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, pimpled 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.