

Living Más: Refreshing the Taco Bell Brand #TacoBOOST

Yusra Akhundzadah, Shirley Carrillo-Acevedo, Talia Kazandjian, Lilly Sheridan-Tishkoff

Living Más: Refreshing the Taco Bell Brand #TacoBOOST

Taco Bell is one of the world's leading fast food restaurants and the largest Mexican-inspired quick service chain (Taco Bell, 2019). It was founded in 1962 by Glen Bell, with the very first location debuting in Downey, California. Taco Bell has an exceptionally high rate of brand recognition in the United States, with customers reporting 95% brand awareness (Kunst, 2023b). In 2022, Taco Bell ranked among the top when it comes to the most well-known restaurant chains in the U.S. (Kunst, 2023a). Taco Bell's present day success is largely attributed to their clever marketing, which incorporates a strategic blend of humor, virality and social consciousness. Taco Bell's food quality has *not* been at the forefront of their current messaging and is lacking when it comes to the common perception/association that most customers have of the brand. In order to change this perception, it is essential to understand Taco Bell's current customer profile.

Within the past five years, the age range that makes up the largest share of Taco Bell customers fall between the ages of 18 to 29 years old (generations that include Millennials and Gen Z) (Kunst, 2022). Taco Bell's brand profile reveals a high level of popularity and patronage from customers (Kunst, 2023b). Respondents who were Taco Bell customers in the Statista (2022) study revealed that 85% are loyal to the brand. The category with the lowest rating is in relation to the brands "buzz," which includes media coverage, social media and advertising (Kunst, 2023b).

A study conducted by Statista in 2011 found that Chipotle, one of Taco Bell's top competitors, was the most "liked" fast food franchise on Facebook by U.S. college students (Statista, 2011). These findings are especially important when it comes to understanding brand perception as it relates to food quality, since Chipotle's brand positioning/values are centered

around freshness and incorporating “real” ingredients, that specifically include local and organic produce (Chipotle, 2023). Currently, Taco Bell's marketing efforts do not focus on the incorporation of fresh and sustainable ingredients or offering healthier menu options, which are essential for changing the perception of the brand—specifically as it relates to higher food quality.

Gen Z consumers prefer organically sourced and sustainable products (Shahbandeh, 2023). “As of 2022, more than half of Gen Z consumers eat at least a partially vegetarian diet” (Shahbandeh, 2023). Promoting “plant-based” vegan and vegetarian options are not currently a key part of Taco Bell's marketing efforts, which are critical for their target consumer, and make up more than half of the customer base that they are intending to market towards. In order to build brand product innovation that specifically appeals to the Gen Z audience and effectively reaches the health-conscious customers within this target group, it is essential that Taco Bell reframes its marketing efforts to focus on increased food transparency. Highlighting the sourcing of foods that includes quality and sustainable ingredients, along with increasing a focus on meatless alternatives will resonate well with their intended customer.

Moreover, Gen Z is especially concerned with environmental sustainability, more than any other generation in the U.S. (Shahbandeh, 2023). Gen Z seeks to support brands whose mission is to have less of an environmental impact and decrease the carbon footprint. Incorporating locally-grown produce and non-GMO options into Taco Bell’s menu supports the brands vision of serving “real food” and sustainability, which is messaging that needs to be communicated across their advertising efforts. In order to effectively convey this message, social media posts will need to focus on eco-friendly initiatives. Promoting sustainable packaging, such as recyclable or compostable paper wrapping and materials shows support for climate change. This further demonstrates the brands commitment to health and the environment, which

simultaneously works to reinforce Taco Bell's intention of making the future better for generations, in an authentic and bold way.

With that being said, although Taco Bell has done an exceptional job when it comes to building and maintaining its social media presence and staying active across a variety of social media platforms—the brand's “buzz” was reportedly the lowest rated category with customers' perception of the brand. Increasing Taco Bell's social and cultural currency can effectively be accomplished by intentionally focusing on Taco Bell's target customers—specifically college students—through the creation of content and curated advertisements that communicate Taco Bell as the premier restaurant for a study snack. The messaging in these ads will focus on the quality component that is currently missing from their present efforts. This will be accomplished by placing an emphasis on the sustained energy that customers gain by consuming Taco Bell's healthy, fresh and nutritious meal options. Implementing these strategies will position the brand from a new angle, to help change the current perception of food quality and to generate social buzz that will lead to increased sales from their intended Gen Z audience.

This new focus will also serve as a fresh way to communicate the “cultural rebel” concept—specifically by using a rebellious college student as the protagonist to tell the story. This main character is relatable to viewers and positions Taco Bell as the hero. Students are able to “Live Más,” by conquering stressful situations like college burnout and fatigue by consuming Taco Bell as the perfect pick-me-up snack for a boost of energy and renewed focus for their studies. This perspective combines the concepts of quality and affordability, rather than isolating the two or neglecting to incorporate the health-factor messaging. Utilizing this storyline also reinforces Taco Bell as a lifestyle brand, by embodying the attitudes, culture and values of Gen Z

in a way that is relevant and engaging. This ensures Taco Bell is keeping up with the younger demographic's evolving interests and trends.

Research

Participants

One hundred and two participants (17 males, 80 females, and 1 non-binary/third gender) were recruited from social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, Discord and Google Spaces) for a study with the description "Gen Z Food and Lifestyle Survey." Participation was limited to those located in the United States. The majority of participants (63.27%) were aged between 18-24. Participants were White (32.65%), Hispanic/Latinx (31.63%), Asian/Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (19.39%), Other (8.2%), Black (3.1%), American Indian or Alaska Native (2.04%). Three participants chose not to reveal their ethnicity. Out of the 102 survey respondents, 76.8% classified as Gen Z. Furthermore, eight individuals who identify as Gen Z were sourced for interviews to understand their perception of Taco Bell and their behavior with branded content (See Appendix B).

Materials and Procedure

An online survey was used to collect data from July 22, 2023 until July 27, 2023. The survey contained 27 questions (see Appendix A) and was divided in three sections: Consumer's Perception of Taco Bell, Understanding Consumers' Social Media Usage, and Understanding Consumer Behavior. The first section, Consumer's Perception of Taco Bell, assessed how participants' feel about Taco Bell—whether it be their food quality or their brand as a whole. An example question from this section was "What is your perception of the food quality at the Taco Bell restaurant?" The second section, Understanding Consumers' Social Media Usage, examined how participants like to interact with content on digital platforms. An example question from this

section was “What content do you like to engage with on social media?” The third and final section, Understanding Consumer Behavior, analyzes what brand attributes influence consumers’ behavior. An example question from this section was “On a scale of 1 through 5, how important is product packaging and design when making a purchase?” The majority of questions were answered via multiple choice and a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from “*Extremely important*” to “*Extremely unimportant*” or “*Extremely likely*” to “*Extremely unlikely*”.

Results and Discussion

Restaurants and fast food chains continue to market their food items to millennials in the age of Gen Z (“Why Now is the Time for Restaurants to Court Gen Z?”, 2018). Considering millennials are frequent diners and are more likely to have a disposable income (“Why Now is the Time for Restaurants to Court Gen Z?”, 2018), restaurants are justified in dedicating their marketing efforts towards those who identify with the millennial demographic. While restaurants cannot go wrong with marketing their food towards millennials, they would garner a larger profit if their focus shifted towards Gen Z (“Why Now is the Time for Restaurants to Court Gen Z?”, 2018). Gen Z is relatively young, yet they are not frugal. In 2016, they spent \$78 billion dollars at restaurants on food only—given they were under the legal age to purchase alcohol (“Why Now is the Time for Restaurants to Court Gen Z?”, 2018). Gen Z’s love for eating out is prevalent today and supported by the data from the “Gen Z Food and Lifestyle Survey.” An independent-samples t test was conducted to evaluate how often Gen Z or non-Gen Z members eat fast food. The test was significant, $t(97) = 2.21$, $p = .029$, although there was a tendency for Gen Z ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 0.722$) to eat fast food more often than non-Gen Z ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 0.767$). Considering Gen Z is more likely to eat fast food than non-Gen Z, it is crucial for restaurants to create the best experiences and products that appeal to this demographic.

Gen Z—individuals born between the mid-90s and early 2000s—have an extensive criteria when it comes to their fast food. Their fast food must be quick, nutritious, and natural—just to name a few (“Aramark Brings Gen Z Food Trends to Life with New Back-to-School Offerings on College Campuses Nationwide”). Gen Z wants their food in a way that is quick and convenient. For instance, they are no strangers to utilizing the mobile order function on the fast food apps to receive their meals instantly (Dean, 2023). The data derived from the survey supports these claims. An independent-samples *t* test was conducted to evaluate if Gen Z or non-Gen Z members think the convenience of fast food is important. The test was significant, $t(97) = 2.08$, $p = .040$, although there was a tendency for Gen Z ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 0.86$) to think the convenience of fast food is more important than non Gen Z ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.14$). Furthermore, the majority of the interviewees also claimed that their reasonings for opting for fast food are for ease and comfort. While some mentioned that they gravitate towards fast food chains due to the low price point or after drinking on a night out, most preferred to eat fast food out of convenience. One interviewee mentioned that “It’s easy and quickly accessible. [It is] also open at times other places aren’t.” Another stated that they choose fast food for “Convenience,” following their statement with “I’m tired at the end of day and I don’t wanna cook.” Due to fast food’s accessibility and simplicity, it is no surprise that Gen Z is its biggest fan.

Gen Z is a health-conscious generation. Approximately 67% of Gen Zers are concerned with the quality of the food that they put into their bodies (San Pedro, 2019). The health benefits and sustainability of ingredients are factors Gen Z seeks in their food (San Pedro, 2019), which is why it is no surprise the data from the “Gen Z Food and Lifestyle” survey showcases that Gen Z were more likely to consider the food quality of fast food as imperative, compared to millennials

or Gen X. An independent-samples *t* test was conducted to evaluate if Gen Z or non-Gen Z members think the food quality of fast food is important. The test was nonsignificant, $t(97) = 0.74, p = .0462$, although there was a tendency for Gen Z ($M = 3.41, SD = 1.25$) to in general think the food quality of fast food is more important than non Gen Z ($M = 3.17, SD = 1.53$). Interview participants also attested to the importance of food quality. Two individuals mentioned how “the food has to not be greasy” and that the food items should be made with “no canola oil.” Another two participants also claimed that the freshness of the ingredients is a quality they look for in their fast food. Contrastingly, some claimed that they did not expect much from the quality of their food and knew that when ordering fast food, it was merely for convenience and not for the quality of the ingredients. Although the interview responses regarding fast food expectations and food quality varied, the data holistically illustrates the value Gen Z places on food quality.

Gen Z does not shy away from commenting on the changes Taco Bell needs to make in order for the restaurant chain to gain their business. Considering the analysis revealed that “once every few months” (28.4%) was the most common amount of times participants frequented Taco Bell, while the least common was “once a week” (8.8%), it is clear that Gen Z wants their Taco Bell experience to live up to their standards throughout their once every few month visits. The primary alterations they requested from Taco Bell was to incorporate more chicken options into their menu (Deighton, 2023). It is evident that brands are not as in charge as they once were, given they are more receptive to what their audience members desire. Gen Z’s request for more chicken in the Taco Bell menu does not showcase complete satisfaction with the brand, as they clearly have room for improvement. Gen Z’s neutrality with Taco Bell is apparent in the “Gen Z Food and Lifestyle Survey,” as the analysis revealed that Fair (34.3%) was the most common rating for participants’ perception of Taco Bell. Conversely, the least common rating for

participants' perception of Taco Bell was Excellent (2.9%). Furthermore, there was a lack of commonality between interviewee answers regarding their perception of Taco Bell. Of all eight interview participants, only one claimed they love Taco Bell. One individual perceived Taco Bell as trendy while another claimed their food was appetizing yet "Wannabe Mexican." On the other hand, some participants claimed the consumption of Taco Bell led to stomach aches, nausea and heartburn due to the poor food quality. Moreover, some weighed in on the inauthenticity in relation to Mexican culture, specifically stating "We know what tacos look like."—implying Taco Bell does not fit the criteria of authentic tacos.

To further understand Gen Z's perception of Taco Bell, interviewees shared if they recognize Taco Bell as a relevant brand for Gen Z. Janzer (2019) claims that if restaurants are socially responsible, active on social media, continuously update their menus, offer quick service and provide a comfortable space for individuals to spend their time, Gen Z will gravitate towards their establishment. Most of the interviewees spoke to Taco Bell's marketing efforts and how their commercials, promotions, and collaborations appeal to Gen Z above everything else. A participant mentioned how "the last memorable thing [Taco Bell] did was the Mexican pizza with Doja Cat." In this circumstance, Taco Bell had their pulse on what—or who—was relevant to their consumers while updating their menu by temporarily reintroducing a fan favorite item. Another respondent mentioned that Taco Bell has a "strong marketing presence that appeals to youth who are not concerned with health and fitness," insinuating Taco Bell appeals to Gen Z individuals who are not health conscious. One interviewee thought Taco Bell could do more to appeal to Gen Z through their marketing, "such as events and aesthetically pleasing live immersive experiences at cool places—like the Cheetos experience at Coachella that promoted their new flavor." It is apparent that Taco Bell is successful in maintaining relevance amongst

Gen Z digitally; however, there is a desire for captivating experiences that places the consumer in the essence of Taco Bell.

Social media has taken precedence in many facets—marketing being one of them. Gen Z favors marketing strategies that garner towards pop culture, are authentic, and implement short-form content on their favorite social media platforms (Youssef & Luong, 2023). Short-form videos are popular amongst Gen Z, as they are a more casual and authentic form of media consumption (“Why do short-form videos attract Gen Z consumers?”, 2023). Furthermore, Gen Z is accustomed to media that is instantaneous, which has resulted in shortened attention spans. The short-form videos allow for quicker consumption and provide Gen Z with a more pleasurable viewing experience (“Why do short-form videos attract Gen Z consumers?”, 2023). Data from the “Gen Z Food and Lifestyle” survey supports this assertion, considering 37.8% of Gen Z are big advocates of short-form content. It is important for brands to also understand what visual appeal captivates Gen Z because this demographic is hyper-visual (Fussel, 2022). Design and aesthetics are important attributes for brands to get right, as Gen Z is easily distracted and are consistently on the hunt for the next best thing (Fussel, 2022). The results from the “Gen Z Food and Lifestyle” survey also indicate that following short-form content, 34.1% of Gen Z is also impressed with appealing photos or graphics. It evidently does not take much for Gen Z to be satisfied and enticed. A short video and inviting graphics will do the trick!

Throughout the rise of social media, influencers have also found their place in the digital sphere. From YouTube to TikTok, influencers have curated their own platforms and have established a niche fan base. Throughout the consumption of influencer content, Gen Z can easily digest what is being said because it is formatted in a way that appeals to them (Youssef & Luong, 2023). Moreover, Gen Z values experiences or interactions they have with others. In

other words, they thrive off of the connections and relationship they form with these influencers (Salukov, 2023)—despite the lack of tangibility of the relationship. Brands can also easily reach their Gen Z consumers throughout the implementation of influencers in their marketing strategies (Salukov, 2023). Considering there is pre-established trust and connection to the influencers, a brand's messaging or product can reach their desired target audience more efficiently (Salukov, 2023). To understand the value Gen Z places on influencer opinions and brand-celebrity relationships, a correlation analysis was performed to see if the likelihood of participants trying food items reviewed by influencers impacted their desire to see brands collaborate with celebrities. The correlation analysis revealed that for the 102 participants surveyed, there was a significant positive relationship between the likelihood to try food items reviewed by influencers and their desire to see brands collaborate with celebrities ($r = .209, p = .038$).

Although the data from the “Gen Z Food and Lifestyle” survey exhibits Gen Z’s preference for influencers and celebrity content, the interview participants were more hesitant in trusting influencers. While some agreed that influencers impact their purchasing decisions, others claimed they do not trust influencers. One interviewee said they recognize that influencers are great assets to a brand in regards to garnering exposure; however, they are “...aware that they are getting paid to sponsor the product. Of course they are going to speak well about the product.” Others also agreed that influencers only look out for their own good, which is why it is hard to trust if the product they promote is actually worth it or if it is a cash grab. Another interviewee mentioned how some brands miss the mark with the influencer they choose for their marketing. They tend to “reach out to those that no one really cares about.” They continued their statement with “I am not going to purchase something [influencers] recommend. It is more about seeing which product slowly pops up and is trending. Then I know the product is worth being

talked about.” Based on the interviewee responses, it is apparent that brands cannot merely focus on influencers for their marketing. Their marketing needs to encompass existing solid foundations—the influencers are just the cherries on top.

Cultural Analysis

Taco Bell is well-situated within the fast-food industry in the United States (Kunst, 2023b). It is known for its Mexican-inspired cuisine, which has become popular and recognized as a part of American fast food culture. Taco Bell has achieved success with millennials, which can be attributed to its bold and playful branding, strategic late-night positioning, and emphasis on customization and variety (RMagazine, 2015). The vibrant and humorous marketing, along with creative menu choices, differentiated the brand from traditional fast-food chains. By catering to millennials’ desire for convenience and personalization, Taco Bell has solidified its association with their lifestyle (RMagazine, 2015). However, cultural milieus change over time. Now, the setting, environment, and social and cultural aspects in which Taco Bell resides must cater to the newer generation, particularly Gen Z.

In order for Taco Bell to effectively evolve its positioning and marketing from targeting a primarily millennial audience to Gen Z, the brand must understand the cultural context within which it currently lives. Currently, Taco Bell has done well in terms of resonating with younger generations by embracing a playful branding approach (Beausoleil, 2020). To the youth, Taco Bell is often associated with late-night cravings, affordable menu options, and innovative limited-time offerings. Additionally, Taco Bell has been actively engaging with popular culture, leveraging social media platforms, collaborating with influencers, and even featuring in some movies and TV shows (Beausoleil, 2020). This has contributed to its presence within youth culture and internet communities.

However, to specifically capture the attention of Gen Z, Taco Bell must examine its current relevance, connection and presence with Gen Z, as well as exactly how to strengthen each of these components. Then, the brand can adopt the appropriate strategies that will help it maintain its appeal in the fast-food industry, while connecting with Gen Z in the areas that matter most to them. In order to do this, Taco Bell first needs to understand who Gen Z is and what the generation values.

Gen Z, born roughly between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s, is a generation of individuals who have come of age in a rapidly evolving world shaped by technology (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). Gen Z's lifestyle, beliefs, wants, and needs reflect the cultural shifts of their time and how they are distinct from the millennial generation. According to a survey by Deloitte, 98% of Gen Zers own a smartphone and spend an average of 4 hours and 15 minutes per day on their phones ("Global Generational Survey," 2022). Being the first generation to grow up with smartphones and social media, Gen Z is highly tech-savvy and adaptable to new technologies (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). They are early adopters of emerging trends, and they play a significant role in shaping digital culture.

For example, social media plays a dominant role in Gen Z's lives as the generation views social media as an essential tool for self-expression and communication (Karthikeyan, 2023). Unlike millennials, Gen Zers are avid users of a wide variety of social media platforms and digital entertainment, including short-form videos and podcasts on diverse topics (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). Gen Z's deep engagement with social media plays a significant role in their fast food choices (Karthikeyan, 2023). Food trends and viral content on platforms like TikTok and Instagram can lead to the popularity of specific menu items or even entire restaurants among this

generation (Karthikeyan, 2023). Taco Bell can use this information to inform its marketing strategies.

Furthermore, studies demonstrated that Gen Z is the most stressed generation (Morin, 2021). This can be attributed to the fact that a majority of the Gen Z population consists of students, with Taco Bell's prime Gen Z being college students (Karthikeyan, 2023). Gen Z students tend to seek remote work and an excellent work-life balance. As a result, their lifestyle is marked by a preference for flexibility and convenience (Grant, 2023; Karthikeyan, 2023). Therefore, they appreciate convenience in their food consumption. Gen Z's tech-savvy nature makes them receptive to fast-food chains that embrace technology for ordering and delivery services (Karthikeyan, 2023). For example, they prefer engaging with mobile apps and online ordering as these features provide a seamless, convenient, and stress-free dining experience.

Given that Gen Z primarily consists of students, they also tend to be more financially cautious than previous generations (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021; Grant, 2023). This is especially important after COVID-19's impact where studies indicate Gen Z college students prioritize saving money and spending less (Morin, 2021). Student loan debt, economic uncertainties, and the rising cost of living influence their financial decisions, leading to an increased focus on savings and financial planning (Morin, 2021). Taco Bell can leverage this concern by emphasizing its affordability.

However, it is equally important to emphasize that Taco Bell's budget-friendly menu is not at the expense of food quality (Grant, 2023; Karthikeyan, 2023). Food quality is critical to Gen Z, and they are known for being more health-conscious and environmentally concerned than previous generations (Morin, 2021; Karthikeyan, 2023). Gen Z places a strong emphasis on health and sustainability when it comes to their food choices. This generation consists of

individuals who tend to be mindful of the impact of their diet on their well-being (Morin, 2021). As a result, they actively seek out high-quality and nutritious food options. They are likely to choose food that supports their physical and mental health, opting for fresh and nutritious options over heavily processed or unhealthy alternatives (Morin, 2021). Therefore, by clearly articulating this aspect of Taco Bell's food quality, the brand can capture the attention of its Gen Z audience.

Furthermore, given their strong emphasis on social and environmental issues, Gen Z tends to favor fast-food restaurants that demonstrate a commitment to ethical and sustainable practices (Karthikeyan, 2023). They respect brands that prioritize ethics in their business operations. They are more likely to support brands that use responsibly-sourced ingredients, offer plant-based options, and implement eco-friendly packaging (Karthikeyan, 2023). Gen Z also responds positively to fast-food brands that tell compelling stories and actively engage in causes they care about (Karthikeyan, 2023). Thus, by considering the ethical implications of their brand's operations and by supporting social or environmental initiatives, Taco Bell can build strong connections with Gen Z customers.

In addition to being more socially and environmentally conscious, Gen Z is a more progressive generation than previous generations (Karthikeyan, 2023). For example, gen Zers have a higher level of political and social engagement than millennials. They utilize social media as a platform to voice their opinions, mobilize for causes, and drive change (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). Issues that are prominent in their activism include gun control, LGBTQ+ rights, and racial equality. They also advocate for diversity, inclusion, social justice, climate change, and environmental sustainability (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). These issues influence Gen Z's purchasing decisions and engagement with brands. By advocating for Gen Z's key social and

environmental concerns, Taco Bell will not only live up to its bold persona but also better connect with its existing Gen Z customers and attract new ones.

However, if Taco Bell engages in social or environmental activism, it must be authentic. Gen Z values authenticity and transparency from the brands they interact with (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021; Karthikeyan, 2023). They are especially keen on food brands being honest and transparent about their food. Therefore, fast-food restaurants that practice transparency in their sourcing, preparation methods, and ingredient information are more likely to gain Gen Z's trust (Karthikeyan, 2023). Gen Z seeks products and services that align with their values, but honesty is essential or it will backfire. By honestly advocating for social and environmental causes in its marketing campaigns, the Taco Bell brand will resonate well with this generation.

Also, Gen Z values opportunities to socialize with their friends over food (Karthikeyan, 2023). Sharing meals allows them to bond, strengthen friendships, and create lasting memories in a relaxed and enjoyable setting. They explore new food trends, such as visiting exciting food trucks, and they view eating together as a fun way to spend their free time (Karthikeyan, 2023). It is important that Taco Bell creates a stress-free, enjoyable, and memorable experience for Gen Z in order to become and remain one of their favorite brands.

Luckily, Taco Bell's core narrative has a high likelihood of resonating with Gen Z. The brand promotes the values of courage, individuality, and authentic self-expression, with the goal of building a brighter future for all (Taco Bell, 2023). It believes in unique experiences, inclusivity, and living your best life. However, in order for Taco Bell to achieve its goals of making the brand relevant for Gen Z, driving a perception of high quality, and transforming the business to be more digital, it must clearly communicate its alignment with Gen Z culture, values, and lifestyles through its marketing material (Karthikeyan, 2023). As Taco Bell navigates

this dynamic shift following its success with millennials, it has the opportunity to secure a lasting presence in the cultural milieu of the newest generation of consumers.

Gen Z's cultural traits and values have a significant impact on their fast food preferences, leading to several distinct trends in this generation's dining choices. Understanding Gen Z's tech-savvy nature, preference for convenience, emphasis on food quality, and commitment to ethical and sustainable practices will be key to effectively engaging with this generation (Grant, 2023; Karthikeyan, 2023). By leveraging social media, embracing technology for ordering and delivery services, and being transparent about its sourcing and sustainability efforts, Taco Bell can build meaningful connections with Gen Z (Morin, 2021; Karthikeyan, 2023). Maintaining authenticity will also play a crucial role in solidifying Taco Bell's position as a brand that resonates with and captures the hearts of Gen Z customers.

Narrative Solutions

The selected narrative is based on Kenneth Burke's theory of Dramatism, in which he addresses the role of language and symbols to create meaning in group life (Framroze, 2023; Nordquist, 2020). Our story will follow Burke's Pentad narrative framework, which includes the act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose (Framroze, 2023; Nordquist, 2020). Burke's Pentad is commonly used for storytelling in developing a marketing strategy. The scene represents the setting of the story. Burke refers to the act as the action through language or symbols (Framroze, 2023). Burke equates language with action (Framroze, 2023). The agent is the character who performs the action (Framroze, 2023). Agency refers to the techniques or methods that the characters use to achieve their goal (Framroze, 2023). Lastly, the purpose is the motive or actions that the character pursues in the story. Burke's pentad allows us to understand the

relationship between these elements in a story (The Nature of Writing, 2023). Burke viewed life as performative and our story expresses this notion (Framroze, 2023).

Our narrative identifies Taco Bell as the Rebel archetype because it aligns with the brand's mission and vision as well as our story's protagonist. Taco Bell advocates for “bold,” “different,” and “self-expression” (Taco Bell, 2023, p.1). The brand also believes in having fun as we create a better future together. Taco Bell (2023) aims to “inspire and enable the world to Live Más” (p.1). This archetype reflects Taco Bell because the rebel is seeking to change and challenge social norms on a global scale. The rebel wants to disrupt conventional ways of thinking and seeing the world. The rebel can be great at raising awareness for important causes. Taco Bell calls its target consumer the “cultural rebel” as the brand wants its customers to be brave and stand out by unapologetically being themselves (Taco Bell, 2023, p.1). Taco Bell challenges social norms by encouraging consumers to live boldly and make real connections with people through new experiences and delicious food.

The Big Idea

College students often spend hours studying for exams or doing homework. They eventually become exhausted with the rigor and demand of academics, and they deserve a break. Taco Bell is here to fix that, with a quick, affordable and savory meal that is healthy and satiating.

On a Wednesday afternoon, a college student is studying for an upcoming exam. The student named James is in his sophomore year, majoring in biology. He sits at his desk, frustrated with papers sprawled everywhere. He is generally a good student who submits assignments on time, gets good grades, and makes time to hang out with friends. But, he regrets attending a campus party last weekend. Now, he has procrastinated on this exam. There are so many terms

that he must memorize and concepts to understand. He is stressed that he will not be able to accomplish his study goals on time. James wants to pass this class, otherwise his grade point average will suffer.

Then, James looks up at the deadline written on a sticky note posted on his bulletin board. He does not have the energy and motivation to continue studying. He has been studying for two hours now. He hears his stomach growl and realizes that he has not eaten lunch yet. He wants to continue studying because the exam is tomorrow, and there is more work to do. However, James knows that he will not be productive if he continues studying like this. His hunger is distracting him as he craves eating something delicious, quick and simple– that will give him the energy he needs to regain focus.

Suddenly, an idea occurs to James and he looks down at his desk that is crowded with class notes, flashcards, and his textbook. He is pensive, wondering if his idea would work. Could he be bold enough to achieve it? James decides that it is worth it. He tosses aside his flashcards and class notes, excitedly watching them fly across his dorm room. He exhales a sigh of relief. He grabs his phone, unsure what will happen next, but he knows that there is something waiting for him. He can feel it.

James runs out of his dorm building seeking an exciting adventure to distract himself from the responsibilities of studying. James craves to do the rebellious thing for once. He is always working on homework and attending classes in order to receive good grades. He cares about his studies, but he also hates feeling stressed and nervous. James believes that he cannot be the only one who feels this way.

While walking through campus, James wonders if he could bring some fun to everyone. He thought, “We all need a break sometimes.” He approaches the library, hoping to find his

friends inside. The library's atmosphere is as anyone would expect—quiet, dull, and dusty. James sees several classmates sitting at a round table with their heads buried in biology textbooks. One of James' friends, Mark, sees him and waves him over.

“Hey man, I thought you were studying for tomorrow's test?”

James shakes his head, “I'm done studying for now. I want to do something different than spend my time stressing for an exam. Will you and others join me?”

Mark looks skeptical at James, but he nods his head. Mark looks to the other students who have been listening to the conversation this whole time. They all nod their heads in agreement, and James smiles.

Knowing that there are many students studying at the library, James decides to make some noise. With the help of his friends, they approach more students whispering in their ears what the plan of action is. In the meantime, James sneaks into the librarian's back office, where he logs into the computer to play music through the loudspeakers. The library erupts with blasting pop beats and James hears the cheers of his fellow classmates. James walks out to see students dancing to the loud music until the librarian and a security guard enter the space.

The librarian yells, “Get back to studying!”

James chuckles and runs out the library with a group of students following him. Throughout their adventures, James is constantly reminded about his upcoming exam. Could his plan actually work? Despite feeling a sense of doubt, he feels compelled to live more for the day. James and his friends are now evading the security guard by taking a different turn towards the music and fine arts buildings. Then, James notices a group of students subtly playing instruments outside the music building.

He yells, “Hey! I can't hear you. Play us your best tunes.”

The lead guitarist nods and looks at his bandmates, signaling them to follow his lead. He begins playing a complex solo while his band chimes into rhythm. James and his friends begin singing along loudly to the band's music. The students dance around the band smiling and laughing. James pauses mid-dance to see many students walking outside from the surrounding building. A crowd forms as many students approach the band. James walks to the center, where new students are gathering to hear the music.

He yells, "Live Más!"

James has the desire to feel motivated again. He needs a boost in energy to feel ready for his exam tomorrow. While having a spontaneous concert in the quad, a security guard spots James and his friends. Before the guard can catch them, James instinctively sprints off with his friends following after him.

Not taking the expected route, which would lead to the main campus walkway, James and his friends run towards the track field ahead. Before entering the field, James peeks to see the track and field team having practice. He notices the exhaustion on their faces, sweating beaming down their foreheads.

Mark calls out to James, "Look!" pointing down at several buckets of water balloons, which are lined up across the field benches.

James smiles and looks at his friends, silently sharing a knowing glance of what is to come. James and his friends run out into the field, grabbing handfuls of water balloons. The group of students throws them, inciting a water balloon fight with the track and field team. As James attracts attention, the group of students from the spontaneous concert arrives to join the fun activity. These students are also secretly seeking the same desire that James wants.

The water balloon fight stops abruptly when several security guards arrive at the scene. Students freeze at their sight. James halts looking worried for causing so much commotion. Before he can react, James hears a blaring honk nearby. James instantly notices what he has been waiting for all this time. James and the other students watch as the Taco Bell food truck pulls up to the track field. Everyone is standing in awe, smelling the savory and fresh aroma of beef and cheese. After all the excitement, James could imagine the refreshing taste of a Baja Blast.

The Taco Bell truck opens up and the chef inside calls out to everyone, “Hey! Do you all need a taco boost?”

The crowd of students cheers enthusiastically. James’ eyes widen and he grins, walking slowly towards the food truck. James pauses his stride as he hears his stomach growl again. He starts running to the truck, then the group of security guards run after him. James arrives at the taco truck window, but the campus security reaches him before he can place an order.

One of them says, “You have wreaked havoc on campus, evoking chaos and you and your friends are coming with us.”

James looks at the guard and then looks up at the chef inside. James nods his head and turns to look up at the taco truck. The chef holds out a Crunchwrap Supreme.

James takes the food item and hands it to the guard, saying “Let’s have a taco boost first.”

The guard laughs and accepts the taco, taking a big bite. The crowd of students cheers happily from behind and gather around the Taco Bell food truck. They wait eagerly to get their food. They collectively share this meal to feel motivated again to continue studying for the exam. They all gathered to enjoy this meal sharing a fun moment with each other.

The Rationale

The story's protagonist, James, is a college student because Gen Z is the most educated generation. The college student will resonate with the Gen Z demographic because "57% of 18-21 year-olds are enrolled in a two-year or four-year college" (Parker & Igielnik, 2020, p.1). James' struggle will be relatable to the Gen Z audience because students experience fatigue and stress while in college. It is a common experience and feeling among college students. Deloitte conducted a global survey to learn more about the perspectives of Gen Z, discovering that "more than 40% feel professionally burnout" (JAB Audio, 2023). This burnout can also be translated into college students and it is expressed through the character's frustration.

Additionally, the protagonist's action to toss aside their study materials and seek adventure aligns with Taco Bell's mission and ideal consumer. The student represents the "cultural rebel" by shifting his attention away from his responsibility for the sake of living more, during a stressful moment (Taco Bell, 2023, p.1). Education remains important to James, but he also needs to fulfill his need for motivation and hunger. The protagonist also embodies the archetype of a rebel because he does not want to conform to studying for hours. He wants to find a way to enjoy his college experience. James wants to positively impact his classmates into finding enjoyment in studying, so the student persuades his classmates to join him on his adventure. This will resonate with the Gen Z audience because Gen Z is known to speak out on important causes; this generation is passionate about standing up for what is right and fair (Karthikeyan, 2023). In doing so, the protagonist seeks to rejuvenate his passion for his studies. The character is fueled by his need to live more and needs a boost in energy. This energy will ignite the proper motivation for him to achieve his goal of passing the exam.

Furthermore, the protagonist's attempts to bring excitement and fun into each scene of the story. This relates to Taco Bell's efforts to align its brand with Gen Z's culture. This idea comes

from Taco Bell's (2023) mission to “bring the fun” (p.1). It reinforces this notion and positions Taco Bell as the energizer for college students. The character goes beyond the norm to capture the attention of other students to do something different and thrilling for once. The protagonist is avoiding being caught by the campus security, which is rebellious, but the situation is resolved as he connects with the authority figure over a Crunchwrap Supreme taco. It strengthens the meaning that food brings people together.

Overall, the story’s ending demonstrates that Taco Bell is a convenient and delicious meal for students to refuel themselves throughout a long day of studying. The story will portray the meaning of unity by seeing diverse students gathered to enjoy a meal together. This narrative will also encourage students to make Taco Bell their preferred quick service restaurant for a study break hangout with friends. Also, the adventures represent an idea of what students wish they could do when they are feeling stressed due to an assignment or exam. The resolution shows that everyone’s needs are met because they enjoy themselves on these adventures and eat delicious, affordable food, while not jeopardizing their studies. In the end, everyone wins.

#TacoBOOST’s Competitive Edge

The majority of individuals in college today belong to the Gen Z demographic (Dennington, 2021). One common trait amongst these college students is their love for eating out. Approximately 58% of college students dine at a quick serve restaurant off-campus, while 56% opt to eat at fast casual establishments (Baltazar, 2019). Furthermore, many Gen Zers are against eating out, as it can be costly and time consuming (Wiener-Bronner, 2022). In order to capture Gen Z’s attention, restaurants have considered lowering their prices, establishing loyalty programs and implementing celebrities into their marketing efforts—similar to that of fast food chains (Wiener-Bronner, 2022).

Considering Gen Z are known to be fast food fiends, it is important for restaurants to create an experience where they can quickly and affordably dine. The #TacoBOOST campaign does just that by specifically appealing to college students. Rather than marketing the tacos towards Gen Z as a whole, this campaign attempts to reach their college student consumers to position their food as a source of energy and revitalization. Furthermore, considering Taco Bell is a quick service restaurant, their service speaks directly towards Gen Z. They are quick, cheap, and now are marketed as a new study food that helps students conquer their stress and burnout.

Fast food chains have made adjustments to their restaurants and services to better cater to their younger demographic. Their technologies have evolved, as they have introduced mobile orders, drive-thru and curbside pickup to their practices (“Fast Food and College Students”, 2020). While these new advancements are progressive and necessary in the digital age, many fast food chains have not been successful in marketing their products towards college students specifically. The evolution in college students being the focal point of quick service restaurants marketing is vital because it will not only catalyze an increase in sales, but also will lay the foundation for long-term relationships between the restaurant and their consumer (“Fast Food and College Students”, 2020). Considering fast food restaurants do not particularly market themselves towards college students, Taco Bell’s #TacoBOOST campaign– is specifically created for college students and characterizes them as the rebel, as their strategy is independent and different from their competitors.

Taco Bell has intentionally marketed towards college students, as their values lie in education. The “Taco Bell Foundation” was created to inspire and motivate individuals to pursue higher education and kickstart their careers (“Taco Bell Foundation,” n.d.). Since 1992, Taco Bell has helped four million individuals and donated \$110 million dollars in endowments,

through their “Live Mas” scholarship program (“Taco Bell Foundation,” n.d.). Taco Bell’s primary goal for this foundation has been to remove the barriers that complicate individuals’ opportunities to obtain their education (“Taco Bell Foundation,” n.d.). The company has expressed a desire to be a financial resource that helps individuals catapult their careers and create rebels of their own—a future generation of people who are firestarters, independent, and challenge the status quo. Considering Gen Z is known for valuing brands that align their practices with their personal beliefs, the #TacoBOOST campaign is effective because it aligns with the brand's values and is authentic to the essence of Taco Bell (Brooks, 2022).

Taco Bell—*Winning the Story Wars*

In today's marketing landscape, consumers are bombarded with information and inundated with media from various brands. In the book, *Winning the Story Wars* by Jonathan Sachs, the author describes how brands must compete for consumers' attention and influence as a result (Sachs, 2012). The #TacoBOOST campaign exemplifies how brands can navigate the challenges of today’s dynamic and ever-evolving media landscape. With an abundance of content overwhelming consumers, it has become increasingly difficult for marketers to cut through the noise and capture attention. By crafting compelling narratives that center around the theme of refueling with Taco Bell as the energizer food for Gen Z students, the campaign creates an emotional resonance with its audience, fostering meaningful connections.

Moreover, the campaign effectively avoids the five deadly sins of communication: vanity, authority, insincerity, puffery, and gimmickry (Sachs, 2012). Instead of relying on overconfidence or gimmicks, the campaign focuses on authentic storytelling that speaks to the universal values and aspirations of the young demographic. It taps into the myth gap, providing a new narrative that aligns with the changing times and resonates with contemporary society

(Sachs, 2012). Taco Bell's purpose-told stories serve as new myths, guiding Gen Z students towards a healthy work-life balance and positioning Taco Bell as their energizing ally.

Through the responsible shaping of cultural narratives, the brand forges a connection between consumerism and a higher human purpose, cultivating a positive and meaningful relationship with its audience (Sachs, 2012). The #TacoBOOST campaign demonstrates how purpose-told stories can be a force for positive change, connecting with Gen Z students authentically and increasing Taco Bell's relevancy within Gen Z culture. By embracing the power of storytelling and ethical communication in this way, Taco Bell can navigate the complexities of the digital landscape and become the architect of a more thoughtful and responsible future.

The Creative Elements

Four elements have been created that bring to life the story and proposed strategies from the campaign. These elements incorporate the narrative framework and objectives of the story's themes into deliverables. Each element conveys Taco Bell's intended brand message, through tangible creatives. The formats for these elements include: digital media, audio, social media content and an immersive experience. A description of each element is outlined.

YouTube Commercial

The first element is a YouTube commercial. This video sharing site has been ranked as the #1 platform used by Gen Z, with a reported 92% of Gen Z users between the ages of 16-25 using the platform; therefore making it essential to connect with Taco Bell's target customer (Ceci, 2023). Following Instagram content, YouTube commercials are a top form of digestible content for Gen Z (Kashyap, 2022). In the age of digital media, it is imperative that brands implement short-form content into their marketing strategy because it captures Gen Z's attention and further incentivizes them to make a purchase (Kashyap, 2022). The #TacoBOOST campaign

aims to entice Gen Z by creating a YouTube commercial that speaks to their struggles as students. Burnout and stress are common emotions students endure throughout their academic careers, which is why in the short video, students are advised to take a break and revive or boost themselves with a taco from Taco Bell (Wright, n.d.).

The #TacoBOOST YouTube videos follow different students who are stressed from their workload. They decide to take a break from their workload and leave the library or their dorm. The second they step foot outside, they are automatically on an adventure. These adventures are meant to be stimulating and are different for each student. The different adventures allow for viewers to follow along to see what escapade each student embarks on. However, the end of each video remains the same as each student refuels with Taco Bell and resumes studying. These videos promote Taco Bell as an energizer, while encouraging students to discover a healthy work-life balance (See Appendix C).

Podcast Advertisement

A Taco Bell podcast ad is an effective way to reach Gen Z. In May 2023 alone, 47% of Gen Z in the United States, or 24 million Americans, engaged with podcasts (Goldman, 2023). Also, 82% of them listened attentively without multitasking, and 43% purchased a product after listening to a podcast ad (Goldman, 2023). Gen Z values convenience and autonomy in their media consumption, and podcasts offer on-demand content that fits seamlessly into their busy and mobile-centric lifestyles. Additionally, podcast ads provide a more authentic and personal connection with the audience, as hosts often speak candidly and genuinely about products or services. This resonates well with Gen Z's preference for authenticity in advertising.

Moreover, since podcast ads are integrated into the content, they are less intrusive, making them more likely to be listened to compared to traditional commercials, which Gen Z

often avoids through ad-blockers and skipping. With a diverse range of niche topics and genres, podcasts cater to Gen Z's varied interests, allowing brands like Taco Bell to target specific audiences effectively. Thus, a 20-second cheerful ad with upbeat music and sound effects inviting students to swing by Taco Bell to fuel up during their study sessions is a perfect way for Taco Bell to increase its relevance in Gen Z lives (See Appendix D).

Instagram and TikTok Content

Taco Bell currently maximizes its use of social media to reach their core market of 18 to 25 years olds and attract more customers. Marketing strategies on social media need to be intensified when it comes to communicating the high-quality ingredients and healthy options offered. Two pieces of social media content were created (one for Instagram and one for TikTok), aimed to improve Taco Bell's brand perception, specifically as it pertains to food quality, which is a theme missing from their current strategy.

When it comes to social media, Instagram and TikTok are the two most used social media apps for Gen Z users in the United States (directly following YouTube that currently ranks in first place) (Ceci, 2023). As of 2023, 85% of Gen Z social media users are active on Instagram and 78% use TikTok (Ceci, 2023). Since these apps have the widest reach for this audience they were selected. The theme of education is incorporated into the Instagram post by including educational-related graphics that support this theme and connect with students (See Appendix E). Similarly, the TikTok ad uses a college level student to act out the scene, by "stitching" (TikTok feature that allows users to combine two videos together) with the official Taco Bell account. To communicate the new message of Taco Bell as the energizer (tied to the narrative) in both pieces of content, the hashtag #TacoBOOST has been incorporated as an interactive way to engage

customers, while emphasizing the concept of ‘refueling’ that eating Taco Bell food will provide a “boost” of nourishment (See Appendix F).

Taco Bell Food Truck Ad

The final creative element is a Taco Bell Food Truck that will visit college campuses across California. The truck will promote Taco Bell’s commitment to using “real” ingredients by serving fresh, in-house guacamole that is made from local, California avocados. Featuring specific ingredients such as the newly offered “Beyond Meat” for plant-based, meatless alternatives will connect with vegan and vegetarian customers, by showing that they offer a wide selection of menu items and healthy substitutes. Shahbandeh (2023) reports that younger generations have a higher likelihood to consider a meatless diet as a healthier option. Including this as a focus will help to change the association of food being viewed and considered as low-quality or outdated, by demonstrating that the brand stays on top of current trends and supports different dietary preferences. This is especially important, considering that over a quarter of Gen Z consumers are on a diet that encompasses “eating clean” (Shahbandeh, 2023). Catering to the health-conscious market within this generation will reframe the narrative and change the perception of Taco Bell as being a healthy and affordable option for Mexican food lovers. This immersive experience will promote the use of high-quality and sustainable ingredients, by providing college-level students with free tacos and a chance to firsthand try Taco Bell’s food, in a new way and with a fresh perspective (See Appendix G).

The Impact of Taco Bell's #TacoBOOST Campaign

According to McKee and Gerace’s (2018) *Storynomics* book, purpose-told stories hold immense power in marketing and advertising because they are designed to deliver key messages and create a lasting impact on the audience. They have the unique advantage of being retold,

generating brand recognition and loyalty with each exposure (McKee & Gerace, 2018). Taco Bell's #TacoBOOST campaign is a prime example of how purpose-driven stories can be harnessed to authentically connect with Gen Z students.

The campaign follows a structured approach, identifying the target market (Gen Z students), understanding their needs (quick, energizing food), and shaping the subject matter (healthy work-life balance). By crafting a relatable inciting incident of stressed-out students seeking respite and fuel, Taco Bell triggers an emotional response within its audience. The message of refueling with Taco Bell as the energizer aligns perfectly with Gen Z's fast-paced lifestyle and desire for convenient sustenance.

Throughout the campaign, Taco Bell effectively highlights the object of desire – a delicious and energizing meal – driving the story toward its climax of students enjoying their adventures and ultimately resolving their burnout by refueling at Taco Bell. Even without explicitly going through all eight stages of story design, the purpose-told stories in the campaign resonate deeply with Gen Z, capturing their attention through relatable scenarios and emotions.

The campaign's use of digital media, audio, and social media platforms enables the purpose-told stories to reach a wider audience and foster meaningful relationships with Gen Z students. With each exposure, Taco Bell strengthens its position as the go-to "energizer food" for this generation, generating brand recognition and loyalty.

This strategic positioning aligns perfectly with the preferences, values, and lifestyle of the Gen Z demographic. By leveraging the power of purpose-told stories, Taco Bell successfully fosters a strong connection with its audience, encouraging real-world action as Gen Z students are enticed to visit Taco Bell for a quick boost during their busy lives. Through this compelling and engaging narrative, Taco Bell effectively cements its relevance within Gen Z culture,

positioning itself as a brand that understands and caters to the needs and values of the young demographic.

Furthermore, the #TacoBOOST campaign employs a diverse range of creative elements to authentically connect with Gen Z, aligning with their preferences, values, and lifestyle. This is the key to the success of this campaign, as Gen Z are technology-driven individuals (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). The proposed creative elements and social media channels, including YouTube, Podcasts, Instagram and TikTok, are especially popular among Generation Z. By leveraging the power of digital media, audio, social media, and an immersive experience, Taco Bell can craft a compelling and engaging narrative that reinforces its brand message and solidifies its position in the youth market.

As the story unfolds, it is poised to boost Taco Bell's appeal and resonate strongly with its target audience, fostering lasting connections and brand loyalty within the Gen Z community. Ultimately, this campaign will strengthen Taco Bell as the premier fast food restaurant of choice for this generation's fast-paced and energy-driven lives.

References

Baltazar, A. (2019). Restaurants would be wise to court college students. QSR.

<https://www.qsrmagazine.com/consumer-trends/restaurants-would-be-wise-court-college-students>.

Beausoleil, M. (2020, December 28). *People Love Taco Bell, and no, it's not just the food*.

Medium. <https://medium.com/swlh/people-love-taco-bell-and-no-its-not-just-the-food-d3358cb035df>

Brooks, R. (2022). 3 things you need to know about gen z and brand loyalty. Forbes.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2022/08/10/3-things-you-need-to-know-about-gen-z-and-brand-loyalty/?sh=5e4c0423c4f2>.

Business Wire. (2023). *Aramark brings gen z food trends to life with new back-to-school offerings on college campuses nationwide*.

<https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20180809005166/en/Aramark-Brings-Gen-Z-Food-Trends-to-Life-with-New-Back-to-School-Offerings-on-College-Campuses-Nationwide>.

Ceci, L. (2023). *U.S. Gen Z Social Media App Usage 2023*. Statista.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1378880/us-gen-z-social-media-app-usage/>

Chipotle. (2023). *Our values*. <https://www.chipotle.com/values>

Dean, G. (2023). Gen z eats fast food like no other generation. from a love for spicy food to visiting restaurants in big groups, these are 6 traits that define their dining habits.

Insider.

<https://www.businessinsider.com/gen-z-fast-food-restaurant-dining-habits-generations-money-spicy-2023-4>.

- Deighton, K. (2023). More chicken, lighter beer, pink drinks: companies craft new products for gen z tastes. *The Wall Street Journal*.
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/more-chicken-lighter-beer-pink-drinks-companies-craft-new-products-for-gen-z-tastes-88d96c7a>.
- Dennington, A. (2021). *Gen Ztressed: A New Generation of College Students*.
<https://timelycare.com/blog/generation-z-college-students/#:~:text=Generation%20Z%20students%20are%20on,Gen%20Xers%20at%20similar%20ages>.
- Fast Food and College Students. (2020).
<https://oncampusadvertising.com/fast-food-and-college-students/>.
- Framroze, A. (2023). *Historical and theoretical approaches*. Class Lecture. CMGT 589: Storytelling, Culture, and Experiential Communication. University of Southern California.
- Fussell, G. (2022). Generation Z: How to Design for the Internet Generation.
<https://www.shutterstock.com/blog/generation-z-design>.
- Gabrielova, K., & Buchko, A. A. (2021). *Here comes Generation Z: Millennials as managers*. *Business Horizons*, 64(4), 489–499. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2021.02.013>
- “Global Generational Survey 2022: Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, and Baby Boomers in the Workplace.” (2022). *Deloitte*. <https://blog.gwi.com/chart-of-the-day/98-percent-of-gen-z-own-a-smartphone/>
- Goldman, J. (2023). *Gen Z loves podcasts-and considers them far less toxic than social media*. *Insider Intelligence*. <https://www.insiderintelligence.com/content/gen-z-loves-podcasts-and-considers-them-far-less-toxic-than-social-media>
- Grant, M. (2023, July 5). *Millennials vs. gen Z: How are they different?*. Salesforce.

<https://www.salesforce.com/blog/how-millennials-and-gen-z-are-different/>

JAB Audio. (2023). *How to tailor your brand's podcast to your Gen Z audience.*

<https://jaraudio.com/how-to-tailor-your-corporate-podcast-to-your-gen-z-audience/>

Janzer, C. (2019). *How Restaurants Can Best Serve Generation Z.*

<https://www.lightspeedhq.com/blog/serving-generation-z-how-restaurants-can-get-ready/>.

Karthikeyan, A. (2023, April 10). *Taco Bell Marketing Strategies - driving its QSR SUCCESS.*

StartupTalky. [https://startuptalky.com/taco-bell-marketing-strategy/#:~:text=Taco%20Bell%20has%20a%20clear,internationally%20\(as%20of%202022\).](https://startuptalky.com/taco-bell-marketing-strategy/#:~:text=Taco%20Bell%20has%20a%20clear,internationally%20(as%20of%202022).)

Kashyap, K. (2022). *40% of Gen Z Consumers Prefer Short Video Ads on Social Media.*

<https://www.spiceworks.com/marketing/advertising/articles/gen-z-prefer-short-video-ads-on-social-media/>.

Kunst, A. (2022). *Visitors of Taco Bell in the U.S. by age 2018.* Statista.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/230987/people-who-visited-taco-bell-usa/>

Kunst, A. (2023a). *Leading restaurant chains ranked by brand awareness in the United States in 2022.* Statista.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1343374/most-well-known-restaurant-chains-in-the-united-states/>

Kunst, A. (2023b). *Taco Bell Brand Profile U.S. 2022.* Taco Bell brand awareness, usage, popularity, loyalty, and buzz among restaurant chain customers in the United States in 2022. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/forecasts/1335733/taco-bell-restaurant-chains-brand-profile-in-the-united-states>

McKee, R. & Gerace, T. (2018). *Storynomics: Story-driven marketing in a post-advertising world.* NY: Hachette Book Group.

- Morin, A. (2021, June 22). *Gen Z is the most stressed out generation right now*. Verywell Mind. <https://www.verywellmind.com/state-of-mental-health-across-generations-5189603>
- Nordquist, R. (2020, November 28). *Pentad*. ThoughtCo. <https://natureofwriting.com/courses/introduction-to-rhetoric/lessons/burkes-pentad/>
- Parker, K. & Igielnik, R. (2020). *On the cusp of adulthood and facing an uncertain future: What we know about Gen Z so far*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/14/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far-2/>
- RMagazine. (2015, October 21). *Taco Bell's marketing captures millennials*. Restaurant Manager. <https://rmagazine.com/articles/taco-bells-marketing-captures-millennials.html>
- Sachs, J. (2012). *Winning the Story Wars: Why those who tell – and live – the best stories will rule the future*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.
- San Pedro, M. (2019). What the gen z market wants from restaurants. F & B Report. <https://fnbreport.ph/11996/what-the-gen-z-market-wants-from-restaurants/>.
- Shahbandeh, M. (2023a). *Gen Z diet and eating habits in the U.S. 2022*. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1360789/generation-z-eating-patterns-in-the-us/>
- Shahbandeh, M. (2023b). *Generation Z food consumption in the U.S.* Statista. <https://www.statista.com/topics/10544/generation-z-food-consumption-in-the-us/#topicOverview>
- Statista. (2011). *Fast food franchises most “liked” on Facebook by U.S. college students*. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/195750/most-liked-fast-food-franchises-on-facebook-by-us-college-students/>

Taco Bell. (2019). *Taco Bell Embarks on Next Chapter of Global Growth*.

<https://www.tacobell.com/news/global-growth>

Taco Bell. (2023). *Taco Bell*. LinkedIn. <https://www.linkedin.com/company/taco-bell/>

Taco Bell Foundation. (n.d.). *Overview, Taco Bell Foundation*. Taco Bell Foundation.

<https://www.tacobellfoundation.org/about/overview/>

The Nature of Writing. (2023). Burke's Pentad.

<https://natureofwriting.com/courses/introduction-to-rhetoric/lessons/burkes-pentad/>

Wiener-Bronner, D. (2022). *Gen z isn't that into dining out. here's how restaurants are chasing them*. CNN Business.

<https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/08/business-food/gen-z-restaurants/index.html>

"Why do short-form videos attract Gen Z consumers?" (2023).

<https://blog.letsplayback.com/why-short-form-videos-attract-the-gen-z-consumers/#:~:text=Authenticity%3A%20Gen%20Z%20is%20a,themselves%20and%20showcase%20their%20personalities.>

"Why now is the time for restaurants to court gen z." (2018). QSR.

<https://www.qsrmagazine.com/outside-insights/why-now-time-restaurants-court-gen-z.>

Wright, L. (n.d.). *Burning out in school: What it means and how to help*.

<https://www.understood.org/en/articles/burning-out-in-school-what-it-means-and-how-to-help.>

Youssef, J., & Luong, S. (2023). What Traditional Media Can Learn From Influencers.

<https://www.oliverwymanforum.com/gen-z/2023/jun/what-traditional-media-can-learn-from-influencers.html#:~:text=Influencer%2Ddriven%20media%20provides%20the,a%20page%20from%20this%20playbook.>

Appendix A

Gen Z Food and Lifestyle Survey

Hello! Thank you for participating in our survey. This survey will ask questions focused on consumer behavior towards fast food and social media usage. When providing your answers, if they require a personal reference/response, please be as descriptive as possible. This survey is expected to take 10 minutes to complete. Your responses are anonymous.

1. Do you identify as Generation Z? (Born between 1997-2012)
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
2. How often do you eat fast food?
 - a. Never
 - b. Rarely
 - c. Sometimes
 - d. Often
 - e. Always
3. On a scale of 1 through 5, how likely are you to eat fast food based on affordability.
4. On a scale of 1 through 5, how likely are you to eat fast food based on convenience.
5. On a scale of 1 through 5, how likely are you to eat fast food based on food quality
6. On a scale of 1 through 5, how likely are you to treat yourself with fast food?

Consumer's Perception of Taco Bell

7. How familiar are you with the fast food chain Taco Bell?
 - a. Not at all
 - b. Somewhat familiar
 - c. Moderately familiar
 - d. Very familiar
 - e. Extremely familiar
8. How often do you eat Taco Bell?
 - a. Once a week
 - b. Once a month
 - c. Once every few months
 - d. Once a year
 - e. Never
9. What is your perception of the food quality at the Taco Bell restaurant?
 - a. Very Poor
 - b. Poor
 - c. Fair

- d. Good
- e. Excellent

Understanding Consumers' Social Media Usage

10. What social media channels do you use to get your news from?
 - a. Facebook
 - b. Instagram
 - c. Twitter
 - d. TikTok
11. What content do you like to engage with on social media?
 - a. Short form videos
 - b. Appealing photos/graphics
 - c. Podcasts
 - d. Online groups/forums
 - e. Live-streaming
12. Do you consider Influencers/Content Creators to be a reliable source of information?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Not sure
13. Do you follow any food reviewers or food influencers on social media?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
14. How likely are you to try a food item after watching a food review by an influencer?
 - a. Extremely unlikely
 - b. Somewhat unlikely
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Very likely
 - e. Extremely likely
15. Where do you most frequently hear about new products from your favorite brand?
 - a. Social media
 - b. Word of mouth (friends and family)
 - c. Traditional advertising (Billboard, TV, Radio, etc.)
 - d. Podcasts
 - e. Online forums/groups
 - f. Live-streaming platforms
 - g. None of the above

Understanding Consumer Behavior.

16. On a scale of 1 through 5, how important is product/service quality when making a purchase?
17. On a scale of 1 through 5, how important is product packaging and design when making a purchase?
18. On a scale of 1 through 5, how important is price when making a purchase?
19. On a scale of 1 through 5, how important is practicality when making a purchase?
20. Rate the following statement from 1 through 5, 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree: I love to see brands collaborate with celebrities.
21. Rate the following statement from 1 through 5, 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree: I would participate in cool events hosted by a brand.
22. Rate the following statement from 1 through 5, 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree: I care about a brand's mission and values.
23. Rate the following statement from 1 through 5, 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree: I feel connected to brands that align with my views.

Demographics

24. What is your age?
 - a. 18-24
 - b. 25-32
 - c. 33-39
 - d. 40+
 - e. Prefer not to answer
25. What is your race/ethnicity?
 - a. White
 - b. African American/Black
 - c. Hispanic/Latinx
 - d. Asian/Asian-American
 - e. Prefer not to answer
26. What gender do you identify with?
 - a. Female
 - b. Male
 - c. Prefer not to answer
27. What is your education level?
 - a. High School diploma
 - b. Some years of college
 - c. Bachelor's degree
 - d. Master's degree
 - e. Doctoral degree
 - f. No education experience
 - g. Prefer not to answer

Appendix B

Gen Z Food and Lifestyle Interview Questions

Questions to understand participants overall perception of Taco Bell

1. What do you like to do when you are with your friends? Where do you go out to eat?
2. What are your favorite places to eat? Why?
3. If applicable, what are your reasonings for opting for fast food?
4. When seeking new fast food restaurants, is there a criteria that these establishments must meet? For example, do the ingredients have to be fresh?
5. What is the first word/thought that comes to mind when you think about Taco Bell?
6. When was the last time you ate at Taco Bell? What was your experience like?
7. What is your perception of the Taco Bell brand?
8. Would you recommend Taco Bell to your friends? Why or why not?
9. What is something you want to improve about Taco Bell?
10. Do you consider Taco Bell a relevant brand for Gen Z?
 - a. If yes, what are they doing to make you feel this way?
 - b. If not, how can they improve?

Questions to understand participants' online behavior and their viewpoint of branded content

11. Where do you hear about new brand announcements? From family/friends? Online? School or Work?
12. How do you engage with brands online?
 - a. Are you an active or passive consumer of online content?
13. Are you more likely to follow brands with a stronger online presence? Can you give me an example? What about their content do you like?
14. What is something innovative that you've seen brands do to promote their products?
15. Do you think social media influencers are a good source of information?
16. What content do you like to engage with on social media?
17. How do brands garner your attention?
 - a. What brand qualities do you gravitate towards?
18. Are you inspired to try a product because of what the brand stands for? Or because the product is innovative?
19. How do you think a brand should communicate their values to you?

Appendix C

YouTube Commercial



TACO BELL

TACO BELL
COMMERCIAL
#TACOBOST CAMPAIGN

FRAME 1



The camera starts by focusing on a stressed college student attempting to study for his upcoming biology exam.

FRAME 2



He looks up at his bulletin board that showcases the date and time of the deadline of when he has to submit his exam. He has lost all motivation to study.

FRAME 3



The camera pans back to the student and he has a sudden change of heart. He throws his notes out the window of his dorm. He picks up his phone and heads out with no plan, but with anticipation that something is waiting for him.

FRAME 4



The camera follows the student as he runs into his peers on campus. The student wants to embark on an adventure and his peers follow. They continue to walk on campus until they encounter a campus concert.

FRAME 5



The group moves on from one adventure to the next. The camera continues to follow them on campus until they halt at a campus wide water balloon fight. The student is seen rebelling against the pressure to study and his deadline and is instead enjoying himself.

FRAME 6



Finally, the camera continues to follow the group to a Taco Bell food truck where a plethora of students are seen refueling with Taco Bell. Once the student finishes eating his taco, the camera follows him back to his dorm where he blissfully opens his laptop to continue studying.

Appendix D

Podcast Advertisement

<https://youtu.be/mGiJSbcRmT4>

Social Media Content (Instagram)



Appendix F

Social Media Content (TikTok)

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1aBYYCSZxIb04SggqwYS6ap4_70szLrJ9/view?usp=drive_link

Appendix G

Taco Truck Immersive Experience Ad

Taco Bell invites SoCal college students to its...

FOOD truck



 *festival* 

Touring college campuses across California!

Follow #TacoBOOST for info and dates visiting your college campus

     

