World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews
eISSN: 2581-9615 CODEN (USA): WJARAI
Cross Ref DOI: 10.30574/wjarr
Journal homepage: https://wjarr.com/

(REVIEW ARTICLE)

# THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SHAPING FOOD CONSUMPTION CHOICES AMONG YOUNG CONSUMERS: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2026, 32(02), 462–472

Publication history: Received on 27 September 2026; revised on 03 November 2026; accepted on 06 November 2026

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2026.32.2.2846

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## ABSTRACT

**Background and objective:** Social media has become a dominant food environment for adolescents and young adults, yet evidence on its influence on their food choices is fragmented across marketing, public health and consumer psychology. This review synthesises peer-reviewed evidence on the role of social media in shaping young consumers' food consumption choices and identifies a future research agenda.

**Methods:** A systematic literature review followed PRISMA 2020. Scopus was searched for English-language articles published in 2016-2026 in ABDC A*, A and B-ranked journals. Of 2,111 records, 24 studies met the eligibility criteria and were analysed thematically.

**Results:** Eleven of the 24 studies appeared in 2025-2026; 75% were quantitative and Instagram was the most studied platform. Influencer credibility, emotional contagion, narrative self-referencing, moral identity, colour-saturated food imagery, peer norms and platform-specific formats such as TikTok videos and livestreams shaped food attitudes, purchase intentions and behaviour. Unhealthy food cues exerted stronger effects than healthy ones, and adolescents' recognition of persuasive intent was not protective. The evidence relies heavily on cross-sectional, self-reported designs and Western and East Asian samples, and only one study centred on Generation Z. An integrative Stimulus-Organism-Response model and a nine-area research agenda are proposed.

**Conclusion:** Social media is a double-edged sword: it mainly promotes unhealthy food choices but, when designed around peer enjoyment, credibility and social proof, can promote healthier and more sustainable eating, informing marketers, educators and policymakers.

**Keywords:** Social Media; Food Consumption; Young Consumers; Generation Z; Influencer Marketing; Systematic Literature Review

# 1 INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of social media use among young consumers has redefined the food consumption environment. Young people's dietary choices are no longer shaped only by nutrition labels, parental guidance and broadcast advertising, but by a continuous stream of immersive, peer-mediated food content on Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube and Snapchat. The combination of visual platform design, algorithmic personalisation, influencer culture and the identity formation of young consumers makes the link between social media and food consumption one of the most commercially and socially significant consumer behaviour phenomena of the present decade.

Over the last decade these platforms have become the main places where food is discovered, evaluated, shared and ultimately consumed. Young consumers make up a disproportionately large share of their billions of users, and Generation Z (born approximately 1997-2012), the first fully digital-native cohort, acquires food discovery, brand engagement and peer consumption norms mainly through digital channels. In one week, teenagers in a parent-child participatory study were exposed to 3,385 food and beverage advertisements across Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and YouTube [1], and adolescents in Uruguay showed high recall of social media food marketing, particularly for fast-food brands and food delivery apps [2].

Despite this, scholarship remains scattered across marketing, public health, nutrition science and consumer psychology. Individual studies address single aspects such as influencer persuasion, visual cues, social norms or platform effects, but no systematic review integrates these strands and sets out where research should go next. Existing studies also rely largely on cross-sectional questionnaires that limit causal inference, concentrate on Western and East Asian countries, often merge Generation Z with other young consumers, and struggle to keep pace with rapidly evolving formats such as short-form video, livestreaming and social commerce. This review addresses these gaps by answering two research questions:

- **RQ1:** What advancements have been made in the context, characteristics, theoretical foundations and methodologies of previous research on the role of social media in shaping food consumption choices among young consumers?
- **RQ2:** What future research opportunities can be identified in the area of social media and food consumption behaviour among young consumers?

Five objectives follow from these questions: (i) to identify and organise the primary ways in which social media influences the food consumption behaviour of young consumers; (ii) to examine how platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and Facebook influence food choices and willingness to buy; (iii) to examine the role of influencer marketing, including trust, narrative features and emotional contagion; (iv) to assess the extent to which social media promotes healthy, organic and sustainable food to young consumers; and (v) to identify the theories employed and suggest areas for further research. In this review, "young consumers" are adolescents and young adults aged 12-25 years.

# 2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

## 2.1 Research design

This study is a systematic literature review (SLR), a qualitative, exploratory form of secondary research; no primary data were collected. An SLR provides a methodical, transparent and replicable way of locating, assessing and synthesising existing evidence using predefined and documented rules. The PRISMA 2020 guideline [3] was used to structure searching, screening and reporting, so that the numbers of records identified, removed, screened and included are fully traceable.

## 2.2 Data source and search strategy

All records were retrieved from the Scopus database on 28 May 2026. Scopus indexes more than 25,000 journals across business, social sciences, psychology and health sciences, offers an ABDC journal-quality filter and allows full export of bibliographic records, which made it suitable as the sole source for this topic. The search window (2016-2026) was chosen to capture the period in which today's major platforms emerged and matured, including TikTok, which rose to prominence from 2019 onwards.

Broad terms ("social media" AND "food consumption") were used first to capture the full literature, followed by more specific combinations targeting Generation Z, young consumers and Instagram. The ten keyword combinations and their yields are shown in Table 1. The broadest query returned 2,111 records, whereas adding "Generation Z" or "Gen

Z" reduced the yield to 26 and 10 records respectively, and the Instagram-plus-Gen Z queries returned only two and three records. This scarcity is itself evidence of a research gap (RQ2).

**Table 1: Summary of keyword search strings used in the Scopus database**

| No. | Search query | Records |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | TITLE-ABS-KEY(social media) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(food consumption) | 2,111 |
| 2 | TITLE-ABS-KEY(social media) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(food consumption) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(Generation Z) | 26 |
| 3 | TITLE-ABS-KEY(social media) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(food consumption behaviour) | 172 |
| 4 | TITLE-ABS-KEY(social media) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(food consumption behaviour) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(Generation Z) | 16 |
| 5 | TITLE-ABS-KEY(social media) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(food consumption behaviour) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(gen z) | 10 |
| 6 | TITLE-ABS-KEY(social media) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(food consumption behaviour) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(young consumers) | 61 |
| 7 | TITLE-ABS-KEY(instagram) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(food consumption) | 140 |
| 8 | TITLE-ABS-KEY(instagram) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(food consumption behaviour) | 60 |
| 9 | TITLE-ABS-KEY(instagram) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(food consumption behaviour) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(Gen Z) | 2 |
| 10 | TITLE-ABS-KEY(instagram) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(food consumption) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(Gen Z) | 3 |

### 2.3 Eligibility criteria

Articles were included if they were: (i) peer-reviewed journal articles in English; (ii) published between 2016 and 2026; (iii) published in journals ranked A*, A or B on the ABDC 2025 Journal Quality List; (iv) focused on social media as a major independent, mediating or moderating variable; (v) concerned with eating, food marketing or food purchase/choice behaviour; and (vi) focused on young consumers, adolescents or youth as the main or a substantial sub-sample. ABDC A* journals are the top tier in business and management, A journals are of very high and B journals of good international standing. Conference papers, books and chapters, journals ranked C or unranked, studies of adults over 25 only, and studies addressing food production, food safety or supply chains without a consumption focus were excluded to maintain the quality and relevance of the evidence base.

### 2.4 Study selection

Selection followed the four PRISMA stages (Figure 1).

- **Identification:** the 2,111 initial records were deduplicated and filtered by ABDC rank (A*, A, B) and publication year, leaving 172 unique records.
- **Screening:** titles and abstracts of the 172 records were assessed against the criteria above; 87 were excluded, mainly because social media was mentioned only briefly, the samples were exclusively adults over 25, or food topics were unrelated to consumption behaviour, leaving 85 records.
- **Eligibility:** full texts of the 85 records were assessed, and 42 were excluded for insufficient empirical analysis of social media's effect on food consumption, a focus on production, policy or nutrition science without consumer behaviour, a non-young sample, or serious methodological limitations, leaving 43.
- **Inclusion:** a final 24 articles were selected on three criteria: relevance to the central focus, theoretical and methodological contribution, and uniqueness of contribution (where several studies had near-identical designs and findings, the most rigorous and most recent was preferred).

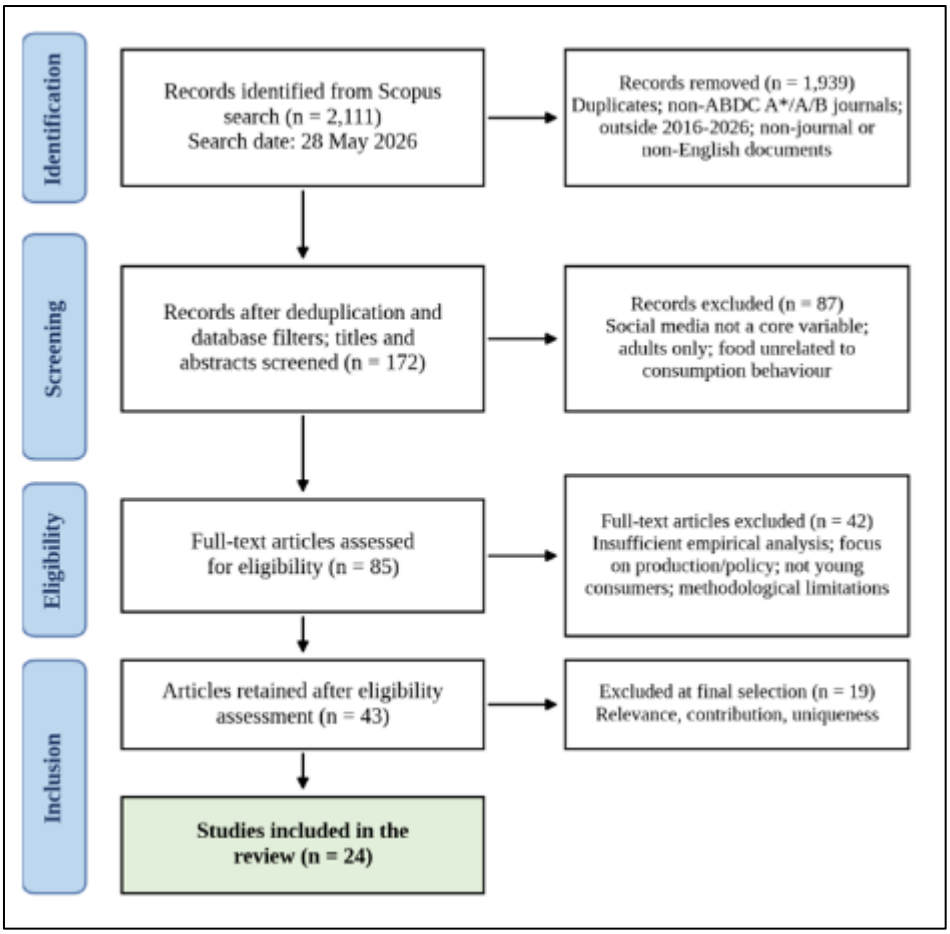



**Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the study selection process.**

### 2.5 Data analysis

The 24 included studies were read in full and compared on context, platform, sample, theory, method and findings. Findings were then organised thematically into the influence mechanisms reported in Section 3, and cross-cutting contradictions, theoretical frameworks and research gaps were identified to answer RQ1 and RQ2.

## 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Profile of the reviewed studies

The 24 articles were published in 12 journals and drew on samples from 11 countries. One foundational study dates from 2016 [4], but output rose steeply from 2022 and 11 of the 24 studies (46%) appeared in 2025-2026 (Figure 2a), reflecting post-pandemic growth in social media use, the emergence of TikTok and growing public-health concern about digital food marketing. Quantitative designs dominate (75%, n = 18), followed by qualitative (17%, n = 4) and mixed or participatory designs (8%, n = 2) (Figure 2b); the qualitative work, such as expert consultation [5] and adolescent interviews [2, 6], supplies the contextual depth that statistical studies cannot.

Instagram was the most studied platform (five studies [1, 7-10]), followed by Facebook (four [11-14]), multi-platform designs (three [15]), YouTube and TikTok (two each [16, 17]), gaming livestreaming platforms (one) and Snapchat (one) (Figure 2c); some studies spanned several platforms, so counts overlap. TikTok is poorly represented relative to its dominance among Generation Z.

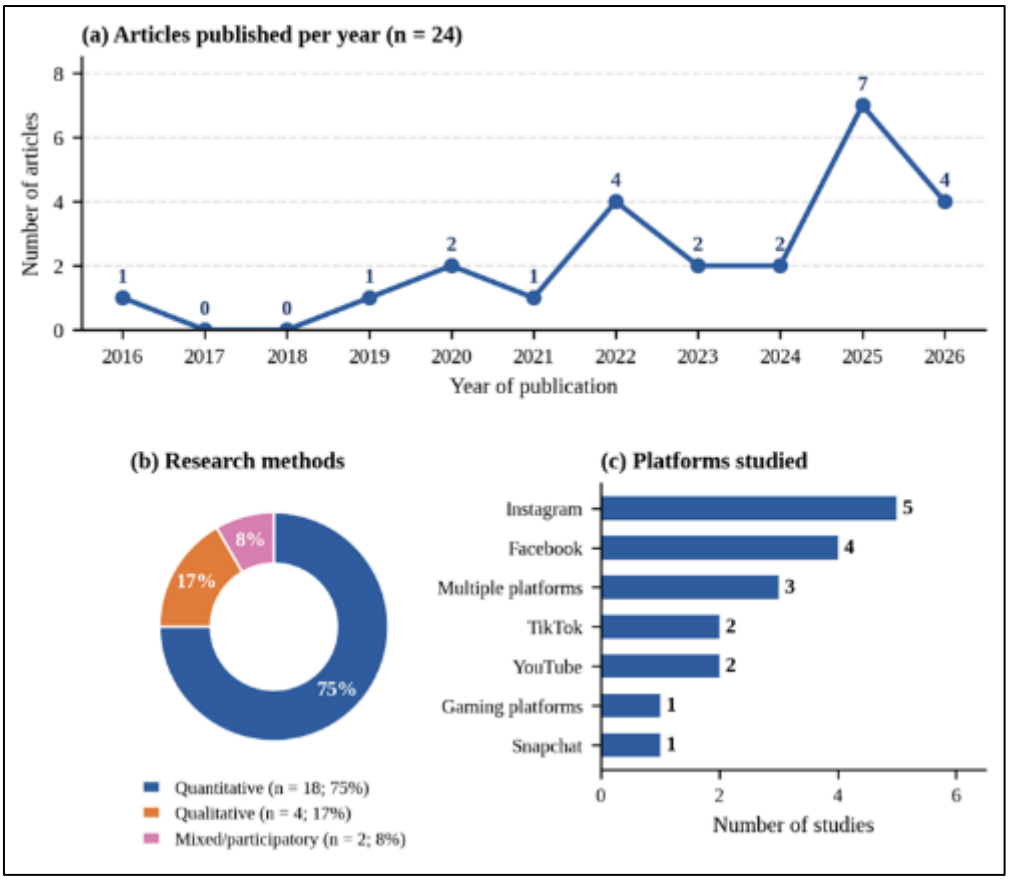



**Figure 2: Profile of the 24 reviewed studies: (a) publication year, (b) research method and (c) social media platforms studied.**

### 3.2 Summary of key findings

Table 2 summarises the principal findings by theme. Sections 3.3-3.9 interpret these themes and Section 3.10 examines contradictions across them.

**Table 2: Summary of key findings from the 24 reviewed studies**

| Theme | Key findings | Studies |
|---|---|---|
| Social media as a digital food environment | Brand-related conversations had commercially material effects on brand valuation and soft-drink market share. Experts identified repeated, implicit exposure ("normalisation") as the main long-term mechanism. Teen-targeted advertising was dominated by carbonated beverages (29%), fast food (24%), confectionery (19%) and energy drinks (14%). | [1, 4, 5] |
| Influencer marketing | Influencer credibility dimensions predicted perceived information quality ($R^2$ = 0.61), which predicted purchase intention (β = 0.72); herd behaviour moderated the effect (β = 0.19). Online-celebrity emotional contagion predicted purchase intention (β = 0.53). Parasocial vicarious experience predicted home-cooking intentions, and moral image increased willingness to buy imperfect food through moral identity. | [18-21] |
| Visual and sensory content | High colour saturation raised purchase intention via perceived freshness and tastiness. Instagram food aesthetics carried ethical and waste-reduction meanings. Self-referencing was the strongest predictor of pleasure (β = 0.41), arousal (β = 0.38) and dominance (β = 0.36) in sponsored food vlogs. | [7, 8, 10, 12] |
| Social norms and peer influence | Perceived descriptive Facebook norms predicted healthy eating (β = 0.24); injunctive norms predicted unhealthy snacking. Peer enjoyment of vegetables modelled on Instagram increased vegetable (d = 0.43) and fruit (d = 0.38) intake. Media on a public figure's diet raised fast-food intentions via ingroup norms. | [9, 11, 14] |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Adolescent vulnerability | High exposure to fast-food and delivery-app marketing; adolescents recognised persuasion but underestimated its influence. Girls showed greater awareness of persuasive intent and colour-cue sensitivity; boys showed higher recall of gaming sponsorship. Gaming-platform marketing recall predicted food purchase (β = 0.31) and consumption (β = 0.28). | [2, 6, 15, 16] |
| Platform-specific effects | TikTok content creativity activated pleasure, arousal and dominance (β = 0.29, 0.31 and 0.27) and drove impulsive dining. Prominent soft-drink cues on Instagram raised carbonated-beverage selection (OR = 1.74), whereas water cues did not raise healthy choice. | [8, 17] |
| Sustainable, organic and green food | Social media improved attitudes toward organic food and online impulse buying and influenced all three TPB constructs for green food (moderated by product availability). Social digital cues generated more e-WOM than product cues for plant-based food. In India, trust was non-significant while information- and value-based paths dominated. | [13, 22-25] |

### 3.3 Social media as a food environment

The reviewed literature portrays social media not as one more marketing channel but as a pervasive, algorithmically curated food environment that young consumers can hardly avoid. Brand-level evidence shows that online conversation measurably shifts market share and purchase probability [4]; audit evidence shows teenagers meet thousands of food advertisements across four to five platforms in a single week [1]; and expert consultation identifies normalisation, meaning repeated, low-attention exposure, as the principal mechanism [5]. Three points of agreement emerge: influence is cumulative rather than episodic; targeted, algorithmic, always-on delivery is qualitatively different from broadcast advertising; and marketers concentrate on high-sugar, high-fat snack and fast-food categories regardless of platform or country. The unresolved issue is causal: claims about long-term dietary effects rest on cross-sectional or short-horizon experimental data, so the direction of influence is plausible but its long-run magnitude is unknown.

### 3.4 Influencers and food choice

Influencer marketing is the most studied mechanism, and four research streams are best read as complementary routes of persuasion. The **cognitive** route holds that expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness and responsiveness raise perceived information quality and hence purchase intention, amplified by social proof [18]. The **affective** route shows that pleasure, arousal and admiration elicited by online celebrities, especially in livestreams, transfer to viewers through emotional contagion and are intensified by co-viewers' reactions, a group-based rather than dyadic form of persuasion [19]. The **identity** route finds that narrative self-referencing, where viewers see their own experiences in the story, drives emotional engagement more strongly than facts or positive statements [12]. The **moral** route shows that an influencer's moral image can activate followers' moral identity and their willingness to buy imperfect produce when the influencer is perceived as autonomous [21], while parasocial vicarious experience extends influence to home cooking and lifestyle [20]. These effects replicate across several countries, including South Korea, China, Egypt, the United Kingdom and France, making them among the best-triangulated findings in the corpus. However, no study models the four routes simultaneously to establish which dominates when all are present in the same content.

### 3.5 Visual and sensory mechanisms

Visual presentation is a powerful persuasive cue. In two experiments, higher colour saturation in online food images increased purchase intention by strengthening perceived freshness and tastiness, although the effect weakened when the food appeared distant or consumption was expected to be social [7]. In two experiments with 964 participants aged 18-25, prominent soft-drink cues in Instagram-style images increased soft-drink choice, whereas water cues failed to increase healthy choice [8], revealing an asymmetry in which unhealthy cues nudge more strongly than healthy ones. A multimodal analysis of 20 Instagram videos by a Michelin-starred chef showed that staging, narrative and aesthetics can reframe leftovers as tasty and worthwhile and challenge food-waste norms [10], so food aesthetics can carry ethical as well as commercial meaning.

### 3.6 Social norms and peer influence

Social norms operate as a dietary lever in both healthy and unhealthy directions. Cross-sectional data show that perceived descriptive norms of peers' eating are linked to both healthy and unhealthy eating, whereas perceived injunctive norms are linked only to unhealthy eating [11]. The only randomised experiment in the corpus found that observing a peer's enjoyment of vegetables, rather than merely seeing vegetables eaten, increased intake among young women who liked vegetables [9], although the trial was small (n = 100, women only, six days). Media attention to a

political leader's diet likewise shifted perceived norms and fast-food intentions in the unhealthy direction [14], which shows that the lever is directionally neutral and depends on the behaviour modelled.

### 3.7 Adolescent vulnerability

Studies from Uruguay, Canada, the United Kingdom and India agree on a counter-intuitive pattern: adolescents can recognise social media food marketing and describe its persuasive techniques, yet this awareness does not measurably change their food decisions [2, 6, 15, 16]. This points to a metacognitive blind spot, in which persuasion is understood but not believed to apply to oneself, rather than to a knowledge deficit. Gender adds nuance: girls showed greater sensitivity to colour and appearance cues and boys greater recall of gaming sponsorship [15], so vulnerability is both gender- and channel-specific. Gaming livestreaming remains a regulatory blind spot, with far less oversight than Instagram or TikTok [16].

### 3.8 Platform-specific effects

Platforms differ in the mechanisms they trigger. Among Generation Z TikTok users (n = 767), the creativity of food review videos was the only attribute that raised pleasure, arousal and dominance simultaneously, and arousal was the main driver of unplanned restaurant visits [17]. Instagram remains the leading channel for food advertising to adolescents [1] and serves both commercial and health-communication purposes [8, 10]. Facebook acts more covertly, through the continuous circulation of social norms [11], while livestreaming and gaming platforms blend entertainment, social interaction and advertising, with real-time interaction intensifying emotional involvement [16, 19]. TikTok appears in only two reviewed studies despite its prominence among Generation Z, so academic research lags commercial reality.

### 3.9 Sustainable and specialty food consumption

Social media is also a channel for organic, green and plant-based foods. Online reviews, ratings, forums and influencer endorsements helped form favourable attitudes towards organic food and led to purchase [13], and social media strengthened consumers' belief in their capacity to choose environmentally friendly foods [22]. For plant-based food, posts emphasising social interaction and belonging generated more e-WOM than feature-focused posts [23]. Evidence from India suggests that information- and value-based paths outweigh affective trust [25], indicating that mechanisms validated in Western settings need adaptation, while tourism influencers promoted sustainable gastronomic behaviour through memorable local food experiences [24]. Social, sensory and experiential framing therefore appears at least as persuasive as ethical or health appeals.

### 3.10 Cross-cutting contradictions and gaps

Five tensions cut across the themes. First, risk-oriented evidence dominates, while the two most promising healthy-direction mechanisms, peer enjoyment modelling and aesthetic reframing, each rest on a single small study. Second, young people's growing awareness of persuasive intent does not reduce influence, which undermines policies that rely on media literacy alone. Third, platform representation lags platform relevance: Instagram is over-represented, while TikTok, livestreaming and gaming platforms are under-represented relative to where Generation Z spends its attention. Fourth, 18 of the 24 studies (75%) are quantitative and most use cross-sectional, self-reported measures, so association pathways can be stated with confidence but causal claims cannot. Fifth, the evidence is geographically concentrated, with 58.3% of studies from Western countries and the remainder largely from East Asia; South Asian evidence is limited to a few studies [6, 25], and Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America are absent. Generation Z is the explicit focal population in only one study [17], which is the largest demographic gap in the literature.

### 3.11 Theoretical frameworks and an integrative model

The Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model is the most frequently used framework [12, 17, 23], complemented by Social Learning and Social Influence Theory [9, 20], Source Credibility Theory [18], the Theory of Planned Behaviour for green food [22], Moral Identity Theory [21], Emotional Contagion Theory [19], Sensory Imagery Theory [7] and Social Norm Theory [11]. The landscape is diverse but fragmented: no study combines individual psychology, social norms, platform affordances and cultural context in a single multi-level model.

Figure 3 therefore integrates the findings in an SOR framework. Three stimuli (platform architecture, content features and social signals) activate four largely automatic and affective mechanisms (sensory imagery, emotional contagion and parasocial engagement, social-norm internalisation, and moral identity and credibility appraisal). These shape attitudes, purchase or consumption intentions and behaviours such as impulsive buying, unplanned dining visits, dietary change and e-WOM, with age or cohort, gender, culture and region, food type and platform affordances acting as moderators. The model's contribution is integrative: a single piece of food content can activate several routes at once, yet these routes have rarely been examined together or compared.

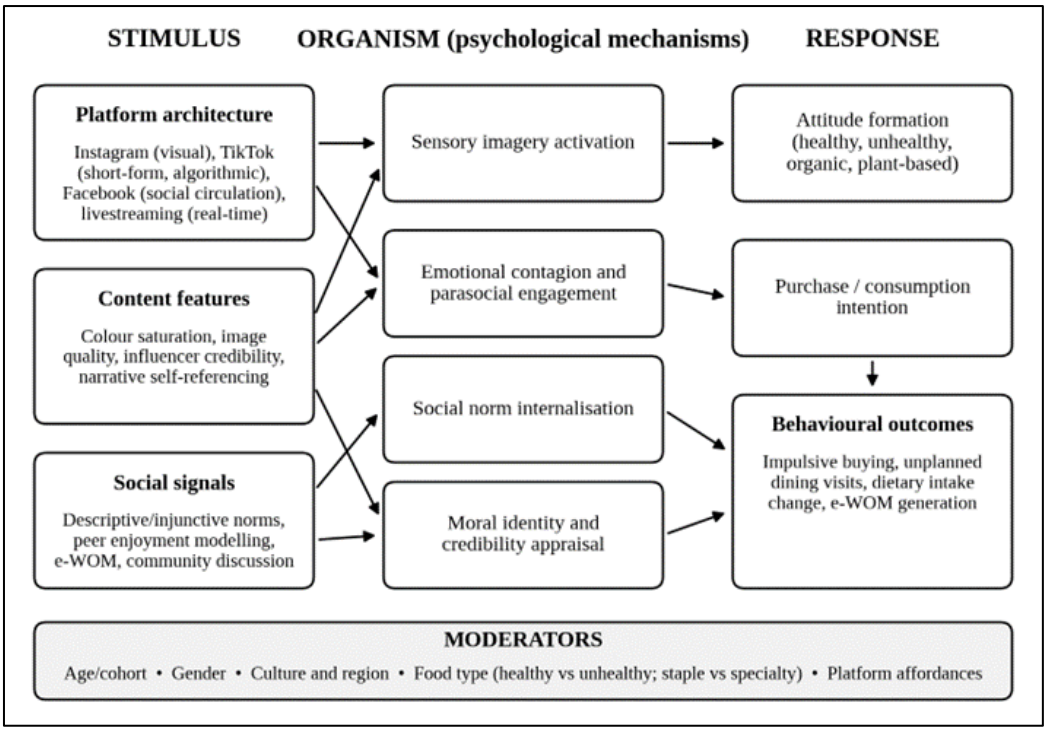



**Figure 3: Integrative Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model of social media influence on young consumers' food choices.**

### 3.12 Future research agenda

Addressing RQ2, the gaps above translate into nine priority research areas (Table 3).

**Table 3: Future research agenda: priority areas, variables, context and methodology**

| Priority area | Specific variables | Suggested context | Suggested methodology |
|---|---|---|---|
| Longitudinal and causal designs | Repeated exposure to social media food marketing; objective intake (diaries, receipts, wearable data) | Gen Z population, 12-24 months | Panel or cohort study; experience sampling |
| Generation Z as a distinct cohort | Platform-native formats (duets, trends, challenges); self-generated food content; sustainability attitudes | Gen Z-only samples (born 1997-2012) | Netnography plus survey/SEM validation |
| Geographic and cultural extension | Trust in e-WOM vs affective trust; collectivism-individualism; food safety and affordability | India, Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America; urban-rural | Cross-cultural survey with measurement invariance; regional-language interviews |
| Algorithmic personalisation and AI | Exposure frequency; perceived vs actual personalisation; credibility of AI-generated content | TikTok and Instagram Reels feeds | Algorithm audits with experimental manipulation |
| TikTok-specific mechanisms | Creativity, sound and music cues, duet and trend participation as predictors of PAD states | TikTok-first Gen Z users across markets | Experimental vignettes; eye-tracking or physiological arousal |
| Mental health, body image and food anxiety | Social comparison; orthorexic tendencies; anxiety about "healthy eating" content | Adolescents and young women exposed to fitness or "clean eating" content | Validated scales in longitudinal or diary designs; ethical review |
| Regulation and policy effectiveness | Age verification; influencer-disclosure compliance; exposure after regulation | UK Ofcom rules, EU DSA, Indian ASCI guidelines | Natural experiment; pre-post policy evaluation |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Social media as a health-promotion tool | Dosage of peer-enjoyment modelling; descriptive-norm messaging; boomerang effects of injunctive norms | Campaigns for adolescent fruit and vegetable intake | Randomised field experiment with behavioural outcomes (extending [9]) |
| Virtual and AI influencers | Perceived authenticity and moral image vs human influencers; parasocial bonding with non-human agents | Virtual-influencer food endorsements (India and global) | Between-subjects experiment (human vs virtual influencer) |

### 3.13 Implications for practice and policy

Food marketers should differentiate content by platform: creative, entertaining content on TikTok; images of people visibly enjoying food, rather than over-perfect or health-oriented images, on Instagram; relatable personal narratives on Facebook; and authentic emotional expression in livestreams [8, 9, 12, 17, 19]. Influencers should be selected for credibility, authenticity and moral consistency rather than follower counts. Colour saturation can be maximised for individual, delivery or home-cooking contexts but should be moderated in social-dining advertising [7]. Organic, green and plant-based brands should build communities and e-WOM and frame content around socialising, sharing and sensory pleasure rather than health or planetary claims; social digital cues generated stronger e-WOM than product cues (d = 0.52) [23].

Public-health campaigns should establish descriptive norms and model peer enjoyment of healthy food rather than list health benefits [9, 11]. Policymakers should update age-specific regulation of digital food marketing, require influencer disclosure and extend oversight to gaming livestreams [16]. Because awareness alone is not protective [2], structured media-literacy education should be combined with regulatory restrictions, and gender differences in vulnerability [15] should be considered when designing and assessing marketing of foods high in fat, sugar and salt to adolescents. Finally, longitudinal cohort studies tracking exposure, dietary intake and health outcomes over 12-24 months are needed before regulatory cost-benefit or commercial return-on-investment analyses can be made with confidence.

*Limitations*

Several limitations apply. Searching only Scopus may have missed articles indexed solely in Web of Science, EBSCO, PubMed or subject databases. The 2016-2026 window excludes earlier foundational work, and restricting to English excludes research in other major languages. The ABDC A*/A/B filter ensures rigour but may exclude recent articles in newly established journals not yet ranked. Publication bias may lead the literature to overstate the effects of social media, and the rapid evolution of platforms and algorithms limits the generalisability of findings over time.

## 4 CONCLUSION

This review synthesised 24 peer-reviewed studies, published in 12 journals and covering 11 countries, on how social media shapes the food choices of young consumers. Social media has evolved from a communication tool into one of the most powerful and commercialised food environments that young people navigate. The evidence points to six influence routes: visual and sensory stimulation; influencer-mediated persuasion through credibility, emotional contagion and narrative; social-norm transmission through perceived peer eating; platform-specific formats that exploit Generation Z behaviour; community-driven promotion of organic and sustainable food; and brand-level market dynamics driven by user conversation. Influencer marketing is the most consistently documented and empirically robust of these, with effects extending beyond purchase to cooking, lifestyle and ethical consumption.

In response to RQ1, research has progressed from descriptive audits of marketing exposure to causal models grounded in SOR, Theory of Planned Behaviour, Emotional Contagion, Sensory Imagery, Moral Identity, Source Credibility and Social Learning theories, with experimental designs giving causal evidence for specific mechanisms and surveys confirming relationships across contexts. In response to RQ2, nine priority research areas were identified, led by longitudinal designs, Generation Z-specific and cross-cultural studies, algorithmic personalisation, regulatory evaluation and virtual influencers.

Social media is a double-edged sword. At present it is the main digital driver of unhealthy food choices among young people, operating through visual stimulation, norm transmission, influencer-led emotional contagion and impulsive platform-specific triggers that are pervasive, often hidden and weakly regulated, with adolescents most at risk. Yet the same mechanisms can promote healthier, organic, plant-based and sustainable choices when content is emotionally resonant, models peer enjoyment, uses credible and morally consistent influencers, and provides visible social proof.

Whether social media is a dietary risk or a health asset therefore depends less on the technology than on strategic design, regulatory oversight and ethical intent.

## STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

The author declares that there is no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in connection with this work.

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