



# Changes in office workers' lived experiences of their own eating habits since working from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic: An interpretative phenomenological analysis

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## ABSTRACT

In response to the unprecedented circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been little insight into how office workers perceived their own eating behaviour in relation to their new home working environment. The sedentary nature of office-based jobs means that it is crucial that workers in these occupations engage in health behaviours that are beneficial to them. The present study aimed to explore how office workers perceive changes to their own eating behaviour since the transition to working from home (WFH) as a consequence of the pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six volunteer office workers who previously worked in an office environment and who are now WFH. Data were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis, allowing the researcher to explore each account and understand their lived experiences. There were five superordinate themes: Healthy eating; time constraints; escaping the office; social cognitions; and food indulgence. Increased snacking behaviour since WFH was a major challenge, which was particularly potent during times of elevated stress. Furthermore, quality of nutrition since WFH appeared to coincide with the participants' wellbeing, such that this was reported as being worst at times of low wellbeing. Future studies must focus on developing strategies to improve the eating behaviours and the general wellbeing of office workers as they continue to WFH. These findings can then be utilised for the development of health promoting behaviours.

## 1. Introduction

To reduce the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, many workers have adjusted to working from home (WFH). Since the start of the pandemic, researchers have begun to investigate the impact that this transition might be having on employees' nutrition. The workplace environment has been found to have differential effects on workers' eating behaviours, with many studies indicating that office environments do exert some influence on these outcomes (Clohessy et al., 2019). Research conducted in Thailand found evidence to suggest changes in lifestyle factors, including eating behaviours, since WFH due to the pandemic, in response to this change of working environment (Ekpanyaskul & Padungtod, 2021).

Findings suggest that the lack of availability of workplace facilities outside the office environment may help to improve the eating behaviour of workers since WFH began. Qualitative research suggests that employees perceive workplace canteens to be associated with unhealthy foods (e.g., Lake et al., 2016), whereas other workers have indicated that

canteens were associated with healthier eating behaviour (Almeida et al., 2014), and some have described how on-site canteens are useful in providing an opportunity to consume proper meals (Payne et al., 2013). But contrasting views have been described by those discontented with their facility's availability of vegetarian foods or those that support medical conditions (Pridgeon & Whitehead, 2013). Similar dissatisfaction has been described by workers in Lake et al.'s (2016) research, who explain how sweet treats were often highly available in times of celebration, resulting in perceptions of the office environment as being unhealthy. Other research has found that the abundance of vending machines in a typical workplace environment is associated with poorer eating habits (Almeida et al., 2014) and greater temptations (Payne et al., 2013).

Time constraints also seemed to be a recurring theme amongst office employees, where many workers in this sector preferred eating lunch at their desk, having noted that this time-efficient strategy allowed them to leave work earlier (Lake et al., 2016). Tighter work schedules are also associated with food intake being driven by availability of time, rather

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than appetite (Waterhouse et al., 2005). Additionally, others perceive it to be a cultural norm to refrain from taking lunch breaks due to this limited time (Pridgeon & Whitehead, 2013). Yet WFH has been suggested to increase time availability, which workers can dedicate to grocery shopping and cooking (Restrepo & Zeballos, 2020). The work commute is no longer in the equation, so workers may have more time to devote to tasks like these. Thus, an in-depth exploration is ideal to see whether schedules have changed since WFH, and if this has impacted upon eating behaviour.

Social factors may also be important amongst workers' eating behaviour, something that has been more difficult since the pandemic. Prior to COVID-19, some office workers have perceived their lunch breaks as a social activity and described how being alone often leads to skipping lunch (Park et al., 2017). Indeed, this is likely to be very different since the pandemic, whereby socialisation in work settings is heavily limited to video-based interactions. Longitudinal research has demonstrated that diet in general has improved since the pandemic, with positive changes seen in the increased consumption of home-cooked foods, but with a higher frequency of snacking (Sato et al., 2021). Additionally, a survey revealed that transitioning to WFH was associated with improved regularity of eating, possibly due to reduced eating outside of the home (Górska et al., 2021). The present research hopes to extend this qualitatively to understand whether office workers perceive any changes in their own experience of eating behaviour since WFH.

Since office workers spend the greatest proportion of time at their desk and can have very sedentary job roles, it is crucial that their nutrition is adequate to ensure they are maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Their new change in lifestyle may have impacts on the overall health and wellbeing of office workers, demonstrated in a U.S. study conducted in the early stages of the pandemic, examining the effects of various lifestyle and occupational factors on the overall wellbeing of workers who transitioned to WFH (Xiao et al., 2021). Their findings revealed reductions in physical and mental wellbeing due to the new working conditions related to physical exercise, food intake and communication with colleagues. Orr et al. (2022) found that, of those who reported greater snacking behaviour and unhealthy eating due to the pandemic, this was more prominent amongst those under 45 years (i.e., the group more likely to be WFH, thereby likely having more opportunities to engage in snacking). Nonetheless, other interviewees in this study reported improvements in their eating habits, thus suggesting that these lifestyle changes may exert differential effects amongst individuals, making it desirable to investigate this at an individual level.

Employees, including office workers, who have transitioned to WFH in Thailand have reported various occupational health issues, particularly related to weight gain, irregular eating patterns, changes in exercise, and decreased sleep, which tended to negatively impact their wellbeing (Ekpanyaskul & Padungtod, 2021). Exploring these findings in more depth using qualitative methodology would be beneficial to understand whether these outcomes would be similar in a British sample.

It is crucial to understand the health behaviours, such as eating behaviour, in office workers as their nutrition may affect their working efficiency. Mills et al. (2007) found a significant improvement in health status and work performance in those who engaged in a tailored health programme, implementing nutrition and physical activity, emphasising the importance of maintaining good health whilst working, and leading to benefits both individually and economically. Additionally, there is evidence for a relationship between job satisfaction, health and wellbeing, which influenced work performance across numerous occupations (Satuf et al., 2018). Further, evidence suggests possible causal links between inadequate nutrition and poorer general wellbeing (Firth et al., 2020). Therefore, understanding this in more depth may provide useful insights into the factors that may be in-part underlying workers' physical and mental wellbeing in their own home office, and this may help to make this transition as comfortable as possible for this group.

Given the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, there has been little insight into how office workers perceive their own eating behaviour in relation to WFH. As such, the present study will explore how office workers perceive their own eating behaviour to have changed in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic working restrictions. This is particularly necessary since WFH is the new norm for many people and is likely to continue following the pandemic. Even with many workers starting to return to an office environment, many will at least WFH for a large proportion of their time.

Based on the research mentioned, it would be most beneficial to explore how office workers perceive their own experiences of their transition to WFH, and prioritising in-depth analysis of problems related to their experiences of: the availability of snacks and unhealthy foods, how time has affected their eating behaviour, how social changes have impacted their eating behaviour, and how their nutritional intake has affected their overall wellbeing. Given that the purpose of this study is the analysis of subjective experiences, a qualitative approach will be adopted, using one-to-one semi-structured interviews to understand these workers' perceptions of their own eating habits, and how these have changed in their transition to remote working, at an idiographic level. Therefore, data will be analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2009) to uniquely explore and interpret each individuals' detailed account of their own lived experience, and with the intended focus of making sense of these individuals' current experiences of their work-related eating habits.

## 2. Methods

The Consolidated criteria for Reporting Qualitative research (COREQ; Tong et al., 2007) checklist was utilised to guide the design, methods, analysis, and reporting of this study in the hope to improve its conduct.

### 2.1. Design

The present study embraced a phenomenological approach for its method of data collection, by adopting the format of semi-structured interviews. Using open-ended questions allowed the researcher to generate rich descriptive data (Bearman, 2019), and qualitatively explore the phenomenon of office workers' new eating behaviour.

### 2.2. Ethics & recruitment

Participants were a volunteer sample of UK office employees and were eligible to take part in the study if they were office workers who had been working in the office prior to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and who have transitioned and have continued to primarily WFH since the beginning of the pandemic (March 19, 2020). The sample was obtained by placing an initial advert on Facebook and, following this, word of mouth. As an incentive for participation, all interviewees were placed in a random prize draw for the chance to win a £50 shopping voucher.

This study was conducted followed the guidelines of the British Psychological Society (Oates et al., 2021). Informed consent was obtained prior to the interview, which was achieved by signing a consent form electronically after having read through the participant information sheet, informing them of their right to withdraw and have their data destroyed without having to provide a reason anytime from the beginning of their interview for up to one week following their interview. Interview questions were not intended to be psychologically damaging in nature or result in embarrassment for the participant, and it was made clear to the participants that they did not have to discuss anything that would make them feel uncomfortable. All participants were provided with a debrief statement which thanked them for their time and directed them to supporting resources related to WFH or any eating-related struggles. Confidentiality has been assured by providing each

participant with a pseudonym and any other identifying information being removed from the collected data. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Leeds School of Psychology Ethics Committee on November 17, 2021 (Ethical Approval Number: PSYC-354).

### 2.3. Participants

In accordance with Smith et al.'s (2009) rule of thumb for reaching best practice when conducting phenomenological research, six participants were included in this study, allowing the researcher to obtain a detailed understanding of the topic, whilst not being at risk of an overwhelming amount of data (Smith et al., 2009). The sample consisted of three males and three females, all of whom were White British. There was no maximum age limit, but all participants were required to be over the age of 18 to partake. The mean age of the sample was 44.7 years ( $SD = 12.5$ , range = 29–60). The participants must have been able to take part in an interview in English. Furthermore, individuals suffering from any mental health difficulties were ineligible to take part in the study, given that this may have an impact on usual eating habits.

Various office-based occupations were represented in the sample. Of which there were: two planning officers (whom were part of a local authority in the East Midlands), one economic development officer (also worked in an East Midlands local authority), one university executive manager (whom worked at a university in the Merseyside area), one I.T. security manager (part of an IT services company, working in Birmingham), and one architectural assistant (whom worked for a volume house builder company in the East Midlands). All employees were in full-time work, but working hours varied within the sample, and half of the participants reported being part of a flexible system, based on banked hours. Participants predominantly resided across the Midlands, and one in Merseyside. Two of the six participants were vegan, but the remaining reported following no specific diet. Furthermore, three lived with partners, two lived alone, and one lived with their partner and two children. Table 1 summarises the general characteristics of the sample (note that all the names given in Table 1 are pseudonyms).

### 2.4. Interview schedule

Data was collected in the form of a semi-structured interview, conducted by the researcher. The interview schedule (Appendix A) was based on previous work and was largely influenced by prior literature that focused on eating habits in relation to the office or the working environment. For example, the interview schedule consisted of questions such as 'Do job demands ever impact upon your eating behaviours during working hours?' or 'What makes you choose the food you eat during the day at work?'. The former was particularly influenced by previous findings indicating that the stress of a working situation had differential effects on the perceptions of different workers' own eating habits (Wandel & Roos, 2005), and the latter influenced by some of the questions in Waterhouse et al.'s (2005) questionnaire, which focused on the drivers related to eating when working versus when not-working. The

**Table 1**  
Characteristics of sample.

Participant	Sex	Age	Office-Based Work	Residential Location	Diet
Hannah	Female	60	Economic Development Officer	East Midlands	None
John	Male	50	Planning Officer	East Midlands	None
Katie	Female	29	Planning Officer	East Midlands	Vegan
Keith	Male	48	I.T. Security Manager	East Midlands	None
Mike	Male	30	Architectural Assistant	East Midlands	Vegan
Sophie	Female	52	University Executive Manager	Merseyside	None

researcher sought to extend this by adopting an exploratory approach to develop a deeper understanding of participants' insights underlying these drives.

All interviews began with reminding participants of the aims of the study, what would be required of them during the interview process, and their right to withdraw, and that they were not obligated to answer any questions that they did not wish to answer. Following this, the participants were first asked standard questions about their job role and important demographical information, such as their age.

Each interview was unique in nature, and most questions were influenced by the participant's responses regarding their own experience (Smith et al., 2009). Given the novelty of remote working as an area of interest in research, additional questions that had not yet been asked in previous studies were also considered, such as 'Have you noticed any significant challenges faced in terms of your eating habits in relation to work, following the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions?'. When the interviewer required a further expansion on a topic, various probes were asked, such as 'Can you think of a specific example?' Other questions that were more closely tailored to the individual participants included questions such as asking about breakfast or the impact of families.

### 2.5. Procedure

One-to-one semi-structured interviews were carried out online, via Microsoft Teams, in the form of a video call. The interviews lasted between twenty-six and 32 min.

The interviews took place in February and March 2022, which was a time when the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions were relaxed, and people were free to leave their homes and socialise.

Each interview was video and audio recorded using the recording software on Microsoft Teams. Following each interview, the researcher converted the recordings to audio in preparation for transcription.

The interview material was transcribed in verbatim, argued to be beneficial in phenomenological research, better enabling a closer relationship between the researcher and the data (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). All possible identifying information, including locations and names, were removed from the transcripts and pseudonyms have been provided for the participants to ensure anonymity. Only the researcher had access to the recordings to maintain confidentiality.

### 2.6. Analysis

The researcher complemented the data with field notes, which were taken during the interview process. Therefore, the researcher was able to ensure that findings were data-driven and allowed the researcher to better determine any patterns that emerged from the data (Keyworth et al., 2020; Koch, 2006). The data was carefully checked to ensure quality, such as using constant comparison (Moustakas, 1994) between our methods of data collection. By auditing the events and actions of the researcher, this ensured that the data was trustworthy (Koch, 2006).

Transcripts were analysed using IPA, following the guidelines laid out by Smith et al. (2009). Initially, each of the transcripts were read several times as individual cases and were compared against the audio recording. During each stage, notes were taken, beginning with initial thoughts, and then later progressing to more abstract and meaningful ideas, whilst maintaining closeness to the original data. Next, emerging themes identified by the researcher were labelled. This meant interpreting the data at a more conceptual level and then considering how connections could be formed between themes to create clusters. Meaningful clusters were retained, whereas those considered less meaningful to the phenomenon were abandoned. This process was repeated across each of the individual transcripts. Finally, the researcher considered the emerging themes across all cases, allowing the researcher to better understand the shared experiences of the participants (Willig, 2008). To minimise subjectivity, the findings were shared throughout the analysis process amongst two of the researchers (EK and CK), and discussions

took place around areas of contention.

### 3. Results

Table Analysis identified five superordinate themes, each comprised of several embedded subordinate themes (Table 2.) Each superordinate theme will be outlined, and each subordinate theme will be described in turn. Themes will be accompanied by quotes from the participants' accounts which are believed to best capture the depth and significance of the theme under topic.

#### 3.1. Healthy eating

Whether in the office or at home, the workers strove towards maintaining a healthy lifestyle, but this was perceived to be more important since WFH, where participants were aware of their greater lack of movement and easier access to unhealthy snacks.

##### 3.1.1. Desire to be healthy

Participants attempted to maintain healthy lifestyles during the COVID-19 restrictions and these motivations were particularly prominent when WFH was first introduced at the beginning of the pandemic.

*"It's sort of like this new leaf kind of situation erm that it felt like."* (Mike)

Anxieties around weight gain, which participants found challenging, was commonly experienced. They talked often about how their increased unhealthy snacking, along with their lack of movement, such as lunchtime walks or regularly climbing stairs at the office, led to increased guilt and reduced confidence. Snacking in the office often composed of healthier choices, such as fruit, since workers tended to bring these into work with them and thus were limited in their choices, unlike WFH.

*"That's when I noticed I'd started putting a bit of weight on, so I thought 'oh I'll cut that out.'" (Keith)*

Furthermore, it seemed apparent that societal influences, such as weight stigma bias, had profound effects on the participants' own feelings towards their eating habits, often resulting in unfavourable feelings towards the self.

*"I promised myself this week, I make my own ice cream and I've got into a bad habit of eating a bit of ice cream every evening [...]. So 'right I'm not doing that this January, I'm going to be good.'" (Sophie)*

#### 3.1.2. Cooking from scratch

Despite reports of opting for convenience food during times of fatigue, most participants recounted an overall increase in cooking from scratch since WFH, where the workers embraced their opportunity to cook more. Participants were comforted by the knowledge that their meal was more nutritious and favoured their subjective experience in response to consuming a home-cooked meal. This has also led to greater variety within their meal choices, particularly at lunchtime, which participants felt very enthusiastic about.

*"Generally speaking, it's a much nicer experience than banging something in the oven or getting a takeaway from somewhere."* (Mike)

#### 3.2. Time constraints

Four subordinate themes were generated within this theme, which related to issues surrounding time in both working environments, as well as the impacts this had on the workers' eating behaviour.

##### 3.2.1. Finding the time

Participants commonly reported that their working hours were very limiting in terms of finding sufficient time to take a lunch break. Working in the office appeared to be more structured in terms of lunchtime, and this appeared to have changed considerably in the transition to remote work. Since WFH, having lunch seemed to be a slave to the timings of the workday, often governed by meeting schedules and workloads. Most participants reported having no strict scheduled time that dictated their lunchbreak since WFH.

*"You tend to eat when you've got time, I suppose. Erm, if you're in the middle of working or something, or in the middle of a meeting or something, then obviously you won't be having your lunch then."* (John)

How challenging the participants perceived this absence of a fixed structure was varied amongst the sample. Some preferred this escape from rigidity, or at least felt neutral towards the matter. Mike, especially, saw the opportunity to deviate from a set time as being beneficial and allowing him to decide how long his break would last.

*"I quite like the freedom of when you're working from home and you can eat when you want and [...], you're not sort of fixed to mealtimes."* (Mike)

Mostly, however, this was perceived as being rather challenging, especially for those who are comforted by adhering to structure, thus making adjusting to this rather difficult.

*"I'm quite routine-based. I quite like structure to my day."* (Keith)

##### 3.2.2. Prioritising productivity

Participants frequently spoke about continuing to work at their desk during meal breaks or how they would multitask eating and work to maximise their productivity. This often coincided with the longer working hours that were reported since WFH (see 'disconnecting from work'). However, in general the participants were in mutual agreement in their desires to finish work earlier and progress to their evening activities. This norm of multitasking was often at the expense of taking appropriate breaks or dedicating time to eating mindfully. Whilst some acknowledged this to be an unhealthy mentality, the efficiency of the workday was nevertheless deemed more important; thus, many of the participants regularly ate lunch or breakfast at their desks.

*"Sometimes I combine a meeting with taking my lunch with me."* (Sophie)

##### 3.2.3. Impacts of the commute

Of those who spent time commuting to work prior to WFH, most expressed the benefits of no longer engaging in this daily activity. The work commute was frequently described as being a hassle and had

**Table 2**  
Superordinate and subordinate themes.

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Healthy Eating	Desire to be healthy Cooking from scratch
Time constraints	Finding the time Prioritising productivity Impacts of the commute Motivation to cook
Escaping the office	Change of scenery Disconnecting from work
Social cognitions	Connecting via food Fear of judgement
Food indulgence	Comfort eating Temptation High street proximity



profound effects on the evening meal. The removal of the commute meant that, for some, the meal is sometimes now eaten earlier. For others, however, this appeared to be unaffected, given the increased determination to work longer hours since the transition to WFH.

*“It [evening meal] sometimes is earlier, I suppose, than it used to be in that I no longer have the commute.” (John)*

Most participants found that the commute did not exert much influence on what they chose to eat in the evening except, however, on those days where the commute was described as causing fatigue. This was more profound in those for whom the commute was a much longer journey. For these participants, a long drive with the added pressures of the workday meant evening meals were driven by speed, rather than nutritional value.

*“My commute can be an hour each way at least. So, two hours in the car, erm when I get in, I don’t mind cooking, but sometimes you’re absolutely shattered.” (Keith)*

The commute sometimes had other activities encompassed within it. Food shopping was more frequent when one commuted to the office, with commute being seen as an opportunity to make this a weekday chore, rather than one that ate into the workers’ free time during weekends.

*“I would sometimes, after work in the office, I would drive to, I’d drive on my way home and I’d probably go shopping more because I’m in the car every day at a similar time [...]. Whereas now, it’s a right fuff to go.” (Katie)*

However, the abolition of the commute was often seen as being positive in that it reduced the temptations for fast-food outlets, creating fewer feelings of guilt amongst individuals.

*“It means that I’ve not got this sort of hour and fifteen minutes where I’ve got to sit in the car bored on the way home, really hungry. So, I’m not tempted to go ‘oh I’ll just swing past McDonald’s and get some chips.’” (Mike)*

### 3.2.4. Motivation to cook

A consistent theme related to the participants’ enthusiasm towards cooking. Whilst participants experienced greater positive affect in response to consuming a home-cooked meal, often the functionality of convenience food outweighed this, which was a product of the levels of motivation they experienced following their workday. This has mostly remained unchanged since working in the office and was relatively coherent across the sample. The evening meal for both environments, therefore, was largely governed by swiftness of the meal and individual levels of exhaustion. Consequently, ready meals or more processed food tended to be consumed more on weekdays, compared to weekends. Alternatively, batch cooking on less tiresome days was seen as a useful approach that allowed the group to have a home-cooked meal on workdays without being hindered by lack of motivation on those days.

*“I’ve noticed, what I’ve mentioned to my wife over time, is that we tend to buy more ready meals on the food shop and erm, ya know, we know they’re not great. Not as healthy as erm cooking fresh erm various meals. So, yeah. But I think that’s just with the times. With being quite burnt out and speed and ease” (Keith)*

### 3.3. Escaping the office

Participants commonly felt unable to find an appropriate work-life balance since the WFH measures. Generally, they felt that it was harder to dissociate between work and free time since the transition to remote work. Two subordinate themes were identified within this theme, relating to the effects that this lack of division had on their eating behaviours.

#### 3.3.1. Change of scenery

A recurrent theme prior to the pandemic was the tendency for the workers to take their lunchbreak as an opportunity to step away from the office and utilise this time to stretch their legs and catch up with colleagues away from the working environment. Since WFH, this change in dynamic has been seen as being very challenging for the participants to adjust to.

*“You got out in the fresh air, you’ve had a good walk, a good chat. Kinda de-stressed and erm it’s a bit of exercise. The difference now is I don’t do those walks.” (Keith)*

Since WFH, many described the act of going for a walk in their lunch break as being something that they must wilfully make time for, rather than being habitual in their daily life. This change appears to have brought about declines in their mental wellbeing, which some perceived to be a prominent reason for their increased snacking throughout the day. Moreover, prior to WFH, walking into town during the lunchbreak often gave the workers a good reason to leave the office. Conversely, WFH has meant that there is a lack of reason to leave the house during a workday, other than for the comfort of their own mental health.

*“I think erm things like getting out of the house, as well. When you’re working from home erm, ya know, there has to be sort of a conscious effort to do that.” (Katie)*

#### 3.3.2. Disconnecting from work

It was common for participants to discuss their difficulties in detaching themselves from their work. Several participants indicated that they depend on others to nudge them to leave their desk and have appeared to struggle with this since remote working. Colleagues, therefore, were considered instrumental within the office environment in supporting healthy breaks and knowing when to finish for lunch or end the day. The absence of others when WFH means the participants must now hold themselves accountable; a skill which is deemed onerous to this group. Others’ habits sincerely appeared to affect their regularity in terms of eating at specific times in the office and ensuring that workers were home at a reasonable time for their evening meal. Whereas now, the patterns are much more dysregulated, and eating is commonly done at the desk. All things considered, this was perceived to be easier for those participants who had a loved one present at home, though they felt discontented with their reliance on this person.

*“Something to do with the psychology, I suppose, of working on your own when you haven’t got other things going on around you. When you haven’t got other people getting up and going out for lunch maybe? I don’t know.” (John)*

Moreover, there was a trend for participants to work longer hours in general since WFH, due to being fully immersed within, or bombarded by, their workload. This usually meant that the workers were more fatigued, meaning that evening meals would often be convenience food due to exhaustion impinging on their incentive to cook.

*“I think it’s very easy, particularly now we’re working at home, to sort of like ... Just the laptop’s there and you could be there for thirteen hours a day.” (Hannah)*

### 3.4. Social cognitions

A major change since WFH is the absence of colleagues. Colleagues appeared to have profound effects on the workers’ eating behaviour, which was heavily dependent on the context in which the colleagues were present.

#### 3.4.1. Connecting via food

In some respects, food was seen as a means of bonding with colleagues, which was generally seen as a positive experience for the

participants. The office environment was often perceived as being abundant in unhealthy snacks, intended for celebrations or to provide some stimulation during the workday. The workers' perceptions of this were very mixed, and this inconsistency was greatly driven by feelings around body weight. Some perceived shared food experiences in the office very positively, highlighting that it helped workers to build relationships with one another. Additionally, the consumption of snacks in a shared manner meant that workers felt more comfortable eating unhealthy snacks around their peers, helping them to feel like the snacking behaviour was more justified, unlike WFH, where participants frequently felt guilty for snacking.

One participant, however, perceived the shared office snacks negatively and felt that WFH allowed him to feel more in control of his snacking behaviour. As such, he was more contented with his eating habits when WFH.

*"The challenging thing in the office is [...] when there's things going on in the office which can be weekly, two-weekly, and I'm talking tables full of stuff [...] or just bring in a stack of different treats."* (Keith)

#### 3.4.2. Fear of judgement

A very common theme to emerge was the anxieties participants felt concerning their colleagues' perceptions of their eating habits within the workplace, which the workers dwelled heavily upon and was evident in their actual behaviour. Consequently, participants tended to report increased snacking behaviour when WFH due to lower levels of pressure directed by their concerns for how their colleagues perceive them. At home, however, participants feel at peace with their privacy and thus snack more. Notably, though, this pressure was attenuated when snacking in the office was a shared activity.

*"In the office, you've got other people thinking 'ooh that's the third biscuit she's had today' whereas there's nobody at home to do that."* (Hannah)

### 3.5. Food indulgence

This theme is related the participants' experiences of the seductive nature of food and how this guided their eating behaviour. Three subordinate themes were identified; two of which were based on internal drivers behind their food choices, and the final concerning external influences.

#### 3.5.1. Comfort eating

Consumption of unhealthy snacks throughout the workday was experienced in both the office and WFH, however colleague perceptions in the office often lessened this, so participants felt that turning to high-fat snacks in states of stress or boredom had increased since WFH. Other reasons appearing to fuel this were low moods and loneliness, commonly believed to have risen since WFH.

*"I can't explain to you why that has changed with working from home, except the fact you haven't had company all day so you turn to food? I dunno."* (Hannah)

#### 3.5.2. Temptation

In general, participants felt more tempted to consume unhealthy snacks when WFH, which was heightened by the ease of access to their kitchens. The consensus was that participants tended to feel overpowered by these desires and frequently believed themselves to feel out of control when these temptations arose.

*"I wouldn't have had access to that [cake] tin if I'd have been in the office."* (Hannah)

#### 3.5.3. High street proximity

The consumption of foods from high street outlets, which were easily

accessed when working in the office due to its location, had decreased since WFH. Participants were generally positive towards this change, seeing this as an opportunity to have more home-cooked lunches and consume healthier meals.

*"The problem is that, when you go over there [Greggs] at lunchtime, you know, there's pastries in Greggs, there's cakes, there's cookies, erm and so on. And erm, as much as I'd always try and just get err a baguette, erm I'd always end up having a sausage roll or a pasty as well."* (Keith)

## 4. Discussion

Using semi-structured interviews and IPA, this study aimed to scrutinise how the participants made sense of the changes in their food-related experiences since the COVID-19 pandemic. There were three key findings of this study, which were related to the increased quantity of food intake since WFH, the more positive perceptions of cooking since WFH, and the lack of time that impacted on the office workers' lunches. Detailed analysis identified five superordinate themes, namely: Healthy eating; time constraints; escaping the office; social cognitions; and food indulgence.

Quality of nutrition since WFH was predominantly hindered by time scarcity, tiresome workdays, declines in mental wellbeing, and the absence of colleagues. Meanwhile, participants felt that some aspects of their diet had improved since WFH, which related to greater consumption of home-cooked meals and reduced access to high street food outlets.

Findings suggested that two major drivers of food choice during the workday were time availability and workload, which exerted greater influence on lunchtime specifically. Evening meals, however, were heavily driven by motivation to cook, which appeared to coincide with deciding to cook from scratch. The present study found that, despite factors like time availability prevalent when working in the office, the impact of these issues on eating behaviour has worsened since WFH.

Moreover, longer working hours and WFH for office workers may be analogous, which is echoed in their motivations to cook. It appears that adjustments in working hours is a barrier that hinders this. This contrasts to reports from office workers in Sweden, who spend less time working when WFH, compared to in the office (Hallman et al., 2021). This discrepancy may relate to differences in cultural norms or a host of other factors, such as living alone and caring for small children. Further work is needed to clarify this, but in these findings elucidate the need for office workers to better learn to disconnect from work and to improve their mental and physical wellbeing with more nutritious meals. Nevertheless, the participants expressed overall positive attitudes towards their more frequent consumption of home-cooked meals when their motivations allowed it, in accordance with previous findings suggesting that people generally perceive cooking from scratch or fresh ingredients as more desirable (Wolfson et al., 2016).

Interestingly, colleagues had a far greater influence on the eating behaviour than the researcher anticipated, which is particularly noteworthy since colleagues are no longer a major part of the workers' daily lives. Participants tended to feel very concerned about their colleagues' perceptions of them, usually leading to restrictions in their snacking behaviour. External pressures, such as injunctive norms in the office environment, therefore, can influence eating-related decisions, which may in-part be explained by the robust conclusions deduced by Cruwys et al. (2014), positing that food intake is largely a product of the norms of others. Similarly, Quist et al. (2014) found that workgroup weight changes were related the average body mass index (BMI) of the group. Therefore, it is apparent that co-workers do drive some eating behaviours, and it may be possible that the effects of the pandemic on presence of co-workers could be driving some of the changes observed in the eating behaviours of the participants in this study.

Furthermore, participants tended to be displeased with their increased energy-dense snacking, often due to this perceived judgement,

suggesting that colleagues can be sometimes beneficial for the prevention of unhealthy weight gain. In other situations, however, colleagues were thought to have the opposite influence in the office, such as when food was seen as a shared experience. This expands earlier findings that sweet treats shared between UK office employees generally facilitated the uniting of colleagues (Walker & Flannery, 2020). Despite occasional office treats, for the most part, workers in the present study agreed that the office was a healthier place to work compared to home, therefore contrasting to Lake et al.'s (2016) participants, who viewed the office as an unhealthy food environment. The researcher anticipated that the absence of treats and facilities in the office would mean that the participants would engage in healthier eating habits since WFH, which were opposed by these novel findings.

Related to Park et al.'s (2017) findings, whereby South Korean office workers reported more frequent meal skipping when lunch was taken in isolation, the participants in the current study reported that they would also often skip meals due to being alone. However, the underlying reasons behind this likeness appeared to differ, and this disparity is likely to be a result in differences in eating-related cultural practices. Office workers in South Korea reported that skipping meals was often a result of feeling uncomfortable eating alone, unlike those in the present study who indicated that the act of skipping lunch was a product of time. Therefore, cross-cultural differences may partly direct the eating behaviour amongst office workers, and it would be favourable to extend the current research to investigate whether these differences are apparent amongst workers of other ethnicities working in Britain.

Much of the observed increased unhealthy snacking behaviour seemed to be related to the participants' mental wellbeing. Whilst the causal nature of this relationship cannot be inferred by this research, these findings are in accordance with those of O'Connor et al. (2008), whereby workers' snacking behaviour was positively related to greater work-related stress. A possible reason for the participants' comfort eating could be that this sample consisted of a greater proportion who are highly vulnerable to emotional eating. In times of stress, emotional eaters are commonly less able to discriminate hunger from anxiety, leading to increased intake (O'Connor et al., 2011). Further research would benefit from exploring this more deeply within office workers to assess the plausibility of this explanation.

#### 4.1. Strengths and limitations

IPA was useful in allowing the researcher to understand the participants' own experiences in detail. Nevertheless, this qualitative approach is not without limitations. For example, IPA simply attempts to capture an understanding of the phenomenon and, in doing so, fails to explain why these experiences occur (Tuffour, 2017). Thus, this should be extended further, using alternative methods, to better understand the mechanisms underlying the experiences captured in this study.

Moreover, whilst efforts were made to ensure that a range of office-based occupations were included, there was strong homogeneity across the sample. A large proportion lived in a small geographical area in England, thus lacking representation of office workers across the UK. Additionally, there was little ethnic diversity amongst the participants. Important differentiations in the eating practices amongst ethnic groups are possible, and although seeking generalisability is not the aim of qualitative research (Smith et al., 2009), this study is insufficient for drawing conclusions about typical changes in patterns of eating behaviour since WFH, but may provide a useful starting point for future research to expand.

Similarly, no clear gender differences surfaced from the data, which may be interesting to examine further, considering that previous findings have suggested the existence of gender differences in eating behaviour, with women having higher eating-related self-determined motivation and generally better diets than men (Leblanc et al., 2015). The researcher anticipated that gender differences would arise from the data, particularly in the domain of 'fear of judgement', considering

strong evidence suggests that women tend to experience greater shame than men in the province of eating (Else-Quest et al., 2012). A possible reason for this difference could be the homogeneity amongst the current sample, with most participants expressing concerns for their health and the use of a volunteer sample may have been unrepresentatively composed of health-conscious individuals, resulting in fewer gender differences emerging. It would be ideal to investigate this more rigorously in subsequent research and better understand the mechanisms underlying this.

Additionally, the interviews may be considered short, with the shortest lasting 26 min, which may lead to concerns regarding the richness of the data. However, the researcher made every effort to ensure that participants' views and experiences were explored in as much detail as possible for analysis (e.g., by asking participants to expand on answers lacking clarity or with lack of depth), whilst also considering the fact that interviewees were working during this time. The researchers strongly believe that the data obtained from this study is still sufficient to demonstrate the need to develop health messages and recommendations for future research and policy.

A final limitation relates to the method of data collection. It is possible that the use of video calls resulted in the analysis being slightly less valuable than if they were conducted face-to-face. However, given that research suggests that this difference is marginal (Krouwel et al., 2019), the use of video call meant that the geographical area from which the participants were obtained was more widespread.

#### 4.2. Implications and conclusions

This research hopes to provide health and occupational psychologists to develop habit-based interventions to promote healthy eating.

Based on the current research, the researcher recommends that professionals develop strategies to improve the eating behaviours of office workers and to raise awareness, potentially through implementing health messages to employers and employees alike to maintain good overall wellbeing within the workforce. Additionally, office-based companies should spread awareness to their employees to promote the improvement of their WFH food environment. This research has provided a starting point for understanding remote office workers' experiences at an idiographic level. The expected continuation of WFH beyond the pandemic means that it is crucial to understand how this population perceive their current health behaviours, and the changes they have experienced since they began working remotely.

Similar views amongst participants were expressed regarding increased unhealthy snacking, particularly during stress, compared to working in the office. Most challenging of the new WFH restrictions for these workers appeared to be the quantity of food and the consistency of eating. These factors and its underlying mechanisms are important to consider to prevent weight gain and improve the overall wellbeing of this population in their new situation. Despite this, the workers generally viewed their evening meals since WFH positively, perceiving them to be at least as good as – if not better than – their previous choices of food for their evening meal.

Most concerning since WFH, however, are the perceived time constraints, which often leads to sacrificing a nutritional lunch to keep up with workload. Based on the current and potential future research, companies have a duty to implement workplace policies, such as informing their employees to allow sufficient time to have a lunch break, without the pressure that is currently faced.

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#### Ethical statement

This study was conducted according to the guidelines put forward by

the British Psychological Society (Oates et al., 2021). In particular, informed consent was obtained prior to the interview, which was achieved by signing a consent form electronically after having read through the participant information sheet, which informed them of their right to withdraw and have their data destroyed without having to provide a reason anytime from the beginning of their interview for up to one week following their interview. During the interview process, questions were not intended to be psychologically damaging in nature, nor that could result in embarrassment for the participant, and it was made clear to the participants that they did not have to discuss anything that would make them feel uncomfortable. Furthermore, all participants were provided with a debrief statement which thanked them for their time and directed them to supporting resources related to WFH, as well as support for any struggles related to eating. Confidentiality has been assured by providing each participant with a pseudonym and any other identifying information being removed from the collected data. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Leeds School of Psychology Ethics Committee on November 17, 2021 (Ethical Approval Number: PSYC-354).

### Statement of contribution

EK and GK conceived and designed the study. EK collected the data. EK and CK interpreted the data. EK drafted the first draft of the article, and all authors approved the final version.

### Declaration of competing interest

None.

### Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2023.106760>.

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