

Public funds, private interests: a critical social marketing perspective on national local meat promotion

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Abstract

Purpose – Despite increasing policy attention to sustainable diets, research has rarely examined whether national, publicly funded food-promotion aligns with meat-industry interests and how such alignment shapes norms around meat consumption. This paper aims to critically examine state-sponsored meat promotion through the case of Slovenia’s national campaign “Our super meat”.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors conducted a multimodal content analysis of the campaign’s central communication materials: four 20-second televised advertisements promoting locally produced meat under the “Chosen Quality – Slovenia” label.

Findings – The authors identified five dominant themes: ethical production, national tradition, social norm, environmentally friendly production and positive aspects of meat consumption. Campaign’s framing re-legitimises meat as a culturally appropriate, desirable and responsible default. The ads also address common motivations for meat reduction (animal welfare, health and environmental concerns) by presenting labelled local meat as reassurance, which may lessen the perceived need for reduction.

Practical implications – Public campaigns that invoke sustainability and health should be assessed not only for informational accuracy but for their normative effects. Critical social marketing can support policy reflection by making explicit the assumptions and power relations embedded in publicly funded food promotion and by informing more coherent communication strategies that normalise plant-forward eating and legitimise meat consumption reduction practices.

Originality/value – Drawing on critical social marketing, the authors show how government-backed promotion can deploy persuasive repertoires typical of commercial meat advertising (norm reinforcement, appetitive imagery and national-identity cues) while invoking sustainability and health. The study therefore highlights a critical tension between public dietary-transition goals and the normalising effects of state-supported meat promotion.

Keywords Meat promotion, Meat consumption norm, Public advertising, Multimodal analysis, Critical social marketing

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Tackling public health and environmental crisis has been in focus of social marketing efforts for the past decades (Delvaux and Van den Broeck, 2023). These two important wicked

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problems (Kennedy *et al.*, 2017) complement each other as escalating environmental problems (e.g. biodiversity loss, air and water pollution, soil degradation) are reflected in increasing public health problems (Maibach *et al.*, 2010; Willett *et al.*, 2019). While many public health issues have been linked to problematic unhealthy dietary patterns, directing much of social marketing efforts towards encouraging healthier eating (Carins and Rundle-Thiele, 2014), unsustainable eating practices have not received much attention in the past and have been considered more seriously only recently in tackling both, environmental and public health issues (Bogueva *et al.*, 2017; Delvaux and Van den Broeck, 2023; Kemper and Ballantine, 2020; Marinova and Bogueva, 2019). In the centre of both unhealthy and unsustainable eating patterns stands mass meat production and consumption.

According to Lancet report (Willett *et al.*, 2019, p. 6) shifts towards healthy diets and sustainable food systems are urgent. The current food system has a significant environmental footprint (Tilman and Clark, 2014; IPCC, 2019), 34% of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) are estimated to derive from food production (Crippa *et al.*, 2021). Agriculture, particularly its recourse intensive animal production systems, has been identified as one of the sectors with the highest potential for reducing GHG emissions (Kemper and Ballantine, 2020; IPCC, 2019; Willett *et al.*, 2019). There is a growing consensus on the need for dietary shifts towards more environmentally sustainable food consumption patterns to meet global sustainability targets (Vermeir *et al.*, 2020; Willett *et al.*, 2019). Animal-based food consumption is consistently shown to have the highest environmental impact compared to plant-based food diets (Scarborough *et al.*, 2023). Reducing meat consumption, particularly red meat and processed meat or shifting from meat-based to plant-based diets can reduce individual GHG emissions by 20%–35% (Hallström *et al.*, 2015; Scarborough *et al.*, 2023), while also yielding substantial health benefits, including an estimated 18%–28% reduction in premature mortality (Willett *et al.*, 2019, p. 6). However, achieving this change remains highly challenging in contemporary Western societies, where meat consumption has become a deeply embedded dietary norm over recent decades (Kemper and Ballantine, 2020).

Individuals can adopt more sustainable diets through two primary strategies. The first, often considered a more achievable behavioural change involves selecting products with sustainable production attributes (e.g. local, organic, fair-trade and free-range); the second entails modifying diet by eliminating or reducing specific food categories, such as animal-based products (Osterman and de Barcellos, 2021). While the former strategy is easier to implement, it is significantly less effective in lowering the environmental impact, as it often sustains high levels of meat consumption, levels that exceed nutritional recommendations by two to four times in high-income countries (EC, 2023) and are rapidly increasing in developing countries (Slingo *et al.*, 2005). This strategy is also more economically driven, as it maintains current levels of meat consumption while encouraging consumers to purchase “greener” alternatives, that are often priced at a premium. It is important to acknowledge the vested interests of the meat industry, a multibillion-dollar sector projected to continue expanding in the coming years (Shahbandeh, 2023). Meat sector’s promotional efforts play a significant role in sustaining high global meat consumption, strategically framing meat as natural and an essential component of a healthy diet (De Vriese *et al.*, 2023; Delliston, 2021; Häkli and Hakoköngäs, 2022). Governments, too, have a strong interest in maintaining meat consumption, seeking to protect the competitive position of national producers both domestically and internationally. Substantial portions of agricultural budgets are frequently allocated to meat promotion under national promotional strategies.

Between 2016 and 2019, 24% of the European Union’s (EU) agricultural promotion policy budget was allocated to campaigns promoting meat and meat products (EU, 2020).

This stands in stark contrast to publicly funded health and sustainability initiatives aimed at reducing meat consumption and increasing the intake of vegetables and fruits to address the climate and public health crisis. Such conflicting policy directions have drawn criticism for supporting the marketing of foods that are both unhealthy and environmentally unsustainable, prompting calls for the demarketing of meat or restrictions on meat advertising (Bogueva *et al.*, 2017; Delliston, 2021; Haffner and Culliford, 2023).

No research, to our knowledge, has yet systematically examined whether national food-promotion strategies align with meat-industry interests, nor how such alignment shapes consumer behaviour. We address this gap through a critical analysis of Slovenia's publicly funded campaign "Our super meat", which presents locally produced quality meat as a sustainable choice. Building on work that identifies mass media and message framing as underexplored yet consequential in normalising meat consumption (de Vriese *et al.*, 2023; Delliston, 2021; Häkli and Hakoköngäs, 2022), we show that the campaign largely re-legitimises meat-eating norms and dampens key motivations for reducing meat consumption. Moreover, allocating public resources to promote a high-impact food under the banner of sustainability is ethically problematic. We therefore apply critical social marketing, focused on the societal consequences of marketing (Gordon, 2011), which is still underused in sustainability research (Spotswood *et al.*, 2025), to show how publicly funded promotion can reinforce consumption norms and to support policy reflection on the governance and ethical tensions this creates.

Challenges in switching to healthy, sustainable diets

Shifting dietary habits towards more sustainable and health-promoting eating patterns remains a significant challenge, despite the well-documented environmental and health benefits. Meat consumption is deeply embedded in historical traditions, national cultural practices, social norms and daily routines (Fiddes, 2004; Vermeir *et al.*, 2020; Stoll-Kleemann and Schmidt, 2017). In most contemporary food environments, including policy frameworks (e.g. subsidies for meat production), marketing practices (e.g. advertising of meat as healthful food) and the food supply (e.g. limited availability of plant-based options in restaurants and markets) meat is positioned as the default dietary choice; normal, desirable and convenient (Haffner and Culliford, 2023). Iconic meat-based dishes (e.g. hot dogs, meat pies and Sunday roasts) often symbolise national identity, heritage, tradition and pride (Fiddes, 2004; Nguyen and Platow, 2021). Such cultural context fosters strong meat attachment and renders meat reduction to a socially sensitive and change-resistant behaviour (Bogueva *et al.*, 2017), where deviations from meat-eating norms can be met with informal social sanction, such as reduced social approval, exclusion from social network, diminished self-esteem and discrimination, responses rarely triggered by the avoidance of other food items (Osterman and de Barcellos, 2021).

Studies indicate that willingness to reduce meat consumption increases when it is perceived as an effective climate mitigation strategy (de Boer *et al.*, 2016) or beneficial to personal health (Cheah *et al.*, 2020). However, widespread public understanding of the environmental impact of meat production and consumption remains low (de Boer *et al.*, 2016; Garnett *et al.*, 2015; Marinova and Bogueva, 2019; Sanchez-Sabate and Sabaté, 2019). Research shows that only a minority of people recognise meat and livestock as significant contributors to climate change (Garnett *et al.*, 2015) or perceive reducing meat intake as meaningful pro-environmental action (Sanchez-Sabate and Sabaté, 2019), even among those most concerned about climate issues (Maibach *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, Tobler *et al.* (2011) found an inverse relationship between frequency of meat consumption and the perceived environmental benefits of meat reduction, which can pose a serious barrier to

change given the high prevalence of regular meat consumption in Western world (Dagevos, 2021). In Slovenia, for example, 80% of the population consumes meat several times per week, while 74% demonstrate low levels of dietary environmental knowledge (Kirbiš *et al.*, 2021).

In such contexts efforts to reduce meat consumption, whether for environmental, health or animal welfare reasons, can provoke cognitive dissonance or normative conflict. Whether these tensions hinder or facilitate dietary change, depends on individual-level factors, including beliefs, attitudes, perceived social norms and social influences (Osterman and de Barcellos, 2021; Nguyen and Platow, 2021; Plows *et al.*, 2017; Lai *et al.*, 2020; Stoll-Kleemann and Schmidt, 2017). For example, Lai *et al.* (2020) found that individuals with strong pro-environmental attitudes or who perceived significant others as reducing meat consumption were more likely to feel morally obligated to do the same. Conversely, Nguyen and Platow (2021) reported that individuals with strong national social identity and internalised meat-eating social norms were less likely to choose plant-based meals when given the option.

A growing body of research consistently demonstrates that individuals who intend to reduce or eliminate meat from their diets, such as flexitarians, pescatarians, vegetarians or vegans, are primarily motivated by concerns related to animal welfare, personal health or environmental sustainability (Armstrong Soule and Sekhon, 2019; Bogueva *et al.*, 2017; Fox and Ward, 2008; Harguess *et al.*, 2020; Kamin and Vezovnik, 2024; Kwasny *et al.*, 2022; Osterman and de Barcellos, 2021; Sanchez-Sabate and Sabaté, 2019). In contrast, individuals who maintain a meat-based diet often rely on the so-called “4Ns” framework, where meat is considered as natural, necessary, normal and/or nice (Piazza *et al.*, 2015). The 4Ns function as rationalisations for individual meat consumption behaviours and are especially potent, when one’s dietary choices are questioned by health, environmental or animal welfare concerns (Piazza *et al.*, 2015). These justifications help individuals defend normalised meat-eating behaviours and preserve their dietary identity within a pervasive meat-centric culture and serve to uphold meat consumption as both legitimate and desirable, even in the face of increasing public discourse around its environmental, ethical and health implications.

When promoting meat reduction, it is essential to consider both the cultural embeddedness of meat consumption and the psychological mechanisms individuals use to resist change. More recently, Kemper and Ballantine (2020) examined interventions targeting structural environmental factors, including physical, economic, political and socio-cultural dimensions, across micro, meso, macro and exo levels. Their work emphasises the underexplored yet critical role of mass media and message framing (e.g. advertising, public relations campaigns) in shaping social, cultural and national norms around meat consumption; a dimension that has received limited research attention to date (de Vriese *et al.*, 2023; Delliston, 2021; Häkli and Hakoköngäs, 2022).

The role of marketing cues and advertising in meat consumption

The persistence of a pervasive “meat culture” is continuously reinforced by mass advertising and promotional strategies (Dagevos, 2021, p. 532). Socially salient marketing cues play a central role in shaping food-related behaviour by signalling cultural acceptability and encouraging patterns of excessive or mindless consumption (Chandon and Wansink, 2012; Herman and Polivy, 2005; Wansink, 2010). Advertising, as one of the most visible and influential elements of marketing, not only responds to consumer needs by promoting products as “optimal” solutions but also plays a broader societal role in shaping values, norms and lifestyle aspirations (Williamson, 2011; Häkli and Hakoköngäs, 2022).

In the case of meat advertising, such campaigns frame how meat consumption is perceived in social reality – shaping thoughts and emotions related to purchasing, preparing and eating meat (Häkli and Hakoköngäs, 2022). Cairns's (2019) review of food marketing effects underscores how marketing shapes the socio-cultural food environment, contributing to population-level shifts in purchasing behaviour, growing demand for heavily promoted food categories and the evolution of new norms and food practices through social learning. These effects occur not only among the target audiences but also through broader “ripple effects” that influence the wider public. Several studies have demonstrated the direct impact of meat advertising on consumption behaviour (Boetel and Liu, 2003; Dong *et al.*, 2007; Boyland *et al.*, 2016). Boyland *et al.* (2016) systematic review and meta-analysis showed that acute exposure to unhealthy food advertisements increases food intake among children. Boetel and Liu (2003) and Dong *et al.* (2007) had demonstrated direct effect generic advertising of different meats (beef, pork, poultry or fish) have on purchasing decision and consumption behaviour. More recently, Ellithorpe *et al.* (2022) found that even brief exposure to meat imagery in advertisements increased the desire to consume meat and reduced individuals' intention to make incremental dietary change, such as participating in “meat-free” days. Although moderating factors such as socio-economic status, product information and health education can mitigate some of the normative effects of a marketing-saturated food environment, they are still insufficient to counteract the cumulative impact of repeated advertising appeals that encourage consumption beyond hunger or nutritional needs (Cairns, 2019, p. 198).

A small but growing body of research examining the content of meat advertising has found that such campaigns consistently serve to naturalise and normalise meat consumption by creating myths about meat consumption (Bogueva and Phau, 2015; de Vriese *et al.*, 2023; Delliston, 2021; Häkli and Hakoköngäs, 2022). The key narratives identified in this research include:

- meat is “green” or natural;
- meat is good for your health;
- meat eating is masculine (particularly consumption of red meat);
- opposingly women need to restrict their meat consumption (they are rarely seen eating meat, when they are it is white meat) and take on a role of a good cook taking care of their families;
- meat as being part of national identity or culture;
- meat brings people together and is enjoyable;
- eating meat is an expression of freedom and individuality;
- idea that we were meant to eat meat; and finally
- that meat is affordable.

These myths construct and sustain meat consumption as a social norm. Notably, no existing studies have examined national advertising campaigns co-funded by the agricultural sector, particularly those aimed at promoting local meat products as part of national promotional strategies, often supported by EU funding (EU, 2020). This paper addresses that gap by analysing such a campaign to understand its role in shaping public perceptions of meat consumption and its (in)capacity to raise awareness of associated environmental and health issues.

Case of Slovenia: the “our super meat” promotional campaign

In Slovenia, meat promotion is regulated under the Law on the Promotion of Agricultural and Food Products (PISRS, 2011). Since 2013, one of the core objectives of the Ministry of

Agriculture, Forestry and Food has been to inform and raise consumer awareness about the importance of supporting locally produced and processed food. Within this framework, numerous general promotional campaigns have been launched. Since 2016, the government also introduced sector-specific promotional campaigns, co-financed by the industry stakeholders. These have included targeted efforts to promote dairy products, beef and poultry meat, reinforcing local consumption through coordinated public–private funding mechanisms (GOV.SI, 2025).

The primary aim of the promotional campaign was to educate and cultivate a competent consumer who can identify and choose locally produced, high-quality foods at the point of sale, specifically those labelled under the national certification “Chosen quality – Slovenia” (org. “izbrana kakovost – Slovenija”) (GOV.SI, 2017). According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food, since 2016 all promotional campaigns have also addressed the following themes (Videčnik, 2022):

- environmental and social benefits, such as reduced CO₂ emissions due to short supply chains, minimal packaging and lower food wastage during transport;
- a balanced diet, in line with guidelines from the National Institute of Public Health and the Ministry of Health, including slogans such as “Pay attention to the healthy eating guidelines when eating meat!” or “When buying meat, make sure it is local, Slovenian meat, as freshness retains a higher nutritional value”; and
- respect for food, promoting reduced food waste and more rational use of natural resources (soil, water and energy), contributing to lower GHG emission.

All campaign materials are branded under the umbrella slogan “Our super food” (org. “Naša super hrana”), with sector-specific adaptations. For the meat sector, this takes the form of “Our super meat” (org. “Naše super meso”). These sectoral campaigns are integrated within a unified communication platform, both website and branding, accessible to consumers and producers for continuous engagement and information (available at www.nasasuperhrana.si).

One of the more recent “Our super meat” promotional campaign was implemented in four waves between fall 2021 and spring 2023 (fall 2021, spring 2022, fall 2022 and spring 2023) (Videčnik, 2022), followed by another campaign in autumn 2024, which lasted almost two months (MKGP, 2024).

The promotional activities for the “Our super meat” campaign included a wide range of media formats, such as television ads, YouTube advertisements, print ads, advertorials, mobile and Web banners, Web articles, social media advertising, radio spots and different public relations activities (Videčnik, 2022).

Methodology

The research focused on the “Our super meat” campaign’s primary communication vehicle: television advertisements. These spots were broadcast on all Slovenian national television channels during the official campaign periods and were also made publicly available via the campaign’s official YouTube channel (“Our super food”). The analysis aimed to examine the ads’ core claims and framing, with particular attention to how (and whether) they substantiate the campaign’s stated emphasis on environmental and health dimensions of meat consumption.

Sample description

The sample comprised four 20-second television advertisements, representing the complete set of television advertisements produced for the “Our super meat” campaign. Each ad foregrounded a distinct purported benefit of purchasing locally produced meat bearing the

Multimodal analysis

We conducted a multimodal analysis using Ledin and Machin’s (2018) film-clip framework. For each of the four advertisements, we systematically documented visual, auditory and textual features, including duration; timestamps; frame-by-frame screenshots; detailed descriptions of imagery; narration and on-screen text (transcribed verbatim); and background music cues. This data was recorded in a structured MS Excel spreadsheet (Figure 1), enabling consistent comparison across ads. We then applied qualitative content analysis to identify dominant messages and recurring patterns, coding visual sequences, narration and on-screen text. Coding proceeded in three iterative stages:

- (1) descriptive coding of segments to capture manifest content (e.g. “care for animals” and “monitoring”);
- (2) consolidation into sub-themes representing the underlying meaning (e.g. “animal welfare” and “food safety”); and
- (3) abstraction into higher-order themes capturing shared communicative framings across ads (e.g. “ethical production”).

Results

The four advertisements exhibited a highly standardised format, combining near-identical visual sequences with consistent narration and sound design. All were softly narrated by an adult female voice, and accompanied by calming, lullaby-like instrumental music. Across the spots, many images and phrases were repeated, with only minor differences in sequencing and emphasis. Each ad followed a similar visual trajectory that mirrors the

| Name | Duration | Time | Screenshot | Picture | Narration (English) | Text/other images (English) | Sounds/music |
|--|----------|-------|------------|---|---|--|-------------------------|
| Zakaj je meso izbrane kakovosti super?/Why is meat of chosen quality super | 00:20 | 00:00 | | Bird perspective, camera moving above the wooden rustic table; table with food – centre piece is roasted chicken, steak, sausages, roastbeef with some vegetables as side dishes (broccoli, carrots young onion, cherry tomatoes, green beans) on each dish. Also on table bread and stew. We see hands of four people grabbing food from plates (bread). Plane view: An idyllic typical Slovene landscape (hills, grass, forest in background), cows are in free range grazing on the grass next to a typical Slovene double trellis (toplar) | (Woman, soft narration with older deeper voice) Why is our meat super? Because the animals are born | | Calm instrumental music |
| | | 00:03 | | Close up: Chicken walking with their chicks under a tree, with grass and sun in the background | and bred in Slovenia | | Calm instrumental music |
| | | 00:05 | | Normal view: A man dressed in a lab coat, plastic gloves, protective cap, glasses is in a sterile, laboratory (around him a lot of laboratory equipment), holding an eylemeyer flask with some liquid in it and a pipet. Normal view: A small truck with a “chosen quality” logo on it, driving on a small road under the trees in the background corn and wheat fields. | and we feed them by natural feed. | | Calm instrumental music |
| | | 00:07 | | | We produce meat to the highest standards | | Calm instrumental music |
| | | 00:08 | | Close up: Plate with baked chicken legs, with a very small broccoli on the side, fork and knife next to a plate on a napkin and a glass. It is set on a rustic wooden table. | and transport it to you by the shortest route. | | Calm instrumental music |
| | | 00:14 | | Close up: Plate with baked steak, seasoned with pepper and small rosemary bunch, with four cherry tomatoes and green beans on the side (smaller than meat), fork and knife next to a plate on a napkin and a glass. It is set on a rustic wooden table. | Our super meat carries a sign of excellence – | Logo Chosen quality (top right corner) | Calm instrumental music |
| | | 00:16 | | | “chosen quality – Slovenia”. Logo Chosen quality (top right corner) | | Calm instrumental music |
| | | 00:18 | | Black background | Coat of arms of Slovenia, Republic of Slovenia Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food and Slovenian meat producers and processors | | Calm instrumental music |

Figure 1. Spreadsheet for multimodal data analysis with collected data

Source: Authors’ own work

meat-production chain: pastoral scenes of farms and animals transition to processing imagery and culminate in a plated meat dish, thereby symbolically linking production to consumption.

Our content analysis identified five recurrent thematic categories communicated across the ads (ordered by prevalence):

- (1) ethical production;
- (2) national tradition;
- (3) social norm;
- (4) environmentally friendly production; and
- (5) positive aspects of meat consumption.

While these themes recurred across the campaign, each advertisement was organised around a dominant theme, marked by a small number of unique frames and corresponding narrative emphases. “Why is meat of chosen quality super?” foregrounded ethical production, particularly food safety; “Meat as an important part of diet” emphasised the benefits of meat consumption, especially health; “About careful monitoring of producers”, again centred ethical production, shifting attention towards animal welfare; and “About positive impacts of local meat production and processing” primarily mobilised national tradition, with pronounced patriotic cues. All advertisements concluded with a black end frame crediting the campaign funders of in white letters: “Republic of Slovenia Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food and Slovenian meat producers and processors”, alongside the Slovenian coat of arms.

Ethical production

All four advertisements prominently featured the theme ethical production, conveyed through both visual and narrative elements. Two key sub-themes emerged from the analysis: food safety and animal welfare. Food safety was communicated through visual markers of expertise, hygienic production safety and production environments and high production standards. Narration reinforced this message with reference to the “chosen quality” label, “highest production standards” and “meat quality”. In one advertisement, additional phrases such as “careful monitoring”, “safety” and “traceability” were used to underline the safety and transparency of the production process. A recurring image in all advertisements featured a man dressed in laboratory protective gear, standing in a sterile laboratory setting surrounded by scientific equipment, and holding a flask and pipette, visually signifying rigorous quality control and scientific oversight. Animal welfare was depicted through imagery of livestock, particularly cows, grazing freely on green pastures in picturesque Slovenian rural landscapes, framed by rolling hills and forests. Narration complemented these visuals by emphasising the “care provided by farmers” and the use of “natural” or “balanced feed”, suggesting humane treatment and alignment with traditional, sustainable farming practices.

Together, these elements presented an idealised view of meat production as both scientifically regulated and ethically grounded, aligning with the campaign’s overarching message of trust and quality.

National tradition

Elements promoting meat production and consumption as part of Slovenia’s national tradition were consistently present across all four advertisements. This theme was communicated primarily through visual references to national identity and narrative expressions of patriotism. National identity was conveyed through imagery of Slovenia’s

characteristic rural landscapes, including rolling hills, forests and farmland. Visuals featured traditional national symbols such as the double trestle hayrack, a distinctive element of Slovenian heritage, and a tractor, a culturally significant marker, given that Slovenia ranks among the highest in Europe for tractor ownership relative to population size (STA, 2023). These images were accompanied by prominent national slogans, including “Our super meat”, “Our super food” and official campaign signatures highlighting the funding bodies. Patriotism was mostly explicitly present in the narration of one advertisement, which promoted the national benefits of consuming Slovenian meat, including the “preservation of jobs and population of rural areas”, a pertinent issue in light of widespread depopulation trends across Slovenian rural areas (EC, 2014). In addition, the use of collective language, such as “our meat” and “our producers” reinforced a sense of shared identity and national ownership across all ads.

Together, these elements served to position meat consumption not only as a personal choice but also as an act of cultural loyalty and civic responsibility.

Social norm

All advertisements subtly reinforced meat consumption as a social norm, primarily through visual cues, with no direct references in the narration. The normalisation of meat-eating was conveyed through imagery that placed meat at the centre of meals. Plates were dominated by meat rather than vegetables, and meat dishes were the most prominent items displayed on the table. In several frames, hands were shown reaching for and serving meat, visually emphasising its desirability and central role in shared eating experiences. The ads also conveyed ideas of social connectedness and cultural tradition, further entrenching meat consumption as a normative social practice. Social connectedness was depicted through scenes of intergenerational togetherness. For example, a large family of 29 individuals, spanning young children to older people, gathered around a long dining table, sharing a joyful, communal meal. The setting further reinforced traditional values, featuring a rustic ambiance with old wooden tables and chairs, evoking a sense of heritage and continuity.

Through these visual strategies, the advertisements framed meat not merely as food, but as a central component of social bonding and normative eating behaviour in Slovenian culture.

Environmentally friendly production

All advertisements conveyed the notion of environmentally friendly meat production, primarily by emphasising aspects of green and local production. The idea of locality was communicated through references to “short transport routes” and the origin of “animals being born and bred in Slovenia”. Natural production was visually supported through imagery of open pastures, grasslands and cornfields, accompanied by phrases such as “from pasture to plate”, reinforcing the idea of proximity and ecological harmony. One advertisement explicitly referenced environmental protection, with narration stating: “By choosing local meat we.../take care of cleaner environment”. Although such claims were not substantiated by detailed environmental evidence, they contributed to framing local meat consumption as an environmentally responsible choice.

These elements collectively positioned local meat as both sustainable and environmentally beneficial, despite broader scientific consensus highlighting the environmental burden of meat production. The use of such imagery and language serves to align meat consumption with environmentally conscious consumer values.

Positive aspects of meat consumption

Positive aspects of meat consumption were the least prominent theme across the advertisements. Within this category, two sub-themes were identified: healthiness and tastefulness. Health benefits were addressed in only one advertisement, which presented meat as “an important source of protein, necessary for human normal functioning and development”. This message was visually reinforced by an image of a cheerful, energetic young couple, with the female figure flexing her arms in a gesture of strength, symbolising vitality and physical well-being. Tastefulness, on the other hand, was subtly but consistently communicated across all four ads. Visually, this was achieved through close-up shots of attractively plated, appetising cuts of meat, such as a chicken leg or steak, arranged on plates or rustic wooden boards. In two of the ads, the “excellent taste” of meat was also explicitly mentioned in the narration, reinforcing the sensory appeal of meat consumption.

Although less emphasised than other themes, these representations contributed to reinforcing meat as a desirable component of a pleasurable and nutritious diet.

Discussion

The analysis of the national advertising campaign promoting local meat and the “Chosen Quality – Slovenia” label reveals that many of the advertising appeals closely mirror those used by the commercial meat industry (Bogueva and Phau, 2015; Delliston, 2021; Häkli and Hakoköngäs, 2022). Our study found that the campaign reinforces meat consumption by framing it as a normal, desirable and responsible dietary choice. Through its focus on ethical production, national tradition, social norms, environmentally friendly practices and the positive aspects of eating meat, the campaign ultimately inhibits motivation to reduce meat intake.

A key concern raised by this study is the discrepancy between the campaign’s stated objectives and its actual messaging. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food claims the “Our super meat” campaign promotes healthy and sustainable diets by highlighting the environmental and nutritional benefits of local meat. However, our analysis demonstrates that the campaign primarily reinforces meat-eating norms, contributing to the maintenance of high meat consumption levels that are neither healthy nor sustainable. It is also important to note that the campaign is co-funded by Slovenian meat producers and processors, as determined under the Law on Promotion of Agricultural and Food Products (PISRS, 2011). The content and tone of the advertisements suggest alignment between commercial interests and state-supported promotional strategies aimed at preserving meat industry profits and securing competitive advantages for domestic products.

This finding aligns with trends observed by The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which reported a decline in meat demand across high-income countries, particularly red meat, alongside a shift towards white meat (OECD/FAO, 2022, p. 192). The OECD also cites research by Sanchez-Sabate and Sabaté’s (2019) identifying main motivations for meat reduction, such as ethical, health and environmental concerns, which the meat sector appears to be strategically countering through campaigns that reposition local meat as sustainable and health-promoting (OECD/FAO, 2022, p. 193). This raises critical concerns about the use of sustainability rhetoric in national food promotion campaigns. As noted in the literature, the strategy of encouraging “more sustainable” consumption (e.g. local or organic products) without addressing overall reductions in meat intake may be insufficient – and even counterproductive – in addressing global health and environmental challenges (Häkli and Hakoköngäs, 2022, p. 318). Localisation and nationalisation of environmental behaviour can undermine global solidarity and dilute the urgency of collective action.

Our study affirms this critique, showing that Slovenian national efforts to promote local meat as a sustainable choice in fact hinder strategies proven to be effective in addressing the climate and public health crises, namely, reducing overall meat consumption. We argue that such promotional practices are not only counterproductive but potentially unethical, as they use public funds to advance commercial interest that conflict with public health and environmental goals. There is an urgent need for systemic change to ensure that food promotion policies and public communication strategies align with long-term sustainability and health objectives.

Opportunity for system change powered by critical social marketing

Our study set out to address an underexamined issue: whether national food-promotion strategies align with meat-industry interests and how such alignment can shape consumer-oriented meanings around meat. The Slovenian “Our super meat” campaign provides a clear case of this phenomenon. The ads repeatedly frame meat as ethically produced, healthy, environmentally benign and culturally ours, thereby reaffirming meat consumption as a responsible and desirable norm rather than engaging with the dietary-transition challenge of reducing overall intake.

On the basis of these findings, guided by principles of critical social marketing, which challenges systems that maintain unsustainable practices (Gordon, 2011; Spotswood *et al.*, 2025) we outline three implications for policymakers responsible for agricultural promotion, public communication and public health:

- (1) establish governance safeguards for publicly funded promotion to prevent policy incoherence and conflicts of interest;
- (2) develop minimum standards for sustainability and health-related claims in public campaigns; and
- (3) treat state-sponsored meat promotion as a food-environment intervention and regulate its normative and affective effects.

The analysed ads foreground ethical production and environmental friendliness while simultaneously intensifying the desirability and normality of meat consumption. As such, they exemplified a tension between stated sustainability and health objectives on one hand and message effects on the other hand. This tension derives from the campaign’s funding structure, explicitly coupling government sponsorship with meat-industry stakeholders. Our analysis shows that when government-funded promotion uses the same frames as the meat industry, it effectively supports the meat market rather than serving the public interest. From a critical social marketing point of view, a responsible policy response is therefore not simply better messaging, but primarily clear governance rules for publicly funded promotional campaigns. For the future public agriocultural campaigns there should be:

- transparent disclosure of industry involvement;
- independent review of message content against public health and sustainability goals; and
- explicit criteria that prevent public funds from being used to promote consumption of foods whose aggregate consumption is inconsistent with climate and health objectives.

A central mechanism observed across the analysed ads is the offering of symbolic reassurance: concerns that typically motivate meat reduction (animal welfare, health and environmental impact) are framed as fully addressed by choosing a labelled local product

(Chosen Quality – Slovenia). This framing can reduce normative conflict and enable continued consumption of meat without perceived ethical compromise. From a critical social marketing point of view public campaigns should be held to higher substantiation and framing standards. Specifically, public communication that invokes sustainability and health should avoid framing label-based purchasing (e.g. choosing “quality” local meat) as the primary resolution to health-, environmental- or animal-welfare concerns, as this reassurance may lessen the perceived need for meat reduction; avoid broad environmental claims that sideline the role of overall meat consumption levels; and maintain consistency with dietary guidance by clearly separating claims about how meat is produced (e.g. standards, monitoring, local sourcing) from messages about how much meat should be consumed as part of healthier and more sustainable diets. Sustainability oriented public messaging should be assessed for whether it unintentionally dampens motivations to reduce meat intake, consistent with the mechanism identified in our analysis.

The campaign’s influence operates not only through what is explicitly said about meat, but also through how meat is made to feel normal and desirable. Across the analysed ads, recurring affective and normative cues, like pastoral imagery of harmony with nature, appetitive depictions of prepared meat and repeated placement of meat at the centre of shared meals, work together to reinforce the cultural legitimacy of meat consumption and position it as the dietary default (consistent with the “4Ns” repertoire). Several ads further anchor meat in national tradition and collective belonging (e.g. “our meat”), which may make reduced-meat or plant-forward practices appear less culturally aligned, particularly for audiences for whom national identity is salient. From the critical social marketing point of view our findings suggest that publicly funded advertising should be treated as an upstream influence on the food environment rather than as neutral information, as it can shape norms, meanings and preferences at population level. Where policy aims include dietary transition, greater coherence would involve avoiding public-sector amplification of strongly appetitive and identity-based meat cues and, instead, using public communication to normalise plant-forward eating and to legitimise meat-reduction practices as socially acceptable and desirable.

This study has several limitations. First, we analysed only the televised advertisements produced for the “Our super meat” campaign. Although central to the campaign, these materials represent only one communication channel and do not capture messaging across print, digital, social media, in-store promotion or related campaign activities, nor do they allow assessment of reach, placement strategies or exposure intensity. Second, our qualitative multimodal approach is well suited to identifying dominant themes and persuasive framings, but it cannot estimate population-level generalisability or causal effects on attitudes and behaviour. Third, as with all interpretive analyses, coding and thematic synthesis involve some subjectivity, despite systematic documentation and iterative refinement. Fourth, we did not include audience-reception or behavioural data (e.g. perceived credibility, emotional responses, recall, purchasing or consumption changes), which would be necessary to test whether and for whom the identified framings dampen motivations for reduction in meat consumption.

In addition, several issues point to important directions for future research that were beyond the scope of this study. Given that dietary transition is unlikely to occur as a rapid shift from meat consumption to complete abstention, future work should examine how publicly funded campaigns might support more feasible near-term objectives, such as reduced-meat patterns and meat-free meals, rather than implying a binary choice between meat consumption and elimination. Drawing on related research (e.g. alcohol marketing, including the promotion of moderation and alcohol-free alternatives) could help clarify how

reduction and substitution of meat consumption are normalised through policy and public communication. Finally, while we document close alignment between state-sponsored promotion and industry-typical framings, we did not conduct a systematic analysis of the institutional and political-economic dynamics behind this alignment (e.g. governance arrangements, conflicts of interest, industry influence on public health and sustainability agendas). Future studies could strengthen these tensions through triangulation with policy and legal analysis, campaign budgeting and procurement data, stakeholder interviews and frameworks that explicitly examine commercial influence on public policy, alongside cross-country comparisons of agricultural promotion and dietary-transition strategies.

Conclusion

This study addresses an underexamined issue in the literature: whether government-funded food-promotion strategies align with meat-industry interests, and how such alignment shapes social norms and meanings around meat consumption. Using a multimodal analysis of the televised advertisements in Slovenia's publicly funded campaign "Our super meat", we identified five dominant thematic framing: ethical production, national tradition, social norm, environmentally friendly production and positive aspects of meat consumption. Together, these framings portray local meat as responsible, healthy and culturally valued, thereby re-legitimising meat consumption and offering symbolic reassurance on concerns regarding health, environmental impact and animal welfare, that commonly motivate reduction in meat consumption. Rather than supporting dietary transition, the analysed campaign is likely to stabilise existing high-meat consumption patterns in Slovenia, by reaffirming meat as a desirable, and at times patriotic default.

From a critical social marketing perspective, these findings raise ethical and governance concerns about state-sponsored promotion that leverages public authority to amplify industry-typical framings, potentially undermining public health and sustainability goals.

The policy implication is straightforward: if governments seek to support healthier and more sustainable diets, agricultural promotion should be explicitly aligned with dietary-transition objectives, governed by clear standards for health and sustainability related claims and protected through transparent safeguards that limit industry influence over public messaging that legitimises and normalises high levels of meat consumption. Critical social marketing can support policy reflection by making explicit the normative assumptions and power relations embedded in publicly funded food promotion. Our findings show that such promotion is not neutral but can actively reinforce the consumption norms that dietary-transition policy seeks to shift.

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