

Lab-grown steak and insect burgers – who will eat the food of the future? Acceptance of meat substitutes depending on motivation to avoid meat in the diet.

Limiting meat consumption, including vegetarianism and veganism, are increasingly popular dietary trends in Poland and globally. This trend has direct links to ecology and conscious consumption, which is fuelling interest in the origin of food products, food production methods, and their health benefits. The market response to these changes in consumer behaviour can be seen in the growing number of products using meat substitutes and the many vegan- and vegetarian-friendly stores and restaurants. There were as many as 21 new restaurant openings serving plant-based dishes in Warsaw in 2019 alone, and almost 160 such restaurants across the city.

Although vegetarianism indisputably is an accelerating trend not only globally but also in Poland, it still cannot be considered a mass trend (it is estimated that approximately 1-5% of people are vegetarian). What is more, many of them are vegetarian only for a certain period of time as they often lose their motivation to exclude meat from their diet. Flexitarianism – which in principle involves not excluding meat altogether from the diet but significantly reducing its consumption and even completely giving it up for certain periods of time – is becoming an increasingly debated topic. These observations reinforce the need to raise several extremely important questions: (1) Can we still consider the simple breakdown into vegans, vegetarians, and meat-eaters as sufficient to fully understand people who exclude meat from their diet?; (2) Does the motivation (beyond the simple division into ethical and health motivations) to follow a diet restricting meat and animal products or totally excluding it from the diet have any bearing on meat-avoiding consumer behaviour and, if so, what kind?; (3) What makes it easier for certain people to follow a meat-free diet and be capable of sticking to it, while others give up doing so after some time?; and (4) How open are various groups (segments) of people restricting meat from their diet to the wide array of available meat replacements (also depending on the way they are communicated)?

The aim of the research project is to understand the complexity of consumer attitudes and behaviours relating to avoiding meat, and the openness of various groups (also depending on the motivation to become a vegetarian or to gradually give up meat in their diet) to the wide array of meat substitutes, starting from classic plant-based products (e.g., soya beans), to more innovative ones using algae, insects, or lab-grown meat. The planned research project will have two parts. Part I will involve investigating the demographic and psychosocial complexity of consumers excluding meat from their diet. Part II of the project will concern the perception and potential directions of meat-substitute communications.

The first part of the research project will consist of 3 studies and will be aimed at identifying and deepening the understanding of the segments of people reducing the amount of meat in their diet. The aim of this stage is to move beyond the classic breakdown into vegan and vegetarian vs. meat-eaters and identify and gain a greater understanding of complex consumer groups with differing motivations underpinning their dietary changes, as well as the degree of meat exclusion from their diet (also factoring in flexitarians alongside vegans and vegetarians). The first qualitative study (focus group interviews – FGIs) will aim at understanding the complex motivations underlying excluding meat from the diet (Study 1). The goal of the second study (quantitative survey based on a representative nationwide sample) will be to identify the consumer profiles (segments) differing in terms of their approach to avoiding meat in their diet and their consumer behaviour in this respect (study 2). The third, qualitative study (ethnographic individual in-depth interviews – IDIs) will allow deepening the understanding of the segments identified earlier with elements relating to values and individual psychological characteristics, and diagnosing the barriers and openness to products containing meat replacements.

The second part of the research project will be dedicated to exploring the potential of meat substitutes depending on the psychosocial characteristics of consumers. A wide array of barriers to the meat alternatives being developed can be observed (e.g., comparing soya-based products with insect-based products and lab-grown meat), and it may be assumed that their acceptance will depend on the characteristics of consumers (e.g., their motivation to reduce the amount of meat in their diet), as well as on the communication of the given product (references to meat, emphasising various benefits, and alluding to groups excluding meat from their diet (e.g., vegans, vegetarians or flexitarians) in consumer identification communications. A total of 5 studies will be carried out in this part of the research. The first qualitative study (FGIs) is aimed at identifying the barriers to meat substitutes (study 4), the second quantitative survey based on a representative nationwide sample will diagnose the approach of Poles to meat replacements in view of their demographic and psychosocial characteristics (study 5). The last three studies will have an experimental design and will test the various ways of communicating meat substitutes and their acceptance by the target group depending on the type of communication (studies 6-8). The obtained results will facilitate answering the question of how marketing communication should be designed to successfully convince people towards meat substitutes. Moreover, the project will provide the means to understand the role of psychological factors in the acceptance and rejection of alternative foods.