

Influence of Social Media on Food Consumption Choice of Youngsters: A Special Reference to Kerala

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ABSTRACT

“You are what you eat”. Good food is equivalent to a healthy body, and thus, a healthy mind. In today’s era of surfing the internet for reviews and opinion regarding everything subluxary, people voluntarily let themselves get influenced by certain individuals having a say. The popularity of such active individuals in virtual platforms make them ‘social media influencers’. With the increasing popularity of food blogs, vlogs and pictures related to it by such influencers, whether people eat according to their bodily needs or whether food has also become a tool of socializing, has become a question of grave concern. This research paper aims at digging out answers to whether youngsters of Kerala are getting subtly or explicitly influenced by the social media posts on food or not. The youngsters of age group 18-35 years living in Kerala are researched upon. Likes, shares and comments on Facebook, YouTube and Instagram posts in the pages of huge following/ subscribers are analyzed. Survey of youngsters and in-depth interview of the social media influencers and restaurant personnel are taken to draw conclusion. The research also seeks to find answers to whether or not, sponsorship/ perks, if any, lead the influencers to endorse unhealthy food items. Findings suggest that youngsters have a neutral opinion towards trying out the suggested restaurant and food.

Keywords: Food, internet, social media, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, blogs, vlogs, influencers, Kochi, youngsters, photography

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Do you eat food of your choice? Or is it another person who tells you what or what not to eat? What are your tastes, what is healthy for you and what do you actually crave for is something that is solely your decision. What if I tell you that a third party is shaping your choice! “The food you eat can be either the safest and most powerful form of medicine or the slowest form of poison.” – **Ann Wigmore**. And this is where the importance of choosing the food wisely, comes into picture. But what exactly happens to us when it’s time to try something different? According to German economist Karl Marx, just as people live in a society, society also lives inside people. An individual gets socialized at every moment of his/her life. And media plays an important agent of socialization.

AIM

This research paper aims to study the influence of social media on the food consumption choice of youngsters. The focus of this research is on youth falling under age group 18-30 years, living in Kerala.

OBJECTIVE

To find whether food pictures, blogs and vlogs posted by social media influencers cause youngsters in Kerala to try out the food as suggested.

SIGNIFICANCE

It is assumed that due to increasing number of food related blogs and vlogs coming up, and the number of followers and likes it gets, youth, who are the major users of social media prefer to try out the food or the restaurant suggested in those blogs and vlogs. Moreover, most youth above 18 years live out with friends and have freedom to choose their lifestyle. Thus, it can be a major reason for them, surfing the sites and to come across the posts. The new found freedom might lead them to try out different things and this is where food influence might play a major role. The status quo and bandwagon appeal i.e, sharing and discussing about the posts with peers, leading them to try out those dishes to ‘fit-in’ the group of foodies can be an indirect way of food influence.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The study is to understand whether or not, there is an influence of food blogging and vlogging in social media over youngsters in Kerala regarding their food consumption choice.

SOCIAL MEDIA

With such widely used social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube and Facebook which is very popular amongst the youth, individuals are very likely to get subtly or explicitly influenced by the content. Tempting pictures of food, vlogs that makes the viewers crave for a particular dish and flowery description of dine-out experiences in blogs are the ways the food bloggers and vloggers gain followers and become social media influencers. Since research indicates that youth are the major users of social media, they are the ones likely to come across the posts and get influenced.

SUMMARY

Food blogs provide information and inspiration regarding recipes, meal ideas, and food items. As such, they have the capacity to shape

In today's world where international cuisines and their recipes are at the tip of our fingers, trying out new dishes is not a novel thing. However, not every kind of food may suit our body. The climate of the place where we live is a major factor to what we are accustomed to eating and also, what suits our body. Food blogs are the source of information regarding various recipes, international cuisines and methods of preparation. Thus, they are likely to shape social norms as to what, where and how to eat. Therefore, it becomes important to know the nutritional limitations of popular food blogs and vlogs.

Having talked about several facts on how social media are likely to create an impact on its users, it is important to know whether there is an influence regarding food consumption as well. This research paper takes a dig at answering this question.

LITERATURE REVIEW

FOOD PHOTOS AND TEMPTATION

According to Holmberg (2016, as cited in Monika Pretty Aprilia, 2020) "Photographs have a greater appeal than advertising". According to Beaver (in Holmberg, 2016, as cited in Monika Pretty Aprilia,2020), "photo food greatly affects the brain activity of a person associated with appetite regulation". "Charles Spence", et al (2015, as cited in Monika Pretty Aprilia,2020) "also expressed a similarity with Beaver expressed through the concept of visual hunger. This concept reveals that exposure to food photos in social media and other digital media can increase a person's desire to eat. Spence outlines the concept of visual hunger as one's natural desire to see pictures of food. In research on human neuroscience shows that viewing food photos can lead to changes in neural activity, physiological responses, behavioral responses, and visual attention. In the neural response change, the participant responds more quickly and also more accurately to high-calorie food photos than low-calorie food photos (Harrar, 2011). Participants reacted more interested to see photos of foods with high calories such as cheese or meat compared with foods with low calories such as beans." "Spence"(2015, as cited in Monika Pretty Aprilia,2020) "mentioned that the food is packed and served with an eye-catching look. In some cases, dishes are served according to aesthetic or artistic standards known as plating. With food photos that are organized can attract people who see it. It can even change their behavior in consuming food."Monika Pretty Aprilia concluded in her research paper, "Visual hunger on three informants who are culinary fans expressed their interest in photos of food on Instagram and the way they enjoy photos of food on social media. They saw photos of food on Instagram in their spare time. The three informants explained that they are interested in high-calorie food photos, such as cheese, sausages, and cakes, rather than low-calorie food photos such as vegetables or fruits. Instagram changed the consumption patterns of the informants. They use photos of food on Instagram as a reference for places to eat. They consume the foods they like, most of which are high calorie foods."

HIGH INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Cornejo (2017) stated, "When it comes to awareness and brand advocacy it was found that consumers trust more on images published on social media by other consumers than any other advertisement. This data is of extremely importance when someone considers that one of the most shared "products" on the social network is food. "Images, texts, reviews, videos, all those types of data are of extremely importance and can be used by the consumers to determine their behaviors but on the other hand it also shape their actions (Spence, Okajima,Cheok, Petit, & Michel, 2016).

HEALTH CONCERNS

According to Smit, Buijs, Woudenberg, Bevelander and Buijsen(2020), ‘as is the case with food marketing in more traditional media, social media influencers predominantly promote drinks and foods that are high in sugar, fat, and salt (Coates et al., 2019; Folkvord et al., 2019). Consumption of these unhealthy products increases the risk of overweight, obesity, and non-communicable diseases (WHO, 2010). “Vlogs of social media influencers are an attractive platform for food industries to promote their products.” “Previous research that has focused on other types of food marketing has convincingly shown that exposure to media depicting unhealthy products, such as sugar-sweetened beverages and snacks, is associated with higher consumption of such products among children (e.g., vereecken et al., 2006; buijzen et al., 2008; lipsky and iannotti, 2012; boyland et al., 2016; folkvord et al., 2016; pearson et al., 2018). These studies have generally studied dose-response associations, finding that the more children were exposed to the various forms of food marketing, the more they consumed the advertised products.”

According to Coates, Hardman, Halford, Christiansen and Boyland (2019), “Less healthy foods (compared with healthy foods) were more often; branded, presented in the context of eating out, described positively, not consumed, and featured as part of an explicit marketing campaign. These data provide the first empirical assessment of the extent and nature of food and beverage cue presentation in YouTube videos by influencers popular with children. Social media users choose how they present themselves online (Blinka and Smahel, 2009), and so products and brands may be featured for self-representation rather than real-life consumption (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). For instance, a popular fast food meal may be featured in an influencers YouTube video for the purpose of creating content that is appealing to their audience, but in real life, the whole portion is not consumed.”

ETHICAL CONCERNS

The researches done so far are regarding the influence of social media like Facebook, Instagram, Youtube and Twitter. The researches were done on the Americans, Swedish and others international and mostly on children and adolescents. Many researches concluded with evidence that food photographs do have an impact on the consumption patterns. Certain ethical issues are also looked upon regarding the nutritional value of the food being presented and the vested interest in it. Previous research also comes out with conclusive evidence regarding the health risks posed due unhealthy eating habits reinforced by the social media.

This research focuses on the youngsters primarily above adolescence in the Kochi city of Kerala, India. It narrows its objective towards knowing whether the influencers really have an impact over the food consumption and restaurant choices; if yes, then the way they shape people’s perception towards liking certain items. It also digs out to understand the health concerns caused due to the inter-geographical food adoption which is subjected to climate change.

METHODOLOGY AND VARIABLES

This research paper aims to identify the cause-effect relationship between food posts in social media and consumption patterns of the viewers. Primary data - both qualitative and quantitative is needed to achieve this aim. The primary data collected is descriptive, which is, the data collected by gathering observations without intervening rather than controlling or manipulating variables.

Research Topic- Influence of social media on food consumption choice of youngsters: A special reference to Kerala

Research Objective- To find whether food pictures, blogs and vlogs posted by social media influencers cause youngsters in Kerala to try out the food as suggested.

Hypothesis-

1. Tempting description and posts of food influences youngsters to try out the suggested food.
2. Bandwagon Appeal- peer discussion about trending food items on social media cause youngsters to try out the suggested food.

- **Quantitative method- Survey/ Questionnaire**

A sample of 220 youngsters of age group 18-30 living in Kerala is taken. Simple Random Sampling Technique is used. Questions regarding the social media influencers they follow, the blogs, vlogs and food related pages they visit or follow, the frequency of their eat-outs their home and restaurant food choices and the likes are asked.

- **Qualitative method- In-depth interview**

Interview of the social media influencers who have more than 100K followers/ subscribers on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and other blogging sites are taken in detail. This is to know about the feedback they get, if any, from their viewers/readers apart from the public comments posted on the platform. This is also to learn about the sponsorship/ paid partnership they have, if any, with the restaurants they show or write about.

Interviews of restaurant personnel are also taken to learn about the varied number of footfalls and the type of food ordered the most by the youngsters.

- **Independent Variable-** Food pictures/ videos/ writings posted on social media
- **Dependent Variable-** Choice of food consumed

INTERPRETATION

From the survey, it has come to understand that the maximum respondents are between age group 18-21 and are undergraduate students. Among 220 respondents, the number of people who have come across food posts (blog, vlog, picture) in social media are 186 i.e, 86.5%

Crosstab 1

FREQUENCY ANALYSIS OF COMING ACROSS OF FOOD SUGGESTION FROM BLOGGERS AND VLOGGERS AND ITS INFLUENCE IN CHOOSING THE FOOD

		Count					Total
		Kindly choose the appropriate option [Do you think social media influences you in choosing the food?]					
		Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Strongly agree	Strongly disagree	
Kindly choose the appropriate option [Have you come across any food suggestion from the food bloggers/ vloggers?]	Never	4	7	14	0	9	34
	Often	24	9	15	6	4	58
	Rarely	9	11	27	1	4	52
	Sometimes	19	15	33	3	6	76
Total		56	42	89	10	23	220

The attitude of maximum number of respondents who have “Sometimes” come across food suggestion are “Neutral” towards the influence in choosing the food.

Chi-Square Test of Crosstab 1

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	31.701 ^a	12	.002
Likelihood Ratio	30.194	12	.003
N of Valid Cases	220		

. 5 cells (25.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.55.

Ho- There is no influence in choosing the food due to the food suggested in social media.

H1- There is an influence in choosing the food due to the food suggested in social media.

The significance value is 0.002 which is less than 0.005

Ho is rejected and it can be said that the hypothesis is valid.

Therefore, there is an influence in choosing the food due to the food suggested in social media.

Crosstab 2

FREQUENCY ANALYSIS OF COMING ACROSS OF RESTAURANT SUGGESTION FROM BLOGGERS AND VLOGGERS AND ITS INFLUENCE IN CHOOSING THE RESTAURANT

		Count					Total
		Kindly choose the appropriate option [Do you think social media influences you in choosing the restaurant?]					
		Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Strongly agree	Strongly disagree	
Kindly choose the appropriate option [Have you come across any restaurant suggestion from the food bloggers/ vloggers?]	Never	6	11	15	0	8	
	Often	26	3	12	7	2	
	Rarely	7	7	34	2	5	
	Sometimes	25	12	28	1	9	
Total		64	33	89	10	24	220

The attitude of maximum number of respondents who have “Sometimes” come across restaurant suggestion are “Neutral” towards the influence in choosing the restaurant.

Chi-Square Test of Crosstab 2

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	53.121 ^a	12	.000
Likelihood Ratio	52.085	12	.000
N of Valid Cases	220		

. 5 cells (25.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.82.

Ho- There is no influence in choosing the restaurant due to the restaurant suggested in social media.

H1- There is an influence in choosing the restaurant due to the restaurant suggested in social media.

The significance value is 0.000 which is less than 0.005

Ho is rejected and it can be said that the hypothesis is valid.

Therefore, there is an influence in choosing the restaurant due to the restaurant suggested in social media.

CROSSTAB 3

FREQUENCY ANALYSIS OF COMING ACROSS OF FOOD SUGGESTION FROM BLOGGERS AND VLOGGERS AND THE PREFERENCE GIVEN TO TRY OUT THE FOOD

		Count				Total
		Kindly choose the appropriate option [Do you prefer to try out the food suggested through social media?]				
		Never	Often	Rarely	Sometimes	
Kindly choose the appropriate option [Have you come across any food suggestion from the food bloggers/ vloggers?]	Never	18	1	10	5	34
	Often	2	32	4	20	58
	Rarely	4	1	27	20	52
	Sometimes	4	5	24	43	76

Total	28	39	65	88	220
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The maximum number of people who have “Sometimes” come across food suggestion from bloggers and vloggers prefer to try out the food suggested by them “Sometimes”.

Chi-Square Test of Crosstab 3

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	144.334 ^a	9	.000
Likelihood Ratio	123.937	9	.000
N of Valid Cases	220		

Ho- There is no preference given in trying out the food due to the food suggested in social media.

H1- There is a preference given in trying out the in food due to the food suggested in social media.

The significance value is 0.000 which is less than 0.005

Ho is rejected and it can be said that the hypothesis is valid.

Therefore, there is aninfluence in choosing the food due to the food suggested in social media.

CROSSTAB 4

FREQUENCY ANALYSIS OF COMING ACROSS OF RESTAURANT SUGGESTION FROM BLOGGERS AND VLOGGERS AND THE PREFERENCE GIVEN TO TRY OUT THE RESTAURANT						
Count						
		Kindly choose the appropriate option [Do you prefer to try out restaurant suggested through social media?]				Total
		Never	Often	Rarely	Sometimes	
Kindly choose the appropriate option [Have you come across any restaurant suggestion from the food bloggers/ vloggers?]	Never	26	0	8	6	40
	Often	1	28	3	18	50
	Rarely	5	3	32	15	55
	Sometimes	3	4	26	42	75
Total		35	35	69	81	220

The maximum number of people who have “Sometimes” come across restaurant suggestion from bloggers and vloggers prefer to try out the restaurant suggested by them “Sometimes”.

Chi-Square Test of Crosstab 4

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	179.708 ^a	9	.000
Likelihood Ratio	152.741	9	.000
N of Valid Cases	220		

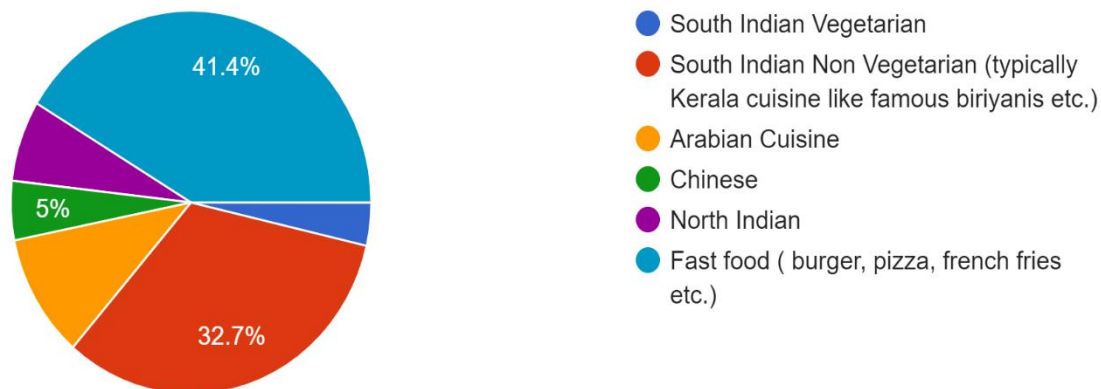
.. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 6.36.

Ho- There is no preference given in trying out the restaurant due to the restaurant suggested in social media.

H1- There is a preference given in trying out the in restaurant due to the restaurant suggested in social media.

Which food item you generally prefer eating out with friends?

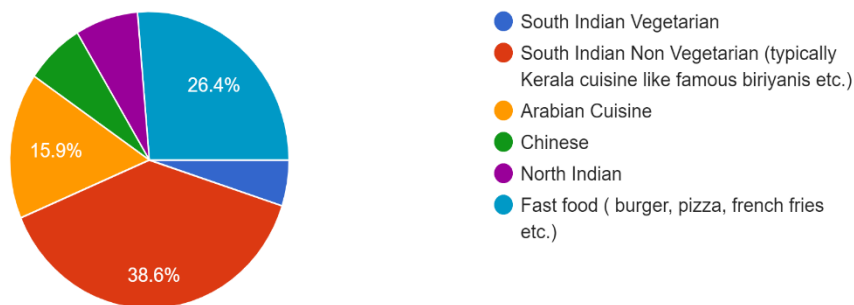
220 responses



The significance value is 0.000 which is less than 0.005

Which food item you generally prefer to eat out/ parcel/ order from restaurants alone?

220 responses



Ho is rejected and it can be said that the hypothesis is valid.

Therefore, there is an influence in choosing the restaurant due to the restaurant suggested in social media.

CHART 1

CHART 2

From In-depth interview with a popular food vlogger (with 116K Instagram followers), it has come to understand that they prefer non-vegetarian recipes to post and talk about. From the survey (Chart 1 and 2), it has come to observation that youngsters prefer non-vegetarian recipes preceded by fast food (which has highest vote) be it with friends or being alone. It shows that being with friends (chart 1) or being alone (chart 2) doesn't make much difference in their food consumption choice. Therefore, the external factor of peer influence in the food consumption choice amongst youngsters can be neglected.

CONCLUSION

From the research carried out on studying the influence of social media on the food consumption choice of youngsters in Kerala, it has come to understand that, the influence is neutral. It was hypothesized that tempting description and posts of food influences youngsters to try out the suggested food. A survey with 220 respondents was carried out in Kerala. In-depth interview of a food blogger and of a restaurant personnel were taken as part of the analysis.

The maximum respondents were under-graduate students between age-group 18-20 years, that is, young adults. Among 220 respondents, the maximum number of respondents prefer to try out fast food items like pizza, burger, French fries etc., followed by those who prefer to try out South Indian non-vegetarian items like famous biriyani particular to a region in south. Now, with the in-depth interview with a famous food vlogger who has 116K Instagram followers, and by analyzing various food blogs and vlogs, it has come to understand that vloggers mostly show South Indian non-vegetarian food items i.e, the poll that stand second in the survey. Thus, a strong influence cannot be observed, at the same time, the influence cannot be nullified as well.

It can also be concluded that, the major factor for maximum number of respondents to try out the food suggested on social media is to try new dishes. Here, the external factor of peers influencing the food consumption choice, with or without the peers themselves getting influenced by social media, is neglected. It means that, whatever small influence can be seen, is directly through social media.

The influence of social media on the food consumption choice of youngsters is more subtle than explicit as the maximum number of respondents have a neutral opinion when asked whether or not, social media food suggestions are trustworthy, and whether or not, social media food and restaurant suggestions influence their food consumption behaviour.

LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE

This research does not clearly convey whether there is an influence of social media on the food consumption patterns of youngsters or not as majority opinion came out neutral in the survey. However, the fact that there are people who do get influenced cannot be neglected. Whether or not, the influence negatively affects their health is not researched upon.

With an in-depth interview with a popular food vlogger, it is evident that some endorsements are paid collaborations with the restaurants. Therefore, the factor of digital marketing in the disguise of blogging and vlogging can be researched upon. Moreover, the type of food we eat highly depends on the geography and climate of the location. Through food blogging and vlogging, youngsters might try out to food endorsed which is staple to an entirely different location. Therefore, the health concerns, if any, after trying out those endorsed food is also a possible area to research on.

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