

The Impact of the 2008 Economic Recession on the Survival and Growth of UK Supermarkets

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Abstract.

Many big businesses, like Woolworths and Lehman Brothers, went out of business following the start of the most recent economic downturn. Supermarkets in the United Kingdom (UK) did not display the consequences of the economic recession, although many other industries did. Thus, the purpose of this study was to dispel misunderstandings among the public, media, and supermarkets. The purpose of the study was to determine whether or not UK-based supermarkets have been impacted by the current economic downturn.

A survey of the literature was used in the study to learn more about supermarkets and the economic downturn. The latest financial results of the chosen supermarkets were also retrieved with the aid of the literature review. All of the information gathered from the literature review helped the researchers come up with appropriate research questions for the main study. Two Asda and Tesco hypermarkets, two Sainsbury's and Morrison's middle-sized supermarkets, and discount stores Aldi and Lidl were the focus of the primary study. All of the chosen supermarkets' shop floor managers were asked to take part in in-person interviews. The primary study focused on bargain shops Aldi and Lidl, two Asda and Tesco hypermarkets, and two middle-sized Sainsbury's and Morrison's supermarkets. Interviews were conducted in person with store floor managers from each of the selected supermarkets. Despite certain limitations in the research methods, the author believes that the results would have been the same even if the restrictions had been fixed.

Keywords: Economic Recession; United Kingdom; Supermarkets; Survival; Hypermarkets.

1. Introduction

There have been other recessions in the past century besides the one that occurred in the late 2000s. The Great Depression, the Depression of 1919–1921, the recession of the mid-1970s, the recession of the early 1980s, the recession of the early 1990s, and the present recession all started the trend of economic recessions (Smith, 2008). Every recession has a unique cause, such as the financial crisis brought on by a lack of liquidity due to bad practices by the major banks (BBC News, 2008), while "the 1919-1921 depression" resulted from World War 1 (Smith, 2008). The subprime mortgage industry in the U.S. caused the global economic recession in 2008 (Eskildson, 2008). This resulted in significant debt for the UK, which had a cascading effect on several areas, including employment. A person's cash flow and mortgage eligibility were also impacted by the recession (Hain, 2009). Since the early twentieth century, supermarkets have played a significant role in people's lives all across the world. There are different types of supermarkets in the UK: bargain stores like Aldi and Lidl, medium-sized supermarkets like Morrison's and Sainsbury's, and hypermarkets like Wal-Mart and Tesco (Mintel, 2008). There is currently no clear answer about the effects of the recession on the UK grocery industry, which is why this research is being conducted in pursuit of a more conclusive explanation. Therefore, this study investigates the impact of the economic recession on UK-based supermarkets.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Economic recession

An economic recession occurs when banks and other lenders abruptly cut back on lending or credit to reduce their risks (Kerley, 2008). The recession can also be described as a capital crisis in which banks lack equity capital. Unemployment rates have historically been a reliable predictor of an impending recession, however, this notion has never been validated (Bernanke & Lown, 1991).

2.2. Causes of the economic recession

The rise in subprime mortgages in the United States (US) was the primary cause of the most recent economic downturn. Mortgages offered to borrowers with poor credit scores who have a high likelihood of defaulting are known as subprime mortgages (BBC News, 2007). Collins (2008) highlighted those who utilised the credit default swap financial tool to support their wagers against one another—that is, investors who disagreed and

turned to this tactic to defend themselves—abused it. Credit default swaps were used when investors foresaw an institution's demise and paid a third party to insure them as though they were business shareholders (Collins, 2008).

2.3. Effects of the recession on supermarkets

Mooney (2009) claims that because Morrison's has more local stores than its competitors, customers do not have to travel far to visit a Morrison's store, whereas Asda, Tesco, and Sainsbury's are less widely distributed, requiring customers to travel significant distances. In terms of stock prices, supermarkets have suffered, as evidenced by the 21% decline in Wal-Mart, the 5% decline in Tesco, the 2% decline in Sainsbury's, and the 9% decline in Morrison's (Mooney, 2009). There is a rough indication from analysing the stock market results that UK-based supermarkets have fared much better than US-based supermarkets, it should be noted that there are not enough results to draw firm conclusions, such as one UK supermarket compared to just one US supermarket.

Tesco and Sainsbury's have seen a decline since the start of the recession, indicating a shift in consumer attitudes towards sustainability. Consumers who previously regularly bought organic products at premium prices are now looking to buy cheaper products. Price comparison advertising has become more prevalent on television and in newspapers, indicating a significant shift in the pricing and promotion strategies of UK supermarkets, such as the price wars between Tesco and Asda on television and in newspapers (Collins, 2008; Kerley, 2008). Therefore, the mixed views on the impact of the recession on UK supermarkets have warranted further research.

3. Research Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 20 supermarkets based in Scotland. The sampling was finalised through purposive sampling. The retrieved findings were analysed through thematic analysis. Supermarkets from three distinct groups in terms of market share were targeted for primary research. Asda and Tesco represented the hypermarkets, Sainsbury's and Morrison's represented the medium-sized supermarkets along with Aldi and Lidl which represented the discount supermarkets.

The type of people targeted as participants in the research were managers. They would be able to indicate whether or not a supermarket has been affected by the recession, from a change in any of the shop floor activities, i.e. customer numbers on the shop floor may indicate effects of the recession. The target participants were contacted in advance via email or telephone communication to confirm their participation in interviews. The consent and anonymity of the participants and the confidentiality of the data were informed by the Data Protection Act 2018 (UK Government, 2024).

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1. Pricing and promotion

Tesco's manager responded that there has been a substantial shift in pricing and promotions, with the product price being the biggest change compared to before the economic downturn when managers from the other supermarkets were questioned about the changes. According to Tesco's management, more frequent adjustments were made to promotions than before. They added that Tesco launched numerous one-pound sales and buy one, get one free promotion following the economic downturn.

Speaking with the Asda Livingston manager, it was discovered that the only significant changes Asda has made to its pricing and advertising are to use rounded numbers rather than decimals. Other than that, not much has changed. In contrast to Asda and Tesco, Morrison's deputy general manager emphasised the company's entirely distinct pricing and promotion strategy, emphasising that during the recession, Morrison's concentrated more on highlighting the freshness of items like salads, sandwiches and meats. Morrison's has developed a unique product line as a result of this concentration, drawing in a large number of new clients, particularly during lunch.

The management believe that Morrison's pricing and marketing didn't need to be drastically changed because they had previously made modifications after the purchase of Safeway and are already known for providing superior quality products at lower costs. The manager of Sainsbury's Murrayfield store in Edinburgh claims that the company has made major adjustments to its pricing and promotions, just as Asda and Tesco. Sainsbury's financial performance has improved as a result of these adjustments, and they have reduced the market share of its primary competitors (Sainsbury's, 2009).

The manager at Lidl Livingston also confirmed that there haven't been many significant changes to pricing or promotions, although there have been instances where certain products have been aggressively marketed (such

as one-litre Coca-Cola bottles that are on sale for free). Television promotions have increased, and there are more half-price promotions, but the prices of some products have increased to capitalise on the company's reputation as a discount retailer that is in high demand in the current market. After learning this, it is reasonable to expect that discount stores would rarely alter their prices and promotions because of the increased price consciousness among consumers brought about by the economic downturn.

4.2. Product lines

The manager from the Asda Livingston store claims that the company has attempted to reduce the number of product lines from low-cost brands to premium brands because they feel that when discount stores like Aldi and Lidl have fewer product lines, they use less space and make it easier for customers to choose products based on price. They also think that there is a greater emphasis on low-cost products being offered at a premium quality.

The store manager of Tesco's Edinburgh location claims that while Asda and Morrison's have reduced their lines, the company has increased its premium product lines and frozen lines, but it has also reduced its product lines in instances where food items have been given priority over non-food items because of shop floor space constraints. Sainsbury's management claimed that the company did not see the need to modify any product lines, even though the three major grocery chains in the UK had done so. Managers at Lidl and Aldi said that their product lines had not changed, like Sainsbury's.

4.3. Cost-cutting measures

The management of Asda claims that there has been a general increase in the focus on expenses, with a close monitoring of the store's gas and electric energy usage. The economic downturn has resulted in a significant tightening of the product waste allowance. For instance, the weekly allowance for expired or damaged products in the bread area at the Asda store has been reduced from £2500 to £1000. Morrison's management claims that by creating recyclable packaging and reducing product waste, attitudes towards costs have significantly improved.

Even though Asda, Tesco, Sainsbury's, and Morrison's have made significant cost-cutting changes, Aldi Livingston's management said the company hasn't made any significant changes in this area. However, Lidl Livingston's management noted that while company costs haven't changed much, a government incentive for a recyclable area in every store has been introduced.

4.4. Recruitment

The management of Asda Livingston claims that hiring at the hierarchy level is about the same as it was before the recession, while lower-level hiring is more cost-effective and is dependent on the number of hours that need to be filled. Additionally, the management stated that Asda has improved working conditions by introducing easy-to-open packaging for products to facilitate shop floor workers' shelving and by encouraging the hierarchy to abandon the suited look in favour of clothing that is more akin to that of lower-level employees. According to management, Tesco's hiring levels have dropped across the board since the recession. Additionally, he stated that working conditions have drastically changed, with lower levels of communication between lower-level employees and the hierarchy, more user-friendly operations within Tesco stores, and greater incentives (such as training courses, promotions, and pay scale increases) offered to employees to encourage them to perform better for the company and to ensure their loyalty.

While Asda and Tesco have seen changes in their hiring practices and working circumstances, Aldi, Lidl, and Morrison have maintained the same hiring practices at all levels and the same working conditions for their employees. Sainsbury's management reported a different pattern in hiring, with hiring increasing quickly while working conditions stayed the same.

4.5. Innovation

The managers of Sainsbury's, Morrison's, Asda, Aldi, and Lidl have all made it clear that there haven't been any notable differences in innovation before and after the economic downturn. However, Tesco's management has said that there have been several differences in innovation, including the introduction of customer club cards that allow Tesco to analyse trends in customer lifestyles and, according to the store manager, a Kaizen (Imai, 1996) philosophy that encourages employees to generate new ideas.

5. Discussion

High-street stores have disappeared because consumers are choosing to buy at supermarkets, which offer a greater variety of goods under one roof (Wood, 2009). Consumers buy various products from supermarkets to save spending time and money travelling to other stores for different products (Wood, 2009), however, the

findings from this research challenge this notion. Tesco's management indicated that there may be plans to reduce the non-food sections in their stores because sales of non-food items were lower than they were before the economic downturn and they thought that the space taken up by non-food items was impeding sales of food items. Murchie (2009) claims that Asda, Tesco, Morrison's, and Sainsbury's had created 18,000 new jobs, defying the economic downturn. Therefore, Murchie (2009) supports the findings from this research.

Mooney (2009) notes that supermarkets have been using more advertising to promote various products ever since the economic downturn started. Wood (2009) notes that supermarkets have made extensive use of pricing and advertising to advertise high-end goods at reduced costs. Therefore, the findings align with the literature.

Wilson (2009) notes that Morrison's has seen a boost in sales as a result of providing fresh food, in-store baked goods, and in-store meat items. Morrison's management stated during the study that the company recently had a boost in revenue as a result of customers purchasing fresh food, in-store baked goods, and in-store meat items. Therefore, the findings about product lines align with the literature.

Therefore, no changes have been made to the way the business is run. The shift in British consumers' attitudes during the recession from a premium quality product at a high price to a lower priced product indicates that the new consumer would rather have a premium product at a discount price from Aldi and Lidl than a premium product at a high price from the top four supermarkets. In other words, supermarkets in the UK have been impacted by the economic downturn.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

6.1. Key finding

The market share has had such an impact that Aldi and Lidl have seen a significant increase in both customer numbers and revenues, while the more established supermarkets have seen no change in either of these metrics despite numerous adjustments made in various areas. It is also possible to conclude that Asda, Tesco, Morrison's, and Sainsbury's would have seen a decline in their respective client bases and earnings if the changes had not been made.

After conducting in-person interviews with management from Asda, Tesco, Sainsbury's, Morrison's, Aldi, and Lidl, as well as analysing the literature, the main conclusion was that the recession hurt the supermarket industry in the UK because consumers wanted premium products at lower prices, which the discount retailers of Aldi and Lidl were able to provide. At the same time, Asda, Tesco, Morrison's, and Sainsbury's were negatively impacted.

There were a few areas that impeded progress after the research concluded that the economic recession had an impact on supermarkets in the UK, but these issues can be readily avoided if the study is conducted again. If the study is conducted again, the first piece of advice for prospective researchers would be to conduct interviews over the phone instead of travelling long distances. They should also stay in contact with the management of various supermarkets via phone or email regarding any changes in supermarket operations. This would guarantee that the data collected would not expire because it would be updated regularly if anything new happened. Despite effective time management, the data gathering for this study was hurried, therefore another piece of advice for researchers would be to devote more time to the entire project.

6.2. Recommendations

6.2.1 Innovation

According to earlier studies, teachers may be able to increase their productivity by using state-of-the-art technology in standard business procedures (Al Jaghoub et al., 2024; Gilani et al., 2023b; Gilani et al., 2024; Subramanian et al., 2024). Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) have revolutionised business operations across all industries (Aseer et al., 2024; Gernal et al., 2024; GM et al., 2024; Moussa et al., 2024).

The advantages of implementing AI or ML for supermarkets are demonstrated by the successful application of these technologies in higher education to improve students' learning and employability (Krupicka et al., 2024; Yasin et al., 2021). However, as Gilani et al. (2023a), Golshan Sorour et al. (2024) and Khan et al. (2024) demonstrate, the supermarket's leadership style might influence the uptake of cutting-edge technologies. In the MaxPro Fitness research by Yasin et al. (2021), for instance, the owner's motivation and attitude were credited with the company's success since they dared to try out novel and inventive approaches to grow and improve the company (Sulthan et al., 2022). This demonstrates how a supermarket's risk-taking leadership style increases the likelihood that innovations will be adopted.

6.2.2 Infrastructure

The writers emphasise how important infrastructure is to a supermarket's survival and growth, especially for customers in remote or rural areas. For example, if consumers have access to adequate broadband infrastructure, they might enjoy shopping at supermarkets more (Gilani and Faccia, 2022). However, Gilani et al. (2022) demonstrate that clients may face infrastructural challenges due to their rural location, especially if they want to order groceries online for delivery. Improved infrastructure may ensure an improvement in employee well-being through added convenience and support via digital technologies (Jaafari et al., 2023; Tantry and Singh, 2016; Tantry and Singh, 2017). Therefore, improved resources in a work environment may lead to increased job satisfaction, ambition and motivation among staff (Tantry et al., 2018).

6.2.3 Partnerships

The authors advise supermarket executives to think about partnering with companies in other industries to increase the company's growth prospects. Collaborations between companies from various industries have advantages such as enhanced practice-based learning and increased employability for students and customers which has been demonstrated in research conducted by Yasin et al. (2023).

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