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Aschemann-Witzel, Jessica; Janssen, Meike

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EDITORIAL

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The role of policy actions to accelerate food consumer behaviour change

Jessica Aschemann-Witzel^{1*} and Meike Janssen²

*Correspondence:
jeaw@mgmt.au.dk

¹ MAPP - Centre for Research on Customer Relations in the Food Sector, Department of Management, Aarhus University, Fuglesangsalle 4, 8210 Aarhus, Denmark

² Consumer and Behavioural Insights Group, Department of Management, Society and Communication, Copenhagen Business School, Dalgas Have 15, 2000 Frederiksberg, Denmark

Society is watching how various crises come together: climate change, biodiversity loss, economic inequality, and global food insecurity exacerbated by conflicts and droughts (Hasegawa et al. 2021). Even though we know that the lifestyle patterns established in the richer countries have contributed to the grand challenges at hand, not much has changed so far.

It is well established that there is a gap between being aware of a problem and acting upon it, often called attitude–intention gap or intention–behaviour gap. Consumer behaviour theories and models explain how factors such as the context in which we choose might come ‘in-between’ the good intentions and the actual behaviour. This holds in particular when it comes to habitual behavioural patterns such as those with an impact on long-term goals related to health and sustainability. Our habits, practices and norms shape our daily behaviours and act as barriers to change, also when we have already changed some of our beliefs and attitudes and have formed good intentions. It is especially difficult in a habitual daily behavioural pattern to connect the choice at hand today, to the long-term consequences for health and environment in the future.

In the past years, consumers in affluent countries have increasingly expressed their intentions to reduce meat consumption and move towards more ‘plant-based’ food in their diet. This can involve both the increased choice of plant-derived food categories such as fruit, vegetables, or legumes, as well as the shift from meat and dairy products to the so-called plant-based alternatives like soy drink and pea-based burger patties. Plant-based alternatives have seen a sharp increase in market share, and there are predictions of huge growth opportunities. However, in the said affluent countries, it is nevertheless only a smaller share of consumers who become flexitarians and change their diets more drastically. Surveys show that the share of ‘plant-based eaters’ or vegans and vegetarians is below 10%, self-reported flexitarians circa 30%, and those not reporting any reduction in meat or intention to do so, often is at 50% or more. Production and sales indicate that in most affluent countries, meat consumption has hardly taken a downward turn. Considering the huge impact that animal-based products have on the climate and the environment, it could make an important difference if more citizens move towards more plant-based diets (Poore and Nemecek 2018; Xu et al. 2021). However, the current pace of change is too slow and what has been done so far is not enough. To

really make a crucial impact on mitigating the various crises at hand, ‘plant-based food’ should become more than just another consumer trend. Ideally, it should evolve into a more profound dietary transition, via passing crucial societal tipping points—with tipping points being the point where small interventions lead to significant and long-term changes to the way a system operates (Lenton 2020).

Policy actions play an important role in this process because they can establish the interventions needed for triggering tipping points. In a recent study,¹ we interviewed 27 market stakeholders and experts to examine internal drivers and external triggers that acted as key success factors for the plant-based food industry, and we identified triggers of societal tipping points in seven case studies of transition processes to sustainable food consumption. The conceptual background for the study is the concept of societal transitions shaped by the interactions of different micro- and macro-factors as well as the interactions between actors over time. The underlying ‘big question’ we attempt to explore is if, when and how these factors and interactions can create ‘societal tipping points’ which then trigger an accelerated change among consumers. The country studied was Denmark, but the observations can hold for other countries as well.

Across this work, it emerged that a bolder commitment from policy actors is needed to move the development of the plant-based food industry to the next level. In the Danish plant-based market, a sustainability-minded consumer segment has triggered the trend, and food companies have picked it up and reacted to it. There has been a bottom-up push by consumers, triggered by a strong international trend and concern among consumers and in policy documents. This growing demand and the international agenda and trends observed in other countries gave the plant-based sector companies and start-ups the courage to create new companies, products, or to launch radical strategy shifts or more controversial communication campaigns. But both of these groups of actors—i.e. a small group of dedicated consumers and a handful of plant-based food companies—can only get so far in developing the niche. Any further upscaling and mainstreaming needs bold policy actions that start changing the system in which consumers and businesses act. As one expert phrased it, it is through the broader external environment where a shift can mean that *‘the magic happens and where big success can emerge in terms of the market development’*. Mainstream consumers will not radically change their behaviour out of intrinsic motivation to stop climate change alone. Systemic changes are needed in the so-called food choice environments, i.e. the availability, attractiveness and affordability of plant-based foods relative to animal foods. In that case, the motivation can interact with ability and opportunity, and this interaction can close the gap in behaviour.

In the interviews with the plant-based industry actors they commented that so far, policy support has been rather absent. Respondents even stated that policy had been perceived as counterproductive—due to the support that the animal-based industry has traditionally received. As one expert described it: *‘You could say that consumers, and the industry in Denmark, are SO ready for change to greener food choices—politicians are lagging behind’*. In the case studies of behavioural change—for example concerning organic food, nutritional labelling, and food waste reduction actions—it emerges that

¹ See more on <https://mgmt.au.dk/plantpro/activities/industry>.

successful transition processes typically entailed substantive policy commitment. Thus, we conclude that it is time for bolder policy commitment to support the shift to more plant-based diets in the population. This could be setting ambitious targets for plant-rich meals offered in public canteens, increasing the share of public investment into research and innovation in the plant-based sector, incorporating environmental sustainability into nutritional guidelines, or furthering the development of climate labelling.

The observation of a gap between consumer attitudes and intention on the one side and actual change on the other highlights that consumers, as well as businesses, act in a larger macro-environment also determined by policy actors. All stakeholders need to collaborate to create the necessary change—but in the end, it is policy-makers that should have the responsibility to look furthest into the future and chip in with bold decisions to secure that future generations' needs are met without trespassing planetary boundaries.

Author contributions

Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Declarations

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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