

Impact of Social Media on Dietary Habits

“A Literature-Based Review”

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Introduction

Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube have transformed how people access information about food, diet, and lifestyle. While these platforms can spread nutrition education, they also expose users, especially adolescents and young adults to powerful food marketing, fad diets, and influencers promoting extreme or unverified dietary advice. These influences can shape food preferences, eating behaviors, and overall diet quality. This literature review examines research evidence on how social media affects dietary habits and nutritional choices.

Aim of the Project

To review existing research on the influence of social media on diet and eating behaviors.

Objectives

- To explore how exposure to social media content influences dietary habits.
- To identify mechanisms through which social media impacts food choices.
- To examine evidence for both positive and negative effects of social media on diet.
- To summarize implications for nutrition education and public health.

Methodology

Study Design:

Secondary research – literature review.

Data Sources:

Peer-reviewed journals, systematic reviews, and research articles accessed through:

- PubMed/PMC
- MDPI
- Pakistan BioMedical Journal
- International Journal of Nutrition and Food Sciences (Science Publishing Group)

Inclusion Criteria:

- Studies examining social media and diet or eating behaviors
- Focus on adolescents and young adults
- Published in English

Review of Literature

1. Social Media Exposure and Dietary Patterns

A systematic review found that exposure to social media content is associated with unhealthy eating behaviors in children and adolescents, such as increased intake of snacks, sugar-sweetened beverages, and lower fruit and vegetable consumption. Additionally, frequent social media use was linked to skipping breakfast and preference for energy-dense foods. These associations were explained by both social mechanisms (food advertising and influencer marketing) and physiological mechanisms (increased neural reward response to digital food images).

2. Role of Social Media in Eating and Lifestyle Behaviors

Another systematic review including adolescents demonstrated that problematic or excessive social media use correlates with disordered eating tendencies and impacts daily dietary habits. Although the evidence in some areas was limited by cross-sectional study designs, the general trend indicates a significant association between social media patterns and eating behaviors that may encourage unhealthy habits.

3. Peer Pressure, Social Media, and Eating Behavior

Research from the Pakistan BioMedical Journal showed that peer influence mediated through social media can significantly affect adolescents' eating choices. Exposure to peer-generated content about food or body image often reinforced certain diet trends, sometimes pushing individuals toward unhealthy dietary behaviors or extreme dieting practices.

4. Nutritional Choices and Social Media Messaging

A systematic review published in the International Journal of Nutrition and Food Sciences concluded that social media plays a dual role:

- **Negative:** Promotion of fast food, processed snacks, and unrealistic diet trends
- **Positive:** When dietitians and credible health professionals are featured, users may adopt healthier eating patterns, including increased consumption of fruits and vegetables. The review highlighted that type of content, credibility of source, frequency of exposure, and user engagement determine whether the social media influence is beneficial or harmful.

Discussion

Mechanisms of Influence

1. **Marketing and Advertising:** Social media amplifies marketing of energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods. Unhealthy products often receive more visibility and engagement than healthy options.

2. **Influencer Impact:** Influencers, especially those without nutrition credentials, frequently promote fad diets and restrictive eating patterns, potentially contributing to unhealthy dieting behaviors among followers.
3. **Peer Dynamics:** Posts by peers can shape perceptions of what is “normal” or desirable eating behavior, affecting food choices and diet quality.
4. **Behavior Reinforcement:** Repeated exposure to food-related content can stimulate reward centers in the brain, encouraging cravings for unhealthy foods.

Positive Aspects

Although much research focuses on negative impacts, some evidence suggests that following credible health and nutrition content can improve dietary choices, such as higher fruit and vegetable intake and reduced junk food consumption. However, this effect depends on content quality and engagement.

Conclusion

The evidence from existing literature indicates that social media significantly influences dietary habits, particularly among adolescents and young adults. This influence is mostly associated with unhealthy eating behaviors due to high exposure to processed food advertising, unverified diet advice, and body image-oriented content. However, when used responsibly, social media also offers opportunities to promote healthy eating through evidence-based nutrition messaging. These findings highlight the importance of media literacy and targeted health communication strategies to mitigate negative effects while enhancing positive influences on diet.

References

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- *Influence of Social Media on Dietary Habits and Nutritional Choices in Adolescents*. *International Journal of Nutrition and Food Sciences*.