



**JOURNAL OF TOURISM,
HOSPITALITY AND
ENVIRONMENT MANAGEMENT
(JTHER)**

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THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL MEDIA EXPOSURE ON FOOD SELECTION BEHAVIOR AMONG UITM CAWANGAN TERENGGANU KAMPUS DUNGUN STUDENTS

Nur'Aifaa Safiah Zainalabidin¹, Mariah Izzati Uzir², Arma Mohd Faizal Abu Bakar^{3*}, Siti Nurhanifah Sulong⁴

¹Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Cawangan Terengganu Kampus Dungun, Malaysia

 2024783591@student.uitm.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-7331-834X>

²Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Cawangan Terengganu Kampus Dungun, Malaysia

 2024783511@uitm.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-3658-0971>

³Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Cawangan Terengganu Kampus Dungun, Malaysia

 armafaizal@uitm.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5009-2949>

⁴Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Cawangan Terengganu Kampus Dungun, Malaysia

 nurhanifah@uitm.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1568-5594>

*Corresponding Author

Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 16.07.2026

Revised date: 30.07.2026

Accepted date: 17.08.2026

Published date: 21.09.2026

To cite this document:

Zainalabidin, N. A. S., Uzir, M. I., Bakar, A. M. F. A., & Sulong, S. N. (2026). The Effect Of Social Media Exposure On Food Selection Behavior Among Uitm Cawangan Terengganu Kampus Dungun Students. *Journal of Tourism Hospitality and Environment Management*, 11 (45), 709-719.

Abstract:

The purpose of this conceptual paper is to examine the effect of social media exposure on food selection behaviour among students at UiTM Cawangan Terengganu, Kampus Dungun (UiTMCTKD). It will focus on how social media influences university students' food choices through key variables such as frequency of social media use, type of social media platform used, and engagement with food-related content. A quantitative research approach will be utilised through a cross-sectional survey design. The data will be collected from UiTMCTKD students using a structured questionnaire. Statistical analysis will be conducted to examine the relationships between social media exposure and food selection behaviour. The findings are expected to provide insights into how social media contributes to both healthy and unhealthy eating behaviours among young adults. This study hopes to contribute to the existing literature by offering empirical evidence within a Malaysian university context and will provide practical implications for promoting healthier food choices through social media-based nutrition awareness initiatives.

DOI: 10.35631/JTHER.1145042

Keywords:

Food-Related Content, Food Selection Behaviour, Social Media, Student Lifestyle



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Introduction

These days, social media has become an essential in our daily lives, especially among young adults and university students. Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok and YouTube are widely used, whether it is for communication, entertainment or searching information (Legendre & Baker, 2021; Pezzuti & Leonhardt, 2021). While the growing number of food-related content such as food reviews, influencer endorsements, viral food trends, cooking tutorials, nutrition awareness and others has mushroomed (Abell & Biswas, 2023; Legendre & Baker, 2021; Li Tan et al., 2024; Mizielska & Strzelecki, 2026). All of these contents are being exposed, may have potential in shaping an individual's food choices, preferences and consumption behaviour.

In Malaysia, the usage of social media among young adults, specifically university students, is high. Malaysia had 26.8 million active social media users in 2023, with nearly all adults using at least one platform. Young adults aged 18–34 are the most active users, and Malaysians spend almost three hours daily on social media for communication, news, and content consumption (Zulkifli & Abd Manaf, 2024). Thus, social media platforms have become a major source of information and entertainment among university students. Increased use of social media exposes users to a wide variety of food-related content, including food advertisements, recipes, cooking tutorials, and influencer recommendations. Frequent engagement with social media, therefore, encourages greater consumption of food content. As students spend more time on social media, they are more likely to view, interact with, and seek out food-related information, making food content a potential outcome of social media use and an important factor influencing eating habits.

Their frequent exposure to food-related posts may influence their food selection behaviour by affecting their perceptions of food quality, attractiveness, convenience, and healthiness. Food content shared by influencers, peers, and food businesses can stimulate food cravings, increase awareness of food trends, and encourage students to try new foods or dining experiences.

Food selection behaviour is a crucial determinant of dietary intake and overall health (Zheng et al., 2025). However, food choices among university students are often influenced by various factors, including taste preferences, convenience, affordability, social influences, and media exposure (Hutchesson et al., 2022; Kilb et al., 2023; Li et al., 2022; Martinez-Perez et al., 2022). With the increasing popularity of social media, there is a growing need to understand how exposure to food-related content affects students' food selection decisions.

Although previous studies have examined the influence of social media on eating behaviour, most research has been conducted in Western countries and may not fully reflect the Malaysian university context (Kar Kei, 2024; Li Tan et al., 2024; Mohamad Saleh et al., 2025). Furthermore, existing studies often focus on general social media use without simultaneously examining the specific dimensions of social media exposure, such as frequency of use, type of social media platform, and engagement with food-related content. Limited empirical evidence is also available regarding how these factors influence food selection behaviour among students in Malaysian public universities, particularly at UiTM Cawangan Terengganu Kampus Dungun.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the effect of social media exposure on food selection behaviour among university students by focusing on frequency of social media usage, type of social media platform used, and engagement with food-related content. The findings of this study may contribute to a better understanding of the role of social media in shaping food-related decisions and provide valuable insights for educators, health professionals, and policymakers in promoting healthier food choices among young adults.

Literature Review

Frequency Of Using Social Media

A study from Gascoyne et al. (2021) has found that social media content promoting junk food and low-nutrient energy-dense products significantly outnumber posts promoting healthy nutrition. This exposure is believed to contribute to the intake of unhealthy food products. The conclusion is drawn that a huge number of advertisements concerning unhealthy food create a biased bubble of food, which might affect food habits (Qin et al., 2025). However, this approach, based on the absorption of volume types, also has some shortcomings. Firstly, this model focuses solely on absorption and does not take into consideration individual active roles. For instance, as young-adult students enrolled at the university and who have knowledge of nutrition studies, they might have the necessary knowledge and cognisance to withstand food advertising attempts. In addition, this research by (Gascoyne et al., 2021) targeted Australian correspondence, and mapping this directly onto the case of Malaysian students may not be appropriate due to food cultural and individualistic health consciousness differences.

Furthermore, no allowance is given for algorithm personalisation. Different users are given different types of information depending on prior usage patterns. Hence, all users may not receive equal information during exposures. Despite its shortcomings, its starting premise for exploring behaviour is useful. To further elaborate on the connection to this particular study, it must be considered that one factor to look at would be how frequently students engage in social media. It must be considered that if unhealthy food is more prominent on social media, then by accidentally encountering this type of food content more often, if one uses social media more often, this could additionally impact their food choices.

H1: There is a significant relationship between the frequency of social media use and food choices among UiTMCTKD students.

Type Of Social Media Used

Different social media platforms provide different types of content and interaction, which may produce different effects on food choice behaviour. Selvakumar et al. (2025) argue that the emphasis on visual appeal in food presentation, characterised by photogenic dishes, vibrant colour, and artistic plating, has become crucial for garnering engagement on social media. Besides, platform algorithms that give visually appealing content may enhance food preferences among university students through repeated exposure. While the visual appeal argument is compelling, it conflicts with platform features and actual behavioural outcomes.

The hypothesis assumes that different platforms lead to different food selection behaviours. However, the theoretical mechanism explaining this relationship remains underdeveloped. For instance, how exactly does Instagram's image-focused format differ from TikTok's video-based content in influencing food choices? Does YouTube's longer form content provide detailed nutritional information that leads to healthier food choices compared to TikTok's short videos? Moreover, literature also lacks specific platform-level analysis that would justify treating "social media" as a distinct independent variable. While many users engage with multiple platforms simultaneously, making it difficult to isolate platform-specific effects (Avalle et al., 2024)

H2: There is a significant relationship between the type of social media used and food choices among UiTMCTKD students.

Engagement With Food Content

Food content engagement on social media is largely influenced by its visual appeal, informational value, and influencer-driven presentation. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok attract users through visually appealing, practical, and interactive food-related posts, while educational and health-focused content can also generate strong engagement when presented attractively (Denniss et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2024; Zeng et al., 2025). Similarly, Abell & Biswas (2023) and Sharma & Peng (2024) found that aesthetically appealing food images tend to receive higher levels of user interaction, suggesting that visual presentation plays a significant role in attracting attention and encouraging engagement.

However, the existing literature primarily focuses on engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments, which may not accurately reflect actual behavioural changes (Fine et al., 2025; Ghahramani et al., 2022; Milne-Ives et al., 2024). High engagement with food content does not necessarily translate into changes in food selection behaviour, as users may interact with content for entertainment rather than act on the information presented. Furthermore, much of the current research emphasises the persuasive power of influencers and visually appealing content while paying limited attention to individual differences such as nutritional knowledge, health consciousness, and self-control, which may moderate the relationship between content engagement and food choices (Palazón et al., 2025; Pancer et al., 2022; Verma & Kapoor, 2025).

In addition, studies by Sokolova et al. (2024) suggest that food vlogs and influencer-generated content can influence behaviours such as visiting recommended restaurants, trying featured foods, and replicating cooking practices. While these findings indicate that engagement may extend beyond online interaction, the causal relationship remains unclear because most studies

employ cross-sectional designs that cannot determine whether engagement directly influences food choices or whether individuals already interested in food are more likely to engage with such content.

H3: There is a significant relationship between engagement with the food content and food choices among UiTMCTKD students.

Food Choices

Food choices refer to the decisions made by an individual on what they want to eat based on preference, perceptions and external influences. Among university students, food selection behaviour is influenced by various internal and external factors, including taste preferences, convenience, cost, and exposure to media content (Li et al., 2026). While these factors have been widely acknowledged in the literature, their relative influence may vary across different social and cultural contexts, suggesting that food choice is a complex and multifaceted behaviour rather than the result of a single determinant (Bell et al., 2026; Hollett et al., 2026; Inoue & Kawasaki, 2026).

In the context of social media, Rini et al. (2024) argue that repeated exposure to food-related content can shape perceptions of socially desirable foods and influence eating habits. However, this perspective tends to assume that users passively accept the information presented online (Ngo et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2026; Zhou & Lu, 2025). Such an assumption overlooks the possibility that individuals actively evaluate and interpret content based on their nutritional knowledge, personal values, and health consciousness. Consequently, exposure alone may not be sufficient to explain variations in food selection behaviour among university students.

Earlier studies have suggested that visual exposure to highly appealing food images can stimulate cravings and increase interest in certain foods (Cunningham et al., 2012; Ngo et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2026). Although these findings highlight the persuasive power of visual content, the study predates the rapid evolution of contemporary social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, where algorithm-driven content delivery and influencer marketing play a much greater role. Therefore, the applicability of these earlier findings to the current digital environment may be limited. Similarly, Ali & Shulamite (2025) found that students are more likely to choose foods promoted by influencers or peers. However, the underlying mechanisms explaining this relationship remain insufficiently explored. It is unclear whether food choices are influenced by the credibility of influencers, social conformity, perceived popularity, or repeated exposure to food-related content.

Furthermore, social media presents both opportunities and challenges for promoting healthy eating behaviours. While some content encourages balanced diets, healthy recipes, and nutritional awareness, a substantial proportion of popular food content features fast foods, sugary beverages, and energy-dense meals (Romeiro et al., 2025). This creates a contradictory online food environment in which users are simultaneously exposed to healthy and unhealthy dietary messages. Existing studies have largely focused on the effects of specific types of food content but have paid less attention to how individuals navigate these competing messages when making food choices.

Methodology

This study will employ a quantitative research approach using a cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationship between social media exposure and food selection behaviour among students of Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Terengganu Kampus Dungun (UiTMCTKD). The study will also identify the influence of three independent variables, namely frequency of social media use, type of social media platform used, and engagement with food-related content, on the dependent variable, food selection behaviour. A correlational research design is considered appropriate as it enables the examination of the strength and direction of relationships among the study variables. Data will be collected through an online self-administered questionnaire consisting of closed-ended questions measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The target population for this study will comprises all registered UiTMCTKD students aged between 18 and 35 years who actively use social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter. This age group will be selected because young adults are among the most active social media users and are frequently exposed to online food-related content and trends that may influence their food choices (Frølich et al., 2020; Stalmirska, 2024). As of 24 December 2025, the total student population at UiTMCTKD was approximately 5,896 students across five faculties such as Faculty of Accountancy, Faculty of Islamic Contemporary Studies, Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Faculty of Business and Management, and Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management. These students will constitute the sampling frame for the study.

The sample size will be determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sampling table. For a population of approximately 5,896 students, a minimum sample size of 361 respondents will be considered sufficient at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. Therefore, a total of 361 respondents will be targeted for data collection. Due to time and accessibility constraints, a non-probability convenience sampling technique will be employed, whereby respondents who are readily available and willing to participate in the study will be selected.

The questionnaire will consist of five sections. Section A will gather demographic information, including gender, age, year of study, and faculty. Section B will measure the dependent variable, food selection behaviour, using five items related to food preferences, cravings, and food choice influences. Section C will measure the frequency of social media use through four items assessing daily usage duration, screen time, and frequency of access. Section D will comprise six items measuring the type of social media platforms used, including TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter, and other relevant platforms. Section E will contain five items measuring engagement with food-related content, including behaviours such as viewing food videos, following food influencers, liking, commenting on, and sharing food-related content. All measurement items will be assessed using a five-point Likert scale.

The questionnaire items will be adapted from established studies related to social media usage, food content engagement, and food selection behaviour. Adaptation is preferred over direct adoption to ensure that the items are suitable for the UiTMCTKD student population and aligned with the objectives of the present study. Before the actual data collection, a pilot study will be conducted to assess the reliability and clarity of the instrument. Reliability will be evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha, with a coefficient value of 0.70 or higher considered acceptable.

Data analysis will be conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 30 software. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, will be used to summarise respondents' demographic characteristics and the distribution of study variables. Reliability analysis will be performed using Cronbach's Alpha to assess the internal consistency of the measurement scales. To examine the relationships between social media exposure variables and food selection behaviour, Pearson's correlation analysis will be employed. In addition, multiple regression analysis will be conducted to determine the extent to which frequency of social media use, type of social media platform used, and engagement with food-related content predict food selection behaviour among UiTMCTKD students. Statistical significance will be assessed at the 0.05 level of significance ($p < 0.05$).

Conclusion

This conceptual paper focuses on three dimensions of social media exposure, such as frequency of social media use, type of social media platform used, and engagement with food-related content, and their influence on students' food choices. The study is expected to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing empirical evidence on the relationship between social media exposure and food selection behaviour within the Malaysian university student context. It also extends the literature by examining multiple dimensions of social media exposure simultaneously rather than focusing solely on general social media usage. The findings may offer valuable insights into how digital food environments influence dietary decision-making among university students.

From a practical perspective, the study may assist educators, health professionals, university administrators, and policymakers in developing more effective strategies to promote healthy eating habits through social media platforms. Furthermore, the findings may help food marketers and content creators better understand the influence of social media content on consumer food choices and encourage the dissemination of healthier food-related messages.

Despite its potential contributions, the proposed study has several limitations. First, the use of a cross-sectional design may limit the ability to establish causal relationships between social media exposure and food selection behaviour. Second, the study focuses solely on students from UiTM Cawangan Terengganu Kampus Dungun, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other university populations. Additionally, the use of self-reported data may introduce response bias and affect the accuracy of the findings.

Future research could expand the study by including students from multiple universities across Malaysia to enhance generalisability. Researchers may also employ longitudinal or experimental designs to examine causal relationships between social media exposure and food choices. Furthermore, future studies could explore additional factors such as nutritional knowledge, health consciousness, peer influence, and social media influencer credibility as potential mediating or moderating variables in the relationship between social media exposure and food selection behaviour. Such investigations would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how social media shapes food-related decision-making among young adults.

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- Acknowledgements:** The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to University Teknologi MARA UiTM Cawangan Kampus Dungun, Terengganu, for providing the necessary resources and support throughout the course of this research. Special appreciation is extended to colleagues and peers who contributed valuable insights and constructive feedback, which greatly enhanced the quality of this paper.
- Funding Statement:** No Funding
- Conflict of Interest Statement:** The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All authors have contributed to this work and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission to the International Journal of Tourism, Hospitality, and Environment Management (JTHER).
- Ethics Statement:** This study will be conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. The data will be collected and used solely for academic purposes.
- Author Contribution Statement:** All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript before submission.
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