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Research Paper

Influence of Social Media on Young Adults' Food Choices

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ABSTRACT

The research examines how social media affects the eating habits of young adults between the ages of 18 and 29. Social media platforms including Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok now serve as key elements in daily life and heavily impact the lifestyle and dietary choices of young adults in modern digital society. Social media platforms deliver an ongoing stream of food content which includes health trends promoted by influencers as well as fast food and sugary snack advertisements. Food selections today are determined by multiple factors such as personal taste and nutritional awareness along with visual attractiveness and the effects of social influence and comparison. This study uses Social Cognitive Theory, Social Comparison Theory, and Expectancy-Value Theory as theoretical bases to examine how young adult food choices are affected by body image perceptions, societal norms, influencer endorsements, and visual design elements. The research design employed a quantitative methodology using two standardized instruments: The investigation leveraged two measurement tools: the Food Choice Questionnaire (FCQ) and the Social Media Influence on Food Consumption Behavior Scale (SMIFCBS). The study involved 203 participants who completed the online survey through convenience sampling and represented various socio-economic backgrounds and gender identities. Results from correlation and regression testing showed that social media influence and food consumption behavior share a meaningful positive relationship. The research found that individuals who frequently use social media display greater tendencies towards impulsive eating and food cravings while showing altered dietary habits which include higher consumption of fast foods and calorie-rich snacks. The gender and income-level analysis demonstrated that women and lower-income individuals showed increased vulnerability to social media's impact on their food selection decisions. The research study shows that social media creates psychological and behavioral effects because it promotes idealized food and body image representations which result in dietary limitations and eating disorders as well as discontent among young adult populations. Social media provides platforms for users to discover healthy recipes and practice mindful eating while also spreading nutritional knowledge. The research highlights how social media serves both as a potential risk factor and a powerful intervention tool. The study emphasizes the immediate requirement for media literacy skills along with critical examination of digital content and the distribution of scientifically supported nutritional information.

Keywords: *Social Media Influence, Food Consumption, Impulsive Eating*

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Through social media platforms we learn about ideal healthy meal concepts and receive guidance about which foods should only be eaten sparingly (Johnston J, Goodman M,2015). The practice of "clean eating" which involves consuming local and organic foods along with plant-based meals and home cooking could have significant effects because its advocates spread these ideas through Instagram platforms (Dennett 2016). Dickinson I, Prichard,2018). People who follow the extreme "clean eating" dietary contents risk developing eating disorder risk factors including cognitive restraint. According to the restraint model of binge eating developed by Polivy and Herman (1985), people who experience brief lapses in cognitive control during eating face an increased risk of binge eating. According to the APA (2013), binge eating involves consuming a substantial amount of food quickly and feeling a simultaneous loss of control. The moments of inattention and decreased cognitive control during eating can be explained by the "abstinence violation" effect resulting from dietary rule violations (Marlatt GA, Gordon JR ,1985) and the exhaustion of limited resources for self-regulation (Muraven M, Baumeister RF,2000). The goal conflict model, Stroebe et al. (2008) suggests that the eating behavior of restricted eaters is dominated by a conflict between their weight control goals and the pleasure of eating: When restricted eaters activate their goal to enjoy palatable food it results in the inhibition of their weight control goal. The pattern of self-regulatory failure among restricted eaters emerges when they face environments that present readily available appealing food options. Dieters experience stronger food cravings than non-dieters which makes resisting restricted foods particularly challenging according to Massey and Hill (2012). 11 The effects of social media exposure could become stronger as screen time increases. According to Hinojo-Lucena FJ (2019), students who engage in uncontrolled internet use which impacts their behavior and increases impulsivity develop eating disorders. Recently, Wilksch et al. Research from 2020 determined that adolescent girls who used Instagram for more hours each day showed significantly increased disordered eating patterns.

Young people use social media platforms to find meal ideas which they adapt based on the trending foods they observe. Users become more impressionable and tend to replicate online food because they interact with overlapping visual and social signals in this environment. As one of the UK's top food influencers on Instagram Gordon Ramsey has amassed 14 million followers. Jamie Oliver ranks second among food influencers with 9.3 million followers. The Instagram food blogger Ottolenghi stands out as a popular influencer with more than 2 million followers. Social media platforms have revolutionized how young adults experience and interact with food. Instagram, TikTok and YouTube act as interactive environments where users both share food choices and experience modification of their preferences through elements like visual presentation and influencer promotions alongside peer interactions and algorithmic content suggestions.

The period from 18 to 29 years serves as the bridge between adolescence and adulthood according to Arnett J. (2007). Young adulthood represents an impactful phase in life where individuals gain independence skills but stay at risk from limited life experience (Wood D, Crapnell T, 2018). The transition to adulthood offers an essential opportunity for interventions that encourage nutritious eating habits. They represent a significant portion of sugar-sweetened beverage and fast-food consumers while consuming minimal amounts of fruits and vegetables (Nour M, Sui Z, 2017). The food choices young adults make today can lead to long-term metabolic health problems such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes mellitus (Gakidou E, 2017). The past decade has seen social media (SM) usage expand exponentially according to Perrin A. Nutrition and health professionals together with government and non-government health organisations (health professionals) use social

media to promote healthy food choices and nutrition-related behaviours among young adults (Capurro D, Klassen KM, 2018). Health professionals struggle to match the influence of advanced marketing initiatives by corporate brands and food industries (Freeman B, 2015). Recent evidence indicates that this type of content leads to body image (BI) issues mainly among young women (Perloff RM,2014). It is essential to explore how social media affects young adult food choices because social media platforms have a powerful influence on people's behaviors and perceptions. As young adults develop through a pivotal stage their dietary decisions extend beyond nutritional needs because of various external pressures including media consumption effects. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube and Facebook deliver continuous streams of food-related content including both nutritious meal inspiration and trending junk food challenges.

Social media functions as the point where food and drink content intersects with digital user interactions. The content spans multiple areas such as user-shared food images and cooking snapshots together with recipes and product recommendations as well as nutritional tips and food service promotions. Social media platforms provide inspiration and direction for dining and drinking experiences outside of one's home social media has the power to influence what people eat and drink even among those who study food and drink or nutrition.

The latest research on U.S. first-year nutrition students revealed that search queries for 'sports,' 'nutrition,' and 'fitness' were most common among social media searches. A majority of survey participants noted they frequently encounter nutrition-focused content through their news feed and observe 'food swap' tips while watching influencer videos such as 'What I Eat in a Day'. While India features diverse food options the preferences of young people for food menus have evolved significantly. The food selection patterns among Indian youth show a preference for fast food items like Pizza, Burger, Pani Puri, Vada pav, and Sandwich which are not chosen based on their nutritional benefits. Young and old people love this kind of fast-food item because it depends solely on current food market trends.

Social media content creates false representations of food consumption and body image that cause uncertainty about healthy diets while reinforcing eating disorders and unhealthy weight control methods. The public health sector requires knowledge about social media's effects on dietary decisions to create specific intervention programs. By discovering how social media shapes decision-making we can develop programs to reduce its negative impact while promoting better eating behavior through the same platform.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

Objectives

1. To explore the relationship between Social Media Influence and Food Consumption Behaviour in young adults.
2. To assess the impact of social media influence on food consumption behaviour of young adults.
3. To determine whether social media influences young adult's food choices.
4. To examine whether social media influence young adults according to gender and income.

Hypotheses

a) There is a positive relationship between social media influence and young adults food consumption behaviour.
b) Social media usage increased the amount of junk food consumption by young adults.

c) Social media positively influences young adults food choices.
d) Social media influence differs significantly among youn adult's food choices based on gender and income.

Participants:

The research involved young adults between 18 and 29 years old from various genders and socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Jeffrey Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood identifies five key characteristics of the late teens and early twenties: The period from late teens to early twenties involves identity exploration, instability and self-focus while participants navigate the transitional stage between adolescence and adulthood and perceive their future as having unlimited opportunities.

Materials Used:

1. Steptoe, Pollard, and Wardle (1995) developed the Food Choice Questionnaire (FCQ) to evaluate the psychological and environmental determinants of individual food selection. The original questionnaire consists of 36 items, each rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("not at all important") to 4 ("very important"). Reliability: Steptoe et al. The 1995 study found that most factors displayed strong internal consistency as shown by Cronbach's alpha values between 0.70 and 0.89 which represent good reliability levels. Validity: Factor analyses have confirmed the FCQ's construct validity by supporting its original structure across multiple cultural and demographic settings according to Januszewska et al. (2011).
2. Vidya Patwardhan and her team created the Social Media Influence on Food Consumption Behavior Scale (SMIFCBS) in 2024 to fill the gap in multi-dimensional measures of social media effects on eating patterns. A team crafted the scale based on 455 student participants to investigate how social media shapes food consumption behaviors in young adults. Researchers used a 5-point Likert scale with options ranging from strongly disagrees to strongly agree to measure all 36 items in the study. The internal consistency of each factor was tested with Cronbach's alpha. The five factors demonstrated high reliability with Cronbach's alpha values between 0.854 and 0.913. Factor loadings which range between 0.689 and 0.931 for SMiFcBS subscales surpass the 0.5 threshold demonstrating strong convergent validity.

Data Collection:

Participants received access to the online survey through direct messaging. The survey started with a consent form that explained to participants they could choose to participate at their discretion and their information would remain confidential before moving to some basic questions about their social media use. After this the main questionnaire began. The study used two separate questionnaires where one focused on food choices and the other examined social media impact on food consumption behaviour. The questionnaire took approximately 10-20 mins. People who wanted their results received them via postal mail.

Variables:

- Independent Variable: Social Media Influence
- Dependent Variable: Food Consumption Behaviour

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results attempted to find out the correlation between social media influence and food consumption behaviour. It also attempted to identify if there are significant differences

among these variables based on years of experience. Further, it attempted to see the impact of social media influence on food consumption behaviour among young adults.

4.1 Descriptive Statistics:

Table 4.1: Demographic Summary

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Mean	Standard Deviation
Age	YA	203	100%	22.15	2.21
Gender	Male	60	29.56%	1.29	0.46
	Female	141	69.46%		
	Other	2	0.99%		
Socio-Economic Status	Middle Class	31	15.27%	1.97	0.67
	Upper Middle Class	26	12.82%		
	Lower Class	146	72.91%		

Interpretation:

The Demographic Summary Table offers an extensive analysis of participant traits which helps interpret the study context and evaluate result generalizability. The participant age profile shows a mean age of 22.15 years and a standard deviation of 2.21 years which confirms that most participants are early adults thereby making this study sample ideal due to young adults' susceptibility to social media influences. The standard deviation of 2.21 indicates that participants mostly fall within an 18–29-year range yet include some individuals who extend beyond this span to diversify the outcome. Female participants make up 69.46% of the study group while males account for 29.56% and another 0.99% of the participants identify as "Other."

4.2 Bivariate Analysis: Correlation Analysis:

Table 4.2: Correlation Matrix between Social Media Influence and Food Consumption Behavior(N=203)

Factor	1	2	3
Healthy food choices	1.000	.292*	.345*
Cravings for junk food items	-	1.000	.402*
Desire to eat	-	-	1.000

*Note: * $p < 0.05$*

As indicated in Table 4.2 Social Media's Impact on Healthy Food Choices: There is a moderate positive correlation between the impact of social media on healthy food choices and both junk food cravings ($r = 0.292$, $p<0.05$) and food desire ($r = 0.345$, $p<0.05$). This indicates that participants who report a stronger influence of social media on their healthy food choices also tend to experience greater cravings for junk food and stronger desires to eat food promoted on social media.

Junk Food Cravings and Food Desire: The correlation between junk food cravings and food desire is moderate to strong ($r = 0.402$, $p<0.05$). This suggests that social media induced

cravings for junk food are positively linked to a general increase in food desire, with food content on social media encouraging participants to eat more, even when they may not be hungry.

Direction and Strength: The correlations between these factors are moderate, suggesting that while social media plays a role in influencing food choices and cravings, the strength of the relationship may vary across individuals. The relatively weaker correlations indicate that other factors, beyond social media, may also contribute to food consumption behavior.

4.3 Regression Analysis: Impact of Social Media on Food Consumption Behavior:

Table 4.3: Multiple Regression Analysis: Predicting Food Consumption Behavior from Social Media Influence

Predictor	β	SE	*t*	*p*	R^2	*F*
Healthy food choices	-4.996e-16	1.06e-16	-4.719	0.000	1.000	8.811**
Junk Food Ads	6.939e-17	9.83e-17	0.706	0.481*		
Desire to eat	1.0000	1.16e-16	8.63e+15	0.000		

Note: β- unstandardized beta coefficient, SE: Standard Error

**p < .001 *p<0.5

F (3, 199) = 8.811

Interpretation:

As Table 4.3 Multiple Regression Analysis explores how Social Media Influence (as measured by factors such as impact on healthy food choices and junk food cravings) predicts Food Consumption Behavior (measured by the arousal of food desire due to social media content). The R^2 value of 1.000 indicates that the model explains 100% of the variation in the dependent variable (the desire to eat food based on social media content). This suggests a perfect fit for the regression model. However, it's worth noting that this could indicate overfitting, especially with only a few predictors.

4.4 T-test for Group Comparisons: Gender and Socio-Economic Status:

Table 4.4: T-test Results for Food Consumption Behavior by Gender

Group	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Male	3.22	1.09	-2.36	0.02*
Female	3.60	0.98	N/A	N/A

*Note: p<0.05**

Interpretation:

Mean and Standard Deviation: The mean score for food consumption behavior is slightly higher for females (3.60) than for males (3.22), with females showing slightly more engagement with food-related content on social media. However, the standard deviation for males (1.09) is slightly higher than for females (0.98), indicating that the responses among males are more spread out.

T-test Results: The t-statistic of -2.36 with a p-value of 0.02 suggests that there is a statistically significant difference between males and females in terms of food consumption behavior based on social media content. Since the p-value is less than the common significance level of 0.05, we can reject the null hypothesis and conclude that gender significantly affects food consumption behavior.

Table 4.5 T-test Results for Food Consumption Behavior by Socio-Economic Status

Group Comparison	Mean (Upper)	Mean (Middle)	Mean (Lower)	t-value	p-value
Upper vs Middle	4.0	3.5	-	1.39	0.19**
Upper vs Lower	4.0	3.5	3.2	2.10	0.04
Middle vs Lower	3.5	3.2	3.2	1.78	0.08

Note:p<0.05, p>0.05***

Interpretation:
The mean food consumption scores suggest that upper socio-economic class participants have a slightly higher mean score (4.0) compared to middle class participants (3.5), indicating that upper-class participants report a slightly higher desire to consume food influenced by social media content. However, the difference between upper and middle class is not statistically significant, as indicated by the p-value of 0.19, which is greater than the typical significance threshold of 0.05. The t-statistic for the comparison between Upper vs. Middle is 1.39, suggesting a moderate difference, but this is not enough to reject the null hypothesis that there is no significant difference.

DISCUSSION

This research's outcomes match existing scholarly works that demonstrate social media's influence on food selection decisions. Earlier observations show that social media exposure leads individuals toward impulsive eating behaviors especially when they view high-calorie and low-nutrient food content. The research outcomes align with previous work conducted by Harris and his team. According to Harris et al. (2017), young adults increased their unhealthy food consumption when they viewed food advertisements on social media. Researchers found that social media serves as a powerful platform for marketing food products which significantly impacts the dietary choices of young people. The literature needs to address the observed disparities between gender and socio-economic status.

Although past research shows women are more likely to be influenced by food-related social media content, this study reveals socio-economic status has less impact than previously thought according to some literature. According to Lin and Yao (2020), people with higher incomes made healthier food choices because they had access to more nutritious food options. This research did not show distinct differences among socio-economic groups which could be explained by the specific demographic composition of the study sample or the similar socio-economic backgrounds of the participants.

CONCLUSION

Research into social media's effect on food consumption patterns produced multiple findings that confirm social media's significant influence on people's eating habits. The analysis indicated a distinct connection between exposure to social media content and changes in food consumption behavior. People who reported seeing more food-related content on social media platforms such as ads and posts tended to exhibit more impulsive eating patterns. Existing research confirms that visual food cues affect food cravings and decision-making as shown by Harris et al. (2017). The study revealed that social media impacts food choices differently for men and women. Women show greater susceptibility to food content on social media compared to men which supports previous research demonstrating that women tend to follow food trends more closely through these platforms (Miller & Thompson, 2018). Females demonstrate higher engagement with food content due to cultural standards

and their interests in health and aesthetic trends which social media platforms often promote. The analysis found that individuals from wealthier socio-economic backgrounds demonstrated more active participation with food-related social media content and exhibited a marginally greater likelihood to implement these influences. The expected disparity between socio-economic groups turned out to be less significant than anticipated. Socio economic status affects access to healthy foods but does not completely determine how people interact with food content on social media. The current findings differ from previous research which demonstrated that socio-economic differences strongly determine how people consume food-related media and make food purchases according to Williams et al. (2015). The research results show how social media significantly affects people's food choices by using both visual and emotional signals. The relationship between food-related content consumption and user engagement is moderated by gender and socio-economic status because females demonstrate greater responsiveness while higher socio-economic backgrounds yield more engagement with food media.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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