

Title	How effective is the “EatSmart@restaurant.hk” campaign in Hong Kong?
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Issue Date	2016
Issue Number	5
Paper Number	8
Citation	Fong, B., Wan, A. & Chan, E. (2016). <i>How effective is the “EatSmart@restaurant.hk” campaign in Hong Kong?</i> (Working Paper Series No. 8, Issue 5, 2016). Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, College of Professional and Continuing Education, School of Professional Education and Executive Development. Retrieved Feb 6, 2017 from http://weblib.cpce-polyu.edu.hk/apps/wps/assets/pdf/w20160508.pdf
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How Effective is the “EatSmart@restaurant.hk” Campaign in Hong Kong?

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ABSTRACT

The “EatSmart@restaurant.hk” Campaign has been launched since 2007 in order to cultivate a healthy eating habit in Hong Kong. EatSmart restaurants provide customers with the healthier dishes, containing more vegetables and less oil, salt and sugar. This Campaign is a good way to encourage citizens to eat healthily and fit into their eating out culture. There are some deficiencies in its promotion, namely the sustainability of the Campaign. The supervision of EatSmart restaurants is not enough and can hardly guarantee the quality of healthier dishes. Moreover, it cannot attract restaurants to join due to the lack of incentives. The contents of promotion materials are also unclear. Although the Campaign has been implemented for around 9 years, the obesity rate is still increasing slightly. The majority of people consume inadequate daily fruits and vegetables intake even nowadays. Besides, there are very few restaurants participating in it. As a result, the effectiveness of the Campaign seems to be doubtful. As such, it is necessary to improve the Campaign. The Government plays the crucial role in this health promotional initiative, not only in its sustainability, but also provides a supporting policy, such as incentives to participate and regular checking of the EatSmart restaurants.

KEYWORDS: Obesity, Healthy Eating, Eating Out, Government Role, Promotion Strategies

1 INTRODUCTION

Hong Kong citizens work long hours in this cosmopolitan city. Most of them ignore the importance of healthy eating. They frequently eat out as part of the culture of Hong Kong, leading to high energy-dense food consumption and inadequate fibre intake. Excessive energy intake causes obesity. Unhealthy dietary habit is one of the main contributors to obesity.

It has been proven that healthy diet and adequate dietary fiber intake can prevent obesity (Slavin, 2005). The government of Hong Kong implements the “EatSmart@restaurant.hk” Campaign to promote healthy eating. However, the outcome of it is far below expectation.

2 OBESITY AND PROMOTION OF HEALTH EATING

The obese population in Hong Kong is about 20%, with nearly 15% of adult females and a third of adult males. The figure is fairly steady since 2007 (Census and Statistics Department, 2016). Obesity is associated with frequent dining out in Hong Kong (Ko, et al, 2007). Based on the data from Behavioural Risk Factor Surveillance System, nearly one in ten people eats out at least five times or more a week. More remarkably, nearly 40% eat out between two to four times a week (Centre for Health Protection, 2012). However, restaurant dishes are often high in fat, sugar and salt, and the portion size of food has been getting larger. Thus, consumers are “pushed” to eat more and increase the unhealthy food intake. Undoubtedly, it may increase the risk of overweight and obesity.

In a local survey in 2012, only half of the respondents were concerned about the calories intake when they ate out (The University of Hong Kong, 2012). On the other hand, more than 80 % of people consume inadequate fruits and vegetables daily, or less than 5 servings a day (Department of Health, 2016). In the Baseline Survey for the “EatSmart@restaurant.hk” Campaign (2007), more than half of the respondents have expressed that the vegetables and fruits portion is too little, whereas, fat is too much in food premises. Besides, people who eat out may consume higher intakes of energy-dense foods than those who eat at home more frequently (Bezerra, Junior, Pereira & Sichieri, 2015). The poor diet habits imply that the prevalence of obesity is going to remain at the same level or will increase.

Unhealthy eating habits also bring out many negative effects on health, such as diabetes and heart disease. These chronic diseases will increase morbidity and mortality, and raise the financial burden for health care. Therefore, the importance of healthy eating cannot be ignored. Without health, people can do nothing. Health is regarded as a basic element of the society and for personal development. Eating habit is affected by political, social, economic, cultural, environmental, behavioural and biological factors, in either good or bad ways. Therefore, health promotion should take good advantage of these factors to favour better and healthier eating behaviours.

“EatSmart@restaurant.hk” Campaign was introduced in 2007 to change the unhealthy eating habit, by educating the public and providing healthy choices as well as promoting healthy cooking in restaurants. Restaurants can provide customers with healthier meals to promote a healthy and balanced diet. The restaurants need to fulfil some requirements, and will pass an assessment to obtain the EatSmart Restaurants door decal, which represents that they offer customers healthier food choices regularly.

These EatSmart Restaurants can constantly provide the EatSmart Dishes - ‘More Fruit and Vegetables’ and ‘3 Less’, i.e. less oil, salt and sugar, dishes. They benefit from the recognition of being socially responsible business operators, and from the supports of

Department of Health to enhance their nutritional knowledge and food quality. For patrons, there are advertisements and “EatSmart Restaurants” Coupon Promotional Activity to encourage them to dine in EatSmart restaurants (Department of Health, 2012).

The “EatSmart@restaurant.hk” Campaign has aimed to promote healthy dishes and tried to build a friendly and healthy-eating environment to raise health consciousness when people eat out. However, only a minority of restaurants have joined the Campaign. Hence, the accessibility of EatSmart restaurants is practically limited. As a result, fewer customers can eat at EatSmart restaurants, leading to even fewer restaurants to join the Campaign as a result of the unfavourable operating environment. Thus, the “EatSmart@restaurant.hk” Campaign is no longer attractive to the restaurants (Centre for Health Protection, 2012).

Not only the number of restaurants suffers, but also the public awareness of this Campaign has limited the effects in the community. According to the Centre for Health Protection (2012), there is a significant relationship between awareness of the Campaign and the consumption of healthier dishes. Among the people, who are not aware of the Campaign, more than 90% of them would not choose EatSmart dishes. Even there is a call for healthy eating out, many people may not really care about their dietary habit and would not actively seek for the information of health Campaigns. When customers have no idea about the Campaign, they may refuse to try healthier dishes in the EatSmart restaurants, or simply turn to other restaurants. Therefore, the impact of the “EatSmart@restaurant.hk” Campaign in Hong Kong is very limited, partly due to the lack of advocacy.

3 DEFICIENCIES IN THE CAMPAIGN PROMOTION

The effectiveness and outcome may not be satisfactory as expected since the Campaign has not enhanced community awareness of healthy eating. Moreover, the participation rate is really low. There are some deficiencies in promoting the “EatSmart@restaurant.hk” Campaign.

3.1 Sustainability of the Campaign Promotion

Sustainability of health promotion activities is very crucial in achieving the goal of promotion and in maintaining the benefits to the communities and population. A sustainable action will continue to be delivered within the available resources, such as the limits of finances, expertise and infrastructures (Smith, Kwok & Nutbeam, 2006). However, the “EatSmart@restaurant.hk” Campaign could not take place continually. EatSmart Restaurant Cooking Competition was held in 2009 and 2010. Then, the activity suddenly came to an end. Moreover, in 2008, the government staged various activities to promote the Campaign, such as seminars, dining offers, promoting at Food Expo, but now, there remain only the newsletters to promote the campaign, giving the impression that it is not sustainable.

In terms of Campaign management, supervision of EatSmart restaurants is far from adequate. Although joining this Campaign is entirely voluntary, there is no supporting policy to maintain the Campaign, such as monitoring the EatSmart restaurants. Dishes with less sugar, oil and salt cannot be assured. On top of that, there has been no innovative improvement in spite of having launched the Campaign for about 8 years. Nonetheless, the government is still granting eligible restaurants decals but the outcome of this action is doubtful. Hence, the government should evaluate and improve this Campaign so as to achieve sustainability of a meaningful Hong Kong wide health promoting project.

3.2 Lack of Incentives to Restaurants

Although the restaurants can receive the decal to enhance their image and reputation, the incentive is not enough to attract more restaurants to join. Indeed, the application

procedure is quite complicated as the restaurants need to design at least five EatSmart dishes and submit the EatSmart Recipes Submission Form, which contains a lot of items to answer. Simultaneously, the staff should attend the briefing session. Indeed, most local restaurants do not have the resources or time to fully complete the requirements. Therefore, due to the lack of incentives, such as administrative supports and monetary subsidy, they are not willing to participate, resulting in a very low participation rate.

3.3 Problems of Promotion Materials

The government made use of the promotion website, leaflets and posters to promote this Campaign, but there are problems with the promotion materials. According to the six-stage model of communication, it is necessary for a sender to let a receiver gain attention, understand and accept the message so as to change the behaviour in order to improve health (Rice & Atkin, 2012, p. 307). The posters and leaflets related to the Eatsmart Campaign only show the slogan, “Dishes with less oil, sugar and salt”, without adding the benefits of participation in the Campaign. The promotion materials do not convey the clear messages of the benefits of healthy eating and the disadvantages of continuing unhealthy eating habit. Thus people cannot percept and interpret the messages of the Campaign. As such, people are not likely to change their behaviour.

4 EFFECTIVENESS AND OUTCOME OF THE CAMPAIGN

The main aim of the “EatSmart@restaurant.hk” Campaign is to promote a healthy eating habit and a balanced diet among people so as to maintain health. Before launching the Campaign, there was 78% of people having less than 5 servings of fruit and vegetables per day in 2008 (Centre for Health Protection, 2008). In 2014, the figure increased slightly to 81% (Centre for Health Protection, 2014). Hence, the Campaign may not have enhanced people’s awareness of health eating. Moreover, the number of people with overweight or obesity have increased very slightly. 38.5% of people in Hong Kong were over the normal BMI in 2007 but there were 39% people with over normal BMI in 2014 (Centre for Health Protection, 2014).

As a result, the Campaign seems to be ineffective in promoting healthy eating, and there are only very few restaurants supporting it. The participation rate is very low. More importantly, the majority of participants belong to restaurant chains, and so there are few choices for the customers, let alone the healthier ones. Besides, the restaurants awarded the EatSmart decal are not monitored regularly. Hence, it cannot guarantee the quality of healthier dishes and to ensure whether the restaurant complies with the guideline to offer customers healthier food.

Originally the “EatSmart@restaurant.hk” Campaign is designated to be a primary prevention initiative. It would help to prevent the onset of diet-related diseases in order to reduce the incidence. In fact, the Campaign is a good strategy to promote healthy eating as it really fits in Hong Kong people’s eating out culture. Unhealthy diet brings about the negative effects on health, such as obesity, high blood pressure and heart diseases. Due to the lack of continuing efforts and evaluation, the Campaign seems to come to “an end” even after the Department of Health have also launched EatSmart recipes and EatSmart restaurant mobile application to enhance the Campaign.

Furthermore, in regard to the ethical issue, health promotion Campaigns can enhance and strengthen personal autonomy in the face of a health risk as they learn more about their personal health risk (Bayer, Gostin, Jennings & Steinbock, 2007, p. 110). In the “EatSmart@restaurant.hk” Campaign, the customers can have healthier food choice in the restaurants. They can receive the message that high oil, sugar and salt intake may increase the

risk of obesity and heart diseases. Thus the Campaign is able to strengthen personal autonomy. As long as the government allocates more resources on increasing promotion of the Campaign and provides the restaurants with more incentives to attract them to join, the Campaign can successfully reach the goals in healthy eating for the benefits of the community.

5 IMPROVING THE “EATSMART@RESTAURANT.HK” CAMPAIGN

5.1 Community Awareness

The Government plays the crucial role in the Campaign, which lacks promotion sustainability. More interaction among the government, medium and catering industry shall facilitate the success of the Campaign. More than eight in ten people have indicated that they would be attracted by the EatSmart restaurants, if they have known the Campaign (Centre for Health, 2012). The Government should promote and advertise the Campaign vigorously through different media regularly to raise the community awareness. Better utilization of the social media can refresh the memory of the vast majority of people about healthy eating more effectively rather than just releasing the online newsletter in the official websites.

Promotional materials for the customers should list the disadvantages and consequences of unhealthy eating habit in order to be a cue to arouse people’s awareness of it, and to drive people to change their behaviour, according to the Health Belief Model. Perceived susceptibility has been found to be predictive of health promotion behaviours, and so people will be more motivated to behave in healthy ways if they are vulnerable to a particular negative health outcome (Orji, Vassileva & Mandryk, 2012). With an increase in public awareness of healthy eating through the mass media, people will be expected to attempt to choose healthy dishes in EatSmart restaurants.

Regular advertisements can also boost up the demand of the market due to the increased publicity. Then the industry will be more willing to join the Campaign. Promotional materials for restaurants should state the benefits of joining the Campaign, such as incentives, so as to attract more restaurants to join. If the participation rate is increasing, other non-participating restaurants may also apply to join this Campaign. More importantly, restaurant operators must understand the aims of the Campaign, and that they also have a corporate social responsibility to maintain the customers’ health through providing healthier food choices. Additionally, the application procedures of EatSmart restaurant should be simplified and be more user-friendly.

5.2 Spot Checks on EatSmart Restaurants

The Government should also provide supporting policy for the Campaign, in order to uphold the food quality and to encourage restaurants to join. For instance, the Department of Health can provide more training to restaurant staff. The Department may evaluate the EatSmart restaurants more frequently, and should enhance the supervision of the participating restaurants to make sure they offer the dishes with less oil, salt and sugar. The restaurants can be provided the measuring spoon to remind them to avoid adding excessive amount.

When a participating restaurant fails to meet the requirements, follow-up work must be done to maintain the quality of food and hence public trust. Some media have spot checked the restaurants and they have found that the dishes have not met the health standard and are even below the WHO standard. The “rumours” may affect the reputation of all of the EatSmart restaurants and the efforts of government adversely (Centre for Health Protection, 2012). Thus, apart from the current annual evaluation, spot check is recommended in order to keep the customers’ faith in EatSmart restaurants. Irregular checking can encourage the restaurants to be more alert and to provide dishes with standard and quality. Essentially, the

Government, media and the catering industry ought to collaborate more closely in a coordinated effort to make the Campaign a success.

5.3 Initiatives of the Catering Industry

The catering industry have a responsibility to co-operate with and be responsive to the Government's policy to promote the Eatsmart Campaign as well. They can encourage and assist the restaurants to enrol in the Campaign. Moreover, the industry may help to change Hong Kong's eating culture, in which dishes contain too much sugar, salt, oil to be more delicious. The industry can educate the chefs and restaurant operators to change their belief and alter their practice, that in spite of using less of the condiments, the dishes can still be tasteful and attractive but being healthier. For example, they can use healthier oil instead. Furthermore, the restaurants can display prominent and attractive healthy eating posters on the walls and around the dining hall to remind patrons to pay attention to eating habit and to choose the healthy dishes. The posters should carry clear messages, including benefits of healthy diet and disadvantages of unhealthy food.

5.4 Customer Actions

Healthy eating out should not be the sole responsibility of the Government nor the catering industry alone. The general public should support the Eatsmart Restaurant Campaign by patronizing these restaurants. The patrons can choose the healthier dishes in Eatsmart restaurants. The increase in such customers will encourage more restaurants to join the Campaign. Indeed, some healthier ingredients are perishable easily, such as farm-fresh vegetables and fresh meats. Hence, a reasonable turnover is needed to keep the ingredients from being wasted and thrown into the bins, and to guarantee the quality of food.

The Government, together with the catering industry and restaurant operators, should enhance public awareness in the community to facilitate customer actions. In addition, surveys should be conducted on customers to obtain opinions and feedback about the choices, quality and taste of the healthy dishes so that restaurants can improve the menu to better serve the customers. Healthier dishes and healthy eating out should become more attractive to the customers, making the healthy order an easy choice for the community.

6 CONCLUSION

Even though there are several inadequacies in the promotional strategies of the "EatSmart@restaurant.hk" Campaign, such as the sustainability of the promotion and problems of promotional materials, it is still believed that this Campaign can ease the increasing prevalence of obesity effectively in long run. The government's initiative has intended to target at the root of the poor eating out culture, which is considered as one of the major contributor to the increasing obesity prevalence, without much doubt. High in fat and low in fibre intake in diet definitely put the community at risk of obesity and diet-related chronic conditions.

Raising the community awareness, guarding the reputation of the Campaign and motivating the catering industry participation are suggested, in the hope to enhance the effectiveness of the "EatSmart@restaurant.hk" Campaign. The government and citizens play equally important roles in community health promotions. They should work closely and jointly since everyone has their own responsibility to maintain their own health. Without the supportive customers, the well-planned promotion can never be a success.

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