

Exploring Night-Time Grocery Shopping Behaviour

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Abstract

Recent legal and societal developments have provided an impetus for rethinking retail opening hours in many European countries. In many of these countries, large supermarket chains are now developing an interest in extending their opening hours to a 24-hour regime. This paper discusses the conceptual foundations for understanding night-time shopping behaviour both from a sociological and a consumer research perspective. It also presents exploratory evidence from a study combining participant observation with a survey of 146 night-time grocery shoppers in a large supermarket in the Republic of Ireland. The results indicate that with a proliferation of ‘unconventional’ lifestyles among modern consumers, night-time supermarkets offer a service that is highly appreciated by parts of the Irish population. The study also shows that despite the prevalence of functional motivators for night-time grocery shoppers, the hedonic and social aspects of this shopping behaviour should not be overlooked. The paper finishes by developing a research agenda for consumer behaviour in the new 24-hour society.

Key words: Retailing, opening hours, shopping behaviour

1 Introduction

“The daytime is too crowded. Its carrying capacity is being strained, and still it does not yield all that the community wants. Production takes time, consumption takes time, and contemporary societies want more of both.” (Melbin 1987, p. 4).

Across Europe, the grocery market is a highly competitive market; annual grocery spend ranges from around €600 per capita in the new accession states up to €2600 in more

established markets, and some national grocery markets are valued at more than €150 billion per annum (IGD, 2004). Given the size and competitiveness of this market, it comes as no surprise that individual players are looking for new ways to expand their share of this lucrative retail cake. One of the more recent developments in many European countries is the gradual expansion of shop opening hours in the grocery sector and specifically in the supermarket and hypermarket subsectors. Hitherto, selling groceries after 'normal' shop opening hours had been the preserve of small, independent, and mainly local corner shops. However, over recent years more and more large retail chains are considering extending their opening hours beyond their existing evening and weekend schedules.

This development is facilitated on the one hand by a relaxation of shopping regulations by many central and local governments (Grunhagen et al., 2003) and on the other hand by societal developments that have led shoppers to what was previously considered an 'unconventional' organisation of their weekly time budget (Yapp, 2000). While the 24-hour consumer society has a long history in countries such as the United States of America, for many European retailers it is still an open question whether there is a sizable and viable market for night-time grocery shopping, and whether patronage behaviours at night will differ from daytime shopping behaviours.

This study examines late-night grocery shopping from a conceptual as well as from an empirical perspective. It discusses theories from sociology and consumer research that help understand the new phenomenon of 24-hour supermarkets and reports on a survey of night-time grocery shopping behaviours in one European country where 24-hour supermarket shopping has recently been introduced: the Republic of Ireland. The findings show that night-time supermarkets offer a service that is highly appreciated by parts of the population. The

study also shows that despite the prevalence of functional motivators for night-time grocery shoppers, the hedonic and social aspects of this shopping behaviour should not be overlooked. The paper finishes by developing a research agenda for consumer behaviour in the new (European) 24-hour consumer society.

2 The Advent of 24-Hour Grocery Shopping

2.1 24-hour Retailing

Judging by research and anecdotal evidence, there is a significant potential market for night-time consumption of everyday products and services. As an example, 1 in 7 UK adults (or 7 million people) are at present economically active between the hours of 6pm and 9am (Future Foundation, 2003); in the Republic of Ireland, 5.4 percent of the working population usually finish work after 1am and another 13.4 percent occasionally work through the night (Central Statistics Office, 2004). Night workers are an obvious and sizable target for 24-hour consumer services, but it appears that the potential market for night-time shoppers may not be limited to this segment: Shell research estimates that in the UK, up to 17 million people regularly shop at night, and Nielsen Homescan found that 58 percent of young people with no dependents would shop at night if amenities were readily available (both quoted in Kreitzman, 1999). A list of existing night-time consumption activities starts with the obvious such as night-time focussed leisure activities (cinema, games arcades, pubs and bars, restaurants and fast-food outlets) and services accessible from home (internet shopping and browsing, medical helplines, call centres), through the more uncommon (Kinkos Business Services and Home Depot in the US, university education) to the downright exotic (local authorities, post offices and Las Vegas style weddings).

Grocery retailing has always had its place in a 24-hour world; in many European countries, this function has until recently been provided by small entrepreneurial corner shops or petrol station forecourts. One of the first big supermarket chains to seize the apparent opportunities of an 'always open' policy, the UK-based Tesco Plc, started offering round-the-clock services in the UK in 1998; in the Republic of Ireland, Tesco launched this service to consumers in 2003 and now offers 24-hour access in 32 of its 92 Irish outlets (www.tesco.ie). Ostensibly, this is a service well appreciated by its audience: a Future Foundation study carried out in the UK in 2003 found that two thirds (67%) of their respondents think that supermarkets opening 24 hours a day is a positive trend. Thus, while there seems to be a willingness to accept the idea of 24-hour grocery shopping among the general population, some critical voices have argued that the "24-hour society" is the realisation of an apocalyptic vision of a high-speed, non-stop world destroying the people it is intended to serve; it is also feared that it is the final step in the gradual destruction of social spaces that are sheltered from production and/or consumption activities (Moore-Ed, 1993).

2.2 Consumer Colonisation in Time and Space

Sociologists may be able to provide greater insight into the social causes and the likely consequences of a 24-hour consumer society. In his treatise on human night-time activities, Melbin (1987) likens the human expansion of its production and consumption activities into the hours after sunset to the expansion of humankind into unexplored geographic territories. According to Melbin, expansion occurs in waves. Each stage fills the 'new territories' more densely than before and alters activity levels and population characteristics. The first wave of expansion consists of isolated wanderers. This wave is characterised by a highly homogeneous population low in numbers who explore the 'frontier' either to escape from the rules of established society or as an economic opportunity to be seized. In consumption terms,

this phase relates to a society where night-time consumers are mainly socialites and few night workers serviced by small, entrepreneurial retailers or highly regulated ‘emergency’ services such as pharmacies or petrol stations. Enclaves of activity – or ‘outposts’ - are typically isolated and small in scale, such as the typical 24-h corner shop, and population characteristics show a high level of homogeneity, heavily leaning toward the young, males and ethnic minorities.

The second phase of colonisation in Melbin’s classification are ‘pioneering settlers’, that is an increasing number of shift workers accompanied by a more organised system of retail services catering for the growing night-time population. The population, at this stage, becomes somewhat more diversified while remaining distinctive from the general population by both the personal characteristics of individuals involved in this phase of settlement as well as by their social standing. During this phase, not only can there be a palpable sense of distance between ‘daytimers’ and ‘night-timers’, but the shared experience of being at a ‘frontier’ may also lead to a perception of solidarity and common identity among night-timers. Melbin and his colleagues conducted four different experiments, one of which took place in a 24-hour supermarket, to demonstrate that night-timers are more helpful and sociable toward one another than their daytime counterparts (reported in Melbin, 1987). They found that the level of sociability at the supermarket checkout was lowest in the morning and evening rush hours and highest at night. The low density of the social environment, looser individual schedules, less social pressure and a feeling of solidarity in the face of atypical living conditions may all factor in explaining this finding. Finally, during the third and last wave of the ‘colonisation’ of (geographic or chronological) space, the population becomes more established in its new habitat and presses for additional utilities and services. In consumer behaviour terms, this phase corresponds to the realisation of a full-fledged 24-hour

society with a broad range of consumer services available for an increasingly heterogeneous population that is no longer too dissimilar from its daytime counterpart.

Melbin's theory can serve as a useful projection of the likely development of the '24 hour society'. For instance, many urban areas in developed countries seem to be in the transitional phase two of Melbin's classification. While these societies have not yet fully adopted a 24-hour life style, they have moved toward an 'extended hours society' (Kreitzman, 1999) where constraints on opening hours are markedly eased and individual consumer schedules become more diverse. It appears likely that this trend will continue in future years: attempting to cram in ever-increasing amounts of activity into their lives, many consumers seem eager to expand the chronological frontiers that have until now governed their individual time utilisation (Willmott and Nelson, 2003).

3 Night-Time Consumer Behaviour

From a marketer's perspective, the challenge is to ascertain whether and how shopping habits, behaviours and motivations change from what is already known of grocery shopping when this behaviour takes place during night-time hours, and who the most promising target segments for late-night shopping are. The following section examines these questions in the light of three broad perspectives on the consumer, namely the consumer as cognitive decision maker, the consumer as behavioural being and the consumer as biological being, and then discusses which grocery shopping segments are most likely to adopt late-night shopping.

3.1 The Night-Time Consumer as Cognitive Decision Maker

3.1.1 Time Allocation for Shopping

For the past 25 years, consumer researchers have recognised that many modern consumers are time-harried and often go to astonishing lengths to alleviate their time pressure (Berry, 1979;

Wilson and Holman, 1984; Herrington and Capella, 1995). Despite the advent of convenience shops, internet shopping and personal errand running, people continue to spend an average of 20-30 minutes shopping for consumer goods, amounting to around 3.5-5 hours weekly (ATUS, 2003). Studies on time allocation for shopping indicate that the average time spent shopping by consumers is a function of both supply-need indicators such as household income or family life cycle, as well as of structural conditions such as retail outlet location and the amount of time spent at the workplace (Arndt and Gronmo, 1977). From this perspective, opening hours are a significant structural constraint on time allocation for shopping, and a relaxation of this constraint should be a positive factor both for the flexibility of time allocation as well as for the total time spent shopping (Jacobson and Kooreman, 2005). This change in time allocation for grocery shopping, in turn, should have a substantial impact on the trade-offs made by consumers between time spent shopping and time spent on other work or leisure activities and may thus result in increased shopper satisfaction. It is conceivable that this structural change will have a particularly pronounced impact on consumers who perceive themselves to be chronically time poor and/or have a forward planning disposition (Cotte et al., 2004).

Research has shown that for many individuals, grocery shopping is a habitual activity with set days and times allocated for this task (East et al., 1994). From this perspective, it is likely that changes in shop opening hours, even if they offer greater time flexibility, will only become effective if shoppers are motivated to alter their shopping routines or forced by structural conditions to explore the newly available 'time zones' (Kajalo, 1997). As an example, dual income couples and families may have little choice but to change their shopping habits to adopt night-time shopping in order to balance demands on their time effectively (Willmott and Nelson, 2003). As economic time is a tradable resource, it is also possible that a structural

change such as the extension of shop opening hours triggers a realignment of activities between household members (Jacobson and Kooreman, 2005). For instance, two spouses could decide that, due to extended opening hours in their local supermarket, one takes over the grocery shopping on their way home from work while the other spends the freed up time preparing the evening dinner – alleviating potential role overload for both participants (Kaufman et al., 1991) and providing greater time and role flexibility.

3.1.2 Shopping Motivators

The psychological costs and gains derived from time spent shopping are narrowly related to the reasons individuals engage in retailing activities. While research on shopping has shown that retail activities can bring enjoyment and distraction especially to women (e.g. Woodroffe, 1997), it seems that for many individuals grocery shopping is a goal-directed undertaking and more closely related to functional shopping motivations than to hedonic ones (Dholakia, 1999; Shet, 1983). Thus, it can be expected that patronage and satisfaction derived from extended opening hours are likely to hinge on perceived convenience rather than the satisfaction of psychological or social needs (Geuens et al., 2001). In other words, task fulfilment will be a stronger motivator for shoppers than for example spending time with friends or family when it comes to patronising supermarkets during the night.

The success of late-night convenience stores appears chiefly attributable to the ease of access and speed of shopping – in other words task fulfilment motivators - that these outlets offer (Baron et al., 2001). It could be argued that all-night supermarkets offer a higher degree of functional motivation to the cognitive decision-maker than a local convenience store. While a typical passer-by topping up on staple items in a convenience store has both a limited amount of products to choose from and often has to content with a price premium for the access the convenience store offers, a late-night supermarket shopper can complete a full shopping trip

rather than just a top-up session or at least choose from a wider range of goods that are typically offered at regular supermarket prices. In this sense, late night supermarket shopping may not represent as much an add-on shopping trip on top of the consumer's normal routines as a real alternative to existing shopping schedules. While the gains derived from such behaviour may be somewhat tempered by access issues, it is still likely that in comparison to after-hour convenience stores, supermarket shopping offers a higher level of task-fulfilment, thus representing a strong motivator for a change of consumption routines.

3.2 The Night-Time Consumer as Behavioural Being

Literature has shown that the physical as well as the social context of the shopping experience plays a significant role in individuals' grocery shopping motivations and behaviours (e.g. Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2003). In the case of night-time grocery shopping in supermarkets, it is likely that four specific contextual factors may influence people's adoption of after-hour shopping, namely lighting, sounds, safety concerns and social interaction (or lack thereof) during shopping episodes. Research in store atmospherics has studied the influence of environmental factors such as lighting and background sounds for some time (Turley and Milliman, 2000). At night, both factors may change from daytime shopping experiences and may render the supermarket environment unfamiliar at first – whether this change is perceived as positive or negative by consumers needs to be ascertained.

Above and beyond the functional motivators mentioned in the last section – task fulfilment and time allocation - environmental factors may play an important additional role in the decision of whether or not to engage in night-time shopping. In their study on grocery shop stressors, Aylott and Mitchell (1998) identify time pressure, crowding and store ambiance stressors as the main detractors from a pleasant grocery shopping experience. It could be conjectured that a perceived decrease in such shopping stressors as retail crowding and

queuing could represent an added benefit to shopping at night for many stress-sensitive individuals.

While consumer safety during grocery shopping seems to be of great concern to practitioners, it has received scant treatment in the retail literature (Claxton, 1995). Claxton's (1995) study shows, maybe unsurprisingly, that safety concerns are more prominent for women than for men; it is however possible that this factor may become significant for both genders at night. Safety concerns could potentially be compounded by another environmental factor specific to night-time shopping, namely the scarcity of fellow shoppers. While on the one hand some late-night shoppers may enjoy the absence of shopping crowds, easy aisle access and increased shopping speed, virtually empty aisles and supermarket checkouts may be perceived as disconcerting or even threatening by others. Thus, while research needs to ascertain how changes in the shopping atmosphere and environment late at night influence the shopper as behavioural being, it is likely that such environmental influences do play a role when it comes to late-night supermarket patronage.

3.3 The Night-Time Consumer as Biological Being

In comparison to other types of retail patronage, a consumer's biology may become an important factor in the potential success or failure of large-scale night-time shopping. A consumer's physiological state will not only affect the time and amount of money spent in a shop, but may also influence choice behaviours (Groepel-Klein, 2005). Writers contemplating the effect of a 24-hour society have pointed out that humans are principally diurnal beings and that the human body seems ill-equipped to adapt to a change in its circadian rhythm: body temperature, hydrocortisone, adrenalin, activity levels, blood pressure, concentration, memory, attention and arousal all fall sharply at night ((Kreitzman, 1999). Thus, when assessing the viability of 24-hour opening, retailers have to take into account

lower arousal, motivational and memory levels in consumers. This may be particularly relevant if many consumers opt to use night-time shopping in the supermarket as a replacement for daytime shopping trips rather than as top-up occasions.

3.4 Night-Time Shopping Segments

Many attempts to categorize different shopping segments in the various retail categories have been based on some of the concepts discussed above, particularly on factors such as time allocation, shopping motivations, situational variables and arousal (for a recent overview see Sinha and Uniyal, 2005). In relation to grocery shopping, Geuens et al. (2001) for instance distinguish six different types shoppers on the basis of time poverty, social needs and experiential needs: the convenience shopper, the low-price shopper, the social shopper, the intense social shopper, the experiential shopper and the recreational shopper. In this classification, it could be expected that the convenience shopper with high time poverty, low social needs and low experiential needs is a more regular fixture in night-time supermarkets than the other types of shoppers. On the basis of a similar classification of attitudes to shopping and attitudes to time, Chetthamrongchai and Davies (2000) segment food shoppers into the four clusters “Time pressured convenience seekers”, “Hedonists”, “Apathetic but regular”, and “Convenience seekers”. What is significant in this classification is the fact that the authors show a distinct difference in the frequency of shop patronage as well as in the days and times of the week that these four clusters choose to engage in grocery shopping. In this classification, both the ‘time pressured convenience seeker’ and the ‘apathetic but regular’ shopper seem to be promising segments for adopting 24-hour shopping if they can be convinced of the advantages of night-time shopping both in terms of greater time efficiencies as well as in the decrease of shop ambiance stressors.

To summarise this literature review, night-time shopping behaviours may differ significantly from that of daytime consumers due to a variety of internal and external factors such as shopping motivation, time allocation, the shopping context and a consumer's (mainly diurnal) physiology. Judging from this review, the most likely consumers to shop at night may be expected to be convenience driven, time poor individuals who are either neutrally or positively affected by the absence of habitual 'daytime' shopping stimuli such as background noises or retail density. These issues will now be further explored through the empirical findings from the present study.

4 Methodology

The author of this paper felt that not enough is known about the similarities between day-time and night-time shopping to utilise any of the existing instruments used for researching grocery shopping behaviour. Thus, an exploratory research design was developed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, namely structured observation, unstructured participant observation (Angrosino and Mays de Perez, 2000) and a personal survey of night-time shoppers. The survey consisted of a questionnaire with nine close-ended questions and one open-ended one on shopping motivations, consumers' shopping habits before and after the introduction of 24-hour supermarkets, safety concerns, the influence of shopping location and planned or unplanned patronage behaviour. These questions crystallised from the literature review as the areas of potential importance for night-time shopping patronage.

In addition to the survey, the interviewer filled out a structured observation sheet with the following data for each respondent: amount of people in shopping group, gender, the content of the shopping basket and an approximate amount spent on shopping for each respondent

(see appendix 1 for questionnaire and observation sheet). The interviewer, a graduate student trained in research techniques and part-time employee of the supermarket chain in question, also engaged in casual conversations with supermarket staff and security personnel and observed supermarket shoppers entering the premises during the hours of investigation in an unstructured manner. These unstructured observations for example related to the pace in which shoppers browsed the aisles, the trajectories they used and the interactions they engaged in with fellow shoppers or supermarket staff. Observations and information imparted in conversations with staff were noted down in a research diary and further explored through daily debriefings by the author.

Data collection was conducted during one week in 2004 in the local branch of a nation-wide chain of supermarkets in the Republic of Ireland. This chain started to open a selection of its supermarkets for 24 hours a day on a trial basis in mid-2003 and has since expanded this scheme to around a third of its Irish branches. The particular branch chosen for the survey was one of the first supermarkets in Ireland to be converted to a 24-hour shop and is situated in a mixed residential neighbourhood with a large hospital in about 2 km distance. At the time of the research the branch operated the following opening hours: from Monday 7am to Saturday 8pm continuously, with Sunday opening from 12-6pm. It thus remained open for five nights per week, with the exception of Saturday and Sunday nights.

Respondents for the structured observation and personal survey were chosen on the basis of a systematic sampling procedure, with every 4th person purchasing items in the supermarket being included in the sample between the hours of 11pm and 12am and again from 6 to 7am and every shopper purchasing items included between 12 and 6am. In total, 146 complete and usable questionnaires and observation sheets were obtained, with an additional 41 incomplete

or unusable questionnaires and 20 surveys of repeat customers who were excluded from data analysis. Unstructured observational notes filled around 20 pages of a scrapbook. The survey data were analysed in the software package SPSS; observational data were content categorised and used to complement the survey data (Silverman, 1993). Thus, both data collection methods were combined to provide an exploratory picture of the 24-hour shopper.

5 Results

The survey showed that night-time frequentation of the supermarket is steady throughout the week, with a slight peak on Friday nights (see figure 1).

- INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE –

All ages of shoppers were represented at night, with just over half of all shoppers under 40 years of age. Men were more likely to go shopping at night than women, with just under half of all respondents represented by single men, 21.3 percent by single women, 10 percent by couples and the rest by mixed groups. While night workers such as taxi drivers, medical staff, airport workers, police and security staff were predominant, the spectrum of shoppers included a wide variety of professions and educational backgrounds (see tables 1.1 – 1.3 for respondent demographics).

- INSERT TABLES 1.1-1.3 ABOUT HERE -

The analysis of the observational data revealed that over 70 percent of shoppers interviewed bought ‘normal’ grocery items during their night-time shopping trip – products such as milk, bread, cereals, other staple food items, toiletries, cleaning products, nappies and small

hardware items (see figure 2). In contrast to night-time convenience stores in more central locations, the 24-hour supermarket seems to attract the ‘regular’ grocery shopper in need of everyday items as much as the spontaneous passer-by in need of a quick sandwich or drink. While the average content of the shopping baskets purchased at night was similar to those of daytime shoppers, the overall amount spent was comparatively small, with an average of an estimated €17 spent per shopper. However, some shoppers did make grocery purchases in excess of €100 and managed to fill up entire trolleys during their night-time shopping trip.

- INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE -

With regard to time allocation, it was surprising to note that grocery shoppers seemed to adapt their shopping habits quite rapidly to the new opening regime; after less than a year of night-time opening, over half of all respondents (56.8%) stated that they shopped once a week or more during night-time hours in that supermarket (see table 2). This habitual use of the extended opening hours is underlined by the fact that almost half of all respondents (48.6%) had planned to visit the supermarket on the night they were interviewed and thus engaged in purposeful behaviour, with a small majority displaying unplanned behaviour. Most interviewees (88.4%) were local residents and lived within a 2-mile (3.2 km) catchment area of the supermarket in question. Even though there are a number of 24-hour petrol stations and convenience stores in this catchment area, night-time patrons seem surprisingly loyal, with 62.9 percent of respondents only frequenting the supermarket in question at night. This figure may be an indication that supermarkets indeed offer a higher potential for task fulfilment than convenience stores or petrol forecourts due to their wider assortment and generally lower prices.

- INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE -

When asked what they did before the shop started to open 24 hours, a third of the respondents stated that they had tried to shop during the daytime for the items they needed, in particular during late openings on Thursday and Friday evenings and on weekends. Night workers in particular commented on the fact that they often had to set their alarm clocks to get up in time to do their grocery shopping during regular shopping hours or alternatively ask another person to do their grocery shopping for them. Other coping strategies to accommodate shopping chores into their life styles under the previous time constraints included going shopping with the children or using some of the consumers' discretionary leisure time available for shopping duties. This suggests that a significant proportion of shoppers does indeed benefit from a decrease in the structural constraint represented by shop opening hours, a suggestion that is reinforced by the positive comments made by many shoppers about the new opening hours at the end of the interviews. Somewhat surprisingly however, only six people mentioned that they had been able to take over the shopping from another member of the household since the shop extended its opening hours. Thus, while the same person may still be doing the grocery shopping, time constraints seem significantly alleviated and shopping habits appear to have quickly adapted to the new regime. Incidentally, the speed of this adoption echoes previous research on weekend shopping hour extensions (Grunhagen et al., 2003).

When asked for the main reasons to come to the supermarket at night, over a third of the respondents indicated that they were either in transit to or from their night work or were taking a break in their night shifts. Thus, maybe unsurprisingly, a significant proportion of habitual night-time grocery shoppers are night-workers who appear to appreciate the fact that retail services now start catering for their daily time organisation. 15 percent of the

respondents cited convenience for job reasons other than night-time work, for example irregular schedules not allowing for planned supermarket visits, or convenience for family reasons (for example young babies at home) as their main motivators. This finding supports the notion that 24-hour opening accommodates the new lifestyles people engage in during formerly ‘unconventional’ hours; for these people, convenience and access seems to be the central motivating factor. A quarter of all respondents (24.7%) indicated that they had run out of something as the main reason for a shop visit, which signals another functional benefit – namely access to emergency supplies - as a dominant motivator. In comparison, eight people (5.5%) cited the speed of shopping and the lack of crowds as their main reason to shop at night, while only one respondent liked the atmosphere and another four were bored at home. Thus, as expected, functional rather than hedonic factors seem to be the main motivators for night-time grocery shopping. (see figure 2). In the light of this lack of hedonic motivators for night-time shoppers and the large proportion of regular shoppers, it may be suggested that it is indeed the time-poor convenience shopper and the ‘apathetic but regular’ creature of habit (Chetthamrongchai and Davies, 2000) who are the most promising segments for shopping at night.

- INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE -

When considering environmental factors, whereas no respondent explicitly ‘liked’ the atmosphere in the nocturnal supermarket, no negative comments were made on either lack of background noise or music, lighting or lack of fellow shoppers. It also seems noteworthy that while a significant proportion of respondents were women shopping on their own (21.3%), almost all respondents (95%) indicated that they felt safe coming to the shopping centre at

night – a finding that may be explained by the highly visible presence of security personnel in the checkout area during night-time hours.

Qualitative analysis of the data from the unstructured observation of shoppers confirmed much of the survey data; many observed shoppers seemed to know exactly what items they wanted to get and where to get them, thus ostensibly engaging in task fulfilment and purposeful behaviour. Unstructured observations however also revealed an important additional aspect of night-time shopping behaviours that did not emerge in the survey, but that echoes prior research on night-time consumers (Melbin, 1987), namely the intensity of social interaction at night. During casual conversations with the interviewer, many check out staff commented on the fact that they enjoyed the night shifts because of the high number of ‘regulars’ among the customers. Indeed, habitual night shoppers, some of them frequenting the shop almost every night, were often observed to engage in sometimes extensive social interaction with check out staff or security personnel. These shoppers – mostly night workers and regular socialites - seemed to create what could only be described as a night-time microcosm in the supermarket, almost replicating the corner shop atmosphere from past times in an environment that, during ‘normal’ opening hours, is more notorious for its anonymity and the almost complete lack of social interaction between service provider and customer.

Thus, while it is beyond doubt that time management, convenience and speed play an important role in motivating shoppers to avail of supermarkets’ night-time opening hours, the qualitative part of this inquiry also points toward a hedonic motivator for night-time shopping that may be of greater significance than the survey results would initially suggest: a possible desire of some parts of the shopping population to reconnect with a ‘community’ of fellow individuals in the retail space.

6 Discussion

While it should be stressed that this investigation is of an exploratory nature and thus can only offer an initial foray into this area, some of the findings are significant for both academic researchers as well as marketing practitioners. Above all, it seems surprising that a great proportion of night-time shoppers purchase such a similar, if slightly smaller, shopping basket to what would be expected from a daytime shopping trip. This finding indicates that an extension of opening hours can indeed attract regular shoppers who are looking for a more suitable allocation of their shopping times and that night-time supermarket shopping, in comparison to top-up shopping at convenience stores, can present a real alternative to existing shopping habits. This observation could be important for retail managers fighting bottlenecks at peak shopping times such as late evenings and weekends (East et al., 1994). The high proportion of habitual night-time shoppers after only 12 months of 24-hour operations in the supermarket under survey also indicates that shoppers are appreciative of and loyal to this new service and that supermarket management can indeed change shopping habits if the consumer perceives the incentives – in our case freed up time during the day and at weekends – as valuable enough.

While the fact that most individuals surveyed were motivated by the functional benefits of late-night shopping may not come as a surprise to many retail practitioners, it is a further indicator that task fulfilment is a more significant driving factor for many grocery shoppers than psycho-social gains. For this task-oriented shopper, a reduction in the structural constraints may be met with higher levels of customer loyalty than any attempt to increase the hedonic perks of grocery shopping. However, retailers should also keep in mind that the night time may be an ideal environment for the more ‘personalised’ shopper (Darden and Reynolds,

1971) to re-create ties with fellow shoppers and supermarket staff that often have been lost in the standard big-format retail outlets that are common in most countries today. Thus, a more concerted effort to create events attracting these ‘personalised’ shoppers, such as singles nights or themed events, may be a simple and effective mechanism to increase hedonic motivations for late-night shopping.

From a research perspective, it is important to note that this study seems to be the first to tap into a growing aspect of retail marketing. While research previously looked at the effect of weekend extensions of retail hours in Europe (e.g. Kajalo, 1997; Grunhagen et al., 2003; Jacobson and Kooreman, 2005), this study suggests that night-time extensions appealing to working professionals and young, time pressured families in particular target significantly different consumer demographics than past extensions. From a societal as well as from a public policy perspective, night-time extensions also have a potentially more profound impact on consumers’ lifestyles and society as a whole than previous relaxations of retail hours. Future research needs to explore such issues in more detail.

It should be noted that there are considerable practical difficulties in researching night-time shopping behaviours that were revealed during this exploratory investigation: the number of drunken or antisocial people, the reluctance of many to be approached by interviewers and the unwillingness of consumers to engage with more detailed Likert-scaled questions, which were trialled during the pilot phase of this study, to name but the most significant. These impediments however should not deter academics from exploring this area further. We would recommend future research to develop instruments that would allow clustering of night-time shopper segments and probe more deeply into motivators and effects of night-time grocery shopping. The recent development of behavioural segmentation based on observational

research (Sinha and Uniyal, 2005) may prove useful for this purpose. We would also urge research to compare and contrast online and off-line grocery shopping behaviours during the 24-hour period. Finally, research into the 24-hour consumer society needs to be broadened from grocery shopping to other consumption domains such as services – hairdressers, medical services, educational services – or other retail sectors. Such research needs to take into account both the social aspects of an expansion of the 24-hour consumer society as well as biological factors governing the 24-hour consumer.

7 Conclusion

This study represents a first foray into an area that is highly topical in a European context. While retail practitioners have commenced to embrace the new 24-hour consumer society on an ad hoc basis, academic research must endeavour to explore this new societal phenomenon in order to lead innovation in this sphere. Research needs to investigate all facets of this new lifestyle and contribute to the development of a sound theory of 24-hour consumer behaviour, taking account of both online and off-line manifestations of this phenomenon.

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Appendix 1: Observation Sheet/Questionnaire

Date: _____

Time: _____

No people: _____

Gender(s) _____

Observations:

Shopping basket: (tick all options applicable)

Snack food (crisps, popcorn, sweets, choc bars) ☐

Sandwiches ☐

Nonalcoholic drinks ☐

Alcoholic drinks ☐

Convenience food (frozen meals, microwave meals) ☐

Staple food items (bread, butter, milk, cornflakes, meat...) ☐

Toiletries ☐

Other: _____

Approximate amount of money spent: _____

Note: Please ask the following questions to one respondent only in each group

1. How often do you shop late at night?

Once a week or more ☐

One to three times a month ☐

Less than once a month ☐

First time ☐

2. Have you planned to come here tonight? Yes ☐ No ☐

3. Why did you come here at this time?

Night worker – start or finish shift ☐

Night worker – take a break ☐

Way home from leisure activity ☐

Most convenient time ☐

 family reasons ☐

 job reasons (other than night-shift) ☐

Speed of shopping/Lack of crowds ☐

Ran out of something ☐

Like the atmosphere ☐

Was bored at home ☐

Other: _____

4. **What did you do in this situation before this shop opened 24h?**

Went to 24h petrol station or convenience shop ☐

Shopped during daytime for these items ☐

When? _____

Got shopping delivered ☐

Didn't get these items ☐

Other _____

5. **Do you use other 24h shops?** No ☐

Petrol stations ☐

Convenience shops ☐

Other 24-hour supermarkets ☐

6. **Do you feel safe shopping here at this time?** Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know ☐

7. **Do you live within 2 miles from this shopping centre?** Yes ☐ No ☐

8. **Could I ask you your profession?** _____

9. **What age bracket are you:** under 20 ☐

20-29 ☐

30-39 ☐

40-49 ☐

50-59 ☐

60 or over ☐

10. **Would you like to say anything else about 24 hour shopping?**

Tables and Figures:

Figure 1

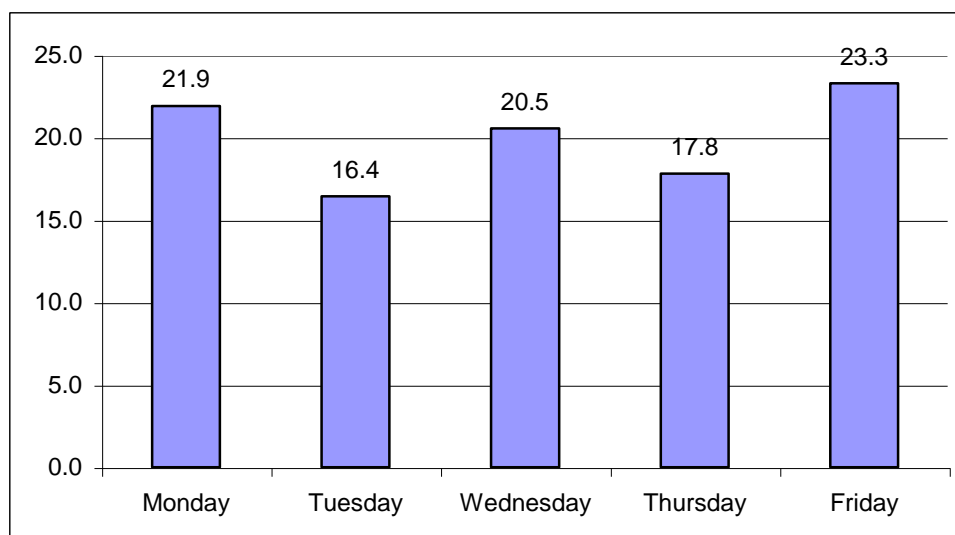


Figure 1: Spread of respondents across the week (in percent of total respondents; n=146)

Table 1.1

	N	%
Single Female	31	21.3
Single Male	69	47.3
Couple	15	10.3
Group of two or more (except couples)	31	21.3
Total	146	100.0

Table 1.1 - Breakdown of sample by Gender and Group Size

Table 1.2

	N	%
Under 20	8	5.5
20s	34	23.3
30s	36	24.7
40s	40	27.4
50s	19	13.0
60 and over	9	6.2
Total	146	100.0

Table 1.2: Breakdown of sample by Age

Table 1.3

	N	%
Taxi driver	16	11.0
Hospitality	14	9.6
Health worker	9	6.2
Childcare & Teacher	9	6.2
Sales assistant	7	4.8
Police & Security	6	4.1
Airport staff	5	3.4
Self-employed	4	2.7
Telephone operator	2	1.4
Other white collar	34	23.3
Other blue collar	21	14.4
Unemployed & Retired	12	8.2
Housewife	6	4.1
Total	145	99.3*

* One respondent did not reply

Table 1.3: Breakdown of sample by Occupation (main respondent)

Figure 2

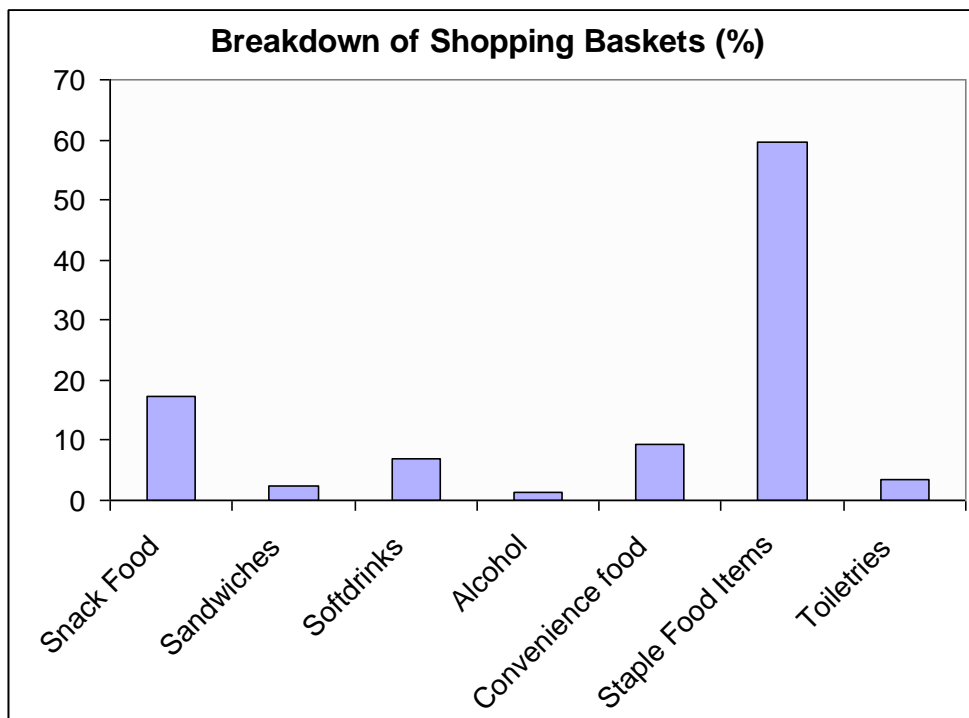


Figure 2: Shopping basket, based on observation

Table 2

	N	%
Once a week or more	83	56.8
One to three times per month	20	13.7
Less than once a month	17	11.6
First time	26	17.8
Total	146	100.0

Table 2: Frequency of night-time patronage in the same supermarket

Figure 3

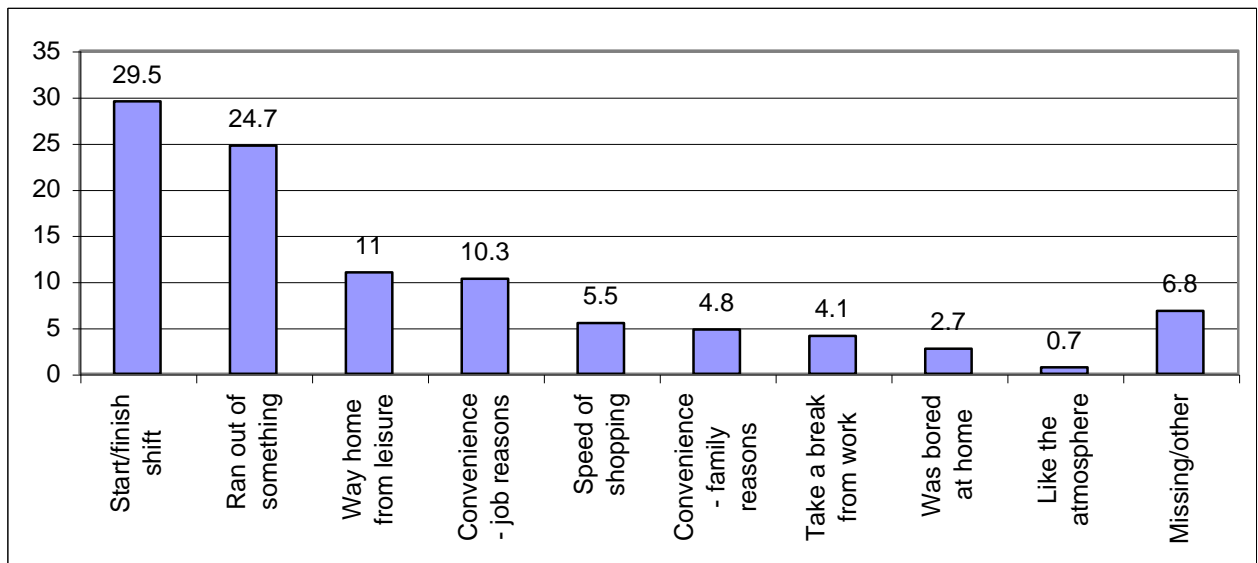


Figure 3: Main reason for night-time shopping (in percent of respondents; n=146)