Shoppers’ childhood last names influence their unplanned shopping. Two studies show that female grocery shoppers with last names deeper into the alphabet report lower number of planned items for the next trip, have larger in-store slack for unplanned purchases, spend more time in the store, and purchase more unplanned items.

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The Last One on Roll Call, the Last One to Leave the Store: The Last Name Effect and Unplanned Shopping

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

One of every two products shoppers buy is not at all planned before entering the store (POPAI 2012, 2014). The extant literature examining the determinants of shoppers’ unplanned purchases has predominantly focused on contextual factors such as store knowledge (Park et al. 1989) and exposure to in-store stimuli (Heilman et al. 2002). In the present research, we examine the link between unplanned grocery shopping and a novel, non-situational social factor, namely shoppers’ childhood last names.

Individuals’ childhood last names can affect their purchase and consumption behavior (Carlson and Conrad 2011). This is because people’s childhood and adulthood experiences pertaining to waiting and getting ready for different tasks at school and college are in part determined by their last name initials. Specifically, as a result of the alphabetical ordering system used in various settings, those with last names deeper into the alphabet typically do not need to get prepared immediately for an activity (e.g., Southgate 1966). Their names come towards the end of roll calls at schools, they are the last ones to leave the class as they sit in the back and wait for others to leave, they are asked to report to such events as orientations and team try-outs at a later time than others, and they get up on the stage towards the end of the graduation ceremony. This difference in individuals’ getting ready behavior developed at early ages through alphabetical ordering may manifest itself as delayed decision-making in other settings including planning for shopping. We argue that the later the one’s childhood last name in the alphabet, the lower the degree of pre-shopping planning (i.e., the higher the rate of in-store decision-making) and thus, the greater the amount of unplanned purchases. Our prediction is rooted in the social learning theory, which posits that people tend to acquire behavioral patterns through direct experience at early ages (Bandura and Walters 1963; Bandura 1977).

We operationalize the information on shoppers’ childhood last name initials in two ways. First, we convert last name initials into their numerical equivalents (i.e., A = 1, B = 2 . . . Z = 26) and take the log of the corresponding value. Second, we categorize all the last names starting with the first seven letters of the alphabet (i.e., A-G) as early alphabet last names and those starting with the last seven letters of the alphabet (i.e., T-Z) as late alphabet last names. The remaining last names are classified as middle alphabet last names. We obtain consistent results using both the numerical and categorical last name variables.

The results from two studies using large samples of female grocery shoppers lend support for our thesis. In study 1, we asked online survey participants to list the items they plan on buying during their next grocery shopping trip. We find that after controlling for typical shopping basket size, shoppers with childhood last name initials later in the alphabet report significantly less planned items for the next trip than those with childhood last name initials earlier in the alphabet. That is, the deeper the one’s childhood last name in the alphabet, the lower the degree of pre-shopping planning. In study 2, we utilize actual shopping data and find that unmarried, but not married (who are most likely to be last name changers), shoppers with late versus early alphabet last names report greater in-store slack for unplanned purchases, spend longer time in the store, and purchase more unplanned items in the current trip. These results are robust to controlling for a number of shopper characteristics including income, age, education, and race, as well as several shopping trip characteristics. An ancillary analysis of shopper spending reveals that after controlling for total number of purchases, late alphabet last name shoppers actually spend less money on overall purchases than early alphabet last name shoppers. This suggests that making more purchase decisions at the point of purchase does not hurt but rather benefits the pocketbook of late alphabet last name shoppers. These shoppers presumably defer their shopping decision-making in an opportunistic manner (Bucklin and Lattin 1991), which may enable them to identify better deals.

Alphabetical ordering of individuals, which is a commonly observed practice at US schools and colleges, represents a subtle but apparently influential social force. Our findings contribute mainly to two streams of research. First, we extend prior research on in-store decision-making by documenting a subtle, non-contextual social factor on consumers’ unplanned purchase decisions. Given that there is limited research on the impact of out-of-store factors on shoppers’ unplanned grocery purchases (Bell et al. 2011), our study offers important theoretical and practical implications. Second, we contribute to the nascent literature on “last name effect” in consumer behavior, which focuses on consumers’ response to limited-time offers (Carlson and Conrad 2011). Our research further the field’s understanding of the last name effect by examining consumers’ planning and purchase decisions as well as by utilizing a typical shopping setting.

REFERENCES


