

**THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOOD TRENDS ON FOOD CHOICES
AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT THE SCHOOL OF HEALTH
SCIENCES, UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA HEALTH CAMPUS**

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SCHOOL OF HEALTH SCIENCES

UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

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by

NURUL JAZMINA BINTI JAMARI

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor in Nutrition (Honours)

January 2026

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled “THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOOD TRENDS ON FOOD CHOICES AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT THE SCHOOL OF HEALTH SCIENCES, UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA HEALTH CAMPUS” is the bona fide record of research work done by Ms. “NURUL JAZMINA BINTI JAMARI” during the period from March 2025 to January 2026 under my supervision. I have read this dissertation, and in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation to be submitted in partial fulfillment for the degree of Bachelor in Nutrition (Honours).

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated and duly acknowledged. 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.

..

Nurul Jazmina Binti Jamari

Date: 8th January 2026

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LIST OF SYMBOLS

n	Sample size
Z	Confident levels
σ	Population standard deviation
N	Size of the total population
Δ	Absolute error or precision
α	Level of statistical significant
f	Effect size
$1 - \beta$	Power of study
$\%$	Percentage

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

FCQ	Food Choice Questionnaire
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
IQR	Interquartile Range
PBC	Perceived Behavioral Control
PPSG	School of Dental Sciences
PPSK	School of Health Sciences
PPSP	School of Medical Sciences
Q1	Quartile 1
SCT	Social Cognitive Theory
SESMEB	The Scale of Effects of Social Media on Eating Behavioral
SMEQ	Social Media Engagement Questionnaire
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
TPB	Theory of Planned Behaviour
URL	Uniform Resource Locator

USM Universiti Sains Malaysia

USMKK Universiti Sains Malaysia Kubang Kerian

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**PENGARUH TREND MAKANAN MEDIA SOSIAL TERHADAP PILIHAN
MAKANAN DALAM KALANGAN PELAJAR SARJANA MUDA DI SEKOLAH
SAINS KESIHATAN, KAMPUS KESIHATAN UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA**

ABSTRAK

Media sosial secara mendalam membentuk semula persepsi makanan dalam kalangan pelajar universiti, memerlukan penyiasatan kuantitatif kritikal terhadap pengaruhnya terhadap 351 pelajar sarjana muda sains kesihatan di Malaysia yang dijangka mengekalkan celik kesihatan yang lebih tinggi. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengukur pendedahan dan kesan trend makanan media sosial terhadap pilihan makanan dan untuk mengenal pasti atribut pilihan makanan yang terjejas, menggunakan reka bentuk keratan rentas dengan ujian statistik untuk membandingkan kumpulan pengaruh. Keputusan menentukan bahawa 48.7% daripada sampel menunjukkan Penglibatan Sederhana dengan kandungan berkaitan makanan. Perbezaan ketara secara statistik didapati dalam lapan ciri pilihan makanan merentas kumpulan pengaruh, di mana kumpulan Pengaruh Tinggi lebih menghargai faktor ini, manakala Harga kekal tinggi secara konsisten. Yang penting, apabila menentukan kedudukan faktor yang berpengaruh, Deria ialah ciri Kepentingan Tertinggi, dengan ketara mengatasi pembolehubah tertumpu kesihatan seperti Kesihatan dan Kemudahan. Pengutamaan faktor hedonik ini memerlukan program promosi kesihatan yang disasarkan untuk meningkatkan literasi media digital pelajar sains kesihatan.

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ABSTRACT

Social media profoundly reshapes food perceptions among university students, necessitating a critical quantitative investigation into its influence on 351 undergraduate health science students in Malaysia who are expected to maintain higher health literacy. The study aimed to quantify the exposure and effect of social media food trends on food choices and to identify the main affected food-choice attributes, utilizing a cross-sectional design with statistical tests to compare influence groups. The results determined that 48.7% of the sample showed Moderate Engagement with food-related content. A statistically significant difference was found in eight food-choice characteristics across influence groups, where the High Influence group valued these factors more, while Price remained consistently high across all groups without significant differences. Crucially, when ranking influential factors, Sensory Appeal was the characteristic of Highest Importance, significantly outweighing health-focused variables such as Health and Convenience. This high prioritization of hedonic factors over health-based ones necessitates targeted health promotion programs to improve the digital media literacy and health-wise decision-making of health science students.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of study

In recent years, the widespread proliferation of social media has fundamentally reshaped various facets of modern life, notably impacting dietary behaviors and food attitudes, particularly among youth and university students (Ahmad & Bruno, 2021; Sadaf *et al.*, 2023; Salleh *et al.*, 2021). Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have expanded well beyond their initial functions as simple channels of communication. They now serve as influential online forums through which food trends are rapidly disseminated, directly influencing users' food perceptions and consumption patterns (Sadaf *et al.*, 2023; Salleh *et al.*, 2021; Wan Mahmood & Ahmad Rosli, 2020). This study aims to quantify the significant influence of these social media-driven food trends on the food attitudes of Universiti Sains Malaysia's undergraduate students in the School of Health Sciences in Kubang Kerian.

Social media, defined as internet-based applications that facilitate the creation and exchange of user-generated content, interactive communication, and community building (Salleh *et al.*, 2021), has emerged as a strong influencer of food consumption behavior. Individuals are continuously exposed to a curated continuum of food-related information, which directly shapes their food consumption attitudes and behaviors. Furthermore, food perception encompasses a complex interplay between sensory impressions, individual attitudes, and beliefs regarding food (Wan Mahmood & Ahmad Rosli, 2020). This perception is also highly susceptible to external influences, such as media exposure and social interaction, thus positioning social media as a significant influencing factor.

Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates the pivotal contribution of social media to the food choices of university students. For instance, a study in Lahore found that a striking 93.3% of undergraduate students identified social media as an important influence on their food selection, with Instagram and YouTube being the most pivotal platforms (Sadaf *et al.*, 2023). Similarly, research involving Malaysian university students demonstrated the extensive influence of YouTube on trendy food products and, consequently, consumer demand, clearly illustrating the impact of visual cues on consumer behavior (Salleh *et al.*, 2021). The influence of social media on food perception is evidently present in the Malaysian context.

Additional empirical evidence further establishes this proven relationship. Research exploring the effect of food images on Instagram discovered a positive correlation between the frequency of exposure to food images and increased sensitivity to sweetness among undergraduate students (Wan Mahmood & Ahmad Rosli, 2020). This suggests that visual cues are indeed capable of affecting taste experiences and can, therefore, contribute to leading individuals towards overeating behavior. Moreover, increased exposure to and influence of social media influencers have been substantially linked with food consumption behaviors. It was also discovered that students' perceived social norms surrounding these influencers are highly predictive of their food consumption behavior (Ahmad & Bruno, 2021).

Given the pervasive and well-established impact of social media on food attitudes, there is a clear need to investigate this phenomenon specifically among Universiti Sains Malaysia, Kubang Kerian students. By discussing the impact of social media food trends on the nutritional knowledge

of the students in this research, this study can offer relevant information that can be utilized to inform the design of targeted nutrition interventions and the promotion of healthier diets among such students in this specific context.

1.2 Problem Statement

The widespread penetration of social media in daily life significantly influences most facets of human behavior, influencing food attitudes and eating habits among university students to a significant level. Social networking sites like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are active, two-way media that disseminate food trends with speed that are likely to have an immediate effect on people's food perceptions and choices (Umennuihe *et al.*, 2024). This trend is particularly characteristic of Malaysia, with 92.7% of the Malaysian populace actively using the internet in 2022, a 4.0% increase from 2020, and social media as the most used online platform among youths in Malaysia (Suruhanjaya Komunikasi dan Multimedia Malaysia & Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2022). Such mass usage makes undergraduate students highly susceptible to such digital influences. The social media food environment is likely to be biased towards unhealthy food as compared to healthy food, and algorithmic platforms have the capacity to create "filter bubbles," which may end up exposing individuals to content highly aligned with prevailing tastes, such as unhealthy food (Qin *et al.*, 2024). Such reinforcement is concerning in terms of its influence on food perceptions.

Earlier research has produced complex and sometimes contradictory evidence of social media's impacts on food habits. For instance, a users' perceptions study concluded that excessive posting of food photos on social media was undesirable (Pham *et al.*, 2018). Millennials and Baby Boomers represent a self-other difference in social media usage perceptions. More specifically, while some research indicates that the eating behavior of undergraduate students has a significant influence through social media consumption, a recent study evaluating the impact of social media consumption on eating behavior and food preference among undergraduate students in Nigeria found that the level of social media consumption was not significantly associated with students' eating behavior and food choice in that specific context (Umennuihe *et al.*, 2024). In turn, a study assessing the impact of social media exposure to food content on food norm perceptions revealed that exposure to unhealthy food content was not significantly associated with perceived unhealthy food norms, but exposure to unhealthy food content (particularly user-generated content) had a significant negative association with perceived healthy food norms (Qin *et al.*, 2024). This implies an intricate and not always direct relationship between social media exposure to food material and food attitude. Social media also employs celebrities and influencers to promote products on behalf of the food and beverage industry, shaping food choices (Umennuihe *et al.*, 2024).

Nevertheless, despite this growing literature that has laid out broad correlations and heterogeneous findings between social media consumption and food behavior, there is still a wide research void. Currently, there is limited empirical evidence for the contextual influence of food

trends on social media on the food attitudes of the USM Kubang Kerian campus undergraduate students in the School of Health Sciences.

. While earlier studies make overall comments regarding the role of social media in food perception and consumption, and more current studies offer contradictory findings regarding immediate correlations, neither attempts to quantify the exact degree to which such trends influence such advanced food attitudes as perceptions of healthiness, perceptions of taste, and international popularity among such a specific Malaysian university culture. This place-based and targeted data is essential for the construction of appropriate and useful interventions for this population, particularly in light of mixed findings elsewhere.

Therefore, the aim of this quantitative research is to quantify the effects of social media food trends on undergraduate students in the School of Health Sciences at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Kubang Kerian, in relation to their food attitudes. By precisely estimating the nature and scope of such influence, this study aims to provide a significant contribution to the development of more targeted nutritional interventions and effective health promotion campaigns on social media in the future, finally supporting the promotion of healthier food consumption patterns among university students in this specific context.

1.3 Study rationale

Social media has been a ubiquitous part of the everyday life of university students as the most popular platform for food sharing and trend propagation, playing a central part in their food attitude and consumption. Though its ubiquitous influence is well documented, particularly in young adults in a pivotal life phase, the exact place of such food material on the internet is complex and not yet exactly defined.

Earlier research paints a mixed and sometimes conflicting image of the effect of social media on food consumption. For instance, research indicates overposting of food images as intrusive, but perceived healthy food norms are negatively affected by user-generated content on the connection between exposure to unhealthy material (Pham *et al.*, 2019; Qin *et al.*, 2025). A few studies, for example, on Nigerian university students, did not find any measurable direct relationship between social media consumption and food decision-making, invalidating sweeping assumptions of general deep effects (Umennuihe *et al.*, 2024). These complementary findings highlight the contextuality of social media's effects on food and eating, underscoring an overarching knowledge gap.

Despite the extensive literature, there is a large gap in research as much as the specific, context-specific impact of social media diet trends on Malaysian university students' food attitudes. There have also been fewer investigations into interdependence between popular diet trends via social media and nutritional awareness within a Malaysian health-science-oriented university population like Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) Kubang Kerian. This specific student

demographic, when they are learning health sciences, is particularly vulnerable to web food trends, and knowledge about their exposure will shed light upon a fundamental chasm between theoretical diet and food belief or practice.

Consequently, this research is most suitably positioned to fill this context-specific knowledge gap by critically exploring the ubiquitous impact of social media on USM Kubang Kerian undergraduate students' food attitudes. The findings will have direct practical relevance, providing critical evidence-based recommendations to guide more efficient, context-specific health promotion programs, increase digital competence, and facilitate healthier food settings for this specific target audience in an increasingly virtualized world.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What is the level of exposure to food-related content on social media among Universiti Sains Malaysia Health Campus undergraduate students in the School of Health Sciences?
2. How does exposure to food-related content on social media influence the food choices of Universiti Sains Malaysia Health Campus undergraduate students in the School of Health Sciences?
3. What types of food characteristics (e.g., health claims, mood, convenience, and sensory appeal) portrayed on social media are perceived to influence the food choices of

Universiti Sains Malaysia Health Campus undergraduate students in the School of Health Sciences?

1.5 Research Hypothesis

1.5.1 Null Hypothesis

H_o = There is no significant association between exposure to food-related content on social media and food choices of Universiti Sains Malaysia Health Campus undergraduate students in the School of Health Sciences.

1.5.2 Alternative Hypothesis

H_a = There is a significant association between exposure to food-related content on social media and food choices of Universiti Sains Malaysia Health Campus undergraduate students in the School of Health Sciences.

1.6 Study Objective

1.6.1 General Objective

To investigate the influence of social media food trends on the food choices of Universiti Sains Malaysia Health Campus undergraduate students in the School of Health Sciences.

1.6.2 Specific Objectives

1. To determine the level of exposure to food-related content on social media among Universiti Sains Malaysia Health Campus undergraduate students in the School of Health Sciences.
2. To examine the influence of food-related content on social media on the food choices of Universiti Sains Malaysia Health Campus undergraduate students in the School of Health Sciences.
3. To identify the types of food characteristics portrayed on social media (e.g., health claims, mood, convenience, and sensory appeal) that are perceived to influence the food choices of Universiti Sains Malaysia Health Campus undergraduate students in the School of Health Sciences.

1.7 Significance of study

The research will be a valuable contribution to theoretical literature at the nexus of nutrition science and new media. By using statistical analysis of social media food trend influence on Universiti Sains Malaysia, Kubang Kerian undergraduates, the research makes initial empirical contributions in a small, previously untested Malaysian setting. Conceptually, it will broaden and confirm models like Social Cognitive Theory and Theory of Planned Behavior to illustrate precisely how dominant social behavior and social norms on the web might influence food decisions of people, thereby illustrating the contribution of cyberspace as an external stimulus towards behavior nutrition. Alternatively, the results can lead to profitable future research on individuals' mental processes in food choices online.

The application of the findings of this study matters, and multiple primary stakeholders have much to benefit. The health professionals, dietitians, and teachers will benefit from the research and a deeper understanding of the determinants of students' complex food behavior, hence facilitating the development of more efficient and engaging health modules. These resources can equip students with critical digital literacy learning, which has the potential to make them read food messages on the internet with ease, identify misinformation, and utilize web platforms responsibly to communicate healthy diets. Policymakers and public health professionals directly benefit from the results in informing guidelines and campaigns for regulating the impact of digital media on eating. This encompasses designing proper social media intervention tactics, influencing

healthy eating habits, especially among teenagers and youths, and raising awareness for potentially controlling unhealthy food marketing on social media, especially influencer-promoted food types.

Apart from immediate professional application, this study will enable universities to design context-specific interventions like workshops, sensitization schemes, or peer counseling strategies. These activities will enhance students' evidence-based food decision-making knowledge on social media and encourage healthy active eating, creating healthier eating environments offline and online. Finally, by providing concrete results, the study is set to close the gap between digital influences and successful health promotion in a tangible way. It is not merely to generate good scholarship but to generate healthier, more informed generations of students that can manage the sophistication of food culture on the web and contribute positively to public health in the future.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

With the world globalized as it is, social media is an influential factor in our lives, and even more so when food is involved. Viral food challenges, Instagrammable food, and the likes of Instagram and TikTok have, to a great extent, revolutionized our relationship with and attitude towards food. This online social platform not only diversifies our preferred foods but also strongly affects eating behavior and attitudes, as all recent systematic reviews confirm, without exception, the irreversible link between social media and food intentions (Rini *et al.*, 2023). The vast predominance of social media to determine food behavior in our modern digital age cannot be overstated (Dhar & John, 2019).

The aim of the current review is to synthesize critically the literature that investigates the different impacts of social media on food behavior and attitudes. By bringing together the key findings, this chapter will identify key gaps in the literature to date and set the conceptual and theoretical foundation for the current research. While social media overall has pervasive influences on dining, current research in this field suggests the need for further focused examination of the precise mechanisms and diverse settings involved. Earlier studies, for instance, have examined the indirect effects of visual aesthetics, the determining role of cultural contextuality in shaping food innovation-readiness, and complex relations between online food consumption patterns and offline social tradition in various global settings (Jacobs, 2017; Pindado & Barrena, 2020; Leu *et al.*, 2022). Yet, a composite and general appreciation of current trends, especially within a range of

cultural contexts, is still required if specific research gaps are to be put into place. For all these insightful observations, a significant lacuna still exists in an investigation of exactly how global and regional forces are interacting directly with Malaysian undergraduates.

These young adults are strongly engaged with social media and are at a formative stage for their diets. However, the interaction effect of body image and social media food trends on their food consumption is yet to be investigated in this group and setting. Thus, the aim of this study is to investigate quantitatively the influence of social media food trends on Universiti Sains Malaysia Kubang Kerian undergraduate students' food attitudes. Grounded on contextually placed research evidence, this research will contribute to the body of research literature on the ways in which digital media shape food behavior and subsequently inform public health initiatives on healthy and better food perception and choice among Malaysian youth.

2.2 The Rise of Social Media and Food Trends

2.2.1 Defining Social Media's Role in Food

Social media transformed the practice of food engagement for consumers and organizations alike, becoming a primary channel of communication and an influential information source (Henderson *et al.*, 2017). Its extensive coverage extends beyond making available general information to areas such as food risk and safety, where the consumer is more likely to utilize platforms as lead or complementary sources to mass media (Rutsaert *et al.*, 2012; Kuttschreuter

et al., 2014). This suggests that food regulators must establish a robust web of influence for successful information exchange, even with acknowledgment of the "two-edged sword" of social media platforms for communicators, offering general access and possible traps (Henderson *et al.*, 2017; Rutsaert *et al.*, 2012).

Alongside its position as a source of information, social media is pivotal in circulating content-specific food stories and shaping public health debate. Companies employ web pages such as Twitter for promotion and health messages, underscoring the fundamental function of social media in contemporary food culture and its ability to push public awareness and firm behavior (Samoggia *et al.*, 2019). This shift from passive food representation to participatory trend creation is most identifiable on visually focused websites such as Instagram and TikTok. In this instance, the participatory culture creates immediate streams of "food trends," such as viral food items and unique foodscapes (Abell & Biswas, 2022; Nasrudin *et al.*, 2021; Paakki *et al.*, 2018).

Social media's very visual and interactive nature is one of the manners by which it enters food culture and facilitates rapid trend formation. Their highly visual nature requires that they be extremely useful in communicating food concepts, with influencer culture becoming the primary agenda in researching social media's impact on food purchasing behavior (Abell & Biswas, 2022). Research has extensively examined the young adults' exposure to advertisements portraying foods, accentuating the growing demand for open disclosure on sponsored posts (Qutteina *et al.*, 2019). For the grocery retailing industry, social media messaging is predominantly pro-healthy food

attributes, with health, nutrition, and sustainability being overarching promotional categories for European retailers (Samoggia *et al.*, 2019). The use of images in online reviews of products also indicates the important role that visual data has in shaping consumer opinions on food (García-León & Teichert, 2023).

Moreover, social media's interactive features, such as hashtags and shareability features, contribute significantly to real-time food trend virality, having a direct impact on public interest and participation. Studies of phenomena like #foodfestivals on Instagram, for instance, demonstrate their clear-cut contribution to user engagement and contagion velocity of food trends (Celuch, 2021; Gu *et al.*, 2021). This reveals the significance of social media as an impetus for mass acceptance and conversation about food.

In spite of the sensational power and accelerated growth in food consumption and internet communication, food consumption behavior in social media calls for a sophisticated, multifaceted approach (García-León & Teichert, 2023). The amount of food content, the number of food bloggers, and social media platforms' interactional nature all combine to create an environment in which food trends are not only observed but actually influence eating impressions and choices globally (García-León & Teichert, 2023). A more nuanced and contextual message is therefore required in an effort to best grasp the broader function of social media within contemporary food culture, namely for certain segments like Malaysian undergraduates and the interplay between social media and body image in food consumption among them, research areas that remain very much in active need of exploration.

2.2.2 Characteristics of Social Media Food Trends

Food trends on social media have a strong visual identity and visually focused presentation of food content that, in itself, contributes mightily to informing consumer sight and interaction. Visual aesthetics of the social media food images are a major concern, and studies using deep models of learning are used to investigate why images of food are gorgeous (Morinaga *et al.*, 2024). This visual attractiveness is also supported by intentional photographic qualities, i.e., color, composition, and figure-ground contrast, that, in their own manner, play their respective roles in aggregate food appeal delivered by media (Gambetti & Han, 2022). Besides this emphasis on attractiveness, taste perception carries a unique connection with food image popularity. Of particular interest is the fact that online active participation exists in images of healthy and unhealthy foods, capturing the diversity of visual beauty-driven popularity and visual richness-driven popularity (Peng & Jemmott, 2018). Food photography popularity on the internet has placed food photography centrally in today's visual culture, wherein food lovability, made possible by processes of visual framing, has rich influence construction (Yang, 2019). In addition to static beauty, novelty and uniqueness of food, and reproducibility, novelty and uniqueness of food also invoke activity and encourage customers to participate in the trend instead of merely passively viewing.

In addition to sheer visual appeal, social media food trends also work to influence consumers' behavior to a great degree by social norms and deliberate marketing efforts. Socially

endorsed food pictures also influence consuming foods indirectly, exhibiting the major influence of friend and internet recommendations (Hawkins *et al.*, 2021). The new cafe business also demonstrates how marketing on social media, along with product innovation and siting impacts, influences consumers' willingness to purchase, and similarly, it is the case with commercial needs leading to the majority of food fashions (Siregar *et al.*, 2025). Social and communal evidence aspects, mediated via sharings, commentaries, and user content, both contribute toward further enhancing such exposure and influence and inform a usage and adoption feedback loop.

The dense, multi-faceted character of social media food trends is challenging to research to the fullest extent, particularly with the erstwhile undervalued visual aspect in scholarly research (Yang, 2019). Even with the growing use of computer vision and deep learning to quantify food image beauty, as well as popularity (Gambetti & Han, 2022; Morinaga *et al.*, 2024), there is still a multiplicative intersection of consumer desire, modified material, and niche marketing. The power of social media to represent and also influence food perception and behavior, at times through misleading information or purposeful sensory manipulation, is the lens through which the new food face of the internet era is revealed. It is necessary to know what visual appeal of a trend is unique from novelty, availability, and popularity to learn a comprehensive picture of how they are affected by it. Such empathic understanding is essential when learning with specific groups such as Malaysian undergraduates, where food trends on social media carrying over to other consumption behaviors, such as body concerns, is a research gap to be bridged.

2.3 The Influence of Social Media on Food Perceptions

2.3.1 Impact on Perceived Taste and Desirability

The visual and multimedia orientation of social media plays a significant role in creating consumers' pre-consumption expectation of taste and hedonic value from food. Experiencing enticing visuals from food on websites such as TripAdvisor, for example, powerfully draws attention and has a direct effect on dining intention and perceived meal pleasure (Simonetti & Bigne, 2022). This supports the manner in which a positive first visual impression created online overwhelmingly leads to an expectation of a good tasting experience. Beyond social media, the broader context of food perception recognizes the role played by visual indicators of all kinds, from presentation and general appearance of a dish, in constructing expectations of taste (Spence *et al.*, 2015). Indeed, the evidence suggests that visual food attractiveness, from bodily shape to table arrangement, has a broader influence on anticipating taste than has previously been thought, and it extends well beyond online consumption (Spence, 2023).

One dramatic demonstration of this visual effect is the "food porn" phenomenon, where extremely good-looking and elegantly styled pictures of food have been found to increase the desire for specific foods. Consumer longing has been revealed to be an active relational process, and emergent technologies, in particular, excessive online food photosharing, have been revealed to strengthen the desire to consume to "transgressive extremes" (Kozinets *et al.*, 2017). This psychological impact is corroborated by neuroscience evidence, which reports that "food porn" elicits more brain activity even than ordinary pornographic images when responding to food cues

and thus to cue-elicited eating behavior (Versace *et al.*, 2018). This shows a highly intense psycho-physiological link between seeing appealing food pictures and the desire to eat.

Furthermore, watching people eat on social media is a powerful driver of "social proof," which is highly significant in perceived taste and enjoyment. Experiments have found that watching "consummatory images," which are images or videos of people eating, especially rich foods, has greater effects on taste than merely glancing at the food itself (Poor *et al.*, 2013). This social endorsement tends to diminish internal conflict and render rich foods more desirable. The underlying reason for sharing "food porn" by college students has also been studied and discovered to be motivated by social bonding and self-presentation, showing the motivation to produce and satisfy people's food desires through shared images (Abril *et al.*, 2022). Besides comfort foods, visual cues also play an important role in affecting consumer attitude and acceptance of new or novel food items.

Strategic visual communication can also effectively overcome initial resistance, such as food neophobia, by making new foods appear more attractive or less intimidating. For instance, health education about the health benefits or taste promises of new local healthy foods greatly increases their intention to consume them (Manohar *et al.*, 2020). Successful innovation of new foods into the marketplace thus requires a very deep understanding of consumer acceptance and behavior, where careful visual communication will effectively lower consumer resistance to acceptance (Tuorila & Hartmann, 2019). Whereas consumers are "programmed since childhood to enjoy traditional foods," there is a need for proper and strategic use of visual cues and

information to bridge the gap in consumer-novelty acceptance and make the acceptance of novel culinary experiences easier (Tuorila & Hartmann, 2019).

2.3.2 Influence on Perceived Health and Nutrition

Social media is a powerful, occasionally first-order, determinant of what individuals believe about the nutritional quality and healthiness of food, and influences attitudes and causes specific diet fads. This section examines how social media transmits "healthy eating" trends on the one hand, and risks of nutritional misinformation on the other, and quantifies its relative contribution to trendy versus traditional foods' reputations.

Social media is a good popularizer of various other "healthy eating" trends, such as greens or superfoods, by providing a platform for the instant mass spread and significant social impact. Despite its ability to induce the consumption of unhealthy food through targeted campaigns, social media also has tremendous potential in directing children towards healthy-oriented consumption of foods through health promotion campaigns (George & Ravola, 2024). The study determines that social media's interactivity significantly enhances relationship quality within online communities, thereby promoting co-creation of value for healthy consumption promotion (Zhao *et al.*, 2024). This provides an understanding of how the social and interactive nature of social media can lead to food-related health trends. The "social food pleasure" also constructs this, suggesting that social food experiences in digital and offline contexts can create healthy and pleasant food experiences and therefore convey social contexts of healthy eating in cyberspace (Mendini *et al.*, 2018).

Conversely, the widely unregulated quality of social media content also offers a lot of space for the dissemination of false or misconstrued nutritional facts, an experience witnessed with fad diets more often than not. Misinformation is ubiquitous in day-to-day life, especially with scientific communication, and is an issue extremely widespread in nutritional fads because of the nature of scientific data to be oversimplified or fabricated (Tan, 2024). This is consistent with overall issues with mass dissemination of misinformation over social media that threatens the public's ability to recognize credible information (Giomelakis *et al.*, 2024; Moran & Knesl, 2025). Furthermore, brand influence and cognitive bias also drive perceived food healthiness, predisposing such decisions to be cut off from actual nutritional value or even reverse their consumption (Provencher & Jacob, 2016). In contrast to highly filtered health campaigns, the speed and lack of regulation of spread on social media readily promote misinformation about the real health benefits or risks of a specific fad food or diet.

The social media effect also intersects with popular food that is thought to be healthy tending to be the opposite of traditionally consumed foods. As hip foods snowball to humongous popularity via viral marketing, traditional foods, as rich in natural nutrients as they are, would tend to respond in a different manner with customers. It's alleged that the sale of traditional foods by customers, irrespective of their established nutritional content, is predicated greatly on the idea and advertising of such foods, which focuses on the duality of traditional food innovation and traditional foods (Guiné *et al.*, 2021). This means that in the absence of "food porn" images or viral tales traditionally associated with trends, common foods may go unnoticed or lack the quality

to be as "healthy" in the minds of social media-influenced consumers even when they are of greater nutritional value. In addition, with continuously growing consumer demand for heritage and local produce, consumer perception is influenced by numerous factors that are not reconcilable with promotion of new trends on social media (Feldmann & Hamm, 2014). This tends to increase the likelihood of inconsistency where the self-attributed value of trendy food, often underpinned by influencer lifestyles and social media visibility, is not always evident in its intrinsic nutritional value or in advantages over more traditional, less "glamorous" alternatives. This intriguing difference warrants a closer look, particularly among Malaysian undergraduates, in exploring how food intake and perception of health regarding trendy and non-trendy food groups are influenced by social media and whether, in fact, there are aversive body image implications.

2.3.3 Social Influence and Normative Perceptions

Social networking sites are potent social influence agents, strongly shaping the food people consume and building concepts of what normal eating is. This is done by a cascade of interlinked mechanisms that involve the bandwagon effect, peer pressure, and purposeful social networking influencer messaging. It is important to comprehend these processes to the extent possible in order to better understand how various forms of eating behaviors are legitimized and normalized within web communities.

One of the determinants of the usage pattern of social media is the bandwagon effect, through which the popularity of the product or behavior as perceived aids more consumption. Research indicates that hints on the popularity of the brand have a great influence on purchase

intention even from the side of consumers with less positive initial attitudes towards the brand (Magnini *et al.*, 2013). This illustrates the manner in which evidence of mass adoption, readily transmitted via social media, can overcome pervasive resistance and trigger consumer adoption. Furthermore, individuals tend to change their diet in an attempt to fit into observed social norms in their online and offline networks (König *et al.*, 2017). This normalization is two-pronged in that whereas normal healthy diet standards can encourage weight, their embracement and maintenance, the nutritionally enabled normalization of unhealthy eating offers monumental challenges to individuals looking for healthier alternatives. Critically, socially oriented subjective social media norms by social media influencers have been found to be a strong predictor of food selection among university students, once again validating the manner in which felt popularity and identification with others significantly affect the adoption of particular eating habits (Ahmad & Bruno, 2021). Social support on social media thus makes food items appear normal regardless of the nutritional impacts.

In addition to broad trends, social learning and peer influence among online food groups are the most influential promoters of personal food choices. A scoping review of peer influence among young people via social media was inclined to highlight the impact of direct online social interaction upon diet (Chung *et al.*, 2021). This is even weaker than direct suggestions; research has demonstrated that social influence and peer information actually alter liking of novel foods, such as raw oysters or chocolate fondue (Placht, 2020). Individuals within online communities are informed and build their preferences from seeing and copying the attitudes and acceptances of

other individuals. The popularity of such foods in mass form, such as street foods, is a spin-off of social and cultural change, modern lifestyles, and widespread social media promotion, all of which make such food widely accessible and attractive to broad consumers (Karmarkar & Paranjape, 2020).

Social media influencers also play an important role in the shaping and shaping of attitudes and norms towards food through their scripted stories and direct engagement with viewers. Their capacity to influence food consumption attitudes and purchasing power, even sustainable food culture in Indonesia, has therefore been validated through studies, bearing witness to their broader influence on food culture (Fadhila & Adiwijaya, 2025). Similarly, research has evidenced that vicarious experience can get food influencers influencing home-cooking intentions, inspiring individuals towards healthier living through normative lifestyles (Sokolova *et al.*, 2024). As significant as influencer personalities are in directly causing traditional food consumption among young people, their effects usually come with moderation by underlying attitudes (Kristia *et al.*, 2024).

The effects of such personalities never occur without probable negative consequences. Research has established that thin ideals applied in influencer images, even of healthy foods, have negative consequences on healthy consumption of foods among tweens (De Jans *et al.*, 2022). This suggests that some underlying body image message, whether implicit or explicit, may prevail over explicit food advertising. Therefore, while the influencer is empowered to encourage the practice of healthy food, their omnipresence has the universally negative consequence of creating