Plant-based diets on social media

How content on social media influence for maintaining a lifestyle

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ABSTRACT

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Plant-based food has recently been a frequently addressed topic for scientific research, mainly because of its benefits for the environmental sustainability, human health and animal welfare. Nonetheless, there is limited research on how people maintain a plant-based diet, as well as research gaps on the topic in relation to media and communication studies.

The purpose of this research is to provide new empirical data on how social media can inspire and/or influence a person to maintain a plant-based lifestyle. Using a qualitative method of in-depth interviews, the aim is to understand how content on social media motivates people to make sustainable movements in their real life. In other words, the research will provide insights on how a lifestyle can be upheld with the help of social media.

As a theoretical basis for the study, the following theories have been applied: The uses and gratification theory, cultivation analysis theory and social cognitive theory.

The findings suggest that social media is a useful tool for a person that wants to maintain a plant-based diet. Facebook, YouTube and Instagram are preferred online platforms for seeking and sharing information about the lifestyle and the most interesting contents for upholding a plant-based diet are food pictures, personal blogs and vlogs, documentaries about the environment and animal welfare, as well as product news and different discussions in virtual groups. The result also shows that people are most likely to change a behaviour after seeing content on social media that makes them emotional, in a positive or negative way.

Keywords: plant-based diets, qualitative in-depth interviews, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, uses and gratifications theory, cultivation analysis theory, social cognitive theory
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1. Introduction

This study aims to explore how social media can inspire and influence a person to maintain a plant-based diet. In fact, there is an ongoing debate on how to make people lowering their meat intake and consume more fruits and vegetables. The interest for plant-based lifestyles is growing because of its benefits for human health, environmental sustainability and animal welfare (Benulic, 2016; Karlsen, 2016). At the same time, the meat consumption is not decreasing. Globalisation and modernization have created easier ways of producing and consuming meat and with the reputation of being part of a wealthy diet, the meat is not only popular in the Western countries but now also desirable by the developing world (Beverland, 2014). Diet and sustainability are closely linked together and plant-based diets have shown to be better for the sustainable development since they require less water, land and energy resources (Dagevos & Voordouw, 2013).

Previous research on plant-based diets focused mainly on consumer's barriers for lowering their meat consumption, however there is limited empirical evidence of people's motivation for maintaining plant-based diets. Another thing identified is the lack of scientific media and communication research on the subject. The research problem of this study is to investigate what role social media has for maintaining a plant-based lifestyle and how social media function as a source for information. It is necessary with further knowledge on how content on social media can be used as a help for making sustainable choices and plant-based diets are therefore of interest from a media and communication research perspective. As mentioned, we live in a time where the meat production is constantly increasing, even though it has several negative effects on human health and the planet. A change is needed and perhaps an understanding of what makes people interested to maintain a more sustainable diet is one step ahead. This study can be useful for marketers, journalists and organisations which are interested in what content on social media that makes people feel a need to maintain a lifestyle with less meat.

1.1 Desposition

The following chapter will give further background on the topic of plant-based diets. Next, aim and research questions will be motivated and presented. Thereafter, a presentation of previous research within the fields of lifestyles, plant-based diets and social media will be looked into, in order to outline the field where this study belongs. The section after this consists of the theoretical framework which will be used in this research: the uses and gratifications theory, cultivation analysis theory and social cognitive theory. Next, the chosen method and material for the study will be revealed. Lastly, the analysis of the result is presented, followed by a discussion and a conclusion of the findings.
2. Background

If it is scientifically proven that plant-based diets are better for the world, why are people still consuming meat? Questions of these kinds have previous researchers been asking themselves and given answers to. As mentioned by Pohjolainen et al. (2015), there are several barriers for people to change to a plant-based diet, for example is meat seen as easier to prepare and there is a belief that it tastes better than vegetarian food. They also mentioned the social and symbolic role of certain food and that plant-based nourishment traditionally has been associated with something that complements the meat on the plate. Turner, Ferguson, Craig, Jeffries and Beaton (2013), described identity as another factor that is important when understanding why people choose to consume different kinds of food. Depending on an individual’s gender, does the social norms expect women and men to make different choices when it comes to food consumption. During the history meat has often been linked to status, power and masculinity, while vegetarian food is more associated with lower status, weakness and femininity (Prättälä et al., 2007; Turner et al., 2013).

However, the normalisation of replacing meat with plant-based food are rising. In Sweden, this can be seen both in reality and on social media. The Swedish music festival Way Out West decided 2012 to only serve vegetarian food on their festival area and the audience responded with positive feedback for this movement (Andersson, Jutbring & Lundberg, 2013). Another example is a commercial from the Swedish food retailer Coop. “Does children eat vegetarian food” is the title of the video, which was published on YouTube in March 2017 (CoopSverige, 2017). In the video, children are eating Spaghetti Bolognese and show enjoyment while consuming it. Not until the end of the commercial they get to know that their meals are made of vegetarian ingredients. The video ends with a headline saying “Children eats vegetarian food. If it is good”. A third example is the growing interest of information about plant-based diets on social media. There are several Swedish lifestyle accounts on YouTube that have a focus on plant-based diets, such as Therese Lindgren which today has over half a million subscribers (Therese Lindgren, 2016).

As understood from the mentioned examples above, there is an interest for a plant-based movement but as mentioned by Karlsen (2016), it is often easier to start a new lifestyle than to uphold it. A change from a meat based diet to a life with more plant-based food is not something that will happen by itself, the change requires an ongoing maintenance. The question of what makes a person maintain a plant-based diet is still unanswered and what role social media has in this process is unexplored. Media, in general, has shown to have the power to influence people to learn and adopt norms, as well as changing values and behaviours (McQuail, 2010). Information seeking on the Internet and interaction through social media has become an important part of people’s daily lives. This year, 2017, it was announced that more than half the world’s population are using the Internet and about a third of all people...
uses social media (We are social, 2017). Among the younger generations in Sweden, Facebook is currently the biggest social media platform which has most users, and the image sharing app Instagram is the second largest. The video sharing site YouTube is also a popular social media, which is used by most individuals in all ages (Internetstiftelsen i Sverige, 2016).

Social media has become a central part of people’s lives and how they live and a research of social media in relation to lifestyle choices are therefore a relevant combination. When understanding what kind of content that are motivating people to uphold a plant-based lifestyle, further knowledge can be identified on how social media inspire and/or influence a sustainable behaviour.
3. Aim

This study is a scientific media and communication work and aims to understand how content on social media can motivate a person to lower the meat consumption.

Previous research on social media generally focuses on user behaviours and identity building on online platforms (Holmberg, Chaplin, Hillman & Berg, 2016; Minton, Lee, Orth, Kim & Kahle, 2012; Park & Goering, 2016; Whiting & Williams, 2013). There is currently limited research on social media and plant-based food. The most similar study to my idea, focuses on information behaviour of health and lifestyle content but with a method of surveys (Pálsdóttir, 2014). This method was also the most common in the other social media research that were looked into. A research gap has been found, both when it comes to topic and method. This study aims to cover these gaps and will focus on content of plant-based diets on social media, with a method of in-depth interviews.

This study has not as a main aim to explore how and why a person decides to reduce the meat intake but rather what helps them maintain their lifestyle, with a focus social media. A study exploring thoroughly people’s reasons for starting a plant-based diet would need a broader approach than this research. For some people, information through social media might have been the reason for them to start lowering the meat intake, while others have been more influenced by socio-cultural factors such as family, friends and culture.

3.1 Research questions

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1 – What are users’ reasons to use social media for information of plant-based lifestyles?
RQ2 – What online content are of interest for a person that has lowered the meat intake?
RQ3 – How can content on social media motivate for upholding a plant-based diet?
4. Review of literature and framework

In this section, previous studies will be presented in order to map the fields of interest and what needs to be contributed to the scientific media and communication sphere. Additionally, a possible research gap will be explained and how it will provide new empirical knowledge.

4.1 Plant-based diets in relation to sustainability and consumer barriers

Benulic (2016) had as an aim to identify possible ways of audience participation towards decreased meat consumption. To find answers, she used content analysis of Swedish newspapers and focus groups of media audience. She focused on theories about the high level of meat consumption in Sweden and its environmental risks, the political responsibilities on the matter and the framing of meat by media and audience. She also explained the importance of understanding that audience are not only influenced by media but also from experience in their everyday lives. The result from her study show that the media can increase the knowledge of an issue but cannot always encourage the audience to make actions. Her conclusion was that the audience do not see themselves as citizens but as consumers that only need to change their consumption patterns and nothing more. In other words, they do not see their individual responsibility to the environmental problems.

In another study from Northern Europe, a survey was used to analyse what kind of barriers consumers in Finland have for lowering their meat consumption (Pohjolainen et al., 2015). They focused on theories about meat in relation to socio-cultural elements, food consumption and its negative impacts on environment and human health. In their study, they described that a current dilemma in the Western countries is that the meat consumption is not decreasing even though the consumer attitude towards meat is negative. The findings from the study show that the biggest barrier for people to change to plant-based diets is the enjoyment they get from eating meat. It is also described that people like to eat what is familiar and that there is a belief that plant-based food is more difficult to prepare. The conclusion from the study clarified that the social-demographic factors play a role for the plant-based food barriers and needs to be considered when confronting the problem.

Beverland (2014) did a similar study on social-demographic food consumption. He argued that countries with high standard, consume a higher amount of animal-protein but that it is a choice rather than something necessary. With a content analysis as a base, the research aim was to identify barriers for doing plant-based food mainstream in the Western countries. The study also had the purpose to identify strategies on how to change consumer food behaviours and how diets are situated in the macromarketing. The outcome of the study show that society normalise certain kinds of food. Meat and dairy are still seen as a wealthy diet but plant-based foods are trending, for example the implementation of “Meatless Mondays”. Similar to the Swedish study, this result show that it is important to spread awareness about
diets impact on the environment. However, the information should not focus on the negative impacts of meat but on the positive effects that the plant-based diets give. It is also explained that people are more interested in messages about their self-interest and that a “green lifestyle” is best maintained when it is practised. Lastly, the study clarified that the Western world’s high meat consumption has negative effects on the sustainable development, as well as a negative influence on the developing countries that want to adopt the meat diet.

An earlier study on food barriers was made by Joyce, Dixon, Comfort and Hallett (2012). They analysed previous literature and research, to understand consumer’s food behaviours and what possibilities there are to reduce the meat consumption. They used theories about livestock’s environmental impacts, public health and behavioural changes. Their findings were similar to the results from Beverland (2014), that consumers find it more appealing to change for a plant-based diet when they hear about health benefits rather than the environmental improvements. A concluding point was that that people have different barriers for adopting a plant-based diet and it is important with more than one campaign about “green living”.

4.2 Research on identity and food trends
Lea, Crawford and Worsley (2006) claimed to have done the first study about people’s level of readiness for a plant-based lifestyle. Their aim was to get an overview on how ready adult consumers are to eat less meat in Australia. A mail survey was used as a method and they used theories about demographic variables, consumption behaviours and benefits with plant-based diets. The result show that more than half of the participants’ were not ready to eat less meat. About a third of the participants’ were currently eating a plant-based diet and the rest were in a stage of change towards eating more green food. It is described in the conclusion, that people are not ready for the plant-based lifestyle because they do not see anything wrong with their current diet and that a change would be too difficult to maintain. Based on the result, more women than men are open for plant-based diets.

Another study about lifestyle changes was made by Giles and Brennan (2015), which purpose was to understand how young adults can change their behaviours for a healthier lifestyle in general. Focus groups in the United Kingdom were asked questions regarding food, alcohol and physical activity. For the theoretical part they focused on behaviours and social marketing. The result show that young people have different knowledge and attitudes on healthier behaviour but the majority do not feel keen to change for a healthier lifestyle. The result did not vary in terms of gender, age and employment status. Similar to Lea et al. (2006), most of the young participants did not feel motivated for a change since they identified more disadvantage than benefits with it. They had several reasons for why a healthier lifestyle is difficult to maintain, such as spending more money, time and energy. They also said that it
would change their social life since socialising often is linked to bad habits. The conclusion clarified that young adults are not committed to change for a healthier lifestyle even though they can identify the benefits from it, such as become fitter or improve the appearance.

The younger generation was also in focus for the study by Voinea, Atanase and Schileru (2016), which purpose was to bring up the importance of healthy eating and to compare the nutritional differences in “fast food” and “slow food”. They used a qualitative method were they interviewed university students in Romania and they also did a food analysis of the content of two different meals. Literature about the “slow movement” were used as a base for the study. The authors described slow food as an international trend and movement, that aims for an environmentally friendly way of produce meat and plant-based food. The result from the study show that about half of the students thought that eating healthy is very important. They also knew about the concept slow food and more than half said that Internet is the mostly used source for information seeking about this. In difference to the study Giles and Brennan (2015), the conclusion for this study was that the younger generation starts to desire healthier food options.

There has also been researched if there are gendered differences in food consumption. Turner et al. (2013) explored what kind of food that are seen as masculine and feminine through a videographic method, were the participants’ recorded their eating habits in their houses. For the theoretical chapter they focused on gender, culture, stereotypes, identity and food. The result from the study show stereotypical pictures of the genders, for example that meat and bigger portions often are seen as masculine and food with less fat, more greens and smaller portions are associated with femininity. It was also shown that different kinds of eating were linked to attractiveness and there were more negative judgements of women than men on their eating habits.

A similar gender study was made by Prättälä et al. (2007). Their aim was to identify if there are food that can be classified as feminine and masculine. They also wanted to see if the gender pattern is the same in Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. They used questionnaires as a method and in the theory part they gave attention to gender differences in food consumption and social norms. From their study they got similar result as Turner et al. (2013), that men tend to eat more meat while women consume more fruits and vegetables. The gender difference did not change in factors such as education level and age. Overall, both women and men with high educational level consumed most plant-based food. The conclusion from the study show that the result was the same in all the chosen countries even though they are different economically and culturally, for example is Finland more known for gender equality than the other.

An earlier study about how we are shaped by our surrounding, was made in New York by Bisogni, Connors, Devine and Sobal (2002). Their purpose was to find different identities
related to eating. They focused on grounded theory, identity, social influences and food behaviour for the theoretical part and they used a qualitative method in forms of interviews with open-ended questions. The result show that there are several different types of identities related to eating but a common factor among the participants was that a person’s living environment has an important impact on how they eat.

In Sweden there was an example of how the surrounding can have a big impact on consumer’s food choices. A music festival in Sweden decided to only serve vegetarian food on their festival area and Andersson et al. (2013) did a research on the outcome of this choice. For the theoretical part they looked into strategic communication, branding, marketing and meats environmental impact. As a method they used surveys of visitors’ food consumption, measured environmental impacts of the festival and interviewed festival managers. Their result show that the vegetarian strategy was a successful move. The festival got media attention, it had 40% less impact of the environment and the “green image” of the event improved. One of the festival’s core values was sustainability and the study concluded that the festivals target groups were reached in a positive way by removing the meat from the festival area.

4.3 Research examining media and communication usage and behaviour

In the study by Whiting and Williams (2013), The uses and gratifications theory was used to identify why individuals are active on social media. The method was qualitative in-depth interviews with young people that are using social media and the findings from the study show that the most popular reason to use social media is for social interaction and to find information. The result also presented information that the two biggest reasons to use social media are for social interaction and to find information, such as self-education. The conclusion brought up that the uses and gratifications theory is a useful tool for social media research, for example when there is a need to understand why users spend time on social media.

Another study that also focused on the uses and gratifications theory was made by Park and Goering (2016). They describe how social media has increased when it comes to seeking health-related information and that the study aims to understand why people are turning to social media for this. In the theory section they looked up components from the uses and gratifications theory, such as audience involvements, motives for media use and satisfaction the audience get from media usage. A survey was used as method, with questions about health-content on YouTube, which was sent to college students. The result show that the users had different motives to search for health-related content on YouTube. They identified four different reasons, which was social utility, the ease to reach the information, to pass time and for entertainment purposes. It is described that this confirms the uses and gratifications theory that media are affecting individual’s habits.
In a study from Iceland by Pálsdóttir (2014), the focus was also on information behaviour on social media regarding health and lifestyle. The method used was a quantitative approach where people participated through online surveys and through telephone. The measurement for the study focused on socio-demographic information, purposive information seeking and social media use. For the theoretical part the study highlighted information about social media, online health content and how people influence each other through the social media platforms. The result show that more women are interacting with content about health and lifestyle on social media than men. Women also tend to receive more information about health from others through social media. The result also show that the younger generations are more active on social media than the elders. The conclusion also brought up that women and younger people interact more than others on content related to health and lifestyle. However, regardless socio-demographic factors, people were more likely to seek and take part of health issues than post or comment something about the topic themselves.

A study that focused on sustainability on social media was done by Minton et al., (2012). They made a study were three different countries were compared on how customers react to content of sustainability on social media. An online survey about social media usage and sustainability were sent to people from United States, Germany and South Korea. They focused on theories about sustainability, “green advertisement”, social marketing and behaviours. The result show that South Korea show more sustainable behaviours than the other two countries. It is described that Germany and the US are more individualistic countries and that this could be a reason for the result. The participants from all countries agreed on that internationalisation is something that makes people commit to a more sustainable lifestyle. In the conclusion it is described that different green advertisements need to be applied for different countries and social media platforms.

Another study that focused on content on social media was made by Holmberg et al. (2016). Their purpose was to identify how adolescents communicate through food images at an application for photo-sharing. The method used was a content analysis for the social network Instagram and the study focused on previous research about how young people communicate, social values and how food is communicated in online communities. Their result show that the food content from adolescents contains mostly of high calorie low nutrient food items but that one third of the photos was on plant-based food. The result also show that all kinds of food images were mostly pictured in a positive way and that it is used as a way to create an identity. In the discussion the authors explained that the positive frame on the healthy food could be seen as a good way to promote a healthier lifestyle.
4.4 Remaining gaps in the research field and the positioning of the study

The findings from the previous research verify that plant-based diets have been researched before. Nevertheless, most of the studies focus mainly on plant-based food in relation to public health, environmental issues and socio-cultural factors. Plant-based food as a topic for media and communication research is somewhat incomplete. It is therefore relevant to do a study about social media and content about plant-based diets, to give a deeper understanding on what kind of media content that motivate people to maintain a sustainable behaviour.

Based on the previous research, several gaps have been identified for topics within lifestyle, social media and plant-based diets. Previous studies about plant-based food focused on people that are eating meat but to understand how a person maintain a plant-based diet, I suggest that the attention has to be given those who uphold a diet with a reduced amount of meat. Another thing identified is that several research results need further answers, namely the study by Park and Goering (2016), which show why users search for health information on social media. The study explains reasons for people to use social media but not what kind of information and content that makes them interested. The results from Pálsdóttir (2014), can also be further explored. Her result describes that people prefer to be observers of health content through social media, rather than posting something themselves. Further research is needed to understand why people not are active users that share their own health contents. Other studies that can be further explored are the ones about gender differences in food consumption (Prättälä et al., 2007; Turner et al., 2013). The findings from the gender studies show that women tend to eat more plant-based food because of socio-cultural factors but there are no in-depth interviews with the women to hear their opinion on this subject. Furthermore, social media with a focus on content of health and sustainability have been researched before but there are limited research on social media and content of plant-based food alone. Different kinds of quantitative methods have been most common among the previous research that has been studied, which can explain why there are gaps of more in-depth knowledge in these fields.

It was discovered that there are limited research on plant-based diets in Sweden. One that was found, explored the audience participation towards sustainable environmental changes in Sweden, with a main focus on lowering the meat consumption (Benulic, 2016). Another study found, aimed to explore the results from when a Swedish festival decided to only serve vegetarian food on their festival area (Andersson et al., 2013). Both the studies from Sweden focused on plant-based diets and both have a media and communication relevance but did not have a clear social media approach.

This study aims to cover the gaps that have been identified in the reviewing process. To bring useful information to the media and communication field, this study will therefore focus on social media content about plant-based diets and use a qualitative method. By doing this, new empirical data can be discovered.
5. Theoretical framework

In this section, a brief description of the main concepts for this study will be presented. The concepts chosen will categorise the field and give a scientific base for the study and its aim. In the first section, two theories within media and communication will be presented: The uses and gratifications theory and cultivation analysis theory. The social cognitive theory, a concept within social psychology, will also be used for this study and is explained in the second part of this chapter.

5.1 Theories related to social media

Information seeking on the Internet and interaction through social media has become an important part of people’s daily lives. The media and communication technologies have made the world seem smaller in terms of time and distance and information sharing has never been easier. A message from one individual has the possibility to reach a broad worldwide audience and culture, knowledge and values are being shared and changed across the world (Flew, 2007; Lee, 2004; Orgad, 2012). New relationships between people are created through the Internet and social media and people feel closer to each other even though they are apart (Baym, 2010).

As identified in the previous research, the uses and gratifications theory is helpful when doing studies about social media. According to the approach, people are using media to fulfil certain needs, such as information seeking, socialisation, for entertainment purposes or relaxation (McQuail, 2010). The uses and gratifications theory was created to understand motives for media interactions and it supports the idea that the audience is an active user rather than passive and that a person makes her or his own choice of content, based on wants and interests. The theory gives attention to the choice of media channel, the choice of messages, how it is understood and how the audience interact with the message (Nabi & Oliver, 2009).

The process of receiving a message and give it meaning is called decoding and it is a psychological process. Cultural background and past experiences have an influence on how the viewer interpret a message. A person’s current mood and attitude towards the message will also have an impact of the decoding (Severin & Tankard, 2010).

As mentioned earlier, the uses and gratifications theory focus on what users are using the media for, while there are other audiences oriented theories which highlight the power of the medium. One of these theories is the cultivation analysis theory, which describes that individuals that are exposed to a certain medium start to create a reality based on the media content. The idea of the theory is that the more a person use a medium, the more influenced will the person become of its message, which can change the person’s world view (McQuail, 2010). The cultivation analysis theory was originally developed for exploring how television can have an effect on people’s attitudes and principles. Previous evidence using the theory
show that people’s television usage can influence them on different levels. The audience can use the television as a source for learning about specific events but they can also take the information and create a new belief based on a few events, such as if the world is good or bad (Severin & Tankard, 2010).

When a person has a special interest in a certain type of media content, he or she can be part of a virtual community on the Internet. The idea with virtual communities is that individuals with similar interest, purposes and/or norms, can interact with each other and feel a belonging. The advantages of virtual communities are the easy access to new opportunities, which can challenge social and cultural norms (McQuail, 2010).

5.2 Social psychology theories

As described by Thompson (2015), a person creates identities to understand the world and to feel belonged. A person builds two identities, one “self-identity” and one “collective identity”. The self-identity refers to the development of a person’s characteristics and knowledge, while the collective identity is when a person tries to adopt certain values and behaviour to feel a sense of belonging in a social setting and among a group of people. The formation of identity is built on pre-existing symbols and social codes and due to the modern society, the identity building is nowadays not only shaped by the real world but also through media.

When socialising, a person tries to adapt a role and behave in a suitable way for that situation. People act like they do because they want to fit in, be accepted by the group they are living with or have chosen to take part of. When meeting someone, a person already has certain expectations of how he or she will behave. Examples of roles we consciously or unconsciously use are: age, gender, profession and class roles (Dimbleby & Burton, 2007). Humans strive for feeling a sense of belonging and being part of a virtual community can fulfil that need. A virtual community is an online based group of people that share the same interests and/or norms. Compared to a community in the real world, it is often easier to be a member of a virtual community but the members still have to follow certain unwritten rules and norms (McQuial, 2010).

When studying the effects of media, psychology theories such as the social cognitive theory has shown to be useful. The theory has commonly been used for mass media, especially when studying effects through television (Severin & Tankard, 2010). According to the social cognitive theory, a person is shaped by personal experiences and observations, as well as information received from media. The theory is a learning theory and explains that observation and imitation of others, gives the individual guidelines for how to act and behave. The social cognitive theory includes four different stages. The first one is attention which means that the person has to actively choose a model to observe. The second stage is retention, were the person remember what has given attention to. Reproduction is the third step and is to make an action
of the observed model. The last stage is about motivation, where the person has to ask himself if the behaviour would create a desirable outcome. If the observer does not see reasons for imitating a behaviour or others would give negative feedback about it, the person will not put the new knowledge into action (Nabi & Oliver, 2009).

The earlier formulation of the social cognitive theory is called reinforcement theory and explains how a behaviour is upholding when the person gets some form of reward and abandon the rest. This thinking is not included in the social cognitive theory, which instead explains how a person can learn to keep observational behaviours that are not rewarding right away but that can be useful for the future (Severin & Tankard, 2010).
6. Method and materials

This chapter will describe qualitative in-depth interviews and the reasons this method has been chosen for this study. Afterwards, the selection of participants will be presented, followed by an explanation of the method process, the interview guide and technical factors. Lastly, technical factors and possible reliability and validity issues with the study will be presented.

To begin with, the research gap found motivates a research method that gives a deeper understanding of the role of social media in upholding a plant-based lifestyle. Therefore, a method of qualitative approach will be useful since it answers questions of qualities and characteristics about the participants. This method is more narrow and the number of participants is lower than in a quantitative research (Reinecker & Jørgensen, 2011).

Since this study aims to understand people’s thoughts and opinions on a topic, ethnography could have been helpful for answering the research questions. However, the method is time-consuming and for a ten weeks’ research process this would have been stressful. Netnography on the other hand requires less time but needs skills of interpretation from the researcher, which makes the result more general than specific (Hansen & Machin, 2013; Kozinets, 2015).

The qualitative methods that possibly would provide better answers to the research questions are focus groups and in-depth interviews. One argument for using focus groups for discussing online content, is that the online activities are a form of social activity and that it should be discussed in a group of people. Compared to the in-depth interviews, the focus groups are seen as more natural and dynamic. However, in-depth interviews have the advantages to provide more detailed understanding to a research topic. When one participant at a time are interviewed, the interviewee can discuss her own experience and opinions about a subject without being interrupted (Hansen & Machin, 2013). With this information as a background, I have chosen the in-depth interview as the most suitable method for this research. I do not want the participants to be influenced by other’s answers, which might have been the case in a focus group.

Another reason for choosing the in-depth interview, is that it was not a common method in the research review. Based on the findings from the previous research, the most common methods for the chosen topics have been surveys and content analysis. Focus groups were also a more popular method than single interviews.

6.1 Selection of participants

Eight women between 20 and 29 years’ old have been chosen as participants in this study. All of them are upholding some form of plant-based diet and are interested in content on social media that are inspiring or influencing them to maintain their current lifestyle. The choice of
interviewing a certain gender is based on previous research which shows that women are maintaining plant-based diets more than men (Pálsdóttir, 2014; Prättälä et al., 2007; Turner et al., 2013). Since there are currently more women that are upholding a plant-based lifestyle, this group is the most helpful for gathering different views and opinions on the subject. Scientific research about plant-based food in Sweden are few and therefore the chosen group of participants is from this country. The choice of age of the participants is based on recent statistics, saying that younger people in Sweden currently are using Internet and social media more than the elders (Internetstiftelsen i Sverige, 2016).

All the participants for this research have been informed about the intention with the project and they have been interested to take part of this work for their own interests (Brennen, 2013). The participants have been found on one of the bigger Facebook groups in Sweden for plant-based food, which is called “Vegetarianer och veganer i Sverige”. During the interview process, two of the participants decided to leave the research project before they had been interviewed and the new participants’ were recommended by one who left the project. The new interviewees fulfilled the same criteria’s as the rest of the participants.

All of the participants are anonymous for this research and the following list gives a brief background of the participants:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of participant in this study</th>
<th>City of residence and population</th>
<th>What she does for a living</th>
<th>Plant-based diet that is maintained</th>
<th>How many years she has upheld the current diet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Umeå 122 892*</td>
<td>Student in language consultant</td>
<td>Vegetarian diet with egg and dairy</td>
<td>11 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Lidköping 39 235*</td>
<td>Employee for a food retailer</td>
<td>Gluten free vegetarian diet with egg and dairy</td>
<td>4 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Nåssjö 30 820*</td>
<td>Currently unemployed</td>
<td>Vegan</td>
<td>1 month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Hässleholm 51 667*</td>
<td>Teacher student</td>
<td>Vegan</td>
<td>6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Malmö 328 494*</td>
<td>Student in landscape architecture</td>
<td>Vegan at home, eating egg and dairy products in social settings</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Uppsala 214 559*</td>
<td>Veterinary student</td>
<td>Vegetarian diet with fish and egg</td>
<td>1 year, 3 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Jönköping 135 297*</td>
<td>Graphic design student</td>
<td>Vegetarian diet with egg and dairy</td>
<td>6 months – 1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Umeå 122 892*</td>
<td>Economy student</td>
<td>Vegan at home, eating egg and dairy products in social settings</td>
<td>1 year, 3 months</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Information about the population is taken from Statistiska centralbyrån (2016).*
6.2 The method process

In the early process of this thesis, the research idea was questioned. The main reason for this was because of the need of specific participants. The participants for this study had to be a woman between 20 and 29 years’ old, that are maintaining a plant-based lifestyle and that are interested in this kind of content on social media. To know if my research idea was possible to perform, a message was sent to one of the bigger Facebook groups for vegan and vegetarians in Sweden, where I asked the members to give my post a “like” if they could agree on all my participant criteria’s (see Appendix 2, p. 42). I also asked if they would be interested in a research interview. During the first day, the post got 29 likes and several of these people were also keen to be part of my project. This made me decide that this research could be achieved.

When eight participants had been chosen, the next step was to create the interview guide. When making the questionnaire, guidelines were taken from the literature by Hansen and Machin (2013). I prepared the interviews by writing down all the questions that I wanted to have answered, including follow-up questions. In the literature, it was recommended to have ten questions to the questionnaire and to come up with new ones when performing the interview. Nonetheless, I decided to add more questions from the start to not forget anything important throughout the interview.

To test if the interview guide was suitable for the research, a pilot study was made (Hansen & Machin, 2013). I realised that the questionnaire could be used but that minor changes needed to be done, such as reformulating some questions. I also identified that there were questions which looked similar to each other but I decided to keep them all to not miss any useful information. The answers from my pilot study have not been included in the result.

After the pilot study the actual interviews were the next step. Something identified during this stage, was that the participants’ answered the follow-up questions by themselves without me asking for them, but I still kept them in the questionnaire as a help for myself. During the interview sessions, it was common that participants started to talk about subjects from other parts in the interview guide. To make the interview more natural, I decided to then leave the current topic and come back to it later.

I recorded the interviews and transcribed them as soon as the interviews were over, when the dialogues were fresh in mind. Later on, when writing the result chapter, the most useful quotes were picked from these transcriptions. I have tried to not edit the participants’ answers too extreme since this could change the tone and the meaning of the answers (Brennen, 2013). Only the sentences when the participants’ are looking for words or repeating themselves have been removed. Since the interviews were performed in Swedish, the quotes have been translated by me as a researcher. This has affected some expressions which could not be directly translated into English. The questionnaire was also translated to English after the interview process was done and the final version can be found in Appendix 1 (p. 40).
6.3 Interview guide

The questionnaire is divided into four sections. The first part is called “Background questions” and will give answers to general information about the participant, such as where the person lives and what kind of plant-based food she eats today. The background questions are easy to answer by the participant, since the questions request facts and not opinions. The second section is called “Lifestyle choices and social contexts” and the questions are also of easier kind. It is focusing on how the participants’ have been influenced by the surroundings and what difficulties there are when upholding a plant-based lifestyle. The third section, “Inspiration and influence of social media” will give answers on how and why the participants’ use content about plant-based diets on social media. These questions will most likely give deeper and more personal answers, which can be important for answering the research questions. The last section of the questionnaire is called “Virtual groups on social media” and requires more personal answers as well. The questions are concerning memberships in virtual communities on social media and how people and content in these groups can inspire and influence.

6.4 Technical factors

The participants lived in different parts of Sweden and the interviews were performed through Skype or phone, depending on what the participant felt most comfortable with. All the interviews were recorded with a smartphone tool and the interviews took between 30 and 60 minutes. It occurred technical problems with the Skype connection during two interview sessions, so our conversations continued over the phone. I do not consider that these problems have had any impacts on the research result.

6.5 Reliability and validity

There can be issues with the reliability and validity when choosing a method of in-depth interviews. As mentioned earlier, the intention of an in-depth interview is to gather personal information from the participants. Depending on the person, different levels of personal opinions and values will be revealed, which can make it difficult to repeat the answers from this study. There can also be misunderstandings during the interviews, such as the interviewee does not understand a question. If the question is simplified or reformulated it can bring different answers. The participant’s knowledge on the subject can also be a factor that will change the interview results. The validity of this work can as well be questioned since there are not a guarantee that the voluntary participants have enough background knowledge of the subject to provide the research field with valuable information. Lastly, there is also a risk that the participants’ do not give any interesting or useful answers during the interview (Brenner, 2013; Hansen & David, 2013).
7. Result and analysis

The results from the eight in-depth interviews will in this chapter be presented and analysed. The first two sections cover answers with a general focus on plant-based lifestyles. The two last sections focus on the participants’ answers about the impact of content on social media when upholding a plant-based diet. This result chapter presents the findings from the interviews with selected quotes from all the participants.

7.1 Background Questions

The interview conversations started off with the basic background questions, which provided me as a researcher with basic information about the participant. In this section, it was revealed that six of the eight participants were students. They were undergraduate as well as graduate students majoring in language consulting, teaching, landscape architecture, veterinary, graphic design and economy. Participant B and C, which were not students, explained that they have plans for studying in the future. One of them was employed by a retail company and the other one was currently unemployed.

As shown in the table from the method chapter, the participants’ were situated in different cities from all parts of Sweden. Two of the participants lived in the same city, Umeå, and one of them explained that it is a popular city for those who uphold a plant-based lifestyle:

H – "It is totally a vegetarian city! It feels like all of us are voting for the Green Party and eats vegetarian here.”

As described earlier, all of the participants’ for this research were maintaining some form of plant-based diet. It was not a requirement to completely avoid certain kinds of food to take part of the study, however no one of the participants ate chicken or meat. One of the interviewees consumed fish but the rest were eating vegan or vegetarian food, or a combination of these two diets.

As described by Dimbleby and Burton (2007), people want to feel a sense of belonging and therefore adapting a suitable behaviour for different situations. This action could be identified among participant E and H, that described how they eat vegan food at home but that they are flexible with their eating in social settings:

E – "When I cook at home I only make vegan food but when I am invited for food, I sometimes eat vegetarian dishes... If there are no vegan options.”

H – “I eat vegan food at home but I am more flexible and choose vegetarian options when I am eating out.”
Seven of the eight participants described that they have upheld their current plant-based diet between one month and less than two years, while participant A had maintained her diet for a longer time period of 11 years. Participant A described that she believes it has become more normal to eat less meat today:

A – "It was not as common as today to be a vegetarian when I started so it was more difficult back then... In my partner's family, some of the elder men are questioning my diet and it is not nice to eat a dinner when it feels like an interview... But there are no problems with people in my own age.”

On the question on how the participant’s diets looked like before, six of the participants’ described that they ate “normal food” and referred to meat, chicken and fish. Participant E and H explained that they have tried different forms of plant-based lifestyles before.

There were three different reasons for the participants’ to reduce their meat intake: environmental issues, animal welfare and personal health. A common factor among the participants’, were that they all started to eat a plant-based diet for one of these reasons and that the more they become interested in plant-based food, the more they decided to stay on the lifestyle for more reasons than when they first started. All of the participants’ described how they also got to know more people that ate the same, which also made it easier to continue.

The least common interest for starting with a plant-based diet was for the personal health. This result did not go along with the findings from Joyce et al. (2012) and Beverland (2014). As described in these previous studies, the results show that consumers rather change for a plant-based diet for health benefits rather than the environmental improvements. Among my participants, there were only two of them, C and G, that started to reduce the meat intake for health reasons.

The environmental issues and the animal welfare showed to be somewhat more important reasons to reduce the meat intake among the participants. Interviewee B, E and F described how their living surroundings had influenced them to change for a plant-based diet. Both B and F started to be interested in reducing meat when they moved abroad and met people that were vegan and vegetarians. Participant B described how the information about the environment got her interested for lowering the meat intake, while F explained that she did it for ethical reasons. She described that she did not feel for eating meat when she started her veterinary studies, that it felt wrong to save an animal at work and eat another one at home. Participant E did also become influenced from school but in her late-upper school years, both for the environmental and ethical reasons.

Participant A, D and H explained that content and interaction with people on social media have had the biggest impact on why they started to reduce the meat intake. They
described that they were affected by information through Facebook, Instagram and contact with vegans at a virtual group. The ethical aspects of the meat consumption were the biggest reasons for participant A and H to reduce the meat intake, while participant D explained that she found the information about environmental reasons the most important:

A – “It was something I had been thinking of for a long time, I mean the ethical part of it. Is it right to eat animals? I was a member of an online forum and talked with a girl, a total stranger, about eating animals... She asked me a lot of questions about why I eat animals and then I realised that everything she said makes sense and that I should not eat meat anymore.”

D – "It all started for some years ago when I became more aware of the environmental issues from posts that I have seen on Facebook and from articles I read... I understood that meat is a big environmental problem and I slowly started to eat more vegetarian food. I researched more about it and came in contact with a friends’ friend and she added me on Facebook... She posted a lot of video clips of the animal industry and these videos made me realise that this is not okey... I can still miss the taste of meat but as soon as I think of what it is, I do not want to eat it.”

H – "I was very active on Instagram about this [vegetarian and vegan food] and from this, I started to see an animal on the plate instead of food... It was not so much of environmental reasons or my health, it was only because of the ethical aspects.”

7.2 Lifestyle choices and social contexts

The participants’ were asked if their friends or family members also following a plant-based lifestyle. The most common answer to this question was that the participant had a few or no people around them that eat a similar diet to them.

An observation from the interviews was that participant B and F did not start to lower the meat intake before they left their family home. According to the social cognitive theory, a person will not adopt a behaviour if she gets negative feedback from the surroundings of the new behaviour (Nabi & Oliver, 2009). This act could be identified for participant B, which described how she wanted to eat less meat at home but she did not feel comfortable with lowering the meat intake because of what her family would think of her. Participant F on the other hand, explained how she never reflected on the meat consumption when she lived at home and it was first when she moved out that she learned more about a plant-based lifestyle:

B – "My family does not eat vegetarian diets, my grandfather is a farmer and a hunter so in the family there is a belief that we should eat meat.”
F – “It started when I moved to Spain. I lived with my parents before and then I ate what they were cooking. When I started to live alone, I did not feel like I have time to cook meat anymore and at the same time I got more aware of how the animal is treated.

The participants’ described that they have been inspired and influenced by a plant-based lifestyle from both people and the media. As explained by the Social Cognitive theory, a person is shaped by personal experiences and observations of the world and people around her and the first stage in the theory is to choose a model or models to observe (Nabi & Oliver, 2009). As described by the participants’, were friends and online connections their inspirations to start eating a diet with less meat. Participant D explained that she got inspired from friends on Facebook that posted contents about plant-based food and she also explained that this information from social media has been the most important part of why she started eating a reduced amount of meat. She also described that she now tries to inspire others the same way as they did to her. Similar to participant D, participant B and F did also get influenced by friends but not on social media. Both participant B and F described that they started reducing the meat after moving abroad:

B – "Friends have always inspired me to eat vegetarian food but I have not been taking it seriously until I met the girl from England when I was in Australia. We cooked food together at the hostel and it was there I got the inspiration when I saw how easy it was to make it.”

F – "In Spain, I lived with four other veterinary students and one of them was vegetarian and she was also my best friend there, that influenced me to change.”

None of the participant thought that there are extreme difficulties with upholding a plant-based diet. However, they explained that it can be problems in social settings, for example at restaurants and when invited to friends or family for dinner.

The result from the study by Pohjolainen et al. (2015), show that there is a belief that plant-based food is more difficult to make than meat dishes. This thinking could be identified among the participants’ for this study as well. Participant G, H and E clarified that there is a belief among many people that plant-based food is something that is difficult to prepare. Participant G and E explained that there is always a struggle when they are invited to friends since their friends are meat eaters. Both of the interviewees explained that they feel that they make people annoyed by their way of eating because the hosts have to make a second dish just for them. Participant F found it difficult to tell people what she eats and not eats. Following a plant-based diet also showed to have an impact on one of the participant’s relationship. Participant H described that she and her boyfriend are seldom at his parent’s place and she believes this has something to do with her special food requirements:
H – ”I have a feeling that my boyfriend’s parents are avoiding to invite me since they do not know what to cook for me, which is sad because it is not difficult.”

Previous research shows that plant-based food is more consumed by women than men and that meat is associated with masculinity (Prättälä et al., 2007; Turner et al., 2013). One question in the questionnaire focused on the gender differences in food consumption and if the women feel pressure to eat less meat because of their gender. None of the participants’ for this study agreed on that they have felt the pressure to eat less meat because they are females, although participant G explained that she felt pressure to eat less meat to look skinnier:

G – ”I feel that the ideal is to be skinny and therefore I feel more pressure to eat more greens because of this but I do not feel that I need to eat vegetarian food because I am a woman.”

Participant D and F believed that their answers to the gender question would have looked differently if they were men and got a similar question about pressure to eat meat:

D – ”... When people get to know that I am vegan, they ask me if my “poor” husband are forced to eat meat as well... He is a man and has to miss meat, this is a stereotypical picture that I have experienced.”

F – ”... I do think it would be different if you would ask a guy to stop eating meat, because he would be offended.”

7.3 Inspiration and influence of social media
All of the participants’ agreed on that social media inspire and/or influence them to uphold their plant-based lifestyle. The participants’ gave different answers to what kind of social media platforms that help them the most to maintain their diet. A common factor among the participants’ was that they all mentioned Facebook, Instagram and/or YouTube as platforms for their information seeking and sharing of plant-based lifestyles. As mentioned earlier are these currently the three biggest social media platforms in Sweden (Internetstiftelsen i Sverige, 2016). Facebook was the social media that all of the participants’ were mostly active on, were they mainly took part of plant-based content through virtual communities. Participant A and B described that they also follow different blogs about plant-based lifestyles, with the content of food inspiration and product news. Furthermore, did participant E mention that she owns her own blog where she writes about her vegan lifestyle and gives people inspiration about things to eat instead of meat.
Participant B and C explained how Instagram is their biggest inspiration channel and that they enjoy watching pictures of vegan and vegetarian food, that they later on try to make themselves:

B – "I get inspired by blogs which have recipes and inspiration... I also get inspiration from Instagram, where I search for pictures of vegetarian food that I can try to make."

C – "I watch a lot of documentaries and food pictures... I get inspired to try food that I have seen on Instagram because it looks so good there."

Content with recipes was a common factor among all the participant. The ones that did not mention food pictures on Instagram, explained that they use YouTube as a source for finding information on how to make plant-based meals. Videos were people talk about their daily food habits and other routines, vlogs, were a popular phenomenon among participant A, F and G. YouTube was also explained to be an important online platform to take part of documentaries and videos with information about the animal industry and how the meat affects the environment:

G – "The YouTube videos are mostly normal people that are vlogging about their days and show what they are eating, why they do it and how they feel when eating like this... I have become more aware of how the meat consumption is affecting the environment, health and animal welfare, everything."

Based on the participants’ answers on how they use social media, they are active users which choose their contents depending on their interests within the plant-based lifestyle.

According to the uses and gratifications theory, people are using media to fulfil certain needs (McQuail, 2010). The findings from the study by Whiting and Williams (2013), show that the two biggest reasons why the participants’ use social media are for social interaction and to find information, such as self-education. The uses and gratifications theory was also used in the study by Park and Goering (2016), which findings show different reasons on why people search for health related content on social media: socialisation, easily accessed information, to pass time and for entertainment purposes. The results from these previous studies show similar result as the findings from my research.

The easy access and the amount of information available on social media were two of the most common answers on why the participant use social media for seeking and sharing information about a plant-based lifestyle. Participant E, F and also mentioned entertainment and socialisation as reasons for looking at plant-based content on social media. Participant F described that she does not have many people around her in real life that are upholding a plant-
based diet and that social media is a good place to find like-minded people. She mentioned that the vlogs made by “normal people”, are both entertaining and educational for her.

Participant B and G described that social media offers more information than traditional media and that content on social media and Internet in general, is the easiest way to learn more about the plant-based lifestyle today:

B – “To get more knowledge. When you are eating vegetarian food you need to know what kind of nutrition’s you need... I have not eaten vegetarian food for too long so it is a new area for me so I use social media to get information about what I need to eat.”

G – “I follow these things to get inspired to do things myself, such as cooking something new and I also think I get a lot of tips on what to take instead of meat to a dish, since this can be difficult in the beginning.”

Participant F and E described that except learning more about the lifestyle, they also use social media as a way to teach others about the lifestyle. Facebook was mentioned as one of the best ways to post opinions about plant-based diet according to participant D. Participant E on the other hand, explained that her blog has helped her upholding the lifestyle and at that she uses this to teach others as well:

E – My aim is not directly to convince someone, I do it more to normalise the vegan way of eating... I want to show that it’s not difficult to eat a vegan diet as many people think, I thought it too before. When I was Lacto-Ovo vegetarian, I thought that it would be too difficult to be vegan but I found out it's not and this is what I was to tell people with my blog posts.”

The participants’ described different reasons for what makes them motivated to maintain their current diet. All of them described that they seek different content on social media to remind themselves of why they should stay on the plant-based lifestyle. This acting can be identified in the last stage of the Social Cognitive theory, which describes that a person will only uphold a certain behaviour if he or she sees a purpose with it (Nabi & Oliver, 2009).

The result from the study by Beverland (2014), shows that the information that is most powerful to change a person to eat more plant-based food is to focus on the positive effects of the diet. This result did not appear the same for my study. The participant for this research explained that both positive and negative content on social media can be effective.

Half of the participants’ believed that the negative information is the best way to make people think and to uphold a plant-based diet. Participant B, G and H explained that it is the negative content that make them motivated to not eat meat and that they think it could have the same effect on others. Content with pictures and videos were described as more powerful
than written text by all the participants’. Both participant B and G explained that they get upset when they see videos about the negative environmental effects that the meat consumption causes and that this makes them feel a purpose to stay on their plant-based diet. Participant H considered that the ethical principles of not eating meat make her motivated to uphold her diet:

   H – "I have seen a picture with a mixed dog and cow face that made me think a lot... These pictures are something that people would react to. I think we need to take something that we currently have ethical principles about, so those who aren’t eating vegan or vegetarian food can see the connection."

Participant H also explained that she believes that different people will react differently to the same information and therefore it is important that there is positive content about the lifestyle as well, even though she herself most motivated by the negative content:

   H – "I think some people just ignore this kind of videos, for example when I am sad after watching this kind of videos my boyfriend asks me why I watch them. I mean, he does not understand why someone wants to see this, so he would need some other information to become interested in eating less meat..."

Participant A, C and E did not believe that information of fear and negative content would result in something positive long term. Instead, they suggest that content that provides the user with information that makes them feel good about themselves and that inspire people to eat plant-based food are the most optimal way to make people maintain the diet:

   A – "The information I like is more the fact-based information and people that are inspiring each other through eating good food and that show that it is possible to make good vegetarian food."

   C – "When you see the collage where it says how many things you save every day by eating a vegan diet. How much water, land, cows, pigs, universe that you are saving... You are doing a little change. I think that is why people continue."

   E – "I think what I do on my own blog could be effective, to show that vegan food is not difficult to prepare... People believe that vegans only eat Spirulina powder and dates but the reality is that vegans eat just normal food."

Two of the participants’, D and F, thought that a mix of negative and positive content are good when maintaining a plant-based diet. Both the participants’ described how they believe that
teaching people about the lifestyle is good to make them interested in the lifestyle. As participant F mentioned, are vegan diets better for the environment, the wallet and the health but she explained that it is important that people get to know the truth about the animal welfare. Participant D said something similar and explained how she sometimes post negative and provocative videos on Facebook to make people react.

All of the participants’ mentioned the USA, on the question if they take part of plant-based food content from another country than Sweden. Australia was the second most popular country. Participant A and C explained that there are many documentaries from these English-speaking countries and that there are more recipes to take part of outside Sweden. On the other hand, did participant H describe that she feels that she cannot fully trust the information that is not from Sweden:

H – “I believe more in the information from Sweden than from other countries because they can have a strong angle... For example, a video with chickens that are put into a mill but they do not tell the audience where this video is taken and what has happened before...”

Participant B and C did not believe that social media have had any bigger effects on them but they described that they often use recipes that they have found online. On the contrary, participants A, D, E, F, G and H agreed that information from social media have made them act in a certain way in real life. As described by the cultivation analysis theory, a person that is exposed to a certain medium and message can get a new world view (McQuail, 2010). This phenomenon could be identified among the interviewees, which described that they take part of content about plant-based lifestyles and that this information has changed their behaviour outside the online world:

D – “...The horrific videos of how animals are treated made me shocked, then I changed my diet immediately... I hope I would have realised this without social media but without input from something else I am not sure if I would have changed. If I did not get this new perspective, I am not sure that I would have changed.”

F – “I have seen different videos on the production and this are affecting me a lot, I am reflecting on the situation is for the animal... It does not feel right to eat them and I do not want to be part of this suffering.”

The social cognitive theory describes how a person will uphold something that will create a desirable outcome even though it does not show a direct reward (Nabi & Oliver, 2009). Except for the two participants that have to adopt the plant-based diet for health, the rest of the participant explained that they follow the diet because it feels right even though they cannot
mention any personal improvements or benefits from upholding the diet. One example of this is when participant A described that she thinks it is difficult to stop drinking milk but she tries to not drink it because she does not think the production of it is good.

7.4 Virtual groups on social media

All of the participants’ described that they are members of at least one virtual group about plant-based lifestyles and that no one is a member of any virtual group outside Facebook. The participant showed different levels of activity in the virtual communities. Participant B and G expressed the least activity in the groups and both explained that they found Instagram and YouTube more useful when looking for content about plant-based lifestyles. The ones that showed most activity in the virtual communities were participant A and C, which explained that they both post and comment a lot. In contrast, participant D, E, F and H liked to take part of the content more than posting things by themselves:

D – “I am not so active, I do not comment or post much myself in these groups. I have difficulties to be active, it feels like it is getting too much...I do not know. There are so many other people that are commenting and stuff.”

H – ”I comment more than I post something myself in this group, since I feel I am copying what other people are doing rather than coming up with new things.”

The participants’ described that the most interesting topics in the virtual groups are food inspiration, product news and discussions. Their answers about the most interesting content in the groups were similar to what content they take part of in other social media as well. However, more participants mentioned product news and discussions as the content they enjoy taking part of in the virtual groups. Participant F and H described that people in the virtual groups are good at posting different vegan and vegetarian products they have tried. Participant E also described that she is a member of a group which focus on the city she lives in, Malmö, and that people post information about vegan products that are for sale in the food stores, as well as reviews of restaurants in the area. Participant E and F described that the discussions in the groups make them feel calmer about their choice of lifestyle because they get to know that other people are having similar problems as them, which has to do with their plant-based diet:

E – “... There are discussions about different dilemmas, for example when someone is going to the aunt for dinner and they wonder how to behave... Even though this does not make it easier for me next time, I think it’s calming to listen to.”
F – ”People have things in common and sometimes there are things that I have been thinking of and I get ideas from others there.”

Participant A was the only person who was a member of a group with a political orientation. She described how the political orientation highlights the importance of people’s freedom to live as they want, as well as animals right to live. She explained that the group is smaller than other vegan and vegetarian groups on Facebook and that this makes the atmosphere between the members better.

A – ”This smaller group that I am in, is not so aggressive but when thinking about the bigger groups there is more a competition and people are questioning each other, such as ‘Why are you eating honey or milk and dairy?’”

The other participants were members in bigger groups and their comments confirmed what participant A explained about the group atmosphere. Several of the participants explained that the worst thing about the virtual communities is the cyber-bullying that can occur. The participants’ that following vegetarian diets mentioned that they sometimes feel frightened to post something in these groups and that they never feel good enough when they post food pictures because they still eat some products from animals, such as milk and dairy.

As described by Thompson (2015) people create a collective identity when socialisation with others and certain values and behaviour are being upheld to feel a sense of belonging. It is also explained by the Social Cognitive theory, that a person does observations and imitations of others to know how to act and behave (Nabi & Oliver, 2009). These behaviours could be identified among Participant C, E and H which explained how the virtual groups make people that are vegetarians, avoid to post certain things because they know they will get negative comments from vegans:

H – ”... It happens every day, in every post, that people are putting shame on each other even though everyone is going the same directions. I think it’s always positive feedback for those who publish something about vegan food but when someone’s eating Lacto-Ovo that person is put to shame. Like those people who has not went completely vegans are not good enough...”

Most of the participant did not believe that the virtual groups have had a major impact on their lifestyle or diet. However, participant A and H explained that their memberships in the virtual groups have changed their eating routines. As mentioned in the theoretical chapter, virtual communities are easy to access for people and might provide the member with new cultural norms and thinking (McQuail, 2010). Participant A and H described that content from the virtual groups has had an impact on their values and behaviours. Both of these participants
described that information from the virtual groups made them decide to lower their egg and dairy intake, mostly because of the guilty feelings they get from eating it:

A – “I have felt that I want to be vegan, I am not ready yet but I feel that I have been influenced in this group. It feels bad to post a picture of a dish of milk and egg when I know people there are vegans. I ask myself why I feel this way and come to the conclusion that I should maybe not eat so much of this.”

H – “I was vegetarian before I started to follow any group... I feel that the groups have made me feel guiltier when eating eggs and milk, so I have started to eat less of this. So more a bad influence than positive.”

Although the participants’ had several comments on the negative sides of being a member of a virtual group, most of the participants’ thought that the general attitude in the plant-based communities is mostly positive. Participant E and F expressed that they enjoy being part of the virtual groups because of people’s willingness to support and inspire each other. Participant H described that the best thing about the group is that there are always a lot of inspiration for those who want to learn to cook new plant-based meals, as well as trying new products. Several participants also mentioned that the virtual groups are important since they make people feel less alone when trying to maintain a plant-based lifestyle. Participant A and D described that the groups make them feel that they are doing the right thing and that it is good to have a common goal with like-minded people.
8. Discussion

In this chapter, the analysis of the result will be further discussed and commented and the first section will present the answers to the research questions. This is followed by an evaluation of the research topic and method. In the end of the chapter, previous theories and research are connected to the findings from this study.

8.1 Answering the research questions

The findings from this study show that social media inspire and influence women to maintain plant-based lifestyles. As mentioned in previous chapters, people nowadays use social media on a daily basis and media has the ability to make an impact on a person's behaviour and values (McQuail, 2010; Thompson, 2015; We are social, 2017). It was therefore assumed from the beginning of this project, that content on social media does inspire and influence a person. Another thing that did not come as a surprise was that Facebook, YouTube and Instagram were the most used social media among the participants', which currently are among the biggest online platforms in Sweden (Internetstiftelsen, 2016).

The first research question (What are users’ reasons to use social media for information of plant-based lifestyles? p. 4) was inspired by previous research which explored the uses and gratifications theory. Compared to earlier findings, my study shows similar result as what has been presented in the previous research (Park and Goering, 2016; Whiting and Williams, 2013). The answer to the first research question is that participant use social media for its easy access to search for information for self-education, socialisation and for entertainment purposes. One addition to earlier findings, is that two of the participant (D and E) explained how they use social media as a way to express their opinions and to teach others about their lifestyle (p. 24). The participants’ for this research had good knowledge and a strong belief for the plant-based lifestyles and this could be the reason for their determination to not only teach themselves about the topic, but also spread information to others.

The interviewees expressed several common opinions on what inspires and influence them to uphold their lifestyle. One of the main factors to maintain a plant-based diet was to have a reason for it. An example of the result shows how a participant described that she often misses the taste of meat but when she thinks what lies on her plate she cannot eat it (p. 20). Based on the participant’s answers, there were three different reasons for the participants’ to uphold a diet with less meat: Animal welfare, environmental issues and personal health. That it was these three topics that motivate the participants’ to uphold their current diet are understandable since the plant-based food has shown positive effects in all these areas, as described in the previous research chapter (see 4.1 and 4.2).

When it comes to the second research question (What online content are of interest for a person that has lowered the meat intake?, p. 4), the result show that both positive and
negative content on social media is useful for upholding a plant-based diet. The positive content that the participant found most interesting were food inspiration and product news. As mentioned earlier, meat is still the “normal food” in the Western society and plant-based dishes are often described as difficult to prepare and less tasty (Beverland, 2014; Pohjolainen et al., 2015). This can explain why the participants’ used social media for seeking information about plant-based food. Social media offers information from all around the world which makes it a good source for those who are looking for new knowledge (Thomson, 2015; Orgad, 2012). Some of the participants lived in smaller cities and perhaps it can be difficult to know what to buy and make if the people around them are eating meat. When focusing on the more negative content, the participants’ found it interesting to take part of videos of how animals are treated on farms. One of the participants’ (H) described how she always starts to cry after watching these videos but that she continues watching them on a regular basis because they make her certain that the plant-based lifestyle is the true way of living (p. 25). Videos and photos were described as the most interesting content among all of the participants’.

The answers to the third research question (How can content on social media inspire/influence for maintaining a plant-based diet? p.4) is about emotions and inspiration from other people. Based on the result, content and people on social media can motivate through the positive and negative emotions it gives the audience. One example from the result, is when participant A and H described how their membership in a virtual group made them feel guilty for eating egg and milk and that these bad feelings have made them reduce their meat intake even more and uphold it (p. 29). Influences from like-minded people or people that the participant looks up to, were also factors that made the participant maintain their diet. Videos from YouTube were people talk about their daily lives as a vegan or vegetarian were popular among participant A, F and G (p. 23). As mentioned by (McQuial, 2010), it is important for people to feel a sense of belonging. The result from this research shows that people feel motivated to continue a lifestyle when they have a common goal with others.

### 8.2 Evaluation of research topic and method

Social media and plant-based food have been important research topics to combine for two reasons. Firstly, the high meat consumption is currently not sustainable and needs to be reduced. It is therefore of importance to understand what motivates people to uphold a more sustainable diet with more plant-based food. Secondly, there is limited research on what impact social media has on a person’s lifestyle choice. Social media is part of people’s everyday lives, which makes it essential to take in consideration when understand what makes people do certain choices in life. The result from this study shows that social media does have a major impact on a person’s choice to maintain a plant-based diet. Participant A, D and H even described that content on social media was their main reason for them to lower their meat
intake. This research has provided details of how social media can be a useful tool for reaching people that are interested in upholding a sustainable behaviour.

Although, this research has its limits. When doing a qualitative method with in-depth interviews, the number of participants are lower. Eight participants in total was interviewed for this study and the results are only based on their opinions and thoughts. Another thing that needs to be considered when reading the result, is that all of the participants have been collected from the same Facebook group, which can have had an impact on their answers since they take part of the same information in this group. One of the requirements for this research was that the participant had lowering the meat intake in some way but most of the participants’ that wanted to be interviewed followed a vegan or vegetarian diet. The positive thing about this is that the participants’ were very interested in the research topic, however it might have been useful to interview people that eat meat but in a reduced amount, to understand what online content they found useful. Another limit with the research, is that the result is only based on interviews with young women. To understand the subject further, more groups of people needs to be focused on, such as men, teenagers and older people. It is therefore possibilities for further research on the topics of social media and plant-based content.

As described in the method chapter, a qualitative interview can have negative impacts on the reliability and validity (see 6.5). Most of the imaginable problems with the method did not occur but I had one problem when using the method. As described in the method chapter, the participants are always free to quit the research whenever they want (see 6.1). For future research with interviews as a method, I would recommend having at least two more participants than planned from the beginning. In my case, two of the participant dropped out in the middle of the research and it would have been easier if I was more prepared for this. Apart from this, I found the method useful for this study since it helped to answer the research questions. All the participants’ were interested and had a good knowledge of the subject and gave useful answers during the interviews. In other words, the validity of the research has been high since the research measure what it was supposed to be measuring.

When it comes to the reliability, there could have been some improvements with the questionnaire to get more different answers and useful information to analyse. The participants’ answered similar on several research questions and I believe that there could have been more deep answers if there were fewer interview questions in the questionnaire and that I as a researcher come up with new ones throughout the conversations with the interviewees, depending on their interest within the chosen topic.

8.3 Choice of theoretical framework and previous research

A notable finding from this research is that social media can provide useful tools for those who want to maintain a plant-based diet and the results show that there is not only one answer to
what kind of content the participants’ use to uphold their lifestyle. While some found motivation through watching YouTube videos of slaughter, others preferred to follow Instagram accounts with plant-based food pictures etcetera. The same information showed different effects on different people and this conclusion was also made in the studies by Joyce et al. (2012) and Minton et al. (2012).

The results from this research provided further knowledge on how a person upholds a certain lifestyle. In previous research, the living environment was described as the most important factor for how a person eats (Bisogni et al., 2002; Pohjolainen et al., 2015). This research shows similar findings to some extent but it also shows that social media should not be overlooked when understanding people’s lifestyle choices. As mention earlier, several of the participants’ did not have people around them that followed the same diet as they did. Instead, they used content and virtual groups on social media as their motivation to uphold their diet.

This research has been exploring more in detail the results that could be seen in other studies, such as the findings from Pálsdóttir (2014). Similar to this previous study, the participants for my research was more likely to read and watch content that others have posted, rather than post something themselves. The previous research did not explain why people preferred to be an observer of content. What has been found in my study is that participants behave in a certain way in the virtual groups to not make any mistakes and to not get any negative feedback from the other group members. When a participant posted or commented something, they explained that they were selective on what they posted to avoid negative feedback from the other group members. This behaviour could be linked to the concept of Thompson (2015), which described that a person creates an identity among people to feel that they belong, which makes them change and adapt certain rules. The construction of a positive identity could also be identified in previous research but which had a focus on how an individual creates an identity through content on Instagram (Holmberg et al., 2016).

According to the uses and gratifications, a person uses social media to fulfil certain needs and the theory supports the idea that the user is active rather than passive (McQuail, 2010; Nabi & Oliver, 2009). When analysing the result for my study, it came clear that this theoretical idea could be identified on how the participant’s used social media when seeking information about their lifestyle. The participant’s described how they choose to follow accounts on YouTube and Instagram, as well as virtual groups that have the same values and beliefs as they do. In other words, the participants’ made active choices of what content they take part of. This conclusion leads to another finding from this study, namely that several of the participants’ showed signs of being strongly affected by the content they had chosen to take part of themselves. This behaviour can be more connected to the cultivation theory, which upholds the idea that the medium and the content has more power on the audience than the opposite (McQuail, 2010; Severin & Tankard, 2010). However, several of the participants’ were
aware of this influence. In some cases, it seemed like the participants’ even took part of content and aimed for being affected by it in some way. The comment from participant H is one example of this, she described that she watches videos that she knows will make her sad because that makes it easier for her to stay away from eating meat (p. 25). Another similar example was when participant A described how her membership in a virtual group makes her questioning her choice of eating meat and dairy. She described that the virtual group makes her influenced to becoming a vegan but that she wants it (p. 29.) Both these women described that they want to take part of content that influences them since this leads to a change or uphold of, for them, a desirable behaviour – a more plant-based lifestyle.

As described in the result and analysis chapter, the participant did become especially influenced by content that has been seen posted in virtual groups or by friends (see 7.2 and 7.4). That it was just these contents that made them most affected, could possibly be linked to the social cognitive theory (Nabi & Oliver, 2009; Severin & Tankard, 2010). The theory explains how a person actively chooses a model to observe and then gives attention to the model’s behaviour. The last two steps in the theory are about doing similar actions as the observed model, as well as deciding if this behaviour would have a positive outcome for the observer. All of the participants for this study were upholding a plant-based diet and all of them followed content about plant-based lifestyles, in order to be inspired and influenced. Since the participants’ already had a goal with following the certain groups and content on social media, they were most likely already having a positive mindset for the people and content in the virtual groups. As described by McQuial (2010), humans want to be accepted among others, which could be another reason for them to take the content from virtual groups and their friends more serious.

Finally, the findings from this research have provided the media and communication field with further knowledge on how social media can influence a person to maintain a lifestyle.
9. Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to understand what content on social media that is useful for a person to maintain a plant-based diet. The result showed that content on social media can be used as a help when upholding a diet with less meat, furthermore were Facebook, Instagram and YouTube the most liked online platforms to seek and share information about the topic. The participants for this study described that they get motivated by the following different kinds of content: Food inspiration through videos and pictures, product news, discussions and documentaries about the environment and animal welfare. The findings also show that content that is affecting the viewer emotionally are often used for upholding a plant-based lifestyle, as well as connecting with other people that are following a low-meat diet.

In difference to previous research, which focused on barriers for lowering the meat intake, this study has given attention to people that already are maintaining a plant-based diet. With a media and communication approach, further knowledge has been discovered of the importance of social media usage for upholding a sustainable lifestyle.

While working with this text, topics for future research have been identified. Firstly, this study explored how a person maintains plant-based diets and it did not have a major focus on people’s reasons to lower their meat intake from the start. There are still research gaps on how and why a person becomes interested in a plant-based lifestyle, from eating a meat based diet to a plant-based one.

Secondly, there needs to be done more studies within lifestyle choices and social media. This research has provided information that social media is important for a young woman that is interested in a plant-based lifestyle. It would be interesting to explore if other groups of people also consider social media useful when upholding a certain way of eating.

Lastly, scientific research on plant-based lifestyles are still relatively new with limited research, not only in the media and communication field. Based on the findings from this study, together with earlier research results, there is an interest in plant-based lifestyles and the topic will likely grow within different scientific research fields (Andersson et al., 2013; Voinea et al. 2016).
List of references


**Personal interviews by phone and Skype:**

Appendix 1

Interview Questions

Background Questions
1. Which city do you live in?
2. What do you do for a living?
3. What kind of plant foods do you eat today? (Vegan, vegetarian, meatless once a week etc.)
4. For how long have you eaten the way you do today?
   a. How did your diet look like before?
5. What made you reduce the meat consumption?

Questions about lifestyle choices and social contexts
1. Does your family or friends eat a similar diet as you?
   a. If yes - have they inspired/influenced you to eat less meat?
      i. In what way?
2. What do you feel is most difficult with a diet with less meat?
3. How has your social life been affected by the way you eat?
4. Do you feel that you as a woman have pressure to eat a more plant-based diet?
   a. If yes – In what way?

Questions about inspiration and influence of social media
1. What information on social media help you maintain your plant-based lifestyle?
   a. What social media do you mainly use when you want to have this information?
      i. Why do you look up this information?
2. Why do you use social media to search/share information about plant-based diets?
3. What content about plant-based lifestyles affects you the most on social media?
   a. Why?
4. How can marketing about plant-based diets be improved on social media?
5. To what extent do you take part of information about plant-based diets from other countries than Sweden?
   a. What kind of information?
   b. From which countries?
6. Has information about plant-based diets on social media made you act in a certain way in real life?
   a. What kind of information?
   b. How?
Questions regarding virtual groups on social media

1. Which social media are you part of virtual groups which focus on plant-based diets?
2. How involved are you in the discussions in these groups?
3. What is the best thing about being a member of a lifestyle group on social media?
   a. What is the worst?
4. What is the general attitudes in the groups?
5. What do you think is the most interesting in these groups?
6. Do you feel that your membership in groups on social media have inspired/influenced you to change your diet further?
   a. If yes – In what way?
Appendix 2

The participants were found on the virtual group “Vegetarianer och Veganer i Sverige” and the following message was sent to the members to understand the interest for the research:

Translation: “Hello everyone! I have started my Master's thesis at Jönköping University and need some help to see if my idea is possible to achieve. Please like the post if you recognise yourself in all these three points: woman, 20-29 years and in one way or another, have been inspired to eat a plant-based diet through social media. You do not necessarily need to be vegetarian or vegan, but you have to be interested in reducing the meat consumption. I would also appreciate if any of you want to participate in interviews (phone/Skype). Send me a personal message and I will tell you more! All participants will be anonymous. Have a nice day! /Hanna”