

Adapting to Veganism in a Meat-Obsessed Country: Experiences, Identity Negotiation, and Strategies Against Misconceptions

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Abstract

In Brunei, a country where the population heavily favors cuisines centered around chicken, beef, lamb, and duck, there is a consistently high demand for meat. However, not everyone prefers meat, particularly those who embrace specific ethical, spiritual, health, and cultural values. Being a vegan in Brunei, where meat consumption is the norm, presents unique challenges. This study examines how individuals in Brunei who have converted to a plant-based diet adapt, manage their vegan identity, and confront problems and misunderstandings in their daily lives. Qualitative interviews were conducted with nine selected participants, alongside a vegan forum sponsored by Green Brunei on February 27, 2022. The results show that the transition to veganism was driven by a desire to protect the land and animals, learn about the benefits of plant-based diets, and align their dietary choices with their personal identities. The study reveals the social histories and experiences that prompted the participants to become vegans, their resistance strategies against popular misconceptions about veganism, and how they negotiate their vegan identity. Despite prevalent beliefs and societal norms, the respondents demonstrated resilience. In a meat-obsessed nation, they often felt isolated. Developing strategies to navigate their daily lives and maintain their motivation despite loneliness strengthened their commitment to veganism.

Introduction

Being a vegan requires individuals to demonstrate a specific social distancing in order to sustain his/her identity. Steele (2013) found that particular civilizations' norms are restrictive to vegans, which was due to many social and cultural impediments. In a country in which meat has been a popular food intake for the general population, vegans often experience multiple challenges to find plant-based food sources, vegan/vegan menu-serving restaurants, and a community (Calarco, 2014); Fiestas-Flores, & Pyhälä, 2018; Hirschler, 2011). To the most extent, both vegans must go against society's conventions on meat consumption in their routines (Andreatta, 2015); Cole & Morgan, 2011). However, they only truly embraced their vegan ideology as they have a robust set of convictions about not eating meat products (Greenebaum, 2018; Oliver, 2021). To our knowledge, further investigation into the way vegans survive in meat-obsessed countries is sketchily understood.

Therefore, the study explores the subjectivities of vegans living in Brunei, questioning how they became herbivores and adapted to a meat-obsessed country, how they remained resilient in their journey, and the challenges they faced. To elucidate vegan resilience, previous studies on vegan identity formation are presented.

The Process of Becoming Veganism

Veganism may not allow for dairy products. However, Phillips (2005) argued that becoming a vegan is a huge struggle. In addition, the restriction is not only applicable to eating but may also include restricting oneself from wearing clothes or cosmetics made of animal furs (Griffin, 2017). However, this study focuses more on the practice of abstaining from meat and dairy products in everyday consumption. Albeit the differences in vegan diets, the majority of studies are found on how their consumption is meant for reducing animal cruelty and the environmental impact stemming from the consumption of meat (Gaard, 2002; Hoek et al., 2004). This section examines the numerous studies that have highlighted the decisions of individuals in transitioning to vegan lifestyles (Bertella, 2020; Buttny & Kinefuchi, 2020; Costa et al., 2019; Fox & Ward, 2008; Greenebaum, 2012; Gruen & Jones, 2015; Hirschler, 2011; Janssen et al., 2016; MacNair, 2001; McDonald, 2000; McPherson, 2015; North et al., 2021; Steele, 2013). Some had a vegan upbringing from when they were infants. However, this study focuses more on the decisive paths of those who are vegan. The family contributes to the process of becoming vegan or vegan and those born into either type of family have had their worldviews shaped since they were babies, often influenced by their parents who raised them or a religion that forbids meat consumption (Fischer, 2016). Therefore, this study emphasizes how one developed from being an 'omnivore' to a 'herbivore'.

According to Fox and Ward (2008), their study on vegans reveals that the primary concerns of vegans are the environment, animal welfare (ethical veganism), and health. Furthermore, their informants appear to follow a trajectory based on their initial reasons for becoming vegans. Those who become vegan for ethical reasons, for example, often experience a drastic change in their diet. In contrast, those who become vegan for health reasons tend to gradually develop into an entirely vegan diet (Fox & Ward, 2008). This demonstrates character differences that influence one's diet. Ethical vegans usually based their whole reasonings around what Fox and Ward (2008) quoted as a "philosophical, ideological or spiritual framework" (p. 425). This means that due to their worldview, it dramatically speeds up their path to transition in contrast to vegans with other motives (Gruen & Jones, 2015). On the other hand, vegans whose main motives were to be healthier are often experiential, and thus in their vegan journey, they may gradually be influenced by ethical and environmental concerns too (Janssen et al., 2016). As a result, it can be argued that, while there are initial differences in motives, it does not imply that there are no similarities, as there is frequently the gradual adaptation of other motives in their lives (Fox & Ward, 2008). These primary motivations (environment, animal welfare and health) are also mainly responsible for the initial process of becoming (North et al., 2021).

In line with Fox and Ward's (2008) research on vegans, Steele (2013) highlights that there is a process of transitioning, illuminating on how one's behavior reflects their worldview, seeking to reflect their beliefs with their actions. This implies how one's

herbivorous identity is influenced by how one sees the world and what one believes in (Greenebaum, 2012). It shed light on value-driven behavior by deviating from the primary motivations instead of inquiring about the daily lives of vegans. This is because one's daily life is frequently clouded by societal norms that may oppress or liberate one's true self (Buttny & Kinefuchi, 2020). McDonald's (2000) research is an influential study in the study of veganism. Her study was reviewed by MacNair (2001) and Hirschler (2011), whose findings support McDonald's (2000). In the path to veganism, McDonald (2000) studied the psychological process of how one becomes vegan. She discovered that most vegans relied on logical and rational thinking to learn about veganism before adopting the lifestyle. In contrast, others relied on a more emotional mindset, usually triggered by past traumas and triggers (a catalytic experience). The most important aspect to note would be people's willingness to learn about veganism, for example, animal cruelty, even if they were initially hesitant to become vegan (Larrson et al., 2003). McDonald's (2000) investigation illuminates how there are vegans who rely on logic and those who rely on emotions, adding better comprehension to the study of veganism as we can now see how it is not only the primary motives such as health, ethics, and environmental concerns that are important, but also delving deeper into how individuals think or feel. Feelings are also quite crucial as they can be a powerful drive towards the decision of becoming vegan (Costa et al., 2019). This is because some know about the impacts of animal consumption but remain omnivores. So, we can see how despite the existence of rationality and logic in one's mind, if one refuses to learn and let their emotions be affected, it will not lead to the development of a vegan identity (McDonald, 2000).

In further examination, MacNair (2001) added that persuading oneself to look at the positive aspects of veganism before transitioning is significant to the path of becoming vegan, which was what McDonald (2000) wrote about; the willingness to learn. Furthermore, Hirschler (2011) discovered that, even though most of his participants grew up in omnivorous households, a strong catalytic experience would frequently orient the participants towards veganism. Both MacNair's (2001) and Hirschler's (2011) findings reinforced McDonald's (2000) study, which led to it being referred to as a framework in the studies of veganism.

The majority of the studies found that a vegan morality is central in navigating them towards veganism, which means that their daily decisions are formed based on their morals, thus aligning their actions with what they believe in, which in this context is to be vegans (Steele, 2013). Furthermore, McPherson (2015) concluded in her article that individuals would act in a way that reflects their values in repetitions (ethics, environment, and health), bridging the gap between their values and actions. Thus, the process of becoming revolves around the personality of an individual and, most importantly, their willingness to learn and adopt a vegan lifestyle (McDonald, 2000). Motives such as environmental, health or ethical concerns are also significant as they form the foundation of one's motivation and maintenance to remain resilient in their vegan or vegan journey, which is examined in the following section.

Sustaining The Vegan Way of Life

This section scrutinizes how vegans (including those who were born into the herbivorous family) are able to maintain their agenda while also facing challenges

and being stereotyped. Consuming meat is also widely acceptable; hence, those who choose not to put meat on their plate are often considered strange (Twine, 2017). Laakso et al. (2021) also stated that excluding meat and/or dairy products is seen as challenging the norms, especially when done repeatedly. Hence, society plays a significant part in affecting vegans. However, it is important to reiterate that society is also one of the bigger roles in determining one's decision to be vegan as stated by Bertella (2020), as society posed a challenge but also enacted a vegan identity.

Institutional resistance found in medical facilities is an example of how society posed a threat to veganism. In his study of veganism in Estonia, Aavik (2021) discovered that the vegan body is viewed and constructed as deviant, not because of health concerns but because it is not socially and politically acceptable. Aavik (2021) also highlighted the view of the vegan body as deviant, which stemmed from the unease and unfamiliarity with veganism, resulting in the challenges faced by vegans not only among other people but also in institutions and public places. Following that, Waters (2020) observed that, while social networks are important in maintaining a vegan identity, they can also hinder and repress it. Most vegans find it easier to interact with their non-vegan friends than with their non-vegan family, people who are blood relatives to them (McDonald, 2000). This is consistent with Twine's (2017) findings that vegans are considered as killjoys by non-vegan family members. Participants in Hirschler's (2011) interviews also argued that it was unfair that vegans were forced to defend their dietary choices, whereas omnivores were never expected to explain why they eat meat. As a result, interacting with others who are more hostile, and intolerant may erode the resolve of some vegans (Markowski & Roxburgh, 2019).

Various studies complement other findings on the challenges vegans face, especially on the influence of family and peers. Due to the challenges, vegans are forced to negotiate their identities, usually concealing the fact that they are vegans or vegans to avoid potential confrontations and heated inquiries from their family and peers (Hirschler, 2011; McDonald, 2000). According to Twine (2017), the role and presence of material objects in a vegan life are noteworthy because practicing veganism means that one needs the materials such as recipe books, guides, and plant-based ingredients. The use of the materials, Twine (2017) stated, has enabled one to experiment and create innovative food. What this implies is how the materials promote pleasure and enjoyment by creating new food that gives vegans a sense of happiness and sustains their dietary choices (Cherry, 2015).

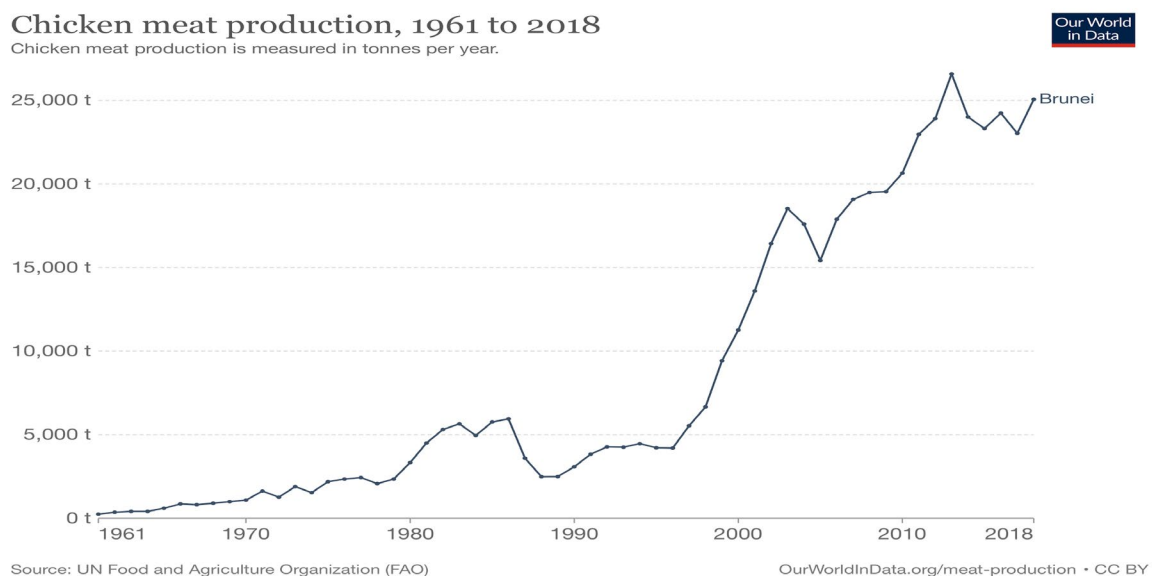
Meanwhile, Bertella (2020) found that the happiness of vegans derived from a sense of integrity and enjoyment of doing the right thing. During her research, she uncovered that the majority of her interviewees said that becoming vegan or vegan is equivalent to reclaiming their authentic identity, which had previously been repressed by their society's norms. This realization motivates them to keep going and such norms are evident in the articles portraying them in a negative light in which only those written by the vegans were positive, Bertella (2020) noted. It can be argued that this sense of integrity is one of the main motivators in sustaining a vegan or vegan lifestyle. In addition, the articles also shed light on how vegans often gather to support each other whether they are near or in front of the computer screen. It also conveys a sense of community, which according to Atkinson (2012), is important in assisting them in maintaining their way of life. This is consistent with Hirschler's

(2011) findings of how participants began to gravitate toward other vegans. Hence, we can see that maintaining this vegan identity also depends on having a community they can rely on for emotional support. In order to maintain their lifestyle, many studies highlight the importance of support systems (Atkinson, 2012; Hirschler, 2011). It is to be noted, however, that most studies are based in the western part of the world, such as in the United Kingdom, where there are more vegan organizations, vegan shops, and so on, unlike in Brunei (Bryant, 2019; Grassian, 2020; Wolfer, 2017). Therefore, the present study aims to understand how vegans in Brunei live and maintain their lifestyles where there are no prominent or influential vegan organizations. Overall, their paths of transition, maintenance, and challenges all contributed to how vegans adapt every day, which relates to our research questions.

Setting the Scene

Bruneians frequently consume meat in their daily lives, the practice of which is greatly internalized among the locals. To demonstrate further, Figures 1 and 2 below show chicken, beef and egg production in Brunei until 2018 (Our World in Data, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c).

Figure 1. Chicken meat production, 1961 to 2018.



As shown in Figures 1 and 2, it is apparent that chicken and egg production in Brunei had increased over the years, with little fluctuation. On the other hand, beef production had significantly subsided, according to Figure 3. Beef supplies in particular, drastically slowed down due to Covid-19 which resulted in various travel bans, preventing halal inspectors from guaranteeing that the imported beef was prepared with the required customs and practices; thus posing a problem for Brunei, an Islamic country, that also primarily relies on beef imports (Economist Intelligence, 2021). Nevertheless, as Economist Intelligence (2021) stated, there were measures implemented to avoid price inflation for buffalo and cattle meat, so it remains

affordable for citizens to buy and include meat on their plates. Figure 3 shows the summary of Brunei’s livestock industry and its development by the end of 2020 (Ministry of Primary Resources and Tourism, 2020).

Figure 2. Egg production, 1961 to 2018.



Figure 3. Beef production, 1961 to 2018

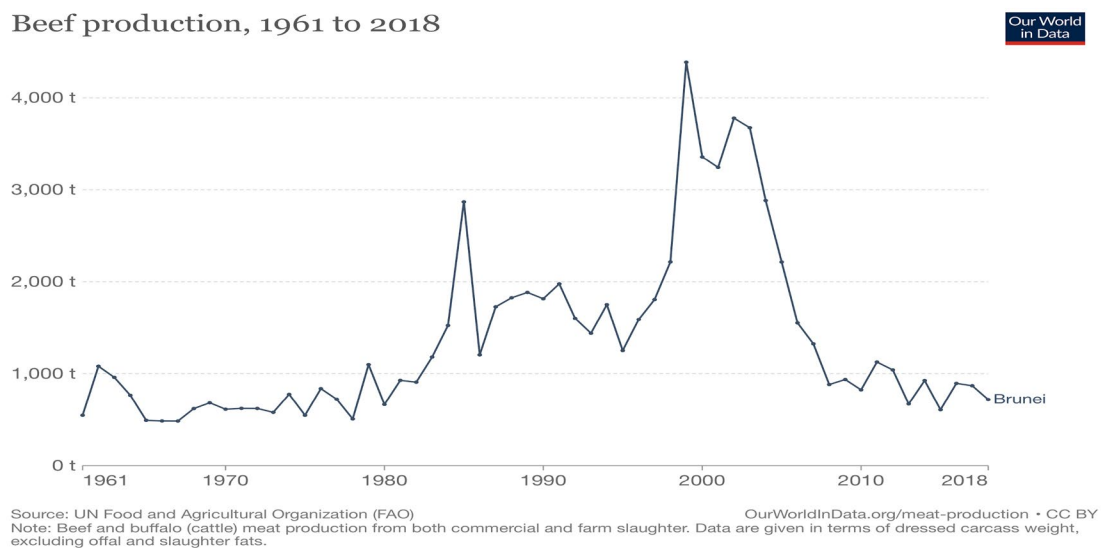


Figure 4 presents evidence of how beef production for buffalo and cattle increased drastically by the end of 2020, compared to Figure 3, which shows Brunei’s dependence on beef imports. This highlights Brunei’s attempt to impose measures to be more independent after the difficulties regarding beef imports due to the Covid-19 travel bans (Economist Intelligence, 2021). This is evident when the livestock industry in Brunei contributed B\$267.17 to the Agriculture and Agrifood gross output, which had increased by 9.94% in value by the end of 2020, resulting from the

measures implemented after the shortages of livestock (Ministry of Primary Resources and Tourism, 2020). As demands for meat skyrocketed, the supplies also followed suit. The aftermath of the livestock shortages also illustrates the citizens' reliance on and fondness towards meat.

Figure 4. Summary of the livestock industry development 2020.

AGRICULTURE COMMODITY	LOCAL		IMPORT		TOTAL	SELF-SUFFICIENCY
	Quantity	Retail Value (\$mil)	Quantity	CIF Value (\$mil)	Quantity	%
Broilers (mt)	26,364.82	114.00	287.98	0.98	26,652.80	98.92%
Eggs (mil eggs)	171.93	26.89	0.00	0.00	171.93	100.00%
Beef – Buffalo & Cattle (mt)	2,148.75	42.16	1,326.02	7.72	3,474.77	61.84%
Goat & Sheep Meat (mt)	76.25	1.557	305.78	2.81	382.02	19.96%
Day Old Chicks (mil heads)	17.52	21.03	1.91	1.56	19.44	90.16%
Fertilized Eggs (mil egg)	10.87	8.70	8.59	4.97	19.46	55.86%
Miscellaneous Livestock (mt)	519.14	2.96	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Livestock Feed (mt)	63,368.20	49.88	95,210.50	47.01	158,578.70	39.96%
TOTAL		267.17		65.05		

Source: Ministry of Primary Resources and Tourism, 2020.

In Brunei where most of the population enjoys consuming meat, there are those, however, who may be less affected by the meat shortages; the vegans. Their diet, which abstains from meat, is different and, for some people, can be considered as strange. Nevertheless, their diet is not only concerning the food they eat on their plates but also their overall quality of life (Elorinne et al., 2016). Cook (2013) theorized that becoming vegan or vegan makes them the minority, living among the meat-eaters. This is applicable in the context of Brunei, a country that celebrates Eid al-Adha annually when Muslims sacrifice their livestock. What it also means to be a part of the minorities is that they are constantly questioned with public misconceptions which affect how others see them and how they feel about themselves. It changed how their families and friends act around them, primarily if they were raised in an omnivorous family (Edwards, 2013).

Methods

A qualitative method of data collection was implemented. We involved 9 participants who were willing to participate in a one-on-one semi-structured interview done virtually using Google Meet. The semi-structured quality of the interview enabled us to have structured sets of questions, but also the openness and flexibility to ask for more explanations depending on the answers the interviewees stated (if it can give more in-depth data). Prior to the final product, a pilot interview with one participant was conducted to test the digestibility of the questions and to update it accordingly. Snowball sampling was used to find participants, and they had to be completely

willing to be interviewed, so we asked for their permission prior to the interviews. Additionally, the authors attended a 2-hour Vegan Forum titled “Veganism in Brunei: Life as a Vegan” hosted by Green Brunei on 27 February 2022, where three vegans, Adriana, Sidd and Zubaidah, shared their experiences, granting us additional insights. Lastly, the informants' age ranged exclusively from 20 to 30, and only 3 out of 9 were males. All of them also considered themselves to come from a middle-class background. Hence, the data may be lacking and is limited to the narratives of only 9 individuals. On the other hand, the purpose of this study is not to find representativity for all the vegans and vegans in Brunei. Therefore, these research findings are only the condensed form of the stories of the different individuals we interviewed who may show similarities and differences with others. As shown in Table 1, all of the interviewees claimed to come from a middle-class background, which posed the question of whether or not the vegan and vegan diet is expensive and exclusively a middle-class phenomenon.

Table 1.

Table of respondents and description of respondents

Pseudonym & Date of Interview	Age	Sex	Race	Religion	Economic Background	Employment
Ella <i>26 September 2021</i>	26	Female	Chinese	Buddhist	Middle-class	Entrepreneur
Korra <i>10 October 2021</i>	26	Female	Malay-Filipino	Muslim	Middle-class	Entrepreneur
Aluma <i>11 October 2021</i>	21	Female	British	No Religion	Middle-class	Entrepreneur
Zamo <i>13 October 2021</i>	21	Male	Indian	No Religion	Middle-class	Student and Activist
Pooh <i>15 October 2021</i>	24	Female	Chinese	Buddhist	Middle-class	Student
Jasmine <i>16 October 2021</i>	22	Female	Malay	Muslim	Middle-class	Student
Eddie <i>16 October 2021</i>	26	Male	Chinese	Buddhist	Middle-class	Student

Soya <i>18 October 2021</i>	26	Female	Malay	Muslim	Middle-class	Entrepreneur
Vera <i>25 October 2021</i>	22	Male	Malay	Muslim	Middle-class	Influencer
Adriana <i>27 February 2022</i>	N/A	Female	Malay	Muslim	N/A	Student
Sidd <i>27 February 2022</i>	N/A	Male	Indian	N/A	N/A	Student and Activist
Zubaidah <i>27 February 2022</i>	N/A	Female	Malay	Muslim	N/A	Entrepreneur, Student and Activist

Source: The Authors

The age range of our respondents is also limited to individuals aged 21 to 26 years old, henceforth further research investigating the differences between ages may be warranted in the future, as well as the differences between genders, due to the majority of the respondents being females, compared to the only three males being interviewed.

Findings

Debunking Popular Misconceptions

From the interviews, the authors found several popular misconceptions about being a vegan in Brunei, which this section talks about. These misconceptions ranged from being “discriminatory” to just “mild annoyance” among the informants. It is also one of the most significant challenges for them, as the myths often delude the meat-eaters into thinking that vegans and vegans are strange, which will subconsciously affect their attitudes and behaviors towards them. As stated in the literature reviews, the respondents suggest that abstaining from meat is considered uncommon because eating meat is rooted in Bruneian culture. Bell and Neill (2014) claimed that because of the tendency to include meat in one's diet, it resulted in adherence to the meat-eating norms in society while also expressing a collective identity, one that perpetuates the acceptance of meat consumption. Once this broad identity which stemmed from the meat-eating norm was rejected, it resulted in the stigmatization and hostility towards vegans or vegans among the meat-eaters. Thus, it is understandable that the majority of the interviewees claimed that they are more than happy to be interviewed, hoping that this thesis would help to lessen the misunderstandings and stereotypes against their communities that, according to

Markowski and Roxburgh (2019), were reproduced from the accusations vegans faced for seemingly interfering with the meat-eating norms of most societies.

Despite the hostility from some meat-eaters, the respondents' reactions towards people who are unfamiliar or judgemental towards them is an understanding of why people are hostile towards them, which they suggest is the lack of knowledge or the desire to learn about veganism or veganism. However, few interviewees stated that if people are hostile to them, they will repay them with equal hostility, showing that although they are among the minorities in Brunei, they will not agree to be pushed around, denying the image that vegans are often "weak and helpless." This view towards vegans as weak can again be traced back to the common practice of involving meat in our diet, as well as meat being an object that perpetuates hegemonic masculinity, always associated with men and power, according to Johnson (2011), who also claimed that vegan food is frequently stereotyped as the weaker food. In addition, Calvert (2014) explained that meat had become so associated with the idea of masculinity, especially in a patriarchal society, normalizing meat consumption as gendered and thus accepting the gender norms in which men are stereotyped as naturally aggressive. This view also enforced the idea that abstinence from meat equates to being weak. This view is rejected by the interviewees, who disagree with the idea that in order to have proper nourishment, one has to eat meat. This is also one of the popular misconceptions that the interviewees laughed about. Some also claimed that going vegan has helped improve their health instead of deteriorating it.

Before starting the interviews, the authors asked the interviewees about their backgrounds. Interestingly, all nine interviewees identified themselves as coming from a middle-class background. This raised the question of whether veganism in Brunei is just a middle-class phenomenon. Indeed, for Pirani and Fegitz (2019), veganism is raced, classed and gendered. It is apparent that the common image of veganism is something mostly practiced by white, middle-class women and not by black, working-class women, because the latter is usually stereotyped as mostly eating unhealthy and greasy food. This may explain the formulation of the typical assumptions that the expenditures of vegans are less affordable compared to buying meat, as it is associated with white people and white supremacy, idolizing white people as superior to others. This can affect not only one's worldview, but this mindset transmits itself and is shared with other people via interactions, which the social constructionist will say, affects the way society works (Burr, 1955). However, from our findings, this myth can be debunked. Even in Brunei, where most people would agree does not have many stores that specifically cater to vegan lifestyles, all of our interviewees disagreed that their diet is expensive and for the privileged only. They stated that they do not experience inconveniences when going grocery shopping and have no problem with searching for ingredients. Their diet, contrary to popular belief, is not expensive but relatively affordable according to them. Their plates often consist of vegetables such as potatoes, chickpeas, tofu, and so on, which are cheap and can be found in the local supermarkets quite easily. Therefore, the popular myth that vegans' diets are "expensive" does not reflect itself whenever they go grocery shopping. However, occasionally, some of the interviewees would like to enjoy specialized vegan ingredients such as the non-beef and non-chicken mocked meats which are less accessible and less affordable.

Again, the widespread belief that vegans eat this expensive mock meat every day is incorrect, as all the interviewees stated that they only eat specialized vegan products occasionally. One of the speakers in the vegan forum, Sidd, stated that being vegan has been “westernized” because according to him, people are often brainwashed into thinking that to be vegan, one must eat the expensive mock meat originating from the West when in reality, vegans can just buy affordable ingredients, not necessarily following the westernized vegan diet (Sidd, speaker at vegan forum, 27 February 2022). Again, this may be in line with the association of veganism with white people, as stated previously. Greenebaum (2016), however, in her analysis of the term “vegan privilege”, argued that social characteristics such as being white and wealthy are not fixed vegan traits. Moreover, by viewing veganism as the aforementioned characteristics, it is continuing the stereotypes of veganism. Therefore, Greenebaum (2016) asked for the rejection of these supposed universal vegan characteristics in order to not exclude herbivores that are not white and wealthy.

Another misconception about the vegan diet is the view that it is dull. People often picture the image of vegans eating salads with no variety of dishes. However, contrary to popular belief, our findings suggest that most of the interviewees are capable of “veganized” dishes and formulating new recipes, such as vegan doughnuts, vegan brownies, vegan fried chicken, and so on. The retaining of information about how to veganize dishes is also considered to be effective in assisting omnivores when first transitioning to a plant-based diet, leading to the maintenance of vegan lifestyles (Asano & Biermann, 2019). Four of the interviewees had also started vegan businesses, which sparked the interests of even non-vegans, they claimed. This is because the dishes they cook are deemed interesting, attracting non-vegans to try vegan food. During the vegan forum, Adriana also touched on how people view all vegan food as healthy when in fact, some vegan dishes, such as vegan doughnuts and French fries are unhealthy (Adriana, speaker at vegan forum, 27 February 2022).

The findings also contradict some of the literature reviews mentioned above. For instance, Twine’s (2017) studies suggest that his informants were mainly uncomfortable in their own homes, being considered the killjoys in the kitchen. However, the findings from this study opposed his findings. Interestingly, most of the interviewees claimed that they feel safe at home and are pretty comfortable even when faced with rejection from their family members. Only Jasmine said that she would rather live independently so her family would not sabotage her by tricking her into eating meat (Jasmine, female, student, interview, 16 October 2021). Aside from that, none of the interviewees has many fellow vegans as friends or support systems. Contrary to the majority of the findings in the literature reviews, many of the interviewees only have three vegan friends at most, thus making it challenging to find participants for this research using the snowball method. This is reinforced by Adriana, Sidd and Zubaidah, who stated that they were alone when they first became vegan. They also stated that finding other vegans was extremely difficult (Adriana, Sidd and Zubaidah, speakers at vegan forum, 27 February 2022). Despite having few or no fellow vegan friends at all, they remain motivated. As a result, a vegan social circle may not play a significant role in motivating them to stick to their decisions. It is a small “bonus” for them to have fellow vegans as friends rather than a necessity in their vegan journey.

Paths into Veganism and Goals of Being Vegan

This section focuses on the informants' paths to veganism, as well as their journey. The interviewees' primary concerns are their attitudes towards animals and the environment. Only a few interviewees mention health as a concern. However, as Fox and Ward (2008) discovered in their research, the reasons frequently evolved and overlapped with other factors over time. Jasmine, for example, stated that her primary motivation for becoming vegan was to lose weight, but as time passed, she became more concerned about the animals and the environment (Jasmine, female, student, interview, 16 October 2021). Her health is now a minor motivator for her, whereas her concerns about animals and the environment have become compelling reasons for her to continue her vegan journey. The assimilation of other motives into their vegan cause is also similar to the findings of Stiles (1998), which may be explained by one's perception of what they considered as a logical continuation of who they are presently.

All interviewees expressed their concerns regarding animal rights, believing that animals should be treated equally. Ella said that humans are supposed to be the more intelligent species, so we should find alternative ways to survive without harming animals, which is veganism (Ella, female, entrepreneur, interview, 26 September 2021). Concerns toward animals and the environment go hand in hand with most of the interviewees. Nevertheless, most interviewees placed the environment as a top priority, believing that when the environment continues to degrade, it will affect everyone, including the animals. They argued that the rearing and butchering of animals are one of the most significant contributors to global warming; thus, by abstaining from eating meat and dairy products, they are reducing their contribution to global warming and living a more sustainable lifestyle, which motivates them even further.

In line with McDonald's (2000) findings, we also found that among a few of the interviewees, they explained that there was a specific event that traumatized them in the past, prompting them to transition. Their feelings became a strong motivator to learn about veganism. This can be seen in Wrenn's (2013) observation that most animal rights movements rely on using emotions and moral shocks to inspire change in behaviors among people due to its effectiveness in instigating the desire to transition to veganism. Events that triggered their decisions and prompt these moral shocks include being asked to butcher a chicken, watching a gory documentary, or listening to arguments made by a Youtuber which Zamo said was life-changing and hard to swallow because "the Youtuber only talked about the truth" (Zamo, male, student and activist, interview, 13 October 2021). In contrast with those who transitioned immediately, many of the informants claimed that their transition is just a slow process of discovering themselves which involves gradually educating oneself and not all at once. These events, whether gradual or instant, resulted in their transition, as they did not feel right to continue eating meat after acquiring knowledge about animal cruelty and environmental degradation. This is also similar to Steele's (2013) findings of value-driven behavior and Bertella's (2020) statement on how those who become vegans follow a route to their true and innermost selves or performing their authentic self (Napoli and Ouschan (2020).

Besides the media that exposed information to the interviewees, some of the informants felt the need to transition because of their interaction with other people, particularly fellow vegans. It unfolded that adolescents may become inspired by their vegan friends to turn into herbivores themselves (Larsson et al., 2003). This includes the famous YouTuber that Zamo and Ella said had changed their view towards meat consumption (Zamo, male, student and activist, interview, 13 October 2021; Ella, female, entrepreneur, interview, 26 September 2021). They deemed the YouTuber as respectable and rational while not pushing their beliefs on others which inspired them, as they were used to seeing people being aggressive in their approach to convincing others to be vegans. Meanwhile, Pooh, Eddie and Korra said that they were eased into transitioning because they already have friends who are vegans; thus they were guided by those friends, making their process of transition easier (Pooh, female, student, interview, 15 October 2021; Eddie, male, student, interview, 16 October 2021; Korra, female, entrepreneur, interview, 10 October 2021). Pooh stated that since her sister was the first one to be vegan in her family, her parents were already more tolerant of her change in diet and lifestyle (Pooh, female, student, interview, 15 October 2021). Therefore, the findings suggest that there was a form of interaction, not only with different forms of socialization (such as the media) but also interaction with other people, encouraging them to shift their lifestyles to becoming vegans.

The Interaction between the Herbivores and the Omnivores

The findings suggest that it is easier for those who have the support of their families and/or friends to stay motivated. This is because of the compromises made between them and their families and friends. On the flip side, making compromises implies the settling of disputes. This can be shown when a few of the interviewees said that despite their families' "support", they still feel the need to avoid the topic of veganism. Rather than flaunting their plant-based diet at home, they prefer to have a silent agreement with their families. Thus, to what extent can it be said that their families really support and accept them. Sidd shared an intriguing experience of his in which he revealed that his parents are not both vegans and they were unhappy with his decision (Sidd, speaker at Vegan Forum, 27 February 2022). Shockingly, when he revealed to his parents that he transitioned into veganism, they were not supportive of it. He thought they would be happy. Instead, he noted that his parents' unwillingness came from them having to compromise and prepare vegan dishes, which exclude eggs and dairy products for their son (Sidd, speaker at vegan forum, 27 February 2022). They had to tolerate having different dishes on the same dinner table, thus showing that although one's family may compromise, it may not be equivalent to their complete support towards their vegan child. This is similar to the explanations by Aboelenien and Arsel (2019), that when one transitions into veganism, they are moving away from what their social circles are used to, thus they are entering a destabilization stage and instigating social tensions with their omnivorous family and friends. The next stage would be the transformation stage, they argued, which is when vegans and vegans tried to create new boundaries and enforce their recent identity and, lastly, rethink their relationships with their social circle, which may end or continue (Aboelenien & Arsel, 2019). For those with no support from their family, it was harder for them to stay motivated. Jasmine claimed that her family often tricked her into eating meat. Thus, she once reverted to eating meat due to the lack of support and constant attempt to sabotage her decision

(Jasmine, female, student, interview, 16 October 2021). Similar to the findings of Larsson et al. (2003), young vegans were put in a difficult position when their parents showed no support, and thus there was no guidance regarding how to cook vegan or vegan food.

Additionally, most interviewees also have friends who are supportive of them, whether the friends are vegan or non-vegan. Vera, for instance, claimed to have two vegan friends who also helped him transition into veganism (Vera, male, student and influencer, interview, 25 October 2021). It is apparent that those who have fellow vegan friends find it easier to stay motivated as they have support from friends, and they can exchange recipes and learn new knowledge from each other. Nevertheless, all the interviewees still tried to reiterate that they do not require support from others in order to motivate themselves. This aligns with the findings of Kaytez and Yasemin (2020) which show that vegan university students do not use their strained relationship with family and friends as an excuse to revert to eating meat.

The findings highlight the importance of a support system, especially when one just started transitioning into veganism. Although it is vital for most interviewees, it is significant to note that from the findings, it is not a necessity to have support from others, and they argued that they could stay resilient and motivate themselves on their own.

Adapting in an Omnivorous Society

This section shows how vegans in Brunei adapt while going through their day-to-day life. Firstly, most interviewees think that going to family gatherings is better than going to formal ceremonies like weddings and so on. This is because, in family gatherings, they can cook and bring their own food more comfortably than at weddings, where it is more awkward to do so because they may be subject to scrutiny by distant relatives they are not close with. Moreover, most interviewees claimed that they just make do with whatever is served before them, usually only eating vegetables, fruits, and rice. Some even stated that they would often eat before and/or after a gathering/event. Meanwhile, hanging out with friends poses no problem if the friends are supportive, but sometimes there will be a clash of interests which makes choosing a place to eat a difficult task. In addition, Sidd reminisced about the time when he transitioned before his birthday, which annoyed his friends because they had already made plans regarding where and what to eat for his celebration (Sidd, speaker at vegan forum, 27 February 2022). This paragraph shows the tendency of vegans and vegans to set aside their needs to have smooth interactions and not pose a problem for other people, as seen in Paxman's (2021) findings. To avoid uncomfortable situations, Paxman's (2021) findings show that vegans downplay their identity and try to not come off as pushing their views on others, as well as using food to manage their identity by planning ahead or sharing vegan food. Failure to make compromises would often lead to tensions between the herbivores and the omnivores.

As mentioned above, many think that events like weddings, Chinese New Year, and Hari Raya are more difficult as they are visiting the homes of their friends or family who are not vegans or vegans, and most likely do not provide appropriate food except for rice, a staple for most Bruneians. Thus, some interviewees mentioned that they will just eat plain white rice and drink. For Ella, it is even better if the host

provides vegetables (Ella, female, entrepreneur, interview, 26 September 2021). However, Soya stated how the Bruneian way of cooking vegetables often includes tiny prawns (sapak), thus exempting them from eating it soya, female entrepreneur, interview, 18 October 2021). Therefore, it highlights how food symbolizes national identity and enforces it, as well as the meat-eating norms, as shown in how Bruneians include prawns in vegetable dishes too. This demonstrates the country's fondness towards meat, and explains again why those who abstain from it can be subject to exclusion from other meat-eaters.

Another common celebration in Brunei is the annual Hari Raya Korban, also known as Eid al-Adha. Adriana and Zubaidah shared their annoyance with this event because they are often questioned and scolded by their relatives (Adriana and Zubaidah, speakers at Vegan Forum, 27 February 2022). This is because, according to their relatives, they must eat meat because of Islam, showing how religion is used to spread the meat-eating norms in Brunei, further acting as an obstacle that vegans and vegans face in the country. However, Zubaidah, who claimed to be religious and had attended several religious talks, had also conducted a talk about veganism in Islam and argued that it is not necessary for Muslims to eat meat, and that the Prophet Muhammad also did not eat meat on a daily basis, unless it was for a celebration (Zubaidah, speaker at Vegan Forum, 27 February 2022). Interestingly, Soya mentioned how she would celebrate Hari Raya Korban by sacrificing her wealth instead of animals and thus providing an alternative way to participate in the event as a vegan or vegan (Soya, female entrepreneur, interview, 18 October 2021). In this paragraph, there is an evident attempt to justify veganism and veganism. According to the findings of Shand's (2012), his participants argued that they are often subject to inquiries regarding why they chose their vegan lifestyles, thus they frequently had to justify their diets to others. Shand (2012) argued that this may be due to vegans occupying a more inferior position on the social hierarchy, in contrast to non-vegans who hold a more powerful position and therefore, do not need to justify their omnivorous diets. Here, there is an inequality that presents itself from the vegan plates of the herbivores.

Furthermore, the reliance of the interviewees to prepare food from home speaks volumes about their ability to "veganize" dishes. A few stated that they enjoy cooking and baking vegan or vegan-friendly food. This finding, therefore, may agree with Twine's (2017) statement in which he argued that a vegan's relationship with material objects (such as vegan recipe books) could motivate and satisfy them. Additionally, Zubaidah talked about her gardening hobby, where she grew her own crops to be more environmentally friendly with no chemical pesticides (Zubaidah, speaker at Vegan Forum, 27 February 2022). What this implies are the strategies they come up with in order to have a smoother journey in this meat-loving society, which also grants them the satisfaction and joy to continue. The respondents feel the need to adapt and manage their identities around the position they're in, coming up with backup plans. Brunei has to be more receptive to non-omnivorous diets due to its dependence on home-cooked meals.

Discussion and Conclusion

Following the findings, we can see how the herbivorous identity stemmed from their need to protect the environment, animals or health. This was mainly produced from the primary and secondary forms of socialization, especially the latter. This includes the media which Omarien (2019) found to have a major role in spreading information about veganism, due to the sharing of knowledge between vegans. As Bandura (1977) stated, media is a powerful agent of socialization that allows for observational learning, in which individuals will then process the information they see from the media, affecting how they behave. Being exposed to the media also allows for long-term exposure that teaches individuals the norms, values and rules that regulate behaviors (Genner & Suss, 2017). This also highlights the role of globalization in today's world, especially on how information, as stated by Jacobs (2019), comes from other parts of the world and can transmit itself to Brunei, educating the respondents on veganism and veganism. In addition, the increasing number of devices, interactive media, and the presence of the Internet has resulted in the intensification of media usage in everyone's day-to-day lives, making it easier to transmit information globally. It significantly contributes to the development of identity for many people, particularly those who spend a lot of time being accompanied by their devices and the Internet (Genner & Suss, 2017). Thus, the internet and media socialization is significant in influencing the respondents to become vegans and vegans (Sharma, 2021). On the other hand, socialization also resulted in the continuity of meat-eating norms, as frequently mentioned in this study. According to Bourdieu (1984, as cited in Hookway, 2014), abstinence from meat does not only portray one's personal choices but also signifies where one stands in a system of cultural distinction. Moreover, Burr (1955), in her theory on social constructionism, argued that daily interactions with others led to the fabrication of knowledge, which formed a shared perception regarding how the world should work. This may explain why some people in Brunei are still suspicious towards veganism or veganism, as the idea of a plant-based diet is still considered uncanny to some. The respondents perform their identity according to the situations they are facing, similar to Goffman's (1956) idea of performativity, where he claimed that individuals would perform a specific role according to the information they obtained about the people they are interacting with.

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