



Association Between Preference Towards Food Content on Social Media and Risky Eating Behavior Among High School Students in Medan

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Abstract

Most adolescents are prone to risky eating behaviors, which are unhealthy and nutritionally imbalanced. Dietary behaviors and eating habits are still developing in adolescents; therefore, it is important to encourage them against adopting risky eating behaviors to prevent various future health problems, such as obesity, diabetes mellitus, and coronary heart disease. This study aims to analyze the association between preference towards food content

on social media and the level of risky eating behavior among high school students in Medan. The sample size in this cross-sectional study was 334 high school students selected by simple random sampling. Data were then analyzed using the chi-square test. The results indicated that there was a significant association between preference toward food content on social media and risky eating behavior among high school students in Medan ($p < 0.001$). High school students with negative preferences, who prefer to watch and follow popular or trending but unhealthy food content on social media, had a 2.188 (95% CI: 1.703–2.811) times greater risk of adopting more severe levels of risky eating behavior than those with positive preferences. The health department is suggested to collaborate with schools and parents in implementing social media literacy programs aimed at educating high school students to be more discerning in watching food content on social media while still considering nutritional value and learning about the impact of their preferred foods.

Keywords: Food content, Preference, Risky eating behavior, Social media

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Introduction

Risky eating behavior is an individual action reflected in unhealthy eating habits, frequency, and patterns, as well as nutritionally unbalanced food choices that may increase the risk of disease (A'yunin et al., 2024). It is not considered a healthy and balanced diet because it consists of high-calorie, high-fat, high-sugar, high-salt, and low-nutrient foods (WHO, 2020). According to data from the Indonesian Health Survey, the majority of the population consumes flavored foods more than once a day (73.8%); consumes instant noodles (60.7%), sweet foods (56.2%), salty foods (52.2%), fatty foods (51.7%), and sugar-sweetened drinks (43.3%) 1–6 times a week; and consumes energy drinks (91.3%), carbonated drinks (85.6%), burnt foods (54.1%), and preserved foods (46.7%) less than three times a month. This high consumption frequency was reported due to reasons such as taste (96.2%), ease of access (91.3%), affordability (79.3%), and lack of awareness of the risks (43.3%) (Kemenkes RI, 2023).

Most adolescents are also prone to adopting risky eating behaviors, such as consuming fast food, ultra-processed foods high in salt, sugar, and fat; unhealthy snacks; sugar-sweetened and carbonated drinks; and less consumption of vegetables, fruits, and dairy products. Globally, 1 in 4 adolescents (25%) reported consuming sweet foods every day (WHO, 2024). Additionally, about 42% of school-going adolescents reported drinking carbonated beverages at least once a day, and 46% ate fast food at least once a week. These unhealthy diets are often accompanied by sedentary behavior (lack of physical activity), leading to health problems and chronic diseases later in life (UNICEF, 2019). Research has shown that risky eating behaviors, including frequent consumption of high-risk foods like fast food, instant food, processed food, and soft drinks, contribute to increased obesity risk among high school students (Dewita, 2021). Risky eating behaviors are also associated with an increased risk of non-communicable diseases, such as type 2 diabetes mellitus (Haswita et al., 2024) and coronary heart disease (Khudayenoor et al., 2021). Global Burden of Diseases data also states that around 11 million deaths worldwide are related to unhealthy eating behaviors (Afshin et al., 2019).

Dietary behaviors and eating habits are still developing in adolescents; therefore, it is important to encourage them against adopting risky eating behaviors to prevent negative health consequences in the future (ALjaraedah et al., 2019). Adolescent eating behavior is shaped through a complex process involving various factors. The social cognitive theory perspective suggests that individual behavior is the result of constant interactions between personal components that include affection or emotion and cognition and external components that come from the environment, both structural and social. Personal factors come from the internal self, such as expectations, beliefs, self-perceptions, physiological needs, knowledge, and preferences, while external factors are



influences from the environment, such as social support, parents, peers, social culture, mass media, or social media (Bandura, 2001).

Social media, particularly, has been widely reported to influence adolescents' eating behaviors amidst the current technological development. A study in Jakarta, Indonesia, showed that adolescents who use social media at least four times a day and for at least 3 hours per day had poorer eating behaviors, such as consuming fast food, sweets, fatty foods, or carbonated beverages more often and having lower physical activity (Amalia et al., 2023). A positive correlation between the duration of using various social media platforms and the consumption behavior of fast food and sugar-sweetened beverages was also found among adolescents in the United States (Smit et al., 2020). Another study in Germany reported that the use of social media leads to more frequent exposure to culinary content and food advertisements, thus influencing unhealthy eating behavior among adolescents (Naderer, 2021). In a study conducted in Australia, it was stated that exposure to peers' food choices on social media also influenced adolescents' preferences in choosing the types of food consumed (Goerke et al., 2024).

A preliminary survey conducted on 30 high school students in Medan found that the majority of these adolescents (60%) had risky eating behaviors such as frequent consumption of sweet, salty, and fatty foods, preserved foods, burnt foods, flavored foods, instant foods, carbonated drinks, and energy drinks. Most of them (70%) use social media more often to watch content or advertisements for popular foods than other content. Based on this preliminary survey showing risky eating behavior and high frequency of social media use for watching food content, and the lack of similar research in Medan, we are interested in analyzing the association between preferences towards food content on social media and the level of risky eating behavior among high school students in Medan.

Methods

This is an observational study with a cross-sectional design, conducted in public high schools in Medan from April to December 2024. Thirty percent of the schools were selected to represent the population of 21 public high schools in Medan (Asenahabi & Ikoha, 2023), amounting to 7 public high schools that were randomly selected for the research location. The selected public high schools are SMAN 2, SMAN 4, SMAN 5, SMAN 8, SMAN 11, SMAN 14, and SMAN 21. Based on the total population (7,604 students), the sample size was calculated using the Isaac and Michael table at an error rate of 5% (Sugiyono, 2019), resulting in 334 high school students. Sample size was determined proportionally to ensure balance in representing each school and selected using simple random sampling, with the following criteria: (1) students in



grades X, XI, and XII who are actively enrolled in the specified school, (2) students who use social media, and (3) students willing to become research samples.

The independent variable in this study was preference towards food content on social media, measured using a structured questionnaire designed by the researcher, consisting of 10 questions with four answer options on a Likert scale, that has been tested for validity ($r\text{-count} > 0.361$ or $p\text{-value} < 0.05$) and reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.740$). Preferences towards food content on social media were further categorized into negative and positive preferences. Meanwhile, the dependent variable was risky eating behavior, measured using a Food Frequency Questionnaire (FFQ) to determine the frequency of consumption of various types of risky foods, such as sweet foods, salty foods, fatty foods, burnt foods, foods containing preservatives, flavorings, instant foods, carbonated drinks, and energy drinks during the past month (Kemenkes RI, 2023). The level of risky eating behavior was further categorized into severe and mild.

Data analysis consisted of univariate and bivariate analysis. The univariate analysis aimed to describe the use of social media, preferences towards food content on social media, and frequency of risky food consumption among high school students in Medan. Meanwhile, bivariate analysis aims to determine the association between preferences towards food content on social media and the level of risky eating behavior of high school students in Medan using the chi-square test with a 95% confidence level (significantly associated if the $p\text{-value}$ is < 0.05).

Results

Based on the research data collected, the following results were obtained.

Table 1. Frequency Distribution of High School Students in Medan Based on the Characteristics of Social Media Use

Characteristics	n=334	%
Duration of social media use		
1–3 hours/day (short)	59	17.7
3–5 hours/day (medium)	103	30.8
5–8 hours/day (long)	117	35.0
>8 hours/day (very long)	55	16.5
Location of social media use		
Home	293	87.7
School	9	2.7
Other	32	9.6
Social media that is often used to search for popular or trending food information		
TikTok	214	64.1
Instagram	89	26.6



YouTube	27	8.1
Twitter	4	1.2
Social media features that most influence the selection of food types		
FYP (For You Page)	232	69.5
Feed and stories	49	14.7
Hashtag	11	3.2
Video	42	12.6
Types of food viewed and ordered via social media		
Healthy food	93	27.8
Unhealthy food	241	72.2

The information in Table 1 shows that most students (35.0%) use social media for long durations (5–8 hours per day) and use it more often at home (87.7%) than at school (2.7%). The majority of students (64.1%) often use TikTok to search for information about popular or trending foods. Furthermore, the “For You Page” (FYP) feature on social media (69.5%) has the most influence on students' interest in choosing the types of food they want to consume. The results also found that more students (72.2%) used social media to view or order unhealthy and risky food types than healthy and nutritionally balanced food.

Table 2. Overview of the Preferences Towards Food Content on Social Media Among High School Students in Medan

Question item	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly agree		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Currently, social media features food trends that are consistent with the concept of healthy food.	70	20.9	196	58.7	44	13.2	24	7.2	334	100
I am more interested in seeing healthy food content compared to unhealthy food on social media.	26	7.8	184	55.1	100	29.9	24	7.2	334	100
I more often buy foods that are nutritionally balanced compared to unhealthy foods on social media.	31	9.3	142	42.5	131	39.2	30	9.0	334	100
Food advertising recommendations displayed on social media are compatible with the concept of healthy food.	11	3.2	181	54.2	83	24.9	59	17.7	334	100
Healthy food advertisements displayed by food vloggers make me	44	13.2	174	52.1	102	30.5	14	4.2	334	100



interested in consuming and buying them on social media.

The social media that I use often displays trending and popular food advertisements.	13	3.8	69	20.7	180	53.9	72	21.6	334	100
Trending food advertisements on social media encourage me to buy and consume those foods.	38	11.4	127	38.0	144	43.1	25	7.5	334	100
The type of popular food content displayed is high-calorie, fatty, salty, sweet and appetizing.	12	3.7	93	27.8	118	35.3	111	33.2	334	100
Influencers/food vloggers on social media display trending food content that is not suitable for the concept of healthy food.	21	6.3	68	20.4	187	55.9	58	17.4	334	100
Unhealthy food content displayed by food vloggers does not contain information on the dangers and long-term effects on health.	46	13.8	89	26.7	98	29.3	101	30.2	334	100

Table 2 describes the preferences towards food content on social media based on the questionnaire responses. The results found that high school students in Medan tend to prefer unhealthy food content on social media rather than healthy and nutritionally balanced food. The details above show that most students accessed content featuring unhealthy food trends (58.7%) and were more interested in viewing such content than healthy food content (55.1%). The majority of students also purchase unhealthy foods on social media more often (42.5%) compared to foods that are nutritionally balanced. According to most students (54.2%), food advertisement recommendations on social media are not consistent with the concept of healthy food, and on the contrary, healthy food advertisements displayed by food vloggers on social media do not even make students interested in buying or consuming them (52.1%). Social media used by most students often displays popular or trending food advertisements (53.9%), thus encouraging students to buy and consume them (43.1%). The majority of students also agreed (35.3%) and strongly agreed (33.2%) that the types of food content on social media that they often access are the types of foods high in calories and fat, as well as salty and sweet foods that are appetizing. Most of the food content by food vloggers or influencers viewed by high school students did not match the concept of healthy food (55.9%) and never displayed information about the impact on health if consumed continuously (30.2%).



Table 3. Overview of the Frequency of Risky Food Consumption Among High School Students in Medan

Risky food type	Proportion of students (%) by the frequency of consumption					Total (%)
	>3 times a day	1 times a day	3–6 times a week	1–2 times a week	2 times a month	
Sweet foods	26.0	26.5	17.8	20.1	9.6	100
Salty foods	17.3	24.5	18.1	21.7	18.4	100
Fatty foods	24.8	21.9	19.4	22.4	11.5	100
Burnt foods	19.9	18.9	18.0	27.8	15.4	100
Preserved meat products	25.3	26.2	17.2	21.6	9.7	100
Food flavorings	23.3	29.9	20.2	18.0	8.6	100
Carbonated drinks	20.7	23.0	20.1	23.7	12.5	100
Energy drinks	22.0	27.3	23.0	16.5	11.2	100
Instant foods	19.3	22.3	21.7	22.5	14.2	100

Table 3 shows the frequency of risky food consumption among high school students in Medan based on the FFQ responses. The results indicated a high frequency of risky food type consumption. Most students consumed sweet foods (26.5%), salty foods (24.5%), preserved meat products (26.2%), food flavorings (29.9%), and energy drinks (27.3%) once a day. The majority of students (24.8%) even consumed fatty foods very often, more than 3 times a day. Meanwhile, for the types of burnt foods (27.8%), carbonated drinks (23.7%), and instant food (22.5%), most students also consume them quite often, 1–2 times a week.

Table 4. Frequency Distribution of High School Students by Category of Preference Towards Food Content on Social Media and the Level of Risky Eating Behavior

Variable	n=334	%
Preference towards food content on social media		
Negative	194	58.1
Positive	140	41.9
The level of risky eating behavior		
Severe	187	56.0
Mild	147	44.0



The results of the study as shown in Table 4 indicate that the majority of high school students in Medan have a negative preference towards food content on social media (58.1%) and have a severe level of risky eating behavior (56.0%).

Table 5. Bivariate Analysis Results

Preference towards food content on social media	The level of risky eating behavior				Total		<i>p-value</i>	PR (95% CI)
	Severe		Mild					
	n	%	n	%	n=334	%		
Negative	137	70.6	57	29.4	194	100	<0.001	2,188 (1.703–2.811)
Positive	50	35.7	90	64.3	140	100		

The results of bivariate analysis in Table 4 show that there is an association between preference towards food content on social media and the level of risky eating behavior among high school students in Medan ($p < 0.001$) with a prevalence ratio (PR) of 2.188, indicating that high school students with negative preference towards food content on social media have a 2.188 times greater risk of adopting more severe levels of risky eating behavior than those with positive preference.

Discussion

The results of this study showed that preference towards food content on social media was associated with the level of risky eating behavior among high school students in Medan (p -value < 0.001). High school students with negative preferences towards food content on social media have a 2.188 times greater risk of adopting more severe levels of risky eating behavior than those with positive preferences. Previous studies have also suggested that there is a significant relationship between social media use and the eating behavior of high school students. The use of social media increases the risk of fast food consumption by 3.625 times among high school students ($p = 0.024$) (Rahmasari et al., 2024). Not only that, social media use has also been linked to affecting the food preferences of adolescents ($p = 0.016$). Adolescents who are frequently exposed to healthy food content tend to choose healthy foods to consume, while those who are often exposed to unhealthy food content or advertisements are more likely to make unhealthy food choices (Jihad et al., 2024).

The social cognitive theory perspective suggests that individual behavior is shaped through the constant interaction between personal components that come from the internal self, such as expectations, beliefs, self-perceptions, physiological needs, knowledge, and preferences, and external components from the environment, both structural and social, including social support, parents, peers, socio-culture, mass media, or social media (Bandura, 2001). In recent years, the growing influence of social media has changed individuals' ways of communicating, accessing



information, and even making decisions. Eating behavior is also significantly affected by the digital revolution. Social media platforms have given individuals, especially adolescents, broad access to food-related content. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube display various content through images, photos, and visually appealing culinary creations, promoting dietary patterns and food trends or sharing culinary experiences from around the world. The influence of these digital platforms ultimately alters preferences and sparks culinary desires among adolescents, thereby playing a role in shaping their food choices and eating behaviors (Patwardhan et al., 2024).

Aside from being useful for promoting healthy foods, social media can also spread misinformation and lead to unhealthy eating habits, particularly risky eating behaviors among adolescents. Information about the types of food that are currently trending or popular is very easy to find on various social media platforms, but most of the foods promoted on social media are classified as unhealthy and nutritionally unbalanced (Ventura et al., 2021). Constant exposure to risky food-related content can contribute to poor eating habits among adolescents (Sina et al., 2022). This is aligned with our findings, showing that most adolescents who have negative preferences toward food content on social media also have more severe risky eating behaviors (70.6%).

Adolescents' negative preferences, leading to greater interest in food content featuring unhealthy foods, have an impact on the high frequency of risky food consumption. The abundance of food vloggers and influencers promoting fast food, sweet foods, or high-calorie snacks, together with advertising trends promoting unhealthy eating patterns, are driving poor eating behaviors. Food vloggers often share content highlighting tempting, yet not always healthy, food trends (Yusuf et al., 2023). Prior research has shown that an increase in the frequency of unhealthy food consumption is directly proportional to the frequency of being exposed to various advertisements across social media platforms. Exposure to food and beverage advertisements on social media at least once a week was significantly associated with high consumption of unhealthy food and beverages ($p < 0.010$) (Gascoyne et al., 2021).

Previous studies describe how advertisements on social media, specifically Instagram, utilize photo and videography concepts that are considered effective in stimulating consumer desire for fast food consumption (Handayani et al., 2021). Another study also showed a link between exposure to food-related content on Instagram and increased consumption of unhealthy foods among late adolescents (Zeeni et al., 2024). Meanwhile, research in Korea found that adolescents who prefer watching eating shows, such as “Mukbang”, on social media are more likely to consume fast food, sugar-sweetened beverages, and high-caffeine drinks (Joo et al., 2024). A strong correlation between exposure to food product marketing by influencers on social



media and an increased desire to try these products among adolescents has also been observed (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024). Food advertisements on social media often attract adolescents with their appealing visuals despite their lack of nutritional content (Potvin Kent et al., 2024). This may be related to adolescents' lack of understanding about healthy eating and balanced nutrition, their ignorance of the nutritional content of promoted foods, and their lack of awareness regarding the long-term health impacts. They tend to follow popular or trending diets without understanding the risks, leading to the development of risky eating behaviors without realizing it (Putri et al., 2020). Therefore, as dietary behavior and eating habits are still developing in adolescents, it is important to encourage them to adopt healthy eating behavior and habits to avoid the risk of health issues in the future (Kemenkes RI, 2024).

However, this study has several limitations. There is a potential bias in self-reported data, and there are possible confounders such as socioeconomic factors that may influence the level of risky eating behavior among high school students. Future research should explore the long-term impact of social media on adolescent eating behavior and other risk and protective factors that influence adolescent eating behavior in order to develop programs that are effective at encouraging healthy eating behavior among adolescents.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The results showed that the majority of high school students in Medan had negative preferences towards food content on social media and had severe levels of risky eating behavior, reflected in high frequency of various types of sweet, salty, and fatty foods, burnt foods, preserved foods, food flavorings, instant foods, carbonated drinks and energy drinks consumption. High school students with negative preferences toward food content on social media are more likely to adopt more severe levels of risky eating behavior than those with positive preferences.

We suggest that the health department collaborate with schools and parents to implement a social media literacy program that focuses on educating high school students to be more discerning in selecting food content on social media and not immediately ordering popular or trending foods without considering their nutritional value and impact on health. Also, health promotion is essential to improve high school students' understanding of the nutritional needs that must be met according to their age and the types of healthy and nutritious foods that can benefit their health.



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