

Generational Differences in Personalized Dining Experiences: Implications For Foodservice Management

Vikas^{1*}, Brijesh wadhwa²

^{1*}Designation: Lecturer, Affiliation- Institute of Hotel Management, Faridabad

E-mail- Vikasihmfbid@gmail.com

Corresponding author *

²Designation: Lecturer, Affiliation- Institute of Hotel Management, Rohtak

E-mail -Brijesh.wadhwa06@gmail.com

Abstract

Personalization is no longer just a marketing trend but rather an essential operational practice within the food service industry; however, there does not appear to be consensus on what constitutes a “personalized” experience. This paper investigates how restaurant and hotel food and beverage (F & B) operators conceptualize personalization through the framework of generational cohort differences. Through the use of peer-reviewed literature in hospitality, consumer behavior, and food science along with recent industry data, this paper assesses how Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z perceive, anticipate, and respond to personalized dining experiences. The findings indicate that personalization can be viewed as a collection of separate behavioral elements, including when a server remembers the previous orders of a repeat patron or when an algorithm recommends a meal item prior to the guest opening their menu and also that each generational cohort responds differently to these behaviors due to differing underlying motivations. The paper will conclude by providing practical recommendations to food service operators looking to develop generationally informed approaches to personalization while at the same time identifying areas in need of future empirical research based on the existing literature.

Keywords: personalization, foodservice, generational cohorts, dining experience, hospitality management, customer loyalty

Introduction

Walk into almost any restaurant today and the word “personalization” is doing a lot of quiet work behind the scenes. A loyalty app remembers that a guest is allergic to shellfish. A server greets a regular by name without being told who they are. A kiosk suggests a side dish based on what a guest ordered the last time they visited. None of this is accidental; it reflects a deliberate shift in how foodservice businesses compete. As dining options multiply and switching costs fall, operators increasingly rely on personalization to build the kind of emotional loyalty that price discounts alone cannot buy.

At the same time, the foodservice workforce and customer base span at least four living generations, from Baby Boomers to Generation Z, each shaped by different formative experiences, different comfort levels with technology, and different ideas about what good

service actually looks like. A Millennial guest may equate personalization with a beautifully tailored app recommendation, while a Baby Boomer guest may equate it with a host who simply remembers their name. Treating “the guest” as a single, generic customer, therefore, risks producing personalization strategies that satisfy no one particularly well.

This paper asks a focused question: how should foodservice operators design personalization strategies that meaningfully address the differing expectations of Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z? To answer this, the paper reviews existing literature on service personalization and generational consumer behavior, proposes a simple framework for thinking about generational personalization preferences, and discusses practical implications for restaurant and hotel F&B managers.

Literature Review

Personalization as a Service Strategy

Personalization in the field of Services Research typically involves providing each customer with a personalized interaction, customized product, or tailored communication based upon that customer's unique needs versus interacting with every customer in a similar manner. Ball et al. (2006) established foundational work related to the impact of personalization on customer loyalty. They determined that personalization generates increased customer loyalty through improved perceptions of the quality of service provided and increased levels of customer trust, rather than being a direct contributor to loyalty. The importance of this distinction exists for Food Service Managers who will judge the success of their personalization initiatives primarily on the degree to which they create an environment that makes customers feel both understood and valued.

The concept of personalization has been further developed into algorithm-based environments. Obiegbu and Larsen (2025) studied how algorithm-based personalization impacts the development of brand loyalty from the perspective of the consumer, i.e., the customer, versus solely from the perspective of the operator/owner. Their findings indicated that while consumers may perceive algorithm-generated recommendations as “neutral” or “functional,” personalization is tied to the level of agency, authenticity, and self-identification a consumer perceives within a particular interaction. The implications of these findings are particularly significant given the increasing presence of AI-based recommendation engines in food service (Ogunleye et al., 2024).

In Hospitality, prior research on food personalization has commonly emphasized the psychological value that customization provides. For instance, several mass-customization studies have demonstrated that when customers are allowed to customize their meal options (i.e., build or modify), they perceive greater value in their dining experience. However, the degree to which this occurs can depend significantly upon the situation (e.g., time constraints or type of dish being ordered), among other factors (Petrescu & Petrescu-Mag, 2023, as an illustration of this larger body of research). Together, these studies suggest that personalization should be viewed as a psychological and relational construct and not simply as a feature of operations.

Generational Cohort Theory and Consumer Behavior

Generational Cohort Theory - The idea that all individuals born during approximately the same time frame experienced similar formative events/periods. Events which formed attitudes and consumption behaviors. These are not identical for each person; however they provide a valuable approach to segmenting consumer perceptions based upon generational cohort.

Dokoupilova et al. (2024), in their study assessing GenZ's core values in multiple European Countries indicated this cohort shares values that are both individualistic (e.g., hedonism) and collective (benevolence & universalism). Additionally, the results suggest that GenZ is unique when compared with prior cohorts; i.e., GenZ leans much less to traditional values than prior generations. The value structure of GenZ will directly affect how GenZ consumers expect personalized services from Food Service Providers. For example, a GenZ customer expects his/her service to be individually tailored, while he/she wants to know that the company behind that service supports the community and adheres to socially responsible practices.

Ivasciuc et al. (2024), utilized bibliometric methodology to create a map of GenZ Tourism Research and confirmed that GenZ's travel and consumption behaviors were significantly different from those of prior generations primarily due to its immersion into digital technology at birth. Ivasciuc et al. further noted that academic interest in studying GenZ's travel habits and consumption behaviors, specifically in hospitality and tourism studies, has dramatically increased over the last few years. This suggests that there is currently very little empirical data available regarding GenZ's preferences for dining out.

Generational Differences in Dining and Food Preferences

Generational Differences in Food Choice and Dining Behavior: Implications for Personalized Marketing Strategies.

Makowska et al. (2024) documented that there is an emerging consensus among researchers regarding the fact that older generations (Baby Boomers & Gen X) view food as primarily a matter of quality/origin, whereas younger generations (Millennials & Gen Z) place greater importance on the price/value of the meal. As such, while marketing messages focused on the premium/high-quality aspects of a brand will be attractive to the baby boomer and gen x consumer; it is unlikely to attract a millennial or Gen Z consumer without incorporating elements related to the value/affordability of the experience. Alqahtani et al. (2025) found significant generational differences in how consumers choose where to eat. In particular, Generation Z was significantly more likely to eat at restaurants, more influenced by peer pressure/taste and less concerned about nutritional content than previous generations. Additionally, although Gen Z has been characterized as environmentally conscious, this generation showed relatively little interest in purchasing organic/sustainably produced foods relative to previous generations. Industry research corroborates many of the academic studies referenced above. A 2024 study of diner preferences across boomer, gen x, millennials and gen z identified that each demographic group uses unique methods to find new restaurants. Specifically, nearly all boomer diners stated that they relied on family recommendations to find new restaurants, most gen x diners stated that they relied on friend/co-worker

recommendations, most millennials rely on online reviews and approximately half of gen z diners stated that they selected a new restaurant because of positive social media posts. The Louisiana Restaurant Association (2025a, 2025b) further demonstrated that younger diners are significantly more sensitive to price and are more interested in obtaining discounts/rewards from establishments than are older diners. These findings collectively suggest that “knowing your guests” means knowing what makes them unique by age/generation, not just what type of menu item they prefer.

Technology as an Enabler of Personalization

Industry analysts at Bloom Intelligence reported in a 2026 review of restaurant personalization practices that having all point-of-sale systems, reservation platforms, loyalty programs, and online ordering data “synchronized” would be the “new normal” or minimum threshold to achieve the promise of consistent personalization because an “unsynchronized” data environment could both equally embarrass and delight a customer. For example, suggesting a menu item that a guest may have been previously advised they had allergies to. The same report stated that use of AI-driven “personalized engagement” in restaurants results in measurable increases in revenues of typically 5% to 10% in addition to increased repeat visitation among customers whose preferences were recognized by the establishment.

Research in applied hospitality supports this view. A quantitative study conducted to examine how AI-driven personalization impacted the experience of hotel guests (business and leisure) in India concluded that AI did improve the experience of guests' experience related to the consumption of food and beverages but how AI was utilized varied based on the type of property: Business Hotels utilized AI to increase efficiency and streamline the delivery of services while Leisure Hotels utilized AI to create experiential dining experiences, which told stories about the culture and history of the region.

This distinction serves as a valuable reminder that technology is merely a vehicle for achieving personalization and should not replace or substitute the contextual elements that define whether an individual will benefit from personalization.

Conceptual Framework

The research in this study can be used as a foundation to develop a new and easy-to-understand two-dimensional model to understand generational differences in foodservice customers' perceptions of personalization. One dimension refers to how personalization is provided, such as human- mediated (i.e. an employee provides personalized service by remembering you are a customer) versus technology-mediated (i.e. using apps, kiosks, etc. that provide personalized service based on your needs). The other dimension refers to what is being used to create the personalization preference. This can range from transactional cues (i.e. past purchases, dietary requirements, budget), to identity-expressing cues (i.e. value statements, beliefs, social media presence). Based upon Dokoupilová et al. (2024); Ivasciuc et al. (2024); TouchBistro (2024), it appears that Baby Boomers and Gen-X prefer human-mediated, transaction-based personalization experiences. Millennials appear to be at a midpoint with respect to preferring technology-enabling convenience and also appearing to want to support authentic brands that

reflect their own values. Gen-Z has indicated they will prefer technology-enabled, identity-expressing personalization experiences that allow them to customize their ordering process while demonstrating that the company they order from reflects their values and perspectives.

Discussion: Aligning Personalization Strategies with Generational Expectations

Baby Boomers

For Baby Boomer diners' personalization is most reliable when it is delivered by a human rather than by systems. This cohort will give more weight to trustworthy human recommendations and are generally more tolerant of premium pricing when the underlying relationship feels authentic (Louisiana Restaurant Association, 2025a; touchbiro, 2024). Some practical ways for restaurants to provide this type of personalization include training staff to acknowledge and greet repeat guests by name and maintaining detailed but discreet guest-preference notes at host stands. Furthermore, they should also limit their use of self-service kiosks or app-only loyalty programs that can make this cohort feel like an afterthought instead of a priority.

Generation X

Generation X is typically referred to as the “middle child” of the hospitality generation groups; and while they are perceived to be somewhat tech-savvy, Johnson Pike (2023) reported that this age group may also have an appreciation for classic, high-quality dining experiences. Additionally, Generation X appears to be comfortable using some basic technology-related tools such as online ordering systems or restaurant loyalty apps, but are generally not seeking flashiness or a high-tech experience. As a result, successful personalization strategies will likely include a combination of convenient features such as being able to save previous orders and easily reorder them with the consistency and reliability associated with the quality of food prepared by your establishment.

Millennials

Millennials are the first generation to have grown up eating while using apps to order their meals. The data suggests millennials associate with personalization through ethical and environmentally responsible values associated with brands (Johnson Pike, 2023; Makowska et al., 2024) When used effectively on this age group, personalization should be more than what you eat. Personalization has an added value of creating a story around the products your brand uses. To create a personalized experience for millennial consumers, consider utilizing digital menu transparency, recommendation tools based upon previous dietetic/ethically preferred selections, and loyalty programs that track both how many times customers visit your store, and how engaged the customer has been with your store's social media outlets.

Generation Z

The generation which is perhaps the most difficult to personalize to are Gen Z. Gen Z has an extreme price sensitivity when it comes to food, they tend to be more influenced by their peers as well as how visually appealing something appears versus the nutritional value of the product, and prefer more engaging ways in which to customize their dining experience through format

types such as build your own (Alqahtani et al., 2025; LRA, 2025). However, Gen Z also desires to create an authentic relationship with brands. This is demonstrated by their interest in creating a story about the employees of the restaurants and the interest in group-based formats that allow people to have face-to-face conversations even though this demographic relies heavily upon technology to connect socially (FI, 2026). Personalizing to Gen Z will require both providing them with a digital customized experience using technologies such as build your own and game-based rewards and loyalty programs and provide unedited, or un-polished, brand storytelling rather than simply relying on algorithms.

Managerial Implications

There are many practical applications in this research area. First, foodservice businesses will want to view personalization not just as one new piece of technology but rather as multiple options for channels and messaging for their guest base depending on what generations those guests represent. Second, since the major impact of personalization is developing loyalty based upon building trust and satisfaction versus creating excitement simply due to novelty (Ball et al., 2006), operators need to focus on reliable delivery of personalized services (e.g., never recommending something if it goes against an expressed allergy) before they attempt to create sophisticated technologies. Third, considering that younger generations have increasing levels of concern about cost (Louisiana Restaurant Association, 2025a), loyalty programs and personalization efforts targeting Millennials and Gen Zers would do well to include some form of clear value/loyalty benefit as part of the strategy. Lastly, since most all full-service restaurant and hotel Food & Beverage operations serve a mix of different generations (i.e., there is no pure Millennial or Gen Z segment in these industries), operators may want to develop multi-layered personalization strategies where humans (hosts/hostesses) can provide relationship-based personalization for their older customers while digital tools can take care of the transactional and identity-related personalization needs for younger customers.

Limitations and Future Research

This literature review uses a conceptual approach to analyze generational consumer behavior rather than the results of original empirical research; thus, the studies analyzed were all performed in different countries (Poland, Saudi Arabia, Romania, and the Czech Republic/Slovakia) which could have differing market conditions for generalizing the results. Most of the generational consumer behavior literature referenced in this review was based on research related to food choices/dietary behaviors as opposed to food service personalization, therefore many of the connections made in this review regarding generational values and preferences for personalization were reasonable extrapolations based upon previous research as opposed to empirical evidence. The proposed channel-and-basis framework should be tested directly using experimental or survey-based methodologies by manipulating the type of personalization offered (technology mediated vs. human mediated, transactionally focused vs. identity expressively focused), and measuring resulting customer satisfaction and loyalty among generational cohorts within a specific restaurant/hotel Food and Beverage (F&B) operation. Additionally, longitudinal research will aid in determining if current GenZ

preferences are due to a stable cohort preference or a life stage preference that may evolve as they age.

Conclusion

Personalization has emerged as a key strategic driver of competition in foodservice; however, the evidence discussed herein clearly indicates that there can be no “one size fits all” application of personalization. The research presented herein indicates that Baby Boomers and Gen-X consumers view personalization primarily as an experience based on human relationships with employees, along with consistency in quality; Millennial consumers see personalization as an opportunity to express a brand's values (e.g., ethics) and experiences; while Gen-Z consumers want high levels of customization, yet still desire human authenticity from the brands they interact with. Therefore, foodservice providers who develop their own custom/personalized marketing/loyalty approaches by aligning them specifically with each generation's expectations relative to the personalization characteristics that most resonate with those generations will have a significant head start in creating customer loyalty -- which Ball et al. (2006) indicate are the ultimate drivers of customer retention.

References

1. Alqahtani, N. S., Alanazi, S., Almuhayd, R., Alanazi, E., Alanazi, J., Soliman, S., & Alruwaili, N. (2025). Generational differences in dietary behaviours: A cross-sectional study of Generations X, Y, and Z. *F1000Research*, 14, Article 858. <https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.167810.1>
2. Ball, D., Coelho, P. S., & Vilares, M. J. (2006). Service personalization and loyalty. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 20(6), 391–403. <https://doi.org/10.1108/08876040610691284>
3. Bloom Intelligence. (2026, June 4). *The role of personalization in dining for restaurants*. MyDigiMenu. <https://www.mydigimenu.com/post/the-role-of-personalization-in-dining-for-restaurants>
4. Dokoupilová, L., Cogiel, A., & Fero, M. (2024). Values as motivating factors for representatives of generation Z in the Czech Republic and Slovakia within the European context. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, Article 1404354. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1404354>
5. Food Institute. (2026, January 21). *Gen Z eats differently – What this means for restaurants*. <https://foodinstitute.com/focus/gen-z-eats-differently-what-this-means-for-restaurants/>
6. Ivasciuc, I.-S., Candrea, A. N., Ispas, A., & Piuaru, B.-A. (2024). A bibliometric analysis of generation Z and tourism research: Insights from VOSviewer mapping. *Administrative Sciences*, 14(12), Article 337. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci14120337>
7. Johnson Pike. (2023, November 29). *How Generations X, Y, and Z are redefining the dining experience*. <https://johnsonpike.com/how-generations-x-y-and-z-are-redefining-the-dining-experience/>
8. Louisiana Restaurant Association. (2025a, February 12). *Generational shifts reshaping the restaurant industry in 2025*. <https://www.lra.org/2025/02/12/adapting-to-generational-shifts-key-to-attracting-new-restaurant-diners/>
9. Louisiana Restaurant Association. (2025b, February 14). *How Gen Z & Millennials are redefining dining*. <https://www.lra.org/2025/02/14/how-gen-z-millennials-are-redefining-dining/>

10. Makowska, M., Boguszewski, R., & Hrehorowicz, A. (2024). Generational differences in food choices and consumer behaviors in the context of sustainable development. *Foods*, 13(4), Article 521. <https://doi.org/10.3390/foods13040521>
11. Obiegbu, C. J., & Larsen, G. (2025). Algorithmic personalization and brand loyalty: An experiential perspective. *Marketing Theory*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14705931241230041>
12. Radu, C.-G., Serban, A. C., Ntanos, S., & Salmon, I. (2025). Generations and sustainability: Analyzing preferences and behaviors for organic food products. In A. Kavoura, V.-A. Briciu, & A. Briciu (Eds.), *Strategic innovative marketing and tourism* (pp. 673–681). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-81962-9_73
13. TouchBistro. (2024, March 26). *New report reveals distinct generational dining habits* [Press release]. Business Wire. <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20240326938992/en>