



A TOUCH OF GREEN: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ABOUT PLANT-BASED MENU OPTIONS IN SELECTED CASUAL DINING RESTAURANTS: GENERATION Z PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study examines Generation Z university students' perceptions, acceptance factors, and underlying motivations regarding plant-based menu options in selected casual dining restaurants in Manila. Semi-structured interviews with 25 participants were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and thematic analysis, revealing four key themes: digital media-driven awareness, sensory experience as the decisive factor, health and ethical considerations, and the alignment of dining choices with personal and global values. Findings demonstrate that sensory attributes, particularly taste and texture, are critical non-negotiable determinants of acceptance. Additionally, health benefits, ethical concerns such as animal welfare and sustainability, and economic factors, including price-value judgment and brand transparency, further shape preference and decision-making. The study identifies gaps in market awareness and emphasizes the importance of integrated marketing strategies combining digital and in-store promotion. Implications for hospitality management include prioritizing product quality, transparent communication about health and sustainability, and aligning the brand with consumer values to engage this demographic effectively. Recommendations for future research include expanding demographic diversity, longitudinal tracking of attitude changes, and cross-cultural studies to deepen understanding of plant-based food acceptance in evolving consumer markets.

Keywords: *Generation Z, plant-based diets, casual dining, consumer acceptance, sensory experience, sustainability, qualitative research*

INTRODUCTION

The inclusion of plant-based options in the hospitality industry's food sector has grown rapidly. It is projected to expand significantly by 2030 (Baum & Lockyer, 2020), driven by the increasing prevalence of veganism, vegetarianism, and flexitarianism. This trend has created a robust global market for plant-based ingredients, with market value expected to nearly double from USD 60.71 billion in 2022 to USD 120.74 billion by 2029, reflecting a compound annual growth rate of 10.32% (Athena Information Solutions Pvt. Ltd., 2024). Such growth presents both opportunities and challenges for food service establishments, particularly fast-casual restaurants, which have been adapting to this evolving consumer demand.

Fast-casual restaurants—hybrids of fast food and casual dining—have emerged as one of the most resilient segments in the hospitality industry. These establishments have continued to evolve by prioritizing customer satisfaction and offering higher-quality, fresher ingredients than traditional fast-food outlets (Compostable Food Service Disposables Market Size, Share & Trends Analysis Report, 2023). Their operational flexibility positions them to incorporate plant-based products into their menus more readily. Concurrently, plant-based producers have continued to innovate, replicating the flavor, texture, and nutritional profile of conventional animal-based proteins (Buokid, 2021, as cited in Abebe et al., 2024). These innovations have positioned plant-based alternatives as viable substitutes for meat, particularly among environmentally conscious consumers (Kopplin & Rausch, 2022, as cited in Mahasuweerachai et al., 2023). Beyond environmental concerns, ethical and health motivations have also influenced dietary shifts toward plant-based consumption.

While global trends highlight the rise of plant-based consumption, regional dynamics—such as those in the Philippines—present a more

nuanced picture. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated interest in plant-based options, as Filipino consumers sought healthier alternatives (Singian, 2021, as cited in Monares et al., 2024). However, this initial surge has not been sustained. A 2024 Statista survey revealed that only 46% of Filipino respondents continued to consume plant-based meat alternatives (PBMs), a decline from the 65% reported in 2021 (Statista, 2024; Statista, 2022, as cited in Pagulayan et al., 2024). This downward trend suggests a gap between perceived health benefits and actual consumer behavior.

Despite the growing availability of plant-based options, several challenges persist. One notable barrier is the perception of taste. Consumers often associate healthy food with blandness, viewing plant-based options as mere imitations of traditional dishes (Sucapane, 2021, as cited in Sadfar, 2022). Supporting this perception, van Vliet et al. (2021) argued that plant-based and animal-based proteins should be viewed as complementary rather than interchangeable, given their distinct nutritional profiles. Additionally, concerns have been raised regarding the elevated sodium content in some plant-based substitutes, which may pose cardiovascular risks (Curtain & Grafenauer, 2019; Sha & Xiong, 2020; World Health Organization [WHO], 2020).

This study addresses critical gaps in the literature concerning customer satisfaction, perceived effects, and consumer perceptions of plant-based menu options in fast-casual dining establishments. Existing research has predominantly focused on health benefits (Thomas et al., 2023; Qin et al., 2022; Peña-Jorquera et al., 2023), environmental sustainability (Bryant, 2022), disease prevention (Peña-Jorquera et al., 2023; Bryant, 2022; Liang et al., 2024), dietary patterns (Craig et al., 2021; Storz, 2021), and purchase intentions (Monares et al., 2024;

Mustapa et al., 2024). However, limited empirical research has examined customer satisfaction and perceptions of plant-based menus in fast-casual dining, particularly in the Philippine setting.

Accordingly, this study aimed to examine student perceptions of plant-based menu options and their availability in fast-casual restaurants. By capturing insights from Generation Z consumers in Metro Manila, the research sought to inform menu diversification strategies and promote sustainable dining practices. The findings contribute to the broader literature on consumer behavior, plant-based diets, and the sociocultural dimensions of dietary choices. Moreover, the study provides practical implications for enhancing customer experience, informing strategic marketing decisions, and supporting sustainable development initiatives. Specifically, it aligns with five Sustainable Development Goals: SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 15 (Life on Land).

Theoretical Framing

This study is grounded in the Perceived Value Theory, developed by Zeithaml (1988), which posits that perceived value reflects a consumer's overall evaluation of a product or service's desirability, based on the trade-off between what is received and what is given (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Initially conceptualized as a unidimensional construct, perceived value was assessed by soliciting consumer feedback on the value derived from their purchases (Fernández & Bonillo, 2007). However, subsequent scholarship has expanded this view, suggesting that perceived value is a multidimensional construct encompassing various dimensions such as price, quality, benefits, and sacrifice. Fundamentally, perceived value arises from a consumer's subjective cost-benefit analysis when evaluating a product or service (Mahasuweerachai et al., 2023).

Given its emphasis on consumer evaluation and perception, Perceived Value Theory provided the most relevant conceptual foundation for this study. It supported the exploration of Generation Z consumers' perceptions of plant-based menu options in fast-casual dining restaurants, particularly through the lens of three key value dimensions: functional, emotional, and social value (Mahasuweerachai et al., 2023). These dimensions are instrumental in shaping purchase intentions and overall consumer satisfaction.

Functional value pertains to the tangible attributes of plant-based options, including appearance, taste, texture, nutritional content, and variety. These characteristics serve as critical determinants for student-consumers in assessing whether the product meets their expectations for quality and satisfaction. A visually appealing and flavorful plant-based dish may enhance its perceived functional value, thereby increasing its desirability among Generation Z consumers. Moreover, this generation's eating habits have been notably influenced by health concerns, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a preference for organic and nutritionally dense foods (Su et al., 2019, as cited in Meixner, 2024). As such, plant-based offerings in fast-casual restaurants may be perceived as aligning with their dietary goals. The availability of diverse plant-based options may further reinforce functional value and attract health-conscious consumers.

Emotional value refers to the positive affective responses elicited by plant-based products. These include feelings of well-being, fulfillment from making health-conscious choices, and excitement from encountering innovative menu items. When plant-based options are perceived not only as healthy but also enjoyable and desirable, they may foster emotional attachment and loyalty among Generation Z consumers.

Social value encompasses the extent to which plant-based consumption reflects and reinforces a consumer's self-concept, personal values, and social identity. For student-consumers, choosing plant-based options

may signify alignment with broader social groups that share similar ethical, cultural, or environmental beliefs. This includes considerations related to animal welfare, religious or cultural dietary practices, and sustainability. By opting for plant-based foods, Generation Z consumers can express their commitment to socially responsible, environmentally conscious lifestyles.

The Perceived Value Theory provided a robust framework for analyzing the multifaceted perceptions of Generation Z consumers toward plant-based menu options. It enabled a nuanced understanding of how functional, emotional, and social values collectively influence consumer behavior in fast-casual dining contexts. Consistent with this theoretical view, prior research on the Philippine restaurant setting demonstrates that perceived value is a key determinant in green behavioral intentions; Teng and Wu (2019) as cited in Ansaldo et al. (2022) indicated that customers preferred to dine at restaurants that implement green initiatives, particularly those offering sustainable products. However, within the restaurant context, food remains the core product, and thus food quality plays a central role in shaping consumers' perceived value satisfaction and loyalty across both casual and full-service dining establishments (Gumasing, 2025).

Thematic Network Map

Given the qualitative nature of this inquiry, the researchers developed a thematic network map rather than a traditional conceptual framework. This approach was grounded in the Perceived Value Theory (Zeithaml, 1988), which served as the theoretical underpinning for exploring Generation Z consumers' perceptions of plant-based menu options in fast-casual dining restaurants.

The thematic network map was constructed to illustrate the initial domains and subthemes that emerged from the literature, guiding the data collection and analysis. Specifically, knowledge of plant-based product variants, taste and flavor profiles, health and nutritional attributes, and ethical considerations was identified as a key factor influencing the perceived value of plant-based offerings. These dimensions collectively shaped Generation Z consumers' overall perception of plant-based options in fast-casual dining contexts. Figure 1 illustrates the thematic flow of the study.

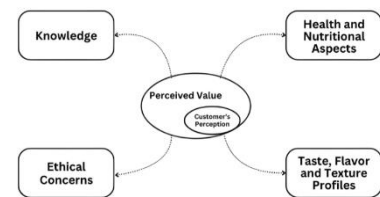


Figure 1. Thematic Map

Statement of the Problem

This phenomenological study investigated students' perceptions of plant-based menu options in selected fast-casual dining restaurants in Metro Manila. Specifically, it explored how students understood and experienced plant-based options in terms of taste, texture, and overall dining satisfaction. The inquiry was situated within the broader context of the rising popularity of plant-based diets and the increasing adoption of such offerings by fast-casual restaurant chains.

The study aimed to generate insights into the factors that influence students' acceptance and preferences for plant-based menu items, as well as the motivations and values that shape their choices. The research sought to deepen understanding of Generation Z's consumer behavior and inform menu development strategies in the fast-casual dining sector. Specifically, the following research questions were posed: (1). How do students perceive the plant-based menu options

offered at selected fast-casual dining restaurants within Taft, Metro Manila? (2). What factors influence students' acceptance and preferences for plant-based menu items in fast-casual dining establishments? (3). What underlying motivations and values shape Generation Z's choices regarding plant-based menu options in fast-casual dining contexts?

Literature Review

Food Sector Industry in the Philippines

The food and beverage industry in the Philippines is expected to continue growing in 2025. Consumer spending is expected to increase over the next few years, with annual sales growth projected to remain steady (Philippines Food & Drink Report - Q2 2025, 2025). According to the Food Industry Asia report, most Filipinos are shifting towards healthier, more functional food options as the number of health-conscious consumers increases (Wong & Wong, 2022). As Filipinos embrace the vegetarian and vegan trends, there is a rise in demand for plant-based menu options, which also has a positive impact on the environment for it minimizes the amount of greenhouse gases that are produced in the production of animal-based products because of the rising demand for healthier options, some cafes and restaurants in Manila are offering products like salads, smoothie bowls, and other vegan options (Wise, 2024). Although our country is well-known as a meat-consuming nation, meat alternatives are slowly entering supermarkets and convenience stores. According to Sentenac (2021), Steele Smiley, the CEO of Stalk & Spade, stated that the reason he is motivated to introduce a plant-based menu is He believes that it will have a significant effect on our well-being, also because of his son, he realized that it is not a wise choice to take him into same fast food restaurant because he is concerned about his son's well-being. At the same time, plant-based products are marketed as vegan, as seen on the menus of some fast-casual restaurants, such as Burger King, Shakey's, Army Navy, Pancake House, and Kenny Rogers (Valmonte & Cabico, 2022). Burger King offers Plant-Based X-tra Long Chicken Plant-Based Whopper (Avila, 2024; Medel, 2021). Shakey's offers plant-based pizza called "Good Taco Pizza." This launch marks the first time a vegan pizza has been introduced. Shakey's is also partnered with unMEAT, a meat alternative company that offers patties, nuggets, and meat toppings, as well as dairy-free cheese called 'unCHEESE' (Hong, 2021). In the Army Navy menu, options include Plant-Based Burrito, Plant-Based Breakfast Burritos, Plant-Based Naked Burritos, Plant-Based Burger, Plant-Based Double Burgers, Plant-Based Bully Boy Burger, Plant-Based Soft Taco, and Plant-Based Quesadilla (Baes, 2021). Beyond Meat's plant-based burger and Beyond Mashed Potato are the plant-based options that Kenny Rogers is offering (GMA News, 2021). Zark offers a 'V Burger' on its menu for plant-based eaters (Caesar, 2024).

Emergence of Plant-based menu

The plant-based diet originated when the Greek philosopher Pythagoras praised the health benefits and taught the moral value of abstaining from animal slaughtering, in which he and his disciples ate only bread, honey, and vegetables (Clem, J., & Barthel, B., 2021). However, the term "plant-based" was coined in 1980 by Colin Campbell. It has a similar definition to vegan food, but focuses on using or consuming products made from plant-derived ingredients (Broomfield, 2021). It is a relatively new concept used by the scientific community to describe eating patterns characterized by an extensive intake of plant-dominant foods while excluding all animal products (Storz, 2021). One way to reduce meat consumption is by replacing it with plant-based alternatives or more environmentally friendly food options (Andreani et al., 2023). If a complete transition to plant-based food in the market is not yet possible, having options that include plant-based products would still cater to the growing demand.

Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the benefits of plant-based products would still cater to the growing demand. Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the benefits of plant-based food options, are more open about their ethical food choices, and are becoming aware of their food consumption habits, which can result in reduced consumption of animal meat (Perez-Cueto, 2021). Plant-based menus are more likely to be chosen by consumers when advertised as beneficial for the planet or society, rather than labeled as vegetarian options (Rosenfeld et al., 2022). Giving it more recognition and having a variety of options will help reduce meat consumption (Kwasny et al., 2022).

Generation Z's Perspective

The customer's perspective is how a company interprets its customers' feedback, recognizing consumers' thoughts and experiences with its products and services. A company needs to understand its customers' insights, as these will impact its financial and sales performance (Villegas, 2023). Both millennials and Generation Z are adopting vegetarian and vegan diets due to their increased awareness of the environmental impact of meat consumption and a strong sense of social responsibility (Laoudai, 2024). Despite people starting to accept meat alternative products, they still hold a small market share, and conducting more studies on plant-based alternatives presents a great opportunity for the food industry to improve consumer acceptance. A recent study found that 30-40% of people were hesitant to choose plant-based burgers due to unfamiliarity with the flavors, tastes, textures, appearances, and costs of plant-based products on the market (Carlsson et al., 2021). Negative feedback about plant-based meat comes from individuals who have not tried plant-based products or who are accustomed to eating and enjoying meat, leading them to refrain from reducing their meat consumption, regardless of the cost of these products (Cutroneo et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2022).

Perceived Value

Perceived value refers to the amount a customer is willing to pay for a specific product or service. It is based on how the product satisfies the customer's needs and desires, and on whether other businesses can or cannot offer the same (Nancholas, 2023). Zeithaml (1988, p. 14) defined perceived value as "The consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product based on the perception of what is received and what is given" (as cited by Solakis et al., 2022; Sevilmiş et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2022). Furthermore, it comprises four dimensions: product value, emotional value, social value, and perceived sacrifices (Ines & Moreira, 2023). By understanding Generation Z's perceived value of plant-based products, marketers can gain a deeper understanding of their customers' perspectives on plant-based consumption (Mahasuweerachai et al., 2023). According to Tedja et al. (2024), their study found that perceived value is linked to satisfaction and the intention to continue a partnership or connection with a business. In this study, perceived value will determine customer satisfaction and the intention to repurchase plant-based food menu options. The study by Afianto and Waskito (2025) states that consumers' trust in product claims plays a crucial role in determining whether perceived value drives their purchase intention. Price is also a factor that can influence a customer's purchase intention, serving as a basis for determining a product's value and whether it is considered cheap or expensive (Sharif et al., 2023). By perceived pricing, restaurants can determine their perceived value based on customers' expectations and aim for customer satisfaction and repeat business (Hashim et al., 2024). As indicated in the study by Kovacs and Karesztes (2022), the concept of sustainable food consumption in this era has also led modern customers to include food reliability as part of their perceived value, considering aspects such as health, environment, and ethics when purchasing food. This appeals to customers' willingness to pay a premium for the product's sustainable food attributes. In addition, taste

preference serves as a primary sensory modality in evaluating overall sensory satisfaction of consumers, including texture, appearance, and aroma (Andersen et al., 2018). Lesme et al. (2019) also supported this statement, arguing that consumer preferences for food products are largely determined by their sensory qualities, including perceptions of texture, taste, and flavor, which are integrated throughout consumption and influence consumer satisfaction. Aside from sensory experiences (taste, texture, flavor), quality (freshness), satiation, food variety, and price, these factors are also key determinants of consumers' food and dining choices (Gluchowski et al., 2021). Meanwhile, product knowledge has also been considered an influential factor in customer-perceived value, with a correlation with environmental concern. A greater understanding of problems and how to address them increases the likelihood that individuals will take action to protect the environment (Kim & Hwang, 2020). Moreover, product knowledge and perceptions of product quality developed from advertisements influence consumers' purchase intentions (Harmen et al., 2022). The amount of information a consumer knows about a specific product or brand not only facilitates perception development but also serves as the foundation for making informed judgments (Hatta et al., 2018, as cited in Setyadi, 2024).

Environmental Concern and Sustainability. Environmental concerns encompass awareness of environmental issues, understanding of how human activities impact them, and assistance in resolving these issues (Lou & Li, 2021). Previous studies have shown that environmental concerns significantly impact customers' purchasing decisions for environmentally friendly products (Bulut et al., 2021). Plant-based food options are considered more environmentally friendly than those derived from animal meat. Plant-based products use fewer resources from water and land, and they also produce fewer greenhouse gases than animal-based products. Plant-based food options are more sustainable than animal-based food options (Chai et al., 2019; Poore & Nemecek, 2018; Rabies et al., 2020; Springman et al., 2018; Willett et al., 2019) (as cited in Perez-Cueto, 2021). According to Jazbec et al. (2022), replacing beef patties with plant-based beef patties will have an estimated 90% reduction in global warming potential (GWP), while replacing chicken patties with plant-based chicken patties will deduct 60% in GWP. For a consumer to be influenced, their country and region have a significant impact on their perceptions and motivations, influenced by factors such as cultural differences, religion, traditions, attitudes, behaviors, and origin, which may vary across countries and regions (Schreuders et al., 2022). Social media can influence people's decisions to make sustainable purchasing choices, thereby altering sustainable consumption globally (Zafar et al., 2021). According to a 2023 report by ProVeg International, five major companies introduced plant-based menu options in the US, Europe, and South Africa. They have mentioned Burger King, Subway, and Pizza Hut, all of which are part of the fast-casual restaurant category. They appeal to this generation because they are more likely to purchase sustainable products and show loyalty to eco-conscious consumers.

Product Knowledge. Product knowledge refers to the awareness and level of expertise about a product that can influence consumer decisions. The study also states that customers will gain knowledge of the product through the following approaches, which aim to promote products to consumers by focusing on either benefits or attributes (Zhang et al., 2023, pp. 3–4). Consumers who have sufficient knowledge and information about plant-based foods can help them choose sustainable products in the market (Marshall et al., 2022). Cordelle et al. (2022) found that even though consumers are open about trying new food innovations like plant-based meat, they are having second thoughts about spending on it because they have low to zero knowledge and understanding about the product and having more exposure about its information may lead to greater acceptance to the public or consumers (De Oliveira Padilha et al., 2022). Having a complete label on the pack, including nutritional information and

ingredients, is important for health-conscious consumers to embrace plant-based foods (Alcorta et al., 2021).

Health and Nutritional Aspects. Health is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a complete state of well-being encompassing physical, mental, and social aspects, rather than merely the absence of illness. At the same time, nutrition is essential for achieving good health and the body's development (Callahan et al., 2020). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, people are becoming aware of the risks posed by zoonotic diseases. People are concerned, especially about food products, and desire to boost their immunity to improve their health. Many people adopted plant-based diets during the pandemic (Hambardzumyan & Gevorgyan, 2021). Jung et al. (2022) stated that plant-based meat is gaining more recognition than animal meat due to its protein source. However, to maintain the popularity of plant-based meat, it must be more efficient and less expensive than animal meat, as it is often claimed to be. Health-conscious individuals are increasingly seeking vegetarian diets and food products that do not contain animal meat (Kurek et al., 2022). Plant-based diets are generally healthy, but some meat alternatives may not provide a complete range of nutrients, as they often contain less vitamin B12 and are higher in sodium (Penna Franca et al., 2022). Additionally, consumption of meat may increase the risk of several digestive diseases (Papier et al., 2021). People who choose to eat less meat or become flexitarians are increasingly motivated to improve their health and nutrition while still enjoying meat occasionally (Grasso et al., 2021; Newton & Blaustein-Rejto, 2021).

Taste, Flavor, and Texture. Palmer et al. (2024) stated that taste is the process by which the mouth perceives flavors when it is activated or stimulated. On the other hand, Hall (1968) defined flavor as “the sensation produced by a material taken in the mouth, perceived principally by the senses of taste and smell, and also by the general pain, tactile, and temperature receptors in the mouth. Flavor also denotes the sum of the characteristics of the material which produce that sensation.” Taste and flavor are crucial for attracting consumers, given their diverse preferences and wants. A study shows that consumers are more likely to accept plant-based foods if their flavor is similar enough to that of traditional meat (Hossain et al., 2024). A study suggests that three key criteria for a consumer to be willing to try, pay, and repurchase are taste and flavor, texture, and smell (Wilks et al., 2021). According to Biazotto et al. (2025), creating plant-based meat alternatives involves combining plant proteins with other ingredients to maintain a meaty texture and replicate the taste of traditional meat products. Food essentialism is the concept that some categorized foods believe to have similarity on taste, texture, and nutrition because of the source they came from are one, so people who believes in this idea might also be thinking that foods that have the same appearance and taste have the same essence, even though their main sources is different (Cheon et al., 2024). According to Kaleda et al. (2021), some meat alternatives contain ingredients such as oats and peas. This combination gives the flavor a strong, cereal-like quality that overshadows legume and other bitter notes. Additionally, off-flavors such as beany flavor, bitterness, and aftertaste are often present in plant-based alternatives. These off-flavors can be attributed to the plant ingredients used, their processing, or storage (Wang et al., 2022).

METHODS

Research Design.

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of Generation Z students regarding plant-based menu options in fast-casual dining restaurants. Phenomenology, rooted in the philosophical works of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, gained prominence in the early twentieth century as a method for understanding human experience beyond mere sensory input (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,

2013). Husserl (1931) defined phenomenology as the study of phenomena as they appear in consciousness, emphasizing the subjective nature of experience. Alase (2017) further asserted that phenomenology allows researchers to uncover the essence of participants' experiences through deep reflection and interpretation.

This approach was deemed appropriate for the study as it facilitated an in-depth understanding of students' beliefs, emotional responses, and perceptions of plant-based food options. Through semi-structured interviews, the researchers captured rich narratives that illuminated how students interpreted taste, texture, health benefits, environmental sustainability, and ethical considerations in their dining choices. The phenomenological method also enabled the researchers to bracket their own assumptions and engage in reflexive analysis, ensuring that the findings authentically represented the participants' voices. By valuing the depth and complexity of individual viewpoints, this design provided a robust framework for examining how broader social, cultural, and health-related factors influenced food choices. It also enabled thematic saturation, in which recurring patterns and meanings emerged across diverse student experiences.

Research Locale.

The study was conducted in Taft, Manila, a vibrant urban corridor known for its concentration of academic institutions and fast-casual dining establishments. In the Philippines, dining out is deeply ingrained in social and familial culture, contributing significantly to the national economy. The food service sector generates over PHP 300 billion annually, with fast-casual dining, fast food, and street food comprising the bulk of this revenue (Balita, 2025).

A key driver of growth in the foodservice market is the rise of health-conscious consumers seeking nutritious and sustainable alternatives. In response, fast-casual restaurants have begun to innovate their menus by incorporating plant-based, low-calorie, and organic options (Singh, 2025). Prominent chains such as Burger King, Pancake House, Army Navy, Shakey's, Kenny Rogers, and Zark's Burger have introduced plant-based offerings to meet this demand (Sy, 2022).

Taft's proximity to these establishments and its dense student population made it an ideal locale for the study. Figure 2 presents a map of Manila highlighting the selected colleges and universities where participants were recruited.

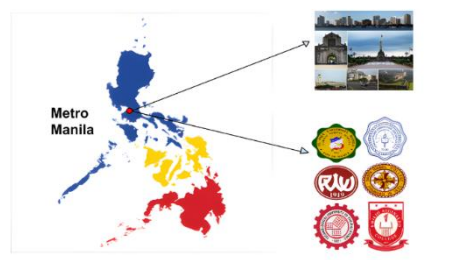


Figure 2. Manila Locale

Participants of the Study.

The participants in this study were Generation Z students, defined as individuals born between 1996 and 2010, specifically ages between 18 and 28, and were selected. This cohort has significantly influenced the growth of fast-casual dining, with 67% expressing a preference for such establishments. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, individuals aged 18–24 account for approximately 12% of restaurant spending (Harris, 2024), underscoring their significant role in this inquiry.

A total of 25 participants were selected from five universities in Taft,
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Manila: the Philippine Women's University, St. Paul University, Technological University of the Philippines, Emilio Aguinaldo College, Philippine Christian University, and Santa Isabel College. This sample size aligned with Creswell's (2007) recommendation of five to twenty-five participants for phenomenological research, ensuring sufficient depth and diversity of perspectives.

The study employed purposive sampling, also known as judgment sampling, to identify participants who met specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Nikolopoulou, 2023). Participants were selected based on their academic background and dining behavior, particularly those enrolled in programs such as Hospitality Management, Food Technology, and Nutrition and Dietetics. These students were presumed to possess foundational knowledge of plant-based food content, value, and benefits. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) Participants must be part of Generation Z (ages 18–28). (2) Participants must be enrolled in one of the identified colleges or universities in Taft, Manila. (3) Participants must be customers of fast-casual restaurants offering plant-based options, specifically Burger King, Pancake House, Army Navy, Shakey's, Kenny Rogers, or Zark's Burger.

This sample selection enabled a nuanced exploration of perceptions of plant-based foods across academic and experiential contexts.

Instrumentation.

Data collection comprised two components: demographic profiling and semi-structured interviews. The first component involved gathering demographic data to ensure participant eligibility and contextualize responses. This included age, gender, educational status, enrolled institution, academic program, and dining history with fast-casual restaurants. Demographic profiling served as a foundational tool for participant qualification and thematic analysis (Marshall et al., 2022; Connelly, 2013).

The second component utilized semi-structured interviews, chosen for their balance of consistency and flexibility. This format allowed researchers to guide the conversation while remaining open to emergent themes and participant-led insights (Fylan, 2020). Semi-structured interviews were particularly effective in uncovering the "why" behind Generation Z's perceptions of plant-based options, enabling deeper exploration of values, motivations, and lived experiences. The interview guide was composed of four segments: (1) Warm-up questions, designed to build rapport and ease participants into the conversation. (2) Core questions, focused on eliciting detailed narratives of participants' experiences with plant-based menu items. (3) Probing questions, used to clarify and expand upon key responses, enhancing the richness of the data. (4) Wrap-up questions, provided a reflective and respectful conclusion to the interview, allowing participants to summarize or share final thoughts (Oerther, 2021).

Data Collection.

The researchers adhered to the ethical research standards set by the Colegio de San Juan de Letran Research and Publication Department (RPD). Before data collection, formal permission was obtained to conduct the study, and participants were provided with informed consent forms outlining the study's purpose, procedures, confidentiality safeguards, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. These forms were distributed digitally via Google Forms and included detailed information on data usage, storage, and protection protocols, and were primarily used for demographic profiling of participants.

Moreover, demographic profiling was utilized as a basis for the

thorough selection of participants to ensure that only individuals who met the criteria were qualified to be part of the study. This process helped on the relevance and appropriateness of the participants in relation to the objective of the study.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, guided by a four-part question framework. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via secure digital platforms, such as Zoom or Google Meet, depending on the participant's preference and availability. Sessions were scheduled at times and locations convenient to the participants, with in-person interviews conducted in private, neutral spaces near their respective universities to ensure comfort and psychological safety when sharing personal and sensitive experiences.

Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes, allowing participants sufficient time to reflect, articulate their thoughts, and engage meaningfully with the questions. Prior to the interview, participants were informed of the voluntary nature of their involvement, the confidentiality of their responses, and the use of audio or screen recordings for transcription. Recordings were made only with explicit consent and were stored securely in encrypted digital folders accessible only to the research team.

To uphold methodological rigor, the researchers practiced bracketing—setting aside personal biases and preconceptions—to ensure that the data reflected the authentic voices of the participants. Reflexive journaling was also employed throughout the data collection process to document the researchers' observations, emerging insights, and ethical considerations. Data saturation was continuously monitored, and interviews concluded once recurring patterns and themes began to stabilize across participants.

All interview data were manually transcribed and organized according to emergent themes. Transcripts were anonymized to protect participant identity and prepared for subsequent analysis using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and thematic coding procedures.

The researchers have provided quota sampling, selecting five (5) participants from each participating school. Originally, thirty (30) participants were interviewed; however, data saturation was reached after the twenty-fifth (25) interviewee, as no new themes and insights emerged. The participants' responses became repetitive, indicating that the data collected were sufficient to meet the objectives of the study.

Data Analysis.

The researchers employed a dual-layered analytical approach, integrating Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) with thematic analysis to explore Generation Z students' perceptions of plant-based menu options in fast-casual dining contexts.

IPA was utilized to uncover the nuanced meanings embedded in participants' lived experiences. As a qualitative method, IPA emphasizes the interpretative relationship between the researcher and participant, focusing on how individuals make sense of their personal and social worlds (Smith, 2004, as cited in Kellett et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2021). Through iterative engagement with the data, the researchers aimed to comprehend the emotional, cognitive, and contextual aspects of plant-based food consumption, encompassing satisfaction, ethical alignment, and health-related motivations. To complement IPA, thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: (1) Familiarization – Researchers repeatedly read the transcripts to immerse themselves in the data and note initial observations. (2). Coding – Key phrases and

segments were systematically coded to capture meaningful units of information. (3). Generating Themes – Related codes were clustered into broader thematic categories reflecting shared patterns across participants (4). Reviewing Themes – Themes were refined and validated against the full dataset to ensure coherence and representativeness. (5). Defining and Naming Themes – Each theme was clearly defined and labeled to reflect its conceptual essence and relevance to the research questions. (6). Reporting – A narrative synthesis was developed, integrating thematic insights with illustrative quotes to contextualize findings and support interpretations.

The integration of IPA allowed for deeper interpretative engagement with the data, enabling the researchers to explore not only what participants said but also how they made sense of their experiences. This enriched the thematic analysis by adding layers of emotional and cognitive depth to the emergent categories. Themes were organized around key domains, including taste and texture preferences, perceived health benefits, ethical and environmental considerations, product knowledge, and social identity. This approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of how Generation Z students evaluate plant-based options and the values that inform their dining choices.

Ethical Considerations and Data Protection Plan.

This study was conducted with strict adherence to ethical research standards and the provisions of the Philippine Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173). The researchers ensured that all scholarly sources were properly cited and acknowledged, and that intellectual contributions from other authors were credited in accordance with academic integrity protocols. Prior to data collection, the researchers sought formal approval from the Colegio de San Juan de Letran Research and Publication Department (RPD). They obtained a certification of exemption from full ethics review. All participants were invited to participate in the study voluntarily and were provided with a comprehensive informed consent form. This form outlined the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, and the participants' right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Consent was obtained digitally via Google Forms or in person, depending on the interview modality.

To uphold confidentiality and privacy, all personal data and interview responses were treated with strict discretion. Participants were assigned pseudonyms or unique identifiers to ensure the anonymity of their responses during transcription and analysis. No identifying information was disclosed at any point in the study, and all data were stored in encrypted, password-protected digital folders accessible only to the principal researchers and the research adviser.

The data protection plan included the following safeguards: (1) Secure Storage: Audio recordings, transcripts, and consent forms were stored in encrypted cloud-based drives with restricted access. (2) Limited Access: Only the core research team and the adviser had access to raw data. No third-party individuals or institutions were granted access. (3) Data Retention and Disposal: Data will be retained for a maximum of one year following the completion of the study and will be permanently deleted thereafter using secure digital erasure protocols. (4) Participant Control: Participants were given the option to review their transcripts and request redactions or clarifications prior to final analysis. (5) Transparency and Respect: Participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question they found uncomfortable and that their preferences regarding the inclusion or exclusion of sensitive information would be honored without question.

Throughout the research process, the researchers practiced reflexivity and bracketing to minimize bias and ensure that the participants'

voices were authentically represented. The study prioritized the dignity, autonomy, and well-being of all participants, and no data were included without explicit permission. Ethical rigor was maintained not only in the handling of data but also in respectful engagement with participants as co-constructors of knowledge.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings derived from the semi-structured interviews with 25 Generation Z students from selected universities in Taft, Manila. The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and thematic analysis, which yielded four overarching themes. The presentation is structured around three main research questions to ensure a clear, direct exploration of participants' lived experiences with plant-based menu options in fast-casual dining restaurants.

Perceptions of Plant-Based Menu Options

This chapter presents the findings from semi-structured interviews with 25 Generation Z university students from selected institutions in Taft, Manila. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and thematic analysis, four overarching themes emerged. The findings are organized around three main research questions that focus on participants' lived experiences with plant-based menu options in fast-casual dining restaurants.

Gen Z perceptions of plant-based foods reflect a complex interplay of digital awareness, sensory evaluation, and critical health consciousness.

The first research question examines students' perceptions of plant-based menu options at selected fast-casual dining establishments. Three themes emerged: (a) plant-based menu awareness and initial framing, (b) sensory experience as the decisive factor, and (c) perceived benefits alongside hidden drawbacks.

Table 1. Plant-Based Menu Awareness and Initial Framing

Category	Theme	Significant Statement
Knowledge & Information Sources	Theme 1: Plant-Based Menu Awareness and Initial Framing	"I'm familiar, kasi, nakita ko lang sya sa social media, yan, direct to the point, yun lang talaga yung pinagkuhanan ko ng info (I'm familiar because I only see it in social media, that's it, direct to the point, that's my only source of info)."- P1
		"Ako, no. Kasi, knowing sa mga fast food, puro kasi mga meat... Sa inyo ko lang mismo nalaman na may mga fast food pal ana, ayun, nagse-sell din sila ng mga plant-based (Me, no. Because, knowing fast food, it's only mostly meat... I only just found out from you that there are fast-food places that, well, also sell plant-based items)."- P17

Table 1 indicates that participants' awareness of plant-based menu options was primarily influenced by digital exposure, especially through social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. Participants associated plant-based foods with being "trendy," "healthy," and "sustainable," demonstrating that online media plays a crucial role in shaping Generation Z's dietary perceptions. However, the thematic table also reflects a gap in awareness, as some participants only learned that fast-food chains offered plant-based items during the interview itself.

This suggests Participants' awareness of plant-based options is largely shaped by digital media, particularly social media platforms. One participant shared, "*I am familiar, kasi, nakikita ko lang siya sa social media*" (P1), indicating that digital exposure informs initial framing.

Participants frequently associated plant-based foods with attributes such as "*interesting, sustainable, and trendy*" (P7). This finding aligns with previous research documenting digital media's influence on health-conscious trends (Zafar et al., 2021; Wong & Wong, 2022). Supporting this, a nationwide survey from GMO (2025) revealed that 91% of Filipino respondents recognize plant-based foods as healthier and more sustainable, with 85% favoring increased availability in food service outlets. Similarly, De La Cruz and Ledesma (2024) found that 91% of medical students became aware of plant-based diets predominantly via social media.

According to Salam et al. (2024), Generation Z—characterized as digital natives—actively incorporate technology in consumption decisions and prioritize brands with social responsibility and sustainability ethos. However, gaps in awareness persist; for instance, Participant 17 stated, "*Sa inyo ko lang mismo nalaman na may mga fast food pala na... nagse-sell din sila ng mga plant-based,*" reflecting limited knowledge about plant-based options in familiar fast-food chains. This finding is consistent with Valmonte and Cabico's (2022) observation that market penetration of such options remains incomplete. Additionally, Raptou et al. (2024) reported that knowledge gaps and unfamiliarity hinder willingness to adopt plant-based diets internationally.

Building on this notion, participants also revealed the uncertainty about how they defined and understood the word "Plant-based". Throughout the interviews, the term was frequently used to describe foods like vegetables, tofu, and mushrooms that are mostly or fully manufactured from plants. As one participant quoted, "*hindi kasi ako aware don, akala ko meat talaga siya, akala ko meat talaga, hindi siya plant*". Many participants used the phrases "plant-based" and "vegetarian" or "vegan" interchangeably, as evidenced by their answers and research (Clem & Barthel, 2021; Broomfield, 2021). Rather than a clear comprehension, this suggests a limited conceptual overlap. Some students used the phrase more literally, while others correctly identified that plant-based meals might include items that imitate meat using elements sourced from plants. In contrast to vegan or vegetarian cuisine, one participant stated that they saw plant-based foods as merely comprising vegetables rather than necessarily being animal substitutes. This analysis shows that although

Generation Z consumers are aware of plant-based alternatives, they are not well-versed in how they are different from vegetarian or vegan options. This conceptual ambiguity highlights the need for restaurants to provide clear labeling, accurate menu descriptions, and educational marketing to inform customers better. Xavier et al. (2025) further note that despite increased awareness, many consumers view plant-based products as niche health or environmental alternatives rather than everyday dietary staples.

Table 2. Sensory Experience as the Decisive Factor

Category	Theme	Significant Statement
Sensory Experience & Evaluation	Theme 2: Sensory Experience as the Decisive Factor	"Yes, because if it doesn't look appetizing for me as a "pihikan" I wouldn't try or order it." -P24
		"It's very mushy, wala yung saltiness nya na katulad nung parang sa meat itself (it's very mushy, it doesn't have the saltiness like the meat itself)."- P2
		"Sometimes if not expected well the texture can be weird, sometimes they're stinky, spongy and it can be kind of off-putting in comparison to the real product." -P8

Table 2 highlights that taste, texture, and aroma are the most influential factors determining acceptance of plant-based menu items. Participants

commonly described unfavorable experiences, using terms like “mushy,” “spongy,” or “off-putting,” indicating that sensory dissatisfaction remains a major barrier to acceptance. Although health or environmental benefits have been acknowledged, poor sensory quality discouraged repeat purchases.

These findings point to the crucial roles of sensory perception in shaping consumer attitudes towards plant-based options. Sensory perceptions strongly influence acceptance of plant-based foods. Participants frequently reported negative sensory experiences, describing textures as “*very mushy*” (P2) or “*stringy, spongy and... off-putting*” (P8). These perceptions represent significant barriers, corroborated by the literature, which identifies sensory attributes as critical determinants of acceptance (Carlsson et al., 2021; Safdar, 2022). Raptou et al. (2024) found that although Generation Z associates plant-based eating with health and sustainability benefits, sensory satisfaction largely governs adoption willingness. Kumari et al. (2023) similarly emphasize texture as a key factor in product quality, acceptability, and consumers’ willingness to pay.

In a Philippine context, Flores et al. (2021) demonstrated that Filipino consumers’ preferences for soybean-based plant alternatives are strongly influenced by taste, texture, aroma, and freshness. This aligns with participants’ accounts, which emphasize sensory experience as paramount in food choice. Furthermore, sensory challenges exist because plant-based products often struggle to replicate the umami flavor and texture profile characteristic of meat (Giacalone et al., 2022; Mouritsen & Styrbaek, 2020). Thus, despite recognized benefits, sensory barriers remain a critical challenge for broader acceptance.

Table 3. Perceived Benefits and Health-Related Drawbacks

Category	Theme	Significant Statement
Perceived Health & Wellness	Theme 3: Perceived Benefits and Health-Related Drawbacks	“For me, it’s a yes, if i-cocompare sya sa other menu, mas healthier sya kahit prineprepare sya in the same way (for me, it’s a yes if you compare it to other menu items, it’s healthier even if it’s prepared in the same way).” -P25
		“For me, I don’t fully consider it as healthy kasi ah yan, kasi meron syang part na healthy kasi plant-based sya, pero in the other hand, processed food parin yon, kaya hindi sya fully healthy (For me, I don’t fully consider it as healthy part because it’s plant-based, but on the other hand, it’s still processed food, so it’s not fully healthy).” -P1
		“...people immediately perceived them as healthy kasi nga “Plant-based” sya pero similar to normal foods in a fast-food (fast-casual) restaurant they’re also very in high in frying and salt... kunh nagluto ka kunyare ng mushroom burger pero kung prinito mo ng deep fry it kinda defeats the purpose, I think?” -P2

In Table 3, participants acknowledged the health advantages of plant-based menus—such as lower cholesterol and reduced disease risk—but also raised concerns about preparation methods and nutritional content.

In line with this, participants generally perceive plant-based foods as healthier alternatives to meat (P25), yet they critically evaluate their healthfulness. For example, one participant remarked, “...*kung nagluto ka kunyare ng mushroom burger pero kung prinito mo ng deep fry it kinda defeats the purpose, I think?*” (P2), highlighting awareness about preparation methods undermining health benefits. This nuanced perspective reflects concerns noted in the literature regarding sodium content and processing in meat analogues (Curtain & Grafenauer, 2019;

Sha & Xiong, 2020). Traditional vegetarian dishes use minimal oil and salt, while various modern plant-based meat alternatives created in the form of burgers, nuggets, and sausages are fried and high in fat, sodium, and calories. Vegan milks and snacks often contain added sugars and salt, which may lead consumers to adopt less nutritious diets despite health-focused intentions unknowingly (Tso & Forde, 2021). Generation Z consumers appear to assess health claims thoughtfully, considering ingredient quality and cooking techniques. Transparency and healthier preparation methods, such as grilling rather than frying, may enhance appeal to this demographic.

Factors Influencing Acceptance and Preference

This research question explores the factors that influence Generation Z students’ acceptance of and preference for plant-based menu items. Two key themes emerged: (a) sensory experience as the decisive factor and (b) alignment of dining choices with personal and global values. The analysis points to two dominant themes that govern these decisions: Theme 2: Sensory Experience as the Ultimate Factor and Theme 4: Aligning Dining Choices with Personal and Global, Values.

Table 4. Sensory Experience as the Ultimate Factor

Category	Theme	Significant Statement
Sensory Experience & Evaluation	Theme 2: Sensory Experience as the Ultimate Factor	“Honestly yes, because the taste is the bigger, the biggest factor for me... I don’t want to feel like I’m sacrificing taste just to eat healthier.” -P22
		“Uh hindi ako fan kasi hindi ko talaga fully nalalalahan yung meat kasi very fan ako ng mga meats talaga (Uh, I’m not a fan because I can’t fully taste the meat, because I’m a huge fan of meats).” P1
		“uhm... it depends because if it’s executed well, yes. And if not, no.” -P8

Table 4 reinforces that sensory quality is the non-negotiable determinant of acceptance. Regardless of price, sustainability, or health benefits, participants stated that taste remains the deciding factor in choosing plant-based meals.

Consistent with these results, the analysis further confirms that sensory experience ultimately dictates consumers’ acceptance of plant-based foods. Participant 22 expressed, “*Honestly, yes, because the taste is the biggest factor for me... I do not want to feel like I am sacrificing taste just to eat healthier*” (P22). This underscores the centrality of taste, which is widely recognized in food consumption literature as a primary driver of food choice and preference (Gluchowski et al., 2021). Similarly, Ling and Hedman (2025) emphasize the importance of complex flavor profiles in shaping dietary behaviors and consumer preferences.

Kershaw and Nolden (2023) also argue that while taste is a key driver of food purchases, sensory appeal remains a significant barrier to the acceptance of plant-based foods across multiple countries. Reflecting this, Participant 8 noted, “*uhm... it depends because if it is executed well, yes. And if not, no*” (P8), indicating conditional acceptance based on product quality. This finding is corroborated by Kumari et al. (2023), who state that consumers’ acceptance of meat alternatives depends on ingredient composition and processing methods, which directly influence nutritional value and sensory properties, including texture, color, and visual presentation. Despite taste and sensory appeal being crucial motivators, research indicates a gap in consumer acceptance due to sensory barriers. For example, nearly half of Americans report disliking the taste of plant-based foods, and over two-thirds are willing to consume more plant-based options if the taste improves (Kershaw & Nolden, 2023).

Table 5. Aligning Dining Choices with Personal and Global Values

Category	Theme	Significant Statement
Perceived Health & Wellness	Theme 4: Aligning Dining Choices with Personal and Global Values	“ah... yes naman... I think kasi, usually plant-based is more expensive than the usual offered meals, So parang if you're gonna buy plant-based it has to be good coz you're paying like extra like 20-50 pesos for that, for me.” -P2
		“Yes po, na knowing na sinusuportahan po ng brand yung sustainability, parang mas nagiging mas inclined po ako to support them (Yes, knowing that the brand supports sustainability, I become more inclined to support them).” -P14
Environmental & Ethical Values	Theme 4: Aligning Dining Choices with Personal and Global Values	“Uh for me yes, it does, because knowing that I am choosing something that's better for the planet, makes me feel good about my decision, so it gives me an extra reason to pick plant-based meals..” -P22
		No, as I said earlier, if its, if its good, I'll take it. The only problem I can see too my decision of purchasing is the price difference.” -P11

Table 5 highlights that participants also connect their dining preferences to personal ethics and social values. While sensory satisfaction comes first, once that expectation is met, students evaluate brands based on sustainability, transparency, and environmental responsibility.

These findings indicate that secondary factors grounded in personal values influence preferences once the sensory threshold is fulfilled. Cost emerged as a critical consideration. Participant 2 commented, “...if you are gonna buy plant-based, it has to be good coz you are paying like extra like 20-50 pesos for that” (P2), highlighting the impact of price on purchase decisions. This aligns with Perceived Value Theory (Zeithaml, 1988), which holds that consumers evaluate the benefits received against the costs incurred. Halicka et al. (2025) identify price, limited product availability, and a lack of information as barriers to sustainable diet adoption among Gen Z.

Beyond price, brand alignment with personal values, particularly sustainability, strongly influences acceptance. Participant 14 remarked, “na knowing na sinusuportahan po ng brand yung sustainability, parang mas nagiging mas inclined po ako to support them” (P14), illustrating how ethical branding enhances consumer loyalty. This supports Bulut et al.'s (2021) findings on environmental concern shaping purchase decisions and aligns with the green food consumption paradigm, in which consumer ethics and environmental awareness drive emerging-market behavior (Zimon et al., 2020, as cited in Waqas Mazhar, 2025). For these consumers, ethical brand practices contribute meaningfully to perceived value, tipping purchase decisions in favor of plant-based options. This reinforces the idea that with the concept of Generation Z's purchase decision, they are perceived as a crucial driver in promoting sustainable consumption and minimizing the negative effects of food systems (Huambancho et al., 2022, as cited in Halicka et al., 2025), thereby contributing to environmental mitigation efforts. Still, some constituents of this demographic's purchase decision remain unassociated with environmental concerns and ethical values but rather stem from taste and pricing. As P11 noted, “No, as I said earlier, if it's, if it's good, I'll take it. The only problem I can see with my decision of purchasing is price differences”, reiterating the significance of sensory appeal and product quality in their purchase decision.

Participants consistently emphasized that taste remains the foremost criterion driving acceptance; any health benefits are secondary if flavor is sacrificed. This presents a critical challenge for restaurants considering plant-based menu items—they must ensure these options

are genuinely flavorful and competitively appealing to traditional meat dishes.

Once taste expectations are met, students perform a cost-value assessment that includes price sensitivity and brand ethics. For hospitality managers, this indicates that while superior taste is essential to gain entry into consumers' consideration, sustaining loyalty may depend on transparent alignment with sustainability and ethical practices.

Underlying Motivations and Values

The third and final research question explored the deeper motivations and values that shape students' choices regarding plant-based menu options. The analysis revealed two powerful themes that drive these decisions: Theme 3: The Perceived Benefits and Hidden Drawbacks of Plant-Based Menu Options and Theme 4: Aligning Dining Choices with Personal and Global Values.

Table 6. Sensory Experience as the Ultimate Factor

Category	Theme	Significant Statement
Perceived Health & Wellness	Theme 3: The Perceived Benefits and Hidden Drawbacks of Plant-Based Menu Options	“Uh personally I feel more energetic and less sluggish when I eat more plant-based meals thank the meat meals.” -P22
		“Um bukod sa makakapag-prevent na nga siya ng mga diseases, metutulongan niya pa tayo maging mas healthy pa lalo (Aside from preventing diseases, it can also help us become even healthier).” -P15
		“Uhhh...Hindi sya naka-affect sa flavor and taste. Siguro sa akin lang sa sarili ko na mas pinipili ko yung mas healthy (Uhm.. It doesn't affect the flavor and taste. Maybe it's just me, I prefer what's healthier.

Table 6 revisits the tension between the perceived health advantages and nutritional skepticism of plant-based foods. Many participants reported choosing these items to feel lighter, more energetic, and disease-resistant, reflecting post-pandemic health awareness. Yet, some questioned whether processed plant-based alternatives actually achieve these outcomes.

Participants reported strong internal motivation focused on personal health. This motivation is grounded in tangible benefits, such as feeling “more energetic and less sluggish” (P22) and the potential to “prevent... diseases” (P15). These findings align with literature indicating increased health consciousness in the post-pandemic context (Hambardzumyan & Gevorgyan, 2021). Gonella et al. (2022) further explain that lifestyle changes triggered by COVID-19 have shifted eating patterns toward healthier choices, including greater intake of vegetables and fruits (Rawat et al., 2021). However, while plant-based products are generally regarded as “healthy” because of their amino acid profiles and other benefits, they may not be universally suitable for all individuals, mainly due to the ingredient composition of the product offered. This was reflected as one of the participants revealed that he has Glucose-6-Phosphate dehydrogenase (G6PD), in which he is cautious with other legumes, including soy, as it triggers symptoms. Soy has served as a major protein source in plant-based food composition due to its high-protein content (Penalver et al., 2025), but being one of the most common food allergens, it has affected its suitability for some individuals with soy allergies or sensitivity and influenced their preference over the ingredients utilized in the plant-based item offered at the establishment.

For some participants, health considerations outweigh taste preferences, as P10 noted, choosing plant-based options “regardless of taste,”

demonstrating health as a primary value. This is supported by Alsubhi et al. (2022), who found that demographic and lifestyle variables, including age, BMI, gender, physical activity, and health conditions such as obesity or diabetes, influence willingness to pay higher premiums for healthier foods. These findings underscore how health motivations drive acceptance and preference for plant-based menu items.

Table 7. Aligning Dining Choices with Personal and Global Values [Theme 4:]

Category	Theme	Significant Statement
Environmental & Ethical Values	Theme 4: Aligning Dining Choices with Personal and Global Values	"I think it's more ethical to animals and it contributes to less food waste." -P8
		"Yes, actually I'm an animal enthusiast, therefore I hate animal abuse, I think this is the main reason for me to consider plant-based option." -P11
		"I guess most likely sa ano uh yung sa hindi kasi ako mapili like for sa food... sa religion lang ako na parang may restrictions, So kasi ah yung sap ag Friday no meat ganun and since Catholic ako so yun lang yung nakakaffect for me personally (I guess most likely in... I'm not picky with food... only in religion do I have restrictions. Because on Friday's no meat, and since I'm Catholic, that's the only thing that affects me personally)." -P18
Role as an Alternative		"For me, yes because I think plant-based options are the best "safe" option that's inclusive to everyone." - P8

Table 7 explores the ethical and cultural motivations underlying plant-based dining. Several participants mentioned concerns about animal welfare, while others referenced religious practices, such as abstaining from meat on certain days. The table highlights how choosing plant-based meals allows students to express personal identity and moral alignment with global sustainability movements.

These results indicate that an equally strong external motivation relates to ethical and cultural values. Animal welfare emerged as a key factor, with Participant 11 stating, "I am an animal enthusiast; therefore, I hate animal abuse, I think this is the main reason for me to consider a plant-based option." This resonates with research characterizing Generation Z's heightened social responsibility and ethical food choices (Laoudai, 2024). Religious values also play a role; for example, Catholic students appreciated plant-based options as practical alternatives when abstaining from meat on Fridays (P18).

Although cultural traditions in some Western countries pose challenges to reducing meat consumption (Jeżewska-Zychowicz et al., 2024a), overall, plant-based options facilitate "conscious consumption," allowing students to "enjoy my food while staying true to my values" (P22). This dual motivation reflects a broader trend in which food choices express identity and values at both personal and societal levels.

Understanding these core motivations offers valuable insights for hospitality management. Offering thoughtfully prepared plant-based options enables restaurants to meet the health, ethical, and cultural needs of a diverse consumer base. These menu choices go beyond mere nutritional alternatives; they signal respect for customers' values and foster inclusivity. This shift signifies not merely a trend but a fundamental realignment of consumer priorities, especially among Generation Z, creating opportunities for deeper brand-consumer connections.

Word Cloud: Participants' Responses

As part of the data analysis, the researchers provide a visual presentation of the participants' responses through a generated word cloud. The word cloud presents the most commonly mentioned words by the participants, thereby emphasizing the recurring ideas and themes that emerged from the data gathered. The researchers utilized Zygoté's [WordClouds.com] to generate the participants' responses into a burger-shaped word cloud—the most common ideas that have surfaced: Food, Healthy, and Meat.



Figure 3. Participants' Responses Word Cloud

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study illuminates Generation Z university students' lived experiences, perceptions, and values regarding plant-based menu options in selected casual dining restaurants. The findings reveal a complex interplay of awareness, sensory experience, health consciousness, and ethical considerations that shape acceptance and preferences. This reinforces existing theories and literature in relation to sensory dominance, media-driven awareness, and dual-motivation frameworks – internal health consciousness and external ethical concern.

Primarily, sensory experience emerges as the decisive factor; taste, texture, and overall sensory quality act as non-negotiable determinants of acceptance. Participants repeatedly emphasized that, regardless of health or ethical benefits, plant-based options must deliver on flavor and sensory appeal to gain lasting traction. This aligns with the existing literature, which underscores sensory attributes as major barriers or drivers of plant-based food adoption (Jilwana et al., 2025; Kumari et al., 2023).

Moreover, awareness of plant-based options is predominantly shaped by digital media and social platforms, yet knowledge gaps remain, especially regarding in-restaurant availability. This suggests that marketing efforts must integrate both online and on-site promotion strategies to penetrate the Gen Z market fully.

In terms of motivations, participants exhibit a dual focus: an internal drive for personal health benefits characterized by increased energy, disease prevention, and well-being, and an outward orientation toward ethical and environmental values, including animal welfare and sustainability. This duality highlights that plant-based menu choices serve both as a lifestyle expression of self-care and as a statement of social responsibility.

The study also reveals that economic considerations, such as price point and perceived value, play pivotal roles; consumers weigh quality and ethical alignment against the premium cost of plant-based items. To address this barrier relating to affordability, restaurants may consider sourcing ingredients locally to reduce cost and enhance affordability for consumers without compromising the quality and maintaining the freshness of their offerings. Brand transparency in sustainability

practices further contributes to consumer loyalty and decision-making.

In sum, this research confirms that Generation Z consumers approach plant-based dining with nuanced, critical perspectives that integrate sensory preferences, health outcomes, ethical values, and economic trade-offs. For hospitality managers, these insights emphasize the need to develop plant-based offerings that are not only flavorful and healthful but also ethically aligned, transparently marketed, and competitively priced.

Implication of the Study

The study provides practical implications for the Hospitality industry, particularly the food and beverage sector. As this study highlights, plant-based options are diverse, increasing accessibility and awareness of the menu offerings of plant-based options among Generation Z consumers. The findings underscore the need to improve sensory attributes – such as taste, texture, and visual – through culinary innovation to not only satisfy nutritional aspects but also the sensory expectation. Considering Generation Z awareness is significantly influenced by digital presence, the food and beverages sector should strengthen its presence in digital media spaces to promote the benefits of its plant-based offerings. Furthermore, this should be complemented by in-store strategies – including clear labeling, knowledgeable staff, and sampling opportunities- to increase visibility and awareness of plant-based options. Additionally, sourcing local ingredients ensures freshness and authenticity but also supports local farmers and the agriculture sector. Encouraging sustainable food systems. Finally, educational initiatives related to plant-based options should be systematically incorporated into health and hospitality curricula to enhance evidence-based awareness and informed decision making. To sum up, the study reinforces a dual-strategy for the hospitality industry in promoting plant-based food consumption among Gen Z through improving sensory satisfaction and expanding awareness facilitated by digital media with credibility, accessibility, and experience-based advertising campaigns.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies could expand the scope beyond urban university students to include diverse demographics, such as rural populations, different age groups, and socio-economic backgrounds. It is also recommended to extend the scope of investigation to food and beverage establishments, such as cafes and other restaurants that offer plant-based menu options, to capture broader perspectives on plant-based food acceptance. Longitudinal research would also be valuable to assess changes in attitudes and consumption patterns over time as plant-based options become more mainstream.

Additionally, experimental designs testing specific sensory modifications or marketing approaches could provide actionable insights for product development and promotion. Exploring cross-cultural comparisons could further elucidate how cultural norms influence plant-based food adoption globally. In addition, integrating the food concept of plant-based foods into educational curricula, particularly within food-related programs such as Hospitality Management, Nutrition and Dietetics, and Food Technology. Such studies could determine how academic exposure and structured learning influence students' awareness, attitudes, and competencies on plant-based products.

Furthermore, future studies that examine the environmental impact awareness and actual behavioral sustainability practices among Gen Z consumers in relation to plant-based diets would deepen the understanding of value-driven consumption. Thus, future studies should explore the influence of social media influencers and peer networks in

shaping perceptions and preferences toward plant-based food choices.

Generation Z represents the most active social media users and was born in the digital era. Finally, employing a mixed method approach is recommended to effectively triangulate qualitative insights with quantitative data, therefore providing a more holistic and evidence-based understanding of plant-based food acceptance and behavior.

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