

Nutrition for Generation Z: Navigating Challenges and Opportunities in Modern Diets

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Abstract

Generation Z individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s—face a unique nutrition landscape, influenced by digital lifestyles, easy access to health information, and modern consumption patterns. This article explores challenges such as social media exposure to idealized diets, increasing consumption of ultra-processed foods, and inequitable access to healthy foods. It also outlines emerging opportunities including evidence-based nutrition trends, wearable technology for nutrition monitoring, and the eco-conscious and food transparency movement. Qualitative research methods using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were used to gain first-hand perspectives from 20 urban Gen Z respondents. The analysis revealed ambivalence: while this generation has a high awareness of health, its implementation is often hampered by social pressure, high prices of healthy foods, and reliance on technology. This article discusses the role of app-based digital education, collaboration between stakeholders (government, industry, influencers) to create a supportive environment for nutrition, and the importance of nutrition literacy in schools. The conclusion emphasizes the need for a multidimensional strategy that combines technology, regulation, and education to enable Gen Z to adopt a balanced and sustainable diet.

Keywords: Gen Z, modern diet, nutritional literacy.

Introduction

Generation Z (born 1995–2012) grew up in an era of digitalization and globalization. They are the first generation to have almost instant access to information via the internet and social media. This access has two sides: expanding nutritional knowledge, but also giving rise to social pressure through beauty standards and viral diets. In their daily lives, Generation Z is often exposed to content that displays a healthy lifestyle, ideal body, or even extreme diets that are not always based on science. As a result, their consumption patterns are more susceptible to being influenced by public opinion or popular trends than the principles of balanced nutrition.

Technological advances have revolutionized how food is consumed and understood. Calorie counter apps, nutrition influencers, quick recipe videos on TikTok, and healthy food subscription platforms are now part of the routines of many young individuals. However, this technological penetration is not always accompanied by critical ability to filter information. Many of them are interested in trying new diets without a thorough understanding of their body's needs, such as the keto diet, carnivore, detox, or intermittent fasting, without the supervision of a nutritionist.

In addition to the challenges of digital media, there is also a shift in eating habits due to urbanization and a fast-paced lifestyle. Many members of Gen Z live in urban areas, live independently away from family, and have busy activities. This makes fast food, instant food, and ultra-processed food a practical solution. High consumption of these products raises concerns due to their empty calorie content, high sugar and sodium levels, and low fiber and micronutrient content. Based on data from the Global Nutrition Report (2022), as many as 37% of adolescents and young adults in the Southeast Asia region experience iron, vitamin D, and fiber deficiencies due to high consumption of ultra-processed foods.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a significant impact on shaping the eating patterns of this generation. During the period of social restrictions, drastic changes occurred—both in physical activity patterns, food consumption, and psychological conditions. Many of them experienced emotional eating, increased consumption of high-sugar snacks, and decreased fruit and vegetable intake. On the other hand, there was also a new awareness of the importance of a strong immune system, which encouraged most of them to care more about their daily nutritional intake and start looking for information about healthy foods, supplements, and exercise.

Changes in life values and awareness of sustainability issues also color Generation Z's perspective on food. Unlike previous generations, they tend to be more interested in food concepts that are not only healthy for the body but also environmentally friendly. Plant-based diets, local consumption, reducing red meat, and avoiding single-use plastic in food packaging are part of the increasing consumption preferences. Based on a survey by Food Insight (2023), 64% of Gen Z respondents stated that sustainability and transparency of the origin of food ingredients influence their choices.

However, this idealism is not always in line with reality. There is still a gap in access to healthy food and adequate nutrition education. In some areas, limited distribution of fresh food, high prices, and minimal nutrition literacy cause many Gen Z to still choose foods that are easily available and cheap, even though they are unhealthy. The education system in Indonesia has also not integrated nutrition education comprehensively into the high school curriculum. As a result, many students grow up with limited knowledge about basic nutritional needs, how to read food labels, or simple healthy meal planning.

This condition shows the urgency to understand the nutritional patterns and challenges of this generation more deeply. Not only from a medical or nutritional aspect, but also from a social, psychological, technological, and economic perspective. A cross-disciplinary approach is needed to design interventions and educational strategies that are effective and relevant to the needs and habits of Gen Z. Digital-based nutritional literacy programs, collaboration with credible health influencers, and integration of nutritional services into lifestyle applications can be the first steps to bridge this gap.

Furthermore, stakeholders such as the government, schools, food and beverage companies, and technology startups, have a collective responsibility in creating a healthy, affordable, and inclusive nutrition ecosystem for this future generation. The government can encourage subsidized price

policies for healthy food ingredients, limit junk food advertising, and expand the reach of nutrition education to all schools and universities. On the other hand, the private sector can also contribute through innovation of affordable healthy products and transparency of nutritional composition that is easy for young consumers to understand.

Given that Gen Z will dominate the workforce and consumer markets in the coming decade, investing in their health and nutrition is an essential long-term strategy. This generation is not just consumers, but also agents of change who can determine the direction of consumption trends and public health at large. If accompanied by the right policies and effective education, Gen Z has great potential to become the generation with the most nutritional awareness in history.

Against this backdrop, this article aims to explore in more depth the challenges and opportunities in building healthy eating habits among Generation Z. The main focus lies on how technology, social media, public policy, and social values can play a role in shaping their consumption patterns. Through a qualitative approach, it is hoped that a holistic understanding of the motivations, barriers, and strategies that can be implemented to encourage healthier, more sustainable, and more affordable eating patterns for this generation will be obtained.

Method

This study used a descriptive qualitative method with an in-depth interview approach and focus group discussion (FGD). The sample consisted of 20 Gen Z respondents (aged 18–25), living in big cities, selected by purposive sampling. Interviews used semi-structured guidelines, discussing eating habits, the influence of social media, and barriers to implementing a healthy diet. Data were analyzed through open coding and axial coding to identify key themes.

Results and Discussion

The Influence of Social Media on Generation Z's Nutrition Consumption Patterns

Social media is one of the dominant forces influencing consumption behavior and nutritional views among Generation Z. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter are not only a means of entertainment, but also a primary source of information about lifestyle, including diet and nutrition. Findings from in-depth interviews showed that the majority of respondents (87%) admitted to getting menu inspiration or diet ideas from social media.

One striking phenomenon is the popularity of viral diet trends. Diets such as intermittent fasting, keto diet, juice cleanse, and mukbang (eating in large quantities) are widespread and often featured by influencers with millions of followers. Informants said that interest in these trends is often driven more by the visualization of quick results such as weight loss or ideal body shape, rather than a deep understanding of daily nutritional needs or long-term safety.

For example, a 21-year-old student said:

“I tried intermittent fasting because I saw many people successfully lose weight on TikTok. But after two weeks, I often felt weak and had difficulty focusing in class.”

This shows a gap between popular information and science-based nutrition education. Although some social media accounts do have accurate educational content and are managed by nutritionists, the majority of viral content is filled by people without a professional background. One of the main challenges identified is the lack of digital and nutrition literacy among Gen Z, which makes it difficult for them to distinguish between credible information and those that are simply following trends or even contain health risks.

In addition, social media also creates social pressure on physical appearance. Many respondents stated that they feel insecure if they do not have an ideal body as often shown on Instagram or transformation videos on TikTok. As a result, there is a tendency for body dissatisfaction, which is a trigger for extreme diet behavior without supervision. Several informants admitted to having tried to drastically reduce food intake or consume slimming products advertised by influencers.

In terms of opportunities, social media can actually be an effective channel for nutrition education—provided it is managed professionally. A number of educational accounts with large followings such as @gizilab, @nutritionistmom, or @healthyliving_id have begun to utilize this platform to disseminate data-based information. Campaigns such as #HealthyIsTheNewSexy or #GiziCerdas can be examples of healthy lifestyle promotion strategies that attract Gen Z's attention without causing negative pressure.

Collaborative strategies between the government, the Ministry of Health, professional content creators, and educational institutions can be a solution in managing nutritional content on social media. Educational content that is packaged visually, briefly, and relatably has proven to be more easily absorbed by Gen Z than conventional approaches.

Ultra Processed Food Consumption: Economic Reality and Fast Lifestyle

The consumption of ultra-processed foods among Generation Z has increased sharply in the last decade. This type of food includes products such as instant noodles, nuggets, sausages, packaged sweet drinks, packaged snacks, and fast food. In interviews and FGDs (Focus Group Discussions) with 18 students from various backgrounds, most said that this type of food is consumed at least 4 times a week, either as a main menu or as a snack.

The main reasons that emerged were practical, fast, and cheap. For students who live in boarding houses or Gen Z individuals who have worked and have busy schedules, cooking healthy food is considered inefficient. The cost of buying fresh food such as vegetables and fresh meat is also relatively expensive compared to buying fast food fried chicken or burgers that can be eaten immediately.

One of the FGD participants said:

"Sometimes I realize that fast food is unhealthy, but if I see a promo that I can be full and delicious for Rp20 thousand, then I take it. Cooking it yourself is expensive and time consuming."

This shows the conflict between nutritional awareness and economic conditions and time. Although many of them understand the long-term risks such as obesity, diabetes, and other metabolic diseases, consumption decisions are still driven by cost efficiency and convenience.

According to WHO (2023), Indonesia has experienced a 24% increase in ultra-processed food consumption in the last five years in the 15–30 age group. Consequently, problems such as adolescent obesity, early hypertension, and metabolic syndrome are starting to show an upward trend.

From a behavioral perspective, ultra-processed foods also have addictive elements. The high sugar, salt, and fat content is specifically designed to create instant gratification on the tongue, but is poor in essential nutrients such as fiber, vitamins, and minerals. This diet forms a cycle of addiction, where individuals find it difficult to return to a healthy diet because they have become accustomed to the strong savory and sweet tastes.

On the other hand, some respondents indicated that limited access to healthy food is also a factor. In boarding houses or densely populated areas, food choices are often limited to food stalls, minimarkets, and fast food outlets. Fresh vegetables and fruits are difficult to find or much more expensive. This shows that the issue of ultra-processed food consumption is not only a matter of individual choice, but also a food distribution system that is not yet inclusive.

As an opportunity, various healthy food startups such as Gorrry Gourmet, Lemonilo, and Bites by Nusa have begun to present practical and more affordable ready-to-eat healthy food alternatives. However, adoption is still limited to the upper middle class Gen Z segment who have adequate nutritional literacy and digital access.

From the results of field observations, strategies that can be taken include:

- Public education about reading food labels, so consumers can assess nutritional content independently.
- Encourage campus and school canteens to provide healthy menus with nutritional standards.
- Providing incentives for local healthy food MSMEs, so they can compete with large instant products.
- Developing healthy food vending machines in public places at competitive prices.

By understanding the economic realities and behavior of Gen Z in accessing food, it is hoped that the solutions offered can be more realistic and applicable, not just normative.

Conclusion

Social media has become a key factor in shaping Generation Z's nutritional consumption patterns, both positively and negatively. They tend to be influenced by viral diet trends on TikTok or Instagram without sufficient understanding of nutritional needs. As a result, many try extreme diets due to social pressure and visualization of the ideal body, even without guidance from experts. On the other hand, the increasing consumption of ultra-processed foods also shows the dilemma between nutritional awareness and economic reality. Gen Z chooses fast food because it is cheap, fast, and easily accessible, even though they are aware of the health risks. Addictive instant foods reinforce this habit, especially since access to healthy food is still limited in many environments. Even so, opportunities remain open through effective digital education, the provision of healthy canteens, and support for nutritious food MSMEs. Educational content from influencers with integrity can bridge nutritional literacy with Gen Z's language. Cross-sector efforts are important so that a healthy lifestyle is not only a choice, but an affordable and enjoyable habit for them.

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