

**THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA
ENGAGEMENT, BODY IMAGE CONCERN AND
EATING BEHAVIOUR AMONG UNDERGRADUATE
HEALTH SCIENCE STUDENTS IN UNIVERSITI SAINS
MALAYSIA**

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UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

2025

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by

MUNIRA ADLEENA BINTI MOHD ALI

**Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of
Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Health
Science Nutrition (Honour) January 2026**

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled “The Association Between Social Media Engagement, Body Image Concern and Eating Behaviour Among Undergraduate Health Science Student in Universiti Sains Malaysia” is the bona fide record of research work done by Munira Adleena Binti Mohd Ali with matric number: 165110 during the period from March 2025 to February 2026 under my supervision. I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it confirms to acceptable standard of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation to be submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of Bachelor of Health Science Nutrition (honours).

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.....

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigation, except where otherwise stated and duly acknowledge. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at Universiti Sains Malaysia or other institutions. I grant Universiti Sains Malaysia the right to use the dissertation for teaching, research and promotional purposes.

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Munira Adleena Bt Mohd Ali

Date: 8 February 2026

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body image, and eating behaviours among university students, and served as a valuable reference for future research.

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SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

SMEQ	Social Media Engagement Questionnaires
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BSIQ-SF	Body Self Image Questionnaire- Shortform
EAT-26	Eating Attitudes Test-26

ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of social media has influenced body image and eating habits among university students. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between eating habits, body image concerns, and social media use among undergraduate health science students at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Kubang Kerian. Simple random sampling was used in a cross-sectional quantitative design with 285 students. The Social Media Engagement Questionnaire (SMEQ), Body Self-Image Questionnaire–Short Form (BSIQ-SF) and Eating Attitudes Test-26 (EAT-26) were used to gather data. The findings showed a significant negative correlation between social media engagement and body image concern ($r = -0.309$, $p = 0.001$), and positive correlation between social media engagement and eating behavior ($r = 0.172$, $p = 0.004$). A stronger negative correlation was observed between body image concern and eating behavior ($r = -0.481$, $p = 0.001$). These results emphasize how crucial it is to encourage positive body image and healthy social media use to reduce the risk of unhealthy eating habits among university students.

ABSTRAK

Pertumbuhan pesat media sosial telah mempengaruhi imej tubuh dan tabiat pemakanan pelajar universiti. Kajian ini bertujuan menilai hubungan antara tabiat pemakanan, keseimbangan imej tubuh, dan penggunaan media sosial dalam kalangan pelajar prasiswazah sains kesihatan di Universiti Sains Malaysia, Kubang Kerian. Kajian kuantitatif keratan rentas dijalankan ke atas 285 pelajar menggunakan persampelan rawak mudah. Data dikumpul melalui Soal Selidik Penglibatan Media Sosial (SMEQ), Soal Selidik Imej Kendiri Tubuh Badan–Bentuk Pendek (BSIQ-SF), dan Ujian Sikap Pemakanan-26 (EAT-26). Dapatan menunjukkan korelasi negatif signifikan antara penglibatan media sosial dan keseimbangan imej tubuh ($r = -0.309$, $p = 0.001$), serta positif korelasi antara penglibatan media sosial dan tabiat pemakanan ($r = 0.172$, $p = 0.004$). Hubungan paling kuat diperhatikan antara keseimbangan imej tubuh dan tabiat pemakanan ($r = -0.481$, $p = 0.001$). Dapatan ini menekankan

kepentingan menggalakkan imej tubuh negatif dan penggunaan media sosial secara sihat bagi mengurangkan risiko tabiat pemakanan tidak sihat dalam kalangan pelajar universiti.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

Social media are Internet-based, persistent channels of communication that facilitate interaction among users and derive value primarily from user-generated content, highlighting their role in creating and sharing content within interpersonal networks (Wolfers *et al.*, 2025). Popular social media platforms include Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). In 2020, over 3.6 billion people worldwide were using social media, with rates projected to increase to 4.4 billion by 2025 (Statista, 2021). Adults spend approximately 2.5 hour on social media per day, equating to roughly 15% of their waking life (Kemp, 2020). While social media is accessible and used by most, higher use is reported among women than men (Auxier & Anderson, 2021), and among younger than older generations. A more thorough analysis is required, however, to determine how a person makes social connections, who those connections are and the level of trust between them. On the other hand, eating behaviour, which is defined as the patterns of when, where and how individuals consume food, can significantly impact dietary quality and body weight over time. The relationship between social media and eating behaviour among the university students is complex and multifaceted that shaped by interrelated psychological, social and cultural factors. This study aims to determine the association between social media engagement and disordered eating behaviours among Undergraduate students.

A quantitative cross-sectional study will be conducted among university students. Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have become a big part of daily life, especially for young people. A systematic review found consistent evidence that visually driven social media, especially when focused on appearance and comparison, is linked with self-objectification and

body image concerns, which are key factors in negative self-image and dissatisfaction among young people (Sarda *et al.*, 2025).

1.2 Problem Statement

The use of social media has become deeply integrated into the daily lives of university students. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and Facebook frequently on a daily basis which shows its importance to their lives (Subramaniam, 2014). According to the latest statistics, social media usage in Malaysia has continued to rise significantly in 2024, with approximately representing 83.1% of the total population, actively maintaining a social media presence. This marks a 20% increase compared to the previous year. Despite this surge in users, the average daily time spent on social media has remained relatively stable at 2 hours and 48 minutes—only one minute longer than the previous year—indicating a consistent pattern of social media interaction among Malaysians (Howe, Sue, 2024). Notably, a gender-based analysis shows that 55.7% of social media users in Malaysia are male, suggesting a slightly higher level of engagement among men compared to women (Howe, Sue, 2024). In Malaysia, social media use is now highly pervasive, with a dominant demographic at the range aged 13-34 accounting for around 72% of users with social media content. Social media use in Malaysia appears to have grown by roughly 20% percentage points from 2015 to 2025 in terms of populations penetration, latest with approximately 85% of the population active on social media platforms. (Kemp,2025)

Research shows that appearance-based influencer content on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube is abundant and has been linked to negative outcomes for body image, especially when idealized appearance standards are emphasized (Tiggermann, 2025). This includes fitness and health-related content that often portrays unrealistic body ideals. This constant exposure idealized social media content could lead to negative self-comparisons, where among students where they evaluate their own appearance against the often-unattainable standards they see online. Over time, this may result in body dissatisfaction and an increase in body image concern— a psychological construct referring to persistent preoccupation with perceived flaws in physical appearance. This can lead the individuals to be overly focus on their physical appearance and often experience feelings of inadequacy or

low self-worth. These feelings are not just limited to aesthetics but can affect a person's emotional health, self-esteem, and day-to-day decision-making.

Body image concern has been shown to significantly predict various disordered eating behaviours such as binge eating, emotional eating, and cognitive restraint mostly in female undergraduate populations (He *et al.*, 2025). Recent studies by Zulkifli *et al.* (2023), emphasize that body dissatisfaction remains a critical issue, primarily increase awareness and exposure to body shaming within their social and academic circles. These behaviours are particularly dangerous during young adulthood, a stage where students are managing multiple stressors including academic performance, social acceptance, and personal identity development. The pressure to maintain a "socially desirable" appearance may push some students toward unhealthy eating habits to alter or maintain body shape, influenced by what is presented as ideal on social media (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016).

Despite the growing awareness of these issues, much of the current research tends to examine social media use, body image, and eating behaviours separately. Eating behaviour is a key factor in both the development and diagnosis of eating disorders, as it often involves patterns like emotional eating, restrictive food intake, and episodes of losing control when eating. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 70 million people globally are affected by eating disorders. Based on recent research by Chin *et al.*, (2020) found that approximately 20.3% of Malaysia university students exhibited signs of disorders eating, with prevalence majority among females compared to males. There is limited while existing research often examines these factors in isolation, limited work has explored their interrelationship within Malaysian or Southeast Asian undergraduate populations. Understanding how these elements are connected is important for identifying at-risk individuals and for designing effective campus-based programs aimed at promoting mental health, healthy eating practices, and responsible social media use.

This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the association between social media engagement, body image concern, and eating behaviour among undergraduate students. The findings could offer valuable insights for educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers in developing interventions that promote healthier self-perceptions and lifestyle habits among young adults

1.3 Research Questions

1. What is the level of social media engagement among undergraduate health science students at USMKK?
2. What is the correlation between social media engagement, body image concern and eating behaviour among undergraduate Health Science students at USMKK?

1.4 Research Hypothesis

Null hypothesis (H_0): There is no significant difference between social media engagement, body image concern and eating behaviour among undergraduate health science students in USMKK

Alternative Hypothesis (H_A): There is a significant difference between social media engagement, body image concern and eating behaviour among undergraduate health science students in USMKK.

1.5 Research Objectives

General Objectives

1. To investigate the association between social media engagement, body image concern and eating behaviour among undergraduate Health Science students at USM Health Campus, Kelantan (USMKK).

Specific Objectives

1. To determine the level of social media engagement, among undergraduate Health Science students at USMKK.
2. To determine the correlation between social media engagement, body image concern and eating behaviour among undergraduate Health Science students at USMKK.

1.6 Significant of Study

Social media engagement has become a dominant part of daily life for young adults especially university students, with platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Facebook. These platforms increasingly influence how users perceive body image and eating behaviour. Related research shown that exposure to highly visual and appearance-focused social media content is positively associated with heightened self-objectification and body image concerns. Moreover, it is also linked to disordered eating behaviours and increases the risks of developing eating disorders. (Sarda *et al.*, 2025).

From an academic and research perspective, this study contributes to the existing body literature by addressing the limited local data in interrelationship between social media use, body image and eating behaviour. Evidence suggests that body image dissatisfaction and unhealthy eating attitudes can negatively impact psychological well-being and academic functioning. Therefore, an early identification and intervention design is essential for students support services. (Rosli & Tsuey, 2024)

Practically, the results of this study may inform the development of targeted interventions that is suitable such as media literacy programs, and campus based mental health initiatives. Media literacy interventions produce significant positive effects on body image concerns, eating concerns and reducing internalisation of these ideals among youth. (Zuair & Sopory, 2020). Understanding the negative pattern of social media towards body image and eating behaviour can guide universities and policy makers in designing evidence-based strategies to promote healthier media engagement and positive self-perception among student.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In the digital era, social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have become integral to the daily lives of young adults, particularly undergraduate students. These platforms serve not only as tools for communication and entertainment but also as influential mediums that shape perceptions of body image and influence eating behaviours.

Research indicates a significant association between social media engagement and body image concerns among university students. A study conducted at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) found that 57.5% of female undergraduate students experienced high social media pressure affecting their body image. Furthermore, 35.3% of the respondents exhibited at-risk eating attitudes, with a significant correlation identified between social media pressure and eating attitudes ($p < 0.001$, $r = 0.486$) (Juraidi & Rostam., 2022). Similarly, a study in Pakistan involving 500 university students revealed a significant negative relationship between social media usage and body image dissatisfaction. Male students reported higher social media usage and greater body image dissatisfaction compared to female students. (Tufail, Muhammad Waseem *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, the type of content, rather than the duration of social media use, has been identified as a more significant factor affecting body image and disordered eating behaviours.

Exposure to weight loss content was associated with lower body appreciation and more frequent binge eating, whereas body positivity content did not have protective effects. In Malaysia, a cross-sectional study among undergraduate students in Kuala Lumpur was found that 13.9% were at risk of eating disorders based on EAT-26 screening, indicating a notable prevalence of disordered eating among this population (Chin *et al.*, 2020).

These findings show that social media use, body image issues, and eating habits are all connected in a complicated way for undergraduate students. Given the integral role of social media shaping self-perceptions and lifestyle behaviours, it is essential to investigate how social media engagement relates to body image concerns and eating patterns among university students. By understanding this better, we can create useful programs or support systems to help students build a healthier body image and maintain better eating habits.

2.2 Factors Influencing Social Media Engagement, Body Image Concern and Eating Behaviour

1. Social Comparison

The increasing global use of social media has prompted research into the consequences of social media use on people's body image (McCabe *et al.*, 2023). Idealized appearance-focused content can foster the internalization of appearance ideals, self-objectification and lead to unfavourable upwards appearance comparisons (Vandenbosch *et al.*, 2022). A number of studies have similarly suggested that photo-based social media (e.g., Instagram) may particularly promote appearance comparison processes, which can in turn result in greater body dissatisfaction. Consistent with this, Instagram users have shown more appearance comparisons and body dissatisfaction than users of a non-visual platform (i.e. Twitter) (Engeln *et al.*, 2020).

Moreover, a recent review of experimental studies (Fioravanti *et al.*, 2022) showed that viewing idealized photos on social media leads to increased body dissatisfaction among young people and supported the role of appearance comparison as underlying these effects. A recent scoping review (Rodgers *et al.*, 2021) investigated the types of social media content which can help to support positive body image and showed that both images that do not contain individuals and images that portray appearances that diverge from appearance ideals were less detrimental to body image outcomes. Thus, the direction of comparison is important for understanding the effects of appearance comparison on body image. Idealized social media images can elicit upward

appearance comparison and body dissatisfaction (Fardouly *et al.*, 2017), whereas online comparisons with more realistic images depicting less thin and less attractive women can lead to greater body esteem and satisfaction (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020).

Moreover, study by (Fardouly *et al.*, 2015) explores the same social media platform which is Facebook, on young women's body image concerns and mood. The authors conducted an experimental study where participants were exposed either to Facebook, a fashion magazine, website, or an appearance-neutral control website. Results indicated that exposure to Facebook led to greater appearance based social comparisons, which in turn was associated with increased body dissatisfaction and more negative mood. The findings highlight that even brief exposure to social media platforms can trigger unfavourable self-evaluations, especially among young women who are prone to social comparison. The study suggests that Facebook use contributes to body image concerns by facilitating appearance comparisons, which may have downstream effects on self-esteem and eating behaviours. This is particularly relevant to students, who are frequent users of social media and are at a developmentally vulnerable stage for internalizing societal beauty standards. Both Tiggemann & Slater (2013) and (Fardouly *et al.*, 2015) emphasize the role of appearance-based content in driving body dissatisfaction, particularly among female adolescents

2. Peer influence via social media platforms

Recent research indicates that social media plays a significant role in shaping adolescents' eating behaviours, with exposure to both healthy and unhealthy dietary content. Adolescents who were exposed to unhealthy food content such as fast food and sugar sweetened beverages, which associated with disordered eating behaviour and body image dissatisfaction. In the other hand, social media also can portray good examples of food content such as increased fruits and vegetables intake. This study highlighted that social media can influences eating through multiple dimensions including attractive food images, peer interactions and influencers recommendations. Therefore, it is shown that social media has dual role in both promoting and potentially harming adolescents' dietary habits (Moffitt & Thomas, 2025).

Furthermore, studied on how media and friends influence how Chinese college students see their bodies. From 407 students, they found that media alone didn't really cause body image problems, but peer influence did. However, both media and peer pressure made students compare themselves to others and believe that being thin is ideal. This can make students feel bad about their own bodies. The study shows that both media and friends can affect how students feel about their looks, so both should be considered when trying to help students with body image issues (Shen *et al.*, 2022).

3. Gender

Nelson and Fleming (2019) explored how gender affects the way people view food-related content on social media, especially on Instagram. In their study, they edited food photos with different levels of details like the number of likes, captions, and icons, then asked participants to rate how healthy the food looked and how likely they were to eat it. The results showed that men tended to see unhealthy foods as healthier compared to women. Also, for women, the more they thought a food was healthy, the more likely they were to eat it—but this wasn't true for men. This shows that gender can influence how people are affected by food posts on social media (Nelson & Fleming, 2019). In addition, another research suggests that social media may influence teenagers' dissatisfaction with their bodies and the impact of adopting ideal body standards.

The study involving over 1,100 teens by (Vuong *et al.*, 2021) found that the teens with higher usage of image-oriented apps like Instagram and Snapchat was most likely to feel unhappy with their body image. This effect was stronger for teens who strongly believed in appearance ideals—thinness for girls and muscularity for boys. The study highlights the importance of creating gender-specific programs to help reduce the negative impact of social media on how teens view their bodies (Vuong *et al.*, 2021).

2.3 The Impact of Social Media Engagement, Body Image Concern and Eating Behaviour

1. Eating Disorder

Dane and Bhatia (2023) reviewed 50 studies from 17 different countries to understand how social media affects body image and eating disorders in individuals aged 10 to 24. The results showed that using appearance-focused platforms like Instagram and

TikTok, especially those promoting thin or fit body ideals, often leads to higher body dissatisfaction and unhealthy eating behaviours. Factors such as comparing oneself to others, adopting unrealistic body standards, and viewing oneself through an outside perspective were key reasons behind this effect. The study also found that people with higher BMI, females, and those already struggling with body image issues were more at risk, while those with strong media literacy and a positive view of their bodies were more protected. The authors stressed the importance of creating specific strategies to reduce these risks and support healthier social media use among young people (Dane and Bhatia, 2023). Other findings found that using social media can strongly influence people's eating habits, often leading to unhealthy behaviours like extreme dieting, binge eating, and unsafe weight control practices. This happens because individuals tend to compare themselves to the ideal body images shown on social media, which can cause them to accept unrealistic beauty standards. These comparisons can make people feel dissatisfied with their bodies, which increases the chance of developing unhealthy eating behaviours. Recent research demonstrates that higher online exposure comparisons are significantly associated with greater body image concerns and eating disorder symptoms. This evidence underscores the importance of implementing interventions programs that foster healthier social media use to reduce negative effects on body image and eating behaviours among youth. (Bonfanti *et al.*, 2024).

2. Mental Health Issues

Teenagers' usage of social media may be harmful to their mental health, and experts are starting to look at the mechanisms that underlie this connection, such as elevated risks for psychological stress, anxiety, and depression, all of which frequently coexist with or exacerbate eating disorders. Particularly for girls who are prone to social comparison, exposure to idealized and altered body photos on sites such as Instagram and TikTok increases body dissatisfaction. Further harming mental health is exposure to pro-eating disorder information, such as posts that support anorexia, which heightens negative body image and the desire for thinness. In order to address the complicated association between social media use, body image issues, and mental health challenges in teenagers, these findings highlight the necessity of initiatives such as media literacy education, body positivity advocacy, and regulation of harmful online content (Mazzeo *et al.*, 2024).

Rounsefell *et al.*, (2023) conducted a systematic review that examined the connections between eating habits, social media use, and adolescent mental health (including problems like low self-esteem, stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness), as well as body image dissatisfaction. According to the analysis, which examined 21 quantitative research released between 2019 and 2023, excessive social media use is significantly positively correlated with higher levels of anxiety, sadness, body dissatisfaction, and signs of disordered eating. The findings stress the importance of policy interventions to reduce the negative effects of social media, especially concerning body image and disordered eating, and call for further research into causal mechanisms and effective prevention strategies (Rounsefell *et al.*, 2023).

3. Low Self Esteem

Negative early experiences, bullying, trauma, social comparison (particularly on social media), and ongoing criticism from others are some of the causes of low self-esteem. It has a strong correlation with mental health conditions such as eating disorders, anxiety, and depression. Colak *et al.*, (2024) study, which was published in *Nutrients*, examined how social media use affected 16–25-year-olds' risk of eating disorders, body image, and self-esteem. The results showed that lower self-esteem was substantially correlated with higher degrees of social media addiction. Negative self-perception and body image dissatisfaction were more common among participants who often used appearance-based comparisons on social media sites like Instagram and TikTok. This association was especially noticeable for female participants, who were more susceptible to disordered eating practices and had lower self-worth as a result of internalizing thin standards and comparing themselves to unrealistic internet portrayals. These findings demonstrate the crucial role that self-esteem plays in the intricate relationship between eating behaviour, body image issues, and social media use, both as a result and a contributing factor (Colak *et al.*, 2024). There are also other studies that show that excessive usage of social media is linked to poor self-esteem, particularly in teenagers who regularly participate in online social comparison or receive unfavourable comments. The review emphasizes how unpleasant interactions and unrealistic social media portrayals are more likely to impact teenagers with poor self-esteem, thus

harming their sense of self-worth and general wellbeing (Valkenburg, Meier, & Beyens, 2021).

2.4 Theories and Framework of Social Media Influence, Body Image Concern and Eating Behaviour

Social Comparison Theory

Leon Festinger, a psychologist, initially put forth the social comparison hypothesis in 1954. It postulated that people are naturally inclined to assess themselves, frequently in relation to others. One people make various types of judgments about themselves, and one of the primary ways they do this is through social comparison or examining the self in relation to others. The two primary forms of social comparison are downward comparison, when we compare ourselves to others who are worse off than us. Such comparison is often centred on making ourselves feel better about our abilities or traits. Thus, which can temporarily increase self-esteem but may also encourage disinterest. An upward comparison, which compares oneself to others one believes to be better off or superior. The former can result in feelings of motivation, while the latter can lead to feelings of inadequacy and decreased self-worth (Cherry, 2023). Social media platforms significantly speed up this process and raise the frequency and severity of upward comparisons by constantly exposing users to highly edited and idealized representations of other people's lives, bodies, and accomplishments.

Particularly for teenagers and young adults who are more susceptible to peer pressure and cultural beauty standards, this increased exposure frequently has detrimental effects like increased body dissatisfaction, decreased self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and unhealthy eating habits (Cherry, 2023). The impact of social comparison is when comparing ourselves to others can have both positive and negative effects, depending on the type of comparison whether upward or downward. For instance, if you assess your basketball skills by comparing yourself to a friend who plays on a school team, this is an example of upward social comparison. Although you might initially feel discouraged by the skill gap, it can also motivate you to practice and improve (Cherry, 2023). Conversely, comparing yourself to a friend who struggles with basketball is a

downward social comparison, which can increase your confidence by making your own abilities seem stronger in comparison (Cherry, 2023).

Social media can skew users' views and worsen the detrimental impacts of social comparison since it makes it difficult to distinguish between reality and idealization. This highlights the significance of awareness and treatments to lessen these effects on eating habits and mental health. In response, as people try to match their looks to the social media ideals, such poor body image is associated with harmful eating behaviours, such as disordered eating patterns and restrictive diets (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). As a result, social media served as a potent medium that exacerbates social comparison processes, raising the risk of mental health issues and poor eating patterns in teenagers and young adults.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Conceptual Framework

