Junk Food Threats and the Need for Urgent Regulatory Measures in Malaysia

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.101000651

Received: 23 October 2026; Accepted: 28 October 2026; Published: 13 November 2026

ABSTRACT

The increasing consumption of junk food in Malaysia has been linked to a surge in non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases, creating a significant public health challenge. This paper analyses the importance of regulating the prohibition of junk food in Malaysia by looking at the best practices of other countries that have implemented bans or strict regulations on junk food consumption. Nations like Chile, Norway, and Mexico have adopted varying approaches, such as implementing taxes on sugary beverages, banning junk food advertising to children, and enforcing clear nutritional labelling. These policies have resulted in reduced rates of obesity and improved dietary habits among their populations. In contrast, Malaysia, with minimal regulation to regulate junk food, continues to face escalating health issues related to poor dietary habits. Adapting doctrinal methodology, comparing the effectiveness of regulatory approaches in these countries with the current situation in Malaysia, this paper highlights the potential benefits of adopting similar measures, such as advertising restrictions, taxes on unhealthy foods, and mandatory nutritional information. The analysis also considers the socio-economic and cultural contexts of these countries and Malaysia's diverse demographic, discussing the feasibility and challenges of implementing such regulations. Ultimately, this paper argues that a tailored regulatory framework through law, guidelines or policies, inspired by international best practices could substantially curb the consumption of junk food in Malaysia, thereby addressing the public health crisis and promoting healthier lifestyles.

Keywords: education, child rights, indigenous children, CRC 1989

INTRODUCTION

Junk food defined as sweet or salty snacks, readily available, inexpensive, and unhealthy, such as chips, sweets, candies, crackers, instant noodles, carbonated drinks and fast food for example not only generates high income revenue for businesses but is also food of convenience for consumers (Pomeranz et al.,2018). Manufacturers are thriving to pro-create as many types of junk food as possible to entice consumers with the aid of the media platform to advertise junk food options apart from the objective of generating income. Even though consumers bask in the convenience and excitement of the varieties of junk food options, junk-food is considered to be unhealthy because it does not have any nutritious value specifically food variants that are high in salt, sugar and additives (Shamsol&Fisol,2023). Consequently, junk food is considered as a non-healthy food option. The ingredients in the junk food are deemed to be a health hazard as it is said to cause obesity which consequently leads to diabetes, high cholesterol, hyper-tension and other related illness which is a cause for concern in Malaysia (Ng et al., 2021). Literature reveals a significant regulatory gap in Malaysia, where the sale of junk food and unhealthy food consumables in schools remains insufficiently governed by a comprehensive and legally enforceable regulatory framework, as existing controls rely primarily on school canteen guidelines and administrative circulars, resulting in challenges relating to consistent enforcement, compliance and the protection of schoolchildren's nutritional health (Mok et al., 2021).

Other countries, however, such as the United Kingdom, Chile, Norway and Mexico recognizing the detriment that junk food causes to human health, have taken regulatory measures to counter the negative nuances even though the junk food industry contributes significantly to the economic growth through job creation, marketing, and tax revenue. Malaysia should follow suit notwithstanding its economic profitability because the growing dependency on junk food undermines public health and sustainability, demanding urgent policy and societal attention. Applying doctrinal methodology, comparing the best practices of other countries such as Chile, United Kingdom and Mexico, the objective of this article is to discuss why and how Malaysia should regulate the sale of junk food.

METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a qualitative research methodology based primarily on doctrinal legal analysis, supplemented by a comparative legal approach, to examine the adequacy of Malaysia's regulatory framework governing the sale and consumption of junk food in schools. The doctrinal analysis involves a critical examination of primary legal sources, including relevant Malaysian legislation, subsidiary legislation, regulations, official policies, administrative circulars and guidelines governing school canteens, food safety, nutrition and child protection. Secondary sources, including academic journal articles, scholarly books, research reports and publications by relevant governmental and international organisations, are analysed to identify existing regulatory gaps, enforcement challenges and the implications of unhealthy food consumption for children's health and well-being. In addition, a comparative legal analysis is undertaken to examine the regulatory frameworks and best practices adopted by Chile, the United Kingdom and Mexico, particularly in relation to restrictions on the sale and marketing of unhealthy food products, front-of-package nutrition labelling, school food standards and the enforcement of measures aimed at reducing childhood obesity. These jurisdictions are selected to identify effective regulatory approaches that may inform legal reform in Malaysia, considering differences in their legislative structures, institutional arrangements and public health priorities. The findings from the doctrinal and comparative analysis are subsequently synthesised to evaluate the strengths and limitations of Malaysia's existing legal framework and to propose evidence-informed, legally enforceable and contextually appropriate reforms to strengthen the regulation of junk food in schools and safeguard children's right to health and adequate nutrition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Why is there an urgent need to regulate junk food in Malaysia?

Junk food, characterized by high levels of sugar, salt, and unhealthy fats, contributes to obesity and related chronic diseases (Fruh, 2017). In Malaysia, obesity accounted for 13.3% of total health costs in 2017, amounting to USD 1.7 billion, excluding indirect costs like loss of productivity (Institute for Public Health (IPH) 2022). The economic impact of obesity is substantial. The World Obesity Atlas estimates that the global economic impact of overweight and obesity will be $3.3 trillion in 2030 and $4.3 trillion in 2035, causing higher healthcare spending and reduced productivity (World Health Organization, 2025). If nothing is done, the global costs of overweight and obesity are predicted to reach US$ 3 trillion per year by 2030 and more than US$ 18 trillion by 2060 (Okunogbe, 2022).

Moreover, consumption of junk food has been linked to mental health issues. A meta-analysis revealed that junk food consumption increases the odds of developing depression and psychological stress in adults (Hafizurrachman et al., 2021, Malmir et al., 2023). This underscores the need for regulation to mitigate the adverse effects of junk food. Furthermore, eating junk food as staple food causes obesity that results in fatty liver, poor metabolic rate, poor cognitive development and overall well-being of a child (Singh et al., 2021). Children's addiction to junk food is particularly due to media advertisements (Naderer, B. (2021). A study found that just five minutes of exposure to junk food ads led children to consume an average of 130 extra calories per day. This highlights the need for stricter regulations on junk food marketing targeted at children (Naderer, B. (2021).

The ill effect of junk food to health is not an unknown fact. Many research has been carried out and it is evidence based. It has been recognised and admitted world-wide that junk food is the root cause to many illnesses(World

Health Organization, 2025). Nonetheless, the production, demand and the glamouring of junk food does not see an end especially when revenue overshadows the well-being of consumers. Though, junk food has been declared to be an unhealthy food option, it is left to the discretion and choice of the consumers to consume and risks the health hazards under the auspice of freedom of purchasing power. Since consumers have the choice and autonomy to eat healthy options, the dichotomy of junk food and healthy food takes a backlash. Furthermore, not all food variants that fall under the definition of junk food are considered to be unhealthy such as dried fruits, cheese, yogurt and health bars namely. Nonetheless, a distinction should be drawn within the junk food definition, as to which food variant should be considered as healthy and non-healthy. The non-healthy options should be monitored and controlled by regulation.

Malaysia faces a growing obesity epidemic, with significant economic implications because obesity causes health implications that can cost the government in the health sector. Large public and private healthcare spending has resulted from the growing demand for medical care and long-term care for diseases linked to obesity. The economic effects of obesity brought on by junk food intake would continue to put a burden on Malaysia's healthcare system and impede initiatives for long-term public health improvement unless adequate action is taken. While the government has implemented measures such as the tax on sugary drinks, experts suggest that more comprehensive strategies are needed. Chai et al. (2024) reported that the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2022 revealed a decline in health status and lifestyle habits among Malaysian adolescents (Institute for Public Health, 2022). The prevalence of being overweight, lack of physical activity, prolonged sitting, inadequate nutritional intake, high consumption of carbonated soft drinks, and an increased intake of fast food is escalating among adolescents across all age groups. The NHMS 2022 indicated that approximately one-third of teenagers were considered overweight or obese, one in three consumed soft drinks daily, and one in ten ate fast food at least three times a week (Institute for Public Health, 2022). These facts indicate the reasons why the need for stricter regulations and policies to promote healthier food environments.

Regulatory Framework in Malaysia

Food safety standards practiced in Malaysia are regulated by the Food Act 1983, Food Regulation 1985 and the Food Hygiene Regulation 2009. The concern of these laws is on food safety, food hygiene, and labelling regulations. These laws, however, do not address the marketing of harmful junk foods, especially to youngsters. In 2008, Malaysia introduced the "Fast Food Advertising Guideline" and the "Responsible Advertising to Children Pledge" (Malaysia Pledge), encouraging food companies to limit advertising to children. However, these initiatives are voluntary and lack enforcement devices. A study found that self-regulatory approach has been ineffective, with industry resistance and insufficient monitoring leading to minimal impact on reducing children's exposure to unhealthy food marketing. Ng in his article stated that ‘lack of resources’ and ‘lack of political will’ by the government was also the deterring factor that curbed initiatives to regulate control over junk food in Malaysia (Ng et al., 2021). Therefore, even though Malaysia's existing food laws ensure food safety and hygiene, they fall short in addressing the public health risks associated with the marketing of unhealthy junk foods.

Comparative Legal Analysis with Other Countries

Countries that have implemented stringent regulations on junk food offer valuable insights into the effectiveness of such measures in combating public health issues like obesity and diet-related diseases. Below is a comparative overview of several nations that have adopted robust policies as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparative Overview with Other Jurisdictions

Country	Key Measures	Outcomes
Mexico & Chile (Crosbie et al.,2023)	Front-of-package warning labels, school bans, advertising restrictions.	73% reduction in children's exposure to junk food ads; decreased sugary product purchases.
Mexico (Abreu et al., 2024)	School sales ban, soda tax, advertising restrictions.	12% reduction in soda and junk food consumption.

United Kingdom(Muir, 2023)	Sugar tax, upcoming advertising bans (Oct 2025).	Anticipated reduction in junk food consumption; ongoing debates on effectiveness.
Malaysia(Sritharan, 2024)	Sugary drinks tax (2019).	Initial steps taken; Obesity is still high. Further measures needed to address obesity crisis.

The measures taken by countries such as Mexico, Chile, and the United Kingdom as shown in Table 1 demonstrate that comprehensive regulatory measures can effectively reduce junk food consumption and improve public health outcomes. While Malaysia has initiated some actions, adopting a more holistic approach akin to those in Mexico should yield significant benefits in combating obesity and related health issues. To effectively regulate junk food in Malaysia, the government should adopt a multi-pronged approach informed by successful international models while considering local context, cultural habits, and enforcement capacities such as legal reforms, health awareness campaigns, incorporate curriculum that includes healthy eating in schools and other holistic non-regulatory approaches apart from regulatory reforms. Regulatory reforms proposed bench marking the best practises of other countries are discussed in the subsequent paragraph.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

How Malaysia should regulate junk food?

To protect consumers, especially children, from the detrimental effects of junk food marketing, there is an urgent need for comprehensive legislative reforms that include mandatory regulations and enforcement mechanisms benchmarking the best practices of other countries namely Mexico and the United Kingdom as follows.

a. Expand Fiscal Policies

Malaysia implemented a sugar-sweetened beverage (SSB) tax in 2019 especially when the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended in 2016 "implementation of an effective tax on sugar-sweetened beverages" as one of several key measures to address childhood obesity. This tax should be expanded to all high-sugar, high-salt, and high-fat processed foods similar to the measures undertaken in Colombia and Mexico to discourage consumers from junk food consumption (James et al., 2020). Instead, the tax revenue can be utilised to fund public health campaigns and subsidize healthy food options such as fresh food like fruits and vegetables.

b. Implement Clear Food Labelling Laws

Mexico implemented robust labelling requirement for junk food as a form of deterrence especially when it was reported that children and adolescents are overweight leading to health deterioration (James et al., 2020). Mexico has been a world leader in getting people to change unhealthy eating behaviors, and they have implemented assertive labelling of processed foods using large octagonal warnings about excess calories, sugar, and fat if the unhealthy ingredients exceed globally agreed thresholds under NOM-051-SCFI/SSAI-2010. The purpose of these black warning labels is to inform people about the dangers of ultra-processed foods and drinks pose to their health. Additionally, the legislation prohibits the sale or free distribution of these items in nurseries and schools, and it limits their promotion to youngsters. This action should be made mandatory in Malaysia under the Food Regulations 1985 with simple easy to understand language so that consumers can understand nutritional risks they are taking in consuming junk food.

c. Restrict Junk Food Marketing

Strict legal measures, self-regulation among industries that produce junk food, and consumer education should be a part of a complete junk food marketing limitation approach. Clear rules, enforcement procedures, and international collaboration is necessary to control and limit junk food marketing especially among children. Consumers should be informed about the negative impacts of junk food marketing and how to choose healthier options, and industry should be urged to establish voluntary norms of practice to encourage healthy eating instead of exploiting children with toys and false representations to entice eating junk food. The United Kingdom for

example implemented a landmark step under the Health and Care bill that ban junk food advertising which is to take effect in October 2025, that would drastically change how food and beverage companies advertise junk food to consumers especially children (UK Government, 2024). This measure was taken in an effort to combat the growing prevalence of childhood obesity, the prohibition targets high-fat, salt, and sugar (HFSS) goods and applies to both television and paid internet advertisements.

d. Ban Junk Food Sales in Schools, Universities and Public Institutions

It is concerning to note that the availability of junk food and beverages in schools is adversely connected with overall intakes of healthy foods and favourably connected with overall consumption of junk food and beverages (Levasseur, P. (2021). Levasser also noted that in developing countries, especially, school canteen regulations are typically relaxed, enabling vendors to sell any goods within the school, particularly junk food that is high-calorie, low-nutrient-dense snacks and drinks. The government of Mexico took a robust a move by imposing a ban on selling junk food in schools. Schools will be imposed a penalty if it sells any junk food to children. Likewise, in Malaysia, the government should implement a total ban on the sale of junk food and sugary drinks in school canteens. Street vendors should also be banned from selling any food outside the vicinity of schools to school children. Healthy meal guidelines as recommended by World Health Organisations should be strictly conformed to introducing and educating lifelong healthy eating habits among school children.

e. Support Healthy Food Accessibility and Affordability

The Malaysian government should subsidize local fruits, vegetables, and whole foods, especially to cater the lower income groups and rural areas to encourage consumers to eat healthy. Furthermore, local retailers should be given incentives to offer healthier food options. The government should also support urban farming and food cooperatives to boost food security and access. For example, in India, has implemented several policy measures and initiatives to subsidize or support healthy eating, primarily through government schemes, public distribution systems, and nutritional programs (Chaudhary et al., 2023). These steps aim to make nutritious food affordable and accessible, especially to vulnerable populations. For example, to encourage consumers to eat millet, the Government of India subsidies millet production and procurement and organises awareness campaigns on their health benefits (Chaudhary et al., 2023). Financial incentives are also awarded to farmers and states to grow millets.

f. National Public Health Campaigns

Lastly, as how the media is used to exploit consumers especially children to encourage junk food eating habits, the government should launch nationwide media campaigns on TV, radio, TikTok, etc. to warn consumers about the health risks of junk food. (Prybutok et al., 2024). Research has also found that the frequency and repetition of these advertisements normalize unhealthy eating behaviors, making junk food consumption a habitual part of children's diets (Boyland & Whalen, 2015). The digital environment further intensifies this effect by enabling personalized ads and influencer marketing, which makes junk food marketing more persuasive and difficult to regulate.

Therefore, by leveraging the power of media for educational and preventative messaging, the government can help shift public attitudes and encourage healthier lifestyle choices, particularly among younger demographics. A sustained, well-funded campaign can also support the effectiveness of policies to encourage healthy eating habits among children.

CONCLUSION

Malaysia can lead the region by implementing bold, evidence-based junk food regulations as with countries like Chile, Mexico, and the United Kingdom that have implemented successful policies to reduce junk food consumption among children. By combining fiscal tools, educational efforts, food labelling, and advertising restrictions, Malaysia can curb junk food threats which is the root cause to health hazards specifically the growing obesity epidemic which would consequently reduce the long-term economic burden on its healthcare system. Robust regulatory measures are imminent such as restricting junk food advertisements targeted for

children and school zone especially can shield children from manipulative marketing tactics and reduce demand for unhealthy options by creating awareness and educating children to healthy eating

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was undertaken under the *Dana Penyelidikan MyRa* (100-RMC 5/3/GPM 003/2020) awarded by Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Shah Alam, Selangor.

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