Chapter 7

Flexitarianism and Social Marketing: Reflections on Eating Meat in Moderation

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ABSTRACT

Society increasingly expresses concerns about the meat-centred food system, there is an increasing choice of plant-based meat substitutes and a growing amount of food consumers abstain from eating meat for several days per week (i.e., flexitarianism). However, consumers differ in their engagement regarding meat consumption moderation, leading to different transition routes of reducing meat consumption. Social marketing strategies are relevant when it comes to this transition and can be divided along a spectrum from light ("education") to heavy ("law"). In the middle of this spectrum, nudging may be typified as aiming to unconsciously change behaviour by intervening in the context of consumption. This chapter presents two field experiments showing how these unconscious behavioural interventions could offer opportunities to effectively reduce meat consumption. Despite the promising contributions of these nudging interventions, a sustainable transition towards less meat consumption also requires changes in both prevalent consumers’ mind-set and consumer culture.

Changes in consumer behaviour and food consumption will be needed, with the need to shift the dietary balance to one with a higher proportion of plant foods relative to animal foods. (Mason & Lang, 2017, p. 2-3)

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter reflects on several prospects for a transition to more sustainable diets generally, with special attention to moderation of our meat consumption. The topic cannot be taken for granted given the circumstances that animal-based consumption patterns and practices are both deeply rooted in multiple socio-cultural ways and continuously cultivated by massive advertising and promotion – making meat the easy choice, and facilitating many consumers to choose one of their most desired food categories. Rather than reconciling ourselves to the fact that the omnipresent meat-centred food consumer culture will and should last forever, this chapter tries to find holes in the stronghold of meat hegemony. The following section examines a few of these cracks in our meat-heavy diet as default foodstyle. It reflects on flexitarianism, dynamics in the world of meat replacements, and rising consumer concerns about the sustainability of the food system as we know it in general and contemporary meat intake levels specifically. The next section is devoted to various modes of meat reduction against the backdrop of social marketing and the emerging field of nudging. Nudging interventions are introduced by presenting some of their merits as well as by positioning them next to other intervention instruments. Pivotal to the section to follow are two recent field experiments applying nudging with a focus on reduction of meat consumption. In the closing section we briefly discuss the potential of flexitarianism, consumer concerns, meat-alternative product innovations and nudging strategies in the transition of moderating meat consumption.

ANTICIPATIONS OF A TURNING TIDE?

The arising flexitarianism, availability of meat alternatives and increasing concerns linked to livestock industry’s impact on sustainability, human and animal welfare are manifestations of a turning tide in people’s diets. They are discussed in turn below.

Arising Flexitarianism

What immediately comes to mind when we start reflecting on (a possible) transition in meat consumption, is the advent of the flexitarian. Flexitarianism means meat reduction on a part-time basis, that is, eating meat occasionally without abandoning meat totally – in contrast to vegetarians and vegans. This flexitarianism has been “detected” in recent years and is appointed as food trend of the year 2017, according to, for example, Whole Foods (Hosie, 2016; Whole Foods Market, 2017). At the same time, the topicality of meat reduction is confirmed by the recent launch of the cognate term “reducetarian” (Katesman, 2017). Although it is unknown how many flexitarians already existed in the second half of the previous century, scholarly attention to meat reduction practices in the last few years provides evidence that flexitarianism constitutes a genuine food consumer segment. As yet, empirical studies from various countries find that a considerable amount of food consumers regularly abstain from eating meat for several days per week (see Dagevos, 2016, pp. 237-238 or Verain et al., 2015, pp. 211-212 for references).

Such results suggest fertile grounds for a growing normalisation of low and no meat consumption patterns. However, prudence is in order because a gradual normalisation of flexitarianism in terms of a socially accepted mind-set and interesting topic for media-attention does not automatically result in a