Research Article

From Posts to Plates: The Influence of Social Media on Nepalese Food Decisions

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Abstract: This study investigates the impact of social media on consumer decision-making regarding food choices, focusing on four key variables: food images, online food reviews, peer influence, and social networking sites. Using a structured questionnaire distributed to 380 social media users in Nepal, the research employed a descriptive and analytical design with convenience sampling. Statistical analyses, including correlation, ANOVA, and regression tests, were conducted using SPSS. Findings reveal a significant relationship between peer influence and consumer food choices, indicating that social connections play a pivotal role in shaping preferences. The study suggests that restaurant marketing strategies should leverage peer dynamics and group-based promotions to attract customers. Limitations include the exclusion of non-social media users and potential omission of other influencing factors.

Keywords: Food image, Online food review, Peer influence, Food choice and social networking sites.

INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, social media has revolutionized the way individuals communicate, share, and access information. Originating from computer-based platforms, it has expanded to mobile applications, allowing real-time sharing of content such as images, videos, opinions, and events. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have not only transformed communication but have also become vital tools for businesses seeking to reach broader audiences in cost-effective ways.

Initially developed as a medium for maintaining personal relationships, social media now serves a much broader purpose. It allows individuals to express opinions, participate in public discourse, and connect with like-minded communities. These platforms support group interactions, foster social influence, and enhance user engagement. Businesses have capitalized on these features by using social networks for targeted marketing and promotional campaigns through customized apps and interactive content. Social networking sites, in particular, have become significant sources of product information. Through features such as likes, shares, and comments, users influence one another's purchasing decisions. Consumers today can evaluate products and services based on peer reviews and recommendations, making online interactions a key determinant in shaping brand perceptions. Companies are now leveraging this social influence to promote their products more strategically.

In recent years, social media has notably impacted consumer food choices. The trend of sharing food images and experiences online has redefined eating habits and food culture. From "eat and tweet" rituals to live-streaming meals, digital platforms have made food not just a personal experience but a social one. This growing visual culture around food significantly affects how consumers evaluate, choose, and purchase food items.

With easy access to information through smartphones and online networks, consumers rely heavily on digital content to guide their food decisions. This includes reviews, recommendations, and images shared by peers or influencers. However, this also presents challenges in discerning credible information. As consumers increasingly use social media to validate their food choices, businesses in the food industry must adapt by providing engaging, authentic, and trustworthy content to meet evolving consumer expectations.

This study addresses the following issues:

- What is the influence of food image on consumer food choice?
- How online food review effects on consumer food choice?
- Does peer influence have any control on consumer food choice?
- What impact does social networking sites have on consumer food choice?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS FORMULATION

This chapter reviews existing literature on the influence of social media on consumer food choice decisions. It begins with an overview of the Resource-Based Theory as the study's theoretical foundation, followed by a review of key variables such as food imagery, online reviews, peer influence, and social networking platforms. The aim is to

identify research gaps, avoid redundancy, and provide a conceptual and theoretical base for the study. Sources include books, academic journals, research articles, and credible online materials. This review summarizes, evaluates, and compares previous findings, offering critical insights that shape the direction and relevance of the present research. The study hypothesized:

Hypothesis I: There is a significant influence of food image on consumer decision making on food choice.

The modern environment is saturated with visual food cues, including both actual food and highly appealing food images. Platforms like Food-pics offer a wide range of food-related visuals, accompanied by detailed information on image attributes, nutritional content, and public perception. Such constant exposure to visually enticing food stimuli can significantly influence individuals' eating behavior by triggering cravings and shaping food choices (Blechert, 2018).

Hypothesis II: There is significant impact of online food review on consumer decision making on food choice.

Online consumer reviews serve as a key source of feedback, reflecting individuals' purchasing behavior, preferences, and past experiences. In the context of food choices, these reviews have become a highly influential tool, helping consumers make informed dining or food purchase decisions. Typically, review platforms are shaped by two main groups: those who actively seek information before choosing what to eat, and those who share their experiences through reviews—both playing a vital role in guiding others' food-related decisions (Manikanth, 2020).

Hypothesis III: There is significant impact of peer influence on consumer decision making on food choice.

Peer pressure refers to the social influence exerted by individuals or groups that encourages someone to adjust their attitudes, values, or behaviors to align with others. In the context of food choices, this influence often manifests in group settings where individuals may select certain foods to fit in or gain acceptance. Research has shown that such social pressure can strongly impact eating behavior, making peer influence a significant factor in food-related decision-making (Gordon, 2015).

Hypothesis IV: There is significant influence of social networking sites on consumer decision making on food choice.

Social networking sites are online platforms that enable users to create public or semi-public profiles, connect with others, and explore their networks within the platform. With the widespread use of the internet and smartphones, these sites have become deeply integrated into daily social interactions. In the context of food choice, social networks influence how individuals discover, share, and decide on food options, rapidly shaping eating habits and preferences in today's society (Saini et al., 2020).

Theoretical review
Consumers increasingly use social media and the internet, mainly through mobile devices, to access information and make informed food choices. These platforms allow users to share reviews, food images, and opinions that influence others' eating behaviors. While helpful, verifying accurate food quality information can be challenging. The food industry actively markets online to engage these consumers. Food-related content on social media, especially posts from friends, strongly shapes users' perceptions, appetites, and daily food decisions within their social environment (Evans et al., 2018; Heinrichs et al., 2019; Hoogstins, 2017; Vaterlaus et al., 2020).

Conceptual Framework

This study explores how social media affects the food choice decisions of Nepalese consumers by examining key factors independent variables such as food images, online reviews, peer influence, and the usage of social networking sites. These elements serve as sources of information and social interaction that shape consumers' attitudes toward food choice a dependent variable. Positive attitudes formed through exposure to appealing food visuals, trusted reviews, and peer recommendations on platforms like Facebook and Instagram are expected to influence consumers' final food selections. Additionally, cultural and social norms specific to Nepal may influence how strongly social media impacts these decisions. The detailed hypotheses developed based on the conceptual framework are listed below:

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Independent Variables   **Dependent Variable**
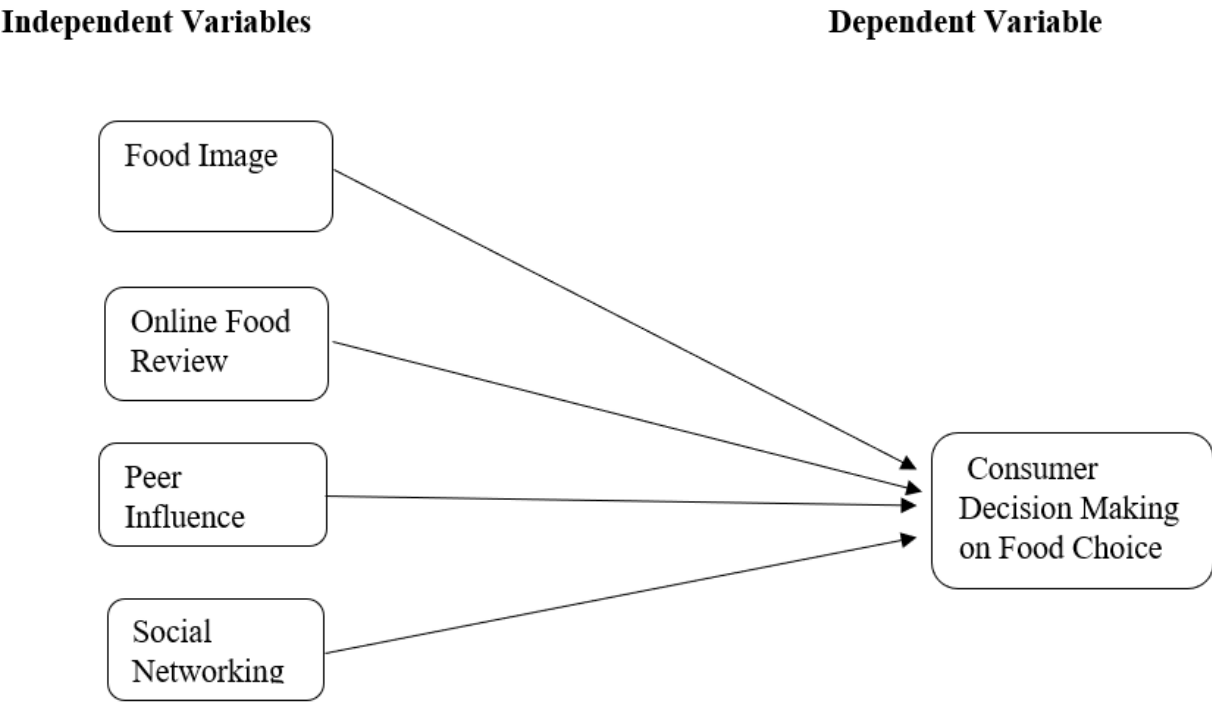
Source: (Neter et al. 2020,Gunden, 2017, Wang et al.,2014, Cornejo, 2017)

Food image
Food plays a vital role in our lives, and sharing food images on social media has become a popular trend that reflects identity and group belonging. Platforms where users post pictures of their meals—known as food logs—have created a space where food choices are influenced by visual content. Theories like social learning and incentive theory help explain this behavior, suggesting that individuals learn from observing others and are motivated by social rewards, such as likes and shares. Seeing appetizing food online can trigger cravings and shape expectations of social approval. Additionally, the brain's reward system plays a role, as people vary in how strongly they respond to food images, especially those high in fat. This helps explain why some individuals are more influenced by such content in their food choices.

Online food review
Online food reviews serve as a trusted form of electronic word-of-mouth, offering consumers credible insights into restaurant quality, often viewed as more reliable than promotional content. These reviews provide detailed feedback on food, service, pricing, and atmosphere, helping consumers assess overall value before choosing where to dine. By reading others' experiences and viewing images of dishes and restaurant settings, consumers form expectations and make informed decisions. Key factors such as food quality, service, and ambiance are frequently highlighted as the most influential in shaping food choices and dining preferences. Positive online reviews also motivate consumers to share their own experiences, further guiding others in their food-related decisions.

Peer Influence
A peer group is typically made up of close friends of similar age who share common interests and activities, providing emotional support, a sense of belonging, and a space to form identity (Castrogiovanni, 2014; Howard, 2017). Peer influence refers to the social pressure individuals feel to align their thoughts or actions with those of their peers, which is especially evident in food choices. Eating is often a social activity, and studies have shown that peer pressure can lead adolescents to choose unhealthy foods in order to gain acceptance or avoid criticism. Younger individuals, in particular, tend to prioritize social approval over nutrition, often basing their food choices on what others around them are eating (Gordon, 2015).

Social Networking Sites
Social networking sites are internet-based platforms that enable users to communicate, exchange content, and interact through features like posting photos or videos, adding captions, tagging others, and using hashtags. These platforms prioritize visual content, especially images, which often gain popularity based on likes, comments, and shares—further influencing user

behavior. A significant portion of shared content includes food-related images, commonly referred to as "food porn," showcasing visually appealing dishes that spark interest and engagement. Platforms like Instagram and Facebook have made food imagery a trend, shaping how people perceive and choose food. Viewing and sharing food content on these platforms is linked to eating habits, as users often track their meals for self-monitoring, social support, or to inspire others (Turner & Lefevre, 2017; Hu, 2013; Chung et al., 2018).

Research Plan and Design

A causal-comparative research design was employed to examine the impact of social media on consumers' food choice decisions using quantitative data. A primary survey method was used, where structured questionnaires were distributed among respondents of varying age, gender, income, and occupation to gather accurate insights. The collected data were analyzed using statistical tools such as correlation, regression, mean, and standard deviation, with support from SPSS and Microsoft Excel for interpretation.

RESULTS

Table 1: *Respondents' demographic profile*

Items		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	203	53.3
	Female	178	46.7
Age	18-25	209	54.9
	26-32	141	37
	Above 33	31	8.1
Occupation	Student	226	63
	Business person	70	12.8
	Job Holder	85	24.2
Income	Below 20,000	202	53.1
	20,000-40,000	141	37
	Above 40,000	38	10
Social networking sites	Facebook	125	32.8
	Instagram	80	21
	Twitter	76	19.25
	YouTube	100	26.25

Source(s): Authors' own work

Out of 381 respondents, 53.3% were male and 46.7% female, indicating a slightly higher number of male social media users. The majority (54.9) were aged 18-25, followed by 37% aged 26–32, highlighting that social media is most commonly used by younger individuals. Regarding occupation, 63% were students, 24.2% job holders, and 12.8% businesspersons, suggesting that students are the most active users. In terms of income, 53.1% earned below NPR 20,000, while 10% earned above NPR 40,000, showing a larger proportion of low-income users. Facebook emerged as the most used social media platform (32.8%), followed by Instagram (21%) and YouTube (26.25%), while Twitter had the lowest usage at 19.25%. Many respondents reported using more than one social networking site.

Table 2. Reliability Analysis

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of items
Food Image	0.902	5
Online Food Review	0.894	5
Peer Influence	0.919	5
Social Networking	0.937	5
Food choice	0.931	5

Source(s): Author's own work

The table displays the reliability assessment of the main variables used to explore how social media affects the food decision-making process of Nepalese consumers. All five variables—Food Image, Online Food Review, Peer Influence, Social Networking, and Food Choice—show Cronbach's Alpha values above 0.89, indicating a high level of internal consistency. This means that the items used to measure each construct are dependable and accurately reflect the intended concepts. Notably, the high reliability scores for Social Networking (0.937) and Food Choice (0.931) suggest a strong impact of social media interaction on actual food selection behavior. Likewise, the reliability of Food Image, Peer Influence, and Online Reviews confirms that visual content, peer input, and digital feedback significantly contribute to shaping consumer preferences. Overall, these results affirm the robustness of the survey instrument and emphasize the influential role of social media in guiding food-related decisions among Nepalese consumers.

Table 3: *Correlation Coefficient between Independent Variables and PFW*

Constructs	FI	PI	SNW	OFR	FC
FI	1				
PI	.360**	1			
SNW	.216**	.478**	1		
OFR	.193**	.402**	.493**	1	
FC	.361**	.456**	.400**	.409**	1

Note(s): **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), FI= Food Image, PI= Peer Influence, SNW= Social networking, OFR = Online food review, FC= Food choice.
Source(s): *Authors' own work*

Table 3 of Pearson correlation matrix reveals statistically significant relationships among the study's key variables—Food Image (FI), Peer Influence (PI), Social Networking (SNW), Online Food Review (OFR), and Food Choice (FC)—all at the 0.01 level. The findings demonstrate that Food Image has a moderate positive correlation with Food Choice (r = .361), suggesting that visually appealing food content shared on social media encourages Nepalese consumers to make particular food selections.

This highlights the growing influence of image-driven digital platforms in shaping food-related desires and decisions.
Peer Influence emerged as one of the strongest predictors of Food Choice (r = .456), indicating that recommendations and opinions from friends or acquaintances significantly impact individuals' eating behavior. Similarly, Social Networking shows a meaningful relationship with Food Choice (r = .400), reflecting how general interaction and exposure to food-related content on social platforms affect consumer preferences. These associations emphasize the interconnected nature of online social environments, where both peer dynamics and digital engagement drive food decisions.

Online Food Review also plays a critical role, with a moderate correlation to Food Choice (r = .409), showing that user-generated reviews and feedback are trusted sources in the decision-making process. Additionally, notable intercorrelations exist among the independent variables, particularly between Peer Influence and Social Networking (r = .478), suggesting these constructs often function in tandem to shape consumer behavior. Collectively, the analysis supports the study's premise that social media platforms significantly influence food choices in urban Nepal through visual, social, and informational cues.

Table 4. *Multiple regression analysis*

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	.597	.267		2.233	.026		
FI	.203	.045	.207	4.529	.000	.867	1.154
PI	.252	.057	.230	4.443	.000	.675	1.482
SNW	.158	.057	.144	2.759	.006	.662	1.510
OFR	.268	.066	.205	4.091	.000	.720	1.390

Note: *Dependent Variable (Food choice)*
Source(s): *Authors' own work*

Table 4 illustrates the findings from a multiple regression analysis conducted to evaluate how four key social media factors—Food Image (FI), Peer Influence (PI), Social Networking (SN), and Online Food Review (OFR)—affect consumer food choices in Nepal. The results indicate that all four variables significantly predict food choice behavior. Food Image (B = .203, β = .207, $p < .001$) and Peer Influence (B = .252, β = .230, $p < .001$) both exhibit strong positive relationships with food choice, suggesting that visually attractive food content and peer recommendations on social media significantly guide consumer decisions.

Moreover, Social Networking (B = .158, β = .144, $p = .006$) and Online Food Review (B = .268, β = .205, $p < .001$) also show significant positive effects, indicating that broader engagement with social platforms and trust in user-generated reviews contribute meaningfully to food selection. The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values, all below 1.51, confirm there are no issues of multicollinearity among the predictors. Collectively, these findings reinforce the notion that social media serves as a powerful tool influencing food-related behaviors among Nepalese consumers, driven by a mix of visual appeal, social validation, and informational cues.

Table 5. *Hypothesis Testing*

S.N.	Hypothesis	Remarks
H1	There is significant relationship between Food Image and food choice of social media users.	Rejected
H2	There is significant relationship between Online Food Review and food choice of	Rejected

	social media users.	
H3	There is significant relationship between Peer Influence and food choice of social media users.	Accepted
H4	There is significant relationship between Social Networking Sites and food choice of social media users.	Rejected

DISCUSSION

The core aim of this study was to identify the major factors that influence consumer decision-making regarding food choices, particularly through social media platforms. Based on an extensive literature review and the researchers' insights, four key independent variables were selected: Food Image, Online Food Review, Peer Influence, and Social Networking Sites. These variables were examined to determine their impact on the dependent variable—food choice.

Among these, Peer Influence emerged as the most significant factor shaping food decisions. The findings align with past research, such as Gordon (2015), who observed that peer pressure can drive individuals to conform to group eating behaviors, even when it involves consuming unhealthy foods. This suggests that people are often influenced by the food choices of those around them to maintain social belonging. In terms of statistical outcomes, Pearson correlation analysis revealed that all four variables were positively related to food choice, with Peer Influence showing the strongest correlation (r = 0.634). Conversely, Social Networking Sites had the weakest (r = 0.476). However, when further tested through multiple regression, only Peer Influence remained statistically significant (p = 0.000), while Food Image, Online Food Review, and Social Networking Sites were excluded due to p-values exceeding 0.05.

Lastly, a comparison with other academic studies shows mixed outcomes. For instance, research by Turner & Lefevre (2017) and Fernandes (2019) found a strong link between social networking and food behavior, which this study did not confirm through regression. Similarly, although past work by Park & Nicolau (2015) and Hoogstins (2017) emphasized the role of online reviews, this study found no significant effect. Likewise, although Valkenburg et al. (2019) and Harris et al. (2016) connected food images to consumer decisions, the present regression analysis rejected this link, underlining that Peer Influence is the most consistent and impactful factor among Nepalese social media users.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that peer influence plays a central and influential role in shaping the food choices of consumers active on social media. It emerged as the most impactful variable, both statistically and behaviorally, demonstrating that individuals are highly influenced by the food preferences and behaviors of their social circles.

While Food Image, Online Food Review, and Social Networking Sites did not show statistical significance in the regression analysis, they cannot be overlooked entirely. The average responses for these factors were above neutral, indicating that participants still perceive them as influential. This implies that, despite their lower statistical weight, they hold psychological and practical relevance in consumer decision-making.

The results further validate the broader notion that social media does affect food-related behavior, but its influence depends on how users interact with content. Among all forms of engagement, peer-driven content appears to have the strongest persuasive impact compared to images, reviews, or general social media usage. As a result, peer influence should be prioritized by food marketers and digital strategists. However, combining this with other elements such as attractive visuals, credible reviews, and active platform engagement can create a more comprehensive and effective marketing approach.

In summary, the research highlights the multifaceted nature of food decisions in the digital space. For brands to stay competitive and relevant, understanding peer dynamics and integrating them with broader social media strategies is key to shaping consumer behavior and building long-term loyalty.

Implications

The findings of this study emphasize the powerful influence of peer dynamics on food choices made through social media platforms. For marketers, this highlights the need to design campaigns that leverage peer engagement—such as influencer collaborations, user-generated content, and referral-based promotions. These strategies can create a sense of social validation, encouraging individuals to follow food trends endorsed by their friends or social circles. Restaurants and food brands can benefit by building loyalty through community-driven interactions that reflect consumer behavior patterns influenced by peers.

Although Food Image, Online Food Review, and Social Networking Sites were not statistically significant in the regression model, their higher mean values suggest they still hold psychological importance. Therefore, businesses should not disregard these elements. Investing in appealing food visuals, maintaining a presence on key platforms, and encouraging reviews can complement peer influence and contribute to an integrated marketing strategy. For example, content that combines visual appeal with peer tagging or testimonials can enhance trust and engagement, even if these factors alone are not primary decision drivers. These insights also have broader applications beyond marketing. Public health organizations can apply peer influence strategies to promote healthier eating behaviors by using relatable influencers or creating shareable content focused on nutrition. Additionally, social media platforms can improve their features by incorporating peer-based recommendation tools, such as "popular among friends" food suggestions. Overall, the study implies that while peer influence is the most impactful factor, a well-rounded

approach that includes visual, social, and informational content will be most effective in shaping consumer food decisions in the digital age.

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