

## Article

# Meat Reduction Practices in the Context of a Social Media Grassroots Experiment Campaign

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**Abstract:** High meat consumption appears regularly in sustainability discourses but finding practical tools for reduction has proven to be challenging. The rise of social media has opened up new pathways to structure political spaces where grassroots initiatives for experiments can take place. Our paper examines how consumer-citizens started experimenting with vegetarian foods in the context of an innovative Finnish meat reduction social media campaign called *Meatless October* during its kick-off year in 2013. The focus is on participants' perceptions of the campaign and reflections of the experiment process. We analyzed participants' blog posts by using a qualitative content analysis. Our results show that the participants were often strongly motivated by the campaign's sustainability frame. They also saw the campaign both as a communal challenge and an opportunity for political action, sharing know-how and experiences with the other participants. In everyday life, participants' main focus and worry were in being able to prepare tasty and healthy vegetarian foods, and they were positively surprised by their ability to learn these skills. Participants typically attributed both success and failure in experimenting to their individual capabilities. Overall, our study suggests that the campaign's public context pushed private practices towards change by facilitating the experimenting process.

**Keywords:** meat reduction; vegetarian practices; political consumption; new political spaces

## 1. Introduction

Meat production and consumption appear strongly in present day sustainability discourses [1,2]. Consumer studies show how interest towards various plant-based foods has been growing to a major new cultural food trend particularly during the 2010s, simultaneously widening the discussions beyond the dichotomy between meat-based and vegetarian or vegan diets and presenting practices of meat reduction and flexitarianism [3–9]. We have also seen how public discussion and supply of meat alternatives has expanded immensely in recent years [10,11], and, as exemplified by the Nordic countries, public nutrition recommendations have turned more critical towards meat consumption, both for health and environmental reasons [12]. Thus, meat no longer holds the same cultural position it used to, and, consequently, plant-based foods have become a more valued option in everyday food choices [8,13].

Simultaneously, foodways have become more varied along with the rapidly changing consumer lifestyles, making individual choices more fluid and flexible [4,14]. Yet, it is somewhat surprising that the statistics on total meat consumption do not prove an equally strong downward trend [15]. Food consumption indeed appears to be strongly embedded into socio-cultural and material practices, suggesting that taking perspectives that are too individualistic and rational on the issue results in a one-sided picture of how practices take place [16,17]. Hence, consumer choice orientations in meat

and plant-based foods call for new discussion arenas and practical experiments supporting structural changes towards concrete, sustainability-oriented food practices and meat reduction [2,18].

This paper investigates consumers' experimentation of sustainable food practices in the context of a popular, social media-based consumer-citizen meat reduction campaign in Finland called *Meatless October*. The campaign's purpose has been to encourage meat-eating consumers to follow a vegetarian diet for one month to tackle the sustainability issues of high meat consumption and production. Meatless October can be considered an innovative grassroots experiment that has opened new possibilities for consumer-citizens to redefine their views and practices. We are especially interested in how the participants address sustainability in this context and potentially turn it into new ways of framing everyday consumption choices. Our focus is on the year 2013 when the campaign was introduced, representing the innovative novelty phase of the phenomenon. Empirically, the perspective is on the participants' blogs that open a window to study experimenting seen through everyday life narratives in the campaign's context.

### 1.1. Politics of Personal Meat Consumption Choices

Political engagement has traditionally not been seen to relate to consumers' everyday choices. Yet, people can wield their political influence over companies by selecting or rejecting specific products for political or moral goals. Giddens [19] called this the emergence of life politics, relating to a political involvement where people combine lifestyle choices with focused and discontinuous political activity and use the market as a venue to express political and moral concerns. Essentially, lifestyle politics deals with individual affairs without disconnecting the private and the personal from the public and the global [11,17,20–22]. Political consumerism thus moves away from institutional and formal modes of engagement and assumes that the day-to-day action may be a more effective way to achieve political ends by using the market.

Political consumption can be framed by the particular context in question, such as sustainable [23], green [24], or ethical [25]. Alternatively, emphasis can be on the countercultural action that individuals take, framed as critical consumption [26,27]. However, all of these approaches encapsulate the dynamics of consumerism and citizenship within the marketplace, offering lucrative opportunities to analyze the changing roles of a consumer. Indeed, a key conclusion here is that the consumption choices are becoming more fragmented and dependent on individual preferences, creating new possibilities but also responsibilities for consumers [28,29].

Personal choices can be seen as an expression of individual values, but also as a project that may require compromising other (hedonistic) goals that consumption could offer. This is nicely depicted by Pecoraro and Uusitalo [25] in their conceptual tandem on ethical food consumption discourses: *living a good life* versus *saving the world*. This means that consumption is often not solely maximizing the political effect of one's actions but more or less embedded into everyday life and the socio-cultural realm, where other motivations, needs, aspirations and life issues also take place [29–32]. Hence, when wishing to understand consumers' political choices, one needs to take into account how they reflect other consumer aspirations and practices and how these ultimately structure the very outcomes that eventually take place.

Literature on consumer studies suggests that eating meat is typically considered a normal socio-cultural food practice that carries meanings of enjoyment, nutrition, strength, convenience and familiarity [9,30,33,34]. On the other hand, vegetarian foods have become increasingly seen as a solid alternative to meat, with attributes of being a healthy, tasty and trendy food choice, among other things [7]. Non-meat foods are also able to offer a solution to the so-called *meat paradox* [35] where meat is seen not only positively, as referred, but simultaneously as a troublesome issue, carrying negative consumer attributes of being a health risk and a morally questionable food choice. Here the political and moral issues of animal origin, welfare and ethics as well as harmful environmental effects feature strongly, representing a production frame of meat as apart from the consumption frame [33,36,37].

In addition, it is the mismatch in activation between these two frames that has been presented to be a key issue for consumer rationalizations within the current high meat consumption culture [33,35,37].

Moreover, the setting has a practical dimension, as several everyday barriers have been detected for individuals on their way to increasing plant-based foods in their diets, relating particularly in finding nutritionally and culturally appropriate alternatives to meat, as well as lack of practical know-how in bringing these practices part of everyday food choices [38–40]. In other words, consumers may lack both practical skills and socio-material resources to turn their good intentions into everyday action in a situation where certain socio-cultural contexts do not support alternative behavior well enough [41,42]. Research suggests that similar interpretations apply to Finland, too [9,43].

Overall, consumer views on meat consumption can be seen to mirror a conflict between public, political views on production and sustainability versus an individual, personal approach on food consumption with different sets of attributes that become activated, but also, at a more practical level, a lack of everyday know-how in making alternative choices. Hence, these issues also represent tensions in political consumption [25,26], as well as a mixed and challenging realm of an ideal cultural consumer image with its different roles and expectations [44]. In this context, the question then becomes about what types of socio-cultural settings and resources define how these different frames are formulated and lived in everyday life.

### 1.2. New Political Spaces and Grassroots Experiments Facilitating Consumer-Citizen Action

The changing consumer foodscapes and frames for political action often come from below and set concrete challenges to traditional practices of policy and politics. Bang and Sørensen [45] captured this by the concept of *everyday maker*. It refers to a type of political activity at a grassroots level, which resists the familiar meanings of participation, social movement and interest group. Characteristically, “institutional ambiguity” produces new political spaces as there are not clear rules that determine who is responsible, who has authority over whom, and what sort of accountability is to be expected [46–48]. Yet, politics also take place here in-between organizations, and people bring their own expectations and routines with them. In this way, social movements have moved towards fluid platforms where thresholds of participation are reframed in interactions between different actors [49,50]. Here, social movements essentially represent something outside the traditional institutional power realms, constructing new, competitive ways of understanding societal issues [51–55].

As social movements are often actively using digital platforms, the working mechanisms of social media can potentially boost their development and growth. Social media does it by, on the one hand, lowering the barriers of social exchange and creating participatory culture [51,53,55] and, on the other hand, enabling some actors to work as influencers and opinion leaders to steer discussions and catalyze action [56,57]. These dynamics open different perspectives on the question of hierarchies in the digital realm, both of which can be valuable in understanding success and failure of social media phenomena.

Other practical implications of political consumption and new political spaces can be seen in grassroots experiments [58–60]. According to Sengers et al. [59] (p. 158):

*“Grassroots experiments refer to networks of activists and organizations generating novel bottom-up solutions for sustainable development; solutions that respond to the local situation and the interests and values of the communities involved. They are thereby motivated by the social needs and ideology. In contrast to mainstream business greening, grassroots initiatives operate in civil society arenas and involve committed activists experimenting with social innovations.”*

Moreover, loose organizational structures of grassroots experiments easily steer them to utilize social media platforms as a basis for communication and structuring action [61,62]. Partly with the help of these tools, grassroots experiments aim at contrasting themselves against the marketplace as a supported safe space where individual actions are restructured to be more in line with certain ethical principles that might be absent in the classical consumer marketplace context [58,60,63].

In the field of food studies, we can find various types of grassroots experiment initiatives that have taken place during the 2010s, aiming to establish sustainable meat consumption practices. These range from meat-free days, such as Anglo-American Meatless Mondays [64], to vegetarian school days in different European countries, for example in Belgium and Finland [65,66], and the rise of the vegan movement in general [11,67]. They also show that innovative changes have typically taken a form of bottom-up direction rather than vice versa. On the other hand, simultaneous changes in the other levels of the food system, such as in official nutritional recommendations in Nordic countries, have potentially nurtured these experiments [11,12].

Overall, grassroots experiments provide individual consumer-citizens with varying assets to implement new ideas and practices in their everyday life. As these experiments can have different kick off points, they become fluid and processed in socially mediated realms where they formulate their actual meanings and outcomes [54,59], as also presented above. Furthermore, as the growth of plant-based practices has taken shape strongly in the Finnish context during the 2010s [11], this opens an interesting possibility to look closer at the dynamics and role of the grassroots initiatives in redefining consumer-citizen practices.

### 1.3. Research Task

In this paper, we focus on Finnish consumers' involvement in sustainable food consumption practices in their everyday life. In more detail, we look at the change to more plant-based diets in the context of a Finnish social media meat reduction campaign's (*Meatless October*) kick off year in 2013, representing a local grassroots experiment in its innovative novelty phase. The campaign originates from a popular Finnish TV-documentary show (*Docventures*) that has been developing a new program concept of mixing trendy lifestyle approaches with discussion on serious matters and has by now received various media awards in Finland for creating an open-minded, inviting, and lucrative venue for high quality cultural and political discussions, actively utilizing radio and social media platforms.

We look at how the campaign participants reflect themselves as agents of change, referring to how consumption of vegetarian foods is politicized and encapsulated in everyday life, and how politics turned into everyday consumption choices. Our primary aim is to see the campaign as a facilitating context for individual thinking and action that can be examined through looking at the participants' blog narratives of change in social media.

Meatless October was kicked off for the first time in 2013 when the Finnish TV-documentary show *Docventures* discussed the sustainability issues of high meat production and consumption, as Finland is a typical Western nation in this respect [68]. However, these issues had not been discussed particularly widely in public prior to that. What happened was that the host of the show, Riku Rantala, came to accept a challenge posed by a guest to live solely on vegetarian food for one month. Rantala had a strong bond to meat-based foods at that time (calling himself "a true sausage eater") and saw this challenge as a very exciting and demanding experiment at the same time. After that the challenge started to circulate in social media, and eventually over 30,000 people announced on *Docventures'* Facebook page their willingness to take part in what has become the largest public campaign aiming at meat reduction in Finland. This was also followed by a lively public discussion in different media platforms regarding the nature, importance and meaningfulness of the campaign.

The campaign was redone in the following years, though public interest around it started to gradually decline. This has been seen not as weakened interest towards plant-based diets as such, as Finland has seen, for example, a remarkable rise in discussions of vegan diets in recent years [11], exemplified in the increasing popularity of the *Vegan Challenge* campaign, as well as many new vegan-based meat alternatives that have come into market. However, the public popularity that *Meatless October* gained particularly in 2013 was most likely related to the fact that the campaign was the first of its kind in Finland, as public discussions on meat reduction had previously mostly taken the form of animal welfare organization campaigns and some pioneering vegetarian day interventions in a few schools [11,66]. For example, the largest daily newspaper in Finland (*Helsingin Sanomat*) published

a variety of recipes, columns and other campaign-related discussions within the first campaign both during and after October.

Overall, Meatless October can be seen as an interesting and important starting point for meat reduction practices in Finland, which have taken place and grown in multitude during the 2010s. Hence, Meatless October forms an interesting reference point to look at how consumers who typically had a more or less meat-based diet started experimenting with vegetarian foods, and how the related political frame was conceptualized and the process carried out in everyday life.

To conclude, we present our two research questions:

1. How are the campaign frame and meanings for new food choices discussed?
2. How are these choices constructed in everyday life?

## 2. Materials and Methods

We firstly used Google to search for *Lihaton lokakuu* (meaning *Meatless October*). We first found mainly news reports regarding the case and its popularity and nature; secondly, public debates, discussion forum topics and recipe sharing; and thirdly, personal descriptions of participation and related general and practical perspectives, mostly found in the form of blog data. We were particularly interested in this third category as it gives a possibility to understand both personal and political consumption choices, and hence we chose it for a closer analysis. When going through the blogs we came across mentions of more blogs that also dealt with the same issues and investigated those as well.

Additionally, we acknowledged that the campaign was discussed lively on other social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter. However, as we were interested in looking at the participants' everyday life choices from a narrative perspective and treating the campaign as a facilitating frame for this process, we narrowed our analysis to the blog content. Blogs can be seen as good quality data for our research frame as they are typically personal descriptions of everyday life that exists naturally without a researcher's interventions to social reality [69,70]. On the other hand, blogs also often concentrate on certain topical themes that make them political and hence give potential insight into the both sides of the consumer-citizen concept. Therefore, blogs give a good opportunity to study how bloggers conduct their everyday life practices in relation to the social context, making the interaction between individual and collective spaces visible. Overall, there are some pitfalls in how social media is able to create political participation and interaction, such as through "slactivism," where sharing, liking and other social media action can have only vague connections to real-life situations [71]. Blogs can be seen as a somewhat different platform in this context, enabling more in-depth and systematic presentation of issues [72].

Materially, blogs are a low-cost and easily available option to study consumers' perceptions that, due to their diary-like structure, also offer a good temporal perspective to studying the process of change in consumption practices [73]. From a validity point of view, the partial anonymity of blogs can create, despite their publicity and social networks, a space that enables the bloggers to express their views more freely than more traditional forms of qualitative social data, such as interviews [69,70]. Ethically, this also means that the public nature of blogs is to be taken into consideration when analyzing the content, which is always a performative expression directed towards certain audiences [73]. In other words, blogs can be considered as public open data, but one needs to understand and respect the subjects when analyzing the content for making conclusions that takes into account the very context where they have been created and the connotations they carry within [74]. Hence, the ethical rules of utilizing personal data that guide respecting individuals and presenting the results in an appropriate manner were particularly essential in this setting.

Looking at the blogs concerning Meatless October, quite a notable number of them had no other posts besides merely an announcement of the willingness to participate and perhaps some recipe sharing later during the month. In addition, some vegetarians or vegans were also participating by stating that they would like to go deeper into their orientations, either by making better quality vegetarian foods or knowing more about the food- and sustainability-related themes. We did not

include these types of blogs in our data as we were interested in studying those participants' blogs who were more or less regular meat eaters and who wanted to start experimenting with new food practices, as well as reflect on this process on the web throughout the month. Furthermore, we only included the first year of the campaign (2013) in our analysis to give an outlook to the emergence of a new campaign and related practices.

Ultimately, 10 blogs were chosen to be analyzed, three of which described their experiences on a daily basis and the rest in approximately weekly intervals or slightly more often; the data consisted of 141 blog updates in total (see Table 1). Despite the differences in blogging activity, all the included blogs brought interesting and nuanced perspectives in understanding the participants' experiences and hence were considered suitable for the analysis. Further, we included in our analysis only those blog posts that somehow concerned participating in the Meatless October campaign, as the blogs were also focused on other issues such as lifestyles and/or everyday family life in general. A typical length of an analyzed blog post extended from a few sentences to several pages, often including pictures of foods and cooking.

**Table 1.** Distribution of the analyzed blog posts.

| Blog         | Analyzed Posts |
|--------------|----------------|
| 1            | 33             |
| 2            | 31             |
| 3            | 32             |
| 4            | 8              |
| 5            | 5              |
| 6            | 7              |
| 7            | 5              |
| 8            | 9              |
| 9            | 3              |
| 10           | 8              |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>141</b>     |

Demographically, our data included mostly females with a family and children, but also some males, couples without children and singles were included. It was about as typical to include fish in the diet during the month as it was to leave it out. Within the families, it was somewhat common that the spouses also participated in the campaign. Some also included their children in the experiment. In addition, some of the bloggers ate meat occasionally outside the home, and the children in particular had no special diet when eating out. This all shows how there were varying arrangements regarding the actual goals and changes that took place during the month.

We analyzed the data with the help of qualitative content analysis by using both theoretical and empirical coding frames [75]. Practically, this meant that we followed the narrative storylines that the blogs presented and focused on theoretically interesting perspectives in this context.

Empirically, the blogs present Meatless October as a journey, starting from a problem setting, presentation of personal food history, and motives and ways for campaign participation as well as reflections of the campaign and its context in general. What followed was both positive and challenging everyday experiences in different settings with using various practical resources and strategies, as well as general discussions on the nature of the campaign and new food choices. Finally, at the end of the month the experiences were reflected as a whole and some future steps for personal eating habits were also pondered. Following this, we analyzed the data and presented it in three separate parts, consisting of the *Beginning*, *Middle* and the *End* parts of the month. We also included a few days of the end of September and the beginning of November into the *Beginning* and *End* categories in cases where we noticed that the campaign was discussed during these days as well.

Theoretically, our approach is tied to our two research questions. In this respect, we firstly explored how the campaign frame, motives and ways of participation were discussed. We searched for

different meanings and motives for participation, evaluations and tones of discussing the relevance and ways of how the campaign can facilitate dietary changes. This meant seeing how the participants linked their action to various personal, socio-cultural and political standpoints (including life history, health, environmental policy and animal ethics), and what views they had on the societal relevance and nature of the campaign itself in creating dietary changes, as well as how they found this all to be meaningful in their own journey. Practically, we searched discussions of social peer support, places of interaction, opinion leaders, practical know-how and ways of politicizing vegetarian practices.

Our second research task was to look at how the vegetarian experimentation was outlived in everyday life settings. We were particularly interested in seeing to what extent this process was experienced as either enjoyable or challenging, expecting that the innovative social media context would restructure the ways in which consumer-citizens perceived changes towards plant-based diets that have previously been considered challenging. To better understand how all this takes place, we detected how positivity and challenges were experienced through various everyday life situations, including shopping, preparing food and eating, and how they were linked to the utilization of different practical strategies and resources in structuring new food practices, with these being various psychological, economic and social elements.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. New Food Choices in the Campaign Frame

We were expecting to find that the motives for participating and discussions on the campaign itself would particularly be reflected in the beginning of the month, and this was indeed what happened. Simultaneously, starting the campaign also evoked stories of personal dietary histories and relationship with vegetarian practices.

In many cases, participants had thought about some or several of the campaign themes (environmental, public health and animal ethics), which were seen as important issues, yet for one reason or another these had not been reflected in personal food choices before. Typically, participants had also had a history of being vegetarian or eating plant-based food, but for various reasons, often related to complexity of everyday practicalities and health issues, particularly vegetarianism had been dropped out. In this way, the campaign was seen for many as a “last push” that was needed to deepen one’s relationship to vegetarian practices.

*“For a long time, a really long time, I’ve been considering a vegetarian diet. I don’t like to eat meat: I don’t like intensive animal farming or the suffering it causes for animals, and as an animal-lover I don’t feel I have the right to be a part of their bad treatment.” (blog 7)*

*“[The kick-starters of the campaign,] Riku and Tunna, the street-credible prophets of ethics, caused quite a stir amongst the thinking young adults. I started thinking, if Riku Rantala does it, why couldn’t I.” (blog 2)*

On the other hand, we also found another type of approach where the focus was personal, but they were willing to teach good vegetarian food practices to other family members or help others to become familiar with vegetarian practices by blogging. Thirdly, it seems that the campaign evoked sentiments that were not defined by the environmental and public health political frame as such, but grew more out of curiosity and willingness to test one’s ability to learn new things and be able to leave old habits in the context of the campaign.

*“I also see it as my assignment to share information with other meat-eating people who are struggling with it because in a land full of blind people, a one-eyed man is the king.” (blog 2)*

*“As a sworn meat-eater, I accepted the challenge just to fuck them up, but also to test my mental strength.” (blog 3)*

Hence, it seems that the campaign succeeded in activating participants with somewhat different mindsets. However, we found no evidence that these were in conflict with one another, since in many cases bloggers seemed to focus on largely on their personally set challenges instead of problematizing the campaign as a whole. When these issues were discussed, they typically emphasized that the campaign should be seen as an open and diverse experiment with a positive tone.

*"Somebody leaves out all intensively farmed animal meat from their diet and for a month only chooses organic meat or wild or game. Instead of the daily 400 g package of minced meat, somebody at least once a week in October buys green light fish they picked from the WWF's fish guide. Somebody else leaves out pesce, lacto and ovo from their fish- and vegetable-based diet and starts a 30-day vegan diet. All equally good."* (blog 10)

As the month went on, the emphasis in the blogs changed to focus more on describing everyday food practices instead of discussing the campaign frame or vegetarian food choices as a politicized issue. However, we found a few mentions where the importance of campaign had been discussed with peers in a positive tone, and also discussions on how the perceived poor variety and quality of vegetarian foods in restaurants and canteens potentially had a negative effect on peoples' perception of non-meat choices. When these latter issues were experienced personally, they positioned participants in ways that opened up considerations of inclusion and exclusion through new roles.

*"This is everyday life for a vegetarian. Having to defend one's choices or end up in an awkward situation just because being a vegetarian is somewhat of a social stigma. (. . .) Why must you be ashamed of being vegetarian? Socially it's okay if you don't kick and torture animals. You don't have to defend yourself saying that you have decided not to kill animals for fun. But if you're not willing to kill them for eating, it's more wrong somehow. Why is it this way? There's something wrong about that. Eating meat reveals an ambivalent side of me that's quite confused about this whole issue. It feels incredibly annoying."* (blog 2)

Yet the major element in blogs during the rest of the month was recipe sharing. It can be interpreted in many ways, but from one aspect it can be seen to relate to participants' willingness to share and promote vegetarian food practices that were experienced as pleasurable and lucrative. This becomes evident in some subtle ways with how the presenting of the recipes was done. In other words, bloggers seemed to encourage readers to try and test how making delicious and wholesome vegetarian foods is relatively accessible and enjoyable and not something that should become a barrier for experimenting. Some bloggers also used other, more nuanced strategies to activate readers and spread the word on vegetarian practices, such as arranging a lottery on a vegan recipe book. Yet social media was not the only channel for being an active political consumer in this respect, as actions of sharing one's know-how and values was done also in everyday life settings by, for example, cooking vegetarian foods to those who were less familiar with them.

*"[The publisher] has promised two books for the readers, too, and I thought I could hit several birds with one stone: I can share the nice book with my wonderful readers and maybe even encourage someone to leave a minced meat package in the store."* (blog 9)

*"My husband's cousin came for dinner yesterday and despite his prejudices, he got a delicious vegetarian meal experience. On the way back he had complimented the food and talked a bit excitedly about vegetarian food."* (blog 7)

Coming closer to the end of the month, the campaign frame was activated again as the month was summarized and reflected on as a whole experience. Here, the importance of the "push" that the campaign created for experimentations was emphasized by linking it with facilitating the mental barrier of trying something new. This setting created retrospective notions, like seeing taking the challenge in the first place as the hardest part of the process. It also became evident that the participants

perceived the social media in itself as a motivating tool in making these types of dietary changes; in other words, not only the hosts and kick-starters, but also the other participants.

*“Acquiring a slightly better ecological conscience was quite effortless. That’s how it is: the starting is the most difficult part.”* (blog 9)

*“Soy-beetroot lasagne was one of those that I remembered exists only after one of my favourite ‘mom bloggers’ (. . .) introduced his version. Mine has been a bit different, but (. . .) [his] version sounded so good I decided to adapt it and try it. It was really good!”* (blog 8)

Overall, there were notions of how the importance of the campaign could be seen as transcending the idea of just a month-long experiment which merely has a start and end, ranging from discussions on different plant-based ingredients and linking them with sustainability themes to general reflections on the effect of dietary changes along with its diverse outcomes.

*“Maybe I will fall for meat again, but I don’t criticize myself. Still, during this month I have thought about the disadvantages of eating meat and thought really hard about the ethics of my diet. I might even have grown a bit as a person even though my body seems to have shrunk slightly.”* (blog 1)

To conclude, participants discussed the campaign on both a more general level as well as through personal choices. Interestingly, the latter was described in a far more detailed matter in our data, making the campaign a highly personal challenge. In other words, the data resonated particularly well with our second research question, which was about finding out how the campaign frame was applied in everyday life settings through consumption choices. Hence, participants constructed the blog storylines heavily on personal choices and experiences that they faced when the old ways of preparing and consuming food were put to test in various everyday life settings. We turn to these discussions below.

### 3.2. Living through the Campaign in Everyday Life Situations

#### 3.2.1. Positivity

Defining positive experiences can be seen strongly in light of the subjective expectations that the participants had on vegetarian foods either in general or, more typically, regarding their own skills of preparing tasty vegetarian foods. These thoughts evoked feelings of stress and doubt in the beginning of the month, which were typically overcome when one’s general wellbeing was increased during the month or when participants managed to find inspiring recipes that they were able to utilize successfully. Hence, the positivity was focused heavily on cooking and the ability to widen one’s food repertoire successfully.

*“One week of the Meatless October has gone by. To start with, I have to say, based on this one week: it has been easy. My first thought is: why haven’t I done this before? Well, I tell myself: after just one week, it’s easy to say, let’s see after a few weeks how good the kidneybeans are then. Still, I’m surprised how easy it is to come up with vegetarian meals. Actually, quite many meals I’ve cooked before have been good even though all I’ve changed is leave out the meat, but it’s been easy to find new combinations, too.”* (blog 7)

Interestingly, the resources and situations discussed here were mostly related to the practical cooking skills and finding of interesting recipes, and less on, for example, issues such as affordability and time constraints, or shopping and eating in itself. Mentions of pleasurable shopping experiences and focus on ingredients were rare, but there were some mentions of these as well in our data.

*“[European food market] was opened today with many wonderful things for sale. A stall with Italian cheese, another with French, and one more with European cheeses. A few stalls full of sweet delicacies, French pastries and English butterscotch. One just with different sorts of olives.”* (blog 2)

Another somewhat minor but still recognizable storyline concerning the resources focused on how social surroundings were important in creating positive experiences: mentions included school canteens and blog comments, which typically focused on recipe sharing. However, particularly positive experiences were evoked by either spouses or other close relatives who were seen managing vegetarian cooking skills and showing how vegetarian foods can be tasty. On the other hand, many also discussed how they found positive experiences of cooking for their family.

*“Ex-wifey: The extreme paragon of turning down meat, the vegetarian Nazi, who has convinced many weak and unsuspecting people to become vegetarian, had come for a visit while I was gone and conjured for us really delicious. . . okay, fucking delicious coconut soup.” (blog 3)*

*“For the first time, my husband ate a Mexican meal made of soy slices right up, and I found it delicious, too. I got inspired to make more different vegetarian meals, and now in addition to random experiments we haven’t eaten meat for dinner for a good week.” (blog 7)*

The middle part of the month saw no major changes in participants’ narratives of positivity but deepened the faith in one’s own cooking skills. We also found that eating out got a few positive mentions, even though it was not a subject that was discussed widely. The campaign frame and cumulative positive experiences also seemed to evoke even somewhat confused sentiments towards meat eating, and it was not always easy to interpret whether this was seen as a purely positive trait overall. We saw it as something where confronting challenges could create unexpected comfort and a sense of pride and excitement in going through something that beholds even heroism and identity work.

*“The second week of Meatless October almost went more easily than the first. Inventing vegetarian meals has been wonderfully easy because the vegetarian challenge has also insidiously revived my motivation for making new dishes, which was previously only limited to a sausage soup. And I’m not fed up with beans yet. On the contrary!” (blog 8)*

*“Today I almost grabbed a piece of chicken sausage from the pan! Well, that wouldn’t have been a huge mistake, and not the end of the world, but I have taken this meatlessness surprisingly seriously. As if the piece of meat the size of a dice would have meant anything, but it seems it would have. It’s as if I’m becoming religious—in the meatless church. :)” (blog 1)*

The end of the month saw participants also taking a conclusive and retrospective approach to the experiment. They typically emphasized both how fast the month eventually went by and how it did not evoke such strong sentiments as expected. This was partly due the positive experiences that were collected during the month by testing new recipes, but also due the fact that the campaign made participants reflect on their diets in general, one consequence of which was that many had underestimated their ability to master vegetarian practices, hence potentially structuring stronger and more reflective identities around food.

*“I suddenly realised today is the last day of meatlessness already. My mind isn’t full of meat craving thoughts like it used to. I even feel bad that I didn’t cook some of the dishes I planned, like vegetarian hamburgers.” (blog 3)*

*“I was also surprised by the fact that we already eat vegetarian dishes quite often, since we already had many recipes we found good and we are used to using minced soy meat and all sorts of vegetables. Many dishes you don’t realise are (of course) vegetarian: porridge, omelets, vegetable puree soup, spinach soup, cheese sandwich. . . ” (blog 6)*

Increased reflective relations to food also seemed to enrich participants’ understanding of their social surroundings and even how they framed and understood food in general. Positive changes

were also perceived bodily as feeling more energized by some participants. Further, as many were prepared for stronger hardships, they perceived that the experiment was even cut short and with collected positive experiences they stated their willingness to continue on a more plant-based diet if not fully vegetarian to test all the recipes they had not had time to do during October.

*“There are so many quick and cheap vegetarian meals for kids’ tastes, too, and there’s no reason for me to think they’re picky.” (blog 10)*

*“The Meatless October was quite a good opportunity to challenge myself to think outside the box and put effort into cooking tasty vegetarian food. Because the month has been easy, and honestly I haven’t missed meat at all, I’ve decided to continue meatlessness for my part.” (blog 7)*

### 3.2.2. Challenge

As discussed, a major kick-off point for many participants was the perceived worry of being unable to cook tasty vegetarian food. Practically, this meant that the aim was not merely to survive by relying on those vegetarian foods that were already familiar but by being able to learn new skills in the kitchen and create tasty—and for many, also healthy and lean—foods. For some, this also meant finding ways to meet these standards when cooking for the whole family. In addition, we found a perspective where the focus was more on the emotional dimension of eating, where giving up meat-based foods in itself created nervousness and worry.

*“In my experience, my challenge this month is to come up with vegetarian meals for a month that the kids would eat with as much appetite as they eat the mashed potatoes and meatballs I make.” (blog 10)*

*“Now that there’s a nine-minute respite to go, I feel like when I was quitting smoking for a while. I don’t crave it (yet), but I’m nervous because I know that it will come—inexorably and certainly—in a few days.” (blog 1)*

Other expected sources of unpleasant feelings discussed were shopping, not exceeding the regular food budget and finding good options while eating out, though these got rather few mentions by the bloggers in the beginning of the month. Indeed, participants typically emphasized their limited vegetarian cooking skills and know-how and expected that succeeding in the challenge would require near pro-level expertise, particularly if the target was set overtly high.

*“I hear that even professional chefs sometimes have trouble preparing, I mean developing vegetarian dishes. . . For the blog, I want to prepare meals I could ordinarily blog about, too. Ones I would like to prepare at other times and not only during the Meatless October. I was considering starting with ones I already know are good and expand my experience with other vegetarian dishes after that.” (blog 4)*

The above citation also reveals a typical trait in the blog narratives, namely the participants’ willingness to seek solutions actively to the expected hardships. Many also showed rather confident traits in this context by underlining how they have made various preparations, such as searching for potentially interesting recipes and emptying their fridge of all the meat-based items, hence turning the negative expectations into practical resources. However, the first cooking experiments set a challenge for many, and descriptions included some failures but simultaneously positive surprises, sometimes even in the same sentence.

*“In the evening, I got excited and made tofu lasagna. Otherwise, it was almost perfection, but the grated cheese turned out to be low-fat cheese and burned badly. Luckily, I was able to lift and remove it easily and the food was unaffected by it.” (blog 1)*

Other sources of feelings of failure in everyday life situations were related to eating meat by accident when either old routines were so strong that they took place unnoticed, or when the situation

was too complicated to control, such as being stressed and tired, coming across tasty meat-based foods prepared by friends or relatives, or eating outside the home. Interestingly, the latter evoked discussion amongst those who were not planning to limit their meat consumption outside the home in the first place.

*“During this second week of the Meatless October there will be relapses as we’re going for a visit for the weekend. I hear the menu includes pulled pork, and my husband and I are not going to oppose, we’re going to have what they’re offering (poor us ;) ). I do hope that one evening I could make a vegetarian quiche for everyone or cook a vegetarian meal. Let’s see what the owner of the kitchen thinks and how the timetable will turn out.” (blog 6)*

Hence, it seemed that even though the participants for many parts acknowledged that the challenge was to learn new things and reduce one’s meat consumption in an inspiring way, the quest for avoiding meat in itself became something that evoked even unexpected sentiments and got the features of an aim in itself. On the other hand, these faced hardships did not often result in eating meat as such, but just in feeling bad. However, these situations were often used as motivators for trying new things, again showing the participants’ willingness to seek solutions actively to surmount the challenges.

*“And the stalls are the worst as they sell wonderful pickled sausages from around Europ[e]. My soul cried as I didn’t even try the truffle salami. Not to mention buying some. As a revenge for all the lovely smells, I gave in and bought 1.5 kilos delicious Parmesan cheese and a fresh French baguette.” (blog 2)*

As the month went on and the meatless period extended, we found that some of the participants started to feel exhausted by constantly learning new things or that they just simply missed familiar meat-based foods, as it was felt that it takes time to adapt both mentally and physically to a plant-based diet. As learning typically includes phases of trial and error, towards the end of the month this became particularly an issue of time constraint and not so much of an unpleasant end result in itself. Other than that, cooking at home became less of a source for negative experiences, but eating out was increasingly mentioned as troublesome because the variety and quality of vegetarian foods was considered poor.

*“I decided to try and make rice pudding with a steaming pot for breakfast. The recipe said it will take around 40 minutes. . . Fuck, after an hour I had only added half of the milk and the rice didn’t show any signs of being done. Well then just wait for breakfast. We managed to clean the flat and forgot about the pudding a couple of times until 2.5 hours later it was ready! It’s not good for a hungry man to cook this!!!” (blog 3)*

*“A few times, I’ve been in agony at the university restaurants, hungry, as they had many better options than the vegetarian one in my opinion. I’ve also left some restaurants as the vegetarian options have been worthless.” (blog 4)*

It also seemed that eating out was seen more straightforward as a problem, whereas issues with cooking at home were typically explained so that they could be overcome with more practice, suggesting that for the participants there were really no excuses for not making good vegetarian foods. Hence, these two realms were positioned rather differently. In this way, we also saw how the nature of challenging perspectives was more uniformed than the positive ones at the end of the month. In other words, the experiment was ultimately thematically perceived more strongly and diversely though positivity rather than as a challenge, and the mentions of the latter were often preceded by practical solutions or other positive notes.

#### 4. Discussion & Conclusions

In this study, we have discussed the image of normativity in sustainability practices which have particularly taken place on discursive levels, yet still often lack actual measures and actions [1]. Meatless October was an innovative niche level for consumers to utilize new political spaces of social media to experiment and communicate new plant-based food practices. Specifically, we looked at participants' blog content where they described the experiment and how they discussed the campaign frame and its importance, as well as their personal motivations to participate. In addition, we focused on how the campaign affected and changed participants' everyday life settings. We found that the month was overall constructed in blogs as an experimental narrative where the storyline typically got an arch of suspense as participants were heading more or less into unknown territories with their everyday practices. Particular interest was paid to what kinds of situations and factors defined these storylines and the sentiments that the new experiments evoked, hence opening a window to understand these types of learning processes. We present a discussion on these two research tasks in the following section.

##### 4.1. *Everyday Life*

We came to see how the blog narratives were centrally based on describing everyday life in the kitchen—particularly through the register of both positivity and challenges that largely defined how the storylines proceeded throughout the month. Moreover, there seemed to be variation in what types of life situations and settings of the aforementioned orientations were embedded, and again what types of everyday resources and strategic solutions were discussed in these moments that helped to deal with the sentiments, particularly the negative ones. Even though our key interest was to find out how the participants perceived and overcame the challenging situations within the campaign, we also wanted to open up a view for the positive perspectives, as these in many ways defined the nature of the campaign as well as assisted in putting the participants' perceived challenges in a context by showing the whole spectrum of experiences. The level of individual challenges and consecutive quality of experiences were defined by the subjective expectations, life history, practical know-how and socio-cultural setting and formed unique ways of making sense of the campaign. Hence, neither positive nor negative experiences were fixed entities that could have simple definitions. On the other hand, certain approaches and framings were more common than others, showing the more or less shared and culturally collective nature of the experiment.

As mentioned, concerning everyday life settings, the illustrated experiences in blogs focused largely on cooking experiences and discussed other everyday domains much less, such as shopping and eating. This is in line with the previous studies that have pointed out how the practical know-how of preparing tasty vegetarian food is often seen as a major barrier for meat reduction [30,38,76]. However, eating outside one's home also evoked discussion in our data and did so typically through challenges and negative feelings. It could be because the home is a place where new experiments can safely be nurtured and controlled from different practical perspectives, resembling a certain type of an innovation niche. Further, the overall positive context of the campaign may have steered the participants to focus on domestic practices.

On the other hand, the challenges perceived when eating outside one's home came for many as a surprise or something that they were not prepared for in the same way as challenges at home. Interestingly, as discussed, the campaign turned these expectations upside down through experimentation. This also has a politicizing aspect, since participants simultaneously came to perceive how easy it was to cook vegetarian foods and that the vegetarian foods available when eating out often had a limited variety and were of poor quality. In other words, same attribution—that there were really no good excuses for making not making good quality vegetarian food—was used here for to both realms, hence putting pressure and expectation not only on developing one's own cooking practices but also those making food for others. Interestingly, as mentions of shopping were very limited in our data, it was perhaps perceived from this perspective already from the beginning of the campaign,

hence potentially seen as a rather unproblematic and non-restrictive part of everyday life in learning new practices.

We were especially interested in examining the everyday life sentiments and what strategies and resources the participants utilized during the month in facilitating the experiment. These included various social connections and the campaign itself, both of which were experienced strongly positively, if not always discussed particularly widely. Personal cooking skills, as discussed, were underestimated but ultimately, through a learning process, became a source of joy. Temporal resources, in turn, were not much of a focus in the beginning but were seen as a negative constraint by some during the month, whereas economic resources were discussed rather little from any perspective throughout the campaign. Hence, the original challenge of cooking tasty—and for many, also healthy—food transformed more into discussions of how this all could be done more conveniently regarding time consumption.

Overall, the effort to turn negative experiences into practical solutions was a common feature across the blogs for structuring new ideas and ways of creating practices on the basis of challenging experiences. Hence, our study suggests that participating in the Meatless October campaign became a successful learning process where meanings and practices were renegotiated and understood anew. In other words, the campaign was able to push these lifestyles changes to take place. The process also had elements of personal growth through putting oneself in a discomfort zone which enabled the participants to see things from a different perspective. Through this, the experiences also had reflections on participants' way of seeing and living other elements of their life, typically reflecting healthy eating and lifestyles in general. This is in line with the studies that have pointed out the various connotations and interlinkages between and within different everyday practices [30,32,77].

#### 4.2. *Individual Defines Political*

Though our data had an emphasis on mundane everyday practices, the campaign frame in itself and the motivations to participate were also discussed, and this was done particularly in the beginning of the month. As discussed, after that the participants discussed these issues relatively little, excluding some mentions of how they received support from the campaign and had interactions with other participants. However, the overall tone of the speaking emphasized the individual ethos and cooking and eating practices mostly in the family life context.

Indeed, as the campaign was perceived as successful for the bloggers, many attributed this to breaking one's bad excuses and prejudices and doing what was eventually a relatively easy task once they had decided to carry it out. This brings the campaign to a political consumption frame where the change is defined as an individual learning process where the socio-cultural setting works merely as a contextual factor. In other words, the sheer acknowledgment of a collective phenomenon worked as an individual motivator and a support that set the change in motion, encapsulated by the phrase "if others can do it, so can I." Hence, the participants worked more as self-governing agents than as a community in its traditional sense, let alone taking an activist role that would have challenged consumer roles and socio-political norms more profoundly [37,78].

Yet all of this does not, in itself, construct the Meatless October as a non-political campaign, as the very fact that the campaign frame was motivated by political discussion around the sustainability effects of high meat eating opened up new ways of framing meat reduction practices, as presented in our blog data. This was true particularly when it came to the environmental perspective, which has typically not been a key issue that consumers relate to meat [30,79], or for that matter, something that has been dealt with in public discussions and media [36,80]. Meatless October seemed to succeed in evoking this discussion, hence structuring linkages between private practices, societal issues and dissolving the meat paradox [35]. In other words, the campaign was successful in motivating consumers from different backgrounds and perspectives to take part in a political campaign through focusing on the experimental niche perspective where no major lifestyle changes were expected as such, but rather temporarily trying new things as the main objective. Indeed, as we discussed, many stated that a month-long commitment was still a manageable if not purely easy thing to do and the

campaign seemingly also committed participants to take the challenge more or less seriously, but was simultaneously perceived mainly positively, hence giving inspiration to something new and fun that leaned more towards enjoyment than a challenge [7,25].

Related to this, the loose and light organizational structure of the campaign could even be seen as a strength in activating consumers, as there were no strong regulative structures or detailed instructions that would have restricted the ways the experimenting was supposed to be carried out. This gave space to superficially individual-orientated consumption practices that were simultaneously strongly rooted to the campaign frame in social media and used to explain the emphasis of the discussions in our data. Overall, it seemed to give an essential impetus and push for the participants to dismantle everyday routines and ways of living that have in many occasions been shown to be a central factor to “lock-in” consumer behavior [32,77]. Furthermore, as social media has become such an all-encompassing and self-evident realm, it may decrease the active acknowledgement and reflection of its existence and importance in general [54].

How did this all eventually come to life? As we are living in the age of information overload and social media itself is present in almost every thematic lifestyle, it is not taken for granted that a single campaign can easily attract thousands of followers and manage to commit them to make a difference in lifestyle choices. Indeed, when everything becomes digitally mediated and described, this can even create “foodie fatigue” [81]—something that could be depicted as a state of pathology where discussions take the main role from everyday action and, in this way, eventually suppress it.

In this context, explanations for the success of Meatless October can be sought from the framing of the topic itself. Indeed, the rationale of the campaign differed remarkably from the old definitions of vegetarianism where it has typically been related to more marginal practices considered unpleasant and even weird to mainstream consumers, carried stereotypically by radical young women who have also wanted to contest the fundamentals of (unsustainable) Western lifestyles in a broader sense [11]. The same types of marginalized and hence un-preferred features have also been linked by consumers to other eco-friendly practices [82]. In other words, this campaign seemed an ideal case for those consumers who had an interest for eating more vegetarian foods but, for any reason, did not yet have extensive practical experiences with them. These orientations are a part of a growing trend called semi-vegetarianism, flexitarianism or plant-based diets, where vegetarian foods awake increasing interest among consumers and potentially also establish a more remarkable role in people’s diets [11,67].

Meatless October, in turn, was personified in the first place around the kick-starter of the campaign, Riku Rantala, who was interested in finding solutions to different societal problems by simultaneously managing to maintain a sort of average consumer role and certain journalistic distance to the issue under question. What is more, he brought a young male perception and discursive rationale to the meat discussion by stating in a businesslike fashion that high meat consumption is just an irrational thing, becoming an opinion leader in redefining vegetarianism in the campaign.

Yet, it is important to note that the campaign had no clear effect on total meat consumption in Finland. However, this does not downplay the importance of the individual consumers’ experiences that may not be visible in the big picture. Indeed, in qualitative terms, the participants were not merely replacing a familiar food item with an alternative meat product, such as local or organic ones, but in many cases had to think of completely new ways of constructing a meal.

Even though Meatless October has not been arranged officially anymore in recent years, it still evokes annual media discussion that has also widened as vegan diets have gained more positive public interest during recent years in Finland, partially manifested in campaigns such as *Vegan Challenge*, resembling Meatless October [11]. There has also been a change in foodscapes more widely as the supply of different meat-alternative products has increased significantly during recent years, and the national nutritional recommendations have turned more critical towards meat eating [7,11,12,25]. Together, these have been creating consumption spaces where politics could be seen more as an enjoyment than a struggle, being the issue that was the other major focus of our empirical analysis. Hence, the value of Meatless October on macro-level sustainable transitions can be seen in opening

new perspectives and possibilities for consumer behavior, yet being simultaneously just one piece in a puzzle, something which should neither be over- nor underestimated in creating sustainable consumption practices.

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