

Understanding the Influence of Social Media on the Perceptions of Cultural Food Among Racially and Ethnically Minoritized College Students

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Introduction

- Despite efforts to improve cultural humility in the dietetics profession, **tailored interventions for populations at risk for racial and ethnic health disparities require further improvements** (Torres-Ruiz et al., 2018). One area needing greater research is the cultural humility of nutrition information provided on **social media (SM)**.
- Cultural competency** is a comprehensive understanding of diverse cultural norms, beliefs, and food practices (McCabe et al., 2020). Culturally competent care helps populations at risk for health disparities maintain aspects of their cultural diets, and promotes improved health outcomes and quality of patient care (McCabe et al., 2020; Raj et al., 2024; Torres-Ruiz et al., 2018).
- Racially and ethnically minoritized **college students** face increased barriers for developing healthy habits (Wright et al., 2021). **Interventions on SM to promote healthy habits for college students should be culturally appropriate and embrace cultural food consumption.**

Research Question

How does SM influence the perception of cultural food among ethnic and racially underrepresented health-related majors of California State University, Sacramento (Sac State) students?

Methods

Study Design, Setting, Participants

- Purposive sampling was used for recruitment.
- Racial and ethnic minoritized Sac State students (n=14) who met inclusion criteria completed semi-structured individual interviews via Zoom (Aug to Oct 2024).
- This study obtained ethical approval from the Sac State IRB.

Theoretical Model

- The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and Social Ecological Model (SEM) instructed the development of the interview guide and thematic analysis.
- The interview guide assessed four topics: SM usage, SM and health perception, SM representation of cultural and healthy foods, and cultural food in a healthy diet.

Data Analysis

- Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Using the NVIVO14 software, the primary researcher conducted thematic analysis to uncover patterns in data and establish illustrative themes.

Results

- Most participants (n=14) were female (79%) and nutrition majors (57%). Average age was 22 years and 8 ethnic groups were represented. The most used SM platforms were TikTok and Instagram.
- When asked to share terms that people use to describe their cultural foods on SM, five participants shared terms with a positive connotation, three stated positive and negative terms, and six stated negative terms.
- Four themes** with relevant sub-themes about SM and cultural food perception were established (Figure 1). The findings support the TPB and SEM (Figure 2).

Greater Connection with Heritage

"[SM] makes me **more excited to eat my cultural foods**. Because growing up with it, I guess I kind of take it for granted. So, when I see it represented on social media in a very aesthetic way, it... reminds me of foods and dishes that I, um, forgot about?" (23, Chinese F)

"[SM] could impact somebody else's views of their own cultural food, especially if they're not familiar with it... They'd be like, 'Oh, maybe I shouldn't try that, or maybe I should'" (26, Filipino F)

Perceptions of 'Healthy'

"If you see someone on social media, eating a plate they say is so healthy... then you look down... and it's your cultural food, you'll compare it. And see which one has like more vegetables or protein in it. If it's the one on social media, **you'll think that's what you should be eating instead**" (20, Hispanic F)

Learning & New Information

"There's this girl who... veganizes a lot of Southeast Asian food... It's very nice because from her content, I learned a lot about, like, alternatives I could use for some of our main sauces" (26, Hmong F)

"I follow some creators that are Mexican or Hispanic and **they eat our cultural foods** but they either **swap out certain ingredients to make it healthier** for them" (20, Hispanic F)

"[SM] has made me try new things because everyone has their different recipes... It was really cool to see the way people make things differently... instead of what I grew up with and what my mom makes" (21, Persian F).

Skewed Representation of Cultural Foods

"Often **what's portrayed in the media is these foods that... we eat more rarely...** It's inaccurate because it takes these foods that we don't necessarily eat very often, and puts them at the forefront, says yes, this is what it normally looks like" (21, Hispanic F)

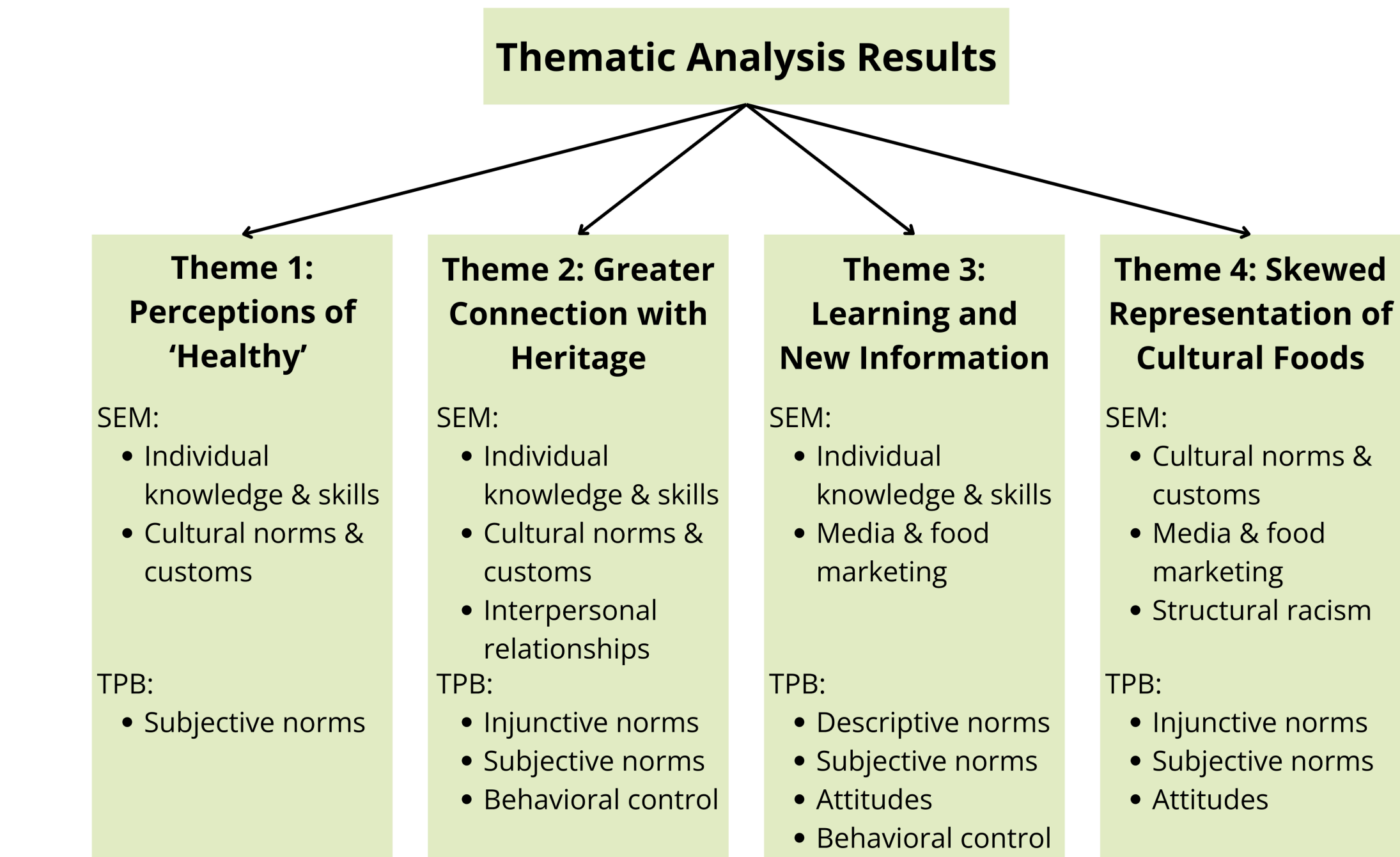
"There's lots of trends with soul food being... a 'clickbait' type of way. But they'll make it as sugary and crazy as possible. They'll make like candy dipped fried chicken and it's just really crazy stuff... I don't really see it as much just like regular food" (23, African American F)

Figure 1. Illustrative Quotes from the Four Emergent Themes Revealed by Qualitative Analysis to Examine Social Media Influence on College Student Cultural Food Perception

Discussion

- Students can utilize SM to maintain a **meaningful connection with heritage and learn nutritious cultural recipes**. Students valued engaging with SM creators from a similar ethnic background as themselves, who were associated with positive attitudes toward cultural foods and identity. However, SM may present a **curated representation of cultural foods** acceptable for a healthy diet and supports social norms about ethnic diets that are limited.

Figure 2. Theoretical Constructs Identified in Emergent Themes from Qualitative Analysis



Note: Definition of acronyms include Social Ecological Model (SEM) and Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB).

Conclusion

This study fills a gap in literature about the role of SM in fostering closeness to heritage through cultural foods.

Recommendations

- RDs have an opportunity to leverage SM to promote the inclusion of culturally diverse foods in dietetics, including encouraging consumption of cultural foods. All RDs have a shared responsibility to utilize SM resources that are culturally inclusive.

Future Research

- Research is warranted to understand how skewed representation of cultural foods on SM can affect intention to eat cultural foods.
- Data is lacking on how RDs can best utilize SM to provide nutrition education to diverse clients to more effectively use SM for healthier eating.
- Future research should explore the most effective method for RDs to disseminate culturally inclusive nutrition education on SM.



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Citations & Contact

Scan for contact information, reference list, and further information on this research.

