



Social Influence and Food Choices Among School Students : Examining The Role of Peers, Family, and Media In Dietary Behavior

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ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a critical stage for the development of lifelong dietary habits, with food choices being influenced by multiple social and environmental factors. The present study aimed to examine the influence of family, teachers, peers, and media on the dietary behaviour of school-going adolescents. A quantitative, descriptive, cross-sectional research design was adopted, and data were collected from 238 students studying in Grades VIII, IX, and X using a self-developed Adolescent Dietary Behaviour and Social Influence Questionnaire. Descriptive statistics, independent-samples t-test, one-way ANOVA, and Pearson's correlation analysis were performed using SPSS. The findings revealed that family influence ($M = 3.87$) and teacher influence ($M = 3.89$) had the strongest positive influence on healthy dietary habits, whereas peer influence ($M = 2.72$) and media influence ($M = 2.33$) showed comparatively lower mean scores. Correlation analysis demonstrated that family ($r = 0.516$, $p < 0.001$) and teacher influence ($r = 0.424$, $p < 0.001$) were positively associated with healthy dietary habits, while peer influence ($r = -0.494$, $p < 0.001$) and media influence ($r = -0.581$, $p < 0.001$) were negatively associated. Gender-based analysis indicated a significant difference only in media influence, with male students reporting greater susceptibility than females ($p < 0.001$), whereas no significant differences were observed across grade levels. The questionnaire demonstrated excellent reliability, with test-retest coefficients ranging from 0.933 to 0.963. The study concludes that supportive family environments and teacher guidance play a vital role in promoting healthy eating behaviours among adolescents, while peer pressure and media exposure may adversely influence dietary choices. These findings highlight the need



for collaborative school- and family-based nutrition education programmes and strategies to improve media literacy among adolescents.

Keywords : Social Influence, Food Choices, Dietary Habits, School Students, Peer Influence, Family Influence, Media Influence.

Introduction

Adolescence is a crucial stage of growth and development during which lifelong dietary habits are formed. Healthy eating during this period not only supports physical growth and cognitive development but also contributes to better academic performance and reduces the risk of chronic diseases later in life (**World Health Organization [WHO], 2024**). However, adolescents' food choices are often shaped by a combination of personal, social, and environmental factors rather than nutritional knowledge alone. The social environment in which young people live, learn, and interact plays a significant role in influencing their dietary preferences and eating behaviors (**Story, Neumark-Sztainer, & French, 2002**). Among the various social influences, the family remains the most important source of dietary guidance during childhood and adolescence. Parents and caregivers largely determine the availability of food at home, meal patterns, and eating routines. Children who regularly observe healthy eating behaviors within the family are more likely to develop similar habits themselves. Research has consistently shown that positive parental involvement and family support are associated with healthier dietary choices, greater fruit and vegetable consumption, and improved nutritional outcomes among adolescents (**Pearson, Biddle, & Gorely, 2009**). As children grow older, peer influence becomes increasingly significant. Adolescents spend a considerable amount of time with friends in school and social settings, where eating behaviors are often influenced by group norms and social acceptance. Students may adopt food choices that align with their peers' preferences, even when those choices may not be nutritionally beneficial. Previous studies have highlighted that peer groups can influence both healthy and unhealthy eating behaviors, making them an important determinant of adolescent dietary practices (**Salvy, de la Haye, Bowker, & Hermans, 2012**). In recent years, media and digital platforms have emerged as powerful influences on food choices among young people. Television advertisements, social media platforms, online influencers, and digital marketing campaigns frequently expose adolescents to food-related content. Many of these advertisements promote highly processed foods, sugary beverages, and energy-dense snacks, which can shape food preferences and purchasing behaviors. Studies have reported that increased exposure to food marketing is associated with higher consumption of unhealthy foods and beverages



among children and adolescents (**Kelly et al., 2019; WHO, 2022**). Although numerous studies have investigated dietary knowledge and eating habits among adolescents, relatively few have examined the combined influence of family, peers, and media on food choices within a single framework. Understanding these social determinants is essential for developing effective nutrition education programs and interventions aimed at promoting healthy eating behaviors among young people. Therefore, the present study was undertaken to investigate the influence of social factors on food choices among school students and to examine their association with dietary behaviors.

Methodology

The present study adopted a quantitative, descriptive, cross-sectional research design to examine the influence of family, teachers, peers, and media on the dietary behaviour of adolescents. A total of 238 students from Grades VIII, IX, and X participated in the study through a convenience sampling technique. The sample comprised 127 females (53.4%) and 111 males (46.6%), providing balanced representation across gender and grade levels. Data were collected using a self-developed Adolescent Dietary Behaviour and Social Influence Questionnaire consisting of 20 items grouped into five constructs: Family Influence, Teacher Influence, Peer Influence, Media Influence, and Healthy Dietary Habits. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The questionnaire was developed following an extensive review of relevant literature and was reviewed by subject experts to establish content validity. The reliability of the instrument was assessed using the test-retest method with a 15-day interval between administrations. Pearson's correlation coefficients for the five constructs ranged from 0.933 to 0.963, indicating excellent temporal stability, while all individual items demonstrated high reliability ($r = 0.845\text{--}0.912$; $p < 0.001$). Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from the school authorities, and participation was voluntary. The objectives of the study were explained to the participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were assured. The collected data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation) were used to summarize the data, while the Shapiro–Wilk test assessed normality. Independent-samples t-tests, one-way ANOVA, and Pearson's correlation analysis were employed to examine differences and relationships among the study variables. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.



Results and Analysis

Table 1 : *Demographic Characteristics*

Demographic Category	Classification	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	127	53.4%
	Male	111	46.6%
Grade / Class	Grade 8	97	40.8%
	Grade 9	73	30.7%
	Grade 10	68	28.6%
Total Sample	Combined Cohort	238	100.0%

Gender Distribution: The sample comprises slightly more female students (n = 127, 53.4%) than male students (n = 111, 46.6%), providing a well-balanced sample size to conduct independent sub-group comparisons. Grade Representation: Grade 8 students represent the largest single block (40.8%), followed by Grade 9 (30.7%) and Grade 10 (28.6%).

Table 2 : *Descriptive Statistics for Main Construct Scores*

Construct Subscale	Mean Score	Standard Deviation (SD)	Minimum	Maximum	Overall Level
Family Influence	3.87	0.69	1.75	5.00	High
Teacher Influence	3.89	0.72	1.75	5.00	High
Peer Influence	2.72	0.86	1.00	4.75	Moderate
Media Influence	2.33	0.87	1.00	4.50	Low-Moderate
Healthy Dietary Habits	3.74	0.66	1.75	5.00	High



Institutional and Family Support Dominance: Teacher Influence (Mean = 3.89) and Family Influence (Mean = 3.87) achieved the highest overall ratings among the students. This indicates that formal authority figures and domestic environments strongly advocate for nutritional boundaries. External Environmental Pressures: Peer Influence (Mean = 2.72) sits in a moderate range, suggesting that while peer pressure exists, it is secondary to parental rules. Media and influencer marketing has a lower raw baseline mean score (2.33), but its wide score spread (SD = 0.87) shows a highly volatile response pattern among individual students.

Table 3 : Gender-wise Independent Samples *t*-test Matrix

Construct Subscale	Male Mean	Male SD	Female Mean	Female SD	t-value	p-value	Significance
Family Influence	3.84	0.71	3.89	0.68	-0.618	0.537	Non-Significant
Teacher Influence	3.86	0.71	3.92	0.72	-0.677	0.499	Non-Significant
Peer Influence	2.82	0.89	2.62	0.83	1.831	0.068	Marginal Trend
Media Influence	2.58	0.91	2.12	0.77	4.223	< 0.001	Highly Significant
Healthy Dietary Habits	3.71	0.66	3.76	0.66	-0.588	0.557	Non-Significant

High Vulnerability to Media in Males: The *t*-test revealed a highly statistically significant difference in Media Influence scores between male and female students ($t = 4.223$, $p < 0.001$). Male students report a substantially higher mean influence from digital campaigns, celebrity endorsements, and social media influencers (Mean = 2.58, SD = 0.91) compared to female students (Mean = 2.12, SD = 0.77). Peer Influence Variance: Male students also scored slightly higher on peer group compliance (Mean = 2.82, SD = 0.89) compared to females (Mean = 2.62, SD = 0.83).

**Table 4 :** Grade-wise One-Way ANOVA Comparison

Construct Subscale	Grade 8 Mean	Grade 9 Mean	Grade 10 Mean	F-statistic	p-value	Significance
Family Influence	3.93	3.84	3.81	0.639	0.529	Non-Significant
Teacher Influence	3.88	3.88	3.92	0.052	0.949	Non-Significant
Peer Influence	2.75	2.70	2.68	0.167	0.846	Non-Significant
Media Influence	2.33	2.33	2.34	0.003	0.997	Non-Significant
Healthy Dietary Habits	3.75	3.68	3.78	0.356	0.701	Non-Significant

Stable Impact Across Grades: The One-Way ANOVA tests across the three grade cohorts (Grades 8, 9, and 10) yielded non-significant differences for all parameters (all p-values > 0.05). Environmental pressures and internal barriers do not alter linearly during the middle-to-high school pipeline.

Table 5 : Pearson Correlation Matrix with Healthy Dietary Habits

Predictor Construct Factor	Pearson Correlation (r)	Statistical Signif. (p-value)	Direction / Strength of Relationship
Family Influence	+0.516	< 0.001	Strong Positive Correlation
Teacher Influence	+0.424	< 0.001	Moderate-Strong Positive Correlation
Peer Influence	-0.494	< 0.001	Moderate-Strong Negative Correlation
Media Influence	-0.581	< 0.001	Strong Negative Correlation

The Digital Degradation Effect: Media Influence forms the strongest single correlation with adolescent eating habits, and it is strongly negative ($r = -0.581$, $p < 0.001$).



This mathematically indicates that high interaction with digital advertising campaigns and online influencers heavily degrades a student's commitment to avoiding highly processed or sugary junk food. Domestic and School Fortification: Family Support ($r = +0.516$, $p < 0.001$) and Teacher Guidance ($r = +0.424$, $p < 0.001$) present exceptionally robust positive correlation matrices.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that family and teacher influences play a significant positive role in promoting healthy dietary habits among adolescents, highlighting the importance of supportive home and school environments in encouraging nutritious food choices. In contrast, peer and media influences were negatively associated with healthy dietary behaviour, suggesting that social pressure and exposure to unhealthy food advertising may encourage poor eating habits. Media influence showed the strongest negative association and was significantly higher among male students, indicating greater susceptibility to digital food marketing. No significant differences were observed across grade levels, suggesting that these social influences remain relatively consistent during adolescence. These findings emphasize the need for collaborative interventions involving families, schools, and public health authorities to strengthen nutrition education and improve media literacy among adolescents.

Conclusion

The study concludes that adolescents' dietary behaviour is strongly influenced by their social environment. Family support and teacher guidance positively contribute to healthy eating practices, whereas peer pressure and media exposure negatively affect dietary choices. The significant influence of digital media underscores the need for effective nutrition education and media literacy programmes. Strengthening collaboration between parents, schools, and policymakers can help promote healthier dietary behaviours and reduce the impact of unhealthy food marketing among adolescents. Further research involving larger and more diverse populations is recommended to validate and extend these findings.

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