Chapter 3: Factors influencing trust and confidence in food bought online

3.1 Familiarity

Participants' confidence in food bought online was influenced by their familiarity with a given establishment or seller. This was reported across groups, regardless of participants' actual online food purchasing habits were. Participants often described not feeling confident about ordering food from establishments or sellers they were unfamiliar with. They consistently associated a lack of familiarity with higher risk when buying food online. This higher risk was specifically attributed to uncertainty surrounding the quality of the food being sold, and the hygiene standards of the establishment/seller.

The influence of familiarity was evident across different platforms. For example, participants across groups often mentioned only ordering takeaway food via aggregators from restaurants they already knew and where they had positive previous experiences. Some described the importance of having physically visited the establishment, as this gave them more confidence that it was clean and hygienic.

"Places you would regularly eat at, or are aware of, yes. But I wouldn't choose a place I've never been – just local places I know and like."
(Northern Ireland, Buy food but only from online supermarkets)

Similarly, participants' lack of familiarity with sellers on food sharing apps and social media platforms was an important driver influencing participants' reluctance to purchase food in this way. There were frequent references to not feeling comfortable buying food 'from strangers'.

"[About buying food through Facebook Marketplace] This is a random stranger selling food. It's a strong no."
(England, Buy food online but only from online supermarkets)

As well as familiarity with sellers and establishments, participants also discussed the importance of familiarity with platforms. For example, some mentioned having greater trust and confidence in buying food through recognised platforms like the 'Big Three' aggregators or Amazon, compared to through food sharing apps which they had not used before.

Indeed, many participants were surprised that food could be sold through social media platforms, such as Facebook Marketplace, even when they were used to buying food online. Their lack of familiarity influenced their trust in the quality of food sold in this way, as discussed further in Chapter 4.

As discussed previously, participants also said they felt more confident buying food online from brands they were familiar with. Some said that they would be confident buying food online from brands that they recognised and had used previously, even if they were buying from a platform that was less familiar.

3.2 Sellers' need to protect their reputation

Businesses' need to protect their reputation also emerged as an important factor driving participants' trust in the safety of food sold online. This was the case across all groups and was closely linked to the importance of familiarity discussed above. For example, participants assumed that well-known, established food businesses would want to ensure that the food they were providing was safe to eat, so as not to damage their reputation. However, this consideration was mentioned by participants across different business types, including restaurants, food retailers and individual online sellers.

"If your reputation goes down by selling dodgy food... Uber Eats would drop you like a hot potato."
(England, Buy food online but only from online supermarkets)

The importance that participants placed on businesses' need to protect their reputation was also seen when participants reflected on different online food purchasing scenarios. For example, when discussing buying food through the Too Good To Go app, participants consistently focussed on how food sold in this way was ultimately coming from established food businesses, with reputations to uphold. Even though this food was nearing the end of its shelf life, across the groups participants generally said they would feel confident buying food in this way, as they trusted these restaurants and cafes would be adhering to food standards to maintain and protect their reputation.

"[Talking about buying food through Too Good To Go] It's a business premise and so it has legal liability. There's barely any risk involved with this."
(Wales, Frequently buy food online)

Conversely, participants expressed a lack of confidence in food bought from individual sellers through platforms such as Olio and Facebook Marketplace, rather than established businesses. In these instances, participants were concerned that these individuals could lack accountability when it came to ensuring the quality and hygiene of food sold, as they did not have the reputation of an established business to uphold in the same way. This was especially concerning for those with hypersensitivities.

"The fact that things like Facebook aren't very moderated, and as someone with a lot of food intolerances, I get nervous."
(Wales, Frequently buy food online)

However, the influence of online reviews and comments was also recognised, with some participants arguing that this feedback had a similar potential to hold individual sellers to account.

"Reputation is everything. It doesn't take long for somebody to be trashed online if they get loads of bad reviews."
(England, Frequently buy food online)

Businesses and sellers' reputations among consumers were also important to participants. Participants frequently made references to 'reputable companies', which appeared to drive confidence in food bought online.

"First and foremost, reputation is the key part of it. The scores on the doors and that kind of thing: every restaurant has to have that but not every place has a good reputation."
(Northern Ireland, Frequently food online)

This was particularly highlighted where participants said they had trust and confidence in food bought from Amazon because of its perceived reputation. Across groups, participants felt

confident that food bought in this way would be safe to eat, even among participants who did not typically buy food online.

3.3 Assumptions about levels of regulation

Consumers' confidence and trust in buying food online was also shaped by their assumptions about the levels of regulations in place for food bought online. Specifically, participants mentioned concerns around:

- the extent to which they perceived food businesses (including delivery drivers) to have and adhere to food safety and hygiene regulations
- what role the online platform had in enforcing regulation for food bought and sold online
- and the extent to which they believed individual sellers' procedures would follow food hygiene standards

Participants trusted food being sold through online platforms from established food businesses (like restaurants and cafes, through aggregator apps, or Too Good To Go). They assumed that these sellers would be subjected to quality control protocols and would have strict food hygiene regulations in place to protect consumers. Participants specifically referenced feeling confident that these establishments would have Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS) ratings, which they felt provided them with some reassurance that suitable standards would be in place for food sold online in this way.

Conversely, participants' concerns about platforms such as Olio and Facebook Marketplace were often directly linked to their assumptions about the lack of regulations for selling food through these platforms. Across the groups, participants questioned whether food hygiene standards were enforced, monitored, or even required by these online food purchasing platforms. This led to participants seeing these platforms as being potentially higher risk for consumers.

Linked to this, participants on the whole were worried about individual sellers' cleanliness and hygiene when preparing food in their own kitchens. Reflecting their concerns about the lack of regulation from platforms, participants were worried that these individual sellers selling food through Olio or Facebook Marketplace lacked accountability. As such, participants were unconvinced whether sellers would be motivated to adhere to food safety and hygiene standards.

"The shops have rules and regulations which they have to follow. John down the road, he might follow them. But he might not."
(Wales, Frequently buy food online)

However, linked to reputation, participants who had previously bought food through such platforms recognised that it would be in the interest of local sellers to ensure that the food they were selling was as advertised and safe for consumption, in order to sustain their business.

3.4 Endorsement

Across groups, endorsement from others (e.g., word of mouth or positive reviews) was an important factor further influencing trust in food bought online, particularly when purchasing food in new ways. In particular, trust in buying food online increased if endorsement came from people known to participants.

This was particularly evident in discussions around the online food purchasing scenarios. For example, across the groups, participants said they were often reluctant to buy food from platforms they were less familiar with, or they deemed higher risk (e.g., Facebook Marketplace or Olio). However, on reflection, some participants said they may consider buying food through these

platforms if products were recommended to them, or well-reviewed. This was seen to be the case across groups and even for higher-risk foods, such as seafood in one instance.

"I know somebody that buys fish, but I know them. I do buy it from their [recommended] place, and I order it through Facebook, but I know that it's decent. I would trust them."
(Northern Ireland, Frequently buy food online)

There were more mixed views about the value of online reviews in building confidence and trust when buying food online. Some participants said positive reviews influenced their trust in food bought online from various platforms. For these participants, knowing that other people have eaten and enjoyed the food gave them confidence in the quality, safety, and authenticity of the food.

"I'd go off reviews if it's somewhere I haven't tried before. If it's got good reviews, I'll try it."
(Wales, Frequently buy food online)

However, this was not the case for those with hypersensitivities, who still wanted reassurance that food had been prepared in line with food safety standards. Some participants also expressed concern in the legitimacy of online reviews and how reliable or genuine they are. This linked again to familiarity and highlighted the greater value placed on endorsements from people known and trusted when buying food online.

"Reviews can be very easily manipulated so I wouldn't pay too much attention to reviews online. I'd pay more attention to reviews from my friends or people I know."
(Northern Ireland, Frequently buy food online)

3.5 Type of food

Across the groups, participants spontaneously mentioned different foods which they would not feel comfortable buying online, as they deemed them to be higher risk. Participants consistently described meat, fish, eggs, dairy, and rice as being associated with an increased risk of food poisoning/illness if these foods were undercooked, spoiled, or out of date.

Many participants had ordered food online from supermarkets which arrived within a day or two of its use-by date. For participants who do not usually buy online, this had reduced their confidence in doing so. They were more cautious when buying fresh food online due to heightened food safety concerns.

"Fish and meat…I've had experiences where packaging has come opened and that can make you seriously ill and I don't like the idea of it. When you go to a market, you see it, they clean it, and if you go to a supermarket [in person] you can see the packaging is sealed. Physically being in the supermarket makes you feel better than [buying] stuff you don't know [online]."
(England, Do not typically buy food online)

This also extended to some participants being reluctant to buy fresh fruit and vegetables online, due to concerns around fresh food's shelf life and arriving close to its use-by-date. Some participants therefore said they preferred going shopping in person to browse and pick items that had a longer shelf life.

"We always go to the shop, and we literally look for things that are further back in the shelf, the one that doesn't go off the quickest, which you can never guarantee when it's online shopping"
(England, Frequently buy food online)

The quality of food bought online was also a concern for some. Across groups, some participants mentioned avoiding buying perishable fresh fruit and vegetables online, as they were worried about the quality of items selected not being what they would have chosen in person. They also had concerns about this type of food being damaged during transportation. However, there were mixed views, with other participants more comfortable buying fresh fruit and vegetables online. They mentioned feeling more confident as they could wash and prepare these foods themselves at home.

Across all groups, packaged, dried foods were considered lower risk. For some, the concerns relating to the quality of fresh food meant that they only bought non-perishable, pre-packaged foods online. Participants noted that they did not need to worry as much about use-by-dates or issues related to the food being damaged in transportation with non-perishable products. Participants were more likely to trust packaged and sealed food as they assumed nobody had tampered with it before it reached them. For example, even though rice was consistently identified as a higher risk food type, participants were not concerned about hypothetically buying pre-packed microwavable rice (as in the example Amazon food purchasing scenario – see Appendix B), as it was pre-packed and sealed. Participants expressed that this indicated there was a lower risk of damage or contamination.

3.6 Previous negative experiences

Negative experiences ordering food online related to both the quality and the safety of food ordered. For example, participants cited negative experiences of takeaway food which was unhygienic (e.g., hair or foreign objects found in meals) but also complained about mixed up orders. These experiences had influenced participants' decisions, putting them off ordering from the same establishment again. However, there were very few examples of participants who no longer ordered food online at all, because of previous negative experiences.