

Kuwait & Obesity: What can you see from the city streets?

Overweight and obesity have reached epidemic proportions in Kuwait, with the region recording the highest rate of adult obesity. Fast-food consumption is one of the contributors to this medical problem. This visual essay presents street views of the city affected by the obesity epidemic through photographs of fast-food displays. This essay aims to contribute to public health discussions by highlighting the association between exposure to fast-food advertising and increase in consumption of the targeted foods and beverages and subsequent modulation of dietary habits. In addition, this essay seeks to address the question of how public health campaigners and policymakers should regulate fast-food displays, installations, and advertisements in countries with prevalent obesity.

Keywords: Kuwait; city; fast food; obesity; outdoor advertising

Introduction: Obesity in Kuwait

Located on the northern edge of Eastern Arabia, Kuwait is one of the wealthiest countries in the world. Its currency, the Kuwaiti dinar, is one of the highest-valued currencies in the world. In this country of over four million people, obesity is currently public health enemy number one. Researchers have found that overweight and obesity have reached epidemic proportions in Kuwait, with the region recording the highest rate of adult obesity (Weiderpass et al., 2019; Oguoma et al., 2021). In addition, the prevalence of childhood obesity is alarmingly high and exceeds the prevalence rates reported in neighboring countries and North America (Al-Kandari, 2006; Elkum et al., 2015).

Fast-food consumption is one of the contributors to this medical problem. Kuwait has reported a high frequency of fast-food consumption among adolescents (Musaiger, 2014; Shaban and Alkazemi, 2019). Traditionally, Kuwaitis mainly consumed rice, fish, seafood, sheep and goat meat, camel milk, and dates as their staple

1 diet (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2006). However, over time, the abundance of
2 food outlets changed the Kuwaiti diet and made it more calorie-dense with a noted
3 decrease in fiber and micronutrient content (Zaghloul et al., 2013). Today, many
4 Kuwaitis regularly eat out or order from restaurants that sell fast foods, such as pizzas,
5 fried chicken, hamburgers, kebabs, or sandwiches. The most commonly consumed cold
6 beverages are fresh juices and carbonated drinks (Food and Agriculture Organization,
7 2006). Such fast-food consumption is associated with obesity (Fraser et al., 2010;
8 Alviola et al., 2014; Burgoine et al., 2014) because of their high calorie content, which
9 influences obesity-related comorbidities such as cardiovascular disease, cancer,
10 diabetes, osteoarthritis, and chronic kidney diseases. These diseases have been leading
11 to other medical issues faced by Kuwaitis.

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After living in Kuwait for more than five months, I can attest to seeing fast-food advertisements daily. In addition, fast-food brands can be found easily in any part of the country. As a researcher, I aim to spark discussions on what I have seen on the streets by presenting the relationship between Kuwaiti obesity and fast food, and highlighting how fast food is transforming city views.

Fast Food: View from the city streets

Here, I adopted the approach of photographic inquiry, as photographs have become a prominent means of documenting life and the environment. Lynn Butler-Kisber (2010) examined how photographs are used in inquiry, that is, as a means of representation. For this visual essay, I focused on using photographs to represent what I have seen. As per the context provided in the introduction, I visually documented fast-food “faces” in the city streets, which showed a complementary relationship between the dynamic fast food and the country’s health issues.

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In terms of area, Kuwait is one of the smallest countries in the world. It takes about three hours to drive and get around the country. I chose two cities in two populated governorates (*muhafazah*) in Kuwait: Farwaniya Governorate and Hawalli Governorate. I traveled from Salmiya City (Figure 2) in the latter to Kuwait City (Figure 1). I took photographs while walking on the streets and driving between these two cities. The main streets here are publicly accessible to the travelers.

Fast-food brands are most visible on the streets from Salmiya to Kuwait City. There is tremendous promotion through flashing LED TVs, billboards, stores, and transportation (Figure 4). Fast-food brands' advertisements almost visually decorate the country. Taking Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) as an example, this photograph (Figure 3) was taken during the construction of a new KFC store while it was becoming a major fast-food brand in Kuwait (Bloomberg, 2016). Moreover, the major roads in Kuwait are adorned with advertisements of prominent fast-food chains that are mostly from the US, including McDonald's, Burger King, Hardee's, Johnny Rockets, Wendy's, Taco Bell, Nathan's Famous, Pizza Hut, Subway, Domino's Pizza, and Five Guys.

Fast-food billboards manifest at every 20 meters on the main roads (*see* Figure 4) and between driveways. In addition, fast-food advertisements pop up on flashing LED TVs on top of buildings and stores, while fast-food poster advertisements are spotted on public buses (Figure 1). These fast-food advertisements aggressively display the easy availability of fast food that is consumed without acknowledging the current obesity epidemic.

Research reviews have repeatedly shown that fast-food advertising affects eating behavior and is considered a significant contributor to the current obesity epidemic (Folkvord et al., 2016). In this visual essay, I have presented a street view of obesity in Kuwait through photographs of fast-food displays. By highlighting these observations, I

1 aim to contribute to public health discussions on the exposure to fast-food advertising
2 leading to increased consumption of the targeted foods and beverages and eventually
3 modulating dietary habits.
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7 Additionally, through this visual essay, I seek to address the question of how
8 campaigners and policymakers should regulate fast-food displays, installations, and
9 advertisements in countries where obesity is prevalent. While outdoor advertising may
10 contribute to health by communicating health information and projecting healthy
11 perceptions of an activity, it is important to regulate the placement of outdoor fast-food
12 advertising, as it has the potential to disadvantage the well-being of the community
13 (Lowery & Sloane, 2013). As suggested by previous researchers (Lesser, Zimmerman,
14 & Cohen, 2013), policy approaches may be important to reduce the amount of food
15 advertising in urban areas, and innovative strategies, such as warning labels, counter-
16 advertising, or a tax on obesogenic advertising, should be introduced as possible public
17 health interventions to reduce the prevalence of obesity.
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34 This visual essay can be reviewed as a visual documentation from my
35 perspective as a teller who presents the visibility of fast-food advertisements from the
36 streets in response to the country's obesity discourse. It captures small samples of these
37 fast-food advertisements in the country; therefore, it cannot be generalized.
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39 Furthermore, this visual essay focuses on capturing fast-food advertisements from street
40 views; it does not look at fast-food advertisements on TV, social media, and news
41 media. Previous research has noted that fast-food advertising through social media
42 platforms such as Facebook contributes to the increase in overweight and obesity cases
43 in Kuwait (Alajmi, 2021). Additionally, fast-food advertisements on TV play a vital role
44 in contributing to rapid fast-food consumption in Kuwait (Alyousif et al., 2020). Hence,
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1 further empirical investigation, by integrating fast-food advertisements found on the
2 streets and other media and examining their role in shaping public health, is needed.
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7 **Note:** I disclose that I intentionally did not consider the aesthetics of visual composition
8 while taking these photographs. I have used quick views from the streets because my
9 intention was to highlight the presence of these fast-food brands in the cities, not
10 advertise them through my photographs. All photographs were taken using a mobile
11 phone camera because DSLR cameras are restricted in public places in Kuwait.
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Figure 1. Fast-food advertisement on a public bus in Kuwait City.



Figure 2. Pepsi truck parked in front of a McDonald's billboard in the Salmiya City neighborhood.

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Figure 3. Construction of a new Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) store.

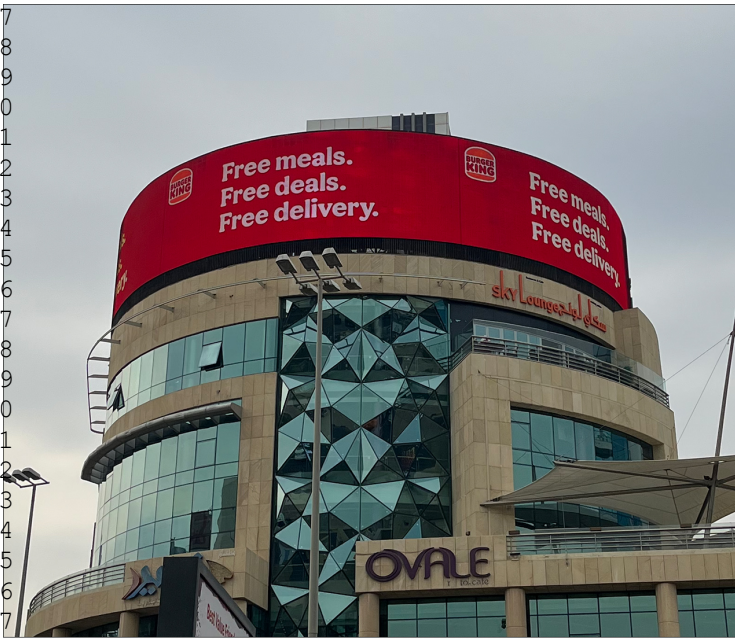


Figure 4. Several photos of fast-food advertisements in the city streets.

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