Meat the carnivore influencers: A content analysis of how animal-based diets are promoted on social media

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The carnivore diet has emerged as a prominent and controversial dietary trend on social media, where influencers play a key role in shaping public understandings of healthy nutrition. Despite growing concern about its public health and environmental implications, research on how influencers promote this diet online remains limited. This study addresses this gap by conducting a mixed-method content analysis of 220 Instagram posts produced by 11 highly visible carnivore influencers. Findings reveal five overarching themes. Meat was (1) framed as medicinal and necessary for health and appearance; (2) portrayed as suppressed by industry-funded research and elite institutions; and (3) presented as an ancient, “natural” human food. Although less prominent, we also observed subtle references to (4) manosphere ideology and (5) broader alt-right discourses. As these narratives have a strong potential to steer people towards increased meat consumption, they carry important implications for public health communication.

Keywords: social media, misinformation, health communication, influencers

Introduction

Although there is a general consensus that diet plays a central role in health and wellbeing, the question of what exactly constitutes a "healthy diet" remains a point of debate, particularly online, where a wide range of conflicting opinions and perspectives circulate (Denniss et al., 2023). In contrast to mainstream scientific guidelines, which increasingly advocate plant-forward diets for both human and planetary health (Willett et al., 2019), certain voices continuously challenge these recommendations, contributing to the spread of dietary misinformation.

One particular counter-voice is found within the carnivore diet community, a growing online movement that promotes a dietary regimen centred on animal-based foods (e.g., meat, organs, dairy, eggs), while keeping consumption of other food groups (e.g., fruit, vegetables, grains) to a minimum or non-existent (Lennerz et al., 2021). Scrolling through social media platforms such as Instagram, users may encounter influencers promoting these unconventional eating behaviours as pathways to true health, from consuming butter by the lump and having tomahawk steaks for breakfast to feeding infants puréed liver (Migom, 2025). Characterised by the predominant consumption of (red) meat and other animal products high in saturated fats, the carnivore diet raises significant concerns from both a public health and environmental standpoint.

Given the growing online popularity of the carnivore movement (Gibbs & Piatkowski, 2023; Muller et al., 2024) and the concurrent public health and sustainability calls to reduce meat consumption (Willett et al., 2019), it becomes increasingly important to know how this diet manifests itself online. Despite this, research on the role of social media influencers in disseminating and legitimising carnivore diet narratives remains limited. The present study seeks to fill this gap by combining quantitative content analysis with qualitative thematic analysis to examine how popular carnivore influencers promote their dietary lifestyle through an analysis of their Instagram posts.

Methods

To examine how meat consumption is framed to promote the carnivore diet, we used purposive sampling to identify highly visible carnivore influencers on Instagram. In May 2025, the search term “top carnivore Instagram accounts” was entered into Google, Bing, and Yahoo! via a private browser. Links from the first results page were screened, yielding 75 unique accounts. Accounts were included if they met five criteria: (1) ≥50,000 followers, (2)

active and recent posting,(3) clear carnivore-related content, (4) non-branded personal account, and (5) English-language posts. Eleven influencers met all criteria. For each, the 20 most recent food-related posts were selected, resulting in a final sample of 220 posts**.**

Each post served as the unit of analysis, with both visual and textual elements examined. Still images, image carousels, and videos were coded consistently at the post level, following established content analysis procedures (Cohen et al., 2019). A codebook was developed using a combination of inductive and deductive approaches. Inductive coding involved identifying patterns emerging directly from the data, such as the overall theme of the post, or the use of scientific language. Deductive elements contained characteristics mentioned in previous studies on carnivore (Muller et al., 2024) or anti-vegan content (Gregson, 2022), such as references to nature, masculinity or conspiracy appeals. Full codebook details are available in the full manuscript.

After coding, these data were analysed using both qualitative thematic analysis and quantitative content analysis. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative method that enables researchers to explore rich, nuanced insights within complex data. It involves systematically identifying, analysing, and interpreting key “themes” that emerge across the dataset and examining how these themes relate to one another (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These qualitative patterns identified in Instagram posts were complemented with quantitative analyses to strengthen the overall legitimacy of the observed. Intercoder reliability was established and indicated substantial agreement between the two coding authors (Cohen’s Kappa > 0.6)

Findings and discussion

Theme 1: Meat as medicine

The first theme identified was that of "meat as medicine". Within this discourse, meat and other animal-based foods were described or shown by carnivore influencers as "necessary" and highly nutritious, even capable of preventing or curing various diseases. In half of the analysed posts (*n*=110; 50.0%), carnivore influencers explicitly attributed specific health benefits to the diet through verbal statements in videos or written captions, often accompanied by visual cues such as displays of a toned physique.

The most frequently mentioned outcome was that animal-based foods enhance physical appearance (*n*=39; 17.7%). Male influencers emphasised muscularity, leanness, and strength, often showcasing their own bodies, thereby reinforcing traditional ideals of masculinity (van der Horst et al., 2023). However, in contrast to earlier studies that primarily associated meat consumption with masculinity (Vrijsen et al., 2025), women were also actively engaged with this discourse. Here, meat consumption was linked to attaining a slim and toned physique, often framed in terms of "losing weight" or achieving "a flat stomach", both by female influencers presenting their own bodies and by male influencers promoting ideals for female bodies. This emphasis on physical outcomes situates the carnivore diet within the broader health and fitness landscape on social media, where physical appearance represents a central theme and a key marker of personal achievement and lifestyle optimisation (Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019).

The second most mentioned health outcome within these posts was the reversal or prevention of diseases (*n*=23; 10.5%), with the carnivore diet presented as a remedy for conditions often considered incurable, including autoimmune diseases, diabetes and, in some cases, even cancer. Within this framing, where conventional medicine allegedly fell short, the carnivore diet was positioned as a universal solution to heal and restore the body. Several statements illustrate this, such as "*healed depression through real food* (I2_M)" or "helping people heal from Hashimoto's with a carnivore diet (I8_F)". While there is some evidence that restrictive

dietary approaches, such as ketogenic diets, may offer benefits for certain inflammatory conditions (Dowis & Banga,2021; Wlodarczyk et al., 2021), there is currently no scientific evidence supporting the effectiveness of the carnivore diet for these or other diseases (Goedeke et al., 2025). Moreover, even if a diet proves beneficial for certain medical conditions, this does not mean it is suitable for the general population to experiment with this without expert supervision. For a comprehensive overview of the health outcomes highlighted in this sample, see Table 1. **[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]**

Theme 2: Paradoxical relation with science

A third recurrent theme is the frequent reference to science and medical institutions, both to criticise them and to selectively invoke them in order to legitimise their own claims.

Mistrust of science

In this sample, carnivore influencers often express their mistrust by either explicitly mentioning their scepticism (*n*=29; 13.2%) toward health authorities, nutritional science, or mainstream dietary guidelines or by attributing societal or health problems to specific groups or institutions (i.e., scapegoating), including Big Pharma (*n*=4; 1.8%), doctors (*n*=7; 3.2%), and scientists (*n*=6; 2.7%). In this sense, influencers often claim that doctors and pharmaceutical companies deliberately maintain poor public health to maximise their own profits, portraying medicine as "*a money-making business rather than a healing profession*" (I4_M).

Non-medical institutions, particularly the current food industry (*n*=14; 6.4%) and to a smaller extent (social) media (*n*=4; 1.8%), were also recurrent targets of scepticism, reflecting a broader, generalised distrust of modern institutions, a pattern characteristic of conspiracy-oriented discourses (Aupers, 2012) and misinformation discourses (Peng et al., 2023). Notably, one post explicitly mentioned this stance, saying that "*If you are not a conspiracy*

theorist today, you haven't opened your eyes (I7_M)". In this regard, official dietary guidelines are portrayed as unreliable due to presumed financial ties to the food industry, which, according to these influencers, allow commercially driven interests to shape recommendations and promote foods they consider unhealthy.

Although such anti-institutional views are frequently dismissed as irrational or paranoid, their critiques that "*literature is mudded by industry funded-research* (I10_M)" are not entirely without foundation. Recent evidence, which was cited in some of the posts, shows that almost all members of (the previous version of) the U.S. Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC) had undisclosed ties to the food and pharmaceutical industries (Mialon et al., 2022). While there is no indication that these relationships have directly shaped the US dietary guidelines, the findings do highlight a clear need for greater transparency in these processes1

1 More recently, in January 2026, the U.S. Dietary Guidelines were revised to emphasise "real foods", including red meat ; however, similar concerns remain, as limited transparency has been provided regarding the role and composition of the DGAC in this revision process. . This suggests, as also observed in the online anti-vegan community (Gregson, 2022), that these carnivore influencers are not merely uninformed sceptics; rather, they engage with legitimate concerns regarding the structural entanglements between science, policy, and industry (Harambam & Aupers, 2014).

Strategic use of science

While these influencers undermine mainstream science, they simultaneously rely on, and even perform, the authority and aesthetics of scientific expertise. For example, four of the twelve (33.33%) influencers in this sample are medical professionals themselves (e.g., Doctor of Medicine (MD)).Their prominent presentation of credentials may enhance their perceived

expertise (Thon & Jucks, 2016), making followers more likely to attribute credibility to the influencer and accept their claims (Lissens et al., 2025). From a health communication point of view, this practice becomes particularly problematic: if even licensed medical professionals disseminate scientifically unsupported or unsafe advice, it becomes increasingly difficult for the public to distinguish credible medical guidance from persuasive but unfounded advice.

Closely linked to this is the strategic use of scientific language (*n*=88; 40.0%), which appeared frequently in the posts as a means of legitimising the superiority of the carnivore diet while discrediting alternative dietary approaches. Similar to the display of formal qualifications, the use of such communication styles can cue perceptions of expertise, leading audiences to ascribe greater credibility to the influencer (Alsaad & Alharshani, 2026).

Furthermore, mentioning of and references to scientific studies are also common. In 35 posts (15.9%), influencers explicitly claim that their assertions are grounded in scientific evidence, often using statements such as "*studies show that meat is essential for living a healthy lifestyle* (I7_M)". In doing so, they present themselves as uncovering research supposedly untainted by pharmaceutical or food industry interests and revealing hidden "truths" suppressed by mainstream institutions. Closer examination, however, shows that only 19 of these 35 posts (54.3%) actually provide specific citations rather than vague references, encompassing a total of 43 distinct studies. Most cited studies do not address meat consumption but focus on issues such as PFAS, microplastics, or seed oils. When red meat is discussed, influencers tend to selectively highlight supportive findings while ignoring contradictory evidence (i.e., cherry-picking). Although these studies do not substantiate the health benefits of the carnivore diet, merely referencing scientific research can enhance perceived expertise (Wellman, 2024), making followers more likely to accept unsupported claims (Lissens et al., 2025).

Theme 3: Return to Natural and Ancestral Roots

The fourth dominant narrative is the romanticised "return to natural and ancestral roots" (*n*=37; 16.9%), in which modern food systems, industrial processing, and contemporary dietary guidelines are portrayed as harmful, artificial, and fundamentally disconnected from human biology. Within this reasoning, meat is elevated as a symbol of what is considered "authentic" and "species-appropriate". Influencers in the sample often invoke evolutionary arguments, drawing on comparisons with predatory animals, hunter-gatherer societies, Inuit communities, or even grandparents from the 20th century, to suggest that humans are "*biologically designed to consume animal products* (I6_M)".

Beyond promoting meat, influencers portray diets lacking "natural" or "ancestral" legitimacy as unhealthy and harmful (*n*=77; 35%), contrasting "healing" animal products with "harmful" non-meat options. Plant-based diets are the most frequently criticised (*n*=28; 12.7%), followed by processed foods (*n*=20; 9.1%), seed oils (*n*=19; 8.6%), and carbohydrates (*n*=14; 6.4%). Interestingly, although influencers criticise processed foods, they often feature processed meats such as bacon or sausages, revealing a tension between their recommendations and practices.

Despite their often outspoken and polarizing opinions, their critiques occasionally touch on valid observations. In particular, their references to the negative health impacts of ultra-processed foods and the environmental consequences of industrial agriculture resonate with concerns increasingly acknowledged within mainstream science. However, their dietary prescriptions are rather extreme and evidence is frequently taken out of context. For instance, echoing patterns identified in anti-vegan discourse (Polyportis et al., 2025), their claims that meat consumption is environmentally sustainable, or even "*more vegan* (I6_M)" than plant-based diets, rely on highly selective interpretations of evidence. In these narratives,

influencers emphasise the unintended deaths of insects and small animals associated with monocrop agriculture to suggest that ethically sourced meat causes less overall harm. While this argument contains elements of truth, it becomes misleading when detached from the broader context: since most crops are used to feed livestock, animal agriculture accounts for around 80% of agricultural land use and remains a major driver of deforestation, greenhouse gas emissions, water overuse, and habitat destruction globally (Kraham, 2017; Ritchie & Roser, 2019).

Theme 4: Meat in the context of the manosphere

Within the sample, only a small subset of posts (*n*=7; 3.2%) explicitly connected meat consumption to manosphere characteristics, by, for example, highlighting the role of men as protectors and providers as dependent on animal-based diets. Statements such as "A strong society requires strong, healthy men (I7_M)" or "*There is a major crisis in masculinity now, and only animal-based diets can restore men's testosterone levels* (I7_M)" exemplify this framing. Women, in turn, were depicted in this small sample of posts according to traditional gender norms, as "*sacred bearers of life* (I7_M)" and caretakers of the home. The modern woman, expected to balance full-time work with domestic responsibilities, was criticised as a symptom of societal decay.

In contrast to previous research on meat discourses and carnivore influencers more specifically, where this extreme masculine messaging was widespread (Muller et al., 2024; Rogers, 2009; Rooney, 2025), this rhetoric appeared in this sample almost exclusively in the discourse of a single male influencer. Moreover, the presence of four highly popular female influencers promoting the carnivore diet further complicates the notion that meat consumption is inherently tied to masculine gender norms (Vrijsen et al., 2025).

Theme 5: Meat as a politicized food

Whereas previous research has documented the politicization of online meat-related discourse (Muller et al., 2024), a pattern that is characteristic of health-related misinformation dynamics (Peng et al., 2023), the present study finds only limited evidence for such connections. Only five posts (2.3%) contained references to political stances or figures, either verbal or visual. These references were generally subtle and indirect, signaling ideological alignment or affinity with particular political actors or movements rather than expressing explicit political opinions or policy positions. For example, two posts referenced the "MAHA" (Make America Healthy Again) political campaign, reflecting elements of the more conservative right-wing political sphere in the United States and their broader anti-establishment rhetoric. Additional examples of political references include the display of American flag apparel, the mocking of Democratic political figures in the U.S., or the hosting of openly conservative speakers on influencer profiles, all of which signal alignment with more right-leaning political stances. As individuals with right-wing political orientations often display greater distrust toward medical and scientific authorities (Pickering et al., 2025), this can be linked to the broader scepticism observed within the carnivore community toward established health institutions.

Conclusion and Implications

Our findings show that current dietary guidelines aimed at reducing (red) meat consumption face online backlash from influencers with large followings. Their content mobilises narratives that may encourage higher meat consumption and foster mistrust in key societal institutions. Public health communication should therefore carefully frame messages about red meat, balancing evidence-based recommendations with culturally sensitive approaches that acknowledge the social and identity-related meanings attached to meat. Strengthening public trust in science and institutions may further reduce defensive responses and enhance openness to healthier and more sustainable dietary guidance, for instance through more transparent and participatory science communication (Goldenberg, 2023).

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