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Meat Me Halfway: Sydney Meat-Loving Men's Restaurant Experience with Alternative Plant-Based Proteins

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Abstract: Within the theoretical framework of psychological reactance and impression management, this study conducted in Sydney, Australia, in 2020–2021, explores the acceptance by men of alternatives to animal-based foods. Qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with 36 men who have visited a vegan restaurant and have eaten a plant-based burger. The findings from the study show that, despite the increasing popularity of these novel food options, men are unlikely to include the plant-based alternatives as a permanent feature of their diets as explained by the theory of psychological reactance. However, the study's male participants acknowledged the importance of women for their visit to the vegan restaurant which can be explained by impression management theory. Using excerpts from the interviews, men's experience is highlighted, particularly as it relates to concerns linked to masculinity, dietary identity and social perception by others. The analysis reveals the complexity of transitioning to more sustainable food choices within a gender-constructed social environment. Whether the new plant-based alternatives to meat are going to be a short-lived trend or a more lasting option in the men's diets is also discussed. Practical implications for social marketing as a tool to influence collective behaviour are drawn. They emphasise the role of women, changing social perceptions and transparency about the new plant-based products.

Keywords: dietary identity; climate change; vegan; Sydney; food; psychological reactance; impression management; sustainability



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1. Introduction

Considered a personal choice in western countries, food options are part of the psychological freedom of consumers who decide their own preferences. By doing so, people exhibit particular behaviours and express individual identity. When food choices are perceived to be somehow restricted or non-voluntary, they are cast by consumers as potentially freedom-threatening [1]. The psychological theory of reactance details consumers' response to such perceived reduction in everyday life's personal freedoms [2]. Reactance arises when people feel pressured to make certain choices or are deprived of some options and consequently tend to move in the opposite direction to restore their freedom [1]. On the other hand, when dietary choices are voluntary, they often become part of a dramaturgical act of expressing a person's identity [3] with well-calculated and judged motives to manage a positive impression upon others. Goffman's dramaturgical framework [3], based on theatrical metaphors of acting on a stage, explains the socially constructed self-identity related to food, made even easier nowadays with the use of social media.

Human diets and food create a social problem. While in the West there is an increasing number of flexitarians—people who conscientiously decrease their consumption of meat and other animal-based products, there is also reluctance by many to include more plant-based options [4]. Despite the scientific evidence about the many environmental, health,

social and animal welfare benefits from reducing meat consumption (e.g., [5]), intake of animal proteins remains high in the West and developing countries are increasing their demand. There seems to be a strong negative reaction when people are pushed to eat more plant-based foods as they perceive this as an imposed limitation on their freedom. This is also reflected in consumer attitudes and values. According to Rosenfeld [6] and Ruby [7], people consuming a predominantly plant-rich diet differ from omnivores in terms of shared values and socio-political attitudes and, in principle, they tend to hold more pro-social attitudes and beliefs. Disparities between these groups in attitudes and values may reduce the possibility of people forming or maintaining cross-diet relationships, especially because in the case of men, eating meat is strongly related to their male identity [8].

Relying heavily on livestock for food is unsustainable from an environmental and human health perspective [5,9]. There is a need to find better ways of supplying calories and proteins to the human population that are different to the current meat-based choices. The success of such a transition largely relies on the individual choice of consumers but it is also linked to the availability of choices.

In recent years, the food industry has provided a range of new products, referred to as alternatives to meat, which are plant-sourced but imitate or resemble the animal-based choices people in the West are used to. A marketing report by Deloitte [10] describes these plant-based alternatives as disruptors to the meat and dairy industry with many companies around the world investing in creating, developing or acquiring such products. This industry response is driven by emerging consumer trends with an increasing number of people voluntarily changing their diets because of sustainability, ethical, environmental, health and animal welfare concerns. Despite still being a niche market, plant-sourced alternatives, together with traditional vegetables, fruits, nuts, seeds, legumes and roots, are becoming more popular and attractive to larger sections of society. This trend is prominent even in Australia, a country with one of the highest per capita meat consumption levels in the world, and a large exporter of meat, including being the top exporter of beef globally [11]. The COVID-19 pandemic has strengthened the plant-based meat alternatives market in Australia with raising interest domestically and from abroad, leading to a 46% increase in grocery sales, doubling of industry revenue and employment, and doubling of products in the supermarkets during 2020 [12].

In addition to supplying calories and nutrients, the choice of what we eat is a social behaviour subject to many influences. There seems also to exist a gender division around food. Across the globe, there are more women than men who are vegan, vegetarian or are prepared to eat plant-based alternatives to meat [13]. A survey in the USA, for example, found that 74% of vegetarians/vegans are women [14]. Different explanations are offered linking these gender dynamics with notions of masculinity. For example, Adams [8] associates violence and domineering with the male appetite for meat and the fact that industrial agriculture exploits for profit, and often in inhumane conditions, the reproductive capacity of female animals. Others explain men's higher meat consumption as being historically conditioned from hunter-gatherer times and, more recently, when the best parts of animal flesh were given to the males in the family while the role of the females and children was to gather fruits, berries, seeds, nuts, roots, tubers and other plants [15]. Through targeted advertising, the meat industry has consistently contributed to strengthening and additionally exaggerating the perception that "real men eat meat" [16]. Other attitudes displayed by men, and sometimes women, is that meat gives them strength and improves their virility [17]. However, the primary target of such messages "are other men, with women acting potentially only as secondary receivers" [17] (p. 12). A study of male consumers concludes that the way masculinity is constructed can predict differences in meat consumption, willingness to reduce meat intake, and attitudes towards vegetarians [18].

We investigated the issue of food choices as they relate to men's identity within the theories of psychological reactance and impression management in relation to acceptance of novel plant-based burgers. This qualitative study used a small sample of male participants, who had branched out into the plant-based world of vegan restaurants in Sydney, Australia.

Compared to other cities around the world, such as Barcelona in Spain or Didim on the Aegean coast of Turkey [19], Sydney, with a population of close to 6 million, is not renowned for its vegan options. This, however, may be changing as currently there are 75 entirely vegan restaurants in Sydney and the city is aspiring to become one of the most vegan-friendly places in the world [20]. Many of the meals and ingredients used in these restaurants are part of the burgeoning plant-based alternatives sector. We approached some of the male visitors in these vegan restaurants to understand their experience and whether, according to them, there is a future for such plant-based protein options, particularly the plant-based burger. Although many of our findings are not surprising, as men's preference for meat has been widely known, we believe this is the first study to explore male attitudes towards plant-based alternatives. The men interviewed in this study have "crossed the line" by trying such new products and it is of interest to see that women played a big part in this process. Despite this, many challenges remain in order to mainstream such dietary behaviour.

The article first presents a brief synopsis of the two theories used in the analysis and the role of social marketing. This is followed by sections describing the methodology of the study and the male sample researched. All in-depth interview questions were open-ended, and the findings are discussed around five main themes, namely: experience in a vegan restaurant, how important is the perception about masculinity, acceptability of plant-based alternatives, taste experience compared with real meat, and whether these options have a long-term future. The insights from these interviews indicate that many men who have been exposed to such plant-sourced food options are reluctant to embrace them as mainstream preferences. Their behaviour can be explained to a certain degree by the theories of psychological reactance and impression management. This has implications for social marketing [21] that can better influence more sustainable food behaviour within society. The contributions of the study and concluding remarks are presented in the final sections of the paper.

2. Psychological Reactance, Impression Management and Social Marketing

In the domain of food, it is common for a person to have a range of alternatives and to freely express preferences. In the theory of psychological reactance [2], this is described as freedom, forming the basis for individuals' free behaviours [22]. However, this freedom of choice may be threatened to be diminished or fully eliminated [22] when there is outside influence. Such external influence may come from social pressure to make a particular choice or simply from the availability, or lack thereof, of particular foods. In most cases, this leads to the individual's motivation to re-establish the threatened or eliminated freedom. When people recognise a threat and start experiencing difficulties in exercising their freedom due to external pressure, they experience reactance [22] or unpleasant motivational arousal resulting in behavioural efforts to restore liberty of choice accompanied by negative emotions, such as feeling uncomfortable, hostility, being angry, or aggressiveness [23,24]. According to psychological reactance theory, when a person feels that someone or something is taking away their choices or limiting the range of alternatives, four components of response are effected to resist the social influence of others and restore the freedom. These components are: perceived freedom, threat to freedom, reactance and restoration of freedom [25].

In relation to food choices, the theory of psychological reactance was used to test behavioural freedom related to emotional eating [26], prevention of anorexia [27], health education campaign messages [28], excessive drinking and alcohol consumption [29,30], antismoking and tobacco use [31–34]. It has also been used in other health-related areas, such as condom use for safe sex [35], teeth flossing [36], sun protection [37], skin-cancer protection [38] and anti-inhalant appeals [39]. We use this theory to explain the reactions and behaviours of men in relation to new food choices based on plant-sourced proteins, particularly men's reluctance to maintain these choices as part of their regular diets.

With eating being an important social process, people's behaviour can also be seen as acting, and impression management in the eyes of their companions is particularly important [40]. This could be a sufficient trigger for someone to modify their eating behaviour, consciously or subconsciously, to create a particular impression of themselves [41,42], an explanation at the heart of impression management theory [43]. According to Sinha [44], impression management is an active self-presentation of a person who wants to enhance their image in the eyes of others. Newman [45] (p. 184) further explains that impression management is an "act presenting a favourable public image of oneself so that others will form positive judgments" while Scheff [46] stresses that the acting is often aimed at avoiding embarrassment. Impression management involves two motives in response to social norm expectations or restrictions, namely instrumental and expressive. The instrumental motive is guided by the desire for self-esteem and seeks the gaining of rewards, acceptance and respect, while the expressive motive pertains to being in control of one's own behaviour and identity, often to present to others something different [47]. Eating in the company of others, particularly in a public place, such as a restaurant, easily becomes a type of stage acting and impression management, as described by Goffman.

Neither of these two theories has been previously applied for explaining gender-based food-related behaviour, and particularly men's attitudes toward novel plant-based alternatives such as the plant-based burger (also described as vegan or veggie burger). However, as this study shows, they offer a powerful way to understand men's behaviour and identity when it comes to consuming plant-based alternatives.

In a time when dietary changes are urgently needed to respond to the challenges of climate change and planetary boundaries [5], understanding male behaviour when offered plant-based alternatives is very important. Men's diet tends to have a higher environmental footprint, mainly because of the larger intake of red meat [48], and the emissions associated with non-vegetarian, compared with plant-based, diets are also significantly higher [48]. If tackling climate change is to be successful, in addition to finding theoretical explanations about consumer behaviour (as offered by the theories of psychological reactance and impression management), we need to also investigate possible ways for changing people's practices.

Men in wealthier countries, such as Australia, need to make a dietary shift towards more plant-based options which are tasty, nutritious and better from a human health perspective. Social marketing can be an avenue for encouraging behavioural changes for improved individual well-being and for the common good [49]. The internationally adopted consensus definition that guides approaches to developing research- and theory-based social change programs, is as follows: "Social Marketing seeks to develop and integrate marketing concepts with other approaches to influence behaviours that benefit individuals and communities for the greater social good" [50] (p. 1). Science-supported social marketing campaigns work and Australian examples include sunscreen protection and reduction in the use of tobacco [51]. Knowing how men perceive their experience with new plant-based food options can inform the possible messages of social marketing to make it more effective. Men's reactions need to be properly understood and the theories of psychological reactance and impression management offer tools for explaining male behaviour. Possible ways of framing any social marketing messages are put forward in order for them to be able to influence broader public behaviour.

3. Methodology

This qualitative study was based on 36 semi-structured in-depth interviews with male participants who usually consume meat but who had visited vegan restaurants in Sydney, Australia in 2020 or 2021. We wanted to understand the experience of relatively young male Australians who have been exposed to quality professionally prepared vegan food, mainly vegan burgers. In addition to having visited a vegan restaurant, the interviewees were largely selected based on the following criterion: being male representatives of Generation Z (Gen Z) or the Millennials, that is, aged between 18 and 40 years, as these

are the population groups most likely to embrace flexitarian or meat reductionist practices and incorporate them as part of their diets [52]. This population are more likely than older generations to replace animal-sourced meat with plant-based alternatives.

In addition to demographic information related to age, education, employment status and frequency of meat consumption, we used six open-ended questions (see Table 1) and included prompts to direct the flow of the conversation. It was made clear to the participants that the aim of the study was to understand their experience—there were no right or wrong answers. We believe that we managed to establish a relationship of trust with each participant, and that this allowed for open and honest expression of opinion.

Table 1. Used questionnaire.

#	Question
1	I understand you visited a vegan restaurant in Sydney. Where was that?
2	Why did you visit the vegan restaurant? Whom did you visit with?
3	Did you eat a new plant-based alternative to animal-sourced product, such as a plant-based burger? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If yes, why did you try the new plant-based alternative product? What did you think about it? Is this something you'll eat again? • If not, why didn't you try the new plant-based alternative product?
4	Describe your overall experience at the vegan restaurant.
5	What did you think about yourself during the visit to the vegan restaurant?
6	Did you tell anybody else (e.g., friends, relatives, colleagues, neighbours or other people) about your experience at the vegan restaurant and why?

A snowballing technique was used to recruit the participants starting with a couple of men who have visited a vegan restaurant and agreed to be interviewed. They further suggested other men who would normally eat meat but had experienced the vegan options. We were not interested in men who are usually vegetarian or vegan as they represent a very small fraction of Sydney's population, estimated at less than 6% [53]. We continued the recruiting of participants through snowballing until we achieved repetition of the issues raised during the interviews indicating data saturation or exhaustion of the number of unique opinions offered [54].

The interviews were carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic and precaution was taken to abide by any restrictions. They were conducted at locations convenient for the respondents and in line with any existing requirements at the time. These locations included public open spaces, such as parks, coffee shops and, on a few occasions, the vegan restaurants themselves.

There was an equal representation of participants from both generations, namely 18 Millennials and 18 Generation Z, with two people per year. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The interviews lasted between 30 min and 1 h and were conducted face-to-face and recorded. Handwritten notes were not taken during the conversations, in order to help the researcher focus on the interview content and the verbal prompts. Although it took longer to recruit participants during COVID-19 and conduct the interviews due to several lockdowns, we do not consider that the pandemic has had a major influence on the responses we collected. This statement cannot be confirmed and there were many conflating factors around the time of the interviews, such as the 2019–2020 bushfires in Australia, coronavirus outbreaks in meat-processing facilities in the Australian state of Victoria, a quarter more than the average rainfall in Sydney in 2020, followed by a heatwave at the start of 2021. Nevertheless, as the findings from the interviews reveal, the interviewed men were not convinced that, despite the increasing popularity, plant-based meat alternatives would stay as an enduring feature in their diets.

The interviews were initially analysed manually and then with NVivo11 to identify the main themes in the respondents' answers. Overall, there was a high level of consistency between the various opinions expressed.

Given that this is a qualitative study, any generalisation should be treated with care. The aim was not to generate evidence for statistical generalisation, but "to provide a rich, contextualised understanding of human experience through the intensive study of particular cases" [55], (p. 1452). It allowed us to apply theoretical insights that are not exclusive to the analysed sample of young men and their particular circumstances but convey higher-level concepts [55]. This is described as analytical generalisation based on the transferability of the results on a case-by-case basis when similarities exist [53]. Therefore, it is essential to present thick description [56] of the cases that forms the basis for analysis and from which conclusions are drawn. We achieved this by using extensive quotes which outline the circumstances and line of thinking of the participants. Furthermore, to enhance the potential for replication of the findings, we used multi-site sampling of participants across different vegan restaurants in Sydney's metropolitan area, including in the Central Business Area (CBD), Bondi, Enmore, Glebe, Manly, Marrickville, Newtown, Parramatta, Potts Point, Randwick and Surry Hills.

4. Description of the Interview Sample

Table 2 presents the main demographic characteristics of the interviewed sample. Millennials and Generation Z were equally represented (n = 18 each). All 36 participants were relatively well-educated with at least high school completed—in addition, 12 had a master's degree, 13 held a bachelor's degree and another 6 were pursuing further university studies. In this respect, the selected interviewees were well above the average educational level of Sydney's population, only 14% of whom have a university degree according to the most recent 2016 Australian population census [57] compared with 69% in our case. A higher level of education implies better knowledge and awareness about environmental, human health and social problems.

Furthermore, 23 of the participants were in full-time, and 7 in part-time, employment, and 6 were studying at university full-time. Overall, the sample represents men of a variety of career paths who all had the same experience of eating out at a vegan restaurant.

This was out-of-the-norm behaviour for many of the participants, given that 24 (66.6%) of the participant men consumed meat daily and the remaining 12 (33.3%) consumed meat 4 to 5 times per week. Again, the sample was not representative of the Sydney population, as our 2018 research indicated that 38% of men consume meat daily and 41% 4 to 6 times per week, with a further 14% 2 to 3 times per week, and 7% once per week or not at all [58]. The relatively higher frequency of meat consumption in the study sample was of interest to us as it represents the section of the population that most needs to reduce its intake of animal proteins if we are to transition to better and more sustainable food choices.

Table 2. Demographic description of the male interview sample.

N	Age [years]	Generation	Meat Consumption	Employment	Education
1	18	Gen Z	Daily	University Student	High School
2	18	Gen Z	4–5 times per week	University Student	High School
3	19	Gen Z	Daily	Part time	High School
4	19	Gen Z	Daily	University Student	Bachelor
5	20	Gen Z	Daily	Full time	Bachelor
6	20	Gen Z	4–5 times per week	University Student	Bachelor
7	21	Gen Z	Daily	Part time	Bachelor
8	21	Gen Z	4–5 times per week	University Student	High School

Table 2. Cont.

N	Age [years]	Generation	Meat Consumption	Employment	Education
9	22	Gen Z	Daily	University Student	Bachelor
10	22	Gen Z	Daily	Full time	Bachelor
11	23	Gen Z	Daily	Part time	Master
12	23	Gen Z	4–5 times per week	Part time	Bachelor
13	24	Gen Z	4–5 times per week	Full time	Master
14	24	Gen Z	Daily	Part time	Bachelor
15	25	Gen Z	Daily	Full time	Bachelor
16	25	Gen Z	Daily	Full time	Master
17	26	Gen Z	4–5 times per week	Part time	Bachelor
18	26	Gen Z	Daily	Full time	Bachelor
19	27	Millennials	Daily	Full time	High School
20	29	Millennials	4–5 times per week	Full time	Bachelor
21	29	Millennials	Daily	Full time	Master
22	30	Millennials	4–5 times per week	Part time	Master
23	32	Millennials	Daily	Full time	Master
24	32	Millennials	Daily	Full time	Bachelor
25	33	Millennials	4–5 times per week	Full time	High School
26	34	Millennials	Daily	Full time	Bachelor
27	35	Millennials	Daily	Full time	Master
28	35	Millennials	Daily	Full time	Bachelor
29	36	Millennials	4–5 times per week	Full time	Master
30	36	Millennials	4–5 times per week	Full time	Master
31	37	Millennials	Daily	Full time	Master
32	38	Millennials	4–5 times per week	Full time	High School
33	38	Millennials	Daily	Full time	Bachelor
34	39	Millennials	Daily	Full time	Bachelor
35	39	Millennials	Daily	Full time	Master
36	40	Millennials	Daily	Full time	Master

5. Results and Discussion

Current food trends show that some of the main reasons why people choose to switch to plant-based options are the smaller ecological footprint, ethical concerns about animal cruelty, and the health benefits of a vegetable-rich diet [12]. With the rise of flexitarianism, people do not have to be vegan to reduce meat in their diets and opt for more plant-based foods. Our male sample represented men who, at least for that meal, have opted to exclude animal-based proteins and were doing this openly in a public environment. The latter fact is of importance as a lot of prejudice and misconception exists in Australia against vegetarian men [53]. It is also interesting in relation to the impression management theory [43] we use in this study looking at whether modifying one's food choices and eating behaviour would be beneficial to creating a particular impression in other people's eyes [40]. Both instrumental (seeking self-esteem and rewards) and expressive (being in control) motives were evident during the interviews outlining the men's experience. Furthermore, psychological reactance theory helps to shed light on whether such a behaviour is likely to persist. All four components (perceived freedom, threat to freedom, reactance and

restoration) were present and communicated by the interviewees. We present below word-for-word quotes and the overall thoughts of the participants, following the identified themes from their interviews. This structure is suitable for a thick description as the identified themes emerged directly from the empirical material and were not constrained by the theoretical constructs. The two theories allowed us to understand how meat-loving men felt and what are the possible levers to influence them in the long run. To the best of our knowledge, this is a new approach and a contribution to knowledge.

5.1. Experience in a Vegan Restaurant

Australian men who normally consume meat are rarely confronted with the hostile social attitudes experienced by vegetarians or vegans [59]. On the contrary, for our sample of men, dining at a vegan restaurant was an interesting novelty. They wanted to have first-hand experience with new alternative proteins, namely a plant-based burger, which they referred to as a “burger experience”. Consciously or subconsciously, this experience was targeted at creating a positive image while downplaying any negative connotations and, as explained in social psychology [41], the impression management was with the purpose of controlling the attributions formed by others about these men. Visiting a vegan restaurant is a suitable “situation” in Goffman’s sense [43] where meat-eating men can control their self-presentation and guide the impressions others may form of them.

The popularity of new vegan burgers had attracted many of the men who shared how they felt:

You don’t need to be a vegan to go and try a veggie burger. I am not a vegan, but everyone is talking about it (the burger). I am not even kidding, they are so popular. When we went there, . . . there were so many people. I was happy to line up with them. It was real fun to chat with the others while meekly waiting for my turn to come. There was . . . kind of fun atmosphere for everyone. I had the feeling that the people waiting around somehow united with me. It’s incredible how you could make laugh with other people in the queue.
(Male, 18 years old, daily meat-eater)

This indicates strong social pressure to try the plant-based burger and for men in particular, to be part of such an experience. They do not want to be perceived wrongly by others in relation to this new trend. This reflects the impression management of the men who want to be in control of their own self-esteem and the way they are seen by others. Impression motivation and impression construction [42] are interwoven in their behaviour.

In some cases, men are motivated to go to a vegan restaurant because they want to please their partners who may not consume animal-based foods. Although being meat-eaters themselves, they respect their female partners’ choice and occasionally want to join in. Being in a visible conformity with their partners is not only flattering for their loved ones, but is also a good motivator as it enhances their relationship. The interviewee below talks about this while distancing himself from “the propaganda” about meat:

A friend of mine told me about the new vegan burger place near his apartment in Manly. He pursued me . . . 24/7 claiming the burgers are bloody good, and I decided to check it out with my wife. (Interviewer: What was your experience?) I wanted to go for quite a while as my wife is a vegan and I wanted to make her a surprise. Also, lately, I was constantly thinking of the environmental impact of meat consumption my wife was talking about all the time and what she said about meat killing . . . aaah-mmm morally unjustifiable meat production. Here I am lured by her propaganda. I think we made the most of it thanks to my Manly friend. (Male, 34 years old, daily meat-eater)

The importance of impression construction is signified by the men’s desire to control the way others see them. Creating the right impression is not only a conscious act, but also an intentionally embodied desired identity as a person who cares about the values shared by his partner. Vegan burgers are seen as a new trend for which people are prepared to stay in a queue to have that novel experience. With this comes the social pressure and men find themselves being part of this new wave. In a situation like this, men are not convinced

they fully possess the freedom of choice, but are happy to construct an image of being open-minded. This may also unite them or just offer a different experience:

I didn't know these burgers are becoming too trendy among my friends. We used to go out and eat steaks and burgers in pubs and steakhouses, but instead, now we are mingling with the veggie burger eaters. Strange world! (Interviewer: Do you like it?) Not much but this is not the point. It opens new dimensions of experiences especially in the COVID-19 setting. You have to go somewhere. You have to do something new Otherwise, it's boring. (Male, 29 years old, eats meat 4–5 times per week)

This man's reaction to reduction in freedom is expressed with the imposition of "mingling with the veggie burger eaters" in a place where conventional meat is not available. However, he also accepts the attractiveness of the new food products.

Impression management has been shown to be particularly important in romantic relationships [40]. A big factor in the decision to eat out at a vegan restaurant is the men's feelings and love for their female friend or partner, indicating the social importance of eating. It seems that in such a setting they are less interested to target other men to demonstrate their manliness [17] but instead they want to enjoy the company of the loved ones and an atmosphere free of machoness, where you can connect to your feelings:

I felt surprisingly satisfying with the taste of the burger, I believe because of the company of my girl and the atmosphere. You know when love is in the air you don't think too much what you are digesting. (Male, 26 years old, daily meat eater)

It seems restaurants serving plant-based alternatives are becoming an arena of social change and an important turning point in the transition toward making more ethical and sustainable food choices while connecting with the people you love. However, the interviewed men feel the need to distance themselves from the choice they have made in an attempt to manage any discrepancies about their identity [28]:

My girlfriend took me to a newly opened veggie burgers' place in Glebe. It wasn't too bad, I mean the burger but if I had another option on offer, I would choose differently. I just stuck to what she wanted me to eat. (Male, 32 years old, eats meat 4–5 times per week)

The defensive position this man takes seeks to protect his image of a meat-eater. This impression management a man strategically makes requires a special effort [43] and can explain the reason behind the decision to eat plant-based alternatives. Modifying eating behaviour in order to create a positive impact on the woman and appear more attractive in a romantic relationship [40] is impression management in action. When a carnivorous man is in love or wants to make a good impression on the opposite sex, he immerses himself in the atmosphere of a vegan restaurant. His negative reactions to consuming only plant-based food are suppressed and he is accepting to give up meat for once. To be fully accepted by the woman, he wants to make a positive impression on her:

When you want to make your girl happy, you just do whatever it takes to make her happy and this included eating plant-based burgers. (Interviewer: Is she an influencer for the food you eat?) Not really. We eat lots of meat and she cooks some of it when around. But I try to please her when I can. (Male, 19 years old, daily meat eater)

Not all men enjoyed the taste of the plant-based burger but pleasing and making their partner happy seemed to be a significant motivator in the vegan restaurant experience. There was, however, an immediate attempt to save the man's freedom with the response "Not really" to whether the female next to him was influencing his food choices. In line with psychological reactance theory, when men's food choices are being threatened, freedom and control need to be re-asserted [2,22]. Impression management and the desire to support the woman in her choice of food seemed to take precedence over the real food experience, despite the impossibility of exercising behavioural freedom:

Vegan meal is a totally irritating experience, but when you love someone, you don't have much choice, but just to be there for her. (Interviewer: Was it that difficult for you?) It was not difficult to accompany her at all, but then when I had to eat the burger I ordered, I experienced a certain difficulty. Why? It didn't have that meaty consistency I'm used to eating. It was very soft, somehow it didn't smell very good to impress my taste. (Interviewer: Did you share what you just described about your meal with her?) No way. She was going to be so much upset and unhappy . . . There is no way she could hear it. (Interviewer: Do you think this is a good thing to do, especially if you love her?) Not really good, but it's saving the family peace. It's more important than to admit next to her how much I hated this burger. (Male, 40 years old, daily meat eater)

Maintaining the “family peace” and the happiness of the romantic partner win over the expressed resistance toward the plant-based alternatives. Experiencing the difficult situation by consciously adopting a behaviour opposite to their inner desire, the men ate the vegan burger recommended by their loved ones. It is important to keep in mind this reaction and worth considering the part women play in men's food choices.

Eating out for a plant-based meal often happens in the context of romantic dating, which offers an intriguing behavioural situation where gendered conceptions of impression management are common [40]. Without the need to display that “real men eat meat”, a latent positive attitude towards the plant-based burger may persist in a softer gentler environment and with the right impression management [40,43]:

At the beginning I was a bit afraid to say that everything on the menu was vegan/vegetarian, but then something clicked, and I haven't put too many thoughts on the meal, but on the atmosphere and the woman next to me. This makes me still feel a real macho man despite the plant burger I needed to eat. (Male, 27 years old, daily meat-eater)

A negativity towards vegetarian and vegan men was not expressed in the atmosphere of public places serving only plant-based foods. In a social environment where animal flesh is excluded, the men did not need to negotiate their manliness and, in fact, could focus on other aspects of their lives and relationships. The norm is not to eat animal-based foods and this seemed acceptable to most of them. Some, however, still resented the fact that they were not eating animal-based meat, reacting to the loss of freedom and adopting an opinion contrary to the one expected by their partner [23]. In the context of persuasion from their romantic partners, this threat to their freedom was seen by men as attempts at social influence:

I felt kind of trapped when at the veggie burger place. My girl enjoyed the many “tasty” options, and I didn't want to make her unhappy, but actually I felt miserable and even I did not enjoy my burger. There wasn't any meat in it to enjoy. (Male, 32 years old, daily meat eater)

It seems that irrespective of whether men really liked the plant-based burger or not, there were other important social aspects that they valued more. Excluding the meat-based dishes from the menu seemed to reduce social tensions and could potentially create a better milieu where food dilemmas are seen differently. Meat avoidance by men might signal to women many things, including righteousness, self-control, non-violence and agreeability, creating a particular positive impression.

5.2. It's All about Masculinity

Masculinity remained essential for the Sydney men we interviewed, but most importantly, it was seen as restoration of the freedom linked with eating meat. As one of the participants explained:

A burger, even plant-based, is simply a burger. I don't think it is a big deal to consume it here and there. The problem arises after that. (Interviewer: Why? What do you mean by “the problem”?) Because I prefer real meat. (Male, 37 years old, daily meat eater)

Eating has a physical function to sustain the living body. Essentially, it is about intake of calories that provide energy and essential proteins which the human organism cannot produce. For men in a western society such as Australia, eating has a much broader social function which is about the experience but also how they are perceived by others. It is important for men to demonstrate their masculinity gender traits related to virility, power and hegemony. Although presumably consumed voluntarily, psychological reactance theory suggests that the plant-burger is a symbol of eliminated freedom. The coercive avoidance of meat makes a man feel and believe his perception of masculinity and freedom are sacrificed. By explaining his action was forced, the man tries to restore his manliness and to regain a masculine image. The threat was clearly visible from the words of the interviewees, who felt obliged to counter-react.

Such a loss of freedom is further exacerbated by the general perception that individuals who eat a meat-based diet are more masculine than people who follow a vegetarian diet [40,59]. Ironically, high consumption of meat and dairy products has been associated with many negative consequences, including increased rates of erectile dysfunction [60] and unpleasant scent [61].

Previous research has shown that “men can use impression management through food intake to bolster their masculine identity” [40], (p. 76). This is expressed by selecting what are perceived to be masculine food options, particularly when their identity is threatened [40]. Visiting a vegan restaurant is a perfect situation which requires impression management. The image that men portray is extremely important, more so for other males. Being ridiculed for not eating meat is a big concern:

I did it only because my girlfriend asked me to do this for her. Male needs to be strong and play by the rules to make their girl happy. When she is happy, I am happy. This is how things work . . . (Interviewer: Does this include going against what you consider masculine traits?) To some extent yes, but I still have to guard what she is saying in front of my male friends. I think she is smart enough and understands the implications of this. We do have a vegan friend, and everybody is constantly fooling him and it's very annoying to think that I can get in his place with my vegetarian burger. (Male, 19 years old, daily meat eater)

This man's words clearly show the application of the two theories—he is divided between the need to defend his threatened freedom and maintain self-presentation. Changing his consumption behaviour is not simple because the needed compliance with the romantic partner's desires generates psychological reactance [2], as well as fear of potential damage to his social self-presentation.

The above interviewee touches on being ridiculed by others for going vegan. This is seen as a betrayal of masculinity, even among the younger generations of Millennials and Generation Z. They feel compelled to remain as macho as possible and food choices are part of building this image [40]. The interview excerpt below shows that, although the man liked the burger, which he describes in the same terms he would use for animal-based meat, he still wants to be seen as being “a carnivore”:

My partner is trying very hard to sway a carnivore like me and I can tell you that some of the attempts are quite spot on, like with the vegan burger I ate the other week. It was juicier, less bleeding than contemporary meat, but in her company, I am easy to get swayed. (Male, 33 years old, daily meat eater)

Being exposed to the broader public with the image of a non-meat eater is another fear that the interviewed men have. Food selfies in the social media are similarly seen at the crossroads between the two theories applied. On the one hand, they symbolise positive impression management in the eyes of others, and in particular the women men love. They provide documentation of the personal satisfaction from the eating experience. On the other hand, publishing a vegan selfie can destroy a man's masculine self-actualisation and reputation among his peers. Sharing food selfies on social media from the vegan restaurant is seen as a formula for trouble and irreversible image destruction. One of the

participants explained his feeling of being trapped when his girlfriend takes a photo of him eating at a vegan restaurant and makes it available on Instagram. Although the feelings are not as strong to be seen as anger and aggression, often associated with psychological reactance [23,24], the man expresses psychological arousal [24] and refers to the need to search for explanations to justify his true identity:

You know, we took a selfie with my girlfriend and she shared it without having my consent to share it, on Instagram. Friends nowadays can trace you everywhere. I don't want to end up with my friends laughing at me over a plant-based burger. (Interviewer: Why is so important what other people, other men think of you?) You are asking me why it matters?! You know, basically it matters a lot and it's part of life, of our lives. People are always going to laugh at you, judge you and the best you can do is to make your actions, such as going to the vegan restaurant, invisible to the others. This way you could at least relax and no bother to search for meaningful explanations. (Male, 22 years old, daily meat-eater)

The prevailing social behaviour similarly has an influence on what men do. They do not want to feel uncomfortable disassociating from the rest and especially when their self-presentation is at risk:

Everyone I know is a meat eater. For me, it is awkward to be seen as a non-meat eater as I am ruining my reputation as a man. (Interviewer: How does this make you feel?) Uncomfortable. Very uncomfortable and even detrimental for me as a man. (Male, 29 years old, daily meat-eater)

Omnivorous men rarely find eating meat morally problematic as animals do not have another status in their mind apart from being just food [62]. One interviewee explained:

My girlfriend is eating veggie burgers for compassionate reasons around animal welfare. My consumption practices are not matching with hers as I think animals are our source of food. (Male, 37 years old, daily meat-eater)

While social perception by others is important and men want to please their female friends and partners, the Sydney male participants maintain their right of freedom to eat meat:

I felt quite guilty when opting for plant-based burgers. (Interviewer: Why was that?) Because I was feeling I am sacrificing my manhood, my masculinity. It's even worse when you are kind of forced to do it as everyone around is doing it. There is no other option. (Male, 38 years old, daily meat-eater)

If the expectation is that after going to a vegan restaurant and experiencing plant-based food men would change, this did not seem to be the case with the people we interviewed. They were particularly worried about the judgments by others based on their, albeit temporary, plant-based food choice.

Plant-based burgers are not the right option for me. It's destroying my manly image. (Male, 39 years old, daily meat-eater)

For them, eating meat is a masculinity fortress that needs to be protected. The social perception of masculinity which disassociates from eating plants, was dominant even when seen by others who also ate plant-based foods. A judgment based on a choice away from the established norms for men causes stress:

I was under constant stress how to get out of the situation, especially if some acquaintance of mine accidentally shows up. And this is entirely possible, because now everyone is crazy and wants to try vegetarian burgers. (Male, 38 years old, daily meat-eater)

This is an expression of reactance measures intended to explain greater variance in attitude toward plant-based burgers. There were negative concerns voiced by some of our male participants around the impact plant-based alternatives may have on them physically:

It's not a quality thing to eat these plant-based burgers. Such food effeminates you, you could end up growing some soya enhanced breast like the same thing you get when you eat chicken fed with hormones. (Male 37 years old, daily meat eater)

Similar concerns were raised in other parts of the world that plant-based meat could possibly make men more feminine and “grow boobs” [63]. If men share such concerns in relation to plants, it would be difficult to justify why they would drink cow’s milk.

Consumption of new meat alternatives by people who usually are not keen on these dietary options may increase their understanding of those who regularly consume plant-based foods. They may even begin to show empathy for others who make such a choice. However, for this to happen, many social barriers must be overcome, especially perceptions related to reduced masculinity. Eating plant-based meals needs to become the new normal, as is the case for their female friends and partners, without whom they would not have had the vegan restaurant experience. However, as explained by the psychological reactance theory, the public has shown resistance to many cogent health messages [28] and is likely to equally reject points related to environmental persuasion. Instead of trying to restore the threatened or eliminated freedoms, men could accept the plant-based options as the new normal and use impression management in their new role. This would require changes in the subsequent perceptions about vegetarian and vegan men by making them similarly normal.

A lot of the social fear seems to exist about labelling somebody as a “vegan”, which is an important observation for any marketing, including social marketing, that promotes the consumption of more plant-based foods. What is considered normal is likely to shift in our lifetimes and people, particularly men, can choose to be one of the first to change, or alternatively be one of the laggards. This particular notion could be related, not to threatened freedoms to food choices and expression of masculinity, but to masculine notions of leadership, taking responsibility and of being a trendsetter.

5.3. Plant-Based Alternatives

Some of the nuances revealed during the in-depth interviews indicated a degree of acceptance of the plant-based options. The acceptance of their presence as an option was expressed with specific attention to maintaining the desired impression and reaffirming the possible discrepancy between how they wanted to be perceived and how other people may perceive them [64]. As one of the participants explained:

I am pretty much a carnivore, but I have gladly given one of the plant-burger a go. (Male, 35 years old, daily meat eater)

This also advances knowledge toward understanding the complexity of the factors influencing food intake in relation to the stereotype of “real men eat meat” [16] and impression management as an important influence on people’s eating behaviour [40]. Some of the beliefs expressed by the participants can be also seen as self-awareness and self-deprecating jokes. In a similar vein, another participant explained his acceptance of occasionally eating plant-based options:

I think consuming meat analogues in the form of burgers is fine here and there as long as it doesn't screw my reputation. (Male, 24 years old, consumes meat 4–5 times per week)

Interestingly, with Australia being a multicultural society, there was a broad acceptance if men who ate plant-based burgers because of religious beliefs. This somehow protected them from being labelled “vegan” or unmanly:

Many people are eating these analogues as part of their religious practices, like India, Bangladesh and other countries or just to merge with the surroundings and the people around them. (Male, 33 years old, consumes meat 4–5 times per week)

Some participants however questioned whether putting forward religious or health justifications was not a way to hide the real intention to give up meat—another reasoning

for potential reactance. This was seen as a plot or mass betrayal by people who are giving up the present status quo:

Religious, animal welfare . . . people are having heaps of excuses for not consuming one thing or another. Many people are following them to justify their own vegetarian consumption. (Male, 22 years old, daily meat-eater)

The novel plant-based analogues are also seen as a new undesired trend penetrating Australian society, including the supermarkets:

Once I bought some, I think Danish burgers, by mistake. I didn't know there are selling fake meat next to real meat. (Male, 21 years old, daily meat-eater)

While women seem to play the main part in this trendsetting, men are prepared to follow to a certain degree, just to maintain an impression in the eyes of their romantic partners:

My wife is fanatic about new food and always wants to try things. There were so many experiments with some plant-based options I never understood from where she was bringing them home. (Interviewer: How successful were the plant-based alternatives at home?) Sometimes you can consume it. Most of the time you prefer to put it in the garbage bin. Actually, the majority of the time if you ask me. But my wife was enjoying it. (Male, 39 years old, daily meat-eater)

Another acknowledgement about women setting the trend is present in the words of the following interviewee who sought to balance the benefits of plant-based and animal meat options:

I don't think there is some sort of belief and structure that guide my wife's daily eating decisions. Even she eats less meat, she continues eating meat because it is a good source of iron she is lacking. Also, vitamins, minerals, B12, zinc, everything precious and much needed for our body to function is in meat. The desire to visit vegan restaurants in my opinion is not because she is that much in love with the veggies, but purely trend-based. She likes these kinds of things and obviously she guides my dietary practices and choices too, ha-ha-ha. (Male, 40 years old, daily meat-eater)

Some saw the plant-based alternatives as a non-Australian thing, particularly as Australia prides itself on producing quality meat. Such options were perceived as foreign to the Australian industry and another justification for creating a feeling of limitation and reactance:

I believe there are not many plant-based products in Australia. I've heard about some American brands "Beyond" and "Impossible", but not other Aussie brands. Maybe Sanitarium and Nestle do something. I am sure I saw something there . . . but apart from these I don't know others. (Male, 33 years old, consumes meat 4–5 times per week)

This expressed opinion highlights potential opportunities for domestic producers in Australia, as national brands for meat alternatives are likely to be important and respected amongst consumers.

The emphasis on the foreign origin of the plant-based alternatives mimicking meat may well be because people do not know how to properly use plant-based ingredients in food preparation at home or feel that the taste is simply inferior:

Till recently I didn't know these things existed. I thought they have them only at restaurants. Maybe if you buy them and don't know how to cook it, you may not have a good experience with it. A friend of mine bought some plant-based mince and tried to use it for the Bolognese sauce. She said that the final result was absolutely yuck . . . inedible. Maybe we will need some practice to familiarise ourselves with these products. (Male, 26 years old, daily meat-eater)

Others are simply not prepared to explore such new foods in their normal buying routine:

I never buy any of these animal-free products. I am not familiar with them. I heard they sell them in Coles and Woolies [major Australian supermarket chains], but I never paid any attention to them. (Male, 34 years old, daily meat-eater)

Some of the interviewees perceive them as something that is interfering with their usual choice and creates unwanted limitations to what they want to consume:

Not sure why we need these alternatives when there are varieties of already existing cuts of meat, salami, sausages, bacon, all good stuff we all enjoy on a daily basis. Sometimes I feel suppressed by their existence and the desire of my girlfriend to consume plant-based imitations, it's honestly giving me a headache. (Male, 25 years old, daily meat-eater)

There needs to be a lot of effort to break down the conservatism associated with food. Messages which are constructed in a freedom-threatening language or are understood as direct persuasion, are likely to provoke even stronger reactance [25,28]. Instead, the use of choice-enhancing language and arguments which emphasize the availability of different options, is more appropriate [28]. It is important to focus on adding another option to the list of foods rather than limiting the freedoms of Australian men and denying them the right of access to “real meat”.

5.4. Taste Experience

The sensory experience is important for any type of food, and this applies equally to plant-based alternatives. While temporarily modifying their eating behaviour to create the desired impression management in the eyes of others, eleven of the interviewees (40% of the sample) expressed concerns about the taste of these new foods:

It's like consuming fried or minced bun between buns. (Interviewer: Interesting description. Why do you think that?) Tasteless for me . . . not even close to real meat. You could have it once but that's it . . . You can't repeat it again. It's a waste of time. (Male, 32 years old, consumes meat 4–5 times per week)

Many properties of the plant-based alternatives, which directly impact on people's taste buds, such as taste, texture, flavour and juiciness, were seen as a barrier to future consumption and essentially a loss of freedom of choice, unless they are improved:

I can't say they (plant-based burgers) were anything special. Rather a little greasy and not meaty. (Male, 38 years old, daily meat eater)

Sensory properties constitute crucial parameters whether the plant-based meat “looks, cooks and satisfies like beef” [65] and delivers “the juicy, delicious taste you know and love, while being better for you and the planet” [66], especially for meat-loving men. While food companies claim that these new “impossible” products made from plants use 87% less water, generate 89% less greenhouse gas emissions and require 96% less land [67], the meat-eating consumer ultimately cares most about how they taste. Good sensory properties are likely to shift men's perceptions about alternative proteins from dull to desirable, with a 2018 survey by Mintel showing that taste was the top reason why US adults ate such foods [68]. Both the sensory properties of plant-based alternatives and consumer perceptions of such products are improving over time [69]. The unfamiliarity and uncertainty about the taste qualities of the new food products are a major barrier for Australian consumers as well:

I was sceptic about plant-based burgers as everywhere they are advertised with the promises of the same taste as meat, same appearance as meat etc. At the end it is unclear whether I was going to have the same eating experience as before when I was chewing on a real steak. (Male, 39 years old, daily meat eater)

Even concerns about possible COVID-19 outbreaks or infections with other diseases are not seen as threats to consumer freedom. They take backstage compared to the taste experience:

Bleeds, taste, maybe will be able to avoid some food worries around contracting diseases, but it still needs a big room for improvement. (Male, 33 years old, consumes meat 4–5 times per week)

There is a strong message from this group of consumers that the taste experience needs to be comparable to animal meat for them to accept the new alternatives and not be seen as resistant or reactant to the social influence of others in favour of consuming plant-based burgers. In addition to the issues related to taste, the complexity surrounding consumption stereotypes and impression management, including the viewpoints about meat and masculinity, is not yet well-understood [40]. This is also directly linked to how the meat-eating men see the future of plant-based proteins.

5.5. Future of This Trend

Plant-based alternatives are projected to reach substantial growth [10,12]. Although most of the interviewees agreed that these products were likely to remain a constant feature on the food menu, some (namely, 13 or 36% of the sample) were of the view that this was only a temporary trend. They highlighted a range of concerns that will impede the long-term adoption of these products and their penetration as a widely accepted choice. Below, we discuss three main reasons expressed as to why the current trend may lose momentum, namely: this is just a curiosity which will wear off, the new products are unhealthy, and there is a lack of transparency about how they are made.

5.5.1. Curiosity

Many people try plant-based meat alternatives out of curiosity. Being a driver of progress, curiosity relates to inquisitive thinking, which makes people enter the unknown, unexplored new areas of knowledge, search for novel experiences, face and be attracted to unfamiliar situations. Many people feel the same way about food, although some may experience neophobia [70]. Among the participant sample, there was a shared opinion that men wanted to have this new experience but not much support that this would lead to a more permanent inclusion of such plant-based options in their diet:

I was glad I had the chance to try the plant-based burger as I have heard so many things about it and was wondering whether I will like it or not. (Interviewer: How was it?) I can't say I was too impressed; it was a bit greasy for my taste, but I tried it and I kind of ticked the box. (Male, 30 years old, consumes meat 4–5 times per week)

“Pure curiosity” was driving many of the men who also wanted to reaffirm their current food choices, leaving little, if not no, space for adding these options on their menu:

Now they are popular as they are something pretty new. I was trying of pure curiosity. I don't think we will be eating these (plant-based) and abandon our meat, but I was just curious to try and reassure myself that this is the case. (Male, 29 years old, eats meat 4–5 times per week)

Many of the interviewees were aware of the multitude of problems associated with current livestock production, including industrial farming, overuse of environmental resources, pollution and contribution to antimicrobial resistance, but that was not convincing enough to see the plant-based alternative proteins as a long-term solution, despite admitting their current popularity:

I can say that plant-based meat is truly having its moment, right now, but not forever. It's despite the livestock industry induced problems with factory farming, antibiotic resistance and environmental problems. Plant-based is having a momentum, so do their producers . . . I don't think that it will replace consumers' meat purchases. (Male, 25 years old, daily meat-eater)

Health concerns also featured as part of plant-based alternatives being only something to try but not to adhere to in the long-run:

I was listening to a podcast last week and they were discussing the projections of plant-based alternatives to go to the roof. Consumers' demand and sentiments linked to animal welfare, health and the environment were pointed to as reasons for the growing trend, but these are all gimmicks. Everyone is keen to try as it's something new because people are curious to know what is out there, but people will be quickly fed up with it . . . (Male, 18 years old, consumes meat 4–5 times per week)

In line with the prevalent opinion among our research participants, the 2020 survey by the International Food Information Council Foundation [71] also placed curiosity as the primary reason for consuming plant-based alternatives and ahead of benefits for the environment and human health [72]. Curiosity was also linked to the availability of choices and the understanding of the freedoms a consumer has. If plant-based protein options are perceived as enhancing people's image and self-presentation, then curiosity may deliver longer-term effects as indicated by the impression management theory.

5.5.2. Concerns about Unhealthiness

Eight of the interviewed men (22% of the sample) believed that the current trend of plant-based alternatives will discontinue because these new options are unhealthy to consume. This opinion was expressed predominantly by Generation Z consumers who were also well-informed about the benefits of meat reduction:

Why should we eat plant-based meat if we have real meat? Plant-based are unhealthy. They contain high sodium contents and saturated fat, basically equivalent fat and caloric contents to meat. Maybe it is far less saturated fat than animal meat on average, but it is still saturated fat. If you reduce your meat intake, you will have to digest less saturated fat than you will with plant-based alternatives. I don't think the whole madness with the plant-based is for real. (Male, 20 years old, consumes meat 4–5 times per week)

Generation Z, which is the largest age cohort in Australia, as well as in the world, wanted reassurance about the health benefits of the new plant-based proteins before they committed to eating this food on a regular basis:

Plant-based is nothing better for our health compared to meat. They are ultra-processed imitations, and I think no matter how hard the industry tries to replicate the taste and the cooking, sizzling and whatever experience of meat, I am not convinced that I want to consume it without a clear indication of plant-based analogues' health benefits (Interviewer: If you are given this reassurance are you going to react differently?) Mmmm, honestly, I am not sure. Even if they want to make them sound healthier, they can't. I read they are too processed . . . It's difficult to decide. I am more inclining toward not eating them. (Male, 21 years old, daily meat-eater)

Scepticism about the health credentials of plant-based meat analogues seems to be common among consumers despite evidence that they are lower in cholesterol and have less salt than many animal-based foods. This was also confirmed by the 2020 survey of the International Food Information Council Foundation [73], in which a sizeable minority of 25% of Americans believed plant alternatives to be unhealthier. Products being highly processed was a common concern as explained by the participant below:

The ways the industry uses soybeans, peas and wheat to create ingredients for plant-based alternatives are not good as the product is highly processed. Then we are offered to eat it without being aware of the price. (Male, 24 years old, daily meat-eater)

Concerns about the novel plant-based meat alternatives being unhealthy were confirmed with the expressed desire to eat vegetables and fruits directly. This was seen as restoration of the freedom to consume better and healthier alternatives:

Eating vegetables is good for you but being plant-based does not automatically makes it healthy. Plant-based meats are just using ingredients that come from plants, and they are the food chemist pride. We don't know what people like about the taste of meat. Believe it

or not, even considered not so healthy to eat, meat is meat, and it will remain the preferred food for the majority of people in Australia. (Male, 22 years old, daily meat-eater)

There were also some who saw plant-based alternatives as something that may be consumed by others, but not themselves, because of concerns related to healthiness and taste:

These products are marketed as containing protein from plants and as long as I am aware, they are formulated to provide an option for non-meat consumers. Not me by the way, as I love eating meat. But made from plants does not necessarily mean they are providing a healthy protein. Who knows what is in there? . . . Also, by default, plants contain less protein than real meat. (Interviewer: Do you think plant-based alternatives have a chance with meat-eaters like you?) Ha-ha-ha. Maybe if they make it similar to at least processed meat like salami, sausages, plant-based options will have the best chances to replace meat. But they . . . I mean the producers, the industry is not yet there. (Male, 37 years old, daily meat-eater)

The survey of the International Food Information Council [69] found that consumers perceive plant-based alternatives as being healthier when it comes to vitamins and minerals content, including specific amounts but were concerned about the presence of sodium. This makes ingredient disclosure very important and is again related to the freedom of choices for the consumer.

5.5.3. Lack of Transparency

The Generation Z participants in our study expressed demand for clear labelling and production transparency for these products. This can be seen as a beneficial step for the industry to build consumer confidence and avoid future undesired surprises. Reactance should be seen not just as an opposition to availability of choices but also as a strategy of empowerment [28] where the consumer has the right to know:

You know, producers need to let us know what they are putting into these plant-based options. There is not much transparency about the hidden ingredients. I know they are including the general stuff in the label, but there are many small doses of chemicals that are not disclosed. I read about this recently in one news article. It's quite disturbing. When people find out what is in it, this will be the end of it. (Male, 19 years old, daily meat eater)

Reactance triggers cognitive processes and acts as motivation forcing individuals to do something to change the circumstances associated with the threat [22,24]. Parallels can be drawn with Generation Z's attitude towards cultured meat where they strongly question the motivation and quality of the food products [74]. Better transparency could help plant-based alternatives to be perceived more favourably by consumers. This is quite important for Generation Z who are already feeling the burden of inheriting the problems created by preceding generations, including climate change, biodiversity loss, reduced soil fertility, contaminated land and waterbodies, plastics pollution and many other environmental problems. Unknowns and reluctance related to accepting genetically modified organisms (GMOs) were also stated as part of the need for transparency, particularly when linked to the freedom of choice and the ability to make informed decisions:

Not sure if they use GMOs and other ingredients that are against my health-conscious lifestyle. We need to know and this needs to be visibly included in the labels. (Male, 26 years old, consumes meat 4–5 times per week)

As can be seen from the questions posed to the Sydney men (see Table 1), we did not specifically target issues related to perceptions about masculinity. However, this theme emerged strongly during the interviews. The association between meat and masculinity may be the result of toxic masculinity [75] or hegemonic masculinity [76] within Australian society. We also did not attempt to measure the degree of meat-loving men's psychological reactance, an area that is increasingly gaining momentum [23,24]. These aspects require

further investigation. The role of friends and social media in influencing what men think was also not investigated.

Most importantly, there were no questions soliciting answers related to Sydney men's environmental attitudes, animal welfare considerations, or concerns about climate change. These themes were expressed in some of the interviews but, overall, they were brushed over as issues of minor importance. This was unexpected for us as we assumed that the main reason for people to eat out at a vegan restaurant would be environmental and animal welfare concerns. However, this was not the case with the meat-loving Sydney men whose experience and intentions we present here. Although concerns were raised about the potential unhealthiness of the new plant-based alternative proteins, there was no discussion of the problems associated with livestock production. In fact, the perception was that animal-based foods are healthy, nutritious and should be a preferred option. This came as a surprise to us given the fact that the sample consisted of men who were relatively highly educated (see Table 2) compared to the average Australian population. All the above issues can be investigated further.

6. Meet Me Halfway: Social Marketing Implications

We interviewed the participant men about their behaviour in a public space, namely at a vegan restaurant, but have no indication whether this experience has affected their food choices in the private realm. We hope this to have been the case, but there were no signs that these meat-eaters have embraced plant-based alternatives in one way or another. Our study, however, confirmed the power of the two theories to explain men's behaviour in the public sphere in the company of girlfriends, partners, friends and when they can be seen by others.

There were strong voices of disagreement and suspicion raised by the men in our study who, on the surface, can be considered as part of the shift we need to see to ensure the availability of healthy and nutritional food across the globe. Previously, we have argued for social marketing to be used to facilitate a transition towards better and more sustainable food choices [51]. The analysis in this study, however, presents a new perspective and potential pitfalls. We were able to identify two complementary reactions supported by the theories of psychological reactance and impression management. Currently, Australian men who are used to regularly consuming meat are unlikely to include plant-based alternatives as an enduring feature of their diets as predicted by the theory of psychological reactance which explains that persuasion poses a threat to the person's free behaviour and induces resistance to change [24,25]. However, the study's male participants acknowledged the importance of women for their visit to the vegan restaurant which can be accounted for by impression management theory. If social marketing is pushed too much, it can be perceived as limiting people's freedoms. On the other hand, building on positive impressions can help steer better food choices.

These Australian men expressed a broader unwillingness to consume plant-based alternatives despite any good intentions behind the development and introduction of the new products. What the analysis was able to suggest is that certain levers can be used in social advertising for the common good. Below are several points that can inform social marketing initiatives:

- Women have a very important role to play in any food transitions, not only as mothers but also as partners to the men who want to maintain good relationships. Eating is a daily necessity and the power of women, be it subtle or by expressing explicit preferences, is important.
- The link between meat and masculinity is mainly targeted at other men rather than women. Men should think about how their dietary choices are seen by women and about the overall food-related perceptions that exist in society. Industry marketing has contributed much to creating messages linking meat and machoness. Social marketing needs to break these mental connections and create images that are better suited for our time of an environment and climate emergency. Manliness has also a caring

side and this should be emphasised in relation to climate change and environmental deterioration.

- It is important to stop labelling people as “vegan”, “flexitarian” or “meat-eaters” as this causes divisions and disagreements among all stakeholders in this complex problem area. Plant-based meat alternatives should aim to become just another, better food option for people, particularly in western countries.
- By being transparent and delivering genuinely healthier options, the new food industry can gain credibility and broader acceptance. Its claims, including through marketing, will be monitored closely by Generation Z, Millennials and any other people who are hesitant to change their diets.

Social marketing, informed in this case by the theories of psychological reactance and impression management, has a role to play in providing a space free of misinformation and false claims while offering possible solutions to the complexity of the food problem. The theories of psychological reactance and image management explain human behaviour; in this case we used them for a situation when men were challenged in a new food environment. Even with good intentions, men are at the crossroads, raising concerns related to what is considered masculine behaviour, and about mistrust of the new plant-based alternative proteins. The mere fact that they have dined out at a vegan restaurant shows that they are willing to explore and be challenged. They need to be met halfway on the road of transformation without fear of being ridiculed, misled, or physically or emotionally compromised with their sense of freedom threatened. Using women as influencers, men’s attachment to meat needs to be overcome for the broader personal, social and environmental benefits. Social marketing has been used to address other complex social problems, such as alcohol and tobacco consumption, and, in isolated cases, for meat consumption [77]. It is time to start using the power of “social marketing theories, concepts, discourses and practice, to generate critique . . . and change that facilitates social good” [21] (p. 86) for transitioning to environmentally and nutritionally better diets.

7. Contributions of the Study

In a time when there is a growing body of convincing scientific evidence that dietary shifts in high-income countries, such as Australia, can generate substantial climate dividends [78], behaviour changes are essential. This study is responding to these challenges by extending the application of existing theories to a new area which positions it in the middle of the contribution continuum ranging from straight replication to new theory development [79]. Its main contributions are as follows.

Firstly, the theories of psychological reactance and impression management have not been previously used individually or in combination to explain male attitudes towards plant-based alternative proteins. This aspect is particularly important as men tend to consume higher amounts of meat. In the latest Australian dietary survey, men were found to consume 32% more meat-based products than women [80]. Moreover, Australians have one of the highest per capita consumptions of meat in the world [78]. The two social behaviour theories explain the importance of perceptions about freedom of choice and the construction of male identities within society. They confirm that eating is much more than satisfying hunger and is a social process where men want to be in control of the choices they make and how they are perceived. Without working on these two aspects, including through social marketing, a dietary change among Australian male population is unlikely to occur within a foreseeable future. This means that there will be missed opportunities for acting on climate change through reducing the greenhouse gas emissions of food, on increasing the potential for carbon sequestration by freeing up land currently used for livestock grazing and feed as well as improving public health. Backed-up by empirical evidence and informed by theory, the study was able to identify the nature of social marketing messages that need to be communicated to Australian men.

Secondly, although the study focused on men only, it confirmed that women play a major role in the dietary choices of their partners. This continues to be the case with new

plant-based alternative proteins. Both theories explained different aspects of the role of women. The impression management theory is particularly strong in highlighting the desire of men to construct an image that is pleasing for their romantic partners. Psychological reactance on the other hand showed the importance of women not limiting the food choices men have and emphasising the availability of choice. This is in line with previous research in flexitarianism [4] which aims at reduction in meat consumption rather than elimination of animal-based food options.

Thirdly, this study was able to identify very strong attitudes of mistrust towards the industry players in the field of new plant-based alternative proteins. Psychological reactance acts as a tool of empowerment where individuals emphasise their right to know and the need for transparency about the nutritional and health values of the new products on the market. Impression management on the other hand can be used by such empowered men to create new male identities built around making good and environmentally responsible behaviour.

Fourthly, this is the first analysis which links psychological reactance, impression management and social marketing in relation to a dietary shift towards more sustainable food options. Social marketing aims to educate people so that they can make informed healthier choices regarding their diet, health and lifestyle [81]. It is being supported by governments, industry, charity organisations and broadly within society [81]. Message relevance and message framing are essential to avoid persuasion resistance, as explained by psychological reactance, and counteract existing trends within society often associated with particular negative images or labelling of people, as expounded by impression management. The study was able to identify possible social marketing messages and ways to frame the most-needed food transition.

8. Conclusions

The two theories that we used to describe men's behaviour following their experience in a vegan restaurant, namely psychological reactance and impression management, have been around for a long time. They have been used for more than half a century in many other situations to explain social behaviour. We were able to show that they equally apply in the case of novel alternative plant-based proteins. Good theories are indeed expected to possess explanatory power. Understanding how the meat-eating men react to what they perceive as their right of choice and how they manage the impressions constructed by others, is also essential in making the transition from theory to practice. We expect social marketing with research-backed messages (for example, as identified in this study) to influence this food transition.

New plant-based alternatives, including the vegan burger, may have a role in the future but, for now, Australian men need to be convinced. Those of them who love meat demonstrate strong reactance to the deprivation of choice and fervent attempts for impression management that disassociates them from plant-based food options. There are however other contributions that this study was able to make that relate to the framing of food choices and the male identities:

- Plant-based foods, including the veggie burger, need to be communicated as options which empower consumer choices with supporting evidence that they are nutritionally healthier and ecologically better – this is likely to suppress reactance towards them;
- From food being at the core of the male identity as represented by meat-based options, it needs to become the centre of care about the future – masculinity needs to be communicated as being defined not by what men eat but what men do about other people and the planet.

Given the heavy environmental footprint of our current meat consumption, plant-sourced foods will need to have a prominent presence in the future [5,78]. Such a scenario may change some of the current explanations provided by the theories of psychological reactance and impression management; however, for now, they provide important insights about men's behaviour.

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