The role of communities in vegetarian and vegan identity construction

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Abstract: The recognition of the necessity to reduce meat consumption in affluent nations is now widely acknowledged. A large body of literature examines the personal factors that lead to meat reduction or avoidance, including the motivations and profiles of individuals. While excluding meat consumption from ones' diet alone could be challenging, surprisingly, literature has sparsely examined the role of communities supporting this process, which includes both practices and convictions. This research seeks to make up for that and aims to investigate the impact of communities (both imagined and real) on the construction of vegetarian and vegan identities. To this end, nineteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with non-meat eaters, ten of whom underwent follow-up interviews. The analyses conducted focused on their practices, convictions, and interactions within communities. The findings revealed two major points: firstly, practices and convictions develop simultaneously and in relation to various types of communities; secondly, identity is constructed through both affiliation and differentiation processes. These findings offer strong theoretical and practical implications by contributing to the understanding of the impact of community-driven value-based identity built on conviction-

based consumption practices. For brands, retailers and public policy makers, this research provides practical recommendations for promoting meat-free diets, not only through making information available but also by using the co-evolution of practice and convictions as leverage, and by empowering communities in the process.

Keywords: Identity, Food Marketing, Communities, Identity projects, vegetarian/vegan, practices

"I feel like I belong to a community because being vegetarian is based on values, it's not just a preference. It's different from other communities because the vegetarian community is underpinned by values. Everybody eats, but we have values behind it…"

Kevin, 24 years old, vegan

1. Introduction

Today, awareness of the unsustainability of current systems is becoming stronger. A growing number of consumers are aware of the consequences of their consumption habits and practices and are deciding to act daily and individually for a better planet and a better society (Alcorta et al., 2021; Fernandes and Saraiva, 2022; Grønhøj and Hubert, 2022; Van Tonder et al. 2023). In this vein, meat-excluding diets represent a type of emerging consumer trend that has become crucial in light of concerns about global warming and ethics. For instance, reducing meat consumption will help to reduce the effects of climate change by decreasing the demand for livestock farming, which is a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions (Godfray et al., 2018).

Individuals who eschew meat from their diet can be categorized as vegetarians (those who exclude red meat, poultry or fish from their diet) or as vegans (those who are more restrictive

and exclude all forms of animal-related products from their dietary habits) (Ruby, 2012; Rosenfeld and Burrow, 2017). Strict vegans refuse to eat or use any animal products or any substance whose production involves animals, including honey and leather (Nezlek and Forestell, 2020). To avoid confusion between different types of diets that exclude meat or animal related products, we use in this article the term "veg*n" to refer to both vegetarians and vegans, as other scholars have done (Rothgerber, 2015; Rosenfeld, 2018; Bagci and Olgun, 2019). Even though the prevalence of consumers who forgo meat and animal food related products is increasing, veg*nism is still not yet widely adopted by consumers in Western countries. A recent report indicates that huge differences exist in the percentage of people eschewing meat and animal products from country to country with India being the leading nation with 41% of the population avoiding meat related products for religious reasons (Statista, 2022). Across the rest of the globe, the combined percentage does not exceed 15%; however, this is expected to increase (Statista, 2022). As a result, brands and retailers are progressively taking into account the development of meat substitutes in their strategy (Gázquez-Abad and Martínez-López, 2021; Martinelli and De Canio, 2021).

A considerable amount of research has been conducted on veg*nism regarding the motivations and profiles of veg*ns (e.g. Janssen et al., 2016; Rosenfeld, 2018; Martinelli and De Canio, 2021), the adoption and maintenance of the practice (e.g. Cherry, 2015; D'Souza et al., 2022) and the veg*n identity (e.g. Jabs et al., 2000; Rosenfeld, 2018; Markowski, 2022; Pabian et al., 2022; Rosenfeld and Burrow, 2017; Ryan et al., 2022). Veg*ns are individuals who opt for principles of consumption that are, most of the time, based on strong convictions and motivations for improved health, environment protection and/or animal welfare (Janssen et al., 2016; Rosenfeld, 2018). It can be an involving and uncomfortable practice to follow, as meat and animal products are most of the time traditionally perceived as positive and encouraged by the market (Nguyen and Platow, 2021; Wendler and Halkier, 2023). Veg*nism

appears to illustrate how individuals attempt to align their consumption habits with their convictions. Its specificity entrains the fact that it is a visible daily practice, veg*ns (in-group) or not (out-group). In addition, individuals who exclude meat and/or animal products can experience the *vegan stigma*, which refers to negative stereotypes or attitudes towards individuals who follow a vegan diet and lifestyle (Markowski and Roxburgh, 2019). Thus, in order to defend their identity and their values, they may look for help and support from others with a similar profile, who could be influential, helpful and supportive of their consumption choices and behaviors (D'Souza, 2022). In particular, they could become part of a veg*n community such as *HappyCow*[1] to find support from peers and to participate in discussions (Cherry, 2015; Hungara and Nobre, 2022).

Although there is extensive research on why individuals become veg*ns, there is a gap in the literature relating to the relationships they may have with individuals who share similar values and practices, or with communities. Furthermore, despite the examination of particular veg*n communities (e.g. vegan community (Cherry, 2015) or the "vegan challenge" considered as a specific on-line community (Laakso et al., 2022), the roles of different types of communities in the development of the veg*n identity has not been investigated yet. Hence, research on veg*nism still suffers from this gap (Hungara and Nobre, 2022) as well as the need to examine the social processes that contribute to the adoption of plant-based diets (Wendler, 2023) and to the veg*n identity (Rosenfeld, 2018). Both from a theoretical and practical standpoint, gaining an understanding of how veg*n identity can be constructed in groups is crucially important. Indeed, a more comprehensive understanding of veg*n identity construction can facilitate the explanation and prediction of behaviors and associated outcomes, such as persuading omnivores to modify their dietary habits towards meat reduction (Rosenfeld and Burrow, 2017; Judge et al., 2022). Besides, another issue that remains lacking in the

[1] https://www.happycow.net/

literature regarding veg*nism is the longitudinal perspective (D'Souza et al., 2022). The aim of this study is thus to contribute to closing these practical, theoretical and methodological gaps by exploring the role of communities in the construction of the veg*n identity with a longitudinal perspective.

The results of 19 semi-structured interviews plus10 follow-up interviews four years later with self-declared non-meat eaters reveal an emphasis on several key points. Firstly, they reveal the extent and nature of the respondent's engagement with various types of communities. Secondly, they shed light on the underlying motivations and effects of community involvement. Thirdly, they provide insight into how identity is developed through both affiliation and distinction processes. Finally, they highlight the unique aspects of veg*n communities that make the veg*n identity project particular. These findings contribute to the literature on identity construction and communities at large, since they highlight (1) the specificity of identity construction with a shared evolution of convictions and practices and the roles of different types of communities in this process, and (2) veg*nism as both a specific identity and as an archetype of value-based, visible and vindictive identity project.

This article starts with a literature review on identity in consumer research, the role of communities in identity construction and the specific case of veg*nism. Secondly, a qualitative survey with a sample of self-identified veg*ns is presented. Thirdly, results expose the levels and types of communities with which respondents interact, the motivations and effects of the use of communities, the construction of the veg*n identity through both affiliation or distinction and finally, the specificities of veg*n communities. The last section presents a discussion of the results, as well as theoretical contributions and practical implications for marketing practitioners and for public policy makers.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Identity in consumer research

Identity is "*the human capacity… to know who's who*" (Jenkins, 2014 p.5) which involves "*knowing who we are, knowing who others are, them knowing who we are, us knowing who they think we are and so on*" (Jenkins, 2014 p.6). It has received a lot of attention in the social sciences and thus has been given a multitude of definitions and conceptualizations (Larsen and Patterson, 2018). To summarize this important literature, identity has been studied as both the object (what is identity) and the process (how identity operates) (i.e.; Ashmore, 1997; Jenkins 2014). Identity is both personal (i.e. the particular traits and descriptor/ idiosyncratic characteristics) and social (i.e. the social roles a person has and the groups this person belongs to) (Tajfel, 1982; Turner, 1985; Bisogni et al., 2002; Hogg et al., 1995). It is both stable and fluid along an individual's life (Demo, 1992). Importantly, two additional perspectives on identity rooted in different ontological visions are observed (Larsen and Patterson, 2018): identity can be ascribed by others based on family lineage and social roles based on the birth (Jenkins, 2014) and can be constructed/achieved (or acquired in Merton's view, 1957) throughout life. Consumers increasingly seek to be freed from traditional identity (ascribed) anchors such as gender, nationality or demographically defined social groups and are defining themselves with self-assigned identities such as being veg*n (Randers and Thøgersen, 2023).

In consumer research, identity pertains to the self-conceptualization and expression of individuals through their interactions with resources available in the market (e.g. brands, products, and experiences), their consumption choices and their behaviors. It involves the degree to which consumers identify with particular products or brands and how these associations contribute to the formation and maintenance of their self-image (Belk, 1988; Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). Indeed, according to Belk (1988), consumption plays a key role in consumers' construction of their identity, using the marketplace to remember and express who they are and to become the person they want to be (Belk, 1988; 2014). In other

words, consumers can construct their personal and social identities through meaningful consumption (Goulding et al., 2002). In line with this, an approach in consumer behavior has been developed: *Consumer Culture Theory* (CCT) (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). CCT researchers study how individuals construct, develop and express their identities via their consumption and they refer to this as *consumer identity projects* (CIP) (Schau, 2018). CIP encompass who consumers are and what marketplace resources they use to become who they want (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Some of the most recognized marketing research examining consumers identity projects are Shouten and McAlexander's (1995) article on Harley Davidson bikers, Thompson and Tambyah's (1999) work on cosmopolitanism, Goulding et al.'s (2002) analysis of people who pursued the identity project of a being a clubber, Üstüner and Holt's (2010) ethnographic case study of poor migrant women living in a Turkish squat, Schau et al.'s (2009) investigation of retirement, or more recently Akaka and Schau's (2019) study on surfers. Two central results have emerged from this research stream. Firstly, consumers pursue multiple identity projects at once, and it is not uncommon for these projects to shift and terminate at some point, or for consumers to pick up new projects throughout their lives (Shankar et al., 2009; Schau, 2018). Secondly, many consumer identity projects encompass how individuals use their consumption patterns to communicate their affiliation with specific social groups, they rely on close and prolonged contact with others and these affiliations create a broader sense of self (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), via this "community membership" (Shouten and McAlexander, 1995; Kozinets, 2001; Akaka and Schau, 2019).

2.2. Communities and Their Influence On Identity Construction

Consumer communities have been under the spotlight of a lot of research (*e.g.* Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Cova and Cova, 2001, Goulding et al., 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Kim et al., 2008; Cova and White, 2010). In CCT research, communities are referred to

as subcultures of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Kozinets, 2001), consumption micro-culture (Thompson and Troester, 2002), consumption world (Holt, 1995), culture of consumption (Kozinets, 2001), consumer tribes (Cova, 1997, Cova and Cova, 2001, Goulding et al., 2009) and brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002; Schau et al., 2009, Wong, 2023).

At a basic level, communities represent groups of people connected because they share the same activities and/or beliefs (Brint, 2001). Indeed, consumers in the same community share common values and practices referred to as a common *ethos* (Cova, 2019). Several typologies of communities exist in the literature but the most common one makes the distinction between *imagined* and *real communities* (Anderson, 1983; Calhoun, 1991; Muniz and O'guinn, 2001). *Imagined communities* are "*large collectives whose members are linked primarily by common identities but minimally by network of directly interpersonal relationships*" (Calhoun, 1991 p. 95-96). In his book, Anderson (1983) states that these communities are based on a shared sense of belonging to a larger group that is bound by common symbols, practices, and values and explain how the nation-state is a good example of an imagined community. Despite the fact that most individuals in a nation-state will never meet or interact with each other, they share a common feeling of being part of the same group (e.g. the "Americans"). To the best of our knowledge, past research in marketing has not examined these *imagined communities*. In contrast, *real communities* are made of physical and virtual/online communities. Physical communities are direct and close, usually defined by a geographical scale (Pretty et al., 1994) such as a local sports club. Virtual/online communities are mediated and distant, they do not consider the geographic space[2] (Rothaermel and Sugiyama, 2001; Wirtz et al., 2013). They are mainly websites or forums that promote information sharing and exchange, belonging, emotional support and facilitate problem solving (Kim et al., 2008; Babic et al., 2022; Bradford

[2] But the relationships within virtual communities can evolve and be consolidated by a physical encounter (Cova and White, 2010).

et al., 2017; Prentice et al., 2019). The literature is now abundant in terms of online communities' research. For example, Kim et al. (2008) examined how different factors contribute to an online commitment and subsequent customer behaviors in a famous (but not cited) herbal cosmetic online community. More recently, Brandão and Popoli (2022) shed light on negative consumer–brand relationships in social-media-based anti-brand communities and investigate among other things the communities "*I Hate Apple"* or *"I hate McDonalds"*. Individuals join both types of real communities not only to exchange useful information but also to make friends and gain support from other participants (Babic et al., 2022).

This stream of research has also identified the rites and stages needed to develop an identity in line with the community. Celsi et al. (1993) investigate why individuals engage in high-risk leisure activities such as skydiving. Their in-depth interviews highlight that the skydiving community is marked by rites of passage (e.g. first jump, 1,000th jump, 12 hours free-fall). Schouten and McAlexander (1995) spent three years doing ethnographic fieldwork with Harley-Davidson motorcycle owners. They explain that the brand's success is due to its ability to create a sense of community and identity among its customers through the use of symbols (e.g., tattoos, motorcycle customization, status of riders signaled by their position in the group during runs) and rituals (e.g., barriers to entry in the group, the obligation for new members to go through a prospect status before being accepted).

In sum, past research has emphasized on the role of communities in consumer identity projects. However, a double gap exists in the literature. Firstly, previous research has focused solely on real communities and has not simultaneously examined the role of different types of communities, such as imagined and real, in identity construction and consumer identity projects. Secondly, the existing literature has primarily focused on how consumption of goods and services, as well as marketplace resources including communities, contribute to the development and maintenance of one's identity (Debucquet et al., 2021) via the consumption

of specific brands (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002; Schau et al., 2009, Wong, 2023) or leisure activities (Celsi et al., 1993; Cova and Cova, 2001; Goulding et al., 2002, 2009; Schouten and McAlexandern 1995). However, it has overlooked alternative forms of consumption. In today's context, some consumers are opting to change their consumption patterns to support environmental causes (Böstrom and Klitman, 2019; Chen et al., 2019). Consequently, identity projects and community memberships involve consumption choices that align with personal convictions and accommodate new forms of consumption, such as resisting, reducing, abandoning, or boycotting specific categories of products (Hogg et al., 2009; Brandão and Popoli, 2022). This is particularly relevant for products that are perceived as unsustainable or non-environmentally friendly, such as animal products. These new projects are becoming increasingly prevalent. However, to the best of our knowledge, the study of alternative identity projects and the role of different types of communities (imagined and real) in these projects has not been conducted thus far.

*2.3. Object of the research: the veg*n identity construction*

This section presents the contributions and limitations of the existing literature related to our research object (1) veg*nism and veg*n identity, (2) the process of becoming veg*n, and (3) social identity and veg*n communities.

*2.3.1. Veg*nism and veg*n identity*

In Western societies, literature reports that veg*nism is primarily driven by health and/or ethical concerns with regard to animal rights and protection of nature (for an overview, see Ruby, 2012 or Rosenfeld, 2018). Adopting a veg*n lifestyle is a complex process in a meat-centric world (Fuentes and Fuentes, 2022 Wendler, 2023) and requires an effort (Wendler and Halkier, 2023). For individuals, being a veg*n can be more than just following a diet; it defines who they are and is a central characteristic of their identity (Jabs et al., 2000; Markowski, 2022;

Pabian et al., 2022; Rosenfeld and Burrow, 2017; Ryan et al., 2022). A 45-year-old vegetarian reported in Jabs et al.'s (2000) *"It becomes part of your identity… My daughter wrote to her [minister], "I am vegetarian." You know it becomes part of your identity because it is so pervasive in your life, but it is also second nature too."* (p. 382). This statement supports Fischler's (1988) thesis that people's food choices are articulated with their self-identities.

Rosenfeld and Burrow (2017) defined veg*n identity as "*an individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors"* (p.80) about being veg*n. They proposed the Unified Model of Vegetarian Identity (UMVI), a key theoretical model that integrates psychological theories of identity with research on veg*nism. The UMVI model has three levels to depict the role of veg*nism in an individual's self-concept. At the first level, the veg*n identity is embedded in a situational and contextual environment, involving historical and socio-cultural forces, depending on the progress of the individual experience and the duration of this experience. The second level captures the direct link between the veg*n food choices and identity: salience, centrality, and regard as well as the specific motivations for the practice. Finally, the third level captures the enactment of the veg*n identity through behaviors. Each veg*n builds a unique dietary pattern, which serves to define their own identity as well as the way they present it to others and from which they may take more or less liberty. The second and the third levels affect each other, as internal aspects of the veg*n identity (e.g., motivation) may affect behavioral outcomes and vice versa (Fox and Ward, 2008). Recently, Vestergen and Usyal (2022) define the veg*n identity as a collective social identity characterized by the rejection of animals as products and the embrace of the intersectional justice movement, which opposes animal exploitation and speciesism, as integral components of this identity

*2.3.2. Becoming a veg*n: factors that help in forming veg*n identities*

Veg*n identity has been explored by past research (i.e., Rosenfeld and Burrow, 2017; Kim et al., 2022; Markowski, 2022) but few studies have focused on the process of becoming veg*n (McDonald, 2000; Larsson et al., 2003; Cherry, 2015; Séré de Lanauze and Sirieix, 2021) or the link with veg*n identity construction. To understand the process of adopting a vegan perspective, McDonald (2000) conducted a qualitative study with vegans. However, she did not study the whole veg*n identity construction, but only focused on the process of learning to become vegan. Larsson et al. (2003) studied veganism as a "*status passage*" for adolescents: they identified different processes of becoming vegan, and three types of vegans: "*conformed vegans"*, "*organized vegans*" and "*individualistic vegans*". However, the focus on adolescents who had been vegans for a short period of time (6 months to 3.5 years) did not allow them to examine their identity construction process. Cherry (2015) studied the process of becoming and remaining vegan in relation with the punk subculture. She showed the importance of learning, reflection and identity work in the process of becoming vegan. She also highlighted the difficulties in maintaining this lifestyle, linked to numerous constraints and restrictions: access to products, difficulty in preparation, limited supply, nutritional imbalances and normative barriers in a society that largely consumes meat, poultry and dairy products. These difficulties tend to isolate the veg*ns from the rest of the population and call into question the management of relationships with others (Cherry, 2015; Greenebaum, 2012). Maintaining the behavior then depends on the support of friends and family but also, cultural capital, which provide the necessary skills and motivation (Cherry, 2015). The participation in the punk subculture also emerged as a facilitator for the identity construction process, but respondents did not mention vegan networks. This study thus shed light on the vegan identity journey, but with a specific focus on young vegans in relation with the punk subculture. Other studies place more emphasis on possible hostility veg*ns feel from those around them (Rosenfeld, 2018). The process of adopting the practice and forming an identity is often long and gradual. It involves underlying

environmental and animal concerns, a long-term interest in veganism, a number of preparatory steps, catalytic experiences (McDonald, 2000) but also, a genuine change in behavior that may include test phases, and a consolidation phase. The support or lack of understanding from family and relatives can influence this process, while support from other vegans and vegetarians (Séré de Lanauze and Sirieix, 2021) can facilitate it.

In sum, veg*n identity is influenced by both personal factors, support or lack of support of friends and family and situational factors. This identity is strongly embedded in a web of influences originated in the perceptions of other individuals and groups (Bisogni et al., 2002). It is also ingrained in a situational and contextual environment, involving historical and socio-cultural forces (Rosenfeld and Burrow, 2017) and formed thanks to both personal commitment, as well as positive and negative relations with others (i.e. family, friends, relatives; Greenebaum, 2012; Cherry, 2015; Séré de Lanauze and Sirieix, 2021).

*2.3.3. Veg*n communities and their role in forming veg*n identities*

As mentioned earlier, adopting a veg*n diet could be challenging. It requires adopting new habits and abandoning past ones (Hungara and Nobre, 2022). A veg*n community can be supportive by providing knowledge and skills as well as support and meanings which helps to maintain veg*n practices and to make the identity shift easier (Rosenfeld and Tomiyama, 2019; Lawo et al., 2020; Hungara and Nobre, 2022; Wendler and Halkier, 2023). The role of communities to encourage and support the adoption of a veg*n lifestyle has rarely been studied. Recently, Hungara and Nobre (2022) stress the need for more research related to veg*n communities using the CCT paradigm to understand how vegan community persists over time and boosts the engagement of its members. However, to the best of our knowledge, no study has focused on the potentially important role that different communities can play in the construction of veg*n identity. Yet, from both a theoretical and practical point of view, it is of

paramount importance to understand how veg*n identity is constructed in relation to the in-group since a better understanding of veg*n identity is needed to explain and predict behavior and related outcomes (Rosenfeld and Burrow, 2017). More precisely, Judge et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of studying veganism from a social identity perspective, given its ability to explain not only individuals' adoption of a vegan lifestyle, but also their collective actions such as the promotion of vegan-friendly behaviors. As a specific practice and value-based identity, veg*n identity construction in relation to veg*n communities may be different from other identity projects in relation with communities, such as brand or sport communities presented earlier in this article and examined under the scope of CCT. As an example of a practice often motivated by strong biospheric convictions and awareness for long term and collective consequences of consumption, veg*nism is a good illustration of how links between identity, communities and consumption practices can be entangled. Hence, veg*nism could challenge current knowledge about the role of communities in identity construction and there is still a need to understand the specificities of the construction of veg*n identity, which is based on both practices and convictions. In order to fill this gap, this research aims to investigate the impact of communities (both imagined, such as "the vegetarians", or "people who care about animals" and real, such as "a Vegetarian Facebook group") on the construction of veg*n identities and their links with practices and consumption.

3. Method

3.1. Data collection

In an interpretive (Lincoln and Guba 1985) and comprehensive (Dumez, 2013) approach, this research is based on a qualitative data collection in order to investigate the way individuals' practices, convictions and identity evolve through time. It is based on life story semi-directive interviews, and on follow up interviews. Interviewing is relevant here as individuals themselves are able to describe their feelings, motivations and past experiences (Gubrium et al., 2012). In

addition, longitudinal approaches provide empirical and theoretical knowledge (Sorokin and Merton 1937), especially when studying dynamic phenomena such as identity construction. Moreover, the follow up interviews facilitate the identification of the evolution of practices and the progressiveness of identity construction. The following sub-sections describe the sampling method, and explain the method employed for the life story interviews and the follow up interviews.

3.1.1. Sampling

We constituted a purposive and snowball sampling of 19 veg*ns, either living in France or with a French nationality but living abroad (see Appendix A for a description of the sample and Appendix B for portraits of the respondents). The aim was not to obtain a representative sample but to obtain some variation in terms of different criteria according to the research objectives. The study focuses on the process of identity construction through time, so we sought individuals with various seniority in the practice in order to take into account a greater diversity of progression in both practice and identity construction. Respondents had been veg*n on average for 8.5 years (min = 6 months; max = 30 years). Moreover, we included individuals from different age groups to capture a broader range of life experiences that may influence identity construction. The average age in our sample is 33.2 years (min = 18; max = 55). Lastly, as this practice is carried out both by men and women, we ensured that we included individuals of each sex. The sample is composed of eight men and eleven women. The sample size was determined according to the principle of theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2006).

3.1.2. The life story interviews

The interviews were conducted according to the principles of the life story interview (Atkinson, 2012), also called autobiographical life account method or narratives, a method inherited from sociology, increasingly used in management and marketing (Özçağlar-Toulouse,

2009). This method allows not only to make an inventory of facts, but also to inform the interpretations that actors make of them and the impact of these facts/events on actions, with a comprehensive approach to the experiences of respondents. This is relevant to investigate the identity construction through practice and convictions. The interviews were semi-structured, with the initial instruction "*Tell me about your journey to becoming a vegetarian (or a vegan) and since you have been vegetarian (or a vegan)*". The purpose was to describe and understand consumers' experiences and the path that led them to adopt their current veg*n practices, with a special attention to the communities spontaneously mentioned by the respondents. The interview guide was organized in different sections: food practices before adopting the veg*n diet, the evolving stages in the practices, reactions of their immediate circle, and relationships with non-veg*ns and veg*ns, their evolution of knowledge, and their prospects for the evolving practice of veg*nism. The interviews lasted on average 52 minutes.

3.1.3. Follow up interviews

Follow up interviews were conducted four years later, with 10 respondents who replied positively out of the 19 respondents solicited. This longitudinal approach allowed to update the respondents' practice and identity construction, in order to better capture the ongoing process of the identity construction. We questioned the interviewees on: 1) the evolution of their practices, motivations, convictions, and 2) their relations with the communities identified in the first interviews. By returning to the themes identified in the first interviews, the follow up interviews guarantee the rigor of our research (Lincoln and Guba 1985). The follow up interviews lasted on average 46 minutes.

3.2. Data analysis

The analysis followed the Grounded Theory process (Glaser and Strauss, 2017) involving an iterative process between the results emerging from the collected data and the literature published at the time of analysis. '*Grounded theory methods [. . .] are a logically consistent set*

of data collection and analytic procedures aimed to develop theory' (Charmaz, 1996, p. 27). In our case, this has been applied to theorizing the construction process of veg*n identity. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The fully transcribed interviews have been submitted to independent manual thematic analysis and interpretation (Braun and Clarke 2006) by two of the authors, who conducted open and selective coding (Miles et al. 2014). They selected the central and repetitive ideas within the collected material (Spiggle, 1994; Andreani and Conchon, 2005; Dumez, 2013). The analysis has been twofold and is presented in the following sub-sections.

*3.2.1. Steps towards a veg*n identity*

First, establishing the events leading to a change in convictions and/or practices aimed at answering the analytical question: what are the steps in the process of constructing a veg*n identity through convictions and practices? We objectively reported on the past by making an inventory of specific events that respondents describe as having impacted their veg*n practices and convictions (e.g., moving in with new roommates, meeting an old friend, being called by an activist association, *etc.*). Then we reconstructed the respondents' journeys as an extension of coherent stages whose temporality is traced, and we distinguished in discourse the descriptive and explanatory elements. For this purpose, an understanding and diachronic analysis (i.e., positioning events in relation to each other) was carried out, to understand the sequential causalities, i.e. understand what event caused what action, ("following the X event there was action Y" and "in the purpose of X there was action Y"). Alongside this sequential description, changes were organized into categories and subcategories without a predefined grid.

3.2.2. Role of the communities throughout the identity construction process

Second, we conducted a thematic analysis based on a constant comparative approach (Charmaz 2006) and guided by the following analytical questions: if relevant, do communities

have an effect on the process of identity construction? For this second phase of the analysis, the analysis led to abstract the results through ascendant thematization (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

4. Findings

Findings allow us to understand mechanisms involved in the identity construction process in relation to communities. They are organized as follows: first, the levels and types of communities with which respondents interact, second, the motivations and effects of the use of communities, third, the construction of the identity through both affiliation or distinction and fourth, the specificities of veg*n communities that make the veg*n identity project particular.

4.1. The levels and types of communities with which respondents interact

The respondents mentioned personal and situational factors in their discourse, but two of them (Hortense and Walter) did not mention any community. Their veg*n identity construction was first influenced by catalytic experiences (video for Hortense, book for William). Hortense got support from family and friends while Walter on the contrary suffered from their lack of understanding. Their practice still suffers from social pressure (see details in Appendix B). Since the focus of this study is the influence of communities, this section presents the different communities with which all the other respondents interact: (1) different levels of sub-communities (vegetarians and vegans) within the veg*n community (2) and different types of community: imagined or real (physical or virtual/online).

4.1.1. Different levels of sub-communities: vegetarians and vegans

The respondents differ in terms of practices: twelve respondents see themselves as vegetarians, three as vegan and four as strict vegans[3] (see Appendix B for a portrait of each

[3] As a reminder, vegetarians do not eat meat, vegans (sometimes called "strict vegetarians") do not eat meat, fish, eggs or dairy products and strict vegans refuse to eat or use any animal product or any substance whose production involves animals (including honey and leather).

respondent and a presentation of their journey). We observe that in spite of the multiple variations in practice and motivations to become veg*n, all respondents tend to position themselves in an identified group (either vegetarian or vegan). They generally use either word with specific purpose and with the awareness that the other group belongs to a wider general community. They identify these two different sub-groups in the veg*n community which are sharing major similarities in terms of practices and convictions but also differences that prove to be strong and clearly distinctive. Indeed, practices are not sufficient to cover the complexity of the veg*n identity. Beyond the practices, convictions have an important place in respondents' discourse, and distinctions between the sub-communities are based on both practices and convictions. Respondents distinguish between different levels of commitment, related to a more or less marked strength of conviction. In fact, the difficulty of an increasingly restrictive practice is matched by the need for a strong commitment, which concerns fewer and fewer individuals. As a result, vegans are often positioned at the extreme end of the commitment continuum.

> *"Well, vegans are the most totally committed that one can find, so necessarily these people who can be the most... There may be a little vehemence in what they say, but otherwise, for me, there is no real difference. It's a bit like steps on a ladder, a bit like evolving pokemons" (Alexia).*

Fewer but more committed, they will often serve as a model or target for vegetarians, or at least impose a certain respect. Some - vegetarians or vegans - are however uncomfortable with such a commitment. Thus, the stronger the commitment, the more divisions appear and seemly more entrenched. For some vegetarians or vegans, the archetypal vegan may serve as a role model, but for others, it may be viewed as an unnecessary extreme.

4.1.2. Different types of community: imagined, physical or online

In relation with their practices and convictions, respondents gave information about their connections with different types of communities: imagined or real (physical/online) (Table 1

and Appendix C). A first type of community does not materialize through places of exchange (8 respondents). For example, Christophe associates himself to "*the people who think about the future*". Similar to the term used in the literature (Anderson, 1983; Calhoun, 1991; Muniz and O'guinn, 2001), we refer to these groups as "imagined/abstract communities" which represent a community of ideas, or worldviews, such as "*I am part of the people who have started to think about changing their way of consuming*" (Baptiste). These communities are the people with whom individuals feel connected or in relation to whom they define themselves, by their practices or convictions.

However, most respondents refer to "real communities", either online (8 respondents) or physical (12 respondents). They often mention groups of veg*ns gathering together on specific web sites, online forums or social networks such as Facebook groups or friends, or people followed on Twitter (online communities). Through these online communities, respondents look for practical information about the veg*n diet and they seek to substantiate arguments supporting their choice (*e.g.* environmental impacts of meat consumption). Respondents also mention physical communities. They are either formal groups like associations or political parties, or informal groups defined around a specific context, situation or place (*e.g.* a vegan fast food, Vegetarians from Bogota). These physical communities also provide practical support and a social context where individuals can meet and exchange with people sharing the same values.

Table 1: Different types of communities identified and links with these communities

Type of community	**Imagined community** (8 respondents)	**Physical community** (8 respondents)	**Online community** (12 respondents)

Examples	“People who have started to think about changing the way they consume." (Baptiste) "People who pay attention to what they eat ". (Sylvie) "The community of people who think about the future" (Christophe)	Being a volunteer of the L214[4] association (Aurélie) The vegans of Bogota (Louise) Activist vegans (Christophe)	A Facebook group of vegans with whom she exchanges online. (Aurélie) A Facebook group she follows, to see that "there are people like [her]self" (Margot) Facebook groups and friends who share content promoting the vegetarian diet (Edouard)

4.2. The motivations and effects of the use of communities throughout identity construction

This section analyses when the veg*ns frequent communities, and how adherence to communities and identity construction evolve, at moments of change or regularly throughout the identity project. Results show that communities may (1), be a catalyst for the transition from convictions to practice (2), be used to obtaining and exchanging information about practices (3), help sharing convictions and (4), help reinforcing convictions.

4.2.1. Communities and the transition from convictions to practice

Communities are, for many respondents, a catalyst for the transition from convictions to practice. This is done in a variety of ways, either intentionally or coincidentally. Frequenting the group showed some respondents how to take the plunge. In this case, the individual is almost trained by other veg*ns. Louise explains that thanks to an acquaintance of hers, she joined a community that helped her to get practical information:

> *"I had made a friend, who had printed little Vogota cards - basically Vegan Bogotá- with all the vegetarian or vegan addresses in Bogotá and we became buddies”.*

Alexandre learnt to be a vegetarian with his roommates:

[4] L214 is a French non-profit association for the defense of animals

“One had been a vegetarian for 10 years, and the other had been a vegetarian for at least five years I think. And so it was perfect to start cooking with vegetables, to make balanced meals, without meat”.

4.2.2. Communities are used to obtaining and exchanging information about practices

Communities are frequently used by veg*ns to gather practical information and knowledge related to their diet. For example, Lydie and Aurelie have joined online communities, such as Facebook groups, to access recipes and health advice, including information on vitamin B12. While some may use these resources passively, simply seeking advice to facilitate their own practice, others like Alexia contribute actively to the community by exchanging cooking recipes and other tips.

"It's nice to be able to disseminate everything we've learned in four years of compiling information, because there are plenty of people who are interested in meatless recipes without wanting to call themselves vegetarians." (Alexia)

Through these interactions, individuals not only gain practical knowledge but also reinforce their sense of identity as part of a larger community of like-minded individuals who share their values and beliefs. Using the knowledge gleaned from others, veg*ns can perfect their practice and assert their veg*n identity by endorsing a role of “skilled” veg*n. The acquisition of knowledge also helps veg*ns to better defend their own practice.

4.2.3. Communities help sharing convictions and influencing

How the use of communities helps in sharing convictions and influencing is explained by Edouard, who has developed arguments with the help of information he found through the NGO Greenpeace. This allowed him to request that the canteen at his workplace offer veg*n dishes. It enables individuals to assume more responsibility for their own practice with regard to others and to be able to "*explain [their] approach*" (Elise). In this respect, thanks to the community, individuals are armed with answers to defend themselves from criticisms, as explained by Jonathan who frequents Facebook groups to "*look for arguments*":

"Well, people call me vegetarian, vegan [...] sometimes I answer them, and I defend my case."

Indeed, communities may help to change the consumption practices of their surroundings (mainly friends and family members but also unknown people), allowing the veg*n individual to endorse the role of a precursor. This is notably the case of Aurelie and Lydie who have joined associations to conduct public awareness campaigns. The most convincing example in our results is Edouard, involved in several associations and now elected as the regional representative of the Animalist Political Party[5]. He explains his desire to change the society:

"There are people that you will never be able to convince, so I don't waste my energy with them, but there are people who are curious, who are open-minded, and even if they are not vegetarians they understand, and I tell myself that my role is to water the seed and help it grow. Like me, the seed was already sewn but interacting with this association helped it grow" (Edouard).

The process of asserting oneself in an attempt to convince others appears throughout the identity construction. On the other hand, it seems to take place when the veg*ns are in phase with their own practices, i.e. when the affirmation of identity is already underway.

4.2.4. Communities help reinforcing convictions

Between the first and the follow up interviews, respondents' convictions have not changed or have been reinforced. Thus Elise during the follow up interview spontaneously notes "*My convictions are even stronger*" when asked what has changed in the last 4 years. In this evolution, identifying with a like-minded community helps validate convictions, allows one to "*feel in tune with oneself*" and feel better equipped when confronted with non-veg*ns. Exchanges with other veg*ns reinforce their arguments and hence their convictions are also reinforced. Edouard explains that he progressively followed a community of Facebook friends who were sharing information about reduction of meat consumption:

[5] Motivated by a desire for justice and progress, the Animalist Party promotes a social evolution that takes into account the interests of animals.

> *“Other friends were sharing posts at the time, especially on Facebook. I saw they were sharing stuff about the impact of meat production on the environment, the link between vegetarianism and the environment, that's really what motivated me in the end, to change."*

Recalling his journey to becoming vegetarian (2018) and vegan (2022), Edouard says:

> *"Without real communities, at least virtual ones, it cannot be done [to become vegetarian]. I think you have to be at least in virtual communities to become sufficiently aware of a certain number of things to be able to change and become vegetarian".*

To summarize, veg*ns have relations with different communities and sub-communities that influence the construction of their identity in different ways. More precisely, two processes can be distinguished: affiliation and distinction. They are presented in the following section.

4.3. The relation with communities in the identity construction process: affiliation and distinction

The veg*ns can affirm their convictions and practices in relation with communities, both by (1) affiliation and (2) distinction.

4.3.1. Affiliation

To begin with, respondents describe how they try to get closer to the veg*n communities they wish to be affiliated with. This is the case of Margot, who was reassured not to be too different thanks to the exchanges on social networks, or Alexia who explains:

> *"[the community] it keeps the flame alive in a way. It keeps things interesting, in the sense that there are always new recipes, new opinions, and even when I don't think I particularly need to be encouraged, because it's a decision I made for myself, not for other people, but seeing wood that is constantly added to the fire, it keeps the flame and the desire going, even growing".*

Some veg*ns seek comfort or shared pleasure with other veg*ns along their identity construction journey. This may be similar to a hedonic search for well-being, through eating with people who enjoy the same types of food. In addition, a eudemonic type of well-being appears, when individuals feel in tune with the people they frequent. Louise explains:

“In Colombia, as soon as I met vegans [...] there was always a spark, we would hug each other and say "Yes! So good! We are “alternative” something like that ...”

The fulfillment comes from just being oneself without the fear of being judged, "*we already understand each other*" (Aurélie). This may even respond to a quest for support, in response to the feeling of always having to justify oneself during meals with non-veg*ns. In these cases, the group can be understood as a form of refuge, in order to be (re)assured in one's consumption choices and to share a good time. This motivation comes into play at various points in the construction of identity, depending on each person's experiences, and makes it possible to assert one's identity by reinforcing both convictions and practices. This affiliation mechanism seems to lose importance when practice has taken hold. It would seem, therefore, that affirming one's identity both for oneself and in relation to others is sought rather at the beginning of the process in order to endorse the convictions that have started to take form.

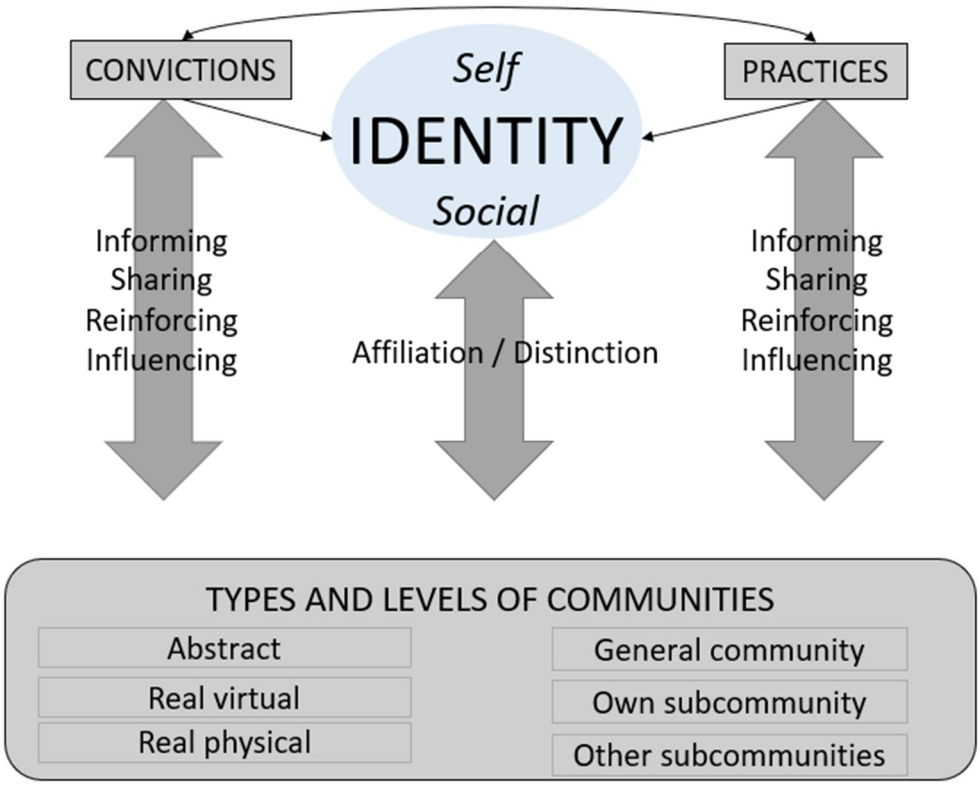
4.3.2. Distinction

Once convictions and practices are more affirmed, several respondents describe how their identity is consolidated by distinguishing themselves from some sub-communities, whether imagined or real. Once a vegetarian, Alexandre broke away from his flat share, as he did not consider himself like them. More broadly, today he is opposed to what he calls "*sectarian vegetarianism*". Indeed, the same community can play different roles in the identity construction, depending on when it intervenes or when the veg*n calls on it. In the same way, Christophe does not identify with militant veg*ns, with whom he does not agree, because he thinks they are too violent. This happened quite late in his vegetarian identity construction, as he became vegetarian before activist movements emerged. Thus, the veg*n’s identity goes beyond the simple values defended (animal cause, environmental protection); all the actions of the community are considered to judge the degree of affiliation to or distinction from this community. In this way Louise, even though she is vegan, does not recognize herself at all, in

what she calls the "*vegan police*". These mechanisms of affirmation through distinction seem to take on importance when practice has taken hold. It consists in affirming one's identity both for oneself and in relation to others, through a more precise affirmation of convictions. The identity is affirmed by putting convictions into practice. During such transformations, a form of internal coherence takes place, the self-affirmation of veg*n identity.

As a synthesis, practices and convictions evolve conjointly, in relation with communities, in a loop where convictions foster practices and practices justify convictions, with a succession of reinforcements. The veg*n's identity evolves under the influence of the relationships with different types and levels of communities or sub-communities, with either an affiliation or distinction process, as presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Synthesis of the effects of communities along the identity construction



*4.4. The specificities of veg*n communities and distinctiveness of the veg*n identity project*

Finally, our results underline the specificities of veg*n communities, which are seen by respondents as very different from leisure communities (*e.g*. sports mentioned by Edouard in the follow up interview) or professional communities (*e.g*. doctors mentioned by Alexia in the follow up interview) because they are value-based communities.

> *"Being a vegetarian is based on values, it's not just a preference. It's different from other communities because the vegetarian community is underpinned by values. Everyone eats, but we have values behind it...*" (Kevin, follow up interview)

For some respondents, this specificity could be generalized to other value-based communities: "*Because it's kind of like I belong to a Buddhist sangha*" (Sylvie, follow up interview). For others, veg*n communities are unique because the practice is not only a value-based, but also a daily and visible to all practice, as opposed to buying ethical products for example for Kevin (follow up interview):

> *What's also special about being vegetarian is how it structures your life. I think that even if we have the same values, for example if we buy responsibly produced, ethical clothes, it's not the same thing, because you don't buy clothes every day, eating is all the time; buying clothes is not like imagining every meal differently, every time you go to a restaurant too... it conditions the way of life.*

Besides, veg*n communities are also specific because of the exemplary nature, conscious or not, of the veg*n practice, as Alexia (follow up interview) notes:

> "*Well the vegetarian sends you back to your own faults, because you eat meat, because you're not helping the environment, all that. Whereas LGBT people are like "I can do what I want, if I want to wear sequins once a year and parade in the street, we let it happen and we are tolerant". In fact here it is, the difference I would say is the LGBT community, to be a good person you just have to let them do it, whereas the vegetarian community, to be a good person you have to do what vegetarians do.*"

As a synthesis, vegetarian communities have the particularity of federating around common values, of involving visible practices and of sometimes taking the form of advocacy.

5. Discussion

This section discusses the main results regarding the progressivity of identity construction and the roles of different types of communities in this process. Table 2 proposes a comprehension of how communities are used along the levels involved in the consolidation of a veg*n identity: identity grounding, identity endorsement, and identity affirmation.

Table 2: The role of community types in identity construction

Identity construction… and main elements involved in identity construction / ***Types of communities***	***Identity grounding*** • *Concerns* • *Individual history* • *Relationships to food* • *Social environment*	***Identity endorsement*** • *Practice knowledge* • *Awareness of consequence and induced convictions* • *Feasibility*	***Identity affirmation*** • *Social positioning* *- Affiliation* *- Distinction*
Imagined/abstract community ***Set of people usually unidentified but seen as sharing the same characteristics allowing them to be named and grouped together***	Importance/use: + At this stage awareness and role of the imagined community is usually low or irrelevant. Awareness of some shared concerns may however develop.	Importance/use: ++ Awareness of a veg*n community is growing. Can be comforting but the effect on practice is low. Can also have negative effects in case of rejection.	Importance/use: +++ As self-identity is maturing as veg*n identity, awareness of veg*ns as an identity group with shared characteristics is strong. Often used as a referential anchoring
Physical community ***Group of individuals physically sharing contacts, information, opinions and practices***	Importance/use: ++/- Contacts with veg*ns (individuals or groups) can be at the origin of a triggering event or initiate a persuasion process towards diet decision. But starting the practice can also be solitary.	Importance/use: +++ Most veg*ns tend to develop relations with other veg*ns for information, advice and sharing. The role is mostly perceived positively in terms of practice and conviction	Importance/use: ++ Can be strong for people in veg*n groups (including family) (+++) Can be strong also for activists and proselytes. (+++) Can also be limited for veg*ns in omnivorous contexts (-/+)
Online community ***Blogs, forums and social networks gathering Internet users around a common interest and discussions***	Importance/use: +++ Most veg*ns starting getting information online. Often first contact with veg*n issues, persuasive discourses and triggering emotional images.	Importance/use: +/- Decreasing focus on practice (limited to information gathering such as recipes or addresses). Growing focus on convictions (opinion sharing, identity-based socialization)	Importance/use: +++/- Mainly centered on convictions and consequences. Used as a support for identity defense. Strongly used for activism and pedagogy. Can be very limited (technophobics)

NB: in each cell, we symbolically summarize the importance of the use of the type of community at each level (+ = weak to +++ = strong) and mention it with a "/" when the use can strongly vary from one profile to another

The main research gap that we aimed to fill concerns the impact of communities (both imagined and real) on the construction of veg*n identities. Vegan identity construction usually implies three levels: (1) a favorable grounding in which both the practice and the convictions are rooted, (2) a progressive endorsement based on strengthening practice and beliefs, and (3) a social affirmation, involving positioning in relation to different groups. First, following the framework for identity proposed by Sedikides and colleagues, which includes the *individual self, the relational self,* and the *collective self* (Sedikides and Brewer 2001; Sedikides et al., 2011; Sedikides et al., 2013), we observe that veg*nism often supposes a preliminary grounding for the *individual self*. This grounding phase is mainly based on motivational concerns, but also on the specific individual history, especially in terms of relation to food and animals, and their social environment (Table 2, column 1). At this stage, the online communities provide both informative and emotional images that make the idea of veg*nism relevant and tangible. Physical communities often happen to trigger and facilitate considering the practice, confirming the results obtained regarding meat-reduction by flexitarians by Halkier and Lund (2023). Based on the design of their specific diet practice and the relation to the practice, individuals progressively develop a veg*n identity, as we observe that beyond the new diet, they more easily define themselves as veg*ns (Table 2, column 2). The construction of *social veg*n identity* is related to growing awareness of an imagined community, to relationships with physical communities for information but also sharing and well-being, and to relationships with online communities regarding both practice (information sharing) and convictions. Several studies had considered partial elements of this construction. Halkier and Lund (2023) have highlighted how social relations support individuals' progress towards reduced meat consumption, but with a focus on practices and without considering convictions (Laakso et al., 2022). The present study highlights the complementary roles of different types of communities

in the identity grounding and endorsement. Even if each case is particular, veg*ns often start relying on online communities for initial information and then to physical communities for more practical experiencing and sharing. The process is also linked to social embedment, as online communities are often the main source of information for isolated people who then can get help from physical communities to familiarize with and assume their new practice. In parallel, the construction of the *relational self* and social veg*n identity (*collective self*) depends on the contact with other veg*ns or communities and the relationships established with or in opposition to them (Table 2, column 3). The veg*n must not only accept their evolving identity but also defend it within their social and societal environment. External regard is an important matter to be dealt with. This result confirms the stigmatization that some vegans report experiencing in different studies (MacInnis and Hodson, 2017; Judge et al., 2022). They must arbitrate between the generally practice-based stereotypes in society and their own more complex motivations grounding their practice. Here, the imagined community, and to a lesser extent the online communities, play an important role as an anchor and as a support for identity defense. The relationships with physical communities vary a great deal: weak for those with defensive posture, and strong for those whose trajectory is more about reinforcing one's posture.

By showing these differences between veg*ns, our study extends prior studies that rather considered what brings veg*ns together (McDonald, 2000; Cherry, 2015; Judge et al. 2022). We confirm the existence of potential tensions between vegetarians and vegans already uncovered by MacInnis and Hodson (2021), and the hypothesis by De Groeve and Rosenfeld (2022) that vegetarians might view veganism as an over-commitment. Moreover, the gradual process through which identity is constructed can go through phases of affiliation to a community as well as phases of distinction. Whereas Larsson et al. (2003) show in the case of veg*n adolescents that individuals can "conform to" or be "individualistic towards" a model,

the present study shows that this affiliation-distinction process is not necessarily stable over time, and that the same community can be a source of identification (resp. distinction) and then of distinction (resp. identification) for the same individual. In this respect, through a "trajectory" approach with adult veg*ns - and therefore with more hindsight - the present study goes beyond the categorization proposed by Larsson and colleagues (2003), who did not take into account the dynamic character of identity construction *via* communities. Cherry (2015) had taken into account the role of community in identity construction, but her approach suggests that joining a community can somehow resume one's identity. Instead, the present study provides insight into how communities are a source of practical knowledge, values, symbols, inspiration from which individuals will blossom but not fully identify. Last, our research also considers different sub-communities, which are not simply vegetarians versus vegans. Tensions between vegetarians and vegans have already been uncovered by MacInnis and Hodson (2021). Our study extends these results by adding that other sub-communities can be considered: for example, the "extreme vegans" from which vegans who feel more tolerant want to distinguish themselves. Finally, this study also extends prior research focusing only on one type of community (Laakso et al., 2022) and shows that several types of communities can be involved in veg*n identity construction.

6. Implications

6.1. Theoretical Contributions and Implications

Two major theoretical contributions emerge: (1) a better understanding of the identity construction in relation to different communities and (2) the veg*n trajectory as an archetype of value-based, visible and vindictive identity projects.

Regarding identity construction, this study highlights a conjoint evolution of practices and convictions, the complementary reasons for recourse and influences of different types of

communities, and the dynamic nature of the affiliation-distinction process. Past literature has highlighted the demand to better understand the social processes that contribute to the veg*n identity (Rosenfeld and Burrow, 2017; Rosenfeld, 2018). More recently, several studies highlighted how difficult such a transition as becoming veg*n is, in a meat-centered society (Fuentes and Fuentes, 2022; Wendler and Halkier, 2023; Wendler, 2023), but with a focus on practices. The first contribution of this study lies in the highlighting of a conjoint evolution of practices and convictions, in relation with communities, in a loop where convictions foster practices and practices justify convictions, with a succession of reinforcements. This echoes the work of Randers and Thørgersen (2023), who show that identity-consistent behavior increases the strength and positive valence of the attitude towards the behavior. It also allows to complete the UMVI model proposed by Rosenfeld and Burrow (2017). This model includes the motivations for becoming veg*n and behaviors and the in-group, but only by means of the in-group regard. In this study we add the importance of convictions and show the influence of in-group on both practices and convictions. Moreover, we analyze the complementary reasons for recourse and influences of different types of communities (imagined, physical, online) on the veg*n identity construction, whereas previous studies focused on specific communities. The last contribution regards the affiliation-distinction process which is not necessarily stable over time, but evolves in parallel with the identity project.

In a wider sense, the veg*n trajectory can be viewed as a typical example of identity endeavors that are rooted in personal values, easily recognizable, and may involve a desire for action, following Fernandes and Saraiva (2022) who see organic products as "an enabler of a mindful mindset towards sustainability" or Thomas et al. (2019) who show that veg*n activism is related to other forms of activism. Besides, showing that recourse to communities is not stable over time invites thinking about their role in a more global trajectory, that of the affirmation of convictions through one or several practices. Indeed, veg*nism is a practice that translates

ethical values, environmental commitments, etc. Other practices are linked to such convictions (e.g., the use of the bicycle as a means of transport with regard to environmental convictions, or the fight against various forms of oppression with regard to ethical convictions). Considering all the practices linked to a given conviction thus makes it possible to de-compartmentalize the communities to which individuals have recourse to develop their practices. For example, a vegan anti-specist community and an (eco-)feminist community will respond to the same ethical concerns against domination. In order to better understand the dynamic character of the recourse to communities, a transversal vision via the prism of convictions allows to account for the coherence of these different recourses. In this respect and as conceptualized by O'Neill et al. (2019) regarding sustainable food, veg*nism can be seen as a "proto-practice or innovation-in-waiting" and veg*ns as agents of change, important for sowing the seeds of change in society.

6.2. Practical Implications for Marketers and Public Policy Makers

This research leads to several practical propositions for either product suppliers or other actors in the veg*n sector or public policy makers.

6.2.1. Enhancing awareness of an imagined community

In terms of promotion, the study of the various links between individuals and communities may help actors to better define tactical options to reach specific targets. Many suppliers have developed dedicated information websites and fostered exchanges between customers to inform and support practitioners; those websites can support the emergence of an imagined community, catching the attention of beginners and providing substantiating knowledge. Such information is key in the initial steps to trigger first trial and adoption and reduce barriers. Messages here are usually informative and practical, but it can be useful to associate conviction-related arguments in the messages in order to strengthen convictions and increase appeal. For example, in 2023, the association L214 and the English NGO Veganuary

have brought the Veganuary challenge to France. In association with several brands such as *Happyvore*, *La Vie* or *The Naked Burger* chain, they encourage vegetarian eating throughout the month of January, with a practical concept for those who are trying to do without meat: by registering for free on the veganuary.com/L214 website, volunteers receive daily vegan recipes and nutritional advice for the whole month. These informal and non-intrusive imagined communities may be a good start to develop awareness and a sense of closeness.

6.2.2. Managing consumer affiliation/distinction process to communities

From the supplier's or retailer's point of view, keeping the link between products, practices and convictions in the information given is key, as veg*ns and soon-to-become veg*ns demand comprehensive information to make their choices and reinforce their identity. Yet, those identity-building processes may be complex, and, beyond the composition of the product, they largely include concerns about the nutritious aspect of protein intake, the sustainability of the packaging, or the environmental consequences of the product production and supply chain, that can be sensitive to the community, as suggested by Martinelli and De Canio (2021). Rather than listing their products in a traditional factual and product-centered way, veg*n brand websites and retailers should position their ranges and products in a more contextualized presentation, referring to more long-term benefits as these are driving consumer convictions and their link to the communities. Advertisers should register this, as it will be difficult for them to communicate to a single given target. When addressing veg*ns, they should be cautious. First because self-identification to the veg*n character can be either strong or weak. Second, because veg*nism encompasses a variety of different and sometimes conflicting expressions, all of them having their own leading communities and stereotypes. To illustrate this, there is currently a debate about the use of meat related vocabulary to sell vegan products (vegan kebabs, plant-

based ham, *etc.*). More and more veg*ns reject the concept of meat ersatz considering that it is detrimental to the veg*n philosophy outreach[6].

6.2.3. Relying on communities for social marketing outcomes

From the specific point of view of associations or public policy makers trying to encourage the reduction of meat consumption (e.g., Greenpeace[7]), the use of real communities (physical and online) is a relevant asset. It may develop and strengthen positive veg*n identities in society and reduce the barriers and/or criticisms that most non-veg*ns experience when they stop eating meat. Relying on strong communities and the many forms they can take is helpful not only to sell a given vegan product (e.g. labelled products, (Martinelli and De Canio, 2021)), but also to disseminate the reasons and expectations attached to the process. Our results show that community advice and discussions result in a better understanding of the moral and political groundings of veg*nism. In this regard, the variety of communities itself is interesting. Real communities are efficient intermediaries in providing information and advice. Physical communities additionally provide practical support, hedonic benefits, and social backing; they can foster adoption through affiliation and mentoring. Online communities represent more abstract but also wider audiences; they are a web of information and a tool for ideas and dissemination of advice. They also open a window in society where even isolated individuals may join a group, share, and find support. Contrary to physical communities, they are more accessible to promoters of ideas and products. The latter can find ways, through ad space, forum and blog influence, to socially disseminate or advertise their arguments. Interestingly, imagined communities also disseminate ideas and practices. The imagined veg*n community, which requires a shared vision (Wong, 2023), is a powerful tool for installing the veg*n identity in

[6] https://vegeweb.org/sujet/vegeta-isme-et-simili-carne.7539/

[7] https://www.greenpeace.org/international/publication/15093/less-is-more/

society. The more people feel like veg*ns and can belong to such imagined communities, the more awareness of this identity-based community will spread among non-veg*n society and hence acceptability and normalization of the practice will grow.

7. Conclusion, Limitations and Further Research

Past research on veg*nism has mostly focused on individuals who become veg*ns or on specific veg*n communities such as vegan community linked to punk sub-culture (Cherry, 2015) or the "vegan challenge" (Laakso et al., 2022). Hence, there was still a need to examine the potential influence of different communities on the veg*n identity construction. From both a theoretical and practical point of view, it is important to understand this process in order to explain and predict veg*n behavior and related outcomes regarding veg*ns but also the society (Judge et al., 2022). Besides, another gap in past research regarding veg*nism was the lack of longitudinal perspective (D'Souza et al., 2022). Drawing on consumer research literature about identity construction and communities, this study contributes to fill these gaps by exploring how veg*ns construct their identity through interactions with different types of communities. This study, conducted with 19 respondents (supplemented by follow up interviews with 10 respondents from the initial group), highlights the types of communities with which respondents interact, the motivations and effects of the use of communities, and contributes to understand the construction of the veg*n identity through both affiliation and distinction. In addition, this study draws attention to the unique characteristics of veg*n communities, which turns the veg*n identity project into a prime example of an identity project based on values, visibility, and advocacy.

The limitations of this study should be addressed by future research. The size of the sample is acceptable for a qualitative research (n = 19 and follow-up n = 10), in line with sample size used in published qualitative research on meat-reducing practices (Fuentes and Fuentes,

2022; Wendler and Halkier, 2023) or veg*ns (Greenebaum, 2012; Larsson et al., 2003), and reaches analytical saturation. However, additional elements are needed to reinforce external validity. More specifically, it would be interesting to conduct analyses based on a more heterogeneous sample especially on age and length of the practice but also on veg*ns from other countries/cultures. Besides, we encourage future research, especially quantitative research, to further investigate the role played by communities in the construction of veg*n identity by combining observations and a longitudinal perspective. This would provide insight into how strong the communities are in the veg*n identity construction process, the dynamics of identity construction and may help foster a deeper understanding of the process. In addition, and following Kozinets' methodological procedures to conduct netnography (2019), studying an online veg*n community would help to develop our knowledge on the nature of the participation and the exchanges between members and how these interactions with other members contribute to the construction of the veg*n identity. Moreover, as other studies (i.e. Rothgerber, 2015; Rosenfeld, 2018; Thomas et al., 2019), this study (i.e. using the term "veg*n") does not specifically distinguish the specificities of the vegans versus the vegetarians. However, it can be assumed that these practices imply a different identity construction process, notably because the practice of veganism is more demanding. Even if some results regarding the differences and relations between sub-communities emerge in this study, future research should clarify these specificities to bring some additional insight for consumer researchers.

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Appendix A. Characteristics of the sample

Respondents (names have been changed)	Gender	Interview		Follow-up	
		Age at date of interview	Diet *	Age at date of interview	Diet
Baptiste	Man	25	Vegetarian	29	Vegetarian
Jonathan	Man	18	Vegetarian	22	Vegetarian
Alexia	Woman	21	Vegetarian	25	Vegetarian
Sylvie	Woman	44	Vegetarian	48	Vegetarian
Christophe	Man	42	Vegetarian	46	Vegetarian
Hortense	Woman	23	Strict vegan	26	Vegetarian
Elise	Woman	49	Vegetarian	52	Vegetarian
Lydie	Woman	30	Strict vegan	34	Vegetarian
Walter	Man	50	Vegetarian	53	Vegetarian
Edouard	Man	30	Vegan	33	Strict vegan
Aurélie	Woman	36	Vegan		
Margot	Woman	38	Vegetarian		
Alexandre	Man	28	Vegetarian		
Louise	Woman	25	Strict vegan		
Charles	Man	35	Vegetarian		
Emilie	Woman	34	Strict vegan		
Kevin	Man	24	Vegan		
Louna	Woman	25	Vegetarian		
Martine	Woman	55	Vegetarian		

* Vegetarians do not eat meat; Vegans (sometimes called strict vegetarians) do not eat meat, fish, eggs or dairy products; Strict vegans refuse to eat or use any animal product or any substance whose production involves animals (including honey and leather)

Appendix B: Portraits of the respondents

Baptiste: At the age of 20, Baptiste began to wonder about the highly meat-based diet that the people around him had, except for some vegetarian friends whose diet intrigued him. After doing a little research, he came across a video that shocked him, and he decided to stop eating meat. He started with red meat and then gradually the other meats and fish. To consolidate his diet, he learned about nutritional and culinary aspects to balance his diet. His family initially poorly accepted his diet, but they, too, have gradually taken to it. In the future, Baptiste would like to get involved in the cause and be an activist, but he wants to refrain from acting aggressively, as he accuses some groups of doing so. Now, Baptiste is still vegetarian but is not involved in activism. He feels that he is really convinced about his vegetarianism. He is less extreme in decisions that may be in opposition with his convictions, and can eat meat on some occasions.

Jonathan: Jonathan used to eat meat until, as a teenager, he came across videos on the internet about animal suffering. He then started to progressively stop eating meat, red meat at first, then all types, then all meat products. After having informed himself about the health risks, the recipes, and in an understanding, although not vegetarian, family environment, Jonathan quickly assumed, with tranquility and pride, to be what he is, without regret or search for conflict. He does not mind sharing his practices, and even less defending his convictions, close to anti-speciesism. Four years later, Jonathan left the parental home to study in another city. His practice is now established, Jonathan has since stopped eating fish and reduced dairy products and eggs of poor quality. He feels closer to others when they are vegetarian. He is also happy to have been able to awaken and lead some people towards vegetarianism, through discussion. Jonathan clearly defines himself as a vegetarian and an anti-specist.

Alexia: Alexia grew up in a family of meat eaters but she has always preferred white meat and rejected meat that was too red. Since she was very young, she told herself that she would stop eating meat one day, for ecological reasons above all. It was when she left home for school and started living on her own that she stopped eating meat and became a vegetarian. Only then, she did start meeting other vegetarians and learning about different communities. She found it useful and pleasant to meet these different groups and share with them, while her close circle of relatives (mother, grandmother) was very worried about her health. She quickly noticed that this practice was developing in society and was becoming easier to follow on a daily basis. Four years later, Alexia found herself in a medical internship and had to share her accommodation with non-vegetarians. The conditions are less favorable to maintain her practice, but she has learned to manage and continues in her practice. On the other hand, it is not the right time for her to go further. Moreover, having come out since then, she has an interesting comparative view on the vegetarian and LGBT+ communities.

Sylvie: When she was 20, Sylvie started to reduce her meat consumption due to financial constraints while she was studying in England. It was extremely easy for her to eschew meat from her diet because she explained that at this time, in England, a lot of information and alternatives to meat consumption were available in the marketplace. Gathering information on the vegetarian diet changed her motivations to avoid meat from financial to ethical ones. Sylvie has never been in trouble with her English relatives because of her diet. However, when she traveled to France, it was not obvious to her circle of family and friends that she was a vegetarian and some of them did prepare some meat or fish that she ate to avoid discussion and conflict. Sylvie has reinforced her vegetarian diet several years later once permanently back in France at 35, even though her diet is still not fully accepted by her family. The taste of meat is “disgusting” for her and she feels that her body does not want meat related products. Four years after the initial interview, Sylvie, 47 years-old, has reduced her consumption of dairy products and has a lot of veg*n friends in her network (due to her dancing practice, according to Sylvie, dancers need to take care of their body and thus avoid animal related products). Sylvie reported that she has no problem with people that eat animals.

Christophe: When he was a child, Christophe already did not enjoy the taste of meat but he was forced to eat at least some meat because it was a social norm. Christophe grew up with his grandparents that were farmers and so, surrounded by animals. At 10, he decided to eschew meat due to his proximity and

affective bond with animals but did consume fish. Indeed, Christophe felt that some animals were more evolved than others and categorized animals under two blocks: those he could (fish) and could not eat (beef, chicken, horses). Being a young vegetarian boy in a farmer's family was complicated and on top of that, it was also a diet questioned by his friends at college and high school. At the time of the first interview, Christophe, 41, had not changed his diet: he excluded meat but consumed fish and dairy products. He expresses his willingness to be "anti-specist" but has not succeeded yet. To him, some animals can be eaten. He also believes that meat consumption has a big impact on climate/ecology but does not subscribe to "extreme" ideas or movements associated with veg*nism. The situation can change but slowly, he is rejecting all forms of extremism. Four years after the initial interview, Christophe, 45, has also reduced his dairy product consumption. To him, things are moving forward slowly but surely.

Hortense: When she was 18, Hortense saw a video about a slaughterhouse on Facebook that changed her diet practice related to meat consumption. She found more and more information related to conditions of animal husbandry and decided to exclude meat and eggs from her diet. Later, she also decided to exclude fish and dairy products but it was not complicated for her to avoid dairy products because she has never really liked milk. Her family and friends were supportive in this decision. Hortense, is doing sports such as fitness and cross-fit and she regularly does blood analyses to check that she is doing well. To this end, she has documented her progress and learnt how to cook with meat and dairy substitutes. Four years after the first interview, Hortense has reintroduced fish and eggs in her diet because she thinks it is too complicated to have a strict vegetarian diet (due to social pressure). She also mentions that it was a cognitive load she needed to alleviate. Now, she lives with her partner and one weekend out of two, with his daughter. They both consume dairy and meat and it's not a problem for her to cook meat even though she does not consume it herself.

Elise: Elise is 53 years old and lives with her partner and their 16-year-old son. As a child, when she went to visit her grandparents on their farm, she saw them killing rabbits to eat them and it shocked her. Gradually she ate less meat and then no meat at all, but she can't remember a specific trigger. In 2018, she was a vegetarian. Since then, she has reduced her dairy intake further but still can't be vegan. Her convictions have strengthened. Her son has become a vegetarian which she is proud of. She has never had much connection with the vegetarian community, but she keeps herself informed, donates money to animal rights groups and tries to show people the benefits of vegetarianism

Lydie: Lydie is 35 years old and vegan. She has always been concerned about the environment but didn't think about food until she went woofing in Australia in 2015 and stayed with vegetarian families. She got a job in a vegetarian fast food restaurant and became a vegetarian and then gradually vegan, using online vegetarian communities for advice and comfort. She had her vegan wedding which allowed her to see that those around her were accepting her choices in different ways. Then she had a baby and she is breastfeeding. She has to make exceptions to her diet (she sometimes eats eggs and milk) but her beliefs are reinforced. She is always in touch with online vegetarian communities to connect and sometimes relieve the pressure.

Walter: When he was 15, he read a book that drastically changed his vision of food, and that made him strongly aware of animal suffering. So he switched to a vegetarian diet. His parents, worried, did not understand his choice. At the age of 17, because of going out with his friends in the city, the temptations to eat meat came back, making him start eating meat again at 20, putting aside his sensitivity to animal suffering. The arrival of his daughter, and the return to the media scene of information reporting animal suffering, gradually reminded him of his concerns. At the age of 33, he took the decision to be vegetarian, but he did not dare refuse the dishes prepared by others, especially in the family. When the aversion became too strong, and after having gained confidence, he stopped eating meat products, even outside his home. He sometimes cooks meat for others, but he no longer eats it. He is not vegan but relies on labels to ensure the good production of the eggs or cheese he consumes. Four years after the first interview, he continues to seek information to maintain his motivation, but his practices no longer change much. He describes being somewhat lazy about going vegan because it would mean changing the balance he thinks he has found, both in his practices and in his social relationships.

Edouard: From the age of 10, Edouard had a particular sensitivity towards animals, and he was disgusted by meat. When he was 20, he was approached in the street by an activist association, and he admired this commitment. When he was 24, he went to India, where he adopted a vegetarian diet, although it did not seem feasible in France. When he returned to France, he went to see a doctor to make sure that a vegetarian diet would not be harmful to his health. After learning enough about how to balance his diet, he became a vegetarian at age 24. It was difficult to get his family to accept it, and he would often slip up and eat meat outside the home. Gradually, and especially by being around more vegetarians, he strengthened his will and made fewer and fewer deviations from his vegetarian diet, until he was 100% vegetarian at 25. Gradually, he got closer to activist groups and took action, and is very actively involved in trying to raise awareness, to the point of politicizing his commitment. As he continued to educate himself, he became vegan at the age of 26, with a few exceptions, during convivial occasions when he sometimes ate eggs, butter, etc. Four years after the first interview, his convictions have been reinforced, and he now refuses any deviation from his diet; he has freed his entire consumption of all animal products. He has joined new activist organizations.

Aurélie: From the age of 12, Aurélie had an aversion to meat, and she remembers being forced to eat it. Later, when she was 25, her immediate circle (notably her sister) made her aware of the animal cause, so that she gradually began to reduce her meat consumption. This change was opposed by her partner and her family, who did not understand her choice. It was not until she was 30 years old that she stopped eating meat completely and tried to reduce her consumption of fish. She gradually learned to cook vegetarian food. Around the age of 35, she started to take part in militant action, and she switched to a vegan diet following the "veggie challenge". She continues to try to make her choices accepted by those around her, and is thinking about becoming vegan.

Margot: From the age of 12, Margot had an aversion to meat and was sensitive to animal welfare. At that age and after watching a documentary on slaughterhouses, she stopped eating meat. Her parents accepted her choice quite easily. Outside of her home and until she was 20 years old, she did not dare to say that she did not eat meat. When she left her parents' home at 20, she was able to assume her diet and become a vegan, but she started eating fish again for fear of deficiencies during her pregnancy. Today, at 38 years old, she no longer eats meat or fish at home, and she only eats eggs when she is sure that the production conditions respect animal welfare. Despite this, she is still concerned about not disturbing and not being marginalized, so she eats fish when her friends prepare it for her. As she gets closer to vegetarian people she does not feel marginalized.

Alexandre: When he was 20 years old, Alexandre started to question the diet he had inherited from his parents, notably because of his training in agronomy and the exchanges he had with his immediate circle. Little by little, he rubbed shoulders with more and more vegetarians, thus accumulating both nutritional and culinary knowledge about this diet. It was when he temporarily moved into a flat-share where most of the people were vegetarians that he took the plunge himself. When he returned to his former life, he was confronted with reproaches, questions and worries from his immediate circle, especially his parents. This even led him to distance himself from non-vegetarians and to get closer to vegetarians. His diet evolved, and he sometimes consumed meat again when it was prepared for him. Now, he continues to educate himself. He is also starting to eat meat again when it is a product that he knows has been "well produced". Little by little, he is trying to convince the people around him to do the same, to eat less meat, but better meat that respects the environment and the animals.

Louise: Until she was 21, Louise ate everything without question. When she was 21, she became aware of the environmental impact of meat consumption and the issue of animal welfare and became a vegetarian. During a trip to Colombia where she met a vegan boy, she became vegan at 22. When she returned to France, her immediate circle had difficulty accepting her choice. She forced herself to consume animal products, but it made her sick so she decided not to compromise and not to consume animals anymore. Her family and friends, who were reluctant at first, gradually understood her position and her mother became a vegetarian. Today, at 25, she defines herself as a vegan, but she makes exceptions. She says she is tolerant of those who still eat meat, but feels attracted to people who eat like her. She still feels quite excluded from society in general, and finds that it is not always easy to be vegan.

Nevertheless, she wants to distinguish herself from some vegans whom she finds aggressive. She continues to learn more, especially about health issues, and imagines herself having vegan children in the future. However, she does not wish to be an activist.

Charles: When he was 26 and living with his wife in Cambodia, she became a vegetarian. This meant that he himself had to reduce his meat consumption, meaning that he only ate meat outside his home. At the same time, he started to receive more and more information denouncing the impact of meat consumption on the environment, so he decided to stop eating red meat at 28 and white meat at 29, to reduce his environmental impact. Together with his wife, he also varied his diet by learning new recipes. At the age of 30, because of his better mastery of the vegetarian diet and in view of the growing environmental problems, he stopped eating meat altogether, but still consumed fish. He gradually started to campaign for environmental action. Around the age of 35, he stopped eating fish, milk, cream and butter, but he did not claim to become a vegan because he liked cheese too much. At the time of the interview, Charles described that reports of animal abuse only confirmed his choice to remain vegetarian.

Emilie: When she was 30, Emilie moved for her work to the USA. After several weeks in New York, she had a skin reaction and consulted a doctor who told her to adopt a vegetarian diet for 2 weeks. She was extremely surprised by the benefits of such a diet on her body, skin and more generally on her wellbeing that she decided to continue. At the same time, her husband launched a Youtube channel that investigates the meat, dairy and clothes industry, which strengthened her growing convictions. Emilie mentioned that even though she was not vegetarian before this event, she had not really liked the taste of meat. In 2019 when she became single, she met Marie, her room-mate and now best friend who was vegan and a trader in New York. Emilie mentioned that knowing Marie enabled her to understand that vegan people were not like her imagined stereotypes (punks with dogs) and this made her realize that it is possible in today's world to be a "normal" person (i.e. to work in finance in New York city) and be vegan. So Emilie decided quickly to go further and adopted a strict vegan lifestyle. She has also decided to be involved in organized activism in New York (i.e. Peta actions, Anonymous for the voiceless, …) and extended her convictions into other practices than just her diet. Emilie has also invested a lot of time in biking and has traveled along the USA with her bike and promoted her biking and vegan lifestyle on her Instagram profile.

Kevin: Kevin grew up with parents who ate meat for lunch and dinner, and he really liked it. Then his aunt became a vegetarian, and he met his girlfriend who was also a vegetarian. So when he was 19, for 6 months he tried to eat meat only once a week. To his great surprise, he did not miss meat at all. Hence he decided to stop completely. His parents and relatives easily accepted his decision. At first he got information from social networks and now continues to get information there, but above all to reinforce his convictions. He is now 24, his convictions are really strong; he would like to see society move towards the vegetarian model and personally he wants to become vegan.

Louna: Louna has always been concerned about animal welfare. This concern led her create a shelter for animals before becoming vegetarian. At the age of 16, she became a vegetarian, thanks to her sister. Her sister showed her videos about how animals were mistreated and slaughtered, strengthening Louna's concerns about animals. Besides, she gave her practical information about eating vegetarian food. Louna comes from a cultural context where meat must be eaten at every meal, so her parents and friends initially did not like her decision but slowly, her parents accepted their daughters' decision. At 23, Louna moved to France, where she found a better environment for vegetarians. Some vegetarian Friends gave her information about where to buy and eat vegetarian food. At 24, she moved in with a non-veg*n. Her boyfriend eats and prepares vegetarian food at home, but eats meat when going out. This concession permits them to have a good relationship.

Martine: Martine is 55 years old and a pediatrician with three adult children, one of whom is disabled. Since childhood she has never been able to tolerate animal suffering, which caused her big problems during her medical studies. Always an anti-specist, she became a vegetarian only later, after reading a book, and when at the same time she converted to Buddhism. For her, vegetarianism is only a means

that cannot be dissociated from her other philosophical concerns. Food is not in itself at the heart of her identity and she is ready to accept deviations from her diet, but on the condition that a certain respect for the animal she consumes is preserved. Her relationships with communities follow the same logic and she is more connected to Buddhist or philosophical communities and think tanks than to groups based on the sole practice of vegetarianism.

*Appendix C: Inventory of the types of communities for each respondent **

Respondent	Imagined	Physical	Virtual
Baptiste	"I am part of the people who have started to think about changing the way they consume".		
Aurélie		She is volunteer for L214 (activist association for animal welfare)	Follows a Facebook group for vegans
Jonathan			Follows Facebook groups for vegans
Alexia			Follows Facebook groups for vegans
Margot	"I feel like I belong to a certain type of people without actually joining an association ".		Follows Facebook groups for vegans
Sylvie	"I'm one of those people who pay attention to what they eat in a healthy way".		
Christophe	"I belong to the community of people who think about the future".	Belongs to vegan activists groups	Follows vegan activists on Tweeter
Alexandre	"I don't feel like those who are there to seek confrontation and to be moralistic about those who eat meat without asking questions". "I am not like the real vegetarians"		
Elise	"I feel like I belong to a community of people who have decided to eat differently".		Follows an activist association for animal welfare
Louise		Vegans from Bogota	Follows Facebook groups for vegans
Lydie		Employees of a vegan fast food restaurant. She is volunteer for L214 (activist association for animal welfare)	"I follow Facebook groups of like-minded people from the region, sharing tips, advice and recipes".
Charles			Follows Facebook groups and activist association news (Green Peace, L214)
Edouard		He is volunteer in activist associations and is an active member Animalist Political Party.	
Emilie		"The first day I went vegan I did some activism. I was in Anonymous for the voiceless."	"In fact, I think it's really difficult to do it on my own. So I said to myself, I'm going to sign up on Instagram because at first I didn't want Instagram, social networks and all that, but in the end it really helped me a lot."
Kevin	"I feel part of a community because being a vegetarian is		"I've been reading a lot and chatting a lot on Twitter".

Respondent	Imagined	Physical	Virtual
	based on values, it's not just a preference".		
Louna		"When I arrived in France, I already knew other people who were vegetarian. […] The good thing is that these people I knew before helped me a lot, showed me the different places where I could find substitutes for tofu and so on".	« "I was part of vegetarian forums, facebook groups, etc. I think I could introduce the word vegetarian community. I think there I could introduce the word vegetarian community."
Martine	"And that's why I was telling you that there are ecologists, ... there are a lot of them, who are a bit like that, who criticise others a bit, and that's not my style at all. I am the way I am, but I'm also a vegetarian, but out of conviction, more out of respect for life, but in all its forms in fact."	"I'm in the free maple sanga, so it's a Buddhist temple, and so I'm in a big sanga, with lots of people who are the same, who are vegetarians, who practise Buddhism and who are in this state of mind of respect for living beings and benevolence".	

* Hortense and Walter did not mention any community