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Millennial Consumer Preference: Waffle Fries vs. Potato Wedges

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Abstract:

For this experiment, two groups of paid volunteers, aged 18-34, provided written quantitative and qualitative data on preferences between waffle fries (test) and potato wedges (control). Each participant provided demographic information and then answered a series of questions, using a hedonic rating scale or by composing a written response. Participants also provided qualitative data about what influenced their preference between the test and control. The experiment confirmed the hypothesis was correct: Millennials prefer waffle fries over potato wedges. It also confirms that Millennials prefer a unique, crunchy, crispy, and decreased potato filled product. Millennial consumers reported significant preference of the waffle fry over the wedge. The results also confirm consumers preferred the crispiness and amount of potato filling of the waffle fry over the wedge.

Review of Literature:

According to research done by the NPD group on millennial consumers at Quick Service Restaurants (QSR) total French fry movement has steadily decreased since 2005¹. These numbers indicate to QSR development teams that a solution must be presented to make up for the decreasing income. CREST and NPD Group data indicates that millennials prefer the “Special” fries or “Waffle Fries” over normal french fries by approximately 7%. The research done by the menu insights team at YUM! Brands indicates that in 2014, there was a 400% increase in restaurants adding waffle fries to the menu^{1,2}. It was also reported that necessary preparation of waffle fries increased by 20% due to sales, while preparation of other fries remained the same or decreased¹.

Millennials are more likely to eat out than the older generations, and some of this can be attributed to the increased amount of time spent in a car due to work commutes³. According to Stafleu, the changes in food purchasing habits are more likely to be seen in women⁴. Women who were employed reported higher fast food consumption than those who were unemployed. 48.1% of female SNAP participants report eating fast food at least 3 times per week. “Travel time and fast-food consumption and frequency [are] positively associated”³. It has also been noted that millennial aged men are more likely to be active than women⁵.

Furthermore, research indicates that millennial consumers are not interested in purchasing meal deals or combo choices that can save them money; however, these consumers report a desire to save money and also claim a higher rate of unemployment than any other^{6,7}. Despite their desire to save money, it has been reported that millennials are more likely to spend money at QSR's than older generations⁸. Millennial preference also points to ethnically diverse QSR food. Consumer data shows that millennial consumers were the largest group to have gotten food or drink at a restaurant in the past month (at the time of the research). Millennials were also the largest group to order off of a restaurant's "Secret" menu, indicating the large desire to feel special or different during their QSR experience. Millennials are focused on maintaining their identity and exploring their individuality⁹. Even concepts as simple as feeding become a way to display self-expression⁹. Millennials also display this desire for self-expression through their involvement. This generation is often described as caring, activists, involved, and interested in the environment¹⁰. Many millennials become involved in order to develop a "meaningful philosophy on life" or to "discover new ways to experience things"¹⁰. These defining concepts of the millennial generation are reflected in their food purchasing patterns.

Some researchers believe that the outside environment has contributed to the changes in purchasing and consumption behaviors of millennial consumers^{8, 11}. Societal norms pressure millennials to seek 'new and improved' products; or products that appear as a novelty, something new to the market. This has driven millennial consumers to show decreased brand loyalty, but rather novelty loyal. This generation commits to brands that reflect personal interests, lifestyle choices, or individuality, instead of committing to a brand solely because of a name. Research also shows that brand selection is influenced greatly by peer recommendation⁸. Recommendations often come through social media or through other forms of electronic communication. Acceptance or rejection of these recommendations is often seen as a method of self-expression or a way to demonstrate who or what they identify with⁸.

To understand, as a developer in a QSR, how to reach millennials and how to identify with their personalities, it must be understood how they describe their age group. Young claims that millennials describe themselves as "confident and self-reliant, technologically savvy and connected, open to change and diversity, closely connected to family and social organizations, service oriented, effective at multitasking, and expectant of immediate access to information"¹¹.

Generational research points to early cultural experiences that contribute to defining preference in the millennial age group. As children, many millennial generation females were exposed to independent, self-sufficient, and brave women in movies, and this is now reflected in their consumer behaviors. This supports why millennial women are more likely to prefer a store that makes them feel like they are more special or noteworthy than other consumers¹¹. Juxtaposed to millennial men who had different exposures during childhood, mainly centered on aggressive warriors and heroes fighting to save society. Many marketing agencies have found effective millennial advertising techniques related to highlighting a male warrior¹¹. Such companies include Axe, the NFL, and various video game companies.

Further research defends generational differences can be affect behavioral choices¹². These differences then produce various outcomes from millennials than their older or younger counterparts. Millennials tend to enter the job market with higher debt due to the increased levels of schooling. Yet, as aforementioned, millennials are still the least interested in deals that could save them money^{5,6}. Although they spend more time pursuing education for career development, Millennials actually identify less with their careers than their older counterparts¹³. Furthermore, due to their increased education, millennials are more selective about the jobs they are willing to do. Millennials do report higher job satisfaction than the older populations¹³. However, there is question regarding the higher levels of expectation placed on millennials due to technology. As technology becomes more advanced, increased expectations are placed on millennials to work from home after hours. Surges in work load can lead to higher levels of stress. Also, being required to work more than one job can increase the stress and the risk associated with poor decision making¹⁴. High stress levels can influence consumer purchasing by making them more likely to be impulsive or purchase sensory-focused foods, such as QSR foods¹⁵. Those with higher stress levels are more likely to overspend and save less money^{14, 15}. These habits can be instilled at a young age, due to stress from school, family or finances. In one study, a significant number of teens reported feeling overwhelmed by the responsibilities they have in their life¹⁵. Many parents do not realize how much stress their child or college student experiences¹⁵. Millennials that struggle with financial decisions focus more on taking care of short term problems than focusing on long term side effects¹⁵.

The paradigm shift from long-term to short-term thinking can hinder the lifelong health status of many millennials. Obesity and lower levels of overall fitness are both higher in millennials than in older generations. Millennials are also less likely to admit that they have a weight problem, which support the claims of higher rates of narcissism¹³. It has also been noted that millennials have a higher energy intake than other generations⁴. Therefore, it is “realistic to expect that millennials will have substantially worse health as a result of obesity than did older cohorts at the same age”¹³.

The harsh differences between the millennial generations and the ones that came before are seemingly insignificant, when analyzed individually; however, when the details are scrutinized as a whole, defining characteristics may be established for the entire generation¹². These generational differences are what QSR food developers and innovation teams must hone in on to provide the most satisfactory product for the target consumer.

Hypothesis: Millennials (age 18-35) participating in the consumer preference study on Waffle Fries versus Potato Wedges will prefer the Waffle fry due to generational differences that influence food preference, in comparison with the older generations’ preference for Potato Wedges.

Secondary Hypotheses:

- Millennials will prefer Waffle Fries over Potato Wedges because of the decreased potato filling and increased crunchy coating.
- Millennials will prefer Waffle Fries over Potato Wedges because of the unique fry shape fulfilling the desire for novelty food items.

SMART Objectives:

- After participating in the consumer preference study on Waffle Fries versus Potato Wedges, researchers will be able to identify millennial preference in regards to the sample shape.

- After participating in the consumer preference study on Waffle Fries versus Potato Wedges, researchers will be able to identify millennial preference in regards to potato consistency/thickness and how that affects overall wedge acceptance.
- After participating in the consumer preference study on Waffle Fries versus Potato Wedges, researchers will be able to employ deductive reasoning to determine which sample will sell better to the target millennial group.

Research Design:

The research design used is the experimental design process. Participants were presented two samples of possible fry options and asked to provide demographic information; indicate preferences for hedonic scales on aroma, flavor, texture, etc; and finally to indicate, through a written response, which sample they preferred and why. From this information, data were extrapolated and statistical analysis was performed. Outstanding variables were controlled and managed. An experimental group was compared to a control group.

Setting:

The setting where the research took place was a safe environment monitored by paid employees. Participants come in to the monitored registration room and sign in at the desk, where they then wait until provided further instruction. Then they are taken across to the hall to a small room filled with individual, divided computers. Both of the rooms are designed to resemble a KFC establishment and are intended to replicate the feeling of eating at a KFC restaurant as best as possible. This is the setting where participants receive their taste samples and provide feedback on the computer registered under their name.

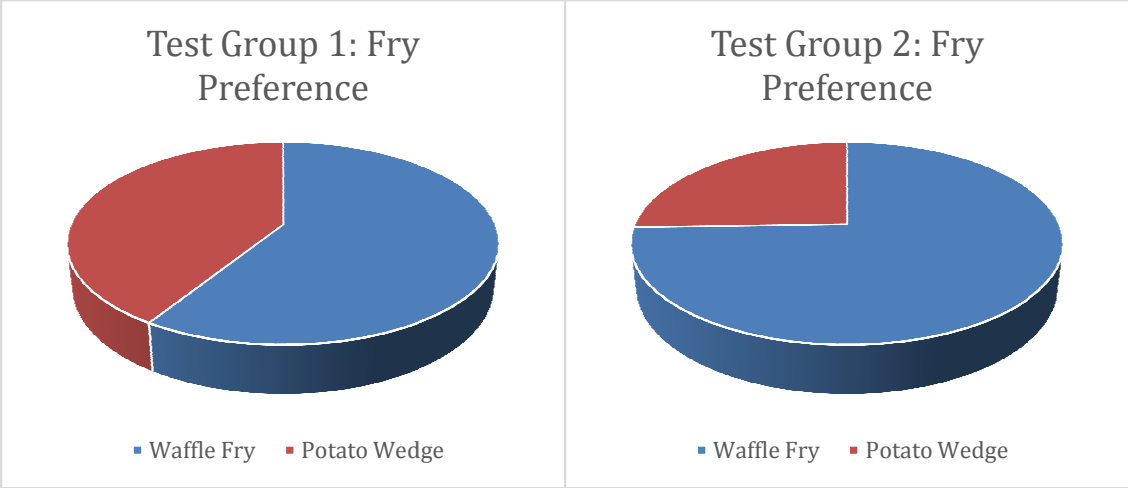
Methods:

Participants were recruited via email prompting and were paid \$20 each to participate in this study. Participation was limited to the ages of 18 and 35. Participants were asked to arrive

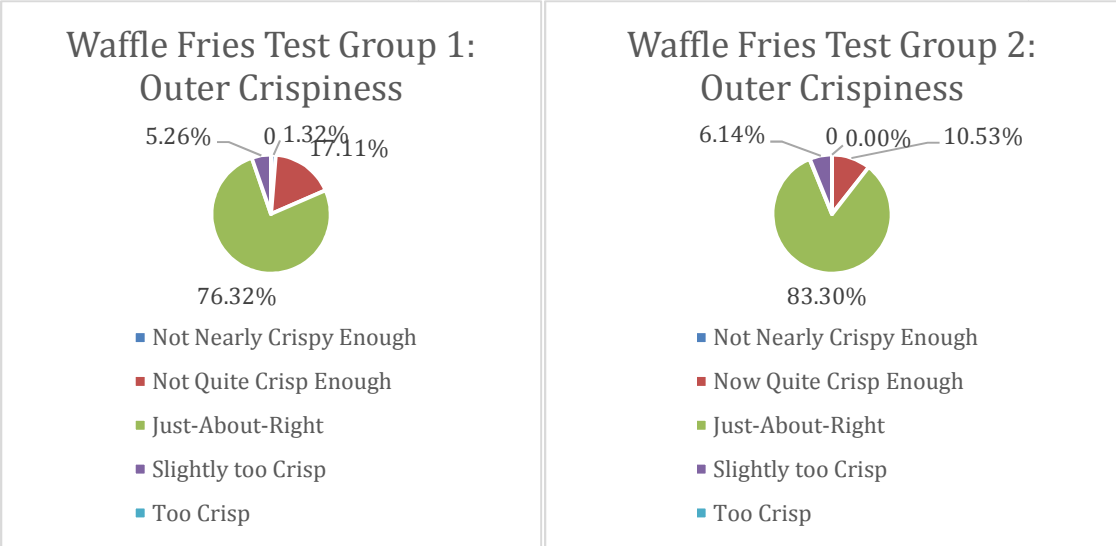
ten minutes prior to beginning the test. They entered the building through a security monitored entrance and were led into the holding room where they signed in and were given a card with their name and an assigned computer desk written on it. On the hour, a worker began to explain how the experiment would work and then led the group across the hall to the tasting room. Once in the tasting room, participants were asked to sit at their assigned computer and wait for further instruction. When everyone was seated, the employee explained how to work through the questionnaire. When a green screen was shown, the participant approached the ordering counter to collect their sample by showing their card to the worker. They took the sample back to their seat, tasted it, and answered the questions related to it. After completing the questions related to the sample, they were asked to clear their desk by throwing everything away and to refresh their palate by drinking some water. Then they went to collect their next sample and repeated a similar process. Upon completion, participants were given their payment of \$20 and were allowed to leave. Email addresses were collected for further recruitment.

Results:

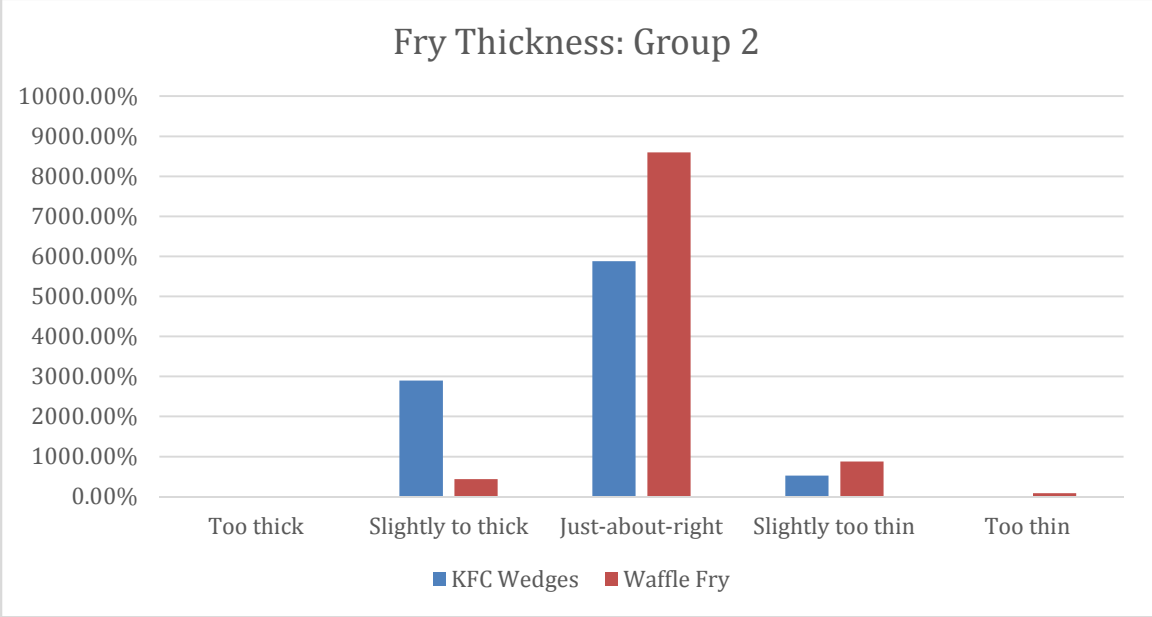
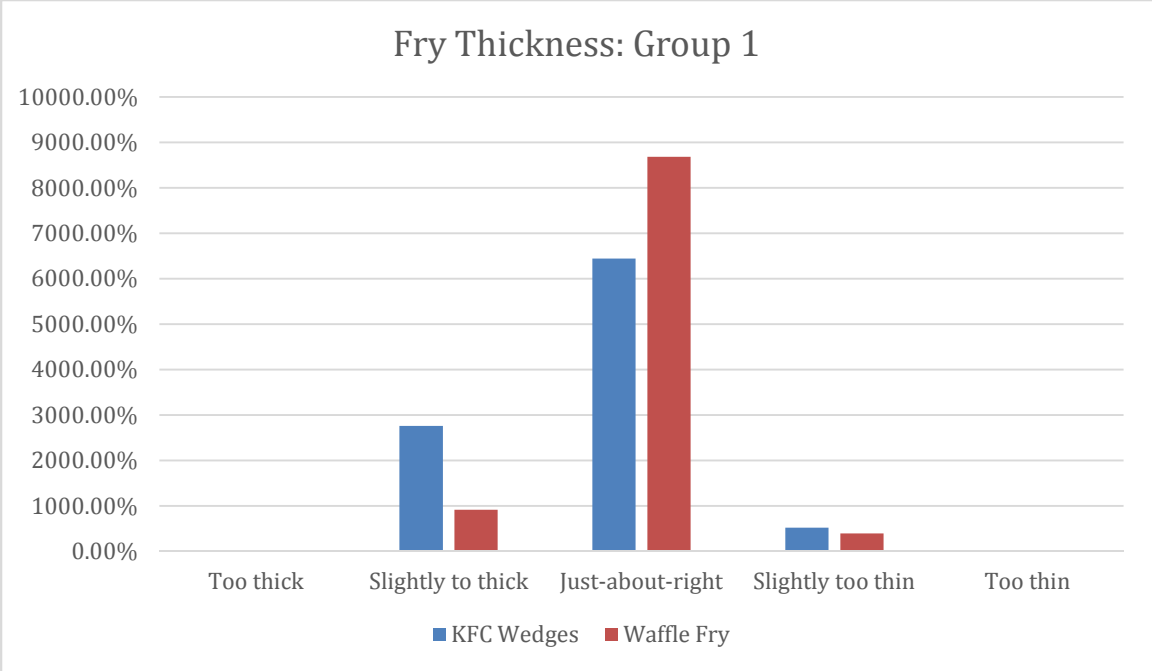
The results of this study present interesting information on millennial consumer preference for French fries. In test group 1, 99% of the respondents claim to like French fries, with 37% claiming to like them extremely. Test group 2 shared the same results. Both averaged a 'like very much' rating. For the first testing session, when asked a general preference, 56% of the 76 participants selected waffle fries over potato wedges, with a significance of 0.08. In the second testing session, 72% of the 114 participants prefer the waffle fries over potato wedges, with a significance of 0.00. Statistical hypothesis tests are confirmed as significant with a p value of 0.05 or less. Some examples of consumer comments include: "I like the shape," "I like how it's a waffle fry," "I love waffle cut fries," and even "waffle fries are always fun to eat!"



The qualitative data collected through the written responses from participants indicates that millennial consumers heavily prefer a French fry that has a crunchy exterior and a small amount of potato filling. One consumer states, “I like that the fries have a lot of soft potato filling, but is still very crispy on the outside.” 76% (test group 1) and 83% (test group 2) of participants said that the waffle fry provided the Just-about-right amount of outer crispness.



This number was also intensely reflected in the written response. 86% (test group 1) and 85% (test group 2) claimed that the piece thickness of the waffle fry is just-about-right. These results compared to the results for the potato wedges indicate the importance of piece thickness, and points to a preference for the crispy waffle fry. Only 64% (test group 1) and 58% (test group 2) claim that the thickness of the potato wedge was just-about-right. 27% (test group 1) and 28% (test group 2) of the participants claim that the potato wedge were slightly too thick.



This quantitative data was also reflected in the qualitative written data, by respondents stating that the potato wedge was too thick, too potato-y, and not crunchy enough. 17% (test group 1) and 27% (test group 2) claim that the inner firmness is not nearly firm enough or not quite firm enough. It is also important to note ketchup usage in the consumer in order to determine how important the ketchup/fry compatibility relates to the overall satisfaction. 47% (test group 1) and 67% (test group 2) used ketchup during the experiment.

Discussion/Conclusion: (2-3 pages)

Project description and results:

The research conducted consisted of a two day taste testing session for the millennial age group (age 18-34). Participants were provided samples of Waffle Fries and Potato Wedges to eat. While eating the product, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their preferences associated with the product. From this research, it is clear that the Millennials preferred the Waffle Fries (test) over the Potato Wedge (control). Thus, confirming the original hypothesis regarding fry preference with a 92-100% certainty. The secondary hypotheses were also confirmed by the test results. Millennials prefer the test product over the control because of the increased crunch and the unique fry shape.

Key Findings:

Some of the key findings of this study include: the evident consumer preference for Waffle Fries over Potato Wedges, consumer preference for a crispy potato product, and consumer preference for less potato filling.

Real-world Implications:

Consumer Insights research similar to this test is very useful for corporate product innovation and development teams. In order to have a successful product, there must be a specifically identified, intended consumer. Intentional research must be performed to identify the needs of the target consumer. Only once the needs are defined can innovation truly begin. Understanding what the millennial age group is interested and what they desire from QSR companies is applicable to making real-world corporate development decisions.

When corporations choose to make changes to core products, improve menu options, or bring in more selection for consumers, interdisciplinary teamwork must occur. If financial and operational components are disregarded, the product development team could potentially recommend a waffle fry over a potato wedge to increase future sales to the millennial age group. However, the company must consider all parts of the operation, especially the effect on cost/profit. Changing from a potato wedge to a waffle fry will cost millions of dollars. Cost increases will be seen in many places: straight from the supply by changing the type of potato

used, from the production of the product by suppliers, from training employees, from developing new packaging for the new product, from developing a new serving storage area for the product, and from adding a new SKU to the system. All of these added costs must be analyzed and compared to determine the true benefit of change to the company. The goal of the company might be to increase the amount of Millennial consumers coming into their stores. If so, adding an attractive fry to increase the amount of millennial consumers as a loss leader, might lead to an increase the amount of Millennials purchasing from the store. The concept of a loss leader must be counter balanced with increased profit from other product sales.

Therefore, QSR companies must consider all facets of research before initiating significant changes to their menu boards. Team members must be diligent in analyzing all aspects of how the change could affect profit.

Future Research:

There is great potential for future research on the topic of millennial consumer preferences. The published, peer-reviewed literature presents very limited data regarding millennial consumer preferences, but it is a topic that is of great concern in the restaurant industry, so future research appears inevitable. Possible topics for future research could include: how cost affects corporate decision making when the consumer preference is clear; how millennial consumer preferences changes with geographic location; and how much millennial consumer preference drives change within corporations.

Strengths and Weaknesses:

There are strengths and weaknesses to the research we conducted. Since the age group was limited to 18-34 years old, recruitment was difficult; therefore, the research team opened up attendance to employees of YUM! Inc., KFC Restaurant Support and the KFC RSCS team. By doing so, the usual demographic of the RGT participant was altered. Many of the participants reported high education levels, high income levels, and low KFC consumption, so the sample could be considered less robust than usual. This group of participants also differs greatly from the typical KFC heavy-user, so that could also affect research findings. To be more effective, this research should be performed on KFC heavy-user Millennial (18-34 years old) consumers.

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