AN EQUITY MODEL OF CONSUMER RESPONSES TO WAITING TIME

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ABSTRACT

Consumer research on waiting time tends to be presented atheoretically. This paper suggests that consumer responses to waiting time are influenced by distributive, procedural and interactional fairness perceptions. This perspective simplifies theoretical explanations of waiting time phenomena reported in a variety of settings, with implications for both researchers and practitioners. The proposed framework incorporates insights from literature on time consumption as well as sociological discussions regarding the symbolic aspects of waiting time.

INTRODUCTION

The experience of waiting can influence perceptions of service quality in a variety of retail settings, including retail banking (Clemmer and Schneider 1989), hotels and restaurants (Mill 1986) and dental services (Barnes and Mowatt 1986). A commercial market research firm found that waiting in line represented the greatest complaint of retail customers (Whalen 1985). Approximately forty percent of respondents to a Wall Street Journal survey listed waiting time among their top pet peeves (Wessel 1989). More broadly, waiting can be seen as a complex social system that symbolizes power and status within a culture (Milgram et al. 1986).

The problematic aspect of waiting time derives from both the macro culture of American society and the micro cultures of contemporary organizations. The "rationalistic" nature of modern culture incorporates values of precision, punctuality, routine and bureaucracy (Schwartz 1978; Zerubavel 1981). Graham (1981) suggests that "Anglos" tend to hold the "linear-separable" time model which leads to the equation of time with money. On a micro level, as organizations become increasingly specialized in response to technological and managerial innovation, queues become linear, or made up of interchangeable elements. A client's "most desperate need" becomes a matter of routine (Schwartz 1978, p. 6).

These cultural elements also influence consumer responses to waiting time. Consumers tend to be busy people; as they wait in line, they may be aware of demands on their time which derive from roles in other aspects of their lives. Additionally, the act of waiting may be experienced as a source of anxiety. The "waiting room mentality" (Williams 1986) includes passive trust in authority figures and a fear of causing any disturbance. Indeed, the act of waiting may be so distasteful that consumers will experience immediate relief as their names are called (Schwartz 1975).

Although the waiting time phenomenon has received attention from marketing scholars, behavioral frameworks have been lacking. A comprehensive set of propositions presented by Maister (1985) identifies categories of waiting and develops managerial implications. However, as Clemmer an Schneider (1989) point out, these propositions lack a theoretical basis. Clemmer and Schneider suggest that dissonance theory will account for increases in satisfaction associated with expected as compared to unexpected waits in a bank setting, while attribution theory accounts for irritation with waits occasioned by inadequate numbers of service personnel. Davis and Vollman (1990) propose an operations perspective, finding that tolerance of a specific amount of delay in a fast-food restaurant varied with time of day and restaurant location.

This paper suggests that theories of distributive, procedural and interactional fairness can provide a comprehensive framework to account for consumer responses to waiting in service situations. From these theories, this paper presents a model which offers explanations of waiting phenomena described by Davis and

Vollman (1990), Clemmer and Schneider (1989), Maister (1985) and Larson (1987). Managerial implications can also be derived from this perspective.

FAIRNESS PERCEPTIONS

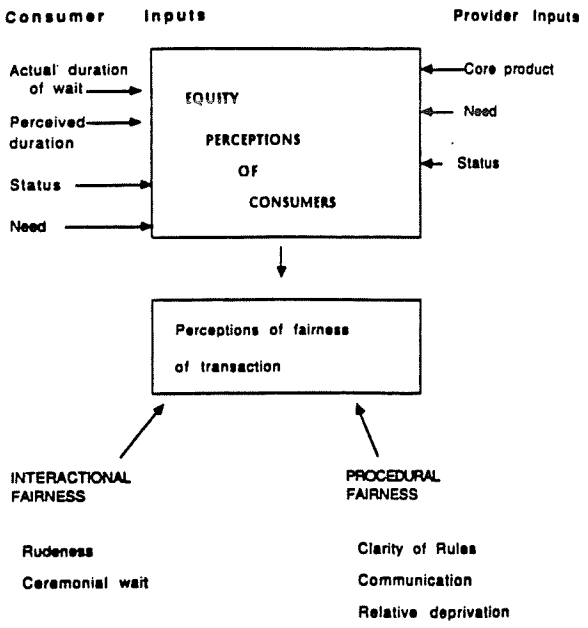
Fairness represents a standard to evaluate distributions of rewards, punishments and resources. Distributive fairness occurs when people believe each party to a transaction is obtaining the outcome s/he deserves. Often equity theory is represented in terms of the contribution rule, i.e, outcomes should be distributed in proportion to inputs of the exchanging parties. However, fairness may also be evaluated according to a "needs rule," exemplified by triage of accident victims, or an equality rule, offering equal outcomes to exchange partners regardless of inputs (Deutsch 1975; Leventhal 1976).

Perceptions of fairness are also influenced by procedures which regulate distributions of outcomes (Thibaut and Walker 1975). People tend to perceive situations as fair when they have greater control over the allocation process (Thibaut et al. 1975). Control over the process involves the opportunity to provide information to a third party who allocates rewards or resources, such as a trial judge who decides civil cases or an employer who allocates merit raises (Cohen 1985).

More recently, Bies and Moag (1986) identified the concept of interactional fairness, which is influenced by the manner in which an allocation decision is implemented. Their studies suggest that rudeness or improper behavior will negatively influence fairness perceptions.

This paper proposes a model suggesting that perceptions of fairness of a particular waiting experience will be influenced by perceptions of distributive, procedural and interactional fairness (Figure 1). Consumer inputs to the transaction include the waiting time itself, although valuation of this input may be influenced by the nature of the waiting experience; price paid for the product or service, consumer status; and need. Provider inputs include the core product or service, the value of which may vary with perceptions of scarcity and desirability; status; and need. Consumers balance these inputs as they evaluate distributive fairness of the wait and compare their input-outcome ratio to those of other customers. They also evaluate procedural fairness by considering whether allocation rules seem clear and unbiased and whether they had an opportunity to influence the length of their wait by presenting information to the firm's representative. Finally, consumers can be expected to evaluate interactional fairness in terms of courtesy, honesty and propriety experienced during the course of the wait; in Schwartz's (1975) terms, these elements differentiate ceremonial from functional waits.

Figure 1
Perceived Fairness Model of Consumer Waiting Time



DISTRIBUTIVE FAIRNESS

Within marketing, consumer inputs tend to be defined in terms of price and effort, while consumer outcomes are defined in terms of quality or value received (Huppertz et al. 1978; Oliver and Swan 1989). Examples of equitable allocations include payment of commission in direct proportion to sales, as well as the exchange of Christmas cards or gifts of equal value (Brinberg and Castell 1982; Caplow 1984; Sherry 1983). In the context of consumer waiting time, both consumer and provider inputs to the transaction

will influence perceptions of distributive fairness.

Consumer Inputs to the Transaction

Actual Duration of the Wait. The speed of service may be viewed as an outcome or reward to the consumer, while waits experience as long will be considered to be negative outcomes or even punishments. In general, people prefer larger rewards to smaller rewards (Walster et al. 1973); therefore, the duration of waiting time can be expected to influence consumer perceptions, regardless of other influences on the transaction, as observed by Davis and Vollman (1990).

On the other hand, people often use waiting time as an indicator of service quality; they may expect good doctors, dentists, and even restaurants to be overbooked. A wait may even enhance the perceived value of the service (Schwartz 1975).

Perceived Duration of Wait. Discussions of consumer time allocation note that subjective time may influence time allocation more than objective time, while physical conditions and opportunities to use waiting time effectively influence perceptions of time intervals (Schary 1971). Thus, supermarket customers tend to read magazines while waiting in line. Maister (1985) suggests that providers find ways for consumers to occupy their time; his suggestion of turning solo waits into group waits actually represents a suggestion for passing time pleasantly, as when lines in college towns become pleasantly anticipated, party-like occasions (Reisman 1985).

Price. Time may be considered part of the price of service (Fox 1980). Consumers implicitly include waiting in time allocation decisions, assigning specific time dimensions or quantitative outlays (Schary 1971) to activities. When waiting time exceeds expected levels, fairness perceptions will depend on how the outcome is valued. Consumers may accept a long wait for tickets to a concert with a well-known performer but not for service at a department store.

On the other hand, consumers may lower inputs by paying lower prices, in effect accepting payment for their time. Members of health maintenance organizations will wait longer than private patients if they feel they are saving significantly. Discount stores typically feature longer lines than upscale stores (Schwartz 1975). When delays are unavoidable, price may be reduced by a form of compensation: people volunteer to be "bumped" from flights to get free tickets.

Consumer Status. Status represents a consensually determined social rank which entitles the holder to some degree of deference (Schwartz 1975). Status elicits not just power, but "respect, consideration and envy of others (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, p. 202). High status has been associated with physical distance; for example, high status members of organizations enjoy such distancing mechanisms as private offices and separate dining areas.

Waiting time represents a form of temporal distance which symbolizes social distance. With this framework, given two clients who expend the same amount of waiting time, the client of higher social rank has made a greater investment (Schwartz 1975). Subordinates expect to wait for bosses, and White House guests assemble before the President of the United States arrives. By expecting a client to wait, the provider communicates, "I am of higher social status than you are. Conversely, making time to see a visitor promptly demonstrates recognition of the visitor's status. Greenberg (1989) suggests that these manipulations of waiting time derive from impression management motives; consumers who sense this motivation may feel insulted.

Perceptions of unfairness can be anticipated when the consumer's beliefs about his/her own status differ from the provider's. For example, the highly-paid business executive or self-employed professional may believe that his/her half-hour wait represents a larger input than the same wait experienced by a blue-collar worker, while the provider may believe that status is irrelevant or simply lack awareness of status differences among clients.

On the other hand, providers can make attributions about status of consumers based on gender (Rafaeli 1989a) and appearance. Thus, the househusband who takes a child to the pediatrician will be seen ahead of mothers because "he probably has to get back to work." The self-employed, highly-paid computer analyst is

mistaken for a hippie when she arrives for her appointment in jeans and sandals.

Consumer's Need. The consumer's need may also be considered an input because many people believe a truly needy person deserves an outcome greater than would be expected by other inputs into the transaction (Leventhal 1976). A genuine emergency will be regarded as a legitimate reason to violate the "first-come first served" rule in a variety of situations: emergency room triage incorporates this principle; on an overbooked flight, airlines will prioritize the passenger who needs to attend a funeral; and the person pleading need often can negotiate directly with people waiting in line to cash checks or pay for items at a retail store.

Provider's Inputs

Core Product. Consumers expect to receive a haircut, a bag of groceries or an airline flight, along with such amenities as courtesy and friendliness. These offerings tend to represent outcomes to consumers. A scarce of highly-valued core product may be seen as a high input on the part of the provider. On the other hand, the provider who attempts to capitalize on the product's scarcity or the consumer's necessity may appear to be taking advantage of disadvantaged consumers.

Provider's Status. Just as people are willing to wait for royalty, government officials and movie stars, as well as their own bosses, consumers may be willing to wait for service providers who are perceived as having higher social status. Providers may attempt to raise their own status; for example, in a British drugstore chain, pharmacists were required to create a delay for customers picking up prescriptions, rather than simply reaching for a bottle on the shelf; the delay was intended to communicate that these drugs were not just commodities (Frankenberg 1988).

Provider's Need. Providers may express genuine need which requires consumers to wait: machinery breaks down or too many people arrive at a service point at the same time. In observing Israeli supermarket encounters, Rafaeli (1989b) found that customers often attempted to shorten their own waits by assisting cashiers. They offered advice, returned to shelves to check prices, and packed delivery creates; at least one customer urged others in the queue, "Come on, let's help her; if we help her, maybe things will move along a little more quickly" (p. 26).

PROCEDURAL FAIRNESS

Thibaut and Walker (1975) were among the first to suggest that perceptions of fairness and ultimately satisfaction with institutions can be derived not only from allocation of outcomes but also from procedures by which outcomes and resources are allocated. Procedural fairness represents a standard that can be applied to processes used to settle conflicts, such as those arising in civil court cases, employee compensation decisions, and even disputes over grades. Lind and Tyler (1988) note that Chicago traffic offenders whose cases were dismissed experienced anger and dissatisfaction. Although the outcome of their cases seemed favorable--no fine, notation on driving record or insurance increase--people felt they had been denied an opportunity to present their stories--what Hirschman (1960) calls voice.

Perceptions of procedural fairness derive from opportunities to present complete information, perceived responsiveness of the decision-maker to the information presented, and a lack of bias in applying procedures to individual cases (Leventhal 1976). If individuals are given an opportunity to speak but the decision-maker appears unresponsive, this opportunity will be experienced as "sham" participation, leaving disputants feeling worse than before (Cohen 1985).

Voice

When consumers protest having to wait, they may apply procedural fairness standards in evaluating management's responsiveness to their explanations, or simply the opportunity to present explanations at all. For example, Maister (1985) proposes that in-process waits seem shorter than pre-process waits. From a procedural fairness perspective, the movement from pre-process to in-process may offer an opportunity for consumers to voice concerns and for the provider to respond. In

the extreme cases of emergency room triage or responses to "911" calls, the consumer's place in the queue derives directly from information s/he provides.

Comparison with Other Customers

The theory of relative deprivation suggests that inequity is perceived when people become aware of others who have managed to achieve a more favorable ratio of inputs to outcomes. For example, if Customer X learns that Customer Y has paid less for the same car, X will avoid patronizing the auto dealer in future transactions (Mowen and Grove 1983). Similarly, people feel unfairly treated if waiting times seem unequal for arbitrary reasons. In a particularly graphic situation, Larson (1987) observed a woman crying outside a package pick-up area of a department store. She had been waiting over an hour to pick up a chair; as she watched three people being served ahead of her, the frustration became intolerable. On the other hand, a genuine difference in outcome may justify differential waiting times: customers will be willing to wait longer if a clerk performs a special service, such as checking item prices or calling around to locate an item.

Clarity of Decision Rules

Sometimes a decision must be made about which customers will be served first, as when an airline agent decides who may board an overbooked flight. A medical provider may have to decide whether a person who is embarking on a business trip should be seen ahead of others with appointments and, if so, which patients should be delayed to accommodate the interruption. In legal contexts, the clarity of decision rule has been associated with satisfaction, especially when the decision was unfavorable (Rusbult et al. 1982). Therefore, people who are delayed may regard the provider more favorably if they understand the reason for the delay. Furthermore, if the decision rule specifies that Customer X rather than Customer Y should be delayed, Customer X will be more satisfied than if the reasons were unclear or arbitrary. A decision to board passengers based on date of original reservation may be considered fair and impartial, as compared to a decision based on more subjective considerations of personal need ("I have a family waiting...")

INTERACTIONAL FAIRNESS

Individuals also assess fairness of the interactions which emerge from procedures (Bies and Moag 1986). Studies of MBA job candidates undergoing interviews suggested that this interactional fairness was evaluated in terms of truthfulness, respect for the interviewee, the degree to which questions reflected interviewer bias ("propriety") and justification of the interviewer's decision. In a waiting time context, perceptions of interactional fairness seem derived from symbolism. In our society, waiting frequently symbolizes an insult (Zerubavel 1987): "either rejection or being less powerful" (Meerlo 1981). These connotations of insult may explain Larson's (1987) observation that people will wait patiently if they perceive that all tellers are fully occupied, but will resent waiting even a few seconds if the teller appears to be "doing nothing" while waiting for the consumer to respond. When teller windows are closed or tellers appear to be unconcerned, the bank may unintentionally communicate a message of insult rather than overload.

Schwartz (1975) introduced the term "ceremonial wait" to describe waits which are created deliberately to emphasize the provider's power and status, in contrast to "functional" waits in which the provider's need represents an input to the transaction. Here waiting also serves as a metaphor of social power; appointments are required to see people in power but "the lowly are summoned."

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

Studies of waiting time have not explicitly addressed individual differences. These differences can be expected to influence responses to waiting time in terms of specific inputs as well as globally, as each consumer brings unique traits and experiences to an assessment of waiting time in general.

With regard to specific inputs, consumers will differ regarding perceptions of status as well as

duration of waiting time. Obviously, individuals will respond differently to provider attempts at distraction: people differ in the degree to which they rate videos or reading material as interesting and informative as well as their willingness to engage in conversation with strangers. More globally, Vezina and Nicosia (1990) suggest consumers differ with regard to Bond and Feather's (1988) construct of "time structure." People whose time is highly structured may resent waiting more than those whose time is loosely structured. Feather and Bond (1983) have associated loosely structured time with conditions of unemployment. Thus, occupations which encourage people to place explicit values on time, such as those involving sales or entrepreneurship, may also foster strong aversions to waiting time.

IMPLICATIONS

The various components of equity theory contribute to consumer perceptions of fairness. The theory presented here has implications for research as well as a number of strategies to minimize dissatisfaction with waiting time.

Research Implications

Equity Theory as Comprehensive Framework. A number of findings from diverse research sources can be explained within the framework presented here. For example, Clemmer and Schneider 1989) found that consumers were especially dissatisfied with waiting time when tellers appeared unoccupied. Larson (1987) reported that bank customers became irritated when tellers appeared idle, although actual transaction time was less than when tellers appeared busy. Davis and Vollman (1990) found that fast-food customers responded more positively to waits during crowded lunch hours than less crowded dinner hours. These three findings can be explained in terms of fairness perceptions. The busy lunch-time setting presented clear evidence of the provider's need as an input to the transaction, while the idle tellers or clerks communicated symbolic messages that translated to perceptions of low interactional fairness.

Indeed, many examples of waiting time dissatisfaction cited by Larson (1987) and Clemmer and Schneider (1989) seem to derive from consumer perceptions that waiting time is a ceremonial reminder of their lower status and power, rather than a functional necessity arising from excessive demand or unavoidable overload. The consumer's sense of inequity arises from his/her disagreement with the provider's assessment of their relative statuses and/or the relevance of status as an input to the exchange. Actions which communicate respect for the consumer, such as warnings of busy times described by Clemmer and Schneider, will reduce perceptions of ceremoniality.

Maister's (1985) classic propositions on waiting also can be examined in this framework. In some respects, this paper extends Maister's Proposition 6, "Unfair Waits are Longer than Equitable Waits," by identifying influences on fairness perceptions associated with waiting time. The consumer's input-outcome ratio may seem more favorable if s/he can pass the time pleasantly and/or productively, or if the service outcome is considered valuable. Unexplained, uncertain and anxious waits may create dissatisfaction because they are perceived as ceremonial or deceptive, representing a lack of communicational fairness; alternatively, the implementation of arbitrary procedures and denial of customer "voice" may suggest a lack of procedural fairness.

New Directions for Research on Waiting Time. The approach presented here also suggests several directions for research in this area: the relationship between fairness and satisfaction, the influence of situation and affect on perceptions of fairness.

First, empirical studies by social psychologists have demonstrated ties between fairness and satisfaction in a variety of settings, including courtrooms, classrooms and employment evaluations (Lind and Tyler 1988). Research on the relationship between fairness and consumer satisfaction has been relatively limited (cf. Huppertz et al. 1978; Oliver and Swan 1989), particularly with respect to procedural and interactional fairness (cf. Goodwin and Ross 1990). The degree to which fairness contributes to perceptions of consumer satisfaction may vary depending on the nature of the interaction; for instance, fairness may be most salient when the

retailer or service provider must allocate resources--such as waiting time--among customers.

Second, situation may influence fairness perceptions, especially perceptions of voluntariness associated with use of a service or retail store. When seeking medical care or a new driver's license, people often have no choice about using the service, and often no option to postpone the visit. On the other hand, people who choose to patronize a popular restaurant or movie recognize that they can leave the queue at any time. The mood of others in the waiting area, the customer's own anticipation and the degree of voluntariness will combine to influence consumer attitudes toward waiting. Thus, strategies which reduce customer dissatisfaction in one setting may be alienate customers in another. People may be willing to watch a film, study reading material, drink a beverage or talk to other customers in some service encounters but not all.

Managerial Implications

The equity perspective suggests strategies for managing customer responses to waiting time. These strategies may be grouped according to whether they reduce customer inputs, enhance customer outcomes, or alter perceptions of procedural and interactional fairness.

Reducing Customer Input to the Transaction. Reduction of actual waiting time can be accomplished by modifying service delivery systems or by investing in computer-based technologies. Some low-tech modifications to delivery systems involve re-training contact personnel or consumers. For example, the California Department of Motor Vehicles now allows motorists to make appointments for such transactions as license renewal and vehicle registration.

Increasingly, computer technology has been used to reduce waiting time. ATM's have become commonplace. Computer registration for university courses eliminates lines; telecommunication systems allow consumers access to bank account and credit card information without waiting for a service representative; a fast food chain is experimenting with double lane configurations to serve four cars simultaneously (Gibson 1990); other fast food chains allow consumers to enter their orders on a computer screen (Dabholkar 1990).

However, because demand is variable, service marketers will have difficulty in consistently achieving objectives related to speed of customer service. Additionally, in labor-intensive environments, waiting time may be influenced by absenteeism, turnover and varying levels of employee performance. Therefore, marketers need plans to reduce dissatisfaction when customer expectations of waiting time are not met.

Reducing Price. Consumers may be especially tolerant of waits when services are discounted for two reasons: the lower price input can offset the greater time input, and consumers of lower-priced service may be more willing to be associated with lower social status. Therefore, in some industries, marketers in effect reimburse customers for waiting time. For example, a New York-based furniture company will reduce the price by 10% if delivery is not made within two hours of the promised time (Crossen 1990). Airlines have offered discounts to stand-by travellers, in effect building up an inventory of waiting customers.

Increasing Pleasantness and Productivity of the Wait. When a wait is pleasant or productive, customers will feel they are contributing a lower level of input as compared to situations where they are forced to do nothing or endure an uncomfortable environment. Pleasantness may be achieved by introducing flexibility into the waiting procedures or by changing the nature of the waiting environment.

Flexible procedures, such as "take a number" systems, allow customers the freedom to leave a waiting area, thus regaining control over their time use. Customers may even be encouraged to shop elsewhere in a store or mall, generating additional sales.

On the other hand, the provider may create a pleasant environment in the waiting area itself. Sometimes a sociable environment is created by encouraging customers to talk to one another (Maister 1985; Reisman 1985). However, while college students waiting for a movie or vacationers on line at Disneyland might enjoy talking to one

another, a business executive waiting for a doctor, dentist or auto mechanic often prefers to get some work done in a private setting.

Video technology has been used to provide entertainment for waiting customers who do not interact with one another. Hearst Corporation is developing special video versions of Esquire Magazine to play in major airports (Reilly 1990). Similar videos of popular interest magazines might entertain customers at department and clothing stores (Goldman 1990).

Calibrating Consumer Outcome in Proportion to Wait. Alternatively, rather than reduce consumer cost or input, the service provider can differentiate consumer outputs based on waiting time. Within many service environments, providers may allocate waiting time based on degree of personalization or special service required. In return for this degree of personalization, the consumer can be expected to allow others to move ahead in the queue. On the other hand, consumers may resist waiting for the resolution of a provider-generated problem; indeed, as the harm done by the original problem is compounded by the requirement of a wait, equity considerations call for even greater restitution.

Managing Perceptions of Procedural and Interactional Fairness

Inevitably, situations will arise when consumers are forced to wait for durations beyond what they perceive as reasonable or when they must be served out of turn. In these situations, consumers may find it easy to interpret the delay as a display of the provider's power or social status, and to believe that the provider considers them inferior to other customers who are served first. The procedural fairness literature suggests two approaches: responsive listening and informative communication.

Responsive Listening. Consumers will want an opportunity to express concerns to service providers who seem genuinely responsive. Research findings consistently suggest that people resent "sham participation." Therefore, genuine concern requires more than a perfunctory apology. For example, flight attendants exhibit responsive listening when they offer to look up options for passengers who will lose connections on a late flight. The flight will still be late, but the passenger's specific need will be addressed.

Explaining Delays. Offering specific information to consumers alleviates dissatisfaction in a number of ways. A credible explanation ("the weather delayed us" or "an emergency took precedence") will also enhance perceptions of interactional fairness by communicating the functional rather than ceremonial nature of the wait Moreover, the consumer's sense of perceived control is enhanced: armed with specific information about length of the wait, the consumer can take action to make the wait more pleasant.

CONCLUSION

This paper has suggested that equity theory offers a useful perspective for understanding consumer responses to waiting time and developing appropriate managerial strategies. This approach contributes to the literature by offering a framework that can unify explanations of a variety of reported encounters in service and retail settings.

The discussion presented here also incorporates insights from marketing literature on time consumption as well as sociological research which addresses the symbolic nature of waiting. Previous discussions of waiting time have paid little or no attention to those literatures. The interdisciplinary perspective presented here allows waiting time to be viewed as a social phenomenon rather than merely a stylistic aspect of services marketing.

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