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Timothy L. Schauer

University of Lynchburg, [schauer\\_tl@lynchburg.edu](mailto:schauer_tl@lynchburg.edu)

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# Understanding Millennials Regarding Online Versus In-Store Grocery Shopping Preferences

Dr. Timothy L. Schauer, University of Lynchburg,  
schauer\_tl@lynchburg.edu

**Abstract** - Grocery shopping has changed in significant ways over the last 150 years – all to allow customers to choose their own items (Strasser, 1989). Within the last decade, large U.S. supermarkets, like Kroger, Walmart, and Safeway have rolled out online stores (Perez, 2015). However, in 2017, when the Internet-based giant, Amazon, acquired Whole Foods and developed the Amazon Go concept store, the march toward online-only sales came into question. The purpose of this research is to attempt to understand the preferences associated with Millennials regarding online versus in-store grocery shopping preferences. This paper provides the following contributions. First, it extends research on grocery shopper preferences regarding online and in-store environments. Second, the findings provide a deeper understanding of an individual’s mindset currently utilizing online and in-store purchasing channels. Finally, it provides initial evidence on the relative importance of online and in-store characteristics.

**Keywords** - Millennials, Grocery, Online Shopping, In-Store Shopping, Retail

**Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners** - Grocers, who operate on tight margins, must increase their understanding for how to best appeal to shoppers to gain market share or simply to remain competitive. Millennials are an important customer segment so understanding why they prefer one shopping method over another may be helpful for future planning to best leverage or integrate particular shopping preferences into their overall marketing strategy. Educators can draw from the literature review to provide historical context to grocery retailing.

## Introduction

Understanding Millennials grocery shopping motivations of online and offline grocery shopping is the purpose of this study. Technology and a changing consumer behavior have given way to online grocery shopping. The customer often has the choice of picking up their grocery order at the physical store or, with certain retailers like Amazon and Walmart, having the items shipped directly to their homes. This style of grocery shopping has evolved from years ago when neighborhood grocery stores were the norm. In 1859, Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company (A&P), became the first grocery chain in America. By 1880 they had over 100 branches and changed the way grocers did business by offering fixed low prices (Turrow, 2017). A&P also offered advanced customer credit and free delivery like most of the other local grocers.

In 1916, the grocery industry experienced a new paradigm. The Memphis, Tennessee, Piggly Wiggly store, under the leadership of Clarence Saunders, changed

history. Saunders' had the idea to allow customers to pick out their own items, instead of having a clerk do so, and then pay at a central checkout area. The rationale behind this change was that if consumers could see and touch their own items, that they would buy more (Turrow, 2017). Before long, the physical layout of grocery stores was restructured. Service counters gave way to grocery aisles and shopping baskets (not yet with wheels) – all with the goal of allowing customers to choose their own items (Strasser, 1989). Manufacturers began marketing items directly to consumers, adopting campaigns and packaging that pointed consumers to the product inside the box or package. Manufacturer's also offered gifts and discounts for collecting proof of purchase from the product package (Turrow, 2017).

Another large disrupter shook the grocery industry in December of 2011. Amazon encouraged shoppers to install their price check app on their smartphones. To entice customers, on certain items, Amazon offered a 5% discount (up to \$5) if the customer purchased the scanned item from Amazon (Mandelbaum, 2011). This creative strategy propelled the use of the Amazon app resulting in Amazon sales. Today, online grocery shopping, although still quite small, is on the rise around the world with an annual growth rate of 14% over the last 5 years (Halzack, 2015). Large U.S. supermarkets, like Kroger, Walmart, and Safeway have rolled out online stores (Perez, 2015). However, in 2017, when the Internet-based giant, Amazon, acquired Whole Foods and developed the Amazon Go concept store, the march toward online only sales came into question. The new Amazon Go store allowed consumers to enter a physical store by scanning a code on their mobile device, pick up products, and leave without any checkout process. This shopping channel blurred the line between digital and physical spaces.

Past research regarding online shopper behavior has mainly focused on comparing purchasing data from offline and online retailers (Anesbury, Nenycz-Thiel, Dawes, & Kennedy, 2016). For example, Degeratu, Rangaswamy and Jianan (2000) examined the effects of a set of attributes related to choice in online and offline environments. The authors found that in some categories brand names are more important online than offline, and that price promotions have stronger effects online than in traditional brick and mortar supermarkets. These two-decade old findings may in part be based upon the relative recency of shopping channels. Another study conducted by Danaher, Wilson, and Davis (2003) examined matched samples of consumers; comparing the observed loyalty in each channel (online, in-store) with a baseline formed from the Dirichlet Model of repeat purchase. The study found that large brands enjoy higher loyalty online than small brands, while the effect was reversed for small brands (Anesbury, Nenycz-Thiel, Dawes, & Kennedy, 2016).

Andrews and Currim (2004) utilized the same data as Degeratu et al. (2000) and found online consumers have higher loyalty to brands than in-store purchasers, are less price sensitive and preferred buying larger pack sizes. A subsequent study of the same consumers, both online and offline, confirmed higher brand loyalty and higher loyalty to pack size and lower price sensitivity when purchasing online (Chu, Arce-Urriza, Cebollada-Calvo, & Chintagunta, 2010). In contrast, Dawes and Nenycz-Thiel (2014) found there was little difference in the loyalty levels between online and offline purchasing regardless of the brand and found that private labels enjoyed slightly higher market shares

online. After a review of grocery shopping modality, past research has identified some differences in purchasing data between online and in-store grocery shopping behavior.

Despite the growth and importance of online groceries, minimal research exists exploring why people shop online or in-store for groceries and how online shopping behavior compare with in-store shopping behavior. Grocery shopping dynamics changed even more in the Fall of 2019 when the novel SARS-CoC-2 coronavirus emerged in Wuhan, China (Scripps Research Institute, 2020). On December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019, spokespeople from China told the World Health Organization (WHO) of an outbreak of a novel strain of coronavirus causing severe illness (Ibid, 2020).

Shopper's behavior changed drastically and could potentially be affected long-term, in terms of why they choose to shop online or in-store, by differences in channel characteristics and the consumers understanding and appreciation of those characteristics. To blur the lines even more, discrepancy between asserted shopping motives and actual purchase behavior prevails in online grocery shopping. A majority of American consumers still express an overall hesitation to engage in online grocery shopping evidenced by less than 4% of all 2018 groceries were purchased online (Hartman Group, 2018). As online grocery shopping increases, traditional grocers may find further pressure in an already historically low margin industry where volume based upon loyalty and foot traffic is being threatened.

This paper provides the following contributions. First, it extends research on grocery shopper preferences regarding online and in-store environments. Second, the findings provide a deeper understanding into the mindset of individuals that are currently utilizing online and in-store purchasing channels. Finally, it provides initial evidence on the relative importance of online and in-store characteristics.

## **Literature Review**

Mertz (2013) posits that consumers and retailers realize benefit from online shopping. Consumers benefit through convenience of time, place and products and retailers have the advantage to be connected with customers at any time – not restricted by store hours. Past research, resulting in an abundant amount of literature, addresses the time-saving component of convenience and suggests that the online environment potentially reduces the amount of time required to shop. Morganosky and Cude (2000) were the first to look specifically at the reasons for U.S. consumers to shop for groceries online. Their survey of 243 respondents showed that convenience and time saved were the primary reasons for shopping online. Much of the existing convenience literature has explored the development of the multidimensional service convenience construct in a conventional, brick-and-mortar retailing environment (Clulow & Reimers, 2009; Fitch, 2004; Reimers & Clulow, 2009).

One such study by Bellman, Lohse, and Johnson (1999) was conducted in the early stages of online shopping. Time savings was an important element of shopping online, however, the study was not specific to grocery shopping and most grocers did not possess the infrastructure to be able to facilitate online purchasing. Later, Berry, Seiders, and Grewal (2002) posited that consumer perceptions of convenience are negatively influenced by their perceptions of the cognitive, physical, and emotional effort associated with the

shopping effort. A later study, conducted by Beauchamp and Ponder (2010), explored the convenience dimensions common to both online and offline shopping settings and examines the relative importance of each dimension from the perspectives of online and offline shoppers.

Researchers also point to save-able shopping lists and retailer site cookies as ways to make it easier for shoppers to find what they have previously purchased (Huang & Oppewal, 2006; Morganosky & Cude, 2000; Sorensen, 2009a). Huang and Oppewal (2006) found that in the United Kingdom consumers shopped online for the convenience and time savings realized over traditional grocery store shopping. The authors concluded that fifteen minutes difference in travel time to the grocery store had a greater impact on the relative preference to shop online or in-store than a delivery fee of £5.

Ramus and Nelson (2005), looked at shoppers in Denmark and the United Kingdom and discovered that in the minds of consumers online grocery shopping has advantages compared with conventional grocery shopping not only in terms of convenience, but also because of the breadth of products and lower pricing. Disadvantages included the risk of receiving inferior quality groceries and the loss of the recreational aspect of grocery shopping. Other hindrances to online grocery shopping include issues surrounding privacy and security (Maignan & Lukas, 1997; Miyazaki & Fernandez, 2001).

One study conducted in Malaysia suggests similar finds of time savings and convenience (Mohd Zaini, Ramli, Ghani, Samsudin, Hamid, Jusoff, Ngali, Rahmat, Khalid, & Musa, 2011). A more recent study from Hong Kong explored the five dimensions of online shopping: access, search, evaluation, transaction, and possession/post-purchase convenience and found convenience is a major reason why grocery shoppers choose online shopping (Jiang, Tanh, & Jun, 2013). In addition to identifying convenience as a major draw to online grocery shopping, recent findings identify better-quality products, and fresher produce as common benefits that consumers associate with online grocery shopping (Hartman Group, 2018). Sensory marketing offers potential explanations as previous research supports that sensory cues (e.g., brightness, softness, temperature) drive consumers' purchase decisions (e.g., Girard, Lichters, Sarstedt, & Biswas, 2019, Spence et al., 2014). Accordingly, consumers' innate need for touch can lower the appeal of online grocery shopping (Brasel & Gips, 2014, Yazdanparast & Spears, 2013).

According to Scott, Faris, and Bielinska (2019), German consumers welcome the flexibility of shopping online without time restrictions (especially on Sundays when stores generally remain closed due to retail law restrictions).

In spite of a great number of relevant studies, a search of the literature revealed few studies conducted within the U.S. that have examined specifically why consumers, particularly Millennials, shop online or in-store. As Millennials become a greater percentage of the grocery shopping population and as more retailers are entering the online shopping market with updated shopping software, shopper's motivations may be changing.

## **Methodology**

Following Moustakas (1994), I used an empirical phenomenological research approach to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and feelings relating to the central theme of

the online grocery and in-store grocery preferences of millennials. Fundamentally, this study attempts to understand millennial preferences related to the purchase of groceries online versus in-store. Core to the study is the age of the participant and their geographic location. This study includes 24 individuals born between 1980 and 1994 living in the mid-Atlantic section of the United States. Eighteen of the participants had children living at home. Participants were invited via social media platforms and potential research participants were vetted according to three qualifiers: (a) Participants had to be born between the years of 1980 and 1994, (b) must live in the U.S. on the east coast, and (c) have must have made some grocery purchases online and in-store. Each qualifying participant was interviewed and recorded so the researcher could later analyze and categorize data by theme.

Interviews were conducted using Zoom and digitally recorded and transcribed using NVivo 10 software before being analyzed for potential themes. Data collected through the interview was transcribed and reviewed line by line as soon as possible after the completion of the interview, and coded by themes using NVivo 10 software. The use of the NVivo 10 content management system aided in the organization of data storage making querying data more accurate and efficient (Hutchison, Johnston, & Breckon, 2010).

I followed the seven step method outlined by Moustakas (1994): (a) transcribing the interviews and listing relevant words and phrases to the qualitative phenomenological study; (b) coding relevant information; (c) grouping related themes; (d) checking consistency of participants' recorded information; (e) discovering and describing the meanings of experiences related from participants; (f) constructing a detailed written account of each participant's perspective notating common categories, patterns, and themes; and (g) constructing a written synthesis of the meanings of the experiences of the participants.

The following questions were used to gain insight into the experience and perceptions of Millennials.

Q1: Describe your typical online grocery shopping experience?

Q2: Are there items that you buy in one mode (online or in-store) that you would not buy in another?

Q3: In general, what differences come to mind when thinking about online grocery shopping and brick-and-mortar grocery shopping?

Q4: Online: What makes the grocery shopping experience enjoyable?

Q5: Online: What are the headaches?

Q6: In-store: What makes the grocery shopping experience enjoyable?

Q7: In-store: What are the headaches?

Q8: What are the factors that influence whether you shop at a store or online?

Q9: If you could speak to the companies that provide online grocery shopping, is there anything you might tell them that would be a good idea for them to know or implement?

## Findings

The findings from the research suggest six major themes. These include: (a) the value of convenience; (b) the ease of the online shopping process; (c) adherence to budget; (d) the annoyances of in-store shopping; (e) angst over out-of-stock items and last-minute list additions; and (f) the joy of seeing people and products in a grocery store.

### Theme # 1: The value of convenience

Berry, Seiders, and Grewel (2002) proposed that service convenience has two dimensions—time and effort. Consumers spend time and effort deciding on, accessing, transacting for, and benefiting from a service. Most participants mentioned the fact that shopping online is more convenient than shopping in-store and therefore, prefer to shop online. This finding supports Kumar and Kashypap's (2018) assertion that consumers' wish for convenience has grown, resulting in an increased desire to shop online. One participant specifically mentioned time and effort when they stated, "I can shop in my pajamas on my couch. Shopping takes a lot less time. I am all about convenience." Another participant stated, "If I remember that I need dog food, and I am at a red light, I'll order it because it is only a couple of clicks. My list is on my phone at all times."

This study revealed that 40% of the online orders were purchased through a smartphone. One participant that uses a smartphone pointed to the ordering process specifically stating, "The ordering process is so convenient. Everything that I order is saved in a favorite section. This feature allows me to conveniently reorder those items on my next order. The interface is super user friendly." Regarding these saved item lists, one participant shared in the above sentiment when they exclaimed, "The start list is a big deal!"

Another participant brought up the convenience of creating an online shopping list. They keep that list "going for a few days, check out tonight, and pick up tomorrow. Creating an ongoing list is convenient and is so much easier to remember." One participant who cares for her aging mother, simply said, "Online is definitely more convenient." A mother of three young children remarked, "I read the labels in a 360-degree view that lists the ingredients right on the screen."

These comments support the recent studies showing that convenience has a direct effect on purchasing trends (Jiang, Yang, Jun, 2013, Mpinganjira, 2015) and should be carefully considered by retailers as millennials' buying power increases and contributes to a greater percentage of grocery revenue.

### Theme # 2: The ease of the online shopping process

Overwhelmingly millennial participants felt that shopping online through retail grocers' proprietary online ordering platforms and through larger retailing websites such as Amazon, was far easier than purchasing through a traditional brick and mortar grocery retailer. Every participant mentioned purchasing food online was easier than purchasing in person. Respondent's feedback are consistent that online purchases are easier regardless of the retailer involved. In addition, 80% of the participants picked up their own groceries at the brick-and-mortar location as opposed to having the groceries delivered to their home.

In spite of this expended effort, time, and expense to pick up the groceries, every participant commented how much easier online ordering was as opposed to shopping in-store. One participant offered this comment, “If I know that I have a busy week ahead, then I just go ahead and order [it].”

Several participants with small children mentioned how online shopping is easier compared to “going around the grocery store with a toddler”. In fact, 20% of the participants only started to shop online after having their first child. One of the participants with a small child said it this way, “Ordering online is extremely easy. It is quick, painless, and I don’t have to argue with anybody.” Twenty-five percent of the participants stated that they like seeing product reviews from other shoppers and point out that this is a huge advantage to them that cannot be realized within the store. The easy ability to compare online prices was a commonly quoted benefit of online shopping.

### **Theme # 3: Adherence to budget**

Thirty percent of the study participants talked about the impact on their budget based on how they choose to shop – online or in-store. Those that mentioned budget were far more adamant about their decision to shop online. One millennial father said “When we used to shop in-store, we constantly ran over budget. Shopping online is much easier to stay within our budget.” Similarly, another participant declared, “Online shopping is much easier for me to stick to a budget. When I am at the grocery store, I have a list but I never stick to it.”

Several participants mentioned the reduction of impulse buying when they shop online and one participant quantified the savings of “10% by sticking to an online shopping list.” They went on to explain that, “Besides removing the temptation by going into the store, I get awesome coupons off of my online order.” One participant mentioned that through online shopping, “I buy a lot less junk and excess items that sit in my pantry.” Impulsive shopping extends beyond purchasing additional groceries for one participant who confessed, “If I go into a superstore, I will come out with blue rays or a comforter that I didn’t need.”

### **Theme # 4: The annoyances of in-store shopping**

A thorough understanding of participants’ preferences for online shopping is crucial to grocers as they seek to create value in an industry with low net profit margins averaging approximately 1.5% – 190th out of 215 industries in terms of net profit margin performance (Hemscott Americas, 2012).

Some of the criticism related to brick-and-mortar stores may be inherent with in-store shopping. However, other components may be addressed by grocers to minimize or eliminate in-store inconveniences and annoyances described by study participants. Many of these comments centered around the joys of not having to shop the grocery aisles with children. One participant explained it like this, “Online shopping saves me the hassle of having to pack up the children, unload them, wipe down the grocery cart, and then get into the store.”

One participant was clear that “people standing in the aisle” was the most annoying thing about shopping in a store and another mentioned that it is “a hassle maneuvering through lines during busy times.” One participant was particularly annoyed at the number



of unmanned cash registers, particularly if they had to stand in long lines. One millennial mother was clear about why she “hates to shop in a store.” She explains, “I hate all of it – the stress, the time, crying babies, way over budget, check-out lines, loading your own groceries, buggies rolling away, and then having to walk the buggy to the cart corral.” One participant brought up two additional in-store shopping annoyances – “In-store shopping is difficult for the elderly. Also, the deli may or may not be open.”

### **Theme # 5: Angst over out of stock items and last-minute list additions**

This theme emerged in a number of different ways by several participants. One participant pointed out that the grocery store will substitute with a higher priced brand name item if the private label item is out of stock, but expressed frustration regarding listed out-of-stock items that she “knows are in the store.” Several participants stated that although substitutes are offered for out-of-stock items, “You will only know what items are out of stock when they come to your car with your order. It sure would be nice to know before you get to the store when I may be able to change tonight’s menu.” Those participants also provided a common solution. One said, “If something were out of stock, a phone call letting us know would be helpful.” Another suggested adding an option to live chat regarding substitutes. “I may be willing to approve a non-organic strawberry option, for example, if organic strawberries are out-of-stock.”

Closely related to out-of-stock items are items that participants would like to add after they placed their order. In this case, the items did not get placed within the order. One participant described it like this, “I hate that I cannot add an item after the order is placed. You may have to go into the store for one thing and I’m not doing that. Oh darn, I forgot to buy taco seasoning and we’re having tacos for dinner tonight. Maybe someone could pick the items I forgot.” A similar sentiment was shared by this participant when they said, “I wish they would provide a grace period for a phone call after the order is placed. Often, I think of something on the way to pick up my order. I would be willing to pay an upcharge for this service.”

### **Theme # 6: The joy of seeing people and products in a grocery store**

The sixth theme centered on the social aspects of being in a social environment within the grocery store. One participant stated, “I love going to the store where I recognize people – friends and employees.” Another participant spoke of the, “... fun of bumping into people you know. There is a community component that is valuable, particularly after a year of Covid.” One participant focused on the stores employees when they stated, “Seeing employees and building relationships, for me, is fulfilling in some way.” Finally, one participant makes the grocery shopping trip a social event and revealed, “I enjoy making it a date. I shop and then go for lunch.”

Many participants do enjoy the in-store environment and expressed that sentiment. One participant was clear, “I enjoy grocery shopping... strolling, looking at labels, and I like the creative part of seeing something that I never thought of.” Another stated, “I like seeing different products and sales.” Yet another said it this way, “Things are neat and in their place.”

To some participants, shopping in-store provides additional value that online shopping cannot provide. One participant pointed out that by shopping online, the customer does lose an element of control. He supported that notion by stating, “When I shop online,

I may get bread that lasts the whole week or I may get bread that last for three days.” Another participant had concerns about product quality. They said, “I buy all my fruits and vegetables in the store. I tried to buy them online once and it was bad.” One solution provided was to provide shoppers quality assurance by implementing a quality verification program. On the other side of the continuum is this comment from a participant that is satisfied with the quality she has experienced through shopping online. She said, “I thought that I would be funny about meats, but I am not. If I am in the store, I look at the meat, pick it, check the dates. The shoppers are picking out excellent meat and eggs.”

## **Discussion**

These findings provide insights into the motivations of millennials for the benefit of grocers vying for market share and, in some cases, for their very survival. Millennials are the largest generation on record and make up one third of the current U.S. population (Gorczyca & Hartman, 2017). Therefore, understanding this generation’s grocery shopping preferences are of great importance. The current pandemic has forced many grocers to accommodate a changing shopper by offering, or improving, the online shopping experience. The pandemic has increased online shopping significantly. By 2025, we expect that 21.5% of shoppers will purchase their groceries online (Perrier, 2021). According to a May 2020 survey by Salesforce Research, due to the convenience and the positive experience during the stay-at-home orders, many customers will continue to buy items online even after the pandemic. However, improving the customer experience by providing a better way to deal with out-of-stock items and substitutions may increase customer satisfaction levels.

Overall, the findings suggest that online shopping benefits far outweigh in-store benefits. However, while online shopping may be gaining in popularity, in-store shopping still provides value for many people – almost 90% that still shop in-store (Perrier, 2021). Reducing some of the addressable annoyances related to in-store shopping, could be useful. For example, could checkout lines be managed more effectively?

No matter which method shoppers use to order and receive their groceries, it would behoove grocers to listen and learn so they can provide greater value to their customers. Creating a new hybrid shopping version could also be possible. Could online shopping adopt a social component? Could the online experience include an automatic price comparison? Would the in-store shopping experience be elevated if the checkout process were modified or eliminated from how it is currently being handled?

## **Conclusion**

Grocery retailers need to gain a deeper understanding of their markets to better connect with their customers. Current retail conditions, particularly in light of the recent pandemic shutdown, may provide opportunities for retailers to examine their brands in terms of brand promise, brand message, and brand attributes. The primary research limitation is that the majority of the research comes from participants. Respondents are limited to those who have the time and inclination to participate in the study (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Additional research limitations include the lack of access to the data large

grocery retailers that possess the infrastructure to offer complex online ecommerce systems. Obtaining data from these corporations could have offered a more comprehensive examination of the backend processes required to execute an efficient online shopping modality.

Future research could examine millennials' motivations and preferences against other generational cohorts to determine how much variation, if any, exists. This will allow retail grocers to better understand and align their purpose, mission, vision, and strategic plans to better serve their various stakeholders.

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## **Author Information**

Dr. Timothy L. Schauer earned his D.B.A. in Marketing from Walden University and is an Associate Professor of Marketing at University of Lynchburg.