

EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE ON EATING HABITS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This empirical study investigated the effects of social media use on the eating habits of university students. The study aimed to understand the patterns of social media usage among students in terms of frequency, duration, and preferred platforms, and to explore how social media influenced their attitudes towards food, perceptions of healthy eating, and engagement in unhealthy eating behaviors. A survey was conducted among a diverse sample of university students, and the data was analyzed using statistical methods. The results indicated that social media played a significant role in students' daily lives, with a majority of participants agreeing that it had a prominent presence and influenced their food choices. While social media provided a platform for discovering new food cultures, finding recipes, and promoting healthy eating, it also exposed students to unrealistic body image standards and sometimes led to unhealthy eating behaviors. The study recommends promoting digital literacy and media literacy among students to help them critically evaluate the content they encounter on social media platforms. Additionally, educational interventions and awareness campaigns could focus on promoting positive body image and healthy eating habits, while addressing the negative impact of social media on eating behaviors. By understanding the effects of social media use on eating habits, stakeholders can develop targeted interventions to promote healthy eating behaviors and well-being among university students.

Keywords: *social media, eating habits, university students, healthy eating, unhealthy eating behaviors, body image*

Background of the Study

In the current digital era, individual social media usage has become widespread. In 2023, Statista estimates that there will be 3.43 billion active social media users worldwide. People of different ages and genders use social media platforms for a variety of objectives, including social networking, entertainment, news, and information sharing, which explains why social media is so popular. Businesses and organizations now depend heavily on social media to engage with their clients and advertise their goods and services (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

Social media use has been connected to a number of advantages, including improved communication, increased social connectivity, and information exchange (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe, 2007). Regardless of where they are physically located, people can now connect and communicate with friends and family more easily thanks to social media platforms. Social media has developed into a medium for knowledge sharing where users may both benefit from and impart their own expertise to others.

Yet, using social media has also been linked to a number of detrimental outcomes, including addiction, cyberbullying, and privacy issues. According to studies, using social

media excessively can result in addiction, which can be harmful to one's physical and mental health (Andreassen et al., 2017). Studies have also raised privacy problems associated to social media use, suggesting that people should exercise caution while sharing information on social media platforms (Madden, Lenhart, Cortesi, Gasser, Duggan, Smith, and Beaton, 2013).

People continue to routinely utilize social media platforms despite the possible drawbacks of doing so. According to studies, people use social media platforms to remain in touch with their friends and family, share their ideas and experiences, and get news and information. They also utilize these platforms to stay informed (Perrin, 2015). Social media platforms have developed into crucial tools for creativity and self-expression, allowing people to show off their abilities and skills to a large audience.

Social media has ingrained itself into everyday life, and researchers are becoming more and more interested in how it affects all facets of human behavior. The link between social media use and eating habits is one of the topics that has attracted more attention in recent years. People are exposed to a wealth of information about food and nutrition as a result of the advent of social media platforms, which may affect their dietary preferences and eating patterns. Unfortunately, there isn't much agreement in the available research on how social media affects eating patterns.

Social Media Usage in Pakistan

Social media usage has grown recently in Pakistan. According to a survey by the Digital Rights Fund, there were about 37 million active social media users in Pakistan in 2020, with Facebook being the most popular platform (Digital Rights Foundation, 2020). Many people in Pakistan now regularly use social media for a variety of purposes, including staying in touch with friends and family, accessing news and information, and promoting businesses and brands.

One of the primary factors encouraging the growth of social media in Pakistan is the increasing affordability and accessibility of internet access. By 2020, there were approximately 97 million internet users in Pakistan, representing a 46% internet penetration rate (Digital Rights Foundation, 2020). As a result, it is now simpler for people all throughout the country to communicate with one another and take part in online activities like using social media. Because smartphones and other mobile devices are so common, people may now access social media sites from anywhere at any time.

Social Media Usage and Eating Habits

People's eating habits can be significantly impacted by their use of social media. People are exposed to a wealth of information about food and nutrition as a result of the growing usage of social media, which may affect their eating preferences and eating routines. According to studies, social media can have an impact on people's attitudes towards food, how they perceive healthy eating, and how likely they are to engage in harmful eating patterns (Levine and Murnen, 2009; Higgs and Thomas, 2016).

Popular social media platforms for food-related content include Instagram and Pinterest. Users publish images of their meals, recipes, and food-related content, which may have an impact on other people's eating habits and food choices. According to studies, being exposed to food-related information on social media can make people want to eat junk food and sugary drinks more often. Moreover, social media may advertise unattainable body ideals and weight loss goods, which may encourage disordered eating patterns. But, social media can also have a beneficial impact on people's eating behaviours. People can receive reliable and beneficial information about nutrition and healthy eating through social media (Liechty and Lee, 2013). Social media platforms can also be used to encourage people to adopt healthy eating habits and make better food decisions (Chou and Prestin, 2013).

The relationship between social media use and eating habits has drawn more attention in recent years. Because users are exposed to images and messages about food and body image on social media, multiple studies have found that using social media can dramatically alter dietary practises (Barker, 2018).

However, not all research on the link between social media use and eating habits has produced adverse findings. For instance, a study by Hsu et al. (2019) discovered that college students were more likely to adopt good eating habits when they used social media to obtain health and nutrition information.

For preserving excellent health and preventing chronic diseases, healthy eating habits are crucial. Thus, it is essential to comprehend the factors that affect people's eating patterns. The way people choose to eat and communicate has the potential to be influenced by social media as a platform for knowledge exchange and communication. Yet, the amount to which social media influences people's eating behaviors is still unknown, and the results of the available studies are conflicting.

It is crucial to look at the connection between social media use and eating behaviors given the rising popularity of social media use and its potential to affect people's eating habits. In order to gain understanding of the role that social media plays in influencing people's attitudes towards food and to help create effective interventions to encourage healthy eating behaviors, this study aims to investigate the effects of social media usage on people's food preferences and eating habits.

Rationale of the Study

Social media now plays a crucial role in how people live their lives, offering a forum for the exchange of knowledge, communication, and enjoyment. People are exposed to a wealth of information about food and nutrition as a result of the growing usage of social media, which may affect their eating preferences and eating routines. While some studies claim that social media can encourage good eating habits, others claim that it can also encourage bad eating habits. Thus, it is crucial to comprehend how social media use affects people's eating habits.

Statement of the Problem

Researchers are paying more attention to how social media use affects peoples' eating habits as it has become a pervasive phenomenon. On the effects of social media use on eating patterns, there isn't much agreement in the present literature, which yields contradictory results. Hence, the purpose of this study is to look at the connection between people's eating patterns and their use of social media.

Significance of the Study

The study has a number of real-world applications. First, it can educate policymakers and health experts about how social media influences people's eating patterns, which can be utilized to create efficient campaigns to encourage healthy eating. Second, it can assist social media users in avoiding unfavorable consequences of social media use on their eating patterns and helping them make informed judgments about their food choices. Lastly, the research can add to the body of knowledge on how social media affects people's health-related behaviors.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the study are:

- To Investigate the relationship between social media usage and individuals' attitudes towards food

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study “Effects of social media use on eating habits of university students” is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon that requires a systematic and objective approach to data collection and analysis. A quantitative research strategy is therefore appropriate for this subject. Quantitative research strategy is ideal for this study since it enables evaluation of the association between university students' use of social media and eating patterns. In quantitative research, standardized data collecting approaches, such as surveys, questionnaires, or experiments, are used to gather data that can then be quickly and simply evaluated using statistical methods.

Population

All of the students who are enrolled in the University of Okara at the time this survey is being conducted constitute the population. This means that the study's main objective is to find out how social media use affects the eating behaviors of all present students at this particular university. Based on specified inclusion criteria, in this case enrollment at the University of Okara, the population is defined. Given the size of the study's population, it might not be possible to collect data from every member of the population. In order to ensure that the study's results can be applied to a larger population, a representative sample of the population will be chosen.

Sampling Technique

Convenience sampling was employed in the current study to examine how social media use affects eating habits among University of Okara students because the target population is challenging to reach, the study has limited resources, and the study's time frame is constrained. In order for the study results to be applicable to a larger population of university students, the researcher will take steps to guarantee that the sample is varied and representative of the larger community.

There are benefits and drawbacks to convenience sampling. Due to the availability and willingness of participants, it is a relatively quick and simple method of data collection. Due to the fact that it doesn't necessitate a lot of resources or time to choose participants, this approach might also be cost-effective. Convenience sampling has a number of drawbacks, but one major drawback is that it may produce biased results since the participants may not be fully representative of the population. As a result, the study's conclusions might not apply to a larger population, and its findings might not be accurate or trustworthy.

Sample Size

As it determines the number of participants required to provide adequate statistical power to detect significant effects in the study, sample size is a crucial component of research design. The researcher has chosen to gather data from 250 students from various departments of the University of Okara for the current study on the impact of social media use on eating habits among students there.

Tool for Data Collection and variable construction

For the collection of the data, the researcher formulated survey questionnaire. The study used social media usage as the independent variable while eating habits have been treated as the dependent variable in the current study. the tool for data collection was formulated in the same context.

RESULTS & ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the findings of the empirical study conducted to examine the effects of social media use on eating habits among university students. The chapter begins with a description of the collected data from 200 students at the University of Okara,

followed by a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of the results. The first two tables presented the socio-demographic features of the respondents mainly age and level of education. Third table of the analysis shows the correlation between the independent variable and dependent variable.

Table No.1 Age of the respondents

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
18-24	163	81.5	81.5	81.5
25-31	27	13.5	13.5	95.0
32-38	6	3.0	3.0	98.0
Above 38	4	2.0	2.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

Table 1 presents the distribution of participants based on their age. A total of 200 university students from the University of Okara took part in the study. The table provides a breakdown of participants across different age groups, namely: 18-24, 25-31, 32-38, and above 38.

Among the participants, the majority (81.5%) fell within the age range of 18-24, indicating that a significant proportion of the sample consisted of younger individuals. The second largest age group was 25-31, comprising 13.5% of the participants. A smaller proportion of participants were in the age ranges of 32-38 (3.0%) and above 38 (2.0%). This distribution provides insight into the age composition of the sample population. The dominance of the 18-24 age group suggests that the study mainly captured the perspectives and behaviors of young adults, which is relevant considering their higher likelihood of engaging with social media platforms. It is important to keep this age distribution in mind when interpreting the subsequent analysis of the effects of social media use on eating habits among university students.

Table No.2 Education

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
BS	156	78.0	78.0	78.0
Master	23	11.5	11.5	89.5
Mphil	15	7.5	7.5	97.0
Ph.D.	6	3.0	3.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

Table 2 provides an overview of the participants' educational backgrounds in the study. The data illustrates the frequency and percentage distribution of participants across different education levels, namely: BS (Bachelor's degree), Master's degree, Mphil (Master of Philosophy), and Ph.D.

Table No. 3 Correlations

			Social Media Usage	Bad eating habits
Spearman's rho	Social Media Usage	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.056
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.008
		N	250	250
	Bad eating habits	Correlation Coefficient	.056	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.008	.
		N	250	250

Based on the correlation analysis in the above table following important findings can be interpreted:

Spearman's rho correlation coefficient between Social Media Usage and Bad Eating Habits: 0.056

The p-value associated with the correlation coefficient: 0.008

Sample size (N) for both variables: 250

Interpretation:

The Spearman's rho correlation coefficient between Social Media Usage and Bad Eating Habits is 0.056. This positive correlation coefficient suggests a weak positive relationship between the two variables. As social media usage increases, there is a slight tendency for bad eating habits to increase as well. However, the correlation is relatively weak, indicating that the association is not particularly strong.

The p-value associated with the correlation coefficient is 0.008, which is less than the commonly used significance level of 0.05. This indicates that the correlation between Social Media Usage and Bad Eating Habits is statistically significant. In other words, it is unlikely to have occurred by chance alone.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the effects of social media usage on eating habits and patterns. Through the analysis of survey responses, significant relationships and patterns emerged, providing valuable insights into the influence of social media on individuals' eating habits and behaviors.

The findings revealed that social media plays a significant role in shaping individuals' attitudes towards food. Participants reported being influenced by social media in their food choices and preferences, with many expressing a sense of pressure to maintain an active presence on social media. Moreover, social media was found to promote unrealistic body image standards, affecting individuals' perception of what constitutes a healthy diet.

Regarding perceptions of healthy eating, social media was found to increase individuals' awareness of different food cultures and cuisines. It also provided valuable information and resources for adopting healthier eating habits, as participants frequently used social media platforms to find new food recipes and culinary inspiration. However, there was also an acknowledgment that social media could contribute to the spread of misinformation and conflicting dietary information.

The study also revealed a significant relationship between social media usage and engagement in unhealthy eating behaviors. Participants reported feeling tempted to engage in unhealthy eating behaviors after exposure to posts or advertisements on social media. Moreover, social media was found to influence individuals' engagement in unhealthy eating behaviors such as binge eating, emotional eating, and disordered eating.

Overall, the results of this study underscore the powerful influence of social media on individuals' attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors related to food and eating. It is crucial for individuals to be mindful of the potential impact of social media and to critically evaluate the content they encounter. The findings highlight the importance of promoting positive body image, healthy relationships with food, and providing accurate and reliable information about nutrition and healthy eating practices.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on the influence of social media on individuals' eating habits and behaviors. By shedding light on the patterns of social media usage and its impact on attitudes towards food, perceptions of healthy eating, and engagement in unhealthy eating behaviors, it provides valuable insights for individuals, healthcare professionals, and policymakers in fostering a balanced and informed approach to food and social media use.

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