E-commerce can substantially widen the choice of products available to consumers, as well as increasing the convenience of the shopping experience. In 2018, 64% of all OECD Internet users made a purchase online, up from 48% in 2010. Although online sales still represent a limited share of business' revenue (17% in EU countries), e-commerce has significantly disrupted traditional distribution channels for some products.

In all countries, the share of Internet users making online purchases in 2018 was higher than in 2010, and reached as much as 87% in the United Kingdom. In Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden, Germany, Switzerland and Norway over 80% of Internet users shop online. In some countries that started with a lower level of uptake, such as Lithuania and Mexico, these shares more than tripled over the period. The proportion of online purchasers among users aged 16-24 was, on average, around 20 percentage points higher than among users aged 55-74.

The items most commonly purchased online in 2018 were clothes and sports goods (44% of Internet users in the EU purchased these), travel and holiday accommodation (37%), event tickets (27%) and reading materials (24%). In almost all countries presented, clothes and sports goods were also among the top-3 fastest growing categories of products over the period 2013-2018. The share of Internet users buying clothes online grew most strongly, by over 20 percentage points, in Ireland and the Netherlands.

Estonia experienced particularly strong growth in people buying travel and accommodation online, at around 30 percentage points. This category has been notably impacted by the digital transformation. Previously, it was common to use a travel agent to book travel, accommodation and other related products together; however the Internet has empowered consumers to book these items themselves – and often separately – allowing the customer to tailor choices to their requirements and potentially to make savings.

Films and music together constitute another product category that has been heavily disrupted by online (streaming) services, and was often among the top fastest growing categories, especially in Nordic countries.

Nevertheless, on average across OECD countries, about one-third of Internet users do not make online purchases. In the European Union, 69% of Internet users who did not purchase online gave preferring to shop in person as a justification. This share was 70% or greater in countries such as Switzerland, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom and Germany even though there is high general uptake of e-commerce in these countries.

A more concerning potential barrier to e-commerce participation relates to the skills needed to make purchases online. This barrier was cited by 20% of EU Internet users who did not shop online, and the rate is around 40% in Spain and Portugal – equivalent to roughly 15-20% of all Internet users in these countries. This barrier could become a policy concern if competition from online vendors causes physical stores to close and leaves such people without access to certain products.

DID YOU KNOW?

Clothes are the most widely purchased category of products online, despite the fact that customers are unable to try them on prior to ordering.

Definitions

Internet users are individuals who have accessed the Internet within the last three months prior to being surveyed. Different recall periods apply for some countries (see chapter notes).

An *e-commerce transaction* describes the sale or purchase of goods or services conducted over computer networks by methods specifically designed for the purpose of receiving or placing orders (OECD, 2011).

Measurability

These data are typically gathered through direct surveys of household ICT usage in the same way as data are collected on Internet usage – by asking if the respondent has undertaken a specific activity during the recall period. The OECD Model Survey on ICT Access and Usage by Households and Individuals (OECD, 2015a) proposes a wide range of activities for investigation. A recall period of three months is recommended (meaning the respondent should have undertaken the online purchase in the three months prior to being surveyed); however, some countries use longer recall periods or have no recall period at all. Such methodological differences mean that care should be taken when making international comparisons.

Some surveys also collect additional or contextual information such as details on the types of products purchased or barriers to undertaking certain activities online. Other barriers can be investigated in addition, such as security and privacy concerns (see Chapter 8).

Measurement of e-commerce presents several methodological challenges that can affect international comparability, such as differing data collection practices as well as practices for estimations and the treatment of outliers. E-commerce carried out by multinationals can be especially challenging to measure. In the case of demand-side surveys, consumers generally have poor recall with regard to certain types of questions, such as the countries from which they purchased items. Furthermore, a significant proportion of users are not necessarily aware of the origin of websites they use for shopping or may not recall the amounts spent. In addition, digital products downloaded or streamed over the Internet are increasingly common, for these it is especially difficult for the consumer to identify the country of origin.

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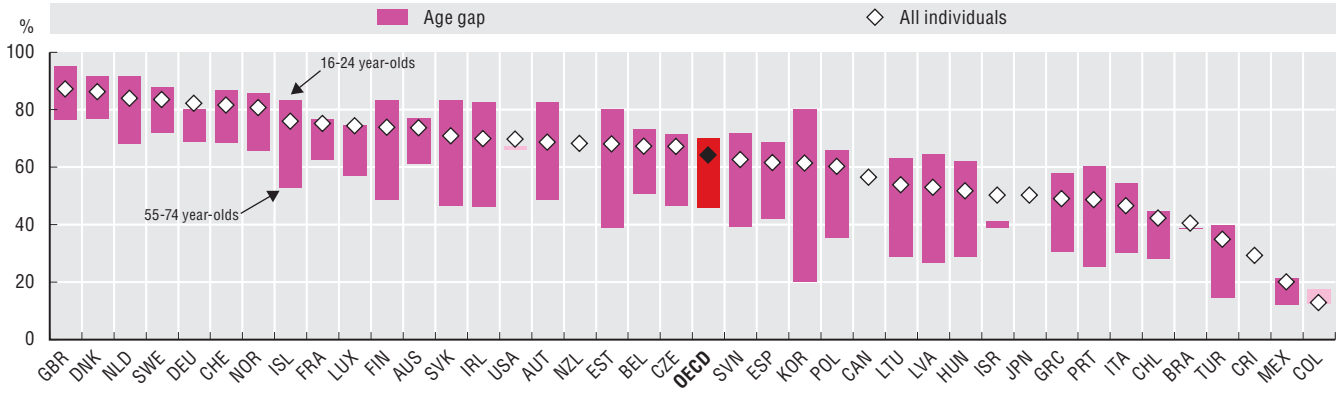
Individuals who purchased online in the last 12 months, by age, 2018

As a percentage of Internet users in each age group

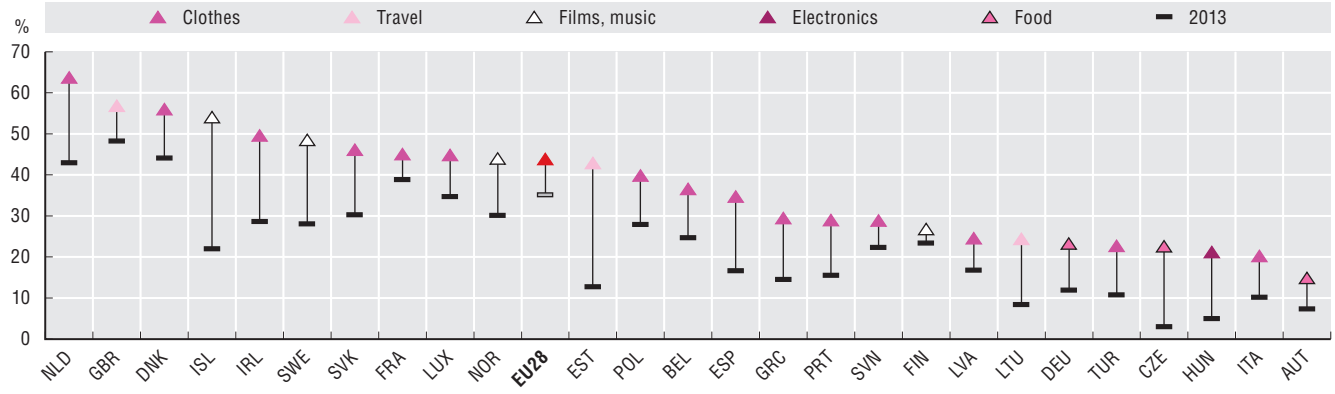


Source: OECD, ICT Access and Usage by Households and Individuals Database, http://oe.cd/hhind, December 2018. See chapter notes. StatLink contains more data.

StatLink https://doi.org/10.1787/888933929946

Fastest growing products ordered online, 2013-18

Percentage of Internet users ordering each product in 2018 (triangle) and change from 2013 (horizontal marker)

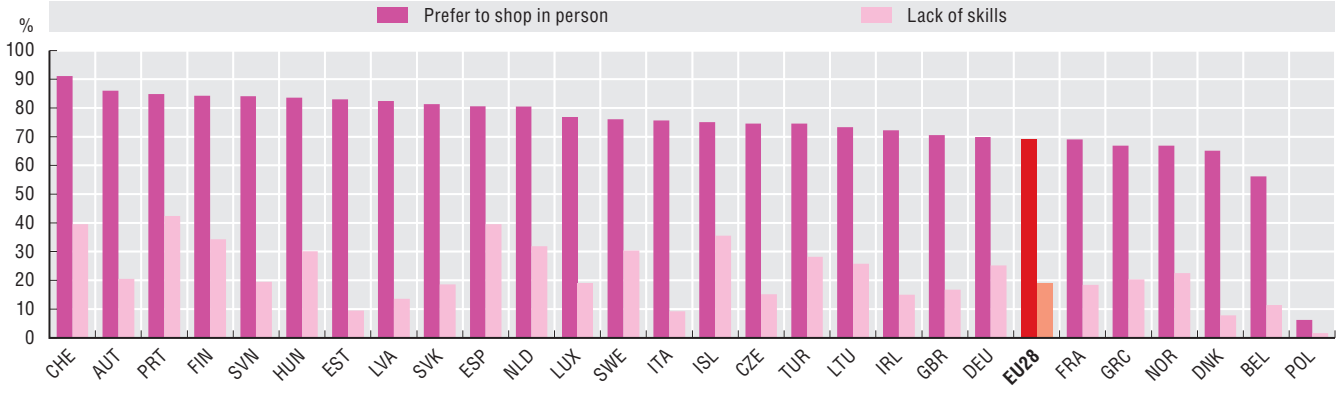


Source: OECD, based on Eurostat, Digital Economy and Society Statistics, Comprehensive Database, December 2018. StatLink contains more data.

StatLink https://doi.org/10.1787/888933929965

Reluctance to buy online in the last 12 months due to a preference to shop in person or lack of skills, 2017

As a percentage of Internet users who did not buy online in the last 12 months



Source: OECD, based on Eurostat, Digital Economy and Society Statistics, Comprehensive Database, September 2018. See chapter notes.

StatLink https://doi.org/10.1787/888933929984

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