
Generation Z's Sustainability and Dining Preferences: The Influence of Gen Z's Values on Casual Dining Choices in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

In recent years, Generation Z customers have increasingly prioritized sustainability awareness as a key factor in their dining choices. This generation holds strong sustainable values, which play a crucial role in pressuring businesses across industries to adopt environmentally responsible practices. This study investigates the sustainability values of Generation Z in the Czech Republic to understand how these values influence their selection of dining venues. Using a qualitative research approach, the study explores the key determinants guiding Generation Z's decisions and differences in sustainable dining perceptions between rural and urban areas. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight Generation Z participants to gather data. The findings reveal that while sustainability values are important, they often serve as secondary considerations when choosing restaurants. Primary influences include price, location, accessibility, and online reviews. Additionally, urban restaurants were found to be more proactive in implementing sustainable practices compared to their rural counterparts. The study concludes with recommendations for the industry and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Sustainability, Generation Z, Dining Preferences, Casual Restaurants, Customer Behavior

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of sustainability increasingly influences consumer behavior and business practices, particularly in the restaurant sector. Gen Z, known for environmental awareness, advocates for sustainable change, and dining preferences are guided by sustainable practices and ethics. This study explores the intersection of sustainability values and Gen Z casual dining choices in the Hradec Králové region in the Czech Republic to understand how these values influence restaurant selection and customer loyalty. Over the past decade, Gen Z has focused on social and environmental issues, prompting businesses to adopt sustainability strategies. According to Jaderná et al. (2018), Gen Z grew up in a digital world, fostering global awareness and offering practical recommendations for stakeholders to better meet Gen Z's ethical and sustainability-driven demands.

A literature review presents an overview of current research on Gen Z's approach to sustainability. The methodology uses a qualitative method of data collection, analysis, and ethical considerations. Results highlight key findings, revealing themes such as sustainability practices and consumer preferences across urban and rural areas, which link findings to existing literature and indicate how consumers' approach to waste management, local sourcing, and pricing impacts decisions on dining locations. Location and easy restaurant access were significant factors in Gen Z's dining decision-making, claiming that the restaurant's proximity to their homes or easy access by public transportation is often crucial. A discussion section links results to the literature. Recommendations for future research are to explore the impact of social media on Generation Z restaurant choices.

2. Literature Review

Sustainability awareness has significantly increased over the past two decades, influencing company strategies and consumer decisions worldwide. According to White et al. (2019), businesses and consumers are more aware of their environmental impact, leading to changes in production processes and consumption of goods and services as sustainability influences purchasing choices.

Gen Z is influenced by technology, making them knowledgeable about their expectations from companies (Jaderná et al., 2018). Research by Ronkáč et al. (2021) supports Jaderná et al.'s findings regarding the strong relationship between Gen Z and sustainability awareness. Gen Z favors businesses that demonstrate dedication to protecting the environment through sourcing methods and manufacturing processes that reduce emissions (Ronkáč et al., 2021). This tendency impacts shopping preferences, support for specific brands, and dining selections (Ronkáč et al., 2021).

The history and development of sustainability in the Czech Republic, described by Kolínský (2024) as a slow and reluctant transition, is influenced by internal and external factors. Kolínský (2024) explains that, after the fall of communism in 1989, the Czech Republic adopted a foreign capitalist model that was heavily dependent on external investments and technologies, limiting the country's focus on sustainability during this phase of economic development. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the Czech Republic was often described as a "green growth laggard," with sustainability policies implemented primarily in response to European Union regulations rather than proactive national initiatives (Kolínský, 2024). The waste separation infrastructure is becoming more robust, with an expanding network in different towns to encourage efficient recycling (Czech Republic National Report, 2020).

Barhate and Dirani (2021) noted that Gen Z exhibits traits shaped by their historical surroundings and are digital natives focused on achievement and engage in meaningful work opportunities. Benítez Márquez et al. (2022) highlight that Gen Z individuals bring their beliefs and aspirations into both work and personal lives, owing to their comfort with tools and healthy work-life balance. Vieira et al. (2023) underscore Gen Z's emphasis on

authenticity and openness in their connections with companies and employers. Akbar and Gunawijaya (2022) found that Gen Z is discerning when spending, often opting for ethical products aligned with their core values. Su et al. (2019) examined the profile of Gen Z individuals, emphasizing that their sustainability awareness influences their food choices. Notably, 83% of Gen Z survey participants prioritize sustainability and health-related qualities in their purchasing decisions, thus supporting how their values influence dining choices.

Sezgin and Uyanik (2022) found that Gen Z places a high value on restaurant ambiance, which influences dining locations, accounting for 49% of their decision-making. Connections between price, quality, and location were ranked as the crucial aspect at 35%, with food accounting for 17% (Sezin & Uyanik, 2022). Orea-Giner and Fusté-Forné (2023) found that Gen Z dining choices indicate preferences for sustainability and consumption practices and develop eating behaviors within their home environment.

Gen Z demonstrates awareness of the environmental impacts of their food selections and prioritizes locally sourced and organic ingredients whenever feasible (Orea-Giner & Fusté-Forné, 2023). Benítez Márquez et al. (2022) explored the qualities and beliefs of Gen Z individuals, highlighting the significance of principles such as sustainability and ethical consumption.

Skýpalová et al. (2022) identified differences between Gen Y and Gen Z in purchasing organic food in the Czech and Slovak Republics, and that despite being price-sensitive, Czech Gen Z demonstrates a higher interest in organic food. The overall quality and acceptability of organic food are pivotal in the purchasing process (Skýpalová et al., 2022). In addition, Skýpalová et al. (2022) note that brand consistency and authenticity are crucial to Gen Z's engagement and overall brand loyalty and influence how closely their purchasing habits relate to sustainable dining choices. Nikolić et al. (2022) found that the significance of sustainability principles in restaurants expands as diners become increasingly aware of how their food choices affect the environment, such as recycling initiatives and plant-based menu items.

Additionally, Gen Z appreciates consistency in the restaurant's sustainable approaches (Nikolić et al., 2022). By incorporating sustainability into their core values and operations, casual dining restaurants could meet Gen Z's demands and contribute to broader environmental efforts. Confente et al. (2020) stated that the sustainability approach involves practices such as sourcing ingredients, reducing waste generation, and promoting sustainability awareness among employees and customers. Targeting sustainability in dining experiences may lead to increased customer appeal and a competitive advantage in the market competitive set (Confente et al., 2020).

3. Methodology

An interpretivist perspective approach was used, which underlines the importance of learning facts by interpreting the experiences of those involved (Bryman, 2016) and to respond to the research question: How do sustainable values affect Czech Gen Z's choice of casual dining restaurants in the Czech Republic? The methodology is qualitative, allowing for exploring aspects such as attitudes and values that may not be sufficiently represented by numerical data (Creswell, 2014). According to Kallio et al. (2016), semi-structured interviews enable the study of topics conducted by an interview structure while allowing participants to address subjects of importance.

This research focused on individuals aged 18 to 27 from Gen Z in the Czech Republic, which comprises 1.07 million people (Český statistický úřad, 2020). Eight participants were randomly selected from various regions, satisfying the minimum participant requirement by Guest et al. (2017). Participants originated in rural parts of the Czech Republic, and all moved to bigger cities such as Praha, Brno, or Zlín. Two pilot interviews were conducted to clarify the research instrument, and minor changes were made based on feedback. Member verification described by Birt et al. (2016), allowed participants to read their interview transcripts and clarify or add to their responses.

Thematic analysis is a method for identifying and analysing patterns of meaning in a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This analysis identified patterns in the interviewees' responses, enabling authors to explore how individual and social aspects, like personal preferences or local dining trends, influence individuals' dining location selection. To protect participant privacy, personal details were replaced with pseudonyms such as P1, P2, and P3. Data were stored in files secured with passwords unique to the researchers. The ethical guidelines in this study follow the advice of Wiles (2013), guaranteeing that participants are respected, and their well-being is essential. Participants were informed of any possible risks, the ability to opt out, and asked to provide written consent.

4. Results

Data analysis identified five themes relating to Gen Z's perceptions of sustainability in casual dining establishments: 1) The relevance of food waste management, 2) sustainability as a secondary factor, 3) the impact of price sensitivity, 4) location and accessibility, and 5) urban vs. rural sustainability perception.

4.1. The Relevance of Food Waste Management

Responses indicated that waste management is the most essential sustainable restaurant practice. Most participants mentioned that restaurants should put more effort into reducing food waste, indicating a vast demand for restaurants to adopt eco-friendly practices. P1, P3, and P6 stated that restaurants should initiate alternatives aligned with their business models. Additionally, P1 noted that proper restaurant waste management relates to good business management and efficiency. P2, P4, and P8 focused on avoiding single-use plastics, so that take-out packaging is easily biodegradable, and restaurants should manage organic waste by composting.

Seven respondents mentioned awareness of the App "Nesnězeno," which helps restaurants sell excess food after closing time, boosting efficiency while reducing waste, and increasing financial gains to restaurants. Respondents' positions on waste management are aligned with the idea of a circular economy, described by Nguyen et al. (2019), where systems are set up to recycle and reuse resources rather than discard them.

4.2. Sustainability as a Secondary Factor

Sustainability was a secondary factor indirectly influencing participants' dining demands. Participants often chose aspects of practicality and affordability, menu diversity, or convenience. P5 and P7 stated that they appreciate sustainability in restaurants. Specifically, P5 welcomed restaurants' efforts in local sourcing and biodegradable packaging, although rarely justifying a price markup.

Although the environment was not the main concern, visible sustainable implementations often created positive customer interaction. P2 stated that it makes them feel better and boosts the dining experience to see waste-sorting bins or biodegradable takeaway packaging, even though these did not influence their choice. P6 mentioned that they are not primarily interested in sustainable restaurants but more likely to revisit places that partner with local suppliers, and that sourcing locally often indicates a willingness to serve high-quality meals. P7 highlighted visible practices that reflect positively in the restaurants, such as transparent sourcing communication, which increases the probability of recommending a particular restaurant.

Participants noted primary factors influencing casual-scale restaurant selection were online reviews, personal recommendations, price, and location. Secondary considerations included the importance of aesthetics, appealing ambiance, service quality, and menu diversity. The

majority of respondents noted that online reviews of word-of-mouth phenomena are the most important restaurant selection factor. Rosario et al. (2016) explain, word-of-mouth is an informal exchange of information between individuals about products and services. P4 and P6 underscored the importance of transparency and fair advertising. P4 and P5 mentioned that brand authenticity is vital and is a key factor in building relationships with restaurants.

4.3. Price Sensitivity

Price significantly influences participants' restaurant selection, revealing a balance between financial limits and expectations of the value of a product or service. Participants with student or post-graduate status mentioned they purchase within their budget and disposable income, prioritizing affordability and accessibility. Affordability was important to five participants, who noted equal importance of perceived value, where the price needs to match the food quality and portion size. According to participants' perceptions, restaurants that serve fresh and high-quality food, or are in upscale dining locations, are more likely to justify higher price markups.

4.4. Location and Accessibility

All participants agreed that proximity to home or accessibility of the dining facility by public transportation is essential. Therefore, convenient transport was crucial when choosing a rural restaurant. This is viewed as sustainable behavior since participants purposefully choose the closer restaurants to avoid producing extra carbon emissions. In addition, the majority of participants linked walkable or bike-accessible options with lower carbon footprints, confirming the relationship between location and sustainability. The location question differed depending on the interviewees' rural or city restaurant experiences, as rural areas had limited dining options.

4.5. Rural Versus Urban Sustainability Perception

Participants noted that sustainability problems vary significantly between rural and urban settings, and that major cities like Prague and Brno usually offer much broader dining offerings with more food diversity. Urban dining establishments tend to adopt sustainable approaches such as biodegradable packaging for take-outs and sourcing local ingredients. Moreover, urban restaurants can develop relationships with non-profit organizations that help distribute leftover food more efficiently. P7 and P2 indicated that sustainable aspects in restaurants are evidence of good business practices and demonstrate care for the environment.

Rural restaurants have more predictable customer traffic, with no sustainable demand components, as consumers are more price-sensitive, which creates a challenge for restaurants to generate a return on investment and is not a motivator to facilitate the minor demand for sustainability. According to P5, customers in rural areas have very different dining standards and preferences, indicating a lack of awareness of sustainable dining in rural areas. Six participants justified the lack of sustainability in rural restaurants by the lack of consumer interest. P1 and P3 shared that sustainability in rural households is linked to convenience and necessity rather than environmental consciousness.

Sustainability practices are more noticeable in urban areas, as diners are more exposed to ecological trends. Both P2 and P8 stated that restaurants in urban areas are more likely to show visible efforts for sustainability than restaurants in rural areas, suggesting that restaurants in urban areas connect more with Gen Z customers. For example, P4 stated that they chose restaurants in Prague mainly because of the menu selection, and efforts in waste reduction made a positive impression, encouraging them to return. Additionally, P7 noted that they

usually discover sustainable restaurants unintentionally. Both P5 and P6 observed that most consumers in rural areas do not associate restaurants with sustainability. P5 further explains that it is a rarity to discover a rural restaurant that openly promotes sustainability and shared: “When a rural restaurant uses local products, it is usually out of necessity rather than conscious sustainability implementation.” This perspective reinforces that customers in rural areas show limited interest in sustainable restaurants.

Most participants were first introduced to sustainability during high school, where scepticism and dislike towards Greenwashing were frequently mentioned. Greenwashing is a marketing practice where businesses present a false picture of their sustainable efforts (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). P6 was adamant about sensitivity to unfair practices, starting with companies’ vague and unfounded claims about sustainability, which damages consumer trust. Similarly, P3 was suspicious of restaurants with strong marketing campaigns but did not apply sustainable initiatives. P3 explained that restaurants presenting themselves as sustainable while serving food in single-use plastic containers weakened their credibility with customers.

5. Discussion

Participants underlined that if well communicated with the consumer, food waste reduction is appreciated and supports customer loyalty. This focus on waste management aligns with the findings of Nikolic et al. (2022), who observed Gen Z’s sensitivity to waste. Our results indicate that sustainability in the restaurant sector is often a secondary factor for Gen Z consumers. Participants expressed keen satisfaction with visible sustainable practices such as waste reduction, local sourcing, and restaurant image. These findings align with Jaderná et al. (2018) and Ronkáč et al. (2021), who described Gen Z’s strong relationships with sustainability and their high level of awareness and identified economic barriers that can limit Gen Z’s ability to act on their values. Participants stressed the need for affordable, sustainable dining. This fact aligns with Akbar and Gunawijaya’s (2022) findings that Gen Z prioritizes cost-effective dining options due to financial constraints.

Location and easy restaurant access were significant factors in Gen Z’s dining decision-making, claiming that the restaurant’s proximity to their homes or easy access by public transportation is often crucial. Participants in urban areas viewed access by public transport as more sustainable and noted they found limited restaurant options and less frequent public transportation in rural areas. This finding suggests that location is not viewed simply as a convenience factor but also as a more sustainable option and supports findings by Ronkáč et al. (2021), which note that consumers in urban areas are more exposed to ecological trends. This exposure necessitated adaptation by those participants who moved from rural to urban areas.

Despite that the participants lived in urban areas at the time this research was conducted, they were nevertheless able to observe their change in dining preferences after moving from rural to urban settings. These changes were influenced by increased exposure to ecological trends, a greater number of dining choices, shorter travel distances from restaurants, and better access to public transport.

6. Limitations

A limitation is that the small sample size restricts how broadly the findings can be applied to the Czech Gen Z community, since qualitative studies prioritize depth over breadth (Patton, 2015). Although thematic analysis delivers insights, the Czech researcher’s understandings inevitably influence the outcomes. In addition, relying upon self-reported data may introduce a tendency for desirability bias, where participants might offer responses that they deem

socially acceptable rather than entirely accurate. Framing the interview questions for clarity reduced this risk.

7. Recommendations for Research and the Industry

Future research should explore the differences between urban and rural sustainability adaptation, including the socio-economic and cultural aspects in the Czech Republic, to explain how lifestyle and economic conditions influence the customer behavior of Gen Z and society. A second recommendation is to research customers' willingness to pay for specific sustainability initiatives in the restaurant sector. A further recommendation is for the restaurant industry to explore the role of digital marketing and social media in shaping Czech Gen Z restaurant preferences and the impact of social media platforms and influencer marketing on Gen Z dining preferences. Additionally, the findings of this research encourage the restaurant industry to tailor its offerings and communications to educate customers in various settings on the benefits of sustainable dining practices so as to balance the dining preferences between rural and urban areas.

8. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that sustainability's role in shaping Gen Z restaurant preferences is indirect and demonstrates that awareness varies significantly between rural and urban areas. Even though participants did not view sustainability as a primary motivation, sustainability appears to be a secondary factor driving Gen Z brand recognition and loyalty. Participants frequently describe practical factors such as price, online recommendations, and location. Sustainable practices such as waste reduction campaigns, biodegradable packaging, and sourcing local ingredients are attractive but rarely justify price markups. These observations further highlight Gen Z's financial constraints.

Restaurants in urban areas were more active in implementing visible sustainable practices such as waste management and partnerships with local suppliers. These sustainable practices boost customer satisfaction and increase the probability of Gen Z returning to the restaurant. Conversely, restaurants in rural areas face challenges such as customers' limited interest in sustainability in price-sensitive markets. Participants in rural areas associated sustainability with convenience or necessity, trust, and transparency rather than environmental consciousness. Participants were concerned about greenwashing practices, viewing them as discouraging, highlighting the importance of clear marketing communication between customers and restaurants.

9. References

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