



Nutritional Labelling in Malaysian Full Service Restaurant Menu

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Abstract

This study empirically investigates customer perception towards providing nutritional information in Malaysian full service restaurants menu. Results reveal that nutritional information is important and the major nutrition elements such as calories, protein, fat and dietary fiber is the minimum information desired by customers in the restaurant menu. Nutritional information in fact directly influences restaurant customers' future purchase decisions. These findings produced significant indicators not only to the existing restaurant operators but also to those individuals or companies who intend to venture into this so called booming sub- sectors of food service businesses. In addition, attaining customer needs lead to repeat patronization and in the long run, contributes to restaurant business survival.

Key words: Nutritional, Menu, Full Service Restaurant, Customer

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1.0 Introduction

Most nutritionists emphasize that too much, or imbalance or substantive nutrition intake not only leads to obesity but also contributes to chronic diseases and lessen longevity (Gopalan, 1992; MOH, 2006). Large numbers of the world populations are reported to be suffering heart diseases, hypertension, and diabetes because of obesity (Schofield & Mullanathan, 2008) and six out of the ten leading causes of death are caused by nutrition related component intakes (Dennison, Dennison & Frank, 1994). Owing to these reasons, more and more people are becoming health conscious and are concerned about the types of food they consume. They are apprehensive not only of the appearance of the products but also the nutritional information for packaged food sold at retail outlets.

The nutritional information or labelling has long been mandatory to food manufacturers and retailers (King, 2006; Ophardt, 2003). Most legislation mandates the disclosure of nutrient information of the food products. Nutritional information in fact is crucially important to the food process industry as it provides a means for consumers to know the nutritional properties of the products. All over the world, most countries require that the nutritional content in foods like calories, protein, carbohydrate, fat and sugar must be regulated by accredited laboratories (McVety, Ware & Lévesque, 2001). In the restaurant industry, food and product information on restaurant menus are normally related to quantity, quality, price, brand names, product identification, points of origin, merchandising terms, visual presentation and food preparation (Thomas & Mills, 2008). Restaurant operators put a lot of effort to display food preparation or methods of cooking like deep fried, smoked, prepared from scratch, roasted, steamed on menus to give customers a general idea and provide an estimate on how long it takes for food to be served. According to Drydale & Galipue (2008) customers will look into this information before making a purchase decision. Nevertheless, basic information disclosure has a relatively minor impact on product perceptions and evaluation, unless nutritional information is available to help customer better understand the contents of food they consume (Consumer Affairs, 2008). Furthermore, in this present day, customers are believed to be demanding beyond those practices and nutritional information is particularly one of the important ones to be included in the menu. Customers expect restaurateurs to provide information on the calorie, sugar, protein, carbohydrates and fat content on the menu (Thomas & Mills, 2006). Such provision of nutritional information on restaurant menus has been gaining popularity and the number of customers who are concerned about this issue has also increased (Thomas & Mills, 2008).

The importance of nutritional information in restaurant menus has caught the attention of academic scholars, particularly in terms of customers' perceptions, intentions and actual purchase behaviour (Basset et al., 2007). According to Hwang & Lorenzen (2008) providing nutritional information on restaurant menus would aid customers in making healthier choices and they are in fact willing to pay more for food that they perceive to be healthier. Burton and Creyer (2004) claimed that customers had more positive attitudes towards the items with higher purchase intentions when the most favourable nutritional information is

presented on restaurant menus and have a slight negative influence on purchase intentions when unfavourable nutrition information is presented. Yamamoto et al. (2005) discovered the provision of nutritional information on the menu resulted in the selection of meals with lower calorie and fat content from two out of the three restaurant menus on average and significant number of customers changing their meal orders. Adams & Ferrett (1997) investigated customer perception towards actual nutritional status of sandwiches and revealed that sandwiches which were below the standard nutrient requirement for energy were not so popular. Similar results were obtained by Cranage, Conklin & Lambert (2004) whereby the lower fat and lower calorie entrées were often chosen by the customers than the high fat and calorie content entrées when nutritional information was displayed for entrée items in a restaurant menu.

In examining the use of nutritional and ingredient information to college freshmen at the point of sales in campus dining facilities, Conklin, Lambert & Cranage (2005) found that females were more likely than males to use the nutrition information labels to make food choices. Females used nutrition information to identify and select lower fat, lower calorie foods while males used the information to select foods with higher levels of protein. The University of California's Center for Weight and Health calculated that, on an annual basis, nutritional information could reduce the average adult fast-food patron's yearly intake by 9,300 calories, preventing the equivalent of 2.7 pounds of weight gain per person per year. Similarly, if customers read the nutrition information it could prevent approximately 40 million pounds of weight gain annually for the entire state of California (Center for Weight and Health, 2009). From the restaurateurs' perspective, Kozup, Creyer & Burton (2003), demonstrated that some restaurateurs have very little knowledge on nutritional content but were willing to provide it in the menu with nutritionists' assistance.

All in all, most of the research studies concluded that providing nutritional information on the menu may help customers make healthier eating choices. Nevertheless, most of the available studies were undertaken in developed countries but not in Malaysian restaurant settings. Thus, the present study empirically investigates Malaysian customers' perception on the importance of providing nutritional information in full service restaurants menu and how it contributes to their purchase decisions. Specifically, this study examines the general perception of Malaysian customers towards providing nutritional information in restaurant menus, compares the perceptions based on customer gender and assesses the most important nutrient information to be included in a menu.

2.0 Methodology

A self reported experience through a questionnaire survey was opted in this study. The population comprise of customers who had experience dining at full service restaurants. Full service restaurants were chosen as they are one of the fastest growing types of restaurants in Malaysia and to have received customers that are concerned about the types

of food offered in the menu (Euromonitor, 2008). Shah Alam city was used as the contextual setting for data collection. However, despite a large number of full service restaurants in this city area, only eight restaurants consented to the researchers' survey in their premises.

The survey questionnaire is divided into three major sections. Each section contains questions addressing the variables relevant to the research objectives. Section A comprises five questions using nominal scale and focused on respondents' demographic profile. Fifteen items were used in section B to assess the general perception of Malaysian restaurant customers towards the provision of nutritional information in the restaurant menu. Respondents were required to indicate their views on a five type Likert scale ranging from 1 as "totally disagree" to 5 as "totally agree". Eight items in section C are used to measure the important nutrients to be included in the restaurant menu using a scale ranging from 1 as "Not Important at all" and 5 as "Very Important".

The survey was undertaken on four weekends and customers were approached after they had lunch at the respective full service restaurants. Anonymity and confidentiality clauses were included in the information sheet attached to the questionnaire. This information sheet provided the details about the researcher, the aim of the study and the purpose of the survey to be conducted. A total of 160 usable questionnaires were obtained.

3.0 Results and Discussions

3.1 Characteristics of the Sample

55.0% (n = 88) of the respondents were female compared to 45.0% (n = 72) male. 47% (n = 76) were between 26 to 40 years old, followed by 33.8% (n = 54) who were between 41 to 50 years of age as opposed to 18.8% (n = 30) under 25 years. The highest proportion of the respondents were Malays accounting for 54.4% (n = 87) as opposed to 25.0% (n = 40) Chinese, 17.5% (n = 28) Indian and the smallest proportion (3.1%, n = 5) were others. Sample also showed that 46.3% (n = 74) of the respondents were government servants, 27.5% (n = 44) were private employees, 16.9% (n = 27) students of higher institutions and 9.4% (n = 15) were self employed. The frequency of customer visits to the restaurants is also shown at 47.5% (n = 76) who dined twice a month, followed by 28.1% (n = 45) around three times a month, 15% (n = 24) dined once a month and 9.4% (n = 15) dined four times in a month.

3.1.1 Customer Perceptions

Descriptive statistics looking at the mean score was applied in examining the respondents' perception towards nutritional information. It is observed that majority of the customers perceived providing nutritional information in the restaurant menu as important (M = 3.82) as it can help them to determine the nutritional intake (M = 4.24). They were interested in

looking at the nutritional contents ($M = 3.93$) and intend to pay attention to it when choosing a menu item. These strong feelings was perhaps best explained through their disagreement to the item "I could not care less whether the restaurant provides nutritional information or not" with the mean score ($M = 2.42$). Interestingly, the majority of restaurant customers in this study clearly expressed themselves of being knowledgeable about nutritional information ($M = 3.68$), having ability to comprehend nutritional information on the menu ($M = 3.59$) and confident in using nutritional information (3.82). This is evident when they were in agreement to all these items. Hence, it is not surprising that they will always be looking for nutritional information on menu items in a restaurant in the future ($M = 3.97$), would like to see additional nutritional information on the menu items ($M = 3.95$) and would not buy the products without nutritional information in the future ($M = 3.84$). In addition, the majority of the customers believed that restaurants should accurately provide nutritional information in the menu ($M = 4.03$), not mislead them ($M = 3.95$) and providing percentages on nutritional information could be sufficient ($M = 3.76$). Despite this, customers concur that it is quite costly for restaurateurs to include nutritional information in the menu. ($M = 4.67$).

These findings indicate that customers generally have high expectations of providing nutritional information in the full service restaurant menu. This contention is in line with other research findings (Thomas and Mills, 2008) that nutritional information on restaurant menus has been gaining popularity today as customers are getting more knowledgeable, practice better lifestyles and are more health conscious particularly when eating out.

3.1.2 Perceptions Based on Gender

It was envisaged that when gender was used in the instrument, there would be a greater likelihood of the female to be more concerned about nutritional information than their male counterpart. Given this, the Independent t-test procedure was utilized to identify if there were any statistically significant differences between those responses. Out of fifteen items, ten showed statistically significant differences between female and male customers. Female customers gave greater levels of agreement ($M = 4.19$, $p = .000$) than males ($M = 3.44$) on the importance of providing nutritional information in full service restaurant menus and believe it will help them in determining the nutrition intake ($M = 4.52$, $p = .000$ compared to $M = 3.95$ for male). Similarly, female customers agree that they were interested in looking for nutritional information of the menu items ($M = 4.19$, $p = .002$ as opposed to $M = 3.65$ for male) and intend to pay attention to it while choosing a menu item in a restaurant ($M = 4.05$, $p = .000$ compared to $M = 3.46$ for male). Thus, female customers reported themselves as being quite knowledgeable about nutritional information ($M = 3.61$, $p = .037$) than the male customers ($M = 3.03$), confident about their ability to comprehend nutritional information on the menu ($M = 3.53$, $p = .009$ compared to 3.04 for male) and were more confident in using nutritional information ($M = 3.56$, $p = .011$ as opposed to $M = 3.18$ for male). Female customers' strong feelings were further supported by their somewhat higher agreement that they will always be looking for nutritional information of menu items in the future ($M = 4.14$, $p = .000$ compared to $p = 3.58$ for male), would like to

see additional nutritional information ($M = 4.19$, $p = .000$ compared to $p = 3.27$) and would not buy the product without nutritional information in the future ($M = 4.07$, $p = .011$ compared to $M = 3.09$ for male). Together these points might suggest that female customers are slightly more concerned than their male counterparts about certain elements related to nutritional information in the full service restaurants.

Despite slight differences in certain aspects, both gender customers however shared similar levels of agreement on the other items used in the instrument. This can be seen from the magnitude of the mean scores which also show no statistically significant differences. Both male and female customers agreed that full service restaurants should accurately provide nutritional information in the menu ($M = 4.09$ for female and $M = 4.06$ for male, $p = .056$), should not provide misleading nutritional information ($M = 4.06$ for female and $M = 4.04$ for male, $p = .805$) and could sufficiently provide percentages of the food product content ($M = 4.04$ for female and $M = 4.01$, $p = .154$ for male). To express their concern, both genders rejected the idea that they did not care whether the restaurants have nutritional information or otherwise. The rated mean score might explain their level of disagreement ($M = 2.56$ for female and $M = 2.60$, $p = .055$ for male). Analysis also revealed that males and females strongly believed and shared the same views that it would be quite costly for restaurateurs to include nutritional information in the menu ($M = 3.78$ for female and $M = 3.76$ for males, $p = .124$). In summary, these results support the idea that both male and female customers realised the slight burden for restaurateurs to place nutritional information in the menu but were still attentive, demanded it and deemed it to be important.

3.1.3 The Important Nutrients

Looking at the mean rating, calories ($M = 4.29$), protein ($M = 4.29$), fat ($M = 4.22$) and dietary fibre ($M = 4.17$) appears to be the most four important nutrients to be included in the menu as perceived by customers. The majority of customers however just ascribed slight importance to nutrients like carbohydrates ($M = 3.38$), cholesterol ($M = 3.30$), salt ($M = 3.20$) and sugar ($M = 3.36$). These findings indicate that customers generally had high expectations on the availability of at least four common nutrients to be included in the menu. In other words, customers were probably exposed to these nutrients which were normally highlighted in packaged, canned, and beverage products.

4.0 Implications and Conclusion

Results of this study demonstrate that there is an awakening of nutritional awareness among Malaysian restaurant customers. The majority of restaurant customers positively perceived the importance of providing nutritional information in full service restaurant menus. Although, presently many of the Malaysian restaurant customers are believed not to have such experience in the full service restaurant, providing nutritional information in restaurant menus is more likely to be expected by them in years to come and its availability

will directly influence their future purchase decisions. Results also reveal that the common highlighted nutrients in food retail products like calories, protein, fat and dietary fibre were the minimum desired information in the restaurant menu. As with other studies, female customers were found to be slightly more concerned than male customers on certain elements related to nutritional information. This is not surprising as females by nature are slightly picky than male customers with regards to food and they are also considered by many scholars as the gatekeeper in providing the meal and meal solution for the families.

The above scenario highlights several important points which warrant discussion. The changing in customer attitudes as they acquire more knowledge has led to the increase in healthier eating including the restaurant food and other foodservice operations. As nutritional information on the packaged, canned and beverage products have been used for some time; full service and other types of restaurant operators will, sooner or later, face tremendous pressure from customers or the government to provide such information in the menu. This is evident when some of the established and world recognised fast food restaurants have started to make nutritional information available in their menu board owing to accusation of providing unhealthy food. The full service restaurants in Malaysia, therefore, should start to equip themselves with nutritional knowledge as they are most likely to be one of the targeted restaurants after the fast food ones, despite claims that the restaurant business is about profit, above all.

As a conclusion, it is hoped that the recommendations and information from this study will facilitate restaurant operators with valuable information on customer concerns because managing customers' needs is becoming more critical as the world economy progressively turns to service orientation. Finally, investigation on the willingness, constraints and obstacles in providing nutritional information from Malaysia's full service restaurant operators' perspectives need to be further explored.

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