




Food Choices of Gen-Z University Students in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into factors driving food preference in Bangladesh's Generation Z, focusing on traditional food consumption habits. Interventions with international trends with the role for social, technological, socio-economic, and cultural dynamics that shape the food choice among Bangladeshi Generation Z. Present study applying a qualitative research design with 30 in-depth interviews with university students. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis and coding with NVivo 12 software to identify key patterns and themes. Findings confirm that factors such as cost consideration, food quality, social media influence, global trends and family tradition, street food presentation, seasonal and weather demand, and changing food flavor significantly impact Generation Z's choice of foods to consume. Cuisine brands and family traditions intertwine, with international cuisines becoming increasingly preferred, with traditional foods holding a strong presence during family occasions and cultural events and celebrations. Foods with pleasure and healthy offerings are desired, and food flavor changes with changing seasons and weather requirements. Food with health issues, nutrition level, food environment, and food access and price are also the major factors for students that are constraints their choosing the food for the generation. Findings serve to inform interventions that must follow in terms of custom preservation, improvement in nutritional values, and intervention of global food trends, factoring in price and changing demand.

INTRODUCTION

The first generation to have encountered digital technology and the internet is known as Gen-Z. They were born approximately from mid-to-late 1996 to early 2012 and are also referred to as the first social members of the digital age (Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018). This era, deeply integrated with digital innovation, displays unique patterns in attitudes, behaviors, and preferences, including their food choices (Jayatissa, 2023). Food selection is the process of selecting foods on the basis of taste, culture, health, and availability. The food choice of this generation is increasingly being driven by online trends, social media, and an increased awareness of health and sustainability, and thus more open to trying various cuisines and experimenting with new dietary practices.

Generation Z in South Asia, specifically in India, is transforming food consumption trends with a mix of traditional and contemporary influences. As native-born technology users, they have access to a variety of cuisines through social media, shaping their tastes (Tan & Trang, 2023). Appreciating traditional foods that speak of their heritage, Gen Z is interested in fusion foods and international cuisines (Prakash, 2020). Health consciousness, sustainability, and ease of consumption shape their food choices, indicative of broader social trends (Garai-Fodor, 2021). With a count of 472 million in India alone, Gen Z is creating strong shifts in consumer values and marketplace



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dynamics (Hameed & Mathur, 2020). With an emphasis on embracing new technology and a critical analysis of sustainability and pricing in buying behavior, Gen Z reflects a thoughtful and socially responsible consumption behavior (Kahawandala et al., 2020). Recent studies reveal Generation Z's organic food consumption and food choices in Pakistan. Urban youth in Pakistan's food choices are determined by family, peers, media, and worldwide food chains, even with an awareness of unhealthy food consequences (Usman et al., 2017). This fascinating mix of traditional values and modern trends is transforming the food environment in South Asia.

The consumption behavior of the post-millennial generation in Bangladesh is shaped by a rich interplay of rapid globalization, shifting cultural forces, economic change, and the revolutionary power of innovative advancements (Shahen et al., 2020). These young individuals are notably influenced by social media, which acts as a powerful platform for shaping their food preferences, emotions, and self-construal (Ufrida & Harianto, 2022). The dietary choices of the Global Generation in Bangladesh are driven by several factors, including health consciousness, food safety, and environmental awareness (Zheng et al., 2021). The widespread adoption of fast food, not only in Bangladesh but globally, is a prominent trend among Generation Z (Tahir et al., 2023). Although this inclination, traditional and local cuisines continue to hold a significant place in their food identity, reflecting the interplay of globalization and cultural heritage (Bhuiyan et al., 2022). Moreover, increasing tourism among young people in Bangladesh offers an opportunity to explore Indigenous cuisines, promoting entrepreneurship and the nutritional values of local foods (Alam & Naser, 2020). However, alongside these preferences, concerns about health issues such as obesity, insomnia, and other chronic conditions are rising, influenced by dietary habits and food consumption behaviors (Orea-Giner & Fusté-Forné, 2023).

These studies have shown an upward trend in consuming fast foods by Gen-Z generations in Bangladesh. In the two largest cities, namely Dhaka and Chittagong, 63%–68% of the young adults reported frequent consumption of fast foods due to convenience, taste, and pleasure, in scholarly work by (Tareq et al., 2022), and (Banik et al., 2020). Indeed, this reflects the world trend of the increasing intake of processed and convenience foods among the younger generations. Yet, as distinct from many Western nations, this was not an inhibiting factor to applying "McDonaldization" principles to local fast-food practices within the nation itself, without the presence of McDonald's in Bangladesh (Zaman et al., 2013). Although the finding was representative of cultural adaptation to a world trend, the implications of fast food and rising obesity are certainly topics that require deeper investigation in light of current public health concerns in Bangladesh.

Despite some existing studies on food preferences and dietary habits, specific research focusing on Generation Z in Bangladesh is scarce (Orea-Giner & Fusté-Forné, 2023). Furthermore, the potential influences of digital platforms, social media, and online food trends on their dietary choices remain underexplored (Chung et al., 2021). Understanding the health challenges linked to their dietary habits, such as obesity and other chronic conditions, is equally important.

While the literature on food choice precedents among Bangladeshi Gen-Z is useful, there are several significant omissions. First, scholarly literature largely refers to urban populations, with little representation of rural voices and socioeconomic disparities. Second, the articulation of the interaction between global and local levels takes the form of a duality rather than something fluid and dynamic. Third, the systemic drivers

of policy frameworks and market mechanisms and their impacts on food choices are rarely explored. The need to fill these knowledge gaps calls for a much more fine-tuned, intersectional approach that engages cultural, economic, and structural dimensions as key drivers in the evolving food preferences of Gen-Z in Bangladesh.

This paper intends to examine the parameters influencing food preferences among Generation Z in Bangladesh, exploring the transition from traditional to global food choices and their implications on health and socio-cultural behaviors. By addressing these gaps, this research intends to enhance the understanding of food preferences among Generation Z in Bangladesh, highlighting the influence of digital technology, social media, and health consciousness on their dietary habits.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is a well-established psychological theory utilized for behavior comprehension and prediction in a variety of behaviors. It has been utilized in a range of domains, including health promotion, marketing, and social psychology, and educational settings, and most recently in food choice studies. This framework underscores three aspects: individual viewpoints, societal influences, and perceived control over actions, which in turn lead to behavior. TPB has found wide applications in various areas like consumer behavior, health promotion, and environmental psychology concerning decision-making processes (Conner & Armitage, 2002). This is highly applicable to the domain of food studies, whereby the preferences of individuals coincide or clash with the social and environmental surroundings (Verbeke & Vermeir, 2006). Here, TPB acts as an integrative perspective on the food choice of Bangladeshi Generation Z, whose eating habits have gradually become the result of tugging forces between traditional, global, and modern forms of food.

Attitudes can be considered the centerpiece of food behavior since attitudes reflect the degree of favorable or unfavorable feelings that are held towards certain food choices. Attitudes of Gen-Z are consequently molded by cost issues, food quality, cleanliness, and changed food flavors (Povey et al., 2001). For example, favorable attitudes towards fresh and high-quality food result in positive consumption, but food choices can always be improvised based on cost. Subjective Norms: The food choice is also conditioned by subjective norms since consumption is always influenced by peer groups, familial traditions, and virtual community effect (Maher et al., 2016). Social connectivity gives food trends, such as street food presentations or global cuisine chains, much-needed publicity, thereby making them socially desirable and a widely followed trend among this generation (Sparks & Shepherd, 2002). Family tradition, on the other hand, acts like an anchor and somehow sustains traditional cuisines despite the increasing popularity of global cuisines.

Another key component of TPB is perceived behavioral control, which represents those external and internal factors influencing the ease or difficulty of making a food choice. For the Gen Z of Bangladesh, PBC refers to economic accessibility, seasonal demands, and the availability of healthy and convenient meals (Verbeka, 2005). To illustrate, this generation, on a small budget, finds accessibility to cheap and nutritious meals highly important. Similarly, seasonal changes and weather conditions, such as food preferences for traditional heavy meals during winter or light meals during summer, are influencing the trend of choices of Gen Z (Chen, 2007). It is elaborated more by explaining the increase in the demand for not trading off health or taste against convenience.

Applying TPB, this research strives to reveal the interconnected mental, societal, and

contextual elements shaping the food choices of Generation Z in Bangladesh. It has come into the spotlight with findings that attitude, norm, and control together model their dietary behaviors and offer insights for policymakers, marketers, and other stakeholders of the food industry. This approach will not only serve to capture the dynamic nature of Gen Z's food preferences but also provide practical guidance in aligning offerings in light of meeting their emerging needs and expectations.

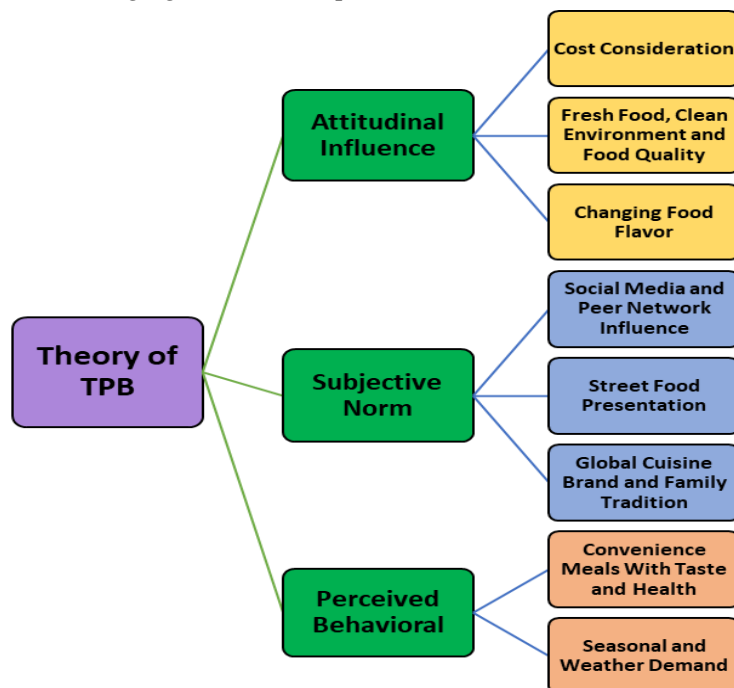


Figure 1: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sampling Size

A purposive sampling approach was adopted to select a sample of 30 respondents. This sampling technique was employed to choose 30 respondents in such a way that diversity is ensured along the dimensions of gender, socio-economic status, and geographic origin. The research targeted Generation Z aged between 18 to 25 students from representatives of public and private universities in Bangladesh. The sample size of 30 is sufficient to achieve data saturation in qualitative research, as studied by (Creswell, 2013). For putting the responses in the frame of reference, the respondents were requested to provide their age, educational background, and city of residence. Additionally, this background helped contextualize their response and provided a better view of demographics and experiences influencing food preferences in Gen Z in Bangladesh.

Questionnaire

This research was executed by applying a qualitative method, where in-depth interviews were used. To guide the interviews, a semi-structured questionnaire was prepared and it appropriately weighted against a structured guide on one side and the freedom to develop new areas of interest during the conversation on the

other, as discussed by (Bryman, 2016). The study utilized open-ended questions that allowed respondents to give detailed descriptions of the foods they preferred. Through this flexible format, an interviewer could track emerging issues and obtain in-depth information regarding respondents' motives, behavior, and food habits. The questionnaire covered a range of dimensions, such as food preference (e.g., "What kind of food do you prefer to have regularly?"), factors impacting food choices (e.g., "Who and what has the greatest impact on your food choices?"), and social media influence over eating behavior (e.g., "How does social media or other online platforms affect your food choices or eating habits?"). Besides, nutrition and health concerns were touched through queries regarding the role of nutrients and awareness regarding calories in food choices. The effects of globalization and Westernization were also examined through questions about fast food.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, based on Braun & Clarke, (2006) has been the main method adopted in this exploration of food choices for Generation Z in Bangladesh. It helps in the systematic identification and interpretation of themes recurring in the data, a true blend of data-driven insights with theoretical material on generational food preference and its consumption pattern. Analysis of data began with a close reading of the data collected, including rereading transcripts and survey responses to build a deep sense of the participants' perspectives. Initial coding involved the application of NVivo 12, which facilitated systematic coding of repeating patterns and significant concepts emerging from the data. Themes were iteratively refined to be more representative of the nuances in Gen Z experiences and attitudes toward food. This approach combines inductive insights with a deductive approach based on prior research into the varied factors driving food preference among the Gen Z population in Bangladesh. It brings in a very balanced perspective, thereby connecting the participants' lived experiences to the broader trends within social and cultural life.

RESULT

The participants in this investigation represented a variety of geographical locations in Bangladesh, yet most lived in Dhaka city during data collection. This urban bias is an expression of the easiness and effectiveness of metropolitan locations in regulating food choices in new youth generations. All respondents took part in humble socioeconomic environments, and such background information plays a critical role in providing a picture for explaining the underpinnings of food choices. Having demographic information is significant in studying behavior, and such a matter has been emphasized in previous work (Sifullah et al., 2023).

Table 1 Frequency and Percent distribution of socio-demographic characteristics of participants [n=30]

Participant's information	N students	Percentage students
Age		
18-20	6	20%

20-22	9	30%
22-24	8	27%
24-26	7	23%
Gender		
Male	14	47%
Female	16	53%
City of Residence		
Dhaka	7	23%
Rajshahi	5	17%
Rangpur	3	10%
Chittagong	6	20%
Khulna	4	13%
Barishal	5	17%
Education/Occupation		
Bachelor's	21	70%
Master's	9	30%
Religion		
Muslim	16	53%
Hindu	11	37%
Others	3	10%

In this current investigation, participant age ranged between 18 and 26 years and consisted wholly of Generational Z youth. Most, at 30% (N = 9), ranged between 20 and 22 years, then 27% (N = 8) between 22–24 years, 23% (N = 7) between 24–26 years, and 20% (N = 6) between 18–20 years. On gender distribution, girls outnumbered boys but narrowly, and 53% (N = 16) represented the group, and boys represented 47% (N = 14). Participating geographically, a variety of city locations in Bangladesh represented its city locations, and geographically, most represented in Dhaka at 23% (N = 7), closely followed by Chittagong at 20% (N = 6). Rajshahi and Barishal shared 17% (N = 5), with 13% (N = 4) in Khulna and 10% (N = 3) in Rangpur, representing the least in proportion. Educational-wise, most participants pursued, completed, or considered a Bachelor's level, and such represented 70% (N = 21), with 30% (N = 9) representing a level at Masters. Regarding religion, a majority of them (N = 16, 53%) were Muslim, 37% (N = 11) of them were Hindu, and others 10% (N = 3). Overall, these demographics present a general picture of participant groups studying food consumption in Bangladesh's

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Figure 2 Perspective overview of the study's results using NVivo 12 software

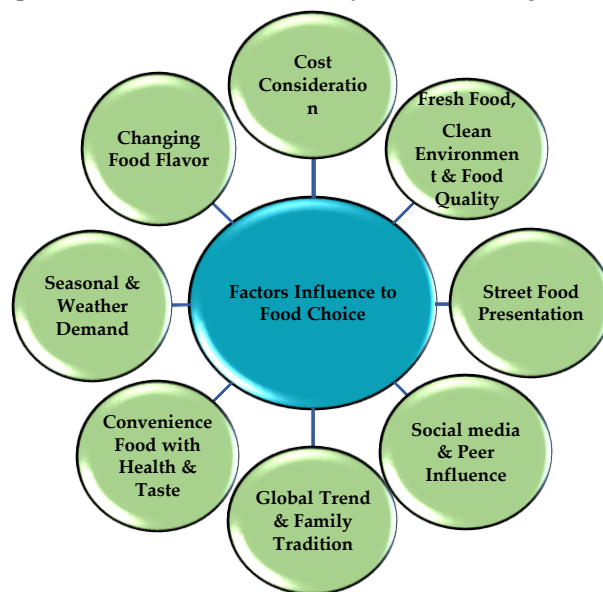


Figure 3 Factors Influencing Food Choices of Gen-Z

Cost Consideration

Generation Z in Bangladesh is highly concerned with the cost of food and often considers low-cost or affordable food items due to financial constraints. The attitude facet Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) concurs with the inspection findings in a way that shows how individual opinion reflects negative or positive feelings toward specific food choices. One respondent said that they always consider the price before buying food. As students, they focus on finding affordable options that provide good value for money. This reflects the economic challenges students face and their tendency to make budget-conscious decisions while maintaining a focus on value.

"I always check the price before buying food. As a student with no income and dependent on my family, I need to find affordable options that offer good value for money." (IDI#10)

Another participant mentioned that while affordability is a key factor, they are willing to spend extra on healthier or organic alternatives. This indicates a growing awareness of health and wellness, which sometimes outweighs cost concerns. They emphasized that their food choices indicate a balance between budget and health priorities.

"Price is important, but I'm willing to pay more for healthier or organic options. I believe it is an investment in living healthier to spend money on good food." (IDI#02,15)

Another respondent shared that their food choices are influenced by both their budget and the portion size of meals. They said they do not mind paying a little more if the portion size is reasonable and the food is filling. This depicts a pragmatic approach to food choice, where there is a focus on a value derived from the quantity and filling nature of meals.

"I think about my budget but also the portion size. I also consider the quality of ingredients and whether the meal is balanced, aligning my choices with both my health goals and finances." (IDI#09)

Fresh food, clean environment, and food quality

The attitude dimension of the TPB can be applied to the observed phenomena in the results. Attitudes of people reflect their positive or negative sentiments toward certain food selections. One reported that they are very particular about the places they dine, choosing places that are clean and serve fresh, hygienic food. They said that cleanliness gives them more confidence about the safety of the food. One other respondent added that actually, they do look for some form of certification or online reviews regarding the hygiene level of a restaurant before opting to eat out. They said this habit has actually helped them in making proper choices and avoiding such places that do not meet hygiene standards. They said that they are quite conscious about cleanliness and food quality, and hence always looks for certifications or reviews online before visiting a place.

"I'm very particular about cleanliness and quality when it comes to food. Before visiting any restaurant, I always check reviews to see

what people say about their food quality and hygiene." (IDI#20)

A third participant expressed that their trust in food quality is directly proportional to the cleanliness of the surroundings. They shared that they instinctively avoid establishments that exhibit even minor signs of poor hygiene, as it creates a negative impression and diminishes their confidence in the safety of the food.

"A clean environment makes me trust the food more. I tend to avoid places that don't seem hygienic, as proper hygiene ensure better quality and reduces the statement more concise" (IDI#3)

They mentioned that freshness, cleanliness, and overall food quality matter a lot to them, but that the location in which they are living at present doesn't have a lot of options for them when it comes to these factors. Because of this, they find themselves in many instances in which they must eat and can't be particularly selective about it.

"I'm highly concerned with freshness, cleanliness, and food quality. But in my current location, these don't exist, and sometimes I must eat with little regard." (IDI#30,23)

Street Food Presentation

Street food has a unique charm that draws people in, especially when it is presented in a visually captivating way. The vibrant colors and creative plating of these dishes make them particularly tempting and appealing to many food lovers. As one respondent expressed, the visual appeal of street food is a big factor in wanting to try it. They love seeing dishes that are bursting with color and beautifully arranged; it makes the food even more enticing. The aesthetic value is almost as important as the taste, as it creates an experience that engages the senses beyond just flavor.

"Street food attracts my eyes through its colorful and innovative plating. The appearance makes it even more inviting. I appreciate the fact that the presentation enriches the whole experience." (IDI#22)

One respondent expressed their admiration for street food vendors who take the time to make their dishes visually stunning. They believe presentation is an essential part of the experience, turning the food into something that feels more special and enjoyable. The effort to create appealing visuals not only enhances the taste but also makes the experience memorable. In today's world of social media and food photography, these eye-catching dishes are a major reason why street food continues to attract so much attention.

"I really enjoy when street food vendors make an effort with the looks of their foods. It makes the whole experience even nicer and memorable. Sometimes, I grab Jalebi, Shingara or Samosa, Badam and Boot from street vendors." (IDI#11)

A different respondent shared that they are not fond of street food in general but appreciates the creativity and thinking involved in its preparation and presentation. They added that even though they may not go out of their way for street food, its preparation and presentation will pique their curiosity and make them try it at times.

They mentioned that sometimes they are tempted to have simple and comfort foods, particularly when prepared and presented in an extraordinary manner. This reflects on how street food can even grab the attention of those not necessarily being a part of street food enthusiasts, providing them with a chance at enjoyment and discovery at times. They explained,

"I'm not really a fan of street food, but I do appreciate how it's presented. Sometimes, when I'm out with friends, I'll try things like popcorn or chicken balls, mainly because of how they're served." (IDI#7)

Social media and peer network influence

The influence of social platforms on food options fits with the concept of interpersonal norms in the Theory of Planned action, as it exerts social pressure to conform to trends. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok showcase food as desirable and socially endorsed, making individuals feel compelled to try popular dishes to gain approval or avoid missing out. Recommendations from friends further reinforce this pressure, blending digital trends with personal connections to shape food choices based on perceived social expectations. The individual expressed that whenever they see a food trend on Instagram or TikTok, they feel curious and are inclined to try it. They also mentioned that recommendations from friends significantly influence their choices.

"Whenever I see a food trend on Instagram or TikTok, I feel curious and want to try it. My friends' recommendations also influence my choices. Sometimes, I see their posts on social media and want to try the food myself." (IDI#26)

One of them commented that social media trends affect them a lot, in that they follow a range of food bloggers. They sometimes go to the restaurants suggested by them, suggesting that social media can act as a strong catalyst in terms of getting access to a variety of cuisines. They also mentioned that they follow a restaurant's Facebook pages to know about new offerings, and then go and try them out in an attempt to try new things.

"I follow a several food bloggers on social media platforms in order to discover new food ideas and trends. I also follow the pages of restaurants in my locality on Facebook in order to know about their new menu items, and I try them out subsequently in an attempt to try out something new." (IDI#17)

More importantly, Mukbang (it's an online video broadcast) on YouTube and food recipes on different social media platforms influence their food choice. They articulate that such videos have helped them to get out of their comfort zones and try different kinds of food. They strongly assert that this online experience has broadened their appreciation for food and made them more open to experiencing a wide array of flavors and types of food.

"Watching Mukbang on YouTube and food recipes on YouTube has actually influenced my food choices. I used to dislike spicy food, but those videos have definitely increased my cravings for it." (IDI#06,13)

Global cuisine brand and family tradition

A mix of appreciation of world cuisines and strong family traditions was noticed among the responses. One participant said that he likes to indulge in trying international foods like sushi or pizzas, though family traditions matter. He explained that on holidays, his family enjoys traditional meals together, and all these occupy a greater place in his life.

"I love experimenting with global cuisines like sushi or pizza, but family traditions matter too my family enjoys traditional meals together during holidays." (IDI#01,29)

One said he remembered how traditional dishes were such a big part of family life when he was growing up. As much as enjoying those moments, he also liked trying out international chains with quick, easy food with great taste. He mentioned the experience of trying outlets like McDonald's or KFC for their convenience in food tasting.

"I grew up enjoying traditional dishes with my family, but I also like trying out global chains like McDonald's or KFC for their convenience and taste." (IDI#24)

One other participant added that even though they love global cuisine since it is so diverse, at home, whatever meal is prepared must be traditional, especially during festivals. In fact, such traditions are what hold their family together during those special times.

"I like exploring global cuisine because it offers such a wide variety of flavors and unique dishes from different cultures. However, at home, we tend to stick to our traditional, local meals for everyday eating." (IDI#21)

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Convenience food with taste and health

With the modern pace of life, most people at least want a proper balance between taste and health, added to the ease of meal preparation. This trend towards convenience is higher in persons who value freshness, nutrition, and economy in fitting around a tightly scheduled lifestyle. As one respondent says, he would go for meals that, besides being quick and easy to prepare, could focus on freshness and health, especially if the offer was reasonably priced.

"My tendency would be towards options that are quick and easy but still focus on freshness and health, especially if they come in at an affordable package." (IDI#28)

Many interviewees also had a behavioral intention of making healthier or more thoughtful choices, even if they fall back on convenience sometimes. They identified that they like having healthier meal options because such meal options have met their intention of eating healthy even when they are struggling with time. They feel that an ideal meal should be convenient and balanced, allowing them to enjoy wholesome nutrition without having to spend a great deal of time preparing the meals. This shows they want to be able to have healthy meals but at the same time, they do not want to sacrifice too much practicality in their daily life.

"I really enjoy meals that are quick and easy to make, especially when they're healthier options. With my busy schedule, I love finding meals that are both nutritious and don't take too long to prepare" (IDI#04,05)

While many people are conscious of the nutritional value of the food they eat, others feel it is hard to do so because of time factors. Convenience and time constraints as important reasons for their choice of food, reflecting perceived behavioral control. One respondent reported that sometimes he values time so much in his tight schedule and prefers to prepare quick, easy meals without thinking about nutritional value. This shows that food choice depends on how easy it is to prepare the food in question, that is, control over time, and so he will go for quick, easy food, although not healthy.

"Sometimes I am unable to focus on considering the nutritional value of food. Due to a lack of time, I always go for readily available quick meals without giving it much thought." (IDI#27)

Seasonal and weather demand

Weather often influences people's food preferences, with choices changing based on comfort and needs. One person shared that they enjoy hot foods like soups or noodles on

rainy days, with Kichuri (Hodgepodge) being a favorite for its warmth and heartiness. On sunny days, they prefer refreshing drinks and cold dishes to stay cool. This highlights how meals are often chosen to align with the climate, offering both comfort and practicality.

"On rainy days, I enjoy hot foods like soups or noodles, and Kichuri is my favorite. On sunny days, I prefer refreshing drinks and cold dishes." (IDI#08)

Quite a lot of people unconsciously adapt their food according to seasonal practices that keep them not only tuned with their body's needs but also bring a lot of variation and enjoyment at mealtimes. The fact was proved by this comment: they like warm dishes in winter to get cozy, while they prefer refreshing salads and fruit juices in summer so that they can keep cool. It shows thereby that seasonal eating, besides comfort, also supports health through keeping the meals tuned to the changes in weather.

"I prefer food that matches the season, like boiled rice, pasta, coffee or tea during winter or refreshing salads and fruit juices in summer." (IDI#12,18)

While the weather influences the food choices of most people, there exist those who believe it does not really make any difference to them. One responded that, for the most part, food preferences remain the same regardless of the season. Still, they added that during summer, they drink a lot of lemonade; it is revitalizing and quenches their thirst. This just goes to say that even for those whose overall food preferences are unaffected, minor seasonal habits of cooling drinks in the heat, for example, arise naturally nonetheless.

"Actually, the weather doesn't really affect my food choices much, but I do drink a lot of lemonade during the summer." (IDI#16,19)

Changing food flavor

People's food choices normally change over time and at times are induced either by an increase in health consciousness or the introduction of a new way of life. According to one respondent, with time, his preference for food has really changed. He used to eat junk food a lot in the past. But since he became more health-conscious, his attitude towards junk food changed. He no longer has the same appeal for it as he had. It reflects a very common trend where people while growing older or becoming more health-conscious, start giving up indulgent food for healthy food.

"Yes, my food preferences have really changed with time. At one time, junk food was something that I really enjoyed eating. But now I am more concerned about my health so I do not feel that attraction for junk food that I used to feel." (IDI#25)

Also, the TPB explains how the external factors of a change in place and lifestyle can significantly bring about a change in taste preferences. A respondent said that when she shifted to another place for studies, she no longer had the foods that she and her family members used to eat together. She was introduced to a new environment where different

foods are sold. These gradually changed her tastes. This is like how a change in environment does not only change life routines but also the food tastes, just like heightened health awareness brings about a new preference for healthier food options.

"I used to live with my family, but because of my studies, I've shifted to a different area. The foods I used to enjoy aren't available here, and with the new environment and different foods, my tastes have changed." (IDI#14)

Some of the respondent's state that their taste for food does not change with time. One respondent reported that his taste in food remained the same as it previously was, liking and disliking the same types of food. They added, however, that in more recent times, fast food had become a more regular part of his diet. As might be expected, while core preferences may remain constant, in effect, changes in life this example, a busier schedule or greater availability of fast food-can affect the choices people make about what to eat. Even though their overall taste has not shifted, external factors have introduced new habits into their eating routine.

"No, my taste in food hasn't really changed; it's still the same as before. The things I liked or disliked in the past are still the same. Just more fast food adds to my list now." (IDI#28,16)

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The objective of this study is to understand food choices of Gen Z in Bangladesh, with a specific view to understand factors shaping food preference. Findings of current work have been grouped under several themes - (i) price as a critical determinant of food selection; (ii) health consciousness and its intersection with preference for taste; (iii) balancing traditional food with international trends; (iv) role of cleanness, freshness, and food quality; (v) influence of social media in shaping preference for foods; (vi) presentation of street food as a factor influencing appeal and perception of quality; (vii) seasonal and weather-driven demand shaping food choices; (viii) evolving food flavors reflecting changing preferences and exposure to global trends. The work also reflects on Gen Z's dual approach towards indulgence and a healthy life, and increased concern for sustainability in face of financial constraints. All these findings have important implications for producers, marketers, and policymakers interested in connecting with such an influential group of population.

Various factors have thus been considered for food choice by Generation Z, relating to socio-cultural dimensions over the past few years. Our study contributes to the literature on the exact dynamics that shape food choices among young adults in Bangladesh. A key finding of this investigation is the pivotal role of affordability in food choice, which again was pointed out in past studies conducted within other contexts. For example, Monika, (2019) argue that since Generation Z enjoys only limited financial independence, the price of foodstuffs plays a critical role in choosing any type of food. This again gets reflected in our own study, wherein all our respondents identified cost as one of the main factors in deciding what type of food to consume. This correspondence with previous literature thus indicates that affordability is one important determinant of dietary habits among young adults, regardless of geographical location. Other than price and place, another important influence on eating out choices in the Gen Z consumer is health consciousness. Indeed, previous studies by (Garai-Fodor, 2021) and (Genç, 2021) have pointed out the

increasing health awareness and nutrition-based knowledge of the youngest consumer generation. In line with this, our results have also indicated that for most participants, healthy eating is preferred when preparing meals at home. Nonetheless, health, though being an important factor, is not necessarily prioritized over the preference for the taste of food, our study learned. In this respect, it corroborates Fox et al., (2021), where health consciousness is indeed a growing trend, but the preference for tasty, filling meals—mostly those that evoke a sense of nostalgia—is still greatly demanded.

Interestingly, the previous study has focused on the duality of food choices representing either health consciousness or indulgence, while our study emphasizes the balance Gen Z maintains between traditional food and modern influence. As mentioned by (Genç, 2021), Gen Z looks for authenticity and connectivity to culture in the case of food during travel. Although this finds mention in our findings, it goes further to show that Gen Z in Bangladesh enjoys a mixture of traditional and international taste in food. It therefore follows that while authenticity and cultural heritage remain a source of appeal, a trend is emerging that looks toward diverse gastronomic experiences which are often modernized. This mixing of the local and the global is certainly something that has not been greatly captured within the previous literature, yet does come through as an important feature of Gen Z food choices in our study. According to Amatulli et al., (2023), compared to previous generations, Generation Z tends to take a hedonic approach toward food. The hedonic approach attributed to Gen Z focuses on the pleasure of taste and experience rather than health concerns. Similar results could be found in our study, as respondents, in general, would consider enjoyment and taste as major prerequisites in selecting what to eat, but unlike in previous generations, they also try to eat foods which are in close relevance to what is trending across the globe today. Dual focuses on indulgence and modernity with respect to food consumption within the Bangladesh paradigm show how Gen Z is balancing between traditional and globalized life.

Our findings also run parallel to those found by Kabir & Islam, (2021) and Chowdhury et al., (2021), where it is forecasted that organic foods are gaining popularity among the people in Bangladesh. Consumers in our sample responded that they would pay more for organic and more healthy alternatives, specifically when they believed it was safer or more sustainable. However, for as long as affordability remains a restraint to organic product access, as reported by (Ahmed & Rahman, 2015), our study found that the desire to spend more on organic products is also governed by factors like trust and availability. Indeed, this goes in line with what Zheng et al., (2021) concluded the core factors of consumer purchase decisions are product label trust and perceived safety in organic food consumption. While organic food has gained a surge in popularity, consumer trust level and product accessibility continue to remain big challenges which should be addressed if the market for these foods is ever to grow.

Portion size also emerged as an important factor in food choice in our study. According to Brunstrom et al., (2016), when people serve themselves large portions of food, they give themselves permission to take in more than they may otherwise need. Our study also found this to be the case, with participants showing a preference for portion sizes that approximated their individual needs of hunger and nutrition. On the other hand, they also reported that larger portions were most prevalent in fast foods, wherein expediency and speed often override considerations of health. Such a finding corroborates the study of Yunus et al., (2021), who found that portion size may vary according to meal type, with fast foods mostly served in larger portions. This means that even though Generation Z may be very conscious of serving sizes for home-cooked meals, they are not entirely immune to the influences of portion sizes offered by fast food establishments.

Hygiene and cleanliness in the selection of food items can't be ignored, which has been reflected in the present study. Shetu, (2022) and Polas et al., (2020) observed that hygiene is a vital component of consumer satisfaction, especially post-COVID-19. Participants in the present inquiry expressed a high level of concern regarding the safety and hygiene of food, particularly when eating out. They remain very keen on observing the situation of cleanliness in restaurants and food stalls. Such a situation indicates greater awareness among consumers about food safety and possible contamination. This has also been theoretically conceptualized that this concern has further been exacerbated due to the pandemic situation, as mentioned by (T. Chowdhury & Hossain, 2023). Online reviews, however, were one of the major factors through which our participants determined the quality of the food item, which corroborates the findings of (Rebollo & Hinlayagan, 2023), where social media and online platforms were considered significant sources for generating information regarding food-related decisions among Gen Z consumers.

The aesthetic appeal also played a significant role in determining the food choice, which agrees with the study by (Wang et al., 2023), underlining the fact that how aesthetically pleasing the foods are by their presentation and color makes a big difference in choice for the preference of eating from the Gen Z group. Indeed, this finding is further supported by our data where participants often mentioned that the presentation of foods may make one want to have it. For example, the attractiveness of street foods such as Kalai Ruti has been mentioned many times by the respondents, thereby focusing on presentation and variety in ingredients making them more attractive. Food aesthetics are one of the key elements when consumers decide about choosing a type of food.

Another well-documented area of literature is the role of social media in developing food preferences. For example, (Sadaf et al., 2023) have indicated how food choices, especially for young consumers, have been changed through social networks by exposing them to elaborate and trendy dishes via Instagram and TikTok. Our research supports this, with the majority of participants indicating exposure to new food trends or experiences through social media sites. For example, Mukbang (online broadcast) video-related influences were mentioned much more often in the context of trying new foods and dishes, where it was suggested that videos on this subject allowed the investigation of international cuisine in ways that were much more enjoyable and entertaining. Again, such conclusions support the idea (Lee & Wan, 2023), pointing out that para-social relationships built up through social media and content influencers are very important in shaping food preferences.

According to (Nyarota et al., 2022), globalization has opened up more food options across cultures, but it is also threatening to erase traditional food habits. Our research confirms the hypothesis that the Gen Z population in Bangladesh is open to global food, especially fast food, but still holds on to traditional food when there is a cultural get-together or family gathering. This duality of moving with the tide of both local and global food habits was reflected in the work of Swadźba, (2012) as they recorded food hybridity in other parts of the world. Our findings say that while the latest generation is susceptible to global trend influences, they still give local food pride of place in social and cultural settings. This was also reflected in the final theme: increasing interest in sustainability among Gen Z, as identified by (Kamenidou et al., 2019) and (Abrash Walton et al., 2022). This is manifest in our study as concern over the ecological consequences of food production and wasting of food, even when these may be tempered practically by cost and availability. Indeed, our results showed that though sustainability was an important factor, it did not always override other determinants of food choice, such as affordability and convenience, as reflected in the work of both (Kamenidou et al., 2019) and Abrash Walton et al., (2022).

While Gen Z is highly aware of sustainability issues, therefore, to a degree, more needs to be done to make sustainable food options available and affordable.

Our findings align with and extend the growing body of literature related to the food choice factors of Generation Z. While price, health consciousness, taste, and convenience are leading the food choice process, an interesting mix of traditional and modern influences is also reflected in our findings. Further, these lights up the diversity in the food preferences of Gen Z under the influence of their respective cultural heritage and global trends. The lessons from our current investigation have far-reaching effects on food producers, marketers, and policymakers in their pursuit of ways to effectively engage this energetic and influential age group.

Policy Recommendations

Addressing the changing food trend among Generation Z in Bangladesh requires an integrated policy approach in terms of affordability, access, preservation of culture, health consciousness, and sustainability. To make organic and functional foods affordable and accessible, the government needs to subsidize such healthy foods, particularly at schools, universities, and workplaces. In terms of public health, there is a need to conduct campaigns through social media, influencers, and digital content creators to promote healthy eating, traditional cuisines, and sustainable practices along with the regulation of unhealthy food marketing. Cultural preservation could be ensured by incorporating traditional cuisine education at school and college levels, giving support to small-scale producers, and holding food festivals displaying Bangladeshi cuisine. Similarly, for stronger food safety and hygiene, one would require more rigorous inspection, certification, and transparent online review platforms that can help consumers trust the produce. On sustainability, policymakers have to ensure that eco-friendly and sustainable foods are made more available and then accessible and affordable to the young generation. This holistic method will help health, cultural pride, and environmental stewardship mark the ultimate signature of dietary preference in the post-millennial world, with benefits accruing intergenerationally toward improved food futures.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examines Generation Z's food preferences in Bangladesh in terms of cultural identity, digital media's influence, globalization, health, and socioeconomic status, evaluating their impact on food preferences.

The results indicate that affordability, convenience, and social media determine food decisions. Cost remains a primary concern, yet interest in healthier food increases. Nevertheless, affordability and accessibility pose significant barriers to adopting a healthier diet, highlighting the need for strategies that promote affordable organic food options. Social media influences food trends, equally advocating healthy and unhealthy food, and suggesting regulation to enhance health. Despite globalization, traditional foods continue to hold ground. Generation Z prefers indigenous foods at home while adopting fusion and international foods. Fusion facilitates indigenous foods to be presented more attractively to younger generations.

The challenges need to be met through cooperation between policymakers, marketers, and stakeholders to improve nutrition, sustainability, and responsible digital marketing. Generation Z's evolving preferences can lead to a healthier food culture.

Limitations of the Study

This examination offers valuable insight into the food preferences of Gen Z in Bangladesh but has various limitations. The only sample size is 30 university students, which restricts generalizing to a wide audience and excludes rural and marginalized perspectives. Its focus is on the urban part, presenting information with typical trends, while self-response information is full of biased answers, such as social desirability. It also lacks quantitative validation, and the influence of factors such as gender, socio-economic status, and psychological factors is not considered, which therefore bounds the findings. Additional research should be carried out large and more varied sample, including rural areas. A mixed-method design needs to be followed so that a more comprehensive picture can be determined.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

The authors' contributions have been acknowledged in the order of authorship. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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