Do Older Consumers Change the Marketplace?: Investigating the Person-Environment Relationship in Food Shopping

Robert Zniva, WU Vienna
Eva Lienbacher, WU Vienna
Peter Schnedlitz, WU Vienna

The study at hand sheds light on the discrepancy between the needs of the elderly as proposed by recent research and the performance of stores tailored to this needs. Using a case study design we show that an older customer base demands adaptions in environmental functions of maintenance and support.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1017944/volumes/v42/NA-42

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Do Older Consumers Change the Marketplace?:
Investigating the Person–Environment Relationship in Food Shopping

Robert Zniva, WU Vienna, Austria
Eva Lienbacher, WU Vienna, Austria
Peter Schnedlitz, WU Vienna, Austria

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Due to the increasing relevance of senior consumers, food retailers in particular must be aware of the trends, needs, and wants of older consumers to secure this increasing share of retail expenditure over the next several decades (Myers and Lumbers 2008). There is consensus within the gerontological literature that personal and environmental resources contribute to aging well and living a good life (Lawton 1983; Wahl and Weisman 2003). Consequently, store concepts for senior supermarkets based on previous marketing-related research efforts (see e.g., Angell et al. 2012; Hare 2003; Mason and Bearden 1979; Moschis, Curasi, and Bellenger 2004; Pettigrew, Mizerski, and Donovan 2005) represent an attempt to improve elderly food shoppers’ quality of life. However, in the marketplace very few food shopping concepts cater successfully to the needs of the elderly.

The aim of the study at hand is to shed light on the discrepancy between the needs of the elderly, as proposed by recent research efforts, and the performance of stores tailored to the needs of the elderly in practice. Therefore, we investigate the person–environment relationship (Wahl and Weisman 2003) in food retailing from the perspective of environmental gerontology. In this context an environment has three basic functions—namely, maintenance, stimulation, and support (Lawton 1983). Maintenance represents the role of constancy and predictability of an environment. Stimulation describes the power of the environment to activate and influence behavior. Support is the environment’s potential to compensate lost competencies. According to the concept of social–physical place over time (SPOT) developed by Wahl and Lang (2003) environmental functions of maintenance and support increase when people get older, and conversely, the environmental function of stimulation decreases. However, the concept has been used hitherto predominantly to investigate housing and has not been introduced in marketing research so far. The project at hand closes this research gap and investigates the “naturally” occurring interrelationship between aging consumers and the retailing environment by answering the following research question:

RQ: How does a chronologically old customer base influence the functions of a food-retailing environment?

We implemented an exploratory multiple-case study design to answer this question. The main phenomenon under investigation is the food shopping experience of elderly customers and the context in which the investigation is situated are different chronologically old social environments (U.S. college town (n=25); U.S. retirement community (n=20), metropolitan area in central Europe (n=24)). As a chronological age threshold, to separate young consumers from old consumers, the age of 55 years was chosen. Data was collected using focused interviews with consumers (n=69) on the three sites of the study. As a research technique within the focused interview, a sequential incident technique (SIT)—a variation of the critical incident technique (CIT)—was used. The interviews were audio-recorded and shortly after transcribed for further content analysis. Following the procedural recommendations of Gremler (2004), we applied a structuring content analysis approach defined by Mayring (2004) to analyze the data. After a first screening of the interviews, a coding guide was developed according to the aim of the study. The retail marketing mix instruments and external environmental forces influencing retailing as defined by Dunne and Lusch (2008) were chosen as a theoretical fundament for the categorization. The final coding guide consisted of two dimensions. First, the type of incident was defined by coding the incident as negative or positive. In a second step, the retailing dimension of the incident was assessed using a coding guide with seven primary categories. To assess the intercoder reliability, we used the coefficient of agreement. With a coefficient of agreement of .99 (positive/negative) and .86 (retailing dimensions) the judge’s coding decision can be interpreted as reliable.

All interviewed respondents in the United States and Europe (n = 69) mentioned a total of 698 incidents. More than half of these incidents were positive experiences (57.1%), whereas 42.9% can be seen as negative events. Looking at the two investigated age groups, the majority of positive incidents were stated by the elderly, independent of the region or site of the study, showing a general, more positive connotation of older consumers in experiencing the retailing environment. Comparing the distribution of positive and negative incidents in the main retailing mix categories, no substantial differences between the investigated groups of the retirement community and the college town can be noticed. A closer look at the associated sub-categories shows that qualitative discrepancies in the experience of assortment, customer service, and layout do exist. More specifically, consumers in the retirement community report positive incidents with smaller package sizes, no changes in arrangements of products and shelves, and competent baggers. Older consumers in the college town report the opposite. These differences are even more prevalent when comparing the experience of the investigated elderly in the retirement town in the United States and the metropolitan area in Europe.

Based on these results we conclude that besides all the factors of dissatisfaction of the elderly customers revealed by previous research, factors that are strongly associated with the environmental functions of support and maintenance in assortment (product sizes), layout (stable arrangement of products and shelves), and customer service (especially at the check-out) can be seen as valuable for elderly customers. This falls in line with the SPOT approach in environmental gerontology. According to the approach, the importance of the environmental functions of maintenance and support increase with age. The importance of stimulation decreases. The result can also be seen as an explanation for the aforementioned questionable success of senior supermarkets. Store concepts dedicated to the needs of older consumers may overshoot this goal by conducting too many adaptions in too many retail dimensions. This overload in adaptions can be seen as a negative age segmentation cue by older customers and may be the reason behind the questionable success of these stores.

REFERENCES


