

The trend of being vegetarian

A comparative case study of how social norms affect meat-consuming behavior



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Abstract

This thesis examines the way social norms affect meat-consuming behavior, through using dietary habits as a way of expressing a political identity. A theoretical framework of social psychological theories will explain the connection between social norms and meat-consumption, by conceptualizing identity as a fundamentally social construction, created within the social context. Theories will furthermore explain the process of social learning and conformity, and how meat-reducing dietary choices can be a part of a person's identity. The theoretical connection will be empirically tested through qualitative interviews with nine informants, consisting of individuals actively reducing their meat-consumption, and those who do not. Findings suggest that social norms do play a crucial part in individuals meat-consuming behavior, where those actively reducing their meat-consumption perceives vegetarianism, or other meat-reducing dietary habits, to be more common among their friends, than those who do not. Results furthermore showed that identity is an important factor, where informants confirm that dietary habits with reduced meat-consumption has been an important part of their identity, especially in their adolescence, an identity that has been important to claim in social situations.

Keywords: vegetarianism, meat-consumption, social norms, identity, conformity

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1 Introduction

Is it a coincidence that almost all my friends are vegetarian? This was the thought that motivated this investigation. Why is it that some social contexts seem to have a vegetarian consensus? When investigating motives behind vegetarianism, previous research has primarily focused on knowledge about meat-industry impact of the environment, and moral motives regarding environmental care or animal rights (Wang, 2017: 1130). However, in a context such as the university town Lund in Sweden, awareness of the meat-industry impact is high. Still, many people persist to consume meat. I do not believe these people have significantly lower moral perceptions of what is right and what is wrong. I believe there is another factor affecting a person's meat-consuming behavior: social norms.

Our lifestyle choices today are resulting in a planet exploited far beyond its carrying capacity. Climate change is rapidly emerging, with rising temperatures and sea levels, as a result of the increasing amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere (Owsianiak, Brooks, Renz & Laurent, 2018). Food production is among the main causes to this development (Tukker & Jansen, 2008), where the meat-production is the industry generating the most environmental damage (Nijdam, Rood & Westhoek, 2012). Contribution to meat-production is one of the individual acts causing the largest environmental footprint, an impact that would decrease with between 20 and 55 % with a switch to a vegetarian or vegan diet (Hallström et al., 2014, 2015). Given the significant impact the meat-industry has on the environment – I consider it to be a vital question in the field of political science, to understand how individuals' attitudes regarding the meat-industry are affected.

The awareness of the meat-industry's environmental impact is increasing, and today, more and more people decide to reduce, or stop their meat-consumption (Mullee et al., 2017). In Sweden today, awareness of the meat-industry is high, and within the last decades, it has been allowed a place on the agenda (Almgren, 2009). However, whilst awareness is increasing, meat-consumption is still deeply integrated within our culture (Chiles & Fitzgerald, 2018). Thus, both awareness of meat-industry impact, and meat-consuming behavior is high. In this research, I aim to further understand the gap between awareness of the meat-industry impact, and the contradictory behavior, where many still consume meat. I will do this by investigating the role of social norms in meat-consuming behavior.

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate how meat-consuming behavior is affected by social norms. Most research about motives behind vegetarianism, and other dietary habits with reduced meat-consumption, regards knowledge about the environmental impact of the meat-industry, or the moral ethics regarding animal rights, to be the main causes for reduction (Wang, 2017: 1130). Through this research, I will furthermore add: “conforming to a social norm”, as an explanatory variable in understanding reasons behind reduction in meat-consuming behavior. This thesis thus aims to investigate if social norms affect meat-consuming behavior, through the use of dietary habits as an expression of an identity. A theoretical framework of social psychological theories will explain how identity is fundamentally connected to a person’s social environment, the process of social learning and conformity, and how vegetarianism, and other dietary choices, can be a part of a person’s identity. The connection between social norms and individual consuming behavior will be regarded through a social constructivist approach, where structural norms and individual action co-constitute the social reality.

The theoretical connection will furthermore be empirically investigated through qualitative interviews. My empirical sample will include individuals who actively reduce their meat-consumption, such as vegans, vegetarians, pescetarians, and flexitarians, as well as meat-consumers, not actively reducing their meat-consumption. My entire sample will have knowledge of the environmental impact of the meat-industry, and regard environmental issues to be important.

1.1.1 Research question

To capture my purpose, I have formulated the research question: *Do social norms affect meat-consuming behavior, by identifying with a vegetarian norm?*

1.1.2 Hypothesis

Individuals actively reducing their meat-consumption will perceive a vegetarian norm among their friends, and identify with this norm. Individuals not actively reducing their meat-consumption will perceive the vegetarian norm to be less common, and identify with the norm less.

1.2 Definitions

To clarify this research, there are a few terms that need to be defined. *Social norm* is a central concept in my study. According to Oxford Dictionaries, a norm is “A

standard or pattern, especially of social behavior, that is typical or expected” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018). It is thus a behavior or opinion that is common, and shared by many people. When I use the term social norm, I refer to a norm that can be found within certain social contexts. A social norm does therefore not imply a consensus among all people, but common patterns within certain social groups. Social norms can therefore differ among social contexts.

In this study, the two variables “prior knowledge about meat-industry impact on the environment” and “moral stance regarding environmental issues and perceptions of animal rights” will not be further investigated. The empirical investigation aspires to keep these variables constant, by solely investigating individuals with similar levels on both variables. By “prior knowledge”, I will seek if individuals are aware that the meat-industry has severe impact on the environment. *Moral* is defined as “A concern with the principles of right and wrong behavior” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018). It thus spurs from individual’s perceptions of what is right and what is wrong. The “moral stance” variable in this study will thus regard individual’s perception that harming the environment is wrong.

There is a difference in following a social norm, and following moral stance. An individual’s moral stances are stable, and might not differ between different situations. Behavior derived from moral stance is therefore less affected by the social context. Following a social norm, conversely, spurs from external perceptions of what is desired within the social environment. A person following social norms thus acts accordingly with their social environment, rather than acting from intrinsic perceptions of what one should do.

In the analysis, a distinction will furthermore be made between following social norms, and following a “trend”. Oxford Dictionaries defines a trend as “A general direction in which something is developing or changing” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018). Trends are thus new movements emerging in a social context, which can, with enough impact, develop into social norms. The distinction is important, since different patterns in following social norms, and trends was found, where trends could emerge as counter-reactions to established norms, to break a mainstream.

The individuals actively reducing their meat-consumption includes vegans, vegetarians, pescetarians (eats fish and seafood, but not flesh from other animals) and flexitarians (primarily vegetarian diet, but eats meat occasionally) (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018). The individuals in my investigation who are reducing their meat-consumption will all have intentions related to political, moral and/or ethical reasons for their reduction, and not, for instance, health-related reasons. Since investigating what underlies the political or ethical reasons would be a thesis of its own, I will assume that these political or ethical intentions are all connected to the norm stating that individuals should reduce their meat-consumption. It is the effects of this norm that this thesis aims to investigate. I will therefore not further investigate what underlies the norm, in order to achieve depth in my effect-analysis.

When discussing identification with the norms encouraging people to reduce their meat-consumption, I will use the term “vegetarian norm”, even though the practiced behavior might be vegan, pescetarian or flexitarian. A vegetarian norm

can contain several moral assumptions, and be interpreted in different ways. In this thesis however, the “vegetarian norm” will solely be defined as *the moral assumption that individuals should reduce their meat-consumption*.

2 Method

This investigation is a comparative case study with a theoretical base (Teorell, 2007: 236). With a social-constructivist approach, I will use a theoretical framework of social psychological theories, including Social Identity Theory, stating that parts of individual's sense of identity derives from being a part of a social group, and theories about conformity, explaining how people internalize group-norms by different social learning processes. I will furthermore empirically test this connection, by interviewing individuals who are intentionally reducing their meat-consumption, and individuals who are not.

To distinguish the role of identification with vegetarianism, I will use a *most-similar design*, where the informants will be as similar as possible in variables such as age, level of education, prior knowledge about meat-industry impact, and moral stance, such as regarding environmental issues to be important. Keeping the alternate independent variables "prior knowledge about meat-industry impact on the environment" and "environmental value emphasis" constant, whilst varying the dependent variable "reduction in meat-consuming behavior", will enable a distinction if the explanatory independent variable "perception of, and identification with, social norms regarding meat-consumption" has an effect on the dependent variable: meat-consuming outcome. This method will allow a distinction of whether perception of vegetarian norms in a person's social environment causes reduction in meat-consuming behavior or not (Teorell, 2007: 239-241).

2.1 Limitations and alternate sources of error

I limited my research to only investigate students at Lund University. All informants are currently, or have previously, studied at the Faculty of Social Sciences. My entire sample thus comes from social contexts with high level of education and high level of political awareness. Environmental issues is a topic frequently discussed in this part of the university, an understanding I have acquired from being a part of the Faculty myself. Many young and progressive people characterize the student life in Lund. Meat-reducing dietary habits is common among the students, and I thus find it an interesting environment to investigate the role of social norms regarding meat-consumption in. The study may not be generalizable for people overall, but I think it can be generalizable

beyond Lund University. I believe that similar phenomenon can be found in other social contexts with young politically aware, and progressive individuals.

There are difficulties in distinguishing the power of certain motives for reduction in meat-consuming behavior, since the different variables will not be possible to isolate from one another. There are particularly difficulties in distinguishing the variable “conforming to a social norm” since conformity includes an internalization of the norm, and the person will therefore claim their behavior is due to their own moral stance. Vegetarianism as a group norm can also provide the individual with information and knowledge about the meat-industry that will motivate the person to reduce his or her meat-consumption.

In the interviews, an alternative source of error might also spur from a sense of social desirability from the informants to me as a researcher, due to perception of my moral stance after my choice of research question. The informants not actively reducing their meat-consumption might claim they value environmental care more than they actually do.

3 Theory

In this section, the theoretical framework will be presented. The framework aims to explain the theoretical connection between social norms and individual meat-consuming behavior. A central component to this connection is the construction of an identity, and its fundamental relation to its social environment. Within an identity, political opinions can take place, creating a political identity. A political identity can be constructed from being a part of a minority food culture, such as vegetarianism. Theories of social learning explain how individuals adopt and internalize group norms, a process captured by the phenomenon conformity.

3.1 Social constructivism

Social constructivism is a philosophical theory explaining how the world can be understood as a human construction. The theoretical perspective has an ontological approach in its attempts to understand what is real, and a sociological approach, in its attempt to understand the relationship between individuals and the collective. I will use this theory as a basis for explaining how people embrace attitudes from their social environment to make decisions about their behaviors, creating patterns of behavior in certain social categories, which in turn become the structures that make out society. (Frueh, 2003: 9-12).

Human action is based on what is perceived as important, and a significant part of perceived importance in action is defined by social rules and norms. In social constructs, norms and values exist in a hierarchical setting, where certain characteristics are valued above others. In certain contexts, environmental responsibility may, for instance, be highly valued, and sustainable consumption is therefore a highly valued action, whereas in other social context, such a norm may not be salient (ibid).

The social world can be explained through both agency and structure perspectives. The agency perspective stresses human power in determining how the world is constructed, and consider power to be situated within rational actors, whereas structural perspectives maintain that social dynamics constitute societal structures, and that social change is created through changes in social dynamics, beyond individual power to affect (Hollis, 2002: 5-7). Social constructivism is created to fill in the gap between agency and structure perspectives in determining human behavior, where agents and structure co-constitute the social reality. Individuals define and alter structural reality, and structures define and alter human reality. Accordingly, social norms are mutually constituted between structures and actors (McKinley, 2015: 11).

3.2 Identity: the social self

Identity is a fundamental part of social psychology, and many studies have been investigating the phenomenon. The concept of identity is separated from an individual's *self-concept*, which refers to the total set of ideas, thoughts and emotions a person holds about oneself. The self-concept is mainly created within oneself, and is relatively stable over time (Oyserman, 2012: 500-501). Identity however, is fundamentally a social phenomenon. It is based on the roles individuals have in different contexts, and it is created in relation to the social environment. Concerns with one's identity are often related to perceptions of desired characteristics from the social environment, such as perceptions of what is good or bad, and right or wrong (Lawler, 2015: 2-3). Within the identity are several group-identities, which is the sense of belonging to a certain group. Henri Tajfel and John Turner originally formed the *Social Identity Theory* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which came to be a central theory in identity and intergroup psychology. The theory describes the social identity, as the part of one's identity that derives from being a part of certain social groups, with value attached to the membership of that group. Within the identity are thus several group-identities (Gilovich, Keltner, Chen & Nisbett. 2015: 412-413). Being a part of a group has positive effects on well-being and self esteem. Individuals tend to adjust their identities to gain positive reinforcement from their social groups, or to avoid negative punishments. Positive reinforcement usually occurs in the form of being accepted by the group, whilst negative punishments include social rejections (Gilovich et al., 2015: 446).

3.3 Identity and politicized diets

Group-identities often have mutual characteristics, such as interest, opinions and norms. Social groups can thus be formed with a political agenda, where the group identity is of a political nature (Gilovich et al., 2015: 456). By socializing in groups where certain political opinions or norms are salient, political stance can become a salient part of a person's identity.

In the article *Awakening to the politics of food: politicized diet as social identity*, Chunk, Fernandes & Hyers describes how minority formations in dietary choices form social identities. They found their informants did incorporate their dietary choice as a sense of identity, and their dietary choice had made them identify with a new social group. They described that going against the mainstream is a predicting factor in creating a politicized group-identity. Food has had cultural significance since ancient time, and it has a role of unifying family, friends and entire cultures. Today, the mass-produced industrialization of food has made it a political issue, where consumers use their infinite options in food consumption to make a political statement, by choosing to support or not support

certain parts of the industry. In that way, dietary choices have become political activism (Chunk, Fernandes & Hyers, 2016).

3.4 Social influence and conformity

After gaining a deeper understanding of identities as a social construction, this paragraph will conceptualize the theoretical aspect of social influence and conformity. Social influence occurs when a person's behavior, thoughts, attitudes, emotions, or values are affected by others. It mainly regards two different aspects: informational social influence and normative social influence. Informational social influence often occurs in ambiguous situations where one is unsure of what behavior is correct, and absorbs information from his or her social environment (Gilovich et al., 2015: 309-313). The individual thus perceives what others are doing as correct in a given situation, and adopt that behavior, a phenomenon called *social proof* (Cialdini, 2008: 99). This is however not the type of social influence I will regard in this thesis, since my investigation solely regards individuals who perceive negative consequences from the meat-industry, and consider environmental issues to be important. It can thus be assumed that both the individuals actively reducing their meat-consumption, and those who do not, considers reducing their meat-consumption to be the "correct behavior". What may differ between the individuals reducing their meat-consumption, and those who do not, is their perception of a *normative social influence*. Normative social influence occurs when individuals adjust their behavior in congruence with the group norm, in order to gain social rewards, in terms of acceptance or approval from the group, or to avoid negative punishments, such as social exclusion. Normative social influence is the influence leading to conformity (Gilovich et al., 2015: 309-313).

Gilovich et al. (2015) defines conformity as "a change of behavior of belief as a response to real or imagined pressure from others" (Gilovich et al., 2015: 305). Conformity includes an internalization of the group norm, separating the phenomenon from *compliance*, which is to knowingly bring one's behavior into line with peers, in order to acquire social rewards, or to avoid negative punishments (Turner, 1991). This sort of influence can work on both implicit and explicit levels, and we can be influenced by comments, actions, or the mere presence of others (Gilovich et al., 2015: 305). Conformity is a mechanism that is driven by the person adjusting to the norm, and it is thereby mainly implicit (Nolan, Schultz, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius 2008). This separates the phenomenon from *persuasion*, which is an explicit behavior aiming to make others adjust to a norm. Persuasion also includes a conscious decision-making from the person adjusting to the norm, which conformity does not (O'Keefe 1990, 17).

Internalization of a norm means that the individuals come to believe that the norm is appropriate, and therefore adjust their opinion, and behavior in line with the norm (Turner, 1991). A person can however conform to a norm without fully internalize it. To further explain this process, the different types of *social learning* must be described.

3.5 Social learning

The process of conformity is a way of *social learning*. It is the process of adapting norms and knowledge from the social environment, and integrating this information with individual behavior, cognitive knowledge system, and beliefs. Argyris & Schön are two researchers that have been investigating the phenomenon, and they have developed a model distinguishing between "single loop", and "double loop" learning (Argyris & Schön, 1995). Bernd Siebenhüner describes these in the study *Social Learning in the Field of Climate Change*, aimed to conceptualize the phenomenon social learning. Siebenhüner assert that social learning encompasses a dimension of change in an individual's values, norms and beliefs, exceeding the person's existing knowledge and frames of reference (Siebenhüner, 2006: 6-7).

"Single loop learning" is a simple form of learning, where individuals perceive knowledge or norms from their social environment, and adapt this information into their existing cognitive knowledge frames. The motives behind this adaption are perceptions of causal beliefs, such as social rewards from adjusting to this norm. Since individuals are sensitive to social information, it may lead to error corrections, and adjustments to perceived norms that deviate from one's own. The "double loop learning" is a more advanced form of learning, which includes an internalization of perceived norms and knowledge. This is a more fundamental learning, which connects the learning into the individual's general framework of beliefs and knowledge. Siebenhüner describes that it involves cognitive and behavioral changes, a change in fundamental beliefs, and reinterpretations of the purposes and strategies for achieving them (ibid).

To have adapted only a single loop learning may not be sufficient for stable changes in values and behavior, since this instrumental form of learning is sensitive to changes in the social environment. An individual may adapt to certain norms, and adjust one's behavior accordingly, but when the norms are changing, or when the individual is placed in a different social context with other social norms, the previous learning may be conflicted. The individual will thereby return to previous knowledge framework, or readjust to the newfound group norms (ibid).

Thus, to explain how individuals can conform to norms without fully internalizing them, the individuals have only reached the single loop learning. When reaching the *double loop learning*, the person has reached *true conformity* by fully internalizing the norm (Turner, 1991). What separates single loop conformity from compliance is that compliance is to *knowingly* adjust one's behavior in congruence with a group norm, and it thus occurs on a conscious level. Single loop conformity is not a conscious adjustment, but an adaption of group norms. In my empirical investigation, I will interpret multiple changes in behavior in line with group norms to be primarily single loop conformity. This can occur if individuals change behavior between different contexts, or if individuals adjust their behavior to a group norm, and if the group norms changes they adjust their behavior accordingly.

4 Empirical research

4.1 Informants and sampling

The sampling was made based on the informants' meat-consuming behavior, since the study seeks to conduct interviews from both informants actively reducing their meat-consumption, and those who do not. I contacted informants from my personal network, where I had prior knowledge about their meat-consumption. I initially asked three pre-sampling question to all informants, crucial for my most-similar design:

1. What do you know about the environmental impact of the meat-industry?
2. Do you regard environmental issues to be important?
3. Are you actively and intentionally reducing your meat-consumption?

I limited my sample to informants aware of the environmental impact of the meat-industry, and who regarded environmental issues to be important. An alternate source of error in question one can be predicted, where informants claim to be aware of the environmental impact of the meat-industry while not actually being so, and I therefore made it an open question that allowed me to determine whether the informants were actually aware of the magnitude of the impact or not. However, since my focus is not to further investigate these variables, I regarded a confirmation that they were aware of the environmental damage the meat industry causes, and a "yes" on question two, to be sufficient to keep these variables relatively constant. Half of my sample answered "yes" on the third question, and the other half answered "no". Among the informants not actively reducing their meat-consumption, I furthermore only interviewed informants who declared it would be possible for them to reduce their meat-consumption.

My interviews aim to investigate informants' perception of social norms regarding meat-consumption, and their identification with these. If informants in my sample had been unaware of environmental consequences, or answered "no" question two, the study would be invalid. That is, since unawareness about meat-industry impact on the environment, or ignorance of environmental issues, would result in lack of incentive to reduce one's meat-consuming behavior. Conformity to social norms would thus be an irrelevant factor.

I conducted interviews from nine informants in total; four who are actively reducing their meat-consumption, one who have previously been vegetarian but currently consumes meat, and four who are not actively reducing their meat-consumption. They are between the ages of 23 and 28, and all students at Lund University, who are, or have been, studying at the Faculty of Social Sciences. I see no reason in revealing the informants identities, they are all described in pseudonyms.¹

¹ See list of informants in Appendix 1

4.2 Interviews

In the interviews, I aim to find if informants perceive dietary habits with reduced meat-consumption to be common among their friends, if they perceive a norm of vegetarianism in their social contexts, and if this norm differs between their contexts. I furthermore seek to find if the informants identify with the norm of vegetarianism, and how the person is affected by the perceived norms in their social surroundings, regarding meat-consumption.

The interviews will consist of four initial questions asked to all informants, aiming to further understand the informants' knowledge and attitudes about meat-consumption and its consequences, and whether they perceive dietary habits with reduced meat-consumption to be common in their social environment. I will proceed with two different sets of questions, depending on whether the informant is actively reducing his or her meat-consumption or not.

The interviews will however be semi-structured, in the sense that the prepared manuscript will be used as a guideline, allowing me to add supplementary questions adjusted to the interviewee (Kvale, 2015: 45), such as follow-up and clarification questions. A semi-structured interview allows an open atmosphere, with the purpose of acquiring open answers from the informants, where they can associate freely without constraints from interviewer's preconceptions (Davies, 2002: 95)

The article "*Awakening to the politics of food: Politicized diet as social identity*" performed qualitatively interviews with informants following a plant-based diet about motives behind their dietary habits, and whether they identify with these habits. The questions fit my ambition in the knowledge I seek to attain by the informants actively reducing their meat-consumption, and I therefore replicated some of my questions from the study, and added several questions myself, focusing on perception of social norms. For the interviews with the informants not actively reducing their meat-consumption, I seek to gain knowledge about their perception of a meat consuming norm, and a vegetarian norm, how these norm affect them, and to what extent they identify with these.²

² See all interview questions in Appendix 2.

5 Results

I consider all informants to be aware of the environmental impact of the meat-industry. Some of them possessed more thorough factual knowledge than others, but I consider them all to obtain sufficient knowledge for the investigation to be valid. All informants considered environmental issues to be “important” or “very important”. Informants differed in how much they think about the animal rights aspect, when regarding meat-consumption. Most did not consider it much or did not consider it at all. Two considered it a lot.

All informants who actively reduced their meat-consumption perceived reduction in meat-consuming behavior, and the vegetarian norm to be common or very common among their friends. The meat-consumers who perceive vegetarianism or other meat-reducing diets to be more common identify with the vegetarian norm more, and have more positive associations with vegetarianism. Two of the meat-consuming informants did not perceive vegetarianism to be common; they identified with the meat-consuming norm more than with the vegetarian norm, and had more negative associations with vegetarianism. These were the informants consuming meat the most.

Many described how the matter of identification was affected by the social context – where the identification became stronger in a context where the vegetarian norm was absent, or weak, but in a context with a strong vegetarian norm, the matter of identification is not as salient, since it does not stand out, and it is not a distinct standing point.

Many informants also described how vegetarianism is a way of claiming an identity, and a way of breaking the meat-consuming norm. Some informants, who have experienced the vegetarian norm to be very common, have also experienced a counter-reaction, where individuals break a vegetarian mainstream by going back to consuming meat after being vegetarian. Many informants also stated how claiming one’s meat-consuming habits was more common in their adolescence.

5.1 Vegetarianism vs. vegetarian norm

It is initially important to state that there was a difference in reducing one’s meat-consumption, and identifying with some sort of dietary habits, such as vegetarianism or flexitarianism. Some informants actively and intentionally reduced their meat-consumption, but did not label themselves as vegetarian or flexitarian. It is also important to state the difference between being a vegetarian, and identifying with the vegetarian norm. Eight out of nine informants identified with the vegetarian norm, whilst only four actively reduced their meat-consumption.

5.2 A political act

All informants confirmed that reduction in meat-consumption is, or can be, a political act, signaling a political stance.

“I believe it’s a political act in the sense that it is a conscious decision made to shape your own behavior, according to a specific idea in order to in some way reach the goal of a better world. It’s breaking with the western history of ‘how and what you eat’ and setting a new agenda for yourself based on ethical and political deliberation, may these be driven by emotion, social pressure or rational thinking.” - Helena

5.3 The role of social influence

All informants actively reducing their meat-consumption claimed many of their friends decided to reduce their meat-consumption around the same time as they did. Some were trend-setting, and experienced many becoming vegetarian shortly after them. Some reduced their meat-consumption when they moved to Lund, and perceived a stronger vegetarian norm there. Many informants perceived a “wave” where people increasingly reduced their meat-consumption. All reducing informants have experienced, or started some sort of social influence.

“My best friend became vegetarian shortly after me, and within a year or two, almost all my friends were vegetarian. That was sort of trend setting.” - Helena

“I think during the time I became a vegetarian, more of my friends also became vegetarian. And then on the internet/social media, and in general among my friends, there was an increasing political awareness, and a norm of being “politically correct” that was starting to grow in the early 2010 decennium.” – Anna

“The social context that I lived in was very aware, and talked about it (referring to vegetarianism) a lot. It was in a time when environmentalism was discussed a lot, and it was pretty clear that everybody thought that the best thing you could do was to stop flying air planes and reduce your meat-consumption.” – Erik

“I think that as soon as five people who are cool become vegetarian, then it will become peer pressure.” – Helena

5.4 The perception of the vegetarian norm and behavioral adjustment

All informants reducing their meat-consumption perceived a vegetarian norm in the main part of their social environment. Many considered the norm to be so strong that consuming meat is a deviant behavior, and that consuming meat is breaking the norm.

“I think it’s been more and more the norm. I really notice it in social circles, when having dinner with friends. It’s very rare that someone proposes meat.”

- Lisa

Many informants experienced a change of social norms when they moved to Lund and started studying at Lund University. Many experience the vegetarian norm to be strong and widespread between many social constellations among the students at the university. For many informants, moving to Lund therefore played a crucial part in their distancing from meat-consumption.

“I think that when I came to Lund, my meat-consumption was reduced. The vegetarian norm was already a part of the social context here. So when I moved here, I just sort of adapted to that culture.” - Erik

“... but when I moved to Lund, many people tried out to be vegetarian, and then I became more aware. So for me, that time was when I moved to Lund.”

– Sandra

Many informants felt unease by breaking the vegetarian norm, and a perception that doing so would require the ability to justify it.

“Because the social norm is so strong – I couldn’t eat meat if I couldn’t justify it for myself in some way, and also be quite defensive about it.”

- Helena

“If I would have lunch with only vegetarians and I would eat meat, I’d feel weird about it.” – Sandra

Ebba also perceived the vegetarian norm to be strong when she moved to Lund. She feels more comfortable with the norm now, but the previous unease from breaking the norm resulted in her becoming a vegetarian for a period. When she was asked if she feels comfortable consuming meat in front of vegetarians, she responded:

Ebba: “Yes, more now than before. Maybe it’s just a perception that some people would judge me if I did – but now; I realized that’s not the case.”

JG: *Back then, when you perceived the vegetarian norm and the perception of being judged if you consumed meat, did it affect you in some way?*

Ebba: Yes, I think I started to eat much less meat; I even became a vegetarian for 8 months. This was like 3 years ago. It was not because I thought I was being judged, but you kind of adjust to what people around you do.”

5.5 Vegetarianism as identity claiming

Many informants experienced vegetarianism, or other dietary habits with reduced meat-consumption, to be a way of claiming an identity. It was a social marker that placed individuals in certain categories. Many experienced how they themselves, and people in their social surrounding, have claimed their vegetarianism in social context; some even experienced people publicly stating it on social media.

“... it was very common to include even in your bio that “I like vegetarian food and reading” or “I’m a vegetarian”, or other political/cultural statements about your identity.” – Anna

“I totally believe that people who are vegetarians will like to talk about the fact that they are vegetarians, and why they became vegetarian.” – Victor

When discussing vegetarianism as an identity – two findings can be distinguished; identity salience is depending on the current norm individuals socialize with, and identity claiming was more important at younger ages.

5.5.1 Adolescence identity claiming

“I think that was the age where I was the most concerned about my identity, and building “who am I”. It was very important that everything was very obvious and structured, to be able to put people and myself in certain categories, for example “I’m a vegetarian”.” - Anna

“I have perceived among others that it was very important to claim one’s identity when we were younger.” - Karl

Showing people “who you are”, and claiming different identities, is a phenomenon that most informants perceive to have been more important when they were younger. In their adolescence, they felt a stronger need to categorize themselves and others, in order to make sense of their social surroundings. All informants who are reducing their meat-consumption, found it more important to claim the vegetarian norm as a part of their identity when they were younger. The meat-consumers also identifying with the vegetarian norm perceived this among others.

Many also declared a stronger need to “stand out”, but at the same time being highly affected by social norms in their surrounding. All informants perceived the meat-consuming norm to be stronger in their adolescence, and the need to “stand out” refers to this norm, to separate them from a meat-consuming mainstream. Many experienced a strong need to claim that their standing point was correct, and an urge to make their social surroundings conform to their newfound vegetarian norms.

“In the beginning I was trying to preach and argue much more” – Lisa

“There was a time when I actively tried to convince other people not to consume meat, just because I thought you were supposed to do that.” – Erik

5.5.2 A matter of context:

“...when the norm is more meat-eating, I identify more with vegetarianism, because I kind of stand out there, since I don’t consume that much meat. But when I’m in a group where the norms are more vegetarian than my own, I don’t identify with those norms as much.” - Ebba

The other finding when it comes to vegetarianism as identity claiming is that identity is context-dependent. Many experience that their vegetarian identity is not salient when being in contexts where vegetarianism is the norm. Within such contexts, being vegetarian is not something that the informants actively think about. It does not either seem to be an identity important to claim in social situations, since it is an identity shared by the group. When the informants however change context, and socialize in an environment where there is not a vegetarian norm, their vegetarian identity becomes stronger and more salient, since it becomes a contrast to their surroundings. Informants then consider it to be a part of “who they are” more, and find it more important to show that to their social surroundings.

“I think a reason I don’t see it as an identity anymore is probably that everyone around me shares the same view of meat, so you don’t reflect over the fact that you’re actually vegetarian. But if you would put me in a completely different environment, where loads of people would be consuming meat, then I think it would definitely be a part of me that I would highlight, and stand by. And use it maybe as a contrast to others. So now, it’s not a big part of my identity, because it’s something I share with everyone around me. I don’t stand out, and then it’s hard to realize it’s an identity aspect as well – because you don’t feel like it is, you just do what everybody else does.” - Helena

“I think the identity-thing differs between different contexts. In my everyday life, I don’t go around thinking that I’m a vegetarian, but for example when I was on exchange in Chile, it was hard for some people in my house to understand the fact that I was a vegetarian ... then my identity of being a vegetarian became stronger, though that’s not how I would describe myself in an everyday context.” – Sandra

“...when I am with my family who are consuming meat, I become more strict and more preaching. When I am in a very vegetarian norm, I don’t really stand out in it, and I don’t really have to claim it. ... I guess my vegan identity becomes stronger when I’m with my family, partly because it stands out. When you can contrast your identity with a certain group, it becomes stronger.” - Lisa

It thus seems that context affects the identity; by affecting the role that the individual has in certain contexts. A person actively reducing his or her meat-consumption does not stand out in a context where everybody else also does so. Consequently, the vegetarian identity is not salient in a vegetarian context. If the person is however put in a context where vegetarianism is not the norm, the person might be seen as “the vegetarian”, and that identity will therefore become more salient. Identity salience can thus be seen as a reaction towards the social environment.

Context does however seem to have the opposite effect on behavior, for the informants who eat meat sometimes. These individuals tend to consume meat according to the norm they are currently in. If they are in a context where the norm is vegetarian, they tend to eat vegetarian food, and if they are in a context where the norm is meat consuming, they tend to consume more meat.

“... if I meet some old friends from Uppsala, then the vegetarian norm does not exist, and then I wouldn’t care about it that much.” – Karl

“If it’s socially acceptable to eat meat, I do it more. So when I’m home in Stockholm during the summer with my family, who all eat meat, I eat meat maybe four times a week. And also when I’m out with friends in Stockholm who eat meat, I will probably eat it more. When I’m in the more “vegetarian norms” of my social context, I eat less meat.” - Erik

5.6 Going back to meat-eating

Some informants have perceived a wave of previously vegetarian going back to eating meat. This seems to occur within social contexts where the vegetarian norm has been so strong and widespread that it has become a new mainstream. Several trends can be perceived as underlying reasons behind this. One is a form of identity claiming, by going against the mainstream, with an attempt to being perceived as unique. The mechanism seems to be quite similar to the one where people broke the previous meat-eating norm. Remi is one of the informants who have observed this trend. He has perceived progressive youths from his social contexts that have previously been vegetarian, but now have started to eat a traditional Swedish sausage called *falukorv*. He also perceived them doing this in a public identity-claiming manner, where they talk about it frequently, and some even shared it on social media.

“I’ve seen a new hipster trend recently where it’s “cool” to eat *falukorv* and stuff like that ... it started to become a norm in high school to stop eating meat – the same way eating *falukorv* and that kind of “ugly meat” have become the trend now. ... Maybe the same trend that led to a person’s vegetarianism in the beginning ... is the same attention-seeking mechanism can be found in a vegetarian who starts to eat *falukorv*” - Remi

Remi perceived this as an attempt to be unique. To start consuming what he refers to as “ugly meat”, is in that sense a distinct statement, since it aims to be as distanced from the vegetarian norm as possible. Anna has noticed similar trends among her progressive social network on social media. She spoke of the emergence of the trend of being *politically correct*, or PC, where vegetarianism was a salient part. When this trend reached its peak, vegetarianism consequently became mainstream in this social context, and it was no longer a unique identity. This resulted in a counter-reaction, where individuals started to consume meat again, to regain a sense of uniqueness.

“... on the internet/social media, and in general among my friends, there was an increasing political awareness, and a norm of being politically correct that was starting to grow in the early 2010 decennium. It reached it’s peak in

2014, which we used to call “the PC-peak”. Then, as a counter reaction, some people started to actively distancing themselves from this norm, for example through having meat, and being open about it. They talked about how good it is, and they also wrote things like “I’m going to have a raw beef now, it is going to be so good” or something on social media; as a statement, and as a counter-reaction.” – Anna

“...within our social context, going back to eating meat is more of a statement and claiming an identity, rather than just keep on being a vegetarian. I think it’s in some way the same type of mechanism – to be surrounded by people who eat meat and become a vegetarian, and to be surrounded by vegetarians and start eating meat. So I definitely think it’s an identity-thing. And it’s definitely more of a statement, because now they are the ones who break the norm within our social group. All of them have written messages “announcing” that they are now eating meat again, and they wrote it as sort of *disclaimers*” - Helena

Anna refers to the counter-reaction as a trend of being “post-PC”. Both the trend of being “politically correct”, and the trend of being “post-PC” thus included a public claiming of meat-consuming behavior as a way of expressing an identity, that differed from the previous mainstream. This shows tendencies related to the context-dependent vegetarian identity, where an identity becomes salient when it differs from norms in a person’s surroundings.

Other informants have also perceived the trend of going back to meat-consumption after being vegetarian. Helena has perceived this among her friends, where meat-consumption was not only a way of standing out from a vegetarian norm, but also a political statement in itself. She explained how the trend of going back to meat-consumption was a feminist movement, where women wanted to distance themselves from external societal restrictions, telling them how they should look and what they should eat. Several informants stated that they have perceived connections between veganism and eating disorders, and that going back to meat-consumption was a way of distancing themselves from these patterns.

“I think this is a feminist political thing as well, to claim that eating meat again is empowering, it’s living life more freely and not to be restricted. As women, we are always told what to eat and what not to eat, and they wanted to separate themselves from that sort of body image.” - Helena

“I have seen a lot of friends who were vegans as a way to try to avoid unhealthy stuff, and as an excuse not to eat things, so I didn’t want to have restrictions in my diet.” - Anna

Helena furthermore described another political statement that going back to consuming meat after being vegetarian entails, where individuals distance themselves from vegetarianism as a reaction towards the individual responsibility over environmental issues that vegetarianism signals. The vegetarian norm, stating individuals should reduce their meat-consumption indicates that individuals should take responsibility over their consumption-patterns, which causes environmental damage. The statement of distancing oneself from vegetarianism advocates that environmental issues should be governed on a higher level, and that environmental responsibility should not rest on individuals.

“Vegetarianism puts the responsibility on the individual, and that is not where the responsibility should be” – Helena

As stated in previous sections, most of the informants however claim that as they have grown older, it is not as important for them to mark their identities, and to show others who they are. As they feel more comfortable within themselves, they do not feel the same need of claiming a meat-consuming diet, as a way of showing others who they are. Anna described how both the trend of being “politically correct”, and the trend of being “post-PC” has blown over today.

“I think that when both the wave of PC, and the wave of post-PC blew over, it became a bit more diverse. Some people continued to eat meat, and some continued to be vegetarian, but it wasn’t as important for your identity construction. I think that it’s both a part of the norms you see among your friends, but also about growing up, and finding out who you are, so that you don’t have to use these labels to clarify it. ... I am environmentally aware, but I don’t find it that important to show it in my identity. I rather make other choices in the environmental question in a broader sense, like use my political vote, or take environmental action in general, more than just being a vegetarian.” - Anna

According to Anna, as soon as people have become more secure within their identities, the different meat-eating habits, when it comes to meat-consumption, has become more diverse. People accept what others eat more, and do not feel the same need to claim it.

6 Analysis

This investigation has aimed to understand how social norms affect meat-consuming behavior, through the construction of an identity. The phenomenon has been empirically investigated through qualitative interviews with nine informants, discussing their approach to meat-consuming behavior. I will in this chapter attempt to understand the empirical findings from the interviews, through my theoretical framework.

I have interpreted my empirical findings through a social constructivist approach, which combines a structure, and an agency approach, by regarding structures and actors to co-constitute the social world. The belief in the ability gain true information by the informants about their thoughts, perceptions and attitudes spurs from the agency-based perspective, where the individual possess the ability to understand patterns in one's social surrounding. Analyzing the patterns perceived from the interviews, with the power of structural patterns and norm-conformation taken into consideration, indicates a structure-based perspective. I will thus, through my social constructivist approach, assume that the informants can possess a relatively true apprehension of the motives and reasons behind their meat-consuming behavior, while still assuming that certain patterns of conformity and social learning can be recognized, without them directly stating it.

6.1 Identity

In the theoretical chapter, identity was presented according to *Social Identity Theory*, as a fundamentally social construction, based on the different roles individuals have in different contexts. The individual perception of identity is thus affected by one's social context, a finding that could be distinguished by the informants. The interviews however, showed that that when a person's identity was not distinct in the context, the person did not think of it as an identity. The informants did not perceive that having a dietary habit with reduced meat-consumption was something they actively reflected over, or to be a central part of their identity, since it is such a common phenomenon in Lund. However, when they change context, and socialize in groups where there is a meat-consuming norm, the sense of identity connected to their meat-reducing dietary habit, and their matter of identification with the vegetarian norm, seems to become more salient.

This finding can be connected to the patterns found in adolescence identity claiming. All informants actively reducing their meat-consumption claimed this diet was a stronger part of their identity when they were younger. This was at a time when the meat-consuming norm was still dominant. Distancing themselves from that norm was a more apparent statement, and gave the individuals a distinct

sense of identity. This furthermore occurred during a time when informants claimed it was important to establish an identity, and to fit into different social categories. Reducing one's meat-consumption thus became an important statement, which many in the informants' social surroundings at the time actively spoke about, and even publically announced on social media.

As stated in the theoretical chapter, concerns with one's identity are often related to perceptions of desired characteristics from a person's social surrounding. The empirical investigation has shown that meat-consuming behavior can be used as a response to these perceptions. For instance, if vegetarianism is socially desirable in a certain context, a person can use a vegetarian identity to gain social approval, and if instead uniqueness is a more desired characteristic, meat-consuming behavior can be used in a vegetarian norm, to break the mainstream. It can thus be interpreted that meat-consuming behavior is a way of showing others who you are, and that motives behind meat-consuming behavior are considerably affected by individuals' identity-claiming in social situations.

6.2 Conformity and social learning

The finding that all informants actively reducing their meat-consumption perceived reduction in meat-consuming behavior, and the vegetarian norm to be common among their friends, can be interpreted as, but not necessarily a proof of, conformity. Additionally, the finding that the informants consuming meat the most, does not perceive reduction in meat-consuming behavior, or the vegetarian norm, to be common among their friends, can be interpreted accordingly. This is not sufficient to be considered proof that conformity has occurred, but it is an indication of patterns showing that attitudes towards meat-consuming behavior is often characterized by a group consensus.

All meat-reducing informants also claimed they experienced a "wave" where people increasingly reduced their meat-consumption, and that many of their friends decided to reduce their meat-consumption around the same time as they did; evidence that can also be interpreted as normative social influence, resulting in conformity. When analyzing the level of conformity, i.e. to what extent informants have adapted and internalized social norms, I have, in accordance with my theoretical framework, divided it into two levels of social learning; single- and double-loop learning. It is difficult to discern the level of conformity, since even in the adaptation stage (single-loop learning), there is a high risk that the informants will claim to have decided to reduce their meat-consumption due to moral considerations, i.e. because they considered it to be the right thing to do.

I however consider the trend described by Anna, Helena, and Remi to be interesting in this aspect. They have all perceived a movement of previous vegetarians go back to consuming meat. They described that there initially appeared a trend of people becoming vegetarian, during what Anna refer to as the trend of being "politically correct". Within certain social contexts, this resulted in vegetarianism becoming the new mainstream, which in turn spurred a new trend to emerge as a counter-reaction, which Anna refers to as "post-PC". In the new

“post-PC” trend, Anna described how it appeared socially desirable to break the mainstream and consume meat; many made their return to meat-consumption into a public statement. The conforming into the trend of both vegetarianism, and the return to meat-consumption, can in this situation be interpreted as a single-loop social learning – where the individuals have absorbed desirable approaches to meat-consumption from their social environment and conform to it, but when the trend changes, so does the individual’s behavior.

For the informants where meat-consuming behavior was context-dependent, single-loop learning can also be distinguished. When these individuals socialize in context with a vegetarian norm, they adapt to this norm and refrain from consuming meat. When they however socialize in context with a meat-consuming norm, their vegetarian norms do not persist, and they consume meat more frequently. This indicates that an internalization of the norms has not occurred.

With some of the individuals, an internalization can however be distinguished. Helena for instance, though not being as affected by social norms, since she was among the first in her social context to become vegetarian, shows an indication of having internalized the vegetarian norm. She described how the majority of her close friends that became vegetarian with her, have started to eat meat again, but that change of trend did not affect her meat-consuming behavior. Other reducing informants also described how they previously adjusted their meat-consuming behavior in accordance with the social context, but today are not consuming meat at all, regardless of social context. This can be interpreted as another indication of an internalized norm, and that they have reached the double-loop learning.

7 Discussion

Due to the environmental damage the meat-industry causes, a deeper understanding of how meat-consumption can be affected is an important aspect. The insight in how social norms affect meat-consuming behavior shows the power that the discourse around meat-consumption has. These insights can thus be used among actors within the media and communication sector, which plays a crucial part in establishing a discourse, and affecting social trends; factors are shown to have an effect on behavior within this study.

Errors of judgment, and alternate explanations for the results are however important to take into consideration. As stated in the discussion, it is difficult to discern how social norms affects meat-consuming behavior, since the different motives cannot be isolated from one another. Reduction in meat-consuming behavior can, for instance, be due to economic factors, since meat is generally more expensive than vegetarian food. The reduction might not be a result of them moving to Lund, but a result of them leaving home. It can also be suggested that with an increased vegetarian norm, an increased level of knowledge about meat-industry impact accompanies it, which is the main motive behind the reduction of meat-consumption. I do however consider the difference in knowledge between the informants of my study to not be significant, an indication that the level of knowledge might not be a vital variable.

The finding that vegetarianism and other dietary habits with reduced meat-consumption can be an essential part in a person's political identity can be interpreted in a societal sense. Since the political identity seems to be sensitive to social norms and trends, a question that can be discussed is whether the increasing norm of vegetarianism is a long-lasting trend, or if it is a temporary trend that will eventually blow over. As vegetarianism will increasingly become a norm – will this make the matter of vegetarianism as a part of the identity decrease? If people will feel less need to claim their vegetarian identity, will it decrease the trend of being vegetarian? And if so, will people have smaller incentives to follow this diet? Will the trend of counter-reactions towards vegetarianism emerge to be a larger societal movement? A lot of trends can be discussed within the aspects of meat-consuming habits, as part of identities and social norms. As this thesis has shown, the social aspect cannot be undermined. To understand how meat-consumption will be developed in the future, it is an important aspect to take into consideration.

8 Generalizability and future work

I believe that the findings from this study can be seen among other progressive, and politically aware youths in other parts of the world, and that the results are thus generalizable beyond students at Lund University. I however think my results are specific for this particular age-span, and time. All my informants grew up during a time characterized by a meat-consuming norm. During their teens, environmental issues, and meat-industry impact, was placed on the agenda in societal discussions in the media, and accordingly, in many social contexts. The fact that this awareness coincided with their adolescence identity-claiming needs, and strives to defy with societal mainstreams, makes them a special group. Reduction in meat-consumption came to be a political statement, which was important, and socially desirable for many individuals. If this investigation would be done on individuals born ten years earlier, or ten years later, I do not think I would get the same results.

For younger individuals who are in their teens today, reducing one's meat-consumption is not as "radical" as it was when the informants in this study were teenagers. It will therefore probably not be as much of a statement, and consequently not as an important part of people's identities, during their identity-formative years. It can thus be interpreted that they will feel less of a need to claim it, and accordingly, it will not become a trend, in the sense that it will not be a new progressive movement. I do however believe that the vegetarian behavior, and the vegetarian norm will be stronger, but the matter of identity might be of a different character.

If the investigation had been done on informants ten years older, the findings would probably be different as well. The vegetarian norm emerged in society when these individuals were older, and had more established political opinions, norms and identities. Therefore, the trend of being vegetarian has perhaps not been as important for them as for younger individuals, and they might not have the same incentive to reduce their meat-consumption. It would however be interesting to investigate these trends in different age groups for further research.

9 Summary & conclusion

The meat-industry has immense effects on the climate, and is one of the main reasons behind environmental damage. Awareness of the meat-industry is increasing, but meat-consumption is still high. In this research, I have aimed to understand the social aspects of the motives behind reduction in meat-consumption by investigating how social norms affect meat-consuming behavior.

To conclude this thesis, I will return to my research question: “*Do social norms affect meat-consuming behavior, by identifying with a vegetarian norm?*” My results have shown that social norms do play a crucial part in affecting a person’s meat-consumption. All reducing informants perceived the vegetarian norm to be common among their friends, whilst only half of the meat-consuming informants did so. This finding confirms my hypothesis, that those who actively reduce their meat-consumption will perceive the vegetarian norm to be more common than those who do not reduce their meat-consumption. Results also suggest that the reducing informants identified with the vegetarian norm more than the meat-consumers, a finding that is also confirming my hypothesis.

Many experienced a “wave” of people increasingly becoming vegetarian, and some also experienced the same trend going backwards, where previous vegetarians started to consume meat again. Both waves can be interpreted an indication of conformity. In both trends, a public claiming of one’s meat-consuming habit was a crucial part in the process. Many also changed their meat-consuming behavior in accordance with the social norm they are currently in. Identity is a crucial factor in the study, where many informants claimed it was common to use vegetarianism or other meat-reducing dietary habits to claim certain political stance, which were in congruence with, or in reaction to, the norms in the social environment, and that this was a way of claiming their political identities.

This research has thus aimed to generate a deeper understanding in motives behind people’s meat-consuming behavior. A concluding remark is that meat-consuming behavior is not solely a product of knowledge about meat-industry impact, or of an expression of deeper moral stance of what is right and what is wrong. It is also a social way of fitting in, and a way of standing out.

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11 Appendix 1: List of informants

- Helena, 24 years old, vegetarian since 17 years old, female.
- Lisa, 24 years old, vegan since 20 years old, female.
- Sandra, 23 years old, vegetarian since 20 years old, female.
- Erik, 23 years old, actively reducing his meat-consumption since the age of 21, consumes meat approximately once a week, male.
- Anna, 23 years old, became vegetarian at 16 years old, started to consume meat again at the age of 22. Currently consuming meat less than once a week, female.
- Karl, 26 years old, not actively reducing his meat-consumption, consumes meat every day, male.
- Ebba, 23 years old, not actively reducing her meat-consumption, consumes meat approximately 1-2 times per week, female.
- Remi, 24 years old, not actively reducing his meat-consumption, consumes meat every day, male.
- Victor, 28 years old, not actively reducing his meat-consumption, consumes meat every day, male.

12 Appendix 2: Interview questions

General questions for all informants:

1. What do you know about the environmental impact of the meat-industry?
2. Generally speaking, do you regard environmental issues to be important?
3. How much do you think about the ethical aspects when it comes to animal rights, when you consider meat-consumption?
4. Is vegetarianism or other dietary habits with reduced meat-consumption common among your friends?

Questions directed to informants actively reducing their meat-consumption.
Questions 10-12 will be added mainly among flexitarians and pescetarians.

1. What type of alternative diet do/did you follow? Please describe in detail. If you follow multiple alternative diets, please describe all;
2. How long have you/did you eat this alternative diet? If multiple, describe how long for each diet;
3. What caused (i.e. inspired) you to start eating according to this alternative diet(s)? If you have multiple reasons or follow multiple diets, please describe in detail what caused you to start each one;
4. Do you see this as a long-lasting, major life change or a temporary practice that you may quit eventually? Please explain why or why not;
5. Do you feel like this diet is/was a central part of your psychological identity/your self-concept/how you view yourself as a person? Please describe in detail how you do or do not relate this diet with your identity.
6. Do you identify with the vegetarian norm, meaning the norm that people in general should reduce their meat-consumption?
7. Do you perceive vegetarianism or other dietary habits with reduced meat-consumption to be a norm among your friends?
8. Have you noticed a time when the norm of meat-consumption or vegetarianism changed? Did it affect you?
9. Does this norm differ between different circles?
10. If yes, does being among different circles affects your dietary habits?
11. Would you feel comfortable consuming meat among your friends? What would the reactions be?
12. How would you think/feel if others would think of you as a person who eats meat?
13. What do you think about others who consume meat?

Questions for informants not actively reducing their meat-consumption:

1. How often do you consume meat?
2. Do you perceive meat-consumption to be a norm? Does this differ among your social contexts?
3. How does these norms affect you?
4. Do you perceive a vegetarian norm? Does it affect you?

5. Do you identify with the meat-consuming norm?
14. Do you identify with the vegetarian norm, meaning the norm that people in general should reduce their meat-consumption?
6. Do you feel comfortable consuming meat among vegetarians?
7. Do you perceive people in your social surrounding want you to reduce your meat-consumption? Does it affect you?
8. Do you perceive it would be possible for you to reduce your meat-consumption?
9. What do you think about others who do not consume meat (vegetarians or people with other meat-reducing dietary habits)?