

# Perceptions of Dutch seniors regarding Home Meal Replacements: a focus group study

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## Abstract

Four focus groups were conducted with self-standing senior (55+) residents of the Dutch Gelderland region with the aim of ascertaining their beliefs, attitudes and opinions regarding Home Meal Replacements (HMR), as well as their perceptions of some of these products. Participants were all in charge of meal acquisition and/or preparation at their households, and included both HMR users and non-users. Results indicate that, besides meal composition, the hedonic aspects of preparing and eating a meal are important. Reasons for using HMR are mainly related with convenience and timesaving aspects or incapacity to cook, while reasons for not using HMR are related with a higher degree of trust and self-esteem achieved by preparing one's meals. This study shows that psychological factors, especially the low moral status of convenience foods, play an important role in seniors' meal choice.

## 1 Introduction

Home Meal Replacements (HMR) have been recently defined as “manufactured main courses or pre-assembled main course components of a meal – a protein (animal/plant), a carbohydrate (starch) and a vegetable source -, designed to fully and speedily replace the main course of a home-made meal”. This definition encompasses not only the so-called *Ready Meals* (manufactured HMR), but also the Meals-on-Wheels service, house delivery and take-away (Costa et al., 2001a). According to an analysis of the 1997-98 Dutch National Food Consumption Survey (DNFCS) data, about 14% of the Dutch population uses HMR (Costa et al., 2001b). This analysis also indicated that about 38% of Dutch HMR consumers were older than 55 years of age, which is rather surprising since HMR consumption in the Netherlands has always been associated with young urban couples with no children and two incomes (Zuurbier & Migchels, 1998). An European study on nutrition and the elderly, reporting a wide consumption of ready-made meals among European subjects between 70 and 75 years of age, seems to confirm these results to a certain extent (Hautvast et al., 1992).

There is not much known about the Dutch seniors, their beliefs, attitudes and wishes, also in what respects meals and meal preparation (Hielkema & Kuyser, 1995). Most studies involving seniors and meals have focused on seniors' nutritional needs, the determinants of appetite in older people, and the quality of meals in resting homes and meals-on-wheels services (Hautvast et al., 1992; Mathey, 2000; LCO, 1995). To our knowledge, there are also no published studies investigating what sort of features seniors expect from their meals in general, or from meals which have been prepared from them in particular, and their relative importance. However, there appears to be the general belief that today's Dutch seniors do not appear to have a high regard for ready meals, since they consider their own cooking to be healthier (Hielkema & Kuyser, 1995). But as the government and society encourage seniors to be more self-standing and intervenient in daily life, less time and energy remain for food-related household activities. Seniors are increasingly questioning themselves about what they will eat when they do not wish, or are no longer able, to fully prepare their meals. As they become more active in society, it is reasonable to expect that they will increasingly demand for healthier meals, requiring none or little preparation (Hielkema & Kuyser, 1995). It becomes therefore imperative for meal providers (both institutional and private) to

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know what seniors expect from products that can potentially replace their own cooking. The aims of this paper are therefore:

- To get a first solid impression of the opinions of Dutch seniors about HMR on which to base future quantitative research, through the performance of qualitative research (a focus group study);
- To come up with a few suggestions to manufacturers on how to make HMR more attractive to elderly.

### **1.1 The senior population in the Netherlands**

Senior citizens (55+) currently represent 23% of the Dutch population, a share expected to rise to about 30% in 2015 mostly due to an increase of life expectancy (CBS, 2000a+b). The largest age segment within Dutch seniors (42%) comprises individuals aged between 55 and 64 years old, equally men and women, with a three-quarter majority of (married or non-married) couples. The second largest segment (32%) comprises individuals aged between 65 and 74 years old, 10% more women than men, 65% of which are married or living in marital status. The third and smallest segment (>74 years) encompasses 26% of the Dutch seniors and is composed of overwhelmingly more women than men, mostly widows and widowers (CBS, 2000a). The majority of Dutch seniors is at least in reasonable health and have an income from which they can live comfortably, although there is a considerable minority – some single seniors and widows, the very old and seniors from ethnic minorities-who are in a less favourable situation. In 1992, only 25% of the Dutch population between 55 and 65 years old (and mostly men) remained in the workforce (Hielkema & Kuyer, 1995). Along the nineties, however, the Netherlands' early retirement trend is slowly being reverted, with the government encouraging seniors to remain working even after retirement to help fight the shortage of labour and the need for immigrant workforce. The Dutch government is also highly interested in increasing the amount of self-standing seniors and their quality of life, as this eases the pressure on welfare and health care systems (Klerk & Timmermans, 1999; BBC, 2000). All things considered, it looks like most of the Dutch seniors will probably be able to enjoy the rest of their (long) lives with a reasonable degree of both physical and economical self-sufficiency (Hielkema & Kuyer, 1995). This evidence, and the expectation of a growing 'grey' buying power with an interest for high-quality products and services, has made of Dutch seniors a very attractive market segment for many companies in the Netherlands (Todd, 1995). In view of this, marketers have segmented Dutch seniors from a life-style perspective into three distinct groups:

The Golden Enjoyers – Socially and physically active people, with high spending power and not much will to cook everyday;

The Silvered Singles – Reasonably healthy, well-off widows, very active in associations, eating frequently out of the house;

The Bronzed Home-birds – More conservative seniors, with poorer health and little wish to be socially active, keen on cooking and eating the Dutch hot-pot (Sonneveldt, 1996).

In what respects food-related behaviour, research conducted by Hielkema & Kuyer (1995) showed that Dutch seniors are mostly interested in the aspects of eating which will enable them to have a long, independent life. They are thus interested in healthy eating, which they associate with the consumption of fresh foods, especially vegetables, and pay attention to their salt, sugar and fat intake, and of course to price. They enjoy shopping for food, preferring speciality shops to supermarkets for their daily shopping, as shopping in supermarkets is found to be very tiresome.

### **1.2 Focus Groups**

A cornerstone of the design stage of a new product development or improvement process is to listen to the voice of consumers to understand their needs and demands. This listening process usually begins with qualitative measurements that enable the product design team to understand consumers' basic needs and desires and learn the consumers' viewpoint about a certain product category. One of the most popular forms of qualitative measurement at the design stage is the performance of focus groups. Focus groups are particularly indicated for situations in which not much is known (or has been investigated) about the consumer segment and/or the product category in question (Urban and Hauser, 1993). Focus groups are thoroughly planned, moderated sessions, designed to obtain the perceptions of several individuals (usually between 6 and 9) regarding a specific topic of interest in an informal, non-threatening environment. Careful and systematic analysis of the discussions provides insight into how a product, service or opportunity is perceived. Focus groups are especially useful for

exploratory research (Casey and Krueger, 1994). Advantages of focus groups, when compared with individual interviews or quantitative methods like questionnaires are:

- Focus groups permit researchers to gather a lot more information more quickly and at less cost;
- Its format allows the collection of large and rich amounts of data in the respondent's own words;
- Focus groups allow researchers to interact directly with respondents, which in turn allows the observation of non-verbal cues, follow-up questions and probing for further information;
- Participants react and build up on responses from each other, which potentially increases the chance of getting new ideas or uncovering underlying opinions;
- Participants often enjoy focus groups, since they are encouraged to give their opinions and have discussions with other people in a relaxed and open environment.

Nevertheless, focus groups may also present limitations, especially if they are not carefully planned and conducted:

- Participants may tend to agree with each other, give socially accepted answers, be unduly influenced by a dominant participant, or not talk at all if they are too shy;
- The presence of a moderator and the way he/she conducts the discussion can lead to biased results;
- Results of focus groups are hard to summarise and interpret, and are not quantifiable;
- Due to an usually small number of participants, who may or may not be representative of a population, results can hardly be extrapolated;
- Researchers may tend to unduly believe more in focus groups' results than in hard statistical data, since these results are generated 'live' and heard directly from the mouth of the consumers (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990; Dawson et al., 1993; Casey & Krueger, 1994; Ressureccion, 1998).

However, careful planning of the sessions, sensible recruiting and extensive moderator training (as well as keeping an open mind), can efficaciously solve some of these limitations (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990; Dawson et al., 1993). Focus groups have also been previously reported as being appropriate to collect beliefs, attitudes, opinions and perceptions of individuals regarding food products, eating habits and diet (Crockett et al., 1990; Brug, et al., 1995; Costa, 1996).

## **2. The focus group sessions**

### **2.1 Planning**

Having in mind the research aims proposed, the planning of the focus group encompassed the proper definition of the target population - the Dutch seniors-, the establishment of an interview guide for the focus group sessions and the selection and training of the moderators (Casey and Krueger, 1994).

#### **2.1.1 The target population**

The target population for this study was defined as 'self-standing Dutch citizens (men and women) aged 55 years or older, in charge of meal acquisition and/or preparation at their households'. This definition excluded individuals living in resting homes, but included seniors who occasionally (but not regularly) eat at day care centres or make use of the meals-on-wheels service. For the convenience of both participants and researchers, it was decided to select only individuals who had their residence in the Gelderland region, preferably near the city of Wageningen. Moreover, and to ensure a reasonable degree of representativity, it was decided that the recruitment procedure should aim at obtaining participants with different educational levels, marital status and living situations. Finally, both users and non-users of ready meals were to be recruited, as we were interested in obtaining as much different views of HMR among seniors as possible.

#### **2.1.2 The interview guide**

The research team began to build the interview guide by studying scientific literature and other available information (and expertise) on the theory and practice of focus groups, the Dutch senior population and the HMR assortment in The Netherlands. Based on this study, a semi-structured interview guide, consisting of a list of questions that had to be discussed during the focus group sessions and instructions for the session's procedure, was developed according to the general guidelines described in literature (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990; Dawson

et al., 1993; Casey & Krueger, 1994). The list of questions is summarised in Table 1. The guide divided the focus group sessions into two parts of 40 minutes each, with a 15 minutes break in between for refreshments. The first part focused on the attitudes, beliefs and opinions of the participants about home made meals and ready meals, and started with a general question to be asked in turn to the participants, in order to put them at ease and lead to further discussion (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). In the second half, participants were to be shown 5 branded ready meals available at local supermarkets (a frozen meal, a chilled meal, a vacuum-packed meal and a dried meal, all composed of the same type of dish), and asked to give their opinion about them. Participants were to be free to touch and examine the samples and to open the packages, but should not be given the opportunity to taste the product, to focus the discussion on other aspects besides only the product's sensory properties.

*Table 1 – Summary of the focus group questions*

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*First part:*

1. Which characteristics do you find important in a warm meal?
2. What kind of ready meals do you know?
3. What is your opinion about ready meals in general? And what is your experience with them?
4. Do you use ready meals regularly? Why/Why not?
5. Would you use ready meals if you were not able or not willing to cook anymore?

*Second part:*

1. Which aspects of the displayed products raise your attention?
2. Having in mind your answer to question 1 (first part), what is your opinion about these products?
3. Which of these products would you choose for your warm meal tonight? Why?

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A pre-test of the interview guide was carried out among food technology students, to see whether the questions were understood as they were intended. The interview guide was finally presented to different experts in senior's nutrition and consumer research, and improved according to their remarks. According to what is recommended in literature (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990; Casey & Krueger, 1994), we decided to conduct at least 4 focus groups, the final number of sessions being dependent on the complete attainment of the research aims proposed. All the sessions were to take place in the morning, between 10 and 12 o'clock. The sessions were also to be video-recorded, so a total of 3 people of the research team per session would be present: the moderator, an assistant and a cameraman. The assistant should organise the arrival and departure of the participants, the break for refreshments, observe the session and take notes of the main ideas discussed. A lecture room of the Wageningen University was chosen to host the sessions. The University is a non-commercial place close to the potential participants' home, and its lecture rooms provide the necessary space, comfort and quietness.

### **2.1.3 The selection and training of the moderators**

According to the guidelines presented by Stewart and Shamdasani (1990), the moderators were recruited among food technology graduates with a background in consumer research who appeared to be genuinely interested in the research and curious to hear the seniors' opinions. Preference was given to people who seemed to possess a reasonable degree of social skills during the recruitment interviews. The selected moderators had two months to familiarise themselves with the topic of the research, the target population, the skills of focus group moderation and the interview guide. Moderators trained themselves to moderate the sessions by asking for advice from people who had experience with focus groups and interviewing seniors, and by watching videotapes of focus groups previously performed. During the above-mentioned pre-test of the interview guide, moderators were also given the opportunity to practise their skills and the session's procedure. During the training, it was stressed that the moderator should interfere as little as possible in the discussion and try to remain neutral in her speech and non-verbal conduct, in order to maintain the discussion as natural as possible (Casey & Krueger, 1994).

### **2.2 The recruitment of the participants**

Participants were recruited in person at shopping centres, at the elderly association of Wageningen and at the canteen of a sports centre. The people approached were briefly informed about the general research aim – to know their opinion about meals and meal preparation -, and asked to provide some answers for a short questionnaire, which included socio-demographic aspects, as well as aspects related to meal preparation and HMR use. Selection of participants for the focus group sessions was based on some of these aspects, such as age, knowledge about HMR and responsibility in meal acquisition/preparation, for instance. The eligible respondents were then invited for a (video-recorded) group's discussion about meals and meal preparation at the Wageningen

University. Potential participants received a written invitation displaying the date and time of the discussion, a map of Wageningen and a telephone number to contact in case of questions or cancellation. They were also informed that transportation, if necessary, could be arranged, and that they would receive a gift for their participation. One day prior to their session the participants were contacted by telephone to confirm their participation. Following the advice given by literature to over-recruit (Casey and Krueger, 1994; Resurreccion, 1998), and to ensure that at least 8 people would actually appear for the sessions, a total of 9 participants were recruited for each session.

### 2.3 Carrying out the focus group sessions

Four focus groups were conducted with a total of 32 participants, 5 men and 27 women. Participants were all in charge of meal acquisition and/or preparation at their households, and included both users and non-users of HMR. Most participants were not familiar with each other. The age of the participants ranged from 54 to 83 years old, with an average of 72 years old. Table 2 shows the socio-demographic composition of the participants, as well as the frequency of their HMR consumption.

*Table 2 – Focus Groups' participants*

Characteristics	Number	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	5	16
Female	27	84
Total	32	100
<b>Age</b>		
50 – 54	1	3
55 – 59	4	13
60 – 64	2	6
65 – 69	6	19
70 – 74	8	25
75 – 79	7	22
80 and older	4	13
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	2	6
Married	17	53
Widowed	10	31
Divorced	3	9
<b>Education level</b>		
Low	6	19
Middle	16	50
High	10	31
<b>Housing situation</b>		
Independently	25	78
Senior Flat	7	22
<b>Ready meal usage</b>		
Yes, more than once	20	62
Yes, once	4	13
No, never	8	25

The participants were received upon arrival by the session's assistant and guided to their seats in the sessions' room. There, the moderator, the assistant and the participants were seated at tables placed in a circle. To facilitate the discussion name cards were placed on the table in front of the participants. The cameraman was located in the background behind the participants and was instructed to film from a fixed point and not to disturb the discussion in any circumstance. The discussion started with the moderator welcoming the participants and briefly introducing herself, the assistant moderator and the cameramen, and reminding the participants that the session was to be video-recorded. Next, the general topic of the research and the aim of the session were explained. The participants were informed of some ground rules for the discussion (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990) and asked if they had any further questions or remarks. If not, the moderator initiated the discussion by asking the participants in turn what they found important in a warm meal. The sessions took between 1 ½ and 2 hours, with a 15 minutes break in which tea or coffee with cookies were served. After the discussion of the last

question, the moderator summarised the main ideas coming out of the discussion, asked for any final comments or questions, thanked the participants for coming and closed the session. The assistant then accompanied the participants out and presented the gifts (a ready meal or a gift coupon). Most of the participants then took the opportunity to tell the assistant that they had greatly enjoyed the session.

#### **2.4 The analysis of the results**

After each focus group, the moderator wrote down her first impressions from the session, afterwards comparing her notes with those of the session's assistant. Next, the complete transcript of the session was written down in Dutch and then translated to English. Two researchers separately checked the English transcript on the accurateness of the translation. In a hybrid process from the different methodologies described in literature (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990; Dawson et al., 1993; Casey & Krueger, 1994), the written transcripts were then read and content-analysed by the moderator and the leader of the research team. With the help of the session notes, a summary of the main ideas was elaborated. Based on this summary, a system of categories was created, extensive enough to ensure that everything expressed during the session would fall under one of the categories. Following a 'copy-and-paste' procedure, the parts of the text relevant to each category were then grouped together, after being coded with the identification of the respective participant and session. Sections of the text that were incomplete or not making much sense were eliminated at this stage, together with sections of doubtful veracity. After all sessions had been conducted and analysed, all the categories generated, together with the respective sections, were put together and analysed. Sections under similar categories were put together; categories not relevant for the research were discarded. Based on the categories addressing the main research questions, an overall summary of the four focus groups – consisting of key findings and examples of related participants' quotations - was finally made.

### **3. Results and discussion**

#### **Important characteristics of a warm meal**

A summary of the four focus groups conducted is displayed in Tables 3 to 5b. According to the focus group participants, the main characteristics of a warm meal are variation, appearance, taste, healthiness and freshness (Table 3). Regarding variation, participants stressed that the warm meal should be varied on itself, that is, that warm meals should not contain only potatoes, and/or only meat, but rather a combination of a starchy component, a protein source and vegetables. Moreover, variation between meals – “It is important not to eat the same everyday” – was highly appreciated, as it was seen as ensuring a healthy diet. Participants stated that, although they believe to remain fairly good eaters, they did not have as much appetite as they did before, and that the perceived appearance and taste of the meal highly influenced their appetite. Therefore, meals should look and taste good in order to increase their appetite. According to the participants, meal components should be well cooked but not overcooked. Potatoes that remained intact and crunchy vegetables were appreciated features, as they were associated with a more pleasurable taste and mouthfeel. Participants stated that it is important for them to eat healthy meals, meaning meals that are freshly prepared everyday from non-processed ingredients, low on salt and fat, and containing a high amount of raw or cooked vegetables.

Other aspects of the warm meal, such as its composition and how the meal should be served and eaten, were also mentioned at this stage of the session (Table 3). According to participants, daily meals should be simple and preferably follow the tradition of the Dutch cuisine: boiled potatoes, fried meat with gravy and boiled vegetables. Soup, dessert and salads are appreciated but not essential. However, some meals may be different. For instance, participants stated that on weekends they rather eat soup with sandwiches or order meals from the Chinese restaurant than prepare a warm meal, since they are usually not in the mood to cook. Participants also found that meals should generally not take too long to prepare, although they were mostly not willing to sacrifice quality for quickness in preparation. Meals should always be served warm and eaten at a set table. The eating environment should be cosy and people should take time to enjoy their meals.

Some of the underlying values attached to meals and meal preparation were also put forward at this stage by the participants (Table 3). Meal preparation is generally seen as a (woman's) duty. Independently of whether a person has time for cooking or actually enjoys it, meals should be cooked from scratch everyday. Moreover, people who are not willing to cook everyday or search for alternatives to their own cooking are seen as lazy, with

participants attaching a high value to being active and doing things for yourself. To prepare meals was also seen as a means of being appreciated by your family and as giving a sense of achievement. Mealtime was regarded as one of the highlights of the day, a time to socialise with family or friends.

*Table 3. Important characteristics of a home made warm meal*

<b>Variation</b>	“Meals must be varied” “It is important not to repeat meals in the same week”
<b>Taste &amp; Appearance</b>	“I think that above all the meal should be tasty” “Taste and smell are very important” “It is important how the meal looks like, that it looks appetising” “I find the colour of a meal important, it should not be too homogeneous” “The meal should be well cooked” “The potatoes should not be overcooked. The vegetables should be crunchy, to let their taste come forward”
<b>Healthiness/ Freshness</b>	“It is not only about eating tasty food, I want to eat healthy food everyday” “You must get your vitamins” “It is important to pay attention to the amount of fat in the meal” “I preferably eat freshly prepared meals” “The freshness and quality of a meal are important things to me”
<b>Preparation</b>	“It has to be prepared quickly, I don’t like standing in the kitchen for hours” “The meal’s quality is more important than how long it takes to prepare it”
<b>Composition</b>	“What I mostly like to eat is the Dutch pot, as mother cooks it at home” “I am from the generation of potatoes, vegetables, meat and gravy.” “Meals should be simple, but good and varied”
<b>Serving and eating</b>	“I always eat at a set table” “It is important to serve the food warm” “It is important that you take the time to have your diner” “It is the atmosphere around it that makes a nice meal”
<b>It is one’s duty to cook</b>	“I do not like to be in the kitchen for long, but I make sure one way or the other the meals appear on the table” “I was never an enthusiastic cooker. I cook because one has to”
<b>One should make one’s own meal</b>	“I hear about women who don’t want to cook and I think: girls, you have the whole day for it!” “I find ready meals totally unnecessary. I can shop for myself. The most important thing is to be active” “Ready meals are for lazy people”
<b>Appreciation/ achievement</b>	“I enjoy when my children come to eat at my place. I love it when they say: ‘Mom, it was delicious’ ” “I make a big effort to please my guests with my meals” “A good meal is the meal I cook, with fresh vegetables and tasty meat”
<b>Socialising</b>	“Making time for diner, the entire atmosphere. Everybody sitting together at the table, the best part of the day” “Dinner is a social event. It is not only the quality of the food, it is also the quality of the conversation” “We try to prepare something in advance, so that we spend less time in the kitchen when the guests are there”

### 3.2 Knowledge and opinions about ready meals

The general knowledge of participants about the current ready meals’ offer in Dutch supermarkets was very good. Even non-users knew a wide variety of products and could correctly describe a considerable number of them. The large majority of the participants declared that they viewed ready meals as being more appropriate for other groups of consumers (Table 4). Ready meals were seen as products suitable for people who cannot cook anymore – “for the really old or sick” -, people who do not know how to cook – young people and male adults in general – and working people – “they don’t have time to cook, we do”. Generally speaking, ready meals were seen as products for people who can not or will not make the effort to cook or do not enjoy eating anymore. Some participants also stated that the fact that they did not have a microwave or did not know how to use such a modern appliance prevented them from using ready meals. Nevertheless, participants could name situations where the use of ready meals might be handy, like on ‘special’ days (when one is “allowed” not to be in the mood for cooking, like on weekends or very busy days) – when eating alone, when having unexpected guests, during holidays, etc. Other situations in which these meals can be convenient are, according to the participants, when you forgot to shop for food or you just came back from holidays, or when a particular dish is too

complicated to prepare. Some participants also said that ready meals are handy when, due to other engagements, you simply do not have enough time to cook and eat your dinner. The use of ready meals by people who are too ill or too old to cook, or by widowers, was also seen as something not reproachful.

Participants saw ready meals in general as being standardised, mass-produced and unwholesome foods (Table 4). They stated to think that ready meals contain mostly bad quality ingredients, excessive amounts of food additives and are prone to quick spoilage. They also affirmed that they believe that people who frequently eat ready meals do not get a well-balanced, healthy diet. Moreover, ready meals were viewed as being expensive and energy-intensive. Participants stated that they could cook a cheaper and tastier meal in the time that takes to prepare a ready meal. Ready meals were also seen as being rather incomplete from a nutritional viewpoint. Participants declared that when they were using ready meals they felt the need to prepare something to add to them, like a salad or a fried egg. Participants could also name some positive aspects of ready meals. They said they thought that ready meals usually tasted much better than they looked, are really quickly and convenient to prepare and also convenient to stock. The experiences related to ready meal use described by the participants were mostly not very positive (Table 4). Ready meals portions were found to be generally too big, but often containing relatively few vegetables. They were also considered to look mostly unappetising. Some participants found them often overcooked and salty, and others found them just not tasty enough. Packages were seen as difficult to handle and open, especially the ones going into the microwave, and creating an excessive amount of waste. The information on the label was found to be mostly not quantitative enough and written in too small letters to be readable. Finally, participants found ready meals not that much easier or quicker to prepare than their own meals. Some of them also stated that they rather order from take-away services, since they supply meals that are already fully prepared.

### **3.3 HMR as an alternative for self-cooking**

When confronted with the idea that in the near future they might not be able to cook anymore, most of the participants reacted in an unconcerned manner. Some of them simply declared never to have considered such possibility. Others declared that they would ask neighbours or a relative to prepare their meals. Others yet stated that people who can not cook anymore should not be living independently anyway. However, participants also discussed alternative solutions to the problem, such as the regular use of ready meals or meals-on-wheels services. Some of the participants were more in favour of using ready meals since they thought these would allow them a higher degree of independence than the meals-on-wheels service. One participant said: “With ready meals you still decide when you eat and what you eat. It is reassuring to know that they exist”. Participants also found it inconvenient that one has to be at home at specific hours to receive the meals from the meals-on-wheels service. Regarding the positive aspects of meals-on-wheels, participants named the fact that they were brought home (eliminating the need to shop everyday) and that they offered plenty of choice, including tailored meals for people following a diet. Participants clearly preferred meals-on-wheels services providing frozen or chilled meals to the ones providing warm meals. They thought that it was likely that the meals were already lukewarm when people received them. Moreover, they found the fact that they would have fixed times to eat, depending on the schedules of the meals’ distribution, highly inconvenient. On the other hand, services delivering chilled or ready meals were seen as giving them more freedom to decide the timing of meals and other daily activities, since distributions were not so frequent and meals could be stored for a longer period. The only downside to this service was the fact that participants would then have to own a microwave and be able to handle it.

### **3.4 Reactions to ready meals and suggestions for product improvement**

Tables 5A and 5B display the results obtained from the discussion during the second half of the sessions. When shown the different products, participants began mostly by mentioning features that had to do with packaging or labelling (Table 5A). Comments related to the packaging generally stressed their wish for easy-to-open packages that keep meal components separated and allow buyers to see the product inside. Attractive packaging was also stated as being highly appreciated. Regarding labelling, participants generally expressed their need for a more precise and clear information. They also expressed their trust in products sold by well-known brands. The following discussion focused on the preparation required by the different products, portion size (Table 5A) and composition (Table 5B). Taking into account what was said, there seemed to be a demand for an increased product choice and more tailored-made meals. Different portion sizes, suiting the needs of different households, more variety of dishes and the possibility to assemble one’s own meal from separate meal components were improvements suggested by a great deal of the participants. This demand for tailored-made meals reappeared

when participants were discussing the healthiness of the products displayed. Participants declared they would like to see available special meals for people following a diet, in particular meals low on fat. Above all, ready meals should be really “ready”, that is, they should demand only minimum time and effort to prepare.

*Table 4. Opinions about ready meals*

<b>Ready Meals are not for me</b>	<p>“They are for people who cannot cook anymore”</p> <p>“They are for men who cannot cook themselves”</p> <p>“Young people do not cook anymore, they don’t enjoy the pleasure of preparing their own food” “People who work would use ready meals before we do”</p> <p>“If you want to use ready meals than you have to have a microwave. I don’t have one”</p> <p>“We are just not used to them”</p>
<b>Ready Meals are mass-produced and standardised</b>	<p>“They contain a lot of added stuff, E-numbers”</p> <p>“Ready meals are mass-produced, I don’t believe that any first class product can come out of that. They must put the cheapest vegetables and potatoes in it”</p> <p>“If you buy the ingredients yourself, you choose the amounts, the quality and the price. With ready meals you don’t have that control anymore”</p> <p>“The quantities are standard: for one person it is too much, for another too little, for another too little vegetables or too many potatoes...” “There are too little vegetables in them”</p>
<b>Ready Meals are not wholesome</b>	<p>“If you eat ready meals everyday you will quickly get a deficiency in some vitamins. We miss a salad as side-dish” “Ready meals are fatty and salty”</p> <p>“Meals that lay for a week in the supermarket before they are sold cannot be fresh anymore”</p> <p>“In spite of the package I have the feeling that bacteria can grow in it really quickly”</p>
<b>Ready Meals are expensive</b>	<p>“I think you can cook yourself for less money”</p> <p>“How much energy you have to spend to get the oven warm in the first place!”</p> <p>“A ready-to-eat meal on its own doesn’t look that yummy, If you want to eat a tasty meal, you have to organise yourself and add something extra. You might as well cook yourself”</p>
<b>Ready meals do not look or taste that good</b>	<p>“I think that they often don’t look that tasty, with all that cooked stuff in it”</p> <p>“I have tried it once, I thought it was not tasty”</p> <p>“It’s too salty” “The potatoes fell apart when warmed, I had to eat them with a spoon”</p>
<b>Package is excessive and not handy</b>	<p>“Everything looks nicely packed, but if you look at your dustbin at the end it is full with plastic” “Even with this one person’s package you get a pile of waste”</p> <p>“The package gets too hot in the microwave. I always burn my fingers on it”</p> <p>“You only get this little piece loose to pull the lid off. You have to get a pair of scissors and cut the package open. I think that is terrible”</p>
<b>Labelling</b>	<p>“The ingredients are there but not how much of each ingredient”</p> <p>“The information regarding whether the package can or cannot go into the oven or microwave is not clearly written on the packages” “Sometimes the letters are too small”</p>
<b>Ready meals are not that much more convenient</b>	<p>“Frozen foods do not warm up well in the microwave. The outside is cooked but the centre is still frozen”</p> <p>“You can also be ready in 15 minutes when cooking yourself. It takes only 10 minutes to prepare noodles”</p> <p>“Take-away meals are already cooked. I just have to take them home and eat them, and that is it”</p>

Participants were allowed to open the packages and look at their contents, if they required doing so. When that happened, the discussion focused on the appearance of the meal (Table 5B). Meals were found to be generally not too colourful or attractive. Participants highly disliked the appearance of meals in which the components were already mixed together, and they had difficulties imagine how the dried ready meals would finally look like. A discussion of the freshness and the storage of meals followed. Some participants found no meal to be fresh, since they were all already prepared. Others thought the chilled meal to be fresher, because it had been packed fresh and had a short shelf-life. Others yet found the frozen meal fresher, because the ingredients were “fresh frozen”. The dried or canned meals were generally found to be not fresh, but were on the other hand highly appreciated because of their storage properties. Different participants appeared to have different concepts of freshness, and no consensus on this topic could be reached.

#### 4. Conclusions and future research

Taking into account the quality and quantity of the information obtained regarding the opinions and perceptions of Dutch seniors about Home Meal Replacements, the focus group technique has resulted in valuable information. The idea of starting the sessions by asking first for the important characteristics of warm meals did much for the quality of the results obtained, since home made meals appeared to be a strong reference point for HMR evaluation. The results obtained show that the participants attach a high moral and emotional value to prepare their own meals, which reflects negatively on their judgement of ready meals and other HMR.

*Table 5A. Reactions to ready meals and suggestions for improvement*

<b>Packaging</b>	<b>See-through package</b>	“I rather have a package that allows me to see the contents, then I know what I’m buying” “You should be able to see what is in it. Maybe they can put a little window on it”	
	<b>Components kept apart</b>	“They should keep the components apart so that you can decide for yourself how much of each you want to eat. That works more on your taste buds” “I should be able to distinguish what I’m eating, otherwise I don’t buy it”	
	<b>Attractive</b>	“I find the package of the dried meal very pretty. It gets your attention” “The package should make the product look tasty”	
	<b>Easy to handle</b>	“You heat it in warm water, and then what? How do you open it? There is only that little metal gadget”	
	<b>Environmental-friendly</b>	“The packages should be recyclable or returnable. They should work less with plastic and more with carton”	
	<b>Labelling</b>	<b>Composition Information</b>	“They should have labels with bigger letter types and a light background, otherwise it is almost unreadable” “Sometimes there is no information about the composition. You should at least know what it contains” “I would not choose for a product that does not mention the quantities of the ingredients” “I have problems understanding the labelling. What is maltodextrine?!” “They should always use the same units of measure”
		<b>Shelf-life</b>	“I always look first at the due-by-date”
		<b>Brand name</b>	“I first look at the name of the producer, to see whether it is a known brand ” “I would not usually buy such a product, but if it is from that brand...”
		<b>Preparation instructions</b>	“I always read carefully the preparation instructions before I start cooking” “It should be clearly stated in the label how you should prepare the meal”
		<b>Preparation</b>	“All these products can be very quickly prepared, 5 minutes in the microwave” “This one must stay 13 minutes in the microwave, or 45 min in the oven. If you are in a hurry... You use a lot of electricity and time just to get the oven warm! It should not take that long to prepare” “Ready meals for people who cannot cook should be as simple as possible. You should only have to warm them up, eat it and throw the plastic package away afterwards. No washing!”
<b>Portion size</b>			“It is too much. I don’t dare to put the rest back in the freezer because I am afraid it will spoil” “There should be different portion sizes for the different people and for one-person households”

Ready Meals only became appreciated when participants were confronted with the possibility of not being able to cook anymore, since they allow them to remain somewhat independent from others. Independently of the psychosocial considerations, seniors think that there is much room for concrete improvement of the quality of ready meals. Handier packages, clearer labels, simple and short preparation, better taste and appearance and tailored-made meals are the sort of practical improvements that would be greatly appreciated by the participants. Whether that would do much to make the whole concept of replacing home-made meals more attractive to seniors and to turn them in sales hits within this segment is something that companies need to carefully contemplate. Perhaps an improvement of the image of ready meals, aiming at changing the low moral status associated with not cooking one’s meal (or removing the consequent feeling of guilt for using ready meals),

could be more effective. In any case, as participants stated, at a certain stage HMR become unavoidable for everybody, and companies selling HMR products seen as “less worse” or “almost as good as my own cooking” will probably have a better chance of success.

From a more fundamental viewpoint, it would be worthwhile to repeat these sessions with other groups of Dutch seniors and with groups representing other Dutch (or non-Dutch) market segments, to see if similar results could be obtained. It would also be interesting to learn more about the cognitive structure (product attributes-benefits-values hierarchy) behind the meal choice of senior citizens, in order to be able to fully understand the motivations behind the low moral status of convenience foods (Reynolds & Gutman, 1985). Finally, the results of the focus group study here presented can also be used to design and perform a quantitative study assessing the actual importance of the low moral status of convenience foods to consumers in general (Gofton, 1995).

*Table 5B. Reactions to ready meals and suggestions for improvement (cont.)*

<b>Composition</b>	<b>Additives</b>	“I would preferably choose a meal which is free from preservatives and colour or taste enhancers”
	<b>Protein source</b>	“I look at how much meat is in it, and what type of meat” “There should be ready meals made of fish too” “A meal does not necessarily have to contain meat”
	<b>Starch source and vegetables</b>	“The overwhelming component of the meal is pasta or rice There are too little vegetables” “Good quality potatoes that do not fall apart when heated” “I would add a salad, you need some more vegetables in a meal” “Product only has carbohydrates, a little bit of vegetables. I would rather have a fried egg with bread” “They should offer more choice. They should allow you to choose the ingredients’ combinations you want”
	<b>Not complete</b>	“I would choose the frozen meals because they contain already all the necessary ingredients” “I would choose the frozen or the dried, with the idea of adding something to it”
	<b>Healthiness/ Nutrition</b>	“The label already informs you that they added vitamins, because they could not keep its original value. I think that is very honest of them” “I wonder what is the amount of vitamins in this product, if it is so harshly processed” “They should not be too fatty” “They should create special meals for sick people, low on fat and/or salt”
	<b>Appearance</b>	“This meal does not look that good, I exclude it immediately because of that” “It is a bit weird, you cannot imagine that the dried meal is going to become food” “I find the noodles too white. I don’t have any high expectations about it” “I don’t see myself eating this, it is all mixed up, a real mess” “We want them to look nice”
	<b>Freshness</b>	“The dried product does not attract me. Dried vegetables are not the same as fresh, even after adding water” “I should choose the frozen one, its vegetables are freshly frozen. I expect that to taste better” “You can read on the label: fresh, quick, easy. But that is really not fresh anymore, it is already cooked” “The chilled meal appears to be the most fresh, it was prepared and immediately set under cool storage. As long as you pay attention to the due-by date it should be ok to eat it. I would choose this one”
	<b>Storage</b>	“The dried meals fit better in my closet” “Frozen meals are handy because you can use half of it and keep the rest in the freezer” “We want meals that we can keep for long in the freezer, or better yet, in the closet”

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