

Article

The Vegan Food Experience: Searching for Happiness in the Norwegian Foodscape

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to go beyond an oversimplified representation of the vegan food experience and approach the investigation of such experience, in particular of happiness deriving from food choices, including factors at the macro and micro level. Broadening the concept of foodscape to emphasize the experiential aspect of food, this study explored how the vegan food experience can be described as a situated story about vegans searching for hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. Veganism in a Norwegian context was investigated through analysis of various secondary and primary data sources, including newspapers, social media, websites, interviews, and observation. The findings suggested that the story framing the vegan food experience is characterized by a fundamental lack of interest and knowledge about plant-based food and veganism at the macro level. At the micro level, the story concerns vegans experiencing sensuous gratification, enjoyment, conviviality, and meaningfulness in limited groups, but also isolation and frustration. This study contributes to an approach to vegan food experiences that takes into consideration contextual factors, as well as relevant well-being related emotions at the individual level. From a practical point of view, this study provides an opportunity, in particular for government bodies, to improve information about the potential benefits and challenges of plant-based diets and confront possible discriminatory attitudes towards vegans.

Keywords: veganism; ethical eating; foodscape; happiness; hedonic and eudaimonic well-being

1. Introduction

More ethically-framed research on veganism and food is both desirable and opportune. This is due to the recent growth of plant-based dieters in Western societies [1]. On the one hand, such growth causes concern about possible health problems of not properly planned plant-based diets, in particularly vitamin B12 and iodine deficiencies, negative outcomes about bone structure and mental health [2–4]. On the other hand, some studies indicate that such diets might have important implications in terms of potential health and environmental benefits and business opportunities [5–9]. To be precise, more ethically-framed research on veganism is opportune as, although sometimes used as a synonymous of plant-based diets, veganism has ethical principles at its core. This is evident when referring to the origin of the term veganism, deriving from the intention to highlight the widespread animal exploitation occurring, not only in the meat industry, but also in the dairy industry and other industries and practices, such as those relating to clothing and entertainment [10]. Based on such principles, vegans choose products and practices other than those based on animal exploitation, and such choice is an ethical one. Thus, research on veganism and food should not overlook the ethical dimension of such phenomenon because ethics, and in particular animal ethics, is central to veganism.

The point of departure of this study was to go beyond an oversimplified representation of vegan food experiences as ascetic experiences that leave little or no place for hedonism [11,12]. In line with some previous studies about veganism, this study presented a more nuanced view of

vegan food experiences. This study's new perspective was that, to provide a deeper understanding of vegan food experiences, it is opportune to integrate insights from the point of view of vegans with factors about the context where their food experiences occur. The idea of this study was that an underlying context-specific story underpins vegans' experiences of food, which might involve hedonism and, more precisely, a search for happiness derived from self-oriented and others-oriented interests. The research question was: How can the vegan food experience be described as a story about a search for happiness? To frame this question, this study adopted scholarly contributions concerning lifestyle movements, food, and experiences [13–15]. This multidisciplinary approach was meant to contribute to a better understanding of the mechanisms of food practices in relation to happiness.

This article is structured as follows. Section 2 begins by presenting veganism as a lifestyle choice based on a search for well-being. It continues to present this study's experiential perspective, reporting some relevant previously-conducted studies about veganism and integrating them with insights from the experience literature. This section explains the concept of foodscape, highlighting the various dimensions and factors relating to a story that constitutes the main theme of the vegan food experience. Section 3 describes the method adopted to investigate the extreme case of vegan food experiences in Norway. Differently from the recent study about vegetarianism, understood in a broad way, and subjective well-being by Krizanova et al. [16] that is quantitative, this study approach has a qualitative approach and triangulates several data sources. Section 4 presents and discusses the main findings, including some epistemological reflections on the adopted multidisciplinary approach. The conclusions in Section 5 answer the research question, commenting on this study's theoretical contribution and indicating some practical recommendations and suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Veganism as a Lifestyle Choice Relating to Well-Being

This study viewed veganism as a lifestyle movement. Although differently understood within the various academic disciplines, a lifestyle can be described as the life choices of an individual belonging to a specific societal structure: A lifestyle is a “matter of chance and choice” [17]. A lifestyle encompasses people's everyday practices and, especially in the case of alternative choices, the individual and collective aspects of such practices may be not be as separate as they are sometimes perceived to be [15]. In line with such position, this study proposed that vegans, through their food choices and practices, reject specific aspects of the dominant culture and do so believing, more or less consciously, that this might promote social change in a direction that they view as desirable.

This study investigated veganism and food and focused on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. Food experiences are understood as occurrences that are idiosyncratic in nature and can be referred to different actions, such as cooking and shopping, and encompass numerous aspects, as nutrition, sensorial gratification or disgust, symbolic and socio-cultural values, and ethics. They are multifaceted phenomena that develop along various dimensions [18]. Hedonism (the experience of an immediate pleasure as a form of personal fulfilment) is one of those dimensions [19]. Another dimension that is particularly relevant to ethical eating choices concerns eudaimonism: Happiness in the sense of following a benevolent inclination to strive towards, and eventually obtain, something meaningful for ourselves and others [20,21]. Hedonism and eudaimonism are interrelated phenomena [22–24], as suggested by the concept of alternative hedonism, indicating the choice of ethical eaters to consume food differently from others [25,26]. Based on the recognition of this interrelationship, this study explored the hedonic and eudaimonic well-being relevant to veganism and food not as separated phenomena, but as dimensions of the same phenomenon that can be described as happiness deriving from food choices and practices.

Twine [27] explored veganism by adopting the concept of alternative hedonism, focusing on the meanings that vegans tend to associate with their eating practices. These were found to include peace, respect, non-violence, caring human–animal relations, and environmentalism. Differently from

Twine's study, the current study focused on the broader experiential aspects of food as experienced by vegans. Based on studies concerning ethical eating [28–31] and vegetarianism/veganism [32–35], this study viewed the vegan food experience as possibly leading not only to a sense of integrity, personal identity-construction, self-development, and meaningfulness as suggested by Twine [27], but also to sensuous gratification, enjoyment and conviviality, serenity, and elitism.

With regard to the potential of food to provide sensuous gratification and enjoyment, some studies indicated that vegans have more diverse diets than omnivores, spend more time cooking, and enjoy preparing their meals and learning about food [36]. As mentioned in the introduction, plant-based diets can lead to some health problems and to some benefits. The latter concern mainly the two major diseases of modern society—heart disease and cancer [2,4,37]. While a focus on the potential damages might contribute to a negative perception of vegans by non-vegans, focusing, more or less consciously, on the latter, vegans can experience pleasure due to their health-related expectations [38]. Health-related expected and, sometimes, experienced benefits can contribute to vegans' enjoyment of food.

Food experiences can nevertheless involve some negative emotions, such as dissatisfaction and boredom [39] and, in the case of vegans, some of these negative emotions might derive from the alternative aspect of their experiences in relation to the specific context. In particular, adherence to veganism is often a public declaration of an ethical position, which might lead to some difficulties in social situations [27,33,35,39]. Cole and Morgan [40] used the term “vegaphobia” to describe the way the dominant discourse about veganism tends to depict vegans in negative and disparaging terms. Bresnahan, Zhuang, and Zhu [41] observed that vegans can experience exclusion and disapproval from other people; something that they described as “daily stigma”. Similarly, Twine [42] used the phrase “killjoys at the table” to describe a situation in which vegans, through their conversations and discussions, or simply by their presence, might provoke negative emotions in other people. Vegans might then “re-make joy” by finding alternative ways to be happy, typically by joining groups and attending events with like-minded people [42,43]. Other coping strategies can include, for example, the avoidance of confrontations on ethical issues and a focus on positive issues such as health benefits [44].

2.2. A Contextual and Experiential Perspective on Veganism

The inseparability of the individual and collective spheres of veganism as a lifestyle movement, and the interrelationship of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, provided an opportunity to develop a contextual understanding of the vegan food experience as a search for happiness. This could be done by adopting the concept of foodscape to investigate the historical, political, socio-cultural, economic, and ethical context in which food-related activities occur [14,45]. The foodscape's ethical dimension is particularly relevant to veganism, and the foodscape of the vegan food experience can be viewed as the context in which such a lifestyle is practiced and promoted [46,47]. The foodscape concept is valuable for the study of phenomena situated in a particular place and concerning a group's relationship with food and possible relevant power relations [48]. Consequently, the use of this concept was particularly suitable for exploring veganism and vegan food experiences.

The concept of foodscape can be developed further using the concept of experiencescape. Such a concept derives from the service literature, where it is used to indicate the context in which the service encounter occurs [49,50]. The experiencescape concept describes a scape consisting of the environmental, social, and symbolic factors that, together, promote a main theme that acts as a story that gives meaning and coherence to the experience [13]. Bertella [51] applied this broadened understanding of foodscape to a case study about vegan food experiences in two guesthouses. Bertella [52] referred to the aforementioned foodscape dimensions and proposed a main theme: A story that frames and gives coherence and meaning to specific food experiences (Figure 1).

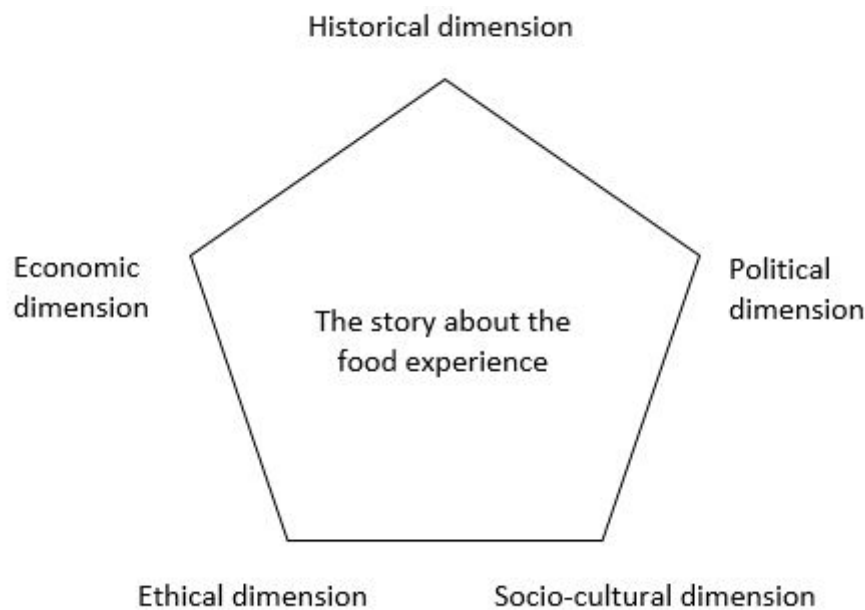


Figure 1. The foodscape framework. Adapted from Bertella [50].

Bertella [51] proposed that the story about the vegan food experience is a story of resistance and coherence, characterized by a conflictual relationship with the dominant contextual factors and a reflective choice of respect for animals, nature, and other humans. Bertella [51] did not pay particular attention to the possibility that such experiences might be important sources of happiness for vegans. The current study aimed to shed some light on this aspect by examining the emergence of a possible story about a search for happiness through food experiences.

3. Method

To investigate how the vegan food experience can be described as a story about a search for happiness, this study investigated constructions of veganism in the Norwegian foodscape. In Norway, veganism is a new phenomenon and, due to the geographical characteristics of the location, practical challenges undermine the possibility of a varied plant-based diet. Norway can be viewed as an extreme case, because the homogeneity and conformity of its society generally discourages alternative lifestyle choices [52]. This investigation was conducted at the macro (national, regional), and micro levels of society. With regard to the latter, the focus was on vegans living in Tromsø (ca. 75,000 inhabitants). Far from any large urban center and located within the Arctic Circle, this town has only recently experienced the emergence of a loosely-organized vegan movement. This was deduced from the recent establishment of a social media forum (Facebook group) and was confirmed by the author's personal experience as a long-term Tromsø resident.

As shown in Table 1, this study used a variety of data sources [53–55]. Table 1 shows these sources and their relevance to the various aspects of the foodscape and the vegans' food experiences that the study explored. The secondary data was collected in April 2018 and the primary data was collected in April–June 2018, with the exception of participation in an event in September 2017. Relevant social media (Facebook pages, blogs) were suggested by two key informants.

Table 1. Data sources.

Data Sources	Details	Relevance
Website: Department of Agriculture (landbruksdirektoratet.no)	2017 report	Overview over food production (economic dimension)
Website: Ministry of Health and Care Services (helsedirektoratet.no)	2017 report; 3 posters targeting schools	Overview over food consumption and promotion (economic, political, socio-cultural dimension)
Websites: Eggs and Meat information Bureau, and Fruit and Vegetables Information Bureau (matprat.no; frukt.no)	Pictures from sections “Diet and Health” and “Five each day” (68); 10 most recent recipes for each Bureau	Food promotion by the most popular (Eggs and Meat Bureau, 212 462 FB followers) and the most relevant (Fruit and Vegetables, 110 156 FB followers) public agencies (economic, political, socio-cultural dimension)
Website: Destination Management Organization Northern Norway (nordnorge.com)	Articles from the section “Local Food” (2); pictures (5)	Gastronomy as a tradition and identity (historical, socio-cultural dimension)
Participation in local food events: Tromsø food festival (September 2017): (1) Meeting about local food and tourism; (2) vegan burger course; (3) food tourism seminar for the local tourism sector (January 2018)	Field notes; conversations with vegans (4)	Gastronomy as cultural heritage (historical, socio-cultural dimension; the story of the vegan food experience)
Website: National newspaper (2016–April 2018) (Aftenposten.no) Search words: <i>Vegansk, veganisme, veganer</i>	Articles (44 of which 15 written by vegans in a section dedicated to youth)	Veganism in the public discourse at the national level (veganism and the vegan food experience story)
Website: Regional (northern Norway) newspaper (2005–April 2018) (Nordlys.no) Search words: <i>Vegansk, veganisme, veganer</i>	Articles (13)	Veganism in the public discourse at the regional level (veganism and the vegan food experience story)
3 FB pages focused on vegan food (FB1: <i>Veggispreik</i> ; FB2: <i>Hva slags mat lager du i dag?</i> ; FB3: <i>Vegansk mat spørsmål og svar</i>); 1 FB page about vegans living in northern Norway (FB 4: <i>Veganere i Tromsø</i>); 3 vegan food blogs (Blog 1: <i>Veganeren</i> ; Blog 2: <i>Veganmisjonen</i> [56]; Blog 3: <i>Veganmannen</i>); 1 personal blog by a vegan living in northern Norway (Blog 4: <i>bindannmalveg</i>); the website of the Norwegian vegan association (<i>vegansamfunnet.no</i>)	FB pages posts: 20 most recent posts for each Page (80); blogs: 5 entries reporting the bloggers’ personal experience about being vegan; website: 7 self-portraits of vegans	The vegans’ perspective on food, veganism, and Self-perception (veganism and the vegan food experience story)
Interviews (see Table 2)	Interviews (10, including 2 key informants: one of the managers of the Norwegian vegan association, a blogger)	The vegans’ perspective on food veganism (the vegan food experience story)

Table 2. Information about the interviewees.

Selection Criteria	Self-Identification as Vegans (Ethical Motivations), Snowball Method with First Recruitments on the Tromsø Facebook Page about Vegans Living in Town
Interviews	2 on Skype (of which one after a meeting during an event); 8 face-to-face
Key informants	2
Other interviewees	8
Gender	8 females, 2 males
Origin	4 not Norwegian
Age	20–50
How long they have been vegan for	ca. 8 months–ca. 12 years

Due to the novelty of veganism in Norway, a timeframe of two years was used when searching for relevant articles. For the national newspaper the search covered the period January 2016–April 2018. Due to the scarcity of relevant articles, the time period for the regional newspaper was extended to cover all the online archives (January 2005–April 2018).

Table 2 provides information about the interviewees. This information is complementary to the information given in the last row of Table 1 and related to the perspective on veganism and food by those individuals adhering to veganism. The interviews allowed the investigation of the food experience at the micro (individual) level. Informed consent was obtained before the interviews and the candidates were oriented on their right to withdraw, data protection, and possibility to review the interviews transcripts and the study's findings presentations. To ensure their anonymity, the individual characteristics of these subjects have not been reported in detail. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 min and were audio recorded and transcribed. Among the interviewees were two key informants, and the interviews were performed until reaching data saturation.

The goal of the interviews was to elicit rich first-person descriptions of vegans' lived experiences. At the beginning of the interviews, the researcher identified herself as a vegan, in order to build a rapport with the interviewees and create a trust relationship [57,58]. The interviews began with narrative background information, with respondents being asked to explain: (1) Their backgrounds and their vegan lifestyle choices, (2) what they liked about being vegan, in general and in relation to food, and (3) whether they felt that the pleasure deriving from food-related experiences (shopping, cooking, eating) were facilitated or hampered by any factors and, if so, which ones. When necessary, the researcher probed the respondents' answers to obtain examples or expand upon certain statements.

The textual data, including the secondary data and the interview transcripts, was analyzed using a deductive approach [59]. Initial coding was conducted according to the foodscape dimensions (historical, political, socio-cultural, economic, and ethical) and the emotions reported about ethical eating, in general and in the case of veganism (sensuous gratification, sense of integrity, personal identity-construction, self-development, meaningfulness, a sense of integrity, serenity, elitism, social difficulties, and isolation). Thereafter, the coded data was analyzed to identify patterns, possible new aspects, and emerging themes that could be relevant to identifying a main story about the vegan food experience in relation to the search for hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. Textual data from recipes and pictorial data showing pictures of plant-based food were analyzed along two dimensions: The types of food/recipes represented (only plant-based, or a combination of plant-based and animal-derived food) and the typology of the food/recipe (ingredient, snack, meal, festive meal, etc.).

4. Findings and Discussion

The findings are now presented and discussed, paying attention, first, to the macro dimensions of the foodscape (Section 4.1), then to the lived food experiences of vegans—in particular the hedonic and eudaimonic aspects (Section 4.2) and the related challenges (Section 4.3). Finally, the story of the

food experience of vegans is presented, highlighting the main themes that emerged from the case and addressed to the research question (Section 4.4).

4.1. Plant-Based Food and Veganism in Norway and Northern Norway

The following tables present a summary of the main findings about this study's foodscape at the national and regional level. In particular, Table 3 refers to plant-based food and Table 4 refers to veganism.

Table 3. The main themes concerning plant-based food.

Main Themes	
Department of Agriculture, Ministry of Health and Care Services	Plant-based food: Import, good for health, its consumption has increased but it is still too low.
Food Information Bureaus	Plant-based food has a marginal role. Only a minority of pictures (8 out of 68) represent exclusively plant-based food (as ingredients, snacks). 1 out of 20 recipes is an exclusively plant-based complete meal.
Destination Management Organization Northern Norway	Food is described in relation to quality, small coastal and rural communities (local production), traditions. The articles and the related pictures refer mainly to animal-derived food (especially fish). The only non-animal derived foods reported on the website are: Seaweed, salt, traditional flat bread
Local events	Food is associated with quality, production from small coastal and rural communities (local production), traditions, business opportunities, branding. One arrangement within an event is dedicated to vegan food (vegan burger course). During the tourism seminar, farm animal welfare was mentioned, highlighting the differences between industrial animal farming and the small household system usually practiced in northern Norway

Table 4. The main themes concerning veganism, presented from the most to the least prominent.

Main Themes	
National newspaper	Veganism as a new trend for youth and artists. New vegan products (processed food). Veganism in conflict with national traditions and food security. Veganism as a lifestyle that respects animals and the natural environment (data from the youth section with articles written by vegans)
Regional newspaper	Veganism as a new trend concerning mainly artistic contexts. Vegans mentioned in ridiculous terms.

As shown in Table 3, the data from the public agencies suggested that plant-based food has a marginal position in the Norwegian foodscape. As reported in the first row, although the national plant-based food supplies rely on imports [60], their consumption has considerably increased, and there are signs of political support for them due to their health and environmental benefits [61]. This has been evident in the Ministry of Health and Care Services posters targeting children; for example, in a poster for secondary schools, it was stated that “students should be given access to vegetables, fruit or berries daily” and “following environmentally-friendly good practice . . . plant-based and fish meals should be central” [62]. Plant-based food tends to be combined mainly with fish and, sometimes, low-fat dairy products. Despite this willingness to increase the consumption of plant-based food, animal-derived food dominates the eggs and meat as well the fruit and vegetables Food Bureaus. As reported in the second row of Table 3, in the vast majority of cases, plant-based food, when available, has a marginal position and is viewed as supplemental to animal-based meals.

The third and fourth rows concern the tourism and event context. The few non-animal derived foods (salt, seaweed, and bread) presented on the tourism website do not constitute complete meals. The data of the tourist organization, as well as events concerning local animal-derived food, highlight its cultural aspects and its role in relation to the economy of small coastal and rural communities. With regard to these events, it is worth noting that a side event at the local food festival was dedicated to vegan burgers, and animal welfare was mentioned in the tourism seminar.

In summary, the main themes of the reported data sources in Table 3 suggested that plant-based food has a marginal position in the Norwegian foodscape, regarding its economic, socio-cultural, and political [14,45]. With regard to the ethical dimension [46,47], none of the data showed any sign of such a dimension of food as understood by vegans. Ethically-relevant reflections, when reported, concerned the socio-economic sustainability of the region. Since sustainability relies on an underlying anthropocentric view of the world, according to which animals are viewed as resources, this was in conflict with veganism. Similarly, the mention of animal welfare observed during the event was not in line with veganism, since it referred to the welfare of animals that, nonetheless, were viewed as food sources for humans.

To explore further the specific foodscape, focusing on how veganism was represented in the public discourse, the data from newspapers was analyzed. The main findings are summarized in Table 4.

In the national newspaper, some comments related to a perceived conflict between veganism and Norwegian traditions, and to food security. One example was an article in which a village resident commented critically on “urban trends”. The article reported his words: “Vegans eat a lot of imported food. If there is a crisis, they will be the first to die” [63]. The article provided a link to a video entitled: “Norway is not a land for vegans”. Articles reporting about vegans concern usually artists and “green” people [64,65]. Veganism was sometimes reported as causing difficulties for non-vegans who, in private and on job-related occasions, felt inconvenienced by the necessity to change some of their practices and routines, or simply to confront new situations: For example, one article reported the owner of a restaurant being shocked when his chef stated that he would no longer taste the animal-derived food that he prepared for the guests, because he had become vegan [66].

The 15 articles written by vegans and included in the youth section of the national newspaper presented a very different view of veganism, with animal rights and environmental concerns being the main themes [67]. In a few articles, the term *matglede* was used. *Matglede* is a Norwegian word formed by the words for food (*mat*) and joy (*glede*), and can be defined as the joy deriving from all food-related activities, not limited to eating and tasting, but also including shopping for food, cooking, and social eating: For example, an article reported as follows:

“I think that it is important to present the vegan choice as a choice that can be taken by everybody. We [vegans] are not strange people ... who eat grass. ... Each vegan meal makes a difference for the animals and the environment ... It is about *matglede*, I think. I believe that it is important to inspire people, through *matglede*, and not point your finger at those who eat animals” [68].

Some of these articles reported social difficulties. One article critically asked whether it is “trendy” or “social suicide” to be vegan [69].

At the regional level, veganism tended to be presented as a growing trend relating to an alternative “artistic” lifestyle; for example, an article reported “many vegans and vegetarians” participating in a rural music festival [70] and another talked about a well-known artist going vegan [71]. Four articles represented vegans as ridiculous; for example, one journalist described the vegans as “those who feel sorry, not only for the steak, but also for the milk, the cheese, and the unfertilized eggs” [72]. In a similar vein, two articles described vegans as “angry” people committed to making a “feverish attempt to be 100% politically correct” [73,74].

The findings derived from the analysis of the newspapers showed that veganism was presented quite superficially in the public discourse and in rather negative terms, with the only exception being the articles written by vegans. The presence of the latter indicated that veganism may slowly become more visible in the mainstream culture. These findings suggested that vegans might represent some

of the stereotypes and challenges indicated in the literature [27,33,35,39–42], as commented on in the study about the vegan foodscape by Bertella [51]. This aspect will be presented in the next section, which turns to the investigation at the individual level.

4.2. Veganism, Hedonism, and Eudaimonism

Vegans tend to describe food experiences by referring to food's sensuous appeal. This provides an opportunity to re-think the dichotomy between self-oriented pleasure and ethical behavior and consider the possibility that ethical choices that support eudaimonic experiences do not necessarily compromise hedonic experiences [21,24,29]. All the interviewees mentioned taste of the food (described as "delicious" and "fantastic") as well as the color and smell, especially in the case of raw ingredients, such as herbs and fruit (ID 1–10). Similar comments about the sensuous appeal of vegan ingredients and meals were made during the informal conversations with the vegan participants at the burger course, and they were also evident in the case of the professional cooks portrayed in the blogs and articles by the vegan association. As reported on the vegan association's website: "Good food appeals to all the senses" [75]. Some of the interviewed vegans claimed to be particularly interested in food. One interviewee commented that even the food waste from a vegan meal looks nice—"much nicer than ... the waste of animal-derived foods ... That looks quite disgusting to me!" (ID 3).

Food variety was commented on slightly differently by the interviewed vegans. One interviewee, originally from outside Norway, reported missing the opportunity to enjoy varied local vegetables and fruit all year round. He said:

"I love apples ... There are not many kinds of apples, but here [in northern Norway] apples are very standard: all the year round, the same apples, and not as good as the ones you can take directly from the tree and eat!" (ID 4).

He and three other interviewees (ID 3, 9, and 10) commented negatively on the impossibility of eating self-produced food in northern Norway; however, one respondent (ID 5) reported finding Tromsø particularly vegan-friendly in terms of variety, and several vegans commented positively on the considerable broadening of choice in recent years (ID 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, and 10).

Commenting on quality and variety, several blogs reported that variation and good raw ingredients were more important than food traditions. The importance of creativity and the desire to experiment were also mentioned. With regard to traditions, several blogs broadly commented, on the vegan association website, about the Christmas celebrations. Here, the concept of "veganization" (imitating non-vegan meals using vegan ingredients) is relevant; for example, the recipe for *vegisterkaker* (meatballs prepared with milk, potatoes, nutmeg, pepper, and ginger)—the veganized version of the traditional Norwegian meat-based *medisterkaker*—was provided by several sources [76].

In ordinary cookery, creativity and curiosity are also viewed as important. One interviewee commented:

"Many think that, when you become vegan, you always eat the same food, but for me at least, it was quite opposite ... It was not that "a door closed" ... but that "many doors opened." I discovered so many ingredients and recipes that I didn't know about!" (ID 1).

In a blog, a vegan wrote:

"There are simply so many ingredients that I never really paid attention to, and so many combinations that I never ever thought of. I always liked cooking, but since I went vegan, I enjoy cooking even more. ... By the way, for a lot of people it sounds strange, but since I went vegan I eat more different things than before ... just so many possibilities I have never considered before" [77].

Inspiration by other cultures was also mentioned. An interviewee reported:

"I love curries, and there is so much you can do with vegetables and spices. I have learned to cook at home and my mom has always preferred vegetarian food, but since I travelled and lived abroad, I have learned a sort of multicultural approach to cooking. I like to mix colors and tastes. I get very inspired by Indian cooking, although I have never been to India" (ID 5).

It was notable that, in these comments, enjoyment played an important role and could be viewed as a form of food-related hedonism [19]. In a few cases, the data showed that food preparation was a social activity, but only in two cases of vegan couples. One interviewee reported:

“My partner and I like to cook together, exchange ideas and . . . just be in the kitchen or at the table together. They are usually simple meals . . . but we love them. I don’t think we need complicated meals in our everyday routine . . . We wouldn’t have the time for them! But simple food can be very tasty, and preparing it while talking about how our day was . . . at work and with the kid . . . well, it’s pleasant” (ID 3).

With regard to the possible enjoyment of sharing food with others, this was mentioned by several interviewees and referred to in the context of either having guests over for dinner or being invited to eat with friends who knew and respected their vegan choice. This suggested that, within limited groups, vegans might not face the social challenges outlined in the literature [27,35,42]

Two interviewees reported, differently from the people mentioned above, that the enjoyment of food preparation had a marginal position in their everyday lives. One interviewee said: “Preparing food is just something I do. A routine. It can be pleasant, but I really don’t think very much about it” (ID 6).

These individuals were happy to use processed vegan food. Processed food was also mentioned by the other interviewees, but mostly as a rare option to save time. Both processed and homemade food appeared on the all the consulted Facebook pages. On the local vegan Facebook page, the vast majority of the posts (17 of 20) focused on food, and these tended to concern new processed foods—for example, ice cream and frozen pizza—coming onto the market, in some cases accompanied by a picture of the specific product. This was reported with enthusiasm, using positive emoticons. Examples of such posts were:

“Oumph pizza can now be found at the Kiwi supermarket in Fredrik Langes Street!”

“Ice cream at the Eurospar market in Kvaløya!”

Examples of positive reactions were:

“It (a vegan product) can also be found at the Eurospar supermarket in Langnes”

“And they also sell it (a vegan product) at the Eurospar supermarket in Tromsdalen 🍌”

“Wow, this is super cool!”

“Hallelujah!”

“I tried it, and it is ve-e-e-ry good!”

“It is crazily good!!!”

The other Facebook pages focused on recipes for homemade food that were sometimes accompanied by pictures. Among the recipes were some that were suitable for special occasions—often veganized classic recipes.

The interview data showed that the vast majority of vegans felt that they had improved the quality of their diets by becoming vegans (ID1–4, 6–10). Health was mentioned often as a very welcome consequence of the ethical choice of veganism. One interviewee (ID2) expressed a sense of relief when thinking about vegan eating. She said that she never feels guilty about eating too much, as several of her friends claim to.

In addition to the hedonic aspects commented on above, the findings showed quite clearly that the vegan food experience had eudaimonic connotations. These related, in particular, to ethical reflections, a sense of identity, integrity, and personal development (e.g., Soper 2008; 19; 31]. The interviewed vegans commented on animal rights and, sometimes, environmental ethics. These ethical considerations were associated with individual identity development, as observed in the following excerpts:

“This [to become vegan] is without any doubt the best choice I have made for myself, the animals, and the environment” [76].

“As a kid I loved animals, as kids tend to do ... I have always shown interest and care towards animals such as cats and dogs ... and then, when I became a teenager, the idea of eating animals started to seem very cruel to me ... and just unfair” (ID 2).

Several interviewees expressed the idea that becoming vegan was a choice compatible with their true identity. In their view, their animal-friendly inclination was inborn, but was somehow overridden by the norms and expectations of the socio-cultural context. One interviewee commented about this, saying: “The more I read, the more I realized that this [veganism] was completely in line with my values. It was definitely something for me ... for the person I want to be” (ID 7). Similarly, in a blog, the following consideration was reported: “I think I was actually born vegan, or at least vegetarian” [77].

A strong sense of commitment emerged from some of the data; for example, when asked whether he thought he could live forever as a vegan, an interviewee answered: “In my opinion this question is strange ... It is like asking whether a feminist will be a feminist forever. You would never ask that of a feminist ... and it’s the same for veganism” (ID 6).

One interviewee (ID 4) said that he had recently consumed self-caught fish. During the interview, he appeared to have reflected thoroughly on this so that, although self-identifying himself as a vegan, but not fully committed to veganism, his commitment related to the effort needed to make the final decision. He commented on this as follows:

“I have always loved to be outside ... in nature ... since I was a kid ... and then, as a teenager ... part of being outdoors was fishing. When I started to think about veganism ... I considered whether I was willing to change this ... and I’ll probably do it. Right now, I feel that doing what I have always done to relax, feel free ... camping outdoors, taking almost no food with me ... and catching it myself ... I see that that is not in line with veganism of course ... but ... in a way ... I’m not there yet” (ID 4).

Such statements were interpreted as veganism as a process of becoming: A sort of search for a satisfying way of living.

4.3. Challenges to Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-Being

Confirming the complexity of food experiences and, in particular, ethical eating (e.g., Soper, 2008), and in line with several studies about veganism [42], the findings showed some challenges in relation to food experiences. Some concerned the feeling of missing out on something good and others, the practical aspects. Two interviewees (ID 4, 6) mentioned the “temptation” to taste meat (hamburgers, steaks) when they smelled it. The data from two interviewees and a blog reported some difficulties when first becoming vegan, due to their lack of knowledge about food (ID 6, 8) [78]. Two other interviewees (ID 3 and 4) expressed concern about how the Norwegian school system might react when they enrolled their child.

Most of the challenges reported by vegans concerned social eating. This aspect was reported on by some online sources and was extensively commented on by all the interviewees, often in relation to family dinners and social events at work. This was in line with the literature that, for example, reported vegans’ “daily stigma” deriving from stepping out of the mainstream [41,42]. All the interviewees told stories about negative, or at least uncomfortable, episodes occurring in social situations. Two exceptions (ID 1 and 2) were those interviewees who specified that, having numerous vegetarian and vegan friends, these episodes were quite rare. Most of the interviewees (ID 3–7, and 10) commented on the discomfort of being the only vegan among a group of people and being asked to explain or, sometimes, defend their choice. This also pertained to servers and cooks at restaurants and cafés; for example, one interviewee said:

“I ask whether the food is vegan ... and I never know if they understand and I can trust them. ... My sister’s husband, who is a cook, told me that they [cooks] hate vegans ... I have to say that sometimes I feel exactly like this: I’m perceived as a difficult customer, a problem” (ID 7).

This quotation was in line with the idea of vegans as “killjoys at the table” [42]. Similar comments were reported by a young vegan (ID 6) who, when visiting some relatives, was warned by his father

not to annoy them by talking about “his veganism”. One interviewee (ID 7) reported her daughter lying to the grandchild, telling her that “Granny is allergic to meat, fish, and dairy”, instead of telling the truth about her choice.

Commenting on social eating, one interviewee said: “What I’d like is ... not to be noticed ... Just enjoy the company, be part of the gang, and eat my food in peace” (ID 10).

During one interview, the interviewee (ID 10) opened an international vegan Facebook page on her mobile to show how widespread this issue is and how deeply it is felt by many vegans. Among the viewed posts, some were quite explicit in this sense; for example, one read:

“How do you guys handle having close friends who aren’t vegan and insist that they could never go vegan? I’m torn, because I have great affection for these people ... It crushes me that they don’t care about the animals and environmental impact of their choices. It implies a level of selfishness, ignorance, and lack of character I’d normally seek to avoid in friends, but then I think maybe that’s too harsh a judgment. I don’t think it’s reasonable to banish all non-vegans from my life, and I was not always vegan ... So ... what should I do?”

These findings confirmed that the social aspect of vegans’ food experiences involved a sense of isolation and loneliness. Some scholarly contributions about ethical eating have suggested a desire for elitism [28], but the findings of this study suggested quite the opposite, with the vegans often trying to blend in.

Some data from the interviews and the articles from the vegan association about Christmas celebrations recommended strategies that vegans might apply in challenging social situations. These strategies were very similar to those indicated in the literature [42–44] and varied from avoiding social events to seeking the company of “allies” who might share, or at least respect, their choice.

The data from the interviews revealed that, for some vegans, a problematic aspect that could interfere with their enjoyment of food concerned a feeling of uneasiness. On the one hand, the vegans seemed to feel that their food choice was morally correct and important, while on the other hand, they felt that it was not enough because, as an interviewee commented, “violence against animals is everywhere” (ID 3). Some of the interviewees (ID 3–8) reported that this feeling of being powerless can cause some frustration. Although the data was not sufficient to come to any conclusion, it can be proposed that this sense of powerlessness and frustration, together with a diffused sense of isolation, can develop into anxiety and might be one of the elements that contribute to compromising vegans’ mental health [37].

4.4. *The Story about the Vegan Food Experience: A Search for Happiness?*

The major themes framing the vegan food experience story at the macro level referred to the marginal position of plant-based food, the almost complete absence of ethical reflections in line with the main tenets of veganism, and a quite superficial (sometimes discriminatory) way of describing vegans and their choice. With regard to the latter, the exception was the public presence of some young vegans expressing and explaining their views. Applying the concept of foodscape, Bertella [51] proposed that the story behind vegan food experiences is a story of resistance, characterized by a conflictual relation with the dominant contextual factors. To a certain extent, this applied also to the case investigated in the current study. To be more precise, in the case of Norway, the story at the macro level might be better described as a fundamental lack of interest and understanding in the mainstream society. Consequently, in this particular time, when veganism is an emerging phenomenon, there is no open debate about veganism in Norway, in general or in relation to food.

At the micro level, Bertella [51] described the vegan food story as a story about a reflective choice of respect towards animals, nature, and other humans. This, in particular with regard to respecting animal rights, emerged clearly from the current study. This study’s findings confirmed the findings of previously-conducted studies about veganism, such as meaningfulness, social difficulties, and the strategic avoidance and management of possible unpleasant situations [27,42,44]. With its focus on happiness, this study’s findings added some new insights in the vegan food experience. The findings

highlighted clearly the sensuous pleasure (taste, smell, and color) that vegans can obtain from food and the sense of conviviality in limited social groups. In relation to the latter, it was noted that the sense of elitism found in some ethical eating studies [28] did not seem to apply to vegans. Some findings suggested that the vegan food experience story is also a story of feeling powerless in relation to animal oppression.

Figure 2 summarizes the main findings relating to vegan food experiences, as investigated by adopting the foodscape framework presented in Figure 1.

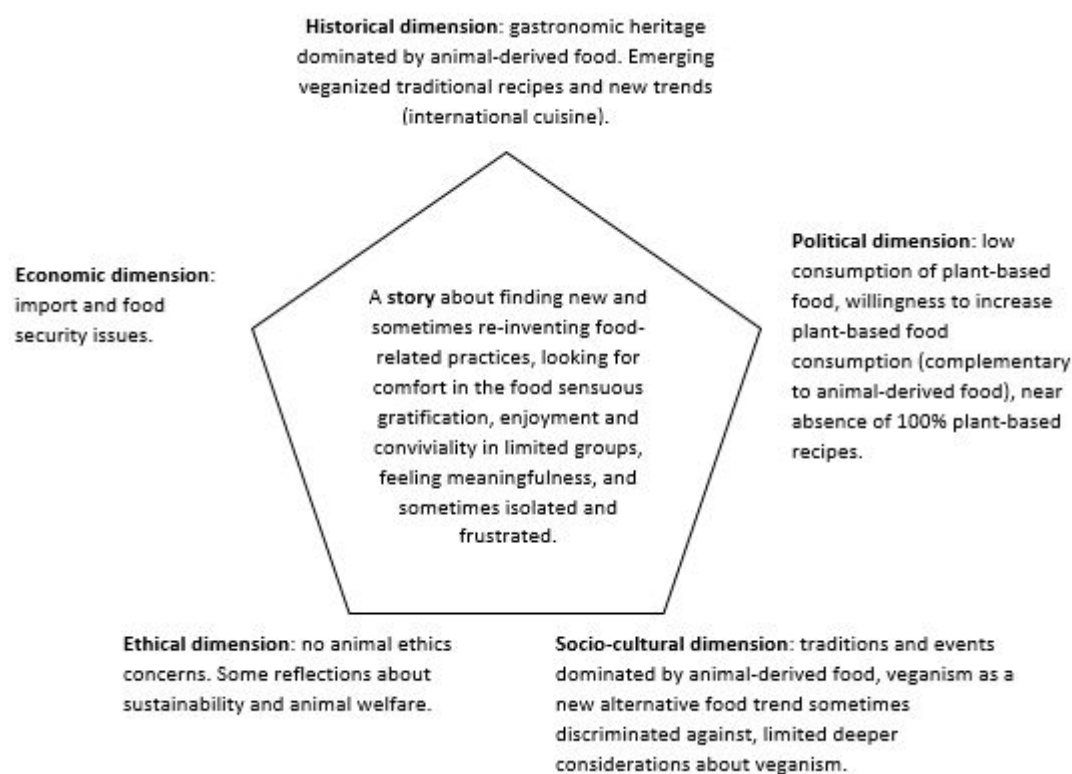


Figure 2. The vegan food experience illustrated using the foodscape framework.

In summary, the vegan food experience story is far from the ascetic experience sometimes portrayed in the literature [11,12]. The story that emerged from this study was about a search for happiness in a broader context, where the core element of such a choice (animal ethics) is not acknowledged in the mainstream non-vegan context. Such a search occurred through some new and some re-invented food-related practices (discovering new ingredients, trying new products, veganizing recipes), finding comfort in the sensuous gratification of food, enjoyment and conviviality in limited groups, and the meaningfulness of acting according to one's own ethical perspective. However, this search occurred through a process that tended to be characterized by an underlying sense of isolation and frustration. Through the adoption of the foodscape concept, broadened with the inclusion of the perspective of a main story framing the experience, this study highlighted the complexity of the vegan food experience occurring in not particularly favorable contexts. This provided quite a rich description of the multifaceted search for happiness by minorities whose food choices and practices differ from mainstream ones.

4.5. Reflections on the Multidisciplinary Approach to Veganism and Food Happiness

This study adopted a multidisciplinary approach to explore the vegans' search for happiness through food practices. As observed by de Garine [78], both biological, sociocultural, and psychological aspects are relevant to the investigation of food and, therefore, multidisciplinary studies are not only desirable, but also needed. Such need derives also from the increasing public discourses concerning

food: Such discourses are diverse and report about numerous challenges, for example in relation to nutrition, sustainability, and multicultural societies [79]. The scholarly contributions on which this study's theoretical framework was based included food related studies as well as studies concerning lifestyle movements and experiences. In addition, the concept of happiness was described by using psychological studies. This multidisciplinary approach was chosen aiming to a deep understanding of veganism, food practices, and happiness deriving from the potential complementarity of the various disciplines.

The findings show that the chosen multidisciplinary approach was useful to uncover the complexity of food practices by vegans and, at the same time, to represent such complexity in relatively simple terms using the concept of story. Such a concept is discussed in the methodology literature in relation to narrative research methods [80]. This study advances the possibility that the concept of story could be viewed also as a way to frame research on complex phenomena that can benefit from inputs from different disciplines. The latter can be conceptualized as the various perspectives through which the same story can be told. Each discipline brings to the study a perspective so that the story can be represented in its complexity and richness.

5. Conclusions

This study explored vegan food experiences by adopting the concept of foodscape, reflecting on various factors at the macro and micro level, and focusing on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. It conducted a case study concerning Norway. This study concluded that the investigated vegan food experience can be viewed as a story that is quite marginal to the mainstream culture and focused on a search for hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. More precisely, such a story is multifaceted and is characterized by food's sensuous gratification, new and reinvented practices, enjoyment and conviviality in limited groups, meaningfulness, isolation, and frustration. The results suggest that the limited or lack of understanding of veganism by non-vegans and the presence of some open hostility act as obstacles for the search for food-related happiness by vegans.

A question that could be asked is whether this study's findings can be extended to other types of ethical food consumption. This seems to depend on the assumptions of the specific ethical choice. In the case of animal ethics, which are central to veganism, the assumptions are not shared by mainstream Western culture; a consequence of this is that food consumption by vegans might be a more complex phenomenon than, for example, fair trade or local eating.

The theoretical contribution of this study is a contextual and experiential approach to vegan food consumption. Such an approach centers on the concept of foodscape and includes relevant factors at the macro and micro levels, and a unified story that frames food experiences. This approach is particularly valuable, due to the complexity and dynamics of food trends, practices, and ethical reflections, especially in an increasingly multicultural society.

Considering the negative emotions felt by the vegans in this study and confirmed by other studies, future research could direct its attention toward those individuals who follow the dominant food choices and tend to underestimate and ridicule veganism. These studies could investigate to what extent the individuals are aware of their effect on vegans and how they understand their search for food pleasure in relation to ethical reasoning (animal and environmental ethics).

Based on the findings concerning the limited knowledge that non-vegans have about veganism and the suspect by some vegans that such ignorance might also be found among people potentially affecting their life (e.g., food professionals, school employees), it is recommended that more attention should be paid, in particular by government bodies, to assisting vegans in their choice. A possible initiative might concern the dissemination of more accurate information about plant-based food. Some examples can be the arrangement of training courses for food professionals from the public and private sectors and the encouragement to include plant-based options in the menu of public canteens and restaurants. Considering the possible social difficulties and discrimination that some vegans seem to experience, other initiatives could involve campaigns and school courses. The aim of such initiatives

would be to inform and educate adults and youth about the dietary aspect of veganism as well as aspects concerning non-food related choices (e.g., clothes, recreational activities), and, ultimately, to promote tolerant attitudes.

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