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Master's Thesis

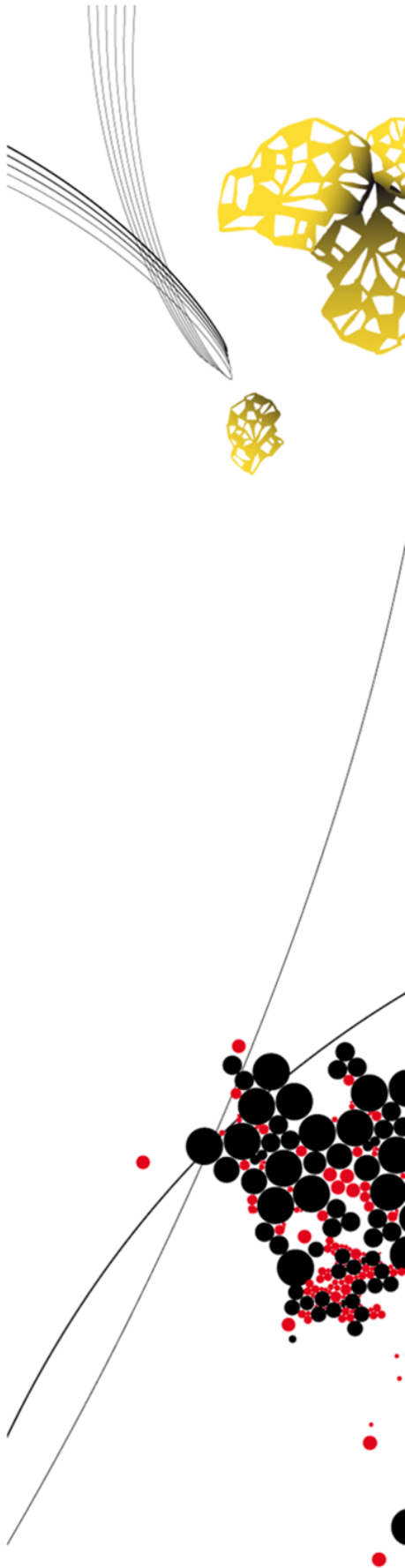
What vegans do to us

A quantitative study assessing the effects of different reasons for a vegan diet on other people's self-concept.

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Abstract

Introduction. Vegans are a group of moral refusers, who face a lot of prejudice in our society. Research has shown that the reasons for someone's veganism seem to be linked to how much prejudice they have to face: Vegans motivated by animal welfare reasons face the most negativity, followed by those motivated by environmental reasons and, finally, those motivated by personal health reasons. Therefore, this study aims at exploring the effects of different reasons to adopt a vegan diet, which differ in their degree of morality, on other people's self-concept. Specifically, the negative effects on perceivers' self-esteem and the resulting resentment towards the refuser will be examined.

Methods. 245 participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions (animal welfare, environment, personal health, control) and asked to engage in a virtual taste test. After evaluating food (a slice of cucumber and a slice of sausage), they were asked to read through the answers of another participant, which indicate that the participant refused to eat the slice of sausage for either personal health, environmental or animal welfare reasons. A control condition was introduced as well. Subsequently, participants answered two questionnaires assessing how much they liked the refuser and how high their self-esteem is.

Results. Statistical tests showed that there was no significant difference in the participants' self-esteem across conditions. Additionally, it was found that the moral refusers motivated by animal welfare reasons were liked significantly more than those motivated by environmental, personal health and non-moral reasons.

Discussion. The findings, which are contrary to prior research, can be explained by the fact that the study was conducted online and participants, therefore, did not engage in the problematic task deemed immoral by the refuser. Therefore, it is recommended to replicate the current study in order to have participants engage in the behaviour which is implicitly criticized by the refusers.

Introduction

Morality

Morality is one of the most crucial facets of self-definition, which is why people engage in great efforts to ensure that they can still view themselves as good and moral (Pronin, 2008). Despite the fact that cultures differ in their perception of what moral behaviour entails, they all agree that one should engage in such behaviours (Minson & Monin, 2012). Due to the centrality of morality to one's perception of the self, people are very sensitive to the feeling that they did something that was not particularly moral and tend to resent not only the person that made them aware of their mishap, but also themselves.

Moral refusers

Because of their universality, moral statements are significantly different from other personal preferences (Haidt, Rosenberg & Hom, 2003). This means that when someone refuses to engage in a certain act because of their moral values, and thus acts as a moral refuser within that situation, this can have severe consequences for someone witnessing this rebellion. A moral refuser can be defined as an individual who, based on moral grounds, refuses to go along with a behaviour that others are executing (Cramwinckel, van Dijk, Scheepers & van den Bos, 2013). By refusing to act a certain way for moral reasons, the refuser automatically implies that others, who do not refuse to act in that way, are doing something wrong and immoral. Since it proves to be important to every person to view themselves as basically moral and good, being confronted with a moral refuser has been shown to have negative consequences for the perceiver (Cramwinckel et al., 2013).

Moral refusers and likability

Specifically, research indicates that when confronted with a moral refuser, individuals show resentment towards that refuser. Research by Monin, Sawyer and Marquez (2008) provided evidence for the fact that rebels were liked significantly less than others, who did not refuse to engage in an obviously problematic task. This finding shows that being confronted

with a moral refuser leads to a less positive evaluation of the disobedient other, who is perceived as a rebel in that situation. This again is a consequence of the fact that the refuser implies that others, who are still acting in that way, are acting immorally.

Moral refusers and self-esteem

Interestingly, the resentment that was shown towards the moral refusers was found to be mediated by the actor's expectation that the refuser would dislike them. That resentment proved to be reduced if the actor's self-esteem was supported prior to the encounter (Monin, Sawyer & Marquez, 2008). The finding that being confronted with a moral refuser has a significant effect on one's self-esteem is substantiated by research done by Cramwinckel et al. (2013) showing that encountering a moral rebel led subjects to evaluate themselves negatively. Therefore, it can be concluded that being confronted with a moral refuser not only leads subjects to evaluate the encountered rebel more negatively, but also leads them to evaluate themselves more negatively.

Conditions for reactions

It is important to note that both the resentment towards the moral refuser and oneself seems to be significantly influenced by the position that the judging subject is in. Specifically, research by Minson and Monin (2012) has shown that acting as a moral refuser within any situation can be judged both as extremely virtuous and as motivated by self-righteousness at the same time. The moral rebel was judged as virtuous when the participant did not engage in the refused act themselves, whereas those that did engage in that act judged the moral refuser as self-righteous. The resentment that was shown towards the moral refuser was found to be mediated by the actor's expectation that the refuser would dislike them. Thus, the position of the judging individual themselves seems to be a crucial factor determining whether a moral refuser is perceived to be agentic and virtuous or rather self-righteousness and unlikable.

Veganism and prejudice

One group of moral refusers are vegans, who are those who refrain from the consumption of any animal products, including meat, milk, eggs and honey. In the UK, the number of vegans grew by a total of 700% from 2016 to 2018, which symbolizes an immense increase (Webber, 2018). Still, vegans are met with a lot of scepticism and prejudice. According to Hodson, Dhont and MacInnis (2019), the prejudice expressed towards those who refuse to consume animal products has been shown to be equal to or even greater than the prejudice expressed towards other stigmatized groups, such as homosexuals. A reason for why vegans are met with such negative attitudes might be that they represent a strong threat to the status quo, since our cultural norms and values favour the consumption of animal products in general and meat in particular (Jallinoja, Niva & Latvala, 2016). By refusing to consume animal products, vegans are perceived to pose a symbolic threat to society, which entails threatening the ingroup's beliefs, values and moral norms, which obviously produces negative attitudes towards them (Schmuck & Matthes, 2017).

Reasons for veganism

Research has shown that different reasons to adopt a vegan diet seem to elicit differently severe prejudices in others. The three most popular reasons that motivate a conversion to veganism are personal health reasons, environmental reasons, and animal welfare reasons. Interestingly, the reasons for why one refrains from the consumption of animal products has been linked to the severity of negativity one has to face. Specifically, research by MacInnis and Hodson (2017) shows that vegans motivated by animal welfare reasons are evaluated more negatively than those motivated by environmental reasons, which are again evaluated more negatively than those motivated by personal health reasons.

Animal welfare reasons to adopt a vegan diet could be described as the most morally motivated of them all. According to Shipman (2017), humans seem to have a strong emotional bond to some species of animals, most of which are those that are held as pets.

Vegans, who refuse to consume animals which are not commonly held as pets, seem to broaden this emotionality to other species of animals. Since there is currently no societal obligation to do so, refraining from meat consumption for animal welfare reasons reflects an extremely moral stance against animal exploitation (The Vegan Society, n.d.).

Another significant number of vegans base their dietary decisions on environmental reasons. Considering the fact that humanity is facing a substantial threat to its very own existence due to climate crisis, which is hugely driven by the meat and dairy industry, going vegan became a popular way to decrease one's carbon emissions (IPCC, 1996). Going vegan for the environment clearly also symbolizes a moral stance in the sense that it is perceived as wrong to value one's own pleasure of consuming animal products over maintaining a planet which both humans and animals can continue to live on. Therefore, this reason is unique in the sense that it is morally motivated and, at the same time, also considers the well-being of other humans.

Lastly, another major reason for adopting a vegan diet is the effects on personal health. It has been argued that diets high in fruits and vegetables have many health benefits and have even been linked to a decreased risk of cancer and reductions in cardio-vascular diseases (Deckers, 2016). Since this information has been made widely available through various documentaries, the number of vegans has risen. What makes this reason significantly different from the other two is the fact that it is less moral in nature and does not entail any values that go beyond one's own well-being.

The current study

Obviously, these three reasons to abstain from the consumption of animal products are very different in nature. Whereas adopting a vegan diet for personal health reasons is a very individualistic measure that does not reflect any moral stance, doing so for environmental reasons is more focused on the well-being of society as a whole and, therefore, more morally motivated. On the other hand, refusing to consume animal products because of animal welfare

reasons is an act stemming purely from moral values and motivations. As indicated above, individuals that refuse to act a certain way tend to induce unpleasant states in other people, leading to a perceived threat that influences both their self-esteem and the evaluation of the refuser. As the reasons for moral behaviour differ in the extent to which they can be regarded as moral, it is conceivable that these may elicit different reactions in other people encountering this act. What this research adds to past findings is the connection of those reasons and the provoked differences to the concept of morality. Specifically, the differences in how morally motivated the reasons to adopt a vegan diet will be linked to the effects on both likability of the refuser and self-esteem of the individual witnessing such a refuser. Therefore, this paper aims at answering the following research question: *Do different reasons that motivate a person to adopt a vegan diet pose differently severe threats to other people's self-concept?*

In order to achieve a differentiated answer to this question, two hypotheses will be tested. Firstly, it is hypothesized that those confronted with the non-moral refuser will show the least affected self-esteem, followed by those confronted with the moral refuser motivated by animal welfare reasons, and finally those confronted with the refuser motivated by environmental reasons (*Hypothesis 1*). This is the case because encountering a rebellion that is not based on moral grounds does not threaten the participants' morality and thus, should not lead them to evaluate themselves negatively. Further, it is expected that environmental reasons elicit more decreasing effects on the participants' self-esteem than animal welfare reasons because in society, an obligation to save the environment is communicated as more urgent than saving animals. Thus, failing to do so should significantly affect a person's self-esteem.

Secondly, it is hypothesized that out of the different refuser conditions, the non-moral refuser will be most liked by participants, followed by the refuser whose motivations stem from environmental reasons and finally, by the refuser motivated by animal welfare reasons

(*Hypothesis 2*). This is expected to be the case because as evident in the literature described above, the most morally motivated rebellion should also induce the most perceived threat in individuals, which is then compensated for by resenting that person. Additionally, refusing to consume animal products for environmental reasons also implies that this person is acting in favour of the whole society, which is expected to make them more likable.

Methods

Participants and design

293 participants took part in an experiment on “personality and food preferences”, in which they were told to evaluate a person’s personality based on their food preferences.

Vegetarians were excluded from the data, which led to a total of 245 participants. The participants’ mean age was 31 years old ($SD = 9.98$), whilst 60% were male and 40% were female. They were randomly assigned to one of four conditions, two of which were moral refuser conditions, one non-moral refuser condition and a control condition.

Procedure

The procedure described below is modelled after the one implemented by Cramwinckel et al. (2013) with a few adaptations in order to answer the research question of the current paper. Specifically, the questionnaires administered within the taste test, the self-esteem scale and the likability scale were drawn from the beforementioned study.

Additionally, the procedure was altered in such a way that the study could be administered online.

Firstly, participants were instructed to answer demographic questions about their age, gender and education. Secondly, in order to not raise any suspicion about the purpose of the study, the participants were then asked about their vegetable consumption. Specifically, they were asked how many times a week they ate vegetables, how much they liked it and what their favourite vegetable-based dish was. Thirdly, the participants were asked the same questions about meat, which was supposed to remind the participants of their meat

consumption. Subsequently, the participants were instructed to imagine tasting a slice of cucumber as vividly as possible. Then, they were asked to answer a range of questions giving insights into their experience (“How do you imagine it would taste?”, “What sensation do you imagine to come to mind?”, “What kind of thoughts do you imagine to appear?”, “How do you imagine you feel?”). After they completed the questionnaire, they were asked to imagine tasting a slice of sausage. Then, they were once more asked to complete the questionnaire about their tasting experience, which consisted of the same questions stated above.

Afterwards, the participants were asked to carefully read the answers on the taste test that were allegedly written by the last person that participated before them. The answers for the cucumber were written as neutral as possible, including concepts such as “freshness”, “water”, and “health”. When asking to read the answers on the sausage, manipulations were introduced.

In the first moral refuser condition, the responses indicate that he/she refused to imagine eating the piece of sausage because he/she thought it is unethical to eat meat because of animal welfare reasons. In the second moral refuser condition, the responses indicate that he/she refused to imagine eating the sausage because he/she thought it was unethical to eat meat because it is bad for the environment. In the non-moral refuser condition, the responses indicate that he/she refused to imagine eating the sausage because he/she thought it would have bad effects on his/her personal health. Lastly, in the control condition, the answers indicate that he/she refused to imagine eating the piece of sausage because of a strong dislike for the taste of meat.

After reading through the alleged answers from the other participant, the participants were asked to rate the refuser’s likability using a 13-item questionnaire, based on Monin et al. (2008). This questionnaire asked to what extent they thought the refuser as smart, kind, warm, pleasant, generous, reasonable, stupid (reverse coded), cold (reverse coded), dishonest (reverse coded), stingy (reverse coded) and obnoxious (reverse coded). The participants were

also asked to which extent they thought the refuser was moral in order to be able to check whether the manipulations worked as intended. Additionally, they were asked to indicate to which extent they thought it would be pleasant to work with the other person. All of the questions above could be answered on 7-point Likert scales with 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*completely*) as endpoints (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$).

In order to gain insights into whether and how the confrontation with the moral refuser had a significant effect on the participants' self-esteem, a 14-item questionnaire was administered, which was answered on a 7-point Likert scale with 1 (not at all) to 7 (completely) as endpoints (Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$). After the participants completed both questionnaires, he/she was informed about the real purpose of the study and about the fact that they could refer to the researcher about potential questions and concerns anytime. Then, the participants were thanked for their participation.

Results

Perceived morality of the refuser

A Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted to check for normality and results showed that the data was not normally distributed, $W(245) = 0.91, p < .01$. Thus, the normality assumption of ANOVA was violated. In order to check how much the introduced refuser was perceived to be morally motivated by the participants, a Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted. A marginally significant difference between the groups was found $H(3) = 6.50, p = .09$. Mann-Whitney U tests were run to determine if there were differences in the perceived morality of the refuser as reported by the participants in the different conditions. Distributions of perceived morality of the refuser were similar, as assessed by visual inspection. Median perceived morality score was statistically significantly higher in the animal welfare condition (6.00) than in the control condition (5.00), $U = 1468, z = -2.45, p = .01$. Comparisons between all other conditions did not yield significant results, $U > 1575.5, z > -1.63, p > .10$.

Table 1

Means, standard deviations and medians for perceived morality of the refuser per condition.

	Mean	SD	Median
Animal welfare condition	5.34	1.24	6.00
Environment condition	5.1	1.39	5.00
Personal health condition	4.93	1.47	5.00
Control condition	4.70	1.45	5.00

Likability of the refuser

A Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted to check for normality and results showed that the data was not normally distributed, $W(245) = 0.98, p < .01$. Thus, the normality assumption of ANOVA was violated. A Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to check for differences in the likability of the refuser. There was a marginally significant difference between groups $H(3) = 7.78, p = .051$. Mann-Whitney U tests were run to determine if there were differences in the likability of the refuser as reported by the participants in the different conditions.

Distributions of likability of the refuser for the control condition and animal welfare condition were similar, as assessed by visual inspection. Participants liked the refuser significantly more when the person refused for animal welfare reasons (5.13) than for non-morally motivated reasons in the control condition (4.73), $U = 1520, z = -2.13, p = .03$. Distributions of likability of the refuser for the animal welfare condition and environment welfare condition were similar, as assessed by visual inspection. Participants liked the refuser significantly more when the person refused for animal welfare reasons (5.13) than for environmental reasons (4.54), $U = 1338.5, z = -2.42, p = .02$. Lastly, distributions of likability of the refuser for the

animal welfare condition and personal health condition were similar, as assessed by visual inspection. Participants liked the refuser significantly more when the person refused for animal welfare reasons (5.13) than for personal health reasons (4.62), $U = 1427.5$, $z = -2.22$, $p = .03$. Comparisons between all other conditions did not yield significant results, $U > 1777.5$, $z > -0.41$, $p > .68$.

Table 2

Means, standard deviations and medians for likability of the refuser per condition.

	Mean	SD	Median
Animal welfare condition	5.08	0.76	5.15
Environment condition	4.68	0.91	4.54
Personal health condition	4.69	1.01	4.62
Control condition	4.74	0.9	4.73

Self-esteem

A Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted to check for normality and results showed that the data was not normally distributed, $W(245) = 0.98$, $p < .01$. Thus, the normality assumption of ANOVA was violated. There was no statistically significant difference between groups as determined by Kruskal-Wallis test $H(3) = 4.81$, $p = .19$ concerning self-esteem. This means that the different manipulations did not have a statistically significant effect in the participants' self-esteem.

Table 3

Means, standard deviations and medians for self-esteem per condition.

	Mean	SD	Median
Animal welfare condition	4.90	0.90	5.00
Environment condition	4.60	1.02	4.29
Personal health condition	4.64	1.09	4.71
Control condition	4.59	1.00	4.39

Discussion

This quantitative study aimed at assessing whether differences in how morally motivated reasons to adopt a vegan diet are linked to the effects on another person's self-concept. The three main findings will be discussed in the following.

Firstly, it was found that being confronted with refusers differing in their morality did not have an effect on the perceivers' self-esteem. Given the fact that this study included both moral and non-moral refusers, it was expected that those confronted with the non-moral refuser will show the least affected self-esteem, followed by those confronted with the moral refuser motivated by animal welfare reasons, and finally those confronted with the refuser motivated by environmental reasons (*Hypothesis 1*). This hypothesis is not confirmed.

Secondly, it was found that the refuser motivated by animal welfare reasons was perceived as more likable than the non-moral refuser motivated by personal health reasons. Interestingly, it was further found that moral refusers motivated by animal welfare reasons were perceived as more likable than the moral refusers motivated by environmental reasons. Given the fact that refusing to eat meat for animal welfare reasons seems more morally

motivated than doing so out of environmental or personal health reasons, it was expected that refusers motivated by animal welfare reasons would be perceived as less likable more than those motivated by environmental and personal health reasons (*Hypothesis 2*). Thus, the second hypothesis is not confirmed either.

Prior research suggests that being confronted with a moral refuser elicits a threat to one's self-concept, which is caused by the moral refuser implicitly evaluating the participant and their morality negatively (Cramwinckel et al., 2013). The findings of the current research are contrary to past findings, since this study showed that a confrontation did not have an effect on the participants' self-esteem. Additionally, prior research has been consistent in finding that being confronted with a moral refuser poses a threat to the perceiver's self-concept, which is then compensated by resenting the refuser (Monin, Sawyer & Marquez, 2008). Therefore, since refusing to consume meat for environmental and personal health reasons is less morally motivated than doing so for animal welfare reasons, it was expected that the latter moral refuser would be disliked more than the former. The current research though, yielded contrary results in the sense that the most morally motivated refuser was disliked the least.

What might have contributed to the findings of the current study is the fact that participants did not engage in any problematic behaviour, which was deemed immoral by the moral refusers, directly. Due to the online nature of the study, participants were asked to only imagine eating a slice of sausage, which might have not been a strong enough experience. Therefore, when encountering the moral refuser, the participants' self-concept might have not been affected since they simply did not feel like they did something, which the refuser implicitly presents as immoral. Additionally, this explanation might also account for the fact that the moral refusers were perceived as more likable than those that were less morally motivated. Research findings show that when participants did not engage in the problematic task themselves, they judged the refuser as virtuous (Monin, Sawyer & Marquez, 2008).

Considering that refusing to eat meat for animal welfare reasons is more morally motivated than doing so for environmental reasons, the participants might therefore have judged the refuser as more virtuous, and thus, more likable than the less morally motivated refuser.

A distinct strength of the current research is the fact that it is one of the first to explore the effect of different reasons to abstain from meat consumption, which differ in their degree of morality, on perceiver's self-concept. Therefore, it is strongly recommended to replicate the study offline with participants engaging in an actual taste test and thus, engaging in meat consumption prior to the confrontation with the moral refuser.

To conclude, it became apparent through this study that the most morally motivated refusers, those motivated by animal welfare, were perceived to be most likable compared to the less morally and non-morally motivated and refusers. This is believed to result from the fact that the participants did not engage in the problematic behaviour deemed immoral by the refuser, which thus, did not lead to a threat to their self-concept. Consequently, they did not have to compensate for that threat by disliking the refuser. Future research is required to examine the effect of reasons to adopt a vegan diet, which differ in their morality, on perceivers' self-concept through administering an offline experiment.

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