



Social Media's Influence on Adolescents' Food Preferences Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic



Adam J. Kucharczuk BSN & Tracy L. Oliver PhD, RDN, LDN
Villanova University M. Louise Fitzpatrick College of Nursing

Introduction

- About 93-95% of adolescents have at least one social media (SM) account with 45% of adolescents reporting being online "almost constantly"^{1,2}
- International food and beverage (F&B) companies are expected to spend \$455.3 billion in SM advertisements in 2022³
- The increased time spent on SM may increase exposure to F&B advertisements⁴
- Increased exposure to F&B advertisements and overconsumption of unhealthy products associated with more screen time during the pandemic may increase negative health risks like obesity^{4,5,6}
- Adolescents are more likely to succumb to brands' marketing tactics when incorporating celebrities and influencers into the advertisements^{7,8}
- The COVID-19 pandemic increased adolescents' time spent on SM and sedentary behaviors, while decreasing engagement in physical activities^{5,6}

Purpose

To examine social media's influence on adolescents' food and beverage preferences during the COVID-19 pandemic and explore their parents' perceptions of this phenomenon.

Methods

- 7 student-parent pairs were recruited from the Parkland School District's sixth-grade class, located in northeastern Pennsylvania
- Inclusion criteria: student in the sixth grade, both student and parent use SM and speak English
- Qualtrics surveys were collected for demographic and preliminary data
- Separate virtual, semi-structured focus groups were conducted for the students and parents in Summer and Fall 2021
- Qualitative content was analyzed for key concepts and themes
- Ethics approval was obtained from Villanova University's Institutional Review Board

Preliminary Results

- Most common SM platforms reportedly used by adolescents include YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat
- All parents reported being married or in a domestic relationship
- 86% of parents reported changing rules around SM usage during the COVID-19 pandemic including allowing more screen time and monitoring usage more

Table 1: Qualtrics Survey Results

	Adolescent	Parent
Gender (% Female)	42.86%	100%
Age, y	12.12 ± 0.38	35-44 (71%)
Change in reported SM usage (hrs)	+1.86 ± 1.57	+1.71 ± 0.95

Findings

Table 2: Themes and Sample Adolescent Responses

Theme	Adolescent Focus Group Response
Increased social media usage	"Definitely used [SM] more than I did in past school years because after the Zooms, I wouldn't have one for the next like hour or so, so I just go on [SM] a lot more often"
Factors that increased consumption	"Definitely boredom" "My cousin has a YouTube [channel] and while they were here, they wanted to try [hot chocolate bombs] out [to post]."
Increased recall of memorable aspects of food & beverage advertisements	"McDonald's," "Starbucks," "Takis," "Gatorade," "Doritos," "Lays," "Travis Scott," "Mr. Beast," "Kevin Durant," "Alex Morgan"

Findings Cont.

Table 3: Themes and Sample Parent Responses

Theme	Parent Focus Group Response
Parental observations of adolescents' less healthy eating behavior	"Sometimes I would catch her on the couch with the entire bag of chips." "He's been asking for more deserts after dinner more which he never used to do."
Parental influence over food & beverage purchases	"It was like 13, bucks for a bag of 10 [jelly fruit] or something ridiculous ... so there was no way she was getting that." "She wants corn dogs and Uncrustables, and I don't usually buy those things."
Increased engagement in food trends seen on social media	"The hot chocolate bombs were all the rage so all they wanted was to drink hot chocolate bombs all day ... I don't think [they] saw [them on] as many commercials as he did trends on Tik Tok."

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Increased SM use influenced adolescents' ability to recall specific F&B brands and potentially increased consumption
- Parents continue to have control over the adolescents' F&B purchase requests
- Parents may be aware of the targeted marketing used on SM and its potential to influence adolescents' eating behaviors
- Providers should be aware of increased SM usage and its potential influence on adolescent eating behaviors
- Further research is needed to explore the magnitude of SM's influence, the motivations behind food choices, and the potential long term health consequences

Acknowledgements

This project was supported by a summer grant from the Villanova Undergraduate Research Fellowship and the Center for Research & Fellowships, Villanova University.