# Social Innovations Dissemination

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Although there is great interest on the global stage in promoting plant-based diets (PBDs) to achieve some of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the results of their adoption are unsatisfactory. Academics propose to entangle this effort by addressing the challenges of dissemination of social innovations (SIs). SIs generate different adoption attitudes, some of them related to socio-psychological aspects on the part of potential adopters. This research work aims to better understand the adoption of SIs, such as PBDs, which may induce socio-psychological concerns in potential adopters. In this sense, this research postulates that current perspectives on the dissemination and adoption of SI offer partial insights into understanding the shift to PBD. To overcome these limitations, a holistic process perspective of the adopter's decision-making to change diet is derived and proposed. An exploratory, abductive, and theory-building effort has been carried out, based on a cross-analysis of three different adopter profiles, with a total of 69 semi-structured interviews. A new model for a comprehensive understanding from the adopter's perspective on dietary change is outlined with new socio-psychological insights emerging from the adopter's viewpoint. Additionally, the new model offers renewed opportunities for practitioners in terms of PBD implementation, usage, and policy.

social innovation diffusion plant-based socio-psychological variables

## 1. Introduction

SI is a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or fair than existing solutions and whose created value accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than to individuals [1]. In addition, SIs have a cultural focus, as they aim to address unmet human and social needs [2]. The European Commission states that SI means developing innovative ideas, services, and models to better address social problems [3]. Different studies [4] highlight that the three broad outcomes of SI are the provision of solutions to pressing social needs, solutions to social and environmental challenges, and SIs for systemic change, and there are different examples of SI initiatives to support people's lives [5]. Moreover, unexpected and unplanned social uses of innovative technologies can lead to SIs (e.g., open-source software) [4].

When innovation has a social component, its dissemination may face problems, such as societal passivity or lack of funding [6], cultural barriers [7], and communication problems [8], among others. Some scholars have pointed out that attention is paid to difficulties in understanding the dissemination of SI [9]. They add that SI has an inherent desire to spread its message and change the world but point out that this is not sustainable for a large majority of SIs that originate from third-sector projects, initiatives, and actors, which do not have a direct interest beyond their local context. The role of professional organisations and networks as intermediaries for dissemination is prominent,

downplaying the role of third-sector organisations and citizen's initiatives, as they are often limited to a more local level [9].

The reduction in meat consumption is framed as a diet-focused SI [10]. Moreover, it is demonstrated that it is possible to link vegetarianism and veganism to SIs [11]. The results of their study suggest that, according to the convictions and motives for following such diets, food choices can be qualified as SIs, as most consumers are influenced by and respond to major social and environmental problems, such as animal abuse in macro-farms, environmental pollution from macro-production, deforestation, etc., by choosing these diets. Although the literature had not previously presented them in this light, they were identified as such when projecting SI indicators onto them [11]. Following the dissemination patterns of most SIs [8], the dissemination of PBDs is affected by several variables that can influence the different stages of the dissemination process, such as stereotypes [12], stigmas [13], and food neophobia [14].

## 2. A Socio-Material Approach to SI Adoption

The socio-material approach is a novel and innovative perspective [15]. In this research study, this approach is appropriate because the adoption of the innovation is affected by the interrelationship between the material aspects of the innovation and the socio-psychological aspects of the potential adopter. The characteristics of the innovation are not enough, and it is necessary to look at the interaction between the innovation itself (material) and the individual (social). In this sense, some socio-psychological variables (linked to the potential adopter) may affect the success of the dissemination among prior and potential adopters and, consequently, disrupt the dissemination process. In the case of SIs, the social component is relevant, as their purpose is to improve the well-being of individuals and communities [16].

Materiality is social because it has been created through social processes and is interpreted and used by individuals in social contexts [17]; furthermore, most material things and objects sustain social life and help individuals. In theories of management [18], organisation [19], and organisational communication [20], the concepts of materiality and socio-materiality are popular due to a deeper understanding of the contextual and relational factors that shape, change, and organise human behaviour.

PBDs can also be understood from a social-material perspective. There are barriers and facilitators related to social and physical-material opportunities to reduce meat consumption and move towards PBDs (lack of social support and changes in service provision in collective meal contexts, among others) [21]. Moreover, meat consumption performs a fundamental role in the social representation of food and meals, especially in Western societies [22][23]. On the material part, i.e., substance side, some interventions are suggested, such as socio-material restructuring focused on modifying physical/material contexts, e.g., increasing the supply and changing the display of plant-based foods and meals [24].

## 3. The Social Network in the Dissemination of SIs

The Tardian theory states that the social contagion of innovations occurs in a community, and its members are the subjects of social contagion. The “social system” is one of the basic elements affecting dissemination, and homophilic relationships facilitate interaction between community members [25]. Moreover, following Tardian contagion theories, influences come largely from the social context and background of the population through social conformity, pressure, and facilitation [26].

Similarity breeds connection [27]. Interaction is easier when both the prior and the potential adopters share some similarities [28] and seems to be more effective when both share a homophilic relationship [29]. Thus, the social network of the prior and potential adopter performs a relevant role in the diffusion process [30][31].

Social networks are relevant in influencing the habits of individual PBD adopters [32][33], critical in maintaining the standard dietary practices of plant-based adopters [34] and perform a fundamental role in what and how we eat [35] [36]. The willingness and support of close people, such as family and friends, facilitates an individual’s opportunity to reduce meat consumption and follow a more PBD [21]. For example, individuals who reduced meat consumption or followed a PBD were encouraged to do so by family members and/or friends [37], among others. Furthermore, network homophily can foster and reinforce divisions between convinced meat eaters and individuals who strictly follow a PBD [38]. In addition, communication regarding PBDs between the prior and the potential adopter may not be effective, e.g., due to a lack of family support [39].

## 4. Challenges of SI Dissemination

Early studies on diffusion assumed that dissemination of an innovation, from the perspective of a potential adopter, meant the exact copying or imitation of how the innovation had previously been used in a different environment and a specific individual’s decision to start using this innovation [25]. Early seminal approaches to understanding the dissemination of innovations suggested that the force enabling their dissemination would be an imitation of the idea and its use, just as it was argued that diffusion was based on small psychological interactions between individuals, prior and potential adopters, with imitation being the fundamental force [26]. This can be considered a social contagion in the social network of the potential adopter. Thus, the adoption of a generic innovation (technology, behaviour, or policy) largely depends on how the social context and background of the population using it influences the interaction of potential and prior adopters. This type of result echoes the importance of imitation and mimicry in studies of other types of innovations, both at other times and in other countries [40]. In addition, interpersonal channels and the interactivity features of technologies enhance the imitation effect during the growth stage [41].

The outcome of the dissemination of a particular innovation is the combination of the characteristics of the potential adopter, the characteristics of the innovation, and some contextual conditions that facilitate the interaction between prior and potential adopters. Moreover, some interdependencies among the above-mentioned building blocks intervene in the dissemination progress. The social network may interfere in the relationship between prior and potential adopters [25] by facilitating and interfering with the necessary trust; the socio-material attributes of the innovation may affect, mainly in SIs, the potential adopter’s decision-making behaviour during the dissemination

process [17] and the potential adopter may encounter socio-psychological barriers to initially consider, and eventually use, the innovation and has to be able to cope with the resistance to overcome these barriers when they appear [42][43].

Furthermore, SI research has to face new challenges [44] to build bridges with current trends in innovation studies and, as an emerging field, develop theory-building efforts that provide a more holistic perspective that can support the specificities of non-technological approaches and in this line, try to overcome the predominant models on adoption patterns. In this vein, new efforts may include new ways to enhance the adoption-side perspective and propose perspectives that focus on adopters, their specificities and capacities within the context surrounding SI adoption [45].

Focusing on PBD, the current situation of the dissemination of these new diets can be considered to be in the early majority stage[25]. This means that dissemination is based on an imitation perspective and not on an innovation perspective. An innovation perspective is appropriate for the “Innovators” and “Early Adopters” adopter profiles[46]. Based on these profiles, the theoretical framework has been structured in three main sections: the contextual conditions, the relevant conceptual frameworks, and the interrelationships between the above components. The following sections describe the theoretical basis that can help formulate the contribution of this research work.

## 5. Conclusions

Although innovation research has developed a good bunch of theoretical frameworks that have made it possible to study the dissemination and adoption of innovations with a solid technological foundation, they provide partial support for an integral perspective of the needs of SIs. It is required to consider the involvement of the adopter, taking into account cognitive, social, and psychological traits. Adopter’s profiles and adopter’s innovativeness are the main theoretical lenses that build dissemination of innovation. This research work proposes an adopter’s point of view that provides an integral vision of the overall social contagion process with all the interdependencies between the different stages of the process, from the initial contact to the definitive use of the innovation by the user and consumer.

In this line, developing an abductive approach, this research work proposes a conceptual framework based on a process perspective of the adopter’s evolution from the first contact with PBDs to the regular use of the new diet. Based on the empirical effort of three cases, a cross-case analysis has been developed to propose the facilitators and barriers of the adoption process paying attention to the contextual elements that affect decision-making for the change from the old diet to the new one. In addition to the context, the process conceptual framework includes the different stages of the decision-making process towards the adoption of the new diet. All the proposed process stages, in an integral perspective, are based on the main theoretical frameworks that have been proposed for the understanding of the dissemination and adoption of innovation.

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