

VEGETARIAN DIETS AND THEIR MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

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Abstract

The objective of this work is to identify the identity aspects of semivegetarian, vegetarian and vegan consumers and to understand how each group perceives one another. The study has a qualitative and descriptive approach. Data collection took place through semi-structured interviews with 42 consumers adept at vegetarian diets. Data were analyzed using Content Analysis, with mixed grid and use of Nvivo Software. The results show that vegetarian identities are multiple and multidisciplinary. There is an expectation when a person declares himself semi-vegetarian, vegetarian or vegan. Thus, identity coherence in their actions is expected. In the virtuous process, the individual understands the position he is currently in and the evolutionary steps he can follow. However, there are also conflicts between the studied groups and within the defined groups themselves. This advanced study in understanding the construction of the identity of semi-vegetarians, vegetarians and vegans, makes it possible to understand the vision that brings them closer to the identities of themselves, and that of others. Therefore, there are differences in perception between semivegetarians, vegetarians and vegans, and these differences in identity are reflected in aspects related to personal life, considering conflicts and the virtuous process.

Keywords: Identity, Semivegetarianism, Vegetarianism, Veganism.

1 Introduction

The search to understand “who I am” and “who and what I appear to be” is central and timeless in studies on identity, but since the 1980s, the concept of identity has also become important for management with regard to studies on consumption that have considered modern subjects and their new identities (Barbosa and Campbell, 2006; Hall, 2011; Oyserman, 2009a; Oyserman, 2009b). For Belk (1988), it is not possible to understand consumer behaviour without first understanding the meanings that consumers attribute to possessions, as these are the main reflections of the identities of subjects.

Studies on consumption are generally based on Hall's (2011) conception of postmodern identity, in which identity is multiple and is transformed during life. The identity of a subject is not present at birth but rather is constructed in childhood and reconstructed throughout life based on social relationships that are established. Therefore, it cannot be said that subjects build identity alone because influence is received from the judgement and recognition of others.

These findings also extend to food consumption. Food identity sets cultural continuity and is an extension of society. Food is a permanent mental link, as well as means of building alliances with certain groups. In addition to being located on boundary between natural and cultural, eating is a social act. Thus, eating is increasingly seen as an act that produces meanings that transcend the mere satisfaction of immediate needs (Abonizio, 2016).

In this theoretical context and considering vegetarian diets, Nezelek and Forestell (2020) state that vegetarianism is a social identity and that it is more than a mere dietary choice. For the authors, being a vegetarian has implications for the values, beliefs and attitudes of people. In turn, vegetarian values, beliefs and attitudes have implications on the behaviour (broadly defined) and well-being of those who choose to be vegetarian. For Greenebaum (2012), identifying oneself as vegan or vegetarian is a public declaration of identity, morals and lifestyle. The author emphasizes that a vegan identity must be understood as more than a philosophy or way of being. It must be constructed, specifically, by what is done (and what is not eaten), consumed and bought.

In this context, given the diversity of identities linked to vegetarian diets, this study addresses the following research question: how are multiple vegetarian identities built and how are they related to each other?

This research is justified by the need for a theoretical understanding of how consumer identity, treated here as semivegetarian, vegetarian and vegan, exerts tension on sociohistorical consumption patterns, understood as the normalized consumption of meat foods, and market cultures – which Arnould and Thompson (2007) consider as tribes or microcultures – in which the market acts as a mediator of social relations. These market cultures point to the ideologies of markets, in which there are actions

contrary to the normalized codes and which lead to alternative ideological forms of consumer identities (in this case, those who adhere to a vegetarian diet). Thompson et al. (2013) state that it is common for studies to exclusively study the construction of identity through consumption. For them, it is important for new research to strive to explain phenomena that occur in certain contexts, as the present study, which focuses on the context of vegetarian diets.

Socially, it is important to consider the growth in the number of individuals who adhere to a vegetarian diet. A study by the GFI (2020), together with the IBOPE, indicated that half of the Brazilian population reduced their consumption of meat in 2020, choosing to eat less meat during meals and to consume this food less times per week.

2 Identity and Food Consumption

Vieira (2007) notes that individual identity is caused by a dialectical relationship between the biological, the psychological and the social and therefore represents a complex mental construction because for himself/herself, a subject perceives himself/herself as unique, but for the group, he/she perceives himself/herself as equal. Identity can be understood as the identification of a subject with certain groups or the recognition of a subject by other people. Alternatively, identity can also be associated with an image that is constructed of oneself, a vision that connects identity to the notions of self-awareness of who one is.

Thus, the construction of identity is a phenomenon that occurs in reference to others and in reference to the criteria of acceptability and credibility, a process that occurs through direct negotiation with others (Dubar, 2005). Identity coherence is important because belonging to certain groups can foster consistent beliefs and values (at least, that is what is expected of everyone involved). However, the construction of identity is related to symbolic identification. For him, identities can be multiple; that is, they generate contradictions in the self-representation of the subject and in social life. At this point of contradiction, consumption is a factor that can resolve or intensify this incongruence.

Thus, the various identities of subjects enter into competition and conflict, given the different social groups that support them and the social relationships that prescribe and are prescribed by such identities. Therefore, identity is constructed based on several points of view. In this sense, identity is never given and finished but rather constructed and reconstructed constantly, based on the experiences of the subject (Dubar; 2005; Viana, 2011).

Oyserman et al. (2012) state that identities are social products, providing three justifications. First, people create their identities from what is important to them and to others in a given time and space. Second, identity requires that other people endorse and reinforce this profile, supporting certain personal characteristics. Third, the aspects of a person's identity that matter at a given moment are determined by what is relevant at that exact moment. The authors also say that stereotyped behaviour is a clear way to signal an identity to other people.

In this direction, Sanderstrom et al. (2016) state that within the perception process, people rely on mental images that they attribute to a series of characteristics common to members of a group, which the authors refer to as stereotypes. From this, it is possible to quickly evaluate others, specify their social identities, anticipate their actions and plan their responses and actions. However, these stereotypes can lead subjects to distort, exaggerate or ignore important information about others. Furthermore, identities transform throughout the experience of people and are culturally, emotionally, socially, politically, ideologically, mentally and physically contextualized.

When social relations and inclusion in certain groups influence the formation of the identity of a subject, i.e., social identity, the person agrees with the ideology of the group, with its paradigms. Thus, people use their identities - in the plural, given the multiple character of identity in a subject - to prepare themselves to act in certain situations and to give meaning to the world around them (Hall, 2011; Oyserman, 2009a; Oyserman, 2009b). This process does not happen in a dissociable manner because "we exist not only as subjects but also as collectivities" (Belk, 1988, p.152). Thus, identity is formed in conflicts and social relationships that are added to feelings of belonging and a specific cultural complex (Viana, 2011).

From this perspective, identity is a significant concept for understanding the reasons for consumption and how people consume or why they do not consume. It is through monitoring the reaction of people in relation to products and services, observing what they like or dislike, that individuals discover who they truly are or want to be (Barbosa and Campbell, 2006). Through consumption, subjects can express their values, ideas, beliefs and global identities in relation to social, environmental, political and historical contexts, focused on the experiences, traditions and cultures experienced (Cherrier and Murray, 2007).

Given this context, Douglas and Isherwood (2009, p. 120) state that “goods that serve physical needs - food or drink - are no less meaningful than dance or poetry”. For Fischler (1988), in a consumer society, a person's food and beverage preferences are seen as indicators of the individuality of the consumer's taste and sense of style, as well as various other aspects of the subject's consumption. Thus, kitchens act as identity references, given that in the process of the construction, affirmation and reconstruction of these identities, certain cultural elements (including food) can become identity markers. Each of these identities has its own specific form of food expression that is not opposed to the others but coexists with them.

Analysing the consumption of meat foods, when a person who eats meat promotes a reduction in its consumption, such a change can be seen as an internal deviation from the group, compromising this desire because it increases intragroup differences - that is, between those who follow a diet without animal origin. In contrast, when a vegetarian promotes the elimination of meat, differences between the groups are reduced because the approach is viewed equally by other vegetarians. Thus, what is perceived is that a meat eater, so named by the authors, is generally not perceived as a significant identity category and socially taken for granted. Conversely, vegetarians and vegans have a perceived identification that legitimizes them as groups (Groeve et al., 2019). Thus, food identity, in the collective context, is a way for individual consumption to be represented in broad choices around a group of people with the same dietary characteristics.

3 Methodology

This study is classified, in terms of approach, as qualitative because it addresses the universe of deep meanings of relationships, processes and phenomena related to vegetarian identities.

To conduct the study, semivegetarians (those who consume white or red meat at most three days a week) (ADA, 2003), vegetarians (those who consider themselves ovo-lacto-vegetarians, lacto-vegetarians and ovo-vegetarians) and vegans (those who do not eat or use any product derived from animals or related to an abusive industry) (Slywitch, 2015) were interviewed.

The first to be interviewed were people known by the researchers, who subsequently provided contact information for potential new participants, and so on, i.e., the "snowball" technique. The number of interviews was defined by the criterion of theoretical saturation, i.e., when no new information emerged from the interviews. Thus, for this study, information began to be repeated in the 11th interview within each group; remaining scheduled interviews were still conducted. Table 1 provides the data of the consumers interviewed, with fictitious names to preserve the identity of the participants, as well as the age and Brazilian state in which they resided at the time of the interview.

Table 1. Characterization of the participants semivegetarians, vegetarians e vegans.

| | Fictitious name, state, age | Diet time |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Semivegetarians (13) | Helena (MG; 45) | 4 years |
| | Alice (MG; 22) | 5 years |
| | Miguel (MG; 30) | 11 years |
| | Laura (MG; 21) | 4 years |
| | Manuela (MG; 56) | 1 year and 7 months |
| | Isabela (SP; 67) | 30 years |
| | Artur (MG; 37) | 2 years and half |
| | Sophia (DF; 26) | 8 months |
| | Lúisa (MG; 35) | 7 years |
| | Heloisa (MG; 20) | 5 months |
| | Valentina (MG; 40) | 2 years |
| | Cecília (MG; 20) | 6 months |
| | Eloá (MG; 26) | 1 year |
| Vegetarians (15) | Lívia (MG; 23) | 4 years |
| | Heitor (MG; 30) | 6 years |
| | Lorena (MG; 19) | 9 months |
| | Giovana (MG; 27) | 8 years |
| | Liz (RO; 23) | 10 years |
| | Antonela (RO; 21) | 8 months |
| | Maitê (MG; 53) | 4 years |
| | Bernardo (SP; 29) | 6 years |
| | Clara (MG; 28) | 13 years |
| | Lara (MG, 27) | 12 years |
| | Théo (MG; 37) | 2 years |
| | Davi (MG; 26) | 11 years |
| | Pedro (MG, 20) | 2 years |
| | Samuel (MG; 30) | 3 years and half |
| | Eduarda (MG; 30) | 3 years |
| Vegans (14) | Ísis (MG; 23) | 1 year and half |
| | Elisa (MG; 27) | 2 years |
| | Melissa (RO; 36) | 2 years |
| | Emanuele (MG; 54) | 3 years and half |
| | Sara (MG; 25) | 7 months |
| | Ester (DF, 27) | 8 months |
| | Lorenzo (SC; 25) | 4 years |
| | Cecília (MG; 25) | 1 year |
| | Benjamim (MG; 18) | 6 months |
| | Alicia (MG; 34) | 4 years |
| | Lavínia (MG; 24) | 3 years |
| | Catarina (MG, 36) | 10 years |
| | Rebeca (SP; 34) | 12 years |
| | Ayla (MG, 19) | 2 years |

Source: Developed by the authors.

Before the interview itself, the participants signed an informed consent form. With consent obtained from every participant, the interviews were recorded for later transcription. Data collection was performed from August to November 2019. The 42 interviews with semivegetarian, vegetarian and vegan consumers resulted in 28 hours, 47 minutes and 33 seconds of recording.

The interview script included questions directed to semivegetarian, vegetarian and vegan consumers regarding the following themes: the meaning of the movement for them; what eating habits say about them; how they consider food a part of their identity; how they perceive other people interpret them; and what image they have of other groups (e.g., semivegetarians were asked to describe the image they have of vegetarians and vegans).

Complementarily, nonparticipant direct observation was performed by the first author at VegFest 8, which took place in Brasília-DF between October 10 and 13, 2019. All stages of observation were recorded in field diaries, totalling 63 manuscript pages.

For data analysis, NVivo software (QSR International) was used for the content analysis, which was performed based on the following precepts by Bardin (2016): (1) pre-analysis of the transcripts; (2) description of the recording units, in which the elements were classified based on their similarities and differences; and (3) treatment and interpretation of the results. Content analysis focuses on thematic or categorical analysis, facilitated by dividing text into units or categories. In addition, a mixed grid was used, as new categories emerged during the data analysis (Bardin, 2016).

4 Analysis and Discussion of the Results

In this section, the identity aspects of the three groups of consumers (semivegetarians, vegetarians and vegans) interviewed will be addressed. Food bears meanings similar to and is as important as other areas of consumption and entertainment for the formation of identity (Barbosa and Campbell, 2006; Douglas and Isherwood, 2009). Consumers seek meaning in the products they need in a way that contributes and sustains the image they have or would like to have.

Accordingly, in her first lecture at VegFest 2019 (“We eat what we are”), Alessandra Luglio stated that “food choices reflect their principles; food choices reflect their values”. In addition, she provided a quote by Michael Pollan: “When we eat, we take the world into us”. For the speaker, food is a form of connection with the body itself. If this occurs, it is through an understanding of their principles and values that their choices are made.

Therefore, it was initially sought to understand how the participants perceived other groups. Thus, each interviewee was asked to describe the identity characteristics of the other groups: the vegetarian participants were asked to describe the attributes of the vegan participants and the semivegetarian participants; the vegan participants were asked to describe the attributes of the semivegetarian participants and vegetarian participant; and the semivegetarian participants were asked to describe the attributes of the vegetarian participants and the vegan participants. Based on these descriptions, it was possible to establish identity traits for each group (Table 2).

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Table 2. Characteristics of the identity of semivegetarians, vegetarians and vegans in the view of other groups.

| | Semivegetarians | |
|------------------|--|---|
| | Vegetar. | Vegans |
| Positive aspects | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enthusiastic • Collaborator • Thoughtful • Conscious • Concerned • Healthy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enthusiastic • Concerned • Strained |
| Negative Aspects | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complacent Undecided | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undecided • Undefined Nonexistent |
| | Vegetarians | |
| | Semiveg. | Vegans |
| Positive aspects | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conscious • Healthy • Evolved • Firm • Respectful • Strained • Educated • Updated | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensitized • Environmental • Strained • Empathetic • Concerned • Enthusiastic • Curious • Apprentice • Reflective • Willing |
| Negative Aspects | - | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complacent |
| | Vegans | |
| | Semiveg. | Vegetar. |
| Positive aspects | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evolved • Decided • Strong • Evolved • Warrior • Respectful • Faithful • Concerned • Engaged | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsible • Conscious • Empathetic • Ethical • Active • Persevering • Courageous • Committed • Dedicated • Healthy • Motivated • Warrior • Fascinating • Spiritualized |
| Negative Aspects | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extremists • Radicals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited |

Source: Developed by the authors.

Each participant was also asked to describe themselves as a semivegetarian, vegetarian or vegan. Based on these descriptions, it was possible to further establish identity traits for each group (Table 3).

Table 3. Characteristics of the identity of semivegetarians, vegetarians and vegans in their own view.

| Semivegetarians | Vegetarians | Vegans |
|--|--|--|
| - | Courageous, Ethical, Demanding, Peaceful, Positive, Reasoned, Reflective | Confederate, Loving, Activists, Cohesive, Enthusiastic, Levelheaded, Combatant, Sensitized, Solidarity |
| Painstaking | - | Painstaking |
| Collaborators, Enthusiasts, Respectful | - | - |
| - | Empathetic, Happy | |
| Conscious, Concerned, Healthy | | |

Source: Developed by the authors.

Based on Table 3, there are identity attributes common to the three groups (Conscious, Concerned, and Healthy) and aspects common to two groups, for example, Cautious for semivegetarians and vegans; Cooperative, Enthusiast and Respectful for semivegetarians and vegetarians; and Empathic and Happy for vegetarians and vegans. Thus, the identities have specific characteristics, as shown in Table 4, and therefore, each group will be analysed separately.

Table 4. Identity aspects of semivegetarians, vegetarians and vegans.

| Semivegetarians | Vegetarians | Vegans |
|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complacent - Enthusiast • Undecided • Concerned • Healthy • Nonexistent* | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conscious • Healthy • Respectful • Concerned • Complacent - Enthusiast | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathic • Conscious • Concerned • Evolved • Engaged - Active • Extremists - Radicals |

Note. * Interviewees do not agree with the existence of semivegetarian (or flexitarians or reductionists) label.

Source: Developed by the authors.

4.1 Semivegetarians

For the semivegetarians, it is possible to identify four distinct behaviours: 1) those who are Complacent and will not eliminate meat consumption; 2) those who are Undecided about the consumption of meat foods, that is, they may return to their previous consumption pattern or eliminate meat from their diet; 3) those who are Concerned with environmental issues and the exploitation of animals and therefore reduce their consumption of food and derivatives of animal origin (Bakker and Dagevos, 2012); and, finally, 4) those who are considered Healthy because they seek to improve their health through semivegetarianism. Malek and Umberger (2021) state that semivegetarians are primarily motivated by issues considered by the authors as selfish (health, taste, price, and convenience). They intend to consume more plant foods but have no desire to eliminate meat foods completely because they do not feel confident about the nutritional adequacy of meat-free diets.

There was no consensus on the definition of a semivegetarian lifestyle. For some, red meat may be included in a few meals per week. For others, semivegetarian is a diet that allows only the intake of white meat but not every day of the week. This restriction does not extend to other animal products and their derivatives, such as eggs, milk and honey. The fact is that they are meat food reductionists (Bakker and Dagevos, 2012). Thus, for some people, it is unacceptable to call these people “semivegetarians” because to be a vegetarian, one has to, necessarily, eliminate all types of meat (SVB, 2019). In this sense, Emanuele (vegan) states that this issue of classifying semivegetarians, vegetarians and vegans is like a “queue”: “Vegans are in the front, concerned with animals and such. I only look at it in the sense of animal causes, of respect. So, it would be a queue; second would be vegetarians; the third would be semivegetarians”.

In this sense, some participants stated that they did not agree with the existence (nonexistent) of semivegetarians, placing them as omnivores, i.e., those who feed on all plant and animal possibilities.

Livia (a vegetarian) states, “For me, a semivegetarian who eats white meat is not a vegetarian”. Elisa (vegan) and Maitê (vegetarian) also believe that there should be no separation of people who eat meat foods a few times a week because they contribute to the meat industry in the same way as carnists.

In this context, Luna Azevedo, a speaker at VegFest 2019 (“The doubts of those who are in the transition (and after it)”), stated that “naming” people who have some dietary restriction makes people “feel part of the movement”. Thus, she presented several definitions, such as Flexitarian - which she also considers as semivegetarian –indicating the flexible consumption of meat foods a few times a week.

Helena (semivegetarian) believes that the vegetarian people “do not look favourably” on the food choices of semivegetarians, claiming that their daughter, who is a vegetarian, always says that “I do not believe you eat fish; fish live”. In this sense, Lara (a vegetarian) states that she has “a certain prejudice” towards people who reduce meat consumption because she has the “impression that people who stop eating a type of meat are more concerned with their body, you know? [...] An aesthetic reason like this”, not for animal causes. Hector (a vegetarian) follows this line and states that semivegetarians are lazy.

However, Sofia (vegan) states, “it is better to be semivegetarian than to eat meat every day”. Catarina (vegan), Alicia (vegan), Esther (vegan), Lavinia (vegan), Isis (vegan), Antonela (vegetarian), Liz (vegetarian), Samuel (vegetarian) and David (vegetarian) also believe that a reduction in meat consumption is beneficial due to the impact on the environment and the benefits to animals - even if semivegetarian people do not have this defined consciousness. For Catarina (vegan), Sara (vegan), Lorena (vegetarian) and David (vegetarian), semivegetarianism is a process that can lead to the complete exclusion of foods of animal origin; in contrast, Sara (vegan) believes that semivegetarians are Indecisive, and as Antonela (a vegetarian) states, it is “interesting they do not stay in this”, only reducing the amount of meat that they eat. For these interviewees, semivegetarians are enthusiasts, that is, they are admirers of something greater (such as vegetarianism and veganism) and should strive to achieve this goal.

However, some of the interviewees acknowledge that people who do not follow any vegetarian diet may have difficulty understanding their food choices. Ana, Helena, Heloísa, Alice, Eloá (semivegetarian) claim that they are often called annoying and/or fussy.

In general, semivegetarian interviewees consider themselves Healthy, Concerned, Respectful and Enthusiasts. The other participants perceive them as Undecided and Enthusiasts, that is, as individuals who seek to eliminate meat consumption but who have not yet done so. This effort is acknowledged, by many, as a step towards greater change.

4.2 Vegetarians

For vegetarians, the following characteristics were extracted (Table 4): 1) Healthy, i.e., vegetarians who seek to improve their health through the elimination of meat foods (Bobić et al., 2012; Moreira and Acevedo, 2015); 2) Complacent (as indicated by the vegan participants), i.e., vegetarians who are not yet been willing to completely eliminate foods and products of animal origin, that is, those who are not yet willing to become vegan; 3) and Conscious, i.e., vegetarians who perceive what is right and wrong in their actions and, therefore, can be considered Concerned about the rights of animals and the environment. Therefore, they know the responsibility they have for protecting animals and the environment, in addition to respect and consideration for animals (Abonizio, 2016; Bobić et al., 2012; Moreira and Acevedo, 2015).

Emanuele (vegan), as she did to define semivegetarians, presents the idea of a ladder (or queue), for which the steps represent the evolution of vegetarian consumption. For her, being vegetarian is one step behind being vegan in the evolutionary process because “vegetarians still contribute, in a way, to suffering when they consume eggs or milk or honey and other things”.

For Rebeca (vegan), a vegetarian is a Complacent person, or, as Alicia (vegan) states, is not a person who has “reflected on the cruelty involved with the consumption of dairy-derived products”, i.e., eggs and milk. For Catarina (vegan), vegetarians are sensitized to the causes advocated by veganism, as shown by Cristina (vegan): a person who began “to be sensitized by other causes, by the animal cause, by the cause for the planet”. For Sara (vegan), vegetarians are connected to environmental aspects and are “attentive to their body” (Healthy). For Lavinia (vegan), “I see a vegetarian as a quasi-vegan. I think this

person is on his/her way". In this sense, vegetarians are Enthusiasts, people who want to reach another point, another level, and, therefore, move in this direction, as stated by Théo (vegetarian) and Samuel (vegetarian). For Cecília (semivegetarian), vegetarians are Conscious people who "are doing good". They are Evolved, as stated by Helena (semivegetarian). In this sense, Eduarda (a vegetarian) claims that she has become a more Concerned and demanding person in her consumption choices. For her, it is having Consciousness and self-knowledge about the impacts of her choices.

However, people who are not included in the context of vegetarian diets do not always understand all the causes of the movement and motivations for following such a movement. The vegetarian participants in this study, as well as the semivegetarians, claim that they are poorly understood and labelled as "convincing others to turn [to veganism]" (Clara, vegetarian; David, vegetarian), annoying, insane (Antonela, vegetarian; Théo, vegetarian), crazy (Liz, vegetarian; David, vegetarian), stupid (Théo, vegetarian; Lorena, vegetarian), fussy (Théo, vegetarian; Pedro, vegetarian), sick (Maitê, vegetarian), and hippie (Théo, vegetarian). For them, they are distorted and stereotyped images.

On the other hand, there are those who admire and think that people who follow vegetarianism are "cool" (Antonela, a vegetarian; David, a vegetarian), that "it is a beautiful action and truly transformative" (Liz, a vegetarian), and that vegetarians have "the most open mind for this" (Clara, vegetarian).

In short, the vegan interviewees associate the following adjectives with the identity of the vegetarian participants: Complacent (for the more radical), Concerned and Enthusiast. For semivegetarians, vegetarians are Conscious, Healthy and Concerned about environmental issues. Vegetarians, on the other hand, consider themselves Conscious, Concerned and Respectful.

4.3 Vegans

As indicated by the respondents, vegans (Table 4) 1) empathize with animals, i.e., they understand the feelings and sensations of animals, put themselves in the place of animals, indicating Concern. Thus, those who are empathetic and concerned can be considered Conscious about issues related to animals and to the environment. If a vegan is Conscious about the basic principles of veganism, he or she is an Involved person who has advanced his or her actions by placing them within his or her moral values (Abonizio, 2016; Bobić et al., 2012; Greenebaum, 2012). 2) Those who are Engaged are certainly Conscious, Empathic and Concerned; therefore, they can be politically involved in favour of the cause of veganism (Abonizio, 2016; Larsson et al., 2003). 3) Those considered Extremists are also Conscious of their acts and practices, both by themselves and by others (civilians, politicians, businessmen, and entrepreneurs), and, therefore, are more Radical regarding change. Thus, they can also be considered Engaged and Concerned.

Given this, Emanuele (vegan), who presented the concept of the "queue/ladder" for types of consumption - with semivegetarianism being the "first step" vegetarianism the "second step" and vegan the "top" step - states that he admires "vegans, above others, because in my mind, I see them as superior people in the sense of having seen something that many people have not yet seen". Miguel (semivegetarian), similarly, states that vegetarian diets are like a "gradient": "the further away from the meat spectrum, I see that he is slightly more warlike, slightly more concerned, slightly more heroic, because the restrictions are greater".

Cecília (semivegetarian), Antonela (vegetarian) and Maitê (vegetarian) also claim to have admiration for vegans, characterizing them in the following ways: "they are evolved people" (Ana, semivegetarian); "They are highly spiritual people" (Maitê, a vegetarian); "They have a great responsibility; they have an awareness that they want to be part of the whole world" (Antonela, a vegetarian). For Hector (a vegetarian), "[...] they are very determined people who have a lot of empathy; at least everyone I know values this ethical issue".

However, for some semivegetarian respondents, the attitude of vegans is understood as extreme, radical or exaggerated. Isabela (semivegetarian) states, "radical vegans, in the sense, do not wear any leather shoes or use a leather bag. I think it's slightly exaggerated, but in terms of their health, I don't see a problem". Helena (semivegetarian) states that she finds the way that vegan people deal with consumption "extreme" because, for her, "you can have milk, in the same way that you can prioritize an

organic garden, with not too much pesticide, on a large scale, and look for food more closely, which is more sustainable”.

In this sense, Sara (vegan) states, “vegans are not always going to be amazing people, little people full of light”, and Melissa (vegan) exemplifies, “there are vegan people, for example, who voted for Bolsonaro; there are vegan fascists”. Sara (vegan), in turn, says that she likes to portray a “very calm image” to other people and tries not to be “imposing”.

Ester (vegan), along these lines, states, “to be vegan, for me, means to make a daily choice that goes against the socioeconomic culture of our country and yet choose it every day because I believe that this is the right thing”. That is, for Rebeca (vegan) and Ester (vegan), vegans are activists and fighters (Active and Engaged). Therefore, according to Rebeca (vegan), it is common that within veganism, there are “some breaks; there are cracks. We fight with strategic veganism, which is comfortable veganism, right”.

Although many people admire vegans and “they want to imitate vegans and think it’s cool, they feel proud” (Sara, vegan), others think it’s “idiocy, bullshit” (Sara, vegan); “they make fun of it. They think it’s silly, fussy, silly, and the people are kind of crazy” (Emanuele, vegan) or “extremists” (Melissa, vegan).

In this sense, semivegetarians see vegans often as Extremists and Radicals but also as Conscious and Evolved, characteristics also presented by vegetarians. For vegetarians, vegans are Empathic, an attribute also noted by the interviewed vegans, who added that they are Conscious, Concerned, Respectful and Active in the cause of veganism.

4.4 Relationships among the vegetarian diet identity groups

Two patterns of identity dynamics were identified based on the aforementioned results: 1) virtuous process and 2) conflicts.

The virtuous process is related to the evolution of vegetarian diets, understanding that such diets begin with a reduction in the consumption of meat foods, as semivegetarians do, continues with the complete exclusion of meat, as vegetarians do, and culminates in the elimination of all products of animal origin, a behaviour adopted by vegans. In this virtuous process, identities are not conflicting, as they complement each other.

This idea of evolution, transitioning through all the stages until reaching veganism, is evidenced by some participants, such as Manuela, who is a semivegetarian and stated that for her to be an ethical consumer, she should be vegan and not only eliminate food with an animal origin but also modify all behaviours related to consumption. In the same vein, Hector, who is a vegetarian, claimed that he does not consider himself an ethical consumer because he still eats dairy products and eggs (ovolactovegetarian), foods that vegans exclude. Emanuele (vegan) presented this idea of an evolutionary process when she exemplified that vegans are on top, followed by vegetarians and then semivegetarians.

Although criticism is present, in regard to the virtuous process, many vegans and vegetarians understand that a reduction in the consumption of meat foods by semivegetarians is an action that should be acknowledged because, even to a lesser degree, it contributes to a reduction in environmental impacts and in the exploitation of animals.

This behaviour is also observed by vegans in their view of vegetarians. Elisa (vegan), Ester (vegan), Lorenzo (vegan), Catarina (vegan), Cristina (vegan) and Lavinia (vegan) think that vegetarians are hardworking and willing to become and sensitized to becoming vegans.

There are consumers who are opposed and others who are in favour of companies bolstering their menus and/or portfolio of products with vegetarian and vegan options. In the logic of the virtuous process, people in favour of these companies claim that these changes, made to meet the needs of the vegetarian and/or vegan audience, should be recognized as a “breakthrough”, that these changes should always be encouraged and that companies should be encouraged to be transparent in their processes (Alice, semivegetarian; Luisa, semivegetarian; Eduarda, vegetarian). Artur (semivegetarian) adds that when companies adapt their menus or products, they help to “demystify” the movement of vegetarian diets and avoid an exploitive industry.

Thus, some interviewees, such as Artur (semivegetarian) and Melissa (vegan), stated that having these food options, even from companies that are not, in essence, vegetarian or vegan, is an important factor, even as a way of understanding the motivations by which people seek these lifestyles. In addition, in the views of Elisa (vegan) and Benjamin (vegan), these companies can contribute to promoting and disseminating veganism because they have more visibility than do companies that are fully vegetarian or vegan. In addition, for Benjamin (vegan), people who are not vegetarian or vegan may try vegetarian or vegan foods and realize that they are flavourful options and suitable substitutes in their diets.

In this context, Ricardo Laurino and Larissa Maluf, speakers at VegFest 2019, argued in favour of nonvegan companies that adopt vegetarian and vegan options in their portfolios. For them, it is necessary to understand that veganism is not being "stolen" by companies but that "veganism is using large companies" and that many people need these foods to make the transition to veganism. Along these lines, Larissa Maluf defended vegan products that "imitate" meats, as, for her, many vegan people feel the need to consume products that generate memories of meat foods in terms of flavour (an aspect also mentioned by Alana Rox at VegFest 2019).

In this virtuous process, Lavinia (vegan) states that despite being a more radical line of veganism, she understands that people may need to feed on plant products that mimic animal meat, and this does not cause the need to further classify types of veganism. For her, any movement that can contribute to a reduction in animal and environmental exploitation should be encouraged. Alicia (vegan) states that veganism should be a movement of acceptance and respect for the time that people spend eliminating all items of animal origin from their consumption patterns. For her, vegans should not feel superior to other people or be aggressive.

The second pattern of perceived identity dynamics refers to identify conflicts. Fischler (1988) considers that food is essential for an individual's sense of identity, and thus, the way groups are organized based on their diet confirms the diversity, unity and alterity of those who eat different ways, potentially leading to conflict. Some conflicts are described in detail below.

a) Conflict between semivegetarians/vegetarians and vegans: Semivegetarians and vegetarians perceive vegans as extreme and radical people. Luísa (semivegetarian), Helena (semivegetarian) and Isabela (semivegetarian) consider the stance by vegans as "extreme", "radical" or "exaggerated". For Helena (semivegetarian), vegans are extremists because the consumption of milk and dairy products could be considered organic and sustainable without the need to eliminate the consumption of these foods. Alice (semivegetarian) states that there are "annoying" vegans, i.e., those who "crucify" people who are not vegan, placing themselves as superior to others. David (a vegetarian) states that he is afraid when a person introduces him/herself as a vegan; what if the individual considers the movement "a dogmatic religion", in the sense of wanting to pass the movement as something certain and indisputable. For Bernardo (vegetarian), vegetarian or vegan activism can often be aggressive, and instead of bringing people together, it can drive them apart, having an effect contrary to what is intended, as mentioned above.

b) Conflict between vegetarians/vegans and semivegetarians: Vegans and vegetarians do not recognize semivegetarians as vegetarians or consider them undecided. Helena, who is a semivegetarian, stated that vegetarian people do not "look favourably" on the dietary style of semivegetarians. She cites the example of her daughter, who is a vegetarian, who criticized her for eating fish. In this sense, some of the vegetarian participants in the study said they did not agree with the term semivegetarian, placing individuals with this eating pattern as omnivores, i.e., those who eat plant and animal options. Many argued that there should not be a "label" for people who reduce their consumption of meat foods, as they contribute to the exploitation industry in the same way as omnivores.

c) Conflict between vegans and vegetarians: Vegans see vegetarians as complacent people. For Rebeca (vegan) and Alicia (vegan), people who are vegetarian are complacent because they still contribute to an exploitive industry by consuming eggs, milk and dairy products and honey (without considering other contexts of consumption). They claim that the suffering involved in the extraction of milk and the manufacture of derivatives is even greater than that of animals raised for meat production.

For Rebeca (vegan), vegetarians must transition to veganism to justify their reductionist behaviour and completely eliminate all foods of animal origin; otherwise, to her, vegetarians become complacent.

As an example of a conflict between vegetarians and vegans, during a talk by Luna Azevedo at VegFest 2019, she asked the participants to identify as either vegetarian or vegan. When the vegetarian people raised their hands, the speaker emphasized that they “will get there” indicating that they are still at a lower level and placing veganism as the most appropriate and correct dietary choice.

d) Conflict between vegans and vegetarians: it is possible to identify conflicts within the vegan movement itself, including in the search for coherence. Sanderstrom et al. (2016) state that groups create their own systems of communication, knowledge sharing, beliefs and behaviours, which are seen as references for actions and interactions between members. Based on this, the authors claim that people identify themselves by having common characteristics, but within a group, there may be opposing actions and thoughts. Catarina, who is also vegan, recognizes that there are some vegans who are more “extremist in some things”. Thus, Rebeca (vegan) stated that it is common that within veganism, there are disagreements and “fights” with followers of “strategic veganism”, considered by her as complacent individuals. Lavinia (vegan) details that there are two lines within veganism. One is radical abolitionist vegans, who advocate for the elimination of all consumption that may involve animal exploitation; actions by this group include boycotting companies, brands and products that are involved in animal exploitation, in any way. For them, even if a person decreases his or her consumption of products of animal origin, he or she is still contributing to the suffering of animals, as in the case of semivegetarians and vegetarians. This attitude is similar to that of organized vegans identified in a study by Larsson et al. (2003). For the authors, they are people politically engaged in the vegan movement and believe in equality between human beings and animals, defending the nonexploitation of the latter.

In this context of radical abolitionist vegans, Cristina (vegan) and Rebeca (vegan) stated that companies that historically are not considered to be vegetarian and vegan but began to offer options for vegetarian diets are only interested in leveraging their sales.

The other line is pragmatic (also called strategic) vegan abolitionists, who do not use any item of animal origin but believe that other people can start by reducing their consumption of meat foods and then transition to vegetarianism and veganism. This line adheres to the classification of conformed and individualistic vegans described by Larsson et al. (2003). Conformed vegans follow the attitudes and behaviour of the group and are sociable with vegetarians. However, for the authors, such people may give up on veganism because they are not engaged with the vegan movement. Conversely, individualists are more convinced of their decision to be vegan, are respectful of omnivorous people and do not try to convince others that veganism is the only possible dietary pattern.

Thus, these two movements (radical abolitionists and pragmatic abolitionists) come into conflict because they believe, on the one hand, that reducing the consumption of animal products is not enough but, on the other hand, that the reduction in these products should be acknowledged, as previously discussed, in the virtuous process. This discussion extends to the validity of nonvegan/vegetarian companies adapting their menus and products to meet the needs of vegetarian diets.

Thus, conflicts can be explained the consumption of certain objects (considered here, food of animal origin) as contributing to the emergence of conflicts, both internal (in the meaning of being) and external (in the resistance or difficulty in understanding other experiences, understood as other types of vegetarian diets). In this sense, the choice of goods continuously creates certain patterns of discrimination that are arranged in perspectives and hierarchies that reinforce or surpass other patterns (Douglas and Isherwood, 2009).

These four conflicts identified through interviews can signal the discrediting of one group in relation to another. For example, when semivegetarians and vegetarians perceive an extreme and radical stance by some vegans, they create aversion and resistance to the group, inhibiting positive exchanges that could occur because they are involved in the same movement, the movement of vegetarian diets.

When vegetarians and vegans do not consider the existence of semivegetarian consumers, they can discourage the greatest changes that could occur and contribute to the movement as a whole. Likewise, when vegans are critical of vegetarians and classify them as complacent, they can generate barriers that

inhibit the adhesion of more people to a vegetarian diet. In all cases, the existence of these conflicts can accentuate the aversion of one group against another, lead to more conflicts and challenges, and thus discredit the identities of each group.

5 Conclusion

Based on the results, vegetarian identities are multiple and multidisciplinary. Thus, regarding identity, this study increased the understanding of the interviewees themselves regarding their identities and the opinion they have about supporters of other vegetarian diets.

In addition, this study considers a group of consumers still little explored and studied, semivegetarians, whose number of supporters has grown significantly in recent years. Moreover, there is an expectation when the person declares to be semivegetarian, vegetarian or vegan. Thus, identity coherence in their actions is expected. In the virtuous process, an individual understands the position that he or she is in currently and the evolutionary steps that he or she can follow. Thus, engagement reinforces the identity of people, as it is linked to beliefs and values.

However, as has been seen, identities can be fluid and accompany expanding movements and can lack substance and not be reconstructed. Thus, conflicts also exist among the groups studied here and within the defined groups themselves. Therefore, there are differences in perceptions among semivegetarians, vegetarians and vegans, and these differences in identity are reflected in aspects related to personal life, considering conflicts and the virtuous process.

These findings demonstrate that when there is a call for the nonexistence of semivegetarians, a proliferation of the belief that vegetarians are complacent, or a perpetuation of the notion that vegans are radicals and extremists, beyond this conflictual relationship, the effects on the movement are negative. However, with an understanding of the virtuous process, these differences can give rise to the understanding that there are phases, often necessary, to achieve a consumption pattern that is as free as possible from animal cruelty and from negative effects on the environment.

6 Implications and Further Research

With regard to the implications for the strategic actions of entities that promote these diets, a contribution of this study is the identification of factors that differentiate vegetarian identities in a negative context (evidenced by the four identity conflicts). In this sense, marketing actions can prioritize the virtuous process presented in this research as a reference for distinct but not conflicting identities.

The understanding that each type of diet, from semivegetarian to vegan, can be a stage in a long-term process and that the promotion of tolerance and understanding that each one has limits and different degrees of maturity can strengthen the vegetarian movement as a whole and allow multiple vegetarian identities to coexist in a harmonious way, integrated into a larger identity that encompasses them. The understanding that vegetarianism is a process and that reaching the last stage (veganism) takes time (and that not everyone can succeed in getting there) is important for the growth of vegetarian diets.

The concept of the virtuous process as well as conflicts among and within the groups studied should be critically explored in future research, seeking to contribute to the growth and consolidation of the vegetarian movement. It is possible to link the time an individual chooses a vegetarian diet and the (re)construction of identity and engagement with the movement. It is also possible to verify whether vegetarian identity is associated with the expression of another self-proclaimed identity, such as environmentalist, feminist, and anti-racist.

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