



# Restaurant Operators and Nutritional Information

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## Abstract

The increasing of chronic diseases associated with imbalance and substantive nutritional intake witness the awakening concern among restaurant customers. Studies revealed that customers positively valued the availability of nutritional information in the full service restaurant menu. However, the extent of restaurateurs' willingness and obstacles in providing the nutritional information in restaurant menu has not been widely explored. This study empirically investigates the Malaysian full service restaurateurs' responsiveness towards providing nutritional information in the menu. Result demonstrates there is a slight disparity between the serious concerns of customers with the operators' responsiveness particularly on certain issues.

**Keywords:** Nutritional Information; Full Service Restaurant; Operators.

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<https://doi.org/10.21834/jabs.v3i8.285>

## **1.0 Introduction**

The imbalance or substantive nutrition intake is commonly associated with obesity which is believed to contribute to chronic diseases and lessening the life longevity. Large numbers of world populations are reported of suffering the heart diseases, hypertension, and diabetes cause by the overweight and six of the ten leading causes of death are related to nutrition components intakes (Schofield & Mullainathan, 2008). A greater concern among the consumers, individuals or family apparent not only on the types of food but nutritional contents on the package of food is without exception.

Food nutritional information or labelling has long been a mandatory in manufacturing and food process industries than those in food service and its sub-sectors of the industry (King, 2006). Many countries' legislation are mandating the disclosure of nutrients information of the food products as means for consumers to be aware of the nutritional properties and nutrients content like calorie, protein, carbohydrate, fat, sugar and most of them must be regulated by laboratories accreditation. In restaurant industry, food and products information on menus are normally portraying something related to quantity, quality, price, brand names, product identification, points of origin, merchandising terms, visual presentation and food preparation. Restaurants operators put a lot of effort to display food preparation or methods of cooking on menus to give customers general idea and provide an estimated time on how long food will be served and presented. These basic information disclosures however have relatively given minor impact on products perceptions and evaluations without helping customers to understand the contents of food they consumed unless nutritional information is provided. In this present day, customers are believed to be demanding beyond those practices and the provision of nutritional information on restaurant menu is gaining popular (Thomas & Mills, 2008).

The importance of nutritional information in the restaurant menu begins to catch attention among the academic scholars'. Hwang & Lorenzen (2008) states providing nutritional information on restaurant menu would aid customers in making healthier choices and customers in fact are willing to pay more for healthier food. Positive attitudes and higher purchase intentions apparent when the most favorable nutritional information was presented on restaurant while negative purchase intentions when unfavorable nutrition information was presented (Burton & Creyer, 2004). A significant number of customers changed their meal orders as a result of the provision of nutritional information on the menu in the selection of meals with lower calories and fat contents from two out of the three restaurant menus surveyed (Yamamoto, 2005). Cranage, Conklin & Lambert (2004) revealed that sandwiches which were below the standard nutrient requirement for energy were not so popular while 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. The University of California's Center for Weight and Health calculated, 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 gained per person per year and it could prevent around 40 million pounds of weight gain annually for the entire state of California if customer sees the nutrition information (University of California, 2009). Roberto et al (2010) assessed the impact of calorie labels and food intake among

customer and found out that when calorie label menu and without calorie label menu were presented, customers were inclined to choose and consumed fewer calorie compared to no calorie labels presented in the menu.

In Malaysia restaurant contextually setting recent study revealed there is an awakening concerned on nutritional information among restaurant customers (Mohd Zahari, Din & Shariff, 2010). Customers positively perceived the importance of providing nutritional information in the full service restaurant menu. However, the extent of willingness, constraints and obstacles on the restaurant operators in providing the nutritional information in restaurant menu have not been widely explored. This paper empirically investigates; a) restaurant operators' responsiveness towards providing nutritional information and b) the constraints and obstacles facing by the Malaysian full service restaurant operators towards providing nutritional information in the menu.

## **2.0 Methodology**

### **Sampling, Instrument and data collection process**

A qualitative approach through face-to-face interviews was opted for the data collection process. The samples were among the independently owned full service restaurants operators. These restaurants are one of the fastest growing types of restaurants in Malaysia and have received customers that are concerned about the types of food offered in the menu. Owing to the huge population of full service restaurants and the geographical dispersion, the restaurant operators in Penang area like Georgetown, Batu Feringgi, Butterworth and Seberang Jaya were selected as a sample. In determining the number of restaurants that meet the stipulated criteria information from yellow pages was initially gathered. Standardized interviewing was used with a pre-determined set of open ended questions (six questions) addressing the objectives of the study under the two headings: a) responsiveness towards providing nutritional information and b) the constraints and obstacles towards providing nutritional information in the menu. Demographic information relating to key informants' age, occupation, experience and level of education were also asked.

Based on the yellow pages, there were 40 restaurants that can be classified as full service restaurant which met the stipulated criteria. All managers or owners were initially contacted via telephone and email in getting permission for the interview. As it requires the owner or manager's involvement in the interview, most operators claimed were too busy with business matters, barely available to take part in the research and some do not entertain any solicitation other than business. Out of 40 establishments, only 8 restaurateurs agreed to participate. Working with the agreed date and time, the interviews were successfully undertaken and researchers were fully satisfied with the answers provided and grateful with commitment and the cooperation given by all of them. On average each interview lasted between thirty minutes to one hour and all sessions were tape-recorded.

### 3.0 Analyses and Result

#### 3.1 Restaurant Profile

The eight restaurants participated were among the popular ones in its locality and surrounding area. All of them have been in the operation between two to ten years with four to twenty five capacities of staffs. All establishments are offering combination of local, western and Thai foods and their target markets range from middle and high income customers as well as international tourists. The profile of all restaurant operators are simplified and presented in Table 1: The actual names of restaurant operators are not revealed.

Table 1: Demographic and establishment's profile

Restaurant	Gender	Age	Year in operation	No. of employees	Type of food/menu offer	Types of customer/market segment
A	Female	Early 40	More than 4 years	6	Local and western	Middle and high income
B	Male	Late 20	4 years	20	Local and western	Family and middle income
C	Female	Late 30	2 years	5	Local and Thai food	Students, middle and high income
D	Female	Late 30	More than 6 years	12	Local and western	Middle and high income
E	Female	Early 50	4 years	15	Local and western	International tourists, middle and high income
F	Male	40	10 years	25	Local and western	Middle and high income
G	Female	Early 40	8 years	20	Local and western	Middle and high income
H	Male	Late 30	2 years	4	Western	International tourists, middle and high income

#### 3.2 Knowledge on Nutritional Information

The first question assessed the knowledge of restaurant operators on nutritional information. All eight operators were slightly familiar with the nutritional information on packed, canned food and those similar but not on the full service restaurant and admitted did not give serious attention about it. They also believed that most of the full service restaurant operators in the country are still ignorance or lack of knowledge about nutritional information despite knowing that some of the fast food restaurants are practicing it. Most of the restaurants operators only get used with two popular nutrients namely fat and cholesterol which was normally highlighted and discussed among the public but were unaware of the function of these two nutrients in human body. Restaurants operator A for instance commented;

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*I am really ignorant about it and believed most restaurant operators are like me. I strongly believed so far, many restaurant operators do not put effort to know or understand about it. Yes, I can see the information been placed in the canned and packed food products but not really aware on the importance of it in the restaurant menu except for Mc Donald's and other fast food restaurants or may be four and five star hotel restaurants. As time goes by I am sure everybody will keep upgrading their knowledge on this matter*

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### **3.3 The Awareness on the importance of Nutritional information in Restaurant Menu**

Despite having lack of knowledge operators positively perceived nutritional information is important and good to be included or display in the restaurant menu as a source of information for customers. They believed in this modern life, restaurant customers are not only looking at the price, fast service but healthy quality of food consumed. This is evident although in small proportion they have experienced with customers who were asking about nutritional contents on the items offered in the menu. Education advancement, overweight problem or obesity and chemical contents in processed food are believed lead to a greater concern among the customers on nutritional intake. Owner of restaurant B stated;

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*Although, providing nutritional information in restaurant menu is not really popular in Malaysia but it is undeniable that the scenario will change due to educational advancement, the issue of obesity and many averted diseases. Yes, my customers frequently ask about fat contents in the stake before they place an order but the server explained that we served lean meat. Therefore, I admitted that nutritional information is becoming gradually important in years to come not only in processed food but in restaurant food as well as a source of information for restaurant customer in general and health conscious customer in particular*

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### **3.4 Customer Demand**

When probed with question on customer demand on nutritional information, operators revealed that besides requesting about nutrition contents, customers often seeks opinion of the service staffs to suggest a low cholesterol, salt, sugar and fat content food in the menu. This contention is in line with other researchers' findings (Thomas and Mills, 2008; Walker, 2008) that nutritional information on restaurant menu has been gaining popularity as customers are knowledgeable, practice a good eating and better lifestyle and more health conscious. Worth mentioning, the most common concerned by customers is the used of monosodium glutamate (MSG) as added seasoning. Quoting from Operators E;

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*I would say the demand is there. Restaurant customers in this era are too advanced. They are knowledgeable, practice a better lifestyle and more health conscious particularly on eating outside foods. Therefore, it is not surprising that they are having high expectations on what we served them including nutritional information. Some of them asked for less spicy food, less oil, less salt, no butter and the most obvious is no MSG seasoning added for their meal. They even asked us to suggest them food with low calories, cholesterol, fat, sugar and salt. I guess there is an awaking of nutritional awareness among the Malaysian restaurant*

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*customers. Although it is believed that customers are not having such experience in the full service restaurant but in the years to come operators may have no choice and providing nutritional information or it availability may directly influence their dining decision*

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### 3.5 The Willingness of Restaurant Operators

The willingness of the operators in providing such information was posed in the interviewed. Looking from the demand and future business survival, operators were willing to provide nutritional information in their restaurant menu. Their willingness however is subject to the enforcement by the relevant authority or government. The chances of them to offering menu labelling voluntarily would be very slim unless it becomes mandatory. Restaurant operators F expressed;

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*Looking at the increasing customers demand, Yes, I have no objection and willing to make it available in the menu and .....I think other restaurant operators would agree with the idea as long it benefits both the operators and customers. Nevertheless, a lot of things need to be considered before we can do that and not all nutrients or nutritional information can be displayed. To me, nutritional labelling needs to be developed, adopted and imposed by the government first. This is the most important issue. You know..... If it is not mandatory and no enforcement who bothers to do so? Voluntary does not work"*

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### 3.6 The Most Common Nutrients

Findings of studies indicated that customers generally have high expectations on the availability of at least four common nutrients namely carbohydrates, cholesterol, salt and sugar. To see whether the same opinion appeared, the most important nutrients to be included in the menu were asked during the interviewed session. Similar to customers, majority of full service restaurants operators' described fat, carbohydrates, cholesterol, salt and sugar contents as the minimum nutrients to be displayed in the restaurant menu. Commented on this, restaurant operator A said;

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*Customers are generally concerned with fat, and cholesterol content in the meat, cream and those similar items. Salt and sugar for the hypertension and diabetic customers. Therefore, these are the important nutrients that need to be considered as compared with the others. In sum, something frequently highlighted in the media or concerned by customers should be included.*

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### 3.7 The Constraint of Making Nutritional Information Available

The last question probed was "what would be the constraints to make nutritional information available in your restaurant's menu". Although expressing their willingness, majority of the operators explicitly realized the constraints and obstacles on their part in providing nutritional information in restaurant menu. The constraints are mainly associated with financial burden or cost like changing the menu, conducting laboratory nutrients test and initial cost hiring nutritionist as an advisor. Greater concerned were also given to the overall business profit.

Offering nutritional menu labelling would be difficult without strong support from government authority particularly the health department. Restaurant operators are unable to accomplish the mission without the advice or monetary support from the government especially during the initial stage of the implementation. The significant impact in terms of spending for staff training was also voiced by the operators. Operator H for instance expressed:

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*It is not as easy as saying. Definitely there will be lots of costs incur on our part. Before implementing, we have to look in-depth on various factors.... We need to change the menu with the elaborated ones. Nutritional information to be displayed requires laboratory testing or analyses; advisor needs to be appointed as well as other requirements. All of these will directly creating unreasonable cost burden to the restaurant operators. The bottom line of any business besides satisfying customer is making most profit out of it. Operators will not do anything that might decrease their business profit or the customer's purchasing power. Business must be spurred after so much money is spent. Therefore, it would be a financial barrier to offer nutritional menu labelling without strong support from the government department"*

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#### **4.0 Discussion and Implications**

This study finding clearly shows that Malaysia is still behind with regards to the implementation or providing nutritional information/ labelling by the restaurant operators. Operator will not provide such information voluntarily. Therefore, there are many factors that need to be considered or adopted before the nutritional information or labelling in restaurant menu can be done. In this sense, knowledge, understanding and awareness of the operators on nutritional information together with government authority and mass media roles need to be heightened and acquired. With regard to the operators, in this information technology era they should always upgrade their knowledge not only on the management, operational but on nutritional matters as well. Because understanding on basic nutritional function, cause and effect of the nutrients to human body would churn the limelight, awareness and creating intention among the restaurant operators.

At this stage, full service restaurants operators in Malaysia seemed are not ready to provide the nutritional labelling. However, this situation is strongly believed will change in line with global scenario. Restaurant operators in this country are expected to receive a tremendous pressure from the customers in years to come and this might lead to the imposing of mandatory legislations by the government in providing nutritional information in the menu. The full service restaurant operators therefore should start to equip themselves with nutritional knowledge as they are most likely to be one of the target restaurants after the international chain of fast food restaurant. Studies in developed countries has proven that mandating menu-labelling legislation is an important tool in promoting healthier food served and customers' healthy eating practices. To strengthen these notion, further investigation on the necessity in providing the nutritional information from Malaysian government authority particularly health department needs to be undertaken.

## Acknowledgements

This research would not completed without the support from the Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) particularly Research Management Institute (RMI).

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