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Impact of Social media on Dietary Choices of Youth

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In an era where social media plays a crucial role in shaping opinions, particularly regarding food, understanding its influence on young individuals aged 18-25 is essential. The research aims to examine how social media affects dietary preferences and nutritional decisions, recognizing that this age group is particularly vulnerable to external influences. Various platforms, including Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, serve different functions in shaping food perceptions, with visual content being especially persuasive.

The results underscore the importance of promoting digital literacy and critical thinking skills among youth. Recommendations include targeted educational campaigns within institutions, utilizing popular social media platforms to promote healthy eating, and fostering a supportive community that encourages informed dietary choices. This study contributes valuable insights into the link between social media and dietary preferences, showing the need for efforts that help youth make healthier decisions in the digital world.

Key words: *Social Media, Dietary Choices, Youth, Nutrition*

Introduction

This study investigates the influence of social media on the dietary choices and eating habits of youth in Mangalore City. In the digital age, social media has reshaped how individuals access information and interact, particularly affecting young people's attitudes towards food. Research indicates that social media platforms significantly impact dietary preferences, shaping both eating habits and nutritional decisions (Harris et al., 2012).

Social media encompasses various platforms that facilitate content sharing and community engagement, such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. Each platform uniquely influences user behaviour and perception, with visuals on Instagram and informative videos on YouTube playing

9th International Conference on**Economic Growth and Sustainable Development- Emerging Trends- November 21-22, 2024**

pivotal roles in shaping dietary norms. The rise of social media is intertwined with broader technological advancements, allowing users to connect globally and exchange ideas in real time.

In this context, 'youth' refers to individuals aged 18-25, a crucial demographic characterized by self-discovery and the establishment of long-term habits. The methodology involved collecting data from 120 college students using non-probability convenience sampling. This age group is particularly susceptible to external influences, making it essential to explore how social media affects their dietary choices and overall well-being.

The findings indicate that a significant majority (54.2%) engage with entertainment-related content on social media, with 63% of respondents acknowledging that social media influences their food choices. Instagram and YouTube emerged as the most impactful platforms, suggesting a preference for visually appealing content. The study also highlights a notable awareness among participants regarding the need for improved dietary habits, with 66.7% recognizing the necessity for better nutrition.

Understanding the intricate relationship between social media, dietary habits, and cultural influences is vital. This study aims to provide insights into these dynamics, addressing the need for comprehensive research to inform public health initiatives and promote healthier eating practices among young people in the digital landscape.

Objectives

To study the influence of social media in the dietary choices of youth.

To identify the positive and negative impact of social media on the dietary choices of youth.

To understand the respondent's knowledge on nutrition and diet, as well as the consequences of their food choices and associated health risks in the study area.

Review

Kucharczuk et al., (2021) are of the opinion that adolescents are using social media at an increasingly high rate; over 90% of them have at least one account, and this tendency has been rising in recent years. Understanding the potential influence of this, online presence, beverage and food companies have ingeniously used social media channels to sell their goods to teenagers.

Almousa, M., Alsaikhan, A., & Aloud, A. (2023) showed that influencers had the greatest impact on millennials' eating habits, although peers also had a significant impact. The results emphasise the significance of peers and influencers in shaping the food preferences of millennials, highlighting the necessity of marketing strategies that make appropriate use of various channels of communication.

Noore Husna et al. (2023) attempted to investigate how social media affects intermediate students' food decisions. Almost 200 students from various colleges in Hyderabad who are between the ages of 15 and 19 and hail from diverse communities have been selected for the study. According to the study, social media sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Snapchat have the ability to promote healthy eating by disseminating knowledge and providing social support. It throws light on how peer pressure, particularly from online entertainment sources, affects the eating habits of people between the ages of 10 and 19.

9th International Conference on

Economic Growth and Sustainable Development- Emerging Trends- November 21-22, 2024

Mehta, Runwal, and Parmar's (2023) study examines the eating patterns of non-conventional male college students, ages 18 to 25. Seventy male college students participated in the questionnaire-based study, which found that social media has a large impact on participants' eating habits even though most of them recognise the value of eating healthily. The results indicate that although academic institutions are still important information sources, young adults' dietary decisions are significantly influenced by social media, as they depend more and more on internet sources for nutritional information.

Methodology

The information was collected from young college-going individuals aged 18-25 years residing in the city of Mangalore. A total of 120 respondents were chosen from the universe for the study. Non-probability convenience sampling method adopted to gather the data.

Analysis & Interpretation

Demographic profile of respondents

Participants belonged to three distinct age groups—15-18(12%), 19-21(41%), and 22-24(47%) and 62% of the respondents were male and 38% were female. The respondents were from different streams that is 56% from Arts and humanities stream, 30% from science, 7% were from Commerce and rest 7% belonged to others like were diploma holders etc. With regard to employment status it was found that 86% of them were full timers and only 14% were engaged in part time employment to fund their studies. It was observed from the study that 46 participants were from rural areas another 31 were from semi-urban areas and rest 43 were from urban settings. It was also found that nearly 43% (51) were day scholars, 32% (39) were staying as paying guests and 25% (30) were hostilities. And as study is on social media influence on dietary choices understanding BMI Index of participants seems relevant. In the study 17 participants reported a BMI of 18.49 and less, classifying them as underweight. The majority, constituting 75 respondents fell within the BMI range of 18.5 to 24.9, signifying a desired weight. However, 28 participants reported a BMI of 25 and more, categorizing them as overweight.

Type of Content Watched In Social Media

| | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------------|-----------|------------|
| Food and nutrition | 32 | 26.7 |
| Entertainment | 65 | 54.2 |
| News and information | 43 | 35.8 |
| Fitness and wellness | 15 | 12.5 |
| All of the above | 56 | 46.7 |
| | | |
| | | |

54.2%
(65)

engage with entertainment content available on social media platforms. Following that 46.7% of

Analysing the majority preference, a striking of the surveyed youth indicated that they

9th International Conference on

Economic Growth and Sustainable Development- Emerging Trends- November 21-22, 2024

participants (56) chose all of the above stating they consume all kinds of data from food and nutrition, entertainment, news and information and Fitness and wellness.

| | Frequency | Percent |
|---------------|-----------|---------|
| Not at all | 8 | 6.7 |
| Slightly | 25 | 20.8 |
| Moderately | 69 | 57.5 |
| Significantly | 18 | 15 |

Fig: Social Media's Influence on Opinions and Decisions

Participants were asked to assess the extent to which social media shapes their opinions and decisions, with responses ranging from "Not at all" to "Significantly." Upon analysing the responses, a notable 6.7% (8 participants) reported feeling "Not at all" influenced by social media. A larger proportion, 20.8% (25 participants), indicated feeling "Slightly" influenced. The majority, 57.5% (69 participants), reported a "Moderate" influence, while 15.0% (18 participants) felt "Significantly" influenced by social media.

| Social Media Platforms | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Instagram | 86 | 71.7 |
| YouTube | 83 | 69.2 |
| Snapchat | 24 | 20 |
| WhatsApp | 33 | 27.5 |
| Facebook | 20 | 16.7 |
| None | 1 | 0.8 |

Fig: Apps Influencing Dietary Decisions

Among the most influential platform, Instagram emerged as the most influential one, with 86 mentions (71.7%), closely followed by YouTube with 83 mentions (69.2%). WhatsApp and Snapchat were chosen by 33 (27.5%) and 24 (20%) respondents, respectively, while Facebook lagged behind with 20 mentions (16.7%). Interestingly, a minimal 0.8% of participants claimed that none of these platforms influenced their dietary decisions.

9th International Conference on
Economic Growth and Sustainable Development- Emerging Trends- November 21-22, 2024
Table: Type Of Content Influencing Dietary Choices

| Type of content | Frequency |
|--|-----------|
| Food related posts , stories or statuses | 79 |
| Recipe and review videos | 69 |
| Advertisements (Swiggy, Zomato or other specific food items) | 41 |
| Celebrity chef recommendations | 30 |
| Fitness influencer meal plans | 46 |
| Social media challenges related to diet | 26 |
| Peer recommendations and posts | 38 |
| Scientific or educational content on nutrition | 39 |

The Analysis reveals that food-related posts, stories, and statuses are the most influential, with 79 participants (65.8%) selecting this option. Recipe and review videos follow closely with 69 mentions (57.5%). Fitness influencer meal plans received 46 mentions (38.3%), while educational content on nutrition got 39 mentions (32.5%). Advertisements (41 mentions, 34.2%) and social media challenges (26 mentions, 21.7%) had lower impact. Peer recommendations (38 mentions, 31.7%) and celebrity chef suggestions (30 mentions, 25%) fell in between.

Table: Adoption of Any Particular Food Or Eating Joint

| Based On: | Yes | Sometimes | No |
|--|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Content posted by your friend in social media. | 59.20% -71 | 18.30% -22 | 22.50% -27 |
| Social media advertisements | 38.30% -46 | 36.70% -44 | 25% -30 |

This data illustrates a significant influence of social media content on the dietary decisions of the youth, with a majority of 71 individuals (59.2%), acknowledging that have indeed chosen a dish or eating joint due to the influence of social media content posted by their friends. On the other hand, 22 respondents (18.3%) indicated that they sometimes make such choices, while 27 individuals (22.5%) reported never doing so. And 59.2% (71 respondents), acknowledged choosing a dish or eating joint due to the influence of social media advertisements. A significant 18.3% (22 respondents) indicated

9th International Conference on**Economic Growth and Sustainable Development- Emerging Trends- November 21-22, 2024**

doing so sometimes, while 22.5% (27 respondents) reported never being influenced by social media ads in their dietary choices.

The analysis of responses received for the need for awareness among youth regarding social media usage with respect to food content indicates a unanimous consensus, with all 120 participants (100.0%) expressing the belief that awareness should be created among youth concerning healthy lifestyles and eating habits.

Major Findings

Most respondents fall within the 19-22 age range, with a notable representation of male participants.

Participants exhibit high levels of engagement with social media, with 30% spending 2-3 hours and 19.5% spending 4-5 hours daily. Instagram stands out as the most utilized platform (82.5%), followed by YouTube (71.7%) and Facebook (25.8%), indicating a strong preference for visually-driven content.

The study reveals that 51.7% of respondents believe social media shapes their dietary attitudes, with 57.5% acknowledging moderate to significant influence on their food choices. Food-related posts and recipe videos are particularly impactful, with 65.8% finding these types of content persuasive.

A notable 40.8% of respondents express uncertainty regarding the reliability of nutritional information found on social media. This doubt is balanced by the fact that 63% of people feel social media shapes their food choices, highlighting a complicated mix of trust and influence.

A significant portion of respondents (66.7%) recognize the need for dietary improvement, reflecting a conscious awareness of nutrition. Additionally, 84.2% agree that poor eating habits lead to health risks, indicating a strong understanding of the health implications of diet.

The research underscores the importance of peer influence, with 59.2% of participants choosing foods based on social media content shared by friends. Celebrity endorsements also have a noticeable impact, although opinions on their influence are varied, with 35.8% feeling influenced, 35.8% not influenced, and 28.3% occasionally influenced.

Respondents indicate varied spending patterns, with 48.3% reporting monthly expenditures on outside food between 0-500. This trend highlights a budget-conscious approach to dining, likely influenced by marketing strategies on social media.

A substantial proportion of youth (67.5%) report being influenced by social media in their late-night eating decisions. Additionally, many participants express habits such as combining screen time with mealtime (50%), suggesting that social media is interwoven with their dining experiences.

Food vlogs notably impact cravings, with 33.3% of respondents reporting significant increases in cravings after viewing such content. This indicates that visually appealing food content can substantially affect dietary desires.

9th International Conference on**Economic Growth and Sustainable Development- Emerging Trends- November 21-22, 2024**

While 49.2% recognize potential health risks associated with food promoted on social media, a striking 63% still believe that social media significantly influences their food choices. This duality highlights the need for improved education on nutrition and the reliability of online content.

Overall, the findings illustrate a multifaceted relationship between social media and dietary preferences among youth. While there is a clear influence on food choices and dietary awareness, there is also a notable level of skepticism regarding the reliability of the information consumed online. These insights underline the importance of fostering critical thinking around social media content and its implications for health and nutrition among young people.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The study reveals the profound impact of social media on the food preferences of young individuals, particularly those transitioning into early adulthood. The findings of this study shed light on the significant impact of social media on the dietary choices and eating habits of youth. The majority of respondents manifested heightened awareness of social media's influence on their food preferences as they transition into early adulthood.

Students constituted the largest proportion of the sample, emphasizing the significance of educational institutions in analysing and addressing the influence of social media on dietary decisions among youth. Interestingly, participants originating from family units rather than joint families displayed a more independent decision-making process regarding dietary choices, underscoring the evolving dynamics of familial influence in the digital age.

Despite most participants falling within the desired weight category, notable proportions classified as underweight or overweight emphasized the necessity of examining the relationship between social media influence and health status of today's youth. Additionally, the preference for a blend of all forms of food, with relatively lower preferences for junk food, reflected a growing awareness of health and wellness promoted through digital media.

The dominance of visually oriented platforms such as Instagram and YouTube in shaping dietary preferences among youth underscores the need for targeted interventions tailored to these platforms. While social media moderately influenced opinions for most participants, there were diverse perceptions regarding its function in shaping dietary decisions among youth. The pressure to conform to dietary trends promoted on social media, coupled with varied responses to online content, highlights the complex interplay between social media influence and individual decision-making.

Moreover, the findings underscored the multifaceted aspects guiding dietary choices, including taste, variety, exposure to new dishes, and peer influence. However, challenges such as dependency on social media and uncertainty about the reliability of nutritional information emphasize the need for comprehensive interventions aimed at promoting digital literacy and healthy eating practices among youth.

To address the significant influence of social media on dietary preferences among youth aged 15-24, targeted educational campaigns should be developed to raise awareness about its impact. Interventions in educational institutions can help address these influences, while exploring family dynamics—particularly between family units and joint families—may provide additional insights.

9th International Conference on**Economic Growth and Sustainable Development- Emerging Trends- November 21-22, 2024**

Utilizing popular platforms like Instagram and YouTube to promote healthier food options can enhance engagement.

Additionally, leveraging peer-generated content can encourage positive dietary behaviours. Strategies to mitigate social media dependency and foster resilience against dietary trends are crucial. Engaging influencers, conducting focus groups, and collaborating with healthcare providers will create a supportive environment for healthy choices. Digital literacy programs should teach critical evaluation of nutritional information, while community events and online mentoring can promote practical skills. Finally, encouraging a balanced approach to online and offline activities is essential for overall well-being.

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