What are Influencers Feed-ing us? A Photo-voice Approach on Emerging Adults' Social Media Food Environment

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Emerging adults increasingly rely on social media for nutrition information, where influencers play a key role in shaping perceptions of healthy eating. However, little is known about the specific food content they encounter in their own social media feeds and how this shapes their understanding of healthy eating. To address this, we conducted content analyses and focus group discussions, enabling 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 excessive 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 misinformation due to shortcomings in credibility evaluation, highlighting the importance of improving digital literacy to help emerging adults critically assess misleading nutritional information.

Keywords: Social media, nutritional information, health, influencers, credibility

Introduction

Social media have greatly expanded access to nutritional content. They enable 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).

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 (Zeng et al., 2025). Content analyses of the health and nutrition discourse on various social media platforms have consistently shown a

high prevalence of inaccurate and poor-quality information (Segado Fernández et al., 2025), often tied to commercial interests (Denniss et al., 2023). This could potentially lead followers to adopt unhealthy eating behaviours. Yet, not much is known about the specific health and nutrition content that users encounter in their own personalised feeds, nor how they engage with it.

To address these gaps, this study uses a photo-voice method, in which emerging adults capture and discuss health-promoting content encountered in their everyday social media feeds to gain deeper insight into their perceptions. We first explore whether the nutritional content shared by SMIs aligns with established national dietary guidelines (RQ1). Furthermore, guided by the Source Credibility Theory (SCT) and Expectancy Value Theory (EVT), we explore how elements of these frameworks (i.e., expertise, attractiveness, trustworthiness, expectancies) are embedded in SMIs messages (RQ2), and how emerging adults evaluate the credibility of these elements (RQ3).

Method

This photo-voice study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, participants completed a photo task to collect SMIs health-promoting food content that emerging adults 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. A total of 40 participants (29 females, 11 males), aged between 20 and 24 years (M=22.7; SD=1.32), were contacted through a combination of convenience and snowball sampling across Flanders, Belgium. All participants completed the one-week photo task, and 36 subsequently took part in a follow-up focus group discussion.

Results and discussion

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. 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%) or *What I Eat In A Day* content (WIEIAD) (9.3%). 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 (Karathra, 2020), 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). Consequently, participants mentioned trying to mitigate these risks by relying on message- and influencer characteristics (e.g., perceived expertise, message and source attractiveness) to assess credibility, reflecting core mechanisms described in SCT and EVT. Despite these efforts, the findings highlight several shortcomings in these evaluative strategies, highlighting the need for emerging adults to exercise caution when navigating the social media health environment.

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Through Seniors Consumers' Eyes: Capturing Sustainable Food Cues in Physical Environments

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Through Seniors Consumers' Eyes: Capturing Sustainable Food Cues in Physical Environments

This paper focuses on the identification of the key sustainable food cues to which consumers are exposed in the physical environment. To reach it, the photovoice methodology was applied with the help of 9 Spanish senior participants (older than 65 years old) who consented to participate in the study. Their task was to take pictures of sustainable food messages and products found in their daily life in physical food environments and to respond to a brief questionnaire for each picture. A total of 54 food pictures were taken and analysed Results show (1) a high sustainable food perception exists in Spain, (2) sustainable information is frequently found in products' packaging or products, (3) prominence of the health impact, and (4) the photos presented mainly a positive frame.

Keywords: photo-voice, physical food environment, sustainability, Spain, senior target

Introduction

It is widely recognized that our food system strongly impacts sustainability's environmental, social and economic dimensions. The food industry is one of the main contributors to global greenhouse gas emissions each year, highlighting the important role that dietary choices play in ensuring the sustainability of the food system (Zidan et al., 2025). In this sense, how we consume food is becoming a key factor in mitigating environmental degradation and promoting social and economic well-being (Nichifor et al., 2025). Thus, ensuring the sustainability of food production has become one of the main political challenges, requiring urgent action in the face of shared threats to planetary health.

This paper tries to apply the photovoice technique for the purpose of approaching the reality of purchasing and consuming sustainable food in physical environments. Previous recent studies have employed this technique in generic food research, but this study focuses specifically on sustainable food research. Furthermore, the technique is applied in physical

shopping environments for sustainable food consumption among people over 65 years of age. More specifically, this paper proposes the following research question:

RQ: How is sustainable information displayed in physical food environments, and how do senior shoppers visually engage with it?

Methodology

This study advocates for using the photovoice method, as a participatory action research methodology, to capture participants' experiences, values, feelings, opinions and perceptions through photography and narrative. We ask consumers to take pictures (using their mobile phone) of the sustainability information they encounter in their immediate physical environment for a specific duration. They share these images with us through an online application where they answer additional questions about these images. The implementation of this method involved several stages (Figure 1).

[Figure 1 near here]

The target analysed was formed by Spanish people +65 years old. 55.6% of participants were women, with an average age of 72.4 years, 44.44% had a bachelor's degree or equivalent, 66.67% were retired, and 33.33% had an income between €40,001 and €50,000. The average household size was 1.79 individuals. This target took 54 pictures in the physical environment.

To answer the research question, diverse concepts were analysed. The **sustainable food perceptions/attitudes** were measured through a 5-point Likert scale based on Singh and Verma (2017). The **sustainable food consumption** was measured following the proposal of Magnusson et al. (2001) through 1 item from never to always. Other variables considered were the **media and place** where the sustainable food message was found, **the dimensions of sustainability** identified in the message captured (environmental, social, economic, and/or

health), with the option to select more than one option and how the **photo/message was framed** (positive, negative or neutral framing).

Preliminary Findings

A preliminary study of the results indicates that, regarding perceptions, senior participants have a high sustainable food observation with scores above 3.5 in all three items with an average score of 4.35 (over 5) across the three items. Regarding consumption, 60% of the participants stated that they often consume sustainable food, and 40% just sometimes. Related to the media, messages are mostly found in products' packaging or products (44.44%), followed by POS displays (37%). In terms of location, 41% of the sustainable food messages were documented in supermarkets, followed by local shops (17%), restaurants (13%) and organic shops (11,1%). In terms of sustainability dimensions, health impact was the most frequently cited (66.7%), followed by environmental (50%), social (38.9%), and economic impacts (25.9%).

Finally, participants perceived that in 68% of the cases, the photos utilized a positive frame, followed by 30% that were considered neutral, and a marginal 2% that featured a negative frame. This distribution suggests a strong preference for gain-framed messaging in sustainable food marketing. A positive frame focuses on the benefits, rewards, or "gains" associated with a choice (e.g., 'Buying this supports local farmers' or 'Better for your health'). Conversely, a negative frame relies on loss aversion, highlighting the risks or "losses" of not acting (e.g., 'Don't let pesticides harm your planet' or 'Avoid toxic chemicals'). Finally, a neutral frame typically presents purely factual or descriptive information without an explicit emotional or persuasive slant.

Initial Conclusions and Recommendations

Considering that this is a work-in-progress and that we are still working with the results, we could anticipate some main conclusions and recommendations.

The senior participants have shown a high sustainable food perception: an average score of 4.35 (over 5). The senior segment is a promising target for sustainable food in Spain. Most of these participants (60%) often consume sustainable food, and 40% just sometimes. Sustainable information is frequently found in products' packaging or products (44.44%), mainly obtained from supermarkets (41%) and local shops (17%). Senior participants have remarked that the photos were considered sustainable due to their health impact (66.67%), followed by environmental impact (50%). They perceived that in 68% of the cases, the photo presented a positive frame (consumer obtaining a gain or avoiding a loss).

Regarding the possible **recommendations**, the preliminary results led us to recommend working intensively in product packaging, because sustainable information is frequently found in products' packaging or products (44.44%), mainly obtained from supermarkets (41%) and local shops (17%). Claims referred to health should be used. As senior participants have remarked that the photos were considered sustainable due to their health impact (66.67%), followed by environmental impact (50%). The tone should be positive. The participants appreciated the positivity of most of the messages: they perceived that in 68% of the cases, the photo presented a positive frame (consumer obtaining a gain or avoiding a loss). They do not want to see the negative effects of not being sustainable; they prefer to see the positive effects of being so.

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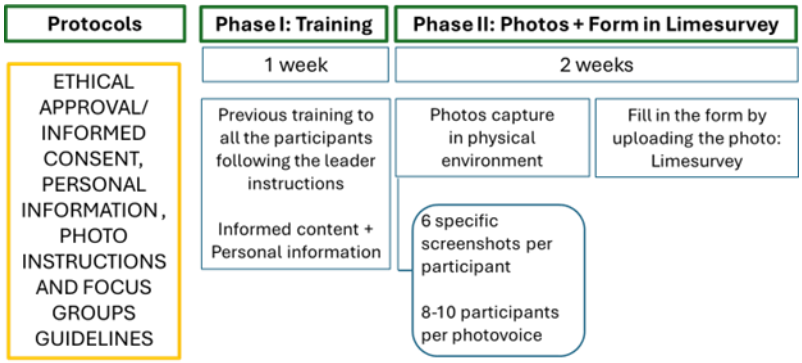
Figures and tables

Figure 1. Procedure followed (recruitment and picture capture)



Source: Own elaboration

Reducing food waste: Price discounts and messages on product packaging that promote suboptimal dairy products

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Reducing food waste: Price discounts and messages on product packaging that promote suboptimal dairy products

Promoting suboptimal food products is a promising strategy to reduce food waste in supermarkets. This study examines the effects of two common promotional strategies (i.e., price reductions and food waste messages) on consumers' purchase intentions for a suboptimal yogurt product. In a 2 × 2 between-subjects experiment, 353 adult consumers were randomly assigned to evaluate a yogurt nearing its best-before date, with or without a 50% discount and/or a food waste message. Results indicate that both the price reduction and the message produced small but significant increases in purchase intention. No interaction effect was found, suggesting that the strategies did not reinforce or suppress one another. The findings suggest that these strategies can encourage more sustainable purchase decisions, offering practical implications for retailers, producers, and policymakers.

Keywords: Sustainable consumption, Retail promotions, Food waste

Introduction

Food waste represents a major sustainability challenge. Globally, approximately 40% of all food is lost or wasted along the food supply chain (Lipinski, 2024). One potential strategy to reduce waste at the retail level is to encourage the purchase of suboptimal food products, such as items approaching their best-before date. Although such products may experience minor declines in quality, they generally remain safe for consumption. Despite this, consumers often hold negative attitudes toward products close to their best-before date, particularly dairy products, due to concerns about safety and quality (Melgaard et al., 2024).

Retailers increasingly rely on promotional strategies such as price discounts and messaging to stimulate sales of these products. Research shows that a price reduction increases consumers' interest in food products nearing their best-before date (Hartmann et al., 2021). However, discounts may not always be sufficient, especially for product categories such as dairy, where consumers are more sensitive to freshness and health risks (Parker et al.,

2014). In such cases, a message that reassures consumers about product safety and highlights the importance of preventing food waste may enhance purchase intentions. Prior research has highlighted the effectiveness of such messages (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2019), but has primarily focused on categories such as bread, fruits, and vegetables, largely overlooking dairy products. Moreover, empirical research simultaneously examining the effects of price reductions and food waste messages for suboptimal dairy products remains limited.

To address these gaps, the present study uses an experiment to investigate the (combined) effect of a 50% price reduction and a food waste message on consumers' purchase intentions for a suboptimal dairy product. Moreover, it examines whether these effects operate through changes in safety and quality perceptions. By identifying the psychological mechanisms underlying consumer responses to promotional strategies, this study contributes to the literature on sustainable consumption and offers practical insights to reduce food waste.

Methods

We carried out an online experiment with a 2 (price reduction: present vs. absent) × 2 (message: present vs. absent) between-subjects design. The sample consisted of 353 adult consumers living in Belgium, with ages ranging from 18 to 81 (M = 32.3, SD = 10.8, 74.5% female). Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions, each featuring a modified image of the same yogurt product (see Figure 1). They read a brief scenario in which they imagined encountering this yogurt on a supermarket shelf one day prior to its best-before date. We used an existing brand of yoghurt not sold in Belgium where data collection took place. This ensured realism of the stimuli, while avoiding existing brand associations. In the price reduction conditions, a 50% discount sticker was displayed on the front of the packaging. In the food waste message conditions, a sticker read: "Still good! Prevent waste." In the combined condition, both the discount and message appeared on a

single sticker.

[Figure 1 near here]

We used validated scales from prior research to assess consumer outcomes (full references are omitted here for brevity). Participants' *purchase intention* was measured with three items (e.g., 'I am considering buying this product'), their *product safety perceptions* with two items (e.g., 'It would be safe to consume the yogurt') and their *product quality perception* with three items (e.g., 'The yogurt would taste fresh') on a 5-Point Likert scale. Participants' *environmental concern* was measured with six items, their *health risk concern* with three items and *their food waste concern* with six items on a seven-point Likert scale.

Data were analyzed using R. The primary analyses involved a two-way ANOVA to examine the main and interaction effects of price reduction and food waste message on participants' purchase intention. Then, we explored whether the effect of the food waste message was mediated by perceived product safety and quality using a causal mediation analysis with 5,000 bootstrap simulations. Finally, moderation analyses explored whether the effects on purchase intention were moderated by participants' environmental concern, health safety concern, and food waste concern.

Results

In general, participants' intention to purchase the yoghurt was rather low (M =1.89 /5, SD =1.13). The ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of price reduction on purchase intention ($F(1, 348)$ =3.96, p <.05, η^2 =.01), such that purchase intention was higher with (M =2.02, SD =1.21) than without the price reduction (M =1.76, SD =0.99). There was also a significant main effect of the food waste message on purchase intention ($F(1, 348)$ =6.14, p <.05, η^2 =.02), such that it was higher with (M =2.06, SD =1.23) than without the message (M =1.76, SD =1.03). This effect was not mediated by participants' safety or quality perception. There was also no significant interaction between the price reduction and the food waste

message ($F(1, 348) = 0.10$, $p = .75$, $\eta^2 = .00$). Finally, the influence of these factors was not moderated by participants' environmental-, health risk- or food waste concern (p's >.05).

Discussion

This study contributes to the sustainable consumption literature by showing that both price reductions and food waste messages increase purchase intentions for suboptimal dairy products. In line with prior research (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2019; Hartmann et al., 2021), price reductions and messages help lower barriers to purchasing products nearing their best-before date. However, overall purchase intentions remained low, consistent with earlier findings that consumers are generally reluctant to buy dairy products close to their best-before date (Melgaard et al., 2024). The absence of interaction effects suggests that price and message cues operate as distinct persuasive mechanisms rather than reinforcing each other. Overall, these findings indicate that simple in-store interventions can make a modest yet meaningful contribution to reducing food waste in supermarkets.

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Figures and Tables



Figure 1. Stimuli used in the experimen

Definitional Archetypes of Sustainable Food Consumption as Communication Frames

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Definitional Archetypes of Sustainable Food Consumption as Communication Frames

"Sustainable food consumption" is widely used in marketing, advertising, retail interventions, and public campaigns, yet definitional ambiguity makes it difficult to design persuasive messages that are credible and evaluable. We analyze 84 published definitions of SFC (2006-2025) from academic and grey literature using a 25-dimension coding framework and derive five recurring definitional archetypes. Findings show that the definitional field is strongly value-led on environment and health, yet comparatively weak on systemic framing and governance, whereas behavioral pathways are unevenly specified. These asymmetries matter for communication, advertising and marketing through shaping which sustainability claims feel "in-scope", where responsibility is implicitly assigned, and how easily campaigns can be evaluated. We argue that definitional archetypes can function as communication frames to design messages that match an intervention's theory of change, and to code and compare sustainability messaging across advertising, packaging, and influencer content.

Keywords: sustainable food consumption; definitions; framing; typology; archetypes; advertising

Introduction

Sustainable food consumption (SFC) has become a prominent term across advertising and sustainability communication, appearing in brand purpose narratives, influencer food discourse, retail promotions, and government messaging. Yet the term SFC remains conceptually unstable across sectors, a problem that complicates advertising, communication, monitoring and implementation (Mensah, Wieck, and Rudloff 2024). Influential science-based agendas add further normative direction without necessarily settling multi-actor boundaries (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2010; Willett et al. 2019). Such definitional pluralism is not merely semantic; definitions operate upstream of message strategy by delimiting what can credibly be claimed, what behaviors are

foregrounded as “sustainability”, which actors are implicitly responsible, and which outcomes appear legitimate.

We reframe SFC definitions as actionable “communication frames” and synthesize five definitional archetypes (i.e. recurring narrative structures that assemble goals, actors, and pathways into distinct logics; Oberlack et al. 2019) that can guide campaign design and improve cross-study comparability. The objectives of the paper are twofold. First (RQ1) we identify which definitional emphases dominate SFC and which remain under-articulated in ways that matter for persuasive messaging. Second (RQ2), we present five definitional archetypes and explain how these archetypes can be used strategically in advertising and social marketing research.

Methods

We compiled 84 definitions of SFC, published between 2006 and April 2025 from peer-reviewed literature and grey sources (including international organizations such as Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations). We coded each definition using a structured 25-dimension framework grouped into six clusters: Substantive Focus, Levels of Application, Systemic Framing, Actors Involved, Behavioral Mechanisms, and Meta-Labeling. Our coding strategy follows established approaches that treat definitional corpora as analyzable objects and extract recurring emphases and boundaries (Kirchherr, Reike, and Hekkert 2017). To derive archetypes, we conducted a higher-order interpretive synthesis, namely an abductive, iterative clustering of recurring configurations of coded dimensions into recognizable “narrative logics”; this approach is consistent with archetype analysis in sustainability research, which aims to identify recurring patterns that structure complex domains (Oberlack et al. 2019). An intercoder audit of 25% of the sample yielded high agreement ($\kappa = 0.90$).

Findings

Across the dataset, SFC definitions are normatively saturated yet procedurally thin in ways that matter for advertising, communication and marketing. Related to RQ1, substantive content is nearly universal (98.8%), with environmental elements most common (92.9%) and health/nutrition also highly prevalent (72.6%). By contrast, systemic framing appears in only half of definitions (50.0%) and explicit intergenerational orientation in 35.7%. Definitions also frequently omit *agency* as only 54.8% specify any actors (consumers 44.0%; producers/retailers 23.8%; governments 17.9%; multi-stakeholder collaboration 8.3%). Finally, although behavioral mechanisms appear in most definitions (86.9%), they are *unevenly* distributed, with sourcing/production dominant (69.0%) compared to dietary shifts (19.0%) and food-waste reduction (17.9%), while grey literature emphasizes health/nutrition more than academic sources (88.2% vs. 68.7%).

Pertaining to RQ2, the synthesis produced five archetypes that can be used as distinct framing options in advertising and marketing research. *Eco-Nutritional Core archetype* frames SFC as the intersection of environmental protection and healthy nutrition. It fits co-benefits messaging ("good for you and the planet") and align with sustainable and healthy diet discourse (Willett et al. 2019), but often leave actors, systemic framing, and behavioral pathways implicit. *Holistic SDG-Aligned archetype* integrates ecological, economic, social, health, equity/justice, food security, and future generations, supporting integrated storytelling and broad legitimacy. *Policy/Institutional Framing archetype* emphasizes governance and macro-level system design, often within food security and institutional discourse (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2010), suiting governmental roadmaps and strategies, and underplaying micro-level change and consumer behaviors. *Behavioral Minimalism archetype* treats SFC as discrete micro-level actions (e.g., choosing sustainable products, reducing waste, shifting diets) that are accessible and testable but risks

measurement capture by downplaying systemic and equity considerations. Finally, *Normative/Aspirationa*l archetype emphasizes broad ideals (e.g., justice) without specifying mechanisms or actors, potentially suitable for brand purpose but may invite skepticism when operational detail is absent.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings show that SFC is a **family of frames** that differ in (a) what outcomes are foregrounded, (b) which actors are held responsible, and (c) which behaviors are treated as legitimate pathways. For ICORIA research and advertising practitioners, this means that the same label can cue different message interpretations and different evaluation standards.

The archetype lens offers three strategic payoffs. First, it supports sharper stimulus design. Researchers can explicitly choose an SFC archetype and ensure that message cues (claims, visuals, responsibility signals) align with that logic, reducing construct drift across studies. Second, it improves message–metric alignment within sustainability message design (Rathee and Milfeld 2023): the archetype selected should determine which outcomes are primary (e.g., shared responsibility and policy support for Policy/Institutional frames; perceived actionability and efficacy for Behavioral Minimalism), thereby lowering the risk that studies evaluate endpoints that are misaligned with what the message actually foregrounds (Mensah, Wieck, and Rudloff 2024). Third, it enables stronger cross-paper synthesis as studies on influencer nutrition content, packaging interventions, and retail promotions can be compared meaningfully when their underlying definitional frame is explicitly stated rather than assumed.

Overall, definitional archetypes provide a compact, communication-relevant toolkit for designing, interpreting, and evaluating SFC messages in a trust-sensitive sustainability communication environment.

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