

# Exploring Younger Generation Sustainable Consumption in the Restaurant Industry

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## Abstract

Sustainable development is a contemporary constant. Current meteorological phenomena and pollution are just two of the present elements that explain the urgent need for implementing sustainable development measures in all economic and social fields. The activity in restaurants generates high consumption of water and energy, and food waste continues to be relevant issue. In the restaurant industry sustainable measures are applied to a small extent, one of the reasons being the fact that consumers are not aware of this problem's acuity. Starting from the idea that restaurant managers have as primary objective the satisfaction of consumers' expectations, this article aims to analyze the coordinates of the sustainable behavior of young consumers in the restaurant industry. In this respect a qualitative research was conducted, based on the semi-directive in-depth individual interview technique. The sample included 32 students and master students from the Transilvania University of Brasov, the Faculty of Economic Sciences and Business Administration. The research was conducted during January 2022, and the interview guide included two topics that were discussed with each respondent. The findings highlight young consumers' attachments to features like quality, freshness, controlled origin for raw ingredients, elements which are considered more important than price. At the same time, they appreciate sustainable measures implemented in the restaurant industry, one of them being the expansion of digital menus. The article also analyzes the main elements considered valuable in the digital menus' concept. The results obtained complete the general knowledge on this subject. The practical implications are related to the detailed information about young consumers' sustainable expectations and consumption, important elements in shaping managers decisions in the restaurant industry.

## Keywords

Sustainable consumption, restaurant industry, younger generation, digital menus, qualitative research.

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## Introduction

Sustainable development is a basic coordinate of our society, being a priority for the world future. Consumption of sustainable food is a scientific issue that has long been discussed in the literature, but the current pressure to increase the consumption of sustainable food (Vermeir et al., 2020) urges to conduct further studies on this topic. Sustainable consumption is considered a broad concept including several behaviors and choices within it (Puntiroli, Moussaoui and Bezençon, 2022, p.330). Contemporary consumers appreciate companies with strong ethical behaviors (Mejia et al., 2022), especially millennials and Generation Z members, which are influenced, on a large scale, by progressive public ideas and corporations' involvement in applying sustainable development practices (Atzori, Shapoval and Murphy, 2018). They also have high attachments to the sustainability attributes of products (Vătămănescu et al., 2021). Assuming that consumers are more or less responsible (Lubowiecki-Vikuka, Dabrowska and Machnik, 2021), business entrepreneurs may appreciate that investing in sustainable development practices has a low impact on consumers' choices. Previous studies argued that in the absence of good citizens there are no good companies, but, at the same time, the idea that companies strongly attached to sustainable development goals are rewarded by consumers, was also highlighted (Valor, 2008). Moreover, Do, Wang and Guichait (2021) argued that collective green efficacy depends extensively on consumers' pro-environmental behavior.

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Being aware of the decisively importance of consumers' sustainable consumption in achieving sustainable development goals, this study aims to explore sustainable consumption in restaurants among the younger generation. A qualitative research was used, and the respondents were students and master students from the Transilvania University of Braşov.

The paper is organized as follows. First, the literature review on the characteristics of younger generation consumer behavior in restaurants was presented. Next, the research methodology was explained, followed by the Results and discussion section. In the final part, conclusions were highlighted based on the findings.

## 1. Review of the scientific literature

Sustainable food consumption is a major contemporary challenge (Baldy, 2019). It is also a complex phenomenon which relies on many different elements, among which sustainable consumption consciousness, selling and shopping sustainable products, sustainable selling methods, etc. (Hansen, 2022). Previous studies have not highlighted important differences in sustainable consumption behavior between age groups, but younger generations show high responsiveness levels to sustainable development issues (Yamane and Kaneko, 2021).

Today's younger generation includes the older cohort of Generation Z (people born in 1996-2012) and the younger cohort of millennials (people born in 1989-1995) (Yamane and Kaneko, 2021, p.1). People in this group have a distinct peculiarity, assuming the same habits all over the world, mainly to their attachment to technological devices and their communication and interaction means (Demeter et al., 2014; Pop et al., 2022). This age group is better informed, more individualistic, but also much more attracted to sustainable companies (Yamane and Kaneko, 2021; Pop et al., 2022). At the same time, younger generation cannot be considered, as a whole, the consumer group with a responsible buying behavior, their inclinations towards sustainability issues being mixed (Calderon-Monge, Pastor-Sanz and Garcia, 2020). Based on consumer behavior patterns, millennials in particular, were grouped into five distinct categories such as: aware consumers, conscious consumers, consumers under transition, unwilling consumers, and rejecters (Francis and Sarangi, 2022, p.9). Another relevant element is their greater concern for environmental issues in comparison with social issues (Calderon-Monge, Pastor-Sanz and Garcia, 2020).

Consumers' food choices are mainly based on price, convenience, taste and health, and the concept of sustainability is not an important factor in food selections (Nguyen et al., 2022; van Bussel et al., 2022). The majority of people are not aware of the environmental impact of restaurants' operations (Sarmineto and Hanandeh, 2018, p.23). The main reasons are related to the low levels of knowledge and consumers' skepticism on this issue (van Bussel et al., 2022). Nevertheless, consumers with a responsible behavior have high perceptions of the effectiveness of their buying habits (Calderon-Monge, Pastor-Sanz and Garcia, 2020, p.74). Locally and seasonal ingredients, organic produced food and food packaging are considered the main sustainability concerns in the foodservice sector (van Bussel et al., 2022).

Younger consumers in restaurants consider themselves as concerned by environmental issues, they are aware of the green restaurants' presence on the market, whilst not interested in experiencing dinners in the green restaurants (Băltescu, 2017). Findings in recent studies suggest that criteria such as origin of the raw ingredients, production procedures or sustainability certifications are not considered important in restaurant consumption (Nguyen et al., 2022). On the other hand, Băltescu (2017, p.82) identified which were the main attributes for younger generation to assess a green restaurant, i.e. the predominant use of traditional recipes based on local ingredients, origin of ingredients and production processes. The same study underlined which were the most unimportant factors, among them smaller portions, nutritional values as prerequisite for selecting restaurant meals and reduced meat consumptions. On the other hand, restaurant managers themselves do not consider the implementation of sustainable development practices as a priority, mainly due to their shortcomings in the responsible education (Băltescu et al., 2022). A relevant decision for restaurants with pro-environmental behavior consists in informing consumers on their sustainability achievements and to introduce several measures (among which the green index) in order to communicate green performances levels in the restaurant (Sarmineto and Hanandeh, 2018).

Attracting consumers is one of the principal objectives of a restaurant manager. In this line, restaurant managers are interested not only to sell, instead they seek to facilitate experiences. Among the specific means of restaurants to achieve this goal, the restaurant menu is the central component for the restaurant success (Nemeschansky, von der Heide and Kim, 2020). Moreover, consumers highly appreciate food attribute information provided on restaurant menu and information transparency (Nguyen, et al., 2022). Digital menus are widely introduced in restaurants' operations based on their improved performances. Digital menus could be accessed through mobile apps, they present a great amount of information, images, they

may be easily adapted with small costs, meals' selection is improved, allow consumers' interaction, more enjoyment, and also increase sales (Yin and Yoo, 2020). Moreover, digital menus are efficient tool to enhance restaurants' responsible behavior. Digital menus allow consumers' easy access to provenance of ingredients, nutritional value of meals, etc. (Mu, Spaargaren and Lasink, 2019).

Based on the findings from the literature review section, the objectives of the research are the following:

O1: To explore the characteristics of respondents' sustainable consumption in restaurants.

O2: The explore respondents' attitudes towards digital menus and the benefits of using these menus.

## 2. Research methodology

The study presented in the paper is an exploratory research and the results were obtained through the semi-directive in-depth individual interview technique (Mooi, Sarstedt and Mooi-Reci, 2018). The respondents were students and master students from the Faculty of Economic Sciences and Business Administration, Transilvania University of Braşov.

The research took place in January 2022 in the faculty's classrooms. The sample included 32 respondents, aged between 21-30 years. The interview guide comprised two topics of discussion, each having several subtopics in order to expand the area of obtained information.

## 3. Results and discussion

The first topic of the interview guide analyzed *the characteristics of sustainable consumption in restaurants*. As respondents revealed, there are numerous factors taken into account. The first factor mentioned by all respondents was the raw ingredients selection, being highly appreciated elements such as freshness, quality, the fact that the raw ingredients are seasonal, offered by local producers and obtained from natural or organic agriculture. In this regard, respondents stated their willingness to pay more for dishes cooked under the above mentioned criteria. When respondents referred to the prices of restaurants' offers, they mentioned the fact that price is no longer the main element taken into account when eating-out in a restaurant, quality, cleanliness and atmosphere being more important selection factors. These findings differ from other studies (Nguyen et al., 2022; van Bussel et al., 2022) which emphasized price as the primarily decision factor.

Another factor revealed by respondents was the portions' size, which they consider a relevant issue for sustainable consumption in restaurants. The results obtained were mixed and no general idea emerged, but women prefer smaller portions and highly appreciate dishes obtained mainly from vegetables, while men still prefer larger portions and meat dishes.

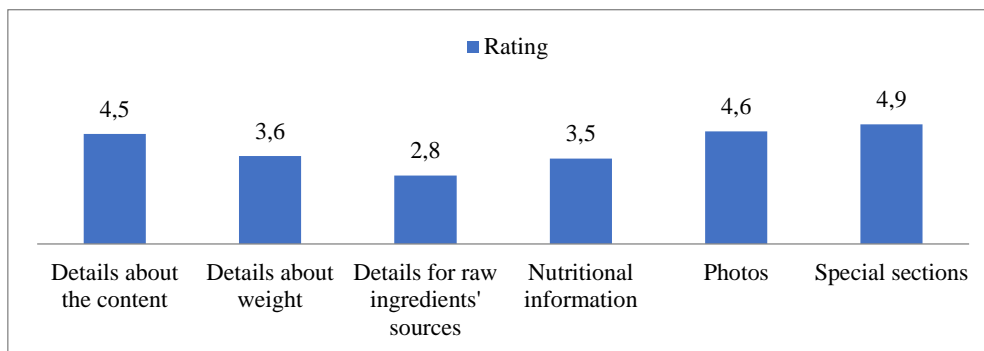
The third factor which was highlighted by respondents about their sustainable consumption in restaurants was the replacement of tablecloths and napkins made of textile materials with those of paper. They mentioned these measures as essential, with an important contribution to diminishing the ecological footprint of restaurants (reduction of water and detergent consumptions).

The fourth factor mentioned by respondents was the replacement of the traditional, written on paper menus with electronic alternatives. From the 32 persons included in the sample, 5 out of them (16%) didn't consider this measure as appropriate in a restaurant, even though they emphasized that the ecological reason in applying such a practice was obvious (reduction of paper usage). Their main explanations relied on two aspects. First they noted that not all consumers, especially elderly consumers, are able to use electronic devices in order to consult the menu and their second explanation reflected their fear that electronic menus would be the first step towards eliminating waiters and digitization the restaurant services which will completely transform the consumption experience in a restaurant. On the other side, the majority of respondents highlighted the advantages of electronic menus, out of which the ease to consult the menus, the ease for placing the order, the fact that the young generation prefers the electronic information, and also the ease to update these menus. Asked by the interviewer about their choice to eat in a restaurant that applies sustainable measures versus a restaurant which does not implement sustainable practices, respondents highlighted medium attachment to restaurants that practice sustainable measures. The findings from this first topic are consistent with previous results (Băltescu, 2017; Drumea et al., 2020; Yamane and Kaneko, 2021; Băltescu et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2022; van Busse, et al., 2022).

The second topic of the interview guide identified *respondents' attitudes and preferences towards digital menus*. The importance granted by respondents to the implementation of digital menus in restaurants was the first issue discussed in this topic. Respondents were also asked about the relevance of the digital menus in restaurants and the answers recorded showed that they rated this aspect with 4.75 (out of the maximum

of 5). They highlighted the importance to implement digital menus considering factors like the possibility to consult the offer and order before arriving in the restaurant, consequently reducing the time spent in the restaurant, and also the functionality of this instrument.

The second element that was discussed related to the content of digital menus. Respondents highlighted that the main elements necessary to completely describe each product in the digital menu are the following: details on the content, weight, sources of the raw ingredients, nutritional information, photos, and also separate sections with special dishes for vegetarians, consumers with allergies, children, etc. Asked about the importance of each of the above, respondents rated each characteristic from 1 to 5 (1 - very unimportant feature and 5 - very important feature), the results being presented in Figure no. 1. Results obtained emphasized that the most important characteristic of the digital menu was the inclusion of special sections, which was rated with 4.9 (out of a maximum of 5), followed by photos for each product (rating 4.6), and details on the content (4.5). The least important characteristics were considered the details for the raw ingredients' sources (2.8), followed by nutritional information (3.5) and details on products' weight (3.6).

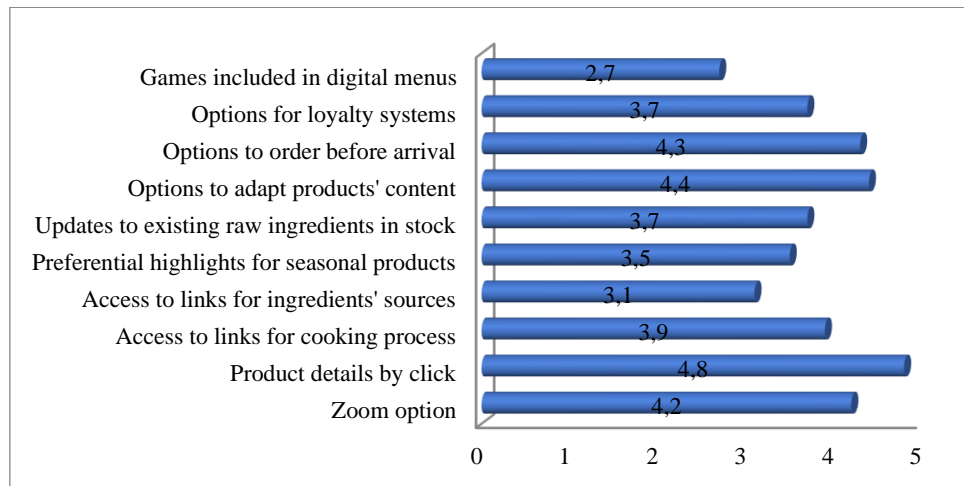


**Figure no. 1. Major characteristics of digital menus**

*Source: Authors' own research*

The last element discussed identified the concept and functions of digital menus. Respondents emphasized that they appreciate the following elements when consulting these menus: (a) zoom option, (b) product details by click, interactivity highlighted by (c) the possibility of accessing links with images for the cooking process and (d) the possibility of accessing links to present the sources of raw materials included in the recipes, (e) preferential highlighting of seasonal products, (f) updating and permanent editing the menu in order to prioritize the use of raw materials in stock and, accordingly, to reduce food waste, (g) options to adapt the content of dishes chosen by consumers according to their preferences, (h) the option to place an order before arrival at the restaurant, (i) options to include loyal consumers in a loyalty system with subsequent benefits, and (j) games included in digital menus. They also rated each of these ten characteristics of digital menus from 1 to 5 (1 - very unimportant feature and 5 - very important feature) and the results are presented in Figure no. 2.

Information obtained revealed that the most important functions of the digital menu are the products details (4.8), options to adapt the products' composition based on customers' preferences (4.4), the option to order before arrival in the restaurant (4.3), and also the zoom option (4.2). Interactivity is not considered an essential element for designing digital menus. The links to access images for the cooking process and links to present the sources of raw materials used in the recipes had scores of 3.9 and 3.1 respectively. Permanent updates of the content of the digital menu according to stocks, in order to reduce food waste (3.7) and preferential highlights for seasonal products (3.5) are features with medium appreciations from the respondents. Also loyalty systems were included into the characteristics with medium rating (3.7). At the same time, respondents do not consider games inclusion in the digital menu as a relevant feature, being the least assessed among all elements (2.7). The major arguments for their opinions on the digital menus' concept were the possibility to select recipe's components which represent the foundation for the utmost fulfillment of customers' needs and tastes, the possibility to make orders before arrival that reduces congestion in restaurants, especially during peak hours and avoiding food waste that was another revealed essential characteristic.



**Figure no. 2. Elements describing the concept and functions of digital menus**

Source: Authors' own research

Comparing the results of this research with those of previous studies, a mixed situation was revealed. On the one hand, detailed information about restaurants' offers, nutritional elements and transparency are features highly rated by young consumers (Nguyen et al., 2022). On the other hand, the provenance of raw ingredients and entertainment options in digital menus are features with lower assessments in the present study, relevant differences from previous studies (Mu, Spaargaren and Lasink, 2019; Yin and Yoo, 2020) being emphasized.

## Conclusions

The present article highlights the results of a qualitative research on the coordinates of the sustainable consumption of younger generation in the restaurant industry. The findings contribute to the general knowledge on this subject, taking also into account the fact that sustainable development term and implications are difficult to assess (Madar and Neacșu, 2020). The importance of this study lies in the analysis of information about sustainable consumption in restaurants that can be useful to restaurant managers in taking decisions for the implementation of sustainable development practices.

Considering that consistency of sustainable consumption does not change rapidly, being consistent within few years (Puntiroli, Moussaoui and Bezençon, 2022), the necessity for restaurants to apply rapid measures to this end is also valid. It is widely acknowledged that the consumer is the main vector in the sustainable development process, but, at the same time, restaurants' initiatives and their high attachment to sustainable development goals is the engine in this demarche. As Calderon-Monge, Pastor-Sanz and Garcia (2020) observed, public campaigns and companies' responsible decision are meant to encourage younger generation to appreciate sustainable development values and goals.

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