

Avocados are 'bad' and vegans are ridiculous: How we justify eating too much meat

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Those of us who find it difficult to eat less meat for the sake of climate tend to apologize or justify ourselves in social contexts. And... shaming

vegans isn't off limits. This, according to a new University of Copenhagen study. Clearer messaging about meat as a climate problem from public authorities could help, say the researchers.

Avocados are "bad" and vegans are ridiculous. My body needs meat. It's my partner who doesn't want to cut back on meat—not me. These are just a few of the things we say when feeling compelled to legitimize not being able to scale back on our [meat consumption](#) for the sake of climate.

The findings are from a University of Copenhagen study. In focus group discussions with Danish consumers, the researchers took note of which arguments came into play as participants addressed meat consumption.

"The study shows how we justify our reluctance to cut down on meat consumption when in social settings. All of the participants—predominantly meat eaters—agree that one of the best things a person can do to be a more climate-minded eater is to eat less meat. But when addressing their own meat consumption, other mechanisms kick in," says Thomas A. M. Skelly, a Ph.D. fellow at the Department of Food and Resource Economics and first author of the [article about the study](#), now published in the *Journal of Consumer Culture*.

While all six focus groups in the study agreed that reducing meat consumption is one of the most effective ways to make eating more climate-friendly, the participants began to engage in social negotiations on their own behalf along the way.

"That is, they come up with various excuses and justifications or try to shift the focus onto something else. For example, there was a tendency for them to shame avocados as being climate-unfriendly and scold vegans for being extremists. Common to the arguments is that they are

perceived as socially legitimate in the groups, and that they help to maintain a morally responsible self-image among the participants," says the other of the study's authors, Associate Professor Kia Ditlevsen from the Department of Food and Resource Economics.

The participants deployed a variety of excuses and justifications. For example, some were based on not having the necessary knowledge, or that there is a biological need for meat, or that meals without meat just aren't filling. Other justifications cast doubt on whether the actual climate footprint of meat production was as large as it is purported to be. Finally, at times, blame is assigned to other members of the household. For example, one participant says, "I don't eat climate-friendly foods, unfortunately. I try, but I have a partner who's against it. He wants meat."

Can we talk about plastic and food waste instead

The researchers also observed a tendency among participants to steer the topic away from meat and towards more comfortable topics.

"People quickly derail the topic and begin talking about other things, such as how they seek to avoid [food waste](#) and plastic packaging. Within the group, people are mutually supportive of such derailments. Our interpretation is that this is because these things are more culturally neutral and harmless to relate to. No one really has much of an identity attached to plastic disposal. People can envision doing these kinds of things without any great deprivation or personal cost," says Ditlevsen.

Furthermore, various forms of shaming "morally superior" vegans are used to justify one's meat consumption, as the researchers point out:

"For example, when a participant states that he or she doesn't intend on going vegan, the other participants laugh. In doing so, they confirm to

one another that veganism would be a ridiculous solution," says Skelly.

The researchers also see a pattern in the groups of portraying vegans as extremists, and suggesting they are hypocritical, because they eat avocados and highly-processed "vegan foods," which focus group participants refer to as climate damaging.

"With this notion, the participants confirm to each other that their food practices are not more problematic than food practices among people who have cut out meat entirely—even though the truth is that red meat has a far greater climate footprint than both avocados and vegan products, and vegans do not necessarily eat more avocados or processed products than meat eaters," Skelly adds.

"So, a variety of things are used to excuse or justify their meat consumption, because otherwise, they would look stupid having already recognized that meat consumption is a major climate culprit. You get hit on the morals. Therefore, one has to—probably unconsciously—reassure themselves of being a morally coherent person," says Ditlevsen.

Are we dumbing ourselves down?

Whether some of the justifications are due to a lack of knowledge on the part of consumers or the selective deployment of knowledge remains unclear:

"When all of the focus groups point to reduced meat consumption as one of the most climate effective things people can do, it demonstrates the existence of a collective knowledge. But on the other hand, this knowledge can be problematized—and the results demonstrate that it is socially acceptable to problematize it," says Skelly.

"We are unable to conclude whether this is because people actually don't

know, or because not knowing is convenient. But there is certainly enough ambiguity in [public discourse](#) and the media for people to make these justifications without sounding completely ignorant in social settings."

Politicians need to message clearly about meat

According to the researchers, the research results point to the need for public agencies and politicians to have unambiguous messaging with regards to meat consumption.

"When we have politicians who say, for example, that Danes should keep on eating spaghetti and meat sauce, it helps support the notion that we can simply carry on with our meat consumption. At the same time, the Danish Official Dietary Guidelines say that we should eat significantly less meat. So, there is a discrepancy between the announcements from public authorities and those in power," remarks Ditlevsen.

The researcher concludes, "If there is to be more clarity and less confusion among consumers, so that it becomes more difficult to come up with socially acceptable excuses and justifications, clear statements from politicians and authorities must be made—messaging that unequivocally supports the importance of cutting back on meat consumption. This is also something that the European Union emphasizes. This alone probably won't do, but it could help get people moving in the right direction."

More information: Thomas A.M. Skelly et al, Bad avocados, culinary standards, and knowable knowledge. Culturally appropriate rejections of meat reduction, *Journal of Consumer Culture* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/14695405241243199](https://doi.org/10.1177/14695405241243199)

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