

Article

Reflexivity in Vegan Eating Practices: A Qualitative Study in Santiago, Chile

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Abstract: Global warming and the necessity to reduce carbon emissions have introduced plant-based diets and veganism into academic and general discussion. Previous studies analyzed vegan consumption practices as central to leading such a lifestyle, but these studies focused on the material dimension of vegan consumption and not on the cognitive strategies involved in food choices. The purpose of this research was to analyze the cognitive and practical strategies used by vegans in adopting non-animal food consumption. For this purpose, the study examined biographic interviews with young vegans in Santiago, Chile. The results showed that adopting veganism implies a new social identity that redefines the edible/inedible categories. To maintain their identity, vegans must control their eating and make it reflexive. The establishment of new eating practices, based on individual and peer learning, facilitates their daily food choices, although reflexivity will always be present. This work contributes to a new understanding of the consumption of plant-based foods, showing that veganism involves the adoption of new food classifications and reflexive routines.

Keywords: edible; plant-based diet; food; routines



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1. Introduction

Global warming, mainly attributed to anthropogenic causes, is one of the main threats to human life and other species on the planet [1]. Livestock production is one of the most relevant factors affecting this phenomenon, given the emissions of greenhouse gases associated with this industry [2]. Faced with this scenario, many international organizations have suggested that reducing meat consumption may mitigate the human role in this planetary crisis [3]. Research estimates that a plant-based diet could reduce personal emissions by 0.8 tonnes CO₂ equivalent per year [4]. In Chile, interest in plant-based diets has increased over the past decade. Currently, 10.2% of young people between the ages of 15 and 29 state that they do not include animal products in their diet [5].

Veganism, and the plant-based diet that characterizes it, is an example of a meat-free diet; however, several obstacles stand in the way of its implementation. One of the main changes when adopting a vegan lifestyle is the transition to a new diet [6]. Even though people tend to base their food decisions for the most part on cultural norms [7], there are also those, such as vegans, whose diets deviate from established tendencies [8], either due to personal preferences or for health or ethical motivations. In this matter, veganism is especially relevant, as the beliefs of vegans have led them to choose a diet that opposes prevailing culinary norms [9,10].

Previous studies have analyzed vegan consumption practices as central to leading such a lifestyle, but these studies focused on the material dimension of vegan consumption and not on the cognitive strategies involved in food choices. Studies that have addressed this latter issue have done so only partially [11,12]. This article attempts to fill this gap, incorporating into the analysis the way in which vegans redefine edible/inedible food classifications and their consequences on eating routines, deepening our understanding of vegan consumption. Within this framework, the purpose of this research was to analyze the cognitive and practical strategies used by vegans in adopting non-animal food consumption, employing biographical interviews with young vegans in Santiago, Chile.

The central argument developed in this article, based on the empirical material collected, states that adopting veganism implies a new social identity that redefines the classifications regarding edible/inedible dominant food norms. To maintain their identity, vegans must control their diet and make it reflexive. The establishment of new eating practices, based on individual and peer learning, facilitates their daily food choices, although reflexivity will always be present. Thus, this work contributes to a new understanding of consuming plant-based foods, showing that veganism involves the adoption of new food classifications and reflexive routines.

Vegan Identity and Practices

Veganism is a political and cultural movement and a lifestyle that seeks to exclude every type of animal exploitation. Even though there are disagreements about the definition of veganism among vegans, they share an essential practice: the exclusion of animal-derived products [13]. Consequently, in their lifestyle, vegans seek to eliminate animal product consumption, thereby, adopting eating practices different from the dominant social norm [9,10].

Adhering to veganism implies adopting a social identity marked by this decision, as vegans consider themselves to belong to a group whose norms, ideas, and practices differ from the majority of society [14–16]. Indeed, the exclusion of animal consumption imposes a norm on the way in which vegans think, redefining the mental categories observed by those who belong to this subculture and who know the world [17,18]. This identity is not static but is socially constructed through actions and relationships with others [19].

Several authors point out that vegan identity is primarily based on food practices. Indeed, vegans reaffirm their identity by strictly avoiding the consumption of meat and other animal products [19,20]. Food is a crucial element in building social identities [21], and as a consequence, the construction of one's self leads individuals to seek to control the food they eat [22]. This idea is confirmed in the case of veganism, in which food choices appear as a manageable terrain, which facilitates a behavior coherent with the identity one wishes to have [23]. For authors such as Fischler [22,24], control over food can generate anxiety in the eater, especially in contemporary societies, where people generally ignore the origin of food and its composition.

Under the umbrella of social practice theory, an approach adopted by many authors, research has shown that veganism is enacted through consumption practices [6]. Based on interviews in the UK, Twine [25] indicated four ways of constituting veganism from material practices: product substitution, exploration of new foods, creation of new dishes, and transition to new tastes. From his perspective, such practices facilitate the adoption of this more sustainable lifestyle and have also helped in its normalization. These practices appear in both food purchasing and cooking. Therefore, as other studies also indicate, adopting a vegan diet requires the development of culinary skills that allow a practical adaptation of the diet [14,26].

Food is a privileged terrain from which to study social practices, because many food choices are routinized [27,28]. Practices correspond to a "routinized type of behavior which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge" [29] (p. 249). In

line with Twine, this research considers that the moral principles of veganism are conducive to a specific daily life, manifesting themselves in differentiated practical forms, with their own routines.

Twine's [6,25] work on veganism as a practice contributes to the understanding of the everyday life of vegans, their material conditioning, and their beliefs. However, it does not delve into the cognitive process of reclassification that drives such practices [17]. New studies have pointed out that this is a key element when adopting veganism in the food field, to the extent that the precepts of veganism redefine the edible/non-edible categories, stressing the dietary routines of its followers [14,18]. Within this framework, this research seeks to delve into the cognitive dimension associated with these practices.

The study on food consumption by Halkier [30–34] can help to understand the vegan practice of non-consumption of animal products. She proposes creating a bridge between routine food practices and the reflective work surrounding them. From her perspective, every practice, however mundane and ritualized, “implies some sort of convention for how it is ‘properly’ performed, which practitioners are aware of in a reflexive manner” [34]. Both elements are continuously present in the performances. This reflexivity is visible both in strongly normative practices and in those posed as cultural contestation, as in the case of veganism. The author argues that it is during social interactions that this articulation between reflexivity and practice is constructed.

In agreement with Halkier's work, this article proposes that the vegan moral imperative against animal exploitation is present even in the daily food behaviors of its practitioners, forcing them to reflect on their decisions. These food practices seek to conform to the categories of edible and inedible, determined by this moral imperative.

2. Materials and Methods

This work is part of a four-year research study that analyzed the adoption of veganism by social class in Santiago, Chile. The project involved interviewing a sample of young people over a three-year period, focusing on their biography, their transition toward veganism, and their daily practices. The focus on young people was because the literature highlights them as the population most susceptible to adopting this lifestyle [35]. We conducted interviews in three waves, to capture the different stages of adopting veganism, its stability, and its variation over time [14]. Additionally, to examine vegans' food practices, the participants made video-diaries regarding their cooking methods during the second wave, and during the third wave, the research team accompanied the participants when making their food purchases. Considering the purpose of this article, this text primarily focuses on the biographical interviews, because they allow approaching the subjects' constructed narratives and capture their reflections about their actions. However, some references to other sources are presented in the results, to confirm certain findings.

To ensure the diversity of the sample and the accomplishment of the main project's objectives, the selection process was conducted in accordance with two criteria: first, the time span of being vegan (less than a year or more than a year); and second, the social class from birth, according to the parents' occupation, following the classification proposed by Erikson, Goldthorpe, and Portocarero (professional and managerial occupation as high class, technic and intermediate occupations as middle class; routine occupations as low class) [36]. Considering both criteria, we planned to start the first wave of interviews with 30 participants. We decided at the beginning to replace participants in wave two if some did not desire to continue in the study. In the third wave, we envisaged no further replacements.

The first wave of the fieldwork started in June 2020 during the pandemic, and all interviews were conducted online. The call for participants was posted on social media platforms and 31 participants were recruited, achieving the number of interviews planned. The second wave of the fieldwork was in September 2021, when Chile continued to experience lock-down measures. Interviews were online and 15 of the 31 vegans from the first round participated. To recruit more participants, the team posted another social media advert, recruiting 10 new interviewees. In the last wave (August 2022), only 18 of the

remaining 25 participants continued to take part in the research; interviews were online and face-to-face. This article considers all 71 interviews of the three waves of fieldwork. The participant's details are in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants in the study.

Nº	Pseudonymous	Gender	Age *	Time in Veganism *	Social Class	Wave
1	Josefa	Female	21	6 months	High	1
2	Pilar	Female	26	9 months	High	1
3	Valentina	Female	25	8 months	High	1
4	María	Female	23	1 year and 4 months	High	1
5	Marisol	Female	26	3 years	High	1-2
6	Denisse	Female	25	4 years	High	1-2-3
7	Consuelo	Female	27	7 years	High	1-2-3
8	Elías	Male	20	1 years and 6 months	High	1-2-3
9	Juan	Male	24	2 years	High	1-2-3
10	Rocío	Female	26	5 months (Not vegan anymore)	High	1-2
11	Martina	Female	27	7 months	High	2
12	Carla	Female	22	5 months	Middle	1
13	Guillermo	Male	28	6 months	Middle	1
14	Sandra	Female	22	7 years	Middle	1
15	Alejandra	Female	24	8 months	Middle	1-2
16	Viviana	Female	21	6 months	Middle	1-2
17	Magdalena	Female	28	9 months	Middle	1-2-3
18	Ana	Female	22	7 months	Middle	1-2
19	Gloria	Female	27	8 years	Middle	1-2-3
20	Claudio	Male	27	2 years	Middle	1-2-3
21	Catalina	Female	26	3 years	Middle	1-2-3
22	Rosa	Female	27	2 months	Middle	2-3
23	Margarita	Female	25	5 years	Middle	2
24	Raúl	Male	29	3 years	Middle	2-3
25	Jennifer	Non Binary	21	3 years	Middle	2-3
26	Sebastián	Male	31	17 years	Low	1
27	Luisa	Female	27	1 year and 7 months	Low	1
28	Paz	Female	23	8 years	Low	1
29	Luis	Male	28	6 years	Low	1
30	Sofía	Female	28	2 years	Low	1
31	Katherine	Female	27	7 months	Low	1
32	Isadora	Female	35	Less than a year	Low	1
33	Simone	Female	35	2 years	Low	1-2-3
34	Nicolás	Male	27	8 years	Low	1-2-3
35	Isidora	Female	26	2 years	Low	2-3
36	Patricia	Female	27	3 years	Low	2-3
37	Trinidad	Female	21	3 years	Low	2-3
38	Soledad	Female	23	4 months	Low	2-3
39	Pablo	Male	19	4 months	Low	2

* The time of veganism listed in the table is the length of time that the individual had been following a vegan diet at the time they first participated in the research.

We conducted biographical interviews guided by four to six topics, depending on the wave. In each topic, the interviewer used an open question as a reference to start the conversation. In the first wave, our interview guideline included topics about the participants' life history and adoption of veganism (e.g., Family and Childhood, Transition to Veganism; Weekly Provision and Feeding, and Obstacles and Facilitators). The second wave interview addressed changes in daily life from the previous wave, their opinion and actions on veganism, and delved into diet and cooking practices. Our interview guidelines had 5 topics: Personal description and Pandemic, Meals, Cuisine, Health, and Consumption and Activism. In the last wave, our interview guidelines covered changes in daily life

compared with the previous wave, their opinion, and actions on veganism, as well as delving into food purchasing.

The research team conducted the interviews, and they were in Spanish. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. This article uses quotes from interviews to present and exemplify our qualitative research findings. The quotes were translated into English for this article. All participants signed an informed consent before the interview, which was returned via email. In this text we use pseudonyms to protect participant identity to avoid their identification. The Ethical Committee of Social Science of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile approved our research (N° 190610025).

This material was analyzed through coding, using MAXQDA software [37,38]. Each wave was analyzed separated and had their own code tree (the first wave had 9594 codes, second wave 6018 codes, and third wave had 4969). Data were coded inductively with an open coding process, identifying emergent themes in the participants interviews [37]. We discussed the codes with our research team members to ensure the correct interpretation. For this article, we worked with codes relatives to eating routines, eating changes, and reflections about food in the three waves of fieldwork. In total, we used 4531 codes related to this article, 2062 from the first wave, 1510 from the second wave, and 959 from the third wave.

3. Results and Discussion

The results of this research confirmed that the adoption of veganism implies conforming to a vegan social identity, guided by the normative precept of not consuming animal products and independent of the underlying motivations that sustain such a choice [14,16]. This precept implies a cognitive break in the way in which the world is classified [17], generating a redefinition of the edible and inedible food categories [18]. These categories challenged the previous culinary practices and food choices of the participants in this research.

Within this framework, food control was a crucial element for our participants, allowing them to maintain coherence between their practices and social identity [22]. Consuming foods of animal origin was always a risk that demanded attention. The fieldwork revealed that vegan practices were also guided by other relevant precepts in contemporary societies, such as the importance of health or sustainability, which contribute to vigilance in relation to food choices.

The new classifications of what is edible and inedible, and the need for food control to maintain a vegan social identity, has led vegans to reflexivity in terms of their eating routines [31]. How this reflexivity manifests itself can vary, depending on the stage in the vegan trajectory, the novelty of the food incorporated, interactions with others, or individual characteristics. In this sense, the results show that the vegan worldview implies establishing new eating practices and routines, but these may be constantly update by moments of reflexivity and can redefine themselves.

The results show us that the length of time that a participant had been vegan was relevant, meanwhile no differences were found regarding social class.

3.1. A Moral Principle Reframing Edible Foods and Identity

In line with Giacomani et al. [14], veganism primarily arises from a catalytic experience that involves an internal questioning around the consumption of animals and their derived products, signifying a cognitive break from the way in which the world is classified. This leads to a conscious redefinition of edible and inedible food categories. These experiences are described as “clicks” that cut off the previous food trajectory, where meat is characterized as a “piece of a corpse” and animal products are associated with exploitation, torture, violation, and death. In this way, these types of foods are labeled as inedible and carry a negative moral connotation, turning into impure foods [39]. It is this principle that redefines what is consumed, as stated in 2022 by Nicolás, lower-class and a vegan for nine years: “You really consume everything vegan, you can’t leave those parameters, so all household

products that you can imagine are vegan, you can't deviate from them because of your ethical beliefs".

The classification between vegan and non-vegan products rests in a new taxonomic categorization [40]. Hence, there is a conscious reconfiguration of the taxonomic categories, bestowing a symbolic value on each food. Pablo, a lower-class participant who adopted veganism four months ago perceives meat as a dead animal or as a corpse's flesh, demonstrating empathy towards the living creature behind the food product:

"For a moment, I began to imagine myself as the dead animal I was eating. I was able to empathize to a certain extent, the animal shouldn't have to suffer as much when I could choose to eat other things. (. . .) [Being vegan] you feel, I don't know whether to say lighter, but you do feel free from something. My conscience is clearer, as I am not eating anything that is dead (. . .) When I used to eat meat, I felt what I was eating and this was filling me with something external (. . .) It is a weird thing to say, but you don't feel like there is blood from another animal running through your veins and you feel lighter and free from something."

Pablo demonstrates that the redefinition of food categories accompanies a practical rationality, in which the possibility of "choosing to eat other things" legitimizes the decision. In this sense, consumption is associated with a context of food abundance [41], the notion of going beyond survival and adding an ethical component to one's food decisions.

In the citation displayed above, a taxonomic redefinition is exposed in the discourse [40]; therefore, a "dead animal" is not typified as food or meat. Moreover, it is stated the consumption of this dead animal is not only unethical, but its dead qualities are transferred to the consumer; thus, it must be avoided. Here, there is a clear link between food and identity, to the extent that by adopting the principle of incorporation, the eater symbolically acquires the characteristics of what he/she consumes [22].

Pablo not only redefines the categories going forward, but also considers his previous food habits. He analyzes his nutrition in hindsight, associating meat with an extra weight or external being that made him feel uncomfortable. This physical sensation was re-signified after becoming vegan and could be explained as having another animal's blood running through his veins and dead animals inside his body.

Accordingly, the vegan identity is formed, based on the exclusion of animal exploitation in food decisions [14,39]. Consequently, the incorporation principle is reformulated, in which the words being and becoming vegan define the individual from the statement, we are what we don't eat.

In addition, it was perceived during the fieldwork that not only the death of the food is considered, but the production system from which it comes also matters. Interviewees considered that the consumption of animal-sourced foods meant that the consumer is an accomplice of the food industry, and therefore, is part of the exploitation, violation, and torture of animals. Consequently, the food's ethical burden is passed on to the eater, turning the individual that consumes these products into a "despicable human being", in the words of Katherine, a lower-class participant who became vegan seven months before we interviewed her for the first time. Indeed, the cognitive activity of defining animal-sourced foods as inedible, appears to be linked to affective and behavioral mechanisms, and even physiological manifestations; simply breaking these new culinary rules could evoke aversion, disgust, and even nausea [24,42]

3.2. Risk and Reflexivity

Redefining edibility has consequences for eating routines. In fact, the problem is that the previous method of choosing and cooking food is now impracticable. Consequently, every food previously classified must be reevaluated to establish whether it meets the requirements of being a "pure" food [39]. In this context, food choice implies a risk; the possibility of eating animal-sourced foods related to animal exploitation challenges the vegan identity. This risk demands that the consumer knows and controls what he/she is eating to avoid making poor choices.

The following quotes exemplify the importance of dietary control in terms of adopting and embracing veganism. The first quote is from Rocío, who became vegan during the pandemic because she felt that confinement allowed her to control her diet more effectively. In the second quote, Juan, an upper-class vegan, who was returning from a trip to Mexico the last time we interviewed him, mentioned that having his own home there allowed him to avoid consuming animal products because the decisions regarding what to buy and eat were his own [14]:

“So, since the quarantine started...I told myself that now is the time [to go vegan] because I’m going to control my meals and my eating, and it’s never been easier.”

“I could have control [of my food] because since I had a house, in my house, I could buy things. I went to the market and ensured that what I was eating was not an animal, because even the quince jelly has bones in it, it’s something like that (laughs); what am I eating? So, I took all the time in the world.”

The need to control what is eaten leads vegans to have reflective moments, to “take their time” as Juan maintained. The fieldwork has shown that vegans conduct “research” into what they are eating, so the knowledge acquired in relation to a product is crucial when making decisions and controlling its intake. However, the process of determining a food’s purity becomes complex in the context of food modernity, as foods are highly processed and the consumer has neither control nor knowledge of the composition or the production process of the foods they eat [24]. This issue was highlighted by Martina, a vegan for seven months, when we first interviewed her in 2021; she kept a vegan diet without identifying herself as such, due to the lack of information on the products consumed:

“When I left out everything, still I said, “I can’t say I’m 100% vegan because I haven’t researched as I should . . . while I think it doesn’t contain any animal products, I’m not sure, because I haven’t researched every ingredient”, now I do it, I’m...I have some guidelines of the ingredients that could be sourced from animals without knowing 100%, so I don’t take any chances, I don’t eat them.”

In Martina’s case, her vegan identity originates from the consumption of certain foods and from the information she must use to make food decisions in a reflective manner, since neither the process nor the products’ ingredients are under her control but having the necessary information to make food decisions is within her control. This limited control over certain areas has led Martina to choose not to eat foods that she is unable to classify as edible, thereby avoiding a transgression [39]. Thus, a new moral burden is added to the information search that turns this reflective attitude into one based on ethical principles. A similar concept was mentioned by Pablo, a lower-class vegan for four months, who claimed that eating a non-vegan food without realizing would make him have “a guilty conscience for not knowing, that is to say, for not being properly informed”.

It is worth mentioning that other interviewees, such as Elías, an upper-class vegan for two and a half years, confirmed that they considered themselves vegans despite having consumed inedible products without realizing along their journey. However, he remarked that his veganism was founded in his willingness to “know what comes behind that fetish, and to understand how... I didn’t know, that this can become problematic, whether to incorporate it in your diet or not, from that point”. Despite the differences between Martina and Elías’ cases, both highlight the importance of having a reflective attitude, prompting research into the products to be consumed.

The change in edible categories also has an unexpected risk. This is biologically based and refers to the possibility of becoming unwell, due to a nutritional deficiency; for example, vitamin B12. This medical risk also entails a reflective aspect, whereby another concern involves meeting certain nutritional requirements, to ensure a feasible and lasting lifestyle. Catalina, who is middle-class and has been vegan for four years, told us that since adopting this lifestyle, she is more conscious of her health:

“I feel that I grew more conscious of my health, so I feel that is why, for example, I had never had a blood test in my life. I had them just when I started becoming vegan (. . .) I feel that I have not changed, but I started to pay more attention and also people bug you, sorry, they bother you, no B12, no vitamin D, so one is forced to become more conscious. There is no other way, you know, with veganism. I started playing a lot of sport, so I feel it complemented me very well, I think it is good for me.”

Catalina emphasizes that since becoming vegan she started to “pay attention” to her health, adding to her concerns the nutritional element of her medical status. In this sense, foods are understood by their nutritional components, similarly to a medicalized view of alimentation [43]. As Poulain [44] mentions, food medicalization acts, in this case, as a rationale that seeks the validation of a specific way of seeing the world. Where previously there were foods or meals, now there are nutrients. Catalina shows us how this consciousness has also materialized through nutritional devices, such as blood tests to check on vitamin levels, facilitating her control over her food.

The citation also points to the medical risk perceived by others, that led to this process of “becoming aware” of her health. She mentions how she was asked constantly about possible nutritional deficiencies, such as that related to vitamin B12, a deficiency commonly associated with a vegan diet. The concern that comes from non-vegans causes the awareness “in a forced way” regarding the vegan person’s health. Magdalena, middle-class and vegan for a year and nine months, mentioned that the need to stay healthy is related to “portraying the movement in a good way”. Here, two interesting elements arise. On the one hand, there is a sense of belonging to the movement, in which not only individual identity but also a collective vegan identity is put at risk. On the other hand, the collective action of others from a reflective standpoint not only comes from the actions of people outside the movement (asking or questioning), but also from the vegans within the group, encouraging their fellow vegans to prove, through daily practices, the viability of vegan consumption [45]. In this sense, the environment favors the reflective process in vegans, to develop answers to these questions by proving that vegans are healthy.

3.3. Reflexivity Practices

Fieldwork shows that vegans introduce reflexivity as a practice in their food choices, as other research found in sustainable or contester eating [31,34].

First, the cognitive aspect regarding the edible/inedible classification leads vegans to look up the ingredients in a product, to check whether they contain an animal-sourced food or derivative before consuming them [6]. In this task, components such as eggs and milk are easy to perceive. However, there are other ingredients, such as casein, albumin, lanolin, etc., which do not seem to be animal-sourced ingredients at first glance [14]. This was also pointed out by Isidora, vegan for two years and lower-class, who claims that “one can read the ingredients that the food contains, but these are often really strange names; we don’t actually know where they come from”.

Label reading consists of different phases. During the first reading, it is possible to identify the ingredients that are already known as being inedible, thus making the whole product inedible. Then, during the second reading, the unknown ingredients are checked online to ascertain whether they are related (or not) to animal exploitation and to decide whether or not to incorporate this product into their diet. The fieldnote from a visit to a supermarket with Jennifer, vegan for three years and middle-class, demonstrates these practices:

“She looked closely at the jams and selected one that she had not bought before, Cuisine&Co brand. She told me that she used to buy the Tía Lía brand but that now they did not have raspberry and she told me that she had also used Watt’s, but it was more expensive. Unlike other products, she looked at the ingredients in detail (. . .) She asked me about two colorants that neither of us knew. So she

took her cell phone and Googled it [asking if they were vegan]. The answer came up quickly confirming that both were vegan” (Observation 281, 2022).

Jennifer has been vegan for some time now, so there were everyday foods that she purchased without looking at their ingredients; however, she did analyze the new products that she bought. New converts to veganism tend to regularly check food sources and composition because most of the ingredients are unknown, but as they become more familiar with veganism, these practices become less intensive.

The constant need to check and read the ingredients was one of the reasons why Rocío, who was vegan for eight months, chose to abandon the vegan lifestyle during his second year:

“And it was like that simple, I said “okay, I’m going to stop being vegan”, because the idea is not to get complicated, the idea is to do it because you truly want to do it. (. . .) What happens is that sometimes I saw myself reading every ingredient of each product, you know, and that was too much. I truly disliked that, and I said “okay, not for me”. It isn’t like I was going to go back to eating meat either. I am never going back to eating meat in my life. So, having to check every detail, I didn’t really feel comfortable about that.”

Rocío associates this activity with a feeling of discomfort that disrupted her daily life; before becoming vegan, there was no reflective process regarding food choices. However, as a vegan, every time she wanted to eat a new product, she had to resort to the reflexive practice of reading the label. In the first interview with Rocío, she mentioned that she began to embrace veganism during the quarantine caused by the socio-sanitary COVID-19 crisis, as she was able to cook her own meals and did not have to read labels, thereby having greater control over her daily meals. Rocío also introduced an important factor, the willingness to adopt this reflexive attitude. She claimed that continuously reading the labels should not be a tedious task if “you want to do it”.

It is worth mentioning that label reading is a continuous process whereby new knowledge is progressively accumulated. In fact, some of the participants create an archive about ingredients with this vegan knowledge, distinguishing whether products are industrially processed or not.

A second practice to increase food control is the search for information within online vegan communities and social media such as Instagram or Facebook [6,14,46]. This activity was introduced by Martina, who presented the process of researching ingredients. Nonetheless, many of the participants in this study incorporated, not only product components in their research, but also the whole production process, which is even more unknown. Raúl, who has been vegan for three years, describes the process of looking for information:

“Generally everything is found on Instagram and if there is one piece of information that often gets repeated, I pay closer attention to it and I research it. It also happens that when one starts to create a group of vegan people, because this tends to happen, one starts to find common interests with other people, who start to send information, and it’s like “look I found this” (. . .) because in fact there are web pages that show vegan products, like Listado Vegano (. . .). You find a vegan beer and it’s like “but beer hasn’t always been vegan?” or “I always thought that beer was vegan”, and then you question yourself and start looking “which beer brands are vegan?”, “why aren’t they all vegan?”, “ah because they use this to produce it.”

Raúl shows us how he formed a network of information in his beginner phase of veganism to obtain knowledge about the whole food production process. This network includes vegan blogs, web pages, Instagram accounts, vegan friends, etc. As found in other works, the internet and social media are presented as important tools in the social learning process of veganism [14,47]. Raúl says that his main source is Instagram, where he follows different accounts that promote veganism, and where recipes, products, ingredients, etc. are shared.

Raúl also mentions how part of his personal network is composed of vegan people that he has met during the time he has been vegan. This network has multiple purposes and benefits, among them, finding groups where the individual is identified, sharing social experiences about the transition, and with that, recommendations and advice to experience veganism in a pleasant way [6]. Therefore, research, sources, and information, handled individually, are shared among vegans, contributing to this social environment that is prone to be reflective.

A third practice aimed at controlling vegan eating is learning how to cook. In this way, many of the participants when converting to veganism began to discover new recipes [6]. This is what eased Rocío into veganism at the beginning; by learning what to cook and buying the products herself, she had knowledge of what she would be eating after the meal preparation. This was useful in minimizing the intrinsic risks mentioned previously.

As a result, new knowledge was formed around vegan recipes, which included new flavors, ingredients, mixtures, and techniques, as well as the learning and creation of new culinary norms on meal preparation, which were consolidated over time to define a new cuisine. Redefining what to eat involves creating new norms that govern food transformation. What to include would be defined by both reflective turns, while new flavors, mixtures, and techniques would allow the combining of elements that are inherent to taste and meaningful elements that remain from the culinary culture before the transition. That is what Patricia told us; lower-class and vegan for three years, who even studied food technology with the aim of readapting her cuisine knowledge professionally to embrace a vegan cuisine:

“You have a spectacular sponge cake, but it contains butter, milk, eggs, you know? And you do this, and the cake rises on its own, but I want the same in a vegan sponge cake, so, how do I achieve that? I will learn the structure of this thing to find something similar, that is why I like food technology.”

Along these lines, not only the creation of new dishes is key, but also the veganization of inherited meals from the original culinary culture [14]. This veganization is carried out through culinary innovation, by replacing those ingredients labeled as inedible to maintain elements related to the meals' flavor, texture, and aesthetics. This way, a new culinary universe is formed in the establishment of rules to create new dishes, while also maintaining the symbolic and sensory elements of certain representations, particularly relevant to the transitioning person [6].

From another perspective, the fieldwork showed us an additional reflective practice, oriented towards gaining medical knowledge to avoid illness. In this case the risk is not to lose one's identity by eating an inedible product, the danger is becoming unwell due to a lack of essential nutrients, as mentioned in a previous section. To deal with this problem, participants seek advice from health professionals. This resolves the difficult issue of establishing a balanced and long-lasting vegan lifestyle [6]. The fieldwork showed us that by consulting a doctor, many different nutritional elements are learnt, such as the importance of seeds and their proper “activation”, the nutritional mixture of vitamins for good absorption, and the importance of taking supplements, among others.

Elías, upper-class and vegan for two and a half years, strived daily to meet the nutritional requirements advised by his nutritionist:

“So, they create nutritional guidelines that specify the days when you should consume proteins, mainly legumes. You must eat this quantity for each type of food, carbohydrates, fruits, vegetables; there are two types of vegetables, I don't remember the difference, healthy fats, seeds and protein, I don't know if there is anything else. There are three different tables, mainly meat substitutes or legumes but you can eat from both. The last thing they send you is a chart, which is a portioner, so it says a cup of legumes soaked is one protein portion, (. . .) you know, that is how you measure it, half a cup of 3/4 of soaked soy meat is one protein portion, etc.”

Elías told us how his nutritionist gives him a detailed diet plan and provides guidelines outlining the macronutrients he must consume during the day. The tables provided by his nutritionist are key to following his diet, and during the day, he must consume the “necessary” protein, carbohydrates, and fat portions. In this way, he is given the tools required to eat the correct number of portions needed, when formulating his daily meals. Other participants also pointed out these practices. Pablo, lower-class and vegan for four months, told us that his nutritionist gave him guidelines with recipes, including the daily nutritional requirements for a whole month. Consequently, nutritionists play a crucial role in reducing the initial complexity of maintaining a vegan lifestyle and providing dietary options that are nutritionally feasible.

It is worth mentioning that Raúl, who described his network of vegan information, has never gone to a nutritionist. However, he is well informed regarding this matter as a result of internet browsing. Thus, social media influencers not only play the role of identifying which products are edible (and those which are not), but also help share nutritional knowledge. These accounts report on protein and vitamin substitutes and provide healthy recipes to help newer and older vegans maintain their lifestyle within medical parameters. In this collective effort to spread information, even the nutritionists, such as Elías’ nutritionist, have Instagram accounts, on which they share nutritious recipes and useful nutritional tips to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

3.4. The Stabilization of Routines and Reflection

The aforementioned information converges on the confirmation and consolidation of new routines, following the classification of edible vegan food. These routines have become relatively stabilized, due to personal learning and a validated source of knowledge and ethical organizations. However, reflexivity can always re-emerge when vegans are faced with new products or situations and because reflexivity forms part of the collective practices in the community. In this sense, reflexivity is also routinized.

The first step in the stabilization of the routines is linked to personal learning and the accumulation of knowledge [18]. The quotes provided by Nicolás and Raúl help in understanding this idea. Nicolás, a lower-class vegan for nine years, demonstrates in the following quote the repetitive practices of searching for ingredients and building up knowledge relating to edible elements that create new purchase habits. For his part, Raúl, a middle-class vegan, pointed out in his last interview in 2022 that his knowledge had become “solidified”, reducing the complexity of decisions and their reflexivity:

“When you are vegan, you start by checking foods with many ingredients. You have to look at the products with these ingredients, many with strange names, but you do get used to it. When you start becoming a vegan, you spend about 10 minutes reading a label to see if it is vegan, but not anymore, you get used to it and you learn which products are vegan and which are not.”

“I think it has solidified a little more because I don’t even question it anymore, I don’t even think about it, because before I was super conscious of what I had to buy and worried about not making mistakes, I don’t know, now I’ve become used to the idea of knowing what to buy and where to buy it; it’s very easy for me to go to the supermarket.”

In fact, with regard to the reflective practices mentioned in the previous section, certain participants suggested creating an archive with vegan knowledge, which was necessary, so as to start normalizing the consumption process in more consolidated stages of veganism. This accumulated set of knowledge produces and reproduces food practices [18], as stated by Martina, who mentioned that she has “guidelines saved”, in order to quickly identify animal-sourced ingredients, without the need to resort to new research. This aspect was also explained by Viviana, a middle-class vegan who adopted this lifestyle one year and six months ago, when we interviewed her for the second time in 2021:

“Ah, I am not usually well informed about these things (laughs), I just trust them. I trust that if I bought it in a vegan store, it is vegan (. . .) I used to do that at the beginning, when I still ate these packaged things, cookies, that sort of thing. Then I started to find out that many of the things from the supermarket that are sold as normal are actually vegan or things that I used to like I didn’t know if they were vegan, like alcohol. It’s like some beers are vegan and others aren’t, wines too, those kind of things, so I started creating a database.”

Viviana mentions that from the information search conducted during her initial stage of veganism, she built a vegan “database” which today constitutes “not usually getting informed about those things”. We evidenced the construction of this database the first time we interviewed Viviana, when she told us that she always had to “learn new things about unknown additives, usually contained in non-vegan products. You always have to learn a little bit more and leave out other products”.

In this sense, as new ingredients and products are discovered, these do not have to be searched for again. It is worth mentioning that although an ingredient may be permanently classified as edible (or not) in the culinary archive, this is not the same with regard to products. Ingredients will always be non-vegan, while the product preparation can change, and inedible ingredients may be added. This, in addition to the fact that the culinary market is constantly launching new and unknown products, is why the aforementioned reflective process is followed every time the consumer is faced with a new food.

In this way, each time a consumer encounters a new product, the creation of this cuisine and its database is reviewed, and the updating process continues. However, the process becomes transformed, from the use of physical guidelines at the start, into mental and interiorized guidelines once the knowledge is consolidated. Along with these guidelines centered around edible and inedible ingredients, different strategies are used to perform this process daily by beginner vegans, but primarily by consolidated vegans. This acquired knowledge is a means of getting over reflexivity and assists with routinized food choices.

Viviana’s quote also highlights a relevant issue, which stabilizes certain practices, namely, that of trust. She mentions trust in relation to vegan stores that stock vegan products, reducing the necessity for constant reflecting and searching for information. In this case, the key to a vegan existence is a validated vegan institution, a store, which allows her to routinize her purchases. This also works with vegan labeling, implemented by local and international NGOs. These findings align with Twine’s work [6], which showed that knowledge of labels and trademarks is a relevant vegan competency to facilitate food choices.

Vegan networks, especially those online, as well as apps, are also a source of trust that help relieve the rigor of food practices. An example is Raúl’s information network mentioned previously; the Instagram account, Listado Vegano, similarly to others with the same purpose, plays a role of authority and trust, as the products displayed in these accounts are immediately considered edible.

The fact that the archive increases in knowledge does not mean that the food practice lacks reflection. On the contrary, the reflective practice turns into a collective phenomenon that allows vegans, by trusting the information presented, to spend less time on taxonomic classification. Along similar lines, authors such as Snejder et al. [40] mention that vegans present their lifestyle as a simple one. This supports previously described strategies that make veganism feasible and ensure its suitability for daily life.

In the same way, the acquired knowledge, due to the initial nutritional advice, is absorbed by the consumer; therefore, it is no longer necessary to review the guidelines and the recipes provided by nutritionists. This is illustrated by Marisol, upper-class and vegan for four years, who mentioned how the nutritional concerns were interiorized:

“Like, I think it is just acquired knowledge, I also know something about this. Well, the first time I went to the nutritionist, I kind of studied every paper they gave me, like the servings I had to eat and everything, so I remembered that a lot of the foods contain certain things, or the servings should be a certain size, like I

learnt that a little from memory (. . .). I feel that I know more or less how many things I have to eat in every meal to reach the amount I must eat, it is not like I say “um, today, oh, at 11 o’clock I will eat 50 grams of protein”, like I don’t count them (laughs), no, I don’t do that. I did incorporate these daily protein shakes because I realized that this way, I didn’t have to worry about that precisely. Like I drink one, and in the day, it tends to add up approximately to what I should be eating.”

Marisol describes how the nutritional knowledge delivered by the professional was incorporated into her knowledge archive. However, this does not involve a detailed reflection of nutritional grammage; instead, it has been systematized from food practices and culinary simplifications. The recipes provided by her nutritionist, such as the protein shake, were incorporated into her diet, meaning that she did not have to reflect on her protein intake for the rest of the day, she simply needed to prepare the shake and drink it. Other participants also mentioned porridge oats as a meal that reduces complexity, which helps them include “the seeds and nuts” needed during the day. However, not only the nutritional knowledge is interiorized, but also the practices linked with it. This is what Nicolás, a vegan for nine years and lower-class, stated, illustrating the mechanization of the learning acquired in the first years of being a vegan:

“The thing about seeds, like those from the nutritionist, is that if you don’t soak them before, they are worth nothing nutritionally, you know? So, I say, if I don’t soak them, I am practically wasting my money, so I had to form a habit in my mind, and at the beginning, I would forget some days and on others I wouldn’t, but gradually it became automatic. It is a topic that...it is like driving a car, you do it through inertia.”

Nicolás explains how these practices stop becoming reflective, such as soaking seeds; at the beginning, he had to resort to his memory to carry out the activity, but nowadays, he does it automatically. Therefore, this practice, along with others, is incorporated into a vegan habitus [14], which comes with a set of rules and culinary practices, some of which require a higher level of reflection than others, but nevertheless are ingrained in daily life.

In addition to the above, not only the recipes delivered by nutritionists are interiorized, but also those searched for and learnt initially by the participants adopting the new cuisine. This is what Consuelo, a vegan for eight years and upper-class tells us; although she does not like cooking, while being a vegan, she has learnt certain recipes:

“Generally, my sponge cakes and brownies are enjoyed by the public (. . .) and many people such as guests or my mom’s friends tell me, “hey, you made that without eggs, how does it rise?” or my grandmother always asks me, it is like the main question...how does it end up fluffy if it doesn’t contain eggs, but really there are truly simple recipes that I know from memory and that don’t fail.”

Within the citation, it is clear how people outside the vegan community ask for vegan recipes, accounting for the initial reflective break in culinary learning regarding the replacement of ingredients and methods of cooking foods, which during the later stages of veganism become known “from memory”, thanks to this practice.

Hence, from the acquisition of knowledge, the consumer regains control over his/her food consumption. This strongly reflective process at the beginning creates an archive of vegan knowledge, which is interiorized and accompanied by diverse strategies that appeal to an individual and establish a collective reflection, maintaining a feasible lifestyle, based on ethical principles. In this way, as with any other cuisine, vegan cuisine becomes a daily activity, which is useful for discriminating between edible and inedible foods, thereby meeting the daily nutritional requirements.

4. Conclusions

This article analyzes the strategies, both cognitive and practical, used by vegans in the process of adopting animal-free food consumption.

The research results show that adopting veganism involves acquiring a new social identity, in which a cognitive break in terms of classifying the world occurs, mainly linked to the redefinition of the categories of edible and inedible foods. This redefinition originates from moral vegan ethics, which oppose animal exploitation.

The maintenance of the vegan identity and the relevance of adhering to the moral imperative that guides it, entail a change in previous omnivorous routines and the adoption of an exercise of constant reflexivity, to control the risk of consuming foods of animal origin but also to prevent illnesses caused by not consuming animal products. The fieldwork showed four reflexive practices: reading the labels to know each product's ingredients, searching for information about products on the internet and in vegan communities, learning to cook vegan dishes, and consulting with nutritionists and dietitians.

Consolidating veganism implies individual and collective learning, allowing new routines to be established. These practices reduce complexity and reflexivity in food decisions. However, this process is not entirely stable. Instead, reflexivity will continually be updated with the appearance of new products, so that it becomes part of the vegan practice itself.

This research demonstrates that vegan consumers experience struggles in their food practices. What do we eat? What is in our foods? Why do we eat what we eat? These are questions that vegans are continuously pondering with regard to food. However, our results show that these questions come from vegans who are trying to simplify their decisions regarding the establishment of new normative frameworks, to guide their food consumption practices.

One potential limitation of our findings is that the participants in this study were self-selected. Except for one participant, we only interviewed people who successfully transitioned to veganism and were able to maintain their vegan practices within the period of this study. Therefore, the experience from those who did not respond or left our study might provide us with additional information on reflexivity that could help us to have a better understanding of it. Our results should be considered in this context, where the stabilization of reflexivity could be an outcome only in successful cases. We recommend that future studies focus on those who abandoned veganism.

Another limitation of this study is that our source of information is mainly self-reported reflexivity through interviews, having less information about the practice itself. Therefore, future studies could use accompanying participants in their food purchases as a main methodological technique. Linked with this issue, as other research using interviews, a final limitation of this study is social desirability [48]. However, we mitigated this problem by conducting interviews with the same participants in several waves.

This work contributes new information, in terms of understanding the transition to plant-based consumption, showing that adopting a new vegan identity involves assuming new food classifications and making routines reflexive. In this sense, the main contributions of this work to the literature are divisible into two aspects. First, this shows that the understanding of vegan practices improves when the cognitive mechanisms that drive them are considered; in this case, the reclassification of edible food categories. Indeed, this paper provides evidence that this is the key framework of reference for the practice. Second, this paper contributes to the literature regarding the reflexivity of routines, as it shows how, in the case of food practices that deviate from the dominant norms, reflexivity is a constant activity, which even becomes part of the routines themselves, so that routine and reflexivity are not opposing principles.

Finally, keeping in mind that a plant-based diet is associated with more ethical and sustainable consumption patterns, this research provides evidence of the obstacles to transitioning to newer food consumption patterns, as well as the role played by collective learning and the redefinition of cuisine in this process.

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