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**Plant-based meat alternatives in restaurants:
consumers' response to environmental and ethical advertisements in
Italy**

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Abstract

A multitude of factors motivates consumers to purchase plant-based meat, such as environmental sustainability and animal welfare. This research project intends to compare the use of new advertising appeals, whose focus is no longer on taste but on the positive consequences of meat alternatives on the environment and animals. After collecting data through an online, analytical survey, multi-linear regression will allow identifying whether relying on an environmental, ethical, or taste appeal is the most effective marketing strategy that an Italian restaurant chain should adopt to promote a new vegan burger made with plant-based meat. The masculine identity of meat and related gender stereotypes have resulted in women's and men's opposite attitudes toward meat and its plant-based alternatives. The role of gender as a moderating variable is going to be tested through an independent sample t-test to determine gender different responses to environmental, ethical, and taste appeals.

Keywords: plant-based meat, advertising appeal, sustainable marketing strategy, anticipated emotion, gender differences, restaurant, sustainability, environment, animal welfare, vegan diet.

Chapter 1: Overview of Thesis Proposal & Research Questions

The increased popularity of plant-based meat products has been encouraging restaurants to add these options to their menus in order to respond to the new consumer's demand as well as gain a competitive advantage and improve their brand image (Nguyen 2021). As a matter of fact, a survey conducted in Europe by ProVeg International reveals that *availability* is one of the main barriers to the purchase of plant-based food, with 45% of the respondents claiming that there are not enough alternatives on restaurants menus (ProVeg International 2021). This research project is going to establish the most adequate strategy for promoting a vegan burger made with a plant-based patty in an Italian restaurant chain. Given the various motivations behind the consumption of plant-based meat, new advertising appeals may have a stronger effect on consumers' buying behavior compared to taste appeals, which have been traditionally employed in the food industry, even to target flexitarians and meat eaters when promoting plant-based meat. Animal welfare and environmental concerns are major drivers for its consumption (Knaapila et al. 2022) and for the adoption of plant-based diets in general (ProVeg International 2021), consequently, they have been successfully used to promote vegetarian dishes (Krpana & Houtsmab 2020) and plant-based dishes in restaurants (Ye & Mattila 2021). However, it remains unknown whether ethical or environmental appeals alone would have a greater impact on consumers. Therefore, the following research question has been formulated: ***Which are the most effective advertising appeals (ethical vs environmental vs taste) for increasing consumers' consumption of plant-based meat dishes in restaurants in Italy?***

Moreover, since women are more likely to adopt a vegan or vegetarian diet due to the "masculine identity" (Modlinska et al. 2020) that is typically attributed to meat, it is interesting to understand whether consumers will have different responses to different advertising appeals because of their gender. Consequently, the second research question is: ***Does gender moderate the relationship between advertising appeals and consumers' preferences?***

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Despite its growing consumption, which is driven by “the prospect of reducing the health risks, environmental harms, and animal welfare” (Bryant et al. 2019), the improvements in taste and texture, along with the entrance into the market of food giants such as Nestlé, and the decline in prices (ProVeg International 2021), plant-based meat remains a recent phenomenon. Therefore, prior investigations on the topic are limited and mostly focused on consumers’ perception and acceptance of these products and how product descriptors and packaging colors are used to attract consumers in grocery stores (Sucapane et al. 2021). In addition, there is scant research on which marketing cues induce meat alternatives consumption in the restaurant context.

Food is typically promoted through taste and health appeals, which emphasize enjoyment and staying healthy, respectively. Accordingly, when restaurants introduce a new dish made of plant-based meat, they resort to taste appeals that stress the similarity with conventional meat, especially in terms of taste (Ye & Mattila 2021). These advertisements have been systematically used to target meat eaters and flexitarians, who drive the growth of the plant-based food sector. However, this strategy may prove to be ineffective for a restaurant whose aim is to expand its target market to vegans and vegetarians, who value more the ethical and environmental reasons behind their diet choice or are not interested in tasting meat flavor. In fact, Bryant et al.’s (2019) findings reveal that omnivores in the US and China were significantly more likely to buy meat alternatives than those who followed pescatarian, vegetarian, or vegan diets because they are more attached to meat yet they understand the damages it causes to human health, animal welfare, and the environment.

A new, different approach may be required to develop a successful promotional strategy for plant-based meat burgers that could attract a great variety of consumers, although close attention needs to be paid to the selection of marketing cues. A study on the consumption of vegetarian dishes in restaurants conducted by Bacon & Krpan (2018) posits that people have contrasting responses to menu designs, with frequent vegetarian eaters being less likely to choose vegetarian dishes depending on the dish description. The label *vegetarian*, for example, discourages consumption for all those people “who do not belong to this social group” (Krpana & Houtsmab 2020). To increase the likelihood of consumers choosing plant-based food, ethical and environmental appeals have proven to be more effective than the traditional approach to food advertising. In Krpana & Houtsmab (2020), the use of the environmental appeal “*Environmentally Friendly Main Courses for a Happy Planet*” to describe a vegetarian dish resulted in increased consumers’ preference compared to moving this option in the menu section dedicated to vegetarian dishes only. When ethical and environmental appeals were used to promote plant-based meat burgers,

consumers' preference increased as well in both grocery stores and restaurants (Ye & Mattila 2021).

The area of study that aims at explaining the reasons behind such consumers' positive responses to these particular appeals may be described as the *positive psychology of sustainability* because it combines environmental and positive psychology (Corral Verdugo 2012). Environmental or conservation psychology analyses sustainable behaviors – “a set of action aimed at conserving the integrity of the socio-physical resources of this planet” (Corral Verdugo 2012) – to determine what psychological factors cause people to perform them. Before embarking on any course of action to achieve a particular outcome, people refer to their anticipated emotions, namely the “future emotional consequences” (Ye & Mattila 2021) they expect to feel after having achieved their desired outcome. Anticipated emotions may be either positive or negative, however, when it comes to sustainable behaviors, the predominant approach employed in environmental psychology focuses on the negative ones. The fear that climate change will make the world uninhabitable, the shame of contributing to environmental degradation, and the guilt of not doing enough to protect the planet are stronger triggers because “negativity is more salient than positivity” (Corral Verdugo 2012). However, the positive psychology of sustainability posits that negative emotions cannot explain such pro-environmental behaviors alone but positive ones must affect people as well, consequently it incorporates both approaches into one theoretical framework. Positive emotions include happiness, pleasure, satisfaction, psychological well-being, and feeling one with nature. Corral Verdugo's (2012) proposed model suggests how positive anticipated emotions first instigate then maintain pro-environmental behaviors, creating an endless cycle.

This research project aims at understanding if the anticipated emotions, which arise after consumers are exposed to ethical and environmental appeals, influence consumers' preference toward plant-based meat. Evidence from Krpana & Houtsmab (2020) and Ye & Mattila (2021) indicate that, when restaurants' communication focuses on the benefits associated with the reduction of meat consumption, consumers are more likely to choose vegetarian and vegan alternatives, respectively. Specifically, the expectation of feeling pleasure after opting for plant-based meat is significantly higher in the case of a *social appeal*, which combines both animal welfare and environmental sustainability in Ye & Mattila (2021), compared to a taste appeal. On the contrary, communication that highlights the negative consequences of meat consumption results in stronger feelings of ambivalence toward this product, the so-called meat paradox, which has been demonstrated to lead to a reduction in consumption (Ye & Mattila 2021). Incorporating such information into restaurants' sustainable marketing strategies shapes consumers' anticipated emotions and is likely to result in increased preference for plant-based meat items,

regardless of consumers' identification as omnivores or flexitarians. These products allow restaurants not only to target multiple customers segments at the same time but also to improve their brand image by presenting meat alternatives as a Corporate Social Responsibility initiative that addresses global issues associated with livestock farming practices, namely climate change, natural resource scarcity, threats to human health and animal welfare. A transparent, authentic sustainable marketing strategy that promotes the social and environmental benefits of plant-based meat is a tool to raise awareness in those consumers who are unfamiliar with these topics and demonstrate the restaurant's actual commitment to creating a better society (Nguyen 2021).

Past academic contributions to the research questions and objectives of this project are mostly limited to vegetarian dishes, the grocery store context, social appeals, and the US market. Ye & Mattila's (2021) findings contribute to filling in some of the gaps in the previous literature by testing the use of social appeals to increase consumers' preference for plant-based meat in restaurants. However, their study has two prominent limitations from which this project will be developed. Combining animal welfare and environmental sustainability into a single advertising appeal (social appeal) does not allow distinguishing the different levels of effectiveness for each advertisement and may compromise the achievement of even higher consumption of plant-based meat given that ethical issues are more relevant to women than men (Knaapila et al. 2022; Modlinska et al. 2020; Rosenfeld 2020) and people's attention for sustainable practices has been increasing over the last years (PwC 2021), as well as their desire for urgent comprehensive action to tackle the climate emergency (Flynn et al. 2021). Secondly, culture significantly affects consumers' preferences; Finnish consumers, for example, were significantly more motivated by environmental reasons than animal welfare concerns (Knaapila et al. 2022), while consumers in India have a greater level of awareness about the negative consequences of meat consumption compared to China and the US (Bryant et al. 2019). Therefore, investigating responses to different advertising appeals from consumers who live in Italy, where previous studies have not been conducted, will provide important insights for restaurants that operate in the country.

To conclude this literature review, the role of gender has been examined. Gender is a social construct that nudges people towards engaging in particular behaviors according to their biological sex in order to comply with norms and roles established within a specific culture or society. Several studies reveal how major differences between men and women are found in cultures with reference to the consumption of plant-based products and the adoption and attitude toward plant-based diets. Bryant et al. (2019), for example, observed that women interviewed in China were significantly more likely to buy clean meat and plant-based meat than men; similar results were recorded in Finland where women's regular consumption of these products was higher than men's (Knaapila et al. 2022). These differences are explained by the cultural

association made between meat consumption and factors such as “wealth, high social status and dominance” (Modlinska et al. 2020) that have been systematically associated with masculinity in the Western world, although Bryant et al. (2019) show that these dynamics emerge in other cultures as well. Therefore, the gender stereotypes associated with diet significantly pressure men to adhere to social expectations of consuming meat and even denigrate vegetarians, who “are perceived as a threat to the status quo” (Modlinska et al. 2020). Avoiding plant-based food, which is traditionally considered feminine in male-dominated Western countries, allows men to dissociate from the other social group and protect their social identity because they fear being perceived as more feminine or gay. These power dynamics between the genders result in women being “twice as likely as men to be vegan or vegetarian across Western societies” (Modlinska et al. 2020) and having a more positive attitude toward plant-based diets and the taste of vegetarian dishes. The second explanation of these phenomena relies on women’s greater concern for animal welfare, which is often a motivation to switch diets. Likewise, gender significantly affects people in their decision to adopt a more sustainable lifestyle, which is coherently perceived as feminine. Yet, this association is reinforced by companies’ eco-friendly campaigns used to market sustainable products that target almost exclusively women, in what has been defined as the *eco gender gap* (Hunt 2020).

Chapter 3: Research Methods & Objectives

Based on the aforementioned research questions and the literature review, two key objectives have been identified to design the most appropriate and efficacious advertising strategy:

- **O1 - To examine the effectiveness of different advertising appeals (*ethical vs environmental vs taste*) on consumers.** According to the positive psychology of sustainability, consumers' decision-making process for embarking on sustainable behaviors is significantly affected by anticipated emotions (Corral Verdugo 2012). Therefore, advertising appeals that convey the benefits of choosing plant-based meat over conventional one will elicit those positive antecedent emotions that strengthen consumers' preference for the meatless alternative. This analysis will ensure the adoption of the most effective sustainable marketing strategy to address consumers for the Italian restaurant chain.
- **O2 - To determine the role of gender in consumers' response to different advertising appeals.** Given that men are significantly more reluctant than women to reduce their meat intake in favor of plant-based food and, in general, to perform any eco-friendly activity because these behaviors have been socially and culturally gendered as feminine (Hunt 2020), it is reasonable to explore if, when ethical and environmental appeals are used to promote the vegan burger, men's preference is negatively affected.

A conceptual framework is then formulated to describe what the variables are and how they are connected to each other. The different advertising appeals constitute the independent variables, namely *ethical, environmental, and taste appeals*, which influence consumers during the buying process. Their final choice depends on the appeal that has the strongest impact; hence *consumers' preference* is the dependent variable. However, the relationship between each independent variable and the dependent variable is affected by a moderating variable, *gender*.

The following diagram displays the conceptual framework as described above:

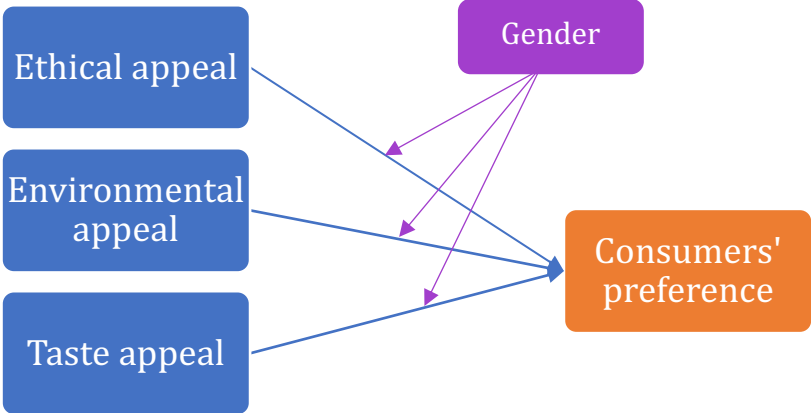


Figure 1: The conceptual framework displays the relationships between the different variables

In order to reach the research objectives and answer the research questions, five hypotheses are going to be tested:

- **H1** – Environmental appeals have a positive effect on consumers' preference for plant-based meat dishes.
- **H2** – Ethical appeals have a positive effect on consumers' preference for plant-based meat dishes.
- **H3** – Taste appeals have a positive effect on consumers' preference for plant-based meat dishes.
- **H4** – Using environmental appeals results in greater consumers' preference for plant-based meat dishes compared to using either ethical or taste appeals.
- **H5** – Men's preference for plant-based meat decreases when the advertisement is based on social claims (ethical or environmental) rather than taste claims.

3.1 Research design

The overall strategy chosen to answer the research questions is a quantitative research design, specifically an experimental one, which ensures greater reliability and robustness thanks to the full control attributed to the researcher. The conceptual framework and hypotheses are coherent with this quantitative approach.

3.2 Data collection

Both primary and secondary sources are employed for data collection.

According to the quantitative research design, an online, analytical survey is employed for the systematic collection of primary data and, therefore, the identification of the set of traits shared within the target research population. Creating an online survey on Qualtrics saves the cost and time required to design and deliver it, although resulting in no control over participants' recruitment (volunteer sample) and sampling error. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that a field study conducted in a real restaurant where consumers' preferences can actually be observed could record slightly different results, introducing a limitation to this research project. The analytical survey allows exploring and testing the relationships summarize in the conceptual framework and it is going to be structured as a questionnaire whose items are either selected from previous studies, in particular from Ye & Mattila (2021), or specifically formulated for the Italian market.

To understand the effectiveness of the different advertising appeals in nudging consumers into buying the vegan burger, two advertisements are going to be shown to participants. The first one promotes a conventional beef burger using a taste appeal (e.g., "Fancy some juicy meat and creamy cheese? Try our new burger, classic combo for a tastier flavor!") while the second one a plant-based meat burger with either ethical, environmental, or taste appeal. The ethical appeal focuses on animal welfare, (e.g., "Enjoy our new burger – meatless and harmless"), the environmental appeal refers to the lower impact of alternative meat on natural resources and subsequent reduced GHG emissions (He et al. 2020) (e.g., "Newest plant-based burger – your green fuel to fight climate change"), and the taste appeal, which is the control condition, emphasizes the taste similarity between the two options (e.g., "Enjoy our new burger – 100% great taste, 100% plant-based"). Such as in previous consumer research, the questionnaire measures data on 7-point bipolar scales where participants express their preferences about the dishes (1= conventional beef burger, 7= plant-based meat burger), the anticipated emotions they expect to feel after making the buying decision (happiness, pleasure, satisfaction, psychological well-being, feeling one with nature, ambivalence, fear, shame, and guilt), and which characteristics of the dishes (tasty, animal-friendly, environment-friendly) they have perceived after being exposed to the two advertising appeals. Finally, demographic questions will provide insights into the role of gender.

As regards secondary data collection, this research project relies on academic articles, an official survey conducted on European consumers funded by the European Commission, a global survey delivered by PwC to analyze recent consumer trends, a global survey on people's opinion on climate change and climate policies conducted by United Nations Development Programme, a

newspaper article from The Guardian, and a Bachelor thesis. These resources ensure cost and time saving, objectivity, and access to a broader amount of data. However, most of these studies were not conducted in Italy, resulting in a mismatch with our target research population.

3.3 Sampling method

The common set of traits shared by the individuals in the target research population is: living regularly in Italy, being of legal age (≥ 18 years old), and being neither vegans nor vegetarians. The latest avoids compromising the results by registering a greater consumers' preference for plant-based meat rather than conventional meat and higher effectiveness of the environmental and ethical appeals, being the reasons behind the adoption of plant-based diets. Hence, the exclusion of vegans and vegetarians represents a critical limitation of this research project.

From this population and using a quantitative approach, a sample is going to be extracted to test the aforementioned hypotheses. Probability sampling, which involves the random selection of individuals, guarantees the generalization of the findings to the entire research population, although it requires larger samples than the qualitative approach. Therefore, a sample size of 160 adult consumers is perceived to be effective and coherent with previous studies (Ye & Mattila 2021). The selection follows systematic random sampling where, after a random starting point, every k^{th} element of a sampling frame is chosen. Finally, the recruitment process takes place on Amazon Mechanical Turk – MTurk, an online platform where researchers, businesses, consulting firms systematically select their samples due to its wide diffusion around the globe, which reduces under- or over-representation of some individuals' characteristics, easiness of use, speed of data collection, and low cost.

3.4 Data analysis

The following stage in the research design process concerns the use of inferential statistics to evaluate the five hypotheses, which must be accepted or rejected depending on the weight of statistical evidence. The quantitative data analysis employs the SPSS Statistics software.

Firstly, a multi-linear regression is going to be performed to test H1, H2, H3, and H4 and, consequently, to analyze the relationships between the three independent variables (ethical, environmental, and taste appeals) and the dependent variable. Results will determine which advertising appeal exerts the most significant influence on consumers' preferences, providing useful insights for the designing of the restaurant's promotional strategy. The model is significant

only if the *Sig. value* in the *ANOVA table* is < 0.05 . In that case, the *R Square (R^2)* shows how much of the variance in consumers' preferences is explained by the advertising appeals. Finally, the *P-values* in the *Coefficients table* indicate which independent variables have a significant impact on the dependent one, while the *Unstandardized B value* reveals the size of this impact.

Secondly, H5 focuses on the difference between men and women in responding to advertising appeals. Since these two groups are independent of each other, the most appropriate inferential statistic to run is an independent sample t-test where *consumers' preference* is used as the test variable and *gender* as the grouping variable. If variances are equal under *Levene's Test for Equality of Variances*, the corresponding *Sig. (2-tailed)* indicates whether the difference between the two means is significant (< 0.05) or not. In case of a positive response, the *Mean value* in the *Group Statistics table* describes the difference between men and women.

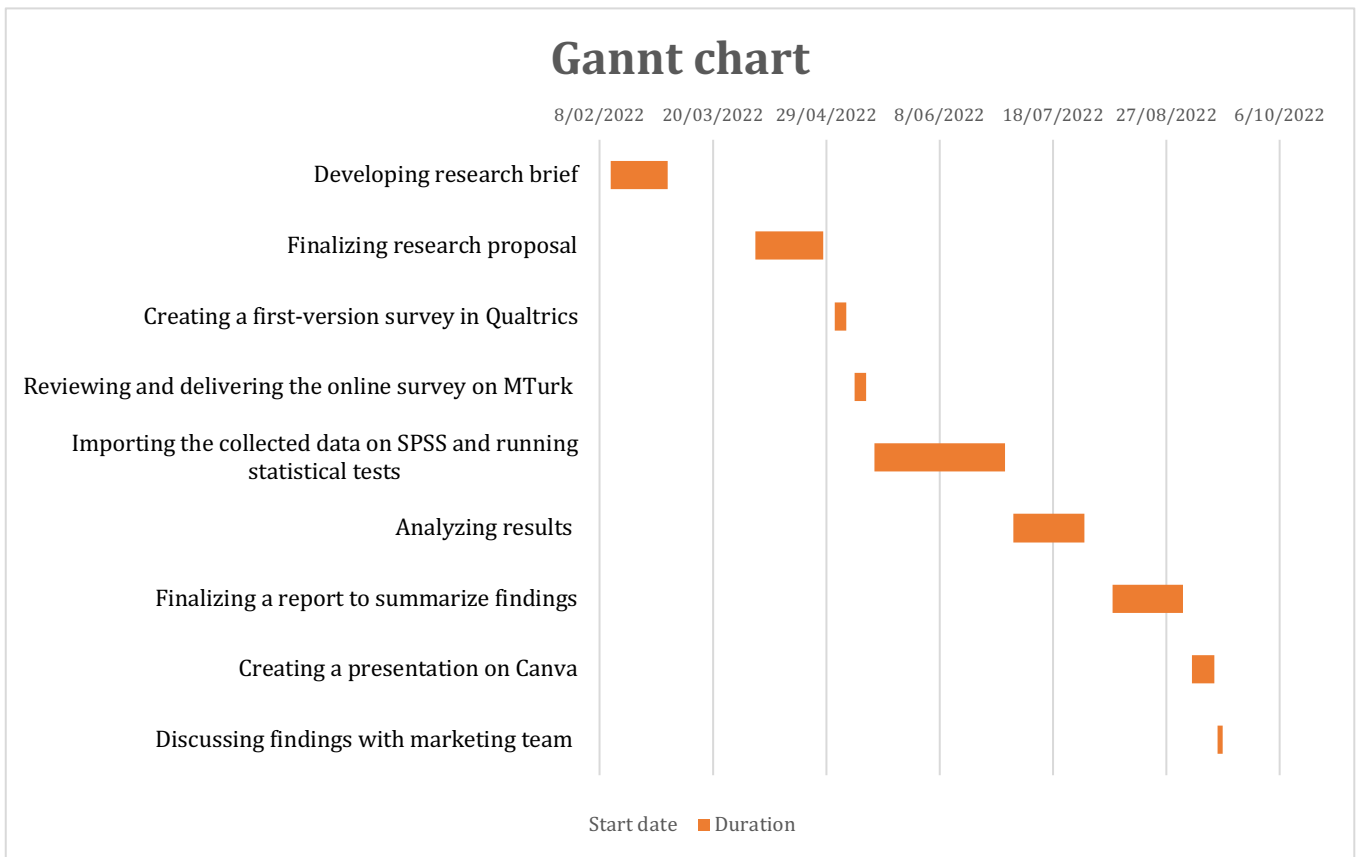
Chapter 4: Work Plan & Timetable

The restaurant chain has planned to launch its new vegan burger at the beginning of November, consequently, this research project must be finalized by September 2, 2022, to ensure that enough time is allocated for the creation of the presentation. Given that all the tasks are going to be performed by one researcher, there is a significant time constraint that requires strictly adhering to the following schedule. Once the results are collected and analyzed, a green marketing strategy will be recommended to the restaurant chain's marketing team during the in-person meeting.

Table 1: Research timeline displaying the schedule and progress of the different tasks required to complete the research

Research timeline			
Task	Start date	End date	Status
Developing research brief	February 12, 2022	March 4, 2022	Completed
Finalizing research proposal	April 4, 2022	April 28, 2022	Completed
Creating a first-version survey in Qualtrics	May 2, 2022	May 6, 2022	Not started
Reviewing and delivering the online survey on MTurk	May 9, 2022	May 13, 2022	Not started
Importing the collected data on SPSS and running statistical tests	May 16, 2022	July 1, 2022	Not started
Analyzing results	July 4, 2022	July 29, 2022	Not started
Finalizing a report to summarize findings	August 8, 2022	September 2, 2022	Not started
Creating a presentation on Canva	September 5, 2022	September 13, 2022	Not started
Discussing findings with marketing team	September 14, 2022	September 16, 2022	Not started

Table 2: Gantt chart displaying the schedule of the different tasks required to complete the research



The completion of the aforementioned tasks will result in incredibly limited costs. Qualtrics, SPSS, and NVivo are available for free to all the students regularly enrolled at the University of Adelaide. Canva’s copious beginner features can be accessed for free as well, allowing the delivery of an engaging, high-quality presentation. The respondents recruited on MTurk will receive a participant reward (0,50€ x 160) while a 20% fee will be paid to the platform based on the total amount of rewards. Therefore, the expenses the researcher will incur amount to 96€.

Conclusions

This research project aims at determining the most effective advertising appeals among ethical, environmental, and taste, to increase consumers' preference toward plant-based meat burgers served in an Italian restaurant chain. Secondly, it examines the moderating effect of gender on consumers' preferences.

A quantitative approach is employed to achieve these results, the experimental research design. Primary data from randomly selected participants (systematic random sampling) is going to be collected through an online, analytical survey delivered in the form of an online questionnaire. Secondary data sources have been used to provide supporting evidence. The relationships between consumers' preference (the dependent variable) and ethical, environmental, and taste appeals (the independent variables) are going to be tested using multi-linear regression. The difference between women's and men's preferences is going to be tested using an independent sample t-test.

The use of environmental appeals is expected to result in the most effective sustainable marketing strategy despite a significant difference between women and men, who are projected to respond better to taste appeals.

The findings will contribute to enriching previous research on plant-based meat and consumers' drivers for its consumption, which is particularly limited in the restaurant context. Moreover, Italian consumers' response to promotional strategies for plant-based meat, whether in grocery stores or restaurants, and the role of gender have not been investigated yet. The growing consumption of meat alternatives and interest in environmental issues contribute to justifying this project as well.

In conclusion, to ensure validity, appropriate sampling, data collection, and data analysis methods have been selected.

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