

# Social media and nutritional habits among nutrition students: A social work perspective

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** According to the research conducted in recent years and after the evolution of social networks, the statistics of obesity and the consumption of fast foods and high-calorie foods have increased significantly. Also, food blogging has become much more widespread and popular in the space of social networks, so we are investigating the impact of social networks on people's nutritional habits.

**Material and Methods:** The purpose of this research is to examine the relationship and impact of social networks on people's nutritional habits. For this research, a 20-question questionnaire was answered by 60 college students and the obtained data was analyzed by SPSS 26.

**Results:** The most social media has been used are Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube, and 22% use social media between 3 and 4 hours a day. More than 58% used ready food less than 2 days a week. But 56% of them reported that social media didn't have a noticeable effect on their informed decision in choosing food.

**Conclusion:** This study showed that the use of social media can be effective in people's lifestyle and food pattern and food intake.

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## INTRODUCTION

Nutritional habits are a pertinent public health challenge, both globally and in Iran [1]. Concerns regarding unhealthy lifestyles and poor nutritional habits among people have been increasing [2]. In the last decade, access to information and news dissemination have undergone significant changes [3]. The internet has modified how people find, communicate, and share information, and its use as the main source of nutrition information has grown rapidly. Additionally, social media has become a popular instrument for sharing knowledge [4, 5].

With the increasing use of social media and bloggers, there is growing concern about their impact on our health, including our nutritional habits. The expansion of social and interactive networks and the significant increase of bloggers have made them popular and influential among people. By presenting

their lifestyles, careers, exercise routines, interests, and eating habits, bloggers can have a great impact on people's habits and lifestyles, including their eating habits [6, 7].

Social media platforms have become a hub for bloggers to showcase their lifestyles, including food choices, meal plans, and dietary preferences, leading to increased exposure to different types of foods and diets, influencing people's eating habits in ways that were not possible before the advent of social media. However, the impact of social media on our eating habits is complex and multifaceted, with both positive and negative effects [8, 9]. On the one hand, social media has the potential to promote healthy eating habits and provide access to valuable information about nutrition and diet. On the other hand, social media can also spread misinformation, promote unhealthy food choices, and encourage disordered eating behaviors in vulnerable

populations [10, 11].

In this research, we investigate the role and effect of social networks in shaping the norms, habits, and nutritional styles of people who follow them, using a structured researcher questionnaire. By analyzing the data gathered through the questionnaire, we aim to provide insights into the impact of social media on people's nutritional habits and identify potential strategies for promoting healthy eating behaviors in the digital age. Overall, this study contributes to a better understanding of the complex relationship between social media and our nutritional habits and offers practical recommendations for improving public health outcomes.

This study answers the following questions:

- Which social media platforms are used by college students, and how frequently are these platforms used?
- What is the health-related reasons that college students use social media?
- What is the relationship between social media use and students' lifestyle behaviors (i.e., dietary habits, and weight)?

### MATERIAL AND METHODS

The purpose of this research is to examine the relationship and impact of social networks on people's nutritional habits. For this research, a 20-question questionnaire was answered by college students and the obtained data was analyzed by SPSS 26.

This is an applied study that was conducted in a descriptive way and at a specific point in time on May 2023 among college students. A 20-question structured researcher questionnaire with demographic and multiple-choice questions and a 5-point Likert scale was used to collect data. The data collected online with Porsline. The validity of the questionnaire was evaluated using expert panels consisting of experts from the Health Information Department.

The statistical population of this research was the students studying in the field of nutrition sciences. All students in Nutrition at Varastegan Institute of Medical Sciences were chosen (350 students), but only 60 of them accepted to take part. The research sample included 60 available students.

The reliability of the questionnaire was determined using Cronbach's alpha. In this way, 20 questionnaires were completed by users and SPSS version 26 software was used to obtain Cronbach's alpha value. Then, with Porsline software and sending its link to people under study, data collection was done. After the students completed the questionnaire, the collected data was again entered

into SPSS for analysis. Descriptive statistics such as mean, percentage were used to analyze statistical data, and bar and pie charts were used to display descriptive data.

### RESULTS

In this study, 78% are women and 22% are men. The most popular social media are Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube, and 22% use social media between 3 and 4 hours a day. More than 59% didn't follow any food blogger, and more than 58% used ready-made food less than 2 days a week, and 54.9% of the participants consumed a small part of their ready-made food as fast food.

More than 34% had a moderate tendency to consume high-fat food, and 37.4% also had a high tendency to consume low-fat and light food. 50.5% have rarely given food or recipes on the Internet and changed their eating habits. More than 31% also reported that social media has affected their interest in cooking to a small extent. But 56% of them reported that social media didn't have a noticeable effect on their informed decision in choosing food (Fig 1- 13).

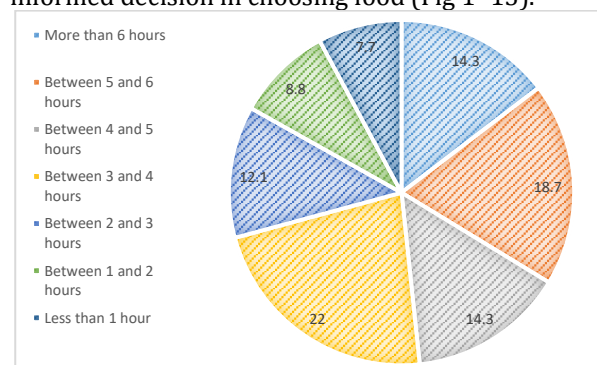


Fig 1: Dispersion of answers to research questions

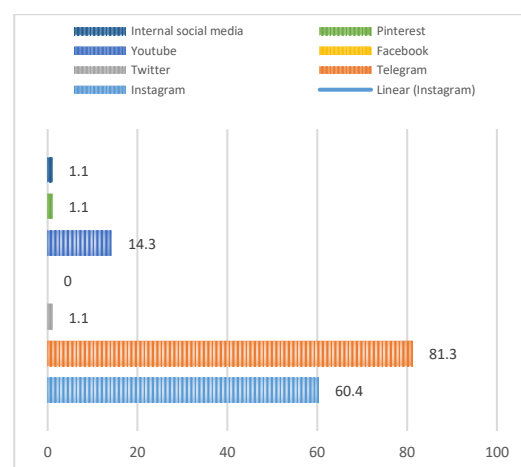
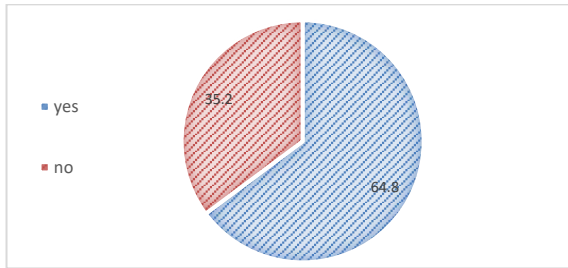
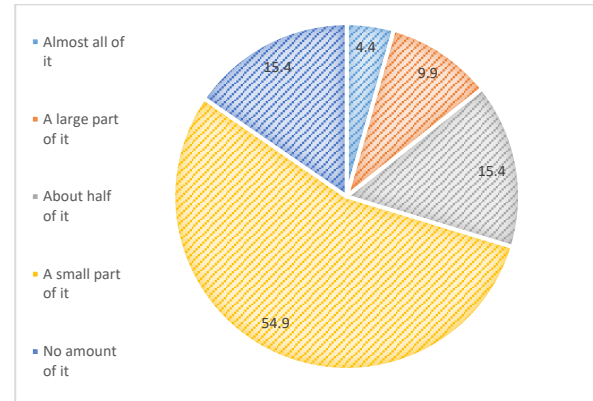


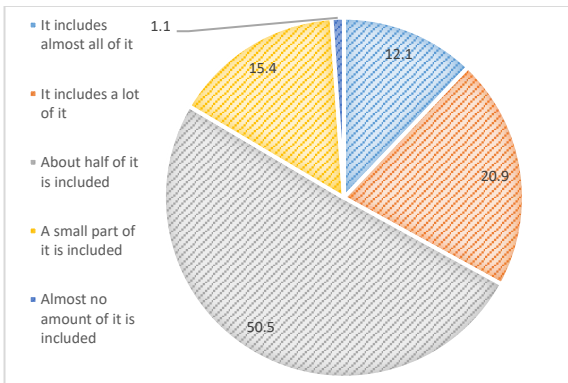
Fig 2: Dispersion of answers to using platform



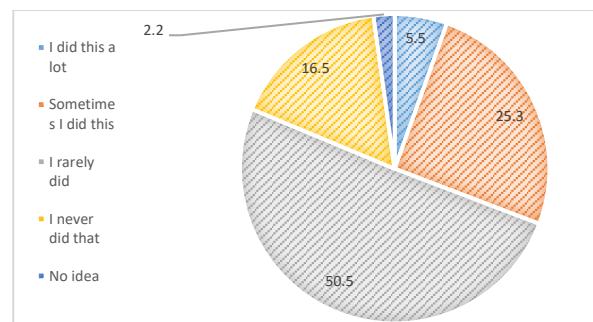
**Fig 3: Dispersion of answers to using during the days**



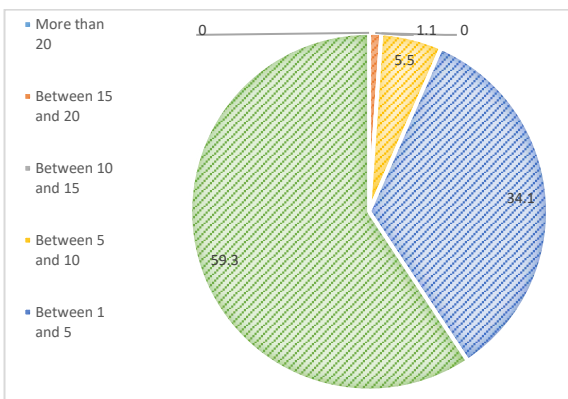
**Fig 7: Dispersion of answers to using fast food**



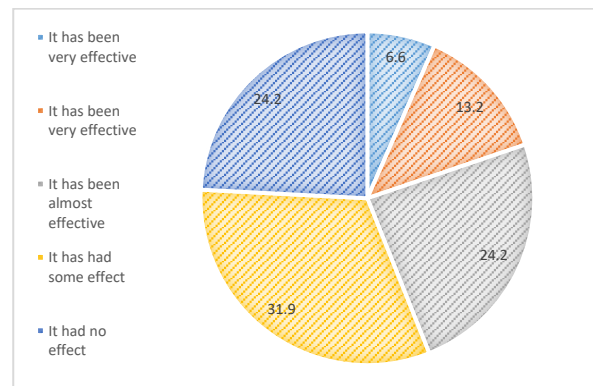
**Fig 4: Dispersion of answers to using contents**



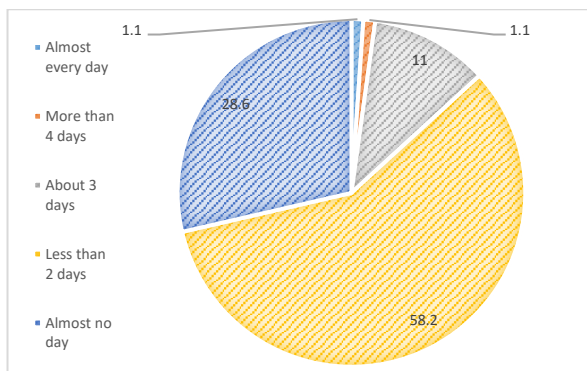
**Fig 8: Dispersion of answers to using food they saw**



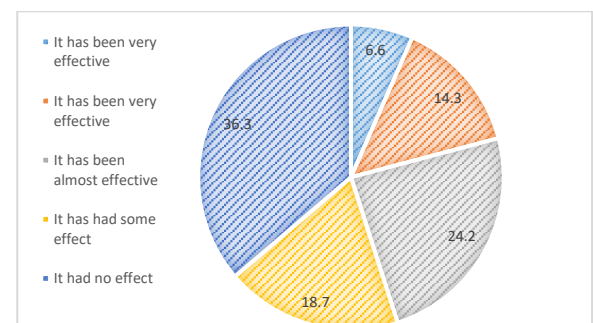
**Fig 5: Dispersion of answers to blogger following**



**Fig 9: Dispersion of answers to cooking**



**Fig 6: Dispersion of answers to food usage amount**



**Fig 10: Dispersion of answers to fast food lover**

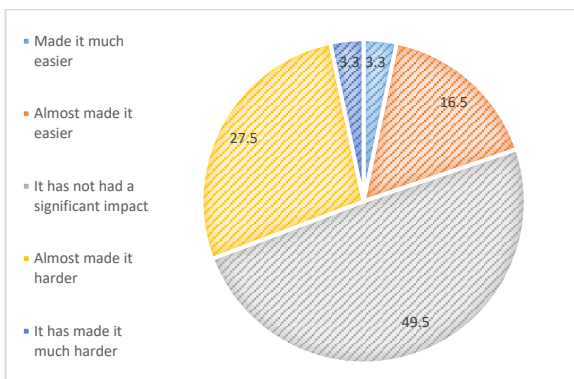


Fig 11: Dispersion of answers to healthy lifestyle

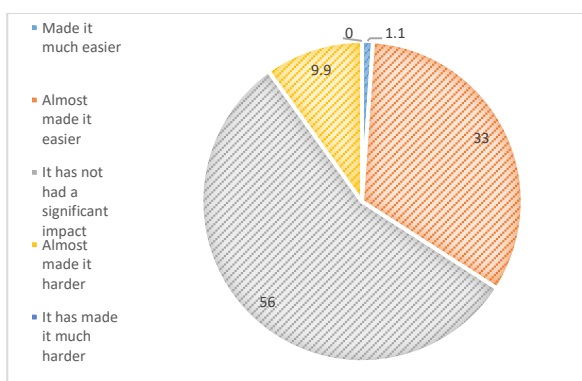


Fig 12: Dispersion of answers to food choices

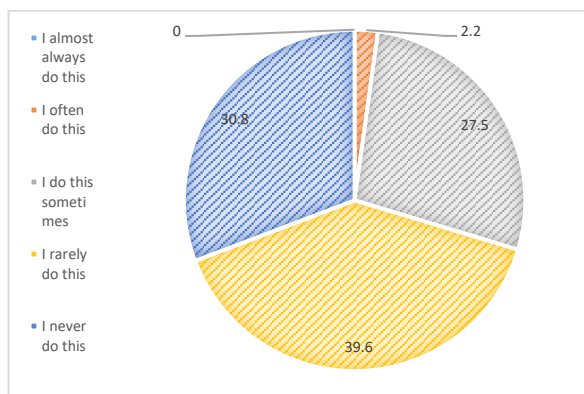


Fig 13: Dispersion of answers to effectiveness of social media

## DISCUSSION

Similar studies have conducted research on the topic of our article and reported their findings, which we can compare with our own work. The articles “Promoting healthy eating habits among youth according to their preferences: Indications from a discrete choice experiment in Tuscany” Ilaria Currazzi and colleagues surveyed 4,669 adolescents using a questionnaire [12]. The female participants made up 56.6% of the respondents. The authors found that most adolescents do not fully adhere to dietary recommendations, but their BMI indicates that their weight is on average normal. Additionally, they

mostly come from families with a medium/high level of education [12].

In the article “Parents’ awareness and perceptions of the Change4Life 100 cal snack campaign, and perceived impact on snack consumption by children under 11 years”, Rhiannon E. Day and colleagues examined the results of a survey on a campaign promoting healthy snacks and reducing consumption of high-calorie junk food. In the survey, 342 individuals responded, with over half of them familiar with the campaign and most having previously seen TV advertisements or similar promotions. More than two-thirds of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the campaign, indicating that it had captured their attention [13].

However, the survey results showed no clear agreement on the perceived positive impact on dietary behaviors, including purchasing healthier snacks or reducing consumption of high-calorie junk food. Nonetheless, respondents provided examples of ways to improve the campaign's positive impact on dietary behaviors, such as better advertising and information, more visible and healthier snack options, improved nutrition labeling, and access to healthier products in supermarkets. Additionally, the results showed that most respondents used positive language to describe the campaign.

Similar studies have also yielded similar results. For example, in another article, the results showed that TV advertising can have a positive impact on dietary behaviors, but improved nutrition labeling and access to healthier products can also have a significant impact. Additionally, other articles have shown that providing better information and more visible examples of healthy snacks can create improvements in dietary behaviors [14-17].

Therefore, the survey results indicate that the campaign promoting healthy snacks and reducing consumption of high-calorie junk food has been successful, but there are still improvements that can be made to enhance its effectiveness. Overall, these results can help inform decisions related to promoting healthy snacks and reducing consumption of high-calorie junk food.

Shobana and et al., showed the relationship between social media addiction and lifestyle among postgraduate students from a social work perspective. The descriptive research was done for this cross-sectional study conducted among 111 postgraduate students of Pondicherry University. Based on the results, most (66.7%) respondents have a medium addiction to social media. Most (64.9%) respondents follow a healthy lifestyle to a moderate extent [16]. The sample size and students were completely different with our research and has the different conclusion with less effect of social media on samples’ healthy lifestyle in comparison with present



study.

Mehta and et al., examined the eating habits of non-traditional male college students. In terms of resources and techniques, the questionnaire for that paper was written out on a card. An anonymous survey was taken by 70 male college students who do not live at home with their families. The sample just included males and completely different with our samples. The same as our research, Mehta showed that vastly young adults are affected by the influence of social media which in turn affects their dietary patterns tremendously [18].

In this research, the most popular social media are Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube, and 22% use social media between 3 and 4 hours a day. The results show a relationship between social media addiction and a healthy lifestyle. Nowadays, social media addiction is also a significant problem requiring solutions from experts.

The primary work of Shobana et al. illustrates the difficulties of the link between social work and social media as it bridges public-personal and online-offline environments and necessitates further investigation [16]. Social work methods can be used to understand individual behavior patterns, vulnerability, and the intersectionality of their social locations to provide appropriate intervention and services. Recent educational discussions on social media and social work have produced novel knowledge contributions and policy implications [19].

In this article, we designed a structured questionnaire consisting of 20 questions that was exclusively available to nutrition students and graduates. A total of 60 individuals responded to the questionnaire. The demographic information, such as age, gender, and academic term, was collected,

followed by Likert scale questions about individuals' use of social media platforms during the day and their engagement with food and nutrition-related content. In the data analysis, we examined the correlation between their social media usage and their dietary habits and styles.

## CONCLUSION

This study showed that the amount of use of social media can be effective on people's lifestyle (age between 19 to 24 years old) and food pattern and food intake, which can be due to various factors, including the content they share on social media. However, it cannot be said that social media has a definite effect. Because even though the amount of social media use was high, they are aware of their food choices and the use of social media has not affected their diet. But in general, the use of social networks can make people more aware of healthy eating lifestyles, and nutritionists can use the results of this research to encourage their patients to visit correct healthy eating content based on the amount of use of social networks.

## AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

All authors contributed to this research, design, data collection and analysis, drafting the manuscript, read and approved the final manuscript.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this study.

## FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE

No financial interests related to the material of this manuscript have been declared.

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