Before supermarkets, smart retail was embodied in the efficient, personal service of the typical neighbourhood grocery stores. Supermarkets squeezed out those stores and introduced the convenience of buying many different products in one location. Today, that location is increasingly digital, the retailer and customer completely separated, and a customer's value lies not in their friendly wave as they enter a store, but in the data displayed in their online behaviour. Digitalising the shopping experience in this way may open the way for what retailers consider smart retail technology, but as two leading researchers in food retail have discovered, that technology is only as effective as the willingness of humans to use it.

Dr Kimberly Thomas-Francois, Thompson Rivers University, Canada, and Professor Simon Somogyi, University of Guelph, Canada, show that food retail is subject to specific customer demands and expectations. Adopting new digital grocery shopping technology depends on consumers' willingness to engage with it and their experience. Social acceptance makes us more willing to engage, and consumer learning in this regard is mainly informal.

Digital technology has increasingly shifted the retail experience online. Dr Kimberly Thomas-Francois, Thompson Rivers University, Canada, and Professor Simon Somogyi, University of Guelph, Canada, are scholars of consumer behaviour in the food business and are particularly interested in how technology shapes food retailing – a concept called ‘digital grocery shopping’. Food is a crucial area of retail research because, unlike t-shirts and trainers, it is critical for human existence. Retail technology for items such as clothing may have evolved to the point where shoppers can step into a simulated shopping space, browse aisles, and drop products into a virtual cart for delivery to their door, but food retail is subject to different customer demands and expectations – you can't test the texture of a block of virtual brie. Over the past few years, Thomas-Francois and Somogyi have focused their research to finding out why, when people buy food, they are willing to embrace certain forms of smart retail technology but not others and what shapes their reasons for doing so. Understandably, what they've discovered is valuable for retailers planning the next levels in digital grocery shopping.

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leadership, value and supply chains, digital technology in the food and hospitality business.

Dr Simon Somogyi holds the Arrell Chair in the School of Hospitality, Food and Tourism Management, in the Gordon S. Lang School of Business and Economics, at the University of Guelph, Canada. He is a teacher and researcher in food and agribusiness sales and distribution management and smart and virtual food retailing.

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Further reading

What are the most important characteristics of a new digital grocery technology that would encourage its uptake?
KT: Convenience, value in use to the consumer, and digital trust and security are all very important factors necessary to promote digital food retailing.

How did the COVID-19 pandemic accelerate the development of digital grocery shopping?
KT: Due to the lockdown and the fear of the consequences of human contact, many shoppers including the traditionalist consisting mostly of older consumers began to use digital and virtual means of food shopping. It is important to note that such products, fruits and vegetables still had special in-store demand even during COVID-19 while other packages of foods were purchased in-store.

KT: Fear of contagion played a part in the adoption of some digital grocery shopping modes. For example, ‘click and collect’ became popular as you don’t have to go into a store but you also don’t have to pay for delivery. But this model is now becoming less popular.

Debt card when they exit. Thomas-Francois and Somogyi have discovered that the willingness of consumers to embrace such online or smart grocery shopping depends on their relationships with the technology behind it – how ready they are to use it – and the optimisation of their learning once they start using it.

KT: To encourage the uptake of digital technology, the level of integration of the use of technology in people’s lives. How well or comfortable the general population is with using the technology. And the value that it brings to the user. It largely depends on what different groups of consumers value, whether it’s their time and convenience or the power to choose their preferences.

SS: A big factor is the interaction with trusted peers. Particularly family and friends. The adoption of technology is also impacted by culture, with certain countries around the world more reticent to a digital life.

KT: How would you like to see follow researchers in your field build further on your findings?
KT: Good question, the area is evolving, and we expect over time that the Gen Zs begin to lead the world, adoption will be faster. As the world embraces the novel metaverse and begins to live in virtual spaces, it would be useful to see how this might be able to affect grocery shopping. There is a lot of unknown, therefore much more to study. Also, how much capital investments would retailers be willing to make to digitise grocery shopping would influence how far we can go.

SS: Younger consumers are more amenable to using these technologies. Older consumers are less amenable, so future research projects should focus on what model – or even a hybrid traditional/digital shopping model – is needed that provides trust and convenience to older consumers. The advent of completely unstaffed grocery stores and how they change consumer use is of interest, too.

KT: What within a culture encourages an uptake in new technologies such as smart shopping?
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