

Consumer responses to shopper solutions in service settings

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Abstract

Purpose – Retailers are continuously seeking to improve upon the in-store shopping experience for their customers. The present research aims to examine consumers' responses to one such initiative – the shopper solution – that, despite its growing marketplace prominence, remains largely unexamined in academic literature.

Design/methodology/approach – Two studies employed a 2(shopper solution: present vs. absent) between-subjects design. MANOVA and regression analyses were used to test hypothesized relationships.

Findings – Findings across two studies reveal that the presence (vs absence) of solutions positively influenced shoppers' perceptions of shopping convenience, as well as their purchase intentions. These favorable effects also extended to the provider in higher word-of-mouth and loyalty intentions. Shopping convenience was identified as the mechanism underlying the impact of solutions, while "smart shopper" self-perceptions were shown to moderate these mediating effects.

Practical implications – Shopper solutions represent a low-cost, in-store marketing tactic that enhances shopping convenience. They are easy to implement, result in little to no overhead costs and can benefit both shoppers and retailers.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this research represents the first academic examination of the impact of shopper solutions. The authors identify key mediating and moderating influences of the effects of solutions.

Keywords Customer value, Retail, Shopper solutions, Retailing, In-store marketing, Smart shoppers, Shopping convenience, Retail displays

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Consumer demand for more convenient shopping experiences is making it difficult for firms to establish competitive advantages based only on merchandise assortment (Beitelspacher *et al.*, 2011; Lloyd *et al.*, 2014). In response, retailers are implementing innovative service strategies designed to enhance shopping convenience to better serve their customers' needs (Grewal *et al.*, 2020; Ruiz-Molina *et al.*, 2017; Sarantopoulos *et al.*, 2016). For example, many retailers are investing heavily in easy-to-use mobile apps aimed at creating more convenient online shopping experiences (Newman *et al.*, 2018). Some now offer convenient "click and collect" services that allow consumers to buy online and pick up

their purchases in-store (Jara *et al.*, 2018). Other initiatives include voluntary nutrition labeling on food packages that help shoppers more easily and quickly identify healthy food items (Newman *et al.*, 2016), as well as self-service technologies that expedite the check-out process for shoppers (White *et al.*, 2012). Such retail services are significantly reshaping the provider–customer relationship.

In the present research, we focus on an increasingly popular, yet understudied, in-store service initiative: the "shopper solution" (Food Marketing Institute [FMI], 2012; Grocery Manufacturers' Association [GMA], 2011; Shankar, 2014). We define a shopper solution here as an in-store promotional display that offers shoppers a set of two or more thematically

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related products, in a single convenient location, that is specifically designed to satisfy a particular shopper problem or need. Retailers use shopper insights to identify these existing problems, and then customize solutions accordingly for their customers (Deloitte, 2015; GMA, 2011). Thus, shopper solutions likely provide consumers with value primarily in the form of enhanced shopping convenience (i.e. by helping them more quickly and easily find the products they need to solve a particular problem).

For instance, a sporting goods retailer may learn through shopper insights that many of its customers are interested in undertaking recreational running to improve their health. It can gather a number of complementary products from around the store and offer them together in one centrally located “running fitness” solution (e.g. a display consisting of water bottles, running shoes, energy bars, shirts, Global Positioning System running watches, reflective safety gear, shorts, recovery drinks, etc.). These products collectively represent a valuable “solution” to shoppers’ running-related needs that also serve to streamline their path-to-purchase (i.e. by eliminating the need to locate and acquire all of these products in their respective categories around the store). Similarly, a retailer may create a “football tailgating” solution display for shoppers seeking products for an upcoming tailgate party (e.g. chips, salsa, beer, soft drinks, disposable plates and cups, tablecloths, ice chest, etc.).

Though shopper solutions have gained considerable prominence in the marketplace, very little is known about their implications for consumers or firms. Thus, the present research attempts to address this critical gap between managerial practice and marketing theory by assessing consumer responses to shopper solutions across two studies (see Figure 1 for a conceptual overview). In Study 1, we assess consumers’ perceptions of shopping convenience in the presence/absence of solutions, as well as their intentions to purchase products displayed in solutions. We replicate and extend these findings

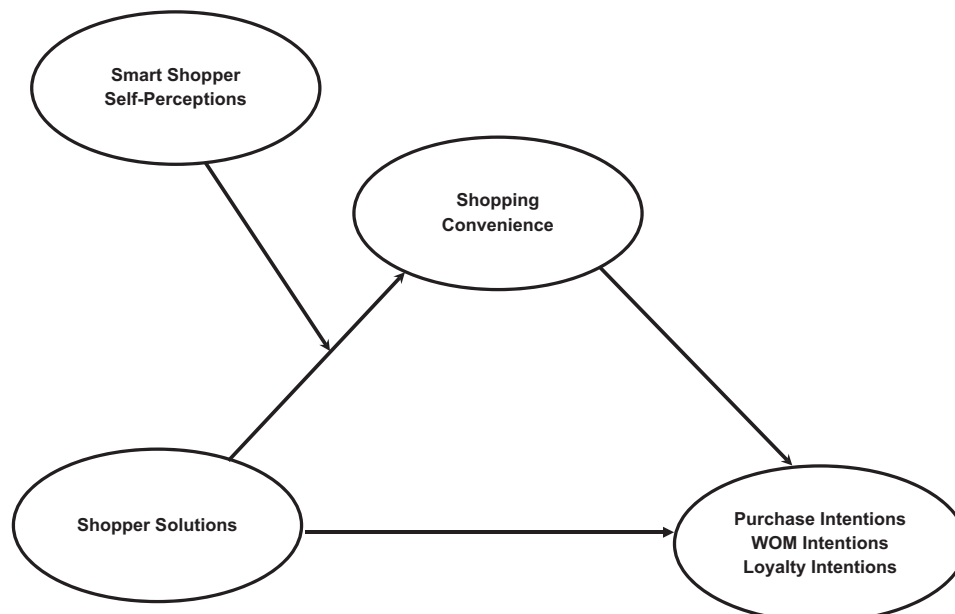
in a realistic retail behavioral laboratory setting in Study 2. In Study 2, we examine whether the effects of solutions also extend to consumers’ word-of-mouth (WOM) and loyalty intentions toward retailers that offer solutions. Finally, we assess mediating and moderating influences on the observed effects.

Our research makes several theoretical contributions. First, we are among the first to examine consumer responses to shopper solutions. In doing so, we provide an initial foundation for future work to build upon in this important, yet understudied, research area. Second, most prior research has focused on *category* needs and different ways to organize assortments of *substitute* products within a *single* category (Lamberton and Diehl, 2013; Morales et al., 2005). However, managerial practice has recently shifted away from product assortment organization towards a focus on shoppers. Recognizing this shift in practice, our work instead emphasizes *shopper* needs, and examines assortments that are comprised of *complementary* products from *multiple* categories.

The present work differs from prior research on product bundles, an in-store marketing initiative that offers consumers a price discount in return for buying all of the promoted items in a given bundle (see Stremersch and Tellis, 2002). In contrast to bundling, which requires the purchase of the complete set of items, solutions instead give shoppers the autonomy to buy as many (or few) of the promoted items as they wish. Whereas product bundling typically entails discounting the “bundle” of items, we document the positive impact of solutions in the absence of price discounts typically used in bundling.

We also demonstrate that offering solutions impacts in-store outcomes (shopping convenience, purchase intent), as well as post-purchase retailer-related outcomes (WOM and loyalty intentions). In doing so, we underscore the role that solutions play in impacting consumers at multiple points along the entire shopping cycle (Shankar et al., 2011). Lastly, we identified a key mediating mechanism that underlies the positive effects of

Figure 1 Conceptual model



solutions (enhanced convenience), as well as an important moderating influence (consumers' "smart shopper" self perceptions). This broadens our understanding of shopper solutions in the academic literature beyond their mere direct effects. Our Study 1 hypotheses follow below.

Conceptual development and hypotheses

Shopper solutions as a unique retail store display

Past research on retail displays has focused on a variety of in-store initiatives such as end-caps (e.g. Phillips *et al.*, 2015), promotional aisles (e.g. Bava *et al.*, 2009), window displays (e.g. Lange *et al.*, 2016), freestanding displays (e.g. Kennedy, 1970) and cash wraps (e.g. Van Gestel *et al.*, 2018), among others.

Shopper solutions differ in several key ways from these more widely studied displays. First, most retail displays offer a single product/brand (e.g. a Coca-Cola display), or a variety of substitute products/brands from within the same category (e.g. a soft drink display with Coca-Cola, Pepsi and other types of soft drinks) (Huffman and Kahn, 1998; Morales *et al.*, 2005). Shopper solutions, by contrast, offer an assortment of *complementary* products that collectively serve as a solution to a specific shopper problem. Further, the items in solutions are most often *cross-categorical* in nature (e.g. a display with Coca-Cola, popcorn, popular family friendly DVDs, etc., which serve as a "Family Movie Night" solution).

Second, the recommended format of shopper solutions is a freestanding (i.e. island or gondola) display (GMA, 2011). Accordingly, solutions are less effective as end-cap displays (GMA, 2011) than in other formats. This may be because end-caps are primarily used to promote new items and often utilize price discounts (Phillips *et al.*, 2015). Thus, endcaps generally attract different types of shoppers (e.g. bargain shoppers who value price savings) than shopper solutions (e.g. "smart shoppers" who value time and energy savings; Babin *et al.*, 1994). In a similar vein, whereas some researchers have examined the effects of cross-categorical aisle adjacencies (Bezawada *et al.*, 2009), the current research explores thematically related cross-categorical products in a single convenient freestanding display.

Lastly, existing research acknowledges that most retail displays have been traditionally used - and accordingly studied - in combination with promotional pricing (e.g. items in displays are often on sale; Cornelius *et al.*, 2010). Thus, the primary value proposition of most retail displays lies largely in the price savings they provide consumers. Shopper solutions, on the other hand, provide consumers with value mainly in the form of improved shopping convenience. That is, solutions benefit shoppers more through time and effort savings, than through monetary savings (Deloitte, 2015; GMA, 2011). We, therefore, expect shopper solutions to positively impact consumers' shopping convenience and purchase intentions, as we elaborate upon next.

Effects of shopper solutions on perceived shopping convenience and purchase intentions

Many consumers highly value shopping convenience thus firms continually strive to enhance convenience (Baker *et al.*, 2002; Deloitte, 2019; Kim *et al.*, 2014; Lloyd *et al.*, 2014). Shopping convenience refers to the "reduced time and effort

consumers must exert to buy or use products and services" (Grewal *et al.*, 2020 p. 97; Rohm and Swaminathan, 2004; Seiders *et al.*, 2005). Prior research indicates that well-executed retail displays can enhance consumers' perceptions of shopping convenience (Ratneshwar *et al.*, 1996; Shankar and Kannan, 2014). In practice, shopper solutions, in particular, are purposefully designed to "enhance convenience by bringing products together for a complete solution" (GMA, 2011 p. 3). Retailers carefully craft solutions with a primary objective of saving shoppers the time and effort associated with finding products in different categories around the store (GMA, 2011). Building on these practical efforts, we test whether the presence of shopper solutions in retail shopping environments increases consumers' perceptions of shopping convenience (compared to when they are not offered).

We also expect shopper solutions to positively impact consumers' purchase intentions. Consumers often harbor implicit theories about marketing persuasion and strategy that guide their judgments and evaluations. For example, prior research finds that individuals make particular choices if they infer that doing so is implicitly recommended or endorsed by the choice provider (e.g. employees are more likely to enroll in a savings plan when they infer that their firm endorses it) (McKenzie *et al.*, 2006; Thaler and Benartzi, 2004).

In retail settings, shoppers often make inferences about products based on how retailers choose to display them. For example, shoppers typically expect products that are placed in the center of store aisles to be "value brands" (Valenzuela and Raghuram, 2009), whereas products positioned on endcaps are expected to be on sale (Inman *et al.*, 1990). Shoppers also expect retailers to have expertise in product evaluation, and thus assume that retailers elect to offer "important" products in their displays (i.e. those with strong positive evaluations) (Buchanan *et al.*, 1999). Therefore, shoppers likely interpret the products in a solution as being implicitly endorsed by the retailer and, consequently, react positively toward them. Specifically, we expect shoppers to have higher purchase intentions for products when they are offered together as a solution (compared to when they are presented individually in their respective categories). In support of this notion, in-store retail displays have been shown to positively influence shoppers' purchasing behavior (Inman *et al.*, 2009; Shankar, 2014; Turley and Milliman, 2000). More formally, we hypothesize the following effects of solutions on perceived shopping convenience and purchase intentions:

H1. Perceived shopping convenience will be higher when a shopper solution is present than when it is absent.

H2. Purchase intentions will be higher when a shopper solution is present than when it is absent.

Study 1

Design and procedures

Study 1 examined how the presence (vs absence) of shopper solutions impacts perceived shopping convenience and product intentions. We used two (shopper solution: present vs absent) between-subjects designs. A total of 198 adult participants were recruited from Amazon Turk (MTurk) and completed the

study for monetary compensation. MTurk has been shown to be a high-quality data source (Kees et al., 2017) and been widely used for consumer research in retail contexts (Kukar-Kinney and Xia, 2017; Newman et al., 2018). Approximately 61% of respondents were women, ages ranged from 18 to 67 years old, and the average household income was \$40,000–\$49,000.

All respondents read the same written instructions prior to the actual manipulation. They were first given the definition of a solution and an example (a BBQ grilling solution consisting of charcoal, lighter fluid, matches, tongs, spatula). Next, they were all told to imagine that they were shopping for cold and flu products at store XYZ (i.e. their shopping objective was to buy cold/flu products). All participants saw the same eight cold/flu-related items offered by that retailer (e.g. cold/cough medicine, tissues, hand sanitizer, vitamin C, chicken noodle soup). To manipulate the presence/absence of the solution, respondents in the solution present condition were told to assume that all of those cold and flu products were offered together in a single seasonal cold and flu display. By contrast, respondents in the solution absent condition were told to assume that all of those products were located throughout the store in their respective (traditional) categories and aisles. All respondents then reported their purchase intentions for each of the eight products (i.e. focal products) and their perceptions of shopping convenience.

Measures

Respondents' purchase intentions for each of the eight cold/flu products were assessed by the item "How likely are you to purchase each item?" (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely; adapted from Kozup et al., 2003). The presentation of the items was counterbalanced to avoid any potential ordering confounds. We created an overall purchase intentions index for each respondent by averaging his/her responses across all of the focal products (Naylor et al., 2012). Perceived shopping convenience was assessed with the items: "It is easy to find the products I am looking for at this store" and "The merchandise I want at this store can be located quickly" (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; $r = 0.96$, $p < 0.0001$) (Seiders et al., 2005). Lastly, we assessed the effectiveness of the manipulation by asking respondents whether the cold/flu products were offered together in a solution or not.

Results

Chi-square test results revealed high levels of awareness of the solution manipulation (93.4% accurately reported that the products were offered in a solution when it was *present* vs 100% accurately reported that the products were *not* offered in a solution when it was *absent*; $\chi^2 = 171.85$, $p < 0.0001$). These findings indicate a successful manipulation.

We conducted a MANOVA for the dependent variables of interest. As expected, there was a significant main effect of the presence (vs absence) of the solution on respondents' average purchase intentions for the focal products [$F(1,196) = 5.05$, $p < 0.03$]. Specifically, respondents expressed higher purchase intentions for the focal products when the items were presented together in a solution compared to when they were not ($M_{\text{Present}} = 5.10$ vs. $M_{\text{Absent}} = 4.70$).

Also as expected, there was a significant main effect of the solution on perceived shopping convenience [$F(1,196) = 126.12$, $p < 0.0001$], such that respondents expressed higher shopping convenience when the items were presented together in a solution compared to when they were not ($M_{\text{Present}} = 4.74$ vs $M_{\text{Absent}} = 2.47$). Thus, *H1* and *H2* are fully supported.

Discussion

Study 1 utilized an online experiment to provide some preliminary insight into the effects of shopper solutions on shopping convenience and purchase intentions. The findings initially suggest that solutions can effectively enhance consumers' perceptions of shopping convenience and also have a positive impact on their purchase intentions. The online setting afforded high internal validity, as well as a rather conservative preliminary test of our initial hypotheses (i.e. the effects of solutions could be expected to be relatively weak in an online setting where consumers do not have to physically shop and search for products). However, the generalizability of Study 1 may be somewhat limited because of its online nature and the fact that we have yet to demonstrate the findings using other types of solutions.

We address these potential limitations and expand upon our Study 1 findings in a more realistic retail lab setting in Study 2 and using a different set of products/solutions. We further assess whether the positive effects of solutions extend to the retailers who choose to voluntarily provide them to their customers in the form of increased loyalty and/or WOM intentions. Importantly, because respondents physically shopped in the presence/absence of a real solution in the retail lab in Study 2, we were able to measure how (in)convenient their shopping experience *actually* was (rather than their hypothetical, or expected, convenience). This allowed us to determine if their experienced shopping convenience accounts for the documented effects of solutions, and further, whether this mediating role of convenience may differ based on a conceptually relevant shopper trait (smart shopper self-perceptions). We briefly offer our predictions and associated rationale below before testing them in our final study (Study 2).

Effects of shopper solutions on retailer-related outcomes

We expect that the provision of shopper solutions will positively affect shoppers' behavioral intentions toward the retailers that offer them. Specifically, we focus on two shopper behaviors that are particularly critical to retailers: loyalty intentions and positive WOM intentions (Inman and Nikolova, 2017). Retailers dedicate considerable resources to customer retention and recruitment (Kamran-Disfani et al., 2017; Kharouf et al., 2014). Loyal customers are willing-to-pay more for products, exhibit higher purchase quantities, and spread positive WOM to help recruit new customers (Wallace et al., 2004; Wright and Sparks, 1999; Zeithaml et al., 1996). Positive WOM has also long been linked to higher sales (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006).

In-store service initiatives, such as solutions, offer retailers valuable opportunities to increase loyalty, WOM and overall sales (Baker et al., 2002; Newman et al., 2014; Silveira and Marreiros, 2014). For example, previous research demonstrates that consumers express higher patronage intentions toward retailers that voluntarily provide helpful

front-of-package nutrition labeling to their customers (compared to retailers that do not) (Newman *et al.*, 2014). Similar spillover effects are also documented elsewhere in the extant literature (e.g. Cornelius *et al.*, 2010). In line with these findings, we expect that consumers will express higher WOM and loyalty intentions toward retailers when they voluntarily offer convenient solutions designed to help them meet their specific shopping needs. Formally, we predict:

- H3a.* Retailer WOM intentions will be higher when a shopper solution is present than when it is absent.
- H3b.* Retailer loyalty intentions will be higher when a shopper solution is present than when it is absent.

Mediating role of shopping convenience and the moderating role of smart shopper self-perceptions

We expect shopping convenience to underlie the positive effects of solutions on our final outcomes of interest (i.e. purchase intentions, WOM intentions and loyalty intentions). Many consumers value saving time and energy when shopping (Kim *et al.*, 2014; Lloyd *et al.*, 2014), and tend to react favorably towards products and retailers that enhance their shopping convenience (Baker *et al.*, 2002). Indeed, shopping convenience has long been shown to be a “distinct motive for store choice” (Rohm and Swaminathan, 2004; p. 750), and a key driver of retail purchases and loyalty (e.g. Kelley, 1958; Eastlick and Feinberg, 1999). Building on H1, we expect solutions to increase shopping convenience for consumers (as previously shown in Study 1). This should, in turn, facilitate higher purchase intentions for products in solutions, as well as higher loyalty and WOM intentions toward the firm offering them. Formally we propose the following mediation:

- H4.* Shopping convenience will mediate the effects of a shopper solution. Specifically, the presence of a shopper solution will have a positive indirect effect on (a) purchase intentions, (b) retailer WOM intentions and (c) retailer loyalty intentions.

However, it is important to note that consumers value shopping convenience to varying degrees (i.e. some may place little or no value on it), so their responses to solutions should vary as a function of this individual difference. In this vein, a key shopper trait that should moderate the mediating effects of convenience is the extent to which consumers view themselves as “smart shoppers” (Atkins and Kim, 2012; Garretson *et al.*, 2002). Smart shoppers (SS) place very high importance on undertaking efficient and effective shopping behaviors compared to those who identify less strongly as smart shoppers. Smart shoppers strive to improve their shopping experience by saving time and energy, and feel a great deal of pride when they maximize the efficiency of a retail encounter (Atkins and Kim, 2012; Babin *et al.*, 1994; Ganesh *et al.*, 2007).

Given that solutions are specifically designed to enhance shopping convenience and streamline the path-to-purchase, we expect that most shoppers will highly value solutions and respond favorably to them. However, we expect shoppers with relatively stronger SS self-perceptions (i.e. those who more actively seek to save time and energy when shopping) to have

comparatively more positive reactions to solutions than those with weaker SS perceptions. That is, shoppers with stronger SS self-perceptions should view solutions that help them save time and energy as more valuable and convenient than those with weaker SS perceptions (i.e. those who place less emphasis on shopping efficiency). As a result, the positive indirect effects (IEs) of solutions through shopping convenience proposed in H4 should be relatively stronger for those with stronger (compared to weaker) SS perceptions. In sum, we predict the following related to the moderating role of SS self-perceptions:

- H5.* Smart shopper self-perceptions will moderate the effect of a shopper solution on perceived shopping convenience. Compared to when absent, the presence of a solution will enhance shopping convenience for consumers with stronger and weaker SS self-perceptions, alike. However, a solution will lead to higher convenience for consumers with stronger SS self-perceptions than for those with weaker SS self-perceptions.
- H6.* The indirect effect of a shopper solution on consumers’ (a) purchase intentions, (b) retailer WOM intentions and (c) retailer loyalty intentions (via shopping convenience) will be more pronounced for those with stronger, rather than weaker, SS self-perceptions.

Study 2

Design and procedures

The primary purpose of Study 2 was to test H3–H6. Consistent with Study 1, we used a between-subjects design in which participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: shopper solution present vs absent. We also used participants’ SS self-perceptions as a measured independent variable, as described later. A mixed sample of 122 adults and undergraduate students was recruited from a large public university’s subject pool and participated in the opportunity to win gift cards. Approximately 55% were women, 79% were Caucasian, and ages ranged from 18 to 50.

The study took place in the Shopper Experimental Lab Facility (ShELF), a behavioral research lab designed to look like a real retail store. The ShELF offers a wide variety of products (cosmetic items, food products, school supplies, etc.), and can easily be arranged into different layouts. This realistic setting helped overcome potential generalizability limitations common to online studies (Burton *et al.*, 2015; Newman *et al.*, 2014).

Researchers first greeted the participants in a small breakout room before entering the ShELF. They were provided with the same definition and example of a shopper solution given to participants in Study 1. This ensured that the only difference between the experimental conditions was the presence/absence of the solution (rather than the amount and/or nature of the information given). From a practical standpoint, it also allowed us to conduct a manipulation check after all the dependent measures were answered. Both of these benefits helped increase the internal validity of the study. Participants were also again informed that they may or may not see a solution when they enter the retail store. This further maximized internal validity by helping account for any potential expectations of seeing a solution across conditions. All participants were then

asked to imagine they were shopping for snacks during their weekly grocery shopping trip. They were told they would be evaluating a number of snack products once inside the store, as well as the retailer providing them [1].

Researchers then escorted participants into the retail store. Participants were not told whether the solution was present or absent; rather, they were left to visually infer this based on the placement of the focal snack items in the store. Those in the solution present condition were provided with a “Snack Central” display in the middle of the store that offered an assortment of nine different types of snack items commonly found in a grocery store (e.g. a bag of chips, a bottled soft drink, a box of popcorn, a package of cookies, etc.). In the solution absent condition, the same nine focal snack items were instead placed around the store in their respective categories (i.e. the soft drink was located in the soft drink section, the cookies could be found alongside other cookies, etc.). The presentation of snack items was counterbalanced to control for potential positioning confounds (such as prominence because of eye level).

All participants responded to the main dependent measures of interest while in the retail store. They were allowed to navigate the store and handle the products freely while taking as much time as needed to complete the survey. This was done to facilitate natural shopping behaviors as much as possible. Upon completion, participants were escorted to a computer lab to answer manipulation check and demographic questions in a concluding online survey.

Measures

Consistent with Study 1, participants again reported their purchase intentions for each of the nine focal snack products separately. We then created a purchase intentions index for each participant by averaging his/her responses across all nine of the focal products (Naylor et al., 2012). Consistent with Study 1, the measure of shopping convenience displayed satisfactory reliability ($r = 0.91, p < 0.0001$). Retailer WOM intentions were assessed with the items: “How likely are you to say positive things about the retailer to other people?” and “How likely are you to encourage friends and relatives to do business with this retailer?” (1 = not at all likely, 7 = very likely; $r = 0.88, p < 0.0001$; adapted from Zeithaml et al., 1996). Retailer loyalty intentions were assessed with the items: “How likely are you to continue to do business with this retailer if its prices increase somewhat?” and “How likely are you to pay a higher price at this retailer relative to the competition for the same benefit?” (1 = not at all likely, 7 = very likely; $r = 0.78, p < 0.0001$; adapted from Srinivasan et al., 2002). SS self-

perceptions were measured with the items: “When I shop smartly, I feel like a winner”, “I get a real sense of joy when I make wise purchases”, “Making smart purchases makes me feel good about myself”, and “When I go shopping, I take a lot of pride in making smart purchases” (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = 0.88$; Garretson et al., 2002). We used SS self-perceptions as a continuous moderator in all applicable analyses to avoid the well-documented drawbacks of median splits (Fitzsimons, 2008). Thus, stronger and weaker SS self-perceptions coincide with values one standard deviation above and below the mean of SS self-perceptions, respectively (Hayes, 2013). Lastly, we assessed the effectiveness of the solution manipulation with the item “Did you see a ‘Snack Central’ display?” with answers of yes/no.

Results

Prior to hypothesis testing, a check was performed to ensure effective manipulation of the independent factor. Chi-square test results revealed high levels of awareness of the solution manipulation (96% accurately reported seeing the solution when it was present vs 88% accurately reported *not* seeing it when it was *absent*; $\chi^2 = 86.05, p < 0.001$). These results indicate the manipulation was successful.

An overview of the results is offered in Table 1. Consistent with Study 1, there was a significant positive main effect of the shopper solution on participants’ shopping convenience ($b = 0.71, SE = 0.11; t(120) = 6.17, p < 0.001$) and purchase intentions ($b = 0.28, SE = 0.08; t(120) = 3.02, p < 0.01$). Specifically, participants expressed higher shopping convenience, and higher purchase intentions for the items of interest, when the solution was present compared to when it was absent. These results provide additional support for *H1* and *H2*, respectively. Adding to these findings, participants also reported higher WOM intentions ($b = 0.37, SE = 0.13; t(120) = 2.93, p < 0.01$) and loyalty intentions ($b = 0.23, SE = 0.13; t(120) = 1.84, p < 0.05$) toward the retailer when the solution was offered compared to when it was not. These results fully support *H3a* and *H3b*, respectively.

Next, we used PROCESS Model 4 with 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs) to test whether shopping convenience was the mechanism underlying the effects of the solution on the dependent measures (as suggested in *H4*; Hayes, 2013). Mediation is indicated by the absence of zero in the CIs (Hayes, 2013; see also Zhao et al., 2010). Results revealed a significant positive IE of the solution, through shopping convenience, on participants’ purchase intentions (IE = 0.1200, CI [0.0315, 0.2298]).

Table 1 Study 2: mediating role of shopping convenience for the effects of a shopper solution’s presence vs absence

Independent variables	Shopping convenience (mediator)		Purchase intentions (with an added mediator)		Retailer WOM intentions (with an added mediator)		Retailer loyalty intentions (with an added mediator)	
	Coefficient	T-value	Coefficient	T-value	Coefficient	T-value	Coefficient	T-value
Shopper solution	0.71	6.17***	0.15	1.47	0.05	0.38	0.05	0.33
SS self-perception	0.11	0.95	–	–	–	–	–	–
Solution × SS	0.22	1.89*	–	–	–	–	–	–
Shopping convenience	–	–	0.17	2.43**	0.45	4.95***	0.28	2.86***

Notes: * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Similarly, there was a significant positive IE of solutions on participants' WOM intentions (IE = 0.3133, CI [0.1550, 0.5113]) and loyalty intentions (IE = 0.1930, CI [0.0758, 0.3466]) through the same mediational path. These findings suggest that perceived shopping convenience serves as a mediator and provide full support for *H4*.

Next, we proposed in *H5* that the provision of the shopper solution would affect participants' perceptions of shopping convenience differently based on how strongly they identified as smart shoppers. As a result, the mediating effect of shopping convenience previously demonstrated should differ for those with stronger vs weaker SS self-perceptions (as proposed in *H6*; see [Figure 1](#)). The solution \times SS self-perception interaction on perceived shopping convenience is offered in [Figure 2](#) ($b = 0.22$, $SE = 0.11$; $t(118) = 1.89$, $p < 0.06$) [2]. The follow-up contrasts of interest indicated that the provision of the solution enhanced shopping convenience for participants with stronger SS self-perceptions ($t = 5.68$, $SE = 0.16$, $p < 0.01$) and weaker SS self-perceptions ($t = 3.01$, $SE = 0.16$, $p < 0.01$), alike. However, participants with stronger SS self-perceptions reported significantly higher shopping convenience than those with weaker SS self-perceptions in the presence of the solution ($t = 1.93$, $SE = 0.17$, $p < 0.05$). This supports *H5*.

To test whether SS self-perceptions moderated the mediating effect of shopping convenience, we used PROCESS Model 7 with 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% bias-corrected CI's ([Hayes, 2013](#)). Results indicate that the Index of Moderated

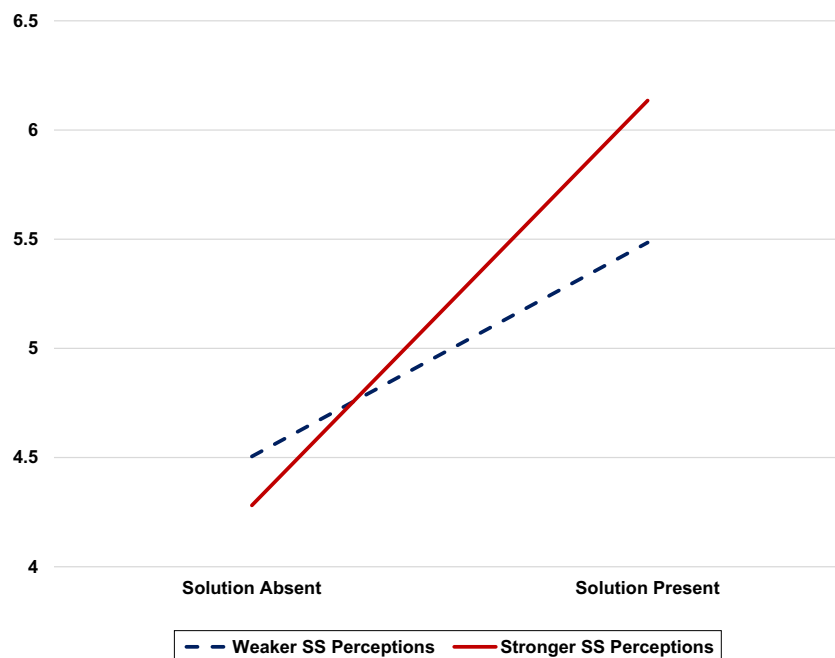
Mediation was significant for purchase intentions (IE = 0.0373, CI [0.0044, 0.1045]), as well as for WOM intentions (IE = 0.0973, CI [0.0136, 0.2320]), and loyalty intentions (IE = 0.0599, CI [0.0063, 0.1565]). The absence of zero in these CI's formally indicates that the mediating role of shopping convenience is moderated by SS self-perceptions ([Hayes, 2013, 2015](#)). It also indicates that IE's of the solution on the dependent measures differ significantly for those with higher and weaker SS self-perceptions, as predicted ([Hayes, 2015](#)).

Specifically, results reveal that the IE of the solution on purchase intentions was significantly larger (i.e. more positive) for participants with stronger SS self-perceptions (IE = 0.1591, CI [0.0388, 0.3139]) than for those with weaker SS self-perceptions (IE = 0.0840, CI [0.0210, 0.2039]). Said differently, the mediating role of shopping convenience was significantly stronger for those with stronger SS self-perceptions than for those with weaker SS self-perceptions. This same pattern of results emerged for the IE's of the solution on WOM intentions (IE_{strongerSS} = 0.4152, CI [0.2020, 0.6890] vs IE_{weakerSS} = 0.2193, CI [0.0770, 0.4181]) and loyalty intentions (IE_{strongerSS} = 0.2557, CI [0.0900, 0.4641] vs IE_{weakerSS} = 0.1351, CI [0.0451, 0.2870]). These results collectively provide support for *H6*.

General discussion

Retailers and service providers are using shopper insights to design more shopper-friendly store formats as they continue to

Figure 2 Study 2 effects of shopper solutions and SS self-perceptions on shopping convenience



Notes: Higher values on the Y axis indicate higher levels of shopping convenience based on participants' actual experiences of shopping in a retail lab store in the presence or absence of a real shopper solution. Stronger and weaker SS self-perceptions coincide with values one standard deviation above and below the mean of SS self-perceptions, respectively

Source: Hayes (2013)

shift their focus from category needs to shopper needs (Shankar *et al.*, 2011; Deloitte, 2015). This transition is particularly evident in the growing prominence of shopper solutions in the marketplace (GMA, 2011; FMI, 2012; Shankar, 2014). We define shopper solutions here as in-store promotional displays that offer shoppers, in a single convenient location, a set of two or more thematically related products designed to satisfy a specific shopper problem or need.

Despite their growing importance, shopper solutions, specifically, have rarely been examined in the literature to our knowledge. More broadly, in-store marketing initiatives, in general, also remain understudied (Shankar, 2014). Our research attempts to bridge this gap between current practice and marketing theory by providing an initial assessment of consumer responses to shopper solutions (see Figure 1 for an overview). Overall, our findings from an online study and a retail lab study suggest that solutions can greatly benefit both consumers and retail service providers, alike. We discuss the implications of our findings below.

Recent reports estimate that up to 70% of in-store marketing initiatives in the USA prove to be unprofitable (Nielsen, 2015). Moreover, many retailers generate only thin profit margins – particularly in the grocery industry (Bolton *et al.*, 2010). With this in mind, our findings reveal that shoppers have higher intentions to purchase products when they are offered together as a solution rather than in their respective categories around the store. This suggests that retailers may be able to increase profitability by electing to strategically display higher grossing products in their solutions. They may also choose to include their own private label products in solutions that typically yield higher per-unit margins than national brands (Garretson *et al.*, 2002).

Our Study 2 results further revealed that shoppers express higher loyalty and WOM intentions toward retailers when they offer solutions (compared to when they do not). These findings are critical to retailers, as positive WOM is linked to both increased revenue (Duan *et al.*, 2008) and new customer recruitment (Shankar, 2014). Retailers relatedly expend considerable resources to keep loyal customers and attract new ones (Inman and Nikolova, 2017). This is particularly true given the emergence of online retailers, such as Amazon.com, that have made it more difficult for retailers to draw and hold shoppers in physical stores (Newman *et al.*, 2018). It is worth noting that all of the positive effects of solutions on consumers' purchase, loyalty and WOM intentions documented here emerged without the use of price promotions (discounts) that reduce retailers' margins and profitability.

Next, we identified shopping convenience as the mechanism underlying the positive effects documented here. Given that physically searching for products in separate categories around stores is often burdensome and time-consuming, retailers can use solutions to help shoppers more quickly and easily find the products they need to fulfill their shopping needs. Doing so has very few associated overhead costs, further improving retailers' margins (i.e. solution implementation requires little to no money, labor or time). Convenience has also been shown to positively impact other critical outcomes such as customer satisfaction and switching behaviors (Seiders *et al.*, 2005).

Importantly, the retail lab setting in Study 2 allowed us to assess participants' perceptions of shopping convenience based

on their actual shopping experience in the presence or absence of a real solution. This gives us more confidence in our findings, overall, and particularly in those related to the mediating role of shopping convenience. It also answers calls for additional insight into the role of consumer investment of scarce personal resources (e.g. time, effort) in exchanges with service providers (Cronin, 2016; Lloyd *et al.*, 2014).

Lastly, we identified SS self-perceptions as an important consumer trait that moderates the effect of solutions on shopping convenience. Findings suggest that shoppers find solutions to be highly convenient, regardless of their SS self-perceptions. However, solutions enhance shopping convenience relatively more for those with stronger (rather than weaker) SS self-perceptions. As a result, the positive impact of solutions was relatively stronger – through shopping convenience – amongst shoppers with stronger SS self-perceptions. These findings can aid retailers' segmentation and targeting efforts. Retailers can easily assess shoppers' SS self-perceptions, as well as their specific needs and problems, through the market research that many are already conducting to guide their in-store marketing initiatives (GMA, 2011; Shankar *et al.*, 2011). They can then customize solutions accordingly for their customers who value shopping convenience the most. Our findings suggest that the SS segment should respond very positively to solutions, helping to maximize retailers' profitability, as well as the productivity of their limited (and highly valuable) in-store display space.

Conclusion, limitations and future research

There are several limitations here that may offer productive research opportunities moving forward. First, the solutions we used matched the participants' specific shopping needs. This was done to reflect the fact that retailers use shopper insights to create solutions that best meet their shoppers' expressed needs (GMA, 2011; Shankar, 2014). However, future research can examine instances when solutions only partially fit with shoppers' needs or goals (or do not fit at all). Solutions may also have contextual or temporal factors that impact their efficacy, which warrants additional investigation. For example, solutions may be more effective when the problem it solves is more immediate and pressing. Similarly, shoppers' perceptions of fit between the products in a given solution (or lack thereof) would be important to explore.

The present research also did not consider the price of the displayed products. Future research could assess shoppers' reactions to price increases and decreases of products in solutions, as they may be willing to pay premiums for the convenience afforded by solutions. We also did not manipulate where solutions are located in the store, so insight is needed on whether shoppers' reactions differ based on their placement (e.g. front vs back of the store). More research is also needed on consumer responses to various types of solutions across different industries (e.g. fashion, sporting goods, home décor) and across different shopping mediums (i.e. in-store vs mobile vs online).

Next, we identified shopping convenience as a primary mediating mechanism underlying the effects of solutions. However, future research should identify other constructs that (also) mediate these effects to provide incremental insight on

how, and why, consumers respond to shopper solutions. We also identified a specific type of shoppers, smart-shoppers, that responds rather favorably to shopper solutions. Additional insight is needed on how other types of shoppers, such as impulsive shoppers or more involved shoppers, react to shopper solutions (e.g. Sarantopoulos *et al.*, 2016). This may help identify important boundary conditions for the positive effects of solutions documented here. Lastly, our findings consistently emerged across multiple types of solutions, samples, and contexts (online and retail lab), helping to overcome potential generalizability limitations. However, future researchers should conduct field studies and/or use secondary data to further build upon these initial findings.

In conclusion, the present research represents one of the first examinations of consumer responses to shopper solutions to our knowledge. We believe it achieves several key objectives, including:

- providing needed initial insight into the effects of shopper solutions on both product-related and retailer-related outcomes;
- demonstrating the mediating role of shopping convenience; and
- highlighting the moderating influence of SS self-perceptions.

We hope these findings provide a useful initial framework for researchers to draw from, and build upon, when exploring the impact of solutions in the future.

Notes

- 1 While snacks can be broadly categorized as “food”, the items used here (and snacks, in general) are typically merchandised physically apart from each other in their own sections and/or aisles (e.g. soft drinks are found with other soft drinks; chips are in the chip aisle, etc.; Shankar, 2014; Shankar and Kannan, 2014). Many snack items are also often consumed together (e.g. sweet and salty items; Shankar and Kannan, 2014).
- 2 Both independent variables were mean-centered prior to testing $H5$ and $H6$ to avoid potential multicollinearity issues (Aiken and West, 1991).

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Further reading

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