

**“You Want to Call Yourself Meat?”
Beef Industry Representatives’ Perceptions on Cultured Meat Products**

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Introduction

In the last decade, consumers have become increasingly curious about how their food is produced. This curiosity often stems from health, environmental, sustainability, and animal welfare concerns (Verbeke et al., 2015). Some consumers have changed their consumption habits of traditional meat products based upon these concerns and have found alternative sources of protein in products like plant-based meat substitutes (Verbeke et al., 2015). Traditionally, plant-based meat alternatives have been the only substitute available; however, a new alternative, cultured meat, is being prepped to hit consumers' grocery store shelves. Cultured meat has been given many names: lab grown, in vitro, cultivated, and synthetic meat (Lee et al., 2020). It is created by taking a small number of cells from a living animal and then cultivating those cells in a controlled, lab environment to create food (FSIS, 2022). While cultured meat products have not yet been commercially released to the public, it is estimated that they will be available in a few years (Stollar et al., 2022). Prior research has been conducted to assess consumer attitudes on cultured meat, but little to no research has been done to study the attitudes and perceptions of those involved in the beef industry (Specht et al., 2020; Stollar et al., 2022; Verbeke et al., 2015). Verbeke et al. (2015) reported that consumers prioritized transparent labeling, stringent regulations as well as supplemental information about cultured meat products.

In line with Priority Area 1 (Enns et al., 2016), this study sought to bridge the gap between consumers and beef industry stakeholders. It explored the perceptions beef industry representatives hold on cultured meat and how the labeling of cultured meat can affect producers, consumers, and policy. The following research objectives guided this study: (RO1) Describe the perceptions beef industry representatives have about cultured meat; (RO2) Describe the opinions beef industry representatives have about the way cultured meat products are labeled and how it may impact the beef industry, consumers, and policy.

Theoretical Framework

Grunig and Hunt (1984) sought to explain the fast moving, ever-evolving realm of public relations through a series of four models: press agency/publicity, public information, two-way asymmetric model and the two-way symmetric model. The public information model focuses on the one-way communication between an organization and their publics. This public relations model is popular among government agencies, associations, nonprofits and educational organizations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Practitioners of this model act on behalf of an organization to disseminate true, timely information to their stakeholders through press, media, and consumer relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Methods

Data were collected through a series of four, qualitative, semi-structured interviews that took place in March and April 2022 via Zoom and MS Teams. The four participants were employed in both state and national beef organizations and served in roles focusing on communications, producer relations, and governmental affairs. The semi-structured interview guide used for this study was researcher created, reviewed by colleagues for dependability, and approved by the university's institutional review board. The interview guide consisted of 20 questions that covered topics such as their experience in the livestock and agricultural industries, perceptions on plant-based protein and cultured meat alternatives and consumer choices. Then, participants were asked to describe potential impacts on policy, focusing on labeling and regulation. To ensure trustworthiness, the interviews were recorded and then transcribed by Otter.ai. The

transcripts were then analyzed for emergent themes through open and axial coding using Microsoft Word (Guest et al., 2006). Throughout the analysis, an audit trail was used to detail theme formation and definition. Upon completion of the analysis, researchers met to debrief the audit trail and theme formation, to ensure consistency among the themes, thus increasing the dependability of the results (Erlandson et al., 1993).

Findings

Policy concerns were one of the more prominent themes that emerged from this research. Participants were asked to discuss any policies they would like to see be carried out regarding cultured meat. This led to the development of two subthemes: labeling and regulatory concerns. Participants spoke about how critical *proper labeling* of cultured meat products will be. All four participants said they believed cultured meat products should be distinctly differentiated from traditional beef products on grocery store shelves. Participant 4 said: “There should be a label at the bottom that says, ‘produced using cell cultured or cell-based technology’ ... Frankly, we don’t care as long as it’s not labeled beef... As long as that label very clearly differentiates how the food was produced.” Participant 2 also indicated clear labeling strategies were needed, “[Cultured meat] needs to be clearly labeled and potentially sectioned off in the grocery store. here are your traditionally raised beef products, and then here are your cultured meat products.”

Regulatory concerns were at the top of participants’ priority list. Consumer safety is of the utmost importance, and some participants are worried the FDA may not provide stringent enough regulations for these products. For example, Participant 1 said: “So, from our perspective, USDA just needs to be involved in the oversight of the inspection and labeling of these products, whether they’re plant-based or cell cultured... I think it’s obvious, surely that, cell cultured meat products, since they are derived from animals would be under USDA... We would like to see USDA be more involved in that oversight, because right now, FDA is just not doing the job.” Participant 3 indicated that if these products want to be called meat, then they should be subject to the same standards as traditional meat: “If you want to call yourselves meat, if you’re allegedly, equivalent in terms of product composition, you would theoretically be subject to the same types of food safety vulnerabilities. You need to be held to the same set of stringent food safety standards, and you need to be complying with the same type of labeling processes.”

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

Industry organizations often act as the bridge between consumers and agricultural producers. They are tasked with advocating for the industry, managing issues and educating their target audiences. The public information model can be used to explain how organizations communicate with their chosen public these issues (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). To inform stakeholders on cultured meat, organizations should consider the public information model. Lobbying for policy that includes transparent labeling and stringent regulation will help differentiate cultured meat from traditional beef products, which could enhance one-way communication to consumers (Verbeke et al., 2015). In addition, further research should be conducted on the perceptions of cultured meat products among different publics. Consumer research has already been conducted; however, other publics such as producers, policymakers, and nutritionists, should be researched as well (Specht et al., 2020; Stollar et al., 2022; Verbeke et al., 2015). It is also recommended that a longitudinal study be conducted to describe how trends and opinions change throughout time, particularly once cultured meat products become available.

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