

Executive Summary

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Method and sample

This research report provides findings from 12 online discussion groups conducted via video with a range of consumers split across different demographics in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. To allow for exploration of the nuances in participants' online food purchasing behaviours, the discussion groups were further split according to participants' online food purchasing habits. During the 90-minute discussion groups, participants discussed their views towards food sold online. Participants were also shown five online food purchasing scenarios designed to explore whether types of food and/or types of platform affected participants' perceptions of risk. To conclude the discussion, participants were asked about their awareness of controls and regulations currently in place to regulate the online food purchasing industry across different platforms.

Key findings

Participants' attitudes towards buying food online

Across the discussion groups, participants' attitudes towards buying food online were linked to their current food purchasing habits.

Those who did not frequently purchase food online tended to prefer the overall experience of buying food in person. While they typically did not have specific concerns about the safety of food bought online, problems with the quality of food bought online were highlighted. Some concerns about buying food online were related to finances (e.g., perceiving buying food in store to be more cost-effective), or frustrations with unsuitable food substitutions they had received when buying food online. Despite this, participants recognised that buying food online suits some people's lifestyles. They further suggested they would consider buying food online if they were unwell or to support older parents by setting up an online food delivery.

Those who bought food online said convenience was the main driver for doing so. Many participants reported buying food online more frequently than prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. 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.

There were no notable differences highlighted between participants in England, Wales and Northern Ireland around buying food online, or the ways they considered the risks around doing so. The factors that shaped online food behaviours and attitudes are discussed further below.

Information required when purchasing food online

Dietary requirements and hypersensitivities were considered, with participants explaining that ingredients lists, and nutritional information were important to them when buying food online.

The importance of reviews for participants when buying food online was mixed, with participants not consistently looking at reviews online:

- some felt that reviews were dependent on individuals' preferences and could be misleading.
- for others, particularly those who had or cooked for someone with hypersensitivities, reviews provided participants with reassurance about the safety of food ordered online.

Paying for food bought 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, raising questions surrounding the legitimacy of sellers and the extent to which they adhere to food hygiene standards.

Factors influencing consumers' confidence in food bought online

The following factors were identified as influencing the extent to which participants trusted, and had confidence in, the safety of food bought online.

- familiarity: 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.
- sellers' need to protect their reputation: Businesses' need to protect their reputation 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.
- assumptions about regulation: Participants' confidence was shaped by their assumptions about the level of regulation in place for food bought online. Specifically, participants mentioned concerns around the extent to which they perceived that food businesses and individual sellers would adhere to food safety and hygiene regulations. Some participants questioned whether food hygiene standards were enforced, monitored, or even required by online food purchasing platforms. They also had concerns about the way in which food is stored, packaged, and delivered by food delivery businesses in particular and the implications this may have for the quality and safety of food bought online.
- endorsement: Across groups, endorsement from others (for example, word of mouth or positive reviews) strongly influenced trust in food bought online, especially where this came from people known to participants – again highlighting the importance of familiarity.
- type of food: 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 past their use-by-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.

- previous negative experiences: While previous negative experiences rarely stopped participants from ordering food online completely, they influenced participants' confidence in the quality and safety of food bought online. Participants cited negative experiences of takeaway food which was unhygienic (for example, hair or foreign objects found in meals) and complained about mixed up orders.

Assumptions and expectations for online food regulation

While participants agreed that the FSA should be involved in the regulation of food standards for food sold online, 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, the 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.