

Exploring the Impact of Social Media on Dietary Decision-Making and Nutritional Patterns

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ABSTRACT: The study set out to determine the extent to which the media, and its practitioners, context, diet mentalities and emotions affect an individual's food choice and nutrition through social perceptions. In this survey, which was conducted in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, Pakistan, data was collected from (n=223) respondents, both male and female, using purposive sampling. The quantitative method was applied alongside. Analysis of the data provided insight into how media strategies could be reshaped to promote healthy eating habits and inform public health policies. It was found that people's eating habits are adversely influenced by advertisements, cultural practices, and information dissemination, and such practices, in turn, adversely affect food and general nutrition. Rather, food products are marketed for ease of use and attractiveness, and in turn, the use of processed and unhealthy food becomes commonplace. Also, the media has the potential to induce healthy eating practices and educate people on nutrition. All things considered, this research advances our knowledge of the significant influence that the media has on dietary preferences and nutrition, opening the door to more successful interventions and laws that will lead to better public health outcomes.

KEYWORDS: Media Influence, Food Choices, Nutrition, Advertising, Public Health, Social Media

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Introduction

The term "media" refers to the means of communication or devices used for data transmission and storage. This phrase refers to various areas of the mass media communication industry, such as publishing, news media, photography, film, television, and advertising. Even though the term "media" was first used to refer to these kinds of communication structures in the 1920s (Shabir et al., 2014a; Sadaf et al., 2023).

Food affects a living thing's general health and well-being and is a basic and essential need. The word "food choice" refers to a broader category of eating behaviors, such as overindulging, snacking, or restricting particular foods. A satisfying and healthful diet can be a persuasive factor in reducing stress (Bremner & Moazzami, 2020; Bukhari et al., 2022).

Young adults' dietary intakes are influenced by personal, behavioral, and socio-environmental factors including body image. A large body of research investigating the impact of social media on eating habits is predicated on the idea that body image is a socially constructed construct.

Fast food consumption has been associated with weight gain, body fatness, elevated body mass index, and a diet heavy in calories, sugar, sodium, and saturated fat. Salted snack snacks, fried fast food, and fizzy drinks are examples of common fast food

items. Fast food has grown to be a significant issue, and several nations are acting to address it. Some are even enacting fat taxes and outlawing the promotion of unhealthy foods in children's programming and schools (Iqbal et al., 2024; Shabir et al., 2014).

Adolescence is crucial for developing dietary patterns, lifestyle choices, and behavioral patterns that will benefit a person throughout their life, ensuring they maintain these habits throughout adulthood. Young adults (18-25 years) develop dietary behaviors from adolescence to adulthood, which significantly impact their dietary habits throughout their lives.

Social media often lacks research, yet it influences people to make decisions about adding or cutting certain foods. Cotter said;

"There are a lot of 'What I eat in a day' posts, which aren't even what people should eat. Plus, there are a lot of drinks and products marketed that can be put out there without proper information. There are a lot of influencers without any nutritional background working with companies to promote products without understanding the effect of what promoting these products does."

There are many different aspects to choosing food, including taste, cost, convenience, health concerns, and social context. Owing to their perceived ease, those with hectic work schedules often choose packaged foods. According to a study done in Delhi on a range of age groups, having kids in the home affects the decision to buy packaged foods that are ready to eat. Furthermore, media exposure—especially on television—has a big impact on how consumers decide what to buy.

Statement of the Problem

Demetrius L. Bailey's "The Everything Nutrition Book: All You Need to Know about Dieting, Nutrition, Eating Healthy, and More" (2005): These are some of the very real debates concerning modernity. One of the critical determining factors of modern living is how the media now influences an individual in terms of diet, and that extends to general nutrition as well. A ceaselessly growing corpus of evidence has pointed out how effective and available a media source, from the most immediate print to television advertisements, as well as social media and material available online, can become in influencing one's food-consumption practices as well as nutritional effects. An understanding of the dimensions of influence and the mechanisms through which individuals make their food or diet choices is critical for the promotion towards healthy eating and solving health problems through diet-disease relationships and nutrient deficiency issues. It is, therefore, the objective of this research to look into the extent to which it affects the consumption of diets and overall nutrition in the context of the themes from the various platforms, as well as impacts drawn from the general health and well-being of the individual.

Significance of the Study

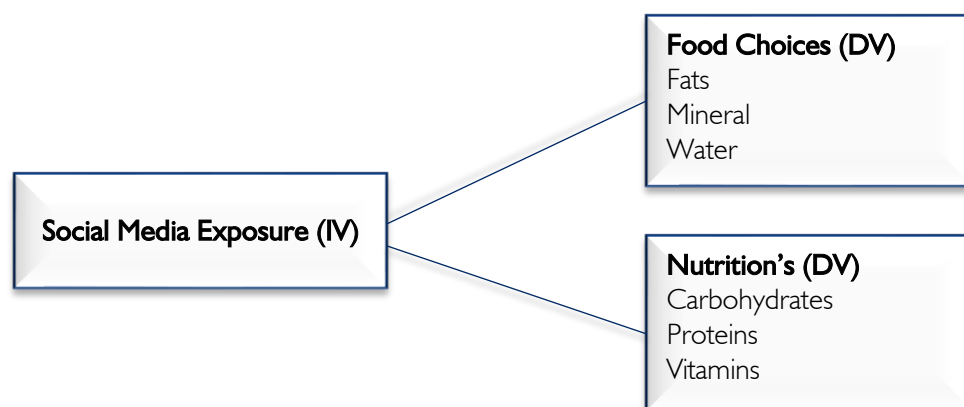
As attention has been drawn from public health and well-being, it is vital to study the effects of media on consumer choices of diet and nutrition. Dietary decisions are being made under the influence of the media, which directly shapes people's perceptions, attitudes, and eating and consumption habits. They must then understand these influences for many reasons.

Health Consequences: The media, including social media and traditional media, often presents food high in sugar and fat as well as the calories-rich ones. The prevalence of serious diseases due to the poor diet is more likely to occur as a result of the campaigns of obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

Theoretical Framework

Social psychology, a fundamental subfield of psychology focusing on how the presence of others influences individuals' thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, serves as a foundational basis for social perception theory, which originated in the early 20th century. By applying social perception theory to analyze the influence of media on dietary choices, we can deepen our understanding of the complex interplay between media messages, individual perceptions, and eating habits. This understanding can facilitate more effective initiatives aimed at promoting healthier eating behaviors and mitigating the impact of harmful food marketing.

Independent and Dependent Variables



Research Objectives

- ▶ To investigate how much exposure to food-related content on social media influences people's dietary decisions.
- ▶ To evaluate how social media affects people's diets' nutritional value.

Research Questions

- ▶ What effects do various social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok have on people's perceptions of nutrition and healthier eating?
- ▶ How does social media affect people's nutritional value in their diets?

Literature Review

Nadeem et al., (2023), conducted a research article titled "Association between social media usage and eating behaviors of young adults in Pakistan". This study aimed to investigate the impact of young people's eating habits in Pakistan on their use of social media. The researchers conducted a two-part structured online survey. Participants' age, gender, and location were among the demographic information acquired in the first portion. The next section asked respondents about their eating habits and social media usage habits. A total of 250 people, both male and female, between the ages of 16 and 30, took part in the study. The participants answered the questionnaire, which sought to ascertain whether young people's eating habits and social media use are related. According to the data, ninety-eight per cent of students use social media for social networking. Furthermore, 37% of interviewees said they occasionally place online food orders. For 19 survey items, the researchers could find no meaningful connections. On the other hand, the P-value for the three items was less than 0.05, suggesting a statistically significant association between certain eating behaviours and the use of Facebook and YouTube. In conclusion, the study discovered a strong link between the use of Facebook and YouTube and an increase in the consumption of fast food, nibbling while utilizing these platforms, and controlling one's diet according to information gleaned from social media. However, only three of the twenty-two items that were looked at—items 9, 12, and 16—showed a meaningful correlation between Facebook and YouTube usage and eating habits. As a result, there is not enough data to conclude with certainty if social media use has an impact on research participants' eating habits.

Kadarla and Ramishetti (2023), the purpose of this study was to ascertain how exposure to the media affected the dietary preferences and nutritional health of 7–9-year-old schoolchildren in Hyderabad, Telangana. For this non-experimental study, 150 schoolchildren—81 males and 69 girls—were selected at random. Paper questionnaires were used to perform a descriptive survey as part of the study. These questionnaires asked about a wide range of subjects, including personal information, body measurements, prior medical history, TV watching habits, eating patterns, frequency of food consumption, and ratings of hunger and satiety. According to WHO growth charts, the majority of boys fell into the normal weight bracket, while girls tended to be overweight. Every day, 48% of youngsters watched television for one to two hours, 24.7% for three to four hours, 18% for five to six hours, and 9.3% for more than six hours. According to the medical histories of the patients, 4% had eye problems, and 23% had dental illnesses like cavities (80%) and toothaches (17.1%). The mean influence of media and children's food

preferences did not differ significantly ($p^*=0.29(>0.05)$). A weak connection (+0.33) was found between Dietary choices and the Impact of Media. The impact of media and prior medical history (dental and ocular illnesses) showed a substantial association (+0.86).

Goerke et al. (2023) carried out a study titled "The influence of social media on the dietary behaviours of young Australian adults: A mixed methods exploration". For this study on the usage of social media by young Australian adults, the researchers had three main objectives. The first goal was to ascertain how young Australian adults' eating habits are influenced by social media. Examining the connection between social media use and wellbeing was the second objective. Finding out how social media affects eating habits was the third goal. Social media was used to recruit 107 young Australian adults between the ages of 18 and 25 for a survey and focus groups. Demographic data, wellbeing scores, and information regarding social media use and food were gathered through an anonymous online survey. Key findings were further investigated in five follow-up focus groups. According to the findings, social media caused 51% of participants to alter their eating habits, and 71% were motivated to make healthy decisions after seeing models make them. On the other hand, individuals who used social media more frequently reported feeling less well-being and were more likely to believe that social media had no beneficial effect on their diet ($H = 10.38, p = 0.02, df = 3$). Focus groups showed that attitudes, not behaviors, were influenced by social media. Information from reliable social media authors is trusted by young adults.

Metha et al. (2023) conducted a research study titled "A comprehensive review on the impact of dietary choices of males". The study was carried out to investigate the eating habits of non-traditional male college students. Regarding methods and materials, the study project's questionnaire was handwritten on a card. Seventy male college students who do not live at home with their families completed an anonymous survey. Although most male students ate twice a day, the majority of their snacking and beverage intake happened in between meals, according to the study's findings. Even with the abundance of internet resources, educational establishments remain the primary information hubs for young men (ages 18 to 25) looking for guidance on eating a healthy, balanced diet.

Kreft et al. (2023) 's goal was to determine how people use social media to learn about nutrition and how reliable they believe the information they find there. A self-administered online questionnaire that was validated for both content and face was completed by 2,318 individuals in a descriptive cross-sectional study that was enhanced with analysis. The statistical significance threshold was set at $p < 0.05$, and both descriptive and inferential statistics were used. The poll was specifically designed for Stellenbosch University undergraduate students in South Africa who were between the ages of 18 and 25 in 2021. Although 91% of participants understood the idea of evidence-based nutrition information, 77% found it difficult to evaluate the veracity of such material on social media. It was discovered that women had considerably greater trouble with this than men ($\chi^2 = 39, p < 0.001$). The participants interacted with the nutrition content on SM and gained an understanding of what evidence-based nutrition content is. However, most are not adept at assessing the veracity of material on social media. The most reliable person to get knowledge on nutrition was a dietitian.

Law and Jevons (2023), the purpose of the current study was to look at how nutrition and dietetics students perceived SMU's influence on disordered eating. Individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with dietetics and nutrition students from UK universities were conducted. The purpose of these interviews was to learn more about the opinions of students on how social media may impact their eating-related thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The gathered information was subjected to a thematic analysis to identify important themes. The results indicated that SMU might give students a helpful tool for trying out new dishes, ingredients, and health-related information, allowing them to enhance the quality of their diets and eating habits. Future studies should look at measures to lessen the detrimental effects that SMU and the course material have on students studying nutrition and dietetics who have eating disorders.

In a recent research study titled "The Influence of Gender, Media, and Internet Usage on Adolescents' Fast Food Perception and Fluid Intake," Al-Haifi et al. (2023) investigated the correlation between adolescents' perceptions of fast food, their fluid consumption, and factors such as gender and media/internet engagement. Employing a multistage stratified random sampling method, a cross-sectional survey was conducted involving 706 adolescents aged 15 to 18 in Kuwait, comprising 343 boys and 363 girls. Data was collected using pre-tested and specially designed self-report questionnaires covering various topics, including

participants' fluid intake and the classification of fast foods. Additionally, height and weight measurements for calculating Body Mass Index (BMI) were obtained using calibrated medical scales. For the purpose of analysis, respondents were categorized into two groups based on gender: male and female. The findings revealed significant gender differences in adolescents' perceptions of fast food across seven out of fourteen options, underscoring notable disparities in viewpoints. The study highlights the need for enhanced nutrition education initiatives focused on fast food for teenagers. It also calls for further research to improve awareness among adolescent consumers regarding food and beverage choices in the State of Kuwait.

Kucharczuk et al. (2022) conducted a comprehensive review aimed at understanding the impact of social media marketing for food and beverages on the dietary choices of adolescents. This literature review involved an extensive examination of previous studies, with a particular focus on how social media affects the food preferences of teenagers. To gather relevant articles, CINAHL and PubMed were utilized, targeting publications in peer-reviewed journals from 2015 to 2020. The search employed keywords such as food advertisements, social media usage, adolescents, and dietary selections. Articles were selected based on predefined inclusion criteria consistent with PRISMA guidelines, and the quality of the studies was assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool. The main conclusions were extracted via narrative analysis. Six of the 234 records that were initially found were considered suitable for the evaluation. The two main conclusions of the study were that unhealthy food was more likely to be remembered by teenagers and that celebrity endorsements were frequently featured in the ads. According to this research, food and beverage companies should use social media to market their products to teenagers.

Daly and Kearney's (2021) present article aims to highlight the common barriers and motivators influencing teenagers' choices of nutrient-dense foods, with an emphasis, when possible, on the Irish setting. Numerous studies on teenage eating habits have concentrated on determining what prevents adolescents from consuming healthful foods. These studies have generally concluded that some external factors, such as cost, accessibility, and convenience in the food environment, are major influences on teenage food preferences.

Erdem and Tarakci (2022) conducted a research study titled "Effect of Social Network Use and Advertising on the Anthropometric Status and Dietary Intake". This study looked into how adults' anthropometric status and eating habits were affected by social media use and advertising. In this randomized cross-sectional study, which took place in 30 Turkish cities, 9,918 adults between the ages of 18 and 65 participated. Participants were given a thorough questionnaire consisting of 40 questions divided into four sections. The sections included information on socio-demographic characteristics, anthropometric measurements, the frequency of 24-hour food consumption, the dependence on nutrition information from advertisements and social media, and changes in eating habits influenced by these sources. It finally came to light that the decisions made by consumers to purchase things are unaffected by celebrities appearing in ads or on social media. Rather, consumers seek nutritional guidance from dietitians and pay attention to mentioned sources in social media posts that highlight themes connected to nutrition. The study suggested that only dietitians should discuss nutrition on social media and in ads while adhering to ethical guidelines, and appropriate institutional inspections should be conducted.

Mediratta and Mathur (2023) conducted a research study titled "Determinants of Food Choices among Adults (20–40 Years Old) Residing in Delhi". The study aimed to evaluate the factors influencing adult Indian food choices. Adult residents in residential colonies in each of the four geographic zones of Delhi, India, were the focus of a cross-sectional study that used a nonprobability purposive sampling technique. Data were gathered using a mixed methods approach from a sample of 589 persons in the upper-middle-class and high-income categories who were between the ages of 20 and 40. Principal component analysis, the chi-squared test, and logistic regression were used to analyze the gathered data; a P value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant. The findings of the study revealed that Adults' food choices are mostly influenced by three factors: taste (20%), nutritional value (22%), and brand (30%). The three main elements influencing food choices were identified by principal component analysis as "individual," "social," and "food quality/wholesomeness". The determinants of food choices should be leveraged by public health policy to improve the food environment through cost-effective food availability that is both healthy and delicious.

Research Methodology

The nature of this study is quantitative research. It is chosen to conduct a research process. The questions were informative about time food nutrition through social media that might influence the public perception of food nutrition. The research was survey-based. The research population consists of people of all ages, including males and females, who live in Rawalpindi and Islamabad. The sample size of this study was (N=223). A non-probability method was employed to choose a sample. The researcher used available and convenient techniques for the selection of the sample. A survey through an online questionnaire (self-design) was used to collect data on how the respondents feel, behave, and think about food nutrition, which is affecting them positively or negatively. The questionnaire consisted of three parts. Part A was demographic information (age, education, income etc.) PART B contained general questions about how media influences their food choices and overall nutrition, and Part 3 contained questions about independent and dependent variables. Data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, which involve the calculation of frequency and percentage by utilizing the 2021 SPSS version. Tables were used to display the results.

Results

Table 1

Demographics Information of the Respondents

Respondents' Demographics		Frequency	Percent
Age	16-19	34	15.2
	20-25	176	78.9
	26-30	10	4.5
	31 or older	3	1.3
	Total	223	100.0
Gender	MALE	6	2.7
	FEMALE	217	97.3
	Total	223	100.0
Education Level	Matric	3	1.3
	Inter	17	7.6
	BS	161	72.2
	Mphil	42	18.8
	Total	223	100.0
Employment status?	employed full-time	6	2.7
	employed part-time	3	1.3
	Student	208	93.3
	Unemployment	3	1.3
	Retired	0	0.00
	Others	3	1.3
	Total	223	100.0

The above table shows the result of responses age-wise. Most of respondents ages were 20-25 (N=176). The table showed that most of the respondents were female (N=217). The Table also showed that most of the respondents had bachelor's degrees (N=161). The employment status of most of the students was students (N=208).

Table 2

General Questions about Social Media Use and Food-Related Information

Questions	More likely	Likely	Neutral	Unlikely	Very Unlikely	Total
Do you trust food-related information or advice shared on social media?	46 (20.6)	100 (44.8)	74 (33.2)	0 (0.00)	3 (1.3)	223 (100.0)
Do you often engage in discussions about nutrition or dietary topics on social media?	6 (2.7)	87 (39.0)	88 (39.5)	32 (14.3)	10 (4.5)	223 (100.0)

Questions	More likely	Likely	Neutral	Unlikely	Very Unlikely	Total
Does social media provide accurate and reliable information about nutrition?	16 (7.2)	84 (37.7)	86 (38.6)	34 (15.2)	3 (1.3)	223 (100.0)
Do you think social media platforms promote healthy eating habits?	12 (5.4)	81 (36.3)	69 (30.9)	37 (16.6)	24 (10.8)	223 (100.0)

The above table shows that people trust food-related information or advice shared on social media. Most of the respondents were likely with it (N=100). The above table shows that you often engage in discussions about nutrition or dietary topics on social media. Most of the respondents' responses were neutral (N=88). The table shows that social media provides accurate and reliable information about nutrition. Respondents were neutral (N=86). The above table shows that you think social media platforms promote healthy eating habits. Most of the responses are likely (N=81)

Table 3*Food Choices and Social Media*

Questions	More Likely	Likely	Neutral	Unlikely	Very Unlikely	Total
Do you see content about food on social media sites?	86 (38.6)	80 (35.9)	54 (24.2)	0 (0.00)	3 (1.3)	223 (100.0)
Do you follow any influencers or accounts on social media that post mostly on food?	96 (43.0)	57 (25.6)	33 (14.8)	28 (12.6)	9 (4.0)	223 (100.0)
To what extent would you try a new dish or recipe that you came across on social media?	41 (18.4)	91 (40.8)	71 (31.8)	7 (3.1)	13 (5.8)	223 (100.0)
Do the things you see on social media make you feel under pressure to eat particular foods?	22 (9.9)	61 (27.4)	76 (34.1)	54 (24.2)	10 (4.5)	223 (100.0)

The above table shows that you see content about food on social media sites. Most of the responses were more likely to have it (N=86). Results showed that "Do you follow any influencers or accounts on social media that post mostly on food?". Respondents were more likely to use it (N=96). Would you try a new dish or recipe that you came across on social media? Most of the responses were likely (N=91). Things you see on social media make you feel under pressure to eat particular foods. Most of the responses were neutral (N=76).

Table 4*Nutrition and Social Media*

Questions	More Likely	Likely	Neutral	Unlikely	Very Unlikely	Total
Do you believe that your general eating habits have been changed by social media?	39 (17.5)	72 (32.3)	72 (32.3)	34 (15.2)	6 (2.7)	223 (100.0)
Do you come across posts on social media that encourage bad eating habits, like eating fast food or eating too much in snacks?	50 (22.4)	70 (31.4)	73 (32.7)	23 (10.3)	7 (3.1)	223 (100.0)
What is your opinion of the nutritional content of items that are advertised on social media?	32 (14.3)	75 (33.6)	103 (46.2)	10 (4.5)	3 (1.3)	223 (100.0)
Have your nutrition-related eating habits changed as a result of social media?	25 (11.2)	98 (43.9)	60 (26.9)	37 (16.6)	3 (1.3)	223 (100.0)

The above table shows that you believe that your general eating habits have been changed by social media. Responses are mixed with likely and neutral (N=72). Do you come across posts on social media that encourage bad eating habits, like eating fast food or eating too much in snacks? Most of the responses were neutral (N=73). Results showed that the opinion of the nutritional content of items that are advertised on social media. Most of the responses were neutral (N=103). Have your nutrition-related eating habits changed as a result of social media? Most of the responses were likely with this statement (N=98).

Table 5*Correlations*

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Age	1					
Gender	.141*	1				
Education Level	.383**	.174**	1			
Employment Status	-.112	.325**	-.235**	1		
Food Choice	-.055	.160*	.076	.078	1	
Nutrition	-.046	.082	-.077	-.112	.465**	1

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The above table shows the correlation among the variables. The relationship among age and gender shows a significant relationship at 0.05 level. The relationship between age and education level shows a significant relationship at 0.01 level. The relationship between gender and education level shows a significant relationship at 0.01 level. The relationship between gender and food choices shows a significant relationship at 0.01 level. The relationship between age and education level shows a significant relationship at 0.01 level. The relationship between education level and employment status shows a significant relationship at 0.01 level. The relationship between age and food choice and nutrition shows a significant relationship at 0.01 level.

Conclusion

In summary, the media shapes our eating habits through advertising, cultural conventions, and the spread of information, all of which have a substantial impact on our food choices and general nutrition. Food products are strategically marketed with an emphasis on convenience and appeal rather than nutritional content, which leads to the widespread consumption of processed and unhealthy foods. In addition, media can be beneficial by encouraging nutritious eating habits and increasing public knowledge of nutrition. A complex interaction of psychological, social, and economic elements affects how people choose to eat as a result of media exposure. Making educated decisions requires consumers to examine this environment critically, deciphering the motivations underlying food messaging.

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