

EXPLORING FOOD ESSENTIALISM BELIEFS: A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY BETWEEN ITALY AND THE NETHERLANDS

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Recently, the market for plant-based alternatives has grown considerably. However, widespread consumption is hindered by consumer perceptions that these products are unnatural or unhealthy. Recent studies have shown that consumer perceptions of processed foods vary significantly and may be influenced by food essentialism, the belief that foods possess intrinsic and unchangeable essences that provide their defining properties. Individuals with high levels of essentialistic beliefs tend to consider plant-based analogues as more natural and retaining the health properties of their animal counterparts. In order to measure Food Essentialist beliefs, the Food Essentialism Scale (FES) was developed and applied within the Singaporean community (Cheon et al., 2024). However, this belief remains unexplored in the European context. This research (1) extended the use of FES to compare the relationship between essentialistic beliefs and the perception of plant and animal-based products in a European context, and 2) explored cross-cultural differences in food essentialism beliefs between countries that vary in dietary habits (Italy and the Netherlands). Two hundred adult participants were recruited in each country and were asked to complete an online survey. Data on socio-demographics, the FES, and food-related nutritional, environmental and sustainable knowledge were collected. FES scores and the associations between FES scores and other background variables were compared between the Italian and Dutch samples, and with previous findings in an Asian cohort. Results contribute to a better understanding of how differences in these food-related beliefs affect consumers' attitudes and acceptability towards plant-based foods.

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