Generation Y's dining out behavior

Bendegul Okumus and Ahmet Bulent Ozturk
Rosen College of Hospitality Management, University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida, USA, and
Anil Bilgihan
College of Business, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, Florida, USA

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this research is to examine the dining out activities of Gen Y's in the United States. In particular, it focuses on dining frequency, restaurant selection, restaurant segments and demographic features of Gen Yers.

Design/methodology/approach – Empirical data for this study were collected from 631 Gen Y's living in the United States.

Findings – The research findings reveal a nascent exploration of eating out preferences of the Gen Y population in an industrialized country in the food service context.

Research limitations/implications – Generation Y is a lucrative and growing customer group for the US foodservice industry. They dine out more frequently than the rest of the population and their dining out preferences are different from other cohorts.

Originality/value – This study offers some practical implications on Gen Y's dining out behavior for food service industry and restaurateurs.

Keywords Gen Y, Dining, Restaurant selection, Restaurant segments

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Generational theory hypothesizes that generational cohorts cultivate similar attitudes and behaviors (Bilgihan, 2016). Generation Ys – also called Millennials – are a growing, lucrative and significant customer segment in the US foodservice industry (Lukovitz, 2009). Gen Yers are seen as the most powerful cohort in the restaurant industry (Yoon and Chung, 2018), and a significant percentage of their expenditure is spent on dining out activities (Nyheim *et al.*, 2015). They dine out twice as much as the rest of the population and spend more money on eating out (Reiter, 2015). Their dining preferences are different from other cohorts, as they prefer health and wellness, and are more open to ethnic cuisines, customization and diverse flavors. Understanding the nuances of their dining out behavior is an important task for restaurateurs and hospitality scholars. Restaurateurs can better serve this segment by understanding its dining frequencies, restaurant selection criteria, choice of restaurant segments and demographic features. Despite the prominence of Millennials in the US restaurant industry, little research has solely been conducted about their dining out behaviors. Existing studies on Millennials and their food and beverage consumption behaviors has focused on food trucks (Yoon and Chung, 2018), menu information preferences

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(Hammond *et al.*, 2013), food choices and technology (Saulo, 2016; Okumus *et al.*, 2018; Okumus and Ozturk, 2020), and cooking preferences (Namin *et al.*, 2020). Against this backdrop, the current research specifically aims to study Gen Y's dining out preferences to comprehend changes in views over time and document technological, economic and social shifts across this generational cohort.

Detailed information on the dining out preferences of individuals is essential to develop an ideal service model in the foodservice industry. However, previous research studies and industry reports provide limited information on this topic (Castrechini, 2018; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018; Lock, 2018; Saad, 2017). Industry reports indicated an increase in sales in the restaurant industry and a fluctuation of customer visitation of restaurants in the US (Lock, 2018). Even though restaurant sales hit a record high level in 2018, dining out was the main budget breaker and the number one financial mistake for nearly one in three (29–36%) Americans (Hill, 2019).

While industry companies provide some relevant information on dining out frequency of public segments through surveys, the hospitality, restaurant and foodservice industries need ongoing and updated figures and deeper insight into dining out preferences to increase customer satisfaction. Solid data from within the industry and academia on dining preferences will help restaurants create the best strategies for the future and ensure an increase in the revenues of eating out businesses (Foodinside.org, 2018; Saksena *et al.*, 2018). Generation Y has been the theme of a broad investigation across different fields however, academic research about food and service preferences and the eating behavior of this generation is still sparse (Okumus and Ozturk, 2020). Understanding consumer preferences and consumer segments in a market-based economy is crucial and some broad assessments have been done to understand these needs and preferences (Bass and Talarzyyk, 1972; Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2015; Okumus *et al.*, 2021). It is important to identify the consumer's expectations and build appropriate marketing strategies. Sometimes marketers assume that consumers purchase a product if they offer a good price (Nijite *et al.*, 2008). To stay away from this faulty assumption, vendors should understand consumers' preferences (Spenner and Freeman, 2012) and the business should start with demographic and psychographic data to create specifically customized offers, accurate services and products. It is important to consider that dining out could be both utility and hedonism driven. With these efforts, retailers can map the purchasing paths of their clients and increase the sales performance (Davenport *et al.*, 2011).

Given this, the research specifically aims to examine Gen Y's (18–35 years of age) dining out preferences to understand changes in views over time and document economic and social shifts across this generational cohort. Following the review of the relevant literature, the sampling, instrument and data analysis are provided in the methodology section. Then, the study findings are discussed and implications for the foodservice industry and restaurateurs are highlighted. Finally, limitations and suggestions for future research are offered to hospitality scholars.

2. Literature review

2.1 Generational theory and marketing

Market segmentation provides a greater comprehension of a particular group's characteristics. It is one of the fundamental determinants of successful marketing and is central to matching customers' wants and needs to an organization's ability to meet those (McDonald *et al.*, 2003). The notion that age changes consumers' beliefs and behaviors has been studied (Hammond *et al.*, 2013). Generational cohorts face events and experiences that encourage shared values and attitudes (Meriac *et al.*, 2010). Generations experience and remember diverse events and view their meanings differently (Arsenault, 2004). These life experiences drive each generation to form diverse beliefs, views and behaviors (Dries *et al.*, 2008). The period in which a cohort was born and grew physically and psychologically offers opportunities or constraints that help form a distinct consumption preference (Zan and Fan, 2010).

Recently, social scientists have started analyzing eating behaviors as a social phenomenon and have deduced that there is evidence to discuss the sociology of food (e.g. Power, 2003). For example, modern society lives without significant food scarcity and individuals make food decisions and a variety of food choices that was not the case for previous generations (Méndez, 2006). Furthermore, different age groups exhibit different consumption needs (Pol and Pak, 1995). For example, because young adults place a higher priority on socialization before marriage, they are more likely to dine out. Age is another influential factor due to such concerns as health and metabolic changes (Zan and Fan, 2010).

2.2 Generation Y and food

Generation Yers' concerns regarding their health are increasing (Sun, 2008). Members of this cohort view themselves as health conscious and adventurous (Roseman *et al.*, 2017). They prefer green restaurants, healthy menus and quality foods (Jang *et al.*, 2011). They also label themselves as foodies (Fromm, 2014) and for them, food is more than just satisfying appetites as it evolved into a social necessity. They see food as a method of personal storytelling and self-expression. Generation Yers spend a greater proportion of their income on prepared foods and cook at home from scratch less frequently than earlier cohorts (Namin *et al.*, 2020). They also eat out more, and spend more when they do, than other cohorts. Generation Y is an affluent market segment whose purchasing power and spending behavior offer a prime opportunity for restaurants (Yoon and Chung, 2018). They are ethnically diverse compared to previous generations and their cultural diversity arms them with the confidence to explore a broader spectrum of ingredients and cuisines (Saulo, 2016). They are also more likely to share their food choices and dining out experiences via online social networks and tend to order different items from the same restaurant to customize their experiences. Gen Yers have a unique set of preferences when it comes to dining out. For example, they prefer bowls over plates (Saulo, 2016). They view dining out as an experience (Hammond *et al.*, 2013) and want to enjoy a nice meal out, even when financially short (Reiter, 2015). They also appreciate the social aspects of dining out (Nyheim *et al.*, 2015) and prefer communal tables at restaurants where either they eat in large groups of friends and colleagues or they are seated with strangers.

2.3 Generation Y and exercise

A generation analysis revealed that Generation Yers perform physical exercises to improve their health status, physical appearance, strength, endurance and managing their weight (Egli *et al.*, 2011). Generation Yers are also more conscious of the advantages of wholesome food, healthy eating and wellness than other generations (Okumus and Ozturk, 2020). Recent industry surveys (i.e. Statista, 2020) revealed that (42% of) Millennials in the US actively involved in physical activities in 2018. Similarly, recent academic research showed increased engagement with physical activities. Moyer *et al.* (2020) utilized descriptive statistics on 1,137 Gen Y respondents in the US and found that 47% of participants met the recommendations for leisure-time physical activities. Their study also indicated that gender, race/ethnicity, and increased education and income were associated with physical activity. Obese Gen Y respondents performed lower levels of exercise and Gen Yers with low education did not meet the daily fruit and vegetable consumption recommendations.

3. Methodology

A self-administered online survey was utilized to collect empirical data for this study. The target population was Gen Y Americans living in the United States. A screening question was used to select the Gen Y participants as the sample of this study. *Qualtrics* data collection platform was hired and the survey link was distributed randomly to selected participants. A total of 649 responses were collected and 631 valid responses were used for the data analysis after discarding the unusable responses. Using a few existing literature on Gen Y and their eating out behaviors, a total of 61 items were analyzed for this study in the overall survey instrument. The questions were organized into four categories as follows (Cooper and Blumenfeld, 2012).

Weight Prevalence was measured by using a 5-point Likert-type scale, where 1 = increased significantly to 5 = decreased slightly, participants were asked (*In the last 5 years, my weight has...*) about their weight fluctuation in the last five-year period. *Exercise Frequency* was used by using a 5- point Likert-type scale, where 1 = rare to 5 = more than six times per week, participants were asked about their exercise frequency to compare the acceptable range of the United States Department of Agriculture recommendations. *Eating out Frequency* was measured by using a 7-point Likert-type scale, where 1 = never to 7 = daily, participants were asked to rate their eating out frequency (i.e. *In general, how often do you eat out? How often do you order food for delivery or take out?*) based on the takeout rate and the regularity of breakfast, lunch and dinner at restaurants. *Eating out with others* was measured by using a 5-point Likert-type scale, where 1 = never to 5 = often, participants were asked (*Please indicate your agreement with each statement by selecting the appropriate choice using the following five-point scale*) to rate their eating out frequency with others. *Restaurant Choosing Criteria* was used with 22 statements by using a 7-point Likert-type scale, where 1 = not at all important to 7 = extremely important. Participants were asked (*On a scale from 1 to 5, 1 is not important at all and 5 is extremely important, please indicate how important to you are the following aspects when choosing a restaurant*) to rate the top factors of restaurant selecting criteria. *Restaurant Segments* was measured by using a 7-point Likert-type scale, where 1 = never to 7 = daily, participants were asked (*How often do you eat out at one of the following restaurant segments?*) about restaurant segmentation and visiting frequency of total of nine foodservice establishments. The restaurants were rated by respondents to understand the desirable dining out places for Gen Y. The restaurant segments were selected based on the National Restaurant Association (2020) and (Bujisic *et al.*, 2014). *In relation to venue/location ranking*, dining activities were ranked from 1 to 4 regarding delivery, cook at home and eating in restaurants criteria. The statement was "*Please indicate in order of importance your preferred eating venue/location. Please select the following options in order according to your preference.*" Respondents were also asked a series of questions about demographics. Data were analyzed using SPSS software and the frequency analysis provided participants' dining out characteristics.

As presented in Table 1, a frequency distribution of participants' demographic characteristics showed that the percentages of male (49.9%) and female (49.1%) participants were almost even. Around 67% of the participants were between the ages of 25 and 35 years, around 47% were single and around 58% had no children. One-third (34.4%) of participants graduated from high school, almost 41% of the participants were full-time employees, around 29% had a gross annual household income of under $25,000, and around 34% had a gross annual personal income of under $25,000. Almost half (47.1%) of the Gen Y participants were single, 57.8% had no children and 40.6% of them were full-time employee. As the ethnic origin of Gen Y participants per US Census was mostly White (67%).

4. Findings

4.1 Weight prevalence

We asked the participants' weight change that occurred in the last five years. Although lifestyle, eating habits and physical inactivity are considered key factors in rapid weight change and may contribute to weight gain among adults and youth (The National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, 2017). As presented in Table 2, 36.6% of Gen Y participants stated that their weight has remained the same, and 29% of the participants stated that their weight increased only slightly over the past five years. Of all the participants, 14% of the participant indicated that their weight increased significantly.

Characteristics	*N*	%	Characteristics	*N*	%
Gender			*Ethnic origin (per US Census)*		
Male	310	49.9	African American	78	12.4
Female	315	49.1	Asian	35	5.5
Other	5	0.8	Hispanic	59	9.4
Prefer not to say	1	0.2	Native American	10	1.6
Total	631	100	White	423	67.0
			Multiethnic/multicultural	16	2.5
Age			Other	1	0.2
18–24	209	33.1	Prefer not to say	9	1.4
25–35	422	66.9	Total	631	100
Total	631	100			
Education			*Marital status*		
Below high school	51	8.1	Single	297	47.1
High school	217	34.4	Married with children	149	23.6
Some college	143	22.7	Married without children	47	7.4
Associate's degree	71	11.3	Divorced/Separated	14	2.3
Bachelor's degree	79	12.5	Living with partner	67	10.6
Master's degree	40	6.3	In a relationship (not living together)	28	4.4
Doctoral degree	6	1.0	Single parent with a child (children)	23	3.6
Professional degree (e.g. JD, MD)	16	2.5	Widowed	2	0.3
Prefer not to say	8	1.2	Prefer not to say	4	0.6
Total	631	100	Total	631	100
Gross annual household income			*Gross annual personal income*		
Under $25,000	180	28.5	Under $25,000	219	34.7
$25,000–49,999	166	26.3	$25,000–49,999	154	24.4
$50,000–74,999	111	17.6	$50,000–74,999	101	16.0
$75,000–99,999	61	9.7	$75,000–99,999	66	10.5
$100,000–149,999	51	8.1	$100,000–149,999	38	6.0
$150,000 and over	22	3.5	$150,000 and over	15	2.4
Prefer not to say	40	6.3	Prefer not to say	38	6.0
Total	631	100	Total	631	100
Employment status			*Number of children*		
Full-time	256	40.6	No children	365	57.8
Intern	11	1.7	1 child	107	17.0
Part-time	64	10.1	2 children	95	15.1
Unemployed	99	15.7	3 children	38	6.0
Student	69	10.9	4 children	14	2.2
Disabled or too ill to work	28	4.4	5 children	2	0.3
Homemaker	67	10.6	More than 5	4	0.6
Self-employed/business owner	21	3.3	Prefer not to say	6	1.0
Other	11	1.7	Total	631	100
Prefer not to say	5	0.8			
Total	631	100			

Table 1. Participants' demographic characteristics

In the last five years, my weight has. . .	*N*	%
Increased significantly	91	14.4
Increased slightly	183	29.0
Remained the same	231	36.6
Decreased slightly	97	15.4
Decreased slightly	29	4.6
Total	631	100

Table 2. Weight condition of participants

4.2 Exercise frequency

Similar to weight prevalence and eating activity, Gen Y participants' exercise frequencies were documented through the survey as part of regular daily activity (Table 3). The results were discussed in the conclusion section and compared to the literature. Most (30.3%) of the young adults engaged in physical exercise of at least 20 min for two to six times per week, which is within the acceptable range of USDA recommendations (United States Department of Agriculture, 2019). However, almost one-third (22.7%) of participants reported that they rarely engage in routine physical exercise daily basis of at least 20 min.

4.3 Eating out frequency

According to Gallup, eating activity is strongly related to age and income. Seven in ten young adults between the ages of 18 and 34 years ate dinner at least once a week compared with those aged 35 years and older (Saad, 2017). Their 2016 survey conducted in December showed that 16% of Americans were frequent diners, eating out three or more times per week. However, our study results indicated that only 6–7.7 % of Gen Yers were frequent diners, eating out four to six times per month or daily (Table 4). Almost one out of third participants were preferred "Order/take out foods" option two to three times a month and they "never" choose "out for breakfast" as a frequent dining option." Surprisingly, almost one in third of Gen Yers visits restaurants for lunch and for dinner "2–3 times a month." Regarding weekdays, weekends and special occasions, less than 10% of Gen Y participants frequently visit restaurants (four to six times a week). These results were not consistent with previous industry data (Saad, 2017; Lock, 2018), which shows that frequent restaurant dining was preferred by 16% of Gen Yers in the US and remained steady.

4.4 Eating out with others

Communal eating and social eating behaviors received little attention in the literature. The recent dining out and social eating study in the UK revealed that adults eat 10 out of 21 meals alone per week due to busy lifestyles (Dunbar, 2017). However, our study revealed that US Gen Yers do not prefer solitary dining and prefer dining accompanies. More than one-third (32.5%) of respondents stated that they never eat alone and mostly prefer family members (37.1%) and friends (33.6%) as dining partners. Even though business dining provides a unique opportunity to develop relationships and build credibility with clients more than office meetings (Carew International, 2013), dining with clients (41.5%) and colleagues (35.2%) were selected less desirable activity by participants (Table 5).

4.5 Restaurant selection criteria

According to existing customer purchasing behavior research (Choi and Zhao, 2010; Elder *et al.*, 1999; Kim *et al.*, 2010; Yamanaka *et al.*, 2003) different ages and demographics in the US prefer service speed, food and service quality, friendliness of serving staff members, convenience and incentives while dining in restaurants. The current study asked participants

Table 3.
Exercise frequency of participants

How often do you engage in physical exercise of at least 20 min?	*N*	%
Rare	143	22.7
1 time per week	96	15.2
2–3 times per week	191	30.3
4–6 times per week	159	25.2
More than 6 times per week	42	6.7
Total	631	100

Table 4. Dining frequency of Gen

Dining frequency	Never		Once a month		2–3 times a month		Once a week		2–3 times a week		4–6 times a week		Daily		Total	
Dining type	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
Eating out frequency in general	79	12.5	114	18.1	171	27	120	19	60	9.5	38	6	49	7.7	631	100
Order/take out	67	10.6	151	23.9	171	27	117	18.5	49	7.7	43	6.8	33	5.2	631	100
Out for breakfast	184	29.2	118	18.7	125	19.8	84	13.3	47	7.4	32	5.1	41	6.5	631	100
Out for lunch	106	16.8	122	19.3	162	25.6	110	17.4	54	8.6	46	7.3	31	4.9	631	100
Out for dinner	74	11.7	122	19.3	174	27.5	125	19.8	58	9.2	43	6.8	35	5.5	631	100
Dining day(s)																
Out on weekdays	99	15.7	115	18.2	155	24.5	114	18	61	9.7	45	7.1	42	6.7	631	100
Out on weekends	83	13.2	121	19.2	155	24.5	139	22	52	8.2	45	7.1	36	5.7	631	100
Out on special occasions	86	13.6	184	29.2	145	22.9	94	14.8	42	6.7	39	6.2	41	6.5	631	100

Companion	N	%	Companion	N	%
Out by myself alone			*Out with colleagues*		
Never	205	32.5	Never	222	35.2
Always	86	13.6	Always	56	8.9
Sometimes	159	25.2	Sometimes	159	25.2
Almost never	106	16.8	Almost never	82	13.0
Often	75	11.9	Often	112	17.7
Total	631	100	Total	631	100
Out with a spouse/partner			*Out with friends*		
Never	135	21.4	Never	158	25.0
Always	122	19.3	Always	59	9.4
Sometimes	157	24.9	Sometimes	212	33.6
Almost never	83	13.2	Almost never	85	13.5
Often	134	21.2	Often	117	18.5
Total	631	100	Total	631	100
Out with family member(s)			*Out with clients*		
Never	84	13.3	Never	262	41.5
Always	95	15.1	Always	65	10.3
Sometimes	234	37.1	Sometimes	148	23.5
Almost never	68	10.8	Almost never	72	11.4
Often	150	23.8	Often	84	13.3
Total	631	100	Total	631	100

Table 5.
Participants dining companions

to rate a total of 22 restaurant selection criteria (Table 6), yielding similar results. Menu items (33.3%), speed of service (33.6%), comfort (34.9%), cleanliness of the restaurant (33.0%), quality of food (33.1%), type of food (35.0%), cost of food (32.6%), location (34.5%), friendly service (33.1%), family members' choice (33.0%) and partner/spouse choice (34.4%) were selected as "very important" or "extremely important" factors by one in third (30–35%) of the Gen Y participants. Since restaurant menus and menu items are effective tools of communication with customers (Chen *et al.*, 2020), restaurant menus were selected "very important" scale by 33.3% of Gen Y respondents. Surprisingly, restaurant ambiance, brand image, having a new experience, the noise inside the restaurant, parking facilities and restaurant reviews were stated as "neither important nor unimportant" factors by more than one in third of the Gen Y participants. Unlike the previous restaurant selection studies (Cullen, 2005; Liu and Tse, 2018), these results provide different indicators of real-world expectations of Gen Y's dining place selection. These attribute dimensions are vital for restaurateurs since they are constantly competing with each other to stand out in the restaurant industry.

4.6 Restaurant segments

Restaurant segmentation targets a specific customer base via price, service, customer type and cuisine. The restaurant segmentation question specified what types of restaurants were considered by Gen Y to be suitable for dining out (Table 7). During 2013–2016, those between the ages of 20 and 39 years (44.9%) consumed fast food on a given day (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). Our data also support the previous findings that among the nine types of restaurants, fast food and coffee shops (e.g. Dunkin' Donuts, Starbucks) were highly preferred daily options by Gen Y. Business dining (37.1%), food trucks/carts (32.6%), ethnic restaurants (38.5%), fine dining (37.2%) and upscale restaurants (30.3%) were "never" selected as a dining option by more than 30% of the participants. Although various restaurant selection attributes were studied previously (i.e. restaurant type, menu, age,

Criteria	Not at all important N	%	Unimportant N	%	Neither important nor unimportant N	%	Very important N	%	Extremely important N	%	Total N	%
Menu item	41	6.5	75	11.9	179	28.4	210	33.3	126	20.0	631	100
Speed of service	43	6.8	52	8.2	182	28.8	212	33.6	142	22.5	631	100
Ambiance dactors	55	8.7	94	14.9	203	32.2	170	26.9	109	17.3	631	100
Comfort level	45	7.1	54	8.6	176	27.9	220	34.9	136	21.6	631	100
Cleanliness	32	5.1	56	8.9	142	22.5	193	30.6	208	33.0	631	100
Quality of food	62	9.8	47	7.4	103	16.3	210	33.3	209	33.1	631	100
Type of food	34	5.4	64	10.1	152	24.1	221	35.0	160	25.4	631	100
Cost of food	49	7.8	47	7.4	153	24.2	206	32.6	176	27.9	631	100
Location	48	7.6	66	10.5	180	28.5	218	34.5	119	18.9	631	100
New experience	60	9.5	87	13.8	201	31.9	171	27.1	212	17.7	631	100
Brand image	61	9.7	83	13.2	212	33.6	150	23.8	125	19.8	631	100
Friendly service	46	7.3	48	7.6	172	27.3	209	33.1	156	24.7	631	100
Noise	43	6.8	82	13.0	192	30.4	184	29.2	130	20.6	631	100
Reviews	49	7.8	74	11.7	217	34.4	183	29.0	108	17.1	631	100
Parking	52	8.2	72	11.4	219	34.7	190	30.1	98	15.5	631	100
Wi-Fi	100	15.8	90	14.3	197	31.2	150	23.8	94	14.9	631	100
Customer profile	92	14.6	103	16.3	200	31.7	143	22.7	93	14.7	631	100
Award recognition	92	14.6	88	13.9	210	33.3	144	22.8	97	15.4	631	100
Family choice	55	8.7	65	10.3	194	30.7	208	33.0	109	17.3	631	100
Friends’ choice	58	9.2	82	13.0	205	32.5	181	28.7	105	16.6	631	100
Partner’s choice	62	9.8	66	10.5	168	26.6	217	34.4	118	18.7	631	100
Unidentified factors	202	32.0	68	10.8	189	30.0	78	12.4	94	14.9	631	100

Table 6. Restaurant choosing criteria

Table 7.
Restaurant segments

Frequency	Fast food *N*	Fast food %	Fast Casual *N*	Fast Casual %	Casual themed *N*	Casual themed %	Upscale casual *N*	Upscale casual %	Fine dining *N*	Fine dining %	Business dining *N*	Business dining %	Food truck *N*	Food truck %	Coffee shops *N*	Coffee shops %	Ethnic restaurant *N*	Ethnic restaurant %
Never	81	12.8	137	21.7	97	15.4	191	30.3	235	37.2	234	37.1	206	32.6	144	22.8	243	38.5
Less than once month	77	12.1	92	14,6	128	20.3	104	16.5	85	13.5	77	12.2	93	14.7	91	14.4	88	13.9
Once a month	89	14.1	118	18.7	128	20.3	88	13.9	77	12.2	70	11.1	81	12.8	92	14.6	75	11.9
2–3 times a month	132	20.9	99	15.7	110	17.4	86	13.6	78	12.4	82	13.0	75	11.9	105	16.6	80	12.7
Once a week	100	15.8	87	13,8	83	13,2	78	12.4	60	9.5	67	10.6	79	12.5	66	10.5	56	8.9
2–3 times a week	92	14.6	59	9.4	54	8.6	48	7.6	54	8.6	58	9.2	59	9.4	75	11.9	54	8.6
Daily	60	9.5	39	6.2	31	4.9	36	5.7	42	6.7	43	6.8	38	6.0	58	9.2	35	5.5
Total	631	100	631	100	631	100	631	100	631	100	631	100	631	100	631	100	631	100

occupation) by hospitality scholars, future research should analyze why some Gen Y "never" select fine, upscale and business dining, food trucks and ethnic restaurant options by utilizing attribute analysis technique to evaluate the current dining characteristics of Gen Y diners.

4.7 Venue/location ranking

Table 8 provides information regarding Gen Y's rankings for their dining activities. The study results indicated that around 20% of the respondents ranked "takeout/delivery" options as their first choice, around 56% ranked "cook at home" as their first choice, around 24% ranked "eating out" as their first choice and finally, only 8% ranked "other options" as their first choice. Unlike the various industry surveys which show fluctuations in customer visitation of restaurants in the US (Lock, 2018), the current data suggest that Gen Yers prefer to cook and at eat home. Although there may be various reasons behind that choice, dining out was found to be the primary budget breaker and the number one financial mistake for nearly one in three (29–36%) Americans (Hill, 2019).

5. Discussion and conclusions

Previous research reveals that different generations view dining out differently (Taylor *et al.*, 2018). For example, Baby Boomers spend the largest amount of money when dining out and they tend to favor upscale restaurants and a variety of menu options (Jin *et al.*, 2015). Baby Boomers place higher importance on aspects of restaurant ambiance than Millennials and Gen Xers when considering where to dine out whereas entertainment is an important factor for Gen Yers (Taylor and DiPietro, 2018, 2019). Baby boomers and Gen Xers spend the most on food and beverage but as Gen Yers enter their peak earning years, they will become the biggest spenders at groceries and restaurants within 10 years (CBRE, 2019). In this research, Gen Y's dining out characteristics were examined based on data collected from 631 participants in the United States. More specifically, dining out frequency, restaurant selection, restaurant segments and demographic characteristics of Gen Yers were examined. This study also compared its research findings with recent industry reports (in the US) on restaurant selection and eating out frequency among this specific generational group. The current study indicated that the restaurant visitation or "takeout/delivery" options are highly preferred by Gen Y. Moreover, more than one-third of the participants' gross annual personal income was under $25,000. It is not clear whether the frequency of purchasing away from home is linked with personal and household income. Therefore, future research should examine whether there is a correlation between annual income and fast-casual or fast-food dining options or whether lower income individuals consume more from quick service restaurants or food outlets than sit down restaurants with higher prices. Gen Y participants in this study frequently preferred fast/quick dining solutions such as fast casual, fast food and coffee shops for their fair prices and quick service. Although recent studies indicated that solitary dining and quick food options were preferred by adults due to their hectic lifestyles

	Takeout/ delivery		Cook at home		Eating out		Other	
Ranking	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
1	124	19.7	351	55.6	148	23.5	8	1.3
2	237	37.6	113	17.9	262	41.5	19	3.0
3	252	39.9	147	23.3	205	32.5	27	4.3
4	18	2.9	20	3.2	16	2.5	577	91.4
Total	631	100	631	100	631	100	631	100

Table 8. Venue/location ranking

and heavy workloads (Dunbar, 2017), in our case, annual income might be one of the important trigger factors for quick and inexpensive food solutions since the participants' annual income was around $25–49K.

Data regarding Gen Y's weight and exercise prevalence were also documented to provide basic information about their health conditions. The results showed that there are some inconsistencies available with previous reports in terms of Gen Yers weight and exercise frequency. For example, the weight condition of some participants showed a slight (14.4%) and significant (29%) increases over the past five years. The results corroborate the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's recent report which indicated that the obesity prevalence of young adults aged 20–39 years was 40% in 2017–2018 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Although recent wellness and health reports have touted Millennials' positive attitudes toward health and exercise (Goldman Sachs, 2020), our measurement of exercise frequency yielded the opposite results: 38% of Gen Y participants engage in physical exercise of at least 20 min only rarely or once a week. Future studies should analyze the possible link between the weight and exercise frequency and healthy food consumption utilizing advanced statistical models also by including restaurant selection criteria.

Demographics are changing fast and the way of the restaurant evaluation and eating style frequently differs among younger generations. Knowledge management and data gathering are becoming crucial (Unwin, 2020) for the restaurant business. In the service industry, knowledge and data provide certain evidence about the current systems; lead to develop new approaches and help to implement evidence-based practices in business (The Council on Quality and Leadership, 2020). Previous market research and academic studies have revealed that Americans have come to rely more and more on the convenience of foods over the past several decades. Since Millennials are the largest generational cohort in the United States, catering to their eating trends is crucial for the foodservice industry. Restaurants and foodservice outlets should make sure to meet and exceed their customers' needs and expectations during the delivery of services and products. Understanding consumer preferences is a key element in developing fruitful marketing strategies (Baltas and Argouslidis, 2007; Verma *et al.*, 2002). Furthermore, the targeting of young consumers for products and services is crucial to many companies, and understanding brands and their corresponding price perceptions, and image congruency is an important marketing task (O'Cass and Kim, 2002). Restaurateurs can increase their market share by better recognizing Millennials' attitudes, beliefs and behavior toward developing dining experiences they will prefer. Although our study did not include the convenient ordering tools and self-serve stations as part of the restaurant selection criteria, we believe that restaurant operators should also integrate these two convenient tools along with the popular flavors, ingredients, fair prices, easy locations to compromise their values for a good service experience. Finally, foodservice and hospitality businesses need to consider the effects of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic on demographics. While our survey did not include any questions regarding the pandemic, its effect on the restaurant industry has been particularly dramatic. With many restaurants closed for sit-down service, many establishments are struggling to keep their doors open by offering delivery and sometimes outdoor dining options. The mortality rate of the virus is higher for the elderly population and therefore their perception toward dining out might be different from the Gen Y members. The expectations from restaurant sanitation and social distancing practices may differ among generations.

6. Limitations and future research

As with other studies, this study is subject to several limitations. For example, this study focused on one specific generation segment, namely, Generation Y. In addition, the data were collected only from Americans. Future studies collecting data from different generations and nations would provide further insights. In addition, this study did not examine the differences in Gen Y's dining out characteristics based on diverse factors such as demographic characteristics. Future studies may investigate these factors to offer insights on Gen Y's dining out characteristics. The study did not include sustainability and health concepts, since the options are costlier and may influence participants' perception of fast food. Also, some new restaurant initiatives (i.e. convenient ordering tools, food apps, third party food delivery, self-serve stations) were not included for data/survey which is the limitation of our study. Further studies may include the above initiatives together with word of mouth, social media and physiological factors for different age groups at both national and global levels. Also, diners may select restaurants on occasions (e.g. celebration, date, etc.) and future research may investigate restaurant segments and dining occasions across different generations. Finally, as we were writing these lines, the world is experiencing a global pandemic. The eating behavior of consumers has changed significantly as there were national lockdowns and restaurants were closed. Future research may investigate the restaurant preferences of Millennials in a post-COVID-19 world.

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Corresponding author
Bendegul Okumus can be contacted at: Bendegul.Okumus@ucf.edu