

# How convenient!?! Adolescents' vistas on food competences in a convenience context

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Adolescents are at a stage in their life course in which they increasingly become choosers, buyers and preparers of food. Hence, they develop and employ required competences. Current food-related competences of adolescents are shaped in an environment with an abundance of convenience foods. Simultaneously food education has been limited in many western countries. The purpose of this paper is to scrutinize how young practitioners engage with the notion of convenience in a context with a strong presence of convenience foods.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Empirical data for this paper have been collected in a Dutch high school context following a participatory approach in focus group discussions. Data have been gathered from different food-related exercises within a classroom context.

**Findings** – The findings indicate that adolescents' food competences and meanings are heavily shaped by the abundant presence of convenience foods. Adolescents perceive a nuanced picture of a skilful consumer that incorporates convenience foods in ways that minimize time efforts, preserves some preparatory tasks for fun cooking and has knowledge about health effects of fatty and salty foods.

**Originality/value** – The investigation takes a novel look on convenience food consumption from a practice perspective scrutinizing competences through the lens of adolescent practitioners. The authors make a plea for tapping into the potential of research on children and adolescents as novice performers of practices to understand how practices are shaped and changed and how practices recruit new practitioners.

**Keywords** Competences, Food consumption, Adolescents, Convenience foods, Social practices

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Food products, even unprocessed foods, may be considered more or less convenient. Through marketing efforts, processed food became highlighted as time-saving as well as tasty. Such processed convenience food was brought to consumers under the guise of comfort, alleviating time pressures and requiring minimal competences, while still being a pleasure to consume (Warde, 1999). The current food environment is demarcated by a vast array of processed food products that aim to save time, physical and mental effort in the planning, preparation and eating of food (Brunner *et al.*, 2010).

Although how to conceptualize to “eat right” is contradictorily debated (Halkier, 2013; Leipämaa-Leskinen, 2007), convenience food is central to many of the critical debates surrounding food consumption (Halkier, 2013; Kimura, 2010). Convenience food is understood as being a cause of health problems such as obesity



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(e.g. Guthman, 2011) and environmental problems. In related food politics, the consumer is often framed either as a scapegoat making irresponsible choices or as needing to be empowered in order to face the food industry (Lang and Heasman, 2004).

Such framing of consumers suggests that the food environment and consumers can be juxtaposed or separated. Such separation is misleading as consumption is shaped together with the food environment. In present day western societies, the food environment saturated with convenience food options shapes know-how, skills and competences of consumers (Caraher *et al.*, 1999). Convenience food often implies a shift in activities from the consumer to the food processing industry. Steps of food preparation are outsourced to companies providing ready-made dishes (Ahlgren *et al.*, 2005), with consumers becoming dependant on the food industry. Such dependencies are likely to expand when consumers will increasingly rely on convenience in their food choice and lose the ability to cook non-convenient foods along the way (Lang and Heasman, 2004). For a majority of consumers such skills have become outdated in the current food environment (Jaffe and Gertler, 2006), whereas consumers concurrently develop skills to employ convenient food options.

Recent developments demarcate a change in the way in which food competences are acquired, endorsing a deskilling of consumers in the preparation of food (Caraher *et al.*, 1999; Jaffe and Gertler, 2006; Simmons and Chapman, 2012). In tandem with the development of convenience foods, education for developing food-related competences, e.g. through home economics education, have been expunged from school curricula in many advanced capitalist societies such as the Netherlands. Alongside, the role children play in family food routines has changed, limiting possibilities to obtain food-related skills and know-how (Carrigan *et al.*, 2006). Consequently, adolescents are developing skills to process and eat convenience foods, but are becoming increasingly unable to prepare non-processed food (Benn, 2014; Braun and Becki, 2014; Caraher *et al.*, 2004; Casini *et al.*, 2015; Jaffe and Gertler, 2006; Lyon *et al.*, 2003). Thus, the current food environment shapes consumers' food literacy, or ability to apply knowledge of food on food choices (Benn, 2014; Närvänen *et al.*, 2013).

Convenience foods have to a great extent developed in combination with technological innovations, e.g. microwaves and freezers finding their way into households. However, changing household structures and lifestyles with, for example more women working outside the home, have added to the normalization of convenience food in contemporary advanced capitalist societies (Caraher *et al.*, 1999; Lyon and Kinney, 2013; Shove and Southerton, 2000; Warde, 1999). Shove (2003) describes how taken-for-granted conventions of normality in domestic practices are constantly re-defined, but typically remain geared towards comfort, cleanliness and convenience. The category of convenience foods seems well-suited to be employed to achieve such ends in domestic practices. It is thus unsurprising that convenience foods have conquered a central position in contemporary food practices (Halkier, 2013).

While convenience food has received scholarly attention, foremost in establishing understandings of its link to health deterioration (Jabs and Devine, 2006), identifying individual consumption motives (Brunner *et al.*, 2010; Veflen Olsen, 2012; Costa *et al.*, 2007) or segmentation studies and buyer behaviour (Ahlgren *et al.*, 2005; McCullough *et al.*, 2003; Shiu *et al.*, 2004), less attention is paid to the way in the abundance of convenience food shapes food competences especially in novice practitioners (e.g. Caraher *et al.*, 2004; Jaffe and Gertler, 2006; Ternier, 2010). According to Benn (2014), a vast amount of literature relating to competence development and food

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literacy is focussing on the level of nutrients and particular foodstuff. However, fewer research on literacy pays attention on the level of dishes and meals or the broader-level food cultures (Benn, 2014, pp. 16-17). The central aim of this paper is to shed light on how adolescents in the Netherlands engage with the notion of convenience in the context of a society in which convenience foods are abundantly available. We are particularly interested how convenience food cultures are interwoven with practices of eating. In the following parts, we present our theoretical point of departure of social practices. Thereafter, we elaborate on our methodological approach and the way we gathered the data for this paper. The findings highlight how ideas of convenience are discussed by Dutch adolescents in relation to convenience practices. We conclude by reflecting how our results implicate policy and education.

### **A practice approach on food competences**

In the sociology of consumption, the understanding of consumption as social practices has gained prominence during the last decade. Theories of social practices provide a way to analyse and understand everyday routine activity in social and cultural contexts (e.g. Warde, 2016; Wahlen, 2011). Practice approaches attempt to shift away from individualistic understandings of the consumer and associated notions of conspicuous and extraordinary consumption to the mundane, trivial and routine processes in everyday life (Reckwitz, 2012). Accordingly, Reckwitz (2002, p. 249) understands social practices as:

[...] a routinised type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, “things” and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge.

The unit of analysis is thus not the individual consumer, but social practices as nexus of different elements. Shove *et al.* (2012) emphasize the nexus of practices to consist of three elements: meaning, material and competence. Practices evolve in accordance with the development of its elements. Shove *et al.* (2012) put forward the importance of the linkages between the elements, as the way in which practices gain consistence across time and place. However, through focussing on such linkages they emphasize the dynamic character of practices. This analytical approach assists in finding answers on how adolescents engage with the notion of convenience shaping their food competences.

Competences refer to both explicit and tacit knowledge as well as enacted skills necessary to perform a practice. Food competences can consist of different aspects such as knowing, doing, sensing, wanting and caring (Benn, 2014). The bodily performance of practices comes across as habits and tastes that are acquired and can be of social as well as of sensory nature (Warde, 2016). Where some competences are explicitly learned, like in a teacher-pupil situation, other competences are learned by doing without directly noticing it, for example knowledge and know how that passes from generation to generation. Warde (2016, p. 132) supposes practices of eating to be learned in rather informal settings.

Moreover, Shove *et al.* (2012) mention that competences not only circulate between people, but also between practices. They provide the example of how in the nineteenth-century, competences transferred from the work environment to the household sphere. Certain techniques were appropriated to the household context in order to run the household as efficiently as one would manage work. Shove *et al.* (2012) emphasize the role of industry in this respect; they positioned the efficiency of

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new household appliances as crucial for the management of the household in order to promote sales. Industry and advertisement thereby influenced discourses associated with homework by framing women as “homemakers”. Indeed, food industries and advertisement take an active part in what is collectively understood as convenience.

In line with Shove *et al.* (2012), competences are shaped in interaction with a dynamic material environment and associated meanings. On the transmission of competences, Warde (2016) contents that meanings of practices are linked with shared understanding in particular food cultures. Alongside with new practices and competences, as Shove *et al.* (2012) describe, certain things fall out of use and subsequently associated know-how, once accounted as “common knowledge”, disappears. The diffusion of new technologies also shapes competences (Warde, 2016). Appliances have often been described as taking over certain competences from persons, but simultaneously consumers have to develop new competences for handling the new technology.

From a practice perspective, the proliferation of processed convenience foods can only be understood by looking at co-evolving materials, competences and meanings. Thus, while the introduction of convenience products has shaped consumers’ competences as well as meanings, the development of such competences in turn has made room for the introduction of more convenience foods. Accordingly, we are interested in the interplay of how emerging and developing food cultures in social practices are shaped by and in turn shape competencies in relation to convenience food.

### Methodology

In order to scrutinize adolescents’ engagement in convenience food practices, we draw upon a new sociological perspective on childhood (Christensen and Prout, 2002). As emancipatory and transformative approach, we included children as active participants in the research process. The idea is that children are considered social actors and should be involved, informed, consulted and heard in the research process. In this vein, children are co-producers of knowledge and the research process involves information sharing, dialogue and reflection (Mason and Hood, 2011). This line of thought is in accordance with what Corsaro (2012) has termed “interpretive reproduction”. “Interpretive” here refers to children’s ability to appropriate information from the adult world to use it within their own cultural context. “Reproduction” refers to the assumption that children do not merely internalize society and culture; they contribute to cultural production and change in their own way (Osowski *et al.*, 2012). This perspective suggests that children are always part of two interwoven cultures, the adult culture and their own peer culture; however these are not opposed to each other as some theorists on childhood suggest (Corsaro, 2012).

Following the new sociology of childhood perspective, we conducted focus group discussions with children. Thus, the data for this research stem from participatory classroom exercises within a Dutch high school context that aimed to stimulate pupils’ thinking about food. There was no stigmatization of good or bad (convenience) food, but a stimulation to think about the food that the adolescents are eating. Mason and Hood (2011) emphasize that focus groups can be used to study how meanings are constructed in everyday life. The adolescents in the class meetings have been faced with different topics related to convenience foods on the hand of several assignments, and in this way they had room to display how they conceptualize convenience food through interaction within their adolescent peer group. Bagnoli and Clark (2010) stress that one of the biggest benefits of focus groups is that data are produced through social

interaction, rather than that it is a collection of individual opinions. This suits the participatory nature of the study and of our theoretical background of the practice theoretical approach (cf. Halkier and Jensen, 2011). Even though we were aware of eventual shortcomings not grasping practices as such, we apprehend the social interaction in the production of data as appropriate as we are interested in the meaning and shared understanding relating to competences adhering to convenience food.

We conducted in total seven focus group discussions at four schools with 145 adolescents aged 12-15 years. The actual exercises in class were all done in groups and by two assignments, one involving a brainstorm on “convenience food” to elicit the pupils’ conceptualizations and associations. The adolescents were free in choosing the reporting method (e.g. mind map, drawings, text). The second assignment involved different hypothetical situations where food choices had to be made, with the choice of products ranging in level of convenience. Notably, pupils had to reason their choice as resulting from their group discussion. The exercises of the assignments resulted in various data: besides field notes, pupils produced drawings, mind maps and other textual artefacts. These were sorted, coded and categorized in order to scrutinize similarities and differences in the participants’ conceptualisation of convenience food. In conjunction, the data were examined on relations and linkages with regard to competences and the other elements of practices.

### **Findings: adolescents’ views on convenience food practices**

The findings demonstrate the linkages of the elements in convenience food practices. We are particularly interested in the relation of materiality and meaning with regard to competences. Hence, we do not outline each element, but demonstrate particular linkages that are of importance to adolescents. We start with aspects of the materiality of convenience before moving to the more concrete competences, skills and know-how.

With regard to materiality, during all seven workshops, branded, processed food as well as take away and readymade foods figured prominently. To the initial question “what is convenience food?”, adolescents responded with pizza, candy or products with “readymade” in the name or branded products like Knorr (known for packet soups) or McDonalds (known for fast food). Correspondingly, during the follow-up assignment in which the adolescents had to work together to display their associations and shared understanding of convenience food, specific branded food products figured prominently next to more general categories like meal packages, fast food and take-away. Next to recurring food products, some brands were repeatedly referred to, indicating that these brands signify convenience to adolescents. Branded products of industrially produced origin such as Knorr, Unox, Hak, Maggi and Cup-a-Soup occurred most often, both in writing, mind-maps and drawings. Nevertheless, some adolescents mentioned the material category of fruit as a convenient food category, too, even though branded as well as processed foods seem to have gained a prominent position in young people’s understanding of convenient food.

In agreement with Warde (2016), we found that sensory perception with regard to competences figures prominently. In the choice assignments, adolescents often chose one out of multiple presented products (with different levels of convenience) based on how it looks. In some cases, tasty or “nice” appearance of the food, or the packaging, resulted in choosing the convenient alternative (e.g. readymade meals and frozen pizza). On the other hand, negative evaluations of food appearance resulted in choosing more natural, meaning unprocessed versions of the respective food item. For example, students mentioned that

certain items “look fake” or “has indefinable bits and pieces in it” (the latter referring to instant mash and bottled salad dressing). Thus, adolescents’ sensory perception of food items has been shaped in the context of convenience foods, with characteristics of the latter being evaluated both positively and negatively.

Convenience food is often associated in practices involving less time and less effort, hence understood as associated with less skills and competences. Time requirements figured prominently in adolescents’ understandings of convenience food. Convenience food is generally defined by the adolescents as food that saves time. Less preparation steps are needed (or provisional steps if planning, shopping and other stages are considered), thus time during consuming convenience products is left for other practices. Time is a valued resource in the perception of adolescents, illustrated by expressed valuations of time-saving possibilities. Some examples were:

Cut and washed mixed salad in a bag because it is less work than cutting the salad yourself.

Fries: quick, you don’t have to do it yourself.

Cup-a-soup [instant, individual portion size soup]: cook water and done.

Burger king: simple, you don’t have to prepare yourself.

One group of adolescents even relates the choice of convenience with the hurriedness of life, stating that while being busy with a lot of things, cooking is less important. An adolescent girl elaborated on a typical weekday when different members of the household follow different activities, more convenient food is chosen to accommodate different time schedules. Thus, competences to incorporate food preparation into busy schedules while exploiting the available convenience foods seem to be valued positively. By contrast, adolescents also mention that the use of convenience food with meanings of laziness, unknowing and incompetent. In one workshop a participant specifically referred to the limited effort needed by the consumer in eating, not just preparing: “food that is easy to eat, easy to swallow”.

The use of processed ingredients to speed up the cooking process is commonplace, as well as limiting and shaping the required cooking competences. A typical representation is the reference to lasagne as favourite dish, with cooking steps being “put sauce in pan, heat the sauce, place with lasagne sheet in oven tray”. There are contradictory accounts in how adolescents see responsibility, dependency and trust in relation to convenience food. It is evident that adolescents are critical towards the role of industry in processing foods to be more convenient. Some even state that everything in supermarkets is convenient. Or they formulate it even stronger by stating that all food nowadays is convenient, compared to prior days when mankind needed to hunt and gather for food.

Knowledge and know-how relates to health literacy in various ways (Benn, 2014). While an ability to maintain busy schedules was valued positively, the understanding of convenience food as unhealthy was a prominent negative association of convenience food in all workshops. Not only did most participants exchange multiple examples of unhealthy convenience food products; they also referred to unhealthy properties of convenience food as a reason not to choose it and discussed possible consequences related to health. Examples for the pejorative meaning of convenience food include references to obesity and weight problems. Further, convenience products were stated to contain too much salt and lack in vitamins.

Debates on health in relation to convenience food (cf. Halkier, 2013) resembled in one mind-map in which the centre term was “vreten” (Dutch for feeding), and only

references were made to snacks. Another group rephrased the Dutch term “gemaksvoeding” (convenience food) into *deMacsvoeding*, indicating the definite tendency to equal convenience food with fast food like McDonalds. In the hypothetical choice situations, many adolescents motivated their choice for unprocessed options as being healthier than the more convenient-oriented alternatives. One group even exclaimed not to choose “pre-cooked junk!”. Another group discussed food made “from scratch” and with fresh or natural ingredients as being healthier, because the ingredients are known.

Several groups managed to see convenience as not equal to unhealthy by providing healthy examples of what they considered as convenient. Next to examples such as raw vegetables and “fruits you don’t need to peel”, two groups in different workshops discussed food supplements such as vitamin pills as convenient food. References were also made to drinking water or milk as easy. In contrast, a vast array of groups included convenience foods that they referred to as healthy, sometimes even directly opposing it to unhealthy convenience foods. The ambivalence of convenience food becomes clear when referring to an adolescent girl who asked if convenience food was possibly healthy. She explained that she once ate at a restaurant chain where she was able to spot lots of convenient as well as healthy options. Thus, within the current convenience food environment, adolescents’ food competences encompass knowledge of the unhealthy ingredients of convenience foods as well as their derogatory effects on health.

Competences in convenience food practices also relate to cooking skills (Benn, 2014). Most adolescents reported to be familiar with basic cooking skills, mostly resulting from experience by assisting their parents, and in case of one school by practicing in (bi-) weekly cooking classes. Prior experience and cooking skills provide frameworks for what is considered as normal conduct in the practices. The data reveal that although all adolescents have an idea of convenience food and can provide ample examples, they do not report much practical experience with processed products in the home environment. They have more direct experiences with out-of-home consumption and preparation of convenience food, such as visiting (fast food) restaurants, take-away and delivery food.

The idea that cooking is difficult and that the food industry is more knowledgeable in processing food resonates quite strongly in the workshops. It is hence not only the cooking skills that adolescents possess themselves, but that professionals come across whilst designing the dishes. For example, in motivating the choice for readymade tomato sauce instead of homemade sauce a group of pupils states: “The makers know what they are doing” and in a hypothetical choice situation between making pizza themselves and buying a take-away pizza a group stated “professionals make the food, so it must be good”. While these quotes illustrate that some adolescents have trust in the competences of the food industry, and that food prepared by professionals comes across with the meaning of quality. However, other adolescents are more hesitant, expressing their uncertainty when they were not making the food themselves. In the hypothetical choice situations, a noticeable number of groups motivated their non-convenient choice by mentioning their doubt of the role of food producers, exemplified by quotes such as “they didn’t do anything with it”, indicating that what “they” did with it cannot be trusted. Or: “If you make it yourself, you know what is in it, and thus it is healthier”. It is clear that these young consumers are to some extent aware of the shift in responsibility and dependency when it comes to food.

Another participant described “hachee” (a Dutch dish with minced meat and onions) as his favourite dish, but when asked to describe the ingredients and the way it is

prepared, the participant indicated that his mom is always cooking it and that he has no clue how to make it. When asked what is needed to make a salad dressing oneself, one group responded, "going to the shop". It is likely that it would take considerably more time than a skilled domestic cook would require to make a salad dressing. Hence, next to the time involved in preparing (convenience) food, skills to do so seem important. Being able to do some cooking is also valued as fun. However, again the activities that require little skills seem to be preferred over the activities that require some experience. For example, in a hypothetical choice situation, multiple groups of young adolescents motivated their choice for using semi-prepared pizza dough as a convenient option, while dressing the pizza with toppings themselves instead of choosing a prepared frozen pizza, because they valued the procedure of choosing and placing toppings themselves. The meaning of cooking is in that way understood as fun.

In the development of practices, it is not only the food as such playing a role, but also the technologies to handle the food (Shove and Southerton, 2000). As outlined in the theoretical background, competences are closely linked with materials other than food. While competences to cook from scratch seem not to be highly valued in adolescents, they do refer to skills to use convenient cooking technologies. Microwaves are repeatedly mentioned in association to convenience food, as well as the oven to prepare readymade dishes such as lasagne and freezers in order to store food. Other conceptualizations relating to technology concern references to conservation techniques employed by the food industry. The presence of technology and its use for preparing (convenient) food is normal in the eyes of most participants. The normality of the use of such devices is also apparent in the discussions, as these technologies are referred to extensively in the listing of cooking steps. One participant ridiculed the process of boiling water in a pan on the stove, by referring to his routine of using water from an electric kettle. Thus, adolescents develop and value skills to make efficient use of cooking technologies.

### **Implications and concluding remarks**

Convenience food has gained prominence during the past decades. The central aim of this paper was to shed light on how adolescents in the Netherlands engage with the notion of convenience in the context of a society in which convenience foods are abundantly available. While we have not measured the change in competences, we can grasp how the choice environment associated with convenience products has influenced food competences in practices of adolescents. The influences on food practices in adolescents are diverse and to some extent contradictory.

What appeared most clearly from our study was the ways in which adolescents learn to navigate between competing ideals. While they consider processed food as tasty and quick to prepare, they are also concerned about the health impacts and about undefinable "bits", e.g. in a salad dressing. While pupils consider food producers as more knowledgeable in making appealing food, they also show discomfort in having to rely on food producers. Competences to make food from scratch were not highly valued but on the other hand they value rather simple cooking activities as fun.

Thus, learning to be a competent food consumer, in current circumstances, is not to be seen as a simple task. Adolescents show awareness for the branded and readymade dishes available and acknowledge the influence of advertisements in general and brands in particular on food practices. The meanings associated with particularly convenient brands are associated with less efforts, however, also with health deteriorating aspects. The adolescents are familiar with the different kinds of product



categories, which promise a more convenient way of life. Time is an important category, living in a 24/7 society, currently consumers are asked to save time whenever possible, even during preparation and eating of food. Here it is important to mention that the convenience food as such plays a role in saving time, however also the localities of particular fast food restaurants. This is likely to be related to the translation of convenience food as in Dutch it refers to easy to eat or comfort food.

By building on the theoretical perspective of social practices, we can see how competences are linked to the way convenience food cultures are understood, to say the meaning of convenience is linked to the time needed to prepare and to eat the food, however, also linking convenience food to be some sort of comfort food, as well as being associated as having deteriorating influence on health. What does that mean for the development of competences? The implicit way of building know-how and cooking skills that does not exist anymore, the way of perceiving convenience food as normal category, because adolescents might not know otherwise.

We are able to see that competences have been outsourced to food industry, being considered as positive by the adolescents, because professionals in the food industry possess these competences to produce tasty food, and they should know what they are doing. In this way this paper comes up with a lot more questions than answers and avenues for future research. The normality of convenience can be further problematized in a way that we are not able to scrutinize the actual practice and in how this might have implications for the health of those eating convenience foods. Further, it is also questionable whether the notion of convenience is leading to fewer food competences, or just towards different food competences. Considering different foodways, as just a changed combinations of elements of practices, convenience food practices as such might have altered the way that young consumers consume, however, only in a different way that the products, tools and infrastructures have changed. The interrelationships hence need more investigation as well to make more concrete recommendations.

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