JHWCR JOURNAL OF HEALTH, WELLNESS AND COMMUNITY RESEARCH 3007-0570

https://doi.org/10.61919/0wrcck65

Original Article

Food Trends and Eating Behaviors Among Adolescents: The Interplay of Social Media and Peer Influence on Health

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"Cite this Article" Received: 18 February 2026; **Accepted**: 24 March 2026; **Published**: 27 March 2026

Author Contributions: Concept: EZ and AQB; Design: EZ, SN, and SE; Data Collection: EZ, SN, and SE; Analysis: EZ and AQB; Drafting: EZ, AQB, SN, and SE.. **Ethical Approval**: UMT, Lahore, Pakistan. **Informed Consent**: Written informed consent was obtained from all participants; **Conflict of Interest**: The authors declare no conflict of interest. **Funding**: No external funding; **Data Availability**: Available from the corresponding author on reasonable request; **Acknowledgments**: N/A.

ABSTRACT

Background: Dietary behavior among adolescents and young adults is increasingly shaped by digital food exposure, social influence, taste preferences, emotional states, and changing food environments. Social media may encourage fast-food intake and food trend participation, while family and peer contexts may further influence daily food choices. Objective: To assess food trends and eating behaviors among students and evaluate the perceived influence of social media, family, peers, emotional states, and taste preferences on dietary choices. Methods: This quantitative cross-sectional study included 200 students from selected government and private educational institutions. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling and completed a structured questionnaire assessing demographic characteristics, meal patterns, beverage consumption, social media influence, emotional eating, peer and family influence, food trends, and usual food habits. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 20, and categorical variables were summarized as frequencies and percentages. Results: Most participants were aged 16–20 years and lived in urban areas. Social media influenced food and drink choices in 69.0%, encouraged trying new foods seen online in 73.5%, and contributed to increased fast-food and snack intake in 76.0%. Fast food was included fully or partially in the usual diet of 81.5%. Taste was the strongest reported driver of food choice (74.5%), followed by family eating habits (62.5%). Emotional eating was most commonly reported in relation to boredom and sadness or loneliness. Conclusion: Eating behaviors among students were influenced by social media, food trends, taste, family environment, peer-related eating, and emotional states. Student-focused nutrition education should address digital food literacy, healthier fast-food choices, beverage habits, and emotional eating awareness. Keywords: Social media, eating behavior, adolescents, food trends, peer influence, fast-food consumption, family influence.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence and early young adulthood represent important developmental periods in which dietary habits, taste preferences, eating routines, and lifestyle behaviors become established and may persist into later life. During these years, nutritional requirements increase to support physical growth, cognitive development, academic functioning, and emotional well-being. However, rapid urbanization, increased availability of processed foods, changing household routines, and frequent exposure to commercial food environments have contributed to a shift away from traditional home-prepared meals toward fast foods, sugar-sweetened beverages, energy-dense snacks, and irregular meal patterns. These dietary transitions are particularly important in college-going populations because students often experience greater independence in food selection, higher peer exposure, and frequent access to inexpensive and convenient foods (1,2).

Digital media has become a major environmental influence on contemporary food choices. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook expose young people to food advertisements, influencer-endorsed products, eating challenges, food reels, restaurant promotions, online delivery trends, and visually appealing fast-food content. These exposures may shape perceived desirability, normalize frequent fast-food consumption, and increase the likelihood of trying foods that are popular online. In addition to social media, peer conversations, shared meals, emotional states, taste preferences, and family eating practices may influence what young people eat, when they eat, and how often they consume foods outside the home. Therefore, eating behavior in this population should be understood as the result of interacting social, digital, emotional, and household determinants rather than as an isolated individual choice (3–5).

Previous literature has shown that food-related media exposure is associated with unhealthy dietary behaviors among adolescents and young adults. Studies have reported that frequent exposure to eating shows, online food videos, and digital food marketing may increase cravings for energy-dense foods, fast-food intake, sugar-sweetened beverage consumption, and emotional eating tendencies. Similarly, research on Mukbang and Cookbang viewing has suggested that eating-show content may be linked with higher intake of fast foods, sugar-sweetened beverages, and high-caffeine drinks. In contrast, evidence on nutrition literacy indicates that better nutrition knowledge is associated with healthier food habits, reduced meal skipping, and lower fast-food consumption, supporting the potential role of nutrition education in improving dietary decision-making among young people (6–9).

Although international evidence increasingly recognizes the influence of social media on dietary behavior, local evidence remains limited regarding how social media exposure, peer influence, family food environment, taste preferences, emotional eating, and current food trends collectively shape the eating habits of college-going adolescents and young adults in urban educational settings. This gap is important because food choices in this population may be influenced simultaneously by household dietary norms, peer acceptance, online trends, affordability, convenience, and personal taste. Understanding these combined influences can help educators, nutritionists, public health professionals, and policymakers design context-specific nutrition education and health promotion strategies that are more responsive to the realities of young people's daily food environments (10,11).

The present study was conducted to evaluate food trends and eating behaviors among college-going adolescents and young adults and to assess the influence of social media, peers, family environment, emotional states, and taste preferences on their dietary choices. The study specifically aimed to describe meal patterns, beverage consumption, fast-food intake, emotional eating responses, social media-related food behaviors, peer and family influence, and engagement with current food trends among students from government and private educational institutions (12).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This quantitative cross-sectional study was conducted among students from selected government and private educational institutions in Lahore, including Superior College, Unique College, Government College for Women Township, and KIPS College. The cross-sectional design was selected because the study aimed to assess existing eating behaviors, food trend involvement, and perceived social, family, peer, and digital influences at a single point in time. The study was completed over a four-month period, during which proposal development, questionnaire preparation, participant recruitment, data collection, data entry, analysis, and report writing were carried out (13).

A total of 200 students were included using a convenience sampling technique based on availability, eligibility, and willingness to participate. Students from the selected institutions were approached during the data collection period and were invited to participate after receiving information about the purpose of the study. Both male and female students were eligible for inclusion if they agreed to participate voluntarily and provided informed consent. Students who were unwilling to participate or who reported

diagnosed diseases affecting their usual dietary habits were excluded. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

Data were collected using a structured paper-based questionnaire designed to assess demographic characteristics, eating patterns, beverage consumption, social media influence, emotional eating, peer and family influence, and food trend-related behaviors. Demographic variables included age group, gender, residence, living status, and type of educational institution. Eating pattern variables included number of meals per day, breakfast frequency, frequency of lunch and dinner with family, late-night meals and snacks, and eating outside the home. Beverage-related variables included frequency of soft drink intake, milk intake, fresh juice consumption, tea or coffee intake, and regular water intake. Social media-related variables assessed whether online food content influenced food and beverage choices, encouraged participants to try popular foods, influenced decisions to try new foods seen online, or contributed to increased fast-food and snack consumption. Emotional eating variables assessed eating responses during happiness or celebration, anger or frustration, stress or anxiety, boredom, and sadness or loneliness. Peer and family influence variables assessed perceived family encouragement of healthy eating, family fast-food consumption, family influence on food choice, meal sharing with friends, and friend-related influence on food choice. Food trend variables assessed trying new and trending foods, following food trends on social media, eating because friends were eating, taste-related influence on food choice, and bubble tea consumption.

Completed questionnaires were checked for completeness and consistency before data entry. Data were coded and entered into IBM SPSS Statistics version 20 for analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the study variables. Categorical variables were reported as frequencies and percentages, while continuous or ordered variables were summarized according to the available data structure. Chi-square tests were planned to assess associations between selected categorical variables related to social media exposure, food trends, eating patterns, beverage consumption, and peer or family influence. Statistical findings were interpreted according to the cross-sectional nature of the study, and no causal inference was made from observed associations. Data integrity was supported by checking completed forms before entry, coding responses consistently, and reviewing frequency outputs for possible entry errors before final analysis (14).

Ethical principles were followed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the study purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to decline participation. No personally identifying information was reported, and the collected data were used only for research purposes.

RESULTS

A total of 200 participants were included in the study. Most participants were aged 16–18 years (46.5%) or 19–20 years (46.0%). Males comprised 54.5% of the sample, and most participants were from urban areas (82.5%) and lived with their families (73.5%). Government and private institutions contributed 54.5% and 45.5% of participants, respectively. Regarding eating patterns, 43.0% consumed 3–4 meals per day and 34.5% consumed 2–3 meals per day. Daily breakfast consumption was reported by 41.5%, while 27.0% rarely consumed breakfast. Late-night meals or snacks were reported often by 36.5%, and 66.5% of participants reported eating outside occasionally or often.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics and Eating Patterns of Participants

Variable	Category	n (%)
Age group	10–12 years	1 (0.5)
	13–15 years	14 (7.0)
	16–18 years	93 (46.5)
	19–20 years	92 (46.0)
Gender	Male	109 (54.5)
	Female	91 (45.5)
Residence	Urban	165 (82.5)

Variable	Category	n (%)
	Rural	35 (17.5)
Living with family	Yes	147 (73.5)
	No	53 (26.5)
Institute type	Government	109 (54.5)
	Private	91 (45.5)
Meals per day	1–2	27 (13.5)
	2–3	69 (34.5)
	3–4	86 (43.0)
	5–6	18 (9.0)
Breakfast frequency	Daily	83 (41.5)
	Never	12 (6.0)
	Rarely	54 (27.0)
	Occasionally	27 (13.5)
	Often	24 (12.0)
Lunch/dinner with family	Daily	65 (32.5)
	Never	9 (4.5)
	Rarely	39 (19.5)
	Occasionally	50 (25.0)
	Often	37 (18.5)
Late-night meals/snacks	Daily	14 (7.0)
	Never	13 (6.5)
	Rarely	57 (28.5)
	Occasionally	43 (21.5)
	Often	73 (36.5)
Eating outside	Daily	10 (5.0)
	Never	10 (5.0)
	Rarely	47 (23.5)
	Occasionally	69 (34.5)
	Often	64 (32.0)

Beverage consumption showed frequent intake of soft drinks, tea, and coffee. Soft drinks were consumed daily by 28.0% and often by 23.0%, while tea or coffee was consumed daily by 42.0% and often by 22.0%. Milk intake was comparatively lower, with 46.0% reporting never or rarely drinking milk. Fresh juice was consumed occasionally or often by 58.5%. Most participants reported drinking 8–9 glasses (38.0%) or 10–11 glasses (31.5%) of water daily. In usual dietary pattern, 51.5% consumed both home meals and fast food, while 30.0% mostly consumed fast food and 18.5% mostly consumed home meals. Overall, fast food was included either fully or partially in the usual diet of 81.5% of participants.

Table 2. Beverage Consumption and Usual Food Habit Pattern

Variable	Category	n (%)
Soft drink consumption	Daily	56 (28.0)
	Never	14 (7.0)
	Rarely	52 (26.0)
	Occasionally	32 (16.0)
	Often	46 (23.0)
Milk consumption	Daily	57 (28.5)
	Never	29 (14.5)
	Rarely	63 (31.5)
	Occasionally	23 (11.5)
	Often	28 (14.0)
Fresh juice consumption	Daily	16 (8.0)
	Never	15 (7.5)
	Rarely	52 (26.0)
	Occasionally	71 (35.5)
	Often	46 (23.0)
Tea/coffee consumption	Daily	84 (42.0)
	Never	20 (10.0)
	Rarely	24 (12.0)
	Occasionally	28 (14.0)
	Often	44 (22.0)
Water intake	5–6 glasses	16 (8.0)

Variable	Category	n (%)
	6–7 glasses	31 (15.5)
	8–9 glasses	76 (38.0)
	10–11 glasses	63 (31.5)
	12–14 glasses	14 (7.0)
Usual food habit pattern	Mostly home meals	37 (18.5)
	Mostly fast food	60 (30.0)
	Both home meals and fast food	103 (51.5)
Preference for fast food over home-cooked meals	Never	17 (8.5)
	Rarely	76 (38.0)
	Sometimes	61 (30.5)
	Often	40 (20.0)
	Always	6 (3.0)

Social media showed a substantial perceived influence on dietary decisions. Social media influenced food and drink choices in 69.0% of participants, persuaded 69.5% to try popular foods, influenced 73.5% to try new foods seen online, and contributed to increased fast-food and snack intake in 76.0%. Emotional eating patterns varied by mood. Eating more when happy or celebratory was reported daily by 22.0%, while boredom-related eating was reported occasionally or often by 48.5%. Sadness- or loneliness-related eating was reported occasionally or often by 47.5%, and stress- or anxiety-related eating was reported occasionally or often by 44.5%.

Table 3. Social Media Influence and Emotional Eating Patterns

Domain	Variable	Main Response Distribution
Social media influence	Influenced food and drink choices	138 (69.0)
	Persuaded participants to try popular foods	139 (69.5)
	Influenced decisions to try new foods seen online	147 (73.5)
	Contributed to increased fast-food and snack intake	152 (76.0)
Emotional eating	Happy or celebratory: daily	44 (22.0)
	Happy or celebratory: never/rarely	106 (53.0)
	Happy or celebratory: occasionally/often	50 (25.0)
	Angry or frustrated: daily	14 (7.0)
	Angry or frustrated: never/rarely	114 (57.0)
	Angry or frustrated: occasionally/often	72 (36.0)
	Stressed or anxious: daily	15 (7.5)
	Stressed or anxious: never/rarely	96 (48.0)
	Stressed or anxious: occasionally/often	89 (44.5)
	Bored: daily	15 (7.5)
	Bored: never/rarely	88 (44.0)
	Bored: occasionally/often	97 (48.5)
	Sad or lonely: daily	11 (5.5)
	Sad or lonely: never/rarely	94 (47.0)
	Sad or lonely: occasionally/often	95 (47.5)

Family influence appeared stronger than peer influence. Family encouragement of healthy eating was agreed or strongly agreed by 49.0%, while family eating habits influenced food choice in 62.5%. In comparison, friends' eating habits influenced food choice in 33.0%, while 53.0% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Food trend engagement was also common: 45.5% often or always tried new and trending foods, and 55.0% often or always followed food trends on social media. Taste was the strongest reported driver of food choice, with 74.5% stating that taste often or always influenced their food choices.

Table 4. Peer, Family, Food Trend, and Taste Influences

Domain	Variable	Main Response Distribution
Family influence	Family encourages healthy eating: agree/strongly agree	98 (49.0)
	Family encourages healthy eating: neutral	76 (38.0)
	Family encourages healthy eating: disagree/strongly disagree	26 (13.0)
	Family eating habits influence food choice: agree/strongly agree	125 (62.5)
	Family eating habits influence food choice: neutral	45 (22.5)
	Family eating habits influence food choice: disagree/strongly disagree	30 (15.0)
Peer influence	Meals shared with friends: agree/strongly agree	84 (42.0)
	Meals shared with friends: neutral	22 (11.0)

Domain	Variable	Main Response Distribution
	Meals shared with friends: disagree/strongly disagree	94 (47.0)
	Friends' eating habits influence food choice: agree/strongly agree	66 (33.0)
	Friends' eating habits influence food choice: neutral	28 (14.0)
	Friends' eating habits influence food choice: disagree/strongly disagree	106 (53.0)
Food trends	Trying new and trending foods: often/always	91 (45.5)
	Trying new and trending foods: never/rarely	60 (30.0)
	Trying new and trending foods: sometimes	49 (24.5)
	Following food trends on social media: often/always	110 (55.0)
	Following food trends on social media: never/rarely	27 (13.5)
	Following food trends on social media: sometimes	63 (31.5)
	Eating because friends are eating: often/always	120 (60.0)
	Eating because friends are eating: never/rarely	37 (18.5)
	Eating because friends are eating: sometimes	43 (21.5)
Taste influence	Taste influences food choice: often/always	149 (74.5)
	Taste influences food choice: never/rarely	21 (10.5)
	Taste influences food choice: sometimes	30 (15.0)
Bubble tea consumption	Often/always	83 (41.5)
	Never/rarely	84 (42.0)
	Sometimes	33 (16.5)

The descriptive findings indicate that participants were frequently exposed to social media-driven food influences and commonly incorporated fast food into their usual dietary pattern. Taste was the most prominent individual-level factor, while family eating habits showed stronger influence than peer eating habits. Formal inferential results were not reported because the manuscript did not provide cross-tabulated data, χ^2 values, degrees of freedom, or p-values required to construct valid Chi-square association tables.

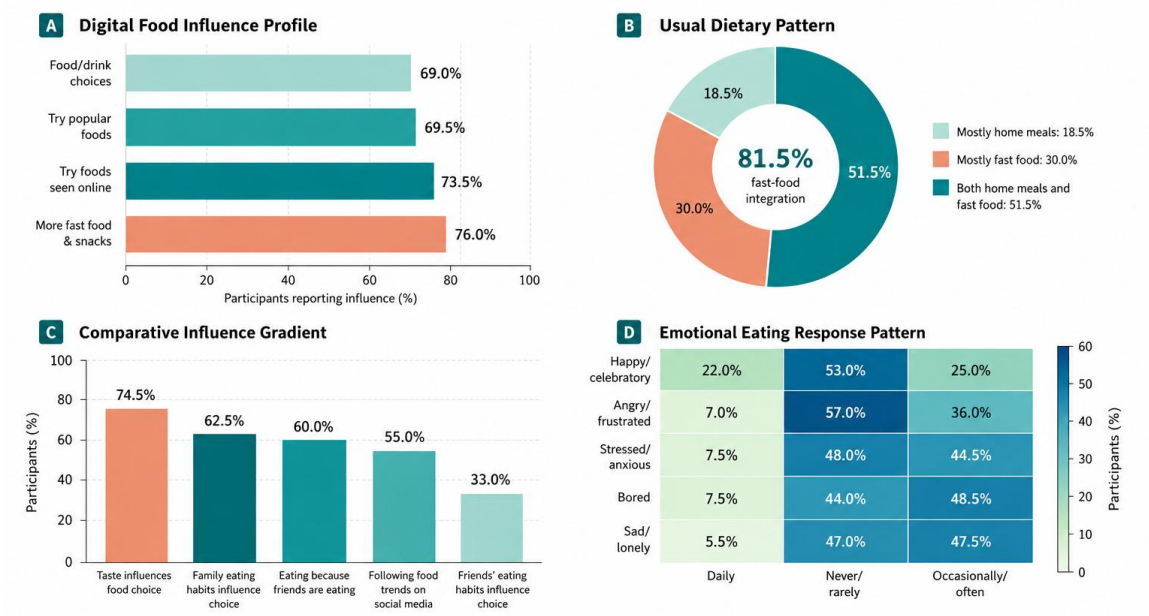

Figure 1 Digital, social, emotional, and taste-related determinants of eating behavior among students. Panel A shows perceived social media influence on food choices and fast-food/snack intake, with the highest influence observed for increased fast-food and snack consumption (76.0%). Panel B shows usual food habit pattern, indicating that 81.5% of participants incorporated fast food either fully or partially into their usual diet. Panel C compares major determinants of food choice, showing taste as the strongest reported factor (74.5%), followed by family eating habits (62.5%), peer-related eating because friends were eating (60.0%), food trends on social media (55.0%), and friends' eating habits (33.0%). Panel D shows emotional eating responses, with boredom and sadness/loneliness showing the highest occasionally/often eating responses at 48.5% and 47.5%, respectively. All values are based on aggregated descriptive data from the study.

DISCUSSION

The present cross-sectional study examined food trends and eating behaviors among students, with particular attention to the perceived influence of social media, family, peers, emotional states, taste

preferences, and fast-food-related dietary patterns. The findings showed that most participants were in the 16–20-year age range, lived in urban areas, and studied in government or private educational institutions. This profile is important because urban students are frequently exposed to modern food environments, digital food marketing, peer-based food choices, and easy access to fast foods and sweetened beverages. The descriptive results indicated that fast food was commonly embedded in usual dietary behavior, as more than half of participants consumed both home meals and fast food, while nearly one-third mostly consumed fast food. This pattern suggests a dietary transition in which home-prepared meals continue to exist but are increasingly combined with convenience-oriented and commercially available foods (15,16).

Social media emerged as a major perceived influence on food-related decisions. More than two-thirds of participants reported that social media influenced their food and drink choices, persuaded them to try popular foods, and affected their decision to try foods seen online. The highest reported digital influence was related to increased fast-food and snack intake. These findings are consistent with previous evidence showing that online food exposure, food-related media content, and digital promotion can shape adolescent eating outcomes, particularly through visual appeal, repeated exposure, social comparison, influencer activity, and normalization of energy-dense foods. Food reels, online eating shows, and digital food promotions may increase curiosity, cravings, and willingness to try foods that are presented as trendy or socially desirable. However, because the present study used a cross-sectional design and self-reported perceptions, these findings should be interpreted as perceived influence rather than evidence of direct causation (17–19).

Beverage consumption patterns also reflected important nutritional concerns. Daily or frequent intake of soft drinks and tea or coffee was common, whereas milk consumption was comparatively lower. This pattern is relevant because frequent soft drink intake may increase added sugar exposure, while lower milk consumption may reduce intake of calcium and other nutrients important during adolescence and early adulthood. Previous studies have similarly reported that adolescents' beverage choices are influenced by gender, media exposure, internet use, marketing, availability, and taste preference. In the present study, fresh juice consumption was more common than milk among many participants, but the nutritional implications may vary depending on whether the juice was fresh, sweetened, commercially packaged, or consumed in large quantities. These findings support the need for beverage-focused nutrition education that addresses both sugar-sweetened drinks and healthier fluid choices (20).

Family eating habits appeared more influential than friends' eating habits in shaping participants' food choices. Nearly two-thirds of participants agreed or strongly agreed that family eating habits influenced their food choices, while one-third reported that friends' eating habits influenced their choices. This finding suggests that the home food environment remains an important determinant even when young people are exposed to social media and peer environments. Family routines, food availability at home, parental food practices, shared meals, and household norms may continue to influence dietary decisions during adolescence and early adulthood. This pattern is supported by previous studies showing that family meals and home food environments are associated with eating behaviors among school and college-aged populations (21,23).

Peer influence was more complex. Although only one-third of participants reported that friends' eating habits directly influenced their food choices, a larger proportion reported eating because friends were eating. This distinction suggests that peer influence may operate less through explicit adoption of friends' eating habits and more through situational eating, social participation, group outings, shared snacks, and food-related social bonding. Therefore, peer influence should not be interpreted only as direct pressure; it may also reflect the social context in which young people eat, purchase food, and try trending items. Prior socio-ecological research has emphasized that adolescent food choices are shaped by overlapping individual, interpersonal, environmental, and social factors rather than by a single determinant (24,25).

Taste was the strongest reported individual-level driver of food choice. Almost three-quarters of participants reported that taste often or always influenced their food choices, exceeding family influence, social media food trends, and peer-related measures. This finding is important because nutrition interventions that focus only on knowledge may have limited effectiveness if they do not also address palatability, affordability, convenience, and culturally acceptable food preferences. Taste-driven choices may also explain why fast food and trending foods remain attractive even when young people are aware of healthier eating recommendations. Therefore, health promotion strategies should combine nutrition literacy with practical guidance on affordable, palatable, and accessible healthy alternatives.

Emotional eating was present but varied by mood state. Boredom, sadness or loneliness, and stress or anxiety showed relatively higher occasionally or often eating responses compared with anger or frustration. This pattern suggests that emotional and psychological states may contribute to non-hunger-based eating among some participants. Previous literature has described emotional eating as a behavior influenced by emotion regulation, stress, body image, food cue responsiveness, and environmental exposure to palatable foods. In the present study, emotional eating should be interpreted cautiously because the data were descriptive and based on self-reported frequency categories; nevertheless, the findings suggest that nutrition education for students may benefit from including stress management, mindful eating, and awareness of emotional triggers (22).

The study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design does not allow causal inference between social media exposure, peer influence, family environment, and eating behavior. Second, convenience sampling from selected educational institutions limits generalizability to all adolescents or young adults. Third, dietary behaviors were self-reported, which may introduce recall bias, social desirability bias, and misclassification. Fourth, the questionnaire details, including validation, reliability testing, scoring approach, and pilot testing, were not fully available in the manuscript, which limits assessment of measurement quality. Fifth, although Chi-square testing was mentioned in the Methods, complete cross-tabulated data, χ^2 values, degrees of freedom, and p-values were not available in the Results; therefore, inferential interpretations should be reported only after complete statistical outputs are added. Despite these limitations, the study provides useful descriptive evidence that social media, taste preferences, family eating habits, peer-related eating contexts, and emotional states are relevant factors in students' dietary behaviors.

Overall, the findings highlight the need for integrated nutrition education and health promotion interventions targeting students. Such interventions should address digital food literacy, critical interpretation of online food content, healthier fast-food alternatives, reduction of sugar-sweetened beverages, strengthening of supportive family food environments, and practical strategies for managing emotional or boredom-related eating. Future studies should use validated dietary behavior instruments, probability-based sampling where feasible, and multivariable analysis to examine independent predictors of unhealthy eating behaviors while accounting for age, gender, residence, institution type, and family living status.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that eating behaviors among students were shaped by multiple interacting influences, including social media exposure, food trends, taste preferences, family eating habits, peer-related eating contexts, emotional states, and fast-food availability. Social media was commonly perceived to influence food and drink choices, trying popular foods, trying foods seen online, and increased fast-food and snack intake. Fast food was incorporated either fully or partially into the usual dietary pattern of most participants, while taste emerged as the strongest reported driver of food choice. Family eating habits appeared more influential than friends' eating habits, although peer-related eating remained relevant in social food choices. Emotional eating was more commonly reported in relation to boredom, sadness or loneliness, and stress or anxiety. These findings support the need for student-

focused nutrition education programs that promote digital food literacy, healthier beverage choices, mindful eating, and practical strategies for maintaining balanced diets within modern social and digital food environments.

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