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SOCIAL INFLUENCES AND NORMATIVE DISSONANCE: THE CASE OF VEGETARIANISM

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INFLUENCES SOCIALES ET DISSONANCE NORMATIVE: LE CAS DU VEGETARISME

Résumé:

Du fait de préoccupations ou de convictions en termes de santé, d'écologie ou de citoyenneté, de plus en plus de consommateurs font le choix de régimes alimentaires particuliers, en marge des habitudes et normes les plus courantes. C'est par exemple le cas du vegetarianism. Cette étude cherche à comprendre comment le rapport aux autres, qu'il soit intra-groupe ou extra-groupe, influence le processus d'adoption et de maintien d'un régime végétarien. Une étude exploratoire menée auprès de 25 végétariens vise à mieux comprendre le poids et les conséquences des relations aux autres sur l'adoption d'une pratique encore marginale en France. Les résultats montrent comment les individus concernés se distinguent dans leur façon de gérer la dissonance normative perçue résultant de leurs relations avec d'une part la société et d'autre part la communauté de pratique. Des implications en découlent notamment pour les marques en matière d'offre et de communication et de façon plus générale, pour la promotion de ces pratiques.

Mots clefs: Vegetarianism; influences sociales; identité sociale; dissonance normative; communautés

SOCIAL INFLUENCES AND NORMATIVE DISSONANCE: THE CASE OF VEGETARIANISM

Abstract: Motivated by health reasons, ecological concerns or social convictions, some people may adopt a restrictive diet outside the usual norms and habits. Vegetarianism is a case in point, and adopting a vegetarian diet can lead to a number of psychological and relational tensions. The present study is based on a survey of 25 vegetarians and aims to better understand how both intra-group and extra-group relations influence the experience of adopting a vegetarian diet. Results show that individuals differ according to their perception of, and capacity to manage, the normative dissonance arising from the contradictions between society at large and the vegetarian community. This also has implications for brands in terms of their product ranges and advertising and, more generally, for the ways in which alternative dietary practices are promoted.

Keywords: vegetarianism; social influences; social identity; normative dissonance; community

Introduction

Vegetarianism and its various off-shoots (veganism, vegetarianism, flexitarianism, etc.) continue to gain ground in contemporary western societies (Mathieu & Dorard, 2016). With more and more consumers deciding to change their eating habits, with a view to halting or reducing their consumption of meat and other products of animal origin, questions arise as to the conditions and consequences of this societal change. The phenomenon is still marginal: only around 2% of the general population are ~~strict~~-vegetarians (Allès et al., 2017). But vegetarianism could well continue to grow, buoyed by its current image, growing visibility in the media and on social media, and the emergence of new markets (vegetarian restaurants, vegetarian products and meals, dietary supplements, etc.).

Dietary behaviours and consumption choices are deeply rooted in our past experiences and habits; they are also connected to a number of individual factors which may be cultural, economic or situational in nature. The complex web of factors surrounding dietary choices – which involve a whole chain of perceptions, attitudes and intentions – becomes particularly apparent when meat is involved. Meat consumption has profound cultural roots and positive associations, not least in France, but is the subject of a growing wave of criticism and warnings about its potentially harmful effects on human health and the environment (Séré de Lanauze & Siadou-Martin, 2016). There has been extensive coverage in the media (and on social media) of health warnings highlighting the dangers of excessive meat consumption, including heightened risk of cardiovascular disease and cancer, as well as the negative aspects of meat production including pollution, public health problems, wasted resources and disregard for animal welfare. More and more consumers are turning their backs on meat products (vegetarians), or even all products involving the killing or exploitation of animals (vegans) (Vialles, 2005). The identity factors associated with veganism are particularly strong, often reaching above and beyond dietary considerations to become something of a life philosophy, in some cases stretching as far as anti-speciesism.¹ (Greenebaum, 2012)

Recent studies have described the motivations and forms of behaviour frequently associated with vegetarianism (for example De Boer et al., 2017, Plante et al., 2019). However, at the time of writing little research has been conducted into the successive phases which lead to such changes in dietary habits and behaviours (Cherry, 2015), or the social influences involved in

¹ Anti-speciesism is a movement in moral philosophy which first emerged in the 1970s, and which argues that the species to which an animal belongs should not be used to determine the way in which that animal is treated. Anti-speciesism is opposed to speciesism, which considers humans to be superior to all other species.

this process. And yet, the social and practical constraints of this diet – and its relative marginality in the broader societal context – require practitioners to rethink their relationships with others, sometimes obliging them to deal with conflicting tensions. The existing studies do not allow us to ascertain how consumers perceive and manage this normative dissonance between the different social groups with which they are associated.

The present study therefore has a dual objective: to examine the role of social influences in the process of becoming vegetarian, and to look at how vegetarians handle the perceived normative dissonance between the vegetarian community and society at large. We begin with a literature review, considering the important impact of social identity, social norms and normative dissonance on food consumption habits. Vegetarianism then provides the framework for a study of social influence. We conducted an exploratory, empirical study based on individual interviews with 25 young adult vegetarians. The results highlight issues of social identification, the different stages in the adoption process, the multifaceted relationships between vegetarians and non-vegetarians and, finally, the perception and management of normative dissonance by vegetarians, and how this influences their relations with their social environment. After discussing the contribution of our research to the existing literature, we conclude by considering its managerial implications, specifically in terms of the product ranges and advertising associated with these dietary practices.

Conceptual framework

There is an abundant existing literature in the fields of sociology and psychology, but also marketing, devoted to understanding the psycho-sociological and cultural processes of food consumption. This literature has also amply demonstrated the prominent role played by social influence and identification in determining the dietary choices made by individuals. With specific regard to vegetarianism and veganism, the practices and motivations underpinning these lifestyle choices have also been widely studied. Nevertheless, only a handful of studies have explicitly examined the role of social influence in convincing people to go vegetarian.

Social identity

Food consumption and dietary habits are held to be powerful factors in self-identity and social representation (Cornelissen et al., 2007; Reed et al., 2012; Sheth et al., 2011). The products that we buy (or stop buying) and the image we have of fellow consumers form a representative model with which we may or may not wish to identify (Reed et al., 2012). Self-identity, defined

as the way in which individuals perceive themselves, comprises three dimensions: individual, relational and collective (Sedikides et al., 2011). The individual dimension covers personality traits and behaviours, experiences and interests. The relational dimension refers to our connections with others and the emotional investment and influence we share with those around us. Finally, the collective dimension corresponds to our perception of belonging to a group, in terms of similarity and identification. Social identity is thus defined by our sense of belonging to a group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). According to social identification theory, people tend to classify themselves and others into social groups, based on criteria they consider to be pertinent. Social categorisation helps people to impose a sense of order on their environment, and define their own position in relation to it (I am a man, I am American etc.). The resulting categories tend to be mutually exclusive, but it may be possible for individuals to span multiple categories. People also tend to define themselves in relation to others, identifying with people they consider to be similar and contrasting themselves with those who do not share the same characteristics. As a result, there is a complex web of connections between personal identity and the perceived dimensions of collective identity, not least self-categorisation, the perceived importance of belonging to a group, attachment and behavioural involvement (Ashmore et al., 2004). These dimensions are important because of the influence they wield over individuals' behaviour and decision-making processes.

Social norms and normative dissonance

Social influence is made possible by the existence of normative processes, inciting individuals to comply with society's approval or disapproval of certain practices or attitudes (Cialdini et al., 2004). Normative mechanisms derive from our inclination to adopt socially shared behaviours, which is to say behaviours that are adopted by the majority of the group. Normative mechanisms are thus descriptive, in that they compel compliance with prevalent, existing models of behaviour. They may also be derived from perceptions of group moral judgements, compelling individuals to comply with the behavioural rules deemed acceptable, and thus encouraged, by the group. In this respect normative mechanisms can also be injunctive (Cialdini et al. 2004; Smith et al. 2012). The reference group, which imposes its example or moral judgement, thus shapes individual behaviour (Smith et al. 2012). Two further points complete this framework. Firstly, not all individuals are equal in the face of normative pressures. Obedience to social norms is a character trait which varies from one person to the next. Individuals may also be subject to normative pressures emanating from different groups, which might thus be contradictory.

Tajfel & Turner (1979) define a group as a collection of individuals united by a shared definition of themselves, and a shared understanding of the group, their affiliation with it and the corresponding sense of emotional attachment (p.40). Social self-categorisation within a group thus constitutes a cognitive tool which shapes the environment and helps individuals to manage their actions and social relations. It also provides a frame of reference which helps individuals to define their own position within society (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identification depends upon favourable judgements within the group and flattering comparisons with other pertinent groups. Group norms reflect the social influence induced by the internalisation of objectives and values shared by the individual and the reference group (Feldman, 1984; Tuomela, 1995). This influence depends on both the distinction and the desirability of these specific norms in relation to broader social norms. For example, Green and Peloza (2014) have demonstrated that some people may choose to adopt sustainable and responsible consumption habits in order to present a positive image and enhance their social status. In the opposite scenario, if comparison with other pertinent groups proves to be negative, the individual may experience normative dissonance, a contradiction between the norms associated with different pertinent groups. Emerging from psycho-sociology, the notion of normative dissonance (Anderson et al. 2007; McKimmie, 2015) remains relatively underused in the analysis of consumer behaviour.

Vegetarianism: a proposed framework for studying social influence

Social influence phenomena are particularly present in the dietary domain, where social environment, shared meals, culture and convictions are all mechanisms favouring the adoption of different food products and practices. Vegetarianism, defined as a dietary regime containing no meat, represents an interesting field in which to observe social influence at work. Although still an emerging, minority practice, vegetarianism is developing rapidly, and this despite the fact that it stands in opposition to the dominant social norms, particularly in France where meal structure and sharing constitute a fairly rigid framework which defines dietary practices and represents an important facet of social identity. The specificity of vegetarian practices, their social consequences in terms of everyday relations and meal sharing, and finally the development of groups and communities united by this issue, raise questions about the social identity of vegetarians, the social influences at play within and without the community, and the corresponding roles and modes of behaviour. Within this context, questions of identity and social norms are of primary importance (De Boer et al., 2017), to the extent that vegetarianism has come to be considered as a social identity in its own right (Rosenfeld, 2018; Plante et al.,

2019). Nevertheless, studies which explicitly explore the role of social influence in the adoption of vegetarianism (Jabs et al., 1998) or veganism (Cherry, 2015) are still relatively rare and in need of further development (Rosenfeld, 2018).

Vegetarianism: a broad array of motivations and practices

Vegetarianism did not receive much academic interest until the turn of the millennium, in terms of either statistics or more detailed research, with notable exceptions including the work of Jabs et al. (1998) and Ouédraogo in France (Ouédraogo, 2005). In the intervening years, the different practices and configurations of vegetarianism have been studied extensively, either illustrating the social diversity of vegetarianism (Ouédraogo, 2005), or else seeking to better understand the prevalence of vegetarianism in specific social groups, such as students (Régnier et al., 2017). The vocabulary used by nutritionists includes an array of specific terms, corresponding to different dietary practices and categories (Inset 1).

Inset 1: Glossary of terms

(source: CERIN, Centre for Nutritional Research and Information (<https://www.cerim.org/actualites/5598645/>))

Dietary practice	Définition
Flexitarian	Flexitarians generally adhere to a vegetarian diet, but eat meat occasionally
Vegetarian	Vegetarians do not eat meat
Vegan	Vegans (sometimes called strict vegetarians) do not eat meat, fish, eggs or dairy products
Ovo-vegetarian	Ovo-vegetarians are strict vegetarians (or vegans) who make an exception for eggs
Lacto-vegetarian	Lacto-vegetarians are strict vegetarians (or vegans) who do eat dairy products
Pescatarian	Pescatarians do not eat meat but do eat fish
Strict vegan	Strict vegans refuse to eat or use any animal product or any substance whose production involves animals (including honey and leather)
Raw veganism	Raw vegans do not eat any cooked or transformed products (eating only fruits, nuts and vegetables)

Different consumer profiles and forms of motivation have also been identified (De Boer et al., 2017). In France, the Nutrinet Santé, based on a sample of 90,000 respondents, notes that a large majority of vegetarians are women (80%), young (under 35) and have an above-average level of education (Allès et al., 2017). In terms of different types of motivation, the model proposed by Jabs et al. (1998) identifies two main categories: health concerns and ethical considerations (Jabs et al., 1998). More recent studies have offered a more detailed picture of the personal, societal and moral factors at play, particularly ecological concerns and interest in animal welfare (De Boer et al., 2017; Rosenfeld, 2018).

The process of going vegetarian, and the attendant social influences

Although the different practices of vegetarianism and their various configurations have been extensively explored and documented, the mechanisms of influence which lead people to adopt these behaviours remain poorly understood.

McDonald (2000) deployed Mezirow's theory of *transformative learning* (Mezirow, 1996) to look specifically at the experience of becoming vegan, describing a seven-step process in which learning and catalysing experiences play the most decisive role. Looking at the very specific example of veganism among punk fans, Cherry (2015) demonstrated the importance of learning, reflection and questions of identity in the process of going vegan. She also highlighted the difficulties inherent to maintaining this lifestyle, as a result of its numerous constraints and restrictions: accessing suitable products, preparation difficulties, limited supplies, nutritional deficiencies and normative barriers in a society where meat, poultry and dairy are widely consumed. These difficulties can leave "the converted" cut off from the rest of the population, creating challenges in the way they manage their relationships with others (Cherry, 2015; Greenebaum, 2012). Sticking with a vegetarian or vegan diet thus requires support from friends and family, and sufficient cultural capital to provide the necessary skills and motivation (Cherry, 2015). Nevertheless, Cherry, contrary to the model proposed by Prochaska et al. (1992) with reference to quitting addictive products, did not report episodes of failure, relapse or regression. Greenebaum (2012) preferred to focus on *impression management* – the practice of adjusting one's behaviour in order to present a particular image of oneself (see Goffman, 1959). Within this framework, Greenebaum described the preventive strategies used by vegetarians to "save face" in their dealings with omnivores, such as avoiding confrontation, focusing on the health benefits of vegetarianism or setting an example.

Looking beyond questions of motivation, our main objective for this study was to examine the various, interwoven social influences which drive individuals to become and remain vegetarians. More specifically, our goal was to better understand the processes of influence and the relationships between actors who constitute positive or negative influences (family, friends, experts, role models), examining their roles at different stages in the process, from first becoming aware of the issue to ultimately adopting a new diet. Furthermore, previous research has demonstrated that vegetarianism involves positioning oneself in relation to social groups which are often amorphous in nature. Nonetheless, previous studies have not provided a satisfactory answer to the question of how consumers handle the perceived normative

dissonance between such groups. Our second objective for this research was therefore to study the ways in which vegetarians handle the perceived normative dissonance between the vegetarian community and society at large.

Empirical study on vegetarianism

In order to more closely examine the mechanisms of social influence at work in vegetarianism – from an exploratory and inductive perspective, seeking to make sense of a discourse which embraces both the temporality of lived experience and the reconstruction of perceptions of social and relational events encountered along the way – we opted for a non-intrusive, biographical method. Conversations were initiated at the researcher’s behest, and responses were gathered in a neutral, benevolent manner (Burrick, 2010). The aim of the study was to allow vegetarians to give their own narrative accounts of their dietary habits, talking us through their origin and successive stages of development. This approach covers the simple facts of the process, while also teasing out the emotional and relational dimensions which allow us to draw connections between vegetarian identity and social influences. In order to get to grips with the variety of mechanisms at work, we decided that the sample should include representatives of multiple categories of vegetarianism, although the boundaries between these categories are far from impermeable (Inset 2).

Inset 2: Structure of our empirical study

Data gathering

Detailed, non-directive interviews were conducted with 25 individuals – 16 women and 9 men, all young (only three of our respondents were over 30, the mean age was 25.1; see Appendix 1). These proportions, with a majority of women and a relatively young average age, correspond to the current profiles and trends observed in vegetarianism in the western world (Allès et al., 2017). Although this may be a limitation in terms of external validity, we decided to focus on a young and relatively narrow age group since this is generally the period in which the process of adopting meat-free diets occurs (Mathieu & Dorard, 2016), and also because it allowed for a degree of homogeneity in certain fundamental social factors such as sensitivity to normative pressures, a context in which being vegetarian is easier than it once was, and the fact that the influence of the media and social media is more significant now than it was twenty years ago. We also sought to encompass a certain variety in terms of dietary practices, since the sample contains 2 vegetarians who allow themselves certain exceptions (and thus consider themselves flexitarians), 11 vegetarians, 6 vegans and 6 strict vegans. Tradition (a family history of vegetarianism, for example) and religious motivations were not considered pertinent criteria for this research. Participants were recruited using the “snowball method,” and interviewed at home or in a classroom. They were asked to describe their personal experience with vegetarianism, starting at the beginning of the process and describing the successive steps, key moments and obstacles encountered. Discussing their relationship to their social environment was a natural element of this narrative, and participants were encouraged to describe their relationships with other vegetarians and non-vegetarians. These interviews lasted for an hour, on average.

Data analysis

The transcripts of these interviews were treated as textual sources, providing a logical narrative of the experiences and feelings encountered by each participant. These narratives are not objective tellings, since they prioritise individual interpretations over simple facts (Bertaux, 2016). As such they enable us to ascertain which elements of their past experiences respondents consider to be most significant. The researchers began by reading the whole corpus thoroughly in order to become familiar with the participants' experiences. They then embarked upon an iterative process, identifying and systematically coding the themes which emerged from the transcripts using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin 1998). This method helps researchers to identify conceptual categories and their various dimensions and facets (Spiggle, 1994). Further analysis led to the emergence of causal schemas connecting the concepts, allowing us to interpret the evolution of relationships over time. In concrete terms, the researchers cut up the text into units corresponding to specific ideas, then used a process of iterative identification and categorisation to classify the themes within the overall conceptual framework. Content analysis was conducted by open coding the data, identifying key themes and concepts, followed by a selective axial analysis of the textual corpus filtered by theme and respondent.

Identification and difficulties of categorisation

It soon emerged that, although all respondents voluntarily self-identify with one of the main categories of vegetarianism, they often add caveats or details to more precisely define their own individual situation. They base these definitions on dietary practices, which they know well, demonstrating a solid understanding of what it means to be vegetarian, flexitarian, vegan and strict vegan (*"Vegan, because vegetarians eat eggs, which is not going all the way, and I'm not in that category. Flexitarian is even less strict than vegetarian, so I don't really count that as being vegetarian. I'm not a strict vegan, yet, because that's about more than just your diet, it's a way of life."* Sonny). Nevertheless, the existing lexicon of terms, although broadly understood and used correctly, is not sufficient to encompass the complex, overlapping array of practices and the blurring of the lines which separate the various formal groups and categories. As such, our respondents struggled to precisely define the boundaries of different categories, a difficulty which led us to draw two conclusions. Firstly, that adopting vegetarianism is an individual experience, with converts adopting those practices which they personally consider to be feasible and appropriate from amid a complex array of options. Secondly, our respondents found it difficult to claim with authority that they belonged to any clearly-defined group (*"it's a bit strange because I'm a vegetarian, but at the same time I do have some aspects of strict veganism, since I'm against fur, for example."* Lorenzo). Ultimately, individuals feel the need for self-examination, deciding whether or not to include certain categories of foodstuffs in their diet, with reference to their own motives and the perceived advantages and disadvantages of each item (*"honey, for example. Strict vegans aren't supposed to eat it, but it doesn't bother me. I've read things about that, too."* Titouan). The difficulty encountered in categorising practices is sometimes accompanied by a certain hesitation due to the rigours of sticking with them (*"As far as definitions go, I'm more of a flexitarian because I do allow myself to err*

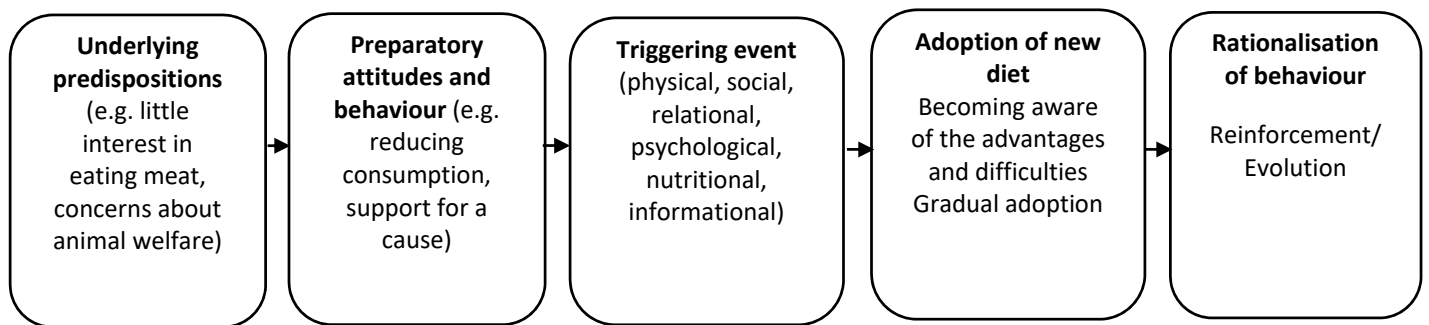
sometimes, especially at Christmas.” Ludovic). Categorisations are also liable to change over time, often as individuals evolve in terms of their principles and observance (“*I went from being flexitarian to vegetarian and then from vegetarian to vegan, which is where I am now. But strict veganism isn’t the lifestyle for me.*” Myriam).

While the practices reported by participants are not always sufficient to definitively classify them in a specific category, motivation is also insufficient in this respect. The motives cited generally fall into one of three categories: (1) health and well-being, (2) environmental considerations and (3) animal welfare and anti-speciesism. Nevertheless, the testimony of our respondents suggests that these motives alone cannot be used to define the differences between vegetarians, vegans and strict vegans. Some trends emerge: for example, animal welfare is almost always the sole or dominant motive for strict vegans, while vegetarians frequently cite their relationship with meat and its health consequences as key elements in their motivational process (e.g. Elena, vegetarian). Furthermore, while ethical considerations regarding animal welfare were judged to be important by all of the respondents whom we interviewed (with one exception), for vegetarians, references to animal welfare are generally restricted to the conditions in which animals are slaughtered, whereas strict vegans express positions akin to anti-speciesism. Nonetheless, multiple motives are encountered in all categories. Titouan, for example, is a vegan who cites both health, animal welfare and environmental concerns as his major sources of motivation (“*For me it’s about health, animal welfare and respect for the environment. I haven’t mentioned this yet, but it’s the way we rear animals which is the most important factor; it’s not cars the problem, it’s cattle farming.*”). Two fellow vegans (Ethan and Laetitia) and one vegetarian (Ludovic) were initially motivated by health considerations, subsequently reinforced by an interest in animal welfare. Here again, the boundaries between categories are not clear-cut.

The process of adopting new dietary practices

As indicated by the majority of respondents, the process of adopting new dietary habits is often long and gradual. Many report an underlying interest in vegetarianism over a long period of time, including a number of preparatory steps: a gradual decrease in the consumption of certain foodstuffs, particularly red meat, or a search for more information and documentation on vegetarianism. The third step is generally triggered by a specific event, often random but decisive nonetheless. A genuine change of behaviour ensues, with a new lifestyle which may include test phases. The final step corresponds to the consolidation phase. Figure 1 presents a visual summary of the successive steps in this process, which will be examined further below.

Figure 1: The process of adopting vegetarianism



Underlying predispositions

Respondents often cite underlying, pre-existing predispositions arising from their personality or past experiences. Concern for animal welfare appears to be the most commonly-cited underlying predisposition in our sample group, sometimes expressed in positive terms (“*I’ve always loved animals*”) and sometimes in a more defensive manner (“*it always shocked me to see animals being hurt*”). Having pets is often cited as evidence of their affection for animals (“*I get it from my mother. We’re big animal-lovers in my house. I live with my dog, my parents have two dogs plus two cats, tortoises, guinea pigs etc.*” Lucie). In terms of attitudes to meat and prior dietary habits, there is more variation. The majority of respondents report that they were never big meat-eaters before they decided to give it up altogether (“*you know what, my family are big fans of meat and cheese. But I’ve never really liked meat or cheese.*” Sonny). Underlying predispositions are primarily individual in nature, independent of social groups, although the adoption of vegetarian practices by friends and family may facilitate the process. Nevertheless, we observed examples in which underlying predispositions were contrary to the respondent’s initial (familial) social context.

Preparatory attitudes and behaviour

In this preliminary phase, changes in attitude and behaviour may occur, evolving gradually as individuals engage more thoroughly with the issue, seeking out more information on the negative aspects of meat consumption and, in some cases, developing a growing disgust for meat. At this point individuals become particularly sensitive to information gleaned from others and from the media (“*When I looked into it on the internet and saw the terrible impact that meat has on the environment – I’ve always been very sensitive on that subject – and the fact*

that it is possible to have a diet without products of animal origin, and that there are no health risks involved, I went for it.” Nicolas).

This is usually a solitary, individual process, as the subject chooses to distance themselves from their initial group (especially if persons within that group have reservations about their new dietary practices, or if the subject does not know many other practitioners). Connections with new acquaintances (colleagues, housemates, experts, etc.) are also common at this stage.

Triggering events

The following stage is when the real change in behaviour occurs, generally in a sudden and dynamic manner. Sudden because it involves a definitive decision to stop eating certain foods; dynamic because it may be difficult to begin with, meeting with opposition and often leading to lapses, especially in the early days of the new dietary regime. There are three main factors associated with this tipping point: the role played by others, a bad personal experience and/or the influence of external information, usually of a shocking nature (*“The thing which really made up my mind was one particular documentary about over-production, and how the food industry exploits animals in terrible conditions, stuffing them with antibiotics just to boost yield and get more out of them.” Mathilde*).

While describing this moment of truth, three respondents connected it to a specific change in their social situation (leaving home, taking a trip and getting divorced), while two more cited a physical incident (surgery, illness, Christmas dinner with the family). Five more respondents alluded to the influence of a third person (housemate, friend, parent, doctor). Finally, fourteen respondents mentioned a specific source of information (taking many forms, including documentaries, videos, lectures, films and books) as the biggest trigger behind their decision; all were related to animal cruelty. Once again, in the majority of cases a desire to protect animals appears to play a decisive role.

Adopting new practices

Adopting a new lifestyle is a gradual process (*“to get an idea of what it entails, and at least discover it for myself [...] I started by doing a week as a vegetarian then another week as a vegan”*, Sonny). It can also be a difficult experience. All of our respondents went into detail about the difficulties they encountered, how they dealt with them and how they sought to resolve various problems and defend their positions. This required them to seek out practical

information on food supply, cooking, health factors and also theoretical arguments which they could use to defend the personal and societal benefits of vegetarianism.

Rationalising behaviour

In some respects, our respondents have become experts in their field, well-informed and often passionate about the subject. While animal welfare was the triggering factor which prompted most of them to become vegetarians in the first place, they have since developed the capacity to defend vegetarianism by invoking a range of themes and arguments (how easy it is, for example, or the benefits for the environment). They begin to rationalise their behaviour, becoming less dependent on the opinions of others and gradually reinforcing their choices and convictions. This includes learning to separate their identity from their diet (*“if I say that I’m a vegan, to other people that means that if one day I decide to eat a chicken that I’ve prepared myself, then I lose all legitimacy. But in my mind, I’m very clear about my convictions.”* Titouan). This rationalisation phase is extremely important in the discourse of our respondents, and helps to explain the progressive nature of the experience reported by all of them. Although some report occasional slip-ups in the past – justified by the desire to defuse a delicate social situation, or by health factors, or by a simple mistake or ignorance of the presence of a “forbidden” ingredient in a dish – none of the respondents envisage returning to their old ways. On the contrary, they explicitly expressed their commitment to their practices, and the majority envisage restricting them even further in the future, often with the goal of adopting a stricter form of dietary regime (*“Because if I tell myself that I’m stopping but then I go back on that decision and eat it again one day, that would be a real failure for me. It would be like taking a step backward away from my objective of becoming a strict vegan.”* Iona). Only Lucie mentions an acquaintance who has ceased to observe a vegetarian diet, proof that such changes of heart do exist, even if they are not represented in the present study. This limitation may well be related to the young average age of our sample. In fact, Lucie only mentions this example in order to convey the sense of guilt she herself would feel if she were to make a similar move (discussing somebody who was no longer a vegetarian: *“When I listened to her talking about it, she made it clear that she turned away from the vegetarian lifestyle because she felt bloated and sick every day. I can’t imagine myself ever not being vegetarian, because it represents my values and my respect for the planet.”* Lucie).

Relations with others: social norms and the response of the social milieu

Relations with the social milieu during the conversion process are frequently evoked by our respondents, often to note the influence of other people (new acquaintances, experts), or to describe the importance of such influences (“*generally speaking, anyone who decides to go vegetarian or vegan does so after meeting somebody else who has already taken that step. That was certainly the case for me; meeting Laura and her family was the biggest factor.*” Myriam), or else to highlight their absence (“*nobody influenced me, it was a purely personal choice and a decision I took for my own health,*” Ludovic). Adopting a new diet is a complex undertaking, on account of the day-to-day constraints imposed by practical difficulties, perceptions of nutritional risks and the social dimension of food and shared meals. These constraints require a restructuring of interpersonal relationships, especially family relationships, since close relatives are likely to be most affected by the change.

During the adoption process, and after the change has been made, individuals must manage their relationships with relatives and social circles: family, friends and colleagues are the three main groups with whom we regularly share meals.

A change of diet can have a considerable impact on an individual’s social context. Friends and family may be impervious or even strongly opposed to the decision, which may lead some people to hide their intentions and dietary practices, to become isolated or to form new relationships. The attitudes of non-vegetarians towards vegetarians can vary enormously, from outright rejection to criticism, tolerance, interest or even mimetic adoption of the same behaviour. By the same token, the attitudes of vegetarians towards others can also vary widely, from withdrawal and breaking off relations to scorn, tolerance, didacticism and, in extreme examples, adoption of other practices (Table 1).

Table 1: inter-group attitudes

Attitude of non-vegetarians to vegetarians (<i>quotations</i>)	NV→V		V→NV	Attitude of vegetarians to non-vegetarians (<i>quotations</i>)
“ <i>I sometimes felt like I was sort of the ‘target’, and people can be weird about it, almost violent in the way they talk to you</i> ” (Lucie)	Hostile social environment			“ <i>I really avoid the subject when I’m with family and friends</i> ” (Fiona,) “ <i>generally, you have to cut off ties with certain people because they really just don’t understand</i> ” (Emma)
	Hostility/ Rejection	↕	Disruption / Isolation	
“ <i>Not everyone understands, and that can turn quite quickly into criticism.</i> ” (Mathilde)	Criticism	↕	Ignorance Scorn	“ <i>Let’s just say they’re not very well-informed, they just see the clichés and hide behind that. They don’t want to hear your arguments. At the start I took that really hard, but now I just let it wash over me.</i> ” (Fiona)

<i>"It was hard for them to accept, especially for my father who had absolutely no interest in the subject, and couldn't understand it at all. But, with time, even if he doesn't understand he has come to accept it."</i> (Mathilde)	Tolerance	↔	Tolerance	<i>"It doesn't bother me if people eat meat, honestly. I mean I'd be happy if everyone were a strict vegan, but each to their own."</i> (Emma)
<i>"They understand, they're more and more interested in it, they're more and more attentive. But I've yet to see any change in their own eating habits."</i> (Nicolas)	Interest	↔	Education	<i>"At the end of the day it's a choice, and if I talk about my own dietary practices it's to explain them to people who are interested."</i> (Myriam)
<i>"My step-sister actually started to go vegetarian a few months after I did"</i> (Lucie).	Encouragement Adoption	↔	Sharing and support	<i>"When I met my boyfriend he wasn't vegetarian at all, but since he's been with me he's started to eat much less meat, and gradually, together..."</i> (Elena)
	Favourable social environment			

When vegetarians announce their decision to adopt this new diet, it appears that family relationships are more fraught than relationships with friends, but are also more liable to change. Several respondents report that their parents had a very hostile initial reaction, often driven by concerns for their children's health, but that this hostility has gradually given way to a greater degree of tolerance. In some cases, the parents themselves have begun to reconsider their meat consumption. The responses elicited from friendship groups appear to be much more diverse, ranging from great tolerance (especially among close friends) to indifference or even open hostility.

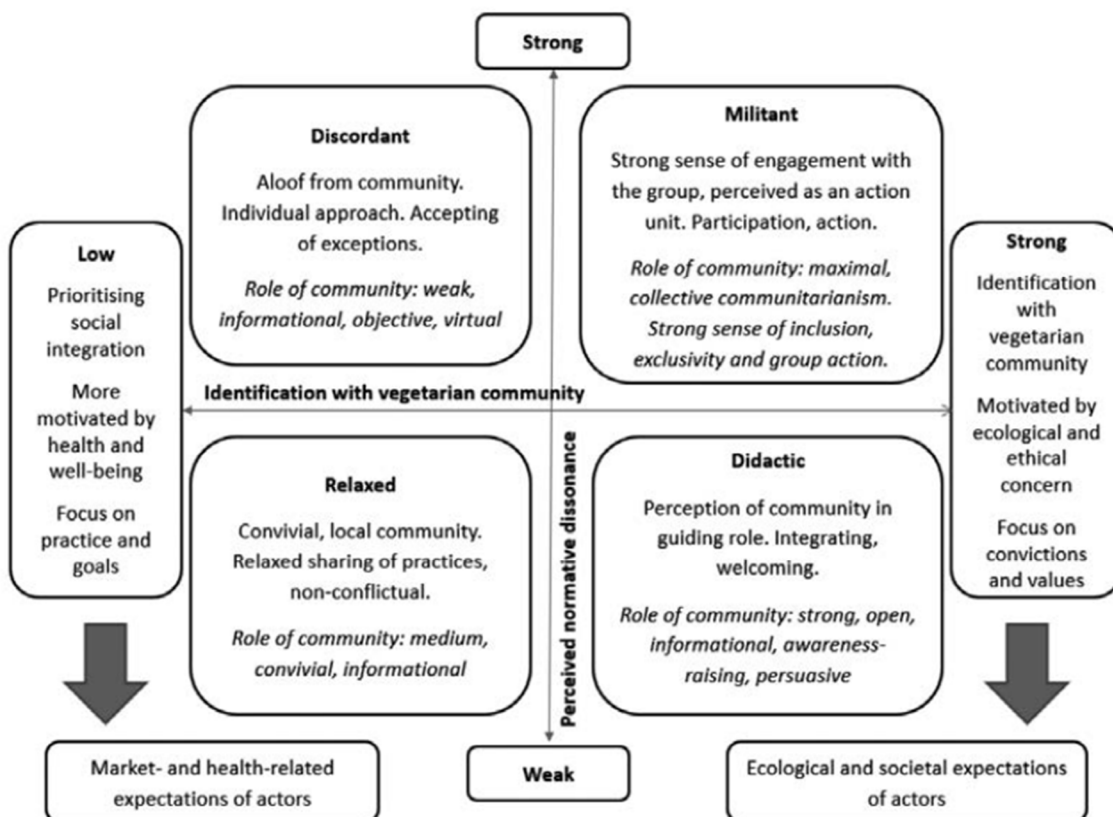
Perception and management of normative dissonance

With vegetarians still being very much a minority, relations with society at large, and with the vegetarian community, crop up frequently in our participants' testimony. Not only do they discuss the difficulties and sources of satisfaction encountered in these extra-group and intra-group relations, they also hint at a certain understanding of the attitudes of society as a whole towards vegetarians, and of vegetarians towards the rest of society. Opinions vary as to the extent to which vegetarianism is integrated and accepted in contemporary western society. For Titouan, for example, vegetarianism *"is all about things which are generally accepted by society,"* while Lucile contends that *"in today's society it's still impossible to be vegetarian, in spite of the trends, in spite of whatever."* The strength of the perceived antagonism between society and vegetarianism is a variable which fluctuates considerably from one respondent to the next, but it is a systematic underlying presence in their accounts, and a factor which serves to illuminate the different positions they adopt. Another differentiating factor, in this regard, is that respondents position themselves differently in terms of their affinity with societal norms or the norms of their chosen community. Some respondents, like Emma, totally reject the idea

that they stand somehow apart from society, refuting all stigmatisation and even questioning the concept of a vegetarian community: “*We’re still part of society, it’s not like we’re excluded. So it’s not really a community.*” (Emma) Others, however, are quick to express their sense of belonging to a community, even if this involves a degree of exclusion, or even marginalisation. In this respect, Mathilde’s declaration to the effect: “*I really do have the sense of belonging to a community, and I really appreciate that sense of belonging. It’s a bit like supporting the same football club [laughs]. Whenever you have things in common, whatever they might be, that creates a sense of belonging and community,*” stands in stark contrast to Nathalie’s opinion on the matter: “*I’m not at all interested in community, the veggie ghetto... I don’t like that sort of thing.*”

Combining these two analytical approaches allows us to develop a working framework in order to better understand their consequences for individual practices, as well as the ways in which adherents defend their practices, and how the practices themselves evolve (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Perceived normative dissonance and identification with the vegetarian community



In cases where there is a strong perceived opposition between society and the vegetarian community, when respondents have the impression that their dietary practices set them apart

from the norm, efforts to resolve this normative dissonance may generate two very different reactions, depending on the individual's level of tolerance for conflict. Those who do not wish to be excluded, and are averse to conflict, struggle with the idea of community. We might describe this position as *discordant*, as individuals foreground their adherence to society's dominant norms and yet find themselves at odds with the prevailing model. They thus approach their dietary practices in an individual, isolated or even secretive manner, and may be prepared to deviate from their principles in situations liable to create tension with friends and family. Their experience is one of marginality but, concerned about how others view them, they are often forced to make certain sacrifices or compromises ("*we used to do these big meals but nowadays I don't... I don't go to the meals, basically, because I know that it's just going to be awkward.*" Lorenzo).

At the other end of the spectrum, *militants* prioritise their convictions and do not shrink from conflict when it comes to defending their dietary practices and championing their benefits, in a spirit of proselytism or even all-out militancy. For these militants, the community is an essential source of support, defence or strength ("*There are things that need defending, in the vegan community.*" Emma)

Relaxed individuals, on the other hand, feel that their practices are increasingly accepted by society, and do not feel excluded or stigmatised. While their perception of normative dissonance is less acute, they nonetheless choose to blend into society, or else into the community. *Relaxed* vegetarians are at ease with their diet, and have no real sense of belonging to a different group. For them, the "community" amounts to nothing more than occasional interactions with like-minded people, an opportunity to share experiences and information ("*We talk about what we eat, in terms of recipes we know, or even things we've found in the shops.*" Soraya).

Last but by no means least, *didactic* vegetarians have firmly-rooted convictions and are prepared to speak out in defence of their practices, their benefits and their values. They look to the community as a model or illustration, in a spirit of sharing and education, often firm in the belief that their message will one day be accepted by a society which is currently behind the curve of a massive and irreversible change ("*you have a valid point of view, and if you are capable of explaining that point of view then people won't think you are crazy. On the contrary, it will make them think and it may even influence them.*" Ethan). Militant and didactic vegetarians are primarily focused on defending their convictions, although their approaches may differ, invoking their community of values to differing extents. Discordant and relaxed individuals, on the other hand, will be more interested in reconciling their practices with those of their entourage, attaching less importance to their community, which they may utilise or else

eschew altogether. For these groups practice takes precedence, with the aim of reconciling the specific demands of their diet with that of their non-vegetarian friends and family. They may also have a more hedonistic outlook, emphasising the potential for pleasure in practices not highly-valued or facilitated by society in general. They are often relative newcomers, seeking to facilitate and justify their dietary decisions.

Discussion

In keeping with the objectives of this study, our results serve to highlight two fundamental aspects of this issue: on the one hand, the role of social influences in the process of adopting a vegetarian diet or similar, and, on the other hand, the emergence and management of perceived normative dissonance with and between the vegetarian community and society at large.

The process presented in Figure 1 builds upon that outlined by McDonald (2000), who has detailed the successive steps in the process of becoming a strict vegan. For the strict vegans interviewed by McDonald, the motivations, underlying predispositions and triggering events which shaped their path to veganism were all related to animal welfare, whereas our research identifies a greater thematic variety. Our results also serve to enrich McDonald's findings regarding the progressive nature of the conversion process, culminating in the new worldview of strict veganism. Our study reveals a similar process of gradual reinforcement, shaped by the progressive resolution of constraints, burgeoning cognitive and motivational resources, the consolidation of values and a fear of guilt in the event of failure, which acts as a deterrent against backsliding. Our results differ from those presented by Prochaska et al. (1992), who argue that the process of giving up addictive products often involves phases of failure, relapse and regression, even if a spiralling dynamic ultimately leads most individuals to restart the process later on.

The results of our study demonstrate the importance of relationships with others during the decision-making and conversion processes. The attitudes encountered among family and friends can vary dramatically, in turn inspiring a variety of reactions from new vegetarians. Although Cherry (2015) notes that, in the specific case of strict vegans, support from friends and family is an important factor in long-term adhesion, most existing studies have focused either on the new relationships that people form with fellow vegetarians and the support they provide (Cherry, 2015; Mathieu & Dorard, 2016), or else on the potential for hostile reactions from friends and family (Jabs et al., 1998; Rosenfeld, 2018). Our study suggests that reactions vary depending on the relative proximity of personal relationships. Closer friends appear to be more tolerant than wider friendship groups. In light of the small sample size, our data do not

lend themselves to the formulation of hypotheses. Nevertheless, these results open the way for further theoretical exploration and validation, raising the possibility that the nature of a person's entourage (family, friends, experts, more distant relations) can have a moderating effect on the interlinking and reciprocal attitudes of vegetarians and non-vegetarians towards one another (as illustrated in Table 1) and the evolution of practices. For example, when met with rejection by those close to them, vegetarians may be more likely to resort to coping mechanisms with family members but more inclined to break off relations with casual friends, offering a more robust defence of their choices. As such, the "face-saving" strategies described by Greenebaum (2012) would only be used with close relations. This once again highlights the complexity of social influences on individual behaviour, rendered all the more complex by the fact that friends and family members are also liable to evolve in terms of their attitudes to vegetarians.

The other theoretical contribution of this study is to propose a model which connects the degree to which individuals identify with the vegetarian community to their perception of the contradictions between the norms of their group (vegetarians) and broader societal norms (society at large). This is a contribution to the existing work on vegetarian identity (Rosenfeld, 2018; Plante et al., 2019), which generally fails to consider perceived opposition from society. It also serves to illustrate the importance of identifying with a community or sub-culture, complementing Cherry's (2015) work on vegans associated with the punk sub-culture. Due to the diversity of respondents involved in this study, our results are more heterogeneous in terms of social identification, ranging from those who have trouble considering themselves vegetarian to those who identify strongly with the vegetarian community. Our results also reveal that the perception of a serious opposition between vegetarianism and society as a whole may exert significant influence over dietary practices and the process of adopting them, in some cases creating cognitive tensions between the need for identification and the desire for integration. The latter notion, which we call normative dissonance, has proven itself to be a useful tool for comprehending the (often contradictory) social influences to which vegetarians are subject, and for expanding the frameworks we use to interpret their consumption choices and sense of community. The four segments identified here are defined by certain shared priorities in terms of the way they manage dietary practices, relationships with others and the power of exemplarity and persuasion. For example, two of our segments chime with the face-saving strategies described by Greenebaum (2012): "discordant" vegetarians seek to avoid confrontation, while "didactic" individuals aim to be exemplary. There is also a clear contrast between "relaxed" individuals who do not perceive any conflict and "militant" who adopt more confrontational approaches. These results also raise some interesting managerial perspectives.

Managerial implications in terms of product ranges and communication

This analysis helps us to better comprehend the expectations of vegetarian consumers, and for brands aiming to reach this target group it may offer ideas on how to optimise their product and communication strategies, in terms of both the content of their messages and the means by which they are conveyed.

For those whose individual motivations tend to be broadly in line with social norms without seeking to challenge them, and who do not feel that they belong to a specific community, the main priority is to identify products and commercial sources which facilitate their day-to-day lives. The quality of the product range is essential, as are its accessibility, its practicality and its promise of pleasure. Consumers in this group are interested in recipes and information on nutritional benefits and flavour. They do not do much to pass on this information, and when they do it is within a narrow, casual context. These consumers are of particular interest to vegetarian brands, since they represent a target audience receptive to promotional arguments and in search of solutions, with high expectations in terms of product quality and characteristics. The difference between the *discordant* and *relaxed* categories are mostly linked to their respective relationships with others. Open to advice which will help them to simplify their day-to-day practices and justify their choices, they do not actively seek out contact or dialogue with fellow vegetarians, except with trusted friends in a narrow, interpersonal context. They are, however, very interested in innovations which might help them to reconcile their dietary practices with those of their entourage, reducing the constraints and sacrifices which they otherwise agree to accept. *Relaxed* vegetarians are more “social.” than the discordant ones. They are more interested in discussing their experiences and sharing recipes and recommendations. They may act as ambassadors for vegetarian brands, as they are the category most invested in innovation and enjoyment.

At the other end of the spectrum, *didactic* and *militant* vegetarians are driven by their convictions and sense of belonging. They feel more closely connected to the vegetarian community and less concerned with broader societal norms, and thus represent a different target market for brands. They attach greater importance to the values which underpin their practices, and demand that brands and products share and represent these values. They are much more sensitive to the way in which products are produced and marketed. They often regard the community as more than just a place for sharing practices (though this function remains), seeing it instead as a forum for the expression and dissemination of their convictions and values. This

may take more active, even aggressive, forms in the case of *militants*, or be more consensual and diplomatic in the case of *didactic* practitioners. For brands, the advantage of consumers in these groups lies in the potential audience to be reached via their community. Didactic individuals pass on messages, endowing them with a sense of legitimacy and credibility founded upon their own exemplarity and persuasiveness. Militants are much more difficult for brands to handle. Their audience reach and proselytism make them attractive, but their intransigence requires products and their brand messaging to be totally aligned with their values.

Table 2 summarises some methods for adapting product and communication strategies to the different segments identified.

Table 2: Marketing implications for the different segments

	Discordant	Relaxed	Didactic	Militant
Arguments	Practicality, Availability, Flexibility	Sensory pleasure, Innovation, self-esteem	Transparency, objective information	Sharing of value, orthodoxy in production methods
Communication				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Profile of the target group ● Viral potential 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Permeable, isolated ● Low viral potential 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Open to new things, enthusiastic. ● Viral potential based on past and shared experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Captive market, rational, keen on transparency ● Viral potential based on legitimacy and exemplarity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● High visibility, large potential audience ● Strong viral potential (positive or negative), divisive

In terms of products and their commercial presentation, the arguments used might vary considerably depending on the target segment:

- For *discordant consumers*, there is no problem with “veggie” foods being ersatz versions of meat products, allowing for common ground with omnivores. They also value vegetarian options in restaurants, without the need for them to be specifically marketed as such,
- For *relaxed* vegetarians, the priority is the quality of flavour delivered by products, their pleasure potential,
- For *didactic* vegetarians, emphasis on traceability and production methods is valued as a way of asserting the difference of products which, visually, are not always immediately distinguishable from non-vegetarian products,

- Finally, for the *militants*, accentuating a product's "cruelty free" credentials chimes with their ethical convictions.

Brands might profitably channel their innovation efforts with reference to the characteristics of each of these segments. Advertising strategies will also need to be adjusted accordingly: using forums and blogs to convey informational messages aimed at discordant consumers, using friend networks and tasting experiences to entice relaxed vegetarians, turning to experts to reach didactic consumers, as long as the "reasons why" are solid and backed up, and perhaps partnering with bloggers and labels to reach militants, the most risky target audience but also a group with a strong viral potential who can convey credibility.

Above and beyond vegetarianism, concerns for animal welfare emerge frequently in the interviews conducted with our respondents, and are an increasingly prominent topic of discussion and media attention. It seems essential for all brands whose products are connected with animals to take these concerns on board, particularly companies producing dairy products (Von Keyserlingk et Weary, 2017), and even cosmetics.

From a more societal perspective, there is also reason to believe that the social influences at work within vegetarian communities could represent social marketing assets, being harnessed to promote greener and more responsible consumption without sacrificing pleasure of sociability. One potential avenue for future development would be to challenge the perceived contrast between vegetarians and non-vegetarians. Putting more meat-free dishes on the menus of restaurants and canteens, thereby narrowing the normative gap, could have broader, knock-on effects for consumption in general. Another potential way forward would be to nurture the development of broader, more inclusive communities and forums for the exchange of reliable information, for example a forum backed by the PNNS (France's national health and nutrition board) or similar organisations.

Conclusion, limitations and avenues for further research

This research has enabled us to shine a light on the ways in which dietary practices – of central importance to numerous contemporary debates on health, the environment and animal welfare – are subject to the contradictory influences of social norms and convictions shared by groups or communities which remain marginal, for the time being, but whose audience reach and public profile continue to grow. The evolution of societal factors helps to define the influence of the macro-environment on the markets, their structure and their future. At the time of writing, vegetarianism remains a marginal practice, but its appeal and level of recognition are constantly expanding. Other markets, such as insect-based foods, new energy sources and green tourism,

are on similar trajectories, driven by pioneers who are unafraid to go against the *mainstream* and are capable of fostering the emergence of new normative frameworks. One of the major results of the present study is the identification of two significant variables: perceived opposition between the adopted community and society at large, and the sense of belonging to a particular group. Combining these two axes allows us to address the issue of perceived normative dissonance within and without the community. Practices, behaviours and relationships take on different forms and follow different trajectories depending on the extent to which group affiliation is perceived as an effective means of reducing normative dissonance, a phenomenon which is always perceived differently by different individuals. This study makes no claim to transcend such limitations. The qualitative approach utilised here, in an exploratory fashion, does not enable us to draw general conclusions. Our sample was limited in size and scope, although it is consistent with the social profile of vegetarians: younger, more educated and more female than the population at large. Although our 25 respondents allowed us to achieve a considerable degree of semantic correspondence, the breadth of this phenomenon and the variety of lived experiences make it clear that more work is required to comprehend the mechanisms in play. Moreover, we are now witnessing the emergence of new, alternative consumer trends which are critical of mainstream consumption habits, which they consider to be irresponsible or unethical, resulting in new and more complex normative frameworks. We must also consider the importance of target audiences and the reach of groups and communities based on shared practices and convictions, particularly online and via social media. All of these phenomena have implications for decision-making processes and consumer behaviour in many markets. This study hints at new avenues for further research, particularly with a view to determining how to measure such variables and their impact on the adoption, adherence to and reinforcement (or abandonment) of alternative dietary practices, in what is necessarily a longitudinal process.

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APPENDIX 1: Composition of the sample

	Respondent	Gender	Age	Activity	Veg. Status
1	Fiona	F	23	Student	Strict vegan (N)
2	Lara	F	29	Teacher	Flexitarian (F)
3	Titouan	M	20	Student	Vegan (L)
4	Thomas	M	21	Student	Vegetarian (R)
5	Mathilde	F	20	Student	Strict vegan (N)
6	Nathalie	F	48	Nurse	Strict vegan (N)
7	Lorenzo	M	18	Student	Vegetarian (R)
8	Iona	F	25	Translator	Vegetarian (R)
9	Sonny	M	22	Student	Vegan (L)
10	Laura	F	24	Student	Strict vegan (N)
11	Elena	F	27	Home maker	Vegetarian (R)
12	Ethan	M	23	Student	Vegan (L)
13	Nicolas	M	23	Student	Vegan (L)
14	Lucie	F	21	Student	Vegetarian (R)
15	Manon	M	19	Student	Vegetarian (R)
16	Caroline	F	26	Student	Vegetarian (R)
17	Sarah	F	27	Student	Vegetarian (R)
18	Lucile	F	17	High school student	Vegetarian (R)
19	Emma	F	19	Student	Strict vegan (N)
20	Soraya	F	28	Student	Strict vegan (N)
21	Cindy	F	24	Photographer	Vegetarian (R)
22	Joceran	M	25	AV technician	Flexitarian (F)
23	Myriam	F	22	Student in biology	Vegan (L)
24	Laetitia	F	36	Self-employed	Vegan (L)
25	Ludovic	M	41	Manager	Vegetarian (R)
Structure of the sample	Gender		Age	Category	
	Men	9	25.5	Flexitarian	2
				Vegetarian	11
	Women	16		Vegan	6
				Strict vegan	6