Little Angus, your eyes are haunting me: Emotion and ethics in the NZ alternative meat market

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Summary

The present study is of a qualitative and exploratory nature and is dedicated to plant-based meat advertisements, with a focus on emotion and ethics. The understanding of both emotion and ethics is important because plant consumers' purchase decisions are often based upon values and morals and associated with lifestyle, consumer identities, and them believes. Results show how plant- and fungal-based meat brands use or shield consumers from the meat paradox and design messages. Further, virtue and utilitarian ethics are important for their messaging. Emotional content balances tension and positivity.

Keywords: Advertisement, Alternative meats, Consumer Research, New Zealand

Introduction

Meat is a stable food item in New Zealand households (Vatsa and Renwick, 2026). Approximately 93 % of the population follow an omnivorous lifestyle; the remainder of the population follows vegan, vegetarian or other forms of meat-reducing lifestyles (Goode et al., 2025; Greenwell et al., 2024; Kidd et al., 2021). Generation Z are often advocates for these lifestyles, and in favour of alternative meats such as plant-based or fungi-based meats (White et al., 2022; Kerslake et al., 2021). The alternative meat market in New Zealand is slowly growing, mostly due to premium prices for alternative meats and somewhat limited product assortments (Statista, 2025). Yet health and climate consciousness among Kiwi consumers drive the demand (Statista, 2025). Plant-based meats are reportedly contributing revenue of approximately $30million to $45million NZD in retail sales (Statista, 2026). Given that plant and fungi-based meats present a niche product, advertising became essential for brands to communicate their value propositions and influence consumer perceptions and purchase intentions (Realini et al., 2023.

Even though the extant literature has covered consumer acceptance, preferences and willingness to pay for these meats, including word of mouth (Realini et al., 2023; Dean et al., 2024), how marketing messages and advertisements shape these behaviours has yet to be more widely explored. Therefore, the present study aims to analyse plant-based meat advertisements, with a focus on emotion and ethics. The understanding of both emotion and ethics is important because plant consumers' purchase decisions are often value and morally based and often associated with lifestyle, consumer identities, and them believes (Yonwikai & Wannamakok,2026; Seyfi et al., 2025). Purchase decisions for a plant-based meat brand require considerations beyond product functionality.

Literature review

Consumers of plant and fungi-based meats are often following meat-free or meat-reduced lifestyles, or are motivated by religious, environmental health or animal welfare-based reasons. Earlier works show that plant-based meat consumption is associated with negative

emotion and socially frowned upon (Markowski & Roxburgh, 2019), more recent work shows normalisation, increased societal acceptance and positive emotion such as pride, satisfaction, happiness and feeling hopeful, morally superior and cool (Onwezen et al., 2022; Zandstra et al., 2024). In advertisements and marketing messages, these emotions are widely explored in the form of appeals (Wang et al., 2024; Ye & Mattila, 2021). However, the wider emotion and ethics-based literature includes various schools of vegan ethics, the meat paradox, and the meat-eating defence mechanism (Buttlar & Walther, 2018; Gradidge et al., 2021; Fonseca & De Groeve, 2025). Aligned with the paradox and defence mechanism (Piazza et al., 2015), three types of emotion, namely victim-oriented, perpetrator-oriented and self-oriented, are discussed (Fonseca & De Groeve, 2025). In plant-based meat advertisement contexts, understanding the paradox, psychological defence mechanisms, emotion and vegan ethics is required to avoid triggering consumer avoidance or anger, and allows the design of messages to widen their appeal to consumers that are meat-free, meat-reducing and those aiming to transition from regular meat eating.

The meat paradox, defence mechanism and emotion

The meat paradox occurs when consumers are encouraged to think about the origin and process of regular meat products (Grading et al., 2021). Eating meat and simultaneously caring about animal welfare and wanting to avoid cruelty or harm can lead to psychological conflict and cognitive dissonance (Loughnan et al., 2010). The discomfort in the consumers' minds is commonly resolved by 4 strategies (Bastian & Loughnan, 2016; Fonseca & De Groeve, 2025), the first, denying the pain capacity and emotional intelligence of animals. Acknowledging these makes the justification of consumption habits more difficult. Second, disconnecting consumption from product description and animals, as well as their processing and packing (Fonseca & De Groeve, 2025). Third, psychologically justifying meat consumption by employing the 4 Ns: it's natural, it's normal, it's necessary, and it's nice. Lastly, seeking justification externally, within food culture and agricultural systems, instead of acknowledging their own choices (Fonseca & De Groeve, 2025). Consumers following a meat-reducing and meat-free lifestyle may view these justifications critically and regard strategic dissociation as a way to avoid victim-oriented emotion, such as empathy and perpetrator-oriented outrage, before they can fully develop (Feinberg et al., 2019). Justifications such as natural and necessary disregard self-oriented guilt by framing regular meat consumption as an unavoidable biological requirement. Similarly, normal and nice counteract perpetrator-oriented emotion, such as outrage and victim-oriented emotion, empathy through social compliance, conformity and sensory pleasure (Fonseca & De Groeve, 2025).

Ethics

The understanding of ethical schools allows plant-based food marketers to overcome consumer defence mechanisms and craft emotionally and morally resonant campaigns and advertisements. Alvaro (2017) uses schools of normative ethics, namely utilitarianism, virtue ethics and deontology, to discuss meat consumption and veganism. Alvaro (2017) makes a case for virtue ethics and outlines the shortcomings of utilitarianism and deontology. For deontology, the shortcoming argument is grounded in animal rights, in that they do not result in a binding moral requirement for consumers to give up regular meat and follow plant-based diets. With respect to utilitarianism, the shortcoming is that an individual consumer's decision to follow a meat-free diet does not change the food industry, agricultural systems, welfare problems, or the associated suffering. The author discusses why meat eating does not contribute to character building and is rather a manifestation of selfishness and moral shortcomings. The development of character and soul requires meat

rejection and compassion. In contrast to Alvaro (2017), research from Scotland discusses how strong ethical or environmental claims are not entirely fit for purpose when it comes to plant-based meat advertisement and hindering inclusivity (Yue, 2023). It polarises consumers with politically conservative values, but is appreciated by those with a liberal mindset. Focusing on product function, health and taste appealed to all consumers irrespective of their convictions and values. Research from Sweden shows that explicit ethical messages shaming meat eaters were avoided to establish the plant-based brand "Beyond Meat" within the Swedish market. Advertisements were designed to appeal to omnivores and meat-free consumers alike (Chaput & Paulsson, 2023). Figure 1 graphically depicts how the aforementioned elements may influence receptiveness to plant-based meat advertisements.

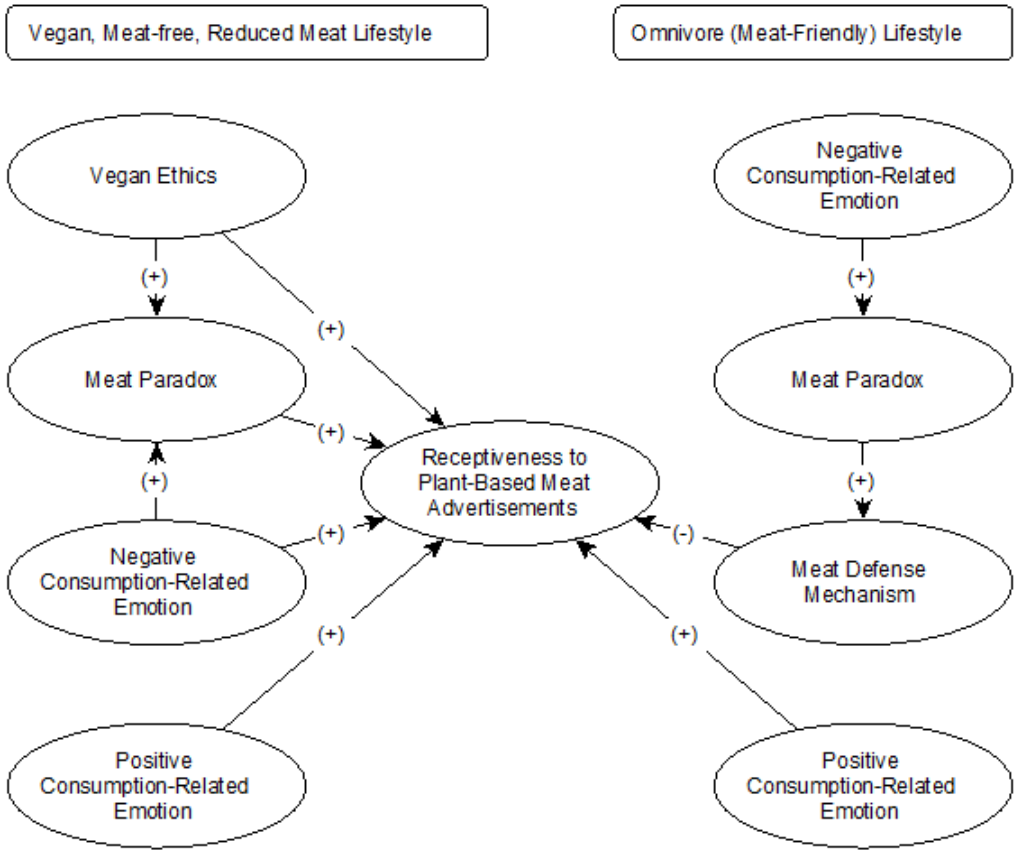


Fig. 1: Elements influencing the receptiveness to plant-based meat advertisements of consumers with varying meat-related lifestyle preferences

Material and methods

The present study is of an explorative and qualitative nature. Thirty-five video clips portraying plant-based meat advertisements shown in New Zealand and Australia were analysed. As both countries have similar retail chains, brands and products, this was deemed appropriate (Rombach & Dean, 2026). The advertisements from *Beyond Meat, La Vie, Impossible Burgers, Sunfed Meats* and *Quorn* were transcribed and analysed via qualitative content analysis following an abductive approach (Elo & Kyngäs, 2006). After an initial inductive analysis, schools of normative ethics, meat paradox and emotion-based concepts were used as a lens to identify, code, and categorise the data. The abductive approach was deemed suitable as it balances discovery and theory in the iterative, reflective

and recursive process (Nicmanis, 2024). Excel spreadsheets and NVIVO as QDA software were used to execute the analysis.

Results and Discussion

Results from the content analysis show that plant-based meat advertisements are diverse. Some display well-known chefs, celebrities or other opinion leaders who advocate for plant-based diets and products. These ads are mostly focused on product features, such as taste and texture, brands, and are humorous, modern, and upbeat in emotional display. Polarising and controversial content is not presented. Findings are consistent with the recent body of literature recommending that marketing messaging and advertisements focus on product functionality, taste and health, to appease omnivores and consumers with meat-reduced or meat-free lifestyles alike (Yule & Cummings, 2023; Cismaru et al., 2024). The positive emotion and support of opinion leaders contribute to stronger normalisation and acceptance in society, such as New Zealand, where most of the population are omnivores and societal and meat products are important in food culture, as well as domestic and export markets (Kemper & Kennedy, 2021; Chaput & Paulsson, 2025; Vatsa & Renwick, 2026).

Other ads from Quorn, La Vie, and Beyond Meat specifically show animals and meat products that originate from them. Ads showcase how animals witness the food preparation, cooking, and eating process. Underlying music creates tension, and imagery shows the taste, enjoyment and pleasure of the meat products. Tension rises until it is revealed that consumers in the video are consuming plant-based products. Young animals such as calves, chicks and piglets are presented as comic figures, hand puppets, or computer-generated realistic creatures sitting at the table in a kitchen or restaurant with childlike features such as big, anxious eyes.

These advertisements address the meat paradox by breaking the mental disconnection between meat products and living animals in an ironic manner. For instance, the La Vie advertisement using a computer-generated piglet at the kitchen table disrupts the defence mechanism of meat eaters by portraying the piglet's emotional intelligence and ultimately presenting plant-based alternatives as a resolution to cognitive dissonance (Fonseca & De Groeve, 2025). The La Vie advertisement does not allow consumers to separate the meat on their plate from a cute living piglet. Following Alvaro (2017), La Vie's advertisement is aligned with virtue ethics. The ad forces consumers to rethink their consumption habits by confronting them with the living animal and their intelligence. When consumers evaluate their meat-eating habits as part of character-building towards altruism and compassion, plant-based meats are a choice beyond product switching; it is the only right and virtuous choice from a vegan ethics perspective. Respectively, the brand stands for transparency and moral accountability. The same findings and interpretation hold for Beyond Meat's all taste and no worry (Muhlhauser et al., 2021; Murdy & Phillips, 2023), as La Vie served as the blueprint for their advertising.

Also, Quorn's ads show the tastiness of fungal-based products (Apostolidis & McLeay, 2016) and use cartoon figures and hand puppets for their advertisements. As an alternative to consumer confrontation, the whimsical and funny hand puppet animals bypass the meat paradox. The concept rather builds on positive reinforcement and emotional shielding from the reality of animal husbandry, slaughter, food processing and consumption (Fonseca & De Groeve, 2025). Following Alvaro (2017), Quorn advertisements are aligned with the utilitarian school of ethics. The use of puppets contributes to normalisation, product mimicking, and the reduction of consumer rejection. The aim is to encourage voluntary

switching to fungal-based meats for every consumer. Utilitarianism seeks to create the greatest good for the greatest number of people and minimise harm. Reducing moral judgment and evaluative force increases the success towards consumer switching and the reduction of animal cruelty. Quorn makes fungal-based meat consumption desirable by presenting controversial topics aligned with meat consumption, such as animal advocacy, as light-hearted entertainment. Interestingly, no advertisement uses perpetrator or victim-based emotion; emotional tension is quickly resolved through emotional nudging towards positivity.

Conclusion

The results of the present study are of value to food marketers and producers alike, as they provide a foundation for informed decision-making in consumer targeting, with a focus on taste, pleasure and positivity to be inclusive towards varying consumer groups. Ethical content can be displayed, but should avoid strong confrontation with the meat paradox or moral lecturing if it is to appeal to omnivorous consumers. Vegan consumers may be receptive towards more explicit messaging, which does not shield consumers from the meat paradox. Future research may conduct choice experiments to elicit consumers' preferences for ethical messaging design. The authors critically acknowledge the limitations in terms of sample size and generalizability of the results, while the merit of the study lies in bringing together ethics, emotion, and the meat paradox to intensify the understanding of plant- and fungal-based meat advertisement content.

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