

Food Fad or Future of Food?

Flexitarianism and Young Adults' Fight for Climate Autonomy

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Deprived of strong leadership, a growing number of consumers are choosing to take matters into their own hands to tackle climate change. Perhaps there is no other sector where this is more evident than that of our food system—a sector of key importance for New Zealand's economy.

Spurred on by documentaries such as *Cowspiracy*, *Game Changers* and New Zealand's own *Milked*, consumers are putting their money where their mouths are and shifting their consumption behaviours to do their part for the planet. The result? The market for meat and other animal-derived products is changing. As consumers increasingly transition to what market research describes as 'plant-forward' ways of eating, consumer taste for red and processed meat in particular is dwindling.

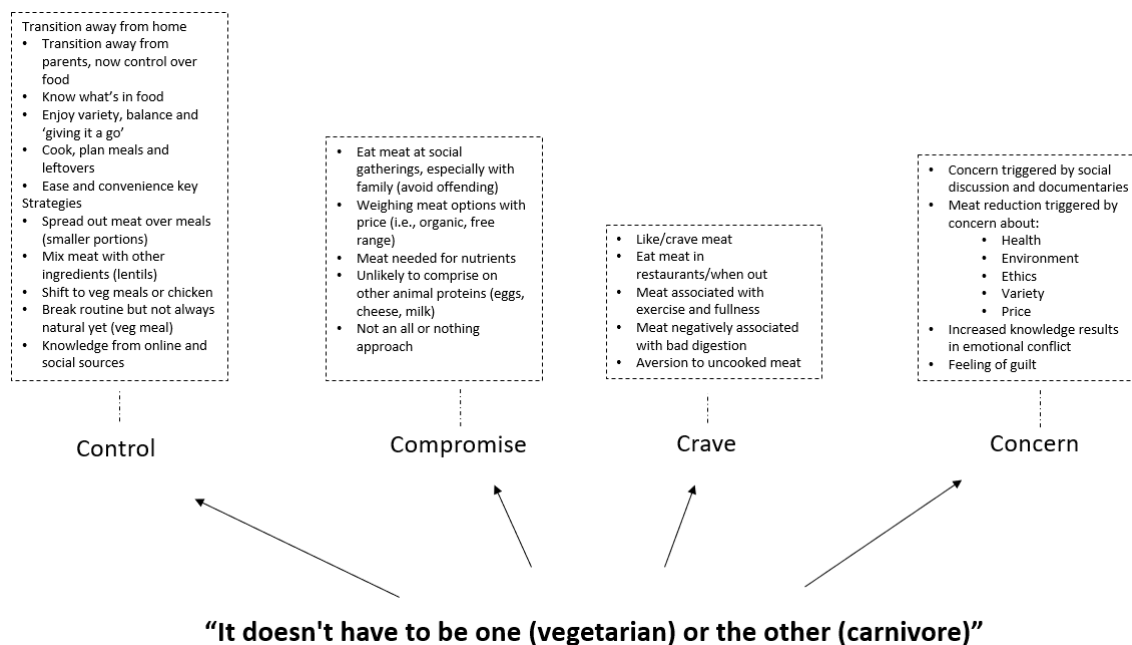
Many are opting for a reduced or 'flexitarian' diet which is seen as a plausible and aspirational diet for many. Flexitarians are flexible vegetarians who eat meat but do not do so daily or regularly. These consumers seek products that prioritise environmental impact, animal welfare, and personal health without giving up meat entirely.

One consumer group at the forefront of global shifts in food preferences and the struggle for climate autonomy is young adults. Research indicates that consumers aged 15 to 34 are the biggest age group adopting flexitarian diets and are more than willing to act for the environment and climate justice. Despite this, academic research on (non) meat consumption for the most part leaves much to be desired in understanding the experiences of young flexitarians. Why do young adults reject meat-centric diets? What is their experience transitioning towards food

lifestyles so different to that of their parents? How do they go about this dietary shift and what barriers do they face? We set out to answer exactly these questions.

Through interviews with young consumers in Aotearoa New Zealand, our research shows that young adults' experience with flexitarianism can be characterised by the Four C's: Control, Concern, Compromise, and Cravings (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Four C's of Flexitarianism for Young Adults



Young adults' transition towards flexitarianism is a means of increasing autonomy and control over their diets and climate footprints. The motivation for this shift arises from growing concern about various individual and altruistic drivers, such as personal health, rising food prices, and environmental impact. However, continued meat consumption is driven largely by the need to find a compromise between a meat-centric diet and one totally devoid of meat whilst also learning new ways of cooking and creating healthy meals. This need for compromise becomes especially important for young adults as they navigate social situations and rising food costs as well as their own nutritional needs and cravings for meat-based products.

This research raises some important considerations for marketers in our food sector. With one in three Kiwi consumers reducing their meat consumption, food service, retailing, and manufacturing businesses (including export, especially to China, the US, and Europe) need to expand their meat-free and plant-based product offerings.

New products need to satisfy consumers' taste and nutritional needs while offering an affordable alternative to meat. Our research shows that meat alternatives should be marketed as a solution for those new to meat-free eating (especially less confident cooks) or those participating in shared consumption settings where meat lovers, reducers, and avoiders come together to share kai—such as the classic Kiwi summer BBQ. Consumers are also more likely to try new products when they are dining out, so food service providers are well positioned to benefit from adding more meat-free dishes and meat alternatives to their menus.

The research also highlights the need for educating consumers about how to prepare easy and healthy meals such as curries and stir-fries that are low in, or free from, meat—particularly during young consumers' transition away from the family home as this a key transition period for diets. Importantly a 'not-all-or-nothing' strategy that softens the meat eater-vegetarian binary could be utilised by social marketing campaigns to position meat reduction as fun and easy to try. Consumer education could be delivered through in-store cooking demonstrations and product sampling of meat alternatives as well as through social marketing campaigns that encourage consumers to give meat free eating a go.