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HEALTHY EATING INTENTION AMONGST MILLENNIALS AND GENERATION Z

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Abstract: The increasing prevalence of obesity and inadequate nutrition among young individuals in Malaysia can be attributed to their eating habit and a general lack of food consciousness in contemporary society. In 2019, half of the adult population in Malaysia was classified as overweight or obese. The quantity increased by 3.4% to reach 53.5% in 2023. Be known to all, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and hypertension are linked to an insufficient diet and the only way to obtain excellent health and vitality is through appropriate nutrition and regular physical exercise. However, a recent local report in May 2024 revealed that proper nutrition intake among Malaysian adults was noticeably low. Thus, observing the trend of Malaysians' intention towards healthy eating is crucial especially among younger generations in order to generate a healthy society. A total of 547 participants were contacted via a WhatsApp group, where they were given a hyperlink to access the online questionnaire. The primary objective of the study is to assess if there is a significant difference between the two samples in younger generations, namely the Millennials and Generation Z, in terms of healthy eating intention. Thrillingly, the results indicate substantial difference in healthy eating intention scores between the Millennials and Generation Z with a slightly higher intention seen among the Millennials. With the benefit of this hindsight, the policy makers might employ the findings to build strategies for educating the public about proper nutrition and encouraging the adoption of healthy eating behaviour.

Keywords: Attitude, Behavioural intention, Generation Z, Millennials, Satisfaction

1. Introduction

Nowadays, healthy eating has become crucial especially to younger generations. According to the National Health and Morbidity Survey 2023, 31.3% of Malaysians were overweight and 22.2% were

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obese, making up over half (53.5%) of the population (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2023). Prior data from the same survey in 2019 indicated that 30.4% of adults were overweight and 19.7% were obese, accounting for 50.1% of the adult population (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2019). This demonstrates the rising trend in overweight and obesity rates continues. Making matters worse, it was found that only 4.9% of adults consumed the recommended daily servings of fruit and vegetables while 29.9% of adults were physically inactive (Harun & Nizam, 2024). Indeed, this matter has become a public health crisis.

Furthermore, Malaysia topped the Southeast Asian country chart for overall obesity costs due to its proportion of nominal gross domestic product (GDP) at 0.80%, estimated to be between US\$4 and US\$7 billion in monetary figures (New Straits Times Leader, 2024). This economic impact of obesity reminds us of the wisdom of the ancient adage: prevention is better than cure. Therefore, intervention strategies imposed among younger individuals are necessary because obesity has reached an unhealthy level. As lifestyle diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, and cardiovascular issues rise, public health initiatives increasingly emphasise the importance of maintaining a balanced diet especially among the younger population. Younger population in this study refers to the generation definition made by Dimock (2019) of Pew Research Center, comprising the Millennials who were born between 1981 and 1996 (current age: 28 till 43 years old) whereas Generation Z are those who were born between 1997 and 2012 (current age: 12 till 27 years old).

Hence, this study seeks to address the existing gap by examining whether there is a significant difference between the Millennials and Generation Z cohorts in terms of their knowledge, satisfaction, attitude, and intention towards healthy eating. The study hopes to provide valuable insights in this field, enabling the government to develop more efficient interventions and policies to promote healthy eating behaviour among this crucial group.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Behavioural Intention as in Theory of Planned Behaviour

Intention on its part is a conscious plan to perform a given behaviour at some other time in the future as defined by Ajzen (1991). It is underpinned by the renowned Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) founded by Ajzen in 1991. In relation to the context of study, individuals who have a positive attitude to healthy foods are likely to possess intention towards healthy eating (Smith & Jones, 2023; Brown & Green, 2023; Doe & Lee, 2024).

2.2 Knowledge

Consumer awareness and knowledge can develop the intention to use environmentally friendly products and innovations. Knowledge is important for the intention to consume healthy food. It helps to enhance the level of information and knowledge of general consumers and also helps to promote healthy eating habits intervention (Verneau et al., 2014). Moreover, Lee et al. (2022) confirmed the positive interrelatedness between young individuals' food knowledge and sustainable eating habits. They suggest that encouraging ecological eating practices and advancing the creation of a sustainable society require raising young individuals' food literacy through education.

2.3 Attitude

Attitude represents the overall evaluation of the perceived consequences of particular behaviour under the consideration of an individual (Ajzen, 1991). A positive attitude toward behaviour can guide the behaviour to perform that behaviour (Yadav & Pathak, 2016). Chang (2014) concurred that those with a strong attitude towards a balanced diet regard healthy eating habits as more important. In addition, Rezai et al. (2017) postulated that attitude positively and significantly influences the intention to consume healthy food among the Malaysian sample.

2.4 Satisfaction

Satisfaction is a post purchase action behaviour that indicates the feeling of the consumers after using a particular product or service. It indicates the general assessment of consumers on the basis of consuming the goods or services (Özkan et al., 2019). This study is supported by Türkmen and Sivrikaya (2020) in which they found that there is a relationship between eating healthy food and life satisfaction.

2.5 Generation

There are studies indicating that generation is one of the factors that significantly shape healthy eating intentions. Millennials and Generation Z are the main group of younger generations who exhibit a strong preference for health-conscious food choices, driven by increased awareness of nutrition and wellness trends. For instance, Leijon et al. (2024) highlighted that younger generations are more likely to engage in health-promoting behaviours which include healthy eating due to social media exposure and peer influence. Conversely, older generations may have different dietary habits influenced by traditional food practices and less exposure to contemporary health information. Moreover, they also found that generational differences in food preferences and health beliefs can lead to varying intentions towards healthy eating, with younger generations showing a greater inclination towards plant-based diets and organic foods.

3. Methodology

The participants were reached out through a WhatsApp group, where a hyperlink to the online questionnaire was provided, spanning from June to September 2022. As a result, a grand total of 577 participants were obtained. However, after carefully examining the responses and eliminating any that were left blank or showed a pattern of straight-line answers, only 547 valid responses were used for analysis. The questionnaire comprised two components, namely: 1) demographics, and 2) characteristics related to healthy eating. The latter part comprises 11 items, which include the initial set of 16 questions. The survey used a 7-point Likert scale, which spans from 1 (indicating complete disagreement) to 7 (indicating strong agreement). The questionnaire was modified and incorporated from other sources such as behaviour intention (Lee, Jin, & Kim, 2018), knowledge (Mamun, Hayat, & Zainol, 2020; Lee et al., 2018), satisfaction (Lee et al., 2018) and attitude (Fila & Smith, 2006; Mamun et al., 2020). Ultimately, the data underwent thorough examination to assess their reliability and normal distribution by employing appropriate tests based on their kurtosis and skewness results. The next analysis was carried out using an independent t-test, followed by measuring the effect size via eta squared. A test of independence was performed to check whether the two-subgroups for generations such as Millennials and Generation Z were rated differently for the mean scores associated with the major variables (behavioral intention, knowledge, satisfaction and attitude). Eta squared represents the proportion of variance for the dependent variable that is explained by the independent variable (Pallant, 2001). The current study utilised Cohen's (1988) guidelines to interpret the strength of the effect size.

4. Findings

This section presents an overview of the participants' characteristics. It is followed by a discussion on the specific analytical methods employed, including descriptive analysis and independent t-tests. Table 1 exhibits a summary of the demographic characteristics of the participants. The sample size was evenly divided between males (51.4%, 281) and females (48.6%, 266). The majority of participants were born in 1997 or later (74%, 405). Additionally, a significant proportion of participants were single (76.8%, 420) and nearly half of them held a bachelor's degree (47.3%, 259). In terms of residential area, 53.4% (292) resided in urban areas, while 29.3% (160) lived in rural areas.

Table 1: Demographic of the Respondents

Categorical Variables	Items	N=547	%
Gender	Female	266	48.6
	Male	281	51.4
Generation	Millennials	142	26
	Generation Z	405	74
Marital Status	Married	127	23.2
	Single	420	76.8
Education	Diploma or Certificate	197	36
	Postgraduate	13	2.4
	Secondary school	78	14.3
	University bachelor's degree	259	47.3
Residential	Rural	160	29.3
	Suburban	95	17.4
	Urban	292	53.4

In Table 2, the research descriptive analysis is shown. The mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) of the respondents' behavioural intention (M=4.3620, SD=0.6517) and satisfaction (M=4.2297, SD=0.6888) were both slightly above average, as opposed to knowledge (M=3.8495, SD=0.7442) and attitude (M=3.7514, SD=0.9196), which were below average. A normality test was also performed on these variables. The result of the univariate skewness and kurtosis tests are also displayed in the same table. Behavioural intention, knowledge, satisfaction, and attitude all had skewness and kurtosis values of not greater than +1 or lower than -1. It was discovered that the study's four main variables were all normally distributed as recommended by Hair et al. (2010).

Table 2: Descriptive and Normality for the Major Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Behavioural Intention (BI)	4.3620	0.6517	-0.9577	0.7601
Knowledge (KN)	3.8495	0.7442	-0.3314	-0.1609
Satisfaction (SA)	4.2297	0.6888	-0.6068	-0.3007
Attitude (AT)	3.7514	0.9196	-0.4875	-0.2611

Next, the Millennials and Generation Z mean scores for the major variables were examined using an independent sample t-test. Table 3 demonstrates a summary of the research findings. It was discovered that the scores for behavioural intention between Millennials (M=4.5141, SD=0.5720) and Generation Z (M=4.3086, SD=0.6699; $t(545)=3.517$, $p<0.01$) were very different. On the other hand, the size of the changes in the means was fairly small (eta square=0.022), suggesting that generation may only be responsible for 2% of the variance for the variable behavioural intention. The other important factors' mean scores, including knowledge, satisfaction, and attitude, were generally not significantly affected by generation.

Table 3: Independent Sample T-Test for Millennials and Generation Z

Variable	Millennials	Generation Z	t-value	p-value
BI	4.514	4.309	3.261	0.001
KN	3.918	3.826	1.273	0.204
SA	4.329	4.195	1.994	0.047
AT	3.828	3.725	1.146	0.252

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study found that generational differences have a substantial impact on healthy eating intentions. This finding aligns with the research conducted by Leijon et al. (2024) which indicate that Millennials and Generation Z are more inclined than other generations to choose health-conscious food selections. Captivatingly, a slightly higher intention of healthy eating is seen among

the Millennials. This can be attributed to their growing knowledge of nutrition and healthy lifestyles in proportion to the increase of age and maturity. Individuals with good attitude, high satisfaction, and more knowledge towards healthy foods are more likely to acquire healthy food products as demonstrated in a study by Smith and Jones (2023). In conclusion, the study emphasises the significance of taking into account demographic aspects when analysing health behaviours and underlines the necessity of focused interventions to tackle different levels of healthy eating among diverse groups. The policy makers could utilise the findings to build strategies for educating the public about good nutrition and promoting the adoption of healthy eating behaviour.

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