

'Techno mums' motivations towards vegetarian and vegan lifestyles

Ariela Mortara

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IULM University (Milan), Institute of Communication, behavior and consumption

Corresponding author:

Ariela Mortara

E-mail: ariela.mortara@iulm.it

Abstract

In the last few years, food related issues have become highly relevant in private and public discourses; along with the increased interest in food safety, both vegetarianism and veganism have enlarged their popularity and acceptance. The general concern toward the consumption of healthy food should be even more important for the mothers wanting to provide safe food for their children and therefore adopting alternative lifestyles such as vegetarian and vegan diets. However, the literature regarding the vegetarian and vegan choices does not focus on the motivations fostering mothers toward these lifestyles. This paper tries to fill this gap presenting the results of a study aimed at investigating the motivations underlying the adoption of vegetarian and vegan lifestyles. Such motivations emerge from the online dialogs among a very specific sample of mothers, the so called 'techno mums'.

Keywords: vegetarian, vegan, netnographic research.

Introduction

In the past years issues related to the food have become highly relevant in private and public discourses. Thanks to such events like the pollution of environment and waters and, more specifically, the alarm related to the epidemic of obesity in children and teenagers (Brown et al., 2009), healthy eating has become a public issue and consumers are more and more concerned about what they eat and drink. Such concerns have contributed to the diffusion of biological food, have forced retailers to make public the traceability of food, and have generally affected food-related consumption practices, leading to the consumption of more healthy and 'safe' food and encouraging the embracing of vegetarian and vegan lifestyles.

But if vegetarianism and veganism seem to be increasing in popularity and acceptance in the Western countries, as far as the media system is concerned, the percentage of people practicing vegetarian diets has not increased much over the past 30 years (Maurer, 2002), in the United States and Canada. In Italy, according to Eurispes data (2013), only 4.9% of Italians declare themselves vegetarian and 1.1% vegan; that means 6% of the population, more or less 3,720,000 individuals. A niche in the market that shows a slight increase if compared to the 4.5% of 2012. The same report highlights that women declare to choose these lifestyles because of ethical reasons (mostly their love for animals - 66.7% vs. 30.8% in men), while men seem to be more concerned with health-related motivations (42.3% vs. 28.2% in women). Most of vegetarian or vegan people are young adults whose age is between 25 and 34 years, and whose main motivation is "the respect toward living beings" (52.2%) followed by "it is good for your health" (39.1%). Except for some papers aiming at medical aspects (i.e. Jacobs, Dwyer, 1988), the literature regarding the vegetarian and vegan choices does not focus on the motivations fostering mothers toward these lifestyles. This paper tries to fill this gap presenting the results of a study aimed at investigating the motivations underlying the adoption of vegetarian and

vegan lifestyles. Such motivations emerge from the analysis of online dialogs among a very specific sample of mothers, the so called 'techno mums'

Literature review

'Techno mums'

The involvement of mothers in the virtual world is not so recent: the issue of mommy blogging has been internationally debated, in 2005, at the inaugural conference of BlogHer, a community of female bloggers (managers, politicians and intellectuals) interested in discussing the issues of parenting (Lopez, 2009).

According to quite recent data (Scarborough, 2011), in the United States, 3.9 million women declare themselves bloggers and 14% of mothers declare to engage in blogging, or at least, to use blogs to search for information related to the problems of child care; in Italy moms-bloggers are around 3,000 (Campitelli, 2013). But the mommy blogging is just one aspect of the broader phenomenon of 'digital mums', a phenomenon that, in the U.S. alone, encompasses 32 million women with children under the age of 18 (Razorfish, CafeMom, 2009). 'Techno mums' (Roscioni, 2011), or Mums 2.0 (Bonsu, 2011), combine the ability to use the new technologies with the desire to share experiences related to their being mothers (Bailey, 2008)

A Nielsen's study (2012), conducted in Italy on a sample of 1.034 mothers with children aged between 0 and 5 years, identifies the typical digital mom as aged between 25 and 44 years (93%), married (76% of cases), in possession of a degree (59%), and with a full-time job (57%). They are hyper-connected, thanks to the mobile (61% of them use a smartphone and 25% have a tablet), although they mostly connects themselves from home (84%) for an average time of four hours a day.

Among the activities carried out online, almost the entire sample (92%) uses e-mail, 72% spends time on social networks, and 51% participates in discussions on blog/forum. Furthermore, 64% of the surveyed moms share online, mainly through social networks, information about their children and the percentage rises to 71% if the child's age is between 0 and 2 years.

Among the different sources of information on new products for children, Internet is referred to as the most important (48%): in fact 60% of the interviewed mothers state to consult websites dedicated to children, so that the web becomes a source of information more important than television (43%), and the advice of friends and family (41%).

The digital mums manifest different level of online engagement (Dubini, Campana, 2009), which ranges from the simple response to external stimuli (as surveys or specific communications) to the management of a personal blog through which they produce information and, at the same time, encourage comments and readers' reactions. However, techno mums mostly interact using a relational mode in which users participate in online conversations through social networks, share photographs and other contents, comment on the posts in forums, so that they can be defined as a proper web tribe (Giordano et al., 2011). As web tribe members, they interact within dedicated spaces (i.e. the most attended forums), discussing a particular brand or products for children and prefer discussion topics that are connected to the most important part of their life, motherhood.

Vegetarian and vegan lifestyles

The term "vegetarian", that has been coined in the mid-19th century (Fox, Ward, 2008), defines a variety of dietary choices that avoid some (at least meat) or all foods (i.e. fish, eggs and dairy products) coming from the animal reign (Barr, Chapman 2002). Vegan people adopt a stricter diet avoiding all animal products not only for food, but also for clothing or other purposes (McDonald, 2000; Larsson et al., 2001).

Beside religious motivations (i.e. Buddhism and Seventh Day Adventism contemplate abstinence from the consumption of meat and animal products), according to literature, two are the predominant drivers leading people to engage in a vegetarian or vegan diet: ethical concerns or health concerns (Jabs, Devine, Sobal, 1998). People avoiding meat following a moral imperative refuse to harm animals

for food or other reasons (Regan, 1983; Fessler *et al.* 2003; Whorton, 1994), while people avoiding meat for health concerns believe that consuming meat has a dangerous effect on health (Key *et al.*, 2006; Kim, Houser, 1999; Wilson *et al.*, 2004), particularly when the animals are treated with antibiotics or are otherwise perceived as harmful. Moreover, in the last years, thanks to the growing concerns toward the environment, an environmental vegetarianism is also emerged. Environmental vegetarians are concerned about the impact of meat production and consumption (Reijnders, Sabate, 2001; Mohr, 2005) on the environment and ecosystem.

Methodology

The study has been conducted through a netnographic methodology applied on Italian forums in order to monitor the online conversations of techno moms.

The netnographic approach is defined by Kozinets (2002, p. 62) as “a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications”. The netnographic approach follows precise methodological stages and allows, after identifying the appropriate forums and blogs (*entrée*), the direct copying of the posts and images, and of any interactions between members of the community (data collection), as well as the qualitative analysis of content (trustworthy interpretation) through classification, encoding and contextualization of communicative acts¹.

The following study has been conducted on a purposive sample of forums, using a non-intrusive approach based on monitoring online dialogues without direct intervention on online activities.

The 753 collected posts have been written between January 1st and August 15th (considering the date of the last post and not the one that originated the discussion). Such time-span has been chosen in order to understand the current debate on the issue, since, according to the previous mentioned data (Eurispes, 2013), the acceleration of the spreading of these lifestyle is quite recent. In the chosen time-span, the 753 posts represent the “universe” of the discussions retrieved through specific keywords.

Starting from the research goal, the sampling has followed a procedure articulated in many stages (Bailey 1978); the first stage was to identify the main forums used by the techno moms through the special search features offered by Google. As confirmed by others studies (Giordano *et al.*, 2011; Bernasconi, 2012), regarding the techno mums community, *Al Femminile* (<http://www.alfemminile.com>) and *Yahoo Answers* (<http://it.answers.yahoo.com>) had the highest number of posts even if they are not specifically dedicated to the motherhood (see table 1). The analysis has been then extended to other forums that, from previous researches on the subject of digital moms (Giordano *et al.*, 2011; Bernasconi, 2012), have emerged as privileged aggregation places: *forum.gravidanzaonline.it* (<http://forum.gravidanzaonline.it>), *nostrofiglio.it* (www.nostrofiglio.it), *leiweb* (<http://forum.quimamme.leiweb.it>), *mammole.it* (<http://www.mammole.it>) e *forum.pianetamamma.it* (<http://forum.pianetamamma.it>)².

Even though most of the posts have been written by authors hiding themselves behind nicknames, the gender emerges quite clearly from text analysis, so that it is possible to reasonably affirm that are actually mothers the ones who are involved in online discussions.

¹ Kozinets's methodology (2002; 2006) contemplates two more steps: ensuring ethical standards, and research representation, both of them have not been taken into account because of the not participative modality of analysis.

² The author has avoided specific vegetarian or vegan forums and generically health- or kitchen-related forums, in order to focus the research specifically on techno moms.

Tab. 1 – Forum and number of posts.

Forum	Number of posts
Yahoo	269
Al Femminile	212
Gravidanza on line	150
Pianeta mamma	63
Mammole.it (Nostrofiglio.it)	59
Qui mamme	0 (for the selected period)

The methodology used for the data interpretation follows the grounded theory approach (Glaser, 2001). The author of the paper has conducted a qualitative content analysis of the posts and has coded them according to the conceptual categories emerged from the existing literature.

Despite the differences existing between vegetarian and vegan lifestyles, given the more restrictive choice of aliments that vegans are allowed to eat (that could also lead to the shortage of some dietary elements), or the strength of believes driving people toward this peculiar choices (Poveya *et al.*, 2001), the collected posts often refer to both the lifestyles. Hence the author’s choice not to differentiate the analysis.

Results

Consistently with the existing literature (Fessler *et al.* 2003; Whorton 1994; Jabs *et al.*, 1998, Key *et al.*, 2006; Kim, Houser, 1999; Wilson *et al.*, 2004), the qualitative content analysis of posts has revealed that ethical concerns and health related concerns are indeed strong drivers toward the adoption of both vegetarian e vegan diets; besides that, the study has exposed some others key-areas of semantic-value: “societal concern”, “similarity with religion” and the “right to choose”, strongly related with the responsibility of motherhood (Tardy, 2000).

Ethical concerns

Ethical concern emerges as a powerful motivator, as already shown in previous research (Fox, Ward, 2008); “techno moms’, who adopt a vegetarian lifestyle, identify themselves as substantially altruistic, driven by humanistic reasons and willing to sacrifice themselves and their children (often non yet born) in order to respect all the living creatures; meat avoidance is perceived as a moral imperative not to harm animals for food or other reasons (Fessler *et al.* 2003, Whorton, 1994):

“And you know what? The life of my son is the most precious thing to me, but it is not worth more than the life of another living being. We humans have the same right to live as other animals have [...] Of course I understand that it is difficult to adopt this idea because we are born and grew up eating meat and believing that it is indispensable for us. And believing that other living beings are at our disposal and at disposal of our palate.” mammole.it, 21-04-2013³

“My son will never know the taste of meat (thankfully), but he will know how to respect all kind of life, what it means to feel empathy towards the weakest, and to what extent it is possible to despise the suffering of all living things. And this is more important than to please the taste.” mammole.it, 21-04-2013.

The different alimentation is part of a lifestyle in which moral issues predominate, leading the mothers to criticize the amoral behavior of the meat’s mass production:

“... Nature gives us much more than we can find in eating meat and fish, animals are now suffering because of uncivilized slaughtering and are farmed without any respect” alfemminile.it 19-05-13.

“Try to think about the cattle breeding, how they are brutally slaughtered and skinned alive, you hear their screams and also the other animals can hear them, you just imagine their fear ... Then tell me if it is really right to treat animals that way and if it is right to eat them after all they have suffered.” alfemminile.it, 20-05-13.

³ Verbatims have been translated by the author, who had tried to maintain the original form (punctuation, uppercase/lowercase choice, etc.). Verbatims feature the forums they have been posted in and the date.

For over ten years, I have completely eliminated the meat from my meals, because I have seen what happens in slaughterhouses and the thought of eating those poor animals makes me shudder!... I am an animal-rights activist, I have protested and I have fought through petitions for the welfare of those who have no voice.

Health related concerns

Consistently with existing studies (Key *et al.*, 2006; Kim, Houser, 1999; Wilson *et al.*, 2004), the collected posts show that the need to follow a healthy diet and the concerns about the safety of foods act as potent motivators for dietary change. Over the last decades, the increase in consumption of very caloric foods, rich in sugar and fat, together with a sedentary lifestyle, has led to an bigger risk of obesity and its related diseases, such as hypertension, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, respiratory disease and cancer. Consumption of fruits and vegetables can reduce the risk of the insurgency of these diseases (Joshiyura *et al.*, 2001):

“It’s useless to pretend not to see: eating animal derivatives (mind you, I’m not talking about those who have nothing to eat in the Third World) leads more easily to have “chronic” or “degenerative“ diseases, that are the most common diseases, debilitating and fatal, that affect rich countries, namely arteriosclerosis, osteoporosis, overweight-obesity, diabetes mellitus, hypertension, cancer.” *forumpianetamamme.it*, 27-05-13.

Preventing obesity from early age has become a major public health priority in the developed world (Horne *et al.*, 2011) and an important concern also for the techno mums.

“... foolish are the parents of thousands and thousands of obese children of Western countries, who probably will not reach the age of 40 due to heart problems.” *alfemminile.it*, 16-04-13.

“I too believe that meat is not healthy, especially in this modern era in which animals are kept in breeding chains, stuffed with unnatural food and antibiotics” *mammole.it*, 21-04-2013.

“[...] It’s a fact than the meat is harmful, it is documented” *forumpianetamamme.it*, 10-05-13.

Health related concerns about meat-eating show also a controversial position (Wilson *et al.*, 2004); ‘techno mums’ fear that vegetarian and particularly vegan diets could be harmful for children:

“I think it's cruel to force a child to be a vegetarian (or even worse a vegan), but above all, it is harmful.” *mammole.it*, 21-04-2013

“[...]Vegan, you have to take so many pills because there are so many deficiencies, because they do not eat anything that comes from animals!”*alfemminile.it* 20-02-13.

As shown by the literature (Sneijder, te Molder, 2005), ‘techno moms’ perceive also that the responsibility to balance their (and their sons) meal depends on individual practices. The health hazard does not reside in the choice of being vegetarians and vegans, but in the moral responsibility for not missing out on nutrients:

“I tell you from experience that if you follow a balanced diet, you do not become anemic, you just have to pay attention.” *forum pianetamamme.it* 10-05-13.

“Even the midwife, who is taking care of me, says that the vegan diet is fine, as long as it is balanced, ... as any other diet.” *alfemminile*, 28-05-13.

“However, I believe, and I have always sustained, that a pregnancy can be totally vegetarian, for good; of course, you have to integrate everything and to pay a lot of attention!” *alfemminile*, 18-02-13.

To support their statements, ‘techno moms’ often quote authoritative sources such as nutritionist associations and pediatrician or obstetrician:

“The American Dietetic Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics agree that well-planned vegan and vegetarian diets can meet the nutritional needs and promote normal growth in infants and young children” *yahoo answers*, 5 month ago.

“I decided to ask for explanations to my pediatrician. He also told me that a vegetarian or vegan diet is not harmful to the children, but that this kind of choice should be embraced wisely and that it is difficult to pursue at a social level.” forum.pianetamamme.it 10-05-13.

“Do you know that this doctor has said that vegan children have an immune defense system more efficient by 70%?” forum.pianetamamme.it 16-02-13.

Analogy with the religion

Beside ethical and health related concerns, the qualitative content analysis has highlighted other dimensions strongly related with the role of the informants. As parents have the right and duty to educate their children in a certain religious confession (McCullough, 2005), techno mums feel the same about the choice to engage in a specific lifestyle. Thus they compare the choice toward a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle to the choice of a religion: you engage in it if you truly believe in it and you will educate your children according to it

“I believe that, and maybe the comparison may seem blasphemous, [being vegan] is a bit like religion.” yahoo answers, 5 month ago.

“[for the children] the meat is something that you add, like a religious choice; if later, as an adult, you want to keep it we have already given it to you, but if you want to become vegetarian, or stop feeling Catholic, that's equally fine.” [alfemminile](http://alfemminile.it), 25-01-13.

“A bit like what it happens with religion (you educate a child according to the “mainstream” religion), nobody is going to prohibit anyone, as he is growing up, to embrace a faith different from that of the parent.” gravidanzaonline.it, 11-05-13.

Social concern

Consistently with their role, ‘techno mums’ seem to be pretty much anxious about the way in which a vegetarian, or worse a vegan, child will cope with his/her social life. The food limitations imposed by the parental choice are perceived, by some informants, as a possible act of cruelty toward the children, who often do not understand the motivations of such restriction.

“an example ... Think about a child’s birthday party ... You bring your vegan son ... what might he eat? ... no cake ... the sandwiches bread? probably not ... the sandwiches’ inside?... No. The fries? Who knows?... popcorn? ... probably not, there is butter As a result ... I see a lot of difficulties and this is just a small example.” forum.pianetamamme.it, 10-05-13.

The thing that I find sad is that a small child does not have the capacity to choose as an adult does and, especially for vegan children, it really sucks if you attend a friend’s party or the kindergarten’s party and you see other children eating a cake that is not vegan, or a ham sandwich and you can’t eat it, because your parents don’t want; but maybe you would eat it, because when you are three years old, what do you know about the motivations fostering this kind of choice? [alfemminile](http://alfemminile.it), 25-01-13.

The difficulties related to eating something different and special let often arise a big question for parents: should they choose for their children, which will be their diet?

Who has the right to choose?

Strongly connected to the parallelism between religious choice and dietary choice, arises the ethical question when parents have indeed the right to impose their personal dietary choice to their offspring. Techno mums are struggling between their right and honor, as a parent, to share with their children their dietary beliefs, and the awareness that being a vegetarian or a vegan is being part of a minority. Since the choice does not concern only the food, but often involves the choice of a lifestyle, the topic appears as very debated.

“My vegan brother-in-law tells me that the parents should choose for their children. He reminds me of this example: if you know that eating poison is dangerous, would you give it to your children? Since, according to him, the animal proteins are bad for the health, he has decided not to give them to his children.” forum.pianetamamme.it, 10-05-13.

“As a vegetarian, I chose to let my daughter eat meat, because I want her to be free to choose about feeding and about life in general, but if I had decided to let her become a vegetarian, I would not have to be judged as a bad mother.”
forumpianetamme.it, 10-05-13.

“My daughter will be vegan like us. And I do not see it as an imposition, but as the choice of a lifestyle: an omnivorous family chooses to give meat to his son, a vegan family chooses not to give it to him, but at that age is an imposition in any way”
forumpianetamme.it, 16-02-13.

“If you think to have the right to impose yourself on your children, obviously you decide also what they have to eat; I mean, the parents choose the name, the religion or the atheism, clothes, schools (at least until the child has no right to choose, i.e. until junior high or high school), so why should they not choose the diet as well?”
alfemminile.it, 25-01-13.

Conclusion and research limit

As the analysis of the posts shows, both ethical and health-related motivations foster some techno mums toward the adoption of vegetarian or vegan lifestyle. Respect for all the living being and concern about the harm that the intake of animal proteins can cause seem to be the most shared issues.

But the analysis lets emerge others areas of concern that are strictly related to the specificity of the motherhood: the social concern and the opportunity for parents to impose a certain choice to their children. Moms are afraid that vegetarian or vegan children could encounter some difficulties with food when attending kindergarten, or more mundane event like birthday parties, especially because they are too young to understand the reason why they cannot eat like the others children. Indeed, involving the children in a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle represents for some mothers a sort of imposition, especially when the father is omnivorous; but usually it seems totally natural for them to educate their offspring in sharing the same food choice, as it happens with religion. And in fact the comparison between choosing a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle and a specific religious confession emerges as a significant discussion issue in the examined posts, testifying that vegetarian and vegan people are truly engaged in their choice of lifestyle.

As far as the limits of the study are concerned, most of them are those that every researcher engaged in e-research encounters: a) the anonymity allowed by the Internet cannot guaranty that the examined posts are indeed written by ‘techno moms’, or even by women (but the tone of the discussion and the richness of details related to motherhood seem to be very reassuring); b) the lack of any socio-demographic information about the posts’ authors, i.e. job description or education, could limit the interpretation of content; c) the kind of topic, highly ideological, could encourage the presence of trolls (Shin, 2008), i.e. people who use the web to spread discord by starting arguments or by posting provocative or off-topic messages in forums, chat rooms, or blogs, thus invalidating the trueness of the discussion and consequently of the analysis (again, while examining the post, the used languages and the tone of voice let the researcher believe in their authenticity); c) the ethical problems related to all kind of e-research; indeed, beside the anonymity of contributors, Internet also guarantees the anonymity to the researcher (Denzin, 1999), who has the opportunity, unnoticed, to study, in a completely non-intrusive way, the online dialogues. Obviously some of the weaknesses of e-methods could be also seen as a strength (Hewson et al., 2003): indeed the anonymity could lessen the inhibition of informants toward sensitive topics (Langer, Beckman, 1005) or mitigate the effect of achieving a certain social desirability.

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