

BREAKFAST HABITS AND ATTITUDES

Skipping or Savoring? Exploring Young Adults' Habits and Attitudes Toward Breakfast

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Skipping breakfast has become a pervasive behavior among young adults, despite the mounting evidence that regular breakfast consumption can be beneficial for metabolic health, nutrient intake, and cognitive functioning (Deshmukh-Taskar, 2013). In young adult populations, irregular breakfast habits are associated with a higher risk of obesity, poorer cardiometabolic profiles, and lower diet quality when compared to those who eat breakfast regularly (Fanelli, 2021). Furthermore, skipping breakfast has been linked with declines in cognitive performance, attention, and emotional regulation (Adolphus et al., 2016). For example, young adults who skip breakfast often reported reduced attention span, slower reaction times, and poorer working memory (Zhang et al., 2024). Some large-scale epidemiological studies have shown that omission of breakfast correlated with self-reports of mood disturbance, depression, and overall mental energy (Abdullah et al., 2024). For breakfast-oriented restaurants, these findings can be highly relevant, as if many in the target demographic, in this case 18 to 28 year olds, are skipping breakfast often, this not only represents potential loss in sales, but may also be an indicator that current breakfast offerings, pricing, convenience, or marketing may not align with the lived realities of their customers.

Gaining qualitative insight into why young adults skip breakfast, what motivates them to eat it, where they prefer to get it, and what might make them choose a restaurant option can inform many aspects, such as service design, menu choices, promotional strategies, and operational adjustments that reduce barriers and enhance appeal. Because this issue sits at the intersection of public health, behavioral science, and consumer behavior, understanding these patterns could yield actionable insights that benefit both commercial stakeholders as well as health educators.

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Method

Procedure

One online focus group was conducted that lasted 10 minutes. The group moderator was a graduate student in the Communication Management program at University of Southern California, Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism.

Participants

A total of 4 participants, 1 male and 3 females, took part in the study. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 28 years old and were diverse with no dominant ethnicity. Participants were young adults who do not eat breakfast regularly. There was no specification on occupation or other life habits. Participants were recruited through random selection at a public mall and screened for appropriateness through a short paper survey.

Focus Group

The focus group discussion consisted of a few main questions. The first focused on the participants' general habits. An example question was "If you do eat breakfast, where do you usually eat it?" The second part focused on how participants feel about these habits. An example question was "Do you want to eat breakfast more often/regularly?". The final part focused on the participants' attitude towards eating breakfast at a restaurant, and the likelihood of them doing so. An example question was "If a breakfast spot wanted to make you a regular, what would they need to offer?" The moderator guide can be seen in the Appendix.

Findings

The focus group discussion explored three primary areas: participants' general breakfast habits, their feelings toward these habits, and their attitudes toward eating breakfast at restaurants. Across all responses, breakfast emerged as a meal that young adults viewed

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positively in theory but struggled to prioritize in practice. Participants' reflections revealed consistent themes of convenience, time management, and perceived necessity, which shaped their overall approach to breakfast consumption.

While discussing their everyday breakfast habits, most participants reported that they either skipped breakfast regularly, or were inconsistent about eating it, particularly on weekdays. Mornings were described as rushed and unstructured, with participants prioritizing other activities such as work, commuting, or sleep. A participant stated that their "mornings are kind of chaotic," and that they are "just trying to get ready for the day and get out the door." One participant also mentioned that because they skipped breakfast so habitually, they can no longer stomach it at all, stating that they now "feel sick after eating breakfast," and thus tends to avoid it completely.

Participants who did report eating breakfast on occasion tended to choose quick and easily accessible options. Prepared meals were the most common and often consumed while multitasking. A participant noted that they "usually eat something fast like yogurt or overnight oats while checking emails," while a different participant mentioned that they will "eat a banana [...] on the way to work."

Interestingly, weekends represented an exception for several participants, who described being more likely to eat breakfast or brunch when they had additional time. The same participant who reported that they often feel sick after eating breakfast said that on the occasion, they *do* eat breakfast, it is always on a weekend because they are "either being forced to go out with family or catching up with friends." So, they "usually order something to not feel awkward being the only person not eating." They also mentioned that "because everyone is talking," they "can get away with eating very slowly, which relieves some of the feelings of nausea and sickness."

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Another participant explained that they will “only go to a restaurant with friends” on the weekends, framing breakfast as a social activity rather than a daily routine.

When asked about eating breakfast at a restaurant, participants indicated that doing so was an occasional, often social, activity rather than part of their daily routines. Participants described it as “a vibe thing” and said that when they go out, they “want to catch up with friends. Somewhere with good coffee, good playlists, and nice lighting.” This sentiment was echoed by another participant, stating that eating out for breakfast “feels like a treat” and provides “an opportunity to slow down a little or meet someone.”

Primary barriers to eating breakfast out more frequently were cost, convenience, and time. “Breakfast food out is so expensive for what it is” said one participant, followed by another participant saying that they “don’t want to sit down somewhere just for some eggs.” When asked to describe what a breakfast-oriented restaurant would have to offer to make them regular customers, participants emphasized features such as mobile ordering, loyalty discounts, or drive-thru options. Participants mentioned that they would “like grab-and-go items,” and that “fast service or pickup would make a huge difference.” One participant stated that “having student or neighborhood discounts” would make eating out feel “more worth it for the price.” A participant summarized this sentiment by saying they would go more often if it were “healthier, faster, and easier to order ahead.”

Discussion

The data from this focus group suggests that young adults generally feel positively toward breakfast as a concept, but struggle to integrate it into their daily routines. Participants’ responses consistently indicated that convenience, time management, and perceived necessity were the strongest influences on breakfast consumption.

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Based on the findings, it has been established that young adults may often find their mornings to be too “chaotic” or “rushed” to factor breakfast into their routines but enjoy the social aspect of a leisurely breakfast or brunch with friends on weekends. This pattern suggests that that breakfast behaviors among young adults are influenced by temporal structure, where weekday eating is governed by functionality and time constraints, while weekend eating is tied to relaxation and social connection. Participants tended to see breakfast as situational rather than habitual, something aspirational or social rather than necessary. Several participants described only eating breakfast with other people, indicating that breakfast often serves as a social or symbolic function rather than a nutritional one.

Attitudes toward eating breakfast at restaurants reflected similar reasoning. Participants described eating out as “a vibe thing,” associating it with atmosphere, quality time, and a sense of indulgence rather than convenience. These remarks suggest that breakfast restaurants are perceived as nonessential indulgences, especially when they do not offer quick service or affordable pricing.

From a practical standpoint, these insights have implications for both marketers and public health professionals. Restaurants hoping to attract this young adult demographic could benefit from offering fast, affordable, and portable options during weekdays, and focusing on the experiential side of breakfast highlighting atmosphere and ambiance on the weekends. Public health campaigns might also frame breakfast less like a rigid health rule, and more as an act of luxurious self-care that fits within flexible schedules.

Some methodological limitations, however, should also be acknowledged. First, the sample size was very small. With only 4 participants, the generalizability of the findings was limited and may not accurately capture the full range of young adult breakfast behaviors. Second,

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though diverse in ethnic backgrounds, the group skewed heavily female in terms of sex representation, which may have shaped the perspectives expressed about morning routines and eating behaviors. A more balanced distribution of sexes could help capture a wider range of viewpoints and priorities. Finally, since participants were aware of being observed, their responses may have been influenced by social desirability bias especially regarding “healthy” habits or lifestyle choices (Bispo Júnior, 2022). In future iterations, this could be mitigated by incorporating anonymous written reflections to encourage greater candor. Addressing these issues would improve both the reliability and depth of insight in subsequent focus groups.

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Appendix**Focus Group Moderator Guide**

Problem: A popular breakfast franchise *Café Fresco* has noticed that many young adults in their target demographic do not eat breakfast regularly, especially on weekdays, let alone at their restaurant. The restaurant wants to understand why young adults skip or delay breakfast, what factors shape this decision, and use this data to determine how they might adjust their offerings or marketing to better attract this group.

Goal: Understand the reasons young adults choose to skip or delay breakfast, identify the barriers and motivators shaping their morning routines, and gather insights that could help a breakfast-oriented business design offerings that fit into these lifestyles.

Participants: Young adults (18-28) who do not eat breakfast regularly. Comfortable sharing opinions about daily routines and food preferences. Recruited through random selection at a public mall and screened through a short paper survey.

Reimbursement: Beverages and simple charcuterie board during focus group, and a \$100 cash reimbursement for their time.

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- . Introductions
 - A. Please share your name, and one thing you do every morning.
 - . General breakfast habits
 - A. How often do you eat breakfast during the week?

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1. Specific probe: Does the likelihood of eating breakfast differ between weekdays and weekends?
 - A. When you skip breakfast, what's the main reason?
 1. Specific probe: Time? Not hungry? Too expensive? Inconvenient?
 - A. Are there situations where you wish you could have breakfast but don't?
 1. Specific probe: Running late? Early commitments?
 - A. When you do eat breakfast, how do you usually feel afterward?
 1. General probe: Have you noticed differences in your life when you eat versus skip?
 2. Specific probe: Does it change your mood, energy, or focus?
- . Linking habits to eating out
 - A. If you *do* eat breakfast, where do you usually eat it?
 1. Specific probe: At home? On the go? At a restaurant/cafe?
 - A. What makes you choose a restaurant or cafe for breakfast (if ever)?
 1. General probe: Can you walk me through your decision-making process?
 2. Specific probe: Special treat? Social outing?
 - A. What stops you from eating breakfast *at a restaurant or cafe specifically* more often?
 1. General probe: Can you elaborate on why?
 2. Specific probe: Cost? Menu appeal? Speed of service? Proximity to home?
- . Motivators for change
 - A. Do you want to eat breakfast more often/regularly?
 1. General probe: Why?

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2. Specific probe: Health goals? Convenience? Affordability? Taste?

A. What comes to mind when you think of a “good breakfast spot”?

1. General probe: What is it about the place that makes you want to go?

2. Specific probe: Do things like menu variety, food quality, speed of service, or atmosphere matter more than others?

. Conclusions

A. If a breakfast spot wanted to make you a regular, what would they need to offer?

1. General probe: What would make you choose them over eating at home?

What would they need to do to entice you to eat breakfast at all?

2. Specific probe: Discounts? Fast service? Healthy options? “Treat yourself” style meals? Drive-thru?