



## Research report

## Chips in black boxes? Convenience life span, parafood, bandwidth, families, and co-creation

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## ABSTRACT

Any consumer who opens a bag of potato or corn chips (or crisps in the UK) knows there is no time to waste to enjoy or share them. The convenience life span of chips is limited: it is the shelf or storage life and a very limited time once outside the bag. Many technologies converge to generate the desired effect as a black box, not only of the packaging but also of the chips themselves. The concept of paratext can be applied to printed messages on the package, including the brand name and other texts like advertising (epitexts), which can be expanded into the concept of parafood. These concepts help to discuss technological developments and interpret why this has recently become a negotiation zone for co-creation (see the *Do us a flavor* campaigns). They are symptoms of changing relations between production, research and development, marketing, and consumption. This paper pays special attention to back stories, underdog brand biographies and narratives about origin. The concept of *bandwidth* is introduced to sensitize about the limits of combining different stories about chips. A recent brand biography, a family history and a cookery book are used to discuss the phenomenon of cooking with Fritos. Together with the concepts of parafood, bandwidth and black boxes, more reflection and dialogue about the role of history and heritage in marketing put new challenging perspectives on the agenda.

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## Introduction

"Bags of time...": that was the slogan HP Snacks used in the 1980s to advertise Hula Hoops (Berry & Norman, 2014). It referred to the plastic watch inside the packets, but it also captured why potato- and corn-based snacks in bags are a paradigmatic example of convenience food available in pubs, gasoline stations, supermarkets and convenience stores since the 1950s.

On the one hand, I present a series of existing and new concepts that help to see and understand the importance of saving and managing time when dealing with convenience food in general and chips in particular. On the other hand, I explore how references to the past and to long term evolutions are attached to brands of fast food, not only via shortcut words on the package like "traditional" or "authentic", but also via so-called back stories and special family histories. Next to the "secret kitchens" in Research and Development Departments, many other kitchens come into view. In (her- and hi)stories of brands, the home kitchens of the families of the founders tend to play a major role. In the etiological narrative about the product "potato chips" itself, it was a restaurant kitchen in Saratoga Springs. In a case-study of attempts in Norway in the 1990s to launch frozen convenience food products,

Marianne Lien tried to unravel how the processes of (de)selection, production and marketing worked. By shadowing a marketing manager of Viking Food, she discovered that "(...) he jokingly referred to recent test results from 'Edvard Griegs vei 54,' his home address, and to informal trials that he had undertaken together with his wife. Thus, while the written documents mostly reflected professional market research, informal, ad-hoc testing was part of decision-making as well, although it was not always referred to as such..." (Lien, 2003, 170). Families and storytelling can be keys to understand some evolutions of the convenience food paradigm.

In this paper, I present a set of sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954; Bowen, 2006) that can function as eye-openers. Next to existing concepts like "black box" (Bruno Latour), paratexts (G rard Genette), "brand biography" or "co-creation", I propose scholarly neologisms like "convenience life span", "bandwidth" or "parafood". I will first discuss the notion of convenience life span and the importance of a sensory vocabulary, as Peter Reyner Banham (1970) emphasized in a famous essay about crisps. Furthermore I examine how the bag-of-chips-as-a-black-box was stabilized and evolved. Then I will focus on the function or role of (hi)stories as a trending topic in marketing and branding studies. I specifically concentrate on the role of convenient families, producers and/or consumers in negotiation processes and explore effects of the co-creation movement. I address the challenge launched by Bruno Latour, "The impossible task of opening the black box is made feasible (if not

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easy) by moving in time and space until one finds the controversial topic on which scientists and engineers are busy at work (Latour, 1987, 4). Or in this case, also CEOs and customers. I will demonstrate the power of the set of sensitizing concepts in case studies. First I examine the most widespread origin or first food story about chips (the Crum saga), then I explore a recent brand-biography cum family-history-and-cookery-book of Fritos, and finally I discuss the worldwide “Do us a Flavor” campaigns in the last five years. This contributes to the growing debate in food studies about brands, immaterial assets and the experience economy (Arvidsson, 2005; Lury, 2004; Ritzer, Dean, & Jurgenson, 2012).

#### *Convenience life span and all senses*

According to Elizabeth Shove, the crucial benefit of convenience food (and related devices like freezers or microwaves) is not only that it saves time, but also that it is possible to mobilize (gather/prepare/serve/eat) it at very short notice. “In allowing users to ‘store’ time, defer activity or manage and minimize interruption, tools of this kind enhance capacity for autonomous organization. The increasing significance of convenience appears to relate to a contemporary sense of always being short of time” (Shove, 2003, 172). Any consumer who opens a bag of chips (or crisps, as they are called in the United Kingdom) knows there is no time to lose for enjoying or sharing them. The convenience life span of chips is limited: it is the shelf or storage life, including transport in cardboard boxes after being sealed in the factory (Theibert, 2013, 57), and a very limited time once outside the bag. The content has to be consumed quickly, not because of the taste but because of the crunchiness or crispness. This requires a sensory vocabulary referring to texture and sound, next to appearance, odor and taste (Dijksterhuis, Luyten, de Wijk, & Mojet, 2007). That it also is a question of sound, was emphasized by the British “historian of the immediate future” (Whiteley, 2003), Peter Reyner Banham: “It’s a food that vanishes in the mouth, so, I mean, it can’t be fattening, can it? It certainly isn’t satisfying in any normal food sense; the satisfactions of crisps, over and above the sting of flavour, are audio-masticatory—lots of response for little substance. The pack is analogous in its performance. Keeping the crisp means keeping water-vapour away from it; and until recently the only cheap, paper-tape flexible materials that formed effective vapour-barriers were comparatively brittle and inflexible, and thus produced a lot of crinkling sound effects whenever they were handled” (Banham, 1970).

Not only differentiation but also the stabilization of these characteristics, like flavor or taste, was crucial to make the chips product into a convenience food for mass consumption. One of the reasons why Barnham’s 1970 essay has become a classic is because he pointed at an emerging trend that would proliferate in the next decades: “The potato crisp is at the crossroads, and to judge by the sundry aromas arising from the secret kitchens of R-and-D departments, the industry can’t guess which way it will go. Whoever guesses right could make a real killing.” In the 21st century, the general public is actively mobilized – nation after nation – to make a widely supported guess in so-called “Do Us a Flavor” campaigns of co-creation, via websites, television and social media. This blending of marketing and research and development is a symptom of shifts in thinking about market mechanisms, brands and the relation between companies, families and consumers (Prahald & Ramaswamy, 2004). Ritzer (et al., 2012), well-known for his work on McDonaldisation, has more recently embraced and elaborated Alvin Toffler’s concept of prosumption (the combination of production and consumption). The concept of prosumers is useful to understand recent online-developments, like the co-creation campaigns for chips flavors. New and old, mass and social media facilitate and heavily influence these processes. Unlike prosumption, co-creation is a buzzword in many strands of life, challenging

monopolies of experts. In the field of constructing stories and resources with sources from the past, next to the academic field and classic museum, public history and the heritage field are also involved (Frisch, 2011).

#### *Black boxing chips*

In order to create the convenience life span of chips (and other products), several forms of technology have to be combined. Not only the bag of chips can be considered as a black box, but also the chips themselves during their convenience food life span. In *Science in Action*, Latour (1987) appropriated the black box concept from cyberneticians to refer to devices that are able to concentrate many stories, processes and forces that function in long chains of human and non-human interactions and come in a form on which extra networks can be inscribed. They can be used to exert power at a distance, stimulating accumulation cycles of consumption and profits. Latour (1987, p. 223) explained that this kind of effect is realized by inventing means that render them mobile and keep them stable so that they can be moved back and forth without additional distortion, corruption or decay, and are combinable. So that whatever stuff they are made of, they can be cumulated, transported and aggregated. Or, in this case, put together in carton boxes, on a shelf or in a display in a convenience store, combined with other bags.

In the early 20th century, chips were locally produced and, if not consumed in a café or restaurant, sold in paper bags from large bins in the grocery stores. Laura Clough Scudder (1887–1959) pioneered the packaging of potato chips in iron waxed-paper sealed bags (Burhans 2008, p. 31). Scudder put a paratext on the bags to freshness date their food products: Laura Scudder’s Potato Chips, the Noisiest Chips in the World ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EYzbv8fDaAo<bstc\\_17></bstc\\_17>](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EYzbv8fDaAo<bstc_17></bstc_17>)). In the United Kingdom, since the 1920s, Smiths added a twist of salt in a small bag. In 1947, William Alexander named his crisps after the Golden Wonder potato, from Scotland. In the next decade his Golden Wonder scored with ready-salted crisps. In the 1950s, several inventions added seasoning during the manufacturing process, e.g. by Joe Murphy in the Irish company Tayto that succeeded in adding additives to the surface of the product, suggesting a Cheese & Onion or Salt & Vinegar taste (Theibert, 2013, p. 49). In 1963, the introduction of Golden Wonder Crisps came with the launch of cellophane film bags that increased the shelf, and hence, convenience life span with six weeks. In the United Kingdom, in full economic crisis, the crisps consumption increased by 25 percent between 1975 and 1982, and even more spectacular was the relative growth of savory snacks that were almost unknown a decade earlier. In 1981 the Smiths Food Group spent at least as much on advertising and marketing than on factory wages in the UK. It was new technology, that eventually would be empowered by kind of chips, that heavily influenced the world of flakes and crisps: computers. In the 1980s, Kellogg’s and Nabisco both took a similar device, the Ishida computer-weigher, that reinforced the weighing and packing line, increased output and reduced waste (Leach & Shutt, 1985).

The packaging of food is no longer only a question of protecting or conserving the product or controlling the portion. Nowadays, as Velasco, Salgado-Montejo, Marmolejo-Ramos, and Spence (2014) emphasize, packaging is seen by scholars as a powerful marketing tool, to more effectively capture the attention of the consumer and communicate through the look, feel and sound. This impacts the expectation and even experience of a product: where does the convenience food (experience) stop and the packaging begin?

#### *Paratext and parafood*

There is an almost six centuries old field of mass produced, stable consumer items that can travel long and far: printed books. One of

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