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The role of educational information on the environmental consequences of livestock production, for reducing meat consumption

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Abstract

Many people remain unaware of the high levels of environmental harm caused by agricultural production. There is a need therefore to raise awareness of the harm with a view to reducing livestock consumption and ultimately production, in order to contribute to a more sustainable environment. This research looked at whether providing information on environmental harm caused by livestock production to regular meat-eaters could contribute to a reduction in meat consumption. I also examined if age played a role in information receptiveness, and I looked at whether a belief that individual actions can contribute to environmental sustainability, was required for changes to occur.

Changing dietary practices is largely dependent on new information superseding existing antecedents. To investigate how this plays out, 12 participants across three age categories took part in focus groups, where a series of images and information about environmental consequences of livestock production were discussed, and pre and post-focus group surveys and food logs were undertaken.

I found the belief that individual dietary choices can make a positive difference to environmental sustainability was only effective for some participants; firstly, those who accepted the information about various environmental impacts of agricultural production provided in the focus group; and secondly, those who had locus of control to make dietary changes. Information receptiveness was highly variable by age, with older individuals being much less receptive than younger participants. Furthermore, antecedent influence was shown to be strongest in the 65+ year age group. Consequently, information targeting younger aged individuals is likely to produce better outcomes in terms of reduced meat consumption, and therefore greater environmental sustainability. For this to be effective however, younger individuals need to also be in a position where they are able to take control of their dietary decisions.

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