

Millennial's intentions to buy plant-based alternatives: insights for quick-service restaurants

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Rapid population growth, shifting consumption patterns, and environmental stresses, are challenging food security, and raising concerns about the global food system's ability to sustainably feed the projected 9.3 billion people by 2050. In addition, the increasing demand for Quick-Service Restaurants (QSRs, also known as 'fast-food chains') [1] has intensified environmental concerns. The large-scale food production and factory farming practices of these types of operations are significant contributors to environmental degradation and issues around animal welfare. In response to growing consumer awareness relating to these issues, QSRs have begun to incorporate plant-based alternatives into their menus, to align with sustainability objectives and appeal to eco-conscious consumers, particularly millennials. The UK plant-based food retail market, one of the largest in Europe, saw a 9% sales increase from 2020 to 2022, reaching £963.8 million. This growth indicates rising consumer interest and market potential.

While demand for plant-based products grows, not all alternatives are seen as equally beneficial. The healthiness and sustainability of plant-based meat vary by ingredients and production methods, and consumers may resist products viewed as being overly processed, or containing genetically modified organisms (GMOs) [2, 3]. For QSRs wishing to introduce these alternatives into their menus, an understanding of market purchasing intentions is essential.

This research examined millennials' intentions to purchase Genetically Modified Plant-Based Meat Alternatives (hereafter referred to as plant-based alternatives) at QSRs in the UK, using Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) [4] to explain the intention. The TPB is a psychological model that predicts human behavior based on three factors: attitudes towards the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. These influence an individual's intentions and actions in various contexts. Millennials are a key demographic for QSRs. They are noted for their environmental consciousness [5], and in 2020, they comprised 14.26 million of the UK population. Their distinct preference for convenience, speed, and affordability, has driven the rapid expansion of the QSR industry [6].

To reach UK millennials, the data collection for the research involved distributing a questionnaire via online forums and social media, using snowball sampling. Among the 207 responses, millennials showed a negative

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attitude towards Genetically Engineered (GE) technology and a low intention to purchase plant-based alternatives at QSRs, both of which were influenced by their views on GE technology and prevailing social norms

According to TPB, belief-targeted messages, such as persuasive communication, can effectively influence attitudes, which in turn affect behavioural intentions and actual behavior [7]. In this context, QSRs can use persuasive communication within their marketing mix, including promotional activities, to improve customer attitudes (e.g., millennials) towards GE technology and plant-based alternatives, thereby increasing purchase intentions.

An essential part of this approach is the creation of belief-targeted messages that align with the environmentally conscious values of the UK millennials. Marketers of QSRs can promote the adoption of plant-based alternatives by addressing the misconceptions associated with GE technology, and highlighting the benefits, e.g., improved nutrition and sustainability. Messaging could highlight GE technology's role in mitigating climate change, and reframe the description of plant-based alternatives from, 'ultra-processed', to 'sustainable'. Social media and online ads are effective channels for reaching this demographic.

In order to enhance message effectiveness, it is crucial, however, that scientifically backed information and trustworthy sources, (e.g., government organisations), be relied on. For example, the UK Food Standards Agency conducts safety evaluations, and establishes labelling regulations for genetically modified food [8]. Therefore, successful integration of plant-based alternatives in the QSR industry requires collaboration among all parties to facilitate productive dialogue around GE technology. This will help to increase millennials' confidence in making informed food choices, and could positively change their attitudes towards genetically modified organisms.

Millennials value the opinions of significant others, i.e., the social norms, and QSRs can effectively leverage influencer marketing that promotes plant-based alternatives, by collaborating with the athletes, chefs, and nutritionists who resonate with millennial values. Partnering with reputable environmental organisations can also reinforce the sustainability message, and highlight the positive environmental impacts. These strategic partnerships can encourage millennials to adopt plant-based alternatives as part of a healthy, sustainable lifestyle.

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