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(IJEPC)**[www.ijepec.com](http://www.ijepec.com)**THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON BODY IMAGE AND  
EATING BEHAVIOUR AMONG MALAYSIAN ADULTS**Shalini Nagalingam<sup>1</sup>, Shubashini Mathialagan<sup>2\*</sup><sup>1</sup> Department of Psychology, Raffles University, Malaysia

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**DOI:** 10.35631/IJEPC.1058067.This work is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)**Abstract:**

This study investigated the impact of social media use on body image and eating behaviour and examined the gender differences in body image and eating behaviour among Malaysian adults. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 150 Malaysian adults using validated measures, including the Social Media Use Scale (SMUS), the Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2), and the Three-Factor Eating Questionnaire-R21 (TFEQ-R18), to assess social media engagement, body image, and eating behaviours. Analysis revealed weak negative correlations between social media use and body image, as well as between social media use and eating behaviour. Additionally, significant gender differences were identified in both body image and eating behaviours. These findings highlight the nuanced yet significant relationships between social media use, body image, and eating behaviour among Malaysian adults, with clear gender disparities. The results underscore the need for gender-responsive interventions aimed at fostering positive body image and promoting healthy eating practices, particularly in the context of growing social media exposure.

**Keywords:**

Social Media, Body Image, Eating Behaviour, Malaysian Adults, Gender Differences

**Introduction**

In the digital era, social media has fundamentally transformed communication, emerging as a dominant platform for social interaction and entertainment (Ospina & Roser, 2023). Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Snapchat, YouTube, and Instagram now exert

considerable influence over various aspects of daily life (Zimba & Gasparyan, 2021). Malaysia ranks tenth globally in social media usage, with 28.68 million active users aged 18 and above as of January 2024, representing 83.1% of the national population (Howe, 2024). Among Malaysian users, WhatsApp (26.8%) is the most popular platform, followed by TikTok (21.9%) for its short-form video content, Facebook (18.8%) for global connectivity, and Instagram (14%) for photo sharing and content posting (Howe, 2024). Furthermore, recent statistics indicate that social media engagement is higher among men (55.7%) compared to women (44.3%) (Howe, 2024), a trend consistent with the findings of Krasnova et al. (2017), who reported that men are primarily motivated by information acquisition, whereas women engage with social media to maintain relationships and gather social information.

However, despite the numerous advantages associated with social media, its use is not without potential drawbacks. Research has highlighted its association with negative outcomes such as social isolation, cyberbullying, and mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and body image concerns (Sus, 2023). The widespread use of social media platforms has heightened exposure to idealized images and curated lifestyle portrayals, contributing to growing concerns about body image. Body image refers to an individual's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about their physical appearance, which can manifest as either a positive or negative body image (Burychka, 2021). Individuals with a positive body image are more accepting of their appearance, weight, and body shape, and are less susceptible to the influence of social media content. In contrast, those with a negative body image are more vulnerable to such influences, often experiencing dissatisfaction and unhappiness with their appearance, particularly when engaging in comparisons with celebrities, models, and influencers. This trend is evident in Malaysia, where 37.8% of social media users primarily follow accounts of actors and entertainers, which can reinforce internalization of idealized beauty standards (Howe, 2024). Khosla (2024) reported that a majority of participants expressed negative perceptions of their body image, frequently comparing themselves to celebrities and peers, leading to heightened body dissatisfaction, particularly among adolescent girls who experience body shaming and discrimination. Similarly, Fardouly and Vartanian (2016) found that social media use, particularly on platforms such as Facebook, is associated with body image concerns among both young women and men, with appearance-based comparisons to peers and celebrities serving as a key mechanism in this relationship.

In addition, the promotion of unrealistic beauty standards and the prevalence of food-related content on social media have been shown to negatively influence individuals' eating behaviours. Eating behaviour is defined as the motives and cognitive processes underlying food choices and consumption patterns, including dieting and eating habits (LaCaille, 2013). The influence of social media can foster both healthy and unhealthy eating practices. Healthy eating is characterized by the inclusion of essential nutrients, such as vitamins, minerals, and fibre from vegetables and fruits, which are vital for maintaining overall health and a healthy body weight. Conversely, unhealthy eating behaviours encompass practices such as the deliberate restriction of food intake to control or prevent weight gain by adhering to rigid dietary rules rather than responding to physiological hunger cues (Costa et al., 2022); uncontrolled eating, where individuals consume excessive amounts of food and experience a loss of control over their eating (Rossi et al., 2023); and emotional eating, wherein individuals eat in response to emotional distress rather than physical hunger (Chawner & Filippetti, 2024). Sawant et al. (2024) investigated the prevalence of disordered eating behaviours and social media use among medical undergraduates and identified a significant correlation between increased social media

engagement and the development of abnormal eating patterns. Similarly, Patil et al. (2024) reported that female participants were more likely to engage in restrictive eating practices as a means of weight control, driven by a heightened desire to achieve idealized body standards. However, despite these restrictive behaviours, they remained vulnerable to weight gain, which was attributed to the pervasive influence of social media on their eating patterns, a trend observed more prominently among females than males.

Although the associations between social media use, body image, and eating behaviour have been extensively examined in Western contexts, research on these issues remains relatively limited in Asian regions, particularly in Malaysia. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the relationships between social media use, body image, and eating behaviour among Malaysian adults. Additionally, this study seeks to explore gender differences in body image and eating behaviour within this population.

## Research Methodology

### *Research Design and Participants*

This study employed a cross-sectional design to examine the relationships between social media use, body image, and eating behaviour. Data collection was conducted in 2024, following approval from the university's ethics committee. The questionnaire was distributed via social media platforms and university notice boards, with informed consent obtained from all participants prior to participation and a debrief provided upon completion. The initial sample comprised 154 participants; however, four individuals were excluded as they were receiving psychological treatment at the time of the study. Thus, the final sample consisted of 150 participants, recruited through purposive sampling, with ages ranging from 18 to 60 years.

### *Measures*

The questionnaire consists of demographic information such as age, gender, race and three instruments: Social Media Use Scale (SMUS), Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2), and Three-Factor Eating Questionnaire (TFEQ-R18).

#### *Social Media Use Scale (SMUS) (Robert & David, 2020)*

The SMUS is a 17-item scale developed to assess an individual's social media usage. It measures how often a person engaged in social media activities over the past seven days. Responses are rated on a 9-point Likert scale, with total scores calculated by summing the items; higher scores reflect greater social media use. The instrument has demonstrated good test-retest reliability ( $r = .77$ ) and a solid internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .83 (Robert & David, 2020).

#### *Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2) (Tylka & Barcalow, 2005)*

The BAS-2 is a 13-item scale designed to assess individuals' acceptance, positive attitudes, and respect toward their bodies. Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from never (1) to always (5). Total scores are obtained by summing the items, with higher scores reflecting greater body appreciation. The scale has demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .94 (Tylka & Barcalow, 2005).

***Three-Factor Eating Questionnaire (TFEQ-R18) (Karlsson et al., 2000)***

The TFEQ-R18 was developed to assess three dimensions of eating behaviour: cognitive restraint, uncontrolled eating, and emotional eating. It comprises 18 items, with six items measuring cognitive restraint, nine assessing uncontrolled eating, and three evaluating emotional eating. The first 17 items are rated on a 4-point Likert scale, while the final item uses an 8-point Likert scale. Item scores are summed, with higher total scores indicating more unhealthy eating behaviours. The instrument has demonstrated good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .82 (Karlsson et al., 2000).

***Data Analysis***

Statistical analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27 to address the study objectives. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were computed. Spearman's rank-order correlation was employed to examine the relationships among social media use, body image, and eating behaviour. Correlation tests were conducted separately for the following pairs: social media and body image, and social media and eating behaviour, resulting in two correlation coefficients. A significance level of  $p < 0.05$  was applied. Additionally, the Mann-Whitney U test was performed to assess gender differences in body image and eating behaviour.

***Results***

A total of 150 participants were recruited for this study. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 57 years ( $M = 30.41$ ,  $SD = 9.53$ ). As shown in Table 1, the majority of participants were female (52.67%). In terms of ethnicity, most participants were Indian (39.3%), followed by Chinese (36.7%) and Malay (17.3%).

**Table 1**  
**Descriptive Analysis of Demographic Variables of Participants**

Demographic Variables	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Age	30.41	9.53		
Gender				
Female			79	52.67
Male			71	47.33
Race				
Indian			59	39.3
Chinese			55	36.7
Malay			26	17.3
Others			10	6.7

***Descriptive Analysis of Social Media, Body Image, and Eating Behaviour***

The overall mean score for social media use was 81.41 ( $SD = 21.94$ ), indicating a high level of engagement among participants. The mean score for body image was 46.50 ( $SD = 8.55$ ), suggesting a moderate level of body appreciation. Meanwhile, the mean score for eating behaviour was 47.00 ( $SD = 8.16$ ), reflecting a moderate level of dietary behaviour. This suggests that participants generally exhibited balanced eating patterns, without marked dysregulation or restriction (see Table 2).

***Correlation between Social Media Use and Body Image***

Two Spearman's rank-order correlation tests were conducted to examine the impact of social media on body image and eating behaviour among Malaysian adults. Table 2 displays the results of the correlation analyses. The first test assessed the relationship between social media use and body image. Findings revealed a weak, negative, and statistically non-significant correlation between social media and body image,  $r(150) = -.02$ ,  $p > .001$ . To sum up, there was less to zero association between social media and body image.

***Correlation between Social Media Use and Eating Behaviour***

The second Spearman's correlation test examined the relationship between social media use and eating behaviour. Results indicated a weak positive correlation that was not statistically significant,  $r(150) = .10$ ,  $p > .001$ . This suggests that social media use had little to no association with eating behaviour. To sum up, there was less to zero association between social media and eating behaviour among participants.

**Table 2**  
**Correlation between Social Media, Body Image, and Eating Behaviour**

Variables	n	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Social Media	150	81.41	21.94	-		
2. Body Image	150	46.50	8.55	-0.02	-	
3. Eating Behaviour	150	47.00	8.16	0.10	-0.36	-

***Gender Differences in Body Image and Eating Behaviour among Malaysian Adults***

A Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to examine gender differences in body image and eating behaviour. For body image, males reported significantly higher scores ( $Mdn = 51.00$ ) than females ( $Mdn = 42.00$ ),  $U = 1323.50$ ,  $Z = -5.59$ ,  $p = .000$  (see Table 3). This suggests that males demonstrated greater body appreciation compared to females. In terms of eating behaviour, females had significantly higher scores ( $Mdn = 50.00$ ) than males ( $Mdn = 44.50$ ),  $U = 3344.50$ ,  $Z = 2.02$ ,  $p = .043$  (see Table 3), indicating that females were more likely to engage in unhealthy eating behaviours than males.

**Table 3**  
**Gender Differences on Body Image and Eating Behaviour**

Variables	Median		Mann-Whitney, U Standardized test statistics, Z p-value
	Male	Female	
Body Image	51.00	42.00	$U = 1323.50$ , $Z = -5.59$ , $p = .000$
Eating behaviour	44.50	50.00	$U = 3344.50$ , $Z = 2.02$ , $p = .043$

**Discussion**

The primary aim of this study was to examine the relationship between social media use, body image, and eating behaviour among Malaysian adults. Additionally, the study sought to explore gender differences in body image and eating behaviour within this population.

***Association Between Social Media and Body Image***

The findings revealed a weak negative and statistically non-significant relationship between social media use and body image among Malaysian adults. This suggests that increased social



media use is not strongly associated with poorer body image in this sample. Although these findings contradict the majority of previous studies, there is existing evidence that supports this outcome. For example, Saud et al. (2019) found no significant relationship between body image and social media addiction among Saudi Arabian females. Similarly, Ahmad et al. (2019) reported that social media use had no direct impact on body image among Malaysians, highlighting instead the influence of self-esteem and peer impact. These results suggest that other factors may play a more prominent role in shaping body image among Malaysians. Supporting this, Scully et al. (2023) found that peer comparisons were strongly associated with poorer body image. This aligns with social comparison theory, which posits that individuals compare themselves to others especially when exposed to idealized images on social media but the effects of such comparisons can be moderated by personal and cultural factors (Festinger, 1954). The tripartite influence model further supports this view, proposing that peers, parents, and media simultaneously influence body image perceptions (Thompson et al., 1999). Additionally, Erikson's psychosocial development theory may provide further insight. According to this theory, identity development achieved during adolescence (identity vs. role confusion) and reinforced in young adulthood (intimacy vs. isolation) contributes to identity stability, which may buffer the influence of social media on body image in adulthood (Erikson, 1950). Therefore, cultural norms, self-esteem, and developmental factors may collectively shape how Malaysian adults experience body image in the context of social media exposure.

### ***Association Between Social Media and Eating Behaviour***

The findings indicate a weak positive, yet statistically non-significant, association between social media use and eating behaviour among Malaysian adults. This suggests that social media use does not have a meaningful correlation with eating behaviour in this population. These results are consistent with the findings of Norazman and Mahmood (2020), who also reported no significant association between social media and eating behaviour in a Malaysian context. This reinforces the notion that eating behaviour may be more strongly influenced by factors other than social media. For instance, Mallick et al. (2014) found that peer pressure and cultural norms were more significant predictors of eating behaviour than other external influences. Similarly, Lee and Popkin (2016) highlighted that eating behaviours in Southeast Asia are shaped by complex and multifaceted interactions, including familial practices, cultural dietary traditions, and socio-economic conditions. Supporting this, Emilien and Hollis (2017) noted that both internal and external factors such as physiology, environment, culture, self-actualisation, emotional states, social dynamics, and economic access play critical roles in shaping eating behaviour, with social media representing only a minor influence. These findings also align with the dual pathway model of eating disorders (Stice, 2001), which posits that while media and social pressures can influence eating patterns, this effect is often mediated by other factors such as thin-ideal internalization, emotional regulation, or culturally driven attitudes toward food and body image. Thus, the relationship between social media and eating behaviour among Malaysian adults appears to be moderated by broader sociocultural and psychological factors.

### ***Gender Differences in Body Image and Eating Behaviour***

The findings of this study indicated significant gender differences in both body image and eating behaviour. Specifically, males reported higher body appreciation scores compared to females, suggesting that men tend to exhibit greater satisfaction with their bodies. This aligns with Quittkat et al. (2019), who found that body appreciation was consistently higher in males across various age groups, while body dissatisfaction remained relatively stable among women.

This trend may be attributed to the heightened societal and cultural pressures placed on women's physical appearance, as supported by research from Hanan et al. (2023), Silva et al. (2020), and Tsang (2017). Similarly, Wong and Say (2013) reported that women in Northern Malaysia demonstrated more negative body image perceptions than men. These gendered differences can be explained through the lens of objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), which posits that women are more likely to internalize an observer's perspective of their bodies, leading to increased body dissatisfaction. Furthermore, the study found that females scored higher on measures of eating behaviour than males, indicating a greater tendency toward unhealthy eating patterns. This is consistent with Barakat et al. (2023), who reported that females are at a higher risk for disordered eating behaviours due to their stronger drive for thinness and greater body dissatisfaction. Patil et al. (2024) and Sawant et al. (2024) similarly found that women are more vulnerable to unhealthy eating habits, particularly under the influence of social media, often restricting food intake in pursuit of an idealized body image. Additionally, Mallick et al. (2014) observed that behaviours such as dieting, meal skipping, fasting, and fast food consumption were more prevalent among females in both Western and non-Western populations, further supporting the current study's findings.

### ***Limitations and Future Directions***

One key limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size of 150 participants, which may limit the representativeness of the findings. As a result, the conclusion drawn may not fully capture the experiences, attitudes, or behaviours of the broader Malaysian population which in turn limits the generalizability and applicability of the findings to other regional groups. Future research should consider recruiting a larger and more diverse sample to enhance the reliability and applicability of results concerning the relationship between social media use, body image, and eating behaviour. Additionally, although Malaysia is a multi-ethnic society with Malays forming the majority, the proportion of Malay participants in this study was relatively low (26%), which may have affected the representativeness of ethnic diversity. Future studies should aim to include a more balanced distribution of participants across various ethnic groups to better explore potential cultural or ethnic differences in body image and eating behaviour. Offering survey instruments in multiple languages is also recommended to minimize language barriers and improve the validity and inclusiveness of responses across different cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, the self-report nature of the questionnaires used to assess social media use, body image, and eating behaviour may introduce social desirability bias. Participants might have underreported or overreported their behaviours and attitudes to conform to perceived social expectations, particularly as the study touches on sensitive topics. This potential bias may have affected the accuracy of the correlations observed in the study. Future research may benefit from incorporating qualitative methods or objective measures to gain deeper and more accurate insights into these behaviours.

### ***Conclusion***

This study aimed to examine the relationship between social media use, body image, and eating behaviour among Malaysian adults, as well as to explore gender differences in body image and eating behaviour. The findings revealed weak and non-significant associations between social media use and both body image and eating behaviour. However, significant gender differences were observed, with males reporting greater body appreciation and females demonstrating more unhealthy eating behaviours. Although no significant relationships were found between social media use and the two psychological outcomes, the results highlight the importance of considering gender as a key factor. Future research should investigate other contributing

factors—such as cultural influences, peer pressure, and self-esteem—that may better explain variations in body image and eating behaviour among Malaysian adults.

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