

DIGITAL FOODSCAPES: HOW STUDENTS NAVIGATE NUTRITION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

¹Zoha Samreen Khan, ²Umaina Sadiya

¹Professor, ²Student

ABSTRACT:

INTRODUCTION: The rapid rise of social media has transformed how individuals, particularly students, find and interact with information about food and nutrition. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have created lively digital foodscapes where influencers regularly share recipes, food reviews, eating challenges, and promotional content that shape perceptions of what is desirable or trendy to eat. As students are highly active users of these platforms, the constant exposure to visually appealing food posts ranging from balanced meals to calorie-dense junk foods may influence their cravings, dietary choices, and long-term eating habits. While some influencers promote health-conscious lifestyles, many others focus on indulgent or highly processed foods, raising questions about how such content affects young audiences. Understanding how students navigate these digital food environments is therefore essential, as this phase of life involves the development of independent health behaviours. This study looks into the role of social media influencers in shaping students' food preferences, the impact of trending food content, and the extent to which online exposure translates into real-life dietary decisions.

METHODOLOGY: This study examined the influence of social media food influencers on the dietary choices and eating habits of students at selected educational institutions. Data were collected from participants using a structured and validated questionnaire that assessed social media usage patterns, frequency of exposure to food-related influencer content, impact on food preferences, and acceptance of trending foods. The survey also included items on demographic characteristics to understand differences across different student groups. A food frequency component was added to compare self-reported eating habits with exposure to influencer-promoted content. All responses were recorded to ensure accuracy and ease of analysis. Using this data, statistical analysis was done using Chi-Square tests, to identify associations between social media exposure and students' food choices.

RESULTS: The study included 111 college students aged 18–25 years, with 45.9% aged 18 years and females forming 62.2% of the total sample. A large majority (82.9%) were undergraduate students. Most participants reported using Instagram and YouTube for food-related content, with females consistently representing over 60% of viewers across regularity categories. Engagement with trending food content was also higher among females, who accounted for 61–83% of those who sometimes, often, or always interacted with viral foods. Craving responses showed a strong gender pattern, with females comprising 84.8% of those who “strongly agreed” that social media increased cravings. Similarly, 81.8% of those who strongly agreed they purchased food after seeing it online were female. Confidence in reading nutrition labels was highest among females, who made up 80% of the “very confident” group. Overall, the findings suggest that social media exposure plays a significant role in shaping curiosity, cravings, and food experimentation among students, with female respondents showing greater responsiveness to influencer-driven and trend-based food content.

KEYWORDS: Digital foodscape, social media influencers, student eating habits, food trends, nutrition behaviour, online food content, dietary choices.

INTRODUCTION

Digital Food Environment

Social media has become an essential part of people's daily activities and has a big impact on individuals' lives. These platforms can affect all aspects of individuals' lives. (Alalwan, A., et al., 2021).

More than 90% of young adults aged 18–25 report using social media on daily basis (Chandwani et al., 2025), creating a continuous feedback loop in which digital interactions both reflect and influence real-world practices especially those related to diet and health (Moffitt, L., et al., 2025).

Social media serves as a “digital foodscape,” where food related exposure is incorporated into everyday interaction through pictures, videos, recipes, and advertisements (Sina et al., 2022) (Qutteina et al., 2021). Food content is now incorporated into influencers' daily routines, making promotions appear natural and genuine (Potvin Kent et al., 2024) (Harris et al., 2024). Designing successful health interventions for young adults requires an understanding of this virtual ecosystem.

However, the same platforms can also promote content that encourages poor dietary choices. As digital platforms continue to develop and spread, individuals particularly the younger generation are increasingly exposed to a virtual environment that can shape their food preferences, eating habits, and overall relationships with nutrition (Prybutok, V., et al., 2025).

Social media platforms provide unknown access to information about nutrition, healthy recipes, and wellness foods. However, these potential benefits are often overshadowed by the negative influences that dominate many popular social media channels (Prybutok, V., et al., 2025). Thus, social media can both be a tool for promoting healthy behaviours and a risk factor for unhealthy ones, depending on how content is created, shared, and consumed.

Young Adults and Dietary Behaviours

Young adulthood, generally defined as the age range of 18 to 25 years, is a critical period for the development of independent dietary habits and lifestyle choices. During this period, individuals move from family-based eating environments to independent food decision making, often balancing

academic, occupational, and social demands. These lifestyle changes can lead to irregular meal patterns, frequent consumption of fast food, and dependence on convenience foods, which have long-term effects on physical and mental health, including obesity, cardiovascular diseases, and metabolic disorders (Ibrahim et al., 2025) (Boyland, 2025) (Chandwani et al., 2025). Studies reveal that young adults tend to skip meals, particularly breakfast, and show a high intake of sugar-sweetened beverages and snacks, contributing to poor nutritional outcomes (Sina et al., 2022) (Elliott & Truman, 2025).

This makes adolescents and young adults particularly susceptible to marketing strategies on digital media. In fact, social media play an important role in shaping the behaviours of younger users. Eating behaviour is influenced by individual factors (like food preferences, and lifestyle), social environmental (such as peers), physical environments (such as community settings) and macrosystem influences (e.g., media and social norms). Social media includes influences through peers, influencers, advertisements, and social norms, all of which have an impact on adolescent behaviour. Adolescents and young adults today use multiple social media platforms (Qutteina, Y., et al.2019).

Social Media Use and its Impact on Diet

It is well known that social media use and diet quality are related. Excessive or problematic social media use is characterised by compulsive checking, extended scrolling, and emotional dependence is linked to lower breakfast frequency and higher intake of sugary drinks and snacks (Khan et al., 2025) (Ibrahim et al., 2025).

Social media influences individuals' food consumption habits both positively and negatively. While some consider social media to have increased their consumption of healthy food, others blame increased use of social media for consuming junk foods. In other words, social media offers opportunities to explore variety of foods and health trends but also presents significant challenges. (Patwardhan et al., 2024). Knowing these patterns is essential to understanding how digital media can either promote or undermine healthy nutrition.

Influencer and Peer Impact on Diet

As the digital age progresses, more individuals use online platforms for inspiration, guidance and social approval in their dietary choices. The influence of social media platforms has shaped our food choices,

preferences and behaviours, leading to a new paradigm in how society engages with food (Patwardhan et al., 2024).

Social media influencers (SMIs) have emerged as a significant major source of health-related information for adolescents. An influencer is anyone who impacts the attitudes and behaviours of other individuals through social media (Quettina et al., 2019). SMIs can be defined as individuals who have a large following on social media and exert significant influence over their audience through engaging content. On the one hand, they can provide reliable sources and positive role models, providing valuable content on important health topics, such as nutrition and mental health. On the other hand, SMIs may lack health expertise (i.e., formal education) and may pursue commercial interests, such as promoting unhealthy products (Quettina et al., 2019) (Engel, E., et al., 2024). In a study with pre-adolescents, exposure to messages of social media influencers with branded unhealthy snacks led pre-adolescents to favour the branded snack to a non-branded alternative (Coates et al., 2019).

Finally, SMIs are important providers of both organic and advertised content. Repeated exposure to such content can affect young people, either through in-depth elaboration or through more priming effects (Engel, E., et al., 2024).

Research has found that adolescents generally overestimate their peers' unhealthy food intake, and underestimate their peers' healthy food intake. These norm beliefs subsequently predict their own food choices. Earned social media posts could reinforce, or even create these misconceptions that adolescents hold about their peers. For instance, seeing peers eat unhealthy or large amounts of food could normalize excessive eating behaviour. Moreover, influencer marketing could also influence these norm perceptions (Quettina et al., 2019).

Peers can also positively affect dietary practices and physical activity by supporting health-promoting practices to achieve weight loss goals and by inviting to participate in sports or cooking meals together. On the other hand, by participating in sedentary social activities or encouraging poor eating habits, peers may discourage health-promoting practices (Jodie Leu et al., 2022). Therefore, understanding the dynamics of peer pressure and social media influence is important for promoting healthy eating behaviours among young adults (Prybutok, V., et al., 2024).

Online Trends and Food Choices

Aesthetic differences between posts generated by friends compared to those generated by companies are subtle, making these ads a covert threat. Few

studies have examined how adolescents engage with social media food ads, leaving major gaps in our understanding of how adolescents relate to brands on social media (Lutfeali et al., 2020).

Social media platforms provide a constant flow of food content which includes health trends promoted by influencers as well as fast food and sugary snack advertisements. Food choices today are not merely based on taste and nutritional awareness but are increasingly shaped by visual attractiveness and the effects of social influence and comparison. The research found that individuals who frequently use social media are more prone to impulsive eating and food cravings and tend to consume more fast foods and calorie-rich snacks (Rukkaiya et al., 2025).

Social media influencers further shape their followers' opinions by promoting brand products in their social media posts, contributing to the widespread of highly appealing, digitally enhanced images of unhealthy foods. Moreover, marketing of unhealthy foods by influencers increased children's immediate intake of these foods, whereas the same marketing of healthy foods had little effect (Elida Sina et al., 2022).

This review suggests that food and beverage companies use social media for marketing their products by targeting the adolescent population. The use of celebrities and influencers to promote "unhealthy" products is one of the most common and effective methods for reaching young audiences (Kucharczuk, A. J et al., 2022).

Health and Nutrition Effects

The abundance of diet and nutrition content on social media platforms presents growing challenges, especially for young users. According to studies, there is a higher chance of adopting extremely restrictive or unbalanced diets when one is exposed to trendy diets and unreliable nutrition information online. Understanding the role of social media-induced distraction is essential for addressing challenges related to mindful eating and promoting healthier food choices.

The impact of social media on eating patterns, lifestyle changes, and body image perception particularly in adults highlights the necessity of addressing the spread of false nutritional information and encouraging healthy eating practices. (Prybutok, V., et al., 2024).

Social media use is linked to eating problems, sleeping duration and poor body perceptions, which commonly affect young users. Students, who use social media and are influenced by it, have been shown to interact more negatively with their bodies and make unhealthy dietary choices and poor quality of sleeping. Additionally, watching videos produced by social media celebrities on different social media platforms may have a negative impact on

the health of the younger generation in the future due to changes in food habits, eating times, and sleeping schedules.

One of the effects of social media use is nutrition. It could affect the nutritional status of its users because it can modify the pattern of eating behaviour and physical activity. Exploring food habits involves understanding individuals' nutritional status and the factors shaping their dietary behaviours which are essential for determining health risks. University students globally have poor eating habits, with high sugar, fat, and sodium intake and insufficient amounts of fruits, vegetables, and dairy. Recent studies show only a small percentage of people follow nutritional guidelines, with many skipping meals, particularly breakfast, and rely on unhealthy snacks.

Social media platforms shape dietary behaviours through variety of content, from nutritious recipes to fast food ads. While health influencers promote healthy eating and good sleeping, unhealthy food marketing can lead to poor dietary choices. (Fouzia T et al., 2025).

While some consider social media to have increased their healthy food consumption, others blame increased social media usage for consuming junk foods. Online communities and social networks provide peer support, accountability and experience sharing, increasing motivation and dedication to healthy eating objectives. Positive reinforcement through positive comments and ratings on social media can also influence food choices. Social media platforms can incorporate behaviour change techniques like goal-setting, self-monitoring and personalised feedback, increasing individuals' awareness of their eating patterns and providing helpful advice for selecting healthier foods. (Patwardhan et al., 2024).

NOVELTY OF THE STUDY

This study examines social media as a digital foodscape and focuses on how trending foods influence students' real-life food choices and acceptance. While previous studies largely focused on general food exposure or body image influences, limited attention has been given to how viral and trend-driven food content on platforms translates into actual dietary behaviour among students. By connecting influencer-driven trends with consumption patterns and food acceptance, this study provides a clearer picture of how online food trends change daily eating practices.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

AIM:

To assess the impact of social media influencers on the food choices and eating habits of Students.

OBJECTIVES:

- To check what kind of food (healthy or junk food) these influencers show or promote.
- To understand how often students watch food-related influencer content and how it impacts their eating habits.

To explore how trending foods on social media influence students' real life food choices and acceptance

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Ali and Shulamite (2025) explored the effect of social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok on the food choices of young adults aged 18-29. Through standardized questionnaires in their quantitative research, they found a positive link between social media use and impulsive eating, cravings, and increased consumption of fast food and calorie-dense snacks. Women and lower-income groups were more susceptible to social media's impact. The study identified social media as both a risk factor for unhealthy eating and a channel for nutritional education, recommending improved media literacy.
2. Boyland et al. (2025) reviewed strategies aimed at reducing children's exposure to food advertising to assess the effectiveness of limiting exposure to unhealthy food marketing. The study population included children, and findings concluded that reducing exposure is likely to improve dietary behaviours, supporting policy action.
3. Chandwani, Singh, and Meena (2025) conducted a scoping review to examine how social media impacts the dietary choices of adolescents and young adults. The study found that over 90% of youth have at least one social

media account, making them susceptible to food and beverage marketing. The review highlighted that social media exposure often leads to poor eating choices and negative health outcomes, depending on the products being promoted. The authors emphasized the need for public health initiatives to counteract these effects.

4. Garcia et al. (2025) in Celebrity and influencer food marketing on Instagram examined the content shared by influencers and its alignment with international health guidelines. The study focused on adolescents, and it was found that most of the promoted products would be restricted for this age group, highlighting the need for stronger regulation.
5. Jingu et al. (2025) studied how social media effects dietary behaviours, particularly focusing on peer influence through food-related posts. They found that a majority of participants reported changes in their eating habits due to social media exposure, emphasizing the strong impact of social media in shaping diet choices among adolescents and young adults.
6. Johnson et al. (2025) studied Food marketing to teenagers across digital platforms with the aim of identifying commonly advertised foods and their effects on adolescents' dietary patterns. The study involved teenagers, and results showed that high exposure to unhealthy food brands had a strong influence on their preferences.
7. Khan et al. (2025) conducted a study titled Link between social media use and dietary habits to examine the relationship between excessive social media use and adolescent nutrition. The study included adolescents and found that excessive social media use was associated with increased consumption of sweets, sugary drinks, and meal skipping.
8. Khan et al. (2025) compiled results from a meta-analysis of 1.43 million youth, revealing that excessive social media use among adolescents was associated with unhealthy behaviours mainly skipping breakfast, reduced intake of fruits and vegetables, and increased consumption of sugary snacks. The review also found that adolescents who engaged positively with healthy

food content increased their fruit and vegetable consumption, suggesting both risks and benefits of social media exposure.

9. Lee et al. (2025) conducted Influence of social media influencers on adolescents' dietary habits to examine the role of influencers in shaping food perceptions and choices among adolescents. The findings found that influencers had a significant impact on dietary preferences, with notable differences based on gender.
10. Parker et al. (2025) in Digital palate: Food marketing appeals to teens aimed to identify the types of foods promoted to teenagers and the persuasive strategies used on digital platforms. Teenagers were included in the study, and results showed widespread exposure to unhealthy food marketing which strongly influenced their food choices.
11. Smith et al. (2025) in their study Influence of social media food marketing on college students' BMI explored the effects of exposure to food-related content on BMI and dietary choices among college students. The findings revealed that exposure to Instagram and TikTok food content linked to unhealthy dietary choices and potential weight gain.
12. Tebbani (2025) examined the effects of social media use on food habits, sleep duration, and weight status among university students in Algeria. The study found that higher social media engagement corresponded with poorer food choices, shorter sleep duration, and fluctuations in weight. These findings highlight the significant impact social media can have on lifestyle factors affecting health of young adults, highlighting the need for awareness and interventions regarding social media's role in shaping habits.
13. Thompson et al. (2025) in Negative influence of social media on children's diets assessed the impact of social media on children's nutrition and body image. The research targeted children specifically and found an increase in

consumption of unhealthy foods, poor body image, and highlighted the need for regulatory actions.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study Design:

This study utilized a quantitative, cross-sectional approach to assess how social media influencers affect the food choices and eating habits of college students. A survey questionnaire was used as the primary data collection tool, allowing the researcher to gather numerical data on students' exposure to influencer content, types of food promoted, and the influence of trending foods on their real-life dietary choices.

3.2 Study Population:

The study population consisted of college students aged 18–25 years who actively use social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook for food-related content.

3.3 Inclusion Criteria: Participants included in the study were college students aged 18–25 who use social media platforms to view food-related or influencer-generated content.

3.4 Exclusion Criteria: Excluded from the study were individuals below 18 or above 25 years, along with students who do not use social media for food or influencer-related content.

3.5 Sample Size: A total of 106 college students aged 18–25 years participated in the study. The sample size was determined based on feasibility, accessibility, and the study duration of three months. A convenience sampling technique was used, where participants were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate in the survey. This method was suitable for the study as the target group, students who actively use social media for food-related content was easily reachable within the college environment.

3.6 Sample Size Determination:

Sample size formula: $n = Z^2 \times p(1-p) / E^2$

Confidence level: 90%

Margin of error: 8%

$$p = 0.5$$

$$Z = 1.645$$

$$E = 0.08$$

$$n = (1.645)^2 \times 0.5 \times (1 - 0.5) / (0.08)^2$$

$$n = 2.7025 \times 0.25 / 0.0064$$

$$n = 0.6756 / 0.0064$$

$$n = 105.56$$

SAMPLE SIZE: 106

Thus, the minimum required sample size was **106 participants**. Considering a possible 5% non-response rate, the final sample size was subsequently adjusted:

$$n_{adjusted} = 106 + (0.05 \times 106) = 111$$

3.7 Data Collection Method and Tools: Data for the study were collected using a structured survey questionnaire, which served as the main research tool. The questionnaire was designed to gather information on students' demographic characteristics, their frequency of exposure to food-related content on social media, the types of foods commonly promoted by influencers, and the extent to which such content affects their personal food choices and eating habits. The survey included a combination of closed-ended questions, and multiple-choice options to maintain clarity, consistency, and ease of statistical analysis. The questionnaire was developed based on the objectives of the study and was reviewed for relevance and simplicity to ensure that participants could respond accurately without requiring additional explanation.

3.8 Data Collection Process: The data collection process involved giving the questionnaire to students who met the inclusion criteria. For data collection, printed questionnaires were distributed in accessible college environments such as classrooms, libraries, and student common areas. Before completing the survey, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality, and asked to provide voluntary consent. They were encouraged to answer honestly based on their current social media usage and eating behaviours. Since the study used a cross-sectional design, all responses were collected within a period of three months, providing a snapshot of students' exposure to digital food content and its influence on their dietary decisions.

3.9 Statistical Analysis: The collected data was compiled, organized, tabulated and statistically analysed using MS Excel and SPSS software.

Descriptive analysis was carried out to summarize the data collected through the questionnaire. Measures of central tendency, including mean, median, and mode, were used to describe the age distribution of participants. Frequencies and proportions were calculated for all categorical variables, and the data were represented using suitable diagrams such as bar charts. These descriptive summaries provided an overall understanding of participants' characteristics and their reported exposure to unhealthy food marketing on digital platforms.

The relationship between selected categorical variables and levels of exposure to unhealthy food marketing was examined using the chi-square test. Cross-tabulation and comparison of percentages were used to present the findings clearly.

1) Descriptive Statistical Tests

Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the characteristics of the study population and to present an overall picture of the variables.

Measures of Central Tendency (Mean, Median, Mode):

a) Mean:

Definition:

The mean represents the arithmetic average of a set of numerical values. It is a commonly used measure of central tendency for continuous variables such as age.

Formula:

$$Mean (\bar{X}) = \frac{\sum X}{N}$$

Where:

- $\sum X$ = sum of all observed values
- N = total number of observations

In this study, the mean was used to describe the average age of the respondents. As shown in Table 1, the mean age of the participants was **19.32 years**, indicating that most respondents were in the late adolescent age

group. The mean provided an overall summary of the age distribution of the study population.

b) Median:

Definition:

The median is the middle value in an ordered dataset, dividing the data into two equal halves. It is especially useful when the data are skewed or contain extreme values.

Formula:

If N is odd:

$$Median = X_{(\frac{N+1}{2})}$$

If N is even:

$$Median = \frac{X_{(\frac{N}{2})} + X_{(\frac{N}{2}+1)}}{2}$$

Median values were calculated to determine the central position of variables such as age distribution. This helped to understand the typical value without being influenced by extreme scores.

c) Mode:

Definition:

The mode is the value that occurs most frequently in a dataset. It is particularly useful for identifying the most common category or response.

Formula:

There is no fixed numerical formula for the mode. It is identified as:

$$Mode = Value\ with\ the\ highest\ frequency$$

In this study, the mode was used to identify the most common age among respondents extreme scores.

d) Chi-Square (χ^2) Test of Association

Definition:

The chi-square test is a non-parametric test used to examine whether there is a significant association between two categorical variables. It compares observed frequencies with expected frequencies.

Formula:

$$\chi^2 = \sum \frac{(O-E)^2}{E}$$

Where:

- O = observed frequency
- E = expected frequency

In this study, the chi-square test was used to compare variables and examine the association between students' exposure to social media food content and their nutrition-related behaviours. Variables such as type of social media platform used, frequency of exposure to food-related content, influence of social media on food choices, and dietary practices were analysed using the chi-square test.

The test helped determine whether students' nutrition behaviours were significantly associated with their interaction with digital foodscapes through social media. A p-value less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant, indicating a meaningful association between the variables.

RESULTS:

Section 1: Demographic Information

Table 1: Descriptive analysis of respondent's age

Statistics	
Age	
Mean	19.32
Median	19
Std. Deviation	1.585
Minimum	18
Maximum	25

Age	Frequency	Percent
18	51	45.9
19	17	15.3
20	20	18
21	9	8.1
22	9	8.1
23	4	3.6
25	1	0.9
Total	111	100

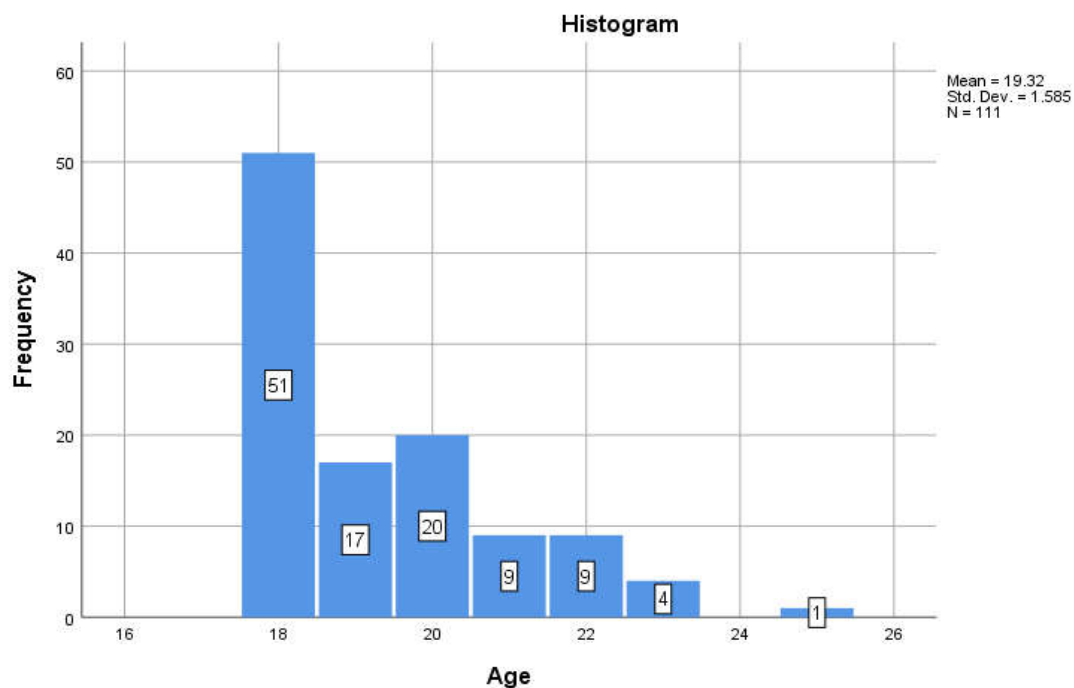


Figure 1: Descriptive analysis of respondent's age

The descriptive analysis presented in Table 1 and Figure 1 shows the distribution of respondents' ages within the study population (N = 111). Nearly half of the participants (45.9%) were 18 years old, making this the most represented age group. This was followed by those aged 20 years (18%) and 19 years (15.3%). Smaller

proportions of respondents were 21 and 22 years old (8.1% each), while only 3.6% were 23 years old and 0.9% were 25 years old.

Table 2: Gender Distribution of Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percent
1	42	37.8
2	69	62.2
Total	111	100

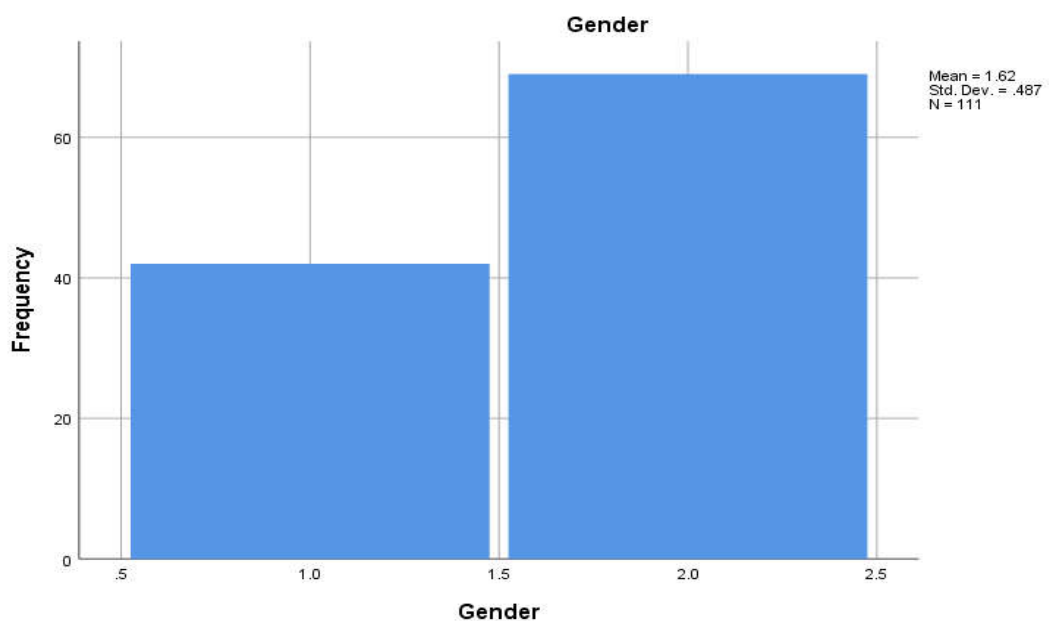


Figure 2: Gender Distribution of Respondents

Table 2 and Figure 2 present the gender distribution of the respondents (N = 111). The results show that 37.8% of the participants were coded as Gender 1, while 62.2% were coded as Gender 2, indicating a higher representation of the latter group.

The histogram in Figure 2 visually supports this distribution, showing a higher bar for Gender 2 compared to Gender 1. The mean gender value of 1.62 with a standard

deviation of 0.487 suggests a moderate imbalance toward Gender 2 within the sample.

Table 3: Education Level of Respondents

Education Level	Frequency	Percent
1	92	82.9
2	19	17.1
Total	111	100

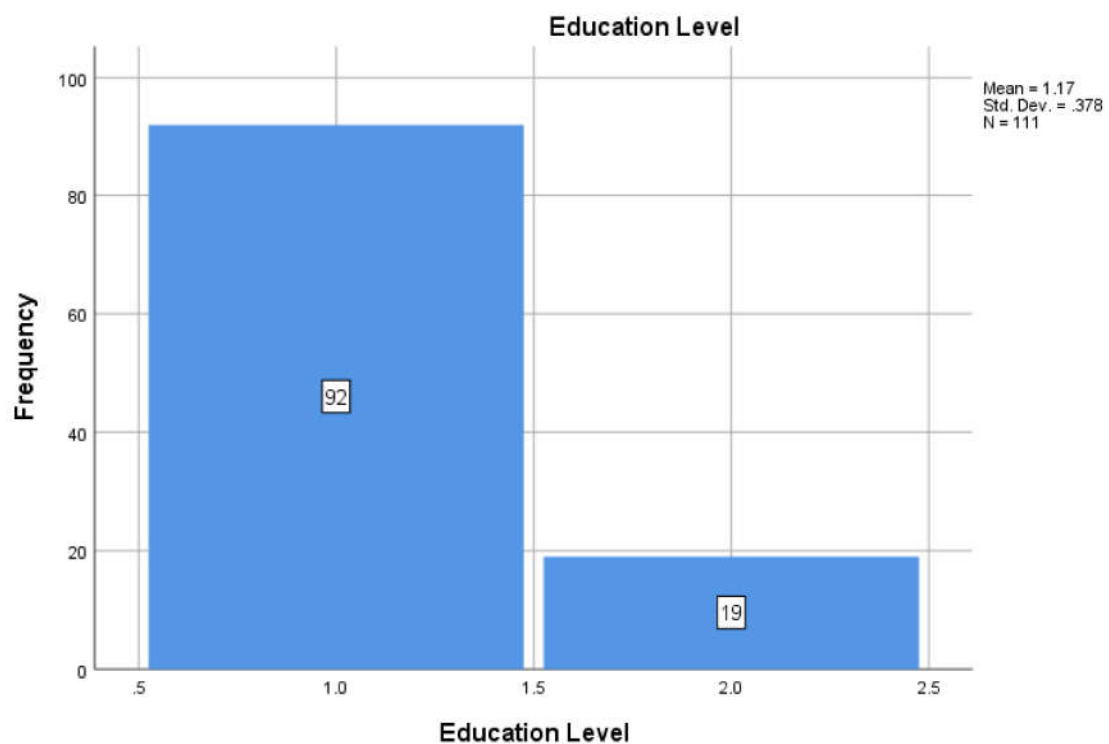


Figure 3: Education Level of Respondents

Table 3 and Figure 3 present the distribution of the respondents' education levels (N = 111). The results indicate that a large majority of participants (82.9%) belonged to Education Level 1, while only 17.1% were in Education Level 2. This shows that most respondents share similar educational backgrounds.

Section 2: Social Media Use

Table 4: Regularity of watching food-related content

How regularly do you watch food related content (e.g., recipes, food reviews)?	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Never	4	2	6
	66.70%	33.30%	100.00%
Rarely	6	10	16
	37.50%	62.50%	100.00%
Sometimes	19	32	51
	37.30%	62.70%	100.00%
Often	7	14	21
	33.30%	66.70%	100.00%
Always	6	11	17
	35.30%	64.70%	100.00%
Total	42	69	111
	37.80%	62.20%	100.00%

X²-2.356^a

df-4

p-.671

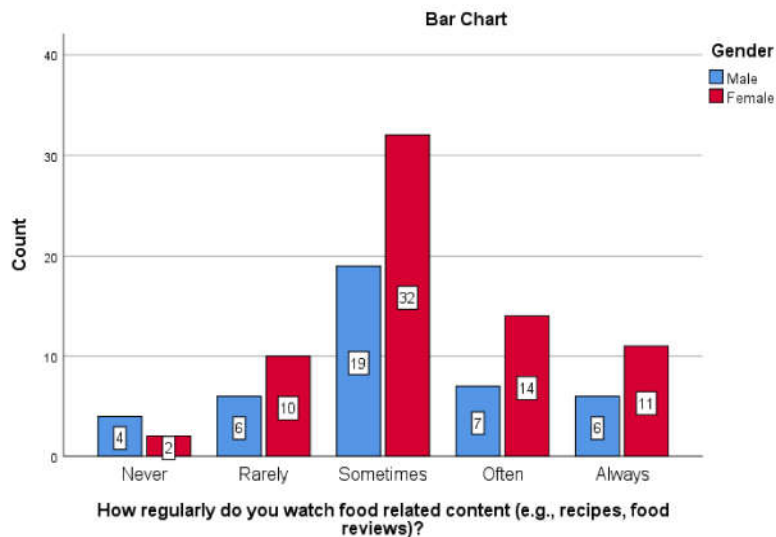


Figure 4: Regularity of watching food-related content

Table 4 and Figure 4 summarize how regularly respondents watch food-related content such as recipes or food reviews. Across all categories, female respondents show higher levels of regular viewing. For example, 62.7% of those who “sometimes” watch food-related content are females, as are 66.7% of those who watch “often” and 64.7% of those who watch “always.” Male respondents form a smaller proportion in each viewing category, indicating comparatively lower overall engagement with food-related online content consumption.

Table 5: Engagement with trending food content

Do you engage with content about trending foods (e.g., Dalgona coffee, matcha, butter boards, etc)?	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Never	9	12	21
	42.90%	57.10%	100.00%
Rarely	15	22	37
	40.50%	59.50%	100.00%
Sometimes	13	21	34
	38.20%	61.80%	100.00%
Often	4	9	13
	30.80%	69.20%	100.00%
Always	1	5	6
	16.70%	83.30%	100.00%
Total	42	69	111
	37.80%	62.20%	100.00%

$\chi^2=1.762^a$

df-4

p-.779

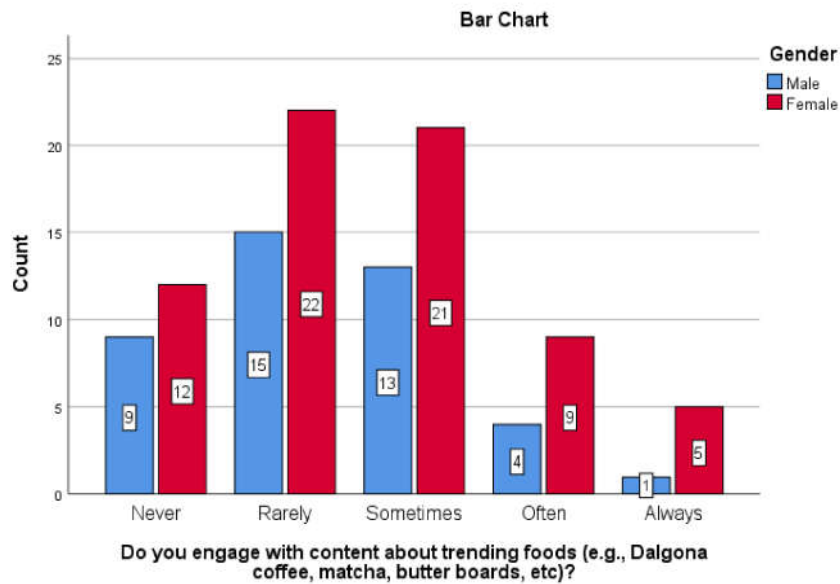


Figure 5: Engagement with trending food content

Table 5 and Figure 5 present respondents' engagement with trending food content (e.g., Dalgona coffee, matcha, butter boards) categorized by gender. The results indicate that female respondents engage with such content more frequently across all categories. For instance, among those who "sometimes" engage, 61.8% are female, and similar patterns are seen in the "often" (69.2% female) and "always" (83.3% female) categories. Male respondents show lower engagement overall, with a comparatively higher proportion in the "never" and "rarely" categories. This suggests that female participants may be more drawn to emerging food trends circulating across social media platforms.

Section 3: Influence of Social Media on Food Behaviour

Table 6: Trying Food Products Recommended by Influencers

I try food products recommended by influencers	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Never	4	29	33
	12.1%	87.9%	100.0%
Rarely	14	9	23
	60.9%	39.1%	100.0%
Sometimes	22	28	50
	44.0%	56.0%	100.0%
Often	2	3	5
	40.0%	60.0%	100.0%
Total		69	111
		62.2%	100.0%

$\chi^2=15.283^a$

df-3

p-.002

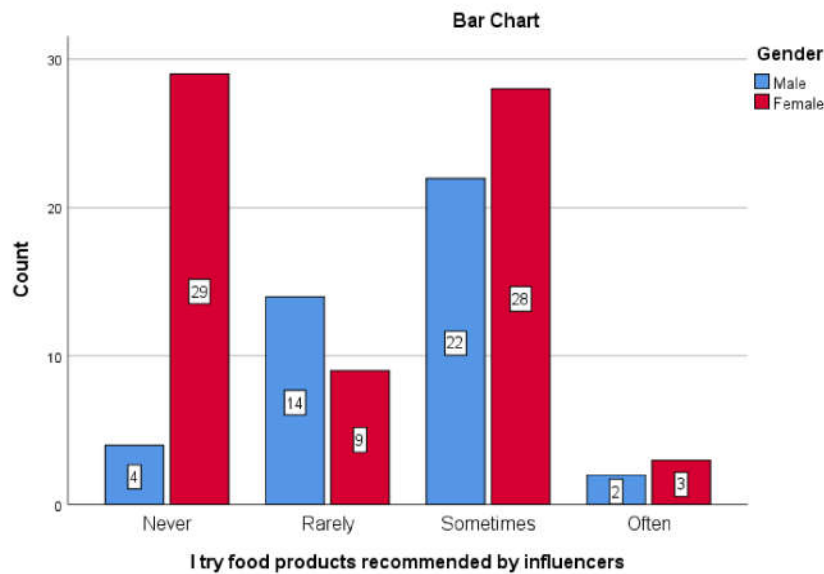


Figure 6: Trying Food Products Recommended by Influencers

Table 6 and Figure 6 present differences in respondents' likelihood of trying food products recommended by influencers. The results show 87.9% of respondents were female and only 12.1% were male. This indicates that females were much more likely to report never trying influencer-recommended food products. Overall, the results suggest that females tend to cluster at two ends of the spectrum either never trying recommended products or trying them occasionally while males are more evenly distributed across the lower-engagement categories.

Table 7: Influence of Food Influencers on Perceptions of Healthiness

Food influencers shape my perception of what is "healthy"	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Strongly Disagree	6	5	11
	54.50%	45.50%	100.00%
Disagree	4	16	20
	20.00%	80.00%	100.00%
Neutral	16	26	42
	38.10%	61.90%	100.00%
Agree	13	20	33
	39.40%	60.60%	100.00%
Strongly Agree	3	2	5
	60.00%	40.00%	100.00%

Total	42	69	111
	37.80%	62.20%	100.00%
$\chi^2=5.090^a$ df=4 p=.278			

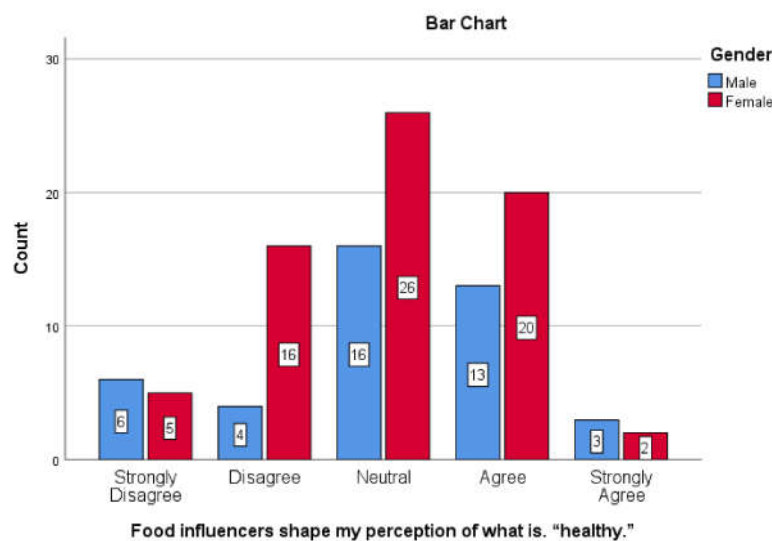


Figure 7: Influence of Food Influencers on Perceptions of Healthiness

Table 7 and Figure 7 show the relationship between gender and the belief that food influencers impact one's perception of what is considered "healthy." The data indicate a noticeable difference, with female respondents showing slightly higher engagement. Among them, 60.6% were female, while 39.4% were male. Neutral responses also showed a female majority, with 61.9% female compared to 38.1% male. Among those who disagreed, 80% were female, suggesting that females expressed both stronger agreement and stronger disagreement compared to males. Overall, the results suggest that females demonstrate greater variability in their views, showing both stronger openness and stronger resistance to the influence of food influencers on their perception of health-related content.

Table 8: Craving Responses to Food on Social Media

Seeing food on social media increases my cravings.	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Strongly Disagree	1	2	3
	33.30%	66.70%	100.00%
Disagree	5	4	9
	55.60%	44.40%	100.00%
Neutral	12	6	18
	66.70%	33.30%	100.00%
Agree	19	29	48

	39.60%	60.40%	100.00%
Strongly Agree	5	28	33
	15.20%	84.80%	100.00%
Total	42	69	111
	37.80%	62.20%	100.00%

 $\chi^2=14.870^a$

df-4

p-.005

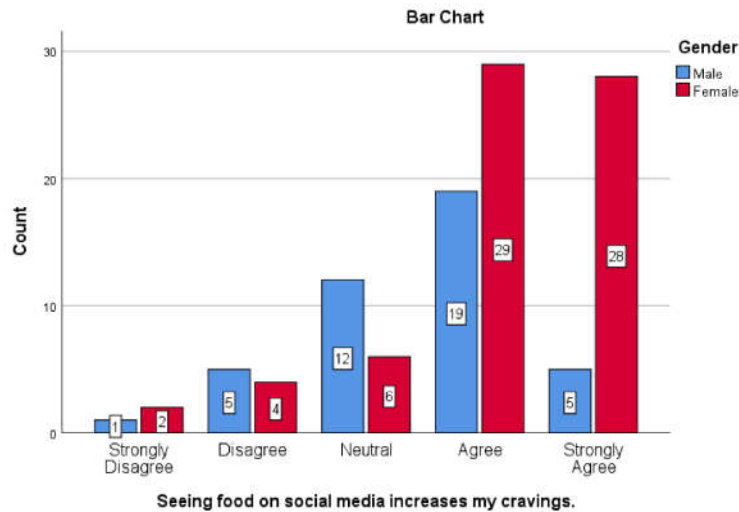


Figure 8: Craving Responses to Food on Social Media

Table 8 and Figure 8 illustrate gender-based differences in the perception that seeing food on social media increases cravings. The results show a clear trend of stronger agreement among female respondents. Among those who agreed with the statement, 60.4% were female and 39.6% were male, while among those who strongly agreed, a striking 84.8% were female compared to only 15.2% male. Conversely, disagreement was more evenly distributed, with 55.6% of males and 44.4% of females disagreeing with the statement. Neutral responses also showed a slight male majority (66.7% males). Overall, the distribution suggests that female respondents were more likely to report heightened cravings in response to food-related social media content.

Table 9: Purchasing Food/Snacks after seeing them Online

I have purchased food/snacks after seeing them online to satisfy my cravings.	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Strongly Disagree	2	4	6
	33.30%	66.70%	100.00%
Disagree	12	8	20
	60.00%	40.00%	100.00%
Neutral	13	24	37
	35.10%	64.90%	100.00%

Agree	11	15	26
	42.30%	57.70%	100.00%
Strongly Agree	4	18	22
	18.20%	81.80%	100.00%
Total	42	69	111
	37.80%	62.20%	100.00%
$X^2=8.178^a$			df-4
			p-.085

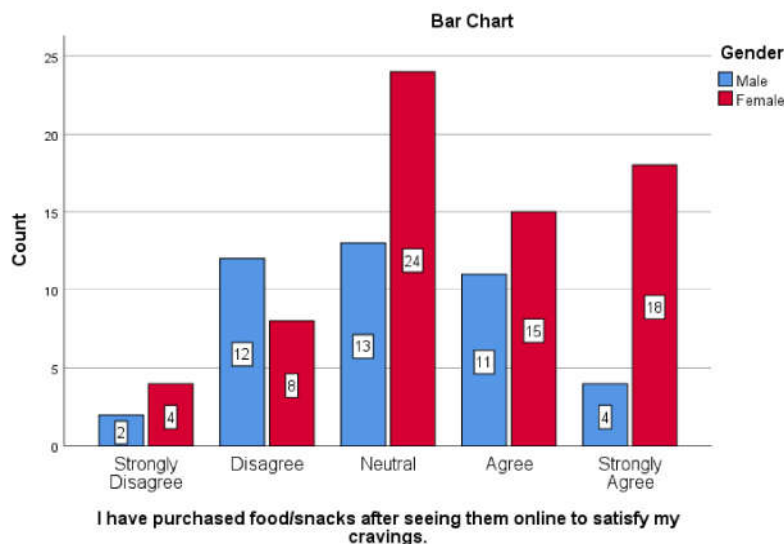


Figure 9: Purchasing Food/Snacks after seeing them Online

Table 9 and Figure 9 illustrate gender differences in purchasing food or snacks after seeing them online. The results show that females were more likely to report such behaviour. Among those who strongly agreed, 81.8% were female, whereas only 18.2% were male. Similarly, 57.7% of those who agreed were female. Neutral responses also leaned toward females (64.9%). In contrast, disagreement showed a slight male majority, with 60% of those who disagreed being male. Overall, the pattern suggests that female respondents were more likely than males to purchase food items in response to online content, as reflected in the higher female representation across agreement categories.

Section 4: Behavioural Intentions and Choices

What kind of foods do influencers you follow typically promote?	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Fast food	6	12	18
	33.30%	66.70%	100.00%

Homemade meals	10	22	32
	31.30%	68.80%	100.00%
Fitness/healthy	13	18	31
	41.90%	58.10%	100.00%
Snacks/desserts	2	13	15
	13.30%	86.70%	100.00%
Supplements	1	1	2
	50.00%	50.00%	100.00%
Trending foods	10	3	13
	76.90%	23.10%	100.00%
Total	42	69	111
	37.80%	62.20%	100.00%

Table 10: Types of Foods Promoted by Followed Influencers

$\chi^2=13.366^a$

df-5

p-.020

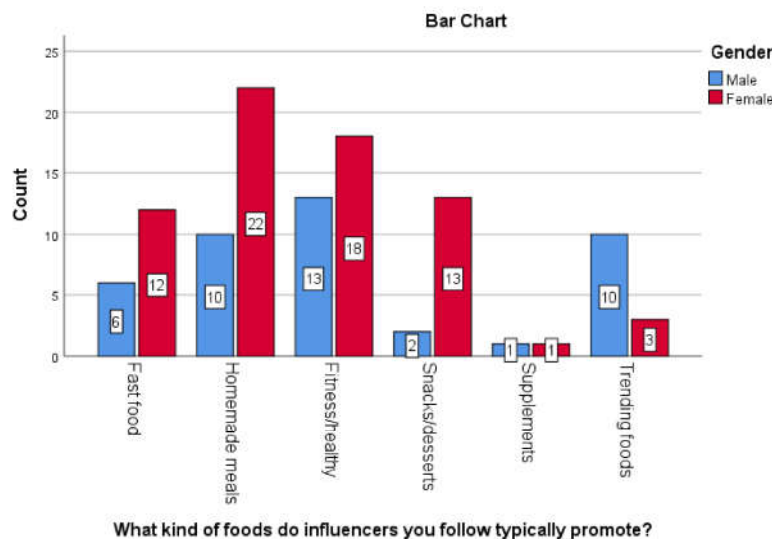


Figure 10: Types of Foods Promoted by Followed Influencers

Table 10 and Figure 10 present gender patterns in the types of foods promoted by influencers followed by respondents. Females overwhelmingly dominated categories such as homemade meals (68.8%), snacks/desserts (86.7%), and fitness/healthy foods (58.1%). Males were the majority only in the trending foods category, with 76.9% male. Supplements were equally represented across genders. Overall, females appeared to follow influencers promoting a wider variety of food categories, while males were more concentrated in specific segments such as trending foods

Table 11: Viral Recipe Attempts

Have you ever tried making a viral recipe at home?	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	

Never	12	9	21
	57.10%	42.90%	100.00%
Rarely	6	14	20
	30.00%	70.00%	100.00%
Sometimes	16	27	43
	37.20%	62.80%	100.00%
Often	5	10	15
	33.30%	66.70%	100.00%
Always	3	9	12
	25.00%	75.00%	100.00%
Total	42	69	111
	37.80%	62.20%	100.00%

 $\chi^2=4.827^a$

df-4

p-.305

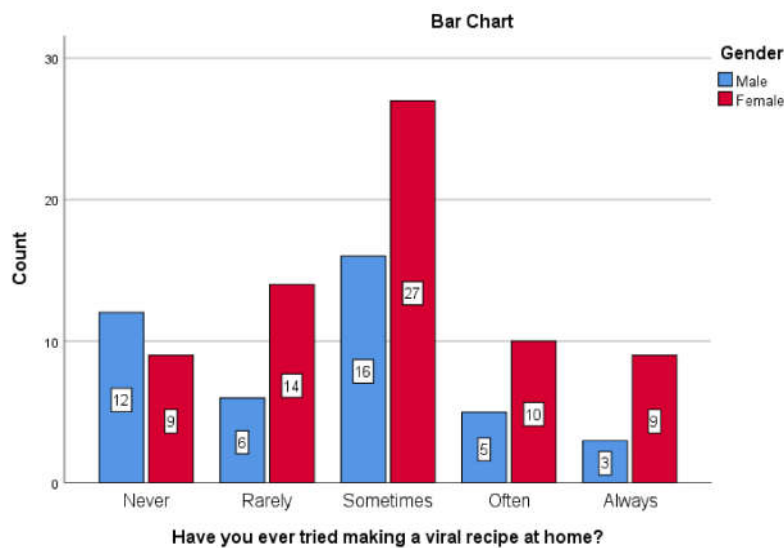


Figure 11: Viral Recipe Attempts

Table 11 and Figure 11 show a noticeable gender difference in how often participants try making viral recipes at home. Females consistently report higher participation across all frequency categories, especially in the “Sometimes,” “Often,” and “Always” groups. For example, 62.8% of those who sometimes make viral recipes are female, compared to 37.2% male. Meanwhile, males are slightly more represented in the “Never” category. This pattern suggests that females engage more actively with viral food trends, while males are more likely to have little or occasional involvement. The chi-square test indicates no statistically significant association ($p = .305$), meaning the gender differences, while visible, may not be strong enough to generalize.

Table 12: Visiting Restaurants Due to Viral Food Trends

Have you ever visited a specific restaurant/café because a trending food from there went viral online?	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Never	12	9	21
	57.10%	42.90%	100.00%
Rarely	6	14	20
	30.00%	70.00%	100.00%
Sometimes	16	27	43
	37.20%	62.80%	100.00%
Often	5	10	15
	33.30%	66.70%	100.00%
Always	3	9	12
	25.00%	75.00%	100.00%
Total	42	69	111
	37.80%	62.20%	100.00%

 $\chi^2=3.065^a$

df-2

p-.216

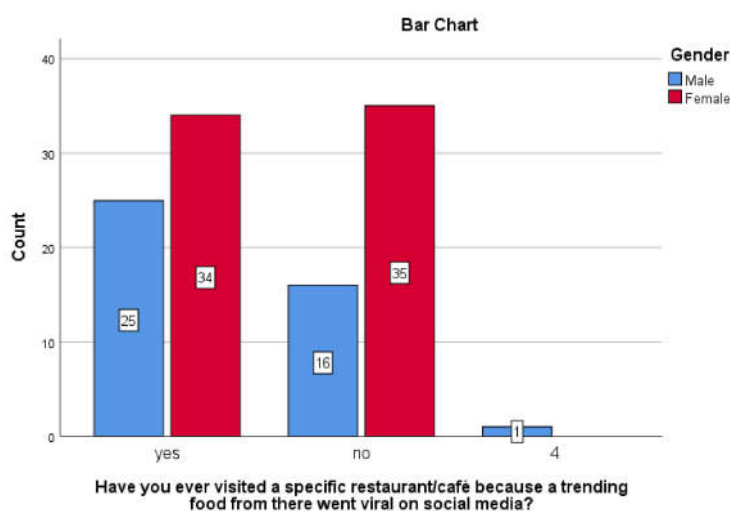


Figure 12: Visiting Restaurants Due to Viral Food Trends

Table 12 and Figure 12 show a higher proportion of female report visiting restaurants because of viral food content, especially in the “Rarely,” “Sometimes,” “Often,” and “Always” categories. For example, 75% of respondents who “always” visit restaurants due to viral foods are female. Males are slightly more represented in the “Never” group (57.1%). This pattern suggests that females may be more motivated to try viral food locations. However, the chi-square test ($p = .216$) shows no statistically significant association between gender and restaurant visits.

Table 13: Disappointment After Trying Trending Food

Have you ever been disappointed after trying a trending food you saw on social media?	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
yes	32	47	79
	40.50%	59.50%	100.00%
no	10	21	31
	32.30%	67.70%	100.00%
3	0	1	1
	0.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Total	42	69	111
	37.80%	62.20%	100.00%

 χ^2 -1.258^a

df-2

p.533

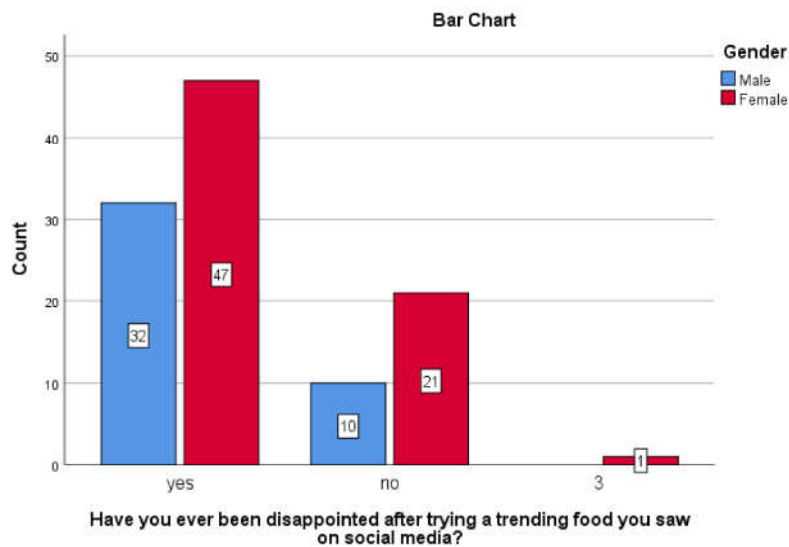
**Figure 13: Disappointment After Trying Trending Food**

Table 13 and Figure 13 indicate that both genders report experiencing disappointment after trying a trending food, but females are more represented among those who answered “yes.” Out of those who were disappointed, 59.5% are female compared to 40.5% male. A similar pattern appears in the “no” category, with females still the majority. Only one participant selected option “3,” and this was also a female. Overall, females show higher participation across all categories,

suggesting they may be more engaged with trending foods in general. The chi-square result ($p = .533$) indicates no significant gender difference statistically.

Table 14: Belief That Social Media Shows Realistic/Healthy Eating

Do you believe food shown on social media represents realistic or healthy eating?	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Strongly Disagree	5	3	8
	62.50%	37.50%	100.00%
Disagree	15	14	29
	51.70%	48.30%	100.00%
Neutral	14	44	58
	24.10%	75.90%	100.00%
Agree	8	7	15
	53.30%	46.70%	100.00%
Strongly Agree	0	1	1
	0.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Total	42	69	111
	37.80%	62.20%	100.00%

$X^2-11.214^a$

df-4

p-.024

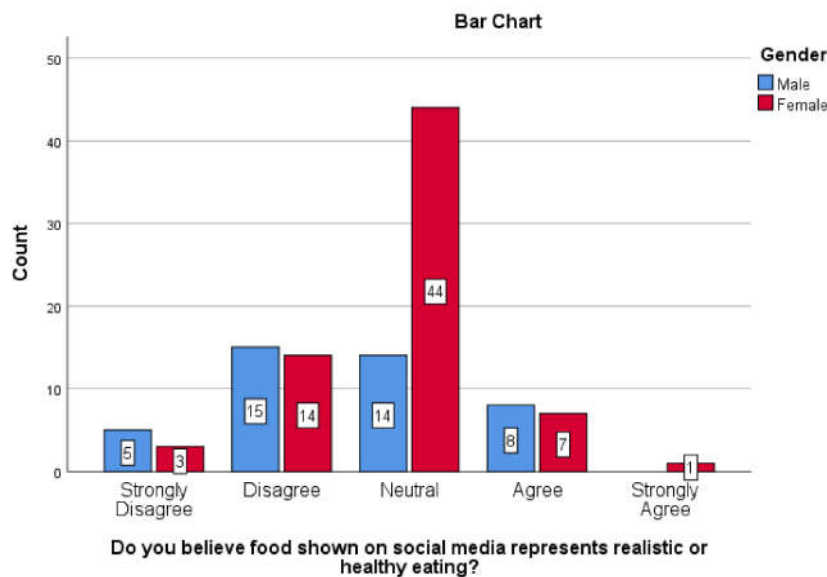


Figure 14: Belief That Social Media Shows Realistic/Healthy Eating

Table 14 and Figure 14 show a clear gender divide emerges in perceptions of social media food content. Females dominate the “Neutral” category (75.9%), indicating uncertainty or mixed views. Males, however, appear more frequently in the “Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree” categories, suggesting they are more doubtful of social media presenting realistic or healthy eating. This is one of the few tables

where the gender pattern is both noticeable and statistically meaningful: the chi-square test ($p = .024$) shows a significant association, meaning gender is related to these beliefs.

Table 15: Preference for Verified Experts Over Influencers

Would you like to see more verified experts than influencers giving food advice on social platforms?	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
yes	22	39	61
	36.10%	63.90%	100.00%
no	11	11	22
	50.00%	50.00%	100.00%
unsure	9	19	28
	32.10%	67.90%	100.00%
Total	42	69	111
	37.80%	62.20%	100.00%

$X^2=1.851^a$ $df=2$ $p=.396$

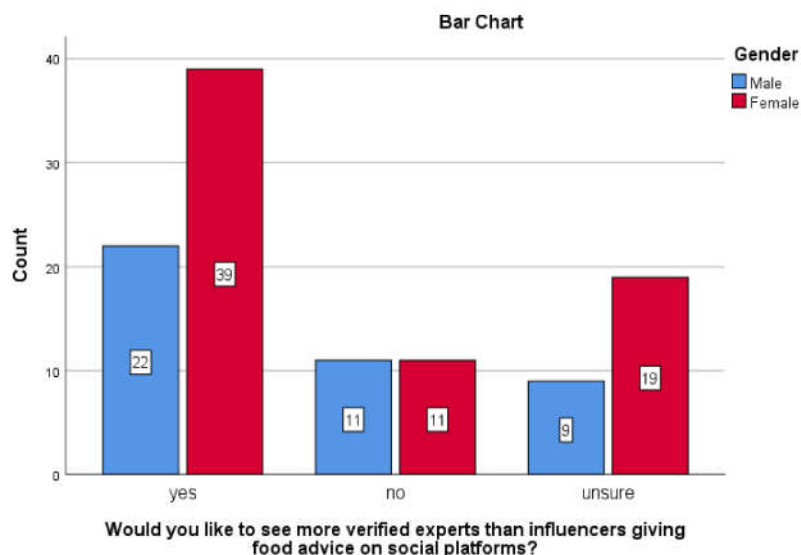


Figure 15: Preference for Verified Experts Over Influencers

Table 15 and Figure 15 show that females are more likely than males to prefer seeing more verified experts giving food advice on social platforms. Among those who answered “yes,” 63.9% are female compared to 36.1% male. Responses for “no” are evenly split across genders, while the “unsure” group again shows higher

female participation (67.9%). This indicates that females appear more supportive of expert-led content, whereas males are slightly more uncertain or indifferent. However, the chi-square test ($p = .396$) shows no statistically significant association, meaning gender does not predict this preference in a meaningful way.

Table 16: Taking Dietary or Fitness Advice from Influencers

Have you taken any dietary or fitness advice from an influencer in the past 6 months?	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
yes	1	0	1
	100.00%	0.00%	100.00%
no	41	69	110
	37.30%	62.70%	100.00%
Total	42	69	111
	37.80%	62.20%	100.00%

$X^2=1.658^a$

df=1

p=.198

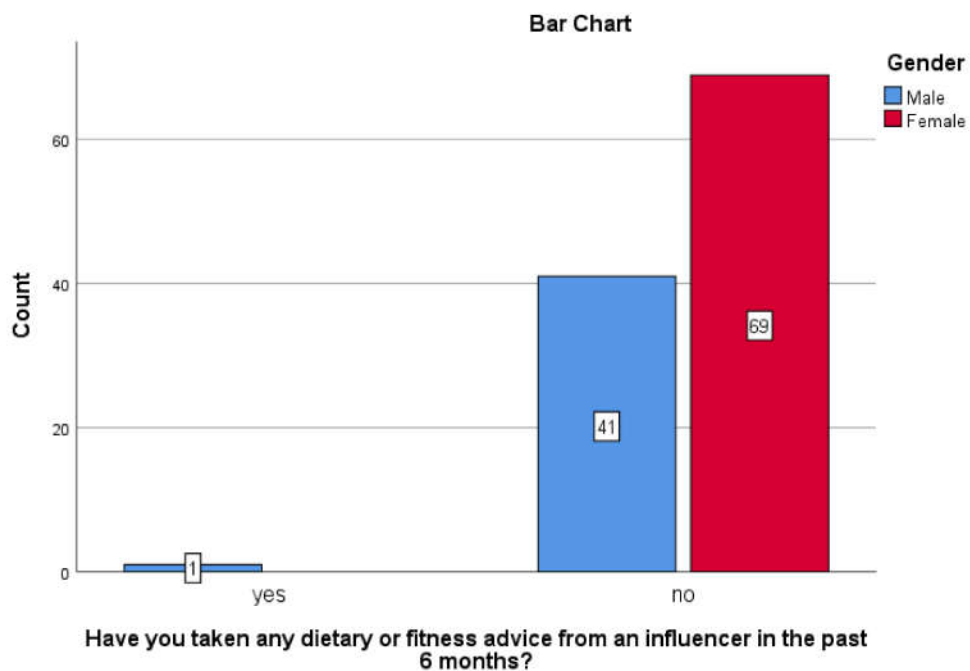


Figure 16: Taking Dietary or Fitness Advice from Influencers

Table 16 and Figure 16 indicate almost all participants report not taking dietary or fitness advice from influencers in the past six months, with 110 out of 111 selecting “no.” The single participant who answered “yes” was male. This distribution shows that influencer-driven health or fitness advice is generally not followed by either gender in this sample. The chi-square test ($p = .198$) demonstrates no meaningful gender difference.

Table 17: Plans to Limit Foods Promoted by Influencers

Do you plan to limit your consumption of foods promoted by influencers in the future?	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Definitely No	5	6	11
	45.50%	54.50%	100.00%
Probably No	2	7	9
	22.20%	77.80%	100.00%
Maybe	20	34	54
	37.00%	63.00%	100.00%
Probably Yes	7	13	20
	35.00%	65.00%	100.00%
Definitely Yes	8	9	17
	47.10%	52.90%	100.00%
Total	42	69	111
	37.80%	62.20%	100.00%

X-1.902^a

df-4

p-7.54

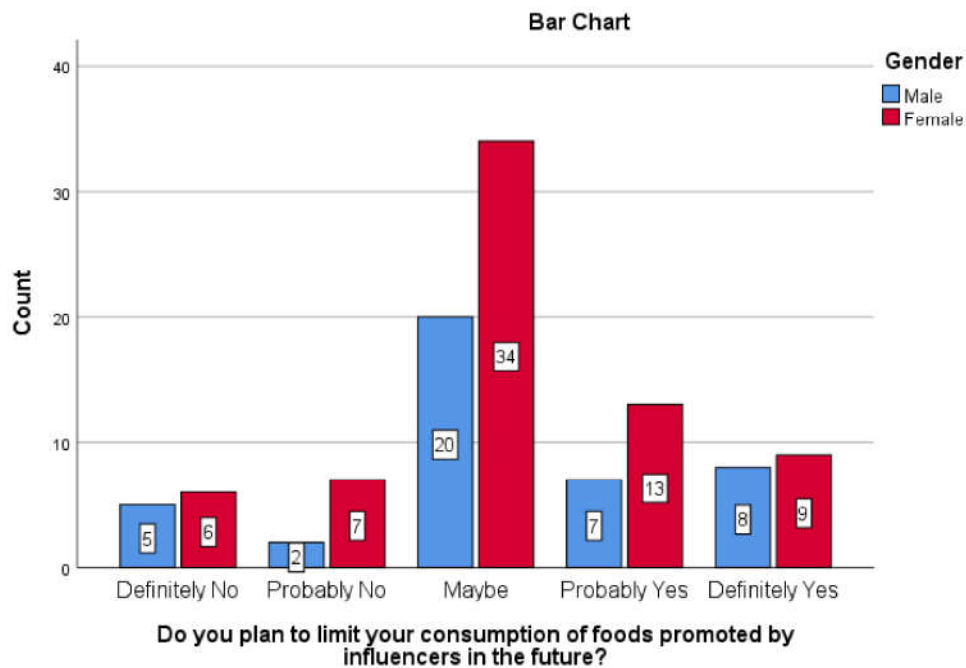


Figure 17: Plans to Limit Foods Promoted by Influencers

Across all response categories, females consistently represent a higher proportion of participants, especially in “Probably No” and “Maybe.” Both genders show similar patterns of uncertainty or moderate intention to limit influencer-promoted foods, with “Maybe” being the most selected option for both. Males and females are fairly balanced in the “Definitely Yes” and “Definitely No” categories. Overall, these results suggest that uncertainty is common while strong positions are less frequent. The chi-square test ($p = .754$) indicates no significant association, meaning gender is not a predictor of future intentions regarding influencer-promoted foods.

Table 18: How social media changed the way you think about Food

How has social media changed the way you think about food? (Open-ended)	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
No change	7	14	21
	33.3%	66.7%	100.0%
Made me try trending foods	3	5	8
	37.5%	62.5%	100.0%
Healthier choices	21	23	44
	47.7%	52.3%	100.0%
Increased curiosity and cravings	2	14	16
	12.5%	87.5%	100.0%
Made me try recipes	0	8	8
	0.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Unrealistic food representation	9	5	14
	64.3%	35.7%	100.0%
Total	42	69	111
	37.8%	62.2%	100.0%

 $\chi^2=15.411^a$

df-5

p-.009

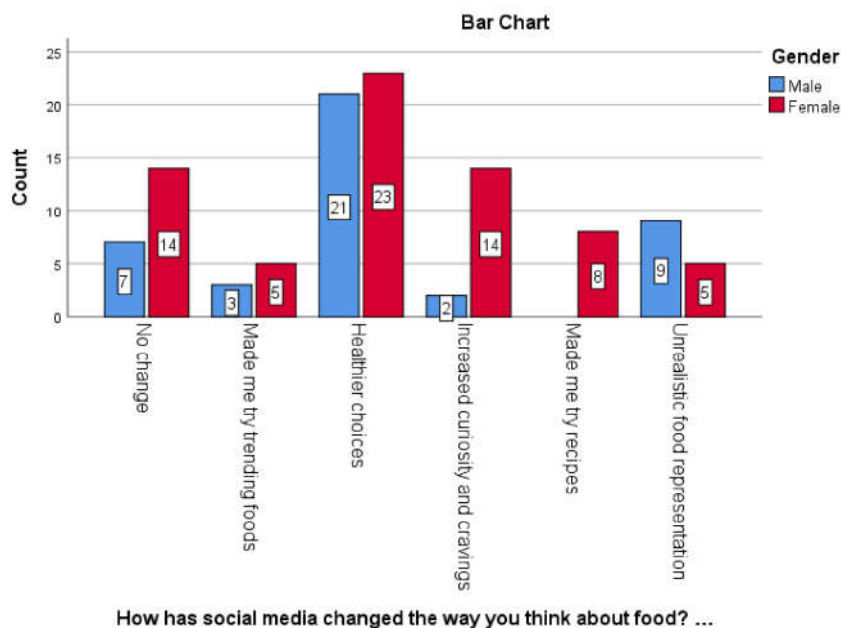
**Figure 18: How social media changed the way you think about Food**

Table 18 and Figure 18 responses show meaningful gender differences in how social media has influenced perceptions of food. Females strongly dominate categories such as “Increased curiosity and cravings” (87.5%) and “Made me try recipes” (100%). Males, however, appear more frequently in “Unrealistic food representation,” where they make up 64.3%. Both genders are highly represented in “Healthier choices,” though females remain slightly higher. The chi-square value ($p = .009$)

indicates a significant association, meaning gender plays a meaningful role in how social media impacts food-related thoughts and behaviours.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that social media plays a major part of students' daily food exposure, strongly shaping their cravings, perceptions, and dietary decisions. Platforms such as Instagram and YouTube were the most frequently used for food-related content, with female students consistently engage more with viewing recipes, food trends, and influencer posts. This regular exposure to visually appealing and trending content resulted in increased curiosity and greater willingness to try new foods, reflecting the persuasive nature of digital foodscapes.

Students mentioned that influencers and viral foods significantly motivate them to experiment with trending recipes, purchase snacks seen online, or visit restaurants promoted through social media. At the same time, many participants showed developing nutrition awareness by checking labels, questioning health claims, and considering nutritional benefits when choosing foods. This suggests that while social media drives cravings and experimentation, students also show selective judgment toward the information they take.

Overall, the results highlight that social media has a powerful behavioural impact, influencing students' immediate cravings, food choices, and eating culture. Influencer recommendations, peer-sharing, and visually appealing content contributes to shaping modern dietary habits, highlighting the growing need to understand digital food environments in the relation to youth nutrition.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the influence of social media influencers and trending food content on the dietary behaviours of college students aged 18–25. Data from 111 respondents showed that digital platforms such as Instagram and YouTube are major sources of food-related content, with female students being more active than males. Exposure to such content was strongly associated with increased cravings, interest in trending foods, and real-life behaviour such as trying viral recipes and visiting restaurants. Students also showed moderate levels of health awareness, frequently considering nutritional information before making food choices. Overall, social media played a significant role in shaping students' food perceptions, motivations, and consumption patterns.

The study concludes that social media significantly influences students' food choices, cravings, and dietary behaviours. Influencers and viral food trends play a crucial role in motivating students to try new foods, experiment with recipes, and purchase items promoted online. While students show some awareness of nutritional information and a preference for verified health experts over influencers, the strong

visual appeal and constant exposure to food content make social media a powerful influence on behaviour. Gender differences were clear, with female students exhibiting higher engagement and responsiveness to digital food cues. The findings highlight the need for digital nutrition literacy and responsible influencer practices to combat the effects of unhealthy food marketing and promote balanced dietary habits among students.

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

- Future research should include larger and more diverse student populations, including multiple colleges and different socio-economic groups.
- Digital campaigns promoting nutrition literacy should be developed and tested, especially targeting students with high exposure to influencers.
- Collaborations between colleges, health educators, and verified nutrition experts can help counter misinformation and promote healthy online food environments.
- Studies comparing the effects of different platforms (Instagram vs TikTok vs YouTube) may provide deeper insights into platform-specific influences.
- Policy recommendations should focus on regulating unhealthy food marketing on digital platforms.

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