
Generation Z Consumer Expectations Towards Online Advertising for Food Products

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Abstract:

Purpose: The aim of this empirical research was to identify the factors influencing Gen Zers' purchase decisions regarding online shopping for food products and to determine their expectations towards online advertising for these products.

Design/Approach/Methodology: The empirical material was collected using a standardized research questionnaire. The survey was conducted in March–April 2024 on a sample of Generation Z representatives. A total of 540 correctly completed questionnaires were obtained and analyzed.

Findings: Research has shown that the motives behind Gen Zers' online shopping for food products include convenience, time and cost savings, possibility to compare prices and access to a wider range of products. Food advertising preferences of young adults involve adverts on social media and YouTube videos. The key information expected by Gen Zers to be provided by an advertising message includes price, ingredients and product origin.

Practical Implications: Understanding Gen Zers' online food shopping preferences allows marketers to better tailor their marketing strategies. Creating visually appealing and easy-to-navigate ads providing clear information about price, ingredients and quality is key.

Originality/Value: Previous research on online shopping for food products has not included Generation Z, which is why this study fills a significant research gap.

Keywords: Online shopping, purchase decisions, food products, consumer behavior.

JEL classification: D12, L81.

Paper Type: Research study.

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1. Introduction

In the literature there seems to be no general definition of the term "marketing" due to its broad scope of meaning and the multitude of interpretations in various theoretical contexts (Hult *et al.*, 2011). The most frequently cited definition of marketing today is that proposed by the American Marketing Association, "Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large." (AMA, 2017).

Consequently, in the most general sense, marketing is a discipline that studies human behavior (Hunt, 2014), and research in marketing science studies the processes of creating, delivering and exchanging offers.

From the perspective of this study, the analysis of the definition of advertising is of key importance. Advertising is the key element of promotion, often mistakenly considered to be synonymous with the word marketing. It is the main form of communication between a company or entrepreneurs and the market.

The main task of advertising is to induce the desired action in its recipient, whether it is the purchase of a product or the use of a service. It provides information about new products, describes the benefits of having certain products and strengthens positive associations with a given brand. An unambiguous definition of the term "advertising," as in the case of marketing, is currently not possible.

Richards and Curran (2002), attempted to identify five essential elements that determine whether an activity is advertising and arrived at the following definition, "Advertising is a paid, mediated form of communication from an identifiable source, designed to persuade the receiver to take some action, now or in the future".

Further work on this definition resulted in a new formulation proposed by Kerr and Richards (2021) "Advertising is paid, owned, and earned mediated communication, activated by an identifiable brand and intent on persuading the consumer to make some cognitive, affective or behavioral change, now or in the future".

Definitions of advertising have changed with innovations in communications and the development of new technologies, which have been used as tools for advertising. The Internet is considered one of the youngest advertising media. Its conventional beginning is 1969, when the first government network called Arpanet was created in the United States (Leiner *et al.*, 2009). It took several decades for the first Internet advertisements to appear in the 1990s. Internet advertising can be defined in different ways depending on the context.

According to Schumann Internet advertising, also known as online advertising, is a form of advertising that uses the Internet to provide consumers with marketing

information (Schumann, 2016). According to AMA (2024), it is a targeted, data-driven approach to advertising through various online channels, such as websites, social media platforms, and mobile applications.

As the definition indicates, it includes activities whose goals are identical to those of traditional advertising using other tools, such as websites, email, social media (Nawaz and Kaldeen, 2020), and others. It is also distinguished by certain features such as: global reach, the ability to precisely profile the target groups (e.g., a specific professional group), low costs of creation and publication, durability, and short placement time (Giombi *et al.*, 2022).

Online advertising also supports building relationships with customers through personalized communication (Pradhan *et al.*, 2023). Food requires special marketing approach (Werenowska, 2020) especially when the aim is to appeal to young adults from Generation Z who get information mainly from digital sources, therefore online advertising for food products has become the focus of our research interests.

Generation Z are young adults born in 1995 or later who are currently completing higher education and entering the workforce (Lyons, Schweitzer, and Ng, 2015; Parzonko, Balińska, and Sieczko, 2021). In the case of this target audience, online advertising seems particularly important as this cohort often uses mobile applications to purchase goods, redeem coupons or discount codes, and make mobile payments (Paczka, 2020).

They also use mobile devices in post-purchase processes, evaluating products and services, contacting companies, sharing their product experiences with friends, and publishing content on their social media profiles. Having access to a large amount of information, Gen Zers make decisions in a more pragmatic and analytical way compared to previous generations. Considering the above-mentioned characteristics of Generation Z and the growing popularity of online shopping for food, we aimed to identify the expectations of the cohort known as digital natives towards online food advertising and the factors determining their purchase decisions.

2. Materials and Methods

The aim of this research was to identify factors influencing the decision to purchase food products online made by Generation Z representatives and to determine their expectations regarding the advertising for food products on the Internet.

The empirical material was obtained using a standardized research questionnaire. The survey questionnaire was placed on the Webankieta platform. The survey was conducted in March - April 2024 on a sample of Generation Z representatives. To obtain the most complete picture of the analyzed problem, multiple choice questions were used in the questionnaire.

The sampling was purposive, based on the age criterion, i.e. we recruited subjects born after 1995 and before 2010. Previous studies on online shopping for food did not include Generation Z, so this study fills a significant research gap. Generation Z, accounting for about 32% of the world's population, is the largest generation and is predicted to have a significant impact on global consumer sales (Miller and Lu, 2018).

Therefore, research focusing on this demographic group is particularly important. Generation Z is addicted to technology and savvy about handling digital information, as they do not know the world without the Internet. As a result, it is the Internet that shapes their consumer behavior and basic social values.

The recruitment process involved direct contact with potential respondents, during which the purpose of the study was verbally presented, and they were invited to complete an online survey. Respondents who expressed their willingness to participate in the study received a direct link to the survey, which enabled them to complete the questionnaire anonymously.

A total of 540 correctly completed survey questionnaires were obtained. The group of respondents included 60.7% women and 39.3% men. As for the place of residence, the study population included 5.7% of rural residents, 29.4% of residents of cities up to 20,000 residents, 18.3% from cities of 20,000-100,000 residents and 46.5% living in cities over 100,000 residents. The research results were presented in descriptive, tabular and graphical form.

3. Results and Discussion

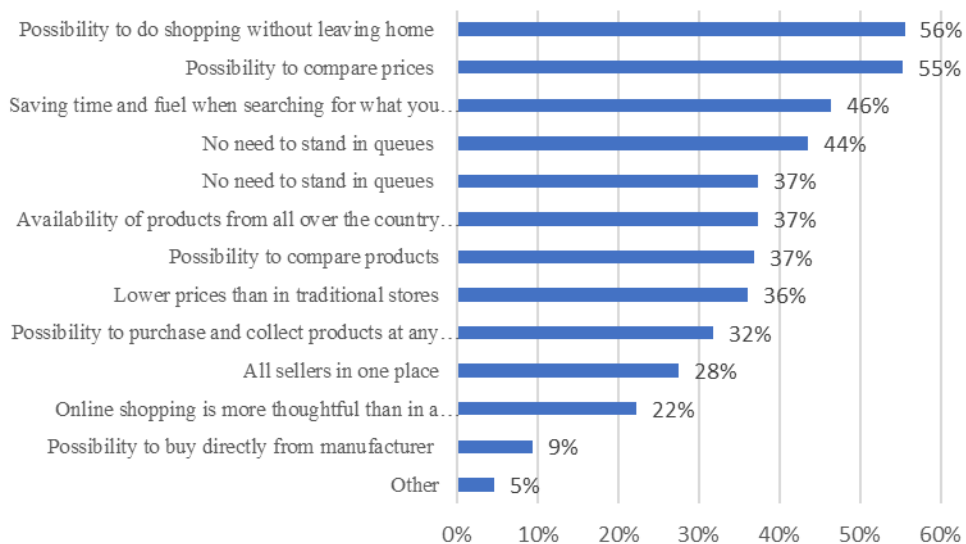
A consumer is a person who feels a need to consume and makes a purchase. Consumer behavior should be treated as one of the elements of the broadly understood human behavior (Jachnis, 2007).

Consumer behavior covers mental and physical activities (behavior) of individuals and small groups (including connecting them with motives and causes) involving buying, using, maintaining and getting rid of a product (consumption cycle) that enable the consumer to function and realize their goals and values (Antonides and Raaij, 2003).

Consumer behavior on the market is influenced by both internal factors - related to the consumers themselves and external factors - inherent in their environment. Among them, the factor of digital technologies deserves special attention.

The conducted research shows that online purchase decisions were mainly determined by factors such as: the possibility to shop without leaving home, comparing prices before making a transaction, saving time and fuel when searching for the needed products and no need to stand in queues to checkout.

Figure 1. Factors determining the purchase of food products via the Internet in the opinion of respondents [%].



Note: *Respondents could indicate more than one answer

Source: Own research results.

Every third respondent indicated a wider range of products not only from all over the country, but also the world, and lower prices compared to traditional stores. The least important reason for online shopping for food was the opportunity to buy products directly from a farm, despite the potential possibility of negotiating prices. Wood (2022) suggests similarly that Generation Z is more willing to use convenient digital channels, such as social media, instead of visiting farms directly to make purchases.

The possibility to do shopping without leaving home, as well as saving time and fuel when looking for necessary food products were indicated more often by women than by men, while men more often than women appreciated a wider range of products, not only domestic but also from all over the world, or the possibility to buy directly from a farm.

When buying food products online, women probably valued the possibility of saving time and money mainly because they could use the time to do other household chores or keep in touch with their family.

Rural residents were more encouraged than city residents to make purchases of food products online by factors such as, the possibility of doing shopping without leaving home and not having to queue to the checkout, while the possibility of comparing products or their lower prices compared to traditional stores were less important for rural residents than for city residents.

Table 1. Factors perceived as important for online food shopping [%].

Factors	Total N=540	Gender		City			Rural areas
		Women N=328	Men N=212	≤ 20,000 N=159	20,000 - 100,000 N=99	≥ 100,000 N=251	N=31
Credibility of the website source	73.9	73.0	76.0	72.3	82.8	71.7	71.0
Free delivery	70.6	73.0	67.0	66.7	73.7	72.1	67.7
Ease of finding information on the website and app	70.4	69.0	72.0	72.3	73.7	68.5	64.5
Possibility to check other customers' reviews	60.6	62.0	58.0	62.9	63.6	57.8	61.3
Quality of product images	50.7	51.0	51.0	49.7	53.5	49.0	61.3
Aesthetics of the website and app	50.4	50.0	51.0	50.3	47.5	50.6	58.1
Detailed product descriptions	42.0	40.0	46.0	40.9	43.4	42.6	38.7
Possibility to buy products without having to log in	40.6	41.0	40.0	37.7	48.5	39.0	41.9
Intuitive navigation on the app	27.4	27.0	29.0	25.8	26.3	29.1	25.8
Website adaptation for mobile devices	27.0	26.0	28.0	22.6	27.3	29.9	25.8
Possibility to download the app on a smartphone	22.6	26.0	17.0	22.6	19.2	25.1	12.9
Color scheme of the website and app	19.6	22.0	16.0	17.6	17.2	23.1	9.7
Possibility to create a persistent shopping cart	18.9	21.0	16.0	13.2	24.2	21.5	9.7
Possibility to buy product sets (e.g. broth vegetables)	9.8	10.0	9.0	11.9	6.1	10.4	6.5
Other	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4	3.2

Note: * Respondents could indicate more than one answer

Source: Own research results.

The analysis shows that when buying food products online, over two thirds of the respondents paid attention mainly to the credibility of the website source, free delivery and the ease of finding information on the website and application.

Nearly two thirds of the participants expected the possibility to check the reviews posted by other users, and half of the respondents paid attention to the aesthetics of the website and application and the quality of product images.

On the other hand, the least important elements of the website functionality listed by the respondents included: the possibility of buying a set of products (e.g., broth vegetables), the possibility to have a persistent shopping cart, the website color scheme and the possibility of downloading an app on a smartphone. A website should be attractive to the consumer, intuitive, functional and useful, including easy navigation, attractive colors, proper layout and frequent content updates.

Women more often than men paid attention to such elements as: free delivery, customer reviews, the website or app color scheme or the possibility of downloading the application on a smartphone and creating a persistent shopping cart. The elegant, modern graphic design focused women's attention to a greater extent, and the above-mentioned functionalities of the website allowed them to save time and money.

When designing an advertisement for food products on the Internet, it is worth considering consumer preferences and ensuring that the website loads quickly and is responsive, i.e., automatically adjusts to a smartphone or tablet. Residents of cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants were much more likely than residents of villages, small and medium-sized towns to pay attention to such elements of the website's functionality as the ability to download an application on the smartphone, intuitive navigation, aesthetics of the website and application, detailed product descriptions, the ability to create a persistent shopping cart or the ability to buy a set of products (e.g., broth vegetables).

This is probably due to users' greater experience in using mobile devices or consumer preferences, convenience and the will to improve the comfort of life. The participants from large cities were much less interested in customer reviews, the possibility of free delivery or the ease of finding information on the website and application.

The residents of large cities are often anonymous, which may be the cause why their interest in the opinions of other consumers was much smaller than in rural areas or in small and medium-sized towns. Place of residence did not differentiate the respondents' opinions regarding the credibility of the website, the quality of product images, and the website adaptation for mobile devices.

Considering that young consumers are active on the Internet, mainly on social media, we attempted to determine the rank of various media advertising food products. It turned out that Generation Z consumers most often notice food product advertising on the Internet. Therefore, the results regarding online advertising were further analyzed. The respondents were asked to indicate the forms of online advertising encouraging them to purchase food products online.

Table 2. Forms of online advertising encouraging online purchase of food products by gender and place of residence [%]

Forms of online advertising	Total N=540	Gender		Cities			Rural areas N=31
		Women N=328	Men N=212	≤ 20,000 N=159	20,000 - 100,000 N=99	≥100,000 N=251	
YouTube videos	32.4	27.4	40.1	34.0	31.3	35.1	6.5
Website banners	27.8	26.8	29.2	22.6	26.3	32.3	22.6
Social media advertising	44.1	50.9	33.5	42.1	46.5	45.8	32.3
Auction site advertising	4.3	2.7	6.6	2.5	7.1	4.0	6.5
Marketing emails	6.5	6.1	7.1	5.7	7.1	6.4	9.7
Search engine advertising	16.1	15.2	17.5	20.8	10.1	15.9	12.9
Blog advertising	11.3	13.4	8.0	10.1	13.1	11.2	12.9
Forum advertising	15.2	16.5	13.2	15.7	13.1	14.3	25.8
Sponsored posts	29.3	30.5	27.4	33.3	24.2	30.3	16.1
Sponsored articles	18.9	19.2	18.4	19.5	19.2	17.1	29.0
Other	5.0	4.3	6.1	2.5	2.0	7.6	6.5

Note: * Respondents could indicate more than one answer.

Source: Own research results.

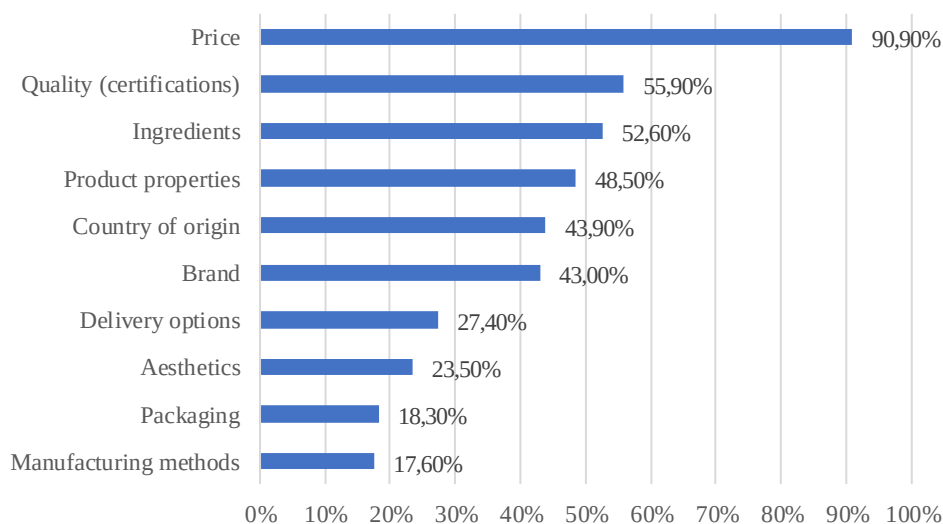
It should be noted that respondents felt most inspired to buy food products by advertising posted on social networking sites. Video ads on YouTube, sponsored posts and banners on websites were also important. This is valuable information for online advertising producers, who can use these suggestions in the process of designing and placing the advertising messages, especially since the ICSC report (2023) indicated similar forms of advertising.

On the other hand, the least effective were advertisements on auction portals and marketing emails. In the "other" category, respondents mentioned, among others: Tik Tok, billboards, promotion on the same website, ads in *Gazetka* application

(digital special prices catalogues), advertisements in dedicated applications of stores, such as *Żappka* from *Żabka* - a retail outlet, or *Moja Skarbonka* from Auchan supermarket, and recommendations from friends who have had good experience with a given store.

It should be noted that advertising videos on YouTube more often encouraged men than women to buy food products online, while advertisements on social networking sites were more often preferred by women. Sponsored articles and advertising on the Internet forums were more appreciated by rural residents than by city residents. In turn, YouTube commercials and ads on social media were more important for city residents than for rural residents.

Figure 2. Consumer expectations regarding information included in online advertising for food products [%]



Note: * Respondents could indicate more than one answer.

Source: Own research results.

The conducted research shows that over 90% of respondents expect food advertisements to provide information about prices. It is worth noting that due to rising inflation the prices of foods have increased significantly, which is why information about prices has become crucial for consumers. Over half of the respondents expected online advertisements to provide information about the product quality its composition. This data allows consumers to make informed purchase decisions.

On the other hand, the least important aspects regarded packaging and production method. Information about the price and composition of food products in advertisements was more important for women than for men. It should be added that

the gender of respondents did not differentiate opinions on the properties and quality of products advertised on the Internet.

As for the place of residence, the prices of food products in advertisements were most important for residents of medium-sized towns and the least important for residents of rural areas. On the other hand, the composition of the product was most important for residents of small towns, the properties of the product for residents of both small and large cities, and the quality of the product for residents of large cities.

Similar research results were presented by McKinsey & Company, which showed that 65% of respondents of this generation declared that they strive to obtain knowledge about the origin of the products they purchase - their place of production, composition and manufacturing process (Francis and Hoefel, 2018) and by Whole Foods Market (2024)

4. Summary and Conclusions

Based on the conducted empirical research, several generalizations and conclusions have been formulated regarding the online grocery purchases made by Generation Z, as well as their expectations towards the online advertising for food products:

- In the opinion of the respondents, the Internet has the potential for transmitting advertising messages about food products, because it is a modern, easily accessible and cheap communication medium.
- Respondents' decisions about online shopping for food were motivated by the possibility of buying without leaving home, the ease of comparing prices before buying, saving time and fuel, and avoiding queues.
- Our research shows that in the case of online shopping for groceries, the most important factors include: the credibility of the website, free home delivery, intuitive website or app navigation, the possibility of checking customer reviews, high quality product images and the aesthetics of the website design.
- Generation Z representatives felt most inspired to buy food products by online advertising posted on social networking sites, advertising videos on YouTube, sponsored posts and banners on websites.

The presented conclusions can be used by producers of online advertising in the process of designing the advertising messages. Our research shows that Gen Zers expect the ads to provide information about the product's price, quality, composition and the country of origin.

In addition, when designing a website and advertising food products, it is worth paying attention to its aesthetics, intuitive navigation, and responsive design ensuring that the website automatically adapts to user's mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets. Understanding the shopping preferences of Generation Z in

the field of online food shopping allows for better adjustment of marketing strategies.

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