

Consumer culture in an ‘age of anxiety’ – project summary

Food safety and food security are priority issues throughout Europe at present, the subject of intense governmental concern, public interest and media speculation. Despite recent advances in food safety and risk management, consumer anxieties about food persist with 68% of EU citizens expressing concerns about the quality and freshness of food and only 51% feeling that food is safer today than ten years ago (Eurobarometer 2010). The CONANX programme sought to increase our understanding of these issues by examining consumer anxieties about food at a variety of geographical scales from the global scale of international food markets to the domestic scale of individual households.

Our research found that consumer anxieties about food are not just personal pathologies, to be addressed at an individual level. While anxiety can be understood as an embodied state involving mental and emotional distress, combined with a more diffuse sense of uneasiness about a coming event, the CONANX project found that food anxieties also have important social dimensions, varying over time and place. Advancing a new theory of anxiety as social practice (Jackson & Everts 2010), the project argued that food anxieties are provoked by specific events that disrupt our everyday social routines, threatening our mortality and established systems of meaning. Anxiety events are framed and mediated by different communities of practice (such as news media, scientific experts and government agencies), generating new practices (such as vaccinations, the wearing of face masks and increased security checks) and shifting between sites (from specific concerns about human health and animal welfare, for example, to wider social and environmental issues). Consumer anxieties become institutionalised to varying degrees, fading as the perceived risk or actual threat diminishes and new systems of meaning become established.

There are widespread concerns about food insecurity at the global level, addressed in our work through research on a recent ‘food scare’ in China where consumer demand for dairy products outstripped available supplies, leading some unscrupulous merchants to adulterate infant formula by adding the dangerous chemical melamine with serious consequences for public health. Our studies of agri-food exports from Brazil and Thailand show how these countries have improved their food hygiene and quality control practices to meet the exacting standards of Western consumers and their commercial intermediaries. The CONANX team also studied a range of recent ‘food scares’ in Sweden and the UK demonstrating the importance of considering the affective (embodied, emotional) as well as the cognitive dimensions of consumer information regarding potential food risks. Our research also probes current tensions over food labelling, originally designed to ensure the freshness of food and now used primarily to reassure consumers about food safety (potentially leading to increased food waste).

Using novel methods of participative fieldwork, our research investigated consumers’ domestic practices at the household level, challenging received ideas about the alleged ‘skills deficit’ among younger generations of consumers. The research charted the significance of men’s increasing participation in cooking and other domestic tasks, a theme that was also pursued through a PhD project on the audience reception of ‘celebrity chefs’ such as Jamie Oliver, examining the long-term impact of his food media and campaigning work. A final project examined the process of product reformulation where food manufacturers are attempting to reduce the harmful content of salt, fat and sugar in various foods without adversely affecting their taste and other sensory properties, responding to current ‘healthy eating’ agendas and anticipated changes in consumer demand.

The research highlights the social basis of consumer anxieties about food and the way this understanding might inform innovations in policy and practice, ideas that are being taken forward in a further year’s Proof of Concept funding.