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Exploratory Study of Romanian Generation Z Perceptions of Green Restaurants

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Abstract: The hospitality industry has taken advantage of consumers' increasing concerns regarding environmental issues. Worldwide, green restaurants have increased their profitability by using environmental attributes as a competitive advantage. In Romania, restaurants could profit from this new trend. This study aims to determine the perception of Generation Z consumers regarding green restaurants, since these younger consumers seem to have adopted more eco-friendly behavior compared to previous generations. Another objective of the study refers to assessing the importance of attributes relating to environmental protection and organic food when choosing a restaurant, consequently revealing a suitable market segment for this type of restaurant. In order to determine their degree of knowledge related to the concept of green restaurant, potential consuming behavior if implemented, and identifying the factors considered important when choosing a restaurant, this research compiles information from individuals belonging to Generation Z. Using principal component analysis, five factors were obtained, among which the "health and fresh food" was the most important. Based on the five dimensions, K-means cluster analysis led to three profiles of consumers. "Pro-environmental and convenience seekers" represent the largest cluster and should be considered the main target for future green restaurant practitioners. Additionally, our study finds an overall positive attitude toward green restaurants among the respondents and, more specifically, opinions on how these restaurants could address environmental issues and offer organic food, both important factors for Generation Z. This translates into a strong incentive for future entrepreneurs considering this business model in Romania.

Keywords: green practices; restaurants; pro-environmental; consumer behavior; cluster analysis



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1. Introduction

Recent years have been dominated by increasing concerns from governments and consumers regarding environmental issues and identifying proper solutions in order to avoid a global crisis (Bonini et al. 2008; Suki 2013; Dagher and Itani 2014; Sousa et al. 2022). This phenomenon has led to two major impacts on the food and hospitality industry. First, it has caused a shift in consumer buying behavior that has led to green consumerism (Bhatia and Jain 2013; Pagiaslis and Krontalis 2014; Ahmad and Thyagaraj 2015) and, second, it has influenced the business sector to integrate a component focused on environmental responsibility into corporate practices (Afzaal and Israr 2016; Hoogendoorn et al. 2015). As a consequence of the increasing worldwide demand for eco-friendly products and services, professionals in the field are committed to satisfying this demand through sustainable business practices (Jeong et al. 2014). As part of the hospitality industry, the restaurant industry was incentivized to adopt green or eco-friendly practices as these emerged as a

key attribute associated with strong brands and can represent a strong asset in terms of staying relevant to consumers (Namkung and Jang 2013). Thus, adopting green practices has progressively been integrated to companies' strategies, e.g., purchasing energy saving equipment, recycling waste, offering locally produced food, and implementing measures to reduce the emission of carbon gas (Schubert et al. 2010). Studies have highlighted that engaging in green practices brings many benefits for businesses by positively influencing consumer purchasing behavior (Han et al. 2009; Kang et al. 2012; Kim et al. 2013) and brand image, as well as bringing the financial benefits (Namkung and Jang 2013; Jiang and Wen 2020). As younger generations enter the market, it is worth noting that they show higher levels of concern for environmental issues than do older generations, e.g., they have a greater sense of responsibility in terms of conserving natural resources than previous generations (Gaidhani et al. 2019), and they tend to focus more on the characteristics of a healthy lifestyle (Su et al. 2019). As these younger generations are forecast to represent the largest percentage among potential consumers with a high buying power (Su et al. 2019), this justifies the need to characterize their attitudes towards the concept of green restaurants.

Compared to other European countries where the number of green restaurants has increased (Hu et al. 2010), the concept of green restaurants has not yet emerged in Romania (Ecomagazine 2022). There have been attempts from a few stakeholders in the restaurant industry to offer eco-friendly food or to adopt some eco-friendly practices in their activities, e.g., reducing waste. However, these can be considered isolated cases in Romania where there is no clear business trend based on the notion of "being green". As a consequence, research focusing on the perception of green restaurants in Romania has been scarce. Additionally, Generation Z refers to individuals born after 1995 or 1996, depending on the source (Dolot 2018; Priporas et al. 2017). Many studies have underscored that individuals belonging to Generation Z are, on average, very concerned with environmental issues (e.g., Singh and Dangmei 2016). Therefore, this study addresses the lack of information on the underexplored area of perceptions of green restaurants by focusing on Generation Z in Romania. Additional information is provided in order to better understand the attributes involved in the decision-making process of choosing a restaurant. The results have strong managerial implications and could represent an important starting point for actual or future entrepreneurs seeking solutions to consolidate their positioning based on more sustainable corporate values or by taking advantage of this potential niche market.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Main Characteristics of Green Restaurants

Green restaurants or restaurants implementing green practices have appeared as a way to meet consumers' increasing environmental concerns (Kwok et al. 2016; Tan and Yeap 2012), which have determined pro-environmental behavior based on recycling, reducing water use, conserving energy, and green purchasing (Gamtessa and Harminder 2019; Whitmarsh and O'Neill 2010; Trang et al. 2019). Implementing green initiatives in the tourism industry has become an important issue (Elshaer et al. 2023) for all of its stakeholders. Even more so for the restaurant sector, which is ranked second in the hospitality industry, specifically when it comes to waste and the lack of recycling (Trung and Kumar 2005; del Mar Alonso-Almeida 2012). Perramon et al. (2014) found that the adoption of green practices in the restaurant sector is sometimes due to external pressures coming mainly from competitors, local administrations, or demand. Neff et al. (2015) stated that consumers are aware of the negative impact of restaurants on the environment and proposed solutions to make them more eco-friendly, such as reducing portion sizes or donating leftovers (Arun et al. 2021).

Compared to a traditional restaurant business model, the green business model tends to follow the "3 R" model: i.e., reduce, reuse, and recycle (Gilg et al. 2005). The green practices used in the restaurant industry can be grouped into four main categories: recycling and composting, the use of energy- and water-efficient equipment, eco-friendly

cleaning supplies and packaging, and a sustainable menu including, for example, organic food (Wang 2012; Schubert 2008). Dewald et al. (2014) conducted a study in the U.S. and concluded that many consumers are willing to pay more for a “green dining” experience, highlighting how this type of niche restaurant could rapidly generate success, and obtain a competitive advantage on the market (Khuong et al. 2023). Previous research (Schubert et al. 2010; Jang et al. 2015) focused on identifying the main reasons for restaurant owners to implement green practices and the influence of these practices on their business. There is a general consensus that the green initiatives positively contribute to improving a restaurant’s brand image and reputation toward their current and potential customers, thereby contributing to increasing customer loyalty (Schubert et al. 2010; Jeong et al. 2014). Perramon et al. (2014) observed a direct link between green practices in the restaurant sector and competitiveness, both internally, through employee satisfaction with being part of an eco-friendly organization, and externally, by encouraging a positive perception on behalf of customers and raising the possibility of offering new products to the market appropriate to their concerns. For example, being green represents an opportunity for the sector to offer green foods, obtaining a competitive advantage for which there is an important marketing segment of consumers who are becoming preoccupied with health and nutrition, leading an eco-friendly lifestyle, or those who have health problems (Perramon et al. 2014; Hu et al. 2010; Jang et al. 2011).

Another reason for the restaurant industry to implement green practices is related to the potential financial benefits (Ham and Lee 2011; Schubert et al. 2010; Blanco et al. 2009). Studying that aspect, Perramon et al. (2014) highlighted that green practices have an indirect effect on company performance through competitiveness (Pereira-Moliner et al. 2012) or through a green capability (Yu et al. 2018), which is defined as the ability to build complementary green competences (Maksimov et al. 2019).

Schubert et al. (2010) mentioned that, in addition to the positive influence on the brand and the financial benefits, being green offers restaurants the possibility to contribute to the economic sustainability of the local community, which, of course, will lead to securing a positive image in society. Sustainable practices were found to be an important factor of influence on consumer satisfaction and intention to revisit an establishment (Chaturvedi et al. 2022; Riva et al. 2022). Meanwhile, Jeong et al. (2014) identified the difficulty of establishing a direct link between consumers’ efforts to act green (i.e., dine at a green restaurant), and the perceived direct benefits, which would be more related to satisfying a psychological need for improved self-esteem.

Apart from the numerous benefits of implementing green practices in the restaurant sector, certain disadvantages can also be mentioned, such as the financial costs of implementation that lead to more expensive prices for guests (Baloglu et al. 2020). In Romania, Băltescu et al. (2022) focused on analyzing the sustainable practices implemented by Romanian restaurants, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their conclusion highlights the fact that restaurant managers are usually more preoccupied by reducing economic costs than solving issues related to sustainability. They explain this behavior further and show that these problematics are often ignored due to a lack of awareness.

2.2. Consumer Perception of the Restaurants That Implement Green Practices

Given relatively recent appearance on the market of green restaurants, Arun et al. (2021) observed that many studies focus on analyzing the consumer attitudes toward green restaurants and their intention to visit one (Han et al. 2020; Tan et al. 2019; Sarmiento and El Hanandeh 2018; Lo et al. 2020; Namkung and Jang 2013; Jeong et al. 2014; Dewald et al. 2014; Teng et al. 2014). Their results concluded that there are three main attitudes, namely pro-environmental attitudes, pro-health attitudes, and others (Jang et al. 2015; Chan and Hon 2020; Dewald et al. 2014; Han 2020; Kim et al. 2013; Moon 2021; Tan et al. 2018). However, Teng et al. (2014) underscored that environmental concerns cannot predict the intention to visit a green restaurant. With regard to the intention to visit, results may differ from one study to another when it comes to hierarchizing the importance of factors. Shin

et al. (2019) found that health consciousness is the most influential factor, followed by social values, and finally by environmental concerns; the three dimensions also mentioned by Choi and Parsa (2006).

With regard to the relationship between green consciousness and the preference for green stores, Jang et al. (2015) concluded that highly green-conscious consumers proved to have greater emotional attachment towards green stores with a positive and favorable attitude for the patronage green initiatives compared to the segment of consumers with lower green consciousness who had less favorable attitudes towards a store's green initiatives which could not generate any emotional attachment to this category of business. Similar results were obtained by Namkung and Jang (2013), who observed important differences between the segment with high levels of health and environmental consciousness, who positively responded to restaurants' green practices, by comparing them to the segment with low health and environmental consciousness. These results were also confirmed by other studies (Han et al. 2020; Tan et al. 2019; Sarmiento and El Hanandeh 2018; Lo et al. 2020).

A study conducted in the United States (U.S.) (Dewald et al. 2014) analyzed consumer perceptions of green restaurants and search attributes, highlighting that more than half of the respondents encountered problems in defining the concept of a green restaurant. With regard to the attributes considered important during the decision-making process of choosing a restaurant, their order was the following: fresh ingredients, health aspects, good value, easy access, and good for the environment. Dewald et al. (2014) and Xu and Jeong (2019) analyzed the effectiveness of different messages within the communication process of green restaurants and observed that benefit-based messages are more effective than attribute-based messages, meaning that focusing on the benefits of green food is more impactful than focusing on the tangible aspects that indicate the implementation of green practices. A fact confirmed by considering that the promotion of green restaurants should emphasize the utilitarian value (Teng and Wu 2019).

To the best of our knowledge, no studies have been conducted in Romania in order to identify consumers' perceptions of green restaurants. A few studies have focusing on attributes such as sustainability and health playing important roles in choosing a restaurant. Their conclusions highlight that younger individuals appreciate the sustainable measures adopted in the restaurant industry (i.e., digital menus), and quality and food freshness are also pointed out as more important than price (Băltescu 2022). In their assessment of the health attributes, Chiciudean et al. (2019) concluded that this represents the most important factor for the largest segment of consumers in their sample.

2.3. Main Characteristics of Generation Z and Their Perceptions of Green Restaurants

Important differences have been highlighted when categorizing consumers according to their socio-demographic characteristics. A study conducted in the U.S. (Schubert et al. 2010) concluded that female respondents perceived green practices in the restaurant industry to be more important than did the male respondents. Additionally, younger respondents, mainly millennials (born between 1981 and 1996), considered the usage of organic food and measures to reduce the carbon footprint of a restaurant as the most important factors influencing their decisions. Further, findings show that female respondents are more loyal to eco-friendly restaurants and have stronger intentions to revisit. Previous research has focused on analyzing consumer behavior and perceptions of green restaurants, taking into consideration a very strict market segmentation based on age (Shapoval et al. 2018). Because of their socio-economic characteristics, i.e., high disposable incomes, eco-friendly concerns, and the desire to adopt eco-friendly and sustainable products (Riva et al. 2022), as well as their willingness to pay extra for dining in a green restaurant (Nicolau et al. 2020), most studies focused on Generation Y (millennials) (Nicolau et al. 2020; Riva et al. 2022; Shapoval et al. 2018; Chaudhary and Bisai 2018; Ghadban et al. 2021; Lo et al. 2020; Oke et al. 2023; Hayuningardi and Najib 2021). However, the potential of the next generation (Dolot 2018; Priporas et al. 2017)—Generation Z (Dimock 2019)—has received little attention comparatively (Seemiller and Grace 2018). This younger generation is con-

sidered to be the most ethnically diverse and technologically sophisticated generation, individualistic, acquisitive, materialistic, and demanding, but also very concerned with environmental issues (Singh and Dangmei 2016). Individuals belonging to this segment are characterized by innovation because of their close relationship to the virtual world, by convenience because of their lack of concerns related to consumption, by security because of the unstable economic environment that forces them to save money, and by escapism from the real world (Wood 2013). After analyzing the consumer behavior of Generation Z, Dabija et al. (2019) concluded that nowadays it will be impossible for producers to sell their products and services without relying on green strategies because they are more green- and sustainability-oriented, but also prioritize health when they make choices (Su et al. 2019). Other studies analyzing their attitudes toward green consumerism concluded that, despite their young age, they are aware of green lifestyles and products and admit that they have a responsibility towards the environment, making them eager to purchase green products (Riva et al. 2022). Similar results were obtained in Vietnam, where Nguyen et al. (2022) underlined the importance of this generation facing environmental changes and being more conscious about the need to adopt a more environmentally friendly behavior. Saran et al. (2023) observed that Generation Z's attitudes and intentions to purchase green products are significantly related to their awareness and seriousness about environment issues. Previous research on Generation Z highlighted three environmentally conscious groups of food consumers, among which sustainability activists and believers in sustainability were the largest, confirming their eco-friendly orientation (Su et al. 2019).

So, given the previous aspects mentioned, the following research question arose:

- (1) What is the degree of knowledge of the term "green restaurant" among Generation Z?
- (2) What would be their behavior toward this green business model if implemented?
- (3) How important are aspects related to environmental protection and organic products, among others, in their decision to visit a restaurant?
- (4) Which market segments can be identified for potential green restaurant practitioners, based on the factors considered important when choosing a restaurant?

3. Results

3.1. Generation Z's Knowledge of and Attitudes toward Green Restaurants, and Their Potential Behavior towards Them If Implemented in Romania

Our results show that half of the respondents (46.2%) consider that they know what a green restaurant is, and 53.8% declare that they do not know. After analyzing the responses regarding the meaning of the concept, it can be stated that most respondents (81.4%), regardless of whether they declared that they know what a green restaurant means or not, generally associate it with organic food, while 62% of the respondents consider that is a type of restaurant that seeks to protect the environment through the equipment used. A smaller percentage of the respondents (42%) believe that green restaurants participate in eco-friendly actions, and 31.1% associate green restaurants with local producers, showing some recognition of the emergence of these practices.

It was also important to determine the type of restaurant frequented by members of Generation Z. The results revealed that 65.5% of the respondents prefer classic restaurants, followed by 48.9% of respondents who preferred fast-food restaurants, and 45.1% who liked going to pizzerias. Regarding the main reasons for not frequenting a green restaurant, higher prices were mentioned by 39.4% of the respondents, followed by a relatively high percentage of 25.8% of the respondents who are not influenced by a restaurant's environmental friendly equipment. Only 3.4% of the respondents from Generation Z declared that they are not interested in environmental issues, a rate that is similar to previous findings (Gaidhani et al. 2019).

Only a quarter of the respondents (24.2%) totally agree to pay extra for a meal at a green restaurant, and 34.1% would agree to pay extra, while a high percent of 31.80% are neutral regarding the possibility of paying more for a meal offered at a green restaurant, indicating

that they are indifferent to the issue of extra cost. There is a small percentage of 9.8% who declared they are not willing to pay extra at an environmentally friendly restaurant.

With regard to potentially visiting a green restaurant, the highest percentage of respondents (51.9%) claim that they would visit such a restaurant once a month, followed by 29.9% of the respondents who believe they would visit a few times a month (Table 1).

Table 1. Potential consumer behavior related to green restaurants if implemented.

Item	Response	Percent
I know what a green restaurant means	Yes	46.2
	No	53.8
Knowledge about green restaurants	Offer organic products	81.4
	Protect the environment by using eco-friendly equipments	62.1
	Support local producers	31.1
	Implement green practices	42.0
Degree of agreement to pay extra for a restaurant that implements green practices	Total agreement	24.2
	Agreement	34.1
	Neutral	31.8
	Disagreement	6.4
	Total disagreement	3.4
Potential frequency of serving a meal in a green restaurant	Every day	1.5
	Few times a week	15.9
	Once a month	51.9
	Few times a month	29.9
	Few times a year	0.8
Type of restaurant preferred by the respondents	Fast food	48.9
	Specialized	25.8
	Self catering	13.3
	Classic restaurant	65.5
	Pizzeria	45.1
	Others	0.4
Main reasons for not frequenting a green restaurant	Environment issues are unimportant to me	3.4
	The higher price	39.4
	I am not interested in the source of the ingredients	7.6
	I am not influenced by the restaurants' recycling activities	16.7
	I do not eat organic products	9.8
	I am not influenced about the restaurants' pro-environmental equipments	25.8
	I am not influenced about supporting local producers	6.1
	I am not influenced about the use of environmental friendly cleaning products	10.6
I am not influenced about the restaurants' actions of protecting the environment	12.9	

3.2. Assessing the Importance Placed by Generation Z on Environmental Protection and Organic Food as the Main Factors Influencing Their Choice of Restaurant

The items from the second part of the questionnaire, referring to aspects considered important by the respondents when choosing a restaurant, were analyzed using principal component analysis (PCA). After conducting the PCA, a five-factor solution was obtained, each factor being named according to the items it consisted of (Table 2). The first factor contained eight items and was entitled “Organic and fresh dishes” explaining 53.8% of the total variance with a reliability coefficient of 0.94 and a mean of 6.203 (Table 2). The most important aspects considered by the respondents belonging to Generation Z when choosing a restaurant were the freshness of the dishes (mean = 6.55, std. dev. = 1.214) followed by the cleanliness of the spaces (mean = 6.5, std. dev. = 1.163). The local origin of the ingredients was the third most important aspect (mean = 6.45, std. dev. = 1.207) followed by good value for money (mean = 6.22, std. dev. = 1.266) and natural ingredients (mean = 6.05, std. dev. = 1.437). Also important was the use of ingredients from ecological agriculture (mean = 5.69, std. dev. = 1.572) and pesticide-free ingredients (mean = 5.9, std. dev. = 1.554).

The second component “Health and environmental-friendly restaurant” explained 6.195% of the total variance with an eigenvalue of 2.168 and a mean = 5.27, and comprises nine items among which it can be noticed that receiving nutritional information regarding the dishes is an important aspect for individuals from Generation Z (mean = 5.91, std. dev. = 1.537). The second most important item is the variety of dishes (mean = 5.89, std. dev. = 1.44), followed by the desire to receive information regarding the ingredients used (mean = 5.67, std. dev. = 1.555). Another important aspect for the respondents is that the food has a high nutritional value (mean = 5.26, std. dev. = 1.753) and that the restaurant offers international dishes (mean = 5.15, std. dev. = 1.594). The restaurant’s involvement in environmentally friendly practices, like the use of eco-friendly detergents, energy-saving equipment, or recyclable packaging, is considered an important aspect, but not as important as the previous ones (mean = 5.05, std. dev. = 1.728). The use of recycled paper is an almost neutral aspect for the respondents (mean = 4.92, std. dev. = 1.852), similar to the item referring to low-calorie dishes (mean = 4.67, std. dev. = 1.812).

The third dimension refers to “Social value” explaining 5.525% of the total variance, with a reliability coefficient of 0.93 and a mean = 5.96. It seems like the most important item for Generation Z is the restaurant’s good reputation on the market (mean = 6.46, std. dev. = 1.204). Also considered very important is receiving exactly what they ordered (mean = 6.14, std. dev. = 1.279). The least important item is a convenient location (mean = 5.64, std. dev. = 1.583).

Six items belong to the fourth component, named “Fast services and price sensitivity”, which explains 4.035% of the total variance with an eigenvalue of 1.412 and a reliability coefficient of 0.88, a mean = 5.28 indicates that the respondents consider being served quickly (mean = 5.83, std. dev. = 1.543) and the fast preparation of food (mean = 5.66, std. dev. = 1.517) to be important, followed by the existence of traditional dishes (mean = 5.14, std. dev. = 1.718).

The fifth factor referred to “restaurants’ style”, explaining 2.998% of the total variance, with a reliability coefficient of 0.84 and a mean = 5.59, comprising four items, among which the ambiance is the most important (mean = 5.93, std. dev. = 1.344), followed by product presentation (mean = 5.81, std. dev. = 1.1379).

Table 2. Factors obtained after conducting the PCA.

Eigenvalue	Variance %	Component	Item	Factor Loading	Mean	Standard Deviation
18.821	53.773	Healthy and fresh dishes $\alpha = 0.94$ mean = 6.203	The cleanliness of the spaces	0.730	6.50	1.163
			To offer fresh dishes	0.721	6.55	1.214
			Non frozen dishes	0.655	6.27	1.331
			Ingredients from ecological agriculture	0.560	5.69	1.572
			Ingredients pesticides free	0.612	5.90	1.554
			Natural ingredients	0.662	6.05	1.437
			Local ingredients	0.747	6.45	1.207
			Good quality-price	0.571	6.22	1.266
2.168	6.195	Product information and environmental friendly restaurant $\alpha = 0.92$ Mean = 5.27	Low-calories dishes	0.757	4.67	1.812
			Dishes adequate for a diet	0.777	5.00	1.922
			Variety of dishes	0.521	5.89	1.440
			High nutritional value	0.692	5.26	1.753
			International dishes	0.543	5.15	1.594
			Nutritional information	0.614	5.91	1.537
			Information regarding the ingredients	0.557	5.65	1.555
			The restaurant implemented pro-environmental practices (eco-friendly detergents, energy-saving equipment, recyclable packaging, etc.)	0.616	5.05	1.728
			Use of recycled paper	0.636	4.92	1.852
			1.934	5.525	Social value $\alpha = 0.93$ Mean = 5.96	Visual attractiveness of the dishes
Reasonable price	0.563	5.92				1.383
Employees willing to help	0.610	5.96				1.444
Receive exactly what I have ordered	0.654	6.14				1.279
Good reputation	0.728	6.46				1.204
Pleasant atmosphere	0.677	5.87				1.440
Convenient location	0.621	5.64				1.583
Favorable reviews	0.676	5.78				1.475
1.412	4.035	Fast services and price sensitiveness $\alpha = 0.88$ Mean = 5.28	Quick serving	0.570	5.83	1.543
			Low price	0.756	5.03	1.524
			Fast preparation	0.695	5.66	1.517
			Promotions	0.781	5.02	1.814
			Large portions	0.595	5.02	1.557
			Traditional dishes	0.506	5.14	1.718
1.1049	2.998	Restaurants' style $\alpha = 0.84$ Mean = 5.59	Ambiance	0.546	5.93	1.344
			Product presentation	0.644	5.81	1.379
			Type of restaurant	0.528	5.34	1.583
			Interior design	0.616	5.30	1.477
Total variance %	72.526	$\alpha = 0.973$				

3.3. Generation Z Segmentation According to Factors Considered Important When Choosing a Restaurant

After performing the non-hierarchical analysis, three homogeneous clusters were obtained (Table 3) and they were entitled according to the factors that members of Generation Z consider important when choosing a restaurant.

The first cluster, entitled “pro-environmental and fashionable consumers” was the largest cluster counting 57.2% of the total respondents. When choosing a restaurant, the clusters’ members deem the most important aspect to be receiving information on the products and ingredients used and the restaurants’ environmentally friendly attitude; they are also interested in fast service and low prices, but uninterested in being served organic food (Table 4). This cluster is dominated by female respondents, representing 70.9% compared to the male segment of only 29.1%. With regard to their personal income, a

very high percentage of 52.3% earn less than 300 euros on a monthly basis, while almost 20% earn between 401 and 600 euros, and 13.3% more than 800 euros. This segment is dominated by young people that just finished high school (75.5%) and are still officially students. A quarter of this segment (24.5%) are employees (Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3. Final cluster centers.

	Cluster			F	Significance
	Pro-Environmental and Convenience-Seeking Consumers N = 151 (57.19%)	Health-Oriented and Fast Service Seekers N = 21 (7.95%)	Health and Socially Oriented N = 92 (34.84%)		
Healthy and fresh dishes	−0.33892	0.73821	0.38777	25.239	0.000 ***
Product information and an environmentally friendly restaurant	0.44154	0.13902	−0.75643	59.632	0.000 ***
Social values	0.20362	−2.28777	0.18800	108.548	0.000 ***
Fast service and price sensitivity	0.28946	0.43172	−0.57364	28.279	0.000 ***
Restaurant style	−0.21822	0.27830	0.29464	8.907	0.000 ***

*** $p < 0.001$.

Table 4. Socio-demographic characteristics of the clusters.

Characteristics	Variables	Pro-Environmental and Convenience-Seeking Consumers	Health-Oriented and Fast Service Seekers	Health and Socially Oriented
		N = 151 (57.19%)	N = 21 (7.95%)	N = 92 (34.84%)
Gender	Female	107 (70.86%)	13 (61.9%)	52 (56.52%)
	Male	44 (29.13%)	8 (38.09%)	40 (43.48%)
Monthly income	Less than 300 euro	79 (52.32%)	11 (52.38%)	38 (41.3%)
	300–400 euro	11 (7.29%)	3 (14.29%)	17 (18.47%)
	401–600 euro	29 (19.21%)	4 (19.05%)	13 (14.13%)
	601–800 euro	12 (7.95%)	1 (4.76%)	7 (7.6%)
	More than 800	20 (13.25%)	2 (9.52%)	17 (18.48%)
Studies	Highschool	92 (60.93%)	15 (71.42%)	53 (57.6%)
	Faculty	51 (33.77%)	6 (28.57%)	26 (28.26%)
	Post-university studies	8 (5.29%)	0 (0.00)	13 (14.13%)
Occupation	Employee	37 (24.5%)	3 (14.28%)	26 (28.26%)
	Student	97 (64.24%)	17 (80.95%)	56 (60.86%)
	Entrepreneur	9 (5.96%)	0 (0.00%)	1 (1.08%)
	Unemployed	2 (1.32%)	1 (4.76%)	1 (1.08%)

The second cluster represents 34.84% of the respondents, who are oriented toward those restaurants that offer organic and fresh dishes, the restaurant's style and social values also being important aspects. Because it was noticed that this segment is not at all interested in receiving prompt service, it was entitled quite the opposite to the second one, highlighting that this segment does not seek prompt service, being more interested in the social aspect of serving a dish at a restaurant (Tables 3 and 4). With regard to gender, the cluster is quite balanced, 56.5% being female respondents and 43.5% males. Even if the number of high school graduates that are currently students is high, it also comprises post-graduate students and the highest percentage of employees. Also, the percentage of individuals who have a monthly income more than 800 euro is the highest (Table 4).

The third and smallest cluster are identified as the “health-oriented and fast services seekers”, representing 7.8% of the respondents. The individuals belonging to this cluster are organic food seekers, but combined with fast service and low prices. To them, the least important factor is the restaurant’s environmentally friendly attitude. The socio-demographic characteristics of this segment are similar to the first cluster, meaning high school graduates, students, and low-income individuals (Tables 3 and 4).

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Research Methodology and Questionnaire Design

The research was conducted in order to identify the perception of Generation Z from the North-West region of Romania toward green restaurants, and consisted of two major steps. The first step relied on the analysis of secondary data, meaning previous research regarding the main characteristics of green restaurants, since the concept has not yet been implemented in Romania, but also the main characteristics of Generation Z and the size of this market segment in the North-West region of Romania.

The main factors influencing the selection of a restaurant in general were chosen along with factors influencing the selection of a green restaurant in particular, resulting in 25 factors (Jang et al. 2011). Based on the factors identified in the literature, a three-part questionnaire was designed. The first part consisted of general questions related to the concept of green restaurants and to consumer behavior regarding restaurants in general, the second part aimed to identify the factors influencing the selection of a restaurant, and the third referred to socio-demographic data. The questions related to the restaurant selection factors were built using a 7-point Likert scale where 1 means not important at all and 7 very important. The use of a 7-scale Likert instead of a 5-point Likert was considered to be more adequate to capture the respondents’ true subjective evaluations (Finstad 2010). The questionnaire was pre-tested on 20 respondents in order to identify eventual misunderstandings.

4.2. Sampling and Data Collection

The empirical research was conducted among individuals belonging to Generation Z by using a filter question in order to obtain responses only from the category of those aged between 18 and 28 years. In order to identify how large the segment of population belonging to generation Z, data from the Romanian National Institute of Statistics were analyzed. According to (Dolot 2018; Priporas et al. 2017) generation Z starts in 1995 until 2012, but we considered only the individuals aged between 18 and 28 years representing 297,941 individuals, of which 157,474 live in urban areas (Romanian National Institute of Statistics 2023). A number of 280 questionnaires were received, but only 264 were validated, out of which 65.2% were female and 34.8% were male. The lower rate of responses from male participants was also noticed by other researchers (Wu et al. 2022; Vaske et al. 2011). The survey was conducted online between May and October 2023 using social networks, all of the participants were informed about the aim of the questionnaire according to European Regulations, and no personal information was requested.

As expected, most of the respondents were high school graduates (60.2%), followed by the category of university graduates (31.4%), while the lowest percentage was represented by those engaged in post-graduate studies (8.4%). With regard to their occupation, 64.4% of the respondents are still in education (high school or university), while 25% are employees, and a similar percentage 5.8% are entrepreneurs or unemployed. Family monthly income is less than 300 euros for 17%, the majority are situated between 601 and 800 euros (39.1%), and 14.8% have a family monthly income of more than 800 euros (Table 5).

Table 5. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents.

Characteristics (<i>n</i> = 264)	Variables	%
Gender	Female	65.2
	Male	34.8
Family monthly income	Less than 300 euro	17.0
	300–400 euro	11.7
	401–600 euro	17.4
	601–800 euro	39.1
	More than 800	14.8
Studies	Highschool	60.2
	Faculty	31.4
	Post-graduate studies	8.4
Occupation	Employee	25.0
	Student	64.4
	Entrepreneur	5.8
	Unemployed	5.8

4.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using the S.P.S.S. software. Descriptive statistics was used for analyzing the socio-demographic data corresponding to the third part of the questionnaire and the questions comprising the first part, which refers to general aspects regarding the respondents' knowledge of green restaurants and potential behavior related to this type of restaurant.

The 25 factors used to identify their importance in choosing a restaurant were reduced to a five-factor solution using principal component analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation, explaining 72.53% of the variance. The condition for retaining the factors is their eigenvalues, which must be greater than 1 (Cliff 1988). Before the PCA, a Bartlett test of sphericity was performed, the value of chi-square (8835.127, $p < 0$) indicating that is significant. The Keiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.954, meaning that the data were suitable for the PCA; values between 0.8 and 1 indicate that the sample is adequate (Hair et al. 2012; Shrestha 2021). Cronbach's alpha test was used to verify the reliability of the data. Values greater than 0.7 were considered acceptable, while a high level of alpha shows the items are highly correlated (Shrestha 2021). The overall value of Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.973.

In order to determine the number of existing clusters according to the five factors identified in the PCA, a preliminary study was performed using the hierarchical analysis with the Ward method. The dendrogram analysis concluded that there are three clusters that can be obtained, so a non-hierarchical analysis (K-means analysis) was performed.

5. Discussion

The study was conducted among individuals belonging to Generation Z, who are, in the near future, expected to represent an important segment of the restaurant industry (Jang et al. 2011; Mahasuweerachai and Suttikun 2022). The results indicate that there is a potential market for green restaurants since there is a high level of interest in environmental protection and eco-friendly actions among this category of consumers but, if implemented, it would be a niche of the restaurant market (Schubert et al. 2010).

Another aspect that must be taken into consideration is the low consumer awareness regarding the concept of a green restaurant, a fact also observed in a previous study conducted in the U.S. (Dewald et al. 2014), where respondents also struggled to define the concept. Given the fact that green restaurants are not yet present in the Romanian market, most of the Romanian respondents associated them with organic products and the use of eco-friendly equipment, while less than half think that these restaurants implement green practices; which is interesting, since the use of eco-friendly equipment is an essential aspect of the implementation process of green practices. These results could indicate that,

in addition to the lack of knowledge regarding the concept of green restaurants, there is also a misunderstanding of what green practices really mean.

Managers should take into consideration important promotional activities in order to increase the consumers' knowledge and mostly to ensure consumers to understand what a green restaurant really means, what their expectations are, and what is the price range that they consider reasonable for green attributes. Unlike for other industries, such as the hotel industry, where the green practices are advertised to customers, e.g., towels and sheets renewed only on demand, the circumstances in which restaurants find themselves are quite different, since most of the processes are not clearly advertised to customers (Schubert et al. 2010). One example, underlined by our research, shows that almost 26% of the respondents are not interested in the eco-friendly equipment used by restaurants. The low visibility of such pro-environmental activities is also confirmed by other studies (Park et al. 2021), which analyzed online reviews referring to restaurants' green practices and reviews containing environment-focused practices were significantly fewer in number than the food-focused green practices. In order to increase public awareness of the ethical approaches adopted, Nimri et al. (2021) suggest that restaurant managers should focus on promoting informative and educative green initiatives. Previous research mentions that, in order to build a green image, restaurant practitioners must take into account the type of restaurant preferred by consumers if they want to implement different green practices: casual restaurants (fast-foods and pizzerias) are more suited to emphasizing the importance of the food, while upscale dining restaurants are more suited to other types of green practices (Namkung and Jang 2013). Since classic restaurants are mostly preferred by the respondents, it should be considered a viable option for future managers to implement different green practices and create a competitive advantage on the market especially for the analyzed segment of consumers—generation Z- which is more preoccupied by the environmental issues compared to older generations.

Managers should also take into consideration that the major barrier for frequenting a green restaurant by individuals of the generation Z is the higher price (40% of the respondents), a fact that can be explained by the relatively high percentage of respondents that rely on a personal monthly income below 600 euros, most of the respondents being generally students. The rest of the respondents are willing to pay extra for such a dining experience, results which are in line with other research among students that are willing to pay extra up to 10% for a dining in a green restaurant (Dogan et al. 2016), so the managers should not be afraid to charge more (Schubert et al. 2010).

Since the green restaurants have not been yet implemented in Romania, the respondents were asked about general aspects they consider important when deciding to choose a restaurant, in order to determine whether the characteristics of a green restaurant would be of a high importance during the decision-making process. With regard to the importance of the factors related to restaurants' choice, five factors of influence were obtained, among which three of them are similar to previous studies that referred to three main attitudes with direct influence on the green restaurant behavior such as health, environmentally friendly and social value (Jang et al. 2015; Chan and Hon 2020; Dewald et al. 2014; Han 2020; Kim et al. 2013; Moon 2021; Tan et al. 2018). Among the five dimensions obtained after analyzing the generation Z factors of choosing a restaurant, "healthy food and fresh dishes" proved to be the most important and aligning with previous research (Mai et al. 2023). Thus, restaurants should consider offering fresh and locally produced food, avoiding the genetically modified products. The second important factor was "social value", and the least important was "Product information and environmentally friendly restaurant", also confirming previous research related to green restaurants (Shin et al. 2019; Choi and Parsa 2006). It has been observed that generally consumers appreciate green practices even if they are less important than food, service, and atmosphere (Eren et al. 2023). The same situation was encountered in other studies focused also on the generation Z consumers for which fresh ingredients, healthy aspects, good value, easy access, and good for the environment were the most important attributes of a restaurant (Dewald et al. 2014; Xu and Jeong 2019).

Finally, information about menu items and ingredients are very important to this group so previous studies (Jang et al. 2011; Eren et al. 2023) consider that marketers should use menu-labeling and information about origin and nutritional aspects as a marketing tool. The high interest of generation Z for healthy meals was previously observed and is in line with other research on organic and natural food (Su et al. 2019), so the restaurant owners should focus on offering dishes from organic and natural food.

Social value was the second most important factor of choice, so the individuals expect from a restaurant to have a reasonable price, good reviews since the internet is the most important source of information for this category of individuals, but also important is to have helpful employees, friendly and customer oriented.

The third most important factor of influence when it comes to restaurant choice is the need to receive “product information and the restaurants’ environmentally friendly attitude”. Both aspects, need of information and environmental concern can be considered as main characteristics of the individuals from generation Z since they have always been in contact with the virtual world, where information can be obtained without any effort (Wood 2013; Dabija et al. 2019). Moreover, their preoccupation and concern for the environmental issues (Singh and Dangmei 2016) must be used by the restaurants’ owners as a competitive advantage on the market (Dabija et al. 2019).

The individuals from generation Z appreciate restaurants that offer fast services such as fast preparation and quick serving, at a low-price fact explained by their low budget. If the results are correlated with the type of restaurant mostly preferred by the respondents –fast-foods and pizzerias, one can realize that a green restaurant that offers organic food should be organized whether as a traditional restaurant or as a fast-food restaurant that offers quick dishes such as salads and healthy sandwiches made from local ingredients. In this case, the green practices should focus mainly on recyclable packaging, while the communication process on the benefits of green food, emphasizing the utilitarian value (Teng and Wu 2019).

Based on the identified factors, three clusters were identified. The “Pro-environmental and convenience-seeker consumers” was the largest, mainly characterized by female respondents. To this group, information on the product and environmentally friendly restaurant is what counts the most, confirming that generation Z is environmentally oriented, emphasizing also one of the characteristics of the generation Z members, the need for rapid information, a fact that must be taken into consideration by the restaurant managers. Also important is that the restaurant offers social value, being highly rated on the internet, having a pleasant atmosphere, visually attractive products, good reputation and a reasonable price. These factors are combined with the desire to have fast services at reasonable prices. What is surprising is the fact that this group is not interested at all in consuming organic and natural dishes, unlike the other two groups that are interested precisely in serving organic and fresh food. For the second group “health and socially oriented” (34.84%), the most important factors are the social value and the style of the restaurant, while for the third group “health-oriented and fast services seekers” comprises the lowest percentage of respondents (7.95%), for which, beside the healthy food, what counts are the fast-services. A similar study has been conducted in United States, among the members of Generation Y and revealed four clusters, among which “health-conscious consumer” and “adventurous consumer” are considered target segments for green restaurants because their willingness to pay premium emphasizing also the importance of segmenting and targeting the most attractive group (Jang et al. 2011).

The Generation Z’s perceptions on green restaurants are quite similar to the previous generation, Generation Y (Nicolau et al. 2020; Riva et al. 2022). This category of individuals also valorize green consumersim and health, but the second factor is determinant for their willingness to pay more for a green restaurant (Nicolau et al. 2020).

Since Namkung and Jang (2013) classified the green restaurants into two sectors: food-oriented and environment-oriented, it can be concluded that the results of the present research validates these orientations as accurately representing the expectations of younger generations.

6. Conclusions

The present study analyzed the perspectives of green restaurants on the Romanian market from Generation Z's point of view, first because the individuals belonging to this group are expected to represent an important market segment for the hospitality industry in the near future and second because of their special characteristics, being highly concerned with environmental issues. The concept of green restaurant is not very familiar to the young generation, mainly because until now there have not been any green restaurants on the Romanian market, even if some of its characteristics can be identified in some units (e.g., organic dishes, local food, etc.). The results show that there is a positive attitude toward green restaurants among the respondents, even the willingness to pay extra for it, confirming previous findings (Baltescu 2017). A large percent of respondents declared that they are interested in frequenting a green restaurant few times a month, being mainly interested in healthy and fresh food as the most important factors of choice when choosing a restaurant, but other factors like "social value", "fast-services and price sensitiveness" or "product information and environmental friendly restaurant" being almost as important as the first one, the difference between the means of each factor being quite reduced.

Three clusters of potential consumers were obtained, among which two of them were interested in serving organic fresh food, while the largest cluster is focused on product information and the restaurants' environmental practices, so according to previous studies it is recommended that the restaurant managers to implement two types of green restaurants, obtaining a competitive advantage whether being focused on organic, local food, or on other type of green strategies (Namkung and Jang 2013). Practitioners should also pay attention to the selection attributes that these segments consider important and try to identify whether some of them could represent a competitive advantage suitable for highlighting it. It is also necessary to be taken into account the type of restaurants mostly preferred by the respondents. Classic restaurants are the favorite type of restaurant followed closely by fast-food restaurants and pizzerias, a fact explained by the desire of most of the respondents to receive fast service. The major barrier to frequenting a green restaurant is the higher price, but only for 40% of the respondents.

The present study aimed to understand the perceptions of Generation Z towards green restaurants, since they represent a large market segment with more free time, unlike other age categories, and are more willing to dine out, but other generations must also be approached by future studies. The main contribution to this paper is in important findings related to the perspectives on green restaurants of the Romanian market, the strategies that should be implemented in order to obtain a competitive advantage, since concerns about environmental issues are seen as more important, which forces hospitality industry practitioners to realign their practices accordingly.

6.1. Theoretical Implications

Our study provides a few theoretical contributions to the topic of green consumerism in the hospitality industry, more precisely related to the restaurant sector. We provided additional empirical evidence of Generation Z consumer perceptions of green restaurants, highlighting the factors considered important during the decision-making process of choosing a restaurant in general, confirming previous studies (Jang et al. 2015; Chan and Hon 2020; Dewald et al. 2014; Han 2020; Kim et al. 2013; Moon 2021; Tan et al. 2018) regarding health, environmental friendliness, and social values as the three main attitudes with direct influence on behavior towards green restaurants. Another important achievement consists of providing information that contributes to a better characterization of individuals belonging to Generation Z and their behavior in the restaurant market, throughout a complex segmentation process that led to three types of restaurant consumers who are indeed preoccupied with the main attributes of green restaurants—i.e., the environment and health.

6.2. Practical Implications

Beyond the theoretical implications, our research findings have multiple implications for practitioners in the Romanian restaurant sector, who now have an alternative to increase their relevance on the highly competitive restaurant market by targeting the young Generation Z with adequate strategies in line with their environmental and health concerns. First, because of the concept's novelty on the Romanian market, future or present entrepreneurs, who wish either to initiate a new business or to reinvent an existing one by becoming greener, have to focus their efforts on developing a proper marketing campaign aiming to inform the public about what being a green restaurant really means and what green practices are, in order to ensure that the public acknowledge that their personal concerns related to environmental issues and healthy food are being taken into consideration, at least when it comes their choice of restaurant. Since green practices, i.e., eco-friendly equipment, recycling, etc. are not very visible to the public, the communication should use the co-creation strategy by focusing on the benefits of being green with the help of customers' personal involvement (Zhang and Jeong 2023). In order to develop a proper promotional marketing strategy, one must take into consideration another important finding of the present research, the existence of two types of consumers: the pro-environmental and the health-conscious. Zhang et al.'s (2021) study concluded that the individuals who would prefer the pro-environmental messages have an interdependent self-view, whereas the ones who would be sensitive to health messages have a strongly independent self-view. Anyway, previous findings have already stated that when it comes to green restaurant strategies, managers should take into consideration the adoption either of a pro-environmental marketing strategy or a health-oriented one. If they choose to target the largest group of individuals belonging to Generation Z, the "pro-environmental and convenience-seeker consumers", practitioners must pay special attention to their perceived image on the internet, since ratings and reviews count a lot for these individuals. In order to receive positive reviews, they will have to pay extra care to customer satisfaction and encourage them to share their positive experience of the restaurant, even if this required some rewards to be handed out (i.e., discounts for future visits, small incentives, etc.). Because the members of this group of consumers consider it very important to obtain product information, managers should take into consideration to offer such details about each dish they serve. The menu should contain information on each ingredient, calories, source of origin, and need not have a physical presence but a virtual one, to align to green practices by also reducing the use of paper.

In order to appeal to the health-oriented individuals, who are divided into two categories, "health and socially oriented" and "health-oriented and fast services seekers", practitioners must pay attention to the menu by including fresh and organic products as much as possible, aiming to identify local ingredients.

Finally, future or present entrepreneurs must consider that Generation Z prefer to frequent classic restaurants followed by fast-food establishments and pizzerias; a fact explained by their desire to have quick service at low prices. So, a future green restaurant could be a classic one with fresh and organic food, or a fast-food restaurant that offers quick dishes such as salads and healthy sandwiches made from local ingredients.

6.3. Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the paper relate mainly to the use of a convenient sample instead of a statistically determined one and, therefore, to the impossibility of generalizing the results to the whole population. Also, the study of just one of the eight Romanian development regions could be considered another important limitation and future research should focus on approaching Generation Z in all eight development regions. Because of restrictions of time, the number of questionnaires could have been higher and the sample much more balanced with regard to the respondents' gender. However, considering that this is the first exploratory research on the Romanian market that explores Generation Z's perceptions,

a future study will be more comprehensive, because we wish to expand it to all eight development regions.

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