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RESPECT IN EVERY BITE









Who Is Really Choosing?

Young people, social media and the illusion of digital freedom

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As part of the ETI_CHEF – Respect in Every Bite project, we conducted a short survey among students and young people to gain a better understanding of their relationship with social media and the role these platforms play in shaping habits, opinions, and food-related choices.

The survey results provide several meaningful insights. Social media occupies a significant place in participants' daily lives, serves as one of their main sources of information and inspiration regarding food, and is perceived as a familiar environment in which young people believe they can navigate with a reasonable degree of confidence.

Scan the QR code to access the survey!

However, when examining complex phenomena involving behaviours, perceptions, and decision-making processes, data cannot be interpreted as a simple snapshot of reality. Above all, the results reveal how young people perceive themselves and their relationship with the digital world. It is from this perspective that a broader reflection emerges on the relationship between freedom of choice, algorithmic influence, the construction of desires, and critical awareness within the social media ecosystem.

The survey reveals an interesting paradox. Young people spend a considerable amount of time on social media, over 90% report using it for at least one to two hours per day, while nearly a quarter spend more than four hours daily.

Their preferred platforms are Instagram and TikTok, both of which are built around highly personalised algorithmic content delivery. At the same time, more than 90% consider themselves fairly or highly confident in their ability to recognise false information, while around 76% believe they can identify images generated by artificial intelligence.

It is precisely here that an important space for reflection opens up.

We cannot know whether this confidence corresponds to genuine critical thinking skills or whether it reflects an overestimation of personal competence. Indeed, a substantial body of research on misinformation and cognitive biases often suggests the opposite: the more immune we believe ourselves to be to media influence, the greater the risk of underestimating its power. This phenomenon recalls the so-called Third-Person Effect (Davison, 1983), according to which individuals tend to believe that others are more susceptible to media influence than they are themselves. The conviction that we are fully autonomous in our choices can become a kind of blind spot, making us less aware of the mechanisms that shape our behaviour.

An interesting framework for understanding this phenomenon is offered by the theory of nudges, developed by behavioural economists Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein (2008). Nudges are small interventions or “gentle pushes” that influence people's decisions without removing their freedom of choice.

The underlying idea is that the way options are presented affects behaviour: making an option easier to find, more

visible, or more accessible increases the likelihood that it will be chosen, while still allowing individuals to decide otherwise.

In other words, nudges neither force nor directly manipulate people; rather, they shape the decision-making environment, taking advantage of the fact that many of our everyday choices are made quickly and automatically, without extensive reflection.

According to Thaler and Sunstein, no decision takes place in a neutral context. Our choices are influenced by what they call choice architecture, the set of conditions that make certain options more visible, accessible, or attractive than others. In social media environments, this architecture is largely built by algorithms. Notifications, suggested content, recommended videos, and promoted posts do not directly dictate our behaviour, but they do help steer our attention and make certain choices more likely than others. In this sense, the power of digital platforms lies not in making decisions on our behalf, but in shaping the informational environment within which we believe we are choosing freely. Understanding these mechanisms does not mean denying our autonomy; rather, it means developing greater awareness of the influences that act upon our decisions every day.

In the context of food, this issue takes on particular significance. When a person chooses a recipe, a restaurant, a diet, or a food product after viewing dozens of videos and images on social media, it becomes difficult to determine where personal choice ends and where the influence of the surrounding digital environment begins.

The relationship between exposure to digital content and food-related behaviours has been extensively documented in international research. The World Health Organization has highlighted how food marketing influences young people's preferences, purchase requests directed at parents, consumption intentions, and actual eating behaviours (Food Marketing Exposure and Power and Their Associations With Food-Related Attitudes, Beliefs and Behaviours: A Narrative Review, WHO, Geneva, 2022). A WHO Europe report on digital marketing also emphasised how social media, influencers, and algorithmic personalisation systems make commercial messages particularly effective in reaching children and adolescents, often in forms that are difficult to recognise as advertising (Monitoring and Restricting Digital Marketing of Unhealthy Products to Children and Adolescents, WHO Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen, 2019). These studies do not suggest that individuals are simply manipulated by digital media; rather, they show that personal choices develop within communication environments specifically designed to capture attention, generate engagement, and influence preferences and behaviours.

Algorithms do not directly impose decisions. Instead, they determine what we see, what is repeatedly presented to us, and what remains outside our field of vision. In other words, they do not choose for us, but they help construct the horizon of options from which we believe we are freely choosing.

This process is neither neutral nor incidental. Recommendation systems used by digital platforms are

designed to maximise user engagement by prioritising content most likely to attract attention and generate interaction (Lasser et al., 2025).

As a result, the more time we spend engaging with a particular topic, the more likely the algorithm is to continue presenting similar content, gradually reinforcing existing interests, beliefs, and perceptions. This phenomenon, often described through the concepts of filter bubbles, the tendency to be exposed primarily to content aligned with one's interests, and echo chambers, communication environments in which ideas and opinions are continuously reinforced, can reduce exposure to alternative perspectives and make certain ideas, products, or behaviours appear far more widespread than they actually are (Ahmmad et al., 2025).

These dynamics are particularly evident in digital food communication. Repeated exposure to the same products, messages, and consumption models can gradually make them appear more familiar, desirable, and socially acceptable. For example, simply spending time watching a few videos about energy drinks may prompt the algorithm to recommend many more. Over time, this repeated exposure can make energy drink consumption seem common, desirable, and socially approved, regardless of whether such content accurately reflects the available scientific evidence regarding potential benefits and risks. Furthermore, when these messages are delivered by influencers or appear to be widely shared among peers, their persuasive power increases through well-established mechanisms of social influence identified in social

psychology, including the tendency to view behaviours as more appropriate and trustworthy when they appear widespread within one's reference group (Sherif, 1936; Asch, 1956; Bandura, 1977; Cialdini, 2009).

These dynamics echo an increasingly prominent idea in studies of digital culture: contemporary power is exercised less through prohibition or coercion and more through the organisation of attention. What we see most frequently tends to appear more relevant; what receives visibility appears more desirable; what disappears from our screens gradually disappears from our mental horizon as well. In this sense, algorithms do not directly determine behaviour, but they help construct the symbolic environment within which behaviour takes shape.

This influence becomes even more significant when we consider that many of our everyday decisions are not the result of fully rational evaluation. Psychologist and Nobel Prize laureate Daniel Kahneman demonstrated that a large proportion of our choices are guided by rapid, intuitive, and automatic cognitive processes (Kahneman, 2011). These processes enable efficient decision-making but are also particularly susceptible to contextual influences. In digital environments characterised by continuous streams of images, videos, notifications, and personalised recommendations, these mechanisms become especially relevant. We often do not choose after carefully evaluating all available alternatives; we choose among those most likely to capture our attention.

In digital societies, control increasingly takes the form of voluntary participation rather than coercion.

We continue to feel like active decision-makers while simultaneously sharing data, preferences, emotions, and habits that are constantly collected, analysed, and used to predict future behaviours (van Dijck, 2017). The key question, therefore, is not whether we are free, but how aware we are of the forces that help shape our decisions.

From this perspective, the central issue is not whether young people are influenced by social media. The survey data clearly show that these environments occupy a substantial part of their daily lives and serve as important sources of information, entertainment, and inspiration. The more interesting question concerns their ability to recognise and understand the mechanisms that influence attention, desires, and preferences.

In other words, the issue is not influence itself. Every human choice emerges within social, cultural, and relational contexts that inevitably shape it. The real educational challenge lies in developing awareness of these influences, learning to question not only the content we consume but also the mechanisms that make that content visible, attractive, and relevant.

In this sense, the survey does not provide definitive answers. Instead, it raises a fundamental educational question for the ETI_CHEF project. The objective should not simply be to teach young people how to recognise fake news or AI-generated images, but rather to foster a deeper form of digital literacy: the ability to question the invisible processes that lie behind the content we consume every day.

Future digital literacy cannot be limited to source verification or the identification of misinformation.

It must also include an understanding of how the digital ecosystems we inhabit function, and of the role that algorithms, platforms, and engagement-driven logics play in shaping our perceptions. Educating for digital citizenship means cultivating a form of critical awareness capable of looking beyond individual pieces of content to examine the broader context that makes them possible.

Perhaps there is no definitive answer to the question posed by the title of this reflection. Our choices emerge from the interaction of experiences, relationships, emotions, values, and external influences. Social media and algorithms do not determine our actions on their own, but they increasingly shape the context within which we make decisions, form opinions, and define what we consider desirable or relevant.

It is precisely within this space for reflection that ETI_CHEF is positioned—not with the aim of providing ready-made answers, but of encouraging questions and fostering a more critical perspective on the relationship between food, information, and digital technologies.

Ultimately, “Who is really choosing?” is not a question that concerns only young people or social media. It is a question that concerns all of us. And perhaps its greatest value lies not in finding a definitive answer, but in continuing to ask it.

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