



A REVIEW: SOCIAL MEDIA-BASED NUTRITION INFORMATION AND FOOD CHOICES AMONG INDIANS

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ABSTRACT:

The rapid growth of social media has transformed the way people access and share information related to food, nutrition, health and lifestyle. In India, social-media platforms have increasingly become sources of dietary advice, food recommendations, recipes, health claims, food advertisements and information about dietary supplements. This narrative review examines the emerging evidence from Indian studies on the influence of social media and nutrition-related information on eating behavior, food choices and dietary practices. Available evidence suggests that social media may influence food-related behavior through exposure to food advertisements, visual food content, nutrition information, peer interactions and recommendations from influencers. Studies have reported associations between social-media use and eating behaviors such as uncontrolled and emotional eating, while other research has identified relationships between online food-related content, food preferences, food consumption and dietary choices. Studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic further demonstrated increased public engagement with online information concerning immunity, food and dietary supplements. At the same time, traditional determinants such as family, culture, convenience, habit and health considerations continue to influence food choices among Indian populations. Although the evidence indicates that social media is becoming an important component of the Indian food environment, significant gaps remain regarding the quality and credibility of nutrition information encountered online and its influence on actual food choices and dietary supplement use. Further research is therefore required to understand how social-media nutrition information translates into dietary decisions and supplement-use practices, particularly among adults..

Keywords Social media, nutrition information, food choice, eating behavior, dietary supplements, young adults, digital food environment, food marketing.

INTRODUCTION:

Food choice is a multidimensional behavior influenced by physiological requirements, taste preferences, family practices, culture, convenience, affordability, health perceptions and the surrounding food environment. In recent years, the environment in which food-related decisions are made has increased beyond the physical environment into an increasingly digital environment. Social-media platforms have become an important part of everyday life in India. People can encounter food and nutrition information while using platforms for entertainment, communication, education or commercial purposes. Recipes, diet plans, health advice, food reviews, weight-management recommendations,

supplement promotions and food advertisements are frequently integrated into social-media feeds. This development is important from a nutrition and public-health perspective because social media differs from traditional information sources. Information can be produced by qualified nutrition professionals, commercial organizations, influencers, celebrities or ordinary users. The credibility of information may therefore vary in a huge extent. The distinction between information and marketing is also becoming less apparent. A food product may be presented through an influencer's recipe, a fitness related post, a promotional video or a consumer testimonial rather than through an obviously identifiable advertisement. Along with that, exposure to

social-media content may influence food-related perceptions and decisions without users necessarily considering themselves to be responding to advertising. Research has begun to investigate these issues. Various studies have examined traditional determinants of food choice, the relation between social-media use and eating behavior, the role of online nutrition information during the COVID-19 pandemic, social-media influence on food choices among young adults, and the emerging digital food environment. These studies provide an emerging picture of how social media may be contributing to changes in food-related behavior in India.

Food Choice in India

To understand the influence of social media we need to understand the factors that have traditionally shaped food choice in India. Bailey et al. examined food-choice determinants among 38 urban Indian women aged 20–35 years using a mixed-methods design. Four major themes that were considered, are family influence, cultural perceptions, convenience and habit. Food safety and health were also seen as important influences, whereas marketing and advertising were ranked relatively low. [1] These findings demonstrate that food choice is deeply influenced by social and cultural contexts. Food decisions may reflect childhood experiences, family preferences, culturally established beliefs and practical considerations such as time and food availability. This is important when considering social media. Digital influence should not be viewed as replacing these established determinants. Rather, social media could play a side role with them. A person may have a culturally influenced preference for a particular food but discover a modified version of that food through social media. Similarly, family members may influence routine food choices while social media influences decisions regarding packaged foods, recipes, restaurants or health products. The Indian food-choice process should therefore

be viewed as an interaction between traditional determinants and widely growing digital influences. Recent qualitative work on Indian food blogs also supports the cultural dimension of this digital environment. Seal et al. found that Indian food bloggers commonly associated food with memories, experience, innovation, fusion cuisine, health and nutrition, and social relationships. [9] Thus, social media may not simply introduce new foods, it can also reproduce and circulate existing Indian food traditions. The growing digital food environment may therefore influence both what consumers choose and how they understand food. Online food content can intersect with affordability, convenience, cultural familiarity and health perceptions. The available Indian evidence suggests that future research should examine digital exposure together with these established determinants rather than treating social media as an isolated predictor of food choice.

Social Media as a Source of Nutrition and Food Information

The increasing availability of nutrition-related content on social media has created a new information environment. Individuals may use social media to search for healthy recipes, weight-loss diets, exercise-related nutrition, information about vitamins and minerals, immunity-related foods, protein-rich foods, dietary supplements, food products and restaurant recommendations. This creates an opportunity for nutrition education but also increases exposure to inaccurate or unsupported claims. The COVID-19 pandemic provided an important example of this phenomenon in India. Gavaravarapu et al. investigated food- and nutrition-related perceptions and practices among Indian internet users during the COVID-19 “infodemic.” The study was conducted by researchers from the ICMR-National Institute of Nutrition and combined analysis of Google Trends data with an assessment of food and nutrition-related perceptions and practices. [2] The researchers

observed substantial increases in searches related to immunity boosters, vitamin supplements and other nutrition-related topics during the pandemic. This demonstrated how rapidly public interest in specific nutrition concepts could increase within the digital environment. [2] The significance of this study extends beyond COVID-19. It demonstrates the potential of online information to shape the questions people ask, the products they seek and the dietary practices they adopt. More recent work indicates that social-media food information is also embedded in food blogs and visual content. Seal et al. reported that Indian food bloggers used social media to communicate themes of health and nutrition alongside memories, cooking practices, innovation and cultural meaning. [9] This suggests that nutrition-related communication on social media is not limited to explicit diet advice; it may also be conveyed indirectly through recipes, food narratives and demonstrations. Consequently, assessments of online nutrition exposure should consider both informational content and the broader food context in which that information is presented. The difference between nutrition education, lifestyle communication and commercial food promotion is particularly important when evaluating its potential effect on food choices.

Social Media and Eating Behaviour among Indian Young Adults

One of the important studies was conducted by Sawant et al. among medical undergraduates. The cross-sectional study included 272 medical students and used two structured instruments: the Three-Factor Eating Questionnaire-Revised 21-item (TFEQ-R21) and the Scale of Effects of social media on Eating Behavior (SESMEB). [3] Approximately 22% of participants reported abnormal eating behaviors. The study also found that students using more than four social-media platforms had higher SESMEB scores. Significant positive correlations were observed between

social-media influence and uncontrolled eating ($r = 0.38$), emotional eating ($r = 0.30$), and total TFEQ score ($r = 0.40$). [3] These findings are important because they suggest that the relationship between social media and eating behavior may involve psychological dimensions rather than simply food advertising. The association with uncontrolled eating indicates a possible relationship between social-media exposure and difficulty regulating food intake. The relationship with emotional eating is also notable because social media may influence psychological responses through social comparison, appearance-related content and perceived social norms. Comparable findings have been reported in a larger Indian university sample. Bindhani and Nayak studied 835 university students and found significant relationships between social-media engagement and changes in eating habits. Participants reported moderate perceived influence on trying new foods and food cravings, while posting, liking and sharing food-related content were positively associated with the tendency to try new foods. [10] Together, these studies suggest that social-media influence may operate through both passive exposure and active engagement. Interactions with food images and posts may encourage curiosity, cravings or experimentation, while repeated exposure may also become incorporated into routine eating behavior. However, the student-heavy evidence base limits conclusions about Indian adults across different age groups and social settings.

Social Media and Food Choices among Young Adults

Patel and Menon specifically investigated the influence of social media on food choices among young adults. Their study included 161 young adults and examined social-media use, food-related content and food-choice behavior using a self-administered online questionnaire. The study reported associations between greater social-media exposure, engagement with food brands

advertised online and consumption of unhealthy foods and drinks. [4] This study moves the discussion from general social-media use toward the more specific concept of food choice. Food choice may involve decisions regarding what foods to purchase, consume or avoid. Social-media content can influence these decisions through food images, reviews, recipes, promotional content and recommendations from social networks. Nevertheless, this study complements the findings of Sawant et al. by providing evidence concerning patterns of food consumption and their association with exposure to food-related social-media content. Evidence further indicates that digital engagement may influence food experimentation and expenditure. Bindhani and Nayak reported that university students perceived social media as having a moderate influence on trying new foods and experiencing food cravings, and found associations between food-related social-media actions and the tendency to try new foods. [10] This broadens the concept of food choice beyond healthy versus unhealthy foods to include novelty seeking, food discovery and consumer behavior. Such findings are relevant to Indian urban food environments where social media, restaurant discovery and online ordering can increasingly operate together.

Social Media, Food Habits and Preferences during the COVID-19 Period

Solanki et al. examined changes in consumer food habits and preferences during the COVID-19 pandemic, with particular attention to social-media influence. The study surveyed 401 respondents using an online questionnaire. [5] The researchers reported greater preference for home-cooked and traditional foods during the pandemic and found that social media was commonly used to obtain information about nutrition, preventive measures and strategies for improving health. [5] This finding is important because it demonstrates that social media does not necessarily promote unhealthy dietary

practices. The effect of social media may depend on the content encountered. Health-oriented recipes, traditional-food content and evidence-based nutrition communication may encourage healthier practices, whereas highly processed foods, convenience foods and misleading diet claims may encourage less desirable behaviors. Therefore, the relevant question is not simply whether individuals use social media, but what they see, whom they trust and how they interpret the information. The study also reported that 91% of respondents relied on social-media sites for food-related information during the COVID-19 period and described increased use of natural immunity boosters and balanced-diet practices. [5] These observations are consistent with the findings of Gavaravarapu et al., who documented increased online interest in immunity-related foods and supplements during the same period. [2] Taken together, the studies show how a period of heightened health uncertainty can amplify reliance on digital nutrition information and may simultaneously increase opportunities for useful communication and exposure to unsupported claims.

Emerging Evidence from Media and Advertisement
More recent evidence provides an opportunity to examine social-media food exposure in greater detail. Nandwani et al. studied 314 young adults aged 18–25 years were examined for their social-media usage, food-related advertising, dietary choices and responses to food imagery. YouTube and Instagram were among the frequently used platforms. The study also assessed perceived hunger responses to social-media food images using a 10-point Visual Analogue Scale. [6] Approximately 30% of participants reported seeing food advertisements on social media every day, while food-delivery platforms were among the frequently encountered advertising categories. The study found significant associations between exposure to advertisements for ready-to-eat foods and food-delivery platforms and BMI. [6] An

important contribution of this study is its examination of specific food-related content rather than social-media use alone. The findings suggest that the type of content may be more informative than total screen time when assessing dietary effects. A person who spends two hours viewing educational nutrition content may have a very different dietary exposure from a person who spends the same amount of time viewing food advertisements and highly appetitive food videos. The study therefore supports a shift toward content-specific assessment in future Indian research. This content-specific approach is also supported by Bindhani and Nayak, who found that active engagement with food pictures and posts was associated with trying new foods and food cravings among university students. [10] The combined evidence indicates that platform, content type and mode of engagement may be more informative variables than duration of social-media use alone.

Social Media and Food Consumption among Indian Young Adults

Ali and Shulamite examined social-media influence on food choices among young adults aged 18–29 years. The study included 203 participants and investigated relationships between social-media influence and food-consumption behavior. The researchers reported positive relationships between social-media influence and food-consumption behavior, including tendencies toward impulsive eating, cravings and consumption of fast foods and calorie-dense snacks. [7] Although the study is recent and therefore has a shorter citation history, it contributes to the growing Indian evidence base by examining food choice from a behavioral perspective. The use of structured measures also illustrates an increasingly systematic approach to assessing social-media influence on dietary behavior. As with several other studies in this field, however, the use of convenience sampling and online questionnaires

limits generalizability to the wider adult population. The findings can be considered alongside the larger study by Bindhani and Nayak, which found that social-media engagement was associated with trying new foods and food cravings among 835 university students. [10] While these studies differ in sampling and measurement, both point toward a behavioral pathway in which exposure and interaction with food-related content may stimulate curiosity, cravings or food experimentation. Future studies should distinguish between short-term food cues and sustained changes in dietary patterns, because an increased desire to try a food does not necessarily indicate a lasting change in overall diet quality.

The Emerging Digital Food Environment

The concept of the digital food environment has recently been examined among adults. Malik and Tripathi investigated the effect of the digital food environment on dietary choices using a quantitative survey. The authors considered social media, food-delivery applications and e-commerce platforms as components of the contemporary digital food environment. [8] This represents an important conceptual development because social-media exposure does not occur in isolation. A consumer may see a food product on Instagram, watch a review on YouTube, search for the product online, receive a recommendation and subsequently order the product through a food-delivery platform. Consequently, food-related digital influence is increasingly distributed across multiple interconnected platforms. This broader perspective may be particularly important for nutrition research because conventional food-environment models may not fully capture the influence of algorithmic recommendations, digital advertising and online purchasing. Evidence from Surat similarly shows the importance of food-delivery and ready-to-eat food advertising within the digital environment. Nandwani et al. found significant associations between exposure to these

advertising categories and BMI among young adults, although their cross-sectional design does not establish causality. [6] The emerging evidence therefore supports a broader definition of exposure that includes advertisements, food-delivery platforms, e-commerce, food images and user-generated content. Such an approach may better represent the actual digital pathway from information exposure to food purchase and consumption.

Social Media, Food Marketing and Dietary Behaviour

Food marketing represents one of the important mechanisms through which social media can influence food behavior. Traditional advertisements are relatively easy to recognize as commercial communication, whereas social-media marketing may be incorporated into entertainment, lifestyle content, recipes, reviews or influencer posts. Indian studies indicate that exposure to food-brand advertising is associated with dietary behavior. Patel and Menon reported an association between engagement with food brands advertised online and greater consumption of unhealthy foods among young adults. [4] Another study similarly identified associations between exposure to ready-to-eat food and food-delivery advertisements and BMI. [6] These findings suggest that commercial food exposure may represent a pathway between social-media use and food choice. A possible pathway is: social-media exposure → food advertisement or branded content → attention and food cues → craving or preference → food purchase → consumption. However, more pronounced research is required to establish this pathway with greater confidence. The digital marketing environment also includes food-vlogger content that may not resemble conventional advertising. Malik et al., studying 319 Instagram food-vlogger followers, found that credibility, physical attractiveness, attitude homophily and parasocial relationships were significant

attributes associated with food-vlogger engagement. [11] Such findings are relevant to food marketing because consumers may respond to the perceived characteristics of the communicator as well as to the food product itself. The commercial influence of social media may therefore operate through both explicit advertisements and relationship-based forms of persuasion.

Social Media and Dietary Supplement Use

Dietary supplement use represents an especially important research gap in the literature. Information concerning vitamins, minerals, protein products, herbal preparations and weight-management supplements is increasingly available through digital platforms. Recommendations may originate from brands, influencers, fitness personalities, health pages or peers. Gavaravarapu et al. provide particularly relevant Indian evidence because their study examined online nutrition information and supplement-related perceptions during the COVID-19 period. The study identified increases in online searches related to immunity boosters and vitamin supplement brands. [2] The findings suggest that online nutrition information can influence perceptions regarding the usefulness or necessity of particular nutritional products. However, there is an important distinction between exposure to supplement-related information and actual supplement-use behavior. Future studies should therefore examine whether participants use supplements, which supplements are consumed, frequency and duration of use, reasons for use, source of recommendation, whether the product was first encountered on social media, whether an influencer affected the decision, whether professional advice was obtained, and perceived benefits and risks. This area is particularly relevant because supplement use involves decisions that may be influenced by both nutrition knowledge and commercial persuasion. Recent research also suggests that

social-media food communication can shape perceptions of health-oriented products and practices beyond conventional meals. Bendi examined the role of social-media influencers in food-safety context and described how online discussion around products marketed as health beverages drew attention to sugar content and contributed to changes in corporate communication and behavior. [12] It illustrates the potential of social-media communication to alter public perceptions of health-related food products. The evidence nevertheless remains insufficient for determining how frequently Indian adults initiate or change supplement use because of social-media exposure. This distinction should remain explicit in future research.

Role of Influencers and Online Credibility

Influencers represent a distinct component of the digital nutrition environment. Their influence may arise from perceived expertise, relatability, popularity, personal testimonials and repeated interaction with followers. A nutrition message may therefore appear more trustworthy when delivered through an individual whom the user follows regularly. However, popularity does not necessarily indicate scientific credibility. The studies reviewed here suggest that social-media influence can affect food-related decisions, but relatively few studies have systematically assessed the credibility of the information source. Future studies could classify nutrition information sources into registered dietitians or nutritionists, doctors, fitness professionals, influencers, celebrities, commercial brands, friends or family, and anonymous social-media accounts, and then examine perceived credibility in relation to food choices and supplement use. Malik et al. provide useful evidence for this issue from the Indian Instagram food-vlogger context. In their study of 319 followers, credibility, physical attractiveness, attitude homophily and parasocial relationships were significant attributes of food vloggers. [11] This suggests that trust may be constructed

through both perceived expertise and interpersonal or social characteristics. Seal et al. further demonstrated that food bloggers communicate food through narratives involving health and nutrition, memories, innovation, fusion cuisine and social relationships. [9] These studies indicate that the influence of online food communicators may extend beyond formal nutrition advice. For nutrition research, it is therefore important to distinguish perceived credibility from actual scientific expertise and to examine whether trust in a source translates into measurable dietary or supplement-related decisions.

Positive and Negative Dimensions of Social Media

The reviewed evidence suggests that social media should not be regarded as an inherently harmful influence. Potential positive influences include improved access to nutrition education, healthy recipes, awareness of balanced diets, promotion of home cooking, healthier lifestyle practices, contact with nutrition professionals and greater awareness of nutritional deficiencies. The findings of Solanki et al. regarding home-cooked and traditional foods illustrate the potential for social media to reinforce positive dietary practices. [5] Potential negative influences include increased exposure to unhealthy food marketing, impulsive food purchasing, fad diets, food cravings, restrictive eating, emotional eating, inaccurate nutrition information and inappropriate supplement promotion. Sawant et al.'s findings regarding uncontrolled and emotional eating provide evidence for this behavioral dimension. [3] Therefore, the effect of social media is likely determined by the interaction between content, exposure, user characteristics and interpretation. The evidence also illustrates that positive digital influence can be strengthened through structured nutrition communication. Abirami and Prabhavathy Devi reported a natural experiment among 200 college students in which a structured nutritional counselling program produced

improvements in eating habits, food choices, nutritional intake and physical activity among students influenced by social-media food content. [13] Although the study population consisted of college students and the intervention cannot be generalized to all adults, it provides an important indication that nutrition education may help

users respond more effectively to the digital food environment. Thus, the public-health question is not simply how to reduce social-media exposure, but how to improve the quality of information, strengthen digital nutrition literacy and support evidence-based interpretation of food and health messages.

Comparison of Indian Studies

Study	Population	Main focus	Major contribution
Bailey et al., 2018	38 women, Delhi	Food-choice determinants	Family, culture, convenience and habit were important influences
Gavaravarapu et al., 2022	Indian internet users	Online nutrition information	Nutrition perceptions/search behavior and supplement-related interest during COVID-19
Patel & Menon, 2023	161 young adults	Social media and food choices	Social-media exposure and food-brand engagement associated with unhealthy food consumption
Sawant et al., 2024	272 medical undergraduates	Social media and eating behavior	Social-media influence associated with uncontrolled and emotional eating
Solanki et al., 2025	401 Indians	Social media and food habits	Social media commonly used for nutrition/health information; food preferences changed
Ali & Shulamite, 2025	203 young adults	Social media and food choice	Social-media influence associated with food-consumption behavior
Nandwani et al., 2025	314 young adults	Food advertising and dietary choices	Food-delivery and ready-to-eat food advertising associated with BMI
Malik & Tripathi, 2026	Adults	Digital food environment	Social media, delivery applications and e-commerce considered in dietary choices

Methodological Considerations

Despite the growing evidence base, several methodological limitations are common. Most studies use cross-sectional designs, which are useful for identifying associations but cannot establish temporal

relationships. Social-media use is frequently measured through self-report, and participants may have difficulty accurately estimating time spent online or remembering specific content encountered.

Studies have also been conducted in selected locations rather than nationally representative samples, while a substantial proportion of evidence concerns students or young adults. Finally, relatively few studies systematically assess the quality, accuracy and credibility of nutrition information encountered online.

Major Research Gaps in the Indian Literature

The reviewed literature identifies several important gaps. First, nutrition information is not adequately differentiated from general social-media exposure. Second, the credibility of information sources remains insufficiently studied. Third, food choice and supplement use are rarely examined together. Fourth, adult populations beyond students and young adults remain underrepresented. Fifth, the specific influence of influencers and commercial brands requires systematic assessment. Sixth, longitudinal evidence is limited. Finally, India's regional, cultural and socioeconomic diversity requires consideration in future studies.

Proposed Framework for Future Indian Research

The reviewed evidence supports a conceptual model in which social media acts as an information and marketing environment rather than a single behavioral determinant. A potential pathway is: Social Media Use → Exposure to Nutrition/Food Content → Source of Information → Perceived Credibility → Nutrition Knowledge and Attitudes → Food-Choice Decisions → Dietary Behavior and Dietary Supplement Use. This relationship may be modified by age, sex, education, socioeconomic status, nutrition knowledge, health consciousness, body-image concerns, social-media usage frequency and platform preference. Such a framework incorporates the major themes identified across research and provides a basis for future empirical investigation.

Implications for Nutrition and Public Health
The increasing role of social media in food-related decision-making has important implications for nutrition education in India. Nutrition professionals should consider social media as a major channel for public nutrition communication, while evidence-based information needs to be presented in formats that compete effectively with commercially driven content. Digital nutrition literacy should become an important component of nutrition education. Individuals should be encouraged to assess the source, evidence, commercial interests and scientific credibility of nutrition claims. Health professionals and public-health organizations can also use social media to promote culturally appropriate Indian foods, healthy recipes and practical dietary guidance. Greater attention may also be required regarding online promotion of dietary supplements. Consumers should be encouraged to distinguish between evidence-based indications for supplementation and commercially motivated claims.

Future Directions

Future studies should consider larger and more representative samples and include adults across different age groups. A particularly useful design would measure frequency of social-media use, platforms used, frequency and type of nutrition-content exposure, information source, perceived credibility, nutrition knowledge, food-choice behavior, dietary patterns, food purchasing behavior, supplement use, reasons for supplement use, influence of influencers or advertisements, and socioeconomic and demographic factors. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable for determining whether exposure to specific types of nutrition information precedes changes in food choices or supplement-use practices.

Conclusion

Social media is becoming an increasingly important component of the food and

nutrition environment. The available literature demonstrates associations between social-media exposure and eating behavior, unhealthy food consumption, food preferences and dietary choices. Research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic additionally demonstrated the capacity of online nutrition information to influence perceptions and practices concerning immunity-related foods and supplements. At the same time, traditional determinants of food choice—including family, culture, convenience, habit and health perceptions—remain important. Social media should therefore be understood as an additional influence operating within an already complex food environment. The evidence also indicates that the nature of social-media content may be more important than social-media use alone. Food advertising, branded content, food imagery, nutrition advice, influencer recommendations and health information may affect individuals through different behavioral pathways. Despite increasing research, an important gap remains in understanding the relationship between nutrition-specific social-media information and actual food-choice and dietary supplement-use behavior among adults. Future research should therefore move beyond measuring screen time and examine the content, source and credibility of information and its relationship with measurable dietary outcomes.

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