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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Factors Affecting Food Choices of Millennials: How they Decide What to Eat?

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Abstract

Millennials, who are also known as generation Y, constitute an important group of consumers for the tourism and hospitality industry. Hence, the purpose of this study is to understand which factors affect their food choices and whether these factors show any difference for demographic variables. A quantitative research design using exploratory factor analysis is employed to understand the different dimensions of food choice behavior of millennials. The findings of the study have explored six factors that guide the food purchase of generation Y. In addition, the relative importance of each factor has provided a better understanding of the role of each dimension. Therefore, this study provides implications about how to address the demands of a generation, which could be considered a unique target market for the hospitality industry.

Keywords

Millennials, Food purchase, Restaurant industry

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Introduction

Food selection is a complex behavior and affected by many interrelated factors, which can be classified in two ways:

1. Food selection depends on personal choice, economic factors, and influence of social environment.
2. Food selection is also affected by what is available (food area), what is accepted (environmental area), and what is preferred (individual factors). At the individual level, taste, monetary constraints, and health concerns shape the food selection behavior.

Since there is increasing research regarding “Millennials” (Generation Y), who have been born between the years of 1980 and 2000, both academicians and professionals have started to focus on the behaviors of this generation (Lancaster & Stillman, 2003). In considering the studies of generations, research shows evidence that different generations have dissimilar values, beliefs, and attitudes that result in different behaviors (Inglehart & Carballo, 1997). That is, it is especially important to understand the behaviors of Millennials because they represent the potential consumers of the future.

Millennials, who are also named as generation Y, are composed of people between the ages of 19 and 37. Therefore, this generation is the second youngest consumer group at this different stage of their lives. While some of them are still studying at university and living with their families, others are either living alone or are married. Hence, being at different life stages influences the values, life styles, needs, and wants of millennials. This also affects their entertainment activities, how they perceive politics and current events, their attitude toward cooking, what they eat as well as how they shop grocery items. Moreover, their cultural diversity also influences the interest for different types of food and demand for different ethnic cuisines. It can then be concluded that millennials represent a generation, who has special demands for food and beverage as well as who search to meet these demands. In conclusion, the purpose of this research is to understand which factors affect the food choices of Millennials, their relative importance, and how they differ based on different demographic factors.

Technology and Millennials

Millennials, who are also known as generation Y, have been integrated with technology at every stage of their lives. Mainly, they search on Google, Facebook, Pinterest, and YouTube for recipes and food items. They also use social media to share their views and experiences with friends, family, and other people to discuss their opinions. Through sharing these views or following others, Millennials both develop

and shape their opinions and beliefs. Generation Y usually follow the ones who share their opinions or the ones who are part of the groups that they want to become a member of. As a result, these activities not only shape their values and beliefs but also affect their food choices and purchase decisions (Wohl, 2016). The reason why Millennials, Generation Y, like to share all kinds of food experiences on social media is because they are accustomed to declaring their individuality even if social networks consist of collective opinions (Leslie, 2016). Further, they also order different kinds of food from the same restaurant in order to personalize and individualize their social media experiences. Additionally, they sometimes change their food plate choices by using a cup instead of a plate or vice versa (Watson, 2016). This generation is always looking for new things and they also want to personalize the food with different presentations.

Previous research has indicated that eating does not mean just getting full, but it is a way of expressing yourself as well as an opportunity to acquire new experiences. Moreover, for generation Y, food is a reason for socializing and bringing people together in a highly digitalized era. This generation is usually online to check their accounts and the people they are following. In this way, they can share images or use similar images that they see on the accounts of people they are following. While this generation is successful at using social media, they also share videos and every moment they live with their followers. They use social media for marketing purposes by generating the sales and marketing of meals that they cook via Instagram. Those meals usually represent trendy foods and some millennials take it a step further by creating their own trends in videos on YouTube channels. This generation also helps define the purchasing behaviors and food choices for the future. In this context, generation Y could be considered the determinant of new trends. Additionally, They are different from other generations in that they like to discover new dishes and tastes and are more adventurous.

In addition to all these discussions, research also mentions that Millennials pay attention to ethical issues in their food choices. That is, they are more likely to purchase food items whose packages are environmental friendly (Capon, 2012). Therefore, the packaging of a product is also a parameter for their purchasing decision. Since the package is the first touch point with an item, good packaging is a way to attract customers (Gillian & Wilson, 2012). In line with this finding, the respect of Y generation for the environment also results in their concern for the packaging. That is why companies need to use environmental friendly packaging materials and pay attention to recycling of these materials.

Health Perception

As discussed before, the food choices of people are formed and shaped due to various factors. Even it was first developed by family and cultural factors, these

choice preferences may vary in time as a result of external factors. Since generation Y is an effective user of social media, they not only set new trends, but they also follow the opinions of other social media users. One of the effects of this influence is the concern for health in recent years. Even though they pay attention to health issues, it has been found that they are not ready to practice a healthy diet. Hence, it is important to analyze the decision process about health food and to understand the factors affecting this process (Corvi & Bigi, 2007; Schewe & Meredith, 2004).

Millennials develop values regarding certain foods and their components because of their tendency to search and engage in social media communications (Leslie, 2016), this generation could institute a motivation for healthy eating (Peskett, 2006). For instance, since sugar has been promoted as unhealthy on social media, there is an increasing interest for Kombucha, vinegar, and traditional tonics that are alternatives for sweet drinks including sugar (Leslie, 2016).

Additionally, it has been found that generation Y spends more money for food items that are considered to be beneficial (Peskett, 2006). They also participate in seminars, workshops, events, tastings, and food festivals related to food consumption.

On the other hand, when we consider the Millennials living separate from their families, they act like generation Z, who focus on tolerance and convenience rather than their diets and health. Some Millennials living by themselves act like the generation X/Baby Boomers in that they care about their health and purchase food that is organic, natural, labeled as clean, and that includes simple ingredients. The food labels that include health and nutritional information constitute a stronger motivation for generation Y, who are more knowledgeable about this. In addition, it has been stated that 60% of Millennials prefer to use fresh ingredients when they cook at home (Suter & Burton, 1996). In this way, they reflect the characteristics of both generation Z and X.

Therefore, it is not reasonable to assume that the purchasing behaviors of Millennials would be totally different from that of other generations. Another difference from other generations is that generation Y gives greater importance to convenience and experience when they are shopping. For example, they prefer to shop in small stores, where there is a higher possibility to find organic foods (Tuttle, 2015). Market analysis proves that this generation looks for healthier and fresher food as well as spending less for eating at home.

The Mood

The mood of generation Y is another important factor affecting the attitude of this generation toward food items. This finding is similar with the results of previous

research indicating that the mood influences the intention for purchasing traditional as well as European food in China (Wang, De Steur, Gellynck, & Verbek, 2015). The importance of food for influencing food behavior of the Y generation could be explained by their emotional states with high levels of stress, depression, and despair resulting from convenience foods prepared by working mothers (Taub & Robertson, 2013). They feel happier when they have convenient and easy food that they used to have during their childhood to feed their body and spirit (James, 2004). Therefore, food items that are prepared and found easily are highly preferred by generation Y resulting in their having snacks. That is why fresh fruit and vegetables presented in small portions have become popular and have been consumed more often by Generation Y, who care about health issues.

Convenience

Time constraints or the perception of time constraints have resulted in less cooking at home, an increase in fast food consumption, a decrease in family meals as well as an increase in easy and ready-to-eat foods. However, these food choices are usually less healthy and they lead to chronic sicknesses like obesity, cardiovascular illnesses, diabetes, and cancer.

Since millennials give importance to convenience, they are more likely to eat at restaurants than other generations. Therefore, grocery stores have started to offer ready-to-eat food items as well as increase other available options. Also, more and more restaurants have started to make deliveries to homes and have made their home delivery menus more accessible. Hence, these kinds of online ordering and delivery applications have a crucial role in making eating more convenient for generation Y. At every income level, this generation prefers foods that are the least processed and allocate a large portion of their budget to ready-to-eat foods, sugar and sweets as well as pasta and low grain foods. The reason for choosing ready-to-eat food is that it is easily prepared and there are usually no dishes to wash (Taylor, 2016). For instance, millennials usually prefer corn flakes or fruit yogurt, which enables them to throw their cups away after eating. Thus, the tendency to have ready-to-eat food could be explained by many factors such as increased number of working women, international students, people living alone, and students with fast living life styles. As a result, restaurants like McDonalds have started to offer standard menus, service, familiar and consistent flavor to provide tourists a food environment that is similar to the food in their home country (Bengtsson, Bardhi, & Venkatraman, 2010). Further, tourists experiencing new tastes are also looking for food items that offer convenience and comfort. However, besides convenience, the availability of food, and health concerns, and some economic factors are also affecting people's food choices (Logue & King, 1991).

Price Factor

Price is an important consideration when choosing among different food alternatives especially for low income level consumers. It has been found that low income level consumers have higher price value awareness compared to high income level consumers (Steenhuis, Waterlander, & De Mul, 2011). In other words, the cost of food is much more a concern for low income levels in their food purchasing decisions. Another interesting result is that women who have diet restrictions are less affected by price compared to the ones who do not have any restrictions. That is, cost is not as important as the desire to eat low calorie foods or for the ones who eat in limited amounts (Stephoe, Pollard, & Wardle, 1995). Therefore, price decreases could be a more effective tool than health messages to increase the consumption of healthy food (Horgen & Brownell, 2002). Recent studies related to changing eating behaviors resulted in different economic theories such as decreasing the cost of food items according to alternative food choices to decrease the prices (French, 2003). For example, to increase the consumption of healthy food, decreases in the prices of healthy food were achieved through industrial cooperation as a public health strategy.

Weight Control

Another problem for millennials is obesity. Therefore, engaging in sports activities has an important place in their lives for weight control. The most recent sports activities, trends, and centers are located at the center of their lives. The concern of millennials for gaining weight is considered to be normal since they are at higher risk of chronic illnesses like obesity, diabetes, and heart diseases as a result of genetics, life styles, socio-economic factors, high levels of stress, lack of sleep and unhealthy eating habits (LaRose, Leahey, Hill, & Wing, 2012).

Since generation Y gives importance to appearance, they spend lots of time exercising in sport centers and consuming energy drinks in their daily lives. In today's world, modern jobs require individuals who are consistently on the move and who have high energy levels. Thus, energy drinks that are available everywhere seem to be the best alternatives for millennials. However, they gain the calories back easily from the food and drink that they eat when they go out in the evening for entertainment. Moreover, their tight relationship with technology increase their use of mobile phones, computers, and tablets that help them to complete most of their work. As a result, the obesity risk is higher for this generation because they sit and stand still a lot due to the increased time they spend using online games, applications, and social media. In addition, social media and online games affect their sleep patterns and lead to irregular nutrition. Therefore, millennials, who are concerned about their appearance and weight, are more selective about choosing healthier food items.

Ethics and Environmental Concerns

Today, environmental concerns have become a global issue all over the world. Thus, companies that address these concerns by producing and marketing green as well as environmentally friendly products. Likewise, generation Y pays attention to food company activities that are related to their carbon footprint, ethics management, community involvement, and nutrition because these activities affect both Millennials decision and purchasing activities (Allen & Spialek, 2018).

Marketing ethics and social responsibility require the discussion of researchers and a socially responsible approach to marketing activities still poses conflicts and difficulties for marketers. Since customers are more conscious, their purchase decisions may result in behaviors that prefer ethical companies or that punish the unethical ones (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001).

Methods

Sampling

Within the context of this research 300 structured questionnaires were distributed to the study participants. The respondents were selected via convenience sampling and at the end 263 usable surveys were used for further data analysis. While 42.6 % of the sample consisted of females, 57.4% consisted of male respondents. Most respondents were between the ages of 18-35 (82.5%). For education level, 85.6% of participants have university degrees and almost 60% of the sample had an income level between 0 and 2,000 TL. The demographic profile of the sample is provided in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Profile of the Respondents

		N	%
Gender	Female	112	42,6%
	Male	151	57,4%
Age	18-35	217	82,5%
	Above 35	46	17,5%
Education Level	University Degree	225	85,6%
	Master Degree	34	12,9%
	Ph.D. Degree	4	1,5%
Income Level	0-1000 TL	101	38,4%
	1001 TL-2000 TL	52	19,8%
	2001 TL-3000 TL	44	16,7%
	3001 TL-5000 TL	32	12,2%
	Above 5000 TL	34	12,9%

Measurement

The factors that affect food choices were measured by 32 items, in which respondents rated their level of agreement from strongly disagree to strongly agree

on a 5-point Likert scale. The survey was composed of two main parts. The first part included questions related to factors affecting food choices and the second part included demographic questions. Thirty-two factors were used to measure the food choices of customers provided in Table 2.

Table 2
Measurement Items

Dimension	Measurement Item	Source
Factors affecting food choices	I prefer dishes that are easy and simple to prepare.	Stephoe, Pollard and Wardle, 1995
	I prefer foods without additives.	
	I prefer low-calorie food items.	
	I prefer foods with natural ingredients.	
	I prefer low price foods.	
	I prefer the food I have tasted before.	
	I prefer low-fat foods.	
	I prefer nutritious foods.	
	I prefer foods with high pulp and fiber.	
	I prefer food that makes me happy when I eat.	
	For the money I pay, I prefer the food I get good value.	
	I prefer easy cooked and prepared dishes.	
	I prefer easy-to-find ingredients in the market.	
	I prefer food that helps me relieve stress.	
	I prefer foods that taste good.	
	I prefer foods that help my weight problem.	
	I prefer food that is nice in texture.	
	I prefer foods whose packages concern about environmental protection.	
	I prefer imported food from countries where I approve their political and life style.	
	I prefer the products in which the country and region are clearly stated.	
	I prefer food that reminds me of the food I had as a child.	
	I prefer food without artificial ingredients.	
	I prefer food that smells good.	
	I prefer food that gives me energy.	
	I prefer foods that make it easier for me to cope with the challenges of life.	
	I prefer food that comforts me.	
	I prefer food with high vitamins.	
	I prefer inexpensive foods.	
	I prefer high protein foods.	
	I prefer foods that are useful for my tooth and skin.	
	I prefer foods that make me healthy.	

Analysis and Results

In the first phase of statistical analysis, an exploratory factor analysis as well as reliability analysis were performed for measurement items used in the study. To assess the applicability of factor analysis to the data set, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test was used to assess sampling adequacy. Bartlett’s test of sphericity was used to test the hypothesis of whether the correlation matrix is an identity matrix. Since the value of KMO is higher than 0.50 and Bartlett test is significant at p-value of 0.05, the data set is considered to be appropriate for factor analysis (KMO=0,800, $\chi^2_{Bartlett}$ (231)=2002,633, p=0,000). After analyzing the data with principal component

analysis via varimax rotation. The results of factor loadings, explained variance, and reliability figures are provided in Table 3.

Table 3
Results of Exploratory Factor Analysis

Factor	Factor Loading	Explained Variance (%)	Reliability
Health			
I prefer food with high vitamins.	0,755		
I prefer foods that make me healthy.	0,744		
I prefer high protein foods.	0,732		
I prefer nutritious foods.	0,679	14,720	0,833
I prefer foods that are useful for my tooth and skin.	0,626		
I prefer food that gives me energy.	0,573		
Mood			
I prefer food that makes me happy when I eat.	0,768		
I prefer foods that taste good.	0,714		
I prefer food that helps me relieve stress.	0,662	11,316	0,687
For the money I pay, I prefer the food I get good value.	0,606		
I prefer food that is nice in texture.	0,569		
Ethics and Environmental Concerns			
I prefer the products in which the country and region are clearly stated.	0,859		
I prefer imported food from countries where I approve their political and life style.	0,817	10,571	0,793
I prefer foods whose packages concern about environmental protection.	0,711		
Convenience			
I prefer easy cooked and prepared dishes.	0,851		
I prefer dishes that are easy and simple to prepare.	0,844	10,103	0,784
Weight Control			
I prefer low-calorie food items.	0,816		
I prefer low-fat foods.	0,751	9,570	0,738
I prefer foods that help my weight problem.	0,695		
Price			
I prefer inexpensive foods.	0,830		
I prefer low price foods.	0,814	7,229	0,713

The results of the factor analysis showed that the factors affecting food choices grouped under six dimensions that are health, mood, ethical concerns, convenience, weight control, and price. The mean values and standard deviation of these six dimensions are shown in Table 4. From the table, the most important factor found was mood followed by health, convenience, and ethical concerns. On the other hand, the least important factor was weight control.

Table 4
Mean and Standard Deviation of the Factors

Factors	Mean	Standard Deviation
Health	3.870	0.669
Mood	4.207	0.573
Ethical Concerns	3.285	0.950
Convenience	3.520	0.883
Weight Control	3.123	0.922

Lastly, to assess whether each factor showed differences for gender and age, an independent T-test was performed to understand group differences. However, the analysis could not find any statistically significant mean difference for gender and age. Thus, further analyses were conducted to see whether there was any mean difference for each item. As a result, for gender, only two items were found to be significantly different for males and females. The findings show that women are more likely to prefer food items with high protein ($\bar{x}_{\text{male}}=3,6159, \bar{x}_{\text{female}}=3,9196$). On the other hand, males were more likely to choose food items that were nice in texture ($\bar{x}_{\text{male}}=4,0662, \bar{x}_{\text{female}}=3,6964$) (see Table 5).

Table 5
Independent t-test Results for Gender

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	p-value
I prefer high protein foods.	Male	151	3.6159	0.915	-2.618	0.009
	Female	112	3.9196	0.950		
I prefer food that is nice in texture.	Male	151	4.0662	0.877	3.222	0.001
	Female	112	3.6964	0.975		

For variable age, the analyses found significant differences for the items of “I prefer easy cooked and prepared dishes”, “I prefer low-calorie food items”, “I prefer food that makes me happy when I eat”, “I prefer foods that taste good”, “I prefer food that is nice in texture”, “I prefer food without artificial ingredients”, and “I prefer inexpensive foods” (see Table 6).

Table 6
Independent t-test Results for Age

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	p-value
I prefer easy cooked and prepared dishes	18-35	217	3,3641	1,08	-2,039	0,042
	35 +	46	3,7174	1,00		
I prefer low-calorie food items	18-35	217	2,8664	1,17	-2,745	0,008
	35 +	46	3,3043	0,94		
I prefer food that makes me happy when I eat	18-35	217	4,5392	0,70	3,162	0,003
	35 +	46	4,0870	0,91		
I prefer foods that taste good	18-35	217	4,5207	0,69	2,590	0,012
	35 +	46	3,1739	0,85		
I prefer food that is nice in texture	18-35	217	3,9770	0,91	2,593	0,010
	35 +	46	3,5870	1,00		
I prefer food without artificial ingredients	18-35	217	3,7005	1,04	-2,485	0,015
	35 +	46	4,0870	0,94		
I prefer inexpensive foods	18-35	217	3,2949	1,06	3,153	0,002
	35 +	46	2,7826	0,99		

In table 6, people between the ages of 18 and 35 gave more importance to items of “I prefer foods that taste good”, “I prefer food that is nice in texture”, I prefer food that makes me happy when I eat”. On the other hand, the items “I prefer easy cooked and prepared dishes”, “I prefer low-calorie food items”, and “I prefer food without artificial ingredients”, were found to be more important for people above 35. The differences are also displayed below in figure 1.

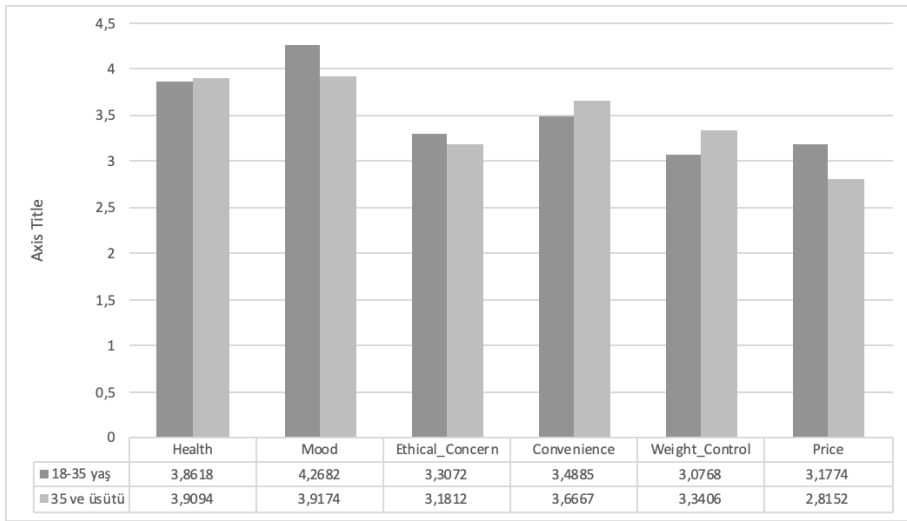


Figure 1. The mean values for age variable

Conclusion

The results of this study provide important conclusions in understanding the food choices of millennials. First of all, the findings of the exploratory factor analysis showed that factors affecting food choices could be grouped into six different dimensions. Mainly, these dimensions were health, mood, ethical concerns, weight control, and price. From these dimensions, it was found that the most important factor for millennials was mood. When generation Y makes food choices, they like to have food items that relieve stress, make them happy, tastes good, nice texture, and offers value for the money. Therefore, it might be concluded that food companies targeting millennials should focus on the factors that affect the mood of this generation in a positive way.

This generation also gives importance to health issues. Even if they like convenience when they are selecting between food alternatives, they also pay attention to nutritional value of the food items. Even if weight control is the least important factor according to the study results, generation Y likes to check the nutritional values for food and

eat accordingly. Other than health, the study also shows evidence that convenience is the third most important factor for millennials. More specifically, they like to have foods that are easy to cook and prepare. This finding implies that food marketers should focus their efforts on ready to cook foods if they are targeting generation Y. They can offer ready to go food items in grocery stores so that people can easily take them home and make it ready in a short time. The convenience factor also creates opportunities for restaurants. That is, restaurants could increase their sales via online food delivery if they provide fast and convenient online food ordering platforms. Lastly, as the study results indicate, millennials also have ethical concerns when they consume food. Especially, they pay attention to the packaging of items. As a result, it suggests that restaurants and food companies need to offer packaging that is environmental friendly as well as recyclable.

Besides the relative importance of these factors for generation Y, the study also analyzed whether millennials show any difference for demographic factors of gender and age. Although, the findings did not show any significant difference for six factors, people showed differences for some items based on their age and gender. Specifically, females are more likely to consume high protein foods, whereas males are more likely to prefer food items that are nice in texture. Thus, it could be concluded that while health seems to be more of a concern for females, it is the mood that is important for males in choosing among food alternatives. On the other hand, for the variable age, people between the ages of 18-35 prefer food items that make them happy, that are nice in texture, and that taste good. People over 35 are likely to use foods that are easy to prepare with low calories. They also pay attention to the ingredients and choose items that do not have artificial things inside.

As a result, this research shows that generation Y is different from other generations in their decision making process for choosing among food alternatives. Therefore, restaurateurs and food companies need to consider them a different target segment and try to appeal to their unique concerns. However, they also need to pay attention to differences among millennials. That is, gender or age could be a factor for the relative importance of factors affecting food decisions. Hence, even though millennials represent a market segment, there might be other segments within millennials. When planning marketing activities, companies should focus on each factor separately to understand its role in food purchasing decisions.

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