



Research report

Convenience foods. What, why, and when

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ABSTRACT

An attempt is made to assess the academic interest in convenience foods in the past decades in order to introduce this special section on historical dimensions of convenience foods, prepared by FOST, a unit that investigates the history and culture of food (up to today). First, the rise of academic interest is trailed since the appearance of the concept in the 1920s and, next, themes in connection to this interest are considered (e.g., time, health, or gender). Then, definitions of convenience foods are tracked since the 1950s, which leads to suggesting a clear focus (linking convenience foods to home cooking of meals and industrially produced foods). The conclusion stresses the changing definition of the concept, as well as the need to gain historical insight in present-day issues related to convenience foods.

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Seizing the emergence of a new phenomenon

With its variety of all sorts of references appearing in several media, *Google Scholar* (scholar.google.com) provides a fair survey of the chronology of attention to 'convenience foods' in past decades. 'Convenience foods', rather than 'ready meal(s)' or 'convenience food', appears to be the pertinent word combination to conduct this search. With only 79 hits ('anywhere in the article') of the word combination 'convenience foods' prior to 1960, it rose to 513 mentions between 1961 and 1970, to 1610 in the 1970s, to 1940 in the 1980s, 2780 in the 1990s and to a startling 7140 in the 2000s (retrieved on 29 January 2015). From 2011 to 2014, this search tool yields another 5350 hits. The total number of mentions amounts to about 19,000 between 1920 and 2014. The availability of journals, reports and other media via databases like JSTOR (www.jstor.com), ensure reliable coverage throughout the whole period, although it is obvious that with the expansion of the number of journals and other media a growth was to be expected. What may seem surprising is the fact that 'convenience foods' was used prior to 1960 (e.g., [Dipman, 1942](#)), and that the growth was highest in recent years (about 7 per cent per year in the 2000s and 2010s, as against growth rates of about 4 per cent prior to 2000). To assess the progress of this scholarly attention in detail, a graph that shows the annual evolution of the frequency of 'convenience foods' in *Google Scholar* from 1920 to 2013 was plotted, thus marking the annual changes ([Fig. 1](#)). A very slow increase up to the mid-1960s is followed by a first but modest jump around 1970, the tottering rise throughout the 1970s and 1980s,

the doubling of references in the 1990s, and the stormy increase after the year 2000. So far I have no explanation for the 2011 peak. Comparing these numbers to *Google Scholar's* complete database per year, it appears that 'convenience foods' attracted more attention in the 1970s and 2000s (0.025 and 0.023 per cent respectively) than in the 1980s and 1990s (0.016 and 0.014 per cent respectively). Between 2010 and 2014, this proportion reached 0.044 per cent, or almost a doubling with regard to the 2000s.

Of course, references are limited to the English language (although 'convenience foods' is increasingly adopted in other languages), they lack data, and they comprise very diverse genres. And yet, precisely this mix may well mirror the degree of attention to 'convenience foods' within the scientific world. *Appetite* confirms the stunning development in the last decade: 'convenience foods' appears 469 times since the journal's beginning in 1980, with a modest presence in the 1990s and a sweeping breakthrough in the 2000s (more specifically, 2003) and certainly the 2010s (3 mentions per year in the 1990s, 18 in the 2000s, but 54 in the 2010s, which exceeds the growth rate of articles published in the journal).

The academic interest concurs with the growth of all kinds of convenience foods in the *real* world of producers and consumers. The latter appears by considering, for example, purchases of all sorts of meat in the UK from 1974 to 2011, which includes a category of 'ready meals and convenience meat products' ([BBC, 2013](#)). The sum an average household spends on meat has hardly changed over the past decades (allowing for price inflation), but the type of meat has radically altered. In terms of weekly consumption per household, ready meals and convenience meats (lasagne, kebab, kiev et cetera) held position five in 1974 (25 g) and moved to position two in 2011 (150 g). Consumption of all other types of meat, except uncooked

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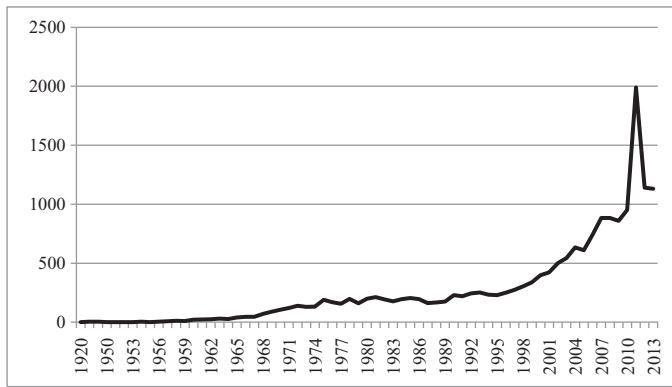


Fig. 1. Yearly number of references to 'Convenience foods' in Google Scholar, 1920–2013 (retrieved 10 July 2014).

chicken (185 g, position one in 2011), declined. Convenience meats especially broke through during the 1990s, followed by a slower rise in the 2000s. A fairly similar picture emerges in other countries (e.g., Winandy, De Fays, Lebailly, Palm, & Claustriax, 2013), although circumstances and motives for turning to convenience foods may differ. A large number of causes may indeed be listed to explain the growing trend of convenience foods in various countries, including the changing household structure, female participation in the labour force, inventive manufacturers, appealing advertisement, ownership of kitchen technology, individualism, time usage, reticence, or (lack of) cooking skills (Brunner, von der Horst, & Siegrist, 2010; Buckley, Cowan, & McCarthy, 2007; Sheely, 2008; Verriet, 2013). These 'drivers' reveal some of the themes of academic writing in past decades.

Shifting scholarly interests

I divided the interest in convenience foods appearing via *Google Scholar* into six uneven periods: 1920–60; 1961–80; 1981–90; 1991–00; 2001–10; and 2011–14, and combined 'convenience foods' with 15 keywords (see below) that I ordered in four groups (Production; Choices; Health; and Household) (Table 1). I disregard words and word combinations like 'Snack[ing]', 'Street Foods', 'Fast Food', 'Trust' or 'Diet' to avoid too many categories and limitless return. The uneven periods (decades in recent times, but longer periods prior to 1980) do not matter because I consider proportions in each period.

'Production' includes 'Manufacturing', 'Retailing', 'Technology', and 'Advertisements'. With 34 per cent in the first period (1920–60) this category was the largest, thus asserting the novelty of this type of food (e.g. Bivens, 1969). Its share, however, declined steadily to attain 22.6 per cent in the last period (2011–2014). 'Manufacturing' diminished from 13 per cent prior to 1960 to 8 in

the 2010s. Pure economic analyses (considering sales, profit rate, assortment, business organisation) are rarely done, unless one company is studied (e.g., Love, 1995). Recently, a new interest emerged: waste reduction (e.g., Darlington, Staikos, & Rahimifard, 2009), but it is marginal up to now. Both 'Advertisements' and 'Retailing' fell by a couple of points, which may reflect the changing expectations or observations of researchers with regard to the role of marketing in connection to convenience foods. 'Technology' remained fairly stable (around 6.5 per cent), with significant presence of domestic device (particularly microwave ovens, but also bread machines, freezers or ice cream makers).

The second group, 'Choices', came immediately after 'Production' in the first period, but gained weight in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. In the 1990s and 2000s, the share dropped to the pre-1960 level. This category includes 'Time', 'Food quality', 'Preference', and 'Cooking [skills]'. In the 1960, 1970s and 1980s time in relation to convenience foods attracted wide attention (13 per cent in 1961–80 and 12 per cent in 1981–90) (e.g., Richardson, 1985), but since 1990 this attention declined somewhat. Initially, the relation between (married) working women, time for cooking and the use of convenience foods was investigated frequently, but since the mid-1990s 'attitudinal measures' became popular in explaining the success of convenience foods, which included (alongside use and control of time) cooking skills, status, and variety seeking (Brunner et al., 2010). The item 'preferences' grew moderately (3.2 per cent prior to 1960 to 4.1 in the 1990s and 5.5 in the 2010s). 'Quality' attracted more attention in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s than in the previous and later periods, but managed to keep about 8 per cent of the total number of hits throughout the whole period. 'Quality' includes the image of convenience foods, and particularly inhibitions regarding these foods, which seem to have caused lots of worries up to 1990 (e.g., Charles & Kerr, 1988, p. 124). 'Quality' also covers issues of food safety, which became more prominent since the 1990s.

The third theme, 'Household', took about one fourth of the total items in the first period, and managed to slightly increase this up to 2014. Items included here are 'Children', 'Women', 'Purchasing power', 'Expenditures', and 'Household' proper (e.g. Kim, 1989). 'Expenditures' and especially 'Purchasing power' appear very modestly (the latter never exceeded 1 per cent, the former fluctuated around 5 per cent throughout the whole period), thus showing that income did not attract much attention when searching to explain the growth of convenience foods. 'Children' at first got little attention, but this item rose steadily up to now (from 3.6 to 7.3 per cent). 'Women', surprisingly, only got more attention since the 1990s (4 per cent up to 1990, and 6 per cent since then), addressing in particular gender issues related to meal preparation.

The fourth theme considers 'Health', which includes 'Obesity' and 'Health' proper. The weight of this group grew continuously, which was primarily caused by the attention to obesity and related diseases (particularly cardiovascular disorders) since the year 2000: less than 2 per cent of the total hits prior to 2000, but 4 per cent in the 2000s and 5.7 in the 2010s (e.g. Alkerwi, Crichton, & Hébert, 2015; Dixon, Hinde, & Banwell, 2006). The share of 'Health' would probably have gone up if I had included keywords such as *Clostridium botulinum*.

This exploration of themes in relation to 'convenience foods' shows the very broad range of interests during past decades, together with some of the shifts of attention. Most likely I did not catch all nuances of these shifts, but I expect that the most important ones have been detected.

Convenience?

My search for 'convenience foods' and associated themes ignored the very diverse contents of this notion. This is linked to the fact

Table 1
Four main themes of attention related to 'convenience foods', in per cent, according to *Scholar Google*, 1920–2014 (retrieved 11 July 2014).

	Production	Health	Household	Choices
1920–1960	34.3	7.2	24.6	33.8
1961–1980	26.3	7.9	26.0	39.8
1981–1990	25.1	8.6	27.3	38.9
1991–2000	27.2	10.1	27.0	35.6
2001–2010	24.9	12.7	28.2	34.2
2011–2014	22.6	14.6	27.8	34.9
Key words:	<i>Manufacturing</i>	<i>Health</i>	<i>Children</i>	<i>Preferences</i>
	<i>Technology</i>	<i>Obesity</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Time</i>
	<i>Retailing</i>		<i>Household</i>	<i>Skills</i>
	<i>Advertisements</i>		<i>Purchasing power</i>	<i>Quality</i>
			<i>Expenditures</i>	

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