

Consumer trust in the food chain: exploring barriers and motivations



About the study

Trust in the food chain is vital to encourage people to eat more healthily and sustainably.

This study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of consumer attitudes towards the food chain and, in particular, the role of trust.

The presented insights, needs and recommendations in this report are the conclusions from the Citizens Participation Forum which took place between late 2020 and early 2021.

The Citizens Participation Forum took the form of an online community of 178 participants from 13 European countries, selected on a basis of a medium-to-high level of interest in the food chain. They took part in open discussions, photo assignments, questionnaires, short polls and five live focus group sessions.

Key findings: the pathways to trust

In general, consumers' trust in the European food system with regards to food safety is rather high. Most consumers do not worry about food safety when buying food because of the high quality of the food and the way it is checked.

However, the longer-term effects of the food we consume need more attention, such as the effects on health and wellbeing. The way that food is produced depletes our natural resources, yet consumers do not always buy into innovations that could tackle these issues.

A different level of trust is needed to entice and support consumers into making more sustainable and healthy food choices. This includes the belief that every actor in the food chain is working towards a higher and greater communal goal. This study aimed to understand people's beliefs, and how food industry actors should respond.

We found three themes that summarise the routes consumers consider as possible solutions for building trust in the food chain. Together they make up the 'pathways to trust'.



**Transparency
and control**



Simplicity



Building love

Transparency and control

This theme is about making the food chain transparent so that everyone can see what is happening and make informed choices as a result.



Radical transparency

Many consumers don't know where their food comes from or what steps it went through in its production process. Radical transparency provides consumers with a full view of what the parties in the food chain do, how they do it, and who with. Participants suggested that any party not willing to disclose this is viewed as suspicious.

Participants were particularly interested in animal farms and slaughterhouses in discussions around radical transparency. They stated that the unnecessary suffering of animals is inhumane and transparency is important to them in this area.

"The consumer must always have the possibility of reconstructing and following the path of a food... through all the phases of production, processing and distribution; must have the guarantee of being able to request clarifications and verifications in order to facilitate traceability, by means of relevant documentation or information according to the requirements set forth in the matter by more specific provisions." (Chiara, IT, 42)

Full clarity on ingredients and sensible logos

The study revealed that many consumers find it difficult to learn how food is produced and what it is made of. Participants indicated that food companies (but also farmers and retailers) should be clear about their products and their ingredients. They argued that because food companies already have this information, it should be made public.

Participants also stated that the information must be presented in ways that consumers can easily interpret, i.e. by using logos or colour schemes.

Quality marks and logos offer consumers a shortcut in their decision-making process. Nevertheless, they can lead to a lowered urgency to educate oneself on certain topics. The organisations behind the certifications must continue to educate consumers. The burden on the parties in the food chain shouldn't be so high that it will lead to price increases.

"Finding products that have easy to understand labels is sometimes difficult... knowing about the food used in products would be good and knowing why certain foods are used and whether alternatives can be used." (Lyndsey, GB, 35)





Power of community

The study disclosed that throughout Europe many people have questions about food and food companies but also have knowledge that can help other consumers. However, there are limited ways to share this knowledge and information.

Participants suggested that grassroots initiatives which organise activities to encourage learning and experimentation with food will allow them to play an active role in the food chain and learn more about the difficulties and costs of growing food.

However, any online consumer platform can be a source of manipulation, so the presence of moderators and thorough checks should be in place to avoid this.

“In today’s world, the consumer has a good opportunity to influence the actors in the food chain. We can make reviews on social media platforms and at best, it can go viral all over the world.” (Päivi, FI, 63)

Simplicity

This theme is about increasing simplicity to make it easier to know what good food is.

Consumers are adopting a back-to-basics mindset, wanting to focus on whole foods, foods with shorter ingredients lists, and fewer processed foods. They want to avoid artificial ingredients, hormones, antibiotics, (excessive) sugars, salt and fat.

Many participants feel that food is complicated; they don't understand how products are made or feel concerned when food contains ingredients they are unfamiliar with. People would like to be able to understand what they are eating, how it's made, and where it came from.

However, taste and price are still primary concerns, and consumers are aware that some ingredients may not be optimal but are needed to preserve food.



"The world grows more complex in all areas of life and I think that people finally get tired of all the options and there simply isn't time to become familiar with everything going on around us. Simplicity is what we need more and more." (Marja-Liisa, FI, 56)

Short supply chains and hyper localism

Consumers also believe that the fewer parties involved, and when food is produced locally, the less it can be tampered with. However, participants expressed that hyper-localism should not come at the cost of sustainability, e.g. by growing crops that would not naturally thrive in the local environment.

"COVID has certainly changed things. The amount of local products available in supermarkets where I live has risen considerably. It's just a shame they are double or triple the price compared to the same non-local products." (Kristian, FR, 46)

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Building love

This theme is about deep and genuine affection for (a certain) food and how this can impact trust.



Education and curiosity

“If I were a farmer, I would organise a workshop for primary school children from nearby towns, so that they could see with their own eyes what our work looks like, how the fields change from month to month, what grows in them and how much effort it takes.”
(Wioletta, PL, 33)

The study revealed that knowledge of food, and love for food, develops at a young age. Many adults have nostalgic memories about their parents or grandparents preparing and growing food. However, today this connection is often lost, so parents cannot pass it onto their children.

Educating adults will empower them to make informed food choices. Education not only comes in organised structures, but also through the consumption of books, documentaries, podcasts, magazines, and newspapers. Educated children can also influence their parents' eating habits and vice versa.

However, when commercial parties provide information there is a chance that the information is biased. There must be an impartial party that verifies the content.

Triggering curiosity can be achieved by creating campaigns for innovative foods using elements of unexpectedness, scarcity and excitement.





Trial made easy

Many consumers like to try new things but often don't know how to prepare them or what to try and end up sticking to old habits.

This can be solved by creating circumstances and environments that make it easier for consumers to try new products.

For example, participants suggested that farmers can host open days where they sell their goods directly in smaller portions, and host cooking workshops in collaboration with local chefs.

“What I like the most about this theme is that it has a low threshold or low entry-level. It's more easily accessible for anyone. It's helpful that third parties can help with endorsing, recipes, clear info.” (Tim, BE, 38)

Influencers

“Social media plays a significant role in controlling the food chain. Through it, one can quickly even influence the demand for a product and even destroy a company’s reputation. I would see that this could really act as a deterrent for many companies to do better.” (Paivi, FI, 63)

Consumers feel encouraged to try new things and change their behaviour if they are supported by people they believe in.

Influencers can trigger curiosity. People “follow” them voluntarily, and, unlike food companies, participants expressed that they are less likely to be perceived as doing something for a profit.

Influencers need to have a certain level of credibility by profession, education or experience so they sound authentic and trustworthy.

Adopting innovation

When adopting innovation, people are reserved because they don’t know what they will gain from it and there is no guarantee that there won’t be negative effects. In particular, any innovation that is considered unnatural is approached with concern.

Consumers associate innovation mostly with new ingredients (e.g. insects, mushrooms, seaweed) as well as plant-based meat, plant-based dairy alternatives, and cultivated meat.

A substantial proportion of consumers are against (technological) innovation in food processing, as it is seen as unnatural or untraditional. But motivation is higher when innovation is in line with other desired behaviour changes, i.e. when innovation helps to sustainably produce healthy food.

Health benefits and sustainability are relevant to some consumers, but for continuous acceptance, innovation needs to lead to affordable, convenient and delicious food.



Health and sustainability: the barriers and motivations



Overall, the motivation to adopt a healthier and more sustainable diet is rather high and most consumers have a good idea of what a healthier diet is.

However, there are large differences in people's ability to eat healthily and many struggle. Factors such as price, knowledge and time are also considered constraints.

Most consumers want to eat sustainably, but sustainability is often not a primary consideration when making food choices.

Participants have an idea about what the relationship is between sustainability and food. However, some aspects of food production are perceived as more sustainable than they are.

Motivation to eat sustainably is often linked to wanting to eat more healthily. Organic and plant-based foods are viewed as good for both one's health and the planet. However, sustainable food is perceived as (much) more expensive.

Consumers are tired of unsubstantiated green claims. Creating a more tangible definition of sustainability will make it an achievable goal instead of a vague wish.



"I would like to eat a lot healthier, but I find information so contradictory as to what is 'healthy eating' that it's so difficult. Less carbs? Keto? 5:2? ww? sw? where do you start?" (Zoe, GB, 37)



"I am prepared to adopt a more sustainable diet such as organic food if I can find it easily in stores but it's often very expensive; only a few products can be purchased each month because of my budget, or I try to take advantage of promotions to buy more." (Olivier, FR, 54)



Food industry actors





Farmers

In general, farmers are the most trusted party in the food chain, particularly small local farms that use environmentally friendly production methods to grow food. Participants suggested that crop farmers are trusted but are exploited by their customers (often large companies) and should be treated equally.

Large-scale industrial farming is viewed differently altogether. These farms are seen as the cause of many problems including loss of biodiversity.

To increase trust, participants stated that farmers should use modern technology and infrastructure to connect with consumers, invite consumers and local schools to their farms, collaborate and connect with local communities and chefs, and explore traditional methods of farming using modern techniques.



"I just want the farmers to be open about how the animals are treated. The local farm where I buy my meat always has open stables and you can see the pigs running freely around on the grass/mud outside."
(Lars, DK, 45)



Manufacturers

Participants generally trust European manufacturers to bring safe foods to the market, as they trust that the EU has strict regulations that manufacturers must adhere to. Manufacturers, particularly large multinationals, are perceived as primarily money-driven and willing to compromise on sustainability or the health benefits of their products.

To increase trust, manufacturers should use well-known ingredients but fewer ingredients overall, be more transparent, limit the number of logos on packaging, work with relevant NGOs and focus on the familiar when communicating innovation.



"I don't trust brands in general... they are more in the business of selling the image/idea of a product and making money from it than making a good product."
(Jean Jacques, BE, 56)



Retailers

The study revealed that people generally trust European retailers to bring safe foods to the market. Overall, discount supermarkets are trusted less by consumers, and local shops trusted more. The participants want retailers to show that they care about health and the planet, for instance by giving free fruit to children, adding more vegan products, or highlighting local products.

Consumers expect retailers to do more to influence consumer choice by promoting healthy, local, and sustainable food with less packaging. But they expect retailers to keep prices affordable.

To increase trust, retailers should stimulate trials of sustainable and healthy options, provide more information, build a community of consumers and demand clarity and transparency from suppliers.

"I think retailers could help by reorganising their store shelves. The healthier/more sustainable products should be eye-catchers instead of being placed on the lowest shelf!"
(Dianda, NL, 28)





Authorities

Authorities have final responsibility on whether food is safe and meets the health and sustainability standards advertised. Participants agree that independent inspection is necessary to ensure the safety, quality and sustainability of the food chain.

Most participants believe that the EU has good, strong regulations that help create high food standards, and that regulations are necessary. However, some feel that certain regulations are too strict, possibly leading to a “one size fits all” approach to farming, where local approaches might be more sustainable.

To increase trust, authorities should focus on consistency, set KPIs for sustainability, help design school curricula, communicate clearly about logo requirements, and support local initiatives.



“I always trust EFSA because they track, evaluate and publish the risks as a result of certain food chains. They try to control the chemicals, nutritional information, hygiene and they’ve got an alert system that helps us as customers to avoid the food that might be harmful for us.” (Victor, ES, 27)



Other actors

The study began with a focus on the above four actors, but it was clear that behaviour change is often triggered by other actors as well, including restaurants, NGOs and peers:

- Chefs and restaurateurs are key influencers but waiting staff can also be influential in the consumer’s choices, simply by making suggestions. Hygiene is important and it is appreciated when restaurants make an effort on sustainability, for example by using locally sourced ingredients. Efforts of fast-food chains to offer “alternative” sustainable options are also often highly appreciated.
- Family, friends, and acquaintances, particularly those with similar tastes, are considered trustworthy sources of information when it comes to new foods. But they can also function as a trigger when peers make changes to their diet.
- NGOs and non-profits are seen as impartial, and therefore trustworthy. This gives them a unique role in the food chain as guides. However, they are not exempt from scrutiny and need to be checked by third parties as well.



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