

Chapter 2: Attitudes towards and perceived risk of buying food online

2.1 Participants' online food purchasing behaviours

The three groups comprised:

1. Those who rarely or never purchased food online
2. Those who bought food online, but only through online supermarket websites and/or lower risk foods
3. Those who frequently bought food online, using multiple platforms including through social media and/or food sharing apps and higher-risk foods (such as meat and dairy products and/or cooked, ready to eat foods).

There were no notable differences observed in participants' behaviours or attitudes to buying food online across the different countries. The main differences were instead linked to participants' current and previous online food purchasing behaviours. Consumers' behaviour and attitudes around buying food online are compared and contrasted between participants in Group 1 and Groups 2 and 3 and are discussed below.

2.1.1 Behaviours and attitudes among those not typically buying food online

Participants who did not frequently purchase food online tended to cite practical reasons to explain their food shopping behaviour. They did not tend to have specific concerns about the safety or hygiene of food bought online. These participants generally found it easier to buy food in person, and often said they preferred the overall experience of doing so. For example, participants frequently referenced the human interaction that shopping in-person offers. These participants said they also liked the physical act of getting out of the house to do their shopping, with some referring to online shopping as 'lazy'.

These participants also preferred the greater choice and control that they felt when buying food in person. For example, they often said they enjoyed browsing through items and handling and selecting what they wanted to make sure items were ripe/in-date/good quality. They felt they were not able to do this when buying food online. They also liked being able to go and purchase items when it suited them – not having to wait for a delivery or click and collect slot. For those who were able to easily access shops in-person, buying food online and waiting for their food to arrive was seen as taking too long.

“If I want something, [buying food online is] just a really long-winded way of doing things.”

(England, Do not typically buy food online)

Some participants also felt online food shopping could be more expensive, and thought they were able to save money by buying their food in person. Examples included not able to purchase items in the reduced section in supermarkets or having to pay delivery charges or reach a minimum spend, which may not be suitable for those shopping for just themselves.

Supermarkets providing unsuitable substitutions in online orders was another source of frustration. Many participants recounted instances where alternatives they had received were not appropriate for dietary, or cultural reasons, or because they would not have made a similar substitution themselves if offered the choice in person. While the overall convenience of online food shopping was recognised, some participants mentioned that having to be at home for online food deliveries may not be suitable for people who work long hours outside of the home.

Previous negative experiences of ordering food through the 'Big Three' aggregators (Deliveroo, Just Eat and Uber Eats) appeared to influence the behaviour of those who did not buy food online frequently compared to those who did. These negative experiences were more commonly reported by older participants. For example, participants cited instances where orders had been incorrect or arrived late. This meant they had decided to not use the aggregators very often, preferring to order takeaways by phone or in person.

Some of these participants also worried that aggregator delivery drivers were not subject to food safety and hygiene requirements. This resulted in some participants preferring to use their local restaurants' own delivery drivers instead, who they trusted would adhere to appropriate standards because they were more familiar with the relevant food business.

Despite these concerns, on the whole, participants who did not typically buy food online recognised that online purchasing could be preferable for other people, including those who had less free time, or who were less mobile. They could also see the benefits of buying certain long-life items online, such as tinned goods, alcohol or condiments, as these were less likely to arrive damaged or spoiled. Many said that they had, or would in the future, set up online food orders for older relatives, even if this was something they did not do themselves.

"I am resigned to the fact that when my mum is older, I'll do her online shopping."
(England, Do not typically buy food online)

2.1.2 Behaviours and attitudes among those who bought food online

Convenience was the main reason participants said they purchased food online. The importance of this was especially highlighted by those who said they lacked the time or ability to buy food in person (e.g., if they worked long hours, did not drive, or if they were unwell). Participants particularly liked how online supermarket websites and apps enabled customers to easily re-order the same items efficiently.

"If I have the app and run out of things, I just add it straight to the app. I don't have to write a list every single week. I have it all stored and hit buy when I'm ready to purchase it, so really handy."
(Northern Ireland, Frequently buy food online)

Many participants reported buying food online more frequently than they had prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some reflected that this had increased their comfort levels with buying food online. Participants also recognised that this method of buying food was suitable for those who were shielding, or those who felt more anxious about COVID-19 restrictions who would prefer to avoid shopping in person.

In contrast to those who did not buy food online, participants who did so felt this saved them money. These participants argued it was a more focused way of buying food, allowing them to make better decisions. For example, participants said there was less temptation to make impulse purchases compared to buying food in person. They also felt that online deals could be easily seen and taken advantage of. Others mentioned liking being able to track the total cost of their order as they added items online.

“It keeps you to the point of your shop – you don't get things you don't want.”

(Wales, Frequently buy food online)

Another perceived benefit of buying food online was the ability to buy speciality foods. Participants mentioned buying international foods they could not buy in local supermarkets, or specific foods for dietary or ethical reasons, such as vegan products.

“I shop on Amazon and Instagram for specialty things. I have a lot of food intolerances. If I can't get the specific things I want in the main supermarket online shop, I'll go buy it individually from other sites.”

(Wales, Frequently buy food online)

Participants did not tend to spontaneously mention social media influencing their online food purchasing behaviour. When asked about this specifically, some participants reflected that social media made a difference to their food purchasing. Examples included seeing TV and social media adverts (specifically adverts on Facebook and YouTube) promoting buying food through the Big Three aggregators; recipe boxes (such as Gousto and Hello Fresh); and using online supermarkets. Some participants had bought food in this way after seeing adverts because it was easy and convenient to do so. This was more common among younger participants.

Participants described buying food as a result of online advertising for the following reasons:

Where this aligned with their personal values. For example, supporting local businesses and combatting food waste (e.g., buying surplus local fruit advertised on Facebook), or if they felt their values were aligned to those promoting the products in the advert, or that the influencer was genuine.

“[Talking about online adverts on Instagram] If it's a celebrity I don't like what they stand for, I won't support the brand they're representing. Especially with appetite suppressants and that kind of stuff... If it's somebody who's toting something you don't think is healthy or they're only doing it for the money side of it, that would make a massive difference for me.”

(Wales, Frequently buy online)

- where this supported their diet/lifestyle (for example, buying ready-made meals through MuscleFoods seen on Instagram adverts);
- if the establishment/products were recommended (for example, buying seafood from establishments they had seen on advertised on Snapchat which friends recommended);
- or if they had seen products advertised which were suitable for people with hypersensitivities:

“I buy through Instagram and there are a lot of specific pages for people with food intolerances. For example, for Valentine's Day, they were sending out nut-free, gluten-free, vegan, everything-free all across the country.”

(Wales, Frequently buy food online)

Within the groups who frequently bought food online, some participants mentioned having bought food through Facebook Marketplace. This was primarily through established food businesses which had a Facebook page, and typically baked goods such as homemade cakes. While not all participants who frequently bought online had used food sharing apps, such as Olio and Too Good To Go, there was higher awareness and use of these apps among these participants.

2.2 Information required when purchasing food online

Participants reflected on the information that was important to them when purchasing food online. This included:

Full ingredients lists. These were especially important for those who had – or who cooked for people with – hypersensitivities. Participants mentioned this was especially critical when ordering from takeaways and restaurants online. As a result, they often used the same restaurants they knew and trusted.

Nutritional information. This was mentioned by participants who said this was important to them, given their focus on healthy eating and/or fitness training, and where they were mindful of salt and sugar content when cooking for others including children.

Brand names. Participants referenced trusting and prioritising buying from brands they recognised, which they linked to trusting that these products would be authentic and safe to eat. This appeared to be linked to a sense of trust in the reputation associated with bigger, recognised brands – both with regards to particular food items, but also food establishment and retail brands, as discussed in Chapter 3.

“I’m not going to buy any obscure foods I don’t know about - it’s pretty recognised brands that would be stocked in Sainsbury’s. It doesn’t concern me.”
(Northern Ireland, Buy food online but only from online supermarkets)

Online reviews and comments. While important for some, this was not always information participants said they would look at prior to making an online food order. When participants did consult reviews, this tended to be when ordering from an unfamiliar business, or if participants had, or cared for people with hypersensitivities. Reviews provided these participants with additional reassurance about the food they were ordering. However, participants acknowledged that comments and reviews could be subjective, as they would reflect consumers’ personal preferences. Some also worried that reviews may not be genuine.

Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS). Across groups, some participants mentioned checking Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS) ratings for establishments when ordering through aggregator apps to give confidence in the safety of the food ordered. This was not something that participants mentioned considering when ordering food from online supermarkets. Participants presumed that individual sellers making and selling homemade food through social media and online marketplaces would not have Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS) ratings, which made some feel more cautious about buying food in this way.

Cost. While not mentioned often, this was a factor which could determine the extent to which people order food online, as purchasing takeaways and recipe boxes online were generally considered more expensive.

2.3 Paying for food bought online

Across the groups, participants did not view buying food online any differently to making other online purchases. PayPal, Apple Pay and debit cards were the most popular payment methods, driven by ease and convenience where participants’ card details were already securely saved. This made the online ordering process more efficient. Participants did not appear concerned about paying for food online using bank details, as this was a trusted method they used frequently. However, some participants recognised that people who are older or less tech-literate and not as familiar with online shopping may be more concerned about inputting bank details online.

When provided with online food purchasing scenarios which gave examples of paying for food bought online in cash, there were mixed responses among participants. Where food was being

bought from established businesses, such as local restaurants requesting cash payments, participants tended to say they would prefer paying for their order online, as it was more convenient. However, participants who did not frequently buy online appeared to view individual, local sellers requesting cash payments for food sold online as a riskier transaction.

"[In response to Facebook Marketplace scenario] ...is there a receipt? If you're paying with cash, then it's a lot trickier to try and get your money back. I wouldn't trust that if I went to Joe off Facebook Marketplace that I'd get a receipt." (Northern Ireland, Do not typically buy food online)

They also thought cash purchases called into question the sellers' business more generally, including how well food safety and hygiene was being managed. However, some reflected that paying in this way could mean consumers could refuse to pay if the products were not as expected on collection.