

Let's Go Shopping Together: Supermarkets as Intergenerational Contact Zones

For many families, supermarket shopping is an intergenerational experience. The Intergenerational Contact Zone (ICZ) dimension of supermarkets can be enhanced through onsite cooking activities, family celebration events, and family food conversation hubs.

Introduction

Shopping at supermarkets has become an experience common for people living in urban settings, where very few could maintain self-sustenance such as through farming and cattle raising in their own backyard possible for those living in rural, farm settings. The growing presence and importance of supermarkets in the lives of an individual has led to the development of focus studies on supermarkets, such as supermarket psychology (Harrison, 2008) which entails studying consumer behavior in supermarkets and its impact on supermarket design which in turn affects and influences the process of shopping.

While supermarket psychology tends to provide detailed analysis on how consumers may be affected by the layout and positioning of products, it has ignored the likelihood that consumers of different generations may gain different experiences and challenges when shopping at supermarkets. In the recent years, with the advent of an aging population and considerations for creating "age-friendly environments" especially in developed societies, there is a heightened awareness of age-friendly concepts in retail stores and supermarkets (Clark, 2007; Sim, 2008; and Thang, 2010).

Taking the age-friendliness concept a step further, in this paper, we would like to consider the age-integration potential of supermarkets. More specifically, we draw upon a series of structured observations and interviews conducted by the second to fifth authors as part of their capstone project (College of Alice and Peter Tan, within the National University of Singapore) aimed at studying the potential of supermarkets in Singapore to function as effective *Intergenerational Contact Zones (ICZ)*.

Questions that helped guide our exploration include:

- How can the young and older consumers complement each other in their strengths when frequenting a supermarket?
- How can supermarkets better function as spaces where social connectedness is potentially strengthened as the young and the old go shopping together?

Results from our observations and interviews suggest that more needs to be done not only in terms of ensuring an age-friendly environment for older consumers, but also for improving the shopping experience for multigenerational families. Our study has led us to consider the potential for modifying spaces within supermarkets to further enhance and support family conversations and cooperation in making food purchases.

Supermarkets in Singapore

As an urbanized country where a total population of 5.53 million is packed onto a mere 719.1 sq. km of land size, a density of 7697 persons per sq. km means that supermarkets as provision of daily food and household needs are also an increasingly ubiquitous presence dotting the island. The supermarket retail industry in Singapore is dominated by four main companies, namely NTUC Fairprice, Sheng Siong, Cold Storage and Giant Hypermarket. In our interest to understand how age-friendly local supermarkets are in Singapore, which is fast becoming an aged society, we have chosen to conduct fieldwork in 4 NTUC Fairprice supermarkets in various locations.



Supermarkets as Intergenerational Contact Zones

During fieldwork at the supermarkets, we observed differences between weekdays and weekends. During the weekends, supermarkets tend to be frequented more multi-generational members of families. This is expected as most adult children would be working and grandchildren would be at school during weekdays. On weekdays, it was noted that most older people who came to shop purchase not as many items so that they can manage to carry them back on their own. They tend to leave the purchase of bulkier items to the weekends when they are accompanied by their younger family members. When both old and young shop together during the weekends, their family members also assist them with the reading of labels that may be too small or written in English which some older people may not understand. In Singapore, where it is common for older people living at home to be cared for by younger foreign stay-in domestic helpers, it is also not uncommon to observe that they are accompanied by their helpers who assist significantly in their purchases.

The form of intergenerational interaction has been observed to vary according to sectional location in the supermarket. At the fresh produce zone, older customers have shown to be more proactive, offering more useful advice to the young who accompanied them. For example, they were able to show their experience with advice on how to choose the freshest products and what are some of the important characteristics to look out for in fresh products. On the other hand, the young are much more confident than some older persons in navigating parts of the supermarkets which sell packaged products such as snacks and drinks.

Below are some excerpts from fieldnotes by one of the authors conducted around 4pm at a supermarket during a weekday, showing the intergenerational interaction and different functions of mutual support between the old and young. With the norm for working couples in Singapore, it is not uncommon for grandparents to be taking care of grandchildren during the weekdays, hence the instances of a grandmother doing shopping with her granddaughter here.

"I saw a young girl (around 12 years old) with an elderly woman who was presumably her grandmother (in her 60s). The girl was wearing her school uniform so she could be shopping with her grandmother after school. The girl helped to push their own home's trolley for her grandmother throughout and seemed to enjoy pushing it. Sometimes, they will be looking at different products. For example, on one occasion, the grandmother was looking at shampoos while the girl was looking at the Nutella jam. The grandmother told her granddaughter that she could not see the words on the shampoo and did not know how to look and differentiate between the shampoo brands. The girl explained to her grandmother which products are shampoo or hair softeners. At one point, the grandmother said she has made a blunder last time and bought the wrong brand after hearing the girl's description.

At the dishwasher section, the auntie [a term commonly used to refer to older woman as a show of respect in Singapore] asked if the products are on offer. The girl helped to check the prices and together they discussed how many products they should buy. They made a few suggestions to each other on the products to buy. For example, the auntie asked if they need to buy mineral water and the girl said they can buy apple cordial/ juice. The grandmother usually asked generic questions like how much the products cost, and whether the things being bought are good or nice to eat and drink. Some of the more specific advice given includes teaching the girl to look out for the expiry date of products and telling her that they can buy more of them if the expiry date is far into the future. After they are done shopping at the second level, the girl offered to help calculate the total price of all the goods chosen. She looked at the products in the trolley and ran back to the shelves from which they were taken to check the prices and calculate them on her phone. The girl continued to be helpful even at the cashier, helping to place the bags of goods into their house trolley as the grandmother made payment." (From fieldnotes: Oct. 5, 2015, 1535 to 1610)

Examples such as the fieldnote observations above help illustrate the potential of supermarket to function as ICZs (intergenerational contact zones). Certainly, going shopping with the young helps improve the experience of shopping and solve challenges of inconvenience faced by older persons - such as carrying heavy shopping merchandise, reading labels with small letters on the packaging and so on. However, there are constraints in shopping together with the young, such as difficulty fitting in with each other's time schedules, particularly when they don't live together or close to each other. The increasing norm for older people to live separately from their children may reduce the opportunity to shop together.

Promoting ICZ in Supermarkets

Although we have seen that the opportunity for the young and old to shop together as a family justifies consideration of the supermarket as a distinct ICZ, we are encouraged to explore ways to modify certain spaces within the overall supermarket setting to elicit additional intergenerational interaction, learning, and cooperation centered around food and family bonding. We can also envision ways to move beyond generating familial groupings to extra-familial encounters. In the following we suggest several ideas that could serve to bring the generations together and enhance exchanges promoting supermarkets as ICZ for both families and communities:

1. **In situ cooking studio:** Older persons in the community could offer cooking lessons inside the supermarket with readily available ingredients. Intergenerational interaction can be promoted with classes especially for children and young adults, to

be taught and supervised by older adults.

2. **Intergenerational Day (period):** This could be a fun-filled day offering a range of intergenerational activities, promotion specials which bundle items that traditionally appeal to generation-specific groups of shoppers, special discounts for intergenerational pairs, etc.
3. **Age-friendly and generations-friendly design in supermarkets:** An age-friendly supermarkets would contribute to easier access by older persons and enable more opportunities for shopping alone or together with younger family members. Instead of trying to enhance the generations-friendliness for the entire space, pockets of generations-friendly zone spaces could be created within the supermarket, such as rest spaces with benches for older persons and mothers with babies and stations where merchandize popular for both the old and young are placed side by side.
4. **Food conversation hubs:** Strategically placed mini-clusters of benches, chairs, and small tables could serve to extend family conversations about which foods to purchase and how to prepare them. Family food conversation cues, with questions such as "Is it healthier to fry or bake?" printed on the tables and signage, could help stimulate such conversations. Seating areas might also be designed to provide families with access to online family-play games with nutrition education themes.

Since there are many aspects of food purchasing and preparation that have a family component, supermarket-based interventions that facilitate family learning and cooperation around matters related to food could have a positive ripple effect on family eating practices and overall health.

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Authors

Leng Leng THANG, William Henry TASLIM, Zheng Hao TAN, Zi Heng WONG, Li Wee HONG National University of Singapore (College of Alice and Peter Tan (CAPT) Capstone project team on "Promoting age-friendly supermarkets")

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