

The Impact of Social Media on the Dietary Habits of College Students in West Bengal

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Abstract—India is among the top nations to utilize online entertainment through social-media. According to the Global Digital Report Jan,2024, there were 751.5 million Internet users in India. Eating habits are largely influenced by cultural practices, social media, personal preferences and socioeconomic status. In the early stages of college life, students drastically change their eating habits and lifestyle. The growing influence of social media leads to unhealthy choices in eating habits. Objectives of the study are i) To find out the dietary habit of college students at present ; ii) To find out the dietary habit of college students with respect to social media ; iii) To compare the dietary habit between present status and as influenced by social media ; iv) To analyse the impact of consuming social media influenced food on their health. In terms of resources and techniques, the questionnaire for the research purpose was written out on a google form. An anonymous survey was taken by 25 college students who do not live at home with their families. Secondary data is collected from books, journals & online resources. Various reports & govt. statistics are used. Findings are reached after analysing the data. It is found that 60% of participants usually eat homemade healthy food & 53.3% students are included new food in their daily diet after influenced by social media. With the constant growth of social media and its increasing effects, it is important to understand how social media affects eating disorders. The relationship between blog or social media viewing and unhealthy eating habits of college students in West Bengal has not been studied yet. Therefore, this study investigates the effect of social media on food consumption of college students in West Bengal.

Index Terms—Social Media, Young adults, Dietary habits, College student.

INTRODUCTION

Food intake is one of the most important daily practices that affects the performance of the entire human body throughout the day. This practice is influenced by various external factors. Nowadays social media significantly influences new trends. The use of social media is increasing every day in developing countries. In 2024, nearly 4 billion people worldwide are using social media, which is double the number of social media users in 2015. DataReportal's figures show that there were 462.0 million active social media user identities in India in January 2024, equating to 32.2 percent of the total population. Kepios analysis indicates that internet users in India increased by 19 million (+2.6 percent) between January 2023 and January 2024 & 12.5 percent of India's population is between the ages of 18 and 24. Social media platforms, once just a space for sharing personal moments, have now become powerful drivers that shape our food choices and dining experiences.

The Role of social media Platforms in Shaping Food Trends -

The influence of social networking sites on food trends is transforming the landscape of culinary criticism, fashion trends, and trend vloggers. Social media is changing people's eating habits through advertisements, news and posts on various platforms.

Twitter: Following the trends

In April 2024, India has the third largest number of Twitter users in the world with 30.3 million users. Twitter is now one of the most used social media platforms and is becoming a widespread source platform for information, including health research.

Instagram: More Than Just a Visual Feast

Instagram has elevated food from mere nourishment to an art form. While the platform's visual focus has long been a playground for food enthusiasts and chefs to display their creations, its influence extends beyond aesthetics. Instagram has acted as a catalyst for food trends, offering visually appealing dishes like avocado toast and rainbow pastries on regular menus. Influencers, especially those who appeal to younger demographics like Gen Z, amplify this trending power. Their visually stunning posts combined with engaging storytelling drive their followers towards massive amount of food choices.

TikTok: The Quick Fix and Flavour Explorer

TikTok has disrupted traditional food by offering quick, easy-to-digest videos that often goes viral. The platform has become a hub for culinary creativity, especially among younger users who are willing to experiment with Flavours. Whether it's a 15-second frothy coffee recipe or the perfect omelette dish, TikTok's influence extends to real-life trends like the feta pasta

phenomenon. The platform's #FoodTok hashtag alone garnered more than 237.5 billion views, underscoring its role as a major food trend driver.

Social media use is associated with eating disorders and negative body image, which mainly affect young users, i.e. college going students. Young adults who had unhealthy eating habits and a negative body image were more likely to be affected by social media. In addition, watching videos posted by social media influencers on various social media platforms can lead to a future health crisis that seriously affects the health of the younger generation, which can be caused by changes in eating behaviour, meal times and also sleep times.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

- a) Food and social media is highly a controversial topic. While some studies point out that the use of social media can be associated with an increase of unhealthy food intake and Body Mass Index (BMI) [Coates et al. (2019)2; Khajeheian et al. (2018)5].
- b) Dietary behaviors also tend to worsen during early adulthood, when young individuals transition into independent living, consuming over time, this can lead to greater risks for cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and other chronic diseases [Health Econ (2015)4, Acad. Nutri. Diet (2020)7, Mikkilä et al. (2005)6].
- c) In recent years, nutrition education interventions have increasingly relied on computing and information technologies, particularly mobile platforms and social media [DiFilippo KN, Huang W-H, Andrade JE, Chapman (2015)3].

DEFINITION OF IMPORTANT TERMS

Social media - Social- media is defined as internet-based platform that allows users to interact and present themselves in real or virtual spaces, with both general and particular audiences that receive value from user-generated content and observations.

Dietary habits - Dietary habits refer to the long-term dietary patterns and habits that an individual forms and maintains in their daily life. These habits can be influenced by personal tastes, ethical reasons, culture or by some external influence. Dietary habits play a significant role in individuals health, quality of life, and longevity.

Food - Food is defined as solid or liquid which when swallowed. digested & assimilated, nourishes our body.

Nutrition - Nutrition is the biochemical and physiological process by which an organism uses food to support its life. It provides the essential nutrients i.e. Carbohydrates, Proteins, Fats, Vitamins, Minerals, Dietary fiber, which metabolized to create energy and chemical structures.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY ARE

- i) To find out the dietary habit of college students at present.
- ii) To find out the dietary habit of college students with respect to social media.
- iii) To compare the dietary habit between present status and as influenced by social media.
- iv) To analyse the impact of consuming social media influenced food on their health.

POPULATION AND SAMPLE

Population of study is all West Bengal's college students (ages 20–24). Sample is taken from West Bengal's five colleges only.

DATA & SOURCES DATA

The primary data is collected in the form of questionnaire for the research project. Questionnaire is written out on a google form. An anonymous survey was taken by 25 college students who do not live at home with their families. All of the participants were adults (ages 20–24). Secondary data is collected from books, journals & online resources. Various reports & govt. statistics are used.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design and Study Population:

A cross-sectional study using survey method was conducted in west Bengal in the month of April, 2024. Participants aged between 20-24 years. The inclusion criteria of this study are students are not living at home with their families, have social media accounts & use social media frequently were eligible to complete the survey.

Sampling Strategy:

Simple random sampling techniques are used. 14 questions are written on a google form & give it randomly to 25 college going students who are not living at home with their families. Participants are from different five colleges of West Bengal. Study aims and objectives were clearly explained at the beginning of the questionnaire of the survey.

Questionnaire Tool:

This study adapted and used a previously validated questionnaire. To achieve the study's aim, a 14-item questionnaire was distributed. This section (14 items) explored the impact of social media influencers on food consumption. Then item of this section was scored using a five-point Likert scale that ranged from zero (never) to four (very often). The lower the score, the less likely the participant was affected by social media changing their dietary habits.

Sample size:

Total 25 college students are taken from five different undergraduate degree college. Five students from each year.

Findings is reached after analysing the data.

ANALYSIS

Table 1: Participants Response to Items That Measure the Impact of social media Towards Eating Attitude

SL. No.	Item	Very Often	Most of the Time	From Time to Another	Rarely	Never
1.	How likely are you to try a diet promoted by a social media influencer?	10.7%	14.3%	17.9%	50%	17.9%
2.	How likely are you to recommend a diet that a social media influencer promotes to friends and/or acquaintances?	10.7%	21.4%	10.7%	28.6%	28.6%
3.	Did you buy a food product that was promoted by a social media influencer/ celebrity?	10.7%	7.1%	7.1%	42.9%	32.1%
4.	I consume any food promoted by social media even if it is not my eating habit.	3.6%	7.1%	14.3%	21.4%	53.6%
5.	After I started using social media, my consumption of fast food increased.	10.7%	14.3%	10.7%	28.6%	35.7%
6.	I follow nutrition-related content, blogs, and posts on social media.	10.7%	28.6%	10.7%	39.3%	10.7%
7.	I eat/cook/buy the foods I watch on social media effortlessly.	7.1%	14.3%	14.3%	42.9%	21.4%
8.	I organize my diet according to the photos/videos of foods I see on social media.	3.6%	17.9%	14.3%	25%	39.3%
9.	I care about the foods/dishes that celebrities share on social media, and I consume them.	3.6%	10.7%	3.6%	39.3%	42.9%
10.	I think the foods/dishes that are shared on social media & get more likes/shares on social media are healthier.	3.6%	17.9%	10.7%	35.7%	32.1%

Figure 1: Graphical representation of participants age group in west Bengal.

Age: (20-24 years)

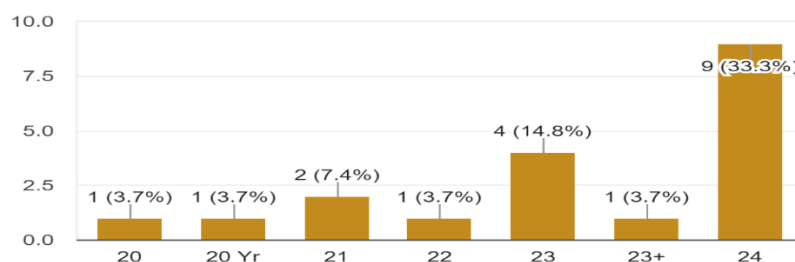
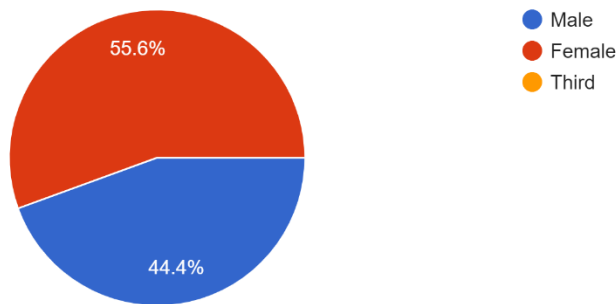


Figure 2: Graphical representation of participants social media users



Gender basis:

Figure 3: Graphical representation of participants those try a diet promoted by a social media influencer:

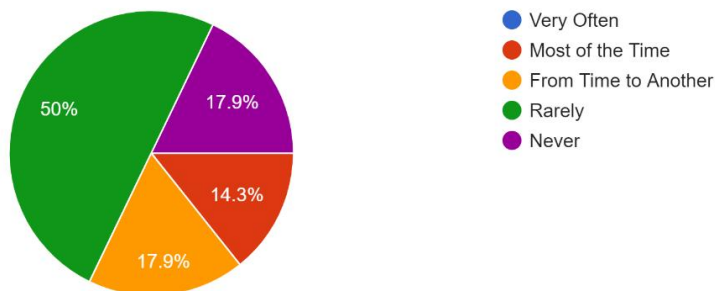


Figure 4: Graphical representation of participants those recommended social media influenced diet to their family & friends

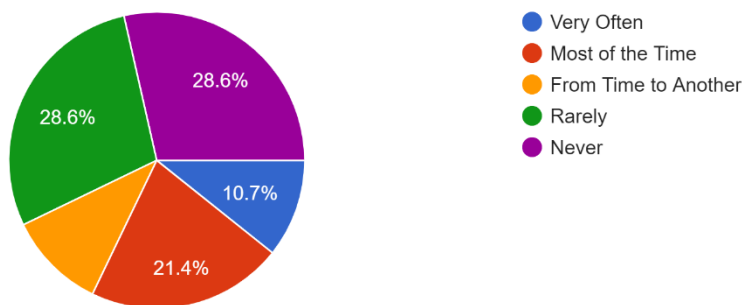


Figure 5: Graphical representation of participants those buy food products that was promoted by a social media influencer:

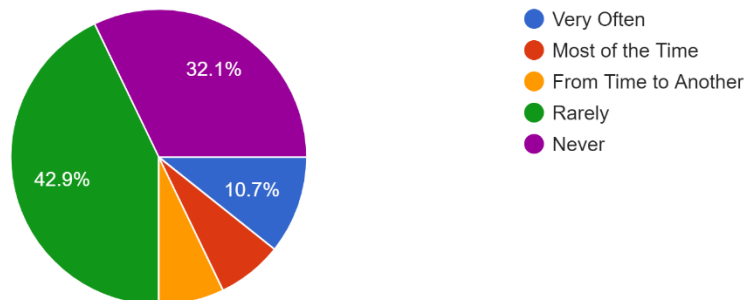


Figure 6: Graphical representation of participants those consume any food promoted by social media even if it is not their eating habits:

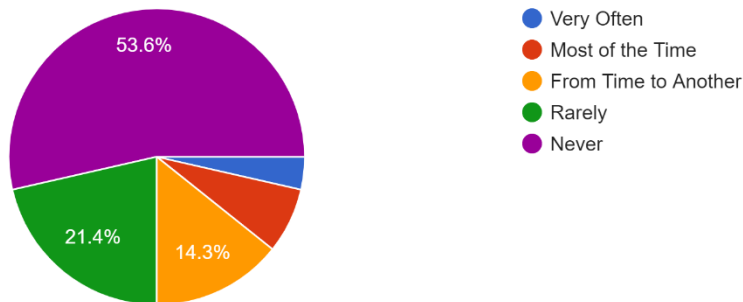


Figure 7: Graphical representation of participants those increased their fast-food consumption after using social media:

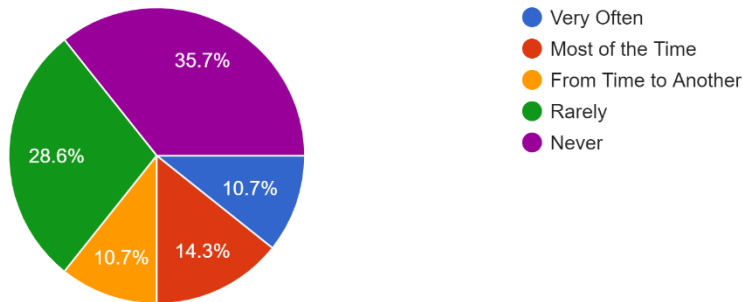


Figure 8: Graphical representation of participants those follow nutrition-related content, blogs, and posts on social media:

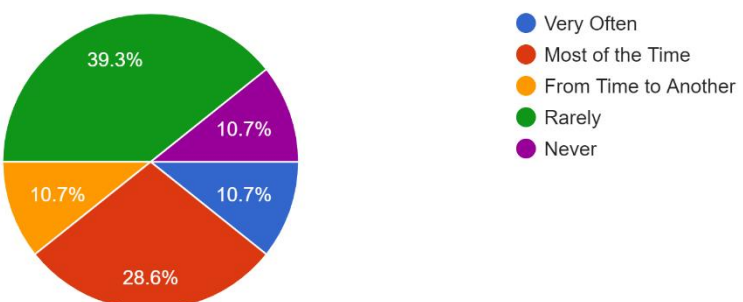


Figure 9: Graphical representation of participants those organize their diet according to the photos/videos of foods, they see on social media:

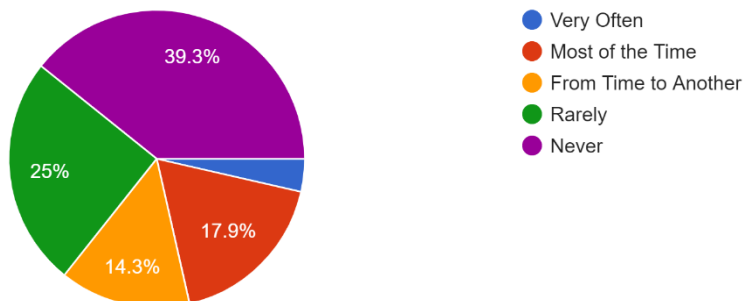


Figure 10: Graphical representation of participants those care about the foods/dishes that celebrities share on social media, and they consume them:

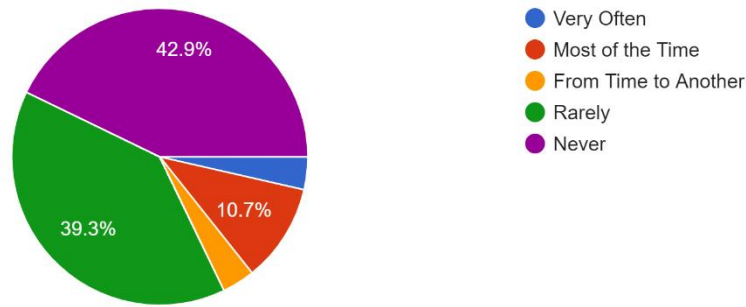


Figure 11: Graphical representation of participants those think foods/dishes that are shared on social media & get more likes/shares on social media are healthier:

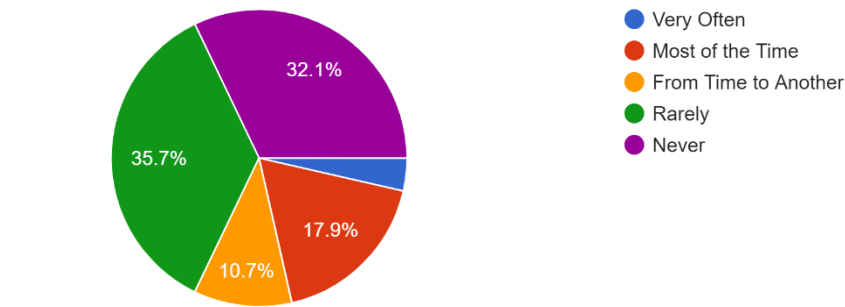
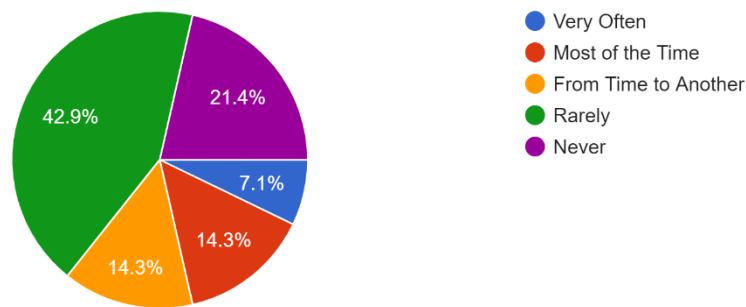


Figure 12: Graphical representation of participants those buy, cook, eat the foods, they watch on social media effortlessly:



FINDINGS

The data table shows participants' responses to items measuring their attitudes toward social media. Males were found to be less influenced by social media than females. Participants' age was negatively related to their attitudes toward social media and diet. Social media followers are ten times more likely to be influenced by social media than other casual social media users.

The dietary habit of college students at present

It is found that 60% of participants usually eat homemade healthy food, seasonal fruits and vegetables, fruit salad, chicken, suji, fruits, vegetables, curd, chocolate, cookies etc. Sometimes they eat junk foods like, biriyani & burgers during brunch times.

The dietary habit of college students with respect to social media

It is found that 53.3% students are included new food in their daily diet after influenced by social media. They included foods like chia seeds, various types of soup, juice and salad, oats, various Chinese foods etc in their daily diet after influenced by of social media influencers.

Comparism between the present dietary habit and as influenced by social media

Without considering what kind of food items are suitable for their body, without any medical advice, they blindly include all these food items in their daily diet just influenced by social media influencers. Many of them are not even aware of the benefits or disadvantages of including these foods in their daily diet. 40% of participant's fast-food consumption is increased after they started

using social media. This heavy shift of dietary interest of college towards unhealthy, high-calorie foods from healthy homemade foods, increases various eating disorders day by day.

The impact of consuming social media influenced food on their health

The data table shows that after they started using social media, their consumption of fast food increased, which affects their health badly. All the disorders that have been observed as a result of excessive use of social media & gives an impact on their eating habits are:

i)Binge Eating Disorder: This is a type of eating disorder characterized by repeated episodes of eating large quantities of food in a short period of time, often to the point of discomfort. The use of gadgets and media can encourage overeating by promoting mindless eating and disrupting normal eating habits.

ii)Orthorexia Nervosa: Orthorexia nervosa is characterized by an obsession with healthy eating to the point that it becomes unhealthy. Constant exposure to images and messages about "clean eating" and "healthy living" on social media and other media platforms can contribute to the development of orthorexia.

CONCLUSION

In this study, a cross sectional online based survey is conducted to investigate the impact of social media on food consumption. This study highlights that social media influences the diet of about a fifth of the study participants. A previous study in Australia found a clear link between social media and eating disorders. The authors of that study also reported that, more social media accounts were associated with higher rates of eating disorders. Similarly, another study conducted in the United States reported that youth who used media for longer periods of time were more likely to be associated with unhealthy diets and insufficient sleep.

From this study, we find that social media had a less significant impact on men than on women. This is also similar to a previous study in Australia⁸ that found that daily time spent on social media was associated with eating disorders in girls. Social media followers were ten times more likely to be influenced by social media than others. Developing a negative body image increases eating disorders, including dieting, binge eating, fasting, calorie counting, and self-induced vomiting, which ultimately lead to long-term side effects¹. Additionally, exposure to social media increases users' anxiety, leading to emotional overeating. Facebook abuse, in particular, has been linked to bulimic symptoms, binge eating, and body dissatisfaction. The problem is that social media content is not intensively regulated and monitored; therefore, people are exposed to misleading information every day. Young adults appeared to make them more susceptible to false or misleading information shared by social media influencers and other advertisers. Social media can sometimes overwhelm people with conflicting information about healthy foods. With so much information posted on social media every day, it can be difficult for non-experts to separate the right information from the wrong. Different studies show that 26.5% of participants rarely read the entire post about food or nutritional content on social media. This behaviour may suggest that if people do not want to read the entire message, they are less likely to investigate further. From this survey, it is found that small proportion of participants (28.6%) frequently followed nutrition-related content on social media. In contrast, 40% of participants started eating fast food most often after they started using social media. This heavy shift of dietary interest of college towards unhealthy, high-calorie foods only adds to the state's growing chronic disease burden. Health care authorities and health care professionals must increase the number of their awareness programs to inform the public about the complications caused by unhealthy food. Beside this, the Indian government must consider reviewing its regulation regarding the advertisement process of food on social media. For example, food, soft drinks and energy drinks use AI to target and promote unhealthy foods. Increased regulation and possibly taxation of these products could benefit the entire population. Policy makers should also encourage social media influencers to participate in public health awareness and healthy food promotion.

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