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**The Popeye Paradox:
Understanding Barriers to Plant-Based
Consumption Maintained by Masculine Identities**

A Phenomenological Study on Dutch Vegan Bodybuilders

Authors: Iris Arts & Siannie Quartero

Supervisors: Fleura Bardhi

POPEYE PARADOX



Abstract

Title: The Popeye Paradox: Understanding Barriers to Plant-Based Consumption Maintained by Masculine Identities – A Phenomenological Study on Dutch Vegan Bodybuilders

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Authors: Iris Arts and Siannie Quartero

Supervisor: Fleura Bardhi

Keywords: Plant-Based Consumption, Gender Identity Maintenance, Stigma, Legitimization, Lifestyle Transitioning.

Thesis Purpose: Contributing to the understanding of plant-based consumption by researching how bodybuilders navigate identity issues associated with a plant-based diet.

Theoretical Perspective: We take on a consumer culture theory perspective by researching identity theory, stigma, lifestyle transitioning, and legitimization strategies of the subculture.

Methodology/Empirical Data Collection: Inductive qualitative research strategy using the ZMET to conduct a phenomenological study. Vegan bodybuilders were identified as lead users to represent masculine consumers. They were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling.

Findings/Conclusion: Consumption of plants is stigmatized, especially in masculine environments. Transitioning is a complex cultural undertaking, weighing heavily on one's masculine identity. Transitioning contains multiple phases, in which appropriate messaging is crucial in each phase respectively. In order for messaging to be effective, it has to be adapted in the form of a benefit specific to the subculture. Contrary to popular belief the ethical argument is counterproductive in acquiring willingness to transition to a plant-based lifestyle. However, it becomes the determining factor for commitment in a later stage. Throughout transitioning, the definition of masculinity is negotiated.

Practical Implications: Plant-based brands and media outings need to be reframed and differentiated to fit the socio-cultural angles. In order to do that effectively, research on various consumer groups is required. To differentiate, we have to consider not only culture, but also the phase of veganism as well as understanding and utilizing the appropriate definition of masculinity.

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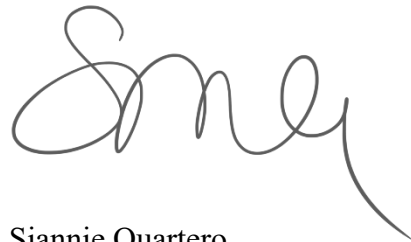
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Siannie Quartero

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Introduction

1.1 Background

"I'm strong to the finish, 'cause I eats me spinach!" -Popeye, 1929

Adults who grew up around 1960 might remember the iconic Disney superstar Popeye. His strong arms, his sturdy personality, and the spinach he ate to foster those significant biceps, remain on the foregrounds of their memories. Despite the (*perhaps unintentional*) message of the importance of eating vegetables (*more specifically spinach*) in order to be strong, Popeye stood no chance against the marketing heavy weights that for decades have spent all their time, money and effort in championing meat as the number one source of protein that will help you build a tall and strong body; Popeye sized biceps if you will.

Taking a leap forward in time to today, 2022, the most common stigma vegan consumers face today is the myth that vegans cannot get enough protein from their plant-based diet and therefore are unable to build muscle. This automatically profiles them as lousy athletes that are incapable of performing well in all strength related sports (McFarland, 2019). However, this has vastly been debunked by athletes going full-plant based without any hiccup. The documentary *The Game Changers* is a perfect example of that. The show features plant-based athletes and the benefits that being plant-based has on their recovery times, even stating that they perform better compared to meat-eaters (*The Game Changers*, 2019). We argue that this phenomenon is theoretically significant in a context of a booming conflict market in society (Ulver, 2021), in which climate change-related economic reconfigurations, such as the production of meat-alternatives to reduce meat consumption, are simultaneously sought and contested by opposing parties respectively.

The consumption of meat and other animal products is a highly polarizing issue in western cultures (Chiles & Fitzgerald, 2018). Chiles & Fitzgerald (2018) pose the notion that the socialization of people to eat a meat-rich omnivorous diet teaches them that it is natural, necessary and “nice”. Food made from non-human animals and their by-products is considered to be acceptable under carnism, the dominant belief system in society (De Groeve & Rosenfeld, 2022). On the other side of the coin, the minority of people that are seen as violating this normative understanding by abstaining from animal-based products are gaining societal and scientific attention (De Groeve & Rosenfeld, 2022; Leenaert, 2017). To go back to Goffman (1963), he argues that deviations from normality are perceived as abnormal, implying that this is also the case for vegans, due to the normalized status of consuming a meat-rich diet. Animal-based consumption is often moralized as harmful to public health, the environment, and/or the animals involved, resulting in vegetarians and vegans being seen as morally-motivated minorities (Trethewey & Jackson, 2019; MacInnis & Hodson, 2017). By challenging the

norm of a meat-rich consumption, they generate a broad range from positive, putting them in an admirable light for being ethically responsible, to negative, making them less socially attractive by their overcommitment and moralistic arrogance, impressions among omnivores (De Groeve & Rosenfeld, 2022; Corrin & Papadopoulos, 2017). Vegans are commonly subjected to negative stereotyping, do-gooder derogation, and stigmatization or, differently put, “vegaphobia” (Corrin & Papadopoulos, 2017; Vandermoere et al., 2019).

Despite the stigma, the Netherlands is not shy in welcoming meat-alternatives. On the contrary, the Netherlands has been seen as the magnet for meat-alternatives makers (Stil, 2021). The meat-alternatives market has been growing around 4% annually since 2014 and is not looking to slow down anytime soon. If anything, it is expected to show increased growth (Food en Retail, 2019). Despite the growth, in relative terms, 4% is not a significant growth and therefore requires more attention. Additionally, only a few years ago, meat alternatives were only aimed at activist vegans and vegetarians. However, due to the collective awareness of the intensive industrial livestock farming that puts a considerable burden on our planet and atmosphere, the topic of meat-alternatives is starting to be seen in a different light (Vogels, 2021). It is then no surprise that more research on the topic of understanding how to drive meat-alternatives is deemed relevant in the context of the Netherlands and Dutch consumers specifically.

The importance of driving the consumption of meat-alternatives is evident by the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food quality, aiming to work towards sustainable consumption of meat and additionally aiming to reduce meat consumption. Driven by this initiative in September 2019, the research body of the HU University of Applied Sciences in Utrecht, the Netherlands, are trying to investigate how to facilitate meat-alternative adoption among Dutch consumers. In addition, the transition to circular agriculture is meant to coincide with a growing market interest in sustainable animal products (Dierzaam, 2021). Market knowledge about purchase barriers for meat-alternatives is scarce and fragmented in both science and in practice (Van Riemsdijk et al., 2017). Therefore, additional, specific knowledge is required regarding the buying motives of consumers to purchase meat-alternatives, about how their intentions are structured, and which contextual variables determine behaviour (Dierzaam, 2021).

Research lectorate Dierzaam focuses on two aspects of meat consumption: (1) how to decrease meat consumption per capita and/or (2) to increase the share of sustainable meat purchase (*meat derived from livestock that have been fed a natural diet and allowed to roam freely*). This research paper aims to contribute to solving the puzzle of how to decrease meat consumption per capita by focusing on understanding the adoption of plant-based meat alternatives. The adoption of plant-based alternatives has not been extensively researched from the perspective of plant-based consumers.

Arguably, understanding what drives their consumption will allow for insights in how to spur this sustainable practice of consuming plant-based meat.

The focus of marketing practices involves understanding consumer behaviour. It becomes a focal point to understand what drives consumption in order to position themselves in a favourable manner. However, another important consumer perspective to understand is what Arnould & Thompson (2005) define as Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). In broader socio-historic contexts of globalization and market capitalism, CCT researchers explore "the heterogeneous distribution of meanings and the multiplicity of cultural groupings that overlap" (Arnould & Thompson, 2018 p.14). Consumption practices in the present can be classified as consumer culture. Consumer culture is a set of commercially produced images, texts, and objects that groups use to make their sense of their environment, their identities, and their lives by creating overlapping and even conflicting practices, identities, and meanings (Kozinets, 2001). In other words, consumption has evolved into an identity-constructing and identity-displaying activity with political and moral motivations (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Ulver & Laurell, 2020). Self-identity and the construction of it through consumption becomes a focal part in understanding the shift towards the consumption of meat alternatives.

From this perspective, CCT is also able to understand culture as a product of symbolic communication, which encompasses the skills, knowledge, attitudes, values, and motives of a group that are used to represent communication both inside and outside the group. A society learns and perpetuates the meanings of symbols through its institutions and artifacts. Culture is a set of normalized ideas and the values associated with them. As a result of a given cultural system's beliefs and values, certain behaviours will be expected and taken for granted (Thomas et al., 2018). Therefore, in light of meat consumption, a practice that has been advocated and habitualised within the Dutch culture as healthy and necessary for decades, this becomes an interesting and relevant point to understand and contest.

As a culture that has relied on the consumption of meat for so many years, its effects on how it builds identity has rarely been challenged other than sustainability issues. Food plays a significant role in both cultural expression and psychological and emotional significance (Warde, 1997), making this topic of food consumption an interesting area of research. Additionally, in order to understand consumption, it becomes valuable to understand how consumers build their identity. It would be impossible to define ourselves without possessions, which are one of the major contributors. It is important to recognize that we all regard our possessions as a part of who we are, regardless of whether this realization is deliberate or unintentional (Belk, 1988). Whereas Belk (1988) highlights possessions as a main aspect of one's identity, Östberg (2003) considers all forms of consumption, including food consumption, part of building identity. In contemporary sociology, food consumption (both cooking and consuming) has an important role in the structure of social life due to it being interconnected with

many aspects of it (Östberg, 2003). It is common for food to serve as a commentary on culture as Warde (1997) notes. Understanding how identity plays a role in meat consumption will therefore act as a guide in how it can play a role in the opposite direction, namely meat-alternatives consumption

1.2 Problematization

The existing literature studies sustainable purchasing behaviour of consumers in the Netherlands mainly around three lines of research. The first line of research studies the importance of sustainability in relation to other product benefits when buying animal foods and other sustainable products. Within this line of research investigated how much consumers are willing to pay for both sustainability in a general sense (B-open & GfK, 2019) as well as for specific aspects such as animal welfare (Clark et al., 2017); what the perceptions of consumers are of (different aspects of) sustainability and the individual differences in such perceptions (Van Dam & van Trijp, 2011; Vanhonacker et al., 2007); and what the importance of sustainability is in relation to other product benefits such as taste, convenience and health (De Jonge & van Trijp, 2013; Murk-Severein, 2019; White et al., 2019). This line of research is mainly focused on understanding sustainable consumption and how it can be encouraged among consumers.

The second line of research studies consumer barriers to their attitudes and intentions in order to translate them into sustainable purchasing behaviour. This line of research lies in the psychological perspective on consumption and focuses on consumer behaviour. The main barriers are the high price, insufficient availability of sustainable animal products (Vanhonacker & Verbeke, 2014), the lack of confidence in the sustainability claims (B-open & GfK, 2019; Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen, 2017; Schröder & McEachern, 2004), situational influences such as time pressure and physical environment (shelf layout, price promotions of competing products etc.) (Carrington et al., 2010, 2014; Warde, 2016), and social norms - as buying food is influenced by others (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006), the popularity of certain behaviour and the perception of 'good behaviour'. While these factors can increase consumption, the cultural understanding of this line of consumption is not addressed. In CCT, culture is viewed as a fabric of meaning, experience, and action (Geertz, 1973). As a result of its internal, fragmented complexity, consumer culture cannot determine causality (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Consumer behaviour mainly addresses causal relationships - e.g., a lower price will most likely result in more purchases. Understanding this angle from a CCT perspective will allow for understanding the cultural complexity within this area to help marketers understand the nuances of consumer choices.

The third line of research brings together the above research by stating that making a sustainable choice presents consumers with a dilemma: the benefits that contributions to their self-interest, such as taste and/or convenience, must be weighed against the benefits that contribute to the public interest, such as animal welfare (De Jonge & van Trijp, 2013). This so-called social dilemma

(Messick & Brewer, 1983) is an internal conflict: consumers who want to contribute to a sustainable society must pay the price for it, while receiving little or no personal benefits (Moisander, 2007). This social dilemma is an important barrier and prevents consumers from doing so to choose sustainable products (de Jonge & van Trijp, 2013; Griskevicius et al., 2012; Gupta & Ogden, 2009). This stream of research once again heavily views it from a sustainability perspective. While it is true that consuming meat-alternatives is a more sustainable choice of consumption, it is not addressed how this affects social relationships or how it can affect self-identity.

While the three research streams prove to be relevant to this topic in their own right, it is evident that a CCT perspective is lacking in the body of research in the Netherlands. Especially in the field of food consumption, in particular the relationship between the consumption of meat, or lack of, and gender identity, has not been addressed. This is problematic for two reasons. The first reason is that the Dutch culture, just like any other culture, is complex and therefore can hold underlying meanings as to why certain consumption practices are in favour. While research stream number two attempts to understand consumer behaviour, it completely ignores the cultural complexity of the culture the behaviour presents itself in. Previous literature in the Netherlands has focused on marketing aspects like price and placement (B-open & GfK, 2019; Carrington et al., 2010, 2014; Warde, 2016). While social norms are mentioned, there are no studies done on the effect of meat-alternatives specifically on one's self-identity in this specific cultural context of the Dutch consumer. Secondly, meat is one of the most, if not most, political commodities in The Netherlands. (will be elaborated on further in section 1.3). As mentioned, in consumer culture, consumption becomes a form of identity building which can be highly political (Ulver 2021). This has to be taken into account when researching the consumption of meat-alternatives and has not been done so. In order to achieve successful adoption of meat-alternatives in the Netherlands, understanding the cultural context and the notion that consumption is the key to building identity is the first step to address mental adoption barriers that consumers may experience.

Additionally, when it comes to meat consumption, previous studies have identified traditional gender values in meat consumption. There are various studies that suggest several arguments in favour of systematically establishing a link between maleness and meat (Fiddes 1991; Sobal 2005; Twigg, 1979). This links to the recent finding regarding the Dutch market in which only 1,7% consider themselves plant-based (Kloosterman et al., 2021). Historically and cross-culturally, hunting, and therefore the obtaining of meat, has been an almost exclusively male domain. Strength and power are two characteristics associated with meat, a combination associated with males. With meat being a highly preferred and limited resource in a male-dominated world, meat has generally been seen as a particularly manly food (Rozin et al., 2012). Rozin et al. (2012) also states that in many cultures, meat is reserved for males, especially preferred cuts (*e.g., muscle over viscera*). In addition, men are

commonly understood to require optimal nutrition in order to be physically strong, and meat is often seen as the most nutritive and muscle-building food. However, while this research presents a strong masculine link with meat, there are many cases where men who engage in typically ‘masculine’ hobbies do not consume meat, and opt for meat-alternatives. There has been little attention to the study of identity from the perspective of vegan/vegetarians males regarding the combination of a plant-based diet and the effects it has on their gender identity. By addressing this gap, we aim to address the lack of the other side of the coin, regarding males who follow a plant-based diet and their gender identity, in the context of the Netherlands.

This brings us to the subculture of bodybuilding. Through the lens of consumer culture theory, one of the biggest barriers for a non-plant-based consumer to transition to plant-based meat is found in self-identity (Gatersleben et al., 2014). Masculinity in hyper-masculine male consumers is warranted by amongst other the consumption of meat (Rozin et al., 2012). Similarly, the consumption of plant-based meat alternatives comes with a strong green, feminine stereotype and thus collision in self values (Brough et al., 2016). To understand how masculine plant-based consumers have overcome this obstacle, we have chosen to study a highly masculine environment; bodybuilding. The two components, plant-based and bodybuilding, create an oxymoron in which no research has been conducted. We argue that due to this highly masculine environment, the pressure on the self- and social-identity of the consumer on being perceived as masculine, might be even greater. Therefore, it becomes an interesting subculture to research, as the phenomenon holds a relevant oxymoron, namely how they overcome identity barriers in their plant-based diet consumption.

1.3 Socio-Cultural Dutch Context

In order to provide more context to the research, the following parts will discuss the cultural history of meat, the current market status and notable trends and events around meat consumption (2022). This serves to create a broader understanding of the Dutch consumer, especially to the reader that is not (yet) familiar with the Dutch consumer and its habits regarding the topic.

History of meat consumption in The Netherlands

The Netherlands does not have its own extensive cultural cuisine like countries such as Indonesia, Italy or Spain. Dutch culture relating to the consumption of food is scarce. The average Dutch person might argue otherwise and mention examples of “AVG” (*Potato, Meat, Vegetable*) and “Stamppot” (*mashed potato stew*). Yet, these dishes are relatively new as they have been introduced in the beginning of the 20th century. Although they might not be regarded as Dutch culture, they are most certainly a vested part of the Dutch identity (Plonska, 2020).

Pre 1900 the consumption of meat was limited and only accessible for the wealthy. The general population was too poor to afford meat, therefore meat became a status symbol. In the 1900's meat consumption started to gain ground as the population became more prosperous. However, the repercussions of World War I was a major setback in the growing meat consumption. World War II would later disrupt the country's food production causing what would later to be known as the "hunger winter" in the winter of '44/'45. Thousands of people died because of food shortages. Its economic engine gained traction when technology and food chain innovations boosted the economy and food production (Verriet, 2022). Meat continued to be a luxury good that was reserved for the 'elite'. However, as prosperity continued to rise it became a commodity that would also be available to the average Dutch citizen. From this point onward the signature "AGV " dish would be marked as traditional Dutch. Mainstream media's marketing machine promoted the consumption of meat on a large scale and made the consumption of meat seem self-evident (Plonska, 2020).

The rapid growth also came with a paradox; more meat was consumed, but daily life became less connected to meat production. Slaughterhouses left the cities and the early stages of factory farming were born. All processes were redesigned, allowing for optimal efficiency (Plonska, 2020). "Meat culture" became part of the Dutch norm.

Food consumption in the post-war era in The Netherlands is characterized by three major trends; health, convenience and exoticism. Particularly the health trend is of interest for this introduction. Consumption went up as to the point where consumers would be over-consuming and compromising their health. Advertisers made a shift and would promote the health benefits of their products, including meat (Verriet, 2022). In 1953 the government interfered by introducing the "disc of five", a tool to help consumers guide themselves to a healthy diet (Voedingscentrum, 2022). As meat is consistently promoted as an essential part of a healthy diet, it has created a notion that one cannot foster a healthy diet if that diet does not contain meat. This advice had not changed in 60 years until in 2016 the advice on meat consumption was altered towards a more moderate consumption of meat including plant-based alternatives. Appendix 4 showcases the development of "de Schijf van Vijf".

Meat Consumption

The average Dutch consumer digests 39 kilos of meat per year. This is 52% more than what the national institute of nutrition recommends for the Dutch population to consume. Even more troubling, it is more than double the amount (252%) of what is recommended by the Eat Lancet Commission (Dagevos et al., 2020). The Lancet commission was assembled to design a food system that can nurture a future 10 billion population in a healthy and sustainable manner (TheLancet, 2022). The lion share of meat consumed in The Netherlands is pork (47,4%), followed by chicken (29,5%) and beef (20,5%). According to the principles of the Lancet commission, consumption should not only be lower, it should

also mostly exist of chicken (67,7%) (Dagevos et al., 2020). Based on these statistics it can be concluded that dietary change at large is not going to be accomplished overnight, nor without a fight.

Sustainable Consumption

The consumption of sustainable food has increased by +18% from 2018 to 2019. As a result the market share of sustainable foods grew to +14% in the same year. The growth of sustainable meat however is slightly lacking behind the general trend with a growth of +10% (Dagevos et al., 2020). We argue that this portrays a resistance in consumers. The market of meat consumption is not expected to shrink. Market Line (2020) forecasted the market volume to increase by +1,1% by 2024. The market value however is expected to grow by +11,7. These forecasted trends indicate a trend where either the category will become more exclusive or where consumers consume more qualitative, thus expensive, products.

Consumption of Plant-Based Meat Alternatives

The Netherlands can be regarded as the front-runner of plant-based meat alternatives in Europe. On average the Dutch consumer consumes 870 grams of plant-based meat (Verhoeven, 2021). However, compared to the annual consumption of 39 kilograms, this is not a significant amount (Dagevos et al., 2020). The Dutch Central Bureau for Statistics (CBS) published their first study on the consumption of meat and meat-alternatives in 2021. Their results showed that within the Dutch population 5% claims to adhere to a vegetarian diet, only 0,4% is fully plant based (vegan). The number of consumers that limit their meat consumption to no more than 4 days per week is more significant. Close to half of the population, 45%, can be regarded as flexitarian. The motives for consumers to consume no or less meat differ per diet. Vegetarians and vegans' core driver is animal welfare, followed by the environment listed as second. Consumers that are flexitarian list their health as their number one reason, lack of desire as second and the environment third (Kloosterman et al., 2021).

When comparing the various diets to consumer demographics there are some remarkable relationships to be found. Men are significantly less likely to have a plant-based diet (1,7%) versus their female counterparts (2,4%). There is a clear correlation between a higher level of education and a plant-based diet. Within the highly educated consumers 3,4% refrains from consuming meat. In contrast, for mid-class educated consumers this is 1,3% and 0,5%. Interestingly, 0,0% of the low-educated consumers have a vegan diet. A clear generational gap in the consumption of plant-based meat is apparent. Within the age segment we see that the cluster 18 to 25 years accounts for the biggest group of plant-based consumers (3,5%). For ages 65 and over only 0,9% is vegetarian and 0% is vegan. Consumers living in rural areas (Little / Non-Urban) show a general preference for a meat included diet, 59% of these consumers admit to consuming meat at least 5 days per week, whereas only 1,7%

adhere to a vegetarian or vegan diet (Kloosterman et al, 2021). The full data set on meat consumption divided over demographics can be found in appendix 3.

Schnitzel Gate

Plant-based meat alternatives in general are named after their animal-based meat counterparts, e.g. “Vegetarian Burger, Vegetarian Schnitzel and Plant-Based Mince”. In 2012, member of parliament and member of political party CDA, Jaco Geurts started the debate on the cognomen for plant-based meat alternatives. This debate was soon shut down, yet the organization for livestock and meat (Productschap voor Vee en Vlees) submitted an official complaint to the Dutch Authority of Food and Consumer Products (NVWA). In 2016 Minister of agriculture Christian Schmidt fought for a ban on “meat names” on products that did not contain animal meat. This again was debated by the parliament. It also had the same results, the discussion was shut down. A year later it was reported that the European meat lobby (European Meat Network, Agri-Cooperatives and UECBV) was joining forces to authorize a ban on “meat names” in non-animal products (Pols, 2017). The argument for the proposed ban was that the names would be misleading to consumers and thus confuse them.

The brand The Vegetarian Butcher took it upon themselves to show the entire country the ridicule in this argument by creating a campaign that showed how “misleading” meat names are. They created a campaign showing posters saying “Kogelbiefstuk, let op uw tanden”, which translates to “bullet-steak, be wary of your teeth”. By asking for the consumer’s support the brand managed to shut down the discussion for good (De Vegetarische Slager, 2022). This case shows the strong resistance of various groups in The Netherlands towards the transition to plant-based meat.

Corporate Transition to (Semi) Plant-Based

Corporate food organizations in The Netherlands are less reluctant to transition to plant-based alternatives. Specifically interesting are the businesses that are Dutch founded and whose core practice was (and is) related to the production of meat. Examples of these are Unox, Mora and Albert Heijn. Unox is a Dutch heritage brand that links its identity to the Dutch identity. Their flagship product, smoked sausage, is a symbol of what consumers look at as the traditional Dutch meal (Unox, 2022). The brand is embracing the transition to plant-based and has set various goals to improve the company’s sustainability. 100% Of their meat products have to have the certification “better life” by 2022. Unox wants to aid the consumer in getting 50% of their proteins from plants and 50% through animal products. By 2025 they aim for a doubled number of plant-based meat products in their portfolio. By then 60% of their soups should be vegetarian (Woensel-Kooy, 2021). Mora is just like Unox, well vested as a heritage brand. It is best known for the production of deep fried classical Dutch snacks such as the ‘Frikandel’ and the ‘Kroket’. They state they want to be 50% plant-based by 2025 (Van Geloven,

2020). Thirdly, Albert Heijn, a leading supermarket that accounts for 35.9% of the food retail market. Sustainability is a key topic on the agenda for Albert Heijn. They state they want to contribute to the transition of consumer's getting 60% of their proteins from plant-based products (Albert Heijn, 2022).

Meat Tax

As a response to the strain on the environment, but also to the unhealthy eating habits amongst Dutch consumers, the cabinet started looking into the concept of Meat Tax. An additional tax on all animal-based meat products, from 9% to 21%, that should slow down consumption and create extra funds for the sustainability of the agriculture industry (Bijlo, 2020). The debate on this topic proves to be difficult and there seems to be a clear polarization in opinions between the different political parties. Even so for consumers. Voters to parties such as D66, ChristenUnie (Christian Union) and GroenLinks (Green-Left) think decreasing the consumption of meat and thus introducing the meat tax is important (LTO, 2020). These political groups are generally more left-winged. Their opposition is found in the PVV, Forum Voor Democratie (Forum for Democracy) and CDA (LTO, 2020). These groups are part of the right-wing. Political parties that are opposed use the argument that general living costs are already expensive and that a meat tax would be a form of culinary dictatorship. Moreover, when prime minister Mark Rutte was asked about the matter, he answered to be opposed as "Life needs to remain fun too" (Avondshow met Lubach, 2022).

Key Take-Outs Dutch Socio-Cultural Context

Considering the everyday surroundings, influences and political discussions that an average Dutch consumer is exposed to daily, we can conclude it is a vested part of the Dutch identity and that it is more than just a form of nutrition. The history of meat consumption in Holland has allowed it to become a socio-economic status symbol that later influenced its position within daily consumption. Meat is not only perceived as a socio-economic symbol, it is also a symbol of superior nutrition. By influences of the Dutch health authority the idea that a varied and healthy meal must contain an element of meat has been spread for over a decade. These strongly rooted beliefs can make transitioning to plant based more challenging. This conclusion is reflected in the statistics of meat consumption. The urgency for the Dutch consumer to consume less meat is high. Despite the fact that the consumption of sustainable alternatives is growing, the market for meat is not expected to shrink any time soon. The number of plant-based consumers is small (5%), but the share of male plant-based consumers is significantly lower (1,7%). This makes them a group of interest. In contrast to consumers, the corporate world is very eager to transition to plant-based products. This includes companies who's core business concerns the production and processing of animal-based meat. This does not mean it comes easy to

them. On top of the fact that the meat industry is lobbying hard to obstruct the plant-based industry, meat has become a political subject that causes polarization between right- and left-winged parties.

1.4 Background to the phenomena of bodybuilding subculture

Bodybuilding is a very particular and specific subculture. Before delving further into the research, we aim to create an understanding of their cultural values, how the subculture arose and what drives these consumers. In doing so we provide the necessary background that deepens the understanding of the following chapters.

Bodybuilding is as much crafting a physique, as it is crafting an identity. Somatic culture regards the human body as an artwork in the making, a project of one's individual self-identity (Schilling, 1993). This is especially true for the male participants (Bosson & Michniewicz, 2013). By means of training individuals are literally and figuratively able to shape their identity through progressing their form. The sought-after aesthetic in bodybuilding is more often than not far from the accepted notion of what a male body should look like. The unnaturally muscular bodies serve as a power move that showcases one's desired perspective on who he is (Fussel, 1991). Bednarek (1985) found that an added side effect to the exploitation of a person's physique is an increased self-esteem.

Bodybuilding has a long and extensive history. Scholars White & Gillet (1994) argue that the rise of this phenomena has been a response to what they coin *crisis in masculinity*. This phenomenon entails a disparity between the masculine traits that society wants them to exude versus their reality in relation to the given social milieu. This can leave an individual with feelings of failure and powerlessness. To compensate for these feelings, individuals are seen to turn to a bombastic display of cultural symbols. Muscularity is one of these and offers the validity to compensate for feelings of loss or lack of masculinity (Padfield, 1980). An example of one of the earliest crises of masculinity is found in the nineteenth century in Britain and America. President Roosevelt explicitly attacked the population's masculinity by stating that men were becoming weak and would be unable to fight wars. Meaning, no further territorial expansion would be possible. Compensatory actions were deemed necessary.

Since sports were seen as key in restoring men's wellbeing and masculinity, this led to the birth of "Muscular Christianity". Christian morality and masculinity were now combined, they formed the social foundation to both men and boys (Whitson, 1990). It was muscular Christianity that led to the founding of modern bodybuilding. The eighteen-hundreds, also known as the "Strong-man-era", were the first time that being extremely physical fit was an actual profession. Superior physical strength was commonly displayed in circuses and various other social settings (Chapman, 1994). Eugene Sandow was the first to be characterized as what we now know as bodybuilders. In his time he was considered

as the optimal combination of muscular strength and attractiveness. The latter was a tipping point in the objectives of bodybuilding. From this point forward, bodybuilding would be less about physical strength and more about physical aesthetics. The popularity of bodybuilding saw a decline, but rose again in the 1970's. The emergence of the fitness industry made bodybuilding to be in fashion again. Once bodybuilding became a hot-topic in the general media, it really took off. It was actors like Arnold Schwarzenegger and films like *The Terminator* that took bodybuilding into people's homes. The 1990's marked an all-time high for the popularity of bodybuilding. Mainstream media had an eagle-like focus on everything related to building muscle. Big muscles were considered sexy, desirable and a marker of good health. From this point on forward it has yet to leave western mainstream culture (Wiegers, 2004).

The academic perspective on the subculture has not been one-sided but does very much recognize that bodybuilding and masculinity are inextricably linked to each other. Contemporary scholars noted bodybuilders to have a lack of masculinity, causing them to work to overturn their feelings of inferiority through which narcissistic traits peeked (Wiegers, 2004). A well-known scholar, Klein (1993), has described bodybuilders as highly insecure, and attempting to replicate a hypermasculine body image in vain.

(Kidd, 1987), argues that sports, body building in particular, is a cornerstone to not only the construction, but also the reproduction of heterosexual masculinity. Like all sports, competition is a masculine inhibitor. Whereas the latter two perspectives regard the individual's considerations of the self-identity inward, the outward component is at least as important. Dutton et al., (1989) & Wernick (1987) provide the following perspective: The prevailing discourse of masculinity and its connection to the male body thrive on the issue of desirability. The male utopia to be attractive, intellectual and successful is promoted by contemporary consumer culture through the allure of actualizing the ideal masculine body. To no surprise, that is a lean, but muscular body. Corporate society exploits these desires by commercializing a god-like torso and connecting it to social desirability. In contrast to popular belief, gaining the socially desired body does not per se promote physical and or emotional health.

1.5 Research Purpose & Research Question

The purpose of this study is to understand the relationship between plant-based diets and masculine identity. We aim to do this through researching the subculture of Dutch plant-based bodybuilders. As highlighted before, this hyper masculine environment combined with a plant-based diet allows us to research both aspects of masculinity and plant-based diets in relation to one another. This leads us to the following research question:

“How do Dutch male bodybuilders overcome and deal with identity related obstacles that result from a plant-based diet?”

In order to answer the main research question, we have constructed four sub-research questions which we aim to understand throughout the research. The combined results of the sub-research questions will lead to the answer to our main research question. The sub-questions are presented below.

- Sub-RQ 1** What drives a person to engage in a lifestyle change of becoming a vegan as a bodybuilder?
- Sub-RQ 2** What are the meanings of meat versus veganism amongst this subculture?
- Sub-RQ 3** How does this subculture’s sense of identity look like and how does it relate to masculinity?
- Sub-RQ 4** How do vegan bodybuilders manage their identity related to veganism in a cultural environment where consumption of meat is the norm?

1.6 Intended Contributions

In the chapter problematization we’ve already discussed that the topic of plant-based consumption is highly relevant and thus gets a lot of attention from researchers. Yet, we found that there are some significant areas that have not been covered so far. This research seeks to add some of those missing puzzle pieces.

Firstly, by providing insight to the Dutch market specific in a qualitative way. Although The Netherlands is filled with great scholars, the number of quantitative studies far outweighs the number of qualitative studies. When studies are conducted specifically about the Dutch consumer from a CCT perspective these are most likely to be quantitative studies. Certain topics, especially the ones focusing on self-identity, are best researched in a qualitative manner. In doing so, we provide extra depth into the self-identity of the Dutch consumer.

Another phenomenon that struck us when diving into the research available on plant-based consumption is that research has been conducted from the perspective of the animal-based meat consumer. This research stream has been successful in understanding what obstructs these consumers from consuming plant-based meat, but have been unsuccessful in understanding how to overcome these barriers. Our second contribution is therefore to add knowledge on a fairly new consumer segment, plant-based consumers. The research we found strongly suggested that men are in a more difficult position to overcome the identity barriers to plant-based consumption as consumption of meat adds to their masculine identity values. Not consuming meat is a process that tails into gender identity maintenance. This is especially true in male consumers that possess hyper-masculine identity values (Bosson & Michniewicz, 2013). This research therefore studies a subculture that portrays a strong masculine culture; Dutch male plant-based bodybuilders. A true oxymoron as the general stereotypical values in plant-based and bodybuilding are more likely to be opposites than equals. Although very specific, this paired set of values offers our third contribution, a look into a subculture that hasn't been studied yet.

Male plant-based bodybuilders depict by no means an accurate representation of the average consumer. They thrive in a highly masculine social environment that draws a significant amount of identity value from traditional hyper-masculinity (Connell, 2005). Moreover, they follow a more extreme diet, consuming seven times the amount of meat an average consumer consumes. One might question therefore how learnings can be drawn from this subculture to the average consumer. We borrow from a key concept within innovation studies, lead users, coined by Von Hippel (1986). This scholar characterizes lead users as consumers who early on face needs that later will be present and adapted to by the mainstream consumer. In understanding these early desires, innovators create a market demand for their product rather than a product push where products are forced upon consumers. This concept has proven successful. User innovations with strong lead user characteristics result in innovations that have a significantly higher appeal in their respective general marketplace (Von Hippel, 1986). Whereas the original concept of lead users looks at how these consumers face new needs and resolve these, we look at the consumers that have faced challenges and successfully resolved them. The extremes in their masculine social environment and the frequency of meat consumption, which is also tied to their environment, makes them what this research categorizes as lead users. Learnings drawn from this subculture can be applied to mainstream consumers in various directions.

Literature Review

We have grounded this literature on four different pillars. The structure can be characterized as a funnel. We start by introducing the conceptual foundations and then move towards more topics specific to literature. The first pillar discusses the CCT conceptual foundations such as identity, morality and stigma. We then delve into self-identity and food consumption. Thirdly, we review the knowledge on plant-based consumption and identity. Finally, we discuss the cultural mechanisms that come alongside transitions.

2.1 Identity

Modernity's post-traditional order and the emergence of new forms of mediated experience bolster self-identity into a reflexively organized endeavour (Giddens, 1991). Reflective self-construction involves maintaining coherent yet constantly revising narratives as filtered through multiple choices. It is a project of the self that consists of maintaining a constant stream of conscious or subconscious self-reflection. The notion of lifestyle has taken on a special significance in modern society. Giddens (1991) argues that in a world devoid of tradition, and increasingly reconstituted by the dialectical interplay between local and global, individuals become more compelled to make lifestyle choices among a variety of alternatives. Yet since a lifestyle choice affects self-identity and daily activities in an increasingly open, pluralistic, and diversified social environment, lifestyle choice has become increasingly important in the constitution of self-identity and daily activities today. As a central feature of identity formation, reflexively organized life planning, which normally takes into account risks as filtered through expert knowledge, becomes integral to self-identity.

A central role in this process is played by the media, both printed and electronic. The impact of mediated experiences has long been felt on both self-identity and social relations, since the first experience of writing (Giddens, 1991). As mass communication, especially electronic communication develops, the interaction between self-development and social systems becomes ever more enhanced.

People are aware of their uniqueness to a certain extent; many people recognize their difference from their surroundings at a very basic level. In common parlance, this would be called an individual's sense of self (Reed, 2002). However, operationalizing a construct like sense of self is problematic due to the complex nature and the term 'sense of self' only being a shorthand sign to encompass all deliberate and non-deliberate behaviours and experiences individuals are exposed to (Toulmin, 1986). Therefore, is it more productive to view it as a notion of self-identity, which makes it less ambitious and easier to manage starting point.

A person's sense of self-identity encompasses all aspects of who they are, including physical characteristics, preferences, values, goals, behaviour patterns, personality traits, and narratives

(Gatersleben et al., 2014). Defining one's self-identity is a matter of expressing a sense of self, either by choice or by endowment (Reed et al., 2012). A consumer can potentially identify with virtually any number of different categories; a consumer's identity can be any category label they self-identify with. There is, however, a caveat related to category labels. An identity emerges once the consumer incorporates the label into their sense of who they are and begins the process towards becoming that person (Reed et al., 2012). The consumption of meat-alternatives allows for the consumer to label themselves as vegetarian/vegan, therefore incorporating their consumption practices into their sense of self. Different consumer behaviours depend on a person's perception of their own self-identity as a typical person who would adopt such behaviour (Gatersleben et al., 2014). For example, if a person regards themselves as open minded, they will be more likely to adopt a more open stance towards trying new products.

Another way to understand identity is through identity projects, in which identity is volitional and the process of forming identity is based on imagination (Schau, 2018). Consumer imagination refers to how people create identities, make sense of themselves, and present themselves using market-mediated objects, symbols, scripts, and practices. An example of this regarding bodybuilding would be purchasing equipment and supplements for muscle growth, as well as the performance in handling these props. How the market supports these identity projects is crucial in understanding identity. As part of social interactions, identity projects manifest themselves as self-presentations or performances. Athletes are social roles and identity projects with elements of grand self-narratives, or ongoing, introspective reflections on personal development. Thus, identity projects are driven by social roles, while marketplace offerings support and help perform identity projects (Schau, 2018). When viewed together, identity projects and self-presentations can be understood as building blocks for self-narratives. Self-narratives organize identity projects and performances to form relatively cohesive narratives.

One's self-identity would not be possible without one of the biggest contributors, namely possessions. According to Belk (1988) recognizing that all of us regard our possessions as a part of ourselves is the key to understanding what possessions mean, whether this realization is intentional or unintentional. Tuan (1980) argues that individuals need to possess things in order to sustain their fragile sense of self, due to the large degree that individuals are what they possess. Evidence of this is the diminished sense of self derived from unintentionally losing or stolen possessions (Belk, 1988). In the case of this research, taking away the consumption of meat can be interpreted as taking away part of what a person believes is their identity. Therefore, the consumption of plant-based meats can be viewed as intentionally or unintentionally expressing identity based on what it signifies.

Through various approaches, research has attempted to understand the concept of self-identity. Different identity theories resulted from these approaches, such as Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould

& Thompson, 2005), Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Identity Theory (Burke & Stets, 2009), originated in Social Psychology (Oyserman, 2007; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), or originated in sociology (Callero, 2003; Howard, 2000). Many social psychologists might argue that a person's self-identity is already reflected in their beliefs, values, and attitudes, and that adding self-identity would not be of any substantial value (Sparks & Shepherd, 1992). On the contrary, research has repeatedly shown that the self-identity construct is a useful construct in understanding consumer behaviour and behaviour in general (Reed et al., 2012; Gatersleben et al., 2014).

Morality

One's moralistic identity work can, through various manifestations, serve a multitude of identity goals (Luedicke et al., 2010). Think for example about maintaining one's status and class in a hierarchy of taste, as often the case of high cultural capital consumers (Arnould, 2007; Holt, 2000), or in the case of opposite brand loyalty where group boundaries are defined and protected by enhanced group commitment (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). These robust narratives in their recurring state indicate an underlying cultural structure in which a meaning is shared that individuals can use to understand their social worlds (Holt, 2004; Thompson, 1997).

Luedicke et al. (2010) contend that this particular pattern of consumers' moralistic identity work is influenced by a variation of the classical morality play myth where a moral protagonist defends sacrosanct virtues and ideals against an immoral rival. Therefore, the morality play's archetype roles had commonplace ideological content in the form of jeremiads against consumerism, which invoke normative tension between self-restraint and hedonic excess. While eating meat can be seen as hedonic pleasure, it cannot be disregarded that eating meat does not involve the killing of animals; a moral dilemma that consumers deal with when succumbing to this practice. Therefore, morality becomes central in self-identity regarding the consumption of meat and, in turn, plant-based alternatives.

Since consumerism has gained such cultural prominence, the jeremiad against consumerism has become almost synonymous with moralism about consumption (Luedicke et al., 2010). Western culture has a long history of morality plays, creating engaging and captivating demonstrations of abstract moral beliefs in terms of everyday concerns and interests (Pineas, 1962). Godshalk (1974) elaborates that plays of morality usually show how ends are determined by means; to reach ultimate good, the Morality figure [protagonist] must lead a good life.

According to Wilk (2001), moralism about consumption is a means by which people balance the goals of people, the ownership and control of objects, and the problem that consumption can deplete or destroy common resources. The perspective of moralism on consumption portrays the beliefs of consumption as a looming threat to society, personal well-being, and the ecosystem at large (Hilton, 2004). Central to this belief are the charges of wasteful consumption, irresponsible personal behaviour,

and selfishness that sacrifices the greater good, as well as commercialized, inauthentic pleasures to replace nostalgic laments with traditional values (Cross, 2000). Cross (2000) refers to this cultural perspective as the jeremiad against consumerism, which has something akin to moralism about consumption. In this ideology, Wilk (2001) suggests that moralism about consumption is an instrument in which individuals confront various problems regarding distributive justice and the issues of consumption depleting or destroying common resources. Hilton (2004) argues that at the core, moralism about consumption stems from a 19th century worldview in which consumption was seen as abusive, unproductive and irrational and therefore contravened the liberal self. Food therefore becomes an interesting topic of discussion, due to its nature of being a necessity while simultaneously being used as a tool to ‘do good’ environmentally.

Social Identity Theory

In order to socially identify, one must share a psychological connection with another individual or group (Deaux, 1996). A variety of different research traditions have developed around this idea of identification, including psychoanalytic models that define identification as a process through which an individual forms ties with another person or group (Reed, 2002). Another line of thought stems from Freud (1955) and his definition in which identification can ‘arise with any new perception of a common quality shared with some other person’ (p. 137). The identification process is considered unconscious by Higgins et al. (1995) in which individuals imitate others who serve as models of behaviour, beliefs, and values. True identification takes place only after an individual has reached older stages of maturity and is capable of making conscious choices among possible identities. Another way of looking at social identity is through the perspective of the referent power. In this light, Kelman (1958) uses the term identification to describe an individual's willingness to adopt an attitude recommended by a referent other. The referent then possesses the referent power. Similarly, French & Raven (1959) pose the idea of referent power, in which this social relationship consists of a referent other and a target aiming to adopt the role of the referent. However, this social identification process is not always one-sided. It is suggested by Eagly & Chaiken (1993) that these social relationships can be reciprocal, in which the target wants to engage in activities with the referent other and vis-a-vis. An identification process is invoked only when the role relationship with the referent other is the basis for it. This means that once the relationship is not relevant anymore for the individual, the identification process stops (Reed, 2002).

Tajfel's Social Identity Theory is based on his lifelong commitment to developing a social psychology of prejudice, discrimination, and intergroup conflict (Tajfel, 1981; Turner, 1996). This theory originated as an extension on the social identification process; a process that underlies group phenomena, including conformity, stereotyping, cohesion, ethnocentrism, ingroup bias, discrimination,

group norms, and group identity (Hogg & Grieve, 1999). Adding to this theory is the sociometer hypothesis (Leary et al., 1995) that states that humans are driven not only to belong, but to maintain a stable level of belonging. Individuals are therefore constantly observing how others react to their actions in order to detect, and avoid, rejection or exclusion (Loveland et al., 2010).

Gender

The concept of gender identity is derived from the above elaborated Social Identity Theory (Brough et al., 2016) in which one's self-concept is derived from particular group membership (Tajfel, 1981; Turner, 1996; Hogg & Grieve, 1999). In the concept of gender identity, one identifies with gender in terms of how much they are masculine or feminine, which is integral to their self-concepts (Fischer & Arnold, 1994; Spence, 1985) through which individuals acquire information about themselves and their surroundings (Bem, 1981; Palan, 2001). Moreover, an individual's choices can help maintain gender identity since possessions and behaviour can signal identity and infer personal characteristics (Berger & Heath, 2007; Calder & Burnkrant, 1977).

The idea of maintaining gender and choosing it is also encouraged by Butler (1990) and her theory of gender performativity, in which Butler poses the idea that the internal essence of gender is manufactured through repetitive sets of acts. This theory holds that gender is socially constructed, performed through various repetition of acts and behaviours that formulate how gender is perceived. According to this theory, gender is unstable in the sense that ideas and norms about which aspects are part of a specific gender can change over time. It is through social interventions about how people should and should not behave that makes one understand and act "accordingly" (Butler, 1990).

However, in contrast to Butler's theory of gender performativity, gender-identity maintenance relies on the notion that self-discrepancies between actual and desired self-views lead to compensatory behaviours (Higgins, 1987). In response to a threat to one's membership in a meaningful group, compensatory efforts may be made to re-establish ingroup status and restore one's self-view; gender identity maintenance (Brough, et al., 2016). An example of this behaviour is toxic masculinity, emerged during the 1980s mythopoetic men's movement, coined by Shepherd Bliss to characterize his father's militarized, authoritarian masculinity (Harrington, 2021). According to Harrington (2021), in toxic masculinity, the marginalized men are essentialized as aggressive and criminal, discursively packaged in such a way as to seem like they care about their well-being. Relating it to the topic of bodybuilding, an exposé on "masculinity" in the form of muscle mass, toxic masculinity is ever so evident in the field that works on dominating other men based on their perceived physical masculinity.

There is research that suggests women and men are differently sensitive to maintaining their gender identity (Brough, et al., 2016). Due to the severity of the consequences for transgressions that violate their gender identity, men tend to be more attentive to maintaining the consistency of their

identity than women (Bosson & Michniewicz, 2013), which would explain why there is a such a small percentage of men eating plant-based due to fear of sabotaging their gender identity.

As an example of this, research has demonstrated that boys who display gender-incongruent play behaviours are punished more severely than girls (Langlois & Downs, 1980), and that gay men are negatively viewed in various domains more so than lesbians (Herek, 2000). Additionally, gender-inconsistent behaviour has been shown to cause greater psychological damage to men than to women (Aubé & Koestner, 1992). Men are therefore more aware of the subtle ways in which gender is often signified, such as colours, shapes, sounds, numbers, and foods, since the price they pay for making gender-incongruent choices is greater (Gal & Wilkie, 2010). In this line of thinking, several studies have shown that men tend to avoid products associated with female reference groups and are concerned about gender contamination (White & Dahl, 2006). Which leads itself to the term defined by Connell (2005) as hegemonic masculinity, or also called hyper masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is a way to legitimize patriarchy and secure men's dominance over women and those who do not fit the standard notion of what it means to be a man (MacDonald, 2014). There are several characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, including resistance to feminization, competition for dominance, increasing social status, and an ethos that exudes strength, confidence, and aggression (Connell, 2005; MacDonald 2014). The aspect of competition for dominance and ethos that exudes strength are of most interest regarding this study, as bodybuilding is a culture in which bodybuilders compete for dominance by showcasing their strength in the form of muscle mass.

Stigma

An attribute of a person is stigmatized when someone else views it as deviating from what they consider normal and devalues them because of it (Goffman, 1963). A person's health condition or social status can have stigmatizing effects (Goffman, 1963). Because of the stigma attached to an individual, it stamps them as deviating from what is considered normal in regarding society, which in turn can deeply discredit them which makes them vulnerable to global devaluation (Crocker et al., 1998). However, a deviant attribute is not by definition a stigma, and no attribute can be a stigma by itself (Goffman 1963). The stigma implies a social hierarchy in which the stigma possessor is in last place (*or a lower position*); they are assigned a position of inferiority by dominant others (*audience members*) in the focal social context (Harmeling et al., 2021). Lin & McFerran (2016), and Wooten (2006) all agree that this audience defines what is "normal," determines enough tolerance to accommodate this standard, and identifies what is deviant and valued. As a result of stigma, consumers may purchase, use, or dispose of possessions differently (Wooten, 2006). It can act as a psychological barrier that prompts consumers to hide their consumption habits (Kozinets, 2001), avoid participation

in promotions (Tepper, 1994), repress their preferences or avoid consumption of it altogether (Adkins & Ozanne, 2005) to avoid stigma-associated risks.

Ulver (2019) researched how something mundane as food consumption can become something significant. Despite the fact that the foodies do not have to destigmatize the mundane, yet legitimate, food category, foodies do have to negotiate its meanings and expand its boundaries (Ulver, 2019). In other words, the act of legitimizing foodie culture is done through active efforts in expanding the culture. Ironically, they stigmatize the mundane to make this symbolic boundary distinct by using words like "cheap" or "greedy". A parallel can be drawn to veganism, which are seen as the minority due to the heavy consumption of meat that has been legitimized in western culture (Chiles & Fitzgerald, 2018). Research suggests that vegans are subject to negative stereotyping, do-gooder derogatory behaviour, and stigma (Corrin & Papadopoulos, 2017) or, shortly put, "vegaphobia" (Vandermoere et al, 2019). Hence, in the scope of this research, a stigma is prevalent when dealing with plant-based consumption due to these assumptions.

2.2 Self-Identity and Food Consumption

Food Consumption as a Structuring Role in Society

The shift to industrialized consumption from industrialized production, like the one in the Netherlands regarding the spur of meat consumption due to industrialization, caused an empirical and analytical attention shift in sociology. Whereas productive work was previously seen as the prime characterizer of who a person is, consumption, which was formerly seen as destructive, is now seen as the determining factor in building identity (Östberg, 2003). British sociologist Warde (1997) claims that today's societal structure is based on consumption rather than production. While classical sociologists with the likes of Marx, Weber and Simmel, who consider consumption a mere function and consequence of production, contemporary social theory reorients this perspective and puts forward the notion of personal motivations that underpin modern consumer culture (Östberg, 2003).

In contemporary sociology, food consumption (both cooking and consuming) plays an important structural role in social life due to it being intertwined with many aspects of it (Östberg, 2003). As Warde (1997) points out, food is frequently used to comment on contemporary culture. Additionally, food plays a significant role in both cultural expression and psychological and emotional significance (Warde, 1997). Considering food consumption in the construct of self-identity is thereby highly motivated.

Reflexive Food Consumption

The central belief in reflexive consumption is based on the social theory of both Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991), in which they state “today, people define themselves through the messages they transmit to others through the foods and practices they possess and display” (Östberg, 2003; Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992). To sustain self-identity, consumers continuously manage appearances and actions in order to create a coherent self-narrative (Giddens, 1990).

Various researchers determine consumption objects as important inputs in creating a narrative surrounding an individual by conveying connection to others and simultaneously aiding our sense of self (Belk, 1988). As mentioned before, Belk (1988) suggests that individuals use objects to derive our self-concept to others as well to ourselves. Fischler (1998) took this concept and focused more on food consumption as a means to facilitate identity construction due to the fact that individuals actively construct themselves both in a physical and symbolic way in the food that we incorporate in our diets and therefore put in our bodies.

Food is regarded as having a remarkable capacity of conveying meaning while nourishing bodies, making it an especially interesting topic for studies (Östberg, 2003). Food consumption is a big part of a bodybuilder's identity due to the collective consumption of lean animal-protein and whey-shakes. Additionally, due to the ever-expanding number of commodities available to consumers, identity becomes more than a mere selection process. Due to the stamp put on individuals that what one consumes is what one becomes, individuals are increasingly obliged to choose their identities; not choosing also becomes a choice. Therefore, consumption in contemporary society becomes risky as it exposes individuals to scrutiny (Östberg, 2003). This ties in with the stigma surrounding vegans, as they are being scrutinized for their way of consumption.

2.3 Understanding Meat Consumption

Morality in Meat Consumption

By contrast, in today's modern society, people who refuse to eat meat are regarded as having a higher moral standard compared to omnivores (Ruby & Heine, 2011). It appears that there is some truth to this perception bias, as previous studies have shown a correlation between meat avoidance and morality (Rozin et al., 1997). There are two main reasons to reduce or ban the consumption of meat: personal health reasons and moral reasons. In terms of personal health concerns, meat may pose health risks due to additives, hormones, and high cholesterol levels (Richardson et al., 1994). Concerns about animal health and concerns regarding environmental concerns are considered moral motives (Latvala et al., 2012). As mentioned before in the Morality paragraph, a moralistic identity is influenced by what one perceives as the right thing to do (Luedicke et al., 2010). Meat becomes a notion that

challenges morality, as it involves the morality of hunting and killing animals, as well as the debate regarding the ethical implications regarding animal welfare and the environment (Bruckner, 2007).

Protein, Fats and Associations

Meat is distinctive in a way that is a food that is more than any other type of food laden with meaning and associations. Most of these associations stem from it having a stronger connection to status and the killing of animals (Fiddes, 1991; Rozin, 2004; Twigg, 1979). All of these associations date back to the time where humans were still hunter-gatherers. Hunting was a daily activity that would often require complex social coordination in order for the hunt to succeed. This is where the first social aspect of meat comes in.

A second social aspect of meat is found in the process of sharing the meat with members of the in-group (Thomas et al., 2018). The values associated with the hunt are also today in line with the most important values assigned to meat. As a product of hunting, meat is categorized into the male domain as historically, but also cross-culturally, hunting of larger animals has been almost exclusively a male activity. Moreover, associations such as strength and power are tied to the product. These are values that are also typically assigned to males (Connell, 2005; MacDonald 2014). As a result, male and female consumers exercise their traditional gender by consuming foods that are regarded gender appropriate. For men that is meat, where especially red meat is an apex in male gendered food. In contrast to women, who opt to minimize the consumption of meat (Sobal, 2005). Rozin et al. (2012) studied the symbolic link between meat and “maleness”. The study confirmed implicit associations between “meat” and “maleness” in both male and female participants. The association between the two concepts was stronger when researchers used words such as “steak” and “beef”. These findings are in line with Sobal (2005) who, as mentioned, found red meat to be significantly strongly gendered. Rozin et al. (2012), suggest that potentially the male-meat is rather off and that it is more of a meat-strength and power-male link. However, their research does not contain strong enough evidence to support this idea. Rothgerber (2013), adds to this discussion in stating that men who vouch for classic male gender roles portray stronger pro-meat attitudes. He concludes that males consume meat because according to their traditional gender classifications that makes them ‘real men’.

Meat is Male, Plants are Female

Generally, the most important drivers for a plant-based diet are decreasing environmental impact and animal welfare (Dierzaam, 2021). Both of these can be categorized as “green” motives for consumption behaviour. It is therefore interesting to see what values are interlinked in green consumption. Brough et al. (2016), found that both men and women see a strong connection between the concept’s “greenness” and “femininity”, despite whether they regarded themselves feminine or masculine. Both

genders consider environmental conscious consumers as more feminine than consumers with no environmental regards. As men are more concerned than women about how they portray themselves, identity maintenance, this stereotype is likely to discourage men who hold masculine values from behaving green (Brough et al., 2016). This potentially also holds truth for the consumption of plant-based meat alternatives. Interestingly, the feminine associations related to green consumerism are not only projected outward, they are also projected inwards. A consumer will attribute more feminine values to him or herself when engaging in green activities, even in private situations. Again, this does not align with consumers who especially seek to reinforce their masculine values. The urgency of gender-identity maintenance results in male consumers being additionally susceptible to gender cues in consumption environments (Bosson & Michniewicz, 2013; Carter & McCloskey, 1984; Gal & Wilkie, 2010; Martin, 1990; McCreary, 1994; Moller et al., 1992). The plant-based meat alternatives in Dutch supermarkets portray category codes. Meaning, specific visual cues to aid the consumer in recognizing the product. These can be regarded as more feminine than masculine. This is in line with Brough et al. (2016), who state that pro environmental messages are generally visually feminine and that marketing efforts are made towards female consumers rather than males. Which in its turn reinforces the green-feminine stereotype. The same study did however also identify a need for masculine marketing. Masculine marketing, versus neutral or feminine branding, is a managerial tool that allows for more green consumption choices when it manages to overshadow the feminine associations towards a product.

The Feminist Perspective

Adams (1991), takes a feminist stance on the consumption of meat. She argues that what we consume is largely impacted by the patriarchal politics of the culture we live in. Moreover, she sees the relationship between meat and virility as an indicator to how we view the animals that are being consumed. The author recognizes a pattern of female exploitation. The lion share of the consumed animals is female and/or a new-born while being subjected to male domination. The inequality is a symbol of feminism (Adams, 1991). In doing so, this author confirms the notion by Rozin et al. (2012), that meat is masculine. Building on Adams, we look to Hyers (2006) who uses his theory of Social Dominance to understand why all animals, not only female animals, are subjected to a hierarchical system. Social hierarchies are maintained through discrimination towards others and are associated with power, aggression and hyper masculinization. One could therefore argue that the food-chain hierarchy holds a symbolism to what is our current social hierarchy, even inter-species.

2.4 Road-Map to Meat Consumption

Since meat is highly charged with associative values that reflect on the consumer, consumption of meat is close to an identity-politics statement. Various researchers have studied specific moments in the consumption of meat and how it affects the consumer's behaviour and state. Even though these theories come from different researches, they all derive from common ground. In order to get a holistic overview of the different action-reaction cycles, the researchers have created a behavioural journey map. All steps and concepts within these steps are elaborate upon below.

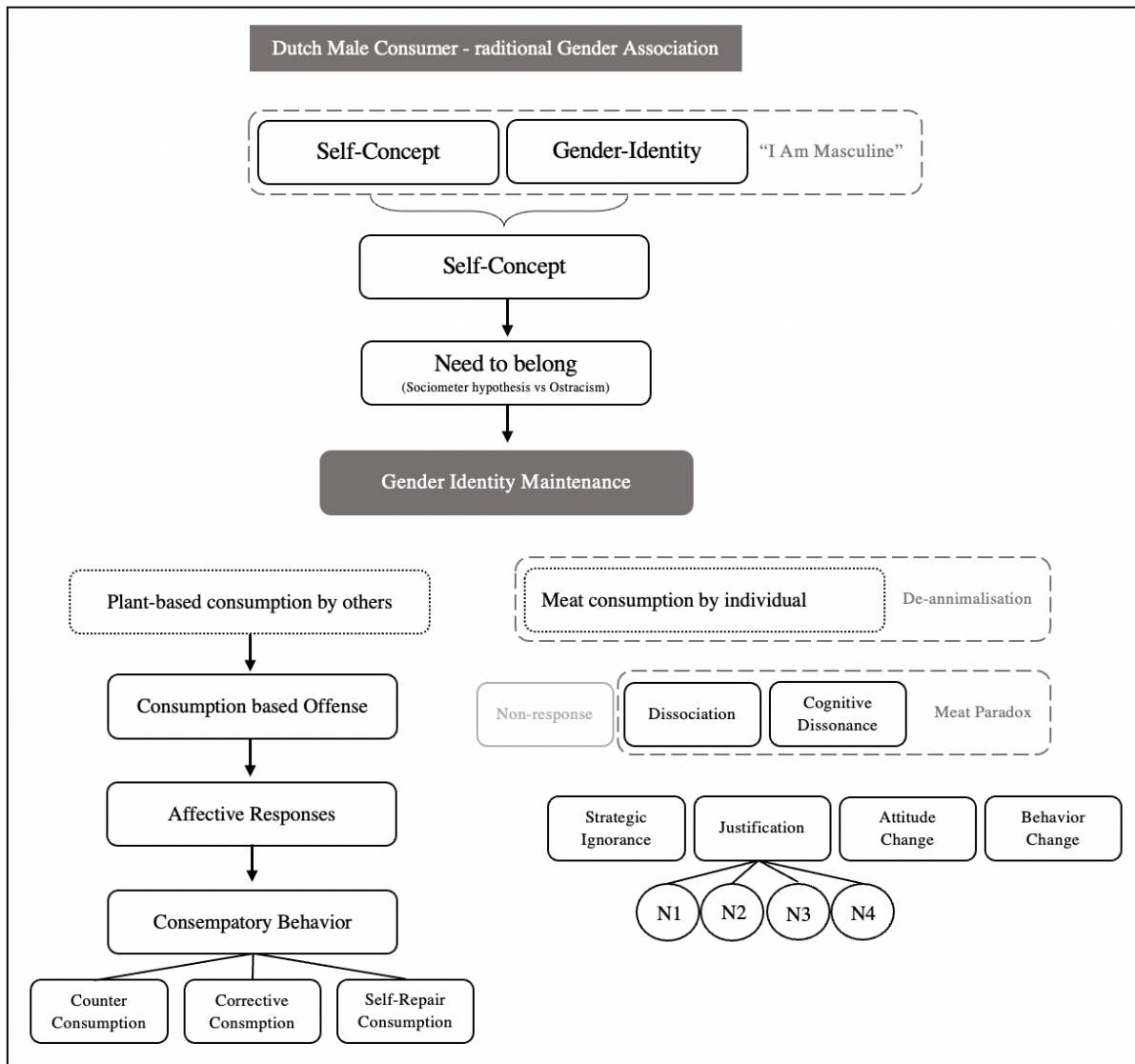


Figure 2 1: Dissonance Framework in Meat consumption

Route 1: Exposure to Plant-Based Consumption by others

It has been examined how self-identity (Giddens, 1991) and gender identity (Brough et al., 2016) can have an impact on self-identity and how it is expressed through consumption, defined as gender identity maintenance by Bosson & Michniewicz (2013). Since the non-consumption of meat or the consumption does not align with the self-concept of a traditional masculine individual, it requires an

action from the individual to maintain their gender identity. This disturbance can be caused by a consumer's personal behaviour, but it can also be evoked by other individual's consumption behaviour. All secondary consumption that interferes with another consumer's self-concept is what Coyne et al. (2016) conceptualizes as Consumption-Based Offense. They give the following definition for Consumption based offense;

The perception that an offending party's (typically another consumer) intentional consumption choice violates a prescriptive normative standard, leading to a threat to one's self-view or world-view and, subsequently, the experience of a degree of anger.

Whereas offense is by definition intertwined to violation of norms, consumer-based offense regards the lack of another person's alignment to an individuals' personal *Prescriptive Normative standards* (Coyne et al., 2016). These standards derive from one's self-concept and portray the beliefs he/she has about desired and undesired behaviour and are thus always dictated from the offended observer perspective (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; DeBono et al., 2011; Opp, 1979). These norms can be individual or shared at large within a society (Liu et al., 2019). Consumer culture researchers distinguish between three different levels of consumption-based offense. Values Consumption-Based Offense (Haidt et al., 1993), regards the values that are shared within a particular cultural group on morals. Relationship Consumption-Based offense (Aggarwal, 2004; Clark & Mills, 1993), concerns the values that individuals share in their relationship to each other. Lastly, Self-View Consumption-Based offense (Swann et al., 2007), occurs when an individual's self-concept is threatened by the consumption behaviour of other consumers. Therefore, it can be argued that if a consumer's prescriptive normative norms include the consumption of meat as the only appropriate consumption choice for adult males, this consumer is likely to be offended when a male from the individual's in-group purchases plant-based alternatives.

As a result of the offense there will be an affective experience for the offended consumer. Based on the violation type there can be various emotions, most commonly these will range from minor irritation to rage. The level of intensity in this affective response will be determining for what behavioural and cognitive consequences will follow (Coyne et al, 2016; Feinberg, 1985; Nichols, 2002). Leary et al. (1998), shed light on what the exact behavioural consequences might be. In his words feelings of sadness will prompt individuals to change their circumstances, whereas hurt is accompanied by devaluation of relationships. As identified by Averill (1982, 1983), feelings of anger cue a different type of behavioural response. This type of behaviour is significantly more malevolent and is characterized by the offended consumer wanting to take revenge on the offender. Finally, as the offended consumer needs to salvage his or her prescriptive normative standards, and thus the self-

concept, a final stage of compensatory behaviour at the account of the offended consumer takes place. These behaviours are most commonly a result of anger provoked through offense-based consumption. Firstly, consumers can develop an urge to inflict (*emotional*) pain on the offender as a means to get even. The consumer does this by engaging in a direct confrontation that addresses the perceived norm violation. This behaviour is conceptualized as Counter Consumption by Averill. The second construct is conceptualized as Corrective Consumption. The offended consumer's emotions are notably less strong and the focal point of this strategy is to use consumption to change the norm-violating behaviour that is portrayed by the offender. Finally, the last conceptualized strategy found in the offended consumer, self-repairing consumption. In contrast to the previous two strategies that were directed externally at the offender, this strategy has the offended consumer focus his or her efforts on themselves. The Self-Repairing Consumption strategy can be regarded as a coping mechanism that aims to make-up for and repair the damage that the offended consumer has suffered (Averill, 1982).

Route 2: Consumption of Meat by the Self

Dissociation and De-Animalization

Researchers Rothgerber & Mican (2014), came to the conclusion that consumers nowadays are so disconnected from animals that the greatest frequency of "interaction" they have with them is during the consumption of them. Moreover, the relationship between a piece of meat and the living animal that it once was, the Meat-Animal Connection (Dowsett et al., 2018) has faded away. This process is termed as De-Animalization by Plous (1993). De-Animalization is exercised by society at large. It can be found in the linguistic differentiation between the name of the animal and what the produced meat is referred to. For example, pig is not termed pig meat but pork and similarly cow's meat is referred to as beef (Kunst & Hohle, 2016; Plous, 1993). In supermarkets consumers are faced with complex marketing and labelling of products (Font-i-Furnols & Guerrero, 2014). Additionally, prompts hinting to the origin of the meat that could remind consumers of the living animal, such as eyes, its head and feet, are not displayed. As a result of the de-animalization, Dissociation in consumers takes place where their consumption of meat holds no relationship to the animal it once was (Plous, 1993). The meat-animal connection is non-existent in this case. Various studies found hints that the re-establishment of the meat-animal connection in consumers through marketing efforts could nudge consumers to make more conscious buying decisions (Hormes et al., 2013; Hoogland et al., 2005; Rozin et al., 1997). However, they nor other researchers have yet to find what the terms to this should look like.

The Meat Paradox and its Implications

Consumers that do have an existent meat-animal connection will be crossed with a state of Cognitive Dissonance when consuming meat. This is a result of what Loughnan et al. (2010) describe as the Meat Paradox. Earlier research already gave examples of this later coined Meat Paradox. In a study by Braithwait & Braithwait (1982) the lion share of consumers (59%) admitted to disapprove of inhumane killing of animals at an abattoir. Yet, it was only 16% that disapproved of consuming the animals slaughtered at an abattoir that uses inhumane methods. Consumers use various strategies to justify self-serving acts in order to protect their moral beliefs and interests (Dowsett et al., 2018).

Onwezen & Van Der Weele (2016) build on the concept of Cognitive dissonance in meat consumption in their research on strategic ignorance in meat consumption. They state that the consumption of meat can create a disturbance between their effect on animals and the consumption to maintain their identity. This internal disturbance can be resolved with a number of strategies. Strategic Ignorance (Carrillo & Mariotti, 2000) allows the consumer to avoid any form of mental discomfort by ignoring certain pieces of information. The objective for this strategy is to indulge in activities that can be regarded as selfish or harmful to another or the future self. As seen above, it can be argued that de-animalization aids consumers in this process. Onwezen and Van Der Weele (2016) state that when informing consumers about the implications of selfish decisions they as a result will be likely to choose a more conscious alternative. However, this is contradicted by other studies that state consumers are inclined to take a greater liking towards meat when their moral inconsistencies are exposed. They will retaliate with defensive justifications and more intensive commitment to consuming meat (Graça et al., 2015; Piazza et al., 2015; Rothgerber, 2014).

Resolving Dissonance

Consumers use justification, a form of trivialization to down-play the significance in meat consumption. This helps them resolve the contradiction between loving and eating animals (Loughnan et al., 2010). The justification strategy, as researched by Joy (2010) and Piazza et al. (2015), is exercised by consumers in four different ways. The first strategy, referred to as 'Normal', is used by individuals to argue that eating meat is normal as it is thought of as socialization. Second, consumers argue that the consumption of meat is 'Natural' as it is part of all their rituals and customs. Thirdly, a common justification is for individuals to argue that this consumption is 'Necessary' as arguably the human body requires the nutrition it can only get from animal meat (Joy, 2010). Lastly, the justification through the argument that the consumption of meat is 'Nice', as it allows for a tasteful and thus pleasurable dining experience (Piazza et al., 2015). 'Necessary' is the most common response in consumers, followed by the rationalization through 'Natural' (Dowsett et al., 2018).

Finally, there are two more strategies for consumers to reduce and/or avoid a feeling of cognitive dissonance, through Behaviour Change (Harmon-Jones, 2007; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999) and Attitude Change (Festinger, 1962). Attitude change requires an individual to divert its weaker opinion, beliefs or norms in order for the most prevalent, and most difficult to change, attitude to be preserved. The author notes the example of a consumer with conflicting values; a love for meat and a love for animals. Through the attitude change strategy this exact consumer would alter its attitudes towards animals for his or her attitude towards meat to remain existent (Harmon-Jones, 2007; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999). One can argue that the self-concept of the particular consumer is determining what attitude change the consumer will decide to make. Behaviour change is a strategy where the consumer enables himself by resolving the cognitive dissonance by applying different behaviours whilst maintaining his attitudes on the matter. The author exemplifies through the same situation, however the consumer decided to be vegetarian (Festinger, 1962).

Rites of Passage

Aiming to create a systematic understanding of transitioning of an individual's "life crises", Van Gennep (1960) developed his model called *Rites of Passage*. He observed three major distinguishable stages during transitioning, namely: (1) separation, (2) transition, and (3) incorporation. Considered as a whole, it is labelled the rites of passage and helps divide and understand each step into transitioning. Van Gennep notes that these subcategories, however, are not the same for every culture or ceremony. He highlights that the transition phase might contain more value during pregnancy and may contain less value in adoption.

Even though the prevalence and elaborateness of different rites is an important consideration in assessing a society or in comparing several sociologies, such a routine or mechanical operation could ignore the theoretical dilemmas (Van Gennep, 1960). Therefore, to accurately interpret this theory, it should be considered a central concept used to explain the transitional stages in which the individual or group finds itself from time to time; in other words, it should be interpreted in relation to the changing circumstances. As a new condition occurs, the individual needs to participate in rites that eventually reunite them with a group and help them return to their routines (Van Gennep, 1960). This change can be upsetting, or even dangerous in some circumstances, to the life of the individual and group alike. The transition period is the period in the rites of passage that contains the most disturbances, but once overcome, it is the determining phase of a successful transition.

Legitimization and Framing Strategies

The concept of *legitimacy* is multidimensional, constituting normative, cognitive, and regulating components (Suchman, 1995). *Normative* legitimacy refers to the notion that a practice is

compromised if it does not align with dominant moral standards and values (Kates, 2004). Cultural-Cognitive legitimacy is achieved when a practice is taken for granted (Humphreys, 2010). Lastly, *regulatory* changes can undermine the compliance legitimacy of a practice (Humphreys, 2010). However, recently a fourth aspect of legitimacy came to light, which is *relational* legitimacy. Relational legitimacy occurs when practices are viewed as affirming social identity and self-worth for individuals or groups, or to ensure dignity and respect for those groups” (Tost, 2011). In order to grant, demand or reject legitimacy, consumers resort to *framing strategies* (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Ulver-Sneistrup et al., 2011). The construction and deconstruction of frames is performed at the same level as reality construction. Benford & Snow (2000), state that all forms of framing are active, strategic and intentional. They also categorize between four different types of framing; *bridging, amplification, extension and transformation*. Koch & Ulver (2022) add an extra dimension to framing; *conflict framing*. Frame bridging connects at least two frames that are ideologically consistent yet structurally disconnected. As a contrast frame amplification focusses on an existing frame and tries to fortify its strength. Amplification is recognized to be especially relevant to new actors that remain on a fragile footing. Extension framing uses existing scopes and presents their frame as a logical addition to that existing frame’s core concern. Transformational framing transforms the vested understanding and or perspective into either an updated version or a completely new one. This specific frame is most likely to overlap with other frames (Benford & Snow, 2000). Lastly, conflict framing focuses on fundamental differences between two or more stances, creating an “us” and “them”. In turn this should spark conflict. Conflict is created as it is believed to be a driver for change (Koch & Ulver, 2022).

Methodology

The methodology of this thesis will be outlined in this chapter. To begin with, attention is called to the ontology and epistemology of this research philosophy. Following that, the research approach and design is described, in which we put an extra focus on the ZMET-method. We will also discuss how the existing literature led to the design research. Afterwards, the sampling method, the empirical data collection method, and the analysis method are considered. Finally, the reliability and validity of the study is covered.

3.1 Research Philosophy

A definitive method for performing CCT research does not exist. Consequently, it is then important to discuss the relationship between theory and research from the viewpoint of this research. In order to apply the right method, understanding of various ontological and epistemological assumptions is therefore key. Understanding philosophical issues is extremely beneficial in at least four ways (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). It is the researcher's first responsibility to understand the basic issues of epistemology to understand what their reflexive role is in the research process. Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) believe that in order to make a creative contribution, clarity is essential when it comes to theory of knowledge. Secondly, it can assist in clarifying research designs. Not only is it necessary to determine what kind of evidence should be gathered and how it should be interpreted, but also to determine whether this will provide answers to the questions being investigated. Thirdly, researchers can identify which research designs are likely to succeed. Providing limitations on particular approaches and avoiding too many blind alleys can help them avoid going down too many paths. The fourth benefit is that it can be helpful to find out more about, and even develop, designs that are outside the range of the researcher's previous experience. Additionally, they can provide suggestions on how to adapt research designs to different subjects or knowledge structures. To summarize, a better grasp of these philosophies can enhance research quality and the creativity of the researchers (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

Ontology

The researchers' view of reality is described by their ontology, which in turn influences their assumptions, and therefore influences their methods and strategies (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). There is a range of ontological positions in the continuum encompassing realism on one side and relativism on the other. Realists think that a phenomenon exists regardless of any observations made about it, whereas relativists think that it is determined by the perspective from which it is viewed. Social science has experienced similar debates, although primarily between the positions of internal realism,

relativism, and nominalism (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Within social sciences, inanimate objects are less of an interest than the behaviour of people.

Over the past two decades, consumer research has addressed the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption. In spite of possessing a variety of different theoretical perspectives and research goals, CCT researchers nevertheless share a common theoretical orientation toward the study of cultural complexity across their research endeavours (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Consumer culture is also thought of as a system of interconnected images, texts, and objects that enables individuals to make sense of their environment and lives through the construction of overlapping and even conflicting practices, identities, and meanings (Kozinets, 2001). Consumers embody and negotiate meanings in particular social situations, roles, and relationships (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Therefore, understanding the common theme in CCT, context is relevant and the reality is highly dependent on the individuals who experience it.

Based on the principle of relativism, this paper embraces the concept that reality is socially constructed (Berger & Luckman, 1967). A relativist ontology is the most effective as it takes into account that the phenomenon may be experienced differently by different people. Additionally, the context regarding the topic and the country that they live in will affect an individual's experiences. There is not a single reality that can be discovered, there are many ways to look at the phenomenon (Easterby-Smith et al, 2021). The culture in which this phenomenon of meat consumption presents itself, is highly influential on the research topic. At the time, the 'truth' according to Dutch standards was that having a healthy diet was that it needed to include meat. However, in other cultures this might not be seen as the truth, therefore acknowledging that the phenomenon is experienced differently by different people. Relativists hold that there may never be a conclusive answer. In order to understand how this research phenomenon takes place in the consumer's mind, understanding the 'truth' as perceived by them is the most respectful thing to do without disregarding that these truths are constructed by humans, which some may argue means that truth does not exist (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Late British philosopher David Hume claims that truths are not universal but are historically and culturally variable, that is, they are socially determined (Easterby-Smith et al, 2021). Hence, the relativist approach is the most appropriate and relevant one for this research study.

Epistemology

Epistemology involves assumptions about the best ways to enquire about the world, it explains how we know what we know. As a result, social scientists have been involved in a long-term debate about the relative merits of two contrasting views on how social science research should be done: positivism and social constructionism (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

Positivism focuses on the idea that the social world exists externally and that its characteristics can be measured by objective means rather than inferred subjectively through feelings, reflections, and intuition. Originally, positivism was envisioned as the best means of studying human behaviour (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Due to limited success in the application of positivist principles to social sciences, a new paradigm originated during the last half-century based on the perspective that ‘reality’ is not objective and socially constructed (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This led to the idea that people give and construct meaning in their daily interactions with others.

Social constructionism established itself as an alternative theory to understand how people make sense of the world by sharing experiences with each other through language; an approach that Habermas (1970) refers to as ‘interpretive methods’. It is of the opinion that people determine what is considered ‘societal reality’ instead of it being determined by external objective factors. Therefore, the role of the social scientist is not limited to gathering facts and analysing social patterns, but also to recognizing how people construct and understand their personal experiences (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

Based on the subculture being researched, this research embraces the social constructionism epistemology in which we will perform qualitative research. As the research phenomenon has changed over time, one of the strengths of having a social constructivist approach enables understanding people's meanings, adjusting to new issues and ideas as they arise, and contributing to the development of new theories (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Due to the proximity needed to be able to understand the phenomenon, the social constructivist utilizes a more natural approach in gathering data. Nonetheless, this approach comes with various limitations. The collection of data involves a lot of time and resources, and the analysis and interpretation of data is challenging and relies on the researchers' knowledge (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Generally, it is a problem that many people, especially policymakers, may not believe studies based on what appears to be subjective opinions (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Despite this, it is evident that this research will be beneficial to our partnership since there is a demand for understanding this specific subculture.

3.2 Research Design

In order to research the chosen subculture, the research approach of this study is phenomenological. The study of phenomenology describes the meaning for multiple participants of their lived experiences relating to a concept or phenomenon (Cresswell, 2007); the lived experiences of the participants relating to the phenomenon of being a Dutch plant-based bodybuilder. It is our task as researchers to focus on describing the commonalities the participants have in relation to the phenomenon. A phenomenological approach is aimed at reducing individual experience with a phenomenon to provide an explanation of essence (Van Manen, 1990). After collecting data from those who have experienced

the phenomenon, the aim is to develop a composite description of the experiences of all individuals (Cresswell, 2007). The description entails *what* and *how* they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994).

There are two approaches to phenomenology: hermeneutic and transcendental, or also called psychological (Cresswell, 2007). For this research, we chose to do the latter phenomenology, in which it is less about our interpretations as researchers but more about describing how participants experience the phenomenon as accurately as possible (Moustakas, 1994). The goal here is to perceive things as if it's for the first time by setting aside your own experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Moustaka (1994) argues that it is seldom done to perfection. However, Cresswell (2007) argues that it is fine to describe your own experiences in relation to the phenomenon and build on from there with the experience of those who participate in it. In our case, what helps us is that the only thing that we have in common with this subculture is the fact that we are all Dutch. Everything else will be described according to what we retrieve through our interviews.

Inductive Approach

Instead of constructing a theory, an explanation, or an interpretation from scratch and then seeking evidence to confirm or disprove it in a deductive manner, inductive reasoning begins with evidence—the particulars—and then constructs theories, explanations, and interpretations from there (Given, 2008). Given (2008) also highlights that most inductive approaches are guided by the close relationship between empirical observation and conceptual formulation. Even though the deductive approach still dominates, it has been challenged recently in several fields due to its inability to capture how people really think (Woiceshyn & Daellenbach, 2018). This research paper focuses on understanding a relatively new and rising phenomenon; therefore, an inductive approach is more fitting. An inductive research approach, however, begins without a preconceived theory to be challenged (or confirmed) or refined, but rather with unanswered questions regarding an intriguing phenomenon (Woiceshyn & Daellenbach, 2018). Therefore, no foundational hypotheses are required, since the authors focus on how their research question and findings go beyond the established knowledge (Locke, 2007).

Research Focus

Research relating to identity often has the downfall that it is rather broad, making it more difficult for researchers to conduct the field work diligently. In order to tackle this issue, we created research focus domains. These domains are constructed on the findings and gaps that resulted from the literature study. We want to underpin that these domains do not represent hypotheses. The following five domains have been used to contain the research to valuable focus points. A more elaborate explanation of each domain can be found in appendix 2.

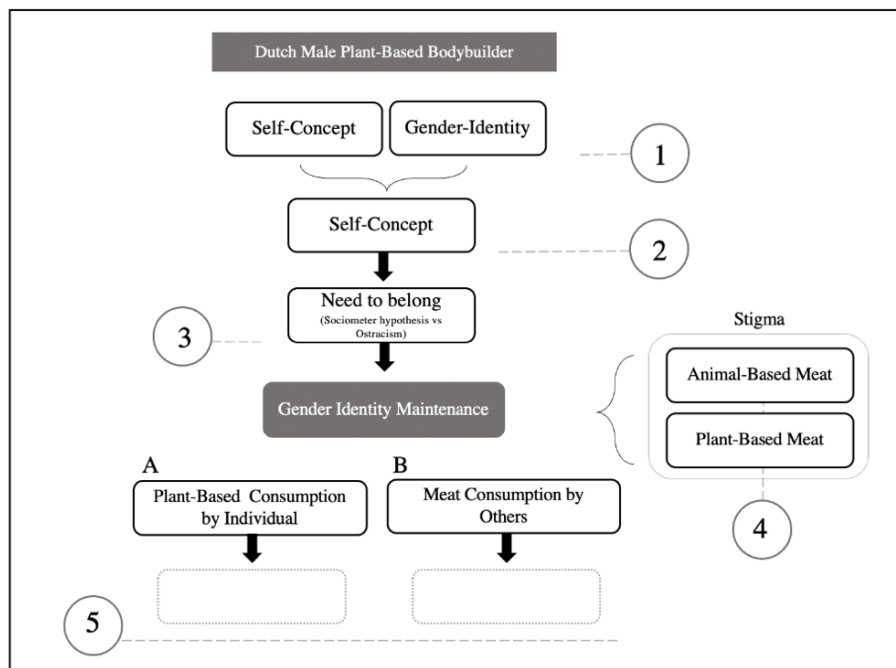


Figure 3 1: Research Focus Domains

- D-1:** To understand their perception on gender identity, the meaning it holds, values associated and its importance in the self-concept.
- D-2:** To understand how this subculture pursues and upholds their self-concept. Their gender-identity is part of their self-concept, it does not make up their entire identity.
- D-3:** Plant-based is not perceived as masculine. The participants will have to potentially find an alternative way to navigate the social situation in order to maintain their (gender) identity. The researchers are looking to explore attitudes, emotions, behavioral patterns and coping mechanisms -if applicable- in these situations.
- D-4:** To understand the differences between associations towards meat and meat-alternatives, if they develop over time and what that development looks like. Additionally, to see what stigmas are present and how they came to be. \

D-5: How did the subculture deal with meat-consumption related disruption of one’s morality prior to their transition. What strategies did they use and what influenced them to change these strategies.

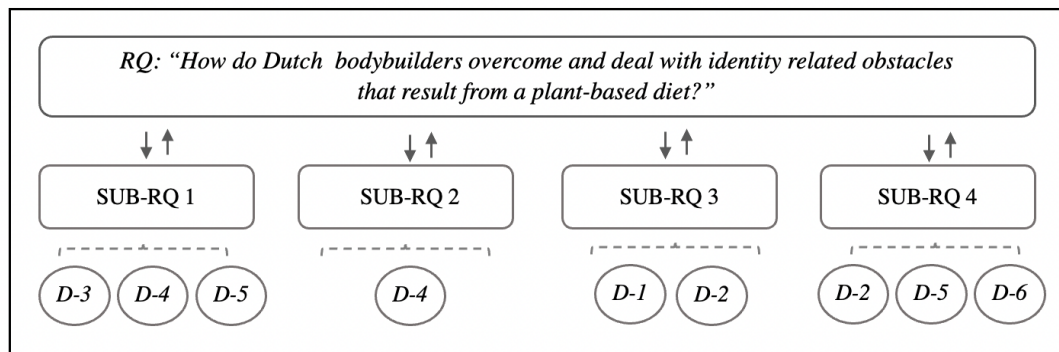


Figure 3 2: Relation between Research Focus Domains and Sub-Research Questions

The purpose of the research focus domains is to gain the necessary knowledge that will allow us to answer the sub-research questions. In turn the sub-research questions will provide the foundation needed to answer the research question. Figure 3.2 a visual representation of how the research focus domains (D-X) relate to the sub-research questions (SUB-RQ X).

3.3 Data Collection Method

Data Collection Approach

The chosen method for this research is the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Approach. Various research has shown that the unconscious mind is the accountable actor for at least 95% of human cognition (Wegner, 2002; LeDoux & Freeman, 2000). The remaining 5% of our cognition is highly conscious. This part of our cognition allows us to examine and confront our mental capabilities that are below this stratum (Zaltman, 2003). Often researchers are only able to look at the logical aspects of decision making, the aspects that occur in the 5% of conscious decision making. However, the emotional aspects are of far greater importance as they take place in the unconscious which, as mentioned, accounts for 95% of total cognition Bauer (1958), roots the cause of this flaw in research towards the fact that most methods for research are biased to work with reason rather than emotion. This is supported by Freud's Three Levels of Mind (1900): the Conscious, the Preconscious, and the Unconscious, which strengthens the validity of this method. The Unconscious mind is the focus here; the place in the mind that stores unaware feelings, thoughts, and memories. Zaltman (2003) elaborates on the different findings in researching the conscious versus unconscious mind. When researching the conscious mind this will result in facts surrounding the Espoused theory, explaining what consumers *say* they believe and do. This differs from Theory in use (unconscious), which illustrates the beliefs consumers *actually* act upon. A study by Morwitz et al. (1997) underpins the importance of qualitative research by posting

that consumers' responses in explicit surveys more often than not contradict their actual behaviour, intentions and emotions.

Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET)

Through this research we aim to get a deeper understanding of how consumers have cleared the obstructions that plant-based alternatives consumption poses to the masculine aspects of the self-concept. Our emotions and memories operate on levels that are out of reach of our awareness. Consumers cannot actively steer the emotions or memories that trigger memories that we can consciously inspect, even though those have a defining function in how we perceive ourselves and others (Zaltman, 1997). Thus, we needed to dig deeper to uncover those emotions and feelings.

Projective techniques are used to allow participants to have a more novel discussion. The projective tools serve to create space between the participant and the topic. Doing so this enables the researcher to address issues that correlate to more traditional interview techniques. Examples being sensitive information or the inability to articulate concepts and or emotions that are more complex (Day, 1989). Many researchers advocate for projective techniques over standard interview techniques, one of them being Collier (1957). Collier states that the use of visuals in comparison to vocal-only interviews, has many advantages. In his findings he sees these interviews to be richer and more in-depth. Visual elicitation allows latent memories to be prompted. These latent memories allow for more novel responses from the interviewees. Harper (2002) states that photo elicitation is able to dig behind the surface levels of human consciousness, something words-alone interviews cannot do.

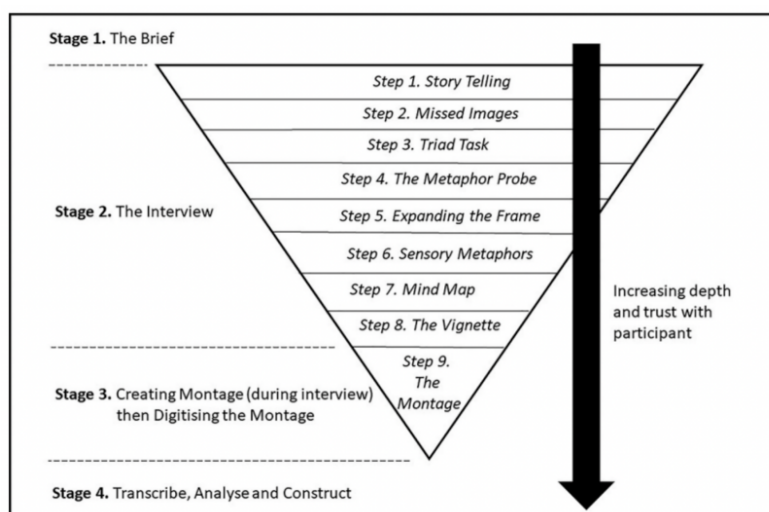
The ZMET method has four guiding principles that are rooted in the science of the human mind (Zaltman, 2003). ZMET explores the unconscious mind, meanings, resulting in participants elaborating on feelings and thoughts they hadn't realized before they felt or shared. Within the ZMET method visuals are a leading tool. In contrast to other projective techniques, these visuals are selected by the participants (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). The visuals thus represent what Coulter et al. (2001) conceptualize as surface metaphors that represent subconscious perceptions. The visuals are used to extract metaphors from the participants mind. Zaltman (2003) defines the metaphor as a vehicle that has the loading capacity to transport thoughts from A to B. A being the unconsciousness and B being the conscious awareness. These transportation vehicles are mostly loaded with meaning about one's identity. Kagan (2002), found that on average participants use almost six metaphors per minute while speaking. This signifies the significance of metaphors in daily life, but also highlights why the ZMET method is highly relevant.

The ZMET method has four phases in which the research is executed, respectively; the brief, the interview, the montage and analysis and construction. We will discuss the first two in this specific section. In the first phase, the brief, the objective is to appropriately prepare the participant to the

interview (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). In contrast to other reflective techniques, it is the participant that has to gather visuals that are used as discussion pieces during the interview. The participant is asked to create a collage of six to eight visuals that represent the discussion topic he or she is presented with. It is important that the participant understands the correct way to select the images, thus they receive a guide with careful instructions. To help the participant as much as possible, the researchers have also created an example collage on a different topic that showcases their emotions and experiences towards this specific subject. This does not only clarify the task at hand, it also helps build trust from the participant towards the researchers.

The second phase, the interview, is the most extensive phase within this method. Within this phase there are 9 sub-steps that together create a holistic interview method. These steps offer a framework for the researchers to adhere to, but that does not mean it is a structured interview. The quality of the results is determined by how well the interviewers manage to draw from the information the participant is giving them and probe them in the most effective way (Hancock & Foster, 2019). Meaning that the time spent and information gathered per step will differ per participant. This can be to no surprise as the leading discussion piece is different in every interview. Below we have outlined the nine different steps and their main objectives. A more elaborate explanation of the mechanisms that build the relevance per step and our experiences in using each step, can be found in appendix 1.

Figure 3 3: Schematic Overview ZMET Method Process



- Step1:** *Storytelling:* Participants are asked to elaborate on the 6-8 pictures they chose, whilst interviewers ask questions to deepen the understanding.
- Step 2:** *Missed Images:* The vegan bodybuilders are asked to describe pictures, scenario's, ideas of which they were unable to retrieve pictures, or unsure whether they wanted to use them for whatever reason.
- Step3:** *Triad task:* Participants are asked to match images with shared or either

contradicting meaning to which then the interviewers ask questions about their relationship.

- Step 4:** *Metaphor probe:* Through the use of various laddering techniques (Could you..., would you..., Should you..) the interviewers probe the interviewee to dig deeper in presented topics.
- Step 5:** *Expanding the frame:* This task requires the participant to think about selective pictures in a broader way. I.e., a cow in a pasture; what else is going on in this scene outside of the picture frame?
- Step 6:** *Sensory Metaphors:* Participants are asked to describe senses relating to pictures selected by the interviewers. What do they smell, taste, hear?
- Step 7:** *Mind map:* Together with the participants the interviewers create a brief mind-map of the main topics and concepts and how these relate to each other.
- Step 8:** *The Vignette:* The participants are asked to create a story that represents the topic to them. It must contain three objects; their self-concept, the object of the study and an eventful situation.
- Step 9:** *The Montage:* Together with the interviewees, the participants create a visual summary of the discussion using the visuals that were provided.

ZMET-method 9 steps - Adapted from Zaltman (1997)

Validity of ZMET

Validity refers to the fact that the study reflects the phenomena being studied (Malhotra & Birks, 2006). ZMET is a widely used research tool, utilized by even the biggest corporations such as Reebok and Coca-Cola, among others (Catchings-Castello, 2000). It has been critically discussed and supported by researchers for its ability to effectively extract attitudes and perceptions in relation to marketing research (Khoo-Latimore et al., 2009).

Regarding the method, the visuals chosen by the participants act as a stimulant that the interviewer can later probe on (Zaltman, 1997) allowing for participants to not feel restricted and limited by the questions of the researcher. The visuals are used as metaphors which opens up the discussion and allows the interviewer to dig beyond superficial emotions from the start (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). The participants are prompted to delve into their experiences by sharing rich narratives, and by asking questions about those narratives they unlock deeper meaning.

3.4 Sampling Strategy

In order to accurately research the phenomenon, we need to be careful with who to include in our research in order for us to create a common understanding of the phenomenon (Cresswell, 2007). Because of the ontology of the study and the lack of ability to generalize these findings we had to be very careful in our sampling process. We first looked at regular male consumers to understand the relationship between masculinity and plant-based, but that proved to be not specific enough, as the perception of masculinity among regular male consumers is not strongly reflected on. Therefore, we chose the target sample of Dutch plant-based male bodybuilders due to the earlier discussed perceived oxymoron between the concept of veganism and male bodybuilders due to the enhanced masculinity aspect prevalent in the bodybuilding subculture. To contribute to project Dierzaam focused on the Dutch market it was particularly important to find Dutch participants to accurately target the sample with knowledge of Dutch customs and culture.

Due to the seemingly elusive group and not mainstream, non-probability sampling is the most fitting approach. The same characteristic of every non-probability sampling design is that it is impossible to estimate the probability that any member of the population will be sampled. Thus, it is harder for the researcher to guarantee that any conclusions drawn from the sample can be applied to the larger group from which the sample was drawn (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Additionally, Easterby-Smith et al., (2021) state that the richness of data from small samples can be seductive to qualitative researchers, who may not be immune to bias issues. Rich data can be persuasive, but every research study involves a sample, and it is vital to the credibility of results to consider how that sample fits into the larger group from which it is derived. Due to the small population size of this subculture, confident claims can be made regarding this specific target group with the use of a big enough sample size. As Dutch vegetarian/vegan male bodybuilders are a niche target, the sample size, despite it being small, can be regarded as an accurate representation of this specific subculture. However, indeed, these cannot be generalized to the general population of vegetarian/vegan consumers in the Netherlands. Because of the specific subculture being researched, two sampling methods were highlighted in this research: purposive sampling and snowball sampling.

Purposive & Snowball Sampling

To gather participants for this research we utilized two forms of sampling; (1) purposive and (2) snowball sampling. When using the purposive sampling technique, the researcher understands what types of sample units are needed according to the study's objectives (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). To research this specific subculture, specific criteria were chosen to conduct the sampling. The deliberate choice was made to choose plant-based male bodybuilders so we could research the relationship

between masculinity and a plant-based diet. Therefore, the criteria were: must consume according to a plant-based diet, the participants have to be active in bodybuilding, and lastly, they have to be Dutch.

Snowball sampling is done by asking someone who meets the criteria for inclusion in a study to nominate other potential participants (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). When individuals are extremely rare and it is difficult to identify which members of the population are involved, this method works well. Considering the subculture being researched, this method is a helpful strategy to recruit participants that fit the criteria. As it is a niche subculture, participants are likely to know one or two other people like them who might be interested in participating in the study.

We first looked at blogs with well-known vegan athletes, from which we got their Instagram handle and looked them up on Instagram. To find more people, we looked on online vegan diet forums. Eventually we ended up looking at companies that sell vegan supplements for workouts on Instagram, which led us to finding one of the most helpful participants. At this stage we continued our sampling through a snowball sampling strategy by asking the participants we had already identified whether they knew someone who fit the criteria and would also be willing to participate. Additionally, we looked into the followers of the bodybuilders we already identified as eligible and their comment section to see if there would be more eligible participants. To our luck, one of the participants offered to help us recruit participants on his Instagram story. From there on, we received additional connections through this person posting the Instagram story.

Sample Size

Name	Age	Bodybuilding Status	Years of Bodybuilding	Years of Plant-Based
<i>Oliver</i>	29	Non-Competitive	4	7
<i>Johan</i>	24	Non-Competitive	6	6
<i>Zane</i>	33	Competitive	12	3
<i>Peter</i>	22	Non-Competitive	7	2.5
<i>Hans</i>	31	Non-Competitive	5	2
<i>Jan</i>	33	Competitive	15	19
<i>Alex</i>	30	Competitive	12	5
<i>Rasmus</i>	26	Competitive	9	3
<i>Mike</i>	30	Competitive	12	5
<i>Jim</i>	26	Competitive	4	0.1
<i>Magnus</i>	33	Non-Competitive	14	1

Table 3 1: Overview Participants incl. Relevant Demographics

In qualitative research, the saturation principle is the most common guiding principle for assessing the suitability of purposive samples (Hennink & Kaiser, 2021). Saturation occurs at the point in the data collection process at which all important insights have been the subject of data collection, which suggests the conceptual categories which comprise the theory are 'saturated', so that the emerging theory is both comprehensive and well-grounded in data (Hennink & Kaiser, 2021).

In total, we reached out to 71 prospective participants and six companies in order to recruit the participants. In the end, 11 participated in the study. According to Hennink & Kaiser (2021) at least 12 participants are needed to empirically assess saturation. We want to argue that this subculture is niche and upcoming. Due to its novelty, it is difficult to reach the desired number of participants. No new information was yielded after the ninth interview and thus saturation was reached.

3.5 Data Collection

A qualitative interview is a guided conversation that revolves around a series of questions about a particular topic (Lofland & Lofland, 1984). It differs from a regular conversation in that it leads to an in-depth exploration of the subject (Charmaz, 2014). Interviews are always contextual and negotiated, and, unlike interrogations, their purpose has to be agreed on between the interviewer and the interviewee (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). According to King (2004), the main objective of qualitative interviewing is to gain an understanding of the participant's viewpoint from both the viewpoint of the participant as well as why they hold that viewpoint. Researchers will need to have the ability to not only understand their own beliefs, but also assist individuals in exploring their own beliefs, in order to obtain these insights.

As part of the interview planning, there are a few formal steps that address data protection, confidentiality, and informed consent (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). In preparation, the participants were sent a PowerPoint presentation (Appendix 7, 8) two days in advance with instructions on the preparation of the interview. This included ensuring that what the participants send is confidential and will not be shared with anyone other than the researchers. Participants were asked to create a mood board consisting of six to eight images in which they answer the following question: “How do you experience eating according to a vegetarian/vegan diet in relation to who you are?”. To make participants feel at ease answering this question, the preparation included the explanation that there are no wrong answers and it is completely up to their personal interpretation. To reduce complexity, an example was given with the question “How do you experience studying at Lund University?”, to which the answer was given with a few statements as to why each image was chosen. This was done to allow the participants to have an example to make the process easier for them.

All interviews were conducted through Zoom. Remote interviewing offers greater flexibility, and participants feel less committed since they are not required to host the researcher or travel to a certain place (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). However, due to these very reasons, remote interviews are not always beneficial to researchers. In comparison with face-to-face interviews, mediated interviews do not provide immediate context, depth, and non-verbal communication. It is therefore that Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) warn researchers that it is crucial to carefully evaluate whether mediated interviews are appropriate for specific research projects. For this reason, participants were always asked to turn

their cameras on to note facial expressions to increase the ability to read non-verbal cues. At the beginning of the interviews, participants were asked for their consent to record the interview. These interviews were then recorded through Zoom.

As the interview requires visuals to successfully conduct it according to the ZMET method, the software Miro was used to visualize the images that the participants prepared. Miro is a collaboration tool and allows for online, real-time collaboration. This way, the participants could move around images and add images and text where they needed to as the ZMET steps progressed. This tool also allowed for the participants to create the mind map (step seven) and the vignette (step eight) in collaboration with us. This tool also made it possible for us to follow along with what the participants were doing.

For full transparency, most often we did not get to step nine of the ZMET process, as the interviews were already lengthy and our participants had limited time for the interviews which we were already grateful for. Additionally, rich data had been collected already from the prior steps.

3.6 Controlling for Bias

The social desirability bias describes the tendency to portray oneself and one's social environment in a way that is perceived as socially desirable, but doesn't reflect the actual situation. Bias in research refers to mismatches between participants' authentic conception of reality and how they present that reality to the researchers (Bergen & Labonté, 2019). Studies which are sensitive or controversial are more likely to include social desirability bias. (Grimm, 2010). This study focuses on general accepted norms and values such as gender, masculinity, and the rising move to equality, participants may not have felt comfortable revealing their true intention, especially when faced with two female researchers. As for our participants, they are all active on social media. Therefore, to combat this social desirability bias and confirm whether they truly believe in their words or not, a conscious effort has been made to keep track of what participants post on the daily. This was done with the intention of checking whether what they say is what they preach on social media. Albeit, social media might still not be their true self and can be performative, one might be more transparent in a way in which they have control over what they post.

Additionally, Bergen & Labonté (2019) suggest five ways of asking questions in a manner that limits social desirability responses: indirect questioning, providing assurances, probing for more information, requesting stories or examples, and prefacing the question. These five aspects were taken into consideration when preparing for the interviews. An example of how these were done can be found in the table below.

Category	Example
<i>Indirect questioning</i>	"What stereotypical characteristics do you know of the typical bodybuilder?"
<i>Providing assurances</i>	"We are curious about your opinion, so don't be afraid to offend us or to step on someone's toes. The more unfiltered the better it is for our research."
<i>Probing for more information</i>	"You said that this seemed stupid. Why did you use that word?"
<i>Requesting stories or examples</i>	"Can you tell me about the time someone commented negatively about your diet and how you experienced that?"
<i>Prefacing the question</i>	"You're in the bodybuilding culture, in which meat is highly regarded as the source of protein and for building muscle. One could say that meat equals masculinity because of its association with that. What is your opinion on that?"

Table 3 2: Controlling For Bias – Questioning Techniques

3.7 Data Preparation

In order to successfully process the data, the raw data needs to be processed before continuing to the analyzing part (Miles et al., 2014). This includes recordings, and in the case of ZMET, it includes images and the created mind map of each participant. Due to the high number of long interviews (each interview being around one hour and 45 minutes), transcribing all interviews manually would require a long time. To save time, Trint was utilized to transcribe the interviews automatically. Luckily, Trint allowed for Dutch transcribing with the use of artificial intelligence, however the accuracy was often lacking. For this reason, we went back to the audio file to check along with the provided transcript to correct it where necessary. The transcripts were not verbatim, as “uhs” and “ehms” were removed from the file in order to provide a smooth text for analysing later on. All images were saved on a local hard drive. For a visual, we combined all the images into one image (Appendix 5). As step ten of the ZMET method requires constructing a mind map with the participants, appendix 6 presents the aggregate mental map of all participants. This map presents the various concepts and themes participants used to describe their own journey and feelings in one visual.

Data Analysis

4.1 Coding

Coding is the process of assigning symbolic meaning to the descriptive or inferential information gathered during a study (Miles et al., 2014). In essence, coding equals analysis. Some researchers may argue that coding is merely a technical process, part of this step. However, Miles et al. (2014) believe that coding requires deep reflection regarding the collected material and thus interpretation and analysis of the meaning of the data. In our study, we identified focus areas early on in the process. These focus areas guided our coding, as it gave us a rough idea of what to look for without limiting ourselves to a set codebook. As described in chapter 4 the discussion topics could only be structured to a certain degree since the visuals that are selected by the participant are leading to the conversations. The interviewers do have an input in the topics they want to discuss through the use of ZMET, but the form and order in which they come up is flexible. This leaves the researchers with an extraordinarily rich set of data that is almost impossible to define beforehand. We therefore argue that the most optimal way of examining the data is through somewhat deductive coding. As this is a phenomenological study with the aim to find new ideas, relations and mechanisms, we did not want to set up a strict codebook. However, despite doing an inductive approach on the research, we want to classify our coding as inspired by a deductive manner as our codes are based on the theories and concepts from the literature review. Each transcript was put into a separate Word file. In Word, we went over the entire transcript and left comments and remarks where we felt that the information presented was relevant and interesting to the study.

As we looked at a phenomenon and how participants experience it, we used process coding, emotion coding, and In Vivo coding to sort the data. To connote observable and conceptual action, this coding method exclusively uses gerunds ("-ing" words) which is helpful when understanding processes such as action and change in relation to the experiences of the participants (Miles et al. 2014). To illustrate; this study looks at how participants construct and consume their identity prior to their vegan diet and during their vegan diet. Ordering the data chronologically helps the researcher understand the process and where junctures are found and what the impact of these is.

Text	Process Code
But then I thought, I need to know how that works. Because if I get a vegan client later on, I need to know what the proper nutrition is.	Experimenting with diet for work purposes.
Then I just went from a lot of meat consumption to zero. And yeah, that was the drive. Health, but eventually to really call myself vegan and do it for the rest of my life, that's where the ethical aspect came in.	Transitioning into a plant-based diet.

Table 4 1: Example Process Code

We were also interested in how the participants felt throughout their experience. Emotion coding proved to be helpful, as it codes with the participant’s emotions (Miles et al. 2014). This was useful regarding gaining insight into the participants’ lived experiences and perspectives, especially because of the rollercoaster the participants experienced throughout their whole journey in becoming plant-based. This allowed us to understand each transition step and how they felt while experiencing it.

Text	Emotion Code
So yeah, there have been periods where it was not fun at all and I felt quite lonely.	Sadness & Loneliness.
There is a domestic animal, and we decided to love it and cherish it ... but another animal that is not domestic, that’s on our plate ... how can people think like this? How is this okay?	Frustration.

Table 4 2: Example Emotion Code

In Vivo coding entails coding using the participant’s own language such as the words they spoke or short phrases they said (Miles et al. 2014). This way of coding was helpful since we encourage participants to use metaphors to explain their experiences. Especially in a difficult language and culture, this made it efficient for us to go back and find specific quotes and metaphors used by the participants without false interpretation.

Text (In Dutch)	In Vivo Code
Kijk, ik ben het er niet helemaal eens, dat buiten de boot vallen. Want ik noem het wel zo, maar voor mij voelt het niet zo.	Buiten de boot vallen.
Ja ik denk ook een beetje dat het over de uitspraak gaat, lone wolf.	Lone wolf.

Table 4 3: Example Vivo Code

4.2 Data Interpretation

Like any other language, it contains nuances that are difficult to translate. Interpretation of the language is especially important in our data analysis process because of the nature of the ZMET method to use metaphors. In order to accurately interpret metaphors, understanding the context of the culture is crucial. Direct translation to English removes cultural context and meaning from the metaphor. Regarding the context of the research, we were born and raised in the Netherlands, therefore we have an accurate understanding of what is being meant with the metaphors in Dutch context. Additionally, we always paraphrase and confirm whether what we think they mean is actually what they meant. Especially in a topic that required a lot of reflective thinking, participants tended to answer with prompts and phrases that can only be accurately understood by native Dutch speakers. While the phrases could be translated to fit the context, it is still important to highlight the nuances when it comes to translating quotes. Below you can see some examples of the metaphors and how they are interpreted.

Original Metaphor (Dutch)	Direct Translation (English)	Interpretation
Buiten de boot vallen.	Falling outside of the boat.	Feeling like you go against what is seen as normal in society.
Één hersencel consumenten	One brain cell consumers	Consumers who lack intellectual depth and reflexive thinking.
Honeymoon	-	Being new to something which creates excitement and an overly positive attitude.
Oogkleppen op hebben	Having horse blinkers on.	Tunnel vision
Sierspier	Decoration muscle.	Muscles that are not regarded as utility but rather for aesthetic purpose.

Table 4 4: Example Data Interpretation

4.3 Quality of Data

A qualitative research project can also be framed by more than one paradigm, or way of understanding the nature of reality and knowledge, each associated with a different way to define, understand, and report quality. Therefore, Stenfors et al., (2020) outline four criteria used widely to evaluate the authenticity of qualitative research: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

For a research study to be considered credible, its methodology must be explained and justified well (Stenfors et al., 2020). In order for research to be credible, there must be alignment between theory, research question, data collection, analysis, and results. Further, the sampling strategy, the depth and volume of data, as well as the analytical steps are considered, and followed appropriately. In the case of this research, ZMET is a widely used and verified method. ZMET interviews provide consumers with a safe space to explore the deeply personal feelings and beliefs that shape them unconsciously. The focus of assessing quality should be on the depth, richness, and relevance of the data (Stenfors et al., 2020). This aligns with the objective of understanding the participants and eliciting data.

Research is considered dependable when there is sufficient information provided so that another researcher could follow the same steps, even if their conclusions are different (Stenfors et al., 2020). The research process outlines the exact steps taken and the importance of each step for full transparency and replicability.

The confirmability of the research entails detailed description and use of quotes to help the researchers explain how they reached their conclusions (Stenfors et al., 2020). All our quotes are derived from the raw data, and can be traced back. Quotes will be translated to English, the original files will be stored in case the legitimacy of the quotes is challenged.

Transferability entails an accurate explanation of the context in which the research was conducted and how it influenced the findings (Stenfors et al., 2020). Earlier in this research paper, the ontology and epistemology were elaborated upon, allowing for a deeper understanding of the scientific tradition this research focuses on. As this research has a constructivist approach, the findings of this research are a co-construction between the researcher and the data, which makes it possible that different researchers will interpret the data differently. To ensure the most accurate results, both

researchers are born and raised in the Netherlands, which allows for accurate interpretation of the culture.

4.4 Ethical considerations

Ethics as a concept was first discussed by Greek philosophers. Their discussions often revolved around the question if it would be possible to determine principles that would help guide individuals in behaving morally (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). In research, this notion is ever relevant. Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) highlight ten key principles in research ethics, adapted originally from Bryman & Bell (2015). These cover the safekeeping of participants, but also the protection of the research community's integrity. These principles involve two pillars: (1) protection of research participants, and (2) protection of integrity of the research community.

Consumer culture research poses no direct, nor physical, risk to the participants. However, we might cause unintentional psychological harm by potentially asking questions that the participants might deem inappropriate. We therefore highlight the importance of protecting the research participants, as highlighted by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021). All participants were beforehand informed about the scope of the study insofar as possible without revealing the true motives to avoid biased answers. All participants have been informed on the matter multiple times and were given the opportunity to ask questions should anything be unclear. This starts during recruitment, during the preparation email and lastly before starting the interview.

Privacy, confidentiality and anonymity are sensitive areas and should be treated with utmost care. Within this research paper, all participants have been given pseudonyms, which makes it unable to track which participants said what. Pseudonyms were also used for the data analysis part, meaning that should something happen to the data, their real names are not linked to the files. Data remains a sensitive issue in research. A leak of data can be detrimental to participants in the study. To combat this, we have stored all our data on a hard drive. While online services were used to transcribe the data, we made sure to delete the files on the program once the transcriptions were finished.

Lastly, we need to make sure to avoid deception, conflicts of interest and misleading reporting, and increase our transparency. Throughout the paper, we have been transparent in our processes, and highlighted our own learning curves as researchers. By providing a clear process of the data collection, analysis, and interpretation, we aim to be as transparent as possible regarding all these areas. Additionally, we have agreed to share this research paper with participants who showed interest in the final product, to show that there will be no misleading information and that we treat the subculture with dignity and respect.

Findings

In this section we will provide the most relevant findings of our research. They are structured to read as a narrative and follow structuration as the discussions in the next chapter. This funnel like strategy will start by presenting contextual findings. Then delving deeper in the process prior and during the transition to plant-based. Finally we will discuss in detail conflict-based experiences of being a vegan bodybuilder.

5.1 Societal Pressure on Being a Man

Within bodybuilding, the focus of importance lies on muscle mass and creating the ‘perfect’ physique. A masculine appearance has been socially conditioned among the participants from an early age, eliciting the feeling of insecurity when these masculine ideals are not met. Within these masculine ideals are the perception that men are strong and tough, and therefore need a lot of muscles to be masculine.

*“.. you do it for the masculine appearance and the prestige that comes with it...” -
-Johan, age 24. Non-Competitive Bodybuilder.*

“I thought to myself, boys need to be strong and tough, they need to be able to fight and defend themselves. So, that is why I started. Just like any other guy I started from a place of insecurity.” -Jan, age 33. Competitive Bodybuilder.

In addition to the perception of masculinity, perception of gender roles also plays a part in this socially conditioned notion. Namely, the notion of providing for a family. Participants expressed a modern take on masculinity, meaning that for them masculinity or “being a man” means being able to provide for their family. Not to be confused with taking care of their family as this is a more feminine role.

*“If I could afford to have an old school, conservative family, by afford I mean financially, then I would like that. I would be the breadwinner and my girlfriend a stay-at-home mom.”
-Rasmus, age 26. Competitive Bodybuilder.*

The connection between masculinity and meat comes from when men provided for their families through hunting animals and bringing home meat. In the current day, providing is no longer hunting but means working and being the breadwinner to provide for their families. Masculinity is providing for their loved ones in the broadest sense of the word, this also relates to the personal values and beliefs they hold so deeply. Whereas masculinity in their teen years was obtained by building a physical masculinity, it has evolved to a more implicit version of self-beliefs.

5.2 Perception on Stigma

Understanding the stigma allows us to take a glance into what the main challenges are regarding external identity. Interestingly, when questioned about what a typical vegan looks like in the eyes of the participants, all comments made were negative.

“... before I was vegan myself, I thought of someone like that as skinny. Someone that is pale and would probably have a vitamin-C deficiency. I thought these people were kind of odd.”
-Zane, age 33. Competitive Bodybuilder.

As discussed in the literature review, there is a strong negative stereotype on plant-based consumers amongst meat-eating consumers, and this is no different among plant-based bodybuilders. When asked how to describe a typical vegan consumer they do not refer to one of their plant-based bodybuilding peers. Instead, they confirm that the being weak stereotype among plant-based athletes is prevalent in their minds, despite having proof that debunks this stereotype. This shows how ingrained this stigma lies within this consumer group, that even they themselves have issues fighting it. Some of these vegan bodybuilders have been plant-based for more than ten years but are still carrying the negative stereotype in their minds.

“A negative person, she resents society except for the people that live exactly like she does.”
-Johan, age 24. Non-Competitive Bodybuilder.
“Vegans are seen as arrogant, judgmental and think that they are better than others”
- Peter, age 22. Non-Competitive Bodybuilder.

Another side of the coin is the stigma of overly arrogant moralistic individuals who will do anything in their power to convert other people in the pursuit of encouraging what is morally right. This stigma can be traced back to the first generation of vegans and the current activist vegans. While this was decades ago, the stereotype still prevails as the only vegans that are portrayed in mainstream media are the ones that fit this stereotype.

*“I didn’t want to talk about it <ethical convictions>, because I thought oh sh*t, I don’t want to be seen as one of those whiny vegans.”* -Peter, age 22. Non-Competitive Bodybuilder.

This negative stereotype is very consistent and also influences their motivations and behaviours in social environments. The activist approach among vegan consumers can trigger negative emotions in others and have an undesired outcome. As a result, vegans are regarded as whiny and irritating, which is a notion that participants do not want to be associated with as they care about their status within the bodybuilding community and would not want to jeopardize it.

“The first person I spoke <after plant-based transition> who is a personal trainer, said that I was definitely going to lose a lot of muscle mass. I asked him why, to which he replied; that is obvious.”

-Zane, age 33. Competitive Bodybuilder.

In relation to the prevalent “skinny” characteristic of vegan consumers, there are numerous misconceptions about the nutritious value of a vegan diet. Most of these misconceptions are tied to the intake of protein and the superiority of animal-protein over plant-protein. Plant-protein is believed to be inferior which as a result would lead for a person to lose body mass, which is especially in bodybuilding very concerning. Participants stated that they were extremely anxious about losing body mass due to a protein deficiency and a lack of vitamins prior to entering their new plant-based lifestyle. Protein intake is also the first concern raised by their peers as a direct response to their diet transition.

“Most people have tried a vegetarian burger 5 years ago and back then it tasted like cardboard, but now they have improved and become tastier. I recommend them a lot”

-Jan, age 33. Competitive Bodybuilder.

The lack of nutritious value and an antagonizing personality are the most prudent generalizations towards a plant based diet, but are followed by a perceived high degree of complexity and a fear of lack of indulgence. The high degree of complexity results in a feeling of restriction and the perception of an extreme diet. Despite the fact that The Netherlands is regarded as one of the front-runners in plant-based consumption (Stil, 2021) when meat-alternatives were first introduced the assortment was very limited and the quality extremely poor. This resulted in a bad product image for this category and it has lasted ever since. The idea that meat-alternatives taste horribly adds to the misconceptions of not being able to enjoy food when on a plant-based diet.

“Popeye is an exception, there is no mainstream media coverage or advertising that shows you that eating vegetables can make you strong.” **-Oliver, age 29. Non-Competitive Bodybuilder.**

Bodybuilders are more reflective in micros and macros compared to the average consumer. Yet, they lack a complex understanding of vitamins and minerals in a meat-based diet, let alone a plant-based diet. Mainstream fitness media overly promote animal-protein as the way to be successful and strong. This belief is repeatedly encouraged by their peers and trainers as well. Moreover, it is what they grew up with and have been taught since they were children due to the Dutch culture and the educational value of “De Schijf van Vijf”. The message became so strong and gained a reputation of common sense, that it did not even cross their mind to question it or consider alternatives.

5.3 The Value of Meat Consumption

All participants, with the exception of one, were already bodybuilders prior to their transition to veganism. Diet wise that has taken them on a journey from one end of the spectrum to the opposite end of the spectrum.

“Before I would go to the gym, I’d consume a specific amount of protein from chicken. I would eat a sandwich with an entire package of chicken filet. That is literally one package of 150 gram of chicken between two slices of bread.” -Magnus, age 33. Non-Competitive Bodybuilder.

The participants typically consumed 750 to 1000 grams of meat per day. To put that in perspective, that is at least 601% more than the average Dutch consumer (Dagevos et al., 2020). The stigma that prescribes that one would lose a lot of body mass if they do not consume animal protein is already apparent in the previous section. However, not only is the functionality valued, but also the social value of meat.

“He taught me how to use the grill ... I used to stand next to him <father>, behind the grill. That was his bonding moment with his son ... At some point <after becoming vegan> I would sit there with a smoked paprika. My family would be very opinionated about that.”
-Mike, age 30. Competitive Bodybuilder.

The social and emotional value of meat predates adolescence where it was seen as a bonding ritual between father and son during the earlier years, once again enforcing the masculinity aspect. While these are family values, the rituals are also prevalent in the bodybuilding groups.

“After a morning training we would go to someone’s house and eat fried eggs with bread. One of those bro-moments. If you would supplement that with chickpea-curry then it wouldn’t be the same, it wouldn’t be manly enough for them.”

“With some of my bodybuilding friends we would go to sushi Sumo <all-you-can-eat Sushi restaurant> and eat six or seven rounds of fish for protein after we did training” -
-Mike, age 30. Competitive Bodybuilder.

Participants refer to these bonding moments as “bro-moments”. These revolve around consuming animal-based products, as the replacement of it results in the ritual being of less symbolic value in this subculture.

5.4 Motivations for Plant-Based Lifestyle

Health is an important factor among our participants. All participants showed that health is prioritized in their diet and daily routine. To them, health is linked to performance, and in a field where performance determines one's career, it is highly important to keep one's health up. The following quote highlights the health justification for going plant-based.

“At first it was health <reason for transitioning>, because I had listened to a podcast in which someone spoke about meat not being necessarily healthy, which confused me because I had never heard anything like that. I always thought it was obvious that animal products were healthy ... So I watched a documentary <What The Health> about it, and I realized that it was not so obvious <that animal products are healthy>. That made me want to eat plant-based, so a week after watching that documentary I went plant-based” - Peter, age 22. Non-Competitive Bodybuilder.

Being exposed to the media was a turning point in which an almost immediate shift in diet would occur from eating a lot of meat to zero. Using the argument of health to keep the motivation close to the individual gave them a reason to want to change, keeping close to their personal values. The continuous aim for better health is also shown in the quote below.

“I’ve always had issues with my gut and bad skin. I always had small pains. And at one point I went everywhere to get it checked, physiotherapy, osteopath, and nowhere could help me with what I was experiencing. My skin was also always chaotic due to lactose and perhaps also meat because it increases the chance of inflammation. So then I came in contact <with a vegan bodybuilder> and he explained to me that once you start eating plant-based it can make a huge positive difference in your body, so I started that <eating a vegan diet> without hesitation.”
-Zane, age 33. Competitive Bodybuilder.

Experiencing pain to which no clear answer is given drives the need for change. Since food is closely linked to one's health, the switch here came from a point of irritation. Having been irritated and not knowing the answer combined with a role model figure who explained that plant-based will have positive effects solidified his decision.

“Some information <from his friend> came my way about how healthy a plant-based diet is or isn't, also regarding various illnesses and inflammation and everything. So that triggered me to research more about the topic, especially since I found it very interesting since I've always been into nutrition.” -Alex, age 30. Competitive Bodybuilder.

As bodybuilders, in general, need to watch and calculate their food intake, their understanding of micros and macros is more advanced than the average person who does not reflect on those matters. Having an already keen interest in the topic of nutrition allows them to be more open towards a plant-based diet. All participants had a general notion that plant-based is healthy, however the most common worry was getting enough nutrition to build muscle.

Progressed Motivation

Although ethics was not a main argument for the transition, it has become the main driver for sustaining a plant-based diet in the long-run. This dissonance between what is consumed and what it takes killing an animal in order for consumers to still eat meat is perceived as reprehensible. The participants all regard animals as the same instead of the typical hierarchy most consumers still do with domestic animals at the top. They feel like their connection to animals has increased and now think beyond the typical domestic animal.

“I do not understand the perspective that others have on speciesism. That’s something I find horrible, that on this earth we decided which animals are domestic, and those we will love, name, cherish, feed... But then another animal, that we don’t consider domestic, which could be more intelligent and empathetic than your domestic animal, that’s my breakfast. That’s on my plate. I just cannot fathom how we can think like that.” -Rasmus, age 26. Competitive Bodybuilder.

Through their diet, they were able to break through their own previous dissonance and re-establish a connection with animals. With most participants, the ethical reason was the factor that solidified their decision to transition, with some even changing their reasoning for becoming vegan along the way.

*“That was the drive <to go vegan>, health, but eventually to really call myself vegan with a lot of confidence that I will be vegan for the rest of my life was the ethical argument that I’ve learned along the way ... Of course, as an individual I want to be as healthy as possible, but the fact that in my opinion veganism should be the moral standard stems from the ethical aspect.”
-Peter, age 22. Non-Competitive Bodybuilder.*

Ethics will prove to become a valuable motivator over time. While it may not have been the reason for the transition, the ethical aspect of it solidifies their decision in going plant-based. The participants state that their sympathy towards animals and their feelings have increased the more they reflect on what they eat, and in turn disapprove of how animals are treated as consumption objects.

“I was aware that it <consuming animals> came with ethical issues, but it was easy for me to put on blinders for that.” -Alex, age 30. Competitive Bodybuilder.

Despite being aware of the process that lies behind their piece of meat on their plate, they actively, but subconsciously, ignored these facts until their lifestyle changed. Additionally, participants also highlighted how it has re-established the meat-animal link in their minds, and are now able to see through the supermarkets efforts to detach the animal from the meat as much as possible.

“People are being misled you know. If I were to drive around and pass pastures, I would see cows in a field. And most people think those happy cows are the cows that end up on my plate. But in reality, only 1% of the meat-cows actually has a life like that”

-Rasmus, age 26. Competitive Bodybuilder.

Comments such as these are common, and are aimed at the meat-producer but also meat-consumer. While they disagree with meat-consumers on their lifestyle, they understand why they think that eating meat is okay due to the way it is promoted. They admit that companies have been doing a horrible, yet amazing job, in the advertising of meat and animal-based products. An example that was commonly found among participants were happy cows, advertised by Campina, a dairy company. This is seen by participants as propaganda, as it is far from the truth.

5.5 Importance of Social Influence

Establishing normalcy

Participants showed that some of them were influenced by someone within their social environment. With this approach comes two reasons for transitioning. The first reason for transitioning was not necessarily altruistic, but came with a sense of normalcy. The second reason is that through their social environment they were educated on the topic of animal welfare and health and therefore decided to make the change.

“For me <becoming vegetarian> it came with the awareness that I was chewing on a dead animal and I didn't like that so I told myself I would stop doing that. It wasn't necessarily because I felt bad about the animals or the environment, that was just an added bonus. It <being plant-based> was stimulated by my childhood friends that I grew up with for twelve years, a lot of them were vegetarian. So when I went over for dinner at one of my childhood friends' place, his entire family was vegetarian, so I saw how it could be and that it was just a normal thing, and they all were healthy.” -Jan, age 33. Competitive Bodybuilder.

Having examples of how it could be and how normal it is for other people to consume a vegetarian diet encourages the idea that it can be done. With the stigma that being vegetarian has nowadays, growing up where it was always just ‘there’ and not questioned instilled a sense of not having to be

ashamed to want a vegetarian diet. Especially in the growing up phases of life, being exposed to behaviour and making it normal allows for an earlier transition.

“My mom was fine with it and told me that if I wanted to do that I could. She thought it would be a phase, not knowing that this change would last.” -Jan, age 33. Competitive Bodybuilder.

A close support system encourages the idea that the transition is welcomed by family members in combination with the perception that it is normal due to the frequency in one’s friend group reduces the barriers of adopting a vegetarian diet.

“I have quite a lot of friends who are also vegetarian. I started going vegetarian with one of my best friends, so that’s been quite nice, especially when you go out to dinner together <and you have a similar diet>.” -Hans, age 31. Non-Competitive Bodybuilder.

Information Source

As mentioned before, the second aspect of how their social environment influences them revolves around having these topics discussed and therefore are brought to light through someone in a close circle through the role of an informant.

*“I have a family member who researched a lot regarding this topic <health and the environment> ... they always told me what they were researching so that’s how I got in contact with it.”
-Johan, age 24. Non-Competitive Bodybuilder.*

Having someone close in your circle that you trust makes one more open towards wanting to know more about the topic. Seeing someone get passionate about the topic made the participants eager to learn more. These contact moments are usually followed up by self-study, through watching documentaries or reading articles.

“Some information <from his friend> came my way about how healthy a plant-based diet is or isn’t, also regarding various illnesses and inflammation and everything. So that triggered me to research more about the topic, especially since I found it very interesting since I’ve always been into nutrition.” -Alex, age 30. Competitive Bodybuilder.

The self-study part after coming in first contact with the topic is the first start to truly considering plant-based. While they receive information from a secondary source, participants eventually opt to research for themselves to see it with their own eyes. It is then that they land in a rabbit hole of research that eventually leads them to the transition.

5.6 Process of Transitioning

The switch towards a plant-based diet starts out as an experiment rather than a change.

“Yeah, that was after three months <duration of experimentation period>. The first three months my focus was that I will see if I can do it <the plant-based diet> and I will give it my all. If I receive negative effects then I would stop immediately, but those three months really solidified it for me because I experienced so many positive effects.”-Zane, age 33. Competitive Bodybuilder.

Hesitation regarding the plant-based diet is acknowledged before going into the transition. Giving themselves a time limit helped the participant to stay motivated because of the perception that it would be temporary. However, the results were so positive that continuing a plant-based diet even after the experiment month was the right thing to do, especially with the value put on health.

“It’s an experiment for me. It’s something new for me. I’ve been vegan for a month now and did a period of five weeks transitioning to get there. I always like experimenting and finding out new things. I’m also someone who can’t sit still, so I’m always looking for a new challenge.”
-Jim, age 26. Competitive Bodybuilder.

On the other hand, being adventurous turns a plant-based diet from an experiment to a challenge. In line with the competitive spirit found in bodybuilding, these can also translate to participants as being competitive towards their own self. For Joris, it did not come from ethical reasons or necessarily health, but he wanted to challenge his body and mind. He has not solidified his change, as he is quite new into this diet and results have yet to come.

“I knew that I wanted to help train people so I wanted to try out various lifestyles. I was an omnivore, so I ate like the average consumer, but I wanted to try out being vegan for a month as a challenge. Because I thought I have to know what this is all about in case I get a vegan client.”
-Rasmus, age 26. Competitive Bodybuilder.

This challenge attitude is also found in this participant who did it for extrinsic reasons. For him it was a way to empathize with vegans in case he would need to help one, however after having followed a vegan diet for a while and learning more about the ethical side, he wanted to stay vegan for the long run because he could no longer look away.

5.6 Successful Transition

A successful transition has been accomplished once the participant is satisfied with the results. These results are based on two pillars, feeling better health wise, and feeling better morality wise.

“A year and a half ago I did a challenge with a colleague of mine. He was on an animal-based diet and I was on a plant-based one. We trained for three months. I felt great, and he felt slightly less optimistic. I think that when you follow a plant-based diet, you easily hit the micros and macros for your body to recover quicker. So yeah, I feel great. So when people ask me if I’m missing anything <regarding nutrients>, I say no. Not that I know. I tested my blood and everything was perfect.” - Oliver, age 29. Non-Competitive Bodybuilder.

Participants show the tendency to compare their results regarding feeling in better shape in opposition to someone who still consumes meat. To highlight this contrast, this shows that participants feel like one-upping meat-eaters by feeling better and behaving morally correct. By contributing to a “better world”, participants feel righteous in their decision. In comparison to the regular consumer, they perceive themselves as doing God's work - something we all should do but not everyone does. It makes them feel good about themselves morality wise, which only encourages the idea of a successful transition.

“The difference in footprint is so big between eating meat and not eating meat that it’s such an easy way to contribute...I cannot get myself to eat meat again.” -Magnus, age 33. Non-Competitive Bodybuilder.

5.7 Types of Conflict

The vegan bodybuilders receive, a lot of push-back for their choice to become vegan. Conflict can occur within their close circle or outside. We also find that participants distinguish between the comments that they get from men and women.

“I think that women by nature have more empathy...and unlike men are less worried about being masculine and tough.” -Rasmus, age 26. Competitive Bodybuilder.

While they do get into conflict due to their lifestyle choice, they acknowledge that it tends to be men who portray a wide range of negative comments regarding their plant-based lifestyle. It is seldom that women approach them and make a big deal out of it due to being perceived as more empathetic.

The biggest trigger for carnivore consumers to engage in a discussion on our participant’s dietary choices is the non-consumption of meat in any specific meal or occasion. The type of discussions and or responses vary, but we see three categories in which these responses are based: (1) the stigma around protein, (2) mockery, and (3) undermining their lifestyle choice.

The first one is related to the stigma around protein in which fellow bodybuilders and fitness enthusiasts are astonished yet worried about the participant’s protein intake. They lack comprehension on how such a physique can be achieved without consuming animal-protein.

“With my physique, I’m 1.80 m and weigh 110 kg, everyone has questions regarding working out, such as why I work out this often or whether I use steroids.” -Zane, age 33. Competitive Bodybuilder.

They feel as if the plant-based bodybuilders are hiding a secret, which leads to accusations of using muscle enhancing substances such as steroids. In turn, while they understand that being muscular is impressive, participants feel like those people only care about the muscles and disregard the person that is underneath. Additionally, people who do not necessarily care about the muscles seem to speak the same worry towards their potential lack of vitamin intake. All in all, plant-based diets are not put in a good light, as these comments are very common, and people cannot comprehend how one can be strong and healthy following a fully plant-based diet as an athlete.

In the second category we find a pattern of mockery consisting of ad hominem statements and/or provocative jokes that underline the participants for their lifestyle. The themes around these jokes vary, but often do revolve around their masculinity or health aspect.

“Let’s prepare a nice leaf of lettuce for you” -Jan, age 33. Competitive Bodybuilder.

These ad hominem comments come in the form of sarcastic digs at the participant. Participants note that these comments mainly come from their close circle of friends. Because of the proximity of these people, the participants declared that they do not mind and see it as a bit of fun. However, if we take a step back, given the meat – protein – masculinity connection as elaborated upon, this can be regarded as an indirect attack on their masculinity.

“My team captain would tell me; oh, so you’re sick? You should eat meat then so you won’t get sick again.” -Zane, age 33. Competitive Bodybuilder.

Additionally, they commonly get comments in favour of a meat-rich diet, stating it as the superior diet in comparison to being plant-based. These comments are delivered in an amicable manner, but have an undertone stating that their plant-based diet may not be as healthy as they think it is. These comments undermine the lifestyle choices of the participant.

The third category highlights blaming the participant for restraining others with their diet. This form particularly plays out at social gatherings where there is external pressure to eat meat.

*“They would tell me to just eat meat for once to not ruin the mood. To them it’s not a big deal.”
-Peter, age 22. Non-Competitive Bodybuilder.*

The plant-based individual is asked to just eat meat for one time because in their opinion it really is not that big of a deal. There is no regard for the justification of that person's lifestyle choices. In doing so, the participant is being pushed towards the stereotypical box of the annoying vegan involuntarily by simply having a different lifestyle.

5.7 Managing Conflict

We note how none of these discussions were started with the intention for the other person to learn something about a plant-based diet or the person's motivation for pursuing it. How the participants will reciprocate and respond to the discussion is dependent on a number of factors: (1) the time spent being vegan, (2) the level of success in bodybuilding and (3) an indication of the person they are talking to.

Starting out plant-based the individuals are excited about their lifestyle and take pride in being able to discuss it. That is because they have a new found profound truth, but also because they discovered that all the negative prejudices turn out to be quite the opposite.

"I refer to it as the honeymoon phase, it's when new, young vegans are excited about their new lifestyle and are eager to share it with their friends and family"
-Mike, age 30. Competitive Bodybuilder.

However, this joyful feeling is short-lived. Given the common negative responses, as discussed earlier, that they get for their lifestyle, their feelings change. Instead of excitement, they start feeling frustration.

"Such conversations can leave quite an irritating feeling because I just think that they are not unintelligent, but they just refuse to critically think about it. You just refuse to, almost as if it was on purpose." -Rasmus, age 26. Competitive Bodybuilder.

They feel like their attempts at conveying their excitement is futile, as it seems like there's a wall in between them and the opposite person. They seem to be listening, but not fully hearing what the participants have to say. From the participant's perspective it also feels like the wall is blocking their sight to what is really going on regarding the meat that they consume.

The degree to which meat-eating consumers want to hold on to their beliefs and are unwilling to look at the matter from another perspective is significant. Mike's case provides an exact example of such stubbornness to believe what the participants have to say.

"Despite my credentials <expertise in bodybuilding and environmental science> people still believe I'm in the wrong." -Mike, age 30. Competitive Bodybuilder.

As an environmental scientist and a successful bodybuilder, he has more in-depth expertise in environmental and nutrition issues. Yet, people are unable or unwilling to take to heart what he is saying. Like Mike, others feel the same frustration and decide to take a different approach. Causes for this change can be found in the in-effectiveness of their current approach, but are also driven by a need to maintain social belonging. Especially through responses type two and three the consumers are pushed into the same box as the stereotype of the “annoying vegan”.

“When we walked in, I asked if they had anything vegan. The man laughed and showed me around the buffet. This is where the tomatoes, cucumbers and lettuce are, he said while guiding me. I figured I was just gonna suck it up and try to make the best out of it, pay an equal share of the bill even though I’m barely eating anything. I’m gonna do my vegan thing in the midst of all these carnivores. It wasn’t the most appetizing thing I’ve ever eaten, but at least I was able to enjoy the occasion. I didn’t want to be the annoying whiner, because I feel like I am in those situations.” -
Oliver, age 29. Non-Competitive Bodybuilder.

Making the best of a situation that is seemingly challenging for a plant-based person seems to be the most effective way to get through to others. By showing a positive approach, they reduce the ammunition that others can use towards them. For example, by not complaining about the lack of choices, they can avoid comments about the difficulty of their plant-based diet.

“You have to spark an interest, give enough stimuli to foster a positive example that inspires.” - -
Mike, age 30. Competitive Bodybuilder.

Once they diverted their tactics it becomes apparent that the strategy is to judge the person who they are talking to and depending on their motives and ability to be open minded decide whether they want to engage or not. In their opinion they achieve the most when they are able to lead by example.

Despite these positive approaches, discussions cannot be avoided at all times, especially when they are started by others. In cases that our participants do have to engage, a common defence mechanism is to reply with humour and sarcasm. However, once their masculinity is being questioned in regards to their plant-based diet, they opt for a simple response - peacocking.

“I have by far the most muscles from all the guys in my friend group, so now everyone wants to eat more vegetables.” -Oliver, age 29. Non-Competitive Bodybuilder.

This brings the discussion to an end and makes it less interesting for the other person to engage in. By using their body as proof of success, they leave little room for people to question the success of their lifestyle. This approach is only successful once the bodybuilder has reached some sort of objective

muscular goal. Peacocking is avoided when the individual has not reached that goal, as they are afraid to amplify the negative stigma of vegan bodybuilders being weak.

“I think there is a correlation between the level of education and intelligence and being plant-based. I think in general that more intelligent people will reach the conclusion to go plant-based faster. It is because they are more aware about life and what their role in the ecosystem is.” -

Magnus, age 33. Non-Competitive Bodybuilder

Academia and intelligence level is linked to their lack of awareness and reflective thinking. With this approach, they make themselves seem superior over the inferior meat-eaters, a direct opposite of how meat-eater’s view plant-based consumers.

“I think in general it’s the less intelligent athletes <that look down on vegans> that want quick results. I think they are also more susceptible to steroids. They don’t have an academic view on how to retrieve and analyse information and are therefore more susceptible to taking things that are at face value as the truth.” -Johan, age 24. Non-Competitive Bodybuilder.

Despite this, participants state that meat-eaters should do whatever they feel best doing, and if that entails consuming meat then so be it. However, it is interesting to note that this negative perception of meat-eaters is evident, but this topic is avoided in social contact to avoid adding to the stigma of the do-gooder, over committed moral figure.

DISCUSSION

6.1 Socio-Symbolic Value of Meat Consumption

We start by elaborating on the socio-symbolic value of meat consumption within the bodybuilding subculture. This finding may seem less significant than the others. Nevertheless, many of the social processes and mechanisms we've encountered can be traced to the fetishization (Marx, 1856) of animal-protein and meat, hence the significance of the finding. Thus, we contribute to the theoretical understanding of meat consumption's socio-symbolic significance.

Animal protein, meat, is highly fetishized (Marx, 1856 in Kaplan, 2016) due to its perceived apex status in nutritional value which has grown into a signifier of the bodybuilding subculture in-group members. This is on top of the already existing *linking-value* meat (Cova, 1997) has in male-to-male bonding rituals and events. It is important to note that the fetishization is tied to animal-protein specifically, not protein in general. Socially constructed *gender norms* (Visconti, et al., 2018) idealize a masculine ideal of a toned body with spectacular biceps. Being able to fulfil these idealized norms will result admiration among male peers and perceived desirability from the opposite sex. To achieve this, a substantial amount of training and animal-protein is required. As a result of strongly embedded beliefs that animal protein is the only means to obtain their protein intake, alternatives are discarded or strategically overlooked. These consumers behave similarly to how they perform strategic ignorance of the ethical aspects of meat consumption (Carrillo & Mariotti, 2000). We termed this the *protein paradox*; a bi-result of a long-standing history of idolizing meat as a commodity. Second, meat consumption promotes masculine identity traits and serves as an ideal consumption object for bonding between men. The post-workout protein binges among the "bro's" offer these consumers the same mechanism for creating value as the annual family barbeque at which a father teaches his son how to handle the grill. In-group members (Thomas et al., 2018) are able to consolidate in their peers and build close bonds. Cova & Shankar (2018), refer to this concept as *sociality*; a feeling of belonging and gratification. The social symbolic events would become mundane without meat. The linking value of meat and animal protein resides strongly amongst the bodybuilding subculture. We argue that the significant linking-value in animal protein forms a social barrier in the willingness for bodybuilders to transition to plant-based.

6.2 Subculture Colored Stigma

Using the Stigma Theory by Goffman (1963), this section aims to raise and understand the stereotype of the vegan consumer. We add to the literature on the vegan stereotype by Brough et al. (2016). Additionally, we contribute to the knowledge of stigma by examining the processes and aims within

the bodybuilding subculture paired with vegan stereotypes. When we learn how stigma is generated and maintained, we can identify the existing hurdles and how they need to be addressed.

The Whining Vegan

Stigma on vegan consumers is culturally distinct; it's built from the general existing stigma, then moulded to fit the values of the bodybuilding subculture. The prevailing values associated with a stereotypical vegan are an extent to the existing green, feminine stereotype that was found by Brough et al. (2016). The stereotype that was present among the bodybuilders was characterized as weak, skinny, nutrient deficient and whiney. This was the perception they had about vegans prior to becoming plant-based and still is the general perception of vegan consumers. However, none of the participants knew someone personally that matched these criteria. Moreover, their closest reference group, fellow vegan bodybuilders, is quite the opposite of this depiction. We argue that terms like “skinny” and “weak” are especially prevalent because those encourage the notion of what it means to be feminine.

The specific characteristics of this vegan stereotype (skinny, weak, malnourished) are created and maintained to pose an urgency on the consumption of meat which justifies the consumption pattern. De Groeve & Rosenfeld (2022) state that the negative stereotype is a resolution strategy created by carnivores and omnivores to defuse threats to their morality. Similarly, bodybuilders use the argument health to eat meat but on a magnified scale where the argument is to refrain from being unhealthy, but also to avoid being skinny. In the bodybuilding subculture skinny translates to a severe lack of muscle and is an insult of the highest degree.

The lingering stigma on the stereotypical vegan consumer is a result of what we conceptualize as *cultural inferiority*. The argument that veganism is undesirable as it will leave you weak, skinny and malnourished is currently used as a moral disposition, but that does not necessarily mean it has always been false. First wave vegans, the hippies in the 1960's, did pose a number of the traits that are passed on to the stereotype. The *theory of product inferiority* by Ottman (2008), justifies why environmentally friendly, green products already carry a disadvantaged image before even having entered the marketplace. Their performance is deemed inferior due to a lingering aftertaste that the early category innovators left behind. These experiences are shared through word-of-mouth and considered to be the whole truth; the created consensus fortifies the value of the inferiority judgment. We borrow from this theory to adapt the concept of product inferiority to cultural inferiority. Consumers have created a general consensus based on the early adaptors to the vegan lifestyle. These hippie-like consumers also used their platform to perform as activists. As stated by De Groeve & Rosenfeld (2022), advocacy is not always well received, especially when it is internalized harmfully on one's morality. Thus, activist vegans are derogated with negative labels, such as arrogance. Vegan

bodybuilders today, who in no way resemble the first wave of vegans, are stained by the lingering residue of the annoying vegan stereotype.

The vegan bodybuilders are enabling the annoying vegan stereotype to prevail by acknowledging, and thus fortifying, its existence. In section 6.5 we discuss how our participants actively seek out ways to unburden their friends in order to make sure that they refrain from the annoying vegan stereotype.

6.3 Trials and Tribulations in a plant-based Rite of Passage

The transition to a plant-based diet is an extensive process through which the individual sheds his dominant identity, a meat consuming bodybuilder, to take on a non-dominant identity, a plant-based bodybuilder. In this section we lay out the different phases and its implications in the transition to contribute to the understanding of lifestyle transitioning through the lens of Rites of Passage (Van Gennep, 1960). Secondly, adding a new perspective to plant-based diet motivations as originally studied at a macro level by De Groeve & Rosenfeld (2022) through our micro perspective; plant-based bodybuilders. Finally, we provide a theoretical understanding on the susceptibility to morality among this subculture.

Phase 1: Separation

The ethical argument, inflicting harm on animals for self-gratification is immoral, is an in-effective transitioning motivation as it is incongruent to a bodybuilder's morality. Up until the transition the individual has been fed information about the impact of meat consumption based mostly on ethical and environmental grounds. A person's belief that they are morally just does not seem to be aligned with the realization that they have been harming animals. Rather than acknowledging lack in moral behaviour, strategic ignorance is easier to apply as it deflects responsibility. Research has found that men are more susceptible to gender identity maintenance (Bosson & Michniewicz 2013; Gal and Wilkie 2010; Martin 1990; McCreary 1994; Moller et al 1992). We argue that the maintenance of their identity as morally just restricts them from being able to un-pack the ethics argument. Thus, plant-based societies' attempt to re-establish the meat-animal connection (Coyne, et al, 2016) with the use of the ethical argument has been ineffective. This is a stark contrast to Bianchi et al. (2019) who concluded that a higher moral salience in the ethics argument generates more impressions and thus more motivation to transition to a plant-based diet.

An argument that is congruent with the bodybuilders self-identity (i.e health) serves as a “foot in the door” to the transition to plant-based. The argument of increasing one’s vitality through a vegan diet does not contradict their self-concept. This perspective seamlessly reinforces the narrative of the bodybuilders as they are continuously on the lookout for novel strategies that enhance their

performances. However, it is not just the content of the message that is relevant, but also the medium in which the message is delivered.

A catalytic trigger in line with the cultural values of bodybuilding brought by a role model is able to open a consumer's mind to the idea of a plant-based diet. Bodybuilders have spent their lives on the notion that a vegan diet equals skinny and weak. Moreover, meat is the protein-rich key to a successful bodybuilding career. As seen in section 6.1, these misconceptions are secured thoroughly enough in the mind of these nutritional experts that they do not even consider to question them. A successful vegan bodybuilder serves as a prime example to counter these beliefs. This sparks enough inspiration and motivation to look into the concept that contradicts their core-truths. Documentaries such as 'Game Changers' and 'What the Health' are poster examples of effective catalytic triggers. They appeal to the naturally curious mind of the athlete and speak their languages. The tone of voice is hard-hitting, containing bold statements based on science with blood tests to exemplify the differences between plant-based and non-plant-based. Moreover, we argue that the documentary touches upon a deeper level of masculinity by showcasing that meat-consumption has a negative impact on the functioning of the phallus. Note that these documentaries also communicate the ethical and environmental arguments, but these are perceived as less triggering by the consumers.

The posed barriers that come with the transition to plant-based, a negative stereotype and loss of muscle and social significance, are too high for the bodybuilder to opt for a swift lifestyle change. The trigger(s) leaves the individual with a feeling of fragility and dissonance. Their beliefs are shattered which leads them to verify the information they just received in order to double check if their previous beliefs were false. Feelings of dissonance make way for a feeling of comprehension. At this point, the individual experiences a loss of identity (Van Genneep, 1960). Their former dominant identity (Weinberger & Crockett, 2018), the one of an omnivore or carnivore, is no longer valid, and the individual has yet to assume a new, non-dominant identity. Non-dominant identities can be characterized as stigmatized and tend to come with negative judgements (Weinberger & Crockett, 2018). Alienation takes place in a considerably more modest form as meat is no longer a linking-value (Cova, 1997) which causes a disturbance in the actualization of sociality (Cova & Shankar, 2018) amongst peers.

Phase 2: Transition

As bodybuilders assume the new identity that comes with a plant-based lifestyle, they seek a liminal safe-space that does not require full commitment (yet). The phase of liminality can be viewed as a period between identities, where the individual has shed his former identity and is in search of his new identity (Van Genneep, 1960). Moreover, he encapsulates this phase as a period full of ambiguity causing the identity to be unstable. Typically, individuals are aware of the rite, the transition, and what

to expect for what comes next which leaves them with a feeling of confidence about what is to gain or lose in stages ahead. In this particular case, the participant does not know what lays ahead and can only pass judgment on past experiences surrounding veganism. These encounters are dominated by rather negative conceptions, but countered by the newly gained information on veganism. Moreover, transition phases are characterized by disarray, learning and disentanglement (Van Gennep, 1960). This creates an ambiguous and uncertain state of mind resulting in a lack of full commitment. The transition phase for this rite of passage is therefore defined by what we term *experimental vegans*. They are hesitant about their choice and actively communicate that what they are doing is an experiment, a phase, and thus temporal. As a result, they maintain a guard and protect part of their former identity, not quite ready to fully devote themselves to it. The perceived inferiority still lingers resulting in them being overly critical. Their biggest concern is to not lose body mass, indeed a physical representation of their former identity that they do not want to shed at any price. The outcome of the experiment is impacted by the amount of push-back and social support they receive from their inner circle. We will elaborate on the intentions and implications of such push-back in section 6.5.

The significantly strong positive dissonance between what they anticipated the results to be and what they actually are, creates commitment. Halfway through the experiment the individual experiences yet another strong wave of dissonance; the results of the vegan lifestyle extending beyond their expectations. This leaves the bodybuilders, now vegan, regretful to not have done it sooner. The positive dissonance based on results from the experiment are what fortifies the individual to move forward to the final stage in his rite of passage. A negative result would have been a confirmation of the individual's doubt and earlier biases, leading him to return back to the former dominant identity. In successfully completing the self-enforced experimental stage, this individual has completed a *ritual dislocation*. A ritual dislocation marks the breaking of a taboo and/ or a personal revelation (Van Gennep, 1960). This profound revelation results in the dismissal of the idea that bodybuilding and veganism do not go together. This leads to a state of excitement in which the individual wants to broaden his new gained knowledge and spread this, in his experience, valuable information with his peers. This excitement helps him step into the final stage, incorporation.

Phase 3: Incorporation

The presence of the honeymoon phase is a marker of a dauntless, fully assumed, evolved identity. When an individual reaches the final stage, incorporation, meaning he is able to reintegrate into society according to his newfound identity (Van Gennep, 1960). The individual has now fully adopted his new non-dominant identity of a plant-based bodybuilder. Typically, this is a celebratory moment including an exchange of gifts or the receiving of emblems that resemble the newly gained status. Van Gennep (1960) exemplifies through the ritual of marriage where rings are exchanged followed by gifts from

attending guests. Since veganism is seen as an inferior lifestyle with plenty of negative connotations there is no such thing as an incorporation ritual. Here, the newly vegan experiences a “honeymoon-phase”; a period where the individual is dedicated to learning more about the vegan lifestyle and topics surrounding it. This is also when he is still eager to share his visions and ideas with thirds. Section 6.5 dives deeper into this phase.

The fully assumed identity of a plant-based bodybuilder allows them to open their mind to the ethical motivated arguments resulting in the re-establishment of the meat-animal connection (Dowsett et al., 2018). Throughout the honeymoon phase, the bodybuilder is likely to end up in an echo-chamber of everything plant-based related. Content highlighting that consuming animals is ethically wrong no longer poses harm to the self-concept. Rather, it confirms the moral superiority of the newly assumed identity, allowing them to open-up to this new perspective and learn more about it and aiding the reestablishment of the meat-animal connection. Moreover, it is eye-opening to the processes that foster de-animalization (Plous, 1993).

Adaptation of the ethical argument as motivation for a plant-based diet is a predictor to the degree of commitment. The results of the learning process on ethics shift the bodybuilder’s motivations from health, to health *and* ethics. Plant-based bodybuilders who’s motivation evolved over time portray a greater commitment to a fully plant-based diet. Moreover, they are more secure in their dietary choices and the negative misconceptions they had at the beginning have vanished. Our findings contradict the notion by Bianchi et al. (2019) stating that ethics is the strongest argument to convince consumers to transition. However, we do second the existing literature that states that consumers who are ethically motivated express a higher commitment to a plant-based diet (Rosenfeld, 2018). Plant-based bodybuilders who are committed to their lifestyle through health motivated arguments waver in their dedication to their diet. They state that every now and then they allow themselves to loosen the reins and consume some animal-protein. It can be debated whether the strong motivation and accompanying discipline to adhere to the plant-based diet in the latter group stems from their health-related motivation. The alternative would be an intrinsic trait that they have personally developed through other of their discipline demanding activities such as their sport, bodybuilding, and work. However, Hung & Labroo (2011) support this notion in stating that the discipline that is required to be a successful bodybuilder, has become somewhat of a trained skill. Thus, it is easier for them to adhere to a challenging diet.

6.4 Negotiating Masculinity

This section is dedicated to understanding how the transition to plant-based impacts the self-identity of the bodybuilders. We contribute to the existing literature on gender identity by exploring how masculinity is negotiated which enriches the theory of gender maintenance by Higgins (1987). We present the various steps and their impacts in this mechanism visually represented in figure 6.1.

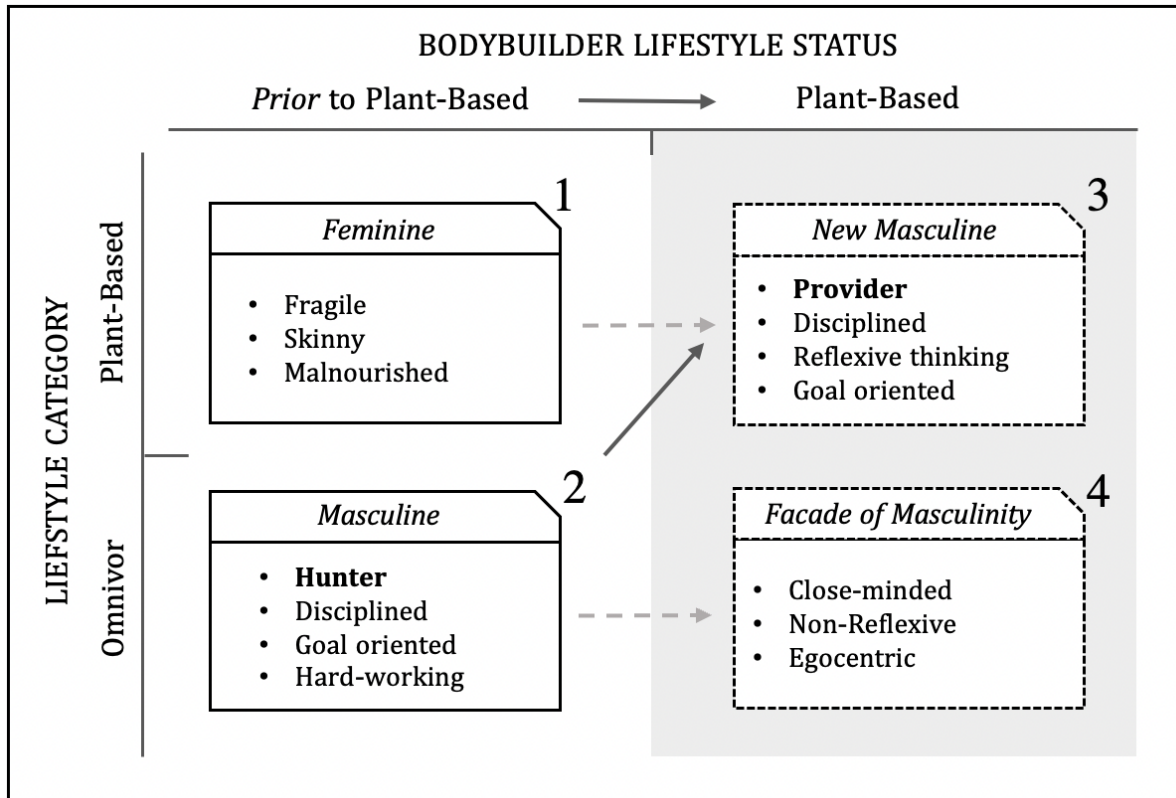


Figure 6 1: Negotiation of Masculinity Framework

The desire to start bodybuilding stems from a classical form of masculinity. Society has created a male utopia for masculinity. The lack of being able to exude masculinity leads to feelings of inferiority. Padfield (1980) states that this leads to a quest of muscularity to compensate for previously mentioned feelings of inferiority. Our findings second this statement even though we have moved 40 years forward in time. The muscles are compensatory and can be regarded as an identity project (Schau, 2018). The external display of physical masculinity ought to lead to the internal embodiment of masculinity. Hence, the participants require external validation of their masculinity to resolve feelings of inferiority. In doing so, they have managed to grant themselves a position in frame two (figure 6.1).

Adopting a plant-based diet poses an existential threat of emasculation to the bodybuilder. The prevalent stigmatized stereotype impacts the granted status of masculine for the bodybuilder. Associations such as weak, skinny and malnourished lead to a sense of diminished masculinity; emasculation (Visconti et al, 2018). We argue that this incongruence is felt in the transition stage, as discussed in section 6.3 and thus contributes to the reluctance to commit to plant-based. The

bodybuilder is now self-assigned with the dilemma to either accept and incorporate feminine values or find a strategy to overcome them.

In order to maintain their gender identity, the bodybuilders have negotiated the values of true masculinity, as a result creating *new masculinity*. The participants portray high levels of masculine energy; they highly value discipline, are goal oriented and place great value on their professional lives. Masculinity inherited from their animal-based diet and the linking value (Cova, 1997) meat offers would be lost. That is aside from the opposing stigmatized values that would be gained. Tracing back where the masculine values in meat come from offers opportunity for the bodybuilders. Masculine associations to meat date back to the time where humans were still hunter-gatherers. Hunting was a daily activity that would often require complex social coordination in order for the hunt to succeed. The killing of animals was inherent for a man to be able to provide for his wife and children (Fiddes 1991; Rozin 2004; Twigg 1979). If we down this narrative, we find that “providing” is at the essence of masculinity. Killing animals for meat is a by-product of the situational context. The bodybuilder takes the essence, being a provider, and accumulates it with the masculine values he already embodies. As a result, what we conceptualize as *new masculinity* is created. Yet, it does not end here as the mould to new masculinity is not yet bullet-proof. If plant-based diets are to be the masculine, more superior life-style choice the consumers need to be able to legitimize that position. To do so they pose the argument of reflexive thinking through questioning and thus delegitimizing the intellectuality of meat consumers. To summarize; gender identity maintenance (Bosson & Michniewicz, 2013) is exercised through the negotiation of masculinity. Creating position three, new masculinity enables vegan bodybuilders to not land in position one, feminine. We will elaborate further on legitimization and delegitimization strategies in section 6.5.

The ripple effect of new masculinity results in the re-conceptualization of masculinity as what we term the *facade of masculinity*, characterized as the inferior version of masculinity rooted from a lack of reflexive thinking skills and egocentric behaviour. Consumers who maintain a similar lifestyle as the bodybuilders prior to their transition are no longer seen in the light of true masculinity from the perspective of the vegan bodybuilder. The belief that a masculine man is a provider and does not inflict harm on animals for selfish purposes, does not corroborate with this life-style. This results in a negative framing of consumers who continue to pursue this diet. Position four is the translated result of the negative framing that is applied to position two.

6.5 Dealing with Conflict: A Legitimization Deadlock

The political and sensitive nature of the subject, as one's dietary choices are a distinctive and interwoven characteristic of identity, is a cause for social conflict. This section aims at understanding

mechanisms supported by the use of legitimacy and framing strategies. In a recent publication Koch and Ulver (2022) examine the cultural mechanisms that come alongside an evolving market. The case of animal-milk versus plant-milk offers a common ground to our study subject, hence we use a similar approach to understanding conflict through the use of framing and legitimacy strategies. We differentiate our focus from Koch and Ulver with their macro approach focusing on understanding market actors by adopting a meso and micro approach in which we focus on the consumers and consumer interaction. Through this section we intend to add to the understanding of plant-based consumers by showcasing how legitimacy is gained and destroyed within our phenomenon.

Delegitimization & Legitimization on Consumer Level - Meso

Vegan bodybuilders utilize framing strategies in order to villainize (portray as inferior) their former in-group to gain legitimacy for the plant-based lifestyle. In section 6.4 we discussed how vegan bodybuilders perform gender identity maintenance by creating a progressed mould of what it means to be masculine. In doing so they have re-legitimized their identity as “a real man”, whilst at the same time delegitimizing masculinity in male omnivores. The vegan bodybuilders have created *relational legitimacy* (Tost, 2011) through the use of transformational framing. This is evident when looking at the socio-symbolic values of meat. In marketplace disputes, actors tend to portray their opponents as villains, i.e. them, and victims, we (Giesler, 2008). In their newly assumed positions they do not portray meat-consumers as villains, but as inferior. They question their intellectual and emotional capacity. Challenging their intelligence can be seen through the lens of *symbolic violence*. Symbolic violence occurs when oppression is invisible because all parties perceive it as natural or ‘just the way things are’ (Martin et al., 2021). Symbolic violence is an act of nonphysical violence that is motivated by power differentials between social groups. As Bourdieu (2000) explained, disproportionate power between parties involved with symbolic violence leads to acceptance and normalization on the part of the dominated group. Through this perspective, the non-plant-based bodybuilders are the norm in which the plant-based bodybuilder feels like they are being oppressed. Hence, the need for this consumer group to gain legitimacy.

Delegitimization & Legitimization on Consumer interaction Level - Micro

We found that there are two significant triggers that create instances of friction and/or conflict from omnivore consumers towards plant-based consumers. We second Coyne et al. (2016) who states that a plant-based diet triggers meat consuming consumers to engage. Notably, it is not the consumption of plant-based alternatives that was most triggering. The lack of animal-meat in a plate poses the spark that leads to consumption based offense Coyne et al. (2016). Secondly, it was the display of extremely well-shaped physiques that presented an opportunity for strife, mostly among

fitness peers. The combination of an excellent physique, by the criteria of bodybuilding, and a plant-based diet create a dissonance in the omnivore consumer that he cannot process. The following sections will provide insight in how these situations are handled and evolve.

Offensive Non-Consumption

The *protein-paradox* is the most common argument narrative that meat-consumers use to delegitimize plant-based consumption. The non-consumption of meat ignites social conflict. The opposing consumers, the omnivores, delegitimize the vegan lifestyle through creating normative legitimacy for the “traditional” way of consumption by means of extension framing. Omnivores express their worry about the vegan consumer’s health which is led by the question on protein intake. We conceptualize this phenomenon as the *protein-paradox*. Consumers firmly believe that a vegan diet equals a lack of protein. Moreover, plant-protein is believed to be inferior to animal-protein. Although such inquiries may seem inquisitive at first glance, they are more likely to be expressed as a jab to the lifestyle choice of veganism. Others may be more direct in their ridicule and spurt out a mocking comment right off the bat. Vegan consumers counter by steering towards relational legitimacy through the use of transformational framing.

A positive and engaging approach to social conflict is highly ineffective and results in a *legitimacy deadlock*. In section 6.3 we have briefly introduced the “honeymoon” phase for newfound vegan consumers. Their rose-coloured glasses motivated them to share their profound new truth. As a result, these consumers engage in the discussion and pose to convince the opponent through environmental or ethical arguments. This sequence is followed through ad hominem, straw man fallacies or another display of mockery. These counters can be considered outright rejections to the attempt to legitimize the vegan lifestyle. The harder the vegan bodybuilders try, the harder they are rejected. This leaves them in what we refer to as a *legitimacy deadlock*. Legitimacy is required for social validation, yet the harder they try to obtain it, the more deflated, delegitimize, their stance is. As a result of this type of discussion the consumer in question will start to refrain from discussion because he is aware that these discussions place him in the stigmatized “annoying vegan” box.

Seasoned vegan bodybuilders trade their strategy of actively building legitimacy for their diet for a more passive strategy where they focus on protecting their legitimacy through delegitimizing the opponent’s offense. We witnessed a one-eighty in the strategic approach to acquiring legitimacy, once the vegan bodybuilder has become more acquainted to his lifestyle. The strategy shifts from actively building legitimacy for the plant-based diet, to delegitimizing the arguments, efforts and attempts when confronted in conflict. Note that it is not a delegitimization of meat consumption itself. In most cases this does not help them grow their legitimacy, but it does enable them to stand their ground and stop the omnivore from delegitimizing their diet. The vegan bodybuilders learned that their biggest

opportunity to make a positive change is in passively feeding positive information to non-plant-based consumers. We argue that discussions often interfere with an omnivore's morality, causing them to lash out. This is why they have chosen to lead by example and take on the ambassador role rather than the activist role. Yet, that does not mean that they do not encounter offensive non-consumption-based conflict. When being pulled into a discussion the vegan bodybuilder will first try to judge the intentions and capabilities of his discussion partner. More often than not the motives will not be inquisitive which will lead the plant-based consumer to deflect the discussion. Conversations that are purely started with the intent to ridicule the vegan consumer will be handled through reflecting the same amount of humour. This is effective as the omnivore has created a conflict frame but the conflict frame is disassembled by posing that they are on the same side. Without the "us" versus "them" element, the delegitimization strategy is delegitimize. To illustrate: "Wow, that vegan pizza without pepperoni of yours must really taste like cardboard" is responded to by "Yes, you are right it is a really lousy meal". The last defence mechanism is particularly interesting because it delegitimizes the opponent's argument at the same time as it builds legitimacy for the plant-based bodybuilder's lifestyle. The protein paradox and other health related arguments are brought to the table in order to build cognitive legitimacy for the meat inclusive diet. The vegan bodybuilder responds with an emblazon of his muscular definition, *peacocking*, invigorated by a statement testifying the results of a vegan diet. We argue that this is a highly effective use of amplification framing.

Offensive -Plant-Based- Physique

Physical proof that bodybuilding on a vegan diet is successful is insulting rather than admirable. We find a delegitimization of the plant-based diet through negative extension framing to uphold the cognitive legitimacy of meat. This type of conflicting interaction plays out in sports related environments. Bodybuilding peers, with or without experience, tend to be impressed by the physiques that the interviewed vegan bodybuilders have successfully curated. Once the omnivore consumer learns that this particular bodybuilder is plant based, his admiration is replaced by a visible confusion. As learned in chapter 2 successful bodybuilding paired with a vegan diet is a trigger for intense dissonance. As a form of sense making of the oxymoron these consumers unintentionally delegitimize the plant-based diet and start looking for a "secret" as a resolution. As a last resort the delegitimization peaks as the vegan-bodybuilder is accused of using performance enhancing substances, steroids. The health argument is thus used to legitimize consumption practices that would otherwise be deemed immoral. Tracing back to the dissonance framework presented in chapter 2, we argue that the stereotype is used as a tool in the "Necessary" (N3) justification strategy (Piazza et al., 2015).

CONCLUSION

7.1 Research Recap

Reflecting on the purpose of this study, it is to understand the relationship between plant-based diets and masculine identity. The phenomenon of vegan bodybuilders was chosen as an extreme example study group. Through understanding what drove them, what their transition looked like, how their life changed as a vegan and what really matters to them we aim to retrieve “lead-user” learnings. The outcomes of the research can be used to trickle down on the general male meat-consuming population. Which eventually helps us to understand their reluctance to a plant-based diet and how to overcome it. This goal is achieved and the translation of the discussion into tangible implications can be found in the next section.

7.2 Theoretical Contributions

In the literature review we have highlighted the theories and concepts deemed relevant to understand this phenomenon of plant-based male bodybuilders. Together with our findings we highlight the theoretical contributions our study poses on the already existing literature and theories.

The concept of self-identity was central to this research. Herein, we make two contributions: (1) we contribute to gender identity by identifying how masculinity is redefined and negotiated within this subculture, and (2) we expand on the theory of gender maintenance by understanding how masculinity is continuously undermined yet maintained in the context of plant-based male bodybuilders. Additionally, we expand the understanding of the value of meat in the context of socio-symbolic value within this particular subculture, in which commodity fetishization (Marx, 1856 in Kaplan, 2016) is used to understand this value.

We touch upon the concept of morality throughout this research, and contribute to the concept by extending it to the morality behind plant-based consumption. Prior research has focused on the conversation regarding meat consumption and its immoral practices. By focusing on the other side of the coin, we contribute to the understanding of the role of morality within consumers who consume according to a plant-based diet in a subculture that has negative connotations surrounding the plant-based lifestyle. In addition, we contribute to understanding the motivations behind becoming vegan by challenging De Groot & Rosenfeld (2022) stating that ethics is the first important aspect for someone to want to become vegan in the first place. We acknowledge that ethics is a powerful motivator, however our research indicates that health is the first aspect that inspires this particular subculture to dabble in becoming plant-based.

Furthermore, this research extends on the theory of stigma (Goffman, 1963), by expanding the vegan stereotype by Brough et al. (2016) in the context of this particular subculture. While Brough et al. (2016) have identified the stigma surrounding veganism, we argue that each subculture deals with their own stigma, despite having touch points with the mainstream stigma. In other words, we define that while these bodybuilders are plant-based, they do not necessarily deal with the same stigma found among average plant-based consumers.

Finally, we contribute to the research of Koch and Ulver (2022) regarding how market actors legitimize and delegitimize one another. While Koch & Ulver focus on a macro approach which encompasses market actors such as producers and industry leaders, our research contributes to the understanding of the meso and micro approach, in which we focus on the specific subculture and the consumer. Herein we contribute to the understanding of the various legitimization and delegitimization strategies the subculture uses to actively engage in legitimizing their identity as a plant-based male bodybuilder.

7.3 Managerial Implications

The lead users mechanism to retrieve learnings that can be applied to the more general consumer has proven fruitful. In this section we will outline our recommendations that are intended to make the transition easier. We talk about both managerial and policy recommendations. The managerial implications are aimed at effective marketing that should help attract more plant-based consumers. The policy implementations are aimed at knocking down the walls that later create barriers to plant-based consumption.

Marketing Communications and Product & Brand innovations

Our first recommendation to managers of plant-based products, brands and business is to reframe their messages according to positive, socio-cultural related angles that do not confirm the prevalent stereotype and are not tied to morality. The stigma on both functional and socio-symbolic values of veganism has to be compensated accordingly. Countering the protein-paradox can be done through framing communication and packaging from a health perspective will resolve the perceived inferiority. By refraining from feminine marketing communications (green, ecological, nurturing) and the use of female advocates, the brand will be able to cut its ties to the negative stereotype bit by bit. An example of this would be to frame a vegan burger as a “Lean Protein Burger” rather than a current “Rootzz of Nature” burger (AlbertHeijn, 2022). The use of ethical framing and marketing messaging is counterproductive when trying to win over new non-vegan consumers. These arguments create an incongruence with the consumer’s morality, leading them to resent a product. One should find a positive form of framing that adds value to the existing interests and norms of the consumer. Currently

all meat-alternative brands in The Netherlands are either activist brands (ethical and environmental) or price-quality oriented (AlbertHeijn, 2022). The concept of framing a subculture related “gain” element into the equation is potentially also applicable to other angles. We therefore encourage brands to explore areas such as “Beauty” to find alternative positive stimuli. Participants in this study were pleased by the positive effects a plant-based diet had on their skin and gut-health. Male consumers within the fitness industry are susceptible to the health argument. Sparks of intrigue can be created through the use of well-grounded scientific arguments and the use of admirable role models. Thus we advise incorporating these arguments in marketing communications to create the above mentioned positive stimuli.

Secondly, we want brand managers and communication specialists to understand that the perception of masculinity is different amongst different consumer audiences. The interpretation of masculinity is crucial as it can either attract or alienate a consumer. When communicating to male bodybuilders brands must adhere to the values that go hand in hand with new masculinity to appeal to their identity. The core value of new masculinity is found in the man being a “provider”.

Thirdly, we urge brand managers and communication specialists to differentiate between what consumer gets *what* message, but also between what consumers get what message *when*. Due to the strong entanglement of identity to meat and meat-alternatives that at the same time is shadowed by a negative stigma, consumption of these goods becomes a complex and volatile undertaking. We distinguish between phases that require different approaches. The first phase addresses the not-yet-vegan. This person is best approached through positive stimuli, such as mentioned in the first paragraph. The goal for the brand is to convince the consumer through inspiration. The plant-based diet has to be a self-discovery and cannot be enforced. Again, the discussion on morality and ethics is off-limits. The second phase addresses the consumers that have recently undergone the transition to plant-based and are now in their experimental phase. For these consumers it is important to gain an in-depth understanding of the benefits and possibilities the plant-based lifestyle has to offer them. As discussed in section 6.3, the success of this phase is determining whether or not this consumer will continue his lifestyle. Lastly, the seasoned vegan. The biggest predictor of commitment to a plant-based lifestyle is the presence of the ethics argument in the core motivations of the consumer. At this stage the consumer is secure enough in his newfound lifestyle to take-on these kinds of messages. This is in stark contrast to phase one.

Policy Implications

The Dutch Government has expressed the urgency to decrease the overall meat consumption amongst the Dutch population (Dierzaam, 2022). The following recommendations could aid this process. We have seen that the normalization of plant-based consumption -to get acquainted to- in early stages of

life lowers the negative perception of plant-based diet later on. There are a multitude of ways to do such a thing. An achievable strategy would be to have institutions such as primary schools offer a partially plant-based lunch in their cantinas. Secondly, we witnessed that the presence of de-animalization (Plous, 1993) was significant among the participants of our study and that this process was an enabler to their dissonance resolution strategy, strategic ignorance (Carrillo & Mariotti, 2000). By fostering realistic and real expectations about the process of cultivating meat. The Netherlands already has a ban imposed on misleading marketing, we suggest that misrepresentation of meat-production should be incorporated under this ban. Without the lack of the meat-animal connection (Dowsett et al., 2018) consumers will be more prone to opt for alternative options.

Contributions to Dierzaam

With this study we contribute to the Dutch National study Dierzaam. Their aim is to understand what can be done to help consumers commit to better (ecological) or less meat in their diets. Through this paper we provide them an understanding of the Dutch male bodybuilder and his significant relationship to meat consumption. The contributions mentioned in the above two sections can be used to foster an understanding on how to have them consume less meat by lowering the barriers to plant-based eating instead.

7.4 Limitations

Limitations to the ZMET method

Despite the many advantages, working with ZMET can also hold some challenges. Supphellen (2000) states that the success of the research is dependent on how well the researcher can overcome the basic problems of elicitation; access, verbalisation and censoring. Supphellen explains that the correct amount of probing is needed to gain “access” to get below the surface layer of what is already known.

Secondly, the potential inability of the participant to verbalize their thoughts needs to be addressed. However, Manusov & Patterson (2006) state this can be overcome if the researchers watch their participants body language closely, which made it challenging as the interviews were conducted online. However, we tackled this by having the two researchers present at the interview, so that if one person misses something, the other can catch it. Finally, the researchers need to be wary of the fact.

Typically, a ZMET structured interview requires two hours of an participants time (Zaltman, 1997). However, our subculture is proved to be very busy and finding an empty spot in their agenda was already a challenge. A two hour interview was too much of a barrier for them thus we resorted to 90 to 105 minute interviews. As a result, we would often have to end the interview before conducting step 8 and 9. We believed to have reached saturation within each interview before these steps, but we cannot guarantee we would not have had extra findings if we had extra time.

The length of the interviews is also cause for what Supphellen (2000) explains as *participant fatigue*. The ZMET method requires a lot of energy from the participant and the interviews are quite lengthy. Exhaustion can take place, resulting in less qualitative answers. We encounter vivid participant fatigue but believe it is important to mark as a limitation.

Finally, this research and all the processes that are involved in using ZMET made that the entire process was incredibly time-consuming. With the limited time available for this study, it was quick paced and therefore caused for capping the sample size in order to manage the time and the data. At the same time, analysing the data was likewise time consuming. Coding and categorization are labour-intensive steps in qualitative research.

Participant Biases

When working with qualitative techniques that address sensitive topics, participants potentially purposely or unintentionally withhold sensitive information. With the use of probing and laddering techniques we have countered this as much as possible (Suphellen, 2000). There are two types of biases that have potentially influenced the research.

The first bias we've witnessed was social desirability bias (Queirós et al., 2017). We found that participants were moderate in expressing opinions around gender roles. Given that they were talking to two female researchers they might have felt slightly uncomfortable as it is a sensitive topic. This is despite our best efforts in creating a safe environment where the participants can freely express their opinions. We have countered this bias by performing a modified form of ethnography where we proved their opinions and statements. We did so by verifying and monitoring their social media pages. We found three cases where the social desirability bias was at play.

Secondly, we want to discuss what we refer to as *advocacy bias*. Due to the elusiveness of the subculture, we would only be able to find participants if they actively mentioned their diet in their social media profile or if we found them through snowballing. This sampling technique led us to find participants of whom a substantial part were advocates of a vegan bodybuilding lifestyle. Hence, they are likely to be more opinionated. This needs to be taken into consideration when reviewing the findings.

7.3 Future Research

The aim of the study was to draw learnings from lead-users (Von Hippel, 1986), the vegan bodybuilders. These learnings provide insight into how obstructions for the general male population in plant-based diets can be resolved. Additionally, inquiries derived from our findings provide insight in understanding the plant-based consumer. As this is exploratory research focused on a specific target group, future research is necessary.

Our study revealed that arguments in favour of a plant-based lifestyle related to the ethics of meat consumption interfere with the bodybuilder's moral self-identity hence they are counterproductive. Bianchi et al. (2019) performed a study on vegan advocates where the findings portrayed the exact opposite results. We hypothesize that because of the fact that these participants are advocates, their values and interests are skewed towards ethics in the same way health is the angle that is effective for bodybuilders. To understand the dynamics of these mechanisms and to find out which effective angles are related to specific subcultures, we call for extra research.

Vegan bodybuilders who took no interest in the ethical argument, posed health as their number one motivator to a plant-based lifestyle. We question whether it is the only argument to offer them enough motivation. Another explanation is found in following Hung & Labroo (2011) it is their highly disciplined lifestyle that has them trained to deal with more difficult life-style choices. The answer to this question will grant insight into the urgency of adding the ethics argument into the mix of motivators.

Lastly, we found that the stigma on stereotypical consumers as researched by Brough et al. (2016) is present in the vegan bodybuilders. Yet, this is an altered version that is moulded to the values of this specific subculture. Understanding stigma allows for a greater understanding of what challenges are related to a specific domain. We therefore recommend further research to look into the deviations on plant-based stigma between different subcultures.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix 1: Detailed Elaboration on the 9-step ZMET Method

This section provides an extensive elaboration on the mechanisms and objectives of the various steps within the ZMET-method. It serves to create a deeper understanding of the ZMET-method for those who are less familiar with this form of projective-interviewing.

Step 1: Storytelling

The objective for the first step is to uncover the own interpretations and meanings that they find in the visuals chosen by them (Martin, 2010). Storytelling is a commonly used projective technique, but most often the participant tells a story about external projection. In this method storytelling is about telling their story. Zaltman (2003) states that this step creates confidence for the participant and it allows them to open-up. This first step will already attract metaphors as they will certainly emerge from the discussion. However, the participants are always probed by the researchers to make sure to get the most out of the answers, but also to make sure all topics that need to be discussed are discussed.

Step 2: Triad Task

This step has been designed by Zaltman and Coulter (1995) to explore relevant discussions that haven't been expressed visually. Participants are asked by the researchers if there are any topics that haven't been covered yet, but they do deem relevant. Reasons for missing images can differ. The participant could have felt unsure about how to express himself or in a more practical sense, he or she just wasn't able to find a visual representation of what they have been trying to express. Finally, participants might refrain from expressing opinions and or feelings that they feel are sensitive topics (Hancock & Foster, 2019). This research discusses identity and the consumption of meat versus meat alternatives. As seen in the introduction, meat consumption is a political subject and thus more likely to be a sensitive topic. This is also valid for identity. Moreover, identity may also be a tricky topic for participants as they are not used to consciously express their own identity. Hence, this step holds great value. Participants are probed with questions such as "are there images you wanted to show but couldn't find?" or "Are there subjects you feel relevant but didn't choose?". Finally, the interviewers will also actively ask about subjects that link to the key domains, but weren't discussed yet. These can be found in the interview guide.

Step 3: Missed Images

The first step focuses on understanding the meaning and interpretations behind the visuals chosen by the participant from a slightly more superficial layer. The triad tasks allows the researchers to dive deeper into the meanings, but also differences, between visuals (Zaltman, 2003). It is up to the researchers to cherry-pick different images and probe the participant to explore how they are connected. These can be images that have an obvious connection, but can also be images that have no relation whatsoever on first glance. By encouraging the participants to think deeper about the relation between the visuals they chose, they will be likely to express deeper thoughts. Secondly, it will create a more holistic view of the overall attitude regarding the subject (Hancock & Foster, 2019).

Step 4: The Metaphor Probe

As can be seen in the schematic overview of the ZMET-method, the interview follows the structure of a funnel. This funnel represents the depth versus broadness of the topics on hand. Whereas step one is about gathering a broad overview of all the topics that are on the table, step 4, and the steps following this step, is about digging deep in a more select range of topics; depth. Zaltman (2003) has designed this step to elicit the deeper metaphors that haven't been uncovered yet from participants. He states this is to be done by using effective probes. Effective probes are based on questions such as "How does...", "Have you.." and "Could you..". The questions posed to participants are always neutral and cannot in any way reflect the subjective opinions of the researchers (Hancock & Foster, 2019). Again, it is up to the researcher to decide on the spot what topics are worth diving deeper into. The discussion will be different for each participant. That is why it is not feasible, nor desired, to pre-structure these interview steps. During this step the researchers will make use of the technique laddering-up (Easterby-Smith et. al, 2015), this is done by using the probes as mentioned. The following example showcases how this might look like. The participant has chosen an image of a sunny, cloudless sky. The researchers can further probe by asking questions such as "What does the sunny sky mean to you?" followed by "How does that make you feel" and "Could you describe your emotions in that last situation". According to Suphellen (2020) the picture serves to trigger initial thoughts that could possibly be censored by the participant, but the probes are the tool that extract the meanings behind the metaphors.

Step 5: Expanding The Frame

The previous steps discussed the meaning of the presented visuals and meaning of visuals that were missing. This fifth step encourages consumers to discuss what is beyond the picture that is being discussed. The participant has to come up with what else may be present inside the visual, but outside the frame that was captured (Coulter, 2006). Hancock and Foster (2019) exemplify this with use of an

example from their study on employment. They asked their participant who had chosen a picture of a wall to explain what would be outside of that frame. The participant answered the following:

Beyond the wall there is freedom to do what you want, and nobody is trying to stop you. Opportunities career wise [...]. I see a positive landscape but at the same time I'm not naïve enough to think I would get a job straight away, so maybe some obstacles.

This step adds value as it discusses specific topics from a broader meaning. It helps elicit more meaning and metaphors as it probes participants to look at the same topic from a different angle.

Step 6: Sensory Metaphors

Similar to step 5, this step probes the consumer to elaborate further by offering a new perspective to approach the subject. The participant is asked to consider the visual in sensory categories and express them in terms of color, smell, touch, taste and sound. Note that the visual sense is excluded as this was already discussed (Hancock & Foster, 2019). It is up to the researchers to cherry-pick the most significant situations and shift their focus to where most information can be found.

Step 7: The Mind Map

Thoughts and feelings regarding a certain topic are more often than not interconnected (Zaltman, 2003). To visualize these connections the researchers make use of a mind map. These mind maps are created during the interview with the participant. Even though every single mind map will look differently, similar groups of consumers share similar connections. That is why these mind maps are helpful in finding common connections. The interviews will take place in person or online. The use of Miro allows for visual creation and thus the creation of the mind map can take place online.

Step 8: The Vignette

In his work, Zaltman (2003) states the importance of having the participant create a story about the topic being studied. This story should present a holistic overview of the overall thoughts and feelings of the participant regarding the phenomenon (Hancock & Foster, 2019). To do so, the participants are asked to create a story that represents the topic to them. This story must contain three objects; their self-concept, the object of the study and an eventful situation. Hancock and Foster (2019) found that this step within the ZMET process is the most challenging for participants. Therefore consumers will be asked to use their 6 to 8 original visuals as a foundation to the story. Due to time-restrictions, this step would not always be executed. Participants generally only had one hour spare for this interview

which we were able to stretch to two hours. However, that is not enough time to go through all these steps. Fortunately, we feel that we already gained the most valuable information, but we cannot guarantee that there are no discussions that were left untouched.

Step 9: The Montage

This step takes the process to phase three. This phase is not characterized by gaining information, it is about accurately summarizing the highlights of the found information. Typically, this type of work is done after the research, but for ZMET it is done as the last step in the interview. This way, there will be extra nuances in the executive summary and has the highest possible accuracy. The objective of this step is to create a “visual executive summary” (Zaltman, 2003) that showcases how the various visuals relate to each other in the form of a collage. After the interview has ended, the montage will be saved as a single visual and shared with the participant. The interviewee is asked to confirm if the visual representation is accurate. Similar to step 8, the montage was more often than not left untouched due to time restrictions.

Appendix 2: Detailed Elaboration on the Research Focus Domains

The research focus domains have been selected and crafted carefully. This section provides deeper insight into the parameters of each domain and its importance.

Research Focus Domain 1: Gender Identity

The chosen subculture of plant-based bodybuilders can be interpreted as the role-model to traditional masculinity. Masculinity is one of the more important obstructions for consumers to unconsciously refrain from eating plant-based. Yet, this population niche, which is regarded as the embodiment of masculinity, does not seem to be bothered. We therefore aim to understand their perception on gender identity, meaning we want to understand how they look at gender roles, but also how much value a gender identity holds in determining their own identity, self-concept.

Research Focus Domain 2: Self-Concept

The second focus is to understand how the participants within this niche view themselves and what they do to pursue this identity. Their gender-identity is part of their self-concept, it does not make up their entire identity. The self-identity entails all bits and pieces that together form one's identity. This includes physical characteristics, goals, values, behavioral patterns and many more (Gatersleben et al., 2014). Morality is one of the angles that will be included. One's moralistic identity work can, through various manifestations, serve a multitude of identity goals (Luedicke, et. al, 2010). Within this construct we aim to look at a bigger picture by expanding the frame. We are interested to see what defines them and what potential patterns can be uncovered that contribute to their consumption of plant-based meat alternatives.

Research Focus Domain 3: Need to Belong - Social Identity

This focus is based on the Social Identity Theory by Tajfel (1981) and Turner (1996) to understand how the participant's identity is affected in a social situation. Originally this concept is an extension to the social identification process; a process that encompasses group phenomena; conformity, stereotyping, cohesion, ethnocentrism, ingroup bias, discrimination, group norms, and group identity (Hogg & Grieve, 1999). Consumers, especially men (Brough et al., 2016), are driven to make sure that they maintain a stable level of belonging (Leary et al., 1995). As plant-based meat alternatives are not perceived as masculine (Brough et al., 2016), the participants will have to potentially find an alternative way to navigate the social situation in order to maintain their (gender) identity. The researchers are looking to explore attitudes, emotions, behavioral patterns and coping mechanisms -if applicable- in these situations.

Research Focus Domain 4: Gendering and Associations of Plant- and Animal-Based Meat

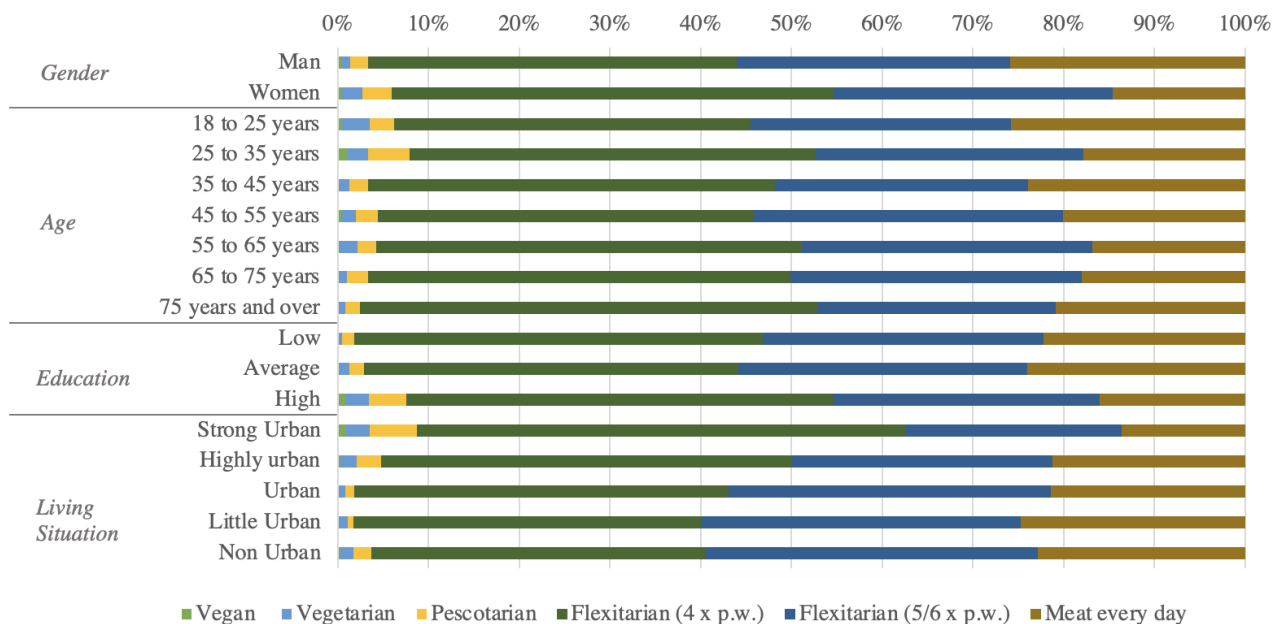
Previous research has shown that meat is typically regarded as a masculine product and that plant-based alternatives to meat are associated with “green” and feminine consumers (Brough et al., 2016). Within the Netherlands only 1.7% eats according to a plant-based diet (Kloosterman et al, 2021). The population at large can therefore hold different associations towards these products than this subgroup does. Adding in the factor that we are only looking at bodybuilders, makes the consumer group slightly more niche. This is why it is important to gain the participants perspective on associations towards meat and non-meat rather than using the results of the previous research as they may very well vary. understanding how this subculture deals with stigma, and how they combat it. As mentioned in the literature review, vegans are susceptible to stereotyping due to their perceived morality, arrogance and overcommitment (De Groeve et al., 2021).

Research Focus Domain 5: (Gender) Identity Maintenance Resolution - Route A

Through previous constructs we aim to understand if there exists a friction between the participants associations and attitudes towards plant-based meat alternatives. Consumers are prone to imitate behavior of what they consider their in-groups. Similarly, they refrain from the behavior that is portrayed by out-groups. When one feels like he or she is caught in a self-discrepancy, a behavior that does not confirm one’s desired self-view, this individual is prompted to correct the wrong through compensatory actions; (gender) identity maintenance. Individuals are not always actively aware of these actions (Brough et al., 2016). If through construct one, two and four it is found that there is a discrepancy between perceived identity, behavior and the different products, it is key to explore how these participants strategize and resolve this dissonance. Brough et al. (2016), found that men experience intense psychological damage from the dissonance created in inconsistencies. Thus the researchers expect to find these strategies if the phenomena is present.

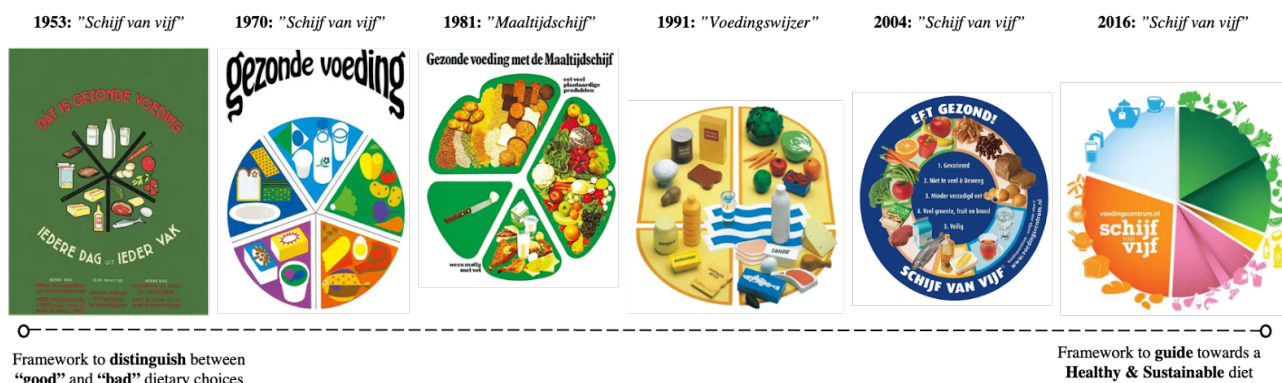
Appendix 3: Meat Consumption Dutch Population to Demographics in %

(MarketLine, 2020)

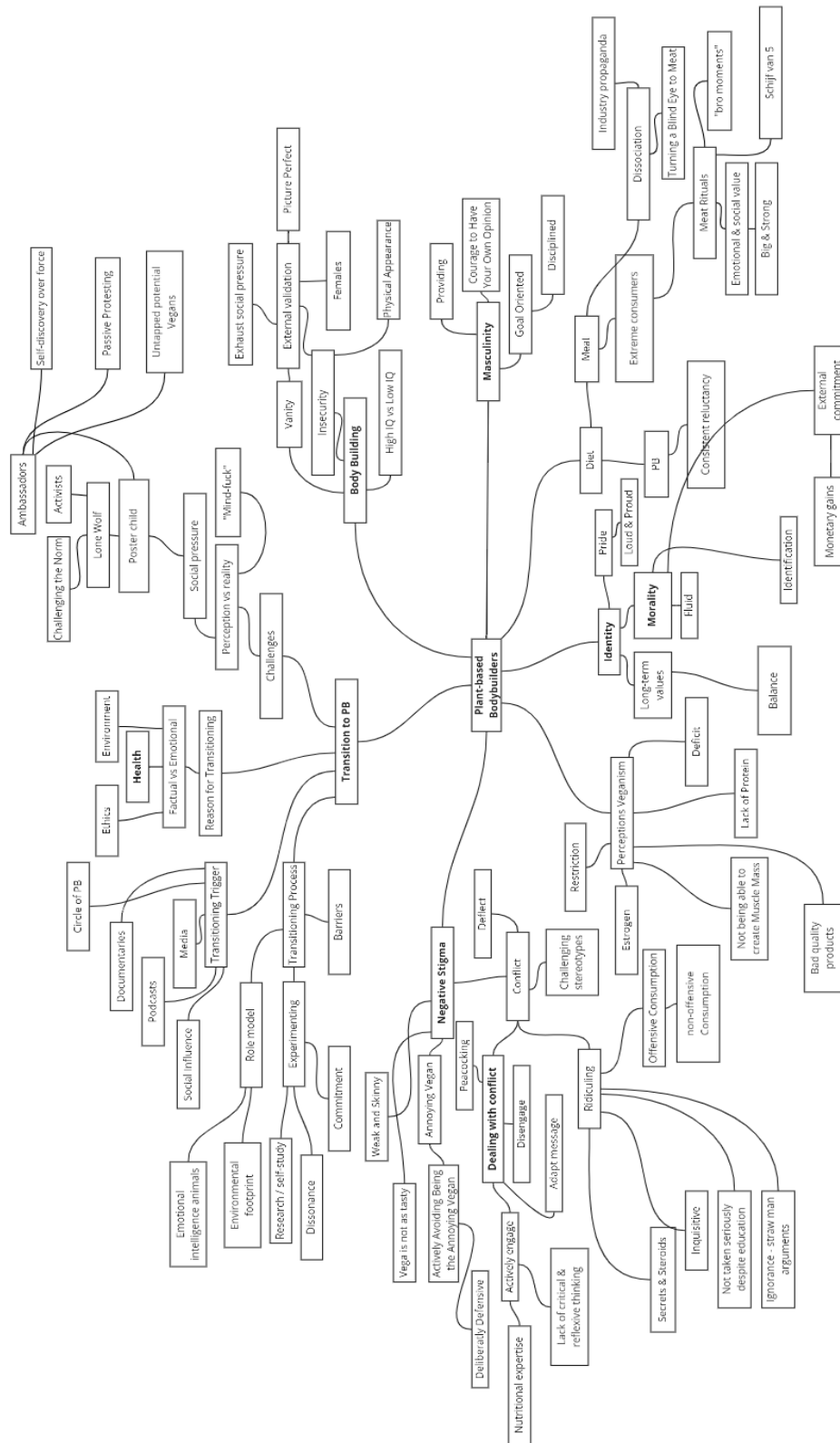


Appendix 4: Development of the “Schijf van Vijf” 1953-2016

(Voedings Centrum, 2022)



Appendix 6: Summarized version Participant's mind-map's ZMET



Appendix 7: ZMET Phase 1: The Brief (Original Version)



Vorbereiding Interview

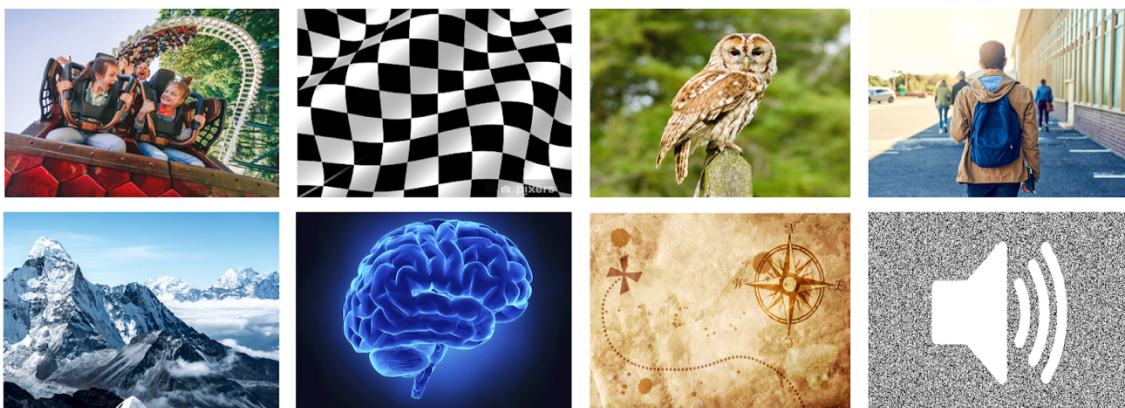
Briefing & Voorbeeld

Toelichting voorbereiding



- Tijdens het interview gaan we het over jou hebben; jouw meningen, ideeën en ervaringen.
 - Er zijn dus geen foute antwoorden.
- Het interview blijft volledig anoniem.
- Ter voorbereiding op het interview willen we je vragen 8 afbeeldingen te verzamelen die jouw mening en gevoelens rondom onderstaand vraagstuk weergeven.
- Dit mag vanalles zijn, maar geen woorden of letterlijke vertalingen van een gevoel.
 - E.g. hierdoor voel ik mij vrolijk graag niet weergeven door een lachend gezicht etc.
- Voeg aan iedere afbeelding één zin toe die kort weergeeft waarom je de afbeelding hebt gekozen.
- De te beantwoorden vraag:
Hoe ervaar jij het eten volgens een vegetarisch/veganisch dieet in verhouding tot wie je bent?
- In de volgende slide staat een voorbeeld. De opvolgende willen we jou vragen te vullen.
 - Let op: het voorbeeld staat los van dit onderzoek en is puur ter illustratie.

Voorbeeld: Hoe ervaar jij een Msc. Studie aan Lund University



Voorbeeld: Afbeelding keuze denkrichting

***Note:** dit is als verdere ondersteuning, de afbeeldingen hoeven niet zo uitgebreid toegelicht te worden

Toelichting in één zin:

Het Msc. Programma voelt als schatzoeken.

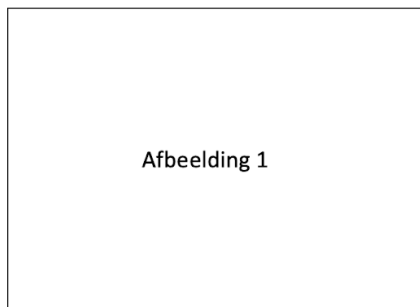
Achterliggende gedachtes:

(Deze niet uitwerken, dit is enkel ter illustratie)



Tot een bepaalde hoogte weet je wat je wat ervan je verwacht wordt. Toch kan deze gedeeltelijke informatie nogsteeds voor een hoop verwarring en chaos sturen. Iedereen kan de informatie anders lezen/ interpreteren en dus op een andere "X" eindigen. Het voltooien van het programma kan een hele opgave zijn met veel verrassingen, positief en negatief. Je weet echter wel waar je het voor doet en dat als je het programma voltooit je met iets bijzonder waardevols naar huis gaat.

INVULLEN: Hoe ervaar jij het eten volgens een vegetarisch/veganistisch dieet in verhouding tot wie je bent?



<Toelichting in één zin>

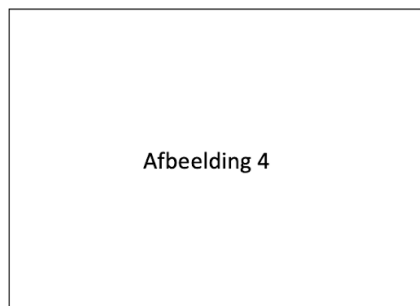


<Toelichting in één zin>



<Toelichting in één zin>

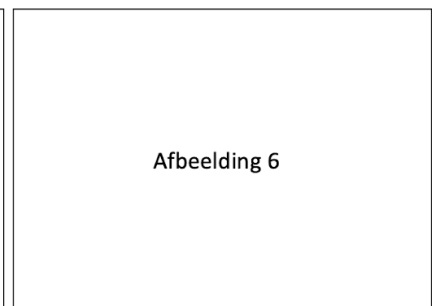
INVULLEN: Hoe ervaar jij het eten volgens een vegetarisch/veganistisch dieet in verhouding tot wie je bent?



<Toelichting in één zin>

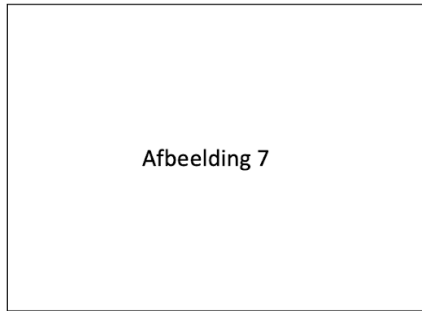


<Toelichting in één zin>

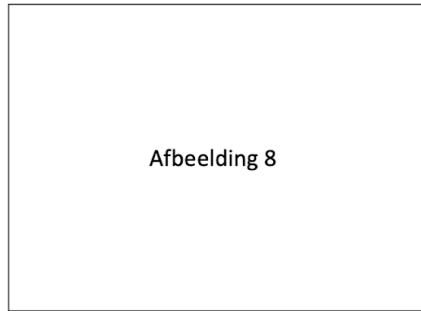


<Toelichting in één zin>

INVULLEN: Hoe ervaar jij het eten volgens een vegetarisch/veganistisch dieet in verhouding tot wie je bent?



Afbeelding 7



Afbeelding 8

<Toelichting in één zin>

<Toelichting in één zin>

Appendix 8: ZMET Phase 1: The Brief (Translated Version)



Briefing Interview

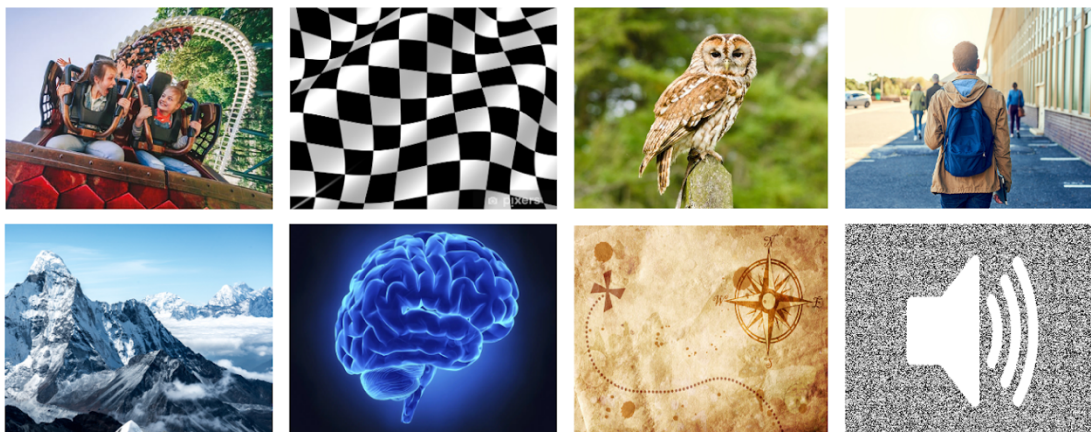
Explanation & Examples

Elaboration preparation interview



- During the interview we will be talking about you; your opinions, ideas and experiences.
 - There are absolutely no wrong answers
- The interview is and remains completely anonymous.
- To prepare for the interview we would like you to collect 6 – 8 images that represent your opinion, feelings and vision on the issue presented below.
- The visuals can be anything that you think, but cannot be words or a literal translation of a feeling.
 - I.e. this phenomena makes me happy and that is represented in a smiley.
- Below the visual you are gonna write one sentences that represents why you chose this visual.
- Please answer the following question:
How do you experience eating according to a plant-based diet in relation to who you feel you are?
- The next slide provides an example. Please bear in mind that the example is only for illustration purposes.

Example: How do you experience your Msc. Study at Lund?



Example: Thought train behind chosen visual

*Note: this is used to illustrate a thought train, you do not have to be this elaborate.

Elaboration in one sentence:

The Msc. Program feels like a treasure hunt



Deeper thoughts behind the visual

(This is only to exemplify)

To some degree you know what is expected of you. Yet you don't have the full picture of all information which can be confusing and chaotic at times. Everyone can read and interpret the information in a different way and thus end up at a different "X". Completing the program is quite a challenge that is full of surprises; both negative and positive. You know what you are doing it for. When you leave Lund successfully, you will return home with something very valuable, a treasure.

To fill out: How do you experience your plant-based diet in relation to who you are?

Visual 1	Visual 2	Visual 3
----------	----------	----------

<Elaboration in one sentence>

<Elaboration in one sentence>

<Elaboration in one sentence>

To fill out: How do you experience your plant-based diet in relation to who you are?

Visual 4	Visual 5	Visual 6
----------	----------	----------

<Elaboration in one sentence>

<Elaboration in one sentence>

<Elaboration in one sentence>

To fill out: How do you experience your plant-based diet in relation to who you are?

Visual 7	Visual 8
----------	----------

<Elaboration in one sentence>

<Elaboration in one sentence>

Appendix 9: Codebook Miro

Given the size of the codebook we created, it would have been not pleasant to read if it was minimized and fit on these pages. Therefore, instead we provide the link to the codebook for the readers to look into, should they want to.

Codebook Miro Access Link: [https://miro.com/app/board/uXjVO7-qM9I=?share link id=40181815916](https://miro.com/app/board/uXjVO7-qM9I=?share_link_id=40181815916)

Appendix 10: Interview Guide

Interviewer:

Participant:

Location: Zoom

Date:

Introduction

- Make sure you test out your recording device before the interview starts.
- Introduce yourself and the research briefly to break the ice.
- Explain briefly how this interview will go, including the tools to create the collage at the end. “We’re interested in your thoughts and feelings. There are no wrong answers, so feel free to speak your mind. Do not feel hesitant or scared to say something that might not be politically correct or in worry of insulting one of us. The more unfiltered, the better. Based on the preparation that you have done for this interview we will ask questions. Because of the ambiguous nature of this type of interviewing we paraphrase things back to you to confirm whether we understood it correctly or not.”

Additionally you can make them feel more at ease by saying things such as: “It might sound like I’m repeating questions, and maybe my questions might seem a bit crazy and weird, but that is all part of the process so we ask kindly for your patience and understanding.”

- Explain that this conversation is confidential: “Your name will not be used in this paper”.
- Also explain that the participants have the right to cut the conversation short whenever they see fit.
- Ask for permission to record the interview. Always double check whether it is actually recording.
- Check before starting the interview whether the participant interpreted the assignment correctly. “Before we begin, could you tell us how you interpreted the assignment we asked you to prepare beforehand?”

Specific instructions regarding this research:

- Two main focus points: We are mainly interested in two things: (1) your thoughts and feelings in regards to your plant-based lifestyle, and (2) your opinion and take on masculinity.

Make sure to ask probing questions in this area and be as open as possible in your questions. Also make sure to link ideas and conclusions that the participants find most important.

- Keep probing with questions. Continuously ask for the reason why, why they think this way, why they experience this, why in their opinion people have this opinion on them. Also use ‘what if’ probes to elicit third person reasoning, where people find it easier to tell the truth if it is spoken from a third person perspective.
- Reflect back throughout the interview. “You said this earlier, how does what you said with that picture relate to this picture?”

Keep in mind the ground rules in doing a successful interview:

- Speak to the participant in their own language. It’s best to use words that they use to formulate the question. Avoid jargon.
- You get the best data if you focus on what the participant says and adapt your answers to their way of speaking so that they feel more comfortable talking to you and allow for a deeper conversation.
- Keep the goal of the research in mind. It is easy to drift on in subjects and discussions that are not relevant to the research. However, be careful to not sway or push the participant in a desired direction, and avoid leading questions.
- Before you ask the next question, make sure that you check whether you understood the answer of the participant correctly. You can do this by paraphrasing it back to them and ask for confirmation or whether they would change anything about that statement.

Example questions for each step:

Step 1

- Could you tell me more about why you chose this picture?
- How does this picture relate to you?

Step 2

- Are there any themes or ideas that you wanted to share but could not find a picture for?
- Did you look for a picture that you want to include but couldn’t find?
 - If yes, ask for a detailed description about the picture that they were looking for. Keep asking about that picture as if it were to exist. Keep the missing pictures in mind continuing forward in the interview.

Step 3

- What makes this picture different from the other one?

- What do these three pictures have in common?
- In what way do these two pictures support or contradict one another?

Step 4

- How does..
- Have you..
- Could you..
- What if..

Step 5

- If we were to zoom out on this picture, what else would you see?
- Who would be there?

Step 6

- “This step is a bit more abstract, it can help if you close your eyes for this one.”
- If you were standing in this image, what would you smell?
- How would you feel?
- What can you hear?

Step 7

- This is the part where we guide them through Miro where we make a mindmap of the participant together.

Step 8

- “I’d like for you to once again use your imagination for this step.”
- If you had to create a montage about you and your plant-based lifestyle, which shots would you include?

Step 9

- Explain that the participant has 20 minutes to create a collage with the pictures that we talked about. “The goal for the collage is to convey your thoughts and emotions regarding you and your plant-based lifestyle.”

Ending the interview

- Thank the participant for participating.
- Finish the mind-map and e-mail this to the participant for approval.