INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE FOOD CHOICES AND EATING HABITS OF UNDERGRADUATES OF TECHNOLOGY AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION STUDENTS IN NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY AWKA.

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Abstract
This study investigated the influence of social media on food choices and eating habits of undergraduates of Technology and Vocational Education (TVE), Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Specifically, it examined the influence social media platforms have on students, the role of social media in shaping dietary preferences, and the extent to which advertising and influencers influence students' eating habits. The study adopted a descriptive survey design. Data was collected using a structured questionnaire and administered through Google Forms questionnaire. The questionnaire was validated and the reliability co-efficient of 0.89 was ascertained using Cronbach Alpha. Data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation. Findings revealed that social media significantly influences food choices by encouraging dietary experimentation, stimulating cravings through advertising, and promoting fast-food consumption. Influencers further shape students' dietary decisions through recommendations and visual content. The study concludes that social media has profound effect on TVE undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka eating habits both positively and negatively. The study recommended increased nutrition education, responsible advertising practices, and awareness campaigns that promote healthy eating among undergraduates.

Keywords: social media, food choice, eating habits and TVE undergraduates

Introduction

The digital revolution of the 21st century has ushered in an era where social media platforms dominate communication channels, influencing various aspects of daily life, including dietary behaviors and food consumption patterns. Among the affected demographics are young adults, particularly university students, who are not only heavy consumers of digital content but also at a critical stage of forming lifelong eating habits (Smith, Johnson, & Williams, 2019). Building on this, the convenience-driven nature of social media food content aligns with the lifestyle of Technology and Vocational Education (TVE) students, who often combine practical sessions with theoretical coursework, which may limit time available for proper meal planning (Jones & Brown, 2020). Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube expose users with visually appealing food content, ranging from viral fast-food challenges to aesthetically plated gourmet meals, which may influence dietary decisions. Studies indicate that frequent exposure to such content correlates with increased consumption of calorie-dense, nutrient-poor foods, as well as impulsive eating behaviors (Robinson, Jones, Whitelock, Mead, & Haynes, 2017). This phenomenon raises concerns about the long-term health implications for students, including risks of obesity, diabetes, and other diet-related non-communicable diseases.

This challenge is further compounded by the sophisticated marketing strategies employed by food brands on social media, which are designed to exploit psychological triggers and foster habitual consumption of unhealthy products (Harris, Frances & Schwartz, 2019). Targeted advertisements, influencer endorsements, and algorithm-driven content recommendations create an echo chamber that continually exposes students to unhealthy food options. For TVE undergraduates, in demanding academic programmes the instant gratification offered by these foods can lead to emotional eating and reliance on convenient but nutritionally deficient meals (Alruwaily et al, 2020). Researches have shown that the addictive nature of social media engagement further exacerbates this problem, as prolonged screen time is often accompanied by mindless snacking, contributing to poor dietary habits. Yet, despite these concerns, social media also presents opportunities for positive change, offering platforms where health influencers, nutritionists, and wellness advocates promote balanced diets and evidence-based nutrition practices (Vater et al, 2021). Some university students actively seek out such

content, using social media as a resource for meal inspiration, healthy recipes, and nutritional education. However, the overwhelming prevalence of junk food promotions and unrealistic body standards often overshadows these beneficial influences, creating a paradox where students are simultaneously exposed to conflicting messages about food (Folkvord et al, 2020). This duality necessitates a deeper exploration of how TVE undergraduates navigate these competing narratives and the extent to which their food choices are shaped by them.

In the Nigerian context, these influences intersect with socioeconomic and cultural realities, adding another layer of complexity to the issue (Ogunmola et al, 2022). In a country where economic constraints often dictate dietary options, students may be more susceptible to affordable yet unhealthy food trends popularized online. For instance, the viral spread of "cheap eats" and street food videos may encourage the consumption of readily available but nutritionally inadequate meals. Conversely, social media can also serve as a platform for sharing cost-effective, nutritious recipes tailored to local ingredients, offering a counterbalance to the predominance of unhealthy options. Understanding these nuances is critical in assessing the net impact of social media on students' dietary habits and identifying opportunities for intervention.

To fully appreciate this, it is important to distinguish between the concepts of food choices and eating habits, both of which are strongly shaped by online influences. In today's digital age, food choices are no longer shaped solely by culture, availability, or personal preference—they are now strongly influenced by social media. Food choice refers to the selection of what individuals decide to eat, influenced by factors such as taste, cost, health awareness, peer influence, and increasingly, online content (Sobal & Bisogni, 2009). Among young adults, especially university students, platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube often promote visually attractive and trendy meals, influencing what they perceive as acceptable or desirable food. Social media influencers and content creators share recipes, food reviews, and diet tips that may or may not align with nutritional best practices. These digital exposures can shape students' preferences, sometimes leading to choices driven more by aesthetics and popularity than health or affordability (Byrd-Bredbenner *et al* 2021). In the context of this study, understanding how social media shapes food choices is essential to exploring broader dietary behaviors among students.

Closely related to food choices are eating habits, which reflect the regular patterns and behaviors surrounding food intake, and these too are heavily influenced by social media. Eating habits refer to behaviors such as frequency of meals, snacking, portion control, and timing (Yahia et al, 2016). Social media plays a major role in shaping these habits by normalizing trends like intermittent fasting, meal skipping, or excessive snacking based on influencer routines or viral challenges. For undergraduate students, whose academic schedules and social lives are often hectic, eating habits can be erratic. This is made worse when social media encourages unhealthy practices such as consuming junk food, skipping breakfast, or relying on energy drinks and processed snacks (Hoffman *et al*, 2020). As students emulate what they see online, they may develop irregular or unbalanced eating habits that affect their well-being and academic performance. Understanding these patterns is critical, particularly in a university setting where independence and lifestyle choices are still forming.

Within this context, focusing on Technology and Vocational Education (TVE) undergraduates at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, provides a unique perspective. These students are typically exposed to practical knowledge areas such as home economics, agricultural science, and technical education, which may include components of food science and nutrition. This academic background may be expected to foster informed dietary decisions. However, this theoretical knowledge may not always translate into practice, especially when students are heavily exposed to conflicting messages on social media (Odeyemi et al, 2019) The daily pressures of student life—financial constraints, peer influence, time limitations—combined with the compelling visual and social appeal of online food content, can lead these students to make choices that contradict their academic understanding. Thus, even students trained in vocational education related to food and health may fall into unhealthy patterns promoted online (Okafor et al, 2021).

Ultimately, as future vocational educators and role models, the food choices and eating habits of TVE undergraduates hold implications beyond personal health. Their ability to make informed and healthy dietary decisions not only affects their own well-being but also has the potential to influence others in their future professional roles. Therefore, understanding the influence of social media on their food choices and eating habits are both timely and necessary, forming the basis for this study.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study was to examine the influence of social media on food choices and eating habits of undergraduates in Technology and Vocational Education (TVE). Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Identify the role of social media on food choices and eating habits of TVE Undergraduates.
2. Investigate the extent to which social media advertising influences food choices and eating habits of TVE Undergraduates.
3. Investigate the extent to which social media influencers' influences food choices and eating habits of TVE Undergraduates.

Research Questions

The following questions were answered by the study:

1. What role do social media play in shaping the food choices and eating habits of TVE undergraduates?
2. To what extent does social media advertising influence the food choices and eating habits of TVE undergraduates?
3. To what extent do social media influencers affect the food choices and eating habits of TVE undergraduates?

Methodology

Research Design: A descriptive survey design was employed to seek for the opinion of TVE undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka on the influence social media has on their food choices and eating habits.

Area of the Study: The area of this study was Faculty of Technology and Vocational Education (TVE) Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra State.

Population for the Study: The population of the study consisted of all 880 undergraduates enrolled in the Faculty of Technology and Vocational Education (TVE), Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka 2024/2025 academic session. This includes students from all four departments within the faculty: Home Economics Education, Agricultural Education, Business Education, and Technology Education.

Sample and Sampling Technique: Stratified random technique was adopted to select a sample size of 110 undergraduates from the population of 880. This ensured fair representation across the four departments of the faculty. Each department formed a stratum, and a proportional number of students were randomly selected from each stratum to form the final sample.

Instrument for data collection: Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled "the influence of social media on the food choices and eating habits" (ISmFcEh). The questionnaire was face validated by one lecturer in Business Education department of the faculty and was content validated by a lecturer in Home Economics Education of the same faculty. The questionnaire was organized into four sections: Section A focused on the personal data of the respondents. Sections B, C, and D examined the role of social media, advertising, and influencers, respectively, in shaping food choices and eating habits. Section B used 4-point Likert scale responses ranged from Strongly Agree (4) to Strongly Disagree (1), while sections C and D used 4-point likert scale responses ranged from very high extent (4) to very low extent (1)

Data collection and Analysis technique: The data collection process was through goggle forms administered digitally to the respondents through WhatsApp and email. Data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation. A mean score of 2.50 and above indicated agreement, while scores below 2.50 indicated disagreement, while standard deviation was used to assess the level of variation in the responses.

Results

Table 1: *Mean rating and standard deviation on role social media play in shaping the food choices and eating habits of TVE undergraduates*

SN	Role of social media	x̄	SD	Remarks
6	I often see food-related content on social media.	3.40	0.69	Agree
7	Social media influences my choice of meals or snacks.	2.80	0.86	Agree
8	My eating habits have changed because of what I see online.	2.64	0.87	Agree
9	Social media motivates me to try new food recipes.	3.19	0.82	Agree
	Weighted Mean	**3.01**	**0.81**	Agree

The data in Table 1 show that all the items have their mean ranges from 2.64 – 3.40. This shows that they all have their mean ranges above the cut-off point and are therefore regarded as agreed. Social media plays a significant role in shaping the food choices and eating habits of undergraduates of Technology and Vocational Education (TVE) at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The most notable influence was that students often see food-related content on social media ($\bar{x}$ = 3.40, SD = 0.69), which indicates frequent exposure to food advertisements, recipes, and promotions online. Social media also motivates students to try new food recipes ($\bar{x}$ = 3.19, SD = 0.82), highlighting its role in encouraging dietary experimentation. Furthermore, respondents agreed that social media influences their choice of meals or snacks ($\bar{x}$ = 2.80, SD = 0.86), and that their eating habits have changed due to online content ($\bar{x}$ = 2.64, SD = 0.87). The weighted mean of 3.01 indicates that respondents generally agreed that social media influences their eating behaviors, while the average SD of 0.81 suggests moderate variation in responses.

Table 2*: Mean rating on extent social media advertising influence the food choices and eating habits of undergraduate students of TVE* **N: 110**

SN	Influence of social media	x̄	SD	Remarks
10	I find food advertisements on social media attractive.	3.37	0.64	High Extent
11	I have bought food items after seeing social media adverts.	2.93	0.76	High Extent
12	Social media makes fast food more appealing than home-cooked food.	2.98	0.80	High Extent
13	Sponsored posts make me crave for food or snacks.	3.14	0.72	High Extent
	Weighted Mean	**3.11**	**0.73**	Agree

The data in Table 3 reveal that all the items on this table has their mean ratings range from 2.93 – 3.37 indicating high extent for the mean rating is above the cut of point. Social media advertising influences the food choices and eating habits of undergraduates of Technology and Vocational Education (TVE) at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, to a high extent. The most significant influence was that students find food advertisements on social media attractive ($\bar{x}$ = 3.37, SD = 0.64), indicating that visual appeal strongly captures their attention. Similarly, sponsored posts often make students crave food or snacks ($\bar{x}$ = 3.14, SD = 0.72), showing the persuasive effect of targeted advertising. In addition, students agreed that social media makes fast food more appealing than home-cooked meals ($\bar{x}$ = 2.98, SD = 0.80), while many reported that they have bought food items after seeing

adverts online ($\bar{x}$ = 2.93, SD = 0.76). The weighted mean of 3.11 confirms that respondents generally perceived social media advertising as influencing their food choices and eating habits to a high extent. The average SD of 0.73 indicates relatively low variation in responses, suggesting a shared perception among the students.

Table 3*: Mean rating on extent do social media influencers affect the food choices and eating habits of TVE undergraduate students* **N: 110**

SN	social media influencers	$\bar{x}$	SD	Remarks
14	I follow food influencers or content creators online.	3.00	0.82	High Extent
15	Influencers shape the kind of food I want to try.	2.90	0.73	High Extent
16	I trust food-related advice from influencers more than traditional sources.	2.55	0.841	High Extent
17	I have tried a meal or diet because an influencer recommended it.	2.82	0.82	High Extent
	Weighted Mean	**2.82**	**0.80**	Agree

The data in Table 4 reveal that all the items have their mean ranging from 2.55 – 3.00 indicating high extent. Social media influencers significantly affect the food choices and eating habits of undergraduate students of Technology and Vocational Education (TVE) at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The highest-rated influence was that students follow food influencers or content creators online ($\bar{x}$ = 3.00, SD = 0.82), indicating frequent exposure to influencer content. Students also reported that influencers shape the kind of food they want to try ($\bar{x}$ = 2.90, SD = 0.73) and that they have tried a meal or diet because an influencer recommended it ($\bar{x}$ = 2.82, SD = 0.82). Moreover, respondents agreed that they trust food-related advice from influencers more than traditional sources ($\bar{x}$ = 2.55, SD = 0.84). The weighted mean of 2.82 suggests that social media influencers moderately affect students' food choices and eating habits, while the average SD of 0.80 indicates relatively low variation in responses. These findings indicates that influencers play a notable role in shaping students' dietary preferences and decisions, primarily through recommendations and visual content shared online.

Discussion

The study revealed that social media plays a significant role in shaping the food choices and eating habits of undergraduate students of Technology and Vocational Education. These findings indicate that social media not only exposes students to food content but also shapes their dietary preferences and eating patterns, with a strong emphasis on visual influence and recipe adoption. This aligns with the study of Umennuihe et al. (2024) on undergraduate students at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, found that social media significantly influences students' food preferences and eating behaviors. The study highlighted that exposure to food-related content on platforms like Instagram and YouTube led to changes in dietary choices and increased interest in trying new recipes. Similarly, Otemuyiwa (2012) reported that food choices and meal consumption patterns among undergraduate students at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, were influenced by social media, with students often seeking food-related content online to guide their eating habits.

The study revealed that social media advertising influences the food choices and eating habits of undergraduate students of Technology and Vocational Education. These findings indicate that social media advertising does not only attract attention but also stimulates cravings, encourages preference for fast food, and drives actual food purchases among TVE undergraduates. This aligns with the studies of Bankole et al. (2024) on Nigerian adolescents found that exposure to fast food marketing on platforms like Instagram significantly increased user engagement and positively influenced food preferences. The study highlighted those promotional strategies such as emotional appeal and product appeal were particularly effective in shaping adolescents' food choices. Similarly, a study by Sadaf et al. (2023) reported that 81% of junk food consumption among university students was influenced by social media, with Instagram being the most effective platform in shaping students' food preferences.

The study revealed that social media influencers affect the food choices and eating habits of undergraduate students of Technology and Vocational Education. These findings indicate that influencers play a notable role in shaping students' dietary preferences and decisions, primarily through recommendations and visual content shared online. This aligns with the study by Sadaf et al. (2023) on university students found that 81% of junk food consumption was influenced by social media, with Instagram being the most effective platform in shaping students' food preferences. Similarly, a study by Umennuihe et al. (2024) on undergraduate students at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, found that social media significantly influences students' food preferences and eating behaviors, with exposure to food-related content on platforms like Instagram and YouTube leading to changes in dietary choices and increased interest in trying new recipes.

Conclusion

The study concludes that social media has a profound effect on TVE undergraduates' eating behaviors, both positively and negatively. While it offers opportunities for exposure to diverse food cultures and recipes, it also contributes to the rising preference for processed and fast foods.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made amonst other:

1. There is need for universities to integrate nutrition awareness campaigns into the students' activities to counter the negative influence of unhealthy food promotion on social media.
2. Policy agencies and social media regulators should monitor and restrict misleading food advertisement, especially those promoting junk and fast food targeted at young people
3. Stakeholders, including health professionals and the university's health services should collaborate with influencers to promote healthy eating habits and showcase affordable, nutritious meal options.

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