

When people talk about how shopping has changed, the conversation often zooms straight into the rise of *online shopping*. It's true that the internet has transformed how we buy almost everything, from clothes to groceries. But is online shopping itself the biggest change? Or is it something a bit closer to home—how we **research before buying** and make decisions online that really changed the game?

Always-On Access and Instant Lookup: The Real Shift

One of the clearest changes over the last decade isn't just that you can buy stuff online. It's that people now expect **always-on access** to information and **instant lookup** whenever they need it. This means that whether you're in a shop, at home, or somewhere in between, your phone is your gateway to everything you need to know before spending a penny.

Take vehicle servicing, for instance. A few years ago, you might have guessed where to go based on past experience or word of mouth. Today, it's much more likely people check out comparison sites for vehicle servicing first to find the best deal, reviews, and location options. No more guessing. People are comfortable switching their loyalty when they feel they have better information.

Map Applications: Verifying Addresses in Real Time

Another tiny yet powerful friction that's disappeared is verifying addresses. In the past, confirming where a business was located could mean calling them, searching through directories, or hoping the paper map wasn't out of date. Now, apps like Google Maps or Apple Maps put address verification just a tap away.

When you're deciding whether to pick a local garage or shop in person, these map applications let you quickly check distance, opening hours, and even street views. This instant lookup capability smooths the path from research to purchase, collapsing steps that might have made someone hesitate before.

How Has Online Retail Share Really Changed—and Settled?

It's tempting to look at the pandemic years and think that online shopping suddenly took over everything. Indeed, online retail share jumped significantly in 2020 and early 2021 <https://britainreviews.co.uk/blog/online-access-changing-consumer-habits> as lockdowns forced physical shops to close. But data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) shows a more nuanced picture since then.

Year Online Retail Share (%) 201818% 201921% 202033% 202129% 202227%

While online shopping did grow fast in 2020, it didn't continue rising at the same breakneck pace. Instead, people mixed their shopping—some things online, others in person—settling into a hybrid pattern that feels convenient and sensible.

This suggests that the biggest change isn't just going online to buy but using online tools to **make better decisions**. That is, online shopping is a piece of a wider transformation that places research front and centre in the **purchase journey**.

The Rise of Research-First Purchase Journeys

Buying a car service, booking a holiday, or even picking a new phone often starts with research. Before brands and stores are in the picture, customers seek data, reviews, and comparisons.



This research-first approach has disrupted many markets. Online comparison sites have broken down friction by gathering pricing and options in one place. Customers can swiftly scan deals, read user opinions, and check provider credentials before committing.

Instead of relying on salespeople's advice or adverts alone, buyers want to feel confident they've made an informed choice.

What Makes Research-First Possible?

- **Mobile devices:** Phones make it easy to jump from browsing a product on a website to comparing prices or reading reviews without delay.
- **Comparison platforms:** Especially in areas like car servicing, insurance, utilities, and electronics, dedicated comparison websites reduce the time and effort needed to research options.
- **User-generated content:** Reviews and ratings offer social proof, helping people trust the information they find online.
- **Friction removal:** Tools like maps, direct booking links, and integrated payment systems compact the research and buying process.

Comparison Sites and Friction Collapse

One of the biggest tiny frictions that comparison sites remove is the time-cost of hunting around. Without these platforms, a consumer might spend hours contacting multiple garages or stores to get quotes and check availability.

Now, it often takes minutes to gather the same information—prices, services, distance, opening hours, and reviews—side by side. This transparency encourages competition but also reassures buyers they aren't missing out.

For example, a driver wondering where to service their car will enter their postcode on a comparison site and see all garages nearby ranked by price, customer satisfaction, and proximity, often with map integration. This setup makes choosing straightforward.

Why This Matters Beyond Vehicle Servicing

The same principles apply to many sectors, from energy suppliers to phones and even holidays. Consumers want to make decisions based on clear and dependable data.



As a result, businesses that don't support easy research—whether through clunky websites, obscure pricing, or poor reviews—face an uphill battle. It's no longer enough to throw products at customers and hope they buy. Instead, companies must participate in the *research-led journey* actively, offering transparency and trust.

Conclusion: Online Shopping Is Part of the Story, But Research Before Buying Drives the Future

To answer the question, **is online shopping really the biggest change**? The short answer: not quite. The bigger change is how consumers blend online access with offline experience to research before buying, reducing friction and boosting confidence.

Online shopping's growth is real but it has settled into a pattern alongside physical retail. The real impact comes from people expecting instant access to detailed, comparable information that supports smart **online decision making**. This research-first approach is reshaping the **purchase journey** across industries.

The tools we have—comparison sites for services like vehicle maintenance, map applications to verify locations, and reliable user reviews—are making shopping smarter, quicker, and less risky. And that shift is here to stay.