

PROXEMICS OF THE BUYER-SELLER RELATIONSHIP

Teodora ROMAN^{a}, Adriana MANOLICĂ^b, Marian BĂLAN^c*

^{a, b, c} Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Romania

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ABSTRACT

In the last period of time more and more people have started to focus on interpersonal distance and although most people focus mainly on verbal communication, an essential role is the choice of the optimal distance from the interlocutor.

We set out to study the optimal distance between two people in different purchasing situations. And this must be a distance that gives the buyer a feeling of well-being when he comes in contact with a seller in a clothing/footwear store, namely an electronics/home appliances store, but also in relation to a waiter in a restaurant, respectively with a doctor in a medical office.

In this sense, we focused on a quantitative research, represented by a survey of a number of 480 people, who are currently students at state universities in Iasi. They also come from the North-East area of Romania, more precisely from the following counties: Bacău, Botoșani, Iași, Neamț, Suceava and Vaslui.

Three types of distances have been determined: one for the situation where the buyer does not intend to buy, a second aims to identify the optimal distance when only testing the market for a future purchase, and a third for where the purchase is made immediately.

The results obtained show that the distance considered to be optimal between a customer and a seller, but seen from the customer's perspective, differs depending on the nature of the product/service purchased, but is not influenced by the type of seller.

KEYWORDS: *buyer-seller distance; proxemics; shopping behavior; shopping style; state of well-being.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the vision of the creator of the term Edward T. Hall in 1963 (as cited in O'Leary et al., 2008) most of the time, proxemics is the game of interpersonal distances escapes conscious control, supposing to make us aware of the game of interpersonal distances, through the following four areas (Prutianu, 2005):

- Public zone (over 210 cm);
- Social zone (123 – 210);
- Personal zone (47-122 cm);
- Intimate zone (0-46 cm).

The public area can be extended over the space of 2.1 meters around an individual. Thus, during this interval, we can no longer talk about the relationship with an interlocutor, but with an audience, the communication losing its impersonal and social character. In many cases, the public area is severely monitored by store security and security services to highlight the relationships between different social roles (Wallace, Iskander, & Lank, 2016). The social area is located between 123 and 210 centimeters, in this sector it is not necessary to individualize the interlocutor. This interval is intended

* Corresponding author. E-mail address: teodoraroman@gmail.com

for socially communicative communications and meetings (Shteingart, Neiman, & Loewenstein, 2013). In this area, the interlocutor, regardless of the situation, remains a foreign person, without a personalized identity, the communication remaining impersonal (Naylor, 2007). Thus, the personal data of the interlocutor such as identity, name, needs and individual history remain unknown. When we address a certain social category portrayed by a civil servant, the faculty member, the hospital doctor or a police officer, we will naturally appreciate being in the social area (Bonaccio, et al., 2016). In these situations it will not be an impersonal relationship, being a social relationship. At the time of the address, the person in front will not be named, but his profession: Professor/ doctor/police officer, etc.

Regarding the personal area, the specialty literature frames it as a second invisible shell located between 47 and 122 centimeters around the human body. This area begins at the point where the intimate area ends and agrees with the interval in which two individuals can touch, when they extend their hands. In this area, however, the level of familiarity of the interlocutor remains high, only close people can remain acceptable here (Andrzejewski & Mooney, 2016). When unpleasant people invade our personal area, there is a very good chance that we will end up in an irritating mood, the expression becoming incoherent (Söderlund, & Sagfossen, 2017). Personal distance differs depending on cultural and demographic factors, but also on the person's temperament. The border of the personal area is considered the limit of personalized communication and connection. In this area, the interlocutors represent an entity for each other, through needs, name and biography. Only within the limits of this interval do they address themselves "as from man to man". Interlocutors who are in this interval cease to be mere strangers or exponents of a social or professional class.

The literature presents the intimate area as an invisible shell located between 0 and 46 centimeters around the human body. One of the main conditions for providing access to this area is trust and a sense of security. (Birkenbihl, 1999).

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF PROXEMICS BETWEEN BUYER AND SELLER

Proxemics is the theory that deals with spatial relations regarding the mode of communication (Morwitz, 2014). In this branch are found: the physical distances of communication (Waroquier, et al, 2010); the symbolic effects of spatial organization (Lin & Lin, 2017); the game of territories (Kim & Baker, 2019); how to perceive space in different cultures (David, 2015). Starting from this aspect, a pragmatic judgment denotes the fact that the first intelligent steps in building a good interpersonal relationship are related to choosing the right and correct distance from the interlocutor (Prutianu, 2008).

The literature presents proxemics as a branch of communication sciences concerned with the influence of distances, orientation and spatial relationships on interpersonal communication (Marquardt & Greenberg, 2012).

Research has shown that a person's gender influences personal space (Muthukrishnan & Chattopadhyay, 2007). Therefore, women prefer a shorter distance than men (Mandal, 2014). People of the same gender take up less personal space than in mixed groups (Buck, & VanLear, 2002).

Another important factor of interpersonal space is culture. People in the United States, Sweden and England take longer distances than those in Latin America, France and Arabia. Willis & Willis (1996) indicated that people belonging to the same culture interact at shorter intervals than with people from different cultures.

When we talk about the language of space, we must take into account a whole series of factors: height, size, inside – outside, far – close, degree of intimacy. (Chiru, 2009). In order to value this communication channel at the highest level, we must understand very well the proxemics towards the different people we interact with. Theorists present this mode of communication differently

from one society to another, and the members of each society take into account the optimal distance from the interlocutor, when they are in a discussion.

Guerrero (2015) showed that most Europeans do not agree with an approach of more than about 50 centimeters, except for close people. They are the only ones who have access to the intimate space. From here we can conclude that the most important thing is to be guided by a very simple principle, namely: keep a greater distance and do not enter a very close area, because there is a risk that the person will not accept you.

Internationally, several studies have been developed that have assessed trust through the proxemics model. In this regard, David (2015) conducted an international study involving 42 countries aimed to determine interpersonal distance. The finality of the study shows that the average interpersonal distance for Romanians from foreigners (average = 140.11 centimeters) is in the range of social distance (123-210 centimeters). Unlike the result obtained by Romanian respondents, the average of the 42 cultures analyzed is below the level of social distance, more precisely $m = 103.94$ centimeters. At the same time, the results of the United States of America are found at the level of personal distance (42-122 centimeters), obtaining an average of 95.38 centimeters. (David, 2015). The distance of the Romanians from the known people was 93.66 centimeters. It is found in the personal area (range 47-123 cm), the average of the 42 countries being 79.80 cm, and the US 68.73 cm. If the personal distance of Romanians is higher than the average of the sample, it seems that the intimate distance is smaller: 47.63 cm (Romanians) compared to 56.67 cm (international average).

If the previous research caught subjects in ordinary interpersonal relationships, the present research aims to identify the peculiarities of proxemics in the conditions of exercising the social role of buyer.

3. THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Proxemics study the distance between two bodies and the choice by a person of the space considered to be optimal in different situations. In the sale-purchase relations we can talk about proxemics, implying an optimal space (the distance that confers a state of well-being) both from the perspective of the buyer and from the perspective of the seller. They have different interests, but they have one thing in common around a transaction, with the seller wanting money and the buyer wanting the goods.

The research issue consists in determining the space between buyer and seller considered to be optimal for a state of well-being from the buyer's perspective, distinct for 4 categories of purchase/consumption (clothing/footwear store, electronics/home appliances store, restaurant and hospital) and highlighted differently for a sample from 6 counties in North-Eastern Romania (Bacău, Botoșani, Iași, Neamț, Suceava, Vaslui).

The purpose of the research is to measure the distance between the buyer and the seller considered to be optimal for a state of well-being from the buyer's perspective, in order to determine the proxemics of the buyer-seller relationship.

The objectives of the research are the following:

- O1: Determining the distance between the buyer and the seller considered to be optimal for a state of well-being by the consumer when he is in a situation of purchase/consumption without the intention to buy.
- O2: Determining the distance between the buyer and the seller considered to be optimal for a state of well-being by the consumer when he is in a buying/consuming situation in order to test the market for a future purchase.
- O3: Determining the distance between the buyer and the seller considered to be optimal for a state of well-being by the consumer when he is in a situation to buy/consume on the spot.

The research hypotheses are the following:

H1: In regards to the Romanian people, the distance between the buyer and the seller considered to be optimal is 1.2 meters. (David, 2015)

H2: The distance between the buyer and the seller considered to be optimal for a state of well-being differs depending on the gender of the seller. (Lin & Lin, 2017)

H3: The distance between the buyer and the seller considered to be optimal for a state of well-being differs depending on the purchase intention. (Kim & Baker, 2019).

Methodology:

The method chosen was the survey, which is a method of quantitative research, through which we can quantify data and we can make determinations from a statistical point of view. All participants were asked to mark the interpersonal distance in which they felt most comfortable. With the help of scale questions, they were asked in different situations to interact with (1) a salesman in a clothing/footwear store, (2) a salesman in an electronics/home appliances store, (3) a waiter, and finally (4) with a doctor according to the model in the figure below. Each scale question has a nominal question attached indicating the preference for the sex of the contact staff. At the end of the questionnaire, demographic questions were introduced which helped us to structure the sample.

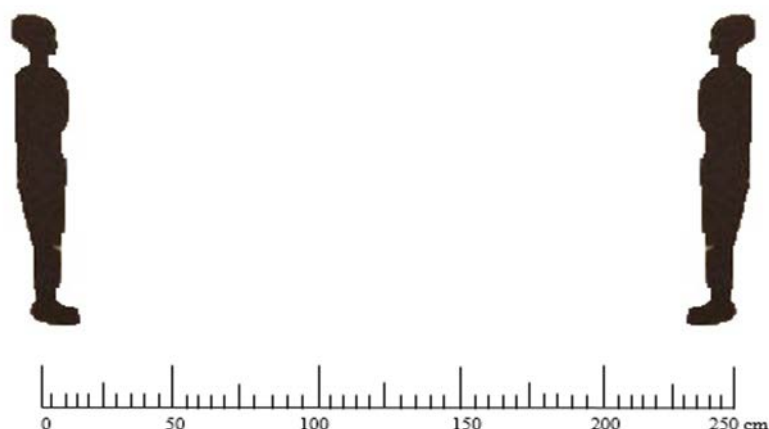


Figure 1. The task of assessing interpersonal distance

Source: created and used in our research

The selected target market is made up of students from 6 counties, studying at Universities in Iași aged between 19-25 years, these being selected according to the established sample.

As a result of the administration of the questionnaire and the validation of the database, in the final sample there are 480 interviewees, these being from different counties, 50% being male and 50% female.

Following the completion of each questionnaire, it was analyzed and entered in the SPSS database, carefully following which category of counties was covered. To obtain the structure of the sample, the snowball method was used, making it easier to find the desired respondents.

Given that the "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University and the "Gheorghe Asachi" Technical University have a higher number of students than the other two universities chosen for this research, we decided to apply 168 questionnaires out of the total in these two institutions. 480. For the University of Medicine and Pharmacy "Gr. T. Popa" and the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine we applied an equal number of questionnaires, respectively 72 for each.

In the case of the first two universities, we identified 84 males and 84 females, respectively. Both the 84 males and the 84 females were divided equally between the 6 counties in Northeastern Romania, with an average of 14 respondents per County.

We started from 2 males and 2 females and applying the snowball method we received 2 recommendations from each person, and finally we reached the 14 people from each County needed for research.

The pre-test was performed on a number of 20 people according to the characteristics of the basic sample. Based on this pre-test, several issues were pursued, such as unclear or incorrect wording, missing answers or misinterpretation of the questions.

Findings:

O1: Determining the distance between the buyer and the seller considered to be optimal for a state of well-being by the consumer when he is in a situation of purchase/consumption without the intention to buy

In order to have a state of well-being, the optimal distance between the buyer and the seller in case there is no intention to buy is 154.26 cm. Most of the respondents (17.7%) or 85 people, mentioned the optimal distance to be 150 and 200 cm, respectively. In these cases, the gender of the seller is not an important factor to have a state of well-being, a fact mentioned by 55.2% of respondents.

Following the application of the Independent Test, we determined that in order to have a state of well-being, in the situation where there is no intention to buy, both men and women have the same perception of distance.

Following the use of the One-way ANOVA test, we determined that people from different counties opt for different distances in case there is no intention to buy. Thus, the people from Vaslui County, in order to have a good state, prefer a greater distance from the seller, this space being 190.94 cm. People from Iași County consider the distance of 121.56 cm. to be the optimal distance to have a state of well-being in the situation where there is no intention to buy.

We also noticed that the distance considered to be optimal for a state of well-being in the situation where there is no intention to buy, differs depending on the location. Thus, in a clothing/footwear store the optimal distance for a state of well-being is 160.4 cm. In an electronics/home appliances store it is 158 cm. In a restaurant it is 155.25 cm. and in a hospital it is 141.18 cm.

Table 1. The optimal distance required to have a state of well-being when there is no intention to buy

Counties	Clothing/ Footwear store (cm.)	Electronics/Home Appliances store (cm.)	Restaurant (cm.)	Hospital (cm.)
Bacău	153.31	154.25	157.25	133.88
Botoșani	206.88	204.63	186.56	180.81
Iași	136.46	131.44	147.69	115.81
Neamț	196.13	195.63	188.44	187.81
Suceava	120.50	120.44	110.75	102.13
Vaslui	149.13	141.63	140.81	127.13

Source: resulted from the research findings

As we can observe in Table 1, in each of the 4 locations there are differences between the perceived distances to be optimal for a state of well-being in the situation where there is no intention to buy between people from different counties. Thus, in a clothing/footwear store, people from Botoșani County opt for a longer distance (206.88 cm.), and people from Suceava County opt for the shortest distance (120.50 cm.).

In an electronics/home appliances store, the longest distance is mentioned by the people from Botoșani County (204.63 cm.), while the smallest distance is indicated by those from Suceava County (120.44 cm.).

In a restaurant, the distance mentioned to be the longest belongs to the people from Neamț County (188.44 cm.), and the smallest distance is indicated by the people from Suceava County (110.75 cm.).

In a hospital, the longest distance is mentioned by the people from Neamț County (187.81 cm.), and the smallest distance is indicated by the people from Suceava County (102.13 cm.).

In all 4 situations, most respondents mentioned that the gender of the seller/waiter or the doctor is not important to have a state of well-being in the situation where there is no intention to buy.

O2: Determining the distance between the buyer and the seller considered to be optimal for a state of well-being by the consumer when he is in a buying/consuming situation in order to test the market for a future purchase

In order to have a state of well-being, the optimal distance between the buyer and the seller in the market testing situation for a future purchase is 150 cm. Most of the respondents (22.1%) or 106 people mentioned the optimal distance to be 150 cm. In this situation, the gender of the seller is not an important factor to have a state of well-being, a fact mentioned by 52.9% of respondents.

Following the application of the Independent Test, we determined that if a person tests the market for a future purchase, women accept a shorter distance (148.49 cm.) to have a state of well-being, compared to men who prefers a longer distance (165.43 cm.).

Following the use of the One-way ANOVA test, we determined that people from different counties opt for different distances in case they test the market for a future purchase. Thus, the people from Botoșani County, in order to have a good state, prefer a greater distance from the seller, this space being 172.88 cm. People from Suceava County consider the distance of 130.69 cm. to be the optimal distance to have a state of well-being in the situation where there is no intention to buy.

We also noticed that the distance considered to be optimal for a state of well-being in the market testing situation for a future purchase, differs depending on the location. Thus, the perceived distance to be optimal in the given situation does not differ in a clothing/footwear store (160.22 cm.) and in an electronics/home appliances store (161.53 cm.). In order to have a state of well-being in a restaurant and a hospital, the perceived distance is shorter (149.38 and 136.65 cm.), respectively, compared to the distance in the shops.

Table 2. The optimal distance required to have a state of well-being in the market testing situation

Counties	Clothing/Footwear store (cm.)	Electronics/Home Appliances store (cm.)	Restaurant (cm.)	Hospital (cm.)
Bacău	166.19	166.13	157.19	140.44
Botoșani	205.81	229.63	180.25	174.88
Iași	145.56	139.25	152.81	119.63
Neamț	186.88	185.94	170	177.44
Suceava	117.38	117.63	103.25	87.56
Vaslui	139.50	130.63	132.75	119.94

Source: resulted from the research findings

As we can observe in Table 2, in each of the 4 locations there are differences between the perceived distances to be optimal for a state of well-being in the market testing situation for a future purchase between people from different counties. Thus, in a clothing / footwear store, the people from Botoșani County opt for a longer distance (205.81 cm.), and the people from Suceava County opt

for the shortest distance (117.38 cm.). In an electronics/home appliances store, the longest distance is mentioned by the people from Botoșani County (229.63 cm.), while the smallest distance is indicated by those from Suceava County (117.63 cm.).

In a restaurant, the distance mentioned to be the longest belongs to the people from Botosani County (180.25 cm.), and the smallest distance is indicated by the people from Suceava County (103.25 cm.).

In a hospital, the longest distance is mentioned by the people from Neamț County (177.44 cm.), and the smallest distance is indicated by the people from Suceava County (87.56 cm.).

In all 4 situations, most respondents mentioned that the gender of the seller/waiter or the doctor is not important to have a state of well-being in the market testing situation for a future purchase.

O3: Determining the distance between the buyer and the seller considered to be optimal for a state of well-being by the consumer when he is in a situation to buy/consume on the spot

In order to have a state of well-being, the optimal distance between the buyer and the seller in the situation of buying/consuming on the spot is 150 cm. Most of the respondents (23.1%) or 111 people mentioned the optimal distance to be 150 cm. In this situation, the gender of the seller is not an important factor to have a state of well-being, a fact mentioned by 49.6% of respondents.

Following the application of the Independent Test, we determined that in the situation of buying/consuming on the spot, women accept a shorter distance (123.42 cm.) to have a state of well-being, compared to men who prefer a longer distance (136.48 cm.).

Following the use of the One-way ANOVA test, we determined that people from different counties opt for different distances in the situation of buying / consuming on the spot. Thus, the people from Bacău County, in order to have a well-being, prefer a greater distance from the seller, this space being 150.63 cm. People from Suceava County consider the distance of 95.81 cm. to be the optimal distance to have a state of well-being in the situation where there is no intention to buy.

We also noticed that the distance considered to be optimal for a state of well-being in the situation of buying/consuming on the spot, differs depending on the location. Thus, the perceived distance to be optimal in the given situation differs in a clothing/footwear store (131.35 cm.), in an electronics/home appliances store (122.48 cm.), in a restaurant (125, 57) and in a hospital (106.26 cm.). Therefore, in a restaurant the shorter distance is preferred, while the longer is preferred in a clothing/footwear store.

Table 3. The optimal distance required to have a state of well-being in the situation of buying/consuming on the spot

Counties	Clothing/Footwear store (cm.)	Electronics/Home Appliances store (cm.)	Restaurant (cm.)	Hospital (cm.)
Bacău	141.13	134.19	138.06	118.50
Botoșani	151.19	146	138	125.94
Iași	136.75	118.56	142.75	103.63
Neamț	170.31	154.06	159.06	142.25
Suceava	83.38	83.94	84	65.69
Vaslui	105.38	98.13	91.56	78.56

Source: resulted from the research findings

As we can observe in Table 3, in each of the 4 locations there are differences between the perceived distances to be optimal for a state of well-being in the situation of buying/consuming on the spot between people from different counties. Thus, in a clothing/footwear store, people from Neamț County opt for a longer distance (170.31 cm.), and people from Suceava County opt for the shortest distance (83.38 cm.).

In an electronics/home appliances store, the longest distance is mentioned by the people from Neamț County (154.06 cm.), while the shortest distance is indicated by those from Suceava County (83.94 cm.).

In a restaurant, also the distance mentioned to be the largest belongs to the people from Neamț County (159.06 cm.), and the smallest distance is indicated by the people from Suceava County (84 cm.).

In a hospital, the longest distance is mentioned by the people from Neamț County (142.25 cm.), and the smallest distance is indicated by the people from Suceava County (65.69 cm.).

In all 4 situations, most respondents mentioned that the gender of the seller/waiter or doctor is not important in order to have a state of well-being in the market testing situation for a future purchase.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Proxemics or "the way we communicate with and in space" is another form of nonverbal communication, having its foundations both in the cultural whole in which we find ourselves and in our own model of power and arrangement of the world. In essence, proxemics is the theory of distances.

A first conclusion that we identified is that the distance considered to be optimal between buyer and seller, among people from Bacău, Botoșani, Iași, Neamț, Suceava and Vaslui counties is 154.26 centimeters if there is not an intention to buy, 155.51 centimeters in the case of market testing for a future purchase and 128.83 centimeters in the case of an on the spot purchase, which differs from the optimal distance of 1.2 meters according to hypothesis 1. Thus we can state that hypothesis 1 was rejected.

The distance considered to be optimal between the buyer and the seller to have a state of well-being does not differ depending on the gender of the seller, which contradicts hypothesis 2. Thus, the gender of the contact person does not influence the customer's state of well-being in each 3 situations: when there is no intention to buy, when the market is tested for a future purchase and when the product/service is bought on the spot. Therefore, regardless if in a clothing/footwear store, electronics/appliances, and restaurant or in a hospital, the respondents mentioned that they do not care about the gender of the seller, the waiter or the doctor.

The distance between the buyer and the seller considered to be optimal for a state of well-being differs depending on the purchase intention, thus hypothesis 3 is confirmed.

In the 3 situations, clients have different perceptions about distance in order to feel good. Thus, in the situation where there is no intention to buy or the market is only tested for a future purchase, the respondents prefer a greater distance towards the contact staff (154.26 cm, respectively 155.51 cm), and in the purchase situation the optimal distance from the seller is 128.82 cm.

Both men and women have the same perception of distance in order to have a state of well-being in the situation where there is no intention to buy (men = 162.101 cm, women = 148.77 cm.).

In the other cases, both in the market testing situation for a future purchase and in the purchase situation, women accept a shorter distance in order to have a state of well-being, rather than men who prefer a longer distance.

People from different counties have different perceptions on the optimal distance required to have a state of well-being in the 3 situations: when there is no intention to buy, when the market is tested for a future purchase and when the purchase is made. Thus, in case there is no intention to buy, the people from Iași County prefer the shortest distance (121.56 cm.), while the longest distance is indicated by the people from Vaslui County (190.94 cm.).

In the market testing situation for a future purchase, the people from Botoșani prefer a greater distance towards the contact staff compared to the people from the other counties, the average distance preferred by them being 172.88 cm. People from Suceava County prefer the shortest distance compared to people from other counties, the average being 130.69 cm.

In the situation of buying the product/service, the people from Bacău County prefer the longest distance from the contact staff, the average distance being 150.63 cm. and the smallest distance is indicated by the people from Suceava County, the average being 95.81 cm.

5. RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

One limitation of this research refers to subjectivity versus objectivity in assessing distances. The respondent was asked to express himself on a piece of paper, being objective, but when he is in front of a person, certain particular things might occur such as: the person in front is full of scars, piercings or all kinds of tattoos (considered to be subjectively interpreted). In real life these distances can be different.

A second limitation refers to the different accuracy in assessing distances. For this reason, in the questionnaire, next to each question that required the expression of a distance, Figure 1 was repeated showing a conventional scale for measuring the distance, which could help to express itself proxemically.

Also, the small sample makes the results obtained exploratory and not descriptive.

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