



Abstract

The Potentially Misleading Effect of Meat Terminology on Plant-Based Meat Alternative Labels [†]

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[†] Presented at the 14th European Nutrition Conference FENS 2023, Belgrade, Serbia, 14–17 November 2023.

Abstract: The importance of meat alternatives is expected to grow significantly in the future. Resulting from their increasing popularity, a political debate has been ongoing in the European Union, among other jurisdictions, concerning regulatory requirements of the labelling of meat alternatives. A restriction of meat terminology on the labels of meat alternatives was proposed, as these labels are allegedly misleading. However, limited research exists that provides insight into consumer perspectives on this presumed confusing or even misleading potential of meat alternatives. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate whether meat-like terminology used on meat alternative labels have a confusing or misleading effect on Dutch consumers. The participants were presented with a reaction time test, where they were asked to categorise food products (based on their labels) as either animal-based or plant-based. There was a total of four categories: (1) vegetables, (2) meat, (3) meat alternatives with meat terminology, and (4) meat alternatives not referring to meat. The participants categorised the presented stimuli as fast as possible. The participants were excluded from the study if they did not speak the Dutch language fluently or if they followed a vegan diet. Additionally, in a short questionnaire, the participants were asked for their demographic information and about their perception towards meat alternative labelling. The preliminary results show that the participants had an increased response latency when classifying plant-based products with meat terminology as plant-based products compared to when non-meat names were used for plant-based meat substitutes. Also, the participants did make significantly more errors when categorising plant-based meat alternatives with names referring to meat products. In conclusion, the increased time needed and an increased number in mistakes when classifying meat alternatives with meat terminology could support the argument that the terminology is confusing when only the name is shown to consumers. Nevertheless, other factors such as packaging design, labels and place in the supermarket can significantly reduce this confusing aspect. These results can inform legislators and policymakers in deciding on labelling requirements for plant-based meat alternatives.

Keywords: meat substitutes; European food law; food information; consumer behaviour

Citation: Ketelings, L.; Kremers, S.; Havermans, R.; de Boer, A. The Potentially Misleading Effect of Meat Terminology on Plant-Based Meat Alternative Labels. *Proceedings* **2023**, *91*, 276. <https://doi.org/10.3390/proceedings2023091276>

Academic Editors: Sladjana Sobajic and Philip Calder

Published: 6 February 2024



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Author Contributions: Conceptualization: L.K., S.K., R.H. and A.d.B.; Methodology: L.K. and R.H.; Formal Analysis: L.K. and R.H.; Writing—original draft preparation: L.K.; Writing—review and editing: S.K., R.H. and A.d.B.; Supervision: S.K., R.H. and A.d.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: All study procedures were approved by the Ethics Review Committee Inner City faculties (ERCIC) of Maastricht University (ERCIC_392_DeBoer_27_10_2022).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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