

Plastic-free grocery shopping: Understanding opportunities for practice transformation

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The reliance on single-use plastic packaging is a growing concern globally. Approximately 78 million metric tons of plastic packaging are produced annually, with only 9% being recycled. The environmental impact of single-use plastics is significant, endangering wildlife and contaminating the food chain. This brief highlights key findings and recommendations based on research exploring consumer behaviour towards plastic-free shopping, particularly in New Zealand, where such practices are emerging but not yet widespread.

Key findings

The research identifies four mechanisms that support the emergence of plastic-free grocery shopping:

1. Destabilisation of Conventional Shopping Habits

Pro-environmental consumers are beginning to challenge and disrupt their established shopping routines due to a growing awareness and discomfort with the environmental impact of single-use plastics. This destabilisation is often triggered by an emotional response to the prevalence of plastic packaging, leading to a critical examination of their shopping practices. For instance, some participants expressed feelings of guilt and frustration when encountering excessive plastic in supermarkets, which catalysed their shift towards seeking plastic-free alternatives. This emotional reflexivity is crucial as it marks the initial step towards changing consumer behaviour.

2. Envisioning a Plastic-Free Future

After experiencing a disruption in their shopping habits, pro-environmental consumers begin to envision a future where plastic-free shopping is the norm. This process involves actively seeking information, resources, and inspiration to make this vision a reality. Participants described various ways they engaged with this process, such as following social media influencers, participating in initiatives like 'Plastic-free July,' and learning from friends who already practiced plastic-free shopping. This envisioning phase is characterised by a proactive approach to aligning shopping habits with environmental values, leading to a conscious and deliberate effort to reduce plastic consumption.

3. Emotional Connection and Commitment

A strong emotional connection to the practice of plastic-free shopping emerged among participants. This connection is not just based on guilt or a sense of obligation, but also on positive emotions like joy,

satisfaction, and pride. Participants reported feeling a sense of accomplishment and moral satisfaction from reducing their plastic use, which reinforced their commitment to this lifestyle. This emotional aspect is significant as it sustains motivation and helps consumers overcome the inconveniences and challenges associated with plastic-free shopping. The emotional connection also extends to a community aspect, where sharing experiences and successes with others further strengthens commitment.

4. Adaptation to New Shopping Practices

Adopting a plastic-free lifestyle requires consumers to develop new shopping habits and strategies. Participants described various adaptive behaviours, such as meticulously planning shopping trips to multiple stores that offer plastic-free options, bringing reusable containers, and learning new skills like baking or gardening to reduce reliance on packaged goods. This adaptation process can be challenging, requiring time, organization, and sometimes additional expenses. However, the participants' strong environmental convictions and the emotional rewards associated with plastic-free shopping help them persevere through these challenges. This adaptability is a key factor in the sustainability of plastic-free practices and highlights the potential for broader societal change if supported by appropriate policies and infrastructure.

The research indicates that consumers with a strong pro-environmental orientation are willing to overcome the challenges associated with plastic-free shopping. By supporting these consumers and facilitating the transition to plastic-free grocery shopping, retailers and policymakers can contribute to reducing the environmental impact of single-use plastics. The proposed recommendations aim to create a supportive environment for plastic-free shopping, making it a viable and attractive option for a broader audience.

Policy recommendations

Our research shows that those who with a pro-environmental outlook can overcome formally habituated grocery shopping routines to shop plastic free, despite the difficulties. It also points to opportunities for intervention in this process that can support the emergence of plastic-free grocery shopping.

Recommendations for retailers:

- Retailers can support consumers by making plastic-free shopping accessible, visible and incorporated into everyday grocery shopping as conveniently as possible.
- Promotion may not achieve direct behaviour change, but can help foster the destabilisation of conventional grocery shopping and communicate the business ethos.
- Online communities can provide an opportunity for potential recruits to connect and support others and marketing promotional tools such as social media influencers can help foster a sense of plastic-free normality.
- Pro-environmental consumers are a potential source of word-of-mouth marketing, which can be a powerful promotional tool for plastic-free businesses

Adaptation: policies supporting convenience

- Policy incentives can reward specialist retailers to focus on increasing convenience of plastic free shopping, e.g. with measuring cups to reduce food waste, provision of plastic-free goods.
- Policies should encourage plastic-free transition in supply chains, which can translate to greater access for consumers and lower prices.
- Manufacturers should continue to invest in plastic packaging alternatives where package-free distribution is not viable.
- Policies can support the provision of plastic-free lunch goods at workplaces and schools.



Image from Markus Spiske on Unsplash.

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