

WORD OF THE MONTH

OXFORD AUSTRALIA: THE FUTURE OF AUSTRALIAN ENGLISH | MAY 2014

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checkout chick

- **noun**: a checkout operator at a supermarket.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

Once I was old enough, I got a job as a **checkout chick** at the local Woolworths supermarket. There was something of a rivalry between those of us who worked at Woolies and the dead beats who had a job at Coles. (*Canberra Times*, 19 October 2013)

The checkout is the point at which goods are paid for in a supermarket or other shop. The checkout typically includes a cash register or computer where items can be scanned and receipts automatically generated. The person who operates a cash register may be called a *cashier* or *checkout operator*, but in Australian English a checkout operator in a supermarket is often colloquially known as a **checkout chick**.

Evidence for the term **checkout chick** goes back to the 1970s. The word *chick* meaning 'a girl or young woman' is originally US slang and is recorded from the 1920s. The use of *chick* in **checkout chick** indicates the traditional predominance of young women in the job, but in recent decades the male **checkout chick** has become an increasingly familiar sight in Australian supermarkets: 'He works as a checkout operator at a Jewel supermarket at Castlecrag and, in case you're wondering, he doesn't mind being called a **checkout chick**.' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 July 1994)

The remuneration for a **checkout chick** is usually set at the minimum wage and the qualification expectations are relatively low, making this role a common introduction to paid employment for many teenagers. Working as a **checkout chick** is often a temporary job for many, perhaps as a means of paying the bills while undertaking tertiary study, but for others it is a career:

It is a myth that **checkout chicks** are blonde no-hopers; to cope with the society of today a PhD in psychology, economics and medicine are the bare necessities! ... I must confess that I actually enjoy working. The casual staff are mostly students, and the staff room is a great place to be. The pay is good and the additional discounts I receive are a real bonus. (*Melbourne Age*, 18 April 1994)

This 1970s evidence for **checkout chick** predicted the automisation of checkouts and

the ultimate demise of the job:

We can, apparently, look forward to supermarkets which are manned by security guards. Gone will be the pneumatic, pimped **check-out chick**, replaced by a device which adds up the cost of your purchases and which takes your loot or digests your credit cards. (*Canberra Times*, 21 December 1979)

Despite the prediction, the introduction of self-checkout systems decades later has not made a great impact on the number of checkout operators. **Checkout chicks** are likely to be a feature of supermarkets and Australian English for some time to come.

Checkout chick has been included in a number of our Oxford dictionaries and will be included in the second edition of the *Australian National Dictionary*.



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