

ASSOCIATION BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA UTILIZATION AND DIETARY HABITS AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT ENUGU STATE UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY (ESUT), NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the association between social media utilization and dietary habits among undergraduate students at Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT), Nigeria. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select 422 undergraduate students across the university's 14 faculties. Data were collected using a questionnaire. The data collected were analyzed using SPSS Version 23.0. The results showed that 63% of the respondents were aged 20-24 years, 90.7% were single, 96.9% were Christians, and 9.0%, 21.9%, 42%, 20.9%, and 6.2% were in the 100, 200, 300, 400, and 500 levels, respectively. All respondents use social media. WhatsApp (100%), Facebook (56.2%), Instagram (74.2%), Twitter (55.4%), and TikTok (90.2%) were the most used. (43.8 %). Moreover, (43.8%) usually spend 4-6 hours, or more than 6 hours, on social media, and 66.8% use it mostly late at night. 79.4% and 15.7% eat two and three meals, respectively, and 88.4% often skip meals. Busy with academics (27.6 %), lack of appetite (24.7 %), to lose weight (9.0 %), financial reasons (11.6 %), social media distraction (12.6 %), and other reasons (2.8 %) were the reasons they gave for skipping meals. 9.3% and 32.7% believe social media has a very positive and somewhat positive influence; 45.6% believe it has a neutral influence; 10.3% and 2.1% believe it has a somewhat negative and very negative influence on dietary choices. There was a statistically significant association between social media use and meal-skipping habits among undergraduates ($\chi^2 = 17.658$; $p = 0.001$). Students with prolonged social media use were more likely to engage in unhealthy dietary behaviours, particularly meal skipping.

Keywords: Dietary habits, Social media influence, and Undergraduate students.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an integral component of modern communication and increasingly influences lifestyle behaviors, including health and dietary practices. With an endless stream of content, users are constantly exposed to messages about food, body image, and wellness from influencers, brands, and experts. Exposure to food- and body- related content on social media has been shown to influence eating behaviors, health perceptions, and dietary choices among young adults (Rounsefell *et al.*, 2020). Social media is a form of digital communication that enables users to build online networks and communities to socialize, share information, and post user-created content. Behavioral psychology

suggests that people naturally try to align their behaviors with perceived social norms, including their eating habits. Before social media, these norms were shaped by cultural traditions, economic factors, and local food availability. People observed the eating patterns of their families, friends, and immediate communities to develop their own. Today, social media expands these influences far beyond personal interactions, exposing users to a constant stream of content that shapes their perception of what and how they should eat. Whether it is through influencers, peers, or viral food trends, social media plays a powerful role in defining what is considered "normal" or desirable in nutrition (Vidya *et al.*, 2024). In recent years, the pervasive influence of social media has reshaped various aspects of our lives, transcended geographic boundaries, and revolutionized how we communicate, access information, and even make decisions (Rani & Tyagi, 2023). As the digital age unfolds, more individuals turn to online platforms for inspiration, guidance, and social validation in their dietary choices. The influence of social media platforms has undeniably shaped our food choices, preferences, and behaviors, leading to a new paradigm in how we approach and engage with food (Rini *et al.*, 2024). Social media's pervasive nature has given individuals unprecedented access to extensive food-related content. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Snapchat are flooded with visually captivating images, videos, and posts showcasing tantalizing culinary creations, trendy diets, and food experiences from around the globe (Canet *et al.*, 2021). These virtual platforms influence taste preferences and fuel desires, ultimately affecting our dietary choices. Social media has also become a powerful medium that shapes our perceptions of food, altering traditional eating habits and introducing novel trends (Rounsefell *et al.*, 2020). While some consider social media to have increased their healthy food consumption, others blame increased social media use for increased junk food consumption (Ventura *et al.*, 2021). In other words, social media offers exciting opportunities and allows consumers to try numerous novel foods, but it poses significant challenges. Social media also contributes to disseminating misinformation, unrealistic body ideals, and promoting unhealthy eating patterns. Additionally, constant exposure to food-related content can lead to overconsumption, disordered eating habits, and adverse psychological effects (Chung *et al.*, 2016). Dietary habits are the food choices people make in their daily lives. They differ from person to person. A healthy dietary habit helps an individual to stay fit and well throughout their life. A healthy diet includes fruits, vegetables, cereals, water, and low-fat dairy products. Nigerian

university students go through a crucial period of life marked by a significant shift in lifestyle and greater independence. This shift often leads to unhealthy eating habits, which can negatively affect a student's academic performance, mental and physical health, and overall well-being. Studies on eating habits among students are expanding, but those specifically addressing the association between social media use and Nigerian university students remain limited (Umoke et al., 2020). Unhealthy eating practices are associated with several health problems, such as obesity and other chronic illnesses, which are common among the Nigerian university student population (Kayode & Alabi, 2020). Despite the growing prevalence of social media use among Nigerian youths, there is a lack of empirical data examining how these digital interactions affect their food choices and overall nutrition. This knowledge gap underscores the need to explore the extent and nature of the relationship between social media exposure and the dietary behaviors of undergraduates in Nigeria. Understanding this dynamic is essential for developing effective health promotion strategies and interventions tailored to this population. WhatsApp, YouTube, and Instagram are the most-used social media platforms, with usage percentages of 96.2%, 84.8%, and 72.8%, respectively (Ukegbu et al., 2017).

Nutritional status is the sum of an individual's anthropometric indices, influenced by nutrient intake and utilization, and is determined from information obtained through physical, biochemical, and dietary studies. It is a result of interrelated factors, including the quality and quantity of food consumed and the individual's physical health. An adolescent's nutritional status has important implications for his health and the development of several chronic diseases, and it plays a key role in breaking the cycle of malnutrition. The transition from adolescence to adulthood is an important period for establishing behavioral patterns that affect long-term health and chronic disease risk (Meg et al., 2016). University students seem to be the most affected by this nutritional transition. Studies have shown that adolescents leaving their parents and living away from home to attend college experience numerous health-related behavioral changes, including the adoption of unhealthy dietary habits (Cluskey & Grobe, 2019). These adopted habits are mostly attributed to drastic changes in the environment and available resources, and frequent exposure to unhealthy foods and habits (Huang et al., 2023). Many undergraduate students are adolescents who encounter numerous health risks along the path to adulthood, many of which affect quality of life and life expectancy. Studies have shown that youth are particularly vulnerable to poor eating habits and are often in the habit of eating "junk" food (Papadaki & Scott, 2022). These poor eating habits likely arise from a lack of knowledge of their cumulative effects. In Nigeria, where there is an increase in fast-food centers in urban cities, this is a major concern (Akinwusi & Ogundele, 2015). Most undergraduates are likely to be responsible for their diets for the first time away from home; therefore, they need guidance on making informed dietary choices (Satia et al., 2014). Other studies have linked students' lifestyles, especially breakfast consumption, to their cognitive abilities, as reflected in their academic performance (Lisa et al., 2017). Dietary habits are the long-term dietary patterns an individual forms and maintains in their daily life. Dietary habits and choices play a significant role in the quality of life, health, and longevity. It can define cultures and play a role in religion (Sherpa, 2025). Despite increasing social media use among university students, there remains limited evidence regarding its influence on dietary habits among

undergraduates in southeastern Nigeria. Most existing studies have focused on general social media behavior without adequately examining its relationship with food choices and eating patterns among young adults in tertiary institutions. Understanding this relationship is important because university students are highly exposed to digital media and are at increased risk of adopting unhealthy dietary behaviors that may predispose them to future non-communicable diseases. Therefore, this study aimed to assess the association between social media use and dietary habits among undergraduate students of Enugu State University of Technology, Enugu State, Nigeria.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was conducted at Enugu State University of Science and Technology, located in Agbani, Enugu State, Nigeria. The institution is a public tertiary institution with a diverse undergraduate student population drawn from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Study Design

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey design to assess the association between social media use and dietary habits among undergraduate students of Enugu State University of Technology, Enugu State, Nigeria.

Study Population

The study population comprised undergraduate students enrolled at Enugu State University of Science and Technology during the study period.

Sample Size Determination

The sample size was determined using Cochran's formula, which is expressed as:

$$N = Z^2 p (1-p) / e^2$$

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Where n = required sample size,

Z = standard normal deviate at 95% confidence interval (1.96),

p = estimated population proportion (0.5), and e = margin of error (0.05)

The calculated minimum sample size was 384 respondents. To account for potential nonresponse and incomplete questionnaires, an additional 10% attrition rate was incorporated, resulting in a final sample size of 422 respondents.

Sampling Technique

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure adequate representation of students across faculties, academic levels, and gender. Proportionate allocation was used within each stratum, after which respondents were selected via simple random sampling.

Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed to gather information on respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, dietary habits, social media use patterns, and the perceived influence of social media on dietary choices. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Health Research Ethics Committee of the University of Nigeria Teaching Hospital, Ituku-Ozalla, with approval number UNTH/HREC/2025/11/4104.

Data Analysis

Data collected were coded and analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0. Descriptive statistics were presented using frequencies, percentages, tables, and charts where appropriate. Pearson's correlation analysis was used to determine the association between social media use patterns and dietary habits among the respondents. Statistical significance was set at $P < 0.05$.

RESULTS

Table 1: The majority of respondents (63.1%) were aged 20-24 years. The respondents were drawn from various faculties, including Agriculture (12.6%), Allied Health Sciences (14.9%), Biological Sciences (11.3%), Clinical Medicine (14.7%), Education (13.4%), Engineering (14.4%), Pharmaceutical Sciences (9.3%), and Social Sciences (9.3%). Also, 90.7% were single, 9% were married, and 0.3% were divorced. 96.9% were Christians, 2.1% were Muslims, 0.5% were traditional worshippers, and 0.5% were others.

Table 1: The socio- demographic characteristics of the respondents

Socio-Demographic Characteristics	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
AGE		
15 to 19 years	58	14.9
20 to 24 years	245	63.1
25 to 29 years	74	19.2
30 years and above	11	2.8
TOTAL	388	100.0
GENDER		
Male	135	34.8
Female	253	65.2
TOTAL	388	100.0
LEVEL OF STUDY		
100 level	35	9.0
200 level	85	21.6
300 level	163	42.0
400 level	81	20.5
500 level	24	6.9
TOTAL	388	100.0
FACULTY		
Agriculture	49	12.6
Allied health science	58	14.9
Biological science	44	11.3
Clinical medicine	57	14.7
Education	52	13.4
Engineering	56	14.5
Pharmaceutical science	36	9.3
Social science	36	9.3
TOTAL	388	100.0
MARITAL STATUS		
Single	352	90.7
Married	35	9.0
Others	1	0.3
TOTAL	388	100.0
RELIGION		
Christianity	376	96.9
Islam	8	2.1

Traditional worshippers	2	0.5
Others	2	0.5
TOTAL	388	100.0

Table 2 indicates that all respondents owned Android phones and used social media, with universal use of WhatsApp. Other platforms used included Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. Most respondents spent between four and six hours or more than six hours on social media daily, while fewer spent one to three hours or less than one hour. Usage occurred mainly late at night and in the evening, with limited use in the afternoon and morning. Social media was used primarily for communication and entertainment, while academic purposes, news or updates, and food or health information were less common. Almost all respondents had encountered nutrition- or food-related content (99.2%), mainly recipes (53.6%), nutrition tips or education (19.8%), food advertisements (17.3%), weight-loss or fitness tips (8.8%), and other content (0.5%). Such content was most frequently encountered on TikTok, followed by Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and WhatsApp.

Table 2: Social media utilization

Do you own an Android phone	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	388	100
No	0	0
TOTAL	388	100
Do you use social media?		
Yes	388	100
No	0	0
TOTAL	388	100
If yes, which platforms do you use most?		
Yes	388	100
Facebook		
Yes	218	56.2
No	170	43.8
TOTAL	388	100
Instagram		
Yes	288	74.2
No	100	25.8
TOTAL	388	100
Twitter		
Yes	215	55.4
No	173	44.6
TOTAL	388	100
Tiktok		
Yes	350	90.2
No	38	9.8
TOTAL	388	100
How many hours per day do you spend on social media?		
Less than 1 hour	13	3.4
1 to 3 hours	35	9.0
4 to 6 hours	170	43.8
More than 6 hours	170	43.8
TOTAL	388	100.0
At what time of the day do you mostly use social media?		
Morning	15	3.8
Afternoon	27	7.0
Evening	87	22.4

Late at night	259	66.8
TOTAL	388	100.0

Do you own an Android phone?

What is your major reason for using social media?

Academic purposes

Yes	128	33.0
No	200	67.0
TOTAL	388	100.0

Entertainment

Yes	347	89.4
No	41	10.6
TOTAL	388	100.0

Communication

Yes	355	91.5
No	33	8.5
TOTAL	388	100.0

News/updates

Yes	69	17.8
No	319	82.2
TOTAL	388	100.0

Food/health information

Yes	54	13.9
No	334	86.1
TOTAL	388	100.0

Others

Yes	4	1.0
No	384	99.0
TOTAL	388	100.0

Have you ever come across nutrition or food-related content on social media?

Yes	385	99.2
No	3	0.8
TOTAL	388	100.0

If yes, what type of content

Recipes	208	53.6
Food adverts	67	17.3
Nutrition tips/education	77	19.8
Weight loss/fitness tips	34	8.8
Others	2	0.5
TOTAL	388	100.0

WhatsApp

WhatsApp	2	0.5
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Facebook

Facebook	32	8.2
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Instagram

Instagram	107	27.6
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Youtube

Youtube	15	3.9
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Twitter

Twitter	12	3.1
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TikTok

TikTok	220	56.7
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TOTAL	388	100.0
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Table 3 also shows that 23.0% of the respondents never consumed food outside the home in a week, while 70.1% ate outside the home 1–2 times weekly. Furthermore, 24.5% reported eating outside the home 3–4 times per week, while 3.1% ate outside the home more than 4 times per week. About 29.1% of the respondents consumed fast food often, whereas the majority (70.9%) did not. Similarly, 20.1% frequently consumed packaged snacks, while 79.9% reported otherwise. Soft drink consumption was reported by 40.2% of respondents, whereas 59.8% did not consume soft drinks. Energy drink consumption was less common, with only 17.8% consuming them often and 82.2% not consuming them. Consumption of fruits and vegetables was reported by 35.0% of respondents, while 65.0% did not consume them frequently. Only 0.3% of respondents consumed other food items, while the vast majority (99.7%) did not.

Table 3: Dietary habits of respondents

Dietary habits of respondents	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
How many meals do you eat per day on average?		
One	5	1.3
Two	308	79.4
Three	61	15.7
More than three	14	3.6
TOTAL	388	100.0
Do you skip meals		
Yes	343	88.4
No	45	11.6
TOTAL	388	100.0
If yes, which meal do you skip most often?		
Breakfast	153	39.4
Lunch	115	29.6
Dinner	75	19.3
None	45	11.6
TOTAL	388	100.0
What is the main reason for skipping meals?		
Busy with academics	107	27.6
Lack of appetite	96	24.7
To lose weight	35	9.0
Financial reasons	45	11.6
Social media distraction	49	12.6
Others	11	2.8
None	45	11.6
TOTAL	388	100.0
How often do you eat outside your home in a week?		
Never	9	2.3
1 to 2 times	272	70.1
3 to 4 times	95	24.5
More than 4 times	12	3.1
TOTAL	388	100.0
Which of these do you consume most often?		
Yes	353	91.0
No	35	9.0
TOTAL	388	100.0
Fast food		
Yes	113	29.1
No	275	70.9

TOTAL	388	100
Packaged snacks		
Yes	78	20.1
No	310	79.9
TOTAL	388	100.00
Soft drinks		
Yes	156	40.2
No	232	59.8
TOTAL	388	100.00
Energy drinks		
Yes	69	17.8
No	319	82.2
TOTAL	388	100.00
Fruits and vegetables		
Yes	138	35
No	253	65
TOTAL	388	100.00
Others		
Yes	1	0.3
No	387	99.7
TOTAL	388	100.00

Table 4 presents the influence of social media on respondents' dietary habits. Social media advertisements affected the food choices of 10.6% of the respondents very much, while 82.5% reported being affected sometimes; however, 7.0% indicated that social media advertisements did not affect their food choices at all. A large proportion of respondents (92.5%) reported trying a food product because they saw it on social media, whereas only 7.5% had not. When eating or drinking, 5.4% of respondents reported always being influenced by what they saw on social media; 35.6%, often; 45.1%, sometimes; 11.6%, rarely; and 2.3%, never. Furthermore, exposure to food-related content on social media was high, with 51.8% of the respondents seeing such content very often and 33.5% seeing it often; 11.9% reported occasional exposure, while only 2.8% reported rare exposure. Changes in eating habits due to social media were reported by 42.3% of respondents, while 46.8% indicated that social media sometimes influenced changes in their eating habits. Only 7.5% reported being rarely influenced, and 3.4% indicated that they had never changed their eating habits due to social media. The types of food-related content that influenced respondents the most included healthy eating and fitness content, followed by foreign or international cuisines, homemade or local dishes, and fast food and snack content, while 2.6% reported not being influenced by any of the listed content. Overall, 9.3% of the respondents believed that social media had a very positive influence on dietary habits, 32.7% perceived it as somewhat positive, 45.6% as neutral, 10.3% as somewhat negative, and 2.1% as very negative.

Table 4: Influence of social media on dietary habits

Influence of social media on dietary habits	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Do social media advertisements affect your food choices?		
Yes, very much	41	10.5
Sometimes	320	82.5
Not at all	27	7.0
TOTAL	388	100.0
Have you ever tried a food product because you saw it on social media?		

Yes	359	92.5
No	29	7.5
TOTAL	388	100.0
When eating or drinking, how often are you influenced by what you see on social media?		
Very often	21	5.4
Often	158	35.6
Occasionally	178	45.1
Rarely	45	11.6
Never	9	2.3
TOTAL	388	100.0
How often do you see food-related content on your social media feed?		
Very often	201	51.8
Often	130	33.5
Occasionally	46	11.9
Rarely	11	2.8
TOTAL	388	100.0
Have you ever changed your eating habits because of something you saw on social media?		
Yes, frequently	164	42.3
Often	182	46.8
Occasionally	29	7.5
Rarely	13	3.4
TOTAL	388	100.0
What type of food content influences you the most on social media		
Healthy eating and fitness content	248	63.9
Fast food and snacks	33	8.5
Homemade/local dishes	40	10.3
Foreign/international cuisines	57	14.7
None of the above	10	2.6
TOTAL	388	100.0
Do you believe social media has a positive or negative overall influence on your dietary habits?		
Very positive	36	9.3
Somewhat positive	127	32.7
Neutral	177	45.6
Somewhat negative	40	10.3
Very negative	8	2.1
TOTAL	388	100.0

Table 5 presents the frequency of food consumption in the past seven days. For cereals, 21.4% of respondents consumed them daily, 8.8% consumed them 1–2 times, 51.3% consumed them 3–4 times, and 17.5% consumed them 5–6 times, while 1.0% did not consume cereals at all within the week. Regarding legumes, 3.8% consumed them daily, 33.8% consumed them 1–2 times, 58.0% consumed them 3–4 times, 3.4% consumed them 5–6 times, and 1.0% never consumed legumes during the week. For roots and tubers, 5.4% of respondents consumed them daily, 43.8% consumed them 1–2 times, 44.8% consumed them 3–4 times, 3.6% consumed them 5–6 times, and 2.4% did not consume them at all. Consumption of animal source foods showed that 10.0% consumed them daily, 18.6% consumed them 1–2 times, 62.4% consumed them 3–4 times, 7.2% consumed them 5–6 times, and 1.8% never consumed animal source foods within the week. Furthermore, 9.8% of respondents consumed fruits and vegetables daily; 25.3% consumed them 1–2 times; 58.4% consumed them

3–4 times; 5.4 % consumed them 5–6 times; and 1.1 % did not consume fruits and vegetables at all. Consumption of fats and oils indicated that 13.9 % of respondents consumed them daily, 15.7 % consumed them 1–2 times, 63.2 % consumed them 3–4 times, and 7.2 % consumed them 5–6 times within the week.

Table 5: Frequency of food consumption in the past seven days

Food Table	Frequency	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
How often did you consume the following foods in the past week?			
Cereals			
Daily		83	21.4
1-2 times		34	8.8
3-4 times		199	51.3
5-6 times		68	17.5
Never		4	1.0
TOTAL		388	100.0
Legumes			
Daily		15	3.8
1-2 times		131	33.8
3-4 times		225	58.0
5-6 times		13	3.4
Never		4	1.0
TOTAL		388	100.0
Roots and tubers			
Daily		21	5.4
1-2 times		170	43.8
3-4 times		174	44.8
5-6 times		14	3.6
Never		9	2.4

TOTAL	388	100.0
Animal source foods		
Daily	39	10.0
1-2 times	72	18.6
3-4 times	242	62.4
5-6 times	28	7.2
Never	7	1.8
TOTAL	388	100.0
Fruits and vegetables		
Daily	38	9.8
1-2 times	98	25.3
3-4 times	227	58.4
5-6 times	21	5.4
Never	4	1.1
TOTAL	388	100.0
Fats and oils		
Daily	54	13.9
1-2 times	61	15.7
3-4 times	245	63.2
5-6 times	28	7.2
TOTAL	388	100.0

As shown in Table 6, there was a statistically significant association between social media use and meal-skipping habits among undergraduates ($\chi^2 = 17.658$; $p = 0.001$). Respondents who spent more time on social media (especially more than 4 hours daily) were more likely to skip meals (e.g., 46.9 % of those who spent more than 6 hours skipped meals) compared with respondents who spent fewer hours on social media daily.

Table 6. Relationship between the utilization of social media and dietary habits among undergraduates in Enugu State University of Technology (ESUT) (n = 388)

Do you skip meals?	How many hours per day do you spend on social media?						Statistical Value	P - Value
	Less Than 1 Hour	1–3 Hours	4–6 Hours	More than 6 Hours	Total			
Yes	11 (3.2)	25 (7.3)	14 (42.6)	161 (46.9)	343	17.658	0.001	
No	2 (4.4)	10 (22.2)	24 (53.3)	9 (20.0)	45			

*Chi - square test was used

Table 7: Association between owning an Android phone and the major reason for using social media

Do you own an Android phone?	What is your major reason for using social media?			Statistical value	P - Value
	Yes	No	Total		
Yes	127 (32.8)	260 (67.2)	387	2.036	0.330
No	1 (100.0)	0 (.)	1		

*Chi - square test was used

DISCUSSION

Table 1: The socio- demographic characteristics of the respondents

The study's findings revealed a diverse socio-demographic profile among the undergraduates in Enugu State University of Technology (ESUT). The gender distribution shows a higher proportion of females (65.2%) than males (34.8%), suggesting greater female representation in the study. This gender pattern is consistent with enrollment patterns in tertiary institutions across several countries, where females increasingly constitute a larger share of university students (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022). In terms of academic level, the highest proportion of respondents was in the 300 level (42.0 %), followed by the 200 level (21.9 %) and the 400 level (20.9 %). This suggests that middle-level students were more involved in the study, possibly because they are more settled into university life and academic routines. Representation across various faculties indicates that the study captured a diverse range of academic backgrounds, which strengthens the generalizability of the findings within the university. The majority of respondents (90.7%) were single, which is expected given the students' age distribution. Being unmarried often implies greater personal responsibility for dietary habits, with limited external regulation. Similar findings have been reported among undergraduate populations in Nigeria (Adeyemi & Olayinka, 2021). Christianity was the dominant religion (96.9 %), reflecting the religious composition of the study area. Overall, the socio-demographic characteristics indicate a typical undergraduate population, with age, gender, academic level, and marital status as important factors in understanding their social media use and dietary behaviours.

Table 2: Social media utilization

The results revealed universal access to smartphones and social media use among the respondents, with all participants owning Android phones and actively using social media. This highlights the pervasive role of digital technology in the daily lives of undergraduate students. Similar trends have been reported among young adults globally, where smartphone ownership and social media engagement are nearly universal (Pew Research Center, 2022). WhatsApp was used by all respondents, while TikTok (90.2%), Instagram (74.2%), Facebook (56.2%), and Twitter (55.4%) were also widely used. The dominance of visually driven platforms such as TikTok and Instagram suggests greater exposure to food images, videos, and influencer-driven content, which have been shown to affect food perceptions and preferences significantly (Coates *et al.*, 2019). Over forty percent (43.8 %) of respondents spent between 4 and 6 hours daily on social media. More than 6 hours daily were also spent on social media by 43.8%, indicating heavy usage. Most (66.8%) students reported using social media late at night, a behavior associated with disrupted eating patterns and meal skipping among university students (Vaterlaus *et al.*, 2015). Although only a small proportion of respondents intentionally used social media for food or health information, almost all reported encountering nutrition and food-related content. This supports the notion that passive exposure to food content can still influence dietary choices (Vassallo *et al.*, 2021).

Table 3: Dietary habits of respondents

The dietary habits of the respondents revealed several concerning patterns. Most students (79.4%) consumed only two meals per day,

while a high proportion (88.4%) reported skipping meals. Breakfast was the most commonly skipped meal (39.4%), followed by lunch (29.6%). Meal skipping among university students has been widely reported and is often attributed to academic stress, time constraints, and lifestyle changes associated with tertiary education (Musaiger, 2019). The major reasons for meal skipping in this study included being busy with academic activities, lack of appetite, financial constraints, and social media distraction. Similar findings have been reported in studies of Nigerian undergraduates, in which academic pressure and limited finances were key determinants of poor eating habits (Akindele *et al.*, 2021). Eating outside the home was common, with the majority (70.1%) of respondents eating outside 1–2 times per week. Although consumption of fast food and packaged snacks was moderate, a notable proportion of respondents consumed soft drinks and energy drinks. Fruit and vegetable consumption was low, with only 35 % reporting frequent intake. Low fruit and vegetable intake among university students has been associated with increased risk of micronutrient deficiencies and future non-communicable diseases (WHO, 2024).

Table 4: Influence of social media on dietary habits

The study demonstrated that social media has a considerable influence on the dietary habits of undergraduate students. Most (82.5%) respondents reported that social media advertisements sometimes influenced their food choices, and a very high proportion had tried food products after seeing them on social media. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that digital food marketing significantly influences food preferences and consumption behaviors among young adults (Coates *et al.*, 2019). Healthy eating and fitness-related content were identified as the most influential types of food content. This suggests that social media can serve as a positive tool for promoting healthier dietary behaviors when evidence-based content is promoted. However, exposure to fast food, snack advertisements, and foreign cuisines also suggests that social media may encourage unhealthy food choices. Similar dual influences of social media on diet have been reported by Vassallo *et al.* (2021). Although many respondents perceived the overall influence of social media on their dietary habits as neutral, a substantial proportion viewed it as positive. This mixed perception highlights the complex role of social media as both a health-promotion tool and a driver of unhealthy eating behaviors, depending on the nature of the content consumed.

Table 5: Frequency of food consumption in the past seven days

The food frequency results showed that cereals, legumes, roots and tubers, and animal source foods were commonly consumed 3–4 times per week by most respondents. This pattern reflects a diet largely based on staple foods, which is common among Nigerian households (FAO, 2022). Fruit and vegetable intake was also most commonly reported at 3–4 times per week, with relatively low daily consumption. Inadequate daily intake of fruits and vegetables has been identified as a major public health concern and is associated with increased risk of chronic diseases (WHO, 2024). The frequent consumption of fats and oils suggests a diet that may be energy-dense. While the overall pattern indicates some level of dietary diversity, the low daily intake of protective foods such as fruits, vegetables, and legumes raises concerns about overall diet quality. These findings emphasize the need for improved nutrition awareness and targeted interventions among university students.

Table 6. Relationship between the utilization of social media and dietary habits among undergraduates in Enugu State University of Technology (ESUT) (n = 388)

The study revealed a statistically significant association between social media utilization and meal skipping among undergraduates of Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT). The chi-square test showed that time spent on social media was significantly associated with meal-skipping habits ($\chi^2 = 17.658$, $p = 0.001$), indicating that social media use influences students' dietary behavior. Findings further showed that students who spent more time on social media were more likely to skip meals. A high proportion (46.9%) of respondents who spent more than six hours daily on social media reported skipping meals, compared with only 3.2% among those who spent less than one hour per day. This suggests that increased duration of social media use is associated with a higher likelihood of irregular eating patterns. The association observed in this study may be attributed to prolonged screen time, which can disrupt daily routines, delay meal times, and reduce awareness of hunger cues. Excessive engagement with social media may lead students to prioritize online activities over proper meals, especially amid the academic demands and busy schedules common among undergraduates. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have reported that excessive screen time and social media engagement are linked to unhealthy dietary practices, such as meal skipping and irregular eating, among young adults (Coates *et al.*, 2019; Qatatsheh *et al.*, 2015). Similar studies among university students have also shown that increased exposure to digital media negatively affects eating behaviors and overall nutritional quality (WHO, 2024). Overall, the significant chi-square result ($\chi^2 = 17.658$, $p < 0.05$) underscores the influence of social media utilization on dietary habits among undergraduates. This highlights the need for interventions focusing on digital health awareness and nutrition education to promote healthier lifestyle choices among university students.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that social media use is pervasive among undergraduate students at Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT) and significantly influences their dietary habits. While students are frequently exposed to nutrition and food-related content, their dietary practices are characterized by meal skipping, low fruit and vegetable intake, and moderate consumption of fast foods and sugary drinks. Social media exerts both positive and negative influences on food choices, depending on the type of content encountered. These findings highlight the need for targeted interventions to promote healthier dietary behaviors among university students. Nutrition education programmes should therefore be integrated.

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