



To be (meat) or not to be (meat)

Is cultured meat actually meat?

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Odd as it may sound, there is a considerable debate on whether cultured meat should be called meat or not. Supporters of this position state that the tissue is created from animal muscle cells, just like ordinary meat. Because cultured meat is made of animal cells it can be labelled as meat without any reservation. Opponents on the other hand claim that slaughter of an animal is central to producing meat and hence cultured meat should be labelled as a meat substitute.

The marketing consequences of the outcome of this debate could be massive. Meat products serve many more consumers than meat substitutes. So being able to sell cultured meat as meat would give producers access to many more buyers.

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In one of our previous studies (https://doi.org/10.4016/j.appet.2017.03.009) consumers stated that slaughtering an animal is central to their idea of meat. This position supports those who oppose cultured meat to be called meat. But in the same study consumers also suggested to be uncertain whether cultured meat was a meat substitute. After all, it was made from animal cells,

the argument used by those who claim cultured meat is in fact meat.

This undecided opinion made us engage in a new series of experiments. We wanted to figure out whether we could position cultured meat more easily as meat or meat substitute. To do so we asked consumers to report their liking to both meat and meat substitute and to cultured meat. If the liking of cultured meat was similar to that of meat, we concluded consumers considered it more like meat. If the liking of cultured meat aligned with that of meat substitutes, participants see it more as substitute.

Then we told half of the participants that cultured meat was just like meat. And we told the other half that it was just like a meat substitute. If they were uncertain whether it was meat or meat substitute, we expected that this information would tip the scales.

And in our first study it did. At least somewhat. When we told consumers cultured meat was just like meat, we found that their opinion became like that of meat. But if we told them it was just like a meat substitute, nothing happened.

To be more certain about this we did the study again. Next to exactly copying a part of the first study we also added some more people who saw different situations, but I will not dwell on that here.

So did the part that was the same as the first study work?

It did..... at least somewhat. But this time when we told consumers cultured meat was just like meat substitute, we found that their opinion became like that of meat substitutes. But if we told them it was just like meat, nothing happened.

This was puzzling, so we did it a third time. After all a tiebreaker could help us out.

It did not.

In the third study participants who looked, once again, at exactly the same situations as those in the first two studies where not influenced by us telling them that cultured meat was like meat or meat substitute. Instead, they considered cultured meat to be a meat substitute.

What happened?

In this third study we included a follow up interview with ten of our participants to figure this out. We just asked consumers why they classified cultured meat as meat or meat substitute. They confirmed what we observed in the experiments already. It is very hard and unclear for consumer to classify cultured meat as meat or meat substitute. In fact when talking about why they classified cultured meat as meat or meat substitute, two of the ten participants started doubting their reasons and ultimately switched their opinion and decided it would better be labelled opposite to their initial idea.

Ok

These inconsistent results and interviews suggest that consumers really do not know whether cultured meat is meat or meat substitute.

The debate goes on and consumers give no easy solution of where it should go. We are looking forward to how it all will go on once cultured meat is introduced in the consumer markets. At that time consumers may follow the naming or may object it or may, as our interviewees change their opinion along the way. The future will have to tell.

These studies are reported in a scientific paper that is freely available to everyone.

The full: reference Bekker, G.A., Fischer, A.R.H., Tobi, H., and van Trijp, H.C.M. (2021) Stuck in the middle with you: The role of similarity information on categorizing cultured meat Food Quality and Preference, 104265, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodqual.2021.104265> (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodqual.2021.104265>)

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Arnout Fischer

Arnout Fischer is associate professor in the Marketing and Consumer Behaviour group. He studies consumer response to new technologies in food products and production. He thinks that consumer response to food innovation can only be understood if we realise that food is very special. Food is that special because all consumers have very much social and cultural knowledge what food should (or should not) be; and food consumption is very emotional.



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