Ready meals from the consumers' perspective
Ready meals from the consumers’ perspective
– attitudes, beliefs, contexts and appropriateness
Abstract


The aim of this thesis was to gain a deeper understanding of ready meal consumers and their demands regarding ready meal products in different situations. Data were gathered with one extensive postal survey and five focus group discussions. The aim of the survey was to investigate the beliefs held about ready meal consumers, identify typical ready meal situations, assess the aims of eating ready meals in these meal situations and, finally, to identify demands regarding ready meals in the purchase situation. The results of the survey showed that the image of the frequent ready meal consumer was a person alone and stressed. The ready meal-consuming respondents confirmed this image when they were in actual situations eating ready meals but not in general. Four common ready meal-eating situations were identified. Ready meals were eaten most frequently as lunch at work and dinner at home. The social context in these situations was found to differ and to affect the activities performed. Ready meals for lunch at work were commonly eaten with colleagues and then discussing was a normal activity. For dinner at home ready meals were usually eaten alone watching TV. The reasons why ready meals were chosen as meal solutions differed. Ready meals suitable for lunch at work should be time-saving and for dinner at home the main demand was that the products should be convenient in order to avoid cooking. Purchaser demands regarding ready meals were found to be influenced by the gender of the purchaser and the intended end-consumer. Female ready meal purchasers were more demanding buyers than males, especially concerning health aspects. The aim of the focus groups was to explore consumers’ reasons regarding the choice of ready meals for dinner and to find out how ready meals suit their needs. Ready meals were not regarded as being very appropriate for dinner at home. The social setting of the dinner was one of the most important aspects affecting the choice of what to eat. For ready meals to be suitable for dinner use they should be dishes out of the ordinary with more taste. This thesis has demonstrated that the context of meals affects the entire ready meal choice process and that there is a need to broaden the research perspective beyond the meal. The entire food provisioning process needs to be taken into account.

Key words: attitude, consumer, context, food choice, meal, ready meal, situation.
List of original publications

This thesis consists of a compilation and a discussion of the work published in the following papers, referred to in the text by their Roman numerals.

I Attitudes and beliefs directed towards ready-meal consumption
Mia K. Ahlgren*, Inga-Britt Gustafsson and Gunnar Hall (2004)
*Food Service Technology 4 (4): 159-169,
with permission from Blackwell Publishing

II The impact of the meal situation on the consumption of ready meals
Mia K. Ahlgren*, Inga-Britt Gustafsson and Gunnar Hall (2005)
International Journal of Consumer Studies 29 (6): 485-492,
with permission from Blackwell Publishing

III Buyers’ demands for ready meals – influenced by gender and who will eat them
Mia Ahlgren*, Inga-Britt Gustafsson and Gunnar Hall (2006)
Journal of Foodservice 17 (5-6): 205–211.
with permission from Blackwell Publishing

IV The appropriateness of ready meals for dinner
Mia Prim*, Inga-Britt Gustafsson and Gunnar Hall (2007)
with permission from Blackwell Publishing

*The author of the thesis changed her surname from Ahlgren to Prim in August 2007.
Sammanfattning

Målet med denna avhandling var att generera en större kunskap om färdigmatkonsumenter och deras krav på färdigmat i olika situationer. För att kunna göra detta genomfördes en omfattande postal enkät och fem fokusgrupper.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations

In this thesis the following abbreviations are used:

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<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FAMM</td>
<td>Five Aspects Meal Model (Gustafsson et al. 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMRs</td>
<td>Home meal replacements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Main courses or pre-assembled main course components of a meal…in single or multiple portion containers, designed to fully and speedily replace, at home, the main course of a home-made main meal’. (Costa et al., 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a specialist service offering complete, home-style meal solutions purchased hot and ready to eat, designed for off-premise consumption (Gibson, 1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRMCR</td>
<td>Non-ready meal consuming respondent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMCR</td>
<td>Ready meal consuming respondent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMPR</td>
<td>Ready meal purchasing respondent</td>
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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Choosing something to eat is something we do every day. We may choose to prepare and cook our meals ourselves and we may choose not to. There are situations when a visit to a restaurant is preferred to cooking. There are also situations when take-away and ready meals are the best solutions to fulfil our needs and wants. Sales of ready meals are increasing and have been for a long time. It is obvious that ready meals are appreciated as meal solutions.

The development of technology has been a leading force in the development of ready meals. Technology has had an impact on each stage of the production, distribution, retailing and home storage and preparation of food. Development has resulted in ready meal products with a longer shelf life and with less loss of nutrients, texture and taste during processing. Changing technology in the home, such as increased ownership of freezers and microwave ovens, has contributed to the ready meal growth. Technology will continue to develop but with a more mature ready meal market there is now the challenge to move from production orientation to market orientation. A critical success factor for product development is the incorporation of the 'voice of the consumer' in the early stages of the development process (van Kleef et al. 2005). As Deliza and MacFie (1996) stated: 'If the target is to increase consumer satisfaction in order to have repeated product use, the key point is to find out what consumers expect from a product and try to deliver it.'

According to Moskowitz et al. (2006), trying to really understand the consumer and the interaction with food constitutes a new concept. They speak in favour of context-based approaches. It has been shown that the context in which the product and consumer exist may be as important as the food itself (Rozin & Tuorila 1993; Bell & Meiselman 1995). Meiselman (1992) called for greater research into 'real foods, in real environments' for better prediction of food-related behaviour.

In restaurants, the importance of context to the customer’s experience of a meal has been known for a long time. The well-known cook Antonin Carême (1784-1833), who created the concept of grande cuisine, included the décor of the dining room in the concept (Gustafsson et al. 2006). The Department of Restaurant and Culinary Arts at Örebro University, Sweden, has developed FAMM, the Five Aspects Meal Model, and uses it when training cooks, chefs and waiters how to plan, prepare and produce meals. FAMM takes the product into consideration but also four other aspects: the room, the meeting, the management control system and the atmosphere (Gustafsson et al. 2006). It is thus clear that the context of the meal is seen as being important to the experience of a restaurant meal. This is also most likely the case when ready meals are consumed. The producers, however, do not have the same tools as
the restaurateurs. Ready meal producers can control the product and can affect the individual consumer through marketing but have no control over contextual factors such as the eating room, the meeting and the atmosphere. Miller and Ginter (1979) recommended objective specifications of commonly occurring meal situations for studying the meal context in order to better describe, isolate and control the situation in relation to the response of the consumers to different stimuli. For practical reasons their recommendation separates the context from the individual and the product. This does not mean that the three parts are independent of each other in the meal situation. They interact, depend on and affect each other.

This thesis is the result of co-operation between the Department of Restaurant and Culinary Arts at Örebro University and SIK, The Swedish Institute for Food and Biotechnology. At the Department of Restaurant and Culinary Arts the main focus is on commercial meals. SIK is an industrial research institute that mainly carries out applied research directed at the food industry. Industrially prepared ready meal solutions were a common aim for both participants in the project.
OBJECTIVES

Objectives

The overall aim of the thesis was to gain a deeper understanding of ready meal consumers and their demands regarding ready meal products in different situations. To achieve this overall aim, investigations were carried out with the following specific objectives:

1. To investigate the beliefs held about ready meal consumers and whether or not these beliefs are supported by the consumers’ self-reported attitudes and reasons for consumption.

2. To identify typical ready meal situations.

3. To assess whether there are dissimilar objectives for eating ready meals in different meal contexts.

4. To identify consumer demands regarding ready meals in two situations: buying and consuming ready meals.

5. To explore how consumers reason regarding the choice of ready meals in a specific meal situation and to find out how ready meals suit their needs in that context.
Background

Gustafsson et al. (2006) argue for the meal context to cover the food product, the consumer and the eating environment and that these three factors need to be considered in an integrated manner since they affect each other. Miller and Ginter (1979) recommended a separation of context from the individual and the product. Meiselman (1996) chose to organize contextual research into food in general into three parts: the food, the eating situation and the individual. In creating a background to this thesis the author has chosen to organize the text into three parts.

The first part, *the meal*, covers definitions of meals in general, eating structures and convenient meal solutions and it also presents the ready meal marketplace. The second part, *the consumer*, provides an introduction to food choice models and social norms and embraces the role of expectations, attitudes and beliefs in a meal experience. The third part, *the eating situation*, covers the social and physical factors that affect the meal experience and also the driving forces behind choosing different meals in different situations.

The meal – definitions and concepts

The meal terminology is very complex and since food consumption is a subject researched by a number of disciplines and from many different perspectives the answer to what a meal is depends on who and how you ask. A meal can originate from many different sources. It can be home-cooked, by the consumer or by others, or it can be produced outside the home – in hotels, restaurants, cafes, institutional kitchens, take-aways and retail outlets (Costa et al. 2001).

Meals might be defined from a component perspective where the separate components of dishes that constitute a meal are described. An example of a component-based meal definition was given by Ekström (1990), who identified four components of a Swedish cooked meal: a centre, a starchy base and two types of trimmings, consisting of vegetables and different condiments. Mäkelä (2001) discussed different definitions of ‘proper’ meals given by others (e.g. by Murcott 1982; Charles & Kerr 1988; Kemmer et al. 1998; Bugge & Döving 2000; Prättälä et al. 1993) and redefined the concept for the purpose of a Nordic study. In Mäkelä’s (2001) definition the ‘centre’ could be not only meat but also fish or vegetables. A category ‘other’ was also added to pick up on traditional dishes such as soup, pancakes or porridge and more recently introduced dishes such as pizza and taco. Bread was also elevated to being part of the meal.
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When cultural perspectives are used to define meals the rules and the structures of the meals are of importance. The meal can then be distinguished from other eating events, such as snacking. One frequently quoted meal classification is the one by Douglas and Nicod (1974), who analysed the structure of British working class meals. Four different types of eating were identified. The first type is a 'food event' which is an occasion on which food is eaten. The second type is a 'structured event', a social occasion based on rules concerning time, place and sequence of action. The third type is a 'meal', which implies food eaten as part of a structured event. The fourth and last type is a 'snack', an unstructured food event without any rules pertaining to combination and sequence.

According to historical evidence, meal patterns and meal order have changed considerably over the centuries. The tendency in modern society towards an increase in grazing and a decrease in sharing of family meals needs further investigation (Fjellström 2004). Bisogni et al. (2007) referred to the term meal as being a less suitable label as eating practices and patterns are changing. They suggested eating episodes as being a more correct concept to describe acts of eating and drinking.

The social interaction during the meal has also been used to define various types of meal. According to Sobal (2000) a 'proper' or 'ideal' meal is typically eaten together with others and many people do not regard eating alone to be a 'real' meal. A meal can be defined as a social event (DeVault 1991) and as a symbol of the ideal family and the home (Charles & Kerr 1988). It was found in a study of young Scottish couples that they considered the evening meal to be an important part of living together (Marshall & Anderson 2002). One definition of the word 'family' is 'those who eat together' (Visser 1993). Marshall and Bell (2003) considered the definitions of a proper meal given by Murcott (1982) and Charles and Kerr (1988) to be too specific for the particular context of the family eating at home at the table and suggested that a broader definition of meals should include lunches and snacks and should look beyond the boundaries of the domestic table. Individuals’ ideas of proper meals have been shown to not always agree with actual practice (Poullain 2002). When ideals conflict with daily realities what is socially acceptable often gives way to what is pragmatically achievable (Carrigan et al. 2006). Moisio et al. (2004) found that 'homemade' was a malleable consumer construct and that it differed in meaning between older and younger women. Older women defined 'homemade' more categorically as cooking from scratch while younger women negotiated the meaning to include, for example, ready-made noodles or adding fresh vegetables (Moisio et al. 2004). In Nordic countries, age was found to be the factor that had the greatest impact on the likelihood of having family meals and such meals were more frequent among older persons (Holm 2001b).

At the Department of Restaurant and Culinary Arts, Örebro University, five aspects were defined and used to study an entire meal experience. The
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Five Aspects Meal Model, FAMM (Gustafsson 2004; Gustafsson et al. 2006), takes into consideration, from a producer’s perspective, the product, the room, the meeting, the management control system and the atmosphere (see Figure 1). The background to the model was the Guide Michelin evaluation of hotels and restaurants. The *product* includes the food items and services from which the meal is composed. The *room* is the physical framework of the meal. The *meeting* concerns both individuals and cultures. Communicating a message to the consumer is essential for the meal experience. The *management control system* encompasses both the economic and the legal aspects. Social and psychological aspects form part of the *atmosphere*. According to FAMM mere products, i.e. the foods and drinks alone, cannot constitute a meal. They become a meal when they coexist with their surroundings in a situation where someone actually eats them.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 1.** The Five Aspects Meal Model (Gustafsson et al. 2006).

The conceptual framework that Bisogni et al. (2007) presented is a holistic view of the meal that can be used to characterize eating and drinking episodes. They defined the meaning of the term *episodes* by reviewing definitions of other terms, such as meals, eating occasions, eating events, and eating moments. The resulting framework consists of eight interconnected dimensions: food and drink, time, location, activities, social setting, mental processes, physical condition and recurrence, see Figure 2. These dimensions aim at being used as a basis for developing assessment tools to gain an understanding of how people manage everyday eating in a time of changing traditional meal patterns. The dimensions are thought to assist practitioners in their counselling in order to better suit the clients’ eating patterns.
By examining the different definitions of the meal it becomes obvious that the subject is complex and that the perspectives of the meal very much affect the definitions. A meal is more than just food and as Meiselman (2000) stated ‘Meals are complex, but understanding meals and addressing meals in the practical world requires a more complex view of the meal’. For this thesis a meal was defined as a proper meal (Mäkelä 2001), eaten as part of a structured event (Douglas & Nicod 1974) after which the contexts in which this meal exist were studied.

Convenient meal solutions
Cooking at home is seen as a chore and meal preparation is considered a very time-consuming activity (Sloan 1997). Convenience orientation among
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consumers has been found to be negatively correlated to cooking enjoyment and positively correlated to role overload (Candel 2001). Warde (1999) suggested that the increasing, widespread consumption of convenience foods is a response to a particular configuration of problems in the temporal organization of daily life, not so much a function of people wanting or liking such foods. Jaeger and Meiselman (2004) studied the perception of meal convenience and found that all stages in the food provisioning process had an influence on the perceived convenience. According to Capps et al. (1985), convenience foods are: ‘... fully or partially prepared foods in which significant preparation time, culinary skills, or energy inputs have been transferred from the home kitchen to the food processor and distributor.’ Gotton (1995) found the term convenience difficult to define since it not only encompassed a set of properties of food items but also a social context. Convenience was neither solely about time-saving nor solely about labour-saving but about ‘how foods fitted into provisioning practices, which were themselves part of a set of household arrangements to provide various sorts of services to household members’ (Gotton 1995:158).

The diversity of prepared and assembled meal solutions on the market is larger than ever. Meal solutions vary in the way they are produced and in the way they are distributed to the consumer. The terminology is very complex due to this diversity and also to the different players on the market who define meal solutions in different ways. One type of meal solution is the home meal replacement, HMR. HMRs are meal solutions that are produced commercially for home consumption and which were defined by Costa et al. (2001) as ‘Main courses or pre-assembled main course components of a meal...in single or multiple portion containers, designed to fully and speedily replace, at home, the main course of a home-made main meal’. The definition focused on user-based requisites such as readiness, pre-assembly and main ingredients. It did not make distinctions between manufacturing technologies or distribution channels. The reason for this was that it reflected the current market integration movements within the food chain business. Costa et al. visualized the distribution of HMR, as they described it, in a model (see Figure 3).
In the case of the Swedish ready meal market it might be appropriate to add a third place of consumption to the model since one of the main places for consuming ready meals is the lunch room at work, i.e. neither a serving place...
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nor at home. Ever since 1946 hot lunches have been served free of charge in school and in view of the fact that school is compulsory and free of charge in Sweden most Swedes have the habit of eating cooked meals at noon.

The different words used to describe ready meals are usually intended to reflect the degree of readiness for consumption and the manufacturing method. Examples of this are: ready-to-eat, ready-to-heat, cook n’ chill, home meal replacement, sous-vide and minimally processed food. Costa et al. (2001) created a classification system based on four classes of convenience (the amount of preparation required by the consumer before consumption) and four classes of shelf life (See Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Convenience Classes</th>
<th>Shelf-Life Classes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ready to eat</td>
<td>&lt;1.5 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ready to heat¹</td>
<td>1.5 weeks – 1.5 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ready to end-cook ²</td>
<td>1.5 months – 1.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ready to cook ³</td>
<td>more than 1.5 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Costa et al. (2001) defined ready meals as a home meal replacement supplied by manufacturers. Gibson (1999) on the other hand provided a hierarchical model that separated different convenient meal solutions based on the temperature of the meal when it was purchased and on the type of distributor of the meal (see Figure 4). Gibson’s definition of HMR is ‘a specialist service offering complete home-style meal solutions purchased hot and ready to eat, designed for off-premise consumption.’
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Figure 4. Hierarchy within the ready-to-eat convenience food market according to Gibson (1999).

Due to the inconsistency in definitions of convenient meal solutions it is very difficult to compare sales figures. What is called home meal replacement in one study might include ready meals and in another it might include take-aways.

The ready meal marketplace

According to a study by Reuters (Economist 2002), ready meals and other meal solutions are most popular in the United States, the UK and Sweden, and the study states that the reason for this was the prevalence of single-person households and working women in those countries. In Europe, the UK has the highest per capita consumption of both frozen and chilled ready meals. Sweden had the second highest consumption of frozen ready meals in Europe in 2001 with 7.7 kg per capita (Olsson 2003).

Although chilled ready meals entered the general Swedish market rather late the sales growth is high. In 2002, Swedish sales of chilled ready meals
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increased by 19% (Olsson 2003). According to a report from Leatherhead Food International, a British research institute, the sales of chilled ready meals has continued to increase steadily during the past few years in most western European countries although in the UK it has begun to decrease. According to the report a possible explanation for the decline is the increase in people’s interest in the healthiness of the food they consume. Bainbridge and Bell (2006) also argued that the ready meal sector is threatened by campaigns promoting healthier eating but saw promising opportunities for the growth of ready meals marketed as ‘better for you’, with reduced fat and lower calories. According to Mintel, an international market research company, a key to the decline of sales in the UK is greater price competition and heavy discounting among retailers (Parry 2007).

The retailer environment of ready meals is becoming progressively competitive and supermarkets, convenience stores, quick-service restaurants and full service restaurants battle for their ‘shares of stomach’ (Schrader & Schrader 2004). Prepared foods will continue to be an area for sales growth and more restaurants are now providing take-away and delivery services, which is why Larson (2002) suggests that supermarkets should put more effort into improving their marketing planning and execution to improve profitability. Schrader and Schrader (2004) recommend that food providers acquire a better understanding of consumer perceptions of their outlets in order to identify and clearly communicate their niches and market positioning strategies.

The Consumer

Since the ultimate judge of the success of a product is the consumer (Brown & Eisenhardt 1995; Cooper & Kleinschmidt 1987), the understanding of the consumer is of utmost importance. There are four main objectives in product development: developing a new product, maintaining a product, improving a product and optimising a product. Consumer research is applied most widely during the development, testing and launch stages of new product development but can also be carried out at the opportunity identification stage (van Kleef et al. 2005).

When developing and marketing a product, it is necessary to identify and gain an understanding of the target consumer. Consumers, however, are individuals with unique sets of needs and demands affecting their food choice. Food options, as well as information and advice about these options, have increased lately and this ever-changing knowledge environment does not always assist the consumers in their decision-making (Östberg 2003). Traditionally, strong norms for eating have guided consumers in their choice of food although the declining importance of these norms now demands that
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the individual constructs personal ways of eating (Fischler 1988). The effects of these circumstances are that people have more opportunities for pleasure as well as more perceived opportunities for harm, making some people feel every bite is fraught with conflict (Rozin 1999). According to Fischler (1980) people are uneasy about making food choices and eating since there is a lack of clear socio-cultural cues as to what their choice should be. The results of Cardello and Schutz (1996), however, show that there are significant differences between products in appropriateness for certain use situations, implying that cues showing what an appropriate choice is still exist.

Food choice models

Food has traditionally been considered as consumer products bought frequently, immediately and with a minimum of comparison and buying effort – products with low customer involvement (Kotler & Armstrong 1996). The food choice process is, however, very complex and it is necessary to find simplifying models. Several models have been created to describe the choice of food. The individual is assumed to be affected by, for example, physiological, psychological, monetary and situational factors (Pilgrim 1957; Shepherd 1985; Cardello 1994; Furst et al. 1996). Factors that have been shown to affect the choice of food include attitudes, beliefs, expectations, the food itself and the individuals’ experiences (Ajzen & Fishbein 1980; Ajzen 1988; Shepherd 1985; Cardello 1994). The literature on attitudes, beliefs and food choice was criticized by Shepherd (1987) for being confusing and lacking a clear conceptual framework. He stated that it is most important to find a model that can predict food choice and/or explain the mechanisms by which the different factors interact.

Shepherd (1985) proposed a system where the factors affecting food choice are categorized into those related to the food itself, to the individual and to economic and social factors (see Figure 5). The model is not predictive of food choice. It catalogues the possible influences rather than suggesting likely action mechanisms related to the multitude of factors identified. It neither quantifies their relative importance nor states how they interact (Shepherd 1995).
A conceptual model of the food choice process based on qualitative research was proposed by Furst et al. (1996) and can be seen in Figure 6. Three major groups of factors affecting choice were ascertained: life course, influences and personal system. People's life course experience was found to affect ideals, personal factors, resources, social contexts and the food context, i.e. major influences on food choice. These influences affected the development of personal systems for making food choices, such as value negotiations and behavioural strategies. Value negotiations took into account sensory perceptions, monetary considerations, health and nutrition beliefs and concerns, convenience, social relationships and quality of food choice decisions. The model is believed to assist policy-makers, educators and clinicians to take a holistic view of food practices, thus helping them to understand the components of the process and to conceptualize and reflect upon it.
Steptoe et al. (1995) created the Food Choice Questionnaire (FCQ) in order to measure the motives underlying consumers’ selection of food. It is thus neither a model nor a theory, but rather an instrument that can be used to gather data. Factor analysis of responses from a sample of 358 adults revealed nine distinct motives behind the choice of food, i.e. health, mood, convenience, sensory appeal, natural content, price, weight control, familiarity and ethical

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concerns. The study showed that these motives were decisive in the choice of food made by some of the respondents. There is no doubt that the food choice decision process is complex. Connors et al. (2001) examined the ways in which people manage values when making food choices in various contexts. The analysis revealed that all 86 participants used a personal food system within which they managed five main food-related values: taste, health, cost, time and social relationships. It was found that the participants mainly used three processes in their personal food systems: 1) categorizing foods and eating situations; 2) prioritizing conflicting values for specific eating situations; 3) balancing prioritizations across personally defined time frames.

Attitudes
Attitudes are mental states used by individuals to structure the way they perceive their environment and guide the way they respond to it (Aaker et al. 1998), or as Allport (1935) defined it: ‘a mental and neural state of readiness to respond, organized through experience exerting a directive and/or dynamic influence on behaviour’. The ABC model might be the most accepted one to explain how attitudes are built up. According to this model attitudes consist of three parts: affection, behaviour and cognition (Solomon et al. 1999). The cognitive component is the information or beliefs about the object; the affection component includes feelings of like or dislike towards the object and the behaviour component is the tendency to behave in a certain way towards the object. Kraus (1995) reported results from a meta-analysis of empirical literature (88 studies) regarding attitudes and their prediction of behaviour and found that attitudes significantly and substantially predict future behaviour. De Pelsmacker et al. (2005) on the other hand showed a discrepancy between attitude and actual buying behaviour for the buying of ethical products. Even if the reported attitude towards ethical products was positive, consumers might not be willing to pay extra in the actual purchase situation. According to de Pelsmacker et al. (2005) people often give socially desirable answers in attitude research, especially when they want to impress the researcher or conform to social norms.

Hearty et al. (2007) found that attitudes towards eating healthily were related to measured dietary and lifestyle behaviour. It was established in a sample of Irish adults that being a female or of higher age was associated with a lower odds ratio of having a negative attitude towards healthy eating behaviour. Suggested reasons why the elderly are more health conscious than younger people are disease avoidance, death of a family member and life-stage changes in family roles (Olsen 2003).

Consumers of today are increasingly concerned about health risks caused by food consumption. The reasons for this might be an increasing number of food safety crises combined with the enormous amount of information from a
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variety of sources, such as the media, the government and consumer organisations. Lobb et al. (2007) found that trust in food safety information provided by the media, alternative sources and independent authorities significantly reduced the likelihood of UK consumers purchasing chicken. Attitudes were shown to be the most important determinant in purchasing chicken but lost relevance in the event of a food scare.

Rappoport et al. (1992) found that convenience motives were negatively correlated to health motives, although Steptoe et al. (1995) found no significant associations between health and convenience in their study. The results of the latter study indicated that women paid more attention to health aspects than men and that this trend increased with age in women but not in men. Other studies have reached similar conclusions, i.e. that female subjects are more likely to try to eat healthily (Hearty et al. 2007; Lennernäs et al. 1997).

In a study by Stein & Nemeroff (1995) it was shown that consumers identify themselves with the food they eat and judge other people on the basis of their diet. In the study, fictitious persons, said to have a good diet with non-fattening foods, were rated by test subjects as being more likable, attractive and fit than identical persons who were said to have a bad diet with fattening foods. However, eating low-fat foods is not the recipe for a totally positive image. Barker et al. (1999) found that consumers of low-fat diets were rated to be attractive and intelligent but also to be highly strung, unhappy and antisocial. Similar results were found by Oakes and Slotterback (2004). Vartanian et al. (2007) stated that the type of food an individual eats influences how he or she is perceived by others.

Consumers have various beliefs that not only influence their attitude towards different products but also have a bearing on their purchase and consumption of food. Fishbein (1966) proposed that people form attitudes towards a product attribute on the basis of their beliefs about the attribute and their positive or negative feelings towards that attribute. Consumers’ attitudes towards an attribute are therefore the result of their beliefs about the attribute and their evaluation of those beliefs. According to Newsholme and Wong (2001), a consumer’s beliefs are based on the attributes assigned to the consumer’s self-image and are connected to the subjective perception of how a person actually sees him/herself (the actual self), how a person would like to perceive him/herself (the ideal self) and how a person would like others to see him/her (the social self).

Social norms

Social norms evolve to regulate social life and imply that people should manifest a prescribed behaviour or not manifest a prescribed behaviour (Biel & Thøgersen 2007). Cialdini and Trost (1998) defined social norms as ‘...rules and standards that are understood by members of a group, and that
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guide and/or constrain social behaviour without the force of laws’. In social contexts, like the sharing of a meal, people search their memory to find similar situations and expectations about proper behaviour (Bettenhausen & Murnighan 1991; Pillutla & Chen 1999).

A meal can be seen as symbolising the ideal family and the home (Charles & Kerr 1988) and a ‘proper’ or ‘ideal’ meal is typically home cooked, eaten with others and an important event in the raising of children (Murcott 1996; DeVault 1991; Sobal 2000). Mealtime is often mentioned as a time for setting an example, i.e. behaving in such a way that children learn what is right to eat and how this should be done (DeVault 1991). According to Gofton (1995) the family that does not eat together has been described as one of the causes of modern social problems. Holm (2001b) found that Nordic family meals were more often shared in households with children than in households without children. The task of arranging joint family meals seemed, however, to be dependent upon the presence of other adults since singles with children had family meals less frequently than couples with children (Holm 2001a).

The influence of social norms on food choice can be assumed to be high. Sometimes the individual’s ideas of proper meals do not concur with actual practice (Poulain 2002) and what is socially acceptable gives way to what is pragmatically achievable (Carrigan et al. 2006). Lyon and Colquhoun (1999) described the sentimental longing for past dinner events as a way of coping with the quickening pace of technology and social change. The feeling of not having enough time to do everything we want or need is common in industrialized societies (Godbey et al. 1998) and has been implicated as causing changes such as a decrease in consumption of family meals, a decrease in food preparation at home and an increase in consumption of ready meals (Jabs & Devine 2006). Mood and stress may play a role in determining not only the quantity of food consumed but also the selection of foodstuffs (Wardle 1987).

At a time when many households are relatively small, e.g. in Sweden about one in three adults lived alone in 2001 (SCB 2002), the social meal is often not realizable. A lack of shared meals has been found to lead people to devote less attention, time and effort to food preparation and food choices (Falk et al. 1996). Singles devote less time to food and cooking than others, which has been explained by the fact that they are less inclined to use their time for cooking for themselves (Gofton 1995). Sobal (2000) stated that eating alone is generally regarded as abnormal, undesirable and even unhealthy.

In a study by Costa et al. (2002) Dutch senior citizens expressed their beliefs about ready meals. Positive feelings associated with ready meal consumption, e.g. being relaxed and spending less time and energy on cooking, were counteracted by a sense of guilt and regret at not preparing meals from scratch. The negative feelings were not only associated with concerns, such as eating junk food or being incapable of preparing a proper meal by oneself, but also with being afraid to be, or appear to be, lazy, laid
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back or careless. The senior citizens also felt that ready meals were more suitable for people living alone. By combining collage techniques and focus groups Costa et al. (2003) carried out a study of feelings, emotions and experiences associated with home meal replacements. It was found that the participants felt that the frequent use of ready meals not only jeopardized their relatives’ and friends’ current regard for their cooking skills but could also be a source of reproach and concern by others. Similar results were obtained by Mahon et al. (2006), who examined the consumption of ready meals and take-aways by British consumers. Subjective norms were found to be important with regard to the consumption of ready meals but not take-aways.

Preference

Preference relates to a situation of choice. One product can be preferred over another, irrespective of whether we like it or not. Preference and liking are terms often used synonymously although a distinction between the two words can be made. Liking refers to an immediate, qualitative, affective (hedonic) evaluation of a food while preference is better used to express choice. Confusion arises when the term preference is also used to indicate a purchase intention. Consumer preference is often mentioned in marketing data, where it refers to what consumers actually buy, and misunderstandings are thus likely to arise. In a preference test, consumers might prefer one product while in the purchase situation they prefer a different one. (Mela 2000)

Another term that should be defined is desire. Desire is stronger than liking and can vary across time and situations. Mela (2000) suggested a bottle of fine wine as an example. We might like the wine very much but have no desire for it in the morning, before breakfast.

Satisfaction is something an individual pursues and hopes to obtain from the consumption of products and use of services. From the company perspective, customer satisfaction means repeated purchase or use of a service (Newsholme & Wong 2001). According to Taylor (1997), satisfaction is an important determinant of brand loyalty, word-of-mouth communication and repeat purchase. As retaining a current customer is cheaper than finding a new one, satisfaction also is also a driving force behind company profitability. Oliver (1997) formulated another definition of satisfaction:

“Satisfaction is the consumer’s fulfilment response. It is a judgement that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provided (or is providing) a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfilment, including levels of under- or over-fulfilment”.

The preference for a meal is influenced by a number of factors, some of which have been studied. The biological-adaptive, physiological and sensory-related factors are discussed below.
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Biological-adaptive factors
Humans are born with taste preferences. A new-born child likes a sweet taste. A bitter taste, on the other hand, causes strong negative reactions. Both of these reactions can be assumed to derive from survival instincts. The sweet taste indicates that the food contains carbohydrates, i.e. provides a great deal of energy. The bitter taste indicates toxic substances, which could be lethal. (e.g. Rozin 2005)

Humans are omnivores and suffer from an inherent paradox: they have a fear of the unknown and an unwillingness to change, neophobia, which is present at the same time as a curiosity to explore new foods and vary the cuisine, neophilia (Rozin 1976). In most cultures neophobia is more dominant than neophilia and new foods are more often avoided than accepted.

Physiological and sensory factors
Hunger and satiety affect food preference. Food usually tastes better when one is hungry rather than satiated, a phenomenon known as alliesthesia, which was first studied by Cabanac (1971). Booth et al. (1982) studied the relationship between the pace of satiety and preference for different aromas. The subjects showed a preference for the aroma associated with the most energy-giving meal served.

Aroma and texture are the factors that in general affect our choice of food most significantly (Schutz & Wahl 1981) although preferences related to sensory attributes are not universal. Because of cultural and physiological differences, for example, there are very large variations in sensory preferences. It is possible to identify groups of individuals with similar preference patterns and knowledge of such groups is used by the food industry when tailoring products to target profitable market segments.

Variation in food is important and has been shown not only to affect the enjoyment of food but also the amount consumed. A large number of studies have found that respondents change their opinions about a food product after repeated consumption of the same product over an extended period (Siegel & Pilgrim 1958; Kamen & Peryam 1961; Porcherot & Issanchou 1998; Hetherington et al. 2000).

Zandstra et al. (2000) studied the effect of variety on long-term product acceptance and consumption in a home-use situation. The product tested was a meat sauce. The results showed that there was a substantial increase in boredom and a decline in acceptance ratings after repeated consumption. The availability of different varieties of particular foods and the degree of freedom of choice influenced the extent to which repeated consumption affected food acceptance (Pliner et al. 1980; Deci & Ryan 1987; Zandstra et al. 2000).
Expectations

Among the most important factors influencing the choice of food are the consumers' expectations of the food and its consumption (e.g. Ajzen & Fishbein 1980; Ajzen 1988; Cardello 1994; Deliza & MacFie 1996). Expectations can be defined as ‘pre-trial beliefs about the product’ (Olson & Dover 1979). Consumers have different beliefs, which influence their attitude towards the product and ultimately the choice of food purchased and consumed. Expectations also influence the degree of satisfaction with the product.

Almost all economic models contain inherent assumptions as to what views individuals hold about the future. In any model where uncertainty is prevalent, the individual expectation-forming process is important. According to Cardello (1993), there are two types of food-related expectations: sensory and hedonic expectations. Sensory expectations lead the consumer to believe that the product possesses certain sensory characteristics, which influences perception during consumption. The hedonic expectation relates to likes and dislikes. Typical marketing instruments, such as advertising, packaging and information, are believed to generate sensory expectations.

Expectations are formed by trial-and-error learning over time and are constantly being constructed for future events. They are the result of many different factors and can be confirmed or disconfirmed. The disconfirmation can be positive or negative. A model illustrating the effects of expectations on product selection and evaluation can be seen in Figure 7 (Deliza & MacFie 1996).
Figure 7. A model for illustrating the effects of expectations on product selection and evaluation (Deliza & MacFie, 1996).
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The eating situation

The terms situation, context and setting, often used interchangeably by food researchers, usually refer to elements involved in the act of eating that are external to the person and beyond the specific food of interest (Bisogni et al. 2007). The definitions of eating situations given throughout the years vary depending on the orientation of the research, the level of analysis and the research approach (Bisogni et al. 2007). Since it is the term meal situation that is repeatedly mentioned by many authors as an important influencing factor in food choice, eating and meal experience this term will be used in this thesis.

Belk (1974) defined situation as: ‘all those factors particular to a time and place of observation which do not follow from a knowledge of personal (intra-individual) and stimulus (choice alternative) attributes, and which have a demonstrable and systematic effect on current behaviour.’ He grouped features of situations into five dimensions of characteristics: physical surroundings, social surroundings, temporal perspectives, task definition and antecedent states. Lutz and Kakkar (1975) argued against the exclusion of the psychological nature of the individual in the definition by Belk. Miller and Ginter (1979) agreed that the situation may involve individual factors but that a more general definition could be more useful.

Miller and Ginter (1979) showed that the preference for fast food differed noticeably depending on the situation in which the food was consumed. A series of field and laboratory studies carried out by Meiselman et al. (1988) showed how the sensory and hedonic characteristics of foods predicted acceptability and consumption. The conclusion was that situational variables are important factors in controlling food consumption. The situational variables make it more or less convenient for us to eat and in doing so they produce signals about appropriate meal times. Meiselman et al. (1988) pointed out the importance of more comparative research in order to compare laboratory and field models of food acceptance and food intake. They considered it likely ‘that factors controlling intake in short-term laboratory environments are different from those in longer term natural eating environments’.

About ten years ago Meiselman (1996) concluded that research into food choice and preference has paid little attention to situational influence. Three years later Verlege and Candel (1999) described studies by Lahteenmaki and Tuorila (1998), Miller and Ginter (1979) and Termorshuizen et al. (1986) as the most important studies of situational influence. These studies showed that the eating situation can affect both the attitude towards the product to be consumed and the choice of location in which it is to be consumed. Cardello et al. (2000) found pre-test ratings of appropriateness to be good predictors of post-test ratings, while food preferences were not. According to Bisogni et al. (2007) even though the importance of situational factors in eating has been
acknowledged lately by food choice researchers there is still a poor understanding of situational variation in eating.

**Physical surroundings**

The place where the food is eaten has been shown to influence food choice (Meiselman et al. 1988). Edwards et al (2003) showed how the acceptability of a dish varied significantly with the type of location it was served in. When served in an upscale restaurant the dish received higher scores than when served in an institutional setting. This implies that a person who purchases a meal intending to eat it quickly in the canteen together with colleagues will have different expectations of the food served than when visiting a four-star restaurant.

It has been shown by Holm (2001a) that in the Nordic countries eating takes place primarily in the home. The same study showed that most eating at workplaces in the Nordic countries take place in canteens or other rooms designed for breaks. Those who go to school in Sweden are offered free hot lunches in the school canteen.

Sobal and Wansink (2007) reviewed literature about how food choice, food intake, obesity and health were influenced by microscale food environments, which they called kitchencapes (the room), tablescapes (the furniture), platescapes (the container, utensils) and foodscapes (the object). The kitchencapes were found to influence food intake through availability, diversity, and visibility of foods; tablescapes through variety, abundance, and accessibility; the platescapes through portion and/or package size, arrangement utensil type; and the foodscapes through food-item forms and landmarks. The conclusion of the review was that it might be possible to influence food intake by re-engineering built environments.

During the meal it is common to engage in activities other than eating, e.g. watching television, listening to the radio or reading (Holm 2001a). Watching television has been shown to be associated with an increase in meal frequency (Stroebele & de Castro 2004) and music has been shown to affect both food intake and meal duration. Two years later Stroebele and de Castro (2006) found that the mere presence of music increased the intake of food by college students. Slower music has been shown to slow down eating but results in higher bar bills for customers (Milliman 1986) as well as higher restaurant bills (Caldwell & Hibbert 2002).
Social surroundings
A meal is a social event (DeVault 1991). It has been demonstrated that social surroundings can encourage or repress food consumption. Verlegh and Candel (1999) concluded that social surroundings had a major effect on the consumption of so-called TV dinners\(^1\) i.e. ready meals. De Castro (1994) showed that meals eaten together with the family were larger and took more time than meals eaten alone.

De Vault (1991:48-49) described informants idealizing their versions of family meals but at the same time striving to make the meal something special; an event where the family get together. Social influence has been shown to be among the most powerful external determinants of amounts of food consumed. Researchers have found that there is a social facilitation effect, resulting in a higher number of people eating larger amounts (de Castro et al. 1994, de Castro 1994, Pliner et al. 2006). However, the relationship between social surroundings and food preferences is less clear (Meiselman 1996).

There has also been a study of the modelling effect. When individuals eat with persons eating much more than they normally do themselves they adapt to that behaviour (Pliner & Mann 2004, Roth et al. 2001). It is well known that gender affects the amount eaten. Women, for example, eat less when there is a desire to enhance their femininity (Pliner & Chaiken 1990, Chaiken & Pliner 1987, Mori et al. 1987).

Pliner and Zec (2007) found that eating within a meal situation (with the food served in a particular order, on plates, at a table and eaten with utensils) resulted in a higher sense of satiety than eating the same amount in a non-meal context. These results were suggested as giving empirical support to recommendations to persons on a diet to eat sitting down at a table set with appropriate dishes and cutlery instead of foraging in the refrigerator and eating out of hand.

Appropriateness
Fischler (1980) speaks about a move from gastronomy towards gastro-anomie or food disorder, with modern individuals left without clear socio-cultural cues as to what their choice should be. Some cues to what is an appropriate choice do still exist. Cardello and Schutz (1996) found that products that did not differ in preference/acceptability showed significant differences regarding consumers’ judgement of their appropriateness ratings for certain use

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\(^1\) According to Verlegh and Candel (1999), TV dinners are defined as meals bought in stores and prepared at home by re-heating, i.e. the meal does not need to be eaten for dinner or in front of a TV.
situations. Products can then be substitutable if they are considered appropriate for similar eating situations. Gehrt (1999) studied snacking products and showed that oranges would compete not only with other types of fruit but also with sweets and crisps in a situation in which there is a need for a snack. This is an example of a consumer-oriented, situation-defined conceptualization of competition. With a product-oriented, attribute-defined conceptualization of competition oranges would only compete with other fruits. Ready meals might likewise compete not only with other chilled or frozen ready meals but also with own cooking, take-aways, restaurant meals and products such as nutrition bars, yoghurts and so on.

Gender differences exist concerning the choice of food products for consumption. Swedish men appreciate food that is satiating and usually consists of meat, sauce and potatoes, while women prefer food that is not too filling and which is light and fresh (Pederby 1995). Swedish men also eat more meat than women and women consume more fruit and vegetables (Becker & Pearson 2003). Another difference in food preferences between Swedish men and women is that the former are more reluctant to try novel foods (Hursti & Sjödén 1997) and females are generally more aware of brands and fast-moving consumer goods than men (Björsne 2005). It remains unclear, however, whether men and women choose differently when purchasing food for others.

The situations preceding the eating

Before the actual eating takes place it must be preceded by other activities. The food must be purchased, perhaps following a planning procedure. The food must also be transported from the source of purchase to the storage, preparation or eating place. The food product must be prepared or cooked in some way by someone and there will also be a need to clean up.

It is usually assumed in food choice models that the person who makes the choice is also the one who will eat it. With this assumption the persons buying food, i.e. making food choices, for other persons, are not considered. Bareham (1995:133) showed that an individual in a family group will not make a purchase decision without being influenced to some degree by other family members. The choice of food will probably be influenced by both the end-consumer and the purchaser. Studies by Charles and Kerr (1988), and Gillon et al. (1993) reveal that for food-purchasing women their own preferences are often secondary to those of their family members.

The female still seems to be in control of the choice of food. According to Candel (2001) mothers found the preparation stage to be the most time and energy consuming. Kemmer et al. (1998) found a more equal division of domestic labour compared to previous British studies (e.g. Murcott 1982; 1983; Charles & Kerr 1988), although the female informants demonstrated greater control than their male partners over the choice of food. Murcott (2000) described two different British studies (Kyle unpubl.; Keane & Willetts
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1995) where interviewed male informants stated that for them it was an option whether or not they became involved in cooking – a personal choice rather than necessity – and they were often praised excessively for their efforts. They also reported that it was not so for their wives. Moerbeek and Casimir (2005) showed that Dutch men do more of the grocery shopping nowadays compared with a few decades ago but the shopping list is usually written by their female partners. According to Statistics Sweden (SCB 2003a), Swedish men and women spend approximately the same amount of time on buying groceries. Ekström & Fürst (2001) found in a Nordic study that cooking is still largely women’s work and that more equal sharing of the work was most visible in the youngest age group and among those with middle and higher occupational status.

Convenient food products, developed due to the increase in the number of dual-income households, faster societal pace and less interest in spending time cooking, have reduced the time needed for food preparation. Domestic appliance innovations have also helped quicken cooking activities. The microwave oven is today a common appliance in Swedish homes (SCB 2006). One result of these time-saving inventions is a reduction in the need to plan ahead for meals (Oropesa 1993), with a reduction in the need to have ‘the cupboard in one’s head’ (Ekström 1990).
Methods and material

Two different methods were used to collect data: a questionnaire (quantitative) and focus groups (qualitative). The questionnaire was designed to investigate multiple aspects of ready meal consumption and purchase and the results obtained through the questionnaire were used in three papers. The first paper focused on individuals' attitudes and beliefs regarding ready meals. The second paper concentrated on the eating situation by mapping the most common ready meal situations and the third paper dealt with the purchase situation and individuals' choice of ready meals within this situation. The results from the focus group discussions were presented in a fourth paper with a focus on individuals' choice of ready meals in a specific meal situation, i.e. dinner.

The quantitative study

The design of the questionnaire was influenced by food choice models (e.g. Shepherd 1985; Ajzen 1988; Cardello 1994), the Five Aspects Meal Model (Gustafsson 2004) and consumer studies in this specific area (e.g. SCB 2003a; Nestlé 2001; Christensen 2000). The aim was to gain a better understanding of the consumers and purchasers of ready meals and especially their needs and wants in frequently occurring situations.

Initially, a pre-study was carried out to formulate hypotheses and to collect background information for the formulation of the questions. The pre-study, in the form of semi-structured interviews, was carried out with 51 persons in a supermarket and a shopping centre in Gothenburg about a month before the questionnaire for the postal survey was designed. Two-thirds of the respondents were women.

After a pilot study involving 19 respondents the final questionnaire was sent out by mail to the selected sample of 400 subjects. The term ready meal was described in the instructions as pre-packaged ready meals bought in a supermarket or similar outlet, consisting of two or more components, positioned more or less separate from each other. The meal components referred to in the definition were; main dish (e.g. meat), staple (e.g. pasta), vegetables (e.g. beans) and trimmings (e.g. gravy) (Mäkelä 2001). Canned products were excluded since they usually consist of one component only. Pictures of some typical ready meals were included in the instructions.

Appendix I summarizes the content of the questionnaire. The first part of this extensive questionnaire consisted of background questions. Then there

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were three parts with questions dealing with the purchase and consumption of ready meals and the general attitude towards cooking, eating and ready meals.

In some of the questions the respondents were asked to respond to statements using a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from ’Very important/decisive’ to ’Not important/decisive’ and with the possibility of choosing ‘don’t know’ (Hearty et al. 2007). In the last question the respondents were asked to describe a frequent ready meal consumer. This latter question was the only one that was open-ended.

Subjects

The respondents to the questionnaire all lived in Gothenburg, the second largest city in Sweden with approximately 475,000 inhabitants and an almost equal gender distribution (SCB 2003b). It is reasonable to expect a large assortment of ready meals to be available in this city.

The questionnaire was sent out to a randomly selected sample of 400 subjects, aged 18-80 years. The sample was obtained from SPAR (Statens Person- och Adressregister, in English: The government register of persons and addresses), a government-owned database containing information on all people in Sweden. The response rate was 62% (n = 249, 120 women and 129 men).

The responses were analysed in three papers (I, II, III). Figure 8 shows an overview of the distribution of respondents in the different papers. As seen in the figure, male and female respondents are relatively evenly represented in all groups. In Paper I the attitudes towards ready meals and towards ready meal consumers were studied and all 249 responses were included in the results. In Paper II the eating situation of ready meals was in focus, which is why only the 144 ready meal-consuming respondents were of interest. Different purchase situations were compared in Paper III, which is why the responses of the 130 respondents who purchased ready meals for themselves and/or for others were included in the results.
Figure 8. The distribution of respondents in different categories and studies

- Consume ready meals
  - n = 144
  - Female (♀) 53%, Male (♂) 47%
- Do not consume ready meals
  - n = 105
  - Female (♀) 50%, Male (♂) 50%

- Purchase ready meals
  - for myself
    - n = 118
    - Female (♀) 49%, Male (♂) 51%
  - for others
    - n = 58
    - Female (♀) 53%, Male (♂) 47%
- Do not purchase ready meals
  - n = 119
  - Female (♀) 47%, Male (♂) 53%

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Analysis

The quantitative questionnaire resulted in extensive data files, which were analysed using the SPSS 11.0 statistical data program. In those cases where respondents were asked to rate a statement in terms of importance, agreement or decisiveness, the labels of the Likert scales were given numerical values before the data were analysed, i.e. Not important at all = 1, Not very important = 2, Fairly important = 3, and Very important = 4. Since the data resulting from the questionnaire were most often of the nominal or ordinal type, non-parametric tests were employed, e.g. Chi-square, Friedman and Mann-Whitney tests. P-values < 0.05 were considered significant. As only a small proportion of the sample selected the response Don’t know it was not included for further analysis.

In Paper I an open-ended question was analysed using quantitative content analysis (see e.g. Weber 1990). The question was coded manually to obtain word-phrase clusters for the purpose of counting. Units of data, which could
be just one word or more lengthy passages, were identified and labelled. The units represented characteristics of the frequent ready meal consumers. The labels of the units were not pre-specified. In the coding process the units were sometimes relabelled since clusters emerged from the data and the resulting clusters were observed first when all the data were analysed. The clusters were reconstructed four times until the resulting 23 clusters were formed. The clusters in themselves were a result but the occurrence of units belonging to a certain cluster was also noted for each respondent. By doing so it was also possible to see which characteristics were mentioned most frequently and also to make comparisons between consumers and non-consumers of ready meals in terms of attitudes towards ready meal consumers.

The qualitative study

The second method used in this thesis was focus group discussion. Five focus group discussions were run, lasting about 1½ hours each. Established recommendations were followed when developing the interview guide (Krueger 1988; 1998; Wibek 2000). An assistant moderator took notes during the discussions, which were also recorded on videotape and audiotape. The moderator informed the informants about this during the introduction phase of the discussion. The focus group discussions were then divided into two main parts.

During the first part informants discussed dinner on a typical weekday and the decision process when making the choice to buy a meal solution instead of cooking. If needed, probing questions were asked to stimulate the discussion.

Before the second part of the discussion, stimuli were introduced to the informants. The informants were asked to prepare ready meal products themselves, to put the prepared meals on the table, and to eat if they wanted. The stimulus material was selected in order to represent different types of ready meals already available. There was no purpose in evaluating each product separately. The preparation was done by heating the meals in microwave ovens.

The second part of the discussion was less structured and the informants tasted the prepared ready meals while discussing how the supply of ready meals could be improved to better match their demands regarding meals for dinner use.

Subjects

The subjects were 25-80 years old and lived in Gothenburg. It was not required that they were consumers of ready meals. Recruitment was by postal invitation and e-mail to approximately one thousand people. The invitations
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contained information about the topic of ready meals. Five focus groups were conducted with an average of six informants per group. See Table 2 for details of the informants in the focus groups.

Table 2. Details of the informants in the focus groups.

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</table>

Analysis

The research material to be analysed consisted of an interview guide, audiotapes, videos, assistant and moderator notes, verbatim transcripts and summaries. Before the content analysis of the transcripts began all research material was examined to acquire a general impression (Casey & Krueger 1994). The analytical process then consisted of coding of units (e.g. Strauss & Corbin 1990); categorizing (Spiggle 1994) and searching for trends and patterns within and between the five focus groups. The units that were coded could be issues that were discussed thoroughly, frequently or with special affection. It could also be issues that the informants were not interested in discussing. The categories emerged from the data, i.e. no predefined categories were used. Throughout the continuous categorization process comparisons were made between emerging categories and already formulated categories, resulting in reformulations of categories. The constant feedback and reformulation was a way to ensure that correspondence was correct. The key findings were finally summarized and selected quotes were translated into English by a professional translator.
Methodological considerations

In the quantitative papers the sample of subjects was taken from the population of the municipality of Gothenburg. This could entail limitations in the extent the findings can be generalized. However, Gothenburg was deemed a suitable population for the survey and it is likely that the results of the survey can be generalized beyond the population of Gothenburg to several other cities in Sweden where supply and demand is, or will be, similar to the situation in Gothenburg.

Likert scales were used for the measurement of agreement with the statements in the questionnaire. Other multiple-item scales suitable for measuring attitudes are the Thurstone, the semantic-differential and the staple scales (Aaker et al. 1998). According to van Laerhoven et al. (2004) the Likert scale is easy to fill out and is comparable in reliability to the Visual Analogue Scale. In a study with American and Chinese respondents, Lee et al. (2002) found that the construct validity of the Likert scale was better when there were four response choices instead of five or seven.

For the quantitative analysis, random sampling, researcher distance and standard statistical analyses are norms to ensure validity. Before mailing the final questionnaire to the randomly selected sample of subjects it was tested to ensure that the respondents understood the questions, could reply to them in the manner envisaged and that the answers given were possible to analyse. The statistical analyses performed were commonly used procedures, part of a standard version of the statistical program SPSS.

When asking for people’s attitudes there is the possibility that they wish to impress the researcher or have a need to conform to social norms (de Pelsmacker et al. 2005). If the respondents give socially desirable answers there will be a discrepancy between attitude and actual behaviour. Since the questionnaire used in this thesis was sent by mail and returned likewise and anonymously there were no possibility of impressing the researcher and nor was there any incentive to conform to social norms.

The questionnaire respondents were compared with the population of Gothenburg (Göteborgs stad 2004), to ensure that the two groups were similar in certain aspects. The comparison showed a similar age, gender and employment distribution. See Figure 9 for the comparison of age.
In 2002, about 51% of the Gothenburg population was female. As 52% of the respondents were female there was no gender difference. The unemployment rate was 2.9% in Gothenburg and 3.3% among the respondents. Because of the similarities between the population and the respondents a closer analysis of the drop-off was not made.

Focus groups have been described as being particularly useful for exploratory research (Casey & Krueger 1994) and appropriate for the collection of the beliefs, attitudes and opinions of individuals regarding food products and eating habits (Brug et al. 1995; Costa et al. 2002). Five focus group discussions were run. The minimum number of participants in each group was set at four (Wibeck 2000) and the maximum six (Korolija 1995). Morgan (1998) recommends three as a minimum and that the number of groups depends on the complexity of the subject and the disparity in agreement between the informants. Glaser and Strauss (1967) speak about the theoretical saturation that will occur after a certain number of discussions. The saturation occurs when very little new information is gathered in further discussions. When the fifth focus group discussion was held it primarily confirmed what the earlier sessions had shown and little new information was acquired. Consequently, no further discussions were held.

The focus groups were heterogenic. They consisted of informants of different genders and ages and with varying social/living situations and lifestyles. Some researchers (e.g. Jarett 1993; Wesslén 1996) recommend homogenic groups since similar experiences and backgrounds are expected to facilitate the sharing of opinions. Bauer and Gaskell (1999) on the other hand discuss the problem of segmenting groups and then generalizing the results.
METHODS AND MATERIAL

For the focus groups used in this thesis it was deemed important not to make any segmentation and risk making the wrong segmentations. The eating of a dinner is a subject that is commonly discussed in heterogenic groups in everyday life.

The reason for using stimuli was to create a mood and evoke positioning (Croft 1997) and to get the informants to interact and talk more freely (Costa et al. 2003; Havlena & Holak 1996; Sijtsema et al. 2002; Kitzinger 1994). The aim of the stimuli was to provide cues for discussion in an environment that encouraged the informants to express themselves in order to uncover, reveal and trigger their attitudes and reactions to ready meal solutions (McDonagh et al. 2002). The meal situation was created with the aid of the Five Aspects Meal Model (Gustafsson et al. 2006) and differed naturally from the informants' normal dinners. The informants who were unfamiliar with each other at the beginning of the discussion became familiar during the meal. The meal appeared to make them more comfortable in expressing opinions that differed from the others. The idea of shifting focus from ‘a dinner in general’ to ‘a dinner with ready meal solutions’ with the aid of stimuli was a success.
Results and discussion

The overall aim of this thesis was to gain an understanding of the ready meal consumer. The results from the qualitative and quantitative studies are presented and discussed here. The Roman numerals indicate from which of the four papers the results are taken.

Background information (I-III)

The age distribution of the sample (n = 249) was similar to the age distribution in Gothenburg and when comparing Ready Meal Consuming Respondents (RMCR, n = 144) with Non-Ready Meal Consuming Respondents (NRMCR, n = 105) the age distribution did not differ significantly (see Figure 10). However, there were indications of a higher RMCR representation in the younger age groups.

Figure 10. Comparison of age ranges of respondents who eat ready meals (RMCR) and those who do not eat ready meals (NRMCR).
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When the whole sample was compared to the population of Gothenburg with regard to employment situation it was found that the unemployment rate was similar and a comparison between male and female respondents revealed that a slightly higher number of the female respondents were unemployed. About 60% (n = 73) of the females and 70% (n = 93) of the males were part of the workforce, i.e. not unemployed persons, students, persons on sick leave or retired persons.

Since half of the sample agreed fully or to a considerable extent with the statement that there is no point having ready meals without a microwave oven it was interesting to see that more than 80% (n = 201) of the sample had a microwave oven at home and only 8% had no access to microwave oven at work/school.

Attitudes (I)

The questionnaire respondents were asked about their attitudes to ready meals and food. They were also asked to describe the frequent ready meal consumer.

...in general

All respondents were asked to state their agreement with nine attitudinal statements regarding ready meals and food in general. Almost 60% (n = 166) agreed fully or to a considerable extent with the statement I enjoy cooking. It has been reported that convenience orientation is related negatively to cooking enjoyment (Candel 2001). It has been found here that a higher proportion of the NRMCR (70%) than the RMCR (60%) agreed in the statement I enjoy cooking, although the difference was not significant (p = 0.073). A significant difference (p = 0.018) between RMCR and NRMCR was found in the statement Good food is important to me. More of the RMCR disagreed with this statement. There were no other statements in which RMCR and NRMCR differed in agreement.

...towards ready meals

The RMCR were asked to rate their agreement with 18 statements concerning ready meals. It was found that more than 70% of the RMCR agreed with the statements that ready meals are usually tasty, have improved and are sufficiently filling. The fact that taste is an important aspect of ready meals has been indicated earlier by Mintel (Lilienström 2004), who found that consumers had discovered that they can have new taste experiences with convenience foods.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Twenty per cent of the RMCR agreed with the statement that eating ready meals is unhealthy and almost 60% of them thought that small children should not be served ready meals. The same proportion of RMCR stated that ready meals have an undeserved bad reputation. If ready meals have a bad reputation it is possible expectations of them are low and that it is easier to be positively surprised when eating. However, according to Deliza & MacFie (1996) low expectations of a product are likely to result in rejection before trial.

Ready meals were seen by RMCR as a solution when feeling stressed, with 55% of the respondents reporting that they eat ready meals when stressed. The feeling of not having enough time has also been shown by others to be common (Godbey et al. 1998) and to increase the consumption of ready meals (Jabs & Devine 2006).

…towards ready meal consumers

In an open-ended question all respondents were asked to describe the frequent ready meal consumer. The question was answered by 202 respondents and the two groups, RMCR and NRMCR, were equally represented. Out of the resulting 23 categories of ready meal consumer characteristics the ten most important are presented in Figure 11. Since it was of interest to see if RMCR had different images of the frequent ready meal consumer than NRMCR, these two groups were compared.

![Figure 11](image.png)

**Figure 11.** The relative frequency (%) of the ten most dominant characteristics of ready meal users, as seen by consumers (RMCR, n = 117) and non-consumers (NRMCR, n = 85) of ready meals.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

‘Being alone’ was the single most common characteristic mentioned by both RMCR and NRMCR. This belief about ready meal consumers was confirmed by the fact that sixty per cent of the RMCR reported that they most often ate ready meals alone. However, the RMCR did not live alone to a significantly greater extent than NRMCR but they ate ready meals to a greater extent when alone. A potential reason why ready meals were primarily chosen when alone might be that cooking was less pleasurable when alone. The hypothesis is supported by the results from de Boer et al. (2004), who found that not enjoying cooking for oneself contributed positively to the purchase of ready meals.

Four of the five most common characteristics of ready meal consumers that were mentioned were related to a shortage of time. The category stress referred to passages in the answers describing a negative feeling, a mood, while the category time pressure was less negative and referred to a lack of time. The other two time-related categories; working and lack of time due to work; further indicated that it is a common belief that ready meal consumers are short of time. Similar results have been found in many earlier studies (de Boer et al. 2004; Marshall et al. 1995; Verlegh & Candel 1999; Gofton 1995). The results of Paper II confirmed that being pressed for time was considered by RMCR to be the most important reason for consuming ready meals. Occupation has previously been assumed to affect the consumption of ready meals (e.g. de Boer et al. 2004; Gofton 1995) but no relationship between the working status of RMCR and ready meal consumption was found in the results. Candel (2001), who also found a lack of a relationship between the meal preparer’s working status and convenience food consumption, suggested that this was due to the fact that convenience food does not offer enough preparation convenience and that other alternatives appeared to satisfy the consumer’s need for convenience more adequately.

Both RMCR and NRMCR mentioned characteristics, referring to the age and the gender of frequent ready meal consumers. As can be seen in Figure 12, more NRMCR than RMCR thought that children and young people, men and older people consumed ready meals. When analysing the background information given by the RMCR and NRMCR no differences were found between the groups in terms of gender or age, i.e. it is not possible to confirm any of the characteristics of demographic type in the sample in this thesis. However, the influence of age on ready meal consumption has been studied by Moisio et al. (2004), who found that younger people are more positive to the use of ready-made products.

The reason for studying the attitude towards ready meals, cooking and ready meal consumers was to gain a picture of prevailing beliefs. According to Fishbein (1966) people form attitudes towards a product attribute on the basis of their beliefs about the attribute and Stein & Nemeroff (1995) showed that consumers identify themselves with the food they eat and also judge other people on the basis of their diet. Hence, the attitude towards ready meals
would affect how consumers of ready meals are perceived by others. The results of this thesis gave a picture of ready meals being tasty and convenient when there is no time or interest in cooking. Ready meals were reported to be mainly consumed alone and not with family. The descriptions of the frequent ready meal consumer as being alone and stressed reflected very well the belief that ready meals are handy in these situations.

The purchase situation (III)

Before the choice of what food to eat is made, there is a choice process of what to purchase. This choice is not necessarily taken by the same person who will ultimately cook or eat the food. It has been found that about two-thirds of the hot meals eaten at home in Sweden are home-cooked (Kjaernes 2001). This implies that the main purchase situations take place in supermarkets of different kinds. This is the place where the purchaser meets the food products.

The gender distribution of the ready meal purchasing respondents was even (51% male, 49% female), which corresponds to the findings of Statistics Sweden that Swedish men and women spend approximately the same amount of time buying groceries (SCB 2003a).

Place of purchase

According to the Ready Meal Purchasing Respondents (RMPR, n = 130), the most common places where ready meals were purchased were hypermarkets (45%) and supermarkets (42%). Other places where the RMPR usually bought their ready meals were the local shop (9%), at work (2%) and at the petrol station (1%).

When a person enters the retail outlet decisions have already been made. The choice has been taken to buy something instead of using meal solutions such as heating up leftovers, buying a take-away or eating what is at home. When choosing ready meals in the supermarket, the choice of convenience was already made as the person headed towards the shelves or boxes where ready meals are displayed. It has been found that the availability of time-saving inventions has reduced the need to plan ahead for meals (Oropesa 1993), which is why younger people are more familiar with a wide range of convenient meal solutions and thus have less need to have ‘the cupboard in one’s head’ (Ekström 1990) than older generations.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Buying for personal use

Of the RMPR, 49% were women and 51% men. About 90% (n = 118) of RMPR bought ready meals for themselves. In general, sensory and convenience aspects were considered most important when buying ready meals for oneself (see Figure 12). However, the demands of female and male purchasers showed significant differences. Fourteen attributes were rated higher in importance by women than by men and of these attributes many were related to nutritional and health aspects, such as having nutritional information, low fat content and high fibre content. The male respondents considered rich taste and easy to prepare to be the most important attributes. Men, more than women, rated no attribute to be more important. The conclusion is that women generally had higher demands regarding ready meals than men when purchasing for themselves. These results are confirmed by the results in another recent study, which found Swedish women to be more interested than men in food products (Björnse 2005). The major difference in interest between male and female respondents regarding healthy eating is also confirmed by findings in other studies (e.g. Kemmer et al. 1998; Beasley et al. 2004).
**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

![Attribute Ratings](image)

**Figure 12.** Attributes rated to be fairly or very important to men and women when purchasing ready meals for themselves.\(^a\) Significant difference between male and female, \(p < 0.05\). \(^1\) The keyhole is an official Swedish symbol for food that is superior in terms of fat content and dietary fibre. The fat content of a ready meal should be 30 per cent or less. \(^2\) KRAV is a Swedish label for organically produced foods.

**Buying for others**

It is not always the end-consumer that purchases the ready meals. In order to gain a better understanding of the choice process for ready meals it is also important to study the demands of purchasers who buy for someone else. About 45\% (\(n = 58\)) of the RMPR bought ready meals for others. When comparing the numbers of ready meals bought for personal consumption and for others, it was found that more ready meals were bought for personal consumption. In both cases it was most common to buy less than one ready meal per week (see Figure 13).
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 13. Numbers of ready meals purchased per week, divided into target consumer groups.

Of the respondents who bought ready meals for someone else the majority bought for their partners (see Figure 14).

Figure 14. Target of ready meal purchase.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The most important attributes when buying for someone else were filling, rich taste, looks appetising, easy to open and good consistency, i.e. the demands regarding ready meals when buying for someone else were quite similar to the demands when buying for personal consumption. However, two attributes were significantly (p<0.05) more important when buying for someone else than when buying for oneself, which indicates that the intended end-consumer has an influence. One of those attributes was easy to open packages, which might indicate that the intended consumer had problems with the opening and handling of packages. The other attribute that was more important when buying for others was that the ready meals should be similar to the food the end-consumer usually ate. This implies that when the respondents buy ready meals for someone else they want to ensure that the food will be appropriate for that person by being similar to what he or she usually eats.

When buying for oneself it was significantly more common that the respondent bought a particular dish. This particular dish was preferred to other dishes. This result is supported by Kramer et al. (2001) who found that if monotony in food choices is self-selected, as when buying the same dish for oneself repeatedly, the acceptability of the food does not decrease as it would if there was no choice.

Neither convenience nor time aspects were considered to be very important at the time of purchase, no matter who the intended end-consumer was. This is most probably explained by the fact that by definition ready meals are convenient and time-saving. These aspects might thus have already been taken into account when the decision to purchase ready meals was taken. Among the least important purchase reasons were that RMPR had seen the product advertised. It is, however, likely that advertising has an influence although respondents were not aware of it. In fact, it has been reported that convenience food manufacturers have increased their advertising budget, indicating that the industry has achieved positive results from such an investment (Hansson 2002).

The eating situation (II)

The main places to eat ready meals were found to be the home and the workplace. The RMCR (n = 144) reported that the most common meal situations in terms of time of day and location for ready meals were, in order of decreasing frequency: dinner at home, lunch at work, lunch at home and dinner at work. Lunch was defined as a meal eaten between 11am and 2pm and dinner was defined as taking place between 4pm and 8pm. Only 3% of the RMCR reported that they ate ready meals in other situations. This is in line with the findings of Larson (2003), who found that most meals in the USA are eaten near the traditional times.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Among the RMCR the most common was to eat ready meals less frequently than once a week (51%, n = 73). Twenty-two per cent ate ready meals once a week, 19% twice a week and the remaining 8% three or more times a week. Among the NRMCR the most common reason to not eat ready meals was that the respondents preferred to cook the meal by themselves (see Figure 15).

![Figure 15. Reasons for not consuming ready meals.](Image)

**Time for preparation and consumption**

Almost half of the RMCR reported that they usually required *less than 10 minutes* to prepare and eat the ready meal. The most frequently chosen alternative for time needed to prepare and eat a meal was *5-10 minutes* (37%). Only 14% of the RMCR spent more than 30 minutes preparing and eating ready meals. Even if the reported time required for both preparation and consumption of a ready meal appears to be very short the results do not differ very much from times required for any meal situation as reported in a recent study of Nordic meals (Holm 2001a).

**The impact of social context**

The RMCR were asked about their company in the most frequent ready meal eating situations. Almost half of them (48%, n = 69) reported that they usually ate ready meals alone. The remainder (52%, n = 75), usually ate ready meals in the company of another person. It was more common that those who ate ready meals in the company of someone else (14%) ate ready meals more
often than twice a week compared with those who ate alone (6%). The most common company for those who usually eat ready meals together with someone else was: colleagues (55%), partner (27%) and another person (18%). Ready meals are seldom shared with children or with more than one family member, which indicates that ready meals do not appear to be replacing family meals. This has also been found by Verleg h & Candel (1999). A ‘proper meal’ is shared with the family, especially in households with children, and is often described as home-cooked (e.g. Murcott 1996; De Vault 1991:50; Sobal 2000).

The most common activities when eating ready meals were talking to someone or watching TV or a video although the type of activity performed was found to be dependent on the social context. When eating together with someone else the RMCR most often talked, and when eating alone they usually watched TV or a video or read, see Figure 16. The association between consuming ready meals and watching TV is obvious. The term TV-dinner was used in a study by Verleg h and Candel (1999). It was defined as meals bought in stores and prepared at home by re-heating.

![Figure 16. Activities in ready meal situations, related to the company present.](image)

**Reasons for eating ready meals**

RMCR were asked to rate nineteen attributes concerning the decisiveness of the attributes when choosing to consume a ready meal. The reason Pressed for time was the most significant when deciding to consume ready meals followed by Like the taste, Want something quickly, Too tired to cook and Don’t want to cook (see Figure 17). The fact that time pressure was the most significant reason for consumption of ready meals is in accordance with the results of
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Marshall et al. (1995), who found a positive relationship between perceived stress and consumption of prepared dinners.

Figure 17. The ten most important reasons for consuming ready meals for RMCR, starting with the statement which was viewed as being the most important influencer.

The intended meal situation was shown to have an influence on the reasons for eating ready meals. The main reasons differed between two common situations: lunch at work with colleagues and dinner at home alone. Time was the most important reason in the situation lunch at work with colleagues. The attributes Pressed for time, Haven’t prepared lunch and Want something quickly were rated to be more important than Liking the taste. In the meal situation Dining alone at home convenience reasons such as Being too tired to cook and Don’t want to cook were more important than time reasons in the decision to eat ready meals. Apart from the convenience and time aspects, the taste of the ready meal was a highly important factor for all respondents. It was the second most important reason for consuming ready meals. The fact that the consumption reasons and requirements regarding ready meals differed between different meal situations confirms the need for a situation-oriented approach as suggested by Köster (2003).
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The dinner choice (IV)

One of the objectives of this thesis was to gain a deeper understanding of how consumers reason when choosing what to eat for dinner at home. A person who decides to eat dinner at home generally has many choices to make if the dinner involves several people.

When the research material for the focus group discussions was analysed three main categories emerged; The dinner - a social event, The different ways for the informants to cope with the planning and cooking of dinner and finally The informants' wishes for the development of ready meals suitable for dinner use.

Dinner - a social event

The informants in the focus groups talked about an ideal dinner as a home-cooked meal eaten with the family and as something important when teaching children how to behave. These results are very much in line with other studies (Murcott 1996; DeVault 1991; Sobal 2000). Some of the subjects expressed a longing for past dinner events, expressed as ideal meals. This longing has been described earlier by Lyon and Colquhoun (1999) as a way of coping with the quickening pace of technology and social change. Quite a lot of informants made excuses for why they did not serve proper meals at home. Östberg (2003) described similar reasoning, with Swedes and Americans making excuses for their eating habits.

Informants living in households with younger children described dinner as being most commonly eaten in the kitchen with mostly household members present. With children present at the dinner table there were more rules about how to eat and what to eat and the dinner was seen as a way of bringing up children. The informants did not find it appropriate to serve ready meals to children.

Cooking from scratch to eat alone was not popular among the informants. This correlates with the findings of Falk et al. (1996) and Gotfon (1995). Eating alone was generally described as sad and boring. It could be positive to eat alone, though, if it were a rare occasion or a personal choice. Then it could represent freedom of personal choice. However, two female single informants found everyday cooking and eating alone so bothersome that they sometimes wished there was a pill as a substitute for dinner. In fact, similar results were obtained in a recent study by Rozin et al. (2003) in which 28% of female American college students would willingly exchange eating for a nutrient pill.

In small households (1-2 persons) dinner was commonly eaten in front of the TV and the TV was stated as being a substitute for company. Informants who generally had their dinners in the kitchen when eating together with their
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partners or family usually had their dinners in front of the TV when they occasionally ate alone.

Different ways of coping with the dinner planning and cooking

Quite a few of the informants had what they considered to be ideal dinners. The main reasons were various family settings and activities. When there was a lack of time and inspiration the ideal meal gave way to more convenient dinner solutions. Lyon and Colquhoun (1999) described it as: ‘We require the best that yesterday had to offer, we do not require those aspects of it that were dull, tedious, uncomfortable or inconvenient’ which is why prepared foods, heated leftovers and sometimes take-aways were common alternatives to ‘cooking from scratch’ for dinner. Ready meals however did not match the requirements for dinner very well. Ready meals were considered to be more appropriate for lunch than for dinner.

The focus group discussions showed that decisions about what to eat are taken very late in some households, especially the younger ones. This instant solving of the problem of what to eat for dinner is possible because convenience foods are available at most places on most weekdays. Planning in advance is not necessary. Shopping for groceries was not an option for the informants when they discovered that they were actually hungry. The purchase situation (studied in Paper III) that precedes the consumption situation (Paper II) is therefore very important since the direct availability of products at the actual time of eating is essential.

In most of the informants’ households it was the woman who had the main responsibility for cooking. It was also the female informants who talked about everyday cooking as a chore and that it was a necessity to cook for the family. Cooking was regarded as a task that was at times dull and boring. The male informants did not speak of any boredom with cooking. This difference could be attributed to the fact that cooking was a choice rather than a necessity for the male informants. This has been discussed earlier by Murcott (2000) and Keane & Willetts (1995), who stated that men who cooked by choice were often praised excessively for their efforts.

Development potential for ready meals

Convenience and longing were much stronger reasons than health when buying ready meals for dinner. The informants reported feeling guilty about giving into cravings for pizza, orgies of meat and fatty foods but they also said that they continued to deliberately not eat healthily because they felt peckish. They found ready meals to be tastier now than before but wished for sustained development of more taste and variety. For ready meals to be suitable for dinner use they should be something to long for and dishes that were out of
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the ordinary. More spices, more taste and exotic dishes were wanted for the ready meal dinner. The fact that the informants wanted more exotic ready meal dishes is contrary to the findings of Reed et al. (2003) who found that on the Irish market for chilled ready meals it was the traditional, non-ethnic dishes that were the biggest growth area.

Ready meals were not regarded as being healthy dinner solutions but it was appreciated that a broader selection of healthy ready meal dishes is available today. Health aspects were more important when buying ready meals for lunch than for dinner. It was mostly the female informants who were interested in healthy eating. This gender difference is supported by other studies (Hearty et al. 2007; Lennernäs et al. 1997) and was also found in other parts of this thesis. The focus of the female informants on health contributed to the expression of feeling guilty for deliberately eating the ‘wrong’ alternatives. It has been stated that the conflict that sometimes arises when having to choose between pleasure and healthiness makes the choice of food a battle (Rozin 1999).

The focus group discussions revealed a certain degree of scepticism towards the food industry and the retailers. The trustworthiness of the different players in the food chain was questioned. Some informants had given up looking for Swedish or ecologically produced food due to the feeling of being deceived by the producer. However, trusted and appreciated, at least by the female informants, was the ‘keyhole’. This symbol, which is authorised by the Swedish National Food Administration, aims to help consumers identify healthy options when buying food. Similar to the findings of Margetts et al. (1997) it was primarily less fat, less sugar and more vegetables that were mentioned as definitions of healthier eating. When a couple of female informants discussed bought meal alternatives they agreed that they did not care about the healthier alternative since they had already given up on healthiness by choosing pizza.
Concluding remarks

The aim of this thesis was to gain a deeper understanding of ready meal consumers and their demands regarding ready meal products in different situations. From the results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses the following main conclusions could be drawn.

The image of the frequent ready meal consumer held by all subjects was a person who was alone and stressed. The ready meal consuming respondents confirmed this image of themselves when they were in a situation where they were eating ready meals, but not in general. Ready meals were primarily eaten when the consumer was alone and under time pressure although ready meal consuming respondents did not live alone and were not stressed significantly more than those who did not eat ready meals.

Four common ready meal eating situations were identified. Ready meals were eaten most frequently as lunch at work and dinner at home. The social context in these situations was found to differ and to affect the activities performed. Ready meals for lunch at work were commonly eaten with colleagues and then discussing was a normal activity. For dinner at home ready meals were more commonly eaten alone watching TV.

The reasons why ready meals were chosen as meal solutions differed between different meal situations. In the situation lunch at work demands relating to time-saving were more important than any other factors and in the situation dinner at home convenience and the need to spend little effort on cooking were the most dominating demands.

The purchaser demands regarding ready meals were found to be influenced by both the gender of the purchaser and the intended end-consumer. Female ready meal purchasers were more demanding buyers than males and their priorities were different. When purchasing a ready meal for someone else other aspects, such as easy to open packages, were considered to be significantly more important than when purchasing for personal consumption.

Ready meals were not seen as very appropriate for the eating situation dinner at home. There is still an image of the ideal dinner to be home cooked and eaten at home with the family. The social setting of the dinner was one of the most important aspects affecting the choice of what to eat. Children especially had an effect on the dinner choice. The planning and cooking activities were important influencing factors in the choice of food. It was quite common that the informants purchased a take-away when they needed a quick and convenient alternative to cooking.

This thesis has demonstrated that the context of meals affects the entire ready meal choice process. Food choice models usually consider factors affecting the intake of food. They do not explain the influence of different
CONCLUDING REMARKS

eating situations or how the food choice is affected by the situations before and after eating, i.e. planning, shopping, preparation, cooking and cleaning up. The results of this thesis demonstrate a need to broaden the research perspective beyond the food itself and also beyond the meal. The entire food provisioning process needs to be taken into account.
Future outlook

The work on this thesis has contributed to an understanding of the ready meal consumer. However, with new knowledge new demands for research become apparent.

Describing modern eating is difficult. The development of a process-based model would therefore be a most interesting and challenging task. Such a model would take into account the importance of planning, decision-making within a household, purchasing, preparation, alternative meal solutions, eating situations and waste management in the choice of ready meal solutions. Concerns about social context, health, ethics and the environment would be included in the framework.

Another important study that remains to be done is to further explore how ready meals can be developed if they are to be regarded as appropriate solutions for a dinner at home. Convenience was shown to be the main driving force behind eating ready meals at home and one consumer segment that may be interested in convenient meal solutions is the increasing number of older persons with an active lifestyle. This is a consumer group with lots of time to spend but an abundance of activities that from time to time might take priority over cooking. They have good finances and are used to other types of dishes and cooking compared with retired people in the past. A qualitative study would generate valuable information about what types of ready meal solutions would satisfy their needs. It would be of particular importance to consider various sensory aspects in order to optimize the taste, flavours and other characteristics of the dishes.

Important marketing aspects to consider might be appropriate distribution channels, design of containers and packages, reliable ways to provide information about the product, and highly rated marketing strategies. Increasing age has been found to correlate positively with interest in health and nutrition (Kearney et al. 1998) which is why examination of nutritional content and labelling would also be interesting. Boutrolle et al. (2007) recommended home use tests when product consumption was expected to be very contextual whereas in other cases central location tests were recommended for convenience reasons. The results of this thesis show that demands regarding ready meals are influenced by the context. So-called home use tests would therefore be recommended after the focus group discussions. The most popular ready meal dishes would then, with the aid of descriptive sensory analysis, be described in detail to provide industry with a guide to satisfying the selected consumer group.

An important aspect that was not studied in this thesis is the impact of immigration. Sweden is a multiethnic society with almost one-fifth of the
population of foreign extraction and in 2006 immigration is predicted to exceed previous years by 48% due to new regulations (SCB 2006). Many of the immigrants confess to religions with food rules that are different to traditional Swedish rules, which mean other important factors come into the food choice process. New tastes, values and habits have also been introduced by the newcomers and have resulted in more variety and new products on the market (Wikström 1997). But it is not only the Swedish range that has changed as a result of immigration. The food paths of the immigrants have changed and immigrants are now part of Swedish society (e.g. Jonsson et al. 2002a; Jonsson et al. 2002b). It has been assumed that immigrants prioritize food and cook more often from scratch (Jansson 2003) and therefore they would be less likely to purchase ready meals. The influence that cultural values have on attitudes and behaviour is an important topic in cross-cultural consumer research (Gregory et al. 2002). Cultural knowledge is necessary not only for food companies and retailers who work in the global arena but also to players on the domestic market. To compare attitudes and demand for ready meals between persons with different meal cultures would be of considerable interest and useful in understanding the ready meal consumer.
Acknowledgements

A friend of mine, Dr Migchels, compared a PhD research project to Dorothy’s journey to Oz. ‘Just follow the yellow brick road’ was the advice Dorothy received when she asked for the best way to find the Wizard of Oz. It was a straightforward answer but did not imply that the road was easy. Before Dorothy reached her destination she made many dear friends and experienced lots of great adventures along the way. With a PhD project the thesis is the final destination and initially the road to getting there seems quite clear. But even if friends and family are there to help you along the way, the journey is very much your own. You need a brain, a heart and courage to work your way through the project. The main difference between Dorothy’s journey and a PhD project would be that from time to time you might feel that you are being blown off course [straight back to Kansas]. The PhD project has indeed been an adventure with a clear goal but a tricky road. If the road were easy the research would be of no value. I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this thesis in some way, walking part of the yellow brick road with me.

Professor Inga-Britt Gustafsson, my principal supervisor. I still remember you showing me the ‘Kingdom of Grythyttan’ and of course the video about the creation of sausages. It made such an impression on me and I am still impressed, by you, by Grythyttan and by the Department of Restaurant and Culinary Arts. Thank you very much for allowing me to take part in all that and for your guidance throughout the research process.

Doctor Gunnar Hall, my auxiliary supervisor. You gave me the food industry perspective on my subject and I thank you for all your support, from the beginning to the very end. Your advice and thorough reading of my drafts have been invaluable.

Pre-opponent Eva Landström and examiners from SIK Karin Wendin and Hans Lingnert. Thank you for taking the time to examine and discuss my thesis!

I have had two places of work: the Department of Restaurant and Culinary Arts and SIK AB. At both places there have been persons who have been invaluable in helping this thesis become a reality. Thank you Birgitta Ulmander, Hans Lingnert, Thomas Blom and Tobias Nygren for your steadfast confidence in my work.
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Special thanks to Cecilia Rydell, Lisa Jacobsson and Berit Albinsson, who helped me out with questionnaires and focus groups, and to Patrick O’Malley for making my thesis readable in English.

Without the 249 people who answered my survey and the 28 people who spent 1½ hours talking to me this thesis would not have become a reality – thank you for helping me!

During the course of my thesis I have also become a stepmother, mother and finally a wife. For me it has been easier to work on the dissertation when brought back to ‘real’ life regularly to take care of two amazing girls, Vilma and Ida! You are the sunshine in my life!

My dear parents-in-law, Gunilla and Ingemar. Without your support this thesis work would have been much harder for me and for my family. Thank you for all your help!
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My wonderful parents, Rose-Marie and Thord, and darling brother Linus. Thank you for always being there for me and for your confidence in me. It means more to me than I can express in words!

Without moving to Gothenburg to start on the PhD project I would not have met my beloved, Fredrik. It is remarkable the way life turns out and I am so grateful to have you by my side, dear husband!

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REFERENCES


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# Appendix I

## Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Background variables</strong></th>
<th><strong>Response alternatives</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. In what year were you born?</strong></td>
<td>Year in digits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Are you a man or a woman?</strong></td>
<td>2 tick boxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. Who is part of your household?</strong></td>
<td>5 tick boxes and an open alternative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. What type of residence do you live in?</strong></td>
<td>3 tick boxes and an open alternative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5. What is your occupation?</strong></td>
<td>14 tick boxes (categorisation according to Swedish Statistics) and an open alternative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6. Do you have access to a microwave oven at home?</strong></td>
<td>Yes/no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7. Do you have access to a microwave oven at work/school?</strong></td>
<td>Yes/no and ‘I do not work/study’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Purchase of ready meals</strong></th>
<th><strong>Response alternatives</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>8. Do you purchase ready meals?</strong></td>
<td>Yes/no (If ‘no’ - directions to question 17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>9. Where do you usually purchase ready meals?</strong></td>
<td>4 tick boxes and an open alternative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>10. Do you buy ready meals for yourself?</strong></td>
<td>Yes/no (If ‘no’ - directions to question 13)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
11. When buying for your own use, how important is it that ...

- ... the ready meal is a chilled product?
- ... the ready meal is a frozen product?
- ... the ready meal has the keyhole label
- ... the ready meal is produced in Sweden?
- ... the ready meal is of a certain brand?
- ... the ready meal has a high fibre content?
- ... the ready meal has a low salt content?
- ... the ready meal is easy to prepare?
- ... the ready meal can be prepared quickly?
- ... the ready meal is cheap?
- ... the ready meal has a home-made taste?
- ... the ready meal has a low fat content?
- ... the ready meal looks appetising?
- ... the consistency of the ready meal is good?
- ... the ready meal has the KRAV label?
- ... the ready meal has a rich taste?
- ... the ready meal can be consumed quickly?
- ... the ready meal is filling
- ... you have recently seen the product advertised?
- ... it is on special offer?
- ... you want that particular dish?
- ... the packaging appeals to you?
- ... the packaging is easy to open?
- ... the ready meal is a dish that is similar to the food you usually eat?
- ... the ready meal is rich in minerals and vitamins?
- ... the ready meal packaging includes nutritional information?
- ... it’s a new product that you haven’t tasted before?
- ... it’s a product that you have tasted before?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONT. PURCHASE OF READY MEALS</th>
<th>RESPONSE ALTERNATIVES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>28 statements and an open alternative to be rated on a Likert scale, ‘Don’t know’ option</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONT. PURCHASE OF READY MEALS</strong></td>
<td><strong>RESPONSE ALTERNATIVES</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. How many portions of ready meals do you buy for your own use in a week?</td>
<td>6 tick boxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Do you buy ready meals for others?</td>
<td>Yes/no (If ‘no’ - directions to question 17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. For whom do you buy ready meals?</td>
<td>4 tick boxes and an open alternative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. When buying for others, how important is it that …</td>
<td>28 statements, similar to those in question 11, and an open alternative to be rated at Likert scale, ‘Don’t know’ option</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. How many portions of ready meals do you buy for others in a week?</td>
<td>6 tick boxes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>CONSUMPTION OF READY MEALS</strong></th>
<th><strong>RESPONSE ALTERNATIVES</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17. How often do you usually eat ready meals?</td>
<td>7 tick boxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. In which of the following situations do you eat ready meals? How often?</td>
<td>4 situations in terms of time and place and an open alternative to be rated on frequency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. How long does it usually take you to prepare and eat your ready meal?</td>
<td>8 tick boxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Do you usually eat ready meals together with someone?</td>
<td>5 tick boxes and an open alternative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. What do you usually do whilst eating?</td>
<td>9 tick boxes and an open alternative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption of ready meals</td>
<td>Response alternatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. To what degree are the statements below decisive for your choice of a ready meal in the situations you mentioned in item 18?</td>
<td>19 statements and an open alternative to be rated on a Likert scale, ‘Don’t know’ option.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- I like the taste.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- I feel like having a ready meal.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- I’m pressed for time.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- I’m alone.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- It’s cheap.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- I don’t want to cook.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- I am too tired to cook.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- My kitchen is poorly equipped.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- I’ve never learnt to cook.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- I’m unable to cook due to a physical disability.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- I haven’t prepared any lunch to take to work.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- I want to spend time on other things.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- I’m very hungry and want something quickly.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Lunch at the canteen does not taste good.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- I’m seldom at home but it’s convenient to have something in reserve in the fridge.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- I have no time to prepare dinner for the children.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- I can’t be bothered to buy a lot of different ingredients.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- I don’t want to go shopping and prefer to heat up a ready meal from the fridge/deepfreeze.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The children have to prepare their own dinner and are only allowed to use the microwave.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General attitude</td>
<td>Response alternatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. What type of ready meals do you usually eat? And how often do you eat them?</td>
<td>14 types of ready meals and an open alternative, to be rated on frequency. Directions to question 25.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ I prefer to cook the meal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ I think ready meals taste bad.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ I think ready meals taste nothing.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ I don’t like the smell.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ I don’t like the appearance of it.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ I think it is too expensive.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ I can’t afford buying ready meals.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ I think the fat content is too high.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ I think the preparation is troublesome.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ I think it takes too much time to prepare.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ I think it is not nutritious enough.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ I don’t get satiated by a ready meal.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ I don’t have access to a microwave oven.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ I don’t have access to a freezer.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. The implications of food to you</td>
<td>27 statements to be rated on agreement, ‘Don’t know’ option</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ I enjoy cooking.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ I usually eat in restaurants’.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Good food is important to me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Women are better cooks nowadays.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Men are better cooks nowadays.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ I consider myself a good cook.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ With whom I eat is more important than what I eat.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ I often try new dishes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ I prefer traditional Swedish food to any other type of food.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Buying many ready meals indicates that you are careless about what you eat.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Ready meals have a high fat content.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cont. General attitude Response alternatives

Cont. 25. The implications of food to you

- I might serve my parents a ready meal.
- I think that ready meals have improved in recent years.
- Ready meals are unhealthy.
- When I invite my friends in the evening I sometimes serve ready meals.
- I think that the bad reputation of ready meals is unjustified.
- Young children should not eat ready meals.
- I usually eat ready meals when I’m alone.
- I usually eat ready meals in the company of others.
- Ready meals are safe, because you know what you get.
- Ready meals are usually tasty.
- Ready meals are sufficiently filling.
- I eat ready meals when I’m stressed.
- I eat ready meals when I want to relax.
- Without a microwave oven it is no use with ready meals.
- I would feel ashamed if somebody saw me eating a ready meal for lunch.
- I buy certain some ready meal dishes because I enjoy that particular dish, but can’t/won’t prepare it myself.

26. Describe the frequent ready meal consumer. Open question