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## Enabling package free shopping

### Reconfiguring a practice and re-distributing agency

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## **Enabling package free shopping: Reconfiguring a practice and re-distributing agency**

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### **Introduction, theory and method**

Package free shopping is being promoted as a new form of sustainable shopping. This mode of shopping is framed and marketed as a way for consumers to address the many environmental problems caused by often unnecessary plastic packages through their everyday shopping. Here grocery shopping package free is presented as a (plastic) waste reduction practice. However, as studies have shown in the past, sustainable consumption in general, and sustainable shopping in particular, are difficult endeavours. Like many other forms of sustainable consumption (Connolly and Prothero 2008), package free shopping requires consumers to acquire new competences, to rethink their way of shopping and be willing to forsake some of the convenience that comes with regular shopping (Fuentes 2014). In addition, unlike many other forms of sustainable shopping, this type of shopping does not involve the acquirement of specific sustainable products, but rather the exclusion of a problematic element - packages - otherwise considered central for grocery shopping. Similar to the case of plastic shopping bags, efforts are made to remove a previously important shopping tool in order to address the environmental problems it generates (Hagberg 2016). This comes with a set of specific problems and complexities as food packages serve a number of important functions such as keeping food fresh, assisting storage, being information sources, and also serving as marketing devices (Fuentes and Fuentes 2017, Cochoy 2004). One can also expect such as change will lead to a transformation in how the practice of shopping is performed (Hagberg 2016). What is required for package free grocery shopping to develop? What problems arise when trying to remove an important artefact from the practice of shopping and how are these problems managed by consumers engaged in this mode of shopping?

To answer these question, we need to understand the formation of this new form of shopping. While sustainable shopping is a much research area, focus has been mainly on consumers decision-making processes and their intentions to purchase ecological or fair-trade products. Much less attention has been devoted to more innovative modes of sustainable shopping (although see, Fuentes 2014). There is therefore a need to explore alternative modes of sustainable shopping, to understand how these new practices (or practice variations) develop, stabilize, or disappear. To accomplish this, we must move beyond ecological and fair-trade products, consumer decision-making processes, and the psychographic profiling of green consumers and examine more closely the actual performance of these alternative modes of shopping. We need to understand the socio-material infrastructures and mechanisms that shape and enable these variations of sustainable shopping.

Against this backdrop, the aim of this study is to understand how package free shopping – as new mode of sustainable shopping – is established. In what follows, we set out to understand how the practice of shopping is reconfigured by the removal of packages.

The paper takes a shopping-as-practice approach (Keller and Ruus 2014, Fuentes and Svingstedt 2017). Drawing on the resources of practice theory we conceptualise package free shopping a new mode of shopping, a variation and reconfiguration of the practice of shopping that draws on and interconnects a specific combination of meanings, competences, and materials. Methodologically, the analysis draws on an ethnographic study of package free shopping conducted at a Swedish ecological store *Matkooperativet*. The study combines observations, interviews and focus groups interviews to explore the performances of package free shopping.

## **Results and analysis: how a new mode of shopping is assembled**

### *Doing package free shopping*

The analysis shows that the successful performance of package free shopping is not an easy task. There are a number of ways in which package free shopping is performed. While these forms of shopping may be (plastic) package free, they are certainly not immaterial. In all cases, a substitute for packages has to be used, a different carrying device.

In some cases, package free shopping is carried out with the assistance of the paper and cardboard containers and paper bags provided by the shops. Here consumers do not have to bring their own bags or jars but can use the more sustainable alternatives provided by the store.

More resourceful consumers bring instead their own carrying devices – for example their own cloth bags or glass jars – to be able to carry the goods home. Here product packages are replaced by bags or backpacks – when possible – and by glass jars or small bags brought from home when the products cannot be carried in a larger bag (such as grains or dates).

In both these cases, the shopping practice observed seems uncomplicated and, although some practical difficulties can sometimes be observed when carrying goods, not completely inconvenient. However, this was far from the truth.

### *The difficulties of package free shopping*

For shoppers to be able to perform this seemingly straightforward new mode of shopping, they had to solve a number of problems that arise before and after in-store shopping. For example, a package free shopping trip required much more planning than a regular shopping trip. Consumers have to plan what bags, jars and other containers to bring to the store, they have to take into account the amounts they plan to bag and if that fits into the existing containers.

The absence of packages also creates problems after the goods have been acquired. Packaging helps identify the product when stored at home, it provides information concerning nutrients, and it also commonly contains cooking instructions. Without this information consumers have to resort to other means of acquiring the information such as looking it up on the Internet and taking screenshots at the store of the labels provided.

### *The elements of package free shopping: A fragile configuration is assembled*

In solving the problems discussed above and performing package free shopping, consumers draw on and interconnect a number of elements. More than that, the performance of package free shopping involves in the development of new competences (how to identify products without packages, what to use as container, how package free stores work), the enlisting of a number of new shopping tools (jars, cloth bags and other containers as well as using smartphones and backpacks in new ways) and the development of a new set of meanings (this new form of shopping has to be framed as environmentally meaningful to be worth the extra effort). When any of these elements is underdeveloped, the performance of package free shopping fails (or is never initiated in the first place).

## **Discussion and conclusions**

What does this tentative analysis tell us? First, it suggests that the promotion of package free shopping is not as straightforward as one may think. Removing packages from the practice of grocery shopping is problematic in two important ways. First, it is problematic because grocery shopping does not exist in isolation, it is part of a nexus of everyday practices and because of this changes in shopping will have ripple effects in other practices (Warde 2005). Changing the practice of shopping then means taking into account and also changing the practices that shopping is closely connected to.

Second, removing from a practice a type of artefacts – packages – that performs a number of important tasks means that those tasks have to be taken over by others. Food packages have

agency; they work as marketing devices qualifying products, they enable the transport of groceries, enable the storage of food at home, and inform cooking practices. When these important artefacts are removed, the tasks they accomplish have to be performed by others, people and artefacts. The promotion and stabilization of package free shopping is thus dependent on the successful redistribution of agency.

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