

The Role of Brand Concepts in the Acceptance of Plant-based Meat Alternatives

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The Role of Brand Concepts in the Acceptance of Plant-Based Meat Alternatives

Plant-based meat alternatives (PBMA) are promoted as sustainable and healthy substitutes for meat, yet consumer acceptance remains limited and highly heterogeneous. This study examines how value-based brand meanings shape consumer expectations and acceptance of PBMA in the German market. Drawing on Schwartz's human value framework, which conceptualizes brand meaning in terms of fundamental motivational value trade-offs, we first map the value profiles of familiar PBMA brands using survey data from 450 consumers. Results reveal two dominant positioning logics: sustainability–innovation versus tradition–performance, largely reflecting differences between new PBMA specialists and legacy meat brands. These value profiles illustrate fundamental motivational tensions in PBMA positioning. Building on these insights, subsequent experiments will test how brand values and familiarity translate into taste expectations, perceived quality, and purchase intentions.

Keywords: *Brand Concepts; Plant-Based Meat Alternatives; Consumer Acceptance*

Track identity: Product and Brand Management

1 Introduction

Over the past two decades, societal challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, poverty, and declining public health have intensified pressure on consumers and firms. Shifts in lifestyles, diets, and energy use can meaningfully reduce environmental and social harm, fostering a consumer segment that integrates environmental and social considerations into everyday purchasing (Rockström et al., 2025). This trend is mirrored in the marketplace as firms increasingly foreground sustainability attributes (Moisander, 2007). A prominent example is meat consumption: while it provides a familiar taste experience and essential nutrients, it relies on a highly resource-intensive production model, demanding large amounts of land, water, and energy and generating substantial greenhouse-gas emissions (Rockström et al., 2025). High intake of red and processed meat is further associated with elevated risks of cardiovascular disease, colorectal cancer, type 2 diabetes, and increased mortality. As these costs become more visible, a growing share of Western consumers is reducing or replacing meat in their diets (Bublitz et al., 2023).

Yet behavioral change remains challenging, as it often requires sacrificing immediate personal benefits for distant societal or environmental gains (Lehmann et al., 2025). In the case of meat reduction, consumers frequently trade sensory satisfaction for abstract benefits. As a market-driven response, plant-based meat alternatives (PBMAs) have emerged as a growing category engineered to mimic meat's sensory and functional properties without animal-derived ingredients (Majcher, 2025; Onwezen & Dagevos, 2024). Their resemblance to meat is intended to appeal to consumers who value its sensory and cultural significance. However, markets for such novel products often face resistance rooted in unfamiliarity, unclear benefits, and perceived risks (Brexendorf et al., 2015).

One effective way to manage the perceived risks of novel products is by branding strategies. Brands give products and services meaning, and provide legitimacy, credibility, and trust (Aaker, 1997). Strong brands help consumers make sense of unfamiliar offerings and, when product launches succeed, they in turn reinforce brand strength and the competitive position of the firm. In a perfect scenario, effective branding and innovation management finds itself in a positive, mutually reinforcing loop (Brexendorf et al., 2015). Such effective scenarios require an alignment between brand meaning or identity and the novel product, as misalignment can trigger negative evaluations that also harm the brand or firm (Brexendorf et al., 2015). Firms must therefore carefully consider which meanings or narratives to emphasize, a particularly difficult task in emerging categories where markets are uncertain and consumer expectations remain unsettled (Majcher, 2025).

Although PBMAAs are uniform in their alignment with the appearance and sensorial character of meat, marketers diverge in the attributes they emphasize: some stress hedonic qualities and resemblance to meat, while others foreground environmental, health, or natural attributes aligned with the category's functional strengths (Lacy-Nichols et al., 2021). Academic literature mirrors this tension, showing that innovation- and taste-focused positioning can enhance curiosity, appeal, and choice, whereas sustainability- or health-focused framing yields mixed effects on attractiveness and preference (Erhard et al., 2024; Lin et al., 2025). Together, these findings indicate the uncertainties of positioning strategies of PBMA. Building on these uncertainties, the present study examines how branding shape consumer responses to PBMAAs. Specifically, we set out to investigate how different brand meanings and frames influence expectations and willingness to try PBMAAs. In doing so, it advances theoretical understanding of branding in emerging food categories and identifies which positioning attributes are relevant for PBMAAs, while offering practical guidance for managers in the field.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Plant-based meat alternatives

In this study, PBMAAs are defined as modern, highly processed meat analogues designed to replicate the taste, texture, and appearance of processed meat products such as burgers, sausages, and nuggets (Majcher, 2025; Onwezen & Dagevos, 2024). This definition deliberately excludes traditional plant-based proteins such as tofu and tempeh, the focus lies on PBMAAs as functional and sensorial replacements for meat. This product category is growing rapidly across Europe, with Germany leading the market at €759 million in 2024, ahead of the UK (€336 million) and Spain (€69 million), and revenues projected to rise through 2030 (Statista, 2024). PBMA consumers are typically younger, more often female, urban, and characterized by higher income and education, as well as strong interest in health, fitness, technology, and climate concerns (Lehmann et al., 2025). Given Germany's position as Europe's largest PBMA market, it provides a relevant context for this study.

Consumer interest in PBMA is commonly attributed to consumption motives such as health consciousness, environmental concern, ethical considerations such as animal welfare (Siegrist & Hartmann, 2019). Acceptance is constrained by concerns regarding the novelty of the product, safety, nutritional adequacy, and naturalness (e.g., issues associated to additives, and the processed nature of the product) (Majcher, 2025; Onwezen & Dagevos, 2024). Moreover, many consumers appear to underestimate the ecological benefits of PBMAAs

relative to meat, and prior research suggests that providing corrective information and improving related perceptions can increase product acceptance (Giezenaar et al., 2024). One last factor that is mentioned across studies is taste perceptions of PBMA, these are particularly low and challenge purchase intentions towards these products. Taste is of relevance for food products as taste expectations primarily drive initial trial, whereas repeated purchase is mainly determined by actual sensory experience (Raghunathan et al., 2006).

Given that consumption motives for PBMA relate to health, environmental friendliness, naturalness, and the hedonic enjoyment (taste), consumer perceptions of these attributes play a role in purchase behavior. But highlighting these attributes is not straightforward, as it includes a combination of multiple and partly conflicting attributes. Framing foods as “healthy” often leads consumers to anticipate a blander taste, through the “healthy = not tasty” intuition, even when the actual flavor remains unchanged (Raghunathan et al., 2006). Similarly, the processed nature of PBMA make the product feel artificial, and undermines consumer trust and weaken both health and sustainability inferences through the “natural” implies “better” intuition (Scekic & Krishna, 2021; Siegrist & Hartmann, 2020). Consumer preferences for these attributes are also heterogeneous, consumers with a high frequency in meat consumption prefer PBMA that closely resemble meat, whereas vegetarians and vegans often favor alternatives that diverge more clearly from meat (Siegrist & Hartmann, 2020).

The heterogeneous preferences, and the multiple, conflicting attributes of the product make it challenging to decide what to highlight in order to promote PBMA. It is so unlike other product categories which have a more clear and singular function (e.g., cookies as indulgence or energy drinks and stimulation and performance). Branding can play an important role here, as it serves as an effective tool to shape these perceptions and to reduce the perceived risks that stem from unfamiliar products (Brexendorf et al., 2015).

2.2 Branding

Consumers often rely on brands as heuristics to make quality inferences, as price premiums for packaged foods are mainly driven by brand reputation, sustainability positioning, and emotional brand connections (Brexendorf et al., 2015). Even when food products are identical, they are evaluated more positively when associated with a familiar or premium brand name than in blind tests (Allen et al., 2008). This can partly be explained by the fact that familiar brands evoke feelings of trust, along with the positive spillover effects that operate through familiarity-based heuristics (Michel et al., 2022). This places brands as

potential actors to reduce the perceived risks that are often associated with novel products (Brexendorf et al., 2015). Strong brands transfer meaning to new products and can ease market entry by leveraging existing brand equity or by launching the product under a separate brand. Brand architecture describes how firms structure their brand portfolios (Aaker, 1997; Brexendorf et al., 2015), and provides a useful framework for understanding branding.

Beyond structural and strategic choices, brand architecture must also account for the symbolic dimensions that branding offers, extending well beyond the functional properties of a product. This dimension is of consequence as emotionally and value-based meanings elicit stronger consumer responses than purely functional ones (Torelli et al., 2012), additionally this can make intangible and abstract product qualities such as healthiness, sustainability, naturalness, or even expected taste—more salient for consumers. This symbolic dimension of branding, which relates to its meaning and identity, is captured by the concept of brand concepts, which is defined as the system of associations and abstract meanings that define what a brand represents. They emerge from the interplay of product attributes, consumer benefits, and marketing activities, that translate these elements into higher-order meanings. These brand concepts should be internally consistent to maximize effectiveness, as when they are not aligned, this can result in lower product acceptance, and thus lower firm performance, while also damaging the image and reputation of a brand/firm (Aguirre-Rodriguez et al., 2012; Brexendorf et al., 2015; Torelli et al., 2012).

2.3 Value based brand concepts

A way to think about symbolic meanings or elements is through Schwartz's value framework. A framework that has been applied in over 200 studies (Schwartz, 2012; Torelli et al., 2012), and can be used to conceptualize brand concepts in terms of the human values a brand represents. Values are abstract life goals that guide judgment and behavior, organized in a circular structure with four higher-order dimensions: self-transcendence (e.g., benevolence, environmental protection), self-enhancement (e.g., power, achievement), openness to change (e.g., stimulation, self-direction), and conservation (e.g., tradition, security). Values adjacent in the circle are motivationally compatible, whereas opposing values are in conflict. Because values are structured in motivational trade-offs, emphasizing certain values suppresses others: highlighting achievement and power implicitly constrains associations with benevolence and environmental concern, while signaling tradition and security limits perceptions of novelty and stimulation. Through repeated communication and symbolism, marketers can embed these values onto brands. As a result, brands signal both functional benefits and meaningful concepts. For example, Whole Foods is associated with

naturalness and ethical consumption, and Rolex with prestige and achievement (Torelli et al., 2012).

This lens could be useful for understanding tensions in the positioning of PBMA, which combine multiple abstract promises as well: health, sustainability, naturalness, and taste. Which are dimensions that are related and associated with human values as well (Khan et al., 2025). Values allow these promises to be mapped onto a coherent motivational structure and reveal where they reinforce or conflict. Prior work has used this framework and found that consumers do not judge products only by their physical attributes; they also interpret what products symbolize. They subconsciously compare the values a product represents (for example power, excitement, care, or equality) with their own personal value priorities. When these symbolic meanings fit, the product is liked more, its taste is experienced as better, and people are more willing to buy it. This suggests that brands can shape quality inferences, such as anticipated taste, by aligning themselves, and resonating with human values. This mechanism is suggested to extend to other product perceptions as well, including perceived product quality (Brexendorf et al., 2015), environmental friendliness (Scekic & Krishna, 2021), and reductions in perceived product risk (Casidy et al., 2021). This raises the question of whether brand concepts can similarly influence additional inferences, such as perceived healthiness, naturalness, tastiness and environmental friendliness for PBMA.

This perspective is particularly relevant because products themselves also carry culturally shared symbolic meanings. Sociological and anthropological research consistently shows that meat is associated with values such as power, status, strength, and hierarchy, whereas fruits, vegetables, and grains tend to symbolize equality, care, and closeness to nature (Allen et al., 2008). PBMA occupy a unique position within this landscape as they are materially rooted in plant-based ingredients, and have production attributes related to health and environmental concern, yet they are explicitly designed to imitate meat and its associated sensory and cultural meanings.

This makes us wonder, if brands that have strong meat-related symbolism may increase familiarity, trust, and perceived similarity to conventional meat. Which could improve taste expectations, reduce perceived risk, and facilitate acceptance among skeptical or meat-oriented consumers. Or, if this same symbolism may conflict with the sustainability- and ethics-oriented image that defines the PBMA category for many, thereby weakening perceived environmental and health related benefits. Conversely, brands that strongly emphasize sustainability, care, and naturalness may strengthen ethical and environmental inferences, but risk weaker associations with sensory performance, indulgence, and meat

consumption. These effects are unlikely to be universal. Different consumer segments prioritize different benefits, immediate and tangible benefits such as indulgence tend to outweigh more abstract benefits such as sustainability. Familiarity-based heuristics imply that consumers are generally more willing to choose options they already know and trust, products and brands that draw on familiar cultural meanings can feel more “normal” and easier to evaluate than products that signal unfamiliar values or consumption practices.

Building on these conceptual foundations, we aim to analyze whether PBMA brands cluster along human value dimensions and whether such clusters differ in the product inferences they evoke, helping to explain how brand concepts shape expectations and positioning tensions in the category.

3 Methodology

Only the first phase of the study has been completed; accordingly, the following methodology and results sections report exclusively on this phase. The aim was to identify clusters on the value-based brand concepts of familiar brands in the German PBMA market, providing the groundwork for further experiments. The procedure was adapted from Casidy et al. (2021) and Torelli et al. (2012).

A list of 20 familiar PBMA brands was compiled based on the 2024 Statista report. Data were collected via an online survey with 450 participants after data cleaning, recruited through Prolific. Each participant evaluated two randomly assigned brands to balance respondent burden and ensure sufficient observations per brand, resulting in 40–50 evaluations per brand. Brands were shown on separate pages and evaluated using 1–5-scale items capturing brand familiarity and brand concepts based on Schwartz’s four higher-order value dimensions (self-transcendence, self-enhancement, openness, conservation), using 21 items from the short Schwartz Value Survey. (Lindeman & Verkasalo, 2005). For Figure 1 in the results section, raw mean scores were used for plotting. Scale reliability was satisfactory (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .77-.89$; average inter-item correlations = $.62-.66$; item–total correlations = $.63-.75$). ANOVAs revealed significant between-brand differences across all value dimensions (all $p < .001$), with effect sizes ranging from small (hedonism, $\eta^2 = .06$) to moderate-to-large (self-transcendence, $\eta^2 = .19$). Estimated marginal means showed a consistent pattern, confirming what is shown in the Figure 1 of the results section.

4 Results and Discussions

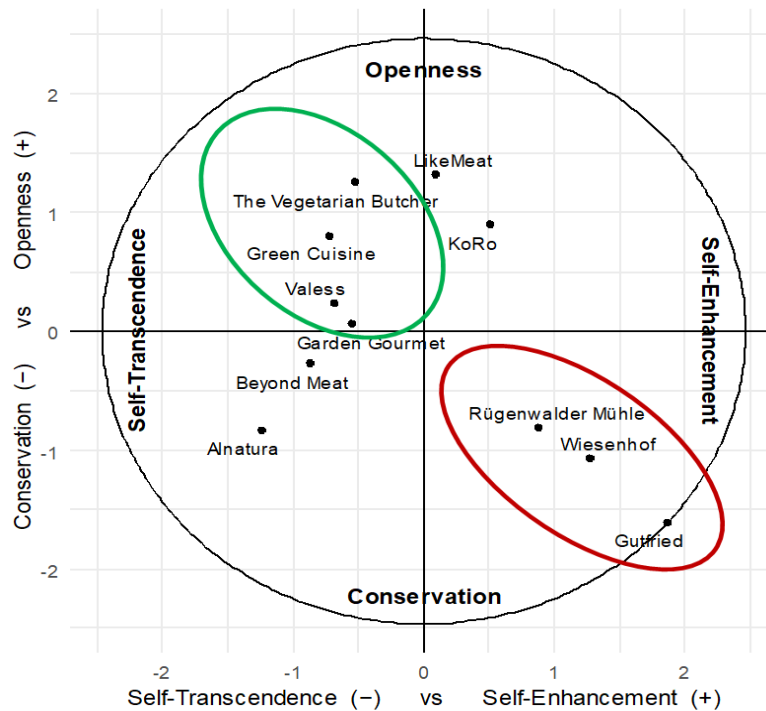


Figure 1 Plot of brand concepts of German brands active in the category of plant-based meat alternatives

Figure 1 positions familiar PBMA brands in a value space defined by Schwartz's higher-order dimensions: self-enhancement vs. self-transcendence (horizontal axis) and openness to change vs. conservation (vertical axis). Dimensions reflect tradeoffs between different value dimensions. Brands in the upper-left quadrant area reflects concerns with nature, social concerns, benevolence (self-transcendence) combined with stimulation and self-direction (openness), reflecting growth-oriented and change-seeking motivations. These are predominantly PBMA specialists and younger challenger brands, whose identities have been built directly around plant-based innovation and sustainability narratives. Their symbolic profile aligns closely with the cultural meanings typically attributed to plant foods—care, equality, and closeness to nature—rather than strength, dominance, or status. These are mainly long-established meat and poultry processors that historically built their brand equity on sausages, cold cuts, and other animal-based products. When such brands enter the PBMA category via brand extensions, they appear to transfer parts of their meat-related symbolic heritage to the new products. This may simultaneously enhance familiarity, trust, and perceived similarity to meat, while also introducing a potential symbolic tension with sustainability- and ethics-oriented category meanings.

The next studies will examine how brand familiarity and value-based brand concepts shape pre-consumption perceptions of PBMA and purchase intentions using a scenario-based, between-subject online experiment. Participants will evaluate a PBMA launched by a

familiar German brand, with stimuli selected from high-conservation/self-enhancement versus high-openness/self-transcendence brand profiles. We will assess how these brand concepts translate into expected tastiness, perceived healthiness, naturalness/processing, environmental friendliness, and purchase intention. The design will further control for food neophobia, dietary identity, price, socio-demographics, product familiarity, and brand architecture conditions.

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