

False Needs in the Digital Age: The Role of Social Media in Junk Food Cravings

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Article Info.	Abstract
<p>Corresponding Author Kamal Neupane</p> <p>Article History Received: February 10, 2025 Accepted: April 18, 2025</p> <p>Email kamalokash@gmail.com</p> <p>Cite Mainali, S., Neupane, K., Chuwan N. K., & Pandey, G. (2025). False needs in the digital age: The role of social media in junk food cravings. <i>Journal of Productive Discourse</i>, 3(1), 59–71. https://doi.org/10.3126/prod.v3i1.78467</p>	<p>Social media (SM) have emerged as influential marketing tools shaping the junk food (JF) consumption behavior of teenage students. This article aims to explore the role SM play in influencing the JF consumption behaviors of teenage students in Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC). The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, using an explanatory sequential research design. Following this design, a cross-sectional survey (199 respondents) was conducted, and its significant findings were further explained through qualitative data collected via a focus group discussion (FGD) (10 participants). Both phases of the study were conducted among students of grades 11 and 12 at Madan Bhandari Memorial Secondary School, located in KMC. The study found that teenage students frequently consume JF. Although most of them consider its consumption unnecessary, they continue to consume it frequently, indicating a gap between their understanding and behavior. Similarly, SM platforms offering video content, such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, were found to be more engaging for the students. A substantial number of students were active on SM, with nearly two-thirds of respondents using it for 1–3 hours daily. The study revealed a significant relationship between the use of SM—particularly engagement with short video content—and the consumption of JF. These findings affirm the role of media in creating false needs, as envisioned by the critical theorist Herbert Marcuse.</p> <p>Keywords: advertisement, short video, false needs, consumerism, sign value</p>

Introduction

Junk food (JF) generally refers to fast foods that are easy to prepare and consume but are considered harmful to health. The term was coined in 1972 by Michael Jacobson, then Director of the US-based Center for Science in the Public Interest (Bhaskar & Ola, 2012), and reflects both the negative health implications of such foods and the marketing strategies intended to promote their mass consumption. The *Oxford Dictionary of Public*

Health (Porta & Last, 2018) defines JF as “mass-marketed manufactured food” that contains high levels of carbohydrates (sugar) and fats but few essential nutrients, and is marketed in “attractive packages,” often “consumed in huge quantities at entertainment venues such as sports arenas and cinemas, by preteen and teenage children at and after school, and by people watching television, where many JFs are advertised.”

Two generalizations can be drawn from this definition. First, teenagers are among the primary consumers of JF. Second, the temptation to consume JF is often intensified by aggressive advertising and attractive packaging. Nutritionists argue that JF should be avoided because its consumption is associated with several harmful effects on the body, including obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and various types of skin cancer (Bhaskar & Ola, 2012). The easy availability of JF in urban areas has exposed urban populations, including teenagers, to the potential harms of its consumption.

In urban areas, the higher consumption of JF coincides with increased use of social media (SM) platforms. SM have now become integrals of daily life. SM are generally understood as online resources designed to facilitate engagement between individuals (Bishop, as cited in Aichner et al., 2021). Online social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, Viber, Instagram, WhatsApp, and blogs are notable examples (Kanchan & Gaidhane, 2023). SM have grown so influential that even our eating habits are no longer free from their impact.

The use of SM as a popular marketing tool has attracted significant academic interest (Vila-Boix et al., 2024; Li et al., 2023). SM have combined three major forms of advertising—text, audio, and visual—into unified platforms, making them more aggressive tools for marketing. Its widespread influence has even prompted traditional television, once the primary medium for advertising JF, to collaborate with SM, giving rise to a more interactive, influential, and aggressive marketing medium known as Social TV (Cesar et al., 2011). Examples include Netflix, iPlayer, ConnectTV, YouTube, Facebook Live, and Google TV.

Internet accessibility is higher in urban areas. This is also reflected in the annual report of the Nepal Telecom Authority (NTA) published for 2079/80 (Nepal Telecom Authority, 2023–2024, pp. 15–16), which shows that 3G and 4G network coverage is more widely available in urban areas. Similarly, people living in urban areas have

easier access to internet-enabled devices such as smartphones, tablets, laptops, and computers, which are commonly used to access SM content. This is why the report also indicates that the distribution of mobile BTS towers is more concentrated in urban areas, where population density is higher. Teenagers are among the primary users of both these devices and SM platforms (Raju et al., 2015). Thus, it is appropriate to investigate how teenagers' exposure to SM content is shaping their understanding of, and behavior toward, JF consumption. This study explores the relationship between JF consumption behavior and SM use through a mixed-research method. The study finds that short video content plays a particularly prominent role in aggravating cravings for JF.

Various studies have indicated that exposure to SM content influences people's consumption habits (Vila-Boix et al., 2024; Li et al., 2023; Erwin et al., 2023; Joshi et al., 2023). Whether SM affects food habits positively or negatively largely depends on the types of content users most engage with (Wu et al., 2024). Some studies (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2015; Fleming-Milici & Harris, 2020; Çakmak & Tanrıöver, 2022) reveal that SM influence unhealthy food consumption habits across different age groups, including teenagers and adults. A study conducted among individuals aged 10–16 by Baldwin et al. (2018) postulates a direct association between online behavior and unhealthy food consumption. In response to such findings, the World Health Organization (WHO) has urged countries to introduce legal measures to protect children up to 18 years of age from the unhealthy marketing of food through digital platforms (Tatlow-Golden et al., cited in Fleming-Milici & Harris, 2020).

Some studies have examined the relationship between SM use and JF consumption behavior among teenagers and adolescents in urban areas of Nepal (Pahari et al., 2017; Sapkota & Neupane, 2017; Bohara et al., 2021). However, given the descriptive nature of these studies, they have not explored the relationship by incorporating the experiences and perspectives of the students themselves. This article aims to fill that gap by

explaining the role of SM use in shaping the JF consumption behavior of teenage students in Kathmandu, employing a mixed-research method.

The Review of Literature

This section reviews existing theories, concepts, and empirical findings that shed light on the role of media in promoting consumption, with a special focus on two issues—SM and JF. The works of Kellner (2003), Ritzer (2018), and Marcuse (2022) are reviewed to gain familiarity with the concepts and theories of Marx, Marcuse, and Baudrillard concerning consumerism and the role of mass media in its construction. Among these thinkers, Marcuse's theories of false needs and class equalization are found to be particularly relevant in explaining the relationship between SM and JF.

Marx focuses primarily on explaining production within the capitalist system. He discusses consumption mainly through the lens of production (Ritzer, 2018, p. 570), categorizing needs as either natural or species-specific. Natural needs are shared with other animals, while species needs are uniquely human. Marx is more interested in analyzing species needs because they are shaped by social settings (Ollman, cited in Ritzer, 2018, p. 49). Given the exploitative production relations under capitalism, the proletariat consumes goods primarily for subsistence, while only the bourgeoisie can afford to consume luxury goods (Ritzer, 2018, p. 570). Although Marx does not focus on the role of media in promoting consumption, his proposition that consumption is a social product is useful in explaining how SM use influences individuals' JF consumption behaviors.

Advancements in production technology have enabled the large-scale production of commodities with minimal human effort. Moreover, people now spend a significant portion of their leisure time consuming goods and services. This shift has made the creation and management of consumer needs more important than production itself (Ritzer, 2018, p. 570). Critiquing Marx's productivist bias, postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard argues that consumers now consume to fulfill social needs,

which are produced through conditioning and socialization (Kellner, 2003, pp. 310–332).

Departing from Marx's concepts of use-value and exchange-value, Baudrillard emphasizes the prominence of sign-value in contemporary consumer society. Sign-value is expressed through the style, prestige, luxury, or power associated with a commodity. People now consume commodities for their sign-value, suggesting that consumption is not only about utility but also about display. Consuming commodities with high sign-value, such as houses, cars, or fashionable clothes, yields prestige, identity, and social standing. This view, according to Kellner (2003, p. 313), differs from the traditional view that sees consumption as a rational satisfaction of needs aimed at maximizing utility. Influenced by Veblen's notion of "conspicuous consumption," Baudrillard suggests that the desperation to consume commodities for their sign-value is instilled in consumers through media and other agents of socialization. This perspective provides additional conceptual guidance for understanding the role of SM in creating the demand for JF consumption.

The limitations of Marx and Baudrillard in explaining the role of SM in JF consumption behavior are largely addressed by the false-needs theory of critical theorist Marcuse (2022, pp. 3–20). In *One-Dimensional Man* (2022), Marcuse argues, that in advanced industrial society, a new form of control is exercised over consumers by instilling false needs through mass media and ideology.

Like Marx, Marcuse views human needs as socially and historically shaped. However, differing from Marx, he argues that needs beyond the biological level are conditioned and manipulated, even converting waste into human needs. Highlighting the role of media and advertising, he asserts that needs superimposing on individuals through means like advertisements are false needs. As he (2022, p. 7) states: "Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume according to the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs" .

Marcuse's concept of class equalization associated with false needs is particularly relevant—more so than Baudrillard's notion of sign-value—for explaining JF consumption behavior. For Marcuse, the consumption of the same commodities by people of all classes leads to the appearance of class equalization. He writes (2022, p. 10): “If the worker and his boss enjoy the same television programs and visit the same resort places, if the typist is as attractively made up as the daughter of her employer, if the Negro owns a Cadillac, if they all read the same newspaper, then this assimilation indicates not the disappearance of classes, but the extent to which the needs and satisfaction that serve the preservation of the establishment are shared by the underlying population.” Such equalization promotes consumerism and demands colossal-scale production, which advanced industrial societies encourage. This ultimately benefits producers at the cost of consumers. According to Marcuse, industrial psychology, aided by mass media, has extended beyond the factory to influence individuals' choices, needs, and overall way of life. His ideas provide a strong theoretical foundation for analyzing the role SM play in shaping the JF consumption behaviors of teenage students.

Various empirical studies suggest that the use of SM and the consumption of JF are emerging as notable trends among teenagers. With the growing global influence of SM (Harari, 2024; Han & Balabanis, 2024; Vladimirova et al., 2023), it is increasingly shaping the course of people's lives to varying degrees. The rapid expansion of internet networks and the easy availability of smartphones at lower costs have contributed to the widening number of SM users. According to data compiled by Datareportal (2024), the total number of internet users in Nepal at the start of 2024 was 15.40 million. In January 2024, 43.5 percent of Nepal's total population were SM users. During the same period, there were 37.47 million active cellular mobile connections in Nepal, exceeding the country's total population by more than 20 percent. Meanwhile, the number of active SM users stood at 13.50 million.

With the growing use of internet-linked devices for various purposes, the intensity of people's engagement with SM is rising rapidly. The number of people using the internet to purchase goods and services and to make payments increased significantly after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a public health emergency of international concern on January 30, 2020 (Giddens & Sutton, 2021; Agusiady et al., 2024). The situation was not much different in urban areas across different parts of the world, including poorer countries like Nepal (Rahman & Salam, 2023; Koirala et al., 2021; Salem & Nor, 2020).

Examining the growing role of SM in influencing individuals' JF consumption behaviors, it is evident that JF producers are investing large sums of money to promote their products on SM platforms. For instance, sugary drink brands invested almost 1 billion rupees in 2013 for advertisements on Facebook and YouTube, and a snack food brand placed more than one billion ads on Facebook in 2016 alone, accounting for more than half of its total online advertising placements (Fleming-Milici & Harris, 2020).

Similarly, other studies have also revealed that the food habits of SM users are influenced by the content they encounter on these platforms (Erwin et al., 2023; Joshi et al., 2023). A study conducted among middle school and high school students in Canada showed that the use of social networking sites is associated with unhealthy eating behaviors among adolescents (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2015). A systematic screening of 9,324 articles further demonstrated the significant impact of media marketing on eating behaviors in pre-adolescents and adolescents (Qutteina et al., 2019).

Some studies have been conducted in Nepal to examine the relationship between SM and JF consumption. One such study conducted in Pokhara Municipality in 2017 found that mass media influences its users' food habits, promoting both healthy and unhealthy (including JF) consumption habits among adolescents (Pahari et al., 2017). Another study (Bohara et al., 2021) explored the determinants of JF consumption among adolescent

students from both public and private schools in Pokhara. The report suggested that JF consumption was remarkably high among both groups, with a slightly higher consumption rate among public school students (65.7%) compared to private school students (56.3%). One of the independent variables in the study was advertisement exposure, and the analysis revealed that media exposure encouraged JF consumption. However, the study did not explore in depth how SM specifically influences food consumption behavior. Nevertheless, the report recommended that the government strictly standardize and regulate advertising policies and curb extravagant health claims made by JF manufacturers.

Urban residents consume more unhealthy foods, including JF, compared to those living in rural areas (Diamond, 2013). This has made urban populations more prone to non-communicable diseases. Preteens and teenagers are identified as the prime consumers of JF (Porta & Last, 2018). Furthermore, the availability of the internet and access to internet-linked devices are higher in urban areas, making teenagers prime users of SM (Nepal Telecom Authority, 2023–2024, pp. 15–16; Raju et al., 2015). Additionally, the diets of people who migrate to urban areas often shift toward lower fiber intake and higher consumption of simple sugars (especially fructose), saturated fats, and trans-unsaturated fats. This indicates that the consumption of JF and other fast foods is even higher among recent migrants to urban areas (Diamond, 2013). Although previous studies have shown that the use of digital media platforms, including SM, exacerbates JF consumption among teenagers, the literature remains largely silent on how SM influence the JF consumption behaviors of teenage students who have recently migrated to urban areas. This study intends to fill that gap by addressing the following research questions:

- a) What is the existing situation of junk food consumption behavior and the use of SM among teenage students who have recently migrated to urban areas?
- b) How social media usage has influenced their JF consumption behavior?

Methodology

The philosophical assumptions of this study fall within the modern camp of the critical paradigm, which holds that a stable reality can be understood and that such understanding can help form specific strategies for “overthrowing, transforming, or improving a problematic institutional structure” (Tracy, 2020, p. 53). This differs from research conducted by theorists within the postmodern camp, who are more concerned with the “shifting, fluid, and constructed nature of power relations” (Tracy, 2020, p. 53). The study draws theoretical insights from Marcuse’s concepts of false needs and class equalization. Marcuse, associated with the Frankfurt School, aligns with the broader philosophical approach of the Frankfurt School within the critical paradigm, which blames capitalism for many societal problems and advocates for restructuring social structures and spaces to ensure equal access, voice, and opportunity for all.

This study follows an explanatory research design and employs a mixed-method approach. Within the mixed-methods framework, an explanatory sequential research approach has been utilized. Previous studies conducted in Nepal (Pahari et al., 2017; Sapkota & Neupane, 2017; Bohara et al., 2021) have been primarily descriptive and have not sufficiently explained how and why teenage students’ use of SM influences their JF consumption behaviors. This research integrates descriptive quantitative data and participants’ voices, based on the assumption that doing so can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Quantitative data were collected and analyzed first, followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data. The dominant data type is quantitative. Quantitative data were gathered through a cross-sectional survey consisting of structured, close-ended questions. The survey findings then guided the design of the qualitative phase of the study, namely, the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). During the FGDs, semi-structured and open-ended questions were asked to participants. The findings from the

FGDs were used to help explain the significant results of the survey. Survey data were analyzed using SPSS, and qualitative data were analyzed thematically. Findings were drawn by integrating both qualitative and quantitative results. The study employed abductive reasoning to understand the causes behind particular phenomena, to explore causal relationships, and to clarify unexpected results. The entire study process adhered strictly to ethical guidelines. The privacy of respondents was protected, and informed consent was obtained.

The study was conducted at Madan Bhandari Memorial Higher Secondary School, located in Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC)-10, New Baneshwor. KMC is the largest metropolitan city of Nepal in terms of both population (862,400) and population density (17,440 per square kilometer) (National Statistics Office, 2021). As the largest metropolitan area, KMC residents are more exposed to globalization factors such as SM and JF. This study primarily aims to explore SM's role in influencing the JF consumption behaviors of students who have migrated to urban areas. Madan Bhandari Memorial Secondary School was purposively selected as the study site because 91% of its grade 11 and 12 students come from outside the Kathmandu Valley (Madan Bhandari Memorial Secondary School, 2024). Therefore, the findings of this study should not be generalized to all teenage students in KMC schools, where a significant number of students are local residents.

The total number of students in grades 11 and 12 at the school was 360. To conduct the survey, cluster sampling was first used under probability sampling to ensure fair representation of male and female respondents from both the science and management streams. A random sampling method was then employed to select the sample

respondents. Using Yamane's (1967) scientific formula, the sample size for the survey was determined to be 190 respondents.

The respondents were selected using a stratified random sampling method, where the proportion of respondents was based on the population size of each stream. Within each stratum, respondents were chosen randomly using a lottery method. For qualitative data collection, purposive sampling was used to select participants for the Focus Group Discussion (FGD). These participants were identified based on a review of the survey findings.

The FGD was conducted with 10 participants, consisting of 5 students from the science stream (3 males and 2 females) and 5 students from the management stream (2 males and 3 females). One moderator and one recorder, who also took notes, were engaged in the discussion.

Results and Discussion

A total of 199 respondents participated in the survey. The majority were male (65.8%), and most fell within the 16–17 age group (50.8%). The distribution between management and science stream students was relatively even, with a slight majority from the management stream (52.8%). These demographic characteristics suggest that a balanced and diverse sample was selected for the study, helping to ensure that the findings are applicable to different groups of students.

Junk Food Consumption Behavior and the Use of Social Media

To understand the JF consumption behavior of the respondents, survey questionnaires were designed to gather information on how frequently they consume JF and their perceptions toward eating it.

Table 1

Junk Food Consumption Frequency

Sex	Never	Rarely	Mostly	Sometimes	Always
Male	0.8%	26.0%	55.0%	11.5%	6.9%
Female	0.0%	17.6%	54.4%	23.5%	4.4%
Total	0.5%	23.1%	54.8%	15.6%	6.0%

Note. Field Survey, 2024

The survey shows that JF consumption among respondents was widespread and frequent, with more than half (54.8%) reporting that they “mostly” consume it, and only 0.5% saying they have “never” consumed it (see table 1). The frequency of JF consumption varied based on students' gender. Male and female respondents exhibited a similar proportion of habitual consumption, with 55% of males and 54.4% of females reporting that they “mostly” consume JF. Additionally, males showed a slightly higher likelihood of “always” consuming JF (6.9% compared to 4.4% for females). On the other hand, female respondents were more likely to report “sometimes” consuming JF (23.5% compared to 11.5% for males), suggesting a preference for occasional indulgence rather than regular consumption. The “rarely” category also showed a gender distinction, with a higher proportion of males (26.0%) reporting rare consumption compared to females (17.6%).

These data suggest that males tend to adopt more extreme patterns—either consuming JF frequently or rarely—while females exhibit a relatively more balanced distribution across moderate consumption categories. These findings contrast with the results of Subedi and Bhusal (2021), which show that females consume more JF,

and also with the findings of Mirhadyan et al. (2020) and Huddar (2023), which reveal that gender is not a significant factor in determining JF consumption. However, the results are closer to those suggested by Feyzabadi et al. (cited in Subedi and Bhusal, 2021), which indicate that males consume more JF.

The survey data further revealed that the majority of students (77.9%) do not believe that eating JF is necessary, while 22.1% do. In the FGD, almost all participants argued that JF is not a necessity, but they consume it to satisfy their cravings. One participant shared, “I know that JF is not good at all. Yet, I cannot control my craving. I immediately consume JF to satisfy my craving. The feeling during consumption is satisfying, but sometimes I regret it afterward because money has been spent. If I hadn't consumed it, that money could have been saved.”

The analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data suggests that students' understanding of JF consumption does not align with their behavior. Most acknowledge that its consumption is unnecessary, yet they consume it frequently. This validates Marcuse's theory of false needs, which proposes that the advanced industrial economy has conditioned individuals to consume things they do not truly need.

Table 2

Frequently Used Social Media Platforms

Platform	Frequency	%
Facebook	141	70.9
Instagram	112	56.3
X (Twitter)	12	6.0
YouTube	165	82.9
TikTok	28	14.1
WhatsApp	5	2.5
Other*	15	7.5
Total	199	100.0

Note. Field Survey, 2024 (*LinkedIn, WeChat, Telegram, Moji, Viber, Google, Pinterest and Messenger.)

Regarding the use of SM, the survey revealed that YouTube (82.9%), Facebook (70.9%), and Instagram (56.3%) were the most popular platforms among respondents (see table 2). The FGD provided further insights into the reasons behind

this preference. Participants explained that these platforms are mostly used because they offer video content and video chat facilities in user-friendly ways. This highlights the growing popularity of video content among the respondents.

Table 3*Social Media Use Duration*

Sex	Never	<1 hour	1-2 hours	2-3 hours	3-4 hours	>5 hours
Male	0.0%	13.0%	31.3%	28.2%	13.0%	14.5%
Female	2.9%	17.6%	27.9%	38.2%	7.4%	5.9%
Total	1.0%	14.6%	30.2%	31.7%	11.1%	11.6%

Note. Field Survey, 2024

The data also show that respondents have been using SM frequently (see table 3). A total of 62% of respondents reported using SM for 1–3 hours a day, with gender-based differences emerging in usage patterns. Males were more likely to use SM for longer hours, as evidenced by their higher representation in the 3–4 hours (13%) and over 5 hours (14.5%) categories. In contrast, females exhibited a more balanced distribution, with the highest proportion (38.2%) in the 2–3 hours category and a notable share (17.6%) using SM for less than one hour daily. These patterns reflect differences in how males and females interact with SM, with males potentially prioritizing longer engagement while females demonstrate more moderate and shorter usage. These findings are consistent with those suggested by the study conducted by [Dufour et al. \(2016\)](#).

Social Media Uses Influencing Junk Food Consumption

As part of the survey, students' perceptions of the influence of SM on their JF consumption behavior were also assessed. The largest group of students (42.7%) said that SM has both positive and negative impacts on their JF consumption. A significant portion (28.6%) believed SM has no impact, while 24.1% viewed the influence as negative, and a small minority (4.5%) saw it as positive. These findings suggest that only about one-fourth of the respondents exclusively view SM as a triggering factor for JF consumption. However, when the cross-tabulation and Chi-square results are compared with these data, an inconsistency between perception and practice can

be observed, suggesting that SM subtly instill the need for JF consumption among students. Based on these findings, it can be said that SM is luring students into consuming JF in ways of which they are not even aware. This further validates the indoctrinating role of media content in promoting the consumption of false needs, as posited by Marcuse.

The survey also explored how respondents engage with JF-related content on SM. An overwhelming majority (89.4%) said they do not enjoy posting JF-related content on SM. Similarly, 80.9% said they never share JF-related content, and the same percentage said they never comment on JF-related posts. Moreover, 79.4% reported that they never share or repost JF-related content from others, while 64.8% stated that they have not purchased JF based on SM advertisements, with 4.1% being unsure. These findings show that students' roles as active promoters of JF on SM are limited, and that they are not actively engaged with JF-related content. However, although their interaction with JF-related content—such as liking, sharing, and commenting—is low, their eating behavior is still influenced by it. This indicates that they are passively engaged with such content and are being influenced by it. Moreover, while students are consuming JF, they are not displaying it. This may be because they perceive JF as something that lacks prestige and social value, given that it is cheap and widely available. This highlights the limitations of Baudrillard's concept of sign value and supports the relevance of Marcuse's idea of the “equalization of class” in the study of JF consumption and its relationship with SM usage.

Table 4*Emotions Experienced When Seeing Junk Food-Related Posts on Social Media*

Emotions	Frequency	Percent
Craving	87	43.7
Disgusting	24	12.1
Hunger	26	13.1
Indifference	62	31.2
Total	199	100

Note. Field Survey, 2024

The influence of SM on JF consumption behavior becomes further evident from the survey, which shows that 43.7% of respondents regard craving as the predominant emotional response to JF-related posts appearing on SM (see table 4). The survey further reveals that the majority of respondents either “rarely” (32.7%) or “sometimes” (26.6%) experience cravings for JF triggered by SM. The data also suggest gender-based differences in how SM trigger JF cravings. Male respondents show a higher proportion in the “never” (32.8%) and “rarely” (35.9%) categories, indicating that a significant portion of males are less influenced by SM in this context. Although males slightly lead in the “frequently” category (m = 6.1% vs. f = 5.9%), they show a lower proportion in the “always” category (m = 4.6%, f = 10.3%). These data indicate that SM exert a stronger and more frequent influence on cravings among females. Females dominate the “always” category (53.8% of the total), reflecting a more impulse-driven response to SM stimuli.

These figures further suggest that SM content triggers a desire for unhealthy foods. FGDs provided clear narratives of these cravings, with participants describing how they often feel satisfaction during consumption but occasionally regret their choices. One participant confessed, “I know that JF is not good at all. Still, I cannot control my craving. The feeling during consumption is satisfactory, but sometimes I do regret it because money has been spent.” It is notable that money is but health is not major concern for the respondent.

Despite its role in influencing JF consumption behavior, SM have not yet become primary platforms for purchasing JF. While most respondents (85.9%) say they purchase JF from local stores, only 5.5% report using online delivery services for this purpose. FGDs shed more light on why students are not using online delivery services to purchase JF. Participants mentioned that online purchases take time, so they prefer buying from nearby stores. A female participant said, “Whenever I make up my mind to consume JF, I wish to have it instantly. Purchasing from the nearest grocery is the best option.” A male participant shared that he occasionally makes online purchases, saying, “I usually go to local stores to purchase, but when it’s nighttime and I do not feel sleepy, I order chips and cold drinks online.”

The strong relationship between the variables becomes even clearer from the FGD findings. They show that SM provide platforms for advertisements and food vlogs that promote JF consumption among students. One participant said, “I had not known about Current noodles [a Nepali brand of hot and spicy noodles] before; I got to know about it from Facebook. Nowadays, I consume it frequently.” This response highlights the role of SM as a conveyor of JF-related information. Another participant mentioned the appeal of Mukbang videos, emphasizing their capacity to create cravings and encourage consumption. Some male participants also noted that they frequently encounter JF-related advertisements on online gaming platforms.

Table 5*Frequency of Junk Food Consumption and Daily Time Spent on Social Media by Students*

JF Consumption Frequency	Daily Time Spent on SM					
	< 1 hrs.	1-2 hrs.	2-3 hrs.	3-4 hrs.	> 5 hrs.	Never
Always	16.7%	0.0%	8.3%	8.3%	66.7%	0.0%
Frequently	6.5%	22.6%	45.2%	9.7%	16.1%	0.0%
Rarely	10.9%	37.0%	30.4%	10.9%	10.9%	0.0%
Sometimes	17.4%	33.0%	31.2%	11.9%	4.6%	1.8%
Never	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Total	14.6%	30.2%	31.7%	11.1%	11.6%	1.0%

Note. Field Survey, 2024

It is crucial to examine the relationship between the frequency of JF consumption and the amount of time students spend on SM each day in order to explore the role of SM in students' JF consumption behavior. This is important for investigating whether increased exposure to SM correlates with higher JF consumption among students.

For this purpose, a cross-tabulation between the frequency of JF consumption and the amount of time students spend on SM each day has been studied (see table 5). The findings suggest that higher JF consumption is associated with longer durations of SM use, especially among those who consume JF “always” or “frequently.” By contrast, more than two-thirds of the respondents who “rarely” or “sometimes” consume JF were found to use SM moderately, i.e., 1–3 hours a day. Interestingly, students who never consume JF tend to have very low or no SM use, with one individual spending less than one hour on SM. Moreover, the Chi-Square test also suggests a significant association between SM use and the frequency of JF consumption, with a p-value of .000 ($p < .05$). These findings highlight the potential role of SM in influencing JF consumption behaviors, particularly among heavy SM users.

These results suggest that SM act as influential promoters of JF consumption by exposing students to JF-related advertisements and promotional content. This supports Marcuse's postulation that false needs are conditioned through the manipulation and indoctrination of mass

media content. These findings reaffirm Marcuse's relevance even in the present context, marked by the widespread use of SM. The relationship between SM use and JF consumption behavior, as explained by this study, was also suggested by research conducted elsewhere (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2015; Alanazi et al., 2023). The prominent role of short video content in aggravating the consumption of unhealthy food, as found in this study, was similarly indicated by Alanazi et al. (2023).

Conclusion

This study was conducted to examine the role SM are playing in influencing the JF consumption behavior of teenage students. An explanatory sequential research design was used to explore the relationship between the frequency of SM use and JF consumption behavior. As a part of the study, a cross-sectional survey was conducted first, and its results were further explained with the help of FGDs.

The study concludes that the consumption of JF and the use of SM are both widespread and frequent among students. A gender-based variation was observed, with females exhibiting relatively more moderate usage of SM and JF consumption, whereas males showed a more extreme pattern in both the high and low categories. This could be attributed to the branding of the internet and JF-related content, which often associates them with masculine-dominated themes like feeling cool, hanging out, happiness, youthfulness, energy,

sports, and gaming. This suggests that if awareness campaigns succeed in associating SM and JF consumption with negative consequences—such as social isolation, illness, and the waste of time and money—it may lead to a decline in both SM usage and JF consumption among students.

A discrepancy exists between the perceptions and practices of teenage students regarding JF and SM-induced JF cravings. Most students believe that JF consumption is not a necessity, yet they consume it frequently. Similarly, most of them think that SM usage does not induce them to consume JF, yet JF-related content proliferated on SM is aggravating their food cravings. This shows that students have succumbed to the subtle influence of SM, highlighting the need for robust awareness campaigns to expose this influence.

Video content proves to be particularly engaging for students, as they tend to spend more time on SM platforms featuring videos. Short video content appearing on SM significantly aggravates their urge to consume JF. Such influence of short video content could be harnessed for campaigning healthier food choices among students.

Likewise, students are less likely to display their engagement with JF-related content on SM, largely refraining from activities such as posting, sharing, and commenting. Nevertheless, such content is still inducing them to consume JF. Students hesitate to display themselves consuming JF, suggesting that they believe society does not view JF consumption positively. Beyond the perception that JF consumption lacks social prestige, this hesitation could also be a consequence of their awareness of the potential health risks associated with it. Moreover, SM have not yet emerged as platforms for purchasing JF because online delivery takes time, which is incompatible with students' desire for instant consumption. These discussions indicate that while SM have become subtle yet strong promoters of JF consumption, they have not emerged as amplifiers.

Students' SM usage patterns have a significant effect on their JF consumption behavior. The cross-tabulation between the frequency of JF

consumption and the duration of SM usage, the Chi-square test, and students' responses during FGDs all suggest that SM usage has significantly influenced their JF consumption behavior. This validates Marcuse's notion regarding the indoctrinating and manipulating roles of mass media in shaping consumer choices. It also highlights the need for mechanisms to regulate the promotion of JF-related content on SM, particularly with a focus on protecting underage users.

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