer and sales assistants (e.g., Blanchard et al. 2016; Main et al. 2007; Mattila and Wirtz 2008; Ward and Dahl 2014). Studies in this area often examine how positive engagements with salespeople—such as receiving compliments (Main et al. 2007), receiving

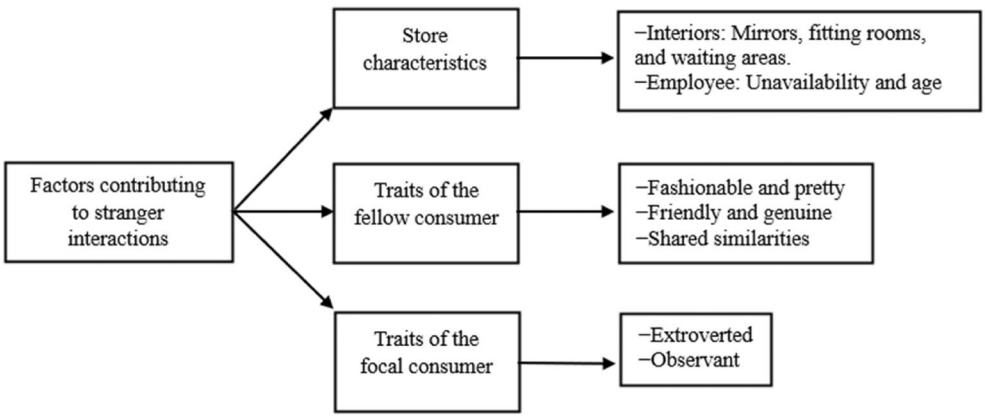

FIGURE 1 | Factors contributing to stranger interactions (obtained from Study 1).

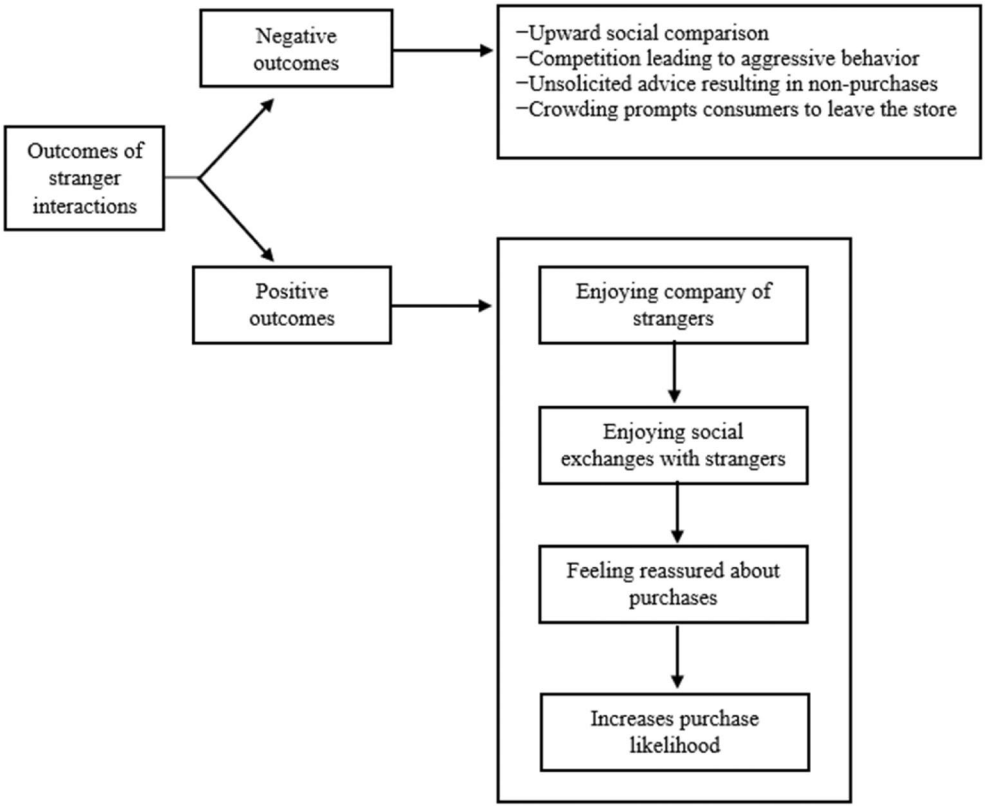

FIGURE 2 | Positive and negative outcomes of stranger interactions (obtained from Study 1).

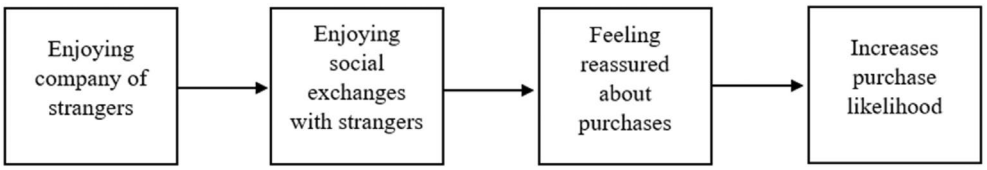

FIGURE 3 | Conceptual model showing the relationship between enjoying the presence of strangers and increase in purchase likelihood.

discounts (Blanchard et al. 2016), or being treated in a respectful and friendly manner (Mattila and Wirtz 2008)—can increase consumers' purchase intentions and enhance positive word-of-mouth. Interestingly, negative social interactions, such as obtaining snobbish vibes from sales staff, have also been shown to increase the perceived value of luxury products, in particular (Ward and Dahl 2014).

The second type of social interaction comprises exchanges between consumers and people they already know, such as friends, family members, or acquaintances. Prior research shows that consumers' social interactions with friends are highly beneficial for retailers (Grewal et al. 2018; Kurt et al. 2011; Zhang et al. 2014). This is because the presence of friends enhances consumers' hedonic experiences (Mangleburg et al. 2004), which, in turn, motivates them to buy more items in-store (Kurt et al. 2011; Grewal et al. 2018). However, when consumers are accompanied by close family members, the opposite effect occurs (De Vries et al. 2018). In general, shopping with friends tends to result in higher spending, while shopping with family members often leads to a consumer being more cautious with money (Luo 2005).

The social interaction most relevant to our work is that between consumers and unacquainted shoppers, which we refer to as "stranger interactions" (Naeem and Ozuem 2021). Although retail employees can also be considered strangers (Delacroix and Guillard 2016), our definition specifically pertains to fellow customers. Importantly, conceptual reviews have documented that—compared to research on the impact of salespeople or known individuals—studies on the influence of strangers on consumers in a retail context remain relatively scarce (see review by Argo and Dahl 2020). Table 1 highlights the extant literature on stranger interactions in various fields and demonstrates how our work differs from prior research.

As mentioned in the introduction section, we aim to fill a gap in the existing literature by addressing three research questions: (1) What factors lead to stranger interactions in physical retail environments? (2) What are the potential positive and negative outcomes of these interactions? and (3) Why do positive interactions with strangers, in particular, tend to increase consumers' purchase intentions? To answer these questions, we employ a mixed-method approach. In the next section, we discuss our qualitative research component.

TABLE 1 | Studies on the impact of stranger interactions.

Positive impact	Area	Relevant findings
This study	Retail	We explain the factors that drive stranger interactions and the underlying reasons why positive interactions, in particular, increase the likelihood of purchase.
Wu et al. (2024)	Services	In theme parks, stranger interactions can foster personal connections.
Kim et al. (2020)	Services	During sporting events, stranger interactions enhance social support, which contributes to improved perceptions of service quality.
Lin et al. (2020)	Services	Engaging with strangers can add value to the overall customer experience and support the firm's value-creation efforts.
Pons et al. (2016)	Retail	Stranger interactions can evoke positive emotions, potentially leading to higher levels of customer satisfaction.
Van Rompay et al. (2012)	Retail	In the presence of strangers, the focal consumer tends to spend more.
Söderlund (2011)	Retail	Stranger interactions can positively influence the perception of the retailer.
Wu (2007)	Tourism	In tourism services, engaging with strangers can strengthen customer loyalty.
Tse et al. (2002)	Hospitality	The focal consumer's perceptions of a restaurant are influenced by strangers.
Harris et al. (2000)	Services	In service settings, the focal consumer views interactions with strangers as valuable.
McGrath and Otnes (1995)	Retail	Strangers can take on the roles of both proactive and reactive helpers in a store.
Negative impact	**Area**	**Relevant findings**
Lin et al. (2020)	Services	Stranger interactions can contribute to the firm's value-destruction process.
Nicholls (2020)	Services	Strangers in a store can sometimes use crude language and fights over products.
Baker and Kim (2018)	Services	Strangers are sometimes accompanied by misbehaving children, which can make the focal consumer feel annoyed and uncomfortable.
Cai et al. 2018	Tourism	Strangers can sometimes exhibit poor hygiene and manners.
Colm et al. (2017)	Services	The focal consumer prefers not to interact with overly talkative strangers.
Martin and Nuttall (2017)	Retail	The focal consumer is more likely to leave the store if touched accidentally by a stranger.
Dorsey et al. (2016)	Retail	Strangers sometime display aggressive behaviors.
Yin and Poon (2016)	Tourism	Strangers sometime litter and break rules.
Zhang et al. (2014)	Retail	Too many strangers in a store reduces the focal consumer's purchase intent.
Camelis et al. (2013)	Services	Strangers can sometime intrude the focal consumer's personal space and privacy.
Dahl et al. (2012)	Retail	A focal consumer with low self-esteem negatively compares themselves to physically attractive strangers.
Martin (2012)	Retail	The focal consumer is more likely to negatively evaluate a product when touched accidentally by a stranger.
Uhrich and Luck (2012)	Retail	Too few or too many strangers in a store can negatively impact a consumer's shopping experience.
McGrath and Otnes (1995)	Retail	Strangers can be complainers and judgmental toward the focal consumer.

3 | Qualitative Study

Qualitative research seeks to uncover the meanings, experiences, and contexts that shape human behavior, offering deeper insights into individuals' thoughts, emotions, and life events (Fischer and Guzel 2023). In the context of our research, the dynamics of stranger interactions in retail environments remain relatively unexplored, especially compared to other related topics in the field. As a result, we chose semi-structured interviews as our qualitative method, given its effectiveness in examining social and behavioral issues that are not widely studied (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik 2021). Additionally, we believe semi-structured interviews are well suited to capture detailed insights into stranger interactions because they foster a conversational style, blending both closed- and open-ended questions with the flexibility for in-depth follow-up (Adams 2015).

TABLE 2 | Retailer details and employees interviewed.

Fashion retailer	Brief description	Country of origin	Employee name	Job role
Chic Fab	Plus size clothing	New Zealand	Vanessa	SA
SS Collection	Mature clothing	Australia	Emma	SA
Dazzle Me	Cool & affordable clothing	Australia	Ella	ASM
Glamz	Cool & affordable clothing	New Zealand	Sarah	SM
Enchante	Chic workwear outfits	Australia	Amelia	SA
Fiorella	Chic workwear outfits	Australia	Joanna	SA
Fresh Radiance	Elegant feminine styles	Australia	Hayley	ASM
Treasure	Tourist clothing store	New Zealand	Anna	SA

Note: The names of the fashion retailer and employees have been changed for confidentiality purposes.
Abbreviations: ASM = assistant store manager; SA = sales assistant; SM = store manager.

3.1 | Sample

Eight retail experts, including store managers, assistant managers, and sales assistants employed in different retail organizations, took part in the semi-structured interviews (see Table 2). We regard these participants as experts in the topic of social interactions due to their rich work experience in retail, frequent engagement with customers, and their observations of regular shopping behaviors in-store. We chose to stop at eight interviews for three main reasons. First, existing literature on interviews and participant selection often does not specify an exact number of participants when relying on "expert voices" (Baker and Edwards 2012; Saunders and Townsend 2016). Second, previous studies suggest that eight interviews are sufficient for understanding social interactions in retail settings (McGrath and Otnes 1995). Finally, saturation was reached after the fifth interview (Clark and Creswell 2008), prompting us to conclude data collection after the eighth interview.

3.2 | Justification for Choosing the Types of Retail Stores

We intentionally chose a variety of retail stores (see Table 2) within the same product category—clothing and accessories—to gain a broad perspective on how stranger interactions influence consumer behavior from the viewpoint of retail experts. The diversity of these stores is particularly interesting because, while they all sell similar products, each targets a different consumer demographic. For example, Enchante and Fiorella focus on working women, offering Australia/New Zealand clothing sizes ranging from 6 to 18. Chic Fab caters to the plus-size market, with options for women size 18 and up. SS Collection targets women aged 40 and older, while Dazzle Me and Glamz provide trendy, budget-friendly clothing for younger women, including teens and those in their twenties and early thirties. Treasure, in contrast, is geared toward tourists, offering clothing for women of all ages and body types. Our aim was to investigate whether stranger interactions have a similarly significant impact on purchase intentions across these different types of stores.

3.3 | Procedure

All of the semi-structured interviews took place at the respective stores where the participants were employed. On average, each semi-structured interview lasted between 20 and 30 min. Prior to the semi-structured interviews, participants were informed of their rights and asked to read the provided information sheet. They then completed a consent form, agreeing to have the interviews recorded. Participants were asked about customer shopping behaviors, customer-to-customer interactions, and typical customer profiles (see Appendix A). At the end of the semi-structured interviews, participants were given a gift card as a token of appreciation for taking part in our study.

3.4 | Data Analysis

The semi-structured interviews were transcribed, and a thematic analysis was performed to identify key themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis has been extensively used in prior consumer behavior studies (e.g., Perannagari and Chakrabarti 2020; Elhajjar 2023; Thomas 2023). The transcripts were thoroughly examined and read by the authors multiple times. We then coded the raw data to identify the main themes. A more specific closed coding system was then applied to develop a detailed list of subthemes (Braun and Clarke 2006). These subthemes were later combined into broader, meaningful themes following prior research guidelines (Spiggle 1994). To reduce bias, an independent coder was requested to analyze 25% of the interview data, unaware of the interpretations made by the authors (Belotto 2018). The independent coder was given the coding instructions, and although there were a few minor disagreements about how to categorize certain subthemes, these were settled through discussion and clarification of the coding criteria (O'Connor and Joffe 2020). In the end, the inter-coder reliability results confirm the consistency and credibility of the thematic analysis (Whittemore et al. 2001).

3.5 | Findings and Discussion

The thematic content analysis revealed two primary themes, each with associated sub-themes (see Figures 1 and 2).

3.5.1 | Theme 1. Factors Contributing to Stranger Interactions

The first theme, factors contributing to stranger interactions (see Figure 1), includes three sub-themes: (1) store characteristics, (2) traits of the fellow consumer, and (3) traits of the focal consumer. These sub-themes are discussed in the subsequent sections.

3.5.1.1 | Store Characteristics. *Mirrors, fitting rooms, and waiting spaces*: Consumers often use the large communal mirrors near fitting rooms to check out the outfits they have tried on, primarily because the mirrors inside the fitting rooms are smaller. As they notice other shoppers doing the same, brief conversations tend to spark. Retail employees have also observed that while waiting in line for fitting rooms, consumers often chat with strangers to pass the time. However, in stores with fewer fitting rooms or limited space for consumers to stand or sit, social interactions are much less frequent.

> Since we are a small store with only four changing rooms, we don't have large mirrors outside the rooms like other clothing stores. Our space outside the changing rooms is quite cramped, so we usually don't have customers coming out to pose in the clothes they've tried on.—Ella, Assistant Store Manager, Dazzle Me

Employee unavailability and age: Retail employees shared that on a typical day, they perform multiple roles in the store. These include attending to customer needs, handling cash registers, organizing merchandise, steaming clothes, and ensuring that the store atmosphere is conducive (e.g., maintaining cleanliness, proper temperature, scent, lighting, and music). The employees expressed concerns about the store being understaffed at times. In such situations, they mentioned that it is difficult for one person to manage multiple roles simultaneously. As a result, the understaffing issue can sometimes leave customers unattended, causing them to seek assistance from either a fellow shopper or another source. Notably, the employees also indicated that when their age differs significantly from that of the consumer, the consumer is more likely to seek purchase advice from a person who is closer to their own age and appearance, rather than from the employee.

> In our store, we have older team members, and sometimes that doesn't appeal to our average customer age. As a result, the customer may turn to another customer for advice instead of asking one of our team members.—Sarah, Store Manager, Glamz

3.5.1.2 | Traits of the Fellow Consumer. *Fashionable and pretty*: People typically link external beauty with positive qualities (Thomas and Abraham 2021) and tend to be drawn to persons or objects they find pretty (Thomas 2020, 2021; Thomas 2022). Attractive individuals in stores can impact consumer shopping experiences (Argo et al. 2008; Dahl et al. 2012). Our research shows that physical appearance affects verbal interactions, with retail representatives noting that consumers engage more with those who are good-looking, well-groomed, and fashionable, while avoiding those who do not fit this image.

> I guess how someone is presented—whether they are well-presented or look really sloppy—would obviously influence someone's opinion. If the person is attractive and well-groomed, a customer might value their opinions more because of their physical appearance.—Hayley, Assistant Store Manager, Fresh Radiance

Friendly and genuine: Humans have an innate need to form relationships (Baumeister and Leary 1995). When unfamiliar with someone, people rely on cues like body language or traits to decide whether to engage socially (Kroencke et al. 2023). Retail representatives observed that if a customer perceives another's body language as unfriendly or unapproachable, they are less likely to interact. Conversely, customers are more likely to engage with those who seem friendly and genuine.

> Maybe the person's initial impression would determine whether they take the stranger's opinion into account, and I guess how genuine and friendly the person seems as well.—Hayley, Assistant Store Manager, Fresh Radiance

Shared similarities: People often make inferences about others based on limited information (Riggio and Friedman 1986) and tend to connect more with those they perceive as similar to themselves, such as sharing birthdays, initials, or name letters (Burger et al. 2004; Jiang et al. 2013). Our research suggests that these shared similarities also improve interactions with fellow consumers inside a store. Retail employees mentioned that consumers feel more comfortable interacting with strangers who are of similar age or body shape, believing that if an item looks good on someone similar to them, it will suit them as well.

> I think they want a fellow customer to be in the same age range or have something in common with them to take advice.—Joanna, Sales Assistant, Fiorella

3.5.1.3 | Traits of the Focal Consumer. *Extroverted*: Extroverted individuals enjoy social interactions and experience positive emotions like joy and excitement in a social setting (Kroencke et al. 2023; Mooradian and Swan 2006). The results indicate that outgoing, self-confident consumers are more likely to seek advice from other shoppers. Retail representatives stated that extroverted consumers are more inclined to engage with fellow shoppers in-store and trust their purchase-related advice.

Observant consumers: Previous research shows that observing other consumers in a store can influence one's shopping

experience (Dahl et al. 2012; Dahl et al. 2001). When consumers see fellow shoppers interested in a product, its perceived value increases (Zhang et al. 2014), as people assume it must be worth pursuing (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004). Our findings support this notion, revealing that non-verbal interactions often follow verbal ones. Retail staff noted that when consumers witness another's product preferences, they often engage in verbal or non-verbal interactions.

3.5.2 | Main Theme 2. Outcomes of Stranger Interactions

Theme 1 identified the factors contributing to stranger interactions. Theme 2, on the other hand, discusses the positive and negative outcomes of such interactions (see Figure 2). The negative outcomes of stranger interactions are upward social comparisons, competition leading to aggressive behavior, unsolicited advice resulting in non-purchases, and crowding that prompts consumers to leave the store. The positive outcome of stranger interactions is presented in a four-step sequential process. These are: (1) enjoying the company of strangers, which leads to (2) enjoying social exchanges with them, which is followed by (3) feeling reassured about purchases, which, in return, (4) increases purchase likelihood.

3.5.2.1 | Negative Outcomes of Stranger Interactions. *Upward Social Comparison*: Consumers have an inherent desire to assess their own opinions and abilities. When they are unable to do so, they often rely on comparing themselves to others (Social Comparison Theory: Festinger 1954). Upward comparisons occur when individuals compare themselves to someone they perceive as superior (Festinger 1954). For instance, if a consumer sees someone more attractive than themselves wearing a particular clothing item, they may make an upward comparison with that attractive person (Dahl et al. 2012). This can result in consumers experiencing low self-esteem, prompting them to leave the store without purchasing the item (Dahl et al. 2012).

> The negative side of interactions with strangers is that customers may compare themselves to more attractive individuals and feel that they are not able to pull off the dress as well as the attractive customer. They might think, Oh my goodness, she looks lovely. I don't think I can look as great as she does in that dress. I'm not her size, and I don't have her body shape.—Sarah, Store Manager, Glamz

Competition leading to aggressive behavior: When consumers encounter products that are limited or scarce in-store, especially during sales with great bargains, they start to view other shoppers as competition for securing the desired item. This perception can lead to aggressive behaviors (Kristofferson et al. 2017). Such behaviors may vary from using harsh language to engaging in physical altercations over products (Nicholls 2020). The retail staff mentioned that one of the most common competitive actions consumers display in stores is hoarding all the available items and placing them in their shopping carts, even if they have no intention of purchasing them.

Unsolicited advice resulting in non-purchases: Consumers tend to dislike when their personal space is intruded upon by overly chatty fellow shoppers (Colm et al. 2017). As a result, when advice is offered without being requested, it can come across as rude, intrusive, or annoying (Colm et al. 2017). Unsolicited recommendations are generally unwelcome (Argo and Dahl 2020). Negative interactions, such as receiving unwanted feedback, may even lead to a consumer leaving the store without making a purchase.

> The two main reasons why these interactions turn negative are when a stranger provides negative feedback or when the person does not value the other customer's opinion.—Hayley, Assistant Store Manager, Fresh Radiance

Crowding prompts consumers to leave the store: The number of other customers in a retail space significantly influences shopping experiences (Aydinli et al. 2021; De Oliveira Santini et al. 2021). When consumers are accidentally touched by a stranger, they tend to leave the store (Martin and Nuttall 2017). Both too few and too many customers in a store can negatively affect a shopper's experience (Uhrich and Luck 2012). For example, too many people in the store can make consumers feel uncomfortable and uneasy (De Oliveira Santini et al. 2021), whereas low levels of crowding can be unpleasant due to excessive attention from sales staff and the absence of social cues from other shoppers (Uhrich and Luck 2012).

3.5.2.2 | Positive Outcomes of Stranger Interactions. *Enjoying company of strangers*: An ideal level of crowding—where a store is not too packed or too empty—motivates consumers to enjoy the company of strangers. This can manifest through verbal interactions, like customers greeting unfamiliar shoppers as they pass by, or through non-verbal cues, such as displaying open, friendly body language towards those nearby. Such behaviors contribute to a livelier store atmosphere and foster positive emotions in consumers (Byun and Mann 2011). The enjoyment of others' company is a key step in embracing social exchanges with them.

Enjoying social exchanges with strangers: Once consumers start to feel at ease with strangers, they become more comfortable striking up conversations with them. In the beginning, these interactions are often light and casual—such as talking about the weather, asking for the time, or commenting on how long the line is to the fitting room. As the conversation progresses, it can become a bit more meaningful, with questions like what the other person is buying and whether it is for a special occasion or just a regular purchase. Compliments or advice about the products are common topics of discussion. Importantly, when consumers receive helpful feedback from strangers, it provides them with a sense of reassurance about their own purchases.

Feeling reassured about purchases: Consumers may seek a second opinion from other shoppers mainly because they have trust issues with sales assistants. Consumers might feel that sales assistants are not being truthful about the product in order to make a sale, whereas a compliment from another consumer

may seem more genuine, as they have nothing to gain from it. Furthermore, consumers seek reassurance about their purchases, especially when they want to be certain that the money they plan to spend on an expensive garment is worthwhile.

> There was a girl yesterday who was trying on prom dresses and her mother was just kind of asking random people in the dressing room like which one do you like? What do you think of this dress on her?—Hayley, Assistant Store Manager, Fresh Radiance

Increases purchase likelihood: Valuable social exchanges with strangers, especially when a fellow shopper reassures a consumer about a product they are planning to buy, increase the consumer's likelihood of purchasing that product. Retail representatives emphasized that when a consumer receives opinions or compliments from a fellow shopper about a clothing item they have tried on, they feel happy and reassured. As a result, they are more likely to purchase the garment.

> Sometimes you'll get customers that, you know, will comment on someone's outfit, they'll say, hey, that looks great on you, and that sort of cements the purchase for the customer... If a customer is holding something and a stranger says it's nice, I think customers would buy those kinds of products more.—Amelia, Sales Assistant, Enchante

3.6 | Need for Follow-Up Studies

Although Study 1 reveals the factors that motivate stranger interactions and recognizes both negative and positive outcomes of such interactions, the study is not without limitations. Therefore, we identify four reasons for conducting follow-up studies.

First, a key constraint of our qualitative study is its exclusive focus on women's clothing stores. This suggests that our theoretical framework may be gender- and context-specific, potentially limiting its applicability to male consumers or other retail contexts. To address this problem, we conducted additional studies involving both female and male participants across a broader range of retail contexts, such as clothing stores (typically female-targeted), electronics stores (typically male-targeted) and grocery stores (a gender-neutral context).

Second, our analysis of the extant literature reveals that, compared to the number of studies on the impact of negative stranger interactions on customers, there are relatively fewer studies on positive interactions. Therefore, from this point onward, the objective of this article is to exclusively explore the positive outcomes of stranger interactions on consumer behavior.

Third, the four-step sequential framework for positive interactions developed in Study 1 is both novel and untested. Given the inherent limitations of qualitative research in terms of objectivity and generalizability (Clark and Creswell 2008), we conducted three surveys—Studies 2a, 2b, and 2c—to validate the theoretical framework for positive outcomes, as presented in Figure 2.

Finally, we believe that employing a mixed-methods approach allows for the development of a stronger theoretical framework by combining the broad patterns identified through quantitative methods with the in-depth insights provided by qualitative research (Clark and Creswell 2008). Our hypothesis is grounded in social exchange theory (SET), which will be elaborated upon in the next section.

4 | Social Exchange Theory (SET)

Social exchange theory (SET) is a widely recognized framework for understanding human interactions and relationships (Ahmad et al. 2023; Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu 2018; Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005). Drawing from concepts in economics, psychology, and sociology, the theory suggests that social exchanges are motivated by the desire to maximize benefits and minimize costs (Cropanzano et al. 2017; Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005; Thibaut 2017). In instrumental social exchanges, individuals seek relationships to gain rewards, such as material resources (e.g., money, goods, or services), information (knowledge that aids in completing tasks), or social capital (access to networks, opportunities, or status) (Cook et al. 2013). In contrast, affective social exchanges emphasize that people are also motivated by emotional rewards, such as the desire for social approval or the satisfaction derived from helping others (Lawler 2001). In affective social exchanges, positive emotions act as a form of social currency, strengthening emotional connections and promoting greater commitment within relationships (Lawler 2001; Lawler and Thye 2006; Nakonezny and Denton 2008).

We assert that, in the context of stranger interactions in a retail store, social exchanges are favorable only when a consumer believes they are more likely to gain something from interacting with a stranger (e.g., enjoyment, help, or compliments) than incur losses (e.g., discomfort, complaints, or judgment). Importantly, based on the principles of SET, we suggest that when a consumer enjoys the company of strangers in-store, they are more likely to engage in social exchanges with them. This is because the consumer perceives potential rewards from these interactions. Furthermore, we hypothesize that the enjoyment a consumer experiences from a stranger's company can lead them to perceive that stranger as an acquaintance—at least temporarily—motivating them to seek purchase-related advice or other assistance. This is supported by prior research showing that when a stranger is asked for help or notices someone in need, they are likely to intervene and offer assistance (Bohns 2016; Bohns et al. 2014).

Importantly, we propose that when a consumer receives purchase-related advice from a stranger (e.g., an instrumental exchange, where they gain information to complete a task) or compliments from a stranger (e.g., an affective exchange, where they experience happiness or joy), it provides reassurance about their buying decision. Reassurance is defined as "restoring confidence or the re-establishment or confirmation of something

that reduces risks" (Feldman 1993, 280). We argue that feelings of reassurance, in turn, increases consumers' intention to make a purchase. However, simply enjoying the presence of strangers does not directly boost purchase intentions. In other words, we argue that enjoying the company of strangers indirectly increases the likelihood of a purchase—specifically through the positive experience of social exchanges and the feelings of reassurance they provide. Our hypothesis is formalized as follows:

Hypothesis. *Enjoying social exchanges and feeling reassured sequentially mediates the relationship between enjoying the company of strangers and purchase likelihood.*

5 | Quantitative Studies

We conducted Studies 2a, 2b, and 2c to test our conceptual model (see Figure 3). These studies were run in three retail settings: a clothing store (typically female-targeted), an electronics store (typically male-targeted), and a grocery store (a gender-neutral context). We chose these settings because clothing stores sell both high-involvement products (such as ball gowns) and low-involvement products (such as hair ties). Electronics stores mainly sell high-involvement products (e.g., laptops, phones, televisions), while grocery stores primarily sell low-involvement products (e.g., everyday items).

5.1 | Study 2a: Clothing Store

Participants: A total of 431 participants took part in an online survey, of which 49 incomplete responses were excluded. The final sample consisted of 382 participants ($M_{age} = 34.24$, SD = 16.33, female = 51.04%). Female participants were recruited through a market research firm based in New Zealand, while male participants were recruited through SurveySwap, a reputable survey exchange community based in the Netherlands.

Measures: First, the participants were asked to imagine shopping in a clothing store. They were then asked to indicate, on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = not at all likely, 7 = extremely likely), the likelihood of each of the following situations occurring: (i) you enjoy the company of fellow shoppers (strangers) in a clothing store, (ii) you enjoy social exchanges with fellow shoppers (strangers) in a clothing store, (iii) fellow shoppers in a retail store reassure you about your purchases, and (iv) you are likely to purchase something in a retail store when given reassurance from a fellow shopper (stranger). These items were adapted from Rosenbaum and Massiah's (2007, 263) social–emotional support scale. All factor loadings were greater than 0.5, and Cronbach's alpha was greater than 0.8 (see Table 3). The correlations among constructs can be seen in Table 4.

TABLE 3 | Descriptive statistics and composite reliabilities for Studies 2a, 2b, and 2c.

1 = not at all likely–7 = extremely likely	Study 2a: Clothing store				Study 2b: Electronics store				Study 2c: Grocery store			
	Factor loading	*M*	SD	CR (α)	Factor loading	*M*	SD	CR (α)	Factor loading	*M*	SD	CR (α)
Positive stranger interactions		3.52	1.33	0.84		3.08	1.36	0.84		3.03	1.34	0.82
You enjoy the company of strangers	0.71	3.38	1.62		0.79	2.86	1.67		0.69	2.96	1.65	
You enjoy social exchanges with strangers	0.72	3.40	1.67		0.73	2.84	1.62		0.74	2.96	1.72	
Strangers make you feel reassured about your purchases	0.65	3.46	1.56		0.70	3.07	1.66		0.62	2.65	1.56	
To purchase something because strangers reassured you	0.60	3.85	1.62		0.50	3.56	1.68		0.56	3.55	1.73	

TABLE 4 | Correlations among constructs (Study 2a: Clothing store).

	Enjoy company	Enjoy social exchanges	Feeling reassured	Purchase intentions
Enjoy company	1			
Enjoy social exchanges	0.75**	1		
Feeling reassured	0.52**	0.51**	1	
Purchases likelihood	0.46**	0.48**	0.63**	1

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

TABLE 5 | Mediation results (Study 2a: Clothing store).

	Enjoying social exchanges (M1)				Feeling reassured (M2)				Purchase intentions (Y)			
	b	**SE**	***t***	***p***	***b***	**SE**	***t***	***p***	***b***	**SE**	***t***	***p***
Constant	0.77	0.13	5.91	0.00	1.58	0.16	9.75	0.00	1.22	0.17	7.18	0.00
Enjoying company (X)	0.78	0.03	22.34	0.00	—	—	—	—	0.08	0.06	1.32	0.19
Enjoying social exchanges (M1)	—	—	—	—	0.25	0.06	4.24	0.00	—	—	—	—
Feeling reassured (M2)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	——	0.52	0.05	10.74	0.00
Model summary	$R^2 = 0.57$ $F(1,380) = 499.13$ $p < 0.001$				$R^2 = 0.30$ $F(2,379) = 80.98$ $p < 0.001$				$R^2 = 0.43$ $F(3,378) = 95.18$ $p < 0.001$			

	b	**SE**	**LLCI**	**ULCI**
Indirect effect(s) of X on Y through M1 and M2	0.10	0.03	0.06	0.16

Abbreviations: LLCI, lower limit 95% confidence interval; M1, mediator 1; M2, mediator 2; ULCI, upper limit 95% confidence interval; X, independent variable, Y, dependent variable.

TABLE 6 | Correlations among constructs (Study 2b: Electronics store).

	Enjoy company	Enjoy social exchanges	Feeling reassured	Purchase intentions
Enjoy company	1			
Enjoy exchanges	0.76**	1		
Feeling reassured	0.65**	0.59**	1	
Purchases likelihood	0.47**	0.42**	0.50**	1

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

Mediation analysis: We conducted a mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 6 with 5000 bootstrap resamples (Hayes 2017) to test our hypothesis. Specifically, we examined the indirect effect of enjoying the company of strangers on purchase likelihood via enjoyment of social exchanges and feeling reassured. The indirect effect was significant ($b = 0.10$, SE = 0.03, 95% CI: [0.06, 0.16]), thus confirming our hypothesis (see Table 5). Enjoying the company of strangers increases enjoyment in social exchanges ($b = 0.78$, SE = 0.03, $p < 0.001$). Enjoying social exchanges leads to feeling reassured about purchases ($b = 0.25$, SE = 0.06, $p < 0.001$). These feelings of reassurance, in turn, increase consumers' likelihood of making a purchase ($b = 0.52$, SE = 0.05, $p < 0.001$). Notably, the direct effect of enjoying the company of strangers on purchase likelihood was not significant ($b = 0.08$, SE = 0.06, $p = 0.19$), suggesting that the effect is fully explained by the mediation involving enjoyment of social exchanges and feeling reassured.

5.2 | Study 2b: Electronics Store

Participants, procedure, and measures: A total of 187 participants were recruited through SurveySwap. Of these, 27 incomplete responses were excluded. The final sample consisted of 160 participants ($M_{age} = 35.81$, SD = 17.07, female = 48.78%). Participants were asked to imagine shopping in an electronics store. The dependent and independent measures were the same as in Study 2a. All factor loadings were greater than 0.5, except for one, which was equal to 0.5. Cronbach's alpha was greater than 0.8 (see Table 3). The correlations among constructs are shown in Table 6.

Mediation analysis: We conducted a mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 6 with 5000 bootstrap resamples (Hayes 2017) to test our hypothesis. Specifically, we examined how enjoying the company of strangers influences purchase likelihood through two mediators: enjoyment of social exchanges and feelings of reassurance. The indirect effect was significant ($b = 0.06$, SE = 0.03, 95% CI: [0.02, 0.13]), supporting our hypothesis (see Table 7). Enjoying the company of strangers significantly increased enjoyment of social exchanges ($b = 0.73$, SE = 0.05, $p < 0.001$), which, in turn, led to greater feelings of reassurance about purchases ($b = 0.25$, SE = 0.09, $p < 0.001$). These feelings of reassurance then increased the likelihood of making a purchase ($b = 0.33$, SE = 0.09, $p < 0.001$). However, the direct effect of enjoying the company of strangers on purchase likelihood was not significant ($b = 0.21$, SE = 0.11, $p = 0.06$), indicating that the effect is fully mediated by the enjoyment of social exchanges and feelings of reassurance.

5.3 | Study 2c: Grocery Store

Participants, procedure, and measures: One hundred and forty one participants took part in an online survey recruited through SurveySwap. Out of which, 2 incomplete responses were excluded. The final sample we obtained consisted of 139 participants ($M_{age} = 31.47$, SD = 12.83, female = 49.64%). The

TABLE 7 | Mediation results (Study 2b: Electronics store).

	Enjoying social exchanges (M1)				Feeling reassured (M2)				Purchase intentions (Y)			
	b	**SE**	***t***	***p***	***b***	**SE**	***t***	***p***	***b***	**SE**	***t***	***p***
Constant	0.75	0.17	4.45	0.00	1.05	0.21	5.05	0.00	1.73	0.26	6.74	0.00
Enjoying company (X)	0.73	0.05	14.47	0.00	—	—	—	—	0.21	0.11	1.86	0.06
Enjoying social exchanges (M1)	—	—	—	—	0.25	0.09	2.70	0.01	——	—	—	—
Feeling reassured (M2)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.33	0.09	3.65	0.00
Model summary	$R^2 = 0.57$ $F(1,158) = 209.56$ $p < 0.001$				$R^2 = 0.44$ $F(2,157) = 62.14$ $p < 0.001$				$R^2 = 0.29$ $F(3,156) = 21.45$ $p < 0.001$			

	b	**SE**	**LLCI**	**ULCI**
Indirect effect(s) of X on Y through M1 and M2	0.06	0.03	0.02	0.13

Abbreviations: LLCI, lower limit 95% confidence interval; M1, mediator 1; M2, mediator 2; ULCI, upper limit 95% confidence interval; X, independent variable, Y, dependent variable.

TABLE 8 | Correlations among constructs (Study 2c: Grocery store).

	Enjoy company	Enjoy social exchanges	Feeling reassured	Purchase intentions
Enjoy company	1			
Enjoy exchanges	0.71**	1		
Feeling reassured	0.51**	0.53**	1	
Purchases likelihood	0.43**	0.51**	0.50**	1

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

TABLE 9 | Mediation results (Study 2c: Grocery store).

	Enjoying social exchanges (M1)				Feeling reassured (M2)				Purchase intentions (Y)			
	b	**SE**	***t***	***p***	***b***	**SE**	***t***	***p***	***b***	**SE**	***t***	***p***
Constant	0.78	0.21	3.66	0.00	0.98	0.24	4.14	0.00	1.54	0.28	5.56	0.00
Enjoying company (X)	0.74	0.06	11.70	0.00	—	—	—	—	0.06	0.11	0.55	0.58
Enjoying social exchanges (M1)	—	—	—	—	0.30	0.09	3.28	0.00	—	—	—	—
Feeling reassured (M2)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.36	0.09	3.83	0.00
Model summary	$R^2 = 0.50$ $F(1,137) = 136.94$ $p < 0.001$				$R^2 = 0.32$ $F(2,136) = 31.48$ $p < 0.001$				$R^2 = 0.34$ $F(3,135) = 23.10$ $p < 0.001$			

	b	**SE**	**LLCI**	**ULCI**
Indirect effect(s) of X on Y through M1 and M2	0.08	0.04	0.02	0.17

Abbreviations: LLCI, lower limit 95% confidence interval; M1, mediator 1; M2, mediator 2; ULCI, upper limit 95% confidence interval; X, independent variable, Y, dependent variable.

participants were asked to imagine shopping in a grocery store. The dependent and independent measures were the same as in Studies 2a and 2b. All factor loadings were greater than 0.5. Cronbach's alpha was greater than 0.8 (see Table 3). The correlations among constructs are shown in Table 8.

Mediation analysis: We performed a mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 6 with 5000 bootstrap resamples (Hayes 2017) to test our hypothesis. Specifically, we investigated the indirect effect of enjoying the company of strangers on purchase likelihood through enjoyment of social exchanges and a sense of reassurance. The results revealed a significant indirect effect ($b = 0.08$, SE = 0.04, 95% CI: [0.02, 0.17]), supporting our hypothesis (see Table 9). Enjoying the company of strangers positively influenced enjoyment in social exchanges ($b = 0.74$, SE = 0.06, $p < 0.001$). This enjoyment of social interactions, in

turn, contributed to feeling reassured about making a purchase ($b = 0.30$, SE = 0.09, $p < 0.001$). These reassured feelings subsequently increased the likelihood of making a purchase ($b = 0.36$, SE = 0.09, $p < 0.001$). Importantly, the direct effect of enjoying the company of strangers on purchase likelihood was not significant ($b = 0.06$, SE = 0.11, $p = 0.58$), indicating that the relationship between enjoying strangers and purchase likelihood is fully mediated by the enjoyment of social exchanges and the feeling of reassurance.

6 | Discussion

In this article, we explore three main research questions: (1) What factors lead to stranger interactions in physical retail environments? (2) What are the potential positive and negative outcomes of these interactions? and (3) Why do positive interactions with strangers, in particular, tend to increase consumers' purchase intentions? In Study 1, we identify several key factors that contribute to in-store stranger interactions, including store characteristics, the traits of fellow consumers, and the personality of the focal consumer. Store characteristics encompass both non-human elements, such as the size of mirrors, fitting rooms, and waiting areas, as well as human factors like employee availability and age. Traits of fellow consumers that encourage interactions include physical attractiveness, welcoming body language, and the perception that the focal consumer shares commonalities with the other shopper. Finally, we find that certain traits of the focal consumer, such as being extraverted and observant, increase the likelihood of engaging in stranger interactions in-store.

In Study 1, we also discover both positive and negative outcomes of stranger interactions. Negative outcomes include consumers comparing themselves to others and forming negative self-perceptions. For example, a consumer might see an attractive woman wearing a dress that they plan to buy and decide not to purchase it because they feel they do not have the ideal body shape that the attractive woman possesses (Dahl et al. 2012). Other negative outcomes that may cause consumers to leave the store include competitive behaviors, receiving unsolicited advice, and crowding (Argo and Dahl 2020; Nicholls 2020).

However, we find that positive outcomes from interactions with strangers are beneficial for both retailers and consumers. Study 1 reveals that positive outcomes occur in a sequence: first, the consumer needs to enjoy the company of strangers. Enjoying the company then leads to social exchanges between strangers and consumers. These social exchanges range from superficial chats (e.g., talking about the weather) to more meaningful conversations, such as giving compliments or asking for purchase-related advice. Meaningful conversations, especially those concerning the product, help consumers feel more reassured about their purchases. Finally, this feeling of reassurance leads to an increased likelihood of purchase. Based on the principles of SET, we tested the positive outcome sequence hypothesis from Study 1 in three follow-up studies (2a, 2b, and 2c), each set in a different retail context: a clothing store, an electronics store, and a grocery store. The hypothesis was supported in all three studies, highlighting the importance of stranger interactions in-store.

6.1 | Theoretical Implications

Our contribution to the literature is fourfold. First, to the best of our knowledge, we are the first to introduce a theoretical framework that identifies both the factors and outcomes of stranger interactions on consumer behavior in a retail context (see Figures 1 and 2).

Second, we are the first to test a conceptual model that focuses on the positive outcomes of stranger interactions, revealing a step-by-step process that begins with consumers enjoying the company of strangers and ends with an increased likelihood of purchase (see Figure 3). Specifically, we extend the social influence literature by demonstrating that, for positive social influence to occur, consumers must not only appreciate the company of others but also enjoy social exchanges with them.

Third, while most research on stranger interactions in retail contexts focuses on negative outcomes, such as consumers leaving a store after being accidentally touched by a stranger (Martin 2012; Martin and Nuttall 2017), our study highlights the potential benefits of positive stranger interactions for both retailers and consumers.

Finally, we contribute to the emotions literature by introducing and testing two novel mediators—feelings of enjoyment and reassurance—in explaining how the company of strangers can increase purchase intentions. Enjoyment is typically associated with the pleasure or hedonic value consumers experience while shopping (Cai and Xu 2006). Previous research has shown that factors like lighting, layout, scent, and music can enhance in-store enjoyment (Ballantine et al. 2010; Foster and McLelland 2015). Our study expands on this by showing that consumer enjoyment can also stem from interactions with strangers. Similarly, reassurance, as defined in the psychology literature, involves feeling confident about something that reduces risk (Feldman 1993). We demonstrate how feelings of enjoyment can lead to feelings of reassurance, which play a central role in increasing purchase intentions.

6.2 | Practical Implications

Stranger interactions in a physical store can offer valuable insights for managers, enhancing both operational efficiency and the overall customer experience. When consumers engage with one another, they often share feedback about products, services, or the store environment (Söderlund 2011). We find that while this feedback may be informal, it can provide managers with a clearer understanding of customer preferences, concerns, or unmet needs. When consumers form positive connections with each other, they are more likely to return, stay longer, and spend more (Söderlund 2011). By creating a sense of community, a store can foster customer loyalty and encourage word-of-mouth recommendations, ultimately boosting sales.

Observing stranger interactions can also help managers identify popular areas in the store where shoppers tend to gather. This awareness can be useful for designing store layouts, for example, creating new shelf-spaces, improving signage, identifying

underutilized corners or pathways. Our results show that consumers are more inclined to interact with strangers when the store layout naturally brings them into proximity. Retailers can take advantage of this by designing spaces that encourage engagement, such as seating areas or collaborative zones. Additionally, if consumers are discussing frustrations—like long checkout lines or overcrowding—managers can use these conversations to pinpoint operational issues that need attention.

We also discovered that when sales representatives are unavailable, or when there is a noticeable age gap between the consumer and the salesperson, consumers are more likely to seek assistance from fellow shoppers. Furthermore, fellow shoppers also help validate the opinions of sales assistants, increasing trust and aiding in purchase decision-making. Therefore, we recommend that managers train sales staff to encourage conversations between consumers, especially when struggling to establish trust or close sales. Finally, we suggest that in situations where a store is understaffed, relying on other customers to temporarily fill in the gaps can be a helpful solution. Overall, we recommend comprehensive training for both sales assistants and store managers, equipping them with the skills needed to encourage positive interactions and enhance consumers' overall shopping experiences.

6.3 | Limitations and Future Research

First, in Study 1, we conducted semi-structured interviews with retail experts working exclusively in women-focused clothing stores. Because shopping for clothing and accessories (e.g., makeup, jewelry, shoes) is more commonly associated with women than men, it remains unclear whether men would engage in similar spontaneous interactions in physical clothing stores. To address this limitation, we included male participants in a clothing store context and incorporated both male and female participants in other retail contexts—such as electronics and grocery stores—in Studies 2a, 2b, and 2c. However, since these studies are quantitative rather than qualitative in nature, narratives (personal stories) about stranger interactions in physical electronics or grocery stores remain uncaptured. This limitation could be addressed in future research through semi-structured interviews that explore individuals' personal experiences and feelings in the aforementioned contexts. Additionally, interested scholars could interview retail employees—experts in male-oriented or gender-neutral retail settings such as fast-moving consumer goods, appliances, automobiles, and furniture—to gain broader insights into gendered social interactions in brick-and-mortar stores.

Second, in Studies 2a, 2b, and 2c, although we demonstrate that enjoying the company of strangers leads to enjoying social exchanges with them, we did not examine whether this relationship is moderated by individual traits—either those of the fellow consumer or the focal consumer—even though such traits emerged as relevant in Study 1. For instance, an extroverted focal consumer may be more inclined than an introverted one to enjoy social exchanges with strangers. Likewise, friendly (or unfriendly) body language displayed by the fellow consumer could increase (or decrease) the extent to which the focal consumer enjoys these exchanges. Furthermore, while not tested, we hypothesize that the focal consumer may enjoy social exchanges more with an attractive person than with someone of average or below-average attractiveness.

Third, we also believe that future research is necessary to determine whether the extent to which enjoying social exchanges results in the focal consumer feeling reassured about their product purchase decision depends on the fellow consumer's level of knowledge. For instance, if a man is shopping alone and planning to buy a nice top for his wife, he may be more likely to engage in product-related conversations with a female customer who resembles his wife than with a male counterpart. This is because he may perceive a female shopper as more knowledgeable in that domain than a male shopper. However, the same may not hold true if he is buying a laptop in an electronics store. Similarly, whether social exchanges lead to feelings of reassurance may depend on the focal consumer's openness to the fellow consumer's advice. For example, a kind focal consumer may be more receptive to such recommendations than someone who displays a "know-it-all" attitude. Exploring how positive and negative personality traits shape interactions between strangers in consumer settings presents a compelling direction for future research. Figure 4 highlights potential moderators that future scholars could investigate.

Finally, our research showed that enjoyment is a key variable for stranger interactions to be successful in a retail setting.

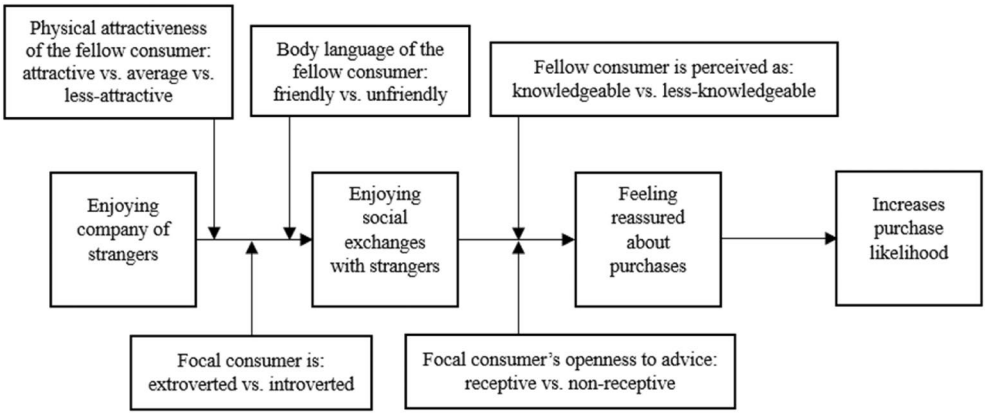

FIGURE 4 | Future research avenues: Potential moderators that can be tested.

However, we did not examine the impact of stranger interactions on buying intentions in the absence of enjoyment. Nor did we investigate whether enjoyment of stranger interactions is a result of the presence of positive emotions (e.g., happiness, love, gratitude) or the absence of negative emotions (e.g., sadness, anger, frustration). In other words, could specific positive or negative emotions affect the relationship between stranger interactions and purchase likelihood? Future research could explore these questions. We hope that our work stimulates further investigation into stranger interactions and the critical role they play in various aspects of consumer decision-making.

Ethics Statement

This study received ethical approval from The University of Queensland's Human Research Ethics Committees, approval number: 2024/HE001545.

Acknowledgments

Open access publishing facilitated by The University of Queensland, as part of the Wiley - The University of Queensland agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

References

Adams, W. C. 2015. "Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews." *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation*: 492–505. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119171386.ch19.

Adeoye-Olatunde, O. A., and N. L. Olenik. 2021. "Research and Scholarly Methods: Semi-Structured Interviews." *Journal of the American College of Clinical Pharmacy* 4, no. 10: 1358–1367. https://doi.org/10.1002/jac5.1441.

Ahmad, R., M. R. Nawaz, M. I. Ishaq, M. M. Khan, and H. A. Ashraf. 2023. "Social Exchange Theory: Systematic Review and Future Directions." *Frontiers in Psychology* 13: 1015921. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1015921.

Argo, J. J., and D. W. Dahl. 2020. "Social Influence in the Retail Context: A Contemporary Review of the Literature." *Journal of Retailing* 96, no. 1: 25–39. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretai.2019.12.005.

Argo, J. J., D. W. Dahl, and R. V. Manchanda. 2005. "The Influence of a Mere Social Presence in a Retail Context." *Journal of Consumer Research* 32, no. 2: 207–212. https://doi.org/10.1086/432230.

Argo, J. J., D. W. Dahl, and A. C. Morales. 2008. "Positive Consumer Contagion: Responses to Attractive Others in a Retail Context." *Journal of Marketing Research* 45, no. 6: 690–701. https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkr.45.6.690.

Aydinli, A., L. Lamey, K. Millet, A. ter Braak, and M. Vuegen. 2021. "How Do Customers Alter Their Basket Composition When They Perceive the Retail Store to Be Crowded? An Empirical Study." *Journal of Retailing* 97, no. 2: 207–216. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretai.2020.05.004.

Baker, M. A., and K. Kim. 2018. "Other Customer Service Failures: Emotions, Impacts, and Attributions." *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research* 42, no. 7: 1067–1085. https://doi.org/10.1177/1096348016671394.

Baker, S. E., and R. Edwards. 2012. "How Many Qualitative Interviews is Enough." National Centre for Research Methods. https://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/id/eprint/2273/4/how_many_interviews.pdf.

Ballantine, P. W., R. Jack, and A. G. Parsons. 2010. "Atmospheric Cues and Their Effect on the Hedonic Retail Experience." *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management* 38, no. 8: 641–653. https://doi.org/10.1108/09590551011057453.

Baumeister, R. F., and M. R. Leary. 1995. "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation." *Psychology Bulletin* 117, no. 3: 497–529. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351153683-3.

Belotto, M. J. 2018. "Data Analysis Methods for Qualitative Research: Managing the Challenges of Coding, Interrater Reliability, and Thematic Analysis." *Qualitative Report* 23, no. 11: 2622–2633. https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss11/2.

Blanchard, S. J., K. A. Carlson, and J. D. Hyodo. 2016. "The Favor Request Effect: Requesting a Favor From Consumers to Seal the Deal." *Journal of Consumer Research* 42, no. 6: 985–1001. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucw005.

Bohns, V. K. 2016. "(Mis)understanding Our Influence Over Others: A Review of the Underestimation-of-Compliance Effect." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 25, no. 2: 119–123. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721415628011.

Bohns, V. K., M. M. Roghanizad, and A. Z. Xu. 2014. "Underestimating Our Influence Over Others' Unethical Behavior and Decisions." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 40, no. 3: 348–362. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167213511182.

Boothby, E., X. Zhao, and V. Bohns. 2021. "A Simple Compliment Can Make a Big Difference." *Harvard Business Review*. https://hbr.org/2021/02/a-simple-compliment-can-make-a-big-difference.

Boothby, E. J., and V. K. Bohns. 2021. "Why a Simple Act of Kindness Is Not as Simple as It Seems: Underestimating the Positive Impact of Our Compliments on Others." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 47, no. 5: 826–840. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167220949003.

Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2: 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

Burger, J. M., N. Messian, S. Patel, A. Del Prado, and C. Anderson. 2004. "What a Coincidence! The Effects of Incidental Similarity on Compliance." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 30, no. 1: 35–43. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167203258838.

BuzzFeed. 2018. "BuzzFeed." https://www.buzzfeed.com/alivelez/26-stories-about-random-acts-of-kindness-that-will.

Byun, S. E., and M. Mann. 2011. "The Influence of Others: The Impact of Perceived Human Crowding on Perceived Competition, Emotions, and Hedonic Shopping Value." *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 29, no. 4: 284–297. https://doi.org/10.1177/0887302X11422820.

Cai, R. R., L. Lu, and D. Gursoy. 2018. "Effect of Disruptive Customer Behaviors on Others' Overall Service Experience: An Appraisal Theory Perspective." *Tourism Management* 69: 330–344. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2018.06.013.

Cai, S., and Y. Xu. 2006. "Effects of Outcome, Process and Shopping Enjoyment on Online Consumer Behaviour." *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications* 5, no. 4: 272–281. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.elerap.2006.04.004.

Camelis, C., F. Dano, K. Goudarzi, V. Hamon, and S. Llosa. 2013. "The Roles of Co-Clients and Their Influence on Overall Satisfaction During the Service Experience." *Recherche et Applications en Marketing (English Edition)* 28, no. 1: 42–64. https://doi.org/10.1177/205157071347834.

Chernyak-Hai, L., and E. Rabenu. 2018. "The New Era Workplace Relationships: Is Social Exchange Theory Still Relevant?" *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* 11, no. 3: 456–481. https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2018.5.

Cialdini, R. B., and N. J. Goldstein. 2004. "Social Influence: Compliance and Conformity." *Annual Review of Psychology* 55, no. 1: 591–621. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.55.090902.142015.

Clark, V. L. P., and J. W. Creswell. 2008. *The Mixed Methods Reader*. Sage.

Colm, L., A. Ordanini, and A. Parasuraman. 2017. "When Service Customers Do Not Consume in Isolation: A Typology of Customer Copresence Influence Modes (CCIMs)." *Journal of Service Research* 20, no. 3: 223–239. https://doi.org/10.1177/1094670517690025.

Cook, K. S., C. Cheshire, E. R. Rice, and S. Nakagawa. 2013. *Social Exchange Theory*, 61–88. Springer Netherlands. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-6772-0_3.

Cropanzano, R., E. L. Anthony, S. R. Daniels, and A. V. Hall. 2017. "Social Exchange Theory: A Critical Review With Theoretical Remedies." *Academy of Management Annals* 11, no. 1: 479–516. https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2015.0099.

Cropanzano, R., and M. S. Mitchell. 2005. "Social Exchange Theory: An Interdisciplinary Review." *Journal of Management* 31, no. 6: 874–900. https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063052796.

Dahl, D. 2013. "Social Influence and Consumer Behavior." *Journal of Consumer Research* 40, no. 2: iii–v. https://doi.org/10.1086/670170.

Dahl, D. W., J. J. Argo, and A. C. Morales. 2012. "Social Information in the Retail Environment: The Importance of Consumption Alignment, Referent Identity, and Self-Esteem." *Journal of Consumer Research* 38, no. 5: 860–871. https://doi.org/10.1086/660918.

Dahl, D. W., R. V. Manchanda, and J. J. Argo. 2001. "Embarrassment in Consumer Purchase: The Roles of Social Presence and Purchase Familiarity." *Journal of Consumer Research* 28, no. 3: 473–481. https://doi.org/10.1086/323734.

de Azambuja, G. M. P., G. A. Rodriguez Peña, and E. G. T. Vargas. 2023. "The Impact of Customer Engagement on Customer Happiness." *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 22, no. 4: 1025–1041. https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.2147.

De Oliveira Santini, F., W. J. Ladeira, D. C. Pinto, M. M. Herter, A. S. Mattila, and M. G. Perin. 2021. "Retail Crowding: Meta-Analysis of Contextual and Cultural Moderators." *Marketing Intelligence & Planning* 40, no. 1: 57–71. https://doi.org/10.1108/MIP-03-2021-0076.

De Vries, E. L., B. M. Fennis, T. H. Bijmolt, G. J. Ter Horst, and J. B. C. Marsman. 2018. "Friends With Benefits: Behavioral and fMRI Studies on the Effect of Friendship Reminders on Self-Control for Compulsive and Non-Compulsive Buyers." *International Journal of Research in Marketing* 35, no. 2: 336–358. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2017.12.004.

Delacroix, E., and V. Guillard. 2016. "Consumers Who Avoid Relationships: Social Anxiety in Commercial Contexts." *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 15, no. 4: 370–384. https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.1582.

Deri, S., D. H. Stein, and V. K. Bohns. 2019. "With a Little Help From My Friends (And Strangers): Closeness as a Moderator of the Underestimation-of-Compliance Effect." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 82: 6–15. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2018.11.002.

Dorsey, J. D., C. Ashley, and J. D. Oliver. 2016. "Triggers and Outcomes of Customer-To-Customer Aisle Rage." *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 32: 67–77. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2016.06.003.

Echo. 2025. "Echo." https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/cost-of-living/i-paid-strangers-supermarket-shop-31525443.

Elhajjar, S. 2023. "Factors Influencing Buying Behavior of Lebanese Consumers Towards Fashion Brands During Economic Crisis: A Qualitative Study." *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 71: 103224. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2022.103224.

Feldman, M. 1993. "The Dynamics of Reassurance." *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 74, no. 2: 275. https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1993-34487-001.

Festinger, L. 1954. "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes." *Human Relations* 7, no. 2: 117–140. https://doi.org/10.1177/001872675400700202.

Fischer, E., and G. T. Guzel. 2023. "The Case for Qualitative Research." *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 33, no. 1: 259–272. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1300.

Foster, J., and M. A. McLelland. 2015. "Retail Atmospherics: The Impact of a Brand Dictated Theme." *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 22: 195–205. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2014.07.002.

Grewal, D., C. P. Ahlbom, L. Beitelspacher, S. M. Noble, and J. Nordfält. 2018. "In-Store Mobile Phone Use and Customer Shopping Behavior: Evidence From the Field." *Journal of Marketing* 82, no. 4: 102–126. https://doi.org/10.1509/jm.17.0277.

Harris, K., S. Baron, and C. Parker. 2000. "Understanding the Consumer Experience: It's' Good to Talk." *Journal of Marketing Management* 16, no. 1–3: 111–127. https://doi.org/10.1362/026725700785100505.

Hayes, A. F. 2017. *Introduction to Mediation, Moderation, and Conditional Process Analysis: A Regression-Based Approach*. Guilford publications.

Jiang, L., J. Hoegg, and D. W. Dahl. 2013. "Consumer Reaction to Unearned Preferential Treatment." *Journal of Consumer Research* 40, no. 3: 412–427. https://doi.org/10.1086/670765.

Kim, K., K. K. Byon, and W. Baek. 2020. "Customer-to-Customer Value Co-Creation and Co-Destruction in Sporting Events." *Service Industries Journal* 40, no. 9–10: 633–655. https://doi.org/10.1080/02642069.2019.1586887.

Kristofferson, K., B. McFerran, A. C. Morales, and D. W. Dahl. 2017. "The Dark Side of Scarcity Promotions: How Exposure to Limited-Quantity Promotions Can Induce Aggression." *Journal of Consumer Research* 43, no. 5: 683–706. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucw056.

Kroencke, L., G. M. Harari, M. D. Back, and J. Wagner. 2023. "Well-Being in Social Interactions: Examining Personality-Situation Dynamics in Face-to-Face and Computer-Mediated Communication." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 124, no. 2: 437–460. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000422.

Kurt, D., J. J. Inman, and J. J. Argo. 2011. "The Influence of Friends on Consumer Spending: The Role of Agency–Communion Orientation and Self-Monitoring." *Journal of Marketing Research* 48, no. 4: 741–754. https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkr.48.4.741.

Lawler, E. J. 2001. "An Affect Theory of Social Exchange." *American Journal of Sociology* 107, no. 2: 321–352. https://doi.org/10.1086/324071.

Lawler, E. J., and S. R. Thye. 2006. "Social Exchange Theory of Emotions." *Handbook of the Sociology of Emotions*: 295–320. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-30715-2_14.

Lin, H., D. Gursoy, and M. Zhang. 2020. "Impact of Customer-To-Customer Interactions on Overall Service Experience: A Social Servicescape Perspective." *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 87: 102376. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2019.102376.

Luo, X. 2005. "How Does Shopping With Others Influence Impulsive Purchasing?" *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 15, no. 4: 288–294. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327663jcp1504_3.

Main, K. J., D. W. Dahl, and P. R. Darke. 2007. "Deliberative and Automatic Bases of Suspicion: Empirical Evidence of the Sinister Attribution Error." *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 17, no. 1: 59–69. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327663jcp1701_9.

Mangleburg, T. F., P. M. Doney, and T. Bristol. 2004. "Shopping With Friends and Teens' Susceptibility to Peer Influence." *Journal of Retailing* 80, no. 2: 101–116. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretai.2004.04.005.

Martin, B. A. 2012. "A Stranger's Touch: Effects of Accidental Interpersonal Touch on Consumer Evaluations and Shopping Time." *Journal of Consumer Research* 39, no. 1: 174–184. https://doi.org/10.1086/662038.

Martin, B. A., and P. Nuttall. 2017. "Tense From Touch: Examining Accidental Interpersonal Touch Between Consumers." *Psychology & Marketing* 34, no. 10: 946–955. https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21034.

Mattila, A. S., and J. Wirtz. 2008. "The Role of Store Environmental Stimulation and Social Factors on Impulse Purchasing." *Journal of Services Marketing* 22, no. 7: 562–567. https://doi.org/10.1108/08876040810909686.

McGrath, M. A., and C. Otnes. 1995. "Unacquainted Influencers: When Strangers Interact in the Retail Setting." *Journal of Business Research* 32, no. 3: 261–272. https://doi.org/10.1016/0148-2963(94)00051-F.

Mooradian, T. A., and K. S. Swan. 2006. "Personality-and-Culture: The Case of National Extraversion and Word-Of-Mouth." *Journal of Business Research* 59, no. 6: 778–785. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2006.01.015.

Naeem, M., and W. Ozuem. 2021. "Customers' Social Interactions and Panic Buying Behavior: Insights From Social Media Practices." *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 20, no. 5: 1191–1203. https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.1925.

Nakonezny, P. A., and W. H. Denton. 2008. "Marital Relationships: A Social Exchange Theory Perspective." *American Journal of Family Therapy* 36, no. 5: 402–412. https://doi.org/10.1080/01926180701647264.

Nicholls, R. 2020. "What Goes on Between Customers? A Cross-Industry Study of Customer-to-Customer Interaction (CCI)." *Journal of Service Theory and Practice* 30, no. 2: 123–147. https://doi.org/10.1108/JSTP-05-2019-0112.

O'Connor, C., and H. Joffe. 2020. "Intercoder Reliability in Qualitative Research: Debates and Practical Guidelines." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 19. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919899220.

Pecoraro, M., and O. Uusitalo. 2014. "Exploring the Everyday Retail Experience: The Discourses of Style and Design." *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 13, no. 6: 429–441. https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.1492.

Perannagari, K. T., and S. Chakrabarti. 2020. "Factors Influencing Acceptance of Augmented Reality in Retail: Insights From Thematic Analysis." *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management* 48, no. 1: 18–34. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJRDM-02-2019-0063.

Pons, F., M. Giroux, M. Mourali, and M. Zins. 2016. "The Relationship Between Density Perceptions and Satisfaction in the Retail Setting: Mediation and Moderation Effects." *Journal of Business Research* 69, no. 2: 1000–1007. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2015.09.005.

Riggio, R. E., and H. S. Friedman. 1986. "Impression Formation: The Role of Expressive Behavior." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 50, no. 2: 421–427. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.50.2.421.

Roghanizad, M. M., and V. K. Bohns. 2017. "Ask in Person: You're Less Persuasive Than You Think Over Email." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 69: 223–226. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2016.10.002.

Rosenbaum, M. S., and C. A. Massiah. 2007. "When Customers Receive Support From Other Customers: Exploring the Influence of Intercustomer Social Support on Customer Voluntary Performance." *Journal of Service Research* 9, no. 3: 257–270. https://doi.org/10.1177/1094670506295851.

Saunders, M. N., and K. Townsend. 2016. "Reporting and Justifying the Number of Interview Participants in Organization and Workplace Research." *British Journal of Management* 27, no. 4: 836–852. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.12182.

Söderlund, M. 2011. "Other Customers in the Retail Environment and Their Impact on the Customer's Evaluations of the Retailer." *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 18, no. 3: 174–182. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2010.09.006.

Spiggle, S. 1994. "Analysis and Interpretation of Qualitative Data in Consumer Research." *Journal of Consumer Research* 21, no. 3: 491–503. https://doi.org/10.1086/209413.

The New York Times. 2024. "Why Not Tell Someone They Look Great Today?" https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/12/style/compliments.html.

The Washington Post. 2023. "Washington Post." https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2023/03/03/jason-boudreaux-kevin-jones-grocery-bill/.

Thibaut, J. W. 2017. *The Social Psychology of Groups*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315135007.

Thomas, T. 2022. "The Material Possessions Stereotype." *NA-Advances in Consumer Research Volume* 50: 13–17.

Thomas, T. 2023. "The Draw-and-Tell-Your-Story Method to Understand Consumption Stereotypes in Children." *NA-Advances in Consumer Research Volume* 51: 142–146.

Thomas, T. S. 2020. "Children Perceive Beautiful People to Own Better Material Things." *Advances in Consumer Research* 48: 156–159.

Thomas, T. S. 2021. "Types of Possessions Associated With Physical Attractiveness." *Advances in Consumer Research* 49: 17–21.

Thomas, T. S., and D. M. Abraham. 2021. "Understanding Beauty Stereotypes Using the Big Five Labels." *Advances in Consumer Research* 49: 22–26.

Tse, A. C. B., L. Sin, and F. H. Yim. 2002. "How a Crowded Restaurant Affects Consumers' Attribution Behavior." *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 21, no. 4: 449–454. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0278-4319(02)00035-X.

Uhrich, S., and M. Luck. 2012. "Not Too Many but Also Not Too Few: Exploring the Explanatory Mechanisms for the Negative Effects of Low Customer Density in Retail Settings." *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal* 15, no. 3: 290–308. https://doi.org/10.1108/13522751211231996.

Van Rompay, T. J., J. Krooshoop, J. W. Verhoeven, and A. T. Pruyn. 2012. "With or Without You: Interactive Effects of Retail Density and Need for Affiliation on Shopping Pleasure and Spending." *Journal of Business Research* 65, no. 8: 1126–1131. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2011.08.005.

Ward, M. K., and D. W. Dahl. 2014. "Should the Devil Sell Prada? Retail Rejection Increases Aspiring Consumers' Desire for the Brand." *Journal of Consumer Research* 41, no. 3: 590–609. https://doi.org/10.1086/676980.

Whittemore, R., S. K. Chase, and C. L. Mandle. 2001. "Validity in Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Health Research* 11, no. 4: 522–537. https://doi.org/10.1177/104973201129119299.

Wu, C. H. J. 2007. "The Impact of Customer-to-Customer Interaction and Customer Homogeneity on Customer Satisfaction in Tourism Service—The Service Encounter Prospective." *Tourism Management* 28, no. 6: 1518–1528. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2007.02.002.

Wu, M. Y., S. Ye, S. Ye, and Q. Li. 2024. "How Other Customers Influence Customer Citizenship Behavior in Theme Parks: The Role of Customer-Customer Rapport." *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management* 31: 100847. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2023.100847.

Yang, L., L. Tang, and Y. Huang. 2025. "Mask Wearing Fosters Relaxation and Store Engagement in an Offline-Retail Context." *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 24, no. 1: 347–362. https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.2416.

Yin, C. Y., and P. Poon. 2016. "The Impact of Other Group Members on Tourists' Travel Experiences: A Study of Domestic Package Tours in

China." *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* 28, no. 3: 640–658. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-07-2014-0340.

Zhang, X., S. Li, R. R. Burke, and A. Leykin. 2014. "An Examination of Social Influence on Shopper Behavior Using Video Tracking Data." *Journal of Marketing* 78, no. 5: 24–41. https://doi.org/10.1509/jm.12.010.

Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Discussion Guide

Store Environment and Customer Description
Let's start by talking about the store you currently work in. Can you describe your typical customer (age, gender, characteristics, etc.)? Can you tell me how your typical customer usually shops?

Shopping with Friends
Can you describe a. typical customer who usually shops with friends? What characteristics define them? How does this influence their behavior in the store? How does it affect your experience with them?

Shopping with Family
Can you describe a. typical customer who shops with a family member? What characterizes them? How does this influence their behavior in the store? How does it affect your experience with them?

Shopping Alone
Can you describe a typical customer who shops alone? What characterizes them? How does this influence their behavior in the store? How does it affect your experience with them?

Crowding
Can you share some of your experiences related to store crowding? How does the store atmosphere change based on the number of people present? Can you describe both the positive and negative outcomes of a crowded store?

Observations of Stranger Interactions (In General)
Think about how you've seen customers interact with one another in the store. For example, if someone shows interest in a dress another shopper is buying, could that affect the buyer's decision? What might make a customer more or less interested in the dress because of this? Have you ever seen one shopper's choice influence another to buy the same item? What traits of the first shopper might encourage or discourage others from following their lead? Do customers judge a. product's quality based on who is buying it?

Observations of Stranger Interaction near Changing Rooms
Have you seen customers near the changing rooms ask others for advice or give compliments on outfits? Do you think an attractive customer affects others' behavior? Are fellow shoppers' opinions seen as helpful? What factors make someone ask a stranger for advice, and does it depend on what they're shopping for?