

An Opportunity for Vegetarian Option in Menu Rahmah: The Social Stratification Barriers

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Abstract

Stumbling upon a vegetarian option is a fresh idea for the *Menu Rahmah* initiative. However, the opportunity can be seized if the right chances turn up and to be granted by the respective authorities in ensuring the success of this programme. As such, there are several obstacles that limits the plant-based alternative to reach the mass. The qualitative methodology is employed to collect the data for this research. Therefore, this paper will explore two research questions focusing on why the food entrepreneurs have difficulties in serving a vegetarian menu and how the social stratification is a barrier for this option. 20 food operators from the Klang Valley region participated voluntarily for the face-to-face interview sessions that investigated their dilemma in this course of study. In addition, their conversations were recorded with their consent and remained anonymous in order to protect their identities. The transcriptions were transcribed and the themes were generated to analyze the information. Hence, the authority and cost played a crucial role in determining the barriers that stratified the vegetarian option for the food operators. Besides that, this article is significant to the stakeholders to strengthen the loose ends and to transpire the necessary solutions for the betterment of *Menu Rahmah* plan.

Keywords: Barriers; *Menu Rahmah*; Opportunity; Social Stratification; Vegetarian Option

1.0 Introduction

In the era of post Covid-19 pandemic, *Menu Rahmah* became a 'saviour' for the lower- and middle-income citizens (Aziz, 2023b). It is because we were grappling with internal and external issues that jeopardized not only our nation but most of the countries around the world. On that note, economy volatility led numerous business sectors to cease their operations. Therefore, it caused a ripple effect that witnessed job retrenchment as companies could not afford to pay the employees' salary. Moreover, the hike of essential goods complicated the matter further that resulted to inflation coupled with devaluation of the currency. Likewise, the eruption of wars in several parts of the states worsen the overall status. As such, the government needed to act swiftly by addressing specific policies in the context of food. Furthermore, it is a known fact that food is required for a man's existence. Hence, without it we will not survive.

On that account, the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Cost of Living mooted the *Menu Rahmah* at the end of January 2023 (Tan et al., 2024). Its inception at the beginning brought mixed reactions from the customers and shop owners as they hesitated of the unbelievable agenda. However, the commotion was put to an end when it managed to garner the support from the food associations to execute this noble intention. Along with that, it champions the corporate social responsibility (CSR) in order to relieve the hardship of those who is in destitute position of a proper meal. Besides that, the serving must include the nutritional dietary: rice, vegetable, fish or chicken and water. It must be sold for RM 5 or below either lunch or dinner hour (Devi, 2024). The six months trial run discovered to be 'victorious' despite encountering countless 'battles' in achieving this notion. In line with that, the programme is extended without any specific expiry datelines (Devi, 2023b).

On those grounds, the social stratification will shed light on the conflict aspect that can potentially harm the society (Thio, 2009). In other words, it limits the opportunities (Allman, 2012) of reaching its utmost capacity. Apart from that, the government exercised its authority (Van de Werfhorst & Salverda, 2012; Haugaard, 2017) by stipulating the price of *Menu Rahmah* at RM 5 and below. By its very nature, the cost of the meal cannot be adjusted according to the expense of the food operators. It is because the raw food price is high. Thus, they had to 'adhere to the ruling' (Bolton & Dewatripont, 2011; Hershovitz, 2010). In consequence, the shop owners will decide whether to sign up and continue or abandon this programme as it causes loss in their business profit. Ultimately, the customers will lose out in experiencing this privilege that was meant to assist the public in their arduous moments.

In essence, this paper will highlight the vegetarian option as a menu to be included in this programme. This alternative is able to provide an opportunity in upgrading and diversifying the typical meal that was introduced by the administration two years ago. Fundamentally, two research objectives will be examined: i) difficulties of the food entrepreneurs in serving a vegetarian menu and ii) social stratification barriers in its option. Thence, the opportunity to serve the meatless products by the shop owners will definitely be challenged due to the limits of stratification in the option.

Besides that, the review of literature will encompass three major aspects in the context of vegetarianism. As such, it is habitual to come across these following sub-sections: animal being, wellbeing and environmental being in the plant-based discourse.

1.1 Opportunity for Animal Being

The animals are living organism that has senses and goes through a similar life cycle in comparative to humans such as birth, adulthood and death. However, these sentient beings are not able to communicate in 'human language'. On that account, it made these animals to be sacrificed without their will as they were unable to express their thoughts and opinions. Moreover, this setback caused mankind to take advantage of these vulnerable creatures for their needs in terms of food pleasure (North et al., 2021). Besides that, the non-vegetarians will generally indicate that it is normal, common and natural to eat meat products (Simons, 2021). Furthermore, they will argue that it enriches a great sense of flavor to the cuisines. Nevertheless, it actually denies the rights of these beings from living life to the fullest. Furthermore, the homo sapiens are superior and exploits the animals for their consumption (Dhont & Ioannidou, 2021).

Intrinsically, the vegetarian community give an opportunity to the animals to be alive from being slaughtered (Nezlek & Forestell, 2020) and going into someone's mouth in the name of food! Likewise, the non-meat eaters feel compassionate of these sentient as they have emotions and feelings just like them (Hopwood et al., 2022). In addition, when the animals are 'butchered' the blood gushes out and causes a painful death. Food for thought: Is it worth to snatch another life for our consumption?

1.2 Opportunity for Well Being

An individual's wellbeing is intertwined with physiology, psychology and social features in thriving a prosperous life. As such, an optimal health can only be attained depending on the classification of food that we consume daily. Moreover, the food pyramid visualizes the portions that needs to be served for our day-to-day intake. Besides that, the Ministry of Health Malaysia had prepared a guideline in the year 2020 for a balanced diet meal. The 'quarter, quarter, half' policy reflects: a half of fruits and vegetables, a quarter of carbohydrate and followed by a quarter of protein on the "Malaysian Healthy Plate" (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2021). This mechanism is believed to project a full spectrum of healthy eating lifestyle behaviour (Dyett et al., 2013; Alexy, 2023) by avoiding diseases near future.

Apart from that, the plant-based perspective is presumed to contain a lower degree of cholesterol and saturated fat that will be beneficial in securing the internal organs from deteriorating in the course of time. Meanwhile, the significant degree of antioxidants and phytochemicals will facilitate in boosting our immune system (Janda & Trocchia, 2001). In consequence, the chances of warding off from terminal illness to non-communicable ailments such as several types of cancers, diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and etcetera (Petti et al., 2017) can be prevented by not indulging the meat substance. Hence, the meatless approach is able to shield us from dangerous infections by sustaining a longevity life (Fox & Ward, 2008). Food for thought: Is it worth to risk our health for meat craving?

1.3 Opportunity for Environmental Being

The environment is the essence of mankind that encompasses air, water and land for all living beings to exist for survival. Therefore, the preservation and conservation of 'Mother Nature' is imperative in sustaining the 'Creation of God'. Moreover, the polluted element that is released in the atmosphere, sea and soil will be detrimental in the long run for our ecosystem. Thus, the adverse effects can be observed via the prevalent incidents that are trending around the globe due to the animal demand for human consumption (Dhont & Ioannidou, 2024). It endangers our planet and depletes the natural resources that results to health issues and food security matters (Sanchez-Sabate & Sabate, 2019).

However, the meat absenteeism provides an opportunity to have sustainable environs. As such, it enables to reduce the anthropogenic impact of the climate footprints (Hopwood, 2022). Likewise, the vegetable plantations have lower risk of harming the ecology as it comprises lesser natural resources in producing food compared to the animal farming (Fox & Ward, 2008). Hence, the vegetarian practice is able to channel multiple advantages in the welfare of environmental sustenance (Bolderdijk & Jans, 2021) of the flora and fauna inhabitants. Food for thought: Is it worth to endanger the environment for our appetite?

Subsequently, the following section will describe thoroughly the methodology that was applied in gathering the information.

2.0 Methodology

Qualitative approach is considered apt for this study as it delves into the 'why' and 'how' inquiries. It allows the research to scrutinize the objectives in understanding the consequences of the present issue. Moreover, the triangulation technique (Bowen, 2009) was adopted to generate a comprehensive outcome in the process of data collection. It consists of evaluating written document, reasoning the observation and interpreting the interviews.

Intrinsically, the written documents (Creswell, 2007) are pertinent as it is the first published reports that comes to our knowledge. As such, newspapers are salient source in exposing the latest information in our nation and around the world. Further, the *Menu Rahmah* articles appeared in several newspapers that attracted the attention of the researchers. These printed and online media include *The Star* and *The Malay Mail*. By and of itself, the headlines that were splashed across these mainstream media were impressive. Even though, it is a gracious idea but it aroused suspicion among the Malaysians. It is because a nutritious square meal cost only for RM 5 that includes a portion of meat! Hence, this elevated the researchers' inquisitiveness to further unearth this 'mystery'. Besides that, the academic literatures in regard to the vegetarian perspective were inspected. However, this novel topic on *Menu Rahmah* had scarce information of the subject in concern.

Therefore, the next phase is to observe in order to authenticate the newspapers' articles. The detached observation (Patton, 2002) was pivotal in monitoring the shops whether they had introduced and implemented the government's policy. Several hot spots in the Klang Valley were watched over for the past three months. This form of method enabled the researchers to view the shops from the outsider's perspective without inquiring the shop owners in relation to the subject matter. In addition, the researchers paid attention to the type of dishes that were offered coupled with the price tags that were put up in their shops. By the same token, the arrival of the customers in purchasing food during the rush hours were also a paramount insight. It enabled to facilitate the planning of the interview sessions without affecting their business schedules.

Henceforth, the final phase is to substantiate the non-participant observation by conducting the interviews. The researchers identified the prior gatekeeper (McFadyen & Rankin, 2016) before embarking the research adventure. It was the gatekeeper's supportive cooperation that enabled to recruit the required purposive sampling participants. Thus, 20 food entrepreneurs voluntarily consented to be a part of the data collection process where their information became saturated. Besides that, the food operators' premises were located at the Klang Valley vicinity. The appointments for the face-to-face interviews were fixed according to the informants and researchers' availability. Moreover, the conversations were audio-recorded by utilizing the smartphone with their permission.

Further, the personal features were concealed in order to safeguard their particular details (Yin, 2009) as sensitive matters were disclosed during the discussions. In other words, they were camouflaged with pseudonyms. The interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes. It allowed these informants to express forthrightly of their opinions, perceptions, comments and suggestions on this current topic. In addition, without refraining their freedom of speech it allowed them to share various challenges in preparing the menu in accordance with the government's guidelines. These dialogues were later transcribed to identify the consequential themes in relevance to the objectives of this study. Intrinsically, the emerged motives were arranged based upon the social stratification barriers that detracts the shop owners. Along with that, the transcriptions of dialogues were cross-checked by both the researchers to decrease the bias element (Irvine, 2011). It is to detect any discrepancies of the information gathered. On that account, it ensures the data to be credible and trustworthy.

Thereafter, the next section is on the results and discussion. It will present the facts that were compiled from the food operators.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The results and discussion will illustrate the shop owners' predicament of the vegetarian option in the *Menu Rahmah*. In essence, two sub-sections were divided to justify the social stratification barriers: authority and cost. The

summary is shown in the table below:

Table 1: Social stratification barriers

Authority	Cost
Movement control order (MCO)	Post Covid-19 era
Close down business	Currency depreciation
Affect lower wage category	Rise of inflation
Introduced <i>Menu Rahmah</i>	<i>Menu Rahmah</i> fixed at RM 5
Food nutrition not compromised	Price of goods became expensive
Food operators support the policy	Food entrepreneurs dissatisfied
Vegetarian alternative welcomed	Fresh menu appreciated
Meat switch with vegetable protein	Healthy vegetarian menu
Lack of manpower to prepare menu	No profit to business

3.1 Authority Stratification Barrier

Stratification barrier will arise when there is specific rule that is enforced by the 'superior' to the 'subordinate' or in this context the 'government' to the 'citizens' (Van de Werfhorst & Salverda, 2012). The authority that dictates expects the public to adhere according to the policy that is outlined by the respective ministries. Hence, the *Menu Rahmah* initially was proposed to alleviate the people's financial burden in the early 2023 (Palansamy, 2024a). This situation occurred due to the devastating coronavirus pandemic that forced the government to impose lockdowns. The twice nation-wide movement control order (MCO) was to curb the widespread of the infection from spreading across the states. It is due to the number of death and the hospitalization cases that rose tremendously. Moreover, it could also make our health system to collapse due to the staggering number of patients that were receiving the medical care.

However, this scenario caused a destructive effect on our economy status keeping in mind that all sectors were impinged not only in Malaysia but around the globe. As such, small and medium enterprises had to close down their businesses as they were compelled to lay off their staffs. This unfortunate incident distressed the specific strata of the society especially the lower wage category (Morden, 2023). By its very nature, the government had the authority to step in to assist in this matter as the people were in dire straits of not being able to have food on the table (Aziz, 2023a). In consequence, it gave 'birth' to the *Menu Rahmah* idea. Nevertheless, this programme had specific rules that were outlined in ensuring the quality of this product is not compromised. The inaugurated scheme must constitute of three elements in its single meal. It involves carbohydrate, meat protein and vegetable. Fundamentally, it is supposed to be of an allocation of rice, a piece of chicken or fish and a share of vegetable. Nonetheless, the food retails can be creative in introducing other substitutes as an alternative such as noodles or bread instead of rice for the carbohydrate component. Likewise, a chunk of chicken or fish can be served in an indirect form such as finely shredded or replacing it with eggs as it contains protein.

During the interview sessions, the shop owners supported the intention of the government as it addressed this issue on time before people went hunger. Besides that, the participants expressed their enthusiasm in wanting to help the poverty-stricken group that needs the basic meal (Devi, 2023a). Furthermore, they conveyed their gratitude and welcomed the ministry's procedure of not making this initiative mandatory to the food and beverage industry. It is because the food operators were also facing struggles such as lack of manpower. This is due to the foreign workers who left and returned to their home country during the unexpected worldwide pandemic. By and of itself, the shop owners will decide whether it is feasible to provide the menu that was recommended by the authority (Hilmy et al., 2023).

Apart from that, the researchers inquired of the vegetarian alternative and the food operators felt it is an excellent plan and would add further variety to the option. In addition, the meat protein (chicken or fish) in this meal can be switched with a vegetable protein source. It is not a difficult task to perform this minor change in their cooking preparation. In spite of that, the government has the final authority or say to revise the policy in diversifying the menu.

3.2 Cost Stratification Barrier

The barrier exerts us to compel to the stratified scenario that is priorly imposed by the individual or organization in power. As such, the subjects must oblige the ruler's stipulated action or face the consequences (Bolton & Dewatripont, 2011). Moreover, the modern-day administration of a government had to tailor distinct strategies to sustain the stability of the nation. It is not surprising if some of the regulations are unfavorable or in other words unpopular choices that leads to resentment of the citizens. Some hardcore decisions had to be made due to the constrained affairs in the state so that the country is able to 'function' and remain peaceful and harmony. Besides that, history had taught us that political instability will bring disaster to one's nation as certain movements will take advantage to coup d'état. Further, the unrest situation will cause the investors and the economy sector in whole to be in a catastrophe strait.

In essence, the post Covid-19 era was disastrous as there were unforeseen armed conflict or videlicet warfare zones within and outside the territories. These circumstances altered the international trade landscape. By its very nature, it depreciated our currency and spurred inflation. On that account, the prices of the goods became expensive. This condition eventually anticipated the surge of necessity items especially food. Intrinsically, it was the case that people felt frustrated, anxious and helpless as they were unable to handle the 'trauma' of being jobless due to the pandemic coupled with high cost of living that worsened their situation and primary wellbeing (Tan, 2023). On this note, the government intervened to improve the citizens livelihood by unveiling the *Rahmah* blueprint. One of the *Rahmah* packages is the *Menu Rahmah* project. The cost of this menu is marked at RM 5 and below.

However, there were dissatisfaction among the food entrepreneurs if the programme is for a long haul despite it is not a compulsory act. Likewise, the shop owners articulated that the price of raw food (rice, meat, vegetables) are costly to the researchers during the interview discussions. In addition, it is not bringing profit to their businesses. By and of itself, such plan will not be carried out as it is not worth the effort to prepare these dishes due to the insufficient manpower and the expensive grocery items. Therefore, it was impossible to keep up with this humane service unless government were to mediate in reducing the shop owners' strain (Hilmy, 2023). These participants made several suggestions to the ministry such as offering allowance, tax relief and subsidy for their shops in order to sustain this generous scheme. In other words, this could be a win-win situation to accommodate all parties such as the government, entrepreneurs and customers (Lee, 2024).

In the case of the vegetarian option, the food retailers felt it was a worthwhile approach. It is because consuming meatless products will have enormous positive impact towards our health, environment and sparing the lives of the animals. In addition, the cost for this meal of RM 5 would remain the same or even cheaper as the meat component is not offered. Meanwhile, designing a fresh menu in terms of plant-based diet for the coming year would yield appreciation from the public. It is because the Malaysians obesity rate had increased for the past decade (Carvalho & Rahim, 2024) and necessary actions had to be taken by the respective ministries in containing this issue. Lastly, the following section will be conclusion. It will demonstrate the significance of this research paper.

4.0 Conclusion

The *Menu Rahmah* is an intriguing conception of thought to ameliorate the citizens hardship and misfortune during the desperate crisis. It is a temporary relief but a crucial one that had to be provided by the government. As such, this move is applauded by the public and they are thankful for the immediate action taken in addressing the plight.

Nevertheless, the social stratification barriers (Thio, 2009) prevent the society to experience the absolute potential. It is because of the obstruction that is caused by certain individuals or organization in achieving the goals. Thus, this scenario harms the wellbeing of the society. Therefore, the *Menu Rahmah* also encountered such dilemma. The Ministry of Domestic Trade and Cost of Living designated a fix rate of a meal at RM 5 and lower. Furthermore, the menu must be nutritional that constitutes a bowl of rice, a piece of chicken or fish and a portion of vegetable with a bottle of water that is offered during lunch or dinner. By its very nature, the food entrepreneurs endured hardship in purchasing and preparing the cuisines. It is due to the high cost of the raw food that hinders them from selling such meals to the people as mentioned by Palansamy (2024b). On that viewpoint, the ministry exercised its authority to determine the selling price of the product. In consequence, the food and beverage industry did not have an alternative but to follow such

stipulation that is set by the government. Hence, the social stratification barriers obstruct the food retailers from serving the menu that eventually affects the public from buying the meals. Palansamy (2024c) noted that this 'vicious cycle' dampens the society from progressing to benefit the welfare of the underprivileged people. However, the administrator did not make this programme compulsory to all the restaurateurs and as such they are indebted of this circumstance.

Apart from that, the vegetarian option is able to provide the opportunity for a healthier choice of diet. Meanwhile, the shop owners complimented this suggestion but it needs to be realistic as the cost of vegetables skyrocketed over the years due to the food security matters. Nonetheless, they are able to design such menu according to the RM 5 cost (excluding meat) but the respective authorities must acknowledge this plan in their scheme. It is to ensure that the shop owners are registered formally with the ministry in-charge and receive the significant advantages of selling the product.

Soo (2023) corroborated that the *Menu Rahmah* programme is highly recommended and to be continued as people from all walks of life are able to enjoy this privilege especially the lower income strata. In spite of that, the government needs to be attentive towards the shop owners' 'voice' as they are carrying out the policy on behalf of the ministry. The food industry requires assistance in rendering specific handouts in the case of those who are registered officially such as discount, subsidy and tax relief on the basic goods item. By doing so, it is a great financial relieve for the retailers and encourages them to remain in serving the menu for the community involved. Meanwhile, branching out to the vegetarian option is another way of expanding the programme by advocating healthy diet approach. In addition, other small and 'roadside' stalls will also be inspired to jump on the bandwagon due to the encouragement of the stakeholders.

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Author Contributions

K. Subaramaniam: Abstract, Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Results and Discussion, Conclusion and Writing; **C. C. Ng:** Data Collection.

Conflicts Of Interest

The manuscript has not been published elsewhere and is not under consideration by other journals. All authors have approved the review, agree with its submission and declare no conflict of interest in the manuscript.

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