



Original Article

Influence of Social Media on Food Choices and Consumption Patterns of Undergraduates in a Nigerian University: A Cross-Sectional Study

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Abstract

Introduction: Social media plays a significant role in shaping the behaviors of undergraduates, including food choices. This study examined the influence of social media on food choices and consumption patterns among undergraduates at a Nigerian university.

Methods: A descriptive cross-sectional study of 400 students was conducted using multistage sampling. Data were collected via a pre-tested, interviewer-administered questionnaire on sociodemographic, food consumption, social media use, and its perceived influence on food choices. Analyses were conducted in SPSS v29, reporting means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages. Binary logistic regression assessed associations between social media use and food consumption, with significance at $P < 0.05$.

Results: Respondents' mean age was 21.17 ± 2.00 years, with 49.8% aged 15–20. WhatsApp (84.2%) and YouTube (80.7%) were the most used platforms. Over 60% reported that social media influenced their food choices. Confectioneries (70.5%), vegetables (62.5%), and oils (62.3%) were commonly consumed, while alcohol was least consumed (14.5%). Higher social media use was significantly associated with frequent meat and poultry consumption ($OR = 2.18$, $P = 0.018$) and lower odds of oil consumption ($OR = 0.42$, $P = 0.002$).

Conclusion: The findings highlight the influence of social media on students' diets, suggesting the need for nutrition professionals to promote healthier food choices through social platforms.

Keywords: Social media, Nutrition surveys, Cross-sectional studies, Feeding behaviors, University

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Introduction

Social media has become an essential part of everyday life, particularly among young people, influencing various aspects of behavior, including food choices and consumption patterns¹. Siddiqui and Singh² defined social media as “the many relatively inexpensive and widely accessible electronic tools that facilitate access to information.” These platforms include WhatsApp, YouTube, X, Facebook, and blogs, YouTube, and Wikipedia.³

Social media offers several advantages. It enables individuals, communities, and organizations to share information and collaborate by posting content online. As a result, it influences many sectors, including education, business, marketing, advertising, recreation, banking, recruitment, and health.^{4,5} It is commonly used to connect with friends, find information, and access entertainment.⁶

Additionally, it is pivotal in sharing health, food, and nutrition content.⁷

Social media has reshaped how food information, like recipes, tips, and reviews, is shared, especially among youth, who often seek meal inspiration influenced by visual and social cues.^{8,9,10} These platforms offer diverse food content that can positively or negatively impact dietary decisions.¹¹

Undergraduates often exhibit poor eating habits, including meal skipping (especially breakfast), low fruit and vegetable intake, and high consumption of fast food, sweets, and sugary drinks.^{12,13} Olojede et al¹³ reported a high prevalence of overweight and obesity among undergraduates. Social media may worsen this poor nutritional state, increasing the risk of nutrition-associated chronic diseases. While social media can inspire healthy eating, its use for promoting nutritious choices



faces several challenges. These include low engagement in health campaigns targeting young adults,¹⁴ competition from corporate and food industry marketing,¹⁵ poor content regulation, and the exploitation of youth through image-based advertising and celebrity endorsements.¹⁶

Understanding how social media influences undergraduates' food choices and consumption patterns will generate evidence-based insights to inform decision-makers, nutritionists-dietitians, and consumers in making informed food and nutrition decisions.

Problem Statement and Justification

Social media use has grown rapidly in recent years, especially among students and young people. Beyond being a popular communication tool, it plays a key role in shaping social norms through widespread and effective sharing of health-related information.¹⁷

Individuals aged 18–29 are the most active social media users, with about 90% using at least one platform.¹⁸ Hamade¹⁹ emphasized that social media is now essential for the younger generation, particularly undergraduates. Despite its benefits, Filippone et al²⁰ reported that food-related content on social media can influence youths' appetites and food choices. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok have become major sources of food-related information. Undergraduates represent a significant demographic, and their dietary habits have lasting impacts on their health and well-being. Sina et al²¹ noted that frequent exposure to food-related content on social media significantly shapes adolescents' dietary preferences and behaviors. While previous studies have explored the frequency and challenges of social media use among undergraduates, few have examined its impact on their food habits and consumption patterns. This study addresses that gap by assessing how social media influences food choices and consumption patterns among undergraduates in a Nigerian university. The findings aim to support nutrition professionals in leveraging social media to promote healthier eating habits among young adults.

Research Methodology

Study Area and Location

The study was conducted at Delta State University (DELSU), Abraka, a state-owned, multi-campus university in Nigeria. The main campus is in Abraka, with a sub-campus in Oleh.

Participants and Procedures

Study Design

This study is descriptive and cross-sectional in design. The data obtained at a single point in time described the characteristics, social media usage, perceived influence of social media on food choices, and consumption patterns of the respondents.

This descriptive cross-sectional study collected data at a single time point to describe respondents' characteristics, social media use, perceived influence of social media on food choices, and consumption patterns.

Study Population

The study population comprised 27,470 undergraduates at Delta State University, Abraka, for the 2022/2023 session.

Sampling Technique

The study used a multistage sampling technique to select 420 students from the undergraduate population at Delta State University, Abraka. First, two faculties were randomly chosen from the Abraka campus. Next, two departments were randomly selected from each faculty. Finally, respondents were randomly selected from each department using proportionate random sampling.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The study included full-time healthy students without obvious disabilities, while excluding part-time students and pregnant adolescents.

Ethical Consideration

All procedures performed in this study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Data Collection and Measures

Data were collected by the principal investigator and two trained research assistants using a semi-structured, interviewer-administered questionnaire. The tool gathered information on respondents' socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics. Social media usage frequency and its influence on food choices were assessed with a pre-tested questionnaire adapted from Alwafi et al.²² Social media use frequency was assessed by asking respondents how often they used the platforms, with responses ranging from "I do not use" to "more than 4 hours per day". Additionally, respondents were asked to answer "True" or "False" to statements assessing the perceived influence of social media on their food behaviors and choices. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) food frequency questionnaire²³ was used to assess respondents' food consumption patterns. The tool was pre-tested on undergraduates from a different faculty within the same institution, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.760, indicating good internal consistency. Consumption frequency was categorized as frequent (more than three times per week) or infrequent (less than three times per week), following Folasire et al.²⁴

Data Analysis

Data were cleaned, sorted, and entered into Microsoft Excel before being exported to SPSS version 29 for analysis. Data was summarized using frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Binary logistic regression assessed the influence of social media usage duration on food consumption patterns (frequent vs. infrequent). Significance was set at $P < 0.05$. Analyses differentiated between healthy and unhealthy food groups to highlight social media's dual impact on consumption patterns.

Results

Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

Table 1 presents the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents. The mean age was 21.17 ± 2.00 years, with 49.8% aged 15–20 years, and 78.8% were females. 95.3% identified as Christians. Most respondents (72.8%) were ranked 1st to 3rd in their family birth order. Additionally, 84.3% were unmarried, while 6.3% were cohabiting.

Socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents

Table 2 presents the respondents' socioeconomic

characteristics. Most (86%) reported a monthly income below ₦100 000, with 45.5% spending over 40% of this income on food and 45.6% on data. Regarding parental background, about half (49%) of the respondents' parents had tertiary education, 53.8% were self-employed, and 36% were civil servants.

Frequency of Social Media Use

Table 2 shows the frequency of social media use among respondents. Over half (56%) use Facebook for at least one hour daily, while WhatsApp is the most popular platform, used by 84.2%, with 44% spending more than 4 hours daily on it. Additionally, 45.8%, 53.5%, and 63% of respondents do not use Twitter, Telegram, and Facebook Messenger, respectively. Platforms like Skype, WeChat, Badoo, iMessage, LinkedIn, Discord, and Pinterest are rarely used by the respondents.

Perceived influence of social media on the food choices of

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents (n = 400)

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Mean Age of the respondents		21.17 ± 2.00 years
Age of the respondents (years)		
15-20	199	49.8
21-25	165	41.3
26-30	36	9.0
Sex of the respondents		
Male	85	21.3
Female	315	78.8
Religion of the respondents		
Islam	5	1.3
Christianity	381	95.3
Traditional	8	2.0
Others	6	1.5
Ethnicity of the respondents		
Yoruba	50	12.5
Igbo	104	26.0
Hausa	2	0.5
Others (Urhobo)	244	61.0
Position of respondents in the family		
1st-3rd	291	72.8
4th-6th	90	22.5
7th and above	19	4.8
Marital Status of the Respondents		
Never Married	337	84.3
Currently Married	36	9.0
Separated	2	0.5
Cohabiting	25	6.3

Table 2. Socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents (n = 400)

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Respondents' Average monthly income		
Less than ₦10 000	86	21.5
₦10 000- ₦30 000	102	25.6
₦30 001-₦50 000	82	20.5
₦50,001-₦100 000	74	18.5
<₦100 000	56	14.0
Respondents' percentage of income spent on food		
0-20%	84	21.0
21-40%	134	33.5
41-60%	98	24.5
61% and above	84	21.0
Respondents' percentage of income spent on data		
0-20%	126	31.5
21-40%	92	23.0
41-60%	103	25.8
61% and above	79	19.8
Respondents' Parent Education qualification		
No formal Education	59	14.8
Primary School not completed	24	6.0
Primary School Completed	20	5.0
Secondary school not completed	20	5.0
Secondary School Completed	81	20.3
Tertiary Education	196	49.0
Occupation of Respondents' Parent		
Self-employed	215	53.8
Civil servants	144	36.0
Unemployed	41	10.3

₦: This symbol represents the naira sign. The naira is the official currency of Nigeria.

Table 3. Frequency of Social Media Use

Items	Frequency of use/day					
	Not used N (%)	< 1 hour N (%)	1– 2 hours N (%)	2– 3 hours N (%)	3– 4 hours N (%)	> 4 hours N (%)
Facebook	176 (44.0)	85 (21.3)	42 (10.5)	29 (7.2)	23 (5.8)	45 (11.3%)
LinkedIn	317 (79.3)	38 (9.5)	12 (3.0)	11 (2.8)	6 (1.5)	16 (4.0)
Telegram	214 (53.5)	92 (23.0)	30 (7.5)	23 (5.8)	12 (3.0)	29 (7.2)
Instagram	138 (34.5)	96 (24.0)	58 (14.5)	36 (9.0)	29 (7.2)	43 (10.8)
Twitter	183 (45.8)	67 (16.8)	48 (12.0)	35 (8.8)	20 (5.0)	47 (11.8)
TikTok	106 (26.5)	70 (17.5)	56 (14.0)	49 (12.3)	33 (8.3)	86 (21.5)
Snapchat	107 (26.8)	119 (29.8)	54 (13.5)	38 (9.5)	22 (5.5)	60 (15.0)
YouTube	77 (19.3)	95 (23.8)	75 (18.8)	47 (11.8)	31 (7.8)	75 (18.8)
WhatsApp	63 (15.8)	35 (8.8)	32 (8.0)	38 (9.5)	56 (14.0)	176 (44.0)
Skype	351 (87.8)	15 (3.8)	6 (1.5)	8 (2.0)	8 (2.0)	12 (3.0)
WeChat	363 (90.8)	18 (4.5)	6 (1.5)	5 (1.3)	3 (0.8)	5 (1.3)
Badoo	362 (90.5)	8 (2.0)	10 (2.5)	7 (1.8)	5 (1.3)	8 (2.0)
iMessage	318 (79.5)	32 (8.0)	19 (4.8)	10 (2.5)	3 (0.8)	18 (4.5)
Discord	350 (87.5)	12 (3.0)	8 (2.0)	10 (2.5)	3 (0.8)	17 (4.3)
Pinterest	284 (71.0)	41 (10.3)	30 (7.5)	16 (4.0)	10 (2.5)	19 (4.8)
Blog/Vlog	345 (86.3)	23 (5.8)	9 (2.3)	8 (2.0)	6 (1.5)	9 (2.3)

the respondents

Table 4 summarizes the influence of social media on respondents' food choices. A majority (60.8%) agreed that food-related content on social media affects their choices. Additionally, 41% felt social media influences their fast-food consumption, and 42.8% often purchase promoted food products. Nearly half (49.5%) frequently recommend diets promoted online to friends, while 41% eat foods they see on social media. About 47.8% believe foods with more likes are healthier. On days of extended social media use, 51% reported increased desire to eat, and 33.8% consume foods seen on social media even if not part of their usual diet.

Food consumption pattern of the respondents

Figure 1 illustrates the respondents' food consumption patterns, showing clear differences between frequent and infrequent intake across food groups. Roots and tubers (80.5%) and legumes (79.5%) were mostly consumed infrequently. Similarly, cereals and grains were infrequently consumed by 69.75%. In contrast, frequent consumption was common for vegetables (63%), oils (75.25%), meat and poultry (69.75%), fish (66.5%), dairy products (60.5%), and confectioneries (72%). Seeds and nuts showed moderate frequent consumption at 58.5%. Fruit consumption was fairly balanced, though slightly more respondents consumed fruit infrequently (53.25%). Alcoholic drinks were predominantly consumed infrequently (82.25%), while sugar-sweetened drinks were more commonly consumed infrequently (54.25%). Overall, the data suggest that staples like roots, tubers, cereals, and legumes are less frequently eaten, whereas animal-source foods, oils, vegetables, and confectioneries

are consumed more regularly.

Relationship between the frequency of social media usage and healthy and unhealthy food consumption patterns

Table 5 presents the relationship between social media usage frequency and consumption of healthy and unhealthy foods. Frequent meat and poultry consumption was significantly linked to higher social media use (OR = 2.18, $P = 0.018$). Cereals and grains (OR = 1.65, $P = 0.065$) and fruits (OR = 1.60, $P = 0.076$) showed trends toward significance but did not reach it. No significant associations were found for roots and tubers, legumes, vegetables, seeds and nuts, dairy, or fish. Notably, frequent oil consumption was significantly associated with lower social media use (OR = 0.42, $P = 0.002$). Frequent intake of alcohol, sugar-sweetened drinks, and confectioneries showed positive but non-significant associations with social media use.

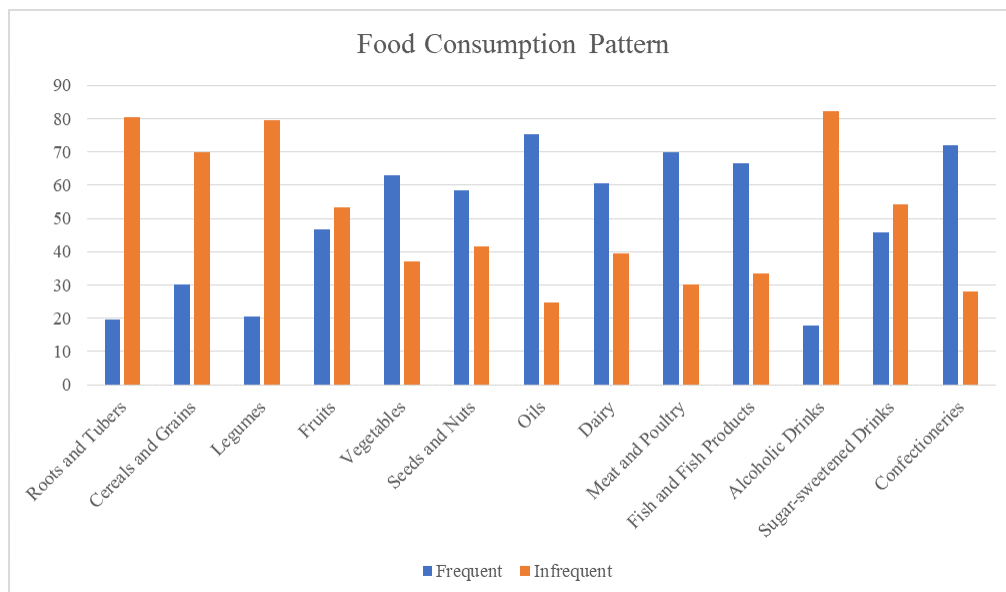
Discussion

Eating is a vital daily habit, and social media has significantly shaped the food choices and consumption patterns of young adults due to widespread access to food-related content.^{8,25,26} This study investigated the influence of social media on the dietary behaviors of undergraduates. WhatsApp (84.2%) was the most used platform, consistent with previous findings.^{12,27} Most respondents reported moderate usage (< 3 hours daily), aligning with Umennuihe et al¹² and Talaue et al²⁸ though contrasting Husna et al²⁹ who found higher daily usage.

A majority (60.8%) affirmed that social media influenced their food choices, consistent with Tan et al³⁰ Notably, 65.7% explored recipes seen online, supporting

Table 4. Perceived influence of social media on the food choices of the respondents (n=400)

Variables	True N (%)	False N (%)
Food-related content on social media influences my food choices	243 (60.8)	157 (39.2)
I often eat a diet promoted on social media platforms	153 (38.3)	247 (61.8)
Social media influences my consumption of fast food	164 (41.0)	236 (59.0)
I often buy food that was promoted on a social media platform	171 (42.8)	229 (57.3)
I often recommend a diet that social media promotes to friends	198 (49.5)	202 (50.5)
When I use social media, I forget that I am hungry.	206 (51.5)	194 (48.5)
I consume any food on social media, even if it is not my food habit	135 (33.8)	265 (66.3)
I care and consume foods that celebrities share on social media	166 (41.5)	234 (58.5)
Even if I do not feel hungry, I eat the food I see on social media	164 (41.0)	236 (59.0)
When I see food content on social media, I read the entire story	250 (62.5)	150 (37.5)
I think the foods shared on social media are more beneficial for health	215 (53.7)	185 (46.3)
When I see a dish on social media, I search for the recipe	263 (65.7)	137 (34.3)
I follow nutrition-related content, blogs, and posts on social media	236 (59.0)	164 (41.0)
I eat/cook/buy the foods I watch on social media effortlessly	186 (46.5)	214 (53.5)
I organize my diet according to the photos/videos of foods I see on social media	152 (38.0)	248 (62.0)
I constantly snack when browsing social media and realize how much I ate later	222 (55.5)	178 (44.5)
I think the foods that get more likes on social media are healthier	191 (47.8)	209 (52.3)
Foods I see on social media make me want to eat more	245 (61.3)	155 (38.8)
On the days when I use social media for a long time, my desire to eat increases	204 (51.0)	196 (49.0)
I lose my appetite for food when I am on social media	198 (49.5)	202 (50.5)

**Figure 1.** Food consumption pattern of the respondents

findings by Noore et al²⁹ and Law and Jevons et al³¹ Many followed nutrition-related content on social media, similar to other studies,^{29,30,31} although most denied being influenced by social media influencers, differing from earlier research.^{32,33}

High consumption of confectioneries aligns with findings by Umennuihe et al¹² and Yun et al³⁴ likely due to affordability, convenience, and social media-driven

appeal. Vegetable intake was also high contrasting with previous studies,^{12,34} potentially reflecting increased health awareness via online content, though social desirability bias may have influenced responses.

Logistic regression showed that higher social media usage was significantly associated with frequent meat and poultry consumption, likely due to the promotion of protein-rich meals. Conversely, frequent oil consumption

Table 5. Relationship between Frequency of Social Media Usage and Healthy and Unhealthy Food Consumption Patterns

Food Group	Odds Ratio	95% Confidence Interval	P-value
Healthy Foods			
Roots and Tubers	1.52	0.83 – 2.78	0.172
Cereals and Grains	1.65	0.97 – 2.82	0.065
Legumes	1.28	0.70 – 2.35	0.429
Fruits	1.60	0.95 – 2.68	0.076
Seeds and Nuts	1.03	0.61 – 1.74	0.902
Vegetable	1.19	0.69 – 2.03	0.539
Dairy	0.93	0.55 – 1.58	0.798
Meat and Poultry	2.18	1.15 – 4.15	0.018
Fish	0.91	0.53 – 1.56	0.736
Unhealthy food			
Oils	0.42	0.25 – 0.73	0.002
Alcohol	1.17	0.61 – 2.25	0.632
Sugar-sweetened Drinks	1.46	0.87 – 2.45	0.149
Confectioneries	1.46	0.71 – 2.34	0.402

was associated with lower social media use, possibly reflecting reduced cooking time or health messaging discouraging high oil intake. No significant associations were found for cereals, fruits, or other food groups, though trends suggest selective influence of social media on specific dietary choices.

These findings support previous studies highlighting the nuanced role of social media in shaping food behaviours.^{12,35} Food choices are influenced by multiple factors beyond digital exposure, including cultural and socio-economic contexts.³⁶ While social media affects select aspects of dietary behavior, it may not alter the overall pattern comprehensively.

Study Limitation

This study examined only the duration of social media use, not its specific purposes (e.g., entertainment, nutrition information), limiting insights into how different engagements affect food choices. Future research should assess both duration and purpose for a broader understanding of its dietary impact.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study concludes that social media affects students' food choices, promoting both healthy (e.g., meat and poultry) and unhealthy (e.g., oils) consumption patterns. Students should be aware of this influence and make informed decisions about the food content they engage with. Registered Dietitian Nutritionists are encouraged to leverage social media by sharing evidence-based, engaging, and youth-friendly nutrition content. Strategies such as partnering with influencers, hosting live Q&A sessions, and promoting culturally relevant recipes and meal tips can further amplify their impact and counter

misinformation.

Authors' Contribution

Conceptualization: Gbenga S. Oladosu, Juliet O. Okoruwa, Tina E. Ovedje

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Competing Interests

The authors declare they have no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval

All procedures performed in this study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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