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The government's U-turn on junk food ban, won't save families money

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The headline in the *Daily Mail* was, as always, illuminating: “Boris Johnson ditches nanny state ban on bogof [buy-one-get-one-free] junk food deal to soften blow of cost of living crisis.”

The UK government, as part of its mission to cut the UK's obesity levels, had intended to introduce a ban on what the supermarket industry calls multi-buy deals for food high in salt, fat, and sugar. It was also going to ban junk food advertising before 9pm. Both those measures have now been put on hold, with health campaigners predicting they are now unlikely to ever see the light of day.

Tory backbenchers have cheered the announcement, arguing this is the worst possible time to impose what is, in effect, an extra and unnecessary tax on food. And with analysts predicting the average household is facing an additional £271 grocery bill this year because of soaring inflation it's hard to disagree. After all, is it really the place of the government to stop a hard-up family enjoying a discount on their weekly food shop?

This argument, however, rests on the assumption that a majority of a family's shopping basket is made up of promotions.

It's certainly true that British supermarkets, probably the most competitive in Europe, do try to tempt shoppers with discounts. Back in 2015, 40% of all food and drink shopping (not just the “junk” element) was bought on promotion—a significantly higher figure than, say, the 15% in France and 16% in Spain. But that has fallen to 27% this year for two reasons. [1] The first is structural. Aldi and Lidl have become major supermarket forces in the UK and they historically have not used one-off discounts; instead they have favoured the tactic of just cutting prices. The established UK groups have responded by following suit. The other reason is that supermarkets, like every business in the country, are facing eye-watering utility bills and labour costs. They just can't afford to be as generous as they once were.

Fine, but 27% is still a hefty amount. Surely banning these discounts will mean a family's weekly shopping basket is going to shoot up in price? Well, no. Because the government was only going to ban the multibuy deals, not the discounts. And it's a myth that “but one get one free” offers are rampant on the shelves of UK supermarkets—a myth left over from the 1990s.

Public Health England commissioned an in-depth study into price promotions in supermarkets and the effect they play on our purchasing patterns, which was published at the end of 2020. [2] It was undertaken by Kantar, a market research company that is widely considered to be an expert on grocery shopping. It has a panel of 30 000 UK households which have been religiously logging all their purchases for years. For this study it examined 64

000 different promotions across a two year period, 2017-18, who bought them, and how the discounts and deals changed their usual consumption patterns. The study found that multi-buys—the buy-one-get-one-free or 3-for-£2 style deals—accounted for just nine per cent of spend. Of course only some of that was for junk food, but its conclusion was unequivocal: “While promotions tend to make products cheaper they also tend to encourage people to buy more.” If families had bought all the discounted food and drink at full price they would have had to spend £372 more a year. In the current environment that is a very substantial saving.

However, a large amount of the products that ended up in the basket were incremental—the extra bag of sweets, the second bottle of cordial. Once the incremental spending is stripped out, the true saving equates to £72 a year.

Again, this is not an insignificant amount. But if you look specifically at the multi-buy deals the net saving was a mere £14 a year.[2] Or 27p a week. Even for the hardest pressed families, that is a pretty meaningless amount. So the government's U-turn will not do much “to soften blow of cost of living crisis” after all.

If that's the case, why bother with the ban in the first place? Well, a disproportionate amount of promotions are found in the junk food aisles. There's a simple reason for this: the discounts and promotions are mostly funded by the manufacturers, not the supermarkets. Fruit and veg farmers, as a general rule, can't afford the millions it costs to fund a “20% extra free” deal on their strawberries or carrots. The alcohol, chocolate and snack companies can. The Kantar report calculated that all the deals, discounts, and promotions meant we were consuming 4% more sugar than we would otherwise.[2]

The government's U-turn will save most families precious little money, but risks adding to the NHS's already vast obesity burden. It seems muddle-headed at best, negligent at worst.

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Provenance and peer review: commissioned, not peer reviewed.

1 Kantar. UK shoppers seek out value as grocery inflation hits 11 year high. <https://www.kantar.com/inspiration/fmcg/2022-wp-uk-shoppers-look-out-value-as-grocery-inflation-hits-11-year-high>

2 Public Health England. An analysis of the role of price promotions on the household purchases of food and drinks high in sugar, and purchases of food and drinks for out of home consumption. A research project for Public Health England conducted by Kantar Worldpanel UK. December 2020. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/947412/Sugar_Reduction_analysis_of_price_promotions_on_the_household_purchases_of_food_and_drinks_high_in_sugar__4_.pdf