

Ethics vs Convenience vs Cost

Findings from a group conversation around supermarket practices and the environment



Summary

The following report details the analysis of a focus group conversation around the environmental practices of supermarkets. It reveals that concern for the environment may be responsible for some consumers purchasing less overall. It also identified that there is a growing market for ethical shopping with an emphasis on reducing plastic but that no one supermarket is doing enough to grab the reins.

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Why we did it.

I initiated this study because of a desire to find out if other people, like me, share similar concerns about the environmental cost of current supermarket practices. This report is the result of an analysis of the conversation that took part between a focus group of four women who agreed to meet and talk about consumption and the environment.

When looking for focus group members I deliberately requested people who consider how their shopping impacts on supermarket practices and the environment, and have used their conversation to qualitatively analyse their concerns, beliefs and behaviours. Many of the preoccupations of the women in this report may be considered niche now but I believe they are setting trends in consumption that will become the mainstream concerns and practices of future consumers assuming that concerns around environmental impact of consumption continue to grow.

Finally, though loosely applied academic techniques have been employed to interpret the conversation of the focus group members, this report has not, and will not, be peer reviewed. Though this study attempts to effectively interpret the conversation between focus group members and all attempts have been made to create an impartial conversation space where participants can speak freely, it cannot defend itself entirely against charges of bias. People converse to come together and it is natural for ideas and attitudes expressed in conversation to reach out for the middle ground. The thoughts and beliefs expressed here are obviously affected by the environmental beliefs of others in the group but, even taking this into account, ideas were enthusiastically expressed, and agreement was high with participants eager to discuss their concerns.

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How we did it.

All the focus group members were contacted either through social media, mutual friends and flyers left in local cafes and shops. Any expenses were incurred by myself and no one within the focus group was paid for their contribution.

The focus group took place in a cafe in South East London at 10am on Tuesday, March 15th, 2017.

In order to interpret the focus group conversation I have used basic thematic analysis techniques such as common word repetitions, underlying themes and narratives, but only loosely so. Much of my interpretation also comes from body movements, vocal and facial expressions.

The conversation took place around two topics. The first topic of conversation was *How do you shop every week?* The intention of this question was to get participants to describe their regular weekly shopping routine. Points of focus included "Where do you shop and how often?", "Which Supermarket/retailer do you use and why?" and "How do your concerns about the environment impact on the way you shop?"

The second topic of conversation was based on members of the focus group taking two unbranded cardboard depictions of items from a children's shopping list game. Each focus group member had then to talk about their negative or positive environmental associations.

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Who was involved?

The focus group was made up of four women referred to here as H1, M2, S3 and E4. They all currently live in South East London.

H1

H1 is a woman in her thirties. She has two children aged 7 and 4 and is a single mother. Her shopping concerns are quality, environment and price with price playing a major part of her decision making.

H1 shops approximately once a week at a lower priced supermarket (either Lidl or Aldi) and, if she runs out of an item during the week, she tends to go without until the next shop.

M2

M2 is a woman in her thirties. She also has two children approximately six and four years of age and lives with her partner. She also appears to be concerned about quality, environment and price; with environment being the biggest concern followed by price. She and her family are pescatarians (they eat fish but not meat).

M2 tends to shop online once a week and then tops up at the local 'little Sainsbury's' for products she runs out of. She used to go to the deli next to 'little Sainsbury's' to buy organic milk and butter but they no longer stock it. She currently does her weekly online shop with Ocado because they tend to stock more environmentally friendly and otherwise ethical products and don't pack everything in plastic bags (she has bought things online from Sainsbury's in the past).

S3

S3 is a woman in her thirties. She also lives with her partner and has one son under two but also works part time. She was also concerned with environment, quality and price but she was more emphatic in her concerns about quality.

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S3 tends to shop online every two weeks for bulk items and dry goods with Ocado (she changed to Ocado because they sell Method). S3 would prefer to buy at local shops as she did previously in Spain and will try to shop locally for organic produce during the week. She doesn't like the shopping experience in the UK. She regularly goes to the local farmer's market at the Horniman Museum to buy organic meat.

E4

E4 is a woman in her late teens/early twenties. She is a full time student and does not work outside her degree course. She lives in shared accommodation in a 'vegan household'. Her concerns were also the environment, price and quality, with environment and price playing the most important role. As a student, she felt she had less time constraints and was more capable of dedicating herself to shopping environmentally but had less money to do so.

E4 shops about once a week but tends to avoid supermarkets (mostly due to excess packaging) and goes to the markets in Camberwell for fresh fruit and vegetables. She visits an anarchist collective in Elephant and Castle to buy dry goods such as rice and pulses.

What did they say?

An analysis of the group discussion revealed the following themes:

- *Ethics vs convenience vs cost*
- *Perceptions of supermarkets and the environment*
- *Why all the plastic?*

Ethics vs convenience vs cost

Ethics

Three of our participants had obviously spent a great deal of time thinking about the environmental impact of their shopping habits. The fourth (H1) had previously given

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priority to cost, mostly out of necessity but more recently had spent time with a particularly environmentally conscious friend, who had encouraged her to consider the environmental ethics of consumption more.

The group as a whole were extremely aware of the environmental impact of their shopping. They tended to take the ethics of food very seriously and this impacted on their shopping habits greatly. S3 said that:

"if I don't find organic eggs or meat, I tend not to buy them",

M2, E4 and S3 all said that worrying about the environment encouraged them to buy less overall and H1 admitted she was not particularly materialistic but felt guilty about buying meat. S3 said she was more likely to buy less meat overall in order to purchase organic meat.

E4 felt that her environmental habits had meant she now was less likely to buy things she didn't need, making her much less materialistic. S3 still liked to shop but she admitted.

"Absolutely, now I buy less, prefer to spend a bit more and buy something, precious, not buy a lot, one pair of shoes for my son. I try to buy things made in England and Europe, not necessarily more expensive, but more inconvenient [to purchase]."

At the same time M2 and S3 both agreed that they were not attracted by the range of products in supermarkets and instead felt there was *"too much choice"*.

Convenience

The word convenience tended to come up a lot in terms of conversation. E4 felt she had the most time out of the group to spend shopping environmentally. She didn't work, have children and was at University about three times a week. She travelled by bike and moved around South East London at her leisure, shopping at different places to get cheap, environmentally friendly produce. She and her housemates were willing to grow their own tomatoes to avoid buying poorer quality tomatoes from the market.

At the same time S3 was the only member of the group that worked and had a child under two but, surprisingly, she was one of the most determined to sacrifice convenience and

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cost for ethics. S3 visited small local stores and markets for organic meat and goods and she changed supermarkets in order to buy a particular environmental product (Method).

S3 and E4 both revealed how they had spent time shopping for particular products online to find and purchase more environmentally friendly *individual* products, for example E4 bought soap nuts online. M2 mentioned that, at one point, she had travelled once a week to the Lewisham market to buy fresh fruit and vegetables which she described as very inconvenient, she said she had stopped doing this because the amount purchased was always too much, and she would return with “bags and bags” of stuff that she wouldn’t be able to use.

H1 did not go out of her way to shop environmentally mostly because she had to concentrate on price. Instead she concentrated on recycling and never wasting anything. She considered her environmental footprint and controlled it by not buying things she didn’t absolutely need.

Cost

Cost was the perhaps the most recurring theme of the focus group and was a constant concern with all members to a greater or lesser degree. H1 expressed annoyance that many of the environmentally ethical products (such as Ecover or Method) were prohibitively expensive. She was aware that Aldi had started providing organic products but she did not mention purchasing them. E4 admitted that she couldn’t afford organic and she had not yet considered buying it due to cost. M2 admitted that she couldn’t afford most organic items but tended to make the exception for dairy products (she doesn’t eat meat). S3, though often undeterred by inconvenience did buy less due to cost restrictions.

And all together...

From the conversation it appeared that each woman had, at some time or other, considered each individual purchase weighing up the pros and cons of the ethics of the product, the convenience of the purchase and use, and the cost. Each person had identified things they felt particularly strongly about and made concerted efforts to spend what money they could on those products but otherwise there was no hard and fast rule as

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to how they would buy at any particular time. The conversation they had with themselves was continuous, long standing and unresolved and often involved feelings of guilt. M2 put it best when E4 admitted she felt bad about not buying organic...

"It's okay to feel that, it can put you off unless you compartmentalise it, once you open the flood gates you think 'I won't eat meat, [I] won't buy that'.... you almost have to pick your focus."

All four women were eager to discuss new products that were convenient, ethical and inexpensive though they often expressed suspicion that this was at all possible. All of the women wanted to find alternatives to less environmentally ethical products and often they went to great lengths, researching, buying products individually over the internet or travelling away from their immediate localities, but in many cases, due to time or cost, they bought nothing, instead.

Perceptions of supermarkets and the environment.

There was no clear winner out of all the supermarkets. Morrisons was lauded by E4 for having a good loose selection (a selection of foods that are not packaged) while M2 felt Sainsbury's online shopping coming in plastic bags, squandered other preconceptions of sustainability within the supply chain.

Our participants tended to express disappointment in all the major supermarkets though Ocado/Waitrose were felt to have a better range of environmental products. However, the participants as a group did not seem adverse to the supermarket model as such, they appreciated the convenience they provided, but they seemed to feel that they could do more.

All the participants, except H1 who seemed preoccupied with cost almost to the exclusion of all other aspects of food shopping, were willing to pay more in some circumstances (but within limits) and had experienced sometimes excessive inconvenience in order to purchase more ethically.

They were, however, not surprised by the lack of effort supermarkets invest in order to make shopping more environmentally friendly, generally unimpressed by their level of

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environmental engagement. They seemed to express the opinion that consumers are still doing all the heavy lifting when it comes to shopping environmentally.

Why all the plastic?

The list of environment concerns regarding the weekly shop was almost too long to include here; air miles were a concern (H1), organic came up repeatedly (S3). M2 was concerned with, and extremely knowledgeable about, nearly every aspect of our modern day shopping practices including tinned fish, sustainable farming methods, cheap clothing and detergent. S3 felt frustrated by nappies but had been defeated by cloth ones.

E4, however, seemed most disturbed by the amount of plastic involved in consumption and her feelings were almost unquestionably supported by all the other participants of the group. S3, M2 and H1 were surprisingly knowledgeable about different recycling rules for different areas. M2 had changed her online supermarket because of the excessive numbers of bags she received (though she was informed by S3 that it was possible to shop online at Sainsbury's and request not to have bags).

E4 almost based her shopping entirely around the presence or absence of plastic. She had a better opinion of Morrisons due to it's loose selection of fruit and vegetables but she expressed a strong desire for all supermarkets to do more. E4 wanted to bring back the bottle return scheme, she wanted a loose section in supermarkets; something all the other participants felt they would be willing and eager to use, even H1 who was suspicious about the hygiene of such practices as she had memories of open barrels of dry goods. H1 did however express a willingness to buy from a loose selection if she felt that it could be done hygienically and cheaply. S3, however, put it most succinctly when she said,

"I don't want it to be recyclable, I just don't want that package to exist,"

a sentiment it seemed that all participants expressed overwhelming support for.

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Conclusion

All four participants seemed to enjoy the focus group, they talked enthusiastically and at length, listening to each others thoughts and often excited to hear their own concerns listened to with interest and agreement. I enjoyed the forty-five minutes we spent in each others company and was pleased and enthused to hear how engaged these women were with their shopping habits and humbled to find out to what lengths they were willing to go to in order to shop ethically and with regard to the future of the planet. They thought deeply and seriously about their environment impact. I was impressed to note that they had all moved past considering their environmental impact, had already educated themselves about it, and were now, almost entirely on their own, taking environmental responsibilities into their own hands. These women have busy lives with children, jobs and university commitments but they are sacrificing time and money to do their bit. It is no small thing.

There seemed to be a feeling among participants that their job was never ending, that every purchase, was fraught with guilt and approached with displeasure. If these women are the future of consumption, and I have to state now that I think they are, things do not look rosy for the mainstream supermarkets. There was too much bad feeling, an overall attitude of opportunities missed and not enough done to make these women feel inclined to return to the food shop with an enthusiasm for purchasing food and other goods.

The good news of course is that the women themselves did not feel antipathy to the supermarkets, they just felt that too much of the onus for ethical shopping was placed on them. When E4, the youngest and probably the least mainstream shopper of the group expressed a desire for a loose section in supermarkets she was expressing her desire to come back to supermarkets. She wants the convenience that they offer but right now they just aren't supplying her with the products she needs. My analysis of the focus group suggests that there is a growing market for ethical shopping but that no one supermarket is doing enough to grab the reins. My interpretation of the focus group discussion is that there is a space in the market that is being left glaringly empty. Perhaps one of the supermarkets will wake up to its existence soon but which one will get there first?

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Afterword

After listening to the focus group, analysing their conversation and considering myself, a solution to their shopping problems, I would like to take this opportunity to offer a suggestion that goes one further than E4. I think that an environmental section in larger supermarkets should be trialed. The environmental section which supplied loose, easily quantifiable fresh and dry goods such as fresh fruit and vegetables, dried apricots, chocolate, pulses, grains, flour and rice, as well as a small selection of environmentally friendly cleaning products and beauty products requiring customers to bring recycled bottles. This could, with the right branding, attract all my participants. It would, by necessity, be cheaper than prepackaged items so it could attract those conscious of saving money as well as those keen to avoid plastic. If other environmental products were also placed in the same area they would encourage people to buy them too, a simple but compelling reward for the many consumers that are time poor and possibly make decisions based on convenience.

However, if the supermarket wanted to trial environmental retail in urban centres it might consider, trialing a kind of cheaper and smaller, less high end version of the wholefood model with organic milk, dairy and meat and with both organic and non organic fresh and loose dried and fresh produce to provide to both the environmentally conscious and cost conscious consumer. A coffee bar thrown in to soak up some of the good feelings and money-saving-afterglow would probably add to the reward factor of such shops as well as attract other custom and subsidise their efforts.

If you would like to obtain a copy of the full transcript of the focus group discussion please contact me and I will supply one free of charge.

Equally, if you have questions you would like to ask an environmentally concerned focus group I am willing to undertake further research free of charge within London or in other parts of the country (but would require any travel, accommodation and per diem costs to be reimbursed).

No participants were paid to take part in this focus group.

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