

“People are going mad”

A disjunctive comparison of rituals of grocery shopping at the beginning of Covid-19 (March-June 2020)

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ABSTRACT: At the very beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the act of loading shopping carts more than usual materialized as a sensible choice for most shoppers. Yet, stockpiling was constructed in parallel to the social pathologizing of so-called *panic buying*. Panic buyers emerged as supermarket “loose cannons” who seemed to create an “indecorous” spectacle out of what is usually considered an unremarkable act of everyday life. In this context, through the disjunctive comparison of experiences of grocery shopping in Italy and England, this paper looks at material cultures of preparedness and moral cosmologies of everyday consumption as they acquired social salience during the first few months of the Covid-19 pandemic (from March to June 2020). The rupture of everydayness allowed to appreciate the ritualistic aspects of grocery shopping and highlight their role in the temporal, social and moral ordering of everyday life.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19; GROCERY SHOPPING; SUPERMARKET; ENGLAND; ITALY; RITUAL

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Prelude

It is the 11th of March 2020, and I am looking for toilet paper in an Aldi supermarket in Cambridge, UK. Amelia, the woman I am shopping for, told me I would find it at the back of the store. I look at the £15 cash she gave me and walk down the busy aisles. The toilet paper was recently restocked and arranged directly on the floor (*figure 1*). I uncomfortably grab three 12-roll packs, the maximum amount I am allowed since the store introduced a limit on the number of key items customers can buy.



FIGURE 1: Toilet paper rolls in Aldi

The rolls are too big to carry, so I put them in a ripped cellophane bag I find flying around the aisle. In this extremely clumsy attempt, I have the anxious feeling that people are staring at me. As I walk towards the cashier, I wonder if I am projecting my self-judgment onto other shoppers. While I wait in the queue, I am relieved at the sight of what I superficially assume to be other *panic buyers*.

It is my turn. The cashier looks at the toilet paper, looks at me and then calls the store manager. I am about to burst out and say: “Don’t worry, this isn’t for me. It’s for a woman in a wheelchair who is waiting outside and asked for help. I wouldn’t panic buy, I’m a researcher.” The affirmative nod of the store manager saves me from this pathetic confession. Instead, I smile awkwardly, pay and walk out. Amelia, who is waiting for me in her wheelchair

already loaded with bags, tells me: “Hurry up, don’t let them see you.” At that moment, my suspicions turn into certainties. I know she has already bought the packs she was entitled to and needed someone to buy more for her. Me. As I put down the rolls, I can see more toilet paper at the bottom of her shopping cart (*figure 2*).



FIGURE 2: Amelia’s shopping cart outside Aldi

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Introduction

This article explores material cultures of grocery shopping in England and Italy during the first few months of the Covid-19 pandemic (from March to June 2020). While scholars have long recognized that a focus on everyday consumption holds the potential to bring salient social relationships and cultural processes to light (Appadurai 1986; Miller 1987; Campbell 1995), grocery shopping remains a much under-researched aspect of everyday life. The theoretical construction and empirical exploration of emergency consumption allowed me to turn the pandemic into an opportunity to conduct novel research on everyday material culture as it acquired new salience under unique circumstances. In a time of crisis, the veil of habit that makes ordinary practices such as grocery shopping unnoticed, or even invisible, to the native is

suddenly lifted. In the face of emergency, supermarket provisioning can be more easily unmasked as an extremely socially charged activity.

Before the outbreak of Covid-19, with a few exceptions (e.g., Kulemeka 2010), emergency consumption had been approached almost exclusively from a quantitative point of view (see Beatty *et al.* 2018; Tsao *et al.* 2019; Dulam *et al.* 2020). As the topic gained more attention, today the still scarce yet rapidly emerging literature mainly falls within the remit of survival psychology (e.g., Arafat *et al.* 2020; Yuen *et al.* 2020; Lins and Aquino 2020; Taylor 2021), risk and disaster management (e.g., Arafat *et al.* 2021; Loxton *et al.* 2020; Prentice *et al.* 2020), supply chain studies (e.g., Bentall *et al.* 2021; Dulam *et al.* 2021; Hall *et al.* 2021; Islam *et al.* 2021) and media studies (e.g., Ahmad and Murad 2020; Barnes *et al.* 2021; Leung *et al.* 2021; Naeem 2021). The anthropological approach of this paper thus aims to contribute to a research gap that is particularly difficult to fill in “ordinary” times. This seems increasingly relevant as, just two years later, once again images of empty supermarket aisles repopulate media reports due to supply chain disruptions as a consequence of the war in Ukraine.

In early March 2020, I compared supermarket shelves and people’s shopping carts during the early phase of growing demand across the main retailers in England targeting different consumer groups (Asda, Tesco, Waitrose, Marks & Spencer, Sainsbury’s and Aldi). During this period, beyond hours of “passive” observation, I talked to shop assistants and managers at different stores in Cambridge and interacted with several shoppers as they walked around supermarket aisles, waited in line to pay, or loaded bags into their cars. With many of them our interactions were limited to me taking photos of their shopping carts and a few relatively brief exchanges that at times were ethnographically interesting due to their blunt nature and defensive tone. With a few others, more meaningful interactions were established as I accompanied them on their shopping expeditions. With three of them, we exchanged contact details allowing for their contribution also during the second part of my empirical work when, after a re-assessment of health-associated risks and the ethics of social distancing, in mid-March I interrupted in-person research. I then conducted phone and video interviews with a diverse group of participants from Italy and England (around 20 participants with additional contributions from some of their family members and friends). Aside from my initial supermarket encounters in Cambridge, English and Italian participants were recruited through my extended personal network among people

who may have been affected differently by the pandemic and lockdown measures. I asked my informants to take note of their visits to the supermarket as different restrictions were enforced between March and June 2020. These “shopping diaries” represented a key starting point for conversations and a way to capture participants’ personal impressions while these were still fresh in their mind. Participants took note and shared their reflections on shopping and consumption by using different formats, from handwritten journal entries to WhatsApp texts and voice messages. The latter were particularly popular among my Italian participants, who generally perceive this medium as more personal compared to other forms of messaging (Taipale and Farinosi 2018). The casual format of voice messages, as well as the “live” element to them, meant that participants had less room to edit and overthink their observations. Some messages were recorded while interlocutors were in supermarket queues, in a store’s carpark or walking home from their shopping expeditions. So, while it was no longer possible for me to walk around supermarket aisles with my participants, WhatsApp messages allowed for some “instantaneity” in my research.

The geographical focus of this research, initially dictated by personal circumstances and issues of access, opened up a productive space for comparison. By borrowing Lazar’s (2012) concept of “disjunctive comparison,” here cross-country observations are not made for the sake of finding differences and similarities between two anthropologically incommensurable social contexts. The point is to let such disjunctive material talk to each other and create opportunities for reflection. Like me, moreover, some of my participants experienced the pandemic transnationally in both Italy and the UK, whether directly (i.e., having repatriated during lockdown) or indirectly, for instance through diasporic kinship or transnational business activities. Here, the metaphor of the Cassandra complex as conceptualized by Benussi and Zhu (2020) is particularly enlightening and analytically handy. In relation to the spread of Covid-19, the Cassandra complex refers to the temporal experience of diasporic Chinese and Italian nationals who saw the state of emergency rapidly develop in their home countries, while witnessing passive attitudes or delayed responses in host communities. Diasporic Cassandras – burdened by the *gift of prescience* – found themselves in different viral temporalities and, as I will argue, also in different consumption temporalities due to positional discrepancies in their experience of the pandemic. For instance, I met one of my participants – an Italian national studying in Cambridge – while she was

walking around the supermarket with a “prophetic” shopping list put together by her mother in Italy to warn her about what items were likely to sell out. My empirical material is thus essentially disjunctive across time and space. Different viral temporalities and localities are put in conversation in relation to disparate consumption experiences in the face of the same travelling virus.

As a diasporic Cassandra experiencing my own temporal and spatial ruptures, I found myself entangled in multiple dimensions of positionality, starting from my role as a researcher, concerned bio-citizen and supermarket shopper. I soon discovered that I was not the only one trapped in subject-object ambivalences in their construction of knowledge and understanding of the pandemic. My participants, by their admission, tended to do a good amount of self-reflection on their own and were particularly interested in making sense of their experience of the unfolding pandemic with me. As life suddenly decelerated due to lockdown measures, many found themselves pondering at home, engaging in what Anderson (2004) termed *folk ethnography*. At times intrigued, and at others disorientated, by their new lifestyle, most participants seemed interested in the art of people watching in the attempt “to navigate uncertain terrain but also as naturally curious human beings inclined to make sense of their social habitat” (Anderson 2004: 23). This mechanism helped overcome boundaries between researcher and informant and favoured a more inclusive production of knowledge. Reflections on consumption were particularly common among my interlocutors given that grocery shopping often represented the only *social activity* outside the space of the home people engaged in. The supermarket became the main venue of observation and investigation for both my participants and me, and a key site of socialisation, even when this consisted of socially distanced interactions.

Ultimately, my analysis does not aim to draw general lockdown trends or make broad cross-country comparisons between anthropologically incomensurable socio-cultural contexts – this was not the point or within the scope of this both time-limited and time-sensitive research during a period of great personal and collective uncertainty. This disjunctive material is not meant to be reconciled in a way that can be generalised or comparatively extended beyond my observations during an exceptional time limited to the first few months of the pandemic. The material I present in this paper may even appear too anecdotal, although by now we should be able to appreciate the long-nurtured value of anecdotes and the way unique instances, encounters and experiences can enrich our understanding and inform our thinking. The

research, moreover, is clearly embedded within my own personal experience of the pandemic as we collectively and intensively pondered over this extraordinarily peculiar time of our existence. On the one hand, in this paper I aim to offer a perspective on the great analytical potential of the pandemic as a rupture of the ordinary that allows us to study the salience of the mundane. On the other hand, the main themes of this paper can be treated as a starting point for further qualitative research on ordinary and extraordinary rituals of grocery shopping beyond the current pandemic. The quotes I selected for this paper are meant to help recall something that participants, readers and I as the author can most likely relate to or have come across during the first few months of the pandemic. This could also feed into a different conversation on the practical limitations of formalised research and the value of experimental, autoethnographic and even organic or spontaneous research, especially on mundane issues of everyday life.

By focusing on material cultures of grocery shopping and by grasping an opportunity to conduct research on the anthropological ambivalences between the apocalyptic and the prescient, this paper is organized as follows. I first provide an account of consumption cultures of preparedness and consumerist practices of panic. This allows me to locate consumption within discourses on millenarianism and to trace the moral construction of grocery shopping as an *ordinary act* that ought to remain so – in this sense, prophetic material cultures of emergency and preparedness seem to clash with the moral and temporal order of everyday grocery shopping. I then consider the orderly aspects of consumption as tangible sources of comfort and mechanisms of control. In doing so, I explore the ritualistic aspects of shopping during Covid-19. Finally, I bring attention to forms of conspicuous consumption that became accentuated and discursively evident in a moment of crisis. This will ultimately allow me to anthropologically *re-socialize* supermarkets as deeply charged social places.

Viral and (un)reasonable orders of consumption

When lockdown measures were enforced in the spring of 2020, even as restaurant delivery services adapted to new regulations, supermarket provisioning came to represent almost the totality of most people's consumption. Due to increased home consumption, less frequent trips to the shops, long physical and virtual queues, and the contingency of having to self-isolate, the act of loading shopping carts more than usual materialized as a sensi-

ble choice for most shoppers. However, practices of consumption in a state of emergency were constructed in parallel to the social pathologizing of panic buying in public narratives, popular discourses and academic writing. Nash (2020) interprets panic buying as a form of “irrational exuberance” (see Shiller 2000). The term indicates a state of consumerist and euphoric myopia that leads people to overestimate a commodity’s “true” value. In Marxist terms, *panic buyers* thus engage in a form of commodity fetishism (with toilet paper as probably the most fetishized Covid-19 commodity in Britain), whereby essential goods acquire a new value independently from the resources involved in their production, their material properties or actual functionality. This “viral” state supposedly prevents people from seeing the detrimental effects of their consumption behaviour and ends up creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Put simply, the allegedly *irrational* fear of a shortage of key goods ends up contributing to their temporary unavailability on supermarket shelves due to stockpiling. The theme of “irrationality” was also popular among my interlocutors when commenting on empty shelves. For example, while shaking his head, a Tesco stock manager remarked that “people are simply panicking and buying irrationally.” A Waitrose shopper – who spontaneously approached me while I was talking to supermarket staff assuming I was complaining about the store’s low stock – repeatedly emphasized that “people are going insane; they take more than their fair share … It’s irrational. People are going mad.”

As I approach the concept of panic buying, I am wary of writing off consumers’ behaviour as simply “irrational.” During the early phase of growing demand across supermarkets, most of my English interlocutors struggled to make sense of the conspicuous absence of toilet paper on supermarket shelves. Despite that, most of them would make sure to grab an extra pack before leaving the supermarket. Aside from people’s cognitive biases in assessing their shopping behaviour and the behaviour of others (see Jones and Nisbett 1971), the expectation that people will stockpile supposedly makes the purchase of extra rolls a rational choice. In the words of a shopper I met in Aldi: “Yes, we are stocking. You need to, because you don’t know what will happen … People are panicking, so we have to stock up.” It is not just the expectation that others will *irrationally* buy, but the expectation that others will *rationally* respond to an expectation of hoarding behaviour by securing their own stock. Attempts to distinguish orderly and rational consumption of preparedness from irrational and impulsive consumption of panic are morally dubious and highly problematic from both a discursive and practical perspective. Different moralities of

material culture dictate what constitutes a sensible and healthy relationship with material goods and distinguish “excessive” from “appropriate” accumulation. In this regard, Kilroy-Marac (2018) looks at popular imaginaries about collecting and hoarding in North America and the UK. Hoarders are qualified as individuals unable to exercise control over things; they become overpowered by the material world:

The closeness they demonstrate toward their belongings seems inappropriate to the outside observer – too emotional, too absorbed, too blurred with the people themselves. From a non-hoarder’s perspective, hoarders appear to care too much and not enough, all at once (Kilroy-Marac 2018: 34).

While hoarding is a clinically recognised condition, panic buyers are similarly constructed as supermarket “loose cannons,” who misinterpret the *true* value of goods; who are *too* concerned with stockpiling things and *not enough* about others’ needs; who believe to be supermarket experts by managing to secure goods but, in reality, ignore the *appropriate* shopping behaviour to be adopted. This ultimately creates an *indecorous* spectacle out of what usually is an unremarkable act of everyday life.

Especially in the UK, the mediated construction of panic buying through reportages of distressed supermarket staff (Mann 2020; Kale 2020), shoppers fighting over toilet paper (Laws 2020; Christodoulou 2020) and health workers in tears due to their inability to find food after long shifts (O'Reilly 2020) created an apocalyptic picture of supermarket consumption. People are increasingly used to the politics of emergency and proficient in the language and aesthetics of apocalypticism, from sci-fi to conspiracy theories and radical environmentalism (see Barkun 1990, 1996; Stewart and Harding 1999; Toscano 2010). In this regard, Franco – an unemployed man in his early 50s from Palermo (Italy) – offered a transcendental explanation of the pandemic and its corresponding mode of consumption:

You know the Lord ... I don't know if you believe. But I do believe. He put us to test to allow us to relish the taste of life again. Many people didn't understand the meaning of life anymore. I see that people are now paying more attention to the small things of life. It was a nice message despite these disgraceful circumstances.

In his view, alienating, fast-paced and self-destructive consumerism called for divine intervention to let us “taste” again the pleasure of “consuming” life together in a simple and modest way. This speaks to the man’s morality of consumption and his views on the “appropriate” relationship with consumer goods, largely rooted in Christian culture (see Parry and Bloch 1989). While

in Franco's case the pedagogy and even the poetics of viral consumption are based on moral and religious grounds, Felicity – a 60+ year-old woman from the West Midlands (UK) who works several jobs as a chef – re-worked this apocalypticism of consumption in political terms. In her shopping diary she wrote:

I will explain why we chose not to panic buy. Over the past 12 months we have been gathering a few things together (tinned and jar items, tea bags, pasta, rice, etc.). Because of Brexit and the uncertainty of that. Little did we know worse was to come ... In hindsight, it was a good thing because you haven't been able to get a toilet roll around here.

This form of preparedness, which reflects Felicity's perception of the geopolitics of consumption, was largely derided by her daughter, Lucy, who was keen for Felicity to send me pictures of her pantry (below) to show what Lucy saw as consumption extravaganza and paranoia.

Here research on "preppers" can be particularly telling. Preppers – often defined as survivalists – are people who *prepare* for all sorts of emergencies, from earthquakes to nuclear wars. They put a strong emphasis on DIY material culture, and pantry stocking is most certainly an important element of prepping. Huddleston (2018) notes that in the US, preppers are typically depicted in popular culture as political or religious extremists. They represent a source of suspiciousness and potential danger in public narratives. Huddleston, however, emphasizes that preppers – mostly consisting of fairly educated, young people in full-time employment – tend to be community-oriented individuals. The stigma around prepping aligns with Faubion's (2001) account of contemporary views on millennialism. In his analysis, while millennialism represents a comprehensive worldview and complex pedagogy, it is dismissed as lunacy. This form of social stigma is also common among scholars, who largely adopt a defensive behaviour and try to distance themselves from their millenarian object of study:

Some of its devices are transparent: rationalist mockery, bemused or belittling, which is content to dismiss as foolish or infantile whatever might threaten to reflect back to it the extra-rational grounds of its own complaisance; and that sort of behavioural scientism that rapidly weaves the feathery headdress of a psychopathological profile (Faubion 2001: 33).

This resonates with the experience described in the prelude of me awkwardly buying toilet paper for Amelia and feeling tempted to self-identify as a researcher to morally requalify my act of consumption and make my socio-intellectual and class position somewhat self-explanatory.



FIGURES 3, 4, 5: Photos sent by Felicity picturing her well-stocked pantry ahead of Brexit

By taking us back to the metaphor of diasporic Cassandras, Faubion (2001: 18) writes: “The paranoid are the inheritors of Cassandra’s curse: their suspicions meet with bemused dismissals; their knowledge falls on obstinately deaf ears.” With regard to provisioning, both material cultures of preparedness and forms of viral consumption or panic buying are largely pathologized. Whether too methodically prepared or emotionally unprepared, they clash with the unspoken code of everyday consumption, whereby supermarket provisioning should be grounded between the temporal brackets of a *reasonable present*. Prophetic supermarket consumption, in conclusion, is either suspicious, psychotic or morally condemnable.

Consumption as order, control and ritual

At the beginning of the pandemic, the emptiness of supermarket shelves provided a strong visual signal that things were out of place or out of order due to their very absence. Bille *et al.* (2010: 179) refer to this as the “ambiguous materiality” of absence, namely the social presence of absent material bodies. The absent body of things proves to have an agency of its own and looks particularly conspicuous in the abundance of modern consumerism (Hetherington 2004). In the context of the pandemic, it symbolized people’s reaction to a perceived threat. If commodities can signal a threat through their absence on supermarket shelves, the hoarding of commodities can represent a way to re-establish order through their presence at least on domestic shelves. Materiality is therefore simultaneously configured as a cue of social (dis)order and a tangible source of comfort – this is revealed in moments of crisis when order is disrupted, and coping mechanisms are employed to re-establish such order.

From a Freudian perspective, the hoarding of toilet paper and the anxiety over its absence have been closely linked to people’s primordial need for order (Halford 2020) and instincts of social survival (Kluger 2020). While I will not go down the Freudian route, it is true that panic buying has been largely interpreted both by experts and non-experts as an (irrational) control mechanism (Garbe *et al.* 2020). In her folk ethnography of Covid-19 consumption, Lucy – Felicity’s 30-year-old daughter – commented: “As for panic buying, I think it’s just hysteria. I guess that if you look at the psychology of it, people can’t control the virus, but they can maybe control how they react to the virus ... It’s a fear of being out of control.” Along the same lines, contrary to the growing trend among British consumers of less copious and more frequent grocery shopping (KPMG/Ipsos Retail Think Tank 2018), a shopper I met at a

Sainsbury's superstore in Cambridge remarked with a hint of pride that she did not need to panic buy as she relied on a carefully put together weekly food planner. Due to her skills in house management and supermarket provisioning, she felt in full control while grocery shopping. In her eyes, panic buyers become constructed almost as “sloppy” and “disorganized” and stockpiling emerges as a coping strategy for people who, unlike her, are not in control.

If consumption is interpreted as a control mechanism, it is unsurprising that my interlocutors in a vulnerable socio-economic position were more likely to stock their pantries. Rosa – mother of three in her 40s – is part of the informal economy in her small town in Southern Italy. She is an off-the-books domestic worker and her husband is an off-the-books construction worker; if they do not set foot outside the house, the family has no income to rely on. As news broke about the first Italian cases of coronavirus, Rosa decided to do some prepping. She claims to have bought 25kg of flour and 1kg of fresh yeast: “I spent €500 at the supermarket, I took everything and more. From that day it's been almost four weeks. May the Lord bless us.” By contrast some of my upper-class interlocutors from the same area ridiculed forms of supermarket prepping and some of the precautionary measures employed by stores. Among them, Giancarlo defiantly went to the shops daily despite official recommendations and only wore a face mask in the stores where it was mandatory. His wife commented: “Maybe it's because I am not an anxious person, but I would feel ridiculous living in fear of touching another person in the supermarket by mistake.” While the couple did not change their shopping routine, they started buying more delicacies (*sfiziosità*) for virtual happy hours with family and friends as afforded by their social class.

Building on these links between consumption and control, anthropologists have long appreciated the increase in ritual activities in moments of crisis or socio-political distress (see Homans 1941; Kluckhohn 1942). According to Douglas and Isherwood (1979: 43), consumption consists of a series of rituals whose function is “to make sense of the inchoate flux of events.” Shopping provides the infrastructure for the performance of such rituals. In line with a classic structure of ritual, in the time of Covid-19, supermarket visitors would wait in socially distanced lines – usually alone and in silence – marking their temporal and spatial abstraction. Especially in Italy, where stricter measures were enforced, this step would entail a prior preparatory stage aiding the ritual with special gear, namely gloves and face masks. Once the wait is over, shoppers would transit into the liminal space of the supermarket. There, they

would learn about the pandemic through a change in the material culture and social experience of grocery shopping: one-way routes, emptier shelves, fuller shopping carts, no cash, no touching, etc. In the suspended space of liminality, shoppers would often end up grabbing a few extra goods and items would start piling up in their carts due to the uncertainty of what is needed in a pandemic and for how long. Finally, shoppers are ready for reaggregation through a process of cleansing. As soon as they pay, leave the supermarket or step home, they apply hand sanitizer or wash their hands. They sort the groceries away and return to the familiar safety of the home. This ritualistic experience also applied to consumers that did not physically go grocery shopping. In their hand-written shopping diary, for example, Maria and Luca – an elderly couple from Bologna – provided a detailed account of their collection and cleansing procedure when their children delivered their groceries:

Shopping bags are left at the bottom of the stairs. We greet my daughter or son from the window. Luca goes back and forth to bring all the bags into the kitchen. We lay a cloth on the kitchen table, which will then be disinfected and exposed to the sun. The bags are emptied onto the cloth and taken to an empty room, where they will stay untouched for three days.

Similarly, online shoppers would long stare at their number in virtual queues or endlessly refresh supermarket websites in the hope of finding an available delivery slot, before performing their ritual of collection and ablution.

This newly reconfigured and intensified ritual activity should be explored in the context of the other rituals that people ordinarily perform. Among my interlocutors, not only did the pandemic suddenly configure supermarket shopping as a new rite of passage, but it also quickly defined new domestic rituals of consumption while replacing old ones. Many of my Italian participants, for instance, interrupted or limited their consumption of *espresso*, which they largely associated with a quick pit-stop at their local café (*bar*). With lockdown, life slowed down and so did the drinking of coffee, with teas and infusions becoming more popular. One Italian family even established a new ritual around tea drinking, an item that would not normally feature in their pantry: every day at 6 p.m., they would all gather around the TV, listen to the daily national bulletin on the spread of the virus, and drink tea. Similarly, in connection to her increase in alcohol consumption, Felicity – who during lockdown had her 25-year-old son, Oscar, back at home – described a new home ritual: “Every day, by 4 p.m. Oscar will say ‘Should we have a beer or a glass of wine?’ Especially when the sun is shining, this has become a very nice, new family tradition.” These examples do not mean to reflect general consumption trends but speak

to the institution of new rituals of consumption within the family. The extraordinary of the pandemic gave visibility to shopping and consumption as the infrastructure for routinisation. In this regard, Mary Douglas (1972) highlights the importance of sequence and the order of meals throughout the ordinary week. Many of my interlocutors instituted new Sunday rituals of consumption as a way to re-establish temporal control over the passing of days, especially when household members did not have an occupation to attend to. One Italian family would dress nicely for Sunday meals “as if we were going to church.” Another family, once restaurant delivery services became available, would make the day special by treating themselves to a nice take-out meal.

Supermarkets as social places

Grocery shops as liminal, ritualistic spaces might bring to mind Augé’s (1995) interpretation of supermarkets as spaces of passage, what he calls *non-places*. Anthropologically speaking, non-places represent anonymous and socially sterile transit points that exist outside space and time. Together with other places of passage produced by super-modernity – such as highways and airports – supermarkets do not allow for identification and socialisation, being “surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary” (Augé 1995: 78). Supermarket visitors become anonymous shoppers; their identity does not go beyond that of consumers. They walk around clinical aisles, read impersonal labels, select mass-produced goods and hand a credit card to a worker or self-check-out machine, before walking out to carry on with real and meaningful social life. Contrary to Augé’s somehow outdated account, through the experience of the extraordinary my research shows that the transience of places of supermodernity does not necessarily qualify them as *asocial*. While it might be true that modernity “pushes them into the background” (Augé 1995: 77), supermarkets still exist as places where social relations and identities are formed and performed. After all, consumption, including grocery shopping, has been interpreted as an inherently social activity even in the world of mass-produced commodities (Miller 1995, 1998 and 2008) and everyday material culture as having the ability to shape social identities (Attfield 2000; Tilley *et al.* 2006; Woodward 2007).

Similar to Rial and Goidanich’s (2012) ethnography of grocery shopping in Brazil, in my research supermarkets are far from being meaningless places of passage; they are a key locus of instant and pedagogic socialisation, paradoxically even when this consists of socially distanced interactions. Some of

my participants came to see supermarkets as a source of entertainment, an activity to plan for or fill the day with. Some of them strategically timed their outings to maximize their opportunity to engage in an activity outside the house. Supermarket workers in the UK reported that shoppers became more talkative during the lockdown (Kale 2020) and a few participants even told me about being involved in, or having witnessed, heated arguments in supermarkets. While in some cases the pandemic unleashed the social potential of supermarkets, in others it betrayed the ordinary and often unconscious expectation of grocery stores as casually social places. One woman from Biella (Italy), for instance, was deeply offended when she was prevented by supermarket staff from chatting (at a safe distance) with a friend she bumped into because during lockdown people were not allowed to “shop together.”

During the pandemic the supermarket was also experienced by most as the only *social place* where to observe and study other people. Anderson’s (2004: 21) description of folk ethnography as a (distanced) social exercise is particularly fitting:

The curious will sometimes gawk at strangers, but most often, people are polite and, from a safe distance, watch others unobtrusively, if indirectly. Others may be reluctant at first, only to find themselves unavoidably overhearing conversations that pique their interest; then they eavesdrop and collect stories, which they may either repeat to friends or keep to themselves.

According to Anderson, this process represents the unconscious, formative experience that determines the foundation of our behaviour and code of conduct in public. Under the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic, shoppers – as folk ethnographers – appeared to be more receptive and alert because, among other things, they had more to learn about themselves and others. Monica, daughter of Maria and Luca (the elderly couple from Bologna), noted that during lockdown she started remembering the faces of those she happened to shop with, as well as supermarket employees: “Before COVID, you didn’t know who was shopping next to you. Each one of us was on their personal ‘track.’ Now, you remember exactly who was walking around the aisles.”

Building on this interpretation of grocery stores as *social places*, the supermarket also powerfully epitomizes and objectifies class relations, particularly in the UK. Consumption has long been recognized as a status marker (Veblen 1899) and the source and expression of cultural capital and class (Bourdieu 1984). In the contemporary age of consumerism, the axiom *you are what you eat* could be easily rewritten as *you are where and what you buy*. This largely satirized element of the British class system became particularly evident in

the early phases of emergency shopping across different retailers. Consider the below photos of supermarket toilet paper sections, taken on the same day at two stores located next to each other. The top photo was taken in Asda – quoted in the Guardian (Jeffries 2004) as the store “for people who aspire to have a second home anywhere but probably never will” – and the second photo in a supermarket-only Marks & Spencer (M&S) – a store with the reputation for appealing to upper middle-class sensibilities and pockets.



FIGURE 6: Toilet paper section in Asda (Beehive centre, Cambridge UK) 12/03/2020



FIGURE 7: Toilet paper section in M&S (Beehive centre, Cambridge UK) 12/03/2020

M&S is not generally considered a store where people buy in bulk and go for provisioning of basic goods, although this store was particularly large and very well-equipped. While bearing this in mind, in mid-March the experience of walking out of Asda – where staff were already overwhelmed, and shelves already half emptied – and stepping into M&S was to be turned into a prophetic Cassandra.

The material experience and the discursive formulation of supermarket shopping radically differed across the two stores and participants from different social classes. An M&S shopping assistant, for instance, told me calmly but with a hint of pride:

All regular here, we did not have any problem with people stockpiling. I know that Tesco and other shops set limits on the number of items that you can buy, but not here, we don't do that ... Maybe we are running low of hand sanitizer, let me check ... Yes, we are out. But I may have some in the back. People here are shopping as usual.

Similarly, an elderly woman in M&S, who was buying fresh food with her husband, when I enquired about her shopping experience, told me rather abruptly: "We shop here every week ... we are shopping as normal." After I thanked her for her time, she remarked again: "This is our regular shop. Just shopping as normal." The woman was almost offended that someone could think that she was at *her* supermarket for anything other than her *ordinary* shopping, or worse that she would engage in something *extraordinary* such as panic buying. This highlights the class-related sociability afforded by grocery stores and the stigma attached to prophetic modes of consumption as explored in previous sections.

Rochefort (2007) maintains that supermarkets as *asocial places* allow for anonymous purchases free from the judgement of other shoppers. Consumers rely on this sense of privacy to express and objectify intimate wants through shopping. Yet, social anxieties and fears of shaming for personal consumer choices at the supermarket became particularly evident during the lockdown. During my fieldwork in Cambridge, shoppers with carts exclusively made up of bulk and non-perishable goods denied doing some prepping. Others claimed they were not thinking about coronavirus at all, when clearly the grocery store already felt and looked very different.

An Italian man I met in front of Asda in Cambridge with only toilet paper in his cart, when I first enquired about his purchase, replied he had run out. Once we mutually identified as Italians and switched to our mother tongue, he admitted he was buying toilet paper "because people were crazy buying it." This



FIGURE 8: Carts of shoppers who claimed to be doing a non-pandemic-related shopping

consumption *shame* was less dominant in Italy, where supermarkets were less sensationalized in public narratives of the pandemic. Having had the chance to get to know her personality, I even suspect that Rosa – the Italian domestic worker I mentioned in my previous section – exaggerated the amount of money and quantity of food she was able to buy with a single trip to the shops. The fact that she did not hide stockpiling but perhaps even emphasized the grandeur of her supermarket expedition speaks to her version of conspicuous consumption. In this context, *buying* and *not buying* as well as *buying what* and *where* figure as charged social choices embedded within a social class system and qualify supermarkets as charged social places.

Conclusion

During my fieldwork I met Amelia, the shopper from the prelude, for two consecutive days in two different shopping areas. After our encounter in Aldi, I met her again in Asda, where I helped her shop for her family and friends (figure 9).

She is a British-Jamaican woman in her 60s, who was a carer until 2014 when her health issues constrained her to a wheelchair. By her own admission, her precarious health and economic condition exacerbated her anxieties towards the then-imminent pandemic. Amelia proved to be an expert in supermarket material culture by skilfully grabbing products, recognizing brands and correctly guessing prices. However, in the extraordinary space of liminality of the supermarket, she seemed to be inspired by whatever item was running low and whatever she could glimpse in other people’s shopping carts, keen to participate in the collective ritual of emergency consumption. After

Asda, she announced that we were going to the B&M store next door, in her words, “to look for other stuff I need.” When I further enquired, she could not tell me what that was, signalling her moral rather than material need for things as a source of control and comfort. While we shopped, she resorted to religious and millenarian expressions such as “I pray that I’m covered in His blood.” As we walked around supermarket aisles, people starred at her overloaded wheelchair. Two young men walked past Amelia and one of them giggled “That woman was covered in toilet paper” to which the other replied “Yeah, that’s what I’m saying. It’s insane.” While grateful for my help, Amelia suspected that I was skeptical, or even judgmental, about her *need* to buy more. When her friends insistently called and messaged her to add more items to her shopping list, she told me: “See? I wasn’t lying yesterday. I have people I need to buy and care for.”

I met Amelia at the beginning of my fieldwork, but her story perfectly summarizes the main conclusions of this paper. Using the pandemic experience as an entryway to explore the taken-for-granted salience of everyday consumption, I explored ritualized social and moral orders of grocery shopping in English and Italian supermarkets. More specifically, I looked at prophetic forms of consumption as responding to people’s cosmologies of everyday



FIGURE 9: Amelia after shopping in Asda

material culture. Grocery shopping and consumption have been interpreted as rituals that morally and materially organize social life by giving people a sense of order and control. The experience of the extraordinary allowed for the anthropological re-socialisation of supermarkets as places where, among other things, we may learn about others and perform what we want others to learn about us. The rupture of everydayness helped highlight the salience of temporal cosmologies of consumption. The tendency to pathologize prophetic grocery shopping speaks to the normative construction of supermarket provisioning as grounded in the temporal order of everydayness. Similarly, the institution of new rites may facilitate the transition into a new present marked by the pandemic and help cope with the idea of an unpredictable future.

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