The conflict between Social Norms of different groups and their effects on Meat Consumption Behavior

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1. Introduction

The challenges related to climate change require a structural change in the economic chain, from production to consumption, including habits and dietary choices of individuals. Food is one of the three most critical consumer sectors in terms of impact and harm to the environment (Lehner et al., 2016), which increase social pressure for changes in diet, especially in meat consumption patterns (Cheah et al., 2020). Meat production, especially intensive, has been identified as an important source of emission of polluting gases into the atmosphere, land and water use, and transformation of ecosystems, leading decrease in biodiversity (The Lancet, 2018). Reduction of consumption, substitution by proteins of plant origin, or an alternative source, such as laboratory meats or substitution by meats of animals raised in agroecological systems, are alternatives to reduce environmental impacts (Machovina et al., 2015).

Changes related to meat consumption are challenging due to their importance in nutrition, survival, and the social representations and symbolic meaning of food and meals (Rozin, 2005). Meat is one of the most important food in the human diet and is consumed all over the world: it is intrinsic in habits, rituals, traditions, and personal and collective expression (Leroy & Praet, 2015). Eating meat is part of the dominant dietary pattern in many societies and is considered the social norm in most areas of the world (Armstrong Soule & Sekhon, 2019).

Humans are social beings by nature and live in a complex social environment, which influences many decisions, such as those related to food (Higgs, 2015). Each person is concomitantly member of different social groups, and participating in a social group is part of personal identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). By social groups, individuals evaluate and categorize themselves and guide how they should behave and what they should believe (Hogg, 2016).

Groups present a single and specific system of social norms that must be followed to confirm and maintain the affiliation (Fritsche et al., 2018). However, social norms from different groups can be important, salient, and incompatible at the same time, which can lead to normative conflicts (Amiot et al., 2020; Hirsh & Kang, 2016). Normative conflict occurs when two or more valued identities stand out at the same time and have divergent norms, and individuals are aware of the divergence and realize that this difference can lead to a situation that harms their social relationships (Giguère et al., 2010; Hirsh & Kang, 2016). In a normative conflict situation, individuals use cognitive activities and behavior as strategies to harmonize identities but are not clear what the effect of incompatible normative standards in consumer behavior.

Despite the relevance of the focus theory of normative conduct (Cialdini et al., 1990) to understand and predict intentions and behaviors, the conflict of social norms among groups and its effect on behavior has been neglected by previous research on consumer behavior area. There is a limited number of academic works discussing situations of conflict of social norms between different groups in the Marketing area, and studies with empirical data are scarce. To the best of our knowledge, there is no published academic study on the conflict of social norms in the context of consumer behavior. To collaborate in solving this gap, this project aims to investigate the effect of conflict of social norms between different groups on consumption behavior, using meat consumption as the context of the study.

To accomplish this, we intent a) to explore the theoretical body of knowledge on social norms and conflicts of social norms of different groups; b) to identify moderating and mediating variables used in previous research on the effect of social norms on the food consumption behavior; c) to explore the socio-economic-cultural context of meat consumption in Brazil; d) to identify and describe the effect of social norms conflicts in meat consumption behavior.

The theoretical contribution expected lies in the development of the Focus theory of normative conduct, exploring the effect of normative conflicts between different groups on the

eating behavior domain, focusing on meat consumption behavior, which has not been studied in previous research. Considering that this theory is deemed to be effective in understanding and changing human behaviors in a social context, it could aid in the development of more effective actions that result in more ethical and sustainable behaviors related to dietary choices.

The results may also support the formulation of public policies on nutrition and food, especially related to meat consumption. They will collaborate with business and economic activity, once changes in meat consumption have effects on the economy, especially in meat producing and exporting countries. Changes in consumption patterns also influence global value chains, which need to adapt to new scenarios. There is a demand for more flow and quality of information for decision-making and innovation in production, distribution, and retail processes. The economic and social importance of the livestock chain is relevant in producing, consuming, and exporting countries such as Brazil.

2. Theoretical background

Humans are social beings by nature, and the social environment has an essential influence on who a person is (Hirsh & Kang, 2016). Each person has a complex psychological system – self-concept - that encompasses a set of identities constructed from the interaction between personal characteristics and the social environment (Amiot et al., 2007). According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), individuals segment, categorize, and classify the social environment through groups, and to categorize themselves as part of the environment from group affiliation (Terry et al., 1999). Self-categorization enables the relative perception of the individual's position and a broader understanding of the role in the social system (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). This process occurs through the identification with a specific group and its members, highlighting intragroup cohesion, and by comparing the similarities and differences of that group with the other groups of the social system, resulting in intergroup differentiation (Terry et al., 1999).

Group affiliation results in following a specific prototype, which guides behavior, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings (Hogg, 2016). The group prototype is influenced by a single, particular, and shared normative system, and members of a specific group are expected to act according to the group's norms (Fritsche et al., 2018; McDonald et al., 2013). These norms are called social standards and must be followed to confirm and maintain the affiliation. It is a prevalent behavior in the community, and this prevalence is known by the members (Hawkins et al., 2019).

Social norms are negotiated rules and patterns to regulate social behaviors, communicated, and understood by members of a specific group (Cialdini et al., 1990). Guides or restrict behaviors and conducts, although they are not supported by a formal system of laws (Cialdini & Trost, 1998), and this influence on behavior is underdetected by people (Nolan et al., 2008). Social norms are shared among group members actively, by instructions, demonstration, rituals, or passively, in a nonverbal way or by observation and imitation (Cialdini & Trost, 1998).

Group memberships and social identities definition are defined by many factors, including nationality, peer group, family or friendship group (Higgs, 2015), gender, race, culture, sexual orientation, and political preferences (Hirsh & Kang, 2016). So, a person is concomitantly affiliated with and influenced by different social groups and is exposed to different normative expectations (Amiot et al., 2020; Hirsh & Kang, 2016). Considering the norm as a group standard (McDonald & Crandall, 2015), it is reasonable to expect that groups have different norms among themselves (McDonald et al., 2013). Intragroup comparison, as a process of self-categorization and a process of self-concept, also reinforces the contrast among

groups. Social norms can be important and incompatible at the same time, which can lead to normative conflicts (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Fritsche et al., 2018; Hirsh & Kang, 2016).

Normative conflict occurs when two or more valued identities are salient at the same time, have different norms, individuals are aware of the divergence, and realize that this difference can lead to a situation that harms their social relationships (Giguère et al., 2010; Hirsh & Kang, 2016). Failure to comply with a group's norms puts the affiliation in risk and causes physical and emotional results, triggering a neurophysiological response that produces anxiety and uncertainty (Hirsh & Kang, 2016). Furthermore, divergence among norms results in identity conflict or incongruity, threatening self-concept (Stryker & Burke, 2010; Swann Jr., 1983).

Individuals use cognitive activities and behavior as strategies to solve this situation and ensure stability (Reed et al., 2012). Potential reactions are to switch between identities (Giguère et al., 2010), to suppress one of the conflicting identity, deny the identity conflict, and to enhance a dominant identity (Hirsh & Kang, 2016). One possible strategy to enhance a dominant identity is compensatory consumption of products and/or services, to enhance a specific identity (Coleman et al., 2019). If a compensatory consumption behavior is a direct strategy, scholars see the act of avoiding consumption also as a manifestation of the self-identity and indirect strategy to reinforce self-concept. Consumption reduction, avoidance, or rejection are practices (or non-practices) of anti-consumption and self-expression, taking a distance from undesired Self (García-de-Frutos et al., 2018).

As norms exert influence in decision making and behavior (Newell et al., 2014; Rilling & Sanfey, 2011), norm-conflict among groups may interfere in this influence process. However, there is a limited number of empirical researches about conflict among social norms of different groups in the consumer behavior area. A more considerable amount of studies is found in the Social Psychology area. In Management, there is empirical research related to identity conflict (and, consequently, social norm conflict) in organizational behavior (e.g., Cooper & Thatcher, 2010), and sustainable behavior.

Regarding sustainable behavior, results of researches carried out by on environmental decision domain (McDonald et al., 2013, 2014b, 2014a) suggest that descriptive normative conflict can motivate or demotivate intentions and behavioral engagement. The effect depending on the degree of incongruence among groups' norms, individual's environmental attitudes, and their perceived effectiveness. Fritsche et al. (2018) argue that the conflict among multiple ingroups norms can both weaken or strengthen norm influence. Conflicts are positively associated with pro-environmental action when personal pro-environmental attitudes are strong, resulting in personal relevance or commitment.

Food consumption is a field of study that has received growing attention due to the environmental impact of food production and consumption chain. Food is one of the three most critical consumer sectors in terms of effects and harm to the environment (Lehner, Mont, & Heiskanen, 2016). Globally, it is responsible for 30% of energy consumption and 22% of greenhouse gas emissions (UN, 2015; Willits-Smith et al., 2020). Considering the projected world population in 2050 - about 10 billion habitants - changes in diet patterns are necessary to limit the damage to the environment and goal of a healthy diet.

The influence of social norms on eating behavior comes from two interdependent functions: adaptive functions and social and personal meanings functions (Neuman, 2019). Evolutionary and adaptive features increase the influence of norms on behavior because group norms help in guiding the selection of correct type and quantity of food allowing cooperation and share social functions among group members and support as a tool for social judgment (Cruwys et al., 2015; Higgs, 2015). Eating behavior and food consumption have a role that goes beyond food intake to survive because of its nutritional aspects (Rozin, 2005).

This complexity takes on another dimension concerning meat consumption. Meat intake was necessary for human evolution as a species, providing a small portion of food with a large portion of nutrients essential for the development of physical and cognitive abilities (Milton, 1999). Also, eating meat has social and cultural importance, highlighted by the symbolic meaning that involves the death and meat intake of another living being. The omnivorous diet is the social norm in most countries and is widely accepted culturally in most societies (Armstrong Soule & Sekhon, 2019; Macdiarmid et al., 2016).

There is an increasing number of people who report the intention to reduce meat consumption or even stop eating it (Apostolidis & McLeay, 2019). Diets free of meat or with reduced consumption of the same have been linked to ethical, sustainable, beneficial to health and aligned with animal welfare (Armstrong Soule & Sekhon, 2019). Vandermoere et. Al (2019) suggests that there is a "call" from society and academy for a sustainable food system, including eating less meat. So, on the one hand, eating meat is the social norm. Still, there is a crescent movement to changes in diet patterns related to meat intake, and it could affect the norms of some groups, like proenvironmental activists, for example. People may be exposed to diverging norms from different groups, especially in regions and societies that are culturally and economically connected with raising animals for slaughter and meat consumption.

So, it is relevant to study conflict among multiple ingroup norms in this context. Norms' conflict impact in behavior can be mixed, positive, or negative and are influenced by other factors (Fritsche et al., 2018; McDonald et al., 2014). Amiot et al. (2020) argue that multiple social identifications and diverging group's norms can decrease the internalization of harmful normative behavior that results from ingroup norms.

3. Method

We are planning to develop this research in three phases, as described below:

Phase 1: Theoretical exploration - This phase aims to consolidate the theoretical bases of the thesis and subsidize the subsequent stages of the research. We suggest conducting a literature review with the following objectives: a) to identify the research carried out so far on social norms and food consumption; b) to analyze academic works on conflicts of social norms of different groups, focusing in conflicts between social norms from a close family group (e.g., parents) and others relevant social groups (e.g., peers of same generational cohort); c) to identify moderating and mediating variables used in previous research on the effect of social norms on the food consumption behavior; d) to propose a theoretical model for empirical research.

Phase 2: Context exploration – the second phase of the research aims to understand the socio-economic-cultural context of meat consumption in Brazil. For this, we will use mixed methodological strategies. We plan to describe the panorama of meat sales and consumption in the country over the past 20 years, employing the statistical analysis of secondary data. This information will be analyzed statistically and crossed with microeconomic data from the country, such as employment, average income, and macro events (crises) that may impact demand (food security, sustainability). In-depth interviews will also be conducted with meat consumers to explore cultural and social issues related to meat consumption and to explore the constructs to be proposed in the theoretical model.

Phase 3: Experimental research - The final step will be the empirical testing of the hypotheses proposed in the theoretical model, through laboratory and field experiments. The experimental designs will be proposed after the elaboration of the theoretical model.

4. Preliminary results

There are no preliminary results because the project is in the phase of theoretical exploration and methodological delineation.

5. Expected contributions

The theoretical contribution expected lies in the development of the Focus theory of normative conduct, exploring the effect of normative conflicts between different groups on the eating behavior domain, focusing on meat consumption behavior, which has not been studied in previous research. Considering that this theory is deemed to be effective in understanding and changing human behaviors in a social context, it could aid in the development of more effective actions that result in more sustainable behaviors related to dietary choices.

The results may also support the formulation of public policies on nutrition and food, especially related to meat consumption. They will collaborate with business and economic activity, once changes in meat consumption have effects on the economy, especially in meat producing and exporting countries. Changes in consumption patterns also influence global value chains, which need to adapt to new scenarios. There is a demand for more flow and quality of information for decision-making and innovation in production, distribution, and sales processes. The economic and social importance of the livestock chain is relevant in producing, consuming, and exporting countries such as Brazil.

6. Chronogram

Phase 1: July/2020 – December/2020
Phase 2: January/2021 – December/2021
Phase 3 – January/2022 – December/2022

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