



Reframing convenience food



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 July 2015

Received in revised form

10 November 2015

Accepted 28 November 2015

Available online 8 December 2015

Keywords:

Convenience food

Ready meals

Health

Sustainability

Theories of practice

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a critical review of recent research on the consumption of ‘convenience’ food, highlighting the contested nature of the term and exploring its implications for public health and environmental sustainability. It distinguishes between convenience food in general and particular types of convenience food, such as ready-meals, tracing the structure and growth of the market for such foods with a particular emphasis on the UK which currently has the highest rate of ready-meal consumption in Europe. Having established the definitional complexities of the term, the paper presents the evidence from a systematic review of the literature, highlighting the significance of convenience food in time-saving and time-shifting, the importance of recent changes in domestic labour and family life, and the way the consumption of convenience food is frequently moralized. The paper shows how current debates about convenience food are part of a longer discursive history about food, health and nutrition. It discusses current levels of public understanding about the links between convenience food, environmental sustainability and food waste. The paper concludes by making a case for understanding the consumption of convenience food in terms of everyday social practices, emphasising its habitual and routine character.

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1. Introduction

In a recent paper in this journal, Scholliers (2015) traces academic interest in ‘convenience foods’ back to the 1920s, with a rapid upsurge in references to the concept in the 1970s and a ‘stormy increase’ after the year 2000.¹ He cites an early definition of the term from the UK Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which proposed that convenience foods are ‘products of the food industries in which the degree of culinary preparation has been carried out to an advanced stage and which are purchased as labour-saving versions of less highly processed products’ (MAFF 1959, quoted in Scholliers, 2015: 3). Noting the diversity of meanings that attach to the concept, encompassing convenience shopping, storing, cooking, eating and cleaning up, Scholliers highlights the need for conceptual common ground, also noting how changing definitions of convenience foods mirror the historical period of their use.

This paper builds on Scholliers’ analysis of academic citations

providing a critical review of recent work on convenience food, focusing primarily on English-language sources since 2000. It highlights the definitional complexities of convenience food and proposes a reframing of the concept within an empirically-grounded understanding of everyday consumer practices.

Though definitions are multiple and contested, ‘convenience foods’ encompass a wide variety of processed and semi-processed food, frequently contrasted with ‘fresh’ foods using raw ingredients, cooked from scratch.² Convenience foods are often regarded as among the least healthy and most unsustainable of dietary options in terms of their low nutritional value, wasteful packaging and heavy reliance on imported ingredients. For example, a study published in the *British Medical Journal* found that none of the 100 supermarket ready-meals it tested fully complied with WHO dietary guidelines (Howard, Adams, & White, 2012), while another study described the composition of ready-meals as ‘nutritionally chaotic’ (University of Glasgow, 2012). Meanwhile, the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs’ Green Food Project concluded that convenience foods such as supermarket ready-meals typically include resource-intensive ingredients,

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¹ Yale and Venkatesh (1986) suggest that the earliest reference to convenience food was in a paper by Copeland (1923) which made the distinction between convenience, shopping and speciality goods.

² On the nature of freshness as a complex and contested categorization of food, see Freidberg (2009) ‘perishable history’.

responsible for high greenhouse gas emissions, consuming large volumes of energy, land and water, and with high transportation costs (Defra, 2012a), while a study of food waste by the Waste and Resources Action Programme found that ready-meals were one of the most frequently wasted foods by UK households (WRAP 2007).

The paper is part of a project on Food, Convenience and Sustainability (FOCAS), funded via the ERA-Net sustainable food programme (SUSFOOD).³ The FOCAS project aims to understand how 'convenience' food is defined by consumers and how its use relates to consumer understandings of healthy eating and environmental sustainability; with what specific practices (shopping, cooking, eating, disposing) 'convenience' foods are associated; how such foods are incorporated within different household contexts and domestic routines; and to what extent current consumption practices may be subject to change (towards more sustainable and healthier practices). The UK component of the research, including the current literature review, is funded by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and focuses on the health and sustainability of supermarket ready-meals. It will be followed by ethnographic research at the household level with consumers in the UK and Germany (the European countries with the highest consumption of ready-meals) funded by Defra and the German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL).

1.1. A chaotic conception

'Convenience food' is a highly contested category, subject to multiple interpretations and different uses (Halkier, 2013: 119). For example, Szabo (2011: 562) uses the concept to refer to fast foods, snack foods and packaged/canned/frozen/pre-prepared foods as well as to the idea of convenience in provisioning foods that do not require direct involvement from the consumer in the work of growing/raising/harvesting it. The breadth of convenience food as a category is underlined by Halkier (2014) who includes fresh fruit cut in cubes, grilled sausages from the petrol station, organic Indian carrot soup and trans-fat fried chicken drumsticks from the supermarket freezer. As these comments suggest, 'convenience' is a problematic term when applied to food, with multiple and unstable meanings (Jackson 2013), described by Bava et al. as 'a complex and multi-dimensional construct' (2008: 486).⁴ Even within a specific domain such as food marketing and retailing, 'convenience food' is a very broad category encompassing processed foods, manufactured for mass consumption, including frozen, chilled, dried and canned goods; confectionery, snacks and beverages; processed meat, pasta and cheese; take-away food and ready-meals.

Definitional issues persist even when a more restricted category of convenience food such as 'ready-meals' is considered. For example, Howard et al. (2012: 2) define ready-meals as those that are designed to be eaten hot and not for special occasions or for breakfast. They excluded soups but included supermarkets' own-brand meals, bought within the container to be used for cooking the product and with a preparation time of 15 min or less, and with a recommended serving size of at least 225 g. Alternatively, market research company AC Nielsen (2006) define ready-to-eat meals as frozen or fresh, hot or cold, fully prepared and purchased in-store to be eaten elsewhere, excluding canned, take-away and fast food.

Comparative research on the meaning of 'convenience food' in different European contexts helps shed light on the term's social and cultural complexity. In Danish, for example, the English term

'convenience food' translates to either *sammensat fødevarer* (compound foodstuff) or *convenience mad* (convenience food) while other relevant Danish culinary categories include *færdigmat* (ready-made food), *hurtigmat* (fast food), *nem mad* (easy food), *halvfabrikat* (processed food) and *tage-med-mad* ('to go' food). In Swedish, the English term translates as *lättagad mat*, *snabbmat*, *bekvämmat* or *färdigmat* (respectively, easily-made food, fast food, comfortable food or ready-made food), while in German, the most common comparable terms include *Fertig-Gericht* (ready/instant-meal), *Schnell-Gericht* (fast-meal), *Fertig-Essen* (ready food) and *Fertig-Fraß* (ready-grub).⁵

It is also important to note that convenience foods do not stand alone as a separate category in terms of everyday consumption being frequently combined with other kinds of food, ranging from 'low-convenience-products', such as frozen spinach that requires additional labour and further ingredients, to 'high-convenience-products' (Ernährungsnetzwerk, 2011) such as ready-made pasta sauce to which fresh ingredients may be added or frozen pizza, enhanced with additional toppings. Further complexity derives from the frequent polarisation of 'traditional' foods, based on raw ingredients cooked from scratch, and the consumption of ready-meals, fast food and other types of 'convenient' food – a distinction which Grinnell Wright et al. describe as 'not necessarily helpful' (2013: 22). Marshall and Bell (2003: 62) insist that convenience and home-made foods are part of a continuum, not two separate categories, distinguished by context not content, while Warde adopts a similar argument suggesting that convenience food is 'not just a set of properties of food items but ... a matter of social context' (1999: 519). In a seminal paper, Grunert (2003) acknowledges that 'convenience' is not a clearly defined concept but usually involves making something easier, saving time or mental effort at various phases of meal preparation including planning, preparation, eating and cleaning up afterwards (see also Scholderer & Grunert, 2005; Jaeger & Meiselman, 2004). Grunert further suggests that convenience foods may be a substitute for meals taken inside or outside the home, with movement possible in both directions (when consumers use convenience food as a cheaper substitute for a restaurant meal or when their experience of restaurant eating affects their choice of particular kinds of convenience food).

Convenience food is, then, an example of what Andrew Sayer (1992: 138) calls a 'chaotic conception' which arbitrarily divides the indivisible and/or lumps together the unrelated and the inessential. As Sayer argues, such concepts are relatively unproblematic in everyday usage and when used in scientific discourse for descriptive purposes, but they become problematic when explanatory weight is placed upon them. Given this definitional complexity, the remaining analysis distinguishes between convenience food as a general category and specific types of convenience food such as ready-meals, though this distinction is not always clearly made in the literature or in consumers' everyday lives. For example, Olsen, Prebensen, and Larsen (2009: 766) perpetuate exactly the kind of categorical confusion that Sayer laments by defining convenience as 'food products bought and consumed with the objective of saving time and effort ("ready meals")' while Costa et al. suggest that 'convenience determines ... when, where, what, how and even with whom we eat' (2007: 77, emphasis added) suggesting that 'convenience' can bear more explanatory weight than such a chaotic conception merits.

³ Further information about the FOCAS project is available at: <http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/focas>.

⁴ The multidimensionality of the term was also recognised by Yale and Venkatesh (1986).

⁵ Thanks to our ERA-Net colleagues for these insights.

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