

Chapter 1: Background and methodology

1.1 Introduction to the research

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) is responsible for food safety across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Their work includes protecting public health and consumers' wider interests in relation to food, as well as reducing the economic burden of foodborne illness.

With increasing numbers of online food delivery and food sharing platforms, and evidence of more people obtaining food online, this research was designed to understand consumer attitudes towards purchasing food online, including the perceived risks. It sought to capture attitudes around purchasing food through a range of different online retailers: from ordering food through established businesses, which had physical presences, such as using online supermarket websites and delivery service apps, through to obtaining food through social media platforms (for example, Facebook Marketplace) and food sharing apps (for example, Olio, Too Good To Go).

1.2 Research objectives and aims

This research aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What influences consumers' decisions when purchasing food online;
2. What are consumers' attitudes towards risk when obtaining food online and in which ways do these vary; and
3. What consumers' assumptions are about how this area is currently regulated, and how it should be regulated in future.

1.3 Methodology and sample

To answer these research questions, 12 online discussion groups were conducted (comprising 69 participants in total) to explore consumers' decision making and perceived risk when purchasing food online. Fieldwork was conducted between 8th February and 22nd February 2022 across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Participants took part in a 90-minute online discussion via video.

To allow for an exploration of the nuances in participants' online food purchasing behaviours, the discussion groups were split by nation and according to participants' online food purchasing habits. Across the 12 groups, discussions were divided into those who:

- don't typically purchase food online in an average month;
- have purchased food online but only through online supermarkets/delivery sites and/or lower risk foods; and
- purchase food online frequently across multiple different platforms (including social media, online marketplaces, and food sharing apps), and higher-risk foods (such as meat and dairy products and/or cooked, ready to eat foods).

To capture a broad range of views on the relevant behaviours, each group brought together a mix of consumers across the following demographics:

- Working Status
- Social Grade
- Rural/Urban and geographic location
- Age
- Ethnicity
- Gender

Additional criteria were also monitored across the sample, including ensuring the views of participants with hypersensitivities and those who had caring responsibilities, were captured.

The design and structure of the discussion groups were informed by the key research questions. Discussions were structured to include a 'warm up phase', where participants discussed typical food purchasing behaviours and spontaneous views towards food sold online. This was followed by an exploration of what information participants would require when buying food online, and participants' perceived risk of buying food online. Participants were then shown five online food purchasing scenarios which were designed to explore whether types of food and/or types of platforms affect participants' perceptions of risk. These can be found in Annex B. Finally, participants were asked about their awareness of controls and regulations currently in place to regulate the online food purchasing industry across different platforms. The discussion guide is included in Annex A.