



Article

Factors That Influence the Use of the Online Channel for the Purchase of Food Products in Spain

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Abstract: The use of the online channel for the purchase of food products is increasing, which not only creates new opportunities for companies and businesses, but also poses great challenges. This study aimed to identify the factors related to these challenges that influence the use of the online channel for the purchase of food products in Spain. Through a bibliographic review and a Delphi study with experts, 26 factors were identified and grouped into four contexts: technology, marketing strategies, buyer convenience, and security and reliability. This identification of factors can be of great value in improving the sales of companies or businesses in the food sector that already use the online channel for the sale of their products or intend to use it for this purpose in the future; furthermore, it will help these companies or businesses to implement sales strategies that will truly satisfy the needs of potential consumers in Spain.

Keywords: food products; e-commerce; grocery; consumer behavior; Delphi



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1. Introduction

E-commerce has revolutionized the way we interact with the market, and the food sector has not been immune to this transformation. Online food purchasing has experienced exponential growth in recent years, driven by the convergence of technological factors, such as advances in digital platforms as facilitators and drivers of purchasing [1], socio-economic factors and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, this trend has reconfigured the food-consumption landscape, creating new opportunities for companies and posing challenges in terms of logistics, consumer confidence, and adaptation to new market demands.

While Spain has experienced notable growth in food e-commerce, there are still significant gaps compared to more advanced countries in this area, such as the United Kingdom. According to a report by the European Commission [2], the penetration of e-commerce for food sales in Spain is around 5% while, in the United Kingdom, it exceeds 10%. This difference can be attributed to various factors, such as the maturity of the online market in these countries, the consolidation of large e-commerce companies, greater consumer confidence in purchasing food online, or the demographic and geographic structure of a country, which impacts the logistical efficiency and the economic distribution (e.g., the population density in the United Kingdom is thrice that of Spain [3]).

The logistical infrastructure and the home-delivery services in Spain still have room for improvement, compared to the other European Union countries. Furthermore, Engesser et al. [4]

reported that the lack of capillarity in some areas, longer delivery times, and higher shipping costs can act as barriers to the adoption of the online channel by some consumers.

Regarding consumer confidence, although the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of e-commerce, some consumers still prefer to buy food products from physical stores due to the possibility of inspecting the products before buying them and concerns pertaining to the security of online payments and the protection of personal data [5]. However, consumer purchasing behaviors regarding food products are dynamic [6], and it is only necessary to know the factors that influence these behavior in order to incentivize purchasing.

Due to the above facts, for e-commerce in the food sector to be adopted by consumers and SMEs that do not yet trust it, this study focused on determining the factors that influence the use of the online channel for the purchase of food products in Spain.

To this end, a bibliographic review was carried out to present a list of factors that influence the use of the online channel for the purchase of food products in general (i.e., not just in Spain), which served as a support in this study in determining these influencing factors in Spain through the Delphi methodology. This methodology was used to obtain the collective opinions of experts in food distribution and e-commerce, allowing for the identification of relevant factors that should be studied further based on the distribution of factors identified in the bibliographic review and the knowledge of the experts who participated in the study; this allowed us to identify, evaluate, and critically analyze these influencing factors.

To collect information when applying the Delphi methodology, the survey technique was used, which was iteratively applied to a panel of selected specialists. The objective of this iteration was to refine the opinions of the group through several rounds of surveys, in which the results of each previous stage were presented. In this way, the experts were able to reconsider and adjust their responses, seeking to reach the greatest possible consensus on the factors that determine the use of the online channel for the purchase of food products in Spain.

The Delphi methodology was considered appropriate for this study due to its ability to obtain consensus on complex or uncertain topics, where expert knowledge is crucial [7]. This study sought to identify and assess the factors that influence the use of the online channel for the purchase of food products in Spain, a multifaceted topic with diverse perspectives. This methodology allowed for the structuring of opinions of experts through iterative rounds, promoting reflection and the adjustment of assessments until a group consensus was reached. This is especially useful when the quantitative data are limited or insufficient, and it is necessary to integrate expert opinions to obtain a more complete and in-depth view of the studied phenomenon [8].

In the following section of the article, the context of the use of the online channel is explored through an analysis of the existing literature, and the selection and classification of the factors that impact the use of e-commerce for the purchase of food products are presented. Subsequently, the methodology used in this research is detailed, and the obtained results are examined. Finally, the factors that influence the decisions of Spanish consumers to use the online channel for the purchase of food are identified.

2. Literature Review

The digital revolution has reached all areas of society [9–11], and the food sector is no exception. The use of the online channel for the acquisition of food products has experienced exponential growth in Spain, driven by a set of socioeconomic and technological factors and, more recently, by the COVID-19 pandemic [12]. This phenomenon, far from being ephemeral, seems to be here to stay, transforming the food-consumption landscape and posing new challenges and opportunities for companies and consumers.

To better understand this phenomenon, given its relevance in consumers' decision to purchase, it is important to clearly understand what is meant by "influencing factors" in purchasing behavior. Generally speaking, these influencing factors are psychological, social, economic, and technological variables that affect consumers' decision to purchase products. Their role has been confirmed by recent in-depth studies on consumer purchasing behaviors, providing a structured view of how consumers process the information they receive about each product and make decisions in that context [13].

The academic literature has addressed the study of e-commerce in the food sector from several perspectives.

Firstly, the determining factors for the adoption of the online channel by consumers have been analyzed. Studies such as that of Garrigós and Molina [14] have focused on the motivations and barriers in this purchasing channel, pointing out convenience, the variety of products, the possibility of comparing prices, and the ease of use as the main drivers of online food purchasing. Moreover, studies such as that of Mainardes et al. [15] highlighted the importance of trust in the seller, perceived benefit, and the perception of security in online transactions to be main drivers of online food purchasing.

Secondly, the impact of the pandemic on food e-commerce has been investigated. The evidence suggests that confinement and mobility restrictions acted as catalysts for the adoption of this channel, generating a change in habits that seems to have been consolidated. However, barriers that persist have also been identified, such as mistrust in the quality and freshness of products, a lack of physical contact with food, and logistical difficulties associated with transport and delivery [16].

However, to understand e-commerce in the food sector in depth, it is necessary to resort to various theories and concepts from different disciplines. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), widely used in the study of the adoption of new technologies, can help explain how the perception of usefulness and the ease of use influence the intention to purchase food online [17]. Similarly, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) can be useful to analyze how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control over behavior affect the purchase decision [18].

However, the consumer's decision to use the online channel for food purchasing is a complex process influenced by multiple interrelated factors, and in order to address this phenomenon in a comprehensive and systematic manner, it was decided to divide these factors into four key contexts: technological, marketing strategies, buyer convenience, and safety and reliability.

This division was based on an exhaustive review of the academic literature that allowed for a deeper and more structured analysis of the variables involved in the adoption of food e-commerce in Spain:

- The technological context is a fundamental catalyst in the growth of e-commerce, in general, and of the food sector in particular [19]. Internet accessibility, the availability of mobile devices, and the sophistication of e-commerce platforms have democratized online food purchasing.
- The marketing strategies context plays a fundamental role in attracting and retaining customers in food e-commerce [20]. Effective communication, promotions, and the customization of offers are key elements to boost online sales.
- The buyer convenience context is one of the main attractions of food e-commerce [14]. The possibility of buying from home, avoiding trips and queues, and receiving products at the door are factors that consumers especially value.
- The security and reliability context is a crucial aspect to generate consumer confidence and encourage online food shopping. The protection of personal data, payment security, and product quality assurance are essential elements [16].

With this approach, to determine the factors that influence the use of the online channel for the purchase of food products in Spain, this study sought to identify them by initially starting from a bibliographic review of scientific articles from the main databases (Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar), without forgetting the support that recent artificial intelligence tools can provide to the search (ChatGPT and Gemini).

In this search, it should not be forgotten that online food shopping refers to the acquisition of food products through e-commerce platforms, whether they are owned by supermarkets or specialized companies, and that the adoption of this channel not only implies making a one-off purchase, but also implies incorporating this practice into regular consumer habits.

Thus, after collecting information, a list of the factors that influence the use of the online channel for the purchase of food products was drawn up, grouping them into the four contexts as mentioned above.

In the technological context, four factors were grouped together (Table 1):

Table 1. Factors influencing the use of the online channel for purchasing food products: the technological context.

Technological Context
User interface (UI) and user experience (UX)
Today, the usability of a system is considered an aspect of each user’s experience [21], rather than being considered as a concrete attribute of a system. Therefore, indices are used that can contrast the experiences of homogeneous demographic groups. The ease of use of e-commerce platforms, with intuitive interfaces and simple purchasing processes, is a key factor in attracting and retaining users.
Personalization
Huang and Rust [22] propose how “integrating artificial intelligence into web personalization enables a more engaging and efficient shopping experience for food consumers”. Incorporating emerging technologies, such as augmented reality or artificial intelligence, can improve the shopping experience and offer new functionalities to users [23].
Interface speed
Page loading speed and smooth navigation on e-commerce platforms are crucial for a satisfying shopping experience. “Consumers expect a fast and frictionless online shopping experience. Slow websites or websites with navigation issues can lead to shopping cart abandonment” [2].
Mobile App
High Internet penetration and widespread use of smartphones in Spain have allowed consumers to access food e-commerce platforms anytime and anywhere [19].

In the marketing strategies context, seven factors were grouped (Table 2):

Table 2. Factors influencing the use of the online channel for purchasing food products: the marketing strategies context.

Marketing Strategies Context
Omnichannel
Omnichannel is a key trend “where consumers expect a seamless and integrated experience that combines online and offline channels”. To adapt to this trend, food companies must have robust omnichannel platforms that include physical stores, websites, mobile applications, social networks, and marketplaces [24].
Prices and market comparison
Real-time price comparisons enable consumers to compare prices across different stores and products, allowing consumers to find the best deals and make informed decisions, increasing their trust and loyalty [2].
Purchase recommendations (cross-selling)
Cross-selling is a very effective strategy to increase the average order value, as well as in improving customer satisfaction [25]. In addition to this, the implementation of loyalty programs, with discounts, cumulative points, or gifts, encourages repeat purchases and strengthens the relationship with customers.
Live product presentation (live streaming)
The live presentation of products, especially the most perishable ones, plays an important role in consumer satisfaction [26], as it provides a perception of superior quality.
Wide and specialized assortment
Traditional consumers need additional value creation to motivate a change in habits. One of these motivational factors is to have a varied assortment [23], greater than what is available in the physical channel, including specialized or difficult-to-access products.

Table 2. *Cont.*

Marketing Strategies Context
Social networks
Creating relevant, quality content, such as recipes, nutritional advice, or product information, can engage consumers and build brand trust [16]. The strategic use of social media to promote products, interact with customers, and generate engagement is essential in the digital environment and has the potential to establish an authentic connection between consumers and brands [27,28]. This connection strengthens brand image and loyalty.
Product reviews
Information usefulness is a key predictor of customer satisfaction. As such, customers value high-quality reviews from other consumers who have already experienced the services and/or products, as it helps them make decisions before making the purchase [29].

In the buyer convenience context, five factors were grouped (Table 3):

Table 3. Factors influencing the use of the online channel for purchasing food products: the buyer convenience context.

Buyer Convenience Context
The buyer convenience context refers to the ease and comfort that online shopping offers, allowing potential consumers to make their purchases from anywhere and at any time, which is especially relevant for people with time or mobility limitations.
Simple and fast purchasing process
Online shopping saves time by avoiding trips and queues in physical stores. Ease of use (product selection and saved preferences or order history, among others) as well as autonomous access to information (stocks, updates, or changes to orders) are very important factors in the success of online shopping for consumers [30].
Flexibility
The use of on-demand service platforms (ODSPs) is another reason for the adoption of the online platforms. The possibility of receiving products at home or at the workplace eliminates the need to carry bags and facilitates the purchase of bulky or heavy products, and this is also reflected through time savings, access to a variety of services, use at any time and any place, and adaptability to changes [31].
Fast delivery
Fast or “express” deliveries can be considered a double-edged sword. Promising fast deliveries can increase online sales, as customers believe they will receive their products quickly. However, it can also lead to increased returns and dissatisfaction if expectations are not met [32]. Therefore, it is essential to find a balance between increasing sales and maintaining customer satisfaction.
Delivery and collection options
Although door-to-door delivery is the most popular and used option, there is an increasing interest in other methods: delivery points, drones, parcel-delivery machines via mobile apps, and so on. Having a wide range of possibilities that adapt to the customer, together with a balance between greener and safer options, is relevant for the adoption of the online channel [33].
Convenience when purchasing bulky and heavy products
Customers expect fast, convenient, and damage-free delivery, even for oversized and heavy products. Alidaee, Bakhtiyari, and Amiri [34] conducted a study highlighting the logistical challenges and high costs of meeting customer expectations for such products. The ability to have products delivered to their home or workplace eliminates the need to carry bags and makes it easier to purchase bulky or heavy products.

Finally, in the security and reliability context, seven factors were grouped (Table 4):

Table 4. Factors influencing the use of the online channel for purchasing food products: the security and reliability context.

Security and Reliability Context
It is necessary to build trust that attracts and retains customers. Hamid and Azhar [18] investigated how perceived security and reliability foster loyalty in the online channel usage.
Accessible customer service and after-sales service
Customers demand quality and empathetic communication. The study conducted by Ma et al. [35] suggests that distributors should focus on customer service during the purchasing process and on the post-purchase experience to improve customer satisfaction and retain customers. In addition, in companies with a good corporate image, this service should be of high quality, matching their image.
Fast transactions and no unexpected charges
Using secure payment systems and protecting users’ financial data are essential to building trust [36]. Consumers are likely to abandon the purchasing process when faced with drip pricing [37]. The perception of deception and lack of transparency are counter-reactions to this type of strategy, which is why they should be avoided.
Sustainable business models
The adoption of “Green Supply Chain Management” (GSCM) consists of integrating sustainable practices to manage the supply chain. As indicated by Alzoubi et al. [38], in addition to improving the corporate image and even reducing costs, it improves customer satisfaction. The adoption of sustainability-friendly marketing policies and strategies are key to boosting online consumer purchasing intentions.

Table 4. Cont.

Security and Reliability Context
Payment gateway options
Companies that offer multiple payment methods can improve the conversion rate, as they adapt to generational preferences, whose habits vary significantly. Cuesta-Valiño et al. [31] applied the theory of the stimulus–organism–response (SOR) model in their study, and found that there is a relationship between the use of different mobile payment services and consumer behavior and satisfaction. The availability of multiple secure and reliable payment options, such as credit cards, PayPal, or cash on delivery, increases consumer confidence and facilitates transactions [15].
Reliability of inventory data
One of the critical points identified by Gopal, Mudunuri, Dutta, and Motwani [39] in their study is the lack of availability of products in the shopping basket. It is proposed to accurately identify the most critical products and prioritize them in inventory management, so as to not negatively impact customer satisfaction.
Fast returns and refund service
Offering flexibility in the time of returns for online purchases, as well as having a generous return policy, can be interpreted as a sign of the seller’s confidence in the quality of their products [40]. A flexible return-policy strategy increases the probability of purchase and can reduce the probability of return, especially for those products in which the customer understands that there is a greater risk, such as perishable products.
Detailed information on transport
Ensuring that products will arrive in perfect condition and with adequate freshness is a key factor in overcoming consumer distrust. In overcoming this distrust, real-time shipment tracking can help, as it provides customers with visibility and control over their orders [41], reducing uncertainty and improving the shopping experience. In last-mile delivery, customer experience is usually defined as the most complex and expensive link in the supply chain. Therefore, the use of geolocation technologies, route optimization, and customer communication allows for faster, more accurate, and reliable delivery.

The selection and distribution of factors that influence the adoption of the online channel by consumers when purchasing food products support this study to determine the factors that influence the use of the online channel in the food sector in Spain.

3. Methodology

In this study, the Delphi method was used to better understand the studied system. This technique, recommended when information on a topic is limited [8], seeks to reach a consensus among experts through successive rounds of questionnaires [7].

The Delphi method, widely used in research, is versatile and can be used for various applications, such as identifying research topics, formulating questions, selecting variables, identifying constructs, and creating analysis instruments [7].

In the context of this study, the Delphi method allowed for the identification of constructs, reflecting the factors that influence the use of the online channel for the purchase of food products in Spain. This knowledge can be of great value to improve the sales of companies or businesses in the food sector that already use the online channel for the sale of food products, as well as those that intend to use it for this purpose in the future; the identification of factors will help companies or businesses to implement sales strategies that will truly satisfy the needs of their potential customers.

Before detailing the application of this methodology in this study, it is important to highlight the essential elements of Delphi surveys and their distinctive characteristics [42]:

- Multiple rounds of questionnaires: the Delphi process involves several iterations of surveys, allowing experts to review and refine their responses based on group feedback.
- Influence of group opinion: each round of surveys is affected by the results of the previous round, encouraging convergence towards a consensus.
- Anonymity: participants’ responses are anonymous to the rest of the participants, preventing the influence of more prestigious individuals from biasing the group’s opinions.
- Interaction with controlled feedback: communication between experts is carried out through questionnaires and feedback on the majority opinion, encouraging reflection and the possible modification of the initial responses.
- Individual participation: experts participate in a personal capacity, not as representatives of their institutions.

Regarding the ideal number of experts, there is no definitive consensus in the literature, but most authors propose ranges that vary between 7 and 35 participants [43–47].

For this study, 24 experts were selected, a number that is in line with the recommendations of the authors cited in the previous paragraph. These experts have a specific profile: they are Spanish users and consumers of e-commerce in the food sector, and have academic training in commerce and marketing (from vocational training to university and postgraduate studies), which makes them ideal candidates to identify the factors that influence the use of the online channel in this sector in Spain. In addition, their knowledge of the new technologies that are being implemented in e-commerce and their potential impact on the food industry were also assessed in their selection.

This study was carried out using three rounds of questionnaires. Before starting the process, the experts were asked to commit to the study to ensure their continued participation and were guaranteed the anonymity of their responses to the other participants. The objective of these three rounds was to achieve the greatest possible consensus among the experts.

The objectives and specific characteristics of each round are detailed below:

In the first phase of this study, an open questionnaire was used to generate a complete list of factors that could influence the use of the online channel in the food sector in Spain. In addition, participants had to classify these factors in the four contexts cited in the literature review: technological, marketing strategies, convenience, and safety and reliability.

To analyze the responses from the experts, the affinity diagram technique was used. This technique allows for identifying and grouping similar ideas expressed in different ways, ensuring a clear and concise understanding of the proposed factors [48].

The second phase consisted of a closed questionnaire where all the factors identified in the first round were presented and organized by context, and the participating experts had to evaluate the degree of influence of each factor on the use of the online channel for the purchase of food products in Spain, on a scale of 0 to 10. The results were analyzed using descriptive statistics, calculating the average ratings for each factor.

In the third and final phase, a closed questionnaire was used, which again showed the factors together with the individual score of each expert in the previous round and the group average. The experts had the opportunity to confirm or modify their initial assessment, providing a final assessment of the degree of influence of each factor in that decision. As in the second round, the results were analyzed again using descriptive statistics.

Through this iterative process, as required by the Delphi methodology, the aim was to reach a consensus among the experts and identify the factors that influence the use of the online channel in the food sector in Spain.

4. Results

As indicated in Section 3, the empirical phase of this study began with round 1. This stage consisted of an open-format questionnaire designed to generate a list of elements that could influence the use of the online channel for food acquisition in Spain (Table 5). In addition, these factors had to be classified into four different contexts.

By combining the experts' similar ideas, and despite the fact that they expressed them in different ways, a concordance was observed between the factors identified by the experts and those identified in the previous bibliographic review on the use of the online channel in the food sector in general (not only in Spain), although it is true that the experts added some factors not contemplated in that previous bibliographic review. Therefore, the initial review suggested that the influencing factors could include the following:

- In the technological context: “user interface and user experience”, “personalization in the presentation of content”, “speed and fluidity of the interface”, and “mobile app option”.
- In the marketing strategies context: “omnichannel”, “prices and market comparison”, “purchase recommendations”, “live product presentation”, “wide and specialized assortment”, “social networks”, and “product reviews”. The experts added two more factors: “free shipping”, and “discounts on foods with close expiration dates”.
- In the convenience context: “simple and fast purchasing process”, “flexibility”, “fast delivery”, “various delivery and/or collection options”, and “convenience in purchasing bulky and heavy products”.
- In the security and reliability context: “accessible customer service and after-sales service”, “fast transactions and absence of unexpected charges”, “development of sustainable models”, “payment gateway with different options”, “reliability in inventory data”, “fast returns and refund service”, and “detailed information on transport of fresh or refrigerated products”. The experts added one more factor: “payment retention until confirmation of receipt from the customer”.

After identifying these factors, the second phase of the process was started using a closed-type questionnaire (Table 6). This instrument aimed to evaluate, on a scale of 0 to 10, the experts’ perception of the level of influence that each of the previously identified factors exerted on the decision-making process.

Table 5. Questionnaire 1.

Classify by Context the Factors That You Believe May Influence the Use of the Online Channel for the Purchase of Food Products in Spain:
Technological context
Marketing strategies context
Buyer convenience context
Security and reliability context

Table 6. Questionnaire 2.

Rate Each of These Factors from 0 to 10 According to Their Degree of Influence on the Use of the Online Channel for the Purchase of Food Products in Spain:	
Technological context	
Factor	Rating (0–10)
User interface (UI) and user experience (UX): ease of use	
Personalization in the presentation of content	
Speed and fluidity of the interface	
Mobile app option	
Marketing strategies context	
Factor	Rating (0–10)
Omnichannel: all purchasing channels are equal	
Purchase recommendations: cross-selling	
Prices and market comparison	
Presentation and visualization of products live: live streaming	
Wide and specialized assortment	
Social media as a place to create authentic brand experiences	
Product reviews	
Free shipping	
Discounts on food close to expiration date	

Table 6. Cont.

Rate Each of These Factors from 0 to 10 According to Their Degree of Influence on the Use of the Online Channel for the Purchase of Food Products in Spain:		
Buyer convenience context		
Factor	Rating (0–10)	
Simple and fast purchasing process		
Flexibility to place your order from anywhere and at any time		
Fast delivery		
Various delivery and/or pickup options		
Convenience when purchasing bulky and heavy products		
Security and reliability context		
Factor	Rating (0–10)	
Customer service and after-sales service accessible 24 h a day		
Fast transactions and no unexpected charges		
Develop environmentally sustainable business models		
Payment gateway with different options of recognized prestige		
Reliability in inventory data. Product information and quality		
Fast returns and refund service		
Detailed information on the transport of fresh or refrigerated products: maintaining the cold chain		
Payment retention until confirmation of receipt from the client		

The findings showed a remarkable consistency between the experts’ assessments, which reinforced the reliability of the provided assessments. Descriptive statistics (means) were used to analyze the results, calculating the averages for each proposed factor, and these averages, which represented the average assessment of the group of experts for each factor, were incorporated into the questionnaire for the next stage (Table 4).

In this third phase, the closed questionnaire (Table 7) again presented all the factors suggested by the experts in each context, but now included both the score given by the expert in the previous round and the average score obtained for each factor in the previous round. The expert, in this third phase, had the opportunity to confirm or modify their previous assessment (reclassifying, from 0 to 10, the degree of influence of each factor on the decision), which allowed them to differentiate themselves from the average assessment of the group or to approach a consensus by adopting the same assessment.

Table 7. Questionnaire 3.

Rate Each of These Factors from 0 to 10 According to Their Degree of Influence on the Use of the Online Channel for the Purchase of Food Products in Spain:			
Technological context			
Factor	Old rating	Average Rating of the group	New rating
User interface (UI) and user experience (UX): ease of use		8.4	
Personalization in the presentation of content		7.2	
Speed and fluidity of the interface		9.0	
Mobile app option		7.3	
Marketing strategies context			
Factor	Old rating	Average Rating of the group	New rating
Omnichannel: all purchasing channels are equal		7.0	
Purchase recommendations: cross-selling		6.0	
Prices and market comparison		7.2	
Presentation and visualization of products live: live streaming		6.1	
Wide and specialized assortment		8.4	
Social media as a place to create authentic brand experiences		7.5	

Table 7. *Cont.*

Rate Each of These Factors from 0 to 10 According to Their Degree of Influence on the Use of the Online Channel for the Purchase of Food Products in Spain:			
Product reviews			8.8
Free shipping			8.7
Discounts on food close to expiration date			7.5
Buyer convenience context			
Factor	Old rating	Average Rating of the group	New rating
Simple and fast purchasing process		9.2	
Flexibility to place your order from anywhere and at any time		9.0	
Fast delivery		9.0	
Various delivery and/or pickup options		8.2	
Convenience when purchasing bulky and heavy products		8.3	
Security and reliability context			
Factor	Old rating	Average Rating of the group	New rating
Customer service and after-sales service accessible 24 h a day		8.9	
Fast transactions and no unexpected charges		8.8	
Develop environmentally sustainable business models		7.0	
Payment gateway with different options of recognized prestige		8.6	
Reliability in inventory data. Product information and quality		8.8	
Fast returns and refund service		9.0	
Detailed information on the transport of fresh or refrigerated products: maintaining the cold chain		7.6	
Payment retention until confirmation of receipt from the client		8.3	

In this third phase, there were some small modifications between the experts’ previous assessments, but no significant changes. The results of this last round were examined again using descriptive statistics (means), calculating the averages in each of the proposed factors (Table 8), and this made it possible to classify the level of influence of these factors on the use of the online channel for the purchase of food products in Spain according to these experts and, therefore, their impact or not on this decision.

Table 8. The degrees of influence of the factors that influence the use of the online channel for the purchase of food products in Spain.

Technological context	
Factor	Rating (0–10)
User interface (UI) and user experience (UX): ease of use	8.5
Personalization in the presentation of content	6.9
Speed and fluidity of the interface	8.9
Mobile app option	7.0
Marketing strategies context	
Factor	Rating (0–10)
Omnichannel: all purchasing channels are equal	6.7
Purchase recommendations: cross-selling	5.7
Prices and market comparison	7.2
Presentation and visualization of products live: live streaming	5.8
Wide and specialized assortment	8.3

Table 8. *Cont.*

Social media as a place to create authentic brand experiences	7.2
Product reviews	8.7
Free shipping	8.4
Discounts on food close to expiration date	7.6
Buyer convenience context	
Factor	Rating (0–10)
Simple and fast purchasing process	9.4
Flexibility to place your order from anywhere and at any time	9.2
Fast delivery	8.8
Various delivery and/or pickup options	8.0
Convenience when purchasing bulky and heavy products	8.0
Security and reliability context	
Factor	Rating (0–10)
Customer service and after-sales service accessible 24 h a day	9.3
Fast transactions and no unexpected charges	8.6
Develop environmentally sustainable business models	6.4
Payment gateway with different options of recognized prestige	8.5
Reliability in inventory data. Product information and quality	8.3
Fast returns and refund service	9.3
Detailed information on the transport of fresh or refrigerated products: maintaining the cold chain	7.4
Payment retention until confirmation of receipt from the client	8.4

The experts’ assessments of each of these factors did not have any significant differences, which is interpreted as a sign of consensus on the involvement of these factors in this decision, and this was highly reflected even when comparing the assessments of experts who have work experience in the food sector and those who do not (as can be seen in Table 9, where after applying the Mann–Whitney U test, none of the *p*-values obtained are less than 0.05, which suggests that the assessments between both groups are similar and there are no significant differences).

Table 9. Mann–Whitney U test: significant differences in the ratings of experts who have work experience in the food sector of experts and those who do not.

	EXPERTS with Work Experience in the Food Sector		EXPERTS no Work Experience in the Food Sector		U of Mann–Whitney	W of Wilcoxon	Z	Asymptotic Significance (Bilateral)	Significant Difference
	Average	Standard Deviation	Average	Standard Deviation					
Factor 01	8.17	0.58	8.82	1.08	42.500	120.500	−1.361	0.115	No
Factor 02	6.67	1.78	7.09	0.83	57.000	135.000	−0.585	0.558	No
Factor 03	8.92	0.90	8.82	0.75	61.000	127.000	−0.351	0.725	No
Factor 04	6.92	1.88	7.18	1.89	58.500	136.500	−0.471	0.638	No
Factor 05	6.33	1.67	7.09	1.22	44.500	122.500	−1.379	0.168	No
Factor 06	5.42	1.56	5.91	0.83	56.000	134.000	−0.639	0.523	No
Factor 07	7.17	1.03	7.18	0.75	64.500	142.500	−0.097	0.922	No
Factor 08	5.75	2.26	5.82	0.98	60.000	126.000	−0.378	0.705	No
Factor 09	8.25	1.22	8.27	0.79	65.000	143.000	−0.065	0.948	No
Factor 10	6.83	1.03	7.55	1.29	41.500	119.500	−1.604	0.109	No

Table 9. Cont.

	EXPERTS with Work Experience in the Food Sector		EXPERTS no Work Experience in the Food Sector		U of Mann–Whitney	W of Wilcoxon	Z	Asymptotic Significance (Bilateral)	Significant Difference
	Average	Standard Deviation	Average	Standard Deviation					
Factor 11	8.50	1.24	9.00	1.10	51.000	129.000	−0.962	0.336	No
Factor 12	8.17	1.99	8.64	0.92	65.500	143.500	−0.032	0.974	No
Factor 13	7.33	1.44	7.82	1.33	51.000	129.000	−0.959	0.337	No
Factor 14	9.25	1.42	9.55	0.52	66.000	132.000	0.000	1.000	No
Factor 15	9.25	0.97	9.09	0.54	51.500	117.500	−0.987	0.323	No
Factor 16	8.50	1.51	9.09	0.54	55.500	133.500	−0.718	0.473	No
Factor 17	7.67	1.56	8.45	0.93	47.500	125.500	−1.201	0.230	No
Factor 18	7.75	1.91	8.27	1.01	60.000	138.000	−0.385	0.700	No
Factor 19	9.33	0.98	9.18	0.75	54.500	120.500	−0.769	0.442	No
Factor 20	8.50	1.24	8.73	0.79	57.000	135.000	−0.580	0.562	No
Factor 21	6.25	1.29	6.64	1.03	55.000	133.000	−0.705	0.481	No
Factor 22	8.67	0.89	8.27	0.79	50.500	116.500	−1.020	0.308	No
Factor 23	8.17	1.27	8.45	0.69	58.500	136.500	−0.498	0.618	No
Factor 24	9.25	0.75	9.27	0.47	64.500	130.500	−0.105	0.917	No
Factor 25	7.58	1.56	7.27	1.01	62.500	128.500	−0.224	0.823	No
Factor 26	8.33	1.15	8.45	0.93	62.000	140.000	−0.258	0.797	No

5. Conclusions

E-commerce and changing consumer habits when purchasing food products create new opportunities for businesses and retailers, but also pose major challenges in terms of logistics, consumer confidence, and adaptation to new market demands. This study aimed to identify the factors related to these challenges that influence the use of the online channel for the purchase of food products in Spain.

The list of these factors, organized by context to enable a more detailed and structured analysis, can be seen below:

- In the technological context: “user interface and user experience”, “personalization in the presentation of content”, “speed and fluidity of the interface”, and “mobile app option”.
- In the marketing strategies context: “omnichannel”, “prices and market comparison”, “purchase recommendations”, “live product presentation”, “wide and specialized assortment”, “social networks”, “product reviews”, “free shipping”, and “discounts on foods with close expiration dates”.
- In the convenience context: “simple and fast purchasing process”, “flexibility”, “fast delivery”, “various delivery and/or collection options”, and “convenience in the purchase of bulky and heavy products”.
- In the security and reliability context: “accessible customer service and after-sales service”, “fast transactions and absence of unexpected charges”, “development of sustainable models”, “payment gateway with different options”, “reliability in inventory data”, “smooth returns and refund service”, “detailed information on the transport of fresh or refrigerated products”, and “payment retention until confirmation of receipt from the customer”.

Regarding the degree of influence of these factors on this decision, it can be said that the factors that have the most influence when it comes to consumers adopting this online channel are the following:

- Simple and fast purchasing processes: this coincides with the study by Aull, Begley, Chandra, and Mathur [30], which considers that saving time in travel and queues compared to physical stores is the most relevant factor for the consumer.
- Customer service and after-sales service accessible 24 h a day: as indicated by Ma et al. [35], this service must be of high quality in companies that want to have a good corporate image.
- Agile returns and refund service: according to Rao et al. [40], having a generous and agile return policy is interpreted as a sign of the seller's confidence in the quality of their products.
- "Flexibility" to place the order from anywhere and at any time [31].

The following factors exhibit a high degree of influence as well:

- In the technological context: "speed and fluidity of the interface", "user interface (UI) and user experience (UX)", and "mobile app option". Tomitsch, Janssen, Curwood, and Thomson [21] indicate in their study that these factors have gone from being attributes of a particular sales system or platform to being considered aspects of each user's experience.
- In the marketing strategies context: "product reviews", "free shipping", "wide and specialized assortment", "discounts on food close to the expiration date", "prices and market comparison", and "social networks as a place to create authentic brand experiences". These factors are quite important even if they are not valued as the most important, and this may be because consumers already consider them as intrinsic in this process [2], as Camilleri and Filieri [29] point out with the "product reviews" factor.
- In the convenience context: "fast delivery", "various delivery and/or collection options", and "convenience in the purchase of bulky and heavy products". Like the previous factors, consumers already consider these factors as intrinsic in this process [2].
- In the security and reliability context: "fast transactions and absence of unexpected charges", "payment gateway with different options", "payment retention until confirmation of receipt from the client", "reliability of inventory data", and "detailed information on transport of fresh or refrigerated products". As indicated by Hamid and Azhar [18], perceived security and reliability encourage loyalty in the use of the online channel.

Finally, the factors with a lower degree of influence are as follows:

- "Develop environmentally sustainable business models", "omnichannel: all purchasing channels should be the same", and "personalization in the presentation of content": these factors are still considered secondary when deciding on the use of the online channel, but this may change as the technologies around e-commerce develop [23,24].
- Live product presentation and visualization: live streaming: contrary to what Chen, Lu, and Zheng [26] indicate, new marketing strategies such as live streaming are not yet considered by experts in Spain as fundamental to having a perception of superior product quality.
- Purchase recommendations: cross-selling: Contrary to what Ma et al. [25] indicate, "purchase recommendations: cross-selling" have not been considered as having a high added value by the panel of experts. It is a technique that has a high added value in other sectors such as the textile sector.

In summary, it can be stated that this study identified the factors that influence the use of the online channel for the purchase of food products in Spain; the knowledge of this list of factors can be of great value to improve the sales of companies or businesses in the food sector that already use the online channel for the sale of their products or those that intend to use it in the future to sell their products; this identification of factors will help companies or businesses to implement sales strategies that truly satisfy the needs of their potential customers in Spain.

The study results highlighted the importance of convenience (simple and quick purchasing process, flexibility, fast delivery), security and reliability (customer service, agile returns), and technology (user interface, interface speed) as influencing factors in the adoption of the online channel by Spanish consumers. The conclusions drawn from this study align with those of other studies on the importance of convenience and trust in food e-commerce in Spain. Research such as that by Rosillo Díaz [49], which has analyzed the factors influencing online food purchasing intentions in Spain, although it does not necessarily use the Delphi methodology, agrees on the relevance of aspects such as perceived usefulness, ease of use, and online trust.

Furthermore, the importance of user experience and service quality in e-commerce in Spain has also been addressed by other authors. The findings of studies such as that by Cuesta-Valiño et al. [31], who studied the influence of digitalization and omnichannel on supermarket customer loyalty, complement this study's findings on the relevance of marketing strategies and user experience in the Spanish context.

Overall, this study aligns with the existing literature in Spain by confirming the importance of factors such as convenience, trust, and user experience in the adoption of food e-commerce. Furthermore, its contribution lies in the identification and prioritization of a specific set of factors, using the Delphi methodology, to obtain an expert and consensual perspective relevant to the Spanish context.

In conclusion, companies or businesses that sell or intend to sell food products online in Spain should focus on offering convenient purchasing processes, ensuring security and reliability, providing efficient customer service, and developing attractive user interfaces. Furthermore, they should consider flexible delivery options, price transparency, and detailed product information.

This study was limited to determining the factors that influence the use of the online channel for the purchase of food products in Spain, and not in other geographical locations. This is because the reasons for using this channel may vary depending on the consumer's country and the needs and customs that come with belonging to that country, as well as consumer habits regarding electronic commerce in that country [50]. This limitation can be overcome in future studies by extrapolating this study to other countries.

In future research, the in-depth impact of new technologies (artificial intelligence and augmented reality, among others) on the online food shopping experience should be explored, analyzing the differences in purchasing behavior across consumer segments, as well as studying the role of sustainability and ethics in this context.

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