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Walking Down the Aisle: The Bleak Marriage Between Supermarkets and Consumerism

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Namrata Menon & Samrat Nath

Namrata - University of Durham, Samrat - University of Leeds

Address for Correspondence: editojohp@gmail.com

*I'm all lost in the supermarket
I can no longer shop happily
I came in here for that special offer
A guaranteed personality
-The Clash*

ABSTRACT

For long, the supermarket has been a hallmark of the urban sprawl, the totem of consumer culture pervading modern societies. Unlike traditional markets that afford fluid movement and facilitate the free interactions between producers and consumers, modern supermarkets with their box-like architecture, gleaming interiors, self-service options, and sophisticated technology often inhibit a social shopping experience. While the act of eating is a collective experience, paradoxically, shopping for food in a supermarket is largely isolatory. This paper seeks to examine the notion of alienation experienced by supermarket shoppers by investigating the identity of the shopper — in the act of purchasing, is the individual a consumer (here, a purchaser who buys for private means) or a citizen (a recognised subject of the state, who partakes in the activities of public spaces — understanding that everyone has a stake in the development of these spaces)?

Marx's notion of 'fetishisation of commodities' makes one question what value we assign to items on the shelves — are we investing in the product or its aesthetics? Further, this paper will also attempt to look at the supermarket as a space that might potentially induce fear, anxiety or paranoia, resulting from, among several factors, forfeiting one's personhood by succumbing to advertising and mass production, and surveillance mechanisms in supermarkets. Moreover, this study seeks to probe whether the online realm alleviates or exacerbates alienation. Ultimately, we seek to explore how/whether supermarkets impose certain conditions/limitations on the purchaser, and why consumers are the screens upon which capitalist fantasies are projected.

Key words: supermarkets, food, alienation, consumerism, urbanism.

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Introduction

In the movie *The Founder*, Ray Kroc tells the McDonald brothers that every town is identified by a church and a courthouse, but soon, they will also have a third icon: the golden arches of McDonald's (Brody). But before McDonald's, there existed a more obvious marker: the supermarket, without which no town was complete. The supermarket as we know today has a long history before emerging as a prominent necessity of urban life. From as early as the Mayan civilisation, food distribution was structured around the civic centre, much like modern supermarkets which are often located in city centres (Lee 13). Further, perhaps as a result of space constraints due to rapid urbanisation, traditional open, non-structured markets have become something of a rarity — giving way to the supermarket where all of one's daily necessities are situated under one roof. If, according to Karl Marx, modern man is defined by that which he consumes (Wirsching 3), this study aims to look at the supermarket as a starting point to analyse consumption trends — i.e. through which means and to what ends.

European critics from the 1950s to the 70s became increasingly wary about consumerism, equating it with alienation and 'no room for genuine individuality' (Wirsching 2). Marx outlined the 'fetishisation of commodities', through which commodities assume a life of their own, imbibing a 'fictitious exchange value' rather than their real/actual value (Wirsching 3). Thorstein Veblen invented the term 'conspicuous consumption' to identify purchases that are not defined by need, but by the meaning it reflects to society (Humphery 64). In his essay 'A Sad Heart at the Supermarket', Randall Jarrell wrote: 'To live is to consume, to understand life is to know what to consume: he has learned to understand this, so that his life is a series of choices — correct ones — among the products and services of the world.' (Jarrell 60) thus critiquing the culture of 'needing to need' (Jarrell 59). With the dizzying array of choice a modern supermarket offers, some even referred to it as a 'stupormarket' (Humphery 71).

In contrast, the American approach to consumerism was more optimistic, where the consumer was the 'actor' and exerted significant influence in the consumption process through their choices (Wirsching 9). Shopping in the supermarket has exemplified both these standpoints, sometimes even simultaneously. In fact, social communication was now replaced by interactions with the inanimate objects on the shelf — by way of logos, packaging and design (Humphery 65). Humphery adds: 'It is not very useful to assume that people are merely compliant consumers when wandering through a retail space such as the supermarket, or that these environments and the use people make of them are culturally bereft.' (Humphery 9). Thus, the supermarket is a complex territory that cannot be pigeonholed into simple binaries.

Nevertheless, modern supermarkets and the items on sale are imbued with the threat of consumer alienation. Although consumption was initially concomitant with democratic participation — where the consumer fulfilled his/her role as a citizen by engaging with the social order (Humphery 22) — the consumer is now perceived to be an individual whose act of purchase is to satisfy private needs (Lee 9). Additionally, shopping in supermarkets was motivated by spectacle, not necessity (Humphery 25), raising questions about what we are consuming: the idea or the good itself. The boom in tinned food embodied luxury and convenience such that consumers were far removed from the actual food processes (Humphery 28). This was enhanced by superior packaging and standardisation techniques (Humphery 28) making consumers wonder what the item will *become* (as in the case of canned ingredients) thus seemingly unconcerned with what it *was*. Hence, 'products begin to exist in and of themselves, independent of the processes that make them and of the other products surrounding them. In this new guise they are given an additional and very particular sensuality.' (Humphery 33).

Supermarkets and Alienation of the Consumer Populace

Traditionally, the supermarket was a feminized realm; shopping was understood to be a woman's job. This is not to deny the existence of male shoppers — however, unlike females whose role as a shopper is the norm rather than the exception, the man can separate himself from the act as he is 'not a natural shopper' (Miller 25). Even when men shop for goods that are associated with the male sex (alcohol, car parts, etc.) 'there is a strong tendency to distance themselves from the identification with the act and the concept of shopping' (Miller 39), denoting an alienation from one's consumer instincts. Although this study is focused on consumer alienation, it must be noted that with the rampant rise of the supermarket, the traditional grocer 'belonged to a race that is rapidly becoming extinct' (Humphery 89), perhaps as a veritable result of capitalism. This perceived lack of control over business was seen to be emasculating (Humphery 90), and previous conventions that regulated marketplace dynamics were now passé.

Another section of the population that is often estranged in supermarkets is the elderly. Older people haunt supermarkets to occupy themselves and fend off boredom (Miller 33). However, interior conditions of the supermarket are not always friendly to the elderly. For instance, differing weight denominations sometimes throw off shoppers — those who are used to seeing everything in kilos, now find that items, like meat, are labelled in pounds (Miller 50). Further, a trip to the supermarket is often tinged with nostalgia, some even lamenting the loss of the cozy, personal community space the supermarket once was (Winterson). The rise of self-service machines has deprived this populace from the little contact they crave, especially in cases where the shopper is also single. An article in the *Independent* addresses these concerns, noting that the elderly is especially vulnerable before this technology, as they feel 'inferior' to the younger population which presumably has a better know-how of the self-service mechanism (Sharp).

The thriving supermarkets of the West (mainly Britain, the USA and Australia) were also frequented by immigrants. However, they faced challenges and felt alienated from the shopping due to reasons like language barriers and being unable to find familiar/native ingredients. Communication was often fraught with humiliation and tension, and immigrants had to learn the language to engage in conversations at the supermarket. Additionally, store-owners and consumers are also impacted by race concerns. A study that sought to understand why Black-owned supermarkets were faring poorly outlined reasons such as assault and violence, theft (as after banks, supermarkets stored the most amount of money), lack of government support in terms of subsidy, and problems of management. Further, Black customers were wary of Black salesman, and they didn't trust them with their job (Bloom 42). Thus, aside from economic concerns, supermarkets are also spaces to negotiate social and racial interactions. Further, the lack of efficient food networks in these areas might go on to cause larger social and nutritional problems like food deserts.

Supermarkets and the Alienation of Desire

As mentioned earlier, supermarket shopping was deemed to be a woman's job, particularly the housewife's. It was common for the execution of this role to be overlaid with 'sacrifice'— where the lady of the household was wont to forfeit her needs for the greater good of the family. Through these acts of compromise (Miller 37), the lady customer alienated herself from her desire. However, one redemption from this behaviour was the idea of the 'treat', where the shopper rewards herself for the act of shopping by buying a good that is usually sweet or fattening, like a bar of chocolate. However, such indulgences were done surreptitiously, sometimes unconsciously so, and were often tinged with guilt — treats were regarded as 'transgressive' purchases (Miller 41).

Retail therapy arose as a mechanism to combat feelings of low self-worth or depression, the idea being that shopping will 'reaffirm the self' (Miller 47). This was again seen in housewives, who believing they are performing thankless jobs, treat themselves, and feel they 'deserve' this extra good — as most of the shopping is directed to people

who are not the shoppers themselves (Miller 48). This is perhaps because shopping for the family is an intangible, incalculable service that 'transcends the logic of exchange' (Miller 48). What this might mean is that supermarkets are sites of temptation, but these temptations must be curbed because shopping for the family is expected to be a 'selfless' activity — yet in some instances these urges are given into. The individual then contends with temporary pleasure, or feelings of guilt and shame. Here, the supermarket is the site that spurs moral/economic ambivalence, where the 'treats' bought are endangered by possible guilt and misgiving in future.

Supermarket Spaces, Non-Places, and Surveillance

According to Michael de Certeau, a space is a 'frequented place', an 'intersection of moving bodies' (Augé 79). The supermarket is a 'space' as it is defined by both the consumers and store-owners; it is the interaction of these two groups of people as well as among the elements of the store that engender the quality of a space. Unlike anthropological 'place' that is defined by language, customs and societal rules, a 'non-place' or 'space' is unique to each individual; he/she enters a contractual relationship with it. As Augé writes, 'he is reminded, when necessary, of the contract that exists.' (Augé 101). In the supermarket, this contract is asserted when the shopper picks up a shopping basket/trolley — now the shopper exists in a triangulated relationship with the trolley, its contents, and himself. Further, his identity is ascertained only while entering or leaving the supermarket (i.e. when he picks up the basket at the entrance and pays through his credit card at the end of the purchase) — he is essentially alienated in-between.

In order to move to anonymity, one must first prove one's innocence (Augé 102). In airports, this is done through passport verification and security checks, following which the passenger can slink back into comfortable obscurity, experiencing the 'passive joys of identity loss'. (Augé 103). In the supermarket, innocence is ascertained through card transactions, where the person's credentials (like his/her signature) are authenticated. What this denotes is that non-places or spaces are powered by a subtle undercurrent of fear, enforcing the desire to conform and not 'stand out'. However, this anonymity is threatened by surveillance methods and CCTV cameras that make people feel on edge while 'performing' their innocence as passengers or consumers. Although such technology is enforced to reassure customers they are safe, this monitoring is often distressing to buyers. When the supermarket chain Sainsbury's introduced CCTV cameras, it drew flak from the customers when they realised it was able to capture the pin numbers of their credit cards. These 'Orwellian' measures potentially dehumanise and alienate consumers from their shopping experience, aggravating paranoia, thus feeling the need to prove their innocence even more acutely (Embury-Dennis).

Food and Promotion

People do not generally invest more than low to medium-level involvement (in terms of time and money) while purchasing items of frequent use like food. Such consumer decisions are usually characterised by lower levels of cognitive processing (Kotler and Keller 171). These are the main parameters for equating food with fast moving inorganic consumer goods like toiletries, stationery, consumer electronics, etc. This process makes buying food a part of retail and consumerism in business dynamics, a sector that is vulnerable to heavy usage of advertising and promotion ("Advertising and Sales Promotion"). What makes food unique as a commodity is its tangibility and perishability, hence placing it in-between the product-service continuum (Hollensen 481). If a service catering to distribution or delivery of food to consumers cannot move a product, it results in destroyed inventory. Any eatables including grocery and culinary experiences sold in today's world follow a distinctive consumer model as every unit (individual, family or institution) has a fixed quantity of consumption at any given time. As people must eat more than once a day, companies or sellers want to organise, institutionalise and commodify culinary experiences to encourage repeat purchases ("An Overview of

Retailing”) thus contributing to higher margins.

In general, advertising for food raises ethical questions for the professional under the 'controversial' sub-section of products (Waller and Erdogan 11) in the marketing communications code. It flags the issue of manipulation, where overselling or underselling certain aspects of the product alter consumer expectations, particularly when the brand does not evidence proof of its claim(s). Visual appeals to food do not always follow traditional advertising methods (Story and French 3) like television commercials or billboards. They lean more towards conditioning the everyday consumer to believe that the product is necessary, personalised and tailor-made for them. SIS International Research observes that the 10 most crucial seconds of optical influence lies in packaging, prompting the 'action' in the AIDA (Attention → Interest → Desire → Action) mode (Fill 120) of advertising. This presents enhanced or isolated fragments of the food and tries to sell it at an exalted value. Further, visual branding of food usually proffers a sensually stimulating snapshot to the consumer (“Package Graphic Design”) — for example, cornflakes being poured into a bowl, a rich slice of a cake, creamy yoghurt, and so on.

The consumer community is divided into several subsections; members are often seen to be resisting other consumers' choices — as a reaction against this over-segmentation and develop personal preferences among variants in the same line of products. This not only encourages an unhealthy relationship between the food and the consumer — where they attempt to prove their loyalty towards the chosen variant (“Greater Food Brand Loyalty is Linked to Food Transparency”) — but also breaks down the bigger commune, for instance meat lovers, vegetarian, lactose intolerant, etc. into multiple smaller units that owe their existence to micro marketing.

Shopping is a highly cohort specific action (Lemon and Verhoef 20). Social trust in peers resulting from the bandwagon effect usually acts as a positive filter (Nepal et. al 10) in food purchase — as consumers' suspicion is aroused if they observe multiple people rejecting food after inspecting it. But with the trend of online shopping overtaking this domain, consumers are deprived of the abovementioned advantage. The independence of choosing one's own pick is a major factor that is used as a subconscious push in online food retail today. In reality, the idea of 'choice' before purchase is veiled beneath corporate gimmicks — facilitating alienation from the 'bargaining power of customers' — defined by Michael Porter as one of the five factors in market forces through which consumers streamline consumption in any market.

Additionally, food consumers' agency is doubly removed because social trust is now replaced by product feedback from unverified prior shoppers (Mayzlin et al 2421-55), and the online consumer is deprived of the luxury of hand picking the product. This is done on their behalf by a middleman whose intentions are in line with the selling brand. The advertised benefits of online services leverage the need for privacy that internet users have become acclimatised to. These services offer freedom from the unsolicited shopping assistance available in supermarkets. By taking advantage of the solitary user before a screen and bombarding him/her with targeted information, companies try to exploit the vulnerability of the consumer via sales tactics.

While services like Big Basket, Amazon Fresh, and numerous others are making food options available online, companies cannot overlook the 60-40 split between physical and online retail in the grocery and food sector. Increasingly, online heavyweights like Amazon are trying to establish physical presence by investing in real estate. Additionally, they also seek to integrate services like swift pay and pay-and-go to extrapolate the ease of online transaction. This is testimony to corporates recognising the alienation customers face in food purchase online (“5 Trends That Will Redefine Retail In 2019”); hence the effort to return to conventional food shopping to not just mitigate alienation, but also boost sales.

Product positioning also has an important role: 'organic products' became a specialty as a result of the artificial-preservative glut in the mass market. This was because 'natural food outputs' could not keep up with consumer demand — thus the return of natural/organic foods with differential packaging, positioning and pricing assumed a niche status and represented a certain kind of consumer consciousness. This might endorse classicism, alienating those consumers who lack the financial power from those who do; although the organic product might be constitutionally similar to an artificial product. The process of adding this perception of novelty also removes the spotlight from the actual person who labored to fashion the food into reality — namely farmers, small-scale local distributors, etc. who are alienated from their role in facilitating the movement of food across the various strata of society. The framed packaging and manipulative promotion transfers credit to corporate giants who own and manage the supermarkets and the departmental stores where these products are sold.

Conclusion

Through Marxist theories and practical marketing and business paradigms, this study has evidenced that alienation and consumerism go hand in hand. Over the years, supermarkets have become glaring examples of how processes of alienation have penetrated daily necessities like food — from the estrangement of agriculturalists and pastoralists from their toil to consumers deluded into thinking they possess agency or choice. Further, this paper has also analysed how different members of the consumer public behave in supermarkets, how they react to alienation, and how it alters their shopping experience. Additionally, the supermarket as a space or 'non-place' has been examined, exploring the ideas of anonymity and dissociation of identity — and observing fear and paranoia permeated by surveillance mechanisms in supermarkets.

Food and culinary experiences do not merely satisfy hunger but have also been principle actors in bringing society together. By altering narratives, tweaking expectations of consumers, and stripping the bargaining power of the customers, food has sustained several social fractures. It is seen that food advertisements run the risk of ethical violations, and that competing for product variants fosters unwholesome approaches to food. Further, food-consumer dynamics are problematised due to online shopping, ultimately resulting in online businesses reverting to physical retail. Thus, supermarkets are momentous proofs of how capitalistic dreams blown out of proportion can result in a non-egalitarian distribution of food — an essential of human survival.

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