

Society, Behaviour and Health Policy Brief

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Public Health Issue

Food industry and prevention of childhood obesity; the complexity behind it and proposed way to approach it based on Malaysian context

- A Policy Briefing for Society, Behaviour and Health

The food industry is an industry that cannot be ignored in our daily lives; nowadays, their existence leads to humans being able to obtain food for consumption conveniently. However, as the convenience of the food produced for human consumption is more significant nowadays, the situation does come around with its problem. The glaring threat posed by this consumption is explicitly obesity pandemic, which in turn will lead to more non-communicable disease (NCD) issues in the future if not being tackled early. Upon discussion on obesity, the food component is always one of the integral issues regardless of the amount of food consumed, calory intake, quality and type of food consumed [1]. However, pertaining to the food component, there is one hidden issue that often overlooked. It is related to the industry that produces the food for human consumption, which is the food industry. The top ten giant transnational corporations in the food industry are reported to generate more than a billion-dollar revenue per day [2]. As an industry with such immense financial power and influence, the impact that the food industry brings to humankind is enormous. It starts with the food produced by this industry, which makes a huge profit, depends on the use of cheap ingredients and arrays of additives made into ultra-processed foods [2, 3].

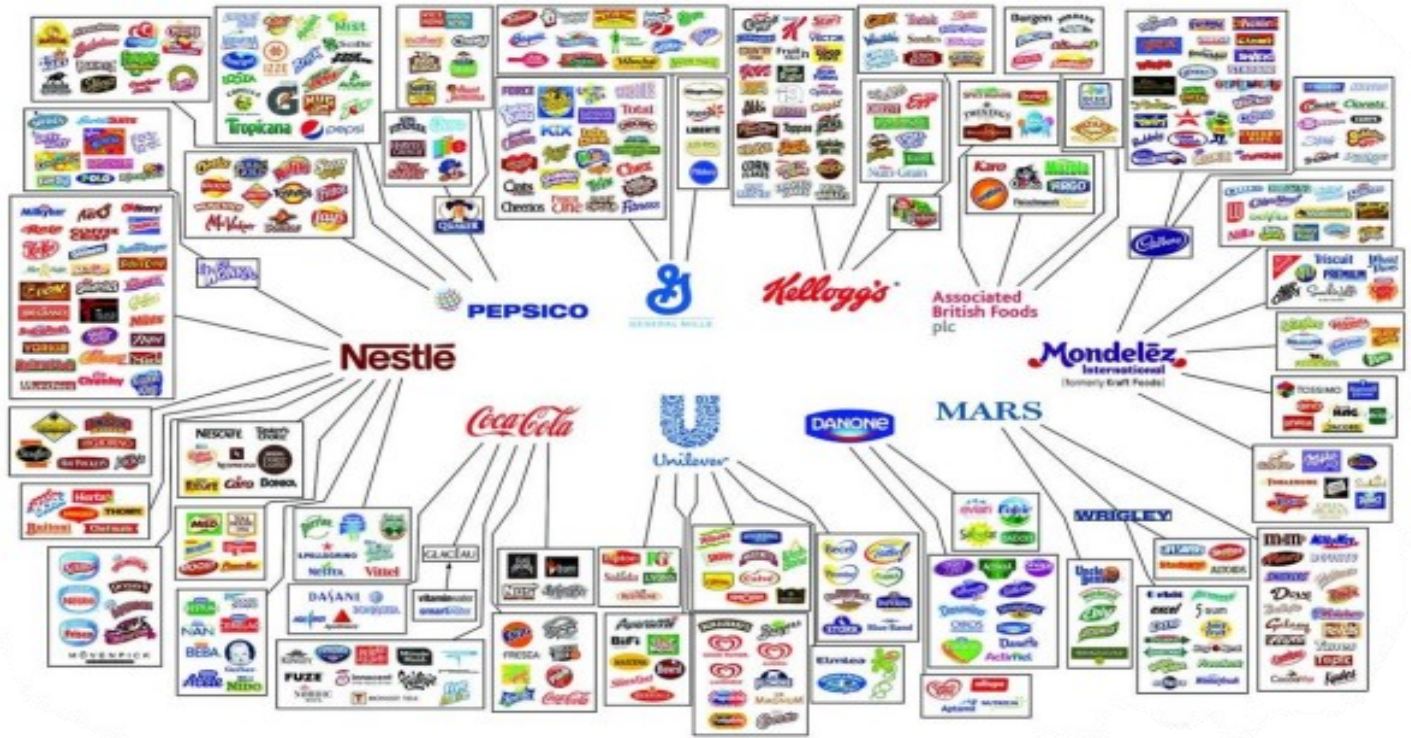


Figure 1: The “Big 10” of food and beverage companies

Ultra-processed foods are characteristically ready-to-consume industrial formulations of homogenised cheap ingredients obtained from high-yield crops and formulated to look, smell and taste good which often irresistible by the use of combinations of flavours, colours, emulsifiers, sweeteners, thickeners and other additives that have a cosmetic function [2]. The convenience of ultra-processed food as it is imperishable, ready-to-consume, hyper-palatability, universal availability, branding and ownership by huge transnational corporation makes this product such a big success for the food industry [2]. Combined with clever and aggressive marketing strategies, this leads to increased demand by the vulnerable population, especially the children [4].

The Complexity Behind

To understand the complexity behind the prevention of childhood obesity and its relation with the food industry, one must look into the history. The relationship of the food industry in influencing the policy that regulates food production and shifting the dynamic of policy from food consumption to lack of exercise has been documented [2, 4, 5]. In 2008, eight transnational corporations formed the International Food & Beverage Alliance (IFBA), which pledge to support World Health Organization (WHO) 2004 Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health [4]. This gives birth to a collectively formal, powerful commercial alliance and highly influential in the global food system as per **Figure 1** [4].

To understand how powerful this alliance are, upon looking on each transnational corporation on its own, the corporation by its own have their considerable influence on shaping public opinion of a country by promoting capital flow to the country, opened the countries to foreign investment, has taken over domestic companies and able to constrained national governments from introducing statutory policies to limit consumption of ultra-processed foods [2]. This corporation mounts multiple strategies to make sure that any attempt to regulate them is unsuccessful via mass-marketing campaigns, co-operation with policymakers and health professionals, lobbying politicians, and public officials to oppose public regulation [2]. This corporation also found, fund and control organisation, some of which may seem independent [2]. The corporation also funds and promote biased research, media stories and press citizens to oppose the public health regulation of the country [2]. How does all this translate into the barrier to childhood obesity prevention by the food industry? One may ask. It has everything tied together with childhood obesity prevention. Using the power and influence that the food corporation has, the food corporation leverage that in the form of shaping policy related to obesity and obesity science as per example documented on soda industry influence to China country [5]. At the same time, the use of integrated marketing communication strategy as per **Figure 2**, which include influencing children consumption preferences, does not help childhood obesity prevention [4]. By influencing the policy decision either through direct or indirect means, the net effect will be resistance on childhood obesity prevention policy and efforts directed towards it.

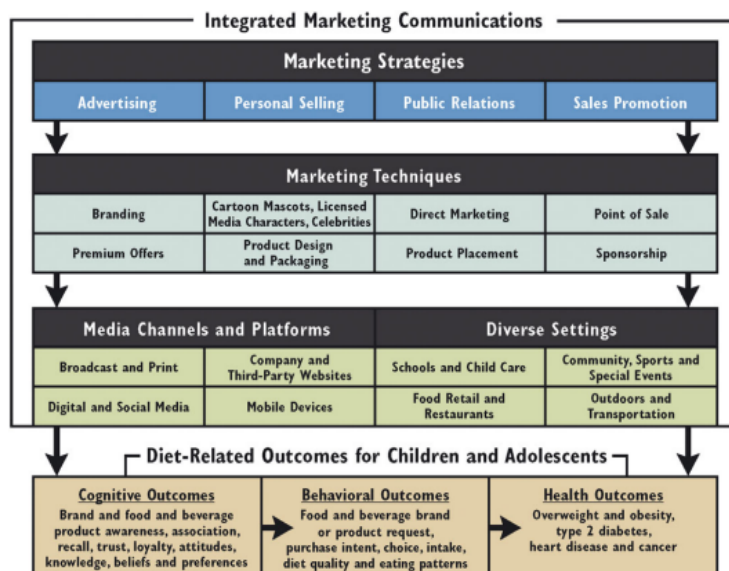


Figure 2: integrated marketing communications used by food, beverage, restaurant, and entertainment companies to market-branded food and beverage products to children

Recommendations for Action – Way Forward

This article attempted to explore the role of the food industry and its effect on childhood obesity prevention in a country-specific setting which is Malaysia. However, to the author knowledge and search, no such article is available yet. Hence, this article attempts to suggest a multidisciplinary approach to address the potential strategies applicable to the Malaysian context. There are three critical suggestions by multiple articles on the best approach to handle the food industry on their accountability of childhood obesity. These suggestions are, restrict food advertising to the children, food reformulation of unhealthy foods and drinks and pricing policy [2, 4, 6]. All these suggestions were focusing more on "upstream approach" instead of "downstream approach".

Restrict food advertising to the children, food reformulation of unhealthy foods and pricing policy.

– Three critical suggestions

Three Critical Recommendation

To restrict the food advertising to the children, much thought was put on it. However, the situation looks more complicated as the food by itself is an advertisement, not including the brand loyalty that the food corporation has achieved. One of the suggested ways to restrict food advertising towards children is by regulating the marketing technique used, including cartoon mascots to promote the food or brand, sponsorship of the brand, and direct marketing. This approach, accompanied by the restriction on the media channel and media platforms, together with limitation on the settings attended by children only, will have a better chance to succeed.

Food reformulation of unhealthy foods and drinks has been described as a damage limitation exercise by some articles. It can lead to food corporations claiming higher prices for health claims that ultimately remain unhealthy products [2]. Although it may be so, food reformulation remains an essential strategy to be adopted and used for a country like Malaysia as, realistically, there is no current way to limit the food produced from entering the Malaysian market. Hence, food and drinks reformulation remain one of the crucial strategies to be employed for Malaysia. The only difference is in which way does the product reformulation go. The Malaysian government can attempt to regulate the food industry by reducing the salt, sugar, and saturated fat across all the food produced by using country-specific requirements. However, this approach requires continuous engagement with the relevant stakeholders and solid political will for it to be materialised. On the other hand, Malaysia can aim to be the producer and exporter of healthy food as a strategic sustainable goal in the future.

Pricing policy is an approach that is sensitive and requires utmost care as it involves money but has an added advantage to work because money can be used as an inhibitor or incentive for an action. The pricing policy will involve taxes that can be charged on the ingredients exclusively used by ultra-processed food manufacturers, such as cosmetic additives and the product sold to consumers [2].

The levels of taxation should be calculated not to burden the consumer so much and affect the national economy severely. The tax revenues gained then should be used to fund programmes design to support healthy food production and consumption, improve public health, and monitor healthy food progress. The taxing of a sugary drink is a step in the right direction, and the scope should be expanded to include the drinks serves at restaurant, café and hotels.

Downstream Approach

There is three suggested downstream approach that can be undertaken on this issue. Firstly, to include the involvement of non-governmental association (NGO's) such as parent-teacher association to play the advocacy role actively and put pressure on the government, food company, media association and the population. The advocacy should focus on addressing issues related to childhood obesity. When there is a robust realism and advocacy that childhood obesity caused more harm than good, the pressure given off by the NGO's may lead to changes in the political stance of the government and leads to an increase in political will to address the issue. Secondly, 3D food printing is a technology to manufacture food products with customization in shape, colour, flavour, texture and even nutrition [7]. This technology can help address the issues related to childhood obesity as the food created can be customized in terms of nutrition and incredibly sustainable. This technology can help on addressing the issues surrounding the imbalance in calorie intake by children. The usage of 3D food printing is an area where the government and even the food industry can capitalize on making the food sell sustainable, affordable, and nutritionally balanced. However, the cost of 3D technology is still relatively expensive and may require government intervention to actually bring down the cost.

References

Thirdly, to limit the targeted advertisement towards children, the government and relevant stakeholders can discuss regulating the usage of Application Programming Interface or popularly known as API. API stores the relevant data about an individual who is using social media such as Facebook and others to make a targeted advertisement. The usage of API in this context leads the advertiser to know more about their audience and better plan how to capture the audience preference [8]. There is a need to address this issue and limit the data that can be used to target the children.

Although all the suggested approach is doable, the food industry is well known to resist regulation and taxation by using means such as weak or ineffective policy such as voluntary reformulation and denialism tactic [4, 6, 9]. The best way to counter this is via advocacy and activism to ensure that scientific evidence is translated into effective regulation and taxation. In Malaysia, the relevant stakeholders are not small in numbers. They include the Ministry of Health Malaysia, Ministry of Education Malaysia, Ministry of International Trade Malaysia, Ministry of Agriculture Malaysia, Ministry of Finance Malaysia, food and beverage key player, private school and kindergarten association, media association, NGO of parent association to name a few. These stakeholders will need to continuously meet and engage together to find the best solution for the Malaysia situation.

In a nutshell, the complexity of tackling one of the biggest threats towards future generation is indescribable. This is particularly true as most of the relations are intertwined with each other. Any form of intervention may require a cautious approach as it may have a domino effect on international relation, the economy, and the social aspect of a particular nation. Therefore, to reduce the prevalence of childhood obesity in Malaysia, efforts and cooperation from all stakeholders, organization, population and individual are essentially required throughout all levels of society. And this is best implied using the upstream-downstream approach.

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