

# Not on my plate: a cross-cultural qualitative study on anti-vegan sense-making and resistance

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Resistance to plant-based diets remains a significant barrier to sustainable food transitions. This study explores how anti-vegans – individuals who stand vehemently against plant-based diets and veganism – rationalize their opposition and investigates how informational and cultural cues shape their attitudes and stances.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Guided by psychological reactance theory, cognitive dissonance theory and focus theory of normative conduct, this study utilized qualitative focus groups conducted with anti-vegan participants in Greece and the Netherlands. Data were analyzed with thematic analysis to identify sense-making patterns, emotional and cognitive resistance mechanisms, interpretations of sustainability-related information and sociocultural influences.

**Findings** – Participants displayed pronounced resistance to plant-based products and labeling, frequently perceiving these as prescriptive, manipulative or deceptive. Psychological reactance emerged when vegan messages were viewed as threats to individual freedom or cultural traditions. Cognitive dissonance was managed through rationalizations that framed meat consumption as natural, traditional or nutritionally superior. Cultural nuances shaped these rationalizations, with Greek participants mostly anchoring their resistance in collective rituals, while Dutch participants emphasized personal autonomy and skepticism toward marketing claims.

**Research limitations/implications** – While limited by sample, findings provide insights into anti-vegan mindsets that can inform culturally sensitive communication interventions.

**Originality/value** – This study uniquely combines cross-cultural qualitative inquiry and leading theories to explore anti-vegan sentiment, a critical yet underexplored barrier to sustainable food transitions. It highlights how resistance is embedded in identity, values and culture, complicating informed persuasive communication strategies.

**Keywords** Anti-vegan, Sustainable food consumption, Cognitive dissonance, Food labeling, Plant-based diets, Cultural resistance

**Paper type** Research article

## 1. Introduction

The shift toward sustainable food systems is increasingly recognized as a critical component in addressing intersecting global challenges including climate change, biodiversity loss and

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public health (Varela, 2025). Central to this transition is the move away from animal-based diets toward more plant-based consumption (Polyportis *et al.*, 2024). Veganism, a norm-challenging plant-based dietary-based lifestyle, has gained institutional support and increased public traction due to its alignment with environmental, ethical and health imperatives. However, the shift to plant-based diets is not without contestation (Hinrichs *et al.*, 2022). Despite growing awareness of the consequences of animal-based food consumption, including meat, eggs and dairy, resistance to plant-based diets remains widespread, and in some cases, ideologically rooted (Bryant *et al.*, 2022).

Among the most pronounced critics of veganism are self-identified anti-vegans – individuals who “stand vehemently against veganism” (Gregson *et al.*, 2022, p. 1). The anti-vegan sentiment is not merely a reflection of dietary preference, but frequently intersects with broader value systems, cultural identities, lifestyles and political orientations. As Gregson *et al.* (2024) argue, anti-vegan discourse increasingly functions as a boundary-making mechanism, used to signal in-group membership, autonomy or skepticism toward perceived moral absolutism. Negative perceptions of vegan identity may further fuel such resistance, as vegans are often stereotyped as oversensitive, physically weak or morally self-righteous (Potts and Parry, 2010; Adamczyk *et al.*, 2023). From a communication standpoint, this poses substantial challenges. While persuasive strategies have been widely used to promote sustainable consumption (e.g. Tseng *et al.*, 2020), these strategies often assume a neutral or persuadable audience. Yet, anti-vegan individuals can entirely reject sustainability messaging, interpreting it as a threat to autonomy. Such resistance may not only prevent behavioral change but can reinforce group polarization, limit message exposure within social networks and contribute to backlash effects that undermine sustainable food transitions.

Extant literature has begun to explore anti-vegan sentiment, particularly through analyses of online discourse. Gregson *et al.* (2022), for example, examined the construction of anti-vegan identity on Reddit, finding that users often employed carnist ideology, and anti-elitism to justify their positions. Building on this, Gregson *et al.* (2024) conducted an online survey revealing that anti-vegans represent a distinct ideological group, differing significantly in their values, beliefs and moral reasoning from both omnivores and vegans. However, these quantitative studies have not yet examined how anti-vegan perspectives are rationalized, emotionally experienced and culturally anchored, particularly in relation to identity preservation, social influence and normative resistance.

This study seeks to fill this research gap by investigating how anti-vegans in two distinct cultural contexts – the Netherlands and Greece – rationalize their resistance to veganism and make sense of the values, norms and information that surround plant-based diets. These two countries represent different cultural contexts concerning dietary habits and attitudes toward sustainability. In Greece, meat and dairy consumption is integral to national identity, religious rituals and intergenerational family practices, making resistance to veganism highly culturally anchored (Keramaris *et al.*, 2025; Papacharalampous, 2025). In contrast, the Dutch context is characterized by a historically more pragmatic and less culturally embedded approach to food, where dietary shifts are often evaluated in terms of personal autonomy and functionality rather than cultural symbolism (e.g. van Otterloo, 2000). This contrast allows us to explore how anti-vegan rationalizations and sense-making vary along a spectrum from strong cultural anchoring to pragmatic resistance. Using a qualitative focus group methodology, the research expands on the exploration of the content of anti-vegan sentiment by integrating its sense-making processes, emotional and sociocultural grounding, and resistance mechanisms.

The overarching aim is hence to map the mindsets and resistance logics of anti-vegans and to explore how their attitudes are shaped by cultural norms, perceived informational credibility and group dynamics. In doing so, this study builds upon emerging research on plant-based diets, veganism and persuasive persuasion, while advancing a theory-driven, empirically grounded contribution to the literature on sustainable food transitions and consumer resistance. The following research question is examined: “*How do anti-vegans rationalize*

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*their resistance to veganism and plant-based products, and how do cultural and informational influences shape their sense-making processes and attitudes?”*

By doing so, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how identity-based resistance functions, thus informing how culturally and socially relevant communication strategies and choice architectures might more effectively engage audiences who feel alienated or threatened by the vegan movement.

## 2. Theoretical background

To approach how anti-vegans rationalize resistance to veganism and respond to persuasive communication regarding plant-based diets, and aligned with the abovementioned rationale, this study draws on established theoretical frameworks, namely psychological reactance theory (PRT) (Brehm (1966), Brehm and Brehm (2013)), cognitive dissonance theory (CDT) (Festinger, 1957; Harmon-Jones and Mills, 2019) and focus theory of normative conduct (FTNC) (Cialdini *et al.*, 1991). Collectively, these theories aim to provide an integrated conceptual lens through which the complexity of anti-vegan sentiment can be understood. Rather than viewing it as mere informational resistance or irrational behavior, anti-veganism is framed as a socio-psychological process rooted in identity, social norms and cultural values.

PRT posits that individuals have a fundamental motivation to maintain autonomy and freedom of choice, and experience psychological reactance when this freedom is perceived to be threatened or restrained (Brehm and Brehm, 2013). Reactance manifests as emotional arousal, usually anger or irritation and prompts behaviors aimed at reasserting freedom, including resistance, counterarguing or overtly oppositional behaviors (Rosenberg and Siegel, 2018). Reactance is especially salient when persuasive attempts are overtly moralized or perceived as coercive, triggering defensive responses to reclaim autonomy. The phenomenon of reactance has been widely documented in relevant contexts such as health communication and environmental advocacy (e.g. Quick *et al.*, 2013; Rosenberg and Siegel, 2018). Recent research has applied PRT to the domain of sustainable diets, highlighting its relevance for understanding consumers' defensive responses to plant-based advocacy (Hinrichs *et al.*, 2022). In the context of anti-vegan sentiment, such reactance may be triggered when plant-based messaging is perceived as moralizing, prescriptive or infringing upon traditional dietary autonomy.

Prior work identifies message features that systematically elicit reactance, including controlling language, injunctive moral tone and threatened choice (Rains, 2013). In food contexts, overt moralization and identity-charged appeals can heighten anger and counterarguing, producing boomerang effects (e.g. defensive rejection of plant-based labels or campaigns) even among otherwise environmentally concerned audiences (e.g. Graça *et al.*, 2015, 2019). Otherwise, autonomy-supportive frames (choice-affirming language, non-judgmental tone, emphasis on optionality) may reduce reactance and improve receptivity to change.

Complementing the perspective offered by PRT, CDT is deemed suitable to provide further insight into how anti-vegans reconcile conflicting cognitions about veganism. Festinger's (1957) seminal theory puts forward that individuals experience psychological discomfort when they hold contradictory beliefs or when their behaviors are inconsistent with personal values or public norms. To reduce such dissonance, individuals employ cognitive strategies, such as rationalizing their actions, reinterpreting evidence or altering perceptions of opposing viewpoints (Harmon-Jones and Mills, 2019). Such cognitive maneuvers can enable individuals to preserve their self-image and justify dietary practices without adopting changes that might otherwise reduce ethical discomfort. Cognitive dissonance has been increasingly applied in the context of sustainable diets and the “meat paradox”, helping to explain how individuals maintain meat consumption despite ethical concerns by employing strategies like denial, dissociation and pro-meat justifications (Dowsett *et al.*, 2018; Matharu *et al.*, 2024). The mechanisms described by CDT may thus be evident in how anti-vegans critically engage with media and marketing; exposure to persuasive vegan messages or plant-

based labeling, which might otherwise provoke ethical reflection, can trigger skepticism, perceived manipulation or outright rejection of claims.

Meat-related dissonance is managed through predictable strategies, for instance, asserting that meat is natural, normal, necessary and nice (the “4 Ns”: [Piazza et al., 2015](#)), downplaying animal mind and feeling, moral disengagement and motivated disbelief about environmental harms ([Bastian and Loughnan, 2017](#); [Rothgerber, 2014](#)). In the present context, these findings imply that anti-vegan sense-making is not merely information-deficit but reflects motivated reasoning that protects valued identities and habits; persuasive information can therefore prompt more rationalization unless it is framed to minimize dissonance threat.

Finally, FTNC ([Cialdini et al., 1991](#)) enhances the understanding of how cultural and interpersonal contexts influence responses to dietary changes and persuasive messaging. This theoretical framework proposes that individual behavior is significantly shaped by social norms and expectations of social reference groups and, thus, broader cultural standards. Cultural norms and practices surrounding food consumption are deeply embedded within social identities and collective traditions, influencing how dietary changes are perceived and whether they are accepted or rejected ([Higgs, 2015](#); [Monin and Szczurek, 2014](#)). Recent findings confirm that social norms meaningfully shape consumer intentions to consume plant-based alternatives, underscoring the predictive power of this theory in sustainable food behavior contexts ([Xueyun et al., 2024](#)). In specific, these social normative effects sit within a broader appraisal chain whereby sustainability knowledge fosters problem awareness and outcome efficacy, which, in turn, activate personal norms that channel into intention ([Xueyun et al., 2024](#)). When dietary shifts for specific diets challenge established social norms, individuals may experience threats to their social identity, prompting resistance aimed at protecting in-group solidarity and cultural continuity. In dietary transition research, social norms have robust effects on food choice and intake ([Robinson et al., 2014](#)). Importantly, dynamic norm messages (e.g. signaling that more people are starting to adopt more sustainable and healthy behaviors; [Lee and Liu, 2023](#)) can shift intentions without direct moral pressure (also see [Sparkman and Walton, 2017](#)). These strands of research provide support for the notion that normative cueing can reduce resistance when it emphasizes evolving practices and inclusion (i.e. “what people like me are beginning to do”), whereas perceived prescriptive norms (“should” language) may provoke pushback among resistant audiences.

Taken together, these theories provide a comprehensive foundation for interpreting anti-vegans’ sense-making and resistance to plant-based diets and veganism as a complex socio-psychological phenomenon. Reactance clarifies how threats to autonomy initiate emotional and cognitive pushback to vegan messaging; dissonance explains how motivated rationalizations (e.g. 4 Ns, moral inversion) maintain meat consumption despite ethical awareness; and normative conduct illustrates how group identities and cultural scripts anchor acceptance or resistance, and how carefully framed dynamic norms can open space for change. Critically, prior research has rarely examined how these dynamics co-occur and are culturally patterned in situated group discourse. Our cross-cultural, qualitative approach is therefore positioned to reveal identity-protective reasoning in interaction and to show how informational cues and cultural anchoring combine to produce anti-vegan resistance.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design using focus groups to examine how individuals who self-identify as anti-vegans rationalize their resistance to veganism and interpret messages promoting plant-based diets ([Kitzinger, 1995](#)). The rationale behind selecting a qualitative methodology was its suitability for capturing complex phenomena such as collective sense-making processes, sociocultural dynamics and emotional and identity-based reactions. Specifically, focus groups were chosen as they enable interactions among participants, generating rich, interactive data that highlight shared attitudes, intersubjective

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dynamics and culturally embedded meanings (Fernqvist *et al.*, 2015; Morgan, 1996). Focus groups were chosen over individual interviews because anti-vegan identity is often performed relationally (Gregson *et al.*, 2022). In group talk, identity work is enacted and negotiated, making allyship, contestation and social signaling visible (Halkier, 2010; Kitzinger, 1994). Group interaction allows participants to signal autonomy, echo allies and contest viewpoints, behaviors far less visible in dyadic formats (Kitzinger, 1995; Morgan, 1996). To mitigate the potential interference of conformity pressure, and thus the inhibiting of dissent voice, the moderator employed a non-directive style, invited minority viewpoints and ensured that all participants had opportunities to speak.

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### 3.2 Participants and sampling

The research was conducted in two distinct European contexts, Greece and the Netherlands, to augment in-depth findings and to potentially provide comparative insights into culturally varied perspectives and stages of plant-based product and diet adoption. While this study includes two focus groups, such sample is consistent with accepted qualitative research practices and precedents in the British Food Journal (e.g. Mancini *et al.*, 2017), where in-depth insights rather than generalizability are prioritized. Although limited to two groups, the study adheres to the “information-power” criterion (aim, sample specificity, theory use, dialogue quality and analysis strategy; Malterud *et al.*, 2016) indicating that the more information the sample holds, relevant for the actual study the lower amount of participants is needed. Aligned with Malterud *et al.* (2016), our aim was narrow and theoretically informed, the sample was highly specific (self-identified anti-vegans), and the quality of group interaction was rich, providing sufficient analytic depth.

Participants were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling to ensure that all group members explicitly self-identified as anti-vegan and demonstrated strong resistance to veganism and plant-based diets. Participants were recruited through a combination of social media outreach and the researchers’ extended professional and personal networks, ensuring access to individuals who strongly self-identified as anti-vegan and aligning with previous research (Gregson *et al.*, 2024). The Dutch focus group included six self-identifying anti-vegan participants (three males, two females, one non-binary), ranging in age from 29 to 42 years ( $M = 33.67$ ,  $SD = 6.02$ ), reflecting diverse urban backgrounds and varied educational levels. The Greek group comprised six participants (four male, two female), similarly aged between 30 and 41 years ( $M = 36.00$ ,  $SD = 4.00$ ), also from mixed urban, educational and occupational backgrounds. Efforts were made to ensure representation of diverse demographic characteristics to augment the depth and range of discussions.

### 3.3 Data collection

The focus groups took place in October 2024 were conducted online and utilized a semi-structured protocol, guided by principles outlined in relevant literature (e.g. Fernqvist *et al.*, 2015). This study received approval from the institutional ethics review board. All participants provided consent to participate.

The discussion guide followed a four-stage funnel inspired by Mancini *et al.* (2017), designed to move smoothly from abstract identity to concrete product evaluation and back to broader social context. Stage 1 focused on general perceptions and self-identity as anti-vegan (e.g. illustrative prompt: “What comes to mind when thinking about veganism? Can you describe a typical vegan?”). Stage 2 presented three stimulus items, namely ravioli, chocolate and steak, prompting immediate reactions to vegan packaging and labels (e.g. illustrative prompt “What are your thoughts or reactions to these labels?”). Exploring reactions to concrete plant-based products provided insight into how ideological resistance to veganism translated into marketplace perceptions and allowed participants to express cognitive and emotional responses in a tangible context. Stage 3 introduced social-norm scenarios, such as hosting a vegan guest in a social occasion, to explore peer influence and perceived pressure

(e.g. illustrative prompt: “Imagine you are shopping for a dinner party, where one of the guests is bringing their plus one, who happens to be vegan. Would you also accommodate the vegan guests? Walk us through how you would select products in the supermarket”). Stage 4 returned to broader sociocultural reflections, including family traditions, media exposure, cultural narratives around veganism and personal turning points, in the formation of anti-vegan identity. Sessions were moderated non-directively. This staged design enabled a smooth progression from abstract ideology to concrete product evaluation and back to broader social discourse, thereby avoiding abrupt thematic shifts noted by the reviewer. The protocol included open-ended questions designed to elicit in-depth discussion and spontaneous interaction, complemented by stimulus-based materials (e.g. product packaging or marketing labels of vegan and plant-based food items) to prompt immediate reactions and facilitate deeper exploration of underlying attitudes and emotional responses.

Each focus group session lasted approximately 70 minutes, was recorded and subsequently transcribed to capture nuances of group dynamics fully. To facilitate cross-cultural comparative analysis, all Greek transcripts were translated into English by a bilingual researcher, ensuring semantic accuracy and cultural context preservation. The Dutch focus group took place in English language, which was appropriate given the participants’ high proficiency in the language and thus did not require translation.

### 3.4 Data analysis

Data analysis followed the thematic analysis approach proposed by established research (Boyatzis, 1998; Clarke and Braun, 2017), integrating inductive and deductive processes to identify, analyze and report patterns (themes) across the dataset. This data analysis approach is widely recognized for its flexibility and suitability in exploring complex, socially constructed phenomena and has been effectively used in previous qualitative studies on food choice (e.g. Fernqvist *et al.*, 2015). The analytic process proceeded in multiple iterative phases. Initially, an inductive coding strategy was employed to generate codes grounded in the participants’ own language and perspectives. This phase emphasized emergent meanings, capturing expressions of resistance, emotion, cultural narratives and value-laden reasoning. Codes were generated without reference to predefined theoretical constructs ensuring the analysis remained anchored in the data. Following this phase, a deductive process was applied using established psychological theories to guide theme development and clustering. In specific, insights from PRT, CDT and FTNC informed the interpretation and consolidation of emerging patterns. These theories served as interpretive lenses to connect participants’ sense-making with broader psychological and sociocultural mechanisms.

The analysis was conducted separately for each cultural context and then synthesized through a comparative thematic analysis to explore similarities and differences. This cross-cultural synthesis resulted in five overarching thematic clusters that consistently emerged across both contexts:

- (1) Rationalizing resistance to veganism,
- (2) Emotional and psychological reactions,
- (3) Cultural influences and identity anchoring,
- (4) Informational and media influences and
- (5) Social norms and social resistance (see [Appendix Table A1](#) for overview).

Together, these thematic clusters reflect theoretically informed groupings of codes and concepts. To ensure analytic rigor, coding and thematic development were conducted iteratively, involving repeated close reading and critical reflection on emerging interpretations. Reflexivity was integrated throughout the process, with the primary researcher maintaining memos to monitor positionality and reduce potential interpretative bias, especially when

analyzing emotionally or culturally charged responses (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). Importantly, this study prioritized theoretical coherence and interpretive depth over statistical measures of inter-rater reliability, consistent with a reflexive, interpretivist qualitative paradigm (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Nonetheless, to enhance trustworthiness and transparency, selected codes were shared with a second researcher for validation, yielding a high degree of agreement. This collaborative engagement supported confidence in the credibility of the final thematic framework. Interactional cues such as laughter, joking and collective “piling-on” were treated as contextual signals that helped interpret participants’ verbal responses. These dynamics informed how we extracted and reported findings on collective resistance, social signaling and identity protection.

## 4. Results

This section is structured into five subsections, each one corresponding to its respective thematic cluster, as reported above. Participant quotes were extensively used to illustrate and substantiate the thematic findings, hence ensuring the findings remained grounded in participants’ experiences and perspectives. Before presenting the findings per thematic cluster, it is useful to contextualize the sample. Across both samples, participants described their anti-vegan identity as stemming from main motivations; in specific, ideological opposition to what they perceived as moral absolutism of veganism, cultural attachment to meat-centered rituals (especially in Greece) and defense of personal autonomy in food choice (especially in the Netherlands). Appendix Table A1 summarizes the cross-cultural comparative findings that emerged; the analysis below highlights how those findings materialized in participants’ discussions.

### 4.1 Rationalizing resistance to veganism

Participants in both the Dutch and Greek focus groups engaged in active sense-making processes to justify their resistance to veganism. These justifications revealed a range of cognitive, moral and cultural rationalizations which allowed participants to maintain an anti-vegan perspective while minimizing internal conflict or social discomfort. While the specific justifications sometimes varied between cultural contexts, what emerged across both focus groups was a discursive effort to reframe resistance not as deviant or uninformed, but as reasoned, authentic and even morally defensible. Such process aligns closely with CDT, as participants sought to resolve the psychological discomfort that might arise from rejecting a practice (i.e. veganism) often associated with sustainability, health and ethics. Instead of altering their behavior, participants reinterpreted the meaning and legitimacy of veganism itself, reframing it as flawed, performative or less ethical than presumed. To deepen this exploration, we linked abstract perceptions of veganism to participants’ reactions toward concrete plant-based products and labels, showing how ideological resistance translated into marketplace evaluations.

*4.1.1 Cognitive rationalizations and moral inversion.* Across both focus groups, participants expressed a desire to position themselves as rational, informed consumers. This was often framed in terms of skepticism toward marketing strategies, with vegan labels and packaging dismissed as visually manipulative or commercially motivated. For instance, one participant, when exposed to a plant-based product with a big V (for vegan) symbol on its label, noted:

The Big V label is vague. And also, there is this green leaf, you know . . . on top of the on the top right of the V, which says that it’s a green product. It needs to give you a more sustainable idea for the production and everything. But from what we see also the plastic that they have used for the packaging it’s the same as the rest of the other products. I mean the kind of plastic that they have used, it’s not a biodegradable plastic. It’s just a regular plastic. (Dutch Participant 1)

This comment not only dismisses the authenticity of the vegan label but also demonstrates a dissonance-reduction strategy, shifting moral scrutiny from meat to packaging, consistent with CDT. Here, resistance emerged as a critique of perceived greenwashing tactics, allowing participants to discredit vegan claims and preserve a positive self-image, a classic dissonance-reduction strategy. Rather than challenging their behavior, they challenged the moral credibility of the vegan alternative.

In the Greek sample, this rationalization process was sometimes more ideologically loaded. Participants, led by moral inversion coupled with misinformation, rejected veganism not only as inauthentic but as a system that may cause harm in other forms, such as environmental degradation, or deforestation, or is even opposite to the history of humanity as a whole:

You destroy entire areas to go and plant soy. Tell me a little bit why if we do it like this, the poor little animal that was taken out of its home, it didn't deserve it. (Greek Participant 3)

Why shouldn't I eat animal products? This has been happening since the dawn of humanity. There is a collaboration between living things and humans that, well, you exploit, not the animal itself, but what the animal produces. (Greek Participant 6)

Collectively, these quotes demonstrate a dissonance-reducing function by reversing the moral frame: instead of being unethical for eating meat, participants framed veganism itself as ethically problematic or unnatural. Such narratives align with the "4 Ns" (Piazza *et al.*, 2015), particularly the idea that meat consumption is natural, normal, nice and necessary – common rationalizations used to reduce moral conflict. These strategies can enable individuals to maintain alignment with moral values (e.g. protecting animals or nature) while continuing to reject plant-based diets.

*4.1.2 Resistance as autonomy: reactance to prescriptive messaging.* Aligned with PRT positing that individuals experience motivational arousal when they perceive a threat to their behavioral freedom, both Dutch and Greek participants expressed discomfort with the prescriptive or normative tone of vegan messaging. The stronger and more moralized the vegan message, the more it appeared to trigger resistance framed around autonomy and agency. This interpretation emerged through repeated patterns in participants' discussions, where prescriptive or judgmental cues in vegan messaging were consistently described as provoking irritation or rejection, indicating that perceived moral pressure was a key trigger for reactance rather than the informational content itself. For instance, in the Dutch group, this emerged as pointed criticism:

I want to adapt it from a marketing point of view. I mean I think that they want to over-advertise the fact that the product is vegan. That's why you can see a huge label, a huge logo. So, I think that is something that it's a marketing trick. (Dutch Participant 2)

In the Greek sample, reactance was also amplified by the cultural embeddedness of food rituals. Veganism was seen not only as prescriptive but as invasive or disruptive to collective customs, thus a refusal to accept that plant-based products can or should replace meat in culturally meaningful contexts (also see [section 4.3.1](#)). Participants expressed a strong need to defend traditions as personal and communal freedoms, resisting perceived attempts to standardize or moralize eating habits.

*4.1.3 Authenticity through familiar logics.* Participants in both groups emphasized that their food practices were more "real", "authentic" or "grounded" than vegan alternatives. In the Dutch group, authenticity was often aligned with pragmatism and affordability, such as choosing store-brand vegan options without subscribing to vegan identity. In the Greek group, authenticity was mostly tied to familiar local knowledge, implying that traditional foods already offer a sufficient, authentic way of eating plant-based – rendering the concept of veganism somewhat ironic or unnecessary. One participant explained:

You can live as a vegan. Will it be ideal? No. But you can. Why? You can eat Greek beans; you can eat things like that . . . And instead we talk about veganism . . . ? (Greek Participant 3)

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This response represents both dissonance reduction and moral reorientation, as the participant avoids behavior change through recasting veganism as detached from local food practices.

#### *4.2 Emotional and psychological reactions*

Beyond cognitive rationalizations, participants in both country samples expressed emotional and psychological responses to veganism that contributed to the construction and maintenance of their anti-vegan viewpoints. These responses were not incidental; instead, they served to regulate internal dissonance, to maintain a sense of autonomy and to reinforce social identity. Participants' emotional responses appeared to function both as a protective mechanism against perceived judgment and as an interpretive lens through which participants evaluated vegan messages and interactions. Also, the emotional reactions of the participants are aligned with the PRT; many participants expressed emotional discomfort or frustration when veganism was experienced as normative, moralizing or socially imposed, triggering defensive affective reactions.

*4.2.1 Emotional reactance to vegan messaging.* Across both samples, participants described experiencing annoyance, anger, irritation, irony or even indifference in response to plant-based packaging, labels or seemingly deceiving promotional strategies. In the Dutch group, participants objected to perceived marketing manipulation, and perceived that marketers are attempting to limit their freedom of choice by moralizing or exaggerating claims, prompting an emotional pushback. For instance:

Annoyance. Anger . . . they use it as a marketing trick to make me buy the product, but at the end of the day, yeah, how many times do I want? (Dutch Participant 4)

Furthermore, in the Greek group, emotional responses were sometimes intense and often relationally charged, as described in the section below.

*4.2.2 Emotional boundary-setting in social interactions.* Greek participants in specific described past interactions with vegans that resulted in social discomfort or conflict, reinforcing their anti-vegan identity not just cognitively but emotionally and relationally. These memories often involved feeling judged, being pressured to adapt, or experiencing relational breakdowns. A participant recalled a personal, emotionally charged experience when co-existing with a vegan in a friend setting:

I felt bad for her there. I couldn't laugh; I was holding back . . . It curbs your appetite; it curbs your appetite to be around this person (Greek Participant 3)

In instances as such, emotional responses reflect not only individual resistance but also a boundary-drawing process, where participants emotionally anchor their anti-vegan stance to protect individual identity, social harmony and personal agency.

#### *4.3 Cultural influences and identity anchoring*

Participants' sense-making processes around veganism were often shaped by the cultural context and traditions in which their food practices were embedded. This thematic cluster reveals that anti-veganism was not merely a matter of individual preference, cognitive evaluation or affective pull-back but, especially in the Greek sample, an identity-anchored response grounded in collective memory, ritual and symbolic belonging. Dutch participants articulated food preferences with more limited cultural framing, instead drawing on functional or pragmatic considerations. These dynamics, illustrating how cultural norms serve as a powerful factor in shaping food-related beliefs and resistance, are highlighted below.

*4.3.1 Tradition as a moral compass and shield in Greece.* Greek participants consistently anchored their resistance to veganism in cultural heritage and food rituals, often evoking seasonal celebrations (e.g. Orthodox Easter), village traditions and family tables as contexts, where meat consumption is not merely normative but considered sacred. Veganism was

viewed not merely as a dietary preference but as a disruption of cultural continuity and an imposition on intergenerational practices. One participant stated:

We don't have any vegan table in all the customs we have . . . but to roast the lamb, yes . . . Let's make a nice dish with everything containing meat, so it's a little hard to get that out of your body if you've grown up like that (Greek Participant 2)

This response highlights how cultural customs and culturally dictated scripts serve as moral buffers against vegan arguments, allowing participants to reduce dissonance by situating food choices within a broader historical and emotional identity, minimizing the sense of personal accountability for dietary change. At the same time, cultural identity also intensified reactance, particularly when participants perceived veganism as attempting to redefine, discredit or replace traditional foods.

*4.3.2 Food as identity protection against external influence.* Cultural anchoring also provided Greek participants with a symbolic shield against change, especially against what was perceived as the moralizing tone of veganism. Meat consumption was narrated not only as natural but as part of a rural, modest and survival-oriented lifestyle, which further insulated it from criticism. Notably, this was one of the few instances where participants also referred to non-meat animal products, such as eggs. Also, other historically and culturally inspired perceptions of sustainability, tied with identity protection, were unveiled, such as avoidance of food waste.

So, if you look at the grandmother's diet, let's say she doesn't eat meat all the time, but she eats animal products, she collects her eggs from the chickens she has. (Greek Participant 6)

Hey, don't throw away easily food like that. I won't throw away food. For me, that's much more important than cooking vegan, not throwing it away, paying for it and setting a table and then not eating it the next day. (Greek Participant 3)

Collectively, these quotes demonstrate narrative strategies that allowed participants to emotionally and cognitively disengage from vegan messages. Also, these identity-protective responses illustrate how cultural frames help reinforce the sense that resistance to veganism is not backward or unethical, but rather authentic, contextually appropriate and even morally superior. This aligns with recent evidence that culture shapes sustainable food adoption (Polyportis *et al.*, 2025), reinforcing the role of deep-rooted cultural scripts in sustaining anti-vegan resistance.

*4.3.3 Lower cultural anchoring and high pragmatism in the Netherlands.* Dutch participants rarely referred to strong heritage or intergenerational food norms when expressing their views. Their resistance to veganism was primarily pragmatic, based on perceived issues of price, labeling or marketing manipulation. Food was not framed as a cultural or identity issue, but rather as a personal consumer decision.

The culture here is welcoming towards going vegan or vegetarian. (Dutch Participant 4)

When asked about accommodating vegan guests, Dutch participants did not exhibit clear signs of cultural conflict. One explained:

I guess we would just buy something so that the vegan person feels included and respected. (Dutch Participant 5)

This reflects a functional and pragmatic approach to food choice; one that probably lacks the identity-protective dynamics seen in Greece. As such, Dutch participants rarely reported emotional discomfort linked to tradition, ritual or cultural expectations. Their responses suggest that food practices are less tied to collective meaning systems, and thus more open to freedom, symbolic reinterpretation or substitution. Nevertheless, even in this lower-stakes context, Dutch participants still displayed reactance toward messaging they deemed excessive or inauthentic, as unveiled in their irritation with branding and packaging. As [Appendix Table A1](#) shows, cultural anchoring was stronger in Greece, whereas Dutch resistance revolved around pragmatic concerns.

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#### 4.4 Informational and media influences

Anti-vegans in both groups discussed how media exposure, informational cues and product marketing potentially influence their viewpoints toward plant-based diets and veganism. However, rather than prompting attitude or behavior change, these informational stimuli frequently led to critical evaluation, rejection or emotional resistance, particularly when perceived as manipulative or moralizing. These reactions can be understood through the lens of PRT, as participants often appeared to resist not the information itself, but the perceived persuasive intent behind it. In cases where ethical concerns were acknowledged (e.g. animal welfare), participants often responded with cognitive dissonance-reducing strategies, minimizing or reframing the relevance of such information to their own choices.

**4.4.1 Reactance to persuasive messaging and packaging.** As abovementioned in [section 4.1](#), both Dutch and Greek participants were exposed to product labels, logos, and packaging during the focus groups and were asked to evaluate their initial reactions. Across both groups, participants expressed distrust toward branding cues and voiced concerns about the authenticity and clarity of vegan claims. In the Dutch group, this took the form of criticism of marketing techniques, reflecting psychological reactance to perceived overreach in labels and branding, where participants sense that their autonomy as consumers is being undermined by emotionally or morally charged cues.

In the Greek group, reactions to labels were even often pronounced and sometimes emotionally charged. Participants sometimes criticized not only the marketing elements but also the ideological connotations of vegan product design, especially when it mimicked meat products:

And why it does it have to look like meat? You know . . . (Greek Participant 4)

Yes . . . So, if I saw a steak like that, just because it looked like a normal one would put me off getting it because I felt like someone was trying to fool me. (Greek Participant 2)

Taken together, these responses reveal symbolic reactance, where informational cues are experienced as not just persuasive, but deceptive or disrespectful. Participants reassert their freedom not only by rejecting purchasing the plant-based product but by delegitimizing the symbolic language of the message.

**4.4.2 Media skepticism and algorithmic disengagement.** When asked about the influence of mass media and social media on food choices, participants in both groups largely rejected the idea that media played a meaningful role in shaping their attitudes toward veganism. Instead, they emphasized their independence of thought and media-savviness, suggesting that they could filter out or ignore vegan messages, thus distancing themselves from algorithmic targeting. For instance, one Dutch participant, upon reflection on social media trends, noted:

I think there is a trend though on being more conscious about your food consumption and how sustainable you are. Which in my opinion has nothing to do with being vegan. (Dutch Participant 4)

Greek participants expressed similar skepticism toward media narratives from established social media influencers as manufactured trends rather than awareness campaigns. Interestingly, some Greek participants also differentiated between “performative” vegan influencers and practical food content creators that they appreciated. Such perceived nuanced media literacy allowed them to distinguish between persuasive vegan messaging and useful plant-based content, hence embracing the latter without adopting a vegan identity:

I follow her on Instagram. But yes, why? Because what she cooks is neither with tofu, nor with soy, nor with anything. It’s with ingredients that I can get from the supermarket that I would have at home anyway and she made me new recipes. (Greek Participant 4)

Here, the participant avoids dissonance by redefining the message: instead of seeing the content as vegan, it is reframed as “just food”, removing the ideological burden.

Another theme emerging from both groups was a sense of informational fatigue, where repeated exposure to vegan messaging led not to persuasion but to disengagement. Dutch

participants voiced this subtly, describing vegan cues as visually repetitive or overdone. In Greece, participants described more active avoidance, such as skipping documentaries or ignoring social media content that might trigger moral conflict:

Now I guess it's everyone's algorithm (on social media). If you're not interested in vegan products, just throw the algorithm away. (Greek Participant 4)

This form of strategic cognitive avoidance reduces potential dissonance by limiting emotional exposure to content that might provoke guilt or moral reflection. It reinforces the idea that resistance is maintained not only through arguments but also through selective attention and emotional regulation.

#### 4.5 Social norms and social resistance

The final thematic cluster explores how interpersonal dynamics, perceived group expectations and social pressure influence anti-vegan identity construction. Participants in both countries described various forms of social interaction, such as including dinner gatherings, family meals or workplace events, that contributed to the formation and reinforcement of anti-vegan perspectives. While some participants acknowledged the importance of mutual respect, many also conveyed experiences of interpersonal tension, peer pressure or exclusion, which often triggered psychological reactance. Some also experienced value conflict in these settings, leading to strategies aimed at resolving cognitive dissonance without changing their dietary practices.

*4.5.1 Perceived pressure and normative conflict.* Participants across both countries described feeling pressured or judged in social settings where veganism was present, often leading to a defensive affirmation of their anti-vegan position. These reactions are consistent with PRT, as individuals push back against perceived attempts to curtail their food-related freedom. In the Dutch group, pressure was often limited to situational discomfort. Greek participants described experiences of great emotional intensity involving vegan individuals, often framed as moments of interpersonal rupture. One participant recalled:

So, I always felt the pressure living with a person who is vegan because then they would start saying, oh, are you cooking meat because it smells. Can you open the window? Yeah, there can be a lot of pressure while you are asked something that you cannot do, right? (Greek Participant 5)

These kinds of experiences also align with FTNC, as they underscore how social friction can solidify resistance, especially when individuals perceive norms of tolerance being selectively enforced, where vegans are accommodated but omnivores are expected to self-regulate.

*4.5.2 Anti-vegan perceived stigma as response to shifting social norms.* Interestingly, in both groups, participants described a growing cultural shift toward veganism as a normative force, leading to a sense of marginalization and stigmatization for meat eaters. This perception fueled defensive reactions and the maintenance of a shared anti-vegan identity. Participants in both focus groups reflected:

I think that we are reaching a situation where also the anti-vegans nowadays feel a bit **stigmatized**. I see a political element in this concept as well. So, I think that also the more we progress throughout the years, I think the more we're going to be stigmatized from now on." (Dutch Participant 2)

An anti-vegan is easier to be stigmatized. I believe that now, with a new generation, extremely that is sensitive to everything, yes. (Greek Participant 3)

This awareness of reversed stigma represents a powerful response to shifting social norms. Rather than viewing veganism as a neutral option, participants framed it as a dominant ideology, or a trend that threatens established practices and assigns moral superiority to one lifestyle over another, hence stigmatizing anti-vegans.

*4.5.3 Social norms and the politics of inclusion.* Social resistance was also tied to broader expectations about hospitality, inclusion and food sharing, especially in Greece. While

participants often said they would “accommodate” vegan guests, they made clear that this was a courtesy, not a concession. As one participant put it:

It should be clear that there will be meat, of course, but first we’ll make something for you (Greek Participant 3)

Aligned with FTNC, this framing establishes meat consumption as the baseline norm, with veganism presented as an exception to be managed rather than a co-equal option. When the norm appears to shift (e.g. when workplace or public events serve only vegan food) participants reported experiencing this as an imposition, sparking strong negative feelings:

I feel pressure when I work for my employer and all the events that we have once in a while have a main course, they are only based on the plant-based food which I find terrible (Dutch Participant 2)

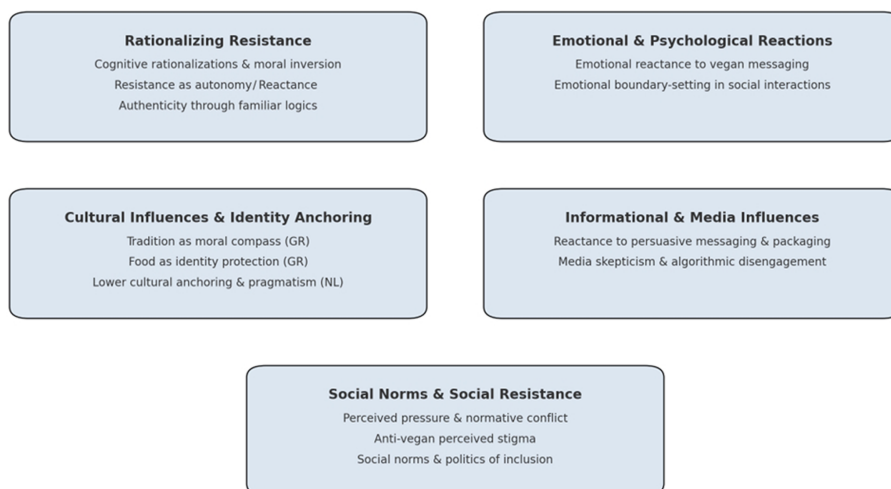
The abovementioned quotes reflect a perceived transactional approach to inclusion, beyond identity tension. Overall, this thematic cluster highlights that resistance to veganism is not merely internal or cultural but is also shaped by social normative conflict, and real or anticipated social feedback.

Figure 1 presents a synthesis of the five thematic clusters, illustrating how the different strands of analysis collectively shape anti-vegan sense-making and resistance.

## 5. Discussion

This study investigated how individuals self-identified as anti-vegans rationalize their resistance to veganism and explored the roles that informational and cultural influences play in shaping their perceptions and attitudes toward plant-based diets and veganism. Findings extend prior research (Gregson *et al.*, 2022, 2024) by demonstrating that resistance to sustainable dietary transitions is profoundly anchored in identity construction that is related to complex rationalization and reactance processes, as well as informational and sociocultural dynamics, rather than merely a deficit of information or lack of environmental concern.

Aligned with PRT, participants’ responses unveiled pronounced cognitive and emotional reactions to perceived threats against their autonomy posed by vegan messaging. This aligns



**Figure 1.** Synthesis of thematic findings on anti-vegan sense-making and resistance. The figure presents the five thematic clusters and subthemes, highlighting how the strands of analysis collectively inform the overarching anti-vegan stance. Source: Authors’ own work

closely with previous work identifying emotional resistance to persuasive messages perceived as overly moralizing or coercive (Gregson *et al.*, 2024; Rosenberg and Siegel, 2018). Specifically, the participants' cognitive responses and emotional intensity observed in reactions to plant-based labels, certifications and veganism highlights reactance as a significant barrier to acceptance, suggesting that attempts to advocate veganism through overt moralistic or prescriptive framing might inadvertently trigger counterproductive resistance. This finding emphasizes the importance of optimal communication strategies that respect consumer autonomy and minimize psychological reactance by avoiding coercive or judgmental tones (Quick *et al.*, 2013). From a practical standpoint, this suggests that public campaigns and product marketing should prioritize autonomy-supportive, choice-affirming messages to reduce defensive pushback, fully consistent with PRT.

Furthermore, findings from the current research resonate with CDT, illustrating how participants applied cognitive strategies to mitigate dissonance between their dietary habits and broader ethical or environmental concerns. Participants often reframed veganism as morally flawed, commercially driven or inauthentic, effectively diminishing the legitimacy of ethical claims associated with plant-based diets. This cognitive reframing aligns with prior observations on belief disconfirmation, where information challenging entrenched beliefs is often actively refuted or dismissed rather than internalized (Harmon-Jones and Mills, 2019). This highlights a key theoretical implication: messaging that triggers dissonance without providing acceptable resolution pathways (e.g. incremental flexitarian steps or non-threatening labeling) risks reinforcing dissonance rather than facilitating change.

The cross-cultural comparison between Greece and the Netherlands further enriches the understanding of anti-vegan resistance by highlighting subtle, yet noticeable variations in how social norms and cultural backgrounds shape reactions to veganism, aligned with FTNC (Cialdini *et al.*, 1991). Greek participants anchored resistance in collective rituals and traditions, reinforcing previous findings that highlight the critical role of culture and identity in dietary practices (Gregson *et al.*, 2024; Salmen and Dhont, 2023). Conversely, the Dutch sample's resistance was primarily rooted in more pragmatic and autonomy-related concerns. From a societal and policy perspective, this underlines the importance of culturally sensitive strategies: dynamic or descriptive normative cues (e.g. "more people like you are trying plant-based meals") may open pathways for gradual change, while prescriptive or moralizing norms risk augmenting the anti-vegan sentiment.

While past research highlights stigma toward vegans (Markowski and Roxburgh, 2019), the present findings suggest that anti-vegans increasingly consider themselves as stigmatized as veganism gains perceived normative traction. Effective interventions should be rooted in local identities and traditions, especially when targeting communities with strong dietary norms.

Skepticism toward sustainability labels aligns with the literature on greenwashing and consumer distrust (Gregson *et al.*, 2022; Tseng *et al.*, 2020). Participants often interpreted labels as manipulative marketing techniques rather than genuine sustainability indicators, consistent with broader evidence that consumer suspicion critically shapes reactions to marketing claims (Panigyraiki and Polypotis, 2024). From a practical viewpoint, this underscores a critical challenge in sustainability communication: the potential for labels to backfire among skeptical consumers. Recent research suggests that food labels framed as "sustainable" or "healthy" instead of "vegan" or "plant-based" can be more effective for shifting consumer choices (Sleboda *et al.*, 2024). These findings can also be interpreted within the broader societal "backlash" against the increasing visibility and moral framing of veganism observed over the past years, where plant-based diets and vegan identity have, at times, provoked cultural resistance and counter-discourse (Cole and Morgan, 2011; Gregson *et al.*, 2022; Markowski and Roxburgh, 2019). Hence, optimal communication strategies should avoid overtly moralistic or prescriptive language, as these can trigger psychological reactance among resistant audiences. Policymakers and marketers must instead

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enhance transparency and credibility in sustainability claims to counteract consumer cynicism and bolster trust.

The implications of this research provide crucial insights into the persistent attitude-behavior gap regarding sustainable food consumption (Polyportis *et al.*, 2024). Participants sometimes acknowledged the importance of ethical or environmental issues but justified their dietary choices through deeper cultural, emotional and identity-based rationalizations. Linking back to the three theoretical frameworks, findings suggest that sustainable dietary transitions require approaches that (1) avoid triggering reactance, (2) offer dissonance-reducing pathways for gradual change and (3) leverage culturally resonant, descriptive social norms. This emphasis on psychological and social processes is consistent with broader evidence that psychological state factors, including emotional responses and social-norm perceptions, strongly shape sustainable food outcomes (Glenisson *et al.*, 2025). This integrated application of theory strengthens the bridge between our findings and practical intervention strategies. It suggests that interventions based purely on rational environmental education or persuasive labelling may be ineffective unless they comprehensively address the underlying cultural, emotional and identity-related dimensions of food consumption. Future research could explore how identity-shift strategies, such as those triggered by self-presentation in public or relational contexts, may encourage alignment with sustainable norms (Carr and Foreman, 2016).

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## 6. Conclusion

While this study provides substantial contributions, certain limitations must be recognized. First, the use of relatively few focus groups might hinder the generalizability of these findings to broader populations or contexts. We acknowledge that additional focus groups, especially in sub-cultures of older demographics, could enrich the cultural contrasts reported here and we flag this as a priority for future research. Second, while this study offers valuable cross-cultural comparisons, expanding the research to additional countries or specific socioeconomic or political subcultures can offer deeper insights into the varied contexts of resistance to veganism and sustainable food transitions. Third, findings do not directly address perceptions of animal-based products such as fish, dairy; future research should explore whether similar resistance mechanisms apply. Fourth, as sustainable food transitions are embedded in complex global systems, future research should consider shifting political, economic and ecological contexts. For example, disparities in sustainability standards, such as stricter EU regulations, can raise costs for local consumers and distort competition (Euronews, 2024). Additionally, external shocks like geopolitical conflicts or pandemics – so-called “Black Swans” (Taleb, 2010) – further destabilize food systems and challenge the adoption of plant-based diets. These systemic disruptions may intensify polarization and reinforce resistance within anti-vegan groups, especially when intersecting with group conformity (Martinelli and De Canio, 2022). To better understand such phenomena, future research should include longitudinal studies to capture how anti-vegan identities polarize over time in response to broader systemic changes.

In conclusion, this study uniquely contributes to the emerging line of anti-vegan research on understanding the complex identities, sense-making and resistance of anti-vegan groups by revealing complex interactions among reactance, cognitive dissonance and cultural norms. As social movements and policymakers attempt to promote plant-based diets as part of a sustainable future, understanding resistance is as crucial as promoting adoption. This study reveals that the anti-vegan sentiment is rooted in deeper processes of identity protection, cultural loyalty and distrust toward sustainability information. The findings shed light on the barriers that prevent informed, sustainable food choices, especially among consumers who feel morally or socially alienated by dominant sustainability discourses. Practically, this study highlights that effective interventions should be autonomy-supportive, culturally sensitive and norm-aware, bridging the gap between social psychological theory and actionable policy or

marketing strategies. For sustainable food transitions to succeed, future interventions must not only inform but also disarm resistance by building credibility, avoiding moralizing frames and engaging with culturally grounded values in respectful and inclusive ways.

*Consent for publication*

All authors agree to publication.

## Appendix

**Table A1.** Comparative thematic table.

| Thematic cluster                           | Dutch focus group  | Greek focus group   |
|--|--|---|
| Rationalizing resistance to veganism       | Pragmatic justifications; skepticism about marketing and greenwashing; resistance framed as informed consumer choice                               | Skepticism about marketing; Ideologically and morally driven rationalizations; moral inversion; environmental critique of plant-based production; appeal to natural order and tradition |
| Emotional and psychological reactions      | Emotional reactance triggered by exaggerated branding or moralizing tone of vegan messaging; annoyance and irony                                   | Feelings of guilt, resentment, discomfort in social interactions with vegans; emotionally charged boundary-setting  |
| Cultural influences and identity anchoring | Lower cultural anchoring; resistance framed in personal terms rather than collective identity; more flexible approach to accommodating others      | Higher cultural anchoring; anti-vegan views grounded in tradition, intergenerational practices, and cultural rituals; food tied to national and familial identity                       |
| Informational and media influences         | Skepticism toward media influence; emphasis on independent thinking; frustration with excessive labeling; media fatigue                            | Distrust of influencer messaging; differentiation between performative and practical vegan content; strategic disengagement from moral media content                                    |
| Social norms and social resistance         | Perceived social pressure; sense of anti-vegan stigma; discomfort in normative vegan settings (workplace events); growing sense of marginalization | Sense of anti-vegan stigma; pressure in social settings leads to stronger reactance; veganism framed as normatively imposing  |

**Source(s):** Authors' own work

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