

Do Food-Related Social Media Content Influence Dietary Habits Among Young Adults? An Empirical Examination

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Abstract: In recent years, there has been a remarkable increase in the usage of social media for exchanging and sharing information across several domains, including but not limited to lifestyle trends, fitness routines, entertainment contents, food related contents, and dietary practices, among others. This study aims to unravel the complexities involved with the influence of food related social media content on dietary habits. The primary objective is to explore how exposure to such contents affects food choices, body image perceptions, and nutritional awareness among young adults. This study utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods to assess the association between exposure to food related social media content and dietary habits. Individuals in the age range of 18 to 26 are considered as young adults in this study. The quantitative data was collected through an electronic survey completed by 110 respondents, and additional interviews were conducted with 30 selected individuals. The survey examined participants view on body image and the impact of social media food ads on food purchasing behaviour and dietary choices. Some of the important findings obtained from this study are as follows: First, participants indicated accessing several social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and Tik-Tok, with a substantial majority engaging for over 5 hours a day. Fashion, lifestyle, entertainment, and food were the most popular genres, with one-third of participants trying new diets or recipes after engaging with food content online. Two-third of participants felt body image pressure, often altering diets due to food-related social media content, while many prioritised visual appeals over nutrition, with 50% influenced by social media marketing. This study is a novel attempt to unravel the complex interplay between social media and dietary behaviors particularly among young adults.

Keywords: Social Media Platforms, Young Adults, Food Related Content, Dietary Trends, Social Psychology.

1. Introduction

Social media has revolutionized the communications landscape of the twenty-first century and has gradually occupied a prominent space in people's daily lives, fundamentally altering their thoughts, perceptions, and behaviors (O'Reilly, 2018; Rani and Tyagi, 2023). Social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, YouTube, Snapchat, Instagram, and Tik-Tok offer a wide variety of content genres each catering to the unique user objectives and interests. The pervasive influence of social media is distinctly evident across several facets of life, including but not limited to fashion and lifestyle trends, health, music, education, entertainment, sports, fitness trends, dietary habits, geopolitics, among others. Swart (2021) finds that the younger generation has a greater propensity to consume social media, characterized by interactions such as comments, reactions, likes, shares, among others. Several studies (Moghbeli et al., 2023; Rini et al., 2024; Canet et al., 2021; Patwardhan et al., 2024) have observed substantial influence of social media on food consumption behavior of individuals. This study refers to the intersection of social media and food content as 'food-related social media content.'

In recent years, food related social media content has emerged as a prominent content genre and has attracted a great deal of attention. As per a latest report published by Statista¹, food related social media content stands at the third position as the most popular influencer genre in the United States. This genre encompasses a great deal of categories, such as food reviews, diet and nutrition advice, culinary trends, autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) style eating, fermented foods and fusion dishes, plant-based diet, recipes, eating challenges (mukbang), among others, each enjoying substantial popularity among users. Digital media has evolved the way food is presented, accessed, and consumed by people. This shift reflects people's dietary habits in the way they engage with food culture and participate in culinary trends (Tortolini, 2021). Social media is a place where visual cues meet social cues, and when users interact with images of impeccably presented, delicious looking meals, it exerts an undeniably powerful impact on their cravings. Hoogstin (2017) observes that the presence of food on social media gives the users an inspiration to seek out and try new food choices which in turn sways their daily

¹ Statista. (2024b, August 9). Most popular influencer genres in the U.S. 2024.

<https://www.statista.com/forecasts/1409176/most-popular-influencer-genres-in-the-us>

dietary routine. The phenomena of "phone eats first," when individuals prioritize documenting their meals before consuming them, illustrates the profound integration of social media into everyday culinary practices, particularly among adolescents and young people. Social media has become a powerful medium that shapes our perceptions of food, altering traditional eating habits and introducing novel trends (Rounsefell et al., 2020).

A great wealth of literature exists that has examined the relationship between exposure to food-related social media content and dietary habits. Scholars have observed that increased exposure to food related contents on social media have resulted in overconsumption, disordered eating habits, unreasonable body images, unhealthy eating patterns, and heightened consumption of dense calorie food (Chung et al., 2016; Sidani et al., 2016; Ventura et al., 2021; Wayles, 2020). Pancer et al. (2021) emphasized that food media, especially calorie dense content, is designed to capture users' attention, thereby contributing to an obesogenic online environment that increases cravings and impulsive eating behaviors particularly among adolescents. Zeeni et al. (2024) found a positive association between exposure to food media on Instagram and increased consumption of junk items among young adults. Social media platforms and food content have significantly influenced dietary choices while simultaneously commercializing them, thereby blurring the distinction between consumption and commerce. Food marketing demonstrates a significant correlation between the excessive consumption of sugar, fast food, and snacks among children and adults and their exposure to images of these unhealthy products on social media. Both snacks and fast-food items have contributed to unhealthy consumption, while restaurant services also promote and serve high energy-dense foods instead of low energy-dense options (Alwafi et al., 2022). Social media serves as a platform for restaurants to display visually appealing dishes to enhance user engagement, as prospective customers often seek reviews prior to dining. These social platforms function as marketing tools and positively influence business valuation, enhance sales, and improve market share². Notwithstanding the perceived negative impact of social media on food consumption habits, studies such as Aldossari and Al-Mahish (2021) and Sharma and De Choudhry (2015) have shown that exposure to social media platforms have resulted in increased awareness about healthy eating behavior and healthy eating choices among young adults.

Given the pervasive presence of food-related content on social media and its impact on dietary habits, it is essential to examine how social media platforms affect the eating behaviors of young adults. This study seeks to investigate this relationship by addressing several key questions: Does the time spent on food-related social media content correlate with changes in dietary habits among young adults? Does food-related social media content contribute to body consciousness among young adults? How frequently do young adults consult nutritional information when purchasing food products? The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: Following this is a section on review of literature followed by a section on research methods and data sources. Next section presents the results and discussions. The last section concludes with certain policy recommendations.

2. Review of Literature

The impact of food-related advertisements on individuals' dietary habits has traditionally been examined through television media. The unfolding of digital age, however, has reduced people's television media usage (Twenge et al., 2018; Anderson and Jiang, 2018). Frazier and Harris (2018) found that the time spent watching television has declined dramatically from an average of 2.6 hours per day in 2013 to 1.8 hours per day in 2017, leading to a 43% reduction in exposure to food related TV content being viewed. Further, the study revealed a substantial increase in adolescents' engagement with social media platforms, including YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat, increasing from 24% in 2014 to over 50% in 2018. Social media has increasingly become one of the most preferred sources of information, particularly among adolescents and young adults, thereby considerably influencing their food choices and nutritional perspectives (Simeone and Scarpato, 2020). It not only influences dietary choices but also has become a platform of visual focus for food enthusiasts transcending mere aesthetics. Social media users are often swayed by visually captivating food posts

² Wong, B., JD. (2023, May 18). Top social media Statistics and Trends of 2024. Forbes Advisor. <https://www.forbes.com/advisor/business/social-media-statistics/#source>

accompanied by engaging storytelling³. Adrini et al. (2022), in their study on college students' engagement with food contents on YouTube, revealed that the participants found the online food presentation as 'enticing' and 'aesthetically pleasant'. Additionally, the study suggested that visual content generates on average 94% more engagement than text-based content alone, underscoring the importance of visual elements in online food marketing and promotion. Moreover, social networking platforms have enabled users to explore diverse cuisines and international flavors, facilitated by collaborations and advertisements that promote various food trends. Available research indicates that food advertising on social media, including contents from food influencers, reviews by food vloggers, and the accompanying social environment, frequently impacts adolescents' food choices. Qutteina et al. (2021) found a positive association between exposure to food marketing contents and eating behaviors, attitudes, and perceived norms in young adults. Additionally, the study revealed that food marketing content has contributed to promotion of unhealthy eating behaviors and has increased the intake of calorie-dense food among adolescents. Molenaar et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative study to understand the effects of food advertising on social media on the eating behavior of adolescents. The study revealed that energy dense, nutrient poor foods were associated with negative health consequences, and that young adults had the poorest dietary behaviors compared to other groups, with diets often high in energy dense, nutrient poor foods and low in fruits and vegetables.

The perception of one's body image is another significant area significantly affected by food-related content on social media. A body image is a combination of thoughts and feelings one has regarding their body and is influenced by both internal (e.g., personality) and external (e.g., social environment) factors. The intricate connections between social media engagement and body image have been examined through two main theoretical frameworks: social comparison theory and objectification theory. Social comparison theory posits that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their attributes to their peers, particularly those perceived as more attractive or slender (Perloff, 2014). This upward comparison is a well-documented precursor to body dissatisfaction. Objectification theory complements this theory by investigating how societal and media portrayals, particularly the sexual objectification of women, contribute to a culture where women internalize objectifying messages (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). Men, too, are influenced by objectifying portrayal, often leading to similar self-objectifying behaviors. Social media exacerbates these dynamics by prominently featuring fitness imagery, thin ideal body types, and evocative food content, further perpetuating body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors. There is a substantial body of research that provides evidence linking social media exposure to negative body image and disordered eating, especially among young adults (Holland and Tiggemann, 2016; Rounsefell et al., 2019; Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2015). Holland and Tiggemann (2016) found that negative social media use was linked with greater body dissatisfaction and disordered eating in young adults.

Rounsefell et al. (2019) found social media feedback influences young adults' dietary choices, linking image-focused engagement to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating. Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) similarly noted that negative social media use and exposure to idealized images heighten body dissatisfaction, with fitness content perpetuating unrealistic beauty standards.

An important source of food literacy is social media, it can either educate its users or distort their understanding of nutrition and healthy eating habits, depending upon the nature of the messages encountered. Research suggests that exposure to content promoting "core" foods— nutrients-dense items such as, fruits, vegetables, grains, can reinforce food literacy, increase the intake of food core foods, and act as a buffer against the influence of messages promoting less nutritious, "non-core" foods (Steils and Obaidalahe, 2020). The surveyed literature clearly indicates the role played by social media in influencing food choices and body image, particularly among young adults. While social media platforms serve as a source of inspiration and information for dietary habits and meal preparation, it simultaneously fosters an environment of comparison, competition, and self-criticism among young adults that makes them evaluate their bodies and food choices against those portrayed online. Addressing these challenges requires continued exploration and targeted interventions to promote critical media literacy, positive body image and healthy eating behaviors among young adults in the digital age.

³ killer Influencer Marketing campaigns in the Food sector (2022). [https://www.kolsquare.com/en/blog/5-killer-influencer-marketing-campaigns-in-the-food-sector#:~:text=influencer%20Marketing%20Food%20is%20also,views%20on%20TikTok%20\(Source\).](https://www.kolsquare.com/en/blog/5-killer-influencer-marketing-campaigns-in-the-food-sector#:~:text=influencer%20Marketing%20Food%20is%20also,views%20on%20TikTok%20(Source).)

3. Research Methods

This exploratory study employs both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to assess the association between exposure to food-related social media content and dietary habits. Further, the study utilized convenience sampling strategy for data collection for two primary reasons: first, it targets at a specific cohort of young adults, and second, it enables straightforward and easy access to consenting participants. Additionally, Jager et al. (2017) finds that the convenience sampling method offers precise generalizability when the population is homogeneous. Individuals in the age range of 18 to 26 are considered as young adults in this study. Quantitative data was collected using an online Google form in the month of September 2024. A pilot survey was conducted prior to the main electronic survey to evaluate the feasibility and reliability of the questionnaire responses. A total of 110 responses were received, comprising students from various educational institutions within a private university in India. The survey explored social media use, including content types, interactions with food-related posts, and their influence on dietary choices and body image. Quantitative data was supplemented with 30 interviews, averaging thirty minutes each, to examine socio-psychological factors affecting young adults food behaviour. The interview questions were structured, and all the interviews were conducted in English to avoid any confusion or misinterpretation of the questions. The interviews facilitated a deeper understanding of the participants' exposure to online food content, the extent of such content's influence on their perception of body image, and the role of peer influence in shaping their dietary choices. Additionally, it examined the impact of online food advertisements on participants' food purchasing decisions and their level of nutritional awareness when selecting these products.

Of 110 respondents, 63% (n=70) were female, and 37% (n=40) were male. Approximately two-thirds of the sample fall within the age range of 20 to 24. The mean age of the sample is 22 years. An overwhelming majority of the participants (69%) are enrolled in undergraduate programs. A total of ninety-eight participants reported engaging with social media multiple times daily (with a total duration of more than three hours of usage), whereas only six participants reported using social media once daily. Additionally, content related to fashion and lifestyle, entertainment, and food emerged as the most popular genre among the respondents. More than half of the participants (n=57) reported interacting with food-related social media content daily. Approximately two-fifths of the participants reported actively searching for food-related content on social media platforms. Instagram and YouTube (n=76) are the primary platforms preferred by participants for engaging with or encountering food-related content.

4. Results and Discussions

A preliminary analysis of the study's results indicates that social media has become a preferred source of knowledge on food and diet among young adults. The interviews conducted with the participants offer important insights into the impact of food-related social media content on body image, purchasing patterns of food products, access to food and nutrition information, and, crucially, their dietary habits. Food-related social media content significantly influences individuals' meal preparation techniques, providing creative ideas to enhance nutrition or transform meals into calorie-dense, flavorful options. A limited number of participants indicated that food and nutrition information on social media was advantageous. Food reviews (58%), followed by cooking/meal preparation reels and recipes (33%) were identified as the predominant types of food content among the survey participants. An interviewee narrated:

"It has a huge impact, especially in the amount of calories I plan to take in a day. It has also helped me with my weight loss. Food related contents have also helped me in giving ideas on how to make food visually aesthetic, gives an opportunity to try new recipes and it also suggest what's healthy and unhealthy for you." An interviewee, age 22 years, India, September 2024.

It is worthwhile noting that users' choice of content significantly influences whether the impact of social media on their food choices is detrimental or beneficial. More than two-thirds of the participants reported interacting with content pertaining to both calorie-dense (unhealthy/junk) and less calorie-dense (healthy) foods, while nine participants reported interaction only with junk food content. This finding corroborates with Stamatiou's (2022) study, where participants reported a moderate impact of social media on their perceptions of food consumption. Additionally, participants expressed that, posts about healthy eating and new recipes were inspiring, while the image of delicious but less nutritious food appeared to enhance their desire to consume such foods. An interviewee illustrated:

"I mainly focus more on calorie food and making sure to try out both less and high calorie-based food (in a healthy manner) have made a noticeable change in my nutritional choices, through online food content." An interviewee, age 24 years, India, September 2024.

Interactive content on social networking sites significantly enhances follower engagement through diverse formats, including posts, reels, long-form videos, and advertisements related to food products. Such content can influence individuals, often driving them to make purchasing decisions. Moreover, aggressive food marketing targeted towards children, teens, young adults and older adults have contributed to this trend. The responses from participants clearly demonstrate the influence of engaging with food-related social media content on disordered eating patterns. A total of sixty-seven respondents (61%) exhibited impulsive behaviors related to dining out, ordering food online, and snacking while watching food-related content online. The complex interlinkages of globalization and novel marketing strategies have resulted in a nutritional transition from minimally processed to ultra-processed food products. This transition underscores the influence of food marketing exposure on purchasing patterns and eating behaviors. An interviewee narrated:

"I end up buying a pack of instant ramen or noodles after watching a trending video on how to upgrade them into fancy meal. I want to try the same recipe myself; this happens a lot of times, but I try different restaurants and fast foods based in what I see on online ads." An interviewee, age 22 years, India, September 2024.

There is a wealth of literature available (Holland and Tiggemann, 2016; Rounsefell et al., 2019; Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2015; Perloff, 2014) that have found an association between social media use and negative body image among women, especially exposure to idealized body images have led to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating attitudes. Out of a total of 69 female respondents, 25 of them agreed to feel pressured to follow certain diets or food trends because of the body images promoted in the food related social media posts. On the contrary, only 10 males agree to feel pressured about the same. Adolescent girls exhibit greater vulnerability to the adverse effects of social media on body image. Social media trends such as, "What I Eat in a Day" have contributed to restrictive diets and contributing to toxic diet culture and leading to disordered eating by glorifying thinness and harmful eating behaviors. Whereas, as per a study, males exhibit greater positive agency over their bodies and social media use, often employing more active coping styles, in comparison to females, however, it is important to recognize that men are still exposed to trends that may make them feel bodily dissatisfied. The survey participants in this study, however, reported minimal effects from social media on their body image, with few of them reporting a positive influence. An interviewee illustrated:

"Social media has a mix of reactions towards body standards as it depends on which side of the app you are on. I've seen the - eat what you want and don't restrict your craving as you will cave in more side. But I don't really follow it so much. I don't really follow diets as such so that's that. But as I scroll on apps, i do get a sense of insecurity when I scroll but I don't do anything drastic." An Interviewee, age 22 years, India, September 2024.

Checking the nutritional value of food products is essential for making informed and healthy choices. It often suggests 'per serving' sizes, thereby helping individuals to manage daily energy intake based on dietary goals. Majority of individuals do not check nutritional values or levels while purchasing a food product and this could lead to severe implications for a healthy lifestyle, such as, it can lead to overconsumption of calories, imbalance nutrient intake, increased health risk or allergies. 11 out of 69 females always look for nutritional content of a food item before trying a recipe or food trend, whereas 34 of them tend to refer nutritional value at times and 24 of them do not check for these values. Conversely, only 5 out of 40 males always look for nutritional value. Available research suggest that this difference could be due to females exhibiting higher levels of health consciousness and more likely to align their dietary choices with perceived health benefits. Few participants in the study reported a tendency to overlook nutritional values when purchasing food products, instead prioritizing visual aesthetics, such as appealing packaging and product presentation. This indicates that the visual appeal of food items can significantly influence consumer behavior, often overriding more health-conscious decision making.

5. Concluding Remarks

This study endeavored to offer new insights into the relationship between food-related social media content and various aspects of dietary choices among young adults. The findings of the study highlight the intricate relationship between food related social media content and dietary behaviors among young adults. In an era where social media usage has become an integral part of daily life, this study sheds light on the significant influence that food related content has on food choices, body image and nutritional awareness. Participants predominantly accessed social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Tik-Tok, dedicating

considerable amount of time to engage with diverse content, such as food-related material. One of the key findings of this study was that food related social media content did significantly affect dietary habits, such that approximately one-third of the respondents reported trying new dietary practices, food products and recipes, while a substantial amount of respondents also neglected to assess nutritional value of food before attempting any new food or purchasing any food product. Another critical finding is the pressure social media exerts on body image perceptions. While respondents did feel compelled to achieve certain body standards depicted in food content, few other respondents did not feel pressured to achieve certain body type and rather enjoyed the food content as it is. The role of food marketing on social media platforms also emerged as a significant factor influencing purchasing behavior. Majority females acknowledged that the appeal of food products overshadowed critical considerations like nutritional values.

The study has certain limitations. First, the small sample size and the use of convenience sampling constrain the generalization of findings to a broader and more diverse demographic population. Second, the sensitive nature of topics concerning personal eating habits and body image may have introduced potential bias among participants during the interviews. This study, despite these limitations, offers significant insights. Overall, this study emphasized the complex role of food related social content and dietary behaviors, revealing both opportunities and challenges. On the positive note, social media can serve as a platform for promoting healthy eating habits but conversely, it also promotes unhealthy food trends, prioritizing food aesthetics over nutritional value. From a policy perspective, the findings of this study underscore the urgent need for health promotion strategies that leverage social media's reach while lessening its negative impact. Public health campaigns and interventions should focus on promoting nutritional literacy and fostering a balanced healthy diet.

6. Conflicts of Interests

The authors of this paper declare that they have no conflicts of interest. Further, we have not received any funding/grant from any organization.

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