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What are influencers feed-ing us?: A photo-voice approach on emerging adults' social media food environment

Louise Glenisson *, Lotte Hallez, Tim Smits

Lab for Media, Information and Persuasion, Department of Communication Sciences, KU Leuven, Parkstraat 45 - bus 3603, 3000, Leuven, Belgium

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ABSTRACT

Healthy eating is a complex and often confusing topic, especially for young people. Conflicting advice, trends, and body ideals contribute to a stigmatising food environment in which social media influencers (SMIs) strongly shape perceptions of what counts as a 'healthy' diet. However, little is known about the specific food content that emerging adults encounter in their own social media feeds and how this influences their understanding of healthy eating.

Guided by Source Credibility Theory and Expectancy-Value Theory, this study used a photo-voice approach combining content analysis and focus group discussions. Emerging adults collected 559 food-related images from their social media feeds, which were later used as discussion prompts. This multi-method design enabled an in-depth examination of the health-promoting food content shared by influencers, its alignment with dietary guidelines, and the features shaping perceived credibility.

Results showed that 30% of analysed posts contradicted dietary guidelines, mainly by featuring too large portions of red meat. Most inaccurate content (78.3%) appeared in recipe posts and was almost exclusively shared by uncredentialed influencers (90.7%). Focus group discussions revealed that participants often overlooked subtle misinformation due to shortcomings in credibility evaluation. Many relied on perceived expertise, such as scientific language or a "healthy" appearance, rather than formal credentials, while others viewed recipe posts as harmless, underestimating their impact on perceptions of healthy eating.

Overall, findings suggest that although influencer content can promote healthier food choices, improving digital literacy is crucial to help emerging adults recognise and critically assess misleading nutritional information.

1. Introduction

Social media, internet-based applications that facilitate the creation, organisation, and sharing of information online" (O'Riordan et al., 2016, p. 244), have greatly expanded access to nutritional content. It enables users to discover new recipes, learn about healthy diets, and connect with communities that support healthier lifestyle choices (Sokolova et al., 2024). In this realm, social media influencers (SMIs) have emerged as pivotal figures and have become informal sources of health education (Raggatt et al., 2018), representing a valuable opportunity for effective public health communication (Gupta et al., 2021; Lutkenhaus et al., 2019).

However, the democratization of this nutrition discourse also brings challenges. Most influencers discussing nutrition lack formal qualifications in the field (Karathra et al., 2020), and misinformation on diet and nutrition is more prevalent among such unqualified sources, as opposed to those with official qualifications (Chan et al., 2020; Zeng et al., 2025). Combined with the largely unregulated nature of social media, this creates fertile ground for the rapid spread of inaccurate nutritional information (Marocolo et al., 2021; Lofft, 2020), potentially leading followers to adopt unhealthy eating behaviours. Indeed, research has already shown that individuals who rely more on social media than on professionals for making dietary changes tend to be more misinformed (Ruani & Reiss, 2023), underscoring the importance of addressing this online nutrition discourse.

Emerging adults increasingly rely on social media for dietary guidance (McKinley & Wright, 2014; Wang et al., 2022), making them more exposed to the wide variety of information available online. As a result, many report difficulties navigating the overwhelming and often conflicting dietary advice they encounter online (EIT Food, n.d.; Hassoun

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: louise.glenisson@kuleuven.be (L. Glenisson), lotte.hallez@kuleuven.be (L. Hallez), tim.smits@kuleuven.be (T. Smits).

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et al., 2025). Research indicates they struggle to distinguish between credible and misleading information (Lissens et al., 2025), which can create confusion about healthy eating and foster broader scepticism toward nutrition and health recommendations (Nagler, 2014).

Content analyses of the health and nutrition discourse on various social media platforms have consistently shown a high prevalence of inaccurate information (Segado Fernández et al., 2025). Yet, to our knowledge, no studies have examined the specific health and nutrition content that users encounter in their own personalised feeds, nor how they engage with it. Personalised algorithms can systematically shape these information environments by selectively presenting content based on users' prior behaviour and interests (Holone, 2016). Over time, this algorithmic tailoring may contribute to the formation of so-called echo chambers, in which users are repeatedly exposed to similar health-related messages while alternative perspectives or corrective information are progressively filtered out. In the context of nutrition and health, such echo chambers may amplify particular dietary narratives, including misleading or unsubstantiated claims, and reinforce existing beliefs about what constitutes healthy eating.

To address these gaps, the present study employs a photo-voice method, a participatory qualitative approach in which emerging adults in Flanders, Belgium, photograph health-promoting content they encounter on their everyday social media feeds. These images are then discussed in group discussions to gain deeper insight into participants' perceptions, providing a more authentic understanding of their lived experiences than self-report or researcher-selected stimuli alone. We first explore how the nutritional content shared by SMIs aligns with established national dietary guidelines. Furthermore, guided by the Source Credibility Theory (SCT) and Expectancy Value Theory (EVT), we explore (1) how elements of these frameworks (e.g., expertise, attractiveness, expectancies) are embedded in SMIs messages, (2) how emerging adults evaluate these elements, and how this shapes their perception of healthy food. Ultimately, this research aspires to provide insights that can inform online communication interventions and educational strategies to empower emerging adults with the tools they need to make informed decisions about their diets in a digital age.

2. Literature review

2.1. Dietary (mis)information on social media

Research investigating online nutrition information shows that content labelled as 'healthy' frequently fails to align with official dietary guidelines (Denniss et al., 2023). Content analyses across platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube reveal a dominance of restrictive, low-calorie meals and niche diets (e.g., paleo, gluten-free, raw vegan) that frequently exclude essential food groups, thereby promoting unbalanced and sometimes misleading views of healthy eating (Del Pozo et al., 2024; Ramachandran et al., 2018; Pfender et al., 2024; Pilař et al., 2021). While these diets can be suitable for specific individuals under professional guidance, unsupervised use may pose nutritional risks (O'Neill & Raggi, 2020).

Social media influencers (SMIs) represent a large source of the growing volume of nutrition and health content online (Gell et al., 2024). In the context of healthy eating, influencers have become prominent figures and sources of health education (Pfender & Bleakley, 2024; Wellman, 2024). With large and highly engaged audiences, they act as modern opinion leaders, influencing public perceptions and behaviours related to food and health (Harff et al., 2022). However, this influence comes with notable risks. Unlike trained professionals, many SMIs lack the expertise to provide accurate, evidence-based information (Denniss et al., 2023; Pfender et al., 2024). Even if unintentional, this can lead to the spread of misinformation or overlook the potentially harmful consequences of their messages.

This highlights the importance of investigating the online nutrition landscape of social media users, particularly emerging adults (18-24y), who are exposed to this on a daily basis. This age group can be situated in the late phases of adolescence and therefore in a critical developmental stage where lifelong eating habits and food preferences are established (Story, Neumark-Sztainer, & French, 2002). As they gain independence, moving away from parental influence, they take on more responsibility for their own food choices (Ziegler et al., 2021). Therefore, when adolescents are exposed to nutrition-related content on social media, it is important that this information is accurate and reliable, as it can have a lasting influence on their future food choices and health outcomes.

It is crucial to examine how SMIs, in the largely unregulated realm of social media health communication, establish their credibility and how this shapes adolescents' perceptions about these SMIs and the promoted food behaviour. To address this, the study draws upon two different, but highly connected, theories: the Source Credibility Theory (SCT) and the Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT).

2.2. Source credibility theory

The SCT (Ohanian, 1990) posits that the credibility of a person (e.g., SMI) plays a critical role in the persuasiveness of a message. This is also evident in the context of SMI health communication, where credibility is particularly important, as the extent to which followers attribute credibility to a SMI shapes how accurately and reliably they perceive the nutritional information, and the degree to which they accept it at face value (Lissens et al., 2025; Pfender & Bleakley, 2024). Other theoretical frameworks on responses to misinformation, such as the Misinformation Recognition and Response Model (MRRM) (Amazeen, 2024), similarly stress the importance of source-related characteristics in misinformation recognition. In online environments, perceived source credibility strongly shapes whether messages are recognised as potentially inaccurate (Amazeen, 2024), a process that is particularly relevant in the online nutrition landscape where misleading information is highly prevalent. This underscores that source credibility is pivotal not only in persuasion, but also in the fundamental processes of misinformation recognition and engagement. Following Source Credibility Theory (Ohanian, 1990), credibility is defined by three key dimensions: (1) expertise, (2) trustworthiness, and (3) attractiveness. The higher these attributes are perceived, the greater the influencer's credibility and the more persuasive their message.

As health influencers (i.e., SMI who focus on health-related topics (Zou et al., 2021)) position themselves as experts of the topic, regardless of their actual expertise, their *perceived* expertise becomes a crucial factor. By *perceived* expertise, we refer to the expertise that audiences attribute to influencers based on observable cues, which does not necessarily correspond to actual, evidence-based expertise. For instance, previous research shows that while individuals with professional certifications tend to be perceived as legitimate experts, influencers who visually embody a "healthy" lifestyle and share advice grounded in personal experience are likewise often automatically regarded as wellness authorities (Jiang, Bailey, & Lamarche, z.d .; Wellman, 2023). The greater the perceived expertise of a source, the more accurate people consider their nutritional recommendations to be, regardless of the actual nutritional quality of the promoted food (Lissens et al., 2025).

According to SCT, individuals who are perceived as physically attractive are often seen as more credible, and this effect extends to SMIs. Research shows that many health influencers conform to societal beauty standards, which can further amplify their perceived expertise and persuasiveness (Rogers et al., 2021). Influencers themselves acknowledge that a fit or aesthetically idealised body can enhance their credibility, as followers often equate appearance with knowledge or authority in nutrition and fitness (Wellman, 2023).

Trustworthiness refers to "the honesty, integrity and believability of an endorser" (Erdogan, 1999). In the literature, this concept is often studied in the context of sponsored influencer content, where research shows mixed outcomes: on one side, participants indicate that sponsored

posts can lead to unreliable health information. Influencers may promote products for brand deals without personally using or endorsing them, causing followers to question their trustworthiness as health educators (Pfender et al., 2024). On the other side, sponsored content can be perceived positively when the source is familiar, liked, and sponsorship appears genuine (van der Bend et al., 2024). In such cases, audiences may view the promoted messages as more credible and trustworthy, which can enhance the persuasive effect of the content (van der Bend et al., 2024). Additionally, numerical indicators of popularity, such as follower count, have been shown to enhance perceived trustworthiness and credibility (Weismueller et al., 2020).

2.3. Expectancy-value model

The EVT (Eccles et al., 1983; Van der Pligt & De Vries, 1998) complements the SCT by offering insight into why adolescents are likely to comply to SMIs health-promoting food content. This theory posits that individuals make achievement-related decisions (e.g., dietary choices) based on two key cognitive processes: probability judgments (the perceived likelihood that their behaviour will lead to a specific outcome) and value judgments (the personal significance or desirability of that behaviour). When individuals perceive an outcome as both likely and valuable, behaviour change is more likely to occur (Van der Pligt & De Vries, 1998).

Health influencers can strategically exploit these cognitive mechanisms by emphasising the perceived benefits of specific diets, either explicitly (by directly referencing outcomes such as weight loss or clearer skin) or implicitly (through transformation photos, testimonials, and success stories) (Pfender et al., 2024; Wellmann et al., 2023). As a result, the anticipated benefits of these diets enhance the perceived value of the promoted behaviour, making it compelling, especially for young audiences. This dynamic highlights the strong interplay between the SCT and EVT, as physical attractiveness not only enhances trust in the influencer but also amplifies the perceived value of the promoted behaviour.

To our knowledge, no content analytical work has explored the health-promoting food content of SMIs that adolescents' actually encounter on their social media. In addition, this study aims to verify whether the food portrayed in these healthy posts aligns with the official dietary guidelines. Hence, we formulated our first research question to fill this gap:

RQ1: To what extent does the health-promoting food content, shared by SMIs and encountered by adolescents, align with the Flemish food-based dietary guidelines?

Using a photo voice approach, this method enables both a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the health-promoting food posts. Quantitatively, post and source characteristics reflecting SCT and EVT are examined, while qualitatively, participants' reflections provide insight into how they evaluate the credibility of these messages, including how they make sense of the quantitatively coded elements. To examine this, the following research questions are stated:

RQ2: To what extent does the health-promoting food content, shared by SMIs and encountered by adolescents, contain elements reflecting source credibility, as defined by the SCT (expertise, attractiveness, and trustworthiness)?

RQ3: To what extent does the health-promoting food content, shared by SMIs and encountered by adolescents, contain elements reflecting expected outcomes, as defined by the EVT (physical and psychological expectancies)?

By explicitly linking the content analysis to SCT and EVT, these questions not only describe what adolescents encounter, but also investigate whether the mechanisms proposed by these theoretical frameworks are observable in real-world social media content. This approach allows us to understand how exposure to health-promoting posts may operate through credibility and outcome expectations to influence adolescents' eating behaviours.

Finally, to explore adolescents' own interpretations and responses, we formulated qualitative research questions:

RQ4: How do adolescents interpret this health-promoting food content?

RQ4a: What factors shape their evaluation of the credibility of these posts?

RQ4b: How do adolescents perceive the influence of these posts on their own intentions or behaviour regarding healthy eating?

In sum, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the healthfulness and persuasive characteristics of social media food content intended to promote healthy eating, as well as how adolescents interpret and respond to these messages.

3. Method

This photo-voice study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, participants completed a photo task to collect the SMIs health-promoting food content that emerging adults (aged 18–24) encounter on their social media over the course of one week. The collected images were subsequently used for the content analysis. In the second phase, focus group discussions were held to explore how participants interpret and engage with this content. This approach provides an in-depth, exploratory, and participant-centered overview of the online health discourse, offering rich insights into perceptions and messaging rather than a representative snapshot of emerging adults' exposures. Prior to the study, the first author participated in a dedicated photo-voice training session to become familiar with the method.

A total of 40 participants (29 females, 11 males), aged between 20 and 24 years ($M = 22.7$; $SD = 1.32$), were contacted via social media and recruited through a combination of convenience and snowball sampling across Flanders, Belgium, ensuring a mix of individuals from both the researchers' personal networks and broader social circles. All participants completed the one-week photo task, and 36 subsequently took part in a follow-up focus group discussion; the remaining four were unable to participate due to scheduling conflicts. More details on participant information is available in the supplementary materials. Ethical approval was obtained from the authors' university (G-2025-9075), and informed consent was collected for each participant through an online consent form prior to participation, having been fully informed about the study's purpose and procedures. The participants did not receive any financial compensation for participating. The following section outlines the methods used in each phase, beginning with the photo task and followed by the focus group discussions.

3.1. Photo task

This part of the study aims to gain an exploratory insight into the health-promoting food messages emerging adults encounter on social media. Each day for one week, participants were instructed to take as much screenshots of SMI content they believed was intended to promote healthy eating (i.e., health-promoting food content), regardless of whether they personally agreed with it. This diary-based method is increasingly used in nutrition and marketing research (Siemieniako, 2017; Qutteina et al., 2019; Wanjohi et al., 2023) and well suited to capture participants' real-life exposure (Atayee-Bennett, 2025). As food-related messages are highly pervasive on social media (Holmberg et al., 2016; Potvin Kent et al., 2019) and systematically evaluating and capturing each of them can be time-intensive, this method cannot guarantee that all health-promoting content encountered by participants is recognised and screenshotted. However, it does ensure that all

captured content was actively noticed and perceived as health-promoting, in contrast to data-donation or automated scraping approaches, where mere exposure does not necessarily imply attention, cognitive processing or consciously labelling as health-related. This conscious engagement with content is particularly advantageous for the photo-voice method as it provides insight into what participants actively attend to and consider relevant in their own social media environments.

Participants could upload these screenshots to a secure digital platform (i.e., LimeSurvey). For each upload, they answered three brief questions, indicating the platform, the post format (story, video, photo, or carousel), and how likely they would be to apply the nutritional information into their own lives. To enhance study engagement, participants received an automated daily reminder to take and upload photos via their phones.

Additionally, participants completed brief surveys both before and after the diary study. The first survey was designed to provide a comprehensive picture of each participant, including demographic characteristics, social media use patterns, and engagement with healthy eating. The post-study survey primarily assessed participants' adherence to the study protocol. Full participant details are provided in the Supplemental Materials.

3.1.1. Materials and coding procedures

Each screenshot uploaded to Limesurvey, that fit our sampling criteria, formed the unit of analysis. In total 637 posts were send in during April and May 2025. After screening for suitability by the first author, 559 posts remained for analysis. Posts were excluded if they did not convey any indication of health-promoting food content, if the account or post was no longer accessible, or if the message did not involve an influencer in any way.

For each post (except for temporary posts such as "stories"), the researcher located the original posts on the respective social media platform to examine the full content of the post. For temporary posts (e.g., stories), the unit of analysis was the screenshot only, since the original post had disappeared at time of analysis. Still images, image carousels, and videos were all coded consistently at an overall post level, following established methods for content analysis (Cohen et al., 2019).

Since no prior codebook existed for addressing these research questions, a new codebook was developed, informed by previous content analyses on SMIs (Del Pozo et al., 2024; Pfender et al., 2024; Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2016) and the theoretical frameworks used (i.e., SCT and EVT). To refine the codebook, a pretest of 50 posts was conducted in January 2025. These posts were collected by seven individuals, who did not participate in the final sample, to mirror the photo task protocol. This pretest informed the refinement of the coding categories.

After finalising the codebook, the first author proceeded to analyse all 559 selected posts. To ensure inter-rater agreement and reliability, the second author independently coded a random 10% sample of the posts (n = 60). Intercoder reliability between the two coders was calculated using Krippendorff's Alpha for each coded element. For almost all elements, perfect agreement was achieved ($\alpha = 1.00$), indicating complete consistency between the coders (Krippendorff, 1980). Any remaining discrepancies (n = 1) were resolved through mutual discussion.

3.1.2. Coding attributes

The social media posts were analysed on three different levels: (1) post characteristics, (2) nutritional evaluation and (3) use of persuasive elements derived from SCT and EVT.

The first level analysed information on the author, platform, post format and content type of each post. The second level analysed the presence of nutritional claims, the promotion of supplements, overall nutritional quality, and the ratio of meat to plant-based foods depicted. Nutritional quality was assessed using the guidelines of the Flemish Food Pyramid (*Gezond Eten? Dat Doe Je met de Voedingsdriehoek!*, z.d.). Each food item in the post was classified according to the pyramid's categories, i.e., recommended, neutral, consume in moderation, or discouraged. Posts were then rated on a scale from 1 (completely accurate), when all foods fell within the recommended category, to 5 (completely inaccurate), when foods belonged entirely to the discouraged categories. Each post was coded based on the information explicitly shown or written in the content. Posts that did not contain a clear recipe or ingredient list were evaluated only based on what was visibly present in the image or accompanying text. This approach ensures that the coding reflects the perspective of the user, who must also rely on explicit cues (i.e., foods) presented in the post. The third level analysed the persuasive strategies employed within the posts, guided by the EVT and the SCT as theoretical frameworks. Table 1 provides a concise overview of the coding attributes, while the full codebook is available in the supplementary materials. The dataset is available on OSF.

3.1.3. Analytical strategy

To address the research questions related to the photo task and subsequent content analysis, descriptive statistics were calculated using R. Additionally, to analyse the relationship between investigated content characteristics (e.g., use of scientific language and alignment with dietary guidelines), chi-square tests were used.

3.2. Focus group discussions

3.2.1. Materials and procedure

After the photo task, the first author (female, PhD) conducted seven focus group discussions in a university setting, each lasting around 1 h and involving four to seven participants. The sample consisted of a subset of the photo task participants ($n = 36/40$) who agreed to take part and until data saturation was reached. The semi-structured interviews aimed to explore how emerging adults engage with and give meaning to the health-promoting food content on social media, more specifically, how they assessed post credibility and how they perceive its influence on their own food behaviour. To support this discussion, selected photos from the photo task were used as prompts, providing concrete reference

Table 1
Short overview of coding attributes.

Coding attribute	Description
Platform	Platform where the post was published (e.g., Instagram, TikTok).
Format	Format of the post (photo, video, story, carousel).
Content	Type of content shared (recipe, tips, food diary, other).
Diet	Whether the post promotes a specific diet (e.g., vegan, keto).
Nutritional claim	Nutritional claims mentioned (e.g., high protein, low calorie).
Supplements	Whether supplements are included and type of supplement
Nutritional quality	Nutritional quality of health-promoting food content assessed against Flemish food guidelines.
Discouraged food	Type of discouraged foods if present (e.g., red meat, sugars).
Environmental implications	Environmental sustainability of health-promoting food content (animal vs. plant-based).
Person	Whether a person is depicted in the post.
Age	Perceived age of the person (if present).
Gender	Perceived gender of the person (if present).
Ethnicity	Perceived race/ethnicity of the person (if present).
Content creator	Type of content creator (e.g., dietitian, fitness creator).
Scientific language	Whether advice is supported by scientific evidence/ language.
Sponsorship	Disclosure of sponsorships.
Self-promotion	Self-promotion (e.g., link in bio, app promotion).
Followers	Number of followers (nano, micro, macro, mega).
Beauty ideals	Adherence to beauty ideals of the person depicted.
Revealing	Level of clothing/exposure of the person depicted.
Physical outcome	Physical outcomes/goals referenced in health-promoting food content.
Psychological outcomes	Psychological outcomes/goals referenced in health-promoting food content.

points and enhancing memory recall (Harper, 2002). The choice of photos was guided by the presence of elements from the SCT and EVT frameworks, providing contextual depth to complement the findings of the content analysis.

3.2.2. Thematic analysis

Focus group sessions were audio- and videorecorded and subsequently transcribed ad verbatim in Dutch by the first author. Using NVivo 14, a thematic analysis was performed on all interview transcripts to examine the data and extract key themes that corresponded to the determinants of the theoretical frameworks of use or the broader evaluation of nutrition posts. The analysis followed a 6-step guide (Braun & Clarke, 2006): get familiar with the data, generate initial codes, search for themes, review themes, define themes, and produce the final analysis. An overview of the coding tree is available in the Supplementary Materials.

4. Results

The results section presents findings from both the content analysis of the photo task and the focus group discussions, providing immediate context and deeper insight into the quantitative results of the content analysis.

4.1. General content characteristics

During the week-long photo task, participants submitted a total of 559 posts that fit sampling criteria. The number of posts per participant varied widely, ranging from 2 to 54 posts. The vast majority of health-promoting food content was encountered on Instagram (n = 305; 54.6%) and TikTok (n = 249; 44.5%), with Facebook (n = 4; 0.7%) and YouTube (n = 1; 0.2%) playing only a minor role.

Most of the submitted content took the form of videos (n = 402: 71.9%) or carousels (n = 116; 20.8%), whereas static images (n = 0; 3.6%) and story formats, i.e., story photos (n = 17; 3.0%) and story videos (n = 4; 0.7%), were far less common. In terms of content type, recipe or meal inspiration posts dominated the sample (n = 410; 73.3%), followed by general advice related to healthy food (n = 80; 14.3%) and "What I eat in a day" (WIEIAD) videos (n = 52; 9.3%). A small portion of the posts was categorized into "other" (n = 17; 3.0%).

4.2. Nutritional evaluation of the health-promoting food content

To answer RQ1, health-promoting food posts were evaluated for their compliance with the Flemish dietary guidelines. A small share of posts could not be assessed because the type of food was unclear or ambiguous (n=56; 10.0%). Among the evaluable posts, only 12.4% (n=65) depicted foods fully aligned with the recommendations, consisting exclusively of nutrient-dense foods from the green (recommended) zone of the Flemish food triangle (e.g., fresh fruits and vegetables, pulses). An additional 20.4% (n=105) combined items from both the green and grey (neutral) zones, containing foods that have less nutritional value than foods from the green zones, but are not necessarily classified as unhealthy (e.g., white grain products).

In contrast, 37.3% of posts (n=193) included foods from the red (discouraged) zone, but only in small portions, still within acceptable limits according to the guidelines (e.g., small amounts of energy-dense foods or ingredients, such as chocolate, red meat, processed meat). However, 29.9% of the posts (n=140) contained red-zone foods in quantities that exceeded the recommended portion sizes, thus contradicting the dietary guidelines. The most frequently depicted red-zone foods in excessive amounts were red meat (n=67; >300 g depicted) and processed meat (n=*34*; >30 g depicted), both exceeding the recommended weekly intake levels, followed by added sugars (n=34; >15% of the depicted food content). Other, less frequently reported red-zone foods included butter (n=9; >1 tablespoon per portion), high-fat or fast food items (n=8; >15% of the depicted food content), unhealthy sauces (n=1; >15% of the depicted food content), and "other" items (n=3).

4.3. Personal evaluation of the health-promoting food content

Overall, participants appreciated seeing healthy food content on social media, specifically recipe content, as it provided "*inspiration for dishes (…) It's a way to try something different from what you usually eat" (participant 2, female, 23y)*. However, they also cautioned against overexposure, noting that an excessive focus on such content could become overwhelming or even "toxic". The role of social media algorithms in this regard was highlighted: while encountering occasional healthy food posts can be enjoyable and may positively influence eating habits, being inundated with this content was seen as potentially having detrimental effects on both mental health and eating behaviour. As one participant mentioned*: "Then there's no balance anymore, it just keeps getting more and more."(participant 13, female, 24y)*. In particular, WIEIAD videos were viewed as especially problematic, perceived as unrealistic and negative, often evoking feelings of guilt or shame about one's own eating habits. Although, participants do indicate that, with age and experience, they have developed the ability to critically assess such content or distance themselves from it, something they fear younger children or adolescents are not yet capable of doing.

Participants also claimed to be aware of the large amounts of misinformation and that you should not take everything at face value. A recurring theme, mentioned in all focus groups, was the confusion caused by the overwhelming and often contradictory dietary information online. Seemingly shifting messages about carbohydrates, animal products, and fats made it difficult to discern what was genuinely healthy. As the following conversation revealed:

> *"Yeah, exactly. You're not even supposed to use olive oil anymore, it has to be coconut or avocado oil …"(participant 15, female, 24y)*

> *"Huh, I thought olive oil was really healthy? "(participant 16, female, 24y)*

> *"Yeah, it's the same with oat milk. Suddenly everyone was like "oat milk, oat milk," and then it turns out it's not that healthy after all—you'd be better off drinking regular milk." (participant 21, female, 22y)*

The complexity and ambiguity of available information sometimes led participants to disregard it altogether, relying instead on taste preferences or established routines. When deciding what online dietary information to follow within this overwhelming landscape, participants often reported tactics such as judging the credibility of the source (see 4.4.), or using the frequency with which messages appeared on social media as a heuristic of verity. The latter approach, essentially following what they saw most often, meant that trends and algorithms played an important role in shaping their choices. Commonly mentioned examples of trends included matcha, avocado, cottage cheese, steak, and eggs, which influenced them to try or even regularly consume these foods. As the following participant illustrated: "*Yes, if they say "you have to make this" a hundred times, it does make you think, "I'll give that a try" … Also, the same things keep coming up. Often it's eggs, often avocado, often steak." (participant 36, male, 23y)*

This availability heuristic may also help explain participants' perceptions around red meat. Because red meat was frequently portrayed as part of a healthy diet in the content analysis and participants acknowledged noticing such content regularly on social media, this repeated exposure likely made these representations within a health context more cognitively accessible. Consequently, despite mentioning being aware that red meat is not recommended in official dietary guidelines, several participants expressed uncertainty about its true health impact. This confusion was exampled as follows:

"Eating a piece of steak every day—some say that's really good, others say, 'eggs, red meat, that gives you colon cancer, is bad for the environment, raises your cholesterol. For some foods, it's clear that they're healthy, but for others, it's not so obvious.'" (participant 10, female, 23y)

Other participants even described red meat as inherently healthy or considered the dietary guidelines on meat outdated, reasoning that it could not be particularly harmful given how often it appeared online, as illustrated by one participant's comment: *"I think everyone knows that eggs and steak and stuff are healthy … I mean, it's not super bad for you." (participant 37, male, 20y)*.

Notably, participants' reported intention to use the posts in their own lives, as indicated when uploading the screenshots, did not differ significantly depending on how "unhealthy" the foods were. In other words, there was no difference in preference between posts that contradicted dietary guidelines (n = 56), such as large portions of red meat, and posts that were partially (n = 62) or fully (n = 56) in line with guidelines ($X^2 = 6.66$, df = 6, p = .354). This suggests that unhealthy foods were neither more nor less preferred than healthy ones, within this health-promoting food context.

4.4. Characteristics of source credibility and expectancy-value model

In the following sections, we explore how participants drew on elements from the *source credibility model* and *expectancy-value* model when evaluating online nutrition information.

4.4.1. Expertise: credentials

A relatively small proportion of the analysed posts (*n*=79; 14.1%) originated from influencers with formal credentials in nutrition or healthcare, such as registered dietitians (*n* = 13; 2.3%), certified nutritionists (*n* = 25; 4.5%), or other health professionals, including doctors and nurses (*n* = 41; 7.3%). In contrast, the majority of content came from creators without a formal nutritional background, such as food content creators (*n* = 206; 36.9%), general health or wellness influencers (*n* = 113; 20.2%), and fitness influencers (*n* = 33; 5.9%). Additional sources included content farms (*n* = 51; 9.1%) and a variety of other creators (*n* = 77; 13.8%) that did not fit into the predefined categories of food content creators, such as broader lifestyle influencers. The classification of influencer types follows the definitions provided by Zeng et al. (2025).

For participants, formal qualifications in nutrition were not generally seen as a prerequisite for sharing content about healthy eating. The perceived need for expertise largely depended on the type of content being shared. When influencers posted healthy recipe ideas, participants felt that no qualifications were necessary as this type of content was seen as non-prescriptive and entertaining. As one participant reasoned: *"I really think, "oh, that looks tasty, so we'll give it a try." And it doesn't matter to me whether it's someone studying medicine or just a regular person posting it." (participant 15, female, 24y)*

In contrast, for posts containing health-related tips or specific advice, relevant credentials were considered important. Such specific advice about food (e.g., potential benefits or harms of a particular type of food) was perceived as potentially more harmful than recipe-content. Although some participants found this type of content useful, it was generally approached more critically, with many questioning both its accuracy and the credibility of the person sharing it. Overall, for all content types, participants noted that formal qualifications did increase the perceived credibility of food-related content. As explained by the following participant:

"Sometimes they also say, before the video starts, "I study this," or "I'm doing research on this," or "I'm a dietitian," and that often makes it seem more credible. I don't know if it's really true—they can say whatever they want—but yes, it does make it more credible when they say, "I am this person, and I studied this." (participant 39, male, 20y)

At the same time, many participants appeared to conflate different types of credentials, often viewing "nutrition coaches" and "health teachers" without any formal qualifications as equally credible as registered dietitians. As demonstrated by the following participant when discussing the credibility of a non-credentialed influencer: *"("name of influencer") has also done all kinds of courses and training and stuff. And they always mention that in the content, which I think is a factor that would make me say, "I'll click follow."" (participant 13, female, 24y)*

While some of them may share valuable information, participants' reliance on such cues shows that perceived expertise can easily be mistaken for genuine, evidence-based expertise, even when the latter is lacking. Indeed, when analysing the sources of the posts that contradicted dietary guidelines (*n*=140), almost all (*n* = 127; 90.7%) came from creators without formal health credentials, primarily food content creators (*n*=49) and health or wellness influencers (*n*=32).

In addition to explicit credentials, participants mentioned relying on more implicit or derived indicators of expertise. For example, when an influencer dedicated their entire account (or a large part of it) to the topic of health, or was highly engaged with sports or nutrition in their own life, this could also serve as a heuristic for credibility. In such cases, the influencer does not claim formal expertise themselves, yet users still attribute knowledge to them based on trust in their lived experience. This was illustrated by the following participant: *"She's also training for some kind of triathlon or something. So you can tell she's serious with her nutrition, she actually has a goal." (participant 10, female, 23y)*.

4.4.2. Expertise: scientific language use

A portion of the posts (*n*=81; 14.5%) included influencers using scientific language, such as complex nutritional concepts or explanations of the health-effects of specific nutrients (e.g., benefits of antioxidants). Health and wellness influencers (*n* = 35; 43.2%) and "other" health professionals (*n*=17; 21.0%) made significantly more use of this vocabular than other creators ($\chi^2 = 95.18$, df = 7, p < .001). This kind of language gave many participants the impression that the influencer was knowledgeable, thereby increasing their trust in their advice. This impact was particularly pronounced when participants repeatedly encountered similar claims about the benefits of certain foods across multiple posts; the repetition made the messages appear more trustworthy and strengthened the perception of the influencer's expertise. An example one participants gave: "*I only start drinking coffee after 9 a.m. to keep my cortisol levels balanced. That's purely because I see it on TikTok really" (participant 4, female, 23y)*. Notably, participants often admitted they did not fully understand the scientific explanations, yet science-like language still made the messages seem credible.

This presents potential risks, as 17 of the 81 posts (21.0%) that used scientific terminology did so in posts with excessive quantities of discouraged (energy-dense) foods, contradicting nutritional guidelines. Misinformation within these 17 posts was most often related to the consumption of red meat (*n*=8), processed meat (*n* = 4), and butter (*n* = 3), followed by added sugars (*n* = 3), high-fat foods (*n* = 1), and other topics (*n* = 1).

4.4.3. Attractiveness and physical expectancies

Approximately half of the analysed food posts (*n* = 287; 51.3%) featured a visible person. Of these, 78.0% (*n* = 224) depicted a female influencer and 22.0% (*n* = 63) a male influencer. Almost all appeared to be young adults in their 20s (*n*=180; 62.7%) or 30s (*n* = 92; 32.1%). Only 15 individuals estimated to be in their 40s (5.2%), and none appeared younger than 20 or older than 40. The vast majority appeared to be White (*n* = 246; 85.7%), followed by Middle Eastern (*n* = 26; 9.1%), Asian (*n* = 9; 3.1%), and Black or African American (*n* = 6; 2.1%).

81.9% (*n* = 235) of the featured influencers fully aligned with prevailing Western beauty ideals, defined by features such as clear, blemish-free and symmetrical faces; neat, shiny hair; straight, white teeth; and toned bodies (Boepple et al., 2016). In four cases (1.4%), the

person was not clearly visible enough to assess their alignment with these beauty ideals. The focus group discussion revealed that a neat and attractive individual generally increases the appeal of the content. All participants acknowledged that having a visibly fit body contributes to the influencer's credibility when discussing healthy food. As showed by the following participant:

> *"I think people also pay a lot of attention to what the person saying it looks like. So if they look good, with a nice body and so on, then I think people are more likely to listen to what they say about healthy eating." (participant 22, female, 22y)*

Influencers often reinforced this link between healthy eating and an attractive appearance, suggesting that consuming the featured foods would directly lead to physical results. A total of 191 posts (34.2%) included at least one explicit reference to physical expectancies such as weight loss ($n = 93$), increased satiety ($n = 28$), improved gut health or digestion (n=28), keeping in shape ($n = 20$) or building muscle ($n = 20$). The prevalence of physical expectancies differed significantly across types of influencers ($\chi^2 = 122.79$, df = 7, $p < .001$), with health and wellness influencers contributing the most ($n = 73$). Additionally, while most influencers in this sample wore outfits that were not revealing ($n = 118$; 41.1%) or only slightly revealing ($n = 110$; 38.3%), those wearing moderately revealing ($n = 43$; 15.0%) or highly revealing outfits ($n = 16$; 5.6%), were more likely to mention such physical expectancies ($\chi^2 = 22.089$, df = 3, $p < .001$), effectively demonstrating what a fit body looks like and thus reinforcing the link between the featured foods and visible results.

Participants also indicated in the group discussions that such claims about physical expectancies, especially those related to appearance, were perceived as more credible when they were visibly reflected in the appearance of the influencer. The influencer's body was thus seen as a form of expertise. This direct demonstration made participants feel that the influencer possessed credible knowledge about healthy eating and lifestyle and was even considered by many participants to be a stronger source of credibility than holding a degree or formal qualification.

In contrast to the physical aspect, psychological expectancies were less frequently mentioned as an outcome of the promoted foods. Only 28 posts (4.2%) referred to advantages such as improved mood ($n = 14$), enhanced brain function ($n = 11$), or better mental health ($n = 3$). A full overview of all physical and psychological expectancies can be found in Table 2.

Table 2
Physical and psychological expectancies mentioned.

Physical expectancy types	N = 191; 32%
Weight loss	N = 93
Weight gain	N = 7
Getting/keeping in shape	N = 20
Building muscle	N = 20
Performing better at sports	N = 9
Gut health/digestion	N = 28
Increase in energy	N = 13
satiety	N = 28
Hormone health	N = 13
Improving skin	N = 18
Improving hair	N = 2
Decrease inflammation	N = 11
Improve joint health	N = 2
Improve sleep	N = 3
Immunity	N = 9
Improving cardiovascular health	N = 4
Blood sugar control	N = 5
Hydration	N = 5
Appetite regulation	N = 3
other	N = 4
Psychological expectancy types	**N = 28; 4.2%**
Improve mood	N = 14
Improve mental health	N = 3
Improve brain function	N = 11

4.4.4. Trustworthiness

Whether social media posts contain paid advertisements can play a role in the trust that people have in these posts. Most posts did not contain any reference to sponsorship, but 13.7% of the posts ($n = 82$) were sponsored by an independent brand and 17.3% of the posts ($n = 103$) were self-sponsored (i.e., promoting the influencer's own health products or coaching programmes). Sponsored content was generally viewed critically and with suspicion. One participant stated that *"I also feel that when a brand is* sponsoring *those videos, I attach much less importance to them than when it's genuine." (participant 6, male, 23y)*.

The number of followers among the sampled influencers ranged widely, from nano-to mega-influencers (Sobuzzy, n.d.). Nano-influencers (500+ followers) accounted for 10.4% of the sample ($n = 62$), while micro-influencers (5000+ followers) made up 27.1% ($n = 162$). Macro-influencers (50,000+ followers) represented 14.4% of the sample ($n = 86$), and nearly half of all analysed accounts (48.1%, $n = 287$) were categorized as mega-influencers, each with over 100,000 followers. The number of followers also plays a role in assessing an influencer's sincerity, although in a less explicit way. Most participants do not consciously check follower counts, instead basing their judgement primarily on the quality of the post itself. However, knowing that someone has a large following can act as a form of *social proof*, serving as an implicit confirmation of their credibility. As one of the participants stated: *"I also think it depends on your followers and so on. If people see that someone has a big platform, they're more likely to think, 'Oh, that must be right then'" (participant 20, female, 23y)*.

5. Discussion

Using the photo-voice approach, this study collected and analysed a snapshot of the "healthy" food content that emerging adults (18-24y) are exposed to on their social media feeds. For this study, Belgian participants shared screenshots of SMI content they believed was intended to promote healthy eating. We assessed the alignment of these promoted foods with dietary guidelines (RQ1) and applied the SCT (RQ2) and EVT (RQ3) to examine how influencers position themselves as credible actors in the field. This analysis was further enriched by focus group discussions that allowed us to incorporate emerging adults' own evaluations and reflections on the content they encountered (RQ4).

A content analysis of the social media posts shared by emerging adults revealed that 67.2% featured foods with poor nutritional quality (e.g., chocolate, red and processed meats), with 29.9% depicting these foods in amounts exceeding national dietary guidelines (*Gezond Eten? Dat Doe Je met de Voedingsdriehoek!*, z.d.). Most of the content involved SMIs sharing recipes or meal inspiration (73.3%), while a smaller portion shared specific advice on healthy food (14.3%). The majority of these posts (85.9%) originated from SMIs without a formal nutritional background, such as food content creators or health and wellness influencers. Our analysis further indicated that most of the posts contradicting dietary guidelines originated from SMIs lacking formal nutritional expertise. These findings align with previous research showing that influencers without professional qualifications are more likely to share nutritional information (Pfender et al., 2024), and that misinformation on this topic is more prevalent among such unqualified sources (Zeng et al., 2025).

Despite the overall positive evaluation of this content and recognition of its many benefits (e.g., healthy inspiration, motivation, practical tips), emerging adults were also aware of the potential risks associated with this content (e.g., misinformation, unrealistic body ideals). This reflects the "double-edged sword" nature of social media health content, as recognised in previous research (Powell & Pring, 2024; Pfender & Bleakley, 2023). Consequently, participants mentioned trying to mitigate these risks and relied on message- and influencer characteristics to assess credibility, reflecting core mechanisms described in SCT and EVT,

whereby source evaluations and outcome expectations shape how health information is interpreted and acted upon. Despite these efforts, the findings reveal four potential challenges that emerging adults must navigate to avoid misinterpreting or overestimating the reliability of the information.

A first potential challenge relates to the type of content and the extent of critical evaluation it receives. In this study, participants most frequently encountered posts from influencers sharing recipe and meal inspiration (73.3%). Emerging adults described this type of content as entertaining, harmless and indicated that formal nutritional qualifications are less relevant for sharing such posts. As a consequence, they tended to engage with these posts less critically, paying little attention to the accuracy of the information presented. This creates a potential vulnerability where subtle inaccuracies, such as overly large portion sizes of unhealthy ingredients, may be internalized without scrutiny, leading to distorted views of what constitutes healthy eating. This type of 'entertaining' content is less likely to trigger emerging adults' persuasion knowledge (Friestad & Wright, 1994), compared to more overt forms of persuasive messaging (Boerman, Willemsen & Van Der Aa, 2017). The failure to activate these cognitive defense mechanisms means that persuasive elements may bypass critical thinking. Therefore, participants risk overlooking inaccuracies or implicit messages about what constitutes a "healthy" diet that are embedded within recipe content.

A second challenge relates to the amount and diversity of information emerging adults encounter on social media. Consistent with previous research (Hassoun et al., 2025; Nagler, 2014), this study found that participants were exposed to an overload of (often conflicting) nutritional messages, which creates confusion about what is genuinely healthy. In the present study, this appeared especially pronounced for red meat, and (to a lesser extent) butter and cooking oils, which participants perceived with mixed views regarding their healthfulness. Interestingly, the content analysis revealed that red meat was also the most frequently misrepresented food item, often framed with scientific-sounding language and thus incorrectly presented as part of a healthy diet. This confusion on the healthfulness of certain foods can be partly explained by participants' own reports that information encountered repeatedly on social media in a healthy context tends to be perceived as more credible, as repeated exposure across multiple sources reinforces its validity in their eyes. Although such reliance on perceived consensus, known as the illusory truth effect (Hasher et al., 1977), may appear rational, it poses significant risks in algorithmically curated social media environments, that can unintentionally amplify misinformation (Tommasel & Menczer, 2022).

A third challenge concerns emerging adults' perception of expertise. Participants reported that formal credentials in nutrition (e.g., dietitians) were not always necessary to be considered an expert. Similar to Lissens et al. (2025), this study found that it is often an SMI's *perceived* expertise, rather than actual expertise (i.e., formal qualifications), that drives credibility. While the mentioning of formal credentials did enhance perceived expertise and message credibility, participants often placed health coaches, personal trainers, or SMIs who were deeply engaged with the topic on the same level of trust, even if they lacked official nutritional certification. These findings align with Wellman (2023), who argues that SMIs often gain credibility by presenting themselves as experts of their own lives, using lived experience and personal relatability as key trust heuristics. From the perspective of the Misinformation Recognition and Response Model (MRRM; Amazeen, 2024), this reliance on perceived expertise represents a critical vulnerability in the recognition of nutritionally inaccurate information. Consistent with previous research (Chan et al., 2020; Zeng et al., 2025), health and wellness influencers in this study were more likely to disseminate inaccurate information than credentialed health professionals. When such influencers are mistakenly perceived as credible, subtle forms of misinformation may evade scrutiny and become internalized, thereby increasing the risk of distorted perceptions of healthy eating (Amazeen, 2024) and potentially leading to increased consumption of misrepresented foods (Provencher & Jacob, 2016), which could in turn negatively affect dietary behaviours and health outcomes.

Fourth, as shown in previous analyses of health influencers (Rogers et al., 2022), this study found that many posts emphasised beauty and achieving a slim, toned body, either implicitly by presenting themselves in line with societal beauty standards or explicitly by linking foods to appearance-related physical outcomes. Consistent with earlier research (Wellman, 2024), a fit and healthy appearance often increased the perceived credibility of the SMI's advice, reflecting a form of "visual expertise." However, this focus on appearance carries potential risks. Dieting primarily for weight control or aesthetic reasons, an outcome frequently emphasised in the analysed posts, has been associated in prior research with psychological distress and behaviours such as binge eating, purging, and other eating disorders (Habib et al., 2023), which have risen substantially over the past decade (HealthyBelgium, 2024). While our data do not allow causal conclusions of exposure to appearance-focused content, these findings underscore the potential value of promoting the broader benefits of healthy eating, such as improved mood, energy, and immunity, rather than focusing narrowly on appearance.

5.1. Implications

Overall, these findings indicate that, in order to provide correct nutrition information, public health communication strategies may need to account for the persuasive power of various non-traditional "experts". To avoid overloading emerging adults with even more health communication than they already encounter, we need to rethink our strategies and harness the existing powers of influence online, namely, influencers with established niche audiences (Lutkenhaus et al., 2019). Influencers who are perceived by their audiences as credible, relatable, and widely followed are uniquely positioned to communicate accurate health information in ways that resonate and motivate behavioural uptake (Gupta et al., 2021). In contrast, certified health professionals tend to have a more limited presence on social media, which reduces users' exposure to their content (Qutteina et al., 2019) and consequently diminishes the reach and impact of their messages. By partnering with influencers whose audiences match target populations, public health initiatives can disseminate guideline-consistent messages within trusted online spaces, thereby enhancing both reach and the likelihood of adoption. By partnering with influencers whose audiences match target populations, public health initiatives can disseminate guideline-consistent messages within trusted online spaces, thereby enhancing both reach and the likelihood of adoption.

5.2. Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study is not without limitations. A first limitation of this study concerns the composition of the sample. Participants were predominantly higher-educated and largely recruited via snowball sampling, meaning that a portion of them belonged to overlapping social networks of friends. This may have introduced a degree of homogeneity, as friends often share similar eating habits and food-related behaviours due to social modelling and norm-setting (Higgs & Thomas, 2016). Lower-educated groups, who may be more vulnerable to nutrition misinformation (Vidgen et al., 2021), are underrepresented and are likely exposed to different content and interpret messages differently. Consequently, the findings may not generalise across educational backgrounds or social networks. Future research should aim to recruit more diverse and independent samples to capture these variations and provide a broader, more representative overview of the online food information landscape. Second, the gathered data is potentially subject to a selective reporting bias. Although participants were instructed to share all images from influencers they believed promoted healthy eating, they may not have shared every piece of relevant content they encountered.

While the study attempted to mitigate this risk by issuing a daily reminder to take and share screenshots, it remains possible that participants inadvertently omitted posts they did not consciously register as being "health-focused". While this diary study still offers valuable and rare insight into emerging adults' actual social media exposure, future research could employ data-donation approaches to obtain a more comprehensive and objective record of exposure. Moreover, longitudinal designs would allow for the examination of changes in exposure over time and their potential effects on perceptions and behaviours. Third, coding for alignment with the Belgian dietary guidelines considered only the foods explicitly shown in each post, which may over- or underestimate actual consumption. However, this approach was chosen because social media users can only respond to what is visible, making the coding reflective of the content's perceived influence on dietary perceptions.

6. Conclusion

Health-promoting food posts are widely present on emerging adults' social media feeds and are shared by a variety of sources. By examining these actual feeds and exploring how emerging adults interpret and evaluate such content, we can identify the factors that shape their decisions to follow, or disregard, specific dietary advice. Although participants perceive themselves as critical evaluators, they rely on certain heuristics that may expose them to potential misinformation. These insights can help inform more effective, evidence-based health communication and support strategies to enhance digital literacy.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Louise Glenisson: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Lotte Hallez:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Tim Smits:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization.

Ethical statement

- the work described has not been published previously except in the form of a preprint, an abstract, a published lecture, academic thesis or registered report.
- the article is not under consideration for publication elsewhere.
- the article's publication is approved by all authors and tacitly or explicitly by the responsible authorities where the work was carried out.
- if accepted, the article will not be published elsewhere in the same form, in English or in any other language, including electronically, without the written consent of the copyright-holder.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the manuscript preparation process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used Chat GPT in order to assist in improving the clarity and style of academic writing. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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Declaration of competing interest

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2026.108551.

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