Scanning the self-checkout situation in grocery and retail

The good, the bad, and the ugly

Deciding how your company should implement self-checkout—or whether you should do so at all—is no easy task.

Ensuring a positive self-checkout experience is so important. Its successful (or unsuccessful) use can directly impact customer satisfaction scores, operational efficiency, and profitability at both the brand and location level.

SMG recently conducted proprietary research on U.S.-based self-checkout in grocery and retail stores to get a closer look at what consumers like, dislike, and actually do when it comes time to using self-checkout.
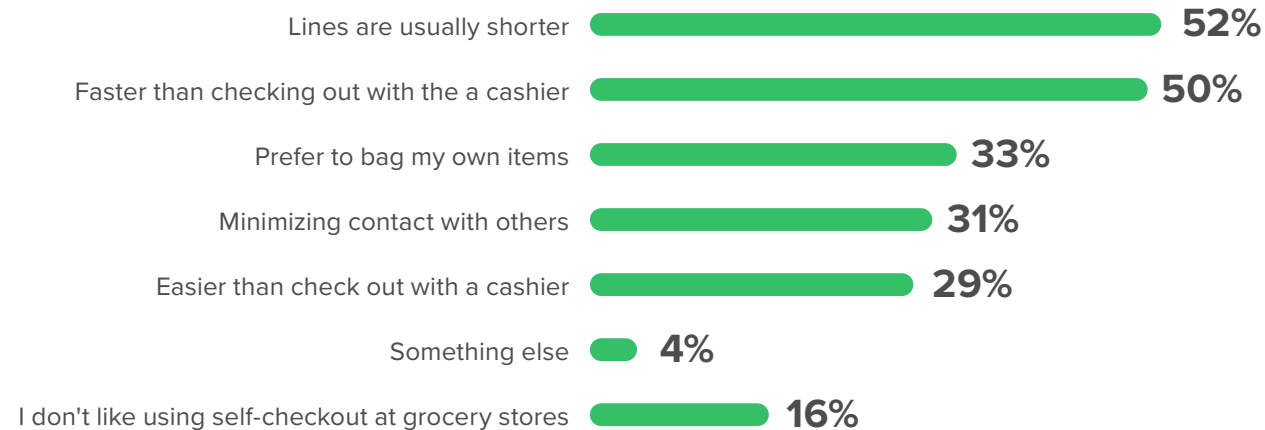
Read on to find out what we learned from the study

3 KEY TAKEAWAYS IN GROCERY

1. Consumers enjoy using self-checkout because it reduces time spent waiting in line, it's perceived to be easy to use, they prefer to bag their own purchases, and they enjoy the minimal interaction with others.

2. Readily available human assistance that can resolve technical issues quickly when they arise is essential to a positive self-checkout experience.

3. The self-checkout experience is improving along with traditional checkout, but it hasn't yet closed the gap—overall satisfaction (OSAT) scores using cashier lanes are still higher than those at self-checkout.

What do you like about self check-out at grocery stores?

Lines are usually shorter	52%
Faster than checking out with the a cashier	50%
Prefer to bag my own items	33%
Minimizing contact with others	31%
Easier than check out with a cashier	29%
Something else	4%
I don't like using self-checkout at grocery stores	16%

If lines are short and they move quickly, **self-checkout users are happy campers.**

Diving deeper into grocery

Self-checkout in grocery stores has grown over time, but isn't without challenges.

Without a trained employee guiding the process, shoppers are at the mercy of those who reached the checkout lane first. Customers despise waiting in lines, and slow shoppers frustrate those behind them.

While the lack of human interaction is a plus for most self-checkout shoppers, technical difficulties almost always require employee assistance.

To minimize complaints, stores should ensure team members are visible and available when customers need help. **And of course**, they should do whatever possible to prevent tech issues in the first place (more on that later).

⚠️ Four of the five most common issues experienced at self-checkout require employee assistance. Until technology is more reliable, people are still vital to the process.

Which, if any, of the following issues have you experienced when using self-checkout at grocery stores?
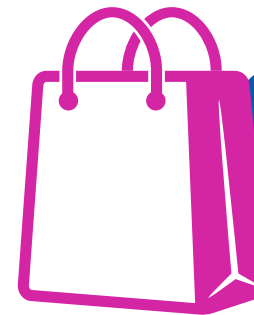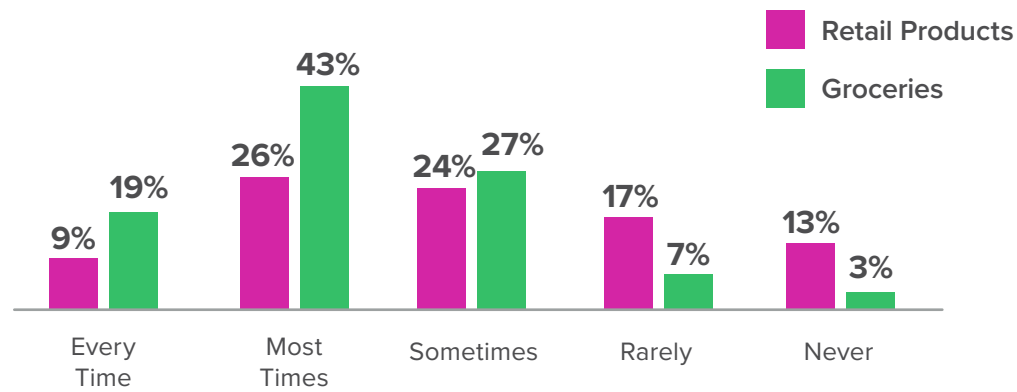
Issue	%
Needing assistance for an unknown reason	39%
Shoppers ahead of me were slow	37%
Items not scanning	33%
Issue applying coupons	33%
Incorrect pricing	30%
Not enough self-checkout kiosks available	30%
Lack of staff assistance	24%
Items did not have a barcode to scan	23%
Difficulty looking up items	17%
Took longer than expected	16%
Item bagging issue	16%
Payment issue	14%
Issue connecting loyalty/rewards account	9%
Forgot to pay for an item	3%
Something else	4%

3 KEY TAKEAWAYS IN RETAIL

1 More than a quarter of retail consumers say they rarely or never use self-checkout.

2 Slow-moving shoppers and pricing errors are the biggest self-checkout deterrents.

3 More than half say "number of items" doesn't influence their checkout method decision.

When shopping for clothing, home goods, or other retail products OR groceries, how often do you use self-checkout?

Legend:
- ■ Retail Products (magenta)
- ■ Groceries (green)

	Every Time	Most Times	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Retail Products	9%	26%	24%	17%	13%
Groceries	19%	43%	27%	7%	3%

While 35% of retail consumers usually or always use self-checkout, it's more popular in grocery stores.

Additional retail-focused insights

The primary motivator for using self-checkout in retail stores is speed—consumers report self-checkout lines are typically shorter and faster than cashier-run lines.
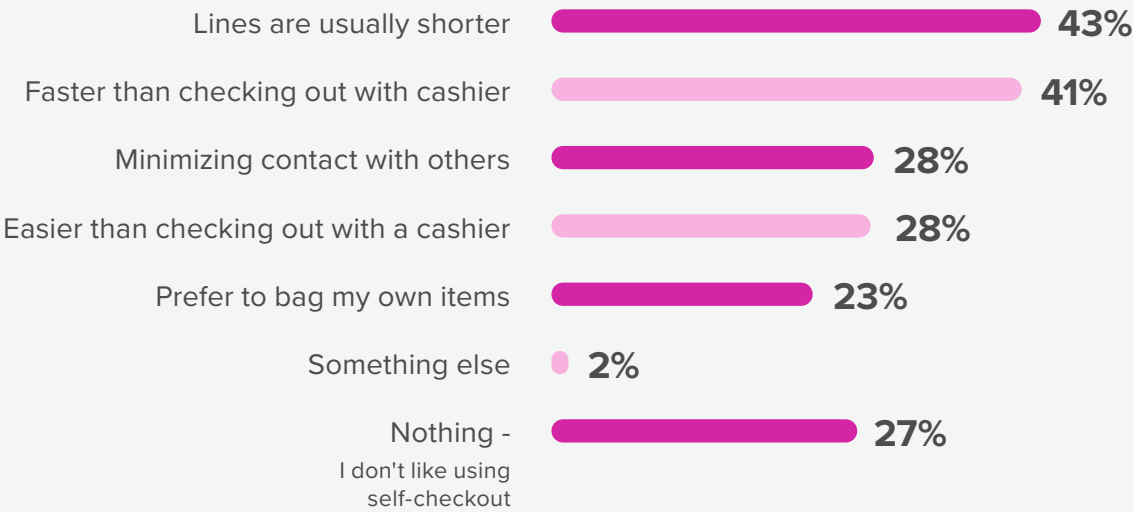
However, more than a quarter say they don't enjoy using self-checkout in retail stores at all.

When considering whether to use self-checkout or roll with traditional, 51% of retail customers say item count is not a significant factor.

That said, one in four indicated they would shop at their regular retail stores less often if the stores began ***"enforcing"*** item limits at self-checkout.

Many shoppers aren't crazy about self-checkout in retail settings, but they like the idea of it getting them out of there faster.

What do you like about using self-checkout at retail stores?

Lines are usually shorter	**43%**
Faster than checking out with cashier	**41%**
Minimizing contact with others	**28%**
Easier than checking out with a cashier	**28%**
Prefer to bag my own items	**23%**
Something else	**2%**
Nothing - I don't like using self-checkout	**27%**

What to watch and how to move forward

1 Many large grocery and retail brands are blaming self-checkout for higher levels of shrink, and some are removing self-checkout stations or adding item limits.

Others—mostly smaller retailers and grocery stores—are continuing to add self-checkout lanes. We're interested to see whether this trend continues or if they'll eventually pull back, too.

2 Brands are incorporating artificial intelligence (AI) to mitigate common self-checkout pain points and create more personalized experiences.

AI and other technology is being used to ensure customers are scanning all items and typing in the correct product codes for each item.

Generative AI (GenAI) is helping brands improve the speed and quality of their self-checkout offering, and can be used to analyze structured/unstructured customer feedback and provide leaders with key insights.

Whether your brand is rolling out self-checkout for the first time, expanding within locations, or even reducing lanes or eliminating them entirely, SMG can help measure self-checkout's effect on your customer and employee experience, as well as its associated ROI and bottom-line impacts.

See why 500+ brands choose SMG

Psst, it's probably got something to do with both our tech AND our humans being great.

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