

Eating, Posting, Reflecting: Social Media as a Tool for Everyday Healthy Eating Habits

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Abstract

This study explores the potential of social media as a design material for promoting healthy lifestyles. Specifically, we propose leveraging Instagram’s “Add Yours” feature to prompt users to share food-related content. Over time, these posts will serve as a basis for reflection on eating habits, providing insights into how social media can facilitate self-awareness and behavior tracking. This approach examines the role of social interactions in shaping food-related behaviors and identifies opportunities for designing technologies that support everyday health and well-being.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Collaborative and Social Computing**; *Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing*.

Keywords

social media, health, identity, agency

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1 Introduction

This study aims to rethink health behaviors and explore the potential of social media as a tool for long-term health reflection and behavioral iteration, with a particular focus on healthy eating.

Traditional health goal models often fail to fully capture the complexities of identity formation, agency, and the evolving nature of health behaviors. Health-related actions are not always driven by predefined goals but are instead shaped by dynamic social and technological contexts. Social media, as a space for both information exchange and identity work, plays a growing role in shaping health habits. This design probe investigates how individuals engage with current social media features for food-related reflection, with the goal of identifying design opportunities that promote more enduring and meaningful self-awareness of health practices.

This study seeks to address these research questions:

- How can making, sharing and revisiting ephemeral social media content serve as a useful tool for self-reflection on eating habits?
- How do individuals use social media to express and document their everyday food practices?
- Does engaging in structured food-related posting over a week influence participants’ awareness or behavior regarding eating habits?

2 Background

2.1 Social Media Design and Healthy Eating

Mobile health applications and wearable tracking devices have long been used as tools to support nutrition and fitness goals. Popular mobile apps like *MyFitnessPal* and *Noom* integrate calorie tracking, goal setting, and behavior feedback, and studies show these tools can support weight loss and healthy behavior changes when used regularly [8, 15]. However, these technologies often suffer from high attrition and user burden, as logging every meal and activity can be time-consuming or cognitively exhausting [5, 9]. Moreover, emerging critiques point to unintended harms, including anxiety, guilt, and disordered eating, especially among users with perfectionist tendencies or histories of food-related stress [1, 11, 17]. While tools like *Noom* attempt to address these issues through cognitive behavioral techniques and psychological support [12], the long-term sustainability and emotional well-being associated with these platforms remain underexplored. These limitations point to the need for alternative approaches—ones that reduce friction, emphasize identity, and align with the social and emotional rhythms of everyday life.

Social media, with its ephemeral, expressive, and socially embedded features, offers a promising complementary pathway for health reflection and behavior change. Prior studies design systems to leverage social potential and affordances to encourage users to eat healthily. For example, allowing users to share and positively evaluate each other’s meals can casually encourage healthy eating habits [19]. Promoting healthy foods on young consumer social networks also has the potential to encourage them to adopt healthy lifestyles [16]. Also, existing work from personal informatics [7] shows that making tracking social could support people with healthy eating goals [2]. In design explorations, lightweight social tools were found to be effective in promoting reflection and mindfulness in healthy eating practices [6]. Ephemeral social media features could also be designed as a personal informatics tool [23].

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2.2 Health, Identity, and Agency: The Need for More Design and Research

Health is not only a set of behaviors but also an evolving aspect of one's identity. The intersection of health and identity requires deeper exploration, particularly in terms of agency. Social media users engage in information and identity work in health [18], negotiating their health-related selves through actions on these digital platforms [21]. For example, in the context of food practices, sharing food choices, fitness routines, or reflections on well-being is part of self-branding for content creators. Seeking validation, support, or critique from peers with shared health concerns is a common practice for those with health conditions, such as food allergies and eating disorders [13, 14, 21]. In the era of fast-paced social platforms, choosing when and how to disclose health-related information remained important in protecting and supporting the well-being of self.

Current health technology research often overlooks these fluid negotiations and the ways in which agency manifests in social media interactions. Understanding how people use digital spaces to shape their health-related identities calls for a shift away from rigid behavioral models and toward frameworks that account for dynamic, participatory, and context-dependent identity work.

2.3 Social Media as a Tool for Identity, Agency, and Reflection

Social media platforms function as more than mere information sources; they are spaces where individuals engage in personal informatics and reflection.

Through passive and active engagements on social media, social media users consume health-related content, interact with others' posts, and reflect on their own habits [3, 22]. Personalized feeds shape perceptions of health norms, encouraging reflection or, conversely, reinforcing harmful patterns or negative emotions [14]. Food posts, saved content, and casual progress updates on social media create informal self-tracking mechanisms that differ from conventional health tracking tools [22].

By examining social media as a material for personal informatics, there are opportunities to explore new ways to design interventions that foster mindful engagement with health behaviors. There is potential in social media enabling more flexible, socially driven self-reflection.

3 Using a Design Probe to Understand Social Media as a Material for Logging Food Habits

We aim to use a design probe approach [20] to explore how people engage with social media as a design material [4, 10] for logging their habits and everyday food practices. To investigate how social media can serve as a material for reflecting on eating habits, we conduct a design probe study with 20 participants who are over the age of 18 and have experience posting food-related content on social media.

3.1 Part I: Pre-Study Interview

Participants will take part in an initial semi-structured interview where they will discuss their perceptions of their own eating habits

and any health-related goals they may have, and how they use social media for food practices.

3.2 Part II: Design Probe: Social Media Food Logging (7 Days)

Participants will engage in a one-week design probe where they are prompted to post food-related content on social media each day. They will be given a set of prompts related to food and eating habits and can choose freely from this pool. Participants may express their responses using text, images, or videos based on their preferred mode of self-expression. Below are some categories and example of prompts, along with their potential impact on reflection and habit tracking:

- **Everyday Prompts (For Consistent Food Tracking):** These prompts support daily or routine-based food logging, helping users track their eating habits over time. For example, "What I eat in a day," "Weekend food," "Food with my family," etc.
- **Healthy Eating Reflection Prompts:** These prompts encourage users to reflect on their perception of health and nutrition, potentially prompting mindful engagement with food choices. For example, "Healthy food pic," "Green food," "My comfort food," etc.
- **Identity Expression Prompts:** These prompts allow users to showcase personal food-related values, cultural background, lifestyle, and aesthetic preferences, reflecting how food is tied with their identity, for example, "Food with my family (family traditions and cultural food practices)," "I made this food (self-expression through cooking, creativity, and personal achievement)," "My favorite food as ___(a college student)," etc.

Each of these prompts serves as a low-effort, engaging way for people to log their food habits while naturally fostering reflection on eating choices, routines, and social connections. Over time, tracking food posts could reveal trends in dietary behavior that might otherwise go unnoticed. Social media acts as a repository of food experiences, allowing users to look back on their posts, compare past and present habits, and engage in discussions with others (whether immediately after they posted or after they revisit together their content). In addition to posting, participants may also choose to keep a short journal or take personal notes during the week to track their thoughts or intentions behind each post. Through this probe-based method, we aim to explore how structured yet open-ended food content prompts can encourage mindful engagement with food practices and digital self-expression.

3.3 Part III: Post-Study Reflection and Interview

After completing food logs, participants will be asked to revisit their Instagram Archive to review their food-related posts from the past week. A follow-up interview will be conducted to explore their reflections on their eating habits based on their archived posts, and whether their perceptions of their food choices or eating behaviors changed throughout the study. They are also asked about their thoughts on the role of ephemeral social media content in supporting self-reflection and expression of food-related behaviors.

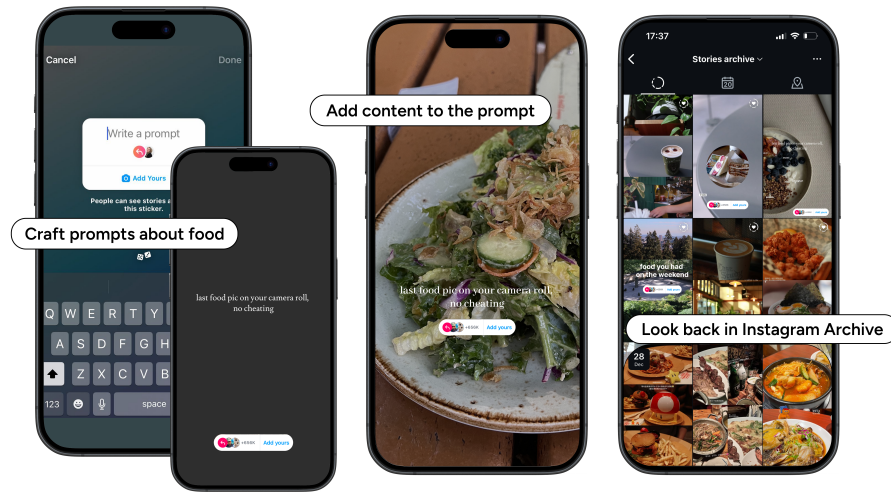


Figure 1: “Add Yours” and Archive on Instagram

Figure 1 shows the “Add Yours” and Archive on Instagram. We also show the mapping of research questions and methods in Table 1.

Research Question	Method
RQ1. How can ephemeral social media content aid self-reflection on eating habits?	Post-study interview; revisiting Instagram Archive
RQ2. How do individuals express/document food practices on social media?	Design probe (food-related posting prompts)
RQ3. Does structured food posting influence awareness or eating behavior?	Comparison between pre-study and post-study interviews

Table 1: Mapping research questions and method components

This study offers several potential contributions to HCI and health technology research. First, it highlights the potential of everyday social media practices—specifically ephemeral and participatory content—as tools for self-reflection on eating habits. If individuals reflect more regularly on their food practices through structured yet flexible prompts, social media could evolve into a low-effort, socially engaging space for promoting mindful eating. Second, the findings could inform the design of future platform features that embed health reflection into daily use, such as archive-based retrospectives, customizable food prompts, or collaborative food diaries. More broadly, this work contributes to ongoing conversations in HCI about integrating identity, agency, and behavior tracking into the design of health technologies. By treating social media as a design material, the study reframes everyday digital practices as meaningful interventions for long-term well-being.

4 Conclusions and Next Steps

Social media plays a crucial role in shaping identity, agency, and self-reflection, offering a dynamic lens for understanding health behaviors. This study is currently in the pilot testing phase, and this workshop is an opportunity for us to gather feedback, refine our approach, and explore new directions in personal health informatics and health technology design. Additionally, we hope to engage in discussions on shaping a future research agenda for designing everyday health tools that leverage social interactions on digital platforms.

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