

## A CONCEPTUAL STUDY ON UNDERSTANDING THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON CONSUMER FOOD CHOICES IN VELLORE CITY

**Ms. S. Elavarasi**

Research Scholar, Department of Business Administration, Auxilium College (Autonomous), Vellore – 632006

**Dr. S.Uma Mageswari**

Assistant Professor and Supervisor, Department of Business Administration,  
Auxilium College (Autonomous), Vellore – 632006

### ABSTRACT

In an era dominated by digital interconnectedness, this study delves into the profound impact of social media on shaping consumer food choices. With the increasing prevalence of online platforms, individuals are exposed to an abundance of information and influences that play a pivotal role in shaping dietary preferences and consumption patterns. Employing a comprehensive analysis of existing literature, this research synthesizes the multifaceted ways in which social media shapes consumer decisions related to food. The study examines the role of various platforms, content types, and influential factors in the digital landscape that contribute to the dynamic relationship between social media and consumer food choices

Findings from this research underscore the significant influence of social media on consumer food choices. Whether through visual content, user-generated reviews, or targeted advertisements, social media platforms exert a profound impact on shaping individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and ultimately their dietary decisions. The study delves into the potential consequences of this influence, considering both positive aspects such as the dissemination of nutritional information, and negative aspects like the promotion of unhealthy food trends. It also explores the implications for public health and the food industry, highlighting the need for a nuanced understanding of the role social media plays in shaping contemporary food choices.

**Keywords:** *Social media, social media Influence, Food choices, Consumer awareness, Online platforms.*

### INTRODUCTION

Over the last 30 years, global computer usage has surged, particularly with the development of the Internet, connecting computers worldwide. The World Wide Web (www) has allowed businesses to enter the online realm through electronic commerce (e-commerce), where they can sell goods and services globally.

In India, the e-commerce market has experienced remarkable growth, jumping from \$14 billion in 2014 to \$84 billion in 2021, and is expected to reach \$120 billion by 2026. A study by FICCI predicts a substantial expansion of the retail sector, projecting a market size of \$1.8 trillion by 2030, compared to \$705 billion in 2020.

The growth of e-commerce in India, especially in smaller cities, has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The accessibility and affordability of the Internet in Tier II and Tier III cities have fuelled a significant increase in online shopping.

The availability of a wide range of products, coupled with attractive discounts, has led to a rapid increase in web searches, with people of all age groups, especially women, using the internet more frequently for shopping. Recent



years have seen a massive surge in e-commerce, reshaping how customers search for and obtain goods and services. Thanks to advancements in technology and the widespread use of online search engines, the Internet has become the preferred platform for shopping. Its accessibility, substantial purchasing power, the availability of various search engines, and the simplicity of payment and security methods contribute to its popularity. Online platforms provide customers the convenience to explore a vast array of products anytime, anywhere, without leaving their homes.

## DEFINITIONS

Electronic business (E-business) - “The digital enabling of transactions and processes within a firm, involving information systems under the control of the firm” (Laudon & Traver – year missing)

Business-to-Business (B2B) e-commerce - “Online businesses selling to other businesses” (Laudon & Traver – year missing) Business-to-Consumer (B2C) e-commerce - “Online businesses selling to individual consumers” (Laudon & Traver – year missing)

Electronic shopping / Internet shopping/ Online shopping - “The buying of goods or services over the Internet, using either a computer or an Internet television”.

Electronic commerce (E-commerce) - “Maintaining business relationships and selling information, services, and commodities employing computer telecommunications networks” (**Encyclopaedia of Britannica, 2008**)

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do social media influencers affect individual food decisions?
2. Are people aware of social media and the impact of social media influencers?
3. What are the diverse factors influencing an individual's dietary decisions?
4. How do social media influencers satisfy individual's consumption needs?
5. Do social media influencers meet the pre- and post-purchase behaviours of individuals?

## BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

“If your business is not on the internet, then your business will be out of business”

– **Bill Gates.**

“Social media will help you build up loyalty of your current customers to the point that they will willingly and for free, tell others about you”

– **Bonnie Sainsbury**

“Consumers go through in making purchasing decisions, including problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior”.

– **Kotler**

The Word-of-mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA), the official trade association dedicated to WOM and social media marketing, defines influencer marketing as “identifying key communities and opinion leaders who are likely to talk about products and can influence the opinions of others” (**WOMMA, 2016**).

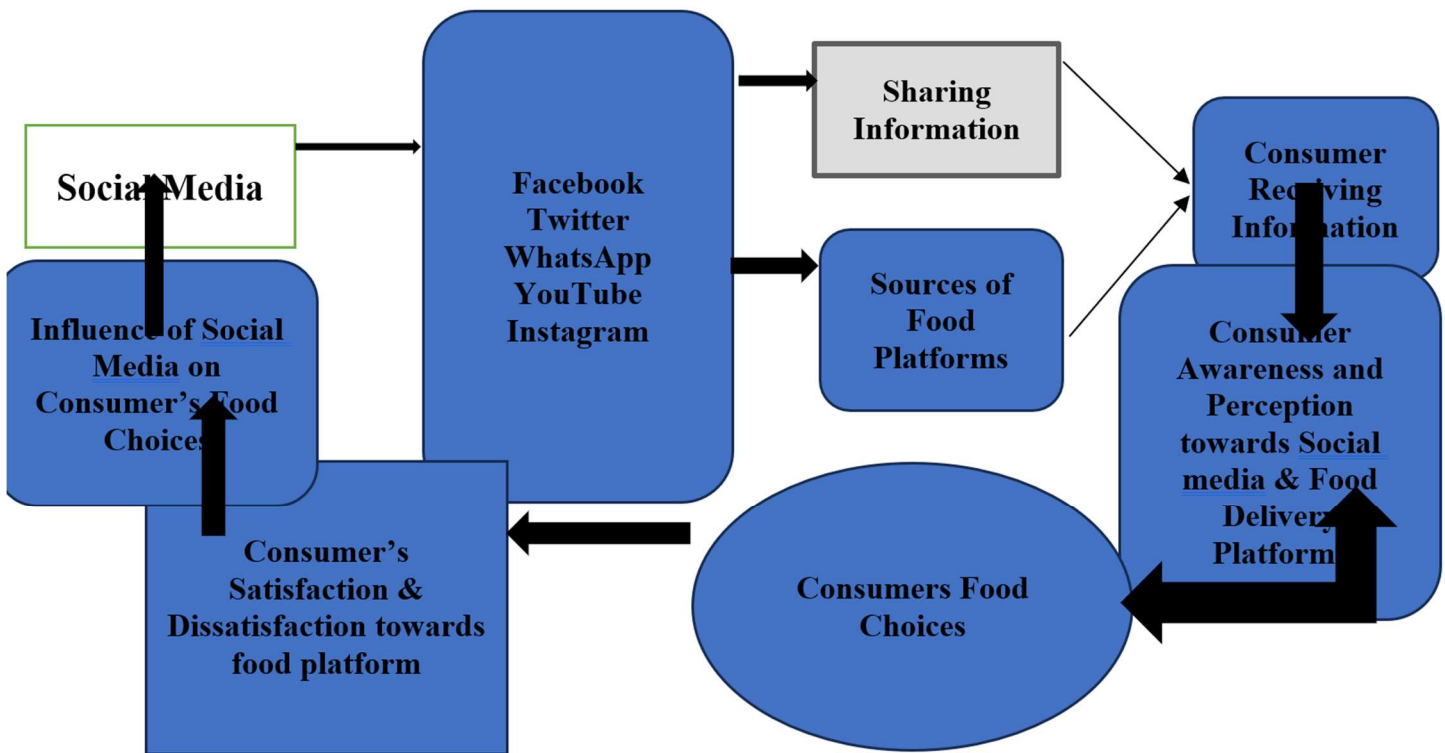
The proposed study illuminates the escalating prevalence of social media usage and its linked concerns regarding body image and disordered eating. Supported by 2023 statistics, revealing a 60% of global social media usage (Kemp, 2023), the research underscores the popularity of image-based platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and video-based sites such as YouTube for content consumption. It emphasizes the interactive nature of social media, enabling users to create profiles, share content, and engage with algorithm-generated posts (Braghieri et al., 2022;

Vandenbosch et al., 2021). This comprehensive overview sets the stage for a thorough exploration of social media's potential impact on body image and disordered eating behaviors. Shifting focus to celebrity endorsements, with global resonance, the research delves into their contribution to global connectivity and GDP elevation across diverse industries. It then investigates the influence of social media influencers on individual decision-making in food choices, considering the estimated worth of global influencers at \$21.1 billion.

**STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Bridging a research gap, the study focuses on understanding how social media affects trustworthiness and, ultimately, influences an individual’s purchasing decisions in their food choices in Vellore City.

**RESEARCH FRAMEWORK**



**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Simeone, M., & Scarpato, D. (2020) stated that social media can influence a consumer's behavior and awareness of sustainable consumption in both positive and bad ways. The unique contribution of this study is its interpretation of the complex interaction between social media information and sustainable consumption in terms of dietary decisions, environmental consciousness, and consumer knowledge. A study conducted on 162 people in Benevento, Italy, showed the connection between social media information and unsustainable eating habits. That is, behaviors that may not be environmentally sustainable are associated with variables that favorably impact the likelihood of knowledge being gained through social networks. Furthermore, one of the most recent findings is that social media frequently leads to homogenized consumption, which is a behavior that harms the environment. The constraints of this study and the results obtained outline future research directions.

**Chen, X., & Yang, X. (2014)** reviewed that a healthy diet is essential for maintaining physical health and a high standard of living. Previous research on the food environment has shown differences in the availability of wholesome food across different geographic ranges. One aspect of this spatial perspective that is often disregarded is the personal impact of one's culinary environment. People often have different preferences when it comes to where, when, how, and what kinds of food they buy and eat. Measuring the degree to which exposure to one's immediate eating surroundings influences one's desire for food is an untapped area for future research. This study approaches this subject in a novel way by requesting personal information regarding food-related behaviors from social media, more especially from "tweets" (messages posted on Twitter). Tweets give an effective way to measure exposure to the food environment in real-time, with spatiotemporally marked information. This metric, which measures each user's access to food individually, is linked to the specific diet choices that individuals express in their tweets. Through a comparison between groups of Twitter users who buy at grocery shops and those who eat at fast food restaurants, we discovered that the presence of fresh produce-stocked grocery stores in a person's neighborhood can have a big impact on that person's decision to make healthy food choices. This research has the potential to greatly benefit stakeholders and health professionals by highlighting the value of social media in crowdsourcing data on human subjects that includes spatiotemporal aspects and by examining how different diets relate to people's perceived food environment, which can positively impact the health of communities.

**Kanwal, M., Burki, U., Ali, R., and Dahlstrom, R. (2022)** the paper examined gender behavioral differences specifically the similarities between men and women in online shopping. Both genders showed favorable attitudes regarding online purchases and e-payments. Social influence has more substantial and positive effects on online purchases among women. Privacy concerns negatively affect both genders but manifest a more significant impact on women than men.

**Skalkos, D., & Kalyva, Z. C. (2023)** the study examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global food consumption and analyzed changes in food choice motivations before, during, and after the crisis. Ten key factors influencing consumer choices—such as health, convenience, sensory appeal, nutritional quality, moral concerns, weight control, mood and anxiety, familiarity, price, and shopping frequency behavior were explored. Despite the ongoing economic crisis, these motives remain significant in the post-pandemic era. The study explored answers regarding post-COVID-19 food choice motives that are premature at this stage. Consumer perceptions and attitudes towards food vary based on factors such as country, age, and gender. Contradictory results indicating changes occurring in two directions, depending on the population were studied. The review underscores the necessity of defining a "new" index of consumer satisfaction, emphasizing its potential to reshape food sales, strategies for retail managers, food companies, and agri-food chain stakeholders. While a complete understanding of food choice motive changes is expected to emerge in three to five years, anticipating and adapting to evolving consumer trends is crucial for industry stakeholders.

**Chen, P. J., & Antonelli, M. (2020)** the study focused on understanding individual food choices that is crucial for transforming the current food system to promote both human health and planetary sustainability. Over the years, researchers from diverse fields have proposed conceptual models to address the various factors influencing food choices. However, a comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach is essential to grasp how these factors interplay in the decision-making process. This paper reviewed and analyzed existing models, offering an integrated perspective by incorporating key elements into a broader framework. The review identifies and

categorizes key determinants of general food choice, including internal factors (sensory and perceptual features), external factors (information, social and physical environment), personal-state factors (biological features, physiological needs, psychological components, habits, and experiences), cognitive factors (knowledge, skills, attitude, liking, preference, anticipated consequences, and personal identity), and sociocultural factors (culture, economic variables, political elements). The paper also discussed possible directions of influence among these factors leading to final food choices.

**Jayashankar, P., & Raju, S. (2020)** reviewed on how low-income customers' view of food availability influenced by social factors such as social networks and cohesiveness? This research, which is comprised of three investigations, concludes that social variables are significant in influencing how these customers perceive their current food situation. Food availability is higher among low-income consumers when they are reminded about their social networks. But only in strong social cohesion does this impact hold, suggesting that social cohesion functions as a moderator. The distance between social networks is another variable of perceived food availability. Both strong and weak social interactions contribute to an increase in perceptions of food availability when social networks are close by (in the same city). Strong social ties are the only thing that can aid when the distance grows (to a different city). This study reveals that self-confidence explains the reason why social factors affect perceived food availability.

**Kurdi, B. A., Alshurideh, M., Akour, I., Tariq, E., AlHamad, A., & Alzoubi, H. (2022)** delved into the evolving landscape of modern marketing, focusing on the effectiveness of social media influencers in shaping consumers' attitudes and intentions. It explores various factors related to influencers and examines the moderating role of vloggers as an emerging marketing tool. The research employs a quantitative approach, collecting data from TikTok users, a widely favored platform for short videos globally. The Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) method is applied for analysis. The results of the study revealed a significant influence of the hypothesized research model, except for the impact of source reliability on consumer attitude and the moderating role of vloggers on consumer intention. These findings contribute not only to the existing literature but also fill a knowledge gap by presenting an integrated model that includes numerous variables not previously examined together in a unique framework. The implications of the research underscore the growing importance of social media influencers and the evolving role of vloggers as key elements in contemporary marketing strategies.

**Eşer Durmaz, S., Keser, A., & Tunçer, E. (2023)** in their the cross-sectional study assessed the repercussions of distance education students and their habits on emotional eating, and the influence of social media on nutritional behavior and obesity among 1000 university students in Turkey during the COVID-19 pandemic. More than half of the students adjusted their meal patterns, with 31.7% adopting a more regular eating schedule and 31.2% skipping main meals. Over 52.6% spent more than 2 hours daily on social media, and female students exceeding this threshold exhibited higher Scale of Effects of social media on Eating Behaviours (SESMEB) and Emotional Eating Scale (EES) scores. Notably, SESMEB was weakly correlated with body mass index (BMI), while its moderate association with EES scores indicated a potential link between social media, emotional eating, and BMI. The interaction between SESMEB and EES scores further elevated the risk of overweight/obesity, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to address the complex interplay of social media, emotional eating, and nutritional habits among distance education students.

**Xie, S., & Madni, G. R. (2023)** investigated the transformative impact of social media on the green consumption intentions of the younger generation in China, particularly focusing on the mediating roles of subjective norms and perceived green value. In response to the surge in social media usage among the youth, this research seeks to fill gaps in the existing literature by exploring how social media influences consumer psychology and attitudes towards green products. A survey involving 303 young individuals in China employs various statistical techniques, including the Fisher F test and confirmatory factor analysis. The findings demonstrate a positive relationship between social media-shared information and green consumption, with perceived green value and subjective norms playing crucial mediating roles. Additionally, consumers' occupation moderate subjective norms regarding green consumption. The study contributes theoretically and practically by revealing the stimulus role of social media in shaping green consumption patterns among the younger generation and offering insights for policymakers in addressing environmental concerns amid China's economic expansion. Future research could be extended to these findings by considering geographical locations and response quartiles in a split sample analysis.

**Gani, M. O., Roy, H., Rahman, M. S., Faroque, A. R., Gupta, V., & Prova, H. T. (2023)** addressed that consumers are becoming more aware of the harmful effects of traditional beauty products, prompting a shift towards interest in organic alternatives. This study explores how social media and consumer engagement contribute to this interest and impact the decision to buy organic beauty products. Analyzing datasets through structural equation modelling, the findings indicate that both social media and consumer engagement positively influence the intention to purchase organic beauty items. The study also identified consumer engagement as a significant mediator between social media influence and purchase intention. While no moderating effect was found for generativity between consumer engagement and purchase intention, the research suggests that marketers should invest more in social media to enhance consumer engagement and influence their decisions to choose organic beauty products. This study offers a new perspective on the organic beauty industry, emphasizing social influence theory and encouraging further exploration of how social media shapes consumer choices in this market.

## **FINDINGS**

The study aimed to uncover nuanced strategies used to engage followers and shape consumer perceptions within the dynamic realm of food choices. This examination seeks to comprehend how influencers influence customer-related factors, including awareness, trustworthiness, price consciousness, satisfaction, uniqueness, customer arrival, brand attitude, envy, and social presence specifically in Vellore City. As social media continues to evolve, this research emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and comprehending its influence on consumer food choices. The study not only contributes to the existing body of knowledge but also calls for ongoing research and awareness to navigate the intricate relationship between social media and the dietary decisions of modern consumers.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the transformative impact of global computer usage, propelled by the advent of the internet, has reshaped the business landscape, particularly through the evolution of electronic commerce (e-commerce). The surge in India's e-commerce market, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, highlights the profound influence of the internet, making online shopping a prevalent trend in Tier II and Tier III cities. The accessibility, affordability, and diverse product offerings have propelled the growth of web searches, particularly among women, contributing to the massive surge in e-commerce in recent years.

As the internet's popularity continues to grow, it plays a crucial role in shaping consumer behavior, with online platforms becoming the preferred choice for shopping. Despite the rapid increase in internet connections, some segments remain hesitant to embrace e-commerce due to various reasons, emphasizing the need to address concerns related to security, delivery costs, and payment methods. In essence, the study contributes to the broader discourse on the interplay between technology, consumer trust, and the shaping of purchasing decisions in the contemporary business landscape.

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