

EN_96144371 Research Introduction

Meat consumption is a fundamental part of Western culture: We are socialized into eating meat, it is a norm and a habit. Because most meat is produced in mass agriculture, it is cheap and accessible to almost everyone in society. According to the OECD, around 354 million metric tons of meat were globally produced in 2023. In 2019, the average Dutch person consumed almost 78 kg of meat (Dagevos et al., 2020). These numbers and a glance into the typical Westerner's fridge capture the true extent of meat consumption.

This is associated with several issues. High levels of meat consumption are linked to various health problems, such as colorectal cancer, cardiovascular disease and diabetes (Godfray et al., 2018). Moreover, mass agriculture is a primary driver of global warming, environmental degradation, deforestation, pollution, wasteful land use and water consumption (Steinfeld et al., 2006). Mass meat production also raises concerns about animal welfare, since the animals reared for food suffer on a large scale. Some examples include scarcely monitored mass euthanasia after outbreaks of diseases on farms (Berg, 2012), overcrowding and dangerous animal transportation (Schwartzkopf-Genswein et al., 2012). These meat-related issues add up on a larger scale.

The magnitude of meat-related issues points to the urgent need to turn towards more sustainable choices of protein and thus reduce global meat consumption. However, the demand for meat has dramatically risen in the past decades (Henchion et al., 2014) and the OECD expects the per-person intake of meat to rise by three percent until 2033. It is thus likely that meat-related issues will shape our future even more.

This status quo which reflects the meat paradox: People empathize with and care for animals but continue eating meat while knowing that it requires their slaughter (Loughnan et al., 2010). For many people, the paradox manifests in a conflict between their values or attitudes and their actions. Such uncomfortable inconsistency gives rise to negative emotions, a state known as cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1968). Because individuals are

motivated to avoid cognitive dissonance, they engage in various strategies to reduce it.

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In fact, Luo et al. (2020) state that a strong awareness of social responsibility in tourists predicts their environmentally friendly behavior. They point out social responsibility concerns both the self and public domains. In an adaptation of Luo et al.'s definition, we describe self-responsibility awareness as the introspection and self-discipline that accompanies meat consumption. Public responsibility awareness concerns meat consumers' attitudes and actions regarding their impact on the greater good, such as the health of the planet and the community of animals reared for food. Because both domains are promising drivers of behavior, we ask: How does awareness of social responsibility influence strategic ignorance in meat consumers? Specifically, we investigate responsibility regarding animal welfare, health and environmental issues.