Bad avocados, culinary standards, and knowable knowledge: Culturally appropriate rejections of meat reduction

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Bad avocados, culinary standards, and knowable knowledge: Culturally appropriate rejections of meat reduction

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Abstract

Cultural conventions are central to tackling unsustainable consumption. In the Global North food conventions are increasingly contested due to the political importance of climate change and the share of global greenhouse gas emissions tied to animal food production and consumption. Significant reductions in meat consumption are touted as pathways to adaptation, but most consumers remain committed to consuming meat-based meals and diets with meat. To explore how consumers handle these issues in today’s cultural context, this article examines culturally appropriate ways of rejecting meat reduction. The theoretical framework is based on interactionism and accounts. The empirical material is from focus group discussions with Danish consumers. We find that in discussions about using plant-based meat, norms of proper culinary conduct are held to be more pressing guides for normative assessment than climate impacts. We also show that the status and function of climate impact “knowledge” is complex and ambiguous. A shared social knowledge of the climate impacts of meat consumption appears to exist alongside “questionable knowledge” and “lack of knowledge”, both of which are referred to excuse, justify, and charge others in reasoning supporting continued meat consumption. Knowledge of climate impacts is accepted when it fits cultural conventions but appears less knowable if it poses challenges to contemporary consumer culture. The article contributes insights into the ways in which cultural conventions and complex knowledge negotiations help to preserve unsustainable consumption.

Keywords

Meat reduction, vegan, climate change, sustainable consumption, accounts, social interaction, plant-based meat
Introduction

In discussions about environmental limits to consumption, the cultural conventions around resource intensive practices are posited as something that must be understood if unsustainable consumption is to be tackled (Jack, 2022). Conventions, according to Warde (2016), are guides for “usual” and competent conduct in everyday life, and simultaneously they serve as grounds on which to explain collective activities in cultures when those activities are questioned. In the Global North food conventions are increasingly contested due to animal products’ climate impacts. In the global food system the majority of food-related greenhouse gas emissions are generated from the production of animal products (Springmann et al., 2018). The production and consumption of meat, beef in particular, is a major contributor to global greenhouse gas emissions (Poore and Nemecek, 2018). Moreover, climate change is increasingly a key political issue for voters and politicians (Lockwood, 2021). “Climate-friendly consumption” (Bostrom and Klintman, 2019) has emerged as a response with meat-reduced and meat-free diets being discussed as pathways to adaptation (Willett et al., 2019).

Despite recent developments indicating a degree of reduced meat consumption in a number of countries, it remains true that most consumers remain committed to meat-based meals and diets with meat, suggesting little change to the general sociocultural practices of food and eating (Dagevos, 2021; Halkier and Lund, 2023). Existing research into (un)sustainable food consumption has focused principally on consumers who are willing, or already committing, to meat-reduced and meat-free diets (Dagevos, 2021; Hansen et al., 2023; Kondrup et al., 2023). Less attention has been given to the conventional questioning of meat reduction in the current cultural setting.

In line with calls to take into account cultural perspectives in newer sustainable consumption research (Welch et al., 2020) this article explores the limited uptake of meat-reduced diets by investigating culturally appropriate statements for rejecting them in negotiations. Our interest is in consumers’ attributions of meanings to “climate-friendliness” around food. In the article, we argue that these meanings are socially negotiated to neutralize threats to existing consumer culture and justify continued meat consumption. The article contributes insights into the ways in which cultural conventions and complex knowledge negotiations help to preserve contemporary unsustainable consumption.
Explanations of why consumers reject meat reduction

The scientific literature’s explanations of why consumers do not reduce their meat consumption can be organized under three headings: (a) knowledge deficits, (b) identity perceptions, and (c) cultural conventions.

(a) Research in this category points to consumers’ lack of knowledge about the climate and environmental impacts of food (Sanchez-Sabate and Sabaté, 2019). Findings suggest that consumers overestimate the impacts of food packaging, transport distance and the production of plant-based meat substitutes and underestimate the impacts of meat (Austgulen et al., 2018; Hartmann et al., 2022; Lazzarini et al., 2016). These explanations fall within the knowledge deficit model, in which undesirable behavior of consumers is explained in terms of a lack of information or knowledge (Bostrom and Klintman, 2019).

(b) Research in this category highlights negative perceptions of the identities associated with meat-free diets (Markowski and Roxburgh, 2019; Vandermoere et al., 2019). Studies show that vegans, vegetarians and meat-reducers commonly experience their diets and identities as unwelcome to others and develop strategies to handle anticipated conflicts in social settings (De Groeve et al., 2022; Salmivaara et al., 2022; Twine, 2014).

(c) Research in this category points to the conventions of meat in meal formats in the Global North (Niva and Mäkelä, 2019). It has been shown that consumption of meat is considered habitual, natural and normal, and something widely associated with a “proper meal” (Hielkema and Lund, 2021). Accordingly, consumers find meat-free meals and plant-based proteins normatively problematic and less enjoyable (Micheelsen et al., 2013; Onwezen et al., 2021).

In this article we take departure in the cultural convention explanation, understanding meat consumption as embedded in cultural conventions and collective understandings. At the same time, we combine the cultural convention explanation with insights from the two additional perspectives on why consumers reject meat reduction by exploring how consumers’ knowledge and perceptions of identity are integrated in the construction of a culturally appropriate position as a meat consumer in a societal context, where the link between climate change and food is culturally contested and publicly recognized (Warde, 2022). We employ an interactionist theoretical approach to examine social negotiations of food’s climate-friendliness and answer the research question: How do
consumers account for their rejection of meat reduction, and, of the accounts they offer, which are considered culturally legitimate? This provides new insights into how consumers negotiate ‘facts’ about climate impacts according to cultural conventions and why specific rejections of sustainable practices are questioned more than others.

**Interactionism, negotiations, and accounts**

In the interactionist theoretical approach, meanings and identities are understood as *socially negotiated* during interactions; the focus is on interactants’ immediate identities and their management in social encounters (Blumer, 1986; Goffman, 1983).

Social interactions are interactive processes in which the sociocultural order is upheld, contested and internalized in participants (Carter and Fuller, 2016). In these interactions, participants recurrently consider the implications of their acts and the (imagined) reception of those acts by others through social negotiations. Social negotiations cover the joint activities of interpretation, sense-making and the making of compromises when symbolic objects are socially reviewed (Blumer, 1986). Social negotiations are configured by the negotiation context, i.e. the surrounding social setting that influences what becomes the objects of social maintenance (Maines, 1982). The significance of social negotiations is that they can reveal which meanings attributed to symbolic objects and identities threaten the social order and how these meanings are interactively resolved for that order’s preservation.

To examine the social negotiations of foods’ “climate-friendliness” we apply the concept accounts. Accounts are an extension of “techniques of neutralization” (Sykes and Matza, 1957) and commonly associated with the sociology of deviance and symbolic interactionism. They generally refer to socio-linguistic devices utilized when a behavior, or statement, is subject to evaluation in a situation (Scott and Lyman, 1968). The function of accounts is to bridge the gap between deviant behavior and social expectations. Given the interactive anticipations of being charged or accused, accounts are employed to reconfigure the pejorative qualities of behaviors that are deemed deviant by an audience to negotiate incongruent identities (Järvinen, 2001). As Scott & Lyman note: “Every account is a manifestation of the underlying negotiation of [situationally cast] identities.” (Scott and Lyman, 1968: 59).
Accounts should not be viewed, however, as conscious deflections of blame or as limited to short-lived interactions. Instead, they can be routinized within cultures (Scott and Lyman 1968) and function as socially legitimate neutralizations of whatever poses a threat to the dominant norms (Sykes and Matza, 1957). We consider the culturally routinized trait of accounts as grounds on which to draw a parallel with Warde’s (2016) “conventions”, as in both terms the definitions suggest that questioning of the taken-for-granted will spark culturally “appropriate” responses.

There are two main categories of accounts: excuses and justifications (Scott and Lyman, 1968). *Excuses* are accounts in which the questioned act is recognized as improper, but the person charged denies full responsibility, alleviating the offensive conduct. *Justifications* are accounts in which responsibility is accepted, but the negative qualities associated with the act are denied, leading to evaluative dilutions of the act in question’s moral significance. Accounts will be judged legitimate or illegitimate depending on the audience’s shared cultural conventions, and thus potentially equip the cast deviant with a tool for minimizing moral loss. In sum, accounts enable people to recast themselves as socially and morally sensible (Järvinen, 2001). At the same time, successful accounts shed light on current cultural conventions.

Examining consumer accounts in the context of unsustainable consumption enables us to identify *culturally appropriate* utterances made around “climate-deviant” practices and statements. In the contemporary cultural context, not embracing a meat-free diet will generate actual accusations and imagined accusations, and thus catalyze accounts, for most consumers, in social negotiations over climate change and food consumption. In this rather complex cultural setting, a consistent and thorough examination of interactions can provide novel knowledge of the culturally acceptable compromises in relation to sustainable foods and dietary identities. In this article, we use Scott and Lyman’s (1968) categories of accounts rather strictly. The purpose is to direct analytical attention upon the range of accounts employed in the rejection of meat reduction, and to identify the accounts generating controversy in current consumer culture.

**Methodology and data**

We used focus group discussions of food and climate-friendliness to investigate the consumer accounts. The focus group method generates data on social interactions that take place during group discussions; it can illuminate socially interactive and contested
aspects of consumption, such as negotiations of climate-friendliness. In focus group interactions, the participants question and explain themselves to each other, thus enabling observations of the diversity in agreements among participants (Morgan, 1996). Interactions in focus groups in which participants do not know each other in advance can be seen as engagements moderated by public discourse (Warr, 2005), because the participants are asked to interact in front of an audience, and this persuades them to assess and moderate their personal opinions.

Given the significant roles of the moderator and the focus group guide in directing the discussion, we conceive focus groups to be a form of “active interviewing” (Gubrium and Holstein, 2003). This entails that the data generated cannot be detached from the focus group moderation and research interests (Morgan, 1996). This also emerges in the uses of exercises during the focus groups to stimulate interactive sense-making of a given phenomenon (Colucci, 2007).

The empirical material referred to in this article is from “SO-Food”, a research project on sustainable food systems and organic consumption in Denmark. Six focus groups were conducted between August and September 2022 with 35 participants in total (see Table 1). The participants did not know each other in advance and were recruited through a professional bureau. They were 17 men and 18 women aged 23-63 years and had been sampled to ensure socio-demographic variation in geographical characteristics, educational levels, gender, and age.

The recruitment was designed to secure three consumer segments with contrasting opinions to organic food: Convinced organic consumers (when purchasing foods, the most important aspect is whether they are organic); Other organic consumers (when purchasing food, it matters that it is organic – but taste, practicalities or price are more important); Conventional consumers (when purchasing foods, it is not important to buy organic). These segments have been shown to generate different understandings and negotiations of food consumption (Ditlevsen et al., 2019). However, the results reported in this article were found to apply across the three segments, and therefore segment comparisons will not be explored in the present article.
Table 1. Focus groups and participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus group #</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consumer segment</td>
<td>Convinced organic consumers</td>
<td>Conventional consumers</td>
<td>Other organic consumers</td>
<td>Other organic consumers</td>
<td>Convinced organic consumers</td>
<td>Conventional consumers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of participants</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age range</td>
<td>24-52</td>
<td>23-61</td>
<td>27-64</td>
<td>23-60</td>
<td>34-63</td>
<td>28-60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of education*</td>
<td>Short: 2</td>
<td>No: 3</td>
<td>Short: 1</td>
<td>Medium: 2</td>
<td>Short: 1</td>
<td>Short: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Medium: 2</td>
<td>Medium: 1</td>
<td>Long: 3</td>
<td>Long: 2</td>
<td>Medium: 3</td>
<td>Long: 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Long: 3</td>
<td>Stud: 1</td>
<td>Stud: 1</td>
<td>Stud: 2</td>
<td>Stud: 3</td>
<td>Stud: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>2 men</td>
<td>4 men</td>
<td>3 men</td>
<td>3 men</td>
<td>2 men</td>
<td>3 men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 women</td>
<td>3 women</td>
<td>3 women</td>
<td>3 women</td>
<td>2 women</td>
<td>2 women</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*No = No tertiary education; Short = Short-cycle higher education; Medium = Medium-cycle higher education; Long = Long-cycle higher education; Stud = Student at higher education

The focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim. The analytical strategy we adopted is informed by an abductive approach (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012), as the results were identified in connection with the research interest on culturally appropriate rejections of meat reduction, surprising findings in the data, and interactionist-informed coding. The data were coded over two rounds. In the first, the coding was thematically driven. In the second, the interviews were coded on the basis of the account sub-categories of excuses and justifications (Scott and Lyman, 1968). The sub-categories provided analytical attention to the different ways in which rejections of meat reduction had been accounted for in the discussions. The results reported in the present article reflect rejections of meat reduction that were found across the focus groups and across different situations.

Results

Casting participants as climate-deviants

Given the background described above, we wish to emphasize how the framings of the focus group discussions, and their chronology, paved the way for accounts in the negotiations of climate-friendliness.

Among the focus group participants, two identified as vegan and three as vegetarian. During discussions in several focus groups vegan diets and vegans (but not vegetarians)
were cast as socially deviant, referred to with ridicule, skepticism, and distaste. Consider for example:

Jon: If I had to choose [between “go vegan” and “buy locally produced seasonal foods”],
then it would probably be-
Miles (interrupts): Vegan! [everybody laughs]
Jon: Eat what is in season [...] Vegan is very extremist, I think.

In the second half of the focus group discussions, participants engaged in a “choosing among alternatives” exercise (Colucci, 2007), where they were asked to reach agreement on which three out of thirteen options are the most effective ways to make one’s own food consumption more climate-friendly. (The thirteen options were: Replace meat with vegetables; Eat locally produced foods; Replace meat with legumes; Replace meat with plant-based replacement products; Eat less; Avoid food waste; Eat seasonal foods; Stretch food and use leftovers; Go vegetarian; Go vegan; Eat organic foods; Replace meat with fish and shellfish; Replace meat with poultry.) Some focus groups modified the options slightly during the discussion. “Go vegan” ended up among the three most effective options in all but one focus group (see Table 2). We suggest this supported moral discomfort among omnivore participants in subsequent interactions. The focus group trajectory thus contributed to the casting of most participants as “climate-deviants”, i.e. “problematic citizens”, and set the stage on which participants would employ accounts when negotiating foods’ climate-friendliness.
Table 2. “Choosing among alternatives” exercise: outcomes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus group</th>
<th>The three most effective options for making one’s food consumption climate-friendly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Go vegan&lt;br&gt;Avoid food waste&lt;br&gt;Eat seasonal foods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Go vegan&lt;br&gt;Avoid food waste&lt;br&gt;Eat locally produced seasonal foods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Go vegetarian&lt;br&gt;Avoid food waste&lt;br&gt;Eat locally produced seasonal foods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Go vegan&lt;br&gt;Avoid food waste&lt;br&gt;Eat locally produced foods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Go vegan&lt;br&gt;Avoid food waste&lt;br&gt;Eat locally produced foods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Go vegan&lt;br&gt;Avoid food waste, use leftovers and stretch foods&lt;br&gt;Eat locally produced seasonal foods</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Negotiating climate-deviance with excuses

Interviewer: Which three options would you prefer to include in your own diet?
Ron: Avoid food waste. I’m already doing it.
Josefine: Well, I’m not going vegan! [other participants laugh]
Fillip: I won’t either, I think.

Following the choosing among alternatives exercise, the participants were asked which of the alternatives they would prefer to implement in their own diets. Departing from the shared construction of the best choice, this task evolved into a situation in which the participants negotiated their unwillingness to stop consuming meat by calling upon excuses. Excuses can take the form of appeals to accidents (pointing to general hazards or problems in the context of the conduct); appeals to defeasibility (pointing to lack of knowledge and/or free will); appeals to biological drivers (pointing to biological needs/universalisms), and lastly; scapegoating (pointing to others’ responsibility) (Scott and Lyman, 1968). We saw examples of all these excuses in the focus groups. The excuses were more pronounced in focus groups where vegans or vegetarians were present and where climate concerns about food consumption were raised in discussions before the exercise. Table 3 offers an overview of the different excuses used in negotiations.

Table 3. Excuses for rejecting meat reduction.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of excuse</th>
<th>Use</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appeal to accidents</td>
<td>Refer to different ways structural circumstances affect or determine food choices. The accidents referred to were cultural norms, everyday life, food prices and the global food system.</td>
<td>“I have to say: with the level of food prices, we're at, I do not consider climate-friendliness.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appeal to defeasibility</td>
<td>Refer to lack of knowledge about the content and climate impacts of different vegan foods, which were considered unnatural and hence potentially harmful.</td>
<td>“It is really difficult to make the right decision. I think only a few individuals have the prerequisites to know about the impact you make.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appeal to biological drivers</td>
<td>Refer to bodily needs for nutrients from meat, lack of satiety from vegan and vegetarian meals.</td>
<td>“Protein from meat is in fact of better value than protein from plants. Therefore, you need supplements [if you are a vegan]. This tells me that it’s probably not entirely natural when it’s that difficult.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scapegoating</td>
<td>Point to other members of the household as responsible, transfer blame to partners, or refer to children’s eating preferences.</td>
<td>“I don’t eat climate-friendly foods, unfortunately. I try, but I have a partner who’s fighting against it. He wants meat.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In all the focus group discussions, the participants stressed that one could cut down on meat without becoming a strict vegan or vegetarian. The participants suggested dietary changes such as reducing meat consumption by replacing meat with legumes and vegetables, and often mentioned replacing red meat (such as beef) with other animal proteins (such as fish or chicken). As we will discuss in more detail later, during the discussions plant-based foods designed as substitutes for meat were often dismissed as redundant foods – even in vegan diets. Overall, there seemed to be strong agreement that meat reduction is something that does not necessarily entail strict veganism or a commitment to specific “vegan food products”. Yet when the focus group participants were considering meat substitution in their own food practices, these more flexible options tended to disappear from the conversations. Instead, omnivore focus group participants negotiated their own position with reference to vegans, strict vegan diets, and meat substitutes (which they understood as “vegan food products”). In this way the omnivores constructed two opposing dietary pathways: they could either become vegans or continue to eat meat. The alternatives thus shifted during the interactions from reducing or omitting meat in different and flexible ways, on the one hand, to becoming a vegan with a diet consisting of many highly processed food products and exotic produce on the other.
Negotiating climate-deviance with justifications

Denial of injury

As well as excusing climate-deviant practices the participants also engaged in various types of justification. An expected way of dismissing plant-based diets was through *denials of injury* (Scott and Lyman, 1968) in which the negative climate impact of meat, and of food consumption in general, is downplayed. These denials appeared especially among the focus group omnivores when plant-based food products were being discussed. Consider Jon’s elaboration on why he rejects plant-based foods:

Jon: (...) So I think there is so much more, that it is a bigger picture, and that the food part is relatively... [interrupts himself]. It may be a big part of it [climate change], but I don’t think it is the biggest part. How much would be changed [by dietary change] in the overall picture I’m uncertain of.

In this justification the dismissal is forged by broader reasoning in which the injurious qualities of food systems relative to efforts to reduce climate change are depicted as minor in comparison with other sectors. This offers an exemption from the discussion of food groups’ different levels of damage to the climate. Others also referred to the lack of damage to the climate from food production:

Josefine: Well, you [the interviewer] say climate problems. I’m thinking that especially heating and cooling are the sinners. There are forms of production where you impact the climate a lot, and I don’t see food products getting close to that - other than when transported.

The anticipated claim that food is the cause of environmental damage is reworked by suggesting that food products’ climatic impacts are subordinate to those associated with other sectors and activities. However, Josefine does recognize that some damage is done to efforts to mitigate climate change by food transport, but in doing so she suggests that the primary cause of climate impact from the food sector is transport. This negotiation neutralizes the validity of “climate-friendliness”, since it is implied that there barely exists a hierarchy of climate-friendliness with food. Additionally, in denying damage by referring to a general food system rather than specific food groups, omnivore participants are offered an interactional gain. The account is shielded from being dishonored by non-omnivores who might question that meat does not have a negative effect on the climate.
These empirical examples suggest that the role of having or lacking knowledge is complex for consumers. There are moral costs associated with “knowing” the damage caused by one’s own consumption practices. This makes “lack of knowledge” attractive for omnivores, whose diets generally have greater climate impact than vegetarian and vegan diets.

Condemnation

Another type of justification, and one often employed to reject meat reduction, is 

*condemnation of the condemners* (Scott and Lyman, 1968; Sykes and Matza, 1957). This strategy is to be expected in discussions about participants’ different diets and their associated social identities. The interactive context is one in which the vegan diet, together with the actual and imagined vegans in the group, are cast as morally superior through the previous “choosing among alternatives” exercise. This context entails that the focus group omnivores must somehow negotiate climate-friendliness to recast themselves as morally sensible. One way of achieving this is by outward condemnation. In our focus groups this kind of condemnation emerged in two ways: 1) through the targeting of vegans, and 2) through the targeting of other condemnable food practices.

Condemning vegans

The condemnation of vegans appears to be tied to the symbolic status of veganism as the most socially deviant form of a meat reducing diet. The construct of “veganism” is the interactive recipient of condemnation tied to perceptions of vegan diets. One way veganism is condemned is through statements about the resource costs of vegan foods, which thus discredits the alleged benefits to the climate. This is a negotiation we find in several focus groups during and after the “choosing among alternatives” exercise:

Anna: Well, I think, if you want to say effectiveness [of climate-friendly food consumption] then “going vegan” or “going vegetarian”, because then you remove those things [animal products].

Ina: Vegan, that’s omitting all the animal-based stuff?

Anna: Yes.

Ina: Anything that’s animal-based requires a lot?

John: But you also need a lot of energy to produce all those plants and vegetables and everything.
Anna: But we eat vegetables anyway. You don’t have to eat plant-based meat, just because you are vegan.

Jesper: It still needs to be produced.

The interactional trajectory in this extract approaches an acknowledgment that the vegan diet is climate-friendly, but the approach is prevented by John’s attribution of energy costs to the production of plants and vegetables. Furthermore, it is implied that vegetable and plant-based food consumption is exclusive to vegans. This is partly dishonored by Anna’s statement, before Jesper validates John’s condemnation, neutralizing the vegan diet as climate-friendly. Along the same lines, participants repeatedly underscore the notion that plant-based foods are highly processed:

Randi: Going vegan maybe isn’t the most important for the climate. Because, again, what does it take for you to make Tofurky or what do I know? Then it can’t be because of the climate you’ve become vegan if you eat Tofurky and stuff like that.

The targeting of Tofurky can be interpreted as a product of participants overestimating the climate impacts from plant-based meat substitutes (Hartmann et al., 2022), but the recurrent linking of plant-based meat and vegans suggests that non-vegans are referring to “vegan foods” as evidence of vegans being climate-deviants in disguise (Sykes and Matza, 1957). This shows how the convention of deeming unprocessed foods superior to highly processed foods (Ditlevsen and Andersen, 2021) serves as a foundation for condemning “vegan foods”.

In the focus groups, in addition to observing highly processed plant-based foods being presented as solely vegan, we saw other supposed symbols of veganism surfacing in the rejection of meat reduction:

Anders: I’ve heard, and it may be that it’s wrong. But I often hear that for vegan products many things need to be shipped to different places and stuff like that, so you’ll maybe eat some special product from Uganda or Southeast India or-

Beate: Or avocados, for example...

Anders: Or avocados. So, I actually think that vegetarian is better than vegan. I may be wrong.

Frederik: I’ve heard that too. Sounds fairly plausible.

The implication that a vegan diet consists of “special products” with significant climate costs in terms of shipment is honored by affirming an example of a problematic vegan food – the avocado. It is not explained why avocados should be seen as a food item
primarily eaten by vegans. The avocado’s continued appearance in accounts of the rejection of plant-based diets can be tied to its cultural position as a “superfood” (Magrach and Sanz, 2020). It may further be related to Danish public discourse in the last decade, in which avocado consumption has been framed as bad for the environment. The avocado is exempt from the critique of being industrially processed, but it is instead asserted that it requires resource intensive production and extensive transportation.

The imagined extreme vegan diet consisting only of highly processed plant-based foods and avocados enables non-vegans to deflect blame. In this way, we see that an account of the rejection of meat reduction is constructed through the idea of “the vegan” as a disguised climate-deviant. Processed plant-based foods and avocados function, for non-vegans, as confirmation of vegan climate hypocrisy. Recognizing that there are many socially sensible “vegans” with balanced plant-based diets would hamper the construct as a legitimate account.

**Condemnation through collective derailment**

The second type of condemnation does not refer to a group of “others”. Instead it targets other “deviant” food consumption acts and causes loss of sight to the initially charged act (Sykes and Matza, 1957). To conceptualize this type of condemnation, we propose using the term “collective derailment”. We define this as an interactive process in which the topical track is switched to neutralize the immediate threat to the local social order. Interactively, collective derailment turns down the emotional heat by switching to a culturally neutral topic, which is picked up by other interactants. The term shares traits with social psychological processes of cognitive dissonance reduction (McGrath, 2017), and in particular “distraction” as a means of reducing emotional and moral discomfort (Zanna and Aziza, 1976). However, collective derailment differs from the various forms of cognitive dissonance reduction in that, where it is concerned, the discomfort that arises in an interaction must be alleviated by social honoring. Additionally, in successful collective derailments the targeting of other deviant acts must be considered culturally appropriate by the audience. Consider the following negotiation of what climate-friendly food is:

Ron: The most dramatic thing is to never eat beef again. That is probably the big one, to bring your meat consumption down to an absolute minimum, if you want to be really good in that direction.
Otto: I know that my social circle cooks way too much food. There is a lot of food waste. So, eating meat is one thing, but to cook less food in general, I think you can come far with.

Interviewer: You also said “purchase less”?

Otto: Yes, that’s what I was referring to.

Anne: Yes, use the food you have, like you said.

Fillip: It’s often how things are packaged.

Ron: Yes, that’s ridiculous too.

Fillip: Then they pack the vegetables in some plastic and I’m thinking “Why?” I just remove it when I come home.

The interaction starts off with the contention that meat reduction ought to be the focal point of climate-friendly food consumption, but this is derailed by responses that divert attention to food waste and food packaging instead. The discomfort generated by being cast as climate-deviants through the contention of meat being opposite of “climate-friendly food” is collectively neutralized. Complaints about food packaging and waste are common in public discourse (Murcott, 2019). The introduction of food packaging and food waste could be a result of the fact that neither are central to consumer identities, rendering them more socially attractive targets of condemnation than meat reduction. In other words, there is a low risk of interactional loss when discussing these topics, because few participants would claim to be heavily invested in wasting food, or excessive packaging.

Successful collective derailments in negotiations of climate-friendly food illustrate the interactive processes through which selected food issues are framed by participants as more pertinent, or favorable, than meat reduction. This may explain why the impacts of food packaging, transport distance and plant-based meats on climate and the environment are overestimated (Hartmann et al., 2022; Lazzarini et al., 2016), and why consumers are positive about the idea of reducing household food waste (see table 2). Rather than the lack of meat reduction being products of knowledge deficits concerning the climate impacts of food groups, consumers’ knowledge of other climate-related food issues may serve as culturally appropriate escapes from embracing meat reduction.

However, in our focus group discussions, there were also unsuccessful collective derailment attempts. The following interaction followed a suggestion, by the other
participants, that cattle numbers in agriculture and the consumption of beef should be reduced:

Gry: I hold the opinion, which some people find wildly provocative, that I don't think the problem is that we eat meat. The problem is that there are too many people in the world. So, if we just had a natural number, we would be part of a natural food chain. [...] I actually think we ought to have a global one-child policy until we have reached a sensible number.

Randi: That's probably going to be difficult [laughs].

Gry’s attempt to switch the topic to a problem of global overpopulation is dishonored in Randi’s response and was not picked up by the other participants in the discussion. Gry’s own positioning of the statement as “wildly provocative” hints that she knows it might be morally problematic. Another example of an unsuccessful collective derailment was an interaction in which a participant repeatedly stressed that insect consumption was the most climate-friendly choice. Compared with Gry’s overpopulation thesis, insect consumption is not morally problematic. Thus, here the absence of honoring from other participants may be tied to insect consumption being seen as culturally unconventional, because insects are not commonly regarded as ‘food’ in the Global North (Fiddes, 1991).

These examples of collective derailment attempts suggest that while condemning food packaging and household food waste are considered culturally legitimate ways of handling challenges to continued meat consumption, drawing attention to global overpopulation and advocating insect consumption are considered unreasonable accounts (Scott and Lyman, 1968: 54) within the current cultural conventions.

**Appeal to culinary loyalties**

An especially common way of handling contestations of continued meat consumption was by *appealing to higher loyalties* (Scott and Lyman, 1968; Sykes and Matza, 1957). The higher loyalties are in this case culinary where the assessment of plant-based meats revolve around their symbolic use through which to display competent culinary conduct. The account was in evidence when participants were asked what they thought about a range of plant-based foods:

Ina: It's great if people like them... I wouldn't buy plant-based meat because I would rather just make something totally different. I don’t have a need to say “I would like a burger tonight, so I will buy plant-based meat.”. I would say “Then I’ll cook a COMPLETELY different dish, a totally vegetarian dish”. Something delicious. I find it
difficult that you must always remove the meat and then put some vege-[tar][9]-
tarian alternative. Why not just make a completely different dish?

In this instance, the plant-based meat is dismissed because it is thought to reproduce a meal format with meat as its centerpiece, the conventional meal format in the Nordic countries (Holm et al., 2015; Micheelsen et al., 2013). The reproduction of a meat-based meal format goes against the culinarily appropriate way of making food without meat; that is through “vegetarian dishes”. In this manner we see how the consumption of plant-based meat signals taking the culturally subpar route of cooking a meatless dish when there is a “completely different dish” available to the competent cook. This finding shows that some consumers may not be attracted to the process of “material substitution” that appeals to some plant-based dieters (Twine, 2018) because, in their view, it appears unacceptable to reproduce meat-based meal formats with plant-based meat rather than adhering to plant-based cuisine through “proper” vegetarian dishes.

We should stress here that the appeal to culinary loyalties is not restricted to direct rejections of plant-based meats. It can also be applied in defense of using them. In the following exchange, Simone, an omnivore, and Anne, a vegan, negotiate the culinary implications of using plant-based meat:

Simone: Would you go and buy it [minced meat substitute based on pea protein] if you yourself had to buy it? Wouldn't you rather just cook a vegetarian dish yourself? I think that the [plant-based] alternatives don't taste very good. Then I would rather cook a dish without meat myself.

Anne: That's because you get the meat.

Simone: Well, it's because I'm curious. Would you go down and buy something that looks like beef?

Anne: I don't. It's not my basic diet. But when I want meat just like when you do, I seek satisfaction, and I've also become really good at cooking. It's not that boring Bolognese someone has cooked. It's with all kinds of stuff.

The interaction starts off with the suggestion that it seems strange to purchase replicas of meat as someone committed to a plant-based diet. This suggestion is slightly dishonored in Anne's statement: “That's because you get the meat”, but then rehonored by her declaration that she consumes plant-based meat because she “seeks satisfaction”. In other words, she acknowledges that she is cheating from an idealized script of appropriate conduct. Anne also performs a deviance disavowal (Davis, 1961) when she
states that she is good at cooking and is not going to use the plant-based meat in a “boring Bolognese”. In this way, she declines to concur with the verdict that she is a culinary deviant and attempts to recast herself as a culinarily “normal” person by communicating that despite using a product of ‘bad taste’, she knows what she is doing.

Rejections of plant-based foods are not tied exclusively to meat replicas. They also happen in the context of foods that seem superfluous to consumers:

Helle: The only reason why I wouldn’t rank it [a packet of ground chickpeas] higher is because usually, when I cook something with chickpeas, then I myself make it with chickpeas from scratch. Then I don’t buy the ready version. I buy the chickpeas.

The above judgement concerning a packet of ground chickpeas can be classified as a ‘from scratch’ rejection (Jackson et al., 2018), because the ground chickpeas are not considered “chickpeas”. This rejection implies that pre-prepared chickpea products are not perceived as ‘just food’ (Short, 2006: 29–30) in the current cultural conventions. The ground version appears overly convenient. For consumers embarking on plant-based dietary transitions plant-based foods offer little disruption to established cooking routines, but for the non-transitioner their status as “convenience food” furnishes grounds on which to dismiss them – to eliminate them as viable options.

These dismissals on culinary grounds echo performances of conspicuous consumption and culinary distinction (Bourdieu, 1986). However, in the context of the social negotiations around climate-friendly food, the presence of culinary loyalty-accounts is significant. As Sykes and Matza (1957) note, appeals to higher loyalties occur not because certain norms are rejected, but because other norms are held to be more pressing. In these examples, we see how concerns about the climate impact of plant-based foods are left in the background in favor of discussing the normative implications of using them.

Discussion

The results revealed ways in which plant-based meats became the centerpiece in negotiations over meat reduction. The excuses and justifications issued to defend the identity of omnivores thus relied partly on the symbolic construction of “the vegan” as a person whose diet centers upon problematic, highly processed and unnatural foods. Further, the symbolic “vegan” displays climate hypocrisy by, among other things, consuming avocados, another contested symbol in the discussions. Interestingly, both
symbolic constructs – i.e., the extreme vegan and the bad avocado – rely on defeasibility. It is the *lack* of certain knowledge that enables the constructions: uncertainties about climate impacts of the production of plant-based meats and the transportation of avocados allow the reasoning to proceed. Seeking to explain why there are consumers with no intention of reducing their meat intake, Hielkema & Lund (2021) point to lack of knowledge, but they add that *willful ignorance* may also be part of the picture. The latter interpretation is supported by our empirical material. Our focus group participants did seem to regard meat as the biggest climate problem stemming from food consumption (cf. Table 2), but simultaneously invoked lacking the same knowledge. In many cases, referring to a lack of knowledge and questioning the climate change benefits of going vegan were accepted as legitimate excuses and justifications in the focus groups. However, knowledge was also used to counter the excuses and justifications. Here, some participants stepped in as “experts” in the discussions and corrected what they saw as false statements. Their expertise relied on certainty about the climate impacts of different kinds of food, and about production methods, and this certainty was often accepted and set the stage for further discussion.

Discussions about climate impact knowledge occasionally manifest in processes we call “collective derailments”. In navigating complex information about climate change and challenges to current lifestyles, consumers gravitate towards the highlighting of “facts” that pose little threat to cultural conventions. In addition, we suspect that feelings of eco-shame (Mkono and Hughes, 2020) more generally can be handled through collective derailments. Thus we can imagine how frequent flyers will direct attention to the fact that private automobiles are sources of pollution, or how YouTube streamers might point to the environmental impacts from Netflix streaming (Beuscart et al., 2022). The function of collective derailments in contemporary consumer culture is to offer consumers pathways to emotional relief by causing the initially charged environmentally problematic acts to be lost from sight. Collective derailments thus help to uphold the social order when contested consumption practices leave consumers vulnerable to charges of moral deviance.
Perspectives for social change

The results imply two aspects relevant to transitions to sustainable food consumption. First, there is the aspect of knowledge itself. If a lack of knowledge can serve as a legitimate excuse or justification, that lack – the ignorance being claimed – must be considered reasonable in the cultural context. Whereas consumers may in fact know enough about greenhouse gas emissions from meat consumption to reach a consensus reflecting the scientific understanding of meat consumption’s climate impacts, the knowledge is ambiguous enough for defeasibility claims to appear reasonable. Transitions in the global food system require structural political regulation and market changes. Acknowledging this, we do not want to overstate the importance of consumer knowledge or to support the oversimplified notion of the knowledge-deficit model (Blue et al., 2014), yet, in terms of the cultural legitimacy of such changes, our results suggest a need for authoritative voices who communicate clearly about meat consumption as a climate problem. If we look at the cultural context, public authorities in Denmark have published dietary guidelines for healthy and climate-friendly eating (The Danish Veterinary and Food Administration, 2021). Other information about climate impacts of different kinds of foods is also available (Concito, 2024) yet no clear communication about meat products as the most important obstacle to “climate-friendly” diets have been issued by the public authorities. Because the global food system and greenhouse gas emissions raise complicated issues, and since media coverage of environmental problems linked to foods such as avocados and soy have influenced the public discourse in recent years, the current knowledge landscape is characterized by epistemic contradictions. Such a discourse is conducive to culturally appropriate rejections of meat reduction. As it is, these epistemic contradictions support the legitimacy of an unsustainable status quo and strong agro-industrial interests, and therefore need to be countered by clear communication, if the aim is to reduce the negative climate impact of food consumption.

Secondly, the fact that all the focus groups in our study reached a social consensus on the climate impacts of animal food consumption that reflected scientific knowledge (despite the ambiguity of that consensus) points to a transformative power in social communities, as has also been pointed out in earlier research on social change (Otto et al., 2020). We observed that reaching the social consensus and shared sense-making were apparently stronger than individual distastes for meat reduction, vegans, identities around meat or
culinary norms. This suggests that it may be possible to use shared deliberation to re-negotiate counterproductive food conventions and culinary norms and create ‘social tipping points’ (Otto et al., 2020) to push for change – something we think ought to be explored further in the future.

**Conclusion**

Unsustainable forms of consumption are sources of cultural contestation, especially in the context of the environmental limits to consumption. In situations where there is a social consensus that meat consumption poses a problem for climate mitigation, some consumers excuse and justify their continued meat consumption. In the accounts, we have found that two overarching, culturally appropriate forms of reasoning are employed. The first relates to cultural norms about culinary standards. The second pertains to knowledge.

In some discussions, climate impacts of food consumption are left in the background in favor of norms governing culturally competent food conduct. This implies that adherence to food conventions is held to be more pressing as a guide to normative assessment than climate impacts.

Knowledge of the adverse impacts of meat consumption on the climate appears in many forms when social consensus on meat reduction as climate-friendly is reached. Questionable knowledge and lack of knowledge are invoked to excuse climate-deviant identities and to justify personal climate-deviance. The contradiction between “knowing” that meat consumption is the biggest problem, as far as the climate impacts of food are concerned, while simultaneously questioning, or referring to the lack of, the very same knowledge suggests that consumers can commit to epistemic shapeshifting. Knowledge of food’s climate impacts may be knowable when it fits within cultural conventions but can also seem less knowable when it challenges consumer practices. Clear communication by the relevant public authorities may make it more difficult for consumers to excuse and justify neglecting to take the climate impacts of foods into consideration.
References


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1 The Danish Official Dietary Guidelines were updated in 2021 and recommend limiting meat intake from four-legged animals (The Danish Veterinary and Food Administration, 2021).

2 For example during the 2022 Danish general election (Engelbrecht et al., 2022).

3 There are social and environmental problems with (some) avocado production, but the climate impact of avocados is lower than the impact of most animal products pr. kg. (Concito, 2024).