

WO KANN MAN SPEISEN KAUFEN?

Will supermarkets in Germany ever embrace self-checkouts?

"Cash payment modules always make SCO systems expensive, which certainly led to a reluctance to invest on the retail side," he told DW.

The second reason he sees is a natural caution on the part of German retailers to invest in SCOs. "Retailers look carefully to see whether there are any advantages for their customers and customer loyalty," he said.

Tom Hutchings from RBR London agrees with both points, pointing out conservative attitudes on the part of both retailers and consumers. He believes there is a "chicken and egg" element in that German consumers are reluctant to embrace the technology when it is so rarely embraced by retailers themselves.

He also points out the historic opposition of discount retailers such as Lidl and Aldi to SCOs, as well as suggesting that there is a "different dynamic" in Germany in terms of relations between management and employees — a reference to the perception that SCOs endanger the jobs of checkout cashiers.

Stealing jobs and pastries

That's one of a number of negative perceptions that many consumers have associated with SCOs over the years. Others include the idea that they increase the risk of shoplifting, lead to less human interactions and create technological confusion — the "unwanted item in the bagging area" effect (a robotic refrain many who have used SCOs will have heard).

"According to our studies, habit is the main obstacle to using the self-checkout and this also includes interpersonal contact at the checkout, which many customers do not want to miss," said Horst.

"But fears of promoting job loss also continue to play a major role, although they are so far unfounded. Mistrust of the technology and a lack of self-confidence also occur, but are of secondary importance. Customers use self-checkout when they see clear advantages for themselves."

Supermarkets slowly get on board

While you may come across an SCO while shopping in Germany, they remain very much the exception. Yet that situation appears to be slowly changing.

A spokesperson for the REWE supermarket group told DW that 120 out of 3,600 REWE stores in Germany now had SCOs. It says it will add more depending on the specific dynamic of a given supermarket.

"At highly frequented locations, for example in large cities, there is often a location-specific high demand from customers for self-scanning checkouts in order to be able to pay for purchases faster and not be in the queue," the REWE spokesperson said. "The feedback from customers is exclusively positive."

A spokesperson for the Schwarz Group, which controls Lidl and Kaufland, said that Kaufland has used SCOs at selected branches for five years and plans to expand their use as a result of positive customer feedback.

More than 100 Kaufland branches employ the tech. However as of yet, Lidl has none. "Lidl is continuously reviewing new service offers," the spokesperson said.

Edeka, which allows independent merchants to run under its brand as franchises, said it could not provide exact numbers of SCOs at its stores due to that model. However, it says it is clear that more and more of its stores are using them due to customer demand. Edeka's subsidiary Netto is currently running an SCO pilot project in around 30 cities and it "has been very positively received by customers."

A self-checkout future

Germany may never use SCOs as much as its European neighbors for some of the same reasons they shun cashless payment systems, like the desire to remain anonymous while shopping. "Data protection is a valuable asset in Germany," said Horst.

Nonetheless, he believes data showing the high usage rate of SCOs when they are available to shoppers in Germany suggests they will eventually become part of the mainstream shopping experience in the country.