

**Realizing the interest shift into a high protein diet: A qualitative approach**

Danielle Henderson

Austin Peay State University

April 30, 2026

### **Abstract**

High-protein food products and diet are heavily promoted through social media channels as a quick way to lose weight and maintain a healthy lifestyle. However, scholarly research indicates that a high-protein diet may not be safe or healthy for everyone. Consuming high-protein foods, which are mainly animal products, deprives individuals of vital nutrients the body needs for healthy living while consuming unhealthy amounts of fat, cholesterol, and calories. The theoretical framework used to understand the phenomena associated with the high-protein diet trend is the Agenda-Setting Theory, a popular framework used on social media channels to influence others. This study will investigate the frequency of interest and engagement with high-protein content using a qualitative content analysis approach. Instagram is the chosen social media platform used for this study, with two highly established social media influencers serving as the selected subjects, who will be referred to as 'Subject A' and 'Subject B.' Fifty posts published in the last three months were pulled from each subject's Instagram channels and analyzed to determine whether specific keywords appeared with high frequency. The purpose of this study is to provide a basic understanding of how social media agenda-setting influences daily health decisions through content frequency.

*Keywords:* high-protein, low-carbohydrate, body-weight management, social media influencers, agenda-setting

### **Realizing the interest shift into a high protein diet: A qualitative approach**

A high-protein diet eliminates certain foods essential to good health, potentially depriving the body of essential nutrients. In a high-protein diet, carbohydrate-rich foods are typically reduced or omitted altogether. However, the body needs complex carbohydrates, as these provide a good source of energy, fiber, and other nutrients. Some foods restricted to a high-protein diet include many fruits and some vegetables, both of which are significant sources of vitamins and minerals, such as vitamins B and C, and Zinc, which promote brain health. At the same time, a high-protein diet, when not appropriately managed under a medical professional's guidance, can lead to overconsumption of fatty animal products such as red meat and dairy. Often, trend (fad) diets are promoted as quick fixes for weight loss and are shared on social media platforms (Lee & Worthy, 2021). Lee and Worthy (2021) state that "22 million Americans go on a fad diet every year," with the diet and weight-loss industry comprising a "\$71 billion industry" (p. 136). High-protein, low-carbohydrate diets have garnered social media attention, prompting a newfound interest in researching eating habits. In contrast, social media influencers are capitalizing on the shift in what people eat.

The Agenda-Setting Theory was first introduced in 1972 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, who suggested that mass media outlets provide topics for public discussion. The more a topic is presented to a person for viewing and consideration, the more likely the individual is to keep the topic top-of-mind and consider what is being communicated (Chung et al., 2023, p. 1395). To understand the Agenda-Setting Theory framework is to understand why further research is needed, as to why content is abundant on social and mass media platforms, and why major food producers are

pivoting their marketing and advertising strategies, "if products are perceived to be healthy, purchase intentions rise" (Scheiber et al., 2023, p. 707). Scholarly research indicates that the current food environment on social media platforms is rife with misinformation that misleads users about healthy eating.

### **Literature Review**

Food blogs have emerged over the past few decades that promote recipes, meal ideas, and food brand products (Ragelienė & Gronhoj, 2021). In addition to food blogs and social media channels, the rise of social media influencers (SMI) has brought to light those who promote specific diets designed to help people lose weight quickly. Marketers and social media advertisers for major food brands have developed strategies that leverage social media channels, partner with social media influencers and celebrities, and adjust branding initiatives to position their foods as high-protein for consumers. However, not all high-protein foods and beverages, or diet trends, are healthy, which is causing misinformation about healthy eating to spread on social media, particularly about high-protein and low-carbohydrate diets.

A social media influencer is defined as "those users who have the potential to create engagement, drive conversation, and/or sell products/services with the intended target audience" (Kim & Kim, 2022, p. 223). They are everyday individuals who spend significant time online, growing their following to sometimes in the millions, and becoming famous through creative, entertaining content posted on their social media channels. Social media influencers share their "knowledge and expertise on a specific topic such as food, fashion, technology, travel, education, reviews, music, movies,

sports, etc.” (Saima & Khan, 2021, p. 504). They dedicate their time to building trustworthy relationships with their followers.

### **High Protein Diets:**

Studies have shown that a high-protein diet combined with regular exercise can support a healthy lifestyle in adults (Chien et al., 2024). According to Leitão et al. (2024), components of a healthy lifestyle include "healthy eating, physical activity/exercise and if necessary, behavioral therapy and or medical intervention" (p. 3). Chien et al. (2024) state that "adequate protein intake can prevent or reduce muscle loss," which is important for one's health, as muscle loss begins in middle age, making weight loss more challenging for overweight individuals (p. 1). High-protein foods typically include animal products such as meat and dairy (Chen, 2022).

Despite the healthy nutrients such as protein, iron, and vitamin D found in animal products, there is significant research suggesting that consuming a high amount of animal products, especially red meat, can cause a high health risk, which can lead to cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, certain forms of cancer, and diabetes. According to Rosenkranz et al. (2025), "Americans consume approximately 226.2 pounds of meat per year" and "646 pounds per person per year" of dairy products, specifically milk and cheese (p. 1). Rosenkranz et al. (2025) further state that the American diet consists of "large portions of calorically dense and nutrient-poor foods, such as processed meats, refined grains, and convenience foods high in added sugar and fats" (p. 1). Scheiber et al. (2023) suggest that "the use of meat imagery in fast food advertising strongly enhances meat consumption" (p. 707), while Jensen et al. (2023) state that "[f]ood and beverage marketing increases" an individual's "preferences and

consumption of unhealthy versus healthy products, with negative long-term impact on dietary quality and diet-related diseases" (p. 1).

### **Healthy Body-Weight Management:**

A study conducted by Lee and Worthy (2021) reported that "42.4% of American adults were obese in 2018" (p. 135). They continue their argument by stating that many health conditions, including some cancers, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and high blood pressure, can be the result of a poor diet and obesity (p. 135). The Center of Disease Control and Prevention (2024) recommends that "[t]aking off as little as 5% to 10%" of an individual's Body Mass Index (BMI) can significantly improve one's health and make "blood sugar levels easier to manage" (para. 8; para. 9). Body Mass Index (BMI) is a measuring tool that compares weight with height for determining a healthy weight of an individual (Center of Disease Control and Prevention, 2024, para. 3). Onyegbule et al. (2020) argues "[o]besity remains a top public health concern for all Americans," and that more information is needed on how to control and prevent obesity (p. 351). The understanding "requires reduction in risk factors, weight management, and empowerment programs tailored to improve self-efficacy and sustainable behavior change" (Onyegbule, 2020, p. 352).

Lee and Worthy (2021) note that "fad diets" or, for this study, high-protein trend diets do not provide lasting weight-loss results and are not sustainable for a healthy lifestyle (p. 136). In addition, there is an overload of misinformation on websites and social media platforms, with Lee and Worthy (2021) stating that social media and its influencers have substantially contributed to the spread of misinformation about healthy lifestyle diets (p. 137). More education is needed, specifically on proper diet and

exercise for maintaining a healthy body weight (Lobelo et al., 2020). An understanding of factors that contribute to weight gain beyond food intake, such as "aging, hormonal change, genetics, medical conditions, environmental and socio-economic factors," also needs to be addressed (Leitão, 2025, p. 2).

In a study conducted by Westerterp-Plantenga (2020), it is stated that "[t]reatment of overweight and obesity may be possible using a medium-high protein" diet (p. 1). The study argues that through proper body-weight management, a medium-high protein daily intake that balances plant and animal protein, plus regular exercise, body weight can be reduced, as this type of diet helps restore healthy energy levels. Studies also show that including more nutrient-rich foods such as fruits, vegetables, low-fat foods, and whole grains can significantly reduce the risk of obesity followed by non-communicable diseases (Ragelienė & Gronhoj, 2021).

### **Social Media Influences and Food Advertising:**

Social media has become a significant tool for marketing and advertising food products as the frequency of "food or drink products seen on social media platforms, including posts, photos, and ads" is significantly related to the "willingness to consume the products seen in the ads" (Ragelienė & Gronhoj, 2021, p. 4). As a result, many social media influencers claiming to specialize in health services and food products have emerged as relevant endorsers of specific trend diets and products as "[s]ocial media... provides a new method of communicating norms about eating: our online social networks suggest what others eat through pictures, as well as what others enjoy eating via likes on social media posts" (Dalla-Pria & Rodríguez-de-Dios, 2022, p. 1).

According to Wang et al. (2023), "[s]ocial media platforms have become an important medium for people to search, share, and discuss information" with "[p]ersuasive information" being used "as a way to motivate individual's health behaviors" (p. 2). In addition, "many food posts also include social contexts, such as eating with friends or in restaurants and so posts may communicate norms around foods relating to context" (Hawkins et al., 2021, p. 6). Dalla-Pria & Rodríguez-de-Dios (2022) state that the "effectiveness of a message relies on the perception of expertise and trustworthiness of the endorser... trustworthiness causes changes in opinion" (p. 6).

In a study conducted by Scheiber et al. (2023), it is argued that "[r]esearch increasingly emphasizes social media's role in the spread of misinformation in various health areas" including nutrition (p. 707). The study by Scheiber et al. (2023) also states that "[p]eople can influence other people's attitudes and behavioral intentions" because "[h]uman learning is influenced, either consciously or unconsciously, by observing the behavior of other people" (p. 709). Knowing this, food and beverage producers increase their social media marketing initiatives. In contrast, an individual's "preferences and consumption of unhealthy versus healthy products, with negative long-term impact on dietary quality and diet-related diseases" also increases (Jensen et al., 2023, p. 1). The increase occurs because "advertisements... use persuasive processes that are often very effective" (Courbet et al., 2024, p. 2).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Due to the conceptual design of social media platforms for providing niche content, many use these platforms to discover new information, particularly on dietary and nutritional needs such as high-protein, low-carbohydrate diets. Instagram, one of

the world's most widely used social media platforms, offers a substantial amount of content on these two keyword variables, with the #highprotein tag generating 3.2 million posts and #lowcarb generating 29.3 million posts since their inception as of March 10, 2026.

According to Chung et al. (2023), Agenda-Setting Theory "is one of the most popular theories in the field of communication" (p. 1395). The Agenda-Setting Theory framework is widely used on social media platforms to shape public opinion and attitudes towards specific topics. Young & Atkin (2023) describe agenda-setting as a "concept of frames" (p. 116). These frames "are seen as concepts that media are using to organize and convey information" through the use of algorithms derived from keyword searches (Young & Atkin, 2023, p. 117). One of the main topics on social media is diet, especially high-protein and low-carbohydrate diets.

### **Gap in Research**

Recent studies have examined the effects a diet rich in high protein has on weight loss and weight loss management, specifically with those who have underlying health conditions such as Type 2 Diabetes. According to the American Diabetes Association (2026), over 155 million Americans are living with diabetes or prediabetes, with 400,000 dying every year as a result of this epidemic. According to Rallis (2019), "[a] growing body of evidence suggests that a low-carbohydrate, high-fat ketogenic diet may be a more effective nutritional strategy for improving glycemic control" (p. 299). However, there is a gap in research in the lack of evidence on the influence of social media for a high protein diet, if those promoting a high protein diet are credible, and if there is adequate educational material provided for understanding any risk that may be

associated with what could be an important dietary transition. This oversight is significant, as those with underlying health conditions may be placing themselves in further harm if they do not clearly understand the risk they are taking.

### **Rationale**

According to Onyegbule et al. (2021), there are over 650 million obese individuals worldwide (p. 350). In the United States alone, there are over 39% of adults and 17% of children who are considered obese (Onyegbule et al., 2021). Many factors contribute to why obesity is slowly becoming a pandemic in the United States. Processed and fast-food retailers offer the convenience of ready-made food, making it easier to put dinner on the table after a long day. In every city or town across the region, an abundance of restaurants catering to a diversity of tastes can be found, many of which offer unhealthy selections, and the list goes on. In the article “Number of fast-food restaurants in America: Key statistics, growth trends, and marketing insights,” by Ridvika Arora (2026), there are an estimated 210,000+ fast food restaurant locations nationwide. The fast-food industry was “valued at over \$189 billion in 2024” in the United States and is predicted to reach “\$261.9 billion by 2033” (Arora, 2026, para. 7; para. 8). Still, for this research, a study focusing on social media influence is being conducted.

Healthy lifestyle influencers on social media platforms and marketing and advertising strategies by major food brands are misleading the American public into believing that a high-protein diet is a healthy option for losing and maintaining a healthy body weight. The information they are not providing is that this type of diet is not only unhealthy but also deprives the body of valuable vitamins and nutrients found in other

foods. Other information missing is that this type of diet is not ideal for individuals with underlying health conditions such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and Type 2 diabetes. Packaged processed food products labeled as high protein are not always a healthy choice, as they may also be high in sodium, sugar, and calories, which, when reviewed against the nutritional guidelines, only further mislead consumers.

Misleading information combined with a lack of education on healthy eating may be one of the most significant contributors to the rise of obesity in the United States. More research is needed to understand how and why social media platforms are significantly influencing consumers' attitudes and beliefs about their eating choices. Presently, there is insufficient empirical research to understand the dangers of allowing social media influencers specializing in diet lifestyles to guide healthy eating habits. Often, many social media influencers are not educated or trained in the nutritional and medical industries, which usually go hand in hand. This study aims to demonstrate that, using social media platforms as a tool for reaching social media users, social media influencers may be spreading misinformation about healthy food consumption. The intention of the study is to raise awareness that more study is needed to educate individuals about proper eating habits for a healthy lifestyle.

### **Methodology**

Instagram is one of the most widely used social media platforms worldwide “with 3 billion monthly users and over 500 million daily active users,” (Kumar, 2026, para. 1). Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that many Instagram users are researching specific trend diets and adjusting their attitudes and beliefs about the food they consume based on the content published by niche healthy lifestyle social media influencers. In the last

couple of decades, high-protein, low-carbohydrate diet trends have become extremely popular. The high-protein diet also gives the impression that this type of eating is sustainable for healthy body-weight management. Social media influencers will create content and post images and videos specific to high-protein recipes. They also post videos or images to promote their products further and sponsored brands. High-protein diets have gained popularity in recent years, as evidenced by open conversations on social media and by interpretations of the influence of social media and big food brand marketing on food choices. What may be promoted as healthy may not be healthy for everyone as those with underlying health conditions may need to practice a balanced diet lifestyle. To gain an understanding of how individuals may or may not be influenced through niche healthy lifestyle social media influencers and major food producers, a qualitative research model was selected for conducting a content analysis of material that two highly established healthy lifestyle social media influencers are posting on their Instagram channels.

**Justification:**

Specific content on social media helps gain an understanding of the interest in high-protein diets. With so many looking for an easy and quick way to lose weight and be healthy, healthy lifestyle social media influencers have homed in on this desire by publishing what people want to see. High-protein trend diets that mainly consist of meat with some vegetables give the illusion that this eating lifestyle will not only help you lose weight quickly but is also incredibly easy to follow, with limited prep and cooking time. The high-protein diet also gives the impression that this type of eating is sustainable for healthy body-weight management. Healthy lifestyle social media influencers will post

pictures of their recently prepared meals and videos of them cooking and enjoying their recent high-protein recipe. They also post videos or images of their workouts to promote their products further and sponsored brands. Weekly meal-prepping ideas for the high-protein diet have gained popularity in recent years.

With the inception of social media platforms and the rise of the influencer industry, a significant shift has occurred in how consumers think about food. High-protein/low-carbohydrate diets have hit media platforms, with millions adjusting their eating habits to follow these high-protein trends. Agenda-Setting Theory suggests that social media influences the public through a variety of factors that include an influencer's reputation, credibility, and trustworthiness (Perloff, 2015). The research outlined in this study seeks to gain a better understanding of how media is being used to persuade decisions about the food choices individuals make through engagement on social media channels.

### **Method**

When studying social media and its dynamics, there are various ways to develop a research strategy tailored to the research topic. For this study, a qualitative research approach was chosen that focuses on a content analysis model that examines how often selected keywords are used in social media posts. Through this analysis, a keyword frequency will be established that determines if the Agenda-Setting Theory is being practiced. An additional objective to this study is an analysis of the frequency in which terms 'high protein' and 'low carb' are searched on Google. The combination of the two will help arrive at a sound conclusion about social media's influence on individuals' food perspectives.

**Research questions:**

According to Busetto (2020), the chosen research method "has to be based on the research question that needs to be answered" (p. 3). The question this research aims to answer is how widespread interest in high-protein diets—an approximate \$20 billion industry—is across society, and whether it is driven by social media influence.

**RQ<sub>1</sub>:** How are healthy lifestyle social media influencers using their digital platforms to promote a high-protein diet agenda?

**RQ<sub>2</sub>:** Why are healthy lifestyle social media influencers partnering with major food brands of high-protein products to further promote the high-protein diet?

**RQ<sub>3</sub>:** What are the search trends for keywords 'high protein' and 'low carb' on Google search engine?

**Qualitative Data Collection:**

Data collection methods for this qualitative study include gathering information posted on Instagram channels owned by two highly established social media influencers. Data collection began with entering the two prompts into Google's search engine bar, one after the other: 'social media influencers who focus on healthy eating' and 'social media influencers who focus on a high-protein diet.' Each prompt yielded several results for further research. However, *influencer-hero.com* and *feedspot.com* were selected for use as both platforms are designed to serve influencers looking to boost their brand and platform through marketing and communication initiatives. Each platform provided articles listing influencers for both healthy eating and high-protein, totaling 200 social media influencers across three articles.

Beginning with a sample of 200 social media influencers, specific criteria were established and used to narrow the sample to a more select population. The criteria include that each follower must have an Instagram channel with a minimum of 100,000 followers, and the bio must include one of the named keywords: high-protein, low-carb, healthy diet, healthy lifestyle, holistic eating, and/or balanced diet. Based on the aforementioned criteria, the sample was narrowed to 13 Instagram influencers.

A second round for narrowing the sample size even further was conducted, following a stricter set of criteria that included the Instagram channels needing to have a similar platform size based on the influencer's following: each influencer must have an active website, and each influencer must have authored and published a cookbook featuring recipes in their specific style of eating. The second round of selection yielded two social media influencers as the final subjects for the study. A series of 50 Instagram posts, published between November 2025 and February 2026, was pulled from each subject's channel and used for conducting a content analysis.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis:**

Content analysis was selected as the preferred research method for conducting the data analysis for this study. The framework of content analysis is designed to "[i]dentify the intentions, focus or communication trends of an individual, group or institution" by analyzing the frequency of keywords in a content source (Busch et al., 2005). The content analysis framework also focuses on "the presence, meanings, and relationships of such certain words, themes, or concepts," providing a more in-depth look at the impact words may have on meaning (Columbia, 2025). For this study,

keyword concepts were pulled from post captions of two established social media influencers and used to conduct the study.

In addition, content analysis is selected because it allows the examination of keywords and their relationships with other content in a post, such as items in videos and images. The two social media influencers in this study are niche influencers who promote a healthy-living lifestyle that includes high-protein recipes. The content pulls were analyzed for keyword frequency across eight concepts, hashtags used in the captions, engagement metrics (specifically likes and comments), and product placement for partnerships. The eight keyword concepts include high-protein, clean protein, veggie protein, protein-packed, low-carb, balanced diet, healthy eating, and body-weight management.

Additional data were pulled from Google Trends to analyze the frequency with which searches for the terms 'high protein' and 'low carb' were conducted over 5 years. Regions used for the analysis included the United States and Australia, with a date range of March 2021 through February 2026.

### **Subject A:**

The first subject, referred to throughout the study as 'Subject A,' founded their food blogging business in 2008 while they were a stay-at-home parent of two, looking for a way to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Their content focuses on a high-protein diet that limits carbs and on macro-friendly, gluten-free recipes. While this social media influencer is not a nutritionist, they partner with a licensed nutritionist for guidance and support when developing recipes and answering followers' questions. This social media influencer creates Weight Watchers-friendly recipes, but there is no indication of an

official partnership. Since the inception of their business, they have built a following of 2.2 million on Instagram alone, with an average engagement rate of 0.1% according to Social Blade (2026), with estimated engagement over 30 days averaging 1,342 likes and 920 comments. Subject A is a New York Times Bestselling cookbook author who has published 8 cookbooks, selling over 1 million copies, with the latest featuring 100 recipes.

**Subject B:**

Originally from France and now residing in Sydney, Australia, the second subject, 'Subject B,' began their journey of becoming a social media influencer after losing a loved one to cancer. Previously an attorney, Subject B, transitioned into the field of nutrition after experiencing the loss and now works as an accredited nutritionist. They focus on and promote plant-based whole foods that are high in protein and fiber, as well as rich in iron and calcium. In 2022, they began posting vegetarian-friendly recipes on social media channels and now have a following of 2 million on Instagram. Subject B has a 0.27% engagement rate according to Social Blade (2026) with an estimated engagement rate over 30 days averaging 3,645 likes and 1,760 comments. To date, Subject B has published one cookbook that includes 100 high-protein vegetarian recipes.

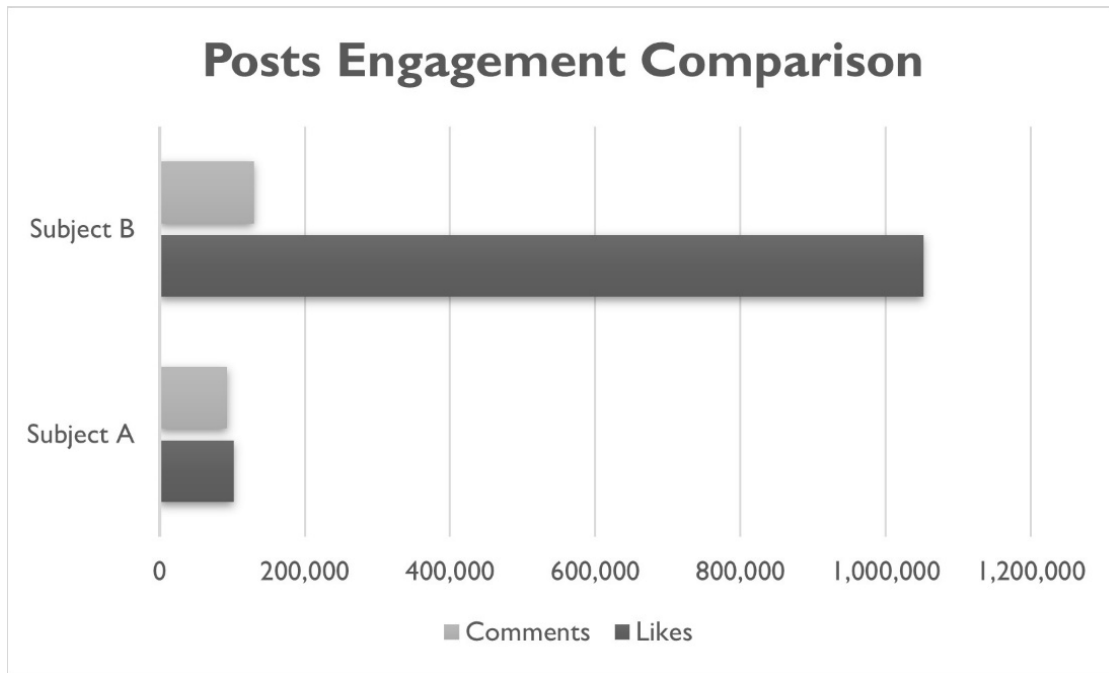
**Engagement Comparison:**

In comparison, using the 50 selected posts of each social media influencer collected for this study, Subject B demonstrates a much higher engagement rate than Subject A, with a 164.73% difference in likes and a 32.92% difference in comments. These percentage differences indicate that Subject B is drawing a larger, more engaged

following for the content they post on their Instagram social media channels than Subject A as indicated in Figure 1 – Posts Engagement Comparison.

**Figure 1**

*Posts Engagement Comparison*



**Results**

This study sought to answer three questions: How are healthy lifestyle social media influencers using their digital platforms to promote a high-protein diet agenda? Why are healthy lifestyle social media influencers partnering with major food brands of high-protein products to further promote the high-protein diet? Furthermore, what are the search trends for keywords 'high protein' and 'low carb' on the Google search engine?

The results indicate that both subjects use the selected study keywords frequently on their platforms, with Subject A averaging 2.06 keyword mentions per post

and Subject B averaging 1.2, showing that at least one keyword is used in every post caption. Food brand promotion was extremely limited, with little to no mention.

Data was also collected on two keyword concepts, 'high protein' and 'low carb'. Google Trends was used to pull the data, and the time period pulled was March 2021 to February 2026. The research conducted was to determine the frequency of searches for these named keywords. Two regions were used: the United States and Australia. Results indicated that searches for the two keywords are utilized in both countries in the thousands each year, with frequency increasing year after year.

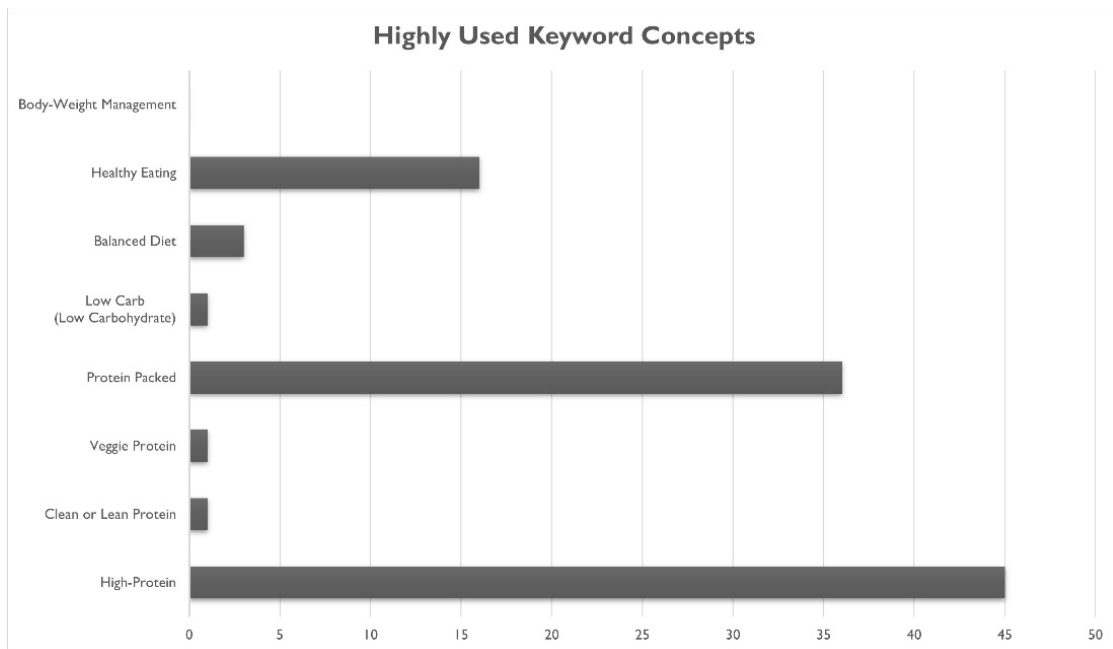
**RQ<sub>1</sub>:** How are healthy lifestyle social media influencers using their digital platforms to promote a high-protein diet agenda?

Social media influencers are creating engaging content that incorporates keyword concepts to attract a niche audience. By following the framework of Agenda-Setting Theory, the keywords high-protein and protein-packed are used in captions for each video or photo collection posted to the two studied subjects' Instagram channels. The content analysis conducted for this study found that Subject A uses the keyword 'high-protein' in almost half of the posts, with a 44% use rate across the 50 posts analyzed. Subject B uses the keyword 'protein packed' at a 50% usage rate across their 50 analyzed posts. Additional keywords are used moderately by both subjects, with healthy eating being a top contributor for Subject A, and veggie protein for Subject B. With the regular use of these keyword concepts and the high volume of almost daily content posting by both subjects, content frequency that follows the Agenda-Setting Theory model is established.

Figure 2 – Subject A: Highly Used Keyword Concepts provides a detailed view of the content analysis results for keyword concepts used in the 50 posts analyzed for Subject A, while Figure 3 – Subject B: Highly Used Keyword Concepts shows the results for Subject B. Figure 4 – Keyword Concept Comparison provides an assessment of how each subject uses the specific keyword concepts in comparison to the other. This evaluation shows a difference between the two styles of social media influencers: Subject A focuses on protein and healthy eating, while Subject B focuses on the same but through a vegetarian approach.

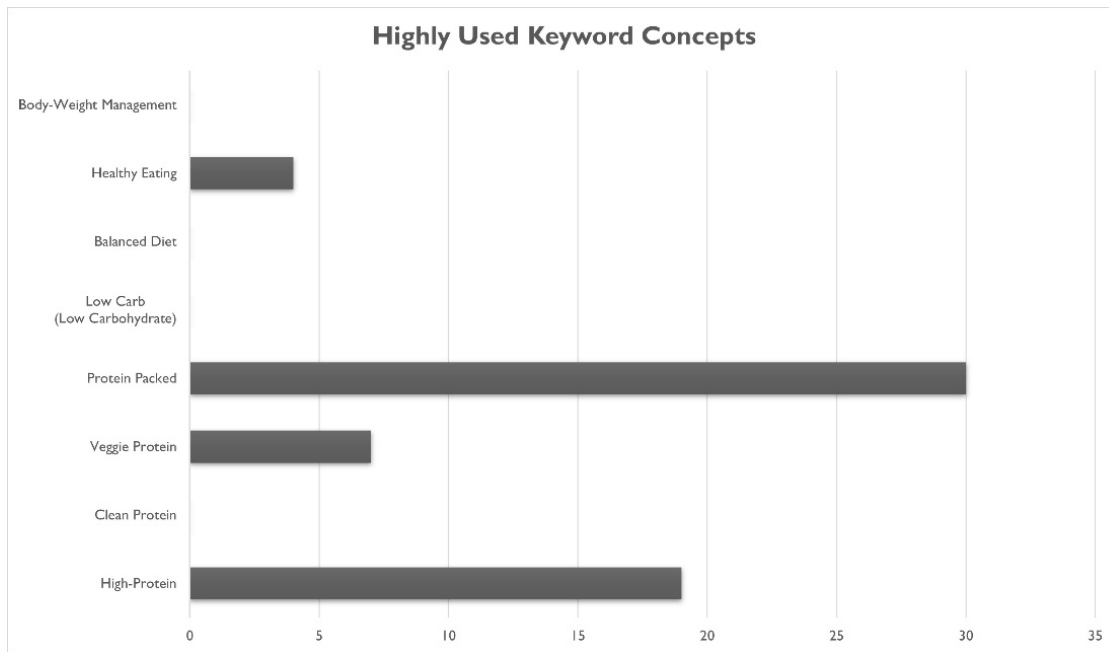
**Figure 2**

*Subject A: Highly Used Keyword Concepts*



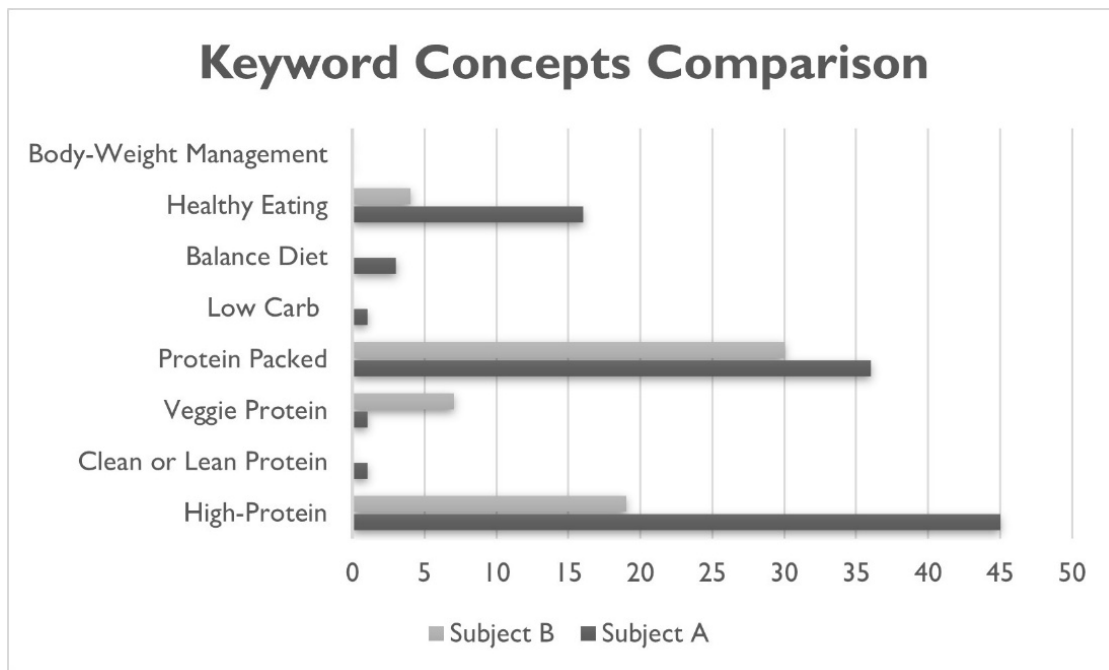
**Figure 3**

*Subject B: Highly Used Keyword Concepts*



**Figure 4**

*Keyword Concepts Comparison*



**RQ<sub>2</sub>:** Why are healthy lifestyle social media influencers partnering with major food brands of high-protein products to further promote the high-protein diet?

The results of this study indicate that there are limited partnerships with social media influencers and major food brands of high-protein products. Across the 50 posts analyzed for Subject A, the subject mentions 7 recipes as Weight Watchers-friendly, but there is no indication of an official partnership between the subject and Weight Watchers. Subject B does not mention products in their social media posts other than maple syrup and only once. Based on these results, the answer to **RQ<sub>2</sub>** is that social media influencers do not partner with major food brands, but this study is limited to the content of only two subjects. Figure 5 – Major Food Brand Partnerships shows the limited amount of food brand mentions per 50 posts of each subject.

**Figure 5**

*Major Food Brand Partnerships*

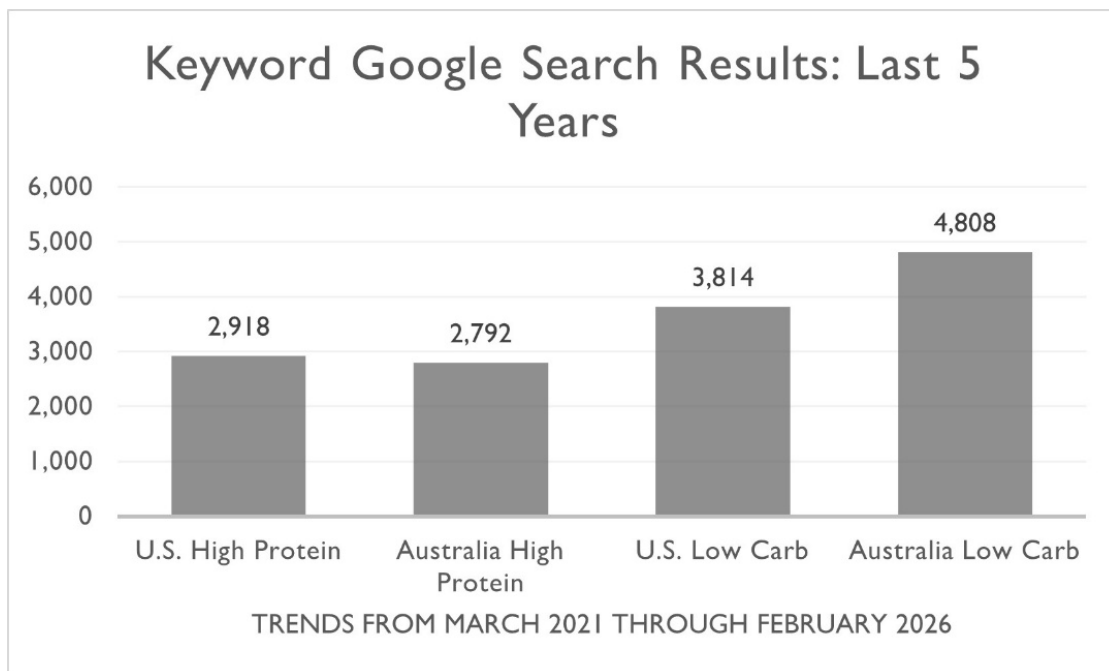


**RQ<sub>3</sub>:** What are the search trends for keywords ‘high protein’ and ‘low carb’ on the Google search engine?

With Subject A residing in the United States and Subject B living in Australia, an analysis of the keywords 'high protein' and 'low carb' was conducted using Google Trends to determine their search frequency. The data pulled for keyword search frequency covered 5 years from March 2021 through February 2026. The results show that 'low carb' searches in Australia far surpass 'low carb' searches in the United States by 20.7%. However, the opposite is true for the keyword search for 'high protein', with the United States surpassing Australia by 4.32%. Figure 6 - Keyword Google Search Results: Last Five Years provides detailed results for each region and keyword combination totals for the five years, while Figure 7 – Google Search Results: Keyword Search by Year provides a breakdown of each year.

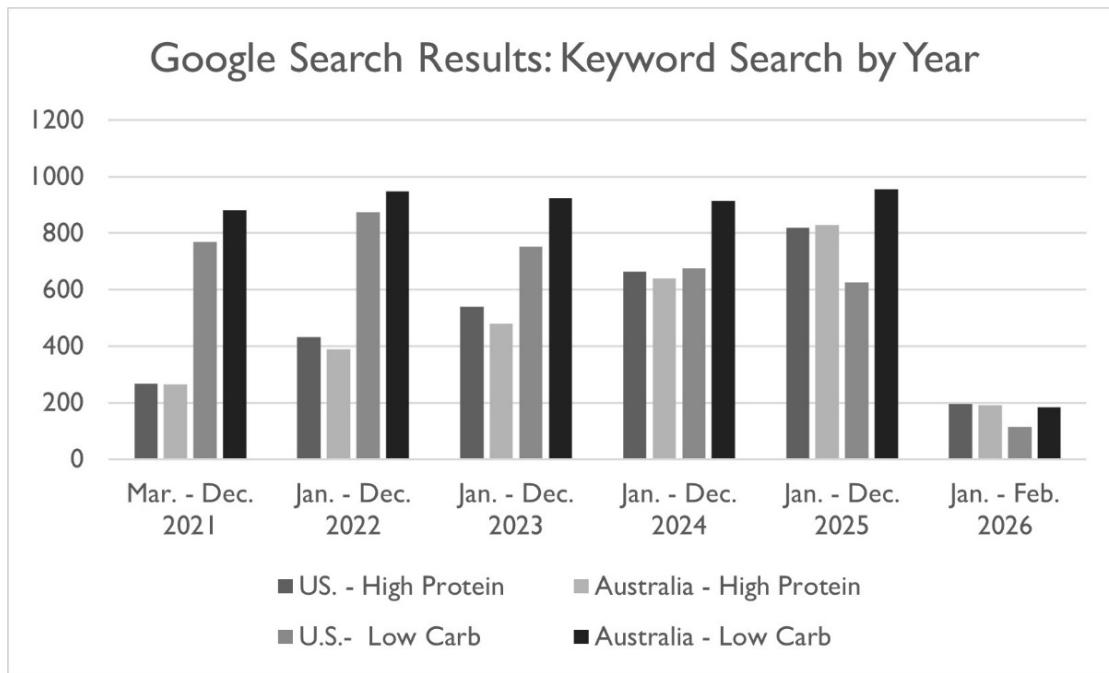
**Figure 6**

*Keyword Google Search Results: Last 5 Years*



**Figure 7**

*Google Search Results: Keyword Search by Year*



**Conclusion**

This study sought to answer questions about how social media influencers use their digital platforms to promote a high-protein diet and whether they partner with major food brands to expand their social media presence further. The study also sought to determine search trends for the specific keyword concepts 'high protein' and 'low carb' on Google.

The results of this study indicate that two well-established social media influencers who promote healthy eating, including a diet high in protein, do follow the framework by using specific keywords in the captions of their posts at least half of the time, with almost daily posting frequency; however, neither influencer partners with big brands to increase their social media platform. Further, while each influencer has a

following of 2 million, their content is highly engaging, with one influencer receiving over 1 million likes in 3 months.

Google Trends is an invaluable tool for determining keyword frequency, especially for marketing and advertising campaigns. Therefore, Google Trends was used to retrieve data on the frequency with which the two keyword concepts 'high protein' and 'low carb' were searched. The results indicate that the keyword concepts are frequently searched for, with 'low carb' as the most searched concept, with 4,808 searches in Australia over the last 5 years.

### **Recommendations**

The study is limited, as it draws on content from two social media influencers, uses 50 posts each, and spans only three months. According to Sprout Social in their Food influencers: Unique industry data to plan your next marketing campaign (n.d.) report, there are an estimated 48,147 food influencers on social media channels from around the world as of March 2026. Considering the number of social media influencers that promote food-related products and diets, further research is needed to determine how these social media influencers are drawing on the Agenda-Setting Theory framework by placing keyword concepts in front of their targeted audience frequently and, in doing so, the influence and overall impact it has on followers, where their eating habits are concerned. It is recommended that future studies be mixed methods, employing both quantitative and qualitative approaches and using larger sample sizes for both models. While content analysis remains highly recommended as a qualitative method, using more subjects with a larger number of posts over a longer period would yield more data for comparison. A quantitative model that uses a survey approach to

answer specific questions and receives feedback from a large sample would provide insights into how individuals perceive what they see from food influencers and to what extent they allow that perception to influence their daily food choices.

## References

- American Diabetes Association. (2026, February). *About diabetes: Statistics by state*.  
<https://diabetes.org/about-diabetes/statistics/by-state>
- Arora, R. (2026). *Number of fast food restaurants in America: Key statistics, growth trends, and marketing insights*. Restroworks.  
<https://www.restroworks.com/blog/number-of-fast-food-restaurants-in-america-statistics/>
- Busch, C., De Maret, P. S., Flynn, T., Kellum, R., Le, S., Meyers, B., Saunders, M., White, R., & Palmquist, M. (2005). Content Analysis. *Writing@CSU*. Colorado State University. <https://writing.colostate.edu/guides/pdfs/guide61.pdf>
- Busetto, L., Wick, W. & Gumbinger, C. (2020). How to use and assess qualitative research methods. *Neurological Research and Practice*, 2(14), p. 1-10.  
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s42466-020-00059-z>
- Center of Disease Control and Prevention. (2024, May 15). *Healthy weight*. CDC.  
<https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/living-with/healthy-weight.html>
- Chen, M. F. (2022). To combine or not to combine? Applying protection motivation theory and the theory of reasoned action to explain and predict intention to reduce meat consumption. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 52, 115-130.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12842>
- Chien, K. Y., Chen, Y. J., Hsu, K. J., & Chen, C. N. (2024). High-protein diet with immediate post-exercise protein drink: Impact on appetite in middle-aged obesity. *Physiology & Behavior*, 273, 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.physbeh.2023.114404>

Chung, M., Seo, Y. N., Jung, Y., Lee, D. (2023). Agenda-setting in social TV: How and when user comments influence perceived issue importance. *New Media & Society*, 25(6), 1394-1411. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211020754>

Columbia University (n.d.). *Content analysis*. Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. <https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/research/population-health-methods/content-analysis>

Courbet, D., Jacquemier, L., Hercberg, S., Touvier, M., Sarda, B., Kesse-Guyot, E., Galan, P., Buttafoghi, N., & Julia, C. (2024). A randomized controlled trial to test the effects of displaying the Nutri-Score in food advertising on consumer perceptions and intentions to purchase and consume. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity* 21(38), 1-13.

<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-024-01588-5>

Dalla-Pria, L., & Rodríguez-de-Dios, I. (2022). CSR communication on social media: the impact of source and framing on message credibility, corporate reputation, and WOM. *Corporate Communications: an International Journal*, 27(3), 543-557.

<https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-09-2021-0097>

Feedspot (n.d.). *Top 70 health food influencers in 2026*.

[https://influencers.feedspot.com/healthy\\_food\\_instagram\\_influencers/](https://influencers.feedspot.com/healthy_food_instagram_influencers/)

Feedspot (n.d.). *Top 40 protein influencers in 2026*.

[https://influencers.feedspot.com/protein\\_instagram\\_influencers/](https://influencers.feedspot.com/protein_instagram_influencers/)

Google Trends (2026). <https://trends.google.com/trends/>

Hawkins, L., Farrow, C., & Thomas, J. M. (2021). Does exposure to socially endorsed food images on social media influence food intake? *Appetite*, 1-34.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2021.105424>

Influencer Hero (n.d.). Top 90 healthy food influencers in the US.

<https://www.influencer-hero.com/top-influencers/top-90-healthy-food-influencers-in-the-us>

Instagram (2026). <https://www.instagram.com/>

Jensen, M. L., Fleming-Milici, F., & Harris, J. L. (2023). Are U.S. food and beverage companies now advertising healthy products to children on television? An evaluation of improvements in industry self-regulation, 2017-2021. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 20(118), 2-13.

<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-023-01517-y>

Kim, D. Y., & Kim, H. Y. (2021). Trust me, trust me not: A nuanced view of influencer marketing on social media. *Journal of Business Research*, 134, 223-232.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.05.024>

Kumar, N. (2025, October 9). *Instagram statistics (2025) – daily & monthly active users*.

Demandsage. <https://www.demandsage.com/instagram-statistics/>

Kumar, N. (2026, March 7). *How many people use Instagram in 2026 [active user stats]?* Demandsage. <https://www.demandsage.com/instagram-statistics/>

Lee, H., & Worthy, S. (2021). Adoption of fad diets through the lens of the diffusion of innovations. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*, 50(2), 135-149.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/fcsr.12419>

- Leitão, M., Pérez-López, F. R., Marôco, J., & Pimenta, F. (2025). Exploring weight management beliefs during the menopausal transition (ME-WEL project): A qualitative comparative study based on Health Belief Model. *British Journal of Health Psychology, 30*(e12779), 1-41. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjhp.12779>
- Lobelo, F., Supapannachart, K. J., Zhou, T., & Frediana, J. K. (2021). Exercise and diet counseling trends from 2002 to 2015: A serial cross-sectional study of U.S. adults with cardiovascular disease risk. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 60*(2), e59-e67. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2020.07.008>
- Onyegbule, P., Iyiegbuniwe, E., Sarter, B., & James, K. (2020). Evidence-based intervention program for reducing obesity among African-American women in Southern California. *Public Health Nursing, 38*, 350-356. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phn.12830>
- Perloff, R. M. (2015). Mass communication research at the crossroads: Definitional issues and theoretical directions for mass and political communication scholarship in an age of online media. *Mass Communication and Society, 18*, 531-556. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2014.946997>
- Ragelienė, T., & Gronhoj, A. (2021). The role of peers, siblings, and social media for children's healthy eating socialization: a mixed methods study. *Food Quality and Preference, 93*, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodqual.2021.104255>
- Rallis, S. (2019). Optimizing glycemic control in type 2 diabetic patients through the use of a low-carbohydrate, high-fat, ketogenic diet: A review of two patients in primary care. *Diabetes, Metabolic Syndrome and Obesity: Targets and Therapy, 12*, 299-303. <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.lib.apsu.edu/10.2147/DMSO.S195994>

- Rosenkranz, S. K., Dennis-McLeod, B. T., Janss, B., Shahamati, D., Yarrow, L., & Rosenkranz, R. R. (2025). Perceptions of meat and dairy foods among college students at a land-grant institution: an observational, analytical study. *Journal of American College Health*, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2025.2479701>
- Saima, & Khan, M. A. (2021). Effect of social media influencer marketing on consumers' purchase intention and the mediating role of credibility. *Journal of Promotion Management*, 27(4), 503-523. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10496491.2020.1851847>
- Scheiber, R., Karmasin, M., & Diehl, S. (2023). Exploring the Dunning-Kruger Effect in health communication: How perceived food and media literacy and actual knowledge drift apart when evaluating misleading food advertising. *Journal of Health Communication*, 28, 707-727. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10810730.2023.2258085>
- Social Blade (2026). <https://socialblade.com/>
- Sprout Social (n.d.). *Food influencers: Unique industry data to plan your next marketing campaign*. <https://sproutsocial.com/influencer-marketing/find-influencers/food-influencers/>
- Wang, X., Zhu, B., Guo, Q., Wang, W., & Zhao, R. (2023). Designing mindfulness information for interaction in social media: The role of information framing, health risk perception, and lay theories of health. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1041016>
- Westerterp-Plantenga, M. S. (2021). Challenging energy balance – during sensitivity to food reward and modulatory factors implying a risk for overweight – during body

weight management, including dietary restraint and medium-high protein diets.

*Physiology & Behavior*, 221, 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.physbeh.2020.112879>

Young, A., & Atkin, D. (2023). An agenda-setting test of Google News' world reporting on foreign nations. *Association for Journalism and Mass Communication*, 17(2), 113-132. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19312431221106375>