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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study, framed by social identity theory, examines how self-identified vegans and vegetarians negotiate diet-related social norm conflicts within their social networks. Twenty-one semi-structured interviews with 18- to 58-year-old vegans and vegetarians who represented five nationalities were analysed inductively through thematic analysis. According to the results, social norm conflicts occurred in contexts where tense family relations or boundaries between in-group and out-group were salient. The results also show that in order to manage norm conflict situations, the interviewees used strategies towards the dominant social norms, such as adapting, challenging, and weakening. In particular, adapting to the dominant social norms was used in relationships that were not close, whereas challenging and weakening were used within close relationships. The interviewees had developed practical solutions to resolve social norm conflicts, such as eating what was served, actively providing information, or acting as an example to others. The results enhance understanding of the challenges entailed by practising vegan or vegetarian diet in an omnivorous society.

## 1. Introduction

The food system is one of the main sectors harming the environment, causing 21–37% of the total greenhouse gas emissions (Rosenzweig et al., 2020), and inflicting changes in land use, loss of biodiversity, and depletion of freshwater resources (Springmann et al., 2018). From the point of view of consumption, one of the most effective ways to reduce climate emissions is to reduce the consumption of meat and other animal-based foods (Springmann et al., 2018). It has been estimated that increased adoption of plant-based diets could reduce climate emissions by as much as 80% (Willett et al., 2019). Although vegetarianism and plant-based foods are more common and accepted nowadays than before (Jallinoja et al., 2019), in affluent Western countries meat eating is still a predominant practice and a social norm (e.g., Koch et al., 2019; Piazza et al., 2015). Dissolving these practices and related norms has proved to be one of the greatest challenges in adopting diets with less or no meat (Niva et al., 2017; Vainio et al., 2016). In Finland, where this study took place, the numbers of vegetarian and vegan eaters have hardly risen in

recent years, the proportion of vegetarians being around 4% and vegans around 2% of the population (Jallinoja, 2020).

Food consumption is to a large extent a social activity, and food preferences are a part of individuals social identities, which refers to the mental images that individuals attach to themselves and others based on what they eat (Bisogni et al., 2002). According to social identity theory, people define themselves through their group memberships and categorise social groups to in-groups to which they belong, and out-groups to which they do not belong (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). For example, adopting a vegetarian diet changes the way individuals view themselves and how they relate to other vegetarians and non-vegetarians (Jabs et al., 2000). Social groups, in turn, have their own norms and values (Turner, 1982). Cialdini and Trost (1998, p. 152) define social norms as "the rules and standards that are understood by members of the group, and guide and/or limit social behaviour without the force of law". Further, social identities and social norms are constantly (re)negotiated (Tajfel, 1978). According to social identity theory, an individual adheres to the social norms of a group to demonstrate their commitment to the

group and to affirm their own identity as a member of the group. However, individuals belong to several social groups that may have conflicting norms, and therefore they sometimes have to choose which norms they will prioritize in specific situations. For example, in the context of pro-environmental behaviour, norm conflicts have been shown to be associated with perceived effectiveness of the behaviour, and either inhibit or encourage people to take action (McDonald et al., 2012).

When becoming a vegetarian, a person leaves the social group of meat-eaters and becomes a member of the vegetarian group (Rosenfeld & Burrow, 2018), which means that a new vegetarian rejects the norm of meat eating and adopts new, vegetarian norms. People belong to multiple social groups at the same time, each of which has a different set of social norms. According to Fielding and Hornsey (2016), an individual complies with the norms of the social group identity that is currently salient. When a social identity is made salient, the common features shared by the in-group and the differences from out-groups are highlighted. In the realm of vegetarian and vegan eating, the highlighting of differences may take place particularly in social eating situations, in which the ideals and ideologies of diets with and without meat become obvious. Plant-based eaters have been found to be likely to perceive their food choices as an important part of their identity (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004; Nezlek & Forestell, 2020; Romo & Donovan-Kicken, 2012; Rosenfeld et al., 2020). It has been noted that in addition to social identity, social expectations of close people have a significant impact on one's intentions to reduce the consumption of meat (Schenk et al., 2018).

Vegetarians have been found to report more negative social experiences than meat-eaters and semi-vegetarians (MacInnis & Hodson, 2017; Nezlek et al., 2018), such as microaggressions (Buttny & Kinefuchi, 2020; LeRette, 2014), discrimination (MacInnis & Hodson, 2017), decreased social interactions with friends, or stigma (Judge & Wilson, 2019; MacInnis & Hodson, 2017). Although meat-eaters may perceive vegetarians as more virtuous than themselves, there is evidence that they have a negative prejudice towards vegetarians (MacInnis & Hodson, 2017). It has also been shown that vegetarians suffer from lower psychological well-being than meat-eaters (Nezlek et al., 2018). One reason for this finding may be that vegetarians are in a minority in Western societies, and minorities generally have lower well-being than majorities (Jetten et al., 2017). Adopting a vegetarian or a vegan diet in some ways disrupts the identity of the family, which may explain why vegans and vegetarians often report a lack of support or even hostility from their omnivorous family members (Jabs et al., 2000).

As vegetarians and particularly vegans represent a minority, they need to develop specific strategies to manage daily social norm conflicts related to food and eating (Buttny & Kinefuchi, 2020; Jabs et al., 2000) that they encounter in social situations with the meat-eating majority. Normative conflicts may cause individual discomfort, particularly in close social relationships. These relationships do not break up when a normative conflict occurs, but instead "are more likely to enter a process of negotiation" (Twine, 2014: 631). For example, there is evidence that regular eating companions, such as spouses and other family members, actively aim to negotiate social norms and shared values about what are perceived as appropriate food choices and intake amounts (Bove et al., 2003; Giacoman, 2016; Higgs & Thomas, 2016).

Vegetarians and vegans have been found to create multiple strategies to manage their relationships with meat-eaters to engage in positive social interactions (Greenebaum, 2012). A previous qualitative study of vegans' negotiations with meat-eaters found that vegans chose to silence their own ethical norms when they sought acceptance in mainstream culture (Buttny & Kinefuchi, 2020). However, as social situations are complex and manifold, it is likely that silencing is not the only strategy that vegans and vegetarians use and that the strategies involve multiple social objectives and ways of acting. Nevertheless, there is a lack of empirical analysis of the kinds of strategies that vegan and plant-based eaters use when they negotiate social norm conflicts, the kinds of social

objectives that drive these strategies, and the behaviours that these negotiations entail. There is also a lack of research that explores the transformative power of individuals' behavioural changes through social identities and social norms (Schulte et al., 2020).

The focus of this qualitative study is on how vegans and vegetarians perceive, negotiate, and resolve social norm conflicts related to their diets within their social networks. The aim is to explore and answer the following research questions: (i) What kind of tensions related to social norms may be identified within vegans' and vegetarians' social relationships? (ii) How are these tensions negotiated? and (iii) What kind of solutions have vegans and vegetarians developed to avoid or overcome norm conflicts?

## 2. Data and methods

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted in March 2020 by students at the University of Helsinki, Finland, as an assignment on a course focusing on sustainable behavioural changes. The course participants were of different nationalities, but most of them were Finnish. Due to the Covid-19 restrictions that were in force at the time, the course was carried out online. Some students took part in the course from their permanent residence, which is why the interviews were conducted both in Finland (in Finnish) and in other countries (in English or French). The authors developed the interview questions (see Appendix A in Supplementary Material). The students were instructed to find a person who is engaged in sustainable food practices, and they were also given instructions on how to carry out the interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the students themselves. The interviewees were informed that the interviews would be used anonymously. Due to the design of the study, an ethical pre-review according to the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity was not required. The respondents did not receive any incentives or other rewards for participation.

The objective of the interviews was to gather information on how self-reported sustainable eaters negotiate social norms related to their eating in their social relationships. The interviewees were first asked what was important for them in food and eating, whether they were doing something to reduce the environmental impact of their eating, what it was that they did, for how long they had been doing it, and what triggered the change towards more environmentally friendly habits. They were then asked whether people close to them were doing similar things, and to describe the eating patterns of their family members and relatives. Finally, they were asked whether they thought that people treated or saw them differently based on what they ate and did not eat, and whether they had encountered any obstacles as sustainable eaters. Background information was obtained by enquiring about age, gender, place of residence and its size (rural area, village/small city, or big city with more than 100,000 inhabitants), as well as household size.

A total of 50 interviews were conducted and transcribed on the course. The subset of the data used in this study includes 21 semi-structured interviews, comprising only those interviews in which the interviewee associated sustainable eating with their vegetarian or vegan diet (see Table 1). Some of the vegetarians expressed to be in a process of considering, transitioning or moving towards vegan lifestyle. The median age of the interviewees was 23 years, the youngest respondent being 20 and the oldest 58 years old. Three participants were men and 18 were women. Of the interviewees, 15 were Finnish and six represented other nationalities (American, Australian, British, French, and Israeli). Most of the interviewees lived in cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants.

It has been found that despite reporting to follow a vegetarian diet or identifying as a vegetarian, part of vegetarians may at least occasionally eat meat or fish (Vinnari et al., 2008), meaning that self-reported and actual diets differ. In this study, our focus is on the strategies of self-reported vegetarians and vegans in social norm conflict situations, and as will be shown below, such dietary flexibility and compromising

**Table 1**
Characteristics of the interviewees.

| Age | Gender | Household | Diet | Duration of following a plant-based diet | Nationality | Residential area type |
|-----|--------|-----------|------|------------------------------------------|-------------|------------------------|
| 20 | woman | Alone/With childhood family | Vegetarian | 5 years | Finnish | big city/small city |
| 21 | woman | With parents | Vegetarian | over 2 years | Australian | big city |
| 21 | woman | With a partner | Vegan/vegetarian | 8 years | French | big city |
| 22 | woman | With a partner | Vegetarian[a] | one and a half years | Finnish | big city |
| 22 | man | Alone | Vegetarian | 4 years | French | big city |
| 22 | woman | Alone | Vegan/vegetarian | 8 years | Finnish | big city |
| 22 | man | Shared apartment | Vegan | 5 years | British | small city |
| 22 | woman | Alone | Vegan[a] | 3 years | Finnish | big city |
| 23 | woman | Shared apartment | Vegetarian | over 10 years | Finnish | big city |
| 23 | woman | Shared apartment | Vegetarian[a] | 4–5 years | Finnish | big city |
| 24 | woman | Alone | Vegetarian[a] | two and a half years | Finnish | big city |
| 24 | woman | Alone | Vegan | 4 years | American | big city |
| 24 | woman | Alone | Vegetarian[a] | 4–5 years | Finnish | big city |
| 26 | woman | Shared apartment | Vegan | 5 years | Finnish | big city |
| 28 | woman | With a partner | Vegetarian | 2 years | Finnish | big city |
| 28 | woman | With a partner | Vegan/vegetarian | over 10 years | Finnish | big city |
| 31 | woman | With a partner and a child | Vegetarian | 10 years | Finnish | big city |
| 33 | woman | Alone | Vegan[a] | 6 years | Israeli | big city |
| 35 | woman | With a partner and a child | Vegetarian[a] | 15 years | Finnish | big city |
| 40 | man | With a partner | Vegan | 4 years | Finnish | big city |
| 58 | woman | With a partner | Vegetarian[a] | 8 years | Finnish | big city |

[a] The diet is the one that the interviewee clearly indicated, even if they mentioned occasionally eating meat/poultry/fish.

leading to occasional meat-eating are in fact one of the strategies adopted.

An interpretative approach (Putnam & Banghart, 2017) was adopted in the study, and the analysis was guided by social identity theory, the framework of social norms, and norm conflicts. Within these theoretical ideas, our research methodology was largely inductive: our aim was to interpret and understand the interviewees' personal experiences of social norm conflicts in eating situations and the strategies adopted to solve these conflicts in different social situations.

The data were analysed by following the six phases of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The codes were inductively derived from the interviews and were then grouped into larger themes in collaborative discussions among the authors, and connections between themes were drawn. The interview transcripts were read through several times. Data coding involved first classifying the data into more detailed themes inspired by concepts related to the research questions (such as eating behaviour, social groups and networks, social norms, social norm conflicts, social identities) as well as topics based on the interview questions (such as obstacles preventing from following a vegan or vegetarian diet, how people treat sustainable eaters). Once the data were encoded thoroughly, the categorisations were combined into broader conceptual themes and subthemes. Developing the themes was carried out in several rounds of coding and using visual thematic mapping with colours. The analysis was led by the first author, with regular discussions between the author group during the process. The authors decided together on the designation of final conceptual themes. The final thematic map included four main themes identified in the interview data: *contexts* where the need to negotiate social norms and tensions between people occurred, social negotiation *strategies* used to resolve conflicts in different situations, *social objectives* as goals for which certain strategies are used, and *behaviours* as observable and concrete means to achieve them. The themes, subthemes, and example quotes are shown in Appendix B in Supplementary Material.

The analysis was conducted with the ATLAS.ti software (version 8). Since the method of collecting the data was different compared to situation in which one person carried out all the interviews, the size of the sample was not determined by saturation of the data during the data collection. However, the analysis process of the 21 interviews showed that we had enough data to answer our research questions without enlarging the data set.

## 3. Results

Food-related social norm conflicts described by the interviewees occurred largely between vegetarian/vegan eaters and meat-eaters in specific social contexts. In the analysis, we identified different strategies that the interviewees used to manage norm conflicts and how these strategies were used to strengthen and weaken social norms in line with social identity theory. These strategies were associated with specific social objectives. Social norm conflict management strategies and objectives, in turn, were linked to specific behaviours. Fig. 1 provides a summary of the main findings.

### 3.1. Contexts of social norm conflicts

The social norm conflicts described by the interviewees occurred most often in two types of contexts: hierarchical social situations, and in situations where the boundaries between in-group and out-group were salient. For example, those who had started their vegetarian diet at a young age stated that their parents were worried that they would not eat healthily. As Twine (2014) has noted, invoking health can be a way for mainstream society to maintain meat eating norms. Moreover, the interviewees mentioned that teenagers and young adults may be regarded as too young to decide what they should eat at school or with the family. A 22-year-old British vegetarian described being confronted with concerns about eating "right" or "enough", and his family referred to his vegan diet as a "phase" even after five years. A 23-year-old Finnish vegetarian described a rather cruel experience when she changed her diet at primary school:

> Teachers in primary school told me straight away that I wouldn't grow up to become a normal adult if I didn't eat meat while I was still growing. And I was also given a detention for refusing to eat meat at school. I had skipped school meals a few times because the school staff had never agreed to advise me on how to get vegetarian food. And I was also suspected of having an eating disorder. I was also told that I wouldn't get any food at all if I didn't accept meat on my plate.

> (23-year-old Finnish woman, vegetarian for over ten years)

Power relations and the ways in which family members tried to maintain them were illustrated by stories about visiting one's parents as an adult:
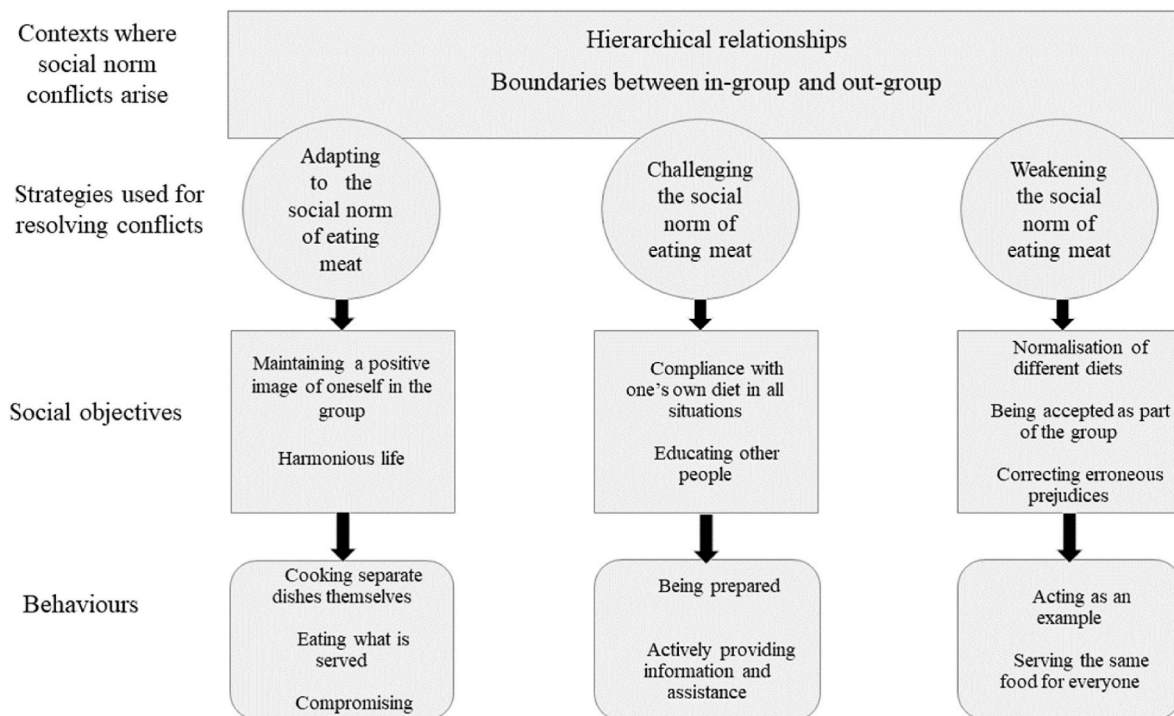
**Fig. 1.** Summary of the results.

If I go to my dad's for dinner, it'll still be like they haven't been able to cook for me like (they've been able to cook for) everybody else. It's as if it was a strange thing or a nuisance, and they comment on it.

(28-year-old Finnish woman, vegetarian for over ten years)

Social norm conflicts also arose in situations where the boundaries between in-group and out-group became salient. The role of meat was particularly pronounced in these descriptions. For instance, according to a 22-year-old French vegetarian, eating meat is a "very sensitive subject" in France and part of the surrounding food culture. "If you don't eat meat, you're not part of us," he noted, and added that he felt like an outsider at a party where only meat dishes were served. A 35-year-old Finnish vegetarian stated that when she had a Mexican boyfriend, the family gatherings in Mexico turned out to be troublesome as the family was not used to cooking vegetarian food, but also because they felt sad that their Finnish guest could "not be a part of the joy that a good meat dish brings" (35-year-old Finnish woman, vegetarian for 14 years).

Even if most of the interviewees lived in their own households, some of them described family gatherings as very tense as they had faced strong resistance because of their choices. A 26-year-old Finnish vegan described her other family members eating in a very traditional Finnish way, "potatoes and meat", and noted that she did not feel as if she belonged to the group as she eats "something other than that kind of Finnish home-cooked food". In these cases, the family was considered an out-group, "them", according to the interviewees. This shows that a single group may have different realms of identification – people may not necessarily identify with their family in relation to eating, even if they identify with them in some other way.

### 3.2. Strategies used for resolving social norm conflicts

Three strategies for resolving social norm conflicts were identified: adapting to, challenging, and weakening the social norms of eating meat. Each of them was related to specific social objectives and behaviours as depicted in Fig. 1. In the following, we present the three strategies and how they relate to particular ways of maintaining or attenuating social group identities (McDonald et al., 2012).

#### 3.2.1. Adapting to the social norm of eating meat

Adapting to the dominant social norm of eating meat meant that the interviewees had to be flexible, possibly violate their own norms and comply with the majority norms, which often favoured meat-eaters. The strategy of adapting was associated with the social objectives of maintaining a positive image of oneself in the group and seeking a harmonious life together. The related behaviours were cooking separate dishes, eating what was served, and compromising. In this strategy, the focus is on preserving social harmony rather than affirming one's own social identity as a vegetarian or vegan. Eating what is offered can reinforce a shared identity among the eaters in a particular situation.

In this strategy, the most frequently mentioned social objective was the desire not to be seen as a difficult person – or "snobbish", as a 33-year-old Israeli vegan mentioned. Some thought that it is reasonable to expect that serious allergies are considered when inviting people to dinner, but that voluntary-based, self-chosen diets do not deserve similar consideration.

Some interviewees agreed that they occasionally adjust their habits to eat what is served to them or what others eat so as not to give a negative impression of themselves. Being flexible and sensitive to the social norms of others, as well as experiencing a strong social pressure to comply with these norms, was often linked to eating occasions during which the interviewee did not know their host well enough to make special requests concerning food, or they had just recently started their diet and the hosts were not yet aware of it. Being more relaxed about their diet was described as reducing social pressure from others. Moreover, flexibility was often seen as important because it presented a positive image of vegetarians and vegans more generally.

Complying with the prevailing social norm instead of declaring oneself a vegetarian or vegan also made it possible to avoid social judgment. The fear of social punishment thus served as a driver in adapting to majority norms when plant-based eaters were a minority or not present at all.

Some vegetarians and vegans had ended up changing their diets to make them more mainstream after experiencing social pressure. They had changed their diet permanently because other people – particularly those living in the same household – had considered the interviewee's

diet too troublesome or too odd.

> About six years ago I was 100% vegan for six months, but it was very, very hard, particularly socially and when I always had to explain to people why I was doing it, because it was so awkward for people that I wanted all these things. (33-year-old Israeli woman, vegan for six years)

Some interviewees explained that they were prepared for others to refuse their request for food without meat. This had happened to some in the past and, to avoid causing conflict again, they had chosen not to ask for vegetarian food. When visiting someone, to avoid becoming a difficult guest and possibly embarrassing the host for not having suitable food to offer, many interviewees took their own snacks with them, or prepared themselves in other ways for occasions when they were unlikely to be offered food in accordance with their diet. The interviewees did not necessarily want to attract attention in such situations.

However, those who dared to ask for vegetarian/vegan food mentioned that it had been particularly hard to begin with when they had decided to change their diet, but that it had become easier over time. Adapting to social norms was often a compromise where people were flexible to a certain extent for the sake of others, for example by consenting to eat fish or dairy products, but not meat.

> I've made the decision that when I'm at Grandma's, I'll eat the fish that Grandpa has caught, as that fish has already been prepared. So, it's not worth hurting Grandpa's feelings. (20-year-old Finnish woman, vegetarian for five years)

A 21-year-old French vegetarian had been vegan earlier but had resumed a vegetarian diet for the sake of social convenience. She had begun to consume dairy products again and her partner had reduced meat consumption at the same time. She justified this with the need to make mutual compromises, which is a prerequisite for cohabitation as she felt that she could not expect her partner to make the same decisions that she herself had made.

> I've started eating certain animal products again because I realise that […] I can acclimatise, stop eating dairy products, cook without them, but it's not necessarily an effort that people who live with me want to make. (21-year-old French woman, vegetarian for eight years)

One behavioural solution was to make two different dishes, one based on meat and the other based on plant-based alternatives.

> When I cook with friends, we always make a meat dish and a plant-based alternative. The boys are dedicated meat-eaters. I'm always the one that's flexible when it comes to food because it's been my own decision to become a vegetarian. (22-year-old Finnish woman, vegan for three years)

Here, the interviewee expresses the view that because vegetarians have made their own decision to become vegetarian, they are the ones who must adapt in social situations. Interestingly, while depicting vegetarianism as an individual choice, she does not attach a similar choice and decision-making to the diet adopted by "dedicated meat-eaters", associated here with the (gendered) category of "the boys". Arguably, such meaning-making and related gendered categorisations illustrate the deeply ingrained normativity of meat-eating in contemporary Western societies (Adams, 1990/2015; Fiddes, 1991; Nath, 2011).

### 3.2.2. Challenging the social norm of eating meat

The interviewees also described challenging the social norm of eating meat in their everyday life. The behaviour described by the interviewees was to follow one's own diet either publicly or privately. It was accompanied by preparations in advance, or actively providing information for others and assisting them in preparing plant-based dishes. Compared to the adaptation strategy above, in this strategy it

appears that enacting the social norms associated with one's own diet are more important than maintaining social harmony or a shared social identity among the eaters. The perceived risk of social sanctions and being seen as "annoying" by others seem to be less pronounced in this strategy.

Challenging the dominant social norm of eating meat demonstrated to others that it is possible to deviate from a common norm, and to question established normative representations, such as men as heavy meat-eaters, or traditional foods as necessarily being based on meat. An example of a "hybrid masculinity" (Greenebaum & Dexter, 2018) was presented by a 40-year-old Finnish vegetarian who was proud to be the one who could show his colleagues that a man can be a vegetarian and still be physically big and masculine, and maybe even a little threatening. He thought that others lacked the courage he had. This kept others from commenting on his diet:

> Not many people have the courage to taunt in any way because I'm often physically bigger than they are, and then they notice that "he only eats some vegetables, that equation makes no sense". But they don't even have the guts to say it. (40-year-old Finnish man, vegan for four years)

The interviewees mentioned that it was easier to challenge social norms particularly within the family, perhaps because it is easier to disagree or be 'weird' with family members than with people they do not know well. In addition, it seemed less difficult to challenge norms with friends, partly because like-minded people seem to be committed to each other, but also because the connection can be broken more easily than a relationship with a relative, as suggested by a 22-year-old British vegan.

> I'm not going to adapt to suit someone else's lifestyle and if they didn't understand that, then I wouldn't want them as friends. (22-year-old British man, vegan for five years)

The interviewees saw that dinner party hosts often regarded it as disrespectful if someone refused to eat the food that they were served. By declining to eat food that may not be suitable for their diet, by bringing their own food with them, or by eating somewhere else later, these interviewees refused to be flexible about their diets. At the same time, the deviation from the social norm of eating meat sometimes forced them to break with the established social etiquette of commensality (Fischler, 2011), i.e., sharing food with other people. However, the interviewees were well accustomed to the situation, and for some, such deviant behaviour had become accepted in their social groups:

> Sometimes I've just been drinking wine when everyone else has been eating steak at some famous steak restaurant. But I've been fine, because I'm really interested in seeing these places even if I don't eat (there). […] Likewise, many want to come along if I find a good or famous vegetarian restaurant. There's that kind of mutual tolerance. (31-year-old Finnish woman, vegetarian for ten years)

According to most interviewees, people close to them were aware of their diet and usually took various dietary requirements into account when inviting guests. If needed, some were ready to take their own food to a social event, duly showing others that there are different ways to eat. A 22-year-old British vegan quoted below took others into account by not asking them to prepare suitable food for him, but at the same time he made the prevailing social norms visible by bringing his own food.

> I don't expect people to stop eating meat to cater for me as I'm happy to bring my own vegan dish or whatever, but if they do then I really appreciate it and their acknowledgement of the problem. (22-year-old British man, vegan for five years)

Some interviewees also maintained that challenging existing norms is a wider obligation for vegetarians and vegans. A 21-year-old Australian vegetarian recognised the possibility of receiving negative feedback in a situation where a guest made demands on the host about food, and thus wanted to help her hosts with vegetarian solutions. Her expectation

was that the hosts would cater for her dietary expectations in the same way as the other guests' wishes:

> In terms of negative attitudes, I'm not afraid to call people out, and provide some information or education about my choice. Before I go over to people's houses or any events, I always make sure to say, "By the way I'm vegetarian" and I'm always happy to provide recipes or alternatives. (21-year-old Australian woman, vegetarian for over two years)

However, negotiations may turn into debates, such as in the case of a 22-year-old French vegetarian, who was not afraid of confrontation about something he strongly believed in:

> I had debates and I was very happy to have them because this is what I want to do. To go from the individual scale to trying to spread something. (22-year-old French man, vegetarian for four years)

Challenging the social norm of eating meat was also carried out by providing information for others, which may eventually lead to the successful adoption of a new, less carnivorous norm. However, a precondition for the emergence of new norms is the mutual desire for compromise, since providing information alone does not create a fundamental change, but sometimes also calls for meat-eaters to be actively involved in enabling new behaviour.

### 3.2.3. Weakening the social norms of eating meat

The interviewees also consciously chose to weaken the social norms of eating meat to make plant-based eating more common in society. Typical behaviour to attempt to weaken the social norms of eating meat included serving the same vegetarian/vegan food to everyone and acting as an example:

> Vegetarian eating is nowadays … that it's kind of normal, there's nothing special about it. On the contrary, you would hope that meat-eaters were becoming abnormal, and that it would be more likely for people to wonder "Why do you eat meat?". (58-year-old Finnish woman, vegetarian for over six years)

The social objectives associated with this strategy were strengthening the acceptance and adoption of different diets, securing inclusion in the group, and correcting erroneous prejudices towards vegetarians and vegans. In terms of social identity theory, this could mean that the boundaries between the vegetarian/vegan in-group and non-vegetarian/non-vegan out-group are fading. If everyone eats the same vegetarian/vegan food, the shared in-group identity of the eaters is strengthened.

Many interviewees explained that "actually all" or "a lot" of people in their circle of friends or family shared their vegetarian or vegan eating practices. When an earlier minority norm becomes a more prevalent norm in a group, the categorisations of different ways of acting outside one's own group are also changed. Some interviewees mentioned that eating meat is not a prevalent norm within their social groups and expressed negative attitudes towards meat-eaters. Minority behaviour was normalised by turning the meanings of majority and deviant behaviours upside down:

> I, for one, already frown upon some people who actually eat meat often. It's not normal anymore. (28-year-old Finnish woman, vegetarian for two years)

Weakening the social norms of eating meat often took place at the respondents' childhood homes. In some of these situations, vegans and vegetarians were supposed to take care of their own meals, while in other situations the parents had agreed to cook separate vegetable dishes for those children whose diet differed from that of others. Sometimes the whole family had switched to vegetarian eating after the interviewees had persistently prepared their own food, and thus developed practical compromises for the shared family meal.

The most frequently mentioned objective for weakening the social

norm was to include everyone by finding a solution that is acceptable to all. Being left out underscored that vegetarians and vegans were not members of the same social group, even as colleagues or friends. By ignoring special diets, the existing norms for eating meat would be further strengthened:

> Some people consciously exclude me from things, especially because they think there won't be any vegan options. Or I'll have friends go out to a place that has no vegan options, so even if I'm invited, it's like what's the point? […] I wish some people would normalise my lifestyle choices as a vegan instead of making me a perpetual "other". (24-year-old American woman, vegan for four years)

The inclusion of different diets in the same group was also described as a practical issue. Even if others did not share the same group identity, equal treatment between all members of the group was described as important and seen as reducing social norm conflicts.

Some interviewees mentioned that they had cooked vegetarian or vegan food for others. Although for some interviewees cooking for themselves was the only way to obtain food that suited their diet, it also increased others' understanding of special diets without demanding that meat-eating others should make an extra effort or change their own habits accordingly. At the same time, the interviewees could show that cooking without meat is not complicated. For meat-eaters, being served tasty vegetarian food or cooking it together may lower the threshold for trying plant-based food (Twine, 2014). This may be an effective way to change attitudes, especially if others are negatively disposed towards vegetarian food. Cooking food for others demonstrates care and an effort to build a community within the groups. However, this requires activity from people who aim to act against current norms:

> But then I made my family pasta and instead of a dairy cream sauce, I made a coconut sauce and they loved it, and they're like still talking about this pasta that I made for them. So yeah, little by little, but they wouldn't make it themselves. (33-year-old Israeli woman, vegan for six years)

According to the interviewees, the general atmosphere has become significantly more positive towards plant-based eating. They stated that vegetarian eating is now seen as a possible choice for meat-eaters too, whereas in the past eating meals without meat was regarded as restricting meat-eaters' rights:

> In many situations, everyone has just been eating vegetarian food, and nowadays it's a much smaller issue. People used to make a fuss about it, like, "Why do we have to eat vegetarian food because of one person?". But nowadays, it's like, "Yeah, I eat vegetarian food like three times a week, I don't mind," and I'm like, "What?". It feels funny. (23-year-old Finnish woman, vegetarian for over ten years)

Based on the interviews, it seems to vary whether meat-eating others are considerate towards vegetarians and vegans and respect their dietary decisions. Within family context, rather than among friends, most of the interviewees agreed that their diet may have had implications for the eating habits of others. Many interviewees mentioned the current good situation regarding the availability of meat substitutes, as it is possible to make almost identical meals with the same composition for both meat-eaters and vegetarians/vegans. One example of this involves replacing products of animal origin with plant-based products, as was the case in the family of a 24-year-old American vegan. The family members were not very pleased with vegetarian food as they were heavy meat-eaters but agreed to cooperate by replacing dairy products with vegan alternatives at Thanksgiving, an important family gathering in the US, with turkey as the traditional dish. This gesture was appreciated by two vegan family members:

> Every year for Thanksgiving, [my vegan cousin] and I cook vegan side dishes. Basically, the only thing at Thanksgiving that's not vegan is the turkey. My mom even uses vegan products for the potatoes and

casseroles that she makes. So that's like 20 people eating mostly vegan, which is cool. (24-year-old American woman, vegan for four years)

While turkey may be the most important dish for some, for the interviewee and her cousin it was the vegan side dishes and eating those with others made her feel part of the group. In such a situation, both vegans and meat-eaters can eat the food they like together. In addition, meat-eaters' resistance to plant-based foods may be reduced by seeing that traditional dishes can be made with vegan ingredients, and that they can be prepared by someone who also cooks meat dishes. The established norms will remain, but at the same time it will be possible to create new internal family norms.

The interviewees mentioned that one social objective associated with weakening the social norms of meat eating was to correct erroneous prejudices towards plant-based eating. Some of the interviewees said that their aim was to increase the general acceptance of vegetarian or vegan eating:

When I was younger, my parents' attitude was, like, more absolute about people having to eat meat. Like, "You'll die if you don't eat meat." But now that this has been going on for so long, the attitude towards my diet, at least, has changed a lot in the family and among my relatives. They've discovered that "She's not dead". And it's like, well, I can see that at least Mum cooks a lot more vegetarian food. There's been some change there, and maybe there's been experimentation too, like trying to figure out what this vegan concept is. They're now very open to vegan alternatives. (26-year-old Finnish woman, vegan for five years)

One interviewee highlighted that abundant meat eating is not a traditional part of the Finnish food culture and that meat was eaten more sparingly in the past, as a festive food only at weekends, for example. Therefore, meat eating should not be deemed "normal" and food without meat "different".

A lot of people think that vegetarianism means eating only cucumber and lettuce. But it's not like that. It's like eating meat, but that meat is replaced with something else. It's, like, super easy. And that's what it was like before, when people couldn't afford to buy meat. It's been one of those special things, for example, at weekends. If you look at what they've eaten in Finland in the past, it's been potatoes and bread and cabbage and some root vegetables. (40-year-old Finnish man, vegan for four years)

I've seen how that kind of spreads to people around me. Since I've moved back home now, my family is having three or four vegetarian meals a week, which is nice. My boyfriend started eating a lot more vegetarian meals so that makes me happy. (21-year-old Australian woman, vegetarian for over two years)

One behaviour regarding weakening the social norms of eating meat was to serve the same food to everyone. The interviewees mentioned that their diet had been accepted by others over time. It had required some reversal of prejudices, but eventually others had changed their attitudes and may even have adopted new more plant-based eating habits. When it came to the family, family members may have started to prepare more or exclusively vegetarian food.

## 4. Discussion

This qualitative interview study explored how vegetarians and vegans negotiate social norm conflicts related to meat and plant-based eating in their social relationships. The results show that the interviewees encountered social norm conflicts in their everyday lives, which occurred between in-group and out-group as well as within hierarchical relationships, which is in line with the existing body of social identity theory research (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The results also indicate that they had developed multiple strategies to manage these

conflicts (McDonald et al., 2012).

We identified three negotiation strategies: adapting to, challenging, and weakening the social norms related to meat eating. As vegetarians and vegans, the interviewees had to be flexible and sometimes violate their own norms and values to adapt to meat eating norms in order not to be seen as difficult and to avoid social judgment. Challenging the dominant social norm and deviating from it required predicting social eating situations in advance and being prepared for them, for example by providing others with information about plant-based cooking and helping others to prepare vegetarian or vegan food. Weakening the prevalent meat-eating norm aims at increasing acceptance and normalising plant-based eating on a small and large scale by treating meat-eaters and vegetarians/vegans equally. These findings are in line with previous research which shows that norm conflicts between multiple in-groups are associated with multiple behavioural outcomes (McDonald et al., 2012). Moreover, the study enhances understanding of the social situations where norm conflicts arise and are negotiated.

The findings widen current knowledge about the ways of negotiating and resolving social norm conflicts encountered by vegetarians and vegans living in Western food cultures. Previous studies suggest that these groups seldom challenge the prevailing norm of meat eating. It has been found that in conflict situations vegans tend to silence their own norms (Buttny & Kinefuchi, 2020), and that for vegetarians it is important to maintain positive social interactions (Greenebaum, 2012). However, at the same time, it may further strengthen current social norms. Our study extends this understanding by showing that vegetarians and vegans do not always surrender to the meat-eating social norm, and that sometimes they also attempt to actively change these norms either by challenging or trying to weaken them. Moreover, these findings increase the understanding how individuals' everyday negotiations of social norms contribute to transformations at the societal level (Van Bezouw et al., 2021).

In Western countries, eating meat has been associated with the endorsement of hierarchy and inequality values (Loughnan et al., 2014; Wilson & Allen, 2007), support for hierarchical structures (Dhont et al., 2014), and as a way to express masculinity, strength and dominance (Rosenfeld, 2020; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). Indeed, our results showed that social norm conflicts between vegetarians/vegans and meat-eaters often occurred in situations in which social hierarchies were salient or questioned, such as meals shared by meat eating parents and vegetarian or vegan children. The hierarchies prevalent in social relations are further accentuated by the minority position of vegetarians and particularly vegans in society, affording them a less powerful position in negotiations on what is good and proper food compared to meat-eaters. It is also possible that such situations emerge due to gradual changes in family relations when children become autonomous adults whereas parents may lose their autonomy when they are aging (Oliveira et al., 2020).

The interviewees also reported social norm conflicts occurring in situations where the boundaries between in-group and out-group were salient, for example by inviting a vegan to a restaurant which does not serve vegan food, or by not inviting a vegan at all. In these situations, the interviewees felt excluded from the social group, such as a group of friends, because they followed a diet that differed from the omnivorous diet of others. It has been suggested that vegetarians represent a symbolic threat to the status quo of Western food cultures (Judge & Wilson, 2019; MacInnis & Hodson, 2017; Potts & White, 2008), a position that may strengthen the sense of exclusion among vegetarians.

It has also been suggested that a transition towards more sustainable eating may start from minority groups, which grow and spread their social norms in society (Davis et al., 2018). The interviews indicate that to some extent the interviewees saw such a transition as being on its way. It was generally agreed among the interviewees that there is more information nowadays about the plant-based food choices available, that various diets have become more common, and that attitudes towards sustainability are more positive than before. There were also

interviewees who did not recognise any situations where they had to negotiate social norms. In addition, a majority of the 21 interviewees expressed that they perceived vegetarian or vegan eating norms to be dominant in at least one of the groups they belonged to. This indicates that although the interviewees had experienced situations where they had to negotiate social norms related to eating meat, they were able to follow their diets and preserve their social identity as vegans/vegetarians within at least one of their in-groups. These in-groups were most often friends or sometimes family members with whom the interviewees cooked and ate together. This contrasted with work or student colleagues with whom negotiations on social norms were often not needed, because everyone made their choice in a lunch restaurant or similar.

*Limitations.* The interviews were conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, which may have accentuated certain social networks such as families, and diminished other networks such as friends. At the same time, it has also made the features of social norm negotiations clearer, as close people have had to compromise with each other more often than before. Another limitation is that this study analysed vegetarians and vegans as one group, and potential differences in experiences of social norm conflicts by these groups have not been analysed. Nor did the study cover what kind of social norm conflicts could arise between these groups with different motivation factors. These are topics that need further research in the future. The interviewees were self-identified vegetarians and vegans, and as can been seen in the results, some of them compromised and did not follow their diet strictly in all social situations. Indeed, the results show that such flexibility is one way of solving the conflicts and explains the difference between dietary identities and actual diets. In addition, the study consisted of interviews conducted with a limited number of interviewees representing the groups in which vegetarianism and veganism are most typical, namely mainly young women (Jallinoja, 2020), the majority of whom lived in big cities. A larger number of people from other socio-economic groups might have yielded an even more varied picture of social negotiations and strategies for resolving conflict situations, and future studies could examine these in a more representative sample. However, the fact that the interviewees included various nationalities and thus experiences of people from varying cultural contexts enriches our analysis.

## 5. Conclusion

The results of this qualitative study contribute to increasing current understanding of why plant-based diets are so slow to become mainstream in Western food cultures. In current Western societies where meat eating is a prevalent norm, those who do not eat meat still need to justify their choices and develop strategies to manage social situations related to food and eating. Previous studies have reported that vegans and vegetarians experience negativity from meat-eaters due to their dietary choices (Buttny & Kinefuchi, 2020; MacInnis & Hodson, 2017; Nezlek et al., 2018) and their social identity that deviates from the meat-eating majority. Our study confirms these findings by identifying contexts where social norm conflicts occur and three strategies in social norm negotiations: adapting to, challenging, and weakening dominant social norms.

Many interviewees had chosen or were forced to adapt to the prevailing social norms of meat eating to avoid negative social experiences such as social exclusion, punishment or being perceived as difficult. This strategy was particularly used in relationships that were not close. Strategies for challenging and weakening social norms were used particularly within close relationships, where becoming a vegetarian or a vegan may require laborious negotiations about food choices during shared meals, including mutual expectations and codes of hospitality related to cooking and serving food for others at home, and the selection of a venue when eating out.

At the same time, there is evidence that a change in social norms around eating meat and plant-based food is taking place. Both our data and earlier research indicate that due to environmental, ethical and health concerns, increasing numbers of meat-eaters replace animal-based foods with vegetarian options at least sometimes (Dagevos, 2021). The increase in flexitarianism (Dagevos, 2021) can potentially contribute to greater open-mindedness among meat-eaters when it comes to understanding the views espoused by vegetarians and vegans.

Eating contexts are often constructed based on meat eating social norms, and vegetarian and vegan choices require more effort. Supermarkets, restaurants, and canteens have a crucial role in facilitating the reduction of meat eating by increasing the availability of plant-based alternatives and placing them as the default option. Eaters themselves can also play an active role in the transition to more sustainable eating by acting as examples and showing how plant-based foods can substitute for animal-based foods without necessarily compromising on taste. Our results suggest that at the everyday level of social interaction, such a strategy of weakening the meat-eating norm may work better than adapting to or explicitly challenging it. Within social groups with close relationships, although established social norms may remain seemingly unchanged, at the same time it may be possible to create new social norms for the group. Moreover, based on the interviews it can be concluded that the social norms of one's own immediate circle can be changed, at least to some extent.

## Ethics approval statement

## Author contributions

M.N., M.S., and A.V. developed the interview questions and instructions for students. L.S. conducted the qualitative analysis of the data and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. L.S. and M.N. were responsible for the structure of the manuscript. M.N., M.S., and A.V. contributed to the writing of the manuscript and provided overall guidance through the manuscript draft. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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## Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

## Data availability statement

The authors elect to not share data. The lead author has full access to the data reported in the manuscript.

## Declaration of competing interest

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.

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