



## Determining the social media platforms used and the real-time exposure of college students to SMFPs at Uganda College of Commerce. A cross-sectional study.

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### ABSTRACT

#### Background:

Social media has grown into one of the most influential aspects of modern life. The aim of the study is to determine the social media platforms used and the real-time exposure of college students to Social Media Food Promotion platforms.

#### Methodology:

A cross-sectional research design was employed. A probability sampling design was employed using the simple random sampling technique. The study focused on 94 students pursuing various courses at Uganda College of Commerce, Soroti Campus. The data were processed and analyzed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS, and the results were presented in the form of tables, graphs, and charts.

#### Results:

(91.9%) indicated that they utilized mobile phones as their exclusive device for engaging with social media platforms, 85.1% of participants engaged with social media at least once within a day, with 87.8% utilizing it in various locations. (60.8%) reported dedicating between 2 and 3 hours daily to social media activities. (54.1%) acknowledged that social media exerted both positive and negative influences on their lives. 74.3% of respondents reported possessing 1-3 years of experience with social media platforms, (66.2%) reported actively following social media accounts or pages, with a nearly equivalent proportion (68.9%) of respondents indicating that they followed social media influencers. 68.9% of participants reported following social media influencers specifically for food or health-related content. 58.9% were identified as male and 41.1% as female.

#### Conclusion:

College students studying at Uganda College of Commerce, Soroti City, have their dietary choices influenced by social media. There is no significant difference between genders, and exposure to food-related information on social media sites can both positively and negatively affect dietary decisions.

#### Recommendations:

Parents should encourage thoughtful consumption of social media, while monitoring usage, to mitigate the impact of misleading or unhealthy content.

**Keywords :** Social media platforms, real-time exposure, College students, Uganda College of Commerce

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### BACKGROUND

Social media (SM) has grown into one of the most influential aspects of modern life. As of October 2023, more than 4.95 billion people worldwide were active users, with the average person engaging across 6.7 platforms monthly. Younger users aged 16–24 accessed an even greater number of platforms, averaging 7.5, while 61.4% of the global

population overall used SM. Penetration rates remain high, with 88.4% of internet users and 5.6 billion mobile phone owners connected to SM. The Global Social Media Statistics Research Summary (2025) confirms this upward trend, reporting that 62.6% of the world's 5.07 billion people are now SM users, with 259 million new users joining in the past year and daily use averaging 2 hours and 20 minutes.

Smit (2019) earlier emphasized the rapid expansion of SM, noting one million new users daily and 300 hours of YouTube content uploaded every minute.

Traditional mass media are no longer the primary source of information. Online personalities, through repeated interaction and shared content, significantly shape lifestyle choices, including consumption and purchasing habits. Yet, such widespread reliance on SM has had both positive and negative consequences. Marciano et al. (2022) highlighted a surge in adolescent dependence on digital platforms following the COVID-19 pandemic, linking it to mental health challenges such as social comparison, exclusion anxiety, and addiction. At the same time, certain SM activities—such as self-disclosure and one-to-one communication—were found to reduce stress and feelings of loneliness.

The role of SM in health communication is particularly evident. Among young people, SM has also become a major avenue for health-related discussions. A study by Rajeh et al. (2021) included 1034 dental students, where the most popular SM network was WhatsApp (97.5%), which was followed by Twitter (85.2%), Snapchat (90.5%), and Instagram (83.4%). SM was utilized for community conversation (55.8%), general information search (63.3%), general idea exchange (63.1%), and amusement (81.4%). Shinde and Garg (2020) cautioned that most students use SM primarily for entertainment, with only a minority engaging for academic purposes. Vieira et al. (2022) further warned of excessive use, finding that 35.9% of Brazilian high school students spent more than five hours daily on SM, with young women most affected.

Commercial influences on SM use have also attracted attention. Gashi (2017) emphasized the persuasive power of influencers, whose appearance, credibility, and content drive consumer decisions. Lokithasan et al. (2019) added that male followers are drawn to tech and gaming influencers, while female followers prefer beauty-focused influencers. Syrkiewicz-S'witała et al. (2018), however, revealed that despite widespread SM access, Polish health promotion offices underutilized SM tools, with fewer than half using platforms like Facebook or YouTube for campaigns.

## Methodology

### Study design

A cross-sectional research design was employed, enabling the collection of data from different respondents at a single point in time to draw inferences about the entire population.

### Study area

The study was conducted at Uganda College of Commerce (UCC), Soroti Campus, located in Soroti City. The objective was to assess the use of social media platforms among students at the campus and the reasons behind their usage. The student population comprised individuals from diverse backgrounds and regions.

### Study population

The study focused on students pursuing various courses at Uganda College of Commerce (UCC), Soroti Campus.

### Sample size determination

The sample size was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+(Ne^2)}$$

Where  $n$  is the required sample size,  $N$  is the population size, and  $e$  is the margin of error. With a study population of 1,200 students and a margin of error of 0.1 (corresponding to a 90% confidence level), the calculated sample size was 92.3, which was approximated to 93 respondents.

$$\text{Substituting the value: } n = \frac{(1200)}{1 + (1200 * 0.1^2)}$$
$$n = 92.3$$

Therefore, the sample consisted of 94 respondents.

### Sampling technique

A probability sampling design was employed using the simple random sampling technique, which ensured that each student had an equal chance of being selected. The probability of selection was given by the ratio  $n/N$ , where  $n$  represented the sample size and  $N$  the study population. The lottery method was applied to achieve randomness in the selection process, making this technique both flexible and reliable for the study.

### Sampling procedure

For this study, a sample of 94 students, consisting of 47 males and 47 females, from various departments of the UCC Soroti of Soroti city, Soroti district in Eastern Uganda, comprising an equal number of males and females, will be selected randomly through sampling. Day scholars and regular students will randomly be selected for the study. Students from various departments will be selected because they will be easily available to the investigator.

A total sample of 94 students, comprising both male and female students from various courses of Uganda College of Commerce (UCC), Soroti Campus, was selected using



simple random sampling. Both day scholars and regular students were included to ensure representation. Students from different courses were chosen as they were readily accessible to the researcher.

### **Study variables**

#### **Dependent variables**

Social media platforms used and the real-time exposure of college students to Social Media Food Promotion platforms.

#### **Independent variables**

The independent variables that influenced the dependent variable (dietary choices) included factors related to social media food advertisements, namely the frequency of exposure, marketing techniques, social media platforms used, and the type of food advertised.

#### **Moderating variables**

The study considered moderating variables that did not directly influence dietary choices but shaped the way independent variables affected them. These included socio-economic status, cultural norms and health beliefs, as well as attitudes related to food and eating.

#### **Data collection method**

Data were collected using a questionnaire survey designed by the researcher to address the study objectives. The tool captured quantitative primary data relevant to the research.

#### **Data collection tool**

Data were collected using self-administered questionnaires comprising structured, closed-ended questions. These questions provided fixed response options for the respondents, which facilitated the collection of quantitative data while limiting open expression.

#### **Data collection procedure**

An introductory letter from Uganda Christian University was presented to the administration of UCC Soroti to obtain permission for data collection among the college students. Informed consent was obtained from eligible participants before they were given self-administered questionnaires to complete.

#### **Validity and reliability**

To ensure the validity and reliability of the research instrument, a pilot study was conducted at Arapai Agricultural College in Soroti District. Approximately 15%

of the sample size was involved in the pre-testing, where respondents completed the self-administered questionnaire. The pilot helped to assess feasibility, identify logistical and methodological challenges, and highlight errors or gaps in the tool. Feedback from the exercise guided adjustments to improve clarity, consistency, and overall effectiveness before the questionnaire was used in the final study at UCC Soroti Campus.

#### **Inclusion criteria**

The study involved all college students at UCC Soroti, including both those residing in campus hostels and day scholars.

#### **Exclusive criteria**

College students without a smartphone or computer were not allowed to participate in the study. In addition, students on restricted diets for health reasons were also excluded.

#### **Data management, analysis, and presentation**

Data were stored on flash disks, questionnaires, and a record book, all of which were accessible only to the researcher and the supervisor. The data were processed and analyzed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS, and the results were presented in the form of tables, graphs, and charts.

#### **Ethical considerations**

The study was approved by the management of MIHS and Uganda Christian University (UCU). An introductory letter from MIHS was presented to the UCC administration to obtain permission for data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from participants, and their privacy, confidentiality, and right to withdraw were respected throughout the study.

### **RESULTS**

#### **Response Rate**

There was 100% response rate. A 94-question Google Form questionnaire was administered to students of UCC Soroti, and no single questionnaire was bounced back because of errors or improper answering, since the questions were all in multiple-choice or check boxes, and each section had to be answered before proceeding to the next. Demographic data of the respondents. Different respondents with different socio-demographic data participated in the study; the results are presented in Table 1.

<b>Table 1: Distribution of respondents by socio-demographic information</b>			
Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n=94)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	55	58.9
	Female	39	41.1
Age Bracket	Below 20 years	18	18.9
	Between 20 & 25 years	67	71.6
	Between 26 & 30 years	6	6.8
	31 years and above	3	2.7
Place of residence	Urban	36	38.5
	Rural	24	25.9
	Rural-Urban	33	35.6
Year of Study	First year	57	60.3
	Second Year	28	30.1
	Third Year	1	1.4
	Final Year	8	8.2
Mode of study	Full-time on campus	75	79.7
	On line	5	5.4
	Weekend Program	14	14.9
Religious Affiliation	Christian	90	95.8
	Moslem	1	1.4
	Hindu	0	0
	Isa Masiya	3	2.8
Socio-Economic Status	Lower Income bracket (<360,000 Ugx Monthly Income)	85	90.5
	Middle Income bracket (360,000-1,800,000 Ugx Monthly Income)	8	8.1
	Higher Income bracket (More than 1,800,000 Ugx Monthly Income)	1	1.4
Food Habits	Basically, food of Animal Origin	80	85.1
	Basically, food of Plant Origin	14	14.9
Body Weight Perception	Under weight	14	14.9
	Right weight	76	81.1
	Over weight	4	4.1

*Source: Field Data, 2025*

A total of 94 collegiate individuals from UCC Soroti participated in the research, of which 58.9% were identified as male and 41.1% as female. This observation suggests that the investigation exhibited no gender bias, as both male and female students were included in the analysis. Table 1 illustrates that a predominant portion of the participants, specifically 71.6%, fell within the age category of 20-25 years, while 18.9% of the participants were under the age of 20 years. Additionally, 6.8% of the participants were aged between 26 and 30 years, and a mere 2.7% of the participants were 31 years or older. According to the findings, 38.5% of the participants resided in urban environments, with a nearly equivalent proportion (35.6%) living in peri-urban areas, while 25.9% resided in rural locales. A significant majority of the participants (60.3%) were in their first year of academic study, followed by 30.1% who were in their second year. Those in the third year constituted only 1.4%, while final-year students represented the third largest group at 8.2%. Furthermore, the study's findings indicated that a substantial majority (79.7%) of the participants were enrolled as full-time students on campus,

followed by 14.9% of participants engaged in weekend study programs, and finally, online students comprised 5% of the total respondents. The Christian demographic formed a considerable majority (95.8%) of the respondents, followed by adherents of the Isa Masiya faith at 2.8%, with Muslims representing the least at 1.4%. Notably, there were no respondents affiliated with the Hindu religion. Moreover, the study revealed that a significant majority of respondents (90.5%) were classified within the lower income bracket (earning less than 360,000 Ugx monthly). A smaller segment (8.1%) fell within the middle-income bracket (360,000-1,800,000 Ugx), while a mere 1.4% were categorized in the higher income bracket (earning more than 1,800,000 Ugx monthly). The majority of respondents primarily consumed food of animal origin (85.1%), whereas 14.9% were identified as consumers of plant-based foods, essentially classifying them as vegetarians. In this study, the majority of participants were classified as possessing normal weight (81.1%), followed by those identified as underweight (14.9%), with only 4.1% categorized as overweight based on individual perceptions of their body weight.

### Social Media use by college students of UCC Soroti Trends in social media use by students of UCC Soroti Campus

Table 2: Trends in Social Media Use			
Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n=94)	Percentage (%)
Device used to access Social Media	Mobile Phone	86	91.9
	Laptop	1	1.4
	Both mobile Phone and Laptop	6	6.8
Time of Social Media use	Anytime	80	85.1
	Morning	13	13.5
	Evening	1	1.4
Place of using Social Media	Every where	83	87.8
	Home	0	0
	Library	11	12.2
Average daily time spent on SM	Less than 30 Mins	25	27
	2 to 3 hours	57	60.8
	More than 3 hours a day	11	12.2
Impact of social media on daily life	Positively	43	45.9
	Negatively	0	0

	Has both a good and a bad impact	51	54.1
	Has no significant impact	0	0
Breaks taken off from social media use	No	29	31.1
	Yes	56	59.5
	May be	9	9.5
Experience in using Social Media	1 to 3 years	70	74.3
	4 to 7 years	18	18.9
	More than 7 years	6	6.8
Following any social media accounts or pages	Yes	62	66.2
	No	32	33.8
Following any SM influencer for food or health content	Yes	65	68.9
	No	29	31.1
Motivated to buy food or drinks promoted by SM Influencers	Always	25	27
	Some times	57	60.8
	Never	11	12.2

*Source: Field Data, 2025*

An examination of social media utilization among the participants of the study is presented in Table 2. A substantial majority of the participants (91.9%) indicated that they utilized mobile phones as their exclusive device for engaging with social media platforms, while 6.8% of respondents reported the use of both mobile phones and laptops; the smallest group, comprising 1.4% of respondents, exclusively employed laptops for accessing social media. The findings of the study revealed that more than 85.1% of participants engaged with social media at least once within a day, with 87.8% utilizing it in various locations, including 12.2% of respondents indicating usage even in library settings. Moreover, a significant proportion of participants (60.8%) reported dedicating between 2-3 hours daily to social media activities, whereas 12.2% of individuals indicated engagement for longer than 3 hours each day. A majority of the respondents (54.1%) acknowledged that social media exerted both positive and negative influences on their lives, followed closely by 45.9% of the respondents who recognized a positive impact, while no respondents classified social media as having

exclusively negative effects or lacking any notable influence in their lives. In response to inquiries regarding the duration of their social media usage, 74.3% of respondents reported possessing 1-3 years of experience with social media platforms, followed by 18.9% who identified with 4-7 years of experience, and the smallest percentage, 6.8%, consisted of individuals with over 7 years of social media experience. Regarding the practice of taking breaks from social media, 31.1% of participants indicated that they had never taken a hiatus from social media use, while more than half (59.5%) acknowledged having taken breaks, and the remaining participants (9.5%) were uncertain as to whether they had engaged in breaks from social media. A majority of the participants (66.2%) reported actively following social media accounts or pages, with a nearly equivalent proportion (68.9%) of respondents indicating that they followed social media influencers. Two additional inquiries were made to ascertain whether participants followed social media influencers for content related to food or health, and whether they were motivated to purchase food or beverages endorsed by social media influencers. Approximately 68.9%

of participants reported following social media influencers specifically for food or health-related content. A noteworthy segment (27%) of respondents indicated that they consistently attempted to try diets promoted by social media

influencers, while 60.8% reported occasionally experimenting with the advertised diets featured on social media.

### Social Media Platforms regularly used by students of UCC Soroti

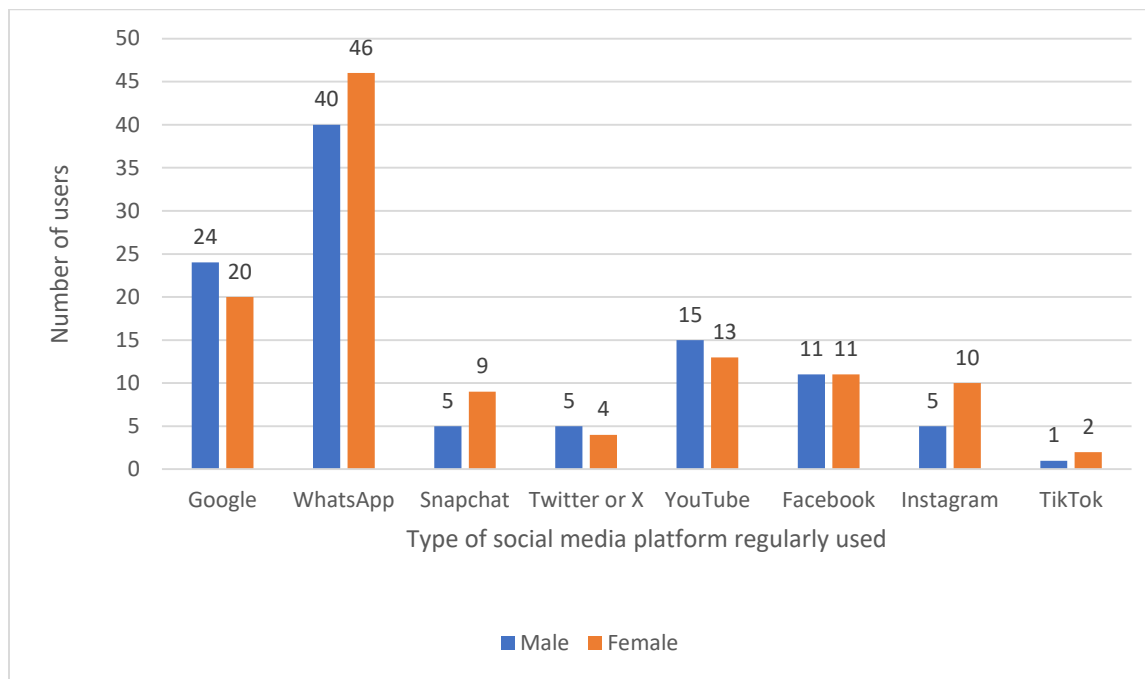
Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n=94)	Percentage (%)
Types of Social Media Platforms regularly used	Google	44	47.3
	WhatsApp	86	91.9
	Snapchat	14	14.9
	Twitter (X)	9	9.5
	YouTube	28	29.67
	Facebook	22	23
	Instagram	15	16.2
	TikTok	3	2.7

*Source: Field Data, 2025*

Among the diverse array of social media platforms, WhatsApp emerged as the preeminent choice with a usage rate of 91.9%, trailed by Google at 47.3% and YouTube at 29.67%. Upon inquiry regarding the nature of content that participants interact with on social media platforms, it was

observed that a significant proportion engaged with healthy eating inspiration (27%), fitness routines (25%), followed closely by nutrition tips and food product reviews, each attaining an equal representation of 21%, while recipes constituted the least favored content category (Fig. 2).

### **Gender-Based Analysis of Social Media Platform Usage among UCC Soroti Students**



**Figure 1: Social Media Platform, Regular use by males and females**

*Source: Field Data, 2025*

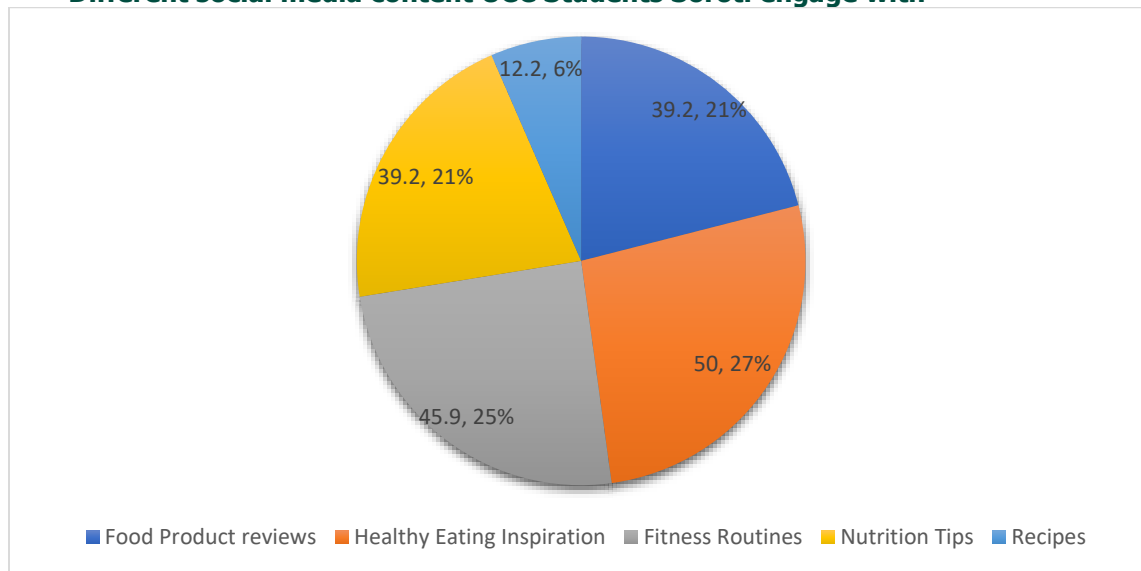
The findings presented in Figure 1 show the distribution of social media platforms regularly used by students of Uganda College of Commerce, Soroti Campus, disaggregated by gender. The results indicate that WhatsApp was the most frequently used platform, with 40 male and 46 female users, highlighting its dominance as a communication and information-sharing tool among students. Google ranked second, being used by 24 males and 20 females. YouTube also had notable use, with 15 males and 13 females reporting regular engagement.

Other platforms, such as Facebook, showed equal use across genders (11 users each), while Instagram was more common among females (10) compared to males (5). Similarly,

Snapchat was used more by females (9) than males (5), whereas Twitter (X) had relatively low use by both genders (5 males and 4 females). TikTok was the least used platform overall, with only 1 male and 2 females reporting regular usage.

These findings suggest that while WhatsApp is the primary platform through which students are likely to be exposed to social media food advertisements, other platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat also play a role, particularly among female students. The variation in platform usage highlights the importance of considering gender preferences when assessing the influence of social media food advertising on dietary choices.

**Different social media content UCC Students Soroti engage with**

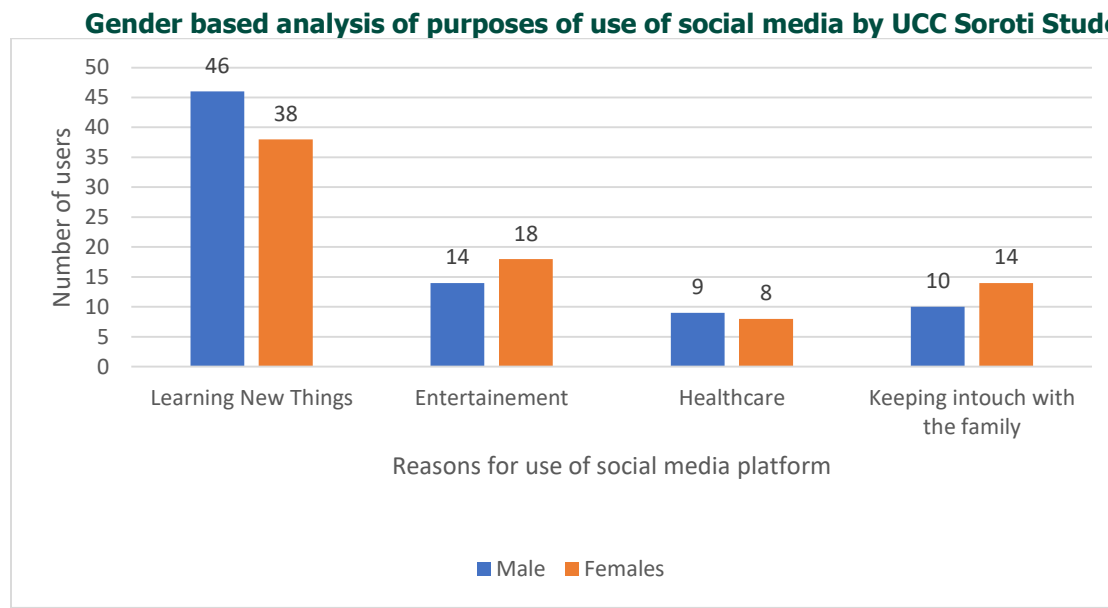


Source: Field Data, 2025

**Figure 2: Social Media Content engaged with Purposes for using social media by UCC Soroti Students**

Table 4: Purpose of Social Media Usage			
Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n=94)	Percentage (%)
Purpose of using Social Media Platform	Learning new things	84	89.2
	Entertainment	32	33.8
	For Healthcare	17	17.6
	Keeping in touch with the family	24	25.7

Most of the participants (89.2%) reported using social media mainly to learn new things, followed by entertainment (33.8%), staying in touch with the family (25.7%), and only 17.6% used it for healthcare purposes.



**Figure 3: Purpose of Social Media Platform use**  
*Source: Field Data, 2025*

Figure 3 presents the reasons why students of Uganda College of Commerce, Soroti Campus, regularly use social media platforms, disaggregated by gender. The most common reason reported was learning new things, with 46 males and 38 females, highlighting the role of social media as an educational and knowledge-sharing tool among students.

Entertainment ranked second, with slightly more females (18) than males (14) engaging with platforms for leisure. Healthcare-related use was relatively low across both genders (9 males and 8 females), while keeping in touch with family showed moderate engagement, with 14 females and 10 males citing it as a reason.

These findings suggest that beyond entertainment, students primarily view social media as a valuable source of information and learning. However, the relatively low use of platforms for healthcare indicates missed opportunities in leveraging social media to promote nutrition and health-related content. This highlights the potential of targeted food and health advertisements to reach students in ways that align with their existing online habits and motivations.

## DISCUSSION

The study findings showed that mobile phones emerged as the dominant tool for social media access, with 91.9% of respondents relying on them exclusively and very few using laptops. This underscores the ubiquity and affordability of

mobile devices as the primary gateway to online spaces in Uganda. For food marketing, this reliance on mobile means students encounter mostly mobile-optimized content such as Instagram reels, TikTok videos, and WhatsApp promotions—formats proven effective for triggering impulse-driven food purchases (Hudders et al., 2020).

Building on this widespread access, the frequency of social media engagement was also remarkably high, with 85.1% of students active every day; 60.8% spent 2–3 hours, while 12.2% went beyond 3 hours daily. Such heavy use mirrors global patterns where young adults rank among the most intensive social media consumers (Global Social Media Statistics Research Summary, 2025). The longer the exposure, the greater the impact of digital advertising, significantly raising the chances that food advertisements shape dietary choices and behaviors.

Ultimately, this strong connection to influencers translated into measurable dietary practices. About 27% consistently tried diets promoted by influencers, while 60.8% experimented occasionally. Taken together, nearly nine in ten students had acted on influencer-driven food content in some way. Globally, research from the UK (Coates et al., 2019) reinforced this trend, showing that children exposed to influencer-endorsed unhealthy snacks consumed 41% more calories than peers without such exposure.

When compared with Hill (2013), who found that Facebook (97%), YouTube (90%), Pinterest (56%), and Twitter (51%)



were the leading platforms where students shared eating and physical activity patterns, clear contextual differences emerge. Hill's findings suggest that in Western contexts, students predominantly use algorithm-rich and content-sharing platforms that encourage broad dissemination of food and lifestyle behaviors. In contrast, the Ugandan context, as reflected in this study, indicates that WhatsApp serves as the primary channel, emphasizing personalized, network-based interactions over open, public sharing. The moderate use of Google and YouTube in the current study further contrasts with Hill's results, where YouTube was reported as a major platform (90%). This gap suggests that, while Ugandan students do engage with search engines and video content, these platforms are secondary to WhatsApp in terms of everyday influence. This difference may be attributed to variations in internet costs, data packages, and cultural preferences that shape platform adoption in low-resource settings. Overall, while Hill (2013) emphasized the dominance of global social media platforms in shaping dietary and lifestyle behaviors, the current study demonstrates that in Uganda, platform preference is highly contextualized by affordability and accessibility, making WhatsApp the leading avenue through which food-related messages are consumed and shared among college students. The results also showed that students engaged most with healthy eating inspiration (27%) and fitness routines (25%), followed by nutrition tips (21%) and food product reviews (21%), with recipes being the least consumed category. This strong interest in wellness-oriented content suggests that students are increasingly motivated by health and fitness trends. The engagement with such content demonstrates that, beyond entertainment, social media serves as a platform for health-related learning, identity building, and behavior shaping among college students. However, these findings partly contrast with Shinde and Garg (2020), who cautioned that most students primarily use social media for entertainment, with only a minority engaging in academic or purposeful learning. While the present study indicates that health and fitness-related content occupies a meaningful portion of students' attention, the possibility remains that such engagement is superficial or trend-driven rather than reflective of sustained, evidence-based learning. This raises questions about whether students' attraction to wellness content translates into meaningful dietary or fitness changes, or whether it simply mirrors the aesthetic and entertainment value of health trends circulating online. The findings also align with concerns raised by Vieira et al. (2022), who found that 35.9% of Brazilian high school students spent more than five hours daily on social media, with young women being the most affected. The strong consumption of wellness-oriented content among students in the current study may

similarly reflect the pressures of body image culture, where young people—especially females—are exposed to idealized representations of health and beauty. This overexposure, while seemingly positive in its focus on health, may inadvertently promote fad diets, unrealistic body ideals, and unverified nutritional claims, which can be harmful in the long run.

## CONCLUSION

College students studying at Uganda College of Commerce, Soroti City, have their dietary choices influenced by social media. There is no significant difference between genders, and exposure to food-related information on social media sites can both positively and negatively affect dietary decisions.

## Study Limitations

The study was carried out only within the campus premises, excluding students living in the community who were not present during the days of data collection and who might have provided additional relevant information.

## Recommendations

Parents should encourage thoughtful consumption of social media, while monitoring usage, to mitigate the impact of misleading or unhealthy content.

Parents and their Children should be well educated about media literacy, building resilience against manipulation, and supporting healthier decision-making.

## Acknowledgement

I am deeply grateful to Almighty God for His guidance and protection throughout this study.

My heartfelt appreciation goes to Mrs. Elizabeth Okello for her invaluable support and expertise.

Finally, I extend sincere thanks to all the respondents for their time and cooperation in completing the questionnaires, which made this research possible.

Uganda College of Commerce

## List of abbreviations

SNS: social networking sites

BMI: body mass index

UCC: Uganda College of Commerce

SM: Social Media

## Source of funding

The study was not funded.

## Conflict of interest



The author did not declare any conflict of interest.

### Data availability

Data is available upon request.

### Author contribution

Martin Ongodia collected data and drafted the manuscript of the study

Elizabeth Okello supervised the study

Hasifa Nansereko supervised the study

Jane Frank Nalubega supervised the study

Immaculate Prosperia Naggulu supervised the study

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