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“It’s All in the Yellow Baskets”: Class Consciousness, Food Justice, and Community through Dollar General

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For my Mom, who first took me to Dollar General and taught me a lifelong love for finding a good deal.

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Driving through a small Ohio town, you're met with several houses decked out in TRUMP 2024 yard signs and Confederate flags on the windows. Older folks sit in rocking chairs on their front porches, watching the traffic pass by. The heart of the town is one stretch of main street with a fruit stand, a few gas stations, and three dollar stores within the span of a few miles. Between grassy hills, black and yellow lettering glows from lit signs reading "DOLLAR GENERAL." Crisp landscaping, automatic doors, and freshly paved parking lots tell you that these stores are brand new. Covered in the same black and yellow text, the stores boast large discounts and products cheap as just a dollar, with the weekly sale and coupon flyers sitting in an inviting bin by the entrance. Household staples like soap, batteries, and T-shirts are among the inventory sold here. Most of the aisles are stocked with foods like candy, chips, and pop[1]*, complete with a freezer section of ice cream, pizza, some few frozen vegetables, and any TV dinner that your heart desires.*

[1] Soda

Because of these small stores, basic household goods are no further than a short drive (or even walk) away. Usually run by one or two employees, Dollar General is a regular part of purchasing groceries for an increasing number of Americans. More than anything, these stores emphasize that they are the best at bargain, offering a wide range of household goods for affordable prices.

This thesis is based within Darlington, Pennsylvania, where I spent the first 18 years of my life. Here, I was smack-dab in the middle of two counties: Beaver County, Pennsylvania and Columbiana County, Ohio. For the sake of ethnographic richness, I have limited my field work to this area. This not only constructs deeper understandings of each of these communities, but also how they individually engage with Dollar General. Using these rural, working class areas brings to light how Dollar General frequently operates within these types of communities, as well as what this reflects about the business itself.

A crucial aspect to this is my positionality as a local. I have the advantage of knowing these communities well and being able to draw upon my experiences, however, this familiarity should not obscure intricacies within my field work. Anthropology is able to convey the complexities of the human experience, especially the emotional, so I have shaped this field work to capture recurring emotions such as buoyancy, playfulness, and joy. Throughout this work, I emphasize the importance of self-fashioning in relation to these positive emotions surrounding shopping at Dollar General.

Dollar General specifically was chosen for its ubiquitousness in American life. The chain has implemented so many locations within close geographic proximity that their business model appears increasingly redundant. While becoming a mainstay for millions of consumers, Dollar General also possesses a distinct liminality, incorporating traits of various store models while

dynamically engaging with each community in which it is situated. Understanding this, I will explore their seemingly bulletproof business model that has allowed them to expand as such.

To accomplish this, my fieldwork methods include interviews, participant observation, snowball sampling, and virtual ethnography. Many people I knew personally were eager to participate in this research, but I also approached customers and employees of Dollar General within the stores. This research was gathered at a dozen different Dollar General locations, with approximately an equal number of locations in Beaver and Columbiana counties. While multiple preliminary interviews were conducted in September through October 2023, the majority of this field work was conducted January through February 2024. The execution and analysis of this field work was shaped in tandem with my preexisting experience with Dollar General over nearly two decades, affirming my own experiences while bringing new possibilities to light.

To begin to unravel Dollar General's paradoxical nature, I campaign for anthropology as a tool to see what previous narratives have overlooked. What is it like for customers shopping within these food systems, and what forms of agency can consumers express in the face of large chains? My fieldwork serves as an attempt to illuminate the lived experiences of people living in these Dollar General-populated parts of America. This is done with an emphasis on individual agency within larger food systems and the innovative potential of these stores. Additionally, a substantial portion of my fieldwork explores the online interactions regarding Dollar General in order to understand the entirety of the discourse surrounding them.

This is especially crucial since Dollar General is frequently the subject of controversy, such as a recent Forbes article titled "How Dollar General is Spreading Like Hot Gossip Across the Country" or a 2024 TikTok calling Dollar General a "criminal organization" ("How Dollar General;" @moreperfectunion), yet I argue that Dollar General has instead become a site of

innovation, community-building, and consumer agency. Dollar General's business practices have garnered attention for supposedly preying upon low-income areas, but I would like to add an optimistic intervention to this narrative. The majority of existing research provides merely a quantitative perspective that states that the chain is forcefully implementing itself within these communities. But what assumptions does this narrative entail, and how do those who are centers of this discourse actually feel?

Furthermore, I also use Dollar General itself as a site of ethnographic inquiry. Examining this chain reveals several norms of grocery and convenience stores, both in America and internationally. Within these storefronts, Dollar General engages in several discourses, including those of the class solidarity and class distinctions. Constructing the ethos of Dollar General reveals interactions (both visible and invisible) between businesses and consumers, where minutiae such as the physical layout of stores, business philosophies, and packaging creates a brand identity that employees and consumers respond to, further shaping the business.

Interspersed through this piece are several vignettes describing my field work and interlocutors. Each vignette is designed to highlight specific concepts that are in conversation with the existing scholarship, exemplifying important aspects of my research while adding dimension to the individual experiences of Dollar General shoppers and employees. I seek for this to demonstrate the theoretical insights of my research, but more importantly, to let my interlocutors speak for themselves, which is especially crucial in the midst of narratives that assume a lack of agency among these communities.

Chapter 1 will provide an analytical overview of Beaver and Columbiana Counties in relation to Dollar General's business strategies. Starting with descriptions of the area in question as well as the nature of Dollar Generals in this area, this chapter analyzes the methodology of the

chain. By comparing Dollar General to other dollar stores, grocery stores, and convenience stores, I paint the grocery-shopping landscape that Americans navigate while considering the intersections of food insecurity and consequently food justice. Thus, better understanding Dollar General's unique ethos will prompt a better understanding of how consumers respond to their business tactics.

In Chapter 2, I will compare Dollar General to other American and international shopping options through their connections with capitalism, convenience, and bargain culture. Tracing how foods have gained class connotations shows how grocery shopping itself has become a class signifier. With this in mind, I compare Dollar General to international discount stores such as the Japanese *konbini* and the British pound store, using these to understand the dynamics between vendors and consumers within this bargain culture more broadly. A crucial aspect to Dollar General's identity as a brand is bargain, as this chapter explores how individuals engage with these hails.

Chapter 3 expands to incorporate field work from social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. I include this because there is a large body of social media content about Dollar General, comprising a significant portion of the discourse surrounding the chain. Additionally, the singular authorship that social media allows gives individuals platforms to individually exchange communication about Dollar General. I consider posts themselves, as well as elements such as captions, titles, hashtags, and comments to holistically analyze how these online sites foster community. Nonetheless, I argue that Dollar General's online and offline communities are inextricably linked, mutually reinforcing one another. This blended ethnographic format reveals how Dollar General has allowed consumers a flexibility to create their own relationships to the chain.

I intend for this project to provide a critique of one of the largest chains in the United States while investigating mainstream narratives of Dollar General's relationship to food justice, especially as an alleged perpetrator of "food deserts." The vast majority of my interlocutors voice feelings of ease, flexibility and even joy surrounding these stores. With this, I challenge the popular idea that consumers within these systems are powerless, instead demonstrating the various ways in which consumers elastically adapt to chain stores within capitalism.

Chapter 1: Dollar General in a Nutshell: *Convenience, Values, and Affordability*

Many streets in Beaver and Columbiana Counties feel like a time capsule from sixty years ago: open fields, intimate main streets, and the sense that everyone knows each other. Most buildings are in need of a fresh coat of paint, but this doesn't stop them from being lively community sites. For most people, getting to the nearest Walmart requires a car or a bus (although public transportation is sparse). Even with transportation, groceries are at least a 20 minute drive, if not more.

Dollar General has been around here for decades, but in the last few years, the chain has exponentially expanded. Everyone, especially those who have lived in the area their whole lives, quickly noticed. In some areas, the chain's locations are so close together that there are two or more within a mile of each other. These observations slowly crept into the collective smalltalk, with the phrase "Just saw a new Dollar General built out by…" instantly being met with "Another one?"

It seems that Dollar General shouldn't be hard to find, yet the chain's website has a page dedicated to finding the stores nearest to one's geographic location. Using this tool, there are over two dozen stores within a 10-mile radius within Beaver and Columbiana counties:

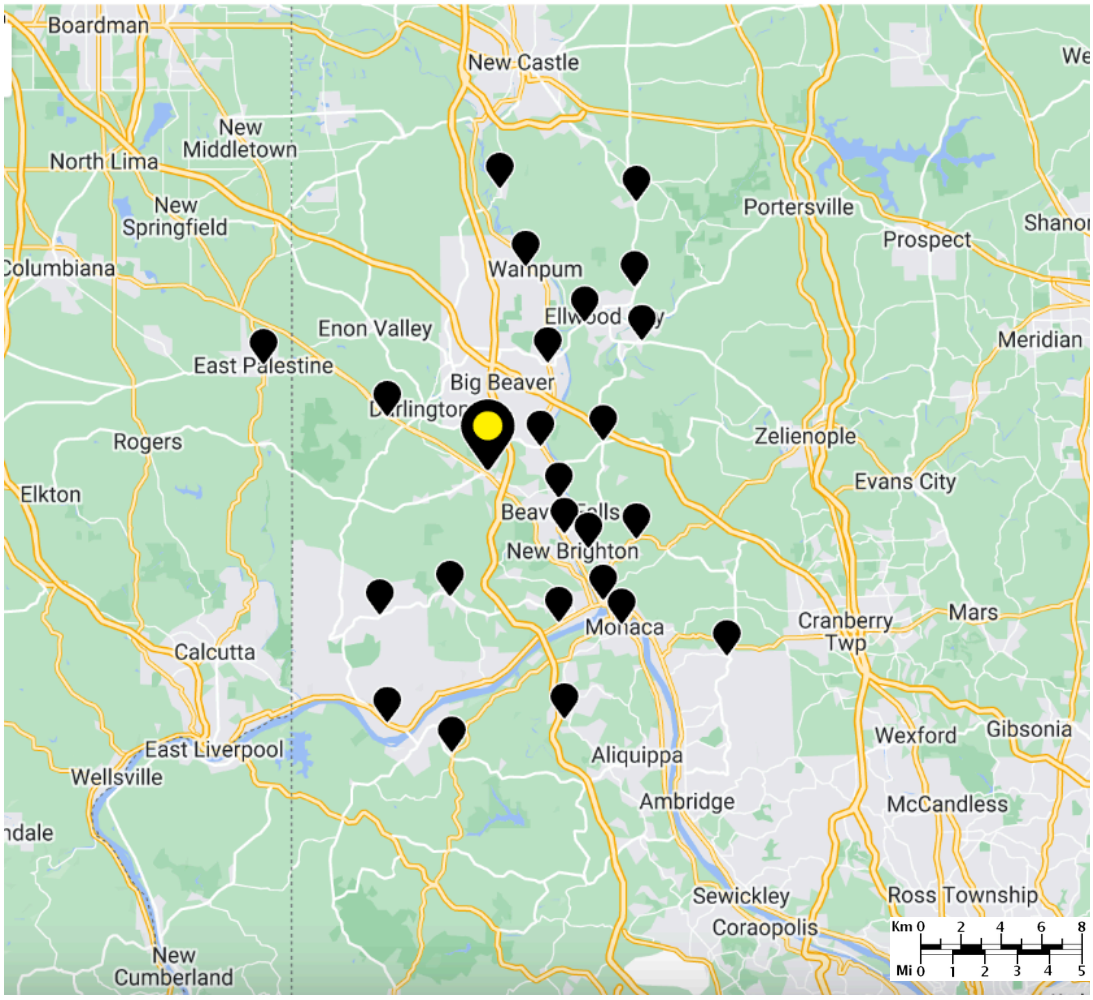

Figure 1: Map of Dollar Generals within the Beaver County, PA ZIP code 15010 (“Dollar General Store Locator”).

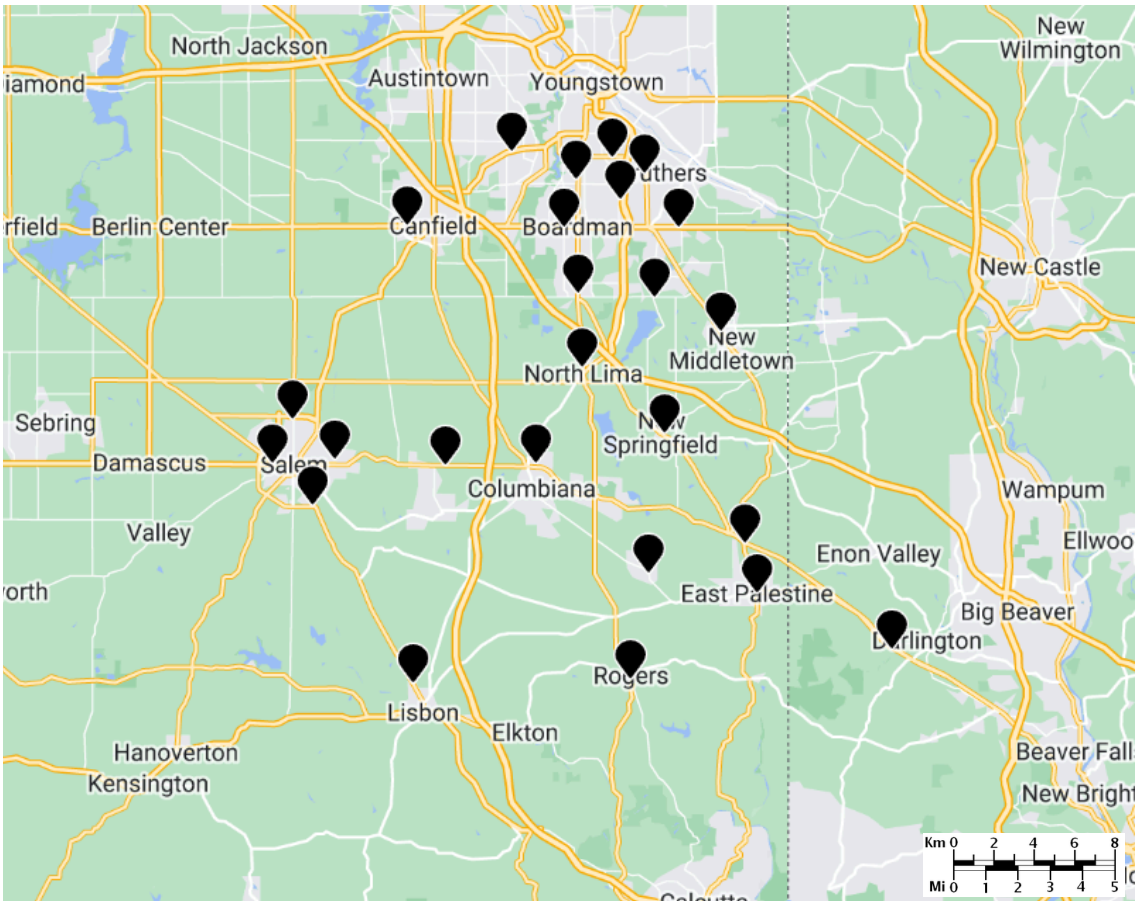

Figure 2: Map of Dollar General locations within Columbiana County, OH ZIP code (44408) ("Dollar General Store Locator").

Although some locations are mapped in both ZIP codes, they nonetheless reflect the numerous options that Dollar General has been able to provide for residents of these areas. At first glance, this many locations within such close proximity may seem unprofitable, but their success speaks instead to the stores fulfilling a need within these communities.

Beaver and Columbia Counties

Understanding the circumstances that allow this many Dollar Generals to thrive requires an understanding of the area itself. Columbiana and Beaver Counties are closely connected to the histories of Cleveland, Ohio and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which both grew thanks to mass industrialization in the late nineteenth century. The Monongahela, the Ohio, and the Allegheny

Rivers, coupled with other plentiful natural resources allowed the area to earn a reputation for industry in coal, coke[2] and especially steel (Neumann 2016: 139). After industrial shifts and decline in the mid-20th century, the city's revitalization efforts prioritized the needs of industrial companies above Pittsburgh's long-time communities as they continued to turn residential areas and protected lands into expanded industrial areas (Neumann 2016: 159). With Pittsburgh's and Cleveland's industrial history and subsequent suburbanization of the surrounding areas, Beaver and Columbiana County were directly impacted as well. Like Pittsburgh, natural resources like gas, oil, and coal have been crucial to the area's success (Beck 1989: 106, 537).

Although industry sustained these communities for decades, communities have also been subject to large amounts of pollutants as byproducts of industrial development. Out of economic necessity, the area has been susceptible to several LULUs (Locally Undesirable Land Use), which are dirty and/or dangerous sites that reduce the quality of life for nearby communities. While industrial sites allowed the area to economically prosper for decades, the management of toxic waste was also improperly regulated, leaving pollution that has infiltrated the air, ground, and water for decades (Georgescu 1994: 3, 4). Given that this area has lost its once booming industries and suffered environmental damage, the area is now struggling economically, with Beaver County's 2022 per capita income being $34,269, and Columbiana County's 2022 per capita income sitting at nearly half the national average for the year at $28,538, with a poverty rate of 16.7% (over 5% more than the national average) ("U.S. Census Bureau").

Beaver and Columbiana Counties' industrial history meant that once these industries left, so would its economic stability. This transition marked a shift away from financial prosperity and

[2] Coke is a "solid carbonaceous residue derived from low-ash, low-sulfur bituminous coal…Coke is used as a fuel and as a reducing agent in smelting iron ore in a blast furnace." ("Glossary - U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA)").

towards pollution and a lack of industry. Decades later, the area still bears signs of this, with several abandoned factories and run-down buildings throughout the counties. These circumstances allowed Dollar General to thrive here, bridging systemic and economic gaps.

American Values and Kinship

It was one of those gray January days that felt almost suspended in time, without much sunlight or signs of life. East Palestine, Ohio is somewhere I had been going my whole life (even before I knew what it was called). It was about a twenty minute drive from my family home, and crossing the state line from Pennsylvania to Ohio meant everything was suddenly a good bit cheaper: ice cream, groceries, and gas.

Walking on a cracked sidewalk, you see that most of the storefronts are closed, and what used to be an area with booming industry was no longer. A former storefront had been repurposed into the East Palestine Republican Headquarters, with signs plastered all over its windows. For nearly a decade, this area has been deeply devoted to the Republican Party and Donald Trump. In some ways, he (despite losing the election nearly 4 years ago) is still their messiah within the despair of declining American industries that had sustained them for so long.

Figure 3: Republican Headquarters of downtown East Palestine, OH (Photo by author).

That day, my dad volunteered to be my field work assistant (and driver since I had no car of my own). He parked next to the Dollar General on the main street before telling me, "You know this used to be the old 5 & 10 store[3] here, right? Kinda weird." This made the Dollar General in its place both the store's reincarnation and a ghost of what once was.

Like most of the town, this Dollar General had also seen better days. According to my father who lived in Beaver County for the majority of his life, the former 5 & 10 store had been turned into a Dollar General in the late 1990s, meaning that this location was pushing thirty years old. The letters on the fluorescent sign were plastered in a layer of grime, and the font of the letters told me that it had not been replaced in some time. This was one of the few locations without the luxury of automatic doors, so I opened the glass doors to go inside.

There were less than five people within the store, and the squealing buggies[4] and scuffed floors brought me back to shopping here with my mother as a child. I took a lap around the store,

[3] A five-and-ten store is a store that sells all items for 10 cents or less; a prototype dollar store ("Woolworth Co.").
[4] Shopping carts

noticing the usual stock of canned food items, household cleaners, and seasonal cards. Half-torn inventory boxes and overflowing garbage bags were thrown about in the aisles. Some shelves were completely empty and others had damaged goods abandoned on them.

Figure 4: Typical aisle within East Palestine Dollar General (Photo by author).

The cashier finished checking out the last customer, so I made my way up to the register. She explained to me that she had been a long-time employee of Dollar General (she didn't want to say how long), but for the past three months this location was much more positive than her last experiences. Her coworkers here are a lot kinder than her last position, but there's still some downsides. As a Dollar General employee, customers will yell at you, cuss you out, and accuse you of stealing because of malfunctions with the register, low stock, or other factors beyond your control.

She called over her friend, a tall, wiry man, who after hearing about our conversation scoffed, "I fucking hate Dollar General."

The cashier laughed and asked, "Then why the hell are you here all the time?"

The two of them explained to me their inside joke: At this point, this man spent so much time at Dollar General that he was an honorary employee.

"Oh? Do you have enough help around here?" I asked the cashier.

"Yeah," she laughed, "because I have this asshole around here all the time."

The man's by-proxy duties ranged from keeping her company to helping stock shelves. He described his shopping experience as horrible, mainly because of the rude customers that he hated encountering. He was primarily there to get groceries and cigarettes, but guessing by the sky-high piles of boxes in the back of the store, they needed more help. Despite these less-than-ideal circumstances of working at Dollar General, the friendship between the cashier and this man provided something for them both.

To an outsider, this outing could have easily been an awful shopping experience: the store was unclean, the aisles were hazardous, and some of the merchandise was broken. Despite this, the store was still the site of kinship between two people who may have not been otherwise connected. Although Dollar General stores suffer in terms of their interiors, this does not stop them from being sites of bonding, especially for locals. Therefore, customers and employees of Dollar General are able to forgo norms regarding cleanliness and customer service when shopping here for the sake of connections.

Liminalities Between Grocery and Convenience

The default for American grocery shopping is the Walmart. For decades, Walmart has been the world's largest corporation, retailer, and grocer (Dicker 2005: 2). Although its employees are massively overworked and underpaid, it is also the largest employer in America (Dicker 2005: 3). This has obviously come with much controversy, with Walmart becoming known as the antithesis of classy or local grocery shopping (Dicker 2005: 25). Despite this,

Walmart continuously attempts to brand itself as a common man's store with humble beginnings. After all, Oklahoma-born Sam Walton founded Walmart after seeing that rural America was being underserved by other stores like Kmart, Sears, and J.C. Penney. Through this strategy, Walmart grew exponentially in the second half of the twentieth century, even after Walton's 1992 death. It only took 12 years for Walmart to become the world's largest grocery store after the first Walmart Supercenter opened in Washington, Missouri in 1988 (Dicker 2005: 54, 55, 58).

"There's absolutely no limit to what plain, ordinary working people can accomplish if they're given the opportunity and the encouragement and the incentive to do their best," Walton wrote in his autobiography (Dicker 2005: 61). Walmart has cycled through various slogans throughout the years such as "Always the Low Price, Always" and "Save Money. Live Better," (Dicker 2005: 54) which both solidify Walmart's reputation so that it becomes synonymous with savings (Dicker 2005: 57).

In addition to Walmart, most American grocery stores like Costco, Kroger, and Sam's Club are all about size. The stores themselves are large, with at least 30 aisles, high ceilings, thousands of products, and large quantities of items for sale. Some of their nearly two dozen checkout lines are self-checkout, while others have a cashier present. There is a wide diversity in the types of products beyond food, with health and beauty products, clothes, and even furniture available. The point here is to be all-encompassing (and slightly overstimulating). Walmarts specifically have music like Miley Cyrus, Bruce Springsteen, or Chuck Berry blasting throughout the store. At the entrance, many Walmarts also have popular fast food chains like Subway to greet you, wafting out aromas of freshly baked cookies and bread. Employees frequently stand here to greet you and set the tone for your shopping experience. These stores are usually filled with employees, but to the point where they contribute to the pedestrian congestion

within the store. Employees are constantly in transit, returning buggies back into the store from the parking lot. If you need assistance during your shopping experience, there should always be an employee nearby to assist you. While this greatly varies by location, these stores are often kept quite clean, thanks to the heightened employee presence and standardization among store locations.

On the other hand, “dollar stores” such as Dollar General, Dollar Tree, Family Dollar, the 99 Cents Only Store, and 5 & 10 stores all follow a similar model of attempting to offer the most for the best perceivable deal. Although most of their inventory is more than a dollar, these stores are smaller, usually only about a dozen aisles, and carry a variety of household and basic grocery products. Only a few employees are needed within the stores and the environment is comparatively calm. There is usually no music, no produce, and no restaurants inside, keeping the mechanics of the store to an almost utilitarian minimum.

Meanwhile, convenience stores such as 7-Eleven, Circle K, and Wawa build upon this model, usually only having a few aisles with a limited stock of items. These items are mainly convenience/nonperishable foods, with little to no produce or fresh food available. The bulk of the food and drink selection is candy, soda, chips. Any beauty or household products are greatly simplified to a single shelf of Benadryl, Ibuprofen, band-aids, and chapstick next to the register. These stores tend to be a lot quieter, almost deafeningly so. On the counters, food like soft pretzels, churros, and hot dogs emanate warm vapors from the heating rack. If you need an employee at any point during this process, there is usually one within earshot due to the size of the store. While there are no buggies, there are occasionally baskets available by the entrance to hold items. With convenience stores, there is a certain expectation that these foods do not need to

be upheld to the same standard of cleanliness that a supermarket would, further simplifying their shopping experience.

This leaves Dollar General in a gray area, appearing to be a dollar store while combining features of both grocery stores and convenience stores. While the name suggests that this chain was originally meant to err on the side of a convenience store, the chain seems to be migrating closer and closer towards the supermarket model. There is a moderate selection of stock, with about a dozen aisles per store. However, Dollar General also maintains convenience store qualities such as the lack of music. Any smells within the store were usually pleasant, coming from the laundry detergent aisle. While I visited only one Dollar General with a produce section, the chain is making a determined effort to implement these more often. They have a selection of health, home, and beauty items that sits between a supermarket and a convenience store, offering a brief selection of detergents, soaps, shampoos, medications, interior decor, and even some furniture. There is a selection of both buggies and baskets, although most customers choose to opt out of this entirely for the sake of convenience.

Additionally, the lack of employee-customer interaction reverses the norms of the American shopping experience. When entering a Dollar General store, an employee rarely greets you. Most of the time, there isn't any sign of an employee except for a few boxes rustling in the back of the store. Dollar General's implementation of self-checkout registers allows customers to shop completely free of any human interaction if they wish. Dollar General also does not take itself too seriously. The store is filled with knick-knacks and signs teasing the customer to buy more of their inventory. It is entirely acceptable for there to be boxes and garbage in the aisles, as there is a among customers that the chain is understaffed and therefore unable to maintain the store. Because of this understaffing, there are also no "cart boys" at Dollar General. Employees

are faced with the impossible task of managing both the checkout counter and stocking shelves during their shifts. Although Dollar General strives for the approval and recognition of being a grocery option, customers also don't go with the expectation of food quality in mind. Instead, most customers and Dollar General's marketing emphasize the bargain and quantity of the food. American grocery shoppers deal with a set of circumstances far more complicated than the atmosphere of the store, as much of their decision making comes down to the affordability of foods offered.

As the name suggests, Dollar General is largely modeled after a general store, where people in rural areas can purchase a variety of goods for low prices. However, Dollar General executes its own version of this model through combining traits of both grocery and convenience stores, creating a liminality within its shopping experience. While Dollar General offers incentives like being low-stimulation in comparison to its competitors, it still rejects standards of shopping, such as cleanliness and employee numbers. Embodying this convenience-grocery liminality, Dollar General is "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner 1969: 95), constituting its own identity and norms through a blended third category of shopping. This liminality therefore creates an ambiguity that allows individuals to fashion their own meanings of the chain.

An Introvert's Dream

One of the most notable things about Dollar General is its lack of employees. One of my field work trips, I went without seeing a single other human. This was in Darlington, a rural town what had its location equipped with automatic doors and glistening new windows. The entire building was built less than a decade ago and exists as a stand-alone store with heavy woods behind it. It was bound to catch a good deal of traffic, as it sat right along the interstate. Like

nearly all of the Dollar Generals that I had visited, this store was strategically laid out so that the food was on the immediate right and the traffic flowed counterclockwise to the register at the far left.

Unlike East Palestine, this location still felt incredibly new. The fluorescent lights were a piercing white above me, and the freezers full of microwave pizza glowed from within. In many ways, this was an introvert's dream; not another soul was in sight. The only semblance of human life was a rustling from the "employees only" area in the back of the store. There was a checkout counter with a self-checkout register, so I was still able to purchase goods if necessary. Here, Dollar General offered the opportunity to shop without even a glance of another human, offering a moment of solitude within the midst of other shopping options.

This is especially notable in comparison to other shopping options. At any time of the day, Walmart, Whole Foods, or Kroger will have both customers and employees bustling through the stores. The comparative barrenness of Dollar General offers an opportunity for customers to make the *choice* of social engagement, creating another level of ease within their shopping experience. Buying groceries can be such an intimate endeavor, as the goods purchased will most likely be brought directly to the consumer's home. This quietness within these storefronts allows for this welcome solitude to occur.

Rural Food Insecurity and Food Justice

Beaver and Columbiana country are the exact types of rural communities allegedly suffering from food insecurity at the hands of Dollar General. The surrounding food assistance programs define food insecurity, and these guidelines dictate how government assistance programs respond and therefore *who* gets assistance. However, many of these public assistance programs are out of touch with the realities of the communities they wish to serve. Despite there

being a safety net for decades now, it has always been the case that we need to expand the criteria to qualify for this safety net. This can be calculated in multiple ways, including Consumer Expenditure Survey data, total household income, and participation in government programs (Hossfeld et al. 2018: 18, 19). Despite this, it seems that no singular source can agree on one standard definition of poverty, inevitably leaving some behind (Hossfeld et al. 2018: 21).

This is compounded by the fact that coupons and sales can greatly influence purchases. Coupons can act as a source of "information, advertisement, and price discount" (Hossfeld et al. 2018: 94). The majority of sales are on non-produce products, meaning that stores like Dollar General that promote sales are more likely to incentivize unhealthy foods high in fat, sodium, and added sugars. Additionally, stores are motivated to not reduce the price of produce because grocery stores already lose approximately $15 billion annually on unsold fruits and vegetables (Hossfeld et al. 2018: 94).

Most importantly, shared and learned eating habits are a way of life. Eating has been described as a "household culture," or "practices concerning eating, cleaning, sociality, and consumption habits." This is the way that families prepare and sit down to consume a meal together. This also includes if there are screens or TVs present at their meals, especially since higher TV consumption has been associated with higher consumption of "unhealthy" foods (Hossfeld et al. 2018: 36). More than any other factor, people's learned habits and relationships around food produce their purchasing and eating habits (Hossfeld et al. 2018: 37).

Through economic, class, and cultural circumstances, families decide what they want to and what they can eat. However, much of the preexisting data tends to diminish individual agency of the working class. They can be perfectly aware of their foods being "unhealthy," yet health is not something that they necessarily value or have *time* to value. Yes, the criteria for

government assistance programs needs to be updated, but this is beyond affordability. People find community, nostalgia, and comfort in familiar foods (Hossfeld et al. 2018: 101). Simply looking at the contents of shoppers' carts overlooks the complex set of circumstances, including coupons, sales, and habits that led them to those purchasing decisions.

In rural areas, there is even less of a "safety net," as there are fewer (and less geographical access to) emergency food resources, food assistance programs, and community gardens implemented (McEntee 2011: 249). Additionally, the concept of a "food desert" may not even be relevant, as a USDA report found that only 2.2% of American households live more than a mile from a supermarket without access to a car. They also found that 93% of residents of low-income neighborhoods have some access to a car for grocery shopping, whether that is their own or a shared vehicle (Norgaard et al. 2018: 38). The term "food desert" by nature implies that those living within it are powerless or choose not to take action given their current circumstances.

In *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability,* Nathan McClintock details the many food access issues that capitalism can create. Although he focuses on the urban environment of Oakland, California, the phenomena that he describes echo the industrial decline and shift of rural towns. If the industry shifts away from what was once a main economy in the area, then that capital is devalued (McClintock 2011: 94). From here, the urban industry and its surrounding residents are left lost, without the once central industry to their community. In both Oakland and the Pittsburgh area, city redevelopment plans were largely unsuccessful, driving the locals out of the region, leaving the properties devalued and several industrial buildings useless. (McClintock 2011: 94, 106).

This phenomenon was also due to the structure and trends in American food systems. Since World War II, supermarkets have been the largest suppliers of food retail. More women entering the workforce, more roads and automobiles, and a growing popularity in quick, efficient grocery shopping only encouraged this trend further. By the 1960s, over two-thirds of Americans' groceries were purchased at grocery stores. As a result, smaller grocers went out of business, unable to compete with the scale and resources of grocery chains. By the mid-1970s, approximately two-thirds of the food retail market was controlled by chain grocery stores (McClintock 2011: 106).

With this takeover of larger, inherently more powerful chain grocers, how did the smaller, local grocers fare? Like the dilapidated former industrial centers, many of these buildings lay closed, collecting dust. Some were converted into discount or dollar stores, but these would inherently attract lower-income customers with less funds to spend on groceries. As a result, the total number of supermarkets increased, yet the overall *quality* of the grocers decreased, especially in these working class areas relying upon these discount stores (McClintock 2011: 107, 108).

Similarly, Ashanté M. Reese describes the shift in grocery options in the Washington D.C. area. From 1968 to 1971, 24 percent of grocery stores left the predominantly black neighborhoods in favor of richer white neighborhoods (Reese 2019: 35). According to Reese, this lack of supermarkets is not indicative of any failure of the individual community, but instead part of a greater phenomena. If living conditions decline and the community cannot sustain itself, then supermarkets cannot be sustained by the community and have no choice but to follow wealthy communities (Reese 2019: 41). Therefore, these trends in food insecurity are

inextricably linked to the larger trends and inequalities of America, demonstrating the “social, economic, and ideological contexts" to regard when fighting food insecurity (Reese 2019: 43).

Residents of rural areas mourn the loss of traditional “mom and pop” stores. Despite small businesses usually having fresher, more local products, these smaller grocers simply couldn’t compete with larger chains and were put out of business. Dollar General itself is aware of this niche need, as it emphasizes its small-town, family-owned origins (“Dollar General 75th Anniversary”). Dollar General’s presence within these small towns is the entry point by which many low-income families engage in American food systems, becoming important yet self-determined points of engagement with these larger systems.

In this same vein, anthropologist Sidney Mintz uses this to highlight that in this modern age of industrialization, communities are disconnected from their environment. He says, “As we succeed in freeing ourselves, we also discover that among the things we have freed ourselves *from* are things we might, on second thought, really want to *keep*…” (Mintz 2006: 9). It may seem more productive to have larger groups and corporations producing food, but this mass industrialization and consequential homogenization of food has financially incentivized processed foods over whole foods. This means that with convenience foods, consumers sacrifice productive control for predictability and accessibility.

Trendy products like the Keurig coffee maker and the air fryer embody this. These machines of convenience have called for a whole category of newer convenience foods. American dietary staples like canned soup, pizza, hamburgers, fried chicken, french fries, and popcorn would not be nearly as common without the development of the microwave (Ritzer 2013: 51). This is also the case for TV dinners, which are uniform in ingredients, taste, portions, and packaging from one to another (Ritzer 2013: 85). These microwave-friendly foods and

microwaves are two sides of the same coin. By having more microwaves in households, there is a greater incentive for microwave-friendly foods. With dollar stores producing large amounts of this microwaveable food, people can now cook it with a relatively inexpensive appliance like a microwave.

To some, these convenience trends are a sign of doomsday. Even the subtle advances in microwave cooking technology contribute to this. Cooking directions on the packaging, color-changing packaging to indicate that the food is ready, and even plastic plates and utensils streamline meal preparation, eliminating the need for cookbooks, attention to the food, and washing dishes. With the microwave, for example, dinner can be prepared in minutes with a singular push of a button. Some fear that with this becoming the future of cooking, the kitchen merely becomes a "filling station," designed for in-transit food preparation (Ritzer 2013: 135).

However, I pose that Dollar General is a source of hope within these doomsday narratives. As a convenience store, Dollar General is able to provide a variety of inexpensive foods to shoppers who may not be able to afford grocery shopping otherwise. This stems from a variety of factors, including the frequency of food insecurity, bargains and couponing, and the weaknesses of the American assistance systems, but does not delegitimize the affection that consumers feel towards Dollar General. Instead of a reliance upon the chain, people use it as a resource for what assistance programs and other grocers cannot provide. The company recognizes its advantageous position with these shoppers, carefully curating their identity within this exchange.

Growth and Class Solidarity

Dollar General prides itself on its image as a humble, common-man kind of store. Their founder James Luther Turner lost his father in an accident in 1902 as a child, and was forced to

quit school to help provide for his remaining family. Having limited education, he tried launching multiple failed businesses before finally finding his niche in general stores. The business strategy was simple: Turner purchased and liquidated bankrupt general stores during the Great Depression and converted these into new businesses with his only child, Cal Turner Sr. In October 1939, the duo opened J.L Turner and Son Wholesale in Kentucky. Eventually, the team switched their strategy from wholesale to retail[5] and opened the first official Dollar General store on June 1st, 1955 in Scottsdale, Kentucky. The company stayed within the Turner family's leadership until Cal Turner Jr.'s retirement in 2002, taking the chain from 29 stores in 1957 to over 19,000 stores today ("DG History").

Although Dollar General's name is misleading in that most products are now more than a dollar, Cal Turner Sr. mimicked the promotions of his competitors called "Dollar Days," where all merchandise was priced at the nearest dollar. Using this as his inspiration, Turner pitched a store concept to his management team where everything was sold for just a dollar each. Cal Turner Jr, said:

> "He knew it would simplify accounting and simplify checking the customer out…But more importantly, he thought that the customer's mind would get reprogrammed not to item and price as much, that they would just get excited about the fact that you could buy one of these and two of these and four of those." (Carey 2000: 367)

Turner Sr. received plenty of skepticism for this idea, but he fashioned a business model that would be guaranteed to be successful. He was aware that some items would have to be sold at an unprofitable price, but this was quickly made up for by purchases of cheap goods from overseas.

[5] "Wholesaling is the process of buying goods in large quantities from manufacturers or distributors, storing them in warehouses, and then reselling them to retailers for a profit…A retailer buys goods in bulk from a wholesaler, manufacturer, or distributor and sells them to end users. They are the last business in the supply chain." Wholesalers tend to sell larger quantities at cheaper unit prices while retailers tend to sell smaller quantities at larger unit prices per item ("Wholesale vs. Retail").

Due to this business model, the first 1955 Dollar General made sales of over a million dollars in its first ten months of operation.

By 1962, the company expanded beyond the "everything for a dollar" concept, generalizing themselves as a discount retailer. Dollar General has always expanded much of its reach through acquisitions, but not all of these were profitable ventures, such as the Eagle Family Discount Stores, which did result in 200 additional stores for Dollar General, but put financial strain on the company (Carey 2000: 368). Dollar General as a company needed reworking. The company studied its data and concluded that its core merchandise from that point forward would be everyday goods like home cleaning products, basic housewares, basic apparel, and toilet paper. Additionally, the company's advertising budget was cut to nearly zero. "Instead of buying things and putting them in the store because we had the opportunity to do so, we needed to define core merchandise and do whatever it took to be in stock every day…The consumption needs of low income people are not a mystery," Turner Jr. said (Carey 2000: 369). This point was crucial in that it was Dollar General's self-affirmation of a company that understood and catered to the needs of the working class.

Appealing to the working class meant that the chain was now in direct competition with giants like Walmart. In the midst of the late 1980s recession, Walmart often implemented themselves away from many communities, allowing Dollar General to position themselves directly within many town centers. "Many of our customers can't get to Walmart," Turner himself said (Carey 2000: 370). This allowed the 1990s to be another period of exponential growth for Dollar General. By 1999, Dollar General had approximately $3.5 billion in revenue and 3900 stores, all of which were located in either small towns or in low-income urban areas. Dollar General especially leaned into its wholesome values reputation. This store then served as

a prototype for three others that were designed to help low-income Americans develop job skills. By the start of the 21st century, Dollar General was Nashville's most successful public company (Carey 2000: 370). Dollar General emphasizes their "American Dream" origins, saying on their website:

> The yellow Dollar General store sign is a popular symbol of value. Our convenient, everyday low prices model has survived and thrived through the decades. The company remains true to the humble ethic of hard work and friendly customer service embodied by the founding family. About a quarter of Dollar General's merchandise still sells for a dollar or less. The simplicity that defined our past is the engine that drives our success today ("DG History").

With this, there are two different versions of Dollar General's history: the narrative according to Dollar General, and the narrative according to others. Dollar General wants itself to appeal to the desires of working class America, as it goes through efforts to emphasize its "self-made" ethos by removing any of its struggles from their history. Dollar General instead constructs a linear narrative of itself where the chain seamlessly expanded, integrated other chains, and customers fell in love with the idea. This narrative also strengthens Dollar General's impression of a business that is trustworthy, relatable, and dependable.

Pushing this rags-to-riches narrative appeals to Dollar General's target audience, as this version of events paints a picture that is the opposite of the company's over 19,000 locations and multi-million dollar status. With this, Dollar General attempts to take on the role of an "underdog" in the vast sea of American grocery and convenience options. This then allows Dollar General to fashion a class solidarity to share with customers, appealing to their class-related senses of self, and allowing Dollar General to get the most support out of their

target customer base. Through this careful curation of its own history, Dollar General distorts certain truths of its origins to attract an ideal customer base.

The spirit of Dollar General has ostensibly been preserved in some ways, such as the East Palestine Dollar General replacing the old 5 & 10 store, yet this authenticity that Dollar General attempts to offer perpetuates small-town America's reliance upon the chain. One employee described his opinion of the chain:

> I think it's [Dollar General] kind of good because there are a lot of people that don't have access to anything for miles, so I think that is the plus...some country places don't have any stores. They might have one gas station for twenty miles so…

From his perspective, Dollar General was well-aware of the geographic, systemic, and financial barriers preventing many Americans from accessing groceries and household goods. The company is instead doing people a *service* in implementing themselves within their communities, creating opportunities for employment, purchasing power, and community. He told me:

> I guess their [Dollar General's] mission is serving others. That's the main thing that they try to preach…just kind of like that camaraderie and helping others out…I'm not sure why they're placing so many rural areas, but I would have to just assume that because people actually need to access the stuff...

Dollar General assures that its own narratives present the chain in the best light possible. This narrative is affirmed on several levels of the business, including its employees, corporate statements, and their website. While the chain did begin as the business venture of a singular hardworking family, it now bears almost no resemblance to the multi-million dollar company that it has become. Nonetheless, Dollar General's careful curation of their business ethos has been able to sustain them among their target market.

Weighing Options

What would an average night of shopping look like for a resident of these areas? For a chicken alfredo dinner, for example, it would take at least 3 items: pasta, sauce, and chicken. All of the prices were calculated using the Beaver County ZIP code (15010) to assure that the prices were geographically consistent. For the sake of simplicity and realism, I have chosen readily available and more affordable brands from both locations. Additionally, all of the items selected were marked as EBT eligible, which is more realistic to the consumer needs of this area. Walmart was selected as my representation of grocery stores for two reasons: 1) my interlocutor's self-proclaimed reliance upon it and 2) Walmart's reputation of being the most affordable grocery store.

Store	Walmart	Dollar General
Barilla Thin Spaghetti Pasta, 1 lb./16 oz.	$1.76	$1.75
Prego Homestyle Alfredo Sauce, 22 oz.	$3.57	$3.75
Tyson Grilled & Ready Fully Cooked Chicken Strips, 22 oz./11 oz.	$8.97	$6.50
Total	$14.30	$12.00

For the same one-pound box of Barilla spaghetti, it would cost $1.76 at Walmart and $1.75 at Dollar General. However, Dollar General's package was labeled strictly as 16 ounces instead of the equivalent 1 pound, suggesting an intentional emphasis on perceived quantity. For one 22-ounce can of Prego Homestyle Alfredo Sauce, it would cost $3.57 at Walmart and $3.75 at Dollar General. For chicken, Tyson Grilled & Ready Fully Cooked Grilled Chicken Breast Strips were only available for $8.97/22 ounces at Walmart and only available for $6.50/11

ounces at Dollar General. While Walmart's chicken is over two dollars more expensive than Dollar General, its unit price is approximately 40 cents per ounce as opposed to 59 cents per ounce at Dollar General.

The total for each trip was $14.30 at Walmart and $12.00 at Dollar General. Dollar General was able to provide a dinner for over 2 dollars cheaper, but that came with the tradeoff of nearly a pound of less protein. Overall, the chains are comparable in terms of pricing, quantities, and options available. Although Dollar General's model may be more cost-effective for smaller households, Americans shoppers are frequently left juggling factors of quality and quantity. Having such close competition in pricing, Dollar General must carefully shape how it presents its business ethos towards customers.

Inside a Dollar General: A Funhouse of Bargain

Popular consensuses assume that Dollar General manipulates low-income shoppers into relying upon them, but I wish to explore the store from the point of view of a typical customer, considering the signs, layout, and prices of the physical stores that create the business-consumer relationship. First and foremost, Dollar General signs are eye-catching and bold. They are almost always based on the company's signature black and yellow color palette and have words written in bold capital letters, almost screaming for your attention. Even before you enter a Dollar General, signs promising deep discounts catch your eye from the street. Stand-alone, lit signs often sit at the edge of the parking lot, enticing customers driving by. Banners written in all capital letters are hung on the outside, with words like "SALE," "Buy one get one FREE," and "EVEN **LOWER PRICES**" slapped across them.

Figure 5: Banner posted outside a Dollar General store (Photo by author).

The store feels like a funhouse of bargains, with bright signs promising savings at every corner. “DG DEALS” says one sign on the endcap, implying that these low prices are exclusive to Dollar General. In case you thought that the store would not live up to the “dollar” part of its name, there are signs marking “$1 Dollar Deals” at just a dollar or less. Supposedly, Dollar General has more than 2000 items in this price range.

Figure 6, 7: Aisle designs within Dollar General (Photos by author).

These signs present a striking tongue-in-cheek self-awareness. Above the frozen food section, a sign reads "**BIG SAVINGS.** LIKE REALLY BIG," with "low prices inside" and "**SNAP** and **EBT** Accepted" below. People shopping at Dollar General are primarily looking to stick to a budget, so the acknowledgement of its shoppers who rely on food assistance programs invites these shoppers through a non-judgemental awareness of their customer's demographics.

Figure 8: Signs above the frozen food section (Photo by author).

Additionally, the few words in these signs are concise and powerful enough to craft Dollar General a personality of its own. The humor in the "**BIG SAVINGS…**" in larger text is continued in the personality of a sign reading, "it's all in the **yellow** baskets" with the store's full logo shown beneath. Similar to natural speech, these are highly informal yet personable, creating a feeling of reliability for customers. This sign is an obvious attempt to persuade customers to pick up a basket to carry and therefore purchase more items. However, the all-lowercase text and the decision to make the word "yellow" yellow also reinforce the trust of Dollar General's brand. This casualness is crucial to the identity that Dollar General curates for itself and the customers that it actively attracts. Dollar General wants to welcome all, but especially working class customers.

Figure 9: Labeled baskets within aisles of Dollar General (Photo by author).

Beyond these, Dollar General has perfected the predictability of each store. The layout of nearly all the stores I had visited followed the same pattern from right to left: food, cleaning/household items, beauty products, and then the registers at the far left. In the middle are a few aisles with rotating seasonal items: holiday cards, home decor, garden supplies, etc. Because of this limited size, there is also limited inventory. However, Dollar General is aware of what products should take up more inventory space. The drink aisle, often along the far right wall, is stocked floor to ceiling with high-sugar drinks. This includes varieties of Coca Cola, Pepsi, Mountain Dew, Fanta, ginger ale, and other sweet drinks like iced tea and lemonade. While there are several different size options available, the majority of the options are 2-liter bottles and 12-pack cans, emphasizing large quantities of drink for purchase. Most of the customers that I had encountered had something from this aisle in their buggies and grocery bags. Although there is bottled water available, most other drinks are cheaper, creating financial incentive to purchase them. Above these aisles are several buzz words like “quick” and “snack

run," emphasizing the convenience appeal of the store and its inventory. According to one study, the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages in rural communities like these was significantly higher than the national average (Norman-Burgdolf et al. 2021). Dollar General is aware of its customers' desires for savings, relatability, and affordable food, seamlessly integrating these appeals within their storefronts.

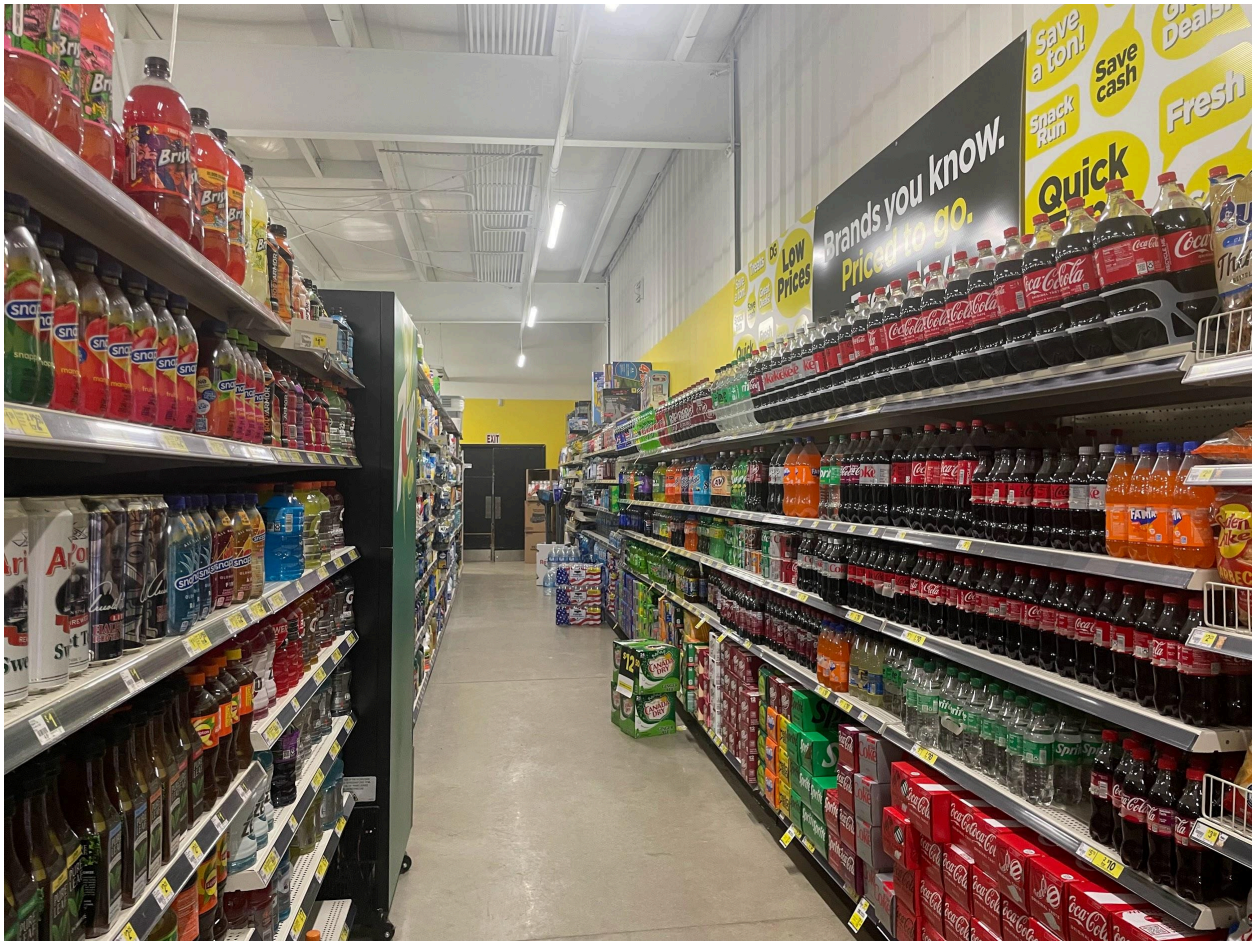

Figure 10: Dollar General drink aisle (Photo by author).

To an untrained eye, Dollar General's choice of store locations appears randomized and wasteful. In reality, the company has created an algorithm that considers "population, population density, traffic patterns, speed limits and nearby destinations that attract visitors, such as schools, churches and post offices" ("How Dollar General Is Spreading…"). They have also incorporated

more information via technology to this algorithm, such as the distances customers travel to stores and what competitors they visit. At this rate, Dollar General's business model needs to be successful, and has proven so. "We believe it's probably the best in the business," said Jeff Owen, Dollar General's chief operating officer. "You can't open stores at the rate we're opening them if they're not successful" ("How Dollar General Is Spreading").

Dollar General is constantly crafting their customer-facing ethos through carefully planning store locations, store interiors, and in-store merchandise, constantly interpolating their ideal customer. The emphasis on savings of both money and time appeals to customers who are missing out on these very things, strengthening their relationships with the chain. Accomplishing this through their personable delivery creates a tenor that is even more effective with consumers.

Relationships Through Convenience

New Springfield, Ohio was one of those stores that had seemingly been built out of thin air less than ten years ago in an extremely rural part of the state. I had visited this store several times over the years, as I would drive by this store on my trips to music lessons in Youngstown, Ohio. This was essentially the only convenience store I could stop at within a 20-30 minute drive, so if I needed to use the restroom or grab a quick snack, this was the place to do so.

I was the only customer in the store, so the cashier at the checkout counter asked me, "Can I help you with anything?"

I explained to her my project, and although she looked a bit surprised that anyone could take an interest in her day-to-day life, she was more than willing to talk to me.

This cashier had been with Dollar General for "too long" (over 13 years), so she was more than familiar with the reputation of the company. "People make jokes about the next Dollar General being built underwater," she laughed. Despite this, she genuinely enjoyed working at

Dollar General and even shopped there herself. Although most of their stock was between the $5-10 range, hundreds of items there were truly just a dollar, allowing her to keep her expenses to a minimum.

Gleaming within this cashier's testimony was the connection between her work at Dollar General and her community. "We're as diverse as the community is," she said. Having worked with the same company for over a decade, it held sentimental value to her at this point. "It's like a Wild West general store," she told me. You get the locals and the regulars, and getting to know them was especially important since this store was so remote that it was bound to not reach very many people. She said that this store served an obvious need in the community, as most people didn't want to drive twenty minutes each way for the nearest Walmart.

In the absence of easily accessible grocery options, this Dollar General store thrived within the community of New Springfield, Ohio. For them, this meant regular trips to this Dollar General where this employee formed relationships with them. This gave the New Springfield Dollar General store the status of being a regular part of consumers' shopping experience and relations. In this process, consumers are capitalizing upon the appeals (intentionally and unintentionally created) by Dollar General.

Conclusion

A history of industrial decline made Beaver and Columbiana counties the perfect candidate for Dollar General to implement their nearly three dozen locations within them. Having a rural, working class community meant that time, finances, and transportation all presented barriers to traditional grocery shopping at chains like Walmart. In the absence of adequate grocery options, it is often assumed that these residents have no option but to Dollar General, yet the chain is able to provide for communities that would otherwise be left

underserved. Having traits of both grocery and convenience stores, they create a liminal yet predictable shopping experience, appealing to consumers while allowing them to create their own relationships with the chain, such as the man who volunteered to work with his friend at Dollar General.

Through this, Dollar General is able to offer a compelling (and comparable) shopping experience among other major chains. By emphasizing their humble beginnings as a small business with a laidback cordiality, they create an appealing ethos for working class customers in small-town America. The foods stocked within these stores are carefully selected with this consumer base in mind, all the while providing options that are economically comparable or even better than many major grocers. Locations of Dollar Generals are so readily accessible that customers have the opportunity to form bonds with employees, making these stores sites of intimate community while offering a more solitary shopping experience. This means that customers here choose how much they wish to engage with others, keeping potential social interactions to a bare minimum. All of these appeals incentivize customers of Dollar General to willfully shop there, further dismantling narratives that these consumers are faced with no other choice. I offer this optimism as a preface to the further exploration of how Dollar General has become synonymous with working class America.

Chapter 2: Class Distinctions and Bargains in America and Abroad

When it comes to the "food desert" argument, the primary issue is not whether there is accessible food, but whether there is *healthy, fresh* food readily accessible. Dollar Generals, despite embodying traits of both grocery and convenience stores, are assumed to be uncivilized compared to these other options, as they appeal to low-income shoppers and have an inventory limited primarily to high-sugar, high-fat foods. I present this chapter as not only an exploration of food's class connotations, but also grocery shopping in both American and international contexts. Understanding the motivations behind working class consumers also requires an understanding of larger bargain culture and the emotional exchanges within these processes. Unlearning negative associations of convenience foods and stores allows a richer understanding of consumer agency within webs of food accessibility.

Class and Food: Sugar and Coffee

From the Walmart to the Whole Foods, a spectrum of grocery shopping in America has become deeply split, with grocery choices becoming both an internal and external signifier of class. This is constructed by several factors including the physical spaces, the employees, the other customers, and corporation's marketing, and the foods themselves. Within Dollar General specifically, their primary food inventory consists of foods such as soda, cookies, candy, ice cream, and cereal, all of which carry high amounts of sugar.

In *Sweetness and Power,* anthropologist Sydney Mintz examines sugar's transformation from a high society food to a low society food. Up until the eighteenth century, sugar was a commodity of the wealthy, usually used as a medicine, spice, or decoration (Mintz 1986: 45). Sugar cane was grown in hot climates far away from Britain and regarded as an "exotic" substance, as the process of harvesting, refining, and distributed sugar had yet to be perfected

(Mintz 1986: 6). Sugar was first introduced to the diets of the middle and lower classes through stimulant drinks such as tea and coffee and easily-digestible foods such as toasts and porridges. Sugar could then be added to these plain foods in a variety of ways, whether that be as granulated sugar, jams, or syrups. These foods combined simple carbohydrates to make foods that would easily power laborers through their days. This incorporation into daily practice allowed sugar to assimilate into the lives of the working class (Mintz 1986: 120).

Dollar General carries dozens of foods high in both carbohydrates and sugar. One of the most frequently consumed, cereal, is marketed as an easy option for a filling morning breakfast. Fruit Loops, for example, are frequently featured in Dollar General ads and sales promotions, yet contain 12 grams of added sugar per 1 ⅓ cup serving, or 24% of the recommended daily intake. ("Kellogg's® Froot Loops® Breakfast Cereal"). High-sugar stimulant drinks like Mountain Dew are also a staple at Dollar General, with large quantities such as 2-liters and 24-packs of cans available. One standard 12-ounce can contains a whopping 46 grams of sugar and 55 milligrams of caffeine, equivalent to half a cup of coffee ("Mountain Dew Original Soda Pop"). I highlight these examples not as a critique, but to demonstrate how substantial sugar is in the diet of convenience.

What started as a necessary source of calories and energy for laborers has become the hallmark of a low-income diet. With this, sugar was transformed from "luxury to necessity…from rarity to mass-produced good, a transformation embodying both the promise and the fulfillment of capitalism itself" (Mintz 1986: 196). Sugar is now the standard food of convenience (Mintz 1986: 198), as it is found in shelf-stable, hand-held foods designed for easy consumption and portable snack-foods like Fruit Loops and Mountain Dew.

Food as a class signifier extends far beyond sugar. Anthropologist William Roseberry examines coffee's shift from a common man's drink to an expensive, crafted product. Specialty coffees can have several appeals, including taste, aroma, ambience, experience, origins, the location at which it is sold, the other people at the coffee shop, and even suggested food pairings. This distinction also draws attention to the movement away from mass production and consumption, instead favoring narratives of smaller, more intimate production. Whether or not they are always truthful, specialty coffee shops and brewers tend to push the idea that they purchase their beans directly from small farms in exotic places such as Chiapas or Guatemala (Roseberry 2005: 123).

These new tastes and types of experiences are compelling for many, but this does not mean that customers are unable to make decisions for themselves. Customers "exercise those choices in a world of structured relationships, and part of what those relationships structure (or shape) is both the arena and the process of choice itself" (Roseberry 2005: 137). With this, critics of the specialty coffee industry have accused specialty coffee sellers of "manipulating" customers (Roseberry 2005: 138). However, this makes certain assumptions: 1) customers are powerless and unable to think for themselves, and 2) the products of specialty coffee sellers are always lower quality than what they claim.

As Roseberry writes, the customer is an active participant in the process of food and class signification. This segmentation of the coffee market appealed to customers who had not only the resources to engage, but also the *desire* to engage in these new coffee varieties. These customers were responding to their needs of variety, quality, and quantity, but also sellers' promises of these. Within this self-fashioning via consumption, there is a moment of full-circle. "[A]mong the commodities in which they demanded variety and quality were the old proletarian hunger

killers," writes Roseberry (Roseberry 2005: 139). In other words, what once were aspects of "lower-class" coffees have been appropriated and transformed. This means that a food's status is less about the product itself, but instead about what the product means to individuals and what it has been *taught* to mean to them.

Similarly, presentation is crucial to how Dollar General customers engage with Dollar General foods. The signs reading "EBT accepted" and "$1 Deals" above food aisles hail working class customers who financially need these discounts, further solidifying the associations between their economic class and the presented foods. Additionally, when customers purchase a specific product, they are also purchasing a specific ideology. To be a certain type of citizen is to *eat* like that type of citizen (Allison 1991: 198). Purchasing Doritos chips, for example, responds to thrill seekers, with packaging featuring explosions and gleaming lasers. Conversely, classic Lay's potato chips come in a friendly yellow bag featuring a sliced fresh potato and a picnic, appealing to customers who are looking for a sense of homeliness or hospitality. The brightly-colored packaging on Dollar General's foods creates appeals that are about thrill and taste rather than sincerity and simplicity seen with healthier foods.

Because of class connotations, purchasing groceries acts as an extension of class. To buyers, this is not only buying foods that they may have been raised on, but also a class affirmation for themselves and others. When Dollar General stocks its shelves with Fruit Loops, Mountain Dew, and Doritos, this is a highly-calculated action that appeals to these working class consumers. For these shoppers, continuing to purchase these foods affirms this, as they actively engage with the image that brands wish to sell them. Additionally, Dollar General continuously perpetuates its reputation as a store for these customers, solidifying the association between its brand and what it means to shop as a working class consumer.

“Savings Picked Fresh for You:” Produce Options in Dollar General

So far, I have focused primarily on the main food options available in Dollar General: highly processed foods that are high in sugar and fat. But if the popular food desert narrative is also about access to fresh produce, what options do Dollar General customers have when shopping?

One Dollar General was on the main street of the small town of Beaver Falls, an older town with one busy main street down the center. Within the past 10 years, a brand new building was built in the middle of main street where there was once a parking lot. The exterior was relatively busy with people running errands, and while there were few people within the store, there were three people engaged in a lively discussion with the employee at the register. I could tell by their glances that they knew that I wasn’t a regular here. This location itself was new enough that the interior still felt sterile as I entered through the shining automatic doors.

Out of all the locations that I had visited, this was the only one to have a produce section, proudly highlighted by a large sign reading “Fresh Fruit and Vegetables…SAVINGS PICKED FRESH FOR YOU,” emphasizing the fact that these foods were recently harvested (as opposed to shipped from a factory). While the other locations only had freezers full of frozen food and packaged snacks, there was a selection of multiple fruits and vegetables here: cherry tomatoes, bananas, garlic, and lots of potatoes. Although these weren't supermarket level standards, with the bananas browning and only lemon juice instead of actual lemons, it was significantly more diverse than other Dollar Generals’ options.

Figure 11: Produce section within Beaver Falls Dollar General (Photo by author).

Even within this produce section, the emphasis is still on the savings (*savings* picked fresh and not *produce* picked fresh). Nonetheless, this expansion still represents a trend in Dollar General towards a produce section like that of a grocery store. This way, Dollar General has been able to provide fresh produce to their customer base who may not have access otherwise. Furthermore, this discounts "food desert" narratives surrounding Dollar General, as the chain is providing fresh produce (even if it is not a large variety) to customers at an accessible price and location, instead bridging access gaps that would have existed otherwise.

This produce expansion also suggests that Dollar General is maintaining their identity while subverting their current reputation. To sell produce with simultaneous emphases on freshness and savings reflects a continued focus on savings while expanding upon the traditional

items thought of as bargain foods. If produce is typically considered a luxury, then offering it in a bargain-centered context to Dollar General's customer base reflects an awareness in changing what it means to *eat* like a working class person. Thus, Dollar General's grocery section provides the flexibility for individuals to eat both "junk foods" and produce, enabling one to self-fashion through consumption.

Worldwide Discounts: Grocery Stores, the *Konbini,* and the Pound Store

With groceries themselves gaining class connotations, grocery stores themselves began to signify class distinctions. The trend away from independent markets and mom-and-pop shops over the twentieth century allowed grocery chains to take hold of the American grocery market. Each grocery chain crafted a specific business model, complete with its own designated customer base that targeted specific ages, genders, and especially socioeconomic class of customers. A grocery customer's economic class influences them in several ways, such as what foods they were raised on and are accustomed to, what foods they want to buy, and what foods they can buy. Intertwined with larger systems of economics and food consumption, grocery shopping is therefore an act of class affirmation for oneself and others (Allison 1991: 196).

In the twentieth century, chain grocery stores began to flourish, appealing to customers with "promises of low prices, trustworthy foods, and freedom to choose products themselves rather than depend upon clerks (Deutsch 2010: 50). Chain grocery stores blossomed through these direct responses to the frustrations of customers. They took a progressive stance for the time, emphasizing "efficiency, low prices, and standardization" (Deutsch 2010: 51). These were accomplished naturally through their larger scale, making it easier to replicate processes, ramp up production, and reduce individual item costs (Deutsch 2010: 52).

Chain stores also appealed to a variety of racial and economic backgrounds. These stores crucially needed employees to run their stores, meaning that they would hire communities that other employers refused to such as African Americans and immigrants. While this may not have been a safeguard against discrimination, it could offer jobs to communities that had been systemically overlooked (Deutsch 2010: 53). Having such close ties to many immigrant communities, the trends of chain stores became inseparable from those of convenience foods that they sold. The same aspects that attracted customers to chain stores (predictability, convenience, standardization) compelled customers to purchase packaged convenience foods that were frequently sold here. Even the presentation itself speaks to this, with shelf-stable products in eye-catching, easily stackable packaging (Deutsch 2010: 69). With Dollar General, the chains serve as signifiers of the American working class, intentionally curating their image through their name, advertisements, inventory, historical presentation, and even strategic location placement. These trends are no different than these same ones of chain stores more generally in the 20th century, prioritizing standardization and affordability to achieve this customer and employee loyalty.

The concept of the convenience store has spread far beyond America. As the American model of franchised convenience stores spread through Japan in the late 1960s, companies needed a cheap, compelling, and appealing food to stock their shelves for Japanese consumers. The most notable food from this was the *onigiri,* or seaweed-wrapped rice balls. They came with a variety of fillings, from pickled plum and tuna-and-mayo to kimchi and Hokkaido salmon. *Onigiri* became synonymous with these convenience stores as a quick and hand-held meal, but it still maintains a mark of humanity, as each one is molded by hand (or at least before they were mass produced). The name *onigiri* even comes from the verb *nigiru*, meaning to press something

together with one's hands. Being a transportable and ubiquitous food, the *onigiri* blurs the line between "commodity and comfort." For many, it is part of a childhood lunchbox, yet it has also become the emblem of Japanese convenience stores. This slowly-made "fast-food" has taken on multiple meanings of both comfort and convenience (Whitelaw 2006: 131, 142).

Figure 12: *Onigiri* and other freshly-made food featured on *konbini* shelves (Marfin 2018).

Figure 13: Popular Japanese *konbini* chain Lawson (Marfin 2018).

These Japanese chains of convenience stores such as 7-Eleven, Lawson, Family Mart, Sunkus, and AM-PM are referred to as *konbini*. Like Dollar General franchises, *konbini* saw an exponential increase in the latter half of the 20th century. These stores' low prices and variety of stock allow for its customer base to make small yet frequent trips because of less home storage in densely populated urban areas and the proximity of these stores to many neighborhoods (Whitelaw 2006: 122, 123). *Konbini* can also offer economic hope for smaller businesses. These chains naturally have more resources, infrastructure, technology, and marketing knowledge, appealing to people who wish to convert old corner stores, rice shops, liquor stores, etc. into *konbini* (Whitelaw 2006: 124), just as Dollar General frequently occupies former 5 & 10 stores.

Anthropologist Gavin Whitelaw describes the entanglements of waste, employment, and interpersonal relations within these *konbini*. Considering how competitive the competition between these types of stores is, this means that product taste, design, freshness, and appearance

are all crucial, highly scrutinized aspects (Whitelaw 2014: 139). Convenience stores also need to comply with government standards of freshness, carefully labeling all prepared foods with a production date and a consume-by date *and* time. This means that most items have less than 24 hours of shelf life left by the time they reach the store (Whitelaw 2014: 139). Certain convenience store chains make this window even shorter through voluntary precautions. Because stores cannot guarantee how soon after purchasing customers will enjoy their food, stores pull many foods from shelves prematurely to their printed expiration dates. Checking these dates and making these replacements can occur ten times per day, making this a regular and crucial part of the *konbini's* functionality (Whitelaw 2014: 139).

Freshly packaged foods have some of the highest profit margins of their inventory and attract customers, but these items have to be replaced at such a high rate that this waste eats into these profit margins (Whitelaw 2014: 141). This is exacerbated by the fact that new store owners must complete a multi-week training course that emphasizes the importance of throwing out potentially spoiled food. Additionally, they are warned against eating or giving away expired food, as this may lead to employees expecting or even taking expired food themselves (Whitelaw 2014: 143).

Contrary to what store owners' training suggested, offering food to employees had no degradation on their work ethic. Instead, employees were more likely to continue working at these convenience stores, even expressing reciprocity in recruiting friends to work at these stores as well (Whitelaw 2014: 144). Additionally, employees were more likely to work longer shifts, just for the increased chance that there is more food that will need to be discarded (Whitelaw 2014: 154). Whitelaw refers to this exchange as "a kind of shopkeeper *habitus,*" (Whitelaw 2014: 144) with this exchange between store owners and their employees becoming a standard

part of the convenience store etiquette. Essentially, the Japanese convenience store itself and its selection provides an inventory that draws upon standards of food while adding some differentiation, creating predictability and surprise within one place (Whitelaw 2014: 155). This resonates with Dollar General's dual embodiment of grocery and convenience stores. By presenting itself as a general store, people enter with the expectation of analogous to a convenience store, yet the produce section and range of products borrows from grocery and convenience stores, creating a liminality that gives consumers flexibility.

Through Whitelaw's research in Japan, we see the crucial relationship between food and societal norms, and these norms in respect to the dynamics between employees and customers. This transaction transforms the guilt that store owners would normally feel engaging in the food freshness guidelines. Convenience stores sit as a crucial site of reciprocity for owners and their employees to navigate their relationship through the implications that food waste carries, transforming these connotations from those of loss to those of growth. All the while, these positive relationships help Japan's convenience stores to thrive within neighborhoods and grow even more, turning their version of the general store into a "global template" (Whitelaw 2014: 157). The integration that Dollar General is able to achieve into their local communities is due to these same kinship ties. Food access is able to facilitate bonds between employees as well as employees and customers, strengthening the emotional significance of Dollar General stores.

Both Dollar General and the *konbini* accomplish the feat of offering a wide and expansive selection of goods within a small space. These stores are meticulous and conscious about their locations as they attempt to implement themselves within walking distance for customers who have no better options. These sites of convenience and their products have managed to become so ubiquitous that they have taken on greater cultural significance. At the same time, however,

the lack of freshly-made goods like *onigiri* present in Dollar General means that employees and customers must create other incentives for kinship. This speaks to their innovations such as customers helping employees stock or employees keeping tabs of their favorite customers.

The enthusiasm for bargain and convenience is echoed in the British equivalent of the one pound store. Many of these stores, such as Poundland, are able to stay true to their name, only offering goods for a pound each. Since Poundland's opening in 1990, they have expanded to over 850 stores in the United Kingdom and Ireland. They offer a variety of inventory, if not more than Dollar General. Poundland offers clothing, health and beauty products, household products, toys, DVDs, and more. On their website, they emphasize their selection of food, claiming that within their food and drink options, they now offer chilled and frozen food at more than 450 locations ("Our Story").

Figure 14: British pound store chain Poundland (Davey 2022).

Shopping at the pound store has been described as both “economic and hedonic” (Hulme 2019: 554). These stores are centered around bargain, but also incorporate playful elements throughout the shopping experience. Customers feel a gravitational trust towards Poundland because the chain is so face-value, with eye-catching signs promising savings. The goods stocked on the shelves are not part of any elaborate display trying to persuade the customer to make another purchase. Instead of items on shelves being grouped together to create themes or packages, the items simply sit alone on the shelves (Hulme 2019: 554). A soccer ball, for example, would be stocked among a crate of balls within the toy section as opposed to being stocked with a soccer set of cleats, shorts, or shin guards (Hulme 2019: 555).

The layout of the pound store itself also appeals to customers. No effort or thinking is required of the customer, and the experience of shopping at the pound store is actively relaxing due to the store’s predictable, leading layout. The stores are rather small compared to a full grocery store, yet still able to maximize their space with neatly arranged aisles and clearly labeled sections. Customers also described reliability when it came to the pound store, citing the stores’ consistency in product placement. Simplifying the shopping experience means that there is less searching, which means less time, physical energy, and mental energy spent (Hulme 2019: 555). Usually stocked to the brim, these pound store displays signify affordability and abundance, hailing customers to purchase these deals before they are gone (Hulme 2019: 556).

Figure 15: Inside a typical Poundland location ("Our Story").

Pound stores, like American Dollar Generals, also tend to offer a selection of small things and items in smaller quantities. Despite the possibility for impracticality with these, these tiny goods with low price tags enable customers on a budget to get the thrill of buying many things while staying within a budget. Even people who enjoy higher-end stores like department stores still enjoy the pound store, as the pound store satisfies the niche of simplicity and bargain (Hulme 2019: 556).

The British pound store incorporates several appeals also found in the American Dollar General: affordability, simplicity, and convenience, all with a whimsical, plain-spoken ethos. The major incentive of purchasing discount stores is a shopping experience that saves finite resources such as time, money, physical energy, and mental energy. With this, Dollar General and pound stores are able to create new positive experiences for their shoppers, strengthening the loyalty

and emotional ties to the chain as a whole. These stores' inventories do vary slightly, with pound stores focusing more on food and snack items rather than household items. However, this again speaks to Dollar General's distinct liminality between grocery stores and convenience stores.

Looking at the history of convenience chains reveals a consistent loyalty to serving communities who had been overlooked by other shopping options. The standardized ease of chain convenience stores allowed them to resonate with working class shoppers who wanted a no-frills shopping experience. Seeing variations of the chain convenience store such as the *konbini* and the pound store highlight Dollar General's uniqueness.

The *konbini's* fresh array of handmade products allowed for these to facilitate kinships between employees, yet Dollar General is able to curate similar relationships through store ideologies rather than freshly made food. Similarly, the pound store achieves its success through eliminating barriers that would normally deter potential employees and customers such as financial circumstances, lack of food, laborious shopping experiences, and elitist brand philosophies. Although their inventory tends to carry less household products than Dollar General, this freedom enables customers to create moments of joy for themselves within these stores.

No Time, No Patience

Downtown Rochester, Pennsylvania, is significantly more suburban than the other locations I visited. This Dollar General shared a strip mall with a physical therapy center. In the plazas surrounding this one were a grocery store (Giant Eagle) and a roundabout busy with traffic. The parking lot had a steady stream of cars arriving and leaving, despite the fact that it was midday Monday.

A woman who appeared to be in her early 60s with a no-bullshit kind of aura walked in right before me. The woman, Janet, had short gray hair and was dressed comfortably in jeans, a sweatshirt, and sneakers. She didn't have a cart or basket and was carrying everything in her arms despite the fact that it was spilling. Upon talking to her, I learned that Dollar General was able to provide her with staple products like toilet paper, Kleenexes, and snacks. But more than anything, the draw of this store was its convenience, as she started and ended our conversation with "I don't have patience. I'm getting old."

Cake mix, spaghetti sauce, and chocolates were some of her self-reported main food purchases (although I also saw her leave the store with several bags of Lay's potato chips and a 6-pack of Pepsi). Overall, she didn't mind coming here. It did the job of supplementing what grocery stores like Walmart or Shop & Save couldn't provide in a trip intended to be under 10 minutes. The only complaint she had, however, were the other people. The employees used to let the store look like a "cemetery," with inventory boxes thrown about and blocking the aisles. The mess got to the point where she would avoid shopping at this Dollar General location until its recent renovation.

The mess had improved since the store was remodeled and more shelves were added. But this new remodeling also created opportunities for crime. The newly added self-checkout was an open invitation for shoplifting, as the employees had to spend nearly all of their shift in the back stocking inventory. Janet described one man who she had encountered multiple times at this Dollar General location who "forgot" to scan several or all items at the self-checkout before swiftly leaving the store.

"What do you do when that happens?" I asked her.

"Oh believe me, I speak up. I don't have any patience for that," she said again as she readjusted the bags of chips in her arms.

Janet is so incentivized by the time she saves at Dollar General that she is able to overlook negative aspects of her shopping experience like clutter and theft. Despite these, she is still able to get the products that she needs with any time or financial restraints she may have. Here, Dollar General is again subverting the standard expectations of the shopping experience by having standards within their stores that would not be acceptable at other stores. This reflects a silent agreement between the business and customers, where lower cleanliness standards and theft are accepted for the sake of providing the discounts that they offer, which again demonstrates pleasures created by customers of Dollar General.

Bargain Hunting

Dollar General's paramount business appeal is bargain. Customers may have different expectations when visiting these stores versus a Walmart, for example, but they will always expect a deal here. So far, I have focused on consumers who have no choice but to search for affordable goods, but I would also like to acknowledge the joys that emerge from the search for a bargain. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz wrote that information in the marketplace is:

> poor, scarce, mal-distributed, inefficiently communicated, and intensely valued. The level of ignorance about everything from the product quality and going prices to market possibilities and production costs is very high, and…the search for information is the central experience of life in the bazaar… (Geertz 1978: 29)

It is assumed within these marketplaces that vendors are selling items with a pretense of a fair price. Sellers need to make a profit on items that they purchased or own, but the markup of retail prices and their true profit margins are almost never known among customers. Therefore, it

becomes the consumer's responsibility to take on this assumption and search for opportunities to obtain the deepest discounts possible. The appeal of this is not only obtaining these bargains, but the *process* of finding them (Geertz 1978: 29, 30).

To Geertz, the entire process of bargaining entails an acknowledgement and navigation of price ambiguity between customer and vendor (Geertz 1978: 31). The customer who shops at Dollar General assumes that that chain does (and continues to) provide a bargain for them. Even within this trust, the bargain-savvy customer will continue to attempt to "hack the system" by searching for sales, coupons, special offers, and even limited-time stock. The average consumer obviously has no knowledge of how much Dollar General bought each item from its manufacturer for, yet all of these efforts are an attempt to bridge any gaps with the selling price.

Another factor at play is the seasonality of items, or the *created* seasonality of items. There were once two seasons: the "spring-summer" season March through August, and the "fall-winter" season from September to February. With the end and transition of seasons, this was a signal for sellers to mark down the prices and clear out that season's merchandise. Now, seasonal merchandise moves so quickly that seasons themselves are blurred and having seasonal sales would put customers in a constant revolving door of discounts. New goods are expected to sell quickly, and if they don't, they are either quickly discounted or discontinued altogether. Sellers are aware that customers wait for markdowns, but it is impossible to accurately guess what timing, percentage, and items having a markdown will get customers to purchase.

Dollar Generals constantly have a rotating inventory of seasonal items: Christmas decorations, Easter baskets, Valentine's Day cards, beach toys, and Halloween candy. These items are always stocked months in advance to the event itself, meaning that customers almost always buy all of the inventory before its corresponding season has actually begun. In the slim

chance that these items are not sold, they are immediately given a dramatic discount to clear out the inventory as soon as possible. The days immediately after Valentine's Day, for example, chocolates are discounted 50% or more. This careful expectation relating to the temporality of bargains is crucial for the dynamics between business and consumers.

This gets increasingly complicated when large retailers make cheapness the basis of their business model. Due to their gargantuan size as a company, retailers like Dollar General are able to provide deeply discounted prices and build a reputation as affordable. Using this rapport, they can sell items and claim that their prices are low, even when they are higher than those of competitors (Shell 2009: 115, 116). This further exemplifies the importance of the business-consumer relationship. Dollar General presents itself as an affordable chain throughout their business model, but it is ultimately up to the consumers to recognize these bargains as worthy of pursuing or not, further highlighting the importance of pleasures that customers find while shopping..

Walmart Without the Fluff

Through its storefronts and pricing, Dollar General allows a great amount of flexibility for its customers. My partner, Rob, was 24 and just entering the workforce after earning his degrees from a college about an hour north, where Dollar General was crucial for getting him through school. Since his freshman year, he visited the nearest location every week or two, saying, "Money was definitely something I needed to keep safeguarded." While there was a Dollar General within a two-mile walk, hitching a ride with friends was usually the way to go.

Rob and his friends would get easy meal options like soup, ramen noodles, beef jerky, and chips. Living in a dorm meant that the only cooking appliance available was a microwave, which confined him to these types of options even more. Rob refers to the soup aisle as "the

illusion of choice," saying, "I could get a different soup but it's basically the same thing….it's not super diverse, but I'm not hunting for diversity when I'm going to Dollar General. I'm just hunting to get food so I can live."

While the primary reason for these trips was to get food, it was also a way for him to have fun on a strict budget. It would always satisfy his inner child to check on their regularly rotated LEGO stock, even if he wasn't interested in purchasing it. If he and his friends were planning any type of party, then they could also get plates, cups, and party favors there. Despite having extremely limited disposable income, these types of cheap items allowed Rob and his friends to purchase decor that could serve as self-expression in their dorms, such as Halloween decorations or other knick knacks.

Having also grown up in Beaver County for his entire life, Rob supported Dollar General's business strategies. "I think that's the thing that Dollar General kind of gets right though…they're just spaced out enough for everybody to have like, a pretty good amount of access to go there," he said, "Dollar General doesn't pretend to be anything that it's not…it's face value and that's kind of why I like it. It's like I'm not going there to expect some kind of like, extreme fantasy experience…" In many ways, Dollar General was also a simplification of what the shopping experience had become. "It's almost like a cut and dry supermarket…it's like Walmart without fluff, " he remarked, "it's super easy to navigate…it's not like 1 to 1 all the time, but everything [in Dollar Generals] is basically in the same area."

Rob's main point of defense for Dollar General was its affordability, even if this meant sacrificing long-term affordability for short-term affordability. When asked about the affordability compared to local options, he said:

> I mean yeah there's a couple [mom and pop shops] in like Beaver Falls yeah and there's Beaver Super [a local grocer], but we stopped going to Beaver Super because it's way too expensive now since everything's upcharged by like $2-3…and it's kind of dirty now…I would rather keep the cheap prices than have my item get shrunk just a little bit because I would rather still pay less and still get the item… that's what most people are living on – short term…that's paycheck to paycheck.

This face-value affordability of Dollar General is what helped Rob through college. I asked him about coupons and he replied, "I don't care," saying that the time spent coupon-hunting could easily be replaced with just working more to *make* more money. In other words, the miniscule economic scales that Dollar General worked with for their discounts made incentivizing coupons difficult. He added:

> I have a working like, clock in my head to how much I want to spend and I'll just total up the items that I'm going to get…and that's why Dollar General appeals to me…I don't have to spend time searching for coupons. I don't have to spend time hunting for deals. I don't have to worry about any of that.

For Rob, Dollar General did all the heavy work of the traditional shopping experience. It was at an easily accessible location, it had affordable prices, carried food that did not require a kitchen, had a predictable store layout, and even had smaller products that were better suited for his budget and living in a dorm. The chain's unspoken guarantee of being able to provide a good deal allowed the shopping experiences there to become playful outings where he momentarily suspended the pressures of being a broke college student, enabling him to enjoy pleasures that he would not have at other chains.

Conclusion

Dollar General's tactics are all about playing with the expectations of customers. The creation and interpolation of a specific customer base is accomplished through Dollar General's awareness of class distinctions and marketing towards the needs of working class customers. Stocking the stores with specific foods, playing with existing conceptions of grocery and other discount stores, and emphasizing savings of money, energy, and time allow customers to enjoy Dollar General as far more than a necessity. Eliminating the normal stressors of the shopping experience also allows customers to innovate within what is otherwise a utilitarian shopping experience.

Furthermore, this challenges the narrative that consumers shop at Dollar General purely out of need. Dollar General is comparable to several other chains, yet their specific blend of characteristics makes shopping more enjoyable for consumers and facilitates employee bonds, strengthening the chain's connections to communities. Without the handmade food of the *konbini* or the diverse grocery options of the pound store, relationships made at Dollar General have to rely on non-materially based social ties. This groundedness to consumers bridges gaps left by competitors, establishing a community that would not exist otherwise.

Chapter 3: Innovations of the Offline and Online Spheres

Sites like Instagram and TikTok have become major platforms for consumers, employees, and community members to share news, jokes, recipes, sales, and information about Dollar General. Posts like mini-documentaries, images, and cooking tutorials therefore create new discourses in dialogue with the larger community of the chain. This online community is essential for informing the understanding of the larger Dollar General community. They are mutually constitutive, as the online community references experiences offline, and individuals may reference online information during their offline interactions with the chain. In both spheres, individuals use Dollar General as a site of collaboration and innovation.

By nature, social media is also self-constitutive. Any user can make an account and begin viewing, sharing, reacting to, and creating content. This is especially crucial when understanding these posts in relation to the issue of consumer agency, as social media gives individuals opportunities to create interventions surrounding Dollar General. Through this final chapter, I seek to illustrate the social media landscape of Dollar General through illuminating the innovations and positive emotions of these posts that reflect individuals' experiences surrounding the chain.

Dollar General on Social Media

Scrolling through Instagram, you're met with a constant stream of easily-consumable content: fluffy kitten videos, world news, sports highlights, and workout routines. Among this endless content are several pages dedicated to posting "memes," or internet jargon for easily-shareable, often humorous content referencing something of public knowledge. Even though you didn't search for any Dollar-General posts, you see several pictures making

commentary on the chain. Somehow, everyone in the comments seems to understand the humor and irony of these posts, commenting a string of laughing emoticons.

Figure 16, 17: Fall 2023 Instagram posts (@autistic.brownies 2023; @mutual.ly 2023).

You see an image of an unrealistically picturesque field with text that reads, “imagine a dollar general right here” with a heart-eyes emoji. The cut-and-paste style of the words “dollar general” implies that the version of this image is one of several, with each one layered on top of the next. But the most important feature of this image is the sarcasm; suggesting a concrete-ridden Dollar General in the midst of undisturbed nature, similar to the way that the chain themselves had done. Even the heart-eyes contribute to this, showing a tongue-in-cheek romanticization of this idea.

The second of the images plays upon the same trope of Dollar Generals disrupting nature, but this time emphasizing the quick, sudden manner by which Dollar General frequently implements themselves. The mention of “Gentry Creek Falls” acknowledges the business tactics of Dollar General, as this is a real location in Tennessee, the state where Dollar General

originated. There is also an element of awe and surprise, especially since this post insinuates that this location was stumbled upon by hikers.

Both of these posts casually confront Dollar General's business strategy of frequent, sudden, and rural implementation. The stark contrast between the rural scenery and the industrial sight of Dollar General also highlight the absurdity of their business practices. Being able to create this content, share it, and publicly agree upon this implicitly stated meaning highlights the social bonds that Dollar General has facilitated among their clientele.

Switching from Instagram to TikTok, you sift through teacup pigs and picturesque travel destinations before you're again met with Dollar General content. However, this one has a much more ominous tone, with a thumbnail reading, "What Dollar General doesn't want you to know." You can't help but tap on it, as it has over 5.2 million views and a caption starting with "Dollar General is stealing…"

Figure 18: "What Dollar General doesn't want you to know…" TikTok thumbnail (@moreperfectunion 2024)

https://www.tiktok.com/@moreperfectunion/video/7350333548567596330

The video, shot in a professional documentary style, begins with two interviews of women accusing Dollar General of being a "criminal organization" and stealing from the community. Intense marimba music accompanies several interview clips spliced together with business professionals and Dollar General shoppers saying more accusations towards the chain. The viewer is taken through this small town that looks very similar to Beaver County, with rural hills and a Dollar General around every corner. Soon, you learn the specific story of one woman who found out that she had been deceived by Dollar General. She claims she shopped at the chain purely out of convenience because of the store's proximity to her home. However, she discovered that she was consistently being overcharged by over a dollar on her favorite cat litter. It wasn't until Dollar General faced a class-action lawsuit that they acknowledged these nation-wide price discrepancies.

A narrator's voice comes in and out of the video, saying highly accusatory descriptors like Dollar General's "deceptive business practices" and the fact that it "sinks its teeth" into working class communities. The chain is accused of being the *cause* of economic distress instead of a symptom of economic distress, demonizing the chain. Several commenters echo these sentiments, saying, "I just bought allergy meds that rung up $4 more than it said on the s[h]elf but I just thought I read it wrong damn" and "Four Dollar Generals in a 15 mile radius of my house" ("Dollar General Is Stealing from Their Customers…"). This TikTok, made by a corporation with the screen name @moreperfectunion, echoes the typical doomsday narrative of Dollar General that you have encountered so far.

You continue scrolling, and instead stumble upon other trends like the "Dollar General challenge" and "Dollar General dinners" where people (some by challenge and others out of necessity) use only dollar store ingredients to cook meals. In 2022, a teenager went viral for

documenting his journey with homelessness and the meals he made to sustain himself. Here, a dollar store is able to provide him with dinner, dessert, and a drink, all for under $5.

Figure 19: "How I cook as a homeless teenager.." TikTok thumbnail (@Zeemer 2022).

https://www.tiktok.com/@randomhomeiessguy2/video/7093876018372562219?_r=1&_t=8hrBHciG6Bf

Upbeat, high-pitched music plays over the camera showing a point-of-view angle of the teen shopping within the store. Their voice is also never heard, instead opting for on-screen captions. The text shows a breakdown of their budget, often down to the exact cent. Each food item that they pick up is labeled with its price on screen, taking the viewer on the same path and mental calculations as the shopper in the video. This poster always shows the process of cooking these foods, which is often in a gas-station microwave or hot plate on a park bench.

Considering his circumstances, these posts are optimistic, as demonstrated by the ":)" smiling emoticon in the thumbnail. The comments are also overwhelmingly supportive, like one commenter saying, "hey! How is school going? Hope you're well! Can I ask how old you are? Take care of yourself." Here, the dollar store acts as a site of opportunity, providing meals that the teenager may not have been able to afford otherwise. Although this specific example features

a competitor Dollar Tree, several other videos by this same content creator feature Dollar General, solidifying this connotation of Dollar General providing consumers with economic flexibility.

As you continue scrolling, you stumble upon “Dollar Tree Dinners,” an account that has garnered over 1.2 million TikTok followers for its recipes of products strictly from dollar stores. The owner of the account, Rebecca Chobat, uses ingredients purely from Dollar General in the following video, along with per unit calculations to justify shopping at Dollar General versus other grocery stores.

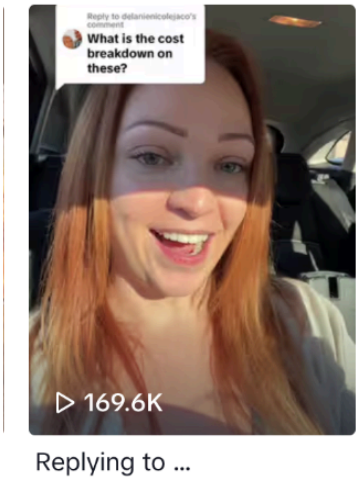

Figure 20: “Dollar Tree Dinners” TikTok thumbnail (@dollartreedinners 2023).

https://www.tiktok.com/@dollartreedinners/video/7306973712899640618?_r=1&_t=8hrAKUc03ti

A commenter from a previous post asks, “What is the cost breakdown on these?” to which Rebecca replies with a step-by-step guide and price breakdown of a recipe she had created. She takes the camera in a POV angle throughout the store, zooming in on each of the price tags to highlight the prices and any special promotions. She walks the viewer through her shopping procedure detailing the thought processes behind purchasing each item, such as

sausage being cheaper per unit if bought in larger quantities. At the end of her shopping trip, she films her receipt, proving to the audience that these prices are indeed real before describing an exact per-unit cost of the recipe once finished.

In the face of the popular Dollar General/food desert narrative, Rebecca's recipes create warm, freshly cooked meals from Dollar General. This post features a recipe on everything bagel flavored breakfast bites, but other recipes include homemade gnocchi soup, tacos, and vegetable fried rice. Several videos show Rebecca buying a cart full of groceries for just $20 at Dollar General, giving viewers a tutorial on how to survive with limited income. DollarTreeDinners' creation of these shopping lists, recipes, and sale-hunting also illustrate how these posts function as sites of innovation for Rebecca and her TikTok community, as well as a counter to elitist ideas of Dollar General being unable to provide balanced, satiating meals.

Instead of Dollar General being a barrier to food access, it becomes a bridge to food security. How many items can one buy for a certain price? What limited-edition items are available at Dollar General this week? Are there any special coupons or deals offered? What innovative recipes can one make with these items? Above all, these videos are budget-conscious, often tallying items up to the exact cent, but this is done with an optimism in the possibilities that Dollar General can offer for the working class.

As you continue scrolling, and by now, your TikTok algorithm has noticed that you have been viewing Dollar General-related content and has selected more to show you. A video with text reading "HUGE SAVINGS" catches your attention, and you see that "liz_the_clearancequeen" was able to purchase $25 worth of products for under $5 at Dollar General. Accounts like these show that with proper planning, coupons and sales at Dollar General can be more affordable than their sticker price.

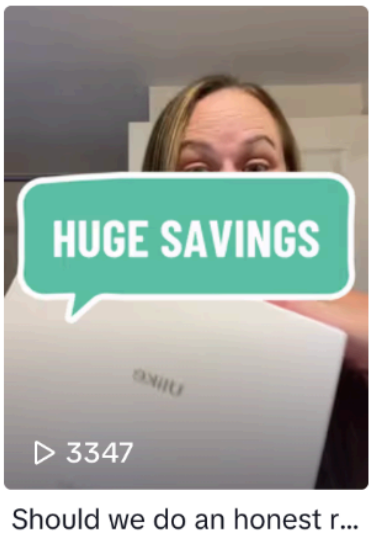

Figure 21: "$25 worth for $5" TikTok thumbnail (Liz the Clearance Queen 2023).

https://www.tiktok.com/@liz_the_clearancequeen/video/7307792538671287582?_r=1&_t=8hrAQkxr4YM

This video takes an enthusiastic approach to Dollar General's bargains, with the creator speaking loudly with a fast-paced filming style. "$25 worth of products for less than 5 bucks!" she exclaims to the camera with colorful text reading "Saturday 12/2 only" at the bottom of the screen, urging consumers to obtain these sales before they are gone. Instead of walking through a store, the viewer sees a screen-recording of each item and what coupons to use in the Dollar General app, making this video serve as a savings tutorial for users. Viewers are then shown a list of how many of each exact product to obtain with prices down to the cent. Not only does this video share the excitement of deals from Dollar General, but it also serves as a step-by-step tutorial for consumers wishing to obtain these deals.

American working class shoppers are then able to see these same posts, further solidifying the link between affordable goods, class, and Dollar General. Viewers are also able to bond over the excitement of a particularly good bargain, whether that be from in-store sales or

coupons. Several users assist each other with accessing these limited-time coupons in the comment section, or even suggest additional coupons to incorporate. This creates feelings of community and exclusivity, where those who consume this online content are able to confide in each other and navigate savings that may not be available otherwise. Here, Dollar General is again a site of optimistic community building for its shoppers.

I offer these social media posts as a brief glimpse into the much larger online discourses surrounding Dollar General. Through these platforms, users congregate online and affirm Dollar General as a valuable resource within their communities, reversing the traditional narrative that these stores are entirely predatory. This is especially crucial considering that posts created by individuals (as opposed to larger companies) are optimistic and upbeat, reflecting the attitudes that individuals have created towards Dollar General.

Offline Versus Social Media Communities

Knowing this, I would like to explore exactly how Dollar General's online and offline communities inform each other. In other words, how are these two separate yet interconnected realms related? Since both areas of the community constitute one another, I argue against the idea of a strict binary between them (Boellstorff 2008: 19). The endless variables of online discourse facilitate the formation and the specific interactions within these communities, and I would like to holistically consider components like hashtags, usernames, comments, etc. as actors shaping the discursive potential of this community,

Names and captions of posts carry much greater meaning than merely labeling. Names of content creators, content categories, captions, and even hashtags have discursive potential. Hashtags, for example, have the ability to not only "file", but also contextualize (Bonilla and Rosa 2015: 5). The simple "#dollargeneral…#couponing" hashtags in the description of

liz_the_clearancequeen's TikTok accomplish several things: They make this content more easily accessible for fans of Dollar General, but they also appeal to Dollar General fans' existing desires to coupon (or even inspire new ones). Conversely, this combination of descriptors can attract fans of couponing to Dollar General-related content, creating the association that Dollar General is a place where they can obtain these deals.

Social media posts' descriptors and hashtags don't even necessarily have to be related. In the TikTok by the homeless teenager, for example, several of their hashtags include "#fyp, #foryou, #foryoupage…#viral…". None of these concepts were referenced in the video, making these hashtags creators of an "intertextual chain" that incorporates additional posts to frame itself (Bonilla and Rosa 2015: 5, 6). The "For You" page on TikTok is an unlimited stream of personally curated content from its algorithm, and these hashtag descriptors are intended to increase the likelihood of this content being exposed to a wide range of people through their feeds. This makes these hashtags an intentional labeling that demonstrates a desire to increase exposure of this dollar store-centered content.

These online landscapes are compounded by the fact that on social media, one primarily sees posts from people in their own social networks (Bonilla and Rosa 2015: 6). Therefore, if someone lives in an area with more Dollar Generals, they are more likely to follow people who also live there, making them inevitably more likely to see Dollar General-centered content. This self-affirming quality is possible due to social media being "interwoven with the qualities, political structures and histories of localities or regions" (Postill and Pink 2012: 1). The more that one participates in the discourse of social media, the more fluent they are in navigating social media and its various discourses (Postill and Pink 2012: 6). The constant stream of shareable content encourages one to keep consuming and creating content, exponentially adding

to the discourses on social media (Postill and Pink 2012: 7) or even inspiring users to seek out additional content (Garrett and Resnick 2011: 114).

What is online is not an isolated phenomena from the offline, and vice versa. Instead the two elements are mutually constituent, existing within the same larger sphere of social exchanges. In *Virtual Ethnography*, Christine Hine describes internet users being both "involved in the construction of the technology: through the practices by which they understand it and through the content they produce" (Hine 2000: 38). The internet, consequently, exists as both a "discursively performed culture" and a "cultural artefact, the technology text" (Hine 2000: 39). Thus, greater meaning is not just produced through online or offline interactions, but the relationships and contexts between them.

Online posts about Dollar General accomplish several things: They reinforce existing communities of people who follow Dollar General while "lassoing" in additional communities interested in the bargains that Dollar General can offer (Bonilla and Rosa 2015: 6). These elements also shape the discourse surrounding Dollar General. Usernames, comments, hashtags, and on-screen text can shape how posts are interpreted, who they attract, and therefore how they build upon existing followers of Dollar General. These online exchanges are crucial for understanding Dollar General's community in a larger context.

Because of this discursive power of social media, the public conversations regarding Dollar General are compounded online. These sites allow consumers to express ideas about the chain and create relationships through innovations like recipes and couponing. I reiterate that these posts are evidence of the joy that consumers feel towards Dollar General, despite most media stating otherwise. Therefore, social media posts dually function as evidence of and an artifact of consumer innovations.

Options and Positivity

This optimism towards Dollar General extends to its real life visitors such as Kathy, who were able to use Dollar General goods to bond with her loved ones. Kathy was an older woman with long, gray hair who pushed a buggy carrying several items. She had lived in the area her whole life, and her home was under a 10 minute drive from this location. About once every two weeks, she could buy detergent, toilet paper, bottled water, and other household necessities from here.

This Dollar General sat at the heart of a deeply suburban area of Monaca, PA. The building itself looked almost artificially new, especially in comparison to the houses and older industrial businesses that surrounded it. No music played in the store and there was little to no foot traffic.

Kathy didn't hesitate to tell me about her grandchildren, who would visit her two days per week. She explained to me that she could buy cupcakes, candy, and other baking supplies here for them. Additionally, this store carried the favorite dog treats that she and her grandchildren would give her dog for a cheap price.

Kathy had no major qualms with Dollar General. Being familiar with the area, she said that she enjoyed how frequently she could run into people she knew here and catch up with them. In terms of the storefronts, they were consistently clean and the staff was friendly. Sometimes the aisles were crowded with excess boxes of inventory, but Kathy was patient with the staff. "You can't really blame them [the employees]," she told me, "they're short handed." These staples made Dollar General a regular stop in the shopping rotation for Kathy, among other stores like Walmart, Giant Eagle, and Shop & Save.

Because of Dollar General, Kathy was able to easily access and afford baking supplies and dog treats. Dollar General was able to provide something that facilitated her relationships through baking goods for her grandchildren and getting her pet treats. This appreciation that this bred for Dollar General was strong enough that she was able to overlook the possible negative aspects like a lack of staff and clutter in the aisles. I highlight Kathy's story because her embrace of Dollar General allowed her to facilitate connections to her loved ones, strengthening their relationships as a result of this store.

The Innovations of Home

The Chippewa Dollar General was the location that was closest to my house for the majority of my childhood, so this was coming to an old place with fresh eyes. I have fond memories of going with my mother, Brandi, nearly every week growing up to get necessities like toilet paper, laundry detergent, and snacks. This time, however, I was curious how these visits resonated with my own family.

My mom supported herself and my two younger siblings, so she was someone who stuck to a budget. Being a school bus driver and someone who didn't eat breakfast meant that my mom needed small, sugary, and portable snacks to get her through her day. She told me that her latest favorite snack was individually wrapped chocolates from Dollar General. "5 for $2!" she reiterated, "Five little individually-wrapped chocolate candies for just $2."

In case her enthusiasm over a 40 cent chocolate didn't make it obvious, my mother raised me to be an avid couponer and sales-hunter. Every cent saved was money in your pocket. This meant that only certain items were worth buying at Dollar General. For example, as a smoker, my mom knew that Dollar General's cigarette selection was "$1.50 to $2 more per pack." Because of this philosophy, the majority of the household's grocery shopping was done at Aldi or

Walmart since these stores could offer cheaper *unit prices* for items. Nonetheless, there was still some flexibility within this, as my mom complained that all of Dollar General's coupons were now digital, alienating a 51-year-old like herself.

Although my mother didn't raise me to love Dollar General, she still pitted it as the lesser of the evils, especially when compared to stores like Walmart that were busy to the point where customer traffic blocked the aisles. Dollar General sat at the other end of the spectrum, with my mom saying:

> ...the aisles are all clogged up because they [the employees] don't put away the merchandise because they have too much stuff to stock…I went in there today and there's two employees in the store. One was at the register…no customer greeting…when I walked up she was busy playing with her Apple Watch and the other one was sitting back in the office. The door was open, I saw. And then she went outside and smoked a cigarette.

In some ways, Dollar General was a necessary evil in my family. It had great prices and accessibility, but this came at the sacrifice of other grocery store standards like employee cordiality and store cleanliness. My mom seemed to be shocked that anyone could feel differently about Dollar General, saying:

> I can't imagine anybody except maybe an 80 year old woman that doesn't have much going on in her life that would really like, enjoy going and think, "Wow this is an experience I enjoy"...seriously so I am kind of surprised that you say people legitimately like it.

Among her grocery shopping options, Dollar General exists as the least heinous, offering thrift, convenience, and a relatively quiet shopping experience.

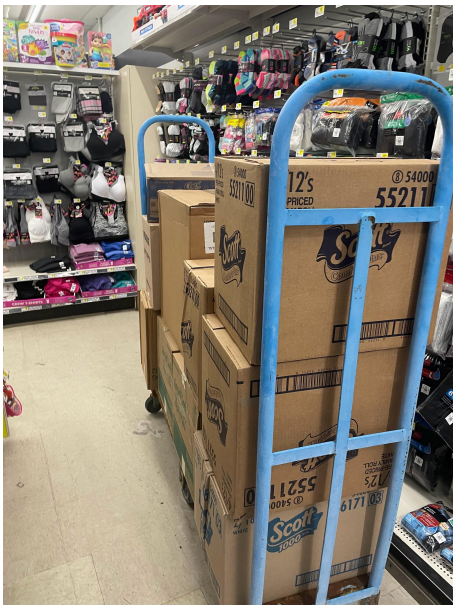

Figure 22, 23: Aisles of Chippewa Dollar General with boxes of inventory and trash (Photos by author).

Days later, when I visited the Chippewa location myself, I was met with the same experience. What was supposed to be a 2-minute trip to grab Benadryl for my father turned into nearly ten minutes, the majority of which were spent waiting at the register. The employee glanced over at me standing at the register (there was no self-checkout at this location), we made eye contact, and she continued to stock shelves for several more minutes. The back of the store had equipment sitting out with older inventory and full garbage bags on the floor. Several carts of inventory sat in the aisles, like paper towels that sat near the undergarments because there was nowhere else to store them in the meantime.

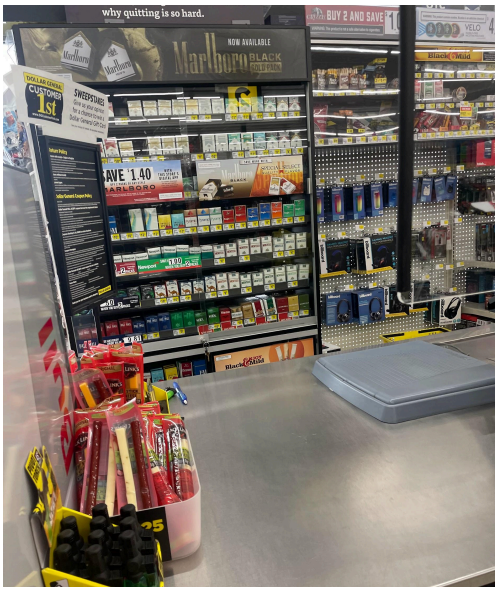

Figure 24: Tobacco selection at Dollar General (Photo by author).

At least this gave me enough time to see the cigarette selection that my mom had mentioned. Behind the register, there was a decent selection of cigarettes, pre-rolled tobacco, and chewing tobacco, almost perfectly placed to entice the customer into a last-minute purchase. And if you need a lighter, there's a selection of those too, with torch lighters pictured at the register. None of the prices were a particularly good deal, but selling it within a Dollar General allowed customers to kill two birds with one stone. Despite the wait at the register, I still walked out with a bottle of Benadryl for less than $5. A steal.

Neither of my parents are what one would call "Dollar General enthusiasts." Even within their complaints, there is an ambivalence where they still appreciate what the store provides for them. My mom may complain about the lack of employees and the clutter in the aisles, but this does not outweigh her enthusiasm in getting a chocolate for 40 cents. Especially compared to the alternatives like Walmart, Dollar General is small, quiet, and secluded. Its suspension of the standard shopping experience allows it to be an indistinct shopping experience, allowing consumers like my own parents to create their own relationships to the chain. Within this

ambivalence towards Dollar General are moments like this of innovations that create excitement, thrill, or joy.

Conclusion

I examine Dollar General on social media to not only provide a comprehensive understanding of the discourse surrounding the brand, but also to see the self-made pleasures of the store. Social media is full of user-generated factors like hashtags, usernames, and comments, and these frame, categorize, and situate collective understandings of Dollar General. The overwhelming majority of posts about Dollar General are positive, emphasizing the fact that individuals have created their own associations with it.

These come partially out of the fact that Dollar General gives people economic flexibility that they would not otherwise have. Buying baking supplies, dog treats, and candies are all mundane gestures, yet these allow people to form connections to loved ones. Within this face-value shopping experience, individuals can create their own relationship to the chain, finding their own appeals that motivate them to shop there. Momentarily alleviating the normal stressors of shopping allows people to form these positive associations, even in the midst of tattered storefronts and narratives stating otherwise.

Conclusion

Dollar General is just one area of ethnographic inquiry to better understand the larger trends of class consciousness, food justice, and consumer agency in America. It is unique in that it constructs an identity comprising both grocery and convenience trends, creating a liminality that allows consumers to fashion their own relationship to the chain. Within this, these processes and interactions dismantle the leading narratives that accuse the stores of preying upon the working class. Instead of consumers being coerced into shopping there out of economic necessity, they willfully lean into this, creating further incentives such as employee-customer relationships or limited-time coupon deals.

This careful attention to Dollar General is also a statement against the popular notion that it is purely a store for the working class. As the chain constantly fashions their brand as personable, affordable, and utilitarian in practice, consumers respond to these hails. I consider both food and grocery stores as important markers of the class distinctions involved in this process, being ostensible indicators of these phenomena. Additionally, I emphasize the possibility that one can become different by consuming (and shopping) differently (Mintz 1986: 185), making grocery shopping an intimate yet discursive practice. By this, I am referring to the potential of grocery shopping to self-affirm one's class while the connotations attached to certain foods or grocery stores may shift.

I situate this research within Beaver and Columbiana counties not only because of my own familiarity with the area as my hometown, but also because it is a prime candidate for "Dollar General-ification," with nearly 30 locations within this working class, rural community.. Here, there are substantial gaps in geographic accessibility, affordable food, and customer-led shopping experiences, and Dollar General capitalizes upon this. Where the American food

systems and competing chains have overlooked rural, working class populations, Dollar General has become an underdog competitor among other stores like Walmart, creating loyal customer bases. Looking comparatively at other major grocery stores and convenience chains shows the common appeals for convenience and bargain. Dollar General's successful business model has perfected this idea of convenience for consumers while providing the flexibility to conform to one's personal restraints on facets like time, income, energy, and even willingness to socialize.

Although Victor Turner's notions of liminality are originally in reference to rites of passage, I use his framework to illuminate how Dollar General transcends standard models of grocery shopping in America. The chain achieves its liminality through combining several traits of grocery and convenience stores, which allows customers to constitute their own meanings of the otherwise ambiguous chain. From Dollar General's ambiguity we see opportunity for an embrace of self-determined meaning. Instead of being an oppressive presence, customers enjoy the processes of creating meanings, finding pleasures in seeking bargains or creating friendships in unexpected places. Because of this, I view the implementation of Dollar General stores within these communities as a welcome presence. I have shown how the communities have adapted to include Dollar General as a regular part of their grocery shopping and community life.

Using comprehensive fieldwork online and on social media highlights the recurring innovations of individuals' interactions with this chain. Arguably, Dollar General offers several aspects that many other shopping establishments do not offer: smaller spaces, fewer employees, accessibility, and affordability. Counterintuitive to most other grocery stores under capitalism, bigger is not always better, and this small scale allows an intimate ease for people navigating Dollar General.

In terms of solutions, I would like to echo my conundrum stated in the introduction of this thesis: There is plenty of research on this phenomenon, but few sources let consumers speak for themselves. Looking outside of the few people who do have unpleasant experiences, the vast majority of shoppers online and offline have a strong connection to the chain. The most notable thing about these bonds is that they are self-fashioned, implying that the impetus for creating this business-consumer relationship stems from the customer themselves, giving them a purchasing power at Dollar General.

This dominant narrative also assumes that working class people taking pleasure in a business marketed to them is a symptom of deception. However, I seek to prove that individuals can reason beyond this. Instead of deception, individuals take pleasure in accepting and transforming the hails that Dollar General sends out to them. Understanding this therefore empowers individuals within larger food systems to have ownership of their habits and their associated meanings, showcasing the agency that they truly possess.

With this, I suggest that we expand notions of agency, specifically that of the working class. Agency is commonly conceptualized as a tangible resistance to a hegemonic power (Mahmood 2001: 210). For Dollar General consumers, this traditional agency could be demonstrated by having decisive power in the store locations or the products stocked within the store. Leading narratives perceive this absence of explicit consumer insight as a lack of agency. However, I would like to pose that Dollar General consumers employ this standard notion of agency through their self-made innovations. Seeking out coupon deals, creating recipes, and finding new products are all ways in which consumers express this definition of agency without uprooting Dollar General's practices.

I would like to propose that agency can also be a willful embrace of social expectations. Simply put, not all individuals wish to be "freed" from greater norms (Mahmood 2001: 211). In the case of Dollar General, people may choose to enjoy the stores once they have implemented their community. Understanding this requires an attention to the motivations of individuals. Anthropologist Saba Mahmood says regarding agency:

> [W]hat may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may very well be a form of agency—one that must be understood in the context of the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment (Mahmood 2001: 212).

Using this framework, working class consumers who take pleasure in shopping at a chain like Dollar General can be expressing their own form of agency. Expanding definitions of agency, I argue that with Dollar General, consumers occupy both the "progressive" and "static" definitions of it (Mahmood 2001: 212). Shopping at Dollar General as a working class customer can be a response to their targeted marketing but also a willful decision, as voiced by several of my interlocutors. Even if individuals are not enthusiastic supporters of Dollar General, creating one's own pleasures while shopping reflects a consumer power.

Knowing this, it becomes clear that consumers are dynamic in response to the perceived challenges that they face. Dollar General's multifaceted nature enables individuals to take pleasure in the appeals created by Dollar General while fashioning new ones. With this, these stores exist as sites of bargain, convenience, and ease, but also a site of innovations, kinships, and joy. Perhaps this makes Dollar General not a perpetrator of rural food insecurity, but instead a source of hope.

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