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Research report

Convenience foods, as portrayed by a consumer organisation. *Test-Aankoop/Test-Achats* (1960–1995)

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ABSTRACT

Food choice, both today and in the past, is driven by a broad range of interacting factors, in which culture is centrally placed. This paper will assess convenience foods by means of a qualitative analysis of comparative product tests done by Belgium's largest consumer organisation *Test-Aankoop/Test-Achats*, and will focus on the influence of socially and culturally normative values between the years 1960 and 1995. The tests provide a unique insight into attitudes to convenience foods within an organisation that saw its role in Belgian consumer society as being both educator and guide. The organisation's views on health, food safety, modernity, tradition, control over ingredients and content, gender roles and taste shaped its attitude to the role and meaning of what food is supposed to be. The organisation thereby both guided and re-affirmed normative values with respect to convenience foods. Values, which are culturally constructed, have always played a key role in the acceptability of products. Cultural and social inhibitions and fears over control of convenience foods, which persist today, were central in the consumer organisation's representation of convenience food.

Introduction

The empirical study of food choice has seen an upsurge since the end of the twentieth century, proliferating even more during the last decade. A seemingly simple question applies to many different factors of a central idea: "why do people eat what they eat, when and where they eat it?" (Köster, 2009). In Western countries food has become abundant and choice wide, and the average person make something like 200 food decisions every day (Schwartz, 2004; Wansink, 2006). Knowing which products will sell and which will not is crucial information from an academic, nutritional, political, marketing and economical perspective.

Different disciplines and sub-disciplines have contributed to better understanding of the complex interactions in the broad spectrum of the variables in food choice. Amongst other things, the following areas of study have all attempted to understand what drives food choice: biology and physiology such as the study of genetic factors, gender, or sensory mechanisms; knowledge of psychology and behavioural sciences such as the study of learning and expectations, stimulation, personality traits, sensory interactions and situational aspects; economics – for example the availability of food, benefits and budget; elements of sociology such as cultural effects, social status and role, time constraints and education; marketing and communication studies like advertising, consumer attitudes and beliefs; food science including sensory attributes, food chemistry and nutritional value. (Connors, Bisogni, Sobal, & Devine, 2001; De Boer, McCarthy, Cowan, & Ryan, 2004; Köster, 2009; Luomala, Laaksonen, & Leipämaa, 2004). A wide array of theoretical tools and methodologies have been developed to understand food choice, ranging from studying the interaction of various choice factors such as the food choice questionnaire (Eertmans, Victoir, Notelaers, Vansant, & Van den Bergh, 2006; Januszewska, Pieniak, & Verbeke, 2011) to a focus on the effect of very specific variables and laboratory controlled situational aspects, for example whether a product is given to a test participant or was taken from a bowl (Hadi & Block, 2014).

Some authors have alluded to the many difficulties of bridging the gap between the different disciplinary biases, methods, findings and the actual food choice of individual consumers (Köster, 2003, 2009; Mela, 1999). On the other hand, others have built on the idea that consumers tend to use simple heuristics to reduce the complexity of the choices they have to make. Consumers tend to scale down their range for selection by prioritising a few crucial pieces of information to create shortcuts that will guide the process of choosing (Brunner, van der Horst, & Siegrist, 2010; Gigerenzer et al., 1999; Green, Draper, & Dowler, 2003; Scheibehenne, Miesler, & Todd, 2007; Schulte-Mecklenbeck, Sohn, De Bellis, Martin, & Hertwig, 2013). Although it is obvious that different individuals use different heuristics (Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011; Schulte-Mecklenbeck et al., 2013), attempts can be made to understand how different values drive food selection (Botonaki & Mattas, 2010). The research presented here builds on the idea that these simple heuristics

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and more general food choices are influenced by social and culturally appropriated values that are believed to influence attitudes towards food and therefore its selection; and more specifically with reference to convenience food products. Individuals learn by socialisation and acculturation what foodstuffs and meals are supposed to mean and what they should consist of. Food choice is therefore seen as being a combination of biological, individual, contextual and normative social factors which guide the cognitive and motivational factors in food selection (Botonaki & Mattas, 2010; Dreezens, Martijn, Tenbült, Kok, & Vries, 2005; Furst, Connors, Bisogni, Sobal, & Falk, 1996; Mahon, Cowan, & McCarthy, 2006; Rozin, 1998; Sobal, Bisogni, Devine, & Jastran, 2006).

Means-end approach is a conceptual term that needs to be written means-end approach (Gutman, 1982; Gutman & Reynolds, 1978; Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). According to their view product attributes have little or no importance to a consumer, but should be understood with reference to the consequences they are perceived to bring with them. The reasons for the purchase or rejection of a product are determined by personal goals, the relevance of the product and the customer's attitude to it. The focus must therefore be on the consequences for individuals of a product's attributes: how they solve or perhaps avoid specific problems to reach goals relevant to them as consumers. By looking more deeply into reasons why consumers prefer specific products and what their goals actually are, we can understand the deeper values that guide the process of their choice. Values, consequences and goals are seen as determining product choice – in this case food, of course (Grunert, Beckmann, & Sørensen, 2001; Olson & Reynolds, 2001; Orsingher, 2011).

The relevance of focussing on values and attitudes becomes even clearer when we look at convenience foods. The primary goal of convenience food products is to make it quicker and easier for the consumer to prepare a meal. Despite what is often assumed, a reduction in the time available is not the only relevant factor determining whether or not convenience products are bought. Research that was done between 1960 and 1995 indicated that when women had less time to prepare family meals, due to more and more of them joining the labour force, this was not directly linked to an increase in the usage of convenience foods (Reilly, 1982). Many authors have found that the attitudes of consumers to convenience commodities are what most reliably indicate their preferences in convenience foods (Botonaki & Mattas, 2010; Brunner et al., 2010; Buckley et al. 2007; Candel, 2001; Furst et al., 1996; Miura & Turrell, 2014).

Convenience foods are often linked to negative side-effects including health dangers such as high levels of salt and fat which can lead to obesity and reduce quality of life, to say nothing of the fact that they are often seen to have a detrimental effect on commensality, and to lead to loss of culinary skills and poor taste in food. Convenience food tends to be associated with lower socio-economic status and through its connection with processed foods and industrialisation, with pollution too (Dunn et al. 2008; Szabo, 2011). As Alan Warde noted: "the idea of convenience foods is tinged with moral disapprobation" (Warde, 1999, p. 518). Some authors and social thinkers have suggested the idea that in westernised societies a re-connection with 'real' food has become necessary, and that it can be seen for example in the success of the slow food movement (Jaffe & Gertler, 2006; Pollan, 2008; Szabo, 2011; Van Otterloo, 2005).

Such attitudes and perceptions are based on historically grown and still-existing cultural frameworks. Research based on food advertisements from the post-war era found that clear cultural inhibitions towards convenience foods certainly existed. A truly loving and caring housewife was seen as being reluctant to serve up industrially produced products like ready-made meals to her family. Such things were perceived to be unhealthy, even improper (Verriet, 2013; Warde, 1997). Suggestions have been made that those findings can be linked to broader cultural perceptions in the post-war western world (Verriet, 2013).

Source and methodology

This paper is a study of the product comparison tests published in the magazine of Belgium's largest consumer organisation *Test-Aankoop/Test-Achats* (TA) from 1960 to 1995.[1] TA began as a small organisation in 1957 but grew rapidly and by 1969 it had 100,000 members and roughly 300,000 during the late 1970s, when numbers stabilised, although in the middle of the 1980s they dropped to 200,000 during a few years. In 1959 the organisation began publishing a bimonthly magazine (*Test Aankoop: magazine/Test Achats: magazine* [TAM]), of which Dutch and French editions were distributed from 1960 onwards. Finally, as a result of its success publication increased to eleven editions per year from 1963. Membership fees for the organisation included receipt of the magazine, so it seems reasonable to surmise that more people read the magazine than were members of the organisation, especially considering that most families probably purchased only one copy. TA saw itself as having a role as an educator, providing information for its members, and as the spokesperson for consumers. It tried to adopt a neutral stance in political matters and kept its direct political actions limited, although its high social resonance in Belgium is clear from the large number of members. TA could maintain its elevated status because its income came almost solely from membership fees, and sale of its magazine and books. The organisation resolutely refused to publish advertisements in its publications for any products, so it could uphold its air of neutrality (Hilton, 2009; Poelmans, 1978; Thorelli & Thorelli, 1974; Van Ryckeghem, 2005). As a founding member of the European Consumer Organisation (*Bureau Européen des Unions de Consommateurs*: BEUC) and the *International Office of Consumers Unions* (IOCU, later *Consumers International*) during the 1960s, TA played a central role in international collaboration amongst consumer organisations, both in Europe and globally, and regularly collaborated with other European consumer organisations to carry out product comparison tests. To begin with, partnerships were formed with Dutch and German consumer organisations, until during the 1970s their efforts had grown into a Europe-wide organisation, the *European Testing Group*, later renamed *International Consumer Research and Testing* (ICRT). TA also supported new consumer organisations in Asia (e.g. India and Singapore), as well as in Southern Europe during the 1970s and 1980s. In 1990 TA founded *Euroconsumers*, a multi-national collaboration of consumer organisations in Belgium, Italy, Portugal and Spain that by 1993 represented 900,000 members, of whom 320,000 were Belgian. It was therefore one of the largest consumer organisation networks in the world (Brobeck, Mayer, & Herrmann, 1997; Van Ryckeghem, 2005).

A survey done by TA in 1970 shows that its average Belgian member was a 37-year old white-collar middle class or lower middle class man with two children. He lived in a suburban house and was married to a stay-at-home mother. He drove a car and owned a premium-brand television, a dishwasher and a washing machine (TAM 1970, 102). TA – and in a sense this is true of all other post-war European consumer organisations – is a striking example of the duality between tradition and modernity. Without the specific changes in production, processing and distribution and more broadly in society, the role of TA as guide and mediator to the consumer could not have existed. TA's goal was to help consumers make sense

[1] Full name: Association Des Consommateurs Test Achats – Verbruikers Unie Test Aankoop. All references to articles in the magazine are in the form of: TAM (Test Aankoop: magazine/Test achats: magazine) year, issue. All translations are by the author.