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Yellow sticker shopping as competent, creative consumption

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Abstract

This paper presents the preliminary findings of an empirical study into a specific and novel form of contemporary consumption: 'yellow sticker shopping'. This type of consumption involves the active targeting for purchase of food products that have been reduced in price because they are approaching their expiry date. Given the complexities of food provisioning in austerity Britain, that include both non-conventional sites like markets and food banks as well as conventional 'discounters' and high street supermarkets the analysis reveals how this form of food provisioning goes far beyond the 'cost-saving' accounts that might be expected. The research uses autoethnographic material in the form of vignette, constructed around research conducted in the North of England, together with analysis of an online discussion forum. Data are thematically analysed using literature on shopping and supermarkets and then organised according to the three dimensions of social practice: materials, competences and meanings. The paper makes three key contributions in relation to the practice of yellow sticker shopping. Firstly, that it has distinct spatial and temporal qualities and the role played by the space of the supermarket and its associated fixtures and technologies is important. Secondly, that the uncertain supply of yellow sticker goods results in unpredictability. Successful shopping is celebrated and characterised in ways other than the drudgery often associated with the weekly shop. Thirdly, it reveals an assemblage of competences, skills and knowledge not only in relation to grocery shopping but that take place in the home, around food, its storage and preparation and cooking and recipe knowledge. The paper concludes by outlining further planned research associated with the practice of yellow sticker shopping that will contribute to ongoing study into the alternative modes of food

provisioning and their spatialities that are characteristic of life in contemporary Britain.

Keywords: Consumption, yellow sticker shopping, supermarket, market devices, food provisioning, analytic autoethnography.

Introduction

According to Miller (1998), based on work within a UK context, “the most important activity in the experience of shopping, apart from actually bringing back the items purchased, is saving” (p.49). This argument has taken on even greater resonance in recent years due to austerity measures, rising food and fuel costs, growing inequality and precarity. Taken together, these factors have necessitated money-saving measures for many and extreme hardship for some. There have been a variety of institutional and organisational responses to these challenges in food provisioning including supermarket waste food redistribution schemes, food banks and food charities (Evans 2015; Lambie Mumford 2016). Meanwhile, contemporary grocery shopping practice more generally has been characterised by a migration of shoppers from the big four supermarkets to ‘discounters’ such as Aldi and Lidl, that have been able to thrive in a shopper climate where lower prices are actively sought.

There are, however, other ways in which the consumer can secure lower food prices, outwith the space of the discount store. One example is through yellow sticker shopping. Yellow sticker goods are products that have been reduced in price because they are approaching their ‘use by’ or ‘best before’ date. A discount is applied to these goods to encourage their expedition from supermarket chillers and shelves before their expiry date and alleviate food waste within the sector. Yellow sticker goods are so named because of the colour of the price reduction label often used to manually override the original product barcode. This price reduction strategy

became popular in UK supermarkets from the mid-2000s. Online discussion on the subject can be found on the chat forums of MoneySavingExpert.com (a popular website for consumers) in 2007 and alludes to its prevalence in the years preceding this (MoneySavingExpert, 2007). The practices of purchasing such goods are worthy of closer examination in part because they reveal the geographic complexities of food provisioning in austerity Britain, that includes both non-conventional sites and spaces (markets, food banks) and also conventional large high street supermarkets. But much more than this, the practice of yellow sticker shopping deserves critical attention because it is about far more than low-cost food provisioning. It requires, and reveals, a suite of consumption competences that are very different to the routine practices that underpin the large weekly food shop: the supply of goods when yellow sticker shopping is uncertain and unpredictable; it cannot be undertaken with a 'shopping list' of required items; the temporal qualities of the food are critical as the items may not keep long, contracting the timeframe available to use the product before it spoils; the spaces of display of goods are highly specific and disrupt the familiar spatial organisation of the store; and particular sets of knowledge and understanding are required on the part of the consumer in relation to storage, preparation and use of unplanned and disconnected ingredients.

The paper firstly discusses the geographic literature on food shopping and supermarkets before outlining the methods employed in the research. The findings are presented in terms of the three analytical constructs applied by Shove et al (2012) to the study of practice. These provide insight into the micro-geographies of the supermarket, the equipment and materials employed in yellow sticker shopping as well as identifying the distinctive knowledges, skills and meanings associated with the practice. The analysis reveals just how competent, creative and skillful yellow sticker shoppers are in negotiating the unconventional rhythms and unpredictable products available within the liminal spaces of the large supermarket and in putting

them to use within the home. The paper concludes that these attributes take us far beyond 'cost-saving' accounts and help contribute to wider work into the nature and place of alternative forms of grocery provisioning in contemporary Britain. A plan for further research is also detailed.

Supermarkets, shopping and thrift

Yellow sticker shopping is predominantly undertaken in the supermarket, a traditional site of consumption characterised by the 'fixtures and fittings of retail capital' (Gregson & Crewe 1997, 243) that is familiar in the routine shopping practices of households. In accordance with the work of Callon and Muniesa (2005) supermarkets might be conceptualised as calculative collective devices. Shoppers populate a socially constructed arena, whose intricate organisation has been framed to facilitate the repeated exchange between retailer and customer. This 'calculative space' (Callon and Muniesa 2005) is based on a regime of sociotechnical devices that "intervene in the construction of markets" (Muniesa et al, 2007, 2) and help to format prices and products and that orchestrate control mechanisms. In his analysis of supermarkets and supermarket accoutrements such as trolleys, signage and aisle layout, Cochoy (2007, 2008) explains how these market devices make shoppers act and 'do things'. The architecture, infrastructure and equipment of the supermarket are all orientated towards a certain consumer journey around store, framed to encourage the purchase of goods. In the practice of yellow sticker shopping these market devices take on different significance and roles.

The rationale for visiting calculative spaces such as the supermarket in order to source provisions is dominated by a morality of thrift that equates to a devotional act of love to the family (Miller 2008). Grocery shopping revolves around spending money in order to save money to spend on loved ones at a later date. "The most important element of thrift within supermarket shopping is the search for savers"

(Miller 2008, 51). 'Savers' refer to various types of bargain including supermarket own brand or value ranges as well as price promotions. However, the notion of saving is by no means the same thing as spending less money or indeed consuming less (Evans 2011) but is instead "the art of doing more (consumption) with less (money)" and thus "thrifty practices are practices of savvy consumption, characterised by the thrill and skill of 'the bargain'" (p.551) (see also Gregson and Crewe 2007). Yellow sticker shopping as a practice situated around the provision of lower-cost food provides new insight into these understandings. Having set out the theoretical basis of the paper, discussion now turns to the methods employed.

Methods

The research comprises an 'analytical autoethnography' (Anderson 2006) featuring 'self ethnography' (Alvesson 2003) retold through vignette together with the analysis of online material on the social practice of yellow sticker shopping. 'Self ethnography' is where the work of 'researching' is not a "major preoccupation, apart from at a particular time when the empirical material is targeted for close scrutiny and writing" (p.174).

The social settings for the self ethnography were a number of supermarkets in a large city in the north of England where one author spends significant amounts of time provisioning food for their family. The researcher is an "observing participant" (Alvesson 2003, 174) and part of a community of shoppers provisioning food in a similar way. The methodological focus utilises the position they find themselves in through the course of their day-to-day life. It is important to note here that this is not a day-to-day life characterised by the lived experience of exclusion or poverty that might necessitate and drive others in very different socio-economic circumstances to perhaps shop in this way. As such there are likely to be big differences in the experiences of yellow sticker shopping. These are to some degree captured by the

inclusion and analysis of additional data from an online community of shoppers. However, it is the practice of yellow sticker shopping within a supermarket context that provides the focus of this research and there is both the need and scope for further study planned by the authors to explore more fully the way that different personal, social and economic circumstances play out in the lived experiences of yellow sticker shopping.

On average the author practicing yellow sticker shopping does this twice a week, a midweek evening visit (between 5.00pm and 8.00pm) and a Sunday trip before most supermarkets close at 4pm. It would be common for this author to visit three supermarkets in one outing. The practice is undertaken to acquire food for their immediate household made up two adults and one child. This methodology makes explicit that findings do not stem from their systematic collection but from an “emergent-spontaneous” (Alvesson 2003, 181) approach that captures when something revealing happens. Over a six-month period from February 2016 to August 2016 an “extended set of incidents candidating for analysis” (Alvesson 2003, 182) was compiled. A series of visual and material prompts are employed to capture the detail of these incidents. They include photographs of purchased yellow sticker food and supermarket receipts. Both help to detail the date and time of purchases and itemise the individual products and price paid. An inventory of freezer contents listed on a mobile phone is also regularly updated as contents are added or consumed. The mapping and timing of supermarket trips and routes around store are also recorded. Special note is made of significant sites or spaces within the supermarket. These maps help to situate and contextualise the incidents as well as to trigger recollections worthy of interpretation and analysis. Vignettes or stories are then used to “micro-anchor” (Alvesson 2003, 182) the richness of a small number of shopping incidents providing useful ‘hooks’ from which to hang, display or displace theoretical interpretation.

The 'analytic autoethnography' also comprises data from an online community of yellow sticker shoppers. This takes the form of an online discussion forum. Rokka (2010) "suggests that any social phenomena need to be studied and analysed via the field of practices" (p.384). This type of online community is brought together through their association with an activity, place or circumstance or what they have in common (Kozinets 2015). The data consist of 968 discussion forum posts, from 326 contributors, spanning over three years from 1st March 2013 to 26th July 2016 on the subject of yellow sticker shopping. The forum is housed on the MoneySavingExpert website and is entitled 'Reduced bargains and yellow stickers shopping'. It sits under the main heading of 'Shopping and Freebies' and the subheading of 'Food Shopping and Groceries'. No login/password is required to view the forum contents. Access is freely and publicly available. The data were treated as archive material in the public domain.

During the qualitative content analysis of the discussion forum data re-reading was important, especially in noting patterns and reoccurrences. The data were then abstracted, categorised, compared and integrated with the material generated from the self ethnography and the literature (Spiggle 1994) on shopping and supermarkets. This approach was enhanced by regular movement between data and theory to capture and combine related data into the wider categorical themes that make up the three key analytical constructs of social practice - materials, competences and meanings (Shove et al 2012). In approaching the data in this way, yellow sticker shopping is conceptualized as a social practice that relates to other practices associated with the maintenance of domestic life such as cooking. What characterises a practice is a nexus of 'doings and sayings' (Schatzki 2002). In the next section, the elements that make up yellow sticker shopping are presented.

Recognising the practice and the role of market devices

Online discussion reveals yellow sticker shopping has different variants but the practice of yellow sticker shopping is something that shoppers, employees and casual observers recognise. There is detail of specific shopping trips planned according to times or dates but also of more opportunistic, fortuitous affairs when reduced goods simply await purchase in assigned chillers. Trips may involve 'waiting around' in the aisles for reductions, actively seeking out or 'stalking' reducers or they may be quick and efficient 'pop-ins' after work. Many contributors complain that the practice can be tense and characterised by aggressive, selfish or greedy shoppers. These aspects are bound up with the materiality of the practice. Shoppers are described as "sharks" who use their "trolleys as weapons" to prevent others from reaching reductions. The supermarket trolley, a market device intended to provide valuable storage for selected items is corrupted in its intended use (Cochoy 2008) to provide a screen to isolate against competing shoppers. There are also further issues with the technologies and market devices associated with the practice including incidences of malfunctioning price reduction equipment or barcode labels not scanning at the checkout. The wrong labels can also be applied by supermarket staff either out of error or convenience to get the job done quickly.

The materiality of the adhesive stickers also provides yellow sticker shoppers with an indelible account of the price to be paid for the item that is not normally visible through the supermarket barcode system. This is because supermarket shopping is ordinarily characterised by the temporary dissociation of "choices from payment" as "prices are forgotten in the literal sense, since price labels remain stuck to the shelves" (Cochoy 2008: 20). This results in a pause in calculation and imbues the shopping basket or trolley with liminal qualities that encourage the accumulation of goods because financial reckoning does not take place until the shopper reaches the checkout and payment is calculated. This is not the case in the practice of yellow

sticker shopping when the reduced (and often the original) price of the good is clearly indicated on the reduction label. This serves as a reminder to shoppers of both money saved and money spent as they travel their own passage around the store in ways that have not been anticipated by the architects of the retail environment.

All of this indicates how yellow sticker shopping disrupts the intention of supermarket devices. This is due in large part to the location of food that requires reduction. This is already on shelves and in chillers so tasks like stock checking and the display of goods often take place on the shop floor in the presence of customers. These actions might ordinarily take place at night (Cochoy 2007) or backstage (Goffman 1990). The equipment associated with this work such as the distinctive beep of the scanner, the presence of a distinctive trolley used by employees to place the items while they are reduced, and the presence of the employees themselves can provide useful cues in shopper detection of the practice.

Times and spaces: When and where, competences and know-how

Knowing when and where food is going to be reduced is critical and the ability to schedule shopping trips at the right time is central to the practice. Various price reductions take place throughout the day but the final reduction usually takes place sometime in the afternoon or evening. The availability and quantity of supermarket food approaching its expiry date (and therefore potentially available to buy at a discount) is unpredictable. A common question by newcomers to the discussion forum is 'What time should I go shopping for yellow sticker items'? The response is that timings will vary both across and within stores. However, there is significant agreement that research within stores to discover general patterns of reduction will subsequently increase chances of securing food that has been (significantly) reduced. Some shoppers do this through prolonged periods of time spent in store observing day-to-day activity; others have simply asked staff or other shoppers when

they usually reduce food. Familiarity with geographical layout of the store and the location of reductions is crucial to successful consumption. The movements of supermarket staff are also important.

Yellow sticker shopping is distinct from the traditional weekly shop in many ways. The shopping list that is often an orientating feature of grocery shopping accounts (Cochoy 2008; Miller 2008; Brembeck et al 2015) has little role in the practice of yellow sticker shopping because of the uncertain supply of items for purchase. This type of shopping is also characterised by much waiting around and revolves around specific sites and locales within the supermarket. These tend not to follow the linear routing through aisles and shelving (Cochoy 2007). Navigation around the store is predicated on prior experience or cues in the sights and sounds of the supermarket. The everyday signage or promotions in store (Cochoy 2007) do not guide the practice of yellow sticker shopping. Instead, other sites, including random chill-cabinets and end-of-aisle shelves, take on significance and importance. This draws attention to the micro-geography of the store and to the ways in which yellow sticker shopping disrupts the familiar spatial configuration of the supermarket.

Vignette 1: Planning, where and when.

It's Sunday afternoon. I usually visit several supermarkets before closing. 2.00pm is early for reductions but it affords time to walk around the key locations in store (pre-packed bakery, store bakery, reduced chiller (meat and fish), reduced chiller (general), cream cakes, store cupboard reduced section) to check for potential reductions. These aren't hard to spot because most will be discounted by half price already - a red label indicates this. The final markdown in this supermarket is 80% of the original price.

Often as I arrive at this time an employee will be sorting through the bakery goods and putting items dated today into a trolley to be reduced. She will then push the trolley into the warehouse to reduce the goods and return to the shopfloor when done, or move the trolley to the store cupboard reduction area and reduce the items as she goes along. If she works on the shopfloor she doesn't mind reducing items on request.

Next on route are the cream cakes. These are not already discounted so to spot potential reductions you need to read individual use-by dates. I spy some cakes dated today so I hang around between the aisles. The employee making his way to reduce food on this section must know that I am there and recognise me from previous visits but there is little competition from other shoppers at this site of reduction. When the goods are wheeled in their trolley to be displayed in the main reduction area they attract attention from other shoppers. This employee is happy to let me take from the trolley so I loiter here. After a final look around store for new reductions I pay and leave.

Not all shoppers will plan their yellow sticker practice in the same way but the more experienced from the online discussion forum reiterate that time, patience and a keen eye are all important. There is detail on how some consumers carry out reconnaissance visits to stores to check dates on items so they can identify future reductions (Gregson & Crewe 2007 discuss similar themes in relation to charity shopping). Some 'loiter' or follow supermarket staff to identify potential items or look in the baskets or trolleys of other shoppers to check for yellow sticker items they may have missed. Adaptability is important because the sites and timings of yellow sticker shopping are subject to change.

The level of price reduction secured on yellow sticker items correlates with perceived competence in the performance of yellow sticker shopping. Forum members congratulate each other on securing goods for a fraction of their original price. A significant number of posts consist almost entirely of lists of yellow sticker food that have been purchased. These lists are often itemised with the original price and the price paid. This echoes the charity shop 'bargain boasting' found by Gregson & Crewe (2003) and points to expertise within the practice. However, competence is demonstrated not only through the price paid but also through the item itself, the qualities of that the particular foodstuff and in knowing what to do with it, or how to store it once bought. This is important because it reveals that the practice is about much more than just provisioning 'cheap' food. Foodstuffs that are secured at low prices are often celebrated because of what can be 'done' or made with the item as well as for the cost-saving that is associated with the reduction. This means that meat, fish, fruit and vegetables are especially prized. Competent yellow sticker shopping is dependent upon 'using' what is purchased. As one forum poster acknowledges this sometimes makes for an interesting challenge and reveals an overlapping relationship between the competences and meanings of the practice.

Meanings – saving, creating, fun and shame.

At first sight the practice of yellow sticker shopping might be understood as the epitome of Miller's (2008) theory of shopping as searching for 'savers' or bargains. This is because of the money-saving aspect inherent in the practice of yellow sticker shopping. For some forum contributors they practice yellow sticker shopping because they do not have the means to purchase goods at their regular price. Some are desperate and feel like they are 'living on fresh air'. They time their shopping trips in the hope of finding reduced foods. Some of the reasons for their financial constraints include job loss, job insecurity, relationship breakdown or living on a state pension, or single or limited income. Others actively choose to shop in this way

because they want to save money or because it's a great way to stretch the budget, some shop this way because it is fun.

When food is reduced to "silly prices" the list of items purchased appears to increase. However, whilst it is true that there are many incidences in the discussion when shoppers admit to buying things (or more of things) because they are (so) cheap it is rare for consumers to declare that they have no use for the items. The concept of 'using up' is inherent within the competences associated with the practice. It is clear that the price reduction of food does allow shoppers to purchase and try food that they would not otherwise buy. This perhaps affords some credence to the act of saving as an expression of devotional love (Miller 2008) that allows household members to be treated through the preparation, cooking and sharing of food that would not otherwise be on the menu. Many contributors ask for advice and guidance on what to do with do with items they have purchased. There is also reference to meals comprising food that has been purchased that day that needs to be eaten quickly, or meals consisting of lots of ingredients that might not ordinarily be put together. Improvising, being creative, innovating, trying new things and new methods of preparing and cooking food are all important attributes associated with the practice according to the contributors to the forum.

Vignette 2: The raspberry incident

I look around to see who else is watching or waiting. An assistant is checking the dates on fruit and printing off stickers for dozens of punnets of British raspberries.

They should be £3.00. The stickers read £0.25. I am excited. There is a couple nearby not taking much notice.

I've wanted to have a go at making jam for a while. I recently made marmalade with reduced Seville oranges. I've discovered you don't need fancy equipment and can make do with a large saucepan. Of course I have no idea how many raspberries I need, but they are only 150 gram packs. As the assistant puts some reduced punnets into a trolley I ask if I can take some. "Yes". I quickly put eight in my basket and deliberate if I need more. The couple come across and take four. I decide to put some more in my basket.

As I line up fifteen punnets of raspberries at the checkout I can see this looks rather greedy so I feel the need to announce to the checkout assistant that "I am going to make jam and I don't really know how many raspberries I need".

Feelings of excitement and fun are also commonly associated with yellow sticker shopping. The thrill of the bargain is associated with the practice of yellow sticker shopping in much the same way that it is observed in shopping at car boot sales or charity shops (Gregson and Crewe 2003). There are those that claim to 'love' or 'adore' yellow sticker shopping or to be addicted and 'bitten by the bug'.

However, along with feelings of pleasure there may also be feelings of embarrassment or shame. There are three key dimensions to this. The first is associated with shopping for reduced goods in general, perhaps because they might be perceived as inferior or second-rate or because shoppers have no choice but to shop in this way. The second is inherent in how the practice is sometimes performed and the third is in relation to the large quantities sometimes bought.

There are references to discomfort at having to 'hang around', at 'following' the person with the gun and 'returning several times' to the reduced chiller. Some

shoppers hide their yellow sticker purchases within their other shopping or turn them over so the labels cannot be seen. Associations of shame or embarrassment can be particularly prevalent when shoppers buy large quantities of heavily reduced items or when they feel embarrassed about the economic or personal circumstances that require them to shop for reduced price food. There are however frequent rebuttals to these attitudes within the forum which extort the virtues of shopping in such a thrifty and astute manner and that reassure doubters that there is no cause to feel shame or embarrassment. Indeed, many forum contributors profess to the accomplishment of the practice.

Conclusions

In a period when concerns about rising food prices are becoming ever more pressing and non-conventional forms of food provisioning are receiving growing media, political and academic attention, the practices of shopping for low-cost food demand investigation. Drawing on theoretical contributions from economic sociology and human geography, alongside data organised according to the analytical constructs of social practice theory, this paper has focused on the practice of yellow sticker shopping as played out in the key site of the supermarket.

The paper has made three key interventions. Firstly, in relation to time and space. There are distinct spatial and temporal qualities to the practice and the role played by its associated fixtures and technologies is important. This is revealed through the exposure of key sites within the micro-geography of the retail environment that differ from those acknowledged in other readings (Cochoy 2007, 2008). Certain shelf locations of little previous significance take on importance. The supermarket is then navigated in recognition of these and whereabouts of store employees and their reduction equipment and not in accordance with the careful planning of retail architects. Secondly, the unpredictability of the practice runs counter to conventional

accounts of grocery shopping with a list. The uncertain supply of yellow sticker goods also means they can be highly prized and sought after and the thrill of the chase in securing a 'bargain' can characterise the practice as fun which is in contrast to accounts of grocery shopping as boring and mundane and associated with drudgery and trudge. Thirdly, this paper connects the space of the store with the home. This is because competent yellow sticker shopping is found to be dependent upon 'using' what is purchased. This emphasis upon utility is significant. Budgeting and household management (in terms of using up short-dated reduced-price food before it becomes waste) are important qualities that suggest an assemblage of competences and technologies not only in relation to grocery shopping but around food and its storage and preparation through cooking and recipe knowledge. The paper marks the start of research that will contribute to wider discussions on alternative forms of shopping and food provisioning. Subsequent work will further explore how the lived experiences of yellow sticker shopping varies across different socio-economic groups; how the practice is situated in relation to other shopping; investigate how the yellow sticker helps to re-value and re-brand food previously languishing unsold in supermarkets and follow the trajectory of yellow sticker items as they enter and circulate the spaces of the home to closer examine the domestic practices associated with cooking and storing these foods.

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