

Looking Back and Feeding Forward: An Analysis of Food Nostalgia on Meat Eaters' Attitudes Toward Transitioning to a Vegan Lifestyle

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Abstract

The study explores food nostalgia as a barrier to adopting a vegan lifestyle. Through 24 semi-structured interviews with regular meat consumers, analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, findings highlighted participants' emotional connections to food memories during cultural gatherings. Initially, these memories posed a barrier to considering change, but after a thought exercise, most participants viewed the dietary change positively, seeing it as a chance for culinary exploration. Social support from friends was more accessible than from family, suggesting that accommodating diverse dietary preferences can reduce social isolation. Surprisingly, participants' nostalgic attachments were more about shared social experiences than specific foods. Understanding food nostalgia can aid public health and vegan advocacy by addressing nostalgia-driven resistance to plant-based diets. Recreating nostalgic dishes with vegan ingredients has the potential to facilitate the transition to a vegan lifestyle by creating novel, nevertheless, equally meaningful memories while preserving cultural traditions.

Keywords

nostalgia, meat eaters, veganism, dietary transition, social connections



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Non-Technical Summary

Background

A growing body of research indicates that avoiding meat and other animal-derived products (such as cheese, honey, gelatine, and eggs) is an effective way to minimise environmental impact and animal suffering. As a result, plant-based diets and vegan lifestyles are increasingly viewed as the most sustainable and environmentally friendly dietary and lifestyle choices. While discussions about meat consumption often consider ethics, health, and environmental issues, they also intersect with deeply personal and cultural aspects. For many people, meat-focused cuisine is tied to memories, family, traditions, and aspects of identity, underscoring the role of food nostalgia in forming dietary decisions and possibly explaining some resistance to change.

Why was this study done?

Food nostalgia is closely linked to many eating habits, as they are connected to personal or collective memories. Culturally traditional food often reflects more than just sources of nutrients; it represents family, culture, moments of comfort, and feelings of contentment. Given that many emotional bonds are formed through traditional food rituals, those experiences and feelings could serve as a strong barrier to individuals contemplating a shift towards a vegan lifestyle. In this context, despite individuals' openness to dietary shifts for ethical, health, and environmental reasons, a sentimental attachment to cherished traditional foods can evoke a sense of loss. As such, a deeper understanding of nostalgia is key to fostering meaningful and sustainable dietary change.

What did the researchers do and find?

This study employed a qualitative research design and included 24 participants who routinely consume meat and other animal products, recruited through purposive sampling. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted online and in person. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) reflexive thematic approach. We found that participants' connections to traditional foods stemmed more from common experiences, family gatherings, and cultural traditions than from the act of eating food itself. Therefore, the attachments to feelings and emotions indicate that changes in dietary habits, whether embracing veganism or maintaining a meat-based diet, cannot be fully understood without recognising the symbolic and interpersonal significance of food. Nevertheless, plant-based dishes were often perceived as less tasty and were associated with a sense of burden during traditional family meals. As such, we argue that social pressure and emotional disconnection at the dining table during traditional celebrations can negatively impact acceptance of vegan practices among those who follow a vegan lifestyle, underscoring the need to consider dietary choices within their broader social and cultural contexts.

What do these findings mean?

Our research offers important insights which can inform the creation and execution of community-based vegan initiatives, such as organising complementary vegan cooking classes and nutrition education sessions. This approach can help replace nostalgic foods with vegan options, fostering a sense of community, creating new experiences, and easing feelings of loss that might arise when transitioning to a vegan lifestyle. It is essential to reconcile the differences between traditional food practises and contemporary moral perspectives about animal products through collective experiences and cultural awareness. Additionally, developing marketing campaigns that highlight the importance of shared food memories while providing plant-based alternatives might help challenge misconceptions about veganism and promote a willingness to embrace dietary changes. Furthermore, exploring the psychological aspects of food nostalgia and their influence on dietary decisions among meat-eaters is crucial to understanding the motivational conflicts and behavioural inconsistencies they may face if considering a transition to veganism.

Meat—used here to refer to the flesh of non-human animals—is one of the most debated foods in contemporary society, facing a range of ethical, moral, health, and environmental challenges (Lugo-Morin, 2022; MacDiarmid et al., 2016). Over the past 50 years, meat production has tripled globally, with over 350 million tonnes currently produced each year (Ritchie et al., 2023). The effect of rearing and slaughtering animals upon the environment is substantial. A growing body of literature suggests that abstaining from meat and other animal-derived products (e.g., cheese, honey, gelatine, eggs, etc.) is an effective way to reduce environmental impacts and animal suffering (Buttlar et al., 2023; Poore & Nemecek, 2018). Thus, plant-based diets and vegan lifestyles are increasingly perceived as the most sustainable and environmentally conscious dietary and lifestyle choices available (Chai et al., 2019). While a plant-based diet is focused on consuming mostly or only plant-based foods, a vegan lifestyle extends beyond dietary choices (North et al., 2021; Vestergrén & Uysal, 2022). Vegans exclude all animal products and strive to reject any exploitation, commodification, or cruelty towards animals (Beck & Ladwig, 2021). However, veganism is a concept that is often not widely understood by those who adhere to an omnivorous diet, which includes both plant and animal-based foods (Ruby, 2012), where animal consumption is frequently regarded as normative in Western cultures.

Although meat consumption debates consider ethics, health, and environmental impact, they also overlap with profoundly personal and cultural dimensions. For many individuals, meat-centric cuisine is associated with memories, traditions, and aspects of identity, indicating that food-related nostalgia serves as a significant factor in influencing dietary decisions and resistance to change (Simpson et al., 2024). The term 'nostalgia' originated in medicine in 1688, when Johannes Hofer described it as a mental disorder arising from separation from home, i.e., homesickness (Rana et al., 2020) leading to 'de-

pression' and 'fatigue' (Hofer, 1934). However, Cho et al. (2014) suggested that nostalgia is predominantly a positive emotion which sometimes becomes bittersweet, reflecting fond memories of the past. Vignolles and Pichon, (2014) defined food nostalgia into three categories: (a) sweet (nostalgia that evokes pleasant and comforting memories often associated with joyful moments, family gatherings, or childhood experiences), (b) bitter (nostalgia that is associated with unpleasant or distressing past experiences) and (c) bittersweet (nostalgia which combines both positive and negative emotions, evoking both fondness and sadness).

Building upon this understanding, the strong connections between food and social interactions indicate that food can offer emotional comfort and evoke nostalgia. For instance, family meals are fundamental in safeguarding cultural traditions, facilitating the transfer of intergenerational knowledge and enhancing social cohesion, contributing to a collective identity and sense of belonging (Chen et al., 2024). Cultural cuisine evokes emotions and memories linked to specific dishes, often leading individuals to opt for comforting foods that remind them of prior experiences (Lee, 2023). Furthermore, the deep emotional and social aspects related to traditional food consumption indicate that memory plays a crucial role in shaping culinary tastes and food selections (Fox & Alldred, 2018).

As such, food serves a purpose beyond nourishment; it is a powerful vessel for memory. When food memory is narrated (orally or in writing), the remembered food is evoked in an embodied experience, and by talking about the foods we consume, we are demonstrating who we are (Abarca & Colby, 2016). It stimulates various senses, making it an important vector for nostalgia. The food industry exploits nostalgia for political goals, to shape collective memories in favour of the food they are attempting to promote (Zhou et al., 2019). Yet, there is limited research on the impact of nostalgia on consumers' attitudes toward plant-based foods, especially when adopting or pursuing a vegan lifestyle. This study investigates the role of food nostalgia on meat eaters' attitudes toward transitioning to a vegan lifestyle.

Guiding Theories

In a society increasingly shaped by ethical consumption and environmental consciousness, the concept of nostalgia presents a complex and often conflicting landscape, particularly with respect to food choices. Boym (2001) distinguished between two forms of nostalgia: restorative and reflective. While restorative nostalgia seeks to reconstruct the lost past and re-establish it in the present, reflective nostalgia dwells on longing and temporality, acknowledging the irretrievability of the past. Both restorative and reflective food nostalgia serve as potent social constructs through the sharing of traditional foods, which connect individuals to their heritage, ethnicity, and national belonging. Nostalgic food memories are deeply rooted in the past, cherished in the present, and may also hold significance in the future, and for our future, or possible selves.

The function of nostalgia aligns with possible selves' theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986), which conceptualises self-identity as encompassing not only current self-perceptions, but also cognitive representations of what individuals might become, would like to become, or are afraid of becoming. Connected to present selves, possible selves are derived from representations of past selves. To help individuals preserve their true self and their inner core of values, beliefs, emotions, and desires when they encounter threats to their present selves, nostalgia can serve as a psychological anchor. If a person's values, roles, or identity conflict with their present actions, reflecting on emotionally meaningful experiences from the past through nostalgic recollections can help restore confidence and composure (Jiang et al., 2021).

Furthermore, possible selves theory allows us to examine how individuals reconcile past and future selves in terms of identity and food consumption habits. Considering that food nostalgia is linked to a sentimental longing for foods associated with personal or cultural history, it significantly influences food choices and identity (Holtzman, 2006). For individuals aiming to transition to a vegan lifestyle, the emotional resonance of traditional, often animal-sourced foods could present a conflict with a future-oriented self that prioritises health, environmental sustainability, or ethical consumption (Ruby, 2012). Under this pressure, the reinvention of nostalgic foods through vegan alternatives allows for the continuity of cultural and emotional identity while aligning with newly adopted ethical or health-oriented values. Considering the internal conflict between ethical principles and well-cherished traditions, constructing vegan 'possible selves' is influenced not only by goal determination but also by a complex engagement with memory, tradition, and cultural food practices (Rosenfeld & Burrow, 2017). As such, the interplay between food nostalgia and future self-concepts illustrates the multifaceted challenge underlying dietary change and identity evolution in the context of veganism.

Method

This study was approved by the University of Stirling General University Ethics Panel following British Psychological Society guidelines, and all participants gave informed consent before participating.

Positionality

AK and CJ approached the study from two distinct perspectives. AK adhered to an omnivorous diet that aligns with the social norms of her home country, while CJ is an ethical vegan and has been for over a decade. This difference in dietary choices allowed for a reduced potential for bias toward any specific lifestyle or dietary practice. Furthermore, despite having ethically conflicting views, our authorship has always been one of continual collaboration, openness, and we are united in our goal to reduce reliance

upon animal-sourced foods. Sharing a common goal, despite our differing views on such an emotive topic, ensures that we remain reflexive and aware of varied perspectives. As a result, we are confident to have mitigated against bias for either perspective and have aimed to fairly represent the views of our participants without judgement.

Philosophical Framework

What we perceive as ‘reality’ or ‘truth’ is not merely a reflection of objective facts but is profoundly shaped by social interactions, language, culture, and shared meanings. From an ontological perspective, critical realism, a philosophical approach developed by Roy Bhaskar, argues that reality consists of different layers: the empirical (our experiences and perceptions), the actual (events that occur regardless of observation), and the real (underlying structures and mechanisms that cause events; Bhaskar, 1975). As such, critical realism accepts the existence of an objective reality, but it also recognises that our understanding of it is consistently shaped by our social and cultural settings. In this context, food nostalgia, situated within the empirical layer, reflects socially constructed memories, emotions, and sensory experiences associated with food. Practices surrounding food are subjective and socially shaped, influenced by cultural narratives and collective traditions (Monterrosa et al., 2020). From this perspective, shifting cultural norms toward veganism would be possible by addressing both the structural mechanisms that maintain current food culture and the emotional significance of food traditions, thereby fostering respectful and effective societal change (Bhaskar, 2008). However, embracing a vegan lifestyle can be viewed not just as a change in diet but as a transformation of one's identity and principles influenced by the socially constructed meanings of food and ethics. A social constructionist epistemology examines how people perceive food practices, moral choices, and emotional attachments not as objective truths but rather as socially and culturally shaped (Sobal & Bisogni, 2009). This research is grounded in the perspective of social constructionism, which posits that experiences perceived as natural or inherent, such as the nostalgia associated with food, are shaped and sustained through social interactions, cultural contexts, and collective memory.

Participants and Recruitment

A total of 24 participants, who regularly consume meat and other animal products, were invited to participate in the study, utilising purposive and snowball sampling methods (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

The sample consisted of 9 males and 15 females from diverse national and cultural backgrounds. Participants were recruited through personal contacts and snowball sampling, with assistance from social media outreach and poster distribution. The study incorporated questions designed to prompt participants to reflect on their childhood

memories and explore nostalgic feelings about food, which could be particularly challenging for some.

Data Collection

A total of 24 interviews were conducted (AK-18) and (CJ-6) using both online and face-to-face semi-structured interviews which was the most direct approach to obtaining detailed and rich data (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). Online interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams. The interviews were audio-recorded, with an average duration of about 45 minutes each. Demographic data were not collected as part of the study to protect anonymity and comply with ethical guidelines. Also, because snowball sampling was conducted through our own personal networks, collecting additional demographic information could have increased the risk of participant identification, particularly regarding nationality.

Semi-structured interview schedules are included in supplementary materials.

Data Analysis

All audio recordings were manually transcribed verbatim, and no generative AI was used. Interview recordings were subsequently deleted. Participants' names were anonymised. NVivo (12.6.0 Pro) software was utilised for data management and coding (Lumivero, 2019). Following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) reflexive thematic data analysis process consisted of six stages. The process of inductively reflecting on the data allowed us to identify patterns from the participants' narratives. The transcripts were reviewed continually to develop a comprehensive understanding, and the data were coded, focusing on both the symbolic and descriptive content associated with food routines and rituals. The codes were organised into themes, which were reviewed, refined, and developed through a reflexive consideration of the researchers' positionalities. Cooperative discussions between AK and CJ supported refining the themes in a way that acknowledged the diversity of meanings. Our concluding themes are shared as interpretations rather than absolute truths, focusing on how participants dealt with food, nostalgia, and identity in the context of a hypothetical situation involving the adoption of a vegan lifestyle.

Analysis

In this study, participants used the term *vegan diet* interchangeably with *vegan lifestyle* at all stages during our interviews. Most participants referred to veganism as a vegan diet, suggesting a lack of understanding regarding the distinctions between the two concepts. Participants often defined others as vegan based exclusively on the idea that refraining from consuming animal-derived foods equates to veganism. For the purpose of

this study, we agreed to avoid the correction of terms vegan diet and vegan lifestyle as a preferred methodological choice; we recognised that interfering might be perceived as highlighting shortcomings in participants' understanding and positioning them as insufficiently informed, which could have potentially caused discomfort or self-consciousness and influence their responses, undermining rapport, and interrupting the natural flow of the interviews. However, when participants explicitly asked whether their understanding was accurate, we provided the definitions of the agreed-upon terms. Nevertheless, we ensured that a clear distinction was maintained between these terms throughout both the analysis and the writing process. Whilst our participants used the term 'vegan diet' we use this in acknowledgement that this was their understanding, which we observe; however, this is an incomplete term as veganism extends beyond dietary choices.

Our data analysis revealed three main themes (1); Compromising Comfort: The role of traditional meat-based dishes in a sense of home and place (2); "Swimming with the tide": negotiating the attitudes of friends and families to change (3); It's Not the Meat, It's the Memories: "I still cook a turkey even though nobody likes it."

Compromising Comfort: The Role of Traditional Meat-Based Dishes in a Sense of Home and Place

The first theme examines the importance of meat in the dietary practices of meat eaters. Meat plays a crucial role in various cultural traditions, religious ceremonies, and local festivals (Smil, 2013), reinforcing a sense of belonging and enriching gastronomic traditions as well as collective identity (Graça et al., 2015). Associations between nostalgic food and cherished moments shared with families played a vital role in relationship dynamics among participants. Such a connection was evident through participants' expressions of how food helps them bridge generations and preserve traditions:

I do feel like a connection with my past, with my family, that I can bring now to my little family as well. [When cooking Golaki like my dad did], it is something that keeps you like connected with kind of your roots sort of thing. (Zoey)

Many described their nostalgic experiences as time shared together, and food rituals well remembered from childhood. For example, when reflecting on the feelings that emerged as he recalled his mother's cooking, Sorel expressed: "I guess comforted, safe, free from cares, just for 10 minutes while I eat this glorious plate of food." Likewise, Daniela noted:

"My mom's cooking cheers me up. It makes me feel safe, makes me feel happy, brings me back to my childhood, makes me feel like I'm home."

In this scenario, participants' association between food, the feeling of home and family emphasises deep emotional connections when recalling moments shared with loved ones. The attachment to routines and the willingness to continue food-eating traditions reflect the difficulty of detachment from memorable customs.

Like from my culture. I don't think I ever tried vegan alternatives. I have tried vegan food. Indian, for example, or Chinese, that was okay, but you know, the foods I'm really used to - the nostalgic ones from my childhood and everything. I don't think you can replace them. (Eliza)

From Eliza's viewpoint, experiences tied to nostalgia that hold significant cultural and emotional value would complicate the replacement of traditional foods with vegan alternatives, potentially threatening the cultural authenticity of the cuisine.

Furthermore, some participants made a clear distinction between trying new plant-based meals and replacing nostalgic traditional food. During interviews we prompted participants to explore the potential of replacing traditional foods with vegan alternatives. They emphasised the idea that food from the past is more than mere sustenance or taste but implies cultural heritage, memories, and identity. As such, many considered preparing traditional ethnic dishes at home as an essential element of preserving their cultural identity (Timothy, 2015) and facilitating social connections, leading to food-related conversations enhancing a feeling of belonging, isolation or melancholy. This sentiment was expressed by Ulysses when describing family gatherings: "[...] so you can't interact with people in the same way because they're talking about the food, and you're excluded in that way."

Others expressed the lack of value and enjoyment in participation of social gatherings without being able to consume nostalgic food and exhibited visible signs of frustration and a sense of resignation: "You may as well just sit at home and not bother going anywhere" (Penny) and "I think is frustration, a little bit? Sadness? Probably anger" (Talía).

Some participants theorised that while there are vegan substitutes for conventional foods, these alternatives may not elicit distinct emotional reactions compared to dishes prepared according to traditional recipes from one's childhood. Accordingly, some participants held the view that reminiscing about the past intensifies the enjoyment of food itself, while embracing new vegan options entails navigating the emotional aspects of change. Nostalgia serves a crucial role in fostering the continuity of the past self by integrating and reflecting upon past memories. A continuous sense of identity may enable participants to feel deeper belonging within social and cultural contexts, fostering social connectedness (Iyer & Jetten, 2011). However, it is essential to acknowledge that self-continuity from the past to the present is positively associated with self-continuity from the present to the future. Similarly, as connections between one's past self and present self are formed, a sense of connection between one's present self and future self can also be constructed (Sokol & Eisenheim, 2016). Therefore, embracing past culinary experiences could possibly play a crucial role during transitioning to a vegan lifestyle. Well-cherished dishes substituted with vegan alternatives could perhaps serve as a bridge between the past and the future, symbolising an evolution of culinary experiences that

reinforces the nostalgic bonds between familiar favourite foods and innovative vegan alternatives.

Others, however, acknowledged that a vegan lifestyle does not align with their personal values and identity; therefore, they anticipate encountering challenges following a vegan lifestyle. Nevertheless, the internal conflict of recognising the negative implications of meat consumption was undoubtedly present, yet insufficient to prompt a conscious decision to sacrifice nostalgic food prepared with traditional ingredients: "[...] conflicting because it is obviously the right thing to do but I just feel like it's not, is more a diet in my eyes than anything" (Isla). Others strongly opposed the incorporation of vegan food to their lives: "I think if I ever wanted to torture myself, that is when I would be a vegan. That is my thought" (Penny). Penny perceives that a vegan lifestyle lacks enjoyment and satisfaction, which causes her to view the shift as a sacrifice. Although unwillingness to give up meat was prevalent among participants, most articulated that they had not attempted to reflect on the implications of such a dietary shift before their involvement in this study.

"Swimming With the Tide": Negotiating the Attitudes of Friends and Families to Change

When we asked participants to imagine themselves being vegans, there was a notable openness to an idea of adopting a vegan lifestyle change, with the majority acknowledging that such a transition is feasible, which was often at odds with their initial stance. Participants articulated differences between spending time with friends and with family when considering a transition to veganism. Hypothetically, socialising with friends was perceived as less challenging than socialising with family when exploring the possibility of becoming vegan.

While participants typically favour their habitual dietary preferences due to the familiarity they offer (Zebrowitz et al., 2007), the willingness to engage with veganism might be the result of individuals imitating the eating habits of those around them. For example, previous studies show that people modify the quantity of food they consume according to the choices made by others, thereby aligning their food intake with that of the group (McFerran et al., 2010). However, recognising that this behaviour primarily happened in social environments with friends without significantly affecting participants' overall eating patterns is important. Eliza commented that: "[...] with my friends, I think it would be totally fine. I mean, there are so many vegan places nowadays, and so many vegan options, I do not think it would cause any concerns."

Most participants believed that 'vegan food' is costly and therefore not feasible for daily consumption, suggesting that dining out with vegan friends would require slight financial adjustments. However, interestingly, when eating out with vegan friends, vegan food options were not perceived as expensive, and none of the participants considered these experiences to be extravagant, but rather ordinary events. In particular, the enthu-

siasm to consume vegan food was evident when Oliver underlined a prominent trend in modern-day dining culture, noticeable through increasing prevalence, willingness, social tolerance, and acceptance of diverse food preferences: "So it may be that I wouldn't feel as bigger adjustment from that point of view, because if anything, I'm just swimming with the tide, rather than swimming against the tide."

However, a different perspective emerged in the discussion of family gatherings. Some participants voiced concerns about their family members' willingness to accommodate a vegan food preference during home visits, as Georgia highlighted, "I don't think my parents would cope with it whenever I go home. I don't think my mom ever cooked a vegan meal in her life", and similarly, Matias said:

Well, I know for a fact there's no other vegans, even vegetarians, in the family. So, if I were to appear at a Christmas gathering, 'No, I can't have that. Oh, no eating that.' I'd be ostracised pretty quickly, I know that. You go sit in the corner.

Many feared that their personal dietary choices might disrupt traditional family routines and shared culinary experiences. This might be explained by the fact that many have either chosen or felt compelled to conform to the prevailing social norms surrounding meat consumption to mitigate the risk of negative social consequences, such as exclusion, punishment or perceptions of being difficult (Salmivaara et al., 2022). This apprehension surrounding the potential disconnection from cultural traditions was particularly pronounced in the context of traditional meal-based family gatherings.

It is important to note that some participants already followed a diet including many vegan alternatives. Thus, a potential readiness to transition to veganism might require only minimal adjustments to their current eating habits, as Audrey highlighted, "I think a vegan diet would look, in terms of what we have for dinner, would like actually really similar when I look at most of my food, it's either fully vegan or its 90% vegan."

The participants' willingness to include plant-based alternatives in their current diet may be seen as an integral step towards making more ethical food choices. Through promoting a conscious reduction in meat consumption rather than advocating for an entirely vegan lifestyle might be a nuanced approach to dietary changes that align with growing concerns about health, animal welfare, sustainability, social cohesion, and environmental consequences (Springmann et al., 2018).

It's Not the Meat, It's the Memories: "I Still Cook a Turkey Even Though Nobody Likes It"

Finally, we examine how cultural food identity is reimagined through vegan practices. This study reveals that what people mourn or celebrate when contemplating changing their diets often goes beyond mere taste; it delves into memory, nostalgia, and the social dynamics of eating. We found that communal animal-sourced product consumption is

integral to numerous cultural traditions, including Sunday roasts, borscht, tamales, panettone, and Christmas turkey. These practises often foster positive connections during family gatherings and strengthen social cohesion (Abarca & Colby, 2016), which can evoke nostalgic feelings and memories (Reid et al., 2022). It is evident that culinary recollections serve as important links between participants' current nostalgic experiences and their pasts. For many, food-related memories not only evoke nostalgia but also facilitate a deeper understanding of personal and cultural identities. However, most have reflected on nostalgic food, frequently emphasising the significant relationships and memories tied to celebratory occasions involving food memories rather than the food itself. Some contend that the memories associated with food preparation and the experiences surrounding these activities hold greater significance than the traditional meals in question: "I think they were more around the kind of all the process and the experience rather than the food itself" (Victor), likewise Barbara commented: "No, I think it's more memory attached to it than the food."

Additionally, the setting surrounding food consumption, including the time, manner, and company plays a significant role in shaping participants' experiences. Axel linked chicken soup to the specific day it was traditionally served, emphasising that the significance of food lies more in the sentimental memories it evokes than in the food itself.

I don't know, it's like a Sunday, like the chicken soup not going to taste the same when you like you are cooking by yourself on Monday or Tuesday or Wednesday. It needs to be on Sunday because it is special.
(Axel)

Interestingly, others also remember Christmas dinner with a sense of nostalgia, but their memories focus merely on the feeling of togetherness with their loved ones rather than specific dishes. For Talia, social connections significantly enhance meal enjoyment and influence taste perception. Thus, food is subordinate during traditional celebrations, serving as a symbolic element rather than the central focus and not intrinsically linked to her sense of belonging and community as Talia described: "I think the memories that I have, that I value the most with food, are definitely the ones that have brought us together, so it is not really the food that's consistent across those things, it is the context."

It can be inferred that the true essence of nostalgic food frequently resides not in the actual ingredients but in the shared experiences associated with them. Maddie emphasised once more that the deep emotional connections associated with nostalgic gatherings are essential for creating enduring memories, more than just the food. She expressed by that "Sometimes maybe tasty food tastes better, because you are enjoying that food with certain people."

Many participants contend that food is enjoyed more within family contexts, whereas others observe that certain customs are preserved solely for the sake of tradition. Audrey exemplified this, noting that despite her family's lack of appreciation for turkey flesh, she

continues to adhere to traditional Christmas practices. As such, the relationship between meat and memory extends beyond mere enjoyment of the food; it serves as a significant symbol of the ways in which celebrations have historically been experienced and remembered. This was particularly evident when Audrey reflected upon traditional celebrations and said, "Well, probably Christmas, even though turkey is always disappointing...we always have, and even now, like, I still cook a turkey, even though nobody particularly likes it."

Furthermore, the memories associated with culinary traditions often evoke reflections on past family reunions, emphasising the bittersweet nature of nostalgia. Many contend that through preserving such traditions, they honour the memories of their loved ones, thereby maintaining a sense of their continued presence. This finding is consistent with Sedikides et al. (2016), who argue that the social connectedness facilitated by nostalgia provides individuals with a sense of continuity between their past and present, enhancing their sense of self-continuity.

I suppose you look back to childhood in general, and it can make you think of family, and yes, definitely a Christmas when you sat around the table with the food, and it makes you think of previous years around the table with people that are no longer there. (Ulysses)

Interestingly, while many derive comfort and joy from adhering to traditions, Victor observed that, over time, memories tend to become increasingly romanticised. This idealisation often distorts the true nature of past experiences, suggesting that certain recollections may not accurately reflect reality as Victor described: "That might be a slightly rose-tinted view of it [the past], because at least one of my brothers and I were always fighting about something."

This narrative combines reality with an idealised version of past events, implying that some participants perceive past events through the lens of 'rosy retrospection'. This psychological phenomenon refers to the affinity of recalling past experiences more positively than they were lived (Mitchell et al., 1997), often overshadowing historical complexities by downplaying conflicts and differences, thus creating an idealised and harmonious narrative of the past (Lupton, 1996).

Conclusion

The primary objective of this study is to examine the impact of food nostalgia on meat eaters' attitudes toward adopting a vegan lifestyle. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on veganism and food nostalgia by articulating how participants experienced nostalgia within the context of food traditions and during contemplation of a transition to veganism. We found that participants' attachments to traditional foods were often linked to collective memories, family gatherings, and cultural traditions in which

those foods were embedded, rather than the consumption of the food itself. Such findings suggest that dietary change, whether toward veganism or the reduction of omnivorous practices, cannot be understood apart from the symbolic and relational dimensions of food. However, vegan food was perceived as lacking in taste and was described as causing feelings of being a 'burden' during family gatherings. These perceptions indicate that social discomfort and emotional detachment in family meal contexts may inhibit the adoption of vegan practices, emphasising that dietary choices are embedded within social and cultural relations. Furthermore, our participants' willingness to embrace a change they had not previously considered indicates that, with social support, any perceived isolation from their past selves during their dietary transition may be lessened, and new diet preferences may be adopted. As such, the implementation of a vegan lifestyle does not have to be impeded by nostalgia, but instead, it can be seen as an opportunity to construct new, distinct experiences that can resolve inner conflicts regarding the disconnect between past and future selves. Hence, integrating past-oriented sentimentalities with vegan traditional meal alternatives may facilitate the creation of novel, yet equally meaningful memories. Like culinary traditions from the past, the food of the future, crafted without the inclusion of meat and other animal-derived ingredients, may also evoke a sense of nostalgia and encourage the creation of new customs that can resonate with and enrich future generations.

Strengths

The first strength of this research lies in its novelty: to the best of our knowledge, it is the first comprehensive exploration of the attitudes, emotions, and convictions held by meat consumers regarding a potential shift to a vegan lifestyle. Secondly, the data analysis was conducted independently by two researchers with different perspectives: CJ, who is a committed vegan, and AK, who follows an omnivorous diet. Their differing views on food not only enhanced the interpretive process but also highlighted how personal dietary practices influence the understanding, memory, and contestation of food traditions. This approach ensured a thorough analytical process and promoted reflexivity whilst ensuring balance (Raskind et al., 2019). Lastly, our findings also contribute to the existing vegan literature and provide a foundation for future studies to explore food nostalgia across diverse contexts, where traditions and heritage foods may shape dietary shifts differently. By engaging with the possible selves theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986), this study emphasises how participants' reflections on food customs are not only rooted in the past but also impact how they envision and negotiate their future identities.

Limitations

A potential limitation of this study is the varying levels of familiarity and experiences researchers had with veganism, which impacted upon how the concept was framed to

participants. This discrepancy in familiarity could have subsequently affected the participants' interpretations and responses. That said, it is imperative to mention that participants often overlook the distinction between veganism and a plant-based diet, which suggests a general lack of understanding of the differences between these concepts. Accordingly, the difference between veganism as a lifestyle and being plant-based as a dietary choice might be confused, highlighting broader challenges in public understanding. This suggests that veganism can be frequently misunderstood in terms of plant-based food alternatives for traditional cuisine, overlooking its ethical, environmental, and ideological aspects. However, it is vital to note that both researchers were surprised by the level of misunderstanding of what veganism constitutes and the extent to which the definitions thereof were misconstrued. Additionally, a purposive sample was obtained through personal contacts and snowball sampling, which involved recruiting participants who were personally connected to the researchers and other participants involved in this study. Therefore, they may hold similar views regarding dietary choices and nostalgic experiences.

Future Directions

Our study offers valuable insights to guide the development and implementation of community-based vegan initiatives, such as free vegan cooking classes and nutrition workshops, to harmonise differences between conventional food traditions and modern ethical values regarding animal consumption through shared experiences and cultural sensitivity. By adopting this strategy, nostalgic foods can be replaced with vegan alternatives, fostering a sense of community, creating new memories, and easing feelings of loss during the transition to a vegan lifestyle. Future research could extend the novel contribution of this study by investigating how food nostalgia specifically influences the adoption and maintenance of a vegan lifestyle, examining which nostalgic foods evoke the strongest emotional attachments, and how plant-based alternatives can recreate these experiences, helping reduce feelings of loss and support dietary change. Investigating how nostalgic memories interact with moral motivations, identity, and behavioural inconsistencies could provide unique insights into the psychological challenges of transitioning to veganism.

Furthermore, future studies should explore the sociocultural influences shaping public perceptions of animal advocacy and veganism, particularly among those whose opinions are based on a superficial understanding of ideology, as demonstrated in this research. The impact of the vegan movement or animal rights advocates may be limited if the public does not grasp the true meaning of veganism.

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Generative AI Use: No generative AI was used in any part of this research process other than use of Grammarly by AK who is a non-native English speaker.

Data Availability: Owing to potential for identification, the data are not available for this research.

Supplementary Materials

For this article, a semi-structured interview schedule is available (see Kosla & Jasper, 2026).

Index of Supplementary Materials

Kosla, A. M., & Jasper, C. (2026). *Supplementary materials to "Looking back and feeding forward: An analysis of food nostalgia on meat eaters' attitudes toward transitioning to a vegan lifestyle"* [Interview schedule]. PsychOpen GOLD. <https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.22287>

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