

The Unhealthy Lifestyle Among Millennial and Gen Z Consumers in Selected States Within Malaysia: Which Factor Matters?

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Abstract

Chronic diseases such as diabetes, cancer, and heart disease are identified as the primary contributors to mortality and morbidity. A deeper understanding of these characteristics, especially in the millennial and Gen Z populations, could facilitate improving public health policies. The present study aims to explore the underlying factors associated with unhealthy lifestyles among millennial and Gen Z consumers. Additionally, this study seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the various factors that contribute to the adoption of unhealthy lifestyles. Therefore, the present study intends to explore qualitative perspectives to gain a comprehensive understanding of unhealthy lifestyles and the factors associated with such behaviours among millennial and Gen Z consumers residing in selected states within Malaysia. This study employs a qualitative research approach, specifically employing open-ended questions to gather data from a sample of 30 selected millennial and Gen Z consumers. The findings from a qualitative content analysis yielded four relevant themes of an unhealthy lifestyle: lack of physical activity, excessive use of social media, influence of family and friends, and poor sleep quality. This study makes a valuable contribution to the existing body of knowledge pertaining to the prevalence of unhealthy lifestyles among millennial and Gen Z consumers residing in selected states within Malaysia.

Keywords: Unhealthy Lifestyle, Millennial Consumers, Gen Z Consumers, Insights, Physical Inactivity, Social Media, Family And Friends, Sleep Quality

Introduction

Chronic diseases such as diabetes, cancer, and heart disease are identified as the primary contributors to mortality and morbidity in the United States. The National Centre for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion has identified these factors as the primary contributors to the \$4.1 trillion in annual healthcare expenditures in the country. In Malaysia,

it has been observed that a significant proportion of the adult population, approximately 8.1%, is at risk of developing non-communicable diseases, specifically diabetes, hypertension, and high cholesterol (CodeBlue, 2020). Cardiovascular disease, encompassing heart disease and stroke, stands as the primary cause of mortality on a global scale. The implementation of measures to manage the principal risk factors, including sedentary lifestyle, inadequate dietary habits, and tobacco consumption, has the potential to avert approximately 80% of premature deaths associated with these factors (Lönnerberg, Ekblom-Bak, & Damberg, 2019). From an alternative standpoint, the adoption of a healthy lifestyle is regarded as the most effective approach to attaining a life characterised by good health and high quality. According to Tee et al. (2018), healthy living behaviour is a comprehensive concept encompassing various aspects such as smoking cessation, moderate or indirect alcohol consumption, and the adoption of healthy dietary habits. Past research has demonstrated that engaging in healthy lifestyle behaviours can effectively mitigate the likelihood of developing dementia and experiencing cognitive decline among the elderly. Meanwhile, Hanawi et al. (2020) explained that a healthy lifestyle is measured in various dimensions. Among them are the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scores (DASS). The measurement of a healthy lifestyle has also been measured through perceived stress and emotional distress, which can influence self-efficacy and optimism among students.

The millennial and Gen Z cohorts have emerged as prominent subjects of study, especially with regards to their significant impact on market influence, as these groups possess noteworthy attributes and exert considerable influence in today's economy. The reason for this phenomenon is that any cohort born after 1982 holds a significant proportion of assets in the current market (Salas-Paramo & Escandon-Barbosa, 2023). However, the increasing prevalence of detrimental conduct among millennial and Gen Z consumers has emerged as a significant cause for apprehension. According to Vallejo's (2018) study, it has been observed that millennial and Gen Z youths tend to exhibit suboptimal health due to their preference for unhealthy behaviours, including the consumption of junk food and fast food, soft drinks, and alcohol, as well as a lack of engagement in regular physical exercise. Recognising the importance of identifying the factors triggering unhealthy lifestyles, this study is expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of the causes of unhealthy lifestyles among millennial and Gen Z consumers and, by all means, guide the development of effective interventions to address them. To address this knowledge gap, an examination was conducted on qualitative research data obtained from open-ended question responses to gain insights into the viewpoints of millennial and Gen Z consumers regarding unhealthy lifestyles and fundamental factors in selected states within Malaysia. The study aimed to address inquiries pertaining to the following:

1. What are the opinions regarding unhealthy lifestyles among millennial and Gen Z consumers?
2. What are the main factors contributing to unhealthy lifestyles among Millennial and Gen Z consumers?

Literature Review

Physical Activity

The significance of engaging in higher levels of physical activity lies in the fact that even minor improvements in moderate-intensity physical activity can yield health benefits (Ekblom-Bak et al., 2016). Research has demonstrated that engaging in physical activity has the potential

to reduce the incidence and mortality rates of numerous chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, and various forms of cancer (Friedenreich, 2016). Numerous studies have provided evidence supporting the notion that engagement in physical activity can potentially reduce the likelihood of developing Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) and its associated advanced fibrosis (Kim et al., 2020; Cigrovski Berkovic et al., 2021). Conversely, sedentary behaviour and physical inactivity are becoming more prevalent. The prevalence of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) was found to be associated with prolonged sitting time and a low level of physical activity in a cross-sectional study conducted on middle-aged Koreans (Joo et al., 2020). Similarly, another study discovered that individuals diagnosed with NAFLD exhibit a predominant sedentary lifestyle, allocating less time to engage in moderate and strenuous activities. According to recent estimates, only approximately one-third of the global population is able to fulfil the recommended levels of physical activity (PA). This is consistent with the findings of the study, which found that a mere 29.7% of individuals met the criteria outlined in the Accepted Article Physical Activity Guidelines Recommendations (Zhang et al., 2020).

Therefore, the main risk factors for non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease, include inadequate dietary habits and insufficient physical activity. Despite the fact that these disorders frequently manifest in adults, the accompanying behaviours are usually established or reinforced during adolescence (10–19 years). To this end, the World Health Organization sanctioned a comprehensive worldwide approach in 2004, focusing on the domains of diet, physical activity, and health. The primary aim of this strategy was to enhance awareness, guide policymaking and implementation, monitor underlying factors, and mitigate the prevalence of NCDs stemming from inadequate dietary practises and sedentary lifestyles. Despite the implementation of the global plan over a decade ago, approximately 81% of adolescents worldwide still engage in insufficient physical activity (Ssewanyana et al., 2018).

Social Media

There is substantial evidence that traditional media marketing of unhealthy products exposes and influences children, adolescents, and young adults (Anderson, de Bruijn, Angus, Gordon, & Hastings, 2009). According to research, “vlogs” (i.e., video weblogs) by social media influencers are a popular channel for advertisers to effectively target young audiences through food marketing, similar to traditional media platforms such as television. This influencer marketing strategy entails promoting and selling items or services via social media via celebrities (“influencers”) who possess the capacity to shape the brand’s image and perception. Social media influencers, like food marketers in conventional media, predominantly endorse beverages and food products that are rich in sugar, fat, and salt (Tan et al., 2018; Folkvord et al., 2019; Coates et al., 2019). Consumption of these harmful goods is associated with an increased likelihood of developing overweight or obesity, as well as non-communicable diseases (WHO, 2010).

The increasing prevalence of online video content on platforms such as YouTube and other social media channels has led advertisers to adopt a novel and innovative approach for incorporating their material within these videos. In contemporary marketing practices, influencer marketing has emerged as a widely adopted strategy employed on various social networks. This approach involves brands establishing collaborative relationships with social media influencers who possess a significant following to endorse and publicise their offerings, be they products or services. In this manner, food companies and products are marketed by

influential vloggers through activities such as “unboxing” (i.e., the act of opening and testing the promoted foods), the creation of tutorials and evaluations of cosmetic products (i.e., beauty vlogs), or engaging challenges (e.g., contests, tricks, and games). Vloggers operate as role models for children, promoting increased consumption of marketed brands and products. In contemporary times, influencer marketing has emerged as a highly preferred avenue for advertising, as evidenced by the substantial majority of 94% of individuals who have employed this strategy attesting to its efficacy (Parnell, 2017; Potvin Kent et al., 2019). (Parnell, 2017; Potvin Kent et al., 2019).

Dunlop, Freeman, and Jones (2016) assert that social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube serve as conduits for the dissemination of advertising and promotional content that expose adolescents to harmful goods, including alcohol, tobacco, and food and beverages that are high in calories but low in nutrients. The prevalence of childhood and adolescent obesity is a major concern within the discipline of global public health. For instance, in the United States, approximately 34.5% of adolescents ages 12 to 19 are classified as overweight or obese, making them highly susceptible to the development of chronic health conditions as a result of their obesity. The phenomenon of effectively marketing nutrient-poor, high-energy foods and beverages through social media platforms has been extensively documented in various case studies. Social media platforms have demonstrated their effectiveness as a medium for brands to engage in innovative and highly shareable campaigns, as exemplified by the successful endeavours of Oreo, Burger King chicken sandwiches, and Coke bottles.

Family and Friends

The percentage of individuals who dined out with their relatives was twice as high as the percentage of individuals who dined out with their friends. Based on empirical evidence, a significant proportion of children consume the majority of their meals in the company of family members. Multiple observational studies have yielded findings indicating a positive correlation between the presence of parents during mealtime and enhanced dietary habits, as well as a reduced incidence of breakfast omission. Consequently, family-based interventions are regarded as effective strategies in the prevention of childhood obesity and the promotion of healthy lifestyles (Mahmood et al., 2021).

According to research, children’s family and friends have an impact on their smoking decisions. The findings from the study provide evidence to substantiate the hypothesis that peer pressure was the predominant factor contributing most commonly to the initiation of smoking (37.1%). Being in the presence of individuals who smoke may serve as a catalyst for initiating smoking behaviour (Qidwai et al., 2010). Livaudais et al. (2007) found a significant association between the presence of smoking friends at the initial stage and the subsequent initiation of smoking among Latino adolescents residing in the United States. The study conducted by Simmons-Norton (2007) investigated the socialisation and selection effects of peer smoking in the adolescent population.

Sleep Quality

Sleep deprivation is a prevalent occurrence in contemporary societies. In many nations, including Japan, there has been a noticeable decrease in the average duration of sleep, prompting a growing focus on the associations between inadequate sleep and adverse health consequences. Insufficient sleep duration, particularly when of short duration, has been found to be associated with both obesity and total mortality (Bruno et al., 2022).

Another study indicates that a significant proportion of respondents (58.9%) report obtaining less than eight hours of sleep per day, which raises concerns and warrants additional investigation. Carskadon et al. (1998), in a study by Brown University researchers, discovered additional significant patterns related to sleep among adolescents: contrary to the notion that adolescents require less sleep, it is evident that adolescents necessitate an equivalent or even greater amount of sleep compared to their childhood years, specifically around nine and a quarter hours. It is imperative to undertake initiatives aimed at enhancing the sleep patterns of adolescents through the dissemination of knowledge regarding proper sleep hygiene and the potential risks associated with unhealthy sleep practises among both youth, their parents, and medical professionals (Qidwai et al., 2010)

Methodology

Design

This study used standard content analysis to explore opinions regarding unhealthy lifestyles and the main factors that contribute to unhealthy lifestyles among millennial and Gen Z consumers. In classical content analysis, a substantial quantity of material undergoes a meticulous process of transformation into a methodically structured and succinct overview of pivotal outcomes. Data is abstracted from its manifest and literal substance to its latent meanings at each analysis phase by examining raw data from an MS Excel sheet and identifying categories or key themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select thirty respondents from the millennial and Gen Z cohorts. Participants were given a questionnaire via an online Google form to examine their opinions regarding unhealthy lifestyles and the main factors that contribute to unhealthy lifestyles among millennial and Gen Z consumers.

Ethics-related Matters

The study was conducted with a completely voluntary participation, ensuring anonymity and obtaining informed consent from individuals. Participants did not receive any financial incentives for their involvement in the study.

Data Collection

The data for this study was obtained through the administration of online open-ended questions, which aimed to gather insights on the perspectives surrounding unhealthy lifestyles and the main factors thereof among millennial and Gen Z consumers.

Data Analysis

The data was recorded on an MS Excel sheet. The researchers employed content analysis in this context to extend opinions regarding unhealthy lifestyles and the main factors that contribute to unhealthy lifestyles among millennial and Gen Z consumers. Conventional content analysis was used to examine the open-ended questions. The term “content analysis” refers to a wide range of textual investigations that often entail comparing, contrasting, and categorising a set of data (Schwandt, 1997; Creswell & Miller, 2000). Utilising content analysis enhances the capacity to discern the perspectives of millennial and Gen Z consumers pertaining to unhealthy lifestyles. Upon careful examination of the collected responses to the

open-ended questions, the researchers proceeded to identify and establish the overarching themes and subsequent sub-themes that emerged in the study.

Findings

Demographic Profile of Respondents

In total, data collection yielded 30 responses, as per Figures 1 and 2.

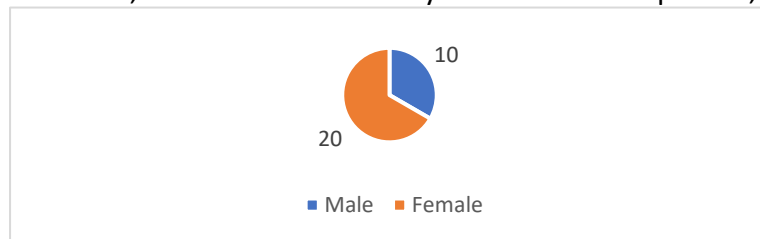


Figure 1: Gender of Respondents

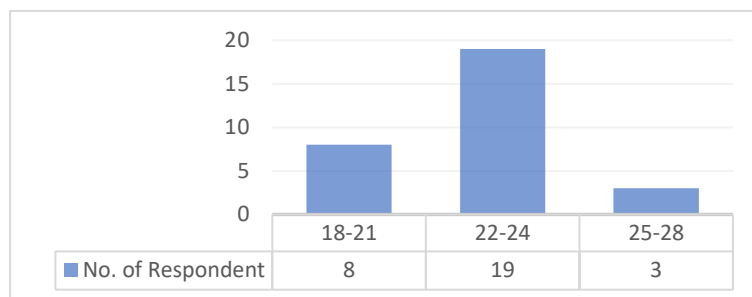


Figure 2: Age of Respondents

Opinion on Unhealthy Lifestyles Previous cross-sectional and longitudinal epidemiological research has shown that healthy lifestyle behaviours are unquestionably necessary for maintaining excellent overall health (Furhata et al., 2018). A number of lifestyle-related factors are known to be associated with unhealthy lifestyles, including inadequate nutrients and foods (Navarro-Prado et al., 2018), poor dietary intake patterns (Fitzgerald et al., 2013), insufficient sleep (Tambalis et al., 2018), and a lack of physical exercise (Fan et al., 2020). Engaging in regular physical activity during early adulthood confers protective effects on arterial health and diminishes the overall burden of disease in later stages of life. Poor fitness and low aerobic performance, on the other hand, are frequently connected with a sedentary lifestyle, which is a well-documented risk factor for the development of metabolic and cardiovascular illnesses (Davidson et al., 2018).

The insights from the millennial and Gen Z consumers are depicted below:

My view is that they are less exposed to healthy lifestyle practices and only practise their own way of life. – R1

Many youths nowadays have health issues because they don't practise a healthy lifestyle. Some of them can't cut down on smoking, and some of them also love to eat fast food. – R2

An unhealthy lifestyle will cause the body to be easily infected with various Diseases. – R6

It is not right for the youth to ignore healthy lifestyle practices and continue to live an unhealthy lifestyle. This is because it will have a long-term effect on them. For example, too many of today's youth are facing chronic health problems such as heart problems, high blood pressure, and diabetes. This is not impossible if bad habits continue to be practised. Therefore, changes need to be made for the good of one's own mental and physical health in addition to improving the quality of life. – R9

Physical Inactivity

The lack of physical activity has been recognised as a leading factor contributing to premature mortality. Research findings have indicated that engaging in physical exercise on a weekly basis is associated with a decreased likelihood of developing metabolic and cardiovascular disorders. Notably, the participants in this study were age-matched young health professionals who spent most of their weekdays engaged in sedentary activities related to their academic pursuits. When queried about their engagement in outdoor exercise during leisure time on weekends, approximately 50% of the respondents reported dedicating 4 hours to any type of physical activity outdoors per weekend. Conversely, a significant majority (83.1%) of the students acknowledged spending more than 3 hours per day on weekends engaged in sedentary screen-related activities (Sieverdes et al., 2010). The responses from millennial and Gen Z consumers to this theme are depicted in Table 1.

Table 1:

Responses from Millennial and Gen Z consumers pertaining to Physical Inactivity

No.	Theme: Physical Inactivity	Respondent
1.	Eat fast food; never exercise; smoke; and love eating cheese. Everything needs cheese.	R2
2.	The factor is a lack of exercise and not taking care of what you eat.	R15
3.	A lot of time is spent on social media, so there is a lack of time for leisure activities.	R16
4.	Do not exercise or take care of one's nutrition.	R21

Social Media

Increased access to technology and social media by young people was identified as a crucial risk factor for a sedentary lifestyle in 40% of key informant interviews and in three focus group discussions with rural secondary, peri-urban primary, and peri-urban secondary school students. Adolescents were found to spend lengthy inactive hours utilising such technology and media due to personal access to gadgets such as mobile phones, the increased presence of entertainment and internet service providers in the neighbourhood, and access to equipment such as televisions at home (Ssewanyana et al., 2018).

Limited research has been conducted on the combined impact of social media influencers and food advertisements. In a study conducted on adult participants, the researchers observed a higher likelihood of purchase for items endorsed by an influencer compared to those endorsed by celebrities. In an experimental study involving children aged 9–11 years, researchers made an intriguing finding: children who were exposed to a YouTube influencer showcasing unhealthy foods consumed a greater number of calories compared to children who were exposed to a YouTube influencer featuring non-food items. A separate laboratory study demonstrated that adolescents who were exposed to healthy food advertisements did not exhibit a higher consumption of vegetables compared to those who were exposed to advertisements featuring unhealthy food, vegetables, or non-food items (Schouten et al., 2020). The responses from millennial and Gen Z consumers to this theme are depicted in Table 2.

Table 2:

Responses from Millennial and Gen Z consumers pertaining to Social Media

No.	Theme: Social Media	Respondent
1.	Viral things that they always follow until they forget about the importance of their own health.	R1
2.	Among the factors are things that are viral and the influence of friends and family.	R6
3.	Influence of gadgets, peer pressure, and social media	R7
4.	Shared content from influencers; viral content from social media; having no time to prepare healthy food; being too lazy to exercise	R8
5.	Influence of current trends, social media, and peers	R9
6.	Influence of social media	R10

Family and Friends

The social, familial, and peer networks of millennial and Gen Z youths have a big impact on their lifestyles. Prior studies have identified a tendency to be unable to decline inappropriate suggestions. Adolescents often engage in unhealthy behaviours as a result of peer influence and the adoption of suggestions put forth by their friends. The participants held the belief that the absence of assertiveness in refusal contributes to the development of detrimental lifestyles. Several participants expressed concerns that refusing an offer could potentially result in expulsion or ridicule from their peers. In addition, families that pay attention to their adolescents and provide a family environment with reasonable independence limit their desire to associate with harmful people and unhealthy lifestyles (Zareiyan, 2017). The responses from millennial and Gen Z consumers to this theme are depicted in Table 3.

Table 3:*Responses from Millennial and Gen Z consumers pertaining to Family and Friends*

No.	Theme: Family and Friends	Respondent
1.	Factors contributing to peer influence	R3
2.	The influence of electronic media, parental inattention, neglecting the food pyramid	R11
3.	Peer influence	R18
4.	Peer influence	R20

Sleep Quality

Multiple studies have demonstrated a decrease in sleep quality among the general population amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in France, Italy, and various global regions. Sleep plays a crucial role in regulating human emotional functioning, and its impact on emotion regulation may elucidate the association between sleep disorders and compromised mental well-being, as well as the connection between sleep difficulties and behaviours related to health. In the presence of stress, emotional dysregulation can potentially play a role in the initiation and perpetuation of unfavourable lifestyle behaviours, such as smoking or alcohol consumption. The implementation of home confinement measures has the potential to disrupt the regulation of circadian sleep patterns due to reduced exposure to light and decreased levels of physical activity during the daytime (Bruno et al., 2022). The responses from millennial and Gen Z consumers to this theme are depicted in Table 4.

Table 4:*Responses from Millennial and Gen Z consumers pertaining to Sleep Quality*

No.	Theme: Sleep Quality	Respondent
1.	Excessive use of gadgets that disturb sleep time	R17
2.	Insufficient nutrition and sleep factors	R12
3.	Exposure to the phone screen for a long period of time, resulting in difficulty sleeping	R5
4.	Prolonged use of gadgets	R4

Conclusion and Implications

In summary, if millennial and Gen Z youths fail to prioritise a healthy lifestyle, they may be susceptible to chronic diseases like diabetes, cancer, and heart disease. Based on the findings from this study, several factors are associated with the adoption of an unhealthy lifestyle among millennial and Gen Z consumers residing in selected Malaysian states, including physical inactivity, engagement with social media platforms, the influence of family and friends, and the quality of sleep individuals experience. Every aspect that has been stated affects the adoption of unhealthy lifestyles among millennial and Gen Z youths, consistent with findings from past studies. Thus, this study has added evidence to existing studies related to factors that influence unhealthy lifestyles among the community, especially among millennial and Gen Z youths. In addition to the field of science, this study has provided input for planning and implementing policies related to healthy lifestyle practices in the community. For the management of NAFLD patients, healthcare providers can use comparison data to

identify areas of deficiency and urge healthy lifestyle practices such as food intervention and frequent physical exercise.

Several key factors have been identified as contributing to the prevalence of unhealthy lifestyles among millennial and Gen Z youths; therefore, the identification of factors affecting healthy lifestyles and the implementation of effective measures to address issues related to unhealthy lifestyles among millennial and Gen Z youths should be prioritised. Community members must be made aware of the significance of adopting a healthy lifestyle as well as the consequences of ignoring this issue. Multiple stakeholders must enhance their collaborative efforts to enhance the capacity for cooperation, thereby enabling millennial and Gen Z consumers to make informed decisions that positively impact their quality of life, particularly in relation to purchasing decisions. Efforts should be intensified and broadened to augment activities and programmes pertaining to the cultivation of healthy lifestyle practices. This is imperative in order to guarantee that millennial and Gen Z cohorts in the community are equipped with the necessary knowledge and resources to effectively tackle the underlying factors contributing to unhealthy lifestyle practices. Thus, within this particular context, families assume a crucial role in facilitating the adoption of a healthier lifestyle by millennial and Gen Z youths. Therefore, the provision of support and assistance from the family constitutes a crucial factor in guaranteeing a high standard of living for the millennial and Gen Z cohorts.

Our study contributes to the theoretical contribution in various ways. First, this research enhances our knowledge and understanding of the lifestyle of millennials and Gen Z consumers, which exposes them to multiple risks, such as depression and several chronic diseases. By exploring the determining factors of unhealthy lifestyles, this study extends the unhealthy lifestyle research stream that could disrupt the agenda towards society's well-being. Our research findings on unhealthy lifestyle factors further deepen the branch in society's well-being and the public health fields. Second, through the evidence from a qualitative study, this study adds several factors identified as the source of unhealthy lifestyles among millennials and Gen Z consumers. The evidence ranges from the selected millennial and Gen Z consumer participants across the states in Malaysia. By identifying determining factors, this study brings attention to the various factors that cause an unhealthy lifestyle, covering physical activity, social media use, family and friends' relationships, and the quality of sleep obtained by millennials and Gen Z consumers. Hence, it is crucial to focus on the factors and the necessary actions that are deemed required to improve the quality of lifestyle among millennials and Gen Z consumers.

For the contextual contribution, the study applies qualitative research that records the narratives of the participants, millennials, and Gen Z consumers, from several states in Malaysia. The data has then been categorized according to the several factors that lead to the main findings of a study. Hence, the qualitative approach has been valuable and significant in identifying factors leading to unhealthy lifestyles among millennials and Gen Z consumers. This study concludes that various factors could influence the lifestyle of millennials and Gen Z consumers and expose them to multiple risks. The study has significantly contributed to more evidence of factors contributing to unhealthy lifestyles among millennials and Gen Z consumers. Further, various parties are required to look at this issue closely, and various measures of action must be taken to improve the quality of lifestyles among millennials and Gen Z consumers. The study is in line with the SDG target, which is good health and well-being, as well as sustainable cities and communities.

Recommendation for Future Study

Further research should be undertaken within these particular demographics to illuminate areas of concern and potential avenues for resolution. Furthermore, future research endeavours should incorporate a larger sample size of participants or respondents, as well as additional states within Malaysia. In addition to the millennial and Gen Z demographics, studies on healthy lifestyles should encompass the elderly (Baby Boomers and Gen X), adolescents (younger Gen Z), and children (Gen Alpha). By doing so, researchers, policymakers, and the community at large can gain a comprehensive understanding of the various factors that impact healthy lifestyles. Consequently, this knowledge can inform the implementation of initiatives aimed at enhancing the overall quality of life within the community, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically the third SDG (i.e., good health and well-being).

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