Enhancing the online grocery shopping experience for South African consumers: A study of challenges, preferences and strategies

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ABSTRACT

The surge of online grocery shopping in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic, marked by a significant increase in regular users by September 2020, resulted in a profound transformation of customer experience, impacting their expectations, preferences and purchasing habits. This shift has prompted retailers to adapt swiftly, emphasising the need for innovative strategies to meet the evolving demands of digital consumers. Utilizing the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) as a theoretical framework, the research explores the intricate dimensions influencing consumers' interactions with digital grocery platforms. Therefore, the study delves comprehensively into the online grocery shopping landscape for South African consumers, aiming to uncover online challenges, preferences, and enhancement strategies. Drawing qualitative insights from two focus groups, it explores the intricate dimensions influencing consumers' interactions with digital grocery platforms. Challenges encountered by shoppers form a mosaic of findings. Modifying orders post-checkout proves complex, often involving time-consuming phone calls. Immediate out-of-stock notifications are lacking, disrupting seamless shopping, and Advocating for real-time stock updates. Compromised product quality upon delivery emphasises the need for customer reviews integrated into the platform. Delivery inconsistencies and safety concerns are prominent, endorsing larger vehicles and flexible options like click-and-collect. Participants expressed a desire for a unified multi-retailer platform, streamlining shopping across various retailers. The study's culmination is a series of recommendations guiding customer-centric improvements including order adjustments, real-time stock communication, quality control, streamlined delivery, safety assurance, and integrated shopping. The findings have significant managerial implications for retailers who strive to strengthen their foothold and engender customer loyalty.

Keywords: Online grocery shopping, customer experience and strategies

INTRODUCTION

Today, customer experience is vital to the company's success and can be used as a competitive advantage (Khandelwal, 2023). Customer experience refers to consumers' mental and internal responses to direct or indirect interactions with a company's products and services (Izogo & Jayawardhena, 2018). Every point of contact when the customer interacts with the business, product, or service is considered a customer experience (Sayyida, Hartini, Gunawan & Husin, 2021: 81). Hsu & Chen (2018) argue that consumer experience is formed every time a customer engages with a service across several channels throughout their lifetime. Three primary concepts define customer experience. Initially, it is interactional, originating from the interaction between the customer and a group of market actors through various interfaces like frontline staff and self-service technology. The second concept relates to a distinctive quality that sets apart each consumer experience. The third concept is associated with its multi-dimensional nature (Pour, Rafiei, Khani & Sabrirazm, 2021: 342). This serves as a backdrop to answer the study's objective:

> **To ascertain how to enhance the online grocery shopping experience by identifying the challenges and preferences of online shoppers.**

LITERATURE REVIEW

ONLINE GROCERY SHOPPING

The retail industry has been affected by the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19), resulting in some South African grocery retailers and consumers embracing online grocery shopping (Ray, 2020: 03). Consumers shifted from offline to online grocery stores to purchase products/services. Older and less digitally savvy consumers started to discover and enjoy online grocery shopping, welcoming the safety offered by technology (Pantano, Pizzi, Scarpi & Dennis, 2020: 209). Naseri, Ahmad, Shariff, Hussin & Nordin (2021: 7863) further divulge that the South African government imposed specific regulations such as social distancing and different levels of lockdown which had vast impacts on consumers' previously preferred shopping channels. Due to consumer behavioural changes resulting from COVID-19, there has been an increase in the adoption of mobile devices, with most grocery retailers introducing apps, mobile payments, QR codes and E-coupons all over the world which significantly accelerated the adoption of online grocery shopping worldwide (Frasquet, Leva & Ziliani, 2020: 01).

The Covid-19 outbreak's mandated lockdown and stay-at-home policy presented a window of opportunity for internet buying and grocery e-commerce. Retailers used creativity and innovation to change and adapt their business operations in response to the new reality, rebuilding and rethinking their business offers (Redda, 2020: 38). However, Covid-19 also presented the grocery retail business with several distinct difficulties and possibilities (Wang, Xu, Schwartz, Gosh & Chen, 2020: 202). The pandemic caused changes in the retail grocery business, including alterations in customer perception, expectations, experience and behaviour (Tang & Kularatne, 2021). Despite the pandemic's transitory character, these changes may have both short-term and long-term consequences on efforts to restructure the grocery retailing sector. In addition, significant adjustments such as shifts in remote work patterns, increased reliance on online shopping, and heightened awareness of health and safety measures have been made to customers' daily routines due to the COVID-19 epidemic, including consumption and demand for products and services (Maryati, 2020: 87).

ONLINE GROCERY SHOPPING EXPERIENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Mustikasari & Astuti (2021: 19) stipulate that when customers shop for groceries online, they examine not only the practical features of the products but also the brand, logo, name, and colour. Online grocery shopping entails visiting a website and or app, purchasing products, receiving delivery, and receiving good customer service. It is equally important to note that the online grocery shopping experience differs from conventional online shopping since the goods are variable and perishable. Given the inherent contrasts between typical traditional retailers and online grocery stores, the web-based consumer experience inherently includes more risks and concerns than the traditional experience.

Online customers, for example, cannot check the freshness of goods and must consider the delivery conditions for various products (Sayyida et al., 2021: 81). However, that is not the only concern. A few customers ordering groceries online have faced issues like receiving faulty items, incorrect deliveries, delivery challenges, or missing goods (Rana, Gaur & Santosh, 2022). Furthermore, Mahajan (2020: 789) highlights that customers encounter difficulties while attempting to exchange or return an item purchased online since certain websites enable users to select the place of delivery while others do not. As a result, the customer must personally courier the goods, which is unpleasant and can indirectly cause negative Word-of-Mouth, non-repurchase, disloyalty or bad reputation for the retailer and much more (Anshu, Gaur & Singh, 2022: 03). Additionally, Daroch, Gupta & Nagrath (2021: 40) expound that customers that are satisfied with online shopping experience are more likely to make subsequent purchases. Moreover, if customers are disappointed with the purchase, they may choose another grocery retailer because switching costs are lower when they shop online (Huifeng & Ha, 2020: 6). What is important is the overall customer experience, as it significantly influences brand loyalty, word-of-mouth recommendations, and the sustained success of e-commerce platforms in an increasingly competitive market. Consequently, businesses should prioritise not only the seamless functioning of their online platforms but also the cultivation of positive interactions, personalised services, and efficient issue resolution to foster enduring customer relationships (Rane, Achari & Choudhary, 2023: 430).

ENHANCING ONLINE GROCERY CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

A study conducted by Jusoh, Sjahrir, Hussin & Ishar (2020: 330) reveals that for retailers to survive the e-commerce business, customer experience is one of the key areas that need to be addressed. Customer experience is always critical to success, but during uncertain times, it can be a significant differentiator for retailers, as consumers demand a different experience relevant to their situation (Hogreve & Fleischer, 2020: 499). Offering unique customer experiences, especially with the rapid change brought on by Covid-19, is incredibly difficult. In a fiercely competitive retail world, retailers should focus on customer experience, product innovation and competitive prices for long-term competitive advantage (Grewal, Gauri, Roggeveen & Sethuraman, 2021). Within the online grocery retailing industry, it is critical to have a thorough grasp of the elements driving customer experience in various contexts (Babin & Li, 2022). This entails not only recognising the dynamic interplay of factors influencing consumers' interactions with digital platforms but also comprehending the ever-evolving landscape of preferences, technological advancements, and socio-economic considerations that shape their online shopping experiences (Sanda, 2021). In essence, a thorough grasp of these elements is fundamental for businesses seeking to navigate the intricate dynamics of the online grocery sector, enabling them to tailor their strategies effectively and consistently meet the evolving expectations of their customer base (Singh & Söderlund, 2020: 2420).

Customer experiences have been studied in a variety of industries, including retail (van Rooyen & Amoah, 2021), fashion (Swiegers, 2018 & Erasmus, 2021), airline (Mhlanga, 2018), banking (Sithole, Mort & D'Souza, 2021). Consequently, such comprehensive investigations underscore the universal significance attributed to understanding and enhancing customer experiences, transcending sector-specific boundaries and contributing valuable insights applicable to a broad range of business domains. Hence, retailers must view customer experience as a long-term strategic focus, enabling them to react positively to changing customer demands, cultivate brand loyalty, and stay resilient in the dynamic landscape of the market (Deloitte, 2021: 11). Customers want online grocery retailers to provide both delightful and smooth online shopping experiences (Rana et al., 2022). Over and above that retailers also need to fully understand that customers can make satisfaction judgements about any component of the product and the online service experience is crucial in the retailing sector (Jaiswal & Singh, 2020). Therefore, it is crucial to expand knowledge or familiarise with issues and strategies about customer experience in online grocery retailing (Neuninger & Ruby, 2020: 02). Antwi (2021: 01) emphasises the need for online grocery retailers to understand what customers need and want at any given time to remain competitive and flourish in the online grocery retail industry. In this way, most customer online grocery shopping experience-related issues will be minimised or resolved.

BENEFITS OF ENHANCING THE ONLINE GROCERY SHOPPING EXPERIENCE

Several research studies, including those conducted by Trude, Lowery, Ali & Vedovato (2022) and van Rooyen & Amoah (2021), have consistently highlighted a multitude of benefits associated with the improvement of the online grocery shopping experience. Moreover, these advantages extend over the long term, demonstrating the sustained positive impact that enhancing this digital shopping process can have on both consumers and the retail industry. The following are key benefits of enhancing online grocery shopping experience. The benefits encompass a holistic approach to customer satisfaction, engagement, and loyalty, positioning retailers for long-term success in the evolving landscape of digital commerce.

Satisfaction

According to Parasuraman, Ball, Aksoy, Keiningham & Zaki (2021: 2), satisfaction was previously defined as an 'affective condition' in which the consumer obtains a joyful state of consumption-related fulfilment from feelings such as happiness, surprise, or delight throughout the shopping experience. Dlamini & Barnard (2020: 2) allude that customers seek consistency more than satisfaction, which is a post-purchase evaluation of the buying conditions. The idea of customer satisfaction is significantly different in the South African setting (Naidoo & Botsi, 2021). Customers do not always make the same choices but they seek value as a necessity, seeking the finest product at the best price (Coutelle, Le Gall-Ely & Rivière, 2020). Additionally, Banik (2021) asserts that customers expect to be entertained, stimulated, engaged, and rewarded in exchange for their patronage, as they seek not only functional utility from products or services but also an enriching and enjoyable overall experience.

E-loyalty

Understanding the elements impacting e-loyalty in a new context is critical in this competitive market (Urdea & Constantin, 2021). E-loyalty has been studied in a variety of industries, including retail (Dlamini and Barnard, 2020). Because of the widespread usage of online shopping, many scholars have focused their efforts on studying e-loyalty (Domingos, 2022; Purwanto, 2022). E-loyalty is a customer's intention to return to a website and or app and make more purchases from the same online retailer in the future. When customers are happy, they are more likely to connect with a website and or app repeatedly, resulting in loyal customers (Mofokeng, 2023). Developing loyalty depends on exceeding the consumer's demands (Azhar & Bahir, 2018: 41).

Businesses encounter challenges in retaining customers online due to more straightforward product comparisons and the availability of alternatives; e-loyalty is a significant problem in e-commerce (Zare & Mahmoudi, 2020: 209). Consumers may use online platforms to visit online stores, explore product information, compare prices, and purchase things without relying on a single online retailer (Moeti, Mokwena & Malebana, 2021: 1). As a result of poor customer loyalty, internet businesses confront a significant problem in developing a long-term lucrative and sustainable business strategy (Azhar & Bahir, 2018: 37). In addition, Dlamini & Barndard (2020: 44) add that knowing your consumer, rewarding them for their loyalty, and encouraging customer feedback are all aspects of cultivating a customer-centric approach, fostering meaningful connections and sustained satisfaction in the business-consumer relationship.

Increased positive Electronic Word-of-Mouth

With the advent of new digital tools, Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM), also known as online reviews, online suggestions, or online opinions, has grown in importance (Pillay, 2021: 2). eWOM, as defined by Thao & Shurong (2020: 42), is any informal communication addressed to consumers via Internet-based technology connected to the usage or qualities of certain goods and services, or their suppliers. In the modern digital era, traditional WOM has developed into eWOM. The key distinctions between WOM and eWOM are the reach of the reviews' impact (the number of people who may be persuaded) and the pace of engagement (Srivastava & Sivaramakrishnan, 2020: 34). Flavian, Gurrea & Orús (2021: 395) state that compared to traditional WOM, eWOM is more impactful due to its speed, ease, one-to-many reach, and lack of face-to-face human pressure. This breadth of eWOM scope and ease of access to evaluations can have a significant impact on a company's success (Chen, Chang & Sung, 2021). As a

result, businesses are more interested in learning about the variables that drive the usage of eWOM, as well as the consequences of its use (Serra-Cantallops, Ramon-Cardona & Salvi, 2018: 147). e-WOM has a substantial impact on purchase decisions (Tata, Prashar & Parsad, 2020: 2000).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the dynamic landscape of online grocery shopping, understanding the intricate factors influencing customer experience is paramount for businesses striving to meet evolving consumer expectations and optimize their digital platforms (Terra & Casais, 2021). The foundation of this study lies in the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), a conceptual framework introduced by Davis in 1989 (Marikyan, Papagiannidis & Stewart, 2023). TAM serves as a comprehensive tool for examining the landscape of online grocery shopping for South African consumers in the digital era. At its core, TAM delves into the factors shaping users' acceptance and utilization of technology, positing that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are pivotal in determining users' attitudes and intentions towards adopting new technology (Vatolkina, Gorbashko, Kamynina & Fedotkina, 2020: 2). This study contends that within the context of online grocery shopping, TAM highlights the importance of user-friendly and intuitive online platforms (Brand et al., 2020: 2). The seamless and effortless navigation, item selection, and transaction completion processes are considered vital aspects influencing customers' embrace of the digital grocery shopping experience (Quade, 2023). Furthermore, TAM emphasises that customers are more inclined to adopt technology when they perceive it as advantageous, with online grocery shopping valued for its convenience, time-saving benefits, avoidance of crowded stores, and access to a broader product range (Gomes & Lopes, 2022: 912).

TAM underscores the impact of attitudes and intentions on actual usage. A positive attitude toward online grocery shopping, fostered by perceived ease of use and usefulness, propels regular engagement, making it a habitual choice (Jun, Yoon, Lee & Lee, 2021: 3). The model acknowledges external factors, including social influence and facilitating conditions. In the case of online grocery shopping, these factors encompass recommendations from acquaintances and the availability of reliable delivery options (Pauzi, Thoo, Tan, Muharam & Talib, 2017: 4). In essence, the TAM model serves as a psychological lens through which the intricate interplay of customers' attitudes, intentions, and external factors in adopting online grocery shopping platforms is comprehended (Yakasai, Almunawar & Anshari, 2021). This model equips businesses with the insights needed to navigate customer acceptance and resistance, enabling them to optimise the online grocery shopping experience in alignment with customers' expectations of ease and utility (Vatolkina et al., 2020: 5).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

An interpretivist paradigm was applied to the study on the premise that reality is socially constructed, emphasising the importance of understanding individuals' subjective interpretations, experiences, and meanings within their unique contexts (Antwi & Hamza, 2015: 220). This implies that the challenges and preferences of online grocery shoppers will be explored in-depth, acknowledging the diverse and subjective nature of their experiences in the digital shopping landscape.

In this study, the participant's reality of their online grocery shopping experience was interpreted to understand how to enhance the online grocery shopping experience. A qualitative research approach adopts a person-centred and holistic perspective and assists in understanding the human experience (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2019: 641) which was an appropriate choice for the comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted aspects of participants' interactions with digital grocery platforms. Two separate online focus groups comprised a total of 12 consumers, purposively selected, who shop for groceries online in South Africa. This involved deliberately choosing individuals who met specific criteria relevant to the research objective through social media platforms and with the assistance of the marketing agency. In this case, the criteria were that participants must be consumers who engage in online grocery shopping in South Africa and all participants were screened prior to data collection. The selection process aimed to ensure that participants had relevant experiences and perspectives related to the online grocery shopping landscape, contributing valuable insights to the study.

The researchers employed a sample of two (2) focus groups, as stated, each group consisted of 6 participants. Maree (2019: 111) reveals that focus groups produce data rich in detail that is difficult to achieve with other research methods. Moreover, Wiid & Digginnes (2021: 110) mention that focus groups can be explored for various reasons, such as insights into online customer perceptions, online customer experiences, online customer behaviour, how products or services can be improved online, or generate new ideas. During the data collection phase, researchers followed an interview guide created in alignment with the study's objective.

To ensure rigour, the study applied Sandelowski's (1986) approach to credibility, applicability and confirmability. For example, to ensure credibility the research strategies used ensured the accuracy of the interpretation and provided a true reflection of the participant's experiences (Al-Raisi, Al Salmi, Magarey, Rasmussen & Hannawi, 2020). The research strategies were devised to enhance the applicability of findings by considering their relevance and practical utility in a broader context or among a wider population of interest. Rigorous measures, including transparent documentation and systematic data analysis, were implemented to ensure the confirmability of the study's outcomes, promoting reliability and objectivity.

Inductive thematic analysis was the selected method, enabling a thorough exploration of the data and ensuring comprehension of participants' experiences in the online grocery shopping landscape. The study incorporated Braun and Clarks (2006) six -step technique in analysing and interpreting the data. These included (1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) generating codes, (3) generating themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) locating exemplars. The analysis procedure employed a systematic and rigorous approach (1), such as thematic coding and pattern recognition (2), to discern and categorise patterns, themes, and categories within the qualitative data (3). This encompassed an iterative process of reading and re-reading transcriptions, data coding, and subsequent organisation of coded segments into coherent themes (Dawadi, 2021). The themes were reviewed and labelled (5), The cited texts of the participants are the exemplars (6) in relation to the identified themes.

In consideration of privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality, rigorous measures were established to protect both the identity and personal information of the participants, as well as the names of the retailers disclosed by them (Fouche, Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021: 124). Therefore, the study will not reveal the retailer's names mentioned by participants. However, those retailers will be referred to as Retailer X and or Retailer Y. In addition, the study was carried out in compliance with the research plan approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Management Sciences, Durban University of Technology. Ethical approval (Ethical Clearance number IREC 057/22) was acquired in accordance with university procedures prior to recruiting participants. Finally, all participants received a letter of information and consent form which was signed voluntarily.

RESULTS

The outcomes from the focus groups yielded substantial and insightful viewpoints, offering a multifaceted understanding of the research area from the participant's perspectives. The inputs and viewpoints of the participants have strongly contributed to the achievement of the research objective, enriching the study with diverse outlooks, personal experiences, and valuable recommendations. These findings from the focus groups serve as an invaluable repository for subsequent analysis, interpretation, and discussion within the context of the study. It's important to highlight that while participants shared similar experiences in certain themes, there were instances where their experiences varied significantly, and capturing these differences was crucial. Moreover, the results utilized in this study were chosen by the study's objective, ensuring their relevance and alignment with the overall research purpose. The following themes emanated from focus group one (F1) and focus group two (F2):

THEME 1: ORDER MODIFICATION CHALLENGES IN ONLINE GROCERY SHOPPING

In the realm of online grocery shopping, customers face notable challenges when it comes to modifying their orders, as illuminated by two distinct subthemes; the challenges of adding or removing products before delivery and the frustrations caused by delayed out-of-stock notifications for specific items.

Subtheme: Adding or removing a product before delivery

The ability to add or remove a product before delivery in the context of online grocery shopping lies in providing customers with flexibility, control, and a seamless user experience. This feature addresses the dynamic nature of shopping preferences and the unpredictable nature of consumers' needs. Here is a notable quote from the participant:

> **F1, Participant 2:** *"I also think once you click that check out button, but you realise that you want to change something, it is a mission because you have to phone… sometimes it is just impossible to change anything from the order even though the item is not picked up yet or it hasn't left the store… or anything. It is almost a mission to change anything from there. You will phone… you will have to hold… it takes you to call centre… this and that… and it is a problem."*

F1, Participant 2 highlighted the challenges associated with modifying orders after clicking the "check out" button in online grocery shopping. The participant describes this as a complex and frustrating process, involving phone calls, waiting on hold, and navigating through a call centre. The participant's experience highlights the discrepancy between the perceived simplicity of the digital platform and the real-world logistics required for post-checkout changes. This observation raises questions about user expectations, customer service efficiency, and the balance between user-friendliness and practical complexities in e-commerce systems. The participant's insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics between users and digital interfaces, suggesting opportunities for enhancement in the online shopping experience.

Subtheme: Out-of-stock notifications

Out-of-stock notifications play a crucial role in enhancing the online grocery shopping experience by providing transparency, managing customer expectations, and ultimately improving customer satisfaction. Here is a noteworthy statement from the participant:

> **F2, Participant 2:** *"I think for me uh… the thing is… what I have experienced is that you'll go into the app and select the items. It does not tell you immediately when the item… with some items, it tells you if they are out of stock but sometimes it does not tell you if it is out of stock. And for me, shopping on the app, you want to shop and carry on as you would like but now you have to shop and wait for the app because somebody might message you and tell you, 'Actually we don't have this or that or change that for that stuff.' For me that is sometimes a bit of a problem because you want to shop but have to wait because there might be a couple of messages coming through saying… do you want to change this for this."*

F2, Participant 2 sheds light on the challenges faced while shopping through a mobile app. The participant's account emphasises the inconvenience caused by the app's inconsistent communication of item availability. While some out-of-stock items are indicated, others lack prompt notifications, forcing users to wait for potential messages that could suggest changes or alternatives. This discord between the desired seamless shopping experience and the need to manage interruptions highlights the participant's frustration. The insights gained from this participant's perspective contribute to discussions on real-time inventory management, user interface design, and the balance between user autonomy and system-generated notifications within e-commerce apps.

THEME 2: PRODUCT

Products in online grocery shopping lie in their central role as the core offerings that customers seek and purchase through digital platforms. Understanding the significance of products involves considering various factors that contribute to the overall success and satisfaction of online grocery shoppers. This theme encompasses two subthemes, outlined as follows:

Subtheme: Quality

> **F1, Participant 5:** *"I think I would say I once had a bad experience in terms of quality… I ordered roses and when they were delivered, the petals were browning. And I think if I was in the store, I would not have picked such flowers for myself. So… why did they do that because they know I am not in the store. My experience was really ruined on that day. I was very sad, you know. A part of me was like let me give them feedback around this so that they wouldn't do it on other customers because imagine giving someone flowers that are bad; it is not nice."*

F2- Respondent 1, F2-Respondent 6 shared a similar experience.

F1, Participant 5 presented a significant narrative highlighting the nuanced challenges within the online shopping experience. The participant recounts a negative incident involving the delivery of roses with browning petals, underscoring the disconnect between the expected quality during the online purchase and the actual product received. This discrepancy triggers emotional distress, emphasising the profound impact that subpar product quality can have on customer satisfaction and brand perception. The participant's inclination to offer feedback for improvement illustrates a sense of personal responsibility and a desire to prevent similar negative experiences for others. This account resonates with broader discussions on quality assurance, customer feedback, and the complex interplay of emotions and expectations in the realm of e-commerce.

Subtheme: Review

> **F1, Participant 4:** *"I think what could be added… depending on what you are buying, I think is reviews. I think I now spend more time and I need to go out of the app to do a review about the product. So, they have advertised; there is this brand. Now before buying it, I need to do sort of research on it besides the description. And to stop here… go and do a review… watch a review video maybe on YouTube… Maybe for just new products."*

F1, Participant 4 emphasised the need for additional information beyond product descriptions, particularly through reviews, to make informed purchase decisions. Notably, the participant highlights the extra effort required to access reviews by leaving the app, suggesting a potential for enhanced integration of external content. The participant's emphasis on watching review videos on platforms like YouTube underlines the multimedia nature of contemporary research behaviour. This perspective invites discussions on user-generated content integration, design improvements for information accessibility, and addressing the challenge of limited information for new products within the e-commerce ecosystem.

THEME 3: THE EFFICACY OF ORDER FULFILMENT

The efficacy of order fulfilment is pivotal for online grocery platforms as it directly influences customer satisfaction, loyalty, and the platform's overall standing in the market. A well-executed fulfilment process contributes to positive customer experiences, strengthens the platform's reputation, and positions it competitively in the dynamic e-commerce landscape. Below is a quote from the participant:

F1, Participant 4: *"I would like to look at it from a customer perspective. I feel like… sometimes… maybe it was my experience with Retailer X, Retailer Y. When, when, when your products leave the store, it is now the issue between the driver and you in terms of the service that comes in. In my next experience, this guy came in, I gave him specific instructions… 'When you get to the gate, please phone me I will open for you.' He never phoned me, but he returned with it. I am looking at the app tracking and when I got there the guy had left. "Did you phone?" -No. I don't know if the training goes down to the drivers or they stop by the store."*

From the above quote; F1, Participant 4 recounted two distinct experiences: one with "Retailer Y" delivery, highlighting the complexities that arise after products leave the store, and another involving specific delivery instructions that weren't followed by the driver. This emphasises the crucial role of delivery drivers in shaping customer perceptions of service quality. The participant's curiosity about driver training and communication mechanisms underscores broader questions about consistency, training effectiveness, and the alignment of customer expectations. This narrative enriches discussions around last-mile delivery challenges, customer experiences, and the dynamics between digital platforms and real-world interactions in the realm of online shopping.

THEME 4: EXPEDITIOUSNESS OF DELIVERY

The promptness of delivery holds significant importance in the realm of online grocery shopping, given its direct influence on customer satisfaction, convenience, and the competitive standing of the e-commerce platform. Below is a quote from the participant:

F1, Participant 2: *"For me, you are right there because with this Retailer X and the Retailer Y app, the scooter is [inaudible segment at 00:22:16] and there are things that you can't buy; there will be restrictions, because if you are going to buy that 18-pack toilet paper and something else, already the space is so limited. You can also fit three more things and there are restrictions. So, that becomes a bit of a problem. And there are things that you can't buy like, you can't buy like a flower that is super tall because it can't fit in. So, there are things that are restricted in terms of buying. And also… the number of items. I have seen that some people would go to the shop and will push up 2 trolleys, full 2 trolleys. So, you can't really buy 2 trolleys on online purchases if you really want to do that. It is too restricted. And also taking into consideration that the delivery costs. So… you also take that into account, and you say, is it really worth it or maybe I should just go to the shop. So, it becomes convenient online if you want 1 or 2 things and don't want to fill up the trolley but if you want to do a big grocery shopping for month end uh… I will go to the shop rather because of these other small restrictions. But like you are saying if you buy big things like 10 kg… 12,5kg… and whatever. Uhm… but maybe if you like small things like 2kgs and you're a bachelor then maybe… then you're [Snapping fingers]."*

A comprehensive analysis of the dynamics of online grocery shopping, particularly through certain platforms like Retailer X and Retailer Y. F1, participant 2 highlighted a crucial operational constraint – the limited space in delivery vehicles – which impacts the types of items that can be included in an online order. This constraint becomes evident when customers wish to purchase bulkier items or a combination of products that collectively occupy a significant amount of space. Moreover, the participant brings attention to the considerations of convenience versus the extent of shopping, noting that online shopping might be more suitable for smaller purchases, effectively serving those looking for quick acquisitions without the need for a full physical shopping cart.

The participant's narrative unveils a nuanced perspective on the demographic suitability of online grocery shopping, suggesting it may particularly benefit individuals who prefer smaller quantities. This observation underlines the tailored convenience online platforms can offer for specific customer segments. Additionally, the participant highlighted the relevance of delivery costs as a key factor in the decision-making process, indicating the need to weigh the convenience of online shopping against the associated expenses, particularly for larger orders. In sum, the participant's insights contribute substantial depth to discussions regarding the practical intricacies and customer considerations that shape the landscape of online grocery shopping, offering valuable context for understanding the complexities of transitioning traditional shopping habits to digital platforms.

THEME 5: SAFETY CONCERNS

The importance of addressing safety concerns in online grocery shopping cannot be overstated. It is a foundational element in building and maintaining customer trust, fostering a positive reputation, and ensuring the long-term success of the e-commerce platform. Below is a quote from the participant:

> **F2, Participant 5:** *"[Chuckles] I never actually had issues with deliveries. Uhm… what I can suggest is that you know as P1 mentioned in terms of security. She is right. We have seen stories with Retailer X even Retailer Y as a whole, there are those drivers that are good and there are those drivers that are not. And some of these people, I don't know how they select. But in terms of trust and safety, when someone sees your address and maybe you are the target, or you have something that they are looking for of course anything can happen. I feel like they should have something that guarantees safety for consumers because we are not safe. Like we are not safe at all… If you allow someone, just give a stranger your address and know that they are coming to you. And the moment that you go pick up or take whatever is being delivered to you and they notice and maybe you are the target or something. It is always easy for them to come back to you."*

F2, participant 5 highlighted the vulnerabilities inherent in sharing personal information, particularly addresses, with unfamiliar delivery personnel. By citing examples from the broader service industry, the participant highlights the variable reliability of drivers and its consequent impact on consumer trust and safety, suggesting that not all drivers can be trusted equally. This underscores the broader concern about the reliability of individuals who have access to personal data in the digital realm.

The participant's insights carry an essential call for heightened security measures. The participant articulates the risks posed by exposing addresses to delivery drivers, thereby potentially inviting targeted incidents or unauthorised access. The recommendation for the implementation of safety guarantees resonates with the broader discussions about enhancing security in the gig economy and online service platforms, where instilling trust through comprehensive safety protocols is essential. Participant 5's perspective provides a significant layer of context for the intricate interplay between digital platforms, user safety, and the imperative to establish security measures. The narrative underscores the broader concerns about privacy and personal safety in the digital age, spotlighting the need for platform providers to ensure user protection as online interactions increasingly permeate the real world.

THEME 6: SERVICE

Service is a critical component in online grocery shopping, influencing customer satisfaction, loyalty, and the overall success of the platform. A commitment to providing outstanding service enhances the platform's reputation, fosters customer loyalty, and positions it competitively in the dynamic e-commerce landscape. Below is a quote from the participant:

F2, Participant 2:" *[=Cross talk=] If they could develop a platform where you could multiply shopping on one app it could work. But bear in mind, like you look at Retailer X and Retailer Y there is multiple places, but you can't shop at more than place together as well. You have to shop one place at a time as well. But if you could do one big basket of each place then you could play around one platform.*"

F2, Participant 2, presented a forward-thinking perspective in this study, envisioning the creation of a consolidated online shopping platform that transcends the current limitations of existing services like Retailer X and Retailer Y. The participant's insights centre on the concept of convenience and efficiency, advocating for a seamless user experience that allows shoppers to aggregate purchases from multiple stores within a single application. By highlighting the current constraint of having to shop at one place at a time on existing or different platforms, the participant underscores the potential for enhancing user convenience through a unified approach.

The participant's proposed model addresses the present gap in the market, where users can access various options but must navigate separate platforms for each store. This vision aligns with user expectations of streamlined digital experiences, suggesting that a centralised platform offering a comprehensive shopping basket across multiple stores could revolutionize the e-commerce landscape. Participant's perspective offers valuable insight into the evolving nature of user needs, emphasising the potential benefits of a more integrated and versatile online shopping platform.

FINDINGS

Participants illuminated a range of issues that impact their shopping journey; firstly, challenges linked to order modifications post-checkout surfaced as a prominent concern. The process of adjusting products before delivery was depicted as intricate and time-consuming, involving communication hurdles, and resulting in unattended changes. This highlights the demand for a more efficient means of altering orders. Additionally, the absence of prompt notifications for out-of-stock items emerged as a recurring frustration. This deficiency in real-time updates necessitates customers to await clarifications, thereby disrupting the seamless shopping experience they seek. Enhancing communication about stock availability stands as a potential remedy.

Participants also accentuated instances of subpar product quality upon delivery, such as receiving deteriorated flowers. These experiences not only detract from customer contentment but also offer opportunities for feedback and enhancement. The integration of customer reviews into the platform could empower users to make informed purchases, thereby enriching overall satisfaction. Furthermore, the efficacy of the delivery process exhibited inconsistencies according to participants. Instances of miscommunication between delivery personnel and customers, along with the possible influence of driver training, underscore the significance of refining the delivery process for a smooth and reliable customer experience.

The velocity of delivery and limitations imposed by vehicle capacities and item dimensions were noted factors. While online shopping proves convenient for smaller purchases, it could pose restrictions for larger orders or specific items. Participants proposed solutions like introducing larger delivery vehicles and facilitating the click-and-collect option. Safety apprehensions materialized as another substantial concern. Participants expressed reservations about divulging personal addresses to delivery personnel, prompting a plea for reinforced safety measures to ensure consumer well-being during deliveries. Lastly, participants envisioned an integrated platform for shopping across multiple retailers concurrently. While acknowledging existing multi-retailer platforms, participants yearned for a consolidated space to curate a comprehensive shopping cart from various retailers, streamlining the process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the insights garnered, several recommendations emerge to enhance the online grocery shopping experience for South African consumers. To begin, a streamlined mechanism for modifying orders post-checkout should be developed to minimize frustrations. Real-time stock updates are crucial to keep customers informed about product availability, ensuring a seamless shopping process. Implementing rigorous quality control measures and integrating customer reviews directly into the platform can bolster product quality and empower shoppers with informed choices.

The delivery process warrants improvement through comprehensive training for personnel and real-time tracking options. Flexibility in delivery options, including the use of larger vehicles and click-and-collect services, can cater to varied customer needs. Addressing safety concerns, such as privacy and secure delivery, is pivotal for fostering consumer trust. Exploring possibilities for a multi-retailer integrated platform can offer a consolidated shopping experience, while ongoing user education, robust customer support, and incentives like promotions contribute to a more engaging and satisfactory online grocery journey. Through these measures, retailers can align their offerings with consumer preferences and elevate the online grocery shopping landscape in South Africa.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study's insights reveal significant challenges in South African consumers' online grocery shopping experiences, including difficulties in order modifications, lack of real-time stock updates, compromised product quality, and safety concerns. The inconsistent delivery process and limitations in delivery speed and items' dimensions further impact the overall convenience. Participants expressed a desire for an integrated multi-retailer platform. Addressing these multifaceted challenges through streamlined order adjustments, improved communication, enhanced product quality, efficient delivery mechanisms, safety measures, and a unified shopping platform could greatly enhance the online grocery shopping experience, fostering higher customer satisfaction and engagement.

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