

Cross-generational analysis of consumer behaviour towards convenience foods: A study of convenience foods in Kerala

ABSTRACT

Aims: From customs dating back thousands of years to contemporary conveniences, food has always played a significant role in our societies. As we travel through history, we can see the tremendous change that has paved the way for the emergence of convenience foods in our lives. The behaviour of various generations is also on the go with time. Considering this, the study emphasises the intricate relationship between consumer behaviour towards convenience foods and age cohorts.

Methodology: The data for the study was collected from a total of 180 respondents. Among these, 60 belonged to Gen X, Gen Y, and Gen Z respectively from the central region of Kerala state.

Results: The results showed that all the respondents taken for the study irrespective of their generation showed a higher inclination towards home-cooked meals rather than convenience foods regardless of their popularity in today's market. For Gen X and Y, convenience food was a choice because of the little time and effort required for preparation while Gen Z preferred it as it fixes their hunger in a snap of a moment. The majority of the respondents purchased convenience food from the supermarkets. All the generations were moderately satisfied with the convenience foods available. Even though most showed modest satisfaction towards various parameters of satisfaction, the degree of satisfaction toward the availability of convenience food options differed among generations.

Conclusion: The results showed the importance of understanding the behavioural differences across generations and how they can impact the acceptance of convenience food. With a comprehensive understanding of the needs and drives of each generation, marketers can adeptly navigate through the complexity of this fast-paced convenience food industry and can be a success.

Keywords: Convenience food, Gen X, Gen Y, Gen Z

INTRODUCTION

The growth of human civilisation is inextricably linked to the evolution of our eating habits. Our forefathers were hunter-gatherers who relied on mother nature for their existence. Then, they started farming crops which brought a dramatic transition in agriculture. It developed and reformed and today we are at that stage where time has become a luxury and convenience foods have become essential for us to strike a delicate balance in our daily life. These modern food habits are a result of urbanisation, technological advancements, and shifting lifestyles (Mendonca, 2023). Moreover, technological advancements are seen now and then in today's world and the attitude toward these developments varies between different generations. In sociology, "generation" is a cohort or set of people who were born during the same time and have therefore been influenced by comparable social, cultural, and historical events. American Marketing Association defines a generation as people born and living at about the same time, regarded collectively. It is also used in social sciences to mean a delineated population who experience the same significant events within a given period of time (AMA, 2022). With all these prevailing definitions for generation, the generational cohort theory emphasises that the social changes that take place in the formative years of a person's life shape their view of the world and influence their behaviour throughout their lives (Puhad *et al.*, 2023). So, the unique qualities, principles, and life events that characterise every generational group create a rainbow of choices that influence how they engage with convenience foods. Since convenience foods are becoming more and more popular because of their time-saving and convenient features, and the attitudes of consumers have changed with generations, knowing how various generations act in the convenience food sector would enable us to forecast the trends and create fresh approaches to maintain the competitive spot in this market.

METHODOLOGY

For the study, 60 respondents each from Gen X, Gen Y, and Gen Z which sums to a total of 180 samples were taken from the central region of Kerala state. The respondents were sorted into different age cohorts based on the classification of population by generation followed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021. According to ABS 2021, people are categorised into six generations namely – Interwar (1949 or earlier), Baby Boomers (1950 – 1969), Gen X (1970 – 1984), Millennials or Gen Y (1985 – 1999), Gen Z (2000 – 2014), and Gen Alpha (2015 or later). The data collected from them were analysed using percentages, the index method, the Chi-square test of independence, the Kruskal-Wallis H-test, and the Mann-Whitney U test.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1. Socio-economic profile of respondents

To make the results of the study more focused, the demographic characteristics particularly the gender, education, and income of the respondents were studied to examine their effect on the behaviour towards convenience foods.

Table 1 Socio-economic profile of respondents

Variable	Category	Gen X	Gen Y	Gen Z
Gender	Male	20 (33.33)	30 (50)	16 (26.67)
	Female	40 (66.67)	30 (50)	44 (73.33)
	Total	60 (100)	60 (100)	60 (100)
Educational Qualification	SSLC	10 (16.67)	0	0
	Higher Secondary	16 (26.67)	2 (3.33)	14 (23.33)
	Diploma	6 (10)	2 (3.33)	4 (6.67)
	Under Graduation	24 (40)	20 (33.33)	42 (70)
	Post Graduation	4 (6.67)	24 (40)	0
	Ph. D	0	12 (20)	0
	Total	60 (100)	60 (100)	60 (100)
Annual income	Less than ₹ 1,25,000	18 (30)	38 (63.33)	56 (62.23)
	₹ 1,25,000 - ₹ 5,00,000	6 (10)	16 (26.67)	4 (6.67)
	₹ 5,00,000 - ₹ 30,00,000	36 (60)	4 (6.67)	0
	Over ₹ 30,00,000	0	2 (3.33)	0
	Total	60 (100)	60 (100)	60 (100)

Source: Primary data

Among the 180 samples surveyed, 60 from each generation X, Y, and Z were selected and all were educated. Among Gen Y and Z, the majority of them had an annual income of less than ₹ 1,25,000 since most of them were students during the study period.

3.2. Preference towards convenience foods

Purchase decisions are often influenced by the set of values and preferences owned by each generation. The respondents were asked if they preferred home-cooked meals or convenience foods.

Table 2 Preference towards convenience foods

Preference	Gen X	Gen Y	Gen Z
Convenience foods	22 (36.7)	22 (36.7)	18 (30)
Home-cooked meals	38 (63.3)	38 (63.3)	42 (70)
Total	60 (100)	60 (100)	60 (100)

Source: Primary data

In any of the generations surveyed, the majority of the people had more affinity towards home-cooked meals rather than convenience foods which might be the result of the generational value that has always been placed on home-cooked meals, which are thought to be healthier, more adaptable, and frequently connected to cultural and familial custom. Even though all generations taken for the survey favoured home-cooked meals, the favourability was a little high in the case of Gen Z. This may be due to the growing awareness of health concerns and the age-related importance people place on the health benefits of cooking at home (Devani *et al.*, 2024).

Table 3 Attributes of preference towards convenience foods

Attributes	Gen X	Gen Y	Gen Z
Saves time and effort in meal preparation	High	High	Moderate
It fits well with the busy lifestyle	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Requires minimal cooking skills	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Quick solution for hunger	Moderate	Moderate	High
Variety of options that suit my taste	Low	Moderate	Moderate
Ease of storage	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Longer shelf life	Moderate	Low	Low

Source: Primary data

The index method was used to find the reasons behind their preference for convenience foods. It was popular among Gen X and Y since they required little time or effort to prepare. This could be ascribed to the interest of consumers in reducing time for food preparation and their desire to devote free time to work or leisure, spending less time on cleaning and economical product management (Barska, 2018). Gen Z had a different opinion on this as most of them preferred it as it offered a quick fix for hunger. Maybe because older people who belong to Gen X are accustomed to the tastes they had throughout their lives (Peura-Kapanen *et al.*, 2017), they are less likely to agree on convenient food selections that suit their tastes. The extended shelf lives of the convenience meals were also not as important to Gen Y and Z. Millennials and Gen Z live healthy lifestyles (Ermawati *et al.*, 2024). They prefer those foods whose nutritional and health information are labelled (Shipman, 2020). This might be associated with their different attitude in terms of longer shelf life seen in convenience foods as they might correlate the extended shelf life with the presence of preservatives.

3.2.1. Association of preference with socio-economic variables

The association of socioeconomic variables gender, educational qualification, and income with the preference towards convenience food was analysed using the Chi-square test of independence.

Table 4 Association of preference with socio-economic variables

	Attributes of preference	P value		
		Gender	Educational Qualification	Annual income
Gen X	Requires minimal cooking skills	0.42	0.01*	1.00
	Quick solution for hunger	0.21	0.009*	0.10
	Variety of options that suit my taste	0.049*	0.03*	0.64

*significant at 5 percent level

The attributes such as the requirement of minimal cooking skills, quick solutions for hunger, and the variety of options that suit the taste preferences show an association with the educational qualifications

of the consumers. This could be because different educational levels place different priorities on time management and may have varying degrees of culinary confidence. An association between gender and the variety of options suitable to the taste was also noticed. Studies have been conducted in this regard and have found women to be more demanding than men in what they eat (Platta *et al.*,2023). The lack of correlation between any of the variables and any of the socioeconomic variables in the Gen Y or Z consumers may indicate that factors other than traditional socioeconomic indicators, like lifestyle choices and cultural influences, have an impact on consumers' preferences for convenience foods, underscoring the complexity of their decision-making process in this area. Also, the ages of these two generations are close to each other thereby showing similar behaviours (Celikel Tasci *et al.*, 2024).

3.2.2. Comparison between different generations regarding their preference

The Kruskal-Wallis's test was used to evaluate the variations in consumer preferences towards each variable between generations.

Table 5 Comparison of attributes preferred by the consumers while making a purchase

Attributes of preference	H value	P value
Saves time and effort in meal preparation	7.93	0.02*
Requires minimal cooking skills	6.40	0.04*
Quick solution for hunger	14.16	<0.001*
Variety of options that suit my taste	9.55	0.008*

*significant at 5 percent level

Significant variations were observed in the features such as time and effort savings, minimal cooking skills, and diversified convenience meal options. The Mann-Whitney U test was used to evaluate the variables that revealed differences to determine which two generations had differences.

Table 6 Differences among the various generations regarding preference

Generations	Saves time and effort in meal preparation		Requires minimal cooking skills		Quick solution for hunger		Variety of options that suit my taste	
	U value	P value	U value	P value	U value	P value	U value	P value
Gen X & Y	273.0	0.003*	306.0	0.02*	289.0	0.01*	274.0	0.006*
Gen X & Z	416.0	0.54	338.5	0.05	213.0	<0.001*	287.0	0.01*
Gen Y & Z	339.0	0.08	398.0	0.40	391.0	0.35	429.0	0.74

*significant at 5 percent level

Opinions from Gen X and Y differed in regards to saving time and effort, needing little cooking knowledge, and having a wider variety of convenience food options. This could be because the two generations had different lifestyles and dietary tastes. When it came to the variety of options that suited their tastes, Gen X also demonstrated a difference in opinion from Gen Z which could be because older people are accustomed to their tastes (Peura-Kapanen *et al.*, 2017). However, Gen Z is accustomed to

advanced technology and multimedia shelling them with information and is eager to try new food as they seek different experiences and new trends especially while they are traveling (Genc, 2021). As a result, there may have been differences in how each generation perceived convenience food options.

3.3. Purchase behaviour towards convenience foods

Regardless of the preference towards convenience foods, almost every respondent purchases one or the other type of convenience food available in the market.

3.3.1. Source of purchase

The insight into the source of purchase of convenience food by different generations will help the marketer to tailor their distribution strategies accordingly.

Table 7 Source of purchase

Source of purchase	Gen X	Gen Y	Gen Z
Nearby grocery shops	52 (86.7)	46 (76.7)	44 (73.3)
Departmental stores	30 (50)	6 (10)	10 (16.7)
Wholesale dealers	36 (60)	10 (16.7)	8 (13.3)
Supermarkets	58 (96.7)	48 (80)	46 (76.7)
Online	12 (20)	24 (40)	16 (26.7)

Source: Primary data

Across all generations, people preferred buying convenience foods from supermarkets and after supermarkets, most of them buy from the nearby grocery shops. This is probably caused by the accessibility and convenience that supermarkets offer, as they house a variety of convenience food options. The advertising media also pushes for convenience foods in supermarkets and hypermarkets where people are easily attracted to such products (Srinivasan and Kulkarni, 2019). Local grocery stores that cater to the regular shopping routines of customers also offer convenience and familiarity.

3.4. Consumer satisfaction with convenience foods

Examining consumer satisfaction across generations yields insightful information about how well convenience food offerings satisfy the varying tastes and expectations of different generations. The satisfaction was assessed using the index method.

Table 8 Customer satisfaction with convenience foods

Attributes	Gen X	Gen Y	Gen Z
Overall quality	High	Moderate	High
Taste and flavour	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Ease of preparation	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Nutritional value	Low	Low	Low
Affordability	Low	Low	Moderate
Packaging	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate

Shelf life	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Availability	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Composite index	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate

Source: Primary data

The overall quality of convenience foods had the centenarians extremely delighted. Convenience food's price and nutritional value rank lowest among its benefits, but its availability, ease of preparation, packaging, and shelf-life rank reasonably well. Along with being only moderately satisfied with all other features, Gen Y is also least satisfied with the nutritional value and price given they appreciate food products that positively impact the body (Barska *et al.*, 2023). Gen Z is similar to previous generations in that they are not as satisfied with the food's nutritional value but are very satisfied with its overall quality. Overall, respondents across generations are of the opinion that convenience foods are less nutritious than homemade alternatives, indicating a shared preference for healthier options. This dissatisfaction with convenience food's nutritional quality may be caused by concerns about processed ingredients, additives, and preservatives that are frequently found in convenience foods. Studies say there are health consequences associated with the overuse of many such additives (Adhikari, 2021). Apart from these apprehensions, convenience meals on the market were generally rated as somewhat satisfactory by all respondents, who belonged to the three generations X, Y, and Z.

3.4.1. Association of satisfaction with socio-economic variables

The relationship between a generation's socioeconomic characteristics and consumer satisfaction with convenience meals, focusing on how factors like gender, income, and education affect satisfaction levels was analysed using the Chi-square test of independence.

Table 9 Association of satisfaction with socio-economic variables

Variables	P value					
	Gender		Educational Qualification		Annual income	
	Gen X	Gen Z	Gen X	Gen Z	Gen X	Gen Z
Nutritional value	0.39	0.19	0.15	0.20	0.20	0.007*
Packaging	1.00	0.03*	0.48	0.06	0.56	0.67
Shelf life	0.39	0.28	0.28	0.03*	0.03*	1.00
Availability	0.12	0.55	0.52	0.16	0.006*	0.65

*significant at 5 percent level

Of all the factors considered in satisfaction with convenience foods, only shelf life and availability demonstrated a relationship between Gen X consumers' annual income to how satisfied they were with convenience food. Higher earners might have more purchasing power and be able to afford better convenience foods with longer shelf lives and greater availability, which would increase their degree of happiness in these areas. On the other hand, individuals with lower incomes might not have as many

alternatives and might find convenience meals that have shorter shelf life or are less readily available to be less satisfying. For consumers from Gen Y, none of the socioeconomic characteristics was correlated with any of the consumer satisfaction measures. In Gen Z, the relationship between nutritional value and annual income might be explained by the fact that consumers with higher incomes may be able to prioritise nutritional value when making food purchases and afford healthier, higher-quality convenience foods. Conversely, people with financial limitations might restrict their options to less expensive but possibly less healthful products. The variable packaging was associated with a particular gender, which could be influenced by gender-specific marketing strategies, like colour schemes, branding, and messaging. Additionally, the educational background of Zoomers is linked to the variable shelf life, which might be impacted by things like dietary preferences, health consciousness, and knowledge of food preservation techniques.

3.4.2. Comparison between different generations regarding their satisfaction

The Kruskal-Wallis's test is used to examine how satisfied different generations are with convenience foods.

Table 10 Differences among the various generations regarding satisfaction

Variables	H value	P value
Availability	6.56	0.04*

*significant at 5 percent level

A significant difference in the variable availability was seen which might be attributed to the different ways that different generations obtain different types of convenience food.

Table 11 Differences among various generations regarding satisfaction

Generations	Availability	
	U value	P value
Gen X & Y	324.0	0.04*
Gen X & Z	302.5	0.01*
Gen Y & Z	442.5	0.90

*significant at 5 percent level

It is evident that when it comes to satisfaction with convenience food availability, Gen X expressed views that differed from those of Gen Y and Z. This might be the result of different perceptions of availability as Gen X prioritises things like accessibility and proximity to favoured convenience food options. Gen X taken in the study also has the opinion that the convenience food available in the market does not suit their tastes which might also be ascribed to the difference in opinion on the availability of convenience foods between this generation with the other two generations.

CONCLUSION

The results showed that all the respondents taken for the study irrespective of their generation showed a higher inclination towards home-cooked meals rather than convenience foods regardless of their

popularity in today's market. For Gen X and Y, convenience food was a choice because of the little time and effort required for preparation while Gen Z preferred it as it fixes their hunger in a snap of a moment. The majority of the respondents purchased convenience food from the supermarkets. All the generations were moderately satisfied with the convenience foods available in the market. Even though most of them showed modest satisfaction towards various parameters of satisfaction, the degree of satisfaction toward the availability of convenience food options was different among generations. The findings highlight the significance of comprehending how generational behavioural variations affect the acceptance of convenience foods. For instance, it was seen from the study that people are becoming more and more health conscious, so marketers could come up with more convenience foods that are healthy. Marketers can also tailor their promotion campaigns based on the drives and motives of consumers of each generation. Since younger generations will be the future consumers of the products, the low desire for convenience food seen in them in the study should be taken into consideration. Marketers should devise strategies addressing their concerns to persuade these consumers to become regular consumers. By deftly navigating through the complexity of generational differences in consumer behaviour with a thorough understanding of the requirements and motivations of each generation, marketers can thrive in this fast-paced convenience food industry.

Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)

Author(s) hereby declares that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of manuscripts.

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