



Supermarket consumers and gender differences relating to their perceived importance levels of store characteristics

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ABSTRACT

Family grocery shopping is the accepted domain of women; however, modern social and demographic movements challenge traditional gender roles within the family structure. Men now engage in grocery shopping more freely and frequently, yet the essence of male shopping behaviour and beliefs present an opportunity for examination. This research identifies specific store characteristics, investigates the perceived importance of those characteristics and explores gender, age and income differences that may exist. A random sample collection methodology involving 280 male and female grocery shoppers was selected. Results indicated significant statistical differences between genders based on perceptions of importance of most store characteristics. Overall, male grocery shoppers considered supermarket store characteristics less important than female shoppers. Income did not affect shoppers' level of associated importance; however respondents' age, education and occupation influenced perceptions of price, promotions and cleanliness.

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1. Introduction

Previous Australian studies examined important supermarket characteristics and influencers of satisfaction, yet failed to consider the effect of gender, income and age (Miranda et al., 2005). Additionally, other research compared cultural differences in satisfaction levels of Australian shoppers in general, but did not specifically address supermarket shopping or how gender influences choice (Jones et al., 2010). Internationally, there has been a steady stream of consumer behaviour studies that point to the growth and presence of male shoppers in food shopping since the 1980s (Davis and Bell, 1991; Piper and Capella, 1993; Polegato and Zaichkowsky, 1994; Mazumdar and Papatla, 1995; Otnes and McGrath, 2001; Torres et al., 2001; Richbell and Kite, 2007). In light of these studies, and the growth of male shoppers undertaking food shopping in Australia, an opportunity exists to examine whether consumer traits, particularly gender, influence the choice of supermarkets (Ambler et al., 2004; Beynon et al., 2010).

The purpose of the present study is to examine the attitudes and beliefs of male and female grocery shoppers in the Australian retail context. It seeks to identify perceptions of store characteristics by

male and female shoppers and investigates the differences in the extent of the importance placed upon these characteristics. In addition, the study also addresses the effect of age, income, occupation or education on the consumers' perceptions towards store characteristics. The contribution of this paper is twofold. The first contribution concerns the notion that men and women are socialised differently and thereby presents a view that these differences play an important role in the retail context, which in turn influences the choice of supermarkets. A secondary goal seeks to understand the importance placed on supermarket store characteristics according to age, income, occupation and education. Such investigations provide the first steps towards a greater understanding of the behaviours of the emergent male grocery shopper. Three research questions guide this study:

- (1) Do male and female grocery shoppers consider store characteristics differently?
- (2) Which store characteristics do male and female shoppers perceive as more important?
- (3) Does the age, income, education or occupation of the consumer affect the level of importance placed on store characteristics?

The literature discussion takes a step by step approach to address the theoretical background and development of relevant hypotheses. The appropriate research methods are identified and used to investigate the differences in the extent of importance

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placed upon store characteristics by male and female shoppers. There is a discussion of key findings and implications for retailers.

2. Literature review

2.1. Gender, grocery shopping behaviour and store characteristics

Sex-role theory defines gender as an individual, dichotomous and physical differentiating role that is relatively static and learnt in childhood. Gender theory suggests a system of inequality that is formed and reformed through daily experiences (Potuchek, 1992). Gender scholars favour a social constructionist approach to understanding and explaining gender (Courtenay, 2000; Fox and Murray, 2000; Leaper, 2000; Poggio, 2006). Simply, gender is shaped through the institutional and social mores and is constantly redefined through the everyday individual practices and interactions (Poggio, 2006). As such, gender identities generate within dynamic and shifting social contexts (Collinson and Hearn, 1996; Courtenay, 2000) because culture and society are more powerful explanatory mechanisms than nature and biology (Synott, 1993; Shilling, 2003). The traditional male gender roles no longer exist as clearly defined social barriers to familial roles. This merging of traditional familial roles, and society's acceptance of these shifts, means that more men now undertake traditional female gendered roles such as grocery shopping (Davis and Bell, 1991; Dholakia et al., 1995; Dholakia, 1999; Gardner, 2004; Richbell and Kite, 2007). Generally, men who report to be the main grocery shopper are employed in white-collar, professional occupations, and have higher levels of education and income when compared with men who do not undertake the grocery-shopping duty (Piper and Capella, 1993) and are mostly less than 34 years of age (Dholakia, 1999). Additionally, the admitted grocery-shopping males tend to search deliberately and limit price comparisons and pre-planning before shopping. There is also a social aspect of male grocery shopping that invokes different motivations (Piron, 2002).

A merging of traditional familial roles and societal shifts mean that more men now adopt broader, gendered roles toward family chores and grocery shopping duties. Fitting within a gender-balance domain, men mainly undertake the grocery-shopping task because their wives work (Piron, 2002). This factor of female labour-force participation is widely recognised as a driving force behind males undertaking the grocery-shopping task (Zeithaml, 1985; Blair and Lichter, 1991; Harris and Firestone, 1998; Murcott, 2000). Piron (2002) argues that male respondents believed men should take a more active role in shopping and viewed grocery shopping as a family activity rather than a responsibility of the household female. Men often act as influencers in the grocery decision-making process. Otnes and McGrath (2001) sought an understanding of the perception and action styles related to male shopping behaviour. Three stereotypical models of male shopping behaviour emerged: grab and go, whine and wait and fear of the feminine. They further contended that men search deliberately, limit price-comparison shopping and browse infrequently—views supported by other researchers (Mazumdar and Papatla, 1995; Thomas and Garland, 2004).

Men took less time to complete the shopping task, purchased fewer items than women but paid a higher price per item. When comparing the speed of the shopping task with the number of items purchased, men appeared to take less time to select products than women. A male's expenditure was higher per minute than the females, which coincided with the view that men seldom comparison shop (Davis and Bell, 1991). Dholakia et al.'s (1995) exploratory work made it clear that men shop for groceries with greater frequency than women and purchased fewer items than women (Davis and Bell, 1991).

In demonstrating a preference for store loyalty, men routinely patronised the same store while women were more inclined to shop around for the best buy. Men favoured a wide product range with quality fresh produce and meat (Donegan, 1986) together with clearly identifiable pricing. As such, men consider objective criteria more important than subjective criteria in the decision-making process (Williams, 2002). Polegato and Zaichkowsky (1994) note that helpful assistants, friendly checkout operators and easy parking were more important store characteristics for women. Researchers considered the levels of enjoyment and satisfaction by men in the grocery-shopping task (Dholakia et al., 1995; Dholakia, 1999; Torres et al., 2001). Men who claim to be the main grocery shopper enjoyed the task and, in general, men gain positive reinforcement from the family's appreciation of their involvement in grocery shopping. In task management, men appear not to ask for assistance, used shopping lists less frequently than women, did not compare prices or use catalogues and did not stick to a defined budget. Male behaviour in the supermarket is very different from female behaviour (Gardner, 2004).

Since behavioural differences exist between genders, differences in perceptions towards the physical characteristics of supermarkets should also exist. Accordingly, this paper seeks to contribute and extend knowledge of consumer behaviour by identifying which store characteristics male and female shoppers perceive as more important and influence their choice of supermarket. Different store characteristics present important decision criteria for consumers in their willingness to patronise particular stores. Helgesen and Nettet (2010) define a store characteristic as a physical attribute of the store that a consumer will reference and evaluate, in order to make choice decisions about the store. These include product characteristics such as merchandise range and availability, merchandise freshness and quality as well as ambient characteristics such as cleanliness and atmospherics. Other aspects are service features such as staffing competence, friendliness and speed of check out service as well as convenience and trading hours (Helgesen and Nettet, 2010).

2.2. Hypotheses development

The term *product* has two meanings appropriate to this research paper. The first refers to the physical stock for sale and the second concerns service delivery. The availability of merchandise, including advertised promotional specials, is an important characteristic of a supermarket (Andreyeva et al., 2008; Trautrimis et al., 2009) to the extent that on shelf availability is a major concern for consumers. Consumer reactions to stock outs have significant coverage over the past 40 years and indicate consumers' reaction to out of stocks is generally consistent (Corsten and Gruen, 2003).

Shoppers, when faced with a product being unavailable for purchase, will elect to substitute the product, delay the purchase or leave empty handed. This is often referred to as SDL—substitute, delay or leave (Zinn and Liu, 2001, 2008). Associated with any retail establishment are the physical location of stock and the ease of flow through the store. An oft used product description is the word—*quality*. Quality is an important characteristic that generally describes a standard of fresh food available in the store. The perceived quality of fresh produce is influential in a shopper's decision to visit a particular store (Helgesen and Nettet, 2010). Accordingly, three Product focussed hypotheses are developed and presented for testing:

- H1: *Being in stock of specials throughout the week is of less importance to men than to women.*
- H2: *Well-stocked shelves are of less importance to men than to women.*

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