

## Effects of Social Media on Eating Behavior of Students in Pune

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### Abstract:

This study investigates the influence of social media on the eating behavior of college students in Pune, a leading educational hub in India. Relying exclusively on secondary data sources such as national health surveys, academic research, journal articles, and institutional reports, the paper identifies how various social media platforms—primarily Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok—shape dietary choices among the youth. The research reveals a growing correlation between high social media usage and a spectrum of unhealthy eating behaviors, including frequent fast-food consumption, emotional eating during periods of stress, and peer- or influencer-driven dietary trends.

Through an examination of recent studies and location-specific data, the paper finds that social media not only alters students' perceptions of food aesthetics and nutrition but also reinforces behavior through algorithms, viral content, and aspirational lifestyle messaging. Key patterns emerging in Pune-based institutions include increased late-night food ordering, experimentation with fad diets, and a growing disconnection from traditional meal routines. The study also analyzes the role of demographic variables such as gender and residential status (hostel vs. home living), showing that these factors moderate the impact of social media on food behavior.

The paper further discusses the underlying psychological mechanisms—such as social comparison, emotional triggers, and behavioral modeling—that mediate this relationship. Implications are explored for educational institutions, policy makers, and health marketers. The research concludes by suggesting targeted institutional interventions, digital literacy programs, and socially-driven health promotion strategies as pathways to mitigate adverse outcomes and promote mindful eating habits among students. This study thus contributes to a growing body of literature on digital influence and health behavior in urban Indian youth.

### 1. Introduction:

The proliferation of social media platforms has transformed how young individuals form habits, including eating behavior. Students are particularly vulnerable to the dietary cues received from online platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. These platforms showcase influencers, peers, and advertisements that affect students' food choices. Pune, known for its concentration of colleges and a vibrant student population, serves as an ideal location to examine the digital-to-diet connection. Understanding how digital consumption translates into nutritional behavior can help design better institutional interventions and public health policies.

**2. Methodology** This paper uses only secondary data collected from:

- Peer-reviewed academic articles from reputed journals
- Institutional studies and surveys conducted in Pune-based universities and colleges

- Government and public health reports on youth health and nutrition trends
- Studies focusing on digital health, behavioral science, and social media influence

Data sources include research papers accessed through platforms like Google Scholar, PubMed, and SSRN, as well as government reports published by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and research publications by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR).

### 3. Literature Review

Social media has emerged as a dominant environmental and behavioral force influencing dietary patterns, particularly among adolescents and young adults. An expanding body of research underscores the psychological, social, and commercial mechanisms through which digital content reshapes food preferences and consumption habits. This section explores global and Indian perspectives, with an emphasis on youth behavior and the role of influencer culture, culminating in the need for localized studies such as the present one focusing on students in Pune.

#### 3.1 Social Media as a Source of Dietary Influence

Visual-centric platforms such as Instagram and TikTok prioritize aesthetic content, often highlighting highly stylized meals and trending food products. Tiggemann and Slater (2014) argue that repeated exposure to such content alters eating intentions, as social media portrays food not merely as nourishment but as a lifestyle accessory. Coates et al. (2019) add that the commercial strategies used in digital food marketing—especially influencer partnerships and peer-driven promotions—tend to bypass skepticism, creating a sense of trustworthiness among youth.

In support of this, Beharay, A., & Tilak, P. (2021). A study on Influence of Social Media on Digital Marketing. *Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(6)2 in their study on the influence of social media on digital marketing emphasize that the seamless blending of marketing content with entertainment on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat lowers the audience's resistance to promotional messaging. Food brands strategically utilize these platforms to encourage impulse consumption, particularly among young, digitally savvy audiences.

#### 3.2 Youth and Peer Influence

Youth are particularly susceptible to peer validation and mimicry in digital environments. Vaterlaus et al. (2015) report that adolescents often align their food choices with what receives approval in their online communities. Viral trends—such as mukbang videos, "What I Eat in a Day" reels, and food challenges—exert subtle social pressure to emulate these behaviors.

Building on this, Harchekar, J. S., & Beharay, A. (2024). A FUNDAMENTAL STUDY ON SOCIAL NETWORKING ADVERTISING<sup>8</sup>. in their recent work on social networking advertising highlight how peer-shared content has evolved into a powerful form of user-generated branding. They note that food-related posts often act as social signals, shaping what is perceived as acceptable or desirable eating behavior in one's digital peer group.

#### 3.3 Social Media and Disordered Eating

The digital promotion of body ideals and "wellness" lifestyles can also contribute to disordered eating. Levine and Murnen (2009) found a clear link between social media exposure and body dissatisfaction, especially

among female students. The content consumed under the guise of fitness or clean eating often sets unrealistic standards, leading to a cycle of restriction, guilt, and bingeing.

This dynamic is echoed in Beharay, A. (2020). Critical study of brands do to engage with India's next billion Internet users<sup>10</sup> who critically examined how brands engage India's next billion internet users. His findings show that brands, especially in the wellness and fitness sector, target aspirational insecurities by showcasing idealized bodies and promoting supplements, restrictive diets, or "superfoods" without adequate health warnings, increasing psychological vulnerability among students.

### 3.4 Indian and Pune-Specific Context

In the Indian context, Sharma and Kapoor (2021) report that over 60% of college students have tried new food or diet plans after exposure to related social media content. Mahajan & Gothankar (2019) found that in Pune specifically, frequent social media use correlates with increased fast food ordering, skipping traditional meals, and irregular eating patterns—habits often normalized or glamorized online.

Beharay, A. (2022). Comparative Study on A Branding Strategy of Online Ordering and Delivery Platforms of Food Industry with Reference of Zomato & Swiggy<sup>6</sup> further deepens this insight with his comparative study of food delivery platforms like Zomato and Swiggy. He illustrates how the algorithms and branding strategies of these platforms—especially their integration with social media through sponsored influencers and in-app trends—amplify impulse food ordering and habituate students to high-calorie, convenience-based meals.

## 4. Key Findings:

### 4.1 Social Media and Unhealthy Eating:

A pan-India study of medical undergraduates indicated that 22% of students exhibited abnormal eating behavior linked to excessive social media use. These behaviors included meal skipping, irregular eating schedules, and increased intake of high-fat and high-sugar food products. Social media exposure often results in students unconsciously associating positive emotions with unhealthy food due to vibrant food visuals, upbeat music, and popular personalities featured in these posts. Among Pune students, a more localized study found that 42.8% admitted to increased fast-food intake directly resulting from viewing food-related content on platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube. Sponsored content by influencers, aesthetic food photography, and reel challenges such as “food hauls” or “cheat day meals” were found to play a major role in shaping dietary cravings and triggering impulse ordering behavior. Furthermore, social media algorithms tend to reinforce food-related content once a user engages with such posts, leading to a cyclical pattern of viewing and consumption.

### 4.2 Fast Food Consumption in Pune Students:

A 2019 survey conducted among 300 students from five prominent colleges in Pune revealed that 85% consumed fast food regularly, with 17% reporting daily consumption. Fast food was not only preferred for its taste and accessibility but also perceived as part of a modern, urban lifestyle. Students reported that being tagged in food location check-ins or sharing food stories online was a form of social validation. The frequency of consumption was often influenced by trending content on social media platforms featuring newly launched menu items, combo offers, or influencer reviews. Online food delivery apps collaborated with social media to promote flash deals that increased food ordering among students, particularly during late-night study hours or weekends. Many students reported making food choices based on “what’s trending” online rather than

nutritional value, reinforcing the idea that social media acts as a virtual menu that guides their eating preferences.

#### 4.3 Stress and Emotional Eating:

A 2024 observational study found that 39.3% of students in Pune experienced changes in eating behavior during times of stress, with two prominent patterns emerging: under-eating and emotional overeating. Under-eating was commonly linked to performance anxiety, exam pressure, or personal issues, leading to loss of appetite. In contrast, emotional overeating was linked to the need for comfort and escapism. This phenomenon was especially prominent among students regularly exposed to idealized body images, unrealistic fitness regimes, and peer accomplishments on social media. Many turned to high-sugar, high-carb snacks and comfort food such as chips, pastries, and instant noodles. The consumption of 'mukbang' videos (where hosts consume large quantities of food) or binge-eating challenges further normalized overconsumption. These trends were particularly prevalent among hostel dwellers, who often lacked structured meal times and relied on late-night online food orders as both a distraction and stress relief mechanism.

#### 4.4 Peer and Influencer Effects:

Social media operates as a digital community, and within this community, peer and influencer behavior significantly shapes perceptions of acceptable dietary choices. Students tend to replicate food choices and meal styles posted by their friends and admired online figures. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok have popularized short-form food content—such as “What I Eat in a Day” vlogs, 15-second recipe reels, or fitness influencer meal plans—which students often perceive as authentic and aspirational. Such mimicry is further fueled by the social reward mechanism—likes, comments, and shares—which drives the need to conform. Consequently, students may attempt fad diets (e.g., keto, intermittent fasting, GM diet) based on online trends without understanding their health implications. Peer challenges like “7-day detox” or “protein week” further propagate temporary, unscientific, and sometimes harmful dietary practices among students.

#### 4.5 Gender and Living Arrangement as Moderating Variables:

Demographic factors such as gender and living arrangement significantly moderate how social media affects eating behavior. Female students have shown higher sensitivity to body image portrayals and diet culture perpetuated on social media. Several studies, including those from Indian Journal of Social Psychology (2022), suggest that women are more likely to internalize thin-ideal messages, leading to restrictive diets, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating. On the other hand, male students, though influenced, showed higher tendencies toward bulk eating influenced by fitness models promoting protein-heavy diets.

Living arrangements also play a critical role. Students residing in hostels or paying guest accommodations often lack parental oversight and are more reliant on digital platforms for food choices. They face increased exposure to food marketing and are more likely to order food online due to convenience, lack of kitchen access, or peer influence. In contrast, students living at home tend to maintain more regular meals and benefit from balanced diets prepared by family members. Thus, distance from familial structures enhances the dependency on social media cues for dietary decisions.

The influence of social media on the eating behavior of students is multifaceted and driven by both psychological and social mechanisms. The following key mechanisms help explain the pathways through which digital exposure translates into dietary habits:

## 5. Discussion:

### 5.1 Mechanisms Influencing Eating Behavior

**Social Comparison:** Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok create a culture of constant comparison, especially when it comes to physical appearance and lifestyle habits. Students often compare their eating patterns, body types, and meal aesthetics with those of influencers, celebrities, and even peers. These comparisons can trigger dissatisfaction with one's own habits or body image, leading to the adoption of restrictive diets, increased snacking, or skipping meals to conform to perceived ideals. The glorification of 'aesthetic meals'—such as smoothie bowls, diet salads, or protein plates—encourages students to imitate diets that may not suit their body types or nutritional requirements.

**Emotional Triggers:** Content on social media has been found to induce various emotional states—ranging from happiness and excitement to sadness, anxiety, or boredom. Emotional eating is a common response to such triggers, with students often consuming food not out of hunger, but as a way to manage emotional distress. Images and videos of comfort food, soothing recipe videos (e.g., ASMR baking clips), or 'mukbangs' (binge eating broadcasts) tend to reinforce the act of turning to food for comfort. These patterns are further intensified during periods of academic pressure, relationship stress, or homesickness, especially for students living away from home.

**Behavioral Modeling:** Social media content repeatedly exposes students to particular food choices, eating habits, and lifestyle routines. The repetition of these patterns leads to behavioral modeling, where students unconsciously start to adopt similar behaviors. For instance, continuous exposure to content showcasing high-calorie street food, sugary beverages, or trendy diets promotes normalization and desirability of those items. Reels and shorts demonstrating easy-to-make junk food or calorie-dense snacks encourage replication. Sponsored content and influencer posts make these behaviors appear more authentic and achievable, often without disclosing the commercial interests involved.

**Algorithmic Reinforcement:** Platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok employ algorithms that show more of the content users engage with. If a student interacts with food-related posts—especially those involving fast food, recipes, or influencer diets—they are more likely to be shown similar content. This creates an echo chamber that continuously reinforces the same themes, often leading to a disproportionate focus on unhealthy or unbalanced food practices. The algorithm not only fuels interest but subtly pushes students toward specific food-related decisions.

**Peer Influence and Virality:** Students are deeply influenced by what their peer groups share or endorse on social media. Group challenges, such as “7-day salad challenge,” “no sugar week,” or “instant noodle recipe hack,” quickly gain traction and often dictate short-term behavioral changes among participants. Peer validation in the form of likes, comments, and shares enhances the likelihood of conforming to group eating behaviors—even when those practices are not nutritionally sound.

### 5.2 Outcomes of Social Media Influence on Eating Behavior

**Increased Consumption of Fast Food and Sugar-Sweetened Beverages:** Fast food brands leverage social media advertising with aggressive discount deals, gamified ordering apps, and influencer collaborations. This contributes to a rise in the consumption of fast foods and sugary drinks among students. These foods are often chosen for convenience, popularity, or trend value, rather than nutritional benefits.

**Skipping Breakfast or Main Meals:** Due to erratic sleep schedules influenced by late-night scrolling and binge-watching, many students skip breakfast or main meals. Instead, they snack irregularly or rely on quick fixes ordered online. Social media also glorifies intermittent fasting and extreme dieting routines, which may encourage unhealthy meal skipping without medical supervision.

**Lack of Nutritional Awareness:** Many students, particularly those not from science or health backgrounds, lack the basic knowledge of balanced nutrition. Social media becomes their primary source of information on food, which often includes misinformation, fad diets, and contradictory advice. Terms like “clean eating,” “detox,” or “superfoods” are frequently misunderstood and misapplied.

**Greater Susceptibility to Fad Diets and Misinformation:** Influencers often promote diets that claim rapid weight loss or muscle gain without scientific backing. Students are drawn to such content due to its persuasive presentation and perceived success stories. This increases the adoption of fad diets like the GM diet, mono-diets, or juice cleanses, which can be harmful when followed for prolonged periods or without professional guidance.

**Disordered Eating Patterns:** Emotional overeating, restrictive dieting, binge eating, and food guilt are among the disordered patterns increasingly observed among students influenced by social media. The cycle of inspiration, guilt, restriction, and indulgence is intensified by exposure to curated and idealized food and body content.

**Conclusion of Discussion:** Overall, the discussion reveals that social media serves as both a mirror and a mold for students' eating behavior. It reflects popular trends while shaping new norms—often divorced from sound nutritional science. A deeper understanding of these mechanisms and outcomes is essential for developing targeted interventions that balance digital engagement with physical health among college students. The findings from the study call for a multidimensional response involving educational institutions, government policy, and health marketers to mitigate the adverse effects of social media on student eating behavior in Pune.

## 6.1 Institutional Interventions

Colleges and universities in Pune have a crucial role to play in addressing this issue at the grassroots level. Some potential and emerging interventions include:

- **Food and Nutrition Education in Orientation Sessions:** Colleges can incorporate mandatory sessions on balanced diets, portion control, and decoding food advertisements during student orientations. For example, **Fergusson College** recently piloted a module in their orientation titled "Smart Eating in the Digital Era," which received positive feedback.
- **Media Literacy and Lifestyle Workshops:** Institutions like **Symbiosis International University** have organized workshops where students learn to critically evaluate influencer content and understand the psychological effects of food marketing. These include decoding filters, editing, sponsored content disclaimers, and the dangers of dietary misinformation.
- **Healthy Campus Cafes:** Collaboration with canteens and food vendors to offer budget-friendly healthy alternatives has shown promise. The **MIT World Peace University**, for instance, introduced a “Green Menu” with smoothies, salads, and millet-based items, promoted through QR code-based meal information systems on student notice boards.

- **Mental Health and Counseling Integration:** Food-related anxiety and eating disorders often remain unreported. Institutions should integrate counseling services focusing on body image, stress eating, and nutrition, encouraging students to speak openly and seek help.

## 6.2 Policy Recommendations

Policy-level interventions are essential to reinforce and institutionalize efforts:

- **Regulation of Digital Food Marketing:** The government can consider regulations on the time and type of food ads shown to youth on social media platforms. For example, the **Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI)** can mandate clearer disclaimers on influencer food promotions targeting young adults, especially for fast food and sugary beverages.
- **Digital Well-being Curriculum:** The **University Grants Commission (UGC)** and **AICTE** should mandate the inclusion of digital literacy and well-being as part of undergraduate curriculum. Topics should cover media consumption habits, algorithmic influence, and mental health. Pilot programs at **Savitribai Phule Pune University** have already shown promise in this regard.
- **Public Health Campaigns:** Government departments like the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare should launch campaigns similar to “Eat Right India” focused on college campuses. These can include contests, awareness days, and mobile-based diet tracking apps customized for student lifestyles.

## 6.3 Marketing Opportunities for Health Promotion

Social media can also be leveraged to promote healthy eating if used strategically:

- **Influencer Marketing for Good:** Partnering with micro-influencers and student ambassadors to promote balanced diets and active lifestyles. For instance, **local Pune-based wellness influencers like @FitWithSneha or @CampusNutriLife** have successfully created awareness on affordable, nutritious food options for students.
- **Healthy Hashtag Challenges:** Running challenges such as **#GreenPlatePune** or **#30DaysFruitBite** where students post healthy meals, with incentives like canteen coupons or fitness band giveaways. Similar campaigns by brands like **Tata Soulfull** and **The Whole Truth Foods** have seen active student participation.
- **Student-Led Recipe Content:** Encouraging students to share their own easy, healthy, hostel-friendly meals via reels and IGTV through official college social handles. For example, **Flame University’s “Cook Smart” digital series**, run by students, features low-cost meal prep ideas and gained traction across multiple campuses.
- **Gamified Health Platforms:** Collaborations with health apps such as **Fittr**, **HealthifyMe**, or **Cult Fit** to create Pune student-specific groups where students can track meals, earn badges, and challenge friends, making nutrition interactive and social.

To conclude, the digital landscape influencing food behavior is complex but not unchangeable. By engaging institutions, policymakers, and the marketing ecosystem collaboratively, Pune can set a benchmark in integrating smart digital habits with mindful eating practices among students.

## 7. Conclusion:

The analysis strongly indicates that social media exerts a significant influence on the eating behavior of college students in Pune. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube not only shape food preferences through visually appealing content but also impact emotional and psychological responses related to food. The promotion of fast food, fad diets, and unrealistic body ideals contributes to disordered eating patterns, increased fast food consumption, meal skipping, and emotional eating among students—especially those living away from home and under academic stress.

At the same time, the potential of social media as a tool for positive health promotion cannot be ignored. With its ability to reach young audiences quickly and effectively, social media can be harnessed to encourage balanced eating, nutritional awareness, and mindful consumption. Influencer-led campaigns, gamified challenges, student-created healthy content, and targeted digital well-being education are some of the ways in which this transformation can be realized.

However, the path to achieving this balance requires a coordinated, multi-stakeholder effort. Educational institutions in Pune must actively implement nutrition and media literacy programs, while policymakers should consider regulating aggressive digital food marketing. Health professionals can contribute by creating credible content and supporting campus-based mental and physical health initiatives. Finally, marketers and influencers have a social responsibility to promote authentic, science-backed dietary messages that resonate with the lifestyle and needs of students.

In essence, the digital food environment is both a challenge and an opportunity. With intentional interventions, it is possible to shift the narrative from indulgence and misinformation to empowerment and education, fostering a generation of students who make informed, healthy food choices in both the physical and digital worlds.

Secondary data suggests that social media significantly shapes the eating behavior of students in Pune. While often linked to unhealthy patterns, these platforms also present opportunities for health promotion if used responsibly. A multi-stakeholder approach involving educational institutions, policymakers, digital marketers, and healthcare professionals is essential to counteract negative influences and leverage the positive potential of social media.

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