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Social Media Usage and Its Effects on Eating Behavior, Lifestyle Practices, and Body Image among Adults

Dr Belinda Lopez

Associate Professor,

Dept. of Home Science,

Smt. VHD Central Institute of Home Science (DCE),

Maharani Cluster University,

Bangalore.

Abstract

The proliferation of social media platforms has reshaped individual behaviours, particularly in relation to dietary practices, lifestyle habits, and body image perception. This study investigates the influence of social media usage on eating habits, lifestyle modifications, and body image perception among adults aged 20–40 years. A cross-sectional design was employed with a sample of 100 participants (50 males and 50 females) selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analysed using SPSS (Version 25). Statistical tools included chi-square tests, Mann–Whitney U tests, and Spearman’s correlation. Findings reveal that higher social media usage is significantly associated with unhealthy eating behaviours, increased reliance on influencer-driven diets, negative body image perception, and reduced sleep duration. Participants with negative body image were more likely to engage in dietary experimentation and experience dissatisfaction linked to social media validation metrics. The study highlights the multidimensional impact of social media on behavioural and psychological outcomes and underscores the need for awareness and interventions to mitigate adverse effects.

Keywords: Social media, dietary behaviour, lifestyle modification, body image, adults

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has transformed the way individuals communicate, access information, and construct their identities. Among these developments, social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook have emerged as dominant tools of interaction, particularly among young and middle-aged adults. These platforms are no longer limited to communication; rather, they function as spaces for self-expression, social comparison, and lifestyle influence. With billions of active users globally, social media has become deeply embedded in everyday life, shaping behaviours, attitudes, and perceptions across diverse domains.

One of the most significant areas influenced by social media is dietary behaviour. Exposure to visually appealing food content, influencer marketing, and diet trends has altered how individuals perceive and engage with food. Research suggests that individuals are increasingly influenced by digital content when making food choices, often prioritizing aesthetic appeal over nutritional value (Filippone et al., 2022). The proliferation of “food porn,” diet fads, and fitness-related content contributes to the normalization of both healthy and unhealthy eating patterns, depending on the nature of exposure. Moreover, social media influencers play a crucial role in promoting dietary practices, often without scientific validation, thereby impacting public health behaviours.

In addition to dietary habits, social media significantly affects lifestyle patterns, including sleep, physical activity, and substance use. Prolonged engagement with digital platforms, particularly during nighttime, has been associated with disrupted sleep cycles, reduced sleep quality, and increased fatigue (Perez et al., 2021). The constant availability of content and the addictive nature of scrolling behaviours contribute to excessive screen time, which negatively impacts overall well-being. Furthermore, exposure to content related to smoking and alcohol consumption may normalize such behaviours, particularly among impressionable users, thereby influencing lifestyle choices.

Another critical dimension of social media influence is body image perception. The visual-centric nature of platforms such as Instagram emphasizes appearance, often promoting idealized and unrealistic body standards. Users are frequently exposed to curated and edited images that portray unattainable levels of beauty and fitness. This constant exposure can lead to self-comparison, body dissatisfaction, and negative self-esteem (Ahadzadeh et al., 2017). Studies have demonstrated a strong association between social media use and body image disturbances, particularly among individuals who engage in frequent appearance comparison (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). The pursuit of validation through likes, comments, and shares further intensifies these effects, contributing to psychological distress.

Despite the growing body of literature on social media's impact, there remains a need to examine its multidimensional influence on eating habits, lifestyle behaviours, and body image perception simultaneously. Most studies tend to focus on isolated aspects, thereby limiting a comprehensive understanding of how these variables interact. Additionally, there is a lack of context-specific research focusing on adults aged 20–40 years, a demographic that actively engages with social media and is particularly vulnerable to its influences.

Therefore, the present study aims to assess the impact of social media on dietary behaviour, lifestyle patterns, and body image perception among adults aged 20–40 years. By exploring these interconnected variables, the study seeks to provide a holistic understanding of how social media shapes both behavioural and psychological outcomes. The findings are expected to contribute to the existing literature and inform interventions aimed at promoting healthier digital engagement and well-being.

Review of Literature

The growing penetration of social media has prompted extensive research into its influence on health-related behaviours, particularly dietary patterns, lifestyle habits, and body image perception. Existing literature highlights both the positive and negative implications of social media usage, with a strong emphasis on its role in shaping behavioural norms and psychological outcomes.

Social Media and Dietary Behaviour

Social media platforms have transformed the way individuals interact with food-related content. According to Filippone et al. (2022), exposure to visually appealing food images on social media can stimulate cravings and impulsive eating behaviours. The concept of “digital food environments” suggests that frequent exposure to unhealthy food content increases the likelihood of consumption, especially among young adults.

Similarly, Qutteina et al. (2019) observed that a significant proportion of food-related content on social media promotes energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods. This aligns with findings by Coates et al. (2019), who demonstrated that influencer marketing significantly increases food intake, particularly among younger audiences. The persuasive nature of influencers, combined with their perceived authenticity, plays a crucial role in shaping dietary choices.

In contrast, some studies highlight the potential of social media as a tool for promoting healthy eating. Robinson et al. (2016) found that peer influence on social media can encourage healthier dietary behaviours when positive norms are established. However, the overall evidence suggests that the negative influence of unhealthy food promotion outweighs these benefits.

Social Media and Lifestyle Patterns

The relationship between social media usage and lifestyle behaviours has been widely explored, particularly in relation to sleep, physical activity, and substance use. Perez et al. (2021) reported that increased social media usage is associated with reduced sleep duration and poor sleep quality. This is attributed to factors such as screen exposure, cognitive stimulation, and nighttime engagement.

Rana (2021) further emphasized that excessive social media use contributes to disrupted sleep cycles and increased fatigue among young adults. The addictive nature of social media platforms encourages prolonged usage, often at the expense of essential health behaviours.

In terms of substance use, O’Brien et al. (2020) highlighted that tobacco and alcohol-related content on social media can normalize risky behaviours. Exposure to such content increases the likelihood of experimentation, particularly among impressionable users. Phan et al.

(2019) also found that social media plays a role in promoting alcohol consumption by framing it as a socially desirable activity.

Social Media and Body Image Perception

Body image perception is one of the most extensively studied outcomes of social media usage. Ahadzadeh et al. (2017) found that Instagram usage significantly influences body dissatisfaction through mechanisms such as self-comparison and self-discrepancy. The visual nature of social media platforms encourages users to compare themselves with idealized representations of beauty.

Holland and Tiggemann (2016), in their systematic review, concluded that social networking sites are strongly associated with body image concerns and disordered eating behaviours. Frequent exposure to idealized images leads to internalization of unrealistic standards, resulting in negative self-perception.

Furthermore, Jiotsa et al. (2021) reported that individuals who frequently compare their appearance with others on social media are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction and a drive for thinness. The role of social validation, through likes and comments, further reinforces appearance-based self-worth.

Integrated Perspective

While numerous studies have examined the individual effects of social media on diet, lifestyle, and body image, fewer studies have explored these variables collectively. The interrelationship between these factors is critical, as negative body image can influence dietary behaviours, while lifestyle patterns such as sleep can affect psychological well-being.

The existing literature suggests a cyclical relationship:

- Social media exposure → Body comparison → Body dissatisfaction
- Body dissatisfaction → Unhealthy eating behaviours
- Excessive usage → Poor lifestyle habits (sleep, substance use)

This integrated perspective underscores the need for comprehensive research that examines multiple dimensions simultaneously, as undertaken in the present study.

Methodology

A cross-sectional study was conducted among 100 adults aged 20–40 years. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire covering socio-demographic details, social media usage, dietary behaviour, lifestyle habits, and body image perception. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS Version 25. Chi-square tests, Mann-Whitney U tests, and Spearman’s correlation were applied, with significance set at $p < 0.05$.

Table 1
Socio-Demographic and Basic Characteristics of Participants

Variable	Category	Frequency (n=100)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	50	50
	Female	50	50
Age (Mean \pm SD)	29.9 \pm 5.9 years	–	–
Education	SSC	1	1
	HSC	5	5
	Graduate	61	61
	Postgraduate	24	24
	MBA	7	7
	PhD	2	2
Occupation	Unemployed	14	14
	Self-employed	11	11
	Employed	66	66
	Homemaker	9	9
Social Media Use	Instagram	90	90
	YouTube	88	88
	Facebook	56	56
	Twitter	11	11

The demographic distribution indicates a balanced gender representation, enhancing the generalizability of gender-based comparisons. The mean age (29.9 years) reflects a digitally active

population highly exposed to social media influences. The dominance of Instagram and YouTube highlights the growing importance of visual platforms, which are known to exert stronger psychological influence due to their image- and video-based content. Despite a relatively high educational background, participants showed susceptibility to social media influence, suggesting that digital exposure can outweigh educational awareness in shaping behavioural patterns.

Table 2
Social Media Platforms by Gender, Body Image, and Time Spent

Variable	Category	Key Finding	p-value
Gender	All platforms	No significant difference	>0.05
Body Image	YouTube usage higher in negative body image group	Significant	0.045*
	Facebook usage differs by body image	Significant	0.010*
Time Spent	Platform usage	No significant difference	>0.05

The absence of gender differences suggests equal exposure to social media across males and females. However, the significant association between platform usage and body image perception indicates that individuals with negative body image may selectively engage with platforms that encourage comparison or validation. The lack of association with time spent suggests that **content type and platform characteristics** may be more influential than duration alone, reinforcing the idea that exposure quality matters more than quantity.

Table 3
Purpose of Social Media Use

Variable	Category	Key Finding	p-value
Gender	Recipe use higher among females	Significant	0.000**
	Networking, learning, entertainment	No significant difference	>0.05
Time Spent	Entertainment (≥3 hours users)	Significant	0.045*

The significantly higher use of social media for recipes among females indicates gendered engagement with food-related content, which may explain differential dietary influences. Increased time spent for entertainment suggests passive consumption patterns, often linked with exposure to unhealthy or unrealistic content. This supports the theory of “digital leisure behaviour,” where prolonged use leads to reduced critical engagement and increased susceptibility to influence.

Table 4
Influence of Social Media on Eating Habits

Behaviour	Significant Group	Key Finding	p-value
Trying influencer diets	Males	Higher likelihood	<0.05*
	Negative body image	Higher likelihood	0.023*
Recommending diets	Males & negative body image	Higher likelihood	<0.05*
Eating outside habits	Negative body image	Significant	0.035*
Increased fast food intake	High usage (>3 hrs)	Strong association	<0.001**

This table highlights a strong behavioural influence of social media on dietary practices. Individuals with negative body image are more likely to experiment with diets, indicating that body dissatisfaction acts as a key motivator for behavioural change. The significant effect of time spent suggests a dose-response relationship, where increased exposure leads to higher behavioural adoption. Influencer marketing emerges as a critical driver, shaping dietary choices irrespective of nutritional value.

Table 5
Body Image Perception

Variable	Key Finding	p-value
Males compare appearance more	Significant	0.021*
Negative body image → feel judged more	Significant	0.013*
High usage (>3 hrs) → comparison & judgment	Significant	<0.05*

The findings challenge traditional assumptions by showing that males are also significantly affected by appearance comparison. Individuals with negative body image exhibit heightened sensitivity to social evaluation, indicating psychological vulnerability. Increased usage intensifies these effects, suggesting that prolonged exposure reinforces negative self-perception through repeated comparison and validation mechanisms.

Table 6
Correlation - Social Media and Eating Behavior

Variables	Correlation	Significance
Social media time & trying diets	Positive	Significant
Social media & fast food intake	Positive	Significant
Social media & product purchase	Positive	Significant
Social media & sleep	Negative	Significant

The correlation analysis confirms that social media acts as a reinforcing system influencing multiple behaviours simultaneously. The positive relationship with unhealthy eating and purchasing behaviour highlights the commercial impact of social media. The negative

correlation with sleep duration indicates broader lifestyle disruption, emphasizing that the effects extend beyond diet to overall well-being.

Table 7
Correlation - Body Image and Social Media

Variables	Correlation	Significance
Appearance comparison & dissatisfaction	Strong positive	Significant
Feeling judged & social media usage	Positive	Significant
Fewer likes → dissatisfaction	Strong positive	Significant

The strong correlations indicate that body image perception is deeply intertwined with social media engagement. The reliance on external validation (likes, comments) reinforces self-worth based on appearance, leading to dissatisfaction. These findings support the social comparison theory, where individuals evaluate themselves against others, often resulting in negative psychological outcomes.

Results

The findings of the study reveal significant patterns in social media usage and its association with dietary behaviour, lifestyle modifications, and body image perception. Among the participants, Instagram (90%) and YouTube (88%) were the most widely used platforms, followed by Facebook. This indicates the dominance of visually driven platforms in shaping user engagement and behaviour.

A key finding of the study is the association between the duration of social media usage and behavioural outcomes. Participants who reported using social media for more than three hours per day demonstrated significantly higher tendencies toward unhealthy dietary practices. These individuals were more likely to consume fast food, try diets promoted by influencers, and purchase products endorsed on social media. This suggests that increased exposure to online content may influence impulsive decision-making related to food consumption.

Furthermore, body image perception emerged as a critical factor influencing behaviour. Participants with negative body image were significantly more likely to engage in appearance comparison and report dissatisfaction with their physical appearance. These individuals were also more influenced by social media content, particularly in relation to diet trends and fitness-related behaviours. The findings indicate that negative body image may act as a mediating factor between social media usage and behavioural outcomes.

The study also highlights the impact of social media on lifestyle patterns. Excessive usage was associated with reduced sleep duration and increased screen time during late-night hours. Participants who spent more time on social media reported feeling fatigued and experiencing disruptions in their sleep cycles. Additionally, exposure to content related to smoking and alcohol consumption was found to influence participants' perceptions and behaviours, particularly among male participants.

Overall, the results demonstrate a clear relationship between social media usage and multiple aspects of health and well-being, emphasizing the need for a balanced approach to digital engagement.

Discussion

The findings of the present study reinforce the growing evidence that social media plays a significant role in shaping dietary behaviour, lifestyle patterns, and body image perception. The high prevalence of Instagram and YouTube usage among participants highlights the influence of visually oriented platforms, which prioritize aesthetic content and user engagement. These platforms often promote idealized lifestyles, which may not reflect reality, thereby influencing users' perceptions and behaviours.

One of the most notable findings is the influence of social media on dietary behaviour. The tendency of participants to adopt influencer-promoted diets and increase fast food consumption aligns with previous research indicating that exposure to food-related content can trigger cravings and impulsive eating behaviours (Filippone et al., 2022). The persuasive nature of influencer marketing, combined with the visual

appeal of food content, contributes to the normalization of unhealthy dietary practices.

The study also underscores the impact of social media on body image perception. Consistent with earlier studies, individuals who engage in frequent comparison with others on social media are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). The pressure to conform to unrealistic beauty standards can lead to negative self-perception and reduced self-esteem. The role of validation metrics, such as likes and comments, further exacerbates these effects by reinforcing appearance-based evaluation.

In terms of lifestyle patterns, the association between excessive social media usage and poor sleep quality is particularly concerning. The findings align with existing literature suggesting that prolonged screen time, especially before bedtime, disrupts sleep patterns and affects overall health (Perez et al., 2021). Additionally, the normalization of smoking and alcohol-related content on social media raises concerns about its influence on behavioural choices, particularly among younger users.

While the study provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causality, and the use of self-reported data may introduce bias. Nevertheless, the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between social media and health-related behaviours.

II. CONCLUSION

The present study highlights the pervasive influence of social media on dietary behaviour, lifestyle patterns, and body image perception among adults aged 20–40 years. The findings indicate that increased social media usage is associated with unhealthy eating habits, disrupted sleep patterns, and negative body image perception. Individuals with pre-existing body dissatisfaction are particularly vulnerable to these effects, as they are more likely to engage in comparison and adopt harmful behaviours.

The study underscores the need for targeted interventions aimed at promoting digital literacy and encouraging mindful social media

usage. Educational initiatives should focus on helping individuals critically evaluate online content and develop healthier relationships with social media. Additionally, policymakers and platform developers should consider implementing measures to regulate misleading content and promote responsible digital practices.

Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to explore causal relationships and examine the long-term impact of social media on physical and mental health. By addressing these challenges, it is possible to harness the positive potential of social media while minimizing its negative consequences on individual well-being.

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