

Factors influencing women's food choices and the support they require to make healthier food selections in supermarkets – a qualitative study

P. Dhuria¹, W. Lawrence^{1,2}, S. Crozier¹, C. Cooper^{1,2}, J. Baird^{1,2} and C Vogel^{1,2}

¹Medical Research Council Lifecourse Epidemiology Unit, University of Southampton, Southampton General Hospital, Southampton, UK and

²National Institute for Health Research Southampton Biomedical Research Centre, University of Southampton and University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust, Southampton, UK

Supermarkets are a major source of food for families and women remain primarily responsible for food shopping^(1,2) The factors women perceive to influence their food shopping choices are poorly understood⁽³⁾ This study examined women's perceptions of these factors, particularly in relation to store layout, and the ways that supermarkets could support healthier choices.

In this qualitative cross-sectional study, semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with 20 women customers aged 18–45 years, recruited from six supermarkets across England. Participants were asked to describe factors in-store that prompted their food selections. The actions supermarkets, governments and customers can take to support healthier food shopping choices were explored. Thematic analysis was conducted using QSR NVIVO software 11. Four researchers were involved in developing the initial coding framework, double-coding six interview transcripts and refining the coding framework.

Participants had a median age of 39.5 years (IQR: 35.1, 42.3), median weekly grocery spend of £70 (IQR: 50, 88), and 44% had left school aged 16 years. Six key themes were identified: 1) Physical Environment, 2) Value for Money, 3) Influence of Family, 4) Physiological/Psychological State, 5) Level of Awareness of Food Decisions and 6) Responsibility for healthy eating. Women reported that achieving value for money, feeling hungry, tired, or stressed, and meeting family members' food preferences influenced their food shopping choices. Many participants described how they made unintended food selections as a result of prominent placement of unhealthy products, even if they adopted more conscious approaches to food shopping (i.e., written or mental lists). Participants described healthy eating as a personal responsibility but some stated that governments and supermarkets could be more supportive to help customers make healthier food shopping choices.

This study highlighted how the in-store environment can prompt unhealthy food choices. The responsibility for healthy food choices is seen to belong to individuals but the supermarket environment is not designed to facilitate this. Creating healthier supermarket environments could reduce the burden of personal responsibility for healthy eating, by making healthier choices easier. Future research could explore the interplay of personal, societal and commercial responsibility for food choices and health status.

References

1. Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs: Food Statistics in your pocket: Food Chain. (2020) In. York, UK.
2. Food Standards Agency: *The 2014 Food and You survey*. (2014) In. London.
3. Castro IA, Majmundar A, Williams CB, *et al.* (2018) *Int J Environ Res Public Health* **15**(11) 2493.