

British consumers complicit in 40-year healthy eating failure, new study suggests

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Healthy eating campaigns have largely failed in Britain for the last four decades because consumers have adapted confusing advice, and incorporated fast and convenience foods into self-defined 'balanced' lifestyles, a new study argues.

Supermarkets and food manufacturers have been excessively blamed for Britain's unhealthy eating habits since the 1980s, according to

Cambridge historian Dr. Katrina-Louise Moseley.

In an article published in *Contemporary British History*, Moseley argues that far from being passive victims of manipulation in this period, consumers were 'complicit' in long-term behavioural shifts, proactively selecting, rejecting and sweetening advice from the government, the food industry and the media to fit their circumstances and to satisfy their appetites.

Rather than seeking to cast blame, Moseley asserts that we should think more carefully about how people rationalise their eating behaviours and interpret advice about food. Speaking ahead of a public event entitled 'Food on the Move' (9 July 2021), Moseley added that this is particularly relevant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had a dramatic impact on eating behaviours.

"Food is a powerful coping mechanism in times of emotional distress, so it isn't surprising that people have been buying extra packets of their favourite snack or eating more takeaways. I'm interested in the psychology of consumption and getting away from moralising language around food, which can be damaging", Moseley said. As part of the event, hosted by the University of Warwick, Moseley invites readers to complete an anonymous survey (closes 9 July 2021) to reflect on how their own food practices have changed during the pandemic.

In her article, Moseley contrasts the success of Britain's anti-smoking campaign, which transformed attitudes to tobacco in the 1960s and 70s, with the failure of the '[healthy eating](#)' campaign to counteract rising levels of obesity from the late 1980s onwards.

Moseley said: "The state faced a really difficult task. 'Don't smoke' was a clear-cut message but you can't tell people not to eat. Food can't be rejected outright, it has to remain a part of everyday life, and that makes

it so much more complicated. We're still really struggling with this today."

The historian makes fresh use of consumer interviews and surveys conducted in England and Wales in the 1980s and 90s. These include a Mass Observation directive questionnaire on 'Food and Drink' completed in 1982; interviews and participant observations gathered from 1992–96 in response to the 1992 Health of the Nation report; and a collection of life history interviews undertaken with a sample of older people in 2017–18.

Moseley argues that a major problem facing Britain's 'healthy eating' campaign has been its reliance, often unavoidable, on malleable language. Words like 'balance' and 'moderation' left themselves open to subjective interpretation. Moseley said: "These records reveal all kinds of people, not just the less affluent, leaning towards convenience foods while still trying to define their lifestyles as healthy."

Looking at the 1982 questionnaire records, Moseley found that attitudes to convenience foods were 'shot through with contradictions'. Speaking for herself and her husband, one female respondent claimed, "neither of us can bear ready-made frozen dinners"—but she made "an exception for certain things from Marks & Spencer—their frozen cod in parsley sauce is palatable and their cauliflower cheese makes me a quick solo meal if Neil is out for the evening."

Moseley said: "For health enthusiasts and cynics alike, official information about food didn't always feel correct. Consumers continued to assert that foods had different effects on different individuals, that one could be overweight whilst leading a healthy lifestyle, and that—in the midst of a dizzying array of information, self-evaluation was key."

The study describes how supermarkets and [food manufacturers](#) seized on

the idea of 'healthy eating' in the 1980s in response to new nutritional guidelines being issued. In 1984, Heinz began a 25-year-programme to reduce salt and sugar in its products; and in 1986 Mars produced a pamphlet entitled 'Confectionary in a Healthy Diet'. Meanwhile Tesco and Sainsbury's turned their attention to nutritional labelling.

Moseley said: "We underestimate what a pivotal role the convenience foods sector played in producing and disseminating knowledge about 'healthy eating' in this period. Sometimes, as with Findus' calorie-controlled ready meals, it was the [food industry](#) rather than politicians or doctors that gave people usable, workable public health messages. But increasingly people came to view big food companies, government and public health experts as one and the same: a mysterious force manipulating consumer behaviour."

Testimonies collected in the 1980s and 90s emphasise that new jargon baffled many consumers. Puzzling over the term 'polyunsaturated margarine', one respondent to the 1980s questionnaire said: "I understand that poly means many and unsaturated means not chock full of something, so what is margarine poly unsaturated with or not with?" In 1985, a market research study of nearly 1,500 consumers in England and Wales found that 43% were uncertain whether saturated or polyunsaturated fat was better for them.

Moseley said: "Terms like 'E-numbers' and 'saturated fats' entered public discourse but that didn't mean that everyone understood or accepted health advice, let alone changed their behaviours. Naturally, people embraced foods that made their lives easier and their mealtimes tastier, often using the language of 'moderation' to justify the consumption of highly processed, time-saving foods."

The study examines the rise of scepticism as consumers felt overloaded with confusing, contradictory and unreliable 'healthy eating' messages.

The 1992–96 interviews reveal that consumers became increasingly committed to using their 'common sense' when thinking about food. Moseley said: "Consumers didn't respond as authorities hoped they would, but they weren't irrational or lacking in judgement. People subscribed to their own, highly personalized logics."

One 1992–96 interviewee said: "some days you just want mashed potatoes and I'm not going to feel bad about that because with the rest of my life... it's balanced". Interviewees also sought reassurance from their childhood eating habits or those of older relatives, saying things like: "Nan lived to a good old age" or "it didn't seem to do us much harm at the time".

Testimonies from the 1990s also reveal the emergence of a new language linking food and feeling. One woman defined healthy eating as "that difference between... getting a good feeling from what you eat and getting this sort of not very nice feeling". "Cheese especially" made another young woman feel "so ugh—you know it makes me feel so fat and just weighs me down". She added that she felt "much healthier and brighter" if she avoided it.

Moseley said: "The idea that different foods might cause individuals to feel a certain way in their bodies prefigured a major shift towards self-diagnosed food intolerances in the early twenty-first century."

The study accepts that some positive health trends did come about in the late 20th century but points out that consumers favoured easier quick-fixes like switching to brown bread and semi-skimmed milk, over sweeping dietary transformations.

Moseley said: "Medical researchers remain very worried about public scepticism, but their studies tend to lack historical context. Thinking about the history of trust and cynicism alongside developments in public

health can help us understand and reconstruct the bigger picture."

Reflecting on Britain's food culture today, Moseley points out that economic, social and geographic constraints on 'healthy' choices lack public visibility: factors like deprivation, time poverty, and mental illness delimit the choices that consumers feel able to make. She said: "Too often, health education campaigns promote 'informed' decision making around [food](#), as if social and economic disparities do not exist. Food has long been a site of inequality in Britain, and unfortunately it remains so today."

More information: Katrina-Louise Moseley, From Beveridge Britain to Birds Eye Britain: shaping knowledge about 'healthy eating' in the mid-to-late twentieth-century, *Contemporary British History* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/13619462.2021.1915141](#)

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