

Chapter 6: Summary and conclusions

Those who did not frequently purchase food online tended to prefer the overall experience of buying food in person. They typically did not have specific concerns about the safety of food bought online. However, problems with the quality of food bought online were highlighted. Participants who did not tend to buy food online wanted to select their own items.

Some concerns about buying food online were related to finances (for example, perceiving buying food in store to be more , -effective), or frustrations with unsuitable food substitutions they had received when buying food online. Despite this, these participants recognised that buying food in this way would be suitable for some people's lifestyles and admitted they would consider buying food online if they were unwell or would set up an online food delivery for older parents.

Convenience was the main driver for those buying food online more often. Participants reflected that they had bought food online more since the pandemic and they liked the overall ease of ordering and paying through apps. Other perceived benefits included cost savings because food purchasing was more focused (contrary to those who did not buy online often). Some also liked being able to order speciality foods online. Dietary requirements and hypersensitivities were considered, with participants explaining that ingredients lists, and nutritional information were important to them when buying food online.

Participants did not consistently look at reviews online. Some felt that these were dependent on individuals' preference and could be misleading. However, for some participants who had or cooked for someone with hypersensitivities, reviews provided participants with reassurance about the safety of food ordered online.

Participants did not view buying food online any differently to making other online purchases. However, where cash payments were required for food bought online, participants sometimes saw this payment method as a riskier transaction. For participants who did not often buy food online, individual sellers requesting cash payments called the legitimacy of their food business into question more broadly, including the extent to which they may adhere to food hygiene standards.

Participants' confidence in food bought online was influenced by their familiarity with establishments, sellers, and platforms. There were frequent references to not feeling comfortable buying food 'from strangers' on apps and social media platforms. Related to this, participants referenced liking buying particular brand names which they knew when buying food online, as they trusted that the food would be authentic. Across groups, endorsement from others (e.g., word of mouth or positive reviews) also influenced trust in food bought online, especially where this came from people known to participants – again highlighting the importance of familiarity.

Food type was another factor affecting participants' online food purchasing behaviours. Across groups, 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. Participants who did not typically buy online were more cautious when buying fresh food online due to the heightened food safety concerns. Packaged, dried foods with longer shelf-lives were consistently considered lower risk, as there was less concern about use-by-dates or issues

related to the food being damaged in transportation.

Businesses' need to protect their reputations also emerged as an important factor driving participants' trust in the safety of food sold online. 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. Linked to this, participants' confidence 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) and individual sellers would adhere to food safety and hygiene regulation. Some concerns were raised where participants presumed that aggregators' delivery drivers were not subject to food safety and hygiene requirements, and participants were uncertain about how consistently food would be transported at the right temperature. However, their main concern appeared to be related to food arriving late and/or cold, rather than significant concerns with food safety specifically. Participants also questioned the role that social media platforms, such as Facebook Marketplace, had in enforcing regulation for food bought and sold online.

There were higher expectations placed on platforms and businesses whose focus was on selling food, as ensuring consumer safety was seen as one of their central responsibilities. Participants expected that these organisations would take steps like monitoring customer reviews and conducting due diligence to ensure the food being sold on their platform was adhering to hygiene and safety standards. Where participants were concerned that aggregator companies' delivery drivers were not subject to food safety and hygiene requirements, they saw it as the responsibility of these companies to monitor their drivers' adherence to food safety regulations. Some participants expected to be able to contact the platform and/or company directly if food being sold was not safe. This extended to aggregator companies, as well as food sharing apps. By contrast, participants did not hold more social media platforms (such as Facebook Marketplace) to the same standards because they were not primarily focused on selling food.

While some participants felt that individual sellers selling homemade food online should specify how they managed food hygiene, participants were uncertain about how this could be regulated in practice. They also generally accepted that social media platforms such as Facebook Marketplace would not have responsibility for monitoring this. Participants pointed to the scale of this platform, and the lack of an obvious way to escalate issues related to food bought online. As such, participants broadly agreed that responsibility for any risks lay with consumers themselves, unless the platform was focused on selling food or sellers were established. Linking to the importance of reputability, participants had different expectations when buying pre-packed, non-perishable food through Amazon. They were confident about the established ways to report issues, and trusted buying packaged food in this way.

Across the groups, there was little detailed understanding or awareness of the regulations in place to ensure that food purchased online is safe to eat. There was some expectation that regulations would be set centrally by 'government'. However, participants were consistently unclear about what these regulations would look like in practice. The importance of businesses' reputation was, again clear, with participants (especially those who frequently bought food online) broadly assuming that hygiene standards would be adhered to for food sold online to maintain businesses' reputation with their customers – especially for established food businesses.

Participants agreed that the FSA should be involved in the regulation of food standards for food sold online. However, they typically did not have strong views about what this should look like in practice. The general trust in the FSA's regulation of established food businesses extended to participants broadly trusting the food that was sold from such establishments online. For many, Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS) ratings provided reassurance that food sold online through established businesses would adhere to hygiene standards.

Participants did not have a clear view on the specific role of the FSA in regulating food sold online by individual sellers. They did not appear to expect regulators to be proactively monitoring this when individual sellers were using general online platforms, with the risk ultimately seen to lie with consumers themselves. However, there were some participants who wanted the FSA to be a point of contact in cases where food sold online had made consumers seriously ill.

Across the groups, there were some participants who reflected that the discussion groups had made them think more about the food hygiene risks when buying food online. Other participants said they may consider buying food online in new ways, like bulk-ordering packaged food on Amazon. Several mentioned that they would look into buying food through food sharing apps, like Too Good To Go, to combat food wastage.