

How does one become a flexitarian? Motivations, transitions, practices and justifications for reducing meat consumption.

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Abstract:

Public authorities encourage reduced meat consumption for health and sustainability reasons. However, the behavioural mechanisms associated with a reduction in meat consumption, often described as flexitarianism, have yet to be thoroughly studied. This research explores how French flexitarians initiate, implement and maintain a reduction in their meat intake. Based on the COM-B model, we ran seven online focus groups, with participants across France (n = 29), grouped by meat consumption frequency and motivation. Our analysis reveals that this change of diet is multifaceted. It is shaped by constantly evolving motivations, varied transition paths and a set of rationalisation mechanisms supporting dietary consistency. Our results show how different capabilities, opportunities and motivations emerge throughout the flexitarian process and can help inform social marketing interventions aimed at supporting sustainable dietary transitions.

Keywords: meat, sustainable behaviours, flexitarianism

Track: Public Sector and Non-Profit Marketing

1. Introduction of Paper

Leading international health and environmental organisations agree on the importance of reducing meat consumption to limit risks to public health and mitigate ecological impact (Calvin et al., 2023; Clark et al., 2019; Willett et al., 2019).

In 2025, 53% of French people said they ate less meat than three years prior. They did this primarily for economic reasons, followed by concerns about health, the environment, and animal welfare (Toluna Harris Interactive pour Réseau Action Climat France, 2025). The term ‘flexitarian’ (a contraction of ‘flexible vegetarian’) refers to individuals who limit their consumption of meat products. This term encompasses a wide range of dietary practices that differ in both the frequency of meat consumption and the underlying motivations (Dagevos, 2021). This change of diet is part of a broader change in contemporary eating habits, which are characterised by contradictory health advice, redefinitions of pleasure, a reshaping of culinary narratives and social constructions (Verain & Dagevos, 2022).

Despite its growing prevalence and the potential flexitarianism offers for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, it remains understudied in the fields of marketing and behavioural research (Onwezen & Dagevos, 2024). There is still little research examining how individuals transition from their initial intentions to established habits over time, or how capabilities, opportunities, and motivations evolve throughout this process (Kemper, 2020; Reuzé et al., 2023). The COM-B model (Michie et al., 2011) has been used to capture the multiple determinants of this kind of change. The study examines the capabilities (C), opportunities (O), and motivations (M) of flexitarian eaters in France to identify both their barriers and facilitators. Using a qualitative approach, this research explores flexitarianism as a thoughtful and evolving process, contributing to a better understanding of dietary transitions and informing future interventions aimed at promoting sustainable and healthy consumption patterns (Chatterjee et al., 2025).

2. Conceptual framework: an integrative approach using the COM-B model

Marketing research emphasises that food choices are the result of complex trade-offs involving social norms, identities, and internal tensions (Lanauze & Siadou-Martin, 2019). This research shows that reducing meat consumption cannot be understood without analysing the compromises and adjustments that structure daily practices. This study employs the COM-B model (Michie et al., 2011) to investigate the behavioural mechanisms that accompany practices

aimed at reducing meat consumption. This framework conceptualises behaviour as the result of a combination of capabilities (psychological skills and physical abilities), opportunities (social and physical) and motivations (automatic or deliberate) of a group of individuals at a specific point in time.

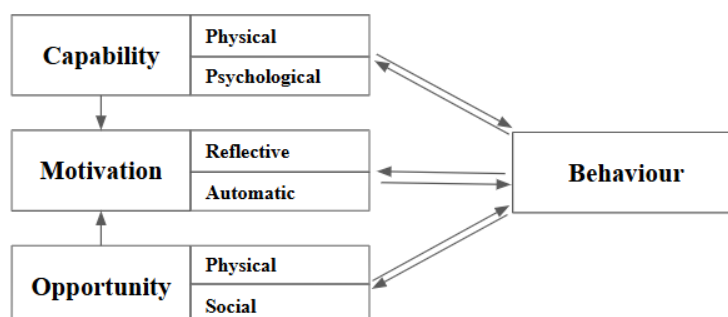


Figure 1. Scheme of the COM-B model by Michie et al. (2011)

The COM-B model is widely used in the design of public health and social marketing interventions because it provides a comprehensive diagnosis of the factors that promote or limit a given behaviour. This model's systemic perspective makes it particularly relevant for examining flexitarian transitions, which involve changes in knowledge, cooking skills, social norms, purchasing contexts and motivations over time. By applying the COM-B model, this research aims to identify the specific levers and barriers that influence the adoption and maintenance of reduced meat consumption. It allows for the articulation of individual dimensions and situated practices, aligned with contemporary approaches to eating behaviours.

3. Methodology

Qualitative research enables the in-depth exploration of specific behaviours, revealing cognitive, social, and cultural mechanisms (Belk et al., 2012). Focus groups (FGs) allow the collection of data on the construction and evolution of behaviours (Morgan, 1997) - particularly those related to food and culinary narratives. Following a contact form, we formed seven FGs by combining two criteria: (1) the primary motivation for reducing meat consumption: ethical, environmental or pragmatic (which can be economic or health-related), and (2) the frequency of meat consumption (weekly, monthly or occasional). This reasoned sampling facilitated internally homogeneous FGs to encourage free speech. In addition, building different FGs allowed us to diversify lived experiences. These FGs were held via videoconference to encourage geographical variety among participants. Once the transcripts were complete, we used NVivo 15 software to code this qualitative data in three stages, using an abductive

approach: initial inductive coding to identify emerging themes, deductive coding using the COM-B model, and final pragmatic coding to identify barriers and drivers of flexitarianism. Once all these codes had been established, we followed the process described by Gioia et al. (2013) to construct the data structure, grouping them by theme and then highlighting aggregated dimensions (see Tables 2 and 3).

Focus groups	Focus group constitution criteria	Participant's pseudonym (family situation, age, place of residence)
FG1	Pragmatic motivations (health/money) - weekly meat consumption	Gabriel (family, age 35-54, La Rochelle) ; Prune (couple, age 25-34, Marseille) ; Martine (alone, age 65+, Marolles-en-Brie) ; Guillaume (flatsharing, age 25-34, Paris)
FG2	Pragmatic motivations (health/money) – weekly consumption	Alice (alone, age 65+, La Roche Posay); Paul (family, age 25-34, Irodouër); Laure (family, age 35-54, Grenoble); Eric (alone, age 25-34, Montreuil)
FG3	Environmental motivations - weekly consumption	Elise (family, age 18-25, Paris); Odile (family, age 54-65, St Maur des Fossés); Adrien (family, age 35-54, Nantes); Lauriane (couple, age 25-34, Paris); Sandra (family, age 35-54, Paris)
FG4	Environmental motivations - monthly consumption	Mia (alone, age 25-34, Vincennes); Adeline (alone, age 25-34, Megève); David (alone, age 25-34, Paris); Simon (couple, age 25-34, Nantes)
FG5	Environmental motivations - monthly consumption	Coralie (flatsharing, age 35-54, Vincennes); Lucie (family, age 35-54, Palaiseau); Marie (family, age 35-54, Paris); Thibaud (family, age 35-54, Vincennes); Clara (flatsharing, age 35-54, Paris)
FG6	Environmental motivations - occasional consumption	Lucas (flatsharing, age 25-34, Paris); Chloé (couple, age 25-34, Paris); Pierre (alone, age 35-54, Montereau)
FG7	Ethical motivations – various consumption frequencies	Florence (family, age 35-54, Chateaubriand); Mathilde (flatsharing, age 25-34, Paris) ; Sophie (couple, age 54-65, Herblay) ; Jeanne (family, age 35-54, Corbeil Essonnes)

Table 1. Focus groups organised and socio-demographic information on participants.

4. Results

We first conducted a COM-B diagnosis of the various barriers and drivers of flexitarianism that were mentioned during the focus groups (summary in the table 2 below). Our results also show that flexitarianism is not a fixed state or diet, but rather a dynamic process. Participants' comments highlight that (1) evolving motivations initiate change, (2) different transition trajectories structure it, (3) concrete practices make the reduction effective, and (4) justifications stabilise or readjust their approaches.

4.1. Barriers and drivers of flexitarianism

Overall, the COM-B synthesis below shows that opportunities to reduce meat consumption are structurally available, but gaps in nutritional capability, hedonic attachments and strong social expectation remain the main barriers.

COM-B elements		Identified drivers	Identified breaks
CAPABILITY	Psychological Capability	Difficulty imagining complete vegetarian menus Lack of nutritional knowledge	Knowledge of simple meat-free recipes Knowledge of nutrition Lack of skills or confidence in cooking meat
	Physical Capability	Time to cook High price of meat substitutes	Ease of preparation (quick meals) High cost of meat
OPPORTUNITY	Social Opportunity	Meat norm during group meals Fear of conflict or opposition from those around them Close friends and family who consume meat	Influence of flexitarian or vegetarian friends and family Exposure to vegetarian recipes on social media
	Physical Opportunity	Lack of options when eating out Lack of plant-based alternatives in shops	Better range of alternatives in supermarkets Better range of meat-free dishes in restaurants Unattractive range of meat products available locally
MOTIVATION	Reflective Motivation	Traditional French meat-based cuisine Fear of nutritional deficiencies Meat substitutes perceived as highly processed Habit of cooking meat Desire to support local farmers and butchers	Health motivations to reduce red and processed meat consumption Environmental motivations Ethical motivations Not wanting to cook meat at home
	Automatic Motivation	Enjoyment of eating meat products, nostalgia for meat-based childhood dishes. No enjoyment of cooking or innovating	Enjoyment of cooking new recipes Attractiveness and ease of use of meat substitutes Attractive vegetarian recipes Flexitarian habits adopted over time

Table 2. Synthesis of barriers and levers to flexitarianism among focus group participants according to the dimensions of the COM-B model (Michie et al., 2011)

4.2. Motivations for flexitarianism: between initial and evolving motivations

Our analysis reveals that motivations do not function linearly or uniformly but unfold according to three complementary registers. Firstly, latent motivations are present in the background and emerge retrospectively in the narrative. These underlying concerns, such as affection for animals or environmental considerations, are not perceived as decisive by participants but play a role as moral anchors or secondary justifications. As Chloé (FG6) explains, “I’ve always been close to animals, for example, and I think animal welfare also played a part, even though I don’t think it was the reason that really... well, that triggered this choice”.

Secondly, triggering motivations correspond to situational catalysts that initiate a reduction in meat consumption. These turning points are often extrinsic, such as exposure to

documentaries, shocking information or the influence of loved ones. Although they effectively encourage behavioural change, they do not guarantee long-term stability. Mathilde (FG7) recounts: “And then one evening as I was going to bed, I came across a video [...], and I was like, “Ah, I think that's it. I think I've really found my trigger to stop eating it”.

Finally, motivations for maintaining the behaviour develop after participants have begun to reduce their consumption of meat products. These motivations are often linked to perceived health benefits, improved well-being or alignment with personal values. They contribute to the internalisation of the behaviour and help maintaining it over time, sometimes replacing the initial triggers: “And then, little by little, something that also helped me maintain the momentum was that I told myself there were side benefits, or rather benefits that came with it [...]” (David, FG4).

4.3. Transitions: types of behavioural implementation

Our analysis highlights four distinct trajectories of the transition to flexitarianism, structured according to the degree of spontaneity or planning involved in the process, and the relative weight of personal or contextual factors driving the change (Figure 2): reactive, planned, gradual or contextual.

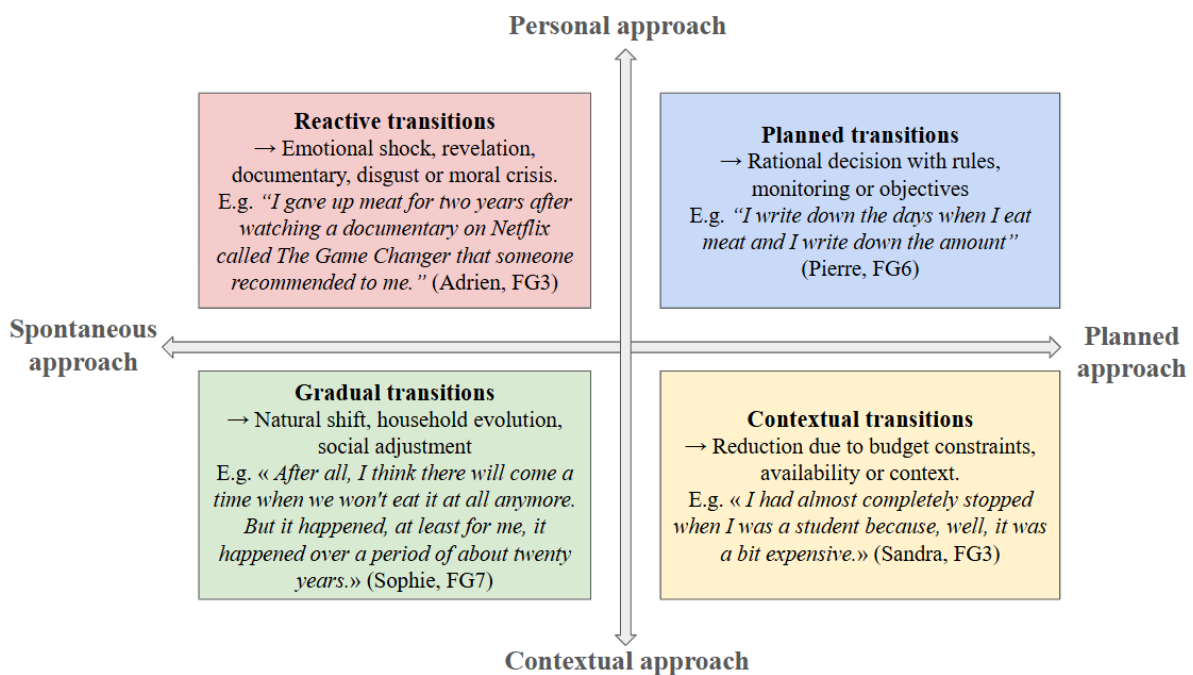


Figure 2. Food transition approaches according to timing and environment.

4.4. Concrete practices for reducing meat consumption

The concrete practices associated with our participants' flexitarianism are organised around four main dynamics. We have named the first dynamic *culinary adaptation*, which is based on pragmatic substitution or reinterpretation of traditional recipes. The next dynamic is *active exploration* to broaden the culinary repertoire by seeking inspiration, learning new techniques and trying new recipes. The third dynamic is *social and contextual negotiation* which refers to choices within the household or among peers, promoting mutual support and the normalisation of meat-free practices. Finally, *conscious regulation* allows for a gradual and controlled reduction in meat consumption through personal rules, monitoring consumption, or paying attention to quality. These practices – presented in Table 3 below using the Gioia method - are not just actions, but ways of dealing with constraints, resources, and values.

1 - Verbatims	2 - Themes	3 – Aggregate dimensions
"I'm replacing the bacon bits by what I had in the fridge – so veggie sausages." (Simon, FG4)	Pragmatic substitution	Culinary adaptation
"Because I really enjoy tweaking recipes to make them vegetarian." (Chloé, FG6)	Recreation / Twisting traditional dishes	
"I find it quite easy to eat vegetarian nowadays because there are lots of alternatives, lots of recipes on Instagram and so on." (Lucas, FG6)	Research and inspiration	Active exploration
"And so now I think that's it, I really enjoy trying out new things." (Elise, FG3)	Creative experimentation	
"It has to please everyone." (Laure, FG2)	Adapting to each other	Social and contextual negotiation
"We give each other lots of recipe ideas." (Elise, FG3)	Mutual support and social imitation	
"I have decided to only eat meat at weekends." (David, FG4)	Self-imposed rules	Conscious regulation
"I looked at how much was on the envelope and divided it by 5." (Jeanne, FG7)	Measure and progressive adjustment	
"We pay a little more attention to quality as well as quantity." (Sandra, FG3)	Attention to quality and origin	
"I gradually started eating less of it." (Thibaud, FG5)	Gradual reduction	

Table 3. Table showing practices adopted by participants to reduce their meat consumption.

4.5. Justifications and rationalisations: the study of discourses that legitimise meat consumption.

Participants employ a wide range of justifications and rationalisations that help them manage tensions, legitimise inconsistencies and maintain a sense of identity coherence. Five families of rationalisations emerge from our analysis: physical, hedonistic, social, moral and contextual justifications (presented in Table 4 below).

1 - Verbatims	2 - Themes	3 – Aggregate dimensions
<i>“And the thing is, I’m cutting down on meat, so I’m worried about getting deficiencies, especially since I was anaemic, or rather, I had quite chronic iron deficiency, so it was something I kept an eye on.” (Pierre, FG6)</i>	Health, deficiencies, physiological needs	Physical
<i>“Well, I’ve already cut out quite a bit of meat. But I realise that I want to keep some.” (Alice, FG2)</i>	Taste preferences, hedonism	Hedonistic
<i>“For me, it’s mainly when there’s a special occasion, like going to a restaurant or a real celebration: we’ll have a barbecue or something like that.” (David, FG4)</i>	Social norms, politeness, family expectations	Social
<i>“I don’t make many sacrifices, and I don’t tell myself I’m going to stop eating it either. I continue to eat it; I just try to eat it better.” (Simon, FG4)</i>	Compensation through quality and origin	Moral
<i>“Well, I don’t buy them anymore, except for Too Good to Go or food nearing expiration ,actually.” (Adeline, FG4)</i>	Specific contexts, opportunism, anti-waste	Contextual

Table 4. Participants’ justifications to eat meat according to the Gioia method

Together, these rationalisations function as stabilising mechanisms that help individuals navigate the ambiguities of a flexitarian practice and consolidate their evolving food identity.

1. Discussion

Analysis of participants' accounts revealed persistent tensions that can be interpreted through the double bind theory conceptualised by Bateson et al. (1956). According to this psychological theory, a double bind occurs when individuals are simultaneously exposed to contradictory injunctions (or paradoxical injunctions) that cannot be satisfied together, thus generating confusion in the face of this dilemma. Meat substitutes or meat-like products illustrate this mechanism well, as summarised in Figure 2. Participants oscillate between attachment to culinary traditions and the desire to try new products. Furthermore, the search for gustatory pleasure coexists with a feeling of guilt about consuming ‘fake’ meat, and the search for protein intake is thwarted by the desire to avoid consuming processed industrial products.

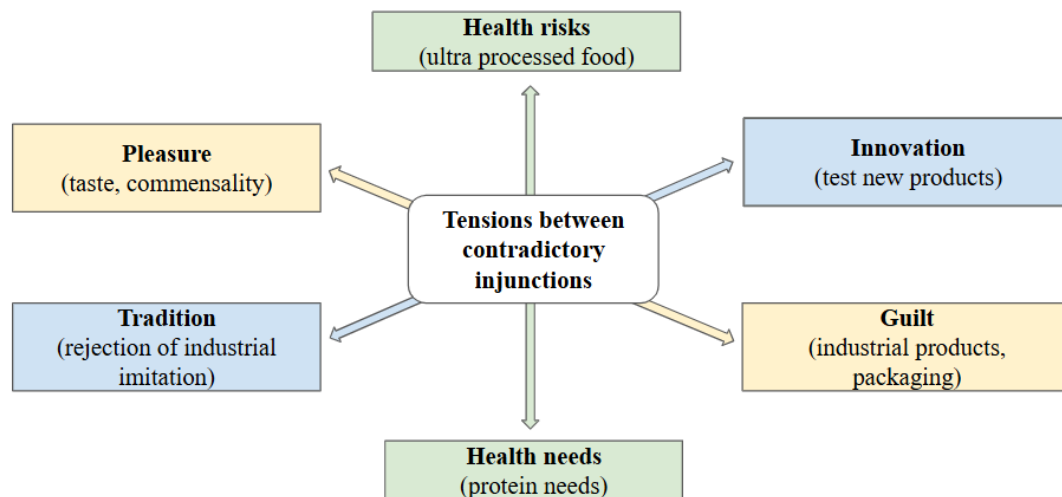


Figure 3. Double bind theory applied to meat substitute products.

This work shows that flexitarianism is part of a long-term process, in which motivations, practices, and justifications are gradually reorganised with distinct phases of dietary change. One avenue of research is to analyse how public actors and marketing services could use this knowledge to design support measures tailored to these stages.

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