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Generation Z's Perception of Fast Food's Product Safety, Nutrition, and Health

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Abstract

The rapid growth of the fast food industry is associated with an extravagant trend of fast food consumption, especially among the young generation. This study investigates how Generation Z perceives the critical factors in determining fast food's product safety, nutrition, and health. The Theory of Stakeholder explains the businesses' responsibility to their stakeholders and four key factors, including economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic are adapted from Carroll's CSR pyramid. 330 respondents responded to the survey. The result reveals that the four key factors elicited a significantly positive response to fast food's product safety, nutrition, and health.

Keywords: Generation Z; Fast food; Nutrition; Health

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Problem Statement

Eating outside has become a common trend among Malaysians due to urbanisation, changing lifestyles, increased household income, and increasing working mother numbers. The rapid growth of the fast food industry is associated with an extravagant trend of fast food consumption, especially for the young generation. Fast food has become an integral part of the young generation's diet due to cleanliness, convenience, speedy service, low price, and variety of choices. For instance, an active university student with a hectic class schedule mostly prefers quickly prepared and readily available food. Also, cooking is not an option for the student stay in college and hostel. Fast food is defined as hot food that is cooked quickly or already cooked and ready to serve to the customers (Man et al., 2021). It also can be referred as food dispensed quickly at a low price, many of which may not be exceptionally nutritious. The customers can choose whether to enjoy the food on-premises, take away, or sometimes delivered (Chopera, 2018).

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Several international studies demonstrate that the young generation perceives good taste, accessibility, convenience, and affordability encourage them to consume fast food (Rajini et al., 2021; Yoon et al., 2020). Moreover, since many of them are students, they unavoidably skip breakfast, which may lead to excessive fast food consumption habits. The young generation is more interested in fast food compared to other age groups. A quantitative study was conducted by Mat et al. (2016) among 18 – 23 years old university students in Kelantan, Malaysia. The findings posit several reasons for students eating fast food are save time, friends outing, fun, family outing and no other food in stock. Another study discovered that the young generation's fast food consumption is influenced by interesting marketing strategies of the fast food companies (Mokhtar et al., 2020). While the young generation's fast food consumption is growing, obesity and other food-related diseases are rising (Bilbiie et al., 2021). Li et al. (2020) postulate that these energy-dense foods are low in nutrients with a high amount of salt, sugar, and carbohydrates, resulting in overweight, child obesity, high cholesterol, blood sugar spike, and insulin resistance. Obesity among the young generation affects their physical health, including pre-diabetes, hypertension, asthma, skin problem and impaired peak bone mass. Also, obese adolescents tend to remain obese in adulthood and are more likely to develop non-communicable diseases (NCDs) (Sahoo et al., 2015).

One of the significant obstacles to sustainable development highlighted in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is NCDs (World Health Organization, 2020). It is essential to know the underlying cause is of overweight and obesity. This occurs when there is an energy imbalance between calories consumed and calories expended, such as a person frequently consumes energy-dense foods that are high in fat and sugar but is physically inactive. Obesity among the young generation has reached epidemic levels in developed and developing countries. The prevalence of obesity among the young generation aged between 5 and 19 signifies an alarming increase from 4% in 1975 to over 18% in 2016 (World Health Organization, 2020). In Malaysia, National Health and Morbidity Survey discovered that the overweight and obesity trends in 2019 continue to rise to 50.1 percent (Institute of Public Health, 2020). The survey also remarks that 29.8% of children aged between 5 to 17 years old are overweight and obese. Increased fast food consumption is correlated with obesity (Hossain & Islam, 2020; Man et al., 2021). Ishak et al. (2020) argued that the young generation in Malaysia knew about healthy eating. Nevertheless, some challenges to practising healthy eating reported by them are the lack of healthy food available at schools and at home and the taste and characteristics of unhealthy food are more attractive to them. To illustrate this, if the parent purchases the fast food for their children, this reduces the benefits of having healthy meals at home.

World Health Organization (2020) recommends that the food industry promote a healthy diet by reducing the amount of fat, sugar, and salt in the food and providing customers an affordable healthy, and nutritious choices. In National Strategic Plan for Noncommunicable Disease 2016 – 2025, the Malaysian government encourages the private sector to perform health-related corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs to reduce NCDs (Ministry of Health, 2016). Nowadays, most young generation are concerned with health, social and environmental problems. Thus, they tend to consider the fast food industry's CSR performance before purchasing the products. To date, a limited study was conducted to investigate the young generation's perception of the CSR initiatives by high-profile fast food in Malaysia. Hence, this study aims to shed light by analysing whether the CSR activities are compatible with the general values of the young generation who target safe, nutritious, and healthy options to ensure a healthy lifestyle. The research objective of this study is to study the relationship between fast food company CSR practices and Generation Z's perception towards fast food's product safety, nutrition and health.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Generation Z's Perception of Fast food's Product Safety, Nutrition and Health Choice

Changes in consumer lifestyle patterns lead to higher demand for healthier food. Nowadays, many fast food outlets increase the availability of healthier food options on their menus by reducing the calories and offering whole grains food and half-portion choices (Yoon et al., 2020). Also, nutrition labelling attracts the restaurant to create new healthier and low-calorie menus. Bleich et al. (2015) argue that 66 large chain restaurants in the United States introduced new menus with lower calories after the government implemented a nutrition labelling policy in 2012.

Fast food restaurants are socially responsible to consumers, the community, and society when promoting healthy restaurant initiatives (Yoon et al., 2020). The healthy initiatives could influence consumers' behaviours to choose healthier food. A study conducted by Yoon et al. (2020) investigated facilitators of fast food product health: (a) nutritional information, (b) putting a label on a healthier menu, (c) reduced meal portion size, and (d) information sharing on healthy eating.

Generally, most businesses employ CSR as policies and practices to ensure society and stakeholders are taken care of and protected. Carroll (2016) describes CSR as the economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic expectations of the community towards the organization. These four responsibilities establish a basis that helps businesses to outline and elucidate the business's duties towards society. Hence, these four dimensions were employed in this study to examine how it affects fast food's product safety, nutrition, and health from Generation Z's perspective. CSR issues for young consumers seemly vital as they are a significant market segment (current and future consumers) for most fast food restaurants.

2.2 Economic Dimension

Economic can be considered a necessary condition of business existence to ensure sustainability. Society expects the business organizations to sustain themselves through profit-making and capable of incentivizing the owners and shareholders to invest and have sufficient resources to operate (Carroll, 2016). Society perceives business organizations as institutions producing and selling goods and services to meet market demand. When the business creates profit and adds value to its products and services, it benefits its stakeholders. In ensuring long-term financial success, it is recommended that the business pay attention to revenues, cost-effectiveness, marketing strategies, operational costs, and investments (Mahmood & Bashir, 2020).

A study executed by Rastini and Nurcaya (2019) confirms a significant relationship between the attributes of economic CSR (price fairness) to customer satisfaction. Consumers value restaurants that can provide valuable products and services. Considering the fast food industry, the customer buying decision is highly influenced by the economic dimension. To support this, Villarreal et al. (2020) revealed that food values such as price, safety, and taste are significantly prioritized by the customers when buying burgers at fast food. Khan (2018) demonstrates that if the organisation offers unreasonable prices to the consumers, they will not be satisfied which indirectly affects their buying behavior and loyalty. It is undeniable that customers who are health conscious tend to understand the nutritional value of what they eat as they want to have a balanced diet that lower the risk of being obese. In addition, fast food restaurants should operate cost-effectively to ensure the food can be offered at a competitive price (Javed et al., 2021). A quantitative study to understand the fast food purchase intention of Generation Y in Malaysia confirms that lower product's price attracts them to buy it (Xiao et al., 2019).

2.3 Legal dimension

Society expected businesses to operate and function legally. To illustrate this, Carroll (2016) postulates that a business must comply with the rules and regulations in its operation. Society views laws and regulations as "codified ethics" that lawmakers formulate at the federal, state, and local levels. Businesses should operate consistently and meet the government's expectations. In ensuring the products offered to the customer are high quality, the provision of products and services provided to consumers must meet at least minimal legal requirements.

The legal dimension outlines that fast food companies should operate according to law and regulations stipulated in the country to ensure it is legal and legitimate (Mahmood & Bashir, 2020). Also, the legal dimension demands the company to comply with environmental laws and consumer protection. A study conducted by Rew and Cha (2020) proved that consumers prefer to choose fast food restaurants that are socially responsible and comply with legal standards, regulations and laws in offering safe and quality food. This includes complying with food hygiene and product safety policies, consumer protection, and disclosing the products's ingredients (Kim et al., 2020). Food safety knowledge among the food handlers ensures they become more aware of the food safety protocols and guidelines during food preparation (Aquino et al., 2021). Another piece of literature unveils that fast food restaurants should regularly monitor the complaint boxes and address the customer complaints to preserve the products' quality (Javed et al., 2021).

2.4 Ethical dimension

Ethics are standard norms and beliefs on what is right and what is wrong. Ethics are not codified into law. Nevertheless, the ethical responsibilities posit that business organizations shall execute norms, beliefs, standards, and practices to indicate their accountability and responsiveness (Carroll, 2016). In the context of fast food restaurants, being ethical means providing reliable information about the company and products offered to the consumers (Mahmood & Bashir, 2020). It also refers to the responsibility to serve hygienic food and acknowledge consumers' opinions. The fast food restaurants shall focus on practicing good things with corresponding values, ethics and societal norms such as providing nutritional information about their products to encourage the young generation attach to healthy eating. With this, they can learn about healthy eating habits. Tong et al. (2019) investigate the impact of ethical CSR and food safety on fast food's reputation. 350 valid responses were collected from the questionnaires. The researchers highlight that displaying product information and sourcing, ethical preparation of food, disclosure of nutritional facts, ingredients, and source of origin is crucial to ensure the demand from consumers for healthy and safe food can be met. These efforts portray the continuous effort of the fast food to improve their food quality, safety standard and minimize the risk of future safety issues.

Consumers perceive fast food restaurants to be ethically responsible when offering healthful foods and nutrition information (Javed et al., 2021; Vijayakumaran & Amalina, 2018). Due to the young generation's tight working schedule, they are not only looking for fast food as it is convenient, but they emphasize the freshness and product quality. The new generation now is more conscious of a healthy lifestyle. Hence, they are more concerned about displaying nutritional information on the menu.

2.5 Philanthropic dimension

Corporate philanthropy is associated with business giving activities that embrace a voluntary and discretionary basis. Business organizations are not compulsory to execute philanthropy giving, but it is commonly expected by the public nowadays. The main concepts of this giving are voluntary and discretionary (Carroll, 2016). It is the business desired to involve in social activities. Hence, the company might engage in various giving activities to make up the community, such as gifts of monetary resources, products and services, and volunteerism. Carroll (2016) mentions that businesses pursuing philanthropy giving reflect the "good corporate citizens." A fast food company actively involved with charity activities, sponsors programs, and events is favourable to consumers (Javed et al., 2021, Kent et al., 2020).

Fast food restaurants might embed education-oriented philanthropic activities by aiming to convey nutritional information to customers (Kent et al., 2020). Also, fast food restaurants that sponsor programs, events or charitable activities related to nutrition are mostly favourable (Kent et al., 2020). For example, fast food restaurants can conduct a nutrition facts campaign by conveying the nutritional

information of their products on the website. It assists the customers in making informed food choices (Lim et al., 2017). Lim et al. (2017) affirm that when a fast food company that offers healthy food products established a career-related CSR program to the young generation, they demonstrate higher authenticity towards the company. The career-related CSR and career exploration activities benefit the companies and the young generation. These work experience programs contributes to better company's image and performance and equip the young generation with working experience (Lim et al., 2017). It is recommended to offer a CSR program that promotes young generation's self-realization as they are more attracted to CSR actions that affect themselves which urges them to involve in CSR-related education programs.

2.6 Theory of Stakeholder

Freeman (2010) originally described the Stakeholder Theory of organizational management and business ethics that upholds morals and values in managing the organization. This theory proposes that businesses should be responsible for all society and shareholders. It should be held accountable to its stakeholders who affect or are affected by corporate decisions. Freeman (2010) postulates that a business is encouraged to interact with stakeholders and inculcate a shared sense of the value to bring important stakeholders together. Creating shared value with stakeholders by fulfilling their interests and ethical demands signifies that businesses operate responsibly and prioritise symbiotic relationships. Kim and Ramos (2018) examine the stakeholder responses toward fast food chains' CSR and employ this theory to describe how fast foods integrate their health-related CSR activities to address public health problems. Previous evidence proved that increased in fast food consumption correlates with obesity-related public health issues. Kim and Ramos (2018) suggested that fast food can address these problems by implementing proper and planned CSR initiatives in their daily business. Hence, it creates an excellent relationship between the business and stakeholders and gains public trust and support.

2.7 Research Framework

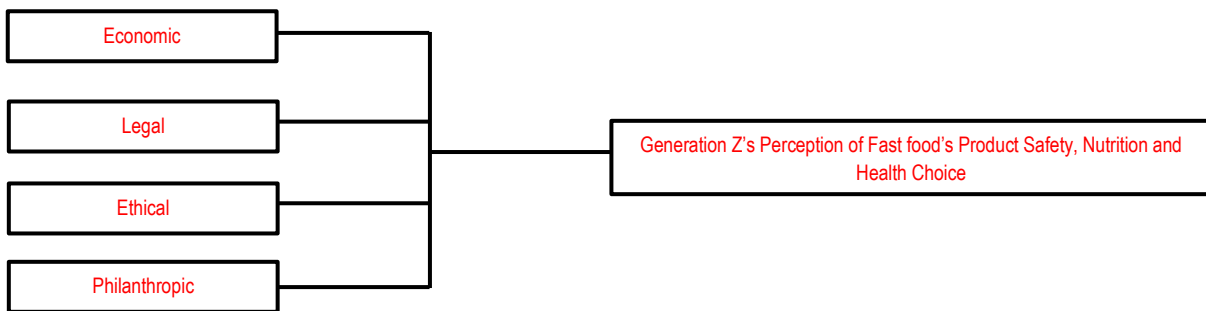


Fig. 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework
(Source: Author)

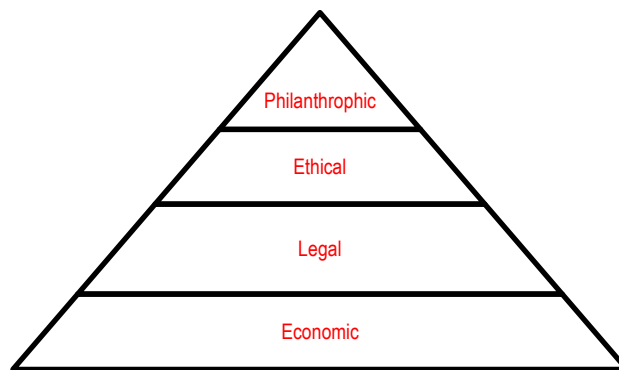


Fig. 2: Carroll's Pyramid of CSR
(Source: Carroll, 2016)

2.8 Hypothesis

- H₁= Economic dimension positively affects Generation Z's perception of fast food's product safety, nutrition, and health choice.
- H₂= Philanthropic dimension positively affects Generation Z's perception of fast food's product safety, nutrition, and health choice.
- H₃= Ethical dimension positively affects Generation Z's perception of fast food's product safety, nutrition, and health choice.
- H₄= Legal dimension positively affects Generation Z's perception of fast food's product safety, nutrition, and health choice.

3.0 Methodology

A self-administered online questionnaire was distributed to individuals aged 18 to 26 years old currently staying or working in Klang Valley. They are categorized under the Generation Z cohort. This sample was chosen due to the limited research thus far that has focused on

investigating Generation Z's perception of fast food's product safety, nutrition and health. This is a cross-sectional study, and the data were collected via a stratified sampling technique to approach the target respondents. A total of 330 completed responses were recorded, and the data was then entered into SPSS Version 27 for data analysis. This sample size exceeded the criterion set by Green (1991) to conduct the analysis. The data were analyzed via several statistical techniques such as descriptive analysis, reliability analysis, and multiple linear regression.

3.1 Research Instrument

All variables employed in this study were developed and adapted various validated items from past studies (Khan, 2018; Kim & Ramos, 2018). Section A requested demographic information about gender, age, marital status, ethnicity, educational level, type of occupation, frequency of visiting fast food and preferred fast food restaurants. Section B outlines 9 items related to fast food's product safety, nutrition, and health choice. Section C until Section F listed 31 items of four CSR dimensions which are economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic. All items were measured using a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

4.0 Findings

Table 1 depicts the demographic profile of the respondents. Of 330 respondents, the majority are female, 78.2%, while 21.8% are male. In terms of age, more than half are between 21 and 23 years old, 39.4% are between 24 and 26 years old, and only 5.5% are between 18 and 20 years old. Klang Valley is the largest urban centre in Malaysia as it is the most developed and fastest-growing region. Most young generations nowadays experience interregional movement to find a job upon graduation. Most respondents are well educated as the findings illustrate that 74.5% have Bachelor's Degree and Diploma. Also, 23% of them has the postgraduate certificate. Thus, they aim to increase their earnings and upskill themselves.

This region experiences fast economic growth and eventually provides many employment opportunities to the nation. This supports the findings of this study whereby 32.7% of respondents are employed in the private sector, 6.7% are self-employed, 2% are working in the public sector, while the rest 6% serve to NGOs. The pressure of working life, and time constraints demand them to choose fast food. The 84.2% of them stated that they buy fast food 1-2 times a week, while 13.9% buy fast food 3-4 times. findings also revealed that the 2 top fast food restaurants they frequently visit are McDonald's and KFC with 28.6% and 21.2%, respectively.

Table 1. Profile of Respondents

Characteristics	Frequency	(%)	Characteristic	Frequency	(%)
<i>Gender</i>			<i>Frequency of Buying fast Food (week)</i>		
Male	72	21.8%	1 – 2 times	278	84.2%
Female	258	78.2%	3 – 4 times	46	13.9%
			5 – 6 times	2	0.6%
<i>Age</i>			More than 6 times	4	1.2%
18 – 20 years old	18	5.5%	<i>Preferred Fast Food Restaurants*</i>		
21 – 23 years old	182	55.2%	McDonald's	296	28.6%
24 – 26 years old	130	39.4%	KFC	220	21.2%
<i>Educational Level</i>			Pizza Hut	98	9.5%
UPSR	2	0.6%	Kenny Rogers Roasters	22	2.1%
Matriculation/ Foundation/ STPM/ STAM (Matrikulasi/ Asasi/ STPM/ STAM)	6	1.8%	Subway	76	7.3%
Diploma/ Bachelor Degree (Diploma/ Ijazah Sarjana Muda) Master/ PhD (Sarjana/ Doktor Falsafah)	246	74.5%	A&W	34	3.3%
			Domino's Pizza	72	6.9%
<i>Type of Occupation</i>			Starbucks	32	3.1%
Public sector (Sektor awam)	2	0.6%	Burger King	28	2.7%
Private sector (Sektor swasta)	108	32.7%	Auntie Anne	60	5.8%
Self-employed (Bekerja sendiri)	22	6.7%	Texas Chicken	22	2.1%
Non – governmental organization/ NGO (Pertubuhan bukan kerajaan/ NGO)	6	1.8%	Marry Brown	18	1.7%
Unemployed (Tidak bekerja)	192	58.2%	Sushi King	14	1.4%
			Coffee Bean	20	1.9%
			Baker's Cottage	10	1.0%
			Dunkin Donuts	14	1.4%

(Source: Author)

Note: *Respondents are allowed to select more than one answer

Cronbach Alpha reliability analysis was conducted to measure the consistency of items used in the questionnaire. Table 2 illustrates the alpha values for all variables. It shows that the Cronbach Alpha values reported are between 0.796 and 0.873. Since the value is more than 0.7, it is acceptable (Field, 2009). Consequently, it is confirmed that all measurement items have high internal consistency and are sufficiently reliable for further analysis.

Table 2. Summary of Reliability Analysis

Variables	Cronbach Alpha Value	No. of Items
Fast food's product safety, nutrition and health choice	.843	9
Economic dimension	.858	9
Legal dimension	.796	6
Ethical dimension	.829	7
Philanthropic dimension	.873	9

(Source: Author)

Table 3. Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

Model Summary					
R ²	.283				
Adjusted R ²	.274				
Durbin Watson	1.983				
Model	Beta	t	Sig	Tol.	VIF
Economic dimension	.348	6.374	.000	.740	1.351
Legal dimension	.109	2.137	.033	.853	1.173
Ethical dimension	.117	2.331	.020	.870	1.149
Philanthropic dimension	.183	3.504	.000	.814	1.229

(Source: Author)

Table 3 outlines the Multiple Regression Analysis results. The proposed research framework for this study is significant as it explains 27.7% ($R^2 = 0.274$) of fast food's product safety, nutrition and health choice among Malaysian Generation Z.

5.0 Discussion

Theory of Stakeholder can support the findings of this study to explain how fast food restaurants create both social and financial value and the inseparable role of ethics and morality to meet their specific value proposition, such as to achieve the strategic alignment of their capabilities and young generation engagement. The findings also postulate that the young generation is looking for healthy substitutes which reveals a change in eating habits. Based on the findings, it was found that economic dimension has a significant positive relationship towards Generation Z's perception of fast food's product safety, nutrition and health choice (Beta = 0.348, p-value < 0.05). With this result, Hypothesis 1 is supported. The customers significantly prioritise food values such as price, safety and taste. Perhaps they believe that fast food restaurants should offer product that comes with value (i.e. safe, nutritious and healthy) as they are willing to pay for it. Also, the young generation who are health conscious tends to buy nutritious and healthy food as they want to have a balanced diet that lower the risk of being obese. Hence, the findings recommended that fast food restaurants offer reasonable prices as this will affect young generation's buying behaviour. This is consistent with findings from the study conducted by Mahmood and Bashir (2020) and Nurcaya (2019).

This study proves the young prefers to choose fast food restaurants that are socially responsible and comply with legal standards in offering safe and quality food. In addition, the relationship between the legal dimension and Generation Z's perception of fast food's product safety, nutrition and health choice was found to be significant (Beta = 0.109, p-value < 0.05) in this study. As such, Hypothesis 2 is also supported. This study proves the young prefers to choose fast food restaurants that are socially responsible and comply with legal standards in offering safe and quality food. Fast food restaurants must ensure the legal requirements for food must be met to ensure its safety and quality. It should operate by law and regulations stipulated in the country to ensure it is legal and legitimate. Suppose the fast food restaurants fulfil their legal obligation. In that case, the young generation will be confident to buy the products as the food safety and quality are assured.

Also, a significant positive relationship exists between the ethical dimension and Generation Z's perception of fast food's product safety, nutrition and health choice (Beta = 0.117, p-value < 0.05). This demonstrates that the young generation expects the fast food restaurants to be ethical and show their concerns about the customers' wellbeing. For instance, McDonald puts "nutrition and wellbeing" as the first focus element of CSR. The young generation expects CSR-conscious fast food to be ethical by focusing on developing and offering healthy and safe products to protect their wellbeing. The findings suggest that the young generation prefers to buy from fast food restaurants that are ethical than buying from the fast food restaurants that are considered less ethical. The previous studies conducted by Chrisjatismiko and Margareth (2018) discovered fast food can build a positive image to consumers when it offers fresh and quality products and adds healthier menu options.

Finally, the research findings also discovered that the philanthropic dimension significantly affects Generation Z's perception of fast food's product safety, nutrition and health choice (Beta = 0.183, p-value < 0.05). Embedding philanthropic CSR activities such as charity and volunteer work is helpful in building fast food's image. The young generation values the fast food restaurants that perform nutrition-related corporate social responsibility initiatives such as food donations, industry-led fundraisers or provide funding or sports equipment to school. The education-oriented CSR initiatives by disclosing the nutritional information on the company website, social media or annual report help to make informed food choices and encourage them to consume healthy and nutritious food. The finding recommends the fast food restaurants to engage more with nutrition education activities on fast food choices as it favourable by the young generation. The nutrition activities could be in the form of educating the young generation about food choices and the impact on immediate and long-term health consequences. This finding parallels with the study conducted by Kent et al. (2020) and Kim and Ramos (2018).

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

The findings of this study provide important information to the fast food manager to devise a sound CSR strategy to become a socially responsible business. This is because the young generation is more inclined and agrees with the values and practices of CSR. CSR initiatives are highly relevance for the fast food industry as they strongly impact on public health. It is relevant to find out the fast food restaurants' development of corporate policies and strategies shall be aimed to promote a healthy lifestyle, based on healthy eating. The type of CSR contents can be in the form of nutritional facts of products, healthy eating habits and good exercise practices. Engaging all employees in social activities is essential to ensure the strategies and initiatives are consistent and reliable. These CSR activities must be widely published on their website or social media accounts to ensure the information is channelled to customers. As a result, it establishes a better perception of products offered by the fast food restaurants and eventually achieves customer satisfaction. There are several limitations to this study: the scope of research only covered Klang Valley area and application of data collection method, quantitative method. Future studies are recommended to conduct the study in a different regional context to compare between these regional characteristics as it leads to new insights and explains similarities and differences of Generation Z's perceptions. Also, a qualitative method can be employed to explore the opinion and perceptions of Generation Z in-depth.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper makes relevant contribution by filling the literature gap in CSR as previous studies have not widely examined the perception of Generation Z towards fast food product's safety, nutrition, and healthy choice by looking at CSR initiatives.

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