

Vegan Pathways Toolkit



Edge Hill University

About the project

Veganism as a practice is growing in the UK. In the last decade veganism has had increased visibility in mainstream media and there has been a rapid expansion of vegan-friendly products in the marketplace. 'Celebrity vegans', media coverage and public information about the relationship between animal agriculture and climate change, health issues linked to meat and dairy consumption, food scares and the treatment of animals in the animal agriculture system have all contributed to changing attitudes towards veganism.

In a move welcomed by some vegan advocacy organisations, Public Health England advice on eating healthily changed in 2016 to highlight non-meat sources of protein and to emphasise food products that are considered more environmentally sustainable. NHS public guidance states that a well-planned vegan diet can meet the nutritional needs at all life stages, a position echoed by the British Dietetic Association (BDA) in 2017. Recent polls suggest that the number of people in the UK who identify as vegan continues to grow although there is a marked difference in terms of gender, with women accounting for around two thirds of the vegan population in the UK.

Despite the increase in media coverage and greater public information on meat and dairy consumption and its impacts on climate change, human health and animal welfare, knowledge about these issues remains low in the general population. Coupled with this, cultural and social norms established in the post-war period of the twentieth century have reinforced meat and dairy consumption patterns in the UK. Cheap

food and particularly cheap meat products, a result of the intensification of the animal agriculture industries, have further normalised meat consumption. Veganism continues to be misunderstood, vegan stereotypes remain evident in popular culture and despite its growth, veganism remains a minority practice.

This toolkit summarises research findings from the 'Pathways to vegansim' project. The original project was funded by The Vegan Society and undertaken by a group of researchers from the Centre for Human Animal Studies at Edge Hill University. The complete findings from the research are detailed in a 141 page peer reviewed report which can be accessed online: https://research.edgehill.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/20745213/Pathways_Final_Report_June_2019_Parkinson_and_Twine.pdf

The research aimed to gain insights into how non-vegans perceive and understand veganism and vegans. Adopting a mixed methods approach, the research involved a questionnaire, household interviews and focus groups. The project aimed to deepen understanding of barriers preventing transition to veganism, with a focus on vegan eating practice. A key objective for the research was therefore to gain insights into how non-vegans perceive vegans and messages about veganism. This toolkit draws together some of the key findings and recommendations from the research. It will be of interest to individuals or groups involved in vegan advocacy or the promotion of plant-based diets.

About the project:

The research team was Professor Claire Parkinson, Dr Richard Twine, Dr Naomi Griffin, Dr Claire Blennerhassett and Lara Herring. The research took place between January 2018 and November 2019. It involved an extensive literature review, an online questionnaire which had over 1674 respondents of which 1435 were non-vegan UK respondents, 12 focus groups with 90 participants, and fifty face-to-face interviews.

1. Eating Practices	1
2. Meat and Dairy Meanings	4
3. Family/Social Dyamics	11
4. Health	16
5. Perceptions of Vegans	22
6. Generational Differences	28
7. Constructing Vegan Narratives	32

1. Eating Practices

Eating practices are often subject to routines. People become used to their food routines and find it difficult to break from established practices. These routines include making and keeping shopping lists, having planned diets, purchasing regular items they consider to be 'staples', snacking and buying treats. As one interviewee in the Pathways study said: *"I buy pretty much the same thing every week."*

Changing established routines is perceived as time consuming and inconvenient and because of this, participants in the study frequently imagined that a transition to veganism would be difficult because simple routines and practices would all have to be rethought. In a survey of 1435 non-vegans 1066 participants responded negatively to idea of following a vegan diet for a month, most of these reasoning that the challenge would be too difficult.

The study asked participants to think more about the difficulties they associated with veganism. Time, convenience and health were the main concerns with participants noting worries about protein, iron, vitamin deficiency, convenience, time taken to read labels for difficult to spot animal ingredients such as gelatin and time to cook from scratch. They also held beliefs that veganism is restrictive and expensive, that vegans are unhealthy, and that meat and dairy consumption is natural.

However, when it comes to barriers, the picture is complicated. In the survey 84% of non-vegan participants responded yes when asked 'do you think that veganism can be a healthy way of eating?'. During interviews many participants talked about how they had already excluded some animal products from their diets, others said that they wanted to reduce meat and dairy, and there was a notable number who

voiced concerns about current practices in animal agriculture. When asked if they thought it was easier to eat vegan today compared with 10 years ago, 90% of survey participants said yes. In addition, 84% of survey participants had eaten a vegan meal and a majority of these (70%) responded positively when asked about their experience of the meal.

VEGETARIANISM AS GATEWAY

Pescatarians and vegetarians in this study held more positive beliefs about the healthiness of veganism in contrast to omnivores. In interviews, vegetarian participants also indicated that their eating practices are increasingly performed in relation to, and under the influence of, similar principles to veganism. The majority of vegetarians interviewed were eliminating

animal products beyond the typical vegetarian exclusion of meat. As a result, it seems that vegetarianism can act as a gateway to vegan transition.

2. Meat and Dairy Meanings

WHAT CAN WE DO?

TALKING/REFLECTING ON ROUTINES AND PRACTICES: SOLUTION-FOCUSED APPROACH

Talking about and reflecting on eating practices offers an important opportunity for supporting the reduction of meat and dairy consumption or transitioning to veganism. Public community workshops that incorporate different processes of reflection (for example arts-based methods, discussion groups etc) might be one way in which a vegan transition is enabled for some.

COMMUNICATION OF VEGAN FOODS

Vegan advocacy organisations could do more to catalogue and communicate the growing range of vegan foods available to consumers in the UK within mainstream high street and smaller outlets.

USER-FRIENDLY, SOLUTION-FRIENDLY ADVICE FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Promotional materials need to go beyond raising awareness and to present user-friendly advice that can be implemented within the context of family commitments and routines. The solution-focused approach (i.e. presenting swaps for the family) to veganism was embraced by the majority of focus group participants and many indicated that they would try the swap.

STORIES

Narratives can be employed to convey the realities of a vegan lifestyle. Engaging stories that include low cost easy to prepare vegan meals can address the perception that a plant-based lifestyle is discouragingly difficult or expensive.

The reasons given for eating meat and dairy are often multiple and attachments to food can be complex. The findings of this research project indicate that it is common for people to have more than one reason to continue to eat meat and dairy and that those reasons are usually thought to hold some benefit for the individual. This can often mean that an animal ethics or environmental message - perceived as distant from the individual or only benefitting others - is not considered to be a persuasive reason to become vegan. When faced with the ethical and environmental dilemmas of meat and dairy, the benefits to the individual are often used to avoid feelings of internal conflict. As one interview participant explained: *“Yes, it’s comfort food a lot of the time. If you’re hungover and somebody offers you a bacon sandwich... I love pigs and I do, I always feel guilty, but it is taste. It’s like that hunger craving isn’t it?”*

In the UK, the context for this study, there exists a cultural expectation that people love and care for animals (a ‘nation of animal lovers’), while at the same time the killing and consumption of animals is normalised. This disjuncture can be conceptualised as ‘the meat paradox’. This apparent contradiction raises the question, how do individuals who claim to love animals negotiate their simultaneous love of eating animals? Ambivalence and moral disengagement strategies have been identified as coping mechanisms used by omnivores to address these contradictions and cognitive dissonance theory is well established as an explanation for the meat paradox.

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

=

having inconsistent thoughts, beliefs, or attitudes, that often relate to behavioural decisions and attitude change.

The pro-vegan messages which resonated most strongly with non-vegans in this study were those that address the personal benefits of veganism. When presented with a series of health, environmental or animal ethics pro-vegan messages, every focus group in this study selected the 'health' messages as the most effective. In interviews and focus groups, participants talked about excluding animal products for health reasons and there was broad agreement that eating more fruit and vegetables was associated with better health.

TACKLING IDEAS ABOUT HEALTH/VALUE OF MEAT

Attachments to meat and dairy are usually expressed in a variety of terms. Pairings or multiple justifications for eating meat and dairy are often entwined. For example, attachments to meat and dairy are expressed as beneficial to the individual for reasons of taste, healthiness, texture and convenience. The people who took part in this study identified a range of ideas related to the perceived value and health benefits of a meat-based diet. In focus groups, perceptions of the relationship between muscle, strength and meat consumption remain strongly held across all age groups and especially in males under 25. Participants from all age groups talked about the protein value of meat.

However, when asked about meat or dairy, the majority of participants in this study did not

think either were essential to a healthy diet. A slightly higher proportion of male respondents (18.1%) thought meat was essential to a healthy diet in comparison to women (15%). It was very similar in terms of perceptions of drinking milk being essential to a healthy diet (8.8% of men, 8.2% of women). Interestingly, every focus group participant over the age of 55 in this study had decided to exclude some meat or dairy product from their diet. The main reasons given were health although a notable number of participants in all age groups over 25 talked about excluding veal for ethical reasons. This comment from a focus group participant was typical of the discussions about veal: *"I'll eat anything. I accept that they have to die. Not veal though. Veal makes me think. I don't eat veal"*

This study showed that the relationship between meat and health is not clear cut and meat is thought of as both healthy and unhealthy.

Participants talked about the health problems associated with excessive consumption of meat and dairy. Where a person might restrict meat and dairy for health reasons, they are viewed as a treat and not something to be eaten regularly. Many of the findings in this study point towards a general loosening of the association between meat, dairy and health. This suggests that the meanings assigned to meat and dairy are becoming increasingly divergent. What was clear from the study however was that vegetables, by comparison, have robust and singular associations with health and wellbeing.

AWARENESS OF AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES

Participants often referenced an awareness of agricultural practices as informing their opinions and understandings of meat and dairy. Those from rural areas or with ties to farming communities often

normalised the routine killing of animals for food. A good example of this type of response came from a focus group participant who said: *“I’m from a farming area. All these animals are born and raised to be slaughtered and to be eaten. Yeah, you can say they shouldn’t be kept the way that they are, but they’re here for one purpose in my head. It’s just how it is, normal. It’s how it’s always been where I come from.”*

Many people in the 55 and over age groups were critical of current animal agriculture practices. Participants in this group said about farming: *“it’s not how it used to be”* and expressed views that farmers were *“more distant from the animals now”*. These accounts are important because they don’t normalise current practices. Some participants talked about current animal agriculture practices as unnatural or untrustworthy, often with reference to a health scare and indicated that this had led to them excluding animal products

from their diets:

“You see I don’t drink cow’s milk for that reason. And because I distrust the factory farmers. I think factory farming, well, factory farmed milk, is untrustworthy.”

“We used to have tripe. I was brought up eating tripe, my parents brought us up on tripe and I used to quite like it until the trouble started with all the beef and that sort of thing and we’ve not had it since. You know. But I do have liver.”

PERCEIVED BIAS AND COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

Participants were highly resistant to messages that were perceived to be biased towards veganism from certain individuals and organisations. The term ‘balance’ was used repeatedly throughout the groups often with regard to perceived imbalances related to veganism. Many participants talked about the concept of a “balanced

diet” which was contrasted with ideas about the imbalanced, deficient or restrictive vegan diet. The term was used frequently in one group in relation to the need for “balanced reporting” on veganism and across all groups participants talked about the need for a “balanced view” about veganism. For example, one group agreed that a BBC article on vegan food was both credible and interesting because it was a good example of being balanced and moderate in its position on veganism. Participants were more open to messages that they felt communicated a balanced view. Some participants also commented on a perceived tendency for vegans to be “biased” and “not balanced” in their refusal to acknowledge non-vegan viewpoints. In another group, participants agreed that there was too much emphasis on how healthy a vegan diet can be and that it can be as “unhealthy and unbalanced as any other diet”. A male participant commented:

“This is about a balanced diet for vegans. This is always there at the time when veganism is discussed. There’s always this implicit assumption that a vegan diet is, you know, in itself, one of the best diets you can have. But there’s balance and on some level it’s possible to have an unbalanced vegan diet and no one explains what it means to have a balanced diet. I found this almost needs to have a caveat to say that it’s no good if you just sit and eat Oreos all day.”

Cognitive dissonance played a role in the participants’ knowledge of and reaction to vegan messages. Across the focus groups, people who already excluded some animal products tended to regard themselves as highly resistant to pro-vegan messages, felt that they were already well informed about animal welfare, and were more likely to hold the strong belief that diet is a personal choice. One participant referred to advocacy groups as being

responsible for creating “animal cruelty myths” and commented that there was a lack of “factual truth” in the messages.

When the credibility of advocacy messages was scrutinised in the focus groups, many participants dismissed them as “ridiculous”. Some participants referred to the need for evidence or scientific proof to support advocacy group pro-vegan claims:

“This compares us to pigs! Just like us, just like our pets, just like our children. We’re all like pigs, that’s what that message implies. Where’s the proof for something like this?”

“What is this trying to say? Is it that we’re too old to drink milk? Some people say that milk isn’t good for you after a certain age. It’s very confusing. What science is this based on?”

Despite finding video footage more compelling than still images, most participants said they would actively avoid films or video of animal cruelty because they considered it too distressing to watch. Participants in all groups said they found videos or documentaries about animal ethics issues more affective or hard-hitting than still images but when asked if they would click on the video that accompanied an article about cruelty in slaughterhouses, most participants said they would either not look at it or if they did, they would not watch to the end.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Tackle the assumptions concerning taste, convenience, habit and health factors of meat and dairy.

Reasons for eating meat and dairy are complex. So, for example, a person might pair health and habit or taste and convenience, but what is important to acknowledge is that the research suggests that it is common to have more than one reason to continue to eat meat and dairy and that those reasons are largely about the benefits to the individual. This suggests that pro-vegan messages which resonate with many non-vegans are those that highlight the personal benefits of veganism.

For many non-vegans, a balanced message about veganism is more effective than a distressing image of animal cruelty. Avoid judgmental messaging. Consider how an ethical message can be delivered in a way that normalises compassion, empathy or fairness.

Consider backing up pro-vegan messages with evidence from reputable sources such as academic studies but avoid overwhelming people with numbers and statistics.

STORIES

Memories, recollections and stories of farming from people in the over-55 age groups could be used to highlight the intensive nature of current farming practices. These stories could be useful to open up discussions about the ethics of current farming practices.

3. Family/Social Dynamics

The findings of this research reveal that family and social dynamics play a key role in an individual's decision to embark on a plant-based diet or vegan lifestyle.

FAMILY/SOCIAL DYNAMICS AS BARRIERS

Family dynamics are a major barrier to transition, reduction or even maintenance of vegan eating practices. This may include feelings of awkwardness, discomfort, and embarrassment in asking for vegan food when in a close relative's home. Individuals may alter their preferred dietary practices to accommodate a partner or relative especially when obstacles such as making more than one meal arise.

Although they lived alone, some single interviewees spoke about the family dynamics that influenced their food choices

outside of their individual homes. When asked about the main reason they ate meat and dairy, a male omnivore explains:

"The main reason that I eat dairy foods has usually been that I've always lived with vegetarians who love cheese. I think I'm a bit of a people pleaser. I buy all of the cheese and cook all of the cheesy things. Since my partner's been living in the States I can't remember the last time I bought any cheese."

Another participant described their strong familial link with meat:

"I think meat consumption is mainly down to my mum... She's Thai and she's a Thai chef. Food is literally her whole world. I think she gets the most enjoyment out of me eating her food. So she just would, absolutely, go off it if she couldn't cook me what she wanted to, which is tricky because I see her, pretty much, every week."

A female interviewee who identified as a vegetarian explained how she felt that her vegetarianism was personal and that self-excluding from certain animal products when eating with her family would be impolite:

"I don't want to exclude myself, if they have cooked something for me, then I would eat it but it's not the reason I don't want to put them off. I feel impolite and I feel also that it's for me to know, not everybody else should know that, what my belief is about health and food."

During another interview it emerged that when visiting the parental home, a female interviewee was worried about inconveniencing her family by asking for vegetarian food:

"Last time I went back, I didn't make any, kind of, big deal about... we'd had a conversation about the fact that we were mostly veggie, but I ate a lot of meat when I went back

to my mum's. So, I didn't make any, kind of, big issue out of it, and I felt a little bit reluctant to do that. Not wanting to put people out, I guess, is part of it."

These comments from interviewees make clear that the influence of family dynamics on eating practices is extremely strong and that individuals may feel compelled to adopt what they see as familial norms or expectations even when those might conflict with their usual eating practices.

The perception of food as being distinctly 'vegan' or 'not vegan' can lead to conflict in a family setting and notions that cooking for vegans means cooking separate meals.

Constructing vegan meals as adaptable to other tastes and preferences might address some difficult familial dynamics around veganism. Where vegan meals are reframed as easily adaptable by simply adding another non-vegan component can benefit those

who might otherwise feel that they have to accommodate the preferences of non-vegan family or friends.

FAMILY/SOCIAL DYNAMICS AS PATHWAYS

Importantly, family dynamics are also a major pathway to reduction and transition. Vegan family members increase familiarity and knowledge of veganism for non-vegans.



Non-vegans who value the inclusion of eating as part of regular socialising practices with vegans in their family or social circle, those who cook for vegan family members or friends tend to be open to imagining vegan transition in more positive terms. They are also more likely to have tried and enjoyed vegan food. A male omnivore who lives in multiple occupancy houses explains:

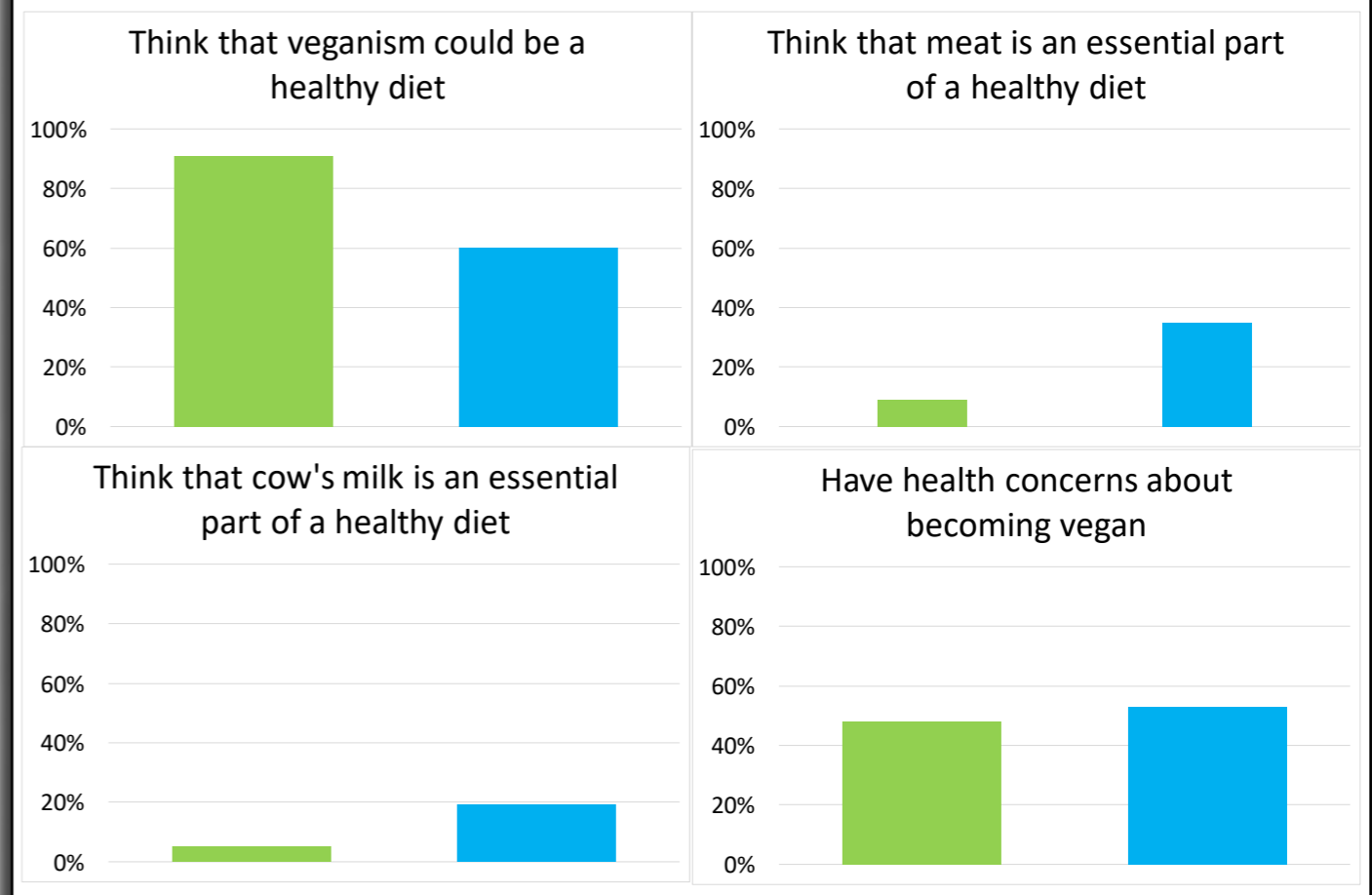
“I think, often, it depends who I’m living with. So I don’t think I’ve ever lived with a meat eater. Not since I lived at home with my dad maybe. So I’ve always cooked vegetarian or vegan, depending who I’ve been living with, but, having said that, whenever I eat out I usually eat meat. I eat out quite a lot.”

Respondents who reported that they had vegan friends or family had a considerably more positive view of the healthiness of veganism. See Table 1.

A large proportion of participants who had vegan friends or family (80.1%), had eaten a vegan meal (83.9%) and 90% thought that it was easier to eat vegan today compared with 10 years ago. Such findings demonstrate the increased social presence of veganism in contemporary UK life.

Table 1

 = respondents who rated themselves as having a high knowledge of veganism
 = respondents who rated themselves as having a low knowledge of veganism



4. Health

WHAT CAN WE DO?

SIMPLE SWAPS

Showing that vegan meals can be adaptable to other tastes and preferences might address some difficult familial dynamics around veganism. Where vegan meals are reframed as easily adaptable by simply adding or substituting a non-vegan component can benefit those who might otherwise feel that they have to accommodate the preferences of non-vegan family or friends.

PUBLIC COMMUNITY WORKSHOPS

Public community workshops that incorporate different processes of reflection (arts-based methods, discussion groups etc) might offer an opportunity for someone to consider or enable a transition to veganism.

VEGAN PLEDGE SCHEMES

Vegan pledge schemes should reconsider their focus on individuals due to the relationship and familial context of food practices. Monthly vegan pledges and vegan transition campaigns may be more successful if they account for these dimensions from the outset.

UTILISING FAMILY/RELATABLE VEGAN MESSAGES

Relatable scenarios and relationships (i.e. parent/child, pet/owner) evoke strong emotions that may promote change, but this needs to be sensitive to the family dynamic/characteristics. For example, they should consider non-traditional families, and should be realistic and not idealised. Therefore, a real family experience may be useful in pro-vegan messages and advocacy materials.

Perceptions of what is considered to be healthy and unhealthy played a key role in the participants' perceptions of veganism. Vegan diets and lifestyles were perceived as both healthy and unhealthy, revealing a complex set of beliefs and standards as far as health is concerned. When prompted to think about health and their eating practices, all interviewees responded that they made connections between food and health. Asked whether health is an influence on their purchasing decisions, a female vegetarian replied:

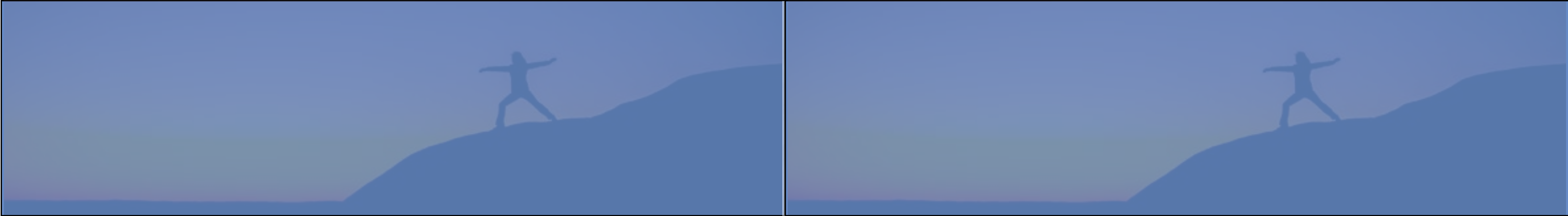
"Sometimes I do consider health. I look at broccoli and I think of health, I look at avocado, I think of health. Whenever I'm in the vegetable section, I think about it. Health is a concern. I feel being vegetarian is a lot linked with my understanding of health. Also, I also don't trust the meat; the production of meat. Chicken especially."

PROMOTION OF VEGAN AS HEALTHY

Over 84% of non-vegans thought that veganism could be a healthy way of eating. 84% did not think that eating meat is essential for a healthy diet. Over 91% did not think that drinking cow's milk is essential for a healthy diet. However, over 52% reported that they would have health concerns about becoming vegan. In a discussion about veganism, deficiencies and health a female participant commented:

"You tend to think that on a vegan diet you you're not going to get all your nutrients, vitamins, things like that but it's interesting to know that you can, through fruit and through different types of milk. I think they do an oat milk so you're actually cutting down for the animals as well as from the health aspect of it."

Participants in all groups discussed the dietary deficiencies



they associated with veganism. One participant summarised the view as follows:

“You tend to think if you’re vegan you’re not healthy, you’re not having this, you’re not having that. You can’t be healthy. You need these other things. You need to have the other foods.”

One participant mentioned a lack of B12 as an issue. All groups mentioned lack of protein as a key concern with some participants making clear distinctions between animal and plant-based proteins, regarding the former as being a higher quality form of protein. One female participant commented:

“I can see why people would cut out meat, because of the animals, but what concerns me is where do you get your first-class protein from. You only get first class protein from animal products don’t you. I mean if you eat beans and all things like that, that’s second-class protein.

I can understand people going vegetarian, but I can’t understand going vegan.”

There was a marked difference in the perception of the healthiness of veganism between those who rated themselves as having a high knowledge of veganism in contrast to those who rated themselves as having a low knowledge of veganism (see Table 2).

Concerns over nutritional deficiencies and concerns related to a pre-existing health condition were the most significant. 60% of all of these responses related to concerns over nutritional deficiencies. In other words, across everyone surveyed, 31% expressed nutritional concerns about a vegan diet. A higher proportion of women (54%) than men (47%) had health concerns about becoming vegan. This could suggest that even though the proportion of vegans in the UK is already disproportionately female more women specifically could be attracted to vegan eating by

being assuaged of their health concerns. However, given that close to a third of the entire sample expressed nutritional concerns over a potential transition to vegan eating this is clearly an area for attention generally.

Individuals with experiences of disordered eating may find veganism overwhelming, overly restrictive, and emulating patterns similar to those of disordered eating. When discussing the possibility of going vegan for a month, one female vegetarian discussed a previous health condition as potentially mitigating against that:

“I am interested in veganism, but restricting my food any further in that way, because I have had disordered eating, I find quite cluttering for my mind”.

They may also actively dissociate from vegans who are perceived as holding judgemental views about food. While views on

veganism and disordered eating are not widely represented in our study it is notable that where a relationship between veganism and eating disorders is expressed, it is from participants in the age groups 18-24, 25-34 and 35-44.

INCOME AND HEALTH

Participants demonstrated a belief that vegan diets are more expensive to cater for. For those with an annual income of under £30k 54% had health concerns about becoming vegan, for those earning over £30k 49% had health concerns.



THE PERCEIVED OBSTACLE OF RESTRICTION

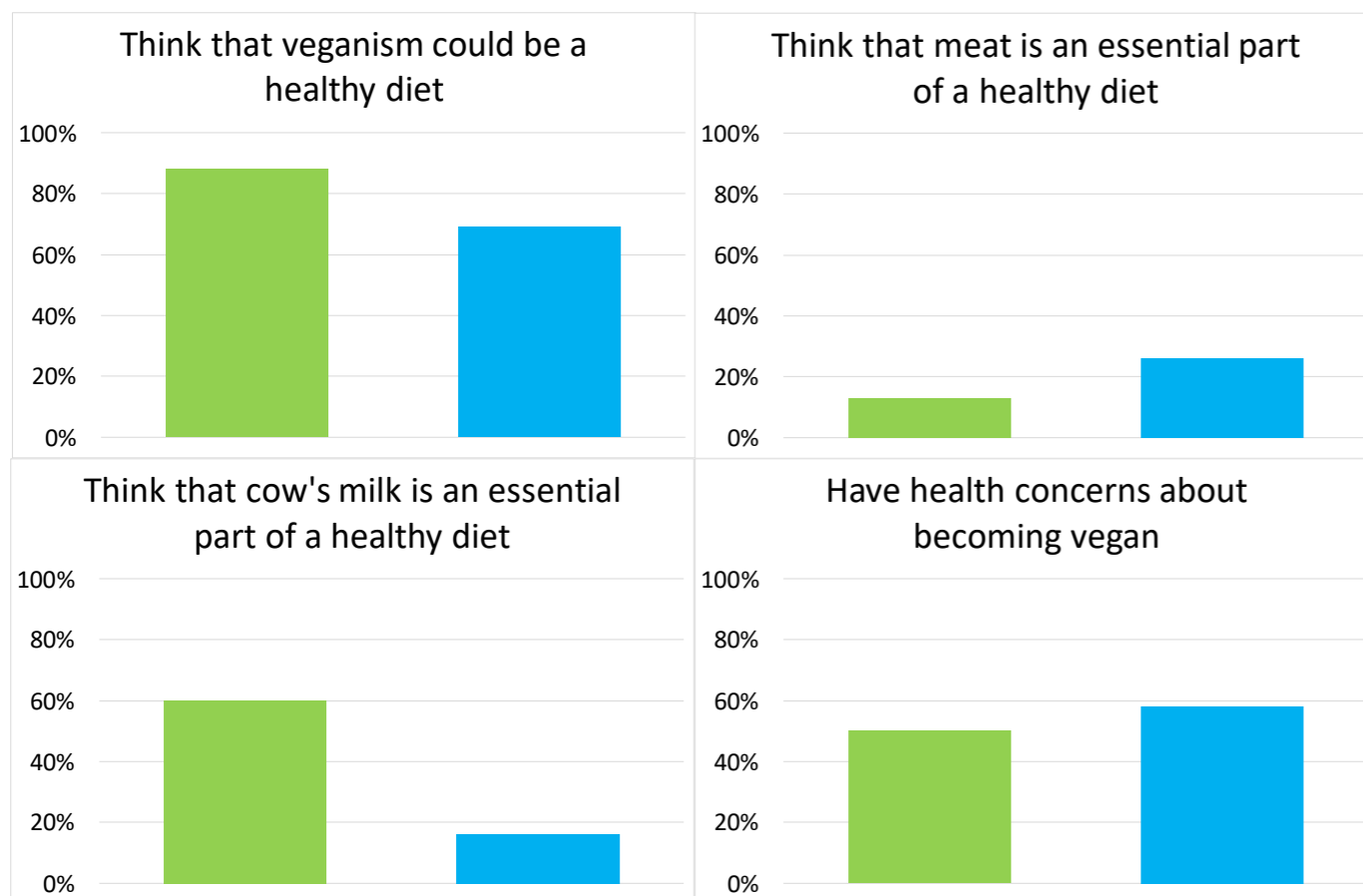
When veganism was considered in a health context it was discussed by participants as a restrictive or special diet, suitable for an existing condition, and perceived to be difficult to adhere to in the long term. One focus group

agreed that veganism was a form of restriction and abstaining from animal products long term, even if it brought specific health benefits, was a barrier. One female participant summarised the group's view in the following comment:

"We've known a lot of people who were diabetic and they're not diabetic anymore. It's from eating a lot more fruit and veg. It's healthy food isn't it but you have to stick to a diet and that's not easy"

Table 2

 = respondents with vegan friends and/or family
 = respondents with no vegan friends and/or family



Participants indicated that they have already or would in future pass on health information about veganism to a close friend or family member. Health messages were seen to have greater credibility than messages that had environmental or ethical content. One female participant explained that she doubted the pro-vegan environmental messages because she mainly associated veganism with health:

"I don't know. I don't see it in this way. I don't think oh veganism, then automatically think of the environment, helping the environment. I think of it more as health, you know, in a health way. So, I see it as a by-product of health, you know helping the environment, and it's a bit controversial to have it presented in this way because there's going to be other factors that they don't even mention in there."

All groups except the over-55 group rated health followed by environmental messages as more effective than ethics messages. The over-55 group rated health

and ethics messages in front of environmental messages.

Medical health-related messages were considered most trustworthy. Of the health messages, the NHS website was regarded by a majority of participants as the most trustworthy source of information about veganism and as having the most credible message about vegan diets. However, unless people actively sought out health messages about veganism it was unlikely that they would encounter the health messages they perceived as credible. By comparison, less credible messages were more likely to be encountered via social media.

Participants who used social media, irrespective of age, expressed message fatigue and frustration with vegan friends who posted pro-vegan messages particularly on Facebook. Ethical messages that were 'pushed' to participants were mentioned as an intrusion in an individual's personal social media space that caused high levels of annoyance

5. Perceptions of Vegans

or aggravation. In one group, two female participants discussed how they “flicked straight past” any vegan-related social media posts from their friends. One participant explained: *“I’m just not interested in any of it. So, you’re a vegan. Why do I care about your personal choice?”*

Health and academic sources

were judged most credible while celebrity and advocacy group messages judged less credible. In the latter cases this was due to widely held views that celebrities and advocacy groups had self-serving agendas while health institutions were perceived to be concerned with the well-being of others and academics considered to have objectivity.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

TACKLE HEALTH OBSTACLES

Vegan advocacy organisations should consider the health-related findings of this study. There are many ways that this can be achieved. For example:

- Organisations could network with health professionals to communicate with the public on wide ranging and detailed aspects of plant-based nutrition.
- Work with health-related organisations and charities to address the concerns of people with pre-existing health conditions.

Whether eating disorders specifically, or other previous or continuing health conditions, this should be an important area of further consideration for vegan advocates.

STORIES

It is important to produce new stories about veganism that move the focus away from a vegan diet as restrictive. Instead, narratives and imagery of vegan food should focus on the combined range and variety of foods, freshness and health benefits.

Participants in the study were less likely to view veganism as suitable for infants, athletes, children, and pensioners. On the subject of whether it was appropriate for children to be raised as vegans a female participant commented:

“I think it’s about fitting in isn’t it. I mean if you go to school and you know you’re going to be singled out for being slightly different, it’s hard. And then are there adequate things for them to eat out there?”

Another group reached the decision that it was not appropriate to feed children a vegan diet. A female participant summarised the view of the group when she said:

“If people want to be vegan, let them, but for children, no, at least in their growing years let them have a full diet and then if they want to follow the parents, well that’s fine.”

A female participant expressed a

popular view in the 18-25 group about an article on a professional tennis player’s vegan diet:

“I look at Serena Williams and I see, you know, a strong independent woman and from the way her arms look in this one picture there’s no way she eats just like the grassy food. You know she’s got to eat a big steak every now and again to get muscles like that.”

In response to an image of a male vegan powerlifter, a male participant expressed a typical view that a vegan diet is calorie deficient: *“To maintain his size, he’d need about six thousand calories per day. To get that from a vegan diet you’d have to be eating 24/7.”*

However, participants acknowledged that images of vegan athletes and sportspeople challenged general stereotypes and their own views about what vegan bodies ‘should’ look like. For example, a male participant

expressed surprise over the image of a vegan powerlifter explaining: *“This is not what I would think of, or what people at home would think of as being vegans; you know, that they’d be all grass-eating skinny people.”*

This suggests that images and stories of healthy vegans at all ages and in different professional contexts could help to change public perceptions. Sportspeople, especially those associated with muscularity and strength are especially important to the normalisation of veganism and are key to breaking down widely held assumptions about vegan deficiencies and associations with weakness.

CELEBRITY ENDORSEMENTS

Acting as cultural intermediaries, celebrities have different roles and functions in relation to veganism; imparting knowledge, having a campaigning role and embodying vegan consumption habits. In

another study, Doyle (2014) found that ethical veganism is often downplayed by celebrity culture to make it more marketable as a consumable set of lifestyle practices.

Across all areas of the study, participants expressed high levels of cynicism towards celebrity endorsements of vegan lifestyles and of media generally in relation to pro-vegan messages. Messages that were linked to celebrities were judged to have little or no credibility and were not considered trustworthy sources of information about veganism. Celebrity claims were regarded as “trivial”, “just opinion” and without substance:

“Coming from someone who’s popular and just saying 100% vegan and joyous day it’s just stupid. They way she’s tweeted it. Joyous. The way she’s worded it, it’s stupid.”

Participants also referred to some celebrity claims as

“hypocritical”. A male participant commented on an old image of Arnold Schwarzenegger that accompanied a 2018 article about the celebrity’s support for meat reduction:

“He’s hypocritical. He’s definitely eaten more meat than anyone in this room. I’d read it because that’s my interest anyway but if I saw him on anything I’d probably read it but this, well, it’s just funny and laughable because he doesn’t look like a vegan does he? He wasn’t then but he might be now.”

Participants observed that celebrities would often claim to be vegan to attract publicity. One male participant explained that he found it difficult to believe any of the celebrity claims for veganism because he doubted their sincerity generally:

“People just announce things. People just say they’re going vegan, they announce a lot of things just to get attention. They

want to get headlines.”

There was an overriding feeling expressed by participants that celebrity statements about veganism in relation to health benefits or environmental concerns were individual “opinion” and therefore could not be taken as having any factual basis. Participants referred to celebrity veganism as “a trend” or “trendy”. Participants in the over-55 focus group agreed that celebrity veganism was an “in thing” a “fad” a “trend”, “attention getting” and held no interest for them.

Despite this general cynicism towards celebrity and low levels of trust in pro-vegan claims by celebrities, participants said that the high level of interest in celebrity lifestyles would drive them to read about celebrity vegans. Participants under 55 said they were more likely to read a celebrity article about veganism than any of the other pro-vegan messages presented during the focus groups. In these cases, participants were interested in the

personal stories of the celebrities and felt that they would read such articles out of curiosity about celebrity lifestyles. One female participant said:

“It makes me want to read it more. I look at that and think there’s no way she could look like that and be vegan so then you want to see what she does and how she gets the way that she is while being vegan.”

A male participant said: *“If there was a link provided on Twitter or something, I’d go straight to it. That would grab my attention. I’d be 50/50 on reading it but because it was that footballer in particular, it would be interesting to read because of who he is.”*

Although participants’ engagement with celebrity endorsement of veganism is complex, celebrity vegans are useful for normalising veganism within the wider media landscape.

When it came to the credibility

of a ‘vegan sportsperson’, this was reliant on length of time as a vegan and improvements to performance. One male participant commented:

“I’d say he’s built most of his muscle from eating meat. You can’t say you’re a vegan-based athlete unless you’ve been vegan for at least a year. Someone like David Haye, he’s been doing it for quite a few years hasn’t he, so he’s been vegan for four or five years. He’s actually done all his fights vegan. I mean he’s had fights before he’s been vegan, but he’s made his name after he’s vegan. So, he’s not one that’s benefitted massively from the meat before they become vegan. Then there’s these who get the benefits of the meat, have their career, then say they’ve gone vegan but it’s just to convince other people to go vegan.”

This study found that sportspeople who have been vegan for a year or more are more likely to have credibility

than those who have been vegan for less than 12 months and those who have demonstrated

improvement after becoming vegan are likely to have even greater credibility.

CASE STUDY: JOAQUIN PHOENIX

Joaquin Phoenix is an actor who is also a vegan activist. As part of the study, focus groups were shown examples of Phoenix’s activism: a promotional image for an animal advocacy campaign and a video on YouTube, detailing Phoenix’s vegan beliefs. This study was undertaken in November 2019, soon after Phoenix’s hit film *Joker* was released, but before he won an Academy Award for the same role.

In a focus group study, overall responses to Joaquin Phoenix as a celebrity endorser were rather mixed. There was a degree of cynicism as he was viewed as a privileged celebrity who was in a better position to make choices and he was also criticised for what was perceived as anthropomorphic and jarring language.

Occasionally his celebrity status was downplayed. Although the video makes clear he has been vegan since the age of three, several participants explained away his veganism as the result of coming from an ‘alternative’ family. This might imply that celebrity status whilst sometimes effective can also reinforce a perception of difference between celebrities and ‘everyday people.’

6. Generational Differences

WHAT CAN WE DO?

CELEBRITY

Vegan celebrities are often subject to scepticism but also curiosity. Due to the complex ambivalent response to celebrity reported in this study careful thought should be given to the use of celebrity. Engaged viewers are likely to be cynical toward the use of celebrity generally and their social status may compound the perceived unobtainability of vegan practices. Celebrity stories may however also act as a gateway to learning about a vegan lifestyle and the overall social normalisation effect of vegan practices, especially for people 18-34.

SPORTSPEOPLE

Sportspeople can be important in breaking down perceptions of veganism as unhealthy and challenging stereotypes of vegans as weak, tired, or lacking energy. Pro-vegan endorsement by sportspeople is also more likely to reach a younger male audience than other types of vegan messaging.

AVOIDANCE OF OVERT AGENDAS

Overt agendas cause resistance, whereas subtle or objective messages with achievable, actionable suggestions are favoured.

STORIES

People need to be able to identify with a pro-vegan narrative. A single story will not engage everyone, so it is important that stories are targeted to specific groups. These stories should avoid idealising and try to think about the realities of the group they are addressing.

There are generational differences when it comes to food practices and responses to pro-vegan messages. The research report identified distinct differences between respondents aged 55 and over, those aged between 45 and 55, participants between the ages 25 and 45 and those under 25. Certain age differences surfaced in relation to the subset of health-related questions, with over 45s less convinced of the healthiness of veganism and more attached to cow's milk consumption as an essential component of a healthy diet. This is likely to reflect generational differences in food practices and could add to evidence that younger age groups are losing their attachment (to an extent) to milk in particular. However, data from the interviews and focus groups undertaken as part of this project demonstrate a more complex picture in relation to generational responses especially around reasons for self-exclusion of specific animal products from diets by over 45s.

55 AND OVER

Those in over-55 age groups who might be regarded as more resistant to pro-vegan messages are still likely to self-exclude individual animal products for ethical and health reasons. Importantly, this study found that self-exclusion of animal products in the over-55 age group was long-term. Some participants in this study spoke about excluding animal products for forty years or more. Attachment to food practices in older age groups should therefore not be viewed as a barrier per se. In older age groups where attachment to eating practices is strong and where those practices include self-exclusion of animal products, those practices are likely to remain in the long-term.

Over 55s are familiar with and receptive to health messages about meat reduction or exclusion, and increased fruit and vegetable consumption. One

female participant commented about the cluster of pro-vegan health messages:

“I know about the health benefits. I go to Slimming World and they’re always going on about vegetables and non-meat products which do boost weight loss as well. It’s filling. I do like vegetables, I do, but unfortunately I have meat with them.”

Resistance increased when health was discussed in the context of a pro-vegan message.

45 AND OVER

People aged 45 and over were less likely to think that veganism could be a healthy way of eating compared to those under 45. However, both age groups were broadly similar in their belief that meat was essential to a healthy diet. There was a more marked difference when asked about milk. 12% of those aged 45 and over thought that milk was essential to

a healthy diet, compared to 7% for those aged under 45.

As over 45s were more likely to consider veganism as a fad or extreme, we can assume that stigma around the term ‘vegan’ persists in this age group. The outcomes of this study suggest that over-45s are more likely to respond favourably to national animal welfare campaigns and mainstream health messages that advise on the benefits of animal product exclusion than to messages that are perceived to be specifically pro-vegan. However, based on focus group responses we can assume that where changes are made, they will be longer-lasting due to strong attachments to food practices. This may therefore suggest a generally longer transitional pathway to veganism for over 45s but with strong and lasting attachment to incremental changes.

Interestingly, participants over 45 were more likely to identify

an ethical message as effective than participants under 45. This we assume is because these participants were more likely to self-exclude some animal products long term and therefore more likely to identify an ethics message that aligned with their exclusion practices.

25-45

In the under 45 age groups there was a tendency to reject advocacy campaigns on the basis of a perception of emotional manipulation but not because there was a particular objection to the message itself. Indeed, many of these participants expressed the view that they were concerned about or opposed to farming practices that were detrimental to animal welfare.

One set of ethical messages were considered more effective than others. These were messages which relate to shared experiences of motherhood between humans

and other species. These messages were most likely to be positively received by females over 35.

UNDER 25

In the under 25 age group avoidance of emotional manipulation and a perceived lack of sophistication in communication strategies by advocacy groups reflected widespread tendencies to ridicule such approaches on social media.

Under 25 group participants were more likely to ignore a friend’s pro-vegan message on social media but more likely to read a celebrity story that included a pro-vegan message to the end if they already had an interest in that celebrity’s life. This reflects tendencies in social media practices to create echo chambers in which individuals are more likely to engage with views and interests that align with their own. It reinforces the point that

7. Constructing Vegan Narratives

celebrity pro-vegan messages and endorsement from sportspeople are crucial to normalising veganism for this group.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

TARGETED MESSAGING:

Targeted messaging should address generational differences in attachments to meat and dairy.

Consider pro-vegan celebrity stories as a way to normalise veganism for younger people who have created 'echo chambers' on social media.

Stories about sportspeople that endorse veganism may be one route to reach younger male non-vegans.

Messages about the shared experience of motherhood for humans and other species may prove effective as an ethical message to reach some female non-vegans.

Messages that use the term 'plant-based' rather than 'vegan' may prove more effective for people over 45.

One of the key overarching findings from the focus groups was the participants' high levels of cynicism regarding the content, context and purpose of pro-vegan videos and images. These barriers appear to be heightened when there is no narrative involved. For example, when shown photographs of farm animals without any accompanying context, participants consistently questioned and scrutinised images to construct their own narratives, which were often based on misinformation or misunderstandings around meat and dairy farming practices.

Despite often indicating a sadness regarding the conditions in which the animals were kept, participants came up with their own explanations for the necessity of such practices. One participant commented:

"The farmer behind this is probably not a horrible person that's like, oh, I hate chickens, I'm going to put them all in a shed. They're probably thinking I need to feed my family and I need to

keep my farm alive. So, this is how; the way I'm going to make any money is putting them in this horrible position. And do we know what chickens feel like? I don't know"

CONTENT

Participants expressed concerns about being manipulated by pro-vegan messages. Anthropomorphising was referenced both explicitly and implicitly.

ANTHROPOMORPHISM
=
the attribution of human characteristics or behaviour to a god, animal, or object.

When mentioned explicitly, examples of anthropomorphising were met with cynicism. In response to a video that

appeared to show a cow crying, participants said:

“Is it crying, or is its eye just watering?”

“Yeah, I didn’t think it was crying”

“I’m not sure cows are that intelligent”

“I’m not saying that animals don’t cry, I’m just saying we don’t know what led to that shot of the tears coming out of the animal’s eye and I felt manipulated, because I don’t know how that was done. I’d like to have seen the process that led to that starting so I could have made my own judgement on why it was crying”

However, implicitly, participants commonly anthropomorphised naturally, particularly in the case of animal parent-child imagery.

“The adult one is bleating. Its mouth is wide open and it’s shouting. I’ve got a two-year-old son and it makes me think if I

was separated from my son, I’d be absolutely livid”

“So that just makes me feel desperately sad and just thinking of even just being a mum and if you had your baby taken away from you and you’ve got milk and your instinct is to feed your baby”

CONTEXT

Context is necessary not only to alleviate doubt as to the trustworthiness of the contents of the image, but also to educate or inform the realities of meat and dairy farming. Context in the form of narrative can help to reduce barriers. Narrative can also aid in creating scenarios that allow the audience to identify with a message. Participants were generally critically aware of feeling emotionally manipulated and often would question the context of the animal images in order to lessen the potential moral severity of what they were seeing. This could suggest the importance of

having a strong clear narrative in order to make it less likely viewers will construct their own more comfortable script.

“Yeah I’ve assumed that it’s [a new-born crying for its mum]. Actually, that could just be that poor little calf has accidentally got, like fallen under the fence and needs rescuing or something, it could just be a ranch or something”

Participants were also highly sceptical regarding both the author and the agenda of videos and images. This was the case when the author and agenda were known and unknown. Images and videos were often accused of being “staged” or “set up”.

“I’m not totally convinced it’s not a stunt. You know? Like, is it? Is it real? I mean, I’m more sad about the fact it looks like such a desolate environment for a cow. Like where’s the grass? You know, you think what cow would be happy? Regardless of being

separated from its calf? Doesn’t look a very pleasant environment for cow anyway.”

Although narratives offer contextual and educational information, which help to reduce the barriers to vegan messages, they were also subject to misinterpretation and did have negative consequences if people feel the story is too idealised or unrealistic. A television advert that featured a family dynamic trying a vegan swap, though received positively by a majority, elicited a negative response with some participants who noted that the message was idealised and inspired guilt by promoting unrealistic standards for parents.

“I feel a bit guilty when I see the advert because I think of [my] little girl who’s now 24 when she came to me and said she wanted to be vegetarian and she didn’t get that response. She got: what you’re going to eat? Come on, chips and mash? I don’t think so, here’s your chicken.”

Mistrust of pro-vegan messages is also directly linked to evidence of overt agendas, with participants commonly referring to their dislike of having someone else's belief 'pushed' or "thrust' on them. Participants judged media and advocacy group messages as less credible due to widely held views that media and advocacy groups had self-serving agendas. Participants mentioned frequently that advocacy messages were "exaggerated" and designed to "pull on the heartstrings". There was a nuanced distinction made by participants who reported that they knew that the images were created to make them feel guilt and shame but that the overriding emotions they experienced were anger, frustration or annoyance. One participant commented:

"It's sad if you think about it. Yeah, but it's probably exaggerated and they're just trying to pull on your heartstrings for you to change your diet. I just take it with a grain of salt. You know, you're taught not

to believe everything you see, especially in advertisements, they're trying to sell something. So, I'm like, yeah, they chose the most pitiful looking pig for this picture. They're trying to make you feel bad. Like you don't have compassion unless you're vegan. It's just a ridiculous message."

Participants discussed how the images of animals were specifically selected to induce an emotional response. In a discussion about whether the images made the participants feel sympathy, one participant explained:

"If you take the image out and read it you're going to feel neutral but if you see the sad face then you're going to feel a little bit sorry for it."

Some participants likened vegan messages to religious discourse, referring to them as "preachy". One participant said: *"It's the same old arguments, seen it all before. It makes me feel angry,*

they're trying to get in my head, like a religion. I don't like others piling things on me."

Participants also expressed the view that advocacy group messages which used emotional manipulation were completely ineffective: *"I just don't care. I look at it and nothing. I don't care". "There's one second of pity then I think, nah. If I go to eat bacon for lunch I won't even think about this."*

CHOICE OF ANIMAL

In constructing a pro-vegan advert an important decision is whether to include images of nonhuman animals. The sample of videos and images in this study included a range of animals and some images which focused on humans. This allowed us to gauge degrees of identification with specific animal species, and how cultural meanings about animals were conveyed in the focus group setting.

A consistent finding across the focus groups was that, although there was concern expressed over factory farming conditions, participants found chickens to be the least identifiable. Interestingly, several participants across more than one group expressed negative emotions toward birds.

"I've got no emotion with the birds. I hate birds. If it was a different animal..."

"They don't have the same kind of- when you see a sheep you can kind of think of it as a dog but when you've got a chicken you don't really".

"It just freaked me out because I'm terrified of birds. If we go to the farm, I avoid the chickens. If I take the kids to the farm, I just avoid the birds".

It is important to note that participants were shown images of fully grown birds. Images of chicks would be expected to carry different meanings and

would not necessarily invoke the same response. The images which participants identified the most with were those that included young animals and their parents, including images of being separated from parents.

The parental/maternal relationship dimension appears to be an effective message. There were even moments when participants related the treatment of the farmed animals, they were viewing to their companion animals.

“I struggle to see the difference between that cow and my little cat”

“I did feel sad at the beginning. It made me think of my dog”

Occasionally the identification travelled not only to companion animals but to relating to participants’ own children or children generally.

“I mean, yeah, you can say they do have a bit of space. But if you imagine that’s kids in that much space then it’s not, sort of...”

WHAT CAN WE DO?

CHOOSE ANIMALS WISELY

It may be possible or even preferable to convey animal ethics messages in such a way that does not obviously include real representations of nonhuman animals.

The samples featuring pigs/piglets, cows/calf, sheep/lambs all had some success in eliciting sympathetic identification. However, in choosing one animal species there is a risk of losing large segments of an audience.

There was rather clear evidence that chickens/birds were seen less

...

favourably by many of our participants. This would suggest that chickens would be a poor choice of animal if the attempt was to elicit moral identification and ethical reflexivity.

Overt anthropomorphising or scenarios read as being anthropomorphic produced cynicism however; anthropomorphism can be a natural outcome when individuals view subtle images of animals with their offspring or acting in a manner typically associated with pets.

CLEAR “UNBIASED” NARRATIVES

Participants were generally critically aware of feeling emotionally manipulated and often would question the context of the animal images in order to lessen the potential moral severity of what they were seeing. This would suggest that it would be risky to construct messages which can be interpreted as ‘emotional manipulation’. Also, a strong clear narrative can lessen the likelihood of viewers constructing more palatable readings of what they are viewing.

Narratives are an effective way of communicating context and increasing trust and awareness. However, “stories” should not be designed to elicit guilt and should, instead, offer factual, objective information and “simple swaps” or relatable scenarios and relationships (i.e. parent/child, pet/owner).

AVOID DISTURBING IMAGES

Shocking or distressing imagery often leads to active disengagement.

INCLUSIVITY

Although the images and videos in this study were used to explore opinions about animals and food, many participants raised other issues such as diversity, familial gender roles and climate change. This indicates that promotional materials may be able to tackle more than one issue.

There is a growing research base on veganism. Much of this is cited in the original 'Pathways to Veganism' report, which can be downloaded here:

<https://research.edgehill.ac.uk/en/publications/pathways-to-veganism-exploring-effective-messages-in-vegan-transi>

As we learn more about veganism and meat culture we are beginning to understand more about effective strategies for change.



Edge Hill University

C. Parkinson, L. Herring, R. Twine, C. Blennerhassett & N. Griffin (2020)

The Pathways project was funded by The Vegan Society

