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A matter of identity: Promoting plant-based food among meat-eaters through a common identity priming

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ABSTRACT

Meat production and consumption has been identified as a significant contributor to climate change, however its consumption is not declining. Through four experimental studies we propose an identity-based intervention to promote plant-based food among meat-eaters. In particular, we demonstrated that meat-eaters are more willing to buy plant-based food when it is primed through a common (vs. vegan) identity, because of lower meat-eaters identification and, in turn, lower identity threat. Our results contribute to the understanding of the identity-based factors in influencing food consumption and offer insights for marketers, retailers, and policymakers to encourage a more sustainable diet.

1. Introduction

Meat production and consumption has been identified as a significant contributor to climate change (e.g., Westhoek et al., 2014). Indeed, animal-based foods account for the 57% of the total greenhouse gas emissions generated by food system (Xu et al., 2021). Moreover, with the spread of social media, information about animal cruelty has a wider reach than ever before, increasing outrage over the poor conditions of animals on intensive factory farms (Mouat et al., 2019). Hence, the necessity of decreasing meat consumption and promoting a shift towards more sustainable, plant-based dietary habits is a relevant matter in the food consumption landscape (e.g., Springmann et al., 2018).

Previous research has suggested various interventions aimed at increasing the adoption of plant-based food or, in general, alternatives to meat, such as leveraging natural appeals and ethical motives (Martinelli and De Canio, 2021; Septianto et al., 2023), exploiting the power of catalytic experiences (D'Souza, et al., 2022), modifying portions sizes (Taufik et al., 2019), promoting the epistemic values (e.g., novelty) associated with meat alternatives (D'Souza, 2022), creating nudge-based menu designs (Hielkema et al., 2022), or adding information coming from the packaging (Martin et al., 2021) (see Table 1).

Despite that, meat consumption shows no sign of decrease (Leiva, 2022); on the contrary, per capita meat consumption is expected to grow in every part of the world by 2031 (Statista, 2023), revealing the need

for additional solutions.

In general, food choices are influenced by the alignment between one's identity and the cultural and social meaning associated with those choices (Oleschuk et al., 2019; White et al., 2022), and consumers usually engage in behaviours that support their identities (Oyserman, 2009). In fact, the adoption of a plant-based diet is particularly difficult where individuals feel more "culturally identified" by eating meat (Barrena and Sánchez, 2009). Nonetheless, despite previous studies have highlighted the central role that identity can play in driving food consumption choices, including the plant-based food context (Zinn et al., 2023), the connection between one's identity and the decision to follow a plant-based diet is still understudied. Therefore, the main objective of the present research is to fill this gap, introducing and experimentally testing an intervention aimed at promoting plant-based food consumption among meat-eaters leveraging the social identity connected to plant-based food (i.e., a common identity).

Thus, the primary aim of the present research is to address the following research question:

RQ: Can social identity theory be effectively leveraged to promote the adoption of plant-based food among meat-eaters?

Indeed, whereas it is generally recognized that people eat plant-based food for environmental, health and ethical reasons (Rosenfeld, 2018), also social identity-related motivations can play a pivotal role (e.

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Table 1
Previous Interventions to promote Plant-based Food Consumption.

Interventions	References
Appeal positioning based on naturalness, quality, and ethicality	Septianto et al. (2023) Martinelli and De Canio (2021)
Leveraging the power of catalytic experiences Menu designs with PBF framed as the default	D'Souza et al. (2022) Taufik et al. (2022) Hielkema et al. (2022)
Doubling portion sizes of PBF in restaurants	Taufik et al. (2019) Reinders et al. (2017) Martin et al. (2021)
Adding health and environmental information on PBF products' packaging	
Including rewarding eating simulation words in PBF description	Papies et al. (2020)
Promoting the epistemic values (e.g., novelty) of meat alternatives	D'Souza (2022)
Offering more PBF menu options	Garnett et al. (2019)
Making PBF more visible in supermarkets (e.g., by placing it next to meat products)	Vandenbroeie et al. (2021)
Labelling PBF dishes as "chef's recommendation"	Bacon and Krpan (2018)
Labelling PBF dishes as "Dish of the day"	Saulais et al. (2019)
Highlighting health-related intrinsic qualities of PBF (e.g., free from chemicals)	Birch et al. (2018)

g., [Bagci and Olgun, 2019](#); [Rosenfeld et al., 2020](#); [Sirieix et al., 2023](#)). In fact, according to [Habib et al. \(2024\)](#) veganism is not simply perceived as a dietary behaviour, but as a lifestyle based on some moral aspects – as the refusal of any form of animal suffering – that meat-eaters neglect, and tend to deny ([Joy, 2020](#); [Monteiro et al., 2017](#)). This moral perspective has the potential to threaten meat-eaters status quo and their self-image ([Bagci et al., 2022](#)). To mitigate this threat, we have drawn from the Common Ingroup Identity Model ([Gaertner and Dovidio, 2014](#)), which argues that priming a common identity can reduce the polarization between two groups, and from the social identity theory, which identifies the primary aspects of individual identification shaped by a group comprised of individual members (e.g., [Tajfel and Turner, 2004](#)). Building on these two streams of research, we argue that a mitigation of the threat triggered by a plant-based diet on meat-eaters can help fostering more sustainable food consumption choices among these consumers.

Harnessing the common identity shared among meat-eaters and their connection to plant-based food is crucial in promoting the transition to plant-based diets. By framing plant-based choices as extensions of familiar dietary habits rather than stark departures, individuals are more likely to embrace change. Therefore, leveraging this common identity fosters acceptance, minimizes resistance, and paves the way for a more inclusive and sustainable food culture.

In particular, through four experimental studies using a total sample of 560 European participants, encompassing various nationalities (i.e., UK, Italy, France, Spain) and age groups (i.e., GenZ, Millennials), we introduced an intervention based on common identity theory. We demonstrated that priming plant-based food through a common ground to which many people can subscribe (i.e., common identity) can reduce the meat-eaters' identity threat, promoting, in turn, their willingness to buy plant-based food. Moreover, we shed light on the underpinning mechanisms explaining the positive relationships between common identity prime and intention to buy plant-based food among meat-eaters: meat-eaters identification, and identity threat.

Our findings contribute to literature of plant-based food promotion and common identity theory, identifying how the common identity priming impacts meat-eaters' behavioural intentions, finding a novel and effective communication tool and its underpinning mechanisms (i.e., meat-eaters identity threat and meat-eaters identification). The results can assist food marketers, retailers and policy makers in developing effective marketing strategies for promoting a more sustainable diet.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

2.1. Plant-based food consumption

A vegan, or completely plant-based diet, is characterized by the avoidance of all animal-derived foods, including meat, poultry, fish, eggs, and dairy products ([Lea et al., 2006](#)). Previous studies showed that plant-based food consumption can be promoted by leveraging the environmental sustainability of these foods (e.g., [Maduku, 2024](#); [Bublitz et al., 2023](#); [Krizanova et al., 2021](#)), as well as their health benefits (e.g., [Kemper et al., 2023](#); [Hansen et al., 2023](#)), and the ethical aspects related to animal welfare (e.g., [De Boer and Aiking, 2022](#); [Pohmann, 2021](#)). Similarly, compassion toward animals and rejection of any form of animal cruelty have been identified as relevant factors in lowering barriers to plant-based diets ([Bastian and Loughnan, 2017](#)). Other relevant enablers of the adoption of a plant-based diet are positive social influences (e.g., [Cramer et al., 2017](#); [Hielkema and Lund, 2021](#)), food curiosity ([Hwang et al., 2020](#)), perceived ease of cooking ([Reipurth et al., 2019](#)), situational appropriateness ([Michel et al., 2021](#)), and the desire to follow global trends ([Hawkins et al., 2020](#)). Finally, as food consumption is often perceived as a form of self-expression ([Rosenfeld and Burrow, 2017](#); [White et al., 2022](#)), social identity aspects associated to meat avoidance also emerged as relevant factors explaining consumers' openness to follow a plant-based diet ([Rosenfeld et al., 2020](#)).

On the other hand, previous literature also underlined several factors preventing individuals from the adoption of a plant-based diet, as sensory properties of plant-based foods (e.g., taste and texture, [Jaeger et al., 2023](#); [Spendrup and Hovmalm, 2022](#)), their higher prices and lower variety and availability compared to meat-based products ([Van Den Berg et al., 2022](#); [Hansen et al., 2023](#)), consumers' food neophobia ([Hielkema and Lund, 2021](#)), and low food literacy ([Bublitz et al., 2023](#)). In addition, the low consumption of plant-based foods is also partly the result of a status quo bias applied to individuals' eating patterns ([Graça et al., 2015](#)) and a strong attachment to meat ([Van Den Berg et al., 2022](#)). Relatedly, identity-incongruence and the cultural meaning associated to meat reduction may also hamper the adoption of plant-based foods ([De Boer and Aiking, 2022](#)). In fact, the adoption of a plant-based diet is more difficult to achieve in countries where meat consumption is strongly associated with masculine identity ([Mertens and Oberhoff, 2023](#)) and where meat eating contributes to identify individuals' culture ([Barrena and Sánchez, 2009](#)). [Table 2](#) synthesizes previous contributions related to plant-based food consumption, distinguishing between its enablers and barriers.

2.2. Identity in decision making

The role of identity in decision making has been widely discussed among multiple disciplines, such as psychology ([Hornsey, 2008](#)), political psychology ([Huddy, 2001](#)) and consumer behavior ([Oyserman, 2009](#)). Individuals have their own personal identity, consisting of their traits, characteristics and goals. At the same time, they also have a social identity: in this case, the traits, characteristics and goals are related to a social group to which an individual belongs or to a group to which he or she aspires to belong ([Oyserman, 2009](#)). For example, past theories about social identity (e.g., Social Identity Approach, [Kreindler et al., 2012](#); Social-Identity Theory, [Tajfel and Turner, 2004](#); Self-Categorization Theory, [Maines, 1989](#)) state that people can categorize themselves and others in in-groups ("us") or out-groups ("them") ([Kreindler et al., 2012](#)). According to the same stream of research, individuals tend to favorite their ingroups, even when represented only by a label ([Diehl, 1990](#); [Huddy, 2001](#)), since they are motivated to have a positive idea of themselves ([Hornsey, 2008](#)).

Another important concept about identity is based on the fact that individuals deal with multiple identities (e.g., [Kreindler et al., 2012](#)). For instance, a person can be at the same time a student, a citizen of a specific Country, a Millennial, and even an artist. Therefore, it is critical

Table 2
Enablers and barriers of plant-based food consumption.

Enablers	References
Environmental concern	Maduku (2024) Heijnk et al. (2023) Bublitz et al. (2023) Krizanova et al. (2021) Tandon et al. (2020)
Health concern and wellbeing	Hansen et al. (2023) Kemper et al. (2023) Henn et al. (2022)
Animal and ethical concern	D'Souza et al., 2022 De Boer and Aiking, 2022 Pohlmann (2021)
Positive social influence	Hielkema and Lund (2021) Cramer et al. (2017)
Personality traits (e.g., openness, universalism, altruism)	Bates et al. (2023) Beverland (2014)
Perceived ease of cooking	Reipurth et al. (2019)
Food curiosity	Hwang et al. (2020)
Situational appropriateness	Michel et al. (2021)
Desire to follow global trends	Hawkins et al. (2020)
Barriers	References
Taste and Texture	Jaeger et al. (2023) Spændrup and Hovmalm (2022) Grasso et al. (2022)
Food neophobia	D'Souza (2022) Hielkema and Lund (2021)
Meat default choice	Van Den Berg et al. (2022) Wang and Scrimgeour (2021)
High prices	Hansen et al. (2023) Van Den Berg et al. (2022)
Cultural meat attachment	Mertens and Oberhoff (2023) De Boer and Aiking, 2022
Negative social influence	Crimarco et al. (2020)
Low food literacy	Bublitz et al. (2023)
Low variety and availability	Hansen et al. (2023)

to understand why and how certain identities can become salient and influence decision making. Two examples of elements that can influence the identity salience process are the individual social context (Kreindler et al., 2012; Oyserman, 2009), and the priming of a specific element (e.g., Zinn et al., 2023).

Moreover, social identity has been demonstrated to affect purchase behavior, as products can reflect consumers' part of the self (Belk, 1988), or their desired identity (Berger and Heath, 2007). More recently, the role of the identity connected to consumption has been studied in contexts such as sustainability and technology (e.g., White et al., 2019; Leung et al., 2018; Leung et al., 2022), and also in the context of sustainable food consumption (e.g., Randers and Thøgersen, 2023; White et al., 2019). In particular, Davis and Papies (2022) found that communication about meat-based food is mainly related to the food domain, while communications about meat-free food is mainly related to the identity domain. Moreover, according to Zinn et al. (2023) priming a sustainable identity can promote the choice of meat-free items.

Given the promising findings that have already been acknowledged about identity in sustainable food consumption, the objective of the present research is to define an intervention that can promote plant-based food consumption among meat-eaters leveraging the identity concept.

2.3. Identity and plant-based food consumption

Meat consumption has a long tradition in western culture, as often literature refers to "Meat culture" (Dagevos, 2021) or "ideology of carnism" (Monteiro et al., 2017). Indeed, meat consumption has a strong symbolic value that goes beyond the mere pleasure of eating meat (Dagevos, 2021), as it is associated with concepts such as power, status

and social dominance (Bagci et al., 2022). These associations can also lead to the perception of a connected identity among meat-eaters. Indeed, previous literature shows that meat-eaters tend to perceive negatively people that do not follow their same diet (Rosenfeld, 2018). Relatedly, De Groeve et al. (2019) claim that even among different dietary patterns, there exists a phenomenon called *ingroup-outgroup bias*, defined as the tendency of people to prefer members of their group and perceive outgroup members negatively (Brewer, 1999). This concept has been largely studied in the literature about affective polarization in political orientation (Iyengar et al., 2019). One way to mitigate this polarization has been proposed by the Common Ingroup Identity Model (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2014), according to which priming individuals characterized by different identities through a common identity can reduce the ingroup-outgroup bias between the two opposite groups. For example, individuals supporting two different political parties (e.g., republicans vs. democrats) can be primed with a common identity as nationality or University affiliation (e.g., being American, belonging to a particular University) reducing, therefore, the negative perceptions towards individuals supporting the opposite party (see Levendusky, 2018).

We propose the presence of a similar polarization also for individuals following different dietary patterns, as veganism and carnivorousism, with meat-eaters presenting a negative attitude towards vegans and therefore towards plant-based foods. In fact, vegan consumers usually form a group affiliation with other meat avoiders, while considering meat-eaters as an outgroup (Greenebaum, 2012; Rosenfeld and Burrow, 2017; Sirieix et al., 2023). In this sense vegans can be perceived as activists that seek to impose their views on others (Habib et al., 2024). According to Branscombe et al. (1999), the idea that the values of a group are undervalued is one of the possible forms of identity threat. In fact, a plant-based item, and therefore a vegan identity, can emphasize the environmental and social issues that eating meat can entail (Bagci et al., 2022), and this can evoke defensive reactions among meat-eaters (De Groeve et al., 2019; Rothgerber, 2014). Indeed, meat-eaters generally tend to perceive a plant-based diet as a threat to their status of carnist ideology (Dhont and Hodson, 2014; Minson and Monin, 2012). This indicates that the perception of identity threat can act as a barrier preventing meat-eaters from embracing a plant-based diet: Meat-eaters may feel threatened by vegans' dietary choices, which keeps them from adopting plant-based options to safeguard their identity. Therefore, according to the Common Ingroup Identity Model (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2014) we propose that priming plant-based foods with a common identity can reduce the meat-eaters' negative identity threat and therefore increase their intention to buy plant-based food.

Formally.

H1. Priming a common (vs. vegan) identity on plant-based food will increase meat-eaters willingness to buy via identity threat reduction.

According to the social identity theory, individuals can have multiple identities (Bahl and Milne, 2010; Ma et al., 2023) and once a particular identity is primed it can influence the individual (Ma et al., 2023; Tajfel and Turner, 2004). This means that identity threat may not be activated if the corresponding identity is not primed. For example, female sport students tend to find knee injuries more threatening when their sport identity, rather than their gender identity, is primed (Levine and Reicher, 1996). Therefore, we claim that meat-eaters, in order to perceive identity threat, needs to have their identity as meat-eaters salient. Conversely, when another identity is primed, the meat-eater identity salience is reduced and consequently, identity threat is not experienced. Although there are several ways in which an identity can be primed (see for example, Charness and Chen, 2020), literature claims that a particular identity becomes salient also when there is the exposure to an opposite one. For example, white people identity about being white becomes salient when they are exposed to other ethnic groups (Knowles and Peng, 2005; Perry, 2002). Therefore, we claim that a meat-eater exposed to a communication about plant-based food with a



Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

message frame that emphasizes vegan identities can make the meat-eater identity salient (i.e., increases meat-eaters identification), leading to defensive reactions, with consequent increase of the meat-eater's identity threat (Rothgerber, 2014). Conversely, when the message frame emphasizes a common identity (e.g., being a food lover), it reduces the meat-eater identity salience (i.e., decreases meat-eaters identification), leading to less perception of threat and less resistance to the product. Therefore, we propose that the underpinning mechanism between common identity and meat-eater identity threat is the meat-eaters identification, and that a common (vs. a vegan) identity priming can increase meat-eaters intention to buy plant-based food via reduction of meat-eaters identification and, in turn, meat-eaters' identity threat (see Fig. 1). Formally.

H2. The relationship between common (vs. vegan) identity and identity threat is mediated by meat-eaters identification.

H3. *Meat-eaters will be more willing to buy plant-based food when it is presented through a common (vs. vegan) identity because of lower meat-eaters identification, that in turn decreases meat-eaters' identity threat.*

3. Method

We tested our conceptual model through four experimental studies. To align with the scope of the present research, we selected the European population for empirical analysis. This decision was informed by European institutions' emphasis on transitioning towards sustainable and inclusive food systems.¹

The objective of the first study is to get initial insights about our conceptualization, namely that common (vs. vegan) identification priming decreases meat-eater's identity threat and therefore increases meat-eaters' willingness to buy (WTB) plant-based food. In Study 2, we get further evidence of the underpinning mechanism explaining the relationship between common identity priming and the reduction of meat-eaters' identity threat, namely the meat-eaters identification. Finally, in Study 3a we tested our third hypothesis showing that a common (vs. vegan) identity priming increases meat-eaters' WTB plant-based food because a common identity decreases the meat-eaters identification and therefore reduces the identity threat normally associated with plant-based food. In order to show the robustness of the proposed effects, Study 3 b replicated our findings considering a more straightforward identification manipulation and using a different plant-based food (i.e., packed plant-based meatballs instead of plant-based burger).

It should be noted that, in all studies, the proposed scenarios were the same except for the identity manipulation. Moreover, consistent with previous literature (e.g., Hornsey and Hogg, 2000), in each of the manipulations we refer to the recall of a specific identity with "identity priming", whereas we use "message framing" when discussing the way plant-based food is promoted through a message.

3.1. Study 1

Study 1 is aimed at investigating the effect that common identity priming has on meat eaters' identity threat and in turn on meat eaters' WTB plant-based food. Specifically, the study tests whether meat eaters will respond more positively to plant-based food when it is framed through a common rather than a vegan identity because a common identity lowers meat-eaters' identity threat perceptions.

3.1.1. Sampling and procedure

The study employed a 2 (Identity priming: common vs. vegan) \times 1 between-subjects design. We recruited a convenience sample of 140 participants (80 Females, 2 non-binary; $M_{age} = 41.52$, $SD_{age} = 13.63$) from the UK on Prolific platform (i.e., <https://www.prolific.com>) in exchange for a small financial compensation. At the beginning of the study participants were asked to attentively read an advertisement about a plant-based burger and then reply to some questions related to it. Specifically, depending on the condition, subjects were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions showing a restaurant advertisement with a fictitious spokesperson offering a plant-based (i.e., lentil) burger. In the common identity priming condition, the burger was presented as appealing "fun lovers" as portrayed by the spokesperson (i.e., Mark, see Appendix A), whereas in the vegan identity priming condition, the burger and the spokesperson were framed as targeting "vegan food lovers". We chose this manipulation for the common identity as the pursuit of enjoyment has been recognized as an important motivator of people's behaviours in modern society (Bourdieu, 2018). After reading the advertisement, participants were asked to indicate their willingness to buy the plant-based burger previously presented (Dodds et al., 1991; $\alpha = 0.95$, $M_{WTB} = 2.70$, $SD = 1.52$) and then they replied to the 8-items of the meat-eater identity threat scale (Dhont and Hodson, 2014; $\alpha = 0.94$, $M_{IT} = 3.46$, $SD = 1.42$). Specifically, participants were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the scale statements based on the advertisement they had just seen. Subsequently, we administered a manipulation check question asking respondents to what extent they agreed that the spokesperson (i.e., Mark) depicted in the advertisement was representative of the values of vegan lovers (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Finally, participants were asked some demographics questions such as age, gender and their current dietary habits (1 = omnivore, 2 = vegetarian, 3 = vegan). All the scales were pre-validated and measured on a 7-point scales (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) and are presented in Appendix E.

3.1.2. Results

Since our objective was to promote plant-based food consumption among meat-eaters, we checked for participants who identified as either vegetarian or vegan. Based on their responses, we excluded a total of 22 subjected. Therefore, we performed the final analysis with a sample of 118 UK participants (67 Females, 1 non-binary; $M_{age} = 42.13$, $SD_{age} = 13.54$).

Firstly, we verified our manipulation through an independent sample *t*-test which revealed that respondents perceived the spokesperson in the vegan (versus common) identity condition as significantly more

¹ https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/research-area/environment/bioeconomy/food-systems/food-2030_en.

Table 3
Study 1, 2, 3 4 results.

	STUDY 1		STUDY 2		STUDY 3a			STUDY 3 b		
	Meat eaters identity threat	WTB PBF	Meat-eaters Identification	Meat-eaters identity threat	Meat-eaters Identification	Meat-eaters identity threat	WTB PBF	Meat-eaters Identification	Meat-eaters identity threat	WTB PBF
Identity Priming (Fun lovers vs. vegan food lovers)	-0.79***	-0.23**								
Indirect effect	$b = 0.18, 95\% [CI] = 0.26; 0.38$									
Identity Priming (GenZ vs. Vegan)			-0.50**	0.37***						
Indirect effect			$b = 0.19, 95\% [CI] = -0.36; -0.02$							
Identity Priming (Travel Lovers vs. Vegan)					-1.16***	0.70***	-0.35***			
Indirect Effect					$b = 0.28, 95\% [CI] = 0.1142; 0.5575$					
Identity Priming (Good Food vs. Vegan Food)								-0.59***	0.48***	-0.23**
Env. Concern Food Neophobia								-0.61***	-0.07	0.21*
Indirect Effect→								-0.09	-0.04	-0.062
								$b = 0.07, 95\% [CI] = 0.0049; 0.2232$		

Notes. * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$.

representative of vegan values ($M_{\text{veg}} = 3.95, SD = 1.48, M_{\text{fun}} = 3.22, SD = 1.54, t(116) = 2.63, p = 0.01$). Subsequently, we conducted a mediation analysis (MODEL 4 of PROCESS MACRO; Hayes, 2017) to test H1, wherein identity priming (0 = “vegan”; 1 = “common”) predicted meat eaters’ identity threat which, in turn, predicted WTB plant-based food.

Results revealed that the exposure to the common identity (i.e., fun lovers) negatively affected meat-eater’s identity threat ($b = -0.79, se = 0.26, t = -3.01, p < 0.01$) which, in turn, negatively affected consumers’ WTB plant-based food ($b = -0.23, se = 0.09, t = -2.49, p = 0.01$). The direct effect of common identity on WTB was not significant ($b = -0.23, se = 0.26, 95\% [CI] = -0.75; 0.30$), however, the indirect effect of meat-eater’s identity threat turned out to be statistically significant ($b = 0.18, se = 0.09, 95\% [CI] = 0.26; 0.38$). As a consequence, findings of Study 1 (see Table 3) provide full support to H₁.

3.1.3. Discussion

In Study 1, we tested H₁ by manipulating the primed identity (vegan food lover vs. fun lovers, with fun lovers as the common identity) in a restaurant advertisement promoting a lentil burger. The results indicate that exposing meat-eaters to plant-based food promoted through a common (vs. vegan) identity increases their willingness to purchase the plant-based burger because the common (vs. vegan) identity diminishes their sense of identity threat.

3.2. Study 2

The objective of Study 2 is to get additional evidence of the underpinning mechanism explaining the relationship between common identity priming and the reduction of meat-eaters’ identity threat, namely the meat-eaters identification. Moreover, we want to extend the proposed results by examining a different common identity manipulation and a different type of plant-based food (i.e., pumpkin burger).

3.2.1. Sampling and procedure

The study employed a 2 (Identity priming: common vs. vegan) \times 1 between-subjects design. We recruited a convenience sample of 239 international students from a large European University, all belonging to the Generation Z (157 Females, 1 non-binary, $M_{\text{age}} = 22.27, SD = 0.98,$

$Min_{\text{age}} = 21, Max_{\text{age}} = 26$) in exchange for a bonus course credit.

Similarly to Study 1, participants were initially asked to carefully read an advertisement and then respond to some questions related to it. Depending on the condition, subjects were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions showing an online advertisement of a fictitious plant-based burger (i.e., Pumpkin Burger) promoted by a fictitious spokesperson (i.e., Mark, see Appendix B). In the vegan condition, the spokesperson was depicted as a vegan consumer, embodying the specific characteristics associated with such consumers, such as criticism towards market-led food norms (Gvion, 2022), engagement in political consumerism (e.g., Sandovici and Davis, 2010), consumption of non-animal-based products (Haenfler et al., 2012), and ethical concerns about their consumptions (Micheletti and Stolle, 2012). In the common identity priming condition, the spokesperson was portrayed as a GenZ consumer, characterized as highly educated, inclusive and digital native (Djafarova and Bowes, 2021). After reading the advertisement, participants were asked to answer to the meat-eaters’ identification (MacInnis and Hodson, 2017; $\alpha = 0.88; M_{\text{meatid}} = 3.52, SD = 1.59$), and to meat-eaters’ identity threat (Dhont and Hodson, 2014; $\alpha = 0.87; M_{\text{threat}} = 2.8, SD = 1.17$) scales, respectively (see Appendix E).

Two items manipulation check measures were then administered, asking participants to rate the extent to which they agreed that the spokesperson of the online advertising represented all the values of the Gen Z community and those of the vegan community (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

Finally, demographic questions regarding gender, age and dietary habits (1 = omnivore, 2 = vegetarian, 3 = vegan) were administered and then participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

3.2.2. Results

Since our objective was to promote plant-based food among meat-eaters, similar to Study 1, we first checked for participants who identified as either vegetarian or vegan. Based on the results, we excluded a total of 14 subjects.

Therefore, we performed our analyses with a sample of 225 participants (147 Females, $M_{\text{age}} = 22.21, SD = 0.95, Min_{\text{age}} = 21, Max_{\text{age}} = 26$).

Firstly, we checked the goodness of our manipulations. Results of two independent sample t-tests showed that manipulation checks were

both successful, as respondents perceived the spokesperson in the common identity (vs. vegan) priming condition as significantly representing the values of the GenZ community ($M_{\text{genz}} = 4.11$, $SD = 1.47$, $M_{\text{veg}} = 3.49$, $SD = 1.36$, $t(223) = 3.27$, $p = 0.001$), and the spokesperson in vegan identity priming (vs. common) condition as significantly representing the values of the vegan community ($M_{\text{veg}} = 5.54$, $SD = 1.28$; $M_{\text{genz}} = 3.97$, $SD = 1.55$, $t(223) = 8.26$, $p < 0.001$).

Subsequently, in order to test H_2 we conducted a mediation analysis (MODEL 4 of PROCESS MACRO, Hayes, 2017), wherein identity (0 = “vegan”; 1 = “common”) priming predicted meat-eaters identification which, in turn, predicted meat-eaters identity threat.

Results revealed that the exposure to the common identity (i.e., Gen Z identification) negatively affected meat-eaters identification ($b = -0.50$, $se = 0.27$, $t = -2.20$, $p < 0.05$) which, in turn, positively affected meat-eaters identity threat ($b = 0.37$, $se = 0.05$, $t = 7.90$, $p < 0.001$). The direct effect of the common identity manipulation on identity threat was not significant ($b = -0.06$, $se = 0.15$, 95% [CI] = -0.35 ; 0.24). However, the indirect effect of common (i.e., Gen Z) identity manipulation on identity threat turned out to be statistically significant ($b = -0.19$, $se = 0.09$, 95% [CI] = -0.36 ; -0.02). As a consequence, findings of Study 2 (see Table 3) provide full support to H_2 .

3.2.3. Discussion

In Study 2, we tested H_2 by manipulating the primed identity (vegan vs. GenZ, with GenZ as the common identity) through an online advertisement of a pumpkin burger. The results indicate that exposing GenZ meat-eaters to plant-based food promoted through a common (vs. vegan) identity diminishes their sense of identity threat due to their lower identification with the meat-eaters group.

3.3. Study 3a

The objective of Study 3a is to provide further insights into the psychological drivers of the effect observed in Study 1 and Study 2 by demonstrating that meat-eaters will show a higher WTB plant-based food when the latter is framed through a common (vs. vegan) identity. This effect is hypothesized to occur because the common identity diminishes meat-eaters identification, subsequently reducing the activation of meat-eaters' identity threat triggered by plant-based food advertisements. In doing that, this study seeks to replicate previous findings using a different common identity manipulation (i.e., travel lover) and introducing a female spokesperson (i.e., Carol) to mitigate potential gender effect. Furthermore, to enhance generalizability of the findings, a different sample consisting of Italian consumers from the adult population is considered.

3.3.1. Sampling and procedure

Study 3a employed a 2 (Identity priming: common vs. vegan) \times 1 between-subjects design. We recruited a judgmental sample of 107 Italian meat-eaters (66 Females, $M_{\text{age}} = 27.27$, $SD = 9.08$) through social networks (i.e., Facebook, LinkedIn, WhatsApp). A research assistant, unaware of the study's objective was tasked with recruiting volunteer adult participants (i.e., at least 18 years old) who identified as meat-eaters, through their social media networks. The research assistant was instructed to distribute the study only to individuals who identified as meat-eaters. Specifically, subjects who agreed to participate were asked to indicate their dietary habits (1 = omnivore, 2 = vegetarian, 3 = vegan). Those who did not follow an omnivorous diet were automatically directed to the end of the study. Conversely, participants who declared themselves as omnivores were directed to the experiment, where they were asked to carefully read an online advertising and respond to questions related to it. Depending on the condition, omnivore participants were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions, where they viewed an Instagram story advertisement featuring a fictitious plant-based burger (i.e., Pumpkin Burger) promoted by a fictitious spokesperson (i.e., Carol, see Appendix C). In the

vegan condition, the spokesperson was portrayed as a vegan consumer, utilizing a description similar to that in Study 2. In the common identity condition, the spokesperson was depicted as a travel lover, namely as a person enjoying exploring new places and learning about different cultures. We opted for this manipulation of common identity because “travels” and tourism are widely acknowledged as significant drivers of sensory and experiential consumer behaviour in contemporary society (Williams, 2006).

After the advertisement exposure, participants were asked to indicate their WTB the advertised plant-based burger (Dodds et al., 1991; $\alpha = 0.98$; $M_{\text{wtb}} = 4.16$, $SD = 2.17$), their level of meat-eaters identification (MacInnis and Hodson, 2017; $\alpha = 0.93$; $M_{\text{meatid}} = 3.82$, $SD = 2.10$), and then their perceived identity threat (Dhont and Hodson, 2014; $\alpha = 0.97$; $M_{\text{threat}} = 3.02$, $SD = 2.07$) (see Table 3).

Subsequently, two items manipulation check measures were administered, asking participants to rate the extent to which they agreed that the online advertising spokesperson represented all the values of the vegan community and all the values of the travel lovers' community (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Finally, demographic questions as gender and age were administered and then subjects were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

3.3.2. Results

Consistent with the purposive nature of the sample, all the participants declared to follow an omnivore diet, consequently we did not remove any subject from our initial sample.

As for previous studies, we firstly checked the goodness of our manipulations. Results of two independent sample t-tests showed that manipulation checks were both successful, as respondents perceived the spokesperson in the common identity (vs. vegan) priming condition as representing the values of the travel lovers community ($M_{\text{veg}} = 1.55$, $SD = 1.19$, $M_{\text{travel}} = 5.16$, $SD = 2.28$, $t(110) = -10.50$, $p < 0.001$), and the spokesperson in the vegan identity (vs. common) priming condition as representing the values of the vegan community ($M_{\text{veg}} = 5.00$, $SD = 2.08$, $M_{\text{travel}} = 1.98$, $SD = 1.66$, $t(110) = 8.49$, $p < 0.001$).

Subsequently, in order to test H_3 we run a serial mediation analysis (PROCESS MACRO MODEL 6; Hayes, 2017) with common identity priming as the independent variable (0 = “Vegan”, 1 = “Travel Lover”), meat-eaters identification as the first mediator, meat-eaters identity threat as the second mediator, and WTB plant-based food as the dependent variable. Results showed that the exposure to the common identity (i.e., “travel lovers”) had a negative influence on meat-eaters identification ($b = -1.16$, $se = 0.17$, $t = -7.01$, $p < 0.001$) which, in turn, positively affected meat-eaters identity threat ($b = 0.70$, $se = 0.07$, $t = 9.81$, $p < 0.001$) and, in turn, negatively influenced WTB plant-based food ($b = -0.35$, $se = 0.09$, $t = -3.61$, $p < 0.001$). The common identity exposure did not affect identity threat ($b = -0.22$, $se = 0.15$, $t = -1.48$, $p ns$), however it significantly and positively affected consumers' WTB plant-based food ($b = 0.70$, $se = 0.15$, $t = 4.57$, $p < 0.001$), whereas meat-eater identification negatively and significantly affected consumers' WTB plant-based food ($b = -0.28$, $se = 0.09$, $t = -2.87$, $p = 0.005$).

The direct effect of the common identity (i.e., “Travel Lover”) on WTB was positive and significant ($b = 0.69$, $se = 0.15$, 95% [CI] = 0.3839 ; 0.9979) as well as the indirect effect of meat-eaters identity ($b = 0.69$ $se = 0.15$, 95% [CI] = 0.4426 ; 1.0136) and the indirect effect of identity threat ($b = 0.08$, $se = 0.48$, 95% [CI] = 0.0074 ; 0.2067). More importantly, the overall indirect effect of meat-eaters identification and identity threat on WTB plant-based food ($b = 0.28$, $se = 0.11$, 95% [CI] = 0.1142 ; 0.5575). Therefore, findings of Study 3a (see Table 3) provide full support to H_3 .

3.3.3. Discussion

In Study 3a, we tested H_3 by manipulating the primed identity (vegan vs. travel lover, with travel lover as the common identity) through a digital advertisement (Instagram story) of a pumpkin burger.

Differently from the other studies conducted in this research, the advertisement featured a female spokesperson. The results confirm that exposing meat-eaters to plant-based food promoted through a common (vs. vegan) identity diminishes their identification with the meat-eaters group. Consequently, this reduction in identification diminishes their sense of identity threat, resulting in a higher WTB plant-based food.

3.4. Study 3 b

The objective of Study 3 b is to replicate and extend the findings of Study 3a using a more straightforward identification manipulation (i.e., “good food lover” vs. “vegan food lover”) and a different category of plant-based food: a package of plant-based (i.e., mushroom) meatballs. For this purpose, we employed a judgmental sampling, targeting European adult meat-eater consumers. Additionally, to investigate potential alternative explanations, we measured consumers’ environmental concerns, given the sustainable nature of plant-based food (Martinelli and De Canio, 2021), as well as consumers’ food neophobia, which has been identified as a possible barrier to the diffusion of plant-based food among meat-eaters (Hielkema and Lund, 2021).

3.4.1. Sampling and procedure

Study 3 b employed a 2 (Identity priming: common vs. vegan) \times 1 between-subjects design. We recruited a judgmental sample of 110 European meat-eaters subjects (69 Females, $M_{age} = 27.32$, $SD = 11.98$; 73% French, 27% Spanish) through three research assistants who were not aware of the study’s objective. Each research assistant was tasked with recruiting at least 35 volunteer adult participants (i.e., at least 18 years old) who identified as meat-eaters through their social media networks (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn).

As in Study 3a, the research assistants were instructed to distribute the study to meat-eaters only. Participants who agreed to participate were asked to indicate their dietary habits (1 = omnivore, 2 = vegetarian, 3 = vegan), and those who indicated they did not follow an omnivorous diet were directed to the end of the study. Conversely, participants declaring themselves as omnivores were asked to carefully examine a food package and respond to questions related to it. Specifically, omnivore participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions, where they viewed a plant-based meatballs package presenting an advertising claim. In the common identity priming condition, the plant-based meatballs package was advertised as for “good food lovers”, whereas in the vegan identity priming condition, it was advertised as for “vegan food lovers” (see Appendix D).

As in Study 3a, after the plant-based food package exposure, participants were asked to indicate their WTB the advertised food package (Dodds et al., 1991; $\alpha = 0.93$; $M_{wtb} = 3.24$, $SD = 1.56$), their level of meat-eaters identification (MacInnis and Hodson, 2017; $\alpha = 0.85$; $M_{meatid} = 3.31$, $SD = 1.79$) and their perceived identity threat (Dhont and Hodson, 2014; $\alpha = 0.91$; $M_{threat} = 2.89$, $SD = 1.47$). Then, a manipulation check measure was administered asking participants to rate the extent to which they agreed that the plant-based meatballs were target for vegan food lovers (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Moreover, participants were asked to indicate their environmental concerns (Haws, et al., 2014; $\alpha = 0.92$; $M_{wtb} = 4.80$, $SD = 1.23$) and their food neophobia (Pliner and Hobden, 1992; $\alpha = 0.85$; $M_{wtb} = 2.82$, $SD = 1.28$) (see Appendix E). Finally, demographic questions as gender and age and nationality were administered and then subjects were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

3.4.2. Results

Consistent with the purposive nature of the sample, all the participants declared to follow an omnivore diet, consequently we did not remove any subject from our initial sample.

We firstly checked the goodness of our manipulation. Results of an independent sample *t*-test showed that manipulation check was successful, as respondents perceived that the meatballs advertised as for

“Vegan (vs. Good) food lovers” were significantly targeted for vegan consumers ($M_{veg} = 4.67$, $SD = 1.62$, $M_{food} = 3.80$, $SD = 1.79$, $t(115) = 2.75$, $p < 0.01$).

Then, similarly to Study 3a, we run a serial mediation analysis (PROCESS MACRO MODEL 6; Hayes, 2017) with common identity priming as the independent variable (1 = “Good food lover”, 0 = “Vegan food lover”), meat-eaters identification as the first mediator, meat-eaters identity threat as the second mediator, and WTB plant-based food package as the dependent variable. Results showed that the exposure to the common identity had a negative influence on meat-eaters identification ($b = -0.59$, $se = 0.30$, $t = -1.97$, $p = 0.05$) which, in turn, positively affected meat-eaters identity threat ($b = 0.48$, $se = 0.07$, $t = 6.61$, $p < 0.001$) and, in turn, negatively influenced WTB plant-based food ($b = -0.23$, $se = 0.11$, $t = -2.11$, $p = 0.04$).

Similar to Study 3a, the common identity exposure did not affect identity threat ($b = -0.11$, $se = 0.23$, $t = -0.49$, p ns), however it positively and marginally affected consumers’ WTB plant-based food ($b = 0.44$, $se = 0.26$, $t = 1.72$, $p = 0.08$), whereas meat-eater identification negatively and significantly affected consumers’ WTB plant-based food ($b = -0.24$, $se = 0.97$, $t = -2.46$, $p = 0.01$).

Among the covariates, environmental concerns significantly and negatively affected meat eaters’ identification ($b = -0.61$, $se = 0.12$, $t = -4.87$, $p < 0.001$) whereas it did not affect identity threat ($b = -0.07$, $se = 0.10$, $t = -0.71$, p ns), and it marginally affected consumers’ WTB plant-based food package ($b = 0.21$, $se = 0.12$, $t = 1.79$, $p = 0.07$). Food neophobia did not affect meat eaters’ identification ($b = -0.09$, $se = 0.12$, $t = -0.75$, p ns), identity threat ($b = -0.04$, $se = 0.09$, $t = -0.44$, p ns) and consumers’ WTB plant-based food ($b = -0.62$, $se = 0.99$, $t = -0.62$, p ns).

The direct effect of the common identity (i.e., “Good food lover”) on WTB plant-based food package was positive but not significant ($b = 0.44$, $se = 0.26$, 95% [CI] = -0.0685 ; 0.9554), whereas the indirect effect of meat-eaters identity was significant and positive (0.14 , $se = 0.94$, 95% [CI] = 0.053 ; 0.4037), but the indirect effect of identity threat was not ($b = -0.03$, $se = 0.64$, 95% [CI] = -0.2087 ; 0.715). More importantly, the overall indirect effect of meat-eaters identification and meat-eaters identity threat on WTB plant-based food was positive and significant ($b = 0.07$, $se = 0.50$, 95% [CI] = 0.0049 ; 0.2232).

Therefore, findings of Study 3 b replicated H_3 (see Table 3).

3.4.3. Discussion

In Study 3 b, we tested H_3 by manipulating the primed identity (vegan food lover vs. good food lover, with good food lover as the common identity) through the packaging of plant-based meatballs. The results of the study confirmed those of Study 3a, indicating that exposing meat-eaters to plant-based food packages promoted through a common (vs. vegan) identity reduces their identification with the meat-eaters group. Consequently, this decrease in identification diminishes their sense of identity threat, resulting in a higher WTB plant-based food. Additionally, meat-eaters expressing high environmental concerns are more likely to demonstrate lower identification with meat-eaters and have a higher WTB plant-based food. Interestingly, contrary to previous research (i.e., Hielkema and Lund, 2021), food neophobia did not affect meat-eaters’ WTB plant-based food.

4. General discussion

The recognition of the necessity to reduce meat consumption in affluent nations is widely acknowledged (Habib et al., 2024; Sirieix et al., 2023), and a transition to more plant-based food consumption habits is encouraged (Springmann et al., 2018). Despite the various interventions suggested by prior studies (e.g., Sirieix et al., 2023; D’Souza, 2022; Martinelli and De Canio, 2021), data indicates that meat consumption continues to persist without a decline (Leiva, 2022). Interestingly, previous research has shown that following a vegan diet entails the development of a strong social identity through which people form a

group membership with other meat avoiders, considering meat-eaters as an outgroup (Greenebaum, 2012; Rosenfeld and Burrow, 2017). At the same time, meat-eaters tend to perceive plant-based food as a threat to their status quo, and therefore to their identity (Dhont and Hodson, 2014; Minson and Monin, 2012). As a result, meat-eaters' identity threat could be an important barrier to the diffusion of a diet more oriented to plant-based food consumption. Consequently, the present research wanted to propose an intervention aimed at promoting plant-based food acceptance among meat-eaters, reducing the perceived identity threat that plant-based food may trigger towards them.

Building on the Common Ingroup Identity Model (Gaertner et al., 1993) and on social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 2004) we demonstrated through four experimental studies that leveraging social identities associated with plant-based food can increase meat-eaters' WTBS. In particular, we showed that common (vs. vegan) identity priming decreases meat-eater's identity threat and therefore increases meat-eaters' WTBS plant-based food (Study 1), and that the relationship between common identity priming and the reduction of meat-eaters' identity threat is, in turn, explained by a decrease of the meat-eaters' identification (Study 2). Moreover, we demonstrated that the relationship between common (vs. vegan) identity priming and WTBS plant-based food is explained by the lower identification in the meat-eaters group and by the decreased meat-eaters' identity threat (Study 3a, 3b).

We provided robustness of the found results proposing different common identity elicitation, different plant-based food operationalizations, and showing that the proposed intervention can be effective both in advertising (Study 3a) and in retailing (Study 3b) setting.

4.1. Theoretical implications

From a theoretical perspective, we firstly contribute to plant-based food consumption literature (e.g., Habib et al., 2024; Sirieix et al., 2023) providing an intervention aimed at promoting the consumption of such a food among meat-eaters. In doing that, we proposed two underlying mechanisms that can be leveraged to foster willingness to buy plant-based food: the meat-eaters identification and the meat-eaters identity threat.

These results, in turn, contribute also to advertising literature, proposing interventions to increase the inclusivity of stigmatized products (e.g., Liu et al., 2023), and in particular to the stream of research on the marketing actions that traditional and online retailers can implement to mitigate consumers' pre-consumption avoidant responses to plant-based food products (Van Den Berg et al., 2022; Hansen et al., 2023).

Moreover, we contribute to the identity literature (e.g., Belk, 1988; Tajfel and Turner, 2004; Thompson and Hirschman, 1995) by investigating common identity manipulations in plant-based food effectiveness context. To the best of the authors knowledge, the present research is the first one that verified the Common Ingroup Identity Model (Gaertner et al., 1993) on plant-based food efficacy in terms of meat-eaters' WTBS. Despite previous studies investigated dietary behaviours from a social identity standpoint (e.g., Judge et al., 2022; Plante et al., 2019), none of them have built on the common identity perspective to propose concrete marketing interventions promoting plant-based food. Our results are in line with those proposed by Sirieix et al. (2023), underlying the strong common identity among vegan consumers that can constitute a barrier to the adoption of plant-based food by outside group members, as meat-eaters. Our findings are also in line with Zinn et al. (2023) in emphasizing the role that identity priming has on the promotion of plant-based food. While Zinn et al. (2023) proposed that priming a sustainable identity makes consumers more likely to choose a plant-based item, we tested the effect of a common identity on the WTBS plant-based food by applying cues of those identities on food advertising and packaging settings. In particular, our findings extend Zinn et al. (2023) results by demonstrating that also identities not connected to the sustainable benefit of plant-based food (e.g., fun lovers) are able to

increase plant-based food adoption.

Finally, we contribute to food packaging literature with particular reference to packaging design of plant-based food (e.g., Martinelli and De Canio, 2021) identifying in the presence of a common-identity claim an effective tool for promoting plant-based food. These results contrast those of Rosenfeld et al. (2022) according to which labelling items as vegetarian or vegan increases plant-based sales. Differently, our results propose that more common identity labels (i.e., good food lovers) are more effective than specific labels (i.e., vegan food lovers).

4.2. Managerial implications

Additionally, our research provides practical implications for food marketers and sustainable policy making. In particular, according to our findings the transition towards a higher consumption of meat alternatives can be promoted through institutional messages aimed at creating a sense of common and superordinate identity, rather than evoking the vegan identity. For example, we suggest avoiding words such as "vegan" or "veggie" that have been found to be not effective when promoting plant-based food (e.g., see Sleboda et al., 2024), and using words and claims able to leverage common values and identities, such as "food lovers" or "new experiences lovers". From a managerial perspective, firms can adopt advertising strategies that emphasize the inclusive nature of food to mitigate potential identity polarizations. Our results suggest that influencers and messaging embodying common identities can be powerful tools in this regard. Therefore, not only the choice of promotional texts aimed at fostering a common identity but also the selection of spokespersons who can represent shared values, such as love for sports, music, or travel, could effectively increase meat-eaters' identification and reduce identity threat associated with plant-based food.

In line with our findings, some companies are already implementing advertising strategies to create a sense of common identity between meat-eaters and vegans. For instance, Burger King's campaign "Confusing Times" promotes their plant-based items by depicting relatable dilemmas and scenarios that resonate with consumers regardless of their dietary preferences (Vegconomist, 2023).

Furthermore, our results suggest that incorporating claims or messages aimed at triggering a common identity can boost sales of plant-based foods. Therefore, the utilization of such claims is highly recommended, whether in-store on shelves or within specific sections of online retail platforms. Additionally, retailers can leverage claims promoting common identities to endorse their private labels of plant-based food packages, utilizing them in promotional flyers, web pages, or social media campaigns.

Moreover, we speculate that the positioning of plant-based food within stores can serve as a promotional tool. While dedicating a section to vegan and vegetarian food may cater to those following a plant-based diet, placing plant-based items in common areas without priming the vegan and vegetarian identity may attract meat-eaters. For example, Trewern et al. (2022) found that increasing the visibility of plant-based food in stores promoted the sales of these items. Our results support this effect by further demonstrating the impact of identity priming interventions.

4.3. Limitations and future research

The findings of our study provide multiple insights for various stakeholders, but the same should be interpreted by considering the following limitations. First, our results are based on meat-eaters, and the scope of the study is limited to the consumer perspective. At the same time, we did not consider the vegan consumers viewpoint, and how the proposed intervention can be perceived by them, and if it can contrast with the values of the vegan communities (e.g., Sirieix et al., 2023). Moreover, plant-based food packages are generally presented with third-party certifications, such as eco-labels (see Donato and Adigüzel,

2022), aimed at certifying the meat-free food composition. Further research could consider how the presence of such certifications can coexist with common-identity promotional messages claims targeting both meat-eaters and plant-based food eaters.

Third, the study sample consisted of Western consumers not representing the entire population because of the awareness level of plant-based food and its availability (Barone and Donato, 2024). Future research should consider other cultural contexts to validate whether our findings still hold in different settings. Fourth, from a methodological perspective, our four studies were conducted in controlled experimental settings and utilized self-reported data. While this approach ensures high internal validity, we suggest that future research should aim to test the external validity of our framework by studying consumer behaviour in real-world settings, monitoring actual meat-eaters' behaviours to acquire the most accurate data about plant-based food sales.

Fifth, although we primed several types of common identities, from belonging to Generation Z to being a food lover, future research could aim to validate our findings by considering different manipulations, such as the national identity. Moreover, while this work focused on communication strategies such as messages and packaging cues, it is important to consider that other marketing strategies could also play a role in testing our identity-based intervention. For example, identities can also be primed by elements related to a store or to a restaurant that may have a theme more focused on a common identity (e.g., a movie-themed restaurant), than on the type of food (vegan restaurant). Another intriguing aspect to consider is the manipulation of the colour of plant-based food packaging to evoke a common identity. Typically, vegan foods are associated with sustainable colours like green, aiming to reinforce associations with environmental values. However, future research could explore whether the increased willingness to buy plant-based food linked with a common (versus vegan) identity among meat-eaters is amplified when food packages are presented in non-sustainable colours, such as red or black.

Additionally, in the present research we did not take into account variables such as climate change and cruelty or ethical concerns related to animal welfare, and how priming these elements among meat-eaters could affect the found results. Further research can consider these variables with the objective of verifying if their salience could magnify or reduce the meat-eaters' identity threat, and therefore their WTB plant-based food.

Finally, our findings are only limited to plant-based food products. Future research could investigate if our results operate similarly for other foods that evoke avoidance or stigmatization, such as lab-grown meat and insect-based food.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, our research offers relevant insights for the promotion of plant-based food among meat-eaters, addressing a pressing need for sustainable dietary practices. By recognizing veganism not just as a dietary behaviour but as a lifestyle based on moral values, which can potentially threaten the status quo and self-image of meat-eaters, we propose an intervention aimed at overcoming the social identity-related barriers to plant-based food consumption. Specifically, through four experimental studies, we demonstrate the efficacy of promoting plant-based foods by priming a common (vs. vegan) identity, in reducing meat-eaters' identification and identity threat, and thus increasing their willingness to buy meat alternatives. In Study 1 we show that common (vs. vegan) identity priming decreases meat-eater's identity threat and therefore increases meat-eaters' WTB plant-based food. In Study 2 we demonstrate that the relationship between common identity priming and the reduction of meat-eaters' identity threat is, in turn, explained by a decrease in meat-eaters' identification. Finally, we establish that the relationship between common (vs. vegan) identity priming and WTB plant-based food is explained by the lower identification in the meat-eaters group, and by the decreased meat-eaters' identity threat (Study

3a, 3 b).

Our novel, social identity-related approach for promoting plant-based food can potentially inspire further exploration and implementation of identity-based interventions in the pursuit of a more sustainable food future.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Carmela Donato: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Luigi Monsurrò:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Martina Di Cioccio:** Writing – review & editing, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors whose names are listed immediately below certify that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2024.103863>.

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