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Convenience on the menu? A typological conceptualization of family food expenditures and food-related time patterns



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ABSTRACT

One of the most fundamental, but also controversial, food trends of the past years is convenience food. This article investigates the underexplored relationship between the heterogeneity in (convenience) food consumption (a feature of a food culture's *cuisine*) and meal patterns (characteristics of a food culture's *structure*). This study hopes to illustrate that convenience food can be interpreted both as a means to maintain a food culture's *structure* and as a means to overturn it. Latent Class Cluster Analysis is performed using data from the HBS 2005 survey on families' food expenditures to conceptualize convenience-orientation and to examine the relationships with families' meal behaviors. Whereas outsourcing cooking is most prevalent among single-person households; two- or more-person households are most likely to buy unprocessed and natural foods and to spend most time cooking and eating in. A higher consumption of convenience food is also more likely to affect individuals' kitchen than table habits.

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1. Introduction

This paper focuses on one of the most important food questions and controversies that mark today's foodways: to which extent convenience foods have become part of the food consumption patterns of families of different social groups, and to which extent they affect today's meal preparation and table habits. So far, there is still little quantitative research about both families' reliance on, or need for convenience, and their day-to-day kitchen and table habits. However, it is precisely the examination of this relationship, that will help to better understand the role of convenience food in a time where the seemingly simple question "what to eat" (Pollan, 2009) has become a fast-growing topic of concern, discussion and insecurity.

Historically, food insecurity is not new, but due to many – especially post-war – food trends, innovations, regulatory changes, social and cultural developments and many more, it has become an even more complicated and omnipresent issue in today's societies. The concerns about food and the ways that people think about food and use it in their daily lives, has never been so strong. One of the most significant changes that has brought this discussion about food to the table, was the way in which convenience food became a defining symbol of the commercialized and industrialized food supply and the ever-changing relationship between people, food and society (Scholliers, 2007, 2014).

By using convenience foods, many of the activities, tasks and culinary skills essential to food preparation are taken over by services and industries intended to make cooking less time and energy consuming, both physically and mentally (Darian and Cohen, 1995; Scholderer and Grunert, 2004). Today's availability of convenience food items goes far beyond the older existing canned products (already available since the early 19th century), varying from canned soups and sauces, cake mixes,

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deep-frozen pizzas, pre-cut vegetables to ready-to-(h)eat meals. Since a few decades, the consumption of convenience food has become more embedded in the way that most people cook, eat and live (Shove, 2003), that it is considered to be one of the largest and most fundamental food innovations in recent years (Brunner et al., 2010; Goody, 2013). The many discoveries, developments and innovations behind convenience food are some of the most crucial foundations on which today's food industry is built (Capps et al., 1985).

Today, convenience food has become such a self-evident part of daily life, that even non-users of convenience food hardly realize how their relationship to food became industrialized and commercialized, going from ground coffee to baked bread, breakfast cereals, margarine, sugar, cold cuts, yogurt, ice cream, and more. However, despite the fact that these commercial food products are generally ready-made (Burnett, 1989), they have become such a taken-for-granted part of individuals' cooking routines that they are no longer labeled as convenience food, but as natural and "fresh" ingredients (Short, 2003).

Despite of the fact that the basic principles of convenience food were already present for centuries (or at least in the supply of canned meat, vegetable and fish products), it was especially from the Second World War on that the food industry started to sell and depict convenience food as an indispensable kitchen ingredient, as a means to taste the comfort of modern life and to save work and time in the kitchen (Shapiro, 2004).

The last decades have, however, not only shown many changes in the supply of and demand for convenience food, but also a clear growth in the accessibility and consumption of away-from-home food products as "the pinnacle" of the commercialization of food (e.g. fast food, takeout or restaurant meals) (Scholliers, 2007) and in the design (e.g. kitchens that increasingly became built around appliances instead of the opposite (Van Otterloo, 2000)) and utensils used in the kitchen (e.g. microwave ovens, freezers, steamers, espresso machines, bread making machines, ...). What these trends seem to illustrate is that cooking not only seems to have become a household task more difficult to organize and schedule (regardless whether one finds it worth the time and effort or not), but also a less necessary task, no longer strictly dependent of the homemaker's efforts (a task which is still seen as a woman's responsibility).

According to Alan Warde (1999) and Elizabeth Shove (2003), convenience food has increased in importance due to people's enhanced needs for ease, efficiency, control, and to manage and spend their times (and lives) better. In just a few generations, we seem to have moved from a society in which people still worked for *bread and butter*, towards 'a leisure society' in which consumerism became a 'way of life' (Veblen, 1994 [1899]) and more and more people started to feel an ever greater time pressure than ever (Linder, 1970) in which "life has become a patternless checklist of having been there, done that" (Robinson and Godbey, 1997, 44). The many different activities that people nowadays need or want to combine, have become so complex, that people are increasingly looking for ways to save time, including into their home-kitchen. Given this, the increase in time-saving and convenient meal options may seem an obvious and successful evolution, while, in essence, it was, and still is, a somewhat complex, disapproved and contested trend (Algren et al., 2004; Shove, 2000; Warde, 1997).

Despite that convenience food is one of the most fundamental food innovations of the last decades, the story of convenience has been far from an *instant* success and has become subject of plenty of discussion and controversy. Its consumption was, and still is, hampered, by the many social and emotional components attached to food and cooking, as ways of showing care for others, to communicate love, to make others feel welcome, and to symbolize social relationships. According to Fernández-Armesto (2002, p. 250) "the companionship of the campfire, cooking-pot and common table, which have helped to bond humans in collaborative living, are in risk of being shattered" due to the growing trend towards commercially processed food. There are strong claims that food habits would be individualized, fragmented, more irregular and hurried, that meals would be no longer act as social *Zeitgebers*, or organize and give meaning to time (Zerubavel, 1985), that the "habitual" mealtimes would break down and that food would have evolved to a state of *gastro-anomy* or normlessness (Fischler, 1979). Home-cooked meals are believed to be increasingly replaced by time-saving meal alternatives and snacks, to enjoy less priority, to be more likely to be eaten outdoors, alone, and on the run (Pollan, 2013). And much, if not all of these problems, are ascribed to the rise of this "convenience revolution" in individuals food spending patterns (Burnett, 1989, 310).

Despite of the fact that both the production and consumption of convenience food are criticized for their possible destructive impacts on the environment, public transport and health (Kjaernes et al., 2007), the *grazing*-hypothesis is the main starting point of this article. This hypothesis assumes that people would increasingly eat in an incidental manner regardless of socio-cultural norms regarding food, time and context (Davis, 1995).

Although, it has already been shown that contemporary meal habits (both in Belgium, as in other European countries or in the USA) are still bound to collective and customary rhythms, routines and social norms (Mestdag, 2007; Warde et al., 2007), the studies that have *cooked* this grazing-thesis, only used information about the ways in which individuals' and families' meal habits are organized in time and space, without taking into account any information about their food intakes, purchases and demand for convenience.

However, it is only by examining these associations that consumers' food consumption choices, and their kitchen and table habits can be fully understood (Marshall, 2005). To examine to which extent convenience food influences household's cooking and eating habits, it is crucial to make the distinction between a food culture's *structure* and a food culture's *cuisine*.

Whereas a *cuisine* is more likely to refer to the food products, recipes, cooking methods and kitchen appliances that people use to prepare their meals; a food culture's *structure* is characterized by the way that people organize their meals into their daily life routines and habits (Rozin, 1982). The main difference between both food culture components, is that a *structure* is more steadfast and that a *cuisine* is, thus, more open to, for example, influences from foreign *cuisines* and more flexible to change towards a *food melting pot* (Askegaard and Madsen, 1998; Schrover et al., 2005). Perhaps this difference can

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