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## Seniors and their food shopping behavior: an empirical analysis

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### Abstract

The focus of our research was to provide an empirical evidence for determining the behaviour and satisfaction of older customers during their food procurement process and to propose some recommendations to retail managers aiming at better consideration and meeting the expectations of the older people. Data collection involved two focus groups with older customers aged over 60 years. The findings from group interviews were supported by the results from a questionnaire distributed among 468 seniors. Both qualitative and quantitative results have indicated that age dimensions influence perceptions and behaviour related to store evaluation.

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### 1. Introduction

Seniors have been usually viewed as an unattractive market due to the perception that they had limited spending power and the image of old people being frail. However, this perception seems to be short-sighted, because not only will be this market growing for the near future, but new pensioners with higher income will come to the segment. To justify studying the seniors' age group, there are a number of factors that differentiate them from other segments. These factors depend on changes in health, lifestyle and psychographic characteristics resulting in specific marketplace needs.

The purchase behavior of older consumers differs somewhat from that of their younger counterparts. Many authors (Moschis, 2003; Pettigrew et al., 2005; Petterson, 2007) have specified such differences, which include: expecting personal attention and special services, considering shopping to be a social event, perceiving brand and

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retailer reputation, longer time in purchase decision-making, increased store loyalty, etc. Given the range of differences noted, retailers need to give them serious consideration and use them to differentiate their services to different consumer segments.

Satisfaction with an activity is a necessary precondition for repeat behavior (Nagyova et al., 2014). With regard to food retailing, consumers face an array of stores in which to shop and the level of choice that exists is immense. In order to guarantee satisfaction, consumers' wants and needs must first be recognized.

With advancing age seniors experience a decline in appetite, food intake and dietary adequacy (Hare et al., 2001) as well as a decreasing ability to taste and smell, chewing difficulties and limited dexterity. Food product developers and retailers should be aware of these changes and tailor their products and services to their customer needs.

Several areas of seniors' satisfaction with the shopping have been identified. Within the store environment, problems have been reported with the use of some facilities, such as large trolleys or large baskets. Also problems with reading price displays and labels on shelves were found to be important to satisfaction (Oates et al., 1996). Several studies found respondents had difficulties reaching high and low shelves and to use deep freezers (Leighton et al., 1996). Seniors suggested that in such cases they either did not purchase the item or had to find staff to help. Older consumers would like to have seats in stores when they feel tired or good lighting within the store.

Display of products has been found to be very important (Oates et al., 1996; Lumpkin et al., 1985). Changing displays of products around a store as a part of retailers' display policy has been frequently criticized by older consumers.

One aspect of dissatisfaction identified in numerous studies has been the service at check-outs (Goodwin & McElwee, 1999; Johnson-Hillery et al., 1997). Long queues at check-outs and overcrowding causes dissatisfaction in older consumers.

Products-related aspects are very important for older consumers (Moschis, 1991). One aspect which is frequently reported to be dissatisfying is the quantity in packaged food. The quantities of food normally packaged were reported as being too large for older people with smaller appetites, particularly when the food is bought for one person (Lumpkin, 1985). Price is also recognized as being decisive factor to older people, particularly for those with low incomes.

Finally, staff and service are important in ensuring satisfaction among older consumers (Johnson-Hillery et al., 1997). This is particularly relevant in availability of staff ready to help with locating products, information on products and advising (Goodwin & McElwee, 1999). Just as staff can bring satisfaction, it can also cause dissatisfaction when they are unfriendly and unhelpful.

Hence, there appears to be a broad range of factors influencing the satisfaction of older consumers when shopping for foods. These factors will be explored and recommendation presented to improve satisfaction level.

## **2. Methodology and goals**

Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were employed for the purpose of this study, whereby each played a distinct yet complementary role. Criteria for inclusion in the research were elderly people aged over 60 years, living independently and carrying out their household shopping. Participants for the research were recruited through senior clubs and age-specific organizations.

Qualitative data was initially obtained with the aim to focus the study and to construct the questionnaire. The data was collected using focus group interviews. Focus groups were used as they are particularly suited to the study of peoples' knowledge, attitudes and experiences. Two focus group interviews were held with 10 participants each, of both gender and aged 60+ years.

The purpose of the interviews was to identify the main food shopping issues experienced by older people and to find out whether or not they were satisfied by the current food retail service.

The focus group interviews were recorded and analyzed according to principles of content analysis, where substantive statements were identified from individual transcripts (Stewart et al., 2007).

The analysis was conducted in more stages. In step one, texts were presented as a whole, a so called naive reading. Statements were then made based on the impressions of and reflections about the wholeness and important elements in the text that had emerged during the naive reading. Then all parts of the text relating to the aim of the study were divided into meaning units that seemed to be similar. In next step the meaning units were coded. The

codes were critically discussed and a number of categories with subcategories emerged. Finally, all texts were re-read and compared with the outcome of the analysis to ensure that the categories covered the contents of the texts and codes. Three categories with twenty subcategories were identified based on the text analysis: food store accessibility (with subcategories: store location, store category), in-store environment (with subcategories: store size, store design, products display in shelves, product variety, trolleys and baskets, checking points, knowledgeable and professional staff, store assistance, regular advertising, sales promotion), product-related factors (with subcategories: quality of products, breadth of the product assortment, product size, product affordability, discounts and bargains, products packaging).

The qualitative research was supported by results from a questionnaire (n=468), which documents numerically the findings described in the focus groups. To explore the food shopping satisfaction, respondents were asked to evaluate 20 factors (subcategories) impacting on their food shopping satisfaction. Finally, factor analysis was used to reduce and identify the crucial factors determining seniors' satisfaction when shopping for foods.

Three principal goals are formulated in our paper: to identify the attributes with positive and negative impact upon food shopping experience in older customers segment during their food procurement process, to reveal the importance of factors determining food shopping satisfaction and to propose some recommendations for retail sector aiming at better consideration and meeting the expectations of the older people.

### **3. Results and discussion**

From the consumer focus groups, the shopping patterns of older consumers were revealed, areas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in food shopping recognized and explored later employing the data from questionnaire analysis. To determine the food shopping experience of seniors, three principle categories with 20 subcategories / attributes were generated into statements that respondents had to judge for satisfaction during their shopping.

#### *3.1. Store accessibility*

Nearly a quarter (22%) of adults aged 60 years and over have mobility difficulties and hence difficulties in shopping. For these people it can be difficult getting to a shop and carrying their shopping home. These mobility difficulties can influence a switch in loyalty between different types of store. Older people who find it difficult to travel to larger supermarkets, reported to prefer shops close to their place of living.

The choice of food store was based on a variety of reasons which included: price-level, close proximity to home, habit or routine and lack of choice. The reasons influencing store choice decisions were: lower prices (30%), habits and routine from the past (25%), proximity to place of living (24%), broad choice and variety of foods (13%), pleasant atmosphere (8%).

Unlike to our expectations, proximity to place of living, which is frequently cited in the literature to be a key attribute influencing store choice (Moschis et al., 2004), was not confirmed in our study as the most decisive factor. Consumer questionnaires revealed that 30% of respondents base their store choice decision on the price-level of foods purchased, 25% on habits and routine from the past and only 24% on the proximity to place of living, which may suggest that older consumers may be adapting to their difficulties.

Various retail categories were noted to be the place of shopping, including supermarkets, smaller food stores and independent retailers. More than one-third (38%) of the participants carry out their regular food shopping in supermarket, 30% use smaller food stores for their grocery shopping and 32% patronize independent retailers.

#### *3.2. In-store environment*

Older consumers face a range of in-store difficulties when shopping for food, particularly the narrow aisles, poor shelf signposting, shelves that are too high or low, a lack of adequate rest and toilet facilities, deep trolleys and freezers, that make it difficult to do shopping.

Nearly one quarter (23%) of seniors perceive the size of the supermarket to be a problem in their shopping, having a negative impact upon the food shopping satisfaction. Because of their restricted mobility it was hard for

them to walk around. In light of the difficulty with store size, it was not surprising that 35% of older people were unsatisfied with the provision of seating. It was stated: “There are no seats in the shops where you could rest a little”, or “A seat is a very important factor for anyone who cannot walk far”. These findings were confirmed in both focus groups: „After shopping I sometimes need to sit down for a minute or need to sort my bags out before carrying them home, but there are often not any / enough seats.“

Checkout queuing and long waiting times were highlighted as one of critical attributes for seniors: “Standing in the queue if there are so many waiting to be served is hard for me”. One of the serious problems reported was a lack of assistance: “I miss somebody to help me to pack my goods”, and “With somebody standing behind me, I feel guilty to be such slowly”. Crowded store and queues at the pay desk have a negative influence on the seniors’ shopping satisfaction.

Respondents expressed also difficulties with reaching high and low shelves and with the use of deep freezers. They suggested that in such cases they either did not purchase the item or had to find staff to help. One in six respondents experience the inability to reach goods and consider inappropriate shelf height to be the main in-store difficulty. It is illustrated in the following quotations: “Sometimes the goods tend to be too high”, or “I could not reach up to get the goods”, or “I cannot stoop down to the lower shelves, so someone has to do that for me”. Consequently, older people have no other possibility, but to ask others for assistance in accessing products when in-store.

The trolleys were seen both to be an aid which can be used by seniors as a support when they are in-store, but also a problem, when large and deep. This was verified in the following comments: “Trolleys give you balance when you are not able to walk”, or “I use the trolley to lean on it”, but also “I have problems at the checking point to get the goods from the deep trolley”. However, preference is given to trolleys (88%), not to baskets, because they are more convenient and of help for those with restricted mobility. Overall 88% of the respondents said they were satisfied with the trolleys.

Ease of finding products has been found to be very important (Oates et al., 1996; Lumpkin et al., 1985). Retailers often move displays of products around the store as a part of their display policy and such a practice has been criticized by older consumers as well as by younger consumers.

Product relocation caused confusion among older people and in some cases was named as a reason not to shop in supermarket stores: “We find it very confusing, if the item is one week here and the next week it is somewhere else”, or “You are running around the store, whereas in independent stores goods are in the same place and you know where to find it”. The importance of familiarity in store was used as a justification for continuing to shop in the same store and one in four seniors (25%) base their store choice decision on habit / routine. The following quotes illustrate this: “You know in smaller stores where everything is located, but when you go to a supermarket, you are lost”, or “They continually move the items from one to other shelves”). Hence the issue of product relocation has the possibility for either encouraging store patronage or losing a customer.

Over one-quarter of people aged 60 and over, and nearly half of everybody aged 75 and over live alone. The retail is however very much focused on the larger households. A particular example that causes much dissatisfaction among older people is the widespread use of buy-one-get-one-free offers (BOGOF) and similar multi-buy deals that offer discounts for buying in bulk. For those who either live alone or are not able to carry a lot, these offers have the opposite effect (Hughes et al., 2004). Older people expressed criticism that such BOGOF offers are impractical for them to purchase because they often are not able to consume greater quantity within the use-by-date. 75% of the questionnaire respondents believe multi-purchase promotions are not good value for them. The respondents claimed: “You have to throw it out, because we are not able to use it, it is a waste”.

Staff and service are crucial in ensuring satisfaction among older consumers (Johnson-Hillery et al., 1997). This is particularly relevant in availability of staff ready to help with locating products, information on products and advising (Goodwin & McElwee, 1999). However, staff can not only bring satisfaction, it can also cause dissatisfaction when they are unfriendly and unhelpful.

The retailer staff were reported with only 42% in a positive light. Staff was commented as not being polite and willing to help. The questionnaire data found that 26% of older people were satisfied with customer service and further 16% very satisfied. The retailers’ policy of taking the customer to the product when asked for assistance in-store was viewed favorably among older consumers. This is beneficial for retailers as poor service and unhelpful

staff can have an immediate negative effect on customers and decreases the likelihood of them becoming loyal to that store (Hayley and Lumbers, 2008).

A further negative aspect stressed in the focus groups was the impersonal service provided by staff in supermarkets. Older people do not experience in large stores the same approach they may have been used to when shopping in smaller local stores. In larger stores seniors reported having some difficulty in finding a member of staff who is willing to help them and bring them to the goods needed. Their experience with staff helpfulness varied. „Sometimes staff give directions to products, but it would be better if they could take me to them”. It was found in the focus groups that seniors in generally do not like to ask staff for help (40%).

### *3.3. Product-related factors*

Product-related aspects are very important for older consumers (Szmigin & Carrigan, 2001). Not only price, which is recognized as being important to older people (particularly for those with low income) plays an important role in food shopping perception. It has been found that older people perceive the price of foods to be high, which can be caused not only by their low pensions in Slovak Republic, but also by higher VAT tax-levels on foods in the country.

The majority of older consumers expressed satisfaction with the range and variety (92%) of product choice in store, stating: “They have everything I want and even more”, or “I can get everything I want”. Only 8% of research respondents reported they are not very satisfied with the range of food available in a store and 12% are not satisfied with the quality of food products.

One factor which was frequently identified to be dissatisfying is the quantity in packaged food. The quantities of food normally packaged were reported as being too large for older people with smaller appetites, particularly when the food is bought for one person. Respondents complained that food was often sold in portions too large for older people living on their own. As a result they often have to have the same food for three-four days in the row, to avoid wastage. This mainly related to fresh products such as meat, fruit and vegetables, but also to some tinned products. One respondent reported: “The size of the portions, in which the foods are sold, prevents me from buying some items”. If food products were available in smaller portion sizes, this would be of much help and greater use to 82% of older shoppers.

It was found that 62% of respondents read food labels and the information provided on food packaging. Because older people are usually more health-conscious, they obviously read the ingredients on the labels before buying. However, the small size on such labels and packaging caused problems for older people (66%) when food shopping, as they were too small to be legible. Many of them were frustrated by the fact that the ingredients were written in a very scientific language and it was difficult to recognize what the food actually contained.

Respondents commented that many of the use-by dates are printed too faint, or there was insufficient color contrast. Yoghurt and cream were cited as examples where there was poor color contrast on packaging, making people unsure whether they were still safe to eat.

Focus groups reported: “The instructions are so small, that I cannot see them at all”, or “I have to ask someone else in the store to read the information for me”, and „I would recommend that all food products state the ingredients of products clearly and put the content of fat, sugar and salt in the food in a large bold print”.

Many seniors indicate problems with food packaging, particularly with opening jars or tins. Most of the respondents (65%) confirmed they had problems opening packaging. Cans, vacuum sealed containers and cartons were all named as examples of products that are hard to open. Some also found ring-pulls difficult, despite the fact that these are aimed to make tins easier to open.

### *3.4. Factors critical in terms of their contribution towards the overall satisfaction*

Factor analysis was used to identify the attributes and the relevant factors that seem crucial for customer satisfaction. Factor analysis suggested three main factors, which were then used for rotation. An attribute loaded on a specific factor, when the loading was 0,3 or greater for that factor. Six items loaded on the first factor, three on the second and four on the third factor. Table1, Table 2 and Table 3 reveal attributes and corresponding factor loadings.

Table 1. Factor 1 and relevant attributes identified through factor analysis as crucial for customer satisfaction – Convenience of shopping

Attribute Code	Attributes relevant to Factor 1	Factor loadings
Convenience of shopping		
C1	Well organised store design/ layout	0,524
C2	Practical shelf layout	0,479
C3	Comfortable and clean trolleys	0,43
C4	Knowledgeable and professional staff	0,408
C5	Short queues at checking points	0,396
C6	Convenient store location	0,382
Percentage of variance (%)		23,41

Table 2. Factor 2 and relevant attributes identified through factor analysis as crucial for customer satisfaction – Value for money

Attribute Code	Attributes relevant to Factor 2	Factor loadings
Value for money		
C8	Fair price / cheaper products	0,691
C9	Frequent discounts /bargains in store	0,604
C10	Regular promotions / demonstrations	0,312
Percentage of variance (%)		18,05

Table 3. Factor 3 and relevant attributes identified through factor analysis as crucial for customer satisfaction – Product related attributes

Attribute Code	Attributes relevant to Factor 3	Factor loadings
Product related attributes		
C11	High quality products	0,511
C12	Freshness of products	0,502
C13	Practical packaging	0,311
C14	Large product variety	0,303
Percentage of variance (%)		13,02

Three groups of attributes were identified and named in terms of their distinct attributes. The first factor, convenience of shopping, contains 6 attributes that can be associated with comfortable shopping and minimum frustration; the second, indicating value for money, consists of three attributes that have relevance to the financial site of the shopping and communication of the value-for-money aspect. The third factor, product related attributes, contains four attributes related to various aspects of product offerings.

Instead of twenty partial attributes of customer satisfaction discussed earlier in the paper, only these three factors were identified as crucial in terms of satisfaction judgement. Both the first factors of customer satisfaction, namely shopping convenience and value for money make a significant contribution in terms of satisfaction.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper highlights the purchase behavior shopping satisfaction of older people during their food procurement process. Seniors face several positive and negative aspects in the food shopping. Through both quantitative and qualitative research the critical areas for improvements in seniors' food shopping satisfaction could be identified: lower ("fair") prices, larger print on food labels, shorter checkout queues, single unit promotions, smaller portion sizes, easy to open packaging.

The results of this research revealed also that older people consider the social element and experience of food shopping to be a positive factor. The social aspect of food shopping is very important to this age group and regular social interaction is recognized as a key element in maintaining both mental and physical well being as people age.

Price level has been cited as one of the most important reasons when older consumers make decisions regarding where to shop. Further important decisive factors have been habit and routine from the past, and proximity to the place of living.

The satisfaction of older people can be improved by the provision of adequate trolleys that provide support for those who need help due to mobility restrictions or due to the impact of advancing age. Staff can also enhance the shopping satisfaction by providing in-store assistance and friendly service.

One positive attribute experienced by the consumers in our study was the variety and choice of food products available for purchase when shopping food. The majority of older people (74%) are satisfied with the current range of food that exists. Satisfaction with product choice was very high.

Several in-store attributes impact negatively upon the food shopping satisfaction. The internal store environment has been identified as a key area for improvement when examining retail provision for older people. This outcome is supported also by the results of other studies (Hare, 2003).

The promotion of multi-purchase products is not beneficial for older people who live alone or in smaller households. Many customers complain they do not want two of the same item; just one. Despite this most supermarkets favor such special deals.

Product and pack sizes do not meet older consumers' needs, as they contain more food than is required and suitable for two-person households or for seniors who live alone. Current quantities are focused towards larger families, they do not meet the needs of older people. To improve the situation, food quantities should be smaller in terms of portion size and pack.

Product relocation also causes confusion among older people. Positive experiences arise if the store makes it easy for consumers to find the product they are looking for.

Shelf height, store size and food labelling have been identified as problem areas for older people when shopping for food.

Based on the factor analysis the research indicated three general factors, namely convenience of shopping, value for money and product related attributes to be crucial in terms of seniors' shopping satisfaction. Our findings demonstrate that there are still more areas for retailers to improve the service for the growing seniors population. As a consequence retail managers should respond to the needs of older people in altering shelf height, increasing in-store seating, informing customers of product relocation changes, minimizing the use of multi-purchase promotions, reducing the product and portion size of food and improving food labelling with increased font size and adequate color. It is in the interest of the retailers to resolve the negative factors and improve the positive experience.

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