

YOUNG CONSUMERS AND ETHICAL MEAT CONSUMPTION

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Abstract

Animal production and meat consumption is a topic that contains ethically and environmentally questionable aspects. This paper presents qualitative research based on some principles of grounded theory and uses semi-structured interviews with young people who live in a large city and are interested in the origin of the meat they eat. The research questions were: How do young people who live in a big city and are interested in the origin of the meat they consume deal with the meat consumption? What factors influence the consumption of meat with a clear origin? How do these young consumers deal with the ethical and environmental demands of meat consumption? What relationship do these consumers have with the farmer? The research results show that meat consumption is influenced by minimalism, i.e. by buying a smaller amount of meat that is sufficient for consumers and at the same time less environmentally demanding. Consumer decision-making is formed by criticism of overconsumption and conventional agriculture. Consumers are aware of the ethical issues of meat consumption, but do not attach much importance to it and prefer quality over quantity, which is reflected in their willingness to support smaller farmers, from whom they look for quality.

Keywords: *meat consumption, qualitative research, Czech Republic, consumer behaviour, animal ethics.*

Introduction

Agriculture has undergone considerable change over the past two centuries transformation. It moved away from traditional agriculture based primarily on human labour, solar energy and the work of farm animals to a form of industrial using advanced technology, and especially energy-intensive inputs, which are often obtained from fossil fuels resources. This transformation was mainly driven by the idea of feeding the rapidly growing population, which but it was not fulfilled. The intensification of agriculture did not lead to solving the problem of the hungry people, but rather to create socially and environmentally demanding food production. (Fraňková and Cattaneo, 2018). Livestock production itself also becomes ethically and environmentally problematic and specifically, meat production is a problem within the global sphere. Intensive farm breeding animals are often criticized in the world, for example, because of their high carbon and water footprints, land occupation for the cultivation of fodder, deforestation and the associated loss of biodiversity of the territory, creation a large amount of waste and, last but not least, depersonalization when working with animals, soil or other sources. Here, the animal often becomes a mere tool to satisfy human needs (McDermott, 2017).

It is not only production that is a problem on the market.

According to Krautová and Librova (2009), it is not possible to researching the impact of human activity on nature also neglects the consumer side of the whole process. It is consumers who influence the behaviour of companies with their purchasing preferences. The inseparability of production and consumption can be seen in the example given by Røpke (2003), who talks about two concepts of understanding consumption, i.e. resource consumption and final consumption. Resource consumption it is not created only with the

help of technologies of production, subsequent redistribute in and distribution, but in a way, it is also affected by the size of the final consumption, which is multiplied by the size population. Final consumption is understood as the volume of goods and services intended for satisfaction needs and is made up of 70% household consumption, the remaining percentage is final consumption government institutions and private non-profit institutions. (Krautová and Librová, 2009).

With increasing consumerism, an anti-consumer society is also developing. Iyer and Muncy (2009) describe a society that is responding to the uncontrolled growth of consumerism in the world. The authors divide anti-consumers into four groups. Groups differ in whether people limit overall consumption or focus only on certain products or brands. And at the same time, the groups are divided according to whether people consume less with regard to social problems, such as environmental problems, or whether they are solving a more personal side of things, such as simplifying their lives. *Global Impact Consumers* who are interested in reducing the total waste on the planet. The reasons for the reduction are primarily environmental, at the same time they point to inequality between people, which is closely related to consumption. They criticize the inequality between the poor and the rich, where the overconsumption of the rich contributes to the poverty of the lower classes. The second group is the *Simplifiers*, who believe that maximizing their consumption, the kind that is common in society, has undesirable consequences such as stress or detachment from the pursuit of higher goals. Spiritual elements can be found in them - they say that it is morally wrong to spend so much energy on self-centered consumption. They experience important decisions about whether to act on a sensitive choice of ethical alternatives or when to reduce consumption to a more sustainable level through voluntary simplicity. *Market Activists* boycott buying a particular brand of goods because they believe that particular brand raises specific social issues – for example, a product that causes environmental degradation or a brand that promotes negative social behaviour. The fourth group of *Anti-Loyal Consumers* represents the opposite of "Brand Loyalty" - this is the commitment to buy a certain brand, to be loyal to it because of real or often imagined superiority over other brands. The Anti-Loyal Consumers group represents the opposite – not buying a certain brand because of its possible negative impact on society or the environment.

The goal of the research was to characterize young consumers of meat with a clear origin and factors influencing their consumer behaviour.

Materials and Methods

The research questions were - The main research question: How do young people living in Brno and interested in the origin of the meat they consume deal with its consumption? Side questions - What factors influence the consumption of meat with a clear origin? How do these young consumers deal with the ethical and environmental demands of meat consumption? What relationship do these consumers have with the farmer?

The paper is based on a review of secondary data and primary data collected by a qualitative research - in-depth semi-structured interviews. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in 2020 with eight respondents (age 18-30) living in the city of Brno (appx. 400 000 inhabitants) in Czech Republic. Respondents were obtained by a snow-ball method and an equal number of women and men was randomly selected so that the data would not be distorted by the predominance of one gender. These were mainly university-educated people, in two cases the respondents had a secondary education. In order to obtain various monthly income levels students, full-employed and a mother on maternity leave were included. The coding method was used in the analysis of the data from the in-depth interviews. After all texts were coded,

all codes were assigned categories they could fall into. The codes in the categories may intermingle in different ways or one code may fall into several categories at the same time.

Results and discussion

The paradigmatic model according to Strauss and Corbin (1999) was used during axial coding: Causal conditions - Phenomenon - Context - Intervening conditions - Action and interaction strategies - Consequences. Based on the coding the following main categories were identified: a) Criticism of conventional agriculture, Criticism of overconsumption – b) Looking for meat of known origin – c) Meat consumption – d) Environmental reflection, Ethical side of meat consumption – e) Conscious consumer behaviour – f) Procurement of meat with a story.

Criticism of conventional agriculture, Criticism of overconsumption - All of the respondents see the beginning of the problems in overconsumption, which humanity builds up through its consumption. This is not only a criticism of overconsumption of meat, but of overconsumption in general. Respondents sympathize with the concept of zero waste and try to reuse all the goods they buy. They plan their shopping and think about the meals they will cook: *"I just care about not throwing food away. So that there wouldn't be any loss of food because of me. And as with the meat, it's probably the highest form for me."* In a certain way, the classic form of transgression is disturbed here, as stated by Librova (1994). The respondent does not experience the expected good feeling from accumulating property. She thinks carefully about what she buys to produce as little waste as possible.

Respondents also see a problem in overconsumption of meat, people should indulge in better quality meat but in smaller quantities. The increase in the amount of goods produced also makes it impossible for people to appreciate the given product. One respondent recalls how, as a child, the fact that they had meat meant that they were well off. For her, meat was a sign of wealth. Today, however, this is not the case for some people, because they have the option of buying kilos of packaged meat in supermarkets, but that is very impersonal. One respondent even described buying meat in a supermarket as "disgusting". On the other hand, she does not find it disgusting to work with animal entrails at a domestic slaughterhouse. Disgust here does not mean an aversion to meat, but an aversion to depersonalization and anonymity, an aversion to the loss of the ritual experience that killing an animal was in earlier forms of society.

The respondents agree that the form of conventional agriculture is unsuitable both for themselves and for the animals and natural resources that are used in it: *"So I realize that there is an awful lot of input. Well, I'm talking about the work put in as a human, but also those resources, such as water, energy, soil, everything. Actually, it is the most demanding production of the meat. As in the entire menu, it is the most demanding"*. And according to the respondents, a large part of society is not aware of this fact. Another respondent sees a problem mainly in the way livestock are raised: *"I see conventional farming as a problem when it is done in a cafo (concentrated animal feeding operation). And those are the ones where the animal is one on top of the other. Of course, soya, I don't know what else, grain is grown for them."* And this is precisely one of the big problems of intensive agriculture that the respondents are aware of. By finding information about where the animal they eat lived, they pressure farmers to change routine patterns of farm animal husbandry. When analysing the behaviour of the producers, the respondents also came to a criticism of the unnatural life of the animal to which it is exposed in today's agriculture. *"You see the farm, in my opinion, meat should not be kept in halls like this. The animal must see, be in the air."* This is a cycle in which the animal is dissatisfied, and thus a disgruntled consumer who eats an animal.

Looking for meat of known origin - For some respondents, the need to know the source of the consumed meat stems from the situation of their family, which owned farm animals. The family has become a source of information for them, which in their own way consumption respondents could later use. This is also where the feeling of naturalness that they have from eating meat originates. The places of origin where the respondents buy their meat vary, and it is not always a direct purchase. We can talk about acquiring rather than buying because if you they get meat from their family, usually they get it as a gift. Smaller farms in the vicinity of Brno are used by about half of the respondents. They also use the options of small butchers in the centre of Brno or online shopping, in which case it is most often a box delivery scheme service.

Finding out the source of the meat is definitely important for the respondents, but they do not always succeed. The amount of meat consumed varies, but the emphasis is always on lower consumption than the general population. So, the quality of the meat prevails over the quantity here, just as it is in the consumption of other products. The respondents do not directly feel the need to consume meat from local sources in the vicinity of Brno. Since most of them still have two "homes" (in Brno and with their family), local is a broader term for them than just the surroundings of their only permanent place of living. Respondents do not seek entirely certified organic label as a clear guarantee of quality: "*But then again, it could be that they're feeding it organic grain or organic soy, which the cow isn't quite made for. So, it doesn't quite work for her and then it doesn't quite work for me. But I was just saying that organic is not as important to me as "grass fed". I don't really care if there is an organic sign. But if it's pastured, that's what makes the meat healthy or better.*". In a different form, they talk about organic, criticizing the high price of organic meat and preferring to get meat from their family. One respondent does not buy organic meat mainly because of the price: "*I almost don't buy organic meat. Unless it is on sale because it's terrible expensive.*"

Meat consumption - The amount of meat consumed from a clear source varies. The research criterion was meat consumption at least once per month and that meat of known origin prevailed. Too little consumption could indicate vegetarianism. The scale of the frequency of eating meat is varied among the respondents. The lowest frequency of meat consumption was once or twice a month. Another respondent says: "*At the moment I try to keep it at a certain level, that is 500 g per week. And I've never even come close to going over it. Such an imaginary border that I really never want to get there.*" The amount of meat consumed also varies in its type. Another reason for eating meat or other parts of animal bodies is health: "*I probably also eat a lot of organs. Mainly the liver. Like mainly, but I try to eat it, I set myself the ideal of having the liver once a week. But I'll take it once every 14 days, when I'm coming home to my family, for example.*"

Environmental reflection, Ethical side of meat consumption - All respondents are aware of the impact of animal production on the planet, as well as the ethical issues that accompany meat consumption. Each of them decided to consciously consume meat for a different reason. Some emphasize more environmental awareness, some was the trigger rather the ethical side. Others, on the other hand, see awareness in taking care of their health. We can say that the respondents may have stopped at the so-called "meat paradox", when they are aware of the impact of animal production on the planet, but do not want to give up meat consumption. They realize that even their style of consumption is demanding for the planet. However, the animal is definitely no longer viewed as a thing, as stated by Frey and Pirscher (2016). But at the same time, we see that the animal is judged according to the purpose it fulfils for consumers. At the same time, animals are evaluated by the respondent as better creatures than people. But that doesn't stop her from identifying animals as food for humans. But everyone feels respect for the animal in a certain sense. Respect for the animal itself and the fact that it will be their food - "*And I also realize that the animal had a life. I respect it so much. I*

respect it as if it were my friend and I care that it is well. I want them to have good conditions if they are to serve me in some way."

Conscious consumer behaviour - Respondents believe that by purchasing meat from a smaller farm, the ethical problem is not solved, but at least mitigated. Criticism of local meat purchase by Stanescu (2019) is commented by the respondent as saying that death awaits everyone. Buying meat from a smaller farm will contribute to at least a partially better life for the animal. In general, killing an animal for one's own sustenance is not seen by the respondents as problematic, some would even be able to kill some animals themselves - *"I can kill a hen, but I don't know a goat. I find that so cute. But I guess if I had to stand up to it, I would. I don't know why, somehow it would bother me more to kill the goat than the hen. The chick looks like she doesn't know anything. When you hold her upside down, by those legs, she looks like she doesn't know anything. She looks so out of it. But that goat roars quite loudly."* Meat is not perceived by the majority of respondents as a necessary component of food, but at the same time, none of them see veganism as the right path. Respondents also sometimes get carried away by their taste and consume meat of which they are not 100% sure of its source.

Procurement of meat with a story - So what led the respondents to conscious consumption? This decision was mainly influenced by the values that the respondents attribute to individual things. The change in values came especially during their vegan periods. Respondents decided to trade their own comfort for the comfort of animals or the planet. But after a certain time, the value scale changed and their health or taste satisfaction became more important than, for example, the animal's welfare. At the same time, they did not want to continue mainstream meat consumption and took something away from veganism, a need to inform yourself about the food consumed - *"Somehow I noticed in myself that veganism is not quite the path for me. But I wanted to preserve some of the values I had acquired during that veganism. Some environmental values. And I try them at least to preserve it by not consuming the meat as much as before and I try to choose a quality source of the meat when possible"*. Respondents evaluate the period of hunters and gatherers, as described by Bulliet (2005), as inspiring, for example, in consuming only the amount that is needed. According to the respondents, the death of an animal is a ritual that belongs to their life. There is also an interesting idea that compares the lives of animals and plants. Many authors such as Singer (1975) or Regan (1983) would certainly disagree with this picture. Conscious consumption is important to the respondents, but sometimes comes second to other issues that are more important to them. An interesting counterpoint is presented by Stanescu (2019). In his article he opens an interesting opinion on the choice of local meat by the consumer. He criticizes the idea that free-range livestock is more environmentally friendly to the planet than indoor farming. He also sees the problem in the fundamental approach in breeding, where farm animals are kept free, but still imprisoned behind a fence or not allowed to cross a certain border. According to the author, the emphasis on "returning to nature" is pointless when it comes to local production. Even with local production, the animal is bought, sold, inspected and killed. According to him, this process does not even come close to "natural" (which we expect when returning to nature). Based on the results the most prevailing approach would be the Simplifiers one, as formulated by Iyer and Muncy (2009). Thus, the ordinary consumer becomes a conscious consumer who is interested in what he buys. He takes responsibility for the consequences of satisfying his needs. (Ulčák, 1997)

Conclusion

The research results contribute to understanding why young consumers decided to limit meat consumption and what conscious consumption means to them. It can be seen that the impetus for this type of consumption came mainly from the criticism of overconsumption in today's

society and the reluctance to support classical conventional agriculture. These factors could be called external. The internal factor is that they want healthy and tasty meat for themselves, which they can get in this way. One part of the respondents went through a vegan life, they found in it a change in values, which they have preserved in a certain form to this day.

None of the respondents is significantly involved in activism related to meat consumption, they are aware of their consumer responsibility, but at the same time they blame the "system" that affects their decision-making in a certain way, but they do not want to influence it more actively. Each of the respondents is aware of the ethical and environmental issues of meat consumption. Some of them even decided on conscious consumption precisely because of the overconsumption of meat, which they criticize as environmentally demanding. Even if they feel respect for the animal that they will consume, ethical issues come second when deciding on consumption, behind their own health or environmental benefits. They deal with meat consumption by minimalism, i.e. by buying a smaller amount of meat that is enough for themselves. Attitude of these consumers to farmers is different, but they agree that they want to get as much information as possible about the farm before buying meat, which will satisfy them as demanding consumers. One part gets meat from their family, the other bets on smaller farms.

The study of young conscious meat consumers is seen as an important insight into today's society intensively debating the pollution of the planet, which is partly caused by animal production. But this production is still for a large part of people a source of tasty food, and therefore also a pleasure that they do not want to give up. Therefore, it is important to know how the meat consumption of these young people takes place, if they consume meat but still want to maintain some values that they attribute to their health, the health of the planet or the health of the animal.

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