

CHOICE AND PATRONAGE: A STUDY OF RETAIL CONSUMERS IN ZIMBABWE

Mlambo Sephath

Department of Retail & Logistics Management, Midlands State University, Zimbabwe.

Marufu Barbra

Department of Retail & Logistics Management, Midlands State University, Zimbabwe.

ABSTRACT

This research focused on one specific consumer group of lecturer at Midlands State University in the city of Gweru in central Zimbabwe in order to investigate their shopping choice and patronage behaviour for a restricted range of basic commodities and foodstuffs. The research also sought to gain some insight the levels of awareness of environmental issues among an elite segment of Zimbabwean consumers. It also sought to find out how demographic characteristics [age, gender, income, marital status, and education and household size] influence patronage and shopping behaviour. A positivist perspective was adopted. Data was collected on aspects of shopping behaviour and relationships patterns and regularities were described as evidenced by the data gathered. A survey was carried out to answer 'what', 'who' 'where' 'how much' or 'how many' to understand the grocery shopping behaviour of the lecturers. Questionnaires were used to collect standardized data from the population in an economical way. Such data allowed for comparison and analysis using descriptive statistics. The research found out that the targeted group has exhibit a greater concern and awareness of health and the environment. The research also found out that shoppers are attracted by low competitive prices, staff attitude towards customers, ambiance, quality of products, variety and parking space.

KEYWORDS: Consumer Behaviour.
Patronage. Retail consumers. Zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumer behaviour is the process whereby people make purchasing choices at individual or household levels especially decisions about what to buy and where to buy. The study of consumer behaviour thus helps us "to understand the changes of consumption practices and shopping habits" [Amine and Lazzaoui, 2011:566]. It is concerned with both the process itself and the factors that affect that process. Further, consumer decision making can often be undertaken even subconsciously. Berman and Evans [2010:205] add that in some cases even "well educated consumers may consult many information sources before making a decision". This study focuses on a consumer segment consisting of lecturers at a state university in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe and especially their choice and patronage patterns over basic grocery goods.

Levy *et al.* [2012:91/2] identified three types of decision situations that consumers face:

- 1) Extended problem solving which involves considerable investment in time and effort analysing alternatives especially in cases involving risk and uncertainty or where an expensive product is bought. In such cases consumers must seek additional information from friends, family or experts or other sources.
- 2) Limited problem solving such as occurs when consumers have prior knowledge and experience with a product/service.
- 3) With habitual decision making, little effort and time is involved. This type of

decision making is used when the product is not important or it is very familiar. In such cases opportunity exists for repeat patronage and consumer loyalty.

Berman and Evans [2010] and Bajaj [2010] also describe consumer choice in similar terms. The food and grocery items covered in this study constitute basic necessities consumed on a daily basis. They thus fall mostly in the third and mainly habitual or routine category due to the frequency and regularity of purchases of these products.

Within any society, retail consumers are a heterogeneous group. Everywhere consumer shopping behaviour is a dynamic process where some of the major driving forces include demographic, socio-economic and lifestyle trends [Ferne, Fernie and Moore, 2003:18]. Writing about retailing in the UK these authors identified the following emerging consumer behaviour patterns:

- They are more demanding, fickle, better informed and more sophisticated,
- They have less time for shopping,
- They are more mobile,
- They exhibit a greater concern and awareness of the environment.

This research focused on one specific consumer group in the city of Gweru in central Zimbabwe in order to investigate their shopping choice and patronage behaviour for a restricted range of basic commodities and foodstuffs. The city of Gweru had a population of 157 800 inhabitants at the last census [2012] for which there are published statistics [ZIMSTAT, 2014]. For the basic commodities covered in this research [namely food items], the range of shopping outlets in Gweru is somewhat limited. Except for one franchise grocery store opened in 2011 under the international SPAR brand and Pick n Pay which opened in October 2014 after data collection for this study had been completed, all other grocery outlets are Zimbabwean retail chains. They include one of the largest grocery outlets in Zimbabwe [OK Zimbabwe] with branches in all major urban areas and towns. There are also some 3 or 4 substantial regional grocery outlets. Smaller neighbourhood shops abound in the residential areas to meet immediate daily needs for consumer basics in the form of proximity retailing [Ferne, Fernie

and More, 2003:27]. As Amine and Lazzaoui [2011:572] have said, small neighbourhood grocery stores [including informal flea market outlets] have their strength in their closeness and geographic density enabling consumers to buy frequently in small quantities.

Writing about the impact of modern food retailing systems in Morocco, Amine and Lazzaoui [2011] highlight that, in all emerging countries, modern retail formats bring to the fore new patterns of consumption and shopping. Zimbabwe does not have the significant invasion by foreign multinational retailers that the researchers focused in Morocco. Moreover, Zimbabwe is emerging from a period of economic hardships, shortages of retail goods and hyperinflation that came to an end with the collapse of the Zimbabwean dollar and its replacement by the US dollar and other currencies in early 2009. Although the severe hardships have lessened, income levels are still very low. "An average Zimbabwean is earning about US\$8.50 daily and spending around US\$12.25 daily" [zbc.co.zw, accessed 16/10/12 5.05 pm]. This same source estimated the national consumer basket to be \$535; for urban areas such as Gweru the basket was estimated at \$1 012. However another source gave the consumer basket for a family of five at \$455.41 in Zimbabwe's largest city Harare and at \$476.15 for the second largest city, Bulawayo [odettejohnrobertson.blogspot.com]. In a study of branding in Zimbabwe, Chikweche and Fletcher [2011] refer to such markets as base of pyramid [BOP]. The researchers include in this group of economies countries where a large body of consumers have annual incomes of less than \$1 500 or those who live on less than a dollar a day. Such countries are characterised by "policy and natural induced risks" such as social conflict, political instability and economic mismanagement [Chikweche and Fletcher, 2011: 253].

Whereas the socio-economic group of consumers in this study are outside the income limits of BOP used by Chikweche and Fletcher [2011], it may be argued however, that the overall conditions of uncertainty which form part of the researchers' definition of BOP were true of Zimbabwe at the time of our study as well. Although the study population had incomes above the poverty datum lines [PDL] indicated above, nevertheless the macro-economic conditions they lived under fall under BOP for the majority of consumers. For the BOP Zimbabwean consumers, Chikweche and Fletcher [2011:254] claimed that "78% of

expenditure...was on food and personal hygiene items". In these conditions buying food or personal hygiene products was however not routine or habitual activity but an important decision of major consequence for them. For such consumers at the bottom of the pyramid [BOP], clearly the concept of "value for money" has special meaning and significance as Prasad and Aryasri [2011:69] have asserted in their study of retail format choices for food and grocery in India. Further, the Gweru consumers covered in this Zimbabwean study might be expected to place emphasis on "value for time" as well. Levy & Weitz [2012:325] have also observed that during difficult economic times, cash strapped wage earning consumers may exhibit a tendency to make the largest purchases at the time they get paid thus operating a "paycheck cycle" because the respondents in the study are paid on a monthly basis. Consumer patronage may also manifest itself through cross-shopping behaviour whereby consumers use more than one retail format for similar or identical commodities or they visit multiple outlets on one shopping trip. In this study, participants were asked to respond on their use of formal and informal retail outlets such as vegetable markets to ascertain levels of cross-shopping behaviour.

Prasad and Aryasri [2011] listed a number of studies that suggested that demographic and psychographic characteristics influence shopping behaviour. Indeed their own research showed significant association between demographics [age gender, occupation, income and family size] and retail format choices and patronage. They concluded that "consumer's socio-economic, demographic and geographic characteristics have significant association with the choice of retail format" [Prasad and Aryasri, 2011:81]. Whereas this Zimbabwean study of retail consumption did not cover psychographic factors, a number of socio-demographic variables were explored in order to understand consumer behaviour for the chosen consumer group as a prelude to more comprehensive retail market segmentation within grocery and food retailing. Prasad and Aryasri [2011] acknowledged that pure demographic factors alone cannot identify the complete characteristics of an evolutionary retail market because consumers in the same demographic group may have very different psychographic make-up. However this study, which is in the nature of an exploratory inquiry, has attempted to link demographic factors with socio-

economic factors [e.g. income and level of education]. Martinez & Montaner [2008] also reviewed literature to show that socio-demographic variables are an imperfect and inconclusive factor in consumer behaviour. However, household size had closer alignment with store brand choice. "We have verified that, as occurs in other countries, the psychographic rather than the socio-demographic profile of the consumer better explains store brand proneness" [488/9]. Carpenter [2008] also reviewed literature in relation to supercentre shoppers suggesting that at least in the United States, demographic characteristics [age, gender, income, marital status, and education and household size] and patronage influence shopping behaviour.

One of the choices retail consumers make concerns the quality and source of goods purchased. In 2011, the 'Buy Zimbabwe' campaign was launched "to promote the production and consumption of local goods and services in the face of an influx of foreign alternatives" [www.buyzimbabwe.org.zw/ - accessed 31 /10/12; 5:45pm]. The initiative estimated that perhaps the shopping baskets of a majority of Zimbabwean consumers contain 80-90% foreign goods. Earlier that year the Zimbabwe Minister of Finance in his Mid Year Fiscal Policy Review had estimated that about 70% of the food retail shelf space was stocked with imports [Paragraph 438, page 123].

One of the aims of this research was also to ascertain the levels of ethnocentrism among a relatively enlightened group of consumers when faced by choices between locally produced goods and foreign imports. Klein, Ettenson and Krishanan [2006:305] described consumer ethnocentrism as an embodiment of judgements concerning the quality of domestic and foreign goods. They suggested that in developing and/or transition economies there is no clarity about how ethnocentrism manifests itself and that consumers perhaps trade-off nationalism and product quality: "the construct of ethnocentrism extends to transitional economies where consumers generally prefer foreign goods" [316]. Results of this research should show some indication of the trade-off respondents in this study may be forced to make.

Another choice issue that aligns with an educated consumer group such as covered in this study is environmentally responsible intention and shopping behaviour [Follows and

Jobber, 2000]. The researchers however caution that, on this matter, consumers exercise a trade-off between the environmental and individual consequences of the shopping choices. As far as green purchase behaviour is concerned, Akehurst, Afonso and Goncalves [2012] have chronicled a progressive increase in environmental awareness by consumers worldwide and that this has had an impact on consumer behaviour. This research sought to gain some insight of the levels of awareness of environmental issues among an elite segment of Zimbabwean consumers. Akehurst, Afonso and Goncalves [2012:975] define a green consumer as “one who associates the act of purchasing or consuming products with the possibility of acting in accordance with environmental preservation”. Such consumers would avoid products which are risky to health or harmful to the environment during production, use or final disposal, have excessive packaging or contain ingredients from threatened habitats or species. They however warn that there is often an “attitude-behaviour-gap” or a “values-action-gap” [Akehurst, Afonso and Goncalves [2012:977]. Thus intention does not necessarily translate into green purchasing behaviour. The initial expectation in this study was for a high level of environmental consciousness and awareness.

In the light of the literature reviewed above, the following research questions were adopted:

- To inquire into the choices consumers make and to describe and analyse the emerging patterns over grocery shopping behaviour.
- To identify the relationships between demographic variables and consumer choice.
- To create a platform for understanding consumer dynamics for a particular consumer group and thus provide opportunities for further research.

METHODOLOGY

De Vaus [2006] has argued that all research seeks to meet two fundamental goals namely to describe what is going on and to seek to provide a platform to explain why it is going on. In so doing research is able to contribute knowledge about the shape and nature of society. Good descriptive research must aim to be the prelude to answering ‘why’ questions. This study is in the nature of a case study which Yin [2009:18]

has defined as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context. Gray [2009:247] also says that a case study explores subjects and issues where relationships may be ambiguous or uncertain.

This study adopted a positivist perspective. Data was collected on aspects of shopping behaviour and relationships, patterns and regularities as evidenced by the data gathered. Saunders *et al.* [2012:135] said that in such studies emphasis will be on quantifiable observations that lend themselves to statistical analysis. “Quantitative research examines relationships between variables, which are measured numerically and analysed using a range of techniques” [Saunders, 2012:162]. A survey of consumers [university lecturers at Midlands State University in Gweru, in central Zimbabwe] was conducted using a questionnaire instrument consisting largely of closed questions or short completion items. Although to a degree exploratory, this study assumed both a descriptive and an explanatory dimension. This allowed the researchers to profile the consumers and their purchasing choices and patronage as a stepping stone towards explaining the revealed positions.

Midlands State University is one of a dozen universities in Zimbabwe. University lecturers are by no means typical of grocery consumers in Zimbabwe. The researchers felt however that they constitute a significant segment of an emergent group of consumers in Zimbabwe following the economic hardships that ended with the collapse of the Zimbabwe dollar and the adoption of a multi-currency regime in which the US dollar dominates. University lecturers are also the cream of Zimbabwe’s educated elite. The proportion of Zimbabwe’s population with post-secondary education is 2% for adult women and 4% for men [ZIMSTAT, 2007:11]. These figures had risen to 5% and 7% respectively five years later [ZIMSTAT, 2012:29/30] reflecting the growing importance of this group of consumers. Overall, Zimbabwe’s literacy rate, at 91%, is the highest in Africa [*theafricaneconomist.com*]. Though few in numerical terms, the educated probably command disproportionate clout in the marketplace.

Saunders *et al.* [2012:176/7] explain that surveys are frequently used to answer ‘what’, ‘who’ ‘where’ ‘how much’ or ‘how many’ types of questions. Questionnaires are commonly used

to collect standardised data from a population in an economical way. Such data allows for comparison and analysis to be done using descriptive and inferential statistics. Questionnaires were distributed and collected by one of the researchers through Chairpersons of teaching departments. In total, 58 questionnaires were returned out of 100 distributed to selected departments from each of the 6 faculties in the university. The 58 responses were analysed using Excel to reveal frequencies and patterns.

Research Results and Discussion

The results of this research are based on 58 lecturers who responded to a questionnaire administered by the researchers out of a sample of 100 drawn from 12 departments across all seven faculties at the Midlands State University in Zimbabwe. The university is located in the city of Gweru [population 158 000 - ZIMSTAT, 2014]. Some 72% of the respondents were male and while the remainder were female. Since the sample consisted of university lecturers, the majority held masters degrees or higher. Out of those who responded 86% were married and 57% stated that their spouses were also employed. Those two-breadwinner households were therefore in a slight majority. It is also pertinent that 27% enjoyed non-salary income as well. Respondents were relatively youthful with some 91% of them aged 50 years and below. Indeed nearly 30% of them were 30 years or younger. The average household size was 4.1; a figure rather lower than the national average of 4.5 [ZIMSTAT, 2014]. A large majority [70%] supported school-going children some of them at colleges and universities.

The majority from this lecturer group have combined household incomes above \$2 000 per month. Perhaps a clearer indication of the socio-economic standing of the group can be summarised in the following statistics: 62% own a house in Gweru; 91% drive a car; they have fridges and freezers and as befits the job and literacy levels of the group, 98% have a computer or laptop.

From this sample, the research findings indicated that the vast majority [save for only one respondent in fact] do the bulk of their grocery shopping after they get paid. The odd one out conducted grocery shopping weekly. The patronage preference of the majority may be linked to the situation that respondents [being lecturers at Midlands State University]

are paid on a monthly basis. Respondents also pointed out that they do their grocery shopping in town with 98% expressing this view. This might be due to the variance in prices whereby stores in residential areas charge rather more than the bigger supermarkets in town.

Respondents were asked about buying patterns for fruits and vegetables. It was interesting to note that the principal sources of vegetables for this group were the vegetable market and own gardens: no one said they relied on the supermarket. Most respondents also bought their vegetables weekly rather than daily. In the case of fruits, respondents were asked how often they bought from a vegetable market. The trend was decidedly against the supermarket [only 7%]. Indeed 28% said that the vegetable market was their source for fruit “always”.

Another choice issue that aligns with an educated consumer group such as is covered in this study is environmentally responsible intention and shopping behaviour as well as green purchase behaviour. This research thus sought to gain some insight into the levels of awareness of environmental issues among an elite segment of Zimbabwean consumers. This goes in line with the definition by Akehurst, Afonso and Goncalves [2012] that a green consumer is one who associates the act of purchasing and/or consuming products with the possibility of acting in accordance with environmental preservation. Thus in some markets consumers avoid products which are risky to health or harmful to the environment during production and consumption and show preference for recyclable packaging.

In the light of the high levels of education in this university lecturer group, views on whether shoppers check for expiry dates on products were sought. Over 95% of respondents stated that they check for the expiry dates of the grocery items “some of the time” or “always”. Only 5% stated that they never check for the expiry dates at all. Products popularly subjected to this scrutiny include canned and dairy products. Most respondents go further to check for product information with 48% of the respondents sometimes checking for product information and 32% always doing so when buying grocery. Only 20% never checked for product information when buying. Respondents indicated that they do this for perishable products ranging from fruit juices and soft drinks to tinned and processed foods and cereals generally.

Another aim of this research was to ascertain the levels of ethnocentrism among a relatively enlightened group of consumers [university lecturers] when faced with choices between locally produced goods and foreign imports. Klein, Ettenson and Krishanan [2006:305] described consumer ethnocentrism as an embodiment of judgements concerning the quality of domestic compared to foreign goods. The researchers found that country of origin was of concern to some of the shoppers in this sample group: 25% stated that they always checked for the country of origin while some 13% checked sometimes. The majority [63%] however, never checked for the country of origin when shopping for grocery. This may be due to the fact that the shoppers were aware of the fact that about 70% of the grocery products sold in Zimbabwe are imported. The Zimbabwe Minister of Finance in his Mid Year Fiscal Policy Review of 2012 had estimated that about 70% of the food retail shelf space is stocked with imports. Perhaps then, little purpose is served by checking for such information. Klein, Ettenson and Krishanan [2006:305] suggested that in developing and/or transition economies there is no clarity about how ethnocentrism manifests itself and that consumers perhaps trade-off nationalism and product quality.

Most respondents [89%] buy grocery items like bread, milk, dairy products drink and vegetables daily while the rest indicated that they buy them weekly. Shoppers indicated that low or competitive prices, staff attitude towards customers, store ambiance and quality of products, variety and parking space were some of the store qualities that drew them to patronize specific supermarkets.

The household is an important unit of consumption. Indeed a number of questions made specific mention of household though no definition was provided. Half of respondents lived in households of 4 people or fewer. Indeed the research average was 4.1 which is still lower than the national average of 4.5 Some 86% of respondents were married and more than half had spouses who were also employed and 15% had some other member of the household in employment. This boosted household incomes: thus most households had combined incomes at the highest level for this study [over \$ 2000 per month]. In any case, incomes for all respondents are over the \$1 000 mark. Some 30% of respondents had incomes further boosted by non-salary elements [the research did not seek further details of these elements

as it was deemed too intrusive]. With most wages earnings falling below the Poverty Datum Line [PDL] of about \$500, this made the households covered through this study rather well-off. The majority of respondents in the research group [around 80%] spent under 40% of their incomes on grocery. There was an insignificant difference on this matter among 20-30 year old lecturers as opposed to their older counterparts.

The respondents indicated their preferences across several supermarket attractiveness factors [price, quality, product range/variety]. Price was rated highly especially among the younger members. Most respondents did their grocery shopping at a favourite supermarket in Gweru especially among the 20-30 age group where this was universal. Nearly all respondents had a desire [in varying levels] to protect the environment through adoption of specified personal environmentally friendly practices. However it was interesting to note that among those who declared a very strong desire to protect the environment, the level was 38% among 20-30 year old university lecturers as opposed to a much higher 71% among those 31 years and older. Perhaps related to this is the fact that 50% sourced their vegetables from their own garden among the latter while among younger members [20-30 years], this choice was at a low 15%.

Most of the factors considered in this study are in the socio-demographic category [age, gender, income, household size and education level]. Age and household size in particular appeared to have various impacts on product choices and patronage. These research findings concurred with findings elsewhere that household size had closer alignment with store brand choice. No direct coverage of psychographic factors was made. In a review of literature in relation to supercentre shoppers, Carpenter [2008] also suggested that at least in the United States, demographic characteristics [age, gender, income, marital status, and education and household size] had influence on patronage and shopping behaviour. Prasad and Aryasri [2011] also had similar findings.

Conclusion

Even within the city of Gweru, the consumers covered in this study are a small proportion of the consumer market. However, they represent a growing segment of consumers; a new and rising middle class. This study attempted to

shed light on the consumption choices of this group and their buying behaviour. Alone the group of consumers covered in this study do not constitute the complete picture. But they are a visible segment who command superior resources and unique insights and preferences.

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