



When indifference is ambivalence: Strategic ignorance about meat consumption



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ABSTRACT

Meat consumption is associated with a tension, for example the tension between love of meat and concern about animal welfare or health. Based on the literature we propose four consumer segments that each respond differently to (potential) conflicting thoughts in the context of meat: struggling-, coping-, strategically ignoring-, and indifferent consumers. As proposed we identified the four segments (of which one segment can be divided in two separate segments) in two separate cases ($N = 1842$). This study is the first to identify a group of strategically ignorant consumers for a real life issue (i.e., conflicting experiences regarding meat consumption). The findings indicate that previously labelled indifferent consumers consists of 1) consumers who do not care and, therefore, ignore the issue and 2) consumers who do care but strategically choose to ignore the issue. We discuss the theoretical implications of strategic ignorance and the practical implications for reducing meat consumption.

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1. Introduction

Currently, the average person worldwide annually consumes an estimated 48 kg/105 lb of meat (which is 0.92 kg/2.02 lb a week). This requires more than 50 billion animals (FAO, 2013). These figures steadily increase as the world gets wealthier and consumers who acquire more wealth eat more meat (e.g., Speedy, 2003). However, consumers also increasingly associate meat with several problems: *environmental*, including associations with climate change and a loss of biodiversity (Steinfeld et al., 2006), *animal welfare*, such as consumer perceptions of a lack of space, fresh air, and light (Grandin, 2014; Te Velde, Aarts, & Van Woerkum, 2002), and *public health*, including health issues that relate to feed formulations that contain animal tissues, arsenic and antibiotics (Clonan, Wilson, Swift, Leibovici, & Holdsworth, 2015; Walker, Rhubarb-Berg, McKenzie, Kelling, & Lawrence, 2005).

Meat lovers are generally perceived as consumers who focus on aspects like price and taste, and who are indifferent to meat-associated problems (Verbeke & Vackier, 2004). However, we propose that this is not always the case, because individuals can enjoy eating meat and be aware of meat-associated problems at the same time (i.e., animal welfare; Dagevos & Voordouw, 2013; Loughnan, Haslam, & Bastian, 2010). In this paper we aim to show that “indifferent” consumers can be differentiated as 1) consumers

who do not care and, therefore, ignore the issue and 2) consumers who do care but strategically choose to ignore the issue. The existence of the second group implies that research often overestimates the number of indifferent consumers. This study therefore sheds new light on motivations for meat consumption.

Previous research has found evidence for the strategy of *strategic ignorance* (i.e., wilfully ignore information that result in a conflicting experience; Carrillo & Mariotti, 2000), via experimental designs (e.g., Dana, Weber, & Kuang, 2007) or via qualitative methods (Van der Weele, 2013; Williams, 2008). However, there is no quantitative empirical evidence for this strategy in the context of meat consumption. We aim to extend previous studies by increasing understanding of how consumers strategically ignore problems in a real world context.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Meat consumption as a form of cognitive dissonance

We begin with a short introduction on cognitive dissonance because this theory highlights the motivational forces that drive strategic ignorance (Matthey & Regner, 2011).

The *theory of cognitive dissonance* has been validated by several studies in multiple contexts (e.g., Elliot & Devine, 1994; Zanna & Cooper, 1974; Zanna, Higgins, & Taves, 1976). Individuals experience cognitive dissonance as uncomfortable and are generally motivated to avoid negative emotions (Bagozzi, Dholakia, &

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Basuroy, 2003; Onwezen, Bartels, & Antonides, 2014a, 2014b). Subsequently, individuals are motivated to avoid or reduce cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962). The modern version of this theory proposes that cognitive dissonance is especially uncomfortable when cherished behaviour is threatened by conflicting thoughts (Aronson, 1992; Beauvois, Joule, & Joule, 1996; Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2007).

In the context of meat, people for example love eating meat but do not like the idea that animals suffer and are killed for meat consumption, which is known as the “meat paradox”; (Loughnan, Haslam, & Bastian, 2010; Loughnan, Haslam, Murnane, et al., 2010). Thus, individuals can have conflicting thoughts about meat simultaneously (i.e., ambivalence; Priester & Petty, 1996; Thompson, Zanna, & Griffin, 1995), which may result in cognitive dissonance (e.g., Elliot & Devine, 1994).

Previous studies have shown that consumers can use several strategies to reduce the cognitive dissonance, including attitude and behaviour change. *Attitude change* is directed towards changing weaker attitudes, so the attitude that is most prevalent and difficult to change can be preserved (Festinger, 1962). For example, individuals can experience a conflict between “love for meat” and “love for animals”. Individuals can resolve this conflicting state by changing their attitudes towards the animals they consume (e.g., these animals are less capable of experiencing feelings and pain; Bastian, Loughnan, Haslam, & Radke, 2012; Loughnan, Haslam, & Bastian, 2010).

Behaviour change is another way to reduce or avoid cognitive dissonance (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2007; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999; Vining & Ebreo, 2002). People may for example become vegetarians, decrease their meat eating, or change to meat that is produced in an animal-friendly manner.

2.2. Strategic ignorance

A small, but growing, body of research indicates that individuals can also deal with conflicting cognitions by strategic ignorance. *Strategic ignorance* occurs when individuals ignore information that conflicts with their thoughts to avoid mental discomfort or dissonance (e.g., Carrillo & Mariotti, 2000). Individuals use this strategy to engage in pleasurable and selfish activities that may be harmful to others (Dana et al., 2007) or to one’s future self (Thunström, Nordström, Shogren, Ehmke, & van’t Veld, 2013). In the context of meat, an individual may, for example, want to eat meat because he/she likes the taste despite the uncomfortable suspicion that the meat is from an animal that experienced pain or boredom. The internal conflict can be resolved by choosing to avoid information or thoughts related to animal welfare conditions, which cause the discomfort. Subsequently, the individual can enjoy a steak without having any concerns.

Several terms are used to characterize this strategy of ignorance. For example, affected ignorance (Moody-Adams, 1994; Williams, 2008), functional ignorance (Ungar, 2008), wilful blindness (Heffernan, 2011; Safran Foer, 2010), and strategic or wilful ignorance (Dana, 2005; Grossman & Van der Weele, 2013; Thunström, Nordström, Shogren, Ehmke, & van’t Veld, 2013). These terms all refer to coping mechanisms in which individuals avoid information that will make them feel obliged to “do the right thing.” This paper uses the term ‘strategic ignorance.’¹

The literature that specifically addresses strategic ignorance is relatively small (Dana et al., 2007; Ehrich & Irwin, 2005; Grossman & Van der Weele, 2013; Larson & Capra, 2009). These

studies generally use experimental designs to show that individuals who are *informed* about the fact that a selfish choice will hurt other participants, will usually choose a fair outcome. When individuals are *not informed* that a selfish choice will hurt other participants, people tend to prefer selfish choices that maximize their own outcomes. The most relevant finding is that if individuals can *choose whether or not to know* how their choice affects others, a significant amount of people will decline knowledge of the consequences (i.e., strategic ignorance) and engage in personally maximizing strategies.

It remains unclear whether and how strategic ignorance is used in daily life. The current study extends existing research by exploring whether we can identify consumers who use strategic ignorance regarding real-life issues in the context of meat. Consumer segmentation is used to explore this research question.

2.3. Consumer segmentation and indicators to identify strategic ignorant consumers

Consumer segmentation is a method that categorises similar subjects into groups that are not pre-defined by number or composition (Smith, 1956; Wedel & Kamakura, 2002). Consumer segmentation is mostly used to categorise consumers into groups with similar characteristics for the effective development of new marketing strategies (Bijmolt, Paas, & Vermunt, 2004; Steenkamp & Ter Hofstede, 2002).

There is no measurement scale of strategic ignorance available yet. Because segmentation can be performed with indirect indicators (Bijmolt et al., 2004; Onwezen et al., 2012), it is a highly useful method to identify strategically ignorant consumers.

Based on previous studies about strategic ignorance (e.g., Dana et al., 2007) we included three indicators that are relevant to identify strategic ignorant consumers: negative emotions, willingness to ignore, and responsibility. The next paragraphs describe the relevance of these indicators, a definition of the indicators and the accompanied proposed clusters. Additionally, Fig. 1 presents a graphical overview of the indicators and our propositions.

Negative emotions can be used as indicator for obtaining the level of cognitive dissonance someone is experiencing (Elliot & Devine, 1994), which allows us to distinguish consumers who are struggling with conflicting issues in the context of meat from those who are not struggling with these conflicting issues. We propose the existence of a group of struggling consumers who have not yet found a solution for their aversive discrepant state (e.g., a love for meat versus animals being killed). These consumers do not ignore information, nor have they found peace through adaptation of behaviour. They are consciously ambivalent and experience a negative emotional state. *Proposition 1: We propose to identify a group of struggling consumers (Cluster 1).*

By measuring self-reported *willingness to ignore*, we can identify a group of consumers that does not ignore the information and deals with the resulting conflicting cognitions and subsequent aversive feelings by adapting their behaviour. This group of consumers has changed their behaviour so that it no longer clashes with their moral principles. They no longer experience cognitive dissonance and are willing to learn about the issue. *Proposition 2: We propose to identify a group of coping consumers (Cluster 2).*

The remaining consumers ignore information. We measure *responsibility* (Schwartz, 1973) to differentiate consumers who do not care at all (the indifferent group) from consumers who strategically ignore information about the issue (the strategic ignorance group). The results of the study of Dana et al. (2007) suggest that respondents maintain their sense of responsibility when they use strategic ignorance. For example, providing information about

¹ ‘Denial’ is sometimes used to refer to a comparable concept (e.g., Dunlap & McRight, 2010), though research on this topic mostly suggests a stronger and less specific concept. This concept is therefore not part of our definition of strategic ignorance.

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