

Psychologies of Food Choice: Public views and experiences around meat and dairy consumption

Area of research interest: [Behaviour and perception](#)

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Background

This report presents findings drawn from qualitative remote ethnography research with 24 UK participants conducted during July and August 2021, plus nine peer-to-peer interviews conducted by main sample participants with their friends and family.

This research aimed to build on existing evidence in this area to fill gaps and provide an up-to-date snapshot of UK public experiences. Areas of focus included:

- Motivations for dietary choices
- Any gaps between consumer intention and behaviour
- Trade-offs and contextual differences (e.g. in vs. out-of home behaviours)
- The roles of specialist diets, substitution approaches, alternatives and 'imitations', locally/UK sourced meat and dairy, socio-demographics, culture and family
- Impact and role of food labelling and terminology

The sample represented a range of variables including age, gender, nationality (England, Wales, Northern Ireland), urbanity/rurality, lifestage and household composition - and dietary profile (carnivore, 'cutting down,' vegetarian, vegan).

This report was informed by an evidence review by the University of Bath on [the factors underpinning the consumption of meat and dairy among the general public](#).

Results

Key motivations shaping meat and dairy consumption

- Participants in different dietary groups tended to have very different key motivations. Carnivores' core motivations tended to be focused on more automatic drivers such as taste and health: meat and dairy were sources of dietary pleasure, but also carried strong associations of 'health' - for example, as important 'natural', 'non-processed' sources of protein and calcium.
- Vegetarian and particularly vegan participants tended to have very strong motivations around animal welfare and/or environmental sustainability. They sometimes found these motivations in conflict with motivations like taste and social pleasure - but then 'put in the

work' to figure out how to balance and satisfy these needs.

- 'Cutting down' participants often found themselves highly conflicted: concerned about the environmental or animal welfare implications of their meat and dairy consumption, but also trying to meet needs for taste, health and social pleasure.

Key capability drivers shaping meat and dairy consumption

- Participants across the dietary spectrum reported that understanding the 'right' way to eat - in a way that would deliver on their motivations, and ensure adequate health and nutrition - was generally quite challenging.
- There was a sense of information overwhelm, as well as distrust of 'marketed' information.
- Change journeys for those attempting to cut down on/cut out meat and dairy were often difficult. Understanding how to meet nutritional needs without taken-for-granted sources of protein and micronutrients was hard, though sometimes made easier by peer-information sources.

Key opportunity drivers shaping meat and dairy consumption

- Social, geographical, cognitive and budgetary 'opportunity' factors were hugely influential in shaping participants' meat and dairy consumption choices - in ways that often interlinked with and shaped motivation and capability drivers.
- Social influences were deeply powerful, with vegetarian and vegan participants often reporting very difficult instances of social exclusion or judgment for their choices, and carnivore participants often fearing this kind of judgement or social isolation if they did change their own dietary habits. Differences within domestic space could also be deeply challenging, with those cutting down on/ cutting out sometimes made explicitly aware of how 'inconvenient' their choices were for those around them, or feeling less accepted.
- Participants also varied enormously in the amount of financial and cognitive resources they could dedicate to the challenge of eating differently.

Implications

- Across the widely varied participant journeys and contexts represented in this research, what people decide to eat and how they deliver on their dietary intentions are highly complex questions.
- Motivations are often layered and contradictory, particularly given how important health is to most people in shaping dietary choices, and how contested the health status of meat and dairy products can be across different public groups.
- In general, very strong motivations are needed to 'walk a different road' in terms of meat and dairy consumption, because this motivation helps them progress through barriers in terms of capability and opportunity.
- In seeking to shift behaviours in this space, it is critical that policymakers are understanding of the nuanced drivers shaping current consumer views and actions - and that any interventions are both realistic in their intention and carefully built and tested.

England, Northern Ireland and Wales

PDF

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