

# MEAT SHAME

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**EXPERIENCES AND AVOIDANCE OF CONSUMPTION-  
RELATED DISCOMFORT AND REMORSE AMONGST  
MEAT-EATERS**

# Meat Shame:

Experiences and avoidance of consumption-related discomfort and remorse amongst meat-eaters

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## **Abstract:**

The disconnect between liking the taste of meat and opposing the harms of meat production is referred to as 'the meat paradox' within the animal and plant-based advocacy movement. This study aims to further explore the feelings of shame and guilt that arise from this phenomenon. Specifically, the characteristics and demographics of those who experience meat shame, as well as those who resist it. Through a representative sample survey as well as two follow up focus groups we were able to uncover the hidden modifiers of meat conscious behaviour and consumption related shame. The hope is that this study will aid the animal advocacy movement in increasing the effectiveness of their campaigns by providing information that will help target those portions of the population that are open to change and avoid or adapt campaign methods for those who are opposed to it.

**Keywords and Topics:** effective animal activism, meat consumption, plant-based diets, social psychology, dietary change, cognitive dissonance, consumer attitudes, shame, guilt, consumption-related discomfort, targeted interventions, vegaphobia, moral disengagement, dissonance, the meat paradox

## Glossary

### The Meat Paradox-

The psychological conflict of enjoying eating meat while disliking the slaughter and harming of animals (Ursin, 2016).

### Adaptive Consumption Behaviours-

The employment of various changemaking techniques to correct undesirable consumption-related feelings and behaviours.

### Compensatory Consumption Behaviours-

The employment of retaliatory or compensatory approaches to correct undesirable consumption-related feelings and behaviours.

### Meat Shame-

The culmination of negative feelings (e.g. remorse, guilt and shame) related to one's own meat consumption levels and their contribution to meat-related harms.

### Vegaphobia-

The development of strong negative thoughts and feelings towards vegetarians and the placement of blame on the vegetarian and vegan community for disrupting one's cognitive dissonance.

### Meat-Conscious Consumers-

Meat-eating consumers who experience negative feelings in response to their meat consumption levels and their contribution to the harms of meat-production and demand.

**Meat-Shame Resisters-** Meat-eating consumers who are resistant to the concept of being shamed for their meat consumption and do not believe there is reason to feel meat-related shame.

# 1. Introduction and Background

## 1.0a The Meat Paradox

Perhaps one of the most puzzling inconsistencies in our modern world evolves from the tension caused by the human propensity to oppose the unnecessary suffering of other living creatures, and the contradictory harsh realities of the industrialized agricultural processes used to provide us with meat. The dissonance caused by liking meat but simultaneously not condoning mass animal suffering is known in the field of animal-related research as *the meat paradox*<sup>1</sup>. Although widely unspoken and unacknowledged amongst this group, there is good reason to believe that the negative effects of the meat-paradox disconnect are experienced by many empathetic omnivores. It is likely that the meat paradox prompts involuntary and uncomfortable feelings of shame, guilt, and remorse amongst consumers.<sup>2</sup>

This is especially evident when considering the widespread ownership of companion animals, growing public concerns for wildlife, and existing and expanding legislation against animal cruelty. Even staunch meat-eaters seem to have some animals in their life that they care about, whether it be a beloved pet, or their favorite wild animal, unfortunately however, the welfare of the animals on their plates is often disregarded.

If, in fact, occasional negative feelings related to the meat paradox are widespread amongst the meat-eating community, then the

consumers desire to rid themselves of these bad feelings could be turned into a positive change-making and support-providing opportunity for animal advocates. A more thorough understanding of the types of consumers most prone to feelings of '*meat shame*' can help provide a foundation for successful dietary guidance initiatives. These initiatives can then be used to provide support to concerned consumers by helping to rectify their uncomfortable feelings. Additionally, these initiatives are immensely beneficial to the planet, animals, and the health of people.

## 1.0b Shame, Consumption and Behavioral Change

While it is difficult to predict how many meat eaters are negatively affected by the meat paradox, research has been conducted to outline the various behavioral responses to meat-related discomfort as well as other negative consumption-related feelings.<sup>3</sup> A social psychology study from 2018 found that in response to negative feelings and experiences related to individual consumption, some people respond positively through *adaptive consumption behaviors*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Saintives, Camille, and Renaud Lunardo. "How guilt affects consumption intention: the role of rumination, emotional support and shame." *Journal of Consumer Marketing* (2016). & Amatulli, C., De Angelis, M., Peluso, A. M., Soscia, I., & Guido, G. (2019). The effect of negative message framing on green consumption: An investigation of the role of shame. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 157(4), 1111-1132. Lemaster, Philip C. "When "What Tastes Right" Feels Wrong: Guilt, Shame, and Fast Food Consumption." PhD diss., Marietta College, 2010.

<sup>4</sup>CHOI, Nak-Hwan, Jingyi SHI, and Li WANG. "Sources of inducing shame versus anger at in-group failure and consumption type." *Journal of Distribution Science* 18, no. 2 (2020): 79-89.

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<sup>1</sup> Loughnan, Steve, and Thomas Davies. "The meat paradox." *Why We Love and Exploit Animals*. Routledge, 2019. 171-187.

<sup>2</sup> Loughnan, Steve, and Thomas Davies. "The meat paradox." (2019)

These adaptive consumers choose to combat these unpleasant feelings by rethinking their existing practices and beliefs and oftentimes, if necessary, changing them. Adaptive consumption behavioral changes are often catalyzed by feelings of shame and are generally motivated by a personal desire for one to rectify the disconnect between their *ideal self* and *actual self*.<sup>5</sup> Understanding this is absolutely the key to long term change. Someone who feels disconnected from their ideal self is someone who, at their core, is not aligning their behavior with their own beliefs and is aware (either consciously or subconsciously) that they are not doing so. Advocates must understand that these consumers have to have a pre-existing desire to get away from the behavior causing them discomfort in order for shame and guilt focused advertising to work.

This shame to positive change pipeline suggests that despite the negative connotations often associated with shame, it may be a constructive tool for motivating change amongst those who *do* wish to respond to personal concerns in an adaptive way, and due to their propensity towards adaptive responses, it seems that adaptive consumers would be a worthy target audience for changemakers. Because of this, there is a need for better methods of identifying meat-conscious consumers and understanding their motivations.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

### 1.0c Meat Shame and Vegaphobia

Unfortunately, there is a darker side to shame-induced cognitive-behavioral responses which can quickly descend into more damaging behavioral changes amongst individual consumers. When shame shifts to anger, consumers can be drawn to engage in *compensatory consumption behaviors*.<sup>6</sup> These are primarily defense mechanisms used to cope with negative emotions through retaliation. These behaviors can include individual efforts to reduce personal exposure to reminders of dissonance and/or personal endorsement and adoption of dissonance-inducing cognitions.<sup>7</sup> In the context of meat consumption, for some consumers this involves simply not thinking about animal suffering when purchasing or thinking about meat, but others may respond to threats with retaliatory behaviors and what has been termed '*vegaphobia*'.<sup>8</sup> Vegaphobia involves the development of strong negative thoughts and feelings towards plant-based eaters and the occasional placement of blame on the vegetarian and vegan community for reminding the consumer of their own cognitive dissonance.<sup>9</sup> These attitudes may lead to harmful consumption behaviors and feelings of anger and

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Kunst, J. R., & Hohle, S. M. (2016). Meat eaters by dissociation: How we present, prepare and talk about meat increases willingness to eat meat by reducing empathy and disgust. *Appetite*, 105, 758-774.

<sup>9</sup> Vandermoere, F., Geerts, R., De Backer, C., Erreygers, S., & Van Doorslaer, E. (2019). Meat consumption and vegaphobia: an exploration of the characteristics of meat eaters, vegaphobes, and their social environment. *Sustainability*, 11(14), 3936.

resentment in response to confrontation. While these reactions may include negative attitudes towards vegetarians and vegans, it is not clear that they actually result in increased meat consumption. Nonetheless, they may lead to avoidance of vegetarian or vegan messages or promotion of anti-vegetarian and vegan messages, which can be damaging to the movement at large. It is likely that shame and guilt focused campaigns would be less effective if directed towards compensatory consumers; and due to the negative consequences that could arise from triggering vegaphobia, it is at least somewhat important for the animal advocacy community to understand compensatory meat consumers' behaviors and motivations.

### 1.0d Meat Eating as a Social Norm

Meat consumption is a socially accepted practice, as well as an institutionalized industry which has encouraged media, social, and governmental biases towards the 'norm' of omnivorous, meat-inclusive diets.<sup>10</sup> In a world that encourages meat consumption so tenaciously, it is much more difficult to go against the status quo. This suggests that the avoidance of acknowledging one's own role in the harmful consequences of animal consumption and the emergence of vegaphobic attitudes is not always a conscious individual choice but rather can be conditioned by social networks, forced

choices, and social pressures.<sup>11</sup> The social acceptability of meat consumption has proven a challenge for animal welfare and plant-based eating advocates who wish to effectively influence public perceptions of the meat industry and encourage positive dietary change among consumers.

People tend to be most interested in change that requires the least amount of personal effort for the highest reward, so without the infrastructure and social support to implement dietary change, many may shy away from the challenge despite pre-existing desires to change.<sup>12</sup> The key to determining whether shame will lead to adaptive or compensatory behaviors lies in how the individual perceives the merit of their behavior being objects of criticism. In the context of proactive shame specifically, it is much more likely that people will feel shame when there is a strong and clear norm existing against the performed behavior. If there is not a social norm their actions push against, it is harder for people to feel ashamed because people naturally compare themselves to others to determine whether their behavior is acceptable or not.

Unfortunately for advocates of individual dietary change, this causes some problems. The systemic aspect of meat and dairy production allows consumers to remain removed from the industry's production processes. This enables consumers to place blame on the industry rather than

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<sup>10</sup> A large majority of UK newspapers portray vegetarians and vegans in a bad light - <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/11/14/3936>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Szejda, K., Urbanovich, T., & Wilks, M. (2020). Accelerating consumer adoption of plant-based meat. Five Work. Pap.

themselves, which can lead to them perceiving criticism as misplaced blame.<sup>13</sup> This perspective can quickly spiral into justification for retaliatory behaviors because compensatory consumers are likely to already have low estimates of their contribution to the harmful systems causing shame and discomfort.

## 1.1 Project Overview

The aim of this study was to examine and illuminate the unique experiences and mitigation tactics of meat consumers in response to negative (conscious or subconscious) feelings about their meat consumption. In addition, this study aimed to make evidence-based predictions about the individual characteristics (demographic or otherwise) that may help predict which areas of the meat-eating population are more likely to implement dietary change in response to personal negative feelings about meat consumption vs. those who are likely to utilize retaliatory and compensatory responses to decrease their personal dissonance.

### 1.1a Relevance to the Field

This research is especially relevant to the field of animal advocacy as it provides guidelines for the effective use of resources through targeted campaigns. A study conducted in 2019 found that targeted

diet-related interventions for meat-reduction significantly outperformed non-targeted interventions.<sup>14</sup> In fact, targeted consumers reduced their animal product consumption by 40g of CO<sub>2</sub> per day on average while participants who were not targeted showed no significant reduction.<sup>15</sup> Based on this information, targeting the groups of meat consumers that are most open to dietary change and experience higher levels of *'meat shame'*<sup>16</sup> may be key to increasing the effectiveness of campaign efforts and providing a better understanding of the dietary change barriers faced by meat-conscious consumers.

This report will attempt to help activists by providing guidelines to identify: 1) groups of compensatory meat consumers who negatively respond to activism in ways that strengthen and reinforce cognitive dissonance (*Meat Shame Resisters*); and 2) groups of meat consumers who experience negative feelings in response to their own meat consumption levels (*Meat Conscious Consumers*). The overall aim of this enquiry is to bolster the effectiveness of animal and plant based advocacy campaigns through knowledge expansion on various types of meat consumers. It is likely that at least some of the resources and time put in by advocates to encourage dietary change is being thwarted

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<sup>13</sup> Kim, S., & Rucker, D. D. (2012). Bracing for the psychological storm: Proactive versus reactive compensatory consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 39(4), 815-830.

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<sup>14</sup> Lacroix, K., & Gifford, R. (2020). Targeting interventions to distinct meat-eating groups reduces meat consumption. *Food Quality and Preference*, 86, 103997.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> This term has been adapted from the concept of flight shame and is used throughout this paper to denote the negative emotions and feelings of shame, remorse and guilt that specifically relate to meat consumption

by the behavioral responses of retaliatory meat consumers. That said, this research will hopefully provide activists with guidelines for avoiding unnecessary use of resources by targeting the groups that are ready and open to dietary change but are in need of support to actually implement the desired changes.

## 2. Methods

This research was conducted through the use of an online survey as well as two follow up focus groups with survey participants. Participants were informed of the general nature of the study and were guaranteed anonymity throughout the process. Procedures were put in place to ensure the survey gathered a representative sample of the current UK population in terms of gender and age groups.<sup>17</sup>

### 2.1 UK Representative Survey

A representative survey of the UK adult population was conducted on Prolific in order to gather information on the beliefs, characteristics, and views of individuals on plant-based diets, meat shame, animals, the vegetarian and vegan community, and more. In addition to a series of demographic questions, participants were asked questions about their diets, sustainability practices, empathy levels,<sup>18</sup> and beliefs. All of which were all made to measure their openness to plant-based diets and their perceived personal barriers to dietary change (both internal and external). They were then asked to report their

own perceived dietary influence on both animal welfare and the environment as well as their self-reported knowledge levels on animal capabilities and the various harms of the animal agriculture industry.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, questions were included to measure exposure and attitudes towards both non-human animals and vegetarian and vegans as studies have shown that exposure to vegetarians may have an effect on openness to dietary change.<sup>20</sup> Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, participants were asked about their experiences with discomfort, remorse, and shame in response to their own personal meat consumption levels and whether these negative feelings prompted any sort of behavioral or dietary change.

We recruited a total sample of n=1,000; to achieve this and throughout the data collection process we iteratively removed respondents who failed attention check questions or completed the survey too quickly (n=101), and recruited more to replace them. An overview of the questions and answer options is available in the supplementary materials section at the end of this report.

### 2.2 Focus Group Interviews

In addition to the survey data, some survey respondents were invited to participate in one of two follow-up focus group sessions based on their survey answers. These group conversations provided useful first-hand testimony from participants on their personal

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<sup>17</sup> Demographic information on the survey sample can be found in the supplementary materials section of this report at the end of the document

<sup>18</sup> Adapted from the [empathy scale](#)

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<sup>19</sup> Specifically: CO2 emissions from factory farms, animal welfare in factory farms, meat production processes, land usage from animal agriculture, meat-related health issues.

<sup>20</sup> Rothgerber, H. (2014). Efforts to overcome vegetarian-induced dissonance among meat eaters. *Appetite*, 79, 32-41.



characteristics, views on plant based diets and their experiences (or lack of experiences) with meat shame. These follow-ups also allowed participants to expand upon and help explain some of the more nuanced survey findings. In total, two 1-hour focus groups were conducted with 4-6 people in each group. Participants were selected on the basis of their alignment with one of two distinct groups of meat-eaters which we have termed; *meat-conscious consumers*, and *meat shame resisters*.

Meat conscious consumers can be defined as meat eating consumers who are conscious about their contribution to the harms and negative ramifications of the meat industry and who experience (either occasionally or often) negative feelings as a result of their meat consumption (*'meat shame'*). Meat Shame Resisters on the other hand can be defined as meat-eating consumers who are resistant to the concept of personally being shamed for meat consumption, do not believe there is reason to feel ashamed for meat consumption, and are more likely to react to information on plant-based diets and animal welfare with compensatory or defensive behaviors. Information on what qualified each participant for each group is outlined in the following section.

### 2.2a .Focus Group Participant Selection

Participants for the meat conscious consumers focus group were selected based on 1) whether they identified themselves as meat-eaters or flexitarians when questioned about their diet and 2) whether their answer to the question *"Have you ever thought twice about eating meat due to personal concerns and feelings of*

*shame?"* was either *"Yes, I often feel shameful for eating meat"* or *"Yes, I've occasionally felt shameful for eating meat"*. These criteria were selected because they provided us with only those meat-consumers who *have* experienced shame based on their meat consumption levels. Participants for the meat shame resisters focus group were also self-identified meat eaters or flexitarians. However, they differed from the meat-conscious consumers group in their answer to the question *"Have you ever thought twice about eating meat due to personal concerns and feelings of shame?"* Meat shame resisters were only chosen if they answered *"No I've never felt shameful for eating meat and I don't think there is any reason to"* when asked about meat shame. There was another answer option which stated *"No, I've never felt shameful for eating meat"* but those who chose this answer were excluded from the meat shame resisters focus group because they only indicated not having experienced meat shame and did not fulfill the criteria of being actively resistant to meat shame.

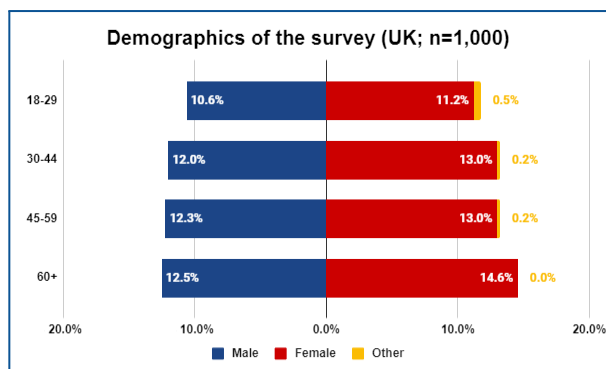
## 3. Results

The data and information collected from the survey was useful in crafting visual quantitative analyses. In addition, the focus groups provided some valuable qualitative insights on individual perceptions, insights, attitudes and beliefs in both Meat Conscious Consumers and Meat Shame Resisters. We hope these findings will improve the effectiveness of targeted activism for meat reduction campaigns and help advocates better understand their audience's beliefs and

dietary motivations. Details on how analyses were conducted and the findings from each research method are outlined in this section.

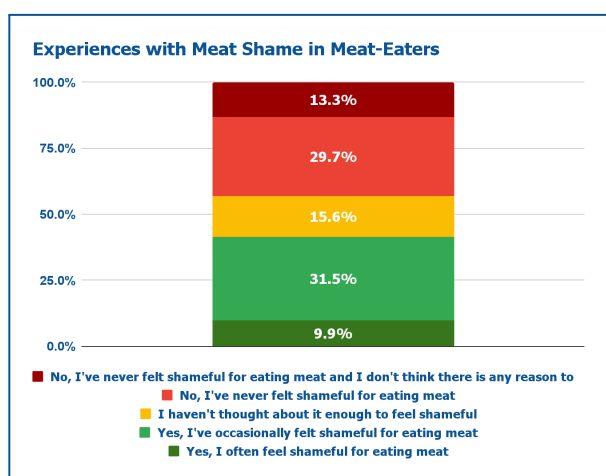
### 3.1 Survey Results

#### Survey Demographics



As shown, the survey reached a representative sample in terms of gender and age groups.

#### 3.1a Meat Shame



The above chart illustrates the prevalence of meat shame in those who identify as meat-eaters (including both those who identify as meat eaters without any reduction and those who identify as meat reducers or flexitarians). As illustrated, the split between those who experience meat shame and those who

experience no meat shame with **41.4%**<sup>21</sup> having reported experiencing meat shame either often or occasionally, and **45.3%**<sup>22</sup> not having experienced any meat shame. The remaining **13.3%** belong to the group of meat shame resisters who when asked about meat shame answered with *'No, I've never felt shameful for eating meat and I don't think there is any reason to'*. This information goes to show that a good portion of the meat eating population does experience or has experienced meat shame.

The survey also helped provide data on how exposure to vegetarians and vegans affects one's likelihood of experiencing meat shame. The 'exposure' variable was calculated by giving each survey participant a score of 1-8 depending on how many of the following answers they indicated applied to them:

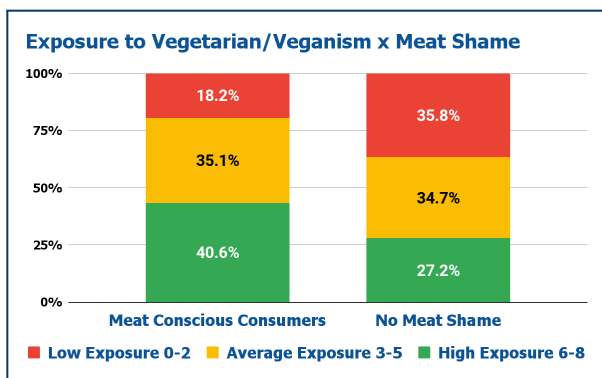
- *I know a vegetarian or vegan*
- *I am friends with a vegetarian or vegan*
- *I have been out to dinner with a vegetarian or vegan*
- *I have eaten at an all vegetarian or vegan restaurant*
- *I have cooked vegetarian or vegan meals*
- *I have watched documentaries on the animal agricultural industry*
- *I have a family member who is vegetarian or vegan*

<sup>21</sup>This figure is a composite of both the % of those who said "Yes, I've occasionally felt shameful for eating meat" (31.5%) and those who said "Yes, I often feel shameful for eating meat" (9.9%) for a total of **41.4%**

<sup>22</sup>This figure is a composite of both the % of those who answered with "No I've never felt shameful for eating meat" (29.7%) and those who answered "I haven't thought about it enough to feel shameful" (15.6%) for a total of **45.3%**

- *I have tried a plant-based meat alternative product.*

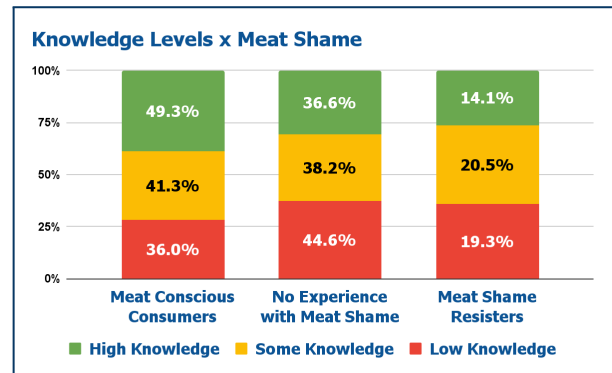
Once participants were scored on exposure levels they were broken down into different groups to express different levels. Anyone with a score between **0-2** was marked as *‘low exposure’*, **3-5** were considered *‘average exposure’* and anyone with **6-8** selected were put in the *‘high exposure’* category.



As shown in the graph, there does seem to be some correlation between being exposed to vegetarian and veganism in day to day life and experiencing meat shame. Of the meat conscious consumers, **40.6%** had high exposure levels and those with low exposure were much less likely to experience meat-related shame or remorse.

In addition to exposure to vegetarians, we were interested in examining the impact of knowledge levels (particularly knowledge on the various harms of animal agriculture) on likelihood of experiencing meat shame. To measure this, we took answers from a series of 4 questions on knowledge levels which asked participants to rate their knowledge on a scale of **1-5** on various aspects of factory farming including **CO2 emissions from factory farms, meat production processes, animal agriculture land use, and**

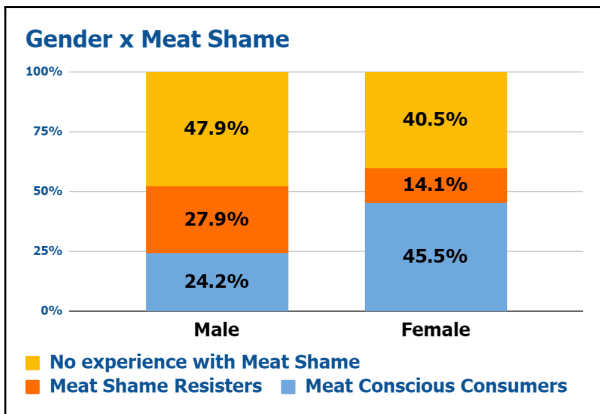
**meat-related health issues.** From this data, we then calculated a composite variable which scored participant knowledge on a scale of **4-20**. Participants were then separated into *‘high’* (12+) *‘average’* (8-12) and *‘low’* (4-8) knowledge groups and graphed based on their answers to the question on meat shame.



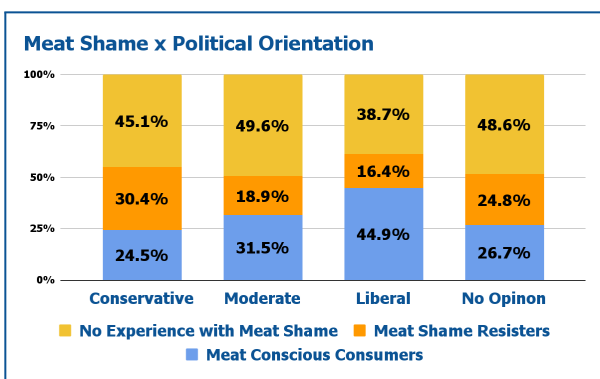
In regards to experiencing meat shame there was a **13 percentage point** difference between those with high and low knowledge levels, suggesting that there may be some correlation between knowledge and consumption related shame. In addition, those with no experience with meat shame were most likely to have low knowledge levels on the practices and harms of animal agriculture **44.7%**, and the percentage of meat shame resisters was lowest in the high knowledge column **14.0%**.

### 3.1b Demographic Findings

Breaking down the meat shame data by demographic information provided us with some illuminating insight on the prevalence of meat shame in different genders.



For instance, there is a **13.8 percentage point** difference between men and women in regards to meat shame resistance, with men being much more likely to be meat shame resisters than women. Even more striking was the **21.3 percentage point** difference in regards to meat consciousness. Women were more likely to be meat conscious consumers (meaning that they experience meat shame either often or occasionally).

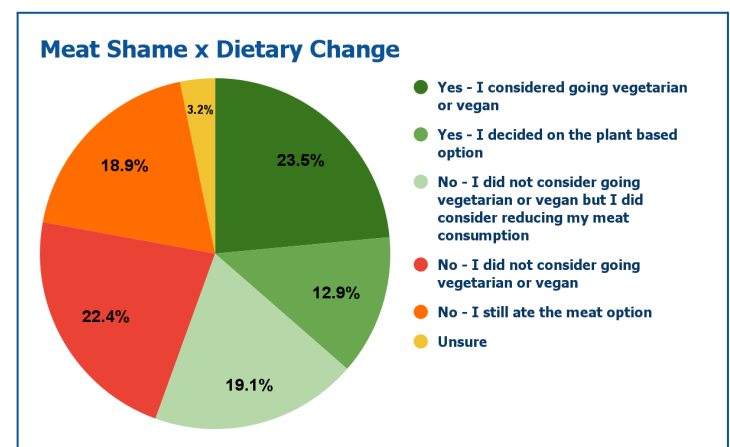


When it comes to politics, conservatives are most likely of all political orientations to be meat shame resisters (**30.4%**), moderates are most likely to have no experience with meat shame (**49.5%**) and liberals are most likely to be meat conscious consumers (**44.9%**). Conservatives are also least likely to be meat conscious consumers, (making them the group

with the least amount of meat shame experience), and liberals are least likely to be meat shame resisters making them the least likely to oppose feelings of meat shame and remorse.

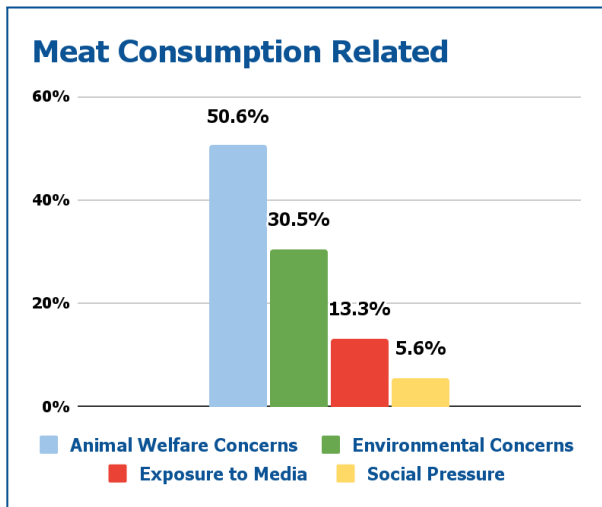
### 3.1c Meat Shame and Intended Dietary Change

In addition to the motivations and characteristics of those who do/do not experience meat shame, we were also interested in the behavioral influence of meat shame on diet. In order to calculate this variable we first isolated the data from meat eaters who have experienced meat shame and then took a look at their answers to a follow up question on whether this shame prompted them to consider any dietary changes.



As shown in the chart above, a substantial number of those who experience meat shame (**55.5%**) considered some sort of dietary change as a result whether it was going vegetarian or vegan (**23.5%**), choosing the plant based option (**12.9%**), or simply reducing their meat consumption (**19.1%**).

### 3.1d Sources of Meat-Consumption Related Discomfort



One of the survey questions asked participants about their experiences with meat-consumption related remorse and discomfort. The individuals were first asked if they have experienced meat related discomfort and, if they answered yes, were then asked to select the reasons why. Participants were allowed to select as many answers as they felt applied to them with the options being:

- *Yes, because of exposure to media on the harms of animal agriculture*
- *Yes, because of animal welfare concerns*
- *Yes, because of environmental concerns*
- *Yes, because of social pressure*

The data collected indicated that the most prevalent reason for meat-related remorse and discomfort in meat-eaters is animal welfare concerns, with this answer making up **50.6%** of the ‘Yes’ answers. The least reported reason for discomfort and remorse was social pressure, and the numbers of those who cited environmental concerns as a reason for remorse and discomfort

was **~20 percentage points** lower than animal welfare concerns.

### 3.2 Focus Group Results - Meat Conscious Consumers

*“Just because we have the ability to condone an animal to death for our own consumption doesn’t mean we should do it lightly... these things need to be dealt with delicately”*

**-Anonymous Focus Group Participant**

The first focus group lasted for an hour and had a total of 5 participants. The session’s goal was to understand the experiences and feelings of ‘meat conscious consumers’, their general views on the plant-based community, and their own personal barriers to making dietary change. The group was majority female, which coincides with our survey data which suggests that women are almost 2x more likely than men to be meat conscious consumers.

#### 3.2a On Meat Shame and Consciousness

*“That’s all it is really, it’s guilt. You just feel like you can’t enjoy putting that in front of the family because you know an animal has suffered for it... it takes the enjoyment away from it really for me.”*

**- Anonymous Focus Group Participant**

When asked to recall and expand on their own personal experiences with meat shame the most frequently mentioned catalyst of these feelings was animal welfare concerns, one respondent even stated that *“everybody has that feeling [of guilt] if they love animals”*. When asked the specific

question of what traits and qualities the participants felt increased their likelihood of being meat conscious consumers one participant said it was a combination of the fact that they have *“always loved animals and hated the way the food industry works”*, another participant stated that her meat shame increased once she began *“reading about veal”* after which she *“had to leave the table and go to another one because it repulsed [them]”*. Some participants touched on specific experiences with meat that increased their meat consciousness. One participant, who had pet dogs, had collected lambs heart from the butcher for them. When recalling the event she states *“I just burst into tears I thought ‘this tiny little baby animal didn’t even get a chance’”*. After that experience the same participant stated that *“it took me a really long time after that to buy meat knowing I was going to eat it because I just did not want to eat anything after that it just made me feel like crying”*. There were many respondents who had their own personal catalysts for their meat consciousness, one stated that after seeing a deceased body they realized that animals were *“just like [them]”* (anatomically) which caused them to severely cut down their meat consumption and refuse to go into a butchers shop due to *“the smell and general repulsion”*. While participants were asked if environmental concerns factored into their experiencing meat shame, the majority of participants said their only concern was animal welfare. One participant however stated that they look more into the sustainability harms of the meat industry than the animal welfare harms. They specifically stated that they do so because *“if [they] looked into animal welfare, it’d put [them] off eating meat completely”*. She says, *“all my life*

*“I’ve desensitized myself and said ‘that chunk of meat doesn’t relate to that furry animal; I sort of separated them’”*. When asked to be specific about the situations that elevated their feelings of meat shame there was plenty of mention of feeling more guilty after having interacted with animals or watching a documentary about the harms of the meat industry. One respondent said that having more vegan and vegetarian options on the menu may also increase these feelings and cause them to reconsider choosing the meat option. This is a strong message to support institutional change and increased accessibility of vegetarian and vegan options.

### 3.2b. On the Vegetarian and Vegan Community

When participants were asked about their views on and experiences with members of the plant-based community there was a general consensus amongst those who reported having frequent exposure to vegetarians and vegans that positive exposure can increase openness to plant based diets in meat conscious consumers. One participant stated that *“having vegan and vegetarian friends or family is something that can influence you in a positive way”*. That being said, proximity to vegetarians and vegans, particularly those with quite rigid dietary restrictions can evidently increase feelings of meat shame. One respondent said that they *“really felt guilt when [they] had [their] quite militant vegan niece over”*. Nearly every participant in this focus group had a vegan or vegetarian in their close circle or family, and most reported having positive experiences and views on the vegetarian and vegan

community.

### 3.2c On Barriers to Dietary Change

The majority of meat conscious consumer participants did make some effort to reduce their own individual meat consumption levels. However, when participants were asked about their own perceived barriers to dietary change, one of the more common barriers mentioned had to do with family and friends. One respondent, a working mother of two young children, restricts her own meat intake but struggles to fully cut out meat because her kids are *“not open to eating vegetarian food”*. This participant also does not eat dairy or wheat so they did have concerns about how restrictive their diet would be if they cut out meat as well, which is another barrier to full reduction of meat. Another respondent echoed the sentiment that the diet of family members can impact their own personal dietary choices. This participant said that when alone, they only eat fish and plant-based meat alternatives but when their adult children come to visit once a month, they eat meat with them and enjoy it. Finally, a third participant opened up about family related barriers that stem from her husband and dog’s diets. Her husband is on a low-carb diet which mainly consists of meat and eggs and her two large dogs primarily eat meat. This makes her discouraged that changing her own diet would have any impact on the wider world. She states *“if I said that’s it, I’m going to go veggie now I wouldn’t make much of an impact anyway”*. In addition, there seems to be concern about skills in regards to plant-based cooking. One participant stated that they are *‘a terrible cook’* and another stated that while they have time to cook, many mothers who

work full time may have a hard time finding a meal that is *‘healthy, plant-based, but doesn’t take very long’*. Interestingly, the food industry itself also came up as a barrier, one participant stated *“the biggest barrier in terms of society is government policy because the food industry is so powerful”*.

### 3.2e On Corporate and Governmental Change

*“Unless a government seriously promotes less meat eating, more sustainability, and more animal welfare, then the vast majority of people in the country and world wide will not follow a vegetarian diet”*

**-Anonymous Participant**

One point that was not directly prompted but still came up in the discussion was the role of the government in regulating meat consumption. While some believed that the consumer could make an impact through individual actions, others were not so sure this can be done without government intervention. There was a general consensus among the meat conscious consumers that some guidance from the government is needed on these issues. One respondent stated that *“it would be vital for the government to do something”*, another saying that *“people in power need to make a decision about these things”*. There was also some worry about a post-Brexit *“watering down of meat safety”*, and a general feeling that *“the government is very wishy-washy about what’s right and what’s wrong”*. There was certainly a desire for more information from the alternative protein industry. One participant says *“the alternative meat industry is certainly improving. I just don’t think there’s enough information from or about it”*. Overall, it seems like there is a demand

for more information on not only the harms of the meat industry but also the alternatives available to those who would like to cut down on meat. One member brought them cultivated meat towards the end of the conversation, stating, *“they grow meat now in laboratories so you don’t have to worry about animal welfare”*. This mention was met with interest by other group participants, implying that there may be some desire for more information on cultivated meat.

### 3.3 Focus Group 2 - Meat Shame Resisters

*“We all have a view and opinion but if you start to force it down my throat, I’ll probably go the other way”*

**-Anonymous Focus Group Participant**

This second focus group session lasted an hour and had a total of 4 participants who we identified as meat shame resisters. This session's goal was to better understand those who are against the concept of meat shame. Questions were asked about exposure to the vegetarian and vegan community, meat reduction, barriers to dietary change and feelings on meat shame. The group consisted of 3 males and 1 female, which coincided with the survey data which suggests men are more likely than women to be meat shame resisters.

#### 3.3a On Meat Shame

*“When it comes to eating meat my concerns are more about climate change and meat production*

*rather than anything ethical about eating other animals”*

**-Anonymous Focus Group Participant**

When asked directly about their aversion to meat shame there was lots of talk about personal choice and dietary freedoms. Some of the statements included;

- *“We can have a discussion about it but no one can sit down and say they have the God-given right to say what is right”*
- *“We all have differences whatever they may be and that’s fine, that’s why I don’t feel bad about it”*
- *“Everybody has a right to their opinions”*
- *“I don’t see any need to make a vegetarian uncomfortable because they’ve chosen a veggie diet. So I certainly don’t feel guilty about doing what I do”*
- *“I’m intelligent enough to make the right choices”*

Despite the focus on personal freedoms , there were still concerns about the amount of information available to help with personal dietary decisions. One participant stated that *“we should be allowed to make our calls given that we’ve been given the information”*, another saying *“I like things pointed out”*.

#### 3.3b On Meat Reduction

A few of the participants had actually modified their diets based on information they had come across or other barriers. Some did so due to the growing prices of meat products saying, *“I’ve cut out a lot of beef because it’s getting very expensive and as I’ve gotten older it’s a little indigestible at night”*, *“I’ve given up eating certain meats mainly*



*due to price*”, and others cut out red meat due to health concerns, and sausages due to worries about overprocessing. One admitted to using vegetarian based protein sources and said because they are *“very keen on fitness”* they *“keep an eye on health outlets about the best sources of protein”*. There were a few respondents who had concerns about meat, but animal welfare concerns did not factor into most of their decisions. The most commonly mentioned concerns about meat consumption seemed to be environment and health related. One even stated *“I do find the arguments about [plant based diets] helping longevity quite helpful”*. There was another group member who touched on animal welfare concerns, saying *“there are slight seeds of doubt that come in when one hears about how intelligent octopuses are and that sort of thing...would one eat a fellow primate?”*. This was the only time in the conversation that animal sentience came up suggesting that animal welfare may be of little concern to meat shame resisters and/or that it is an issue they try to avoid thinking about.

### 3.3c. On the Vegetarian and Vegan Community

*“I do get the point that vegans and vegetarians can be a little preachy, and I don't quite understand that”*

**-Anonymous Focus Group Participant**

A couple of the group participants had friends and family members that were vegan or vegetarian. Amongst these people, it seems like their exposure to vegetarians and vegans helped them have a better view on the community at large. One participant, who has 3 veggie family members

stated that *“I think because it's all family I haven't had any problems, I don't feel a huge amount of pressure from them”*. This same participant went on to say that they *“don't think vegans are catered for properly”* and that *“there could be more vegetarian options on the menu”*. Another participant, who is friends with a vegetarian said *“I've got a veggie friend and it's never really been an issue for us, we have far more heated discussions about other matters in the world today than who is having the pork chop”*. Amongst those with little or no exposure to vegetarians and vegans, the views on the plant-based community were a bit different. Amongst these participants there were sentiments that vegetarians and vegans can be *“preachy and intolerant of the rest of us”*, that there is *“a slightly sanctimonious air about them”*. The general sentiment was that *“a group of people with a diverse cross-section of views and opinions is a nice group to be in”* but they *“don't want it rammed down [their] throat”*.

### 3.3d On Plant Based Alternatives and Cultivated Meat

*“The ingredients in the plant-based sausage to make it taste like sausage might be doing me more harm than if I just ate the sausage in the first place”*.

**-Anonymous Focus Group Participant**

The group had a lot to say about the plant-based meat alternatives currently on offer. Many of them were concerned about the perceived *“overprocessing”* that goes into these products. One stated, *“I can't deny that they get the flavor. But actually, what you're eating, I just can't enjoy it”*. Nonetheless, many of them had tried plant-based

meat alternatives and had positive views on the amount of options now available. One participant said *“There's a lot being said and done about [the alternative protein industry] and the choices have become far wider now”*. This same participant said that their family tries to eat meat alternatives at least every fortnight to see if it makes a difference for them. They attributed this adoption of alternative protein sources to the expansion of choices having made it easier to find alternatives that fit into their family's *“schedule and diets”*.

When asked about their knowledge of cultivated meat, most were open and optimistic about its future. Some of the responses included;

- *“There's probably a way forward for it”*
- *“I would be prepared to try it”*
- *“That could be a way forward”*

The main concerns about cultivated meat stemmed from a lack of information, some participants were concerned about the long-term health impacts that cultivated meat may have on individuals, stating *“I would be dubious about how good it would be for us”*. Another big concern was price. The group unanimously agreed that if cultivated meat was much more expensive than conventional meat, they would not consider trying it. Overall, this quote from the group seems to summarize views on alternative meat options; *“Hopefully science will not replace meat, but give us more choice”*.

### 3.3e On Government Influences

*“The government shouldn't be telling people what they can/can't eat, they can give us guidance but I don't think they should do any more than that”*

**-Anonymous Focus Group Participant**

Another topic that came up was the role of the government in reducing meat consumption, particularly in the context of the environmental concerns related to meat production. One group member opened this conversation by saying *“maybe the environmental concerns will help it to move up the agenda so it becomes something we talk about and vote about”*. The same participant enquired about who's responsible when it comes to food, he was curious about whether it *“will be left to the individual to eat less meat”* or if *“there will be some form of state or market nudging”*. On the topic of nudging, most group members were open to certain constraints being placed on meat consumption so long as options aren't completely taken away. All of the participants were also open to a certain level of guidance and information from the government, one stating that *“we should be allowed to make our own calls given that we've been given the information”*. The sugar tax came up as an example of government nudging, most participants were not opposed to this, one said *“just because they put 20p on it because it's bad for you doesn't mean anything. If you want it you're gonna have it”*. That being said, there was concern about the amount of control the government should have over individual dietary choices, one participant anxiously saying *“we have to be very careful how far they go”*.

## 4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to quantify and further understand both sides of meat shame; meat conscious consumers, and meat shame resisters. Through the survey we were able to gather information on who is more likely to experience meat conscious feelings. One notable finding from the survey was that a considerable portion of the meat eating population does experience meat shame (41.4%), and of that population, a significant amount (~55%) considered some sort of plant-forward dietary change as a result. Importantly, the most cited reason for experiencing meat shame amongst survey respondents was animal welfare concerns. This high volume of meat conscious consumers who do want to make dietary changes suggests that there may be a demand for resources that can help individuals make adaptive behavioral changes. If we can target those who are looking for help with dietary shifts, we may be able to more effectively make change through advocacy.

Demographically, we found that women are much more likely to be meat conscious consumers, and men are more likely to be meat shame resisters. In addition, the survey data suggested that knowledge of animal agriculture and exposure to vegetarians/vegans can have a positive effect on one's propensity to experience meat shame.

Through the focus groups conducted, we were able to further explore these feelings of meat shame from the perspective of both meat conscious consumers and meat shame resisters. The focus groups were illuminating and supported some of the survey findings.

In the meat conscious consumer group, animal welfare concerns were the most mentioned reason for experiencing meat shame. In addition, most of the respondents had a desire or had made an effort to reduce their meat consumption in response to their meat conscious feelings. Finally, the discussion provided reason to believe that positive exposure to vegetarians and vegans can increase meat conscious feelings. Importantly, the meat conscious consumers were vocal about their desire for more guidance from the government on the harms of meat consumption as well as the alternatives available.

In the meat shame resisters group, we were also able to gather some insights on what makes people averse to the concept of meat shame. In this group, there was very little talk of animal welfare and more talk about health and over processing concerns with both meat and non-meat alternatives. This may suggest that this group is less interested in animal suffering, or it may suggest that they are more actively avoiding thinking about it. Health or environmental arguments may be more effective for this group, but unobtrusively giving them facts about farmed animal suffering should not be ruled out. Price was also brought up as a reluctant reason for meat reduction amongst this group, suggesting that price increases in meat products may reduce meat consumption on both sides. Additionally, similarly to the meat conscious consumers group, those in the meat shame resisters group who had positive vegetarian and vegan influences within their family or friend groups seemed more open to, and positive about the plant-based community in general. Finally, in this group there was aversion to plant-based meat alternatives due to concerns

about overprocessing. However, when asked about the prospect of cultivated meat alternatives, the group was generally open to trying cultivated meat, so long as it is not more expensive than animal meat. This suggests that successful technological development of cultivated meat may be a good way forward for meat shame resisters and meat conscious consumers alike. The biggest concern amongst this group was a loss of personal dietary freedoms; that being said, they were not completely opposed to state or market nudging towards meat reduction, so long as the option to eat meat is still available to them.

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

All in all, this study provided us with valuable information on the various manifestations of meat shame as well as vegaphobia and meat shame aversion. Consumers on both sides have some thoughts about their personal dietary choices, but some are more open to plant-forward change than others. We believe that this information can aid the plant-based and animal-welfare advocacy movement in increasing effectiveness of meat reduction campaigns. Our recommendations to advocates are as follows:

- When possible, **target populations** that are more likely to be meat-conscious consumers for dietary change resources.
- Invest in campaigns that further **institutional and corporate nudging** towards plant-based diets to increase the availability of PB options.

- **Information is key**; on both sides, there is demand for more information on the harms of meat consumption and the alternatives available.
- Invest personal time in being a **positive vegetarian or vegan influence** in the lives of others; positive exposure can increase feelings of meat shame.
- **Be cautious with guilt-focused campaigns when targeting meat shame resisters** as they can drive those prone to meat shame resistance to avoid further engagement.<sup>23</sup>
- **Focus on the animals** when appealing to meat conscious consumers and be ready to focus on a wider variety of **health, environmental, and financial concerns as well as animals** if appealing to a group that may include meat shame resisters.
- **Invest in cultivated meat technologies** and increase awareness on what cultivated meat is.
- **Lobby governments to be vocal about meat consumption harms** as legislative guidance is important, especially to meat conscious consumers.

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<sup>23</sup> Note: this does not mean to suggest that guilt-focused campaigns are not useful in other contexts. The data collected in this study suggests that guilt and meat consciousness can be effective in encouraging change amongst meat-conscious consumers

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## Supplementary Materials

### - Representative Survey Questions and Answer Choices

Question	Answer(s)
Q1- To what extent do you believe your personal dietary choices can influence animal welfare?	(Multiple Choice- Select One) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No influence</li> <li>- Little Influence</li> <li>- Moderate Influence</li> <li>- Lots of Influence</li> <li>- Unsure</li> </ul>
Q2- To what extent do you believe your personal dietary choices can influence environmental sustainability?	(Multiple Choice- Select One) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No influence</li> <li>- Little Influence</li> <li>- Moderate Influence</li> <li>- Lots of Influence</li> <li>- Unsure</li> </ul>
Q3- Please select the following statements that best describe your views of plant-based diets.	(Checkbox- Select all that apply) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- It is expensive to eat a plant based diet</li> <li>- It is nutritious to eat a plant based diet</li> <li>- It is ethical to eat a plant based diet</li> <li>- The vegan and vegetarian community is welcoming</li> <li>- The vegan and vegetarian community is radical</li> <li>- It is sustainable to eat a plant based diet</li> <li>- It is easy to eat a plant based diet</li> </ul>
Q4- Do you participate in any of the following pro-environmental behaviours?	(Checkbox- Select all that apply) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Regular Recycling</li> <li>- Composting</li> <li>- Environmental Activism (e.g. protests, social media activism)</li> <li>- No waste shopping</li> <li>- Using Public Transportation</li> <li>- Community Clean Up</li> <li>- Reducing Meat Consumption</li> <li>- Reducing Flying Habits</li> </ul>
Q5- Please select all of the following which apply to you	(Checkbox- Select all that apply) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I have a pet</li> <li>- I have been exposed to farm animals in a non-commercial setting (e.g. not a petting zoo)</li> <li>- I grew up on or near a farm</li> <li>- I grew up with pets</li> <li>- I have a strong bond with one or more animals in my life</li> <li>- I work with animals on a daily or weekly basis</li> <li>- I encounter animals on a daily or weekly basis</li> </ul>
Q6- Please select all of the following which apply to you	(Checkbox- Select all that apply) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I know a vegetarian or vegan</li> <li>- I am friends with a vegetarian or vegan</li> <li>- I have been out to dinner with a vegetarian or vegan</li> <li>- I have eaten at an all vegetarian or vegan restaurant</li> <li>- I have cooked vegetarian or vegan meals</li> <li>- I have engaged in debate with a vegetarian or vegan</li> <li>- I have watched documentaries on the animal agricultural industry</li> <li>- I have a family member who is vegetarian or vegan</li> <li>- I have tried plant based meat alternative projects</li> </ul>
Q7- To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements	(Agreement scale- Choose one for each statement; strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Animals deserve to be respected</li> <li>- Humans have the right to use animals as we see fit</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Animals experience emotions (e.g. fear or joy)</li> <li>- It is ok to use animals in medical research for the benefit of humans</li> <li>- I prefer not to think about the harm animals endure at the hands of humans</li> <li>- I prefer animals to humans</li> </ul>
Q8- How familiar are you with the following issues related to animal agriculture?	<p>(Familiarity scale- Choose one for each issue; Not at All Familiar, Slightly Familiar, Moderately Familiar, Very Familiar, Extremely Familiar)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Animal welfare on factory farms</li> <li>- CO2 Emissions from factory farms</li> <li>- Meat production processes</li> <li>- Animal Agriculture and land usage</li> <li>- Meat-Related health issues</li> <li>- Animal Capabilities (e.g. emotional, intellectual, moral)<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>
Q9- Have you ever experienced discomfort or remorse about your meat consumption levels?	<p>(Checkbox- Select all that apply)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Yes- Because of animal welfare concerns</li> <li>- Yes- Because of environmental concerns</li> <li>- Yes- Because of social pressure</li> <li>- Yes- Because of exposure to media on the harms of animal agriculture</li> <li>- No- I prefer not to think about it</li> <li>- No- I've never thought about it</li> </ul>
Q10- Have you ever thought twice about eating meat due to personal concerns and feelings of shame?	<p>(Multiple Choice- Select One)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No, I've never felt shameful for eating meat and I don't think there is any reason to</li> <li>- No, I've never felt shameful for eating meat</li> <li>- I haven't thought about it enough to feel shameful</li> <li>- Yes, I've occasionally felt shameful for eating meat</li> <li>- Yes, I often feel shameful for eating meat</li> </ul>
Q11- If you answered yes to the previous question, did this shame result in you opting for a plant based option or considering a plant based diet?	<p>(Checkbox- Select all that apply)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Yes - I considered going vegetarian or vegan</li> <li>- Yes - I decided on the plant based option</li> <li>- No - I still ate the meat option</li> <li>- No - I did not consider going vegetarian or vegan</li> <li>- No - I did not consider going vegetarian or vegan but I did consider reducing my meat consumption</li> <li>- Unsure</li> </ul>
Q12- To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?	<p>(Agreement scale- Choose one for each statement; strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I am an empathetic and compassionate person</li> <li>- I enjoy caring for other people</li> <li>- I try to treat everyone with respect</li> <li>- I have strong opinions about morality</li> <li>- I tend to get emotionally involved in friend's problems</li> <li>- I think about the consequences of my actions before I act</li> <li>- I am always striving to be the best version of myself</li> <li>- I care a lot about what other people think of me</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> This issue was not used when calculating the knowledge x meat shame levels as it did not directly relate to harms from the animal agricultural industry

- Demographic Information of Survey Participants by Age

Age	<30	30-45	45-60	60<
Count (Female)	107	124	130	158
Percentage (Female- Not including Males)	20.62%	23.89%	25.05%	30.44%
Count (Male)	101	115	123	132
Percentage (Male- Not including Females)	21.44%	24.42%	26.11%	28.03%
Percentage Total in each age group (Female)	10.81%	12.53%	13.13%	15.96%
Percentage Total in each age group (Male)	10.20%	11.62%	12.42%	13.33%

Percentage of Total Count Female	Percentage of Total Count Male
52.42%	47.58%

n=990 (amount of survey takers that indicated their genders as either 'male' or 'female')