



FROM JUNK FOOD TO HEALTHY FOOD, CONSUMER PERCEPTION ANALYSIS OF MCDONALD'S PRODUCTS

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze changes in public perception of McDonald's products, whether McD's efforts to provide healthier food have been perceived as such by consumers, more specifically, this study looks at whether there is a change in perception of McDonald's products from junk food to healthy food. This study is a quantitative study with a sample of 70 respondents, namely Indonesian consumers who have consumed McDonald's products at least once in the last 6 months. Data collection using an online questionnaire via the Google Form platform. The data analysis technique used is quantitative descriptive analysis using SPSS version 26. The results of this study indicate that McDonald's efforts to change its image from a junk food provider to a healthier fast food provider have been very well received by consumers. This change in perception not only increases consumer confidence in McDonald's as a provider of quality and healthy food, but also influences consumer decisions in choosing a fast food menu. These findings provide important insights for the fast food industry in developing better marketing strategies, while maintaining the practicality and taste that are the main attractions of fast food.

INTRODUCTION

Junk food refers to foods that are easy to prepare and consume but have low nutritional content and high fat content that can be detrimental to health (Rajveer & Monika, 2012). Junk food has become a popular food choice among modern society, especially because of its ease and speed in preparation and consumption. Popular junk food categories on the market include various products such as soft drinks, pizza, hamburgers, potato chips, ice cream, hot dogs, and French fries (Rajveer & Monika, 2012). Fast food is often categorized as junk food because of its low nutritional value, easy access, and fast processing (CNN Indonesia, 2021). However, the popularity of fast food, which is often perceived as junk food, continues to increase due to the fast service factor and the convenience it offers to consumers (Amalia & Syaipudin, 2023). The fast-food sector is now increasingly global and its consumption continues along with the development of people's living standards (Rehiara, 2013).

However, in recent years, there has been a shift in public perception of junk food. According to Kotler & Keller (2016), consumer perception is the process by which individuals select, organize, and interpret information to form a meaningful picture of a product or brand. This process involves recognizing and interpreting stimuli from the environment through human senses, including sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch (Cozer & Wikner, 2018). In the context of junk food, this shift in perception reflects recent socio-cultural changes characterized by an increasing interest in healthier eating patterns due to the influence of the media and awareness of the risks of junk food, where people are increasingly maintaining a healthy lifestyle and starting to pay attention to the nutritional content of the food, they consume (Nair & Das, 2020). According to Jian et al. (2021), fast food restaurants that are often perceived as Junk Food are increasingly viewed as unhealthy because they play a role in increasing cases of obesity, high cholesterol, and cardiovascular disease, which have a negative impact on their market decline. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of changes in perception is important for marketers in adjusting more effective marketing strategies (Galvano, 2021), helping in determining the next marketing steps (Limantara, 2017), and determining the success or failure of a product in the market (Hanna et al., 2017).

To gain a deeper understanding of consumer perception, Mehmedovic et al., (2012) identified three main elements that influence consumer perception, namely sensory factors, involvement, and psychological and social factors. Sensory factors are closely related to the five human senses that receive and process stimuli from the environment. Meanwhile, involvement refers to the level of interest or relevance that an individual gives to a purchase, which is determined by the product category, communication method, situational conditions, and individual traits. Psychological and social factors include aspects such as personality, lifestyle, and cultural background that influence how a person understands and reacts to information from their surroundings. These three elements work together to form complex consumer perceptions, so understanding these three elements of consumer perception provides important insights for various industries, including the food industry, where each element plays a significant role in shaping consumer perceptions of healthy food versus junk food. This allows marketers to design more effective strategies in changing consumer perceptions from junk food to healthy food, as shown by Chandon & Wansink (2007) in their study on how manipulating sensory and psychosocial elements can change consumer perceptions of the healthiness of a food product.

Not only that Kotler & Keller (2016) emphasized that perception is more important than reality in marketing, because perception influences actual consumer behavior. Marketers can use an understanding of perception to strengthen brand image and build long-term relationships with consumers (Cozer & Wikner, 2018). In the context of changing perceptions from junk food to healthy food, marketing strategies can focus on health benefits, sustainability, and quality of food ingredients (Choi & Reid, 2018). It is important for marketers to understand that changing consumer perceptions requires a consistent and sustainable approach and must be supported by product quality that matches the claims made (Hanna et al., 2017).

McDonald's, as one of the major players in the global fast-food industry, has long been known for its iconic products such as the Big Mac, McChicken, and Happy Meal that set them apart from their competitors (Boardmix, 2024). However, along with changing health trends, McDonald's is often perceived as a restaurant that offers unhealthy food (Samsudin et al., 2011). McDonald's products are often criticized for their negative impacts on health (Jian et al., 2021). In response, McDonald's has made significant efforts to change this perception.

In line with Troy & Kerry (2010) research on the dynamics of consumer perceptions that can change over time, McDonald's has introduced healthier menu options such as salads, fish, smoothies, and fruit variations (Jian et al., 2021). Other efforts include the introduction of a low-calorie menu, providing meals containing less than 400 calories (Choi & Reid, 2018) and increasing nutritional transparency by providing detailed information on packaging and tray liners (Samsudin et al., 2011). McDonald's also provides a nutrition calculator on their website, which allows consumers to calculate nutritional information of various menus according to their choices. In addition, the company has committed to improving the nutritional quality of products, especially the Happy Meal, by utilizing fruits, vegetables, and low-fat milk, and simplifying the ingredients used by reducing artificial preservatives, eliminating artificial flavors, and artificial colors (Cahya, 2018). Commitment to the quality of raw materials has also been increased, with the use of fresher and more natural ingredients (Callia, 2023). However, there is still debate about whether these efforts are enough to change the perception of McDonald's as a provider of healthy food.

This study aims to analyze changes in public perception of McDonald's products, whether McDonald's efforts to provide healthier food have been perceived as such by consumers. More specifically, this study looks at whether there is a change in perception of McDonald's products from junk food to healthy food. The results of this study can be used to assess the effectiveness of McDonald's strategy in changing its product image from a junk food



icon to a healthier fast food provider, and to examine the extent to which these changes have influenced consumer perceptions and behavior. The results of the study are expected to determine the extent to which these changes in perception influence consumer decisions in choosing fast food menus, thus providing valuable insights for the fast-food industry in developing better strategies to meet consumer demands for healthier food without sacrificing taste and practicality which are the main attractions of fast food.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a quantitative approach with a survey method. The population in this study is all McDonald's consumers in Indonesia. Given the wide geographical coverage and the large population that cannot be identified with certainty (infinite population), a sampling technique is applied. The purposive sampling technique is used with the consideration that this technique is able to direct sampling according to the specified characteristics (Friday & Leah, 2024). The sample criteria set are Indonesian consumers who have consumed McDonald's products at least 1 time in the last 6 months. The number of samples in this study was 70 respondents, this refers to the opinion of Sugiyono (2013) who stated that a feasible sample size in research is in the range of 30 to 500 respondents.

Data collection was carried out using an *online questionnaire* via the Google Form platform to reach a wider range of respondents with more efficient time and cost. The questionnaire consists of several parts, namely demographic profile, respondent consumption behavior towards McDonald's products, and respondent perceptions of McDonald's products. Perception measurement uses a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), which according to Joshi et al. (2015) is an effective scale for measuring respondents' attitudes and perceptions. Distribution of the questionnaire was carried out via the WhatsApp and Instagram platforms. On the WhatsApp platform, the questionnaire link will be distributed via personal chat to contacts who meet the criteria and on the Instagram platform, distribution is carried out via the Direct Message (DM) feature to potential followers.

For data analysis, this study uses quantitative descriptive analysis to describe consumer perceptions of McDonald's products. According to Kaur et al. (2018), descriptive analysis is the right method to analyze perceptions because it can provide a clear picture of the characteristics and tendencies of respondents. Descriptive analysis in this study includes calculating the frequency distribution, percentage, mean, median, mode, and standard deviation for each perception indicator. In addition, cross-tabulation was carried out to identify the

relationship between the demographic characteristics of respondents and their perceptions of McDonald's products. The data that has been collected will be processed using SPSS version 26, where the results of the analysis will be presented in the form of tables and graphs to facilitate data interpretation. With this method, it is hoped that the research can reveal the shift in public perception regarding McDonald's image, from *junk food* to healthier choices, and provide insight for companies to adjust more effective marketing strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to analyze changes in public perception of McDonald's products, whether McD's efforts to provide healthier food have been perceived as such by consumers. More specifically, this study looks at whether there is a change in perception of McDonald's products from *junk food* to *healthy food*. Table 1 shows the profile of respondents in this study. This study used 70 Indonesian consumers who had consumed McDonald's products at least once in the last six months. Based on the demographic distribution, it is known that the majority of respondents are women (64.3%), with the age group 20-25 years and 26-30 years dominating with 44.3% each, having a Bachelor's degree (S1) which is 40%, having a private job (45.7%) and having a monthly income or pocket money of Rp 2,000,000–4,999,999 which is 41.4%. These results indicate that McDonald's consumers in Indonesia are mostly in the productive age range, have secondary to higher education levels and come from middle-income groups. The following is the respondent profile.

Table 1. Respondent Profile

Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	25	35.7
Female	45	64.3
Total	70	100.0
Age		
< 20 years	2	2.9
20-25 years	31	44.3
26-30 years	31	44.3
31-35 years	6	8.6
Total	70	100.0
Education		
Senior High School	23	32.9
Diploma	19	27.1
S1	28	40.0
Total	79	100.0
Occupation		

Category	Frequency	Percent
Public employees	8	11.4
Private employees	32	45.7
Students	14	20.0
Self-employed	10	14.3
Other	6	8.6
Total	70	100.0
Income/pocket money per month		
<Rp 2,000,000	12	17.1
Rp 2,000,000 - 4,999,999	29	41.4
Rp 5,000,000 - 7,999,999	24	34.3
Rp. 8,000,000 - 10,999,999	5	7.1
Total	70	100.0

Table 2 illustrates consumer behavior towards McDonald's products. In the last six months, every respondent (100%) admitted to consuming McDonald's products. This study analyzes the preferences of Indonesian consumers who have consumed McDonald's products at least once in the last six months. Based on the frequency of consumption, the majority of respondents consume McDonald's very often (65.7%), while the other 34.3% consume it often. These data indicate that McDonald's has a consistent appeal among local consumers. Regarding the types of products most frequently consumed, the chicken menu dominates with a variety of combinations such as chicken and salad (25.7%), chicken with salad and Happy Meals (18.6%), and chicken with Happy Meals (12.9%). Other combinations such as chicken with French fries or drinks have a smaller percentage. In addition to chicken, products such as burgers, French fries, and salad are also consumed in various combinations, although the frequency is relatively low. This reflects the popularity of the chicken menu as the main choice of McDonald's consumers in Indonesia. The main reasons consumers choose McDonald's are varied, with healthier menu choices being the highest reason (22.9%), followed by a combination of good taste and healthier menu choices (7.1%). Other reasons include prestigious brand image, affordable price, and menu variety. Some consumers also appreciate a combination of factors such as good taste, affordable price, and brand image. These findings indicate that consumers are not only looking for good taste but also consider health and brand value when choosing McDonald's. The following is a table of consumer behavior:

Table 2. Consumption Behavior (Preferences Products)

Keywords	Frequency	Percent
Consuming McDonald's products		
Very often	46	65.7
Often	24	34.3
Total	70	100.0
McDonald's products are frequently consumed		
Chicken	2	2.9
Chicken, Happy Meals	9	12.9
Chicken, French Fries, Happy Meals	2	2.9
Chicken, French Fries, Salad	2	2.9
Chicken, Drinks, Happy Meals	1	1.4
Chicken, Drink, Salad	1	1.4
Chicken, Salad	18	25.7
Chicken, Salad, Happy Meals	13	18.6
Burger, Chicken, Fries	1	1.4
Burgers, Chicken, Fries, Drinks	1	1.4
Burgers, Happy Meals	1	1.4
Burgers, Fries, Happy Meals	1	1.4
Burger, Fries, Salad	2	2.9
Burgers, Fries, Salads, Happy Meals	1	1.4
Burgers, Salads	1	1.4
Burgers, Salads, Happy Meals	1	1.4
Happy Meals	2	2.9
French Fries, Ice Cream, Salad, Happy Meals	1	1.4
French Fries, Happy Meals	1	1.4
French Fries, Salad, Happy Meals	2	2.9
Drinks, Salads, Happy Meals	1	1.4
Salads, Happy Meals	6	8.6
Total	70	100.0
The main reasons for consuming McDonald's		
Brand image (prestige/popularity)	1	1.4
Brand image (prestige/popular), Healthier menu choices	7	10.0
Affordable prices	1	1.4
Affordable price, Brand image (prestige/popular)	3	4.3
Affordable prices, healthier menu options	4	5.7
Various menu options	1	1.4
Wide range of menu choices, Brand image (prestige/popular)	4	5.7
Diverse menu choices, Brand image (prestige/popular), Healthier menu choices	4	5.7
Various menu choices, Healthier menu choices	6	8.6
Healthier menu options	16	22.9
Good taste, Brand image (prestige/popular)	3	4.3
Good taste, Brand image (prestige/popular), Healthier menu choices	2	2.9
Good taste, Affordable price	1	1.4

Keywords	Frequency	Percent
Good taste, Affordable price, Various menu choices	1	1.4
Good taste, Affordable price, Healthier menu options	3	4.3
Good taste, various menu choices	3	4.3
Good taste, Various menu choices, Brand image (prestige/popular)	2	2.9
Good taste, Various menu choices, Healthier menu choices	3	4.3
Great taste, Healthier menu choices	5	7.1
Total	70	100.0

Table 3 provides a comprehensive overview of respondents' perceptions of product quality, health, product transformation, and McDonald's brand. Based on the data, respondents' perceptions of product quality showed an average score of 4.40, indicating that respondents strongly agree that McDonald's uses quality ingredients, has consistent taste, attractive product appearance, and food portions that meet quality and consistency standards. In respondents' perceptions of health, an average score of 4.60 revealed that respondents strongly agree that McDonald's serves products that are nutritionally balanced, supports healthy eating patterns (examples: Salad, Happy Meals), meets food safety standards, and supports a healthy lifestyle. Meanwhile, respondents' perceptions of product transformation recorded the highest average score, which was 4.63. This shows that respondents strongly agree that McDonald's has innovated in providing healthy menus, transformed its image from a junk food provider to a healthy food provider, increased transparency of nutritional value, promoted healthy menu choices through marketing campaigns, and introduced more low-calorie menus. Then on the respondents' perception of the brand, the average score of 4.63 also confirms that respondents strongly agree that McDonald's is a brand that reflects a modern and health-conscious lifestyle, consistent in providing quality products, innovative in meeting consumer needs, and trusted in maintaining quality standards throughout its outlets. Overall, this table shows that respondents have a very positive perception of McDonald's, both in terms of its products and brands, with an emphasis on innovation and commitment to health.

Table 3. Respondents' Perceptions of Product Quality

Variables	Indicator	STS	TS	N	S	SS	Mean	Category
Perception of Product Quality	Quality Materials	0	0	0	4	66	4.94	Strongly agree
	Consistent Taste	0	0	15	51	4	3.84	Agree
	Attractive Appearance	0	0	20	37	13	3.90	Agree

Variables	Indicator	STS	TS	N	S	SS	Mean	Category
	Quality Control	0	0	3	13	54	4.73	Strongly agree
	Natural Ingredients	0	0	2	26	42	4.57	Strongly agree
Average Perception of Product Quality							4.40	Strongly agree
Variables	Indicator	STS	TS	N	S	SS	Mean	Category
Perception of Health	Balanced Nutrition	0	1	0	16	53	4.73	Strongly agree
	Healthy Eating Patterns	0	0	5	21	44	4.56	Strongly agree
	Healthy Menu	0	0	3	27	40	4.53	Strongly agree
	Food Safety	0	3	1	24	45	4.54	Strongly agree
	Consumer Health	0	0	1	23	46	4.64	Strongly agree
Average Perception of Health							4.60	Strongly agree
Variables	Indicator	STS	TS	N	S	SS	Mean	Category
Perceptions of Product Transformation	Healthy Menu Options	0	0	0	20	50	4.71	Strongly agree
	Healthy Food Provider	0	0	5	21	44	4.56	Strongly agree
	Nutritional Value Transparency	0	0	1	24	45	4.63	Strongly agree
	Marketing Campaign	0	0	1	23	46	4.64	Strongly agree
	Low Calorie	0	0	25	45	0	4.62	Strongly agree
Average Perception of Product Transformation							4.63	Strongly agree
Variables	Indicator	STS	TS	N	S	SS	Mean	Category
Perception of Brand	Lifestyle	0	0	1	19	50	4.70	Strongly agree
	Consumer Health	0	0	3	23	44	4.59	Strongly agree
	Quality Products	0	0	4	21	45	4.59	Strongly agree
	Consumer Needs	0	0	1	29	40	4.56	Strongly agree
	Can be trusted	0	0	0	18	52	4.74	Strongly agree
Average Perception of Brand							4.63	Strongly agree

The results of this study support the theory of consumer perception, which states that perception is the process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting information to form a view

of a product or brand (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019). McDonald's efforts to change its image from an unhealthy fast food provider to a healthier one have had a positive impact on consumer perception. This strategy includes adding healthy menus such as salads, fruits, and low-calorie foods, as well as transparency of nutritional information on their products (Economy, 2014). Research shows that consumers respond to this change by having more trust in McDonald's commitment to supporting a healthy lifestyle (Cheon et al., 2019). In addition, this change is in line with global trends that emphasize the importance of social responsibility and consumer health.

The result is that McDonald's is able to increase loyalty and a positive image in the eyes of consumers (Eisyami et al., 2022). The high consumption rate (65.7% of respondents very often consume McDonald's) reflects consumer acceptance of products identified as quality, healthy, and innovative. Positive perceptions of product quality (average score of 4.3972) reflect that consumers view McDonald's products as having consistent taste, quality ingredients, and standard portions. Health perceptions with an average score of 4.6000 indicate strong acceptance of McDonald's claims in providing a healthy, safe menu and supporting a healthy lifestyle. Furthermore, appreciation of product transformation (average score of 4.6336) and brand (average score of 4.6343) indicate that consumers not only see McDonald's as a trusted and consistent brand, but also relevant to the needs of modern consumers who care about health.

McDonald's communication and innovation strategies have proven successful in creating positive perceptions that support consumer decisions in choosing its products. This is in line with the theory that states that consumer perceptions influence purchasing behavior (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). McDonald's has utilized various communication channels to convey relevant messages, such as the "Our Food, Your Questions" campaign that increases transparency and consumer trust (Yazdanpanah, 2021). Healthy menu innovations, digital-based ordering technology, and environmentally friendly promotions also contribute to the success of this strategy (Setiadi, 2024). These findings provide important insights for the fast food industry to develop marketing strategies that emphasize convenience, taste, and other added value, while still considering the preferences of increasingly health- and environmentally conscious consumers (Xue et al., 2021).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

This study shows that McDonald's efforts to change its image from a junk food provider to a healthier fast food provider have been very well received by consumers. This is reflected

in the high consumer perception scores for product quality (average 4.40), health aspects (average 4.60), product transformation (average 4.63), and brand (average 4.63). This change in perception not only increases consumer trust in McDonald's as a provider of quality and healthy food, but also influences consumer decisions in choosing fast food menus, with 22.9% of consumers citing healthier menu options as the main reason they consume McDonald's. These findings indicate that McDonald's strategy in integrating health aspects into its products, such as the introduction of healthy menus and increased nutritional transparency, has succeeded in changing consumer perceptions while maintaining a strong and trusted brand image.

Given the success of McDonald's image transformation, the suggestion from this study is that fast food companies like McDonald's must continue to strengthen their position as healthy fast food providers. This can be done by consistently innovating in developing healthy menus, increasing transparency of nutritional information, and strengthening marketing campaigns that focus on health aspects. In addition, companies need to maintain product quality consistency across global and local outlets, develop healthy menu variations that suit local preferences, and conduct regular evaluations of consumer perceptions so that strategies remain relevant to dynamic needs. Finally, companies can increase consumer education about healthy menu choices through various communication channels to maintain and strengthen the positive perception that has been built.

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