

## PROMOTING HEALTHY EATING AMONG FEMALE YOUTH THROUGH FAST FOOD RESTAURANTS' CSR PRACTICES

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### ABSTRACT

*The World Health Organisation (WHO) has highlighted the obesity issue for more than four decades. The World Health Organisation has regarded the phenomenon as “globesity”, which refers to the problem of obesity across the globe due to its seriousness and impact across the globe. Unhealthy diets can lead to non-communicable diseases, which, as a result, pose a higher burden on total healthcare costs and productivity loss. While the statistics of obesity among women are increasing around the world, this study aims to explore the four dimensions of CSR practises by fast food restaurants on healthy food from the perspectives of female youth. This study utilises a quantitative approach through an online survey among 508 female youth in Selangor. The findings of Pearson correlation analysis revealed that female youth perceived economic ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $r = 0.514$ ), legal ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $r = 0.421$ ), ethical ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $r = 0.479$ ) and philanthropic ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $r = 0.367$ ) CSR practises have significant positive relationships to reduce obesity. This finding described the need for fast food industries to play their roles at all levels (economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic) to address the issue of obesity among women. However, other than the roles of the companies (fast food industries), individual eating lifestyles have been recognised as one of the most critical factors in influencing obesity. This study concludes that the issue of obesity among female youth is rising due to changing lifestyles. While obesity has a huge impact on an individual's health, family, community, and nation, this issue requires serious attention by the government and all parties in order to address it effectively. Healthy nutrition is crucial to building a healthier nation. This focus aligns with Goal No. 3 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Malaysia's MADANI on prosperity (kesejahteraan).*

Keywords: obesity, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), nutrition, women

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### INTRODUCTION

Overweight and obesity are described as abnormal or excessive fat accumulation in an individual's body (World Health Organization, 2021). The alarming rates of overweight and obesity incidence, especially among developed and developing countries, led to the introduction of the “globesity” term by the World Health Organization (WHO). In Malaysia, the second and third National Health and Morbidity Surveys (NHMS) in 1996 and 2006 reported a three-fold increase in obesity prevalence among adults, from 4.4% to 14%. In addition, the latest findings from NHMS in 2019 highlight that the prevalence of childhood obesity has increased substantially to 14.8% (Lai et al., 2022). According to Kasirye et al. (2020), the rise in obesity has ensued primarily among children and youth. This matter has become a public health crisis, and past studies also confirmed that women had a significantly higher risk of being obese compared to men, which is consistent with the global trend (Chong et al., 2022, 2023). To illustrate this, a study conducted by Mohd-Sidik et al. (2021) postulates that the prevalence of obesity among young adults in Selangor was 18.6%, with a higher proportion being females (21.1%) compared to males (14.2%).

It can be seen that the changing modern lifestyle among Malaysians, particularly in urban areas, leads to changes in dietary habits such as high consumption of sodium, fat, and sugar. Al Mamun et al. (2020) and Fen et al. (2021) argue that a proper diet is one of the most effective means to prevent obesity. Obesity during the youth period is associated with adverse health consequences throughout the life course. This is because youths who are obese are five times more likely to be obese in adulthood. Bellew et al. (2019) predict that actions to reduce obesity among youths are undoubtedly needed rather than dealing with adult obesity to tackle

morbidity and healthcare costs. This aligns with Goal No. 3, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which aim to prevent untoward suffering from preventable diseases and premature death by focusing on critical targets that boost the health of a country's overall population. In realising this goal, the Ministry of Health Malaysia has introduced the 'MADANI Afiat' programme to raise awareness of health issues among the community through door-to-door health screenings, health fairs, and *gotong-royong*. The government's effort deserves commendation because the data obtained through these activities assists the government in producing a comprehensive strategy to align with the nation's health reform agenda.

The fast food consumption trend is increasing among the young generation (Abdul Malek et al., 2022; Hossain & Islam, 2020; Mumena et al., 2022). They love to consume fast food because it offers prompt service, convenience, safety, and affordable prices. Fast food industries should play their roles at all levels (economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic) to address the issue of obesity among women. The development of corporate policies and strategies is generally aimed at promoting a healthy lifestyle (Tahir et al., 2023). However, other than the roles of the companies (fast food industries), individual eating lifestyles have been recognised as one of the most critical factors in influencing obesity. Therefore, this paper aims to examine the relationship between CSR practices performed by fast food restaurants from the perspective of female youth and promoting healthy eating.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The obesity issue in Malaysia

During the past three decades, obesity has increased to the extent that it has become one of the biggest public health concerns worldwide (Folkvord et al., 2020). In February 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) posited that obesity has reached epidemic proportions globally. Since 2000, Malaysians have been facing issues of obesity and eating disorders, which lead to the risk of developing hypertension, cardiovascular diseases, and diabetes. According to Al Mamun et al. (2020), Malaysia has the highest number of obese citizens in Southeast Asia, with 48% of the population obese. According to the recent findings from the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2019, the current prevalence of obesity or overweight among Malaysian adults was 50.1%, whereby 30.4% are overweight and 19.7% are obese (Institute of Public Health, 2020). The findings also highlighted that there was an alarming rate of increase in obesity among adults in Selangor, a highly populated state in Malaysia. As highlighted by Figure 1, 54.7% of women are overweight compared to men, while the highest prevalence of obesity was found among those aged between 55 and 59 years old. Malaysia recorded the highest rate of obesity, with 15.6% in Southeast Asia compared to Brunei, Thailand, and Indonesia. There are several contributing factors to obesity, which are food intake, physical activity, environment, genetics and disease, stress, and medicine. Poor dietary intake is also one of the significant contributors to obesity and many other non-communicable diseases. Since the fast food industry has mushroomed in Malaysia, many Malaysians have adjusted to the changing fast food culture (Mahmoud et al., 2021). This has resulted in unbalanced energy intake among Malaysians, leading to inadequate dietary quality.

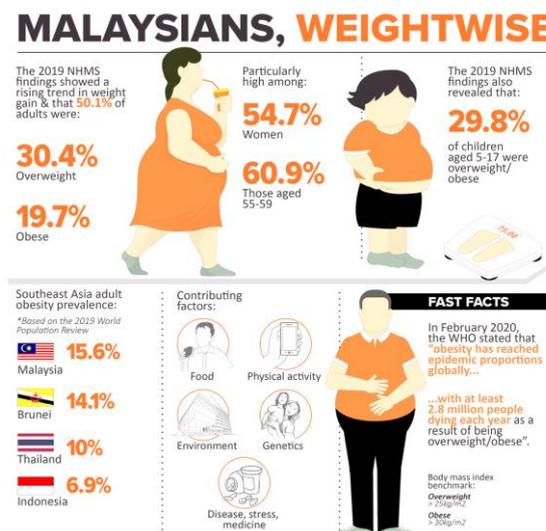


Figure 1: The obesity prevalence in Malaysia based on NHMS 2019  
Source: Adapted from Bernama (2020) and Institute of Public Health (2020)

Past literature postulates that the prevalence of overweight and obesity among women is increasing. A study by Mohd-Sidik et al. (2021) confirmed that a higher proportion of obese females was discovered among young adults in Selangor, with 21.1% compared to males (14.2%). Obesity negatively impacts the health of women in both reproductive health and chronic medical conditions. Obesity in women has been shown to contribute to the risk of certain types of cancer, such as breast, endometrial, gallbladder, oesophageal, and renal cancer (Pati et al., 2023). Not only that, obesity also negatively affects fertility and contraception. Therefore, prevention strategies for overweight and obesity among youths should be directed towards achieving and maintaining a healthy weight by practising healthy eating.

### ***Promoting healthy eating through CSR practises by the fast-food industry.***

Considering the societal, health, and economic consequences of the current obesity epidemic, the fast-food industry should take responsibility for young adults' health by focusing on selling more low-calorie and healthier foods. In addition to the ethical considerations towards building a healthier society, the fast-food industry can increase young adults' attention to more nutritious foods since young adults are the group that frequently visit fast food outlets. Healthy foods improve individual health by providing adequate nutritional ingredients that reduce disease risks and benefit human health. Individuals with a better understanding and knowledge of healthy food can enhance their intention to consume healthy foods (Folkvord et al., 2020). This is probably due to concerns about personal health. Furthermore, practising a healthy diet assists in maintaining and improving overall health and provides the body with essential nutrients such as fluid, macronutrients, micronutrients, and sufficient calories.

The fast food industry is taking steps to adjust their menus, introduce healthier food options to consumers, offer better value for money, review current portion sizes, introduce healthy value-bundled meals, convey a better value-for-money message, and deliver on what they promise to meet the demand from young consumers for more nutritious food options (Gopaul, 2015). Compared to the United States, Malaysia's fast-food industry is still considered slow accepting this trend, regardless of the health awareness campaign announced by the Ministry of Health. Understanding the perceptions of young consumers is hoped to help the fast-food industry develop corporate strategies for intensifying collaboration with the government to overcome the obesity epidemic.

#### ***Economic***

Economic responsibility is considered the primary responsibility that must be fulfilled by the organisation (Carroll, 2016). This is associated with business development, offering job opportunities, and producing and delivering products and services to society to earn profit. The fast food industry must consider changing its current marketing strategies and focusing on quality or healthy food so that young consumers will not be continuously enticed to seek food that can harm their health (Lun et al., 2021). When more Malaysians change their food from unhealthy to healthier options, the demand will increase and eventually contribute to the sustainability of fast-food restaurants.

#### ***Legal***

The fast food industry must have food preparation standards regulated by the government. Providing nutritional information on fast food products can stimulate healthy food choices in a fast-food environment. A better initiative to solve the obesity epidemic in Malaysia is to regulate the controls on ingredients and other food substances that can harm health. In Malaysia, all food handlers are governed by the Food Act 1983 (Amendment) (No. 3) Regulations 2014 and Food Regulations 1985 to protect consumers against health hazards and fraud in food preparation and consumption. The ingredients, chemical elements used, textures, appearance, quantity, and weight must meet the standards stipulated by the authorised body to ensure the food meets the quality standards and is safe to consume (Shamsudin et al., 2020).

#### ***Ethical***

The business goes beyond legal regulations or obligations for ethical CSR practices. Carroll (2016) stated that a company is expected to run their business ethically and, at the same time, incorporate activities, norms, standards, and practises even though they are not codified into law. The fast food industry should care about the local community's health by responding to the obesity issue and creating a healthy and sustainable environment (Yoon et al., 2020). The alarming rate of obesity demands that the fast-food industry collaborate with the government to tackle this epidemic. This is because the fast food industry can influence consumers to make healthier choices through food sourcing, marketing, and pricing.

#### ***Philanthropic***

Businesses may perform philanthropic CSR practices by giving cash donations, offering scholarships, providing free services and products, or providing nutritional education to the local community voluntarily (Chrisjatmiko & Margareth, 2018). As mentioned by Lai et al. (2022), the organisation is favourable to consumers when it is actively involved with charitable activities, organises educational programs and sponsors events to benefit the local community. Therefore, several philanthropic CSR practices that can be done to promote healthy eating are managing more health education programs, providing dietary guidelines on the corporate website, and frequently conveying information on more nutritious fast-food choices to consumers.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study utilised a quantitative approach using an online survey with 508 female respondents aged between 18 and 30 years old staying or working in Selangor. The data collection was conducted for three months, from 1 June 2023 until 31 August 2023. Applying the quantitative method provides advantages such as allowing this study to fulfil the objective findings through verifiable facts (Creswell, 2016). This is supported by the studies conducted by Tahir et al. (2023) and Jha et al. (2022), whereby the researchers employed a quantitative approach to establish the causal relationship between the variables. The stratified sampling technique falls under the probability sampling technique and allows for the generalisation of the findings (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). The data was then analysed using Statistical Package for Social Science (Version 27). Several analyses were performed, including Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), Reliability analysis, Normality analysis, Descriptive analysis, and Pearson correlation analysis.

**FINDINGS**

**Profile of Respondents**

This study gathered data from 508 female respondents staying in Selangor. The majority of respondents (61.2%) were between 22 and 24 years old, followed by those between the ages of 18 and 21 years old (30.1%). Malay respondents outnumbered other ethnic groups, accounting for 74.8% of the respondents in this study. Ninety-eight per cent of respondents who answered the survey have a tertiary education from public or private universities, higher institutions, or colleges., whereby 86.8% of respondents have a diploma or bachelor’s degree certificate (7.1%), 7.1% of the respondents studied until postgraduate level, 2% studied until secondary and primary schools. Notably, 91.5% (465 respondents) declared they are currently unemployed, and majority of them, 89.8% (456 respondents), were students. Furthermore, the respondents stated that 58.7% of their monthly household income was less than RM2,500, followed by RM2,501 - RM4,849 (17.7%). The majority of respondents (57.3%) reported that they generally visit fast food restaurants with their friends, and the frequency of eating fast food is once to twice times a week (64.4%) (Refer Table 1).

Table 1: Profile of respondents (N = 508)

| Characteristics                                | Total | Percentage |
|--|-------|------------|
| <b>Age</b>                                     |       |            |
| 18-21 years old                                | 153   | 30.1       |
| 22-24 years old                                | 311   | 61.2       |
| 25-27 years old                                | 28    | 5.5        |
| 28-30 years old                                | 16    | 3.1        |
| <b>Ethnic</b>                                  |       |            |
| Malays   | 380   | 74.8       |
| Indians  | 73    | 14.4       |
| Chinese  | 55    | 10.8       |
| <b>Educational Level</b>                       |       |            |
| UPSR   | 1     | 0.20       |
| PT3/PMR/SPM/SPMV/SMA                           | 9     | 1.80       |
| Matriculation/Foundation/STPM/STAM             | 21    | 4.10       |
| Diploma/Bachelor’s degree                      | 441   | 86.8       |
| Master/PhD                                     | 36    | 7.1        |
| <b>Type of Occupation</b>                      |       |            |
| Private Sector                                 | 23    | 4.5        |
| Public Sector                                  | 12    | 2.4        |
| Self-employed                                  | 7     | 1.4        |
| Non-governmental organisation                  | 1     | 0.2        |
| Unemployed                                     | 465   | 91.5       |
| <b>Reasons of unemployed</b>                   |       |            |
| Student  | 456   | 89.8       |
| Housewife                                      | 2     | 0.40       |
| Currently seeking a job                        | 7     | 1.4        |
| Not applicable                                 | 43    | 8.5        |
| <b>Monthly household income</b>                |       |            |
| Less than RM2,500.00                           | 298   | 58.7       |
| RM 2,501.00 – RM4,849.00                       | 90    | 17.7       |
| RM4,850.00 – RM 10,959.00                      | 79    | 15.6       |
| More than RM 10,959.00                         | 41    | 8.1        |
| <b>With whom the respondents eat fast food</b> |       |            |
| Alone  | 65    | 12.8       |

|   |     |      |
|---|-----|------|
| Colleagues                                    | 2   | 0.40 |
| Family  | 150 | 29.5 |
| Friends                                       | 291 | 57.3 |
| <b>Frequency of eating fast food (weekly)</b> |     |      |
| 0 time  | 64  | 12.6 |
| 1-2 times                                     | 327 | 64.4 |
| 3-4 times                                     | 95  | 18.7 |
| 5-6 times                                     | 9   | 1.8  |
| More than 6 times                             | 13  | 2.6  |

Before conducting the Pearson correlation analysis, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed, and the findings revealed that the items of each construct were loaded in the same dimension. Furthermore, all of the constructs used in this study were deemed reliable because Cronbach’s alpha values were all above 0.7 (Field, 2018). Following this, all analyses for testing parametric assumptions were fulfilled: linearity was assumed between all independent and dependent variables, and all data were normally distributed. Hence, the data was further analysed using the Pearson correlation.

Pearson correlation coefficients were established to assess the inter-construct associations between the independent variables (economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic) and the dependent variable (promoting healthy eating). This study conducted Pearson correlation analysis to answer the research objective. The strength and direction of the linear relationship between the variables can be explained by examining the R-value (Cohen, 1988). The findings of Pearson correlation analysis revealed that female youth perceived economic CSR practices have a significant positive relationship to promote healthy eating ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $r = 0.514$ ). Next, the correlation between legal CSR practises ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $r = 0.421$ ) and ethical CSR practises ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $r = 0.479$ ) in promoting healthy eating is positively significant but medium. Lastly, philanthropic ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $r = 0.367$ ) CSR practises have significant positive relationships to reduce obesity with small relationships (Refer to Table 2).

Table 2: Pearson’s correlation analysis

| Variables                         | Mean  | SD    | (1)     | (2)     | (3)     | (4)     | (5)     |
|-----------------------------------|-------|-------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| (1) Economic (IV)                 | 3.699 | 0.870 | (0.795) |         |         |         |         |
| (2) Legal (IV)                    | 3.949 | 0.573 | .599**  | (0.804) |         |         |         |
| (3) Ethical (IV)                  | 3.519 | 1.148 | .619**  | .583**  | (0.790) |         |         |
| (4) Philanthropic (IV)            | 3.809 | 0.541 | .589**  | .541**  | .548**  | (0.869) |         |
| (5) Promoting healthy eating (DV) | 3.590 | 0.467 | .514**  | .421**  | .479**  | .367**  | (0.890) |

\*\*Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed)  
 Values in the diagonal are the Cronbach’s Alpha

**DISCUSSION**

This finding portrayed the need for the fast food industry to play their roles at all levels (economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic) to address the issue of obesity among women. However, other than the roles of the companies (fast food industries), individual eating lifestyles have been recognised as one of the most critical factors in influencing obesity. These findings corroborate with a study conducted by Tahir et al. (2022) and Wan Zakaria et al. (2021). Al Mamun et al. (2020) also found that global youth is encouraged to engage in pro-health behaviours as it empowers the public to lead a healthy lifestyle. Female youth’s eating lifestyles can be affected by the CSR practices performed by the fast-food industry. With this, the fast-food industry should continue innovating new healthy foods and revising its current marketing strategies to attract more young consumers to practise healthy lifestyles. When the fast-food industries adhere to food regulations and standards, the products served to consumers are safe, high-quality, hygienic, and nutritious. Providing nutrition information on food labels has also been recognised as one of the strategies to help consumers adopt healthy dietary practices. Besides that, nutritional labelling helps consumers make informed choices. The nutrition information on food labels is essential, as such information may assist consumers in making better food choices when planning their daily meals. It informs consumers of the amount of energy and other nutrients in the product. It can then reflect how this food contributes to the day’s total nutrient intake, especially for female youth.

The above prevalence of obesity, especially in women, is a warning sign for the government and the broader community that obesity and all its implications are a severe threat to the nation. If young people do not practise a healthy eating lifestyle at a young age, this government will be burdened with high healthcare costs in the future. Other than CSR practises introduced by fast food restaurants, the youths must begin to practise healthy eating, such as adopting the current and more straightforward healthy eating

concept, 'Malaysian Healthy Plate,' introduced by the government in 2016. Using the tagline 'SukuSukuSeparuh', this concept is a simple and practical guide to assisting the public in making healthy food choices. The youths can practise this concept when they dine out by following the recommended portions: a quarter for grains like rice, a quarter for proteins like chicken, meat or seafood, and a half for fruits or vegetables. Currently, the majority of non-diabetic adults are not aware of this concept compared to adults with diabetes. This is probably due to diabetic patients typically receiving nutrition counselling from nutritionists or dietitians during their regular visits to health clinics for medication. In addition, by referring to Malaysian Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents, it is recommended that the young generation include appropriate amounts and types of fats in their diets, restrict their consumption of salt and condiments, choose safe and hygienic food, and ensure they drink an ample amount of water every day. By practising these strategies, the young generation will adopt and maintain healthy eating habits for a lifetime of well-being.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the issue of obesity among female youth is rising due to changing lifestyles. Obesity significantly impacts an individual's health, family, community, and nation; thus, this issue requires serious attention by the government and all parties to address it effectively. It is crucial to have healthy nations, and the health of a country depends on healthy food consumption by the youth. This demonstrates that nutrition is essential to building a healthier nation. This study discovered that this is the future trend for fast food restaurants to encourage female youths to choose healthy eating lifestyles by revising the current marketing strategies and selling lower-calorie salads, sandwiches and desserts that are tasty and nutritious. The fast-food industry should continuously adjust its current CSR strategies to attract young consumers' attention to purchasing healthy fast food.

Since the prevalence of obesity increases significantly among women, this poses the risk of developing several chronic and fatal illnesses, including diabetes, heart disease, breast cancer and pregnancy complications in the future. This paper informs female youths on the importance of healthy eating to avoid disease, prolong life, and promote sustainable health. Also, the findings of this study provide supporting data to policymakers and relevant government agencies to introduce programs to encourage the young generation to practise a healthy eating lifestyle. This study has the following limitations. The findings of this study cannot be generalised to the whole population as it only covers female youths in the Selangor area. Hence, it is recommended that a future study involving female youths be conducted in a different geographic setting (state) to compare with the findings of this study.

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