

WHAT'S IN A NAME? AN ANALYSIS OF VEGAN AND 'PLANT-BASED' LABELS.

Report One 2022



CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Origins of 'plant-based'	4
Modern definitions of 'plant-based'	4
From medical to mainstream	6
Definition and origins of 'vegan'	6
The Vegan Society stance on 'plant-based'	7
Consumer perception	7
Stigma and depoliticising veganism	8
Vegan or 'plant-based'?	9
Conclusion	11

The goal of this research is to understand whether the increased use of the phrase 'plant-based' for vegan food and drink products is helping or hindering the wider vegan movement. In order to answer this key question, The Vegan Society has produced this initial report which provides a detailed overview of the issue.



INTRODUCTION

This report is the first publication of a multistage research project addressing the relationship between 'plant-based' products and the wider vegan movement. The goal of this research is to understand whether the increased use of the phrase 'plant-based' for vegan food and drink products is helping or hindering the wider vegan movement. In order to answer this key question, The Vegan Society has produced this initial report which provides a detailed overview of the issue. In addition, through The Vegan Society's consumer research partner Attest (an online consumer research platform), 2000 people were surveyed in the UK to understand consumer perceptions regarding the use of the terms 'vegan' and 'plant-based'. The results from that survey will be published in the coming months.

This is a collaborative project between The

Vegan Society and The University of Manchester, led by Dr Jack Coffin. Dr Jack Coffin is a member of The Vegan Society's Research Advisory Committee, which supports the staff and trustees of The Vegan Society by conducting and sharing academic and other research relevant to veganism. In his early career, Jack was interested in the role of markets and consumption in relation to issues of equity, diversity and inclusion. Over time, he has become increasingly interested in the diverse array of animals that are excluded from, or treated inequitably within, markets and consumer culture. His current work focuses on the possibility that consumers can improve the lives of animals by making different choices, hence his interest in understanding why certain consumers prefer vegan options and why others prefer 'plant-based' products.



ORIGINS OF 'PLANT-BASED'

The first thing to acknowledge is that the modern use of the term 'plant-based' is contested. One understanding of a 'plant-based' diet is one whereby people eat foods mostly from plants and avoid animal-derived products but do not exclude animal products entirely. For example, someone following a 'plant-based' diet will mostly eat vegetables, fruits and legumes but may also incorporate small amounts of egg, dairy or even perhaps meat into their diet. There is no universally accepted definition of 'plant-based'.

It is thought that the term 'plant-based' was coined by [Dr T. Colin Campbell](#) in the early 1980s. Dr Campbell felt the need to come up with an "objective, scientifically valid" phrase to describe a diet with no animal products, but one which avoided the controversy, or "charged atmosphere", of using the word 'vegetarian'. The feeling within the scientific community at

the time was that vegetarianism, and the little-understood veganism, were ideas "outside of normal science".

"Plant-based" and then later "whole food, plant-based" emerged as suitable phrases to essentially describe vegetarianism. As such, the phrase 'plant-based' has its origins in efforts to depoliticise veganism/vegetarianism and avoid controversy within the scientific community.

It seems that, at its birth, 'plant-based' was exclusively used to reference a desirable diet in order to combat the risk of cancer. At some point, the phrase was picked up from outside of the nutritional and oncological sciences and ended up being popularised to describe individual foods, cosmetics, fashions, etc. How, exactly, this happened is unclear. What is clear, however, is that the use of the phrase 'plant-based' by brands is widespread.

MODERN DEFINITIONS OF 'PLANT-BASED'

'Plant-based' is a deeply confusing phrase due to its ambiguity and contested meaning.

“ [A]lthough the phrase is now often used synonymously with 'vegetarian' or—now especially—'vegan', it is also increasingly used in contexts in which people are trying to reduce the amount of meat and other animal products in their diet, rather than to eliminate them entirely. [Oxford English Dictionary](#)

Merriam-Webster, arguably the most trusted US-based dictionary, has recently defined 'plant-based'. According to their dictionary, 'plant-based' has two definitions, these are:

“ *"Made or derived from plants" and "consisting primarily or entirely of food (such as vegetables, fruits, nuts, oils, and beans) derived from plants"*

[Merriam-Webster](#)

In an earlier blog post on the issue of defining 'plant-based', the dictionary group made the following comment on the relationship between 'vegan' and 'plant-based':

“ *"In subsequent decades plant-based has come to be employed in a looser fashion by many people. In many instances it can be difficult to*

say why speakers choose to distinguish between vegan and plant-based; possible reasons include a perceived animus toward vegans, or the desire to be semantically precise. [Merriam-Webster](#)

[Cambridge Dictionary](#) has defined 'plant-based' as "consisting or made completely of plants, or mainly of plants". The "mainly of plants" aspect of this definition indicates that, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, non-vegan products can be considered 'plant-based' provided they are mainly plants. Of course, this is further complicated by using the word 'mainly' which is yet another ambiguous word – at what point do we consider something to be 'mainly' made from plants?

Outside of the dictionary, there are more competing, and inconsistent, definitions of 'plant-based' used by various groups:

[The British Dietetic Association](#) defines a 'plant-based' diet as:

“A plant-based diet is based on foods that come from plants with few or no ingredients that come from animals.”

In a 2020 academic journal article, [Feher et al.](#), described followers of a 'plant-based' diet as those who base their diet on plants and greatly reduce or eliminate animal products, but do not necessarily abstain from animal products completely, including meat:

“People using a plant-based diet do not consider meat a necessary and integral part of their daily nutritional needs. Some individuals may choose simply to limit the amount of animal product consumed rather than removing it completely from the diet.”

[BBC Good Food](#) defines a 'plant-based' diet as follows:

“A plant-based diet is any diet that focuses around foods derived from plant sources. This can include fruit, vegetables, grains, pulses, legumes, nuts and meat substitutes such as soy products. People often have different interpretations of what 'plant-based' eating looks like. Some people still include small amounts of animal products such as meat and fish, while focusing mainly on vegetarian foods – this is referred to as a semi-vegetarian or flexitarian diet.”

A study by [Storz \(2022\)](#) published in the European Journal of Clinical Nutrition researched how the phrase 'plant-based diet' is used by researchers in nutrition intervention studies. Storz found that of the 44 studies analysed, 50% defined 'plant-based' as totally excluding animal products, meaning they considered 'plant-based' and vegan to be the same. Furthermore, "In ~20% of the retrieved studies, a plant-based diet included meat and fish. One-third of studies allowed the consumption of dairy products."

Commenting on these findings, [Storz](#) says "... researchers have varying ideas about the content of a plant-based diet. Concepts range widely from a traditional vegan diet (excluding all animal-derived products) to a semi-vegetarian diet or even an omnivorous diet."

The above research tells us that 'plant-based' lacks a common definition, or understanding even, within professions where the term is commonly used such as nutrition and research. Such wide-ranging definitions of 'plant-based' create confusion and contribute to the ongoing ambiguity of the term.

To add another level of complexity, the term 'plant-based' may also have different meanings in different situations. The definitions above are

for 'plant-based' *diets*, which may contrast to the consumer understanding of a 'plant-based' *product*.

FROM MEDICAL TO MAINSTREAM

The most formal definition of a 'plant-based' product is from the [Plant Based Foods Association](#), based in the US. In its Certified Plant Based Claim Certification Program, it considers 'plant-based' to mean:

“Plant-based foods are defined as foods made from plants that do not contain any animal derived ingredients.

Plant-based foods include foods from whole grains, nuts, seeds, and/or legumes (peas, beans, and other pulses), vegetables, fruits, fungi, and algae.”

These conflicting definitions across both similar and different situations are very likely to cause confusion to food producers and consumers alike. 'Plant-based' is often used interchangeably with the term vegan, and many people would assume that a 'plant-based' product does not contain animal products. However, there are various factors, such as marketing preferences and limited regulation, that lead to perfectly vegan and non-vegan products being labelled as

'plant-based'. Some examples of this are:

- Rustlers, the microwaved burger brand, launched a 'plant-based' burger in 2021 which included a slice of dairy cheese – making the burger not vegan. After the launch, [The Grocer](#) reported that “The latest confusion over the [Rustlers burger](#) suggests it's time for a more clear-cut definition [of plant-based] in the UK... The simplest being that plant-based should equate to vegan”. Rustlers have since reworked the packaging to say 'plant based patty'.

- An animal-product-free meat company, [Prime Roots](#), does not use 'plant-based' or 'vegan' to describe their product despite it being vegan. Instead, they use “koji-meat”, in reference to the fungi used to make the product. According to their website, this is because “we try to separate ourselves from the vegan label. We believe Koji-Meat is a more inclusive way of talking about our products.”

- The issue is also gaining traction outside of the food and drinks industry. In 2020 [Garnier](#), a health and beauty brand, launched a shampoo bar labelled as '94% plant-based' which contains honey – making it not vegan.

DEFINITION AND ORIGINS OF 'VEGAN'

Veganism existed as a concept within the membership of The Vegetarian Society until several members broke away to form The Vegan Society in 1944. The Vegan Society first defined veganism in 1949 before eventually settling on the current definition in 1988:



“Veganism is a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude—as far as is possible and practicable—all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other

purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of animals, humans and the environment. In dietary terms it denotes the practice of dispensing with all products derived wholly or partly from animals."

[The Vegan Society](#)

Veganism is not a diet, though what we eat plays a large role in the day-to-day experiences of being vegan. The diet of a vegan, as the definition of veganism states, excludes all animal-derived

products including meat, eggs, dairy and honey. This then extends further into other forms of consumption. For example, vegans do not wear animal-derived products such as wool or leather and do not use animals for their own convenience or entertainment, e.g. horse riding and zoos.

It is also important to note that for many people, veganism is a deeply held ethical belief. In January 2020, an [employment tribunal confirmed](#) that veganism comes within the scope of legal protection under the 2010 Equality Act. Claiming our rights in [law](#) helps vegans around the world to live a life more closely aligned to their values.

THE VEGAN SOCIETY STANCE ON 'PLANT-BASED'

In 2019-2020, The Vegan Society fed into the Publicly Available Specifications (PAS) run by the British Standards Institution (BSI) which aimed to clarify recommendations about the composition and characteristics of 'plant-based' foods. In the draft document, the BSI said that "plant-based foods may be understood to occupy a position between 'vegan' and 'vegetarian'" and that "plant-based foods: should not contain any ingredient derived from slaughtered or dead animals; and should contain a **maximum of 5%** of ingredients in the final product that are 'animal-derived'." In the public consultation to this PAS, The Vegan Society commented that it "supports transparency for consumers via product labelling. After considering feedback from our supporters, we strongly believe that a product labelled as 'Plant-Based' would be considered by most vegans to be **free from animal-derived ingredients**. As a term

closely linked with veganism, we would, therefore, only support a Plant-Based PAS which observed a [completely free from animal-derived ingredients](#) standard".

Following the consultation period and discussion with the steering committee, BSI published the "[100% plant-based](#)" PAS which states "100% plant-based foods should be food whose characterizing ingredients are derived from plants and should not contain any animal-derived ingredient". It is important to note that the PAS document was changed from "plant-based foods" to "100% plant-based foods".

There is currently an International Standard for "plant-based foods" being developed by the ISO. The Vegan Society is part of the steering committee and the standard will be published in 2023.

CONSUMER PERCEPTION

In 2022, research findings from [Veylinx](#) found that there was a 16% increase in consumer demand for hot dogs that were labelled 'meatless' rather than 'vegan'. The research was conducted in the

US and presented multiple options which also included 'veggie hot dog', 'plant-based hot dog' and 'animal-free hot dog'. The Veylinx report does not mention why consumers would rather have a

hot dog labelled 'meatless' rather than 'vegan'. In 2019, research from [Technomic](#) showed that 58% of consumers would rather buy 'plant-based' foods, 49% would purchase vegetarian foods, and 43% would buy vegan. According to this research, consumers also think that vegan and vegetarian foods do not taste as good as 'plant-based' ones. This is not surprising: research from [The Vegan Society and The Ecologist](#) found that many consumers perceive vegan food as being "un-tasty" and that a perceived lack of tasty alternatives is a barrier to veganism.

In 2020, The Vegan Society [surveyed](#) a nationally representative sample of 1000 people in the UK to hear their thoughts on the use of the word 'plant-based'. Below are some of the highlights from that survey:

- 64.1% of the public believe that the term 'plant-based' means the product contains absolutely no animal products (i.e. vegan)
- 26.9% of the public believe that the term 'plant-based' means the product may contain small amounts of milk and/or eggs
- 9% of the public believe that the term 'plant-

based' means the product may contain small amounts of meat

- Within dietary groups (vegan, vegetarian, partly vegetarian, avoids certain food for religious or cultural reasons, none of the above), the majority of each group believed 'plant-based' to mean vegan. Interestingly, it was meat-eaters who felt most strongly about this at 69.5%

- When segmenting age groups, the majority of each group also believed 'plant-based' to mean vegan.

The Vegan Society also looked at which of the two terms – vegan and 'plant-based' – the public preferred, and found that:

- 52.8% of the public prefer the term 'vegan', and 47.2% prefer the term 'plant-based'
- Perhaps unsurprising, vegans felt most strongly about this – with 71.2% of those questioned favouring the term 'vegan'
- There were marginal differences within age groups, with all groups favouring 'vegan' except those aged 55-65 who slightly preferred 'plant-based'.

STIGMA AND DEPOLITICISING VEGANISM

In 2020, [Faunalytics](#) found that many vegetarians and omnivores had hostile or negative opinions of vegans. Terms used to describe vegans ranged from "pretentious to aggressive". The report found that those who harboured negative opinions of vegans feared experiencing similar stigma if they went vegan themselves. This perceived fear of stigma acts as a disincentive to going vegan.

According to research conducted by [The Vegan Society and The Ecologist](#), many vegans reported feeling that they are "victims of stereotypes" such as "extremists, pretentious, elitists and 'unmasculine'". The most prevalent answer was the accusation of being "disruptive and violent, generating discomfort in others." These perceptions of vegans may be driving some brands to avoid using the word 'vegan' to describe

their product as they want to distance themselves from any negative perceptions associated with veganism.

[99designs](#), a graphic design service which offers support to brands as they market their product, recommends vegan brands reconsider using the word vegan on their product, saying that:



"...the term "vegan" on a product can make it seem exclusive and turn non-vegans away. Using terms like "plant-based" can help get the same idea across without potentially turning away would-be customers that aren't exclusively vegan."

There is a growing body of literature which takes a critical approach to the mainstreaming of veganism in popular culture. The argument is that agri-food companies are capitalising on veganism's growing popularity to boost their profits. These companies are often not ideologically aligned with veganism but see veganism from a purely consumerist perspective rather than as a moral belief. Some companies, wary of having their brand associated with a moral or political stance, have started using the phrase 'plant-based' as an apolitical alternative. According to research published by [Sexton et al. in 2022](#):



“These neutralising efforts are apparent in the agri-food industry’s recent uptake of ‘plant-based’ over ‘vegan’ as their favoured product descriptor due to the former being seen as more palatable to a broader consumer base (Sexton, 2018; Clay et al., 2020). Giraud (2021) is similarly critical of this emergent ‘plant-based capitalism’ that has seen individuals and corporate brands exploiting the now fashionable vegan identity without any deeper commitment to systemic

VEGAN OR ‘PLANT-BASED’?

Should brands use the word vegan or ‘plant-based’ to describe their products? Some evidence suggests that vegan should be used as it provides clarity and is widely understood. Others suggest that ‘plant-based’ appeals to a broader audience. It’s worth trying to understand the strengths and limitations of these labels in greater depth.

[Forbes](#), an American business magazine, found mixed results on the vegan vs ‘plant-based’ issue. They found that whether it was best to use ‘plant-

ethical living (see also Reed, 2020). These commentators speak for a wider movement in vegan studies calling for urgent critical reflection on this corporatized direction of travel.”

Brands which use ‘plant-based’ but shy away from using the word ‘vegan’ on their product are at risk of being perceived as disingenuous and inauthentic by bandwagoning on the growth of veganism but without displaying any deeper commitment to, or even sympathy with, the ethics of veganism – also known as a form of greenwashing.

Food companies such as [VFC](#), a vegan fried ‘chicken’ brand, do not use ‘plant-based’ and only use vegan. According to the VFC website, this is because “We want to use our food as a starting point for a bigger conversation about the rights of animals, the health of our planet, and how our food choices impact these.”

Brands like VFC are run by vegans with an unapologetic and passionate commitment to ending animal exploitation – as is the ultimate goal of veganism. It isn’t necessary of course for brands which offer vegan products to be vegan themselves. However, the profits enjoyed by these brands are due to the increasing awareness of, and opposition to, animal exploitation and its related environmental and health concerns.

based’ or vegan depends on the nature of the product being sold. The suggestion from Forbes was that companies aiming to sell to health, environmental or animal welfare conscious consumers should use the vegan label because “it makes sense to label your product clearly as being suitable for those groups who will be actively searching the packet for this information”. However, “if you’re aiming your product at mass consumers not overly interested in health,

sustainability, ethics or allergens, I believe it's still worth putting, in small letters, tucked away on the back of the packaging (as well as discreetly on your website) something like 'suitable for vegans' or 'vegan-friendly' or a vegan trademark symbol".

However, as addressed at the start of this report, there is no universal understanding of what 'plant-based' means. Even if 'plant-based' is perceived as a term which enjoys greater market appeal, it is still a phrase that lacks broad understanding. The variety of 'plant-based' definitions means that consumers could be finding 'plant-based' more appealing because they think 'plant-based' products contain milk, eggs or even meat. What is clear is that one person's understanding of what 'plant-based' means will be different from the next person. This is not an issue with the word vegan. Unlike 'plant-based', vegan is an unambiguous term which provides consumers with a certain standard of clarity which 'plant-based' simply cannot.

According to a 2020 report by [Euromonitor](#), the vegan label enjoys the most penetration in the European and North American markets, whereas the 'vegetarian' label enjoys greater success in the

Asia-Pacific and Australian regions. "Penetration" in this context refers to the frequency that the words appear on product packaging. The report also notes that 'plant-based' lags behind in all regions in comparison to vegan or vegetarian, however, the 'plant-based' claim may be perceived as more aligned with reducing or 'flexitarian' efforts.

There is a lack of data on UK markets with regards to consumer attitudes towards 'plant-based' and vegan. The Vegan Society's 2020 survey is one of the few pieces of research to interrogate this in any depth. Although there is a perception that 'plant-based' is more appealing to wider audiences, it also seems to be a confusing and less well-known label. The vegan label is sometimes assumed to be 'off-putting' for those who do not self-identify as vegan, but it is also clear and well known. Further empirical research is needed to test these assumptions, to better understand which label consumers prefer, if any, and why. This is why The Vegan Society has been conducting research tailor-made to answer these questions, which will be published in the near future.



CONCLUSION

Vegan or 'plant-based'? It's not an easy thing to understand. When taking a hard look at the issue, there are layers upon layers of increasingly complicated and inconsistent findings, perspectives and opinions.

Thanks to The Vegan Society's definition, the term vegan has a clear and universally accepted meaning. If a food or drink product is labelled vegan, consumers have confidence knowing that it should be completely free of animal products – this confidence is guaranteed when brands use the [Vegan Trademark](#). As this report has demonstrated, it's not as clear when something is

labelled 'plant-based'. Clearly, there are contested definitions of 'plant-based' and further debate is needed about the effectiveness of its use.

This is the first publication of a long-term research project into the use of 'plant-based'. Our hope is that this report has highlighted the issue as one of importance and sets the stage for our future research findings into consumer perceptions. As this phrase becomes increasingly widespread, our task is to determine whether 'plant-based' helps or hinders the vegan movement.





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