



**Food in the Platform Economy:
Digital Food Marketplaces for Unconventional
Food Entrepreneurs**

Final Report

Sebastian Prost
Open Lab
Newcastle University

RCUK Policy Intern
August 2018

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
1. Introduction.....	2
2. Research Questions.....	4
3. Case Study: Digital Food Platforms.....	5
4. Research Methods.....	6
5. Findings.....	7
5.1 Backgrounds, Motivations and Aspirations.....	7
5.2 Regulatory Aspects: What makes a food business?.....	9
5.3 Work Practice.....	11
5.3.1 Getting the Business Started.....	11
5.3.2 Event Preparation.....	12
5.3.4 Experiences with Guests.....	12
5.3.5 Work Challenges.....	13
5.4 Platform Experience.....	14
5.4.1 Motivation to Join.....	15
5.4.2 Getting Started on the Platform.....	16
5.4.3 Business Model and Commercial Dynamic.....	16
5.4.4 Reviews and Ratings.....	18
5.4.5 Autonomy and Control.....	19
6. Conclusion.....	23
7. References.....	25

Abstract

Digital marketplaces enabling consumers to purchase food from a variety of different sellers have proliferated rapidly in recent years. These platforms differ from conventional retailers in that they typically neither select nor take legal ownership of the food products offered for sale on their websites. They offer aspiring food entrepreneurs who might not trade from a registered food business establishment an accessible route to market with limited economic costs and risks. These enterprises – which sometimes trade from domestic kitchens or rented event venues, or provide food only intermittently – complicate existing definitions of what constitutes a food business for regulatory purposes. So far, little is known about this population of enterprises, including their backgrounds, motivations, economic circumstances and food safety practices. This project used a qualitative research approach involving in-depth interviews to explore the business practices of small vendors trading on two distinct digital food marketplaces, namely EatWith, a platform for home cooks selling food experiences, such as supper clubs, and Feast-It, a platform to book street food vendors.

1. Introduction

In recent years, digital marketplaces in which consumers may search, compare and purchase food supplied by a variety of different sellers have proliferated rapidly, and have gained increasing purchase within certain sectors of the food economy. The expansion of these platforms has to date been most dramatic in relation to the market for takeaway meals, with recent estimates (CMA 2017) suggesting that roughly half of all takeaway meal orders placed in the UK are now processed by online takeaway order (OTO) aggregation platforms such as Just Eat and Uber EATS. However, the growing involvement of established marketplace platform operators such as Amazon in the grocery ordering and delivery market suggests that digital marketplace platforms may begin to exert greater influence across other sectors of the food industry in the future.

While such platforms facilitate the selection and purchasing of food products by consumers, and often process payments on behalf of their users, they differ from conventional retailers in that they typically neither select nor take legal ownership of the food products offered for sale on their websites. Instead, sellers using such platforms usually manage their own product range and inventory, retain ownership of the goods offered for sale and bear some measure of responsibility for ensuring the safety and legality of these products up to the point of delivery to the consumer.

It appears that digital marketplace platforms may play an important role in enabling some aspiring food entrepreneurs to make the transition from experimenting with small-scale, informal food production or retailing activities to establishing a registered food business. Trading via these platforms may offer aspiring Food Business Operators (FBOs) which do not trade from a registered food business establishment – for instance those who operate a business from their own home or in rented kitchen spaces – exposure to a larger audience of potential consumers than they would otherwise be able to access. In so doing, some digital marketplace platforms may provide incipient food businesses with a route to market which offers lower start-up costs than would be involved in renting or purchasing a dedicated commercial unit. In some cases, these platforms also appear to provide new vendors with advice on commercial and regulatory issues. Indeed, some digital marketplace platforms have reported that they consider helping new food businesses to become established to be a core part of their mission and purpose (Brice, 2018).

As a result, it is possible that the user bases of these platforms will include informal or unconventional food producers, caterers and retailers which may complicate existing definitions of what constitutes a food business for regulatory purposes, as elaborated in the EU General Food Law (Regulation (EC) 178/2002) and in Regulation (EC) 852/2004 on the hygiene of foodstuffs. For instance, such enterprises may operate in unusual spaces – from domestic kitchens to rented event venues – or provide food only intermittently (selling food only when they have customer orders to serve, or when it takes the owner’s fancy). In so doing, such online-only traders not only potentially challenge many traditional mechanisms of regulatory scrutiny (such as the registration and inspection of dedicated food business establishments). They may also complicate regulatory definitions which characterise food businesses as possessing a certain continuity and organization of operations (Regulation (EC) 852/2004, recital 9), raising questions about whether they should be subject to the provisions of food law and, if so, how food regulation might best be delivered to and enforced on them.

This is a population of enterprises about whose backgrounds, motivations, economic circumstances and food safety practices regulatory authorities so far know relatively little. To the best of our knowledge, the research presented in this report constitutes the first attempt to explore the scale and regularity with which food businesses trading primarily or entirely via digital marketplace platforms provide food, their operators’ level of food safety competence, their motivations in starting a food business, or their relationship with the platforms via which they trade. Yet answering these questions will be of considerable importance in determining how this population of businesses might most effectively be supported in this emerging digital economy. Moreover, given that such businesses are in many cases new ventures which may represent the proprietor’s first foray into the food industry, more effective engagement with them holds significant potential to advance the FSA’s aspiration to ensure that food businesses understand and are ready to meet their responsibilities to produce safe food from the outset. Indeed, better access to and engagement with this group may offer both an early opportunity to deliver information and training on how to comply with food law to new FBOs.

This report aims to deliver a clearer understanding of how to identify and reach these enterprises, the regulatory and commercial issues that they might face, their current levels of food safety knowledge and competence, and the types of support that they might need. Moreover, this population of digital marketplace vendors is, like other groups of ‘gig economy’ workers and ‘sharing economy’ enterprises (Schor et al 2017), highly diverse – including supper club hosts and mobile street food caterers. As such, it is also important for the FSA to understand whether, and if so why, the circumstances and needs of different types of vendor and vendors trading via different marketplace platforms might vary.

2. Research Questions

This research project aimed to address the above gaps in the FSA's understanding of the characteristics, circumstances and practices of food vendors trading via digital marketplace platforms through answering the following research questions:

- What are the backgrounds of these FBOs? Have they worked in the food industry before? How did they come to start a food business?
- What level of food safety qualifications do these FBOs exhibit?
- At what scale do their enterprises operate, and what sales channels do they use? How many consumers do they provide food to, how regularly do they trade, and what platforms or offline channels they use to do so?
- What sources of advice, information and support (both financial, legal and operational) did these FBOs draw on during the process of starting their business?
- Did these FBOs encounter any regulatory or commercial barriers in the course of establishing their businesses?
- In what ways do these FBOs aspire for their businesses to evolve over time?

3. Case Study: Digital Food Platforms

This research focused on vendors trading on two distinct digital food marketplaces. On the one hand, we looked at EatWith, a platform that allows individuals to advertise food experiences, most commonly supper clubs, but also other events such as cooking classes. At a supper club, a host offers tickets to a meal, typically in their private home. Guests can purchase tickets in advance and eat with the host and other guests who they generally didn't know before in a social setting. EatWith offers hosts profile pages with text and images to describe themselves, a calendar with their events, and a booking and payment system. Guests can use the built-in messaging tool to communicate with hosts and leave reviews after the event on their profile. EatWith is the trading name of VizEat, a company that trades in a number of countries across Europe and North America and has acquired a number of competitors over the past year – most recently the London-based company Grubclub. This has left EatWith as the dominant operator in this market, although it still has competitors (e.g. WeFiFo and Tabl).

The second marketplace we researched was Feast-It, a platform for street food vendors. Feast-it functions as a conventional event booking agency, and as such contracts with event organisers such as corporate event organisers, festivals, and street markets to fill their street food slots. In addition, it offers an online directory of their vendors for individuals or organisations to browse and contact (and book) directly. The latter is primarily aimed at smaller and private events, such as weddings or parties. Feast-it started only fairly recently (early 2017) and is still expanding into new cities to establish a UK-wide presence, having started out in London.

While both platforms are quite different in terms of the types of food event they are servicing, there are some key similarities that make them relevant to look at together. First, both platforms operate as intermediaries which enable buyers to purchase a meal (or other food) which will be prepared and served by a host or caterer during an event. Rather than a marketplace in which the customer purchases pre-packaged food products or indeed takeaway meals for delivery to their home. Similar to online takeaway order (OTO) aggregators like JustEat or Deliveroo, the platforms act as a technology provider for food provisioning, but do not actually make or handle any food. This is particularly interesting from a regulatory side. Second, both platforms provide a marketplace for small and unconventional food businesses, with EatWith more so than Feast-it. These businesses lack some of the characteristics of traditional food businesses, such as permanent premises that are exclusively used by the food business, permanent and trained staff and a certain degree of regularity of operation. Again, from a regulatory perspective it is interesting to ask to what extent these operations qualify as food businesses and whether existing procedures for registration and inspection are appropriate.

4. Research Methods

To gain a rich understanding about the diversity and complexity of the vendors' business practices, we followed a qualitative research approach with in-depth interviews with vendors on EatWith and Feast-it. Potential participants were identified using their public profiles on the case study platforms, and were initially contacted via email or social media. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants based in Greater London, to enable face to face interviews, and to ensure (in the case of Feast It) that we were getting interviewees who were providing food to their customers rather than ones who were simply serving beverages (with one exception). This included all of the 48 EatWith hosts currently operating within the Greater London area and 60 Feast-it vendors. After initial communication, 11 EatWith hosts, 7 Feast-It vendors agreed to participate, resulting in 18 in-depth qualitative interviews), lasting between 30 and 90 minutes each. The interviews followed a semi-structured question guide with roughly 100 questions, mirroring and detailing the research questions presented above. During the interview questions were dynamically adjusted based on the flow of the conversation.

Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and analysed following a Thematic Analysis approach. Based on observations and notes taken during the interviews we developed an initial code tree. For analysis we read through each interview transcript and coded segments partly using the pre-existing code tree, partly adding new codes as analysis progressed. After all interviews were coded, we clustered codes into a final code tree, with the top level forming the central themes of the analysis. The following chapters follow this structure.

5. Findings

The findings are grouped in to several sections. The first section, “Backgrounds, Motivations and Aspirations” gives a broad overview over the characteristics of food vendors we interviewed, including their background and motivation for selling food via a digital platform and the type of events and food they deliver as well as the locations they operate from. The second section, “Regulatory Aspects”, discusses the characteristics of our participants’ undertakings in the light of the food law, in particular the difficult question whether they can be classified as food businesses and what challenges the nature of their operations might pose to current food business registration and inspection processes. In the third section, “Work Practices”, we will talk about the challenges food vendors face in starting and running their operation, the process of preparing for events, and their experience with customers. Finally, in “Platform Experience” we will discuss the participants’ motivation for and benefits of using the platforms, how they began trading on the platform, the platforms’ business models and the commercial dynamic on the platform, the platforms’ review and ranking systems, the level of autonomy and control the vendors have over their operation, and the trend of consolidation and commercialisation of digital marketplaces for food.

We will conclude this report with a summary and a discussion of the key insights and questions for the regulator and future research.

5.1 Backgrounds, Motivations and Aspirations

Overall, the interviewed street food vendors and supper club hosts make a highly diverse population. Nevertheless, there are certain trends and groups we could identify. Their diversity is foremost reflected type of food they offer. We encountered supper clubs dedicated to Cameroonian, Lebanese, Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, Brazilian, and British and Western food. We also identified three supper clubs in which different events were catered by different cooks, and in which the style of cuisine available therefore varied from meal to meal. Among the street food vendors there were producers of ice cream, Indian wraps, cheese toasties, vegan burgers, champagne, hummus and crêpes.

All participants catered to some degree for a range of dietary requirements. Usually vegetarian options are offered, and in several cases the food is already vegetarian anyways. In terms of consumers with food allergies, most of the street food vendors interviewed put up signs requesting that customers ask staff for information regarding allergens. EatWith allows supper club guests to send a message along with their booking request in which they can declare their dietary requirements. The host can then respond and either confirm that they are able to prepare a meal free from these allergens or inform the guest that they cannot accommodate their dietary requirements. In the interviews our participants generally showed a high awareness of food allergies and how they can or cannot be accommodated (e.g. through substituting or leaving out certain ingredients), as this quote illustrates:

I have catered for people for gluten-free and nut allergies before, but caveated with the fact that it’s not a gluten or nut-free kitchen, so as long as the customers are aware. –
EatWith host

The vast majority of our participants had already some professional experience in the food sector before they started catering activities. About a quarter had professional training as chefs, about half had other work experience in commercial kitchens, and the rest learned from their family. Only two participants reported that they had learned their cooking skills on their current job, both from their respective business partner. However, 13 of our interviewees said that they did have a professional background in a completely different

area, and many of them, particularly the supper club hosts, currently have another job as the main source of their income.

Seven of the 11 supper club hosts considered themselves to be running a business, however only two of them run them professionally for profit. Two supper clubs were hobby projects, and two were hosting in an arts context. The biggest group, with four participants, were interestingly a social enterprises or charities running supper clubs as a way to raise funds or for cross-cultural understanding. The supper club hosts generally run their supper clubs alone, only the four charity supper clubs and one of the professional ones have a partner or a small team of up to three people. To the contrary, all but one of the street food vendors interviewed reported that running their catering business was their full-time occupation and considered themselves entrepreneurs. However, they generally only have one business partner and only employ permanent temporarily for events.

Unsurprisingly, almost all our interviewees expressed a passion or interest for food as a motivation to start their current undertaking. In several cases this was also connected to the interviewee's dissatisfaction with the food offer they found available in the UK at the time they started and the wish to change the food culture. For about half of our interviewees food is also a way of achieving social or environmental goals, like connecting people of different cultural backgrounds, using food as a platform for artistic expression, or reducing food waste. For another 8 participants their involvement with food was also a business opportunity or born out of the desire to change their careers.

About half of the supper club hosts use their private kitchen and dining rooms to cook and to host their events. The other half, in particular the charitable and professionally run supper clubs host their events in rented spaces, such as cafés (that are closed in evenings) or commercial kitchens. Some supper clubs use several locations depending on the nature of the event. Street food vendors usually operate from mobile trailers, vintage vans, or a gazebo. Most street food vendors own or rent a kitchen somewhere in which they prepare their food. Four of our seven interviewees have actually outsourced their production to a manufacturer who they give the recipes. At the actual event the food is then only assembled or heated up. This is done largely due to the limitations a mobile unit offers and to be more efficient in serving customers. Street food vendors are generally present at a wide range of types of events. With one exception all of them go to festivals or other large public events where street food is sold next to the main event. Most are also trading on dedicated street food events, such as food markets or lunchtime events in business areas. An attractive, but limited revenue stream are corporate events and private parties, at which organiser generally agree the quantities and prices of food to be served in advance, meaning that the vendor bears little risk in terms of footfall or weather. About half of our participants are or have also been selling their products to retail and wholesale customers.

One of the questions we were asking going into this research was whether both street food vendors and supper club hosts see their activities as an intermediary step towards establishing a more traditional food business, such as a restaurant. However, only a minority of 3 interviewees identified this as one of their goals. Most participants instead aimed to get better at what they are doing and to run more events. The most growth-oriented were the street food vendors, with several interviewees having long-term plans to start or expand their wholesale and retail activities, or to expand their business to create a franchise or chain. About half of the supper club hosts simply want to continue hosting events as they are doing now, with several participants pointing out that they are at capacity in terms of energy and space they have available to invest in their project.

5.2 Regulatory Aspects: What makes a food business?

In terms of scale or professionalism of their business, the street food vendors clearly fall within the definition of a food business and thus are subject to food business registration requirements and to food hygiene and food standards inspection and regulatory enforcement regimes. However, our findings show that it is difficult to fit the supper clubs into existing regulatory frameworks. Regulation (EC) 852/2004 (recital 9) states that an undertaking needs to show both “a certain continuity of activities and a certain degree of organisation” in order to be considered a food business. All of the street food businesses exceeded the FSA’s guidance that a business needs to provide food on average at least once per month in order to demonstrate continuity of activities, although their work is highly seasonal and weather dependent. In the summer months when the weather is good these businesses would typically cater 2-4 events per week, but between October and April there are hardly any events. Some of the vendors we interviewed see event catering also more of a side business and concentrate on wholesale or direct online sales. Many supper clubs host about one event a month, but some also organise events as infrequently as twice a year or only upon request. Only one professionally run supper club runs three times a week.

Regarding the degree of organisation, the FSA follows a risk-based view, taking into consideration the type of food served, the control mechanisms needed to prepare and serve this type of food safely, the number of consumers to whom an undertaking provides food, and whether events are open to all consumers or restricted to defined groups. Most of the food served by our interviewees is hot food that is prepared for direct consumption, therefore carries a medium risk. Regarding the number of consumers at risk, the street food vendors fall clearly within the high-risk group, as they typically serve hundreds of customers on a trading day. Supper club hosts, on the other hand, sometimes only have one or two guests. The largest number reported was 25-30 guests per event.

Therefore, street food vendors can be considered food businesses and our participants reported consistently that they have the necessary hygiene training, have registered their business with their local authority, and received an inspection and a food hygiene rating scheme (FHRS) score. For supper clubs, this question cannot be answered in general, and needs to be evaluated case by case.

All but one of the supper club hosts interviewed stated that they have at least a Level 2 food hygiene training qualification. However, only two of the supper club hosts interviewed have registered as a food business. There seems to be some confusion over what registration means, as some are registered as a business or a charity for tax purposes, but appear to be unaware of the requirement for food businesses to register with their local authority. Two supper club hosts who rented spaces for their events mentioned that these premises had undergone food hygiene inspections as part of their normal operations (e.g. as a café during the day), and therefore believed that their supper clubs did not need a separate registration. Consequently, the majority of supper club hosts had not undergone a food hygiene inspection and did not have a food hygiene rating. When asked, none of these participants mentioned this has ever been a problem for them.

Across all participants good hygiene practices are seen as important, but displaying an FHRS score is not considered crucial. A high rating is seen as essential and not just a bonus, as the following quotes illustrate:

I have a sticker, so if I had a five, I'd put the sticker on. I know four is fine, but still I pride myself on being very clean and everything. If someone were to ask, I'd tell them. –
EatWith host

I don't think, me as a customer, I don't really look at that. I look myself to the state of the kitchen and everything, the staff, and everything. But I don't make my judgment on the sticker that you can put at the front of the shop. So, yes, it's no big thing for me. –Feast-It vendor

Several interview participants pointed out problems they see with the registration and inspection process in regards to their business. As pointed out above, some supper clubs occasionally use premises belonging to other food businesses. This raises the question to what extent separate assessment processes might be required for premises and for the people using them in order to provide a meaningful assessment of the food hygiene performance of businesses of this type. A kitchen might be spotlessly clean and have all the required control mechanisms in place, but when the venue is used by different people, some of whom may not have adequate training, this might mean little. Similarly, some supper clubs have different cooks for each event, and each would require their own rating independent of the location. Equally, some supper clubs might change location frequently, which would require them to be re-inspected constantly:

Lots of professions no longer need a set place to work. I feel like that's kind of what this sort of thing offers as well, if you see what I mean. You don't need a set restaurant to work from. [...] It's hard to regulate. If you're in one place for a few, like a month or two, and then you move to another place. It's constantly like where are you now? –EatWith host

Additionally, many of the supper club hosts use their private homes to prepare food and host guests. When their kitchen is mainly used for private purposes, a scheduled inspection will prove difficult. The evaluation criteria used during food hygiene inspections are designed for premises which are used continuously by a food business. Interviewees considered many of the control mechanisms assessed during a food hygiene inspection, such as monitoring of fridge temperatures or use-by dates, to be inappropriate for premises used only sporadically for commercial purposes, as this quote exemplifies:

But what you need to remember is that I don't cook every day. When I know that I have an event, then I'm going to buy these ingredients for that event. [...] Everything is fresh, so there isn't so much a challenge of ensuring that I have dates and I would know when to trash the food. Because once the event is finished, then the family would eat leftover. It won't be reused for the following events. –EatWith host

In fact, some supper club hosts pointed towards alternative mechanisms, such as the review systems operated by marketplace platforms (which we will discuss later) or the platform operator's reputation that is at stake. If an incident were to happen, hosts would quickly feel the peer pressure in the form of negative reviews or would be removed from the platform by the operator. Moreover, two hosts argue that hygiene standards are probably higher at a supper club than in a typical restaurant because the ingredients are always fresh and there is a lot less time pressure in the kitchen:

I think the hygiene actually is probably a lot better. Even though because you have more time to do things properly. Whereas, in restaurants it's kind of like it's always just a cover up job basically. [...] From my experience, food hygiene, the worst is when you are part of a busy [restaurant] kitchen and things get very disorganised and people lose track of what's going on. –EatWith host

In summary, supper club hosts often saw the food hygiene inspection process as inappropriate and burdensome. Some hosts expressed the fear that if the FSA were to

enforce regulations in the emerging market, it would deter many new starters and “stifle that creativity” (EatWith host):

I'm very much, I'm for the idea of basic requirement skill, basic knowledge. But I think to enforce it, to sort of make it like inspectors and all the rest of it, I think people won't join, it will kill the idea and it will stop in its tracks. –EatWith host

The aim would then be to achieve a careful balance between over- and under-regulation, ensuring that hosts hold the necessary food hygiene skills but don't require them to go through the whole inspection process.

5.3 Work Practice

Beyond the characteristics of the undertakings, our participants also talked in depth about their daily work practices and the implication this might have for regulators. This included how they started their business, how they go about preparing for food events, the experience of running events and interacting with customers, and the challenges they face in their work.

5.3.1 Getting the Business Started

Most participants reported, perhaps surprisingly, that they had experienced no major challenges while starting their business. This speaks to the low economic risk for an entrepreneur to start both supper clubs and street food businesses, as they do not require dedicated premises. Premises is one of the biggest challenges for new food businesses, especially in London, where real estate prices in attractive locations are extremely high. The street food traders only needed a mobile unit, which can be a simple gazebo setup. Additionally, they require a kitchen, but some use facilities at home, rent kitchens as needed, or outsource production altogether, to keep production costs low. For supper club hosts, the biggest investments were often investments in furniture, like chairs and a bigger dining table. The type of business allows for a slow start and continued growth as demand increases, as this supper club hosts points out:

The fact that you're running a business from your own home takes away that element of risk, in terms of the upfront costs of rent. And now that I think, I, obviously I've got bit more of a base that's now that I'm taking on more risk in terms of renting this space. – EatWith host

While starting a new food business demanded a lot of energy and physical labour, all participants were able to establish their businesses using their existing financial reserves and did not require external financial investment. In terms of regulatory requirements, supper club hosts did not report encountering any issues, which can be partly explained by the fact that many did not go through official registration in the first place. However, most street food vendors did not encounter specific problems either. While 2 participants mentioned that there were a lot of hurdles to overcome, 4 of 7 interviewees praised the Nationwide Caterers Association (NCASS) for their helpful guidebooks and personal support, as this quote illustrates:

Any equipment questions, the legal side of anything. They sorted out our public and product liability and employee's liability insurance. [...] You ring them up, and they've always got time to you. They'll always get back to you. It's really, really remarkable, I think. It's an amazing company. I couldn't recommend it more. –Feast-it vendor

5.3.2 Event Preparation

Unlike traditional food businesses, both street food vendors and supper club hosts don't have fixed trading hours and walk-in customers. They usually trade for set events, for which they can prepare specifically in advance.

Supper club hosts usually receive booking requests via EatWith or other platforms they offer their tickets. Only very rarely would customers contact them directly to make a booking. Customers who find them via their social media presence or dedicated website, are generally redirected to book via one of the platforms. This is slightly different for street food vendors. They tend to curate personal connections with event organisers or with various booking agencies in order to secure bookings for events. Most of the bookings which street food vendors receive via Feast-It comes in fact from their booking agency side of the business, not from clients directly who use the Feast-It website. Usually Feast-it sends out text or WhatsApp messages offering opportunities to cater a specific event, and the vendors can choose to accept or ignore an offer on a first-come, first-serve basis. Occasionally clients will contact the traders directly, but these events are usually much smaller, e.g. for weddings or private parties.

Generally, both supper club hosts and street food vendors accept all bookings as long as they are able to make it. Street food vendors usually consider their own availability, expected footfall, and the distance from their home or business to the event in deciding whether a booking makes economic sense for them:

Location, footfall, how many hot food traders. [...] We have a formula that we were told by someone else. [...] That will give you a rough estimate of how many covers to do. – Feast-It vendor

Supper club hosts also usually accept all inquiries, as long as they are available and a minimum number of guests is reached. Depending on the host this can be as low as 1 or 2, but most would ask for 4 to 6 guests as a minimum to run the event.

In preparing for the actual event, both street food vendors and supper club hosts usually buy fresh ingredients and start preparing food on the day or a day in advance. For supper clubs, depending on the concept, a lot of time and energy can go into the design of the menu and its alignment with a certain theme, such as artwork that gets displayed alongside the food.

5.3.4 Experiences with Guests

Street food vendors reported a growing market and an increased interest from customers, particularly from a young and 'urban' social group. Interviewees attributed this growth in the market for street food to a perceived increase in the quality of street food during recent years, as these two quotes illustrate:

I see that there is really a big change happening right now. And it happened to me. I used to be, me and my wife, the restaurant type of guys, exploring restaurants every week, going to try new things, a restaurant here and there. And now we do much more of street food or mobile food, just because there are so many people doing really good stuff. – Feast-It vendor

Like in France street food is like a bit dodgy food. You don't think it's going to be quality. But in England it's something very popular and you can find real chefs, real proper food, by visiting the market stall and the food trucks and all these kinds of things. It's real quality. It's not just quick food that you can make at the back of a van. – Feast-It vendor

At least in the UK, street food has left its 'dodgy' past behind and is considered the new 'thing' to go for. Supper clubs are serving the same group of 'foodies' that are looking for new experiences. EatWith hosts consistently reported the demographics of their guests as young and explorative, but above the student age and with the necessary financial capital to eat out frequently, as this quote shows:

They largely range probably like late 20s to 30s to early 40s, yes, late 20s to early 40s, for the most part middle class, working people, kind of into new experiences. They like food. They like eating out. They're looking for, yes, new experiences. What it's like in London, you're trying to always hunt up the new thing. –EatWith host

Since EatWith is a globally operating platform, a key user group looking for authentic experiences are travellers. EatWith is frequently labelled as the 'AirBnB for food'. Most supper clubs therefore don't have many repeat customers. Even local guests are often more interested in a one-off experience than joining a 'club', as the name suggests. However, participants do report a small number of repeat customers, in particular for charitable or arts-based supper clubs.

Given the high rotation of guests, a key element of supper clubs is that strangers who did not know each other before, share a meal together. The hosts therefore put effort into creating a friendly and comfortable atmosphere in order to encourage guests to mingle and socialise. Most guests know, however, what to expect:

The sort of people that choose to come to a supper club are going to be quite sociable. They always have food in common. Actually, they're usually very interesting people. They know that they're coming to a space where they're going to be interacting with people they don't know. –EatWith host

There is therefore a certain self-selection of guests happening. Only respectful and sociable guests come in the first place. Therefore, none of the supper club hosts have reported any serious negative experiences with guests. The few cases of negative experiences reported were typically guests that expected a restaurant-level of service. Usually our participants could clarify these misconceptions easily during the event. When asked, participants struggled to pick a particularly positive experience, as often all of them were very positive. In fact, when asked about security concerns with inviting strangers to their homes, our participants generally had never even considered any potential threats. Only two hosts expressed concerns about events in the past that were attended only by male guests. Typically, they would either make themselves unavailable for the event, or would invite friends or neighbours. For those supper clubs that operate from rented premises this issue is obviously less of a concern. It is worth pointing out that EatWith and other platforms currently offer hosts little information about guests beyond their names. We will discuss later the importance of guests leaving reviews, but unlike platforms such as AirBnB or Uber, where reviews are reciprocal, on Feast-It and EatWith this is not (yet) common practice. It is therefore not possible for hosts to know in advance who exactly will come to an event. Our participants were also not aware of any specific protective measures or incident procedures against abusive guests. Nevertheless, it appears, due to the aforementioned self-selection of guests, that supper clubs currently operate in an amicable and safe space.

5.3.5 Work Challenges

As already indicated, the working patterns of both street food vendors and supper club hosts are quite irregular and these occupations therefore require significant flexibility. For street food vendors, season and weather plays a significant role. The quiet winter months require

them to save money during the busy summer months. As a result, wholesale or retail income streams are very important for some street food vendors. Events with lower-than-expected footfall or bad weather can also result in a significant financial loss if the food business does not have financial reserves. Additionally, street food events often take place on weekends, requiring unusual working hours. Equally, supper club hosts feel pressured to work nights and weekends, when most guests want to book:

It would just steal my whole weekend, because to do something on a Saturday, I needed to start prepping it from the Friday and then I wouldn't see my family on the Saturday, and then the Sunday I would be there trying to recover and put the house back in shape and getting ready for the Monday work. It doesn't make sense. –EatWith host

The same EatWith host went on explaining how they had struggled when only a couple of guests booked for an event and they still felt the need to accommodate them, making their event hardly worthwhile:

You're going to have one or two people wanting to book, and it's a lot of effort just to cook for two people. [...] You look at the time it takes to buy all those ingredients cook and so on and so forth, even though somehow you cook at home, it's just not always worth the effort, as shameful as it sounds. –EatWith host

For hosts who run their supper club as a part time business while holding another job, this can be extremely demanding. Additionally, a low number of guests obviously has financial implications as well, which we will discuss further below.

A different challenge several supper club hosts and street food vendors have pointed out relates to British food culture. Three of our supper club host interviewees explained that they had difficulties in successfully running supper clubs in the UK, as social dining even among friends is not a common thing to do:

I don't know, there's not much [...] intermingling if you like between people. People tend to be rather private. So, in that sense that kind of concept doesn't really work very well. – EatWith host

This means that the idea of supper clubs has had a more difficult start in comparison to other European cities, even in a large city like London. Citing a representative of a supper club platform, one of our participants argues:

They have said that England, or London in particular, has been a problem [...], where they were getting a lot fewer bookings. I think maybe because the British have such a bad reputation for food still within Europe, but that's why [...] it was particularly interesting to realise that 90% of the hosts are foreign-born. –EatWith host

The above quote also points to the fact that many of the supper club hosts are from migrant backgrounds, which is also reflected in the diversity of the cuisines offered. Interestingly, and perhaps paradoxically, supper clubs then appear to be almost a phenomenon existing between foreign-born hosts who want to change British food culture and travellers who like to socialise and experience authentic food.

5.4 Platform Experience

The work practices of our participants are closely connected to their experience of and interaction with one or several digital marketplace platforms. This includes their motivation to join them, how they got started and the requirements they had to fulfil, the business model

under which they operate, the review and rating system, and the level of autonomy and control they have in their relationship with the platform.

5.4.1 Motivation to Join

Supper club hosts and street food vendors expect to gain a number of benefits when joining a platform like EatWith or Feast-It. The platforms are generally seen as a high-quality environment. Feast-It in particular appears to have high standards in terms of professional appearance. While this was not specified in any detail in the interviews, vendors seem to be able to communicate a certain 'image' of high quality and 'trendiness' in order to be accepted on the platform. Also, EatWith hosts generally seem to have very high ratings left by their guests on the platform. To be listed therefore boosts one's own image.

The main benefit to a vendor of establishing a presence on a digital marketplace platform is unsurprisingly increased visibility to an audience looking for their products, and thus greater brand awareness, leading to more bookings. The platforms also provide essentially free promotion through their own marketing mechanisms, on the platform itself but also through social media or their own brand marketing:

I think it's a very good synergy, what we can get from it, because Feast-It is not just a webpage. It's really a platform. They have content creators. I've been interviewed. I'm going to be photographed next week. I've been showcased in a couple of stories that they put. So I see them as very proactive. –Feast-It vendor

Similarly, supper club hosts report consistently that EatWith sends a photographer to take professional pictures. Several hosts have also been booked for PR events with journalists to promote the platform itself:

But for some reason, each time I enrolled in a platform, I ended up being one of if not the person they would contact to promote the platform if they wanted to do something on a newspaper or have some kind of interviews. –EatWith host

Additionally, being listed on targeted platforms makes it easier to establish one's business. Being listed on EatWith and not on a generic event booking platform helps to explain the concept to potential customers:

It's not necessarily a mainstream area of dining. You know? [...] You know everyone who goes to EatWith understands what a supper club is. But if you're selling on a website where, which is generally just for restaurants then you have to be quite clear what you're, what it is. You know, that it's social dining. Not you go and sit on your own table. – EatWith host

In the case of Feast-It, the 'safety in numbers' helps to access big corporate clients that would otherwise be unattainable for a small street food vendor:

It's a necessity if I want to be able to have big event like the [large corporate] event. I think like on my own I'm not going to say oh guys, if you do a Christmas party, I can do the crêpe for you. You know, I can't do that. Feast-It will do it for me and there is, yes, they have big customers, I would say. –Feast-It vendor

Additionally, Feast-It provides financial security for street food vendors and their clients. After a booking is confirmed, Feast-It holds the client's money until after the event and if necessary would facilitate communication to resolve any conflict:

For me, I have a hundred percent confidence in them that it will never be a problem for me to be paid if everything goes well. And on the other hand, for the client, they have that extra piece of mind that if something goes wrong, there is somebody there who can arbitrate things. I think it's a good system. – Feast-It vendor

5.4.2 Getting Started on the Platform

Interestingly, both platforms are quite active in recruiting potential hosts or vendors. Several of our participants reported that they were approached by the platform and therefore did not have to apply to be listed. The process of creating an account was generally described as fairly straightforward and uncomplicated. As pointed out earlier, both platforms offer support to vendors in terms of creating a convincing online visual representation through, for instance, professional photographs. Our participants, who all essentially sell food in a digital space, rely more heavily than traditional food businesses on convincing imagery. The platforms have understood that and are looking for matching users:

I feel like there's a new wave of caterers [...] and that's what these companies are buying as well. They're not just getting the food in now. They're getting the whole package, the whole image of the great food but also the social media that comes with it, the branding, the energy. – Feast-It vendor

Beyond the visual representation, it remained relatively unclear what requirements the platforms have for new hosts and vendors. For Feast-It, some participants stated that there were no formal requirements, however most reported that they had to submit food hygiene rating, qualifications and insurance documents during the onboarding process. For EatWith, requirements seem to be more relaxed. Instead of submitting actual documents, hosts simply have to tick boxes stating that they fulfil the necessary legal requirements:

I had to submit, obviously, my details, details about what the supper club is, about myself, menus, pictures, those kind of things. Then I had to confirm that I'd done all the necessary legal things like registering my business and food safety and all of that. – EatWith host

It appears that EatWith (more so than Feast-It) places the responsibility to fulfil legal requirements into the hosts' hands. This position is important when considering whether the platform's role more closely resembles that of a food business or that of a technology provider.

5.4.3 Business Model and Commercial Dynamic

As is common in the platform economy, both platforms operate on a commission model – adding a percentage to the price charged by the host or trader for each ticket or booking. It is up to the host to incorporate this into their business model. According to rates given by our participants, Feast-It's commission is about 10-30% of the price of all sales, depending on the event. Street food vendors usually face additional fixed-rate pitch fees, which they have to pay to the event organiser. EatWith generally adds a 20% surcharge to the ticket prices the hosts set. The customer only sees the final price. This is a significant increase from the 10% commission charged by Grub Club (a precursor platform recently acquired by EatWith, and formerly used by many current EatWith hosts). Like Grub Club, EatWith does offer discounted rates for charitable supper clubs. Rates reported range between 2.5% and 10% of ticket prices.

For almost all of our street food vendor participants, the Feast-It model is worth the money, as they feel the additional income from attractive events compensates their loss. They generally felt that the platform's business model is fair:

It's more profitable because I get more business. If you had the same amount of sales online and offline, it would probably be more profitable offline because you've got all those other costs you've got to deal with. But yes, you can't run a business now without offering that. It's just another way of getting out to customers. – Feast-It vendor

Only one vendor did not feel that Feast-It's commission is justified for what the platform is doing, as they felt the platform does not give them more jobs. To the contrary, clients with whom they used to have direct relationships they now have to book through Feast-It, who take their margin:

I do question some of their work in that okay, they're going to get some business from various different organisations. But a lot of these businesses we've worked with sort of like directly before in the past. So essentially, they're getting the business when traders used to get it independently, but they're collecting their commission on top. – Feast-It vendor

By exclusively providing street food vendors for an event, Feast-It essentially monopolises the event – meaning that it becomes necessary for street food vendors to be listed on Feast-It and pay them their commission in order to secure bookings.

On EatWith only 4 of our 11 participants stated that they are able to run their supper clubs profitably. The reason why so many 'unhappy' hosts are still using the platform, can largely be explained with the fact that most of them were transitioned following the recent merger between Grub Club and EatWith. As pointed out above, this transition came with an increased commission fee, which many hosts find disproportionate and reason to look for alternative platforms:

I mean since the merge of EatWith and Grub Club happened, I've not really managed to sell very many tickets on EatWith, because, well, one thing, they charged 20% commission which is a huge amount. [...] So, people are obviously put off by that. So, I'm actually, I look at other websites now as well. – EatWith host

Several EatWith hosts reported that their sales have dropped significantly with the merger. They explain this partly in terms of lower demand due to the increased commission fees. The other reason frequently given is that they feel that EatWith's marketing and promotion of their events is less effective than Grub Club's was. EatWith is a global company and promised its hosts more international customers. This, however, has so far not been delivered:

Been given all the spiel. Huge international presence, so people coming from abroad will have heard of this platform. This is where they'll go. I'm still waiting for the influx. I'm going to hang about for a little while and see what happens. – EatWith host

To the contrary, some hosts reported that since the transition they feel they have to compete more with the larger pool of hosts compared to the comparably smaller Grub Club community:

I feel like that because they offer a wide range of experiences and they offer worldwide, it just seems more difficult to get attention. And also, because obviously they had their own supper club listings before they merged with Grub Club, so I think that there must be a higher number of supper clubs on offer I guess. – EatWith host

Comparing the two platforms, competition is, however, more of a phenomenon in the street food market than among supper clubs. Nevertheless, street food vendors and supper club hosts seem to largely operate in an isolated fashion and within their own 'bubble'. Across both platforms, our participants consistently reported that they feel their product is very unique and does not have many competitors. While they all might compete for the same audience, each is able to capture the customers who are looking for a specific type of cuisine. The following quotes illustrate this confidence:

I feel like the food I offer is quite different. I haven't seen anybody else doing exactly the kind of thing that I do. It depends really what is the customer looking for. – EatWith host

It's just that London and the southeast of the UK is such a huge market that I think there is space for everybody. I'm really not concerned about it getting too busy. [...] There is a good variety, but I don't see it at a level that would be cannibalization. – Feast-It vendor

Both street food vendors and supper club hosts see their fellow traders generally more as colleagues than competitors and speak of a friendly atmosphere. There is, however, fairly little direct contact among traders. While there are online forums and Facebook groups for both communities, most of our interviewees said they don't take much part in them. The reason is less a disinterest, but simply because they are too busy. Participants from both platforms did, however, report that they monitor other traders and to some degree even adjust their prices accordingly, as this supper club host shares:

I think £40 is a good price point for what I offer compared to looking at other supper clubs, what their offers are, what kind of food they do. I started off at a price where I thought to get people in, to get their reviews, [...], to get my name out there, and now I'm sort of, I think, at the ceiling price. – EatWith host

5.4.4 Reviews and Ratings

Like many other sharing economy platforms, EatWith and Feast-It use customer reviews and ratings for traders to build trust and reputation. Uniformly, all of our participants stated that reviews are very important for their business. In addition to the visual representation discussed earlier, reviews bring personal references and thus credibility to an intangible product:

That is what people value nowadays, the commentary; this one has a five rating. That is the traffic or the engagement. People want to read to actually believe you, the unknown. No one knows who you are and mission and stuff, so these are the things that bring some kind of, not value, but I would say, weight to what you're doing. – EatWith host

These informal reviews are valued more than awards or accreditation schemes. While these formal recognitions are not central for most EatWith hosts, Feast-It vendors do place some importance in them, although they are more used for marketing purposes than to directly draw in customers:

I think they cover different, let's say, areas. I think the reviews for direct customers, that's it, like when somebody reads a review that is super praising about that specific flavour. I think the [...] awards, they are more institutional. So, if we are going to do an event for a corporate client, then they would be looking into those things. Again, it's that idea of covering different bases. – Feast-It vendor

Interestingly, three Feast-It vendors stated that they have not received any reviews in their profile. The reason for this seems to be either due to them having joined only recently or the fact that most of their jobs come via the agency side of Feast-It, and not via the customer-

facing website. EatWith sends out automated emails after an event to remind guests to leave reviews and most hosts stated that they get enough reviews. Nevertheless, several hosts do explicitly encourage their guests to leave them reviews, underlining their importance. However, it can still be difficult to motivate them:

My customers, they'd all tell me, oh, my God, I love the food. It was so good, thank you, blah, blah, blah. We had a really nice evening. I said, please, if you really liked it, please write a review, and most people forget, unfortunately. But often it's the reviews that attracted them to the event in the first place. – EatWith host

Generally, all participants reported that they receive very positive reviews throughout, reflecting the high quality of the vendors on both platforms. Negative reviews do happen, but are exceptional. With positive reviews driving sales, negative reviews can, however, have a much stronger impact:

A negative review has a much higher impact than a positive review. [...] Even if you've got ten positives, I think, at certain events like a wedding, they would rather look for somebody that's got all positive reviews. – Feast-It vendor

Given the importance of reviews, there is a certain incentive for vendors to limit their presence to one platform and stay on it, in order not to spread reviews too thinly or lose them when switching.

5.4.5 Autonomy and Control

By a large majority our participants see digital food marketplaces as being very important, although not necessarily essential, to the viability of their business. They provide infrastructure, marketing channels, and access to potential customers:

I don't think it's obligatory. Like, I wouldn't think that it was absolutely vital you know, kind of live or death thing. I think there's no doubt that it makes it easier because you've got a built-in customer base who are going to be looking and trawling for us anyway. So yes, I think it's probably more of a matter of just making your life easier than you know, it being a necessity. – EatWith host

In particular Feast-It traders expressed that the platform is a nice-to-have, but that their business model would equally work without an online platform. Street food catering has been an established industry well before platforms like Feast-It started to spring up, so it is easy to see it working without them:

My honest opinion is it's not a necessity, it's a nice to have and it makes sense to do. But if you do not have anything online you could still make a lot of money doing catering and street food. You just might not make it as fast or as easy.

While supper clubs also could be and have been advertised through word-of-mouth and leafletting, given their more grassroots character, it is harder to imagine to have the same reach and scale with only a single individual behind it.

Given their importance, it is crucial to ask to what extent the platforms influence the business practices of their users. Vendors were therefore asked whether they felt that the platforms they used were prescribing their working times, work patterns or business practices in any way. However, both platforms allow their users to accept or reject requests at will. They are also not pushing users to respond within a certain timeframe or accept a certain number of requests.

As pointed out when discussing the reviews, concentrating on one platform can help vendors to build up an online reputation. However, only five of our participants stated that they are only on one platform, all of them EatWith hosts. The reasons named were either a sense of loyalty or to avoid the additional effort that managing several platforms simultaneously would require. In addition to duplicating content, handling the limited number of tickets that can be sold across several distinct sites can be tricky. However, the majority of vendors use several different platforms and neither EatWith nor Feast-It try to restrict this practice in any way. While they do try to convince hosts to build their network on only their platform (partly out of interest in their own profit, partly with the argument that it would be more effective), most hosts feel they can increase ticket sales when offering on several platforms. The main reason appears to be the transition period from Grub Club to EatWith, which has left many of the supper club hosts looking for alternatives due to the increased commission fees. This is particularly relevant for supper clubs with a social aim:

I've just signed up to a different one to try and see if that will bring more people through and also, they take a lot less commission, so... I just feel bad about all the money that we are getting from people going to EatWith, which is an organisation I don't particularly feel I need to support. –EatWith host

Additionally, even though Grub Club and EatWith might have offered a similar service, the overall dynamic on the platform and the audience that can be reached has changed with the merge. Hosts are looking out for better 'matches' for their supper club concepts:

Well, this is exactly what I'm exploring. [...] I need to just spread myself a bit more thinly across other platforms and sort of hedge my bets and try out different options and see what works best now. –EatWith host

Street food vendors, it seems, follow more of a 'more is better' strategy when it comes to platforms:

It's just to broaden our possibilities as much as possible. [...] When you have a small business, it's not a bad thing to be as visible as possible. – Feast-It vendor

Nevertheless, both platforms deploy a number of control mechanisms that restrict the autonomy of their users. While the reason for these might simply be to protect their financial interests, this has important implications for the power dynamics in the platform economy.

A key element is the control over financial transactions. As already discussed above, both platforms take commission from vendors for income generated via the platform. For corporate events, Feast-It takes this commission non-transparently, as Feast-it's cut is deducted from the rate per head that is made available to traders when job opportunities are communicated to them:

So, say we were charging for a private event £10 per head, they're now saying to traders that we can do this job at £7 per head. So, they're taking £3 per head from the traders for the business I used to get independently and directly. –Feast-It vendor

For food events where the customer pays, Feast-It provides their own payment terminals (iZettle) and all the revenue is paid to their account. After the event the traders are paid their share minus Feast-it's commission:

So basically, when you trade with Feast-It you put all your transactions through iZettle and after they calculate, they take the commission, they can see how many payments you took all day. They take their commission and whatever they need to take, the credit card charge and they send you an invoice. You invoice them, and they pay you straight

away. [...] The cash you take home. You tell them how much you took. And after they deduce it from your invoice and they pay you the difference. So yes, it's very, very easy-going. And they even provide you the iZettle machine. They provide you everything. – Feast-It vendor

While this system is very convenient for traders, as they don't have to provide their own payment system, it also locks them into Feast-It and allows Feast-It to control every single financial transaction.

Similarly, every EatWith booking is administered via their own online payment system. Payments are held by EatWith and only after the events hosts are paid. While this system is once again convenient, as hosts don't need to provide their own payment system, this also requires them to have the financial means to cover costs upfront. It also makes them financially dependent on the platform, in particular when payments are delayed, as this quote illustrates:

Obviously, they hold all the ticket money until the event is finished and sometimes in the past that's been delayed. Usually you would receive your funds within 24 hours from an event. Sometimes, for varying reasons, it's been delayed, often sometimes by a week, a week and a half, which is not very acceptable, because we have to reimburse obviously our cooks and all the expenses. So, I think when it comes to control you do feel, from that side of things, sometimes you do feel a little bit powerless. –EatWith host

Another mechanism of control is data. Platforms gather huge amounts of data about site usage, event bookings and financial transactions that could provide useful insights for traders to learn how to improve their offer and operation. Neither Feast-It nor EatWith share this data with their users. It is, however, unclear whether this is due to an unwillingness or simply because the platforms are very small companies themselves and (currently) don't have the capacity to analyse the data. Either way, among Feast-It hosts it appears there is little awareness of the service the platform could provide them with and vendors generally keep their own records using various tools or using spreadsheets:

I've never requested anything like that to be fair [...] and we've got our own records of what we do, you know? And events and how it goes, so we don't necessarily need their information, to be fair. We've got our own sort of like recording methods. –Feast-It.

Similarly, EatWith does not share any statistical data with their users. However, supper club hosts show little interest in using it either, instead relying on personal accounts and feedback from guests:

I mean, these days you never say no to data. You know, the more data the better data. But you know, I think at the moment we're able to offer the best kind of service that we can offer, based on what we know just from speaking to our customers and seeing their reviews. –EatWith hosts

Another mechanism through which both platforms influences the operation of their users is the ranking or order in which their profiles are listed on the websites. Depending on the platform operator, an algorithm takes various factors (such as, for example, customer rating, number of visits to their profile, distance to customer, relevance to search term entered etc.) into account in determining this ranking. It is of key importance for vendors to be ranked high to increase the chances of securing bookings. The precise mechanism appears, however, to be completely non-transparent for the users. Our interview partners were all either not aware of such an algorithm or could only speculate which factors might influence their ranking, as these quotes illustrate:

I don't know. I haven't checked anymore, but sometimes, I was in the first [page], but most of the time I would have been the second [page]. I have the impression it's about location. How close to the centre of London you are. That's my impression but maybe I'm completely wrong. –EatWith host

Yes, they tried to explain this to us. I mean, on the old website, [Grub Club, it] is a simple ranking of how many reviews you have. [...] This [EatWith] is more to do with your responsiveness and the number of reviews you've had. It's a bit more complicated an algorithm, I believe. –EatWith hosts

This issue is more relevant for supper club hosts, as street food vendors get less bookings directly from customers via the website. For them another issue is relevant though: The way call-outs for events are sent out appears to be non-transparent. It is not clear whether these get sent out to all traders, to a short-listed group selected by Feast-It, or if the event organiser selects certain types of vendors. Moreover, as we have already discussed briefly, Feast-It exclusively provides food for certain events, thus controlling who gets access to these opportunities and who does not. Finally, Feast-It also seems to at least ask (if not require) its vendors to offer consistent pricing for their food across different platforms, irrespective of the different commission fees:

My website, let's say £80, they'll benchmark to my website. That's how they do it. They don't let you fluctuate price. [...] They'd probably kick you off if you didn't comply. –Feast-It vendor

EatWith also deploys a number of additional mechanisms to bind vendors to their platform. Unlike at Grub Club, EatWith profiles do not include any social media contact details. While the built-in messaging feature is certainly convenient, it also enables the platform to monitor and restrict communication to prevent the sharing of hosts' contact details or recruitment by competitors:

And also the messaging thing. I've noticed that somebody tried to message me and it said that it wasn't appropriate and I think that that is because I had had messages before, when it was VizEat, from people saying, actually, we like the look of you, so you want to join a different platform? –EatWith host

Furthermore, each event posted on the platform is reviewed and approved by the platform. If it is deemed inappropriate or not up to their quality standards, it is rejected. Finally, EatWith wants their hosts to be as available as possible, often not understanding the complex working cultures of its hosts. Requiring hosts to block out days for potential bookings, even if no-one comes in the end, limits the hosts flexibility:

If I put myself available for let's say, one to three days a month, these are days where I need to make sure that the day before or the day after the day I'm supposed to, I'm not going to be cooking, I'm not going to be traveling, I'm not going to be doing anything in case someone booked me. –EatWith host

While these mechanisms do exist, it needs to be acknowledged that EatWith's influence over its hosts practices appears to be much less pronounced than, for example, AirBnB's influence, which has been described as "pushy" by one of our participants. Ultimately, it is up to the hosts to decide when and how they want to work, and EatWith does not prescribe or sanction any frequency or style of work.

6. Conclusion

To summarise and conclude we want to go back to the research questions initially posted. As discussed above in the findings section, the backgrounds of our participants are highly diverse, with many having at least some prior professional experience in the food industry. Among the supper club hosts, a large proportion are running their food preparation operations on a part time basis while maintaining another occupation or business activity. Meanwhile, street food vendors are generally committed full time to their business. Many food vendors on both platforms were motivated to move into catering activities by a passion for food or a dissatisfaction with current food offers, with pure business opportunities being only secondary reasons.

Our participants typically showed a general understanding of food safety and food hygiene, but provision of additional guidance on their legal responsibilities could be appropriate. Their unconventional business practices also challenge current regulatory definitions of what constitutes a food business, and thus of the range of enterprises to which food regulation should be applied and enforced. In particular, questions remain regarding the extent to which food sellers which operate from changing locations or from their private kitchens, with changing chefs and staff, and with varying frequency can be considered to meet the criteria of regularity and organisation which identify an undertaking as a food business. It might, therefore, be worth considering whether alternative approaches might be applied to ensure consumers are protected without stifling this emerging market. Such approaches might include developing a food hygiene rating scheme for FBOs which might complement existing premises-based inspection and assessment practices, or having a more restricted set of inspection requirements for smaller enterprises operating from domestic premises. Given the relatively low importance the FHRS stickers have by vendors, adjustments to the scheme could also be investigated.

The food sellers interviewed currently serve varying numbers of customers, but are predominantly small-scale enterprises. They often are sole traders or have one business partner. Some of the supper club hosts interviewed served up to 30 guests, but some might also cater for a single guest on some occasions. Similarly, street food vendors are predominantly small independent traders, but operate a considerably larger scale business, as they generally serve many more customers at events, albeit infrequently. Platforms such as EatWith and Feast-It however act as aggregators and provide a relatively easy route to market for very small businesses, which currently may fall beyond the scope of regulatory enforcement. While the market is currently still small, in the long-term these businesses may, taken together, nevertheless have a significantly larger cumulative impact on food consumption practices and therefore, potentially, on the health and interests of food consumers. The commercial landscape within which digital marketplace platforms for food operate is still changing rapidly, with new platforms starting frequently and many vendors using different channels to reach customers. With EatWith there is, however, a certain consolidation trend visible. This has important implications for the reach of this platform and, potentially, for the power dynamics between platform operators and food vendors. Currently, vendors enjoy a relatively large degree of autonomy and have little competition to fear, but this might change in the future as the marketplace platforms which they use continue to grow.

The process of establishing oneself as a supper club host or street food vendor appears to be relatively easy and to pose a relatively low economic risk, as little investment in equipment, location, and staff is required. This could potentially attract many more aspiring Food Business Operators to choose this route over starting a traditional food business with

fixed premises and staff. Legal and operational support is well established for street food vendors. Given the low scale of operation of most supper club hosts, the extent of their need for legal support and information would depend on the clarification of the question to what extent they qualify as food businesses. To date our participants have encountered few regulatory or commercial barriers in establishing their businesses.

The future of this market is promising but unclear. However, the individual businesses themselves show interest in improving their products and services they sell, but this will not necessarily be translated into business growth. While street food vendors often aspire to expand their business into selling to wholesales, a franchise, or a chain, supper club hosts often already operate at the limits of their personal resources and would prefer to continue to do what they are doing already.

This initial research project could be developed further in two ways. First, future research could go beyond interviewing a small number of food sellers, and take a quantitative approach in order to build up a more complete picture of the activities on these marketplaces. Such research could also seek to include vendors trading on a wider range of platforms, such as marketplaces for small artisan food producers. The second route would be to look more deeply into the business practices of vendors as well as the platforms via they trade and the challenges this poses to the regulatory framework. Such an approach could produce specific recommendations for reforms to food regulations which might better accommodate the transformations which the UK's food system is currently undergoing.

7. References

Brice, J. 2018. *Food in the Platform Economy: Understanding and Governing Emerging Online Marketplaces for Food*. London: Food Standards Agency.

Competition & Markets Authority. 2017. *Just Eat and Hungryhouse: A report on the anticipated acquisition by JUST EAT plc of Hungryhouse Holdings Limited*. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a0d6521ed915d0ade60db7e/justeat-hungryhouse-final-report.pdf> (accessed 18/11/17).

Schor, J. B. & Attwood-Charles, W. 2017. The “sharing” economy: labor, inequality, and social connection on for-profit platforms. *Sociology Compass*, 11(8):