



OUR FOOD
OUR FUTURE

YOUNG FLEXI- TARIANS IN SLOVENIA

QUALITATIVE STUDY
REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

The research “Young Flexitarians in Slovenia”¹ focuses on the dietary practices of young people (aged 18–35) who, for various reasons, have decided to reduce their meat intake in the last year.

In the present research, the age category of young people was the subject of analysis, as young people are the potential agents of social and environmental change. They are more sensitised to environmental issues, have an active role in environmental civil society initiatives, and act as drivers of change in the economic system. They are ready to rethink and change their values and consumption habits. Understanding young people’s needs, concerns and views on nutrition is therefore essential to direct the global transformation towards a sustainable, environmentally friendly and equitable food system (Barraclough et al., 2021²).

FLEXITARIANS ARE DEFINED AS PEOPLE WHO HAVE REDUCED THEIR MEAT INTAKE, CONSUME SO-CALLED HYBRID MEATS (e.g. patties containing vegetable and meat components where the function of the vegetable component is to partially replace meat), consume meat analogues or substitutes (vegan burgers, sausages, hot dogs, pâtés, etc.), replace meat with other animal or plant proteins (tofu, tempeh, seitan, soya, legumes, etc.), omit meat without replacing it, and substitute meat with products that are more environmentally- and animal-friendly (Dagevos, 2016³).

The key findings of the qualitative research “Young Flexitarians in Slovenia” are presented in the following paragraphs.

1 Qualitative research on Young flexitarians in Slovenia is part of a wider research project on the future of nutrition in Slovenia, conducted by the Centre for Social Psychology (FDV, University of Ljubljana).

2 Barraclough, A.D., Sakiyama, M., Schultz, L. et al. “Stewards of the future: accompanying the rising tide of young voices by setting youth-inclusive research agendas in sustainability research”. *Sustain Earth* 4, 2 (2021).

3 Dagevos, H. 2016. Exploring Flexitarianism: Meat Reduction in a Meat-Centred Food Culture. In T. Raphaely & D. Marinova.

RESEARCH DESCRIPTION

DEFINITION OF THE SAMPLE

A purposive sample was used for the analysis scope. The sample included young Slovenians aged 18 to 35. Demographically, the participants were heterogeneous in terms of gender, age, place of residence (urban/rural), household members, education, and occupational status. The interviews were completed when data saturation was achieved. The final sample comprised 15 respondents (n = 15).

RECRUITMENT CRITERION

Recruitment was carried out by publishing a call for participation in qualitative research on social network sites. The selection criteria for the sample were age (18–35) and a positive answer to the question: Have you deliberately reduced your meat intake (including fish) in the last year?

ETHICAL PROVISIONS

The research was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Code of Ethics for Researchers of the University of Ljubljana. The participants in the research were appropriately anonymised during the process of data collection and analysis, and their identities remain concealed. They also signed informed consents. For the participation in the interview, they received a 20 EUR gift voucher.

METHOD

The data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with young flexitarians in Slovenia, using a guide covering the key themes of the interview, which was developed on the basis of a literature review and previous research data.

Data was collected over two periods, June 2021 and September 2021. 15 interviews were conducted.

Due to the epidemic situation, the interviews were held via Zoom. They lasted on average 2 hours and 20 minutes. The interviews were transcribed verbatim.

ANALYSIS

The interviews were analysed according to the inductive thematic analysis method using the MAXQDA2020 software. The analysis took place from June to November 2021.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

THE OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH WERE:

- ↳ To find out the dietary practices of young flexitarians;
- ↳ To find out how young flexitarians understand ethical eating;
- ↳ To identify young flexitarians' motives for reducing meat consumption;
- ↳ To identify young flexitarians' motives for occasional meat consumption;
- ↳ To find out which meat substitutes (if any) young flexitarians use;
- ↳ To find out what influences the flexitarians' choice to reduce meat consumption;
- ↳ To find out why young flexitarians are substituting meat;
- ↳ To find out what attitudes young flexitarians have towards "novel foods"⁴ (in vitro meat and insects);
- ↳ To determine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the dietary practices of young flexitarians.

⁴ Novel foods are: « food that had not been consumed to a significant degree by humans in the EU before 15 May 1997, when Regulation on novel food came into force. Novel Foods can be newly developed, innovative food, food produced using new technologies and production processes, as well as food that is or has been traditionally eaten outside of the EU." (European Commission, Food Safety).

GENERAL FINDINGS

THE DIETARY PRACTICES OF YOUNG FLEXITARIANS ARE VERY DIVERSE. From a dietary point of view, flexitarians form a heterogeneous group of individuals who, for different reasons, choose to reduce their meat consumption. In general, this group is inclined towards sustainable dietary patterns, the consumption of local and seasonal food, and is largely sensitive to the environmental impacts of eating habits and the food industry. Flexitarians are to a large degree sensitive to the issue of excess packaging, partially sensitive to issues related to the protection of animal rights and welfare, and almost insensitive to the issues related to workers' rights in agriculture and the food industry.

DIETARY PRACTICES OF YOUNG FLEXITARIANS

PARTICIPANTS PAY PARTICULAR ATTENTION TO THEIR DIETS and can be divided into two groups. The first group prefers locally produced seasonal food, which is predominantly plant-based. The second group prefers processed plant-based foods, for example second-generation meat analogues, and is not particularly sensitive to the local and seasonal character of the diet. Young flexitarians eat a diet that is largely plant-based and consume meat only occasionally (e.g. on special occasions, when having lunch with their family) or less than the average Slovenian (e.g. one to three times a week). Young flexitarians are careful to eat regularly, usually 3 to 4 meals a day, which they mostly prepare on their own.

UNDERSTANDING THE TERM ETHICAL EATING

ETHICAL EATING IS A WIDE RANGE OF CONSUMPTION PRACTICES and includes fair pay for workers/farmers/artisans producing food products in the industry,

agriculture and craft sector; short food chains (avoiding middlemen, e.g. by buying from farmers); environmentally friendly food (organic, from sustainable farming, non-processed); local food (from Slovenia); avoiding big retailers (not buying from chain stores such as Mercator/Špar/Tuš or Hofer); avoiding packaging; composting and minimising waste; choosing foods that do not undermine animal rights or farmers' and workers' human rights; fair trade.

YOUNG FLEXITARIANS MAINLY ASSOCIATED ETHICAL EATING WITH RESPECT FOR ANIMAL RIGHTS, AND LESS WITH THE OTHER PRACTICES LISTED ABOVE.

They are not particularly familiar with the concept of ethical eating and have difficulties understanding it. At a declarative level, they agreed that ethical eating is necessary, openly welcoming it and trying to pursue ethical principles of food consumption. The most commonly pursued ethical principles were: buying local products, buying seasonal products, buying from farmers or at farmers' markets (with the bulk of shopping done at large retailers), respect for animal rights, composting, and reducing food waste and packaging. There was less awareness regarding respect for workers' rights, avoiding large retailers, and buying processed food.

MOTIVES FOR REDUCING MEAT CONSUMPTION

- ↳ Environmental care and reducing carbon footprint;
- ↳ Taking care of one's own health (too much meat has a negative impact on health, meat sits heavily in my stomach, I have no energy after eating meat);
- ↳ Taking care of body image and physique (weight loss);
- ↳ Concern for animal welfare (the respondents' views were highly contradictory in this matter, the majority of them expressing empathy for animals, but at the same time normalising and naturalising the consumption of animal meat);
- ↳ Concerns about meat safety (bacterial contamination and its highly perishable nature);
- ↳ Other concerns: respondents do not like meat, are disgusted by it, do not know how to prepare it, are tired of eating it, etc.

MOTIVES FOR EATING MEAT OCCASIONALLY

- ↳ Hedonism: “Sometimes I fancy eating meat”;
- ↳ Environmental pressure: adapting to a carnivorous family, partner or friends (avoiding conflict);
- ↳ Unavailability of (attractive) meat-free dishes in restaurants.

MEAT SUBSTITUTION

IN MOST CASES, YOUNG FLEXITARIANS

HAVE ONLY REPLACED MEAT WITH A PLANT-BASED DIET (vegetables and legumes), without paying much attention to targeted protein substitution. The most commonly chosen substitutes are simple, such as tofu, soy meat and seitan. Processed substitutes (vegan pâtés, sausages, hot dogs, patties) are less commonly used, as are second-generation meat analogues (Beyond or Amaze burgers and medallions). The participants in the research select these meat substitutes occasionally. The reasons are mainly the flavour and the feeling that without these products, something is missing on the plate. The participants do not eat them more often mainly because they do not actually miss them (they do not crave meat replacements, since they do not miss the taste of meat); moreover, these products are less financially affordable and hard to find on shop shelves. As consumers, flexitarians are quite curious, open to new ideas and very keen to try new vegan products, but they are less likely to introduce them into their regular diet.

KEY FACTORS INFLUENCING THE REDUCTION OF MEAT CONSUMPTION

- ↳ Young flexitarians mainly cited peer influence (following the role model of their significant others: brother, sister, partner, friend or colleague);
- ↳ A key facilitator that enables young people to reduce their meat consumption is moving into their own household, where they can start to develop their culinary capital independently; distancing from their parent’s dietary culture, which is predominantly based on meat and dairy, is a key factor in reducing meat consumption;

- ↳ Participants reported media influence (documentaries that sensitise audiences to the dietary impacts on the environmental and animal welfare);
- ↳ The role of influencers (following/imitating influencers' practices);
- ↳ The influence of a chronic disease and a consequent dietary change.

ATTITUDE TOWARDS NOVEL FOODS – IN VITRO MEAT AND INSECTS

IN PRINCIPLE, FLEXITARIANS ARE IN FAVOUR

OF INTRODUCING IN VITRO MEAT AND INSECTS, but only when this choice is a result of a rational preference based on the knowledge that these alternatives reduce the environmental impact of the diet. However, subjective preference is predominately characterised by a sceptical attitude towards alternatives. The main reasons are: scepticism towards the food industry, scepticism regarding the affordability of the products (e.g. in vitro meat), scepticism regarding the flavour (whether the alternatives will taste close enough to meat), the yuck factor (disgust towards insects and in vitro meat), scepticism of the safety of the listed alternatives to meat, and scepticism regarding the ethical nature of these products. Some participants reported a lack of interest in alternatives, expressing that they do not miss meat and do not feel the need to substitute it.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DIET AND THE REDUCTION OF MEAT CONSUMPTION

SOME PARTICIPANTS REPORTED THAT THE PANDEMIC HAD A POSITIVE IMPACT ON THEIR DIETARY CHANGES, AS THEY HAD MORE TIME TO REFLECT ON THEIR DIET,

more time to cook, experiment and transform their diets. They were able to avoid the time pressures that they often felt when attending college or going to work, which made them more likely to eat fast food. Most participants did not specifically cite the impact of the pandemic on the reduction of meat consumption, but on the introduction of more sustainable and healthier diets in general.

CONCLUSION

In order to triangulate the data, the second phase of the research will consist of an online survey involving a representative panel sample of young people aged 18 to 35. The survey will be conducted in December 2021. The survey will measure food neophobia, attitudes towards the environment, motivating and inhibiting factors for limiting meat consumption, ethical and unethical shopping practices, factors influencing the reduction of meat consumption, the self-definition of adopted dietary style, the frequency of consumption of particular ecologically and ethically controversial foods, reasons for removing animal foods from the diet, eating out in restaurants, the frequency of consuming delivered food, practices of food shopping, location of food shopping, online food shopping, the perceived environmental impact of food, attitudes towards reducing meat consumption, subjective social norms regarding meat consumption, self-efficacy in reducing meat consumption, the perceived control of behaviour regarding the reduction of meat consumption, attachment to meat, attitudes to plant proteins, attitudes to insects, attitudes to in vitro meat, willingness to consume plant-based substitutes, insects and in vitro meat, demographics and lifestyle.