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Changing Context And Composition Of Convenience Foods: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT:

Food, though the basic need of human, a highly complex subject to understand. The complexity increases as we move from staple food to value added foods like convenience foods. We wanted to understand fundamentals of convenience foods based on the available literature. We scoped our study in three parts. First, to collate relevant definitions for convenience foods and clarify the common threads, second, understand the classifications of convenience foods and the rationale of such classifications and finally drivers of convenience foods, its evolutions and how they play in developing and developed markets.

Scholarly articles in platforms like Google Scholar and Science Direct, industry reports, published data from Government departments (Open Government Data - OGD) and data from non-profit organization like Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) were surveyed to get appropriate understanding of the subject. Last 30 years of literature were surveyed to get proper

perspective from a reasonably longer period. We selected 62 articles for in-depth study which discussed definitions, classification and consumption drivers and also cited more frequently by other authors.

The critical learning from literature review is that convenience foods have to be always understood within a context, as the meaning, definition and utility of convenience foods change when the context changes. The context is also important while classifying convenience foods. Context also plays major role in the evolution of consumption drivers, its commonality and contrast nature among developed and developing markets. This paper brings the relevant definitions and classifications of convenience foods in one place. It also makes reasonable comparison of consumption drivers between developed and developing markets.

The literature review is limited to relevant scholarly articles and reports of past 30 years. Recent research papers which considered COVID-19 impact as one of the factors were excluded from the scope of this study.

Key Words: Convenience Foods, food drivers, convenience food definition, diet shift, packaged foods

1.0. INTRODUCTION:

Its human nature to seek convenience in all facets of life. Food being the basic need of human race, it can not be an exception when it comes to convenience. Researchers attribute the success and growth of street foods across globe for centuries to the convenience it provides and hence another evidence of human's quest for convenience. Convenience and availability along with taste and low cost are major reasons for choosing street foods (Dixon, J. et al. 2006).

We wanted to understand the concept of convenience in foods by studying definitions of convenience foods, classification of convenience foods and its basis, the critical contexts, how it changed over a period of time and variations in different demography, particularly developed and developing markets.

Convenience foods is very complex and it is difficult to define it with one definition. In this paper, we attempted to capture various definitions available to define convenience foods. We presented most of the relevant definitions available in the literature. We also captured the classification of convenience foods from manufacturers perspective as well as consumers view. Context is important in understanding convenience foods and the context is changing as the market and society evolves. At the same time markets are at different stages of evolution across the globe. To understand developing market, India is taken as representative market and status of food production, processing and diet shifts are studied. In this review, we attempted to capture the changes in chronological order as far as possible. Finally, we compared drivers of convenience foods in developed and developing markets and presented the commonalities and differences as we inferred.

To get the required and adequate information, we did literature survey covering scholarly articles, Government and Non Government Organization reports and industrial reports. Last 30 years of literatures were studied along with some older papers to understand the historical events

and context. In the conclusion, we presented our interpretations and recommendation for future work.

2.0. Methodology:

The objective of this work was to understand the basics of Convenience Foods. We wanted to get a fair idea about the definition of convenience foods by going through available definitions, understand the types of convenience foods, its drivers and how the drivers play based on context, period and geography.

Convenience foods is a vast subject with multiple dimensions. A search in Google Scholar with “convenience foods” as key word alone resulted in over 3 million results. It is impractical to scan through all articles for definitions, classifications and drivers. Hence, we started searching Convenience as a concept cutting across disciplines to get a broader sense of the subject. We further funneled our search into drivers of food consumption, factors of diet shifts, convenience foods and drivers of convenience foods. After acquiring basic knowledge on convenience foods, further searched to get the drivers of convenience foods at different markets like developed and developing markets. This helped us to understand the subject through a zoom in and zoom out approach. We selected 62 articles related to convenience foods, definitions, classifications and drivers which are highly cited by other authors.

To select the 62 focus papers, we reviewed scholarly articles, industrial reports, Government and Non Government Organization reports to get authentic and reliable information about the subject. We used platforms like Google Scholar, Science Direct, Government and Non Government Organization’s web sites to draw the information. We did in-depth study of all 62 articles and presented the findings in this paper and 28 articles were mentioned as reference.

3.1. Concept of Convenience and Convenience Foods:

The concept of convenience to consumers and marketing started as early as 1923 when Copeland in his HBR article suggested the idea of convenience goods as one required little cognitive decision-making effort. Later researchers like Douglas, Strober, Schaninger and Allen empirically operationalized the term convenience as more of time buying and time saving effort of consumers (Yale, L., Venkatesh, A., 1986).

Going by this concept, convenience foods are existing for centuries if one traces the time period of street foods in Asia, Middle East, Europe and Americas. Street hucksters sold Chinese egg rolls, Middle East falafel, Mexican burritos and Italian sausage sandwiches for many centuries. Taylor et al documented the fluctuating fortunes of street vendors in New York city as far back as 1691 (Dixon, J. et. al., 2006).

The popularity of street foods which provided both convenience and availability was commercialized by pubs and cafes and fed large number of time constraint industrial workers during industrialization in Europe and America. The charitable kitchens also adopted this convenience and provided food to poor people in nineteenth century.

Proliferation of kitchen appliances like refrigerators, micro-oven, freezers also aided procurement and storage of foods and there by bringing convenience into the overall food preparation. Based on household income and life cycle, households bought time saving appliances irrespective of working status of women at home (Kim, C. 1989)

Some authors point out two decisive and important stages in convenience foods, the American TV dinner that appearance in 1954 and invention of micro-oven in 1980s (Scholliers, P. 2015).

We can conveniently say that the concept of convenience and convenience foods exists for centuries at different part of the world with different purposes and benefits.

3.2. Definition of Convenience Foods.

It is very difficult to provide one definition for convenience foods as it is continuously evolving with change in time and context. At the starting of industrialization, people traded time in the labor market to earn money and spent money to buy convenience foods or services to save time (Yale, L., and Venkatesh, A., 1986). Change in the time and space the people operate, technological advancements and change in lifestyle have added food varieties, availability of ingredients across seasons and skill along with time pressure as factors for seeking convenience foods. The drivers are getting added over a period and evolving at different rates across the globe.

Alan Warde (1999) argues a distinction between modern and hypermodern form of convenience. In modern form, people are constraint with time and hence need convenience solutions. Whereas in case of hypermodern, people are at wrong place at wrong time. For example, all the family members are not able to be around dinner table at a fixed time. This is because people are at wrong space at wrong time and this hypermodern situation requires hypermodern convenience food solutions.

Convenience in case of food can be delivered with a wider range, that is, from making available cleaned ingredients like cut vegetables, fish and meat to providing fully prepared food for ready consumption. Convenience manifests differently if we take the space people occupy into account. For example, people seek different convenience when they are at home compared to on the go or in office. To make the things more complex, consumers mix and match convenience and non-convenience foods to make the final food.

It is difficult to define convenience foods based on few drivers or geography or period. Having said, despite all these complex contexts, it is important to arrive at a commonly agreeable definitions for convenience foods to focus on this critical aspect of life.

There are many definitions available for convenience foods. In 1959, British ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food proposed a definition referring to home cooking: convenience foods are “products of the food industries in which the degree of culinary preparation has been carried out to an advanced stage and which are purchased as a labour-saving versions of less highly processed products” (Scholliers, P. 2015). Charles and Kerr, in their 1988 book provided similar definition: “any food which has had work performed on it outside the home can be

regarded as convenience food”. These definitions cover the convenience provided not only to the person preparing the food but also consuming it.

Along with minimizing time, minimizing mental and physical efforts are also considered as part of convenience foods. Brunner et. al. (2010) applied convenience in its broader sense by defining “convenience food products as those that help consumers minimize time as well as physical and mental effort required for food preparation, consumption and cleanup.”

Dixon, J. et. al. (2006), consulted 50 Australian experts spreading across fields of nutrition, physical exercise, public health, public policy and marketing. These experts are employees of Government, non-government agencies, academia and commercial organizations. Based on their description of convenience foods, the authors arrived at the definition of this category as “the domestic outsourcing of food planning, preparation and/or cooking”.

Earlier, Candel (2001), also discussed the commercial aspects in convenience foods when he mentioned shifting of energy input, culinary skill and preparation time from home kitchen to food processors or distributors. It is also implicit that the time and energy required in honing the skill to prepare fully or partially convenience foods is also shifted to commercial entities.

Based on the available literature, we can say that convenience foods have to be always defined or discussed with a context. The context could be time saving, physical and/or mental efforts, skill, life cycle, social status, geography and period – either all or combination of few will play critical role.

3.3. Types of Convenience Foods.

At fundamental level, convenience foods give two benefits to its consumers. One, it shifts the timing even though the total time take is same. For example, total time taken to buy vegetable from the corner store and cutting for preparing food is same every time a dish is prepared. However, presence of a refrigerator at home gives the convenience of picking the vegetable at any time of the day – irrespective of whether the corner store is open or closed. This shift in timing gives convenience besides total time taken. Allen Warde (1999) explains “the appeal of convenience increasingly involves appeal to a new way of conceptualizing the manipulation and use of time”. Secondly, convenience foods make the continuous process of food preparation into a discontinuous operation with adequate time between the processes. For example, it is no longer required to purchase, assemble, clean ingredients and prepare food in one go. Cut vegetables can be bought and stored in refrigerator and can be used at any point of time. Dough can be made from flour and stored in freezer, breads from this dough can be made any time based on one’s need. These discontinuous operations provide huge convenience to the consumers. This process perspective is advocated by Jaeger et. al. (2004) for fully capturing the complexity of food related convenience. Any food preparation process starts with the decision of what to eat to management of leftover and dishes after the food is eaten.

The types of convenience foods can be understood better if this framework of multiple stages of food preparation process is considered. Researchers generally taken two paths to classify the

types of convenience foods. The first one from the user (consumer) perspective of level of convenience and the second from the manufacturer's perspective of level of processing.

Brunner et. al. (2010) categorized 17 food items by subjecting them through principal component analysis using varimax rotation and categorized them into four groups of convenience foods: highly processed convenience foods like ready meal, moderately processed convenience foods items like sandwich, single component like marinated meat and finally salad, example cut and washed salad. We could see that this classification has considered the manufacturer's perspective while classifying foods.

Costa et. al. (2001) classified home meal replacements based on convenience as viewed by consumers. They also considered shelf life of food items as part of classification. As per them they grouped convenience foods into Ready to Eat (example, chilled sandwich and take away meals), Ready to Heat (example, chilled pizzas and canned soups), Ready to End Cook (example, chilled and frozen lasagne, dehydrated pasta dishes) and Ready to Cook (example, raw chilled meat and cut vegetables).

Based on the way foods are prepared and delivered Lin et. al. suggested 4 points convenient index (Lee, J.Y., 2013). No-preparation convenience foods (example, Yogurt and burgers), Low-preparation convenience foods (example, Canned soup, frozen meals), Medium-preparation foods (example, Tuna salad, cooked fresh vegetables) and High-preparation inconvenience foods (example, Homemade foods prepared from scratch).

Classification of convenience foods helps to understand different consumer needs states and develop process and products to meet those unmet needs.

3.4. Food Production, Processing Industries and diet shift in India.

To understand the evaluation and status of convenience foods in India, one needs to focus on the food production along with food processing status and diet shift among critical mass.

India is the largest producer of milk, pulses and jute and second largest producer of rice, wheat, sugarcane, ground nut, vegetable, fruit and cotton in the world (FAO, 2016). India contributes to 25% of world spice production (Thomas & Sanil, 2019). India's long coastal line of 8041 Km and river stretch of 28000 Km provides one of richest sources for fish and marine products. India could achieve these levels at the backdrop of diverse ecosystems and varied climatic conditions, enabled by initiatives like Green and White revolutions.

Having said, the proportion of process / packaged food presents another scenario. For example, per capita consumption of packaged food is just 6.5%, 24 Kgs Vs.366 Kgs as per Center of Policy Studies, 2011. Only 15% milk is processed in organized sector. India tops in livestock population and at the same time 1% of meat is converted into value added product (Chengappa, 2004).

Diet shifts in two stages in any country as it gets economic progress, India is no exception. In the first shift, people move from low quality to high quality food retaining traditional codes. In the second stage, consumers move away from traditional food to western diet (FAO, 2004).

Globally seven factors (income, urbanization, trade liberalization, MNC, retailing, marketing and consumer attitude) drive food consumption (Kearney, 2010). Though India is also impacted by these factors, it varies in quantum compared to similar countries. The extent of impact also differs from state to state within the country. This may be explained as follows.

1. India is a diverse country with respect to its culture, food habits, economic growth etc and hence responds differently to different driving factors.
2. Both the stages of diet shifts are probably happening simultaneously – a part of the country in first stage and another part in second stage.

The low proportion of packaged foods implies the growth potential for packaged foods industries. The diversity and co-existence of both stages of diet in India may lead to its own way of behaviours towards packaged foods.

3.5. Drivers of Convenience foods.

Convenience foods drivers had changed over a period of time and evolving along the global market. By and large scarcity of time/time saving and time buying were the starting tenant of convenience foods as mentioned in multiple literatures particularly Yale, L. et. al. (1986). Besides time savings, physical effort, mental effort, time pressure, cooking involvement, cooking skills, value for money, avoiding waste, social status, variety seeking, house hold structure, female participation in labor force, kitchen appliances, appealing advertisement, availability, technological innovations like cold chains, marital status, age, children, naturalness and gender are other important drivers responsible for the growth of convenience foods. (Brunner, T. et. al. 2010, Scholliers, P. 2015, Jackson, P and Viehoff, V. 2016).

Majority of the literatures related to convenience foods mentions above drivers either partly or in slightly different form. With few exceptions we captured most of the drivers of convenience foods. However, these drivers will not yield more insights if they are looked at an abstract level, as convenience food drivers have to be viewed with a context for better understanding and utilization. The critical contexts and how the drivers operate within this context are summarized below.

One of the contexts to understand the drivers is food production process stages. One or more drivers becomes critical at every food production process stage like decision, purchase, storage, preparation, eating and disposal. Two dimensions of convenience need to be met: first, the type of convenience like mental effort, skill gap filling and the second, timing of convenience, that is at what stage of food production process the convenience is provided (Darian & Cohen, 1995). Darian et. al. also argue that absolute time shortage may not be the right indicator for understanding drivers of convenience food, but perceived time shortage by the consumers is key. This way, they push the marketers to see convenience from consumer's perspective. Again, the convenience sought at each stage also changes between countries. For example, storage plays an important role in case of Dutch consumers, they acquire and store food for longer time. The UK consumers prefer to buy chilled meal and consume within few days of purchase (Jackson, P.

2016). Though consumers in both countries possess required infrastructure to store frozen food, one prefers to eat at the earliest and other wants to store for longer time.

Sociability and socio demography can be another context through which the convenience foods drivers can be understood. Fully convenient TV dinner meal consumption (as convenience food) was studied among Dutch consumers to understand eating situations. The consumption of TV dinner was high when eaten alone followed by with families and finally with friends (Verlegh and Candel, 1999). This study empirically established the relationship between a particular convenience dish in a standalone and social set up.

Scholliers (2015) lays emphasis changing household structure as one of the causes to explain the growing trend of convenience foods. Household income, presence of children, elderly person and household size are playing important role in the convenience foods consumption. A negative relationship was found for age, children and household size whereas a positive relationship was found for education. Male consume more convenience foods compared to female (Brunner, T. et. al. 2010).

Drivers of convenience foods can be better understood and applied if the social aspect of the humankind is used as a prism rather than age old belief of time saving solution.

3.6. Convenience foods drivers in developed and developing countries.

One cannot assume one size fits for all even in the case of convenience foods. It is important to understand the commonality and contrast between developed markets of west with developing market of east to appreciate the subject in totality. Based on the literature review, we attempted to understand the similarities and differences.

Contrary to the conventional expectations, working women families are not spending more on convenience foods against non-working women families (Darian, 1992). The plausible reasons are working women are more educated and avoids convenience foods due to the lack of information on ingredients. Non-working women has more children compared to working women compensating the time spend in raising children with working hours of working women. Hence both groups end up with same amount of convenience food. Third reason is that working women prepares home food instead of convenience food to emphasize her role in home affairs, whereas a non-working woman manages the home completely and hence no special obligation to prove her role in home.

Another study conducted in Canada suggest that, purchasing / eating away from home food is major time saving strategy of working women compared to non-working women (Kim, 1989). However, the amount spent on ready to eat food is same in case of both working and non-working women. This is explained by the fact that working women family consumed regular / fast foods at more frequency compared to non-working women family's less frequency fine dine habit.

Eastern countries like India, Bangladesh and Malaysia have similarities as well as differences in some of basic behaviors / motivation towards convenience foods compared to western countries.

For example, working women in both part of the world preferred to prepare home food for her family to show care towards their family members. (Warde, A, 1999, Sudha, J. 2014).

Time pressure and time saving are still a major driver for convenience foods in eastern countries compared to the current weightage given to the same in western world. Market maturity in west could be one reason for this difference in significance. Time saving is a major consideration in purchasing convenience foods in Bangladesh. The other factors influence purchase of convenience foods are education, recommendation from friends and sale offers from departmental stores. Consumers also mentioned pleasure in purchasing convenience foods amid their busy schedule (Akter, 2018).

A study conducted in Malaysia also emphasizes the time factor's positive impact on convenient food consumption (Osman, 2014). The same study also found that long working hours and consequence stress level turns consumers to convenience food.

Another difference is in the perceived notion of consuming outside foods. Food Choice Drivers study conducted in Delhi (Bailey, 2018) revealed many unique and some common traits compared to west in making food choices. For example, eating outside food or away from home are considered un-healthy by consumers in India as compared to common belief in western world.

Managing relationships is a major value negotiation in both part of the world. However, in western world, it is restricted to children and husband. In Indian context, mother in-laws are major influencers on food choices and post marriage, husband's home practices take presidents compared to wife's household or hometown practices. In another study done in rural Kerala, food decisions are made at household level. Within household the preference of children and spouse takes importance along with cost consideration. The woman of the household, who is the explicitly acknowledged decision-maker, carried out various activities based on available financial and other resources and the needs and preferences of the implicit decision-makers - most often, spouse and children. (Daivadanam, 2015)

A study by Lee et. al. in 2013, developed household production theory framework and concluded that in USA, household income has positive relation to use of convenience food. They also found positive correlation between number of children and the use of convenience food. We could find similar observation in India. Migration with high income level leads to more westernized convenience food choices compared to migration with low-income group (Gupta, 2009).

In the western world ethnicity is more important in use of convenience food rather than time pressure (Lee et. al. 2013). We could not find studies in line with ethnicity in eastern world. At the same time, we could find differences between rural and urban consumers. Given that the urbanization is lower in developing world compared to developed world, we can understand this phenomenon. For example, we could see a difference in behavior of working women in urban and rural areas towards packaged foods. The major reason cited by rural working women, mostly farm labors for buying convenience food was saving time. Price and quality of food were primary consideration before purchase of packaged food. Energy rich spicy snacks were major item of purchase (Prakash, 2015). In contrast to it, urban working women purchased packaged

foods to manage emergency situations like sudden show up of guests. They purchased rarely available ingredients and ingredients required for variety of meals. They mostly bought bottled products and ready to eat snacks (Srinivasan & Shende, 2015)

Drivers of convenience foods are broadly common among developed and developing world. Having said, based on the maturity of the market, context and social fabric we could observe differences in the way drivers operate at different part of the world. We also could notice very few unique drivers applicable to certain part of the world.

4. Conclusion.

Convenience foods have to be understood with contexts as the case with other important topics. After studying the important literatures of the past 30 years on convenience foods, we came to two major conclusions on defining convenience foods.

One, the definition of convenience foods is ever evolving based on the lifestyle of consumers and food market. Industrialization and women participating in labour force made time as precious commodity pushing food production from home to industry (atleast partially) leading to one way of defining convenience foods. However, invention of kitchen appliances, economic prosperity over a period made consumers seek convenience in easing mental effort and quality of life. This shifted the definition of convenience foods around stages of food preparation process.

Second, more than one definition can co-exists based on differences in demography of the consumers and market maturity. Differences in family structure, age, gender and income will view and define convenience foods differently. Similarly, definition will vary in developing and developed markets. We observed that the drivers and definitions are closely connected and hence same inference can be drawn on drivers of convenience foods.

Classification of convenience foods are generally based on utility value of consumers or process level of manufacturers. Hence either consumer perspective or industry perspective or mix of two are basis of classification of convenience foods. Advancement in science and technology provided a host of convenience foods solutions to consumers like novel ingredients, long shelf life materials, convenience through packaging etc. However, the classification and study of convenience foods is majorly available around Ready to Cook, Ready to Heat or Ready to Eat convenience foods with few exceptions of individual ingredients. There are opportunities to study other convenience foods solutions like convenience ingredients, packaging.

COVID-19 is recent but an important life event. It is and will impact decisions about foods including convenience foods. Hence, it may become another context to define and classify convenience foods. Since it is a recent phenomenon, we avoided literatures which considered COVID-19 as a factor. As the world is slowly coming out of the pandemic, future researchers may investigate the impact of COVID-19 on various dimensions of convenience foods.

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