

NATIONAL NUTRITION WEEK 2026

From Screens to Plates

*Creating Healthy Digital Food
Environments for Better Nutrition*

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Where digital habits meet public health nutrition



SETTING THE SCENE

Why This Topic, Why Now

Digital habits move fast worldwide — and South Africa is not a follower here. It's one of the most digitally engaged food markets on earth.

GLOBALLY

\$435bn

Global online meal-delivery revenue projected for 2024 (up from ~\$109bn in 2017)

2.7bn

People expected to use meal-delivery apps worldwide by 2029

SOUTH AFRICA

#1 globally

for daily time spent on the internet — 9h 24m a day, most on social media

99.3%

of SA internet users own a smartphone — a mobile-first food market

26.7 million social media users - ~33% of the population already using meal-delivery apps
- digital ad spend now ~40% of SA's total ad market



A NEW CONCEPT

What Is the Digital Food Environment?

The online spaces and tools through which people **see, choose, buy and receive food.**

Everyday examples



Grocery delivery apps

Ordering weekly shopping from a phone



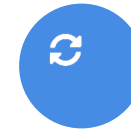
Food-delivery platforms

Restaurant and takeaway meals on demand



Social media marketing

Ads, influencers and sponsored posts



Personalised recommendations

Algorithms suggesting what to buy next



Why It Matters for Public Health Nutrition

Two key links

Diet-related NCDs

Obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease are shaped by everyday food access and marketing exposure.

Food security

Digital access, affordability and delivery convenience affect who can reliably get nutritious food.

Relevant across the life course



Children

Exposed to persuasive digital food marketing



Adults

High reliance on convenience-driven delivery apps



Older adults

May face digital access and literacy barriers



GROUNDING IN MY OWN WORK

My Research in This Field



COMPLETED

Digital Food Environment & Health Behaviours

403 respondents nationwide (mean age 32.6). 95.5% own a smartphone; 50.9% use food-delivery apps. Frequent app use was linked to poorer health-conscious behaviour, and heavier social media use predicted lower overall health-behaviour scores.



COMPLETED

Digital Food Environment & Consumers' Relationship with Food

354 respondents; 48.6% check social media 6+ times daily. Identified four food-meaning domains (Aesthetic & Health, Social Connection, Environmental Impact, Spirituality). Food-delivery app use was negatively associated with Aesthetic & Health scores.



IN PROGRESS

Marketing Practices in SA Online Grocery Stores

Cross-sectional analysis using the INFORMAS Protocol

Applying an internationally recognised monitoring framework to systematically audit promotion and placement of foods within South African online grocery retail.



IN PROGRESS

Food Literacy in Digital Food Retail Environments

Scoping review

Mapping the current evidence on how consumers' food literacy shapes, and is shaped by, digital food retail — identifying gaps for future research.



EVIDENCE • 1 OF 3

Online Food Marketing



Personalised & immersive

Challenges, filters and influencer content blend into entertainment — harder to recognise as advertising



High exposure of youth

A 2025 review found frequent targeting of ultra-processed, high-fat/sugar/salt products on Instagram, TikTok and YouTube; exposure rises with age



Targeting vulnerable groups

A Nigerian Instagram study found fast-food brands used emotional appeals and slang to specifically target lower-income adolescents



WHO calls for regulation (2023)

Comprehensive, mandatory marketing restrictions recommended, closing the loophole of ads shifting from regulated TV to unregulated digital space

Research gap: most digital-marketing evidence is from high-income countries — very few studies cover Africa



EVIDENCE • 2 OF 3

Food Delivery Platforms

\$3.3bn

SA online food delivery revenue, 2024

\$5bn+

Projected SA market size by 2030

33%

of SA population already using meal-delivery apps

1m+

active users on Mr D Food by 2022, +50% order growth YoY



“Digital disruptors”

A 2024 review warns delivery apps may undermine global diet-improvement goals — menus skew fast food, healthy options often buried in-app



Outside normal regulation

These platforms sit outside food-retail rules — no menu labelling or portion limits — while promotions nudge toward less healthy choices



Africa adoption drivers

A 2024 review (SA, Ghana, Tanzania) found convenience, status and trust drive uptake — but almost no local research yet links use to diet or weight outcomes



Digital Nutrition Interventions — the Opportunity Side

The evidence isn't only about risk — digital tools also show real, if modest, benefits.



What works

- 2023 meta-analysis (39 trials, ~7,300 people): digital dietary interventions improved diet quality — about +0.6 servings/day of fruit & veg vs controls
- African mHealth successes: SMS/messaging programmes improved exclusive breastfeeding and child-feeding practices in several countries
- Best results when paired with behaviour-change techniques — goal-setting, self-monitoring, feedback



What holds it back

- Attrition: dropout in digital dietary interventions ranges from 35% up to 75–99% in some programmes
- Equity risk: poorer, rural and female populations are less likely to own smartphones — digital tools could widen rather than close health gaps
- Most trials are short-term — long-term maintenance of diet change is still poorly understood



ONE SYSTEM, NOT TWO

Digital and Physical Environments Are Connected

Online promotions influence what people buy in-store — and in-store cues shape online behaviour. The two environments constantly interact.

Digital

Apps, social media, online stores,
personalised ads and recommendations

*Example: click-and-collect and social media posts
drive in-store purchases*



Physical

Supermarkets, shelf placement, in-store
promotions and pricing

*Example: shelf placement and in-store signage shape
what people search for online*



WHAT CAN BE DONE

Practical Actions, Grounded in the Evidence

1

Make healthy foods easier to find online

Answers: healthy items get buried in delivery-app interfaces

2

Provide clear nutrition information at point of purchase

Supports informed choice before checkout

3

Encourage healthier promotions and recommendations

Answers: value-meal deals & engagement-driven algorithms

4

Promote water and minimally processed foods

Builds a positive digital counter-narrative

5

Strengthen rules on marketing to children

Answers: WHO 2023 call & targeted youth marketing evidence



CONCLUSION

Making the Healthy Choice the Easy Choice — Online and Offline

- 1 Digital food environments are now part of everyday nutrition and food security — and South Africa is one of the most digitally engaged markets in the world
- 2 The evidence shows real opportunities alongside real risks — especially for children and for equitable access
- 3 Most evidence still comes from high-income countries; Africa-led research and action is a clear priority

Discussion: Where should research and regulation focus first — marketing exposure, delivery-app dietary impact, or intervention equity?



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