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THE INFLUENCE OF FOOD SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT TOWARDS EATING HABITS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract:

The purpose of this conceptual paper is to examine the relationships among social media usage, food content usage, and eating habits among university students. Recently, the rapid growth of social media has significantly influenced students' daily lives, particularly in shaping their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours related to food consumption. Despite this growing influence, research exploring the relationship between social media, food-related content, and eating habits remains limited. Continuous exposure to food-related content, such as dietary trends, influencer endorsements, and idealised body images, may influence students' food choices and eating behaviours.

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Therefore, an in-depth literature review was conducted on social media use and food content exposure as predictors of eating habits among university students. Based on the review, a conceptual framework and future research directions are proposed for further exploration. The findings are expected to contribute to the theoretical understanding of social media's influence on eating behaviours and provide practical insights for universities and health educators in developing strategies to promote healthier eating habits among students.

Keywords:

Eating Habits, Social Media, University Students



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Introduction

The mushrooming growth of social media platforms has fundamentally altered how university students' access and engage with information. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook have emerged as primary sources of food-related content. University students frequently search for recipes, food reviews, diet trends, and lifestyle information online (Sina et al., 2022). These visually engaging platforms shape users' perceptions of food and influence their views on what constitutes 'normal' or 'desirable' food behaviours.

The influence of social media extends beyond information dissemination, impacting both psychological and behavioural dimensions. Prior research indicates that excessive exposure to idealised images and curated content can result in negative outcomes, including body dissatisfaction, unhealthy comparisons, and disordered eating patterns (Rafael Silva et al., 2024). Conversely, social media can also offer positive benefits, such as enhanced access to nutritional information and greater awareness of healthy lifestyles (Cal-Herrera et al., 2025a). University students constitute a highly active demographic of social media users and are frequently exposed to food-related content. Research demonstrates that a substantial proportion of students recognize the influence of social media on their food preferences and dietary choices (Sadaf et al., 2023). In Malaysia, the widespread popularity of social media influencers further amplifies the impact of online content on students' eating behaviours (Ahmad & Bruno, 2021). Despite its benefits, social media has also contributed to the normalisation of unhealthy dietary patterns, particularly through the promotion of fast food, high-calorie meals, and sugar-sweetened beverages (Moffitt & Thomas, 2025). This raises concerns about the long-term

effects on students' health, as eating habits formed during university years often persist into adulthood.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationships among social media use, food content use, and eating habits among university students. It is important to understand these relationships to develop strategies to promote healthier dietary behaviours within this population.

Literature Review

Eating Habits

Eating habits refer to regular patterns of food consumption. These include meal frequency, portion size, food choices, and snacking behaviour. These habits are influenced by individual preferences and environmental factors, such as during adolescence and early adulthood. This is because some individuals gain independence in their dietary decisions (Štiková & Kysel, 2025). Eating habits are highly flexible among university students. It may change due to academic pressure, time constraints, and exposure to external influences such as social media (Shama et al., 2024). This can be seen when social media platforms expose their users to a wide variety of food-related content, such as advertisements, influencer recommendations, and viral food trends. These variables can significantly shape food preferences and behaviour of the users (Ali Abbas et al., 2023). Research also has shown that long-term exposure to social media is associated with harmful eating behaviours such as emotional eating, frequent snacking, and high consumption of fast food (Shama et al., 2024). Although it promoted the negative effect, social media can also promote healthier eating habits by increasing awareness of nutrition and encouraging balanced diets.

Social Media Usage

Social media is a digital platform that enable users to create, share, and interact with virtual communities. Social media such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn play a significant role in communication, information sharing, and social interaction (Cai et al., 2025). The extensive use of social media has transformed the way students access information because they rely heavily on digital platforms for daily activities. Besides that, social media facilitates knowledge sharing, community engagement, and access to diverse information sources (Wang et al., 2025). In addition, social media usage is also linked with dietary choices, but mostly in negative ways. This can be seen when higher exposure is frequently linked to more fast food, sweets, sugary drinks, irregular meals, breakfast skipping, and poorer diet quality. This happens when the content involves food marketing or unhealthy food shows (Cal-Herrera et al., 2025b; Daly et al., 2024; Kucharczuk et al., 2022; Qutteina et al., 2022). At the same time, some previous studies show that nutrition-focused content can be associated with healthier intentions, trying new foods, recipe use, and attempts to follow better diets; thus, the relationship is not uniformly harmful (Ayhan et al., 2025; Friedman et al., 2022; Jurado-Gonzalez et al., 2025; Nandwani et al., 2025).

H1: Social media usage positively influences eating habits

Food Content Usage

Food content on social media has become a key factor in shaping eating behaviour among university students. Food-related content, such as cooking tutorials, food reviews, and mukbang videos, is designed to be visually appealing and engaging, increasing users' interest and emotional responses towards food (Tan et al., 2024). Studies by Bang & Jung (2023) have shown that frequent exposure to food content can influence dietary decisions. This exposure can stem from visual appeal, the accessibility of food trends, and peer interaction. Individuals who engage more with food content tend to develop specific eating patterns, such as a tendency towards snacking and a preference for convenient or viral foods. Furthermore, exposure to visually stimulating food content has been linked to hedonic hunger, in which individuals are motivated to eat for pleasure rather than physiological need (Dumlu Bilgin et al., 2024). This, in turn, can lead to increased consumption of high-calorie foods and unhealthy dietary patterns. Research also indicates that repeated exposure to eating-related content is associated with higher consumption of fast food and sugary beverages among young adults (Joo et al., 2024).
H2: Food content usage positively influences eating habits.

Proposed Framework

In this proposed conceptual framework (Quispe et al., 2025), social media usage and food content usage will be used as the independent variables, while eating habits will be the dependent variable. The framework proposes that frequent engagement with social media and food-related content can shape their dietary behaviours and food choices. This study aims to examine the relationship between social media usage and food content usage towards eating habits among university students. The conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1.

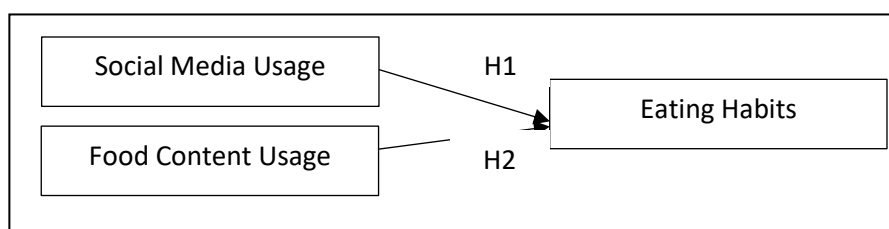


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Proposed Methodology

The primary objective of this study is to examine the relationships among social media use, exposure to food content, and eating habits among university students. The study proposes a quantitative correlational research design to examine the relationship between the abovementioned variables. A cross-sectional survey design is also proposed for this study, in which data will be collected at a single point in time to capture current patterns of social media engagement and eating behaviours. This design will be considered appropriate as it allows for the identification of relationships between variables without manipulating them. The approach will enable the use of statistical techniques to measure the strength and direction of associations between the independent variables, which are social media usage and food content usage and the dependent variable, which is eating habits.

The target population for this study will comprise students enrolled at Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Terengganu Kampus Dungun (UiTMCTKD), including those in pre-diploma, diploma, undergraduate, and postgraduate programmes. This population is selected because university students are active users of social media and are frequently exposed to food-related content that may influence their eating habits. Based on records obtained from the Academic Affairs Department of UiTMCTKD, the estimated student population is approximately 6,339. Referring to the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sampling table, a sample size of 362 respondents is considered adequate for this study. However, as this study employs a non-probability sampling approach, the sample size serves as a guideline to ensure sufficient data collection and statistical analysis rather than to achieve probability-based representativeness. A convenience sampling technique will be employed because this technique is suitable for recruiting readily available respondents to participate in the study. Although this approach offers efficiencies for researchers, it also presents certain limitations. The issue might be that the target population will not have an equal chance of being selected. Thus, the sample may not fully represent the characteristics of the entire student population. As a result, it will lead to sampling bias, whereby certain opinions, behaviours, or demographic characteristics are overrepresented or underrepresented.

A self-administered questionnaire will be distributed to students in UiTMCTKD for all courses. The questionnaire will be adapted from previous studies (Quispe et al., 2025) to ensure content validity. The instruments will be using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) to measure respondents' level of agreement for each instrument. The instrument will consist of four main sections. Section A will gather demographic information such as gender, age, level of study, and faculty. Section B will measure social media usage in terms of frequency, duration, and purposes of using social media platforms. Section C will assess food content usage through examining respondents' engagement with food-related content and its influence on their emotions, decision-making, and food-related behaviours. Section D will measure whether eating habits, such as food choices, meal patterns, and dietary level behaviours, can be influenced by social media exposure.

Before the actual data collection, a pilot test will be conducted to ensure the reliability and clarity of the questionnaires. A total of 30 respondents, who are university students, will participate in the pilot test. The pilot test will be used to identify any ambiguous or unclear questions. It also helps the researcher to gain feedback from respondents. Thus, the feedback can be used to refine the instruments. A reliability test through Cronbach's Alpha will be used to assess the internal consistency of the measurement scales.

Data will be distributed using an online survey. Digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram and other social media channels will be used for questionnaire distribution. Participation in the study is voluntary. Respondents will be briefed by the researcher before answering the questionnaire. Ethical considerations such as anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent will be maintained throughout the data collection process.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) will be used to analyse the data collection. Descriptive analysis, such as frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation, will be used to summarise the demographic attributes and main variables of the study. Pearson correlation analysis will be used to examine the relationships between social media usage, food content usage, and eating habits. In addition, multiple regression analysis will be performed to determine the direction for both independent and dependent variables.

Study Implications

Theoretical Contribution

This study will contribute to the body of knowledge that social media and food media shape eating behaviour through content type, social influence, and food cues rather than through screen time alone (Daly et al., 2024; Kucharczuk et al., 2022; Qutteina et al., 2022). It will also add to the literature by showing that the relationship is mixed and context dependent. For example, unhealthy food content is more consistently linked to poorer dietary choices, while nutrition-focused content can support healthier intentions and behaviours (Ayhan et al., 2025; Friedman et al., 2022; Gersten & Anderson, 2025). In addition, this study will explain why previous findings are often debatable because the effect depends on whether users are exposed to food marketing, influencer content, or health-oriented nutrition content (Daly et al., 2024; Kucharczuk et al., 2022; Lafontaine et al., 2025).

Practical Contribution

Practically, the study will suggest that interventions should focus on what is shown on social media, not just how much it is used (Aljefree & Alhothali, 2022; Lafontaine et al., 2025; Qutteina et al., 2022). This supports designing healthier digital food environments, media literacy efforts, and nutrition campaigns that promote credible, recipe-based, and health-oriented content (Friedman et al., 2022; Gersten & Anderson, 2025; Prybutok et al., 2024). It will also imply that parents, educators, and public health practitioners should pay special attention to adolescents and young adults, since this group shows stronger links between food media exposure and dietary choices (Kucharczuk et al., 2022; Prybutok et al., 2024; Qutteina et al., 2022).

Conclusion

This conceptual study highlights the potential relationships between social media usage, food content usage, and eating habits among university students through an extensive review of the literature. The proposed framework suggests that both social media use and exposure to food-related content are important factors that may influence students' dietary behaviours. To further examine these relationships, a quantitative correlational study is proposed among university students. The findings of the future study are expected to contribute theoretically by showing that social media affects eating behaviour through content type, social influence, and food cues, rather than screen time alone, and that the relationship is context-dependent because unhealthy food content is linked more often to poorer dietary choices while nutrition-oriented content can support healthier intentions and behaviours. In terms of practicality, it will suggest that interventions should focus on what is promoted on social media by supporting media literacy, healthier digital food environments, and nutrition campaigns. Any promotions that feature credible, recipe-based, and health-oriented content, especially for adolescents and young adults, should be supported.

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