

South Korea's Virtual Supermarket

Online

shopping is nothing new, especially in South Korea, where the population is plugged in. But one supermarket chain there says it's gone a step further. HomePlus is testing out it calls a virtual store that allows shoppers with smartphones to buy their groceries while they wait for the subway.

At Seolleung station, there's a row of brightly lit billboards along the subway platform, with hundreds of pictures of food – things like instant noodles, bottled beverages and bunches of bananas.

Standing on the platform, a man in his 60s named Mr. Bae said it looks like an ad for a convenience store. When I explain that it's for a virtual supermarket that you access with your smartphone, he doesn't seem impressed. Mr. Bae said he doesn't have one so it's not for him, but it sounds like a good idea for youngsters.

In fact, young Korean adults in their 20s and 30s are exactly who the virtual store was designed for, according to HomePlus, the South Korean affiliate of the British supermarket chain Tesco. Project coordinator Jo Hyun Jae said young Koreans already rely on smartphones to take care of daily tasks.

"Our customers are really busy and many don't have the time to go to the supermarket to do their shopping," Jo Hyun Jae said. "So our virtual store allows them to save their time."

My friend 25-year-old Kim Yoona volunteered to give the new virtual store a try. After downloading the HomePlus app onto her smartphone, Kim stands on the subway platform, checking out what's on offer.

"I'm thinking of buying the Maxin Mocha Gold Might, an instant coffee mix," Kim said. "They have one, two, three, four, five, six kinds of coffee mix lines. Because Maxin is my favorite, I will buy this.

Kim holds her phone over the black-and-white Quick Response Code under the picture of coffee. There's a beep, and then the picture of the coffee mix appears on her phone screen. She selects what size bag she wants, and then the app asks her to enter where and when she'd like the product delivered.

HomePlus' Jo Hyun Jae said there are plans to put virtual stores in other subway stations, especially in areas close to universities, and later, in other countries.

"We think this concept can work outside of Korea," he says, "since many young people around the world are adopting smartphone technology."

But Kwon Ki-Duk, at the Samsung Economic Research Institute in Seoul, said there are aspects of Korean consumer culture that make technologies like the virtual store more likely to take off here. She pointed out that Koreans are very quick to adapt to new tech products.

"Koreans are really interested in converging and cramming many different functions into a single gadget and mixing technologies in order to find novel ways to complete ordinary tasks," Kwon said.

But Kwon said that she doesn't think South Koreans will abandon brick and mortar markets. For many Koreans, she said, going shopping is a way to relax when they finally have some down time.

She includes herself in that group.

After trying out the virtual store, Kim Yoona also said it can't really replace the real thing. "When I go to the real store, I can check the quality of the vegetables or fruits," she said.

For the moment, there's no smartphone app that can do that.