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Shopping strategies for times of crisis: The temporary reconfiguration of the practice of food shopping

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Abstract:

Shopping in general and food shopping in particular changed drastically during the Covid19 pandemic. While general consumption levels went down, food consumption increased. However, while more food was shopped, it could not be shopped in the same way. Restrictions and lock-downs made food shopping increasingly difficult. Shopping without being infected or infecting others became a priority.

Food shopping and food consumption more generally is often characterized as highly routinized and therefore difficult to change. Food shopping is connected to and also held in place by multiple other practices as well as norms and values regarding everything from family values to the importance of eating healthily. Despite this, there are strong indications that consumers radically changed their food shopping during this period to address these concerns.

How was this drastic change in previously routinized practices possible? What was involved in making these new modes of food shopping possible? What, if any, of these changes can we expect to continue after the Covid19 crisis is over?

In this paper we aim to examine the new food shopping modes that emerged as a response to the Covid19 crisis with the aim of understanding how shopping practices can change and under what conditions the altered shopping practice stabilize.

Drawing on practice theory, we conceptualize shopping as a practice. From a shopping-as-practice perspective shopping is seen as set of routinized ways of doings and sayings aimed at recurring the resources, that is goods and services, needed for the performance of other practices. The practice of shopping, like other practices, can be seen as consisting of a set of elements – meanings, materialities and competences – that both shape the practice and are in turned shaped by it. Shopping for food thus requires materialities (e.g., shopping carts, apps, means of transportation, price scanners) and competences (e.g., how to determine if a product is expensive or unexpensive, an understanding of available stores, how to use an online platform). But shopping is also driven and involved in the reproduction of meanings. We shop for different reasons and the act of shopping is away to both express and reproduce those meanings (fun, responsibility, a form of care etc.). Previous research has shown that understanding the practice of shopping, how it changes, and how it becomes stabilized (or not) involves thus understanding the specific configuration of elements but also how a practice intersects with and is interconnected with other practices. In this paper we take this approach to conceptualize the novel modes of food shopping that resulted from the Covid19 crisis.

Empirically, the study consists of 30 digitally held ethnographic interviews with urban households in the southern parts of Sweden. The households were recruited on the basis of having changed the way they shop for food, and more specifically we recruited households that have started to order food online, ordered more food online, volunteered to help others shop for food, and ordered more take away meals. The interviews were conducted by using video conference software (Zoom and Microsoft Teams), and the interviews were designed to cover themes such as shopping for food, cooking and eating food, as well as storing food.

Our study shows that to address this problematic Covid19 situation, consumers developed a set of novel shopping strategies. We will focus on five of these: (1) Online food shopping as risk management,

(2) Shopping protected in store, (3) Hoarding food, (4) Shopping by proxy, and (5) Take-away as safety measure.

We argue that these shopping modes developed to address and neutralize risk constructions. Shopping was no longer a matter of merely procuring the resources needed for other practices. Shopping was no longer a desirable practice nor only a way to show care. During the Covid19 pandemic, food shopping became also a way to neutralize risk and to act responsibly.

We discuss the reconfiguration of material, meanings and competences needed for these new shopping modes to develop, and under what condition these changes could be stabilized. Drawing on insights from previous practice theory influenced research on practice dynamics and stability we will argue that only a few of the many changes to food shopping performed during the pandemic have a realistic possibility to stabilize.

Through this analysis, we aim to contribute not only to our understand of Covid19 impacted consumption but also, more generally, understand the dynamics of food shopping and how it can be changed.
