

## Customer's Perception Towards McDonald's Icon-Based Nutritional Labels

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**Abstract:** Nowadays, nutritional labels are very important instruments in the restaurant industry as it helps customers in making informed food choices. Therefore, McDonald's should take action to become the first in the world to make extensive nutritional information and comprehensive ingredient listings and other food facts available to the customers. Additionally, McDonald's provided in-store nutrition information pamphlets, on food wrappers, on tray placemats as well as official restaurant website in order to let the customers be aware of it. However, McDonald's are always perceived as unhealthy restaurants and portray a bad image to the public. In relation to that, in order to change public perception towards fast foods, nutrition label acts as a safety guide in choosing healthy foods. Thus, this study aims to determine customers' perception on the icon-based nutrition labels of McDonald's food products. The study was conducted at McDonald's outlets within Shah Alam area and the data was gathered through self-administered questionnaires. From the analyses, the results showed that customers positively perceived McDonald's icon-based nutrition labels as a good effort and step towards healthier lifestyle as people nowadays are more conscious and aware of their health and nutritious food intake. Furthermore, the findings revealed some important points which could be useful for the fast food operators, food manufacturers as well as other restaurant operators to come out with the idea of producing nutrition labels as a new marketing strategy or tool. Additionally, it will increase customer turn over, as well as create a new environment geared towards a healthy lifestyle. As a final point, for future researchers they should explore on the effectiveness of nutritional labels on the customer in terms of making healthy food choices. In addition, the study can be broadened to investigate whether nutritional labels help build more trust in providing nutrition information to the customers in making decisions to buy a meal.

**Key words:** Nutrition Label • Icon-Based Nutrition Label

### INTRODUCTION

These days, fast food industries are found worldwide more than in previous years and along with the fast food consumption has continued to boost in popularity as mentioned by [1]. In sequence, [2] reported that, fast food restaurants are becoming common and in trend as it penetrated the cities and suburban areas of Southeast Asia today, including Malaysia. The first fast food restaurant was introduced by Allen and Wright (AandW) in 1963 and it showed the acceptance of fast food trend in Malaysia. Since then, customers' acceptance of fast foods has been on the rise [3]. Conventionally, fast food restaurants is also known as quick service restaurants

that provides a limited menu, limited service and often self-serve at counters [4]. Likewise, [5] described the term fast food as food purchased in self-service restaurant or carry out eating-places without waiter service and are popular among the adolescents. However, this eating out lifestyle further heightened the problems of unhealthy eating and unbalanced diets, as more people are eating foods bought from fast food restaurants [6].

As one of the successful fast food restaurants, McDonald's is now facing changes due to customers' new tastes and nutritional concerns and this resulted to an expansion of their product range. The effect can be seen when salads, decaffeinated coffee, skim milk, fish and chicken sandwiches were introduced in the menu in

the early 1990s. On the contrary, McDonald's has become the target of activists that criticized the fast food giant for selling unhealthy food high in fat and sugar [7]. In addition, the concern of customer's personal health as well as the rising use of nutrition information in print and other media such as the internet leads to increased customer's knowledge about health and nutrition [8]. In relation to the increasing number of healthier foods, nutritional labels has been considered important, mainly because it can provide customers with information that can be used to inform them about the calories in the food and allow them to make healthier food choices [9].

At this phase, McDonald's started to take an action to overcome this problem by designing icon-based nutritional labels. Labeling refers to the terms of information illustrating what a product is and any other relevant description that may benefit the food producer or customer of such a product [10]. According to [11], nutritional labels can be defined as a description used to inform the customer about the nutritional properties of a food, which also helps the customer in purchasing nutritious food and composing nutritionally balanced meals. Besides, nutritional labels of food products is intended to inform customers the choice they have and to stimulate the consumption and production of healthy products [12].

In addition, [13] revealed that customers have more favourable attitudes toward the product, nutrition attitudes and purchase intentions when nutrition information is presented. For instance, McDonald's outlets had provided nutrition information often on tray liners and food wrappers and generally the information will be available to people after they have already ordered a meal [14]. Regardless of the increase in nutritional awareness, it was found that customers' ability to interpret nutrition information on nutritional labels are limited [15].

Correspondingly, [16] reported that 45% of customers understand for the most part what they are reading and 51% reported partly understand the information. As a consequence, the same phenomenon might happen in Malaysia; therefore, this study aims to determine customers' perception on the nutritional labels on McDonald's menu items.

## **Literature Review**

**Perception of McDonald's:** McDonald's has expanded globally into 31,000 worldwide outlets and employed more than 1.5 million people in more than 119 countries [17]. Nevertheless, McDonald's always faces negative perception and is commonly related in serving unhealthy

and junk foods amongst its customers around the world [18]. It is not only the negative perception of public, but McDonald's have been attacked and accused of selling unhealthy food in several countries, including the US, China, Belgium, Holland, India, Russia, Sweden and the United Kingdom [19].







Meanwhile, the core of the current problem is that customers' still buy fast foods, even though they have negative perceptions on McDonald's as regards to unhealthy foods. At this point, customers are confused about fast food nutrition messages provided by McDonald's, while it is still perceived as bad images [20]. In order to overcome this issue, there are changes in McDonald's marketing and communication strategies as they have started to plan strategic action with two objectives; first, to change the image of McDonald's from junk food restaurant to a healthy food restaurant, as this will attract health conscious customers and at the same time can enlarge the market scope. Secondly, to change behavior of the existing customers who keep on taking only junk foods and to persuade frequent fast food consumers to change their lifestyle by buying balanced meal with McDonald's new healthy foods [20].

## **Perception of McDonald's Icon-based Nutrition Label:**

The increasing number of developments in the nutrition field and technologies give a great contribution and involvement to the rapid development of the fast food nutrition system, in which the development itself has led to the change of nutritional habits and preferences of people [21]. Since that, customers are interested in the nutritional quality of the food products that they purchase [22]. On the other hand, [23] expressed that, fast food restaurant should display or make nutrition information of foods and beverages they sell available to the customers. Interestingly, as stated by [24], most customers would like to see nutrition information at places or restaurant they went to.

In reducing customer misinformation or wrong interpretation, nutritional labels format was revised to improve customer's usage of it in 1993 [25]. Alternatively, [26] mentioned that, the goal of revising the food label is to help customers select diet that is more healthful by making the nutritional labels more user friendly and easy to comprehend, unfortunately, studies indicated that many nutrition label readers often do not understand or correctly apply the nutrition information provided. A survey found that, nutritional labels used increased in 1994 after the Food, Drug Administration (FDA) revised the nutrition label format and yet 70% of customers still wanted these labels to be easier to understand [25].

Table 1: Explanation of Nutritional Labels Icon-Based

Icon	Explanation
	Calories - 'Kcal' is an easily recognized abbreviation for calories.
	Carbohydrate - Since carbohydrate fuels a body, a fuel gauge is used.
	Protein - Protein is needed to build a body. It is represented by building blocks.
	Salt - The three holes represent the top of a salt shaker, or three salt crystals.
	Sugar - Sugar is represented by the image of a spoonful of sugar.
	Fat - The icon shows measuring tape, which is a common measuring tool.

Note: [http://www.aboutmcdonalds.com/mcd/csr/report/nutrition\\_and\\_well-being/practices.html](http://www.aboutmcdonalds.com/mcd/csr/report/nutrition_and_well-being/practices.html) [28].

Over 30 years, McDonald's has been sharing nutritional information about their food to ensure that their customers are aware of their foods' nutrition. In addition, McDonald's has drawn attention to the fact that they do not want to replicate the existing packaged foods formats, whereas customers are expecting more innovation in this field [27]. Hence, starting from this point, McDonald's Europe business unit cooperated with the European Union (EU), to come out with minimum guidelines on the communication of nutrition information for the packaged foods industry. This new guidelines is known as the Nutrition Information Initiative (NII), which functions to implement and enhance nutrition information system in a simple, short, visual and comprehensible way for customers [27]. Likewise, McDonald's instantly developed their new nutritional labels by including visuals (icons) to represent key nutrients, as well as with bar charts enclosed with the details on key nutrients. Additionally, McDonald's prefers to use nutrient visuals rather than words because visuals can universally communicate the concepts without language. There are five key nutrients in the new labeling system, the most frequent nutrition used by the nutritionist and customers, are calories, protein, fat, carbohydrates and salt [27].

Illustration in Table 1 below shows the icon-based nutritional labels used by McDonald's on their food wrapper, pamphlet and restaurant website. As compared to other fast food, McDonald's has taken active steps to create an awareness of nutritional labels through different channels and this is explained by [27] that these different channels purposely generate repeated exposure to the nutrition label and customers should eventually grasp their meaning, with or without printed labels presented.

### Methodology

**Sampling:** The sample population for this study was collected amongst McDonald's customers within the

Shah Alam area. The researcher chose Shah Alam because of the number of McDonald's outlets is average compared to other more developed cities and the location is quite easy to access. In terms of population, the total population of Shah Alam until early 2010 was estimated to be 465, 374 people [29]. Likewise, with regard to the sufficient numbers of respondents for this study, [30] suggested a minimum numbers of 382 to 384 respondents as an appropriate sample size that statistically represents a population of 75,000 to 1,000,000. In line with this statement, sample size for this study is set at a minimum of 385 respondents and approximately 500 questionnaires were distributed. A random sampling method was used due to the large number of McDonald's customers. In addition, [30] mentioned that, this sampling method has the least bias and suggested the most generalizability, in which every element in the population has a known and equal chance of being selected as a subject. In the context of this study, McDonald's customers refer to any person who purchased and consumed any foods and beverage from McDonald's outlets, through dine-in, take away, drive-thru or delivery service.

**Data Collection:** In collecting the data, researcher had to wait outside the restaurant, approximately 300 to 400 metres away when approaching the respondents. Before proceeding with a set of questionnaire, each prospective respondent who agreed to take part is given a short brief about the study, through the information sheet attached with the questionnaire. This information sheet provides details about the researcher, the aim of the study and the purpose of the survey. Additionally, respondents were also asked to sign the consent form if they agreed to participate in the survey. A total of 500 questionnaires in mini booklet form were distributed in the selected area of study within three weeks time.

Afterwards, the data entry process began as soon as the completed questionnaires were collected. However, only 392 completed questionnaires were successfully collected without errors or unanswered questions. Likewise, [31] reported that the sample size for this study is determined by rule of thumb, in which the appropriate sample sizes for most research are between 30 and 500.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results in table 2 reveal that eleven items which related to the general perceptions on McDonald's nutritional labels. Based on the table, general perceptions of McDonald's nutritional labels attained positive results.

Table 2: The mean of respondents' perceptions on McDonald's nutritional labels

No.	Items	N	Mean ( <i>M</i> )	S.D
1.	McDonald's put good effort in providing nutritional labels in their restaurant.	392	4.55	0.737
2.	McDonald's nutritional labels are easy to understand.	392	3.72	0.815
3.	McDonald's provides nutritional labels that help me informed of my food choices.	392	2.97	0.847
4.	McDonald's nutritional labels formats are comprehensible.	392	3.45	0.795
5.	McDonald's icon-based nutritional labels format increases my understanding on nutrition information.	392	3.36	0.934
6.	McDonald's icon-based nutritional labels format helps me in choosing of my meal.	392	2.92	0.876
7.	It is easy to access McDonald's nutritional labels.	392	3.05	1.013
8.	McDonald's nutritional labels can be easily found on food wrapper.	392	3.40	0.850
9.	McDonald's nutritional labels can be easily found on tray mat paper.	392	3.84	1.009
10.	McDonald's nutritional labels can be easily found on pamphlet.	392	1.89	0.923
11.	McDonald's nutritional labels can be easily found on McDonald's website or the Internet.	392	2.60	0.910

Note: 1=Totally disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither 4=Agree, 5=Totally Agree

The majority of the respondents agreed that McDonald's puts on good efforts in providing nutritional labels in their restaurant, ( $M = 4.55$ , item 1), as it can be seen on food wrapper, tray mat, pamphlet including the restaurant's website. It is a good sign to encourage the public to practice consuming healthy and balanced diet while marketing their product. In addition, most of the respondents agreed that McDonald's nutritional labels are easy to comprehend ( $M = 3.72$ , item 2), while others, were uncertain whether McDonald's nutritional labels helped them to make informed food choices or not ( $M = 2.97$ , item 3). Furthermore, it was also found that, the respondents still agreed that McDonald's nutritional labels format are comprehensible ( $M = 3.45$ , item 4) and increase their understanding on the nutrition information ( $M = 3.36$ , item 5).

Nevertheless, the majority of respondents were indecisive whether McDonald's nutritional labels influenced them to make food choices or not. This is reflected in item 6, in which the respondents were uncertain whether McDonald's icon-based nutrition labels format helps them in choosing a meal ( $M = 2.92$ , item 6). In relation to the displayed area, the respondents felt that it is not easy to have and they experienced difficulties to access McDonald's nutritional labels, as it shows in the undecided rate ( $M = 3.05$ , item 7). The customers may not be aware of the position of McDonald's nutritional labels at the point of purchase.

Even though the respondents had difficulty in accessing McDonald's nutritional labels, they reported that the labels can be easily found on food wrappers ( $M = 3.40$ , item 8) and tray mat paper ( $M = 3.84$ , item 9). This shows that, customers observed what they had on their meal trays and food wrappers while they were eating. It is

worth mentioning, although customers observed the nutritional labels printed on their food wrappers, still there are disagreements on the item: "McDonald's nutritional labels can be easily found on pamphlet" ( $M = 1.89$ , item 10) and item: "McDonald's nutritional labels can be easily found on McDonald's website or the Internet" ( $M = 2.60$ , item 11). Owing to these disagreements, it shows that there is a possibility of shortage of stock of in-house pamphlets and it cannot be displayed on the rack for customers' references. Besides, there is also probability that customers do not have time to surf restaurant's website to check the information.

In addition, the test illustrates that majority of the respondents agreed and perceived nutritional labels practiced by McDonald's as a good effort as well as to encourage people to practice healthy lifestyle. In relation to that, respondents also agreed that McDonald's nutritional labels are easy to understand and the format is comprehensible. However some of the respondents reported that they are uncertain whether icon-based nutritional labels format will increase their understanding on nutrition information, even though [27] mentioned that icon-based nutritional labels format is an excellent opportunity for McDonald's to provide leadership in genuine innovative labeling.

Other than that, the availability of nutritional labels on McDonald's food wrappers, in-store pamphlets and restaurant website were also not obvious among respondents. Additionally, a majority of respondents only noticed the availability of nutritional labels on tray mat paper during point of purchase. This is in line with the finding above, which shows agreement on the statement that nutritional labels can be easily found on tray mat paper as compared to other spot such as on food wrapper and official website of the restaurant.

In sum, customers positively perceived McDonald's nutritional labels as a good effort and step towards healthier life as people nowadays are more conscious and aware of their health and nutritious foods intake. This is in sequence with [32] survey, which indicated that customers would prefer to have nutritional labels that include more information. Thus, the need of nutritional labels has increased and it should be effectively provided with simple design appropriate for customers understanding [33].

On the other hand, the same report showed that as part of McDonald's commitment to its Balanced Lifestyles Initiatives, McDonald's proactively continues to educate customers about nutrition, in which customers are able to notice in-restaurant nutrition information poster at the point-of-purchase [34].

### CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, it is clearly declared that Malaysians perceived McDonald's icon-based nutritional labels as a positive plan, even though some customers were not able to comprehend the labels. It is worth to mention that, McDonald's can encourage the public to make informed food choices before purchase. It is not about the nutrition labels itself, but it is more towards educating the public to form healthy and balanced lifestyle.

Moreover, by knowing how to interpret the labels, people can manage their diet effectively based on a healthy diet. In order to encourage and educate the public, the first step is to come out with attractive and comprehensible nutritional labels, as it might attract customers' attention as well as to understand easily the figures or technical terms used in the label. Sequentially, McDonald's should promote and remind their customers that their icon-based nutritional labels are printed on food wrappers, in-store pamphlets, tray mat paper as well as can be accessed through the official restaurant website. This is because some of customers may possibly overlook the labels especially on food wrappers. Perhaps it is such a waste if the customers do not notice what the company has done in the process of informing them about food contents.

Although, it has been 30 years since the company has provided nutritional labels, yet, the customers still did not realize the campaign and effort put into this matter. The researchers suggested that, fast food operators should co-operate with government or related authorities

for more campaigns on the practice of using nutritional labels before purchasing any food products. Besides, compared to other countries, the government has started to enforce the rules and regulations on nutritional labels as it helps customers to choose healthy meals and a balanced diet. Further added, the company should also do road shows or trade fairs to create awareness on the importance of practicing and understanding the purpose of nutritional labels. It may take a long time as it is not easy to educate people about this issue.

However, lifestyle and behavior of customers always change and hopefully, it will create a new healthy environment for the local community. On the other hand, other restaurant should also develop and apply the use of nutrition labels on their menu in order to help customers make decisions based on healthy diets. Besides, the company should determine the appropriate or right nutrition information that should be included in the menu. For that reason, it will draw more attention to the information as well as the entire nutritional labels.

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