Plant-based diets and destination image:
A holistic approach

ABSTRACT

A growing number of individuals in contemporary society follow a plant-based diet due to discourse and debates around the environmental impacts, the treatment of animals and health-related issues associated with animal agriculture. At the same time, food is regarded as a gateway to experience authentic elements of local cultures, traditions and heritage. This raises questions about the influence that a plant-based diet which strictly excludes all forms of produce derived from animals exerts on the tourist's destination image development process. Current studies on destination image argue that these images can be framed from the cognitive (knowledge), affective (emotional) and conative (behavioural) perspectives. Hence, this research aims to understand how following a plant-based diet for environmental, ethical and health reasons influences tourists' destination images from the cognitive, affective and conative dimensions. To this end, a qualitative social constructivist approach was adopted and 20 semi-structured interviews with tourists who follow strict plant-based diets were conducted using a combination of a simple random sample and a snowball sampling approach. Findings indicate that these diets stimulate destination images of social belonging (affective), images off-the-beaten-track (conative), images of cosmopolitanism (cognitive) and images of emotional solidarity (conative) rooted in these tourists' personal normative beliefs around food consumption.

Key words: Plant-based diets, Destination image, Emotional solidarity

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GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT
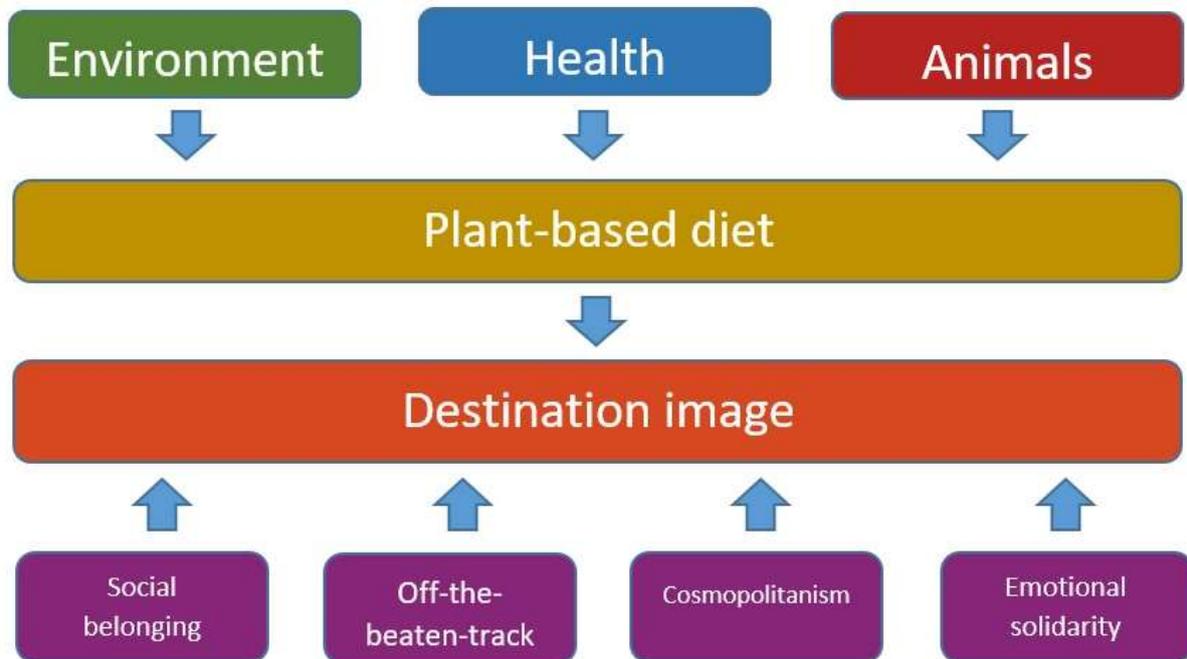
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1. INTRODUCTION

The role of food in destination image continues to be central in the understanding of the factors that project images of a destination's cultural attributes as food is widely regarded as a critical element of the tourist's perceptions and experiences of place (Björk and Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2017; Skinner *et al.*, 2020) . Indeed, food consumption provides effective platforms for tourists to experience distinctive and authentic features of a destination's cultural fabric, leading them to capture strong images of the places they visit (Hsu and Scott, 2020; Lai *et al.*, 2019; Antón *et al.,* 2019). This results in what literature on destination image refers to as cognitive, affective and conative images of places – each referring to knowledge about a destination, emotional elicitation and behavioural patterns/opportunities respectively (Woosnam *et al.,* 2020; Stylidis *et al.,* 2020; Agapito *et al.,* 2013). A destination's culinary landscape signals messages of local agricultural systems, cultural heritage and values shared across local communities (Sthapit *et al.,* 2017; Stone *et al.,* 2019). However, with an increasingly diverse tourist market, destinations face the challenge of maximising the potential of projecting attractive images around their culinary offer whilst catering for the needs of specific groups with dietary requirements, beliefs and preferences (Robinson and Getz, 2016). In addition, discussions and debates around sustainability, ethical practices in food production and healthy eating have gained significant momentum in recent times (Janssen *et al.,* 2016; Sanchez-Sabate *et al.,* 2019). This is in light of environmental challenges that food supply chains pose on the planet's finite resources which can widely divide views and perceptions (Ritchie and Roser, 2020; Chai *et al.,* 2019). The ethical issues involved in the use of animals reared for food raise equally polarising questions about the ethics of animal agriculture (Bekoff, 2006) as health-related debates surrounding the consumption of animal-derived produce take place on a variety of platforms (De Boer and Aiking, 2011). Hence, a triad of issues encompassing environmental concerns, ethical treatment of animals and health-related arguments drives an increasing number of people to follow a plant-based diet that strictly excludes all forms of produce resulting from animal agriculture (Henning, 2011).

Research has been conducted on the role of food in destination image development within specific reference groups such as dietary requirements rooted in religious beliefs or niche culinary tourism markets (Cvetković *et al.,* 2016; Moira *et al.,* 2017; Mannaa. 2019; da Costa Birchal *et al.,* 2018). However, there is a significant gap in knowledge regarding the influence that following a strict plant-based diet exerts on the tourist's destination image formation process. This study intends to bridge this gap by approaching the role of food in destination image holistically, from the cognitive, affective and conative perspectives; with a specific focus on tourists that follow a plant-based diet for environmental, ethical and health-related reasons. Therefore, the overall aim of this research is to understand how a plant-based diet influences the tourist's destination image development.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This research seeks to understand the influence that plant-based diets exert on the destination image development process of tourists that follow them. As current literature contextualises destination image from the affective, cognitive and conative dimensions; the first segment of the conceptual framework developed to inform this study defines and reviews these concepts. The second part of the literature review evaluates the specific role of food in destination image development. The third and final part presents a summary of environmental, health-related and

ethical concerns typically associated with the decision of following a plant-based diet which in turn may influence a tourist's perceived destination images. Therefore, this conceptual framework approaches the subject area holistically as it evaluates the three dimensions of destination image development within the context of food and alongside the issues connected with plant-based diets that may influence this process.

2.1. Destination image

Discourse on destination image appears to have evolved from Gunn's (1972) framework on primary and secondary images towards a comprehensive approach using the cognitive, affective and conative dimensions (Echtner and Ritchie, 1993; Pike and Ryan, 2004; Tasci and Gartner, 2007; Chen and Phou, 2013). Agapito *et al.* (2013) discuss the benefits of unraveling the complexities of these processes by focusing on each of these layers independently. This provides a more inclusive and detailed understanding of the character, nature and relationships between each of these elements (Martín-Santana *et al.*, 2017). In the first instance, Kim (2018: 858) notes that cognitive images are "directly observable, descriptive, and measurable and therefore they provide more concrete and interpretive information regarding the uniqueness of a destination". Papadimitriou *et al.* (2018) suggest that the cognitive aspect of a destination's image includes beliefs and knowledge whilst Kim (2018) asserts that they might be simpler to measure as these focus on attributes that can be shaped through marketing and other destination development tools (Kladou and Mavragani, 2015). Secondly, the affective component refers to emotional cues and feelings developed by tourists in response to a destination's attributes. Marine-Roig and Anton Clave (2016) propose that these can gain more importance in destination image development than the physical and tangible aspects of places. Therefore, as the affective perspective focuses on the emotional dimension rather than the physical environment, it could be argued that the measurement of this affective element of destination images is more subjective and therefore complex (Kock *et al.*, 2016).

A third dimension is identified from a behavioural perspective referred to as conative destination images. These are approached by Woosnam *et al.* (2020) who relate them to behavioural intentions and outcomes such as repeat visits (loyalty) and recommending the destination to others. Critics of this focus include Stylos *et al.* (2016) and Stylos *et al.* (2017) who advocate for the behavioural implications of destination images to be understood within the cognitive/affective dimensions. However, Woosnam *et al.* (2020) make a valuable contribution to the analysis of the role of conative destination images as they link tourist behaviours to what is referred to as 'emotional solidarity'. They define this notion as "the affective bonds individuals experience with one another, often characterized by a degree of closeness" (p. 918). This sense of togetherness (Moghavvemi *et al.*, 2017; Erul *et al.*, 2020) may result in the development of social capital, which enables a specific type of activity to function effectively (Moscardo *et al.*, 2017). Ribeiro *et al.* (2018) assert that this can potentially bridge gaps between tourist interests and other stakeholder groups including resident communities (Yang, 2016; Bertella *et al.,* 2018; Stylidis *et al.*, 2020). These frameworks provide a general understanding of knowledge, feelings and behaviours that derive from different aspects, attributes and dimensions of destinations. Food consumption specifically may play a critical role in these processes and the following sections approach the role of food in destination image development.

2.2. Food and destination image

Food consumption and its influence on the tourist's experience and destination image development is a widely researched topic given the significance of the role of food in the travel experience. (Su *et al.,* 2020; Björk and Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2017; Stone *et al.,* 2018).

Andersson *et al.* (2017) highlight the benefits of using food to showcase a destination's cultural attributes which add distinctive staples of authenticity to a tourist's experience of place (Antón *et al.,* 2019; Skinner *et al.,* 2020). However, Andersson *et al.* (2017) highlight that these culinary experiences do not necessarily warrant a positive impression of destinations as they may be negative in nature. This is a complex area to study as negative outcomes can refer to social interactions, quality of food, service level thresholds, variety and location of eating establishments among a host of other factors that can lend themselves to negative impressions (Lai *et al., 2019).* These can then be potentially associated with other elements of the travel experience such as accommodation and further guest-host relationships among others (Sthapit, 2018; Mannaa. 2019; Cvetković *et al.,* 2016; Sthapit, 2017). Conversely, Sthapit *et al.* (2017) link positive gastronomic experiences to place identity in a wider sense and to the place attachment context leading to destination loyalty and other behaviours related to conative destination images as discussed above (Agapito *et al.,* 2013; Stone *et al.,* 2019; Hsu and Scott, 2020). Inevitably, literature on the role of food in travel experiences leading to destination image building derives in the question of which factors intrinsic to the individual makes them seek particular food types (Zhang *et al.,* 2019). Hsu and Scott (2020) discuss the notion of food personality traits, moderators and antecedents to a specific travel outcome, which exert an influence on food choice behaviours as reviewed below.

2.2.1. Food consumption patterns

Given the research area, it is important to understand the role of dietary choices and eating patterns in the tourist's perceptions and experiences of destinations. The concept of food personality is situated within the food neophobia/neophilia framework depending on the tourist's flexibility standards applied to the novelty of foods they are willing to consume (Ji *et al.,* 2016). Neophobia refers to a sense of reluctance to experience novelty in food whilst neophilia indicates willingness and flexibility to engage with a wider set of culinary resources beyond each tourist's regular consumption and comfort zones. However, such flexibility may not exist when the tourist's decision-making process is driven by religious or ethical beliefs. Mannaa (2019) and Moira *et al.* (2017) note the critically central role of religion in tourists' culinary consumption and its impact on perceptions of the quality of their travel experiences. As highlighted by Moira *et al.* (2012), these beliefs add pressure on tourism suppliers such as accommodation and catering providers to tend to the needs of these specific elements in tourism demand (Cvetković *et al.,*2016). In doing so, destinations can become more competitive as this may signal welcoming messages to diverse tourist markets and project images of progressiveness and versatility.

Specific diet requirements and their role in the travel experience are evaluated by Antón *et al.* (2019) who suggest that a process of cultural contrast assessment is undertaken by tourists depending on their level of familiarity with the food they consume resulting in either positive or negative outcomes. This notion, rooted in Crotts and McKercher's (2006) proposed cultural distance framework, can be applied to the context of the presence or absence of animal produce in food as tourists may feel more culturally proximate to culinary resources that are free from animal products. In this sense, Mak *et al.* (2017: 8) assert that "culture is a major determinant affecting the types of substances that a person considers appropriate to eat (…) it defines how food is coded into "acceptable" or "unacceptable", and "good" or "bad" within a particular social group". Stylos *et al.* (2016) refer to this as personal normative beliefs that can be shared among groups of individuals suggesting that these beliefs systems may result in a tourist's engagement with local communities that share a similar set of values. Thus, tourism suppliers and tourists that reject animal-derived produce in their consumption can be conceptualised as reference groups. Kim *et al.* (2018) identify these as direct influences on the tourist's food

choices leading to the development of social capital if these specific demands are catered for (Moscardo *et al.,* 2018). Although very limited tourism research is available on diets that are entirely free from animal-derived products, da Costa Birchal *et al.* (2018) found that vegetarian diets may report physical and mental wellbeing benefits to the travel experience of those who follow them. These can then lead to positive emotional cues and social interaction but the authors also note that sacrifices and compromises are made within the same dimensions by tourists who subscribe to this eating pattern. The resulting positive social interactions may be linked to Moghavvemi's *et al*. (2017) concept of emotional solidarity. This can be developed through positive tourist relationships and shared experiences (Stylidis *et al.,* 2020) which may revolve around food consumption and foster loyalty to destinations and the businesses that provide such opportunities.

2.2.2. Dimensions and roles of food

From a destination image development perspective, it can be argued that just as tourists have food personalities, destinations themselves develop distinctive personality features because of what they offer in terms of food consumption (Ab Karim and Chi, 2010). Lai *et al.* (2019) categorise cognitive images of food in destinations as: (1) place and geographic environment, (2) food and cuisine culture, (3) food and people, (4) food quality, (5) dining places/restaurants, and (6) food activities. This is a useful contribution because it highlights the ample spectrum of destination elements that can be associated with culinary resources beyond their role as food in its most simple sense. From an affective image perspective, the authors refer to both symbolic and experiential values. Mak *et al.* (2017) link symbolic values in the affective image context with cultural capital acquisition whilst Lai *et al.* (2019) associate them with the socialising functions of food in the travel experience. This also relates to Yang's (2016) notion of 'togetherness' and co-creation of the travel experience (Bertella *et al.,* 2018). Therefore, food acquires a central sense of social significance rooted in shared values and experiences associated with food which may provide tourists with exposure to reference groups and local communities with similar personal normative beliefs.

In their assessment of the position of food in destination image development, Robinson and Getz (2016) propose that this can be framed through differing degrees of 'food involvement', which include the following dimensions: food-related identity, food quality, social bonding, and food consciousness. Hence, the authors also associate layers of destination image with food knowledge (including its production) and its social functions that bring together reference groups. These groups can include those tourists who share similar views on food that is acceptable and unacceptable to consume which may in itself present opportunities for social bonding rooted in these shared belief systems. From a consumption perspective, the multisensory nature of eating exerts a stimulating influence leading to the elicitation of feelings and knowledge acquisition deriving in cornerstones to an individual's food destination image (Kim and Kerstetter, 2016). Adding to these debates, Chang and Mak (2018) refer to Fox's (2007) gastronomic identity to approach the role of food in destination image development. The authors (p. 91) propose that food products are subject to a symbolisation process in the task of creating a destination's gastronomic identity, which is "to culturally assign values to typical ingredients, dishes, menus, and gastronomic processes". Hence, it is clear that the process involved in creating the gastronomic product and the provenance of its ingredients may play instrumental roles in destination image development depending on the tourist's food identity and consciousness (Robinson and Getz, 2016). Consequently, food transitions from being a culinary resource to acquire a more symbolic and therefore representative aspect influencing the tourist's destination image development process.

2.3. The plant-based perspective

In order to evaluate how following a plant-based diet influences the process of destination image development, it is important to note the main issues and debates that often result in an individual's decision to remove animal-derived produce from their consumption (Sanchez-Sabate *et al.,* 2019). Some of these are presented in Table 1 using a threefold framework encompassing the environment, health and ethics in treatment of animals.

Table 1: Selection of issues supporting plant-based diets

Environment	Human population more than doubled in less than 100 years as meat consumption increased fivefold	Steinfeld *et al.* (2006)
	Studies argue that animal agriculture is the single leading cause of environmental depletion	Ritchie and Roser (2020)
	Plant-based eating is not neutral to the environment, but there is evidence that it is less damaging	Henning (2011); Chai *et al.* (2019)
	Social sustainability – Use of resources to feed animals for meat and dairy as poverty and hunger remain critical world problems	Janssen *et al.* (2016); De Boer and Aiking (2011)
Health	Adequately planned plant-based diets are nutritionally sound, and may provide health benefits for the prevention and treatment of health conditions including obesity, heart disease and cancer	British Dietetic Association (2017)
	Infectious diseases caused by campylobacter, salmonella, norovirus and others may be higher when eating animal produce	Food Standards Agency (2016)
	Up to 80% of antibiotics are used on animals which may hinder their effectiveness in treating current and future outbreaks in humans	World Health Organisation (2017)
	Physical injury and exposure to serious psychological distress are widespread among slaughterhouse workers	Leibler *et al.* (2017)
Animals	Animals are sentient and have the ability to experience feelings of fear and pain in farms, slaughterhouses and in live export	Bekoff (2006)
	In response to increased demand, the majority of livestock-produce in developed nations stem from the most intensive factory farms	Euractive (2019) Kirby (2010)
	In the EU (most stringent legislations), piglet tail docking and teeth clipping are common and legal practices	D'eath *et al.* (2016)
	In dairy production, cows are artificially inseminated and separated from their calves routinely causing distress to both	Beaver *et al.* (2019)

As summarised above, a range of arguments and debates are associated with animal agriculture which some individuals engage with resulting in diets that exclude all forms of animal produce. This dietary choice poses questions about its impact on the tourist's destination image development process which this study sets out to evaluate. From the environmental perspective, the extensive use of resources to rear animals for food and resulting emissions in a variety of processes pre, during and post-farm to feed a rapidly expanding human population is increasingly questioned. This is because a growing body of evidence suggests that these resources could be used more efficiently by removing animals from the food chain which would not achieve environmental neutrality but result in less environmental costs and pressures on the planet. Health debates around the consumption of animals link this to ailments and conditions such as heart disease, cancer, obesity and infectious diseases. The COVID-19

pandemic dramatically transformed contemporary society and, some argue, this initiated with the fondling of wild animals in the meat trade in China. Agreement has not been reached on this but the fact that the majority of antibiotics produced are used on farm animals reared for food is a source of concern regarding food safety and antibiotic resistance. Ethical issues arise at farms where increased levels of demand for animal products and a quest for space and resource efficiency often result in animals deprived from basic freedoms and displaying natural behaviours. Their lives are typically terminated at slaughterhouses that often operate at industrial pace as animal advocacy groups frequently document these facilities as places of fear and suffering for sentient beings.

It is essential to note that each of the arguments above generate rebuttals and counterarguments and hence the debates are current and ongoing. But they do resonate with increasing numbers of individuals that turn to diets that seek to move away from these environmental, ethical and health-related concerns. Therefore, an evaluation of the meaning of these issues to each individual and their influence on their destination image development process requires a rigorous and flexible methodological approach as presented below.

3. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Research approach: An individual's decision to follow a plant-based diet may be rooted in environmental, health or animal-related reasons depending on their personal interpretation and engagement with these issues. Hence, a non-foundational approach was needed to allow an in-depth evaluation of how each person constructs their own realities through their subjective lenses of interpretation leading to images of destinations under their individual plant-based looking glass. Thus, the methodological approach chosen to address the overall aim of this study responds to the qualitative social constructivist paradigm given its flexibility and non-foundational nature (Bryman, 2016). The needs of this study align with Quinn-Patton's (2014) evaluation of the merits of social constructivism as it acknowledges and credits the subjective nature of the research area. This in turn provides a frame to "understand how one's own experiences and background affect what one understands and how one acts in the world" (p.546) which is what this study intends to achieve in the context of destination image and the factors that influence it.

3.2. Research method: As per the research approach, the data collection method needed to provide flexibility to enable individuals to expand their views in detail and the researcher to enquire further and probe on specific issues raised by respondents (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, data was collected using semi-structured interviews. The use of this data collection tool allowed for probing on specific salient issues whilst also following a basic initial structure that assisted in the data analysis process (Silverman, 2017). After capturing the interviewees' socio-demographic profiles, the interview topic guide firstly enquired about the reasons why they chose to follow a plant-based diet and generally how this influences their travel perceptions and experiences. Subsequently, specific cognitive, affective and conative images projected by destinations and their relationship with their plant-based diet were enquired about. This was achieved by asking core questions regarding what they learn about the destination, how they feel about destinations and what they do at destinations influenced by their plant-based dietary choice.

3.3. Sampling: With the aim of capturing a diverse set of views whilst extending equal probability of inclusion to a large population of tourists who follow plant-based diets, a simple random sampling approach was used initially (Brunt *et al.*, 2017). Invitations to inform the

project were extended online via general community groups on Facebook such as Vegan Travel and more specific ones aimed at women and LGBT+ travellers that subscribe to plant-based diets as a lifestyle choice. Inadvertently, the approach evolved into snowball sampling as participants enjoyed being interviewed and published the invitation in further platforms. This eased the task of recruiting interviewees (Veal, 2017) until data saturation stage was reached (Bryman, 2016). In total, 20 participants were recruited, 10 males and 10 females – an undeliberate equal gender distribution. Their ages range from 21 to 49, the median age being 32.5. They reported following a plant-based diet from 8 months to up to 22 years. Their nationalities: the UK, France, the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, Romania, Canada, Australia, the US and Israel. Although the notion of plant-based eating is sometimes applied to flexitarian and/or vegetarian diets, this study was informed exclusively by tourists that follow vegan diets (entirely free from all forms of animal produce). They are not referred to as vegan tourists and generally this study makes reference to plant-based diets because the concept of veganism cuts across other lifestyle choices such as clothing among others which some respondents did not entirely subscribe to beyond their diets.

3.4. Data collection and analysis: Interviews were conducted over the phone and online via FaceTime and Skype calls. After attaining informed consent, they were recorded using an audio device and initial field notes were taken to summarise the main messages arising from each interview (Silverman, 2017). These were then transcribed manually which allowed for deeper familiarisation with the data (Veal, 2017). The total interview material was 8.15 hours, the longest interview lasted 38.75 minutes and the shortest 12.15 minutes. The median interview time was 24.75 minutes. As evidenced by their contrasting length, some interviews yielded robust and substantial qualitative data whereas others were shorter and not as detailed. The transcripts were then coded in two stages: firstly by organising findings in initial categories which were then compared against the field notes captured during the data collection process. The initial set of categories translated into codes referring to cognitive, affective and conative destination images influenced by plant-based diets as noted by the interview material. The second analytical stage involved revisiting these codes and identifying specific themes. These themes refer to affective images of social belonging, cognitive images of cosmopolitanism, and conative images off-the-beaten-track and emotional solidarity as presented and discussed below.

4.   EVIDENCE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The findings stemmed from the evidence analysis have been organised in four types of destination images influenced by plant-based diets. These are: images of belonging (affective), images off-the-beaten-track (conative), images of cosmopolitanism (cognitive) and images of emotional solidarity (conative).

4.1. Images of belonging

Many interviewees noted stark differences in reasons why individuals choose to follow plant-based diets and approaches to implementing them. However, there is a general consensus that from a social perspective, tourists who follow plant-based diets experience a strong sense of community at the destinations that offer them the spaces to congregate, consume and interact with individuals (tourists and locals) who share similar views and beliefs: *"Vegetarianism in Hinduism is related to the principle of doing no harm. I think that if people are basing their diet on that understanding then you have a common ground with them. There is an understanding that animals suffer and that is not necessary to inflict that suffering. Sharing that level of compassion gives you that sense of community. If I go to vegan places I tend to*

assume that they have certain political ideas that I would probably be in tune with. That is important to me".

The interviewee above makes an interesting connection between following a plant-based diet, religious beliefs and even political inclinations, which have the ability to develop communities and provide platforms for socialisation. Another interviewee linked these opportunities to gaining a stronger and more authentic sense of local values and cultures: *"I think you get a deeper sense of place when you spend time with the people that actually live there. Which you tend to see when you connect with them and they tell you stories about what is going on in the local community. You feel like you are more than just a tourist. (It makes me feel) more connected".* Further supporting this, another interviewee explained the relaxed, less pressurised experiences that plant-based establishments provides them with, leading to feelings of acceptance and inclusivity: *"Being vegan can feel quite isolating in a world where people do eat meat and dairy and will not necessarily agree with things that you might say in that respect. It is very nice to go out and connect with other people that have similar views. You feel less isolated, you feel more inclusive and included. It is checking in with my values and reaffirming them".* The tone adopted by this interviewee highlights the social benefits of integrating with members of local communities that share the same set of values and beliefs. But this also poses questions about feelings that may unravel when this common ground is absent at other places they may visit.

Kim and Kerstetter (2016) note the multisensory aspect of food in the travel experience. The physical proximity among this type of tourists to each other and to like-minded local residents results in social bonding through food consciousness due to their shared food-related identity (Robinson and Getz, 2016). This stimulates emotional elicitation (Sthaphit *et al.*, 2017) resulting in place attachment as da Costa Birchal *et al.*'s (2018) positive social interactions are evidently driven by shared values that derive in a sense of togetherness and cohesion (Yang, 2016). Cross and McKercher's (2006) framework on cultural proximity is relevant to this evidence as these shared values can be construed as cultural aspects of each individual's food personality that these tourists feel proximate to (Mak *et al.*, 2017). These relate to Stylos *et al.*'s (2016) personal normative beliefs that shape destination images, travel patterns and intentions (Stylos *et al.*, 2017). Hence, social experiences appear to be co-created (Bertella *et al.*, 2018) which results in affective qualities to destinations (Marine-Roid and Anton Clave, 2016). This in turn appears to add value to the travel experience (Moghavenni *et al.,* 2017): *"I was in Canada last year and I got to know the local vegans there. I did some volunteering at a local farm animal sanctuary and got to know local people a lot easier because there is already that existing community which I would not have experienced if I was not vegan".* The socialising function of food consumption is evident then (Lai *et al.*, 2019) in what appears to relate to a symbolisation process (Chang and Mak, 2018). In this case, symbols are not strictly related to the quality, shape, taste or make of the food that is consumed, as evidenced above by a tourist who engaged with the local community through volunteering rooted in belief systems around food consumption. These values engender a social cohesion effect (Yang, 2016) founded upon a shared sense of belonging and acceptance that appear to form affective images, adding value to their overall experience of place (Sthapit, 2018) and levels of enjoyment (Björk and Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2017): *"I definitely feel more comfortable with people with a similar outlook. Obviously not the exact same outlook because people are vegan because of a variety of reasons. But generally, I do feel more relaxed surrounded with like-minded people".*

4.2. Images off-the-beaten-track

Many interviewees noted that following a plant-based diet influences their experiences of destinations as they seek to consume at establishments located outside the most popular touristic areas. This provides them with further opportunities to experience an authentic sense of place: "*Making the effort to track down that small vegan place will take you to places that are even residential that you would not see otherwise. In Japan, I took a vegan cookery class in Kyoto, held in someone's traditional Kyoto home. So I actually got to see a Kyoto residential neighbourhood, a local market. I saw that aspect of the city*".

Supporting this further, an interviewee noted that a tourist's itinerary may actually be shaped by the quest to experience plant-based cuisine leading to the social interactions noted above as fostering feelings of acceptance and authentic experiences of place: "*It gets you into the little vegan local restaurants that you would not necessarily go to otherwise. Finding them is interesting because it takes you down the little alleys and off-the-beaten-track away from the main tourist areas. Getting there gets you to speak to people that you would not speak to otherwise. Just normal streets, normal shops, normal residential areas that personally I quite like*". Hence, plant-based diets appear to potentially act as platforms for experiencing local settings at destinations and socialising with local communities. But this also suggests that in this process, these tourists engage in conative behaviours that may be segregating as opposed to integrating them with wider segments of the local population.

In spite of the above, this evidence indicates that plant-based diets provide opportunities to experience authenticity and aspects of destinations that may not be experienced otherwise (Anton *et al.,* 2019). As per Skinner *et al.*'s (2020) notions on sense of place, authenticity and travel behaviour, plant-based food appears to act as a gateway to what is construed as local and authentic, which evidently can have a positive impact on the tourist's travel satisfaction and experience of place (Moghavenni *et al.,* 2017). Ji *et al.* (2018) assert that individual food personality traits motivate tourists to seek novelty in their culinary experiences (Mak *et al.,* 2017). This conative behaviour (Agapito *et al.*, 2013; Hsu and Scott, 2020) is evident in these tourists' willingness to visit non-mainstream precincts within destinations, either through necessity or curiosity (Levitt *et al.*, 2019). As a result, they are not only exposed to local and authentic settings that project a stronger sense of locality (Anton *et al.*, 2019). But these journeys also derive in opportunities to interact with local communities, further enriching the social value of these experiences in spite of the fact that they may separate them from the local population in a wider sense (Skinner *et al.*, 2020): "*It has taken me to some places that I would not have gone to unless I was vegan. When I travel I do not only want to see the tourist areas, I also want to see standard places. So this gives you more exposure to these more authentic places (...) it also makes you feel more integrated in the local culture*". This surfaces as an important influence on the tourists' planned behaviour, which is clearly a conative response to their dietary requirements (Levitt *et al.*, 2019). This behaviour and responses result in images if authentic scenes, places and people (Erul *et al.*, 2020). And all of these have the potential of yielding emotional elicitation resulting in place attachment and memorable experiences (Sthapit *et al.*, 2018; Kim and Kerstetter, 2016; Stylos *et al.*, 2017). However and as noted above, the strengthening of bonds among people that share these personal normative beliefs could mean that they segregate and separate them from members of the wider community.

4.3. Images of cosmopolitanism

Generally, interviewees agreed that destinations with well-developed social and physical infrastructure to sustain the plant-based eating tourist market project a more cosmopolitan and diverse image to its visitors: "*It shows a willingness to welcome people who have different*

beliefs and different cultural associations around food. It demonstrates an openness and readiness to understand other people's beliefs and ways of life". An interviewee linked this perception of openness and diversity with existing local cultural values at the destination and their influence on its appeal towards tourists that follow plant-based diets: *"It's all about being accommodating to diversity. When they welcome diversity that says a lot about their culture and that is a very important thing for diverse people visiting them".*

Adding to this, an interviewee noted the link between culinary offer innovation and catering to a growing market of visitors that follow plant-based diets: *"With all the information out there now I find it disappointing to go somewhere and find that they do not understand it. This is a very common dietary requirement and the number of people making this ethical choice is growing".* The following statement clearly cements the importance of images projected by destinations when their culinary resources do not match the expectations of this specific tourist market: *"They do not only miss out on business, they miss out on giving people the option to eat without so much cruelty. They miss out on giving people the option to eat healthier. There are so many factors involved other than profits. This movement will continue to grow, so people and businesses are waking up and adapting as well".* In view of this, it can be argued that destinations that do not sufficiently cater to this market segment may project regressive images leading tourists to conclude that local communities are not in tune with environmental and ethical issues connected to plant-based eating.

Mak *et al.* (2019) point out that food consumption is a platform for cultural capital acquisition and this evidence suggests that indeed tourists that follow plant-based diets gather cultural cues projected by a destination's plant-based offer. As noted by Andersson *et al.* (2017), these tourists capture cognitive images as food is used to illustrate a destination's cultural fabric. The data confirms that given the ethical, health and environmental issues related to animal produce, destinations and businesses are under pressure to respond to and adapt to the needs of an increasingly diverse set of modern tourists (Cvetković *et al.*, 2016; Moira *et al.*, 2012). In this sense, an evolving set of culinary resources that actively caters for a growing market presents significant opportunities for positive destination image building (Ab Karim and Chi, 2010) as this may also speak of higher levels of development, social diversity and versatility in what a destination has to offer: *"I think that more cosmopolitan cities are able to embrace a more diverse market because they have a real mix of culture and ethnicities. They tend to be busier and more developed areas where they have the ability to sustain more niche restaurants and shops. So for that reason, if they are in a big city and have lots of people passing their door, then they can afford to be niche".* This evidence suggests that if the dietary needs of a specific sector are met (Mannaa, 2019; Moira *et al.*, 2017), messages of progressiveness and openness are projected. These are destination attributes that can be directly observable, descriptive and measurable – cognitive images (Kim, 2018). A well-developed provision for the plant-based market is noted as an expectation given the expanding popularity and discourse around ethics, health and sustainability. Therefore, the absence of this offer may result in negative images of place and gaps in the fulfillment of the tourist's expectations. It may also result in torusts drawing conclusions about the local communities' engagement with debates around animal produce. Therefore, this evidence indicates that tourists may build their knowledge-base and beliefs about a destination by examining its offer for their plant-based diet, leading to cognitive constructions (Papadimitriou *et al.*, 2018). Hence, responding to changes in consumer habits structure welcoming images of diversity, which in turn enhances levels of satisfaction (Björk and Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2017). These can potentially yield positive conative responses such as emotional solidarity and destination loyalty (Agapito *et al.*, 2013; Ribeiro *et al.*, 2018; Stylidis *et al.*, 2020) as evaluated below.

4.4. Images of emotional solidarity

An overarching theme within the evidence analysis was the enthusiasm for supporting plant-based businesses and the type of experiences that interviewees get from visiting them: *"I just think it is more ethical to support family-owned vegan businesses rather than big corporations. Small businesses historically were always the first to introduce new products and big companies would mimic that"*. The interviewee also finds a link between plant-based food and innovation in culinary design. This results in consumer loyalty as repeat visits to these establishments are connected to the wider issues why increasing numbers of individuals choose to eat plant-based food: *"I always love going into a vegan place especially where there is not as much veganism around. Then you get to talk to the people who work there and see how they have such a strong passion for it. It gives you more hope that it is starting to spread around and I think they're already doing a great job just by making veganism more accessible"*. This evidence supports the notion that plant-based diets may act as a driver for community development amongst those who follow them. However, it also raises questions about whether emotional solidarity may engender a sense of social segregation between tourists that follow plant-based diets and the wider local community.

Moghavenni *et al.*'s (2017) concept of emotional solidarity is clearly evident in this analysis as these tourists' willingness and increased levels of satisfaction by supporting plant-based businesses is stark (Woosam *et al.*, 2020; Erul *et al.*, 2020). This has implications on the tourists' planned behaviour (Zhang *et al.*, 2019; Hsu and Scott, 2020) rooted in their personal normative beliefs (Stylos *et al.*, 2016): *"I actively look for vegan places and try to support them so that they will have a sustainable future. I don't want those places to run out of business, I want them to flourish so I try to support them as much as I can"*. Therefore, this support towards local businesses catering for this specific market yields the social capital needed to sustain the plant-based economy (Moscardo *et al.*, 2017): *"As vegans, now certainly in the West, we are getting really spoiled as a lot of chain restaurants now cater for us and more options are being brought up all the time. It makes it quite easy to be in a big city and go to a chain restaurant. But I do think it is important to support vegan businesses as well, especially if they are small businesses because if you don't, inevitably those places will close"*. In turn, the sense of togetherness and cohesion (Yang, 2016) and co-created environments between locals and tourists (Bertella *et al.*, 2018) actively structure positive memorable experiences (Stone *et al.*, 2019). On the other hand, segregation and exclusion may result from strenghetened bonds among specific reference groups. In spite of this, the evidence highlights the need to innovate and cater to a diverse tourist market (Cvetković *et al.*, 2016; Mannaa 2019; Moira *et al.*, 2017) which could further cement images of progressiveness and cosmopolitanism as highlighted above. Therefore, the conative and affective dimensions of the images that destinations can project to these tourists are clear. This is because the socialising function of food consumption (Lai *et al.*, 2019) appears to result in loyalty towards businesses that provide tourists with positive emotional and social cues through the platforms that stimulate these outcomes (Stylidis *et al.*, 2020; Agapito *et al.*, 2013; Ribeiro *et al.*, 2018).

5. Conclusions

The environmental, ethical and health-related arguments that result in people following plant-based diets tend to generate debates as they polarise views and cause division among different stakeholder groups. It could be argued that people that follow plant-based diets remain a minority and that they should adapt to and accept that the consumption of animal-derived produce is the most popular option. However, this study concludes that in spite of being a minority, they show resilience in their travel behaviour, have service level thresholds and multifaceted destination image development processes. They seek authenticity and cherish a

sense of community, among each other and with locals that share their ethical views and values, just as omnivorous tourists do. But their commitment to not consume animals takes them on physical and emotional journeys that add many layers of complexity to their images of destinations rooted in their plant-based travel experiences – in all the challenges and rewards they pose.

From a cognitive perspective, their plant-based diet leads them to learn that destinations are progressive, that they move with the times when they provide a rich offer to the plant-based market. These tourists interpret this offering as a sign of cosmopolitanism and openness to accept and welcome an increasingly diverse tourist market. From an affective perspective, they celebrate the sense of community when they share culinary experiences and environments with people who follow a similar set of normative values. They foster feelings of connectivity and shape images of cohesion when they are provided with spaces where they can support businesses that wish to enrich a destination's offer to this specific market segment. Their plant-based choice fosters a sense of belonging and provides them with exposure to local communities that have also moved away from animal agriculture in their diets. Their travel experiences are co-created in that sense, which actively contributes to the factors that form their images of destinations from a social perspective. From the conative dimension, they adapt their travel patterns and itineraries in their quest to find the businesses that cater for them. As opposed to posing a disadvantage, this evidence indicates that they embrace the challenge positively and feel rewarded with journeys that take them off the mainstream. These provide them with further exposure to distinctive scenes, enriching their experiences with a different set of images of locality and authenticity. The positive emotional cues that are elicited by this exposure makes them wish to support businesses that they believe operate more ethically and in line with what they see as a healthier, more ethical and sustainable way of eating. Their behavioural intentions and patterns speak of solidarity which further highlights the sense of community rooted in images of diversity, acceptance and belonging with individuals, businesses and destinations alike. These project positive messages of progressiveness and cosmopolitanism to a destination's image rooted in culinary consumption that is perceived by this tourist market segment as less harmful to the planet, to its animals, and to human health. Therefore, this research makes a contribution to current studies on destination image development by shedding light on affective, cognitive and conative destination images that are stimulated and unraveled specifically around the choice of following a plant-based diet. This choice clearly can exert a profound influence on an individual's perceptions and experiences of destinations, which have been approached holistically within current frameworks used to understand destination image development and the factors that influence them in this context.

6. Reflection and recommendations for further research

The evidence analysis indicates that following a plant-based diet reports specific destination image development processes rooted in perceptions of progressiveness, opportunities to experience authentic local settings and to engage with local communities. The tone adopted by those who contributed to this research was generally very positive as interviewees explained in detail how their plant-based diets add benefits to their perceptions and experiences of the places they visit. However, it is also important to note that these processes may derive in travel behaviours and perceptions that can potentially hinder and achieve the opposite of social integration and positive destination image building. It could be argued that when destinations have a very limited or non-existent offer to cater to the needs of this tourist market, negative images of place can develop. These could lead tourists to note a lack of understanding of the environmental, ethical and health-related issues that drive forward the motivation to follow a plant-based diet from the local community's perspective, potentially resulting in judgment and

resentment. This in turn may create division and widen social gaps between those who follow plant-based diets and those who do not. As many tourists that follow plant-based diets choose to visit and support businesses operating in line with their personal normative beliefs, social alienation may occur. This can result in journeys off-the-beaten-track that actually insulate this market segment fracturing opportunities for cross-cultural understanding – if following a diet is approached from the cultural perspective. It is therefore clear that plant-based diets may report benefits to perceptions and experiences of places and local communities. But they can also result in negative destination images and conative behaviours that segregate these tourists as opposed to integrate them with the wider local population.

This study stems from the generosity of 20 individuals that spoke soundly about how their plant-based diets influence their destination image formation process. But evidently, there is ample scope for approaching the subject area using a larger sample through focus groups which would result in even richer conversations and sharing of perspectives. Different destinations have contrasting varieties of culinary resources to offer the plant-based market, either rich or poor, long-standing or developing. Further studies could use a case-study approach to evaluate plant-based images of specific destinations. The influence of specific socio-demographic indicators such as age, gender and orientation on this type of tourists' destination image development process is also a relevant and interesting area to study further. As noted above, plant-based diets may result in negative destination images and segregating conative behaviours. Hence further research could place a specific emphasis on the negative aspects of destination image building that plant-based diets may engender. Importantly, this research has specifically focused on the role of plant-based food. However, veganism as such encompasses a much wider range of lifestyle choices including clothing and the use of cosmetics among others. This provides opportunities to study how veganism in a broader sense impacts destination images and travel experiences among individuals who, in their decisions as consumers, perceive themselves as taking a lesser toll on the planet's finite resources and those we share it with.

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