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The role of food in older adults' everyday lives

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A collaborative food-based initiative in partnership with Marks and Spencer

Alongside the leading UK retail chain Marks and Spencer, York researchers are working on improving the well-being of senior citizens through the medium of food. The project developed interventions through working with the M&S Company Archive, primarily on a series of community-based engagement activities with older adults in the North of England. The aim was to disseminate the idea of 'food as material care', highlighting how diverse life circumstances impact on older adults' mundane food practices. This will be translated into recommendations that will inform the M&S 'Plan A 2025' strategy around both enhancing community-business relationships and elder customers' wellbeing.

The research

The research encouraged participants to think about their everyday food consumption, and understand the meaning of food along the life course, recognising that older adults experience food in a different way when compared to other age groups. In particular, changing family relations during the life course mean that it is increasingly necessary to engage with a wider understanding of everyday materials, food being a prime example, as 'forms of care'.

Dr Wes Lin and the team, brought together 18 older adults from different communities to understand how they perceive food and the role it plays in their life. Participants were asked to keep a photo diary of the meals they were eating and/or their shopping, and then to explain the reasons behind their choices, with a key focus on changing life circumstances. At the end of the project these images were displayed as a Photo Exhibition 'My Life of Food', hosted at the M&S Company Archive in Leeds.

The outcome

A collaborative agreement between Marks and Spencer and the University of York has been signed, and will support the ongoing work emerging out of this study. It is anticipated that the analysis and results will assist food retailers, including but not limited to Marks and Spencer, to develop a more nuanced understanding of the food needs of older adults, and provide a more tailored service. The study also provides an insight into how food retailers can offer appropriate support when older adults or their loved ones are facing life-changing challenges, such as living alone or becoming a carer. The collaboration will assist Marks and Spencer achieve their social responsibility objective within their Plan A 2025 strategy, in addition to informing further co-produced interventions, projects and engagement activities. In 2019, with the Marks Spencer Company Archive and Simon Marks Court Care Home, they staged a photography exhibition 'My Life of Food' at the M&S Company Archive and the York City Screen Picturehouse during April to July 2019.



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