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Edited by: Ms Daniela Spanjaard, Dr Sara Denize and Dr Neeru Sharma  
School of Marketing, University of Western Sydney

Contact: ANZMAC  
Web site: <http://www.anzmac.org/>

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# **Why Happy Shoppers Don't Stop and Think**

**Daniela Spanjaard, University of Western Sydney**  
**Lynne Freeman, University of Technology, Sydney**  
**Louise Young, University of Western Sydney**

## **Abstract**

This paper discusses findings from observational research of grocery shopping. Videographic analysis via qualitative research techniques reveals that consumers who display less emotion tend to be more positive about the experience and have shorter shopping visits. Whereas those who display distinct emotional responses tend to reveal negative reactions and result in taking longer to make a decision. Four categories of consumer decision behaviour for grocery products are suggested as a result of this research and as a discussion point for further investigations into this specific topic.

## **Introduction**

There are many reasons why grocery shoppers don't stop and think during their shopping trip. It may be the actions of their restless off-spring, work demands and even the popular 'time poor' profile. However our research suggests that there is more to it than this. Prior work in this area of why consumers choose particular brands has focused mostly on the external surrounds impacting the consumer's emotional state and how marketers can manipulate these (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982, Sherman, Mathur and Smith, 1997, Fiore and Kin, 2007) in order to increase the likelihood of a positive experience (eg; in-store music, product range etc). This research takes this perspective one step further and challenges the notion that decision making is mostly a cognitive process and instead investigates how the consumer interacts with their brand from the consumers' perspective and not the marketers.

## **Methodology**

Whilst it can't be discounted that a shopper is genuinely in a hurry, our findings propose that it can also be partly because the 'in-store situation' is meeting their emotional needs. We don't mean just the previously mentioned background music, the in-store demonstrations or the quality of the staff. Instead, we used videographic techniques to go beyond these factors and observed the behaviour of our informants doing a grocery shop within a naturalistic environment. This involved the researcher using a small hand held camera to capture the data at a store familiar to the informant. Prior consent to access the store was given by supermarket.

The observer also remained a comfortable distance from the informant so as not to feel intrusive to any 'personal space'. After the informants' initial self-consciousness, their attention quickly focused on fulfilling their shopping requirements rather than the presence of a camera. To further confirm that normal shopping behaviour was being observed, informants provided up to six weeks of previous shopping receipts, which confirmed their normal brand repertoire via a visual inspection of each of these receipts.

The informants were aware of the general purpose of the research but not told specifically it was with reference to the emotive aspects of grocery shopping. This was regarded as the best option because to introduce the concept of emotional inputs into a routine activity may encourage the informant to 'show emotion' whether consciously or unconsciously. They

were also notified that the researcher would not be involved in making their brand decisions nor asking any questions about their selection until after their shop had been completed. Videoing began the moment the informant entered the grocery aisle. This was because the emphasis of the research is on the relationship between the consumer and the brand (Datta, 2003, Blackston 1993, Pimentel and Reynolds, 2004, Hess and Story, 2005). The video camera was kept on for the entire shopping trip to capture the point at which the consumer undertook searching behaviour, especially in relation to their surroundings at the time. Given that past research has suggested consumer emotions can be influenced by in-store atmospherics (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982), it was important to consider the consumers' movements prior to brand selection and just after this. Videoing finished once the informant began to make their way to the checkout registers. To assess emotional content of brand choice, various theories of emotions were utilized to develop an emotion recognition framework (Mehrabian and Russell, 1972, Putchik, 1980, Frijda, 1986.). The framework was based on identifying central (and less ambiguous) emotions and the way that they were expressed. According to Blum (1998) there are five universal expressions of emotion – happiness, sadness, anger, surprise and fear. This perspective is similar to that of Plutchik (1980) and Izard (1991) who believe that there are a small number of core emotions from which all other emotions are derived.

It should also be noted, that this observational research was only one aspect of a larger study on the same topic using a variety of different research methodologies (not included here).

### **Analysis process**

Each video tape was viewed multiple times both by the initial observer and by another researcher. Both researchers noted the following during the viewing of the video - 1) The stance of the informant during product selection; 2) The number of products visually inspected versus the number of products picked up; 3) When products were physically inspected, for how long and what was inspected (eg: label information, shelf tickets,); 4) Of those products that did undergo a physical inspection, how many products were returned to the shelf versus how many were put in the shopping trolley; 5) The number of times an inspection was made (visual or physical) but no product was selected

Throughout all of these aspects, body attitude in terms of posture, hand gestures, head movements (Lee & Marshall, 1998), facial expression (ie: smiles, yawning, frowning, grimacing) and eye movements (Lee & Marshall, 1998 Reeve, 2005) were noted. These behavioural groupings were chosen because they tend to be non-culturally specific (Plutchik, 2001) and are a common human reflection of emotion (Reeve, 2005).

The review of video observation showed a total of 342 product selections made from 12 different shopping trips. Comparison of the characteristics of these product selections showed considerable behavioural consistency in that the informants displayed a similar range of body language, and facial expressions during the shop. The duration of each product selection timed from the point when the consumer undertook seeking behaviour (monitored by their eyes specifically searching the shelves) and finished when the informant left that specific product category after a selection (or non selection) had been made.

### **Findings**

Due to the mainly qualitative nature of this research, a complex statistical analysis of the results cannot be included here. This part of the research study captured the number of

products inspected and the length of time taken to do this but did not extend beyond these two variables. Visual displays of emotion were considered within brand selection episodes. These are defined as commencing when the informant either slowed down or stopped at a certain aisle section of the supermarket, and their eyes were noticeably seeking out a product. The selection episode was considered completed once the informant moved away from the section and began further product-seeking activity for another item. This was based on the practices of previous studies. For example, Kendall and Fenwick (1979) report that brand selection in supermarkets can take as little as eight seconds through to thirty-eight seconds. Diagram 1.0 interconnects displayed informant emotion as an outcome of this analysis, which further contributed to the definition of four distinct behavioural segments. These segments were characterized by the amount of emotional display and its corresponding opposite – lack of emotion (indifference).

“Emotive displays” are those occasions where the informant physically exhibited a type of emotion be that via facial expressions, head movements, and/or posture. “Indifference” is the lack of attention paid to the brands available. That is, if there is “high indifference” the informant did not take time to compare brands on the shelf, and simply chose a single product before moving onto the next section of the store.

**Diagram 1.0** *Variations in emotional intensity during shopping visit*

<b>Segment Label</b>	<b>% of Observations</b>	<b>Average Time taken to select product</b>	<b>Emotional Display</b>
<i>Habitual</i>	40.9	6.8 secs	No or Minimal emotive display
<i>Confirmatory</i>	28.9	14.9secs	Low emotive display, high indifference
<i>Verification</i>	18.1	24.1 secs	Moderate Emotive displays, moderate indifference
<i>Hesitation</i>	12.1	48.5 secs	High Emotive displays, low indifference

(n=342)

These categories will be further explained in the following sections.

### **Segment 1: Habitual Decision Behaviour**

The behaviour in the “habitual” segment is characterized by the brand being located and picked up immediately, with very little emotion revealed. This behavioural display was the most common with many selections (n=141) showing little or no emotional conduct by the informant. The time taken to select the brand was short (average time taken =6.8 secs) and in many cases, the informant immediately moved to the next section in which to purchase, ignoring any further investigation of the shelves.

The presence of emotion was minimal in this instance – there were no (or very minor) changes to both facial expression, and body language, thus the behaviour observed seems to be habitual (Assael, 1981). Behaviourally, it appears the product has been bought before, and no comparison or reference to promotion is needed, or desired. Subsequent depth interviews confirm this is a possible reason for the observed behaviour but also indicate other reasons for these habitual-appearing episodes. Habitual buying also emerges when there is low involvement with the product category (Ehrenberg, 1991) and brands are seen to be similar in nature and there is high familiarity and consistency in what is bought (i.e. no deliberation

needed by the informant). The following comment is a typical example of informants' characterizations of their habitual selections.

*“It’s more to do with the shape of the pasta rather than the brand, so long as the right ingredients are there, it doesn’t bother me which brand I choose”*

It is possible that when it comes to scrutinizing consumer actions, emotive ties are not immediately observable, and that a quick decision may either be a lack of interest in the category or alternatively familiarity with their chosen brand needing no comparative actions.

## **Segment 2: Confirmatory Decision Behaviour**

Segment Two contains behavioural episodes characterized by a brand being picked up quickly whilst visually scanning competitive brands on the shelf. Twenty nine percent of brand selections (n=99) were of this type. The time taken to select a brand was brief although longer in duration than ‘habitual’ purchasing (average time =14.9 secs compared to 6.8 secs). Product comparison was short and didn’t include physical assessment of products occurring during actual product choice.

This action of selecting a brand quickly but then also scanning the shelves suggests that the informant was ‘confirming’ that their choice of brand was the best one for them. An example of this behaviour is seen in Photo 1.0 where an informant has already selected her brand of milk (in her hand at the bottom of the image), but her head is still directed towards the milk section. Whilst emotional displays were not immediately obvious for these kinds of brand selections, careful video review uncovered subtle non-verbal actions. This included small facial expressions (eg: eyebrows raised), shoulders held back, and a larger distance between the informant and the shelves - as if to give the informant a wide view of all the available products. Overall, emotional expression appeared to be mostly of a positive nature (eg: absence of frowning, no visual consternation, uncrossed arms). Again, a typical example explaining this behaviour is noted in the comment below:

Photo 1.0



*“I buy the same things again and again, but what I do is I always look at the other things on offer as a re-affirmation that what I’m buying is the best for me and my family”*

It is suggested that the informants have pre-made a decision on their preferred brand be that based on their own ideals (Sherman, Mathur and Smith, 1997). However, for some reason they are inclined to continue to review competitive options at the same time – even if just to confirm that the decision they made is the right one. There is still potential to understand why shoppers sometimes feel obliged to further affirm their decision given that even though a visual comparison is made, the brand initially selected remains their final choice.

## **Segment Three: Verification Decision Behaviour**

Segment three contains behavioural episodes characterized by a branded item being picked up. Eighteen percent of brand selections (n=62) followed this form of conduct. The time taken to choose the brands in this segment was longer than both the previous two (average time=26.6 sec). The amount of non-verbal cues increased for this activity, as it was often

accompanied by not only holding the product but moving it from hand to hand, touching their hair/face, putting the product in the trolley and even taking it out again, all whilst still reviewing other products on the shelf.



Photo 2.0

Although only one brand was actually picked up in the physical comparison, there was definitely greater visual judgment compared to that seen in the previous segment - especially when one or more products appeared to be of a similar nature. Whereas in prior segments, behaviour appeared to be confirmatory, this group's action appeared to reveal less confidence in the final choice. This was reflected by the increased time to make the choice, and even when a brand was selected; it remained in the informants' hand whilst they continued to survey the shelves instead of it being put directly into the trolley. The woman in Photo 2.0 has selected a brand by placing her hand on the product and picking it up, however her eyes are directed towards alternative offerings. It appears that she seeks to 'verify' her initial decision. Post-shopping depth interviews suggested reasons behind this form of behaviour :

*“Rather than go straight to it, I like to do a comparison so that I can still say that what I choose, will be the best”*

Emotional displays for this group were either moderately positive (eg: quick nod of head) or moderately negative (eg: touching their face, puzzled expression). The key emotional indicator is the total amount of time spent and the fact that even though a choice was made relatively quickly, considerable time was spent reviewing the shelf. There were several occasions when the informants even backtracked to the same section for another visual corroboration about their choice although they had already made a selection and left the category, but none of them actually changed their selected product.

#### **Segment Four: Hesitation Decision Behaviour:**

Segment four's behaviour included shoppers picking up a product and examining it closely. This often included reading the label, checking the price visually, and then picking up one or more similar products for closer comparison. This segment displayed the longest time to compare the different product options (an average of 51.3 secs) but with less frequency than other behavioural sequences - only twelve percent of total product selections (n=40).

An example of this behaviour can be seen in Photo 3.0. Both women here (who were unknown to each other) are touching their faces as they search the food wrap section. From their body language, both women seem concerned about which brand to choose and are taking their time to make this choice.



Photo 3.0

Reviewing other similar situations across the videos disclosed that even if all products were placed back on the shelf and nothing was chosen for purchase, there were strong physical indicators of emotion present. Those observed exhibited not only visual and physical comparisons but they touched their hair, wrung their hands, frowned, crossed their arms, rubbed their face and on occasion put their hands on their hips as a display of frustration and annoyance. Post purchase depth interviews revealed the presence of such emotion:

*“What a dilemma! Normally I just buy Homebrand sandwich bags – they’re just sandwich bags, I don’t really care which brand I buy because I’m going to throw them out anyway – but today there wasn’t any left on the shelf... today, I couldn’t find them... I was like ‘what else do I buy?..... I really had to look, it was extremely frustrating...”*

The discussion with the informants about this behaviour reveals a substantial degree of uncertainty (or hesitation) on their part, often because they didn’t appear to have enough information or experience to make a quick decision. “Hesitation” decision behaviour is unique to this segment because the product searching tends to be for specific brands that the informants feel strongly about and are unable to locate it at the time of shop. This results in more negative emotions being displayed as shoppers are then forced to make a decision to buy an inferior brand (in their eyes) or go without.

### **Conclusion**

Adopting a multidimensional approach to the analysis of the videographic data collected gave us a deeper understanding of the role that emotions play within routine shopping encounters. The four segments identified not only confirmed the importance of habitual purchasing in the supermarket, they further illustrated the importance of emotions in understanding in store behaviour. It appears that the fast shopper isn’t necessarily the time poor or the efficient shopper rather their time in store may well be indicative of a happy shopper whose emotional needs are being met on a deeper level than previous research would suggest. Conversely, the shopper who takes their time and appears to make considered judgments may not have time to spare or be a canny shopper rather it is more that their needs, both emotional and physical are not being met by the in-store situation. Although only one area of a larger project has been discussed here, our research challenges the view that emotions have only a minimal role to play in explaining the routine purchase behaviours observed in supermarkets.

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