The pandemic brought rapid, unprecedented change to the way we shop. Lockdowns and safety concerns pushed many consumers online, causing a sharp spike in online retail sales share. Yet as restrictions eased, the share of sales made online settled at around 28% in the UK—significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels but far from the peaks seen during 2020 and early 2021.

What explains this new equilibrium? How did consumer preferences evolve, and what https://britainreviews.co.uk/blog/online-access-changing-consumer-habits barriers remain to online retail growing further? In this post, we'll unpack the forces behind the post-pandemic shopping landscape. Along the way, we'll explore how research-first purchase journeys, always-on access, and the collapse of traditional "comparison friction" shaped online retail's share, using everyday tools like vehicle servicing comparison sites and map applications as examples of changing consumer habits.

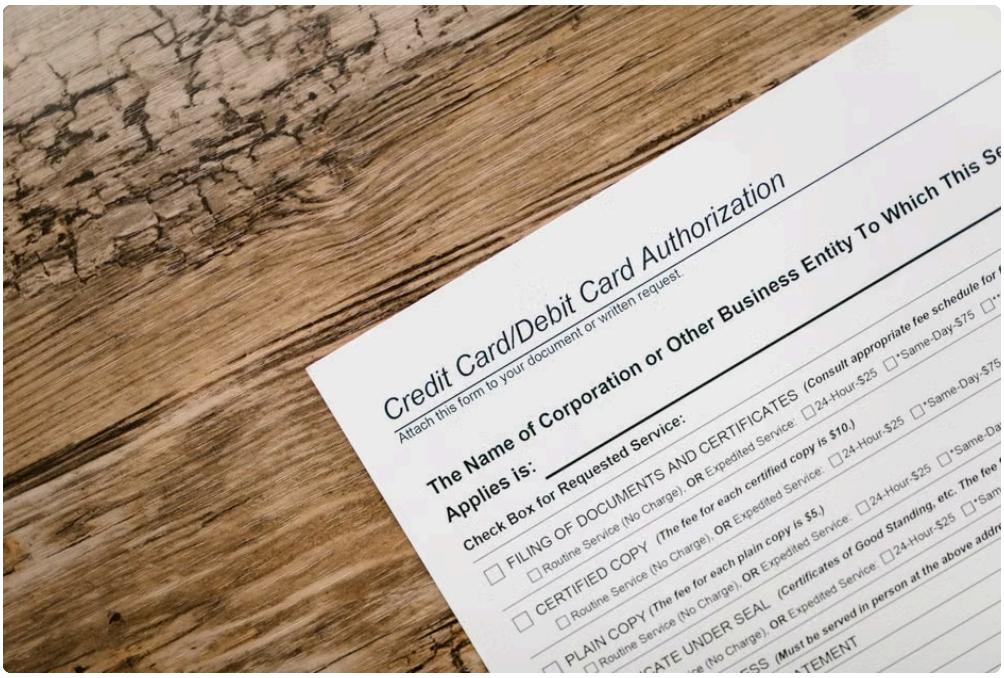
The Online Retail Spike: A Brief Recap

When the first UK lockdown hit in March 2020, physical shops closed or severely limited access. Consumers had fewer choices but online stores were open 24/7. Online sales share jumped to over 35% of total retail sales at points during 2020 and early 2021, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

This was a huge surge from the previous years, where online retail had hovered around 20-22%. Many pundits suggested that the pandemic would permanently push online to dominate. But by mid-2023, online settled at about 28% and remained stable around this mark.

Always-On Access and Instant Lookup: The Convenience Revolution

One of the biggest draws of online retail is always-on access. Consumers can shop or research products at any time without waiting for stores to open. This convenience is not just about buying—it's about instant lookup, doing preliminary research, and making confident decisions.



Take vehicle servicing, for example. Comparison sites like WhoCanFixMyCar and ServicingStop make it easy to instantly compare prices, services, and reviews across local garages. Consumers don't have to physically visit or call multiple places. Access to verified customer ratings and clear pricing helps shoppers make informed choices faster than ever.

Similarly, applications like Google Maps provide instant verification of addresses and directions for in-person retail or services. This reduces the friction traditionally associated with offline research and planning.

- **Benefit 1:** Consumers no longer need to travel just to research.
- **Benefit 2:** Information is consistently up-to-date and easy to verify.
- **Benefit 3:** Access is "always on," fitting consumer schedules rather than store hours.

These factors combine to set a new baseline of consumer expectation: blending online research and instant information access with occasional in-store visits.

Post-Pandemic Online Sales Share: Why 28%?

So why did online retail settle around 28%, rather than continue climbing or returning to pre-pandemic levels? Several consumer preferences and practical factors play a role.

1. Preference for Mixed Journeys

Most shoppers don't use "online vs offline" as a strict either-or. They engage in mixed, research-first purchase journeys. For example, someone might check product reviews and prices online, compare options on a mobile device, then visit a store to see and touch the product before buying.

It turns out that many choices still benefit from physical experience—especially for categories like clothing, footwear, and bulky household goods.

2. Persisting Tiny Frictions for Switching Fully Online

Online retail improved drastically during the pandemic—better websites, faster delivery, easier returns. However, small frictions remain that stop some consumers switching entirely. My running list includes:

- Concerns over product fit and feel, especially in fashion
- Delivery charges and timing uncertainties
- Uncertainty about after-sales service quality
- Lack of personal interaction when advice is needed

Such tiny frictions, though individually small, add up to influence consumer preferences toward maintaining some offline interactions.

3. Saturation and Category Variation

Online penetration varies hugely by category. Electronics or books are near 50-60% online sales share, while groceries hover below 10%. Overall retail share mixes these extremes to arrive close to 28%.

Category Online Sales Share (%) Electronics & Media 55 Fashion & Apparel 40 Groceries 9 Home & Garden 35

Research-First Purchase Journeys: A New Normal

One of the lasting pandemic effects is the entrenched habit of research-first shopping. Consumers routinely use their phones or computers to check product specs, price comparisons, stock availability, and reviews before stepping into a physical store or making an online order.

Before the pandemic, many shoppers still relied on in-store browsing. Now, online information accelerates decision-making and reduces uncertainty.

Consider how vehicle servicing comparison sites changed this journey. Before, most vehicle owners called garages or asked friends for recommendations. Now, they check multiple service options, prices, and customer feedback online before booking in person or online.

Collapse of Comparison Friction

Comparison friction means the cost in time, effort, or uncertainty involved in comparing options. Previously, researching offline involved calling multiple stores or physically travelling to check options. Online tools have dramatically reduced this friction:

1. **Simplified price comparisons:** Side-by-side price and service lists
2. **Trust via reviews:** Verified customer ratings provide social proof
3. **Clear location data:** Map applications verify addresses and opening times, removing guesswork

The result: consumers can make more informed, confident choices quickly, blurring the line between online and offline shopping.

What This Means for Retailers and Consumers

Understanding why online sales share settled around 28% helps retailers focus strategy more realistically.

- **For Retailers:** Improving online experiences is essential, but supporting seamless offline-online journeys is just as important. Think click-and-collect, clear return policies, and accurate stock info.
- **For Consumers:** The hybrid approach offers the best of both worlds—easy research and instant information online, with the assurance and experience of in-store visits when needed.

Future Outlook

Online retail will likely continue growing—driven by better technology, faster delivery, and evolving preferences. But expect a steady, nuanced path where consumers use digital tools for research and convenience, then mix online and offline channels to meet their unique needs.

Summary

The post-pandemic shopping landscape reflects a new balance in consumer behaviour. Online retail's share settled around 28% due to a mix of always-on access, eliminated comparison friction, and research-first purchase habits. But persistent tiny frictions and category differences maintain the relevance of physical retail.

By understanding these dynamics, both retailers and consumers can better navigate the "new normal" of blended shopping journeys where digital and physical complement each other seamlessly.