

**It's in the Bag: A Qualitative Study
on Grocery Shopping Behaviors**

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EDU 5003 Research Methods

Assignment 4

Fall 2009

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It is overcast and humid late on a November Sunday afternoon on San Antonio's northeast side. Waiting drivers lurch at the first sight of back-up lights in the crowded grocery store parking lot. Shoppers rush in with lists of needs; shoppers rush out with bags of purchases. This same scene is likely being replicated all over the city, the state, or even the country at other grocery stores. Grocery shopping is familiar to most Americans, and over the last fifty years, marketers have studied this ritual to better understand buying behaviors in order to optimize the experience and increase sales. That study has included observing natural behaviors in shopping environments, but also investigating influences and behaviors that happen before, during, and after the shopping experience.

The purpose of this case study is to describe how the behaviors of three women shopping at San Antonio grocery stores compare with existing research about the buying behaviors of grocery shoppers in general. At this stage in the research, the shopping habits are defined as: shopping preparation activities; reasons behind store choice; and the influence of advertising, promotion, and coupons on shopping behaviors. The research was recorded through artifacts, observations, and interviews obtained and recorded on November 29, 2009.

Literature Review

Home interviews with shoppers formed the foundation of mid-20th Century research about grocery shopping behaviors (Schapker, 1966). While this data was valuable, it did not paint a complete picture because interviews revealed only what people *said*, not necessarily what they actually *did*. By the late 1960s, observational methods in qualitative research provided more varied sources of data, thereby increasing validity (McEwan & McEwan, 2003). One of the first observational studies was an analysis of 1,500 grocery store aisle-by-aisle observations, which when combined with interviews offered deeper insights into purchase influences and concern for

price (Wells & Lo Sciuto, 1967). That led to countless more observational studies, and a growing desire to study individual grocery shoppers while paying attention to environmental influences (Sheth, 1967).

Research has revealed that shopping preparation takes many forms, from making mental notes to creating physical ones. In fact, the latter practice is used by more than half of grocery shoppers (Rickard, 1995), and research suggests that lists prepared in the planning phase of shopping contribute to one quarter of purchases (Spiggle, 1987). Lists also successfully help shoppers make planned purchases of frequently bought items (Block & Morwitz, 1999) and may help reduce impulse purchases (Kollat & Willett, 1967). This shopping list research is significant, considering that on a typical shopping trip, the average consumer faces 30,000 to 40,000 items but buys just 18 (Narisetti, 1997).

Need for a certain product often determines where a consumer chooses to shop, but the research points out several other significant influences on store choice: proximity of the store (Fotheringham, 1988), price of individual products or prices at the store as a whole, assortment versus convenience (Briesch, Chintagunta, & Fox, 2009), the effectiveness of advertisements, and loyalty (Volle, 1999). These influences have been studied in isolation but not in combination, which could prove enlightening but would be an expensive endeavor.

Pre-existing working memory of price for frequently purchased items helps shoppers recognize a good deal while shopping (Vanhuele & Dréze, 2002) and influences purchases, but there are many more influences on shopper choices, not the least of which are advertising, coupons, sales, and promotions. For example, a research study by Blattberg et al (1995) concluded that sales advertisements increase the amount of store traffic for certain categories, and temporary price reductions produce a significant spike in sales. Once a shopper is in the

store, the number of unplanned purchases increases significantly when a shopper finds an unexpected in-store coupon (Heilman, Nakamoto, & Rao, 2002). Researchers speculate that these unanticipated monetary gains are spent more readily because they are seen as a windfall and elevate a shopper's mood. Then there is the issue of matching (buy one get one free) versus rebates. In an observational study, Davis & Milner (2005) found that customers prefer matching because the price of redeeming a rebate was not worth the savings offered.

Data Description

This qualitative study compares existing literature to the behaviors of three San Antonio women who shopped at a local grocery store to purchase items for a social gathering. All participants stated verbal consent to be observed and interviewed. They were instructed to prepare for the shopping trip as they normally would for any trip to the grocery, and were given one hour to complete the activity. Although the women occasionally ran into each other in the store, the intent was for each woman to shop and be observed separately so that the data could be compared for analysis and added to the larger body of research on grocery buying behaviors.

Because this study is confined to limited participants observed and interviewed at a given naturalistic site during a limited time period, it can be considered a case study (Creswell, 2007). Triangulated data collection (McEwan & McEwan, 2003) took the form of recorded observations of shopping behaviors at the local grocery store chain, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions (Anderson, 2004) after the shopping experience in the home of one of the participants, and analysis of documents, which included the receipts and actual store lists used by study participants.

Two of the three shoppers brought lists of items they planned to buy and consulted them as they shopped. Shopper 3 crossed out items as she purchased them, starting off with the dessert

section, making her way into the meats and produce, and walking the whole perimeter of the store before going down the aisles. Shopper 2 visually consulted her list but made no marks on it while in the store. She explained that she and her husband typically keep a running shopping list posted on the refrigerator at home. As she approached the produce aisle, she said, “My needs are basic. I write down the uncommon things I might forget.” Her route through the store was very deliberate based on her list, and she commented that she preferred labeled aisles to speed up the experience. “When I walk in here, I’m in charge of my experience,” she stated.

Shopper 1 was unfamiliar with the layout of the store. Her route through the store was circuitous and leisurely. She commented that since she had only recently learned what she was to purchase for the gathering and the list was short, she did not write out a physical shopping list. However, she did note that on typical grocery shopping trips, she shops with a very detailed list organized by category. “My husband makes a list of what we need, then I categorize it. When we’re shopping we finish each category before moving on,” she said.

While the choice of this particular store was predetermined for this study, each of the shoppers articulated store choices that illustrated preferences ranging from convenience to selection and price. Convenient location was the top priority mentioned by Shopper 1, who likes shopping at nearby stores that doesn't require driving. Shopper 3 said she prefers to shop at either Wal-mart or Target because they have a fair selection of items and good prices. For her regular shopping trips, Shopper 2 explained that she and her husband prefer to shop at wholesale clubs and buy in bulk. She explained that they fill other needs with trips to the supermarket, trying to avoid mega-store chains. She said:

We go to Costco every two weeks around payday. We go to HEB more often. ... I hate the new superstores. They take you through a gauntlet of cheap stuff made in China. I want products made locally. I try to buy local. I don't like it to take so long to get through the store to what I need.

While all the participants said they notice price, the observations and interviews demonstrated that price was not a top priority in making purchases at the grocery store during this particular experience. For all three shoppers, quality and brands with which they had experience had greater influence than coupons, discounts, or lower prices. Shopper 2 stated, “I’m willing to pay for quality. It’s important to me.” However, she did exclaim enthusiastically when she noticed that the soup she planned to buy was on sale. Later in the shopping trip, she said as she tried to match the coupon she brought with a display of dental floss, “I don’t usually use coupons.” When she found another brand that suited her needs, she left the unused coupon on the shelf, commenting that she does that so someone else can use it. “We’re all in this together,” she commented about shoppers and the shopping experience.

Shopper 3 described herself as “middle of the road” with respect to price, stating that she spends about \$100 a week on groceries. “Some people think that’s a lot for just me and my husband, but I don’t care,” she said. Shopper 1 commented that she buys things she likes, “not just because it’s on discount.” For her that means avoiding the risk of trying new brands. She added, “Even if a new brand is cheaper, we stick with what we know.”

After making their selections, all three shoppers paid for their groceries with debit or credit cards at the checkout. Shopper 3 used the self-checkout; Shoppers 1 and 2 used the regular lane.

Data Interpretation and Implications

The use of shopping lists in this study was in line with the existing research (Rickard, 1995). A comparison of lists and receipts from this study revealed that both study participants who used lists purchased almost every item written down (16 out of 17 items total written on the

two lists), which supports the findings of Block and Morwitz (1999) on the effectiveness of using external memory aids in shopping. However, the lists did not prevent impulse purchases, as two of the study participants who used lists made impulse purchases. While this finding conflicted with the findings of Kollat and Willett (1967), this study's sample was quite small and the shopping conditions were slightly different.

The effect of coupons and other promotional strategies has been well researched, however much of this research is out of date. Despite the prevalence of coupons in today's society and the fact of the economic downturn, none of the shoppers in this study expressed interest in coupons. Just one of the shoppers brought one single coupon to the store, and it was not used. In this study, the need for certain products, desire for quality, and reliance on brands with which they were familiar trumped the savings offered by coupons as purchasing influences. In this study, finding a particular brand on the shelf appeared to be more important than getting a coupon for a competing brand. If the price was lower, that was considered a bonus, not a priority. These findings may or may not be generalizable, as the sample in this study was quite small, and the participants' relatively higher socioeconomic status may have made them less likely to use coupons in general. To get a fuller picture of the influence of coupons and advertising, future studies should screen for a wider variety of socioeconomic levels in participants to analyze the possible differences among those levels.

A factor that should be considered with the findings of this study is the particular store where all three shoppers were observed. It was familiar to just one of the shoppers, so findings related to convenience may not be valid. Store choice was covered as a topic in interviews but not in observations since the store was pre-selected for the participants. To gain more credible data, researchers interested specifically in store choice as it relates to the grocery shopping

experience should observe shoppers in grocery stores or markets chosen by the participants, or ones with which the participants are most familiar. Other issues that may be investigated with further research are the quality of the products in the grocery store itself and the *combined* effect of the influences described in the existing research — proximity of the store (Fotheringham, 1988), price of individual products or prices at the store as a whole, assortment versus convenience (Briesch, Chintagunta, & Fox, 2009), the effectiveness of advertisements, and loyalty (Volle, 1999).

Other limitations of this study include the fact that the participants were women only, and the sample size was very small. To get a more detailed picture of the behaviors of all shoppers, future studies on this topic should include a representative sampling of both genders and a larger number of participants. The addition of more methods (such as surveys) and longer engagement in the field could also increase the credibility of future findings (Del Siegle, n.d.).

This study began with themed theories in the existing research, to which the gathered data was matched, a method that can be considered deductive coding (Anderson, 2004). The three original themes — shopping preparation, store choice, and the influence of advertising and coupons on shopping behaviors — grew to 28 themes after reviewing the interview transcripts, observation notes, and shopping list artifacts (see Appendix A). That coding, which served as the basis for our analysis, revealed that the most-often mentioned topic was a preference for shopping alone. All the shoppers in this study discussed at length that they would rather shop alone because it allows them to focus. Shopper 2's reasons were practical. "I talk too much when someone is here with me," she explained, "If I'm in my own head, I get done quicker." Shopper 1 relished the shopping-alone experience so that she could "take as much time as I want."

Shopper 3, who normally listens to her iPod while shopping, admitted feeling awkward shopping with others because “it feels like they are just tagging along.”

The fact that the most frequently mentioned topic was not identified in the existing research may indicate a need for future study. Based on this study of female shoppers, digging deeper into the value of shopping alone could lead grocery store marketers in San Antonio to their Holy Grail — optimized experiences that increase sales among women.

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Appendix A

Coding Key for themes

Code	Theme/Topic	# of times noted in interviews or observations
A	Foundational buying behavior	3
B-1	Shopping prep	7
B-2	Shopping prep – lists	9
C	Store choice	4
D	Coupons/Advertisements/Promotions/Specials/Sales	5
E	Price consideration	17
F-1	Shopping alone or with someone	8
F-2	Prefer shopping alone	46
G-1	Time consideration—prefer leisurely pace	4
G-2	Time consideration – get in and get out	3
H	Convenience consideration	4
I	Influence of impulse considerations and actual purchases	8
J	Brand choice/Product choice	24
K	Store ambience	8
L	Paying/Check-out line	11
M	Store displays	4
N	Store samples	4
O	Cognitive dissonance about choice or purchase	4
P	Frequency of shopping trips	5
Q	Store organization	4
R	Gender differences in shopping	4
S	Like/dislike grocery shopping	5
T	Control	5
U	Other influences (ex. kids)	2
V	Multi-tasking	1
W	Route through store	17
X	Demeanor	4
Y	Memorable shopping experiences from the past	11