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Redefining food behavior in the digital age: Insights from Gen Z eating patterns

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Abstract

Generation Z (Gen Z), aged 10-27, represents a pivotal cohort in shaping emerging dietary patterns, balancing convenience oriented lifestyles with cultural and familial food traditions. This study examines the determinants of Gen Z's food choices in Albania by integrating Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to explain how convenience, perceptions of traditional recipes, impulsive eating, and digital and peer influences shape eating behavior. Using data from 302 face-to-face questionnaires analyzed through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), the findings show that convenience and social media significantly and positively influence food choices. In contrast, a strong attachment to traditional food negatively predicts the selection of modern and convenience based options, suggesting a value-based tension between cultural identity and contemporary consumption patterns. Impulsive eating was not a significant predictor, indicating that Gen Z's food choices may be more structured and socially influenced than purely spontaneous.

The study contributes theoretically by extending SDT and TPB to a transitional food culture context and empirically by providing evidence from an underexplored Southeast European setting. The findings emphasize that food producers and policymakers should balance convenience with cultural authenticity when targeting Gen Z.

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Introduction

Eating patterns established during adolescence often persist into adulthood, potentially leading to long term health consequences (Gilmour, 2020). In the short term, inadequate dietary intake is associated with impaired immune function, reduced cognitive performance, and lower academic achievement among young people (Burrows *et al*., 2017). Diets high in nutrient poor foods, combined with sedentary lifestyles, contribute to excess body weight, chronic inflammation, and compromised immune health (Morales *et al*., 2024). Understanding the factors that shape dietary behavior during adolescence and early adulthood is therefore critical for promoting lifelong health and well-being.

Generation Z (Gen Z), currently aged approximately 10-27 years, represents a key population for examining emerging dietary patterns. This generation shows a growing preference for convenience oriented food options and international cuisine, while simultaneously valuing health and nutritional quality (Bumbac, 2020). However, most existing research has focused primarily on health related drivers, such as nutritional awareness or weight control, with limited attention to the broader social, psychological, cultural, and digital influences that also shape eating behavior. In particular, impulsivity, perceptions of traditional recipes, and digital/social media exposure remain underexplored. This is reinforced by the fact that Gen Z, characterized by both cultural diversity and a strong dependence on technology, represents a generation deeply influenced by rapid technological developments (Zoltán *et al*., 2024).

Moreover, few studies integrate established behavioral theories to capture both intrinsic motivations within (SDT) and social cognitive determinants within (TPB), leaving a gap in understanding how these factors jointly influence food choice among Gen Z.

This research gap is particularly relevant in the Albanian context. Albania presents a transitional food environment where strong traditional dietary heritage rooted in Mediterranean patterns (Cakoni *et al*., 2025) coexists with increasing exposure to globalized food markets, fast-food culture, and digital media influence. Rapid economic development, urbanization, and technological diffusion have reshaped young people's eating habits, yet empirical evidence on the determinants of Gen Z's food choices in Albania remains scarce. Studying this population offers a unique opportunity to examine how cultural identity interacts with modern convenience and digital influences in an emerging economy, providing insights that are both locally relevant and internationally informative.

The present study investigates the key determinants of Gen Z's eating behavior by focusing on four main dimensions: Convenience (time pressure); Perceptions of traditional recipes (heritage food, emotional attachment);

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Impulsive eating tendencies (food craving and self-control), and Social Media influences (peer pressure through social media). The study integrates SDT (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) and TPB (attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control) into a unified framework to examine the interplay between psychological, social, and cultural factors in shaping dietary choices.

By addressing these determinants, the study makes several contributions. It develops a multidimensional, theory driven model of Gen Z food behavior that extends beyond health centric explanations. Seconds it provides empirical evidence from an underexplored Southeastern European context, highlighting how traditional food heritage coexists with modern lifestyle influences. It offers practical insights for policymakers, educators, and food system stakeholders seeking to design interventions, products, and communication strategies that align with Gen Z's evolving preferences and support healthier, culturally sustainable diets.

1. Conceptual background: nutritional patterns among Gen Z

The Industrial Revolution marked a pivotal shift in human diets, driven by urbanization, technological advances, and changes in labor and production, which transformed eating habits and food accessibility (Crane-Kramer & Buckberry, 2023). In the modern era, the growth of the food processing industry has prioritized extended shelf life and enhanced taste, promoting the widespread adoption of Ultra-Processed Foods (UPFs) through natural and artificial additives (Global Research Program, 2023). While estimates of diet-related Global Burden of Disease (GBD) risk factors offer guidance for public health interventions, existing models remain insufficient for capturing the lifelong health impacts of diverse dietary choices (Fadnes *et al*., 2022). Such shifts in nutrition have contributed to the emergence of "diseases of civilization," including obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disorders (Rakhra *et al*., 2020).

The literature indicates that both historical and contemporary structural changes in food systems shape dietary behavior and health outcomes (Fonte, 2019). Patterns are understood as the habitual ways in which foods and beverages are consumed, taking into account their quantities, proportions, diversity, combinations, nutrient composition, and the frequency of intake (Romieu, 2019). Dietary choices influence a wide range of dimensions, including health, environmental, social, and economic aspects. According to FAO and WHO (2019), optimal early life nutrition involves breastfeeding from birth, complemented by diverse minimally processed foods while limiting highly processed products. Consumers are increasingly attentive to

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how their dietary choices affect their personal health, the environment, and the welfare of living beings (Vițelar *et al*., 2019). Regardless of lifestyle, Gen Z should follow key dietary principles such as quantity (aligning intake with bodily needs), quality (ensuring nutrient completeness), balance (maintaining proper nutrient proportions), and adequacy (adapting food choice and amount to age, weight, physiological state, and activity), in order to achieve appropriate food consumption patterns (FAO & WHO, 2019). Factors influencing dietary behavior are categorized into internal factors, such as psychological and sensory aspects, and external factors, including social, economic, and cultural influences (Bumbac, 2020).

Youth, defined by the UN as individuals aged 15-24 or 15-34, are increasingly recognized as drivers of sustainable food consumption and innovation within food systems (United Nations, 2025; Halicka *et al*., 2025). Gen Z, in particular, is the first truly global cohort, sharing cultural exposures to food, fashion, and digital media (Ruppenthal, 2025). Research identifies key Gen Z characteristics relevant to dietary behavior: Health Orientation: Gen Z perceives homemade food as healthier, valuing balanced diets and portion control shaped by parental practices (Meyerding & Ahrens, 2024); Social Awareness and Sustainability: This cohort exhibits heightened concern for environmental impacts and sustainable consumption, although knowledge of broader food systems remains limited (Marinova & Bogueva, 2022); Technological Competence: Digital literacy and social media engagement significantly influence food knowledge and preferences (Ruppenthal, 2025; Priporas *et al*., 2017); Global Awareness and Consumer Behavior: Studies describe Gen Z as more aware of and engaged with global concerns (Vițelar, 2019). They actively participate in family decision making related to purchasing and eating patterns (Bumbac, 2020), and often prefer sellers with an active social media presence that facilitates engagement (Nickalls, 2019). Their use of technology relates to self-efficacy, perceived usefulness, and perceived risk, although they still tend to favor brick-and-mortar stores for food purchases (Vițelar, 2019). Moreover, Gen Z exhibits relatively low levels of consumer ethnocentrism (Rašković *et al*., 2020).

These characteristics suggest that Gen Z's dietary choices are influenced by a combination of health-conscious motives, sustainability awareness, and digital information channels. However, their knowledge gaps indicate the potential for educational interventions to enhance informed decision making. Although some studies report contradictory findings, such as Gen Z's interest in local cuisine (Maynard, 2019) or preference for vegetarian foods, these trends are often linked to the cohort's moral and ethical orientation toward food.

The literature reveals a tension in Gen Z behavior between convenience driven, impulsive eating and health oriented choices: Impulsive Eating:

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UPFs and ready-to-eat products appeal to convenience, speed, and hedonic pleasure, often leading to impulsive dietary decisions (Global Research Program, 2023; Rakhra *et al.*, 2020); Health Orientation: Simultaneously, Gen Z demonstrates awareness of the benefits of homemade or minimally processed foods, associating them with nutrition and well-being (Meyerding & Ahrens, 2024). Prior studies often conflate impulsivity with unhealthy eating, but for Gen Z, impulsivity may coexist with selective health consciousness. This conceptual distinction is critical for understanding trade-offs in dietary decisions and for the proposed conceptual model linking behavioral tendencies to food choices.

Gen Z's exposure to social media heavily shapes food knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors (Marinova & Bogueva, 2022). While platforms provide access to information about environmental sustainability and health, the reliability of such information varies, leading to partial or biased understanding. Social media also amplifies trends, peer influence, and experiential consumption, reinforcing both convenience driven and health conscious behaviors. Understanding the dual role of social media as both an educational resource and a driver of impulsive consumption is essential for modeling Gen Z dietary patterns.

Although research identifies Gen Z's distinct characteristics, the literature reveals several gaps: limited integration of behavioral, environmental, and technological influences into comprehensive models of food choice; ambiguity in constructs such as impulsive eating versus health orientation, which often overlap conceptually in prior studies; and underexplored links between traditional food perception (homemade or culturally familiar foods) and modern consumption patterns. The proposed conceptual model addresses these gaps by explicitly linking Gen Z characteristics health orientation, impulsivity, sustainability awareness, and social media influence to dietary behavior and food choice. This structure ensures theoretical clarity and a direct connection between literature and study hypotheses.

2. Drivers of Gen Z Eating Patterns: Theoretical Insights and Hypotheses

The evaluation of factors such as convenience, impulsive eating as the opposite of healthy eating patterns, social media, and traditional foods will be the aim of this study from the perspective of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) and TPB (Ajzen, 1991). Integrating these frameworks allows for a comprehensive explanation of Gen Z's food choices by linking underlying motivational processes with intention formation.

SDT explains behavior through the quality of motivation and the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy (experiencing

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volition and self-endorsement), competence (feeling effective in one's actions), and relatedness (feeling connected to significant others and social groups). The theory distinguishes between autonomous regulation, driven by internalized values and personal endorsement, and controlled regulation, driven by external pressures or obligations. Behaviors supported by need satisfaction tend to be more stable and self-sustaining.

Applied to Gen Z's food consumption, convenience, impulsive eating, perceptions of traditional food, and social media influence can either support or undermine these psychological needs. Access to affordable healthy or traditional foods may enhance autonomy and competence by enabling individuals to make informed and self-directed dietary choices. In contrast, financial or time constraints may limit perceived choice, fostering more controlled forms of regulation, such as reliance on fast food. Traditional foods may satisfy relatedness by reinforcing cultural identity and family connections, particularly when chosen out of pride or emotional attachment. Similarly, impulsive eating can reflect diminished autonomy and competence when behavior is driven by emotional triggers or peer pressure. Social media environments may strengthen relatedness through shared identity and online communities, but they may also reduce autonomy when food choices are shaped by external validation or trends. Thus, SDT clarifies the presence and quality of motivation underlying Gen Z's eating behaviors.

However, SDT does not fully explain how motivational states translate into concrete behavioral intentions. TPB (Ajzen, 1991) complements this perspective by proposing that behavior is predicted by intention, which is shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (PBC). Attitudes reflect the individual's evaluation of the behavior, subjective norms capture perceived social expectations, and PBC refers to the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior. Prior research has widely applied TPB to food-related decisions (Marques, 2022).

Within this framework, convenience may strengthen PBC by increasing perceptions of ease and accessibility (e.g., fast food availability or delivery services), thereby enhancing intention to purchase. Impulsive tendencies may correspond to favorable short term attitudes toward food consumption. Traditional food, conceptualized in terms of preference, availability, and cultural value, aligns primarily with subjective norms, as food practices are embedded in familial and cultural expectations. When Gen Z consumers perceive that important reference groups such as family members, peers, or cultural communities value traditional foods, they are more likely to form intentions consistent with these social influences.

By integrating SDT and TPB, this study connects deep motivational drivers (need satisfaction and regulatory orientation) with proximal cognitive determinants of intention. This combined framework provides stronger

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explanatory power than either theory alone in understanding Gen Z's food consumption patterns and the mechanisms through which motivation is translated into intention and behavior.

Convenience

Convenience remains a central requirement for Gen Z, driving increased fast-food consumption and contributing to the internationalization of dietary habits (Bumbac, 2020). This generation expresses strong concern for ease of access and availability when making food choices (Bogard, 2024). From the TPB perspective, convenience enhances perceived behavioral control (PBC), as easily accessible and ready-to-eat options increase the perceived ability to obtain food with minimal effort. Greater perceived control, in turn, strengthens behavioral intention. Lifestyle pressures and time constraints are defining characteristics of Gen Z's daily routines, significantly shaping their consumption patterns (Brunner, 2010). These constraints often lead to reliance on quick food solutions and greater demand for ready-to-eat products (Bogard, 2024). Within a SDT framework, time scarcity may reduce perceived autonomy by limiting the range of feasible choices, pushing individuals toward externally regulated decisions such as fast-food consumption. At the same time, although Gen Z leads a fast paced lifestyle, evidence suggests a willingness to invest time in sustainable food decisions when conditions allow. However, traditional home cooked meals are increasingly perceived as less attractive due to the complexity of preparation and the effort required to source ingredients (Diddi *et al.*, 2019; Bumbac, 2020). Such complexity may lower both perceived competence (SDT) and perceived behavioral control (TPB), thereby weakening intention to prepare these meals. Affordability constitutes a critical dimension of convenience and consistently ranks among the top motivators of Gen Z's food choices. Evidence from the British Food Standards Agency highlights price as a key determinant of young people's dietary decisions (FSA, 2020). Although Gen Z is widely recognized for its interest in healthy and sustainable products, financial constraints particularly among students, who represent a substantial segment of this generation limit the adoption of such diets (Halicka *et al.*, 2025). In SDT terms, economic limitations may undermine autonomy by restricting meaningful choice, while in TPB terms, price constraints reduce perceived behavioral control, thereby weakening intention to select healthier alternatives. The literature reflects ongoing contradictions regarding whether convenience ultimately outweighs the appeal of foods requiring greater preparation effort. Nonetheless, expectations from this generation indicate a demand for a food system capable of delivering affordable, accessible, and

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healthy options that reduce preparation time while preserving a sense of choice and control. Based on the literature findings, the following hypothesis is:

H1: Higher perceived convenience positively influences Gen Z's likelihood of choosing convenience food options.

Impulsive Eating as the opposite of healthy eating patterns

Psychological factors, together with individual psychological traits, are important determinants of food choices (Keller & Siegrist, 2015). Among these traits, impulsivity reflects the tendency to act quickly in response to stimuli, often without considering the consequences (Moeller *et al*., 2011), which are frequently linked to disordered eating patterns (Bari & Robbins, 2013). From the perspective of SDT, such behaviors may indicate a lower level of self-regulation, where actions are driven more by immediate impulses than by autonomous, reflective choice. Impulsive eating is marked by spontaneous eating behaviors, commonly triggered by strong emotional states (Shope *et al*., 2020). It is associated with rapid reactions to both negative and positive emotions (Sweerts & Romo, 2020). Impulsive behavior may also arise from an emotional urge or desire, which occurs when a person is exposed to an attractive or interesting stimulus (Oblak *et al*., 2017). Also, these behaviors are often expressed through the rapid consumption of snack foods or other convenient items that provide immediate gratification (Joghee & Alshurideh, 2021). Impulsivity has been shown to lead to higher caloric intake and unhealthy eating patterns as well as increased purchasing of high calorie foods (Mullan *et al*., 2014). Bénard *et al*. (2019) further demonstrate that individuals with high impulsivity levels are particularly drawn to palatable, sugar and fat rich foods. These patterns can also be interpreted through the TPB, where impulsive tendencies may weaken perceived behavioral control and strengthen favorable attitudes toward immediately rewarding food options. These findings raise the question of how Gen Z's impulsive tendencies interact with their attitudes toward healthy eating. Despite these risks, Gen Z consumers are placing increasing emphasis on product quality and healthier dietary patterns, including a notable rise in the consumption of fortified foods enriched with vitamins and minerals. This trend underscores the need for careful nutritional planning and innovation across the food system. A health focused dietary orientation may be defined as "an individual's mindset and approach to dietary choices, prioritizing nutritional quality and health benefits over other factors such as taste, convenience, or cost" (Patwardhan, 2024, p. 10). Within SDT, such an orientation may reflect more autonomous forms of motivation, where

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healthy eating is aligned with personal values and internalized goals rather than external pressures. Positive attitudes toward organic products, interest in detailed nutritional labeling, and recognition of the health advantages of "better for you" foods illustrate a strong connection between health concerns and food behavior (Ashton *et al.*, 2015; Jo *et al.*, 2016; Liu *et al.*, 2022). This connection has been identified as a particularly strong motivator for Gen Z in their food-related decisions (Mitic & Vehapi, 2020). In TPB terms, these positive evaluations shape attitudes and strengthen intentions to select healthier alternatives. Compared with previous generations, Gen Z has been exposed to greater education emphasizing the benefits of fresh over processed foods and a stronger emphasis on food quality. This is reflected in their pronounced preference for fruits and vegetables as alternatives to meat (NPD, 2019; Bogueva & Marinova, 2020). They value authenticity, freshness, and purity, favoring natural sources, particularly whole plants, fruits, and vegetables (Food Frontier, 2019), and their demand for innovation in taste, texture, and functionality positions them as influential actors in the future evolution of food systems (Wheeler, 2020). From an SDT perspective, this may signal a need for competence (making informed choices) and autonomy (expressing identity through food). Gen Z's openness to diversity also extends to food, shaped by growing up in a globalized environment that has familiarized them with international and ethnic cuisines (Campisi, 2020). For this generation, what matters is the effect of food on the body its benefits, potential harms, and its role in personal wellbeing. They demonstrate a preference for products that offer solutions rather than problems. Such behaviors may enhance perceived behavioral control (TPB) and intrinsic motivation (SDT), reinforcing intentional and health-oriented food decisions. However, the coexistence of strong health consciousness and impulsive tendencies suggests a potential tension between reflective intentions and spontaneous behaviors. When impulsive traits dominate, immediate gratification may override autonomous motivation and planned intentions, increasing the attractiveness of convenient, ready to consume options.

Based on the literature findings, the following hypothesis is:

H2: Strong impulsive tendencies positively influence Gen Z's likelihood of choosing convenience food.

Traditional Food Perception

Traditional food refers to culinary practices rooted in gastronomic heritage, typically consumed on specific occasions (Guerrero, 2009). It carries an authentic value, is prepared using traditional techniques,

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relies on inherited recipes (Colozza, 2021; Fibri 2019; Putra 2023), and often incorporates ingredients sourced from local farms or wild resources available in the surrounding area (Pieniak 2009). Quaranta and Salvia (2011), defines tradition as "the combination of representations, concepts, theoretical and practical knowledge, behaviors, attitudes, etc., that a group or a society accepts to ensure continuity between the past and the present." The conceptual development of traditional food has been explored extensively, raising questions regarding distinctions between "traditional foods" and related categories such as typical, artisanal, local, ethnic, regional foods.

Amilien and Hegnes (2013) propose four defining dimensions common across these categories: place, time, knowledge, and cultural meaning of particular importance is the sociocultural value, which refers to the benefits of consuming traditional cuisine, including the preservation of cultural heritage and the strengthening of community connections (Apak & Gürbüz, 2023).

Research on Gen Z's engagement with traditional foods is limited, likely due to their young age. Food serves as a means of recalling memories and reinforcing emotional connections within communities (Abarca & Colbi, 2016; Kim & Lee, 2020). The aromas and flavors of home cooking evoke memories of one's place of origin, providing comfort and continuity (Bailey, 2017) and contributing to cultural identity formation (Volpato & Ellena, 2023). Despite this, aspects of nostalgia and emotional connections with food remain underexplored in the literature (Vignolles & Pichon, 2014; Ju *et al.*, 2016). Nostalgia can evoke both positive and negative emotions (Espinoza-Ortega, 2021), generating simultaneous feelings of joy and sadness (Vignolles & Pichon, 2014). Food nostalgia has been analyzed in relation to time and space (Kessous & Roux, 2008), and for Gen Z, it is often linked to childhood, particularly with sweets and fried foods, which are associated with rewarding experiences. Food can serve as an emotional refuge, especially in the context of relationships between parent and child, and the sensory arousal elicited by nostalgic foods is cognitive, emotional, and physical (Anderson, 2016).

Although nostalgia highlights a contrast with past practices where food was prepared from scratch (Locher *et al.*, 2005), cooking traditional meals is often perceived as complicated by young people (Sanda, 2014), leading to a preference for industrialized foods that are more convenient. Nevertheless, according to the literature, Gen Z is highly active in cooking, inspired by media and online platforms, experimenting with new flavors and recipes (Hartman Group, 2018; Bumbac *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, traditional foods are generally perceived as natural, healthy, and reliable, often produced without chemicals or pesticides, and their recipes and ingredients emphasize unique cultural characteristics (Cerjak *et al.*, 2014). In emerging markets such as Albania, characterized by information gaps and food safety concerns

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(Haas *et al.*, 2021), local and traditional foods are considered a rational alternative to organic products, which are more expensive and distributed through limited channels (Cvijanović, 2020; Orea-Giner, 2023).

Previous studies indicate that Gen Z recognizes the economic and sociocultural sustainability value of traditional foods, although ecological benefits are less well acknowledged. Traditional foods represent a familiar, affordable, and economically rational means to promote sustainability (Kristia, 2024). Despite being exposed to alternative options such as fast food, Generation Z continues to demand quality foods with controlled quantity and composition (Liew, 2021).

Based on the literature findings, the following hypothesis is:

H3: Positive attitudes toward traditional food negatively influence Gen Z's likelihood of choosing convenience food.

Social Media/Peer Influence

Social media, in particular, has transformed daily life and communication (Rani & Tyagi, 2023), with food consumption emerging as one of its most impacted domains (Moghbeli *et al.*, 2023). As the food system evolves, Gen Z increasingly favors sugary and fatty snacks over traditional meals (Chen, 2024), reflecting a broader shift in dietary patterns influenced by technology. Social media refers to platforms that facilitate interactive, user created content, allowing individuals to share images, ideas, videos, music, or commentary. This includes social networking sites such as Facebook, blogging and microblogging services like Twitter, and media-sharing platforms including Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok (Ventola *et al.*, 2014). This digital revolution has introduced a new paradigm in how food is perceived and consumed (Rini *et al.*, 2024), as platforms showcase visually appealing images, videos, posts, trendy diets, and global culinary experiences that shape users' attitudes toward eating (Rounsefell *et al.*, 2020; Canet *et al.*, 2021). Such exposure not only informs healthy eating goals (Krishnan & Zhou, 2019) through attention cues and behavioral prompts (Patwardhan, 2024) but can also provoke impulsive responses when foods are presented attractively, triggering cravings strong, irresistible desires for specific foods (Cherpitel *et al.*, 2010). Research highlights significant associations between obesity rates and the prevalence of social media followers of sugary drink or fast-food brands on platforms like Instagram and Twitter (Gu *et al.*, 2021). Among adolescents, marketing on social media has been shown to increase preferences for and consumption of unhealthy foods (Fleming-Milici &

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Harris, 2020; Filippone, 2022), creating a complex digital environment that influences food choices and social norms. At the same time, social media can foster impulsive behaviors that challenge the regulation of eating habits (Filippone, 2022), though it also has the potential to promote healthy food consumption (Ventura *et al.*, 2021). However, exposure to idealized body images and unrealistic dietary expectations on these platforms can have significant psychological consequences (Chung *et al.*, 2021; Sidani *et al.*, 2016). Theoretical frameworks help explain these patterns. SDT emphasizes that food choices are shaped by intrinsic motivations and the fulfillment of psychological needs autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). Meanwhile, TPB highlights how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control influence eating behaviors (Ajzen, 1991), providing insight into how social media affects both intentions and actual consumption. Together, these theories clarify why Gen Z may gravitate toward visually appealing, convenient, or trendy foods despite potential health risks. Digital platforms accelerate interactions beyond the reach of face-to-face communication, allowing food companies to influence beliefs, attitudes, and norms at scale. Studies show that social media advertising for fast food can shape adolescents' perceptions, dietary behaviors, and purchase intentions (Thaichon, Quach, 2021). Peer influence further reinforces these behaviors, as adolescents' eating habits are affected by perceived social norms and pressures to conform during this developmental stage (Rice & Klein, 2019; Sharps & Robinson, 2017). While face-to-face peer interactions have long been recognized for their role in shaping health behaviors, social media extends this influence, affecting the full spectrum of adolescents' dietary choices from healthy to unhealthy (Chung, 2021).

Based on the literature findings, the following hypothesis is:

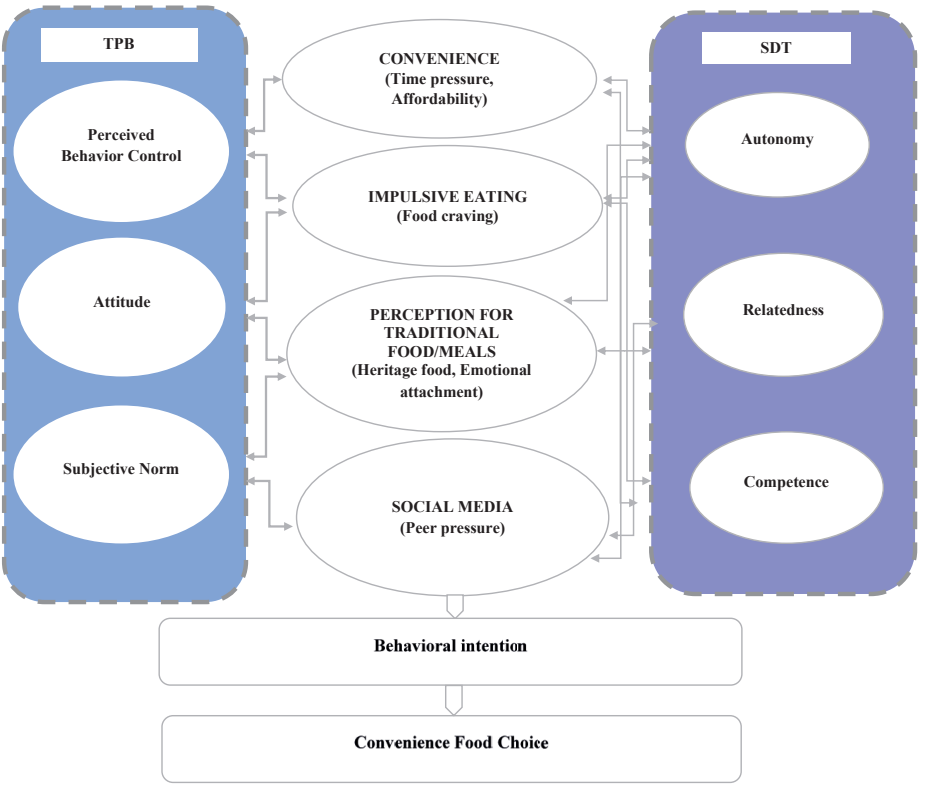
H4: Exposure to social media and peer influence positively influences Gen Z's likelihood of choosing convenience food.

Based on the literature above, a conceptual framework has been developed, as presented in the figure 1.

Following the formulation of the study hypotheses, the next section describes the materials and methods used to empirically test these relationships among Gen Z consumers in Albania.

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Figure 1 - Theoretical Framework



4. Methodology

Data Collection

Data for the current study were collected in 2025 from students at the Agricultural University of Tirana, Albania to investigate Gen Z consumers' behaviors and attitudes regarding food choice trends. Data were collected via a structured questionnaire administered in person. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions organized into three sections.

Section A collected demographic information, including gender, age, employment or study status, living arrangements (living with family or independently), and monthly income. For respondents living with family, total family income was recorded, while individuals living independently reported their personal monthly income.

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Section B focused on general food consumption patterns and attitudes, including changes in diet over the past five years, the proportion of imported versus domestic food consumed, perceived food quality, frequency of fast-food consumption, and the relative importance of various food attributes, such as taste, price, convenience, peer influence, and online recommendations.

Section C measured factors influencing food choice using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). This section assessed constructs including Convenience, Impulsive Eating, environmental concerns, Traditional Food Perception, international food influence, Social Media / Peer Influence, and actual food selection behaviors.

The survey was conducted in person to maximize response rates, minimize potential sampling bias, and allow clarification of questions when needed. While all participants were enrolled at a single university, they come from different regions of Albania, providing geographic diversity and enhancing the representativeness of the sample for the national student population. Nonetheless, this limitation is acknowledged in the interpretation of the results. Participation was voluntary, and all responses were collected anonymously.

Measurement Development

To test the study hypotheses, reliable and valid measures were developed for all constructs. Each construct was measured using multiple items adapted from previously validated scales. A pretest with a small group of students ensured that the questions were clear and understandable, and minor adjustments were made based on feedback.

Internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, with values above 0.70 considered acceptable (Nunnally, 1981). A construct is considered valid not only when it demonstrates convergent validity, meaning that the items intended to measure the construct load significantly on the same factor, but also when it shows discriminant validity, ensuring that the factors are distinct from one another and do not exhibit high covariance (Bagozzi *et al.*, 1991).

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted in SPSS to examine the underlying structure of the measurement items. Composite scores for each construct were generated from the EFA results and were used in subsequent analyses. The study variables, measurement scales, and sources of each item are summarized in Table 1.

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Table 1 - Study Variables, Measurement, and Sources

No.	Variable	Measurement Scale	Source
1.	Convenience	Likert Scale	Adapted from: Chen *et al*., 2024
2.	Impulsive Eating	Likert Scale	Adapted from: Vermeir & Roose, 2020
3.	Traditional Food	Likert Scale	Adapted from: Espinoza-Ortega, 2021
4.	Social Media	Likert Scale	Adapted from: Chung, 2021; Zhang *et al*., 2024
5.	Food Choice	Likert Scale	Adapted from: Ilieva *et al*., 2025

The data were analyzed using SPSS and AMOS. Following the EFA, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed in AMOS to validate the measurement model. Finally, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was applied in AMOS to test the hypothesized relationships between the independent constructs and the dependent variable. SEM provides a robust framework for hypothesis testing, ensuring that the constructs are reliable and valid for analyzing the relationships between variables.

5. Results

Sample Characteristics

A total of 302 valid questionnaires were obtained. As presented in Table 2, 114 respondents (37.7%) were male and 188 (62.3%) were female.

Table 2 - Socio-demographic characteristics of study sample

Socio-Demographic Characteristics	Groups	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	114	37.7
	Female	188	62.3
	Total	**302**	**100**
Living with	Family	283	93.7
	Alone	19	6.3
	Total	**302**	**100**
Work and study status	University & part-time job	201	66.6
	Only university	80	26.5
	Only working	21	7.0
	Total	**302**	**100**

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Most participants (283; 93.7%) lived with their family, while 19 (6.3%) lived independently. Regarding work and study status, 201 students (66.6%) were enrolled in university while also working part-time, 80 (26.5%) were solely university students, and 21 (7.0%) were employed full-time. The participants' mean age was 20.65 years (SD = 1.67), consistent with the Gen Z age range. The mean monthly family income was 150,860.93 ALL (SD = 51,503.19), reflecting a broad socioeconomic range.

Measurement Model Results

EFA using principal component extraction with Varimax rotation revealed a five-factor solution, which we labelled Convenience, Impulsive Eating, Traditional Food Perception, Social Media / Peer Influence, and Food Choice (Costello & Osborne, 2005; Field, 2018; Watkins, 2018). All factors demonstrated excellent internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.982 to 0.997 (Cronbach, 1951). Item loadings were consistently high (≥ 0.93), confirming a clear factor structure. A summary of factor reliabilities and item counts is presented in Table A.1, while detailed factor loadings for all items are provided in Appendix A.

Following the EFA, CFA was performed using AMOS to validate the proposed measurement model. The CFA results indicated a good fit to the data: χ^2 (118) = 201.751, $p < 0.001$; CMIN/DF = 1.71; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.993; Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.991; and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.049, confirming the adequacy of the model structure.

Table 3 presents composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), maximum shared variance (MSV), maximum reliability (MaxR(H)), and the inter-construct correlation matrix (with the square roots of AVE on the diagonal) for the five latent constructs: Social Media / Peer Influence (Soc Med), Convenience (Conv), Impulsive Eating (Imp Eat), Traditional Food Perception (Trad Food), and Food Choice (Food Cho). CR values ranged from 0.979 to 0.997, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 and indicating strong internal consistency (Bagozzi *et al.*, 1991; Hair *et al.*, 2010). Convergent validity was confirmed, as AVE values ranged from 0.922 to 0.991, well above the 0.50 criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair *et al.*, 2010; Malhotra & Dash, 2011; Mehmeti & Luga, 2024). Discriminant validity was supported by each construct's AVE exceeding its MSV, and by the square root of AVE on the diagonal being greater than the inter-construct correlations, consistent with the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair *et al.*, 2010).

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Overall, these results demonstrate a robust measurement model with strong reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity, providing a sound foundation for subsequent structural model testing.

Table 3 - Validity/Reliability and factor correlation matrix with square root of the AVE on the diagonal

	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	Soc Med	Conv	Imp Eat	Trad Food	Food Cho
Soc Med	0.991	0.973	0.249	0.991	**0.986**				
Conv	0.989	0.957	0.118	0.992	0.291	**0.978**			
Imp Eat	0.992	0.967	0.067	0.992	0.030	0.259	**0.984**		
Trad Food	0.979	0.922	0.052	0.984	–0.198	–0.159	–0.030	**0.960**	
Food Cho	0.997	0.991	0.249	0.997	0.499	0.344	0.087	–0.228	**0.996**

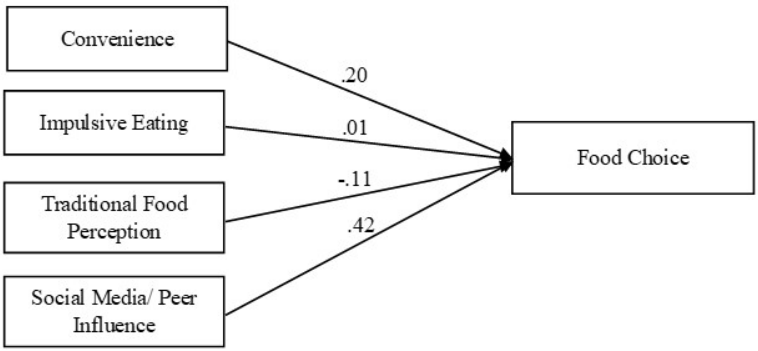
Note: CR - Composite Reliability, AVE - Average Variance Extracted, MSV - Maximum Shared Variance, MaxR - Maximum Reliability.
Soc Med - Social Media / Peer Influence; Conv - Convenience; Imp Eat - Impulsive Eating; Trad Food - Traditional Food; Food Cho - Food Choice.

Structural Model Results

The structural model demonstrated a good fit to the data, as indicated by the following indices: $\chi^2 = 189.157$, df = 117, $p < .001$; CMIN/DF = 1.617; CFI = 0.994; TLI = 0.992; and RMSEA = 0.045. Given this satisfactory model fit, hypotheses were tested by examining the structural coefficients presented in Table 4. Convenience had a significant positive effect on Food Choice, supporting Hypothesis 1 (H1). Traditional Food Perception exhibited a significant negative effect on Food Choice, confirming Hypothesis 3 (H3). Social Media / Peer Influence showed a strong positive influence on Food Choice, supporting Hypothesis 4 (H4). Impulsive Eating did not significantly influence Food Choice, and thus Hypothesis 2 (H2) was not supported. This non-significant effect suggests that, in this sample of Gen Z university students, food selection may be less driven by spontaneous hedonic impulses and more influenced by structured lifestyle and environmental factors. Specifically, habitual consumption patterns, family or cultural routines, and exposure to digital media may overshadow individual impulsive tendencies, indicating that convenience and peer driven influences are more salient determinants of dietary behavior in this cohort. These results are presented in the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) diagram (Figure 2).

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Figure 2 - Structural Equation Modeling Diagram



Note: Standardized path coefficients are shown on arrows.

Overall, the results highlight the predominant role of lifestyle and media related factors over impulsive tendencies in shaping food choices, emphasizing that structural and socially mediated determinants may be more predictive than dispositional traits among Gen Z consumers.

Table 4 - Structural model results

Hypothesis (H)		Estimate	Std-Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Results
H1	Food Choice ← Convenience	0.213	0.201	0.054	3.983	***	√
H2	Food Choice ← Impulsive Eating	0.012	0.011	0.048	0.245	0.807	×
H3	Food Choice ← Traditional Food Perception	–0.180	–0.114	0.076	–2.358	0.018	√
H4	Food Choice ← Social Media / Peer Influence	0.395	0.419	0.047	8.378	***	√

Note: *** significant at $p < .001$, √ - Supported, × - Not Supported.

6. Discussion

The structural model indicates that Convenience is the strongest positive predictor of Food Choice among Gen Z, reinforcing prior evidence that this cohort prioritizes time-efficient, easily accessible, and affordable processed food options (Johansen *et al.*, 2025; Nguyen & Simpson, 2024). The highest loadings were associated with pre-preparation characteristics (e.g., cutting,

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mixing, partial cooking), suggesting that Convenience operates not only as a time-saving mechanism but also as a means of reducing cognitive effort in food selection. This finding is consistent with previous research identifying Convenience as a central requirement for contemporary consumers (Arenas-Gaitán *et al*., 2021; Bogard *et al*., 2024). However, unlike older generations for whom Convenience may function as a secondary attribute (Chen *et al*., 2024), our results suggest that for Gen Z it represents a primary decision criterion.

Similarly, Social Media / Peer Influence emerged as a strong positive predictor of Food Choice, confirming the pivotal role of digital environments in shaping dietary preferences (Jang *et al*., 2024; Brenkusová *et al*., 2025). While some studies suggest that social media can promote healthier behaviors, others associate it with increased consumption of unhealthy foods (Ventura *et al*., 2021), consistent with our findings. Exposure to influencers and marketing stimuli has been shown to increase willingness to try new products (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024), while also contributing to unrealistic expectations and higher consumption frequency of convenience-oriented foods (Patwardhan *et al*., 2024). Moreover, digital platforms have been linked to misinformation and the normalization of unhealthy dietary patterns (Chung *et al*., 2021), as well as broader shifts in traditional eating practices (Rounsefell *et al*., 2020).

In contrast, Traditional Food orientation demonstrated a significant negative association with convenience-driven food choices, suggesting that cultural attachment and heritage-based preferences may serve as protective factors against the adoption of fast-food consumption patterns (Kristia *et al*., 2024; Mitchell & Vehapi, 2021).

Unexpectedly, Impulsive Eating did not significantly predict Food Choice. Rather than indicating a methodological limitation, this finding may reflect the structured and socially embedded nature of food consumption within the present sample. Notably, 93.7% of participants reported living with their families. As highlighted by Ares *et al*. (2024), eating habits are strongly shaped during childhood and adolescence, and early-established routines may stabilize food-related behaviors in later stages of life. In such contexts, family norms and shared meal practices may function as regulatory mechanisms that attenuate the influence of individual impulsive tendencies. Instead of being guided by spontaneous hedonic reactions, food choices may be embedded within pre-existing household routines and culturally reinforced expectations. Ares *et al*. (2024) further emphasize the importance of fostering rational and functional food-related competencies while minimizing impulsive drivers, which may help explain the reduced explanatory power of impulsivity in this cohort. Additionally, broader generational evidence indicates that Gen Z consumers prioritize sustainability and authenticity in food purchasing decisions (Deloitte, 2023), suggesting a value oriented and reflective

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consumption style. Taken together, these findings imply that ultra-processed food consumption in this context is less a product of uncontrolled impulses and more a function of structurally conditioned, socially normalized, and culturally mediated decision making processes (Shope *et al.*, 2020).

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings extend the explanatory scope of both Theory of Planned Behavior and Self-Determination Theory in the context of Gen Z food behavior. Within TPB, Convenience appears to strengthen perceived behavioral control by increasing the perceived ease and feasibility of consumption, while Social Media / Peer Influence reflects evolving subjective norms and socially shaped attitudes. Importantly, the non-significant role of Impulsive Eating supports TPB's core assumption that behavior is largely reasoned rather than purely spontaneous. However, the findings also suggest that contemporary digital environments may intensify normative pressures beyond what traditional TPB applications have considered, indicating the need to incorporate digitally mediated norms more explicitly in future theoretical applications.

From an SDT perspective, Traditional Food orientation reflects dimensions of relatedness and internalized value alignment, indicating that cultural attachment may operate through more autonomous motivational processes. At the same time, the strong effects of Convenience and Social Media suggest that externally structured environments and controlled motivational dynamics can significantly shape food choices. The absence of an impulsivity effect further implies that motivational regulation may override dispositional tendencies when food behavior is embedded in stable cultural and family contexts.

Methodologically and conceptually, these results highlight the importance of adopting an integrated framework that simultaneously incorporates lifestyle, digital, and cultural determinants when examining Gen Z food choices. Rather than relying exclusively on health-centric or trait-based explanations, the findings support a context-sensitive perspective in which structural constraints, digitally mediated norms, and cultural identity collectively shape dietary behavior.

Practical implications

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for actors across the agro food system.

First, food manufacturers and food-service operators should integrate elements of Convenience into product design by offering items that reduce preparation time while retaining nutritional quality and cultural familiarity. For example, traditional dishes could be reformulated into ready-to-cook

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meal kits, pre portioned ingredients, partially prepared components, or frozen versions requiring minimal preparation time. Packaging innovations such as resalable containers, single-portion formats, or microwave-ready options may further enhance perceived ease of use. By combining efficiency with recognizable flavors and culturally embedded recipes, producers can better align with Gen Z's demand for time saving yet identity consistent food solutions.

Second, marketing strategies should adapt to the central role of Social Media/Peer Influence in shaping perceptions and purchasing behavior. Campaigns may benefit from collaborating with credible influencers who demonstrate practical preparation methods, transparent sourcing practices, or culturally meaningful narratives. Short form video content showcasing quick preparation of traditional inspired meals, behind the scenes production transparency, and user generated content challenges may enhance engagement. Emphasizing authenticity and sustainability values increasingly prioritized by Gen Z can further strengthen brand credibility.

Third, initiatives promoting Traditional Food should highlight not only symbolic and cultural value but also functional and practical attributes. Traditional products can be repositioned as modern and adaptable by offering simplified recipes, time efficient preparation instructions, or digital tutorials accessible via *quick response* – QR codes on packaging. Restaurants and retailers could introduce "modernized traditional" menu lines that preserve core ingredients while adapting format and serving style to contemporary consumption habits. Such strategies may help bridge the gap between cultural continuity and convenience oriented lifestyles.

Finally, public-policy interventions should recognize that structural drivers such as convenience and digital exposure appear more influential than impulsive tendencies in shaping Gen Z dietary behavior. Public health strategies may therefore benefit from improving the availability and affordability of convenient, nutritionally balanced options in schools, universities, and urban food environments. Nutrition education programs could incorporate digital literacy components, helping young consumers critically evaluate online food marketing, influencer content, and nutrition misinformation. Additionally, integrating culturally grounded dietary education into school curricula may reinforce traditional food knowledge while promoting practical cooking competencies that align with contemporary time constraints.

By combining industry innovation, digitally adapted communication strategies, and culturally sensitive public health initiatives, stakeholders can more effectively respond to the evolving dietary patterns of Gen Z consumers.

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Limitations and future research

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design restricts causal inference, as relationships among Convenience, Social Media / Peer Influence, Traditional Food orientation, and Food Choice were examined at a single point in time. Although the structural model identifies significant associations, temporal ordering and causal direction cannot be definitively established.

Second, the sample consists exclusively of Albanian young adults, which may limit the generalizability of the findings across different cultural, economic, or food system contexts. Albania represents a transitional food environment where traditional dietary patterns coexist with rapidly expanding convenience oriented options. As such, the relative influence of cultural attachment and digital exposure may differ in more industrialized or culturally distinct settings. An additional limitation concerns about the sampling frame is that participants were recruited from students at the Agricultural University of Tirana, although they originate from several cities across the country. While this geographic diversity enhances internal variation, the academic background of respondents may introduce a form of educational or domain related bias. Students enrolled in an agricultural focused institution may possess greater awareness of food systems, nutrition, or sustainability issues compared to the broader Gen Z population. This could influence their reported attitudes toward traditional food, convenience, or sustainability related considerations, potentially limiting the external validity of the findings.

Third, the study relies on self-reported measures, which may introduce social desirability bias and recall inaccuracies. Participants may underreport unhealthy food consumption or overstate culturally valued behaviors such as preference for Traditional Food. Additionally, the constructs were measured using perceptual scales, which capture subjective evaluations rather than objective consumption data. While reliability and validity indicators were satisfactory, future research could strengthen measurement precision by incorporating behavioral tracking methods (e.g., food diaries, purchase records, or digital consumption data).

Moreover, Impulsive Eating was assessed as a dispositional tendency rather than through situational or experimentally induced impulse conditions. This may have limited the ability to detect context dependent impulsive behaviors that emerge under time pressure, emotional stress, or digital cue exposure.

Future research should therefore adopt more diversified methodological approaches. Longitudinal designs would allow examination of how digital exposure and convenience orientation evolve over time and whether they reinforce habitual ultra-processed food consumption. Experimental studies

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could manipulate social media stimuli (e.g., influencer endorsement vs. neutral content) or convenience framing to test causal effects on food selection. Mixed methods approaches combining structural modeling with qualitative interviews or focus groups may provide deeper insight into how Gen Z interpret and internalize cultural and digital food cues in everyday decision-making contexts.

Cross national comparative research would further clarify whether the buffering effect of Traditional Food orientation observed in this study persists across societies with varying degrees of culinary continuity and market modernization. Finally, future studies could examine potential interaction effects or mediation mechanisms for example, whether cultural identity moderates the impact of social media exposure, or whether perceived behavioral control mediates the relationship between convenience and food choice.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature on food behavior by demonstrating that Generation Z's dietary choices are best understood through an integrated perspective that combines structural, digital, and cultural determinants. Rather than framing ultra-processed food consumption primarily as a consequence of impulsive or purely health related decision making, the findings highlight the dominant role of convenience oriented lifestyles and digitally mediated social norms within a culturally embedded context.

The study advances generational research by showing that Gen Z food behavior reflects a hybrid consumption logic: one that simultaneously embraces efficiency and digital connectivity while maintaining selective attachment to traditional food values. This dual orientation challenges simplified narratives portraying Gen Z either as purely convenience driven consumers or as uniformly sustainability focused actors. Instead, their food choices appear to be shaped by the interaction between modern food environments and culturally internalized identities.

From a theoretical standpoint, the research enriches applications of the TPB and SDT by illustrating how digitally mediated norms and perceived convenience can outweigh dispositional traits such as impulsivity in predicting food related decisions. The findings suggest that contemporary food behavior models should more explicitly account for digital exposure and cultural continuity as interacting mechanisms within younger cohorts.

Moreover, by examining Gen Z within a transitional food system context, this study extends existing evidence beyond highly industrialized Western settings and provides insight into how modernization and cultural heritage coexist in shaping dietary patterns. In doing so, it offers a more context-

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sensitive understanding of generational food behavior in emerging and transforming markets.

Overall, the study underscores the need to move beyond health centric or trait based explanations of youth food consumption and toward multidimensional frameworks that integrate lifestyle efficiency, digital influence, and cultural identity. Such an approach offers a more comprehensive foundation for future research on generational food behavior in increasingly digitalized and culturally dynamic food environments.

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Appendix A

Table A.1 - Exploratory Factor Analysis

Rotated Component Matrix	**Component**				
	Cronbach's Alpha	**F1**	**F2**	**F3**	**F4**	**F5**
Convenience (Adapted from Chen *et al*., 2024)	**.990**					
I choose foods that save me time		.962				
I prefer foods that are quick to prepare		.957				
I buy foods that are easily accessible and affordable in supermarkets		.955				
I consume semi-prepared foods because they are easy to carry to school/work		.951				
Impulsive Eating (Adapted from Vermeir & Roose, 2020)	**.991**					
The visual appearance of food prompts me to eat even when I had not planned to do so			.978			
When I see a food I like, I pay little attention to its healthiness			.980			
Foods I enjoy trigger positive emotions			.978			
Foods with an appealing texture motivate me to purchase or try them			.979			
Traditional Food (Adapted from Espinoza-Ortega, 2021)	**.982**					
I perceive local and traditional products as healthier than other products				.971		
I believe local products provide greater nutritional value				.964		
I consider traditional meals prepared by local products to have superior taste				.960		
I make an effort to consume local products whenever possible				.971		
Social Media (Adapted from Chung, 2021; Zhang *et al*., 2024)	**.991**					
My food choices are shaped by content I encounter online					.950	
Recommendations from web influencers affect my food choices					.955	

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Rotated Component Matrix	**Component**				
	Cronbach's Alpha	**F1**	**F2**	**F3**	**F4**	**F5**
My food consumption is influenced by global food industry promotions disseminated through online media					.935	
Food Choice (Adapted from Ilieva *et al*., 2025)	**.997**					
The foods I consume are mostly foods that are well - known worldwide						.940
The foods I consume are easy to prepare.						.940
The foods I consume are mostly convenience foods						.938

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