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Craving foods from social media: Which one to blame? For-you-page, followed culinary accounts, or friends who posted food content

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ABSTRACT

In social media, food references may come from multiple sources, including algorithm-induced content (for-you-page, FYP), culinary accounts, and friends' posts. It is not known, however, which source exerted more effect on the food purchase decision. This study investigates the influence of social media on food purchasing behaviour among young adults, focusing on the impact of content exposure from these sources. A total of 73 respondents from the final year student population participated, predominantly female (mean age = 21.79 years). Results indicated that 76.7% of participants spent more than three hours daily on social media, with 94.5% exposed to culinary content from for-you pages (FYPs). Interestingly, while exposure to FYP content was massive, it did not significantly correlate with food purchases (p=0.138). Instead, content from followed culinary accounts and friends showed significant positive correlations (OR: 3.17 and 4.35, respectively; p<0.05) with purchasing decisions. After further analysis using binomial regression, only friends' posts persisted as a predictor for food purchases. The findings suggest that peer influence plays a crucial role in shaping food choices, highlighting the need for public health initiatives to promote healthier eating behaviours among young adults.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Young adults and college students are increasingly immersed in social media, with significant implications for their daily lives and sanity. Recent research indicates that U.S. teens spend an average of 4.8 hours daily on social media platforms, with 37% reporting usage of ≥ 5 hours daily (Rothwell, 2023). In Indonesia, 89% of urban teenagers spend 3-6 hours on social media daily (Rahayu et al., 2019). During and after the Covid-19 pandemic, where most activities were done online, social media had been essential in nurturing people to keep their sanity—or losing it. The most popular platforms, including YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, account for 87% of this time, highlighting a concentrated engagement with specific applications (Rothwell, 2023). These social media platforms employ algorithms to suggest relevant content to a particular user. These algorithms analyze a multitude of data points, including user behaviour, preferences, and engagement patterns, to predict and deliver content that aligns with users' interests (Kim, 2017), for example by displaying the *for-you-page* (FYP) upon starting the social media platform.

Social media influences people's behaviours, including purchasing behaviour (Mason et al., 2021; Palalic et al., 2021), food preferences (Kucharczuk et al., 2022; Simeone & Scarpato, 2020), and whether they believe in a conspiracy theory or not (Enders et al., 2021). In fact, the intensity of social media use correlates with adverse mental health outcomes, such as an increase in anxiety

and depression symptoms (Lee et al., 2022) and poor sleep (Yu et al., 2024). Some positive effect of social media use was also reported, such as obtaining greater online support (Godard & Holtzman, 2024), making the judgment of social media's overall effect complicated, depending on the characteristics of the user, their social media habits and experiences (Weigle & Shafi, 2024).

Compulsive consumerism is strongly correlated with social media use intensity among urban Indonesian teens (Setyaningtyaz et al., 2025). The consumed goods range from clothes, foods, cosmetics, and gadgets, to exotic (i.e. weird) collectibles (Alves et al., 2016; Skinner, 2024). Since the title of this research is about food consumption, we will now focus on food consumption behaviour. There is a correlation between exposure time to social media and food craving scores among young adults in France (Filippone et al., 2022). Rounsefell et al. (2020) found that most young adults reported being influenced by social media when deciding what to eat, indicating that these platforms serve as a source of inspiration for meal choices and dining experiences. People who were exposed to energy-dense snack posts on social media were influenced towards consuming similar snacks (Hawkins et al., 2020).

The constant exposure to food-related content will influence the buying decision of the user, mostly towards compulsive consumption. This food-related content may come from several sources: algorithm-generated FYPs, followed culinary accounts, and friends' posts (i.e. friends in the real world). It is not known, however, which source will exert the most effect on food consumption behaviour. In this current research, we aim to examine which source of food media content would affect the food craving and hence, buying decision the most: the random food content suggested by the FYPs, the content suggested by followed culinary accounts, or friend's posts about food.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

We conveniently surveyed 73 final-year students in our department about their exposure to culinary content from three different sources (FYPs, followed culinary accounts, or friends) and asked about their actual food purchases in the recent month. These final-year students (intake year 2020) do not have regular classes anymore; thus, most of their time is spent doing research, thesis writing, and of course, scrolling social media. Moreover, their past courses were mostly done online during the lockdown waves in Indonesia (2020-2022), making this batch unique in terms of their intensive engagement with social media during and after Covid lockdowns.

Average frequency and duration of social media were assessed using the categorical scale (more or less than 3 hours/day and more or less than 4 times/day, respectively). Exposure to culinary content from different sources was assessed by a yes-or-no scale (e.g. "Have you been exposed to food content from random source (FYP)/followed culinary accounts/friends?", Yes/No). All respondents were exposed to at least one of these sources. Food purchases were measured categorically ("Did you actually seek or purchase the food(s) suggested/displayed in the content", Yes/No). Correlation strengths and statistical significance were calculated using chi-square followed by a binomial regression analysis using SPSS ver 19 (IBM, USA). Statistical significance was set to $p<0.05$.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The demographic characteristics are displayed in Table 1. Most respondents were females due to the nature of the student population in our Department. We also collected their family history of diabetes mellitus (DM) and body mass index (BMI) as these may influence consumption behaviour. Most of the respondents have normal BMI. Interestingly, 24.66% of them have a family history of DM, consistent with the high regional DM prevalence in Minahasa, Indonesia.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Parameter	Values
n	73
Age, year (mean±SD)	21.79±0.96
Sex (n, %)	
Male	5 (6.85)
Female	68 (93.15)
DM in family member (n, %)	
Yes	18 (24.66)
No	55 (75.34)

BMI raw value (mean+SD)	23.41±14.55
BMI category (n, %)	
Underweight	9 (12.33)
Normal	53 (72.60)
Overweight	7 (9.59)
Obese	4 (5.48)

DM: diabetes mellitus, BMI: body mass index

The univariate analyses of the variables are displayed in Table 2. Most of the respondents spent ≥3 hours a day on social media and accessed them ≥4 times daily (76.7% and 80.8%, respectively). Most of them have been exposed to culinary content from the followed culinary accounts (67.1%) and friends (57.5%), and mostly from FYPs (94.5%). After these exposures, 60.3% of the respondents actually purchased the food seen on social media.

Table 2. Univariate analysis of the variables

Variables	n	%
Social media use duration per day		
< 3 hours	17	23.3
≥ 3 hours	56	76.7
Social media access per day		
< 4 times	14	19.2
≥ 4 times	59	80.8
Exposed to culinary content in FYPs		
Yes	69	94.5
No	4	5.5
Exposed to content from followed culinary accounts		
Yes	49	67.1
No	24	32.9
Exposed to culinary content shared by friends		
Yes	42	57.5
No	31	42.5
Do purchase the food seen on social media		
Yes	44	60.3
No	29	39.7

The frequency and duration of social media use did not correlate with food purchases (p=0.382 and 0.481, respectively, Table 3). Despite being flooded by food content from FYPs (94.5%, Table 2), the correlation between FYP and food purchase did not reach statistical significance (p=0.138, Table 3). Exposure to content from followed culinary accounts and friends had a positive significant correlation with food purchase (OR: 3.17, and 4.35, respectively; p<0.05). These correlations were calculated separately for each variable. When accessing social media, the exposure to food content will come from a complex interaction between these three sources, especially during long access. Therefore, since exposure to social media usually involves multiple sources, we then plotted these variables of interests into a binomial regression (Table 4) and found that only the exposure to food content shared by friends correlated with food-purchasing incidence (B=1.563, OR=4.77, p=0.04).

Table 3. Correlation matrix between the independent variables and purchasing incidence

Variable	Category	Purchased food		Not purchased food		OR	p-value
		n	%	n	%		
Social media access frequency per day	≥ 4 times	37	50.7	22	30.1	1.68	0.382
	< 4 times	7	9.6	7	9.6		
Social media use duration per day	≥ 3 hrs	35	47.9	21	28.8	1.48	0.481
	< 3 hrs	9	12.3	8	11.0		
Exposed to culinary content in FYPs	Yes	43	58.9	26	35.6	4.96	0.138
	No	1	1.4	3	4.1		
Exposed to content from followed culinary accounts	Yes	34	46.6	15	20.5	3.17	**0.023***
	No	10	13.7	14	19.2		
Exposed to culinary content shared by friends	Yes	41	56.2	22	30.1	4.35	**0.035***
	No	3	4.1	7	9.6		

*p<0.05 by chi-square.

Table 4. Correlation matrix between the independent variables and purchasing incidence

Variables	B	S.E.	Wald	df	p-value	Exp(B)
Exposed to culinary content in FYPs	1.447	1.227	1.390	1	0.238	4.252
Exposed to content from followed culinary accounts	1.030	0.547	3.552	1	0.059	2.802
Exposed to culinary content shared by friends	1.563	0.763	4.200	1	**0.040***	4.774
Constant	-2.966	1.422	4.352	1	0.037	0.052

*p<0.05.

This current research highlighted several interesting findings. The data indicates that 76.7% of respondents spend more than 3 hours daily on social media and access it more than 4 times a day. This high level of engagement suggests that social media is a significant part of their daily lives, potentially affecting their food choices and consumption patterns. This effect can even be more marked in our final-year student population, where they do not attend any regular classes and thus, have more spare time. It is interesting to see that 94.5% of the respondents have been exposed to FYPs with food-related content. However, despite high exposure to FYP content, the lack of significant correlation with food purchases (p=0.138) raises interesting questions about the effectiveness of algorithmically suggested content compared to peer influences. This could lead to further investigation into the quality and type of content that resonates with users. On the other hand, the positive and significant correlations between exposure to content from followed culinary accounts and friends with food purchases (OR: 3.17 and 4.35, respectively) suggest that personal connections and trusted sources play a crucial role in influencing purchasing decisions.

Following a regression analysis, only the correlation between food shared by friends and food purchase persisted, while the other two dissipated. The physical proximity and accessibility to the food shared by friends could in part shape this strong correlation since food recommended by FYPs and culinary accounts can be difficult to get. Interestingly, friendship can also influence body weight towards one another by influencing eating patterns (Cunningham et al., 2012). In the context of Minahasan people, where the people (especially friends and family) tend to eat together on most occasions (Supit et al., 2021; Weichart, 2008), a friendship can be identical to meal sharing or eating together, which from our current research, may stem from sharing food contents on social media.

In this current research, we did not examine the type of food displayed in the FYP, followed account, or friends' posts. Previous research showed that advertisements for unhealthy food evoked significantly more positive responses, compared to non-food and healthy food (Murphy et al., 2020). Further research may address this phenomenon, whether peer influence on food choice would work on both unhealthy and healthy food. The small number of respondents may also limit the generalisability of the result; however, similar patterns can be expected due to the homogenous social media culture among Indonesian youths (Ida et al., 2020; Marbun et al., 2020). Moreover, the reliance on self-reported data for social media usage and food purchases, which was employed in this study, may have introduced bias. Further research involving more objective data collection, such as internet-history tracking or food diary logging can assist in tackling these limitations.

4. CONCLUSION

Who is to blame? This current research suggests that friends' postings will exert the most influence towards food purchase decisions compared to FYPs and followed culinary accounts. Therefore, if a person has decided to undergo a dietary restriction, it is advisable to temporarily withdraw from viewing the contents shared by friends who love to post about food.

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