How Social Media Influences Dieting and Eating Behavior

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Background

Social media plays a major role in influencing use of popular fad diets. Searching for diet-related information on social media is becoming more common. Research indicates that 45 million Americans go on a diet each year, and approximately half of all dieters report that their primary information source regarding special diets is the internet.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine the social media influence on eating behavior among adults living in the United States. A *social media influencer* is an individual who has access to a large audience and can persuade others by virtue of his/her authenticity and resources (celebrities, coaches, athletes, health and fitness role models, etc.). A *brand influencer* is a social media influencer who partners with a brand for the purpose of increasing marketing and sales.

Methods

Data Collection: Participants completed an online SurveyMonkey® research questionnaire after providing informed consent. The survey included demographics, health status, and social media engagement.

Data Analysis: Analyses assessed participants' history of fad dieting and outcomes, likelihood of being influenced by social media recommendations for food product brands, and/or following social media influencers promoting different diets. Data was analyzed using SPSS ($P \leq 0.05$). Frequency distributions and correlations were analyzed for trends in dieting and eating behaviors and how these are influenced by social media.
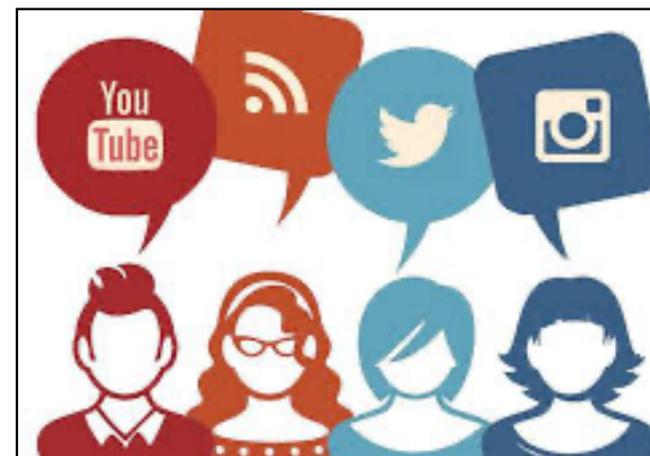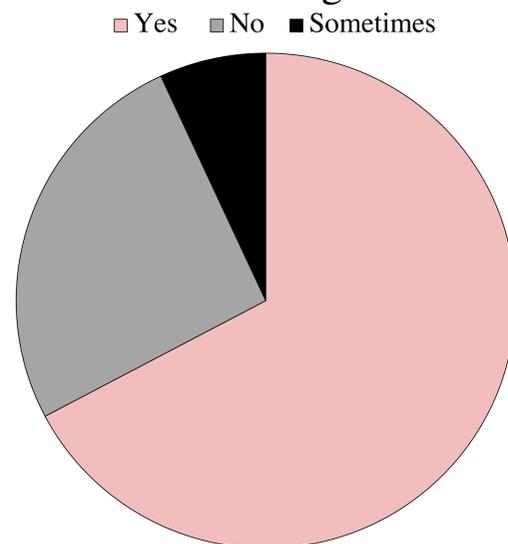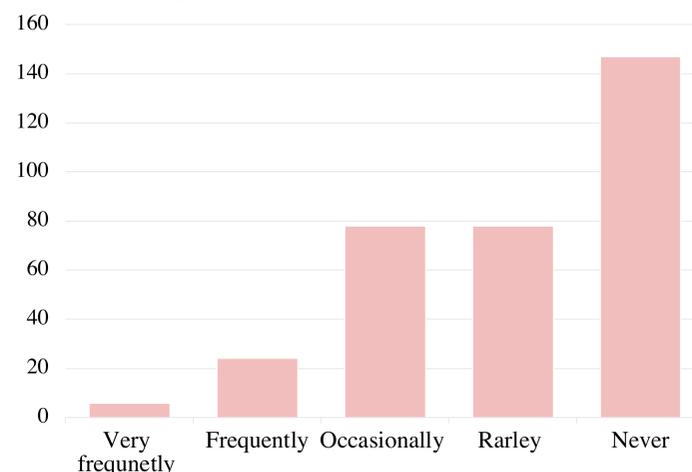
Age of Participants
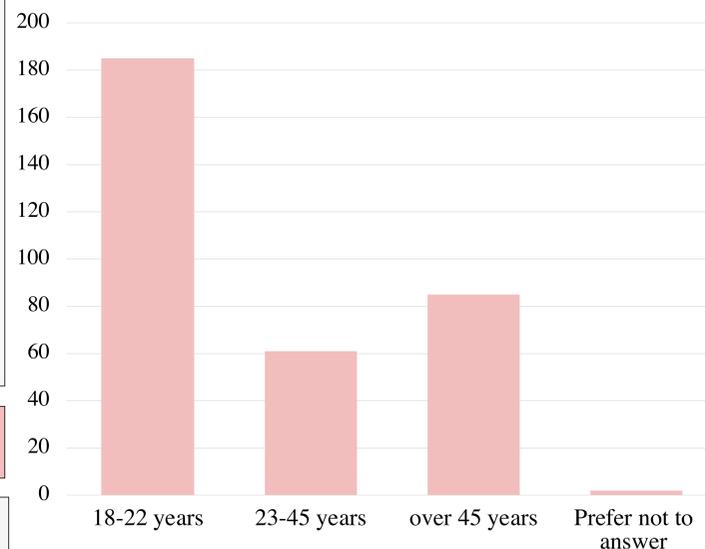
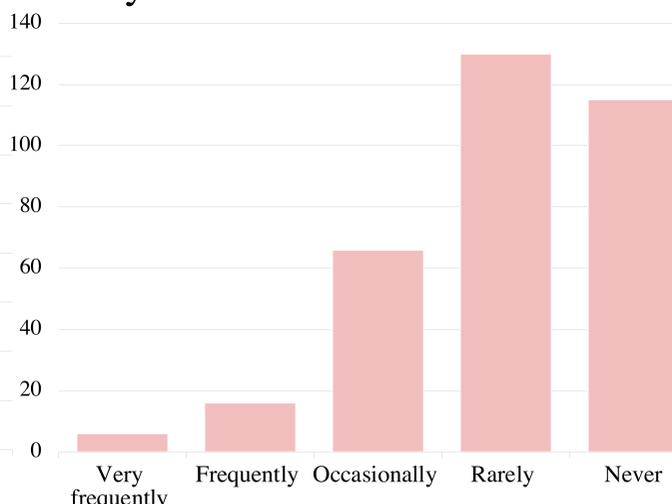

Relationship Status of Participants
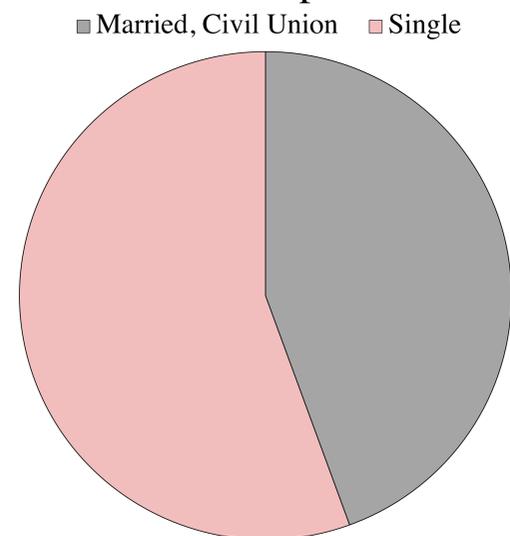
Have you ever attempted a diet to lose weight?

Have you ever bought a food product promoted by a social media influencer?

Would you try a diet promoted by a social media influencer?

Participant Profile

Participants included 333 individuals, 22% male/78% female. Majority of participants (55%) fell into the 18-22 year age group. Caucasian participants comprised 87%, and 11% were classified as other/ multi-racial. Education level of participants included some college/Associate's degree (37%) and Bachelor's degree (30%). Forty-four percent of participants were married/civil union; while remaining participants (55%) were single.

Results

Age was the overriding factor in determining influence by social media among participants, with 18-22 year olds more likely to follow a diet and/or try food product brands recommended by social media influencers (P=.01). Married and older participants vs. single younger participants were more likely to have attempted a weight loss diet but less likely to try a diet promoted by a social media influencer (P=.01). Additionally, regardless of age or marital status, there was a positive correlation between participants who dieted more frequently throughout the year and the likelihood of trying a diet promoted by social media influencers (P=.01).

Discussion

Limitations for this study included the exclusions of asking participants about food allergies and religious food preferences. In addition, the Hispanic socioeconomic group was not included in the demographic survey. Social media provides Registered Dietitian Nutritionists (RDN) with the unique opportunity to market their skills and to educate the public about evidence-based nutrition science.