**An Ethnographic User Study of the Older Customers’ Supermarket Shopping Experience in the UK- Summary Report**

**Authors and acknowledgements**

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**Introduction**

This ethnographic user study was a part of an ESRC funded project entitled ‘Silver Shoppers: designing a better supermarket service for the older consumer’. It aimed to investigate older customers’ supermarket shopping experience via an ethnographic user study, so as to explore issues and challenges older customers face during their holistic shopping process and make recommendations for retailers to improve their service for this customer segment in the UK.

**Research Background**

The population of the world is ageing. It has been forecasted that, by 2050, the number of people classified as old in the world could rise over 2 billion. Due to such a substantial demographic shift, many researchers have highlighted the importance of elderly consumers to retailers and concentrated on improving ageing people’s shopping experience from multiple dimensions such as transportation service, social care and pension system.

Numerous studies have identified characteristics of elderly consumers that differentiate them from their younger counterparts, such as decreased price sensitivity, preferences for quality products, a tendency to make joint buying decisions and greater levels of store loyalty. These features play a significant role on their shopping experience and satisfaction. Thus, a better understanding of consumer behaviour within and between age cohorts can support retailers in improving their service in particular for the ageing group. Numerous factors that have had a significant impact on the elderly consumers’ shopping behaviour and experience have been explored and identified from the literature. Those factors can be categorised into three groups human-based, culture-based and retail-design-based factors: a) the human-based factors represent the elderly consumers’ physical and psychological features that will influence their shopping behaviour and experience, for instance, their ability to see, hear, move, learn, remember, taste, small and handle product; b) the culture-based factors include the elderly consumers’ cultural background, living situation, family structure, shopping habit, diet habit, communication style and community care; and c) the retail-design-based factors cover details of retail environment and service design that will influence the elderly consumers’ shopping experience and the level of satisfaction.

Although the results from previous research are notable, some research gaps still remain. Despite the supermarket has been identified as the most important store, affecting an older person’s day-to-day life, there is a scarcity of research that has deeply investigated elderly consumers’ shopping experience in supermarkets. It has been widely recognised how little accurate information on elderly consumers’ supermarket experience exists, because the elderly consumers have not received justified attention. Meanwhile, studies on the elderly consumers have gained greater importance in North America and parts of Europe with research in the UK lagging behind. Thus, this study aimed to investigate challenges and difficulties that elderly consumers face during their supermarket shopping process in the UK, and in turn to understand the way in which supermarket service and environment design can be improved for this customer segmentation.

**Methodology**

An ethnographic user study methodology was chosen for this study as it could support the researchers in obtaining a higher-level understanding of the older consumers’ shopping life. It also represents a dynamic picture of the life of the targeted older consumer group. The key feature of an ethnographic study is its capacity to view a system through the eyes of the user so as to discover the user’s needs. Therefore, it is instrumental in helping to design products and services that are able to satisfy the end-user, the older consumer in this case. The ethnographic user study was planned to take place over six-weeks so as to balance the richness of data collection and feasibility of high-quality participant engagement. Cultural Probes, video-based direct observation and in-depth interviews methods have been applied for data collection.

Culture Probes is an experimental research method used for information collection for design inspiration. It is an information-gathering package that contains participant diary cards, shopping experience evaluation cards, an instruction book, a digital camera and a Dictaphone for people who have problems with writing. The participants were required to complete at least four diaries per week to record their daily activities that included both shopping related and non-shopping related events. For the shopping inspection cards, they were asked to review supermarket service from one of their most frequently visited stores. With the intention of collecting balanced feedback that covered most components of a supermarket service, shopping inspection cards were designed with six weekly-based focuses, probing areas such as Layout, baskets and trolleys; Shelving and product display; Products and promotions; Comfort and services; Customer service; and Checkouts. This also helped the researchers to establish a consistent and comprehensive view of older customers’ shopping experience with a particular store setting. Under each of the six focuses, there were three shopping inspection cards: a ‘List it’ card, a ‘Dream it’ card and a ‘Score it’ card. The cards enabled the participants to record their shopping observations, describe their shopping and rate their satisfaction levels in different areas within a theme on a 1-5 scale. In total, there were 18 shopping inspection cards for the participants to fill in the user study.

• List it: to list issues of supermarket service and design

• Dream it: to describe how supermarket service and design can be improved

• Score it: to score the current supermarket service with 1-5 starts

Apart from the diary cards and shopping inspection cards, the researchers visited the participants twice for shopping observations and in-depth interviews during the users study period. The participants were asked to conduct their shopping in a natural way and they were observed from a distance. A small size video recorder (GoPro camera) was used for data collection to reduce the level of unavoidable disturbing of video recording to participants’ shopping process. Immediately after shopping observations, the participants were interviewed to elicit their feelings and satisfaction levels. The observations started from how people prepared for shopping at home and ended with, after shopping, when they put all shopping items into the right places at home. The interviews were conducted at the participants’ home and based on their shopping journey and experiences within the supermarket, without any set sequence of discussion. The observations took between 40 minutes to 1.5 hours, and the interviews were between 45 minutes to 2 hours. Due to unexpected issues such as illness, among the 30 participants, one of them did not participant shopping observation, seven of them were observed once, 22 participants were observed twice and four participants did not complete all shopping inspection cards. Overall, the results from the user study data collection were based on 26 sets of completed shopping inspection cards, 30 sets of diary cards, 51 shopping observations (29 first observations and 22 second observations), 29 background interviews and 29 first post-shopping interviews and 22 second post-shopping interview. This dataset includes data from all diary cards, inspection cards, 29 background interviews and 29 first post-shopping interviews.

Customers who aged above 65 years old and able to undertake their own food shopping at least once fortnightly were invited for this user study. This ensured that they were mentally and physically capable of completing the research experiment. Participant recruitment information was disseminated through local ageing related groups, such as Age UK, Age Concern, elderly clubs and lunch groups. Once the participants agreed to join the project, the researchers had explained research background, the user study process and collected consent from them before the user study started. In total, there were 30 participants in the user study. Alnwick, Shrewsbury and Christchurch were selected as research regions for the user study because they have a comparatively high proportion of people aged 65 and over in the UK. 10 participants from each of the three research regions were invited.

Among the 30 older customer participants, 47% of them aged between 70-74, 23% of them aged between 75-79, 20% of them aged 65-69, 7% aged 80-84 and 3% aged 85+. There were 13 males and 17 females. From a shopping habit viewpoint, most of them (73%) visited supermarket 2-6 times per week, and 80% of them travel to supermarket either by walking or taking buses.

**Key findings**

*Shopping preparation*

Half of the participants indicated that they shopped once a week and half 2-6 times a week. They were therefore regular shoppers and had their own routines and shopping practices. Participants had particular routines for preparing for their grocery-shopping trip. In making these preparations routine, participants were less reliant on their memory. To limit the likelihood of a failure in memory, participants kept their belongings in the same place, such as a mobile phone or wallet being left by the door or shopping bags already in the car.

The majority of participants took a shopping list that they either wrote that day or had been adding to over the course of a few days/week. Lists were particularly important when shopping on behalf of a relative and the most organise lists were written in order of product layout in store. At most, participants planned their meals two or three days ahead but did not always stick to the plans. Many participants had extra food in storage in case of emergencies such as not being able to leave the house due to sickness or weather conditions, and for future visitors.

*Travel*

Two thirds of the participants travelled to the supermarket by car, the others by bus, on foot or on a mobility scooter. Because shopping bags could be heavy to carry home, those that travel to the store on foot either got a bus or taxi home. Mobility scooters were difficult to take in the car or on the bus, being heavy and clumsy to lift and manoeuvre. One participant expressed safety concerns about travelling next to traffic in her mobility scooter, even though she is on the pavement. Car journeys were smooth and efficient in all of the observation trips. Although all of the stores were said to have enough parking spaces, participants did experience problems in parking close to the store.

*In-store*

Baskets and trolleys

The vast majority of participants preferred to use a shallow trolley, which was easier to load, unload and manoeuvre than deep trolleys as well as being more comfortable to shop with than baskets. Baskets were used for very small shops, otherwise considered too heavy to carry when full. Trolleys, however, provided support to participants with mobility problems or fatigue, as it was clear that many leaned on the trolley at times during their shopping journey. Participants did not like having to carry handbags and walking sticks while pushing the trolley so these were usually left in the trolley, raising security concerns about the safety of personal belongings.

Layout

Issues with store layout are focused around difficulties finding products and obstacles hindering movement down aisles. Participants felt far more comfortable in stores they were familiar, and therefore felt uncomfortable when visiting new stores. Frustrations arose when the store layout altered or if signage did not correspond to items in the aisles. There were also problems locating the correct item amongst shelves full of similar items. Aisles were generally considered wide enough for regular shopping. Problems occurred when there were obstacles in the aisles, be they staff, displays, architectural features or other shoppers.

Comfort

Participants appreciated a pleasant shopping environment and would avoid supermarkets that did not meet this standard. Although lighting was regarded adequate for most participants, those with poor eyesight struggled with the source of light being so high and would prefer individual shelf lights. A number of participants felt the store was too cold, particularly in the chiller/freezer areas although they understood the need for this. Overwhelmingly, customers would prefer more seating both inside the store and outside the store.

Services

One of the stores had an upstairs café. Although a lift was available, it had been out of service for weeks before being repaired. This made it impossible for wheelchair users or customers with a trolley load of shopping to access the café. While many participants were happy with the café service an equal number chose not to visit it because it was noisy, busy, they did not like the refreshments on offer or they considered it a financial extravagance. Regular café users would prefer that their supermarket had a larger restaurant serving hot meals.

Customer service

Participants rated good customer service as a priority. Overall, customer service was seen to be good, the main complaint being that there was not enough staff around to help when needed leading to queue times and confusion on the shop floor. In general, customers went to staff if they could not find an item or need other assistance, but one male customer explained how he felt foolish having to ask and others felt it was too much effort to ask. In these instances the store loses a sale if staff are not actively looking to assist customers. Frustrations arise when staff gave the incorrect product information or do not know where an item is placed in store.

Product packaging and labelling

Labelling in terms of nutritional information was considered improved in recent years and schemes like colour coding salt and sugar help customers to make healthy choices. Participants were keen to pick products with the longest use-by/best-before date available on the shelf, particularly if they were items they would not use up quickly. To do this they would select products from the back of the shelves. The font used for product labelling was considered too small in some cases, particularly for those with eyesight difficulties.

Products

Participants were happy with the quality and range of products in supermarkets overall. Most of the comments focused on fresh food, particularly fruit and vegetables, which customers would check for freshness. Whilst some preferred pre-packed saying that the products lasted longer, were more hygienic and were easier, others preferred the flexibility of buying lose. The plastic bags were available in the fruit and vegetable area to pack lose items were difficult to find, to take from the dispenser without grabbing a handful, and to open with dry fingers. Participants tried licking their fingers to open them or blowing into the bag. Participants appreciated British-grown produce but many were sceptical about organic.

Promotions

Participants were wary of promotions, which were not always offer the best value for money. Promotions were often geared up to families more than single or dual-person households so over consumption leads to wastage. In some case, participants would choose to avoid buying an item on their list altogether if buying one is ‘more expensive’ than buying two or more that they do not need. Too many promotions on similar products can lead to confusion over the best buy. The majority of participants had a store loyalty card but most agreed that the coupons they gained through this were not very useful and had short expiry dates.

Shelves

The participants understood that supermarkets needed to fit a wide product range onto their shelves, but they still expressed frustration at not being able to reach items on high or low shelves without difficulty. It was particularly difficult to reach items at the back of shelves, as well as to see if any stock is there at all. Whilst price labels were adequate, the comparative weight information was often in too small a font or difficult to compare through lack of consistency. Sometimes labels were not correspond with the products on the shelves making it even harder to identify best-buys.

Checkouts

Participants tended to avoid busy times of the day but did sometimes have to queue for a checkout. Staff often opened new checkouts at busy times and direct customers to shorter queues but there could be a delay in this happening. Two thirds of the participants never used self-checkouts and for a range of reasons; they preferred interacting with a person and wanted to protect their jobs, they were afraid of the self-checkout technology, they had too much shopping for the self-checkout, they found it a nuisance or they could not see the screen. Some customers did use the self-checkout for a small shop but did have to wait for staff assistance.

Mobility scooters/wheelchairs

Three of the thirty participants used a mobility scooter to do their shopping. One of these was permanently wheelchair bound as she suffered from MS. The other two were suffering from temporary or recent mobility problems following injury and did not use a wheelchair at home but needed the extra assistance of a scooter for travelling distance. One participant therefore used the store’s own mobility scooter which was located at the far end of the store forcing the participant to walk to where they were stored. Although it had the benefit of an in-built basket, it was bulky and difficult to manoeuvre around the store. The participant’s interview transcript suggested that the store’s scooter for customer use was often out-of-service, not charged, or staff did not have access to the key. Therefore it was very difficult for customers to be able to rely on these being available on any one day. Height of shelves and counters were more of a concern for scooter users.

Unpacking shopping at home

Whilst many of the participants felt fine after their shopping trip, others described feeling tired, thirsty or hungry. Certainly, many participants put the kettle soon after arriving home to make a cup of tea. Bringing shopping from the car to the house could be deemed tiresome and if a spouse were home they would usually help. It also raises some security concerns as cars were always left unlocked when individuals disappeared into the house with shopping bags, as well as leaving front doors open. Bags were unpacked from the kitchen worktop or table as participants found it uncomfortable bending down to bags on the floor. Furthermore, this enabled participants to unpack onto the worktop before moving products to their respective area. There were some instances of participants being short of space leading them to move items around in the cupboard of fridge and remove excess packaging to save space. Many participants had extra storage outside the space of the kitchen in their garage or elsewhere in the house. Shopping was folded neatly and put away until the next shopping trip.

Health and mobility

Eyesight, mobility and strength were the most prevalent of problems with the highest percentage of coding during analysis. It could also be said that they relate more to the shopping journey and were therefore more likely to be picked up by the interviewer, whereas hearing problems or cognitive issues may be more long-term or something that participants have accepted or even not noticed declining. All of these issues influenced the journey to and from the supermarket as well as the in-store shopping experience. Diminishing strength was a reason that participants prefer trolleys to baskets, because “I never used to bother with a trolley, I was so strong and macho I could carry two baskets in each hand, but I’ve got to accept the ageing process and I use a trolley. It was so much easier, silly to think you could do it all and carry the whole lot.” A trolley also helped with mobility, giving frail shoppers or those experiencing fatigue a support for walking.

Whilst some participants were particularly cautious, they also spoke about not knowing how they would feel on any one-day and the surprises their own body could throw at them. One participant lived in a wheelchair but she could sometimes stand on her feet. Problems arise however, if she pushes herself too far, “I've got an arthritic hip and an arthritic knee and I forget sometimes. I could try and stand up to get something off a shelf and I could just fall to the floor. You do it automatically though, you just see something up there and just do it.”

None of the participants had severe cognitive declines as they would not have been able to complete the weekly tasks, however, many described lapses in memory and there were some instances of confusion. Particularly problematic was one of the case study supermarkets that had two entrances. With doors at either end of the store, three participants got confused in trying to find the exit after their shop and failed to remember which end they had walked in.

**Conclusion and recommendations for further research**

Using a mixed method approach has generated a rich data set exploring not just older customers’ shopping experiences but also their lifestyles, wants and needs. As the population ages it is vital that retailers and policy makers understand these factors so that individuals can continue to live happy, independent lives for longer without putting undue strain on public services. Although shopping has been considered a social activity for older people, this research suggests that for many people aged 65+ shopping is a chore and a segmentation that has to be fit between their voluntary and family commitments. Perhaps for the oldest participants, or those living alone, it becomes more of an outing and form of exercise. However, the user-study collected in-depth data the sample was still relatively small and did not include the most frail or oldest old of senior shoppers due to the time commitment involved and nature of the tasks. Instead, it captured a range of issues that affect the shopping experience of senior shoppers, issues that may become more problematic as they age and become less able.

This study was the first of its kind to investigate the entire shopping journey of older customers and capture participant data over a sustained period of 6-8 weeks. More than 300 individual issues have been highlighted, many of these novel to the existing literature. The data collected provides in-depth information for academics, policy makers, retailers and designers in order to improve quality of life for older people and provide a more inclusive service.