



# Role, Relevance and Significance of Convenience Food -A Literature Review Approach

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## Abstract

The following paper provides a critical review of research on convenience food. It also highlights the significance of convenience food in the dimensions of time saving and time shifting and its growing importance felt due to the recent changes witnessed in domestic labor and family life. A total of 14 different classification of convenience food is presented in the paper and out of 14 categories four categories of convenience food are widely used. These are eat as it, ready to use, ready to cook and ready to heat. The paper concludes by making a comprehensive study for understanding the consumption of convenience food in terms of everyday social practices, emphasizing on its habitual and routine character.

**Keywords:** Convenience food, readymade meals, time saving & time shifting, domestic labor and family life

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## Introduction

The word convenience first appeared prior to 1960. A total of 79 studies were undertaken prior to 1960. 513 studies were done between 1961 and 1970 and it rose to 1610 in 1970. The pace of work on convenience foods gained momentum from 2011 to 2014. The total research work published in between these years was 5350. The plausible reason behind the increased work on convenience food products was due to the drastic transformation in the lifestyles of people and their eating patterns. Now-a-days people devote more time to work that has promoted the consumption of food products that provide more time to be spent on leisure activities [1,2] Earlier studies averred that convenience was correlated with the perspective of lack of time [3]. Many researchers elucidated that convenience acts as a multidimensional construct that fostered consumer comfort [4]. Convenience in the food context was linked with saving time, physical effort and mental effort required to buy, prepare and consume foods and cleans the kitchen [5]. It offers benefits at each one of these stages [6]. The convenience food encompasses all food products which mitigate time, physical & mental effort, and cleaning results from the process of preparing meals [7]. The drastic changes in the definition of convenience food happened in the year 2015. Scholliers (2015) said that convenience foods are the result of processed food industries in which substantial amount of culinary preparation has been carried out to an advanced stage and which are purchased as labor-saving version of highly processed food products. The convenience food products encompass a numerous variety of processed and

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semi-processed food, often compared with fresh food using raw ingredients, cooked from scratch. It is often regarded as among the least healthy option in terms of low nutritional value and hefty dependence on imported ingredients. Scholliers (2015) highlighted that how changing definition of convenience foods overshadowed the past definition of convenience foods. He explained the convenience foods into 15 keywords which was categorized into six uneven periods shown in **Table 1**.

### Sources: Google Scholar (11 July 2014)

With the passing time the consumer gives more priorities to health aspect of the convenience food demonstrated on above table. This might be due to the obesity and health related disease associated with the consumption of convenience food. Most of the recent developments & innovation in convenience food products are associated with healthier option (with low salt, sugar and less calorie food). There are other numerous factors which explained the growing trend of convenience food in various countries, including nuclear family, active participation of female, innovative manufactures, persuading advertisement, and individualism, ownership of kitchen technology, time usage, and reticence and degrading cooking skills.

Based on the definitional intricacies of the term convenience food, the paper aims to present the critical review of the literature,

**Table 1:** Four main themes of attention related to convenience foods, in percent.

Time Period	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	38.8
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
Keywords	Manufacturing Technology Retailing Advertisement	Health Obesity	Children Women Household size Purchasing power index	Preference Time Skills Quality

highlighting the significance of convenience food in time saving. The paper also presents the importance of recent changes in family life and domestic labor, and the way it influences the consumption of convenience food.

## Research Questions

Based upon prior research and extensive literature review, we proposed the following research question for the study

- How researchers have defined the various concept of convenience foods
- What are different classifications of convenience food used for home consumption
- How the consumption of convenience foods varies with time saving and time shifting and domestic labor and family life

### An explicit conception

Convenience food is an eclectic category of processed food, manufactured for mass consumption, including chilled, dried, and canned foods; confectionary, snacks and beverages; processed meat, pasta and cheese, ready to eat, ready to cook and ready to serve. The very first definition of convenience food was proffered by [8]. Any food which has work prepared it outside the home can be regarded as convenience food (Charles & Kerr, 1988). According to Dixton et al., (2006) convenience food is deemed as domestic outsourcing of food planning, preparation and or cooking [9]. Stressed that convenience food required very little preparation related to home cooking. They are the product of processed food industries in which degree of culinary preparation has been carried out to an advanced stage. According to [10] canned, frozen and dehydrated foods are the part of convenience food because it required little preparation. Such foods can be stored in home for longer periods of time. These are canned, vacuum packed, frozen and dehydrated. The convenience food is fully or partially prepared processed food which has significant preparation time, culinary skills or energy inputs transferred from homemaker kitchen to the food processors & distributors. They add certain convenience features in food before it reaches to the home kitchen [11,12] extended the work of Traub & Odland and demarcated the home based food into four categories. These respective categories were named

- a) Non-convenience- It includes home based fresh foods,

home canned, home preserved & ingredient foods. The ingredient foods are processed food product used in food preparation, usually in the most basic form in their category. It cannot be prepared in home.

- b) Basic convenience- Main single ingredient processed item
- c) Complex convenience- saves time & culinary skills and it composed of multi-ingredient prepared mixture
- d) Manufactured convenience- It is no-home prepared counterparts

The international symposium on ready to serve foods was held in the year 1977. Paulus suggested a system based on the stage of processing a food: ready to process, ready to kitchen process, ready to cook and ready to eat. Harrison (1979) developed the six categories of convenience food were zero convenience, basic convenience, preassembly convenience, precooking convenience, pre-service convenience and full service convenience. Pepper (1980) delved on the consumption of processed food at home and suggested that convenience foods split into five classes based on the methods of preparation. These classes were no preparation, mixing, heating, mixing and heating and cooking. Livingston and divided the convenience food into three categories: ready to eat, ready to heat and ready to cook. The researcher found that two-third of the purchase hailed from ready to eat convenience food, 17% from ready to cook and 15% from ready to heat. These sales figure belonged to US supermarket in 1976. There are three levels of food. The first one required no preparation, second required some preparation and the third required considerable preparation. The food which required no preparation deemed to be convenience food. It included eat as is, ready to use, ready to heat, hydrate, hydrate and cooking, thawing, thawing and cooking. The considerable preparation food included cut, peel or shape & then cook, eviscerate, prepare for cooking, then cook and cut, peel, or shape, then cook [12] stated that all the foods in convenience categories include some preparation but non convenience food required considerable preparation. It mainly includes unprocessed food, along with some processed items and a few processed ingredient foods. Convenience foods are special class of processed food which requires little or no major processing or cooking before consumption. These Processed foods require less handling such as mild heating / warming or rehydration in hot / cold water. The processed food goes into a lot of technological transformation where food morphs into a simpler form with minimum handling. According to [13]

distinguished four forms of convenience food (highly processed food items; moderately processed food; single components; and salads), whereas [14] revealed four other forms (basic ingredient; complex ingredient; ready to cook, ready to eat) It included milk, butter and fresh meats cuts in their first category (basic ingredients), and bread, pasta, canned vegetables came under (complex ingredient foods); they also included candy, drinks, yoghurt and snacks (ready to eat; which may be consumed as is). Fine and [15] defined that convenience foods generally required some preparation and can be feasibly stored in the home. They are canned, vacuum packaged, frozen or dehydrated and snack. The recent forms of convenience foods were chilled foods. A very recent paper by [16] put forwarded a very useful topology given below in figure 1 demonstrating the differences between non-convenience, semi convenience and convenience foods. These classifications provide some clarity towards convenience foods and the discernible firm line which differentiate between semi-convenience and convenience food **Figure 1**.

### Classification of convenience foods

A 14 category degree of readiness classification scheme was developed for food used in at-home consumption. It consists of three categories: no preparation, some preparation and considerable preparation. The classification system of food was extensively tested with two groups of people one is experience and other was not experience. The inexperienced people are undergraduate students in a beginner's level of nutrition course and they were selected due to their shallow experience in food preparation. The experienced people included in this study are the member of HEIH (local home economists in homemaking group), mainly middle-aged women had considerable experience in food preparation. The result was found to be acceptable both by inexperience and experience food prepares. The major chunk of the people from both the group conceded that they required food with no preparation or some preparation in their home prior

to consumption the table (2) below demonstrates the different classification of processed food categories. These categories are approved by food technologist at the consumer nutrition division, USDA hence accepted all over the world. The codes depict that the food could be used in more than one way, the lower readiness code was assigned **Table 2**.

### Convenience food consumption in relation to

#### A) Time saving & time shifting

[17] Said that the increased consumption of convenience food was due to scheduling problems of the increasingly de-routinized society. He stated that time shifting as well as time saving devices like fridges, freezers and ovens have not only reduced the time spent in the kitchen but also enhance the stature of comforts and cleanliness. Shove & Southerton (2000) reported that 30 years ago only 3% of the consumers owned a freezer in UK, by 1995 more than 96% of household had one or more. Besides, the fast proliferation of supermarket & hypermarket had positive impact on the consumption of convenience food [18,19]. There are some interesting evidence revealed that the consumption of convenience food varies from country to country. In case of Dutch consumer storage of convenience food plays very important role [20]. This is less the case for UK consumer who liked to consume convenience food within a few days. The focus group research conducted with Irish people revealed that there is myriad number of relevant factors which contributed the sale of convenience food products. These were work commitment, dietary needs and different preference of the family member who may not eat the same food [21]. The perceived benefits of convenience food leave more time for social activities. It includes stress reduction, relaxed lifestyle and facilitation of hosting social event [22]. The gradual decrease in cooking skills or dislike of cooking, perceived value for money and continuous decline in commensality encouraged people to choose ready-meals. The marketers linked convenience

NON-CONVENIENCE		SEMI-CONVENIENCE		CONVENIENCE	
<i>Meal ingredients</i>				<i>Full (fast) meals</i>	
(1)	(2)	(5)	(6)		
Preparation meals - single meal components used for cooking from scratch (e.g. potatoes, rice, non-preserved meat)	Partially-prepared and/or preserved single meal components (e.g. processed potatoes or preserved fruit)	Complete fast meals (e.g. soups)	Meals out (away-from-home food or restaurant expenditures)		
<i>Accessory meal ingredients</i>					
(3)	(4)				
Accessory stuffs (e.g. fats and spices)	Ready-made accessory stuffs (e.g. sauce)				
				(7)	(8)
				'Other' (e.g. Bread, sandwich fillings, milk products and breakfast cereals)	'Ready-to-eat' snacks

**Figure 1** A topology of convenience foods (Daniels and Glorieux, 2015).

**Table 2:** Degree of readiness categories- description and codes.

Sr. No.	Readiness Category	Description	Codes
1	Eat as is	Products requiring no further processing to achieve a servable form. Consumed as purchased	00
2	Ready to Use	Products requiring no further processing to achieve a servable form but typically used in combination with other food rather than served alone	01
3	Cut slice, shell	Foods which are eaten raw but have to be trimmed, cut, sliced or shelled first. Includes ready-to-eat and ready-to-use items that require cutting, peeling or slicing.	02
4	Thaw	Foods which have been frozen from the 'eat-as-is' form and only require thawing prior to consumption. Also includes items frozen from 'ready-to-use' form	03
5	Hydrate	Foods which require addition of a liquid, most frequently water, prior to consumption. Includes several items where one ingredient such as sugar is also added	04
6	Ready to heat	Products which need only heating to obtain servable form. Usually includes fully cooked foods which are not consumed cold.	05
7	Thaw then heat	Foods that have been frozen in 'ready-to-heat' form and only require thawing prior to heating. Includes fully cooked foods which are not consumed cold.	06
8	Hydrate then heat	Foods which require addition of a liquid, most frequently water, prior to heating. Also includes foods hydrated with heated water.	07
9	Ready to Cook	Foods which have been processed to a readiness state allowing direct cooking to achieve a servable form. Also includes commercially frozen breaded products and nuts which must be roasted or boiled	08
10	Thaw then cook	Foods which have been frozen in 'ready-to-cook' form and only require thawing prior to cooking	09
11	Hydrate then cook	Foods which require the addition of a liquid, most frequently water, prior to cooking.	10
12	Cut, peel, shape, then cook	Items which must be pared, peeled, shelled, trimmed, cut, scaled, shaped or skinned before cooking. Also includes foods which must be thawed before cutting, scaling or shaping before cooking.	11
13	Add other ingredient then cook	Foods which require the addition of other ingredients as well as manipulation prior to cooking. Also includes frozen items which must be thawed prior to the addition of other ingredients and subsequent cooking.	12
14	Eviscerate, prepare for cooking, then cook	Items which must be eviscerated prior to preparation for cooking. Includes frozen live-weight meat, fish and poultry which first must be thawed, then prepared for cooking.	13

**Sources:** Consumer nutrition division, USDA (1977-78)

food products with time- scarcity and food related lifestyle which acts as key drivers for the growth of convenience food products.

### B) Domestic Labor and family life

Suggested that social change played very important role in the phenomenal growth of convenience food just like technological innovation [23]. Stated that the rise in the consumption of convenience food was due to the active participation of women in labor force and their involvement in long working hours outside home Thus the hectic use of convenience foods was an effective way to manage food preparation in context of women's busy lives. The food marketing company always target working women and busy housewives with readymade meal solution so that they can cope up with time scarcity and easily balanced their work life. The provision of convenience food solution help to conserve the status quo rather than advancing gender equality, enabling women to combine motherhood and paid employment with ought significantly modifying either sets of demands [24]. The demand of convenience food is very much impacted by gendered division of labors and employment pattern, eventually influenced the time available for household food-work [5]. In a study conducted in Sweden, demonstrated that the demand of convenience food was very much impacted by the gender of the purchaser and whether or not the buyer is the end consumer. He accentuated that convenience food are linked to social context in which they are consumed, mainly eaten alone. Many-a-times consumers

were exhausted or prefer not to cook hence they succumbed to such meals took less than ten minutes to prepare and eat [25]. found that strong correlation exist between consumption of convenience food, gender & marital status, with men consume convenience food more often than female and single person consume more than married couples. The positive correlations also exist between education level and social class. It has been found that people with people with tertiary education and higher (ABC1) socio-economic status consume more readymade food. Similar results were found with Swiss consumers where the consumption of convenience food was very rampant among men than women, especially higher young people (17-39 years) and overweight people. The educated people eat less readymade meals [13]. The family meal bind members of the family but accretive consumption of convenience food was due to the decline in commensality. This was due to splitting of family life [26]. Those women heavily rely on convenience food are generally frowned upon. Women failed to provide proper meal to their families became subject for shame and embarrassment. This external judgment has come to be internalized by many women with a quarter of full-time employed mothers in Germany stating that they feel guilty about not providing proper nutrition to their child [27]. The qualitative research conducted on New Zealand people revealed that women choose convenience food to minimize time & cognitive effort in domestic provisioning [5]. Time pressure, hectic day routine and lack of working skills are all considered as



important constraints on women's time, restricting their ability to fulfill their culinary ideals. The Italian people perceived that convenience food are an acceptable short cut for delivering traditional family meals and Irish mothers consider readymade meals as a treat for family and friends [28]. Some mothers believed that convenience food products are the means to show their affection & love for their family and use of such foods might be strategy for mother to enhance their devotion to their families [29]. Many times convenience food assists women to assuage the conflict over food choice, retaining family cohesion in the face of other contemporary life pressures. Many processed food industries made an onerous endeavor to endowed processed food with the character, tradition and meaning of home-made food in order to enhance its acceptability to consumer who confront the normative pressure for convenience, casualness and speed.

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## Conclusion

This paper has furnished a critical review of work on convenience food. The evidence shows that convenience food encompasses an eclectic range of products & practices. Rather than focusing on a single definition of convenience food, this paper delved on the complex definition of convenience food put forward by many researchers. The paper also highlighted the different classification of convenience food and its way of consumption linked to time saving, family life and domestic labor. The commercial success of convenience food can be easily explained in these terms 'as fitting' with consumers domestic routine and with their ways of imbuing sense of their busy lives, as well as technically feasible (through industrial innovation and domestic technologies) and practically possible (transformation in food retailing and supermarket shopping).

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