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THE EATING HABITS OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN SLOVENIA

RESEARCH REPORT

THE EATING HABITS OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN SLOVENIA

Research report

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1. INTRODUCTION

The present study sought to address the lack of research in the area of dietary practices that take young people and their attitudes towards ethical consumption as a starting point. Existing research shows that some young people are changing their dietary practices to reduce their impact on the environment (e.g. by choosing to eat a meat-free diet or avoiding beef (Ruby, 2012) as it causes a heavy environmental burden) or are expressing their environmental concerns and political views at protests organised by the Fridays for Future movement (Ziesemer et al. 2021, 428), which has been present in Slovenia since 2019 as part of the Youth for Climate Justice organisation.

Despite the great potential for political engagement in the sphere of consumption, ethical consumption is practised by only a few young people, reflecting the gap between their views, the intention to take action, and their actual actions (Melović et al., 2020; Saheli-ces-Pinto et al., 2021). However, from the perspective of theories of behavioural and social change, this is not surprising.

In the process of planning behaviour change, one of the fundamental requirements is a good understanding of the target groups, as well as of personal and environmental factors that influence problem-related behaviours, as pointed out by numerous models of behaviour change, ranging from the individualistic and group-based to ecological models (e.g. the transtheoretical model and stages of change, the rational action model, and the planned behaviour model).

The amount of information that young people have about the impact of dietary practices on the welfare of their environment is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to change behaviour in terms of ethical food consumption. Ethical food consumption is a complex phenomenon, which can be most concisely defined as practices based on the idea that people can influence society, politics and/or the environment through their consumption choices. But consumption depends on many structural and personal factors, on capabilities, desires, values and beliefs.

It is considered that food not only satisfies biological needs, but also social and cultural needs; for this reason, individuals do not choose it exclusively on the basis of rational criteria, but according to many other requisites. Eating is

primarily an emotional behaviour and only secondarily a rational behaviour. Food serves as a means to mark life transitions (birthdays, marriage, retirement and death) and has an important role in community renewal rituals (especially during the holidays: Christmas, New Year, Carnivals, Easter; work parties, family lunches); it can be a way of expressing affection, care and hospitality, as well as worldviews and attitudes (vegetarianism, the rejection of food products from various producers, fair trade); parents use it to control their children's behaviour (rewarding and comforting); moreover, it is an important building block of an individual's identity and an indicator of social status and economic situation. At the same time, the ethical aspect of consuming food depends on structural factors beyond the control of the individual, such as the availability of foods, the tax rate on foodstuffs, commercial pricing policy etc. (Tivadar and Kamin, 2005).

Ethical dietary criteria are only one piece in the mosaic of dietary factors. In the light of sociopsychological findings on the influence of attitudes on behaviour, this is completely understandable. First of all, people need to be informed about the impact of food and eating habits on society and the environment and have to consider this aspect as important; moreover, they need to be under an appropriate amount of social pressure and to feel in control of their own behaviour. People will therefore buy and eat food that they believe has qualities or effects that they value positively, food their significant others think they should eat, and food whose consumption is presumably under their control and is considered consistent with their "food identity" (Conner et al. 1998; Denison and Shepherd 1995; Shepherd and Raats, 1997). The personal support the individual receives from relatives, friends and professionals when making the decision to change eating habits is also significant (Povey et al., 2000). Dietary practices are, of course, also strongly influenced by socio-demographic factors; among these, the impact of gender, age, social class, formal education, and income level are most frequently identified by both foreign and Slovenian research (see, for example, Kamin et al. 2012).

Even though young people nowadays are able to choose between different dietary patterns, many continue to embrace established dietary practices learned in their primary social environments. This is consistent with findings from other research showing that dietary patterns and habits change remarkably slowly (e.g. Kamin et al., 2012), since, according to Fischler (1988: 290), dietary patterns and habits are an important part of an individual's identity and their belonging to a group.

Many contemporary dietary patterns are linked to broader societal changes and trends that promote more sustainable diets, which young people may be more inclined to adopt than their parents' generation. In fact, the values of solidarity, global justice and equality, which are directly linked to tackling environmental problems, are perceived as important by young people, who also consider care for the environment as a primary concern (see Vezovnik et al., 2022).

Therefore, the aim of the present research is to examine how sensitisation to environmental issues shapes the eating habits of young people. In particular, the research focuses on the following questions:

1. What are the eating habits of young people in Slovenia?
2. How do young people choose the foods that are part of their diets and to what extent do they evaluate/consider various environmental and ethical factors, such as the environmental footprint of food and the exploitation of animals?
3. What environmental impacts do they associate with or attribute to particular foods?
4. What are young people's attitudes towards limiting or reducing meat consumption in their diets?
5. What are young people's attitudes towards the consumption of "new" foods or alternatives to meat, which include cellular meat, plant-based meat and insects?

* The research "The Eating Habits of Young People in Slovenia" is part of the project concerning the dietary future in Slovenia, which is carried out by the Centre for Social Psychology (Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana).

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2. RESEARCH

2.1. METHOD

Taking into account the theoretical underpinnings and the results of previous research, a quantitative research method was chosen, i.e. an online survey involving a sample of JazVem panellists.

The survey included 1023 participants aged between 18 and 35 years. The sampling was quota-based. Quotas were set after stratifying all the members into quota cells as combinations of gender, four age groups, and 12 statistical regions (2 × 4 × 12 quota cells). 4850 panellists were invited to complete the survey. Of these, 99 did not complete the survey.

Data collection took place between 9 and 16 December 2021. The average duration of the survey was 26:39 minutes and the median was 23:18 minutes.

2.2. DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLE

- The survey sample was composed of 47.5% female and 52.4% male respondents.
- 71.3% of the respondents were born between 1990 and 2003; the rest were born before 1990.
- The majority of the respondents have completed four or five years of secondary school (59.2%) and are employed (54.8%).
- The majority of the respondents are in a relationship (63.0%) and live with their family of origin (34.4%).
- Most of the respondents come from the Central Slovenia (29.4%) and Podravska (15.8%) statistical regions.
- The majority of the respondents identify their dietary style as omnivorous (89.2%).

2.3. THEMATIC SETS OF SURVEY QUESTIONS

- The questionnaire consisted of several thematic sections:
- young people's eating habits and their eating style;
- food shopping practices;
- consumption of selected foods and reasons for the possible avoidance of certain foods;
- attitudes towards meat consumption, attachment to meat, and willingness to reduce the usage of meat;
- food waste;
- the perceived environmental impact of the selected foods;
- attitudes towards the environment;
- attitudes towards information sources;
- values;
- satisfaction with life.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The data shows the significant influence of **media content on the eating habits of young Slovenian consumers.** For example, among those who have limited or intend to limit their meat consumption, 31.5% said they have been encouraged to do so by documentaries and series. Moreover, the results reveal that young people perceive that foods with a major impact on the environment are often part of the media agenda and presented as problematic in terms of their negative environmental footprint. Thus, most young people describe products containing palm oil (43.1%), imported fruit and vegetables (41.2%), and wild-caught fish (33.8%) as having a very serious or serious impact on the environment. Interestingly, all three of these foods are ranked higher in terms of the perceived environmental burden than conventionally produced meat from large-scale meat companies, which was identified as a product with a serious or very serious negative impact on the environment by 32.9% of young people. On the other hand, almost half of young people (40%) expressed that coffee has no or only a minor negative impact on the environment, despite its production heavily affecting natural habitats as a result of mass consumption.

The analysis of the **purchasing of ethically-sourced foods** shows that one-third of young people in Slovenia (29.6%) buy food products certified as organic at least once a week, 33.8% choose products without packaging, 43.8% shop for products with a certificate of local origin, and 28.3% pick food products certified as free-range. It should not be ignored that some young consumers never buy foods with labels associated with ethical consumption. For example, almost a third of young consumers (27.4%) never buy products certified as Fair Trade.

The family of origin has a significant influence on young people's eating habits. Young people living at home adapt to family preferences, which means that they may not participate in ethical consumption even if they wanted to. In the case of food with a certificate of local origin, young consumers in Slovenia living with their families of origin report less frequent shopping than those living in other types of households. This indicates that family is an important factor in ethical food consumption. This interpretation is reinforced by the findings of qualitative research (Vezovnik and Kamin, 2021).

Young Slovenian consumers of ethical food are often concerned about the environmental impacts of food production caused by modern conventional food production systems. Despite this, for the most part, the concern about the **environmental footprint of food does not generally deter young people from consuming it**. This finding is consistent with behavioural models showing that available information, attitudes in favour of ethical consumption, and behavioural intentions do not necessarily lead to behaviours that meet the criteria of ethical consumption. As the data suggests, the impact on the environment (or the environmental footprint of food) is generally not the most prominent reason for not consuming certain foods or consuming them less often. When environmental footprint was mentioned, it was most often cited as a reason for not consuming poultry (7.6%) and beef (7.2%), or for consuming these types of meat less often. 11.2% of respondents do not consume poultry or consume it once a month or less often, and 26.5% of respondents do not consume beef. In Slovenia, a little more than a third of **young people who do not consume beef** or consume it less often, have made this decision for ethical reasons: 22.9% of young people cited that meat consumption is associated with animal suffering and exploitation, while 7% of respondents expressed that eating meat impacts the natural environment.

As conventionally produced meat is one of the foods that has a major environmental impact, the research specifically assessed **young people's willingness to reduce the amount of meat they consume**. Similar to previous studies, the results show that the attachment to meat is markedly higher in men than in women. Moreover, other associations can be observed. Young people who express a greater attachment to meat also show a lower willingness to make a sacrifice for the benefit of the environment, a lower awareness of the impact of environmental problems on their daily lives, a lower willingness to limit their meat consumption to twice a week, and a lower sense of control over the possibility of cutting meat out of their diet.

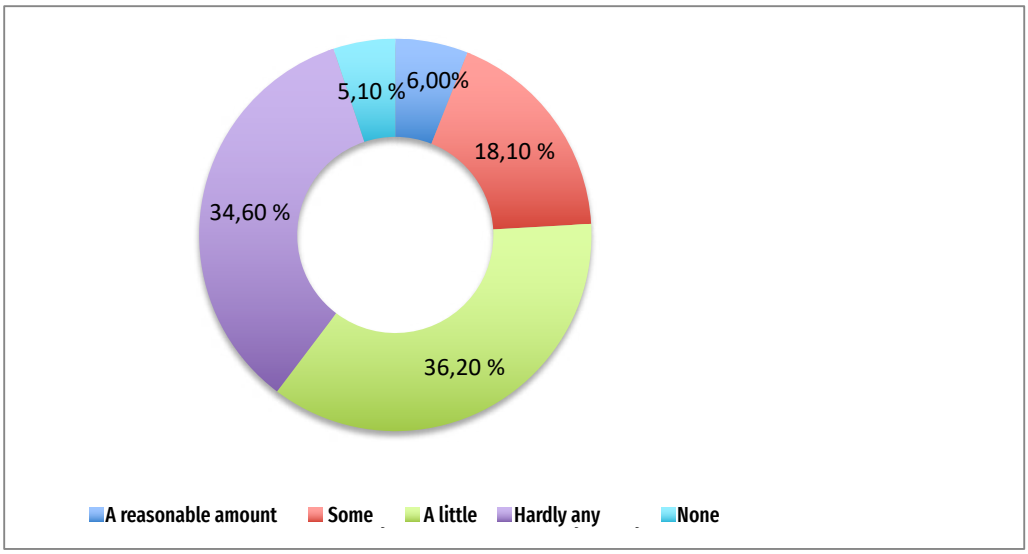
3.1. SELECTED FINDINGS DERIVING FROM THE BASIC STATISTICS (I.E. FREQUENCIES AND MEAN VALUES)

↳ Most respondents attributed a very serious (negative) environmental impact to products containing palm oil (18.3%), but also to wild-caught fish (12.1%), imported vegetables (12%), and conventionally produced meat from large-scale meat companies (10.6%).

- A total of 40% of respondents attributed no or only a mild (negative) environmental impact to coffee.
- A total of 38.5% of respondents attributed no or only a mild (negative) environmental impact to chocolate/coffee.
- Conventionally produced meat from large meat companies and conventionally produced milk and dairy products from large dairy companies were considered to have no or only a mild (negative) impact on the environment by a total of 27.9% and 38% of respondents respectively.
- The impact on the environment (or the environmental footprint of food) was generally not listed among the most prominent reasons for not consuming certain foods or consuming them less often. When mentioned, it was usually cited as a reason for not consuming poultry (7.6%) and beef (7.2%), or for consuming these types of meat less often. 11.2% of respondents do not consume poultry or consume it once a month or less often, and 26.5% of respondents do not consume beef.
- The majority of respondents (45.8%) who do not consume poultry or consume it occasionally (i.e. once a month or less frequently) – 11.2% of the total sample – cited animal suffering and animal exploitation as the main reasons for their choice.
- More than two-thirds (i.e. 78.4%) of the young people participating in the survey do not consume avocados or consume them once a month or less frequently.
- More than two-thirds (i.e. 78.4%) of the young people participating in the survey do not consume soya products or consume them once a month or less frequently.
- 66% of young people never consume almond-based drinks, whereas 19.4% consume them once a month or less frequently.
- On average, respondents reported that they like meat (M = 3.67; SD = 1.18) or agreed with this statement. In total, 63.5% of young people agreed or completely agreed with this statement.
- On average, respondents also agreed with the statement that consuming meat is natural and unquestionable (M = 3.66; SD = 1.08). In total, 63.7 % of young people agreed or completely agreed with this statement.

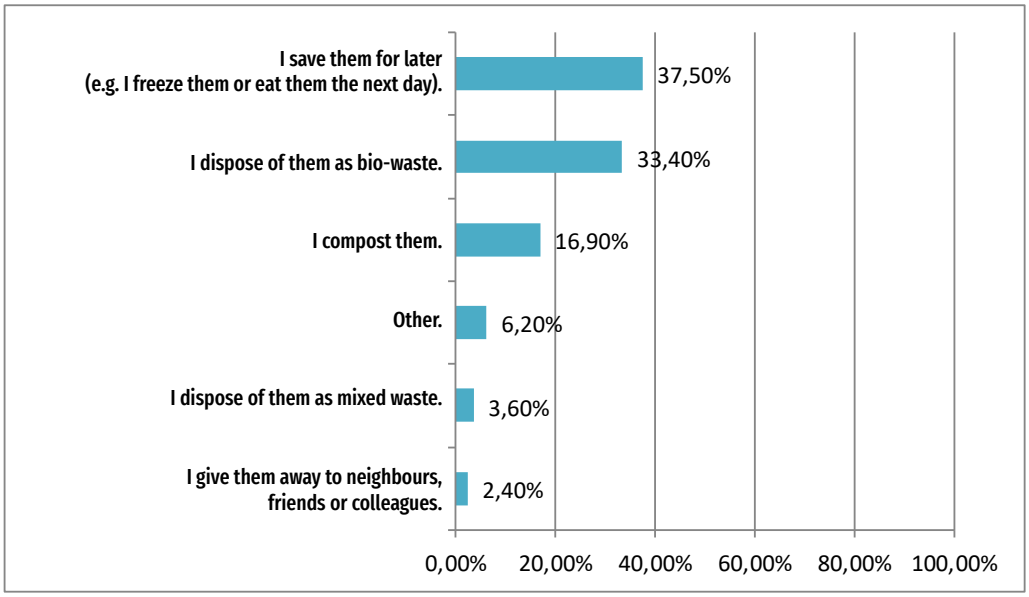
- A total of 43.8% of young people participating in the survey buy foods with a certificate of local origin several times a week or about once a week.
- 27.4% of young people participating in the survey never buy Fair Trade certified foods; the data also shows that in the group consisting of certified organic foods, products without packaging, foods certified as free-range, foods with a certificate of local origin, and Fair Trade certified foods, the highest proportions of respondents *never choose to buy* Fair Trade certified foods.
- 66.4% of respondents never shop for groceries online.
- On average, respondents disagreed with the statements that they would be willing to eat whole insects in the future (M = 1.78; SD = 1.04) or that insects or insect products could replace meat in their diet (M = 1.90; SD = 1.08).
- 47.5% of young people would be willing to try cellular meat or cultivated meat.
- 54.8% of young people would not be willing to try foods containing edible insects.

Figure 1: Proportion of young people according to the (self-)estimated amount of food they throw away (N = 1023)



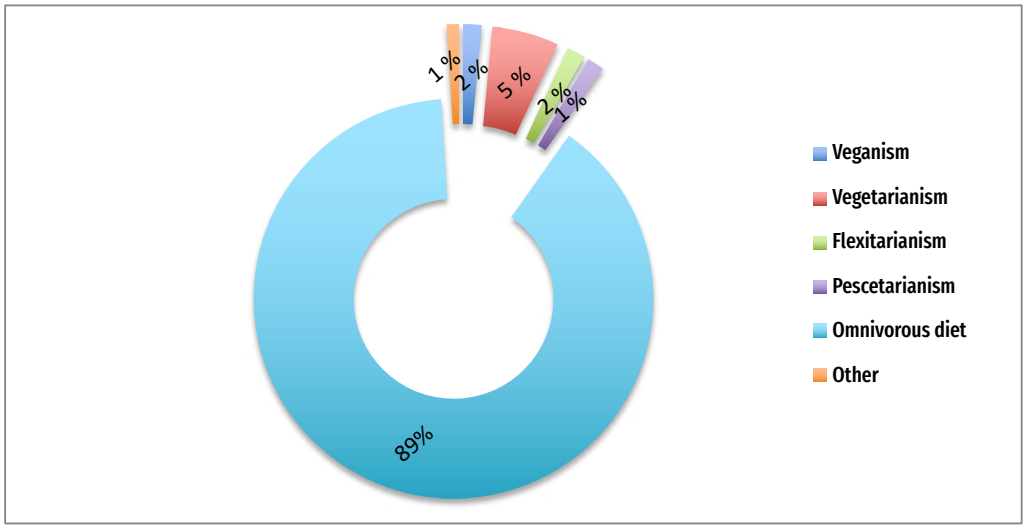
36.2% of young people estimate that they throw away a little food. This is followed by slightly more than a third of young people who estimated that they throw away hardly any food (34.60%) and just under a fifth of respondents who throw away some food (18.1%). 6% of respondents said they throw away a reasonable amount of food, while 5.1% reported that they do not throw away any food.

Figure 2: Proportion of young people according to their management of leftovers. (N = 1023)



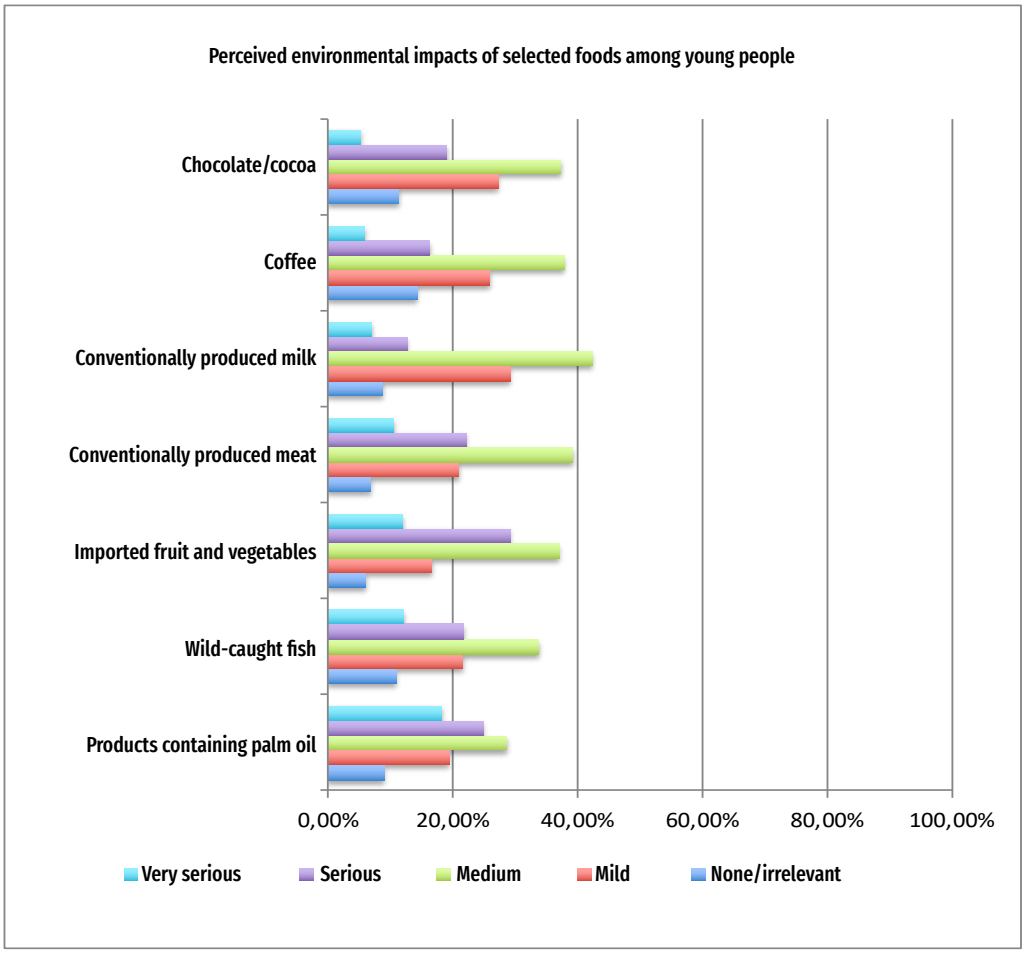
More than one-third of the respondents reported that they usually save leftovers for later use (37.5%), slightly more than a third dispose of leftovers as bio-waste (33.4%), and 16.9% compost them. The lowest percentage of respondents dispose of leftovers as mixed waste (3.6%) or give them away (2.4%).

Figure 3: Proportion of young people adopting a particular dietary style, based on their self-definition (N = 1023)



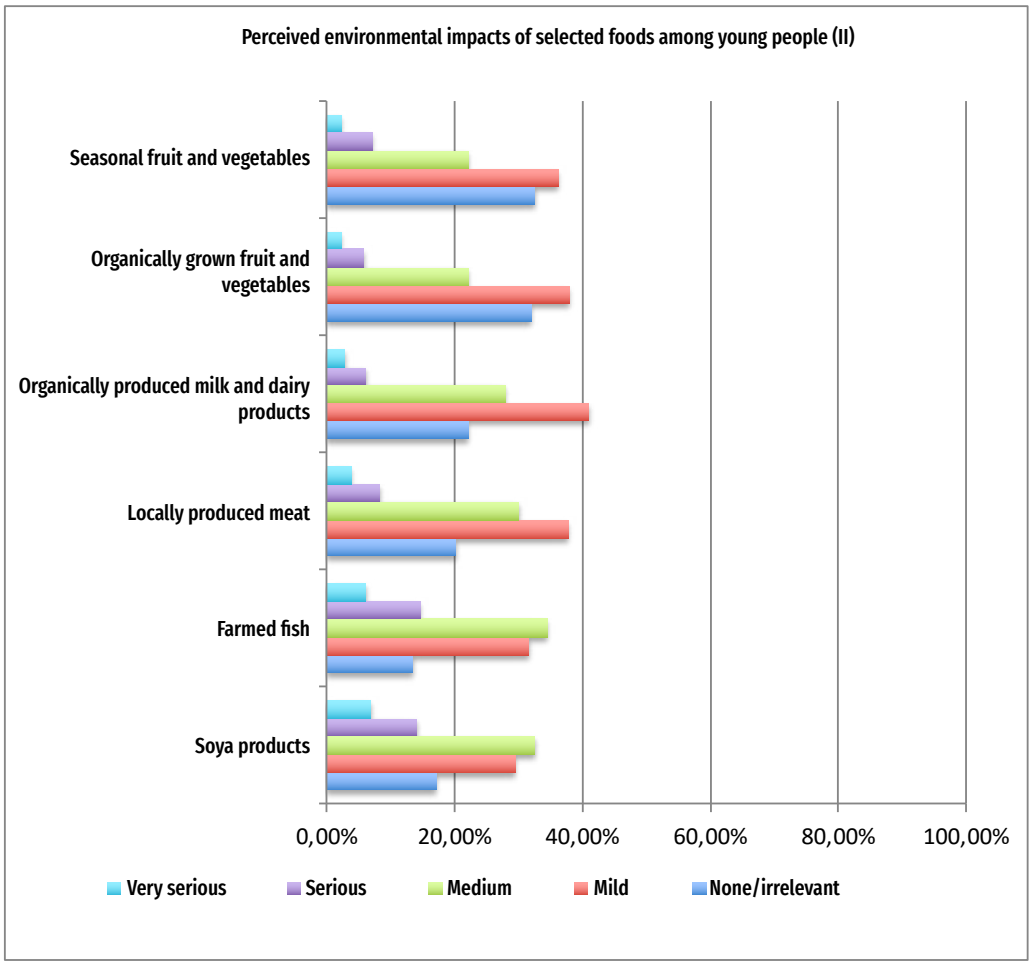
The majority of young people (self-)defined their eating style as omnivorous (89.2%). Other dietary styles are less common among young people according to their self-definition. 5.4% defined their dietary style as vegetarian, 1.5% as flexitarian, 1.5% as vegan, and 1.4% as pescetarian.

Figure 4: The frequency distribution of responses according to the perceived environmental impact of selected foods



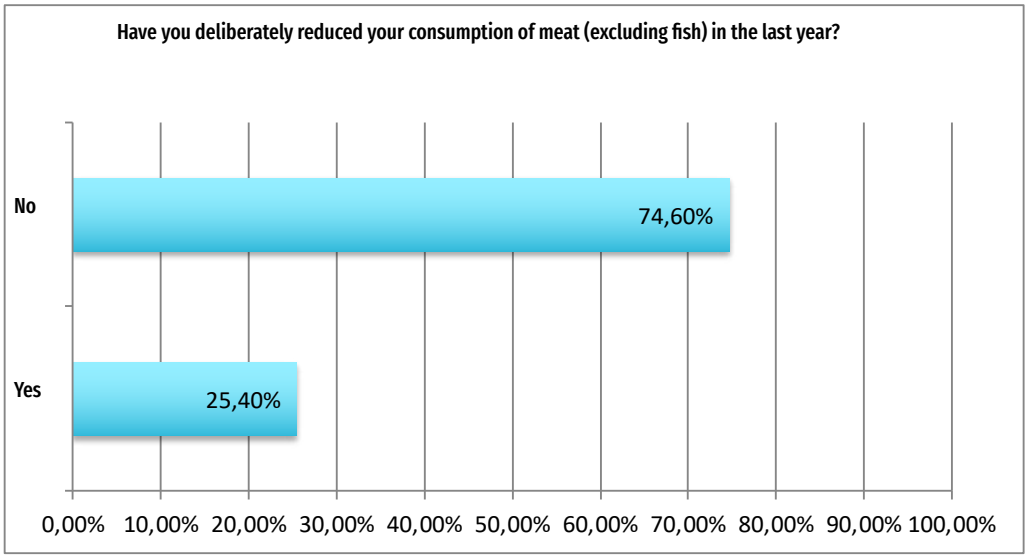
Most young people attributed a medium environmental impact to the foods listed above, despite the fact that in the general social discourse on dietary styles these foods are often associated with various aspects that contribute to creating a negative environmental footprint. In the case of conventionally produced milk, for example, the percentage is 42.3%. Of all the foods listed, the highest percentages of young people attributed no environmental impact to coffee (14.2%), chocolate/cocoa (11.3%), and wild-caught fish (11%). On the other hand, the majority of young people described products containing palm oil (43.1%), imported fruit and vegetables (41.2%), and wild-caught fish (33.8%) as having a very serious or serious impact on the environment.

Figure 5: The frequency distribution of responses according to the perceived environmental impact of selected foods



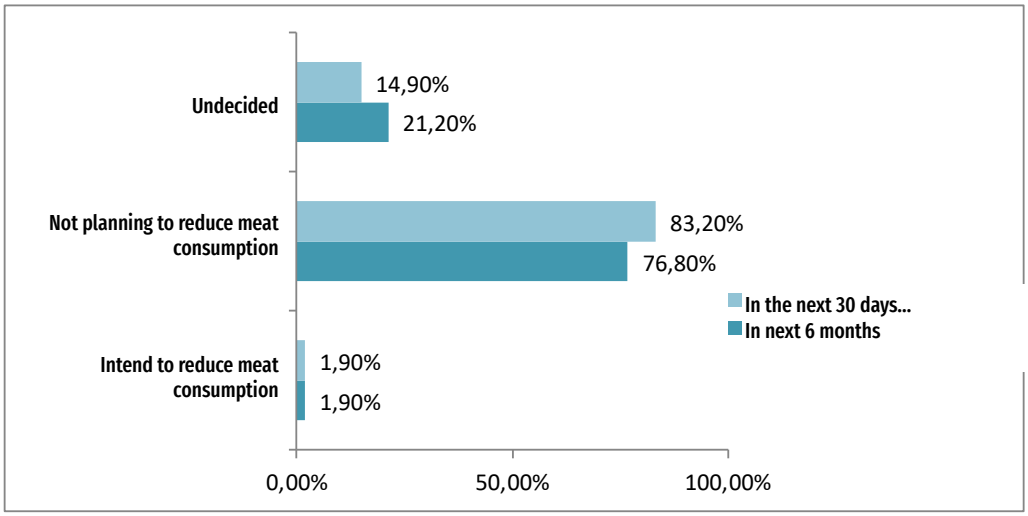
Among the foods that general social discourse on nutrition associates with a smaller negative environmental footprint (than their alternatives with a greater environmental impact), young people most often attributed no or mild environmental impact to organically produced vegetables and fruit (69.9%), seasonal vegetables and fruit (68.7%), and organic milk and dairy products (63.2%). A fifth of young people attributed a very serious or serious impact to soy products (20.9%) and farmed fish (20.8%).

Figure 6: Proportions of young people who have reduced their meat consumption in the last year and of those who have not (N = 1023)



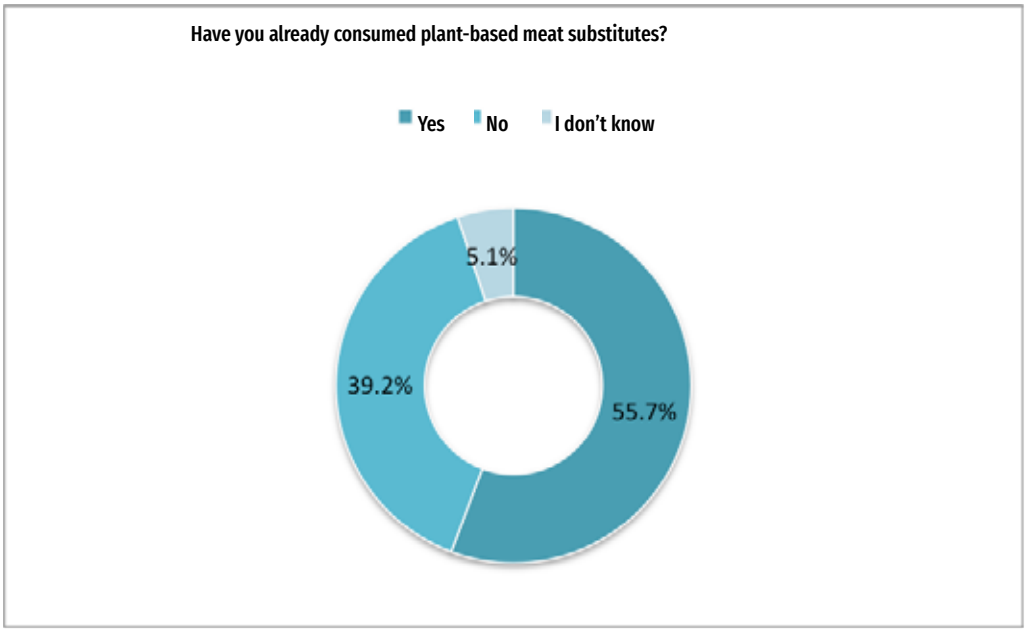
Among all the respondents, 74.6% reported that they have not reduced meat in their diet in the last year. One-fifth (25.4%) have already reduced their meat intake in the last year.

Figure 7: Proportions of young people who intend to reduce their meat intake in the next 30 days or 6 months, do not intend to reduce their meat intake in the observation period, or are undecided (N = 763). **Responses of respondents who have not reduced their meat intake in the last year are included.*



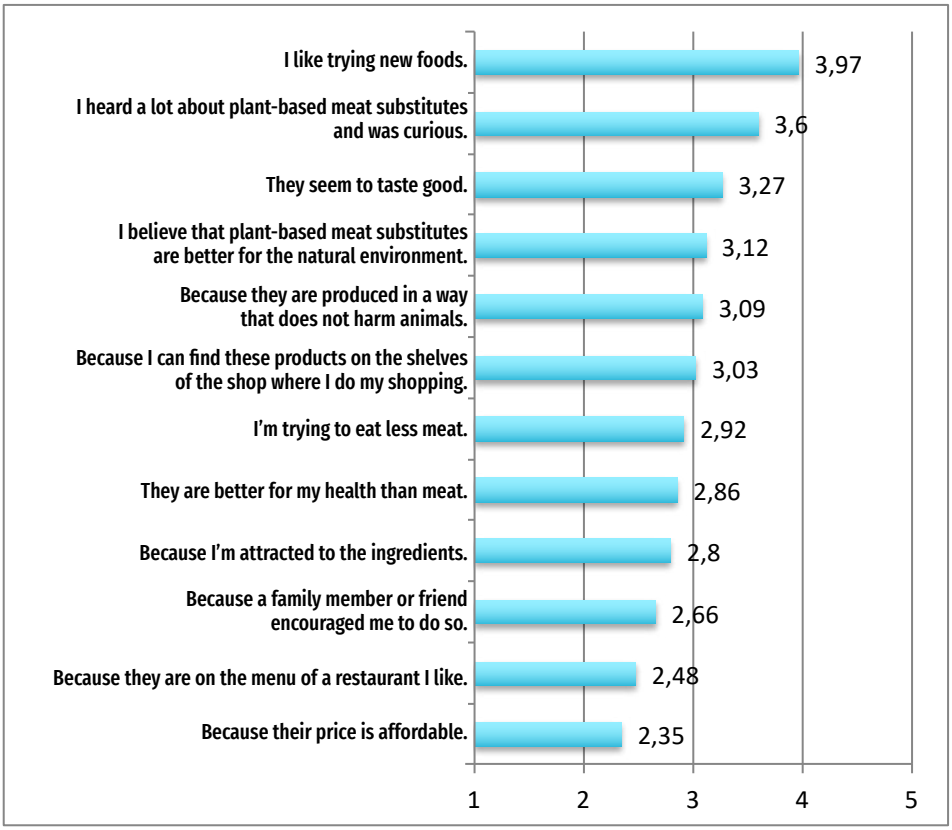
The majority of respondents who have not reduced their meat intake in the last year reported that they do not intend to reduce their meat intake in the next 6 months (76.8%) or 30 days (83.2%). However, 21.2% are also undecided about whether they will reduce their meat consumption in the next 6 months, and 14.9% are undecided about whether they will reduce their meat consumption in the next 30 days.

Figure 8: Proportions of young people who have already tried meat substitutes, have not tried them yet, or are unsure (N = 1023)



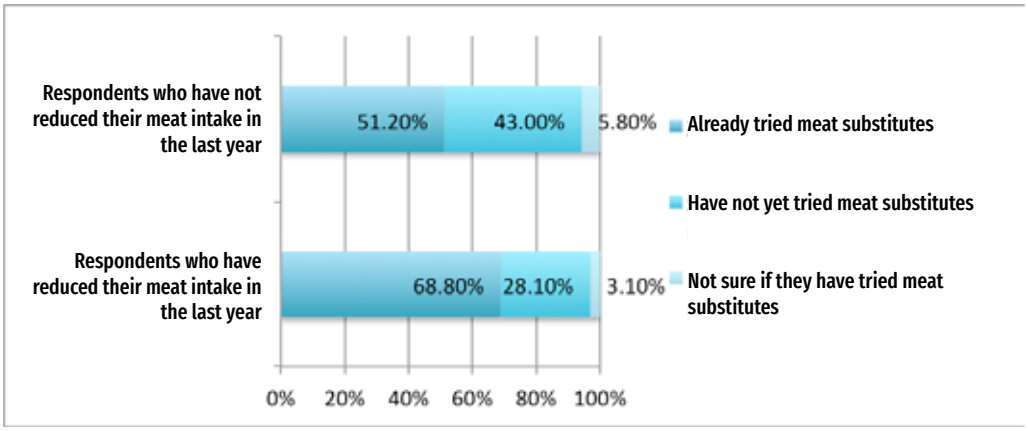
55.7% of young people reported that they have already consumed plant-based meat substitutes (e.g. vegan burgers, patties, pâtés, medallions, tofu, soy meat, tempeh or wheat meat), whereas 39.2% of respondents have never tried such meat substitutes.

Figure 9: Reasons for the consumption of meat substitutes among young people, where (1) means "does not apply to me at all" and (5) means "applies to me completely" (N = 570)



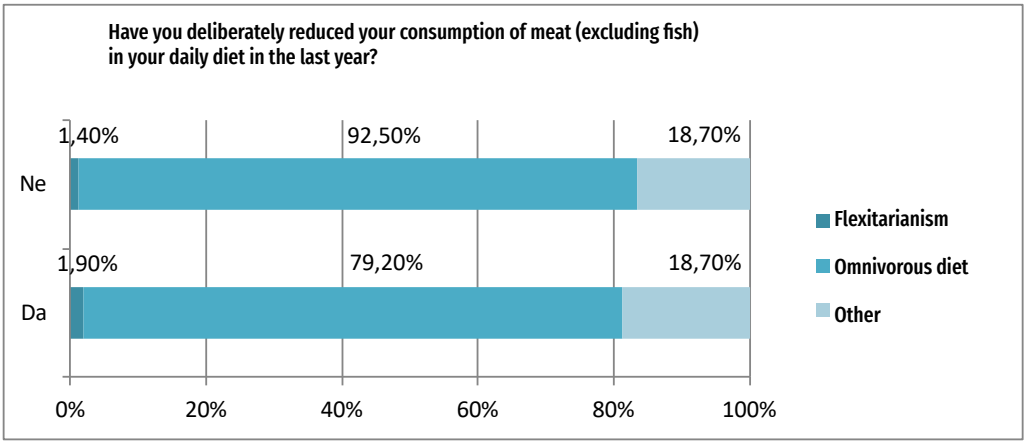
Young people who have already tried meat substitutes cited the fact that they like to try new foods and their curiosity about plant-based substitutes as the most important reasons for consuming meat substitutes.

Figure 10: Consumption of meat substitutes in relation to the reduction of meat intake in the last year (N = 1023)



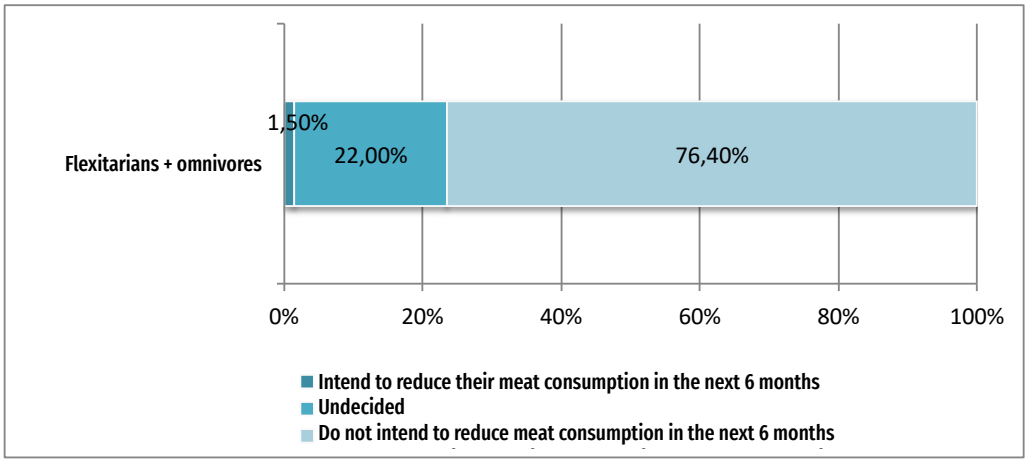
Among young people who have reduced their meat intake in the last year, 68.8% have already tried meat substitutes, while 28.1% have not yet tried them. The majority (51.2%) of young people who have not reduced their meat intake in the last year have also tried meat substitutes; however, 43% of respondents in this group said they have not consumed them yet.

Figure 11: Structure of young people who have not reduced their meat consumption in the last year (N = 763) and of respondents who have reduced it (N = 260) according to their dietary style



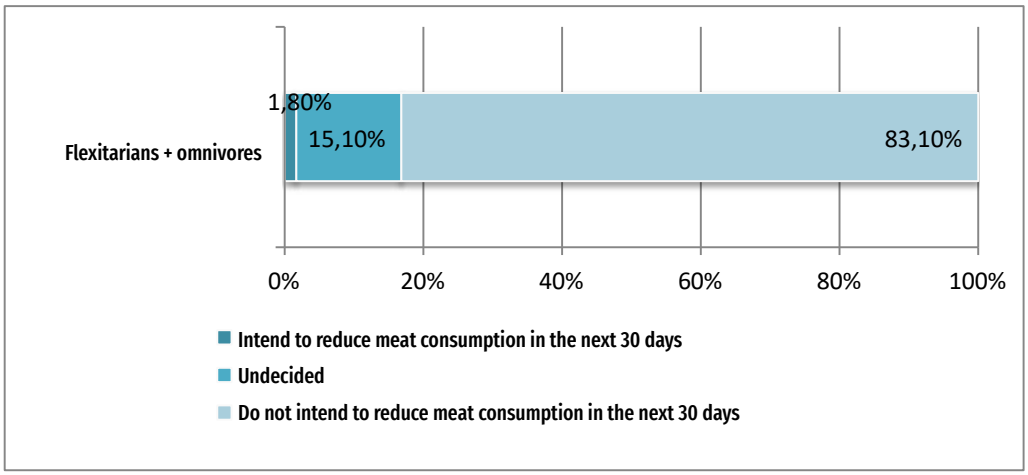
Focusing on the key dietary styles that allow for meat consumption, the data shows that among young people who have not reduced their meat intake in the last year (N = 763), 92.5% define their dietary style as omnivorous and 1.4% identify as flexitarian. However, among those young people who have already reduced their meat consumption in the last year (N = 260), 79.2% identify with an omnivorous dietary style and 1.9% with a flexitarian dietary style.

Figure 12: Proportions of undecided and those who intend or do not intend to reduce their meat consumption in the next 6 months in the group including both flexitarians and omnivores (N = 717)



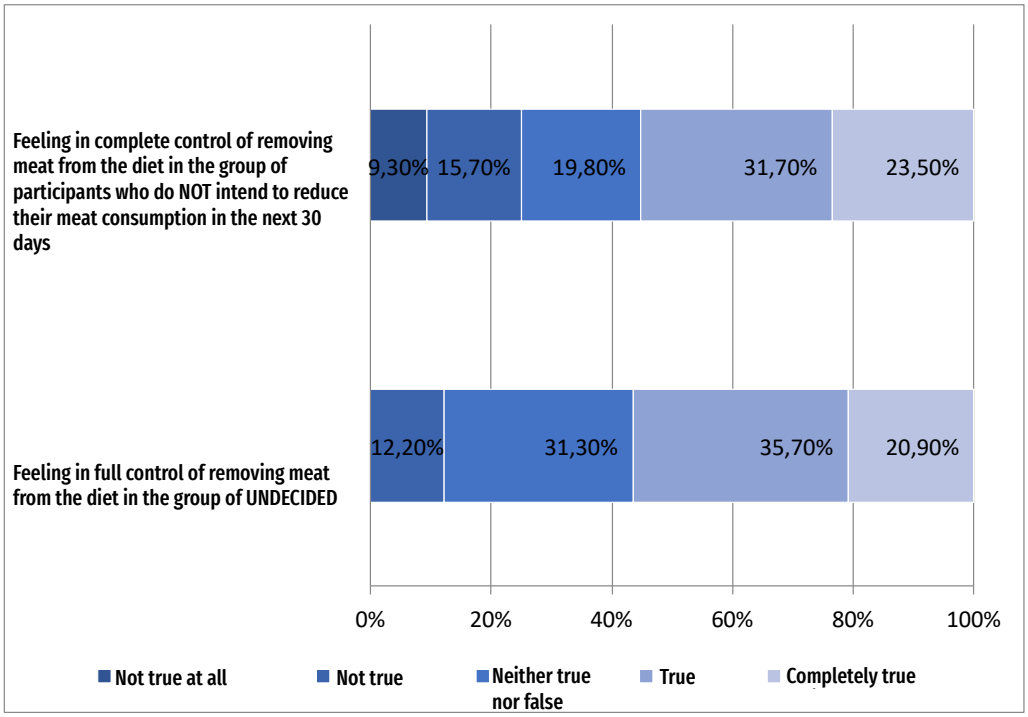
The majority (i.e. 76.4%) of young people in the group composed of flexitarians and omnivores do not intend to reduce their meat consumption in the next 6 months, while 22% are undecided regarding this matter (i.e. it is possible they will change their dietary habits).

Figure 13: Proportions of undecided and those who intend or do not intend to reduce their meat consumption in the next 30 days in the group including both flexitarians and omnivores (N = 717)



The majority of young people in the group consisting of flexitarians and omnivores do not intend to reduce their meat consumption in the next 30 days. Nevertheless, the percentage of undecided respondents (15.1%) is lower than in the previous case (see Figure 10).

Figure 14: Proportion of young people who are undecided (N = 115) or have no intention to reduce meat consumption in the next 30 days (N = 635) based on their agreement with the statement that they have complete control over how often they will cut meat out of their diet from this point on (on a scale from 1 – strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree).



The majority of young people (i.e. 55.2%) who do not intend to reduce their meat consumption in the next 30 days consider the statement that they have complete control over how often they will/would cut meat out of their diet as either completely true or true. In the category of undecided respondents, a total of 56.6% provided the same answer.

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