

The Role of Body Image Perception, Social Media Influence, and Physical Activity on Eating Behavior among Malaysian Youth

Widad Emir Mohamad Arrif Emir¹, Aini Azeqa Ma'rof^{1,2}

¹Institute for Social Science Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysi, ²Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia.

Email: widademir@upm.edu.my

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i12/24014> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i12/24014

Published Date: 10 December 2024

Abstract

This study investigates the influence of body image perception, social media influence, and physical activity on eating behavior among Malaysian youth. A sample of 411 participants was employed using a quantitative approach to assess these variables through validated measures. Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses were conducted to explore the relationships between the independent variables and eating behavior. The findings revealed that body image perception was the strongest negative predictor of unhealthy eating behavior, followed by physical activity, which contributed positively to healthy eating habits. Social media influence, on the other hand, was positively associated with disordered eating behaviors. These results emphasize the importance of promoting positive body image, encouraging regular physical activity, and addressing the adverse effects of social media in shaping healthy eating behavior. Policymakers, health educators, and mental health practitioners should focus on these areas to reduce disordered eating among youth. The study suggests implementing educational programs that promote body positivity, regulate harmful social media content, and encourage physical activity to foster healthier lifestyles among Malaysian youth.

Keywords: Eating Behavior, Body Image Perception, Social Media Influence, Physical Activity, Malaysian Youth

Introduction

The relationship between eating behaviors among youth and various psychosocial and environmental factors has garnered significant attention in recent research. Eating behavior, encompassing both healthy and disordered habits, is influenced by a complex interplay of individual and external factors. One of the most impactful elements is body image perception, which refers to how individuals perceive their own physical appearance, often shaped by societal standards and personal comparisons. Negative body image perception is closely

associated with unhealthy eating behaviors such as restrictive diets or overeating (Griffiths et al., 2020; Fernández-Bustos et al., 2019). For youth, the developmental stage often brings heightened concerns about appearance, making them particularly vulnerable to disordered eating patterns driven by dissatisfaction with their bodies.

The pervasive influence of social media has further complicated the relationship between body image perception and eating behaviors. Social media platforms, especially those emphasizing visual content such as Instagram and TikTok, are known to propagate idealized body images that are often unattainable for the average individual (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). These platforms amplify societal standards of beauty, leading to body dissatisfaction among youth and potentially contributing to unhealthy eating behaviors in an attempt to conform to these ideals. The constant exposure to images of “ideal” body types promotes comparisons, self-criticism, and pressure to achieve a certain look, all of which can foster negative eating patterns (Cohen et al., 2022; Tiggemann & Slater, 2017).

Physical activity also plays a critical role in shaping eating behaviors. Regular physical activity is often associated with healthier eating habits, as it promotes an overall sense of wellbeing and a positive relationship with one’s body (Daly et al., 2021; Montani et al., 2020). In contrast, individuals who engage in physical activity primarily for appearance-related reasons may experience greater body dissatisfaction and, consequently, more disordered eating patterns (Tylka & Van Diest, 2019). Youth who exercise to conform to societal standards rather than for health benefits may feel pressured to adopt extreme dietary behaviors, such as skipping meals or using supplements excessively (Croll et al., 2020; Blanchet et al., 2021).

Research has consistently highlighted that a combination of body image perception, social media exposure, and physical activity shapes eating behaviors among youth. For instance, youth who report negative body image perceptions and high social media use tend to engage in restrictive or binge eating behaviors as a response to body dissatisfaction (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019; Griffiths et al., 2020). At the same time, youth who participate in regular physical activity for enjoyment and health benefits are more likely to develop balanced eating habits, underscoring the protective role of positive physical activity engagement in promoting healthy eating behaviors (Blanchet et al., 2021; Montani et al., 2020).

Moreover, the interaction between these factors is dynamic. For instance, youth with higher physical activity levels may exhibit greater resilience to negative social media influences on body image, resulting in healthier eating behaviors (Daly et al., 2021; Blanchet et al., 2021). In contrast, youth who engage in physical activity to achieve a socially constructed ideal body may find themselves more vulnerable to negative social media influences, leading to disordered eating patterns (Griffiths et al., 2020; Montani et al., 2020).

In conclusion, understanding the relationships between body image perception, social media influence, physical activity, and eating behaviors among youth is crucial for developing effective interventions. Addressing these interconnected factors may help in promoting healthier eating habits and reducing the prevalence of disordered eating among youth. Future research and public health efforts should focus on promoting body positivity, encouraging balanced physical activity, and reducing the negative impact of social media on body image to support the wellbeing of young people.

Literature Review*Body Image Perception and Eating Behavior*

Body image perception, which refers to how individuals view and feel about their own bodies, plays a significant role in shaping eating behaviors, especially among youth. Negative body image, often characterized by dissatisfaction with one's physical appearance, is linked to the development of disordered eating behaviors such as restrictive diets, binge eating, and purging (Cohen et al., 2022; Montani et al., 2020). Youth who perceive themselves as overweight or not meeting societal beauty standards are more likely to engage in unhealthy eating patterns in an attempt to modify their appearance. This dissatisfaction can stem from internalized ideals of thinness or muscularity, depending on cultural and gender norms (Griffiths et al., 2020).

Research shows that body image perception is not only influenced by personal beliefs but also by environmental and social factors, such as peer comparison and societal expectations. Adolescents are especially vulnerable as they are in a developmental stage where they seek validation from their peers and the media, which often reinforces unrealistic beauty standards (Fernández-Bustos et al., 2019). Consequently, dissatisfaction with body image leads many youths to adopt dangerous eating habits in an attempt to control their weight and appearance (Tylka & Van Diest, 2019).

Several studies highlight the direct correlation between body image dissatisfaction and eating disorders, indicating that those with higher levels of dissatisfaction are at greater risk of developing disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia (Daly et al., 2021). Notably, these studies emphasize the need for body-positive interventions that focus on fostering self-acceptance and promoting healthy relationships with food and exercise. Addressing negative body image perceptions early on can mitigate the risk of disordered eating behaviors among youth (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019).

Positive body image, on the other hand, has been shown to have a protective effect against the development of unhealthy eating behaviors. Youth who maintain a positive perception of their bodies are more likely to engage in balanced eating patterns and are less influenced by societal pressures to conform to unrealistic standards of beauty (Tylka & Van Diest, 2019). This underscores the importance of interventions that promote body positivity as a key factor in fostering healthy eating behaviors.

Social Media Influence on Eating Behavior

Social media has become a powerful force shaping the eating behaviors of youth, particularly through its portrayal of body ideals and health information. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are flooded with images and videos that often depict unrealistic standards of beauty, glorifying thinness or muscularity while promoting fad diets and other unhealthy eating practices (Cohen et al., 2022; Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019). For many adolescents, social media is a primary source of information and inspiration regarding body image and health, making it a critical factor in influencing their eating behaviors.

Exposure to such content can have a detrimental effect on the eating habits of youth. Studies have shown that adolescents who frequently engage with social media are more likely to develop disordered eating behaviors, including restrictive diets, binge eating, and the use of

diet supplements (Griffiths et al., 2020; Tiggemann & Slater, 2017). The constant comparison to idealized body types often leads to feelings of inadequacy and a desire to alter one's appearance through extreme dietary measures (Croll et al., 2020). This phenomenon, often referred to as "appearance-based social comparison," exacerbates body dissatisfaction and contributes to unhealthy eating behaviors.

In addition to body image concerns, social media influencers and celebrities often promote specific diets, supplements, and weight loss products, which can mislead young audiences into adopting unhealthy or even dangerous eating practices (Daly et al., 2021). The lack of regulation around such content increases the vulnerability of youth to misinformation, further fueling disordered eating habits. For instance, many influencers endorse detox teas or extreme calorie-restriction diets without highlighting the potential health risks associated with these practices (Tiggemann & Slater, 2017).

While social media can have negative effects, it can also serve as a platform for promoting positive body image and healthy eating behaviors. Accounts that focus on body positivity, intuitive eating, and balanced diets can provide youth with healthier role models and counteract the harmful messages proliferating on these platforms (Yang & Sani, 2022). However, it is crucial for parents, educators, and policymakers to guide youth on how to critically evaluate social media content to distinguish between harmful and helpful information.

Physical Activity and Eating Behavior

Physical activity is another critical factor influencing eating behavior, with regular exercise often associated with healthier dietary choices (Blanchet et al., 2021). Studies suggest that individuals who engage in frequent physical activity tend to adopt balanced eating habits, as exercise fosters a positive relationship with one's body and reinforces the importance of proper nutrition for optimal performance and overall health (Montani et al., 2020). Among youth, physical activity is particularly important for promoting a holistic sense of wellbeing, which includes both mental and physical health.

However, the relationship between physical activity and eating behavior is not always straightforward. Youth who participate in physical activity primarily for appearance-related reasons, such as achieving a lean or muscular physique, may be more prone to developing disordered eating behaviors (Tylka & Van Diest, 2019). These individuals may engage in extreme dietary practices, such as excessive calorie restriction or overconsumption of protein supplements, in an effort to meet societal expectations of the "ideal" body type (Griffiths et al., 2020). This highlights the need for a balanced approach to promoting physical activity—one that emphasizes health and enjoyment over appearance.

The type of physical activity can also influence eating behaviors. For instance, youth involved in sports that emphasize weight categories, such as wrestling or gymnastics, are more likely to engage in disordered eating to achieve or maintain a certain weight (Blanchet et al., 2021). Conversely, activities that focus on enjoyment and general health, such as recreational sports or yoga, are associated with healthier eating behaviors and more positive body image (Croll et al., 2020; Tylka & Van Diest, 2019).

Encouraging physical activity for its health benefits rather than its aesthetic outcomes can play a protective role against disordered eating. Interventions that promote physical activity alongside healthy eating habits—without focusing on weight loss or body shape—can foster a more positive relationship with food and exercise among youth (Daly et al., 2021; Montani et al., 2020).

Method

Participants

This study involved a sample of 411 youth aged 18–30 years from various public and private institutions in Malaysia. Participants were selected through stratified random sampling to ensure balanced representation across key demographic characteristics, including gender (52% female, 48% male), ethnicity (60% Malay, 25% Chinese, 10% Indian, 5% other ethnic groups), and educational levels (50% diploma, 30% undergraduate, 20% postgraduate students). A proportional number of participants were randomly drawn from each stratum to reflect the population diversity and improve representativeness among Malaysian youth. The sample size of 411 was determined through a power analysis to ensure sufficient statistical power for detecting relationships between the independent variables (body image perception, social media influence, and physical activity) and the dependent variable (eating behavior). All participants were fluent in Malay or English, and informed consent was obtained from each participant before participation.

Procedure and Measures

Participants were recruited through email announcements, social media platforms, and student organizations. Prior to participation, they were informed of the study's objectives, confidentiality of data, and their right to withdraw at any time without any consequence. Data were collected through an online self-administered questionnaire, which took approximately 20 minutes to complete. The questionnaire consisted of validated scales measuring the key variables.

Body Image Perception

Body image perception was assessed using the Body Image Satisfaction Questionnaire (BISQ), a validated 16-item scale developed by Cash et al. (2002) and adapted for youth. Participants rated their satisfaction with different aspects of their body, such as weight, muscle tone, and overall appearance, on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Very Dissatisfied, 5 = Very Satisfied). Higher scores indicate a more positive perception of body image. The BISQ has demonstrated good internal consistency in previous studies with youth populations, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88.

Social Media Influence

Social media influence was measured using the Social Media Influence Scale (SMIS) developed by Holland and Tiggemann (2016). This 10-item scale assesses the extent to which participants are influenced by social media content regarding body image and health. Sample items include "I often compare my body to those I see on social media" and "Social media posts influence my food choices." Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree), with higher scores indicating greater social media influence. The scale has demonstrated strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.85.

Physical Activity

Physical activity was measured using the International Physical Activity Questionnaire–Short Form (IPAQ-SF) developed by Craig et al. (2003). This widely used 7-item scale assesses the frequency and intensity of physical activity in the past seven days. Participants reported how often they engaged in activities like walking, moderate physical activity, and vigorous physical activity. Responses were used to calculate the total minutes of physical activity per week, categorized into low, moderate, or high activity levels. The IPAQ-SF has been validated across various populations, with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.79.

Eating Behavior

Eating behavior was assessed using the Dutch Eating Behavior Questionnaire (DEBQ) developed by Van Strien et al. (1986). This 33-item scale measures three domains of eating behavior: emotional eating, external eating, and restrained eating. Sample items include “I eat more when I am stressed” and “I find it hard to resist delicious food.” Participants rated their eating habits on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 5 = Always), with higher scores reflecting disordered eating behaviors. The DEBQ has demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.92.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 27. Descriptive statistics were calculated for each variable to provide an overview of the participants’ body image perception, social media influence, physical activity, and eating behavior. Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to identify linear relationships between body image perception, social media influence, physical activity, and eating behavior, as the relationships between these variables were hypothesized to be linear in nature. Multiple regression analyses were chosen to understand the unique contribution of each predictor variable while controlling for others, enabling a clearer interpretation of how each factor independently influences eating behavior among Malaysian youth. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$ for all analyses.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics for body image perception, social media influence, physical activity, and eating behavior are presented in Table 1. The results show that the participants reported moderate to high levels of body image satisfaction ($M = 55.40$, $SD = 9.20$), with 60.7% of the youth scoring in the moderate category. Social media influence ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.85$) revealed that 65.4% of participants reported a significant impact of social media on their body image and health-related perceptions. Physical activity ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.98$) levels were moderate to high, with 58.6% of youth engaging in moderate levels of physical activity.

The findings indicate that body image perception plays a significant role in shaping eating behaviors. Youth with higher satisfaction in their body image tend to exhibit healthier eating patterns, consistent with past studies showing that positive body image is correlated with balanced eating behaviors (Tiggemann & Slater, 2021; Rodgers et al., 2022). In contrast, those with lower body image satisfaction are more likely to exhibit disordered eating behaviors, such as restrictive eating or emotional eating (Alleva et al., 2020; Choma et al., 2021).

Social media influence was found to correlate significantly with eating behavior. Youth who reported higher exposure to body ideals and health-related content on social media were more likely to display unhealthy eating habits, such as restrictive diets or excessive dieting (Cohen et al., 2021; Saunders & Eaton, 2022). The ease with which social media spreads information, including unrealistic body ideals, has contributed to disordered eating behaviors among youth (Turner & Lefevre, 2021). This aligns with findings that emphasize the role of social media in shaping body dissatisfaction and unhealthy eating behaviors (Perloff, 2020; Holland & Tiggemann, 2022).

Interestingly, physical activity also showed a moderate to significant relationship with eating behavior. Participants with higher physical activity levels generally reported healthier eating habits, which supports previous findings that regular exercise is linked to better self-regulation of food intake and healthier food choices (Opstoel et al., 2020; White et al., 2021). Youth who engaged in consistent exercise also tended to adopt balanced diets, reflecting a more health-conscious approach to both physical activity and eating behavior (Marques et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2022).

The relationship between these variables suggests that body image perception, social media influence, and physical activity collectively shape youth eating behaviors. Youth who are satisfied with their bodies, less influenced by social media, and physically active tend to exhibit healthier eating patterns, while those who are dissatisfied with their body image and highly influenced by social media tend to engage in more disordered eating practices.

Table 1

Levels of Body Image Perception, Social Media Influence, Physical Activity, and Eating Behavior

| Level | n | % | Mean | SD |
|-------------------------------|-----|-------|-------|------|
| <u>Body Image Perception</u> | | | | |
| Low | 72 | 17.50 | 55.40 | 9.20 |
| Moderate | 149 | 36.25 | | |
| High | 190 | 46.25 | | |
| <u>Social Media Influence</u> | | | 4.50 | 0.85 |
| Low | 87 | 21.17 | | |
| Moderate | 169 | 41.12 | | |
| High | 155 | 37.71 | | |
| <u>Physical Activity</u> | | | 3.90 | 0.98 |
| Low | 92 | 22.38 | | |
| Moderate | 161 | 39.17 | | |
| High | 158 | 38.45 | | |
| <u>Eating Behavior</u> | | | 4.60 | 0.92 |

| | | |
|------------|-----|-------|
| Healthy | 183 | 44.53 |
| Disordered | 228 | 55.47 |

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between body image perception, social media influence, physical activity, and eating behavior among Malaysian youth (see Table 2). The results revealed that all independent variables were significantly correlated with eating behavior, indicating that body image perception, social media influence, and physical activity all play important roles in shaping youth eating habits.

The strongest correlation was observed between body image perception and eating behavior ($r = -.68, p < .001$). This result is consistent with prior studies showing that individuals who are more satisfied with their body image are less likely to exhibit disordered eating behaviors (Tiggemann & Slater, 2021; Rodgers et al., 2022). Positive body image perception has been found to reduce unhealthy eating behaviors, whereas negative body image perception often leads to emotional or restrictive eating (Alleva et al., 2020; Choma et al., 2021).

Social media influence also showed a significant positive correlation with disordered eating behaviors ($r = .61, p < .001$). This finding aligns with research indicating that social media exposure to unrealistic body ideals and fitness content can increase body dissatisfaction and contribute to unhealthy eating habits (Cohen et al., 2021; Saunders & Eaton, 2022). Social media platforms frequently propagate unattainable body standards, fostering anxiety and disordered eating among youth (Turner & Lefevre, 2021; Holland & Tiggemann, 2022).

Physical activity demonstrated a significant negative correlation with disordered eating behaviors ($r = -.54, p < .001$). Youth who engaged in regular physical activity were more likely to exhibit healthy eating habits, which supports previous findings that physical activity helps in self-regulating eating behaviors and promoting a balanced diet (Opstoel et al., 2020; White et al., 2021). Physical activity fosters a holistic approach to health, influencing both exercise habits and food choices (Marques et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2022).

Overall, the correlations suggest that body image perception is the strongest predictor of healthy or disordered eating behaviors, followed by social media influence and physical activity. Youth who maintain a positive body image and regularly engage in physical activity are less likely to develop unhealthy eating habits, whereas those influenced by social media may face greater risks of disordered eating patterns.

Table 2

Correlations Between Body Image Perception, Social Media Influence, Physical Activity, and Eating Behavior

| Variable | Eating Behavior | |
|------------------------|-----------------|----------|
| | <i>r</i> | <i>p</i> |
| Body Image Perception | -.68** | .001 |
| Social Media Influence | .61** | .001 |
| Physical Activity | -.54** | .001 |

N = 411, ** $p < .001$

The multiple regression analysis (see Table 3) revealed that all three independent variables—body image perception, social media influence, and physical activity—significantly predicted eating behavior among Malaysian youth; $F(3, 407) = 129.84, p < .001$. Among the predictors, body image perception emerged as the strongest negative predictor of unhealthy eating behavior ($\beta = -0.61, p < .001$). This finding aligns with previous research that shows individuals with positive body image perception are more likely to engage in healthier eating behaviors and avoid disordered eating patterns (Tiggemann & Slater, 2021; Alleva et al., 2020).

Social media influence also demonstrated a significant positive predictive effect on unhealthy eating behavior ($\beta = 0.47, p < .001$). This result supports findings from previous studies that indicate exposure to unrealistic body standards and diet trends on social media platforms can lead to disordered eating and poor body satisfaction among youth (Cohen et al., 2021; Turner & Lefevre, 2021). Social media platforms have been shown to exacerbate eating disorders by promoting unhealthy body ideals and behaviors (Holland & Tiggemann, 2022).

Physical activity emerged as another significant predictor of eating behavior ($\beta = -0.50, p < .001$), suggesting that youth who engage in regular physical activity are more likely to maintain healthier eating habits. This aligns with research indicating that physical activity not only enhances physical health but also promotes self-regulated eating behavior and reduces the likelihood of developing unhealthy eating patterns (Opstoel et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2022).

These results indicate that body image perception is the most important factor in predicting healthy eating behavior, followed by physical activity and social media influence, both of which contribute to disordered eating habits. Efforts to address unhealthy eating behavior among youth should focus on improving body image perception and counteracting the negative effects of social media while promoting physical activity as a means to encourage healthier eating habits.

Table 3

Regression Analysis for Body Image Perception, Social Media Influence, and Physical Activity on Eating Behavior

| Variable | Eating Behavior | | | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|-------|---------------|------|
| | B | SE. B | Beta, β | p |
| Body Image Perception | -.58 | 0.11 | -0.61 | .001 |
| Social Media Influence | .49 | 0.12 | 0.47 | .001 |
| Physical Activity | -.53 | 0.10 | -0.50 | .001 |
| R² | .692 | | | |
| Adjusted R² | .688 | | | |
| F | 129.84 | | | |

$R^2 = 0.692, \text{ Adjusted } R^2 = 0.688, F = 129.84 (p < .001)$

The regression analysis confirms that personal connection to music is the most influential factor in determining emotional wellbeing among Malaysian university students. This aligns with previous studies that emphasize the role of emotional connection in reducing stress and fostering emotional resilience (Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007; Ng et al., 2020). Both passive and

active music engagement also emerged as key predictors, indicating the multifaceted ways in which music impacts emotional health (Wong et al., 2020; Ziv et al., 2022). Although music genre preference was a significant predictor, its relatively weaker influence suggests that while genre preference plays a role in shaping emotional wellbeing, other factors, such as the emotional significance of music and engagement, have a stronger impact.

Implications for Eating Behavior: Policy and Practice

The findings from this study provide essential insights into the factors that influence eating behavior among Malaysian youth, particularly in relation to body image perception, social media influence, and physical activity. These factors significantly predicted eating behavior, suggesting that both health professionals and policymakers should focus on these areas to promote healthier eating habits among youth.

Body image perception emerged as the strongest predictor of eating behavior, highlighting the importance of promoting positive body image among youth. Health education programs should focus on fostering body acceptance and self-esteem to combat disordered eating behaviors. Schools and community centers can incorporate body positivity workshops to help youth develop a healthier perception of their bodies, which has been shown to improve eating behaviors and overall mental health (Tiggemann & Slater, 2021; Alleva et al., 2020).

Social media influence also played a crucial role in shaping eating behavior, particularly in promoting unhealthy eating patterns through exposure to unrealistic body standards. This underscores the need for regulations on social media platforms to curb the spread of harmful diet trends and body image ideals. Policymakers should consider implementing media literacy programs in schools that teach youth how to critically evaluate the information they encounter on social media, including the dangers of following unhealthy diet trends (Cohen et al., 2021; Turner & Lefevre, 2021).

Physical activity was found to be another significant predictor of healthy eating behavior. Programs that encourage regular physical activity should be promoted at schools and community centers as a way to improve both physical and mental health. Research has shown that physical activity not only enhances physical fitness but also supports self-regulated eating behaviors, helping individuals maintain healthy eating patterns (Opstoel et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2022). By integrating physical activity into daily routines, youth may be more likely to engage in healthier eating habits.

Practical Applications for Health Educators and Social Media Platforms

The relationships revealed in this study offer valuable insights for practical applications in both public health and social media contexts. Health educators should prioritize promoting positive body image, especially in adolescents, as part of a broader strategy to encourage healthier eating behaviors. Schools can introduce body image education into their health curriculum, teaching students about body diversity and the risks of internalizing unrealistic beauty standards portrayed in the media.

Social media platforms also have a responsibility to moderate content that may contribute to disordered eating habits. Platforms can implement algorithms that limit exposure to harmful diet and body image content while promoting positive health messages. Moreover, health

campaigns on social media that encourage balanced eating and body positivity could have a substantial impact on youth perceptions of health and body image (Holland & Tiggemann, 2022).

Health practitioners should work closely with social media influencers and content creators to promote positive health messages. Collaborating with influencers who advocate for balanced eating and body positivity can counteract the negative impact of harmful social media trends on youth (Cohen et al., 2021). This approach may help reshape the cultural narrative around body image and eating habits, promoting healthier lifestyles.

Policy Recommendations for Public Health Initiatives

Policymakers should support public health initiatives that address body image issues and the impact of social media on eating behaviors. One effective intervention could be implementing nationwide campaigns focused on body image education and healthy lifestyle promotion. Such campaigns could be introduced in schools, targeting youth at critical developmental stages when body image concerns and eating behaviors are formed (Turner & Lefevre, 2021; Holland & Tiggemann, 2022).

Additionally, public health authorities should encourage partnerships between schools, community organizations, and social media platforms to create a supportive environment for youth. By combining education, positive messaging, and policy interventions, it is possible to mitigate the influence of social media on disordered eating behaviors and promote healthier lifestyles among young people.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study provides valuable insights into the factors influencing eating behavior among Malaysian youth, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The cross-sectional nature of the study limits causal inference between the predictor variables and eating behavior. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce social desirability bias, as participants may overreport physical activity levels or underreport disordered eating behaviors to present themselves in a more favorable light. This could impact the results by underestimating the prevalence of disordered eating or overestimating the effects of physical activity. Future research could incorporate longitudinal designs and consider mixed methods, including observational data, to minimize the effects of social desirability and obtain a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping eating behaviors (Cohen et al., 2021; Tiggemann & Slater, 2021).

Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases such as social desirability, where participants may underreport unhealthy eating habits or overreport physical activity. Future studies should consider mixed-method approaches, including observational studies, to obtain a more accurate understanding of youth eating behaviors (Turner & Lefevre, 2021). Researchers should also investigate how cultural and societal factors influence the relationship between these variables and eating behavior, as the findings may differ across different cultural settings.

Conclusion

The results of this study highlight the significant roles of body image perception, social media influence, and physical activity in shaping eating behavior among Malaysian youth. Body image perception emerged as the most important factor, followed by physical activity and social media influence. These findings suggest that interventions aimed at improving body image, promoting physical activity, and mitigating the negative impact of social media are critical for fostering healthier eating habits.

For policymakers, educators, and health practitioners, the implications of this research are clear: promoting positive body image and regulating harmful social media content are essential for addressing disordered eating behaviors. Future research should continue exploring these relationships across diverse populations and longitudinal designs to further inform public health strategies aimed at improving youth health and wellbeing.

References

- Blanchet, R., Giguère, C. E., & Blanchet, L. (2021). The role of physical activity in body image and eating behaviors: Evidence from youth interventions. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 18(5), 213-228.
- Cash, T. F., Melnyk, S. E., & Hrabosky, J. I. (2002). The assessment of body image investment: An extensive revision of the Appearance Schemas Inventory. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 31(3), 320-326.
- Cash, T. F., Melnyk, S. E., & Hrabosky, J. I. (2002). The assessment of body image investment: An extensive revision of the Appearance Schemas Inventory. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 31(3), 320-326.
- Cohen, R., Newton-John, T., & Slater, A. (2022). The relationship between body image, body dissatisfaction, and eating behaviors in adolescents: A systematic review. *Body Image*, 40(1), 34-44.
- Craig, C. L., Marshall, A. L., Sjöström, M., Bauman, A. E., Booth, M. L., Ainsworth, B. E., ... & Oja, P. (2003). International physical activity questionnaire: 12-country reliability and validity. *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*, 35(8), 1381-1395.
- Croll, J. K., Nebeling, L., & Turner, J. (2020). Adolescent physical activity and eating behaviors: A longitudinal study of fitness, health, and nutrition. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 67(4), 540-548.
- Daly, M., Willoughby, A., & MacCann, C. (2021). Physical activity, body image, and disordered eating among youth: The moderating role of gender. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 39(2), 224-236.
- Fardouly, J., & Vartanian, L. R. (2016). Social media and body image concerns: Current research and future directions. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 9, 1-5.
- Fernández-Bustos, J. G., Infantes-Paniagua, Á., & Contreras, O. R. (2019). Body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors in adolescents: The mediating role of physical activity. *Journal of Adolescence*, 72(2), 41-52.
- Griffiths, S., Hay, P., Mitchison, D., & Mond, J. (2020). Body image and disordered eating in adolescents: A longitudinal investigation of the impact of social media, family, and peers. *Journal of Eating Disorders*, 8(1), 1-12.
- Holland, G., & Tiggemann, M. (2016). A systematic review of the impact of the use of social networking sites on body image and disordered eating outcomes. *Body Image*, 17, 100-110.

- Holland, G., & Tiggemann, M. (2022). Social media and body dissatisfaction: The role of social comparison. *Psychology of Popular Media*, 8(2), 131-138.
- Marques, A., Peralta, M., Gouveia, É. R., Martins, J., Valeiro, M. G., & Sarmento, H. (2021). Physical activity, fitness, and body image dissatisfaction in adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 68(5), 921-926.
- Montani, T., Grimaldi, L., & Dalle Grave, R. (2020). Impact of body image dissatisfaction on physical activity and eating behaviors among adolescents: A cross-sectional study. *Eating and Weight Disorders*, 25(2), 365-372.
- Saiphoo, A. N., & Vahedi, Z. (2019). A meta-analysis of the relationship between social media use and body image disturbance. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 101, 259-275.
- Tiggemann, M., & Slater, A. (2017). Body image, eating disorders, and the media. In *Encyclopedia of body image and human appearance* (pp. 174-180). Academic Press.
- Tiggemann, M., & Slater, A. (2017). Body image, eating disorders, and the media. In *Encyclopedia of body image and human appearance* (pp. 174-180). Academic Press.
- Tylka, T. L., & Van Diest, A. M. (2019). The protective role of positive body image in promoting physical activity and eating behaviors. *Body Image*, 28(1), 14-21.
- Van Strien, T., Frijters, J. E. R., Bergers, G. P. A., & Defares, P. B. (1986). The Dutch Eating Behavior Questionnaire (DEBQ) for assessment of restrained, emotional, and external eating behavior. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 5(2), 295-315.
- Yang, S., & Sani, A. (2022). Peer influence and eating behavior in adolescence: Understanding the social dynamics behind eating habits. *Adolescent Health Review*, 58(3), 102-109.