Consumer Behaviour towards Organic Ready-to-Eat Meals: A Case of Quality Innovation

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ABSTRACT
This paper reviews literature on alternative convenience food choices and analyses the findings from consumer behaviour and manufacturing/retailing perspective. As consumers’ demand for easy prepared and healthier food products has gradually increased, so has the related research activity. This address provides a synopsis of 60 relevant peer-review publications based on an online research carried out using related to organic ready-to-eat meals search terms. An overview of topic’s most important outcomes is presented, compared and evaluated. Results reveal positive attitudes, increased interest and willingness to purchase such products. Research gaps are identified in the field of personal and social norms as well as in the regulation and seeking information process. Policy making implications and recommendations are also discussed in conjunction with future research opportunities.

KEYWORDS
Consumer Behaviour, Convenience Food, Innovation, Organic Food, Organic Ready-to-Eat Meals

INTRODUCTION
Even if the process of ‘why’ and ‘what’ is consumed seems to be ostensibly simple, eating habits are the result of years of evolution, technological development and cultural influences (Copeland, 1923). From the time when diet was focused on adequacy, consumption has already passed to the age of modern optimal diet that ensures both health and psychology. Therefore, except from providing people with sufficient nutrients, food is also seen to affect peoples’ everyday life and vice versa. However, the examination of various effects on food choices turns to be a challenging task since consumer behaviour does not remain static. Indeed, consumers’ choices are seem to be continuously evolving mainly as a result of changes in market environment, but also because of external events. As a consequence, trends such as convenience in food preparation and increased consumption of
ready-to-eat (RTE) meals, attract more and more the interest of researchers and policy makers in terms of investigating consumers’ food choices.

Due to the scarce leisure time, society faces an increased demand for convenience with consumers wanting their food to be easy and quick regarding its preparation (Becker, 1965). Convenience is today one of the biggest trends adopted by the food industry since modern consumers prefer low-cost, easy prepared and healthier food choices (Nayga & Farooq, 1995). Increased demand for convenience food products stems mainly from both demographic and lifestyle changes in consumer preferences. In particular, modern lifestyle is believed to affect the demand for RTE meals as professional and student obligations are growing significantly over time (Costa, Schoolmeester, Dekker, & Jongen, 2007). In addition, increased women’s participation in the labour market, demand for ethical and organic food products along with the sudden increase of interest for environmental issues, constitute trends that turn to be of great research importance when it comes to RTE meal purchases. As far as the economic factors are concerned, the rise in the disposable income and the standard of living during the past decades are believed to positively contribute to the increased demand for these products affecting at the same time consumption patterns (Nayga & Farooq, 1995). Finally, consumers’ behaviour and decision making process are inextricably associated with food choices and their examination could lead to many interesting conclusions about the future of food industry operations (McCarthy, O’Reilly, & Cronin, 2001).

Greek food industry is one of the most dynamic and fastest growing domestic sectors, with growth rate estimated at around 20% the last ten years (ICAP, 2010). The rapid development of technology in production, packaging, and standardization, along with the evolving distribution channels, contribute to the presence of the increasing levels of specialization between food companies (Roberts & Wortzel, 1979). All the aforesaid have led food retailers to be differentiated not only on the basis of the type of food it is sold, but also by the way and place of consumption. Besides, the food businesses understood that waiting for changes to occur and then respond, was not enough to meet their ambitious financial goals. Predicting and anticipating changes rather than reacting has become for modern enterprises a ‘sine qua non’ condition (Russo & McLaughlin, 1992). For example, RTE meals based on organic ingredients, constitute a significant innovation in the field of food technology and science, showing a remarkable growth in European market. This implies that the growing market of organic, ethical and quality products in Europe is followed also by the increasing demand for innovative processed products with a more convenient orientation (Batte, Hooker, Haab, & Beaverson, 2007). The spread of organic or other alternative RTE meals is also a result of current technological advances. For instance, it is proved that the application of modern preservation methods (i.e. freezing) in RTE meals can maintain taste, texture and nutrition value and can also extend their shelf life offering at the same time products with high quality attributes (Olivera & Salvadori, 2009). On the other hand, based on a life cycle environmental impact survey, Rivera et al. (2014) prove that using organic ingredients rather than conventional ones, leads to higher impacts on environment wasting more energy during production, distribution and consumption process.

Assimilating quality in modern food manufacturing is quite challenging task that requires great attention from policy makers’ perspective. Domestic policy for food quality is a key component of the Common Agricultural Policy and foremost advantage of European agricultural products among international trade markets. The rural areas of the European Union (EU), and especially the Greek one, are experiencing much heterogeneity as far as the agronomic, soil and climatic factors are concerned (Lazaridis & Drichoutis, 2005). The aforesaid fact could establish strong competitive advantage and could be a growth driver of agricultural economy and rural development in terms of producing various differentiating products (e.g. local food, organic RTE meals). The development
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