

Does literacy affect shopping ability?

Alan Greenspan summed it very well when he said: "...to succeed, you will soon learn, as I did, the importance of a solid foundation in the basics of education - literacy, both verbal and numerical, and communication skills." South Africa like the rest of the world is thriving to increase the literacy levels of its citizens.

Functional literacy demands that an individual leverage on reading and writing skills to complete tasks in specific contexts. Typical in a supermarket, consumers need to tap into these skills in order to locate desired products and meet their shopping needs. The primary aim of purchasing products is to satisfy a need or a want, hence it is essential that consumers possess appropriate skills crucial for good communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving. This includes communicating in the English language as well as uses one's mathematical knowledge successfully to make sound shopping decisions. In countries like South Africa where English is the business language, yet most of its citizens are not first language English speakers, purchasing products can be very challenging.

A study was conducted by Sisa Mhlanga, a [Master's](#) student in the [Department of Marketing Management](#), aimed at discovering the decision-making processes and coping mechanisms used by functionally illiterate consumers in South Africa. The study focused on the use of literacy skills to aid consumer decisions that emerge during grocery shopping in a self-service supermarket. These decisions include choosing products amongst competing brands; interpreting product labels, reading prices and finally settling for the best deal. Further, the study focused on how consumers meet their shopping when faced with inadequate literacy skills.

The study was conducted among Gauteng grocery shoppers and the findings suggest that a significant portion of the adult population lack the basic literacy skills needed to function in a grocery shopping environment. They struggle in the supermarket to meet their shopping needs. These shoppers faced challenges that include: a) not being able to read in-store signage and product labels written in English; and b) inadequate numeracy skills needed to make calculations. These consumers do not enjoy shopping as it can lead to verbal abuse by fellow shoppers or/and shop floor staff in the supermarket. However, these illiterate shoppers have devised means of coping with their challenges. The coping mechanisms can be divided into two categories: a) to deliberately conceal the deficient literacy skills; and b) to openly seeking help. The findings imply that all stakeholders (i.e academics, policy makers, retailers) concerned must each play their role in assisting these adults, most of whom are women who shop on behalf of their families.

This research was conducted as part of the fulfilment of the [MCom degree](#) in Marketing Management in 2011 in the [Department of Marketing Management](#) under the supervision of [Theuns Kotzé](#). The dissertation is available electronically from: <http://upetd.up.ac.za/thesis/available/etd-05092011-154032/>