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Article

Consumers' healthy lifestyle as a determinant of the influence of microcelebrities and microinfluencers

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Consumers' healthy lifestyle as a determinant of the influence of microcelebrities and microinfluencers

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Abstract

Purpose – This study analyzes what type of influencer – microcelebrity or microinfluencer – is best suited to promoting healthy food brands and how that influence depends on consumers' healthy lifestyles.

Design/methodology/approach – An empirical study with a real healthy food brand was developed in which three real influencers from Instagram collaborated and posted a story showing the company's products. A total of 148 individuals participated in the study. The proposed model was tested using the PROCESS macro.

Findings – Drawing on the celebrity endorsement literature and the meaning transfer model, this study proposes that microcelebrities' and microinfluencers' influence on consumers' perception and behavior in terms of post relevance, brand attitude and purchase intention toward healthy food brands depends on the consumers' healthy lifestyle. Thus, microcelebrities have more influence on individuals with unhealthy lifestyles, while microinfluencers have more influence on individuals that pursue a healthy lifestyle.

Originality/value – It is one of the first studies to examine the different roles of microinfluencers versus microcelebrities in promoting consumers' attitudes and behaviors toward healthy food brands. In addition, this is one of the few studies to show a higher effect of microcelebrities over microinfluencers.

Keywords Healthy food brands, Healthy lifestyle, Microcelebrities, Microinfluencers, Food influencers

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Consumers' concerns about food quality have been increasing, particularly regarding food's perceived healthiness (Teixeira and Rodrigues, 2021). People have developed a propensity to maintain healthy lifestyles (Teixeira and Rodrigues, 2021) and use social media to seek and share information regarding healthy food consumption (Belenioti *et al.*, 2015; Samoggia *et al.*, 2019). One of the most powerful information sources on social media about healthy food is influencers, as they have been shown to affect consumers' food choices. For instance, Chetioui *et al.* (2023) demonstrated that influencers affect consumers' purchases of organic food brands; Sicilia *et al.* (2023) showed that influencers can even have a greater effect on healthy food choices compared to front-of-package labeling. Therefore, companies selling healthy products have begun to rely on influencers in their communication campaigns (Alwafi *et al.*, 2022). Although previous studies in the food context have started to analyze influencers' effect, a clear understanding of their influence is still lacking (Hudders and Lou, 2023). It is

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vital to analyze whether influencer endorsement can affect consumer knowledge, awareness of healthy food choices, and healthy food behaviors (Ventura *et al.*, 2021).

This study seeks to understand how different types of influencers (microinfluencers vs microcelebrities) are best suited to promoting healthy food brands. Previous research about influencers has distinguished between celebrities, who are known in other areas outside social media, and influencers, who are unknown offline but have become famous through their self-branding activities on the Internet (Al-Emadi and Yahia, 2020). Both can be considered micro if they have fewer than 100,000 followers (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017). In general, previous studies have shown a higher effect of influencers on consumers compared to celebrities (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Schouten *et al.*, 2021). This result could be explained because influencers are seen as closer than celebrities (Leung *et al.*, 2022). However, when both types of influencers have a similar number of followers, microcelebrities interact similarly to influencers, reducing their followers' distance. In fact, microinfluencers and microcelebrities have been found to be more influential than macro ones (Taylor, 2020). Additionally, previous studies have shown that celebrities' influence on consumers is aspirational, that is, consumers follow the celebrity's behavior because they want to be like him/her (Escalas and Bettman, 2009). Therefore, in the healthy food context, consumers could eat the same foods as celebrities to get the same body. Then, microcelebrities could become relevant in promoting healthy food compared to microinfluencers. However, to the best of our knowledge, no study has compared whether microinfluencers are also more influential than microcelebrities in promoting healthy food brands. Previous studies in the food context have not distinguished between different types of influencers (e.g. Chetoui *et al.*, 2023); instead, they have analyzed a unique type of influencer (e.g. Pfender *et al.*, 2023) or focused on sporty influencers (Von Mettenheim and Wiedmann, 2021). This indicates the need to improve our understanding of the complex figure of the influencer and their potential effects on health decisions (Truman, 2022).

In the context of healthy food consumption, consumers' concerns about following a healthy lifestyle stand out. Attitudes toward healthy food and following a healthy lifestyle are related to the intention to consume healthy food (Tan *et al.*, 2022) and may determine how an influencer's recommendation is perceived (Von Mettenheim and Wiedmann, 2021). Consumers' healthy lifestyle concerns in the context of food could have a similar role to product involvement in determining consumers' responses to influencers' recommendations in other product categories such as beauty, tech, or travel. In that context, product involvement could determine the different effects of celebrities and influencers on consumers (e.g. Chapa and Khan, 2024). However, previous results are not conclusive. Some studies have shown celebrities' superiority to influencers in high-involvement conditions (Chapa and Khan, 2024), while other studies demonstrated the opposite (Ahmadi and Ieamsom, 2022). Nevertheless, these studies are limited to product categories unrelated to consumers' health. Therefore, the need arises to investigate how microcelebrities' and microinfluencers' impact on consumers varies for consumers with different healthy lifestyle concerns.

Therefore, we propose that the effect of microcelebrity endorsers and microinfluencers on brand attitude and purchase intention toward healthy food brands is mediated by post relevance, and this indirect effect is contingent on individuals' concern about following a healthy lifestyle. This study makes two main contributions to the literature: (1) It examines the different roles of microinfluencers versus microcelebrities in promoting consumers' attitudes and behaviors toward healthy food brands. (2) It considers consumers' concerns about following a healthy lifestyle.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Microcelebrities versus microinfluencers

Celebrities are primarily known for their non-social-media-related activities (e.g. music) and can have their own community of followers on social media (Jin *et al.*, 2019). However, neither their followers nor their main outcomes come from social media; rather, they use social media

to support their careers (Campbell and Farrell, 2020). Therefore, celebrities' characteristics, such as their source of influence, their role as content creators, and their relationship with their followers, are different compared to influencers (Sicilia and López, 2023). Celebrities typically do not feel that they must create content and interact with their followers. In fact, celebrities are less likely than influencers to interact with followers and thus are perceived as more distant (Yuan and Lou, 2020). In general, consumers are influenced by celebrities because they admire the celebrities and aspire to be like them (Escalas and Bettman, 2009).

In contrast, influencers gain fame on social media through self-branding – that is, using their social media activities to engage in strategic self-presentation to attract the attention of a large number of followers (Folkvord *et al.*, 2020). They can be defined as “people who built a large network of followers and are regarded as trusted tastemakers in one or several niches” (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017). Ordinary people can become influencers, producing their own content and managing their personal brand image to increase public awareness and develop a following that can be used for commercial endorsement purposes through online platforms (Khamis *et al.*, 2017). Their great influence usually comes from their knowledge, experience, expertise, and involvement with a product category (Lyons and Henderson, 2005). Sometimes, they also influence consumers due to their physical and social attractiveness (Delbaere *et al.*, 2021) or because they are seen as authentic and close to their followers (Leung *et al.*, 2022).

Previous studies have compared the effects of celebrities versus influencers on consumers. Schouten *et al.* (2021) have shown that influencers have a higher effect on consumers with respect to ad attitude and brand intention compared with celebrities. This higher effect is explained by influencers' higher credibility, expertise in the product category, and perceived similarity to followers (Schouten *et al.*, 2021). More recently, Hess *et al.* (2022) showed that influencers have a greater effect than celebrities when they fulfill their followers' expectations and are perceived as credible. However, celebrities can have a greater effect on consumers than influencers in certain conditions. For example, Jin *et al.* (2019) found that celebrities have a greater effect than influencers under conditions of high self-discrepancy – that is, when the follower compares themselves with the celebrity or influencer and feels there is a discrepancy between that person's actual self and the idealized media images. Furthermore, Gräve and Bartsch (2022) showed that celebrities have a greater effect on consumers when the promotion is intrusive.

In this context, the size of the community also determines microcelebrities' and microinfluencers' influence. Some studies have shown that microinfluencers exert a higher influence on consumers than macroinfluencers (Taylor, 2020). This effect can be explained by stronger parasocial relationships with the microinfluencers (Conde and Casais, 2023) and because they are perceived as more authentic than macroinfluencers (Taylor, 2020). In the same vein, microcelebrities may be more influential than macro ones. Microcelebrities can deliver very targeted messages, as their audiences include followers who have similar interests to the microcelebrity compared to macrocelebrities' interests (Taylor, 2020). However, no study has compared the different influences that microinfluencers and microcelebrities exert. Microcelebrities may also have traditional characteristics associated with microinfluencers such as higher authenticity or higher connection with their community. Therefore, there is a need to analyze microcelebrities' and microinfluencers' influence in relation to healthy food brands.

2.2 Influencer marketing of healthy products

Healthy food intake is important not only because it can reduce obesity but also because it increases well-being and prevents diseases (Blanchflower *et al.*, 2013). Understanding the factors that influence consumers' food choices is essential (Tan *et al.*, 2022). Traditionally, customers' food selection has been greatly influenced by their social environment, including friends' opinions, and by commercial information. In view of this, the food industry has been

criticized for encouraging the consumption of highly processed products and not promoting consumers' health (Fleming-Milici and Harris, 2020). However, since the outbreak of COVID-19, the global food industry has been under tremendous pressure to adapt to the changes in the market, and researchers and industry experts have observed a surge in demand for healthy foods (FoodCircle, 2022).

Accordingly, social media can influence what food consumers buy and eat (Castro-González *et al.*, 2024). Consumers who are exposed to socially endorse healthy food images on Instagram tend to select and consume larger portions of fruits and vegetables, in comparison to those exposed to non-healthy food (Hawkins *et al.*, 2021). According to Hawkins *et al.* (2021), the more individuals perceive other Facebook users to consume fruit and vegetables, the more the individuals consume themselves. In addition, obese customers who disclose their fitness goals on social media show healthier lifestyle behavior intentions compared to those that do not disclose their goals (Singh and Sharma, 2022). Influencers may affect this (Folkvord *et al.*, 2020), as they are important creators of content. In fact, new figures in this realm have appeared, such as Instagram health and well-being influencers (Chetioui *et al.*, 2023) and digital food influencers (Goodman and Jaworska, 2020), who are impacting the consumption of healthy products. In fact, previous studies have shown that influencers can affect consumers' well-being (Jamil *et al.*, 2024). In this context, influencer expertise, credibility, and physical attractiveness have been identified as antecedents of attitude toward the influencer, and hence toward the intention purchase to organic products (Chetioui *et al.*, 2023). In addition, the influencer's personal characteristics (i.e. athletic vs sedentary lifestyle) may affect children's healthy food choices (De Jans *et al.*, 2021).

Instagram posts regularly feature influencers whose lifestyles and values are referenced in images – for example, an image of an influencer eating healthy foods (Coates *et al.*, 2019). For instance, young people have been shown to attend to health-food advertising posts from influencers for longer than those from other sources (e.g. peers) (Murphy *et al.*, 2020). However, considering the characteristics of healthy products, viewers may be engaged with the influencer but not feel inclined to imitate their dietary behavior (Von Mettenheim and Wiedmann, 2021). That is, consumers may feel attracted by the influencer, but not by the product category promoted. Therefore, it is necessary to clarify the role influencers play in followers' engagement with posts and intention to consume healthy products.

2.3 The meaning transfer model

Various models and theories have been employed to explain celebrity endorsement, including the source credibility model, the source attractiveness model, the congruence or match-up model, and the meaning transfer model (Han and Balabanis, 2024; Jain and Roy, 2016). More recently, Han and Balabanis (2024) identified parasocial interaction theory, the two-step flow model, and the persuasion knowledge model as being able to explain influencers' impact on attitudinal and behavioral outcomes – although these theories do not consider the endorsement process.

The source credibility model posits that the endorser's credibility can carry over to strengthen the persuasiveness of product information (i.e. Sternthal *et al.*, 1978). Regarding the source attractiveness model, endorsement researchers have found that an attractive celebrity can affect consumer attitudes more favorably than a less attractive celebrity (Jain and Roy, 2016). The congruence or match-up model suggests that the endorser's effects are contingent on the "fit," or endorser–product congruence (Kirmani and Shiv, 1998). According to the meaning transfer model, consumers buy the meanings of the celebrity lifestyle by consuming endorsed brands, assuming that these symbolic meanings will transfer to them through mimicry and thus enhance their self-identity (McCracken, 1989).

Considering the different meanings that microcelebrities and microinfluencers may transfer to healthy food brands, the meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1989) is especially relevant to analyze which type of influencer, the microcelebrity or the microinfluencer, is more

effective in promoting healthy food brands. [McCracken \(1989\)](#) proposed a three-stage meaning transfer process. In the first stage (pre-endorsement), the meanings associated with a celebrity emerge from the celebrity's roles, campaigns, characteristics, or accomplishments. Celebrities in general, and microcelebrities in particular, are influential cultural symbols, and as a result, consumers associate them with certain valued personality and lifestyle attributes ([McCracken, 1989](#)). The meanings associated with microcelebrities derive mainly from their professional careers (e.g. singers, actors, journalists) and were created outside of social media, whereas microinfluencers' meanings derive from self-branding on social media.

In the second stage (endorsement), the celebrity transfers the meanings to products through endorsement ([Jain and Roy, 2016](#)). [Jain and Roy \(2016\)](#) identified seven themes of celebrity meaning: personality, credibility, physical appearance, feeling, performance, values, and cogent power. In this sense, [Campbell and Warren \(2012\)](#) found that both positive meanings, such as smartness and fun and negative meanings, such as conceitedness and arrogance, were transferred from celebrities to endorsed products and brands. Microcelebrities transmit a meaning associated with their fame and professional activity that microinfluencers do not possess. This process takes place through celebrity-endorsed advertisements ([Chan and Fan, 2022](#)).

In the third stage (post-endorsement), meanings are transferred from the product to the consumers through purchase and consumption. The observation of role models' (celebrities') behaviors, attitudes, and lifestyle choices may lead to vicarious observational learning and behavioral emulation ([East et al., 2014](#)): "If I see a good-looking microcelebrity eating a healthy food, I am likely to emulate that behavior." When the consumer can identify the product's meanings, they will respond to the endorsement, proceeding to the last step, namely consuming the product ([Lee and Jeong, 2023](#)).

3. Research model and hypotheses

This study proposes that the effect of microinfluencers' versus microcelebrities' endorsements on post relevance will differ. Post relevance is defined as the extent to which consumers perceive the information conveyed in a post as valuable ([Sohn, 2014](#)). The proposed different effects on post relevance can be explained through the "endorsement stage," when the celebrity or influencer should transfer certain meanings to products ([Jain and Roy, 2016](#)). According to [Parmar et al. \(2020\)](#), for beverages and food products, endorsement requires the celebrity or influencer to be attractive and have a healthy lifestyle. Celebrities, as opposed to experts, create greater levels of pleasure and arousal from Instagram food posts ([Kusumasondjaja and Tjiptono, 2019](#)). [Batra and Homer \(2004\)](#) provided some of the earliest experimental evidence showing that celebrity traits could be transferred from celebrities to endorsed brands. Thus, the symbolic meanings associated with microcelebrities are transferred to the brands that they endorse through advertising and marketing communications ([Parmar et al., 2020](#)). As [Roy and Jain \(2017\)](#) demonstrated, celebrity meaning contributes to brand meaning.

However, the symbolic values that microinfluencers endorse are based on the personal brands they have created through their posts on Instagram, so they lack certain imagery associated with microcelebrities. Finally, in the post-endorsement stage, consumers perceive that the imagery associated with the celebrity can be achieved if they also consume the healthy product. Based on this reasoning, we propose that microcelebrities may transfer more meaning to healthy food brands than microinfluencers due to the symbolic meanings associated with microcelebrities. Therefore, we propose:

- H1.* An Instagram publication about a healthy food brand will be perceived as more relevant when it is published by a microcelebrity than by a microinfluencer.

Brand attitude and purchase intention are important outcomes to determine the return on investment for a social media endorsement ([Sicilia and López, 2023](#)). Effective brand-

sponsored content on Instagram has led to positive consumer responses, such as stronger recognition, more favorable attitudes toward the brand, or greater intention to purchase (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). We propose that this effect could be moderated by consumers' healthy lifestyle concern.

In the context of healthy food brands, consumers' healthy lifestyle is an important determinant of attitude toward green products (Tan *et al.*, 2022). A healthy lifestyle is defined as the behavior related to health-promoting activities – for example, the consumption of natural food products, taking care of one's health, and maintaining balance in life (Teixeira and Rodrigues, 2021). Health-conscious people tend to have positive attitudes toward organic products and a higher intention to consume them, and they adjust their behavior to maintain a healthy lifestyle (Ahmadi Kaliji *et al.*, 2022). However, consumers who have low involvement with healthy products are typically also those whom a healthy nutrition campaign should primarily target (Von Mettenheim and Wiedmann, 2021).

When a microcelebrity or microinfluencer posts regarding healthy food brands, consumers' healthy lifestyles may influence their perception of this message. According to the meaning transfer model, celebrities/influencers will transfer meanings to the product they endorse (Jain and Roy, 2016). As was discussed above, microcelebrities transmit meanings associated with their fame and professional activity. The meanings they transmit are more related to their image outside of social media than the content they publish. Accordingly, we propose that for consumers who have low healthy lifestyle concern, microcelebrities' recommendations will be valued more, as consumers try to adopt celebrities' behaviors (Bandura, 2004). People will be motivated to develop a certain behavior when they see the success that it brings to others whom they would like to emulate (De Jans *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, they will imitate a microcelebrity's behavior to attain his/her image.

In contrast, for consumers who have high healthy lifestyle concern, the microcelebrity's effect is less important, as these consumers already have more knowledge regarding the benefits of healthy products and so will be less influenced by the role models represented by microcelebrities (Hung *et al.*, 2011). Microinfluencers usually share on social media their lifestyle, what they eat, and the exercise they do and advise followers about these issues. Therefore, consumers who have high healthy lifestyle concern will be more critical of content about healthy food, perceiving as more relevant the content created by a microinfluencer who has built his/her image by sharing this type of content. Therefore, microinfluencers' publications will have a higher effect on them. Thus, we propose:

- H2. An Instagram publication about a healthy food brand posted by a microcelebrity (versus a microinfluencer) (a) will be perceived as more relevant and will have a higher effect on (b) brand attitude and (c) purchase intention for individuals with less concern toward maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

According to the meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1989), the positive disposition toward a post endorsed by a celebrity with whom consumers can identify (i.e. a microcelebrity) will transfer into a more positive attitude toward the brand (Jin, 2018). Dutta and Singh (2013) demonstrated that celebrity endorsement led to higher sales of healthy food brands because the celebrities appeared to make a conscious effort to stay healthy by consuming healthy food brands and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. A celebrity's behavior affects consumers' actions (Bandura, 2004); therefore, we propose that the effect of microcelebrity endorsers and microinfluencers on brand attitude and purchase intention is mediated by post relevance, and this indirect effect is contingent on whether individuals have high or low concern about following a healthy lifestyle. Based on this reasoning, we propose the following.

- H3. The effect of the type of influencer (microcelebrity vs microinfluencer) on (a) attitude toward a healthy food brand and (b) purchase intention is mediated by post relevance and is contingent on the individual's level of concern toward maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Figure 1 shows the relationships proposed.

4. Methodology

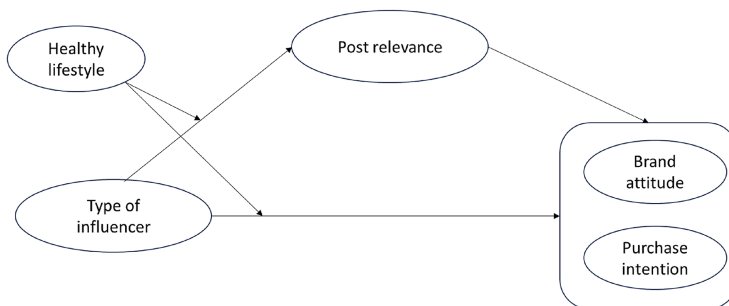
4.1 Data collection and sample

The study was developed on Instagram, since it is the most popular platform for lifestyle marketing (Statista, 2019). In addition, Instagram is a highly popular platform on which to share “fitspiration” (a portmanteau of “fitness” and “inspiration”) images while endorsing healthy products by “fit influencers” (Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2018).

The study’s population was followers of microinfluencers and microcelebrities on Instagram. First, we chose the influencers, and then we approached their followers. As previous studies have shown that an influencer’s characteristics, such as gender, age, or type of content shared, affect their influence on followers (Sicilia and López, 2023), to use microinfluencers and microcelebrities with similar characteristics is needed. Thus, influencers based on our own judgments were sampled. To approach their followers, the influencers asked them to answer a questionnaire (see next section). Thus, participants were selected using a non-probabilistic self-selecting method. This process was followed as the control of external variables was prioritized above sample representativeness.

The study was developed in collaboration with the company Primaflor (a brand of vegetables and salads), so three influencers from a panel of an influencer marketing agency that offered their services to this company were selected. These influencers showed an interest in participating voluntarily in the research, without any economic incentive for recommending the brand. A microcelebrity and two microinfluencers were selected. Two microinfluencers, instead of one were used, to ensure a minimum sample size for the social media influencer category. The microcelebrity was Flora González (97,200 followers), who is a weather presenter on Channel News in Spain and appears in some TV shows. The microinfluencers were Cristina Polanco (27,800 followers), who is a nurse and athlete, and Rosa Sorroche (15,700 followers), who is a beauty and lifestyle blogger [1]. The three women were of a similar age, and the marketing agency considered that, due to their profiles and interests (e.g. beauty, lifestyle, and sports), they were suitable to promote Primaflor products.

The study was conducted in a realistic setting. Each influencer created a story about the product and shared it on their profile on Instagram, so each influencer’s followers saw the story created. To ensure that the stories created by each influencer were similar, the influencers were instructed on the characteristics of the story they should create. Specifically, they were told that the story should be an unboxing video, the duration should be around 20 s, they should tag the brand’s Instagram account (@Primaflor), and they should write some short text or sentences referring to the Christmas season, as the data were collected in December. It was not realistic



Source(s): Figure by authors

Figure 1. Proposed model

for each influencer to post identical Instagram stories, as each has her own communication style.

To ensure that the publications posted by the three influencers were perceived similarly, after data collection, a pre-test was conducted on the stories that were published. We employed a convenience sample of 81 individuals (49.4% women, mean age = 21.67). These were randomly assigned to one of the stories and rated the extent to which the stories were attractive and interesting, as previous studies have shown that these variables affect consumers' attitudes and behaviors (Chang *et al.*, 2015). The following responses were measured using a seven-point Likert scale: "The story was interesting," "The story was attractive." No significant differences were found between the three influencers in terms of attractiveness ($F = 1.844$; $p > 0.1$) or level of interest ($F = 1.724$; $p > 0.1$).

4.2 Procedure and measurement

The sample collection procedure was as follows: First, influencers posted the video via Instagram stories, a feature that lets users post photos and videos that automatically disappear after 24 h. Twenty-four hours later, influencers posted a recruitment message through the same channel asking their followers to participate in a 10-min research survey to provide their opinions and feedback about the Primaflor salads shown in the story. Thus, participants were asked several questions regarding vegetable brands, post relevance, brand attitude, purchase intention, and healthy lifestyle. Other control questions were asked, such as attitude toward the post (Batra and Stayman, 1990), the influencers' credibility (Schouten *et al.*, 2021), identification with the influencers (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000), and brand awareness (Yoo *et al.*, 2000). In total, 148 participants answered the questionnaire, representing the final sample size. The study took place in December 2020. Detailed information on the reliability and validity assessment of the measurement scales is included as [Supplementary Material](#).

5. Analyses and results

5.1 Sample characteristics

The participants' mean age was 33.9, and 85.71% were women. Of the participants, 74.32% were unfamiliar with the brand Primaflor before the influencer's post, and 47.29% remembered the post about Primaflor after the exposure. Before testing the hypotheses, the sample was split into two groups: individuals exposed to the microcelebrity ($n = 86$) and individuals exposed to the microinfluencers ($n = 62$). There were no differences in mean age between the two groups ($M_{\text{microcelebrity}} = 33.8$, $M_{\text{microinfluencers}} = 34$, $p > 0.10$). To check for differences between the two groups, we controlled for credibility and identification with the influencer. There were no differences in credibility (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.95$) ($M_{\text{microcelebrity}} = 5.90$, $M_{\text{microinfluencers}} = 5.75$, $p > 0.10$) and identification with the influencer ($M_{\text{microcelebrity}} = 5.10$, $M_{\text{microinfluencers}} = 5.15$, $p > 0.10$) between the two groups. The attitude toward the post (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.96$) was over 4.5 for both types of influencers. Thus, the stories were valued positively.

5.2 Hypothesis testing

A moderated mediation model (see [Table 1](#)) was calculated with the PROCESS macro 4.2 (Hayes, 2022, Model 8). We decided to use the PROCESS macro because it is specifically tailored for mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis (Hayes, 2022). All of the reported regression coefficients were unstandardized, and the bootstrapping method ($m = 10,000$) was employed. Brand awareness was introduced as a control variable. As predicted, the type of influencer (microcelebrity = 1; microinfluencer = 0) had a significant effect on post relevance ($\beta = 3.01$, $p < 0.05$). That is, microcelebrity posts were perceived to be more relevant than posts from microinfluencers, which leads us to accept H1. As we can see in [Table 1](#), there was a significant negative interaction between influencer type and consumers'

Table 1. Model results

Paths	β	SE	t	p
Type of influencer → Post relevance	3.01	1.01	2.99	0.003
Healthy lifestyle → Post relevance	0.53	0.15	3.51	0.001
Type influencer*Healthy lifestyle → Post relevance	−0.57	0.18	−3.10	0.002
Brand awareness → Post relevance	0.18	0.06	2.88	0.004
Type of influencer → Brand attitude	−0.12	0.68	1.75	0.082
Healthy lifestyle → Brand attitude	0.04	0.10	0.38	0.704
Type influencer*Healthy lifestyle → Brand attitude	−0.26	0.12	−2.09	0.039
Post relevance → Brand attitude	0.46	0.06	8.13	0.000
Brand awareness → Brand attitude	0.28	0.04	6.58	0.000
Type of influencer → Purchase intention	1.20	0.88	1.36	0.175
Healthy lifestyle → Purchase intention	0.13	0.13	0.98	0.328
Type influencer*Healthy lifestyle → Purchase intention	−0.23	0.16	−1.42	0.158
Post relevance → Purchase intention	0.62	0.07	8.46	0.000
Brand awareness → Purchase intention	0.19	0.05	3.47	0.000

Note(s): Dependent variable = brand attitude: $R^2 = 0.77$; Dependent variable = purchase intention: $R^2 = 0.71$
Brand awareness was used as a covariate

Source(s): Table by authors

healthy lifestyles on post relevance ($\beta = -0.57, p < 0.01$) and brand attitude ($\beta = -0.26, p < 0.05$). Typically, one standard deviation above and below the mean of the moderator is used to indicate high- and low-level conditioning. As Table 2 shows, participants with low healthy lifestyle concern ($\beta = 0.99, p < 0.05$) perceived the message posted by the microcelebrity as more relevant than the message posted by microinfluencers. However, for participants with high healthy lifestyle concern, the effect reversed ($\beta = -0.80, p < 0.05$), and messages posted by microcelebrities were perceived as less relevant. Regarding healthy lifestyle's moderation of brand attitude, only for individuals with high levels of healthy lifestyle concern was

Table 2. Conditional effects at values of the moderator

Path	Values of the moderator	Effect	t	p
Direct effect				
Type of influencer → Post relevance	3.72	0.87	2.23	0.027
	5.17	0.05	0.18	0.854
	6.62	−0.77	−2.10	0.038
Type of influencer → Brand attitude	3.72	0.22	0.85	0.394
	5.17	−0.158	−0.90	0.370
	6.62	−0.54	−2.19	0.030

Indirect effects	Values of the moderator	Effect	CI _{low}	CI _{high}
Type of influencer → Post relevance → Brand attitude	3.72	0.40	0.03	0.79
	5.17	0.02	−0.23	0.27
	6.62	−0.36	−0.76	−0.01
Type of influencer → Post relevance → Purchase intention	3.72	0.54	0.39	1.03
	5.17	0.03	−0.30	0.38
	6.62	−0.48	−0.97	−0.01

Note(s): Moderate mediation index (DV: Brand attitude) = -0.2609 ($-0.46, -0.07$); Moderate mediation index (DV: Purchase intention) = -0.3495 ($-0.58, -0.11$)

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 3. Hypotheses testing

H	Hypothesis	Result
H1	An Instagram publication about a healthy food brand will be perceived as more relevant when it is published by a microcelebrity than by a microinfluencer	Accepted
H2	An Instagram publication about a healthy food brand posted by a microcelebrity (versus a microinfluencer) (1) will be perceived as more relevant and will have a higher effect on (2) brand attitude and (3) purchase intention for individuals with less concern toward maintaining a healthy lifestyle	Partially accepted
H3	The effect of the type of influencer (microcelebrity vs microinfluencer) on (1) attitude toward a healthy food brand and (2) purchase intention is mediated by post relevance and is contingent on the individual's level of concern toward maintaining a healthy lifestyle	Accepted

Source(s): Table by authors

microinfluencers' effect on brand attitude higher than that of microcelebrities ($\beta = -0.54$, $p < 0.05$). Both types of influencers exerted the same effect on brand attitude for individuals with low and medium levels of healthy lifestyle concern. In contrast, healthy lifestyle concerns did not moderate the effect of the type of influencer on purchase intention ($\beta = -0.23$, $p > 0.1$). Thus, H2a and H2b were accepted, while H2c was rejected.

H3 posited that post relevance would mediate the effect of the type of influencer on brand attitude and purchase intention. In this sense, post relevance had a significant effect on brand attitude ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < 0.01$) and purchase intention ($\beta = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$). The direct effects of the type of influencer on brand attitude and purchase intention were not significant. However, the results showed that the conditional indirect effects were significant for brand attitude (index of moderated mediation = -0.2609 [-0.46 , -0.07]) and for purchase intention (index of moderated mediation = -0.3495 [-0.58 , -0.11]). The indirect effect of the type of influencer on brand attitude and purchase intention was positive for individuals with low levels of healthy lifestyle concern (DV: brand attitude: $\beta = 0.40$ [0.03 , 0.79]; DV: purchase intention: $\beta = 0.54$ [0.39 , 1.03]) and negative for individuals with high levels of healthy lifestyle concern (DV: brand attitude: $\beta = -0.36$ [-0.76 , -0.01]; DV: purchase intention: $\beta = -0.48$ [-0.97 , -0.01]) (see Table 2). Thus, Instagram posts by microcelebrities led to a more positive brand attitude and higher purchase intention through post relevance when the individuals had low healthy lifestyle concern. In contrast, the indirect effect was higher when the post was created by microinfluencers for individuals with high healthy lifestyle concern. Table 3 summarizes the results of the hypotheses testing.

6. Conclusions

Social media conveys what others eat via pictures, with influencers being one of the most important information sources about healthy food. This study highlights microcelebrities' and microinfluencers' importance in promoting healthy food brands. Both types of influencers have different effects depending on the extent to which consumers are aware of a healthy lifestyle. Microinfluencers are more persuasive for individuals with higher concern about maintaining a healthy lifestyle. However, individuals who are less aware of a healthy lifestyle prefer to follow microcelebrities' recommendations. The study's theoretical contributions and our findings' practical implications are discussed below.

6.1 Theoretical implications

First, this study contributes to the literature by analyzing the different effects of microcelebrities versus microinfluencers on consumers' healthy food decisions. The results indicate that post relevance was higher for products endorsed by a microcelebrity than by a

microinfluencer for healthy food brands. While previous results have shown a higher influence of social media influencers in comparison with celebrities (Jin *et al.*, 2019; Schouten *et al.*, 2021), this study found that microcelebrities could be a good option for healthy food brands. In fact, young people have been found to view healthy food advertising posts from celebrities for longer than those from peers (Murphy *et al.*, 2020). Many authors have shown that influencers' perceived genuineness results in a higher purchase intention toward endorsed products because consumers identify with the influencers and try to imitate them (Sicilia and López, 2023). However, the imagery associated with celebrities may be important in the consumption of healthy food brands (Dutta and Singh, 2013). Logically, microcelebrities may have some of the same imagery associated with celebrities, as well as some characteristics of social media influencers, such as a higher identification with their followers or a closer relationship with them. Thus, the meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1989) represents a useful framework to analyze the meanings and imagery that microcelebrities and -influencers transfer to a product category, such as healthy products. In this sense, this study discusses the three-stage meaning transfer process and shows that the endorsement stage, when the influencer posts content about the healthy food brand, helps us to explain why individuals consume the product endorsed by microcelebrities or microinfluencers.

Second, microcelebrities' and microinfluencers' effect on consumers depends on consumers' concern about a healthy lifestyle. Higher relevance of microcelebrities' Instagram posts was found specifically for individuals with low healthy lifestyle concern. The positive effect reversed for individuals with high healthy lifestyle concern. Thus, consumers' healthy lifestyle concern is a key aspect when considering celebrities' or influencers' influence on healthy food product promotion. Previous research has found that attractive influencers are more effective in convincing consumers with low involvement in healthy nutrition to further improve their diet (Von Mettenheim and Wiedmann, 2021). Our results agree to the extent that microcelebrities may be considered more attractive than microinfluencers. In this sense, the present research demonstrates the importance of consumers' motivations and behaviors in the influence exerted by influencers and highlights that influencer selection should consider aspects related not just to the brand (e.g. congruency between the brand and the influencer) but also to the consumer (e.g. concern about maintaining a healthy lifestyle).

6.2 Practical implications

From a managerial perspective, this study provides strategic recommendations for the food industry when using influencers in communication campaigns. The results underline that matching influencer types with customers' healthy lifestyle concerns is important to maximize marketing impacts (brand attitude and purchase intention). Brands that target consumers who have low healthy lifestyle concerns should collaborate more with microcelebrities, as their aspirational influence can motivate these individuals to emulate their behavior. On the contrary, brands that are targeting health-conscious consumers should collaborate with microinfluencers, as their perceived authenticity and closer connection with their audience make them more credible sources of health-related advice. This strategy would align with health-focused consumers' preferences and generate deeper trust and engagement with the brand. Therefore, managers should analyze the consumer motivations that may influence consumption in their product category.

Our results highlight the importance for food companies to segment their audience based on healthy lifestyle levels. Using data analytics and consumer insights, marketers can identify which segments are more likely to respond to microcelebrities versus microinfluencers and tailor their influencer marketing strategies accordingly. Besides selecting the appropriate category of influencer, healthy food enterprises can sharpen their marketing activities based on recent data about customer behavior and also flexibly adjust their campaigns. In addition, the evolution of the symbolic values associated with the influencers by key audience segments should be monitored when designing an influencer marketing campaign.

The fact that this study demonstrates that post relevance mediates the effect of influencer type on brand attitude and purchase intention means that marketers should not only choose the appropriate influencer type but also make sure that the content created is highly relevant to the target audience. Such content should be personalized and relatable and resonate with the audience's lifestyle and preferences.

6.3 Limitations and future research

The present study is not without limitations, which open up many possibilities for future research. Owing to the difficulty of obtaining a real sample case study and finding influencers who were willing to participate in the research, only one microcelebrity and two microinfluencers were considered. From this perspective, future research may incorporate different types of influencers, including macrocelebrities, microcelebrities, and microinfluencers. In addition, we used microinfluencers that generate content about lifestyle. Previous studies have shown that the influencer's expertise on the topic at hand determines their influence on consumers (Hudders and Lou, 2023).

We are also conscious of the limited sample size but want to highlight that we worked with a real brand and real influencers. Another limitation is that the research focused on only one product category; the endorsement of other product categories should be analyzed to determine whether the effect is the same or if there are differences based on the product category. Additionally, the data's cross-sectional nature might constitute a limitation. Finally, the type of publication posted by the celebrity and the influencers in this study was a story. It would be interesting to analyze the influence of other content types, such as reels or text. In this vein, previous studies have shown that a visually appealing post may be more influential than plain text (Ki and Kim, 2019). This should be tested in future research in this field.

To conclude, as a future research line, considering the steady growth of consumer interest in health and wellness products, it would be interesting to analyze whether brands could benefit from partnering not only with microinfluencers but also especially with key opinion leaders who are medical professionals or nutrition experts. Building brand partnerships with these influential individuals holds the possibility of adding credibility and relevance to their brand messaging among targeted consumers who value health consciousness. This might take the form of specialty services, such as their own personal organic nutritionist or a cardiologist with expertise in supporting specific heart-healthy dietary habits – areas in which brands can connect and build very targeted marketing campaigns. Related to this, companies could segment their target market by generations, knowing the younger cohorts, such as millennials, have different behaviors from older generations when faced with a professional's advice. These strategies would help the brands increase their market saturation in the ever-growing health food sector.

Notes

1. Number of followers at the moment of data collection.

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Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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