

P-01-30**Consumer views towards meat and plant-based protein alternatives – A qualitative investigation in Germany and Belgium (#580)**

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Introduction

In Western countries, the consumption of meat is deeply rooted in consumers' culture, self-understanding and tradition. Meat is seen as part of a healthy diet (Verbeke et al. 2010). At the same time, few consumers are aware of its large environmental impact (Hartmann & Siegrist, 2017). Moral disengagement (Graca, Calheiros & Oliveira 2016), cognitive dissonance (Onwezen & van der Weele 2016) and rationalisation (Piazza et al. 2015) drive continuous meat consumption despite growing recommendations to reduce meat intake for health, animal welfare and environmental reasons.

Because meat eating is connected to sensory-based associations, health and sustainability do not suffice as arguments for dietary changes. Rather, the consumption of plant-based proteins needs to be encouraged by building familiar culinary principles and enabling consumers to make positive sensory associations with such protein dishes (de Boer & Aiking 2017).

Low levels of acceptance for meat alternatives or substitutes are linked to food neophobia, lower perceived product quality, lower perceived healthiness, and higher prices in comparison with regular meat (Apostolidis & McLeay 2016). But positive experience through repeat exposure can impact product liking and willingness to eat such meat alternatives (Hoek 2013).

These and more insights from literature have built the foundation for the CORNET project MEATHYBRID (AiF 196 EN) which has set out to develop meat hybrid products that contain added plant-based protein. An exploratory study among consumers was undertaken to investigate views towards meat consumption, attitudes regarding various plant-based protein sources and willingness to try meat hybrid products.

Methods

A series of focus groups were carried out in Germany and Belgium. Two focus groups per country (n=8) allowed for a differentiated sampling approach: one group consisted of regular meat eaters and one group of flexitarians. Additionally, socio-economic status (SES) was taken into account. For Germany, focus group 1 consisted of regular meat eaters with lower SES and focus group 2 comprised flexitarians with higher SES. For Belgium, focus group 1 consisted of regular meat eaters with higher SES and focus group 2 comprised flexitarians with lower SES. The focus groups were organised by market research agency VIGA and moderated by experienced and skilled experts in the local language. They were recorded and transcribed into English. Comments were provided by the moderator in each country, the mar-

ket research agency and the researchers within the project.

Results

Regular meat eaters considered meat a staple component of their diets and identified health benefits, variety, indulgence, tradition and protein intake as important roles of meat consumption. Flexitarians, on the other hand, saw meat as only one component of their diet, saying that health, animal welfare and environmental concerns reduced their consumption. For this group, protein intake, indulgence on special occasions, tradition, but also energy and health benefits were considered important roles of their deliberate meat consumption.

Regular meat eaters were, to a certain extent, aware of the effects of meat consumption on health and environment. Strategies to reduce meat consumption consisted of eating poultry, fish, having more veggie days and choosing meat alternatives. Flexitarians, on the other hand, showed considerable awareness of the effects of meat consumption. Their strategies to reduce meat consumption included conscious (i.e., reduced but higher quality meat consumption), varied diets, buying local and high quality, buying organic, reducing portions and opting for plant-based alternatives.

Regular meat eaters showed little awareness of plant-based alternatives and those that were discussed were seen as lacking taste. Plant-based alternatives were reported to be confusing and the benefits were unclear to participants, including scepticism over production processes. Flexitarians, on the other hand, discussed consuming a wide range of plant-based alternatives but did not consider them a replacement, rather a separate part of their varied diet. There was a shared sentiment that products pretending to be meat would be rejected. Benefits of plant-based meat alternatives were unclear to this group.

Conclusion

Flexitarians across both countries were less open to plant-based meat alternatives due to their already reduced and conscious consumption of meat. They did not see value in such alternatives given that they considered plant-based products a separate part of their diet. Regular meat eaters became more open to the idea of plant-based meat alternatives throughout the discussions.

Overall, there was much confusion over what a plant-enriched meat product was and what its benefits for consumers would be. There is a strong need to communicate benefits clearly, in combination with information on the pro-

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duction process. Participants were interested in knowing the exact plant-based and meat ingredients, the origin of the meat and the 'naturalness' of the final product. Price was also mentioned as an important decision factor, comparing it to the price of regular meat products which were seen as the competing alternative for such products.

Notes