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Online food shopping reinvented: developing digitally enabled coping strategies in times of crisis

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted consumer food shopping. This paper aims to conceptualise, illustrate and explain how and why online grocery shopping has changed during the pandemic. Taking a shopping-as-practice approach and drawing on ethnographic interviews with 31 Swedish households, we analyse how online grocery shopping was performed during the pandemic. Our findings show that online grocery shopping was reinvented during the pandemic, it was no longer only a convenient mode of shopping, but became also a way to cope with the crisis brought about by Covid-19. This change, however, was demanding as developing and routinizing a new mode of shopping practice required substantial work on the part of consumers. Consumers had to engage in detailed planning, to learn to shop anew, and to develop temporal sensitivity. By developing this new mode of online grocery shopping consumers were able to cope, both practically and emotionally, with the challenges brought on by the restrictions. This study provides insights into consumers' capacities to manage a food crisis, showing that this capacity depends on both retailers' digital food platforms as well as consumers' pre-existing shopping competencies and social networks. We conclude by discussing both the managerial and societal implications of these results.

Introduction

This paper examines the practice of online grocery shopping during the COVID-19 pandemic. Shopping in general and food shopping in particular changed drastically during the pandemic (Babbitt, Babbitt, and Oehman 2021; Hassen et al. 2021b). Although general consumption levels went down, food consumption increased. However, while more food was being shopped for, it could not be shopped for in the same way. Lockdowns and social distancing restrictions made food shopping increasingly difficult (Sheth 2020). Food shopping without getting infected, or infecting others, became a priority for many consumers (see, e.g., Marinkov and Lazarevi 2021; Naeem 2021).

These changes have been well-documented. Research on food shopping during COVID-19 has explored changes in eating and shopping routines. Mainly using surveys, these studies have generated overviews of the changes in food practices occurring in

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Russia (Hassen et al. 2021a), the Lebanon (Hassen et al. 2021b), the USA (Chenarides et al. 2021), the Netherlands (Poelman et al. 2021), Serbia (Marinkov and Lazarevi 2021), and the Czech Republic (Eger et al. 2021), to name a few examples. Most studies show a significant change in consumers' shopping behaviour (Hassen et al. 2021a; Marinkov and Lazarevi 2021), including the reduction of food waste (Güney and Sangün 2021; Hassen et al. 2021a, 2021b) and a shift towards healthier diets (Güney and Sangün 2021; Hassen et al. 2021a, 2021b), but also, conversely, cases of unhealthy food consumption (Poelman et al. 2021).

Other studies have focused more squarely on changes to a specific mode of food shopping, e.g. panic buying or online food ordering, and the underlying psychological mechanisms of these modes of shopping. These studies show that consumers' perceived (transitory) vulnerability is increased by government measures (e.g., lockdowns and restrictions), social media communication, and conventional media coverage of the pandemic (e.g., TV and newspapers), in turn prompting consumers to shop for larger quantities of specific products fearing shortages or unexpected price increases (Islam et al. 2021; Naeem 2021; Naeem and Ozuem 2021; Prentice, Quach, and Thaichon 2021). In addition, studies looking more closely at online food shopping during the pandemic have taken an interest in the role that digital technology plays in supporting and driving online ordering (Kumar and Shah 2021), or at the factors influencing satisfaction when purchasing online during a pandemic (Dirsehan and Cankat 2021).

In summary, previous research on the topic of food shopping and COVID-19 has convincingly shown that food shopping has changed, has mapped out some of the differences between countries, and has offered in-depth examinations of the psychological mechanisms shaping specific modes of food shopping, which have become particularly important during the pandemic, e.g. panic buying and online food shopping.

While this is clearly valuable work, studies that look more closely at how changes in food shopping actually occur are largely absent from this emerging field of research. Most of the studies reviewed above show that food shopping has changed, but do not show or explain *how* it has changed. The studies that offer explanation as to why food shopping has changed tend to rely solely on psychological explanations. As a result, we know little about the actual practices involved, the re-skilling of consumers that is needed, or the changing meanings attached to these new modes of food shopping. If consumers change their food shopping routines and engage in new modes of food shopping to cope with the COVID-19 crisis, it is important to understand both how they are able to change and what is involved in these new modes of shopping.

To address this paucity, this paper examines in more detail the practice of online grocery shopping during the pandemic. Our aim is to conceptualise, illustrate and explain how and why online shopping has changed during the pandemic. By focusing on one mode of shopping, which has been particularly important during the pandemic – online grocery shopping – we hope to add to our understanding of food shopping during a crisis and retail change, and of the practice of shopping more broadly.

Theoretically, we take a shopping-as-practice approach. The shopping-as-practice approach has been employed to analyse shopping as a practical accomplishment involving materialities, meanings and competencies (Bulmer, Elms, and Moore 2018; C. Fuentes

and Svingstedt 2017; Tran and Sirieix 2020). In this study, we draw on this theoretical resource to analyse online grocery shopping as a specific mode of shopping involving a specific set of competencies, meanings, and materialities, and configured to address or mitigate, both practically and emotionally, the demands put on consumers in this stressful situation. This theoretical approach draws our attention to the complexity of food shopping practice, emphasising that this practice exists in a nexus of household practices and that, because of this, changes in shopping can both impact on and be impacted by surrounding practices.

Empirically, the study consists of 31 digitally-conducted ethnographic interviews with southern Swedish urban households, which had changed the way they shopped for food during the pandemic. The interviews were conducted using video conference software (Zoom and Microsoft Teams) and were designed to cover themes such as shopping performance online, trying out digital platform services and navigating digital platforms.

Our study shows that, not only did online grocery shopping increase during the pandemic, it also changed as a shopping practice. We argue that the version of online grocery shopping that developed during the pandemic is also a coping strategy – an effort for dealing with the demands created both by the threat of the COVID-19 virus and by the need for social distancing.

Online grocery shopping as practice

Practice theory is a school of thought that views the social as being made up of a web of social practices (rather than, for example, understandings or discourses). Practices – typically defined as a complex set of interconnected bodily and mental activities linked by understandings, know-how, emotions, motivational knowledge, as well as an array of material artefacts (Reckwitz 2002) – are considered the smallest unit of analysis.

Practice theory is widely used across the social sciences and has, for example, been employed in the fields of consumption (Shove and Pantzar 2005), design (Ingram, Shove, and Watson 2007), marketing (Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009), tourism (Östrup Backe 2020; Lamers, Duim, and Spaargaren 2017), and management, as well as organization studies (Corradi, Gherardi, and Verzelloni 2010; Corvellec 2010), to name but a few examples. In recent years, it has also been used to analyse shopping as a practice. Shopping-as-practice studies have, for example, examined the emergence of mobile shopping (C. Fuentes and Svingstedt 2017), how parents and children co-shop (Gram and Grønhøj 2016; Keller and Ruus 2014), the adoption of self-service checkouts (Bulmer, Elms, and Moore 2018), and sustainable shopping (C. Fuentes 2014).

The shopping-as-practice approach has been proposed as an alternative to the dominant psychological and socio-cultural approaches to shopping (C. Fuentes 2014; Tran and Sirieix 2020). In line with practice theory, shopping is approached as a set of interlinked doings and saying aimed at acquiring the goods and services required for the performance of other practices (C. Fuentes, Cegrell, and Vesterinen 2021; Röpke 2009). From this viewpoint, food shopping practices, like other practices, involve three types of basic elements (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012; Shove et al. 2007): materialities (this includes all artefacts/devices, larger infrastructures but also other material non-human elements), meanings (what shopping means, expected ends, correct ways of performing the

practice), and competencies (both the general understanding and the specific embodied know-how to correctly perform various modes of shopping) (see also, C. Fuentes, Cegrell, and Vesterinen 2021).

Practices, however, do not exist in isolation but are part of bundles or complexes of practices (Hui, Schatzki, and Shove 2017). Therefore, to understand shopping practice and its reconfiguration, we have to study the nexus of practices within which shopping exists. This is particularly relevant to the case of food, and has also been argued to be relevant to online grocery shopping (Droogenbroeck and Hove 2020a). Food practices typically exist within a chain of interrelated food practices where one is dependent on another. For example, eating is typically preceded by food shopping and cooking, and succeeded by washing and tidying up.

With additional complexity, food practices are also connected to and shaped by a number of non-food practices such as childcare responsibilities (e.g., picking up the kids), leisure practices (e.g., working out or going out with friends), and work practices and schedules (day or night jobs, shifts etc.) (Dyen et al. 2018). Because of this, the practice of food shopping cannot be fully understood by studying food shopping alone: We have to take into account the nexus of practices intersecting and interacting with food shopping (C. Fuentes and Samsioe 2020).

Our focus in this paper is shopping change. Food shopping is typically highly routinized (Dyen et al. 2018). Shoppers typically develop weekly food shopping routines (e.g., everyday shopping vs weekend shopping), where shopping occupies specific slots of time (e.g., after work) and is connected to a specific set of practices (e.g., cooking dinner). Intervals, durations and sequences of actions are then faithfully repeated in the performance of food shopping. This makes food shopping difficult to change under normal circumstances. Conversely, food shopping can also be dynamic. Practices are continuously being reformed; i.e. elements are added or changed, reconfigurations are done, and the temporal and material structures enabling and anchoring practices change. Also, because practices are interlinked, changes in one can cause ripples effect leading to the reconfiguration of an entire nexus of interlinked practices (C. Fuentes and Samsioe 2020).

In our case, the emergence of new modes of food shopping is not the result of these everyday dynamics but a response to a broader crisis. Crisis situations often suspend, albeit temporarily, established norms, conventions and procedures, creating a liminal state (Orlikowski and Scott 2021). In this liminal state, established practices and routines are commonly abandoned as they are either practically impossible to perform in new situations or lose their meaning in new contexts. This, in turn, opens up for creativity, whereby novel ways of doing things are experimented with and implemented (Orlikowski and Scott 2021). Thus, under times of crisis practices are often remade, as their typically lock-in and routinized character is temporarily disrupted.

Drawing on our practice-based approach, we set out to understand and conceptualize how shopping change in this time or crisis, looking closer at the new mode(s) of food shopping that emerge in this new context. More specially, our practice-based analysis will show that the break in routine brought about by the Covid-19 crisis opened up an opportunity for consumers to try new shopping modes. The new grocery shopping mode that developed was however less focused on exploration and more on coping with the crisis situation at hand. Online grocery shopping was

reinvented as a practice during the crisis. This involved both the practical adaptation of the practice and as well as changes in the meaning of the practice (what it means, why it should be carried out). These changes, in turn, required substantial work from consumers, the development of consumer competencies, and the redesign of the digital food shopping infrastructure.

Method: ethnographic interviews with households

To investigate how consumers have been developing new ways of food shopping during the COVID-19 pandemic, we conducted ethnographic interviews (Spradley 1979) with 31 Swedish households. The fieldwork was conducted over a period of six months, from January to June 2021. We recruited households by posting recruitment notices both on supermarket notice boards and in social media groups that were targeting food shopping during the pandemic. To find new participants, we also used our social networks and referrals from participants. We sought participants who had changed their food shopping by, for example, starting to shop for food online, or who had increased their online grocery shopping. The households recruited were mainly in urban areas (with a few exceptions in the countryside) in southern Sweden. These households differed in terms of age, household composition, and occupation. For details regarding the households, please see Table 1.

Table 1. Research participants.

	Interview alias	Household	Age interval	Profession/Occupation
1	Lars	Couple	60–70	Teacher higher education
2	Susanne	Family/2 children	55–60	Office worker
3	Anna	Single	50–55	Teacher higher education
4	Moa	Student/family, 2 grown-up children	20–25	Student
5	Karin	Single	50–55	Cultural worker (unemployed)
6	Hanna	Family, 3 children	40–45	HR Manager
7	Marita	Couple	60–65	Administrator
8	Gunhild	Single household	75–80	Retired
9	Elin	Family, one child	35–40	Nurse (parental leave)
10	Anette	Couple	55–60	Teacher higher education
11	Caroline	Couple	30–35	Consultant
12	Erdem	Single	45–50	Student
13	Kerstin	Couple	75–80	Retired
14	Mats	Family, 2 children	55–60	Counselor
15	Julia	Family, 2 children	40–45	Midwife
16	Magnus	Family, 2 children	45–50	High school teacher
17	Ulla	Couple	70–75	Retired
18	Ingrid	Couple	65–70	Retired
19	Malin	Family, 2 children	45–50	Consultant
20	Mariann	Couple	70–75	Retired
21	Ola (M)	Couple	50–55	Sales manager
22	Catarina and Erik	Family, 2 children	45–50	Recruitment manager & Office manager
23	Isabella	Single household	45–50	Priest
24	Ulrika	Family, 2 children	40–45	Business owner
25	Linda	Couple	45–50	Communicator
26	Eva	Couple	65–70	Retired
27	Mikael	Single	45–50	Financial advisor
28	Helena	Single	50–55	Customer service manager
29	Britta	Couple	50–55	Regional manager
30	Sandra	Family, 2 children	35–40	Student
31	Jenny	Couple	25–30	Graphic designer

As Table 1 demonstrates there was variation in the sample, but the majority of the participants were women aged between 40 and 60. While females dominate our sample, they act as representatives for households that typically (but not always) include men. Furthermore, it was not uncommon that spouses or children were consulted during the interviews, to for example double check specific details surrounding the household shopping.

The digital ethnographic interviews were conducted using video conference software (Zoom and Microsoft Teams). The interviews were arranged as private video calls. The link to the video call was shared with the participant at the time when the online meeting room was created; in order to guarantee privacy in the best way, the meeting room was created in close connection with the start of the interview. When working with digital interviews, we secured the consent of the participants twice (as also mentioned by Gray et al. 2020). Firstly, by explaining the study to the participants and asking them to read and sign a consent form concerning their participation in the study (recording the interview and using the interview data), and secondly by verbally asking for consent to record the interview just as it started, which was also followed by an automated voice in the software announcing the recording of the interview (which the participant agrees to by clicking continue within Zoom).

Following Spradley (1979), the ethnographic interviews conducted were qualitative in nature, contextual, informal, semi-structured and aimed at understanding both a set of actions and their meanings. Following the guidelines for ethnographic interviews (Ibid), the interview guide included a few descriptive 'grand tour' questions on shopping for food during the pandemic, questions which were supplemented by a number of follow-up questions focusing on specific themes such as shopping performance online, trying out digital platform services, and navigating a digital platform. During the interviews, the participants were asked to show us how they utilized the digital platforms to do online shopping. The interviews lasted between 45 and 80 minutes, being recorded using video conference software and transcribed verbatim.

The focus of the analysis was on the practice of online grocery shopping, how it was performed, what elements/resources were involved, and how this mode of shopping had changed as a response to the Covid-19 crisis. The practice theory outlined above works as a lens, guiding the analysis and development of the categories, but not determining them. The coding process was guided by questions such as: How was shopping online carried out? How do consumers interact with websites and apps? What kind of skills were utilized by consumers? The material was analyzed using a constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014). The coding of the material was done using Nvivo software. The coding process, e.g. exploring new themes and modifying codes, was regularly discussed by all three authors at analytical meetings. The themes developed are presented in the following section. The material is illustrated using quotes.

Results and analysis: a new mode of online grocery shopping emerges

While consumers developed multiple ways of managing their food shopping during the pandemic (see, e.g., Basara and Skogman 2021; Marinkov and Lazarevi 2021; Naeem and Ozuem 2021), none was more prominent than online grocery shopping. This mode of food shopping, which had already started gaining ground in Sweden, became the main

solution for many to the problem of social distancing. As we will show below, this also meant that online grocery shopping was reinvented as a practice; it changed from a convenient mode of food shopping to a necessary coping technique used by consumers. This reinvention was accompanied by a number of other changes as regards to who performed this shopping mode, how it was performed, and the digital platforms involved. However, before moving on, we need to set the scene by discussing the Swedish context.

The Swedish case: shopping subject to restrictions

Even though Sweden never went into a full lockdown, several policies and recommendations still impacted consumers' possibilities of doing their shopping. In March 2020, the Public Health Agency of Sweden formulated several guidelines intended to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 (https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/the-public-health-agency-of-sweden/). These recommendations and guidelines included general advice, e.g. work from home, stay at home when experiencing symptoms, socially distance when away from home, and comply with local instructions at, for example, restaurants or shopping venues. For shopping venues (stores and shopping malls), there were specific recommendations and guidelines; e.g. shop alone, avoid going into stores if you are experiencing symptoms, wash your hands or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, and practice social distancing.

Looking more closely at food shopping, online grocery shopping accelerated during the second and third quarters of 2020 (E-barometern 2020). Yet, overall shopping for groceries (both online and in-store) increased the most during March 2020 as Swedes started hoarding (E-barometern, 2020). This suggests that, in Sweden, as in many other countries, COVID-19 restrictions resulted in radical changes to how food shopping was being conducted.

Coping with a pandemic by shopping for food online

As practice theory makes clear, a practice has to be meaningful in order for it to be performed and thereby also reproduced. It has to make sense to those performing it. As we have indicated, our study suggests that online grocery shopping during the pandemic was meaningful mainly as a coping strategy (Echeverri and Salomonson 2019; Folkman and Lazarus 1980); as a way of addressing a problematic situation brought on by the pandemic. Consumers suddenly found themselves in a vulnerable situation. They could be infected with a potentially fatal disease, and they could infect others. Their movement and agency were delimited by restrictions and government guidelines. Online grocery shopping was thus meaningful as a safety practice. The correct and expected end of the practice changed and was now not only performed as a convenient, inexpensive or fun way of grocery shopping (Driediger and Bhatiasevi 2019; Elms, Kervenoael, and Hallsworth 2016; Singh and Rosengren 2020), but also as a coping strategy to address a situation in which consumers were vulnerable (Elms and Tinson 2012).

While some participants admitted to still buying groceries in-store, for others shopping groceries online had become their main mode of provisioning. Shopping for groceries online and having them home-delivered enabled consumers to avoid travelling to and from the store and visiting the store itself.

For some, this change to online grocery shopping came gradually, as they found in-store food shopping increasingly difficult or risky:

> Well, I felt that, now I don't want you to go shopping anymore at five in the afternoon. So, then we switched completely to shopping online. Cause we, well we'd have been able to go shopping on Saturday evenings maybe. But maybe there are other things you'd rather be doing on Saturday evenings. (Linda)

As this interview extract illustrates, consumers would try to find 'odd' hours to go and do their grocery shopping, typically early in the morning or late at weekends in order to avoid other consumers and maintain social distancing. This was also commonly recommended by food retailers. As time passed, this became inconvenient as it did not fit in with the everyday practices of consumers. That is to say, it did not fit into the established temporal order of household practices whereby, for example, Saturday nights are for leisure activities rather than household chores. This inconvenience motivated consumers into engaging in online grocery shopping.

Social distancing was, of course, more important for those who saw themselves as members of at-risk groups, due to age or a pre-existing medical condition. For these consumers, avoiding stores became important early on in the pandemic:

> …… quite quickly, we felt that we didn't want to be in shops so much. And that, of course, is partly due to my husband having a weak immune system too. So, we felt we wanted to protect ourselves. And then we started having a bit of a look. . . . / I'd never shopped on the web before. That is, for food I should say. (Eva)

In these cases, online grocery shopping was a crucial coping strategy that allowed the household to provision safely. Health issues, previous studies have shown, are a common trigger of online grocery shopping (Droogenbroeck and Hove 2020b). So, while the far-reaching effects of COVID-19 on food shopping may be unprecedented, switching to online grocery shopping in order to cope with health issues or disabilities is not (Elms and Tinson 2012).

Others started ordering food online not to avoid getting infected, but to avoid infecting others. In some cases, the event that prompted consumers to start ordering food online was contracting COVID-19:

> And then when the pandemic arrived, both myself and my partner got Covid quite early on, you see. Last spring. At the start of April. And then we had food delivered to us by *Mathem* or *ICA* and others who do all that. So, then we made a bit of a start on that. And then we ordered, we continued ordering takeaways almost more than before. As that was when we were ill, you see. So, neither of us really had the strength to make food. (Elin)

Here, we see that online food ordering is both a safety measure – not infecting others – and a necessary form of support for the infected household which, due to the symptoms experienced, did not have the energy to shop for or cook food.

Another version of this mode of shopping was shopping groceries online to help others cope with the COVID-19 crisis. In these cases, it was a concern for the well-being of theses 'others', often elderly family members who were not acquainted to shopping food online:

> I shopped [groceries] online for my parents in Turkey . . . / It was a bit complicated in the beginning but then I found a few supermarkets that sold online. and that also accepted foreign credit cards . . . / So for a while, two months maybe, I shopped for them . . . they don't know how to order online. And also, I was bit worried [for them] in the beginning (Erdem)

Here we see how the informant helped his parents cope with the crisis, offering them practical support by managing their online grocery shopping and also finding some emotional support for himself, as it enabled him to address a concern of his (his parents health) by helping them at a distance.

In other cases, ordering groceries online was a way of coping with the new demands accompanying the new situation rather than being directly connected with COVID-19:

> Well, finding recipes and so on the whole time. Otherwise, you often have lunch at work. And you don't need to worry kindof, maybe everyday in any case, making food at home. Cause then there's kindof more of a pressure to make food at home and then you make it easier by ordering meal boxes. And I do think that it's more the case that this thing is the fear of going into stores actually. (Anette)

Here, our informant explains that it is not the fear of going into the store that has driven her family to meal box schemes but the increased demand for home-cooked meals as they are unable to eat at work or go out to restaurants. The point of the meal box service here is to facilitate both cooking and food shopping.

Furthermore, for the elderly consumers, learning to shop for groceries online was simultaneously a way of maintaining their independence. The situation brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic meant that many of them had to enlist the help of friends, family or neighbours in their food provisioning. In their view, this meant that they had become dependent on someone else for their food provisioning. Because of this, online grocery shopping was meaningful to this group of consumers in that it enabled them to maintain (or regain) their independence:

> Well. . . . it's made him independent. Because he found it difficult. He got like a child when people shopped for him. At times, it was because someone else had decided which brand he would get. (Karin)

Here, we see that both independence and control over your food shopping were important.

For other, less vulnerable consumers, the pandemic situation, with all its horrific consequences, presented a challenge. Now that food provisioning had been interrupted, consumers had to make do and even accept going without. This situation offers an opportunity for creativity. Consumers need to prepare meals with the food they have available. This involves both accepting the imposed limitations and also putting their cooking skills to the test in order to, as they often phrased it, 'throw something together':

> – But if it's more a matter of doing without, that there's more. Or do you think it's more accepted now due to it beingwhat it is?
> – Or, before, I felt like, well I don't know if I can manage without this. Well, I can think that it's a bit of a fun challenge. Well, I think that, yeah, raid the fridge and mix something together using what's left. So, it's completely ok with me. (Linda)

In sum, online grocery shopping during the pandemic became meaningful mainly as a coping strategy (Echeverri and Salomonson 2019; Folkman and Lazarus 1980). For this to be possible, this mode of food shopping had to be re-positioned. While it was still considered a convenient mode of shopping that also allowed consumers more control over their purchases, it was now also a shopping strategy that allowed consumers to 'manage' the Covid-19 crisis both directly – by avoiding infection and infecting others – and indirectly – by allowing consumers to work around many of the practical restrictions on their everyday shopping that resulted from the crisis. This in turn was deeply meaningful to our informants, albeit in different ways as the analysis has illustrated.

Digital food platforms and material reconfigurations

The formation and reproduction of a new practice, shopping or otherwise, does not hinge on its meaningfulness alone. A practice also needs to be practically and materially possible to take shape and reproduce. In this case, digital food platforms were key to the development and performance of online grocery shopping as a coping strategy. Sweden's digital infrastructure and its relatively well-developed food retailing industry played a crucial role in facilitating online grocery shopping as a coping strategy. Right from the outset of the pandemic, consumers were able to order from pure e-commerce actors, e.g. mathem.se or mat.se, or from bricks-and-mortar food retailers, e.g. Coop or ICA, which offered consumers online ordering as a supplement to in-store shopping. Consumers were able to choose between various food retailers offering both home delivery and pick-up options. In addition, a number of meal box alternatives were also available to consumers (C. Fuentes and Samsioe 2020). However, as pointed out by our informants, this was not true in all areas. While urban areas had a variety of online food shopping options, some smaller towns in rural areas had either few options or none at all to purchase groceries online. Online grocery shopping was, in some cases, the sole mode of provisioning for households, but combining channels was equally common (Elms, Kervenoael, and Hallsworth 2016).

When placing an order, the design of websites and apps became important for consumers:

> We really like the *Coop* one. … / cause for us it was easier. … the website is very well composed so it's kinda bread, milk – you, it's like moving through the store. Then you get to the milk. And then you can get into everything to do with milk. I felt, when I was visiting the *ICA* and *Hemköp* websites, that maybe it isn't like that, but then I felt more that I had to search out every item. But here I could kinda go in, then I got into the bread section. And then I found the bread I wanted. And then I go into the dairy section and so on. That's why I like *Coop*. (Eva)

Here, the participant wanted an e-store design that followed the layout of the physical store as this allowed her to navigate more easily. In other cases, issues such as the size of the images or what was displayed on the front page could be important. While the specific issues considered varied between consumers, what was common was the importance of finding a digital design that matched their specific ordering needs. This consumer-digital device fit was crucial for enabling this mode of online food shopping (on the

importance of consumer-device alignment see, C. Fuentes 2019). In previous research, the design of digital platforms has also shown itself to be crucial for online grocery ordering (e.g., Droogenbroeck and Hove 2020b; Hansen 2006).

The socio-material script of the devices also supported the routinization of online grocery shopping. Built into these devices was the aim of making online food shopping a convenient routine that could be carried out with little conscious deliberation. The websites and apps allow consumers to re-order the same items as last time, to choose favourite items, and to also suggest items on the basis of previous purchases. Through these and many similar functions, these digital devices work towards establishing online grocery ordering as a shopping routine.

The e-tailing landscape of food shopping was not static during the pandemic. Encouraged by increasing demand, food e-tailers scaled up their volumes, developed their digital interfaces, and also added products to their range. This was noted by our research participants:

> *Hemköp* doesn't have as good a range online as it does in its stores. As they want to guide you towards own-brand goods. You notice that quite clearly. I think, or at least initially. I actually think that it's better now. That they have a better range now. Their online store was quite new then, I believe. Eighteen months ago, maybe. And then, there were loads of own brand goods. (Linda)

These material reconfigurations enabled the new mode of online grocery shopping to develop and take hold. Without these developments, this would not have been a widely-available coping strategy. While done for business reasons, this development played an important role in enabling safe food provisioning in Sweden during this period.

Online shopping during the pandemic also required the material reconfiguration of the kitchen. Because many of the sites encourage consumers, via discounts, to buy large quantities of each item, the storage space available in kitchens was often insufficient to accommodate this new shopping mode:

> You see, my husband, he says I'm one of these preppers. So, I've stocked up a bit in my cellar. I'm very well off when it kinda comes to, well as I said, it didn't matter to me that I suddenly had 5 kilos of pasta down there and sort of 100 tins of crushed tomatoes. Then I thought, well this is kind of a good thing. (Julia)

Here we see how this household 'solved' that problem by adding to the storage capacities of their household.

Thus, the introduction of new material devices and the reconfiguration of the existing socio-material landscape were crucial for enabling and shaping online grocery shopping as a coping strategy.

The re-skilling of consumers: learning to shop anew

Developing online grocery shopping as a mode of coping did not only involve new technology, but also the re-skilling of consumers. As is the case with all shopping, practitioners have to acquire the competencies and know-how necessary for the proper performance of this shopping mode. While food shopping per se was not new to any of the informants, this new reinvented mode of shopping requires a specific set of competencies. Both general digital competencies and competencies specific to online grocery

shopping are required. While some of the consumers had pre-COVID-19 experience of online grocery shopping, others had to learn this new mode of food shopping during the pandemic. The material shows that there are mainly two ways of acquiring this competence; i.e. by interacting with others and by interacting with the technology itself (see also, C. Fuentes and Svingstedt 2017). These two ways of acquiring shopping competence are not mutually exclusive, instead frequently being combined.

Many of the consumers with pre-existing competence in online shopping relied mainly on the latter technique. When faced with a new e-commerce platform and a new mode of online ordering, they preferred to learn by interacting with the platform. Here, the instructions communicated via the platform itself were important:

> . . . I probably just went on to Google and then I visited *ICA Skrea strand*, as it's called. And that was online, of course. And it told you a bit about what to do. And, now and again I made mistakes but, in some way, it came out right in the end in any case. Well, it's not too difficult if you take it calmly. (Ingrid)

Beyond the explicit instructions, the design of the website and the socio-material script built into it were important for acquiring competence. In using the platforms, consumers gained the embodied know-how needed to make and change orders. It was evident from the digital walkthroughs, where they showed us their ordering process, that a considerable part of the competence required to use these e-commerce platforms had been developed in close interaction with the digital device.

> . . . but I think it's gotten clearer. Or we've learnt to use it better. Don't know really. I think it's way easier today than at the start. Well ok. They've probably updated their website too. But, you've gotten used to it. (Mariann)

A socio-material script that is either aligned with consumers' pre-existing know-how or can easily be understood can then make the difference between successful or unsuccessful digital interaction (C. Fuentes 2019).

Learning by interacting with the digital infrastructure was also possible for those who lacked direct knowledge of online food shopping, but had digital competence and previous experience shopping online. Erdem, for example, a digitally competent scholar unfamiliar with online grocery shopping, quickly learned how to perform this practice by relying on Google and browsing the information on existing digital food platforms:

> I didn't know that ICA Maxi [a supermarket], for example, that you could order online and they delivered to your door the same day . . . / So I discovered this, you learn things when you have Corona . . . / I googled "shop food online". I don't remember exactly how I came to the conclusion that ICA Maxi had great service . . . I looked at several websites and it seemed to be cheap, quick, and reasonable . . ../ (Erdem)

For consumers lacking preexisting knowledge of online food shopping, and perhaps online shopping altogether, interactions with others, usually family, were crucial. Without their support during the initial phase, online grocery shopping would probably not have been possible. One informant told us she spent months teaching her elderly father how to order groceries online, and supporting him in these processes:

> But it took six months for my father to get this to work electronically. He's been against smartphones, against using *BankID*. And now he's almost a fanboy . . . /But it took a long time, you see, if I hadn't been living with him, it wouldn't have worked. As it was every day,

> and I can still kinda, when I call him, I get "Now I've clicked on something again". But now he's not as hysterical. But it took him six months to learn . . . /Well, now he orders stuff from *Coop.se*. And then he goes and collects it in Västerås. And then he comes back and . . . Yesterday, he was so happy that they'd delivered one packet of biscuits too few. As then he'd succeeded in ringing on his own, and getting a refund. So now you know, now he's connected. (Karin)

Now, several months on and living in her own apartment again, Karin still provides her father with support by phone to help him solve the problems that arise. While he now manages to order food online, he is still in need of some support, both technical and emotional. This was a recurring theme. Those who had not previously shopped online, typically the elderly, needed support during the initial phase from more experienced, and typically younger, family and friends. Here, the network of these consumers was crucial for enabling this mode of coping. This also exposes the vulnerability of the mode currently in place.

Developing temporary routines and the importance of planning ahead

Finally, key to establishing and successfully performing this new mode of online food shopping was also establishing a shopping routine. That is, routinization was also important in this specific situation for the, at least temporary, stabilization of this shopping mode (see also, Samsioe and Fuentes 2021). Meaningfulness, technological availability and competencies were also necessary for the performance of online shopping. Routinization, on the other hand, was key for its stable reproduction.

Groceries were ordered using websites or apps, either by one member of the household or collectively by several members. Online shopping was, in many cases, a collective practice in which two or more of the household's members participated (see also, Droogenbroeck and Hove 2020a). Shopping online collectively also allowed consumers to coordinate their shopping and to integrate the varying preferences of the household members:

> We do it together. Well, the first time it was me and my, one daughter. But if we do it, me and my husband, then it's him and me that do the shopping. He finds it great fun too. But then it's like this we shop, you see, there's a difference when I shop and when he shops. Whatever we're going to have. So, it's quite good if we combine it so that we both get want we want. (Linda)

When the food was ordered by a single household member, this often involved a considerable amount of coordination with the other household members.

> You see, one of us does it [places the online order] and then we shout to each other: Is there anything in particular you . . . ? And then the other one has to look at the order and add to it and so on. But we actually have an account each with *Mathem*, so I log into mine and he logs into his. (Marita)

This couple were jointly responsible for ordering food online. In other households, one household member would be mainly responsible for placing the order but would communicate with the other household members in the planning of meals. Here, as in other cases of online grocery shopping, coordination within the household and task division are key (Droogenbroeck and Hove 2020a).

According to the research participants, planning was one of the main differences between shopping for food online before and after the pandemic. While food shopping before the pandemic was often characterized by spontaneity and a day-to-day approach, pandemic food shopping required detailed planning. For some, this new approach to food shopping was not altogether positive. When every meal has to be planned days or even weeks in advance, some of the enjoyment of both shopping and eating is lost, they argued:

> Yes it's, in some way I can feel it's becoming a bit more boring. Cause you never really make any spontaneous purchases. And at times, you can miss that. At times, you get such a damn craving for something. Well, then you don't have that at home. So, then you plan things on a more detailed level. You write up what you're going to have and going to eat. ... So then things are much more on a detailed level. ... And this thing too of not having, well the spontaneous bit disappears ... It disappears entirely. And that's a bit boring. (Mariann)

This was in part connected with the experienced shortage of products available through online food platforms, mainly early on during the pandemic. Because consumers had in many cases ordered a week or even two weeks in advance, planning ahead became much more important. The complementary or fill-in shopping in physical stores that consumers often carry out (Aslan 2021) was not possible, or at least not advisable because of the need to socially distance.

Some households had designated 'ordering days':

> Catarina: Yes, you have to book a delivery time ... and you can do it several weeks in advance. On Mondays I usually have a look and start ordering. And then you have Monday and you can make some changes on Tuesday. And then on Wednesday you pick it up. ... This was a bit difficult around Christmas and New Years. there were no time slots. You really had to go in and ...

> Erik: ... trick the system and place an order for a liter milk [to hold the delivery time] and then log in the day after and place the complete order. (Catarina and Erik)

Our study also suggests that the frequency of food ordering was in part influenced by the size of the household (larger households needed to order more frequently), the storage capacity (those with less storage capacity needed to order more frequently), and the combination of retail outlets used (those that complemented online grocery shopping with other forms of provisioning ordered less frequently). Others did not have any specific ordering days but used certain items as indicators. When milk or orange juice were running low, it was time to do a new round of online shopping. While almost all the online food shopping platforms offer consumers the possibility of automating their shopping, none of the consumers we talked to did so (with the exception of meal box subscriptions).

Online food shopping during the pandemic was thus different in at least two respects. It required much more planning and was not easily combined with other modes of food provisioning. Here we see the importance of coordinating the households' schedule and routines with the ones of the digital food platforms. As has been shown in other studies, making these new shopping routines 'fit into' the complex patterning of households' everyday practices required some work on the part of consumers (C. Fuentes and Samsioe 2020). However, for those working from home, this was somewhat easier since they did

not have to coordinate delivery times with work schedules. In addition, many of the leisure activities that had previously competed with grocery shopping and cooking over time had now been cancelled.

Discussion

Our study confirms the findings of previous studies on COVID-19 and food shopping. It shows that food practices have indeed changed, and also, more specifically, that digital technology plays an important role in shaping online grocery shopping (Kumar and Shah 2021), for better or worse (Dirsehan and Cankat 2021).

Furthermore, over and above merely confirming these changes, this study also contributes to our understanding of food shopping during the COVID-19 crisis by providing an in-depth understanding of one single shopping mode and how it has been reinvented during the pandemic. Shopping for food online during the pandemic has had much in common with online food shopping prior to it. It was, for example, a social, or at least a collaborative, form of shopping (Droogenbroeck and Hove 2020a), considered a convenient and time-saving mode of shopping that gave consumers a sense of control (Picot-Coupey et al. 2009), at times even being enjoyable (Hansen 2006). Similarly, in this context, too, e-commerce interfaces need to be easily navigated (Hansen 2006), to work properly (Singh and Rosengren 2020), and to be considered (financially) safe (Hansen 2006) in order to successfully support online grocery shopping.

Nevertheless, it was also clear that there were some important differences. During the pandemic, online food shopping became a form of coping with the stressful and inconvenient situations brought about by restrictions and the need for social distancing. As previous research has shown, coping involves the cognitive and practical resources for dealing with the demands created by a threat or harm (Echeverri and Salomonson 2019). Coping is often a practical endeavour, aimed at addressing a practical problem or mitigating the negative effects of a stressful situation. Coping can also, however, be emotion-focused and aimed at managing the negative emotion generated by a stressful event (Folkman and Lazarus 1980).

Beyond merely noting that online grocery shopping developed to become a form of shopping, our practice theory-based analysis extends the analysis of coping by also acknowledging and taking into account the set of elements that made this form of coping possible.

It illustrates how coping becomes meaningful to consumers. In this case, it was clear that online grocery shopping as a mode of coping both addressed practical and emotional problems, allowing consumers to acquire food but also to do so in a way that was meaningful to them, guaranteeing for example independence or allowing them to reframe the crisis as a challenge to be addressed. The meaning of online grocery shopping had thus shifted radically. Rather than merely being a convenient or novel way of buying groceries, it was now a crucial pandemic coping strategy.

The study also draws attention to the material conditions necessary for this coping strategy to take form and be performed. Online grocery shopping as a mode of coping was made possible by the existence and continuous development of digital food platforms. The digital food platforms available enabled and shaped this mode of shopping; the actions included, the temporalities involved, the competencies required, and the

meanings associated were shaped, at least in part, by the socio-material scripts of the platforms. Conversely, these platforms also shaped, and adapted to, the emerging practice during the pandemic, scaling up their capacities, broadening their ranges, and adapting their interfaces and the services they offered.

Moreover, the formation of this mode of shopping as coping required the re-skilling of consumers. New competencies had to be acquired to perform this new shopping mode. To develop these, consumers used mainly two methods: by interacting with the technology and by interacting with social networks. What new competencies needed to be acquired and which method what used depended both on their familiarity with digital technology, previous knowledge of online shopping, and their social network.

Finally, for this mode of shopping as coping to work, it had to fit into consumers' everyday practices and become routinized. This is in turn, required work on the part of consumers. Pandemic online grocery shopping required more planning and thus also more coordination of future practices. This was, for most people, a new experience which changed the temporal structuring of their everyday practices. Relatedly, this new mode of shopping both required and led consumers into developing what we refer to as their temporal sensitivity. As a result of the difficulties of planning ahead and breaking in everyday routines, they became more aware of the temporal dimension of both their own practices and those of others. Consumers started planning while bearing this new understanding of temporality in mind. During the pandemic, analysis of others' shopping routines, calculations of their practices, and efforts to map out the temporal patterns of retailers became all the more common when performing online grocery shopping.

Conclusions

Our aim in writing this paper has been to conceptualise, illustrate and explain how and why online shopping has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic and to discuss the stability of this new mode of shopping. Taking a shopping-as-practice approach, and drawing on an interview study of 31 Swedish households, we analysed how online grocery shopping was performed during the pandemic.

In contrast to much previous research, our study does not merely establish that food shopping has changed during the pandemic, it also gives some insight into how it has changed and why. The analysis in this paper moves beyond exploring the psychological mechanisms of pandemic food shopping, bringing to the fore the social and practical dynamics of developing and driving online grocery shopping as a coping strategy. Drawing on the theoretical resources of practice theory, the analysis not only notes that online grocery shopping has been reinvented into a mode of coping, it also shows and conceptualizes the changes and resources needed for this change in shopping mode to be possible. It shows that for shopping as coping to be performed during the Covid-19 crisis required a number of key elements to be in place. This mode of shopping as coping had to be meaningful to consumers, the necessary digital food platforms had to be available and support this mode of shopping, consumers needed to develop their shopping competence, and the new mode of shopping had to be 'worked into' consumers' everyday practices and become routinized.

This analysis contributes to research on Covid-19 food shopping by offering a new approach to understand the changes in food shopping during the crisis. Rather than exploring the phycological mechanisms behind changes in food shopping, it has shown that shopping change is thoroughly socio-material, and involves both meanings, competencies, and materialities. Moreover, the approach developed and resulting analysis also shows that changes in food shopping practice require the reorganization of everyday life and routines to be possible, not merely changes in cognitive processes.

Practical implications

This practice theory analysis can, in turn, give us some insight into consumers' capacity to manage food crises, and what can be done to develop this capacity. Our study shows that the capacity of consumers to cope with food shopping crises depends on both their pre-existing shopping competencies and their social networks. Consumers comfortable with multiple modes of shopping are better prepared. Likewise, consumers with social networks that can be consulted regarding new modes of shopping are better prepared to manage food shopping crises.

It can also say something concerning the role of retailers and retail infrastructure for crisis management. Our analysis emphasises that the ability to change shopping modes in order to address an urgent crisis is also enabled or restricted by the surrounding socio-material landscape. In this study, we saw the key role that digital food platforms played. Without these, online grocery shopping would not have been possible as a coping strategy. As in other settings, the (retailing) infrastructures in place restrict or enable the modes of food shopping available (M. Fuentes and Fuentes 2021). Because of this, a long-term goal for both retailers and government agencies should be having well-developed retail grocery infrastructures in place offering consumers multiple modes of shopping. To this end, diversity is important.

Future research

Finally, our analysis also suggests, that different groups of consumers have different approaches to and available resources for the development of new modes of crisis shopping. While it is beyond the scope of this paper, the analysis suggests that the propensity for consumers to develop new modes of shopping in order to cope with a crisis is linked to a specific understanding of that crisis and what a proper response to it might be. In our study, we saw a difference between those who understood the pandemic as a health crisis (a dangerous virus needing to be avoided) and those who saw it more as practical problem (new restrictions making it difficult to shop as usual). While both groups approached online food shopping as a coping strategy, the way this mode of shopping was performed differed. Therefore, while the perceptions of consumers cannot (nor should they) be completely controlled, retailers and other actors need to be mindful of the fact that the way in which they are framing the current situation (e.g. crisis or inconvenience) will likely have important consequences for the shopping practice that has developed. Likewise, there was a difference in how well-prepared consumers were to develop a new mode of online grocery shopping. Many, and especially elderly consumers, were not familiar with digital food platforms before the start of the pandemic. Moreover, there seems to be a difference between consumers

based on their social networks. Those that had close relationships with family and friends could rely more on their network to teach them to use the new digital food platforms and thus help them develop this new shopping mode. Those that lack this close social network were at a disadvantage. Therefore, an issue for future research is how differences between consumer groups (income, education, technological competence, social network) impact their approach to and available resources for development of new modes of crisis shopping.

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