

# MAPHM Symposium 2017

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Abstract Title:

## **Product assortment in grocery stores: application of the GroPromo tool in Malta**

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### Abstract

**Background.** Malta's high prevalence of child and adult obesity has generated interest in the food environment as a potential target for obesity prevention interventions. The placement of food products within food outlets is a key strategic element of the 'marketing mix' (comprising price, product, promotion, and place) that influences consumer purchasing behaviour. Supermarkets and grocery stores are the primary outlets for food and beverages purchases in Malta. Placement strategies that increase the visibility of healthier foods in grocery stores and supermarkets have been shown to significantly enhance the sales of healthier items, leading to potential improvements in dietary choices. This observational study aimed to characterize the promotional in-store environment of grocery stores in Malta.

**Methods.** The GroPromo tool was designed to assess promotional strategies employed within grocery stores, particularly the placement and promotion of seven product categories in nine key locations of varying prominence within each store. This instrument was used to measure aspects of the grocery store environment that may influence food purchasing from a nationally representative, random sample of grocery stores between March and April 2014. Grocery stores were defined as stores selling fresh fruit and vegetables, and included specialized green grocers, discount stores, and supermarkets. All localities in the Maltese islands were ranked by median socioeconomic deprivation and categorised into tertiles. At least three localities from each tertile were subsequently randomly selected and audited. The tool was applied to one small (1 checkout), one medium (2-4 checkouts) and one large (5 or more checkouts) grocery store in each audited locality was assessed (n = 28).

**Results.** Unhealthy food and beverage items were placed in more prominent locations than fruit and vegetable items, regardless of grocery store size. Larger stores promoted proportionally more unhealthy foods in more prominent locations than smaller stores. There were no significant differences by area-level deprivation in the promotional practices of grocery stores of any size.

**Conclusion.** Although grocery stores are often thought to contribute to the healthfulness of the overall food environment, there is a potentially obesogenic consumer food environment in grocery stores in Malta. Public health interventions that aim to influence consumer food choices through product re-assortment (e.g. altering product placement within grocery stores to increase the accessibility of healthy food items, whilst conversely reducing the visibility and promotion of less



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healthy products) may improve the food environment in Malta and support more healthful food purchases.