

WHAT RETAIL INTERVENTIONS FACILITATE HEALTHIER AND MORE SUSTAINABLE FOOD PURCHASES?

In people living with obesity and food insecurity

INSIGHTS FROM THE FIO FOOD PROJECT

FOOD INSECURITY & OBESITY

The cost-of-living crisis has an impact on the increasing food insecurity prevalence and the obesity epidemic in the UK, producing more **diet and health inequalities**. Although the link between food insecurity and obesity may seem counterintuitive at first, the rising cost of healthier food creates a food-insecure environment, not related to access to food, but rather, **access to affordable and healthier food**. We have discussed this paradox in our paper [1].

In Scotland, obesity rates are 36% in areas in the highest quintile of deprivation and 26% in areas in the lowest social deprivation quintile [2]. In parallel, the most recent Food Standard Agency survey reported that by the end of 2022, 25% of households were experiencing food insecurity, which is the highest prevalence recorded since late 2020 (16% of households) [3]

Food insecure families spend a greater proportion (75%) of their monthly food budget in supermarkets [4]. Hence, supermarket promotions, advertising, and online product placement are instrumental in healthy food affordability and accessibility to healthy foods.

OUR METHODS & APPROACH

In this policy brief, we present **bite-size results** related to the perceived helpfulness of supermarkets interventions that aim to facilitate healthier and more sustainable food choices.

The inclusion criteria were participants aged between 18-65-years old, who resided in England or Scotland, were the primary grocery shopper, and had a BMI of greater than or equal to 30 kg/m². Participants were recruited between February and May 2023, using the participant pooling website, Prolific (www.prolific.com). A total of 583 participants completed the survey. This study operated as a cross-sectional online questionnaire study delivered using Qualtrics. Household food insecurity was assessed using the United States Department of Agriculture Household Food Security Survey Module (10-item; USDA-10) [5].

About the FIO Food Project

'Food Insecurity in People Living with Obesity' (**FIO Food**) is a 3-year, £1.6m research project funded by the Transforming the UK Food System - Strategic Priority Fund (**TUKFS-SPF**) that aims to provide actionable evidence for policy on retail strategies to address dietary inequalities in people living with obesity and food insecurity, in order to support more sustainable and healthier food choices in the UK food system [6].

1. Johnstone & Lonnie (2023), *The cost-of-living crisis is feeding the paradox of obesity and food insecurities in the UK*, *Obesity*.

2. *Scottish Health Survey* 2019.

3. Armstrong et al (2023). *Food and You 2: Wave 6 Key Findings*.

4. The Food Foundation (2023) *Food insecurity tracking*.

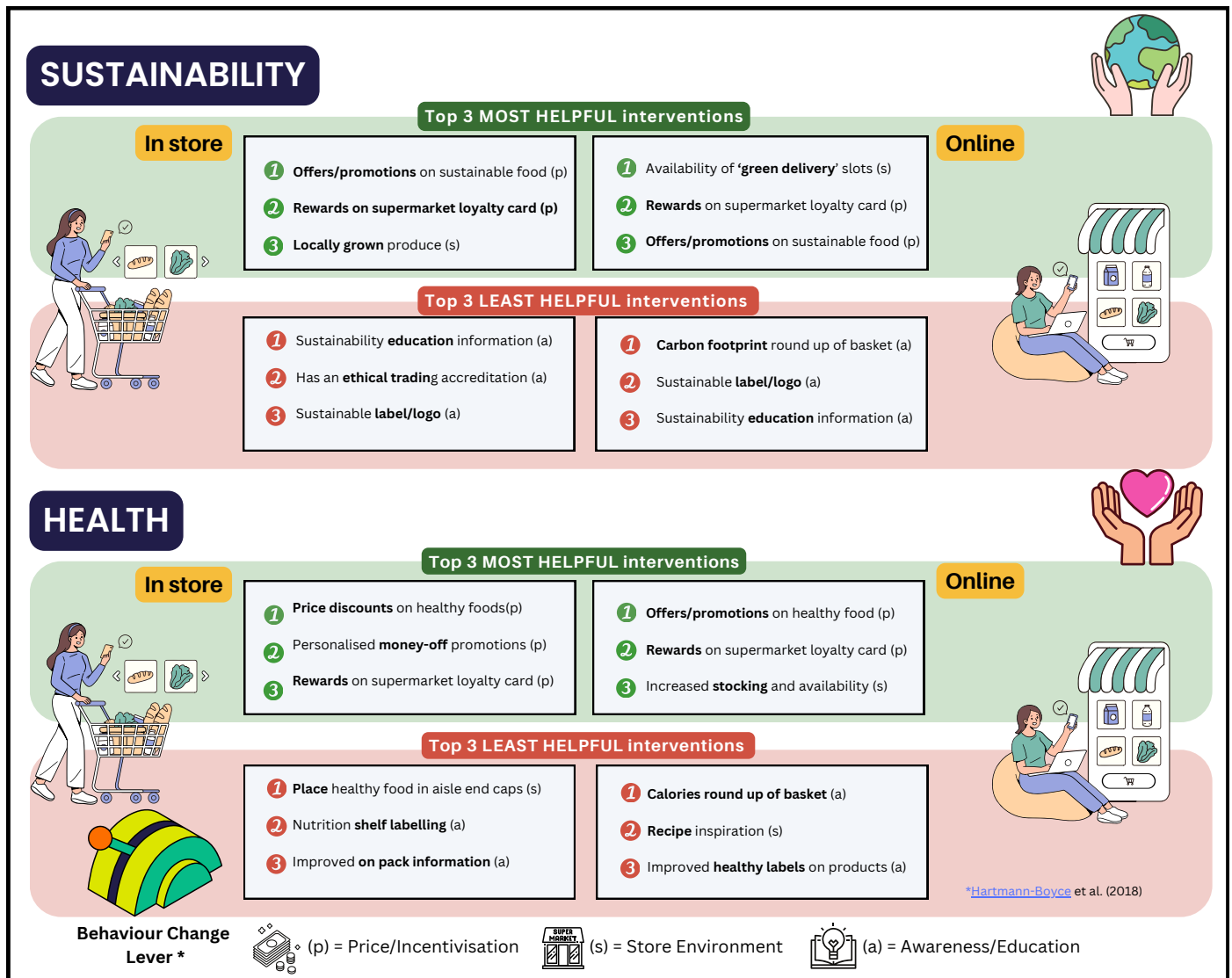
5. United States Department of Agriculture, E. R. S. (2012). U.S. Adult Food Security Survey Module (10 items).

6. Lonnie et al. (2023). *Food insecurity in people living with obesity*. *Nutrition Bulletin*.



MOST AND LEAST HELPFUL INTERVENTIONS

Reported by people living with obesity and food insecurity



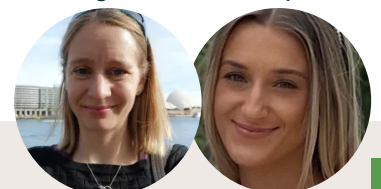
THE EVIDENCE

Our participants indicated that **the main behaviour change lever** that would enable them to purchase healthier food was based on **price and incentivisation**, in the form of price discounts, money-off promotions and rewards on the loyalty cards - which were similar regardless of the mode of shopping (in store vs. online).

In contrast, the interventions perceived as the **least helpful** were interventions targeted at consumer **education and store environments**. These findings challenge existing approaches used to change consumer's dietary behaviour, where the focus has predominately been on increasing nutritional education. Whilst education may still may be helpful, our study underscores that for people living with obesity and food insecurity, it is insufficient.

Similar observations were made in how to enable more sustainable food purchases. Study participants reported, that **interventions based on price and incentivisation** would be **the most helpful** to enable the purchasing of sustainable food products'.

Our data shows that **increasing awareness and knowledge of sustainability** through the use of labelling, information leaflets, accreditation symbols, and carbon footprint information, are the **least helpful** in enabling sustainable food purchasing. These findings again underscore how price is the strongest determinant of purchasing for people living with obesity and food insecurity.



WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

WHOLE SYSTEM APPROACH

The current UK food system is contributing to the **double burden of malnutrition**, which includes people experiencing food insecurity and hunger, but also those who are living with obesity. The challenges to address UK diet to improve inequalities in health are pressing. **Approaches focusing solely on individuals' responsibility and consumer education are insufficient** to improve population health. To tackle the environments that encourage people to eat unhealthily, a whole system approach is needed with interventions that will be complementary and synergistic.

Our research is bringing together food-insecure people living with obesity, retailers, policymakers, health care professionals and academics to co-develop strategies that can support future transformative potential in the food system.

KNOWLEDGE GAP

Currently, there is a **lack of understanding** of the magnitude and impact of the ongoing cost of living crisis on food purchasing behaviours in people living with obesity and food insecurity.

Better evidence is needed to highlight and inform the development of policy measures and interventions aimed at supporting groups disproportionately affected by the cost of living crisis. Fiscal, governmental and environmental measures are needed to transform the UK food system and address these diet and health inequalities.

NEXT STEPS

We are planning an **in-person workshop in early 2024**, to triangulate the perspectives of the key stakeholders' in order to ascertain what the directions are for transforming the food system, enabling people living with obesity and food insecurity to make healthier and more sustainable dietary choices.

We will be sharing more details about the event in due course.

Project Partners



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