

Report Summary: Can simple nudges reduce meat consumption?

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Overview: In order to investigate how to steer large groups of people towards choosing more environmentally sustainable diets, we carried out a field experiment encouraging vegetarianism at Cambridge college formal halls.

Aims: The aim was to find an implementable intervention, which reduces unsustainable meat consumption.

Process/methodology: As choice architects, we manipulated formal hall online booking forms in three independent experiments to see how different ‘nudges’ impacted on the choice made between a meat and vegetarian meal. A nudge works with the cognitive biases associated with automatic thinking while maintaining freedom of choice. People often make decisions that are not in their own best interest – smoking, overeating and binge drinking are all examples. Theoretically, a nudge can be designed to reverse these choices (Campbell- Arvai, Arvai & Kalof, 2012). Experiment 1 involved alternating (in successive weeks) the label of the meat meal between “meat” and “normal”/“standard” to see whether a “meat” label encouraged more vegetarian bookings. Experiments 2 and 3 involved alternating the order in which meat and vegetarian options appeared on the booking form (experiment 3 involved manipulating a default system in particular).

Results: The nudges for Experiment 1 and Experiment 3 did not work. At first it appeared that our second nudge did encourage more vegetarian bookings. However, further investigation has indicated that it may not have worked in the way intended because people made mistakes on booking.

Recommendations: The fact that experiments 1 and 2 were not significant, as well as the lack of success during our third experiment, suggests that students have strong, pre- conceived intentions about meal choice, which a default setting cannot overcome at time of booking. This suggests that stronger choice interventions, such as coupling with education or even regulation may be required to effectively reduce meat consumption in Western diets.

Conclusions: Our findings show that these nudges don’t work for formal booking at

Cambridge University colleges. However, we are known colloquially as “the bubble” for the reason that we are an unrepresentative sample of the British general public. There is heterogeneity of values across and within populations (Sunstein & Reisch, 2013) so that a one-size-fits-all solution is not what we should seek when it comes to changing diets or solving climate change.

Next steps: As our results were not significant, we cannot, from this study, directly recommend actions to take. However, we can strongly recommend further experiments by students and staff at the University who are welcome to use our experimental template and introductory knowledge on the topic. These include moving the vegetarian meal to the front of the buffet, as at the moment vegetarian is almost always the last meal option students will come to; offering a price incentive on vegetarian meals; better understanding the role of sex and culture in response to nudges with regards to meat consumption; and investigating the effects of adding images next to meal options in the canteen or booking form.

Further information: If you want to read the full report with concise information on the impacts of meat consumption/animal agriculture industries then email me at gs512@cam.ac.uk. Further “emotive” information is available in film material, including “Cowspiracy: The sustainability secret”. Ethical issues are not mentioned in the report but Marian Dawkins writes well on the contentious issue of animal welfare.

Photo(s)/graphics related to the project: No copyright requirements, share as you please.

About you: Our names are Georgia Stewart, Riya Patel and Gail Sucharitakul. We all do Natural Sciences (Biological).



Motivation: My co-authors and I are all studying 1B Natural Sciences (Ecology). We are all interested in the complex triangle of meat consumption (or food more generally), the environment and animal welfare.

Personal outcomes from project: While it’s a shame that changes may not be made directly from this project, it is important to remain objective and appreciate that we have at least crossed one option off the list, for the time being. I’ve learnt a lot about the meat industry, but more about how people here can be set in their ways and resist change on all fronts. Some catering managers were reluctant to dedicate any time to be included in our project. While of course they are busy, this project was concerned with sustainability in their area of university operations and they owe it to the student body to at least be curious. Pressure from college students may be required.

Vision: I hope this project might bring the dark side of meat-consumption under the radar of catering teams in different colleges, and also of the university boards appointing managers and corporations to

run our food networks. There are potentially many different ways to encourage sustainable consumption, reaching beyond the topic of food, and the university should hold this as a foremost priority, hiring teams with intuition in this area.

What's next?: Post-degree I would like to travel, maybe do a masters in sustainable policy, or in sustainable food/agriculture policy more specifically, and then probably work in the finance sector - encouraging pensions, institutions, asset managers and private corporations to think carefully about where they choose to invest their money. If you're interested in "sustainable finance" then check out Positive Investment (<http://positiveinvest.org/>), contact us and come along to any of our weekly meetings in Cambridge. It's super interesting and a great way to make a larger scale difference to our future.