

**Social media influences on food choices:
A study of online food preference of Gen Z in Capiz**

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ABSTRACT

Social media plays a significant role in shaping the food choices and preferences of Gen Z in Capiz by exposing them to trends, reviews, and visually appealing food content that influence their decisions on what to eat. This study examined how social media platforms shape the food choices, preferences, and eating behaviors of Generation Z in Capiz. Using a qualitative descriptive design, the research explored where Gen Z encounter food-related content, how they perceive its influence, and how they respond to online food trends. Thirty-two participants from different municipalities in Capiz were purposively selected and engaged in in-depth, semi-structured interviews, with data analyzed through thematic analysis. Findings revealed that Gen Z primarily encounter food-related content on platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Reels, with a high frequency of exposure shaping their awareness and preferences. Social media emerged as a catalyst for food desire, curiosity, and trend-driven consumption, as participants reported increased cravings and interest in visually appealing and viral foods. Additionally, social media significantly influenced decision-making, with food choices shaped by influencers, reviews, algorithm-driven content, and the popularity of restaurants and brands. Repeated exposure to such content often resulted in shifts in taste preferences and the desire to try trending foods. Moreover, social media functioned as a learning and experiential space where participants developed cooking skills, explored diverse cuisines, and recreated recipes at home. At the same time, participants demonstrated critical awareness by considering factors such as authenticity, health implications, affordability, and accessibility when engaging with food trends. Their responses reflected a balance between influence and personal judgment, highlighting both the benefits and limitations of digital food content. Based on these findings, the study proposed a Social Media Health Tips in Eating Good Foods for Gen Z in Capiz to promote informed, healthy, and responsible food choices. The guide aims to enhance critical thinking, health awareness, and practical decision-making, positioning social media as both a tool for learning and a space requiring mindful engagement.

Keywords: Generation Z, social media, food choices, eating preferences, food literacy, qualitative research.

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INTRODUCTION

Food consumption behavior is among the many domains significantly transformed by the ongoing digital revolution, as individuals increasingly rely on online platforms for inspiration, guidance, and social validation in shaping their dietary choices. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok provide widespread access to visually appealing and persuasive food-related content, which influences preferences, motivations, and consumption patterns. As a result, food engagement has shifted from traditional practices to digitally mediated experiences, creating a new paradigm in how individuals perceive and interact with food.

At the global level, this shift reflects broader technological and cultural transformations that influence health and lifestyle behaviors across populations. The increasing role of digital platforms in shaping food choices aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). These goals emphasize the importance of promoting balanced nutrition, informed consumption, and sustainable food systems amid globalization and technological advancement.

At the national level, the Philippines has experienced a rapid rise in social media usage, especially among younger generations, making digital platforms a powerful driver of consumer behavior. While social media can promote healthy eating and provide access to diverse food information, it also contributes to unhealthy eating habits, misinformation, and unrealistic body standards. This dual influence presents a challenge for educators, policymakers, and health professionals, highlighting the need for research-based interventions that promote digital literacy and responsible consumption.

At the local level, particularly in Capiz, known for its rich culinary heritage, the influence of social media presents both opportunities and challenges. While digital platforms introduce new food trends and experiences to Generation Z, they also risk overshadowing traditional practices such as the pangat method and other indigenous cooking techniques that are often passed down orally. The limited documentation of these traditions further increases the risk of cultural erosion, emphasizing the importance of preserving local culinary identity amid rapid digital change.

Anchored in the mission of Capiz State University (CapSU), this study supports the institution's commitment to producing relevant and impactful research that addresses community needs. It aligns with the CapSU Research Reform Agenda, which emphasizes innovation, cultural preservation, and responsiveness to contemporary issues. Moreover, the study reflects the FORGE framework of the College of Education (Fostering Opportunities for Research and Growth in Education) by promoting contextualized research, interdisciplinary perspectives, and the integration of local knowledge into academic inquiry.

Overall, this study contributes to both global and local discourses by examining how social media influences the food choices of Generation Z in Capiz. It seeks to fill existing research gaps in provincial contexts while providing insights that can inform educational practices, policy development, and cultural preservation initiatives. By understanding these dynamics, the study aims to support the development of more informed, health-conscious, and culturally grounded food choices among young individuals in the digital age.

Statement of the problem

This study aimed to explore the social media preferences on the food choices of Gen Z in the province of Capiz. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Where do Gen Z usually encounter food-related content in online platforms?

2. How do Gen Z describe the role of social media in shaping their food choices and eating preferences?
3. In what ways do social media food related- content (e.g. food reviews, vlogs, influences, and food trends) shape the eating behaviors of Gen Z?
4. How do Gen Z interpret and respond to popular food trends, viral recipes or food challenges they encounter online?
5. What output may be produced from the results of the study?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design, which aimed to provide a rich, comprehensive, and minimally theorized account of a phenomenon grounded in participants' own perspectives. Qualitative descriptive research is particularly appropriate for studies seeking to explore real-world experiences in a straightforward manner without imposing highly abstract interpretations (Sandelowski, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach allowed the researcher to remain open to emergent insights while maintaining methodological flexibility, making it especially suitable for under-researched contexts. It focused on describing the who, what, where, and how of lived experiences, thereby enabling a nuanced understanding of how social media platforms influence the food preferences, perceptions, and behaviors of Gen Z in relation to traditional Capiznon culinary practices. Furthermore, the design supported the integration of semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, which were effective in capturing rich, contextualized data within a practical and manageable timeframe.

From a methodological perspective, this study was anchored in an interpretivist paradigm, which assumed that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the meanings individuals assign to their experiences (Schwandt, 2014). The researcher acknowledged their positionality as a member of the local context and recognizes that knowledge was co-constructed through interaction with participants. Reflexivity was therefore practiced throughout the research process to ensure that personal assumptions and experiences did not unduly influence data interpretation. This perspective aligned with the goal of capturing authentic, contextually grounded insights into the intersection of digital media and local food culture.

Purposive sampling was utilized to select participants who could provide rich and relevant insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). The study involved thirty-two Generation Z participants drawn from the seventeen municipalities of Capiz, including Roxas City, based on clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews lasting between 30 to 60 minutes, allowing for both consistency and flexibility in data gathering (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview guide, composed of twelve bilingual questions, went through expert validation by an advisory committee and was pilot tested with ten non-participants to ensure clarity, cultural appropriateness, and linguistic accuracy. Interviews were conducted in participant-preferred locations, audio-recorded using a mobile application, and subsequently transcribed and translated by language experts to maintain fidelity and contextual meaning.

Data analysis was conducted using the six-phase thematic analysis framework of Braun and Clarke (2021), a flexible yet rigorous method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. The process began with data familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts, followed by systematic coding to generate initial codes. These codes were then organized into meaningful clusters and categories, leading to the identification of

preliminary themes. Through an iterative process of reviewing, refining, defining, and naming themes, the researcher ensured that the findings accurately reflected participants' lived experiences. Manual analytic strategies, including column-based coding and thematic grouping, were employed to enhance transparency and depth in the analytical process. The final phase involved synthesizing the themes into coherent narratives that captured the essence of participants' perspectives.

To ensure methodological rigor, the study adhered to the criteria of trustworthiness, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with the data, participant validation through member checking, and triangulation of findings. Participants were given the opportunity to review and confirm the accuracy of their transcribed responses, ensuring that interpretations faithfully represented their intended meanings. Transferability was addressed by providing rich, thick descriptions of the research context and participants, allowing readers to determine the applicability of findings to similar settings. The methodological approach reflected a coherent integration of qualitative descriptive design, interpretivist perspective, and systematic analytical procedures. It ensured that the findings are not only grounded in participants' authentic experiences but also produced through a transparent, rigorous, and ethically sound research process. This strengthened the study's contribution to understanding the complex interplay between social media and food culture among Generation Z in a localized context.

The rapid expansion of digital media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube has significantly transformed how food is perceived, shared, and consumed, particularly among Gen Z. As digital natives, Gen Z individuals are constantly exposed to visually appealing food content, viral food trends, and influencer-driven recommendations that shape their preferences and eating behaviors. This growing influence of social media has contributed to shifts in culinary practices, where convenience, aesthetics, and novelty often take precedence over tradition. In the Philippine context, where food is deeply tied to cultural identity and community heritage, this transformation raises important questions about how modern digital influences interact with and potentially reshape long-standing local food traditions. In Capiz, a province known for its rich culinary heritage and distinctive local dishes, the intersection between traditional food culture and contemporary digital trends becomes a critical area of inquiry. While Capiznon cuisine reflects the community's history, values, and identity, the increasing exposure of Gen Z to globalized food content may influence their appreciation, consumption, and preservation of these traditions. Understanding how social media affects the culinary identity of Capiznon Gen Z is essential in determining whether these digital influences contribute to cultural continuity or cultural dilution. Thus, this study situates itself within the broader discourse on culture, technology, and identity, aiming to explore how evolving digital environments shape local food practices and meanings.

The study targeted Gen Z individuals who were born between 1997 and 2012 in Capiz, Philippines, and who were active users of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube. The participants included thirty-two Gen Z individuals from sixteen municipalities and one city, capturing diverse perspectives on the influence of online food preferences. Purposive sampling utilizing the snowball method was used to select individuals who actively engaged with food-related content and could provide rich insights. A total of thirty-two participants provided appropriate and sufficient information, consistent with the principle of data saturation and redundancy as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016).

The study also considered the participants' familiarity with Capiz's traditional food heritage to explore how social media influenced food choices and the preservation or adaptation of local culinary practices. The researcher sought approval to conduct the study through formal letters addressed to schools across different municipalities. Data were collected through

interviews and analysis of online food content, with emphasis placed on building trust and local engagement, particularly in rural areas. Data collection continued until saturation was reached, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of how social media shaped Gen Z's food choices and contributed to evolving food preferences in Capiz. The qualitative data were gathered from participants across sixteen municipalities and one city, with two participants per municipality, totaling thirty-two respondents who were purposively selected based on their availability and willingness to participate.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were carefully established to ensure the selection of participants who were knowledgeable, contextually relevant, and capable of contributing meaningful data to the study. Participants were required to have been born between the years 1997 and 2012 and to have lived in Capiz for at least ten years in order to be sufficiently familiar with local food practices, food culture, and food preferences in the province. They must have been actively engaged with food-related content on social media, including food reviews, food trends, recipes, food vlogs, and food posts, and must have been familiar with online food trends and capable of providing relevant insights regarding food choices and online food preferences. Furthermore, participants must have been able to communicate effectively in Hiligaynon, Filipino, or English during the interview. Conversely, individuals born before 1997 or after 2012 were excluded, as were those who had lived in Capiz for less than ten years or who were more familiar with food practices and food culture from other provinces. Those whose engagement with digital content was limited to content other than food-related material were likewise excluded, along with individuals who were familiar with trends other than food trends or who were unable to communicate effectively in languages other than Hiligaynon, Filipino, or English.

The socio-demographic profile of the research participants reflects notable characteristics relevant to the study. In terms of sex, the participants were evenly split between males and females, with each group comprising 50% of the total participants, resulting in 16 male and 16 female participants out of the total of 32. In terms of age, the majority of participants, comprising 40.63%, were aged 18 to 19 years old, representing 13 individuals. About 21.88% were in the 20 to 21 years old range, accounting for 7 participants. Smaller percentages fell into the older age groups, with 3 participants or 9.38% aged 19 to 20 years old, 4 participants or 12.5% aged 21 to 22 years old, 2 participants or 6.25% aged 22 to 23 years old, 2 participants or 6.25% aged 26 to 27 years old, and 1 participant or 3.13% aged 27 to 28 years old, bringing the total to 32 participants or 100%. With regard to educational attainment, 4 participants or 12.5% were senior high school students, 25 participants or 78.13% were at the college level, and 3 participants or 9.38% were college graduates, yielding a total of 100%. In terms of civil status, 31 participants or 96.88% were single and 1 participant or 3.13% was married, with a total of 32 participants. With respect to occupation, 3 participants or 9.38% were teachers and 29 participants or 90.68% were students.

This study employed research instruments to gather qualitative data from participants, focusing on the impact of social media on food choices and preferences among Gen Z in Capiz. The goal was to understand how food-related content on social media influenced the food preferences of Gen Z in the province. A research instrument in the form of an interview guide containing a list of questions and prompts was designed to guide the interview in a focused, flexible, and conversational manner (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The research instrument utilized in this study was a researcher-made interview guide, which served as the primary tool for gathering the qualitative data needed. The interview guide was prepared and subsequently approved by the advisory committee.

Considering that participants were primarily fluent in Hiligaynon or Filipino, the interviews were conducted in these languages to ensure clarity and authenticity of responses. The interviews were conducted face-to-face for accuracy and were transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were then translated into English for data analysis, ensuring that the original meanings were preserved during the translation process. To ensure the validity and reliability of the interview guide, the questions were reviewed by experts in qualitative research as well as a focus group of local food experts to confirm that they effectively captured the influence of social media on food choices in Capiz. The guide was pilot tested with a small group of participants prior to full data collection to refine the questions and ensure clarity. In addition to audio recordings, visual documentation such as photos or screen captures of food-related social media content was also collected, with participants' consent, to supplement the interview data. These visuals helped contextualize the influence of social media on participants' food choices and provided additional material for analysis. Through the use of these instruments, the study aimed to capture rich qualitative data that reflected the lived experiences of Gen Z in Capiz, particularly in understanding how online food culture shaped their food preferences and behaviors.

Data were gathered through participants' interviews over a period of approximately two months. Interviews were conducted based on the participants' availability, including weekends when most were free and willing to participate. In line with Tesch (2013), qualitative data were collected in settings and at times that were convenient for participants, allowing the study to align with the progressive, responsive, emergent, and interpretative nature of qualitative descriptive research. In this study, data gathering was carried out in locations chosen by the participants, ensuring comfort and openness during the interview process. The procedure included preliminary activities, the main data-gathering phase, and post-data-gathering activities, all aimed at exploring how social media influenced food choices among Gen Z in Capiz, particularly in relation to online food trends and eating habits.

In the preliminary phase, the researcher identified the target population of Gen Z individuals born between 1997 and 2012 residing in Capiz. Prior to data collection, formal permission to conduct the study was secured through letters addressed to schools and relevant institutions across different municipalities. The researcher coordinated with senior high school students, college students, and professionals to recruit participants who were active users of social media, particularly those engaged with food-related content. A total of thirty-two participants were selected, with two participants representing each municipality. Snowball sampling was also employed, wherein initial participants referred other potential respondents, enabling the researcher to gather information-rich cases (Patton, 2015). The researcher also immersed in the local community to build rapport, foster trust, and encourage participation, which included informal conversations and initial discussions regarding social media use and food choices.

During the data-gathering proper, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face with the thirty-two participants from different municipalities. The interviews allowed participants to share detailed narratives about their experiences with social media and its influence on their food preferences. The interview guide covered topics such as social media usage patterns, exposure to food-related content including influencers, recipes, and food challenges, and food choices influenced by online platforms. Interviews were conducted primarily in Hiligaynon or Filipino to ensure clarity and authenticity of responses. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English. A language expert verified the accuracy of the translations using back-translation techniques, ensuring the credibility and consistency of the data.

In the post-data-gathering phase, the researcher organized, reviewed, and cleaned the collected data, particularly the interview transcripts. The qualitative data were analyzed using

thematic analysis to identify emerging patterns, categories, and themes related to the influence of social media on food choices. In addition, the researcher examined relevant social media content such as food blogs, Instagram posts, Facebook content, and TikTok videos to contextualize the findings. Secondary data sources, including online articles, food reviews, and platform-based insights, were also reviewed to support and enrich the interpretation of results. These procedures ensured a comprehensive and systematic analysis of how social media shaped the food preferences and behaviors of Gen Z in Capiz.

The study employed thematic analysis following the six steps by Braun and Clarke (2021). Data analysis was treated as a process of organizing, classifying, and interpreting linguistic data to uncover both explicit and implicit meanings embedded in participants' responses. The first step, familiarization with the data, involved an in-depth engagement with the data wherein the researcher repeatedly read and reviewed the interview transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences. This immersion allowed the researcher to identify initial patterns and meaningful insights related to how social media influenced food choices among Gen Z in Capiz. The second step of generating initial codes involved systematically identifying significant statements and assigning labels to relevant data segments. These codes were then organized through clustering and grouping techniques, allowing patterns to emerge across the dataset. During the step of searching for and reviewing themes, the researcher cross-analyzed the coded data using column-based organization to ensure consistency and coherence of categories. Potential themes were refined by examining their relationships and relevance to the research question following the fifth step of defining and naming themes, by which point themes had been clearly defined and named to capture the essence of the data. This was followed by the producing of the thematic narrative. This rigorous and iterative process ensured that the resulting themes accurately represented the participants' lived experiences and provided a credible interpretation of how social media shaped their food preferences and behaviors.

In this study, the researcher acknowledged their own subjectivity and the influence of personal experiences in shaping the research process. Having grown up in Capiz, the researcher had observed firsthand the evolving food culture in the region, particularly how it had been influenced by digital platforms and the increasing prominence of social media in the lives of younger generations. This personal connection to the local context fostered a strong interest in understanding how social media affected food choices among Gen Z, who were often at the forefront of trends and digital culture. The researcher was aware of their position as both an observer and a participant in the digital age. As a frequent consumer of social media and someone familiar with the food culture in Capiz, the researcher recognized that their experiences and perspectives might have shaped the interpretation of data. This subjectivity was acknowledged as part of the researcher's reflexivity process, which involved being mindful of personal biases and ensuring that these did not overshadow the voices and experiences of the participants. The researcher strived to approach data collection and analysis with openness, aiming to present findings authentically while minimizing the influence of personal assumptions.

In interactions with participants, the researcher remained conscious of the importance of trust and rapport in conducting interviews. Since social media use could be a personal and sometimes sensitive topic, particularly among younger individuals, the researcher emphasized creating a comfortable environment where participants could freely express their thoughts and experiences. The researcher recognized and respected the diversity of perspectives among Gen Z, acknowledging that food choices and social media engagement were shaped by a complex interplay of individual preferences, cultural values, and peer influences. Additionally, the

researcher acknowledged their familiarity with food culture and digital trends, which could have influenced both the framing of questions and the interpretation of responses. While striving to maintain objectivity, the researcher also drew on their understanding of the evolving food landscape in Capiz, particularly how platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook had transformed how food was perceived, consumed, and shared among younger generations. To ensure that the study remained credible and representative, the researcher employed multiple data collection methods, such as in-depth interviews and supplementary data sources, while remaining mindful of potential biases. The qualitative data were analyzed with an emphasis on deriving themes directly from participants' narratives, ensuring that interpretations reflected their lived experiences. By acknowledging subjectivity, the researcher transparently engaged with the complexities of examining food culture in a digital context, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how online food culture influenced the local food practices of Gen Z in Capiz.

The study adhered to fundamental ethical principles in social science research, particularly respect for persons, beneficence, and justice as outlined in the Belmont Report (1979). In the context of this study, ethical procedures were carefully observed before and during data collection. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of their participation, and how the data would be used. Informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews, ensuring that participation was voluntary and that respondents could withdraw at any time without consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously maintained, especially considering that participants shared personal experiences regarding their social media use and food preferences. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and identifying details were removed from transcripts and reports to protect their identities. Audio recordings, transcripts, and translated data were securely stored and handled only by the researcher. These procedures were aligned with ethical standards in qualitative research that emphasize the protection of participants' privacy and the responsible handling of data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This was particularly important in this study, where participants came from different municipalities and communities within Capiz.

The principle of beneficence was applied by ensuring that participants were not exposed to harm or discomfort throughout the research process. Since the study explored participants' engagement with social media and food-related behaviors, interviews were conducted in a respectful, non-judgmental, and culturally sensitive manner. Participants were allowed to express their views freely in Hiligaynon, Filipino, or English, which helped create a comfortable environment for sharing authentic experiences. The researcher avoided leading or intrusive questions and ensured that participants could skip any question they were not comfortable answering. Transparency and research integrity were also upheld throughout the study. Participants were given the opportunity to review and validate their responses through member checking, ensuring that the translated and transcribed data accurately reflected their intended meanings. The researcher ensured that all findings were presented honestly and were grounded in the actual data collected, without fabrication or misrepresentation. Reflexivity was practiced to remain aware of potential biases, particularly given the researcher's familiarity with the local food culture and digital environment in Capiz.

Finally, the principle of justice was observed by ensuring fair and inclusive participant selection across the seventeen municipalities of Capiz, including Roxas City. Participants were chosen based on clearly defined inclusion criteria, ensuring that those selected were capable of providing meaningful insights into the research topic. Equal respect and consideration were given to all participants regardless of background. By contextualizing ethical practices within the local setting, the study ensured that the research process was not only methodologically sound but also culturally respectful and socially responsible.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the results, analyses, and interpretations of the data gathered in the study, which examines how social media influences the food choices and eating preferences of Generation Z in Capiz. The study employed a qualitative research design using purposive sampling to select thirty-two Generation Z participants whose responses formed the primary data source for the investigation. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, and the findings were derived from transcribed and validated interview responses analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify key themes and patterns. The discussion that follows is grounded entirely in the data gathered from participants and is interpreted in direct relation to the research problem statements guiding the study, which focus on the online platforms where Generation Z encounters food-related content, the role of social media in shaping food choices and eating preferences, the influence of food-related content on eating behaviors, and the interpretation and response of Generation Z to popular food trends, viral recipes, and food challenges encountered online.

Online platforms where Gen Z encounter food-related content

The thematic analysis of participants' responses regarding their online platform use revealed three major themes: online platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, Reels, YouTube, and Instagram as primary sites of food discovery, Facebook as a dominant platform for food discovery through Reels and shared posts, and cross-platform algorithmic exposure and reinforced visibility. These themes illustrate that Generation Z's encounters with food-related media are not random but are strongly influenced by platform algorithms, user engagement behaviors, and influencer-driven content, which collectively shape their food interests, preferences, and consumption tendencies in the digital space.

Online platforms like TikTok, Facebook, Reels, YouTube, and Instagram. The first theme reveals the central role of widely used digital spaces such as TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram in shaping how individuals discover, engage with, and make decisions about food. These platforms serve not only as sources of entertainment but also as powerful channels for information dissemination and cultural exchange, particularly among Generation Z users. Participants' responses suggest that these platforms function as primary gateways for food discovery, with short-form video features such as TikTok videos and Facebook Reels allowing users to quickly consume visually appealing and easily digestible content that often showcases trending dishes, local delicacies, and food preparation processes. The algorithm-driven nature of these platforms ensures that users are continuously exposed to food-related content aligned with their preferences, thereby reinforcing interest and influencing cravings and consumption behavior.

Among these platforms, TikTok emerged as the most dominant space where Generation Z participants encounter food-related media. This is largely driven by the platform's algorithmic "For You Page," which continuously curates and personalizes content based on users' viewing behavior, likes, comments, and watch duration. As reflected in the participants' narratives, once users engage with food videos such as mukbangs, cooking tutorials, or food vlogs, similar content repeatedly appears, creating a continuous cycle of exposure that strengthens their interest in food-related materials. Beyond algorithmic personalization, TikTok is also characterized by the popularity of viral food trends, mukbang culture, and influencer-driven content, where participants frequently mentioned exposure to both local and international food trends including street foods, Korean cuisine, and viral items such as "Dubai

chocolate." This reflects how TikTok operates not only as an entertainment platform but also as a powerful space for food marketing and digital influence.

Participant 4 explained how following food influencers directly increases repeated visibility of similar content, stating that on TikTok food brands always appear because of following content creators, and that their posts continuously pop up on the newsfeed because of likes given to mukbang videos and vloggers, such that similar content keeps reappearing in the feed and on TikTok those creators always appear because the participant follows them. Participant 27 further articulated how active engagement reinforces this algorithmic cycle, noting that whenever a video is watched, liked, commented on, or shared, similar content keeps coming back. Participant 20 shared the emotional and behavioral influence of TikTok food content, explaining that spending time on TikTok means food content commonly appears on the feed, and as someone who often feels hungry, cravings are triggered upon seeing food videos. Participant 32 elaborated that staying mostly on TikTok means seeing food videos like mukbangs and cooking tutorials, that once a video is watched, after a few minutes similar content appears again and makes continued scrolling and watching more food videos likely, and that as a Generation Z user, the short videos are more catchy and easier to engage with, as if inviting the viewer to try what they are eating. These accounts demonstrate how TikTok's algorithmic design and short-form video format are key factors that sustain continuous food content exposure, encourage prolonged engagement, and stimulate curiosity and desire to try the featured foods.

One participant described in extended detail how the algorithm and content structure of TikTok intensify food exposure, engagement, and behavioral influence, explaining that food brands are usually seen on TikTok because that is where most videos are watched and also on Facebook, that they sometimes appear on the newsfeed because of likes given to videos from content creators and vloggers who do mukbangs, such that they keep appearing repeatedly in the feed, and that on TikTok they always appear because of following those content creators, so their posts continuously pop up on the newsfeed (Participant 4). The dominance of TikTok as a primary gateway for food-related content among Generation Z is supported by related literature emphasizing algorithmic curation and short-form video engagement. According to Bucher (2018), algorithmic platforms shape users' media exposure by continuously filtering and recommending content based on prior interactions such as likes, watch time, and follows, resulting in a personalized and repetitive content environment. Similarly, Kaye et al. (2021) found that TikTok's short-form video structure promotes high user engagement, particularly with visually appealing content such as food vlogs and mukbangs, which often lead to sustained viewing and repeated exposure. Smith and Short (2022) further explain that TikTok's viral ecosystem accelerates the spread of trends through influencer participation and algorithmic amplification, making food-related content highly visible and influential among young users. Regarding YouTube, participants identified the platform as a source of more detailed and informative content. One participant explained that on YouTube, the focus is on watching how food is prepared and where good places to eat are, indicating that longer-form videos provide deeper engagement by allowing users not only to discover food but also to understand preparation methods and evaluate dining options. Instagram, meanwhile, emphasizes aesthetic presentation, where visually curated images and reels contribute to the appeal of certain dishes or food trends. Participants noted that on Facebook and Instagram, seeing what others are eating creates a desire to try it as well, reflecting how peer influence and curated content contribute to shaping food preferences, where the experiences of others create a sense of social validation and desire.

Facebook as a dominant platform for food discovery through Reels and shared posts. The second theme highlights the significant role of Facebook, particularly through its Reels feature and sharing mechanisms, as a space where participants frequently encounter

food-related content through shared posts, viral videos, and recommendations within their social networks. Participant 28 explained that food vlogs and recipes commonly appear while scrolling through Reels on Facebook, and that the platform has become an everyday space where Generation Z users regularly encounter food content without actively searching for it. Participant 18 highlighted how engagement behaviors such as liking, following, and sharing reinforce repeated exposure to food-related content, noting that following content creators and liking and sharing food content causes more similar content to keep appearing on the feed, demonstrating how user interaction directly influences the type and frequency of food content that appears and creates a cycle of continuous exposure. Participant 21 further described how Facebook supports experiential learning through food discovery, noting that step-by-step cooking videos always appear and generate curiosity about how the food is made and a desire to try it as well, indicating that Facebook not only serves as entertainment but also facilitates culinary curiosity and informal learning.

Participant 30 provided a detailed account of how Facebook functions as a continuous space for food discovery, explaining that time is typically spent scrolling through Reels on Facebook because that is where most food vlogs and cooking videos appear, and that once a video is watched, liked, or commented on, it feels automatic that more similar content keeps appearing in the feed, reaching a point where even without searching, food that looks tempting and interesting to cook still appears. The dominance of Facebook as a platform for food discovery via Reels and sharing is supported by literature emphasizing the role of social media as a participatory and algorithm-assisted environment where content is continuously circulated and reinforced through user interaction. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media platforms function as interactive spaces where users are both consumers and creators of content, allowing information such as food videos and recipes to spread rapidly through sharing and engagement. De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017) further explain that user-generated and influencer-driven content significantly shapes audience preferences and learning behaviors, particularly when content is perceived as authentic and relatable. Tuten and Solomon (2018) also emphasize that engagement behaviors such as liking, commenting, and sharing serve as key signals that influence algorithmic distribution, leading to repeated exposure of similar content on users' feeds.

Cross-platform algorithmic exposure and reinforced visibility. The third theme highlights how Generation Z experiences food-related content as a continuous, interconnected flow across multiple social media platforms, driven by algorithmic systems and user engagement behaviors. Participant 28 emphasized how algorithmic personalization follows users across platforms, stating that when a food video is watched on TikTok, after a few hours or even on Facebook or YouTube, similar content still appears because it seems to follow what is watched and done online. Participant 7 described how engagement history significantly shapes what is repeatedly encountered online, noting that watching mukbangs and food vlogs and liking them means that even on other apps like Instagram and YouTube, the same type of videos still appear. Participant 21 identified search behavior as a key factor in sustaining cross-platform visibility, explaining that searching for recipes on YouTube or TikTok causes the same food videos to appear when returning to Facebook or Instagram, as if the algorithm follows what is being searched for.

One participant provided an extended reflection on this cross-platform experience, stating that when recipes are searched on TikTok or YouTube and then returning to Facebook or Instagram, the same type of food content still appears, that it feels like all apps are already connected and following personal interests, that even without actively searching, videos and posts similar to what was previously watched keep appearing, that the algorithm already

recognizes what the viewer likes and continues to provide related content, which increases exposure to that type of food, and that because of this, it becomes difficult to resist being encouraged to try or cook trending recipes that constantly appear on the feed even if it was not originally planned (Participant 21). Participant 6 further elaborated that even on other social media platforms, the same food videos appear as long as watching and engaging starts on one platform, because it then follows across all apps. The theme of cross-platform algorithmic exposure and reinforced visibility is supported by Bucher (2018), who explains that users experience algorithms as persistent systems that extend beyond a single platform, creating the perception that content follows them across digital spaces. Zuboff (2019) further explains that user interactions such as searches, likes, and watch histories are continuously collected and processed to predict preferences and personalize content delivery across platforms, reinforcing repeated exposure. Kaye et al. (2021) additionally highlight that short-form video content and digital trends, particularly in food-related media, circulate across platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube due to interconnected engagement systems and algorithmic amplification. Among the online platforms identified through the thematic analysis, TikTok was referenced by 13 participants, Facebook by 10 participants, Reels by 9 participants, YouTube by 9 participants, and Instagram by 7 participants, demonstrating the breadth and variety of digital environments through which Generation Z regularly encounters food-related content.

Gen Z's description of the role of social media in shaping food choices and eating preferences

The thematic analysis of participants' descriptions of the role of social media in shaping their food choices and eating preferences revealed three major themes: social media as a powerful catalyst for food desire, curiosity, and trend-driven consumption; social media as an influencer of food decisions, preferences, and consumer choices; and social media as a learning, experiential, and adaptive food space with critical awareness. The findings revealed that social media serves as a powerful platform influencing food desire, curiosity, and trend-driven consumption among young individuals. Participants described how repeated exposure to viral food trends, mukbang videos, reels, and aesthetically appealing food content stimulated cravings and encouraged them to try popular or unfamiliar foods. Moreover, social media significantly influenced their food decisions and consumer preferences through influencers, online reviews, ratings, and algorithm-driven recommendations that shaped perceptions of restaurants, brands, and food products. Participants also viewed social media as a learning and experiential space where they developed cooking skills, explored recipes, and discovered new food options. Despite these positive influences, participants demonstrated critical awareness regarding misinformation, food authenticity, and potential negative effects of online food content, indicating that Generation Z consumers are not only highly influenced by social media but are also reflective and selective in their engagement with digital food culture. Across the three themes, social media as a powerful catalyst for food desire, curiosity, and trend-driven consumption was represented by 20 participants, social media as an influencer of food decisions, preferences, and consumer choices by 17 participants, and social media as a learning, experiential, and adaptive food space with critical awareness by 13 participants.

Social media as a powerful catalyst for food desire, curiosity, and trend-driven consumption. The first theme reflects how exposure to viral food content on platforms such as TikTok, Facebook Reels, and mukbang videos stimulates immediate interest and curiosity toward various foods. Repeated viewing of visually appealing food content creates a sense of familiarity and attraction, making users more inclined to try foods they may not have previously encountered. Curiosity plays a central role in motivating Generation Z to engage with unfamiliar or foreign foods such as Korean dishes, Dubai chocolate, and Tikoy, as seeing others enjoy or review these foods online triggers a psychological response of wanting to try or

experience the same taste. This curiosity is often reinforced by the perceived popularity of the food content, where high engagement such as likes, shares, and comments signals social approval, making unfamiliar foods desirable not because of prior experience but because of their repeated representation and social validation online.

Participant 1 illustrated how perceived enjoyment and social proof in digital content encourage food trial and consumption, stating that on social media many kinds of food can be seen, and that when content creators appear to enjoy the food, there is a tendency to choose and try it because many have already proven it is good, and that whatever restaurant or food brand is featured sometimes gets patronized, and when a restaurant becomes popular online, it can also encourage trying their food or even visiting the place. Participant 2 shared that watching food online creates a desire to eat it, and that seeing people eating makes it feel like it might be delicious as well. Participant 10 noted that social media has a big influence on food choices because when something goes viral with many likes and shares, curiosity to try it is generated. Participant 19 described how trending foods on TikTok generate cravings even when it is known that trying them is not necessarily the wisest choice, explaining that because the food was seen online, the desire to try it is strong. Participant 28 reinforced this by stating that social media influences food choices because when many people like and share something, it also becomes desirable because it seems delicious. These accounts demonstrate how trend visibility and collective online behavior strongly shape Generation Z's food cravings and consumption decisions, consistent with Robinson et al. (2021), who found that exposure to food-related images and digital content significantly increases cravings and immediate food intake among adolescents and young adults. Hawkins and Velazquez (2022) further explained that platforms such as TikTok and Instagram function as digital food environments where algorithm-driven content and visually appealing food presentations shape users' perceptions, preferences, and willingness to try trending foods, while Vaterlaus and Patten (2020) highlighted that social media fosters curiosity-driven food exploration through influencer marketing, peer sharing, and viral trends.

Social media as an influencer of food decisions, preferences, and consumer choices. The second theme reflects how food vloggers and content creators shape decisions by showcasing food experiences that appear appealing, trustworthy, and worth trying. Reviews, ratings, and comment sections further reinforce credibility, as users tend to rely on collective opinions before deciding what to eat, reflecting how social validation in digital spaces functions as a key mechanism in guiding food-related behavior and reducing uncertainty in food selection. Brand and restaurant popularity heavily influence food preferences and consumer choices among Generation Z, as participants noted that restaurants or food brands that frequently appear on social media tend to attract more attention and patronage regardless of prior familiarity.

Participant 8 described how social media gives recommendations of food choices and that food content boosts appetite and makes users want to try featured items, reflecting how algorithm-driven recommendations and food content influence consumer decision-making and preference formation. Participant 28 noted that social media influences food choices because when many people like and share something, it also becomes desirable because it looks really good, demonstrating how popularity metrics function as indicators of trust and desirability. The same participant further noted that social media influences food choices because seeing the same thing repeatedly causes increased cravings, highlighting how algorithmic repetition and visibility reinforce preference shifts. Participant 9 articulated how social media functions as both a source of guidance and uncertainty, explaining that through social media, food brand choices are influenced, that it is sometimes no longer easy to distinguish what is fake or real,

that before eating it is important to ensure food brands and restaurants are safe and that expiration dates are checked, and that social media also gives recommendations and options on what might be better or preferred, noting that in today's generation its role is very important because it makes it easier to decide what food to crave or eat. These findings are supported by Coates et al. (2019), who found that exposure to food and beverage marketing on social media significantly increases the likelihood of food choices among young adults as repeated visual cues strengthen preference formation. Buchanan et al. (2021) reported that algorithmically curated content plays a crucial role in shaping dietary preferences by repeatedly exposing users to specific food products, and Murphy et al. (2020) emphasized that influencer endorsements and user-generated reviews contribute to perceived credibility and trust, which strongly affect consumer decision-making.

Social media as a learning, experiential, and adaptive food space with critical awareness. The third theme highlights how Generation Z participants view social media not only as a source of entertainment and influence but also as a practical learning platform for food-related knowledge and skills. Participants described how cooking tutorials, step-by-step videos, and recipe demonstrations available on platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook serve as accessible guides for learning how to prepare different dishes. This digital exposure allows users to acquire culinary knowledge informally, transforming social media into an alternative space for food education outside traditional learning environments. Participants also emphasized the experiential and adaptive dimension of social media use, particularly in experimenting with and recreating recipes at home.

Participant 7 highlighted the instructional value of online content, sharing that social media describes how to cook step by step and also advertises new foods, and that when new recipes are seen, they are tried at the boarding house to see how they taste. Participant 13 shared a particularly detailed account of how social media serves as an experiential learning space, explaining that a recipe called Mozubi Bites was seen on TikTok and tried, and that it helped start a small business, that what was watched online was applied and tried personally, that after liking it others were invited to try and they also bought it, that there are many viral food contents, vlogs, and recipes, and that since the ingredients are available locally, trying to make it was seen as worthwhile because food vloggers said it is worth trying. This illustrates how social media becomes a space for skill development, creativity, and even entrepreneurial opportunity, consistent with Sims (2017), who emphasized that social media and online video platforms function as informal learning environments where users acquire practical skills through observation, imitation, and participation. Choi and Lee (2020) found that user-generated content and tutorial-based videos significantly enhance experiential learning by allowing individuals to replicate and adapt procedures in real-life contexts, while Livingstone and Sefton-Green (2016) noted that while digital media provides rich opportunities for participatory learning, it also requires users to develop critical media literacy skills to evaluate credibility, accuracy, and authenticity of online information.

However, alongside these benefits, participants also demonstrated critical awareness of the limitations of social media content. Participant 19 noted that social media has both advantages and disadvantages, that sometimes there is a tendency for it to be used as a scam, and that when using social media, the content should be relevant to what is being looked for. This reflects a reflective stance, showing that while Generation Z benefits from social media as a learning tool, they also critically evaluate the reliability and authenticity of the information they consume. The findings imply that social media has become a powerful determinant of Generation Z's dietary behavior, functioning not only as a source of entertainment but also as a platform for shaping consumption patterns, learning food practices, and influencing decision-making processes. This suggests that educators, health professionals, and policymakers should recognize the strong impact of digital food environments in shaping young people's food

choices and consider integrating digital literacy and critical media awareness into food education and health promotion programs.

Influence of social media food-related content on the eating behaviors of Gen Z

The reflexive thematic analysis of participants' responses regarding the influence of social media food-related content on their eating behaviors revealed three major themes: social media as a powerful driver of food craving, choice, and consumption behavior, which was reflected by 27 participants; social media as a platform for food learning, exploration, and culinary development, reflected by 10 participants; and critical and contextual filtering of food content in decision-making, also reflected by 10 participants. These themes collectively demonstrate that Generation Z's food-related behaviors are shaped by continuous exposure to food reviews, mukbangs, and influencer-generated content, while also highlighting their active role in evaluating such content based on health considerations, budget constraints, and personal taste.

Social media as a powerful driver of food craving, choice, and consumption behavior. The dominant pattern across the narratives of 27 participants is the activation of cravings through visually appealing food content, particularly mukbangs and highly stylized food presentations. Participants described how watching influencers enjoy food, often emphasizing taste reactions and sensory appeal, triggers immediate desire and appetite even for foods they had not previously considered. This reflects how repeated visual exposure, combined with emotional and sensory cues, transforms passive viewing into an embodied craving experience, leading individuals to associate online food representations with anticipated satisfaction. The influence of viral and trending food content, amplified by algorithm-driven platforms, significantly shapes participants' food choices, as frequently appearing content on their feeds creates a sense of familiarity and desirability that encourages them to try these foods.

Participant 1 highlighted how observing enjoyment in others translates into personal desire and eventual consumption, noting that seeing content creators enjoying food creates a tendency to also choose and try it because many have already proven it is good. Participant 6 similarly emphasized that when others are seen enjoying food, cravings begin to develop. Participant 10 articulated how social validation amplifies desirability, noting that many people sharing and liking something makes a person feel encouraged to try or buy it even without personally experiencing it, and that one of the biggest influences is when vloggers visit different restaurants and try various foods, such that even without having been there, those places become familiar and eventually become part of a wishlist because they are presented as delicious and worth trying. Participant 26 described how online feedback and social validation shape willingness to engage with viral food content, explaining that considering whether recipes are really good leads to immediately thinking about trying them, and that many positive reactions encourage trying because of the good feedback. Participant 28 expressed that seeing the same food content repeatedly causes increased cravings, while Participant 17 noted a strong desire to try out of curiosity and to experience what an admired online personality has experienced. Participant 29 further shared being encouraged to try new things for the taste buds.

These findings are well supported by existing literature, which highlights the powerful role of social media in shaping food cravings, choices, and consumption behavior. Studies have shown that repeated exposure to visually appealing food content, particularly through short-form videos and mukbang, can significantly increase appetite and desire to eat even in the absence of physical hunger (Scully et al., 2020). Social validation cues such as likes, shares, and positive

comments function as persuasive signals that enhance perceived taste and desirability, reinforcing individuals' intention to try featured foods (Harris et al., 2021). Influencer marketing has also been found to promote imitation and aspirational consumption, where viewers model their food choices based on the behaviors and experiences of content creators (Coates et al., 2019). These studies collectively affirm that social media is not merely a passive source of information but an active agent in shaping dietary behavior, driven by visual stimulation, algorithmic exposure, and social endorsement mechanisms.

Social media as a platform for food learning, exploration, and culinary development. The second theme, reflected by 10 participants, highlights how digital content extends beyond entertainment and persuasion into informal education and skill acquisition. Participants' narratives reveal that platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook function as accessible learning environments where users acquire knowledge on recipes, cooking techniques, and food preparation processes through observation and imitation. The ease of access to step-by-step demonstrations allows users to repeatedly view, pause, and replicate cooking processes, thereby strengthening procedural understanding and confidence in food preparation.

Participant 28 described learning recipes from YouTube and immediately trying them at home by following how they are done, illustrating how social media serves as an informal instructional space where cooking skills are developed through observation, imitation, and repeated practice. Participant 12 shared that many new foods seen on the internet that have not been tried before are subsequently experimented with, reflecting how digital platforms function as catalysts for exploratory behavior enabling users to go beyond familiar food choices and engage in creative experimentation. Participant 7 expressed that foods from other places not available locally are seen in vlogs and inspire a desire to try them someday, demonstrating how exposure to digital food content shapes curiosity and future intentions and encourages culinary openness and appreciation of food diversity. Participant 16 indicated that when a restaurant is not accessible, the food seen there is made at home as long as the ingredients are available, showing that social media not only supports food exploration but also strengthens self-sufficiency by enabling users to become active producers of culinary experiences.

These findings are strongly supported by Morris and Campbell (2020), who demonstrated that video-based platforms such as YouTube and TikTok function as visual learning environments where users acquire procedural cooking knowledge through observation and imitation. De Solier (2018) explains that digital food media encourages culinary experimentation by normalizing creativity and encouraging audiences to try new recipes and adapt cooking styles, while Lu (2019) highlights that food vlogs and online content expand culinary awareness by exposing users to diverse cuisines and global food practices, often motivating them to recreate dishes at home when direct access is limited.

Critical and contextual filtering of food content in decision-making. The third theme, also reflected by 10 participants, highlights that while social media strongly influences Generation Z food behaviors, participants do not passively accept all content they encounter. They exercise discernment when evaluating food reviews and ratings, often weighing credibility and authenticity before making decisions, reflecting a growing awareness that online content may be biased or promotional in nature. Participant 4 acknowledged influence but also recognized the variability and uncertainty of online food content, explaining that when cravings arise and different foods appear on the newsfeed, decisions are influenced because the variety of foods seen also changes the cravings, demonstrating critically interpretive engagement with digital content. Participant 13 demonstrated health-conscious filtering, explaining that seeing on social media how processed foods like hotdogs are made has led to avoiding them because they are not good to eat every day, showing that awareness gained from online content leads to selective avoidance and that social media can function as a tool for health-related decision-making. Participant 17 articulated the moderation of desire by budget, noting a desire to try

expensive restaurant food but an inability to afford it as a student, indicating that while social media generates desire, economic limitations regulate actual consumption. Participant 25 highlighted that personal taste functions as a decisive filter, noting that foods which are good for others may not be suitable for a picky eater, and that if a food cannot be eaten, it will not be tried, reinforcing that final decision-making remains grounded in individual preference.

These findings are strongly supported by Harris et al. (2021), who show that while food-related content on social media can strongly shape preferences and cravings, individuals often apply skepticism and critical evaluation when assessing credibility, particularly in influencer-generated reviews and promotional content. Scully et al. (2020) highlight that health consciousness plays a key moderating role in food selection, as exposure to nutritional information online encourages users to avoid excessive consumption of processed and unhealthy foods, while Coates et al. (2019) confirm that affordability often limits the extent to which individuals can act on digitally induced food desires. The findings of this study have important implications for understanding how social media shapes the eating behaviors of Generation Z, suggesting that educators, parents, and health advocates should consider media literacy and critical viewing skills as essential competencies for young people to help them manage impulsive food cravings triggered by online content and reduce overconsumption influenced by visual stimuli and social validation.

Gen Z's interpretation and response to popular food trends, viral recipes, and food challenges encountered online

The thematic analysis of participants' interpretations and responses to popular food trends, viral recipes, and food challenges encountered online revealed three major themes: digital social influence and trend-driven consumption of viral food content, reflected by 17 participants; economic constraints and affordability-driven food decision-making, reflected by 7 participants; and health-conscious evaluation and adaptive learning from food trends, also reflected by 7 participants. These themes collectively demonstrate that Generation Z's food-related decisions are shaped by a combination of social media influence, financial capacity, and health awareness, and that their engagement with viral food content goes beyond simple viewing, reflecting how digital exposure interacts with personal circumstances and critical thinking in shaping curiosity, preferences, and actual food practices.

Digital social influence and trend-driven consumption of viral food content. The first theme, reflected by 17 participants, highlights how Generation Z's food-related behaviors are strongly shaped by what they encounter on social media platforms. Participants consistently emphasized the influence of food influencers, vloggers, and reactors in shaping their perceptions of what is desirable, delicious, or worth trying. The credibility and relatability of these online personalities make their food content persuasive, often guiding viewers toward imitation or curiosity-driven engagement. Repeated exposure to aesthetically pleasing food visuals and trending recipes stimulates cravings and increases appetite, often leading to immediate desire to try or recreate the food, with the algorithmic nature of social media further intensifying this effect by continuously feeding similar content.

Participant 26 highlighted how social validation shapes willingness to engage with viral food content, explaining that when many positive reactions are observed, the encouragement to try the food increases because of good feedback, reflecting that decision-making is significantly influenced by perceived collective approval and that digital engagement metrics act as persuasive cues guiding consumption behavior. Participant 7 described the emotional appeal of virality itself, noting that excitement and a desire to buy and try something arise

because it is viral and the taste is wanted, reflecting how the label "viral" functions as a psychological trigger that intensifies anticipation and curiosity. Participant 10 illustrated the persuasive power of online communities, explaining that overly tempting mukbang foods are bad for health, but that reactors and commenters have a big influence, and that viewers' comments and likes strongly affect perception of whether food is good or not, showing that food consumption is no longer an individual act but a socially mediated decision. Participant 8 reflected a more critical layer of engagement, noting that through honest food ratings and reviews and depending on the food content creator's background, it is possible to decide whether something should be tried or not, reflecting emerging digital literacy where content source credibility is evaluated.

The theme is supported by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) and Kietzmann et al. (2011), who emphasize that social media platforms have transformed consumers into highly exposed and interaction-driven audiences where visibility, repetition, and influencer credibility significantly shape attitudes and behavioral intentions toward products including food. De Veirman et al. (2017) further show that influencer marketing strongly affects consumer trust and purchase intention due to perceived relatability and authenticity, while Appel et al. (2020) explain that algorithmic curation continuously reinforces exposure to similar food content, thereby increasing craving and preference formation through repeated visual stimulation.

Economic constraints and affordability-driven food decision-making. The second theme, reflected by 7 participants, reveals that while Generation Z is highly exposed to viral food trends and often develops curiosity and craving toward them, their actual food choices are strongly regulated by financial limitations. Being students with limited allowances directly affects their ability to try trending or expensive foods, such that even when food content online appears attractive and desirable, decisions are frequently filtered through considerations of budget availability, making affordability a central factor in food engagement.

Participant 21 expressed the tension between aspiration and financial limitation in detail, explaining that wanting to make or try viral food seen on social media that looks really good requires immediately checking whether it can be afforded or made, and that if the student allowance is not enough, even when desire is strong, one is forced not to try it because daily needs and allowance take priority, demonstrating that financial responsibility overrides curiosity and that economic survival and budgeting take precedence over participation in food trends. Participant 22 similarly noted that trending food generates excitement but when the cost and the need to travel or order online are considered, a judgment is made about whether it is worth the money, and if the expense cannot be justified, simple food at home is chosen even with curiosity remaining, illustrating how cost-benefit evaluation becomes a practical decision-making tool limiting participation in viral food consumption. Participant 14 described an adaptive strategy, explaining that because viral foods are expensive and the student allowance is limited, ways are sought to make them using available ingredients at home by recreating the recipe in order to satisfy curiosity without spending much, reflecting how affordability constraints lead to creative substitution rather than outright consumption denial.

These findings are supported by Solomon (2020) and Kotler and Keller (2022), who emphasize that affordability and price sensitivity continue to be dominant determinants of consumption decisions especially among young consumers operating under limited financial resources. Research further shows that students tend to prioritize essential needs over discretionary and trend-based spending, resulting in selective engagement with lifestyle consumption such as viral foods (Statista, 2021; PwC Global Consumer Insights Survey, 2022). Sheth (2020) additionally indicates that when financial constraints are present, consumers are more likely to conduct cost-benefit evaluations and shift toward affordable substitutes or homemade alternatives, while Deloitte Digital Consumer Trends (2023) confirms that

economic limitations remain a strong moderating factor that prevents actual purchase behavior despite the desire generated by social media exposure.

Health-conscious evaluation and adaptive learning from food trends. The third theme, also reflected by 7 participants, reveals that despite the strong influence of viral food content, Generation Z participants demonstrate an emerging awareness of health and nutrition in their food-related decisions. While social media exposure stimulates curiosity and desire to try trending foods, many participants also expressed concern about the nutritional value and potential health risks associated with excessive consumption of highly processed, sugary, or oily foods, indicating that food decisions are not purely driven by visual appeal or popularity but are also filtered through personal health considerations.

Participant 6 expressed health-oriented reflection, sharing that before trying food seen online the question of whether it is really good and whether it is healthy is considered, showing that engagement with viral food trends involves evaluating both taste and nutritional value. Participant 15 emphasized moderation and caution toward unhealthy food trends, noting that overly tempting foods in mukbangs are bad for health and that boundaries need to be set because not all viral foods are healthy and self-control is necessary especially with junk foods and mukbang content, reflecting awareness of the risks associated with excessive consumption influenced by online content. Participant 11 highlighted learning and creativity as adaptive responses, sharing that viral food content is considered a way to improve cooking skills in food preparation and that it might be used in future business or teaching applications, demonstrating how viral food content becomes a tool for culinary learning and skill development. Participant 24 described innovation and adaptation, noting that viral foods are tried using simple ingredients at home and that alternative versions are created to explore cooking creativity and satisfy curiosity without spending much, demonstrating how Generation Z adapts food trends into practical, creative, and resourceful culinary practices.

The findings imply that Generation Z's interpretation and response to viral food trends are shaped by a complex interaction of digital exposure, economic reality, and health awareness. While viral food content generates desire and engagement through visually compelling and algorithm-amplified presentations, students' limited financial capacity often restricts actual consumption, leading them to prioritize affordable, accessible, or homemade alternatives. At the same time, growing awareness of health risks, nutritional value, and food safety encourages more cautious and moderate eating behaviors, resulting in adaptive strategies such as recipe modification, selective consumption, and health-oriented decision-making. This shows that Generation Z does not simply follow food trends blindly but filters them through practical considerations, reflecting a digitally literate generation that navigates between influence and critical awareness in shaping food behavior.

Taken together, the findings presented across all four research areas of this study provide a coherent, comprehensive, and internally consistent account of how social media influences the food choices and eating behaviors of Generation Z in Capiz. The thematic analysis revealed that Generation Z's food-related behaviors are multidimensional and deeply embedded in digital culture, shaped by the interplay of algorithm-driven platform exposure, social validation, influencer-generated content, culinary learning opportunities, and contextual filters including health consciousness, economic capacity, and personal taste. Online platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram emerge as primary digital food environments where cross-platform algorithmic systems create continuous and reinforced visibility of food content, persistently shaping participants' food interests and cravings. Social media simultaneously functions as a catalyst for food desire and trend-driven consumption, an influencer of food decisions and consumer choices, and a learning and adaptive food space

where culinary skills are developed and creative experimentation is encouraged. While digital exposure drives strong craving activation, imitation behavior, and aspirational engagement with viral food trends, Generation Z also demonstrates active agency through critical filtering of food content, selective acceptance based on health awareness, budget regulation, and personal preference, and adaptive strategies such as recipe recreation and homemade substitution. These findings collectively address the research objectives of the study and contribute meaningfully to the growing body of knowledge on digital food culture, youth consumer behavior, and the role of social media in shaping dietary practices and food identity formation in the contemporary digital age. The insights generated in this chapter lay a strong empirical and analytical foundation for the conclusions, recommendations, and implications for practice and future research presented in the succeeding chapter of this manuscript.

CONCLUSION

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore how social media influenced the food choices of Generation Z in Capiz, Philippines, particularly in relation to local culinary practices and online food culture. Guided by semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 32 purposively and snowball-selected participants drawn from 16 municipalities and Roxas City, the study gathered rich narrative data on lived experiences with food-related content across TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Data collection was conducted over two months in convenient locations and schedules to ensure participant comfort and accessibility. The participants, composed equally of males and females aged 18 to 28, were mainly college and senior high school students actively engaged with social media food content. Using a validated and pilot-tested interview guide, data were recorded, transcribed, translated, and subjected to participant validation to ensure credibility. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-step framework was applied, supported by coding, clustering, and iterative theme development, while triangulation and peer review were conducted to strengthen trustworthiness, dependability, and confirmability.

The findings of the study reveal that Generation Z's food choices in Capiz were strongly and consistently shaped by algorithm-driven exposure to viral food content, influencer marketing, and visually appealing food presentations. Social media platforms functioned as primary gateways for discovering food trends, triggering curiosity, cravings, and the imitation of online food experiences among young consumers. TikTok emerged as the principal platform for food content discovery, owing to its personalized feeds, viral trend cycles, and the pervasive presence of influencer content, while Facebook further supported food discovery through Reels, shared posts, and cooking videos. Cross-platform algorithmic systems reinforced repeated exposure based on user engagement patterns, deepening the integration of social media into everyday food decision-making. Continuous exposure across these platforms collectively reinforced food preferences and shaped consumption behaviors in ways that were both deliberate and inadvertent.

The study further found that social media exerted a significant influence on Generation Z's food perceptions, preferences, and behaviors by generating food curiosity, cravings, and trend-driven consumption. Beyond passive consumption of content, social media also functioned as an active learning space for cooking skills and recipe experimentation, though participants demonstrated varying degrees of awareness regarding misinformation and exercised selective engagement with online food narratives. Mukbangs and other forms of viral food content were particularly effective in driving cravings and influencing food choices, while also encouraging food exploration and home cooking. However, these behaviors were not uncritical or uniform, as they were consistently moderated by health concerns, budget

limitations, and deeply held personal preferences that participants brought to their engagement with online food culture.

Importantly, the study found that participants showed varying degrees of integration between global food trends and local Capisnon cuisine. While some participants reinforced their appreciation of traditional food practices through social media engagement, others embraced digital food influences in ways that reshaped or reoriented their eating habits. Generation Z's responses to viral food trends were thus characterized by a dynamic interplay of influence and critical awareness. Visual appeal and influencer endorsement encouraged imitation and curiosity, yet participants also weighed considerations of affordability, accessibility, and potential health risks before adopting new food behaviors. A notable proportion of participants further transformed online food trends into creative, educational, and entrepreneurial activities, reflecting a generative rather than purely consumptive relationship with digital food culture.

Based on these findings, the study draws several consequential conclusions regarding the nature and extent of social media's influence on Generation Z's food choices. It is concluded that Generation Z in Capiz primarily encountered food-related content through TikTok and Facebook, where algorithmic systems consistently delivered viral and influencer-based content that shaped food perceptions across multiple platforms. Social media significantly influenced their food curiosity, cravings, and decision-making processes, while simultaneously serving as a platform for culinary learning, despite participant awareness of the risks of misinformation. Eating behaviors were strongly affected through the promotion of food exploration and the triggering of consumption impulses, yet these were meaningfully tempered by health consciousness, financial constraints, and individual preferences. Generation Z demonstrated both receptiveness to influence and a capacity for critical thinking in their engagement with viral food trends, balancing curiosity with practical considerations related to cost, health, and accessibility, while some participants channeled these trends into creative and entrepreneurial expression.

In light of these conclusions, the study offers a range of recommendations directed at diverse stakeholders engaged with food, culture, digital media, and youth development. Local food businesses and entrepreneurs may draw on these findings to strengthen social media-based marketing strategies that align with Generation Z's preference for viral, visually appealing, and trend-driven food content, and may promote Capisnon dishes by thoughtfully integrating them into prevailing online food trends. Influencers are encouraged to design content that is engaging, relatable, and visually compelling, while balancing trend-driven material with authentic and informative food storytelling that supports healthier and more culturally grounded consumption habits. Generation Z consumers themselves may practice more critical and mindful engagement with online food content by carefully considering health, budget, and authenticity before adopting viral food trends, and may continue to leverage social media as a constructive space for food learning and creative experimentation.

Schools and universities may integrate digital food culture topics into relevant academic subjects to help students understand the mechanisms through which social media shapes food behavior, while also utilizing the study's findings as a reference for scholarship in gastronomy, culture, and digital media. Local government units may develop programs that promote the culinary heritage of Capiz through targeted social media campaigns while simultaneously supporting local food enterprises, and may create initiatives that responsibly balance cultural preservation with the dynamic nature of digital food trends among young consumers. Cultural workers are encouraged to utilize social media platforms as instruments for preserving and promoting Capisnon food heritage by adapting traditional dishes into modern digital content

formats, thereby strengthening cultural identity among Generation Z and broader online audiences. The tourism sector may highlight local cuisine through digital campaigns and food tourism experiences that are aligned with contemporary viral food trends, with the aim of attracting visitors and enhancing culinary tourism across the province. Finally, future researchers are encouraged to expand upon this study by exploring comparable dynamics in other regions or by undertaking comparative generational analyses of social media-influenced food behavior, and to examine the long-term effects of digital food choices on health outcomes, cultural identity, and sustainability. Collectively, these recommendations affirm that the relationship between social media and food culture among Generation Z is a multidimensional phenomenon that warrants sustained scholarly attention, thoughtful policy engagement, and culturally sensitive practice across all relevant sectors.

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