

Consumer Insights Tracker Report July 2023 - March 2024: Discussion

Discussion

One of the key findings from this report is that the cost of buying food continues to be a top concern for consumers. In the context of the ongoing cost of living crisis and high levels of food price inflation, food prices were consistently the topic most consumers were concerned about, while food poverty and inequality ranked as the second or third concern in every wave. This suggests that concerns relating to food costs and affordability are top of mind for consumers, with the data from this survey indicating that this has a knock-on effect on cooking and eating behaviours. Although levels of worry about their own household's ability to afford food were lower, and declined slightly throughout the tracking period, there remained a sizeable minority (approximately one in five) reporting this. Worries relating to household food affordability were particularly apparent for those aged under 55, those in the most deprived IMD deciles, those limited by a health condition or disability, and those with children in their household.

People reported making a number of changes to their shopping, cooking and eating behaviours to save money. While some of these changes, such as buying cheaper alternatives to branded products or cooking from scratch rather than buying ready-made, are less of a cause for concern, sizeable proportions also reported taking actions which are more of a concern, such as eating food past its use-by date, lowering the cooking temperature for food, or reducing the length of time food is cooked for. Those worried about food affordability were much more likely to report practicing these kinds of 'risky' food behaviours, suggesting a link between purchasing power and food safety. Overall, these findings indicate that financial pressures in the context of the cost of living crisis and food price inflation might be driving some to engage in unsafe food behaviours to save money.

Concerns about the healthiness of people's diets, including ultra-processed or over-processing of food, also ranked highly within this research. Concern with these issues associated with other issues, such as GM foods or ingredients/additives in food. In contrast to food affordability, concerns about these issues tended to be higher among older age groups. This highlights the importance of ensuring that the needs and preferences of all age groups, especially the older demographic, are addressed in communication and educational campaigns about these issues.

The proportion who said that they were worried about there not being enough food available for their household was also relatively low, although still around 1 in 5 were worried about this. However, when considering those involved in the food supply chain, most respondents were confident that they ensure there is enough food available. Confidence in the food supply chain was lowest when it comes to the perception that those involved in the food supply chain ensure that there are affordable food options for everyone. This again suggests food affordability is a key issue and area of concern for consumers.

A majority reported trust in the FSA, while there was also high confidence in the FSA's ability to carry out its functions. Those who trusted the FSA were generally less likely to be concerned about all food-related issues asked about, compared to those who did not trust the FSA. Caution should be taken when analysing the relationship between these perceptions. For example, it may be that those with lower levels of concern about food-related issues tend to trust institutions related to the food system more, as opposed to higher levels of trust in the FSA driving lower

levels of concern.