

## Health- and Non—Health-Related Corporate Social Responsibility Statements in Top Selling Restaurant Chains in the U.S. Between 2012 and 2018: A Content Analysis



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**Introduction:** The aim of this study was to understand the prevalence and content of corporate social responsibility statements in the top-selling chain restaurants between 2012 and 2018 to inform the ways restaurants can impact population health.

**Methods:** The study used a web scraping technique to abstract relevant text information ( $n=6,369$  text sections that contained possible corporate social responsibility statements or thematically coded portions of the text section) from the archived web pages of the 96 top-selling chain restaurants. Content analysis was used to identify key themes in corporate social responsibility statements across restaurants and over time. All data were abstracted, and analyses were completed between November 2019 and November 2023.

**Results:** The majority of restaurants (68.8%) included a corporate social responsibility statement on their web pages between 2012 and 2018, and approximately half of the restaurants featured a health-related corporate social responsibility statement (51.0%). There were increases in corporate social responsibility statements by chain restaurants over the study period from 186 corporate social responsibility statements in 2012 to 1,218 corporate social responsibility statements in 2018, with most statements focused on philanthropy (37.1% of coded statements), community activities that were not health related (18.4% of coded statements), and sustainability initiatives (18.3% of coded statements). Only one quarter (24.4%) of these corporate social responsibility statements were health related, and many were vague in nature (only 28% of the eligible statements could be coded by theme).

**Conclusions:** There is a need for more actionable health-focused initiatives in the corporate social responsibility statements for chain restaurants. Public health initiatives that engage with the restau-

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rant industry should work to promote corporate social responsibility statements that are in line with other collective positions around improving health and reducing diet-related disease.

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## INTRODUCTION

Reports from the National Academy of Medicine and the American Heart Association have called for the engagement of the private sector in public health efforts to prevent obesity and cardiovascular disease as a way of promoting healthy living environments.<sup>1–4</sup> Similarly, there have been increasing calls to mitigate the negative health and societal impacts that many companies contribute to through commercial determinants of health.<sup>5</sup> Over time, food companies have changed how they talk about their role in the obesity epidemic—shifting from a narrative of personal responsibility to wanting to be part of the solution.<sup>6</sup> As part of these initiatives, some restaurants have adopted corporate social responsibility (CSR) positions and activities that demonstrate a company's commitment to be “socially accountable—to itself, its stakeholders, and the public; ...[these CSR commitments] encourage companies to be conscious of the kind of impact they are having on all aspects of society, including economic, social, and environmental.”<sup>7,8</sup> For example, Subway's CSR page states, “We aim to offer a variety of great tasting sandwiches and salads that are responsible in calories. None of our U.S. market, permanent 6 sandwiches will exceed 650 calories and at least 50% of our national 6 subs will be less than 400 calories. Over the years the Subway® brand has always provided better choices to our customers and as an established nutritional leader in the quick service restaurant (QSR) industry is committed to offering a variety of balanced choices that can fit into any lifestyle.”<sup>9</sup>

Obesity and cardiovascular disease affect almost 1 billion people globally<sup>10,11</sup> and are among the leading causes of mortality and healthcare costs.<sup>10,12–14</sup> Restaurant meals increase the risk for obesity and cardiovascular disease risk among consumers when they promote excessive intakes of calories, sodium from salt, and saturated fat.<sup>15–20</sup> Furthermore, these meals are becoming a norm for children and families, with one third of U.S. adults and children eating fast food on any given day.<sup>21,22</sup> Restaurant foods, especially less healthy restaurant foods, are heavily marketed, with over 9 billion dollars spent on advertising in 2022,<sup>23</sup> and there is a disproportionate amount of marketing directed toward historically marginalized communities.<sup>24–29</sup> CSR may provide an opportunity for restaurant

chains to counter the marketing of unhealthy foods through various health-related initiatives that can impact menu offerings.

Importantly, CSR statements may also contribute to decisions to eat from restaurants by influencing perceptions of brands. Indeed, previous research indicates that consumers may internalize positive CSR statements and automatically associate restaurants with health-related CSR statements as being healthier,<sup>30</sup> which could be misleading.<sup>31,32</sup> In the behavioral economics literature, evidence suggests that consumers are more likely to make inaccurate estimations of the calorie content and select higher-calorie items from restaurants with health halos (e.g., Subway).<sup>33</sup> In the tobacco industry, there is evidence that CSR measures were used to exert political control and gain access to policy makers, without actual changes to tobacco products or distribution.<sup>34–38</sup> In literature evaluating the processed food and beverage industry, investigators found that companies were using CSR statements to build the image of their brands through positive associations, were targeting children and parents through community activities, and were establishing partnerships with respected organizations to enhance their image.<sup>39,40</sup> In the restaurant industry, there is also evidence that participating in voluntary nutrition initiatives such as the Kids LiveWell program<sup>41</sup> does not have any impact on the dietary quality of children's menu offerings overall.<sup>42</sup> Although some of these initiatives may be a nod toward better nutrition and chronic disease prevention, they may not be sufficient to impact customer behavior and population health.

Despite the increasing contribution of restaurants to population-level diet and chronic disease risk through menus that include larger-portion sizes of foods that are high in calories, saturated fat, sodium, and sugar,<sup>15,43–47</sup> no studies have systematically evaluated CSR statements within the restaurant industry, which can inform the conversation about how effective (or ineffective) these initiatives are from a public health and societal perspective.<sup>15,43–47</sup> The goal for this paper was to understand the prevalence and content of health- and non-health-related CSR statements within a national sample of quick-service, fast-casual, and full-service restaurant chains to help inform the many ways that the restaurant food environment can contribute to improved population health.

## METHODS

### Study Sample

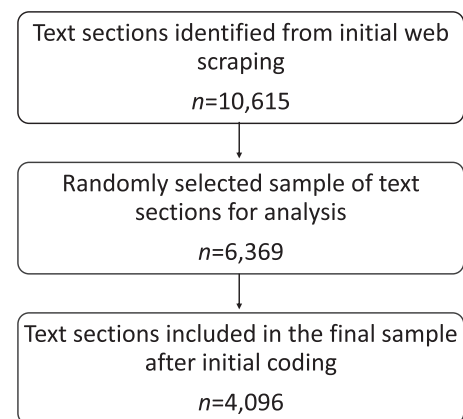
The authors identified 96 top-selling U.S. restaurant chains to include in the analysis. Top-selling restaurants were identified by system-wide sales (the total revenue generated by all the company-owned and franchised outlet locations across all restaurant chains). These 96 restaurants met 2 criteria. First, historical archives of restaurant websites were available on the WayBack machine (<https://web.archive.org/>), an Internet archive database that has over 306 billion web pages that have been saved from 1996 to the present.<sup>48</sup> Second, these restaurants also had data on menu nutrition content in the New York City Department of Health's MenuStat database.<sup>49</sup> The selected restaurant chains accounted for \$245 billion in total sales in 2018 and are among the top 200 restaurants on the basis of system-wide sales.<sup>50</sup> The study focused on the restaurants from this database because a subsequent aim of this research project was to evaluate the associations between CSR and the nutrition quality of offerings. The most complete data on menu nutrition content and quality that were available from the New York City Department of Health's MenuStat database at the time of abstraction were from 2012 and 2018. Restaurants in the MenuStat database that were evaluated in this study include  $n=47$  quick-service (fast food) chains,  $n=25$  full-service chains, and  $n=24$  fast-casual chains. A full list of the restaurants included in this analysis can be found on the MenuStat website: <https://www.menustat.org/>.

### Measures

CSR statements were identified through archived versions of restaurant web pages using the WayBack machine. Archived web pages from 2012 to 2018 were searched for the 96 U.S. restaurant chains that also had data on menu nutrition content in the New York City Department of Health's MenuStat database.<sup>49</sup> CSR content from archived web pages was collected through web scraping using the Python (Beaverton, OR) Scrapy and BeautifulSoup coding packages.<sup>51</sup> Web scraping enabled the authors to identify text from web pages that would correspond to CSR statements made about CSR initiatives. The Scrapy coding packages abstracted data from the raw html code that included key words identified by the research team and previous literature, and then these data were converted into text using the BeautifulSoup coding package. Each text section in the final data set represents all the text information after and before section breaks in the html code that contained at least 1 of the following keywords: foundation, prosperity, social impact, helping, community, health, cares, ethical, citizen,

sustainable, opportunity, community service, responsibility, stewardship, fundraiser, commitment, and nutrition. The key words livewell and live well were also used to identify these statements related to the National Restaurant Association Kids LiveWell program.<sup>41</sup> The authors then randomly extracted 60% of all text sections available for every restaurant during every year for the final sample, consistent with other content analyses using large data sets and standard practices for this analysis method.<sup>52–56</sup> In total, 6,369 text sections that included possible CSR statements from archived web pages that included the keywords mentioned earlier were downloaded into a CSV (comma-separated values) file and used for analyses in NVivo, Version 12. After initial coding, the study team identified some statements as not codable because they were from website legal disclaimers or because they did not include enough information in the text to be codable. The final sample included 4,096 text sections; some of which included multiple CSR statements (Figure 1).

A preliminary codebook was adapted from the CSR activities outlined in Richards et al.<sup>39</sup> (2015), which includes “activities related to the responsible marketing initiatives and policies of the company in relation to health, for example, health initiatives, provision of nutrition and health information, and resources to promote



**Figure 1.** Flowchart for the final sample of text data for analysis.

Notes: Initial text sections were identified on the web pages of the 96 top-selling restaurant chains on the basis of system-wide sales. Each text section represented all the text information after and before section breaks in the html code that contained select keywords, including prosperity, social impact, helping, and community. The study randomly selected 60% of all the text sections with keywords. The final sample of text sections for analysis was identified after initial coding identified some statements as not codable because they were from website legal disclaimers, because they did not include enough information in the text to be codable. Some text sections included multiple corporate social responsibility statements. The final number of CSR statements was 5,026 (Table 3).

CSR, corporate social responsibility.

healthy behavior” for big-food companies in Australia, including Coca Cola, McDonald’s, and Nestle. The codebook used in Richards and colleagues<sup>39</sup> was originally adapted from the Inclusive Social Rating Criteria,<sup>57</sup> which included 7 categories of CSR, including community, employee relations, and the environment. These authors adapted this original tool by removing several CSR activity categories that were not prevalent in the CSR statements made by their sample of big-food companies and adding several new categories, including consumer responsibility and partnerships.<sup>32</sup> Their final tool included 7 categories of CSR: environment, consumer responsibility, community, partnership, employee relations, indigenous community specific, and diversity.<sup>39</sup>

This study further adapted the codebook from Richards and colleagues<sup>39</sup> to better reflect the categories of CSR that were observed in the CSR statements made by the companies included in the sample. Moreover, the study also wanted to differentiate between CSR statements that were specific to health and nutrition and those that were not. The purpose of identifying both health-related and non-health-related CSR statements specifically was twofold: (1) for the purposes of this study, the authors wanted to capture the full extent of all the CSR-related activities that these top-selling restaurants were participating in to be consistent with previous studies,<sup>8,39,58–60</sup> and (2) to address the hypothesis for the subsequent aim of this research study around CSR and menu offerings. In this study, it was hypothesized that those restaurants that had health-related CSR were more likely to have healthier options than restaurants without CSR or with CSR that was not health explicit.

To make sure that the codebook reflected what the restaurants in the sample included in their CSR statements and to capture both the health- and non-health-related CSR statements made by restaurants, the following changes were made (as displayed in [Table 1](#)): (1) further differentiated the community activities identified in Richards et al.<sup>39</sup> by whether they were health related or not; (2) made distinctions between health-related activities the restaurant participated in directly on location through their business practices ([Table 1](#)) (including calorie labeling prior to the federal mandate, providing healthy or quality foods/options, providing nutrition information, and sodium-reduction initiatives; coded as health initiatives) and those that they participated in indirectly (such as hosting an event to address hunger in their community; coded as community activities health related); (3) added philanthropic activities as a separate category, which included elements of the partnerships activities and community activities from Richards and colleagues<sup>39</sup>; (4) included the diversity activity category within the employee-initiatives activity category, because

those were the only diversity initiatives that were mentioned in the texts examined; (5) removed the indigenous community-specific activity category, which was not mentioned at all in the CSR statements evaluated in this study; and (6) added a category to capture restaurants that mentioned general CSR initiatives on their websites.

The study also further identified more explicit health-related CSR statements for 2 activity categories: health-related community activities and health initiatives within the restaurant such as calorie labeling and sodium-reduction initiatives. Previous literature indicated that CSR statements are often vague in content,<sup>60–62</sup> and the authors hypothesized these 2 CSR activities were the most likely to be related to the subsequent research question around whether restaurants with CSR have healthier menu offerings than restaurants without CSR. Statements were coded as explicit if they included 1 of the following: (1) specific goals or criteria for the nutrient content of menu items, (2) location of nutrition information (e.g., in store or on the website), (3) the amount of money invested or the number of individuals served during a health initiative, (4) specific outcomes from a health initiative, or (5) details on the execution of a health initiative.

The final codebook contained 7 activity categories: community activities health related; community activities not health related; employee initiatives; health initiatives; philanthropy; sustainability; and general CSR initiatives and an additional 13 activity subcategories ranging from health-related community activities that were directed toward young children to philanthropic activities, including volunteer work ([Table 1](#)).

## Analysis

Content analysis was performed in Nvivo12 to evaluate whether the activities mentioned earlier were commonly included on restaurant websites as well as to assess: (1) whether CSR statements (or thematically coded portions of the text section) were explicit (i.e., include specific goals for the nutrient content of menu items), (2) frequencies of different categories of health-related CSR statements and the nature of these messages (explicit versus not), and (3) relationships between themes. Statements were coded using the keywords described in [Table 1](#). Three trained research staff coded the statements. The study established intercoder reliability through an iterative method where reading and coding a subsample of articles calculated Cohen’s kappa statistics, discussed differences, and adjusted the coding instrument. This was repeated until approximately 250 statements had been coded and an acceptable level of agreement was reached (kappa=0.8). During the coding

**Table 1.** Categories Included in CSR Statement Coding Instrument Adapted From Richards et al.<sup>39</sup>

Category	Definition and activities included in each category
<b>Community activities that were health related</b>	
<i>Health and wellness</i>	Activities that address exercise, nutrition, mental health, health, and wellness.
<i>Efforts toward young children</i>	Activities that address exercise, nutrition, mental health, health, and wellness, specifically related to children.
<i>Healthcare</i>	Activities that address healthcare reform, healthcare issues, and raising awareness about a healthcare issue
<i>Hunger relief</i>	Activities that describe food being donated or served directly to hungry people (not a food bank).
<b>Community activities that were nonhealth related</b>	Activities in the community not related to health or hunger relief. Examples include scholarships, grants, percentage nights, public safety, raising awareness about a non—health-related issue, summer camps, and commitment to the community (including rewarding individuals and organizations who work to improve the community).
<b>Employee initiatives</b>	Activities provide employee benefits, training, and career development. In addition, company efforts around diversity and inclusion or building relationships between employees were included.
<b>Health initiatives</b>	
<i>Calorie labeling</i>	When restaurants listed calories on menu or menu board prior to the federal mandate through the Affordable Care Act.
<i>Provide healthy or quality foods or options</i>	Restaurants reported offering menu items that were healthy, quality, organic, light, vegetarian, gluten free, low fat, no high-fructose corn syrup, or trans-fat.
<i>Provide nutrition information</i>	Restaurants reported providing the nutrition content of menu items (outside of calorie information) in store or online.
<i>Sodium reduction</i>	Activities aimed at reducing the sodium content across all or a subset of menu items.
<b>Philanthropy</b>	
<i>Donations to charity</i>	Activities that address the donations of money, food, or other products to an organization or a food bank
<i>Established foundation arm of the restaurant</i>	When the restaurant has a foundation or nonprofit organization associated with the parent company
<i>Established relationship with an organization</i>	Activities that address partnership with an organization with welfare connotations, including charity partners. Examples also included when there was evidence of a long history (10+ years) of donating to an organization or when describing the activities of another organization.
<i>Fundraising</i>	Activities that address the restaurant or foundation raising money from patrons, community members, or employees.
<i>Volunteer work</i>	Activities including offering employees paid time or otherwise encouraging employees to volunteer with outside organizations. Statements around the restaurant's support of community service were also included.
<b>Sustainability</b>	Activities that address the environment, ethical farming/sourcing/pesticide use, animal welfare, and antibiotic use. Examples include the purchasing of products with environmentally friendly certifications (e.g., Ethical Tea Partnership, Rainforest Alliance).
<b>General CSR initiatives</b>	Activities that include any mention of the following: CSR, responsibility, mission, and value, followed by a description of the restaurant's CSR (e.g., supporting the environment, employees, strengthening communities)

CSR, corporate social responsibility.

Note: Bolded categories were major categories (parent nodes), italicized categories were secondary categories (child nodes), and unformatted categories listed under italicized categories were tertiary categories (subnodes).

process, statements that were difficult to interpret were reviewed by the research team and coded on the basis of consensus. The authors used the matrix query function to quantify the frequency of activities reported in CSR statements and the nature of these statements overall and over time. All data abstraction and analyses were completed from November 2019 to November 2023.

## RESULTS

The majority of restaurants (68.8%) included CSR statements on their web pages from 2012 to 2018, and almost half of the restaurants included at least 1 health-related CSR statement (Table 2). Almost two thirds (63.5%) of the restaurants included philanthropy-related CSR



**Table 2.** Percentage of Restaurants With CSR Activities Included in CSR Statements Between 2012 and 2018

Activity category	% of restaurants
Restaurants with any CSR activities	68.8
Restaurants with health-related CSR activities	51.0
Restaurants with philanthropy-focused CSR activities	63.5
Restaurants with sustainability-focused CSR activities	39.6
Restaurants with explicit CSR activities	33.3

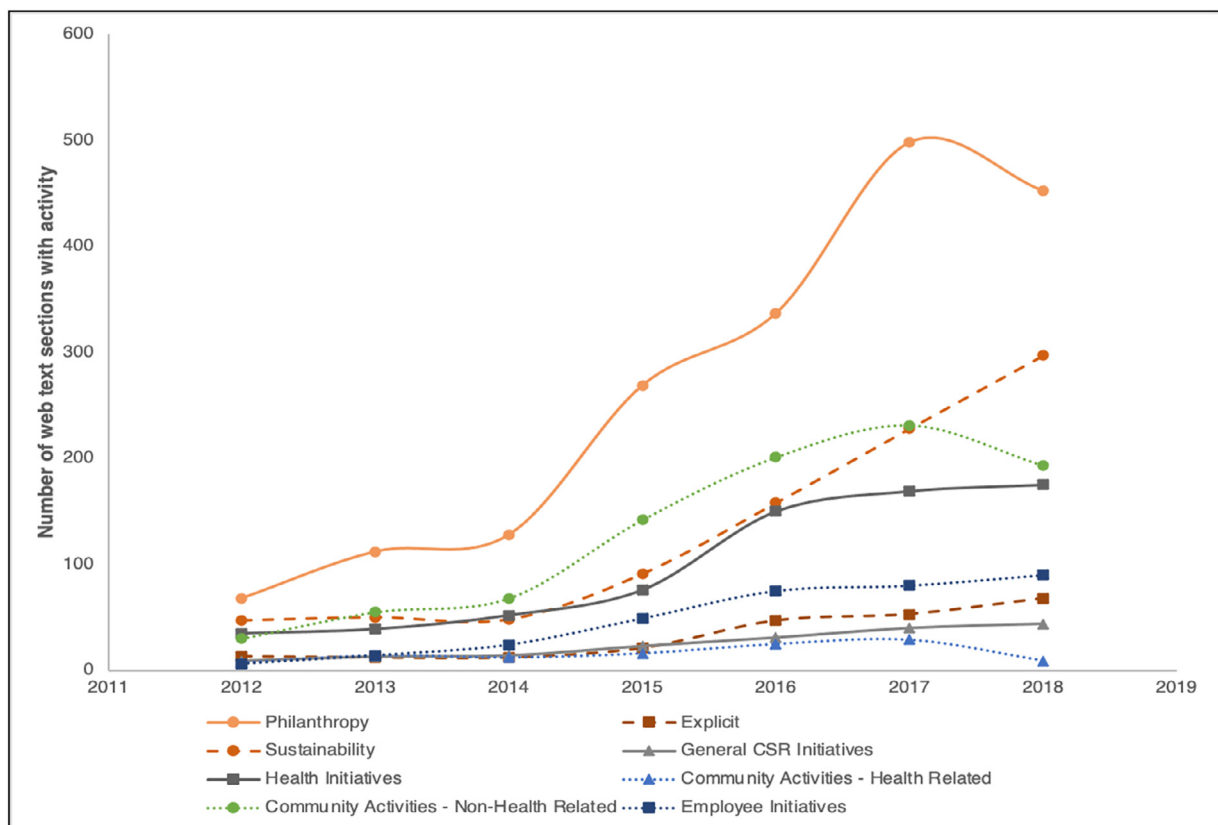
Note: Percentages represent the percentage of restaurants that included any statements with each category of CSR activity between 2012 and 2018.

CSR, corporate social responsibility.

statements, two fifths (39.6%) of the restaurants included sustainability-related CSR activities, and one third (33.3%) of the restaurants included explicit CSR activities in at least 1 CSR statement over the 2012–2018 time period (Table 2). Restaurants with the most CSR statements were primarily coffee-focused chains such as Starbucks (729 total CSR statements) and Tim Hortons (507

total CSR statements) (data not shown). There were increases in CSR statements on restaurant web pages over time in all activity categories from 186 to 1,218 CSR statements between 2012 and 2018 (Figure 2). The largest increases over time were for sustainability, philanthropy, non–health-related community statements, and health initiatives (Figure 2).

The number and percentage of coded text sections that included each of the CSR statements are presented in Table 3, and a word cloud of the most frequently utilized words in CSR statements is presented in Figure 3. The most frequently used words in these statements included community, foods, responsible, local, and foundation (Figure 3). Across all years and restaurants, the majority of CSR statements were not health related (75.6%) (Table 3). The top CSR statements were philanthropic in nature (37.1%), followed by community activities that were non–health related such as scholarships for community members (18.4%), and sustainability initiatives such as offering items that include certified organic ingredients or joining sustainability business councils (18.3%) (Table 3). An example is as follows: “7

**Figure 2.** Mentions of CSR activities in web text sections over time.

Note: Numbers represent the number of CSR statements in web text sections that include each activity.

CSR, corporate social responsibility.

**Table 3.** Total Number of CSR Statements, by Activity Category

Activity category	n	% of total CSR statements
Community activities—health related	112	2.2%
Health and wellness	29	0.6%
Efforts toward young children	27	0.5%
Health care	22	0.4%
Hunger relief	34	0.7%
Community activities—non—health related	923	18.4%
Employee initiatives	338	6.7%
Health initiatives	696	13.8%
Calorie labeling	7	0.1%
Provide healthy or quality foods/options <sup>a</sup>	416	8.2%
Provide nutrition information	262	5.2%
Sodium reduction	11	0.1%
Philanthropy <sup>b</sup>	1864	37.1%
Donations to charity or other organization	409	8.1%
Established foundation arm of the restaurant	489	9.7%
Established relationship with organization	441	8.8%
Fundraising	392	7.8%
Volunteer work	133	2.6%
Sustainability	919	18.3%
General CSR initiatives	174	3.5%
Total number of CSR statements	5,026	100%

Note: Percentages represent the percentage of coded CSR statements that included each respective activity category. The subcategories are not included in the overall number of statements and percentage of statement.

<sup>a</sup>A total of 50.2% of these statements were in reference to providing healthier options versus quality ingredients or foods.

<sup>b</sup>A total of 25.2% of these statements were in reference to health-related philanthropy (i.e., donations to hospitals or a disease-focused organization such as the American Cancer Association).

CSR, corporate social responsibility.

**Figure 3.** The most frequently used words in CSR statements from the websites of 96 of the top-selling U.S.-based restaurant chains.

CSR, corporate social responsibility.

Eleven announced in 2016 that it was working with Conservation International (CI) to set measurable CSR goals to reduce its environmental footprint. 7 Eleven's CSR mission has three focus areas: planet, products and people. The retailer also joined CIs Business and Sustainability Council, a forum for corporate leaders taking positive environmental actions in their businesses, to explore mutually beneficial ways to further reduce its environmental impact."

Most philanthropic efforts were centered around establishing a foundation, partnerships with charitable organizations, and giving away or raising money through donations and fundraising efforts; the majority of philanthropic efforts were not health related (74.8%; i.e., not donations to hospitals or a disease-focused organization such as the American Cancer Association) (Table 3). An example is as follows: "The Arby's Foundation was founded in 1986 as a way for Arby's to give back to the communities we serve. Since then, we have donated more than \$80 million to youth-related causes. We are committed to helping kids build, expand and pursue their dreams . . . ."

Employee initiatives were a small percentage of total CSR statements (6.7%). Most of these initiatives were around providing employee benefits, training, and career development. Some of the restaurants also engaged in diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) initiatives. None of the restaurants included fair or living wage initiatives as a part of their CSR. Similarly, housing security or homelessness only included in 7 (0.3%) of the non-health community activities or philanthropic statements, for example, "Providence is honored to partner with Jersey Mikes for the Month of Giving in March. Providence House dares to Imagine . . . a community where no family is homeless. We invite you to join us in that vision. Providence House is a residential development center for homeless families and children committed to breaking the cycle of homelessness one family at a time." Other broader initiatives around education and pollution mitigation were also only included in 5.1% of relevant statements evaluated in this study.

The most prevalent health-related CSR statements were in-restaurant health initiatives (13.9%), followed by community activities that were health related (2.2%) (Table 3). Health was only a mentioned priority in 25.4% of CSR statements (Table 3), for example, "Community is the heart of our business. The Foundation's mission is to serve the basic needs of our communities through food for the hungry, safety and children's health. It's what we do every day." The most popular health initiatives happening on location were related to providing complete nutrition information for menu items and providing healthier or quality food options.

However, almost half of the statements around providing healthier options were about offering items that were high in quality rather than those that were more nutritious (Table 3). Moreover, many of these statements were vague in nature. For example, one restaurant website stated, "Our dedication to wellness means supporting policies and efforts to improve the health of our communities in addition to offering balanced food and beverage options to our customers."

Approximately 55% of all CSR statements that mentioned health-related community activities were specifically targeting efforts toward young children and hunger relief (Table 3). For instance, one website noted, "As a restaurant company, it's impossible to ignore the reality of the need for food. Nearly 50 million Americans including 16 million children are at risk of hunger. . . We have a unique opportunity to help change these numbers for the better." Similar to the statements around providing healthier options, many of the statements around health-related community activities were vague. For example, one website stated, "We are dedicated to serving the basic needs of our local communities from providing food for the hungry and support for children's health and wellness. . ." without describing the actions the restaurant is taking to provide this support. A similar example is "Our purpose is to foster the spirit of giving at Panda Restaurant Group by promoting the health and educational needs of underserved children." Another statement mentioned programs that the company funds aimed at helping youth: "7 Eleven stores play a vital role in healthy, growing neighborhoods. We're committed to making a difference in these communities by getting involved and giving back through programs that directly benefit the well-being of our youth," and, finally, other initiatives focused on initiatives through the restaurants' foundation arm: "Community is the heart of our business. The Foundation's mission is to serve the basic needs of our communities through food for the hungry, safety and children's health. It's what we do every day."

Only a small subset of CSR statements overall was coded as explicit (only 28% of the statements that could be coded as explicit or 4.3% of all the CSR statements) (Table 4), which represents over a quarter of those CSR statements that were in the health initiatives and health-related community statement categories. Table 4 includes the percentage of all CSR statements coded as explicit that fall into each activity category. Of those CSR statements coded as explicit, most were under the health initiatives activity category (88.5%). Statements not coded as explicit were vague in nature, for example, describing the importance of providing nutrition information without providing information on how the



**Table 4.** Eligible CSR Activity Statements Coded as Explicit

CSR activity category	n	% of all CSR statements coded as explicit
Community activities—health related	26	11.5%
Health and wellness	21	9.3%
Efforts toward young children	4	1.8%
Health care	11	4.9%
Hunger relief	5	2.2%
Health initiatives	200	88.5%
Calorie labeling	7	3.1%
Provide healthy or quality foods/options	61	27.0%
Provide nutrition information	133	58.8%
Sodium reduction	3	1.3%
Total	226	100.0%

Note: Percentages represent the percentage of all CSR statements coded as explicit that fall into each activity category. Of the CSR statements coded that could be coded as explicit, 28% were coded as such. CSR, corporate social responsibility.

restaurant was actually doing so (e.g., “nutrition facts [are] available. . . in a detailed brochure and on the website” [explicit] versus “we are passionate about. . . providing accurate nutrition information so that [consumers] can make the best choices for themselves” [not explicit]).

## DISCUSSION

The 96 top-selling chain restaurants included in this study demonstrated an increasing number of statements related to health and other social issues and initiatives during 2012–2018. A majority of restaurants included at least 1 of the CSR statements, and almost half of restaurants included at least 1 health-related CSR activity on their websites. However, when looking at the relative amount of content included on the webpages, most of the CSR statements on the webpages were not specifically related to health, and the majority involved philanthropy and not direct action in communities. When health was a stated priority for a particular restaurant brand, it was often focused on the healthfulness of their menu offerings or other point-of-purchase initiatives. Yet, many of these statements were still vague in nature. For example, health initiatives around providing healthy or quality foods or options often referenced the quality of the foods offered or the balance of food and beverage options versus having specific nutrient- or food-based goals. The limited focus on health and lack of specificity within the CSR landscape suggests that there is more work to be done to understand how restaurants can

(and should) be part of the solution to prevent obesity and chronic related disease.

The findings in this study mirror those of other studies evaluating trends in statements to social issues through CSR in the broader corporate landscape<sup>63</sup>; these findings are also in line with changes in media messaging from 2000 to 2012.<sup>6</sup> CSR has been a part of the business landscape since the 1950s, has evolved in meaning to include a shared responsibility between businesses and society, and has been increasingly adopted in various industries.<sup>61</sup> The study observed increases in overall statements to CSR as well as slight increases in the percentage of those statements that are explicit and that involve interactions with communities. Despite previous analyses suggesting that food and beverage companies changed their narrative in the media to being part of the solution to rising chronic disease rates,<sup>6</sup> health was only included in just over a quarter of CSR statements and was not a top priority in this sample. Because this sample only overlapped with the latter part of the Nixon et al. (2015)’s study<sup>6</sup> and included different food industry stakeholders, it is unclear whether health-related initiatives are being diluted by initiatives on other social issues (such as sustainability) or whether health- and diet-related disease prevention really was not a primary priority for this sample of food companies. Future research, including interviews with Chief Social Impact Officers from restaurants and/or qualitative evaluations of other industry documents, would help build the body of knowledge around how CSR is being operationalized and what that means for public health. Moreover, future research should consider other non-text-related sources of CSR-related initiatives such as icons, mascots, and advertisements that were not evaluated in this study.

Similar to these findings, the Richards et al.’s (2015) study of 6 big-food companies’ 256 CSR statements also found that most statements focus on sustainability (30.5%) and community initiatives (19.5%) (including philanthropic efforts).<sup>39</sup> Many of these companies specifically targeted families and children through their community-based initiatives. Activities such as sponsoring a youth sport team or supporting children or family events were frequently mentioned in CSR statements published by their sample of the companies, which included Nestle, McDonald’s, and Coca-Cola.<sup>39</sup> In this study, similar initiatives aimed at children and their parents were observed as well. However, only statements targeted at children in about a quarter of the CSR statements were observed that were about health-related community activities. It may be that these types of initiatives are more common in larger food and beverage companies such as Nestle and Pepsi than in larger restaurant chains. It is also possible that there has been

more parent pushback for these types of activities in more recent years (the original Richards et al.'s study included content analyses of industry documents from 2014). In a subsequent study by Richards and Phillipson (2017), parents reported feeling that CSR strategies were a smokescreen for the public and a deceit of companies.<sup>40</sup> If this sentiment is consistent with societal trends in skepticism toward marketing and corporations,<sup>64–66</sup> restaurants and other food companies may have also changed their CSR priorities away from health in response to customer or shareholder pushback or societal pressure. Future research should evaluate current consumer perceptions around CSR, especially whether these statements are influential in ultimately changing eating behavior in or outside of restaurants.

Through CSR initiatives, restaurants have an opportunity to address commercial, social, and political determinants of health by offering healthier options to their customers, offering employees living wages, and engaging in DEIJ initiatives.<sup>5,67–69</sup> Some of the health initiatives evaluated in this study around sodium reduction and providing healthier options may be related to overall healthier menus, but this question was not directly evaluated in this study. Moreover, some of the hunger-relief efforts these restaurant chains engaged in may have provided temporary relief for families experiencing food insecurity, but only 0.3% of the philanthropic or non-health community activity initiatives addressed other social/political determinants of health such as housing security.<sup>67–69</sup> In addition, some restaurant chains provided career development opportunities to their employees or engaged in DEIJ initiatives through their employee initiatives. However, these initiatives were only included in 6.7% of the statements evaluated in this study, and none included any fair wage initiatives.<sup>5,67–69</sup> Moreover, some of the philanthropic efforts of these restaurant chains can contribute to the changing existing power structures through donations to specific organizations.<sup>5</sup> However, additional research is needed to understand the upstream/downstream impacts of these corporate donations. Furthermore, other financial practices that are commercial determinants of health, such as tax avoidance or vertical integration, were not included in CSR webpages and were not evaluated in this study.<sup>5</sup> Finally, sustainable sourcing practices such as purchasing of products with environmentally friendly certifications (e.g., the Ethical Tea Partnership or the Rainforest Alliance; evaluated as part of the sustainability initiatives node) may also influence the impact of restaurants on human and planetary health.<sup>5</sup> Future research should examine the impacts of CSR initiatives on other business practices (such as offering healthier menu options) as well as other outcomes such as economic opportunity,

access to policymakers, and climate impacts, which are important for public health.<sup>5,70–74</sup> Future research should also examine potential competing practices that restaurants with CSR may engage in through their marketing and promotional practices, such as targeted marketing to historically marginalized populations<sup>75</sup> or point-of-purchase deals such as getting a dessert with the purchase of a large beverage.

### Limitations

This study adds to the understanding of how CSR statements have evolved over time within large restaurant chains and the extent to which these restaurants are prioritizing health within CSR. Several limitations should be noted. First, although this sample of restaurants is important because of their large relative contribution to system-wide sales, they only represent a portion of the restaurant industry and may not be representative of the restaurant or food industry more broadly. Second, CSR statements were only abstracted directly from the restaurants' websites, so it is possible that CSR initiatives may have been missed or included in other industry publications (shareholder reports) or news outlet coverage, and finally, the coding scheme was updated to better reflect the CSR statements being made by these restaurants during this time. However, some of the updates make it difficult to compare the findings with those of other studies. Future research should evaluate other sources of CSR information such as stakeholder reports and company social media accounts and a larger sample of restaurants (including smaller, local restaurants).

### CONCLUSIONS

Restaurants are heavily frequented in the U.S. and contribute to excess calories, saturated fat, and sodium in the American diet.<sup>19–22,76,77</sup> Between 2012 and 2018, only a quarter of CSR statements made by restaurant chains included health-related CSR, and these statements were often vague; at the same time, the restaurant industry has not substantially improved the nutritional quality of their menu offerings.<sup>15,43–47</sup> As such, calls for commitments to engage with the private sector will require more actionable steps for how the restaurant industry can and should be involved in obesity and chronic disease prevention.<sup>1–4</sup> The results suggest that additional efforts are needed to better align CSR with approaches such as the National Strategy from the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health, which calls for a whole-of-country approach to the problem of obesity, diet-related diseases, and health disparities.<sup>78</sup> Stakeholders at the national, state, and local level can also work with restaurants to ensure that CSR efforts

are both actionable and meaningful. National strategies such as the one outlined after the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health<sup>78</sup> can also reinforce CSR efforts by (1) providing a model for these initiatives, (2) contributing to the collective impact of positive actions taken by the public and private sectors for public health, and (3) shifting societal norms around the role of private industry in public health.

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